So That All Shall Know: Memory Activism & Epistemic Authority in Guatemala

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“So That All Shall Know”: Memory Activism & Epistemic Authority in Guatemala

by

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43: The memorial in Chimaltenango is dedicated “In memory of the thousands and thousands of martyrs that fought for the peace with social justice, of the people (both) Maya Kaqchikel and non-Maya, who were: Kidnapped, disappeared, tortured, massacred and murdered by the repressive forces of the last 36 years.”

44: An updated (1988) version of the 50 centavo bill. Tecún Umán is still featured prominently, though only by name—his status as national hero appears to have become uncertain during an era when indigenous Guatemalans were defined as the internal enemy. A stylized Maya pyramid now provides the backdrop.

45: This neglected monument to the “Supreme National Hero” Tecún Umán, in the municipal building of Quetzaltenango, “his community of birth,” should feature a never-dying flame—that it should be extinguished when the homeland ceases to be free, sovereign, and independent.” It is unknown when the flame last burned.

Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, 2010.

46: This iconic sculpture of Tecún Umán is one of at least three completed by the prolific Guatemalan sculptor, Rodolfo Galeotti Torres. Erected in February 1967, it stands in the central plaza of the city of Santa Cruz del Quiché.

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48: Rodolfo Galeotti Torres, the crafter of most of the extant monuments in Guatemala, unveiled this status of Atanasio Tzul in 1972. Today it stands in front of the Municipal building of Totonicapán, the city he helped lead in rebellion against the Spanish in 1820.

49: Close-up view of the memorial at Cantel. The inscription reads: “Their hatred of tyrants made them martyrs. Here rest the remains of a municipality (community), and patriots (who were) shot on September 4, 1884. Municipality of 1958.”

50: A tranquil town today, Cantel was the site of Guatemala’s first forays into mechanized textile production—a tradition continued today in the maquiladora economy (cf. Thomas 2009). In the photo above, the red roofs of the sprawling fábrica (factory) are visible. First opened in 1874, the Cantel fábrica remains in operation (though it ceased production from 2008-2010) (cf. Gamarro & Toc 2010).

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53: This poster supports one of the defendants: “Sirs of the Inter-American Court [for Human Rights] it is begged of you to investigate more deeply the record of Carlos Carías and that you realize his innocence…” The photo depicts the accused coaching a soccer team.

54: The Palace of Justice, site of the Supreme Court of Guatemala.


56: The ‘villagers’ are left in a pile of bodies after their murder by the ‘soldiers,’ during a performance of Contrahuella. Photo credit Caja Lúdica.

57: The external wall of this building is completely covered by empapelados, along with graffiti proclaiming “Neither forgetting, nor forgiveness. 45 thousand detained / disappeared.” Photo credit CPR-Urbana.

58: Flyers such as this one were posted throughout Zone 1 of Guatemala City in anticipation of the June 2011 Memory Offensive. The slogan for that year was “Genocide: The peoples are going to judge you.”

59: Memory Offensive poster from a previous year, utilizing a photo taken during one of the dramatic standoffs between members of H.I.J.O.S. and the metropolitan police in full riot gear.
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89: The IIARS exhibit was possibly the first Guatemalan museum to broach discussion of the 1944 October Revolution, the 10-year period of democratic rule that ended with a CIA-backed coup d’etat in 1954.

90: “The dispute between dictatorship and democracy brought with it many social demands and armed conflict. All of this demonstrates the difficult history of our relationships. Armed conflict: When, because of competing ideas, organized groups and governments confront each other with arms to impose their will on each other.”

91: A display of recent publications of the K’iche’ Linguistic Community, on sale during the Congress of the Popol Wuj.

92: A diverse panel of honored guests during the opening ceremonies of the Congress of the Popol Wuj.
## Abbreviations & Terms

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<th>Word or abbreviation</th>
<th>English translation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Aj q’ij(ab’)</strong></td>
<td>Day keeper, shaman, spiritual guide</td>
<td>Maya aj q’ij(ab’) (singular: aj q’ij) are adepts at ‘keeping’ and interpreting the cholq’ij, a 260-day ceremonial calendar. They advise people about the significance of their birthdays and the influence of other dates on their wellbeing, conduct ceremonies for divination or giving thanks, and request the blessing of the ancestors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ALMG</strong></td>
<td>Guatemalan Academy of Mayan Languages</td>
<td>The ALMG is an autonomous, state-backed institution created in 1990 to investigate, standardize, and promote the revitalization of Guatemala’s 22 Mayan languages through cultural and educational programs. The ALMG has a central base in Guatemala City and regional linguistic communities throughout the country.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CEH</strong></td>
<td>Commission for Historical Clarification</td>
<td>The CEH was established during the UN-brokered Peace Accords between the government of Guatemala and the leaders of the guerrilla movement. The CEH was a two-year undertaking, employing at its height 300 personnel who helped to collect and analyze over 8,000 individual testimonies in order to produce the 12-volume Memory of Silence report (see Grandin et al. 2011:386). The CEH concluded that the Guatemalan army was guilty of genocide (1999).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CLK</strong></td>
<td>K’iche’ Linguistic Community</td>
<td>The CLK is the local K’iche’-specific branch of the ALMG. The main offices of the CLK are located in the Popol Ja, or ‘Meeting house,’ a large building on the outskirts of Santa Cruz del Quiché, El Quiché. There are also sub-branches in Mazatena and San Cristóbal Totonicapán.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CPR</strong></td>
<td>Community of Population in Resistance</td>
<td>The CPRs were formed by indigenous campesinos who fled from counterinsurgency violence in their ancestral lands and created autonomous, highly-organized settlements in remote areas, far from the interference of the Guatemalan state. Three separate CPRs were established during the conflict; they remained in hiding until the 1990s, when they began to participate in the Peace Accords.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EQ</strong></td>
<td>Quiché Link</td>
<td>Enlace Quiché is a small NGO based in Santa Cruz del Quiché, the departmental capital of the department of El Quiché. EQ is primarily focused on bilingual education, including the creation of digital software and websites that help facilitate learning K’iche’ Mayan.</td>
</tr>
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</table>
| **FAFG**  
(Fundación de Antropología Forense de Guatemala) | **Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation** | The FAFG was founded after the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team visited in the early 1990s to excavate the mass graves in and around the village of Dos Erres. To date, the FAFG has carried out investigations of more than a thousand cases related to the internal armed conflict, including exhumations of mass graves in multiple departments of Guatemala. |
|---|---|---|
| **Kaibil**  
*Derived from Kayb’il B’alam, a 16th century Mam Maya ruler* | The *kaibles* are the Guatemalan military’s commando special forces brigade. Their training is considered to be exceptionally physically and mentally demanding, and their tactics during the armed conflict were often among the most violent (CEH 1999b). |
| **ODHAG**  
(Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala) | **Office of Human Rights of the Archbishop of Guatemala** | ODHAG is an instrument of the Catholic Church in Guatemala, with its primary headquarters housed within the metropolitan cathedral. Its mission is to “strengthen the processes of empowerment, promotion, and defense of human rights, to contribute to the construction of a more inclusive society” (ODHAG 2014). |
| **REMHI**  
(Proyecto Interdiocesano de “Recuperación de Memoria Histórica”) | **Interdiocesene Project for the Recovery of Historical Memory** | The REMHI project was the first of Guatemala’s two truth commissions. It was organized by ODHAG and carried out across the country by researchers collaborating with local dioceses. Although ODHAG did not explicitly declare that the Guatemalan military committed genocide, they included a lengthy description of the corresponding international conventions (1998). |
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comes first. His excellent mentorship began before I even formally enrolled in graduate school, and I am proud to follow his example of engaged, collaborative ethnography.

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"Somos la memoria que tenemos y la responsabilidad que asumimos; sin memoria no existimos y sin responsabilidad quizá no merezcamos existir" -- José Saramago, Cuadernos de Lanzarote
In memory of Myrene and Hazel, *mis abuelas*.

Thank you for watching over me.
This dissertation examines historical memory and the politics of knowledge in Guatemala. Memory activists and Maya intellectuals demand recognition of the truth of their historical narratives. Their practices of knowledge production are rooted in uncovering perspectives that were previously silenced, especially the experiences of indigenous communities. By building on extensive networks and new technologies, these actors have reconfigured the constraints of epistemic authority in Guatemala. Moreover, their alternative interpretations of the past have led to new identities in the present, including the (re)emergence of a trans-local, pan-linguistic Maya identity. The rapid spread of these processes reflects the resonance that new historical narratives have for diverse groups, following centuries of structural exclusion from the Guatemalan national community. I investigate two sets of questions about memory activism and epistemic authority. First, I interrogate local meanings of *memoria histórica* and ask why it came to inspire activism in the post-conflict era. For most of Guatemala’s past, official historical narratives have focused on a European heritage that rings hollow to the majority of people. However, memory is never static; it functions less as a 'burden of
tradition’ and more like a ‘reserve of alterity,’ as the proliferation of new subject positions in Guatemala illustrates. Second, I investigate how the inclusion of previously subjugated knowledges has shifted public discussions of concepts such as citizenship, justice, history, and the national imaginary. I draw on participation in urban activist events and interviews with historical revisionists to identify the strategies underlying their memory activism. I ask how memory activism overlaps and interacts with indigenous rights movements: how do both strains of activism challenge the racist and colonial character of Guatemalan national identity? One of their common goals is the inclusion of Maya experiences and perspectives. In addition to the role that Maya survivors played en masse as witnesses of violence during the armed conflict, individual Maya leaders have led campaigns and authored texts that address social problems in Guatemala. I ask whether this process can be extended to imagine “a more truly pluralist Guatemala.”
“...Aside from the drums and red clothing and flags, many of the marchers have brought hand-printed banners made from cloth... several of these depict the faces of loved ones who were murdered or disappeared during the war. I recognize some of their portraits from the paper flyers that are still pasted to walls throughout the city, stating their names and biographies and the dates when they were last seen alive.... Although these banners don’t feature any slogans or demands, I find them the most compelling, haunting, accusatory. ... The women—all women—who carry them are old enough for me to wonder if their missing loved ones are represented among these faces...”

Note recorded 30 June 2011 after the Memory March in Guatemala City

Let the history we lived
be taught in the schools,
so that it is never forgotten,
so our children may know it.

TESTIMONY GIVEN TO THE CEH
Chapter 1: Introduction & Context

“The Book of Meetings”

Masacres de libros vi
al Sol el humo cubrió;
dolor muy grande sentí
y el pueblo entero lloró.

El fuego los devoró
la historia allí vi morir
del pueblo que sobre el pop
cantaba el son de Tojil.

Cantaba él, cantaba yo
y así aprendí
a cantar el Popol. (x2)

Me dio golpes Tonatiuh
Mí manos muy fuerte ató.
“Olvida todo eso tú”,
me dijo con ronca voz.

Mirando arriba al azul
clamé, “¡Gran K’u’x Paló!”
“Debés salvar el Pop Wuj,”
me dijo en el corazón.

Cantaba él, cantaba yo
y así aprendí
a cantar el Popol…

“I saw massacres of books. The smoke covered even the sun. I felt great sorrow, and all of the people wept. I saw it die there, the history of the people who sang the song of Tojil\(^1\) over the meeting mat. He sang, I sang, and thus I learned to sing the Popol (Wuj). Tonatiuh\(^2\) gave me blows. My hands were tightly bound. ‘Forget all of that, you,’ he told me in a grating voice. Looking above to the blue (sky) I cried out, ‘Great Heart of the Sea\(^3\) ‘Vos’, you should save the Pop Wuj,’ he told me in my heart. He sang, I sang, and thus I learned to sing the Popol (Wuj).’"

On July 8, 2010, Dr. Ricardo Falla, a Guatemalan anthropologist and Jesuit priest, led a spirited rendition of the song excerpted above during the Fifth International Congress of Studies about the

\(^1\) Dennis Tedlock described Tojil as “a god who is owed a great sacrificial debt and who is able to shroud himself in clouds and rain” (Tedlock 1996:296). The song here refers to the people who sing the songs of Tojil, i.e. who practice Maya spirituality, and practice Maya forms of governance by meeting over the pop, a reed council mat.

\(^2\) Tonatiuh was a name given to Pedro de Alvarado, the leader of the Spanish conquistadores.

\(^3\) Uk’u’x paló was one of the creator beings evoked in the opening passages of the Popol Wuj.

\(^4\) The Guatemalan voso form is less formal than tú, and is usually reserved for close friends. Here it is indicated by the conjugation of the preceding verb deber, i.e. (vos) debés.
Popol Wuj. The setting for this performance was the grand meeting hall on the top floor of the K’iche’ Linguistic Community’s newly opened Popol Ja, or Meeting House, an impressive four-story building inspired by classical Maya architecture. Several hundred people had traveled to the provincial capital of Santa Cruz del Quiché to take part in the five-day conference. It was organized as a multi-disciplinary forum for discussions about the Popol Wuj, a text that is important for many different publics. The conference drew historians, anthropologists, linguists, and archaeologists, scholars who traveled from the United States and Europe as well as from Guatemala City—the former group being almost entirely white, and the latter almost entirely Ladino. However, the majority of those in attendance were Mayas, members of over a dozen Guatemalan linguistic communities, as well as a small group from Yucatán, Mexico.

Although the leading roles in the long panel sessions and keynote addresses were reserved for the foreign and Ladino academics, the Maya audience continually steered the conference as a whole toward discussions of their immediate concerns, namely the religious and political significance of the Popol Wuj. The workshops, roundtables, and question-and-answer sessions after each presentation were dominated by aj q’ijab’—“daykeepers”—the spiritual guides of Maya cosmology who were greatly interested in the mythological symbolism discussed in the Popol Wuj. At one point, the

5 Audio (http://www.anthropo.org/s/8) and video (http://www.anthropo.org/s/9) recordings of this song are archived online.
6 Ladinos are non-indigenous Guatemalans who generally trace their cultural heritage to Europe; the Guatemalan etymology and significance of this term are discussed in more detail below.
7 It is worth noting that in Guatemala, question-and-answer sessions tend to be allotted at least as much time as the original presentation. This was true in the large academic conferences I attended, as well as in smaller-scale book presentations at universities and book stores. This is a marked contrast to the perfunctory few minutes reserved for audience responses in most academic conferences or university lectures I’ve attended in the U.S.
entire assembly was redirected for half an hour by an aging *aj q’ij* who interrupted the keynote speaker in order to perform an impromptu ceremony, calling on the blessings of the ancestors and asking permission to continue discussing the sacred text. For many of the Maya participants, the Congress of the Popol Wuj provided an opportunity to network with members of other linguistic communities, hear alternative perspectives on a common sacred text, and share ideas for constructing new religious practices and interpretations based on this information. The conference also presented a practical political opportunity: the chance to draft a letter to the government calling for progress on a law that would guarantee *aj q’ijab’* and their followers access to sacred places. The organizers of this campaign recognized that their demand would carry more weight because of its endorsement by the full conference, including the international participants and observers.

Dr. Falla’s presentation on the morning of July 8 turned out to be one of the highlights of the conference, in no small part because his topic connected to participants’ political and religious concerns. Falla described how religious practices and historical memories were preserved by indigenous communities living in exile after military violence forced them to flee from their homes and live *pa juyub’*, “in the mountains,” during the violent conflict in the 1980s. The song he introduced, “The Book of Meetings,”8 was written down by members of the Community of Population in Resistance (CPR) living in the Ixcán forest in 1990. Falla projected the lyrics onto a screen for the audience, and then he began to sing; almost immediately, other voices joined in

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8 This title reflects a fairly direct translation of *Popol Wuj*, lit. “Meeting mat book.” In a more recent published volume (Falla 2013:xiii-xiv), Falla refers to the song by a different title: “The young master of the word.” Since I am interested in the song as a performance during the *Congreso del Popol Wuj*, I will retain the original name. See Image 1 in Appendix.
carrying the tune—including a compañera who had lived among the CPR-Ixcán and knew the song by heart. By the end of the first chorus, the entire Popol Ja reverberated with the voices of the participants.

“The Book of Meetings” offers a handy illustration of the processes that I describe in this dissertation: historical memory and the politics of knowledge, as well as the diverse forms of activism that surround these issues. I argue that these processes are mutually constitutive, influencing and reinforcing each other in complex ways that are most clearly uncovered and represented through ethnography. Memory activists and indigenous intellectuals demand recognition of the truth of their narratives about historical memory. Their practices of knowledge production are fundamentally rooted in uncovering perspectives that were previously silenced, especially the experiences of indigenous peoples. By building on extensive networks that cross ethnic and national boundaries, and by making innovative use of new and traditional technologies and techniques, these actors have reconfigured the constraints of epistemic authority in Guatemala. Moreover, their practices of narrating alternative interpretations of the past have led to new imaginaries of identity in the present, including the (re)emergence of a trans-local, pan-linguistic “Maya” identity. The rapid spread and inter-connectedness of these processes reflect the resonance that new historical narratives have for diverse groups in Guatemala, following centuries of structural exclusion from the national community. “The Book of Meetings” illustrates this argument on three levels: as a song, a historical narrative, and a performance.

As a song, and a relatively recent construction, “The Book of Meetings” represents an attempt to preserve historical memory, as well as its authors’ ideas about the relationship between
memory and group identity. In addition to affirming indigeneity as an identity marker at a general level, the song functions as a mnemonic device that preserves specific names and ideas recorded in the sacred text shared by the community, a point reiterated by the refrain, “And thus I learned to sing the Popol (Wuj).” As a historical narrative, it calls to mind an earlier struggle against violence, particularly the attempted obliteration of Maya identity and knowledge through the “massacres of books,” and the acts of cultural resistance that are seen as having preserved Maya identity despite this violence. The protagonist of the song is an unnamed scribe who recorded the Popol Wuj in the 16th century, a “wise young man of the Nim Ch’okoj lineage who rescued the tradition of his ancestors by putting it in writing” (Falla 2013:xii).9 For the song’s authors during the armed conflict, their sacred text was once again in danger of being lost; thus they called on the example of this anonymous hero for inspiration. Once again, violence committed by the state had driven the K’iche’ people from their homes, disrupted their religious practices, and threatened their very identity; once again, the act of remembering became a defiance of the order to “forget all of that, you.” The resonance between the song’s purpose and the narrative it conveyed was a reflection of the repetitive experience of history for many indigenous communities in Guatemala; as one of my Maya colleagues explained to me, “The terror in Guatemala began about five centuries ago, and it isn’t known when it will disappear. The armed conflict is only one case and one period.” Despite these cycles of

9 Later passages in the Popol Wuj record lineage information connecting its authors to the original K’iche’ lords of Q’uma’rkaj at the time of the Spanish invasion. Dennis Tedlock has explained that this information dates the work to between 1554 and 1558, though the extant version of the text was copied by a priest in 1701-03 (1996:55-56).
violence, communities like the CPR-Ixcán managed to endure the conflict and revitalize their collective identities by drawing on such acts as singing the *Popol Wuj*.10

Finally, the performance of “The Book of Meetings” in the context of Dr. Falla’s presentation—during an international conference, the fifth of its kind, convened in highland Guatemala to discuss a Maya text—represents the profound yet incomplete shift toward epistemic equality in Guatemala. Indigenous actors have gained access to the traditional means of legitimated knowledge production—the academy, publishing, and journalism, among others—while simultaneously pushing for the recognition of the legitimacy of other forms of knowing, including the expertise of *aj q’ijab’* and the political and legal wisdom of indigenous community leaders.11 The conference as a whole symbolized the argument that Maya knowledges are worthy of international attention and respect; if its organizers failed to include more indigenous ‘experts’ among its panelists, this did not stop the audience from making use of the gathering for their own purposes. “The Book of Meetings” was taken up in song by the participants, loudly and with pride, because it was recognizable as a popular form of knowledge, as a product of indigenous authors. Its inclusion in an academic conference represented an affirmation of the value of Maya practices, and the participants’

10 Victor Montejo (1999; 2005) and Jonás Moller (2004) offer rich descriptions of the revitalization practices of refugee communities in Mexico and the CPR-Ixcán, respectively. Montejo described the foundation of cross-linguistic solidarity in refugee communities as an important resource and example for the pan-Maya movement (1999).

11 As examples of this push for the inclusion of ‘knowledges otherwise,’ one of Editorial Cholsamaj’s most popular books is Carlos Barrios’ (2004) *Ch’umilal Wuj: El Libro del Destino* (The book of destiny), which explains the significance of different combinations of days in the Maya 260-day ceremonial calendar. In 2010, Cholsamaj published Norwegian anthropologist Stener Ekern’s book on the Maya form of government in the department of Totonicapán, known as the “48 cantones.” This edition of the book was intended to demonstrate practical lessons in governing for other administrative bodies in Guatemala, based on K’iche’ Maya principles.
spirit of resistance in solidarity with the CPR-Ixcán and other communities that were devastated by the violence of the armed conflict. Joining voices in song during the Congress of the Popol Wuj was an act of performing historical memory: calling to mind their own experiences during the armed conflict, and incorporating the song and the conference into their interpretations of those experiences.

Questions & context

This dissertation investigates two sets of questions about memory activism and epistemic authority in Guatemala. First, I interrogate the meaning of memoria histórica and ask how and why it came to serve as one of the most powerful organizing principles for a generation of activists in the aftermath of Guatemala’s internal armed conflict. Through ethnography, I put the academic field of memory studies into dialogue with on-the-ground knowledge practices of memory activists and indigenous intellectuals in Guatemala. For most of Guatemala’s past, official historical narratives
have focused on a European heritage that rings hollow to the majority of people. I use innovative methods to gather information about the alternative historical memories that have been preserved in indigenous communities through their own distinctive commemorative practices. I draw on theories of mediated collective remembering to read these narratives, and I begin to identify a “schematic narrative template” (Wertsch 2002) based on the ideas of young Maya professionals. I show that collective memory is a type of knowledge or cognition set apart by the sense of ownership it engenders: the remembering subject’s investment in the narrative is a defining characteristic of memory, as opposed to other forms of knowledge. However, memory is never static; it functions less as a ‘burden of tradition’ and more like a ‘reserve of alterity,’ as the proliferation of new subject positions in Guatemala illustrates.

Second, I investigate how the inclusion of previously subjugated knowledges has shifted public discussions of such concepts as citizenship, justice, history, and the national imaginary. I draw on participation in urban activist events and interviews with history curriculum revisionists to identify the strategies and goals underlying their memory activism. I ask how memory activism overlaps and interacts with indigenous rights movements: in particular, how do both strains of activism challenge the racist and colonial character of Guatemalan national identity? One of their common goals is the inclusion of Maya experiences and perspectives. In some cases, this means drawing directly from the actual testimonies of survivors of violence during the internal armed conflict. The post-conflict truth commissions conducted thousands of individual interviews, mostly with survivors from the Maya communities that bore the majority of violence. Consequently, their
voices—transcribed into database records and case studies—formed the intellectual resources that allowed researchers to identify the causes and consequences of the conflict.\textsuperscript{12}

In addition to the role that Maya survivors played en masse as the principal witnesses of violence during the armed conflict, individual Mayas have led campaigns and authored texts that address social problems in Guatemala. The ability of these indigenous intellectuals to participate in public discourse depends in part on their access to the dominant forms of legitimate knowledge production, a circumstance that has only recently become possible for more than a tiny fraction of the indigenous population. However, indigenous rights groups have also fought for recognition and respect for alternative knowledges. Moreover, I found that my Maya colleagues were very innovative and creative in using limited resources to accomplish their goals. What are the effects of the addition of these Maya voices to public debates about history and identity in Guatemala?

\textit{Defining memory activism \& epistemic authority}

I found that many of the groups and individuals who work in campaigns for social justice, international solidarity, and public accounting for past violence were connected through loose social networks. As I attended films, lectures, workshops, and protests organized by different groups, I recognized many of the same faces in the crowd. Between these groups, memberships overlapped,

\textsuperscript{12} The Recuperation of History Memory project (REMHI), an initiative of the Office of Human Rights of the Archbishop of Guatemala (ODHAG), was the first of these reports (1998). The researchers’ description of their records illustrates the value attached to these testimonies: “The cassettes and the filled out forms in the offices of REMHI have a halo of sacredness. They are not just things like any other: they are the victims, their tears, their blood and their audacious tenacity to exist-in-spite-of-fear; it was their memory, confided to the Project, that allowed the construction of the Report. Before creating the database with their thesaurus (tesauru), the workers of REMHI already spoke with veneration of the ‘treasure (tesoro) of testimonies” (ODHAG 2003:379).
event spaces were shared, and semantic objects—artworks, photographs, and slogans—were often re-used and remixed in materials such as flyers and posters, which were distributed online as well as pasted in urban spaces. I adopted “memory activism” to describe the work of these groups for three reasons. First, this label reflects the most important shared focus of their various events: historical memory. The events I attended, though diverse, were organized around this topic, frequently in relation to “truth” and “justice,” such that a common triptych emerged: memoria, verdad, justicia. Second, “memory activism” includes the work of other groups with similar goals but different modes of activism than this urban, primarily student population, including ODHAG with its ongoing project to incorporate elements of the truth commission reports into school curricula. Third, the looseness of “memory activism” highlights the processual nature of this fluctuating movement of actors, institutions, and discourses. Rather than a concretely delimited organization, memory activists are a decentralized, non-hierarchical network, usefully described by Manuel de Landa’s concept of “meshworks” (1998; see also Escobar 2008:274). I hope to avoid the portrayal of these actors as members of a monolithic movement, while recognizing the shared focus of their activism.

I sought descriptions of memory activism by other scholars, but the phrase has not been used frequently. Carol Gluck has referred to Japanese “memory activists” who played an important role in preserving public memory of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in defiance of the “sanitized version” maintained by official memory (2005). A more common use of the phrase appears in scholarship about the Israeli NGO Zochrot, which formed to raise awareness of the Palestinian experience of forced relocation after the creation of the state of Israel (Zochrot 2013b). Yifat Gutman describes Zochrot’s memory activism “as a transnational strategy of peace activism in
which a contested past is recovered through local on-site commemoration” (Gutman 2011). She asks whether reconciliation can “begin separately and exclusively, in a one-sided framework of truth production” (2011:70), since in this case only the Palestinians and their allies are willing to renegotiate the truth about the past (specifically the 1948 war and its aftermath). Gutman’s argument approaches my own focus on the role of epistemic authority in legitimizing certain knowledge practices. One might investigate Zochrot’s activism with an eye to the manner in which Palestinian perspectives are excluded, translated, or otherwise incorporated into their discourse. As Gutman argues, the tailoring of Zochrot’s activities and narratives to fit the expectations and sensibilities of potential Jewish-Israeli allies lends itself to a weakened form of activism: the possibilities for social change are limited by what the actors perceive as being acceptable to their intended audience (Gutman 2011:70).

Noam Leshem sees Zochrot’s activism as a form of resistance against Israel’s creation of a “spatial-memory regime,” namely the state’s practice of (re)namingsettlements and geographic features to replace earlier toponyms with “Jewish, or Jewish sounding, names” (Leshem 2010:164). Leshem focuses in particular on Zochrot’s activities in erecting signposts that commemorate the Palestinian community that lived in the spaces now occupied by Israeli settlers:

Signposting is a practical tool used to write on—and about—the landscape. As a discursive practice, the sign acts to construct the body of knowledge that is accessible to the inhabitants of a specific landscape … and blocks out unwanted or competitive knowledge. … [Zochrot’s] signposting practice is aimed at countering the hegemonic effort to empty landscape of its political content: it is an estrangement of space and a de-automatization of the process of reading landscape. (Leshem 2010:170)
Zochrot’s signposting strategy bears a resemblance to Guatemalan memory activists’ attempts to mark the urban landscape with reminders of the violence inflicted on civilians. By calling out the hidden histories of space—for example, by pasting photographs of disappeared citizens in the spots where they were last seen alive, or forcing the government to rename the street where a victim was murdered by paramilitaries (see image below)—memory activists hope to raise the awareness of passersby and elicit a public response.

2: In 2005, the Presidential Commission for Human Rights formally renamed a section of 12 Calle in Guatemala City in honor of Myrna Mack Chang, a Guatemalan anthropologist who was murdered by a right-wing death squad near this site in 1990. The act was required as part of a ruling on the case by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, but likely would not have been carried out without the persistence of Helen Mack, who created a Foundation in her sister’s name and who has become a leading figure in the fight against criminal impunity in Guatemala. Photo credit: (Fundación Myrna Mack 2009)

13 I describe this practice in more detail in chapter 7.
As I observed and participated in debates about historical memory in Guatemala, I learned to recognize signs of conflict and negotiation about the politics of knowledge. Claims to truth by any party are inevitably evaluated by listeners or readers, and any understanding of how debates are resolved depends on developing familiarity with the epistemologies available to different actors. The appropriateness and legitimacy of varied knowledge practices are ranked differently, even idiosyncratically, by different people. Thus, “epistemic authority” emerged as a helpful concept to refer to how different actors made use of the resources available to them in order to interpret and give shape to their social environment through the skillful deployment and negotiation of knowledge. There are various factors involved in any narrative performance of truth: the central role of power, the (hierarchical) variability of epistemological and linguistic practices, the presentation of self and experience, among others. In some cases—for example with the written production of history textbooks or newspaper columns—the bases of epistemic authority take on a familiar form, depending first and foremost on the academic and professional credentials of the author. Beyond this, authors must employ various linguistic and performative competencies in order to craft, present, and defend their narratives in the public sphere.

More recently, the dominant views of truth and knowledge in Guatemala have been called into question by the inclusion of knowledge experts who draw on alternative bases of epistemic authority—such as exegetical commentary on the Popol Wuj as a religious text, or the application of

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14 I conceptualize any claim to truth as a performance of a speech act, or an utterance in the Bakhtinian sense (1986:71), a concept I develop in more detail in the following chapter. I share Bret Gustafson’s use of epistemic “to refer to knowledge, its social and discursive modes of validation, and to power relations that adhere to knowledge production” (2009:285).
local indigenous forms of justice to resolve legal cases from the official court system. A convenient shorthand explanation for this shift has been that a small cadre of indigenous (organic) intellectuals took advantage of openings provided by democratization and the adoption of multicultural neoliberalism to carve out a space for Maya knowledge production, particularly around the issues of bilingual education and linguistic research (England 2003; French 2010). This reading has informed many influential descriptions of the Maya movement(s), though each has offered more detailed ethnographic data about particular pieces of the puzzle (Fischer & Brown 1996; Warren 1998; Hale 2006; Bastos & Brett 2010). My project extends the focus of ethnography beyond Maya leaders and elders to interrogate how younger participants in Maya intellectual labors conceptualize their identity, goals, and practices—particularly through the rubric of historical memory. Having observed and at times participated in their daily work, I feel confident in identifying them as young Maya intellectuals. However, just as Rappaport found that “indigenous public intellectuals in Cauca are generally loathe to call themselves by such an elitist epithet” (Rappaport 2005:12), I found that the same observation generally held true for my colleagues and research participants in Guatemala: most would shy away from the label “intellectual,” preferring instead to be seen as capacitados—trained / prepared for professional work.

The conceptualization of these individuals and their labors as intellectual is itself a reflection of the shifting meaning of epistemic authority. In the postscript to the written proceedings of a conference convened precisely to “rethink intellectuals in Latin American” (Moraña & Gustafson 2010), Gustafson noted the myriad shifts toward epistemic pluralism in Latin American intellectual production, from the rise of new genres and digital media formats to the arrival of subaltern and
subjugated knowledges within the academy (2010:360). However, he affirmed that the situation “is not one of a postmodern free for all”; rather, scholars must adapt their research accordingly:

To speak of epistemic pluralism requires paying empirical attention to groundings of intellectual projects and agendas in relation to ongoing issues of contention: structural inequalities … legacies of patriarchal coloniality … the risks and possibilities of new models of development and democracy linked to new forms of nationalism … the shadow economies which move drugs, guns, and people; the multiple crises of the urban milieu; and the ongoing significance of rural struggle now charged with environmental extraction… and finally, the reconfiguring of the state and the nation against the premature announcement of the demise of both. It is against this more familiar backdrop of Latin American economic and social history that today’s intellectual pluralism, heterogeneity, movement, and translocal articulations must be engaged. (Gustafson 2010:361-362)

In this project, I observed that each of the diverse factors listed above played a role in the practices of memory activism and indigenous knowledge production. I have attempted to account for many of those effects in the writing below, as well as others that may be particularly significant in the context of Guatemala. Recognizing the limitations of my perspective, I present this research not as a definitive account of the state of historical memory or indigenous politics or urban memory activism—all of which are multi-faceted examples of the need to “ground” intellectual projects in relation to the shifting reality of epistemic pluralism—but as one empirical study of these social phenomena and the densely interwoven connections between them, grounded in the experiences I shared with young Maya intellectuals—or capacitados—in the sites described below.

**Defining conflict**

This dissertation is not primarily about Guatemala’s internal armed conflict—or the “civil war,” “the Violence,” “the Situation,” the “Guatemalan Holocaust,” or any of the other designations that have been applied to describe one of the longest civil conflicts in the Americas. Other scholars
have capably described these events and their historical context (Schirmer 1998; Cullather 1999; Jonas 2000; Sanford 2003; Manz 2004), two independent truth commissions produced extensive documentary evidence of the violence’s effects on thousands of people (ODHAG 1998; CEH 1999a), and in recent years, survivors of the Guatemalan violence have published their own accounts of the experiences they endured (Montejo 1987; Montejo and Akab’ 1992; Museo Comunitario Rabinal Achi 2003; Tecú Osorio 2006; Hernández et al. 2008). Rather than contributing another analysis of the history or causes of the conflict, this dissertation is concerned with the difficult processes of meaning-making in the still-dangerous context of the “post-conflict” era (cf. French 2013; McAllister and Nelson 2013).

The shifting, varied nomenclature for the constellation of events described by many of the interlocutors in this dissertation is a sign of the general level of disagreement about history in Guatemalan society. As Trouillot succinctly put it, “Naming the fact thus already imposes a reading and many historical controversies boil down to who has the power to name what” (1995:114). The labels that different groups and individuals use are often indexical of their own personal or institutional perspectives on—and ideologies about—the past that they name and describe. Names have also shifted over time in response to new social understandings of events, such as the gradual inclusion and privileging of victims’ narratives in the public sphere, or the truth commission’s conclusion that the violence constituted genocide in several of its manifestations. “The war” (la guerra, see NACLA 1974) or “the civil war” (la guerra civil, see Moser and McIlwaine 2001:1) effectively convey the national scale of the violence, and the deep polarization that presented an existential challenge to the nation; however, these labels obscure the gross differences in military
power and level of participation of each side in the conflict. Specifically, they tend to over-exaggerate the level of popular support for the guerrilla movement (Smith 1984; Le Bot 1995; Stoll 1993). Labeling the conflict as a war also tends to gloss over the imbalances in which side committed the majority of the damage to civilian populations. The Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH), an independent truth commission established by the United Nations during the Peace Accords, found that the Guatemalan State was responsible for 93% of the human rights violations and acts of violence during the period 1962-1996, while the guerrillas were responsible for 3%.15

During the height of the military’s counterinsurgency campaign in the highlands, anthropologists working with communities of survivors and refugees found that references to the ongoing conflict were couched in discretion and fears of reprisal. In her work among survivors of counter-insurgency violence, Victoria Sanford (2003:15) recorded a shift in nomenclature from “la Situación” to “la Violencia” as an indication that people felt more freedom to speak publicly about the events, which were becoming part of a recognizably shared past. Judith Zur likewise found that “La Violencia is the popular name” for the counterinsurgency campaign among indigenous communities in the highlands (1998:1). Indigenous communities suffered terribly during the conflict—over 440 different communities were destroyed, by the military’s own accounts (Schirmer 2002:54). The CEH report found that 83% of the conflict’s victims were ethnically Maya, and

15 This categorization of group responsibility includes “the Army, security forces, Civil Patrols, military commissioners and death squads” (CEH 1999a:86). Excluding para-military forces, the Army was responsible for 85% of human rights violations and acts of violence.
concluded that the military’s strategy in some regions amounted to “acts of genocide” (CEH 1999a:41), a determination that has proved legally and politically consequential in more recent years. Influential Maya scholars have referred to the events as another in a series of holocausts: Victor Montejo wrote that “The holocaust that the Maya suffered … during and after the Spanish invasion has been repeated through the centuries” (Montejo 2005:12), and Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil specified that it was the “third Maya holocaust” (1997:5), a contention made years before the CEH issued its findings on genocide.

Ultimately, the process of naming is (necessarily) an act of silencing and privileging some views, and packaging the complexity of reality in a more convenient and accessible form. Even the CEH had to settle on a name for the events it set out to study—they ultimately decided on “armed confrontation,” echoing the UN-brokered accord that originally let to the CEH’s creation (Oglesby 2007:196,n2). In the text below, I reproduce the terms used by informants when I am describing their own interpretations and ideas; elsewhere I employ the term “internal armed conflict” to refer to the period in question, which at the time of this writing seems to be emerging as the preferred neutral term across registers (popular, academic, journalistic) and interest groups (student, leftist, State, and Maya intellectual). However, it is worth noting that the term “genocide” is gaining more salience as a result of legal proceedings against former military leaders, including the historic conviction of former president José Efraín Ríos Montt for genocide in May 2013, a decision that was overturned days later by a Constitutional Court that has been accused of corruption (Neier 2014; Open Society 2014). This label is decidedly not neutral: its adoption and application to describing Guatemala’s recent history by memory activists represents a challenge to the state,
demanding the prosecution of war crimes (see chapter 7). In response, right-wing sectors have claimed that “there was no genocide” (President Otto Pérez Molina, quoted in Carlsen 2012), or have called for prosecuting former guerrilla leaders for genocide as well (Fundación Contra Terrorismo 2013; Stoll 2013a; 2013b). Consequently, memory activism is often visible from the point of defining and naming the events of the internal armed conflict.

**Defining ethnicity**

In Guatemala, the extension of mestizaje toward describing multilingualism, pluriculturalism, or other forms of contemporary social mixture tends to be reserved for defenses against charges of racism, e.g. through claiming that “we are all mestizos” and thus rendering charges of racism as baseless (Hale 2006). In daily practice for contemporary Guatemalans, Ladino identity is the one marked by privileged access to popular resources, treated officially as the normalized default national identity—a situation not unlike white privilege in the United States (McIntosh 1989). Today, Ladino identity is rarely questioned—unlike Maya identity, which has shifted in meaning in recent decades and consequently is subject to frequent challenges of inauthenticity or politically-motivated constructivism. However, just as Maya identity has a traceable history with roots in previous expressions and traditions, so is it possible to identify the uniquely Guatemalan etymology of “Ladino”:

Initially, Ladino was the name of the Castilian language of the Jews. Its second connotation was with ability… In Spain there was a shift from using Ladino to mean the Castilian that Jews spoke, to eventually calling the Jews themselves Ladinos. That process repeated itself here. Before the actual renaming of mestizos as Ladinos, the historical documents began to include phrases such as ‘so and so is an Indian who is very Ladino.’ And that is how the word started to appear in Mesoamerica. (Martínez Peláez 1992)
Martínez Peláez noted that in the earliest references by colonial writers, *Ladino* referred to persons who were “neither Indians nor Spaniards nor creoles,” a broad category that included various distinguishable groups—*mestizos, negros, mulatos, zambos*—following the caste system established by the Spanish Crown (1992).

Arturo Taracena traced the transformation of the Ladino category in the 19th century, as “Guatemala evolved toward a society polarized as *Indios* and *Ladinos*” (2006). Under the liberal reform state, creole identity was gradually merged with Ladino, which resulted in racializing the term as it became defined in opposition to indigeneity:

> [As the] ideological product of a new structuration of the dominant class, the word Ladino lost the last indigenous element of its expression: *mestizaje*. The concept of the *mestizo* became something so irritating, it disappeared from the official vocabulary and, little by little, from the collective memory. The statistics divided the population into Indians and Ladinos. Ladino is [defined as] the opposite of Indian. (Taracena 2006)

This seemingly inevitable merger led to Guatemala being defined today as a Ladino state and society in spite of the persistence of an oligarchy that is ethnically distinct, creole or no (Casaús Arzú 2000; 2010). However, Carol Smith (1990) reminds us that the political forces that led to this “new structuration of the dominant class” were the culmination of specific historical events—namely, the late 19th-century liberal reforms. Smith points to the presidency of Rafael Carrera, an illiterate *mestizo* farmer who led a populist revolt to capture power in the 1830s and who, for a brief period, united Guatemala’s ethnic groups into a mass popular bloc in opposition to a tiny creole elite class (Smith 1990). Had the ‘conservative’ ideology of Carrera’s movement lasted, the present-day social reality of Guatemala would look very different. Instead, under the liberal reforms instituted by Justo Rufino Barrios in the 1870s, capitalism boomed at the expense of ethnic unity: a racial hierarchy
crystallized, cementing the indigenous majority at the bottom and marking the appropriation of Ladino identity by the creole elites.

In contrast to the association of Ladinos with the nation-state, indigenous Guatemalans have long been associated with local-level communities. Eric Wolf wrote in 1959 that despite “great changes” in the intervening three centuries, “It is still possible to speak of this community in the present tense, to regard the present-day Indian community as a direct descendant of the reconstructed community of the seventeenth century” (1959:214-215). Later anthropologists continued to describe locally-defined indigenous groups, arguing that the close-knit social relations enabled the preservation of traditions and indigenous identity in the face of an expanding nation-state (Warren 1978). More recently, Brigittine French wrote that “the municipio [roughly, county] has been the locus of indigenous identity” (2010:6). In my own experiences, I found that local community membership continues to operate as an important marker of personal identity, even for migrants to the urban centers—the Kaqchikel personnel of Editorial Cholsamaj make great sacrifices in order to maintain their connection to their birth communities despite daily labor in the capital. In chapter 5 I discuss a specific example of the powerful link between local municipio-level identity and collective remembering practices.

The association of indigenous identity with local communities is a complicated issue; on the one hand, the negation of broader-scale political or economic participation by Mayas feeds into “enduring essential constructs of ‘Indians’ as inherently backward, uncivilized, and ignorant [which] have supported a structurally racist society” (French 2010:3). It is easier to exclude indigenous citizens from the project of nation-building and the nationalist imaginary as long as they are seen to
reside at the margins, reliant on outside guidance (see Grandin and Goldman 1999). On the other hand, the strength of local identity is recognized as an important resource by Maya intellectuals, who often draw on decentralization as the basis for reimagining the state, or advocate the construction of “local autonomies” of governance (Cojti Cuxil et al. 2007; see also Alvarado 2004).

Although local identity retains its importance for many Guatemalans, in recent decades a new identity project has emerged, a “Maya movement” that has no definite structure or leadership but tends to press for greater autonomy and rights for Guatemala’s indigenous citizens. French describes the Maya movement as being “linked to the dual political objectives of promoting cultural autonomy for Maya peoples and of reconfiguring the Guatemalan nation into a multilingual and multicultural democracy” (French 2010:5). One of the most significant outcomes of this movement has been the widespread adoption of “Maya” as an identity label, on the one hand substituted in place of indígena or indio, the latter of which is increasingly viewed as a slur by most young Guatemalans, especially Mayas. Scholars have noted that this movement resonated with broad swaths of the country from its first articulations. Richard Adams wrote in 1994 that “While the intensification of ‘being Indian’ or ‘being Maya’ is a particular project of urban Mayan intelligentsia, it has also become a concern of countless provincial and rural Maya” (Adams 1994:537). A decade later, Nora England reported that “the ideas that are generated by Maya intellectual leaders have become quite generalized among the Maya population” (England 2003:734).

