*The Language of Terror and Reconciliation?*

*An Exploration of Narrative and Identity in Post-Conflict Societies*

*and the Disconnect between the Individual and National Representation*

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Introduction

In the hot sun we were desperate to find shade as we said our goodbyes to the wizened old woman chewing coca as she sat on the cracked step of her home (which was little more than a shack).\* A young woman rushed toward our group, with tears glistening in her eyes, speaking hurriedly in Quechua, the indigenous language of the highlands of Peru. She had been looking for us since we arrived in town and was grateful to finally accomplish her mission. She wanted to tell us her story; to have a chance to give her testimony and be heard. Events like this one were common during my experience as part of the 2012 UNBC/EPAF field school in Ayacucho Peru. The field school conducted by the Peruvian Forensic Anthropology Team (EPAF) provided students with the opportunity to observe and participate in post-conflict projects including taking the testimony of victims and survivors of the Peruvian Civil Conflict.

Terror, civil unrest, and genocide have occurred around the world, leaving nations and individuals broken. The woman from this account was a victim of the Peruvian civil conflict, which lasted from 1980-2000. In the wake of a series of oppressive political regimes and inequality of the mid 1900s there was growing unrest within much of South America. Within Peru civil unrest gave way to support for newly formed rebel factions based in Maoist communist ideology. One such group, the Shining Path, committed an attack on a small town in the department of Ayacucho on the eve of a local election. This event sparked over two decades of political violence that cost the lives of nearly 70,000 Peruvians (Peru’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission 2003). The people of the highland communities of Ayacucho were removed from the bustling streets of the capital. For Lima residents, the indigenous people of the highlands were foreign, backward, and little more than an afterthought. As a result, the initial military orders to suppress the rebel factions gave little thought to the communities living in these regions. Mass murders were committed by both the government forces and the rebels. By 2000 the conflict was declared officially over. A Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established to document the crimes committed, and promises of reparations were made. (Peru’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission 2003: para1).

Many non-government organizations such as EPAF have taken crucial roles in the recovery of post-conflict Peru. The members of EPAF are a unique team comprising socio-cultural anthropologists, physical anthropologists, archaeologists, and historians. The mandate for this organization is to return the bodies of the “disappeared” to their loved ones, to allow for proper burials and emotional healing for survivors. Through the development of the organization and the ongoing work, the organization has expanded its mandate to include community projects and work dealing with memory. A vital part of this work is the taking of testimony from survivors and family members. This testimony is used to help identify bodies, provide cases with which to lobby the government, and also to provide a forum through which survivors can share their stories. The personal experiences highlighted in this essay were the result of participation and observation of the work conducted by these anthropologists.

How can the pain of others be understood, and what can be done with this knowledge? Language, specifically the use of testimony, has been one of the central mechanisms by which countries and individuals are rebuilt in the aftermath of civil conflict (Hamber & Wilson 2002:35). Testimony is used to create an account of the ‘truth’ while also being presented as cathartic and ‘healing’ for the ‘victim’ (Hamber and Wilson 2002:35; Young 2004:150). The use of language in this context is complex. Inconsistencies have been observed between the representation of post-conflict reconciliation reported by the official report/government and that of the individual experience of giving testimony. This dichotomy will be highlighted by examining the use of the words ‘truth’, ‘healing’ and ‘victim’ within testimony itself, as well as discourse about testimony.

