

‘From Now On’: Conscientización, Evidentiary Poems and Readerly Encounters in the
Work of Carolyn Forché

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Abstract

The publication of Carolyn Forché’s memoir *What You Have Heard is True* (2019) permits new insights into the emergence of her poetics and especially, the centrality of *conscientización* to her work as a poet, translator and anthologist. Drawing on the conceptualization of *conscientización* put forward by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, I explore the interplay between this process and two of the ‘modes’ of poetry of witness identified by Forché: the evidentiary poem and the readerly encounter. For the implied reader of Forché’s poetry and anthologies – situated in the Global North – a critical reading of the limit-situations imposed by denial is a crucial element of evidentiary poems and of the readerly encounter with them. Through evidentiary poems and readerly encounters, poetry of witness invites a process of *conscientización* in the implied reader and in so doing, creates a ‘parola contraria’ to denial and facilitates the capacity for transformation.

Key Words

Conscientización, critical consciousness, poetry of witness, El Salvador, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, denial

In her 2019 memoir *What You Have Heard is True*, Carolyn Forché recounts journeys to El Salvador she undertook in 1978 and 1979, shortly before the outbreak of the civil war and during a period of intense, direct, and physical violence perpetrated by death squads.¹

During these journeys she underwent a process of *conscientización*, or coming-to-consciousness, which changed the course of her life, as well as her poetry. After this transformation, Forché spent years ‘trying to understand the impress of extreme violence on the poetic imagination’, as a reader of poetry and as the translator of poets who bore witness to situations of extremity. As a result, she published two seminal anthologies offering a transcultural and relational take on what she termed ‘poetry of witness’, *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness* (1993) and, with Duncan Wu, *Poetry of Witness: The Tradition in English 1500-2001* (2014). With these anthologies, as well as her translations, she facilitated encounters with poetry of witness for readers who, in their majority, were not themselves caught up in situations of extremity.

Within the framework of this special issue, and in light of some of the insights into the experiential and political groundings of Forché’s poetics in *conscientización* revealed in *What You Have Heard*, I want to consider the mode of poetry of witness identified by Forché in an essay introducing the second anthology. Poetry of witness, she writes, ‘is a mode of reading rather than of writing, of readerly encounter with the literature of that-which-happened, and its mode is evidentiary rather than representational – as evidentiary, in fact, as spilled blood’.² Throughout this article I will explore the relationship between the ‘readerly encounter’ and the evidentiary mode of poetry of witness, through the lens of *conscientización*. This approach expands existing scholarship on Forché’s work and on poetry of witness, in that I argue that the full force of her work and her poetic voice can only be understood through one of the most influential practices in Latin American political education and culture; a practice which has far more traction than Anglo-Saxon lyrical conventions. In the readerly and personal encounter experienced and created by Forché, Cold War neo-colonial cultural power relations are thus turned around and upside down.

NAMING THE WORLD: *CONSCIENTIZACIÓN*

Forché's process of *conscientización* was initiated and curated by Leonel Gomez Vides, the cousin of poet Claribel Alegría, who Forché had met during the summer of 1978, and whose poetry she was in the process of translating.³ Leonel shows up at Forché's house in Southern California in 1978. He administers an intensive crash course in Salvadorean history and invites her to this country, with the explicit aim of putting her into a position to bear witness to the war that, in his view, is about to break out. She accepts this invitation and travels to El Salvador in 1978 and 1979. Much later, he identifies *conscientización* as the guiding principle of his actions:

From the beginning, this has been *your* journey, *your* coming to consciousness. All along I have only been responding to you. When you ask me a question, I try to place you in a situation in which you might find your answer. I do not have your answers, Papu.⁴

Conscientización was conceptualized by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Freire was concerned with the ways in which oppressive situations – specifically social injustice – affect the psychology and consciousness of the oppressed, and how education can contribute towards their liberation. *Conscientización* in Freire's sense refers to a process of coming-to-consciousness during which a person becomes fully and critically aware of their own presence in the world, including the ways in which oppression forms their consciousness. Only thus aware are they able to initiate truly transformative processes and attain liberation.

