

Archiving the Central American Revolutions: The Value of Documentation in the Reconstruction of History

by BRENDA ESTELA XUM

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WHAT IS THE ROLE of historical archives in memory and human rights activism? How can archival documents be a tool of social justice and reconstruction of history? Why is it valuable to rebuild history through archives, and what

are we to do with such information? LLILAS Benson Latin American Studies and Collections held its 2014 Lozano Long Conference, “Archiving the Central American Revolutions,” on February 19–21, 2014, at The University of Texas at Austin. The main purpose was to open a dialogue and to promote new critical interpretations of the Central American revolutions through a mix of academic panels, roundtables, workshops, and a film screening, many of which drew standing-room-only crowds. The conference was organized by LLILAS Benson digital scholarship coordinator Kent Norsworthy and UT history and religious studies professor Virginia Garrard-Burnett.

The diverse program included major protagonists from the revolutionary struggles of the 1970s and 1980s in Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador, as well as U.S. and Central American scholars, UT Austin graduate students, filmmakers, journalists, clergy, and solidarity activists. The program also showcased the expertise and resources of the Benson Collection and the Human Rights Documentation Initiative (HRDI). Benson curator Julianne Gilland developed the exhibition *¡Venceremos! Posters and Ephemera of the Central American*

Revolutions, and archivists Christian Kelleher and T-Kay Sangwand led an archiving workshop. During the conference, graduate students coordinated by Sangwand interviewed numerous participants to record micro oral histories about their involvement in the Central American revolutions. The Benson Collection will digitize these audio recordings and make them available for use by researchers and the general public. In addition, the Benson will archive other donations

of papers and ephemera made by conference attendees.

Each of the conference participants used different print and audiovisual materials to remember the era of revolution: video testimonies, documentaries, police files, newspapers, photographs, and music. This combination of elements made the event a very atypical academic conference, going beyond one-way presentations and giving the audience the opportunity to watch and listen, to hear the voices of survivors, and to enter into a critical dialogue with

them about the historical significance of the revolutionary era. The diversity of perspectives (academic and experiential) and the variety of narratives also allowed those in attendance to appreciate a transgenerational experience: the survivors’ voices were present as were voices of the youth of today, who did not live through the civil wars but have learned about them through literature and research. Some of the younger generation who participated in the conference are Central American–Americans whose families survived this violent

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period. A panel that showcased the work of LILLAS graduate students was the best example of this dynamic: each of the presentations highlighted different areas of student research on Central America, including human rights, health care, the solidarity movement, literature, and specific cases of disappearance and torture.

The conference also sought to initiate an ongoing process of acquisition of historical archives and recording of micro oral histories that will become part of the Benson Collection. These goals were greatly exceeded. The participation of several important protagonists of the Central American revolutions together with high-profile academic researchers focused a unique intersectional lens on the complexities of history, and the crucial role of archives, narratives, and academia in reconstructing historical processes. This combination of factors made the conference an amalgam of feelings, utopian visions, experiences, memories, and tears that united its participants to reflect on the ideals for social change that were promoted during the revolutionary period.

The conference provided a space to talk about the impact of revolutions and archives in contemporary history, along with the great necessity for a constant promotion of projects in the areas of memory, vindication, and human rights. The opening keynote panel was deeply touching and especially intimate, as it became a dialogue between comrades who shared a whole history in common. Professor Charles Hale, director of LILLAS Benson, introduced the speakers. Then, Guatemalan indigenous leader Pablo Ceto, who was an active member of the guerrilla movement during the civil

war in Guatemala and later became vice provost and co-founder of Guatemala's Universidad Ixil, reflected on the role of indigenous people in the revolutions in his country. His speech highlighted the dreams of social change represented by the enormous number of people who died hoping for a better future and those who still stand in resistance, fighting for native land rights, social and economic equality, and recognition. "Revolutions are not dead; the dreams and struggles of revolutionaries are still alive because the roots of the war and the oppression are still palpable for indigenous people," argued Ceto. He was echoed by Gustavo Meoño, national coordinator of the Guatemalan National Police Historical Archive (AHPN), who stressed the importance of archiving, classification, and disclosure of the remaining documentation from the revolutionary period.

In the search for justice, documentation is a puzzle piece that allows researchers and social activists to prove the actual magnitude of human rights violations by the state. "Along with oral history and victim testimonies, justice can be achieved," asserted Irma Alicia Velásquez Nimatuj, a social activist and UT anthropology PhD graduate whose work focuses on sexual violence against indigenous women. The genocide trial that convicted former Guatemalan dictator Efraín Ríos Montt and sentenced him to eighty years of prison is the most remarkable achievement in the process of vindicating memory in Central America. The voices of the victims were heard and there was no doubt about the human rights violations during the civil war. Velásquez Nimatuj argued that such recognition also opened the eyes of society to the need for an integrated vindication



Dora María Téllez, Virginia Garrard-Burnett, Carlos Henríquez Consalvi, and Pablo Ceto view *iVenceremos!* exhibit

Photo by Mari Correa



At the Lozano Long Conference

of indigenous women in all respects: economic, social, and political.

