



## Introduction

Near the Mexican border a serpentine path meanders through the dense, verdant rain forest of northern Guatemala, skirting tall mahogany trees and brown hanging vines, traversing the undulating terrain toward the remote village of Santa María Tzejá. Landless Mayan peasants from the highlands made the difficult weeklong, 150-mile journey to settle the village in 1970, building a new life with little more than sweat, hope, and a few antiquated hand tools. Twelve years later, on February 13, 1982, a long column of soldiers traveled that twisted path weighed down with combat gear in the languid heat. Their feet sank in thick mud. The late-afternoon sunlight reflected off their automatic weapons. As they proceeded, hidden sentries from the village watched them approach with deep apprehension.

Already the villagers knew the army had slaughtered all the inhabitants of a nearby settlement two days earlier. So when the sentries gave prearranged signals, the villagers grabbed their children and fled into the sanctuary of the thick rain forest. When the first soldiers entered the village, they found fires burning, food still cooking, and wash laid out by the river. But the villagers had vanished, and only the noise of the troops themselves and the sounds of the rain forest broke the eerie silence. Since the targets of their march had eluded them, the soldiers turned on what remained. Over the next several days, they destroyed what had taken a decade to build. They looted anything of value, slaughtered animals, and torched everything else. Hiding in the rain forest, the villagers—about a hundred families—could hear the staccato bursts of gunfire and see the flames consuming their dreams. During their incursion, the soldiers stumbled across a lone woman, whom they raped, beat senseless, and murdered, dumping her battered body near the village cooperative. When

nothing more remained to destroy, the troops packed up and began heading south to the next village. Marching down the path into the rain forest, one of the soldiers heard a dog bark. The troops stopped to explore more closely. They found a cowering pregnant woman cradling an infant and two young boys left in her care, all hiding by the side of the trail. The soldiers yelled at the woman and unleashed a withering volley of gunfire at the small group, killing them all. As they left, a soldier lobbed a hand grenade at the bodies to complete the slaughter. Now on full alert, the troops quickly located a second group. They confronted eight children, their pregnant mother, and their grandmother. The soldiers for a second time began firing mercilessly.

Amid the screaming, the smoke, and the gunfire, several of the children ran deeper into the forest, including a six-year-old boy followed by his older sister. When he reached the safety of a fallen tree he discovered in horror that his sister was no longer behind him. His mother, grandmother, and siblings were sprawled on the ground in a rough circle, disfigured and silent. Many years later he recalled what he saw.<sup>1</sup> “My grandmother had a bullet under her eye, my brother was laying there—the one who had said that he would rather die than be caught by the army.” He quietly continued, “My sister, the one who ran behind me when the army began shooting, had a hole in her back. Now I think, maybe she blocked me, because I was in front of her and she was following me. And I turned right at that moment. When I looked back she wasn’t there. I think that she gave her life for mine.” The soldiers had done more than empty their weapons; they were determined to desecrate as well as murder. “My little sister had her stomach slit open; another sister had no head.” He had seen the soldiers search the clothing of their victims for valuables, finding nothing but a few sweets. They took the candy and left the bodies.

The other villagers hiding in the rain forest knew that the army intended to kill everyone. Terrified, they hid among the mahogany trees and the vines for weeks, and then the weeks turned into months. They had no notion of what would become of them. After several months of constant fear, more than half the families made a harrowing forty-mile journey to Mexico, where they would stay for more than a decade. A year after the flight, the army placed those who had remained behind—about fifty families—under harsh military control, literally on the ashes of the original village. To fill out the new village’s population, the army brought in a new group of land-starved peasants from the highlands, mainly from the Alta Verapaz region.

This should have been the end of the story, an all-too-familiar Guatemalan tale of displacement and death, another village reduced to blood-soaked ashes. Instead, the survivors refused to give up. They struggled for more than a decade against the longest of odds, the most daunting of obstacles, and ultimately those who stayed behind and those who fled were reunited. Together, they would not only rebuild but prevail. Symbolic of their success, more than one hundred of the community's youth were pursuing professional training and degrees outside the village as of 2002. Nonetheless, appalling human rights violations still plague the country and threaten the village. A 2002 Amnesty International report finds that in the "prevailing climate of impunity," the violations are "so severe" that Guatemala can only be referred to as undergoing a "human rights melt-down."<sup>2</sup> The village is still in the eye of the storm.

