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Memorialization from below in Guatemala and El Salvador

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Tine: Welcome to this new episode of Justice Visions. I am Tine Destrooper, and it's lovely to be back after a few months of not podcasting, mostly due to our big conference on the role of victims in transitional justice. For those who are interested in learning more about that, several recordings are still available on justicevisions.org and on our [YouTube channel](#) of Justice Visions. But today we are back with a new podcast episode and actually with a new miniseries of the Justice Visions Podcast on the topic of Memorialization. With me today, as a co-host is Gretel Mejía Bonifazi. She's one of our own researchers at Justice Visions working on this topic. So welcome, Gretel.

Gretel: Thanks, Tine. It is a pleasure to be here.

Tine: And as I mentioned, we'll be zooming in on the topic of memorialization in next few episodes, not primarily because memorization has come to be seen as the fifth pillar of transitional justice, but also, and I think more importantly, because memorialization, memory work more generally, has been developing in interesting ways over the past few years, especially also driven by civil society actors, so we felt it was time to explore that link between the practice, the bottom-up initiatives and the institutionalization of the field in some more detail.

Gretel: Indeed Tine, because when we look at what's happening on the ground, and there is just so much from a wide range of memorialization efforts spearheaded by civil society to those installed by governments. This could be anything from museums, memorials, monuments, places of mourning, artistic practices... and if we look at the different contexts, we can see the growing institutional, but also scholarly attention for initiatives in the field of memorialization that have been prompted by grassroots and civil society actors.

Tine: I think a couple of people have even called that this “wave of remembering” or this boom in memorialization. And we're also seeing a lot of innovation, a lot of experimentation, a lot of collaborations also, which is exactly what we want to foreground in this miniseries because a lot of the contexts in which we have worked at Justice Visions, they are facing all kinds of challenges, from impunity to lack of political will to ongoing repression, et cetera. So, in these contexts, exploring how different stakeholders from academia, from civil society and so forth are trying to collaborate and to form partnerships to forge some kind of memorialisation, some kind of acknowledgement. I think that's crucial to understand how the field is shaping up, where were heading.

And today in the first episode of this miniseries will be focusing on Central America, a region where there are several examples of this kind of vibrant memorialization landscape coming from civil society basically. And the two countries we will be talking about today are Guatemala and El Salvador. We have a guest on El Salvador who will join us in just a moment. But first, Gretel, your expertise is in the Guatemalan case, I first wanted to ask you if you could describe in some more detail what the memorization landscape looks like in Guatemala.

Gretel: First, I would like to mention that Guatemala suffered an internal armed conflict from 1960 to 1996 with the signing of the peace agreements with the result of more than 250,000 deaths, and more than 40,000 disappeared. Memorialization practices or initiatives started to shape up in the mid-90s. They were mainly pushed for at the local level by victim committees, community associations and coalitions of civil society organisations wishing to build a shared narrative about the past, but also to dignify the memory of the victims and denounce human rights violations as they were taking place. So, these organisations work with the limited resources, which often requires that they develop and they adopt creative and innovative strategies to pursue their goals. In these regard, civil society has advanced for the creation of memorials, museums, exhibitions, oral history projects, performances.

But, I would like to highlight the memorial called *Paisajes de la memoria* or landscapes of memory which was spearheaded by [CONAVIGUA](#), which is the National Coordination of Widows of Guatemala, one of the first victims organisations in the country. Its leader, Rosalina Tuyuc, who was one of the keynote of our Justice Vision Conference, she mobilised resources to create a memorial to commemorate the victims of enforced disappearances in the town of Comalapa, where she's from. So after mobilising to locate mass graves and conduct exhumations, more than 40 victims were identified using forensic anthropology methods. They were later buried in a mountain in the same village. So besides serving as a place of mourning, the memorial has compelling murals, but also plaques with the names of the victims. And according to the leaders of CONAVIGUA, one of the main purposes is also to resignify places of terror, because the memorial is located close to the former military base where the torture and the disappearances took place.

What is particularly remarkable about memory activism in the country is that on the one hand, you have a State that has no political will to implement, public policies on memorialization. But on the other hand, society is still deeply polarised. There are revisionist discourses which are rampant as well as stigmatising narratives against victims and human rights organisations; but victims and civil society have found opportunities to reshape the narratives regarding human rights violations that took place.

