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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Feminist Praxis towards Liberating Psychology in the 21st Century: Knowledge Constructed with Mayan and Rwandan Survivor-Protagonists

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ABSTRACT

Jesuit priest and social psychologist Ignacio Martín-Baró sought to liberate psychology from its roots in a dominant, dualist, positivist paradigm evident in Euro-American/Western psychological theory, research and praxis in the 20th century. He called for a new horizon for psychology, one of relevance defined by its contribution towards breaking cycles of personal and social oppression. He has been credited with developing an onto-epistemology 'of the people' – ways of being, knowing, and doing that evolve in situ – within and beyond the context of the 1981–1990-armed conflict in El Salvador in which he was one among approximately 75,000 people assassinated. Against the backdrop of his contributions, we note the emergence of a contrasting 'trauma industry' whereby mental health professionals regularly enter war zones and post-conflict settings with diagnostics and treatment models imported from the global North, thereby de-politicizing and de-contextualizing historically rooted violence and locating social suffering in individual symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. We authors – feminist community and clinical psychologists, researchers and consultants with long-term relationships of accompanying survivor-protagonists in Guatemala and Rwanda – explore selected ethical and conceptual shortcomings of that international trauma boom as it has influenced our work. We then discuss our engagement with and confrontation of contradictions encountered within the very power structures that we seek to overcome through a praxis of mutual accompaniment. Martín-Baró's liberation psychology orients our research and trauma work as we draw on critical reflexivity vis-à-vis our positionalities as 'outsiders', Euro-American/Western educated White feminists who have developed dialogic relationships with women and child survivors of gross violations of human rights. We seek to decolonize psychology while the latter continues to privilege us and marginalize those we accompany. Through a lens of an open dialogue between two different regional contexts we identify and discuss 'lessons learned' through similar praxis developed 'from the perspective of survivors', while identifying ruptures and limitations as well as pending questions encountered in the field as we seek to contribute to a liberation of psychology through a praxis of mutual accompaniment.

Introduction

*What is needed is the revision, from the bottom up, of our most basic assumptions in psychological thought. But this revision ...has to come from a praxis that is committed to the people. Only through such a praxis of commitment will we be able to get a new perspective on the people in our communities...*¹

Ignacio Martín-Baró, often described as the 'founder' of liberation psychology, was a Spanish Jesuit, pastor of a rural Salvadoran parish, social psychologist and professor at the Universidad de Centro América José Simeon Cañas in El Salvador. His approach, developed during the Salvadoran military dictatorship and armed conflict in the 1980s, constitutes a hermeneutic Copernican turn in psychology; and, as other liberation paradigms in pedagogy, philosophy and theology, liberation psychology calls for methodological and practical agenda 'desde' [from] the perspective of the oppressed, marginalized and impoverished.

Against the uncritical absorption of an ahistorical, decontextualized 'scientific mimicry' of United Statesian psychology in El Salvador at that time, Martín-Baró argued for an alternative based on three main postulates: First, he called for a new horizon whereby psychology's relevance would be defined by its contribution towards breaking cycles and dynamics of personal and social oppression. Second, he outlined a new psychological epistemology of seeking knowledge developed through social scientific research from the perspective of the poor and oppressed; he challenged the 'safe and sterile little academic boxes'² of positivist psychology and called for

constructing knowledge 'from below'. Finally, he proposed a new praxis whereby liberation psychology demanded psychologists make a commitment to the 'poor': as a professor of social psychology he urged students of psychology to begin by 'immers[ing] themselves in the frightening daily reality wherein the Salvadoran majorities live'³ and only then and 'from there' develop their psychological knowledge at the university¹. He himself embraced a new praxis – as a priest, social scientist and professor – one that eventually contributed to his brutal murder by the Salvadoran military in November 1989.

One of Martín-Baró's central ideas was that psychology should contribute to the conscientization of the marginalized, a concept of personal and social transformation developed by the Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire: psychology needs to help people 'take hold of their fate a move that demands achieving a critical understanding of themselves as well as of their world'⁴. Martín-Baró opted for research paradigms and topics that reflected the potential for the critical reflection and participation of the marginalized. Although he was not a clinical psychologist, he inspired a new vision and professional attitude for a liberating practice of clinical and counseling psychology. He unmasked a psychology that pathologized people and labeled them 'sick' or 'traumatized' when in fact it was the traumatogenic historical and social structures that needed to be held responsible⁵. According to Martín-Baró, addressing post-traumatic stress by teaching relaxation techniques was far too limiting; it meant rendering psychotherapy as 'a palliative that contributes to prolonging a situation which

generates and multiplies the very ills it strives to remedy⁶. Consequently, drawing on this critical analysis of the powerful role of psychologists and psychotherapists themselves, he urged a search for tools and resources that offered 'a dosage of rupture with the dominant system⁵' and designed interventions both for individual and community psychology that focused on building and nurturing 'humanizing relationships' by building on people's virtues and recovering historical memory.

Over the past four decades, the liberation psychology described above, together with a related praxis in feminist psychology, community psychology, critical psychology and, more recently, decolonial psychology have sought to liberate mainstream EuroAmerican/Western psychology grounded in assumptions of autonomous individualism towards a global praxis of scholarship, research, mental health practice and academic and clinical training⁷⁻⁸. These initiatives have enriched, informed and challenged the activist scholarship and psychosocial practice of both authors of this article, about which we write below. We begin this article with a critical analysis of contemporary trauma diagnostic discourses and humanitarian trauma interventions that stand in contrast to liberation psychology and informed our university-based studies. We then describe the two contexts in which we have worked – Brinton in Guatemala and Simone in Rwanda – elucidating how we entered these communities during armed conflicts, genocidal violence and transitional justice (for Brinton) and post-genocide (for Simone). Although space does not permit lengthy historical descriptions, it is critical to situate our psychosocial praxis as it emerged

from and responded to the horrific contexts in which the women, youth and children we accompanied survived and to which they and we responded – and to clarify how we entered the communities in which we worked. We have thus positioned ourselves to then describe our on-the-ground praxis within each context, Brinton as a community-cultural psychologist and facilitator of participatory action research among the Maya, and Simone as a clinical psychologist and psychotherapist, consultant, and trainer among Rwandan women and youth. Thus, the work in Guatemala is grounded in and emergent from feminist and anti-racist participatory and action research within creative workshops and that in Rwanda draws on community-based interventions. We documented that work through field notes, in-depth interviews, ethnographic observations, consultancy reports, and knowledge generated and produced through the arts and creative practices (e.g., theater, drawing, collages, storytelling) in situ. Findings were analyzed and interpreted with participants and subsequently upon our return north.