This book is the story of Santa María Tzejá. It chronicles the exceptional moments of its birth, destruction, and rebirth over three decades. Santa María Tzejá is not a typical village—if there is a "typical" village in Guatemala—but rather a place whose history embodies the forces and conflicts defining contemporary Guatemala. "It is in remote villages such as Santa María Tzejá," reporter Andrew Bounds observed in the *Financial Times of London*, "that the battle for Guatemala's future is being fought. . . . [T]he story of Santa María Tzejá speaks eloquently about the country's troubled recent history."<sup>3</sup> The highland peasants who founded the village had been squeezed mercilessly by their lack of land and, given the repressive social structure of the country, had few political or economic options. As a result, they embarked in 1970 on what seemed a desperate, if not foolhardy, attempt to colonize a distant, inaccessible rain forest. Paradoxically, the isolated site they chose became one of the centers of the war that would convulse the entire country in the 1980s. As it turned out, Santa María Tzejá became the first village visited by a small band of men that would grow into the largest of Guatemala's insurgent organizations, the Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres (EGP), the Guerrilla Army of the Poor.

The sacking of the village in 1982 was part of a larger nightmare inflicted upon Guatemala. The report of the United Nations–sponsored Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico (Commission for Historical Clarification, or CEH), hereafter referred to as the CEH (U.N.) report, concluded that two hundred thousand people were killed or disappeared during the Guatemalan civil war, 93 percent at the hands of state forces and related paramilitary groups.<sup>4</sup> More than six hundred massacres took

place, more than half of them in El Quiché province, and during the most intense period of the military onslaught, from 1981 to 1983, as many as 1.5 million people, out of Guatemala's 8 million, were displaced internally or had to flee the country.<sup>5</sup> The displacement included about 150,000 who sought refuge in Mexico.<sup>6</sup> "The massacres, scorched earth operations, forced disappearances and executions of Mayan authorities, leaders and spiritual guides," the CEH forcefully charged, "were not only an attempt to destroy the social base of the guerrillas, but above all, to destroy the cultural values that ensured cohesion and collective action in Mayan communities."<sup>7</sup> The savagery "exceeds the toll in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Chile, and Argentina combined," Stephen Kinzer, the former *New York Times* correspondent in Guatemala, wrote in the *New York Review of Books*. "Ethnic cleansing was practiced on a scale beyond even that of Bosnia." For decades Guatemalans, especially Mayas, had endured living "under a ghastly form of state terrorism."<sup>8</sup>

### fieldwork under fire

I first went to Santa María Tzejá in the summer of 1973.<sup>9</sup> I was a graduate student studying anthropology in the United States. My research that summer was in the El Quiché highlands, centered in the outlying areas of Santa Cruz del Quiché, a place that seemed very far from the rural Chile where I had grown up. Fabián Pérez, a Maya K'iche' man in his early thirties whom I met early on, suggested I visit a new settlement of highland Mayan peasants in a distant area near the Mexican-Lacandon border.<sup>10</sup> I had heard about this region and was interested in the dynamics pushing Mayas to leave the highlands. A lack of land had pressured these peasants first into seasonal work on the coastal plantations and then to colonize the rain forest—a place where land was available because the region was so remote and inhospitable. The first families had come to the Ixcán, as the area is known, three years earlier, in 1970.