Testimony

Testimony is a personal narrative. It is a communication form infused with an air of authority and centered in the idea of truth (Pelicer-Ortin 2011). Scholars are clear that testimony cannot simply be summed up by the word “story”. Morris (2012:31) describes testimony as a type of communicative product, which results from human rights violations and the restorative process that follows. Ochs and Capps (1996:19) emphasize the fact that this type of narrative incorporates a description of events while also incorporating the experiences and emotions of the narrator and audience. Testimony is a complex speech product, but the most significant feature of this speech genre is the endowment of agency on the testifier. Smith and Watson (2001:45) identify this idea within their definition of *testimonio: “the narrator intends to communicate the situation of a group’s oppression, struggle or imprisonment to claim some agency in the act of narrating and call upon readers to respond actively in judging a crisis*”. Chatterjee (1993) describes collaborative narratives as an expression of resistance in the face of “master story lines” or large scale events. This was observed in Peru where women who culturally maintained quiet, subservient demeanors became assertive and vocal when providing testimony. The accounts provided by the men and women of Ayacucho were not simply stories; they were testimonies, contracts and an outpouring of the fragile emotional state of a people plagued with fear and desperation.

Felman and Laub (1992) describe this communication as a speech act. A speech act is an utterance that accomplishes an action by the process of producing said utterance (Baker and Hengevveld 2012). This occurs in two distinctive ways. First, testimony forms a contract between the testifier and the interlocutors (listener), who are expected to respond by way of acknowledgement and redress (Laplante & Theidon 2007:231). The significance of this communication was expressed by the members of EPAF, who described their role as a “guarantor of the memory”. The process of giving testimony is argued to provide psychological relief or ‘healing’ to the testifier (Hamber and Wilson 2002:35; Young 2004:150; Laplante & Theidon 2007:229).

The use of testimony in post-conflict societies was introduced with the first Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Uganda in 1974 (Hayner 1994:611). Since that time, the model of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has been used across the world. The purpose of a TRC is to create a comprehensive, collective account of the conflict. To accomplish this, commissions collect testimonies from victims who are often heard during highly publicized events held in courts with spectators (Young 2004:147; Verdoolaege 2009:442). Publishing an accurate record of the violence is intended to educate the public. It is believed that a more knowledgeable citizenry will recognize and resist the reoccurrence of similar atrocities (Hayner 1994:609). These commissions do not have a judiciary role, nor do they examine present-day human rights conditions (Hayner 1994:609). Instead, the functions of a TRC focus on improving the opinion and psychological state of the nation. A TRC is an affirmation by the new head-of-state/ authority of respect for the law and human rights and therefore a means to strengthen authority and popularity. A TRC plays a psychological role by creating a frame for public discourse and memory. In addition, a TRC also acts to legitimize the accounts told by the victims; this is established through publication and media coverage which theoretically prevents any continued denial of the atrocities that occurred (Hayner 1994:608; Wilson and Hamber 2002:36). Authors such as Hayner (1994:608) observe that the creation of a TRC may be a reflection of a change within the country’s social structure or it may simply be a political tool to gain support in an unstable country.

TRC hearings are only one way in which victims can express testimony. Jolly identifies both official and unofficial testimony as separate categories in contemporary human rights. These two frames are distinguished based on the presence or lack of commission/government sanctioning (in Morris 2012:33). The report created by a TRC is comprised of official testimonies, which have been edited and are often reduced from the original format (Morris 2012:5). Unofficial testimony may result from informal meetings, community events, or victims gathering together; in these cases scholars have described the communicative form as “storytelling” (Morris 2012:33). The difference between these two communicative contexts is significant when considering the dichotomy between the national representation of post-conflict testimony and the description of testifying provided by the victims individually.

Official testimony is a formal process. This is exemplified through the use of space, as well as the content. It is usually described as a “podium event” in which the testifier and commissioners (identified as ratified speakers) are positioned on a stage, apart from the audience (non-ratified speakers) (Verdoolaege 2009:444). Some authors have described the event as “theatrical”, with a profound influence stemming from the presence of media (Verdoolaege 2009:441). Additionally, the material included in the final published report is edited and controlled by the commission. Hayner (1994) notes that the choices made are indicative of political motivations. The choice of language and content within the TRC will be further discussed within the frame of “truth”.