We conclude this article by describing some of the lessons that we have learned from dialoguing about our respective praxis and the meanings we have made through the documentation and interpretation of the findings described below. We discuss select ways of being, thinking and doing that we have identified both within each context and in dialogical relationality with each other and with psychology. We engage in a series of final reflections through which we draw out some of the lessons learned about what it means to both liberate psychology and engage in a liberation psychology in the midst

of ruptures and constraints during and in the wake of genocidal violence. We offer several provisional conclusions at the edges of the liberation paradigm and argue that those who seek a liberatory psychological praxis are challenged to take a hermeneutic Copernican turn in psychology and develop a praxis from the perspective of the oppressed, marginalized and impoverished.

A Critical View on EuroAmerican/ Western Trauma Discourse in Contemporary Humanitarian Emergencies and Beyond

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) (American Psychiatric Association, 1980) introduced 'post-traumatic stress disorder' (PTSD) to categorize stressors attendant to concentration-camp experiences, torture, bombings, and natural disaster. Although not a 'new' discourse, since then PTSD has been popularized globally, and psychologists, psychiatrists and other mental-health workers have convinced international agencies, including the United Nations and the World Health Organization, and many NGOs, of the importance of including mental-health workers as first responders to war, natural disasters and other 'exceptionally difficult circumstances'⁹⁻¹⁰. The scope of PTSD as the dominant discourse and practice vis-à-vis the psychological effects of violence is historically embedded in traditional Euro-American or Western medical conceptions of illness, wherein selected symptoms and behavioral indices in the individual following exposure to violence are categorized as 'disease', thereby locating meaning making about the effects of

war, state-sponsored violence and structural oppression within an apolitical biomedical framework. The underlying ontology reveals an individual at the center of morality and cosmology, as well as a presumed universalism of the symptoms of mental disorders. This view has been challenged as side-lining other more diverse understandings that emphasize non-dualistic, non-pathologizing, holistic ways of being and knowing, including those that draw from Indigenous cosmovisions¹¹⁻¹³.

International donors find psychosocial trauma work attractive to fund because of its unquestioning apolitical and benign character: Working for classical victims' groups such as 'women' and 'children' with a preconceived 'hierarchy of suffering' and suffused with binary stereotypes of 'victims' and 'perpetrators' seems commendable, but reflects an inappropriate linear and parsimonious orientation in overwhelmingly complex contemporary situations¹⁴⁻¹⁶. Additionally, 'trauma-based business' interventions, often presented as evidence-based approaches, obscure the multiple historical and socio-political ways in which actors in the global North failed to protect (e.g., in Rwanda) and politically undermined (e.g., in Guatemala) local citizens, resulting in genocidal violence. This neo-colonial psychology imported into crises has been criticized as lacking historical and socio-political embeddedness and challenged the field to standardize best practices in mental health and psychosocial support^{11,14,17}. The latter was undertaken by organizations such as the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) affiliated with the United Nations; however, despite their good intentions of limiting harms, these standards

fail to question basic assumptions of an underlying dominance of EuroAmerican/Western psychology¹⁸. Trauma-based psychosocial interventions have similarly informed and become part of an ongoing transitional justice theory and practice whose four pillars (truth-telling, justice, repair, and non-repetition) have informed peacemaking processes in search of democratic transitions in the wake of genocidal violence in both Rwanda and Guatemala and beyond¹⁹.

Against this broader background, this article (re)views some of our accompaniment experiences as feminist clinical and community psychologists, sharing how liberation psychology has been a compass or a *hilo conductor* [integrative thread] for each of us as we have struggled not only to “do no harm” but to facilitate opportunities through which local survivors can draw on their resources towards survivance and change. That said, we do not claim to replace the deficient trauma discourses described briefly above with a romanticized, simplified view that enthusiastically and uncritically embraces local ‘others’ of the global South. Rather we offer reflections on our lived experiences of co-creating psychological praxis through vulnerable encounters within the contexts in which we have each worked and now, in dialogue with each other about those contexts, that is, Rwanda and Guatemala. We critically question ourselves and our work, striving to collaborate in a praxis that authentically contributes to the well-being and conscientization processes of the people with whom we journey, while recognizing that our praxis is limited by our positions of power and privilege in the global North from which we continue to benefit.

Thus, this article is an iteration of dialogical relationality and praxis through which we strive to continue to liberate psychology through our positions of chosen vulnerability - a potential resource for decentering northern-based positions of power, while repositioning ourselves through activist praxis carried out in complex situations. The next section analyzes two professional journeys initiated as psychosocial and then mutual accompaniment [*acompañamiento/ accompagnement*]²⁰⁻²¹. We sought to walk alongside local survivors as they repositioned themselves as what we call protagonists, drawing on what we saw and heard as we formed dialogic relationships²². We write here on how we each critically reflected on processes in which we embraced listening and sought to develop professional humility vis-à-vis the complexities that we encountered.

Dialoguing Between Contexts: Professional Encounters and Narratives Generated in Guatemala and Rwanda

In the following, we briefly describe our professional engagements with survivors within two different regional contexts, both devastated by genocidal violence, and our efforts to interweave what we have learned from our praxis. A longer description of the details of the two countries internal conflicts and broader transitional justice (TJ) responses to them is beyond the scope of this article but we note them briefly to clarify that our psychosocial work was rooted in and sought to respond to the historic, sociopolitical and economic realities that have deeply informed and constrained the lived experiences of those whom we accompanied.

