

New book

Chixoy dam, displacement and development: Perspectives from Río Negro, Guatemala

By Nate Einbinder, SpringBriefs in Latin American Studies

- **Share/ View in browser:** <http://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/new-book-chixoy-dam-displacement-and-development-perspectives-from-ro-negro-guatemala-by-nathan-einbinder-springer-briefs>

Below

- Preface: **“To Witness the Rage & Silence of Genocide in Río Negro and Pacux”**, by Catherine Nolin
- Epilogue: **“There Is No Means By Which To Quantify What Was Lost In Río Negro”**, by Grahame Russell

Summary

Guatemala’s history is plagued by “development” projects that result in displacement, violence, and increased impoverishment and marginalization of its Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations.

To make way for so-called “economic development” - production of bananas, African palm, coffee and sugar cane; mining extraction, such as gold, silver, nickel; or, in this case, the construction of the Chixoy hydroelectric dam - land-based, predominately Mayan campesinos are systematically and violently uprooted from the lands of their birth and ancestors, and launched into violence, loss, dispossession and future uncertainty.



(Flood basin of the Chixoy dam project, along the Chixoy river (aka Rio Negro), that borders Rabinal, Baja Verapaz, to the right, and Uspantan, Quiche, to the left. Along this Chixoy river, over 30 Mayan communities were illegally, violently evicted from their home lands; in the foreground, the village of Rio Negro suffered 5 large-scale massacres, leaving over 440 community members killed and dumped in mass graves, some of which remain under the flood basin. Photo @ Nathan Einbinder)

Using the case of the Chixoy hydroelectric dam project - constructed between 1978-1983 by the U.S.-backed military regimes of genocidal generals Lucas Garcia and Rios Montt, in partnership with the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank -, this book examines the effects of the project's extreme violence and displacement on the former residents of Río Negro, a community partially eliminated (over 440 children, men and women massacred) and violently removed by the Guatemalan military, paramilitaries and project security guards.

Through the use of open-ended interview discussions, or *testimonios*, Nathan Einbinder shines a light on this particular "development" project – its massacres and killings, displacement and dispossession - and discusses the outcomes over thirty years later. Einbinder finds that the majority of survivors of the massacres and dispossession are still adversely affected from the destruction of their families and livelihoods, and that the return to a more traditional Mayan-Achí way of land-based life would be beneficial for personal and community recovery and possible restoration.

Einbinder concludes that despite certain unique circumstances pertaining to the Chixoy dam "development" atrocity, the same struggles over land, the environment and human rights continue today. If these "economic development" policies are left unchanged in international development agencies and banks, companies and investors, and governments, the resultant death, destruction and dispossession will continue and even increase.

Foreword

To Witness the Rage & Silence of Genocide in Río Negro and Pacux

By Catherine Nolin

“Bearing witness,” like “solidarity” and “compassion” is a term worth rehabilitating.... Bearing witness is done on behalf of others, for their sake (even if those others are dead and forgotten).... No matter how great the pain of bearing witness, it will never be as great as the pain of those who endure, whether in silence or with cries...

Paul Farmer, *Bearing Witness* (2005, 28)

To Witness

To witness, listen, and write well about the cries and silences of life in contemporary Río Negro and Pacux is to write about post-genocide realities of struggle and strength. It is to write about pain and social suffering, on one hand, and brutality and structural violence on the other. To carry out this daunting task, Nathan Einbinder opened his mind to critical questions of the deep connections between ‘development’ and violence and grappled with ensuing violent geographies at the scale of the individual to those at the scale of the community, nation, and onto the dominant transnational worlds of the World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank, and the American government.

Nathan also opened his heart to the *testimonios* of community members and survivors, those who rage against the decades of injustice that followed displacement and genocide, as well as those often silenced in post-conflict realities of trauma, hunger, and dysfunction. In the pages to follow, Nathan (*final page, final paragraph) demonstrates what it looks like to bear witness as an academic and activist committed to “proclaiming that it is our duty to alert the international community of what is happening in the far corners in which we study.”

To Witness Together

Grahame Russell of Rights Action and I have co-organized delegation-style field schools to Guatemala since 2004 as part of our vision of transformative learning. As a former graduate student of mine, Nathan traveled with fellow university students and us many times over the years to explore issues of culture, rights, and power through the experiences of state violence, genocide, and recovery in Guatemala. The most honorable way to do this work is through a commitment to the very human action of witnessing together. Witnessing is more than observing. *Témoignage* – the French word for witnessing – is the act of being willing to speak out about what we see happening in front of us. Bearing witness in the context of human rights atrocities and major crimes means a willingness to speak on behalf of the people we meet, to amplify their voices, and to bring abuses and intolerable situations to the public eye. This book is Nathan’s witness.