Edgar Esquit offers a more nuanced evaluation of the movement, warning sympathetic researchers to avoid “fall[ing] into a simple celebration of Maya resistance” (2011:215). He points out that the movement is driven by “primarily one sector of educated Maya” (Esquit 2011:202) who
draw on whichever discourses are currently in vogue with foreign funding agencies—“human rights, religion, education, languages, Maya rights, and racism”—to support their ideas and strategies with the “double aim of pinning down the idea of the Maya people (Maya unity) and challenging the exclusionary makeup of the Guatemalan nation-state” (Esquit 2011:196-197). Esquit questions the influence of Western, Ladino, and North American traditions of knowledge on the narratives offered by these movement leaders, echoing in reverse my questions about the impact of indigenous knowledge practices on Guatemalan (and foreign ‘Guatemalanist’) discourses (Esquit 2011:202).

Esquit’s concern is that a reliance on professional forms of knowledge production may lead to the perpetuation of state ideologies, as these forms remain largely under the control of “Guatemala’s oligarchy and political class” (2011:213). Consequently, for the Maya movement to continue to grow and present opportunities for more substantial reforms of the nation-state, Esquit argues that its leaders must draw on the diversity of experiences and knowledges offered by local-level, rural Mayas:

[I]t is crucial to bring different Maya historical experiences into the discussion, for they are central to the definition of multiculturalism’s ideological and material foundations. … The Maya have not been isolated… It is unlikely they have lived in a homogenous way. Their diverse historical circumstances have given rise to diverse viewpoints, interests, and identities. Among the Maya, one can therefore discern many forms of memory and thought. In short, we Maya must pay close attention to the relationship between memory and identity in order to recognize that our own images about history are not uniform and instead reflect the complexity of our lives and relations. (Esquit 2011:214)

Esquit’s perspective is echoed in recent practices by other members of the “sector of educated Maya.” My capacitado colleagues spoke often of “the need for the movement to reconnect with the bases,” as one influential Kaqchikel publisher described it. Many indigenous leaders interpreted the electoral
success of the right-wing Patriot Party as a wake-up call, a sign that they have failed to understand or influence politics in local communities.

As Esquit recognized, the “Maya” identity articulated by intellectual leaders has drawn on historical memory as a primary resource, and the authorship of a new historical narrative about the Maya past has long been one of the central aims of Maya intellectual production. Maya identity is almost invariably constructed around a founding claim of a link to the prehistoric indigenous civilization that lends its name to the project (cf. Warren 1998; Bastos et al. 2007). The promotion of Maya historical perspectives to be on par with official histories is regarded as a prerequisite to achieving a “truly inclusive and multicultural society” (Montejo 2005:59-60), which is often the “grounded utopian” goal espoused by Maya activists (Price et al. 2008). Epistemic parity with Ladino compatriots is an end in itself, especially for the activists who are most invested in intellectual labor. Many memory activists see their campaigns as a cathartic activity for guaranteeing a more peaceful future, a belief that “the freedom to forget begins in the act of remembrance” (P. Smith 2001:61). And there are often more overtly political goals embedded in memory work: Esquit argues that the “new Mayanist historical imaginary” has become a sustaining force in the broader pan-Maya identity project, providing the Maya people with a “birthdate” over 5,000 years ago (Esquit 2005): “This narrative generates pride… Maya individuals, for example, can make reference to their millenarian past when they present their demands to the government, just as they can cite their history of greatness when they appear in public, attend universities, or talk on national and international stages” (Esquit 2011:201).
Finally, given the effects of the internal armed conflict on many indigenous communities, it is worth exploring the role that this violence played in the formation of pan-linguistic Maya identity. Arturo Arias and Victor Montejo, among others, identified the conflict as a catalyst for the articulation of trans-local solidarity (Arias in Hale 1997:824; Montejo 1999). Montejo’s research among refugees in Mexico revealed that their experience led to a fundamental re-orientation in their worldviews: Brought together by the worst of conditions, Maya survivors found new allies among their fellow Mayas, Mexican hosts, and international observers and NGOs, weaving new social networks that spanned the globe. As Dorothy Holland argued through a “Bakhtinian conceptualization” of identity formation, these “dialogues across difference” led to “new cultural forms of knowledge [being] produced and subsequently appropriated for use in later interactions” (Holland et al. 2008:99). Education especially became “a valued tool in the struggle for survival in an ever-changing world,” providing a means to both defend Maya communities from exploitation and to provide new opportunities to younger generations (Montejo 1999:174). The themes of revitalization and pan-Maya solidarity, central to the message of the Pan-Maya movement, were developed in an early form in the revolutionary education of the refugee camps.

*Guatemala, divided by violence*

The history of Guatemala tends to be interpreted using one of a handful of general patterns. For some, the country traces its origins to the colony founded in 1525 by the Spanish conquistador, Pedro de Alvarado. The modern nation really got its start in 1821—specifically on September 15, as commemorated by an annual holiday—when Guatemala declared independence from Spain. Thus
began a process of development that continued until the 1950s, when communist rule—or the threat thereof—led to the necessary overthrow of a radical leftist regime and the substitution of military leadership. The communist threat would continue to plague the nation for the next half century, highlighted by leftist guerrillas’ high-profile kidnappings and assassinations. The darkest period followed the success of the Sandinistas nearby in Nicaragua. By the early 1980s, the military leaders adopted a new counterinsurgency approach to combat the guerrillas: “take the water away from the fish” (Ríos Montt in Schirmer 1998:45), by targeting the rural communities that the guerrillas depended on for resources and protection. Even many former military figures—Ríos Montt included—have referred to the army’s campaign as committing “some excesses,” but altogether this was a necessary sacrifice to save the country from communism. In an unexpected reversal of the ethnographic gaze, an interviewee once asked me if I had ever heard of Abraham Lincoln. After I affirmed that I had, she nodded and claimed that Ríos Montt had done the same for Guatemala as Lincoln had for the United States: he practiced “scorched earth” warfare because it was “what was necessary to save the country.” Once the guerrillas were soundly defeated, the war could finally come to an end—by 1985, democracy returned, and by 1996 the accords for a firm and lasting peace were finally signed.

Another train of thought interprets events differently. Guatemala’s colonial past set the conditions for a tiny oligarchy to control the economy and the state for hundreds of years; independence was practically insignificant for most citizens. The only hope for true democracy was the “Democratic Spring” of the October Revolution, 1944-1954, which brought crucial progressive reforms such as labor organizing, social security, and the redistribution of fallow land from huge
estates and foreign corporations to landless peasants. However, the anti-communist paranoia of the U.S., combined with the influence of the powerful United Fruit Company, which vehemently opposed the expropriation of the fallow lands that buffered its banana plantations, led to a CIA-planned and executed coup d'état that overthrew the government of Jacobo Arbenz, a democratically elected president who had legalized the communist party, though he did not belong to it. In his place, the U.S. installed a puppet, Carlos Castillo Armas, the first of a long line of dictators who ruled for over 30 years, occasionally replacing one another through assassinations and coups d'état. Against this series of oppressive regimes, a group of military officers rose up in 1960 in an attempt to recreate the revolution of 1944. Guerrilla movements continued for the next 36 years, taking different names and strategies, but none succeeded in gaining enough popular support to threaten the military government, which relied increasingly on sophisticated military training and weapons from the United States. The military inflicted inexcusable violence against indigenous communities, leftists, and anyone who spoke out or criticized the regime—students, labor organizers, even priests and nuns. The Peace Accords included an amnesty for all combatants, but former officials like Ríos Montt should face justice for the crimes committed in violation of human rights.

Generally, these two interpretations of history correspond to the right- and left-wing ideological blocs in Guatemala; however, the interpretations offered by the young Maya intellectuals I interviewed do not entirely fit into either of these camps. One of the goals of this dissertation is to begin the work of identifying alternative interpretations of the Guatemalan past that fit their historical memories and that might allow for more dialogue than the dualism represented above. As a first step toward understanding the context and deeper significance of the historical memories that
I gather in this dissertation, I look to the final reports prepared by Guatemala’s two truth commissions (ODHAG 1998; CEH 1999a), as well as Jennifer Schirmer’s excellent investigation of the conflict from the point of view of the military’s leaders (2002). The purpose of these efforts at historical clarification was to establish some guidelines for explaining the violence. Elizabeth Oglesby, an anthropologist who took part in the production of the CEH report, described the anticipated effect of “officializing history” through the report and thereby “establishing some parameters within which future discussions can take place. … [T]he truth commission report makes it much more difficult, if not impossible, to deny certain realities” (Oglesby 2007:176).

The REMHI report, *Guatemala: Nunca Más*, was the first to be completed and published, on April 24, 1998. The researchers for REMHI collected 5,465 testimonies, which led to the documentation of 52,427 victims of “human rights and humanitarian law violations,” of which the largest share (47.92%) were victims of individual or collective murder (ODHAG 1999:289). Based on the testimonies, REMHI assigned responsibility for 47,004 victims’ violations (89.65%) to the combined government forces—including the army, police, civil patrollers, military commissioners, and death squads; Guerrilla organizations were identified as the responsible party in 2,523 cases.

16 Despite these goals and the enormous amount of intellectual labor involved in the preparation of the truth commissions, powerful individuals still deny certain data and conclusions presented in the reports. The current president, Otto Pérez Molina, and many members of his government reject the finding that there was genocide in Guatemala. In reaction to the conviction of Ríos Montt for genocide in 2013, Marco Augusto García, the director of a powerful trade group “demanded the annulment of the verdict, because, in his opinion, there was no genocide” (Prensa Libre 2013b; my emphasis). García’s wish was granted by the Constitutional Court within days.

17 Two days after the report was released, Juan José Gerardi Conedera, the Bishop who directed the ODHAG and supervised the REMHI project, was brutally murdered in his home in Zone 1 of the capital. In 2001, three army officers were convicted of the crime and sentenced to 30 years in jail; however, the “intellectual authors” of the crime remain unpunished (Goldman 2008).
representing 4.81% of the total violations (ODHAG 1999:293-294). Using the definition of massacre as “multiple killings of three or more people,” REMHI tallied 1,090 massacres reported in its testimonies; using the more conventional definition which includes “community destruction,” the final count was 422, of which 16 were committed by guerrilla forces (ODHAG 1999:295-296). In summary, the REMHI project found that: “Sociopolitical violence in the form of mass destruction of groups and communities was a central feature of the counterinsurgency war in Guatemala, particularly from 1980 to 1983. Most of the victims of massacres occurred under the Ríos Montt regime” (ODHAG 1999:296).

The UN-organized CEH found similar results in its Memory of Silence report, published in 1999. The commission drew on 7,200 interviews with 11,000 people, as well as recently declassified documents from the U.S. government. Based on this data, the CEH concluded that at least 132,000 and probably over 200,000 people were killed during the internal armed conflict, of which 83% were Maya (CEH 1999b:4366). Similar to the REMHI findings, the CEH attributed 93% of the responsibility for violations to the state and paramilitaries. Crucially, the CEH concluded that within four regions of the country, and possibly others, “agents of the State of Guatemala, within the framework of counterinsurgency operations carried out between 1981 and 1983, committed acts of genocide against groups of Mayan people” (CEH 1999a:41).

Jennifer Schirmer’s research revealed that even the army’s own reports and narrative accounts often corroborated the stories told by survivors. The top brass interpreted their role as “giving birth to democracy,” viewing the military as the only institution capable of managing such profound social transformation (Schirmer 1998:64). This campaign was painstakingly premeditated; as General
Héctor Gramajo, the Minister of Defense put it: “One of the first things we did was draw up a document for the campaign with annexes and appendices. It was a complete job with planning down to the last detail” (Schirmer 2002:54). The general guidelines of the pacification project were to “destroy you to save you … re-define you so that you may maintain your identity” (Schirmer 2002:52). Schirmer reports that anyone who didn’t fit the army’s definition of the “Sanctioned Maya” would be subjected to violence. During the final 18 months of the Lucas García administration (1981-1982), General Gramajo intensified the counterinsurgency’s use of “killing zones,” in which 50,000—75,000 people were killed in “at least 440” attacks that razed villages to the ground; 90% of these victims were “noncombatants and indigenous”—and all of this according to the military’s own documentation (Schirmer 2002:54). The policies continued and in some areas worsened after Ríos Montt seized power in a coup. In October 1982, he confided to a group of political party leaders that “We are killing people, we are slaughtering women and children. The problem is, everyone is a guerrilla there. They use the Vietnamese system. If the situation goes on much longer, we'll have to drop napalm on those villages” (LAWR 1982).

Although Maya communities suffered a disproportionate amount of the violence, it is necessary to emphasize that indigenous Guatemalans, like other citizens, do not hold a monolithic view of the armed conflict. Even among the millions of people who were directly affected by violence, individual responses to the memory of those experiences vary. In interviews with Maya survivors, Patricia Foxen found that “For most, there is not a single social memory or narrative which can accommodate their pain and confusion, but many conflicting memories vacillating around feelings of guilt, sorrow and pain, the desire to forget as well as the impulse to create
meaning out of chaos—a meaning embedded in complex past and present cultural realities” (2000:358). In particular, Foxen critiqued the widespread normalization and expectation of a victim identity, which she found did not fit her respondents’ self-conceptualizations based on their own memories of the violence. Instead, she proposed an ethnographic approach to “re-membering past violence in a fragmented present”:

In order to cope with this intolerable past, and the unbearable guilt and suffering of having been forced to witness or participate in brutalities external to their moral worlds, a variety of memory strategies—fluctuating between continuity and disjuncture with the past, between different explanatory models for the violence, and between various representations of self—are utilized. Mayan reconstructions of past violence thus rarely revolve around one coherent logic or meta-narrative, weaving together instead various threads of meaning which stem from fragments of both past and present cultural models and references. (Foxen 2000:362)

Among the memory strategies adopted by survivors, Foxen’s profile of silence as a coping mechanism is far more open-ended manner than many scholars have allowed. Rather than a form of repressed memory, she argues that silence may be a “self-conscious acknowledgement, a communal agreement” to avoid trying to discuss or make sense of the past (Foxen 2000:363).

Some individuals have chosen to put aside memories of their experiences during the internal armed conflict. This need not signify that they feel guilt or shame about their role in the past; on the contrary, some choose to remain silent about their experiences of abuse and victimization, even in cases where the possibility of moral ambiguity are extremely slim and the self-identification as a victim could bring a measure of reward in the form of reparations, prestige, or legitimacy among political groups or, more likely, foreign NGOs. For example, while discussing my research with the husband of one of my Maya intellectual colleagues, he mentioned in a nearly conversational tone that he had been kidnapped by a military intelligence group as a young man and subjected to torture
for several weeks. He confided that he suspected that he would have been killed, if not for one of
the frequent changes in power that led the incoming dictator—in this instance, Efraín Ríos Montt—
to grant a partial amnesty and release some political prisoners in order to gain legitimacy among the
international community. This was the extent of the story that my friend was willing to share; it
wasn’t an experience that he wanted to revisit any more than necessary. He did not criticize others
who choose to make their experiences publicly known; on the contrary, his interest in hearing about
the stories I had gathered from other sources was what led him to offer this information about his
own past. But in his case, the decision that he chose—which I respected—was to put aside the
memory.

I also acknowledge that I have come to develop my own historical memory of the armed
conflict, based on countless forms of interaction with the narratives of others, including narratives
that have passed through other intermediaries before I encountered them. I experience a deep-seated
sense of resistance to interpretations that present radically different narrative truths, whether that
interpretation originates with political leaders who were personally involved in the events they
describe, fellow academics who employed similar tools to my own to reach their conclusions, or from
Guatemalans who I recognize simply have more at stake in the matter. I own this knowledge and
subjectively experience it as “truth,” and it has shaped my interactions, including disagreements with
people holding different interpretations. It also shapes my interpretation of more recent events in
Guatemala by offering a context for understanding new events. I offer this introspection because it
demonstrates that memory can be shared among social contacts, regardless of their participation (or
even existence at the time) in the events described, and that it can be appropriated and take hold as
an integral part of one’s personal identity. The same characteristics apply to the historical memories of the Guatemalans I accompanied and interviewed, whose ideas are represented throughout this dissertation.

Research methods, roles, & experiences

*Multi-sited fieldwork in ‘grounded utopian’ ‘meshworks’*

Indigenous media or knowledge production is an “inherently multi-sited” object of study (Marcus 1995:103), a sort of activist-intellectual assemblage that contributes to the shifting balance of epistemic authority in a country that is at least 50% indigenous. The labors and goals of my informants contribute to a “grounded utopian movement” aimed at “build[ing] a more satisfying society by pursuing alternative cultural practices in the face of (and as a cushion against) repressive state actions and capitalist exploitation” (Price et al. 2008:130). This concept reflects two of the characteristics of “long-durée Maya activism” (Price et al. 2008:138) that I found useful for understanding the context of my informants’ actions. First, the existing state structure and economic mode of production are typically not seen as the objects of struggle, but rather as the primary threats to the movement’s goals. Energy is instead spent on imagining “alternative realities distinct from existing states and markets” (Price et al. 2008:145). Second, activism and intellectual production in this mode are inherently non-hierarchical, tending instead toward the proliferation of discreet elements that often overlap and share goals and resources, but are also capable of competing, claiming exclusive domains or contradictory interpretations of knowledge and space. My research project reflects the experiences of young Maya intellectuals and urban memory activists by moving
along the nodes that connect different groups and their sites of knowledge production and interaction. My research participants were tapped into expansive “meshworks” (Landa 1998) of activity that often required their mobility. It was not uncommon for my colleagues to pack up and head to a workshop or presentation on the other side of the country, and as I accompanied them on such trips I realized that their labors were more multi-faceted than they appeared in the context of their offices.

One ethnographic anchor of my research was the community of Santa Cruz del Quiché, the departmental capital of El Quiché, a municipio (county) of 82,000 people, over 80% of whom identify as Maya (CODISRA 2010:58). Q’umarakaj, the K’iche’ capital at the time of the Spanish invasion, lies less than 2 miles from the center of the modern city and remains a valued sacred place for many practitioners of Maya spirituality. Santa Cruz also hosts the primary branch of the K’iche’ Linguistic Community (CLK), the section of the Guatemalan Academy of Mayan Languages (ALMG) responsible for standardizing and promoting the K’iche’ language and culture. Just before I left, the CLK moved into the impressive Popol Ja building described at the beginning of this chapter. Located on the outskirts of town in Xatinap Quinto, the Popol Ja towers above the surrounding milpa corn fields and is viewed with pride by local K’iche’ residents.

While in Quiché, I also worked occasionally with the private NGO Asociación Aj B’atz’ Enlace Quiché (EQ). EQ fits the description of “a hybrid organization situated in the paradoxical space between the boom in development aid to native peoples (on which it depended) and the political visions of the indigenous resurgence” (Gustafson 2009:10-11). EQ’s “digital weavers” pioneered the development of computer-based curricular materials to assist with bilingual education.
in K’iche’, and they continue to offer computer classes in rural communities on occasion (EQ 2011). However, like many education-focused NGOs in the past generation, EQ depended heavily on international aid that has since dried up, as foreign governments and donor agencies turned their attentions away from bilingual education to focus on other topics. Consequently, EQ now employs a much smaller staff and carries out fewer programs, and a large portion of their operating budget now depends on customers who pay for K’iche’ or English language classes. Local government employees make up the majority of the students in the K’iche’ class, as they seek bilingual proficiency certificates in preparation for new hiring regulations. I also briefly filled in as an instructor for one of EQ’s programs, an experience I describe in chapter 5.

The ethnographic anchors of my work in Guatemala City were the University of the Valley of Guatemala (UVG), where I taught a course on political anthropology, and Editorial Cholsamaj, a widely respected publishing house founded and run by Kaqchikel activist-intellectuals, located just a few blocks west of the National Palace in the heart of the historic downtown. Although the senior board members continue to exercise control over major issues, the day-to-day operations of Cholsamaj are carried out by a relatively young group of editors, designers, and administrators, most of whom live in Kaqchikel communities over an hour from the city. Through participation in the daily routines of the editorial staff I gained a greater understanding of the skills, practices, struggles, and relationships that shaped the work of these young Maya intellectuals. I was able to view the editorial process as the team prepared an updated re-edition of a book by the K’iche’ anthropologist Irma Alicia Velásquez Nimatuj (2011). I also participated in book presentations for several recent publications, including an anthropological study by Stener Ekern (2010) that was ceremoniously
presented to the indigenous leadership of the 48 *cantones* of Totonicapán, as well as a novel by the late Mario Payeras, a project carried to fruition by his former partner, Yolanda Colom—the sister of Álvaro Colom, who was president of Guatemala at the time. Written texts have long had symbolic power in Latin America, which Ángel Rama described as being ordered as a “lettered city” (1996); Rappaport and Cummins argued that “Within this system, documents were worth more than simply their contents. They became objects subject to ritual manipulation, operating as symbolic representations of the colonizing project” (Rappaport and Cummins 2011:113-114). The labor of Cholsamaj, and in more recent years a handful of competing presses, has been to make the authoritative power of texts accessible for Maya authors. A published text, with its glossy full-color, professionally-designed cover and _contraportada_, represents a particularly powerful—and imminently tangible—symbol of the rise of Maya epistemic authority.

I also count among my ‘field sites’ in the capital the buses that I took daily between the _centro histórico_ and my apartment on Avenida Reforma, and the eight blocks I would walk each way between Editorial Cholsamaj and the bus stop—blocks that included the _mercado central_ of zone 1 and the Constitutional Plaza in front of the Cathedral and National Palace, the symbolic center of the nation. Passing through these vibrant urban spaces each day helped me to feel the city’s pulse, and led to many serendipitous encounters: book fairs in the plaza, concerts and festivals near the palace, and even running into colleagues visiting from the highlands or the U.S. This downtown area served as the stage for most of the protest events that I witnessed, including the Memory Offensive and its associated march and concert, described in chapter 7.
I have also continued to collect data through my ongoing participation in online networks since returning from Guatemala. Many of the groups I worked with and the individuals I interviewed are active users of social media, and I regularly communicate with them and keep abreast of new developments in their lives and in the labors of their groups and movements. In the case of the Ríos Montt trial, I “observed” the events entirely from afar, through participation in online resources and interaction with friends and observers who were in the courtroom during key events. On the afternoon of the historic sentencing of Ríos Montt for genocide, I followed the events through streaming video and audio, Twitter feeds, and Facebook posts that included commentators’ reactions to the unfolding events and photos of the packed courtroom. While this form of virtual participant observation is no substitute for actually being present in the time and place of interest, I have been impressed by the sheer amount of information that is available to remotely document and analyze certain events. This dissertation thus touches on the potential for ethnography to develop through interaction with digital media artifacts.18 As the use of computer-assisted research gains traction in related fields (e.g., initiatives in digital humanities), my hope is that anthropologists will also take note of the advantages and challenges presented by these tools. Given our long-standing

18 The new methodological opportunities that digital media offer anthropologists have been explored by Michael Wesch (2014) in his pioneering “digital ethnography” of YouTube, which include collaborative student-led research projects that involve participation in the production of video blogs (“vlogs”), interviews with vloggers from around the world, and dissemination of research findings through the same media. An alternative definition of “digital ethnography” is offered by Underberg and Zorn: “a method for representing real-life cultures through combining the characteristic features of digital media with the elements of story” (2013:10). Rather than using new media to gather data, they focus on how anthropologists might use websites, databases, and even video games to present their ideas to readers in more effective and interactive ways. Such projects blur the lines between gathering and publishing ethnographic data, pointing the way to more interactive and publicly-engaged forms of anthropology.
interests in human (user) experiences, practices (programs), and relationships (networks), I expect ethnographers will have much to gain and to offer in the study of computer-mediated human cultures—as Tom Boellstorff argued, “Ethnography has a special role to play in studying virtual worlds because it has anticipated them” (2008:6; emphasis in original).

Decolonizing anthropology

I have attempted to carry out my research and writing in a manner that decolonizes the anthropological process at multiple steps: from the design of methods to the production of knowledge based on my ethnographic research. I have drawn inspiration in this endeavor from the Narrating Native Histories series (Lomawaima et al. 2008; Gustafson 2009; Rappaport & Cummins 2011; Mallon 2011), a collection that “recognizes Native intellectuals, cultural interpreters, and alternative knowledge producers within broader academic and intellectual worlds” and aims to “decolonize the relationship between orality and textuality” and “work the tensions between the norms of Native cultures and the requirements for evidence in academic circles.” These goals overlapped significantly with the institutions I supported and studied in my fieldwork; Editorial Cholsamaj could be described succinctly as a project of decolonizing knowledge production. Likewise, the CLK engages in translating oral knowledge—especially the grammar and lexicon of K’iche’ Mayan language—into published, written forms, and the CLK linguists are well aware of the importance of this activity for boosting the epistemic authority of their language and its speakers.

One of the key theoretical maneuvers of my project has been the adoption of historical memory as the object of my research, a concept that helpfully blurs the distinction between history and
memory. This has helped me to maintain awareness of the often unchecked privileges of historical accounts—which draw on exclusive forms of power and authority—over the memories of ‘everyday’ people, most of whom do not partake in authorship of texts, yet possess valuable knowledge nonetheless. By uncovering the hidden transcripts that normalize racism and naturalize colonial power structures within official representations of history—in school textbooks, national museums, and monumental landscapes—I hope to assist my Guatemalan colleagues in their quest to provide more “truly pluralist” representations of their nation and their shared past.

In addition to seeking the ‘everyday’ knowledge of people, I have tried to understand and to represent in my writing the ways in which respondents not only ‘consume’ knowledge but help to (re)produce it themselves in their everyday practices (Certeau 1984). I attempt to approach their narratives in the same manner I would read a text by an esteemed author or an oral performance by a master storyteller: by seeking the internal logics to understand how the narrative makes sense in its own terms. This demands treating the inconsistencies in people’s accounts of the past as something more than error or simply false consciousness, or the “fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential” results of “common sense” (Gramsci 1971:419); it demands recognizing the possibility that such narratives reveal the germ of Gramscian “good sense” (1971:330n) or the contours of a “knowledge otherwise,” an alternative vision of the social ‘good’ altogether (cf. Escobar 2003).

While gathering knowledge from my research participants, I also shared ideas and introduced people across institutional and geographic boundaries, playing my role as a “hinge” connecting “disparate knowledges, cultures, and places” (Mallon 2011:4). Just as in my academic life in my home university, I offered educated debate and respectful critique within the communities of
scholarship around Maya and memory activist knowledge production. In some cases, I took a more
direct approach to offering actionable ideas: in my paper for the 2011 Congress of Maya Studies, I
described the historical struggle for the African Burial Ground National Monument (Billingsley
2011; cf. Blakey 2010). I directed my paper to any activist-intellectuals in the audience who might
appreciate the practical knowledge earned by African American activists, as Mayas and memory
activists look to construct new monuments and public commemorations in Guatemala.

Ethnography as epistemic authority: matters of representation

My thoughts on ethnography and on epistemic authority have evolved in tandem. Given the
inherent diversity of ethnographic work—not just in themes or methods, but in the epistemological
underpinnings of different research—it can be difficult to articulate the characteristics of ‘good
ethnography.’ My own experiences in reading and discussing ethnographic arguments—combined
with over 34 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Guatemala during a six-year period—led me to
recognize that epistemic authority functions at a more fundamental level in anthropological research
than in most scholarly traditions. Anthropologists are our own research instruments: the quality of
our data depends on how well we come to understand the phenomena and social groups that we
study, a process that requires time, trust, and the sort of familiarity that only comes about through
participation in quotidian action and interaction. On the heels of gaining this understanding, our
efficacy at (re)presenting it to others depends on additional practices of translation in order to
persuade readers that our ideas are indeed knowledge—that we represent the truth—while
maintaining the voice and presentation of the people or processes that we describe.
The influence of social scientists extends beyond scholarly journals and classroom discussions. When we follow the rules of scholarly discourse, we may expect our research to make its way into the corpus of texts that are imbued with prestige value and assumptions of truth. Thus it seems that wherever we tread, whatever we ask or say or write, we risk the hazard of normalizing or naturalizing phenomena that contribute to unbalanced distributions of power and privilege. On the other hand, we may problematize concepts and ideas that people depend on for stability in their daily lives. The unsettling dilemma for the intellectual in all of this is that our research interacts discursively with the forces of history. Certainly we take our cues from the reality around us, but we also write back to that reality and help to shape it, especially through the manipulation of history and memory. Michel Ralph Trouillot has offered the conceptual tools to understand this process, which applies equally to the work done by memory activists and Maya intellectuals. Trouillot explained that “History, as social process, involves peoples in three distinct capacities: 1) as agents, or occupants of structural positions; 2) as actors in constant interface with a context; and 3) as subjects, that is, as voices aware of their vocality” (Trouillot 1995:23-24). It is this final capacity of subjectivity that “makes human beings doubly historical or, more properly, fully historical. It engages them simultaneously in the sociohistorical process and in narrative constructions about that process” (Trouillot 1995:24-25).

In this view, identity is never essential; it is processual, constructed in the present by dynamic forces and persistent structures and, to some degree, by self-conscious deliberation. Collective identities like nationalism or pan-Mayanism depend on commemorative practices for their affective hold on members. By eliminating the idea of essential identities, we may limit the discursive
strength of actors who draw on this concept to argue for indigenous rights—for example, the right to 
privileged access to sacred places. However, the recognition of processual identity does privilege the 
present-day actions and intentions of actors to a greater degree than essentialist views allowed. The 
interests of a people change over time; the energy and resources that Maya people contribute to their 
identity projects today are evidence of their importance.

These realizations call for a critical examination and awareness of the relationship between 
anthropology’s claim to truth, and the powerful economic and political structures that enable 
anthropological research. The Guatemalan historian Arturo Arias has critiqued “First World 
scholars” for “speaking in the name of the subaltern subject” (in Hale 1997:824). Arias contrasted 
the ethnographic practices of David Stoll and Ricardo Falla to illustrate his point:

The issue of ‘who speaks’ is central to any theory of representation and points to the scholar’s 
role in the power relations of cultural production. ... By adopting the point of view of the 
Guatemalan army as a monological discourse... Stoll fails to address the plurality of voices, 
odies, populations, and histories that come from 'elsewhere' to disrupt his very American 
sense of the anthropologist as a legitimized voice of authority. In contrast, Falla’s book limits 
itself to mapping a preliminary reconstitution of memory. It challenges our understanding 
of how meaning is produced by linking its many voices with the concept of a fluctuating 
identity. (Arias in Hale 1997:825)

In my own practices of representing the people, institutions, and practices that constituted the 
primary foci of this research project, I have tried to respond to Arias’ critique. I attempt to 
reproduce the words of my interlocutors as often and as clearly as possible.¹⁹ In an effort to ‘return’

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¹⁹ In translating speakers’ comments from Spanish or K’iche’ into English, I tend to aim for functional equivalency in 
order to better convey their intentions, balanced with attempts to represent certain dramatic, even poetic language that 
my respondents sometimes used to share their thoughts. I draw inspiration from the work of Christine Eber (2000:xv).
my research to the communities and individuals whose knowledge made it possible, I have made plans to work with my Guatemalan colleagues to prepare a trilingual K’iche’-Spanish-Kaqchikel summary to include with copies of my dissertation, which will be left in several institutional and community libraries in Guatemala. My third, related commitment draws on one of the lessons that my Maya intellectual friends taught me about the possible uses of knowledge resources such as books: such texts are always useful in ways that the authors may not have intended—and this isn’t necessarily a bad thing. I am confident that my dissertation will be read, interpreted, shared, critiqued, and otherwise used in ways that respond to the changing needs and desires of my Guatemalan friends and colleagues; and it is for that reason that I look forward to providing copies to them, and learning from their reactions.

*Participation with the Information-Age Maya*

The final manner in which I tried to practice solidarity through ethnography was by finding ways to contribute concretely to the goals of the organizations I accompanied in my research. I helped EQ by filling in as an English teacher for a handful of classes, and helped them find a more permanent replacement. In the case of the CLK, I served as something of a resident ‘computer guy,’ helping the team adapt to the Ubuntu Linux operating system when the ALMG decided to switch

20 Specifically, I plan to provide copies for Editorial Cholsamaj, the K’iche’ Linguistic Community, and Enlace Quiché—the three Maya intellectual organizations that allowed me to join their community during my fieldwork; as well as the University of the Valley of Guatemala and the U.S. Embassy.
over all computers to this free platform—and then helping everyone migrate their files to Windows 7 when the ALMG decided to switch back.

My role at Cholsamaj was more specialized. They had no need of my technical support skills; most of their editorial team was far more skillful than me. I had the opportunity to witness the impressive skills of B’alam Tijax, the lead layout designer, when he contacted a client by Skype one afternoon to review a document that she had commissioned. B’alam organized several program windows into different areas on his enormous monitor, using keyboard shortcuts and alt-tabbing to quickly navigate and manipulate the information with minimal use of the mouse. At breakneck speed, he arranged the document to include a new illustration that had just been wrapped up by
Kaqb’atz’ on the other side of the office, then he alt-tabbed to Skype and dialed the client. As he conversed with the client, B’alam shared his screen and began modifying the layout and graphics to fit the client’s requests in real time. Soon, the document was complete and sent to coworkers downstairs who would print the file onto aluminum plates, which could be used at any offset printing press to create however many thousands of copies the client wanted.

After witnessing this masterful exhibition of skill, I was certain that I had encountered a fellow computer geek, someone who must have spent countless hours of their youth playing, working, and experimenting with computers. However, B’alam told me that before coming to work at Cholsamaj, he had never worked with publishing or graphic design software—nor anything beyond email and basic web browsing in internet cafes, really. He did not have a computer at home, nor did he desire one since he had access to the internet every day while at work. He learned the basics of digital publishing and graphic design while watching his predecessors work—much as I was watching over his shoulder now—and later he taught himself to use the new Adobe software suite when Cholsamaj upgraded to a pair of state-of-the-art Macintosh computers. Much as his confidence and competence in speaking Kaqchikel grew with everyday practice in the office at Cholsamaj, so did his skill as a graphic designer develop to a professional level of expertise.

I found B’alam’s experience inspiring as I set out to fulfill my own commitment to the group. Having some experience in creating websites, I volunteered to help rebuild and update the Cholsamaj website and to try and create a searchable database of their published works. Ultimately, this led me to teach myself a great deal more about database design and server-side coding than I had ever anticipated. During the quiet afternoon hours when we each worked at our own computer,
occasionally interacting to share news or ask questions about a collaborative project, I sat at the
lunch table debugging my latest attempts at constructing a MySQL database. I pored over textbooks
and sneaked peaks at the source code of other websites to garner ideas about how to make my ideas
work. During the bus ride home in the evenings, I would think about the best ways to organize and
search the database, while I watched the hectic rush hour traffic. Even before I finally succeeded in
crafting the database of Cholsamaj’s publications and a web-based point of access for searching and
updating the database, I began to think of other creative uses for my new coding skills.

At some point I realized that, like B’alam and my other coworkers and their predecessors, I
had gained from my time at Cholsamaj a powerful creative skill that I likely would not have ever
learned otherwise. This is a connection that feels different from the other bonds and debts that I
gained over time in my research. Whenever I use these skills to interpret and interact with the world
differently because of the technical literacies I developed through my labor, I feel connected to
Cholsamaj—to my friends, the work that they do and the goals that they share. I won’t pretend to
understand exactly what it means to these young intellectuals who gain not just professional skills
but ethnolinguistic identity, community, and a vision of meaningful action from their interaction
with Cholsamaj; yet I’ll wager that my recognition and appreciation of this process was
immeasurably enhanced by my own transformative experiences.

Layout of the dissertation

This dissertation is divided into two parts. In the first part, “Mapping Memoria Histórica: An
Ethnography of Remembering Practices,” I describe the status quo of historical memory in
Guatemala. Rather than privileging historical accounts, as is often the practice in academic writing,
I attempt to balance my project with the memories of speakers I interviewed. Chapter 2 presents the key concepts and literatures that provide my theoretical tools in this endeavor. Drawing on the interdisciplinary field of memory studies, I articulate a framework for the ethnographic study of collective remembering practices. I also highlight the role that epistemic authority plays in the relationship between memory and history, arguing that the incorporation of Maya perspectives in Guatemala has shifted the truth values of different genres of discourse.

Chapters 3 and 4 describe the historical narratives conveyed through official channels, exploring their underlying colonial ideologies of racism and privilege. In chapter 3 I focus on the fragmentation of historical narratives in national museums and monuments, which tend to reproduce a national imaginary that celebrates the triumph of European and creole progress. Other voices and experiences of the past are excluded from these sites, though in some cases local communities tactically appropriate the nation’s “patrimony” for their own uses. I describe the “absence of history” in the National History Museum, which focuses on providing an overarching vision of national progress and permanence, eschewing details that contradict this vision. In the process, the Museum alienates visitors who feel no connection to the outdated narrative. I also describe the contrasting official and local interpretations and uses of the archaeological site / sacred place Q’uma’rkaj. Finally, I discuss the broader social purpose of monuments and the consequences of Guatemala’s lack of official commemoration.

In chapter 4, I turn to investigate the role of school curricula in perpetuating exclusionary historical narratives. I examine a sample of social studies textbooks from the previous generation, written during the last decade of the internal armed conflict, to reveal what educators and curricular
planners had to say about Guatemalan history. After the Peace Accords, historical knowledge has been even further devalued as a nonessential topic of study, having been replaced by “citizenship formation” classes that emphasize rote memorization of such symbols as the national anthem. I close the chapter with an examination of two symbolic figures who have been the exceptions to the rule of indigenous exclusion: Tecún Umán and Atanasio Tzul. I show how the co-optation of these figures into the nationalist narrative reveals the processes by which indigenous agency has traditionally been appropriated to provide greater legitimacy to the state—particularly the military—and simultaneously silences the possibility of recognizing other rebellions and leaders. However, as with other recent acts of reinterpretation by Maya actors, these symbols retain the potential to represent alternative narratives, particularly during moments of crisis.

In the second part of the dissertation, “Memory Activism & Historical Revision: Confronting the Difficult Past,” I focus on several examples of the changing state of historical knowledge in Guatemala as new perspectives gain the epistemic authority needed to affect public debate and policy. Chapter 5 presents an investigation of the historical memories of several young Maya professionals and organic intellectuals. I draw on in-depth discussions and domain analyses to gain and represent their visions of Guatemala’s past, including long excerpts of their own descriptions of historical events. In many cases, these narratives discuss the present-day consequences of events that happened hundreds of years ago, including the lasting trauma of the Spanish invasion for Maya communities. Cantel, Quetzaltenango provides a useful case study of the manner in which historical memory and communal solidarity are intertwined, such that the past informs action in the ever-shifting present. I conclude by identifying the discernible patterns in their
accounts that reveal shared conceptual tools and narrative templates for understanding the collective past, particularly the recurring feature of state-sponsored violence against indigenous communities.

In chapter 6, I review the impact of testimonio, both as a literary genre associated with such well-known public figures as Rigoberta Menchú Tum, and as the form of historical memory ‘raw data’ that enabled the memory work accomplished by the truth commissions in the years immediately after the Peace Accords. I discuss the lasting and wide-reaching effects of Maya testimonies for revisionist histories and ongoing legal campaigns. I also touch on the fundamental role that testimonies have played in shifting the parameters of epistemic authority in Guatemala.

In chapter 7, I describe the relationship between memory activism and youth popular culture, investigating memory activists’ savvy blend of technology and pop culture with iconic elements of traditional leftist and indigenous cultures to craft social movement practices that resonate with a broad base of Guatemalans across generational, ethnic, and linguistic differences. Crucially, among the most active participants are urban teenagers who were never in a position to personally experience the effects of the armed conflict, yet who feel roused by the calls for justice and the “recuperation of historical memory.”21 Drawing on analysis of public protests and performances, I describe the alternative visions of national identity, social responsibility, and citizenship that are promoted by memory activism at the popular level.

In chapter 8, I examine efforts by several Maya authors and memory activists to revise official accounts of the past as represented in authoritative public institutions—namely, the school and the

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21 See images in Appendix for examples of the imagery applied in these calls for recuperating memory.
museum. By developing new textbooks and museum exhibitions that address gaps in history education, these groups hope to foster greater public dialogue and social justice, ultimately contributing to a lasting peace in Guatemala. I draw on interviews with the authors and editorial teams, and careful attention to the narratives conveyed in their published and drafted texts, to examine how their interpretations of history compare to the pre-existing official narratives and to the understandings of history shared by my own research participants. I describe how epistemic authority has gained new roots in various literacy practices that were not traditionally held in prestige by the academy, and ask whether this process can be extended to imagine a more truly pluralist Guatemala.

4: “The memory of the living makes the life of the dead.” Sign at the entrance to the cemetery in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala.
Part One: Mapping *Memoria Histórica*: An Ethnography of Remembering Practices

5: Memory activists cover the walls in Guatemala City’s historic center with photocopied sheets featuring the names and portraits of missing loved ones, a sample of the 40,000-50,000 citizens “disappeared” during the internal armed conflict. The Guatemalan military still refuses to assist in the historical clarification of their final whereabouts.
“The word memory is not abundant in the testimonies of the Recovery of Historical Memory Project. Its frequency is irrelevant compared to the occurrences of suffering or fear, for example. And yet, the entire Project is an impressive exercise in memory. … Memory is like the blood of the people.” – Human Rights Office of the Archdiocese of Guatemala (ODHAG 2003:376)

Chapter 2: Theorizing an Anthropology of Memory

Ethnographic prelude: The case of the misplaced sculptures

At the time that I was living in Santa Cruz del Quiché and working with the K’iche’ Linguistic Community (CLK), a team of construction workers was hastily putting the finishing touches on the multi-story Popol Ja that would soon serve as the CLK’s new headquarters. One afternoon I accompanied “Javier Marta”, a CLK linguist, to meet with the engineer in charge of construction. The engineer told us that he had been confused about where to place several concrete sculptures that were meant to be arranged in the subterranean “Inframundo” level of the building. We descended into the work space and I saw for the first time the addition of these figurines, representing personages and scenes from the Maya origin myths described in the Popol Wuj. The engineer, a Ladino contractor from the capital, complained that he couldn’t make heads or tails of the sculptures. He had architectural drawings that showed how each piece should be mounted, but one page of the drawings seemed to have been printed incorrectly, and the sculptures had arrived “hacked into pieces.” He flipped through the stack of pages on his clipboard and showed us the corresponding drawing, which depicted a scattering of unidentifiable objects arranged around a figure that appeared to be a house. He then pointed at the wall, where he had “successfully” recombined the fragments and set them upright, similar to the figures that decorated the other walls of the building (see image below). Still, he wanted Javier Marta, who was regarded by his CLK
coworkers as the most knowledgeable about Maya cosmology and the *Popol Wu¡*, to explain what the mysterious scene represented.