Brinton Enters Guatemala

The US role in the overthrow of the 1954 democratically elected government in Guatemala, and its ongoing support of multiple dictators later found responsible for genocidal violence framed my (Brinton's) work during years of armed conflict therein as well as in post-genocide transitional justice processes²³. The UN-sponsored truth commission (CEH: Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, 1999) found the Guatemalan military responsible for 93% of 669 massacres against the highland Mayan communities of Guatemala, including over 300 in the Quiché department in which the work I describe herein is situated²⁴⁻²⁶.

The CEH documented what it characterized as acts of genocide against the Maya, within the context of a 36-year armed conflict perpetrated by the country's military. The latter was found to be responsible for killing more than 200,000 people and for the forcible displacement of hundreds of thousands within and beyond the country's borders. Ixil and K'iche' Mayan women (see below) were some among the many survivors of multiple gendered and racialized violent assaults, including sexual violence.

My work in Guatemala began as a consultant to the Association of Communitarian Health Services (ASECSA for its Spanish name), a local Guatemalan health NGO, to work with children whose families had been massacred²⁷. We collaborated with Ignacio Martín-Baró and colleagues from Chile, Argentina, El Salvador and Guatemala in a four-country community-based intervention drawing on the creative arts for work with children and youth survivors of armed conflicts in Central America and dictatorships in the Southern Cone²⁸.

I was invited to Chajul, a town in the remote northern Quiché department, by a Maya Ixil refugee with whom I had worked in Mexico. She hoped I would accompany women there seeking to rethread community where nearly 2/3 of the massacres described above had transpired. Their community had been ruptured and no family was untouched by the gross violations of human rights and horrific losses. Returning annually each summer and during sabbatical leaves I worked with a women's group that sought accompaniment as they grew into a non-governmental organization (NGO). I accompanied their journey, listening from zero, as I actively participated alongside the local activities, as they built a corn mill and I sought to understand or, in the words of Raimón Panikkar, to 'stand under' the meanings they were making of a process that they described as a 'mental health project'²⁹.

Evangelical Christians, Mayan healers, Roman Catholics, former guerrillas and wives of local civilian patrollers or military settled on the category of 'women' as that around which they could gather across multiple diversities including polarized positionalities as victims and perpetrators. They performed tasks together, recognizing that their geographic proximity as returnees demanded that they support each other if they were to mobilize the Indigenous ways of knowing and being that had contributed to their resistance for centuries. These ixil and k'iche' women gathered in small groups, engaging in traditional rituals, prayer, dance, and, over time, creative workshops including dramatic play, rethreading relationships among themselves and across diversities, forming a small NGO they called the Association for the

Development of Maya Ixil Women (ADMI, for its Spanish name)³⁰.

The 'corn mill' was their first initiative as they felt that it would not only be 'healing' for them and serve other women in the community who were forced to grind corn by hand - but they saw it as generating funds with which they could help educate their children in their Indigenous languages. They were together building educational and economic-development projects towards a 'better future' for themselves and the next generations. In lieu of speaking about their stories of *la violencia* [the violence/armed conflict], the Maya ixil and k'iche' women of Chajul elected to focus on what was required of them if they were to build a better future for their children. Building a corn mill required: finding land, identifying a tree that would provide the wood, seeking help from men in Chajul to cut it down and build a small house for the mill, rising at 4 am and walking alone through the night to the town's center where their corn mill was sited, etc. Each step forward required imagining themselves as women into the actions they were taking, the story they were narrating together. As doors refused to open, they imagined what might be found behind them – and through workshops I was facilitating, dramatized contemporary fears. Windows into present fears opened on fears from the war and, then, onto a deeper past that preceded those 36 years of genocidal violence ceding memories of customs, cultural practices, daily grinding of corn by hand and beliefs of who they are and were as Maya ixil and k'iche'. They engaged in everyday activities, working as mothers and grandmothers, daughters and sisters, rethreading community, performing

survance as Maya ixil and k'iche' women. That was my first feminist participatory action research process in the final days of the armed conflict.

Simone's Journey in Rwanda

Between April and June 1994, approximately 800,000 people were killed in the Rwandan genocide against the Tutsi and moderate Hutu and Twa. After colonialization through the Germans (1899-1919), Belgian colonial rule took over in the wake of the first World War and they later introduced a racialized ideology and colonial policies that fostered divisions between the Hutu majority and the Tutsi minority and that led to different phases of genocidal violence up to and including the genocide of 1994.

It is estimated that between 250,000 and 500,000 women were sexually abused and raped, tortured, genitally mutilated, or forced to choose between death or sexual abuse by their 'husbands' in forced marriages during the genocide. Thousands of rape survivors were deliberately infected with HIV/AIDS.³¹ Many became pregnant, and while an untold number tried to self-abort, kill their children, or abandon them to die, between 2,000 and 5,000 children survived³¹⁻³². They are still today often called children of 'bad memories', 'of hatred', or 'children of Interahamwe', the name of the Hutu militias.

Children whose origin is located in the rape experiences of their mothers have largely been neglected by researchers, human rights activists, and also by psychosocial practitioners³³⁻³⁴. We know that many of these children were mistreated in the wombs of their mothers, when they tried to self-abort, or since birth.

Many were emotionally and physically neglected as babies and, as a result, are less physically developed than their peers and some suffer from severe cognitive disabilities – due to the violence and the constant survival stress that they have undergone. In some cases, these children were the only members of their mother's families left alive after the genocide. They grew up with the burden of emotional ambiguity under the overwhelming and impossible existential burden of being both their mother's consolation and the symbol of their loss. Many children today care for their HIV positive mothers and some are themselves HIV positive. When children ask about their fathers, they are often severely punished or experience their mothers' emotional breakdown or silence. Some children resemble their fathers so closely that their mere physical presence is a constant, stressful reminder of the sexualized violence they endured³⁵.