To Witness Together in Río Negro and Pacux

Back in 2008, two years before Nathan started this journey, Sebastian Iboy Osorio, President of the COCODE (community development organization) of Río Negro, quietly arrived in our hotel

in Rabinal with his son Nelson while we listened to a talk by Fernando Suazo, a former activist Spanish priest who arrived here in 1984 (shortly after the series of massacres that hit Rabinal like a tidal wave in 1982). Fernando left the church and married into the Maya Achí culture and so offers a window into the Maya cosmivision in a way that few non-Maya can. We talked liberation theology, big business, neo-colonization, and the process of recovering the historical memory of the years of genocide, silence, the culture of violence, and so much more.

Sebastian – I'm not sure how to put into words what a beautiful person he is. Sebastian was only 16 years old when, in 1982, his mother, father, sisters, brothers, cousins, aunts, uncles, and friends were ripped out of his life in a whirlwind of brutal violence. First, his father and brother were murdered in the Xococ massacre of February 13, 1982 not far from his home community (he wanted to go with them as they were called by the patrols to present themselves in Xococ to be accounted for by the military commissioner. But, his father told him that there might be violence, they may even be killed, so to please stay at home with his family). A month later, he was an eyewitness to the murder of 177 women and children on March 13, 1982 up the mountain from his home in Río Negro.

Sebastian recounted these events and the years of hiding in the mountains with Carlos Chen and others, meeting and marrying his wife Magdalena in a ditch while in hiding, and his eventual return to Río Negro a few years before to help with the REMHI project (the Catholic Church-driven recovery of historical memory project to document the human rights violations and genocide).

On Mother's Day, we awoke at 5:30 am to make the long, difficult, physically challenging walk up to that massacre site with Sebastian. The significance of making this journey with Sebastian on Mother's Day to the place where so many women and children were brutally ripped from this world was not lost on our group. We were hot, tired, needing water, needing rests ... but always knowing that the women and children were forced to march up this mountain at gunpoint with no rest, no water, no hope. Sebastian quietly showed us where he hid, where he saw this horror take place, what he and Carlos found when they crept back a day later. He has given his *testimonio* before so he could recount these events calmly and clearly. But, of course, we could hardly breathe, we could barely speak.

Sebastian looked straight into the eyes of each of us and said that he thanked us a thousand times for being with him that morning. That he lost so much in this life and that our presence validated that it was not right, what happened was wicked, and that our connection to the place would be forever.

Sebastian, Cornelio, Cristobal and so many others came to put their trust in Nathan in the following years to bear witness to the story of Río Negro and Pacux. He is now part of the remembering, the resisting, and the hope for something better.

To Witness and Accompany

Through his devoted accompaniment of the communities of Río Negro and Pacux, Nathan is clear that the well-documented human rights violations cited here are “not accidents; they are not random in distribution or effect. Rights violations are, rather, a symptom of deeper pathologies of power and are linked intimately to the social conditions that so often determine who will suffer abuse and who will be shielded from harm” (Farmer 2005, xiii). These social / political / economic / moral conditions and their devastating effects sit at the heart of Nathan’s critique of power, racism, extreme inequality, and neoliberal visions of ‘development’ in Guatemala. And they also offer the grounds on which truth- and justice-seeking activism emerges, grows, is threatened, moves forward.

The unequal power we witness in Guatemala – with a set of military and elite alliances that, by all measures, have ferociously targeted, repeatedly, a largely defenceless Indigenous and progressive Ladino majority population - generates brutality that is both obvious but quiet on the world stage. Through documentary analysis and face-to-face conversations with survivors in Río Negro and Pacux, Nathan reveals some of the logic of power and the expected outcomes of state-sponsored terror and total disregard for the human dignity of the indigenous Maya population. Structural violence, internal to the country and supported beyond the country’s borders, has, for centuries, enabled an intransigent elite-military-political minority to benefit from the suffering of the majority, and even call it ‘development.’

Throughout this book, Nathan Einbinder illustrates the devastating impacts of structural violence, of the still-shocking collaborations among the Guatemalan state/military/elite, the World Bank, American decision-makers and funders, among others. Their roles as the intellectual and material authors of the Chixoy dam ‘development’ project and the crimes linked to it continue to go unpunished but change is happening.

We are all witnesses now, through the *testimonios* that Nathan gathered, to courageous struggles for dignity, truth, and justice.

Epilogue

There Is No Means By Which To Quantify What Was Lost In Río Negro

By Grahame Russell

Any update on the life struggle of the Mayan Achi people of Rio Negro can only be understood in the context of what Nathan wrote: “There is no means by which to quantify what was lost in Río Negro.”