I arrived in the village with Fabián Pérez and Luis Gurriarán, a Catholic priest born in Spain, while it was still being established in that summer of 1973. I remember sweltering in the jungle heat, the endless mosquito bites, and being startled by the cries of strange birds and the sight of even stranger snakes. But most of all I remember the spirit and kindness of these Mayan pioneers. After little more than a day I felt I wanted to be connected to this village for years to come. In so many ways, the setting and the people were different from Chile, yet I heard young K'iche' men, the leaders of the settlement project, singing songs by Víc-

tor Jara—the most popular of Chile’s singers of the *nueva canción*, or new song—and by Chile’s Quilapayún, a folk group in the same tradition. Up to that point everything that I had read or heard in lectures about the K’iche’ Mayas had portrayed them as locally centered and apolitical. When I later mentioned to my professor that many K’iche’ youth were interested in not only political issues but also international politics, he dismissed my observation as interpreting rural indigenous Guatemala from a Chilean perspective.

The fact that much scholarship in the 1970s and early 1980s missed the growing mobilization and discontent among the Mayas raises a challenge to the narrowness of perspective among many scholars. In contrast to what I had been taught in some graduate courses, I noticed that the peasants were interested in me precisely because I was Chilean; it was 1973, and they were surprisingly aware of the social mobilization and conflict taking place in my country. In the Ixcán rain forest that summer I suspected that a guerrilla movement might be quietly active. Several years later I read the autobiography of Mario Payeras, a guerrilla leader, who related his experience in the Ixcán and recalled hearing the news of Chile’s coup d’état in September 1973. It was only then that I realized I had been right.

After that first visit to the village, my inclination was to move to Santa María Tzejá and become a teacher in the one-room schoolhouse that had just been built. I had decided to study anthropology because I thought it was a noble profession, and I envisioned my role as a passionate advocate for marginalized people. I was full of idealism and felt Santa María Tzejá and I were a good match. It was clear from the moment I arrived that the villagers were committed and optimistic about improving their lives. Poverty accompanied by a defeatist perspective would have been unattractive—particularly when the snakes and the mud were factored in—but poverty and neglect coupled with a community eager to move forward seemed just right for me. I thought I might be able to make a difference.

The coup d’état in Chile that September was a sad and disorienting personal blow that distracted me from Guatemala and Santa María Tzejá. When I returned to visit the highlands in late 1975 and early 1976, I was told by a somber Fabián that things had changed drastically since my first visit. A death squad had murdered a dedicated young woman, who had moved to the village to become a teacher, when she was on a visit to Guatemala City; threats from the army had forced Father Luis to leave the village; and soldiers had kidnapped a villager, who never returned.

These tragic events turned out to be only the beginning. By 1976—

in retrospect it seemed almost overnight—my own idealism and optimism had begun to wane. General Pinochet was still in power in Chile, but the repression in Guatemala and the Ixcán in particular was soon to dwarf what took place in my own country. Understandably, the world had become aware and outraged by the human rights abuses in Chile—a country with a long tradition of democratic governments—but no one seemed to care or even notice the escalating repression in Guatemala. It was difficult to explain why the world was moved by one but not the other, especially since the atrocities in Guatemala far exceeded even the horrific human rights violations endured in Chile. In Guatemala, the long, dark night into which the country was descending had only begun—the worst was yet to come. The unimaginable was about to become real.

### *Observation over Time*

Three decades after I first stepped into that clearing in the Ixcán rain forest, I have decided to write a book about the journey of Santa María Tzejá's peasants and the fate of the village. My hope was to capture the spirit of what took place in the village by documenting discussions, arguments, interviews, observations, laughter, and tears. The ethnographic method allowed me the closeness to understand what took place, and time has provided the distance to put it into perspective. I was a participant in and observer of truly remarkable events. My participation grew out of a deep admiration and affection for the village and a commitment to its future. As an observer, I felt an equally deep commitment to providing perspective and, when necessary, to not flinching from the unpleasant either in my interactions with the villagers or in my writing about them. For me it was never really a question of following the role of many traditional anthropologists: distant, dispassionate, inattentive to national or world politics, ostensibly neutral and apolitical. My position might have had a lot to do with the mix of my own personal background and the social violence of Guatemala—exclusion, repression, discrimination, and poverty.

