

# On Ethnographic Responsibility: A Discourse-Centered Approach

Maria de García

University of Texas at Austin

## *Abstract*

---

Analysts of social behavior, particularly with regards to Latin America, have expended much academic energy in considering how to understand the stories told by the people with whom they work. Much of this effort has had the purpose of finding an academic frame of analysis for these narratives by reclassifying them according to academic discipline or by genre (placing them within the domain of literature, of anthropology, of history etc.; considering them to be *testimonios*, autobiographies, oral histories etc.). What I would like to offer here are some approaches to analysis of these stories that have arisen out of my work with Ixil Mayan community-based organizations and their leaders.

---

Analysts of social behavior, particularly with regards to Latin America, have expended much academic energy in considering how to understand the stories told by the people with whom they work. Much of this effort has had the purpose of finding an academic frame of analysis for these narratives by reclassifying them according to academic discipline or by genre (placing them within the domain of literature, of anthropology, of history etc.; considering them to be *testimonios*, autobiographies, oral histories etc.). What I would like to offer here are some approaches to analysis of these stories that have arisen out of my work with Ixil Mayan community-based organizations and their leaders.

In particular I focus on the words of a Mayan priest who is well respected in the Ixil area and of the *Grupo de Mujeres por la Paz*. The *Grupo* is a community-based organization of Ixil Mayan women in Nebaj, El Quiché, Guatemala, that was formed in 1998 by its members with the purpose of finding collective solutions to the economic, political, and social destruction

caused by the Guatemalan civil war. The 36 year long war , reached its height during the 1980s when the violence became a genocide of the Mayan people and caused widespread destruction that especially affected Mayan women. Most of the members of the *Grupo* are widows or the daughters of widows, and all live in extreme poverty. As a collective, they have begun an agricultural cooperative, a weaving cooperative, a microcredit lending project and literacy classes. While it is beyond the scope of this article to provide full analyses of the women's stories themselves and of how they fit into the collective action of the women, the Ixiles with whom I have worked have given some clear guidelines as to why they tell their stories and what it means for us to be hearers of them. Their interpretations of their own storytelling offer insight not only to the discourse itself but into their understanding of the social, historical and political context in which this speech arose and of their vision of the role of the ethnographer. The implications of their contributions are both theoretical and methodological for the study of language and society.

### *Don Miguel Rivera<sup>1</sup>*

Muy bien, vamos a platicar un poco aunque no puedo mucho en castellano, pero algunas cosas podemos, por ejemplo de todo lo que preguntan de lo que hemos sucedido en la situación, pues en que hemos pasado durante la guerra. Pues bien, pero queremos también que ojalá que con buen corazón ustedes también porque nosotros siempre tenemos una organización, tenemos una organización de Pueblos Mayas. Entonces lo sabemos el

Very well, we are going to talk a little although I can't very much in Spanish, but some things we can, for example all the things they ask about that have happened to us in "the situation," well in what we have gone through during the war. Well fine, but we also want you to come to us with a good heart as well because we have always had an organization. We have an organization of the Mayan People. Then, we know that the Mayan

---

<sup>1</sup> Following the tradition of Sherzer (2003), Tedlock (1983), and others I take the work of transcription and translation to be a representational act in which the rendering in written form of a text spoken within a particular ethnopoetic context is not a transparent process. The fairly literal translation that I provide here is an attempt to be faithful to the original spoken words, even though the result may be a text that requires more work on the part of the reader (see Sherzer 2003 for a similar approach). The transcription of the original Spanish has also been done fairly literally, although per the request of the speaker, I have edited for gender and number agreement and have edited out non-meaningful repairs.

Pueblo Maya está pues en contra de los españoles pongamos. Ya hace tiempo en sus historias, sus historias nuestros abuelos, tata abuelos, pues nuestro Pueblo, Pueblo antepasado, siempre que está perseguido pues, por los españoles, y como pueden a convencer, pues, por eso nosotros siempre tenemos una organización, una organización importante. No está legalizado bajo la ley pues en el gobierno sino que sólo estamos así tomado de acuerdo municipal. Estamos de acuerdo a dar todas las historias pero que no es con un buen corazón porque así pasaron nuestros abuelos. Sólo llegaron los españoles a sacar todas las ideas de lo que hacen los Pueblos Mayas. Lo recogieron todo, saber donde fueron a cambiar. Buscaron otra manera para discriminar, para explotar. Entonces eso es lo que no queremos. Eso es lo que estamos estudiando en la organización. Por ejemplo yo no soy más anciano, y tal vez nosotros así menor de edad pues que los ancianos, pero bueno, Dios me ayuda porque siempre alcanzaron así su objetivo los españoles, los invasores que invadió todos los Pueblos Mayas. Entonces los otros, otros ancianos nos regañan pues por soltar ideas pero siempre queremos un poco idea también para que se desarrolla nuestro idea como el Pueblo Maya. Estamos buscando. Si tenemos muchos amigos que son amigos pues, así como ustedes si llegan conmigo así con corazón. Bueno, pues tal vez algún día nos apoya, vamos a ver como. Por ejemplo en la guerra que ya pasó un poco, pues tiene los mismos raíces con los españoles, las discriminaciones, las explotaciones. Nos explotan pues porque quieren ellos que nos deja bajo su responsabilidad. Nos deja como su material, nos deja como su machete para que vamos a trabajar sin hablar sin respetar nuestro derecho como Maya. Pero yo ahorita pues casi gracias pues a la organización porque estamos avanzando. Tienen que

