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A political dimension of grief: Individual and social healing after conflict

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ABSTRACT

Mass violence is often characterized by the disappearance of the victims' bodies, preventing families from mourning. In Latin America, the exhumation processes emerged partially as a response to this situation. The search for the dead has always been a political issue, as the mourning of the victim's relatives has been presented as a "humanitarian" objective and a peace-building tool, thus articulating individual and social healing. Based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Guatemala, this article questions the representations of the legacy of violence between generations, as well as local indigenous representations of mourning through appropriated notions such as trauma and *susto*.

This article focuses on the practices through which forensic workers and families handle funerary rituals in the extra-ordinary context of exhumations of bodies deprived of any funerary rituals, as well as on the expectations associated with the exhumations as a technique for individual and social mourning. My research was oriented toward observing the official and non-official ritual practices implemented around human remains, in a post-conflict context, where exhumations are a politically and emotionally charged event. The present analysis is based on ethnographic fieldwork I conducted between 2016 and 2017 with Guatemalan forensic anthropologists and other individuals involved in the exhumations in the Ixil region, including victims' relatives, associations in charge of helping them through the process, state functionaries, and some religious officiants.

The following reflections explore some of the social expectations regarding the place of the exhumations in the mourning process, as well as the imbrication between collective and individual mourning. I will therefore use the term "mourning" to describe two very distinct, although closely connected, situations: on one hand, the individual process of overcoming the grief of losing a relative, and on the other hand, a collective process of integrating the memory of the past and rebuilding a heavily damaged social fabric, which I will call social grief. The powerful analogy between one and the other is present symbolically, in the discourses of civil society actors, who describe the Guatemalan

society as a wounded and grieving unit. In the discourses of psycho-social actors, such "wounds" are usually described in terms of "trauma." This formulation tends to dissociate the socio-psychological issues associated with the war heritage from the political ones. However, the perception of the wounds of conflict, how they should or can be healed, and their consequences, developed in the specific political context of the peace process and transformed during the post-conflict period. The exhumations of victims has been presented since they started as a key element in allowing a mourning process that was prevented by uncertainty about the fate of the missing. I will examine what role the exhumations have played and continue to play as part of a difficult peace process, focusing specifically on the words used to describe the wounds of the past, in an attempt to approach the issue of grief. The ambivalence of the local discourses that stress the necessity of a mourning process for the individuals, as well as for the Guatemalan society, is central in this analysis. I seek to understand the representations of mourning through the discourses collected and the ethnographic observations conducted during the exhumation process, from the uncovering of the dead to their re-burial.

In the first part of this paper, I examine the ambivalent place the state took in the exhumations. Then, I question the post-conflict representation of the heritage of the conflict in terms of "health" and the exhumation process as a healing tool. Finally, I will examine how designations inherited from psychology,

such as “trauma,” as well as religious practices, are re-appropriated locally in order to understand local perceptions of mourning without obliterating the political undertone that exists within it.

A forbidden mourning

The exhumation process consists of the locating, identification, and re-burial of victims whose bodies were not previously recovered. This process emerged from the battlefields of World War I, with the search for soldiers’ remains. Today the work of forensic anthropologists is mostly about finding “disappeared” victims from mass violence. Worldwide, exhumations have grown in number since the late 1970s, in the wake of Truth Commissions, as a tool for peace building in post political violence contexts (Ferrandiz & Robben, 2015). In those contexts, justice—understood as a judiciary system assuring respect of the law by the state—is often considered to be unattainable. The rule of law is replaced with “transitional justice” for crimes associated with political violence (Lefranc, 2008). In this sense, reburial of the victims “emerges as a privileged mechanism for doing justice to the forgotten dead” (Rojas Perez, 2015, p. 185). The exhumation process is supposed to help bring closure, both to victims’ relatives and to a profoundly affected society, allowing a long-delayed mourning process. It can be considered as a funeral process, as “archeology becomes a form of tribute to the dead, and so a form of commemoration” (Fontein, 2010, p. 431). The restitution of the remains to the families is considered to be the key element that enables the mourning process, when the absence of corpses and/or knowledge of what happened to their loved ones has left the relatives in a state of in-between.