“The idea of an active, politically committed, morally engaged anthropology strikes many anthropologists as unsavory, tainted, even frightening,” anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes has noted. “This is less so in parts of Latin America, India, and Europe (Italy and France, for example), where the anthropological project is at once ethnographic, epistemological, and political and where anthropologists do communicate broadly with ‘the polis’ and ‘the public.’”<sup>11</sup> It is also a recognition

that being a witness at times demands action, and that failing to witness in these situations is amoral or perhaps immoral. The communities where we immerse ourselves are generally far less able than we ourselves are to expose human rights violations, abuses of power, and repression. The choice is really not between ethnography and activism. Certain circumstances call for an ethnography that is aware of the broader social conditions in which ethnographer and subject find themselves. The research and writing of this book could not have happened without a combination of scholarship and political engagement.<sup>12</sup>

Over time most ethnographers conducting research in Guatemala joined an organization called the Guatemala Scholars Network (GSN), founded in 1982 and still active today, with more than three hundred members from many disciplines and professions.<sup>13</sup> Many scholars in the United States who study Guatemala have been active, concerned, and committed on human rights issues for more than two decades. During the period of the worst carnage, GSN members drafted resolutions at the Latin American Studies Association, the American Anthropological Association, and other professional groups. The GSN organized teach-ins, sponsored visits by victims of human rights abuses, and was instrumental in informing the U.S. Congress and the press about these atrocities. Above all it has been a supportive, convivial association that has kept us in close touch with one another over the years.

Many people—both within and outside academia—have been more fascinated with the ancient Mayan civilization than with the living Mayas. Some archaeologists conducting research in Guatemala at the height of the terror seemed oblivious to what was happening around them. In 1984 archaeologists discovered a well-preserved tomb in northern Guatemala dating back fifteen hundred years. It garnered prominent coverage in the major newspapers in the United States. The *New York Times* ran a front-page article entitled “Untouched Mayan Tomb Is Discovered,” which reported on the find and included a photograph and an artist’s representation of the tomb.<sup>14</sup> The article related that Guatemalan guards were protecting the extraordinary and valuable site with rifles and machetes. I sent a letter to the *Times* the following day that was published under the title “Mayas Celebrated and Mayas Persecuted.”<sup>15</sup> I wrote that “the impression is given that these brilliant pre-Hispanic people left only a fossilized heritage” and questioned, “How will the four million Mayas in Guatemala receive the news?” I wanted to provide a sense of the conditions in which contemporary Mayas find themselves. “Too many are grieving over fresh tombs of kinsmen recently killed. Tens of thousands

hiding in the mountains and jungles will not hear of the discovery for some time.” I found it ironic that the same army that was littering the countryside with fresh bones was treating ancient bones with such respect and concern.<sup>16</sup>

Even though the record of many ethnographers in Guatemala is laudable, some ethnographers and archaeologists during the late 1970s and 1980s conducted their studies with blinders on. Others selected research sites in new and distant countries. Tracy Ehlers examined seven major anthropological journals in the 1980s and discovered far fewer articles than there once were on Guatemala overall. Those that were published tended to be on ethnohistory or sociolinguistics. “Research published in the 1980s has been emphatically non-policy-based, even though fieldwork was conducted in the midst of crisis,” Ehlers observed, inferring that “the reticence of anthropology as a discipline to legitimate policy-based research in Central America stems from a tendency that has characterized the field since its beginnings: studying communities as isolated, timeless cultures that are unaffected by regional, national, and international events taking place outside their borders.”<sup>17</sup> The dearth of research and publications in the main journals about the crisis in Guatemala (and Central America more generally) during that period gave the misleading impression that nothing unusual was happening, when in fact a genocide was in progress. One of the more important breakthroughs during this period was the 1988 publication of *Harvest of Violence: The Maya Indians and the Guatemalan Crisis*, edited by Robert M. Carmack, which sought to disclose and grapple with the violence that was taking place.