The process of *conscientización* occurs through the critical reading of ‘concrete existential, “coded” situations’.⁵ These situations are ‘limit-situations’, in which an oppressive force limits those caught up in them. Initially, the learners experience the situation as ‘a dense, enveloping reality or a tormenting blind alley’ (p. 82). For learners to be able to identify the different components that make up the limit-situations and discover ‘the interaction among the parts of the disjointed whole’, the person guiding the learning process has to identify a ‘generative theme’ in each situation. The theme will put learners into a position of analysing this reality. Once they do this, ‘This whole (the coded situation), which previously had been only diffusely apprehended, begins to acquire meaning as thought flows back to it from the various dimensions’ (p. 78). Once the person is able to critically analyse the situation and name its components, they have come to consciousness of the oppressive processes within which they are embedded. The person can now ‘name’ the world they inhabit and in so doing, initiate transformative processes, always together with others.

Once Carolyn is in El Salvador, Leonel places her within situations coded by manifestations of oppression. While she attempts to make sense of what she is perceiving and experiencing, they maintain a continuous conversation. Eventually she becomes conscious of these coded oppressions and is able to name them, in conversation and notes and eventually, in her poetry.

There is an important twist in this scenario. In Freire’s thinking, *conscientización* is an integral part of the liberation of the oppressed. Within this process of liberation, the oppressors are unable to liberate the oppressed, or even themselves. The approach put forward in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* would therefore not be applicable to Forché because of her situatedness.⁶ However, Leonel recognizes that Carolyn is situated in a marginal

position among the oppressors.⁷ He also realizes that among those situated within the group of the oppressors, there is a limiting force at work that they cannot apprehend, and that enforces complicity with the ongoing oppression of Others. This force is denial.

Stanley Cohen, in his study *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering*, identifies as one of the concrete manifestations of denial ‘the refusal to acknowledge a truth which seemed too impossible to be true’.⁸ Cohen’s observation resonates with what Leonel articulates as a future challenge for Forché, once she starts writing ‘for her own people’ about what she has witnessed in El Salvador:

I promise you that it is going to be difficult to get Americans to believe what is happening here. For one thing, this is outside the realm of their imaginations. For another, it isn’t in their interests to believe you. For a third, it is possible that we are not human beings to them.⁹

Indeed, the implied readers of the first collection Forché published after her coming-to-consciousness in El Salvador, *The Country Between Us*, are people embedded within the *status quo* of the United States and therefore, within the limit-situation of denial. They doubted or outrightly denied the disposition to violence that U.S. governments were willing to support in El Salvador (and elsewhere in Central America). Denial cannot be countered with fact-based arguments and reports because denial is related to disposition, not evidence. To transcend denial, consciousness needs to shift and for this, nothing short of a watershed moment is needed.

THE WATERSHED MOMENT AND THE LANGUAGE OF THE SMALL LIGHT

Forché lives her own watershed moment in El Salvador. In an interview with Chard deNiord, she describes its impact:

Forché: It's an explosive moment, and it turns you in another direction.

deNiord: For the rest of your life.

Forché: Yes, you can't go back. I didn't know that at the time, but I would choose it again.¹⁰

During the initial part of her journey, she struggles with the situations she is placed within. She 'diffusely apprehends' many of their elements, yet she cannot name them. Her watershed moment comes when Leonel takes her to Achuapán prison and, immediately after, to meet a group of poets. At Achuapán, she enters the prison as a visitor under a false pretence and is shown around by a prisoner-organizer. She witnesses the psychological impasse created by arbitrary prolongations of confinement, the everyday dehumanization of the prisoners, and the 'cages' in which men are kept in solitary confinement. When she leaves, she and Leonel have to engage in small talk with a group of soldiers positioned outside the prison. As they finally drive off, Forché goes through a violent physical response to the internal process unleashed by what she has just witnessed and experienced:

... I felt myself lurching forward and vomited onto the dashboard. At the sight of this, I began to sob and, at the same time, tried to wipe the vomit up with my sweater. Finally, I threw the sweater on the floor and, still crying, turned away from him. Still, he said nothing. He stopped the Hiace and pulled hard on the emergency brake, I remember the sudden grind of it, almost as if he were angry but still nothing.¹¹

Leonel explains that the situation he created by arranging the prison visit was the response to one of the questions she kept asking, which he identified as a ‘generative theme’:

You are always asking me why people don’t do something, why they put up with this brutality, why they don’t rise up against it, this and that. Okay. You’re exhausted, you’re shocked, you’re sick to your stomach and you feel dirty. These things are what people feel every day here – and you expect them to get themselves organized? You expect them to fight back? Could you fight back at this moment? ¹²

Shocked by his apparent lack of emotional engagement, expressed in giving her an explanation instead of providing consolation, Carolyn mobilizes a repertoire of reactions expressing nostalgia for her comfort zone: cancel the meeting set up for the evening, go to the city, take a shower, rest. Effectively, she wants to choose ‘the option of silence’, as Freire puts it, which suggests ‘a structure of mutism in face of the overwhelming force of the limit-situations’. ¹³ Leonel allows for this option, but insists that they stop by those they were meant to be meeting that night, to notify them of the change of plans: a group of poets in a place called *La Fosa*, The Grave. When they get there, the poets do not pass judgement on Carolyn for wanting to cancel the meeting because ‘Leonel told us where you were today’. ¹⁴ They wish to share with her two precious gifts: the encounter with a newborn baby, and a mimeographed collection of poems which they entrust to her for safekeeping:

I followed him through the darkness into a passage, then through the door lit by a candle and, by the light of it, saw people gathered and one of them, someone, took me by the hand and drew me into the circle surrounding a young woman lying on her side on a blanket on the floor, her head propped in her hand. There was a cardboard box

beside her, and in the box, a newborn girl with her hair still wet, lying in a towel.

Leonel was looking at me from across the room.¹⁵

In this secularized nativity scene, the poet passes through darkness to the light. Poetry takes the place of religious prophecy or scriptures, and the newborn child is a girl instead of a boy. Forché is not guided by a star, but by another poet and the light of a candle. Once she is within this new situation, she snaps into a different mode. She tells the poets that she is no longer tired and that she will look after their poems:

That night I knew something had changed for me, and that I wasn't going to get tired or need a shower or want to call something off so I could rest, and I hoped that if I forgot this I would somehow remember Alma in the cardboard box in the barrio, and the mimeographed poems.¹⁶

The poets, as well as Leonel, respond to her in the spirit of the three affects which, according to Freire, are the basis of trust and horizontal relationships: love, faith and trust in other human beings. The poets' care is informed by (non-individualized) love, and they show faith in her by offering their poems and the encounter with Alma. Carolyn 'responds' immediately and enters into a dialogue with them. She lets go of her attachment to the seeming impossibility of what is true, expressed in her tendency to question individual's or group's responses to the situation – why do they not get organized? – rather than the conditions that create the reality within which people become unable to organize and resist. Now that she meets them in this way, the poets can truly trust her.

These two coded situations – the dehumanization of prisoners in Achuapán prison, as well as the prisoner-organizer’s tenacious faith in their humanity, and the encounter with Alma and the poets – engage different aspects of hope in the Freirean sense:

Hope is rooted in men’s incompleteness, from which they move out in constant search – a search which can be carried out only in communion with others. Hopelessness is a form of silence, of denying the world and fleeing from it. The dehumanization resulting from an unjust order is not a cause for despair but for hope, leading to the incessant pursuit of the humanity denied by injustice. Hope, however, does not consist in crossing one’s arms and waiting. As long as I fight, I am moved by hope; and if I fight with hope, I can wait.¹⁷