Tine: The last point you mentioned about the challenges, that's quite interesting, because these challenges are obviously and unfortunately not unique to the Guatemalan context there. I think in, in other countries, especially also in Central America, we see these kinds of memory battles in several TJ or transitional justice processes. And I think El Salvador is actually another interesting example where we observe some similar dynamics. So today we have as a guest, [Amanda Grzyb](#), who is a professor of information and media studies at the University of Western Ontario. She's with us today because she's also the project director of [Surviving](#)

[Memory in Postwar El Salvador](#). And Amanda, you just recently returned from El Salvador where you were conducting fieldwork, so welcome in the episode today.

Amanda: Thanks so much for the invitation. It's great to be here.

Tine: We just listened to Gretel talk about the current memorialization landscape in Guatemala. And I wonder if you could just tell us a bit more about what that looks like in El Salvador and whether that's similar to what we just heard about Guatemala.

Amanda Grzyb: There are a lot of similarities. The Salvadoran Civil War was a 12-year conflict from 1980 to 1992. Between the FMLN, which was a coalition of guerrilla factions and left-wing groups, and the government of El Salvador, which was heavily trained and funded by the United States. And the conflict was marked by orchestrated scorched earth campaigns, of state violence that targeted civilians, who the government perceived as sympathetic to the left wing groups. And by the end of the war, 75,000 people, approximately, were dead, another 8,000 disappeared and more than 1,000,000 Salvadorans were displaced, many of them having fled to the refugee camps in Honduras.

After the peace accords were signed in 1992, the [United Nations Commission for the Truth on El Salvador](#) heard 22,000 complaints of violence, and they ultimately concluded that 85% of the wartime violations and atrocities were committed by the government of El Salvador, funded by the United States, including death squads and militias. And the Truth Commission, in its report called for State recognition of the civilian massacres and for particular work focused on documentation, commemoration, and reconciliation. They called for memorials with the names of the victims and unfortunately most of the post-war governments have not adequately complied with these recommendations, and, as in the case in Guatemala, a lot of this memorialization work has been left in the hands of grassroots survivor groups, community leaders, Salvadoran civil society organisations and international projects that support that work. There are a number of important initiatives like the [monument to memory and truth](#) which opened in 2003 in Parque Cuscatlán. It has a partial list with the names of the victims, documents about fifty percent of the massacres in the regions where we are currently working. And it's a really important memorial in San Salvador, but it is not adequate and was not spearheaded by the government. It was funded almost exclusively by survivor groups and international NGOs. There are many vibrant memorials and museums across the country. Again, they have grown from the bottom up and through the initiatives of survivor groups. They include [Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen](#) in San Salvador, which is a partner on our project, [Centro Arte Para La Paz](#) in Suchitoto, which is another partner working closely with us as well as an array of small memorials and museums in rural communities that were affected by the war.

Tine: This is really interesting and it actually also brings us to your project, the Surviving Memory project. And I was wondering if you could say a bit more, not just about a project itself, but also how it responds to or how it is embedded in those dynamics, in that context that you're just describing?

Amanda Grzyb: [Surviving Memory in Postwar El Salvador](#) was formed in 2016-2017, and it is an international research partnership that's committed to documenting and commemorating the history of the Civil War and also preventing future violence. We have a really large international team that includes civil war survivors, Salvadoran community leaders, artists, architects, scientists, scholars, mental health practitioners, museum workers, municipal governments, Salvadoran civil society organisations and NGOs, and in total we have about 22 partners and around 100 active researchers, both scholarly researchers and community-based researchers and collaborators that are working on a range of bottom-up memory initiatives.

Tine: This sounds fascinating, and I will actually return to some of those elements in a bit. But for now, Gretel, I also wanted to hear a bit more from the work that you've been doing because you have been doing a lot of work on the dynamic landscape, civil society initiatives, but a lot of the work that you have been doing has also been studying how those initiatives are then influenced by policy, by what we call the standardisation of TJ and initiatives taking place at the former level at the institutional level. For example, this institutionalisation of memory as a fifth pillar of transitional justice. So could you say a bit more about what that interaction between informal initiatives on the one hand and formal collaborations on the one hand, and then the kind of more formal and institutional landscape looks like in the Guatemalan case?