The absence of publications is one thing, the other is that some failed to see the maelstrom approaching or chose to ignore it.<sup>18</sup> “Many of us who have worked in Guatemala are disturbed about what has come to be called ‘the situation,’” Benjamin Colby stated in a review of Barbara Tedlock’s 1982 book *Time and the Highland Maya*. “I was disappointed that not even in the history section which talked about rebels of the previous century was there a single mention of what is happening in Guatemala today, where thousands of Indians have been brutally killed by a repressive government in what is now a holocaust. One would hope that all contemporary scholarly contributions on Guatemala, even if only in a footnote, would make reference to this state of affairs.”<sup>19</sup> Colby’s review in 1988 of another book by Tedlock mentions sympathetically the difficulties of doing research in Guatemala in those years, and that many ethnographers had chosen to take their research to other countries. “[Tedlock] does not give the reason for closing her research on the

Quiché,” Colby notes, “but presumably it is that the countryside in Guatemala now has been militarized with troops, government torture, and death squad activity. To do any extended, sensitive fieldwork in those areas of Guatemala today is to risk the lives of one’s informants, not to mention other problems of data collection among people who are filled with fear and suspicion.”<sup>20</sup>

If some anthropologists ignored the larger forces that were convulsing Guatemala in the 1980s, a controversial contemporary account by David Stoll, *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*, superimposed a distorted and misleading framework on the conflict. What garnered the lion’s share of attention for Stoll’s book after it was released in late 1998 were the real and imagined discrepancies he found in the widely read oral history *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, the testimony of a young K’iche’ woman in the early 1980s, edited by Elisabeth Burgos-Debray. Menchú’s story became particularly important when she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992. Typical of the media attention accompanying the release of Stoll’s book, the *New York Times* ran a front-page story entitled, “Nobel Prize Winner Accused of Stretching Truth.” Stoll himself admitted that the inaccuracies he unearthed in Menchú’s account are “not a very serious problem.” The central issue for him was the fact that “Rigoberta’s account is seriously misleading . . . in its depiction of the social background of the killing [in Guatemala].”<sup>21</sup> For Stoll, the insurgency was neither the “inevitable response to centuries of oppression” nor “a ‘last resort’ for peasants with their backs to the wall.”<sup>22</sup> In fact, he pointed out that “many Mayas felt they were making modest political and economic gains through the Catholic Church and other institutions in the 1970s.” The alternative framework he laid out was essentially an apolitical peasantry trapped between a vicious army and a cruel, manipulative guerrilla force all too willing to sacrifice the innocent. Although Stoll recognized the brutality of the army, he nonetheless observed that “in the absence of an identifiable enemy, counterinsurgents tend to retaliate against nearby civilians,” in effect arguing that the guerrillas provoked the violence.<sup>23</sup> The context is far more complex.

Stoll’s argument is flawed in two important ways. First, he underestimates the ways in which memory may change over time and the reasons why peasants may not trust a stranger. He points out that “the bulk of [his] interviewing occurred between 1993 and 1995,”<sup>24</sup> a decade after the worst violence and when the guerrilla insurgency was near collapse. He conflates the views of the peasants in the mid-1990s with how they may have felt when the rebellion appeared to be growing in the early

1980s. He does admit that “oral testimony from a repressed town like Uspantán could be affected by fear of the army or distrust of the interviewer. That is why I checked what Uspantanos told me against other sources.”<sup>25</sup> Evidently, these sources did not include the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the U.S. State Department, or the Guatemalan army itself. These institutions had no difficulty understanding the extent of support for the EGP in El Quiché department. (In Guatemala, provinces are known as “departments.”) Consider one challenge to Stoll’s thesis on the causes of the insurgency. “What [the Ixiles] do understand is that they are poor and that they are so because they live miserably, their work tasks are exhausting and the exhausted land yields little,” one well-informed observer commented. The guerrillas were “successful from the very beginning offering the Guatemalan Indians a hope for dignity, something they had not been offered during more than 400 years of humiliation and misery.”<sup>26</sup> Who is this critical observer? A naive solidarity activist confusing political orientation with scholarship, a perspective Stoll skewers in his book? In fact, the author, Captain Juan Fernando Cifuentes, was a Guatemalan military officer who wrote a seventy-two-page document published by the military academy in late 1982 to explain why the guerrillas were tapping into such widespread support.