The abandonment or concealment of corpses is the result of the implementation of specific killing techniques in genocides and mass violence (see Anstett & Dreyfus, 2014). It is a form of violence charged with political meaning. The absence of bodies to bury prevents the victims’ relatives from mourning properly. The interdiction of mourning can also be enforced through threat of violence: burying the dead can designate one as the next victim to be killed (Losonczy, 2003), or cast suspicion on him, as was the case for the inhabitants of the Ixil region, in the late 1980s. This rural area is an 8-hour drive from the capital city, and is mostly populated by indigenous Maya-Ixil farmers. In the 1970s and 1980s, the military in Guatemala was at war against Marxist guerrillas. However, most of the victims were civilians suspected of having sympathized with “subversives.” Some of them simply “disappeared.”

They were brought to military facilities and never seen again. For others, their corpses would reappear in the morning, in the streets of the villages. The Ixil people remember the impossible dilemma the presence of theses corpses created:

The soldiers forbid the men from picking up the bodies, a local widow told me, because the person they killed was a guerrilla, they said. So, if you take it [the body], ‘you too are a guerrilla!’ As for the women, none of them cried. If a woman cried for her own dead, they would hit her, they would kill her. (Personal fieldnotes, 2012)

The climate of violence and suspicions prevented the widowed from expressing their grief and properly burying the dead. As a result, dead bodies remained hidden or hastily buried in the town’s surrounding landscape. Many inhabitants had knowledge of where the dead were, but it wasn’t until the arrival of exhumations teams that they were actively searched for.

At the end of the 1980s, the mass killing of indigenous populations reached the awareness of the international community. The UN-led Peace Process put an end to the conflict when the last accord was signed in 1996 by the newly elected Government¹ and Guerilla leaders.² The accords established the basis for a new democratic society. However, “pacification” was a complex and often ambiguous process. The exhumation process started in the 1990s, along with the Truth Commission work, in the context of demand for Human Rights and cultural recognition for indigenous peoples. Members of the two Truth Commissions collected testimonies of survivors and historical evidence. Their work was published in two reports: *Guatemala, nunca más* (ODHAG, 1998) and *Guatemala, memoria del silencio* (CEH, 1999). The Bishops of Guatemala implemented the first Truth Commission, whose work was foundational, relying on the vast network of parishes to collect testimonies. The publication of their report led to the assassination of its principal promoter, Mgr Gerardi, Bishop of Quiché, in 1998. Because they followed the truth-building work of the Commissions, the exhumations were seen as a symbolic form of “mourning” the past for society as a whole, understood as a way to overcome the political and social wounds of past violence. Simultaneously, they were part of a very intimate process for the individuals wanting to bury their loved ones. The psychological approach adopted by many participants in the exhumations shapes their interpretation of the widowed’s mourning experience. However, the funerary practices and the exhumation process itself can be invested with a variety of meanings and political messages.

Exhuming the past: the hopes and disillusion of national reconstruction

At the end of the 1990s, the peace process marked the beginning of the exhumation of Guatemalan victims by forensic experts. In contrast to other post-genocide contexts, where the remains were re-appropriated by political powers to serve their own agendas, in Guatemala, the state action was essentially to take none, letting civil society actors lead the process of inventing new ways to deal with the dead (Duterme, 2017). The involvement of these actors shaped the exhumation process toward a “dignification” of the victims, and played a crucial part in the invention (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2012) of mourning and burial rites that make the healing of “past wounds” into a process of social and individual recovery. Within a psycho-social vision of wounded individuals and a wounded society in need of “healing,” exhumation processes are mobilized as a tool for bringing closure to the victims’ relatives and, directly or indirectly, to society as a whole.

The first exhumations focused on large mass graves and led to collective re-burial ceremonies, gathering together state and civil officials, the victims’ families, people from the community, and the media. It was a period of hope for the reconstruction of the country. The end of the armed confrontations, the return of democracy, and the rise of human rights demands seemed to indicate better times. Exhumations had a part to play in this new era. They provided material evidence of the violence that could not be dismissed as easily as testimonies by opponents and helped to spread awareness about what had happened during the years of *Violencia*, the name given to the period of intense massacres. The U.N. Historical Clarification Commission (CEH) concluded that at least 200,000 people were killed or disappeared in extra-judiciary ways. Most of them were Mayan people—83% according to the Commission report (CEH, 1999). The army was identified as the principal perpetrator (93% of the violations). Re-burials were public events. Locally, victims’ relatives and inhabitants of the neighboring areas would gather. These gatherings were given a national (and international) visibility through media coverage. During the years following the conflict, images of large numbers of coffins gathered in Catholic churches or other public premises helped spread the peace process vision and redefine the dead as *victims*—a significant change from when they were killed under the accusation of being “subversives.”³ The remains of children, women, and pregnant women were often given special visibility, as they

embodied the image of civilians who were free from any political association. The uncovering of hidden corpses was, and still is, a strong symbol shedding light on the Truth, and, as Victoria Sanford has phrased it, “excavating memory” of Guatemala violent past (Sanford, 2003).