The local Rwandan NGO Solidarity for the Development of Widows and Orphans aimed at Work and Self-Promotion (SEVOTA, for its French name) was founded in December, 1994 to support Rwandan widows and orphans. Its mission later extended to a unique group of survivors: women who had been raped and who conceived and kept the child. As a German psychologist, psychotherapist and theologian working as a consultant for psychosocial trauma work, I (Simone) have been journeying with SEVOTA for the last 14 years with at least one consultancy visit per year. My first encounter with the staff of SEVOTA was in early 2009 as a trainer for a self-care retreat for staff developed in the wake of their reporting exhaustion from the profound despair that they encountered in their work. They sought more psychological tools and techniques

to help them in dealing with the mothers and described that they sometimes knew neither how to set boundaries in listening to them nor how to set priorities in the midst of suffering that surpassed their capacities. They felt connected to and responsible for these mothers and their children, not as 'counselors' but as 'their sisters', as many had been ostracized by their own (few remaining) families for having kept the child of the 'enemy'. Probably one of the most profound sources of SEVOTA's exhaustion was the fact that the staff themselves were survivors of the genocide and some volunteers were mothers of children born after the genocide. In places with histories such as Rwanda, it is naïve to call for 'boundaries' or be under constant supervision in work with other survivors. Such standards do not work in contexts wherein psychosocial work, by necessity, is frequently provided by survivors.

In the beginning of my consultancy, we examined what 'had worked' in the way SEVOTA had organized its accompaniment of the survivors and whether they felt that they were actually offering a stabilizing presence for the mothers and their children. In order to confirm this, I followed SEVOTA staff for 3 years with one visit per year, documenting their intervention and the impact that survivors reported. With my local Rwandan colleagues, I conducted interviews and focus group discussions with the mothers and then sat together with the staff, and other women's rights activists from other organizations that served as a sounding board, in week-long retreats, looking at the themes they had identified, and their unique methodology that combined spirituality and prayer, women's and children's rights education, dance, body exercises and sharing in dyads and small

groups. Later on, my accompaniment stretched to developing jointly-designed psychosocial resources for the children.

Taking a Liberation Psychology Perspective: Learning from the Survivors Themselves and Their Journeys towards Healing

Both of us, Brinton in Guatemala and Simone in Rwanda, entered local communities through small women's groups or NGOs as consultants – subsequent to years of living and working in the rural Highlands of Guatemala and in Eastern Africa, where we had generated experiences with community-based interventions grounded in Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed and Martín-Baró's liberation psychology infused with frameworks from feminist liberation and critical psychologies³⁶⁻³⁷.

When sharing our more recent personal and educational 'herstories' as well as our encounters with survivors, we discerned in our dialogue similarities between the trajectories of healing of the survivors who we accompanied despite the diverse contexts: In the absence of adequate documentation of and responses to the multiple forms of violence against women and their sequelae within many of the formal truth and reconciliation processes in Rwanda, Guatemala and beyond, local communities of women found ways to gather, drawing on Indigenous or local beliefs, spirituality and practices as well as small scale income generating processes through which they sought to generate funds to, in the words of a Maya ixil woman in Chajul, 'build a better future for their children'.

Brinton noted that in Guatemala, diverse groups of community-based health promoters encountered mothers and/or children who had survived the genocidal violence described briefly above, as they sought to render health services in rural communities and with displaced populations (see e.g., *Actoras de Cambio* [Actors for Change], *ECAP* [Community Studies and Psychosocial Action Team] and *Proyecto Buena Semilla* [The Good Seed Project])^{27,38-41}. Simone commented that these initiatives showed similar dynamics to the approach of SEVOTA whose group work with mothers was named '*forum Abiyubaka*': A forum is a place, real or virtual, where people meet to share ideas; *Abiyubaka* is a Kinyarwanda word meaning 'the women who rehabilitate themselves'. The name emphasizes the coming together as peers within a community and gaining new insights through sharing and discussion.

As we dialogued about our experiences as feminist consultants inspired by liberation psychology, we noted that in both countries the initiatives included stable groups of mothers, sometimes gathering with staff from local NGOs. They meet to pray, sing and dance together, and to self-reflect about their suffering and their potential as individual survivors and as groups, through the presentation of pictorial codes and stories as well as dramatizations through which they depicted their experiences and meanings made of women's rights and gender. Paulo Freire had called this methodology 'conscientization', one of the central ideas that Martín-Baró incorporated into his development of a psychology 'of the people'. Similar to groups among the Maya of Guatemala, SEVOTA teaches simple body

exercises to the women which they then spontaneously use and offer to each other in the meetings when the pain and tension become too overwhelming. In addition, when memories of the past and current survival stressors become overwhelming, SEVOTA provides social workers and a psychologist who offer individual conversations: What is provided is *guhumuriza*, a Kinyarwanda word which means comforting or *sanación* [healing].

Maya k'iche' healer and psychologist Sara Medrano Álvarez served as an intermediary between the Maya and EuroAmerican educated psychologists, noting conceptions from her language and cosmovision:

there are several conceptions that they [the k'iche' Maya] use within their cosmovision, including: Kakojachoq'ab', 'use your strengths'; Chatz'ukuj a kaslemal, 'find the best way to live'; Chayik'a'a Kaslemal, 'build your own life' and Xojch'awoq, 'let's talk'⁴².

Thus, the Maya k'iche' as the Maya ixil draw on local resources, grounded within their cosmovision, and name not only their losses and grief but also their strengths, what Brinton and colleagues increasingly envision as their 'protagonism'¹⁸.

Simone stressed that in SEVOTA, most of the accompaniment is done by the women themselves in dyads and small groups during their forum meetings wherein they share pain, but also their strengths and plans for the future. In both Guatemala and Rwanda, mothers emphasized the need to provide for their children, thus income-generation is of major importance for them – and planning for these 'projects of the future', as they call them, is central part of the work. As they gradually move beyond seeing themselves as

'destroyed' and as they experience belonging to this new community, they become even more aware of the contributions they can make towards rethreading their communities, towards creating a peaceful society. This change is captured by one Maya chuj woman's reflection in 2011 who noted:

[I am] old, without suffering, without fear and without shame.

Today I am capable of doing all that I can. I am like a bird. I can fly with large wings.²²

And a Rwandan survivor described her healing journey:

Before joining the forum, for years, I had not taken care of my body or of my hair. I looked dirty and filthy. When I learned that I still had dignity and that I had rights, I started to wear clean clothes and to look after my hair. And when I started valuing myself, I could see my child also being beautiful - just like any other child" (Interview by Simone).