The application of an official testimony also differentiates it from unofficial testimony. The process of creating an official record from personal testimony is used to ascribe a collective identity to the nation as a whole (Hamber & Wilson 2002:35). Labov similarly concluded that a group identity can be forged through narrative in which events, stances, and opinions towards those events are linked (Baquedano-Lopez 1997:27). Through a TRC, the individual experience of a testifier is expanded to encompass the entire nation. Baqueedano-Lopez (1997:375) observed a similar phenomenon when exploring the development of social identities in Latino children learning the story of *Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe* (a Mexican apparition of the Virgin Mary). In this example, the formation of a collaborative narrative, which incorporated multiple accounts of interactions with the Virgin Mary, allowed for the formation of a group identity encapsulating the Latino students. In a similar way, the TRC merges the stories of thousands of victims and then uses identifier language, which allows for all members of the country to consider themselves included, despite the fact that in many cases (such as Peru), it was a specific population within the country that was targeted.

Unofficial testimony, on the other hand, is unsanctioned by the transitional government or commission and as such is unhampered by official processes or structures (Morris 2012:33). The testimonies I was involved in collecting as part of the 2012 field school provide examples of unofficial testimony. These interactions were less formal compared to the official commission interviews. However, the structure and use of space was not unlike the official testimony. The testifier and primary facilitator held central positions and could be classified as the ratified speakers. As a student I was instructed to remain silent unless specifically addressed. I was paired with a small group of students, about five, and we were in turn paired with an EPAF anthropologist. The anthropologist took the central position in the interview, sitting very near to Mama A. The other students and I were set apart from the main speakers providing a false sense of privacy as our EPAF guide conducted his work. Mama A. would whisper, leaning in close, offering the anthropologist the possibility to lay a light hand on her shoulder as reassurance. When our EPAF guide deemed the situation appropriate, he would relay the information to our English translator. As such, the students would be described as non-ratified speakers (Verdoolaege 2008:5). The testifiers spoke directly to the facilitator. When these interviews were completed, the level of formality decreased, and many of the women we spoke to receded to less central locations and often remained silent. For many of these individuals, providing testimony had become routine. The familiarity of process may have influenced the formality observed within these examples of unofficial testimony.

The interviews conducted by EPAF with survivors in Ayacucho, Peru were indicative of some of the limitations of official testimony. One of these concerns highlighted by the members of EPAF associated with the Peruvian TRC is the significant number of individuals who were affected by the conflict but did not speak about their experiences when the TRC testimonies were being taken. Some victims chose not participate in the TRC because they were required to indicate whom they supported in the conflict. Group affiliation was the source of many deaths and disappearances during the violence. With this knowledge, it is easy to understand why many survivors were distrustful of the TRC officials. In addition, many communities and families were divided in their support, and therefore to provide testimony would often implicate a relative or neighbor. In some communities, the decision has been to maintain peace by silence. As such, these testimonies were not included in the TRC. Some of these individuals were comfortable speaking unofficially about their experience. The willingness to share details in unofficial testimony was increased with the use of the indigenous language as well as an established relationship with the individual and community. Morris (2012:162) similarly observed that increased detail was included in unofficial testimonies as compared to official. The choice to speak as part of a TRC is a very carefully considered action, which is dependent on many extrinsic factors.

Truth

The concept of ‘truth’ is central to the process of rebuilding post-conflict nations. This is demonstrated in the name *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. “Truth commissions by their name and nature, promise to deliver the truth…for the purpose of helping a wounded nation to heal.” (Daly 2008:24). Truth is also a central feature of many definitions for testimony. For example, Pellicer-Ortin (2011:73) describes testimony narrative framed as a depiction of truth, which typically involves pain and suffering and is told by a survivor to another person. While ‘truth’ is given central importance in the context of human rights, there is little by way of an accurate definition of truth used in these contexts. Desmond Tutu described four types of truth found within the South African Commission: 1) the objective corroborated truth which is obtained through forensic investigation; 2) a personal storytelling or personal narrative truth; 3) a transcendent truth which is achieved through debate and dialogue; and 4) sense-making contextual truth which is for the purpose of healing and restorative purposes (South African Commission of Truth and Reconciliation 1998). Morris (2012), among other authors, questions the linguistic value of the categories described by Desmond Tutu. However, these distinctions clearly highlight the reality that there are many different perspectives of “truth” within these human rights cases.