Javier Marta stood for a moment, his gaze passing back and forth between the wall and the clipboard, before grinning and wincing simultaneously, an expression I had learned to recognize as a sign of his frustration and strained patience. He explained that the figures *had* been drawn correctly: as described in the *Popol Wu¡*, they were personages that had been defeated and hacked to pieces, left as food for scavenging animals. By altering the placement of the sculptures, the meaning of the entire wall was thrown into ambiguity, which in turn upset the narrative about the Hero Twins that was “told” by viewing each of the three walls of the *Inframundo* in order. Nevertheless, Javier Marta
made some suggestions about how the message might be salvaged by re-arranging the placement of some of the remaining sculptures.

There were many tools and actors involved in this case of the misplaced sculptures, some more readily visible than others. The engineer had several useful tools at his disposal, including pre-formed shapes and a blueprint that depicted where each piece should be mounted, as well as a specialist literacy for reading such blueprints. However, he also brought other “tools” to bear on the work, including memories of other experiences in which plans had been mistaken and building materials had arrived in ramshackle conditions. Moreover, his common sense told him that sculptures should not be mounted sideways. In his effort to faithfully represent good construction practices, and eager to wrap up a construction project that was many months behind schedule and hundreds of thousands of Quetzales over budget, he took the initiative and “solved” the problem.

On the other hand, Javier Marta’s interpretation of the sculptures was informed by his knowledge of the Popol Wuj and Maya spiritual practices, including his extensive family collection of sacred objects bearing Maya iconography. He had spent many years studying these representations of mythology, discussing their meaning with friends, family, colleagues, and his own aj q’ij spiritual adviser. He was able to quickly recognize the intended significance of the sculptural scene based on his memory of events in the Maya origin story. He realized that the engineer’s ‘corrections’ were actually errors, and drew on his memories of other symbols in Maya cosmology to try to reinscribe the intended meaning by re-arranging the remaining sculptures. Thus, for both of the principal actors in this example, the key operation was the act of using tools to interpret the dilemma posed by the misplaced sculptures. Each man drew upon his knowledge and memories of
past experiences in an “effort after meaning” (Bartlett 1932; below), and each attempted to make the best of a situation that initially appeared amiss.

A framework for ethnographic memory studies

The explanation I offer for interpreting this case of the misplaced sculptures is derived from my framework for the study of remembering practices. The basis of this framework, which I borrow from James Wertsch, is the focus on “mediational means” (Wertsch 2002; Wertsch & Billingsley 2011:25), namely the techniques and technologies that people use to interact with the world and with each other. These include especially the “narrative frameworks that mediate our understanding
of the past” (Wertsch & Billingsley 2011:25), a set of tools that we commonly find in literature, school materials, and in more local and oral media, including intra-familial storytelling. In the Guatemalan context, such narrative forms of understanding the past are a pervasive topic of discussion and debate among engaged citizens. *Memoria histórica*—historical memory—is a particularly salient concept, and one that blurs the relationship between memory and history in ways that complicate facile interpretations of local remembering practices using standard academic frameworks. In order to make sense of the various meanings attached to historical memory, and the relationship between these practices and other cases described by social scientists, I knew I would need to refine my theoretical toolkit.

This chapter draws on ethnography and literature review to open up a dialogue between two camps of knowledge: the ideas of Guatemalan memory activists and young Maya intellectuals about *memoria histórica*, and the ideas of historians and social scientists about collective remembering. I begin by tracing the history of memory studies from the foundational work of Maurice Halbwachs and Frederic Bartlett through the ‘memory boom’ period, noting useful ideas from these earlier scholars. I describe in greater detail the Wertschian framework that I adapt for my research, followed by an explanation of the changes and additions I made to reflect the specific local realities of *memoria histórica* as a Guatemalan genre of discourse. Among the most important of these are 1) a focus on the philosophical bases of epistemic authority; 2) a rejection of the memory / history divide commonly posited in academic writing; and 3) incorporation of memory activists’ ideas about the inherent agency in memory, or in other words, the portrayal of memory as a testimonial form of discourse. As I proceed through the dissertation, I will augment and refine this framework by
drawing on concrete cases from ethnography, media analysis, and cultural interpretation. Two of the end goals of this project as a whole to provide an ethnographic investigation of historical memory in Guatemala, and to construct a more practicable and theory-driven approach to the anthropological study of collective memory. As I hope to show, these goals are intertwined and best accomplished by moving back-and-forth between theoretical analysis and methodological reflection.

A brief history of memory studies

**Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945) and the Durkheimian tradition**

The concept of collective or social memory is nearly as old as social science itself. Émile Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912) focused largely on the role of rituals in helping to create and preserve group identity. In turn, a ritual’s efficacy in promoting feelings of solidarity within the group was based on its ability to trace continuity with the past, enabling a sense of group stability across time (Misztal 2003a:136). Durkheim’s student, Maurice Halbwachs, introduced the term ‘collective memory’ to the social sciences with his 1925 *La mémoire collective*, wherein he advanced the idea that society provides the frameworks that determine what individuals find memorable, and how they remember it. Halbwachs also further developed the idea that shared memories are fundamental characteristics of social groups, and that groups only last for as long as they continue to share a collective memory.

Halbwachs’ original formulation distinguished between *autobiographical memory* and *historical memory*. The former consists of memories of directly experienced events: certain important events may have been experienced by many members of a society, who thus share common
memories. Jeffrey Olick has referred to this as “collected” rather than collective memory, reflecting that there is not necessarily any degree of inter-personal communication or sharing involved in such memories (Olick and Robbins 1998). *Historical memory*, in contrast, refers to memories of events that remain part of public discourse despite the unlikelihood or impossibility that any living members maintain autobiographical memories of the events (Olick et al. 2011:18). For example, no one alive today has autobiographical memory of the *Llegada,*22 the arrival of the Spanish in the early 16th century; yet I found that in certain contexts in Guatemala it is conventional to speak of those distant events as being “remembered.” My historical memory interviews, presented in chapter five, demonstrate the centrality of this event in interviewees’ narratives. Far more than the 19th century moment of national independence, which for most citizens represented “more of the same,” the *Llegada* represented a breakpoint separating the past into significantly distinct periods. For some of my friends, the past before the 16th century is remembered as a golden age, while the *Llegada* itself initiated a cycle of events—mostly negative—that have repeated continually ever since. Indeed, their interpretations of the more recent armed conflict were clearly intertwined with knowledge of “the Spanish Invasion.”

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22 As is common with landmark events (cf. “internal armed conflict,” above), the naming of these events as the Arrival (*la Llegada*), or the Conquest (*la Conquista*), reflects interpretative decisions on the part of the narrator. In present-day Guatemala, the more common word choice remains Conquest; however, many younger Guatemalans seem less comfortable with this term. Moreover, some Maya leaders prefer to refer to the Invasion (*la Invasión*) by the Spaniards, highlighting that indigenous peoples were met with violence, but were not conquered—they adopted different forms of resistance that in some cases continue to the present day (Oxlajuj Ajpop 2001). The increasingly prevalent adoption of *Llegada* seems to reflect intent on the part of its users to avoid the more polemical alternatives.
Halbwachs’ chief contribution to my theoretical framework is the insistence on tracing the social origins of memory. Even understanding how individuals organize and make sense of their personal memories requires attention to the social and cultural tools that mediate interpretation, to use the terms introduced by later scholars. The Durkheimian tradition continued to dominate studies of collective memory through the late 1980s. Despite the theoretical and philosophical appeal of these approaches to collective memory, Misztal warns that they “are often criticized for being too vague and difficult to operationalize, for neglecting the question of the individual dimension of memory and for overlooking the interplay between individual and social memory” (2003a:124-125).

Frederic Bartlett (1886-1969) and the “effort after meaning”

Sir Frederic Bartlett is regarded as one of the founding figures of cognitive psychology. In experiments that have gained somewhat legendary status within the psychology of memory, Bartlett concluded that humans do not simply store mental images of our experiences, as presumed by generations of philosophers. Such rote memorization, or reproductive memory as Bartlett labeled it, is actually restricted to very specific and uncommon tasks—for example, memorizing a phone number. To the extent that our minds engage in such copying of information, we are fairly accurate at reproducing it. However, Bartlett argued that most of the day-to-day business of remembering is far

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23 It is interesting to note that Bartlett very nearly pursued studies in anthropology, but was advised by W.H.R. Rivers to first cultivate his knowledge of psychology; Bartlett remained in psychology for the duration of his career (Rosa 2000:48). His interests remained in areas of mutual concern to psychology and anthropology, including social and cultural influences on individual remembering and cognitive practices.
from such rote memorization; rather, it is concerned primarily with remembering information of an altogether different level of comprehension and abstraction. Our more common practices are a type of *reconstructive memory* in which we piece together information in “an effort after meaning” (Bartlett 1932). Bartlett shared with Halbwachs the idea that our social context and cultural background play important roles in shaping the patterns that we use to remember. We routinely introduce biases into our memories, remembering details inaccurately but in ways that conform to our expectations and our need to understand the overall *meaning* of the information we encounter. Bartlett stressed that this was an active process, imbued with agency and intention—hence he named his seminal text *Remembering* rather than Memory (1932; cf. Wertsch 2002).

Through his experiments, Bartlett identified numerous characteristics of reconstructive memory. In 1999, Erik Bergman and Henry Roediger replicated Bartlett’s most well-known experiment and confirmed several of the original conclusions. In the experiment, participants—Cambridge students in Bartlett’s case, Washington University undergraduates in the more recent rendition—listened to or read a traditional Kathlamet short story, “The War of the Ghosts,” collected by Franz Boas in the Pacific Northwest (Brainerd and Reyna 2005:19; Boas 1901:182-
This story was selected because it featured elements that the students would find unusual, rooted in an altogether unfamiliar cultural tradition. As Bergman and Roediger described it, “the story is rather disjointed and contains supernatural elements” (1999:937); the plot of the story is difficult to understand because the actors’ motivations do not follow recognizable scripts.

When asked to recall the story, participants invariably reconstructed it in ways that tended to accomplish the following: 1) unfamiliar and unexplainable details were omitted or transformed into more familiar substitutes—for example, Bartlett’s students replaced “canoes” with “boats”; 2) the story as a whole became shorter and simpler, tightening into a more coherent narrative; and 3) the elements most likely to be remembered (though still subject to transformation into more familiar versions) were those that participants found most relevant for the overall “form, plan, type, or scheme of a story,” for example the protagonist’s death at the end (1932:88), while the elements most likely to be omitted were “irrelevant” details that did not determine the plot.

Altogether, Bartlett referred to these transformative processes as *conventionalization*: “Conventionalization is a process by which cultural materials coming into a group from outside are gradually worked into a pattern of a relatively stable kind distinctive of that group. The new

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24 Boas described the story in an abstract: “Two men are met by a canoe, the occupants of which invite them to join in a war expedition. One of them refuses, the other one goes, and in combat is wounded, though he does not feel any pain. The people carry him home and he discovers that they are ghosts. The next morning he dies” (Boas 1901:260). Interestingly, Boas himself recorded two renditions of this tale over three years apart, as a means of testing the reliability of his interlocutor. The differences in these recordings suggest that the narrator drew on reconstructive memory practices of a particular sort, repeating the overall gist of the story while significantly adding and removing details such as dialogue. These changes are similar to the narrative practices of storytellers in oral traditions (cf. Ong 1982; Basso 1996). Boas did not provide any exegesis on the stories, as he was primarily interested in using them to build a grammar of the Kathlamet language (1901).
material is assimilated to the persistent past of the group to which it comes” (Bartlett 1932:280). Notably, repeated testing of the participants after longer periods of time showed that conventionalization continues over time, such that details may be remembered with less accuracy while the story becomes more concise—a sacrifice of accuracy for familiarity. It is worth noting that Bartlett’s ideas have also been productively applied to anthropological research: In her writing about the Betsimisaraka of Madagascar, Jennifer Cole found conventionalization to be useful for explaining local practices of sacrifice and commemoration that actively re-interpreted colonial-era impositions as being parts of indigenous culture (2001:279). Cole’s research also serves as a reminder that the effects of conventionalization differ according to the particular social group doing the conventionalizing—in other words, we should not expect memories to become assimilated to the forms that are conventional in our own society or academic discourses, but we must look to examples of discursive practices from the specific local group for assistance in identifying the signs of conventionalization.

In summary, we gather from Bartlett that: 1) memory—or more precisely, remembering—is an active process, involving an effort after meaning; 2) meaning and emphasis are defined within the contexts of social and cultural systems; 3) experiences are organized and remembered in ways that prioritize the search for meaning, rather than accurate recall; 4) reconstructive memory tends to simplify memories and substitute familiar forms for unfamiliar ones and 5) the memory-distorting effects of this conventionalization increase over time. We will see these characteristics in more detail in the narratives offered by participants in my historical memory interviews, described in chapter 5.
The “memory boom” and the emergence of memory studies

In recent years memory has resurfaced as a theme of interest in the humanities and social sciences. The historian Jay Winter identifies the origins of this “memory boom” principally in responses to the horrors of war and genocide in the mid-20th century: “The memory boom has focused on many, many subjects, but at its core are the victims of war. … It is the construction of the category of the victim and the witness that is central to our understanding” (Winter 2012). According to Winter, the causes and effects of this memory boom are most visible in our uses of technologies to capture memory—including computers but also earlier devices such as audio and video recorders—and in deeper philosophical and religious shifts that have led to “fundamental changes in the ways in which societies configure sacred questions,” such that “the performance of memory is a pilgrimage to the past. Art galleries, museums, sites of memory are the cathedrals of the 21st century. They’re the places where sacred questions are posed … and occasionally, answered symbolically” (Winter 2012).

While Winter identifies the initial “memory boom” in the post-war period, Kerwin Klein paints a different trajectory. In tracing the mention of “memory” in the social sciences, Klein notes that, after a brief period of early psychological interest in the works of Herman Ebbinghaus, the term “memory” gradually faded from use (2000:131). He identified Bartlett’s Remembering as the turning point, as it shifted the focus for psychological researchers to the active process of remembering and away from imprecise conceptualizations of memory as a container—an important development, as noted above. Following this, Klein found that “Memory’s association with old-fashioned varieties of psychologism had placed it on the endangered species list,” and influential volumes in the 1960s-
70s—including Raymond William’s classic *Keywords* (1976)—failed to mention memory at all (Klein 2000:131).

Wherever we define the starting point for the “memory boom,” the uptick in interest was firmly established by the 1980s and continued unabated through the remainder of the millennium. In 2008, the journal *Memory Studies* launched with the goal of “facilitating a critical forum for dialogue and debate on the theoretical, empirical, and methodological issues” within a field of scholarship cogently described by the founding editors as “driven by problem or topic, rather than by singular method or tradition” (Hoskins et al. 2008:5). In the opening article of *Memory Studies*, Henry Roediger and James Wertsch outlined a series of goals for transforming the field from *multidisciplinary* to *interdisciplinary* (2008), i.e. from a broad catch-all for scholars carrying out studies in particular traditions with little overlap in methods or language, to a more unified field where terms could be shared and ideas borrowed freely, or at least with greater understanding of the caveats involved.

Olick and the co-editors of a new reader in collective memory see the field as “an increasingly important paradigm that unifies diverse interests across numerous disciplines, and consolidates long-standing perspectives within them, in perspicuous ways” (2011:5). Echoing Jay Winter, they venture that the re-emergence of interest in collective memory can be traced to new possibilities in scholarship enabled by digital technology, as well as the “moral force of the

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25 My own casual investigation, using Google’s Ngram Viewer, suggests that the frequency of “memory” in all literature rose steadily from 1970 to 1980, and more sharply from 1980 until its peak in 1992 (see images in Appendix).
Holocaust” and a subsequent discourse of truth and justice that is familiar and appealing to scholars working in sites of violence around the world—an observation that certainly extends to Guatemala (Olick et al. 2011:36). The upshot of these efforts is that memory studies continues to operate as a productive site for cross-fertilization and dialogue between scholars in different disciplines—including such diverse perspectives as art, neuroscience, and ethnography. My own perspectives have been shaped by conversations with scholars across the full range of academic disciplines, including the Memory Studies Group at Washington University, an authors’ meeting for a volume on Cultures and Globalization (Wertsch & Billingsley 2011), as well as a conference panel exploring anthropological approaches to the study of memory (Billingsley 2013). As an anthropologist, my gains include the ability to draw on rich traditions of memory research in psychology, art history, literature, and cultural studies while maintaining the critical awareness that these ideas often must be translated to apply to ethnographic methods and theory. A more comprehensive and actionable theory of memory should be able to negotiate the terrain between processes of remembering at the individual and group levels without losing sight of the critical differences between them.

Remembering as mediated action

My approach to collective memory has been shaped by the work of James Wertsch (1998, 2002), including through collaboration in teaching and writing (Wertsch & Billingsley 2011). In brief, Wertsch’s framework treats collective remembering as a form of distributed cognition (cf. Hutchins 1995; Lave 1988), in which cultural tools—including especially narratives—serve alongside other human beings as agents that mediate our experiences of thinking about the past. Among the advantages of this approach, several are especially relevant for ethnography: 1) it allows
us to account for patterns of behavior and shared ideas—i.e., historical memories—without relying on an implied collective mind or an essentializing view of cultural groups; 2) it emphasizes the possibility for non-human agents—books, rituals, technologies, etc.—to play significant roles in the mediation of remembering; and 3) it enables an ethnographic approach to collective memory through analysis of the tools, agents, and practices that constitute it.

The basis of operationalizing Wertsch’s framework for a fieldwork methodology is presented in the proposition that “the agent of mediated action is seen as the individual or individuals acting in conjunction with mediational means” (Wertsch 1991:33; emphasis in original). Put another way, “to be human is to use the cultural tools, or mediational means, that are provided by a particular sociocultural setting” (Wertsch 2002:11). Such tools may span any order of abstraction and complexity: they may include language, a computer, an online search engine, a dance technique, a religious ritual, a dissertation, or a list of examples intended to demonstrate a concept. Recalling the contributions of Frederic Bartlett, we are better off conceptualizing remembering as a process, always embedded in a sociocultural context. What Wertsch’s framework contributes to this definition is a concrete focus on the “sociocultural tools” that can be identified and studied.

The emphasis on the role of mediation in collective remembering has been adopted by other scholars, as well. In his critique of the prevailing methods used to study collective memory, Wulf Kansteiner recommended that scholars focus on mediation:

[W]e should conceptualize collective memory as the result of the interaction among three types of historical factors: the intellectual and cultural traditions that frame all our representations of the past, the memory makers who selectively adopt and manipulate these traditions, and the memory consumers who use, ignore, or transform such artifacts according to their own interests. (Kansteiner 2002:180)
For example, Zerubavel (2003) has focused on the influence of calendars in shaping public behaviors and shared ideas about time, particularly by designating certain “holy” or holi-days as having special significance. Julia Hendon, also drawing on Lave and the distributed cognition approach, writes that “Memory is not something people have but something they do” (2010:27). She argues that everyday inter-personal practices like household labor are the stuff of collective remembering and the very sorts of “action and interaction [that] create society, which does not have an abstracted or reified existence separate from the practices that constitute it” (2010:29).

One of the most important consequences of relying on a distributed, mediated model of collective remembering is that it enables us to avoid the pitfalls of what Wertsch labels “the strong version of collective memory” (2002:21). This depiction is rarely made explicit but operates implicitly in popular and loosely-developed descriptions of collective memory. In short, the “strong version” implies that collective memory exists sui generis, as if “some sort of collective mind or consciousness exists above and beyond the minds of the individuals in a collective” (Wertsch 2002:21). In place of this fallacy, a distributed model of collective memory allows us to identify the actual means by which ideas are (re)produced through specific practices, usually involving the sorts of sociocultural tools described above. Importantly, beyond its greater theoretical validity, the distributed model opens the door to ethnographic approaches via research on the agents and tools involved in collective remembering practices.

Wertsch draws from Vygotsky the idea that mediation brings into being an “irreducible tension” between the human agent and the mediational means at her disposal: in any account of human action, the agent and her tools function as a combined unit. While we might examine pieces
in isolation, we gain much more information by considering the different “mixes” of elements—for example, not just “what does this text mean,” but “what does this text mean for different readers” or “how do different people make use of this text?” This maneuver allows room to recognize dynamism and potential alterity within any described system (Wertsch 1998:28). Similarly, our analysis must maintain awareness of the linkage or “tension” between agents and tools, in order to re-assemble the information gathered about any one piece (Wertsch 1998:27).

It is illuminating to examine more closely the meaning of this “tension” at the center of mediated action. Wertsch explains the caveats involved in the selection of the term “tension”:

Some readers have objected to my use of this term since in English it sounds like some kind of conflict is involved (which in one sense there is), and this has negative connotations that are not really intended. “Dialectic” is not a good term since it suggests synthesis at the end of a process, which I don’t think serves the account well. It is more like “dialogue,” and this could be OK if one is really informed about Bakhtinian ideas, but most people don’t understand it means something like endless dialectic. In any event, I continue to think “tension” serves us best, even with its various drawbacks. (Wertsch, personal communication 2014)

We can see that our description of mediated action is itself a demonstration that every tool—including language—has built-in limitations. This ‘tension’ between what we intend and what our tools enable us to accomplish is one of the inherent characteristics of mediated action. However, the same tools allow us to approximate a representation of our intent. Whenever we borrow a tool for a purpose, our action is marked in some ways by the previous uses of that tool—including uses by other people. In cases of mediated remembering, in particular, our memories may even be reconfigured through the process of engaging and representing them. In order to grasp more fully
the range of possibilities that are enabled by mediated action, we can turn to a closer reading of Bakhtin’s ideas about text and dialogicality.

Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin was a literary theorist and “philosophical anthropologist” (Holquist in Bakhtin 1986:xiv) whose expansive ideas about language and thought began with an insistence on the primacy of “text”:

The text (written and oral) is the primary given … of all thought in the human sciences and philosophy in general … The text is the unmediated reality (reality of thought and experience), the only one from which these disciplines and this thought can emerge. Where there is no text, there is no object of study, and no object of thought either. … [I]f the word “text” is understood in the broad sense—as any coherent complex of signs—then even the study of art deals with texts. Thoughts about thoughts, experiences of experiences, words about words, and texts about texts. (Bakhtin 1986:103)

Building from this expansive notion of “text,” Bakhtin contributes three fundamental ideas to our model of mediated action: dialogicality, multi-voicedness, and speech genres. **Dialogicality** pervades Bakhtin’s writings: at its simplest, the “primordial dialogism of discourse” reflects Bakhtin’s contention that all speech, all communication, all understanding is grounded in dialogue. There can be no understanding, no communication without text, and all text is dialogic in nature. **Multi-voicedness** adds that every time we speak, our words carry the echoes of previous speech acts made by other speakers—we do not invent language *sui generis*, but make use of it for our ends. Bakhtin’s concept of **speech genres** is useful for expressing the philosophical unity of his ideas and the possibilities he raised for navigating the issues of truth, authority, and the dichotomous treatment of memory and history, discussed below.

The primordial role of dialogicality is first revealed by Bakhtin’s designation of the *utterance* as the “*real unit* of speech communication,” rather than words or phonemes (1986:67, 71, emphasis
in original). Any analysis of text—including a historical narrative—must approach its object through a focus on the specific utterance that gives it form, through the intention and performance of the speech act (1986:104). To understand what Bakhtin means by this, we must consult his ideas about the “two poles” that define any text (1986:105-108). First, he explained that “behind each text stands a language system,” the conventional understanding of language as a set of signs shared by other people; this aspect of the utterance is “a means to an end” (Bakhtin 1986:109). There are conceptual similarities and overlaps between this aspect of text and Saussure’s langue, but Bakhtin’s divergence from the structuralists becomes clear when we include the “second pole” of the text: every utterance is a unique, unrepeatable event (Bakhtin 1986:105). For Bakhtin, what has been uttered can never be exactly reproduced, though the sign system that it draws from will continue to exist (albeit forever affected by the utterance): “An utterance is never just a reflection or an expression of something already existing outside it that is given and final. It always creates something that never existed before, something absolutely new and unrepeatable” (Bakhtin 1986:119-120). In contrast to parole, which Saussure defined as an “individual act … by which the speaker uses the language code for expressing his own thought” (1966:14), Bakhtin argues that a speaker is merely borrowing pre-existing words and sentences, along with a “repertoire” of speech genres that “are not created by [the speaker] but are given” through the same socialization processes that provide our understanding of the lexicon and grammar that characterize our language use (1986:80-81).

The second of Bakhtin’s contributions is the concept of multi-voicedness, which follows from the tension between the two poles of every utterance, the fact that speech is always dialogic:
The sentence as a unit of language, like the word, has no author. Like the word, it belongs to nobody, and only by functioning as a whole utterance does it become an expression of the position of someone speaking individually in a concrete situation of speech communication. (Bakhtin 1986:83-84)

Everything that is said, expressed, is located outside the “soul” of the speaker and does not belong only to him. The word cannot be assigned to a single speaker. The author (speaker) has his own inalienable right to the word, but the listener also has his rights, and those whose voices are heard in the word before the author comes upon it also have their rights (after all, there are no words that belong to no one). *The word is a drama in which three characters participate.* (Bakhtin 1986:121-122; my emphasis)

The third character in this drama of the word is the sedimentation of all previous voices “heard in the word before the author comes upon it,” each of which attaches its own meanings to the word. When the author speaks, she draws on pre-existing utterances; likewise the listener hears and actively interprets the speech through his own memories of pre-existing utterances. On the surface, Bakhtin’s ideas bear a resemblance to Kansteiner’s methodological point raised in the previous section: namely, we must be attentive not only to speakers and listeners, but to the mediational means that are employed by each—what Kansteiner referred to as “intellectual and cultural traditions that frame all our representations of the past” (2002:180).

Bakhtin’s vision of the primacy of dialogicality in text and speech ultimately provides a basis for a philosophy of language and thought. This culmination of his ideas is represented in the “complex and multiplanar phenomenon” that Bakhtin labeled the “problem of speech genres” (1986:93). Having recognized the primacy of dialogicality and the importance of the utterance as the real unit of communication, Bakhtin warned that we must consider every speech act in its relationship to the existing dialogic sphere that it joins, as well as the future responses that are elicited from listeners. We must also learn to focus on utterances as wholes, rather than in parts, in
order to determine the true meaning of the words and sentences that are joined to the expressive meaning. For example, Bakhtin claims that words have no neutral expressive value outside the context of an utterance:

The word ["sweetie"\textsuperscript{26}]—which is itself affectionate in both the meaning of its root and its suffix—is in itself, as a language unit, just as neutral as the word “distance.” … Words belong to nobody, and in themselves they evaluate nothing. But they can serve any speaker and be used for the most varied and directly contradictory evaluations on the part of the speakers [when used in an utterance]. (Bakhtin 1986:84-85)

In other words, we cannot determine the message conveyed by any speech act without a comprehensive familiarity with \textit{other} utterances, other potential addressees. Bakhtin’s emphasis on the concrete performance of speech corresponds to Certeau’s call for studying the “consumption” of texts (Certeau 1984). As Certeau saw it, the question of “use, or consumption,” is fundamental to any understanding—it is indeed more expansive even than the question of production:

In reality, a rationalized, expansionist, centralized, spectacular and clamorous production is confronted by an entirely different kind of production, called “consumption” and characterized by its ruses, its fragmentation (the result of the circumstances), its poaching, its clandestine nature, its tireless but quiet activity, in short by its quasi-invisibility, since it shows itself not in its own products (where would it place them?) but in an art of using those imposed on it. (Certeau 1984:31)

Once more we are reminded of the importance of studying \textit{reception} of ideas, or in Bakhtinian terms, the full context of the utterance. My approach to the ethnography of memory practices draws from these ideas the necessity of focusing on how people interact with commemorative practices, objects,

\textsuperscript{26} I substitute “sweetie” in place of “darling,” Vern McGee’s translation of the original \textit{милен ький} (Bakhtin 1986:102n9). I judge the etymological link between “dear” and “darling” to be archaic and seldom recognized.
rituals, texts, and other cultural tools and social agents—including other human beings. To the extent that these practices can be characterized as “consumption,” I am interested in identifying the “strategies” and “tactics” (Certeau 1984:34-36) that memory activists and young Maya intellectuals use to draw on narratives about the past and articulate new interpretations, new genres of being and identity.

Truth, authority, and appropriation

Through his analysis of historical, experimental, and ethnographic data, Wertsch has extended Bakhtin’s ideas into new areas, including especially the study of collective remembering. For example, during and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Wertsch conducted interviews with ethnic Estonians about their views of national history. Many respondents were able to recount the official historical narratives they had learned in Soviet-era schools. However, they typically disavowed the truthfulness of these accounts—especially the overall “narrative truth” that they presented. Interviewees demonstrated that they had mastery of the historical narratives, reflected in their ability to reproduce them and make use of them as tools for “reason[ing] about the causes of events or the motives behind a group’s actions” (Wertsch 2000:40-41). However, such mastery did not require or confirm that the subject believed the narrative, that they had appropriated the truth that it presented:

The main point is that mastery of a cultural tool falls primarily under the heading of cognitive functioning and has relatively little to do with emotional commitment to narratives as “identity resources.” In the case of national historical narratives mastery is concerned with the ability to “think the nation” but tells us little about the emotional ties and forms of attachment required in the formation of “imagined communities.” (Wertsch 2000:41)
In contrast to the merely cognitive nature of mastery, appropriation “involves a different sort of relationship between agent and cultural tool” (Wertsch 2000:41). Wertsch draws on Bakhtin’s interpretation of prisvoenie to understand this process, offering this deconstruction of the term:

The root of this term and the associated verb prisvoit’ are related to the reflexive term svoi (“one’s own”). The prefix pri carries the meaning of “movement toward.” Hence prisvoit’ means bringing something toward or into oneself or making it one’s own, and the noun prisvoenie means something like the process of making something one’s own. This sense of making a text one’s own involves an emotional dimension that may operate quite independently of cognitive mastery; hence, the need to avoid reducing appropriation to mastery. … The opposite of appropriation in this sense is resistance, which involves distancing oneself from a text. Just because someone is exposed to a cultural tool—and just because the person has mastered it—does not mean that the individual has made it his or her own. (Wertsch 2000:41-42)

We can see the similarities between this concept and Bakhtin’s ideas about communication: just as in the action of an utterance—which is what historical narratives ultimately are, after all—the listener must actively respond to the message. However, responses can vary. I may understand the text, the textbook, the account about national origins and manifest destiny; but understanding is not believing, certainly not integrating the account into my self-perception. As Bakhtin pointed out, we begin to anticipate and form an idea of the whole message contained within the utterance from the very moment that we begin to receive it (1986:68). I may identify the utterance as “official,” reflecting the ideology of the State, or “parochial,” representing the Church, or “counter-cultural,” produced by the student leftist bloc. I may ignore the text if it does not interest me, or even resist it if the message contradicts my existing beliefs. Alternatively, I may find the text compelling or impossible to ignore, and I may appropriate it as my own idea and expression.
Wertsch finds self-determination theory a useful tool for understanding how and why some ideas are appropriated. As Deci and Ryan explain, self-determination theory builds from the postulate that people “are naturally inclined toward integration of their psychic elements into a unified sense of self and integration of themselves into larger social structure” (2000:229). Recognizing the inherent agency of individuals, the theory identifies four processes that lead people to adopt behaviors: 1) external regulation controls behavior through rewards and punishments, administered by a third party; 2) introjection pertains to individuals self-regulating their behavior as if the external regulations persisted, without necessarily agreeing with the values of the behavior; 3) identification signals that the individual sees the behavior as compatible with the self and worthy of maintenance for its own instrumental rewards or avoidances; and 4) integration, in which the individual practices the behavior willfully of her own volition, “integrating those identifications with other aspects of the self” (Deci and Ryan 2000:236-237). The upshot of this research is that appropriation, in Wertsch’s terminology, may reflect varying levels or stages of agreement; it also provides a set of more precise terms for discussing possible responses to narratives.

**Epistemic Authority**

Another approach to understanding how some ideas become appropriated while others are resisted or ignored is to focus on the epistemic authority of the speaker or author. In my research, I conceptualize this authority through attention to the local significance attached to different forms of knowledge and expertise. However, it is useful to step back and consider the philosophy of epistemic authority in order to identify more general questions and concerns. Trust and truth often
occupy the center of debates among philosophers of epistemic authority, just as they play important roles in testimonio and memory activism.

Gloria Origgi (2005), in language echoing Bakhtin’s points above, claims that trust plays a fundamental role in any form of cognition: “Our cognitive life is pervaded with partially understood, poorly justified beliefs. The greater part of our knowledge is acquired from other’s people spoken or written words” (2005). Consequently, we must learn to decide when it is safe to trust the authority of others’ words. Origgi critiques the “reductionist” framework that has become predominant in social epistemological studies of trust, a model represented by the formula competence + benevolence = trustworthiness:

For example, a scientist who trusts the authority of a colleague on a certain experimental data grounds her judgment in her knowledge of her colleague’s previous records in that scientific domain (such as the number of publications in the relevant reviews of the domain, or the number of patents, etc.) plus the beliefs that she is self-interested in being truthful for the sake of their future collaborative work. (Origgi 2005)

Beyond this deceptively simplistic ‘pure logic’ model, Origgi identifies another form of trust granted through “motivational analyses” without slipping into the prevalent “sociological and moral” theories that “fail to make the distinction between epistemic [and] political authority and present themselves as simultaneously accounting for the two concepts” (Origgi 2005).

Notably, Origgi points to testimony as an example of discourse that requires more than evidential analyses for evaluating trustworthiness. According to one school of thought, testimony often rings true because “as humans we have a natural disposition to speak the truth and a natural disposition to accept as true what other people tell us” (Origgi 2005). However, Origgi offers a more comprehensive explanation for such motivational analysis, based in the role that inter-personal
communication plays in creating a “mutual cognitive environment” in which beliefs and ideas are shared, evaluated—and appropriated or resisted. The roots of trust are grounded in the belief that any effort to communicate will seek mutual relevance. In the case of evaluating testimonies, our willingness to engage in the narrative leads us to seek relevance, and in finding it we affirm the intentions of the narrator to communicate cooperatively. Origgi’s perspective here echoes Bakhtin’s ideas about the search for meaning and identity being a necessarily dialogic project: “To be means to communicate... To be means to be for another, and through the other, for oneself. A person has no internal sovereign territory, he is wholly and always on the boundary; looking inside himself, he looks into the eyes of another or with the eyes of another” (Bakhtin 1984:287). Extending this analysis to testimonio (the subject of chapter 6), the epistemic authority of the witness is based in part on his ability to represent his intention—i.e., to utter his historical memory—in an understandable way, negotiating the tensions ever-present in this mediated action.

A second approach is provided by Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, who defines “epistemic authority” as a person, object, strategy, or community that a follower would allow to “stand in for” them in a discursive array because the follower believes that this authority would be able to reach a more reliable decision than the follower herself could achieve (2012: 105-119). This approach seems to reflect Zagzebski’s concern for defending the authority of experts, rather than challenging the structural or historical factors that led to some forms of knowledge being more highly privileged than others. In the Guatemalan context, similar ideas about authority take precedence in discourses defending the military, particularly the publications by the right-wing Foundation Against Terrorism (2013). In these texts, the author’s credentials as a military veteran are presented as an irrefutable
credential of authority to speak about ‘what really happened’ in the zones of conflict; by the same token, the Foundation uses ad hominem attacks to challenge the authority of individuals who hold opposing views (see image in Appendix). Zagzebski also subscribes to the idea that the search for trust in one’s self and in others derives from a fundamental need to achieve cognitive harmony, or more precisely to avoid “psychic dissonance” (2013). This belief has parallels in the work of memory activists who chronicled the experiences of victims in Guatemala’s internal armed conflict, and who push for public witnessing and “breaking the silence” on both social and individual levels. Like Zagzebski, their motivation is founded in the belief that resolving contradictory ideas, memories, and beliefs is necessary for a happy, satisfying existence (ODHAG 2003).

A third approach is Lorraine Code’s “ecology of epistemic authority,” which describes epistemic injustice and its relation to opaque authoritarian institutions. Whereas other philosophers focus on thought experiments or ideal types, Code follows feminist epistemologies in concretizing the social and political context for any matter of cognition and communication, which are ultimately the factors at stake in epistemic authority. For example, while my framework acknowledges the possibility for authority to be conveyed through the naming of an author (who is presumed to be an expert), Code points out that in certain cases authority may be invoked or enhanced by obscuring the individual subject and representing knowledge as the product of institutional practices: “institutionally produced knowledge functions as the arbiter of truth and facticity, whose trickle-down effects in everyday lives play a constitutive-normative part in shaping the social order they analyze and inform” (2011:26). I would also emphasize the usefulness of this approach for illustrating several of the common characteristics of knowledge politics in the wild: the focus on
formalized bureaucratic practices which are intended to minimize the influence (and visibility) of the individual researcher or author; the legitimacy automatically afforded “official data,” based entirely on a hierarchical chain of command; the infallibility assumed of such data, once reconstituted at the top (as in the presentation of a formal report); and finally, the high expectations placed in the knowledge production capabilities of an investigative committee.

Each of these characteristics also plays a role in the cases of knowledge production I investigate below. The danger of investing epistemic authority in such institutions is that, by their opaque and hierarchical nature, it can be difficult for the subject to access and assess the trustworthiness of the knowledge produced (Code 2011:27). Moreover, “testifiers-informants are removed from and insulated against both individual and collective accountability” in such a scenario (Code 2011:26). This draws attention to the potential shortcomings of reports such as REMHI and the CEH’s Memory of Silence.27 These important documentation projects were relatively transparent in that the individual researchers involved in each can be identified and evaluated on the basis of their competence. However, practically speaking the reports are discursively presented as the intellectual products of large-scale, autonomous processes. In both popular discussion on the ground and in academic literature, to the extent that the truth commission reports are identified as having authors, those authors are their sponsoring institutions—the Catholic Church’s Office for Human Rights and the United Nations Mission in Guatemala, respectively. These knowledge production

27 As I will discuss in chapter 4, textbooks published after the Peace Accords also illustrate this dilemma: they tend to be the products of large editorial teams, reducing the visible contributions of any single author.
processes have democratized or at least widened the set of actors who are able to claim a stake in the reports; however, by the same token they challenge the authority of any one author to claim that they “speak for” the institutions, and thus the dissemination and public discussion of these documents remain to some extent incomplete. This issue affects the CEH report to a greater degree, as the UN closed its mission offices in Guatemala in 2004. The ODHAG team, however, remains active: in chapter 8 I profile their campaign to incorporate information from the REMHI report into school curricula.

Official knowledge & the role of nation-states in producing memory

The act of appropriation enables the existence of remembering in any collective sense, as well as the formation of mnemonic communities organized around shared memories, “textual communities” (Stock 1983) sharing an authoritative text, or “communities of practice” (Lave and Wenger 1991) in which knowledge is collectively constructed and shared. Appropriating a text, a narrative, or a memory entails taking ownership of it and becoming deeply invested in the truth that it represents. At times, people are willing to commit or endure violence in the defense of such truths. They may see alternative, contradictory narratives as personal attacks. It is this process of appropriating, owning, and protecting historical memories that gives them so much power. For this reason, it should come as no surprise that political leaders in diverse contexts have strived to control historical memories by promulgating official narratives. In particular, nation-states have turned to educational systems to “turn out worthy, loyal and competent” citizens (Gellner 1983:34). However, as Wertsch’s research in Estonia showed, such efforts are never guaranteed to work: Even
where the state is able to achieve “the totalitarian state’s dream: a univocal account of the past [without] competitors” (Wertsch 2002:85-86), subjects may resist or ignore those accounts.

In post-conflict Guatemala, the State has put increased pressure on the national education system to promote democratization through an emergent “culture of peace” curricular model, which I describe in chapter 4. In previous generations, public education in Guatemala was ineffectual at promoting national unity and severely limited in the distribution of resources, leaving the majority of the rural population without access to schools. Edgar Esquit described the contrast in epistemic authority between official narratives and the informal “remembrances” of indigenous communities, which have carried communal identity for centuries:

[people in the communities continue to narrate their own histories, which are also categorized disdainfully by liberal and racist Guatemalan ideology. In any case, Maya narratives delineate and construct images about recent and remote ancestors. … Many Maya people in communities and villages have never stopped sharing and listening to these remembrances. Nevertheless, these narratives do not comprise the dominant history. Even though they form part of the social and ideological reproduction of the Maya, they do not resonate nationally. Instead, other voices are taken to be the true ones, primarily Creole and ladino narratives that up to now have told us how our past truly happened. (Esquit 2011:204)]

Esquit finds evidence that the situation has been improving—there have been high-ranking Maya officials within the Ministry of Education, and official state support for bilingual intercultural education (EBI) has at least changed the formal status of schooling. However, in practice, the dismal government support for public education renders policy advancements a hollow victory: the latest guidelines for textbook production make little difference, if schools aren’t provided with textbooks.

Given the historical weakness of the Guatemalan state, it was no surprise to me when numerous interviewees from diverse class and ethnic backgrounds told me explicitly that there were
no “national narratives” in Guatemala. The situation is similar to the quotidian realities of social reproduction in Bolivia: as Gustafson points out, the Foucauldian logic of micro-politics “fails to recognize the incapacity of state institutions to effectively generate docile, manageable subjects … the apparatuses for imposing the conduct of conduct simply do not exist” (2009:21). Thus, I diverge from Wertsch’s framework on the point of national-level official narratives. To the limited extent that Guatemalans share historical memories, they are neither national-level nor are they primarily attributable to formal education. Owing in part to the weak infrastructure and distrust of the public education system and to unresolved tensions about differing interpretations of the past, most of the Guatemalans I interviewed offered descriptions of history that were at odds with academic history, and many expressed confusion about specific events and timelines.

Interestingly, official state-sanctioned representations of speech—textual sites such as museums, monuments, and textbooks—are also typically inconclusive or contradictory in presenting “official” versions of history. In short, the Guatemalan state has never achieved a sufficient level of public control through reliance on what Althusser called “ideological state apparatuses” (1970) to successfully propagate an official history. The situation now unfolding in Guatemala would be more appropriately defined as a contest between an official policy of avoiding difficult subjects, elite narratives that lionize the military as defenders of capitalism, democracy, and the homeland, and myriad counter-narratives that present alternative interpretations of history, either grounded in Maya experiences or leftist interpretations of the conflict as a failed revolution. It is of course possible to regard the state’s silence as a form of narrative in itself, but the increasing intensity of debates between memory activists, international observers, and defenders of the military point toward the
disintegration of this status quo; the crucial question is what will follow: which history (or histories) will gain legitimation as the “official” version endorsed by the State?