From then on, hope becomes one of the defining elements of Forché’s work. Her poetic and narrative language is infused with references to light and specifically, to luminosity originating from small or undefined sources of light, like the small candle that guides her to Alma’s cardboard box. This language of luminosity first manifests in the – programmatic – poem ‘Message’, published in *The Country Between Us* and titled with an explicit reference to the *pintas* that were painted onto walls in El Salvador under the cover of night. The poem is directly addressed to those she feels connected to in El Salvador:

Link hands, link arms with me
in the next of lives everafter,
where we will not know each other
or ourselves, where we will be a various
darkness among ideas that amounted

to nothing, among men who amounted
to nothing, with a belief that became
but small light
[...] ¹⁸

The language of the small light contrasts with the stark and dark language in which she denounces direct and indirect violence. The actions of following a ‘small light’ and receiving the emotional warmth – created by an interdependent relationship between herself and the people who take her by the hand, look at her across the room or link arms with her – correlate with the emotional and intellectual lucidity she now exercises in decoding situations and in poetically naming the world.

EVIDENTIARY POETRY: DECODING SITUATIONS AND NAMING THE WORLD

Observation, decoding and naming interact in what we can term, following Forché, evidentiary poetry: ‘the poem as trace, the poem as evidence’ (p.31). On the back of her watershed moment, Forché creates evidentiary poems which, in themselves, contain the possibility of a watershed moment for the reader, as we can see in her poem ‘The Colonel’.

This well-known poem begins with an affirmation of her integrity and credibility as a witness: ‘What you have heard is true. I was in his house.’ She then describes the environment typical of the self-assured Salvadorean military castes and upper classes, one which enacts a reactionary version of civilization, including the traditional gender relations of the wife carrying a tray of coffee and sugar, the daughter filing her nails, and the son going out for the night. Forché describes the lush meal, the archaic class relations (symbolized by a

gold bell on the table to call in the maid), the small talk, and the Colonel's violent rejection of a harmless conversational intervention by the household parrot (a wild animal now caged). The minutiae of this ornate home are permeated by cruelty: 'Broken bottles were embedded in the walls around the house to scoop the kneecaps from a man's legs or cut his hands to lace.'¹⁹ What appears as a protective measure against intruders entails a casual acceptance of extreme violence, physically built into the everyday existence of the Colonel and his family.

In this environment infused with structural and symbolic violence, the dinner conversation moves easily from questioning whether the speaker of the poem enjoys the country, to observations about how difficult it has become to govern, to the Colonel leaving the table and then returning with 'a sack used to bring groceries home.' This object is ominous: the classist world evoked in the poem has already suggested to the reader that the Colonel himself would not be carrying home any groceries. The Colonel then spills the contents of the sack onto the table:

[...] He spilled many human ears on the table. They were like dried peach halves. There is no other way to say this. He took one of them in his hands, shook it in our faces, dropped it into a water glass. It came alive there. I am tired of fooling around he said. As for the rights of anyone, tell your people they can go fuck themselves. He swept the ears to the floor with his arm and held the last of his wine in the air. Something for your poetry, no? he said.²⁰

The Colonel – stage director and lead actor – creates a *mise-en-scène*. His bourgeois dining room is the stage, the table and the floor are props, and his visitors are the audience. He spills the ears onto the table so that they are in plain sight of his visitors, and then performs a

perverted magician's trick: he picks up one of the ears, shakes it in their faces and drops it in a water glass where it 'came alive' (p.18). His command performance suggests that the Colonel has rehearsed this role before; or perhaps, in his circles, the effect of the immersion in water on this particular dried human body part is a topic of conversation. After adding the verbalized element of the message he wants to convey to his visitors – 'I am tired of fooling around he said. As for the rights of anyone, tell your people they can go fuck themselves' (p.18) – he sweeps the ears to the floor in a gesture that disparages human body parts. In the same movement (the same sentence), he holds his wine glass up in the air as if he were about to make a toast, and announces to the poet the perversion of poetry: 'Something for your poetry, no?' (p.18)