The truth that is sought out by Truth and Reconciliation Commissions is dependent on the parameters established in the creation of the commission. This is usually dependent on presidential decree, legislation, and/or the terms of peace agreements (Hayner 1994:607). Specifically, the definition of investigatory power may limit the areas and offenses that can be examined. This was the case in Uganda in which the TRC was restricted to illegal detention and torture. As a result, many human rights cases were ignored. Hayner (1994) notes that another area that is often ignored in the search for ‘truth’ is the international role in these conflicts. From the perspective of a TRC, the ‘truth’ is defined by the political value of the account.

Duranti (2006:264) identifies the use of narrative as a political tool, which can be used to construct a moral image of a political candidate. He comments that the particular concern for issues of truth, within a political campaign, help create what he calls “existential coherence”. This is an important mechanism by which political candidates are able to personify themselves to the general public. Truth and Reconciliation commissions operate under a similar mechanism. In the wake of a civil conflict, transitional governments are in need of a positive popular opinion and a renewed sense of morality in the face of the atrocities that just occurred (Hayner 1994:605). The blatant focus on ‘truth’ in the TRC model helps to emphasize the morality of the new authority.

The significance of ‘truth’ for victims/survivors of conflict differs from the use of ‘truth’ within the national scale. For victims, ‘truth’ is a basic human right. Hayner (1994:607)) comments that “The right to know the ‘truth ‘ has been included within the meaning of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in response to the work of TRCs around the world”. Similarly, while discussing the meaning of justice among the people of Ayacucho an EPAF facilitator identified “to know the truth”. Many of these individuals do not know what happened to their loved ones, and the acceptance of death is difficult in the unclear circumstances of forced disappearance. The ‘truth’ that the victims are seeking is twofold. First, they want tangible proof of what happened (i.e. a body). Secondly, they want to understand why it happened. “Ironically, truth reports are designed to relate what survivors most commonly refer to as the unspeakable. To speak is not necessarily to convey what happened and to read what happened is not necessarily to know the truth” (Daly 2008:26). Daly (2008:27) concludes that the problem with “finding the truth” in the process of a TRC is that there are too many truths, each different from one another. The process of ethnography attempts to find similar information to that sought in the process of a TRC. Similar to the incomplete record Daly describes in a TRC, Clifford (1986:7) concludes that ethnographic truths are inherently partial and incomplete. He explains that there is a complexity to the process of revelation and secrecy that controls communication. This mechanism, combined with the limitation of the anthropologist, prevents understanding of a specific truth.

Verdoolaege (2009:441) postulates that interaction between the testifier and the observers and media further shapes the “truth” that is collected. The events of a narrative are influenced in the process of telling it, through the style, language choice, changes in tone, and other communicative tools (Ochs and Capps 1996:20). Verdoolaege further argues that this was evident in the choices made by testifiers and commissioners in the South African TRC. She notes the use of graphic narratives as a way in which to appeal to the spectacle of the event. She also comments on several occasions in which testifiers chose to directly address the audience or media rather than the commissioner, further indicating the conscious awareness of the audience. Within the context of the Peruvian field school, several of the women chose to transition their narrative from a graphic description to a positive reference, following which they explained that they wanted to be sure that the field school participants left with a good impression. Again, the speaker was consciously altering her choice of words to meet the expectations of the audience. It is important to realize that the ‘truth’ referred to in testimony, both official and unofficial, is not objective or verifiable (Daly 2008:23). Through the process of communicating testimony the account is invariably affected, and as a result it is necessary to recognize that testimony cannot be objective.