**Specific narratives & metanarratives**

To more clearly understand the role of narrative discourses in mediating collective remembering, it is helpful to distinguish between specific narratives, which are accounts of events grounded in an identifiable time period, involving concrete, identifiable actors or forces, and “schematic narrative templates,” which are patterns that organize people’s understandings of the past into frameworks of a more abstract nature (Wertsch 2002:60-61). In terms of remembering-as-process, schematic narrative templates are the mechanisms that constrain and influence culturally-mediated distributed remembering. They may be based in shared instruments—including the corpus of specific narratives—that help humans distribute remembering and other cognitive functions. Each social group has its own bodies of literature and practices (albeit there is always overlap between ‘groups,’ and diversity within) that mediate action and cognition. There is a suggestive link between such higher-level schemata and Bakhtin’s ideas about speech genres: perhaps communities develop entire genres of meaningful speech based on repertoires of specific narratives that share general patterns. In chapter 5, I describe the shared characteristics in the specific narratives offered by my research participants—including interpretations of repetitive cycles in history—and offer a schematic narrative template that corresponds to the young Maya intellectuals I interviewed.
The Memory / History divide: Debating knowledge about the past

In my research, I reject the conventional divide between memory and history. I reached this decision based on my observations of the production of knowledge about the past in Guatemala. As I hope to demonstrate in this dissertation, negotiations about truth are often politically-loaded, and the final determination of which narratives become accepted as historical rather than ‘merely’ memory is often based on the power of the authors and interlocutors. Indeed, the reason that historical memory is such a salient and embattled topic right now is that decisions about officialization are ongoing—through public debates in the press and popular gatherings, through the creation of new school curricular materials, and especially through the recent trials of former army and police officials for their roles in violating human rights during the armed conflict. As I conceptualize it, historical memory offers a fortuitous and pragmatic approach to studying collective memory because it conspicuously blurs the line between memory and history, categories which some scholars treat rather like opposites. I find the conventional separation of these categories to be problematic. For one thing, this binary view of knowledges about the past limits our ability to understand local practices on their own terms. Anthropologists are often attuned to knowledges that we encounter outside the bounds of officialdom or the mainstream—one might even say this is our disciplinary specialty. We stand to gain a richer understanding of past experiences, as well, by recognizing the different local discursive conventions at play in any act of commemoration.

More importantly, I am concerned that an *a priori* analytical break between memory and history risks obscuring the role that power plays in claims to truth. For example, the peculiar forms
of subjectivity and literacy practices that make up professional historiography or social science have come to enjoy a great deal of power and prestige. As academics we may be especially prone to consider ‘authoritative’ and ‘true’ those interpretations that fit our expectations of what a well-researched account should look like: precise dates, named actors, perhaps some nice unrounded numbers that suggest an exact count. However, such accounts are not inherently more or less true than any others. We must cultivate awareness of different conventions—that is, different local understandings of the parameters of “history,” “memory,” or even “historical memory”—in order to evaluate the truth value of claims, and understand how different forms of authoritative statements compare against each other.

In comparison, Wertsch finds it useful to maintain a methodological distinction between memory and history, where memory is described as being “subjective,” to “focus on stable, unchanging group essence” and treats the “museum as a temple” (2002:44). History, on the other hand, is “objective,” focuses on transformation, and sees the “museum as a forum” for debate (2002:44). Where memory is conservative and rejects alternative versions of the truth, history as a practice is built on refining the knowledge of the past by incorporating new and alternative versions—at least in theory. Wertsch points out that these characteristics are “tendencies and aspirations of collective memory and history rather than ironclad attributes, and that the opposing tendencies often operate in tension with one another” (Wertsch 2002:43; emphasis in original). He acknowledges that the distinctions often cannot be examined too closely, because even historiography depends on narratives to provide meaning, which introduces distortion through “a moralizing impulse,” as Hayden White described (1980:22). Louis Mink also challenged the
assumptions of a universal history that underlie historiographical practices, going so far as to argue that “Insofar as the significance of past occurrences is understandable only as they are locatable in the ensemble of narrative form, it is we who make the past determinate in that respect” (Mink 1978:202).

I also find the critiques lodged by Mink and White compelling; however, my examination of the memory-history dichotomy extends beyond the theoretical critique of historiography and seeks to interrogate the larger hegemony that underwrites history’s superior epistemic authority over alternative forms of knowledge about the past. I trace the most recent influential version of this debate to one of the texts that Klein identified as a source of the renewed interest in memory in the late twentieth century: Pierre Nora’s encyclopedic *Lieux de mémoire*, which began in 1984. Following Klein, Nora “identified memory as a primitive or sacred form opposed to modern historical consciousness” (2000:127), setting up a dichotomous representation of the relationship between memory and history that persists in many accounts to this day. Nora equated memory with life and endless creativity, while history formed a sterile intellectual practice. The onset of historical consciousness is linked, in his account, to the rise of modernity. For Nora, the difference is not just a matter of degree or a different way of representing knowledge about the past: it is a far more profound change that reflects the crisis of national identity rooted in French experiences of the 1930s. The “sacred character” of the synthesis between national identity, history, and memory was destroyed by the failure of the French nation-state; after the war, “the nation ceased to be a cause and became a given; history became a social science; and memory became a purely private phenomenon” (Nora 1996:6). In the introduction to *Lieux de Mémoire*, Nora wrote:
Think, for example, of the irrevocable breach marked by the disappearance of peasant culture, that quintessential repository of collective memory ... Globalization, democratization, and the advent of mass culture and the media have turned the world upside down. Among the new nations, independence has swept into history societies only recently roused from their ethnological slumbers by the rape of colonization. At the same time a sort of internal decolonization has had a similar effect on ethnic minorities, families, and subcultures that until recently had amassed abundant reserves of memory but little in the way of history. (Nora 1996:1-2)

The views that Nora expresses in this passage indicate a very particular, provincial view of space and time based in late 20th century Western Europe. It is from this basis that Nora forms his idea of an unprecedented, universal cleavage between memory and history.

The term “memory crisis” was coined by Richard Terdiman to describe even earlier anxieties about memory, rooted in the 19th century origins of the nationalist identities that would agonize Nora over a century later (Terdiman 1993). As intellectuals began to conceive of themselves as “modern,” increasingly distant from their own predecessors in significant if arbitrary ways, Terdiman argues that memory became the chief tool in their “disciplined obsession with the past”:

The loss of a sense of time’s continuous flow and of our unproblematic place within it, the disruption of organic connection with the past evidenced in numerous texts from this period—such representations indicate an epochal rupture, a perception by those who were living within it that the world had decisively changed. (Terdiman 1993:5)

In language reminiscent of Nora’s writing, Terdiman reveals that the relationship between history, identity, and memory became problematized at the beginning of modernity as well as at its end. However, we could look even further back in time for examples of these tensions being activated. Charles Hedrick offers a compelling case for viewing the mass conversion of Roman elites to Christianity in the fifth century A.D. as a case of what we might also call a memory crisis (2000). Faced with difficult decisions about representing their relationship to their pagan predecessors, “the
elite [was] struggling to remake itself and deciding what of its past should be remembered and what left to oblivion” (Hedrick 2000).

These examples should illustrate that claims that memory and history were irrevocably separated by modernity, or by the rise of the nation-state, or by any particular political or economic development, should be subject to interrogation. As Wulf Kansteiner pointed out in 2002, at the beginning of another resurgence of scholarly interest in memory, it seems that “memory is valorized where identity is problematized” (2002:184). While I do not doubt that the “memory booms” of the nineteenth century or post-World War II era were real phenomena, deserving of scholarly attention—just as today’s resurgence of interest in memory and identity could be convincingly linked to Western anxieties about globalization, post-industrial labor, and migration—I do profess skepticism that modernity represents a unique origin point in some essential division between memory and history, or more precisely between “modern” ways of dealing with the past—and the practices left to everyone else.

In contrast, Eric Wolf argued in 1982 that the idea of “people without history” was a European fiction, reliant on a willful ignorance of the “long and complex histories” of the peoples encountered by Europeans; furthermore, he showed us that long-distance social relationships predated colonialism by centuries. Indeed as Fernando Coronil reminds us, “The self-fashioning of Europe as the home of modernity has been premised on the colonization of vast regions of the world that are seen as backward and in need of civilization” (1997:73-74). I argue that the rejection of the memory-history divide is an additional task in the project of “provincializing” European hegemonic perspectives on knowledge more generally (Chakrabarty 1992:23). Rather than concluding that
social conceptions of time must fit exclusively into one category or another, we should consider how any group conceptualizes time for its own purposes. Rather than asking whether a given narrative is an example of memory or history, the more important question is how any interpretation of the past is evaluated, appropriated, or resisted. In present-day Guatemala, how does *memoria histórica* engage with issues of truth and power?

Arjun Appadurai reminds us that rules about ‘the debatability of the past’ exist in all societies, though these rules vary widely by context and by period (1981). Appadurai’s argument leads us to consider how contentious debates take place not only within groups but between them, including groups with different ideas about expert knowledge and different conventions for representing truth—be it a scientific article or a formal speech. Even when considering the field of history or historiography, we must pay attention to the specific practices of knowledge production. Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) seeks to go beyond a dichotomous portrayal of epistemologies of history: neither an overly-optimistic positivism in which “the role of the historian is to reveal the past, to discover or, at least, approximate the truth. Within that viewpoint, power is unproblematic, irrelevant to the construction of the narrative as such” (Trouillot 1995:5). Neither does he accept radically constructivist positions which deny “the autonomy of the sociohistorical process. Taken to its logical end point, constructivism views the historical narrative as one fiction among others” (1995:6). Rather, Trouillot reminds us that in the conventions of historical knowledge production, one who mimics the narrative forms and practices that define historical text, while fabricating their sources and inventing details, has broken the rules: they “have not written fiction, [they] have
produced a fake” (Trouillot 1995:6-7). These rules vary between societies, but they are important everywhere:

[A]s ambiguous and contingent as it is, the boundary between what happened and that which is said to have happened is necessary. … It is not that some societies distinguish between fiction and history and others do not. Rather, the difference is in the range of narratives that specific collectivities must put to their own tests of historical credibility because of the stakes involved in these narratives. (Trouillot 1995:14)

In the following chapters, I will examine how competing historical memories are articulated through different narrative forms—speech genres, perhaps—by speakers who wield epistemic authority grounded in diverse epistemological backgrounds. The meaning of the past is defined through these remembering practices, and in the contests over truth that they represent. And as the past is defined, present subjectivities are formed (Trouillot 1995:16). Remembering begets community.

**Memoria histórica: A Guatemalan genre**

In May 2011 I visited the Office of Human Rights of the Archbishop of Guatemala (ODHAG) to learn about the influential organization’s recent campaigns in memory activism. “Lupe,” a member of the ODHAG technical team, told me about their engagements with the Ministry of Education, developing new curricular materials based on the Project for the Recovery of Historical Memory (REMHI). Like many of the Guatemalan intellectuals and teams involved in memory work, Lupe has spent decades studying and thinking about *memoria histórica*. I decided to draw on her insights to begin piecing together my own ideas about the concept, so at one point in
our interview I asked her: “How do you define historical memory?” She paused for a moment before answering, choosing her words more carefully and speaking more slowly and deliberately than in our preceding conversation:

Well, for us historical memory is that collective history (pause) recounted by the victims of the most recent incidents in the country (pause) which makes us face the past, understand the present, and construct a different future. It is, yes, to know, but also to act. That, for us, is historical memory. (pause) It’s the recent past of Guatemala, but to know it in order to act in the present and construct a different future.

Lupe’s response illustrates four key characteristics of the Guatemalan genre of memoria histórica. First, she highlights the close relationship between memory and history by immediately making reference to “collective history,” which in concrete terms consists of the testimonies of victims. This further supports the methodological combination of memory and history in my research approach.

Second, the internal armed conflict occupies the predominant period indexed by the term “historical memory,” brought to listeners’ minds practically by default. Lupe’s definition also reveals the fraught nature of giving name to this period, as she demonstrates the nuanced ability to communicate that she is referring to the period of the armed conflict while offering only oblique references to “the most recent incidents” or “recent past.” The mention of the “victims” is the key to concretely identifying what period she is indexing, as well as indicating information about her perspective on the events—both in word choice, and in attributing the production of “collective history” to those victims’ accounts. By pausing before continuing her definition, she gave me the impression that she was gauging my response to her choice of words and agents.

28 Lit., “¿Cómo define usted la memoria histórica?”
Third, Lupe’s definition emphasizes the agentive power imbued in memory by activists and by intellectuals in general: historical memory is not merely information; it is a force with the potential to cause meaningful action. More precisely, memory is a form of knowledge that, by its very nature, causes the knowing subject to interact with the world in a different manner. Historical memory thus appears more akin to a verb/process than a noun/object. From its origins in the accounts of the victims to its effects on understanding the present and shaping the future, “historical memory” for Lupe is a product and force, rather than a specific narrative. This characteristic reflects the moral power imbued in testimonios as well, in which the witness shares their experience in order to call the listener to respond (see Yúdice 1996:44 and chapter 6 below).

Finally, Lupe’s definition of historical memory reveals its fundamentally shared nature. Despite my query being specifically about her definition—a point that is more recognizable in Spanish, which distinguishes between singular and plural second-person pronouns—she immediately offered an explanation of what historical memory means for “us.” The idea that historical memory is a shared phenomenon resonates with other memory activist groups that I encountered. As one popular urban movement put it, “We are all children of the same history.” Lupe may have been referring to Guatemalans or even to human beings in general, but in all likelihood she meant her co-workers at ODHAG, who like her have spent a lot of time thinking about the nature of memory.

A few years after the publication of the REMHI report, ODHAG published an extensive account of the methods they adopted to carry out that project. This report, Memory Has the Final Word, devoted an entire chapter to describing the team’s concept of memory, which they defined as having six important characteristics or “propositions” (ODHAG 2003:376):
1. Memory is a present consciousness of past experiences
2. Memory does not exist alone; it belongs to someone
3. Projects of domination do not tolerate the memory of victims
4. Memory and history are mutually necessary
5. Where does this forgetting leave us?
6. Memory and forgiveness

The propositions range from rather straightforward, methodological points (e.g., #1-2) to deeply philosophical and theological considerations of the effects of memory on individuals, families, and society as a whole. The final two points could be restated as “Forgetting leads to harm and stunted development for both individuals and society” and “Forgiving cannot be forced by a higher power or left to God, but must come from action and interaction by the victims and perpetrators of violence.”

This text reveals a great deal about the theoretical framework and understandings of historical memory that inform ODHAG’s labors, and particularly their focus on the best ways to help communities and individuals heal from the experience of violence. They identified two motives that drove victims to give their testimony in the REMHI project: a subjective need “to break the silence” as well as a social need to give witness “so that all shall know” i.e. to ensure that their story is shared with the world (ODHAG 2003:390). Illustrating these needs through excerpts from actual testimonies, they draw attention to the unsettling effects of repressed memory for individuals as well as for societies: it leaves individuals feeling isolated, which in turn erodes cohesion within the family and community. The act of speaking relieves the tension for many, because it “liberates their emotions” and, crucially, it “socially legitimate[s] their memory” (ODHAG 2003:391).
It is important to consider how all of this memory work being undertaken in Guatemala is a form of knowledge production itself. The researchers who have collaborated with ODHAG and the CEH, or with institutions such as the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation (FAFG) or the project to digitalize the Police Archives, have collectively gathered tens of thousands of testimonies, digitalized hundreds of thousands of documents, prepared enormous databases with rich metadata and authored reports based on the analysis of this data. They have also made coordinated efforts to ensure that their findings are made accessible to the wider public. The efforts to popularize the findings have combined with other forms of organic communication—by word-of-mouth and various other media—such that the most salient bits of information have become widely shared and, in some cases, hotly debated. The knowledge about historical memory produced by these institutions takes on a life in other avenues within Guatemala. I have witnessed the same phrases and statistics and methods being reproduced and adapted in various settings, from primary school classrooms to murals on the sides of playgrounds. The recurrence of these discourses, which evidences the high epistemic authority of ODHAG and other institutions among memory activists, will be described ethnographically in the rest of this dissertation.
Defining memory: a summary

Memory is a subset of knowledge about the past that is usually, but not necessarily, of a declarative nature. Memory often takes the form of historical memory, in Halbwachs’ sense, in that it is shared like other forms of collective knowledge, through mediating resources such as language, text, media, and the landscape. Even in cases where memory is autobiographical, its interpretation and representation are strongly influenced by social frames of reckoning—i.e., speech genres or repertoires of utterances that echo one another. Memory is set apart from other knowledge about the past by its high degree of appropriation—it is “integrated” as an “identity resource,” although in some cases the scale of the collective identity—i.e., the mnemonic community—may be larger or smaller than the nation-state.

Although many scholars have described collective memory as relatively unyielding, I found that in everyday cases the truth value of the details of specific events or ideas were not accorded great importance—rather it is the gist of what happened and what it meant that matters to believers. In particular, the “narrative truth” (Wertsch 2000:39) may be unquestionable, while specific propositional truths may be ceded as new perspectives are heard and evaluated. This description holds, at least, for the young Maya professionals who made up the largest segment of my research population. For several of these individuals, their openness to hearing and accepting alternative

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29 Some scholars posit that the traumatic violence and atmosphere of constant terror and paranoia experienced by survivors of the Guatemalan internal armed conflict cannot be made meaningful because it defied fundamental understandings of human nature and the world (Scarry 1985; Zur 1998; Green 1999), and destroyed the communal bonds that would have allowed understanding to develop through dialogue and mutual support (see Fultz, n.d. on communal creation of truths).
historical details reflects a general awareness within intellectual spheres that new historical accounts are being actively constructed in the present moment, and that the success of this labor will require compromises and epistemological pluralism. In these cases, the act of listening to competing explanations is thus a form of solidarity.

In my research context, historical memory is seen as an agentive force. Historical memory in Guatemala is politically charged because so much of the past was marked by conflict; it often seems that the only “neutral” position is to claim not to remember. Knowledge about the past is politically salient for Maya interlocutors because it invokes a sense of historical continuity with ancestral culture, which has been a key strategy in demands for indigenous rights. Recalling Bakhtin’s ideas, there are ever-more abundant speech genres about memory in Guatemala: as more memories are discussed in the public sphere, listeners actively respond, even if their response is to ignore or reject the narratives they hear. Some listeners become speakers in turn, adding their voices to corroborate or challenge the memories of others, and so the cycle continues and the repertoire grows.

Finally, a key methodological point about studying memory is that researchers must focus on the consumption or reception of narratives. As Wertsch put it: “This bears repeating because of the tendency to assume that it is somehow possible to produce collective memory directly. … In actuality, even the most exhaustive study of text production cannot tell us whether narratives will be used in the way intended by their producers” (2002:117). Bakhtin and Certeau also remind us that the person on the receiving end may hear a different message than we, or the speaker, or another listener expects. How they interpret the text, and what they make of it, are questions to address ethnographically.
Chapter 3: The Absence of History

“In 2000, somewhere in the corner of Parque Morazán, in the center of Guatemala City, the cornerstone of a national monument to the victims of the country’s internal armed conflict was laid. Eight years on, neither the monument nor the stone are anywhere to be found.” – Frank de Ruiter (IW 2009:4)

The disappearance of the monument from Parque Morazán can serve as a metaphor for the current state of commemoration of the armed conflict in Guatemala. Notwithstanding local-level efforts provided by various groups and communities over the years, the predominant characteristic of Guatemala’s monumental landscape is one of absence. This absence is a reflection of unresolved tensions at both local and national levels: those who hold competing perspectives on the past—and most especially on the period of the armed conflict—have yet to ‘settle’ on an agreeable compromise narrative; thus any attempt to present a singular historical ‘truth’ is met with conflict. Pre-existing discourses and representations of history, included those institutionalized by monuments and museums, have gone largely without revision, despite the opening of democratic spaces in the past decades that render their homogeneous depiction of national identity outdated and unconvincing.

In other contexts, historical information has been largely expunged from public discourse—such as the trend in education over the past two generations, a situation I describe in the next chapter.

Diane Nelson described the “sickening fear, the fierce exhilaration, and the doggedly persistent hope” that accompanied the “intricately articulated emergings” (1999:4) of new identities, a description that eloquently summarizes the heterogeneous responses to the arrival of multiculturalism in Guatemala—or “Mayanization,” as some scholars have rechristened it in more local terms (Bastos et al. 2007). With new identities come new claims to the past, including new
interpretations of events that are claimed by multiple publics. “Official history” was once represented as a chain of events that began with Europeans arriving to conquer a New World, a story told by and for a narrow and exclusive class of elites. However, the Guatemalan genocide shattered that narrative, leaving “wreckage upon wreckage” (Benjamin 1940) to challenge the progressive view of history.

Guatemala’s national historical narrative is now in a general state of fragmentation and flux. As intellectual production turns to the difficult labor of reconciling competing perspectives on the past, entirely new sources and forms of knowledge are now being included in public discourse—the result of decades of struggle by indigenous activists. Consequently, the present moment in Guatemala bears witness to the reconstruction of historical knowledge alongside the widening of knowledge’s potential effects and the reformulation of epistemic authority. Pre-existing historical narratives have lost their authority, and newly emergent narratives are diverse, unsettled, and frequently contradictory. It may be premature to identify which narrative or bundle of narrative frames are most likely to be appropriated by the next generation and beyond. However, it does seem safe to conclude that these future descriptions of the past will pay far greater attention to indigenous experiences than previous traditions have done—and Maya scholars are likely to play significant roles in the writing of these stories, as well.

In this chapter and the next, I examine the fragmentation and flux of official histories in Guatemala. I approach the “official” in broad terms, a necessity borne of the heterogeneity of “the State” even within what would appear to be a limited time and space. Over the past century, Guatemala has experienced over half a dozen overthrown governments, followed more recently by
the boom and bust integration into the global economy (Benson and Fischer 2006), the highlight of which seems to be the designation of Guatemala’s hinterland as a primary route for drug trafficking (Bird 2012). The subsequent proliferation of violence in the supposedly “post-conflict” era attests to the ruptured social networks left by the long war, leaving a dismal context of distrust and ongoing paranoia in which contemporary activism unfolds (Benson et al. 2008; McAllister and Nelson 2013). The upshot of all these upheavals has been that politics and policies tend to exhibit a mercurial nature, even within short time frames.

The bureaucratic spaces formed and occupied by the State are also myriad and complex. Some institutions seek to maintain the status quo of historical ignorance and confusion, while others lead campaigns for exhumations and documentation of human rights abuses. The spatial aspect of these differences is perhaps expressed most clearly by the building occupied today by the Academy of Mayan Languages of Guatemala (ALMG). For forty years prior to being ceded to the ALMG, the Casa Crema30 housed the Ministry of Defense, indisputably the most powerful organ of the State during the height of the counterinsurgency campaigns, when the tenure and selection of presidents was decided by the men who occupied this building. Today the space is given over to the production of TV Maya, a multilingual television station run by the ALMG, and offices housing the various officers and personnel who carry out the Academy’s programs in research and language

30 Named for its “cream”-colored walls, the building occupies an entire block at the northern end of Avenida Reforma, an important traffic artery and historically significant thoroughfare that also hosts, within a few blocks, the Ministry of Education, the U.S. Embassy, and the elite military Polytechnic School. The ALMG was granted a 25-year lease on the property in 2003, and has done little to alter its appearance; consequently there are often anti-US and anti-military slogans spray-painted on the outer walls by protesters who presumably think the building is still occupied by the Ministry of Defense.
promotion. Shortly after arriving in their new offices, these Maya activists encountered a clandestine holding cell once used to “process” suspected subversives (Nelson 1999:128n1).31 Thus, the same space that “the State” used to torture and interrogate citizens is now used by “the State” in another of its forms to revitalize indigenous languages.

The conversion of the Casa Crema from a space of militarism into a space of multiculturalism provides one example of the Guatemalan State’s transformation in the post-conflict era; the abandoned and disappeared monument in Parque Morazán offers another. I argue that the current “absence of history” represented by Parque Morazán and other missing monuments is not the result of happenstance, nor is it a natural and inevitable outcome; rather, it is partly the product of the intents and actions of powerful actors. In the chapter below, I will examine further the fragmentation of official history in Guatemala by describing several sites where historical knowledge has traditionally been developed, represented, and distributed—namely in museums and the monumental landscape. I focus on the narratives communicated by these institutions of commemoration, as well as the role that epistemic authority played in the construction and continues to play in the ongoing maintenance of these “official” discourses. I also show how people make use of these resources for their own purposes, sometimes at odds with the official intent.

31 My ALMG contacts also assured me that “there are still some sections” of the large building that “are kept closed,” unofficially off-limits to the current occupants. More worryingly, they shared a rumor that soldiers from the Polytechnic School across the street are able to enter the ALMG offices at night through secret subterranean passages.
Memoria histórica in Guatemalan state & civil society

In Guatemala, history is a conflicted domain, serving less to unify citizens and more to fragment groups according to their experiences of the past. One sign of this fragmentation is a silencing effect that frequently occurs whenever conversations about contemporary problems turn to discussions of their historical causes. Many of my friends would routinely critique the current and recent governments for failing to meet expectations—bashing the National Civil Police for corruption and harassment of innocent citizens, calling out political parties for their hollow lip service to indigenous rights, among other grievances. However, their critiques would not commonly venture into a discussion of how things came to be in their current state; the conventions of “safe” day-to-day critique seemed limited to ad hominem attacks on specific political figures or, quite at the opposite end of the spectrum, calling out the impunity and injustice that are rampant throughout the entire “system” of state and society.

On the occasions when someone—such as a foreign anthropologist—prompted questions about the more specific historical causes of contemporary problems, the tenor of the conversation would usually change abruptly. Often, the introduction of historical questions into the conversation would cause hierarchies of epistemic authority to take visible form: Elder participants, especially those who had lived through the referenced time period or who were known to have experienced certain key events, and participants who had attained higher levels of formal education, were most likely to offer comments. Most participants, however, refrained from statements that would reveal much about their interpretation, preferring to hem to more diplomatic overtures. The most common response, and one that seems sufficiently inoffensive in most cases, is to simply claim
ignorance: to state that one “does not know enough” about the subject, that events were confusing enough at their unfolding and have only grown more opaque with the passing of time and the cacophony of voices offering competing descriptions of what really happened and why. It was often impossible for me to tell when my friends were being self-deprecating about their historical knowledge because they genuinely did not feel confident about their answers, or because they were employing a tactic to remain silent and avoid giving away their political position on the issues. In a nutshell, talking about the past seems to still be perceived by many as a practice that is confrontational at best, and at worst potentially dangerous—and this despite the apparently universal readiness to critique the present state of affairs.

On the other hand, some individuals have demonstrated their willingness to engage with historical knowledge and draw on it for informing their arguments. For example, on the eve of Guatemala’s Independence Day celebrations in September 2012, columnist Francisca Gómez Grijalva offered this caustic perspective in the leading daily paper:

This “celebration” is, in reality, a farce invented by the creole elites that from 1821 until the present have been entrenched in the country’s political, economic, religious, and legal power. Through the educational system, the media, and the military culture, these creole elites—also known as oligarchic groups or conservative sectors—have spread and legitimated their false discourses about the celebration of ‘independence.’ (Gómez 2012)

Gómez went on to argue that the colonial system of governance and domination continues to exist in Guatemala today, and that in reality the only people who benefitted from the momentous events of 1821 were the creole elites who took the reins of power from the Spanish. The Independence Day narrative is a linchpin in this national origin myth: with the declaration of independence from Spain, a new Guatemalan identity was supposedly formed. Gómez argues that this narrative arc
ignores the fact that indigenous populations were not considered citizens at the dawn of independence; even as late as 1965, when universal suffrage was finally established, political leaders explicitly referred to “los indios” as “a national problem” (Velásquez Nimatuj 2007).

Gómez’s critique of the meaning of Independence Day was hardly unique; it has become something of a tradition for the country’s leading opinion columnists to use the annual holiday as an opportunity to critique national failures past and present. However, Gómez’s take on the topic stands out for two reasons. First, her argument presents contemporary social problems as the consequence of historical patterns of discrimination: specifically, the colonial hierarchy that racially categorized people and divvied up privileges and restrictions accordingly. While other intellectuals often use the occasion of Independence Day to decry the failure of state policies or the slow pace of development, their historical analyses rarely extend further back than the 1996 Peace Accords, which are treated as a sort of Year Zero for contemporary Guatemala. Second, Francisca Gómez Grijalva is a K’iche’ Maya journalist, originally from the rural department of El Quiché, and her weekly column, Ukemik Na’oj, or “The weaving together of knowledge,” is one of very few examples of indigenous viewpoints in the national press. This relative absence of Maya perspectives in the national media is a reflection of the distribution of power and authority in Guatemala in general.

However, Gómez’s defiant voice and references to historical knowledge represent the shifting parameters of epistemic authority in Guatemala; she represents a relatively new group of Guatemala’s indigenous citizens who refuse to be shut out of the country’s history any longer. After the drawdown of military counterinsurgency, Guatemalan intellectuals have revisited the issues of national history and identity. While viewpoints diverge dramatically on the interpretation of details
and even the general “narrative truth” (Wertsch 2002) that should be presented in official history, writers across the ideological spectrum agree that the current historical narratives are inadequate. Most critiques focus on the failure of the existing narratives to present a national imaginary that is inclusive of non-Ladino Guatemalans—including the Maya, as well as the Xinka and Garífuna peoples recognized among the “Four Peoples” framework of Guatemalan multiculturalism. The historical narratives that have gained various degrees of official status in Guatemala in the past tended to reproduce racialized, colonial patterns of domination and subordination in which the Guatemalan national imaginary is idealized as a European figure of exploration and conquest. In contrast, in the few cases where indigenous Guatemalans are featured at all, they tend to represent—at best—sources of national folklore and curiosity, or—at worst—internal ‘others’ who constitute an existential threat to the state. Guatemala’s museums offer clear illustrations of these earlier narrative patterns; they also offer evidence of their increasing obsolescence in the face of multicultural changes elsewhere in contemporary society.

The absence of history

Of the thirty-eight institutions in the Guatemalan Network of Museums (REDGUATEMUS), only one is dedicated to national history. There are a few smaller museums that present historical information about very limited domains, such as the Postal and Stamp Museum or the Museum of the University of San Carlos. However the majority of the REDGUATEMUS institutions are focused on archaeology or art, typically featuring little more description than the excavation site or artist studio where pieces originated. All eleven of Guatemala’s regional museums—State-funded institutions located in departments outside of the
capital city—are focused primarily on archaeology, and most are located within archaeological sites that have been redeveloped for tourism (see images below, and in the Appendix). The purposes of these curated exhibits of Maya artifacts and bodily remains are frequently at odds with the concerns or desires of local Maya communities, the living descendants of the “classic” civilization on display for foreign and domestic tourists. Although archaeological museums could potentially serve as local and regional history museums, they invariably present the ancient pre-contact Maya as prehistoric, existing only in the past with no ties to the living descendants who make up half of the national population. The end result of this pattern of museum design and infrastructure is that many of the most visited and best promoted museums in the country are intended to cater to foreigners rather than national citizens. Alternatively, the State-supported design and maintenance of museums offers a reflection of the interests of the elite governing class, presenting a narrow vision of national identity based on Euro-American ideals and the subjugation or expropriation of indigenous ancestry and culture. In this section I will examine two museums that operate with State funding and supervision, identifying the narratives that each presents in their respective attempts to explain Guatemalan history and national identity.

32 For example, the tourist hotspot of Antigua, Guatemala hosts over a dozen private museums—including several members of REDGUATEMUS, which professes in its mission to advocate for the wide public diffusion of the national cultural patrimony. However, the majority of visitors are foreign tourists or wealthy capitalinos visiting town for the weekend. Entrance to the REDGUATEMUS-affiliated Coffee Museum at the Azotea plantation costs 50 Quetzales, which is prohibitively expensive for the vast majority of Guatemalan workers. On the other hand, the regional museums typically charge much lower rates for citizens than for “internationals” or “norteamericanos.”
History as national patrimony

The Guatemalan National History Museum is located in the center of Guatemala City’s historic Zone 1, at the corner of the heavily-trafficked 10a Avenida and 9a Calle, roughly equidistant to the Constitutional Plaza and (Christopher) Columbus Park. It is open to the public each weekday, charging a relatively low 5 Quetzales ($0.63) admission for Guatemalan citizens, or free for students. Like other State-run museums, the Museum eschews explicit historical narratives, choosing instead to present collections of artifacts grouped according to their functions, or simply by chronology. For example, the Museum features collections of agricultural tools and office equipment from different time periods, hallways filled with small photographs showing scenes of the capital through time, and various architectural elements—cornice pieces, columns and the like—salvaged from dismantled buildings, many presented without any identifying information or context (cf. Prensa Libre 2013a). Despite the lack of overt descriptions for nearly all of the exhibits, it is possible to “read” an implicit narrative defined by the structure of the museum’s presentation, and the narrow selection of the “things that matter” in Guatemalan history. A handful of individuals and events are tacitly, architecturally emphasized by the designation of particular spaces and assemblages to organize and represent them. In particular, the historic moment of the signing of the Central American declaration of independence from Spain is given a privileged location near the center of the museum. This display, one of the most elaborately produced, is embodied by life-sized figures of key participants arranged around a few period articles of furniture and multiple facsimiles of the forenamed document.
However, even this key event is presented with scant exposition—a simple placard identifies the scene and key actors and notes the date, along with a reminder to refrain from crossing behind the guide ropes. Nearby, reproductions of historical maps and documents associated with the Federal Republic of Central America include short captions that allow observant visitors to piece together bits of the history of this short-lived union. However, there are no lengthy explanations of the context or significance of Central American independence, or of the later fracturing of the union into its constituent countries. I remember my interest being piqued by many of the objects on display, and jotting notes to remind myself to look up more information about their historical context when I next had internet access. In other rooms and display cases, the complete absence of expository information resulted in those parts of the museum appearing rather like an antique store or the kitsch-cluttered walls of certain familiar diners and restaurants, memorabilia that at best add something to the ambience of the space without providing any declarative information.

The scope of Guatemala’s national museum is conspicuously circumscribed, both in the time periods that are included or skipped over, as well as in the types of events and individuals that are

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33 In particular, I have been intrigued by the history of the rise and fall of the “Sixth state” of the Central American confederation, a short-lived republic called Los Altos with its capital in Quetzaltenango. If Los Altos had survived, it would now include most of the western highlands of present-day Guatemala as well as the Soconusco region of Chiapas. I imagine what this nation might have looked like today, and how the division of most of the region’s indigenous population into Los Altos would have affected the history of identity politics in each country—would ethnic or linguistic identity have played such a defining role in either country, if the population had been so predominately indigenous or mestizo? Would violence have played out between competing nations, rather than as an internal conflict? Despite the potential that Los Altos once possessed to completely transform Central America as we know it today, the brevity of its existence—less than two years—and the weakness of the state’s presence outside of urban centers and elite classes led to its virtual disappearance from historical memory as well as professional historiography. Few of my friends and colleagues in Guatemala knew anything of the history of Los Altos—even among those who lived in Quetzaltenango—and only one mentioned it, without being able to offer a description, during the interviews described in chapter 5.
represented. The narrow focus on power at the highest official levels reflects the limited scope of “national history” for the intellectual architects of the museum, and corresponds quite closely to the conceptions of history contained in textbooks and other pedagogic resources. Consequently, Guatemalan presidents are the most obvious protagonists in this display of national history. Their images fill multiple rooms, including a long hallway featuring portraits of the earliest heads of state which opens into a small, well-lit room with its walls filled with the photographic portraits of more recent presidents—including those like Carlos Castillo Armas and Efraín Ríos Montt who gained power by overthrowing their elected predecessors. The overthrown, exiled, and assassinated leaders are likewise featured—Jacobo Arbenz, still a controversial figure, shares the wall with Castillo Armas with no indication of the violent nature of the transition between the two. A recreation of the opulent living room of Jorge Ubico is considered one of the most popular exhibits. These presidential objects and icons are testimony of an unbroken genealogy of the Guatemalan nation from independence to the present, presented without any biographical or historical context that might raise questions about the legitimacy of some of the included administrations, or complicate the reveries of nationhood and progress that tacitly underlie the museum’s organization. The seamless barrage of faces in these portraits serves as a reminder that Guatemala has “always” been led by a particular type of person: white, male, and more often than not, a leader in the military.34

34 I borrow from Marta Casasús Arztí’s analysis of the “pigmentocracy” at play in Guatemalan elites’ conceptions of racial purity and hierarchy (2000:39; see also Nelson 1999:213n7).
Aside from adding new presidents’ portraits to this collection, the museum actively ignores more recent history; even the few captions in the exhibits are clearly dated, the typewritten paper showing signs of discoloration and curling. Over the course of repeated visits from 2006 to 2010, I noted only one significant modification: under the administration of the center-left president Álvaro Colom, the Museum added a small exhibit about Juan José Arévalo, the first and less controversial of the October Revolution presidents. Two rooms at the end of the self-guided path through the museum host large, glossy-print poster board descriptions of Arévalo, including life-size portraits and photographs of the handsome president smiling and waving to jubilant crowds in the streets of Guatemala City. The final room, somewhat awkwardly oversized for the task, presents Arévalo’s tidy steel desk with copies of several of the books he published—most written during his exile, years after the fall of the democratic governments. The addition of this exhibit represented a step toward broaching the controversial topic of the counter-revolution and the subsequent armed conflict, but at my last visit these more recent events were still absent from the historical purview of the Museum.

Chronological blinders are also applied toward the past: The millenarian Maya culture featured so prominently in Guatemala’s official tourism campaigns is conspicuously absent, in large part because the historical scope of the museum intentionally begins with the arrival of Europeans—as the current director put it, the oldest objects in the museum’s collection are “those that pertain to the Conquest, or rather, 1524” (Cali 2013), and the pre-contact period is reserved for archaeological museums. The inclusion of earlier artifacts and narratives would contradict the implicit historical
narrative that the museum projects: a narrative in which the birth of Guatemalan nationhood is fixed at the moment of independence from Spain, a dramatic moment that sets the scene for the unfolding of history as a progressive nation-state united under an unbroken line of leaders, and in which any mention of events predating independence are necessarily and exclusively indicative of the European origins of the foundational concepts of nation, independence, and progress. This exclusionary ethno-cultural focus extends throughout all time periods in the museum’s collection: the only specific, named individuals who are represented among the artifacts and texts are European or criollo, with very few Ladino exceptions, and in all cases they are members of the political or religious elite. With just two exceptions, indigenous Guatemalans are present only in descriptions of the conquest, and in old mimeographs and photos depicting the manual labor that built the nation in a more material sense, in coffee and banana plantations and the construction of the roads and railways that brought these cash crops to the ports.

How do people make use of the National History Museum? On every one of my visits I found that I was one of only a handful of visitors, the other visitors tending to be elderly groups. Unlike most members of REDGUATEMUS, this institution does not explicitly cater to foreigners.

35 The implicit official narrative thus glosses over the complication that this independence belonged not to a single Guatemalan nation, but to the unified Federal Republic of Central America—as well as the complexities presented by their subsequent annexation by Mexico, the temporary loss of nearly half of the national territory to Los Altos, and the fact that this independence was of no real consequence for the indigenous majority of the realm.

36 The narrative also ignores the complexities presented by many of those leaders overthrowing their predecessors in coups d’état, or the military juntas that overruled electoral results to handpick the next head of state, as well as the constitutional suspensions and reforms that accompanied some of the changes in administration, signaling more profound transformations of the social order than “business as usual.”

37 Namely, Tecún Umán and Atanasio Tzul, two K’iche’ Maya historical figures who have been appropriated by the State—an issue I explore in more detail in the following chapter.
When I first visited the museum in 2006, the attendants expressed surprise that I had come by myself, admonishing me that the capital was a dangerous place for tourists. The higher foreign admission fee was not posted on the information board, and a slot near the admission desk for holding English-language brochures was empty during every visit over the four year span 2006-2010. On one visit, I noticed a group of four students from a high school located directly adjacent to the Museum. The boys were ostensibly completing an assignment printed in the social studies textbooks they carried, but their energies were primarily spent making wisecracks and laughing about the exhibits as they preceded me through the rooms. The atmosphere of the National History Museum is perhaps especially susceptible to such parodic interpretation. The official narrative that it presents is an example of what Bakhtin called “authoritative speech”: Like the commands of a father or the pronouncements of a priest, “the authoritative word… demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own” (Bakhtin 1981:342), and as it leaves no room for compromise or doubt, “one must either totally affirm it, or totally reject it” (Bakhtin 1981:343). The context and articulation of the Museum’s message seems to have undermined its authority. The Museum presents a historical trajectory of progress within a crumbling building, its exhibits in visible need of repairs and renovations. It leaves off any discussion of ethnic diversity or social hierarchy after the moment of Independence, which leads to a de facto presentation of the overwhelmingly white cast of subsequent historical events without attempting to explain why most Guatemalan visitors are unable to see people who look like themselves in these exhibits. Even the institution’s name is betrayed by its narrow focus on the white patriarchal oligarchy: Neither the working classes nor the rural majorities of Guatemala are represented in their country’s “National History” Museum. The Museum thus
fails to authoritatively convince members of its audience—apparently not only myself, but young urban Guatemalans who are perhaps the chief targets of its pedagogical message.38

8: Image of the central plaza at Zaculeu, Huehuetenango. The site was “restored” by the United Fruit Company in the late 1940s. Like Q’umarkaj for the people of Quiché, Saq’ Ulew is a favorite local spot for picnics or strolls. Although the spiritual energy of the site appears to have been dampened by the “restoration” process, the remains of two ceremonies are visible in the photo above.

The past as cultural patrimony

Guatemala is a country with an uncommon abundance of archaeological wealth, owing primarily to Maya cultural patrimony. However, the social existence of recovered artifacts is

38 This situation contrasts with the more recent experiments in museum format described in chapter 8; rather than claiming an exclusively “authoritative” voice, the Why are we the way we are? museum combines multiple sources of epistemic authority within an over-arching strategy of motivating visitors to engage personally with the exhibit—akin to Bakhtin’s “internally persuasive” discourse (1981:345).
typically constrained by non-indigenous epistemologies and economies. The excavation, analysis, preservation, curation, and interpretation of such materials fall within the domain of specialist scientific knowledge, namely professional archaeology. The historical development of archaeology in Guatemala is far beyond the scope of the present dissertation, but a few details should suffice to illustrate how far removed Maya communities have been from the practice of administering the objects and landscapes that come to be organized as archaeological projects. As is also the case with ethnographic research, most archaeological research in Guatemala has been carried out by researchers from U.S. or European universities or museums, often enabled by substantial grants from their own national governments. The first Guatemalan archaeological program, at the public University of San Carlos, was only initiated in 1975, followed by a program at the University of the Valley of Guatemala in 1986; by the turn of the 21st century, these two universities had awarded a total of 85 licenciaturas in archaeology (Martínez 2001). As described in more detail in the following chapter, the accessibility of higher education in Guatemala is severely impaired by the overall economic environment: few people outside the wealthiest classes are able to devote the time and resources needed to earn a professional degree. The path to a professional degree is even more difficult for indigenous and rural students, who must overcome structural barriers to accessibility, only to face discrimination once enrolled.

Jay Winter calls for acknowledging the full spectrum of relationships and forces at play in what he calls “the cultural economies of heritage,” the assemblages that organize around such components as archaeological sites, government tourist agencies, and scientific legitimation of “patrimony”:
In order to fully appreciate the cultural economies of heritage today, it is necessary to consider how the predominance of particular discourses or forms of knowledge expertise within the heritage sector occurs precisely because they are both privileged by capital and at the same time enable the production of capital, a process which, by implication, allows certain forms of heritage, memory and identity to prevail. In its diversity, the cultural heritage sector draws upon and integrates a wide array of expert knowledge forms, ranging from archaeology, architectural conservation, anthropology, engineering, sociology, art history, and more. However, as we shall see, certain ways of understanding and conserving a heritage resource come to be privileged in particular contexts, in large part because of the relation that knowledge form has with capital. (Winter 2011:77; emphasis in original)

It should perhaps be no surprise, then, to learn that archaeology is viewed favorably by many Guatemalan elites as a motor for development and an important part of tourism campaigns such as the *Ruta Maya* (cf. Hervik 1998). In addition to drawing foreign investment, archaeology provides seasonal employment opportunities in some of the most isolated communities in Guatemala—almost exclusively in the lowland Petén region, where “classic” period sites are most concentrated.