Two elements of this coded situation could potentially turn into generative themes for the reader. The first is what Forché has called with reference to Adorno and Benjamin the 'superstitious worship of oppressive forces':

Modernity ... is marked by a superstitious worship of oppressive forces and by a concomitant reliance on oblivion. Such forgetfulness, they argue, is wilful and isolating: it drives wedges between the individual and the collective fate to which he or she is forced to submit.²¹

For many reading publics in the Global North, the bourgeois-reactionary environment that the Colonel has created in his house bestows upon him a veneer of respectability. Respectability, in turn, grants him credibility in the eyes of those engaged in the suspicious worship of oppressive forces, who will then argue that despite the evidence, the Colonel is certainly more trustworthy than those who do not provide such a veneer of respectability; the poets in

La Fosa, for example, or the peasants in their *champas*, or the enigmatic Leonel Gómez Vides. As a result, people like the Colonel have a voice and get to influence political decisions, while the poets, workers, intellectuals and peasants do not.²² The unmasking of this particular oppressor's brutality makes clear that whoever bestows any respectability or credibility on people of his ilk engages in a 'superstitious worship' of these forces.

The second potential generative theme concerns the denial of an 'impossible truth.' Many US American (and European) readers at the time – and, as we had seen earlier, during the Vietnam years, and have seen again today during the withdrawal of the U.S. and European allies from Afghanistan – would have considered it an impossible truth that someone, anyone, should cut off peoples' ears, keep them in a sack, spill them on the dinner table in front of guests who have just eaten off that same table, put one in a water glass to demonstrate an effect, and tell U.S. Americans to go fuck themselves as far as the rights of anyone were concerned. Yet, the poem is evidence that this did happen and that the refusal to acknowledge this is an act of denial.

The last two lines of the poem reject despair: 'Some of the ears on the floor caught this scrap of his voice. Some of the ears on the floor were pressed to the ground' (p.18). The secret attentiveness of the ears pressed to the ground, their sensitivity in catching the scrap of the Colonel's voice, suggests the formation of a resistance that readers could, if they wanted to, seek out and hear out.

Forché demands that readers do not surrender their perception to shock and repulsion, that they engage with the evidence of the butchery and the violence, with the 'shattering' that manifests here in the preserved remains of cut-up bodies, and that they let go of their

superstitious worship of the Colonel's veneer of respectability. Only when they do this, when they engage with the situation through critical consciousness, can they become free of the limits imposed on them by denial and superstition and start to rescind their own complicity with the oppression of others. That is how this evidentiary poem offers a potential watershed moment to its reader.

READERLY ENCOUNTERS

Dialogue – which we can translate as readerly engagement with regards to poetry – is an indispensable aspect of the process of *conscientización*. Through dialogue, Freire argues, human beings name the world and in so doing, transform it. Dialogue, he maintains, 'is an encounter among women and men who name the world': 'It is an act of creation; it must not serve as a crafty instrument for the domination of one person by another.'²³ Naming and transforming the world is a relational act. It encompasses and integrates the uniqueness of each person involved. Because the creative action is shared, those involved cannot be 'self-sufficient' on the terms of traditional conceptions of autonomy; 'self-sufficiency', Freire argues, 'is incompatible with dialogue' (p. 63)

The readerly encounters that Forché eventually facilitates as an anthologist, poet and translator are marked by the sustained dialogical encounters she has during her own process of *conscientización*. These encounters are not only with Leonel, but also and especially with Margarita Herrera, an activist involved in human rights organisations and the theology of liberation, and a friend and critical ally of Leonel's. Leonel introduces them and entrusts Carolyn to Margarita whenever it becomes necessary. From the beginning of their friendship, Margarita impresses on Carolyn that: 'You have to be aware here, very aware, but more important, you have to be your own person. You have to think for yourself, do you

understand?’²⁴ Initially, Margarita’s exhortations counter those tendencies in Carolyn’s relationship with Leonel that enact emotional strategies with their origins in bourgeois practices of individualized intimacy and attachment. As Carolyn’s process of *conscientización* evolves, Margarita embeds the process within practices of female complicity and care (expressed in the sharing of clothes or make-up), cultural translation between gendered situations and gender expectations in El Salvador and the U.S., gestures of understanding and support, conversations, and sometimes, rescue missions. The effects of the watershed moment consolidate in Carolyn’s interactions with Margarita:

I would call this period the era of being my own person. I was spending more time with Margarita at the Catholic University and in the human rights office, and I was meeting on my own with people who were authorized to speak for the guerrillas in a more official way [...].²⁵

During this time period something happens that puts Carolyn on the radar of the death squads. Leonel decides that she needs to leave the country, even against her will. When she discusses this with Margarita, the decision is reaffirmed dialogically:

I didn’t want to go back to the United States and I gave her my reasons. She listened and seemed to consider them. The silver lighter sent its wavering flame from her hand to her face and then she held it to mine and admitted that she understood that it would be difficult for me to live in my country again without ever coming back. *But think of us who have to stay here with war coming.* You will be isolated, Carolina, yes, but you stand a good chance of surviving. For us – who knows? Our throats could be cut in a moment.²⁶

Living in fear for others, while also being far away from them, is a terrifying and isolating experience. The intensity of isolation is compounded when those around the person do not share the truth the person shares with those she fears for. Margarita and Carolyn know that she will be in this situation when she returns to the United States, an environment where people hold fast to denial. When, in a deeply affectionate, relational gesture, Margarita illuminates first her own and then Carolyn's face with the silvery shimmer of her lighter and the warm colour of its tiny flame, she asks the poet to not surrender herself to the fear of loneliness and isolation. The small flame of the lighter is reminiscent of the small flame of the candle that guided Forché to Alma's cardboard box, and it becomes part of Forché's language of small light in 'Message': '[...] with a belief that became / but small light.'²⁷

After she leaves, Forché finds and offers the spirit of 'poetic camaraderie'²⁸ through her anthologies, even in environments where she, her fellow poets, and fellow readers might be surrounded by those holding fast to denial. A community may be created here, around a relationality achieved through reading-in-dialogue: the reading of situations, and the reading of poetry.

CONCLUSION

The possibility of a truthful readerly encounter emerges from the moment in which the interdependently recognized truth becomes more significant than the limits of one's own imagination and the defence of one's comfort zone. In *The Country Between Us*, Forché offers the reader poems that can initiate watershed moments akin to those she herself was offered in 1979 in El Salvador. With evidentiary poems like 'The Colonel', Forché pulls the cultural carpet from underneath the feet of the self-assured Colonel and his cultural and

political allies. She creates poetry that is relevant because it works against the destruction of life and the human soul, or against the destruction of hope. The poems she anthologized as ‘poetry of witness’ also seek to initiate a readerly encounter within which *conscientización* can unfold.

Poetry of Witness can transform the way in which readers relate to human and non-human life, to nature, to the objects that compose the material reality of a world. That change of relationality leads to a transformation of the way in which that person is present in and with the world. Poetry of witness is committed to creating the possibility for such transformative watershed moments and therefore for hope, if not yet liberation. This potentiality sets poetry of witness apart from most other types of poetry we know in the Western world. It turns poetry of witness into a ‘parola contraria’ to denial and, instead, proposes a truthful naming of the world. Thus, the impact that poetry of witness seeks to have on the interdependent reading subject is more profound than any other form of Western poetry we know.