People are against the Spanish, let's say. Now a long time ago these histories, the histories of our grandparents, our great grandparents, well our People, the People before, are always persecuted by the Spanish, and how they try to overcome<sup>2</sup> us. Well, that's why we always have an organization, an important organization. It's not legalized, under the law of the government, but rather we're only in municipal agreement. We are in agreement to give all the histories, but not if it's not with a good heart because that's what happened to our grandparents. The Spanish only came to take all the ideas of what the Mayan people do. They collected them all, who knows where they went to change them. They looked for another way to discriminate, to exploit. Then this is what we don't want. That is what we are studying in the organization. For example, I am not one of the oldest, maybe we younger people, may the elders, or fine, may God help me because they always achieved their objectives, the Spanish, the invaders, who invaded all the Mayan people. Then the others, other old people scold us for letting loose the ideas, but we always want other ideas as well so that our ideas as Mayan people can develop. We are looking. If we have a lot of friends who are really friends, like you who come here with me like this with good hearts, fine, well maybe some day you will give us some support. For example in the war that has passed some, well the same roots with the Spanish, the discriminations, the exploitations. They exploit us because they want us to be left under their responsibility. They leave us like their tool, they leave us like their machetes so that we will work without talking, without respecting our rights as Maya. But now, well thanks to our organization, we are always advancing. Our rights have to be respected because we, well for example, like the advice of the spiritual guides, the advice of the guides

<sup>2</sup> Here as elsewhere, Don Miguel uses the word *convencer*. He uses it to mean defeat or overcome, usually through deception.

respetar nuestro derechos porque nosotros  
 pues como por ejemplo como consejos guías  
 espirituales, consejos guías de espiritualidad  
 maya estamos aquí trabajando en nuestro  
 Pueblo porque estamos organizados.  
 Organizamos para recuperar nuestro valor  
 todavía porque nuestro valor nos quitó la  
 guerra.

of Mayan spirituality, we are here working in  
 our town because we are organized, organized  
 to recover our courage still because the war  
 took our courage.

### *On Ethnographic Responsibility*

For the Mayan priest who said these words to me, the key to the analysis of the stories that he was about to tell me is an understanding that language, be it that of his own stories or those of the grandparents, has power. It *does* things. And with this power comes responsibility both for the producer of the language and for the recipient. It is this responsibility inherent in the act of narration that the priest, Don Miguel Rivera, refers to. Even though I come with outstanding “credentials” as I am accompanied and introduced by my friend and coworker, Don Miguel Guzaro Raymundo, there is too much history for Don Miguel Rivera to simply tell stories without making clear the implications of this process. Don Miguel Guzaro Raymundo has begun this conversation by speaking respectfully to the priest, also his long time friend and coworker. The two have worked together as leaders of their communities for thirty years now, much of that time through the intense years of civil war that resulted in much death and devastation for their people. They share great mutual respect. Don Miguel Rivera extends some of this respect to me, as I come accompanied by Don Miguel Guzaro Raymundo who introduces me as a friend and ally. Nonetheless, my being a foreigner, marked by race, class and nationality means that before he will talk to me, Don Miguel Rivera warns me that I must not be like the Spanish colonizers.

In my position as an information taker and recorder, an academic, Don Miguel gives me a lecture on ethnographic responsibility. He makes me conscious that here the reception of language is not a passive process but one in which the listener becomes an active participant in the world of the interlocutor. For him, the active potential of language is realized in the telling of a narrative. In this respect, Don Miguel wants me to be aware that the transmission of cultural knowledge and of Mayan world views has been historically used to cause violence and oppression for the Mayan people as far back as the conquest. For the ancestors, speaking of the knowledge and ideas of the Mayan people with the Spanish conquistadors had the consequence of exploitation and oppression. When Don Miguel tells me the story of what it was like to be an Ixil priest leading a community of refugees through civil war, he knows that his act of narration, the words that he speaks, perform an action. They have an effect. Even in the Maya's most recent history, to tell a story during a war only officially declared over in 1996 could have cost the life not only of an individual but of a whole community and could thereby endanger an entire culture. Today the sharing of knowledge like the ancestors once did during the years of the Spanish conquest can have the same results of violent oppression or it can lead to support for Mayan organization. In Don Miguel's view, the power to commit the genocide and ethnocide of the conquest came from the knowledge gained through the narration of Mayas, but the power to rebuild Mayan society today, impaired by centuries of violence, is also found in the language of Mayan narration.

Thus, in addition to the negative responsibility of not using his words for any kind of violence, Don Miguel adds the positive responsibility of using narration to build alliances with organized Mayan people, a process that he is actively engaging in through sharing his stories. As an organized population conscious of both their own exploitation as well as of their basic rights

and cultural knowledge, Don Miguel sees that the Mayan people must use their stories to exchange information and build alliances with friends. The relationship between speaking and hearing these narratives is mediated through the organized Mayan people. He is clear as to the agency of this organization. He will let loose the information that has been entrusted to him and that he has lived only in so far as it serves the end of exchanging ideas that will promote the advancement of organized Mayan people. When Miguel Rivera tells me of what it was like to be a spiritual leader of his people during a time of war, it is an act of solidarity not just with me but with his old coworker, Don Miguel. He affirms their relationship of solidarity as leaders of their communities and leaders of the Mayan people. He thus prefaces several hours of continuous narration that would follow with this contract, he will share his knowledge if I will fulfill my positive responsibility to act in solidarity with Mayan communities and my negative responsibility not to use the powerful knowledge contained within these narratives to further oppress the Mayan people. My response to Don Miguel's imperative requires further reflection on notions of ethnographic writing, academic research and on the specific context of working with organized Maya people in Guatemala, for me, with the *Grupo de Mujeres por la Paz*.