Ironically, despite the fact that there have been no professional archaeologists of Maya ethnicity until recently, most of the manual labor of excavation is carried out by labor crews from the indigenous communities that surround sites. The long-standing gap in knowledge prestige between museum- or university-employed academic researchers and rural-dwelling peasant laborers reflects the larger-scale historical development of inequality both within Guatemala’s racial hierarchy and in Guatemala’s relationship as a colony or periphery to Europe and the United States. However, the rise of indigenous activism has shifted the terrain of public debate and participation in meaningful ways, including at the level of the archaeological site. While professional researchers and their counterparts within the Ministry of Culture and Sports certainly continue to enjoy a privileged position vis-à-vis peasant communities, archaeologists no longer hold a monopoly on epistemic
authority. Other types of knowledge about objects of ancient Maya provenance—what we would call “artifacts” from an archaeological perspective, or “relics” or “icons” from a religious one—operate in concrete ways on the social and physical world. For example, a political demand that has become increasingly emphasized in indigenous movements over the past decade is the right to guaranteed access to lugares sagrados, sacred places, along with the right to perform religious ceremonies in these places. The National Indigenous & Campesino Coordinator (CONIC), an offshoot of the influential Committee for Campesino Unity (CUC), has repeatedly called for the Congress to establish this right (Contreras 2014).

On a more day to day level, I found that members of highland communities tended to hold their own interpretations of material objects, and their own readings of the landscapes marked by the remains of pre-contact Maya architecture. For example, in the K’iche’ community of Cantel outside the city of Quetzaltenango, I visited the home of an aj q’ij—don “Filiberto”—who had spent over ten years working in various archaeological projects in Petén, the northern lowland department that contains many sites of interest to archaeologists, such as the famous city-state of Tikal. Filiberto’s home was quite modest by local standards, really a makeshift shelter that he was occupying while waiting to build a more permanent dwelling. He had a well nearby, but no running water, and the indoor lighting was provided by a single bulb that hung from the ceiling and swayed when the wind blew through the various open spaces between the tin roof and plastic siding. Just beyond the doorway of his home, Filiberto had hung tapestries from the ceiling in order to form a space for receiving guests and potential clients. The space held two simple plastic chairs, and against the wall, a simple hand-carved table was covered by another tapestry. Filiberto carefully lifted the cloth aside
to reveal dozens of small objects—clay figurines, sherds of ceramic pottery, and small stones in irregular shapes. I also recognized some quartz crystals, and two obsidian cores the size of a child’s fist that bore signs of the controlled percussion that would have yielded numerous obsidian blades.

9: One of the more elaborate objects among Filiberto’s collection, this stone head was attached to a necklace of heavy beads.

Filiberto explained that these objects were all “things from the ancestors,” some of which were merely utilitarian in their original functions and others which had been created with explicitly religious intent in mind. Regardless, they were all sacred now by virtue of their antiquity. Having participated in archaeological excavations and analysis in the past, including at a lowland Maya site in the Yucatán peninsula, I recognized that at least half of the objects on the table might have been considered archaeological artifacts, though none appeared particularly noteworthy. I asked Filiberto if he had gathered any of the materials while working in Petén; he picked up a fragment from the
rim of some long-shattered piece of pottery and explained that he never removed objects from active excavation units, nor had he “stolen” anything from the “patrones”—the “bosses” who supervised the labor, including the foreign archaeologists at the top of the chain. However, ever since he gained awareness of his calling to become an *aj q’ij*, he would inevitably stumble upon such objects in his own time, and he felt no qualms about “guarding” these gifts from his ancestors. Moreover, such objects were imbued with powerful forces that could do harm to other people. Thus, he explained, most of the pieces had been given to him by others who came across them and worried that they might bring bad luck. A friend of mine who lived in the same community confirmed that while building a new section for his family’s house, he and his father uncovered several potsherds and other objects; some were added to the family’s altar of ancestral objects, and others were given to *aj q’ijab’* who had more experience with such things.

Such tensions between local communal interpretations and uses of archaeological materials, and the practices mandated or recommended by official institutions—in this case, the Ministry of Culture and Sports or the Institute of Tourism—do not only exist at the household or neighborhood level. Rather, this is a debate that is gaining steam with each passing year. Most political reservations about the proposed Law of Sacred Places revolve around the issue of private property—will property owners be required to allow access, and prohibited from developing the land as they see fit? However, others raise concerns about the potential impact of the law for existing and future archaeological sites. Would the rights of living Maya to practice their spiritual beliefs interfere with future research? With tourism? Regardless of the fate of the law, pre-contact Maya architecture is
already routinely appropriated for various purposes not intended by the state authorities. Lisa Breglia found a similar situation in Mexico:

For communities around the world residing in landscapes of ruins, the stuff of contemporary everyday life continually trespasses upon privileged sites of ancient civilization. Yet, monuments are not isolated in time or space from the social and political lives of citizens… archaeological ruins in Mexico, although juridically mandated as national property, are in practice sites of multiple, coexisting claims on ownership, custodianship, and cultural inheritance. (Breglia 2006:3-8)

For Guatemalan practitioners of Maya spirituality, sites of pre-contact monumental architecture are frequently preferred places for the conducting of ceremonies.

The site of Q’uma’rkaj offers an illustrative example. As the former K’iche’ capital at the time of Alvarado’s invasion of the Guatemalan highlands, the site is now colloquially known as “las

10: Sign posted at the entrance to Q’uma’rkaj, declaring that it is an “archaeological site” and part of the “cultural patrimony of the nation,” under the “Department of Prehispanic and Colonial Monuments.”

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ruinas.” According to ethnohistorical sources, including Alvarado’s own correspondence, the Spanish razed the city, burning the K’iche’ rulers alive (Akkeren 2007:74). Under the Arévalo administration during the October Revolution, the Guatemalan state adopted a resolution claiming guardianship of all “monuments, archaeological, historical, and típico objects” (see image 7). By the mid-1970s, anthropologists from the United States began archaeological excavations and reconnaissance at Q’uma’rkaj. They left one trench open, now covered by a tin roofed structure and surrounded by barbed wire, allowing visitors to see one of the original stone walls covered by a foot or more of topsoil. Nearby, a small museum contains a scale model of what the city may have looked like in 1524, as well as numerous sketches and paintings by Guatemalan art students, demonstrating their interpretations of what the grand battle between the K’iche’ and conquistadores may have looked like. A glass display case at the far end of the museum contains human remains, including a skull, that were presumably discovered during excavations of the site—there is no identifying information attached—as well as an arrangement of obsidian knives and spearheads. On the occasions when I visited the museum during trips to Q’uma’rkaj, I noticed there were often candles and flowers left below this display, as an offering for the ancestor encased within. On one occasion when I arrived as part of a large group, an elderly woman in the traje of nearby Chichicastenango was kneeling, praying before the skeleton; when our group entered the building, she rose and left behind a burning candle set into a recessed block of wood, a device presumably

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39 Decreto 425, adopted September 25, 1947
40 Notably, these scenes do not feature the Tlaxcala or Kaqchikel allies who played a pivotal role in the destruction of Q’uma’rkaj (Akkeren 2007).
supplied by the museum caretakers to safeguard against candles being knocked over or scorching the floor (see image 8).

![Image of museum exhibit](image)


The transformation of this “museum exhibit” into a religious shrine by local users is echoed by the practices ongoing at the site’s temples, a few hundred meters further into the site. A recessed, flat area marks the former plaza, where a large grass-covered heap of stones evinces the remains of one temple; the other, the Temple of Tojil, still retains one standing wall. On another side of the plaza stands the ball court, which was restored in 2011 by an Italian power company as a gesture interpreted by many locals as an attempt to win their support for a hydroelectric project in northern El Quiché (see images below and in Appendix). The remaining end of the plaza leads to a path
descending to the mouth of a cave; several K’iche’ friends assured me that it once extended all the way to Quetzaltenango, and that Tecún Umán used this subterranean passage to quickly lead his troops into battle against the Spanish. Today, the cave extends only about a hundred meters under the earth, directly below the central plaza.

Regardless of the “ruined” state of the cave and temples, these places are clearly highly significant for locals, particularly for practitioners of Maya spirituality. On any given day, even during the rainy season, one can find numerous ceremonies ongoing at the Temple of Tojil—the
preferred site—or at the entrance to the cave, both of which have taken on a multicolored tie-dye appearance from the thousands of brightly colored candles that have melted during ceremonies. The Temple of Tojil plays host to a persistent cloud of bees, attracted by the *panela*, unrefined sugar used in some ceremonies, or the sugars left behind by burning *aguardiente*. At times, crowds of over a hundred participants may gather to celebrate the Maya new year or for life events like weddings and funerals. During my last trip to the site, I found a crowd celebrating in the plaza, complete with marimbas and large jugs of *horchata* rice drink which was served in *jícaras*, the hollowed-out shells of gourds.

The most frequent visitors to Q’uma’rkaj thus have little interest in the museum, or in the site’s status as an archaeological project. Rather, they come because the site has spiritual significance. As the practices of self-identifying as Maya or Maya K’iche’ have become more prevalent, and Maya spiritual practices have lost much of their former stigma, the status of Q’uma’rkaj has grown more prevalent as well. Thus, despite the advantages granted to professional archaeologists by the State and other powerful institutions, the actual quotidian existence of Q’uma’rkaj—its social life, as a place (Certeau 1984)—is overwhelmingly defined by *aj q’ijab’* and local community members, who continue to actively campaign for greater control of their own “cultural patrimony.”

Living Maya communities have also laid claims to the architecture left by their predecessors by reinitiating the practice of erecting stelae, the giant stone slabs in which texts are inscribed. In 2013, a Kaqchikel group led by Pakal B’alam Rodríguez, Q’aq’awitz Igor Xoyón, and Iyaxel Cojti mounted the “Kaji’ Ajpu” stela at the site of Iximché, former capital of the Kaqchikel and site of the first provisional capital of colonial Guatemala (MAM 2013). The stela presents the history of the Kaqchikel people up to the dawn of the 13th B’aqtun in December 2012, a period of over five millennia of existence:

Led by Kab’awil Kumk’u’, on [August 13, 3114 B.C.], the three stones of creation were placed in the sky and [the long count was initiated].
4,649 years later [August 9, 1470 A.D.], the city of Iximché’ was founded by four lords of the Kaqchikel people.
21 years and 249 days later [December 26, 1491], the sun rose on the dawn of the internal revolt caused by the Tuquche’.
32 years and 287 days later [April 24, 1524], the Spanish arrived at Iximché’ and the death of the Maya people began.
16 years and 128 days later [June 7, 1541] the lord Ajposotz’il Kaji’ Imox was killed by hanging, by Tunatiw [the Kaqchikel name for Pedro de Alvarado].
410 years and 247 days later [March 23, 1945], slavery was abolished from the shoulders of the Maya people by [President Juan José] Arévalo.

40 years and 142 days later [January 14, 1985], we achieved recognition in the Political Constitution of the Republic.

28 years and 123 days later [December 21, 2012], 4 Ajpu 3 K’ank’in completes and ends the Roxdajpiq, for which this stela, called Kaji’Aipu, is erected at Iximche’. From our roots, all of us Mayas, we continue reclaiming, demanding. (cf. MAM 2013)

The decision to place the monument at Iximché represents a clear claim to the heritage of the ancient occupants of the site by their living Kaqchikel descendants. The authors adapted the form of Classic Maya glyphs to represent modern spoken Kaqchikel, by including new glyphic representations of sounds that were not marked (and presumably not phonemic values) in ancient texts. They also reproduced the chronological form of narrative, emphasizing the passage of time between events. The process echoes the work of other Maya scholars who draw fresh inspiration from colonial texts. As Judy Maxwell writes:

Maya epistemology imputes truth to ancestral knowledge. … Revitalization, almost by definition, entails re-creation. The modern highland rememberers, elders and ajq’ija’, are refinding, redefining, and reremembering their past as they consult colonial documents and take glyph workshops. These rememberings become the bases of the modern episteme. (Maxwell 2012:245-246)

By combining ancient and living forms of Mayan language to produce the message, the authors simultaneously drew on a genre that holds substantial epistemic authority—the ancestral medium of chronology, complete with glyphic representations of the exact dates of events in the Maya Long Count—while also connecting their spoken language to this millennial tradition, “updating” the corpus of Mayan texts.

41 I substitute Gregorian calendar dates in place of the Maya chalq’ij, or lunar calendar dates.
The absence of history in the social landscape

It has been said that “We erect monuments so that we shall always remember, and build memorials so that we shall never forget” (Danto 1985). In practice, what for one group may be an event (e.g., a victory) to be remembered and celebrated forever, may be for another an event (e.g., a defeat) that should never be forgotten. This tension perhaps adds to the irresolvability of the armed conflict in Guatemala, wherein the military’s “victory” over communism came at the cost of thousands of innocent lives. In either case, the reference to a monument or a memorial is to a physical object that occupies a space for the express purpose of transmitting a message about a past person, action, or event. The objects are at least modified by human artifice, and often they are wholly constructed from scratch, as in the cases of sculptures and buildings. Monuments are often designed to be highly noticeable, even to dominate the local spaces they occupy, and to be permanent fixtures that will stand the test of time. To this end, they are often constructed of concrete, granite, or other hard materials, fashioned into tall or imposing shapes. To some extent, the archetypal monuments follow classical Greco-Roman designs: pillars, obelisks, arches, and realistic sculptures of human forms. However, the twentieth century saw a turn toward modernist and post-modern designs, leaving it debatable whether any new ‘standard’ monumental architecture has replaced the classical forms. Additionally, in Guatemala there are Mesoamerican monumental styles that occasionally serve as inspiration for modern designs. Whatever the form a monument takes, there remain possibilities for explicit exposition of purpose in the form of inscriptions on the monument itself or on nearby markers. As we will see below, monuments in Guatemala have taken various forms but tend to share a number of characteristics.
Among the recommendations for social reconstruction offered by the truth commissions were steps to commemorate the victims of the armed conflict. The CEH called for “the construction of monuments and public parks in memory of the victims at national, regional and municipal levels,” and specified that such monuments should be designed “in accordance with the forms of Mayan collective memory” (CEH 1999a:49). Similarly, ODHAG wrote:

Public, symbolic reparation measures, such as commemorations, monuments, and tributes to the victims, are a necessary contribution to honoring the victims of human rights violations. … The government should promote forms of remembering and honoring victims that can become a permanent fixture in the collective memory of present and future generations; for example, changing the names of plazas, streets, or places in memory of people or events that have a collective significance and epitomize the struggle for human rights. (ODHAG 1999:316)

Unfortunately, such transformations of the monumental landscape have not occurred in Guatemala. In this section, I review studies conducted by other scholars that have shown the lack of large-scale commemorative activity on the part of the State. I also share the results of my own search for memorials to the victims of the war.

Altogether, at least 200,000 Guatemalans lost their lives in the conflict—mostly indigenous villagers in the rural highlands. Another 2 million were displaced at some point during the war, many seeking refuge in southern Mexico or Belize. A national trauma of such massive scale would seem to warrant commemoration. However, the Guatemalan landscape shows few signs of public will to memorialize the tragedy. In 2003, Steinberg and Taylor summarized the contrast between monuments sponsored or hosted by the Catholic Church, serving as the “moral conscience” of the nation, and those built by the military with state support: “These presentations … offer radically different memories of the recently concluded civil war, with the Catholic Church emphasizing the
victim and the military emphasizing victory and power” (Steinberg and Taylor 2003:466). Monuments to victims of the war are focused primarily in a few regions—typically in areas that withstood the worst of the army’s counterinsurgency campaigns in the 1980s. The Ixil Triangle, Rabinal, Huehuetenango, the Ixcán, and Santiago Atitlán are among the few regions of Guatemala where the landscape has been marked by monuments to some degree, where local communities have built reminders of the violence they experienced. Even there, however, monumentalization is not universal; Steinberg and Taylor recount that in the Ixcán:

If one has not read anything about the war and is not specifically looking for landmarks, the violent past and its victims can easily be overlooked. In the Ixcán we visited villages that had been razed by the military in the early 1980s and found that the present-day landscape shows no signs of past conflict; in fact, the military often built model villages on the ashes of destroyed community centers. (Steinberg and Taylor 2003:452)

The military was practicing a strategy long recognized by conquering powers: to pacify a population, erase their historical memory. Building new structures on the site of ancestral communal lands, and forcing people to relocate to these ‘model villages,’ was a dramatic demonstration of the military’s unrivaled power in the Ixcán and elsewhere in war-time Guatemala (Clouser 2009:10-11). The military has constructed its own monuments, for example building roadside memorials to commemorate the engineers who were killed by guerrillas while constructing the Transversal del Norte, a highway through the northern borderlands of the country. Now painted “Caterpillar yellow,” Steinberg and Taylor found that the memorials stood to remind communities of the military’s self-proclaimed role as the stewards of development and security in the region (2003:459).

It can be difficult, even dangerous, to fight for uncovering past secrets and publicly commemorating them. Simone Remijnse (2005) reported that the unexpected excavation of a
clandestine cemetery in Joyabaj, Quiché led to a resurgence of intra-communal violence, reaching the point where participants in the excavation received anonymous death threats warning them to stop their memory work. In another community in southern Quiché, an outspoken leader who helped organize an exhumation was assassinated, leading to the abrupt termination of local efforts to uncover the past: “The spaces for dialogue in that community were thus closed, and the fear of the army and ex-[civil defense] patrollers’ power was restored” (Remijnse 2005).

In other communities, the military has failed to erase or silence memories inscribed in the social landscape, though not for lack of trying. In Río Negro, a Widows and Orphans Committee built a monument to victims of counterinsurgency violence. Within a few days, the monument was blown up and the nearby graves were defaced; the level of destruction indicated that soldiers from a nearby garrison were likely responsible. However, Gidley and Roberts described how “[t]he community responded defiantly, building an even bigger monument that named the killers” (2003:155). Rather than backing down, the community also launched a criminal investigation into the war-time massacres (Stewart 2008:237). Other communities have adopted the strategy of placing memorials inside churches or on church grounds, taking advantage of the tenuous sanctuary that these spaces provide for experiments with public commemoration. The Catholic Churches in Nebaj, San Juan Cotzal, and Santiago Atitlán are among those featuring hundreds of small, hand-hewn crosses inside—each one bearing the name of a victim of violence during the war (Steinberg

42 After a series of legal decisions and appeals, in 2008 five ex-civil patrollers were each sentenced to 780 years in prison for their role in one of the massacres (Kohler and MacLeod 2008).
and Taylor 2003:455-456). The community of Sahakok, Alta Verapaz constructed a memorial before the peace accords were even signed—a large cross and eight marble plaques naming 917 people from 28 nearby communities (Gidley and Roberts 2003:155). In the capital city, the Metropolitan Cathedral of Guatemala features twelve columns along the exterior gate, each holding marble slabs inscribed with the names of victims gathered by the ODHAG researchers for the REMHI report.

In my own search for state-sponsored monuments and memorials, I found two iterations of a monument to the peace, a sculpture symbolizing the national unity achieved by the peace accords (see image below). However, these monuments offered no explanation for the violence, nor did they name the perpetrators. The most significant “Monument to the Peace” is a sculpture created in 1997 by the Guatemalan sculptor Luis Fernando Carlos León. Frieda Morales describes the sculpture:

The work was shaped in bronze … It is composed of a base that includes 16 interlocking arms, representing the united people, who support the weight of liberty, represented by a block of stone, which represents the union of races and the responsibility of the people. Above the base are two left hands lifted toward the sky, in the position of releasing a dove, which symbolizes the peace and liberty. (Morales 2011)

The original, bronze version of the monument was initially located in the Constitutional Plaza, but it was soon moved into the interior courtyard of the National Palace, a site that requires an
admission fee to visit. In 2006, to mark the tenth anniversary of the Peace Accords, a larger replica of the monument was unveiled in the “civic center” plaza located between the Municipal Building and the Tower of Tribunals, the primary court system of Guatemala. However, the significance of this highly visible monument unfortunately seems to be lost on many observers. When I asked Guatemalan friends and contacts about monuments commemorating the internal armed conflict or its end, a few mentioned the original monument located inside the Palace, but no one referenced the larger replica in the civic center. Even cab drivers, the most knowledgeable guides to the urban environment of Guatemala City, would respond to my questions about the “Monument to the Peace” with confusion. At the monument itself, there is no plaque or identification, though a plaque thanks the defunct Banco del Café for a set of sculptures placed in 1998, presumably once occupying the space now filled by the Monument to the Peace.

43 Carlos León was unable to attach a dove to the original monument; instead, the government began a program called the “Ceremonial placing of the white rose,” a daily act of commemoration in which a soldier in dress uniform would place a fresh white rose into the hands each morning; however, this act was also altered. Instead of a daily ritual, the Secretary of Peace invites a distinguished person to replace the rose once each month.
Julia Hendon warns that the “communicative capacity” of monuments “evanesces unless renewed over time” (2010:70). As she notes, monuments “obtrude on our notice so forcefully through their sheer size and mass,” they come to seem “permanent, enduring, immobile, and indestructible” (2010:68). However, she reminds us that remembering is a process, and thus “monuments do not preserve a memory or stand in for that memory but instead serve as a point of focus around which and through which recollection is made possible, a generative and dynamic process” (Hendon 2010:69-70). In the case of Guatemala City’s Monument to the Peace, it seems that a lack of commemorative processes may have threatened the symbolic meaning of this, the most significant monument offered by the state. Most of the extant monuments are local level,
community productions. These can be extremely important for helping communities to unearth the difficult past and open up discussion of truth, justice, and reconciliation. But without corresponding and corroborative efforts at the national level, these local monuments lack larger-scale legitimation and attention.

It is also significant that the transition to democracy in Guatemala did not bring significant changes in the country’s grossly unequal distribution of power. Steven Hoelscher sees a direct link between the static status quo and the persistence of violent crime in Guatemala:

"Because perpetrators have been allowed to commit crimes with impunity, virtually no one has been investigated or prosecuted for committing crimes against humanity. Quite the opposite: many of those primarily responsible for the worst atrocities have retained powerful positions. Thus, despite nearly a half century of civil war and violence, and the ostensible transition to democratic rule following the peace accords, power and social relations in Guatemala remain largely unchanged. The country has remained hostage to shadowy military forces, which long operated within a climate of sweeping impunity (Hoelscher 2008)"

A comparative perspective may be illustrative here. After the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, countries such as Georgia and Estonia experienced dramatic transformations in their political hierarchies. Along with democratization came education reforms and the construction of new monuments to celebrate new post-war national identities. In Latin America, the fall of the dictatorships in the Southern Cone brought revelations of los Desaparecidos and state-sponsored terrorism to light on a national level. Similar public discussions of the past and other commemorative activities have only recently begun in Guatemala. Although the Guatemalan state inflicted the majority of damage during the war, the burden of remembering has been borne almost exclusively by local communities of survivors.
The role of monuments & the burden of forgetting

What is the social cost of the absence of national-level commemoration of the armed conflict? Why should memory activists—or for that matter, any ordinary citizen—find it outrageous that their elected leaders deny the past as it was experienced by hundreds of thousands of victims of state-perpetrated violence? Put differently, what hope can the recuperation of historical memory bring to a violently disrupted society like Guatemala? When a country faces problems like severe inequality, chronic hunger, criminal impunity, and an entrenched lack of respect for indigenous rights and cultures, what could we hope to gain from the construction of new monuments or the revision of historical textbooks? And how could the prosecution of former military officials—many of whom are now in their 70s and 80s—bring greater peace, rather than reigniting conflicts?

One first step to answering these questions would be to consult the response offered by someone who has experienced the process of commemorating the violence that affected her family and community. Antonia Osorio Sánchez is a survivor of a series of attacks by the Guatemalan military on her community of Río Negro, Rabinal, Baja Verapaz during the period 1980-1982 (Stewart 2008). In the years following the attacks, she took part in the community’s efforts to prosecute the perpetrators and to commemorate the victims through the construction of a monument. In her own words:

We build this monument so that our children will know what happened during the violence. We write the names of 177 murdered women and children so that everyone will know who died. We will not let our past be forgotten. And we will not let it be repeated. (in Stewart 2008:238)
In four short sentences, we find four valuable reasons for engaging in commemorative practices. First, the recuperation and maintenance of memory serves an educational and communicative function, spreading knowledge to additional people or generations who did not directly experience the original events. Monuments are able to stand in as participants in public discourse; in some cases, they may represent the voices of those who are no longer present because they are the victims and martyrs that the monument itself commemorates. “Our children” includes children who were made orphans by the violence; for them, the memorial may serve as a reminder of their missing parents and an explanation of the reasons for their absence. It may provide a feeling of closure, a site of memory, and a public recognition of the wrongs of the past.

Second, commemoration helps us to honor the dead. This is one of the defining practices of human beings throughout the world, and in cases like post-war Guatemala, where thousands of people were disappeared or murdered and no bodies were left behind, it can be difficult to lay loved ones to rest properly because there is no body, no grave, and no place to mourn. At times, groups of memory activists channel the frustration and anger over this lack of closure by re-presenting the faces and names of the missing on posters, flyers, banners, and graffiti. These images are often accompanied by demands such as “Alive they were taken, alive we want them returned.” At other times, commemorative practices provide a measure of catharsis to participants, for example by providing a meaningful context for remembering and honoring the dead. Monuments can help to fulfill these needs, to the degree that community members recognize the monument as being truly representative and genuine in its purpose.
Third, the recuperation of historical memory preserves a group’s memory of the past, and in so doing it helps to preserve the group. This solidarity-building function of commemoration can be traced back to the origins of collective memory studies, as discussed in the preceding chapter. Traumatic events like war, forced military service, and the massacre of a village can be profoundly damaging to a community. The process of monumentalization can open a space for public discussion of the past and help the community reach an agreement about how to interpret their shared history—including acknowledging different perspectives—and how to move forward as a group. In practice, the commemorative practices at local levels tend to help individual communities rebuild solidarity in the aftermath of violence between neighbors. However these dialogues can occur at multiple levels, and Guatemalans’ concerns about the lack of national identity would likely be assuaged by turning more attention to the state’s potential in national-level memorialization.

Finally, commemorating past wrongs can be an effective strategy to avoid their repetition in the future. Like the hope encapsulated in the title of the REMHI report, “Never Again [Nunca Más],” historical memory can stand as a moral obstacle to the resurgence of violence. In the case of Guatemala, where counterinsurgency violence reached the level of genocide, every effort to prevent the repetition of history is important. Without historical narratives to contextualize the violence and remind us of what happened—and without substantial changes in the distribution of political representation—Guatemala continues to face the risk of returning to a militarized society. Indeed, the election of a former general as president may suggest that Guatemala is sliding backwards. The path to ‘never again’ requires moving past ‘never’—the claim that genocide never happened, that there is nothing to be remembered.
Chapter 4: Mapping Historical Memory: Textbook Cases

In contrast to the scant official attention paid to monuments and museums, political leaders have focused a lot of energy over the past twenty years on education reforms. Maya communities have been especially active in demanding increased access to schools, and the transformation of pedagogy to better respect their identities and to meet the needs of Maya children. In this chapter, I examine public education in Guatemala over the past generation through a close reading of a collection of social studies textbooks. As with monuments and museums, the selective nature of the histories presented by these books is just as revealing in terms of what details get left out. I identify important curricular changes that followed the Peace Accords, including the simultaneous rise of multiculturalism and further de-emphasis of historical information. Finally, I examine two exceptions to the general pattern of excluding indigenous actors from official histories, revealing how alternative readings of history can slip through centuries of epistemic gatekeeping and reappear in moments of crisis or opportunity.

The absence of history in schools

At the general level, education in Guatemala is hampered by chronic underfunding, insufficient infrastructure, and low teacher-training standards. The Guatemalan state has long maintained paltry funding for education—among the lowest in Latin America, just 1.6% of GDP in
1995, and still comparatively low at 3.2% in 2008 (UNDP 2013a). As a result, the UN ranks Guatemala’s educational infrastructure as the second poorest in the Americas, below neighboring Honduras and El Salvador by 23% and 30%, respectively (UNDP 2013b). The problem is exacerbated by the fact that more than half of public spending per student is allocated at the university level, leaving only 13% for primary education—despite the fact that 80% of primary schools are public and depend on state funding (CIEN & PREAL 2008:26; Oglesby 2007:183).

The effects of this insufficient support were apparent in schools I visited from 2006 to 2011 in K’iche’ communities outside the departmental capitals of Quetzaltenango and El Quiché. These schools were in rural settings, but by national standards they were comparatively wealthy communities, close to urban centers and relatively successful sites of economic diversification and export agriculture. Nevertheless, the schools were typically in rough shape, their buildings in need of repairs and basic upgrades to plumbing or electricity. Teachers and directors in some schools informed me that the Ministry of Education had not supplied updated textbooks in nearly a decade, since the initial push toward bilingual education reform. Some schools operated entirely on provisional budgets provided by foreign NGOs or bilateral aid agencies, and all of the schools—public or private—had received basic provisions such as buildings, furniture, and textbooks from such donor agencies. In the case of some public schools, the only expenses paid by the Guatemalan state were teachers’ salaries; additional items like children’s food and class materials were provided by

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44 For comparison, neighboring El Salvador committed 2% of GDP for education in 1995 and 3.7% in 2008; Jamaica committed 3.7% in 1995 and 6.2% in 2008; Bolivia committed 5.6% in 1995 and 6.3% in 2006; Cuba committed 7.7% in 2000 and 14.1% in 2008 (UNDP 2013a).
family contributions. A recent World Bank study indicated that this situation is common across Guatemala, in urban schools as well as rural; poorer Ladino populations are also consistently underserved by the educational system (Hernandez-Zavala et al. 2006). However there are substantial gaps in school enrollment and completion for females, rural, and indigenous people, with compounding effects. For example, in 2008, rural indigenous women had a dismally low literacy rate of 35% (GHRC 2010). While primary school enrollment levels have increased substantially since the post-conflict influx of foreign aid, the rate of completion for all students remains low at 40%. Graduation from secondary school, the equivalent of high school in the U.S., is below 10%, and pursuit of a university education is even lower (USAID 2014). The structural framework of education does not offer much room for optimism about new national-level policies, as the implementation varies dramatically at the local level, even between classrooms. Max Kintner noted that the supervisors of education reform have “weak protocols for control” (2011). In my interviews with teachers, enthusiasm for the multicultural education reforms was dampened by their top-down implementation: several teachers told me, independently, that the policies were “handed down from above” with no input from the educators on the ground.

In terms of history education more specifically, the situation is even more desperate. Michelle Bellino, in her research on present-day history education, describes how teenage students

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45 The total expenses per child vary between schools and communities, but for some families even the costs of basic supplies like pencils and paper can be prohibitively expensive. Parents are also routinely required to provide financial support for classroom supplies, food or drink, or other supplementary materials; in short, public education in Guatemala is not entirely free (see Kintner 2011).

46 Grade repetition is so common that primary school enrollment figures tend to be well over 100%; however, USAID estimates that 96% of school-age children are now enrolled in primary schools (2014).
would invariably respond to her questions about history with claims that “We have no historical memory” and that “In Guatemala, there is no historical consciousness” (2013:64). Bellino persevered in her search and discovered that there are practices of knowledge production about historical memory in classrooms, despite students’ ingrained skepticism about their own epistemic authority. I also found that most of my interviewees were doubtful or excessively self-critical about their levels of historical knowledge. My historical memory interviews (discussed in more detail in the following chapter) were designed to emphasize that there were no “right or wrong answers,” and that the exercise was foremost a means of organizing ideas. This approach helped to relieve the pressure of being evaluated, and led to many fruitful conversations about Guatemala’s history. In part, young Guatemalans’ doubts and critiques of historical knowledge are reflections of the lack of political will toward revitalizing historical narratives in the aftermath of the internal armed conflict, and the obsolescence of the centuries-old official histories that originated in the colonial era.

To understand the content of historical narratives in curricular materials, it is helpful to contextualize the changing purpose of schooling over time. Guatemalan historian Tania Sagastume has explored the trajectory and changing purposes of history education in Guatemala over the past two centuries (2005). She traced the origins of historical education as “an instrument of national unification and formation of citizens,” to the period of revolution. Newly-independent Guatemala, like other new nations in the Americas, sought to establish its own national history apart from its previous colonial identity. A crucial part of this process was the designation of September 15, 1821, the date of Guatemala’s declared independence from Spain, as the dawn of a new era. The early historical narratives also naturalized the hierarchical order of society by emphasizing the superiority
of the “hegemonic white minority” over “an indigenous majority that is defined invariably as ignorant, and an intermediate group formed by Ladinos” (Sagastume 2005). That this official hierarchy was sustainable for so long was a reflection partly of the absence of the popular sectors in Guatemala’s struggle for independence: unlike the Bolivarian republics or the United States or Mexico, Guatemalan independence came largely through diplomatic and political maneuvers by “a group of peninsulares [colonists born in Spain] and criollos” without any struggle by the popular sectors. Even today, the highest echelons of the business and political class remain a discrete group of families that are able to trace their lineages to the 17th century or earlier (Casaús Arzú 2010).

For Guatemalans of indigenous descent, education was restricted initially to the children of former elites, who were seen as useful agents for mediating between colonial authorities and the indigenous labor force. This vision of the function of education—assimilating indigenous citizens to serve the ruling class—remained in place for centuries. Gustafson described the analogous function of schools in Bolivia, which followed “archaic, colonial senses of education as a process of racial and cognitive evolution away from Indianness that never fully allowed for equal status. Schools were seen to move indios on a track between savagery … and civility” (Gustafson 2009:18-19). According to Sagastume, the October Revolution brought the strongest attempts at revitalizing the national historical narrative, yet even these revolutionary reforms maintained the purpose of history education as a tool for assimilationist nation-building through “ladinization” (Adams 1994). As late
as 1982, one of the most influential institutions of the state\textsuperscript{47} saw its goal as the “ladinization of the Ixil [Maya] population until it disappears as a cultural sub-group foreign to the national way of being” (in Schirmer 2002:57). The military’s Operation Ixil plan even offered an operative definition of ladinization: “[O]ne must understand it to mean \textit{castellanizar}\textsuperscript{48}, to pressure the population to use Spanish language and culture, to suppress the distinctive indigenous dress and other exterior displays of differentiating oneself from the group” (in Schirmer 2002:57). Ronald Wilhelm notes that similar pressures were exerted through the national curriculum, which promoted “positive images of the Spanish as bearers of ‘civilization’ to the indigenous… offer[ing] only limited mention of any historic or continuing Maya influence in the development of the Guatemalan national culture” (1994:181).

After the fall of democracy and the rise of military dictatorships, the education system was reformed to de-emphasize historical knowledge in favor of more “practical” subjects. In the place of history classes or textbooks, Guatemalan students after 1956 were introduced to a broader “social studies” curriculum. Sagastume writes that these texts—which were the materials that most working-age, professional Guatemalans today were most likely to have experienced in their school

\textsuperscript{47} The military’s new “Civil Affairs” department, which was charged with re-integrating insurgents and guerrilla supporters into the nation through re-education programs (cf. Schirmer 2002).

\textsuperscript{48} Literally, “to hispanicize;” this term appeared frequently in my interviews with teachers about the differences between education today, and their own memories of school as children. The former policies of \textit{castellanización} meant offering instruction only in Spanish, despite the difficulty this posed for children who had never been exposed to it before entering the classroom; several teachers pointed out that this contributed to the high drop-out rates among students even at the primary school level. Interviewees also recalled how \textit{castellanización} often led to teachers punishing and publicly humiliating children whenever they spoke in their maternal Mayan languages, experiences that are still remembered painfully today.
days—were defined by “a gradual simplification of contents which, together with the introduction of illustrations, tended to present Guatemalan history as a disconnected series of personages, dates, and events” (2005). Although education later underwent important reforms, including a wide-reaching campaign for bilingual, multicultural education in the 1990s, the substitution of vague “citizen formation” curriculum in place of historical knowledge has persisted and even been accelerated. Sagastume critiques such classes for their inability to contribute to the project of constructing a more inclusive national narrative:

There is a lot of discussion of citizen rights, but not much deeper thought into the aspects that unite Guatemalans across the Four Peoples described in the Peace Accords. … The academic textbooks and educational legislation tend to emphasize the differences between the two [sic] groups, leaving aside the search for common characteristics that would permit us to come to terms with ourselves as Guatemalans before the world, without this implying our renunciation of cultural identity or cultural unification. The Guatemalan person is defined in the school textbooks in terms of Geography and cultural patrimony. However, beyond the sharing of a territory and having similar rights and obligations as citizens, the texts fail to construct a national imaginary—one which the diverse ethnic groups are able to feel they identify with. (Sagastume 2005)

Although Sagastume does not offer a prescription for what a satisfactory, unifying narrative would include, her frustration seems to echo the sentiments that I encountered from many intellectuals: Guatemala needs a shared identity, but how can anyone understand the country without knowing about its past?

**Textbook cases: Social Studies and the reproduction of racism**

Although the “social studies turn” greatly reduced the time and resources spent on teaching history, one subject area that remains a perennial favorite component in such curricula is “the
ancient Maya.” Despite indications that the situation is changing—including in the textbook projects I discuss in chapter 8—the tradition has been to glorify the accomplishments of the “Classic” period Maya, whose monumental architecture is proudly embraced as patriotic icons of national identity, while tacitly rejecting the notion that present-day Maya peoples are the genuine descendants and bearers of this millennial civilization. In this section, I will demonstrate how these texts encourage the reproduction of discrimination against living Maya alongside the appropriation of their images and heritage for assimilationist nation-building. By comparing social studies textbooks from different years, we might identify certain questions that help to define the parameters of national history and identity.

One of the most influential series of social studies textbooks in the previous generation was prepared by Óscar de León Palacios, who left behind a publishing house that continues to produce educational materials. The 1988 edition for sixth-graders opens with a riddle, asking what “giant” creature has been able to “lift a train without the least effort” and “has eyes that can see the invisible,

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49 Sagastume points to the early 1970s as the origin of the adoption of these terms for delineating periods of Maya history, a practice borrowed from archaeological discourse (2005). The terms reify a chronological trajectory in which the highest point for Maya civilization occurred over a millennium ago, followed by a “collapse” and “postclassic” decline into the colonial period, which lies outside the interests of most archaeologists. The origin of the practice of using these terms appears to date back to the earliest American archaeologists, including Franz Boas and Manuel Gamio (George Bey, personal communication).

50 For example, what domains of knowledge are included under the purview of “social studies” as conceptualized by each textbook author? What portion of the text is devoted to discussing Europeans and creoles, compared to other groups? How are the relationships between ancient and living Mayas defined? What are the moments in Guatemalan history that deserve the most explanation? How are certain controversial events and actors described, such as President Jacobo Arbenz and his CIA-backed successor, Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas? Finally, do the texts make any mention of the conflict that was wreaking havoc across the country at the time of their publication? Or—to borrow from our Bakhtinian toolkit—might we identify examples of “hidden dialogicality” wherein the texts respond to these questions without explicitly invoking them?
ears that can hear people speaking on the other side of the world”: the answer, of course, is that “This giant is man” (León 1988). With this preface, León embarks on an account of the social evolution of humankind from “living like all the animals” to our current state of technological wonders (1988:4). The textbook’s narrative approach is to focus on “great men” and “great civilizations,” which are defined through a narrow focus on Old World civilizations.51

León’s greatest interest was clearly ancient civilizations, which account for nearly half of the text; however, he makes no mention of New World civilizations such as the Aztec or Maya. Altogether, Europe is the focus of more than half of the textbook, and one could be forgiven for assuming the textbook was prepared for a Spanish classroom. Only near the end of the textbook does León at last provide some description of Central American and Guatemalan history, albeit a curious selection: He devotes 2 pages to a description of the invasion of Central America by North American filibusters in the 19th century, another page explaining Guatemala’s legal right to the territory of Belize, and less than a full page describing the constitutional form of government in Guatemala.52 The search for a vision of Guatemalan identity in León’s vision suggests that history is a domain of knowledge filled with stories about European actors, which were founded on the

51 More precisely, of the book’s 140 pages, Greece receives 17 pages, and the history of ancient Rome, “another of the great Western civilizations,” unfolds over 15. A further 30 pages span European history from the middle ages through the end of World War I, and near the end of the book León presents 13 more pages under sections such as “things of old Europe,” “other things about Europe,” and “more European things.” Finally, León devotes 6 pages each to Asia, “the mysterious land,” and Africa, “the strange and savage continent” (León 1988).

52 These are curious choices; the publication of this edition followed the ratification of a new constitution by less than three years, so it stands to reason that this was still a salient issue when León prepared the text. Additionally, the 1985 constitution included an article about the Belize situation, calling on Congress to resolve the government’s official position (Article 19 of Title 8). As to why the majority of León’s sparse treatment of Guatemala was focused on filibusters, it is possible that he used the example of these 19th century invaders as a symbol of more contemporary U.S. intervention in political affairs.
classical sources of Western civilization, chiefly Greece and Rome. As these were the only peoples worth mentioning, it stands to reason that Guatemala follows their legacy today. Other places and peoples are “strange,” “mysterious,” or ignored altogether.

Later textbooks published during the period of the internal armed conflict provide more information from which we may draw some conclusions about the “official histories” being promulgated (or allowed) by the military government. Unlike León’s Eurocentric focus, Elsy de Cortés (1990) focuses on Central America from the very first page. Aside from an extensive appendix of maps, and a three-page list of such items as the national bird/flag/anthem/tree, etc., and the rights of children and parents, Cortés’ text is remarkably historical, and focused almost entirely on Guatemala. Cortés writes about the Maya only in the past tense, referring only to pre-contact Maya; she often uses the passive voice when discussing the Maya, reserving the active voice for Europeans and creoles (cf. Wertsch 1998:92). Consider the following sentence, from the opening page of the book:

**Pre-Columbian epoch:** This epoch spans from the ancient times until the coming of the Spanish. When the Spanish came to the Americas, they found these lands inhabited by indigenous groups, and in Central America they also encountered different groups: in Guatemala these were: the [K’iche’s], [Kaqchikeles], Mames y [Tzutujiles]. (Cortés 1990:1)

We can see that even in introducing a period that, by her definition, did not include European actors, the author relies on the Spanish as the active agents. It was the Spanish who came and found, while the indigenous groups did not inhabit; rather, the lands were inhabited by them. She dramatically reduces the diversity of indigenous groups by listing only four of the 22 Mayan linguistic groups now recognized in Guatemala alone; it is possible there was even more ethnic and
linguistic diversity at the time of Alvarado’s arrival. Cortés provides only 5 and a half pages (or about 10% of the total text) to discuss the ancient Maya, though her account explicitly limits this category to the pre-contact civilization, which was “already in decadence” by the arrival of the Spanish (1990:2). Her final comments about the Maya, before moving on, were that “the indigenous were very superstitious. Of their civilization, what remains are ruins,” followed by a list of former cities now commonly regarded as archaeological sites (1990:6).