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¹ Livelihoods in El Salvador in the 1970s depended widely on agriculture, especially coffee. Most of the coffee plantations were in the hands of just a few landowners. The caste of landowners was allied with the military forces of the country, in a staunch attempt to quash all attempts at implementing social justice, whether those took the approach through armed uprising, or through civilian organizing. The United States had been supporting these forces with training, weapons, and consultancy, to extend their influence in the Central American isthmus, to protect U.S. corporations, and to further the implementation of capitalism. In the

late 1970s, the Carter Administration implemented criteria for the extension of military aid, drawing on human rights standards. The Salvadorean army and upper classes were deeply offended by this, and to blur accountability, the repression of those fighting for social justice was delegated to covertly operating death squads. Those squads operated with utmost brutality and complete impunity. At the same time, armed resistance groups were forming. They came together in the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) and rose up in October 1979. It took the Salvadorean army 12 years to achieve a stalemate with the FMLN, who enjoyed widespread support especially among the rural population. According to estimates of the United Nations, the army and death squads were responsible for 85% of the violence perpetrated against civilians, the FMLN for 5%. Forché arrived at a time when it was crucial to convince the U.S. public and government to end support for the Salvadorean army and government, in order to curtail the terror exercised against the population.

² Carolyn Forché, *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1993), p. 21

³ Her translations were published in the bilingual edition *Flores del Volcán / Flowers from the Volcano* (1982).

⁴ Carolyn Forché, *What You Have Heard Is True: A Memoir of Witness and Resistance* (Penguin, 2019). p.322

⁵ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (London: Penguin, 1970, 1993; repr., 1993), p. 78

⁶ For Freire, oppressors are unable to liberate the oppressed, or themselves, for that matter. To overcome the psychosocial state of oppression, the oppressed have to liberate themselves, and they can then liberate their oppressors. Leonel is keenly aware of this. In a key moment

of the journey, Leonel explains to the incredulous Carolyn that he cannot give the peasants working on his land that same piece of land, because ‘They have to take it from me.’ This is so because the peasants taking the land will be the collectively self-determined actualization of their political and psychosocial liberation. If Leonel gave them the land, he would foreclose the possibility of this act of liberation by reducing the psychosocial to the structural. However, in relation to Carolyn Forché he is situated as one of the (structurally and politically) oppressed. This is why he *can* contribute to her liberatory process of *conscientización*.

⁷ Forché’s life previous to meeting Leonel is infused with experiences suggesting her diffuse awareness of denial. These experiences include her growing up Catholic in a predominantly Protestant culture, the influence of her grandmother Anna, who had escaped from Slovakia, the family’s awareness of the Holocaust and of the oppressive regimes of Eastern Bloc state communism, her previous marriage to a Vietnam veteran suffering from PTSD, her being invited into a Native American family, and her being a victim of police violence.

⁸ Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p. 14

⁹ Forché, *What You Have Heard*, p. 313

¹⁰ Chard deNiord, “‘An Inexhaustible Responsibility for the Other’: A Conversation with Carolyn Forché,” *World Literature Today* 91, 1, no. January-February 2017 (2017). p.14

¹¹ Forché, *What You Have Heard*, p. 161

¹² Forché, *What You Have Heard*, p. 161

¹³ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 79

¹⁴ Forché, *What You Have Heard*, p. 163

¹⁵ Forché, *What You Have Heard*, p. 163

¹⁶ Forché, *What You Have Heard*, p. 164

¹⁷ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 64-65

¹⁸ Forché, *The Country Between Us*, (p. 18)

¹⁹ This refers to a built-in feature of many private homes in Central America: glass bottles are cut or smashed in half and embedded with the sharp edges pointing upwards on top of the walls surrounding the perimeter of the property.

²⁰ Forché, *The Country Between Us*, p. 18

²¹ Forché, *Against Forgetting*, p. 32

²² A meeting between Ronald Reagan and Efraín Ríos Montt, recounted and analysed by Corey Robin in the first edition of *The Reactionary Mind*, perfectly captures Reagan's superstitious receptiveness to Ríos Montt's veneer of respectability, as well as the terrible consequences: for years, the U.S. government supported a genocidal regime that inflicted horrific atrocities upon large parts of Guatemala's population. See p. 151-152.

²³ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 62

²⁴ Forché, *What You Have Heard*, 127

²⁵ Forché, *What You Have Heard*, p. 317

²⁶ Forché, *What You Have Heard*, p. 325-326

²⁷ Forché, *The Country Between Us*, p. 23

²⁸ Forché, *Against Forgetting*, p.30