These views expressed by Don Miguel on the function and importance of language have consequences for the writing of ethnography. In response to the growing presence of third world authors on the academic stage and the raised voices of those whom the ethnographer previously considered consultants at best, anthropology began to question traditional forms of cultural description and analysis. James Clifford became one of the key voices in this discussion as he noted a crisis in establishing who has the authority in ethnographic representation. His essay "On Ethnographic Authority" (1988) brings this into focus and casts a critical eye on the various

strategies being used in the discipline to deal with this crisis. He concludes that authority can be solicited by various means: through claims of experience where simply participating gives the ethnographer the authority to describe a foreign culture; through interpretation in which the theoretical constructs of the ethnographer provide the authority for analysis; through textual representations of dialogue in which authority is shared between the ethnographer and a key “informant”; and through polyphonic representations in which multiple voices share ethnographic authority. Thus, Clifford says, the ethnographer has tried to create various strategies for establishing ethnographic authority in the text, but the central dilemma remains dealing with an “informant” who “talks back,” leaving the ethnographer uneasy about what gives him the right to write.<sup>3</sup>

However, Clifford’s reflection on the crisis in anthropology does not go beyond the predicament of who can represent culture. These same questions of authority have additional implications when we consider the effects that these representations have, an issue that Clifford and many who followed him left untouched. This is the point that Don Miguel belabors to me in introducing his history. It is not enough that he is a respected leader in his community who has been given the authority to present these stories. He knows that the action of narration has direct consequences and takes responsibility for them. He asks the same of the ethnographer. He essentially takes a politically engaged discourse-centered approach to the history of his community. For Don Miguel, history is created, reflected and politicized in its retelling.<sup>4</sup> If we are to participate in the process of narration either as narrators or as listeners, we must realize the

---

<sup>3</sup> I used this gendered pronoun consciously as subsequent responses criticized Clifford for his failure to include feminist contributions to these questions that were contemporary to his own writing.

<sup>4</sup> In that it takes as central the position that discourse is the locus for the creation and reflection of culture, don Miguel’s position is not unlike the discourse-centered approach advanced by Urban 1991, Sherzer 1987, 2001. However, his emphasis on particular and severe political implications of this approach is unique.

powerful potential of this act and handle it responsibly. We must be conscious of and reflect critically on the active power of language, particularly of stories. Don Miguel makes a call for ethnographic responsibility.

The form that ethnographic responsibility takes inevitably varies depending on the context in which we are working. In my work with the *Grupo de Mujeres por la Paz*, I have found that it means a fully collaborative methodology both in the collection of data and in its analysis. It has meant a research plan that has been discussed first with the group's directive board and then with the membership such that it is accomplished according to the group's organizational principles in which every member participates equally in every aspect of the project, and as such, each member receives equally any funds that may be available for consultant fees or materials. It also means that the only research that is undertaken is that which the group sees as furthering their objectives in some way while respecting these organizational principles. As a result, my work is based largely on the women's discourse during meetings, group work days, collective discussion about research itself and about topics for research, and in personal interactions with all of them. These words have been transcribed in collaboration with each one of the members, most often in small teams. Analysis has arisen out of meetings about the work that we are doing, and I have discussed any further analysis of my own with the directive board, and it has been reviewed in general assemblies with the entire group. The following are some of the themes that have arisen from this process that we have identified as important to understanding the discourse of the *Grupo de Mujeres por la Paz*. I present it as an ethnographically situated example which can shed light on questions of what it means to think about the study of language and society in terms of ethnographic responsibility.

*Discourses of War***Juana Ramirez Sanchez<sup>5</sup>**

**J:** Como kam ta'an sol; de una vez murió.

**J:** He died because of the soldiers; all of a sudden he died.

**J and ML:** Aah.

**J and ML:** Aah.

**J:** Yel ib'aal u xaak ati. Kamyá ib'aal.

**J:** My boy didn't have a father. His father died.

**ML:** Kam kat ib'ana?

**ML:** What happened?

**J:** Jub'a ma'l tiro kat ok sti' ta'an u sol.

**J:** A bullet entered his body because of the soldiers.

**ML:** Tu ko'm?

**ML:** In the village?

**J:** Tu ko'm, tu ko'm. Kam b'eni vale' ijub'al sol. Kaa in de una vez. Teq'o sol u voksam toksa tu xamal. De una vez unmuñ kuxh kan vet vib'. As pal vet u sole' sum vatz eche vile'. Jit til in. Kaa vet in. Pero untzumel yakuxh kamoj kan. De una vez ok tira ti ivatz exh tel ti ixhikin. Ok u ma't ti iq'ab exh tatin iq'ab, ile'. Ok ti iq'ab tzila' kuch'ul u baj. Tzila' pajtej de una vez elch'uul u b'aj tu toj. Ech lejat u pap, kat ech u lejat u pap. Eche uve kat u b'an unido, pet yel u esposo ati. Yenu esposo primero.