The colonial period is clearly the richest in historical detail, from Cortés’ perspective: at 27 pages, it accounts for more than half of the total textbook. She presents the historical narrative through the life stories of key personages: Christopher Columbus begins the story, with abundant trivial details about his university studies, his family life, and the highlights of each of his four voyages to the Americas. The next protagonist is Pedro de Alvarado, the conqueror and first colonial governor of Guatemala. Cortés uses Alvarado’s life story as the vehicle for introducing other famous people and important events in the intervening pages: for example, she includes Friar Bartolomé de las Casas in her narrative by noting that when Alvarado returned to Guatemala from a trip abroad, “he learned that a friar … had peacefully conquered” the region known today as Baja and Alta Verapaz (1990:25). Even more effectively than Léon’s explicit focus on “great men,” Cortés’ literary strategy presents Columbus and Alvarado as enormously influential actors who played integral roles in nearly every event that transpired during their lifetimes.

Shortly after recounting the details of Alvarado’s death, Cortés moves on to the final section of her textbook: Guatemalan history from independence until “our days,” which is not entirely accurate since her timeline ends 20 years before the date of publication (1990:1). In describing the
process of independence, Cortés initially reifies Guatemala as the agent: “When our Guatemala realized that it was capable of governing itself, it tried to gain independence, as other nations had done, such as Mexico and some [nations] in South America” (1990:33). However, she then reveals the actual historical agents by listing several reasons why “the patricians” decided to choose independence, beginning with: “the poor treatment that the Spanish gave our Indians” (1990:33). This claim seems disingenuous, given that the most direct beneficiaries of the colonial hierarchy were local creole landowners who utilized indigenous labor under various forms of slavery and indentured servitude, a system of exploitation that endured for over a century after independence (Grandin et al. 2011:107-110). Even the construction of her claim—“our Indians”—betrays a paternalistic, possessive view of the indigenous population “as state or hacienda property” (cf. Gustafson 2002:289). Cortés also includes the reason “that in public jobs, preference was given to those born in Spain [peninsulares], even though those born in Guatemala [creoles] were the sons of Spaniards and were capable of the work” (Cortés 1990:33). With this comment, Cortés reveals the fundamentally colonial and racial limits of political agency and participation in Guatemala, right up to and including the moment of independence. There was, presumably, no consideration of granting public positions to the “mixed”-race Ladinos, much less Mayas or other populations of non-European descent.

Regarding the act of independence itself, Cortés again provides a rather detailed and compelling narrative account of the events. She explains that the highest leaders under the colonial government, including Carlos Urrutia, the highest colonial official in Guatemala, were opposed to independence through the beginning of the 19th century, preferring to wait until Guatemalans had
more experience at self-rule. The decisive turn of events came on September 14, 1821, when a letter arrived with news that the province of Chiapas had joined Mexico in its war of independence from Spain. Chiapas was part of Guatemala until that point, and Urrutia and company feared that it would be lost to Mexico permanently unless Guatemala joined in declaring independence. An emergency meeting was called on the following day, and by Cortés’ account, the debate over whether to declare independence or wait till a later date was very close. However, “almost at that moment, they heard from the plaza the shouts of joy from the people, which began to fill the entire palace” (Cortés 1990:35). The national heroine Dolores Bedoya de Molina, a wife and mother to men participating in the assembly, had rallied people to the plaza by going door-to-door in the streets of the capital, sharing the news that Independence had come. Thus she forced the assembly’s hand: “All the people discussing in the chamber, when they heard the happiness of the people, saw the necessity of declaring independence” (Cortés 1990:35). As a sign of the ambivalence of these founding fathers, the man chosen to craft the declaration of independence—José Cecilio del Valle—was among those preferring to remain loyal to Spain. Nevertheless, he consented to the request of his peers and drafted the act.

The historical scope of Cortés’ book extends up until the 1970 “election” of Colonel Carlos Arana Osorio. However, in dramatic contrast to her engaging stories of discovery, colonialism, and independence, the level of detail provided in her account drops sharply after the independence period, growing shorter with each period such that she covers the entire 20th century in just three paragraphs. For example, consider her treatment of the volatile period of the October Revolution and counter-revolution, up to the last event recorded:
Juan José Arévalo … took possession of power on March 15, 1945, turning over command at the end of his six year term to Jacobo Arbenz on March 15, 1951, but [Arbenz] did not finish his term because he was overthrown by the armed movement led by the colonel Carlos Castillo Armas in July of 1954. Carlos Castillo Armas was assassinated the night of July 26, 1957. … On July 1, 1966, Julio César Méndez Montenegro was elected popularly. When Montenegro ended his presidency, he turned over command to Colonel Carlos Manuel Arana Osorio on July 1, 1970, who also was popularly elected[sic]” (Cortés 1990:47)

In covering this recent period in history, Cortés resorts to simply listing the series of rulers, including each of the interim rulers who served brief periods between one overthrown or assassinated leader and the next. She offers no details whatsoever of what each of these presidents accomplished—no mention of the revolutionary fervor under Arévalo and Arbenz, or the return of military authoritarianism after Castillo Armas’ coup d’état.

It may be noteworthy that her final sentence ends without punctuation, an anomaly in an otherwise carefully drafted text: could Cortés have intended to subtly mark the preceding claim as problematic? It is doubtful that many citizens considered Arana’s election legitimately democratic; as the military regime’s chosen figurehead, he ushered in the period of intense counter-insurgency and increased military intervention in public services and private enterprise, including the creation of the Bank of the Army (Piedra Santa 2010). It is also noteworthy that the textbook does not include more recent events: there were five additional presidents between Arana and the publication of the textbook in 1990, including the return of civilian rule in 1986 with Vinicio Cerezo. It therefore
seems likely that the Cortés text was republished without substantial revision in the two decades since the Arana presidency.53

Manuel Salguero’s 1993 textbook illustrates the effects of later reforms that further de-emphasized the role of history in social studies by requiring the inclusion of certain topics such as “the family.” Where Cortés’ textbook provided a one-page glossary of terms, Salguero devotes an entire chapter. He defines “the family as the base of society,” including six pages of details such as kinship terms, legal rights, the dangers and causes of divorce, and a worksheet for students to chart their own family trees. However, set apart at the end of these descriptions is a section about “the indigenous family”:

**Family:**

From the economic point of view, in our country the indigenous family constitutes a unit of production for its own consumption, and all of the members contribute to the work: the husband, woman, and children [el marido, la mujer y los hijos].

**Birth and death:**

Are events of great importance for indios. They especially show interest in offspring. Pregnant indias are attended by midwives in the majority of cases. When the child is born the priest (inappropriately called a witchdoctor [brujo]) prays to ensure that the child has a long life and good luck. Mothers care personally for their children and in order to avoid the evil eye [mal de ojo] (another of their beliefs), they cover the child’s face with a wool cap. When someone dies, they practically do not mourn for any time at all; the following day they continue their habitual routines. In the cemetery chapels they frequently pray to the dead to ask them for protection. (Salguero 1993:25)

Already in the first paragraph of the first textbook among our sample that mentions living Maya (though in Salguero’s vocabulary, they are “indigenous” or the more pejorative “indio”), we can see

53 Although I do not have other editions of Cortés on hand, I can confirm that several other textbook publishers routinely provide annual re-editions without substantive changes, merely shifting contents around so the page numbers no longer correspond.
why Maya scholars have been so critical of the depiction of indigenous culture in Guatemalan textbooks (cf. Montejo 2005, and below). Salguero presents a very narrowly limited view of indigenous peoples as rural, poor, and superstitious. First, indigenous families are set apart from all of the previous descriptions of familial roles and rights, indicating that these ‘normal’ characteristics do not apply to them. Instead, the indigenous family is reduced to an economic function of subsistence agriculture. This obfuscation ignores the facts that Maya agricultural laborers put most of the food on Guatemalans’ tables (Rojas Lima 1992), that the export economy, foreign exchange through tourism and remittances, and the vast informal economy are all heavily dependent on indigenous peoples’ participation, and that Mayas had gained participation in virtually every sector of civil society by the time Salguero’s book was published.

In the next paragraph, Salguero manages to invoke the specter of indigenous “witchdoctors” while pointing out that this is an inappropriate term, thus shielding his claim from critique. As if that were not enough to paint indigenous people as having exotic superstitions, he then claims that indigenous mothers guard their children from the evil eye, “another of their beliefs”—though this superstition was likely introduced by the Spanish54—and that they pray to the dead for supernatural interventions. Clearly, if such people “practically do not mourn” their dead, their visits to cemetery chapels could not be seen as a form of commemoration or communion. Salguero’s comments about Maya responses to death do not correspond whatsoever to the bereavement practices that several of my colleagues and I have witnessed. Death of a loved one among the K’iche’ is met with a

54 See (Baer et al. 2006) on persistence of mal de ojo beliefs in contemporary Spain.
community-level response, including a formal wake attended by local and visiting relatives, prescribed keening practices, public interment ceremonies attended by virtually the entire community, and a large gathering to share food and express solidarity with the bereaved. Salguero’s mischaracterization, lacking any references to outside sources, reproduces prejudice as scientific or historical fact.

Salguero reserves the final section of his book for historical narratives, beginning with the liberal reforms and the Democratic Spring, then skipping back in time to pre-contact Mesoamerica through the colonial period and independence. The most recent event covered in his account is Castillo Armas’ ascension to the presidency in 1954. Unlike Cortés, Salguero offers a description of the Arévalo and Arbenz presidencies, which he evaluates positively. He attributes Arbenz’s fall to the Cold War environment and U.S. intervention, spurred by the United Fruit Company’s reaction to the Law of Agrarian Reform (Salguero 1993:78). He reserves critique of the Castillo Armas presidency, only noting that it began with an armed insurrection against Arbenz.

Salguero’s description of pre-contact Mesoamerican culture consists of a list of common regional cultural characteristics such as pyramidal architecture and the 18-month calendar. His description of Maya civilization, entirely in past tense, clearly avoids linking the ancient Maya with contemporary indigenous peoples. In presenting the “Conquista de Guatemala,” Salguero notes that the Spaniards were accompanied by Tlaxcaltec allies from Mexico, and that their military campaign was focused on urban centers; thus “the indigenous masses that lived dispersed were at the margins of the fight” (1993:87). This very point—the recognition that Maya resistance fought not just “a few” Spanish but their entire mercenary army of Mexican allies—has been one of the highlights in
recent Maya calls for reforms of history (Montejo 2005), and Salguero here presaged many of these critiques by several years. However, he describes Alvarado setting off to conquer Guatemala accompanied by “300 men and many auxiliary indios,” which simultaneously obscures the massive extent of Tlaxcaltec involvement and implies that these indigenous men were not equivalent to the unmarked “men” of European descent.55

Salguero’s reading of the “conquest” is likewise contextualized through European frames of reference. For example, he presents sections defining the religious and political categories that structured the conquistadors’ approach, such as the “Papal Donation,” the right of the Holy See to claim any newly discovered lands and to grant possession to the Spanish Crown at its discretion (1993:88). He also describes how the conquistadors’ violent subjugation of indigenous peoples was a form of “Just War” because “the natives were designated as pagan sinners, vicious barbarians” who were to be brought under the spiritual command of the Church by any means necessary (Salguero 1993:89). Although “the natives opposed the Spanish dominion with great force,” in the end they fell because the Spaniards were superior “in weaponry, tactics, and shrewdness” (Salguero 1993:89). In the colonial era, the role of indigenous peoples was limited to functioning as the objects of forces initiated by European and creole actors: the repartimiento and encomienda systems of tribute labor.

Salguero mentions the pro-indigenous causes of Friar Bartolomé de las Casas, but here too the indigenous are not agents, but passive beneficiaries of a peninsular’s agency. Finally, as a symbolic

55 Laura Matthew concluded that “a conservative estimate” of the level of participation of Mexican allies in the conquest of Central America would be in the range of 10,000 to 12,000 warriors, “oftentimes accompanied or followed by their families and friends” in order to settle the newly conquered lands (2012:90).
precursor to Guatemalan independence, Salguero points to the uprising in Totonicapán led by Atanasio Tzul and Lucas Aguilar—the only indigenous individuals in the entire text who are identified by name as agentive subjects.56

The last of the pre-Peace Accord textbooks was published by Roberto Arriaza months before the Peace Accords were signed. Like Cortés and Salguero, Arriaza (1996) devotes entire chapters to discussing the colonial period and the events surrounding Guatemalan independence. However, Arriaza’s textbook differs in two substantial ways: 1) the first quarter of the text is devoted to briefly introducing each country in the Western hemisphere, and 2) the amount of text provided for describing pre-contact American civilizations is on par with the other chapters, rather than a minor fraction as in Cortés and Salguero. Indeed, Arriaza’s textbook as a whole contains far more textual information than the other authors.57 For example, he includes short surveys of Aztec and Incan civilization in addition to a longer treatment of the ancient Maya. “Reading sections” at the end of each chapter draw primary source material from popular publications like Newsweek.

Despite these differences, Arriaza’s text follows the same patterns as the earlier authors. The ancient Maya civilization is worthy of description, but not connected to the living descendants at all.

56 Salguero names Tecún Umán and Cahi Imox as “symbolic representatives” of the K’iche’s and Kaqchikels, respectively; however he does not describe their participation in battle or politics.
57 In part, the differences in scope and information density may be attributed to the intended grade levels for each textbook. Cortés (1990) was designed for 4th grade, León (1988) for 6th, Salguero (1993) for 7th grade (1st básico), and Arriaza (1996) for 8th grade (2nd básico). The estimated age difference between a student reading Cortés and Arriaza would be 4 years, though in reality very few students (<10%) attend school past 6th grade and less than half of all students complete 6th grade (USAID 2014). Technical differences may also correspond to the increasingly stringent standards for educational materials passed by the Guatemalan Congress and implemented by the Ministry of Education, including the re-organization of grade levels in 1991 and the adoption of “environmental education” in 1996 (Mineduc 2009).
The other noteworthy periods of history are the discovery of America and establishment of the colony, and the context of Guatemalan independence. The scope of Arriaza’s narrative is far wider, not only for the profiles of other countries but for the inclusion of figures such as George Washington and the Cuban José Martí in his chapter on the context of independence movements in the Americas. There are no named indigenous actors aside from Tupac Amaru of Peru, who Arriaza introduces by his “true name,” José Gabriel Condorcanqui, and refers to his “so-called” indigenous ancestry (1996:132). The textbook does not mention any historical events after the 1820s, and in its wide-ranging scope on pan-American independence movements, it does not provide a specifically Guatemalan national history. Arriaza sees the Guatemalan independence movement as part of a wider “spirit of independence” that swept the hemisphere, choosing to ignore the absence of popular sector involvement in the Guatemalan case.

Education after the Peace Accords: From history to civics

Textbooks published after 1996 usually featured financial support and technical assistance from USAID or other bilateral aid agencies. Consequently, these books tend to have higher production values, including more color photography, “interactive” components such as cut-out construction figures, and they tend to include more pages and material altogether. The flood of foreign donations for educational projects also allowed new publishers to start up and gave existing publishers an incentive to begin including curricular materials among their offerings. As a result, there was greater variety of textbook choices in the decade after the Peace Accords, though there are signs that the publishing market has cut production drastically in the wake of the global recession.
that began in 2008. In this section, I will briefly examine four textbooks published after the Peace Accords, focusing especially on how they differ from the earlier cases.

The defining characteristics of post-Peace Accord education are illustrated by two textbooks published in consecutive years by Editorial Santillana, the world’s largest Spanish-language publisher of curricular materials (Galindo 2004; 2005). The Santillana books may be more broadly regional in focus that other examples, owing to the company’s transnational production methods—for example, the 2005 edition includes references to online resources for further information, but the URLs are at web servers with the Mexican .mx top-level domain, indicating that they presumably present the same material for students in several of Santillana’s “markets.” The increased emphasis on neighboring countries is present in all four textbooks—at most, the entire Western hemisphere, and at least listing Guatemala’s Central American neighbors.

Similar to Arriaza’s 1996 textbook, the social studies curriculum has grown to include numerous topics besides history, which in turn has been reduced to an ever smaller section. The 2004 edition of Santillana’s textbook continued the practice, found in Arriaza, of describing Aztec, Inca, and other North American indigenous peoples alongside the pre-contact Maya; however, these groups were again relegated to the past (and described only with past tense verbs), severing the link with living Maya peoples.58 The 2005 edition repeats this pattern, but reduces the description of the Maya to equal the same number of pages as the Aztec and Inca, no longer privileging the civilization

58 However, one minor difference is the note that 2.5 million “indios” still live “on reservations” in the United States (Galindo 2004:70). In my own interactions with K’iche’ school children in the department of Quiché, students were surprised to learn that the United States has an indigenous population.
linked with Guatemala’s cultural patrimony (Galindo 2005). The newer version also continues the trend toward minimizing historical information altogether; less than half of the 2004 edition and barely one-third of the 2005 edition are focused on historical information. Instead, the books focus on topics such as geography, climate, the universe, and especially the capitalist mode of production: the books explain how citizens’ jobs fall into categories of production, resource extraction, and retailing consumer goods (Galindo 2004; 2005).

The history that remains in these textbooks is not at all specific to Guatemala, but deals more broadly with the Hispanic world. For example, the discussion of colonialism in the 2005 edition is nearly as equally focused on the Spanish experience as on its colonies, discussing the role of inflation in weakening the empire; the specific colony of Guatemala is not mentioned at all. Columbus’ discovery of the New World is likewise presented without reference to Guatemala, and Guatemalan independence is portrayed as another case of a regional pattern. As in Arriaza’s textbook, descriptions of U.S. independence and the French revolution set the stage for the revolutionary fervor sweeping the Americas. The Santillana books do, however, briefly mention both the 1954 overthrow of Arbenz and the period of dictatorship and “return to democratic rule,” and the 2005 edition even includes a photograph of guerrilla and government representatives meeting for Guatemala’s Peace Accords (Galindo 2005:174). However, in both cases the events are contextualized within broad regional patterns, generally over-determined by the interests and interventions of the United States in the context of the Cold War. The other textbooks—one
published by the Ministry of Education itself (MinEduc 2000), and the other marking Editorial
Etamanik’s foray into textbooks⁵⁹ (Arathoon 2001)—are even more devoid of historical content. In
the handful of pages that they reserve for history, they focus on the periods from colonialism until
independence, and then skip the past two centuries entirely, presenting “Central America today”
through maps of neighboring countries and definitions of democracy and illustrations of national
flowers and trees. Their historical narratives are thus echoes of earlier texts, presented in an even
more abbreviated form.

Elizabeth Oglesby reached the same conclusions about the dearth of historical education in
2007, after surveying dozens of textbooks and visiting numerous schools around the country. As a
former researcher for the preparation of the CEH report in the 1990s, she was especially dismayed to
find that the contents of that report had still not been incorporated into schools’ curricula
(2007:180). She suggests that this was partly a consequence of the “inaccessibility” of the original
12-volume report, which requires mediation on the part of actors who may be indifferent or even
hostile to the message it conveyed. Oglesby concluded that “future truth commissions … should
produce their own didactic guidelines” (2007:194).

In addition to the decreasing attention to historical information in post-Peace Accords
education, another important, common characteristic has been the explicit turn toward multicultural
perspectives on ethnicity, citizenship, and nationhood. This new policy is reflected both in explicit

⁵⁹ Eta’manik means “learning” in K’iche,’ yet despite the Mayan name, this publisher appeared to be a Ladino-run
business. They were no longer in operation—at least by this name—during the period of my fieldwork.
text, as well as more subtle clues such as the illustrations that accompany the text. For example, Arathoon (2001) presents Rigoberta Menchú as an important Guatemalan historical figure, illustrated alongside fellow Nobel Prize winner Miguel Angel Asturias (2001:18; see image in Appendix). The MinEduc text provides a multicultural contrast to Salguero’s earlier critical views of indigenous families by using an illustration of a Maya bride and groom, surrounded by family, to illustrate matrimony (2000:20; see image in Appendix). The full spirit of this multicultural turn may be best represented by the “anthropologist workshop” activity included near the end of the 2005 Santillana text:

The Conquista and the colony had a very strong effect on indigenous cultures, from which they have not yet recuperated. … Today, these peoples fight for the conservation of their identity and for the respect of their culture. They also struggle in order to not be discriminated against, and to be treated equally with the descendants of the Europeans, with the same rights and obligations. The anthropologist can dedicate herself to investigate and come to understand aspects of the American cultures, with the goal being that the population learns to value the identity and cultural richness that their countries possess. (Galindo 2005:189)

The inclusion of such language signals a profound shift away from earlier policies of ladinization, toward a process that has been described by Santiago Bastos, Aura Cumes, and Leslie Lemus as “Mayanization,” in reference to the primary “other” culture that is being incorporated into the new multicultural national imaginary. These scholars launched a multi-year research project that included dozens of researchers and hundreds of participants, with the goal of discovering the variety of ways in which the “multicultural ideology and discourse” of Mayanization plays out in everyday life for Guatemalans (Bastos & Cumes 2007; Bastos et al. 2007). Demetrio Cojti describes the situation as a transition away from a nationalist project that sought to assimilate indigenous peoples
into a solitary, European-based national identity. Since the mid-1980s, a new paradigm of “normative multiculturalism” had been adopted with the goal of positively evaluating indigenous identity, and incorporating Mayas and other non-Ladino citizens into the nation-state without requiring the sacrifice of their ethnic, linguistic, and cultural practices (Cojtí 2007).

It is worth emphasizing these positive aspects of the multicultural turn in Guatemalan education, as well as the importance of having multiple publishing houses involved in the production of curricular materials. Just as each social studies textbook represents a distinctive “cultural tool” that teachers and students use in their discussions about history, citizenship, and national identity, the same could be said about the National Base Curriculum (CNB) developed by the Ministry of Education to guide what topics should be included in such textbooks. 60 Shifts in official discourse may mark profound, yet less visible transformations in the conceptualization of the state itself. Gustafson showed how the revolutionary transformations in Bolivia that included Evo Morales’ rise to power were preceded by “a dramatic shift from prior ‘official’ discourse,” including the Constitutional revision that “declare[d] Bolivia a ‘multiethnic and pluricultural’ nation” (2002:268). In the Bolivian case, educational reforms were foremost among the emerging demands that “unsettled long-standing ideas about relations among schooling, power, and indigeneity in the country, bringing a new politics of knowledge to the center of struggles over the state itself”

60 The CNB applies to all schools in Guatemala, public and private, and outlines the topics to be covered in each semester, from pre-primary (kindergarten) through secondary education. The CNB provides a highly centralized, top-down framework for pedagogical programming in schools nationwide. Efforts by memory activists to incorporate more material about the history of the internal armed conflict into the CNB would thus, in theory, apply to every student in the country. In practice, as the preceding description of the Guatemalan school system should indicate, actual implementation of education policy varies dramatically.
While Guatemala may be unlikely to experience such a profound political renovation in the near future, the possibility for sparking such change is often on the minds of the activist-intellectuals who press for changes in education, and for new narratives that redefine Guatemala’s past and future.

Notwithstanding improvements with the multicultural turn, the predominant image of Guatemalan history painted by social studies textbooks is one that continually focuses on European features at the expense of other possible protagonists and narrative frames. Indigenous Guatemalans were typically excluded or ignored in the earlier accounts, and when they were included, as in the Salguero example, the results are worthy of critique. The Kaqchikel historian Edgar Esquit has described the “outsider-written” national histories that “in other moments” were used to “foster a vision of the Maya and of indigenous people in general as backward, childlike (*mozos*), uncivilized peasants subject to integration and incapable of realizing […] development without outside intervention” (Esquit 2011:204). Similarly, Victor Montejo, a Jakaltek Maya anthropologist, has traced the role that North American anthropologists have played in producing “scientific knowledge” that is subsequently “taken at full face value and placed in primary-school textbooks in order to fulfill racist and classist national agendas that perpetuate social control and intellectual domination” (2005:39). Montejo points out the particularly outsized influence of Sylvanus
Morley\textsuperscript{61}, an early Mayanist whose influence began over a century ago, yet remains a common bibliographic reference even today:

[Morley’s] ethnographic work … has been appropriated by the Guatemalan educational system and placed in social-studies textbooks. No other work has been used as extensively in the construction of these textbooks as Morley’s *Ancient Maya* [first published in 1946], an indication of how obsolete these textbooks are. (Montejo 2005:49)

Among the most damaging of Morley’s legacies was the scientific legitimacy he lent to the view of contemporary Maya as being disconnected from the heritage of their ancestors. Among various examples, he once wrote: “Two hundred thousand Maya toll for foreign masters today in the henequen fields of Yucatán, all memory of their former magnificence gone as completely as if it had never been” (Morley & Brainerd 1925:86). Moreover, in uncritically embracing the accounts written by the 16\textsuperscript{th} century Bishop Diego de Landa, Morley’s scholarship perpetuated the idea that the Maya worship an expansive pantheon of gods. Thus, “the true religiosity of the Maya has been converted into a myriad of misunderstandings,” including the belief that the Maya practice devil worship or view “all sorts of bugs and objects” as deities (Montejo 2005:49).

Victor Montejo offers a useful summary of the current state of Guatemalan education as it represents and serves the Maya people:

Despite some minor changes in the Guatemalan educational system since 1996 as a result of the implementation of the peace accords, the educational program is still obsolete and inappropriate for Maya people, and it needs revision to include Maya values and knowledge.

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\textsuperscript{61} Montejo points out that Morley’s personal views about the Maya likely influenced his scholarship; on the subject of Mayas’ inherent capacity for intelligence, Morley wrote: “No foreigner has considered them as really stupid although they lack inventiveness and are happy to follow the same kind of life as their ancestors. It is believed that they have a good memory and good observational abilities; especially in the cornfields, they are excellent” (in Montejo 2005:46-47).
… The distorted image of the Maya in history books and other documents promotes the interests of the dominant elite, and the present reality of the Maya is denied or minimized. The elite appropriation of Maya symbols maintains their power and hegemony. … In this process of appropriation, ancient Maya civilization is glorified while the present Maya are condemned as responsible for the backwardness of the nation. In this entire process, the agenda of the educational system in Guatemala has been to present the Maya as a people opposed to national unity, a people who need to be civilized. Because Guatemalan children often received their first understanding of national life from the information in textbooks, the distorted image of the Maya is internalized at an early age. For non-Maya, this distorted image becomes the basis for their persistent prejudice and discrimination against the Maya. (Montejo 2005:59)

The textbook cases described above fit Montejo’s description quite well: the bulk of historical knowledge taught in Guatemalan schools has excluded and ignored Mayas, or relegated them to a prehistoric era through which they became simply part of the raw, natural environment that Europeans would later master and convert into ordered empire. By excluding the Maya from historical accounts, such texts also discount Maya interpretations of history. This is the context in which memory activists and Maya intellectuals are now laboring to prepare new curricular materials and other forms of participation in public discourse—processes described in chapters 7 and 8.

From “indios bochincheros” to “indios permitidos” and back again

Despite the general pattern of ignoring or excluding indigenous actors in Guatemalan history, there are two curiously complex exceptions: Tecún Umán and Atanasio Tzul. The inclusion of these figures in museums, textbooks, and other commemorative sites reveals much about the prescribed role of indigenous citizens in the official imaginary of national history. Particular versions of their histories have been promulgated through official state policies and actions, including the minting of currency and construction of monuments, as well as the designation of spaces in the
official curriculum of public schools and in the national calendar (see image below and in Appendix). These commemorative and historiographical practices illustrate how agents of the State (and particularly the military) have sought to craft a nationalist project in which even potentially contradictory figures have become useful additions to the official historical narrative—and in the process, alternative interpretations have been silenced from history, and nearly from social memory as well (Trouillot 1995).

Tecún Umán was the mythico-historical leader of the K’iche’ troops who met Alvarado’s invasion in the field of battle. As the story goes,62 when their armies met in battle on the plains of El Pilar, near present-day Quetzaltenango, Tecún squared off against Alvarado. When Tecún Umán

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62 There are several worthwhile academic discussions of the history of Tecún Umán, or more precisely the meta-history of the Tecún Umán story; see especially Paz Cárcamo (2006) and Carmack (2001). For the present purposes, however, I present the version that I encountered in popular media as well as conversations and interviews.
beheld Pedro de Alvarado, clad in metal armor and mounted on a warhorse; he mistook his adversary and his horse as being a single creature and struck accordingly, slaying Alvarado’s horse but leaving himself exposed to a mortal blow from the Spaniard. As Tecún laid dying on the ground, a quetzal bird—the national bird of Guatemala, and Tecún’s own nahual spirit companion—sprang from the bloody wound in his chest and took to the sky. As the story is told today, this moment marked the consecration of the national territory, steeped in the blood of its first defender. Tecún Umán was transformed into a paragon of Guatemalan nationalism during the administration of Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes. In 1959, the military administration declared Tecún Umán the “first soldier of the national Army.” A few months later in March of 1960, the Congress declared him the “national Hero and symbol of Guatemalan nationality” and established February 20 as Tecún Umán Day; soon afterwards, Tecún was featured on the 50 centavo bill and memorialized in a series of heroic sculptures by the masterful Rodolfo Galeotti Torres (Castro 2013).

Atanasio Tzul was an influential K’iche’ leader in the highland community of San Miguel Totonicapán during the early nineteenth century, three centuries after Tecún Umán’s lifetime. Having occupied the highest rungs of local political power within both the official government, as a

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63 Ydígoras Fuentes was a general who came to establish the first lasting presidency after the assassination of Castillo Armas, the leader of the CIA-backed coup that overthrew the Arbenz government. As was often the case during Guatemala’s half-century of military leadership, the transition in power was actually more complicated: after Castillo Armas was assassinated, an interim president was chosen to lead until elections could be held. Ydígoras Fuentes ran as a candidate in these elections, but lost to Miguel Ortiz Pasarelli, former vice president under Castillo Armas and presumptive pick of the political establishment. Ydígoras Fuentes declared the elections a fraud and urged his supporters to protest in the streets. In response, a military junta intervened to appoint a new leader, who again governed only long enough to hold elections in January 1958. Ydígoras Fuentes won in the second round, and went on to govern for five years—the longest reign of any of Guatemala’s military dictators after Castillo Armas’ CIA-backed coup.
first mayor, as well as serving as a first principal within the indigenous mayoralty, Tzul was able to draw on extensive connections to mobilize the people of Totonicapán in an uprising against the Spanish imperial authorities in 1820. For the better part of a month, Tzul reigned as the king of an independent “Kingdom of Guatemala” established by this “Indian rebellion” (Pollack 2005). Aaron Pollack and Arturo Taracena have argued that:

The importance of Atanasio Tzul resides in the fact that he embodies, like no other personage with the exception of Tecún Umán, the participation of the indigenous in the creation of the Guatemalan history, through his active role in the conflicts of that era, thus defining the political trajectory of the country. (Pollack and Taracena 2007)

The fate of the uprising by Tzul and his companion Lucas Aguilar was decided in less than a month.

As the indigenista Guatemalan anthropologist Flavio Rojas Lima explained:

The rebellion of Tzul and Aguilar only lasted 29 days. On August 3 of the same year, 1820, the colonial troops arrived in San Miguel Totonicapán, where an Indian whose name has been recorded in history, Mr. Manuel Vásquez, made an armed resistance—hopeless perhaps, or more symbolic—but a valiant resistance in the end. Other attempts at combat were recorded, all of which were rapidly brought under control by the Spanish soldiers and by some Ladinos and Creoles who had united with the royalist contingents. They then unleashed a violent repression that brought death, prison, and exile (emigration and refuge in the mountains) to the ranks of insurrectionary Indians. (Rojas Lima 1992:170-177)

The success of Tzul’s uprising offers an example of an indigenous political and military movement acquiring enough power to overthrow an entrenched political system and replace it with a new social order that elevated Mayas to be the equals or betters of their European-descended, Ladino, and
Mexican-descended counterparts.\footnote{Pollack and Taracena (2007), among other scholars (cf. Akkeren 2007) argue that as late as the nineteenth century, population centers in Guatemala were marked by ethnic diversity and racial hierarchy that included the differentiation of certain indigenous populations. Descendants of the indigenous groups that assisted the Spanish in their colonial ambitions, including some migrants from Mexico, were rewarded with higher social status, and these benefits—or at least the memory of them—were still in effect when Tzul’s uprising swept the area.} However, the deaths of these “insurrectionary Indians” could not prevent the revolutionary fervor that would soon carry Guatemala to independence from the oppressive Spanish empire—never mind that the same officials who put down Tzul’s rebellion would inherit power in the newly independent nation.

On the surface, these historical figures—one a defiant military leader who mounted a defense of his community against the European forefathers of Guatemala, the other a revolutionary figurehead who forcefully replaced a white monarch and turned the colonial racial hierarchy on its head—would appear to provide an unsettling narrative for Guatemalan Ladino and creole elites who define themselves as much by their European cultural roots as by their difference from and superiority to indigenous Guatemalans. Indeed, other cases of indigenous uprisings throughout history are still vividly recalled by present-day Ladinos, as Charles Hale found in his research on the racial ambivalence that governs their attitudes toward Mayas (2006). In frank conversations with Ladinos of various generations and social classes, Hale uncovered pervasive “atavistic fears” that his informants expressed about an imminent ethnic war in which the long-repressed Mayas would rise up and exact vengeance on Ladinos, tearing the nation apart in the process (2006:145). Hale argues that in its most extreme form, Ladino elites’ racially-marked fears and anxieties were responsible for the “brutal logic of the army’s rampage against rural Indian communities” during the internal armed
conflict—and that to be perceived as an “indio bochichero [unruly redskin] … was a deadly serious matter” for indigenous citizens during this period and for years beyond (2006:140).

However, by incorporating Tecún Umán and Atanasio Tzul into official historical discourses, the intellectual authors of their “authorized” biographies effectively appropriated these powerful indigenous figures into the dominant narrative framework. Tecún Umán was transubstantiated into an “honorary” Guatemalan citizen in an act that lent the modern military a claim to legitimacy that it desperately needed in the face of open rebellion by a cadre of young officers who would go on to found the first guerrilla front. Atanasio Tzul’s uprising was redefined as a direct precursor to the declaration of Guatemalan independence, despite the ambivalence felt by even the founding fathers at the time, as described by Cortés above. Thus, rather than remaining a sign that the young republic was precariously fractured along ethnic and regional lines—a reading that would be supported by the founding of the break-away state of Los Altos just a few years later, as well as recurring uprisings in indigenous communities throughout the country around the same period (Grandin et al. 2011:101-102)—Tzul’s rebellion has been called out and preserved as an example. This strategy had the effect of, on the one hand, silencing the discussion of other rebellions, other leaders, and the violence that authorities brought to crush them—Tzul and Totonicapán are left to stand for those moments as well. On the other hand, lest rebellious hearts turn to Tzul for inspiration, every repetition of the story also carried the reminder of its fatal outcome: “violent repression that brought death, prison, and exile […] to the ranks of insurrectionary Indians” (Rojas Lima 1992:170-177).
The officialization of Tecún and Tzul could be seen as an early precursor to the neoliberal strategy that Charles Hale and Rosamel Millamán identified in the concept of *indios permitidos* or “authorized Indians”: “the identity category that results when neoliberal regimes actively recognize and open space for collective indigenous presence, even agency” (2005:284). In exchange for this limited autonomy on issues like language rights, authorized Indians are prohibited from challenging the economic and political status quo. The further indigenous demands depart from the sphere of permitted critique, the more dangerous and “unruly” they appear to the powers that be. Edgar Esquit sees this tension playing on an even more fundamental level, arguing that “the Guatemalan state and governing elites are able to nourish themselves with Mayanist ideology and discourse to … impose [their] legitimacy at the local as much as the international level” (2011:206). The breaking point is reached whenever Maya demands overstep these boundaries, and Esquit sees an example of that in the protests in Sololá in late 2004: as local communities blocked the passage of a large piece of mining equipment destined for the western highlands, the Guatemalan state responded by sending nearly two thousand soldiers and police to break up the protests, leading to the death of one indigenous farmer named Raúl Castro Bocel, and the injury of 20 other protestors (Imai et al. 2007:110).

History was repeated on October 4, 2012, when 15,000 Maya community members gathered in Totonicapán to block the Pan-American Highway in protest of the Pérez Molina administration’s proposal to radically change the national constitution, among other issues. The protesters were met with violence by a contingent of army soldiers: seven protesters were killed, dozens were injured, and at least one protester was *desaparecido*, his body later discovered bearing
signs of torture and fatal blows to the head and chest (GHRC 2013). This event was described by Ricardo Falla as “the first massacre since the peace,” and serves as a reminder of the danger faced by indigenous communities that challenge the state. However, the aftermath of these same events also revealed the manner in which commemorative resources can serve as reserves of alterity, offering possibilities for powerful new articulations (cf. Certeau 1984). Protesters re-activated the symbolic potential of the monument of Atanasio Tzul in Totonicapán, making use of a symbol that had largely faded from public consciousness, melding into the scenic background of Totonicapán’s plaza.

16: Forty years after its dedication, the statue of Atanasio Tzul was utilized as a symbol of indigenous resistance following the slaying of 8 K’iche’ men by members of the Guatemalan military on October 4, 2012 (IACHR 2012). In the photo above, a black cape of mourning has been draped over Tzul’s form, and a sign claims that “Totonicapán is in mourning because of the murderers Otto Pérez Molina (president) and Mauricio López Bonilla (Minister of the Interior). Photo credit: (Camaja 2012)
The protesters draped a black cloth around Tzul’s shoulders, signifying that the defiant K’iche’ leader shared in the mourning felt by the people of Totonicapán (see image above). Later, protesters added signs to the base of the monument, as well as photographs of a soldier aiming a Galil automatic rifle at the unarmed crowds—a piece of documentary evidence that contradicted President Pérez Molina’s earlier statements that the soldiers had not been armed (Falla 2012). This spontaneous re-reading of the monument of Atanasio Tzul reminds us that historical memory may maintain alternative narratives that are not readily apparent, but in moments of crisis or opportunity they may bubble to the surface and take shape, leaving a powerful mark on the world.
Part Two: Memory Activism & Historical Revision: Confronting the Difficult Past

17: This flyer for the inauguration of a photography exhibit provides an elegant demonstration of the convergence of networked activity around the theme of memory: the flyer was shared by Caja Lúdica on Facebook; the exhibit is hosted by IIARS at the Why are we the way we are? museum space; the event is a commemoration of the anniversary of the release of the CEH report; and the featured photograph is by Jonás Moller—it is the same photo used for the cover of his group’s textbook, Reclaiming Our Memory.
Chapter 5: The Burden of Memory

“Heretofore the analysis of Guatemala’s pre-Hispanic and colonial history has been in the hands of Creoles, ladinos, and foreigners, commentators who have constructed different images about the Maya and their past. … That history has been expressed in racist and colonial terms … Despite these tendencies, people in the communities continue to narrate their own histories… In diverse ways these histories have given life to past indigenous communities, to their identities and ways of organizing as well as to the conditions of resistance produced at different moments and in distinct eras.” – Edgar Esquit, Kaqchikel Maya historian (2011:204)

In the preceding chapters, I described the current state of official historical discourses in Guatemala. In this chapter, I shift to exploring the types of histories narrated by “people in the communities,” and by the young organic intellectuals who often serve as mediators between the capital-based Maya intelligentsia and local highland communities. I draw on a sample of five interviews that utilized a unique methodology to elicit information about participants’ historical memories of Guatemala’s past. In the text below, I define that methodology and describe the historical narratives that it revealed. I show that the historical narratives described by my interviewees reveal evidence of shared understandings of the past, and I describe several of the most important ideas and events to be included in any new national-level narrative frameworks. I then focus on one particular case—the cycles of violence against civilians in the community of Cantel, Quetzaltenango—to illustrate the challenges and opportunities confronted by memory activists in their campaigns for historical revision. Finally, I synthesize my findings in order to identify a potential schematic narrative template for understanding history in Guatemala.
Collective memory as a knowledge domain: notes on methodology

In order to investigate interviewees’ views of Guatemalan history, I adapted a set of techniques based on cultural domain analysis through pile-sorting (Bernard 2006:299; Weller & Romney 1988). Domain analysis begins with the task of defining a bounded domain of knowledge. Many of the best-known examples of the method involve domains that take the form of a list or typology, such as “types of fruit,” “colors,” or “symptoms of an illness.” Once the domain is defined, interviewees are asked to free list as many items as they can think of that fit the criteria for belonging to the domain. My interviews were aimed at gathering information about historical memory, a rather more complex domain than the archetypal examples, but I follow Linda C. Garro in viewing the potential for complicated systems of knowledge to be addressed through such methods (2000). Although it would be possible to approach historical memory through eliciting a list, perhaps by asking interviewees to “List as many historical events as you can remember,” I wanted to capture the narrative forms that people use to understand and interpret the past. Thus, I developed a prompt in which I would simply ask interviewees to “Tell me the history of Guatemala.” As my informants narrated, I recorded each event, date, person, or place that they mentioned, as well as any abstract force or process—such as “colonization” or “persecution of religious beliefs”—which was discussed as an agent, i.e. as acting on people. I wrote each of these items on a small card, along

65 In research that drew heavily on cultural domain analysis, Garro wrote: “I also examine some ideas about the nature of collective memory in light of my findings and suggest that generally shared cultural understandings can be considered a form of collective memory; resources variably used by individuals in reconstructing the past and making sense of the present” (2000:276).
with a number that would allow me to quickly and efficiently record their position in the piles that would come later.

In the second step of the interview, after the interviewee completed their narration, I would repeat each listed item and prompt for additional details, including whether the item reminded them of any other events or ideas that they would like to include; this step doubled the number of items listed by each interviewee (Bernard 2006:302). For each of these additional items, I created an additional card and included a number code that indicated which original item prompted its remembrance. After preparing cards for all of the items, I handed the cards to the interviewees and prompted them to sort them into piles according to a “constrained sort” (Weller & Romney 1988): using three piles, they were asked to sort items according to their “positive,” “negative,” or “neutral” evaluation. This seemed to be an appropriate way to start the pile-sorting exercises, as every participant appeared to immediately understand the instructions. After completing these piles, I asked them to rank-order the contents of the “positive” and “negative” piles such that the most

66 In more traditional domain analysis methodologies, it is recommended to continue iteratively prompting with each new item produced, until the informant’s knowledge of the domain is “exhausted.” I found that while the first round of prompts contributed a significant number of additional items, a second attempt to prompt with those additional items only led to impatience and confusion on the part of interviewees. In trial attempts to ‘exhaust’ the domain, my informants would simply connect the second-round items back to their original prompts, and vice versa. As a result I decided to stick with a single round of prompting, with the additional request for “more details,” which sometimes led to new items that were not immediately tied to the original prompt—for example, “dependence on outsiders” led to a discussion of religion and “polytheism” specifically.

67 For example, in one interview the seventh item mentioned and recorded in the original narrative was “Q’uma’rkaj,” and my prompt for additional information about Q’uma’rkaj led to a description of the importance of “sacred places,” so these items were recorded as 7 and 7a, respectively. The addition of these short codes on the cards allowed me to quickly copy down the organization of cards in the piles, without rewriting the full name written on each card. This caused the pile-sorting sessions to move along more quickly, allowing interviewees to prepare several piles in succession.