In El Salvador, El Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen (MUPI) preserves history and teaches future generations about the Salvadoran revolution using documentary archives. Carlos Henríquez Consalvi, founder and current director of the Salvadoran initiative, spoke during the opening ceremony about how even today the Salvadoran political leadership has denied not only access to military archives but the archives' very existence. Henríquez Consalvi shared his experiences as leader of Radio Venceremos, which was one of the most important community radio networks during the civil war, chronicling the armed struggle from the mountains on a daily basis for eleven years. "The radio was a powerful tool for information and denunciation, but also played the role of promoting collective memories, cultural rescue, and popular education, challenging the attempts by U.S. politicians to hide the massacres of the civilian population," he said. El Museo keeps records of that time in the form of documentary collections and personal writings of notable thinkers (Matilde Elena López, Monseñor Óscar Romero, and others), as well as films made on the battlefield and other audiovisual materials. But this collection is small compared to the amount of missing documentation still to be collected, according to Erik Ching, professor of history at Furman University. Without preservation, historians risk reconstructing incomplete

histories that lack supporting documents or, in the worst case, these histories are lost to future generations.

The conference highlighted the importance of testimonies as a way of circumventing attempts by governments to erase the role of the military in human rights violations. This includes not only the testimonies of victims but also those of perpetrators, whose voice is less heard and many times forgotten. Carlos Mauricio, executive director of the Stop Impunity Project and Salvadoran torture survivor, highlighted the powerful effect of healing through narratives and justice. He decried the fact that victims are usually accused of lying; their testimonies are not taken seriously and they have even faced accusations of mental illness. "There are many victims of torture who will never tell their stories, even when they know that they have personal problems [as a result of trauma]," affirmed Mauricio. "I am an activist, I went to court and I decided to tell my story." His testimony was an expression of hope for survivors and an example of how important activism is in the quest for justice. He serves as an inspiration for all victims to speak out about their experiences, and his story is a reminder of how much work still needs to be done.

Even amnesty is not possible without knowledge of the truth, nor is forgiveness possible when people do not know whom to forgive. Yet amnesty does not mean amnesia, asserted Terry Karl, professor of Latin

American studies and political science at Stanford University; amnesty is deliberate forgiving. Karl was an expert witness and key participant in the U.S. prosecution of former Salvadoran colonel Innocente Orlando Montano, at which Mauricio also testified. Montano was indicted by a Spanish court for planning the 1989 massacre of six Jesuit priests in El Salvador, yet he was never extradited for trial. Found to be living in a Boston suburb, Montano was subsequently sent to prison in the U.S. for criminal fraud on his immigration forms. His U.S. hearing, which took place in Boston, highlighted his role in human rights violations, and opened the possibility of his eventual extradition. His conviction is historical for El Salvador because the U.S. judge recognized the voices of victims as evidence of human rights abuses. It is also the first time in the history of the United States that a judge acknowledged the responsibility of a former member of the Salvadoran military for torture and murder.

The panel "Change or Continuity? Re-Assessing the Meaning of the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua" was moderated by LLLAS Benson associate director Juliet Hooker, an associate professor in the UT Department of Government. The panel participants addressed the twists and turns in Nicaraguan history. Dora María Téllez—a founder of Movimiento Renovador Sandinista—said, "I am an optimist and have a biological resistance to believing that all the sacrifices made by my comrades in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala were in vain." In Nicaragua, many think that the revolutionary process was not worth it, that socialism did not have the answers Nicaraguans were looking for. At the end of the 1970s, Nicaragua started a process of political, economic, and social redefinition. The Somoza dictatorship was removed in 1979 and the Sandinista revolutionaries claimed their role as protagonists in the new economic system. But the ideal of revolution and the postwar reality obligated Nicaraguan society to rethink the social system, a task that was out of the hands of the revolutionaries. "Many people who participated in the Sandinista Revolution felt hopeless," said Téllez. Now, thirty-five years after the end of the Somocista dictatorship, one can retrace the mistakes of the past. Nicaraguans thought that the Sandinista Revolution had ended the dictatorship, but

they only fought its institutional expressions, not its political model.

The conference recognized different patterns of violence in the region; in Guatemala, it was massive violence focused in specific rural and indigenous communities, while in El Salvador the violence was highly focused among the leaders, with the purpose of defeating the movement from above. The military strategies also differed, to the point that El Salvador is seen by the U.S. military as a successful example of division and “pacification” of revolutionary movements.

In addition to exploring the region’s different patterns of violence, the conference assessed the Central American revolutions from diverse vantage points. For example, Manolo Vela, history professor at Mexico’s Universidad Iberoamericana, spoke about the modus operandi of the Guatemalan army, its training methods, and the military intelligence involved in its strategies to destroy communities. Vela’s presentation was hard to hear for the victims in the audience. Yet his expertise in Guatemalan military tactics shows the importance of viewing history from all sides, and the value of rescuing perpetrators’ narratives and documents so that the memories of the past can be complete.

In short three days, the Lozano Long Conference generated applause of emotion, hugs of support, and smiles of healing; it opened the hearts of everyone present to the importance of humanity and social ties in reconstructing history. In coming together, its participants reaffirmed their commitment to remembering, and to keeping the ideals of Central American revolutions alive. ☀

Brenda Estela Xum is a Guatemalan scholar. She graduated with a master’s degree from LLILAS in May 2014. She looks forward to continuing her research on human rights violations in Guatemala.

(Partial proceedings from the conference are available online, including photos, video, audio, and full-text papers, at <http://bit.ly/cenam2014>.)

Top to bottom: Carlos Henríquez Consalvi of Museo de la Palabra y La Imagen, El Salvador; (left-right) Charles Hale, Pablo Ceto, Dora María Téllez, and Carlos Fernando Chamorro; Pablo Ceto and Dora María Téllez