**J:** In the village, in the village. Like I said, the soldier shot him. I just stayed. The soldier took my clothes set them on fire. I stayed hidden. But the soldier passed right in front of me, like this [*she indicates with her hand*]. He didn't see me. I stayed. But my husband died there right away. Right away a shot went into his eye and came out his ear. Another one went in his arm here and the bone came out. The bone came out in his foot too. That's how the man was found, that's how the man was found (that's how the man found him?). That's how it was that I was united<sup>6</sup>, but I don't have a husband. I don't have my first husband anymore.

Doña Juana first told me this story relatively soon after I had arrived in Nebaj, and although I had heard many other stories freely offered with similar accounts of brutality, this

<sup>5</sup> Here **J** refers to Juana Ramírez Sánchez and as in all further transcripts, **ML** refers to the author.

<sup>6</sup> living together but not legally married

story still raised fundamental questions for me about what my role was. Why write about violence and how do we write about it? The stories of mass violence are so personal and intimate while at the same time often being public through legal and political battles. In stories told with unbearable pain through both individual and collective struggles, we see lives that have been forever destroyed. Something about relaying the stories again, outside of their original context, removed from their original narrator who lived these events, seems almost grotesque. It raises questions of how anyone, much less an anthropologist who most likely did not personally experience the violence, can represent such brutality with words. In addition, the material itself of widespread death is so important that the need to treat this information sensitively and, most of all, responsibly, is great. It is an ethical, academic and personal quandary for the anthropologist. As such, it has become a topic to which anthropologists have devoted increasing attention. Alexander Laban Hinton recently published a book on the subject, and several panels devoted to the topic were scheduled to be presented at the 2004 meetings of the American Anthropological Association. In the context of Guatemala, Victoria Sanford (2003) makes a valuable contribution to this question in reviewing the relevant literature as well as contemplating dilemmas about the knowability of terror and how to place it in history. Also working in Guatemala, but reflecting more broadly as well, Kay Warren reflects on the ability of the anthropologist to write about violence saying, “‘while there are horrors I know but cannot recount’ it is still possible for anthropologists to ‘work to understand the violence of memories only partially revealed and partially revealable.’” (Warren 1993)

Additionally, the work of Rigoberta Menchú, a K’ichee’ Mayan human rights activist has brought this discussion to a broader audience. In her 1983 book, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y*

*así me nació la conciencia* (published in the US as *I, Rigoberta Menchú*), she employs narrative strategies which offer both a collective and a personal account of the years of violence.<sup>7</sup> Coming as it did at the height of the years of violence in the Mayan highlands, her book was crucial in drawing attention to the atrocities being committed by forces of the Guatemalan state. In part because of her account, increasing foreign and domestic pressure on both the Guatemalan state and its US government supporters contributed to a decline in violence and the signing of the 1996 peace accords. Menchú's recounting of her own story and that of the Mayan people of Guatemala had real world consequences. However, in 1999 David Stoll, an anthropologist whose prior work focused on the Ixil area near Menchu's home municipality of Uspantán, published his book, *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*. Here he critiqued Menchú's book, taking his position in the debate about the possibility of writing appropriately about mass violence. He claimed that Rigoberta Menchú could not tell the story of "all poor Guatemalans," but rather only a highly positioned story which itself was not "factual" and therefore not reliable, as it conflated multiple accounts with personal experience (Stoll 1999). This critique has been rejected by many ardent voices in the academy and among Guatemalan activists as being sensationalist (in accusing a Nobel Peace Prize winner of lying, Stoll garnered front-page headlines) and out of touch with Mayan narrative practices which include, among other things, repetition and collectivization of stories into "master narratives" of a community (see Rus 1999, Smith 1999, Sanford 1999 and Arias 2001 ed). This entire debate has been extremely emotionally and politically charged and is evidence of the stakes involved in what we can write about genocide, who can write it, and how it should be done if it is to be done at all.

---

<sup>7</sup> Here too questions about authorship and the role of the anthropologist in the narration of Mayan histories is an issue as much has been made of the role of Elizabeth Burgos Debray in editing Menchu's story.

Thinking about it for myself and in my own work, I find that I can write absolutely nothing about the *Grupo de Mujeres por la Paz* without writing about the violence. It is in terms of the violence that the women I work with have organized, in terms of the violence that I was received into Nebaj and into the community of women, in terms of the violence that my friendships have been built, and in terms of the violence that the women frame their daily lives and their work as a group. Even more than the academic responsibility to accurately represent the anthropological phenomena I have personally witnessed, the women themselves impose on me the responsibility to include their stories of violence in any account of the work that we have done. They do this through example, modeling for me how they present themselves to others by beginning with stories of their wartime experience, and through direct instruction -- whenever we have worked together to communicate the group's needs to others (through written applications for funding or in meetings with international NGOs or individual visitors), they tell me that we need to begin with an account of the time of violence. They see it as important that the world know that they live in poverty, but not because they don't want to or don't know how to work, but because the Guatemalan government, in collusion with the US government, actively destroyed their families, their communities and their economy, and as such, the women seek accountability from governments and citizens alike in causing the poverty and suffering of Mayan communities.