68 However, one participant rejected the categories of “positive” and “neutral” and substituted her own framework of “negative,” “historical,” or “related to the conservation of Maya identity.” Although these may have corresponded significantly to the original constraints, I elected to treat the results as an unconstrained free sort.
positive item was at the top, etc. The final step of the interviews consisted of prompting for unconstrained pile sorts—that is, I asked if the interviewees could think of any additional, interesting ways to organize the cards. In all cases, I recorded the piles created by informants and inquired about their decisions on how to organize certain items.

There are two additional observations worth noting about my methodology for these historical memory interviews. First, before I started the interviews or asked participants about history, I elaborated on the context of my research in ways that likely affected their responses. First I
read a prepared statement requesting consent to record the interview, and explaining that the manner in which I would record, analyze, and distribute my findings would maintain the anonymity of their responses. I also explained that I was interested not in the accuracy of interviewees’ responses, but in their perspectives on the issues—a distinction that more than one participant compared to the presidential opinion polls then in the news on a daily basis. I then explained the basic principles of pile sorting, using a set of cards listing 10 fruits that are grown in Guatemala. With these cards, I demonstrated that one could organize them into piles and in rank-order by their size, price, season of harvest, personal preference, or a “sinfin” (endless amount) of other options. I explained that I would be preparing similar cards based on the upcoming interview, and reiterated that what I sought was to understand how the informant understood historical relationships, rather than searching for an abstract universal truth. Lastly, before embarking on the topic of historical memory, I asked questions about informants’ experiences with bilingual education, a topic that many felt more knowledgeable about discussing. These preliminary steps helped informants to feel more comfortable talking about history, a knowledge domain that many would have considered themselves unqualified or unwilling to address if they felt their answers would be evaluated for accuracy, or if they thought their individual responses might be identified by potential readers. Additionally, by using something as mundane as fruit for the demonstration of pile-sorting, I believe I indicated how natural it can be for personal, idiosyncratic preferences and experiences to inform interpretations. This attitude seemed to carry over into informants’ own pile-sorting exercises,

69 Approved by Washington University’s Human Research Protection Office, file #09-1401.
which included some very unique and unexpected results. In other words, it seemed clear to me that
participants were not trying to meet my expectations, either in their narration of history or in their
organization of domains, but were representing their own thoughts and opinions.

The second methodological observation concerns my choice of prompt—“Tell me the
history of Guatemala”—which carried certain limitations and expectations. Had I asked “Tell me
the history of your country,” or “Tell me the history of America,” or “Tell me about the past in this
area,” my interviewees likely would have presented very different narratives. However, “the history
of Guatemala” seemed to be the domain that corresponded most closely with the contents of
textbooks, the organization of museum exhibits, and other examples of the articulation of “official
histories” by the state. Other histories—at the community level, or the institutional memory of
groups like Cholsamaj or the K’iche’ Linguistic Community—would be worthwhile subjects in their
own right, but I wanted to be able to compare the historical knowledge shared by my interviewees
with these other national-level historical narratives. I also wanted to leave space for future interviews
among distinct social groups, whereby a national-level focus will provide more opportunities for
comparison. One initial concern was whether this prompt would preclude any mention of pre-
contact Maya civilization and other events that preceded official nationhood in 1821. However it
became clear that for my participants, no discussion of Guatemalan history could begin otherwise
than with the Maya. Unlike textbook accounts, their narratives invariably linked the living
indigenous populations of Guatemala with their pre-contact ancestors.

Once I began conducting these historical memory interviews, I found that this interviewing
method was not only remarkably effective at prompting conversations about history, a topic that did
not usually arise spontaneously; it was also enjoyable for participants, to boot. Every interviewee extemporaneously remarked that the exercise was “interesting” or “fun,” and several referred to it afterward as “the card game.” Some participants also explicitly recognized and expressed ideas about the potential utility of pile-sorting as a new method for organizing and communicating their thoughts. One interviewee, a primary school teacher, told me that she planned to adapt it for use in her classroom and in teachers’ union meetings; while I recorded notes about her pile sorts, she pulled out a notebook and took notes about the pile-sorting method!

The low-pressure, game-like environment for discussing history provided by these interviews may have been a cathartic experience for several participants. As I mentioned in chapter 3, my colleagues often felt uncomfortable or unqualified to discuss the past, even when our conversations veered into critiques of the current political situation in Guatemala. On occasions when we did discuss the past, these young professionals would typically preface their responses with qualifying statements about their lack of knowledge and certainty. In contrast, as the historical memory interviews got underway, participants gradually opened up and provided details and personal interpretations without hesitation or expressions of doubt.

My interviews solicited the knowledge and opinions of individuals who are under-represented in Guatemalan and international discourses about historical memory, primarily due to their age and, in some cases, their rural locations. On the one hand, all of the research participants were very familiar with interviews, which became especially familiar parts of the “discourse repertoires of many Guatemalans” in the post-Peace Accord era, as hundreds of researchers gathered testimonies for the UN’s CEH report and the Catholic Church’s REMHI project (French 2010:83).
Brigittine French contends that the widespread participation of Maya in these interviews could be seen as “marking a potentially democratic opening of the public sphere, one that has until recently been closed to indigenous citizens” (2010:83-84). On the other hand, most of the interviewees in my sample were young, from 19 to 35 years old, with various backgrounds and experiences—from a schoolteacher in a rural school to a graphics designer in an urban office environment. They are self-identified Maya intellectuals and professionals, whose daily labors contribute to projects of reimagining “a more truly pluralist Guatemala,” as one participant put it. However, they are not (yet) seen as “leaders” of Maya political or intellectual movements, routinely attracting the attention of foreign scholars and national pundits. Thus, participation in the interviews offered them an opportunity to express their ideas, which they occasionally noted were different from the views of their parents and elder generations.

One key difference that separates my research participants from the leaders and founders of the Maya movement described in other works (Fischer and Brown 1996; Warren 1998; Nelson 1999) is that self-identification as “Maya” does not seem to be nearly as problematized as an act of conscious construction. Especially for younger interviewees, Maya self-identification seemed to be taken for granted, a reflection of the widespread and rising epistemic authority of pan-Mayan discourses in the face of charges of constructivism from Ladino and foreign observers across the ideological spectrum (England 2003). Finally, the pile-sorting technique was also well-received because it allowed participants to have more hands-on control in the representation of their thoughts, a characteristic that also inspired ideas for the creative uses anticipated by some participants.
Searching for patterns in historical memory

I now turn to describing the contents of the historical memory interviews and domain analyses, including an examination of patterns that may be indicative of schematic narrative templates among young Maya professionals’ understanding of the past. I begin by briefly introducing the participants in the sample included here:

- **Lorena** was a teacher in a bilingual primary school; her maternal language is K’iche’. She grew up in the county of Cantel, just outside Quetzaltenango. She has been closely involved in local community development and labor organizing as a member of the teachers’ union, and has completed a master’s degree in “rural primary bilingual education.” She considers her development as a teacher—and the accompanying ability to “share bilingual education with [her] children (students)”—to be her greatest personal achievement.

- **Q’anil** works in publishing at Editorial Cholsamaj; his maternal language is Kaqchikel. He has co-authored and collaborated on several books, and has a licenciatura but stopped shortly before completing the requirements for a master’s degree, noting that “universities fail; they deform people. Such education is not necessary for the lucha (the struggle, the movement), it’s only necessary for social capital.” He views the work of Cholsamaj as playing an important role in organizing the Maya movement in Guatemala.

- **Daniel** works with the K’iche’ Linguistic Community; his maternal language is K’iche’. He completed his high school education in the nearby school, and earned a post-secondary certificate. Despite these credentials, his official position with the CLK is non-technical: he maintains the building and grounds. However, unofficially he contributes to the intellectual labors of the organization, and is “proud to represent” the institution. He is a founding member of a “folkloric dance” troupe which has been invited to participate in festivals in other regions of Guatemala.

- **María** works with the K’iche’ Linguistic Community; her maternal language is K’iche’. She completed the equivalent of a specialized high school education for office administrative work. She has been an active participant in a women’s organization in the local community, and since joining the CLK she has enrolled in classes at a local university. During the 2011 election season, she was approached by several competing parties to serve as a K’iche’ translator for nearby presidential campaign events.

- **B’elejeb’ K’at** works with the K’iche’ Linguistic Community; his maternal language is K’iche’. His role at the CLK was established, along with several other new positions, when

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70 The names used here are pseudonyms, in some cases chosen by the participants themselves.
the organization moved into the large new Popol Ja and subsequently expanded its cultural revitalization campaigns. Funding for the position was made available by the Netherlands' international aid agency, but remains contingent on renewal every six to nine months. He completed the training to become a bilingual teacher, and was about halfway through classes for a university degree at the time of our interview.

The narratives offered by these participants provide useful insights into what Guatemalans think about their country’s history. In some cases, their accounts contradict each other, or do not match academic histories, or present ideas that would not stand up to closer inspection. However, I am not interested in exploring them as ‘flawed histories,’ but as expressions of identity. I find inspiration for this project in Tabea Linhard’s close reading of the memoirs of the author Trudi Alexy (2010:100). Linhard showed that Alexy’s invocation of 15th century events to construct a “coherent narrative” about experiences in her own lifetime was a necessary part of a survival strategy:

This coherence, rather than being simply taken as a historical inaccuracy at worst and wishful thinking at best, is an important and necessary aspect of the way in which these traumatic events are remembered and narrated by those who have direct or mediated connections to them. (Linhard 2010:97)

Rather than exploring the intricacies of the conversions that took place both before and after 1492, Alexy invokes the past in order to articulate heroic and undoubtedly appealing stories of subterfuge and resistance. Yet rather than making claims about the book’s historical accuracy, I seek to understand why she paints a very specific picture of Spain’s secret Jews and why it is a constitutive part of her narrative. The book is not a historiography, but a text in which the author makes sense of a deeply personal and traumatic loss that occurred at a young age; her spiritual and emotional connection with the Marranos allows her to overcome the melancholia caused by that loss. (Linhard 2010:105)

Rather than challenging my informants’ accounts, I look to them for information about the significance of their memories of the past, and their evaluations of those past events in/for the present. As Linhard sought in reading Alexy’s book, I want to understand how my informants take
ownership of certain memories, and what the effects of that mnemonic ownership are for their
personal identities.

*Where to begin*

The historical memory narratives shared by my informants, like all stories, have beginnings. In contrast to Guatemalan textbook accounts of history, which focus on the conquest or independence as the origin points for history, the narratives I collected invariably put Mayas front and center for the entirety of the story. Although there were some significant differences in the events mentioned and their interpretations, all of my interviewees referred to “the Maya” using the first-person plural pronoun at multiple points in their narratives. Nearly all of my informants began their narrative with the pre-contact Maya civilizations. Here are the beginnings of their accounts of the “history of Guatemala”:

**Q’anil:** First, we’d have to begin before the year 1492. Before this year, obviously, the continent that we now call the continent of America was known as the continent of Abya Yala. And in this great continent of Abya Yala, there was a little piece (pedazo) of land, that now we know as Mesoamerica, which was the Maya territory. So the Maya territory, obviously, goes from Mexico, passing through Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador. In that time, there was here a civilization very different from what has been studied in Europe or in Asia. That’s to say, that the civilizing process here in Abya Yala had its own categories, its own concepts of development as human civilization. So here, there was an incredible advancement of knowledge. One example of this was the Maya calendar, which was only surpassed by the modern astronomical calendar developed by NASA. So here there was a very advanced level of civilization. As one of the Spanish chroniclers wrote when they arrived… he said there were no two cities in Spain that, even combined, could equal the marvel of this place…. So here there was an incredible level of development, but with other patterns, other concepts of civilization…

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**B’elejeb’ Kat:** Well, note that, everything begins before the arrival of the Spanish conquest. Our grandparents the Mayas were already here, they were divided in various linguistic communities. … They already had their form of government then. So the beginning of the story of Guatemala is in this time, and so it’s not the case that the arrival of the Spanish begins the story of Guatemala because it was already history, and the invasion starts another history, right?...

**Daniel:** Guatemala has had many stages, yeah? I think that, since antiquity, the ancient Mayas, I believe that they had their own form of life, their own form of coexistence, their philosophy, their spirituality, their own politics, for example. I believe that it’s a form of living completely different from what we live now…

**Lorena:** Guatemala is a country that, in some form, during the existence of its inhabitants, [has had] many difficulties … according to the little that it said in the history of these hundreds of years, Guatemala is a country that has always had its organizations at the community level. It’s also a country that has [been] required to experience / experiment with interculturality. It’s a country that has a cultural and natural richness… I believe that before the Spanish came, Guatemala had many things … [our grandparents’] culture, their *cosmovision* … that which they had lived through and experienced—it was their form of living…

The first characteristic worth mentioning about these accounts is their features of “hidden dialogicality” (Wertsch 2002:91). Bakhtin illustrated this concept with the example of “a dialogue of two persons in which the statements of the second speaker are omitted… The second speaker is present invisibly, his words are not there, but deep traces left by these words” are nonetheless identifiable in the speech of the first speaker (Bakhtin 1984:197). Q’anil’s account illustrates this most clearly, from his opening statement that “we’d have to begin before the year 1492,” an assertion that makes visible the presence of an alternative reading of history—namely, the official version in many of its state-sponsored expressions—that would locate the origins of national history with the arrival of Europeans. B’elejeb’ K’at likewise begins by using the Spanish conquest as a
reference point, arguing that “the beginning of the story of Guatemala” is located in the pre-contact period, while the conquest “starts another history.”

The stories also share the pattern of emphasizing the sophistication of the pre-contact Maya civilizations. Each speaker highlights this differently, either by touching on the technological advancement of Maya astronomy and architecture—mentioned here by Q’anil in his opening remarks, but also included by most interviewees at some point in their narratives—or by focusing on the forms of government and spirituality practiced by the ancestors. The descriptions of these achievements also tend to emphasize that they belonged to the Maya—that they were “their own” forms of doing things—and that they were substantially different from what the Spanish brought. Joanne Rappaport noted that in the cases of Nasa indigenous intellectuals’ discourses, lo propio—lit, “that which is their own”—was a key term used to identify their activities, as it “refers to how culture is experienced (vivenciado) on the ground” (Rappaport 2005:141).

Plurality is also a defining characteristic of the pre-contact era: Q’anil references the extensive territory of the Maya, the region that we now call Mesoamerica, spanning across several present-day nations. Likewise, B’elejeb’ K’at points out that there were numerous linguistic communities—he actually named several in the interview. Lorena sees interculturality as a part of the Guatemalan experience even in the pre-contact period, a reference to the cultural diversity of different Mayan linguistic communities as well as a reflection of the class-less egalitarian society that she (alone among the interviewees) attributed to the ancient Maya civilizations.

The final, related point is that their narratives do position the Spanish invasion as a momentous breakpoint in Guatemalan history. However, by locating the origins of Guatemala in
the pre-contact, “pre-Columbian” period—in effect, staking an indigenous claim on the nation—their narratives redefine the arrival or invasion as a moment of trauma, as the pillaging of millennial civilizations that in some ways surpassed the achievements of the Europeans. This framework thus challenges the triumphalist perspective seen in some textbooks and other official narratives, recasting the heroic conquistador as, at best, an ambivalent harbinger of violence, and at worst a rapist and genocida.\footnote{lit., “someone who commits genocide.”} As B’elejeb’ K’at succinctly put it, the arrival of the Spanish initiated “another history”—but not the only history.

“The history of Guatemala has been very difficult”

Altogether, the predominant topic of most of the interviews was the Spanish invasion, and the myriad, mostly negative effects of the subsequent colonization for Maya peoples’ practices and beliefs. Three participants indicated that the “Spanish invasion” was the most negative item in their domains, while the responses of the other two—the “genocide” and the “conflict between right-wing and left-wing”—were essentially the invasion by different names (see tables in Appendix). B’elejeb’ K’at continued his comments about the invasion marking the start of another history, listing it as one among several disasters:

B’elejeb’ K’at: Practically it starts another history, we can see how a project begins for Christianization and, how do you say, dehumanization… Guatemala has had various processes, various situations, since the armed conflict, since the invasion, colonization, wars, so the history of Guatemala has been very difficult. It has had various blows / coups (golpes) and other issues … these days it’s a little bit better, yeah? But the people most affected are

\footnote{lit., “someone who commits genocide.”}
the indigenous, we the indigenous, right? Our parents and everyone, right? So the history of Guatemala is very difficult…

**Doc:** Can you say more about “dehumanization?”

**B’elejeb’ K’at:** Dehumanization is, well, when the Spanish came, they saw us (as being) very different. Different physical features, foods, oral practices, buildings, everything, yeah? Different. They couldn’t speak with us because we spoke different languages and they only brought the Spanish tongue, yeah? So they began to (say) “they don’t know anything, they’re animals,” and this wasn’t true, right? We had many technologies, we had an exact calendar … but they didn’t realize this…

In B’elejeb’ K’at’s account, the Spanish response to difference was to “dehumanize” the other, an act that allowed them to justify violence. Invasion and colonization are lumped together in no particular order with “various blows and other issues”—including the internal armed conflict—that have led to Guatemala having a “very difficult” history, especially for indigenous peoples. Once again, the Mayas’ level of technological advancement is presented as a demonstration of the value of their pre-contact civilizations.

B’elejeb’ K’at’s narrative includes the four points of focus that were described in most of the interviews: 1) religious beliefs, namely the imposition of Catholicism; 2) the desire for gold and other material wealth; 3) the imposition of Spanish culture; and 4) the annihilation of the Maya as a civilization.

**Religion: the return of Maya spirituality**

For Daniel and María, religion played the most important role in colonization. Daniel described how the ancient temples and altars were destroyed, and for a long time “they prohibited the practice of Maya spirituality,” though he notes that “Now it’s freer, yeah? Whoever wants to
practice Maya spirituality, nobody says anything.” He has been interested in learning more about the *Popol Wuj* and Maya cosmology, in part to incorporate the ideas into his dance troupe’s costumes and presentations, and in part for his own personal beliefs. María described the Spanish in religious terms from the outset:

**María:** The Spanish, the Spanish are the invaders [*she sings, rhyming*]. The Spanish are the people who came here in Central America … they’re the people who came to impose their Catholic religion. That is the Spanish, but they were born there in Spain, and were looking for wealth, and because of mistaken routes they ended up in Central America. … According to the history, I understand that the slaughters were because the Mayas did not want to believe in the Catholic religion, because they say this was imposed on them. The Maya peoples that didn’t want it, they killed them. They told the people: “accept it or you die.” That’s how it was, and so there were slaughters, because of the imposition of Catholicism.

Although she listed the imposition of Catholicism as a negative item in her pile sorts, María was somewhat unique among interviewees in the emphasis she placed on the positive consequences of colonization, noting such things as the construction of highways and hydroelectric projects. She placed special emphasis on the spread of Christianity. She explained that the “Maya mentality” had called for believing in many gods; without the Spanish influence, the Maya would still be polytheists who “would continue existing without electrical energy, and such things.” However, she later distanced herself from this idea by clarifying that it was something she had heard from “a creole man” in the town center, someone who traced his descent to “the Spanish invaders.”

María’s narrative reflects her own complex and changing relationship to religion. She was raised as an evangelical Christian. However, through her work with the CLK—especially conversations and shared experiences with Javier Marta, a coworker who practices and often discusses Maya spirituality—María grew more familiar and comfortable with Maya beliefs during my
time in Guatemala. When I first discussed Maya ceremonies with María, she told me that she did not participate “because [she was] a Christian,” with allusion that such events were associated with the occult. However, by the time I conducted this interview she defined “Maya spirituality” more positively as “the practice of the Maya ceremony. But you have realized, Doc, that the ceremony is done for various reasons, because they do it to give thanks, for a baptism, for a groundbreaking, for a wedding; there are various reasons for making a Maya ceremony. It’s a form of thanksgiving of Maya peoples.”

For both María and Daniel, the evaluations of Maya spirituality as a positive force—and the consequent evaluation of its prohibition as negative—reflect a broader shift in social attitudes toward Maya religious practices in the past generation. The Guatemalan president from 2008-2012, Álvaro Colom, was even trained as an aj q’ij—a political posture, perhaps, but nonetheless an illustration of the esteem now associated with Maya spiritual practices. One conclusion to draw from these narratives is that “a more truly pluralist Guatemala” must also find space for religious pluralism.

Material wealth: rich creoles & exploited Mayas

Every interviewee made reference to the exploitation of indigenous peoples by the Spanish, and most identified this as the cause for the widespread poverty experienced by Guatemalans today. Lorena even identified the creation of social classes as a direct consequence of the Conquest, which set the stage for ongoing struggles today:

Lorena: Sadly, of all that was done in the epoch of the Conquest, they put in place social classes, where before these had not existed. Until they came, I think, there were no classes of rich and poor as we call them now, and extremely poor. I think before, according to what the grandparents tell us… in the communities we shared the fights, the pains, and also the
happiness, they said. It’s something that we haven’t totally lost, but because of the classes that exist, it’s something very difficult. Because the rich managed a very racist politics, they only thought of their own sector of the population. And perhaps the largest sector is the one most abandoned by the government.

Lorena: The authorities in our communities possibly are not the ones that control economic things, but in spite of this, we’re organized and we’re trying to combat against the government. But because we’re a sector that’s perhaps poor, we’re not able to arrive unto the government to speak. It’s like a monster for us, yeah? Because the governments have always been, in their majority, governments that are very right-wing, right? I would say that the leftists, the good ones, have been very few, in the government. And when there are few, they get absorbed and manipulated, and now they aren’t able to do anything substantial for their people. Some people no longer have any faith in the government and don’t even vote, because they know that all presidents do the same thing, right? I think that this is the situation up to now, a little bit generally.

For Lorena, the struggle between the rich, with their “right-wing” governments, and the other leftist-and-poor “sectors” of the country could be seen as the defining characteristic of Guatemalan history. Her interpretation hewed closely to more traditional leftist narratives, of the sort I encountered in urban memory activists’ discourse (described in chapter 7) and in conversations with university students. However it’s important to note that Lorena puts special emphasis on the importance of maintaining and revitalizing Maya culture, a struggle that some leftists would view as a product of false consciousness. The community-level sharedness of struggles and victories was a theme that she reiterated several times in her historical narrative. She views the reinvigoration of that solidarity as the key to social change.

Q’anil identified colonialism as the root cause of all of the violence inflicted on indigenous Guatemalans over the centuries—including the armed conflict, because “the colony was never changed. The colony continues in force. That’s why it’s so important to begin [social change] with
the colony.” Similar to Lorena’s vision of a right-wing versus left-wing struggle, Q’anil sees the overarching history of Guatemala as a struggle between elite creoles and the indigenous majority:

Q’anil: These days, they claim that we (Maya) aren’t thoughtful beings. They claim that it’s our fault, the lack of development in the country. But the truth is: it’s because here, the colony was never changed. The colony continues in force. The colony didn’t end with the Independence of 1821. The Independence of 1821 was only a change of owners of the country—that instead of Spanish creoles, they were Ladino creoles in Guatemala. … With this invasion came the colony. And this, this is what continues affecting the country… And that’s why there are massacres, armed conflict, expropriation of lands. … One must reverse history, get rid of the colonialism. But nobody wants to get rid of the colonialism. Who here [he gestures around] tries to get rid of the colonialism? If 76% of the national territory is in the hands of these families. … That’s why there are so many conflicts.

Q’anil reverses the common trope that Guatemala’s indigenous population is responsible for the country’s “backwardness,” laying the responsibility at the feet of the 22 elite families that manipulate power in the country. Independence only brought a change in the self-perception of the “owners of the country,” from identifying as Europeans to claiming a Ladino identity. Here, Q’anil employs the term creole (criollo) as something more like a marker for class and power, rather than an ethnic identity. “Ladino creoles” functions to blur the distinction between the categories, smoothing and simplifying history. In claiming that “nobody wants to get rid of” the colonial structure of power, Q’anil is referring to the creole class who have the means to affect changes; in his view, the popular classes and Maya movement actors remain too fragmented to overcome the entrenched powers. He does not expect significant social change until “an entire generation” comes of age under the

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72 Q’anil was referring to the research by Marta Casaís Arzú—her Linaje y Racismo (2010) was not published by Editorial Cholsamaj, but it was one of a handful of books published by other presses that Q’anil kept in his office.
multicultural education system now in place—a generation with the “tools and knowledge to articulate a vision” that not only privileges the Maya, but “really helps the entire country.”

Cultural imposition & the resistance of “our grandparents”

Lorena succinctly described how the Spanish set out to not only loot the material wealth of Guatemala, but to destroy the Maya way of life:

Lorena: (The Spanish) came to destroy that which (the Maya) had lived… Possibly it changed totally, and sadly it was a negative change, if you ask me, because the Spanish came to rob, not only economically but to rob the cultural wealth (riqueza cultural) that we had. In addition to the gold and silver, more than that it’s the cultural wealth. They made for it to disappear, and in some manner—not totally but yes, in great part (they succeeded). And I believe that it’s something that hurts even now in our communities. Because (the ancestors) couldn’t do anything more against them. Even though our grandfathers and grandmothers, yes they fought… each one of them, they never ceased to practice (their way of life)... What they left behind of their beliefs, their traditions... now are ours, right? And the little bit that they were able to maintain, with so many struggles... with too much blood.

Lorena went on to express her sympathy for the first generations of ancestors who experienced the changes wrought by the invasion. Whereas it still pains her, and other members of her community, to think of what was lost, she called this a “second pain” compared to those who had directly lived the old, better way of life, only to have it taken away. She gave thanks for the resistance that the ancestors showed by continuing their practices, which allowed for the preservation of the Maya way of life that she embraces today.
This appreciation for the teachings and traditions of the ancestors—often referred to as the grandparents—was a common element in every narrative. Some of the descriptions offered personal examples of this inter-generational sharing of knowledge and historical memory:

**Doc:** “The Maya abuelos?”

**B’elejeb’ K’at:** Practically, they have left us everything that we have now. Practically all the teachings that we have, have been passed generation to generation, generation to generation. … It’s from our own experiences that we’ve had. Like my father learned from my grandfather, so he passed it on to me. … For example, the Maya medicine. … Before it was already known by the little granny… And she taught it to her daughter, who taught it to her daughter.

**María:** …my grandmother, before she passed away, I conversed a lot with her. I say that from six to eight years old, I chatted with her. I went with her (often), and for that reason I say that she had the real history, because she told me many stories. For example, she said that in the old days, a person who doesn’t have respect for their elders, they could easily become sick or something. For the same reason, she said that everything has a consequence. … She told me many stories / histories...

B’elejeb’ K’at later told me how he had learned about the rules of the Maya ball game through conversations with his father and grandfather, and that “there were no books” to shed light on this topic. For María, the stories that her grandmother told her as a child remain the best example of “real history,” as I discuss below.

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73 As the interviews were conducted primarily in Spanish, the participants referred to the “ancestors” (ancestros), the “grandparents” (los abuelos), or in some cases the “grandmothers and grandfathers” (abuelas y abuelos); this final phrase matches the K’iche’ or Kaqchikel language, qatt qamam, lit. “our grandmother(s) our grandfather(s)”, which is used ceremonially to invoke the ancestors.
To contextualize the maintenance of traditional practices by the ‘grandparents’ as a form of resistance, it is helpful to consider Irma Alicia Velásquez Nimatuj’s writings about her experience wearing *traje*, the traditional regional dress worn by many Maya women (2003). Velásquez was denied entrance to a Guatemala City dining establishment because she wore the clothing. She went on to file a legal case against the establishment for this “act of racial aggression,” and against “the State of Guatemala itself for letting the Government Ministry allow the running of restaurants and shops where racial discrimination is part of a management policy” (2003). In reflecting on why the Guatemalan oligarchy would perpetuate this form of discrimination, she concluded that they feel threatened by the continued existence of Maya people and their distinct ways of life:

> Whenever we are seen in regional *traje*, the ruling classes are reminded of the failure of their efforts to make us disappear, which have ranged from genocide to ideological coercion. Five centuries of humiliation have not succeeded in bringing the Maya people to their knees. For the Maya, leaving our own communities means losing the cultural shield that protects us when we live and work in the towns or villages where we are usually the majority and where we understand the logic of how life operates. But when … we decide to leave our communities, we come up against the other Guatemala, “imaginary Guatemala,” urban and capital-city Guatemala, where we are rejected by almost all the Ladinos who wield political and economic power. (Velásquez Nimatuj 2003)

The fact that a woman could be turned away for wearing indigenous dress in 2002 provides a reminder that racism is still very much in force in Guatemala. However, this victim of racism happened to be a professional scholar and journalist with multiple postgraduate degrees. She was able to draw on her epistemic authority to use the legal system to demand her rights; moreover she used the event as an opportunity to intelligently unpack the racism that indigenous women experience whenever they cross into “imaginary Guatemala.” Thus, Velásquez Nimatuj’s response offers a sign that the situation *has* changed significantly, though the struggle remains incomplete. As
she put it, the experience made her think about “the various forms of historical resistance that our ancestors, our grandmothers and mothers, have been putting up since 1524” (2003). It is these countless, everyday acts that have maintained the knowledge and practices—and the historical memory—that Irma Alicia, and my research participants, recognize as their cultural heritage.

Violence: the internal armed conflict amid other holocausts

The internal armed conflict was invoked at some point by each interviewee, though in three cases it was only mentioned in passing during the initial narrative. Many of the details emerged in the second pass, while providing additional details about items. One notable pattern in these descriptions was that they tended to blur together: for example, B’elejeb’ K’at occasionally mixed together causes and effects across centuries of time. When I asked him to describe “the armed conflict,” he pointed out that Santa Cruz del Quiché had been severely affected by this “hard blow”:

B’elejeb’ K’at: They left many dead, it was so unjust. Children, youth. They were called to form part of the militias [the PACs], so indigenous people (were) killing indigenous people, but they were—how do I say—they were told “do this,” and they did it, right? And all this was against the human rights, yeah? So this led to a coup, in… the 1940s, then.

B’elejeb’ K’at’s timeline presents some problems at this point. There was a coup in 1944—the October Revolution which overthrew the dictator Jorge Ubico and led to Guatemala’s 10-year experiment with democracy. There was also a coup in 1954, in which the CIA helped install Carlos Castillo Armas in place of the leftist Jacobo Árbenz (Cullather 1999). Arguably, this coup was the origin point for the later guerrilla movement that would seek to restore democracy, and thus the beginning of the internal armed conflict. However, the coup that best fits the description of events here would be the overthrowing of General Lucas García and his eventual replacement by General
Efraín Ríos Montt, in 1982. However, the militias described here continued and even became more common under Ríos Montt.

For more clarity, I asked B’elejeb’ K’at to define coup d’état (golpe militar) for the next item. This led him to turn back in time to the Conquest:

**B’elejeb’ K’at:** Among the coups, most—well, for the Maya people—well, when they got rid of all—for example the clothing that is no longer used. The war, the armed conflict was difficult for the Maya people. Because, practically, many indigenous people died. The conquest as well, our abuelos, in the case of Quiché, many abuelos like B’elejeb’ Tz’i’ died, and all those who were in Q’uma’rkaj.

As I’ve attempted to reproduce here, B’elejeb’ K’at initially had difficulty coming to terms with this item. This seemed to reflect some inherent ambiguity in the term: golpe can mean a coup d’état, which is usually indicated by the addition of “militar” in Spanish; however, more commonly it refers to a blow or strike. In B’elejeb’ K’at’s own narrative, this latter meaning was more common, and though he had just employed the term in the sense of a coup d’état, his response indicates that he interpreted my question as a reference to the difficulties experienced by the victims of military violence. Forced assimilation, the prohibition of clothing and other identity markers, the “war, the armed conflict,” and the conquest of the K’iche’, including the burning alive of the nobility captured at Q’uma’rkaj—events of destruction spanning five centuries, all invoked together as a testament of the “very difficult history” experienced by the Maya.

Q’anil offered the most detailed description of the cycles of violence experienced by indigenous Guatemalans. In an earlier interview, he referred to the armed conflict as “just the latest episode in a long series that began with the arrival of Pedro de Alvarado.” I provide several excerpts from Q’anil’s historical narrative, in order to point out several important features:
Q’anil: In the moment of the invasion—and this is a key word, the *invasion* initiated in 1492—everything changed in this civilizing process. It truncated many processes of knowledge, of civilizing. So it initiated a very dark era for the Maya people, [who] were practically decimated. What passed was that, with the arrival, with *only* the *arrival* of the Spanish to these lands, they were infested by virus. Viruses like smallpox, and other sicknesses, and so the population got sick. And since these sicknesses weren’t known here, they didn’t have a cure. The people died, and died *decimated* practically. In Iximché alone, as was recounted in the *Anales de los Kaqchikeles*, there alone it was recorded that so many, so many people died—children, women, elders, curers, governors, they all died. And only a few remained, and these few had to flee to the mountains. Why? Because now the invasion came on top of it all.

Q’anil alone offered a description of the actual *means* of the Spanish conquest, and the decisive role that European diseases played. Before the invaders even arrived, the diseases they brought swept through indigenous communities. Q’anil’s explanation for the severity of these epidemics was technological and epistemological: the indigenous curers had never seen these diseases and did not know how to treat them. This account differs from my own understanding, namely that the root causes were biological—i.e., indigenous populations had a lack of immunity—but it’s noteworthy that his explanation allows for an interpretation of the epidemics as an obstacle that could have been overcome, with the appropriate training or professional preparation.

This interpretation aligns with Q’anil’s vision of the social importance of the “organization of thought,” a phrase that offers a concise translation of Cholsamaj’s Kaqchikel name. However, his vision of the essentially unchanged nature of violence over the past five hundred years reveals the stakes involved in activism. He claims that the invasion was not really a conquest; Maya communities had always fought each other and resisted militarily. However, the Spanish brought a far worse form of violence:
Q’anil: It wasn’t a conquest, since here in this territory there were always conflicts between nations. They knew in a manner how to make war, but not the annihilation like the Spanish practiced. The Spanish annihilated every sign of life. Whereas the others when they made war … once they defeated the chief, either captured or killed, the conflict ended. Whereas when the Spanish did it, when they captured the governors, they burned them, they hung them, and they killed the entire population.

Q’anil claimed that the “annihilation” of Maya communities was repeated under the liberal reformer, Justo Rufino Barrios, in 1871, in order to expropriate Maya communal lands and put the Maya to work in service of the coffee economy. Moreover, he saw the same pattern of events playing out in the internal armed conflict, and more recently in the government’s response to drug trafficking:

Q’anil: The armed conflict decimated all over again the indigenous people. And only for the fact of being considered collaborators of the guerrilla. The army, until today, never has said that the razed communities had been guerrillas. No. They razed them because they had been categorized as collaborators of the guerrillas. So, here, for the sole act of aspiring for their own liberation, the Maya people are seen like criminals. And they are treated like criminals… these days, a new force has emerged which is the drug trafficking, which isn’t concentrated only in the (capital) city but is concentrated in the middle of the country. And this, newly, what does it mean? It represents a serious problem for the Maya people. Why? Because now entire communities are evicted from their lands. They’re catalogued as criminals—entire communities. Just for the fact of being considered collaborators of the drug trafficking. In other words, since now that we have arrived at an epoch in which the upper echelons that maintain power in the country see the necessity of decimating the Maya population, they have to find a pretext to do it. And now the pretext is precisely to catalogue them as collaborators in drug trafficking. And the current candidates pose/suggest/create (plantea) this. In fact, the Patriota [party candidate for president] Otto Pérez Molina suggests that there are pulses of drug trafficking in Maya communities and they’re going to be treated like criminals. This is what he has said in the interviews and in his photos.

What Q’anil outlines with this narrative is a complex description of the shape of power in Guatemala, and how that power is maintained through ideology and violence. He begins with the reminder that the military razed entire communities during the armed conflict, not because they
were guerrillas but because “they had been categorized as collaborators”—a bureaucratic action that criminalized the civilians and led to horrific violence against them. He then points out the parallels to present day interventions in communities that are “catalogued as criminals,” “considered collaborators of drug trafficking.” I, too, had noted the striking similarities between accounts of communities being occupied or “supervised” by military units for their supposed participation in drug trafficking, and archived descriptions of similar interventions in communities suspected of supporting the subversive guerrilla during the armed conflict. Q’anil points out that Pérez Molina—who would go on to win the presidency with promises of bringing an “iron fist” to dismantle crime—had already begun to articulate a policy that would provide the “upper echelons that maintain power” a “pretext” for “decimating the Maya population” once again. The cyclical view of repeating violence thus extends into predictions for the future.

Imbuing salience and urgency across time

Another important detail to note from these descriptions of violence is that they tend to be very detailed, and elicit a visceral reaction from the narrators. For example, while describing the violence perpetrated against indigenous women, Daniel became upset:

Daniel: The invasion? …what they tell us is that, well, how the things happened, [he is visibly uncomfortable, has difficulty finding words] I don’t know how real it was, that in the invasion they destroyed all the houses, that they raped the Maya women and little girls. They stole many of our things. For example, they say that they took a lot of our things, our gold, that they put the women to work. They forced Maya women to weave for hours to produce fine textiles for the wives of the invaders.

Clearly, the events of the 16th century invasion lie outside individual experience. Why, then, do they inspire such emotion? The answer must lie in how they are commemorated today, and in the
manner in which present-day and more recent contexts lend salience to these interpretations of the more distant past. In other words, the lived experiences of violence during the internal armed conflict likely served to “recall” and shape ideas about the much earlier invasion. I had the opportunity to witness how this process can play out even within a single hour-long classroom exercise, while collaborating with the director of a bilingual English-Spanish educational program that served Maya children in the department of El Quiché.74

In a series of workshops, Tzunun and I each spent an hour giving a presentation about cultural diversity in our respective countries. Tzunun presented information about Guatemala’s diverse population, including the great variety of different languages spoken by groups around the country, and he presented the “Four Peoples” framework of multiculturalism, including photos of Xinka and Garífuna women in traditional clothing, alongside Mayas and Ladinos. Altogether, his presentation was a marked contrast to the generic content found in social studies textbooks because he treated Maya identity as the norm, and he discussed the departmental and national communities in terms of their Maya composition, with Ladinos relegated to the periphery (along with Xinkas and Garífunas). Likewise, almost every photo and illustration in the presentation used images of indigenous persons as the actors. Tzunun described Guatemala’s pluralism as a strength, but

74 This “ACCESS Program,” funded by the U.S. Embassy, is the financial lifeline for the K’iche’ NGO Enlace Quiché, which organized in the 1990s in order to develop pedagogical materials for bilingual K’iche’-Spanish education. Foreign aid money for that sort of bilingual education dried up over a decade ago, forcing Enlace Quiché to drastically downsize its staff and turn to offering classes in K’iche’ and English for paying customers. These measures, and the ACCESS contract from the Embassy, have allowed Enlace Quiché to remain active, and as the description of this class workshop illustrates, Tzunun continues to push for multicultural, Maya-centric education, even when the subject of the classes is English language.
critiqued the government for its tradition of putting down indigenous groups and causing underdevelopment “in the communities,” such as the rural community where we were having the workshop. Tzunun linked current events and policies, such as the Colom government’s conditional cash transfer program, *Mi Familia Progresa*, with historic events like the armed conflict and the Spanish invasion.

Tzunun’s message to the students, in keeping with the goals of the program that led us to give these workshops, was that education was the key to overcoming their centuries of struggle. He emphasized throughout his lecture and in more relaxed, spontaneous conversation with the students afterwards that their ability to participate in this program was a great opportunity, one that their ancestors could not have dreamed of. He presented it as their duty to their community—and by extension to their linguistic groups—to do well at learning English in order to draw on international resources to bring local development. Yet he also told them to remain connected to their communities and to their families, and to continue speaking K’iche’ or Sacapulteko or Ixil. He chastised students for being able to remember the date when Christopher Columbus “discovered” America, but not remembering their own father’s or grandfather’s birthday. He emphasized that remembering local and family history is an essential part of being Maya, and without this identity it would be impossible to improve things.

Tzunun’s historical interpretation may not have been convincing or memorable for the students on its own; as was common during the classroom meetings of this program, most of the students chatted and divided their attention throughout the lecture. However, Tzunun included short YouTube videos in his presentation as a “dynamic strategy” to recapture the students’ interest.
One video in particular was remarkably effective at evoking an emotional response. It brought tears to the eyes of many students—and myself—and shushed the chatting for the remainder of the lecture. The video combines footage of Guatemala during the 1980s with the audio track of the Argentine musician Leon Gieco’s “Cinco Siglos Igual” (PaysDesVolcans 2008). The song references the five centuries of suffering in Latin America following the Spanish invasion. Gieco composed it in 1992, to serve as his rejection to an invitation from the government of Spain to participate in an official celebration of the 500th anniversary of Columbus’ voyage (Gieco 2011). Rather than a ballad, Gieco’s lyrics are a series of unlinked phrases that evoke complex images of pain: “Solitude over ruins, blood in the grain,” “God could not manage to cry / long nightmare / children of no one,” and the refrain after each verse reminding us that this has continued for “five centuries unchanged.” The chorus attests that “In this part of the world, history fell / like stones fall.” Altogether the lyrics paint a dismal image, but the song has been embraced as a message of resistance.75 The final verse, especially, challenges the heroic interpretation planned by the Spanish government: “It’s darkness with flowers / Revolutions / And even though many are no longer here / Never did anyone think to kiss your feet.”

The accompanying video opens with footage from a rural village, mountains visible beyond adobe houses, corn growing in the surrounding fields. Although cinderblock has taken the place of adobe for most building construction, the view was remarkably similar to what the students would

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75 For example, in 2004 during the anniversary celebrations of the foundation of Santa Fe, Argentina, the students of a local Moscaví school sang “Cinco Siglos Igual,” which prompted the presiding Archbishop of the city to “retire from the (ceremony), apparently disgusted by the musical selection of the teachers of the school” (Notife 2004).
have recognized as home; it might have been filmed right outside the classroom we were sitting in.

The video then cuts to short scenes of people walking as if headed to the fields for the day’s labor, then a woman washing clothing in a riverbed. However, with the second verse the video cuts to footage recorded from the back of a jeep transporting soldiers. One of the soldiers turns to look more closely at a woman and child who are hastily passing in the opposite direction at the side of the road; in the last frames of the shot, she turns to look anxiously at the soldiers. In the following scene, soldiers on foot seem to be following or chasing a group of Maya men, women, and children. Further scenes show the militarization of daily life in communities during the armed conflict. The video, like the song, foregoes extended story-telling and exegesis, instead drawing on diverse, short clips to depict the events unfolding during the armed conflict. Yet the combined effect, the synchronization of Gieco’s painful lyrics with scenes of women crying over the bodies of slain husbands and sons, or workers cutting sugar cane under the watchful eye of armed guards, is powerful and heartbreaking. Tzunun did not provide much detail about what the students should know or remember about the armed conflict or other periods of violence. Rather, his goal was to inspire the students to want to know more, and he advised them to ask their own grandparents for the true history.

Cycles of violence in Cantel: “We call to life these martyrs”

The more recent violence of the armed conflict was not a major focus for most interviewees—at least not on par with the more fundamentally disruptive violence of the Spanish invasion. However, for Lorena it was connected to what she saw as the core of her community’s identity. As a native of Cantel, Lorena was drawing on the collective memory of two violent events
that rocked her community at points nearly a century apart from each other: the 1884 execution of leaders upset about the construction of a textile factory, and the 1982-84 clandestine assassinations and human rights violations inflicted on the community as intimidation by the military. The local significance of these events, and the practices and tools adopted by the community to maintain their memory, are worth exploring in more detail. Local Cantelense interpretations of history offer an additional source of knowledge about the historical memory practices of Guatemalan Mayas.