The exhumations also played a more discrete role during the early post-conflict years, of re-asserting the state as guarantor of rights for all citizens, including the indigenous population. As a symbol spread in the national space, the collective funeral practices served as a political discourse of human rights, and highlighted the structural discrimination against the indigenous part of the population, in order to counter the way the army had depicted them as “subversives.” Indeed, the peace held an ambiguous position in the country, as the state in charge of implementing the Peace Accords was also identified as the principal perpetrator of genocidal violence against a large part of its own population, directly linked with a long-term history of discrimination (Smith, 1990) and a general absence of the state outside the center of political and economical power. The violence perpetrated by the army, in the early 1980s, was the most direct relation with the state that some of the indigenous peoples of the Highlands had ever had (Stepputat, 2001).

The weakness of the Government institutions was (and continues to be) a tangible reality in everyday life of the Ixils farmers. They often had to travel several hours in order to interact with any state official. During the *Violencia*, the region experienced the highest number of massacres perpetuated against civilians. In the 1990s, the exhumations mobilized state agents, although the forensic work was conducted by independent experts; as a forensic anthropologist from FAGF⁴ explains:

In the early 1990s, in the Ixil region, we excavated a lot of places, mostly military encampments. There were many policemen from PNC [the civil national police], *fiscales* [prosecutors], judges, with forensics, and the press. It was important. They were in their role as citizens. At a symbolic level, it was important, about citizenship. Sometimes, you could see a policeman carrying a kid; the families took a ride in the cars [of the officials]. It was lost, but, in these days, it was important.

The presence of state agents during the exhumations and their positive interactions with the victims’ families were seen as an important element in making the exhumation process a tool for reconciliation between indigenous people and their own political authorities. At least, that is what it felt like for the *ladinos* (non-Indian) actors involved in the exhumation process and

for those among the Ixils involved in victims' right organizations—like the important widow organization CONAVIGUA—and educated public workers. However, when my discussion with the FAFG expert took place in 2016, these early hopes had become subdued. The state never fully complied with its obligations toward victims. The poorly funded National Program of Indemnification of victims (PNR), which was theoretically in charge, assumed a very limited role in the exhumation process. Civil society actors filled the void, with the bitter feeling that they were substituting for a deficient state (Duterme, 2016). Impunity largely prevailed, while public security (Sieder, 2001) and the electoral system (Sonnleitner, 2009) were considered failures.

The 2005–2015 decade corresponded to a decrease in the media interest in exhumations and the “normalization” of the exhumations, at least in areas like the Ixil region, where they became more common. With the passing of time and the absence of judicial consequences, some of the local perpetrators started to tell what they knew. During the same period of time, the nature of the exhumations gradually transitioned from large mass graves to smaller ones. Simultaneously, the presence of members of the judicial system became less and less common. The exhumations and re-burials that had been gathering large crowds in the 1990s become more “intimate” events. However, individual exhumations, and the private mourning they allowed, still depended on collective representations and collective expectations.

Re-arranging the bones: the place of the material remains in the healing process

In Guatemala today, after the hopes of a real state reform rapidly disappeared at the beginning of the 2000s, and with little to no trust in the deeply flawed judicial system, justice reclamation is mostly about symbolical reparation. The process of making peace with the past is often presented as a “healing” process, one that applies to individuals, but also to the society as a whole. References to the violent past as a “wound” are common among members of the victims' support NGOs. “They say ‘*Ya pasó, ya estuvo*’ (It has already passed), but it isn't. There are victims and who will heal their wounds?” Fredi, a coordinator of a victims' support association in Nebaj, told me. The implicit “they” refers to the government, the exhumations' opponents, and those in the country who consider that forgetting is the only option. The recurring images of “wounds” and “healing” in public discourses

create opposition between those stressing the necessity to remember in order to build a viable society, and those who condemn this vision. One of the most obvious examples I observed, during my fieldwork, was on the 25th of February 2010, the “day of dignification of the armed conflict's victims.” The center of Nebaj, one of the main towns in the Ixil region, was filled with members of victims' associations, NGO representatives, and bystanders:

The place [was] full of people, flowers, candles and crosses with the names of the victims. People are waiting for the arrival of some “officials”, who will finally arrive several hours late. [...] On a stage, speakers are giving testimonies or addressing the crowd, for memory, testimonies. “You have to tell what you lived to your children, they need to know it was true, not lies, as some are saying. [...] It is forbidden to forget! They are saying we are re-opening wounds. But those wounds never mended.” (Personal fieldnotes, 2010)

The mobilization of an allegorical vocabulary about individual and social healing illustrates this abandonment of direct political reclamation, in favor of a discourse of social reconciliation. This vision relates to “what Michel Foucault would have called the ‘biopolitics of international justice’” writes Anne-Yvonne Guillou, referring to the trials in post-genocide Cambodia where “many narratives [...] have focused on the ‘healing’ of the victims as its most important role, as if post-genocide justice were first and foremost a matter of health” (Guillou, 2012, p. 212).

There is a dissonance concerning healing and the memory process, at both individual and social levels. On one hand, the injunction to “never forget” is addressed to Guatemalan society, as a way to build a better future, while respect for the dead—primarily through their proper burial—is necessary to heal social wounds. In this way, mourning for the victims is not only their relatives' prerogative, but should be a national concern. On the other hand, individual healing is connected with the imperative to “let go of the past.” Society requires the survivors' “resiliency” for the next generation's sake. Individual and social healing are presented as connected to each other, both indirectly (the respect paid to individual dead have a collective meaning) and directly, through the social injunction to pass on the memory and avoid passing on the wounds to children. It is expressed in terms of the need to bring the relatives “closure,” usually expressed using bodily metaphors: “*sanar*” (to heal) or “*cerrar las heridas*” (to close the wounds). Closure for the parents' generation is in turn the necessity to not raise the children in a “culture of violence.”

The implementation of techniques to achieve that goal was a long and dynamic process that took place mostly in the first decade after the exhumation started. These techniques took the form of a combination of “traditional” funeral practices, “re-inventions” associated with the reclamation of a Mayan identity, and local innovations, borrowing not only from religious tradition but also from tools mental health professionals would use. What kind of “proper burial” could reach the objective of healing? What gestures, what words, would be appropriate for the occasion? The absence of commemorative practices or funeral norms imposed by the state let participants rely mostly on their own initiatives.

Marcelino’s story illustrates the dynamic process that led to the actual form of the exhumations. A native of Nebaj, he was among the first people to participate in the exhumations in the Ixil region in the 1990s, looking for his father. At the time, very little or no psychosocial support were given to the victims’ relatives (Pérez-Sales & Navarro García, 2007). Marcelino was shocked when the recovery of his father’s remains did not give him the expected closure. “I had many illusions, many hopes. And when the process began, when I saw the remains of my relatives, I felt hatred, sadness, I felt guilt. My personal experience was in contradiction with the original aim of healing. [It] reopened the wounds.” While the reappearance of the body is considered a necessity to enable the mourning process, the process of finding and returning remains is not enough. Marcelino soon felt the need to implement ritualized practices that could give meaning to the process: “[For] people to assimilate the experience more as a healing and not as a return to the past.” Marcelino’s response to his own disappointment was to organize collective sessions with victims’ relatives. His first inspiration was his Catholic faith; he was a dedicated member of Nebaj’s parish. He was probably also inspired by psychosocial approaches, then in their early stages in the Ixil region: “[We were] together, two to three hours, praying and weeping, sometimes they laughed.” The result is an innovative practice, relevant to the participants, although the meaning may differ from one person to another.

The historical importance of the Church to the victims made it a central actor in the funeral rites. Liberation theology also influenced the psychological theories of grief mobilized in Guatemalans’ exhumations.⁵ The insistence on letting go of the pain and moving toward “beautiful, positive things” reflects the Catholic discourse. It was also prevalent in the

psychosocial approach, with the addition of the idea of a trauma potentially passing through generations. In today’s psychosocial discourse, the relatives’ healing is perceived as the key to raising a healthy new generation, the incarnation of a new Guatemala. “Sometimes, [when there is no re-burial] they live in the past and they don’t care about their children anymore. It is important to live in the present,” explained Raquel, a young psychosocial worker. Here, the return of the dead is described as necessary to break the link to a haunted past and allow the living to exist in the present. The private mourning of the relatives and the community is also a collective matter, and the grief is a collective inheritance shared by several generations.