These women's circles and groups of 'women-in-community' in Guatemala and 'forum groups' in Rwanda remain together, naming themselves in ways that reflect and symbolize their identity (e.g., Actors for Change and The Good Seed in Guatemala; the forum of women who rehabilitate themselves 'in peace' in Rwanda). They have continued meeting for farming and other income generating activities, visiting each other, offering each other gifts and accompanying each other for community ceremonies – becoming 'family' in the absence of their spouses or children who were killed (in Guatemala) or families who ostracize them for having kept the child of the 'enemy' (in Rwanda).

In our dialogue and drafting of this article, we realized that without having been taught any

explicit therapeutic tools, the women we accompanied had recovered practices from their ancestors or generated processes of accompaniment that contributed to recovery: they shared both painful and joyful experiences while learning from each other as they were working together in income generating activities. But, as importantly, we observed how they contained each other's pain and provided the safety of a new community-of-women. They embraced themselves as protagonists building a future in the wake of huge losses and persistent challenges, not as traumatized clients or patients in need of specialized therapy but as mothers and fellow travelers. The language was neither pathologizing nor therapeuticizing: the local women and those who accompanied them 'simply' and, at the same time, impressively, assisted in rethreading community and refocusing possible futures.

Liberation Psychology as an *Hilo Conductor* [Integrative Thread]: Locating the Historical Roots of Violence towards Transformative Change

Both of us drew on the experiences described above in our next steps within Guatemala and Rwanda. Below we dialogue about how we creatively engaged with local protagonists to develop the next generation of accompaniment in post-genocidal healing journeys.

Windows, Doors and Meaning Making in Chajul

I (Brinton) had engaged in the above work while the military was still installed in Chajul and the war, ongoing. Yet by early 1997 the Peace Accords had been signed and the truth

commissions described briefly above had begun to gather testimonies from survivors. Upon the signing of the Peace Accords in December, 1996, new spaces opened within the country to collectively explore the root causes of what rural Maya had referred to as *la violencia* [the violence] for nearly four decades of armed conflict – and we initiated a new phase in our work together. The truth commissions initiated by the Catholic Archdiocese (ODHAG) and by the United Nations (CEH) sought to document stories from local survivors throughout the countryside. I noted that many women in Chajul who had suffered horrific violations either spoke of the suffering of their spouses or children, silencing their own violations, or resisted participation in these processes. As an outsider but a local accompanier who had been in the community for several months each year for nearly a decade, I was attentive to the refusal of many of the women in ADML to formally give their testimonies to the ODHAG or CEH workers. Some were not eager to share their suffering with “outsiders” while others did not want to talk to Catholics (from the ODHAG project) or to those who spoke neither ixil nor k'iche'. Among their reasons for self-silencing, one that impressed me was a refusal to retrieve the past if it would not help them to 'build a better future' for their children.

I was reminded of the work of Gianni Rodari, an Italian pedagogue who worked with autistic children, who often advised those who were experiencing challenges in new contexts or in work with new populations to embrace creativity and curiosity – that is, to enter a house through a window rather than a door as it is often easier and, a lot more fun.⁴³ As I listened to the women, I realized that the official

truth commissioners were entering through the door, while the Chajulense sought to build a better future for their children by storying or narrating their stories locally. They challenged me to discern a strategy for entering their 'herstory' through the window rather than the door of transitional justice.

In thinking about doors and windows and journeying without a map, I was reminded of the women's mental health initiative, that is, their corn mill. I had not understood their initial description of a 'corn mill as mental health' but I opted to follow them through this window, and each creative workshop – designed to help them discern their skills and the resources they had, but failed to recognize, that would enable them to do something women had never done before – was also a window that opened on rooms that had been locked, stories silenced in the midst of massacres, rapes, murders of their children, burning of their crops, weavings, and homes – racialized and gendered violence barely mentioned in the truth commission reports being drafted at the time. Psychosocial accompaniment meant walking behind or alongside those who allowed or invited me to join them, learning from and with them which required standing under them, listening more closely or digging more deeply as they re-storied their lives together towards mutual accompaniment.

These Maya ixil and k'iche' women were together building educational and economic-development projects towards a 'better future' for themselves and the next generations. But it was in the midst of reflecting on their lived experiences of self-silencing that we together developed the idea of using 'talking pictures' or 'photovoice' to tell the stories of their

experiences of 'the violence' and of how they as women had not only survived but were building a better future for themselves and their families⁴⁴. Accompanying their steps entailed the embrace of a creative and participatory action-reflection process that would involve what they called 'talking pictures' – a photo Participatory Action Research (PAR). The process was informed by the experiences of Caroline Wang and her colleagues in rural China whose book I shared with the women of ADMJ as they identified the window through which our developing dialogic relationship could continue to grow⁴⁵⁻⁴⁶. It was grounded, as I understood it, in the systematization of their experiences of recovering their customs and cultural practices by their decision to dig deeper into their pasts – beyond the recent 36-year armed conflict – to build a better future for their children. They determined to tell their stories in their own words – and they sought to re-present not only their individual and collective suffering due to the armed conflict but their positions not as victims but as those who not only had survived but were taking action as women, what I called, protagonists.

Twenty women from the 125 members of ADMJ formed a small working group that sought to 'write their story', a process that unfolded through small group discussions, learning how to take pictures, how to interview each other and then those whose images they had captured on film and through stories, to develop 'phototexts', that is, the image + words. Each phototext became a code, in the Freirian sense, that was presented to a small group of women who then deconstructed and reconstructed a single photovoice, generating multiple diverse narratives, each grounded in the diverse lived

experiences of the intergenerational group of women that included Catholics and evangelicals, youth and grandmothers, and those whose families were on opposing sides of that conflict. Some women worked within the town while others traveled to surrounding villages where they learned for the first time that despite the horrors in the town, including its occupation by the military, the displacement of many families, the rape of many women, the public hanging of a woman accused of being a *guerrilla*, and more, that life in the villages was ever more horrific as the armed soldiers lit fire to the village after raping its women, slaughtering their fetuses and young children, and murdering the latter's fathers.

