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Buried Secrets: Truth and Human Rights in Guatemala (review)

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Finally, while the book discusses indigenous movements in Brazil, Colombia and Guatemala, it unfortunately neglects case studies in Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador, countries where the indigenous population is a greater proportion of the national population and thus may add greater relevance to the trends underlined in this book.

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Victoria Sanford. **Buried Secrets: Truth and Human Rights in Guatemala.** New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. xviii and 313 pp., maps, photographs, notes, and index. \$35.00 cloth, \$ 19.95 paper (ISBN 1-4039-6023-2).

Victoria Sanford's *Buried Secrets* makes a valuable contribution to our understanding about how rural Guatemalans come to grips with the death and destruction that dominated their lives over the past forty years. Through the voices of over 400 massacre survivors, former soldiers, civil patrollers, and insurgent combatants, which Sanford documented during her years of participation on teams exhuming mass graves, she writes a book about *La Violencia* in highland Guatemala from the perspective of rural Maya survivors. Guatemalans use the term *La Violencia* when referring to the massacres in 626 villages and 200,000 civilian victims of a thirty six year-long civil war. *Buried Secrets* is a difficult read simply because, in parts, tears flood the eyes of readers who wade through the traumatic memories of massacre survivors. If you want to learn more about how rural Guatemalans slowly come to terms with a horrific past and how academics theorize about how those impacted by the violence conduct their lives in post-war societies, Sanford's book must rest open in your hands.

In ten detailed chapters, supplemented by extensive notes and citations at the end of the book (which makes for annoying flipping back and forth if one wants to read in context), Sanford outlines how testimonies play an integral role in the exhumation process because they help us understand "local attempts to make meaning of the experience of survival" (p. 26). Sanford also attempts to understand the context and structure of Guatemala's bloody past, again through the voice of survivors. This talking about the past, Sanford stresses, is vital to transitional justice in Guatemala where survivors seek to rebuild full lives and communities. Finally, in *Buried Secrets* Sanford document how communities move to rebuild their lives by requesting exhumations and formal burial of victims, demanding public recognition of the truth, and in some cases, calling for justice and prosecution of perpetrators of past crimes. Now I leave the summary of the book behind to focus on the weaknesses and strengths of Sanford's contribution to our understanding of Guatemala's grisly past and uncertain future.

First and foremost, this book should stand as a monument to all Guatemalans who fell victim to the gun and machete, not just the Maya. Sanford follows the worn and tired track of many social scientists before her by focusing exclusively on Maya victims. Lest we forget in our academic discussions, even the word "Maya" is a misnomer and rarely used by Guatemala's indigenous people. Instead, they refer to themselves as "naturales," "gente de corte o traje" (people of traditional dress), "campesino," or "indígena." When I ask rural indigenous folk about the use of the word "Maya," they often retort "ah, nuestros antepasados" (ah, our ancestors). Sanford discusses at length genocide against the Maya. Yet, often in the same paragraph, Sanford mentions that 17 percent of the

200,000 victims were not Maya. So then, what of those 34,000 non-Maya Guatemalans? These 34,000 Ladinos (non-Maya) slip off the pages of this book just as they fail to make the budgets of non-governmental organizations and the proposals of western academics. By ignoring rural Ladinos, we perpetuate a long-held and often academic created Maya/Ladino dichotomy, which in many cases simply does not exist. In this case, using the words of Sanford, "when people become numbers, their stories can be lost." The lives of Ladinos, once again remain lost.