Today, the moment of restitution of the remains is symbolically embedded with the “return” of the dead—the restitution of the remains to the relatives. It is one of the moments most invested with the symbolic meaning of closure. The remains are re-arranged in anatomical order, re-creating the form of a human body inside the coffin. This practice contributes to re-creating the identity of the deceased and to establishing the remains as a specific individual being, what Leyla Renshaw has called “affective identification” (Renshaw, 2010). In Guatemala, it is a product of the joint work of forensic experts, psychosocial workers, and the victims’ relatives (Duterme, 2017). Even though the physical presence of the bones is not enough to ensure the possibility of mourning, it occupies a specific place in the processes, recognized by all of the actors. The care of the skeleton observable in Guatemala can be contrasted with Memmi’s observations about another case of unusual mourning: the care for an unborn fetus or a stillborn birth in France. The significant decrease in infantile mortality in France between 1940 and 1990 led the loss of a child-to-be to be perceived as more and more of a tragedy. The reaction of the medical profession transitioned from rapid concealment of the dead fetus, to a new supportive approach, where parents were encouraged to be in the presence of the corpse, which was properly arranged. This is the result of a new approach to mourning in the psycho-scientific medical literature, especially for midwives (Memmi, 2011), where the confrontation with the materiality of death became understood as necessary to process a difficult loss, during the decade of the 1990s (Memmi, 2015).

The ritualized process of re-making the skeleton responds to the violence of the killing and to the disappearance.⁶ As Uribe (1978) showed in the case of Colombian massacres, killing during political violence can be analyzed as a ritualized act, used to establish

domination. In particular the dismemberment and reorganization of different body parts by the perpetrators, read as killing their victims several times (as her book's title *Matar, re-matar y contramatar* illustrates). The death (by shooting) is often followed by the decapitation of the corpse and postmortem desecrations: the perpetrators proceed to cut and re-arrange the parts, reversing their natural order. Beyond the horror of showing the suffering of the victims, these actions also indicate strong symbolical violence, inverting up and down, in and out.

Such violence toward the dead was observed in the Guatemalan conflict (CEH, 1999), as has been shown by the analysis of the remains made by the forensic experts. Even without any expertise, the vision of the remains can be a powerful evocation of the violence for those present during an exhumation. The materiality of the bones can evoke memories of a violence experienced or acknowledged by a survivor. An Ixil woman in her 80s, while describing for me an exhumation she observed, suddenly rose from the stool she was seated on and bent her body, impersonating the positions revealed by the bones, curled or bound, head facing the soil. "You could see they suffered" she said. One particular skeleton caught her attention: a woman "they found with her legs open," a position my interlocutor interpreted as evidence she was raped. Whether or not that was true matters less than the fact that the bones' position are given meaning, elaborated in relation to one's experience of the conflict and understanding of the victims' biography. The final re-arrangement of the bones by the forensic expert in a coffin corresponds to the usual representation of a dead body. It lies in the coffin, head up, arms at its sides, legs straight: in a resting position, corresponding to the "normal" position. The family often dresses the reassembled body in the coffin, with the help of the forensic anthropologist.

Inherited wounds: the transmission of trauma

There is a collective effort among those performing the exhumations to frame the exhumation process experience as a healing one, through ritualized practices such as the re-arrangement of the body. As such, the steps of the exhumation process, from the excavation of the remains to their re-burial, are supposed to guide the mourners toward closure, helping them come to terms with memory and forgetting. But do those principally affected perceive the process in the same way? And, is closure always what the relatives are looking for? Those questions are difficult ones to

answer. The intimacy of the mourning process cannot be easily measured. In the interviews I conducted in the Ixil region, the psycho-social support employees would usually emphasize the positive experiences they had observed, while the families would focus on their effects and the difficulty of the process they were going through. Their view of their own grief would vary with time and circumstances, not always in a linear way. Grief could be reactivated years after the re-burial, "pangs of grief"⁷ emerging on occasions such as an anniversary, or while assisting with other exhumations, with the mourning experience being a process more than a fixed moment in time. Furthermore, the discourses and representations the living have of their mourning are profoundly related to what they are actually experiencing, in particular the personal and political contexts. The use of the normative notion of "trauma" can obscure the reality of the past and present violence (Vanthuyne, 2014), pathologizing what is, actually, the experience of a continuum of violence (Bourgois, 2012).