This locally-based transitional justice process was further iterated through the photovoices' use as codes in larger participatory workshops wherein the 20 co-researchers included others in ADMI who wanted to learn alongside them as participants as they brought their experiences into a next iteration of photovoice through dramatic play and dramatic multiplication⁴⁷. Women who had hesitated to share their lives through speech, performed them, first vis-à-vis current fears living in the post-conflict context of impoverishment and family violence while building a corn mill, and then recovering the fears of the nearly four decades of armed conflict and genocidal violence through dramatic multiplication. Younger women spoke about childhood experiences of witnessing the massacre of their parents and younger siblings, the burning of their crops and clothes, their fears hiding in the mountains for days before joining others who were fleeing, restorying their and their community's life through the creative arts.

Years later when I returned to Chajul to interview the 18 surviving co-researchers about these experiences, those who had been youth at the time of participating in the project spoke of the groups being their first ever experiences of accompaniment—of being 'heard into speech' by someone who experienced their stories through their dramatizations—and then someone among the 20 who they listened into speech through an interview they facilitated and who had then interviewed them⁴⁸⁻⁴⁹. These experiences illuminated deep running emotions of loss and grief and were also infused by creativity and play. For the younger women in the group opportunities for play had been silenced during childhoods permeated by violence. They were now re-experiencing embodied performances, breaking silence, and discovering together the historical roots of *la violencia* and of the persistent impoverishment that preceded the conflict and stretched beyond it. That story, their *nunca más* [never again], was published in Guatemala and tells through multiple chapters and phototexts organized as a collective photostory, the herstory of the Maya ixil and k'iche' of Chajul, of the multiple ways in which their lives had been upended, the losses they experienced at the hands of the military, the resistance of those who joined the guerrilla movements or the civilian support of the latter, and the multiple traditions that they were slowly re-covering/un-covering in the rethreading of their lives as well as the new understandings of their rights as women and their children's rights as children.⁴⁴

Some participants have shared this *nunca más* with their own children and grandchildren, at home and in their schools, so that the next generations who can now read are learning

what their parents and grandparents had experienced, and sharing it beyond their borders. In contrast to truth commissions, their book is a collective rendering of the meanings women made of their experiences, grounded in more than 500 years of Indigenous knowledge(s) and in the more contemporary performances of women's leadership within and beyond the family. Some among the group have gone on to occupy positions of leadership among protagonists from beyond Chajul's borders or to testify publicly in the trials that convicted one dictator, Efraín Ríos Montt, who was found guilty of many of the massacres in this region⁵⁰. Others have developed small income-generating projects within the town while others have run for local leadership through public office in the town. And still others have returned to their neighboring villages and multiplied the experiences of ADMI by facilitating women's groups within the villages, sharing creative techniques, and learning from the local women about their traditional dance and religious and cultural rituals, while continuing to teach and learn about their and their children's rights as women, children, and Maya.

Journeying Without a Map with Youth in Rwanda

For me (Simone), SEVOTA sought to extend their work more explicitly to the children of the mothers in 2014 and asked me to accompany them in this process. The children – who were almost 20 years old when we decided to shift the focus – had been mostly present during the mother's forum meetings, but their activities had been restricted to recreational activities. There seemed a certain hesitancy in SEVOTA to work with the children

explicitly, as they feared intense reactions of these wounded young adults. We started again to conduct interviews with some of the youth who had previously processed their experience with their mothers. Drawing from these deep conversations and based on the organization's methodology developed for the mothers, SEVOTA staff and women's right activists journeying with them as well as some survivors and I went on a retreat to come up with a process. For some journeys, there are simply no coordinates and no maps, just as a fellow practitioner in the field described it for the mothers: '(...) If the question is "are there any psychological theories that fully understand the nature of becoming pregnant from rape", I would say no, there is none.'⁵¹

Despite this, our community of practitioners decided to 'move ahead'. We sought a nomenclature that resisted the repeated stigmatization of the label 'children born of rape' calling them the 'youth who are capable' or, in Kinyarwanda, the '*Urubyiruko rushoboye*'. We came up with a plan for two intense youth camps of 5 days each in which the *Urubyiruko rushoboye* spent days and nights together in a protected space, accompanied by facilitators of SEVOTA, with sessions of traditional and disco dance, prayers, creative and arts exercises, and small group and dyadic work. The 'youth who are capable' shared lived experiences, learned to find words to the silenced story of their identity in a context facilitated by compassionate staff of SEVOTA who they described as those 'who love us'.

Again, the idea was to build a community of these young survivors. It included time to get to know each other and settle into a safe space where they could feel comfortable and begin to share, understanding their own and

each other's experiences of pain, while grieving the losses of a broken childhood that could not be repaired. Activities contributed to experiences of reconnecting to and discovering strengths and talents and celebrating these talents; envisioning a future where they became responsible for their relationships and life projects.

Prior to the camp, we had developed case stories and typical situations in pictorial codes where the youth were portrayed in their everyday experiences of being belittled, overwhelmed by negative emotions such as hypervigilance and self-hatred as well as shame³⁶. They were encouraged to discuss issues of sexuality among themselves, a topic that had proven to be highly problematic for the girls and boys alike in prior interviews, and in interviews with those who had accompanied them: The boys had been described as feeling insecure vis-à-vis sexuality, sensing the destructive impact it had had on their mothers. SEVOTA staff noted potential resentment of their own masculinity, based on perceptions that their 'fathers' had 'destroyed' their mother's lives in the rape. Anecdotal evidence contributed to perceptions that the girls feared sexuality, having grown up with a mother that experienced major difficulties with her sexuality and suffered from retraumatization in married life due to rape experiences. Responding to what we were learning, we shared a short German documentary, subtitled in Kinyarwanda, about a Bosnian 'child of war' of the same age as these participants. After viewing the film, the 'youth who are capable' sat together to discuss their life experiences in small groups. The film about Bosnia introduced them to an international

community of survivor children and youth who shared similar violations.