Gretel: There are definitely a number of ways in which one influences the other and vice-versa. As I mentioned, on the one hand, you have a vibrant civil society mobilising in different ways which have inspired institutionalisation or standardisation of memory in transitional justice from being regarded as a form of reparation to now becoming a standalone pillar in transitional justice. But on the other hand, you have regional or international developments. For example, the inclusion of memorialization as a form of symbolic reparation. So when you read a judgement of the Inter-American Court, you see a concrete reparations orders about building a museum or creating an exhibition, translating the judgement in indigenous languages as a form of acknowledgement, and I would like to maybe highlight one example, which is the [Plan De Sanchez Massacre memorial Chapel](#), which was created in the town of the same name to commemorate the victims of the massacre. What is really interesting is that even though the [landmark judgement of the Inter-American Court](#) paved the way for the construction of this memorialization, this judgement, as a whole, is also the result of long-term participation of victim survivors, of human rights organisations conducting a strategic litigation, which have been successful in integrating the demands of comprehensive reparations according to the epistemologies or the priorities of the victims themselves, which then resulted in landmark judgements. So these interactions, I would say, are quite illustrative of the dynamics of Guatemala. And I would say in other countries in Latin America and merit further academic discussions to see how this cross-fertilisation is taking place on the ground.

Tine: This is interesting because I'm hearing both of you talk about, you know, the importance of victim driven and agendas that are determined by victims, about kind of long term processes, about especially also the importance of collaboration. And I was wondering, Amanda, if you could say a bit more about that, because I feel that, especially also in academia, increasingly, people are looking to work in more collaborative ways, that are genuinely driven

by the agendas of the people that we work with. And I was wondering if you could say a bit more about what those collaborations have looked like in your project, maybe even within the different subprojects, on commemoration, documentation and research.

Amanda Grzyb: So, we're collaborating in a context of impunity, which is important to mention. And this is one of the reasons that the bottom-up work is so important because I think there is more and more a kind of national impetus towards forgetting the history of the civil war. And this is, part of what drives the collaboration within communities, across communities and then across sectors, including academia. Our methodology is participatory and community based and collaborative. So all the projects that we work on come from the bottom-up and we operate with a very horizontal governance structure. So this means that we have a lot of planning meetings, a lot of brainstorming about what kinds of memorialization projects the communities want to prioritise. The projects that have emerged from this process include: historical memory workshops and the documentation of refugee experiences, architectural co-design of memorials and museums. So we're currently finishing up a [major project at the site of the Sumpul River massacre](#). But we have seven more memorial projects that we're working on and the design of three community museums which includes architectural design of repurposed spaces in the community, and then the development of the exhibition. We are working on video testimonies and documentary films. We are co-creating an [interactive online map of massacres](#), and this involves really intensive field work of hiking into massacre sites with survivors, getting very precise GPS coordinates for sites of capture, mass graves, sites of killing, sites of sexual violence, and then recording survivor testimonies at the site, which are then uploaded onto the map and fully accessible to the public. We are working on a [Community book series with-different communities in war affected regions](#). In commemoration we also have a lot of public art initiatives, such as embroidery workshops and exhibitions, community mural sculptures, ceramic installations and community-based research focused on mental health, local economic development and post war reconstruction, environmental reparation and also a strong emphasis on intergenerational education.

Tine: Thank you Amanda, and on those topics, we also talked to one of the collaborators that you work with, Felipe Tobar, who is a survivor, but also the founding President of [Asociación Sumpul](#), and former mayor of San José Las Flores in Chalatenango. Don Felipe, we talked to him because he is one of the founders of the project and a key collaborator on many aspects of the work, for example the memorial of the massacre at Las Aradas, the massacres map, workshops, etc. And here is what he had to say about the project.

Felipe Tobar: The project, in the first place, came to facilitate, to strengthen the organization of all the survivors and relatives, because with the project we had resources to hold informative meetings, assemblies with survivors and different workshops. This has helped us a lot to unite the survivors and relatives, which is the most important issue; people now have information about everything, they have become involved in the different activities. That is what I am committed to... to continue supporting the relatives in the search for truth, justice, reparation, so that there is no repetition of what we have lived through. Well, and that there are also health programs, psychosocial attention to the people, which we have never had access to, but we have had it from this project. It has helped us a lot to deliver these workshops to the people,

which has helped to heal the wounds that one has... these are the reasons that motivate me to continue the struggle.