Catarina and Francisca's family is a product of this continuum of violence. Catarina is a member of a widow's cooperative, founded in the 1990s by a local Catholic priest. Initially, the group consisted of a few women whose husbands were killed during the conflict. Today, many younger women have joined, including Francisca, Catarina's daughter, whose husband was killed in the capital city, while she was pregnant with her second child. Both widows live together and raise Francisca's children. Both men were victims of a violence embedded in the period they lived: Catarina's husband was taken at night by a group of uniformed men and never seen again. Francisca's worked as a private guard. This was a dangerous profession, accessible without any schooling, and very common in the capital city, where the lack of public policing led to the rise of private security. The life of the Ixils in today's Guatemala has profoundly changed since the armed conflict, but violence is still present. The homicide rate is similar to what it was during the war (Benson et al., 2008). The deaths now occur mostly in the capital region and large towns rather than in the villages targeted during the conflict. The villagers, especially in the indigenous regions, still face direct violence, as well as structural and socially invisible violence through ethnic and social discrimination and limited access to health and education.

New forms of violence are now affecting the young people of Francisca's generation and of her children's. Marcelino first mentioned it, at the end of our

conversation, explaining to me his intention to work with the “*social pastoral*” on juvenile suicide prevention:

There are waves of suicide here in Nebaj. For lack of perspective, children fathered during those times of fear, of terror, of bombs ... In their mother’s womb, the children absorb not just food, but emotions. They are born with a trauma they don’t know where it comes from. I know where my pain came from. I remember. They don’t know. They are time bombs, with aggressive attitudes.

Marcelino’s description is an example of local subjectivities about the way trauma affects different generations. I will not discuss here all the implications of the associations of the younger members of the population with violence.⁸ Rather, I will focus on the local representation of these “aggressive attitudes” as an inheritance of the armed conflict and the local use of the term “trauma.”

The Ixils people use both the terms “trauma” and “*susto*” when referring to their experience of the conflict. However, they are not a substitute for one another. The term “trauma” belongs originally to the vocabulary of psycho-social workers. It was then adopted by many locals. For the people of Marcelino’s generation, a “trauma” is presented as the result of events one has directly experienced. In this regard, it has much in common with the local notion of *susto*—a polysemic term covering a large variety of physical and mental symptoms. While “trauma” is generally interpreted within a strictly psychological approach, even in anthropological research, an analysis of *susto* requires consideration in a situated context. In her analysis of a Guatemalans war widows’ healing group, Green (1999), suggests considering *susto* in the same way that N. Scheper-Hughes approached *nervos*: considering it as a “polysemic folk concept,” an “elastic category” (Scheper-Hughes, 1992) that needs to be analyzed in context, considering social relations as well as physical symptoms. Analyzing the use of *susto* in survivors’ testimonies in Guatemala, Karine Vanthuyne points out that the use of the idea of trauma, even if it states a truth about humans facing an “extraordinary” situation, does so to the detriment of the other possible registers of qualification and actions, that *susto* allows (Vanthuyne, 2009). I agree with Vanthuyne’s perspective.

Analyzing the local use of the term “trauma” helps us to understand the representation of transmission between generations, underscoring the idea of an inherited violence, when it is not the case with *susto*. As illustrated in Marcelino’s words, “trauma” is described as an emotion, an affect that can be passed to the children in the womb, “feeding” them with

something quasi-organic that is revealed as dangerous. Its appropriation in local vocabulary reflects a concern about the way new generations can be affected by past violence. The expression “time bombs” (*bombas de tiempo*) used to describe the effected young is striking. It evokes the war violence (bombs were dropped by planes in the Ixil region during the conflict) and its potential resurgence in another form through time. The term “bomb” portrays a form of unpredictable violence that is out of control, which resists explanation. Marcelino’s discourse shows the integration of psychological representations generalized through social workers’ activity, and their adaptation to a local system of interpretation and knowledge production about current problems the locals are facing. The briefly evoked “lack of perspective” hints of the existence of other motives beyond psychological explanations. It also shows the importance of the question of transmission. Two modes of transmission coexist in the discourse: the negative transmission of violence (“trauma”) and, indirectly, the transmission of knowledge about the past, the needed memory that the “time bomb” youth lack. Psycho-social workers and local families both worry about the issue of trauma, understood as a lack of transmission or a harmful one. However, where psycho-social workers develop a discourse about society—children are seen as the future of the country, relatives are more worried about the well-being of the young.