Second, in a book about rural Guatemalans and their struggles to survive Sanford spends an inordinate amount of time debunking the work of fellow anthropologists and social scientists. Specifically, Sanford contests the interpretations of David Stoll and Yvon Le Bot. Rather than let her interpretation of Guatemala's past stand on its own merit, Sanford takes up the "Stoll debate" and disparages other voices that interpret recent events, albeit at different scales of analysis. This almost personal attack on other interpretations detracts from the power of Sanford's book, but also raises the hackles of readers who are well versed in Guatemala's history. Sanford laments that Stoll's history (and that of others) is "devoid of facts, lacks critical analysis, and has no room for the testimonies of survivors" (p. 62). If we want to pick holes in the work of others, we can easily point to the work of Sanford, who, like many before her, cannot include all voices and consider Guatemala's violent past from all scales. Indeed, Sanford must consider her own words carefully when she writes, "when anthropologists, sociologists, and historians fail to consider Maya [and the Ladinos, I ask?] as actors in their own history, they commit a discursive silencing of human agency. They compound the terror of La Violencia by not taking into account the voices of the survivors – in effect, they silence them. Thus, however unwittingly, they compound the political, social, cultural, physical, and material violence with discursive violence" (p. 71). Does Sanford commit any discursive violence of her own? Indeed, Sanford falls into the trap she so readily accuses Stoll and Le Bot of being "First World scholar[s] speaking in the names of the subaltern subject" (p. 200). The pages Sanford uses to criticize Stoll and Le Bot, and what she calls their "validation of army propaganda" about the causes of the massacres, are well wasted in a text that is supposedly dedicated to the voices of the survivors. Likewise, such strong sentiments result in long replies in book reviews like this. All of our time could be used more constructively. Moreover, if Sanford criticizes the views of Stoll and Le Bot, who state that guerrilla insurgency unleashed the power of the state, she must cite the many guerrilla voices that speak to the conflict. Sanford omits key works by guerrilla leader Mario Payeras (1987, 1996, 1998) and female guerrillas like Yolanda Colom (1998), who support the theses of Stoll and Le Bot.

Like many of us who conduct lengthy research in other parts of the world, Sanford accumulated years of intimate knowledge about a country and its people. This long-term exposure to a complex place like Guatemala makes writing a focused book about a single issue a difficult task because writers want to include all their ideas and release, almost in a cathartic way, the burden of Guatemala's truth (e.g., Nelson 1999). Indeed, Sanford, while holding a laudable goal of suggesting, "that those best able to historicize violence are those who have survived it" (p. 14), often drifts away from the primary purpose of letting survivors speak in an attempt to redress past human rights violations. For example, the voices and memories of Guatemala's survivors that bravely make their way to the pages of this book struggle to rise above academic rhetoric and into the hands of whom this text could be, most valuable – Guatemalans.

Constructive criticism aside, Victoria Sanford produced a masterpiece here. Where Guatemalan voices come through, they come through forcefully. Sanford also provides remarkable detail about the atmosphere of exhumations, the continual fear of simply

being Guatemalan, and the newly-found bravery and hope of a people who refuse to submit to five centuries of repression – Maya and Ladino alike. This valuable volume takes those of us who study Latin America, violence around the world, and the difficult process of justice in post-war societies on a fruitful path of increased understanding about life after widespread massacres. The book will not serve well as an introductory text to Guatemala, but is aimed more at an academic audience already well-versed in recent Central American society. Thank you Victoria Sanford for courageous fieldwork and for bringing to light how rural Guatemalans can begin to rebuild their lives by first coming to terms with the truth.

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David Stoll. **Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans**. Boulder: Westview Press, 1999. xxi and 336 pp., notes, bibliography, and index. \$27.00 cloth (ISBN 0-8133-3574-4).

Controversy has surrounded the publication of David Stoll's book, *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*, from Day One and no review can begin without acknowledging this fact. Compelled to expose how a "valuable symbol can also be misleading," (p. x) Stoll challenges the icon of Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Rigoberta Menchú, by comparing her life story with local testimony and documentary sources. Stoll, a professor of anthropology at Middlebury College, contends that key points might not be true in the Guatemalan's testimonio — a first person narrative of individual and collective experiences — titled, *I Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (1984), and that "it is not the eyewitness account that it purports to be" (p. 70).

Rigoberta Menchú was the first indigenous woman to speak out about the repression and state sanctioned violence suffered by Guatemala's indigenous population in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In 1982, Menchú narrated her testimonio in Paris to anthropologist Elizabeth Burgos-Debray who soon published it as *I Rigoberta Menchú*. The power of Menchú's testimonio is its first person narrative — a form of speech that worked to change public consciousness about Guatemala and eventually spurred action towards a