Second, Stoll recounts the conflict in Guatemala with an underlying cold war sensibility. Consequently, there are few comments about the U.S. role in propping up a genocidal military, but considerable commentary about a ruthless left and their manipulative or misguided international allies. Clearly, the insurgents could be manipulative, misguided, and, on occasion, they committed egregious abuses, but that does not mean that the peasants were simply trapped between two equally malevolent forces, or that they could not be agents in determining their own political alternatives. At the heart of this thesis is a yawning logical inconsistency: If the peasantry were caught between two armies, why didn’t they simply turn for protection to the far stronger one? Ultimately, Stoll’s account becomes a prisoner of his ideology. Consider his comment about the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Menchú: “Romantic views of the guerrillas are not hard to find in [the solidarity network] milieu, nor the mystique of the noble oppressed Indian. Such assumptions are rarely contradicted by the Scandinavian media, which in Central America rely on young, idealistic freelancers rather than more experienced, cynical correspondents. The resulting haze has allowed European social democrats who fought tooth and nail to shut down revolutionary Marxists in their own countries, to be smitten by revolutionary Marxists from Latin Amer-

ica.”<sup>27</sup> The issue is not romanticism or naive freelancers or smitten Scandinavians but rather seeking to understand the complexities, contradictions, and roots of an unusually destructive armed confrontation.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, understanding that the guerrillas had a strong network of support—as Captain Cifuentes discovered—hardly means that one supports the insurgents.

Debates have raged for many years over the role of international anthropologists, mainly those from the United States. The issue in my mind, however, is not so much between international and native researchers, but rather what research is undertaken, and what relation researchers have with the community. Orin Starn has observed that anthropologists missed the deep dissatisfactions in Peru because of academic distractions and the distance between modern Peru and the U.S. academy.<sup>29</sup> Researchers who promote academic disengagement in the field should consider that geographic distance and sociopolitical detachment, ironically, can create their own set of distortions.

Víctor Montejo, a Guatemalan Mayan anthropologist, has observed that non-Mayan anthropologists often go to the field with limited, self-interested reasons. “Foreign anthropologists have studied Mayan culture for one purpose: to write dissertations and to get good-paying jobs at prestigious universities. But let us not forget that, as in the case of the Ladinos, some foreign anthropologists . . . have worked for human rights issues also, and have produced books denouncing the genocide suffered by indigenous people (Manz 1988a; Falla 1994).”<sup>30</sup> Mayan scholars have been intensively debating the role of foreign anthropologists for some time, particularly since the unleashing of the war against Mayan communities. “Pan-Mayanists see social science as profoundly political by definition,” Kay Warren writes, “and consequently doubt the motives and intentions of foreign researchers who act as if their verbal support for indigenous issues should be accepted at face value.” She adds, “What Mayas see so clearly is that linguistics and anthropology are not neutral sciences or nonpolitical ways of knowing.”<sup>31</sup> Mayas have argued that “foreign anthropologists evade their accountability to the people they study,” noting that it is not acceptable to hide “behind their academic status.” Outside researchers should understand that not opposing certain actions gives the appearance of approving of them.<sup>32</sup>

One challenge faced by all anthropologists is documenting violence and atrocities, above all how to protect the individuals and communities. An engaged ethnographer should report about human rights violations in a tone that will allow events as much as possible to inform the

reader—a detachment often difficult to undertake, in which I at times don't follow my own advice. "It is more effective to bear witness with restraint rather than with scorn," Primo Levi advised. "The scorn should be the reader's, not the author's, and it is by no means inevitable that an author's scorn will become the reader's."<sup>33</sup>