Victim

Within civil conflict there is often a blurred line between those who committed the crime and those who had crimes committed against them. As a result there is often a discrepancy between the use of ‘victim’ by the individuals involved in the truth and reconciliation process and its use by the government. “The Eye That Cries” is a monument in Lima dedicated to the 70,000 people killed or disappeared during the Peruvian conflict. The monument is a labyrinth composed of stones, each one representing an individual who was killed. The organization which maintains the memorial describes the monument as a tribute to the “‘victims, police and military”. Linguistically, it is interesting to note that the term victim was not applied to the military and police. This may connect to a recent development in which the government removed support and funding for the maintenance of the monument.

Within the final report of the Peruvian TRC the blame for the conflict resided with the *Sendero Luminoso*  (SL), a communist rebel group based in Ayacucho. Members of EPAF, among others, attest that an accurate representation of the conflict would place blame equally between the government and SL. As a result of the Commission’s findings, any individuals with a connection to SL were not considered eligible for reparations. To be a “victim” in the government’s eyes required the completion of a bureaucratic process involving documentation and approval. The deceased individual had to be registered as a victim, and if this status was approved, the surviving relative would be issued a certificate of victim status, acknowledging the murder of the deceased as well as the pain of the survivor. For many of the women in Ayacucho, the acknowledgement of victim status was psychologically dependent upon receiving reparations. This was further impacted by a change in the reparations laws, which allowed the government to refuse to provide monetary reparations for anyone under the age of 65, and depending on the circumstances, possibly even older. In this way, these women have symbolically lost their status as victims.

It is interesting to consider the interaction between the survivors and their association with being victims. There is a need to be identified as a “victim” so as to obtain reparations. Attaining ‘victim status’ is a form of symbolic capital. Symbolic capital refers to the body of resources that an individual can draw upon and is in reference to objects and representations that are of value to a social group (Erickson & Murphy 2008:188). For the survivors, having the ability to obtain reparations is extremely valuable from both an economic standpoint and a symbolic psychological standpoint. Despite this value placed on ‘victim status’, Laplante & Theidon (2007:229) observe that many people did not want to actually identify as ‘victims’. The word victim was associated with helplessness and negative connotation. Among many communities the term *afectados* (affected) was used as a replacement. Laplante and Theidon suggest the use of “victim-survivor”, which highlights the transitional process associated with individual post-conflict recovery. Pellicer-Ortin (2011:79) confirms this idea. The director of EPAF described the role of their organization as trying to “re-citizenize, turning them [those affected by the conflict] from victims to citizens.” In the case of the Peruvian TRC, the *afectados* both want to be identified as victims, yet at the same time do not want to be identified as victims. The opposing meanings for the term ‘victim’ can be considered an example of indexicality, which refers to a difference in the meaning of a word depending on the context with which it is spoken (Gee 1999:25). In this way, to be a “victim” can be both a positive and a negative concept for the survivors. This is a key example of the interplay between indexicality and symbolic capital. The indexicality seen with the word “victim” is a product of the symbolic capital it provides for the speaker.In this way symbolic capital, such as the reparations received by “victims”, can serve as a mechanism for the production of indexicality.

Healing

Healing is another key word that is incorporated into discourse about testimony and also within testimony itself. There are two functions for this word. It refers to the proposed psychological healing which comes through giving testimony, and it also acts as a metaphor (Young 2004:157). The concept of healing within testimony is a highly contentious subject, and some authors such as Meneloff (2004:355) suggest that the act of testimony does not provide individual healing.