There is no silver lining to the story of the Chixoy dam project. One cannot understate the enormity of the Chixoy dam crimes (massacres, killings and death by disease and hunger; complete dispossession and destruction of home, property and land) suffered by the Rio Negro villagers, crimes that in many ways continue today.

Perhaps an update can best be understood in terms of their survival, and then work and struggle to tell the truth and seek justice.

Survival

Most survivors live today – some with new children and grandchildren – in the former military controlled “model village” of Pacux, or on the dry mountainside above where the original Rio Negro community now lies under close to 100 meters of Chixoy dam flood basin silt buildup and water.

Their on-going life conditions of poverty, landlessness, joblessness, trauma and varying degrees of hopelessness are complicated and toxic, and are a direct result of the Chixoy dam crimes.

Yet, survive they do, and re-build, and tell the truth and demand justice. One might say it is “miraculous”, but it is not. It is a testament to the Rio Negro survivors’ (specifically) and the Mayan peoples’ (generally) courage, dignity and spiritual strength rooted deeply in their ancestors, Mother Earth, gods and ceremonies.

Truth

Since the first Chixoy Dam/Rio Negro mass grave exhumation, carried out in 1993-94 by the EAFG (Guatemala Team of Forensic Anthropology), precursor to the FAFG (Guatemalan Foundation of Forensic Anthropology), at the place known as ‘Pakoshom’ on a mountain ridge above the original village, the survivors – spearheaded by people Nathan interviews and discusses - have been truth-telling for any and everyone to hear.

Sadly, not surprisingly, the mainstream media, politicians and “development” experts in the countries and institutions responsible for the Chixoy dam crimes – Guatemala and the U.S. primarily, the World Bank (WB) and Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) – pay as little attention as they can to this genocidal “development” project that is a skeleton in all of their closets.

Since this first Chixoy dam linked exhumation, the survivors have been demanding and supporting other mass grave exhumations (that are the fundamental truth-telling process in Guatemala today), and they have been initiating legal and quasi-legal efforts to seek justice (summarized below) in Guatemala and internationally. Survivor eye-witnesses, like Jesus Tecu Osorio and Carlos Chen Osorio, have written testimonial books; documentary films have been made; articles and reports written; survivor activists have travelled the world giving testimonials in conferences, and protesting at WB and IDB meetings. This book is part of the truth-telling process.

Justice

Despite widespread truth-telling about the Chixoy dam crimes, little justice has been achieved against any institution (IDB, WB) or government (Guatemalan, U.S.) for their roles as the intellectual and material authors of this “development” project and the crimes linked to it.

National courts

There is an exception to this last statement. Since 1994, the Rio Negro survivors have courageously (receiving death threats) and, finally, successfully pressured the corrupted and dysfunctional Guatemalan legal system to put on trial, find guilty and send to jail some nine former Civil Defense Patrollers (PAC) and military commissioners, mainly from the neighboring Mayan Achi village of Xococ.

On one level, this is an important achievement. In Guatemala's corrupted, manipulated legal system (still today), war crimes trials are few, and convictions fewer. However, on most levels, the jailing of nine of the lowest ranking material authors of the Chixoy dam crimes is proof of the impunity with which most material authors and all intellectual authors of the crimes act.

Not one single military personnel in the chain of command, from foot soldiers to generals, who ordered and carried out the Chixoy dam crimes was captured, tried and sentenced. Not one official or program officer from the WB and IDB was subjected to any investigation into the role of the two "development" banks in partnering with the U.S. backed military regimes of Guatemala (1975-83) in planning and carrying out all aspects of the project.

Inter-American Court of Human Rights

Because only low-ranking PAC members were found guilty of the Chixoy dam crimes, and no officer in the chain of command was even detained, let alone tried, the Rio Negro survivors filed a petition with the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights, arguing impunity and lack of justice.

After years of delays, manipulations and threats to the Rio Negro survivors leading this quasi-legal struggle, on October 20, 2012, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights found the Guatemalan government responsible for the Chixoy dam crimes and ordered the government to: investigate the Chixoy dam crimes; prosecute the perpetrators; search for the disappeared; carry out exhumations and identify the victims; publicly acknowledge its responsibility; build basic infrastructure and services for Rio Negro survivors in Pacux; implement projects to rescue the culture of the Maya Achi people; provide medical and psychological treatment to the victims; and, pay compensation to surviving families for material and non-material damages suffered.

While this ruling of the Inter-American Court is also an important achievement of partial justice, it is noteworthy that the Court did not individualize responsibility - the ruling had no impact on the material and intellectual authors of the Chixoy dam crimes. Furthermore, the Inter-American Commission declined to investigate the roles and responsibilities of the IDB and WB, reinforcing their impunity.