As the best academic work stems from the researcher taking seriously the concerns of the people with whom he or she is working, I will take to heart the repeated request made of me to

translate these stories. In my work I have not only reproduced the women's stories, but I have examined what social realities the women are reproducing or constructing for us and for each other, drawing on both the women's explicit reflections on these questions and linguistic data drawn from their discourse. Just as in elaborating the discourse-centered approach to language and culture Joel Sherzer discusses the properties of discourse as both reflective and constitutive of social reality, so too I put forth an understanding of the past that the women reflect in their stories as well as the new social reality that they are constructing through their stories (Sherzer 1990: 1)

### ***Brief Framework of Narrative Analysis***

The particular type of discourse that I focus on here is personal narrative. However, the term personal narrative is deceptive because as Simone Remijnse reflected on her work on narrated memories of violence among civil patrollers in Joyabaj, Guatemala, "memory is always a social act and never a purely individual one" (Remijnse 2002: 39). Citing Burke, she goes on, "although 'Individuals remember in the literal, physical sense,' it is 'social groups which determine what is "memorable" and also how it will be remembered'" (Burke 1989: 98 in Remijnse 2002). In addition, just as memory is a way for the individual to define his or her identity, it also serves as the foundation upon which a social group bases its representation of itself. Thus memory is not only produced at both individual and social levels, but it also functions at individual and social levels. Individually, the women use their stories of violence as part of a longer process of healing and of personal struggle. Collectively, the women use discourses of wartime violence to build common ground in order to establish a basis for

collective action, to construct alternate feminine identities which allow for political action, and to draw on cultural models that provide the political space for organizing. Understanding both what is being reflected and what is being constructed in these stories will move us towards an understanding of what the women are actively doing in their choices to narrate.

### **The Stories of the *Grupo de Mujeres por la Paz***

#### ***Violence as part of daily life today – pervasiveness of the discourse of violence***

In many of my first conversations with the women of the *Grupo*, I began by asking them about their children. It quickly became apparent that the women could not talk about their children, about the most basic aspects of their lives, without also talking about the war. Many of the women could not simply answer “I have four children.” and leave it at that. Much more common was, “I had six children, but two died in the war.” War could no longer be described as an exceptional circumstance, but rather after twenty years of violence, it had to be the norm which defined their daily lives both in the past and today (see also Zur 1998). This experience and the resultant contemporary social implications for the women are reflected through their discourse. This why Doña Juana Ramírez Sánchez concludes the story of watching the murder of her first husband by army soldiers by explaining that this is why the man that she is with now is her second husband.<sup>8</sup> She can only tell me about their current family life by telling me about

---

<sup>8</sup> Bureaucratic reasons, often including incomplete documentation of deaths and women’s inability to pay processing fees, prevent women from being able to legally marry a second husband, as a result, Nan Xhiv is “united” and not legally married with her second husband.

her violent past. In short, the women told me their stories of war because they had no other way to talk about their lives.

However, this is not always the case for all Mayan communities at all stages of recent Guatemalan history. Work in Mayan communities throughout Guatemala, including one study done in the Ixil area, repeatedly describes women who do not speak about the years of violence. Much of the literature on Guatemala, particularly that dealing with women who are victims of war, reports women's overwhelming fear of telling stories. Given that such a response is both logical and expected after so many years of violent repression of indigenous voices, the questions of why the Ixil women of the *Grupo de Mujeres por la Paz* felt that they could share their stories and why it was in fact so important for them to do so on a regular basis become increasingly important.

### ***What makes storytelling possible?***

In my experiences with the women of the *Grupo de Mujeres por la Paz* and even with their family members, the stories of violence during wartime have been constant. Dinner time and then the hours that stretched on after the meal were when stories were most often told, but I also heard about family members killed or livelihoods destroyed in stories told while sharing a cup of coffee, walking through the *milpa*, going to the market, preparing a meal or participating in a meeting. The degree to which accounts of violence pervaded my daily life in Nebaj made it all the more surprising for me to read Joan Walton Williams' dissertation. Her fieldwork, finished only one year before I began my work took place in a town in the Ixil area which she leaves

unnamed because of the residual fear of the women living there. Correspondingly she also omits the names of the individual women, noting that several women were afraid to speak to her at all and many of those who would speak did so on conditions of anonymity.

However, Williams was certainly not alone in her observations. In fact her findings were much more representative of a state of normalized fear that has been described as characteristic of the Guatemalan countryside over the last thirty years. Linda Green identifies fear in Guatemala as “a chronic condition embedded in social memory” (cited in Sanford 2003: 24). Likewise, writing of her work with a group of K’ichee’ widows from 1988 to 1998, Judith Zur argues that “repressive silence” continues among the women such that “violence continues long after the atrocities cease” (Zur, 1998). It is precisely this atmosphere of fear and repression that the women of the group are contesting through their storytelling from within the organizational setting of the *Grupo de Mujeres por la Paz*. Their act of narration is an act of defiance against the longstanding culture of fear that has resulted from the genocide. Many Ixiles have chosen to resist this fear through the act of narration, insisting that they be recognized by name as the ones who have survived this violence. In fact, another community organization related to the *Grupo* was offended by my repeated and careful questioning about including their names along with their histories until finally one group leader responded that if the stories had been lies, then they would hide their names, but instead they wanted their names to stand as testimony to the truth of what they recounted.

