

Preface

To Witness the Rage and Silence of Genocide in Río Negro and Pacux **By Catherine Nolin**

“Bearing witness,” like “solidarity” and “compassion” is a term worth rehabilitating.... Bearing witness is done on behalf of others, for their sake (even if those others are dead and forgotten).... No matter how great the pain of bearing witness, it will never be as great as the pain of those who endure, whether in silence or with cries...

Paul Farmer, *Bearing Witness* (2005, 28)

To Witness

To witness, listen, and write well about the cries and silences of life in contemporary Río Negro and Pacux is to write about post-genocide realities of struggle and strength. It is to write about pain and social suffering, on the one hand, and brutality and structural violence on the other. To carry out this daunting task, Nathan Einbinder opened his mind to critical questions of the deep connections between ‘development’ and violence and grappled with ensuing violent geographies at the scale of the individual to those at the scale of the community, nation, and onto the dominant transnational worlds of the World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank, and the American Government.

Nathan also opened his heart to the *testimonios* of community members and survivors, those who rage against the decades of injustice that followed displacement and genocide, as well as those often silenced in post-conflict realities of trauma, hunger, and dysfunction. In the pages to follow, Nathan (*final page, final paragraph) demonstrates what it looks like to bear witness as an academic and activist committed to ‘proclaiming that it is our duty to alert the international community of what is happening in the far corners in which we study.’

To Witness Together

Grahame Russell of Rights Action and I have co-organized delegation-style field schools to Guatemala since 2004 as part of our vision of transformative learning. As a former graduate student of mine, Nathan traveled with fellow university students and us many times over the years to explore issues of culture, rights, and power

through the experiences of state violence, genocide, and recovery in Guatemala. The most honorable way to do this work is through a commitment to the very human action of witnessing together. Witnessing is more than observing. *Témoignage*—the French word for witnessing—is the act of being willing to speak out about what we see happening in front of us. Bearing witness in the context of human rights atrocities and major crimes means a willingness to speak on behalf of the people we meet, to amplify their voices, and to bring abuses and intolerable situations to the public eye. This book is Nathan’s witness.

To Witness Together in Río Negro and Pacux

Back in 2008, two years before Nathan started this journey, Sebastian Iboy Osorio, President of the COCODE (community development organization) of Río Negro, quietly arrived in our hotel in Rabinal with his son Nelson while we listened to a talk by Fernando Suazo, a former activist Spanish priest who arrived here in 1984 (shortly after the series of massacres that hit Rabinal like a tidal wave in 1982). Fernando left the church and married into the Maya Achí culture and so offers a window into the Maya cosmivision in a way that few non-Maya can. We talked liberation theology, big business, neocolonization, and the process of recovering the historical memory of the years of genocide, silence, the culture of violence, and so much more.

Sebastian—I’m not sure how to put into words what a beautiful person he is. Sebastian was only 16 years old when, in 1982, his mother, father, sisters, brothers, cousins, aunts, uncles, and friends were ripped out of his life in a whirlwind of brutal violence. First, his father and brother were murdered in the Xococ massacre of February 13, 1982, not far from his home community (he wanted to go with them as they were called by the patrols to present themselves in Xococ to be accounted for by the military commissioner. But, his father told him that there might be violence, they may even be killed, so to please stay at home with his family). A month later, he was an eyewitness to the murder of 177 women and children on March 13, 1982, up the mountain from his home in Río Negro.

Sebastian recounted these events and the years of hiding in the mountains with Carlos Chen and others, meeting and marrying his wife Magdalena in a ditch while in hiding, and his eventual return to Río Negro a few years before to help with the REMHI project (the Catholic Church-driven recovery of historical memory project to document the human rights violations and genocide). On Mother’s Day, we awoke at 5:30 am to make the long, difficult, physically challenging walk up to that massacre site with Sebastian. The significance of making this journey with Sebastian on Mother’s Day to the place where so many women and children were brutally ripped from this world was not lost on our group. We were hot, tired, needing water, needing rests ... but always knowing that the women and children were forced to march up this mountain at gunpoint with no rest, no water, no hope. Sebastian quietly showed us where he hid, where he saw this horror took place, what he and Carlos found when they crept back a day later. He has given his *testimonio* before so he could recount these events calmly and clearly. But, of course, we could hardly breathe, we could barely speak.

Sebastian looked straight into the eyes of each of us and said that he thanked us a thousand times for being with him that morning. That he lost so much in this life and that our presence validated that it was not right, what happened was wicked, and that our connection to the place would be forever.

Sebastian, Cornelio, Cristobal and so many others came to put their trust in Nathan in the following years to bear witness to the story of Río Negro and Pacux. He is now part of the remembering, the resisting, and the hope for something better.

To Witness and Accompany

Through his devoted accompaniment of the communities of Río Negro and Pacux, Nathan is clear that the well-documented human rights violations cited here are ‘not accidents; they are not random in distribution or effect. Rights violations are, rather, a symptom of deeper pathologies of power and are linked intimately to the social conditions that so often determine who will suffer abuse and who will be shielded from harm’ (Farmer 2005, xiii). These social/political/economic/moral conditions and their devastating effects sit at the heart of Nathan’s critique of power, racism, extreme inequality, and neoliberal visions of ‘development’ in Guatemala. And they also offer the grounds on which truth- and justice-seeking activism emerges, grows, is threatened, moves forward.

The unequal power we witness in Guatemala—with a set of military and elite alliances that, by all measures, have ferociously targeted, repeatedly, a largely defenseless Indigenous and progressive Ladino majority population—generates brutality that is both obvious but quiet on the world stage. Through documentary analysis and face-to-face conversations with survivors in Río Negro and Pacux, Nathan reveals some of the logic of power and the expected outcomes of state-sponsored terror and total disregard for the human dignity of the indigenous Maya population. Structural violence, internal to the country and supported beyond the country’s borders, has, for centuries, enabled an intransigent elite/military/political minority to benefit from the suffering of the majority, and even call it ‘development.’

Throughout this book, Nathan Einbinder illustrates the devastating impacts of structural violence, of the still-shocking collaborations among the Guatemalan state/military/elite, the World Bank, American decision-makers and funders, among others. Their roles as the intellectual and material authors of the Chixoy Dam ‘development’ project and the crimes linked to it continue to go unpunished but change is happening.

We are all witnesses now, through the *testimonios* that Nathan gathered, to courageous struggles for dignity, truth, and justice.

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