[El proyecto en primer lugar vino a facilitar, a fortalecer la organización de todos los sobrevivientes y familiares, porque con el proyecto tuvimos recursos para hacer reuniones informativas, asambleas con sobrevivientes y bueno, diferentes talleres. Eso nos ha ayudado muchísimo a como a unir más a los sobrevivientes y familiares, que ese es el tema más importante que la gente hoy tiene información de todo, se ha involucrado en las diferentes actividades. A mí eso es lo que más me compromete de seguir apoyando a los familiares a la búsqueda de la verdad, la justicia, la reparación, para que no haya repetición de lo que hemos vivido. Bueno, y que haya programas también de salud, de atención psicosocial a la gente, lo cual nunca hemos tenido apoyo, lo hemos tenido de este proyecto, que nos ha ayudado muchísimo a dar estos talleres con la gente, que ayuda mucho a sanar las heridas que uno tiene... pero sí son las razones que me motivan de seguir la lucha.]

Tine: I think listening to how meaningful this work is for the people that you collaborate with, it is probably very inspiring for a lot of our listeners who might also want to try this. And I was wondering if you could share a bit more about any lessons, maybe that you have learned, but also how you navigated some of the tensions that are inherently there, right? because of different incentives, structures, short-term funding and etcetera, these things that we all know. So maybe there's some insights that you could share with the listeners on how to navigate those tensions?

Amanda Grzyb: It is a challenge, but our work is really strongly founded on principles of solidarity. And so, we often refer to our methodology as accompaniment, and this means in some ways rejecting an extractive model of research and focusing instead on public facing projects. So, this requires a lot of listening and consensus building between researchers and survivors and community leaders. In our project, the survivors defined the research objectives, they collaborate as co-researchers and they determine the priorities for the research outputs. And I think part of the struggle within academia is really recognising how, what we call in Canada, research creation, commemoration, inter-generational education encounters, and community capacity building can count as research. And so definitely in the 7-to-8-year arc of our project, we're prioritising those public facing outcomes first and then thinking about the academic writing and peer reviewed articles as something that is secondary; an important part, but something that comes after the public facing work. And we also have, as a general guideline, an initiative to co-author with survivors and with community members. In terms of the project itself, you know it, it has been based a lot on serendipity and when we started the project, we were working on a very small-scale pilot project around photos and refugee experiences in one community in Suchitoto. The group that is now our main collaborator, Asociacion Sumpul, heard about the work that we were doing and invited us up to talk about how we might support their committee in fundraising, raising awareness about the Sumpul massacre and other massacres in Chalatenango. And so, when we started, it really was to assist them with developing a strategic plan, one that could be published in English and Spanish and could be used primarily as a fundraising tool. And through that process, which took about 12 to 18 months, our researchers were able to work at a slow pace with survivor groups without the pressure of research funding. In terms of lessons learned, I think that it is really important that we work with our institutions to push back against neoliberal ideas of research. I also think that there needs to be more attention to internal and external funding opportunities to

allow for this kind of slower paced exploratory research that is community-led and recognising the value of that work as research.

Tine: Thank you so much. Gretel, I only see nodding from your end, because I think a lot of this is also there's a lot of parallels with the project that you're also starting up together with the communities that you've been working with in the past four years, right?

Gretel: Yeah. Just by listening to Amanda, I could see a lot of similarities of how the project emerged in itself. The idea of the project that came as a result of the fieldwork that I was conducting in the Ixil region. The Ixil region is one of the four regions where the [Commission of Historical Clarification](#) concluded the acts of genocide took place against the Maya Ixil. I conducted interviews as well with grassroots leaders from the region themselves. And when I was interacting with the different actors, they voiced their need, not only for young generations, but also for the country to know their history and to commemorate the victims. This is one of the most pressing demands So, in the on the basis of these conversations, I managed to also facilitate some General Assembly meetings in which it became more relevant how can we as researchers, in a way, facilitate or strengthen these kind of priorities too. And as a result of the PhD, I managed to also organise a memory walk in the community in which was a form of intergenerational dialogue between the youth of the community and the elders, so talking about the violence that took place, but also their ongoing efforts for justice, but at the same time, the lack of political will and the impunity taking place.