However, a sheer act of will alone is not enough to create the space needed for these stories to be told. Indeed, several women of the *Grupo* make reference to fear that they have felt

in the past or when talking to strangers about their histories. In response to my question during a meeting about why the women felt that they could share their stories now, Magdalena Baca de Paz said,

B'ii chaj chit ni qalvete' tan auk xoovichile' ta' kat el vet sukuk'atz.	At every turn we tell our stories because apparently our fear has left us, our sadness has left us.
--	---

Another woman, Cecilia Pérez Chávez, adds,

Ma't xool va la ul vete', nu kuxoove' b'ata' yel o' ootzin qi'b' tuk chalab' maas.	If another person comes, we're afraid because we don't know them well.
--	--

However for the group today, this fear felt in the past or among strangers does not stop the women from wanting the experiences of each person to be included in representations of the group. Given these repeated statements of initial fear with outsiders, I was quite explicit in explaining to the group that once we wrote down their histories in the present format, they could be read by anyone, so they should discuss their decision carefully. They agreed that nonetheless they would like their experiences documented. When I asked further what stories they would like included, Doña María Raymundo, an older woman with significant organizing experience twice made the point that in meetings,

Kayil chit o' la alon. Kayil chitexh ta' ootzin tetz. Ye'le ta' va maj kuxh o' ootzin u ch'o'je' la q'ala.	All of us are going to tell. All of you have your own knowledge. It's not just one of us who knows about the war.
--	---

Again, the women of the group expressed the idea that just as the struggle during and after the war was experienced by all of the women, so too it must be represented as a shared experience.

Thus no single woman should be made to stand as spokesperson, and, for better or worse, the

experiences of the past, the recounting of them, and the consequences of this act of narration belong to all of the women. For them, discussion in a meeting constitutes public representation whereby equality of experience among members must be the message expressed, and they agreed that this philosophy extended to written representations as well.

Thus a number of historical and political factors as well as the collective organizing of the group have made storytelling possible in ways that were not possible in the cases that Zur and Williams observed. I attribute part of the discrepancies between the climate of fear described by Zur and Williams and the *Grupo's* desire to share their stories to the historical context in which organizing is occurring. Zur writes of war widows meeting at a time when the most violent years of war have passed but when the peace accords have not yet been signed. In talking with the group's treasurer and most active organizer, Marta Cobo Raymundo, about these differences between the *Grupo's* behavior and that of other groups, she remarked that the women would not have been as willing to tell stories in years past. For her, the signing of the peace accords is significant. She and the other women often refer to this as a turning point in the period after the violence as well as a symbolic moment for them in their personal lives. The following is an exchange Marta and I had on the topic:

**ML:** Entonces hay otras cosas que estoy leyendo cuando otra gente vienen aquí y vienen a platicar con la gente, dicen que la gente no quieren platicar que aunque si van a rogar que cuenten sus historias que no cuentan. Entonces lo que estoy pensando es, y porque esta gente aquí, a muchos les gusta contar sus cosas, y de plano cuando llegaron esta gente antes que no querían decir, en mismo de Nebaj fue.

**ML:** Then there are other things that I am reading. When other people come here, and they come to talk with the people, they say that the people don't want to talk, that even if they are going to beg them to tell their stories, they won't tell. Then what I'm thinking is, and why do these people here like to tell their stories so much, and it seems like these people before didn't even want to say, and they were right here in Nebaj too.

**M:** Pues tal vez ya hace años. Hace mucho tiempo porque como ya hace años todavía tenían los miedos para contar o decir algo o saber qué quiere la gente, ah? Pues tal vez con eso no cuentan la gente, pero como ya saben todos de que eso fue antes de que firmaron la paz, digo yo, pero ahora saben ellos que hay instituciones, y por eso ya todas las señoras que se están participando, digamos ya la mayor parte sienten que en cualquier lado hay grupos, con eso ya tienen (?) Porque hay instituciones quien les va a apoyar si hay alguna cosa o algún problema que pasa por sus historias de ellas o por algo. Entonces ya tienen sus derechos.

**M:** Well maybe years ago. A long time ago because years ago they were afraid to tell or to say something or who knows what the people (who come) want, ah? Well maybe with that the people don't tell, but since now everybody knows that that was before they signed the peace I say, but now they know that there's some institution, and that's why now all the women that are participating, let's say that the majority feel that there are groups everywhere, and with that now they have (?). Because there are institutions who will support them if there is something or some problem that happens to them because of their histories or because of something. Then now they have their rights.

Marta affirms that in the past many women were afraid and refused to tell their stories out of fear of a visitor's intentions. However, with the 1996 signing of the peace accords, she and the other women feel that institutions will protect them. Although the signing of the peace accords has surely not meant an end to state violence or the establishment of reliable institutions of the state, Marta and many other women as well, feel that it has opened some political space in which Mayan institutions can function.

The women Marta speaks about here worry about physical retributions, but also, when I pressed Marta on the point, she said that they were worried about others using their stories for economic gain. Again, she cites institutions as being a place that women can go to for recourse. They can turn to the *Defensoría Maya* or *Derechos Humanos*, Marta says. The *Defensoría Maya* is a Mayan cultural and legal organization formed in 1993 to deal with the effects of genocide and the larger political and historical issues of oppression and marginalization facing Mayan people in Guatemala. It describes itself as, "an organized and conscious expression of the

Pueblo Maya to educate, promote, denounce and defend before the law the rights of the Indigenous Pueblos of Guatemala and to resolve problems in the communities through the application of Mayan Law” (my own translation; original at <http://www.laneta.apc.org/rci/defmay/>). The *Defensoría Maya* has played a key role in the formation of the *Grupo* as both the former national president of the organization, Francisco Raymundo, an Ixil man, and the former local office staff in Nebaj provided the group with technical support and the promise of legal support without which the group might never have been organized. While the *Grupo* has no direct tie to what is referred to in the Ixil area as “*Derechos Humanos*,” the Human Rights Procurator (PDH), it is an institution established by the peace accords which has some legitimacy for the women, although fewer women have had direct interaction with the PDH.