Michael Lapsley (a priest and facilitator of the *Healing the Memory Workshops* in South Africa) argues that “memory can be healed by individuals… individuals need to talk about their distinctive pasts, put their memories on the table, open them up and clean them out and in so doing facilitate healing.” (in Hamber and Wilson 2002:37). Similarly, banners displayed by the South African TRC used the phrase “Revealing is Healing”. A significant body of psychological research has found that the process of testifying is cathartic (Laplante & Theidon 2007:228). However, there is also a significant body of work that recognizes the limitation of testimony as a healing process. Meneloff (2004:357) describes the fact that the healing value of testimony is dependent upon what is said and how it is expressed. Laplante and Theidon (2007) contend that testimony is only valuable as a “healing process’ if accompanied by material action. The findings of Laplante and Theidon were observed in the testimonies collected by EPAF: “Every time we have visitors you make us remember that day. Every time this happens it brings my hopes up, hope of reparation. But it doesn’t happen.” Within Peru, many communities have formed new identities by sharing and healing together. In the community of Sascamarca there is a group of widows who meet regularly to talk and consider new ways to find their disappeared husbands. “It is good and healthy to be able to share with these women (the widows)”. One of the women of the community was not yet married when her fiancé disappeared; she still identifies as a widow to maintain membership within the group. Similarly in Hualla, a group of rape victims joined together to create a combined declaration about their experience. Through these new group identities many of these women have taken on new roles as activists, where they would otherwise not have attempted communication with official government bodies.

Healing is also used as a metaphor in the language of testimony and within the reports produced by TRCs On a national scale this connects to Duranti’s claim that political speakers are skillful manipulators using linguistic resources (2006:245). In these cases, the commission and government are utilizing the idea of healing to portray themselves as doctors who can cure the problems of the nation. Wilson (2001:35) highlights the use of language such as “collective cleansing of a national sick body” and “heal the nation” within the south African TRC. Young (2004:149) is critical of the use of metaphor in this context and writes that when the reconciliation of a post conflict country is presented and understood within the terms of “healing” the society may simply celebrate the “healing that has occurred rather than feel implicated in the atrocities or any engagement in the pain”. “Wilson and Hamber (2002:36) similarly argue that claims to heal the collective unconscious of the nation address denial and public silence toward the conflict but replace them with a “regime of forgetting”. Lakoff and Turner (1989) describe metaphor as a trigger for a specific cognitive framework. As such, the words we use to describe things can reframe and restructure our understanding of them. In this way Truth Commissions and governments use metaphor to improve their public perception.

Healing and sickness metaphors are also used within individual testimonies themselves. “I feel that what has been making me sick at the time is the fact that I couldn’t tell my story. But now it feels like I got my sight back by coming here and telling you the story” (Young 2004:154). In many cases these metaphors speak to the lack of healing; -“ma’am. I am not here to get any compensation; I am just-…I just feel very sore inside. My heart is broken. There is nothing else I am going to say now.” (FR5.9.17:355). A similar dialogue was used by many of the women in Peru; one woman described how she was going blind from her tears. In these cases the use of a healing metaphor was a method of expressing an incomprehensible psychological state with a tangible expression. This usage is quite different from the political use of the healing metaphor.

Conclusion

Testimony and *testimonio* are powerful narratives that interact with, and are the product of, violent conflict. My experience in Peru with these survivors and anthropologists provided little opportunity to gain an understanding of the pain of these people; however, the function of sharing testimony was illuminated through these interactions. The communicative forms associated with giving testimony have tangible reactions as well as salient identity-building functions. Within the context of a post-conflict nation, these testimonies are further employed for political use, which may not always reflect the situation and reality for the original speaker. The difference in political and individual use is highlighted through the use of the words truth, victim, and healing. The search for truth and healing for the victims of conflict is important, but complex. It would be naive to conclude that to give testimony is a healing process, because such a claim was derived from political convenience. At the same time it is impossible to deny that for many of the people we spoke to, sharing testimony was important for their psychological well being. At the heart of this process is the role of language, which structures, shapes and transforms the process of reparation and recovery. Language is both a barrier and an opportunity, the source of symbolic and tangible capital and the driving force for hope: hope for healing, hope for truth and hope for a day when the “victims” can truly feel that they are not a victim, but instead simply a person, a Peruvian.

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