The most powerful and life-changing intervention, however, according to the feedback of the youth themselves and of SEVOTA, was what we termed the reconnection to the historical background of their experience: One of the mothers, whom we call here Mama Angèle, volunteered to record a testimony of how women and girls experienced sexual violence during the genocide, without being explicit about her own experience for reasons of confidentiality. She explained her experiences of the genocide, including what women had experienced at that time. We recorded her testimony and she agreed to be present when the youth watched that video, to be available for questions. Afterwards, they were able – most for the first time in their lives – to ask her questions about the rapes and about their mother's experiences without being slapped or without their mothers breaking down. Mama Angèle described that she had felt not only valued but also self-confident: She treasured the experience that her sharing had helped young people to find their own path in life.

The youth's experience of inserting their overwhelming personal experiences within the historical, contextualized history of the Rwandan genocide provided them with a sense of consolation regarding who they were, that is, their identity. It had unexpected consequences: Not only did they better understand themselves, but they described feeling empathy for their mothers, able to value their pain in addition to their own personal suffering as children. I learned from my interviews with the participants that on many occasions, upon returning home, these youth, often angry or depressed young people,

had asked their mothers for forgiveness, while some of their mothers in return also asked their children for forgiveness. As one of the youth said:

When I heard the testimony of Mama Angèle, I understood what my own mother had gone through. I could forgive her. I could see it was not her fault. And it is not my fault.

After the experience in these workshops, the youth returned to their hills of origin where they reported to the local authorities and shared their learnings. What was striking was that the youth themselves spoke out about their experiences. They publicly asked their mothers for forgiveness and expressed that they loved their country. They called upon the community to work for reconciliation and affirmed their willingness to contribute. This is when we realized that the interventions had helped to integrate their history of pain – not only on a personal level, but more so, on socio-historical and political levels. Later, after the camps, they formed peace groups of ‘youth who are capable’ (with names that reflect what they as a group felt capable of, e.g., ‘youth who are capable of empowerment’) and met in these groups or phoned each other up to give and receive support.

In the follow-up sessions with SEVOTA, the staff reported changes they had observed in the youth, including improvements in their performance at school and in their relationships with their mothers. They noted that some of the young people had developed small income-generating projects. In some cases, they were giving public testimonies at national conferences and speaking openly to local authorities and leaders about their experiences and needs. One of the most

common feelings that young people, reported as a result of the youth camps, was that: *“I am not alone; others understand what I have gone through.”* This is not the end of their journey as new challenges continue. But the process confirms that maps are sometimes a result of and not a prerequisite for a journey.

Lessons Learned and Unresolved Tensions: Towards Provisional Conclusions at the Edges of the Liberation Paradigm

What have we learned in this dialogue about psychological praxis informed by liberation psychology, a dialogue of contexts and between each other in our positionalities of privilege? What have we, feminist liberation practitioners with a background in US/Western-European psychology, become aware of in this dance between ‘belonging’ and ‘being othered’ in ways that affirm our presence or submerge us in self-doubt at the margins of the everyday? Below we conclude with select ‘lessons learned’ that reflect both the potential and the limits of the liberation psychology paradigm that we share with those reading our reflections – in hopes that it informs future praxis that further liberates psychology.

Dialogic Relationality Over Time, Towards Nos-otras [we-others]

Thinking together and dialoguing about liberation psychology’s potential to allow us as ‘outsiders’ a standpoint from which to accompany local protagonists, activists, and practitioners from the base of their experiences has generated renewed confidence in the praxis described herein. We have re-experienced the value of dialogue and solidarity within

each context, wherein we have derived psychological knowledge from and with the women and youth 'who are capable'. We have also affirmed the value of dialogic relationships among those of us who are 'outside' of these contexts wherein genocidal violence has threatened the life worlds of *el pueblo* [the people], to draw on an understanding generated by Martín-Baró, one that has infused our experiences in Guatemala and Rwanda.

Among that which we have learned is that the latter was possible, we believe, because there was an openness from both sides, that is, from those of us from the global North and those in the global South, to work together, to share knowledge and practice with each other, to seek to generate experiences through which we aspired to documenting a 'third voice' towards *nos-otras*⁵²⁻⁵³. We sought to position ourselves with humility, affirming what we were discerning from the knowledge(s), meaning making, and actions of those with whom we journeyed. We sought to become witnesses within these journeys of discovery and recovery – and to accompany the protagonists' efforts by systematizing and documenting local ways of being and doing.

Holding the Pain of Others – In Situ and From Afar

A role that I (Simone) became particularly aware of in journeying with SEVOTA was my willingness and capacity to hold pain together with my Rwandan colleagues. I was not part of this immense historical pain of the 1994 genocide, even though I felt emotionally connected; I had not lost so many people. I was touched by, but not drowned in, the

enormous and seemingly boundless grief. I was engaged, but not entangled nor blocked. This created some safety for me in the process, and, then also for my SEVOTA colleagues who were often too close to the experiences, and sometimes felt the powerlessness vis-à-vis their beneficiaries, as evidenced in their self-doubts about their work, one possible effect of countertransference reactions⁵⁴. When I asked my Rwandan colleagues what they felt was the most important contribution I made to the work they did, they answered: 'You always believed in the resilience of the women and their children and you encouraged us.'

Sitting together, in the hills up-country we created something that had not existed before. It was a courageous collaboration and opened a new chapter in individually and historically breaking silences. We were developing a response from our own personal and community experiences and those of the women survivors, and of their children; from Rwandan history; from culture; and, from developmental and trauma psychologies. I brought the latter from my background – and those learnings contributed a flow for the interventions we were planning for the youth camps. We agreed to try out what we were thinking about and to seek feedback from the youth.

After my visit, upon returning to my home country, I called the team every evening during the first pilot camp. I asked how the exercises had gone and talked with my Rwandan colleagues about their journey that day, their fears, their moments of strength. I felt touched when they shared moments of joy and recovery, and anxious upon hearing about difficult moments that these wounded youth experienced. Yes, we had talked previously about the heaviness that would

come up. Yet, when the young people cried and expressed strong reactions, the staff felt overwhelmed by their histories.