When I asked Marta about the *ministerio público*, the municipal court, she says that women do not go there to seek recourse. When I questioned her further about this, she admits that perhaps a woman might go there, but in the *ministerio*,

Nunca van a dar su resultado, o a veces que se dejan por el dinero.

They are never going to give results, or sometimes they let themselves be taken by money.

A reputation of corruption and general mistrust have eroded faith in the *ministerio público* making other institutions, such as the *Defensoría Maya* and *Derechos Humanos*, the place most Ixiles look to for problem solving. Thus, if the women were to feel that someone was using their stories inappropriately, particularly in a way that put them in danger, or was unfairly making a profit from them, they see these institutions as possible resources. For the women, the

peace accords have opened the space for institutions like the *Defensoría Maya* and *Derechos Humanos*, and these institutions have in turn created what Victoria Sanford calls a “public space for memory of violence” (2003: 18).

Likewise, the great numbers of community groups that have proliferated in the Ixil area since the signing of the accords give women an added sense of security. Again Marta emphasizes the peace accords as a turning point in a meeting with North American representatives of an NGO saying,

Ya están libre ahorita, ya que se firmó la paz, entonces ya ahorita vamos a empezar y ayudarlos cómo salir en adelante pues y cómo dejar la necesidad atrás.

They're free now (the women), now that the peace is signed. So now we're going to start and help them to move forward, well, and how to leave need behind.

Here she ties the signing of the peace accords to the ability of their group to organize and begin the work of economic reconstruction. This is what leads Marta to say to me several months later,

Por eso ya todas las señoras que se están participando, digamos ya la mayor parte sienten que en cualquier lado hay grupos.

That's why now all the women that are participating, let's say that the majority feel that there are groups everywhere.

Equally important to the conditions of storytelling as the historical moment is the identity of the woman telling the story and that of the women listening to it. Marta notes that a woman who participates in a group is more likely to share a story than one who does not participate in any group, particularly if she is only sharing with other women in the group whom she already knows well. In the *Grupo de Mujeres por la Paz*, after eight years of meeting together, the women have established a sense of trust among themselves which enables them to share stories. Marta says,

Como ya es una señora parte del grupo y saben, saben muy bien que se han conocido ya de antes. Todas las cosas ya se pueden contar así, pero otras personas, no creo que lo cuentan. Si nosotros les decimos que ustedes cuentan sus historias entonces tal vez allí ellas empiezan a contar, pero al contrario no solo van a encontrar una persona en la calle, “voy a contar mis historias!”

Since a woman is already part of the group, and they know, they know very well that they know each other from before. Everything can be told now like that, but other people, I don't think they'd tell them. If we (the directive board) are going to tell them that you all are going to tell your stories then maybe there they will start to tell, but on the contrary they're not just going to find a person in the street and say, “I'm going to tell my stories!”

Marta affirms that the sense of knowing with whom they are dealing is vital to the women's inclination to share stories. In fact, the sense of trust among the women today is such that Marta likens storytelling among women in the group to telling stories in the family, a practice with a long history in Mayan communities. Marta says,

Como te digo, porque ya para ellas, ya somos una familia. Entonces, ya no hay necesidad que le vamos a pedir que lo cuenten, pero si tienen ganas, cuentan ellas.

Like I tell you, that for them, we are a family now. Then now there's no need for us to ask them to tell stories, but if they want to tell, they tell.

This comment and other similar remarks by members of the group reference a strategy for building group cohesion that I have discussed in greater detail elsewhere (García, Gómez de García and Axelord 2005), but that the women feel that they can make the analogy between group and family is indicative of a sense of trust which allows storytelling to happen in this setting.

Because the trust that they have built up among themselves makes them feel comfortable telling their stories, it is much more difficult for them to tell stories with someone not from the group. Also, because the group provides them with a measure of security, they feel more

comfortable telling their stories with outsiders when it is within the context of the group. For example, Marta says that she will not tell her stories to just anyone,

Si es igual que me para alguien en la calle “contarme tus historias,” pues “no tengo tiempo” eh? Depende cómo, cómo va a hacer también, o cómo me va a hablar.

It’s like if someone stops me, if someone in the street, ‘tell me your stories,’ well, ‘I don’t have time.’ eh? It depends on how they do it too, or how they’re going to talk to me.

When pressed on the hypothetical situation in which an unknown person comes to the group asking for stories, Marta responds,

Entonces *tal vez* porque cuando ya entre el grupo y está pidiendo que viene tal parte y pues está bien.

Then *maybe* because when we are already among the group and they are asking, and say that they come from such and such place, and well that's fine.

Thus the fact that a visitor approaches the women from the setting of a group meeting makes them more likely to share their experiences.

Coming among the group also helps to avoid concerns about financial impropriety. Since the women know that there is money to be made from their stories (through project/grant applications, academics whom they see as making money from their words, sympathetic NGO workers, even a charitably inclined tourist etc), it is all the more important that stories be told in the context of the group where all women have equal access to any possible funds. The concern that economic resources be divided evenly is of great importance to the women of the group. The women originally organized the group so that together they would all have an equal chance of receiving any economic remuneration for damage suffered during the war, and there are frequent lengthy and impassioned discussions about how to ensure financial parity among group members. Marta uses the specific vocabulary of fair distribution of funds (*parejo*) to explain the importance of having requests for stories be made within the group.