Individualized ways of mourning: negotiating how to mend open wounds

In Guatemala, the history of the conflict is not part of school programs, leaving it the parent’s responsibility to talk (or not) with their children about what happened to them. Children and teenagers are usually present at all steps of the exhumation process. The ritualized moments and the physical presence of the remains can prompt words usually silenced, calling for a story as in the former example with the woman’s skeleton. The wake, commonly organized after the re-arranged remains are brought back to the relatives’ house, can be a moment for speaking memory as well. The wake goes on for at least a night, and can be extended to *novena* (9 days), and brings together the relatives of the dead, neighbors, and members of the community. “People come. It doesn’t matter if the death was years ago. They come anyway,” Catarina told me about the mourning wakes. Directly following the reconstitution of the skeleton, the wake signals the re-introduction of the dead into “ordinary” funeral

rites and everyday social life. As such, it can be a sign of “closure.” Based on what I could observe, having a wake is the norm for the restitution of the victims’ remains. However, the material organization of the wakes displays the importance of local negotiations with religious norms. The religious plurality existing today in the communities, and in the family units, raises the question of how to handle house-hosted mourning. While a widespread practice among rural populations in Guatemala, the vigil is nevertheless associated with the Catholic tradition and is not acknowledged as part of evangelical mourning practices. Evangelists adopting Catholics traditions is common,⁹ but relatives can also invent their own way to do things.

These exchanges can seem surprising, given the history of political opposition between the two groups during the conflict. The figure of ex-dictator Ríos Montt, who belonged to a Pentecostal church, embodies the close links between political power and evangelical movements. On the other hand, belonging to the Catholic religion often led to becoming a victim of counter-insurgency operations (Falla 1995). In the beginning, a large part of the opposition to exhumations came from evangelical pastors and leaders. At a local level, the opposition was not so obvious,¹⁰ and weakened with the passing of time and normalization of the exhumations. Today, intra-familial or intra-community sociability are at play to ease the sharing of practices. The practices put in place draw on the Catholic repertoire, which is more often adopted because of the familiarity of the participants with it and its flexibility, while evangelical churches are opposed to any syncretism. An example of such a wake shared with me by the victim’s two sons, one of whom is a Catholic, while the second belongs to a local evangelical church. The Catholic brother held the nightlong vigil in his house, but his brother “borrowed” the remains for a few hours with his own family. I directly witnessed another example, in the house of an evangelical family receiving the remains of the husband’s father, in the town of Cotzal. The family had not made any arrangement for the arrival of the remains, nor responded to the requests of the psychosocial workers, asking them if they wanted to “say something for [their] father” or to “take some time” for prayers. However, a lot of the neighbors had come over. It rapidly became clear that most of them were Catholic. In the face of the son’s inaction, a neighbor took the initiative to begin a collective song and a prayer. The song, “*juntos como hermanos*” (“together as brothers”), is not specifically related to funerals,¹¹ but is widely known, allowing all

the participants to join in. Ritual *bricolages* emphasize the prevalence of local sociability. The meaning expressed here is the expression of conviviality between members of a collective and can serve as a re-affirmation of a local unity damaged during the conflict.

After the vigil, the re-burial ends the exhumation process. It marks the return of the deceased to the place where they belong. For the psychosocial workers, this last step of the process should be a final closure. However, the local reality does not necessarily agree with the psychological view in this case, as “closure” can also be perceived as a way to “lay the collective memory of the conflict to rest.” The manipulations, transformations, and displacements of human remains are symbolically charged and therefore always the subject of hesitation and negotiations on how to proceed. When the digging for victims started in Argentina in the mid-1980s, the leaders of the well-known Mothers of the *Plaza de Mayo* movement objected to the forensic work being conducted. The group demanded “*aparición con vida*” (that “they come back alive”) even if the chances for the children and grandchildren to reappear were mostly non-existent. The real question was political: “*We, the mothers of the disappeared, will not be converted into mothers of the dead*” declared one of them (Joyce & Stover 1991, p. 254). Similarly, Ferrandiz (2006, p. 9) signals that, in Spain, “early in the process, exhumations were described by some other organization as an ‘erasure of genocide’ or even a ‘second killing’ of the victims.”

These oppositions highlight the fact that the current representation of exhumations as a tool for justice and truth is not self-explanatory. The re-burial of the dead has not always been seen as the final step of a long mourning process, but can be mobilized as a political statement. I never heard individuals directly express that concern, even after the re-burial, however, this concern is expressed by groups of victims, and/or by individuals during collective events. During the 25th of February “*Día de la dignidad de las víctimas del conflicto armado*,” which I described earlier, several hand-written signs were visible in the crowd. Some of them appeared with national victims’ associations’ slogans, other were bare, with hesitant handwriting and grammatical errors. They contained individual and collective statements (“I am a victim of the armed conflict,” “We are victims of the armed conflict of the [name of the birthplace]”). Some were more directly political: “We demand justice” “We demand *resarcimiento* (reparation).” The same elements produced in ritual contexts (such as a cross bearing the name of the victims, flowers, and candles)

are mobilized here to enforce political re-vindications. It shows the underlying objection to the burying of the dead as being equivalent to simply burying the past again.