So in this case in the Ixil region, there are different grassroots organisations that have spearheaded memory efforts such as oral history projects, artistic practises, for example, a compilation of songs which also speaks to what you just said about the importance of music, no? But most recently there is a particular initiative of a consortia of organisations who are undertaking efforts to build a community museum to commemorate the victims of the genocide in the Ixil region. So this consortia of victims organisations have already secured a plot of land to build a museum, and it is quite symbolic because the plot of land is actually quite close to one of the military bases in the region. So in this context, civil society actors reached out to me as a Guatemalan researcher based in Europe to mobilise support. There is already a lot that they have done in terms of how they envision the spaces of the museum and also there's some parallels that I see here in which they not only want to commemorate the victims of the genocide, but they also want to recover the cultural heritage of the Maya Ixil so they envision spaces for traditional medicine, gastronomy, and for different arts and crafts. So, it's an encompassing project, and we aim to work with the organisations and communities spearheading the museum project and to also involve local and international architects or museologists to craft this conceptual or spatial basis of the museum. But what is really important is to be able to contribute to their ongoing efforts, local actors that have participated for a long time sometimes feel a sense of participation fatigue from their long term involvement in both research projects, but also justice efforts without tangible outcomes or benefits for the communities themselves. Therefore, working on the basis of their most pressing needs and epistemologies for us becomes imperative.

Tine: There are so many overlaps there and I think one of the topics that I also wanted to address a bit more with both of you and maybe Amanda is also one of the previous episodes. We also talked about this notion of participation fatigue and how kind of the formal avenues for victim participation often lead to a lot of resistance on the side of the people that we're looking to collaborate with. And I wanted to ask what your experience with that is, if that's also something that you're observing, that people are reluctant to engage in these kinds of projects. And then if so, how to overcome that?

Amanda Grzyb: I would say, that we are not seeing a lot of participation fatigue in the context of our project. I actually have seen the opposite, which is that in the last 7 to 8 years, we have seen a lot of momentum building in the communities and a broadening of participation in the memory work. So, when we started working with Asociación Sumpul, they were a committee of survivors. They had no legal standing and they were, meeting with very little funding provided by one of the survivors who was currently acting as Mayor of San Jose Flores. It was a place for testimony. It was a really important support group. And they had lots of visions for what they wanted to do in the future. So, we have a lot more youth involvement, more youth attending commemorations, larger numbers of people attending commemorations. And so we've really seen the momentum grow from the beginning. I mentioned that Asociación Sumpul was a committee. We worked with them and with [Tutela Legal](#) in San Salvador to establish Asociación Sumpul as a legal non-profit in in El Salvador. The first two terms of the Board of directors, those positions were occupied exclusively by survivors from the older generation. And now the third term of the Junta Directiva is dominated by youth, so young people who were born in the refugee camps are born after the war, who have really taken over that memory work. And so I think there has actually been an alleviation of pressure on the survivors and a feeling that the intergenerational education objectives of the project and of Asociación Sumpul as an organisation is really working to kind of carry this work into the next generation. Another example, you mentioned that I was in El Salvador a couple of weeks ago we met with a survivor who has been keeping a list of names for the last 30 years, of people who he remembered, who died in the Santa Marta region during the Civil War. There are more than 360 names on that list, and it's in a little notebook that he has kept in his house, and one of the things that that we can do in collaboration with this survivor and with the Santa Marta community is to turn this into a published book of martyrs. So, I think that, well, that survivor may have been feeling some fatigue, right? I mean, he has been keeping this book for decades. There's now, you know, an excitement for actually publishing this and creating a resource for the community that will outlive the survivors themselves.

Tine: The story you're telling is so hopeful. And at the same time I'm thinking, you're of course, working in a deeply polarised context. You already mentioned the context of impunity and a lot of other political challenges and I was wondering how you feel that that kind of broader context effects people's involvement the way in which they are involved, whether they're involved in, in, in the project and what that does for the project that, that broader context.