I also realized my position within the team through these regular calls. I had to trust the process as I tried to hold their pain from a position that required empathetic reasoning. I tried to reassure them, to help identify strategies for next steps they might take, to normalize their lived experience of a process that was, indeed, overwhelming. I realized that nobody can be prepared for such pain. Yet we all felt that we needed to go through a process that was unveiled in ways we had anticipated, that is, that the truth could be shared amongst these young people, because we could hold them as a community. They found a home in this courage. The silence that kept the young people from understanding themselves was breached because they experienced a community who was listening, who held the pain.

When I asked SEVOTA about these phone calls during the pilot phase of this work, about why they were important for them, they told me that I encouraged them to continue the journey with the youth:

We did a work without having models from other places in the world. It was such hard work with a vulnerable group that needed so much support in order to get out of their immense sadness, stemming from their experiences of abuse as children and even during pregnancy, hated by their own mothers and by their community.... You (Simone) were important because we were overwhelmed by their emotional reactions. We needed you as an external person and without you we would perhaps have given up

or even entered critical moments ourselves. You reassured us that the pain could be contained and you were available in these moments.

Choques [shocks] and Fractures Within Circulations of Power

In the midst of powerful experiences of contention informing a radical hope for a future among Rwandan women and youth and Maya ixil and k'iche' women, there were inevitably fractures and ruptures. These are a part of any group of vibrant and diverse learners who are also teachers, particularly groups coming together who have experienced and have been affected by structural injustices – and in these contexts the latter included violations of their rights within and across generations. As I (Brinton) engaged in this journey in Guatemala, I sought to facilitate processes in which differences, even conflicts, could be expressed. I drew on processes given life by the feminist Gloria Anzaldúa in her work with Chicanas within and beyond US borders.⁵³ She talks about 'choques' [shocks] to describe experiences in which arguments erupt or perspectives clash, overtaking previous moments of belongingness. Michelle Fine and Maria Torre refer to these as 'participatory contact zones'⁵⁵.

Although I and the communities with whom I sought to forge mutual accompaniment worked to generate understanding and deep listening, the socio-historical contexts rooted in centuries of colonial power over, recent genocidal violence, persistent impoverishment and ongoing heteropatriarchy contributed to multiple choques. Disagreements often emerged within and across circulations of

power within groups, circulations inflected by gendered, racialized, classed, religious, and linguistic social differences among the Maya. Despite efforts to bring these disagreements into our participatory circles for processing and possible resolution, we were sometimes unable to rupture legacies of participants having been forced into silence as a resource for survival. This was particularly notable when the resources provided by external funders, often from the global North, were insufficient to support the desires of all individuals as well as the collective plans developed by the NGO. This played out in painful ways when ADMI secured funding for building a home for their organization, a longstanding dream that reflected stability and security for many in the group. Yet conflict emerged in determining who within their town would be hired to do that work, with different members recognizing that in a context of scarce resources, this funding was not only a resource for the organization but for some, not all, of the men in their town.

I (Brinton) was invited to return to Chajul in the midst of that conflict to facilitate a conflict resolution process in which all parties had committed to participate. I followed efforts by the funding organization and the local priest, meetings in which some from one or the other conflicting sides refused to participate. When I arrived, all of the women appeared and we met for several days seeking to hear into speech a compromise solution. Yet we failed to suture the rupture and eventually a second women's group formed in Chajul. Although not the focus of this article, this is one brief example of one of the effects of work with local survivors and protagonists in organizations committed to accompanying survivors of

extreme violence. We (Brinton and Simone) have both been confronted with the destructive powers circulating in our midst that have fractured a team or ruptured an organization and pained each of us in dialogic relationality with the women we accompanied. Genocidal violence builds on and installs processes wherein polarization and conflict emerge as the primary or exclusive strategies that one can imagine when seeking change. This is often evermore true in contexts of scarce resources or ongoing impoverishment wherein peacemaking processes have sidestepped the resolution of root causes of the armed conflict. The processes described herein are grounded in and have generated understandings of historical and socio-economic root causes of genocidal violence but they have neither resolved them nor taken up the macro-level interventions needed to install more participatory and equitable governance in either country. As psychologists and activist scholars, we humbly acknowledge the importance of these participatory processes at the micro- and meso-levels within the lived experiences of those whom we accompanied as we seek to read back the knowledge(s) and meanings made through these processes in our northern-based communities of teaching, learning and clinical practice.

Conclusion

By way of concluding our dialogue, we note that our experiences, as analyzed throughout this article, affirm that liberation psychology does not guarantee a happy ending to the level of suffering created by genocidal violence. Liberation is not a false surrogate or a politically correct response or a quick fix to the pain that the immense losses described

above have generated, losses that in large part are rooted in our countries of origin and their historical relationships with the countries in which we have accompanied survivors and protagonists. Rather than reducing or removing this social suffering, the processes described herein, informed by liberation psychology and infused with feminisms, name the pain by situating it in historical and socio-economic contexts while preparing those who seek to accompany survivors for brokenness. As Judith Herman notes in her books on trauma and recovery – an understanding that certainly also pertains to working with survivors in ways discussed herein – within local organizations but also, and more so, as ‘outsiders’:

*The work [...] is both a labor of love and a collaborative commitment. Though the therapeutic alliance partakes of the customs of everyday contractual negotiations, it is not a simple business arrangement. [...] It is a relationship of existential engagement, in which both partners commit themselves to the task of recovery.*⁵⁴

There are not, of course, always forward movements in processes of psychosocial accompaniment. And, as intimated in our descriptions herein, they require humility, deep listening over years, and a willingness to de-center knowledge(s) from the global North in order to ‘hear into being’ local understandings and meanings made through action and reflection. As importantly, they require a risk to enter through a window rather than a door, or a willingness to embark on a journey without a map.

Relatedly, we interpret the belief that our journeys as feminist psychologists accompanying victims/survivors always have a

positive outcome as reflective of the neo-liberalism of mental health praxis which persists in the belief that we can always find a ‘good-enough technique’ to guarantee health and wellbeing. Perhaps what liberation psychology has taught us as we have journeyed with those living in contexts of post-genocidal violence and impoverishment is exactly this: that what counts in the end is the authenticity of bearing witness and accompanying those with whom we generate communities in which they can hold each other.

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