Conclusion

In this article, I have focused on the views of mourning from the perspective of the actors in the peace process: forensic anthropologists, associations for victims support, and the local actors invested in the production of innovative funeral practices. The practices described are an example of how the various actors in the exhumations invented and adapted funeral rites in the specific context of post-conflict Guatemala. The practices that can be observed today are the result of a combination of factors more than a particular intention. However, the general intention to use rituals as a tool for healing defines the practices for all. The ritual and social practices that are part of exhumations in Guatemala have been developed in relation to a certain definition of individual mourning and social grief. The exhumations are a place of production and dissemination of plural coexisting visions of mourning.

These analyses are part of an on-going investigation. There is a need to understand the perceptions of grief of the victims' relatives, beyond observation of their practices. The weight of political issues impacts the individuals' mourning process, as they try to find their own way to grieve their lost ones. As Capdevilla and Voldman (2002) have shown for post-World-War II France, post-conflict contexts stimulate ritual innovations, either to accommodate necessities—like the absence of a body to bury—or because of the interrelation between private and social mourning. The place the human remains occupy in public and private discourses is a central issue. The funeral practices for victims that have emerged since the Peace Accords are heterogeneous and reflect the dynamics between actors. New practices often result in a combination of borrowing “traditional” mourning forms, re-adaptations, and inventions. To present the mourning process only in term of “healing” can conceal the political issues at stake. However, this discourse is also re-appropriated locally to express a local understanding of grief, where the mourning process is negotiated within personal, religious, and political arenas. The study of these practices highlights the transformations in political and religious dynamics in today's Guatemalan society, showing that ritualization can stand as a means for expressing political aims for the new Guatemalan society.

Notes

1. In response to international pressure, the military organized an election in 1985, allowing a civil president to be elected for the first time since the 1954 coup.
2. The peace negotiations between the state and the guerrilla leaders were spread over several years. Between 1990 and 1996, several accords were signed by the newly democratic Guatemalan government and the ex-guerrilla leaders, regarding the reforms of judicial and law enforcement institutions, indigenous rights, and the democratization of electoral politics.
3. It is worth noting that the process of redefinition of the deceased, through narration, corresponds to a well-recognized process of mourning (Walter, 1996), frequently fuelled by the event of the death, and the event of the funeral, as illustrated by Hemer in this volume.
4. The *Fundación de Antropología Forense de Guatemala* is the larger and most important national forensic team.
5. In 1986, the Spanish psychologist Martín Baró published “Hacia una psicología de la liberación” (“Towards a psychology of liberation”) in the *Boletín de psicología* n°22, referring to Paulo Freire's work on conscientization. In his recent doctoral thesis, Smaoui (2016) shows how, in the context of contemporary exhumations in Spain, psychologists are mobilizing these theories largely adopted in Latin America.
6. Azevedo (2016) describes an opposite case in the Peruvian context, where some of the survivors received the remains of their exhumed relatives in tin cans or emptied milk boxes from local State-run forensic team. The symbolism associated with this act is of great violence towards the dead, and expresses the government's determination to prevent the memorialization of the victims.
7. Simon (this volume) also showcases, through Sunia's case-study, such a long-term frequent re-emergence of feelings of grief in a Kanak country.
8. The violence described here refers to self-harm (suicide) or to a violence directed against others (petty or serious crime). The discourse of attribution of violence specifically to the young can also be understood as a reflection of a national political discourse using the “young” and the “gangs” as a general categorization to disqualify any form of protest against an established order (see Benson et al., 2008), or in terms of a local power struggle confronting different ways of life among generations (see Burrell, 2009).
9. Such borrowing is not unheard of; it fits within the history of dealing with absent bodies. See the case studied by Cabantous (1990) about Protestants sailors borrowing Catholics popular practices and prayers in Europe.
10. Evangelical converts have participated in the exhumations in the Ixil region since the 1990s, sometimes against their pastor's directives.

11. The song is not part of the liturgical repertoire as such, as it is adapted from the tune of the US spiritual song “My lord what a morning.”

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