Amanda Grzyb: Well, the current government is really focused on the future and not on the past. So the President of El Salvador recently called the Peace Accords a joke. This has had an

impact on the participation of survivors, particularly in regions where they are less organised, and so we have for the first time, we have a six month period when we do video testimonies in which survivors can change their mind and withdraw their testimony. So we don't publish anything for six months and for the first time ever, we had someone withdraw their video testimony. They wanted to have an audio testimony, and this really was in response, I think, to the attitudes of the current government. There is a new level of fear about the suspension of human rights under the state of exception. I think there is a real risk of a national forgetting about the civil war, not only because of the current political context, but because the survivors are ageing, which is its own challenge and risk, we're really concerned about what happens when that funding ends, particularly because El Salvador has recently collapsed municipalities. So that local communities don't have the same kind of access to discretionary funds to hold commemorations or cultural activities and so one of the things that we're working on in the second-half of our project is grant writing workshops and capacity building around external fundraising. So, that the survivor groups can continue to build on the momentum that we're creating with the project, rather than, you know, waking up one day with no access to resources.

Tine: I think as we're approaching the end of this episode, I want to direct us back from the challenges to the more kind of hopeful evolutions that we see and it's actually a question that we ask of all our interviewees in this podcast as the last question. Are there evolutions or innovations, if you will, with regards to victim participation or participation in this case in memory practises that are making you hopeful, I think Amanda, you have given us a lot to think about already. So I'll first give the word to Gretel and then I will come back to you.

Gretel: I find inspiration from so many sources. Me, coming from Guatemala, find inspiration mainly from the long term mobilisation that I have observed from civil society organisations, from the survivors themselves. But they're still fighting for justice, and fighting memory and for dignity and to restore the social fabric, to promote their own culture, to recover the historical memory in the face of impunity, intimidation and stigmatising discourses coming not only from the state itself but also from other sectors of society. The fact that I've been able to do this kind of research, and now to be able to collaborate again is a source of inspiration and, as well as a motivation to do things in a collaborative manner, in an ethical manner too. But I'm also hopeful and as well inspired by projects such as Surviving Memory which shows that it is possible to work together with communities, local leaders, academia, human rights organisations, but also international stakeholders to recover memory, to reshape narratives and to promote participation of young generations.

Tine: Amanda, anything you wanted to add?

Amanda Grzyb: I mean, I have learned so much from our Salvadoran collaborators, particularly from survivors, about leadership, about inclusive research practises, the importance of memorialization in transitional justice and post conflict reconstruction. So all of that has been a deep inspiration to me, but also I think, as in the Guatemalan case, the political organisation of communities is incredibly inspiring because the civilian leaders of the Civil War period, who have founded memory organisations, are also the environmental leaders

of today who are, for example, on the forefront of the struggle against extractive industries, many of which are based in my home country of Canada. So I take a lot of inspiration from the way in which they can balance looking at the past and the importance of remembering the civil war and seeking dignity for victims and survivors, but also looking forward to the future of new generations and concerns about climate change and environmental issues as well.

I am also inspired by the way that the project has taken hold across sectors, so finishing these the Sumpul River Memorial project, it was quite a project, and so we, under the auspices of our grant funding, we were able to do the architectural design and some of the artistic installations, but we still had this daunting task of fundraising to actually build the rest of the memorial. And my biggest worry at the beginning was that we would design with survivors an incredible memorial that would never be built. But in fact, it's almost near completion. We just have to finish a mural at the site, and it is completed thanks to financial contributions from the UNDP, from the labour sector, as well as solidarity actors. So to see the project, you know, really take hold across the labour sector, the civil society, religious organisations, academia, survivor groups has been has been incredibly inspirational for me and yet, there's still a lot of work to be done.

Tine: Thank you so much for all of this, and for our listeners who are interested in learning more about some of the practises and some of the resources that we've been mentioning here, we will make them available in show notes on the Justice Visions website so that you can read more about both projects. For now, thank you so much, Amanda and Gretel for joining us here in the studio. And we'll be back next month with a new episode.

Gretel: Thank you, Tine. Thank you, Amanda.

Amanda Grzyb: Thanks so much.