Finally, as of the writing of this epilogue, the government of Guatemala has not complied, at all, with the sentence.

Chixoy Dam Reparations Campaign

While not a legal process, this Reparations Campaign is an extraordinary achievement. After years of exhumations and other truth-telling struggles, the Rio Negro survivors united with approximately 30 other Mayan villages harmed by the Chixoy dam crimes to demand comprehensive reparations. (A clarification: the Inter-American Court sentence deals with the Rio Negro massacres directly linked to the Chixoy dam project; the Reparations Campaign deals with other losses and destructions caused by the project.)

As with the Inter-American Court case, it was only after years of delays, manipulations and threats to the survivors leading this struggle, that on November 8, 2014, then president and former army general Otto Perez Molina (now in jail on corruption charges) formally apologized on behalf of the government for the human rights violations and sufferings caused by the Chixoy dam project, and signed into law Decree #378-2014, “the Public Policy of Reparations for Communities Affected by the Construction of the Chixoy hydro-electric dam project”.

As of the writing of this epilogue, the government of Guatemala has paid out some of the \$154,000,000 determined to be the amount to be paid in family compensation and re-building projects for the communities harmed and destroyed in varying degrees by the project.

Notably, the WB and IDB easily resisted all pressures to be included in the Reparations Campaign investigation into roles and responsibilities - global “development” bank impunity reinforced, once again!

The Enormity of Global Impunity

Thus, 33 years later, a measure of reparations is being paid. While a measure of justice was provided by the Inter-American Court holding the Guatemalan government responsible (keep in mind that the government has yet to comply!), no justice has been done for the roles and responsibilities of the WB and IDB that promoted, designed and implemented the project ... (it must not be forgotten that the WB and IDB profited from their investments in this project).

No justice has been done for the roles and responsibilities of the military and political leaders of successive U.S.-backed military regimes that oversaw implementation of the project from 1975-1983.

Pointing out the reality of impunity for the authors and profiteers of the Chixoy dam crimes is to highlight the enormity of this global human problem. Today, governments and global banks, corporations and investors push ahead with projects across the planet, always in the name of “development”, violently displacing populations and destroying habitats, violating a wide range of individual and collective rights, and ravaging Mother Earth. The Chixoy dam was one such project, perhaps more violent and destructive than most.

The Enormity of Courage, Dignity and Strength

Pointing out the reality of impunity takes nothing away from the courage and dignity, strength and vision of the Rio Negro survivors. Since I first met Carlos Chen, Jesus Tecu Osorio, Dona Antonia, Cristobal Osorio and other Rio Negro survivors in 1994, I have been in awe of their

heart, their spiritual strength, their dignity, their commitment to re-building lives, families and community, and their courageous, relentless struggle truth and justice.

Since 1994, Rights Action (the U.S. and Canadian based non-profit organization I work with) has been a proud and ongoing supporter of dozens of development, human rights and environmental projects initiated by the Rio Negro survivors. I am committed to continuing to support their work and struggles for re-building, truth and justice, and to continue to demand that the WB and IDB be held fully to account for their role in the Chixoy dam crimes.

To purchase the book:

- Springer Publishing: <http://www.springer.com/gp/book/9783319515106>
- Amazon.com: https://www.amazon.ca/Dams-Displacement-Development-Perspectives-Guatemala/dp/3319515101/ref=sr_1_1?s=digital-text&ie=UTF8&qid=1495209594&sr=8-1&keywords=nathan+einbinder

Chixoy Dam: No Reparations, No Justice, No Peace

- View: <http://vimeo.com/50015125>

By Lazar Konforti, this 15 minute film summarizes how, at the height of the genocides in Guatemala, the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank invested close to \$1 billion in the Chixoy hydroelectric dam project. Thirty-two Mayan communities were forcibly and illegally displaced to make way for the dam; hundreds of Rio Negro villagers were massacred. Over 34 years later, survivors are still struggling for truth, justice and comprehensive reparations.

Poverty In Pacux

- View: <https://vimeo.com/52439128>

By Rachel Schmidt, this 3 minute report documents how, over 34 years later, Mayan Achi survivors of the Chixoy Dam / Rio Negro massacres live in endemic poverty, discrimination and trauma in "Pacux", a former military concentration camp, now cramped refugee community, still fighting for justice and full reparations.

More information

- Nathan Einbinder, nathaneinbinder@gmail.com
- Catherine Nolin, Catherine.Nolin@unbc.ca
- Grahame Russell, grahame@rightsaction.org

Please re-post and publish this information

More info: info@rightsaction.org

Subscribe to e-Newsletter: www.rightsaction.org

Facebook: www.facebook.com/RightsAction.org

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/RightsAction>, @RightsAction