Guatemala, like most countries intensely studied by ethnographers and archaeologists, has few anthropologists of its own. In the 1980s two outstanding Guatemalans, Myrna Mack and Ricardo Falla, made exceptional contributions. They broke the mold confining many traditional anthropologists to a narrower vision that ignored the larger forces shaping community life. Ricardo Falla worked for years painstakingly documenting violence against Mayan communities. As a result, he was forced to do his field research in hiding, with displaced families in the rain forest under the most grueling conditions, with the communities of population in resistance (CPR), or in the refugee camps in Mexico. Tragically Myrna Mack paid with her life for her broader vision. As she left her office in the early evening on Tuesday, September 11, 1990—just blocks from the presidential palace—she was stabbed twenty-seven times by a former sergeant in the Presidential High Command.<sup>34</sup>

Myrna Mack accompanied me on her first, and what was to be her only, field trip to the Ixcán in May 1987. In Santa María Tzejá, despite the exhaustion from the unbearable heat, humidity, rain, and mud, she conducted interviews late into the night with candlelight. After these exhausting days, we would sit under the open sky, tired but unable to sleep, and talk through the day's events—the gossip, the hopes, the dangers, and the possibilities. As we gazed toward the sky, no stars were visible on these hot humid nights; we were enveloped in smoke as forest and fields were aflame, a slash-and-burn agriculture practice in preparation for cultivation. At that time the village was militarized. Palm-thatched homes with stick walls were crammed next to each other in one small area for tighter military control. The poverty was extreme. Mack's field notes were filled with careful documentation and astute observations, displaying a sharp understanding of people and context, a sense of humor and a passion. I wrote in the preface to Ricardo Falla's *Massacres in the Jungle* that while few in Guatemala knew what an anthropologist was, Myrna Mack was always referred to as "la antropóloga Myrna Mack" following her murder in 1990. Now in the most remote areas of the country, as a result of Myrna's death, "anthropology has become an honored, widely known, and admired profession. It has become synonymous with courage, social consciousness, and first-rate scholarship."<sup>35</sup>

Myrna Mack had a love-hate relationship with the profession. She loved the research that brought her so close to the people, but she resented the foreign anthropologists who chose Guatemala for their research and cared little about Guatemalans, “sponging” everything they could with indifference and failing to do anything to help those exposed to injustice and violence. “What is the difference between an American and a Guatemalan anthropologist?” Myrna used to ask friends jokingly. “In America you publish or perish; in Guatemala you perish if you publish!” She could not have imagined how correct she was in her assessment of her country and her work.

In looking over Mack’s field notes of our trip to Santa María Tzejá, I find little sense of cynicism or personal political bias. She carefully recorded her impressions, and in interview after interview she copiously wrote what she was told and what she observed: the community organizations, the number of churches, the ethnic groups, the land disputes. Her careful analysis reflected what she was hearing; of one woman she wrote: “La señora did not explicitly recognize who had burned the village and her belongings. In some way, implicitly she blamed the guerrillas. She speaks with disdain of the ‘*envueltos*.’”<sup>36</sup> She goes on to describe physically the woman and her daughters (Ladinas). Myrna Mack was there to conduct probing interviews, record what she was hearing, and gain a sense of the living conditions and perspectives of the people. She was not there to confirm her own preconceived notions or personal viewpoints. In her opinion, the latter would have been pointless. At times doubt crept into her letters. In one, she wrote to a friend, “What troubles me is that all I do is talk to people. I draw out their sad histories, and that’s it. I feel my role reduced to one of extraction.” In another, “I still wonder how to give something worthwhile back to the communities. . . . Can there ever be any hope for them?” She would listen attentively and with compassion. “It makes me realize,” she wrote, “that no matter what side you’re on in all this, people, especially the people in this region, have an overwhelming need to speak, to tell about their lives, to confide in a sympathetic listener.” Dismayed by the suffering, she never questioned the value of her fieldwork, “It was an exciting trip from the point of view of the research, but at the same time you find yourself inundated with sadness at the misery that abounds everywhere. Add to that the impotence of not being able to do anything. We witnessed a tragic case in one village.” She ended her letter on an ambivalent note, “You are right; those forays into the interior are a source of strength for me. I feel close to the people there, and those moments make me forget other

hurtful things in my life. I have seen new places where beauty and sorrow are intertwined, where there is a silent struggle to rise above pain and despair, to not surrender. But the minuscule changes occur at such a ‘low intensity’ rate, while the social costs are inordinately high.”<sup>37</sup>