Pero como digo, para ellas ahorita, todo es parejo, igual, porque ya la necesidad lo obliga a uno también.

But like I tell you, for them now, everything is equal (*parejo*), the same, because necessity obliges one too.

Despite the talk about peace accords and the security that institutions and participating in groups give the women, Marta still reports,

Digo yo porque muchas señoras con quienes he platicado antes dicen que no es bueno contar las historias o no es bueno decir las cosas porque todavía uno trae los temores pues.

That's what I say because I have talked with many women before and they say that it's not good to tell the stories or it's not good to tell things because one has fear still.

Thus even though Marta says that the group setting mitigates the possible complications that come with telling stories, other women are still afraid. Though the climate of fear left by genocide is not absent from the *Grupo de Mujeres por la Paz*, historical factors like the signing of the peace accords, structural factors like the presence of institutions with a degree of legitimacy, and social factors like the support of the other women in the group make storytelling possible for these women even if it can be an emotional and at times even fearful process. As a result, discourse practices revolving around women's storytelling became an available strategy for women in their individual and collective processes of resistance of the government's carefully cultivated climate of fear.

### ***Conclusions***

The metacommentary of the women of the *Grupo de Mujeres por la Paz* is interesting in terms of the light that it sheds on our understanding of this particular period of Guatemalan history. It is also instructive insofar as it reveals much about emic classifications and analyses of Ixil Mayan discourse. However, what I would like to propose here is that the implications go beyond this regional or even disciplinary scope and respond to what Don Miguel Rivera, the Mayan priest cited at the beginning of this article, demands of a listener, what I have called ethnographic responsibility. Through these reflections on their own speech, the women provide guidelines for

us as listeners and analysts. By introducing stories of violence into daily conversation, they motion towards an understanding of this period of history not as exceptional but as something terrible that has become a part of their everyday which must be included in any analysis of their current work. By using their stories to establish relationships of teaching with the listener, they validate their own authority as tellers and knowledge producers which must then be reflected in any analysis that the ethnographer produces. In explicitly framing their stories as all the same, the women direct us towards taking a community based outlook to their stories, seeing a “personal narrative” not just as the experience of a single individual but as something indicative of a shared history. And in emphasizing that the decision to narrate is an act of collective strength even while they fully recognize lingering fear, they resist the terror that the violence instilled in Mayan communities. For Don Miguel and for the women of the *Grupo*, the stories that they tell are politically, socially and culturally situated, and to take them out of these contexts would not only be analytically misdirected but also ethnographically irresponsible. As such, Don Miguel makes reference to the Spanish taking the words of the Maya and changing them until they became something else which were ultimately destructive to the Maya, and the women of the *Grupo* cite a long history in which others try to speak for them only so as to take advantage of the women’s own words. Both Don Miguel and the women of the *Grupo* demand that those who wish to represent them in academic writing recognize the importance of the words that storytellers themselves have used to represent their experience and analysis. They are not, as Don Miguel puts it, simply the “tools,” the “machetes” of academic projects, but rather they have their own ideas and conclusions which must be recognized in their own right. In essence, they require the inclusion and analysis of extended transcripts of spoken language. These speakers present their stories not as isolated pieces of discourse but as words that they are using

as social action, and as such both the text and its social significance must be central to our own representations. Paying close analytic attention to both of these elements is an important way in which we can begin to respect Don Miguel's call to ethnographic responsibility, an obligation that extends beyond the Ixil area of Guatemala.

**References**

- Burgos, Elizabeth (ed). 1983. *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*. Verso: London.
- Clifford, James. 1988. *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- García, María Luz with Jule Gómez de García and Melissa Axelrod. 2005. "The Construction of Collectivity in Historical Narratives of Ixil Mayan Women." CILLA II: Second Conference on Indigenous Languages of Latin America. October, 2005, Austin, TX. Conference proceedings
- Hinton, Alexandar Laban. 2002. *Annihilating Difference: The Anthropology of Genocide*.
- Rus, Jan. 1999. "Introduction." *Latin American Perspectives*, Issue 109, Vol. 26 No. 6, November 1999, 38-46.
- Sanford, Victoria. 1999. "Between Rigoberta Menchú and La Violencia: Deconstructing David Stoll's History of Guatemala." *Latin American Perspectives*, Issue 109, Vol. 26 No. 6, November 1999, 38-46.
- Sanford, Victoria. 2003. *Buried Secrets: Truth and Human Rights in Guatemala*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sherzer, Joel. 1987. A Discourse-Centered Approach to Language and Culture. *American Anthropologist* 89:295-309
- Sherzer, Joel. 1990. *Verbal Art in San Blas: Kuna Culture through Its Discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sherzer, Joel. 2003. *Stories, Myths, Chants and Songs of the Kuna Indians*. Austin: The University of Texas Press.
- Smith, Carol. 1999. "Why Write an Expose of Rigoberta Menchu?" *Latin American Perspectives*, Issue 109, Vol. 26 No. 6, November 1999, 38-46.
- Stoll, David. 1999. *Rigoberta Menchu and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Tedlock, Dennis. 1983. *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation*. Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania.

Urban, Greg. 1991. An Approach to Culture and Language. In *A Discourse-Centered Approach to Culture*. pp. 1-28. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Warren, Kay. 1993. *The Violence Within: Cultural and Political Opposition in Divided Nations*. Boulder: Westview Press.

Zur, Judith N. 1998. *Violent Memories: Mayan War Widows in Guatemala*. Boulder: Westview Press.