I shared Myrna Mack’s sense of the way “beauty and sorrow are intertwined.” Such was the case in my own research in Santa María Tzejá, surely “fieldwork under fire.”<sup>38</sup> I conducted research for years during violent and stressful periods, highlighting the important issue of methodology. Participation and observation took place over an extended period of time and required critical trust, or *confianza*.<sup>39</sup> I was aware of my “*compromiso*” (commitment) and never felt this commitment to a better life for the villagers would interfere with my ability to carry out research. My concerns about the well-being and future of the villagers and my relationships with them hardly handicapped my fieldwork. On the contrary, my concerns contributed to the ease in our interactions and laid the basis for the mutual trust that developed. I assumed that the villagers would discuss my role among themselves and then decide whether to speak with me, while considering the advantages or disadvantages of doing so. They assessed me by checking me out and testing me—not all that different from what an employer does when consulting references. I gave them the time to determine if it was worth their while to include me and to what extent. As with any group, there were differences in perspective: some trusted me from the beginning, others maintained reservations; some liked me, others did not. I too got along and liked some villagers more than others. Though never stated, I felt they assessed my *compromiso*—assessing it by deeds, not words.

I tried to be attentive to their expectations and cognizant of my role. I recognized that placing myself amid a highly charged and violent situation would of necessity involve me in some unexpected, and undesired, ways. Although my fieldwork experience was rewarding, ultimately I was aware of the “inherent moral asymmetry of the fieldwork situation.”<sup>40</sup> Nonetheless, I developed long-lasting personal relationships. I never viewed the villagers as exotic but rather as normal human beings—with all their strengths and weaknesses—and that made my research easier and less obscure. The most rewarding aspects of my interaction were those moments—increasingly more frequent—when I was able to have extensive conversations with individuals and, at times, with groups, that reflected deeply on their experiences. Their analytical abilities under conditions of stress were impressive; they saw the positive dimensions of an

experience, as well as the negative, and developed carefully nuanced observations. Contradictions or changes in their individual and collective memories were themselves profoundly meaningful. My constant (and no doubt annoying) role as the devil's advocate was soon understood by the most astute as an interest in his or her point of view no matter how inconsistent or contradictory.

Over the years the village's geographical isolation has diminished, considerably influencing perspectives and outlooks. During the initial settlement of the village in 1970, peasants undertook a grueling week-long hike from their old home in the highlands. Later on, when a dirt road was built in the region in the late 1970s, the journey took two or three days by a combination of vehicle and a tough hike through muddy paths. Today the village itself has a dirt road, and under normal circumstances one can arrive there from Guatemala City in one day.<sup>41</sup> The earlier isolation kept the villagers from easily moving and limited their exposure to a wider world. Today half of the villagers have been to Mexico, likely to Cancun and other major Yucatecan cities, by virtue of having been refugees. Young women wear shorts, and dozens of young villagers have made it to the United States. Those who have not migrated north have seen photos and videos and have heard from family members about life and work in California and other states. They talk on the phone, send remittances, and use extensive social networks that are always expanding.<sup>42</sup> Some have been to my home in Berkeley. This transnational experience creates a new reality for the practice of contemporary anthropology. "One of the major assumptions upon which anthropological writing rested until only yesterday," Geertz writes, is "that its subjects and its audience were not only separable but morally disconnected, that the first were to be described but not addressed, the second informed but not implicated, has fairly well dissolved. The world has its compartments still, but the passages between them are much more numerous and much less well secured."<sup>43</sup> The cultural and geographic distance has dwindled. Distant individuals previously described by professionals now reside in translocal communities in the United States and can speak for themselves. With migrations come rising expectations and, at times, crashing disillusionment. Dreams are seldom realized in the short term. Paradoxically, while encounters are more frequent, the technological and economic distance is far deeper. The Internet links some in seconds, while others lack electricity, computers, and schools.