Cantel is a county of just over 35,000 people located half an hour east of Quetzaltenango. The majority of Cantelenses—96.2% in Manning Nash’s 1958 survey, and still 95% of the population in 2008—identify as K’iche’ Maya (CODISRA 2010). Cantel became the site of Guatemala’s first industrial-scale textile factory in 1883, a sprawling compound founded on the banks of the Samalá River (Gamarro & Toc 2010; Grandin 1997). The red-roofed buildings of the factory, still in operation today, dominate the landscape and views of the town, and the development of space in the town was strongly shaped by its presence; for example, buses from Quetzaltenango follow separate routes for “Cantel centro” or for “Cantel fábrica,” the destinations lying only half a mile apart but on separate sides of the river and several hundred meters apart in elevation (see image in Appendix).

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76 Quetzaltenango is Guatemala’s second-largest city and the seat of an elite class of highland merchants and finqueros—including some K’iche’ families—that have long exerted influence over regional and national politics (Velásquez Nimatuj 2005; 2011). Quetzaltenango was the capital of the short-lived breakaway republic of Los Altos, and it provided the initial power base for the liberal reformer, president Justo Rufino Barrios. Some historians see Barrios’ liberal revolution as the application of Quetzalteco-style politics to govern the entire country (cf. Grandin 1997:223).
A corporation associated with the factory co-opted the community’s name for its up-scale textile brand; the corporate website describes the history of Cantel, the business, vis-à-vis Cantel, the community:

Cantel is a business with more than 100 years of experience in the textile industry. The company was founded in the year 1874 [sic] in the county of Cantel, Quetzaltenango and was the first textile factory in Guatemala. Cantel was established in an area where the workforce possessed a millennial knowledge of weavings and spinning, and ever since then we have managed to be present in Guatemalan homes, offering textile products of the highest quality. (Cantel, S.A. 2010)

A more thorough examination of history—including oral and “popular history” records—shows that the relationship between the two Cantels was not so tranquil in the beginning. While the “millennial knowledge” of local textile producers makes for a positive marketing image today, it had little to do with the selection of the plant’s location. The factory was established by the immensely wealthy Sánchez family, who had properties in Quetzaltenango, Totonicapán, and in the capital. By drawing on close personal and political ties with President Barrios—the Sánchez sons all served in the liberal government and one even married Barrios’ daughter—the Sánchez family was able to obtain an exclusive lease on the communal ejido lands at the center of Cantel (Grandin 1997:224-225). The location was selected for its proximity to the urban centers of the west and the Salamá River, which would power the first generation of textile machines, all English-built (and maintained by on-site European engineers) (Nash 1958). However it was also an attractive site because it provided Barrios and regional administrators with an opportunity to break up and privatize communal lands in Cantel, which they saw as a necessary step for economic and political progress in the highlands (Nash 1958; Grandin 1997).
The people of Cantel not only lost the prime real estate granted to the *Sánchez e Hijos* firm; they were also ordered by the Guatemalan authorities to provide labor and funds for the improvement of roads between Cantel and Quetzaltenango, for the transport of textiles and raw materials (Grandin 1997:225). Barrios’ liberal regime had implemented a *mandamiento* in 1877, “a colonial forced-labor draft retooled to fit the needs of coffee finqueros” (Grandin 1997:222). Under this policy, local authorities were required to provide able-bodied men to fill work quotas set by plantation owners or “political bosses” acting on the orders of the state. Before the establishment of the *fábrica*, the people of Cantel had largely managed to avoid participating in these labor drafts; Grandin suggests that Cantel’s leaders shrewdly used clan and kinship-based employment contracts to avoid the appearance of any “idle” workers being available (1997:222-223). However, the construction of the textile factory was deemed top priority, and the Cantelense tactics for avoiding the draft no longer worked. One mayor tried to resist Barrios’ orders to provide labor, only to have the state expropriate valuable forest land from Cantel and redistribute it to a neighboring ladino town. Chastened by the threat of losing even more Cantelense territory, the town’s leaders acquiesced. Cantelenses provided the funds and labor, and by 1883 the textile factory was operational (Grandin 1997).
Given this context of growing tension between an embattled local power structure and an expanding national government, it is not surprising that less than a year would pass before six Cantelense men would be publicly executed by firing squad for supporting a conspiracy to overthrow Barrios’ government; indeed, similar executions were carried out in no less than 16 other communities around the same time (Grandin 1997:233). However, I am not as interested in what
“really happened” in this event as I am interested in how the event is remembered. For the present purposes, what is more consequential is the collective memory of the 1884 execution, and its commemoration through practices over the next century—including, especially, its use as a point of reference for interpreting the violence of the 1980s.

The version of the memory in its most common form corresponds closely to an account published locally by Cantelense historian Mariano Cornejo Sam (2008), as well as details I gathered from my own interviews with Lorena and other Cantelenses. As the story goes, at four o’clock in the afternoon on one September day in 1884, Justo Rufino Barrios and a troop of ladino soldiers from Quetzaltenango arrived in the central plaza of Cantel and ordered all of the people of the community to gather around. Anyone who refused to come and watch would be put to death themselves. Barrios then had six men—all elected leaders of the town—blindfolded and marched into the square, where a firing squad publicly executed them for conspiring to commit treason. However, the torment did not end with this violence. Barrios ordered artillery units from the Quetzaltenango garrison to take up positions surrounding the town, and he ordered the Cantelenses to pay a hefty fine: “If they did not comply, under pain of punishment, the town would be destroyed

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77 For example, Greg Grandin builds a convincing argument that the men who were executed in 1884 were not the elected municipal authorities—a claim that, as he points out, contradicts both popular and earlier academic accounts of the event. Grandin’s key piece of evidence for this argument is a document written by an anonymous author in the 1980s, which Grandin found in the municipal offices of Cantel. The document explains how the leaders of the municipality met with “a delegate from [an] invented Anti-Barrios Revolution,” who tricked them into admitting their willingness to help overthrow the liberal regime; it then describes the execution of 6 men, as well as the installation of artillery surrounding the community and the levying of a fine of 1,200 pounds of silver on the townspeople (Grandin et al. 2011:126-127). Grandin points out that other records indicate the fine was a more realistic 15,000 quetzales, which was still consequential enough to force Cantelenses to sell land and migrate to work on coastal plantations (1997).
piece by piece and all of Cantel’s territory would be transferred to the [ladino] municipality of Salcajá. The people managed to scrape together the required sum, but only by selling off valuable lands and working as seasonal laborers on coastal plantations—a fate that they had been able to avoid before.

This narrative was preserved in the historical memory of Cantelenses for generations after the execution. The story was kept salient—and somewhat crystallized in this form—by several important remembering practices, including the “imprisonment” of a bust of Justo Rufino Barrios in a holding cell in the municipal building. Other commemorative practices were interventions by municipal leaders in the late 1950s in attempts to increase community solidarity in order to exert more control over the staff and employees of the fábrica. Like memory activists today, these leaders hoped that by laying claim to the past and commemorating Cantelenses’ shared struggle, they would be able to affect changes in their present. For example, through the 1960s, local schoolchildren were taught about the execution and given a day off from classes on the anniversary of the execution. However, the most important physical manifestation of the historical memory of 1884 is represented in a monument that was constructed in the town cemetery by the municipal authorities in 1958 (see image below).

79 The municipal building burned down in 2006 and renovations remain unrealized (Colop 2013). Colleagues in Cantel report that the bust of Barrios most likely perished in the fire; at any rate it is not stored in the multi-purpose building which now functions as the provisional city hall.
When I first heard that Cantel had a monument, I did not know any of these details about the 1884 execution. In fact, I arranged my first trip to visit the monument—the day after my Cantelense friend Jaime informed me of its existence—in order to catalog it as a local-level memorial to the victims of the internal armed conflict. However, when I located the monument it became clear that it could not have been a commemoration of the internal armed conflict; the inscription on the simple cross read: “Their hatred of tyrants made them martyrs. Here rest the remains of a
municipality, and patriots (who were) executed on September 4, 1884. Municipality of 1958.” The monument clearly indicates that it predated the onset of the armed conflict; how could it come to be associated in (some) locals’ minds with events that followed nearly a generation later?

One clue lies in understanding how the internal armed conflict affected the community of Cantel. In 1982, following Efraín Ríos Montt’s rise to power, the Guatemalan military expanded its program of “civil self-defense patrols” (patrullas de autodefensa civil, or PACs), recruiting 1.3 million men in a strategy that effectively militarized entire communities and turned neighbors against one another; as Jennifer Schirmer summarized: “Nowhere else in Latin America has an army managed to mobilize and divide an indigenous population against itself to such an extent—to the point of forcing victims to become accomplices in killing—as in Guatemala” (Schirmer 2002:52). The strategy was effective not only for demoralizing the guerrilla and their supporters, but for disarticulating local organizing and activism for well into the future by spreading blame and suspicion: “Such terror not only fractured local solidarity; it also achieved the objective of the pacification campaign by binding the perpetrators in a blood ritual to the state” (Grandin et al. 2011:363).

Cantel was the only community in Guatemala that refused the military’s orders to establish a PAC. Americas Watch investigated Cantel’s response to the events in 1985, publishing excerpts from the testimony of a local school teacher (AW 1986). The teacher explained that an army brigade arrived in the town plaza one afternoon in November of 1982, expecting to gather the local men and instruct them in how to form a PAC. However, the Cantelenses had already heard that the
soldiers were coming, and by the time they arrived, “we had 40,000 people in the square” waiting to yell “no” at the colonel:

When the colonel saw that everything was useless, he said, “I am going to inform General [then-President] Ríos Montt that you do not want the civil patrol.” And the people shouted back, “Go tell him and get out of here.” (AW 1986:88)

The military tried several more times to organize a PAC in Cantel—in February 1983 and a year later, in November 1983—but each time the community rejected the proposal and most individuals simply ignored the military officers. There were repercussions for this resistance, of course. Where before, “there used to be one assassination every 17 years, and even then, they were committed by someone from outside Cantel,” by the time the military gave up its efforts to form a PAC, entire families had been disappeared, local leaders assassinated, and women were raped and viciously attacked in an organized intimidation campaign (AW 1986:89-94).

The teacher interviewed by Americas Watch claimed that Cantel was able to resist the military, despite the violent reprisals, because the town “has always had a very high level of social conscience,” which he attributed primarily to the union formed by workers in the fábrica during the October Revolution (AW 1986:85). However, the teacher also mentioned the expropriation of communal land by Barrios as an inspiration for distrusting the military and the national government (AW 1986:86). Greg Grandin also found that Cantelenses attributed historical memory as the agentive force that allowed their community to resist the army and reject the order to form a PAC:

When I asked how Cantel, unlike any other Maya community, was able to prevent the formation of a PAC, all those I interviewed, to a person, invoked a group cohesiveness and drew on a memory of collective resistance. “Somos gente culta” (We are educated, cultured people) and “Tenemos un conocimiento de nuestra historia” (We have knowledge of our history) were two of many similar responses I received. Nearly all mentioned the 1884
execution, “when Barrios came to destroy the town because we loved freedom.” (Grandin 1997:242-243)

Grandin also pointed out that Cantel’s integration into the national economy made the town less dependent on local resources, and after all “It is easier to burn crops and destroy a town on market day than it is to stop a paycheck” (1997:242).

My own interview with Lorena confirmed that for her, the events of 1884 and 1984 are understood as closely intertwined, and they also reflect an even longer view of history—linking both events to the moment of the Spanish invasion:

**Doc:** Do you have more details to add about “the Spanish conquistadors?”

**Lorena:** Perhaps the cruelest thing that we experienced from them, we in the community of Cantel, the workers, the peasants most of all—our grandparents, our parents—they were organizing during that moment and trying to exercise power. In that era, all the authority was in the hands of others, and in our community they began to organize to demand power from the bosses in a factory that was there, near Cantel. They didn’t pay fairly, and some (workers) weren’t paid at all, just gave them some food for their pay. And some leaders among these workers … began to protest before the administrators of the factory, who were allies of the rich, who were trying to exploit the lands of the municipio of Cantel, and exploiting not only the land but the people… I think that they fought, and when they tried to organize themselves and give form to a protest … it became a terrorizing situation because some of them were executed by a firing squad (*por fusilación*, verdad? Some of them who were the leaders… And since the population was extremely poor, some betrayed the leaders for a few coins that they needed desperately … They tried to *desaparecer* the knowledge of this in our community, but I believe that it remained in the thoughts, in the thoughts and hearts of our grandparents, so that up until now, they maintain and preserve them. I think that there are perhaps only a few things that I could mention, but there are many profound effects left from the arrival of the Spanish, yeah? …

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**Doc:** Do you have anything more to say about “the execution of peasant leaders in Cantel?”

**Lorena:** The execution was a horrifying act, an act that never should have happened in our town. It was an act that was very difficult for us, that never should have—they began to
fight. When it came to this execution it was something that, we couldn’t do anything… to defend or fight for our leaders who were executed. … So, I think that it’s a part of the history of Cantel that… it’s a negative part of the history because we had never experienced that, but we value the maximum effort and the life of the leaders who were shot because it marks a greater transcendence of the fight that we’ve had in Cantel. And up till now … all the years, they commemorate these… I forget the word.

**Doc:** Martyrs?

**Lorena:** Martyrs, thanks. These martyrs, yes. … I believe that we have tried to share this history so that the children, the youth are able to know the history of Cantel, and in some form value it. We call to life these martyrs. Cantel is one of the communities that has suffered by confronting, even losing lives, to defend justice.

Lorena’s narrative is at once in line with the overall “narrative truth” offered by other representations of the local history; her comment about locals betraying the leaders “for a few coins” may also reflect the alternative reading that Greg Grandin offered—either an example of academic text returning to the community being studied, or evidence that the events he detected through archival research are still remembered by some living Cantelenses. As Lorena views the history, the 1884 execution is linked to the Spanish invasion, as well as municipal leaders’ struggle with the factory owners in the 1950s and 1960s. For Lorena, the overarching explanatory framework for all of these moments of violence is the dialectical struggle between labor and capital, or in her terms the left-wing and right-wing sectors. Given the similarities in these events, her interpretation of history as an overarching narrative of cyclical violence seems entirely reasonable.

**Patterns & templates**

In this final section, I look to the shared elements in these historical narratives to identify general patterns underlying interpretations of Guatemala and its past. The identification of such
patterns may be most useful for evaluating future efforts at historical representation—for example, determining whether new history textbooks are likely to meet the demands of engaged Maya citizens. In reviewing the narratives offered by my research participants, I identified two themes or patterns that were common features, though they also appear to be unique consequences of Guatemalan history—at least as interpreted by these young Maya intellectuals: 1) agency & resistance through social solidarity; and 2) chronological slippage.

First, the manner in which agency and resistance are discussed in the interviews offers a strategy for reconciling the often-cited crisis of representing the Maya as both agents and victims in history. For example, in recent years leading Maya intellectual leaders have referred to the Spanish invasion, the liberal reform era, and the internal armed conflict as the “three holocausts” of the Maya civilization (Cojtí Cuxil 1997; Montejo 2005). Concurrently, state institutions such as the National Program of Reparations and the Fund for Peace have provided some tangible benefits, however insufficient, for a few communities that suffered violence during the armed conflict. A handful of communities have won legal battles against perpetrators of human rights violations (Kohler and MacLeod 2008; Tecú Osorio 2006).

These important discourses all depend, to some extent, on their authors representing themselves as victims and survivors of the violence. Some scholars have labeled this self-representation of victimhood a “trap” that denies victims the claim to agency (Hale 2006). The difficulties of this position are demonstrated by Rigoberta Menchú’s ambiguous state: she became world famous as a member of the leftist movement, but she now rejects that identity and presents herself foremost as a spokesperson for Maya victims of the conflict. Right-wing commentators and
military sympathizers often label public intellectuals like Menchú hypocrites because they critique counterinsurgency violence without also calling for guerrillas to stand trial. However, my Maya colleagues would consider it odd to suggest that communities or individuals who took part in resisting violence would have to forfeit their claims to justice. For them, the evidence is clear and locally at hand: the greater burden of violence was borne by rural, Maya communities. As both historical clarification reports clearly indicated, the vast majority of the abuses were perpetrated by the military and para-military forces (ODHAG 1998; CEH 1999a).

On the other hand, younger Mayas do not typically defend or identify with the guerrillas—in my interviews, only Lorena expressed sympathy or solidarity with the revolutionary cause. The preferred avenue for social change most often expressed by my informants was education and the creation of solidarity on local and regional levels, rather than armed struggle for control of the state. In particular, the perceived “loss of values” or “loss of respect” that accompanies violence is viewed as the greatest threat to indigenous identity and community organizing. In over a dozen interviews with bilingual school teachers in K’iche’ communities, these perceived losses were blamed for language loss, community and family disintegration, the rise of drug trafficking and gang membership, and even the corruption of state education authorities. While campaigns for linguistic and cultural revitalization do not appear to touch on political topics directly, they do help to restore the prestige of local traditions, or to create new traditions that are ascribed Maya identity. In turn, these efforts may help communities organize resistance to future threats—similar to Cantel’s response to counterinsurgency campaigns in the 1980s. This narrative pattern of defining social solidarity-building as a fundamentally important act of agency shares characteristics with the
“peaceful utopias” imagined by Andean activists, who Rappaport described as being focused on “the need to strengthen native cultures, to build grassroots authorities, and to relegate shamanic practice and authority” (Rappaport 2005:9).

The second pattern in my research participants’ narratives is a theme I call chronological slippage—a tendency to ‘misplace’ events chronologically, or to condense multiple events, time periods, or historical figures into fewer exemplary figures. The Cantelense experiences described above illustrate this pattern, as when locals identify the town’s monument as a commemoration of violence from 1982-84, when it was actually constructed to commemorate events of a century earlier. I also saw chronological slippage at play when informants completely skipped over the 10-year period of democratic rule from 1944-54; this aberration did not fit into their interpretation of history. One colleague with a university education matter-of-factly described the transition of power from President Jorge Ubico (whose time in office ended in 1944) to José Efraín Ríos Montt (whose dictatorship began in 1982). Chronological slippage is due in some cases to an underlying conventional view of history as repetitive or circular. This is not to suggest that my informants lack a linear view of history, but is rather an acknowledgement that they utilize circular visions of time for some purposes as a matter of custom or convenience—a practice shared by many societies. Eviatar Zerubavel notes that similar “mnemonic typification” occurs in Israel, where holidays that follow the “very same schematic formula (‘military uprising against foreign occupation’)” tend to get mixed up (2003:23). He quotes Mark Twain’s poignant description that “history doesn’t repeat itself, but it does rhyme” (in Zerubavel 2003:25). The recurrence of history in Cantel demonstrates such ‘rhyming,’ and the accompanying sense of déjà vu.
A schematic narrative template for Guatemalan history

The patterns identified above, combined with the highlights of the specific narratives described earlier in the chapter, can be used to approximate a schematic narrative template for the interpretation of Guatemalan history. In this endeavor, I draw on James Wertsch’s example of the “triumph-over-alien-forces” narrative template that Russians use to interpret their history (2002:93):

1. An “initial situation” in which the Russian people are living in a peaceful setting where they are no threat to others is disrupted by:
2. The initiation of trouble or aggression by an alien force, or agent, which leads to:
3. A time of crisis and great suffering, which is:
4. Overcome by the triumph over the alien force by the Russian people, acting heroically and alone. (Wertsch 2002:93)

Wertsch notes that “to many it will appear that there is nothing peculiarly Russian about this narrative template since it may be found just about anywhere” (2002:93). Other societies could easily interpret certain events in a similar manner; and Russians themselves are able to draw on other organizing frameworks for their narratives. However, the template “plays an extremely important role in collective memory, even in instances where it would not seem relevant” (Wertsch 2002:94). This “ubiquity” of the template—its applicability to describe the predominant interpretations of so many of the most important events in Russian history—lends it a special significance.

Narrative templates exist at a higher level of abstraction than specific narratives—as such, they “are not readily available to consciousness”; neither do they extend universally—they correspond to “particular narrative traditions that can be expected to differ from one cultural setting to another” (Wertsch 2002:62). In formulating this concept, Wertsch draws on Lowenthal’s description of “textual heritage[s] [with] uniquely national modes of explanation” (1994:53). As I
noted in chapter 2, neither specific narratives nor, it can be assumed, narrative templates are effectively shared at the national level in Guatemala. My aim in this final section is to identify the template shared by my research participants, who were young Maya professionals and intellectuals. I do not claim, nor would I expect to find, that this template—or the specific narratives that exemplify it—are shared universally in Guatemala. Members of other ethno-linguistic groups, social classes, or generations may use different narratives and schematic narrative templates—a topic that may prove productive for future research. It is more reasonable to simply anticipate that my findings apply to a much larger population beyond my study sample, possibly including most Maya Guatemalans of the same generation.

By combining the two patterns described above, we can begin to construct a schematic narrative template that represents this interpretation of Guatemalan history:

1. Maya communities exist in peace, with high levels of internal solidarity and their own forms of life and government.
2. Powerful outsiders feel threatened by the independent development of the Maya; in response they construct an ideological framework that “others” the Maya and justifies intervention.80
3. These outsiders use the instruments of the state to attack the local Maya, both ideologically and militarily.
4. This violence not only costs lives and property, but also causes a “loss of values” and the fragmentation of communal solidarity, which in turn leads to betrayal and internecine violence.
5. The violence only comes to an end once the Maya have regained their sense of solidarity (returning the cycle to its point of origin).

80 Examples of “othering” or “criminalization” at different points in time include branding the Maya as non-human pagans during the invasion, as racially inferior degenerates during the liberal reform era, as communist subversives during the internal armed conflict, and as accomplices in drug trafficking today.
This framework captures the shared elements and the overall “narrative truth” conveyed by my informants’ narratives (Wertsch 2000:39). It provides a view of history’s trajectory that is at once linear and circular, reflecting the patterns of chronological slippage as well as the hope encapsulated within the view of resistance and agency through solidarity. In the remaining chapters of the dissertation, I will show how the discourses promoted by memory activists and Maya intellectuals relate to this template: Will my research participants’ views of history be represented in these new narratives?
Chapter 6: Testimonio in Guatemalan Remembering Practices

In this chapter, I discuss the impact of testimonio, both as a literary genre with recognizable authors and witnesses, and as a form of ‘raw data’ for social scientific knowledge production, as in the processes of interviewing conducted under the auspices of the truth commissions after the Peace Accords. At its most basic, testimonio may be defined as “a first-person, mediated text, in which a member of a subaltern group shares a story with an interlocutor in order to provide testimony of an event or significant life experience that might otherwise be silenced or forgotten” (Gates-Madsen 2012:88). In practice, however, many of the most celebrated examples of the genre possess additional defining characteristics, or lack some component of this description. Kimberly Nance notes that since its origins, testimonio has held a sense of “overrunning established boundaries” (2012:242).

Testimonio was one of the first avenues for Maya historical memories to enter into wider Guatemalan (and international) discursive spheres, principally through the testimonies of survivors and victims of the 36-year long armed conflict (French 2010:84). In some cases, individually-authored and -narrated testimonios reached large audiences and had substantial social impacts. The most well-known example is the testimonio of Rigoberta Menchú Tum, transcribed and edited by the French anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos-Debray in 1983. Menchú’s narrative attracted the attention of scholars and solidarity groups in the U.S. and Europe—including the Nobel Prize Committee, which awarded Menchú the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992 “in recognition of her work for social justice and ethno-cultural reconciliation based on respect for the rights of indigenous peoples"
Several other Guatemalans contributed influential, individual testimonios as this literary genre gained worldwide interest—Mario Payeras, a founding member of one of the guerrilla movements, authored an account of his “days of the jungle” in 1980 that helped define a new “guerrilla testimonio” genre (Zimmerman 1991:25).

In addition to testimonies written by individual authors and their collaborators, the Guatemalan truth commissions—the CEH and REMHI projects—collected thousands of testimonies during the process of gathering information about the causes and effects of the armed conflict. The truth commissions translated these interviews into extensive databases documenting violations of human rights that occurred during the conflict, coding their contents in order to perform statistical analyses that allowed answers to such questions as the total number of civilians killed in the violence—over 200,000 by the CEH’s estimate (1999a). Excerpts of the original testimonial narratives have been pulled out occasionally and used to provide illustrations and contextual background for describing the violence. These “cases” have since been reproduced in various forms, including popularized versions of the truth reports intended for low-literacy adult audiences, and new textbooks aimed at primary school children.

Yet another form of testimonial narrative—courtroom testimony—has been gaining importance in Guatemala since the signing of the Peace Accords, especially gaining steam after the 2001 conviction of military officers for the assassination of Bishop Juan José Gerardi, the first case in which members of the military were tried and convicted in a civilian court (Goldman 2008). Through courtroom testimony, witnesses have taken part in trials against former military officials and civil patrollers for their actions in violating human rights during the internal armed conflict.
The most historic example of this legal form of testimony was the Ríos Montt genocide trial, which featured testimonies by more than 90 Ixil Maya survivors of a massacre carried out by the military under Ríos Montt’s command. In announcing the court’s decision, the presiding judge referred to the witnesses’ testimony as evidence of the standard pattern of violence carried out by the army, and noted that “after listening to the witnesses... we could see the pain of the victims, who knew of the death of their loved ones and were powerless to do anything to prevent it” (Sentencia C-01076-2011-00015:688). Although the trial was ultimately set back on questionable legal grounds, the participation of the survivors in sharing their testimonies helped to focus public attention on the issue of Maya genocide to an unprecedented degree (MacLean 2013).

Ultimately, each of these forms of testimonio has played an important role in shaping the historical memories and political imaginaries of Guatemalans today, including resetting the parameters for the discussion of history, truth, and social justice. In particular, testimonio has opened numerous spaces for Maya participation in the public sphere, and in turn their voices and practices have been incorporated into the procedures of knowledge production (Habermas 1970; Morrow and Torres 2002:47-48). Much of the broader shift in epistemic authority visible today has its origins in the testimonial narrative-building of the 1980s-1990s. The legitimated truth value of the CEH and REMHI reports, or Menchú’s recognition by the Nobel Committee, or the short-lived imprisonment of Ríos Montt for genocide, were moments that marked the culmination of processes of knowledge production by countless individuals—not only the recognized authors and project leaders, but unidentifiable others who participated: as “cases” in the CEH & REMHI files, as readers
who publicly responded to and shared Menchú’s account, or as memory activists who spent over a
decade calling loudly and persistently for justice to reach Ríos Montt.

In order to fully appreciate the social effects of these testimonios in Guatemala, we must
examine the several meanings attached to this discursive genre across different contexts. In the text
below, I begin by disentangling the definitions of testimonio—as literature or narrative or legal
practice—offered by different fields of scholarship. I then examine case studies of Guatemalan
testimonio, including the writings of Victor Montejo and the truth commissions set up by the
United Nations and the Catholic Church. I juxtapose these testimonial forms in order to ask: 1) How
do the personal experiences of testimonio differ, between testifying or witnessing or authoring
a narrative?; 2) What are the processes and purposes of testimonio, and do these suggest the
possibility of a unified definition?; and 3) What does each form reveal about the (changing) role of
epistemic authority in Guatemala? In the final section, I discuss testimonio as a form of historical
memory that carries legal weight, as in the case of several recent trials involving human rights
violations during the armed conflict. I focus my interrogation on the critiques and challenges posed
by those who stand to lose their monopolies on power and expertise as subjugated knowledges gain
legitimacy.

Defining Testimonio

Two of the most influential definitions of testimonio were offered by George Yúdice, who
focused on the purpose of testimonial writing, and by John Beverley and Marc Zimmerman, who
focused on the form and process of the genre. For Yúdice:
Testimonial writing may be defined as an authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation (e.g., war, oppression, revolution, etc.). Emphasizing popular, oral discourse, the witness portrays his or her own experience as an agent (rather than a representative) of a collective memory and identity. Truth is summoned in the cause of denouncing a present situation of exploitation and oppression or in exorcising and setting aright official history. (Yúdice 1996:44)

In the context of examining testimonio as a form of memory activism, the crucial element of Yúdice’s definition is the circumstance of the witness being “moved to narrate,” an observation that expresses the agentive power of the memory of such traumatic events. In this approach to testimonio, the relationship of the genre to memory activism is made visible in the shared claim to memory as a type of knowledge that matters and motivates, in fundamental and inescapable ways. The agency of such memory begets further remembering: the testimonial witness does not merely record her memory for posterity; she ‘summons truth’ to challenge injustice in the here and now.

The second ‘classic’ definition of testimonio, by Beverley and Zimmerman, focuses on the process and form of testimonial composition:

[Testimonio is] a novel or novella-length narrative, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the actual protagonist or witness of the events she or he recounts. The unit of narration is usually a life or a significant life episode… Since in many cases the narrator is someone who is either functionally illiterate or, if literate, not a professional writer or intellectual, the production of a testimonio generally involves the recording and/or transcription and editing of an oral account by an interlocutor… (Beverley and Zimmerman 1990:86)

The highlight of this approach is the focus on the mediation provided by an interlocutor, such as an anthropologist. Again, a defining characteristic of testimonio is that it is told by an eye-witness to the events. In later writing, Zimmerman expanded upon the role of mediation: in addition to the complexity added by the interlocutor’s strategies of representation, the narrator is presumed to be a
“typical or extraordinary witness … who metonymically represents other individuals or groups that have lived through other, similar situations” (Zimmerman 1995:12). Altogether, these layers of interpretation and representation make testimonio an “intertextual dialogue of voices, reproducing but also creatively reordering historical events in a way which impresses as representative and true and which projects a vision of life and society in need of transformation” (Zimmerman 1995:12). In short, testimonio is a genre that (re)produces meaning dialogically, with a call to action embedded within the narrative.

Recently, scholars such as Nancy Gates-Madsen have pushed for expanding the “umbrella of testimonial representation” by shifting the emphasis wholly to testimonio’s role as “a representation of trauma that aims to promote action,” discounting the mode or form of its expression:

A definition based on purpose avoids the issue of truth value that has plagued much of testimonial theory. For despite the differences of opinion regarding its definition, the central purpose of testimonial narrative remains constant: testimonio speaks truth to power; it seeks to break a repressive silence regarding a traumatic event. (Gates-Madsen 2012:89)

For Gates-Madsen, this maneuver allows her to consider fictional narratives as examples of testimonio, a step she finds appealing because she recognizes that traumatic experiences are sometimes best represented through fiction, as the ‘real’ story is too painful for expression (2012:89). Although I agree that knowledge can be gained from including such accounts, which are “haunted by testimony,” I would avoid going so far in discounting the role that truth plays in the purpose of
testimonio. As I argue below, much of the force of testimonial narratives derives precisely from the assumption of truth on the part of the narrator. They inspire action because of this truth.81

The high point of testimonio production corresponded to the period of political struggles between right-wing, repressive states and leftist guerrilla revolutionaries. Leigh Binford described a spirit of solidarity for scholars in the “age of Latin American rebellion and revolution [when] testimonio seemed an appropriate medium for expression of the voice of those without voice: workers and peasants, men and women, Indian and ladino struggling to bring down repressive military dictatorships” (2012:12). As the revolutionary paradigms lost steam, testimonio fell from favor within the academy, alongside an “increasing skepticism about the possibility of representing subaltern voices” (Binford 2012:16). Elzbieta Sklodowska has called for greater attention to the “intricate tension between the indeterminacy of experience and the closure of discourse, between the act of living/surviving/witnessing and the act of testifying/transcribing” (1996:87). Diane Nelson eloquently expressed this dilemma when writing about Guatemala:

It is a well-known joke that the longer a foreigner stays in Guatemala, the harder it is to write about it. … Guatemala is extremely complex, a space of terror as well as laughter, of horrific violence as well as bravery. So much of the information available there has been multiply encoded and recoded, filtered through rumor and personal histories, and encased in a hard veneer derived from political antagonisms, that it is a truly perilous claim I make in trying to represent it at all. (Nelson 1999:31)

81 To the extent that fictional accounts achieve the same end, the cause must either be that they succeed in recalling to mind the true events or accounts that the audience has encountered elsewhere; or, in the perspective of Trouillot, they are not fictions, but fakes (1995:6-7).
My own experiences led me to a similar outlook. In formal interviews as well as everyday conversations, I was frequently reminded that deeper processes were at play beneath the surface. This was clearest in instances of my closest informants’ practices of self-representation, in which I learned that identity is situational and dynamic, and certain tropes or stereotypes may be strategically embraced in the pursuit of political objectives. Understanding the significance of a statement about “we the Mayas” or “we the pueblo of Guatemala” required attention to not only the present setting, but recalling previous conversations or presentations that demonstrated an alternative set of interpretations.

Attention to (self-)representation also proves crucial for the interpretation of testimonio: traditional Maya narrative genres did not include autobiography, and even in the post-truth-commission era, biography and its individualizing focus remain foreign to many Mayas (Warren 2001:202). For many scholars responding to the crisis over Rigoberta Menchu’s testimony and its several inaccuracies, the recognition of local forms of narrative truth became something of a totem or rallying cry. Additionally, our increasing awareness of memory’s malleability and its unexamined potential for inaccuracy led to a widening gap between different disciplinary approaches to testimonio, based in differing epistemologies of knowledge and truth. As Sklodowska elaborated:

The strange hybrid we have come to call testimonio thus offers an amalgam of shreds of memory and cohesive narrative. It involves a series of erasures, emendations, and amalgamations quite similar to those that Freud sets out in his account of ‘screen memories,’ where the unconscious mind performs the operations of displacing, projecting, splitting, and telescoping. From a literary standpoint, this is an intriguing blend; from the perspective of more ‘scientific’ disciplines it is, at best, an uneasy combination. (Sklodowska 2001:263)
The tension between competing disciplinary and ideological claims to truth will be examined in the cases below. Perhaps more optimistically, Binford reminds us that testimonio is often put to diverse uses by the witnesses themselves: “Which is to say that the context that shapes their reading experiences reaches beyond academia or literary institutions to encompass a much wider field of thought and action” (Binford 2012:18).

Sklodowska noted that memory “plays such a fundamental role in the mediation of all telling, writing, reading, and interpreting that the theme of remembrance and forgetting emerged almost of its own accord” when she began to write about the controversy that erupted over Rigoberta Menchú’s testimonio (2001:259). She drew on the ideas of Jean-François Lyotard, who saw “memory as a mechanism whereby human suffering can be made ordinary, dismissed, ‘taken care of,’ exorcised” (1988:26), as well as Raphael Samuel’s argument that memory is deeply temporal, “historically conditioned… according to the emergencies of the moment” (1996:8). Sklodowska concluded that “testimonio—as a form of narrative predicated on memory—is particularly vulnerable to oblivion” (2001:257). I argue that memory activism could be conceptualized as an attempt to resist this oblivion, by adopting commemorative practices that keep alive the memory of the dead and their struggles. This is perhaps more visible and obvious for the more institutional forms of commemoration, such as the production of historical textbooks and new museum exhibitions (described in chapter 8), yet it also holds true for the more immediate and in some cases ephemeral practices of testimony described below and in the next chapter.

Altogether, I draw from the discussions above three key elements of testimonio that will be explored in greater detail below. First, a testimonial narrator typically establishes the truthfulness of
his or her narrative by appealing to the immediacy or intimacy of knowledge of the experience, such as an eye-witness account. Second, the events described in the testimonio—of destruction, violence, violation—are perceived as significant to the collective social body, which may even be defined as the entire world community. Third, the focus of testimonial narratives is not primarily on accuracy, but on effectively (and affectively) appealing to the audience’s moral sensibilities in order to encourage action. The specific ways that witnesses or testimonial narratives express these tendencies are illustrated in the following case studies of Guatemalan testimonio.

Guatemalan testimonio: genres & case studies

Testimonio in Truth Commissions

In Guatemala, the wider social effects of testimonial agency are most clearly articulated in the truth commission reports prepared just after the signing of the Peace Accords. The anthropologist Lynn Stephen defined testimonio within this context as “a person’s account of an event or experience as delivered from the lips of that person through a speech act. … It signifies witnessing, from the Latin root testis, or witness” (2012:109). In Stephen’s definition, she implicitly positions herself as the ‘interlocutor’ in the framework identified by the more literary scholars, an unsurprising move for an ethnographer to make. Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs) have been carried out in at least eight Latin American countries in the past thirty years, and in many cases

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82 In the future, the role of testimonio within judicial contexts may supersede the truth commissions, as the conviction of Ríos Montt affirmed the CEH report’s designation of genocide; however, the subsequent overturning of that sentence illustrated the persistence of impunity and the obstacles to the rule of law in Guatemala (see Burt and Thale 2013; Doyle 2012).
anthropologists have participated in the efforts to collect testimonies from survivors and victims. In Guatemala, the Catholic Church’s REMHI project collected over 5,000 individual testimonies, while the UN-sponsored CEH collected 7,200; both projects drew on the expertise of social scientists for the collection and analysis of this information (ODHAG 1998; CEH 1999b).

Stephen optimistically characterized TRCs as instruments for “rewriting national histories,” gathering information that serves as “archives of historical materials that are and will be continually drawn upon to interpret periods of brutal violence … as well as the ‘democratic transitions’ that followed” (2012:111). These two functions—providing a new national narrative, and safeguarding a set of legitimized knowledge materials for later historical research—are among the most often remarked-upon features of TRCs; however, in practice the outcomes of such projects leave doubts that such national-level consensus is achievable. Critiques tend to approach from two angles. Brandon Hamber and Richard Wilson claim that TRCs are based on a fundamental misapplication of individual-level psychological concepts to treat social-level problems:

[T]he idea of dealing with the past through a national truth commission ascribes a collective identity to a nation, and assumes that nations have psyches that experience traumas in a similar way to individuals. This act of ‘psychologizing the nation’ mistakenly implies that the pursuit of national unity is a unitary and coherent process, and that individual and national processes of dealing with the past are largely concurrent and equivalent. … the mythology of nation building can have damaging consequences for individual survivors who are seen as ‘out of step’ with a putative collective conscience. (Hamber and Wilson 2002:35-36)

The incongruence of this forced equivalence becomes apparent whenever survivors are accused of seeking revenge or threatening the peace by demanding justice—charges that are commonly used against memory activists in Guatemala, and elsewhere. The mandate to forget painful memories in
the interests of social harmony thus places an additional burden on the victims and survivors who were most negatively affected by the violence in the first place (Zur 1998; ODHAG 2003).

The second angle of critique focuses on the individualizing nature of the actual processes involved in carrying out TRCs. Greg Grandin and Thomas Klubock identified an inherent limitation in the tension between the mission for a ‘reconcilable’ historical truth and the demands of victims for a more actionable, legally binding truth:

In order to avoid such divisive conclusions, truth commissions, for the most part, presented history not as a conflict of interests and ideas within a context of unequal power, but as a parable of illiberal intolerance, distilling a nation’s recently ideological feverish past into a useful moral, one that portrays terror as an inversion of a democratic society, a nightmarish alternative of what lies ahead if it does not abide by constitutional rules. (Grandin and Klubock 2007:3-4)

This description aptly fits the “culture of peace” discourse that emerged after the end of the Guatemalan conflict; the historical factors described in the CEH report were ignored while political leaders tautologically defined the conflict as a consequence of a “culture of violence” that must be avoided (Oglesby 2007). Grandin and Klubock pointed out that TRCs tend to “disaggregate the collective nature of social justice struggles,” leading victims to abandon their narratives of agency within broader political movements in favor of “submit[ting] their experiences to the procedural and doctrinal compartmentalization of liberal jurisprudence” (2007:3-4). This set of practices and discourses thus concretizes a simplified, standardized ‘victim’ identity in place of the more complex lived realities of individual survivors. Alejandro Castillejo-Cuéllar described the TRC as “simultaneously a technology that rendered visible certain forms of violence while obliterating others” (2007:12). In tracing the way that a single, “iconic” case of violence was investigated by the
South African TRC, he showed that distinct types of truth—“narrative and forensic”—were prioritized differently at stages in the TRC research process, leading to “a series of translations: from the first testimony, itself framed by the informational necessity of the statement-taking process, into the findings, [or in other words] from experience into knowledge” (2007:21).

Lynn Stephen sees truth commissions more optimistically, viewing the witness “as an active social agent who is engaged in a personal and collective performative act that can potentially broaden the meaning of truth, and also serve to advance alternative and contested understandings of history” (2012:111). Stephen reminds us that “the same people circulate their testimonials in different forums outside of the courtroom where they may be expressed and interpreted quite differently,” thus we cannot assume that the ‘passive victim’ role adopted for one narrative performance encapsulates the totality of an actor’s interpretation of their experiences in history (2012:112). The positive impact of TRCs’ translation of testimonies into ‘data’ or ‘evidence’ is that these legal procedures broaden the parameters of truth. Laplante and Theidon noted that the inclusion of survivors’ testimonies alongside the perspectives of specialists helped to validate survivors’ experiences, affirming that the horrible events really occurred as they remembered and claimed (2007:238:239). However, they also “detected high expectations of what the TRC would do in terms of restorative justice, leaving open the question of what would result if those expectations went unmet” (Laplante and Theidon 2007:240).

The outcomes of TRCs “indicate that truth gathering must be followed by concrete measures to end impunity and build the rule of law if the transition process is to create the foundation for a viable democracy” (Laplante and Theidon 2007:230). The persistence of impunity
in Guatemala lends support to the view that TRCs may be a necessary, but insufficient step toward establishing the rule of law in a new democratic state. TRCs are mandated to pursue historical clarification and to support the reconciliation of diverse sectors; they are not intended to build legal cases, especially the Latin American TRCs that were set up alongside blanket amnesties for perpetrators (Hamber and Wilson 2002:39). The Guatemalan CEH was exceptional in that its mandate called for identifying the broader historical context of violence, an opening that the researchers used to examine the racist and colonial basis of the social structure and to ultimately conclude that the Guatemalan military’s actions constituted genocide against Maya people in at least three regions during the presidencies of Lucas García and Ríos Montt—notably, a crime that was not excused under the amnesty laws (Oglesby 2007:179).

Nevertheless, the CEH report itself did not carry legal repercussions for former guerrillas or members of the military. At best, the documentary evidence compiled by the CEH and REMHI has offered validation of survivors’ experiences, and resources for later, additional legal battles. Guatemalan memory activism emerged as a response to this shortfall: popular forms of memory activism are invariably associated with calls to prosecute former officials for war crimes—individuals who remain influential in the public- and private-sector institutions most often accused of corruption. The argument that past violence fuels present crimes is frequently reproduced in activist discourse. In more institutionalized (and arguably ‘sanitized’) versions of memory activism, the same argument appears in less individualized forms—as critiques of institutional corruption, rather than the identification of single individuals, a concession to the realities of the distribution of political and economic power in the Guatemalan state.
It is also crucial to consider the experience of TRCs for the victims and survivors of violence: Researchers and activists who have worked in TRCs have also pointed out that witnesses’ participation often appears to bring feelings of catharsis, as well as opportunities for the expression of guilt, anger, fear, and various other feelings associated with the experiences of violence. The editors of Guatemala’s REMHI report described this process:

These testimonies represent the first time that many victims and survivors have spoken of their experiences. Remembrance frequently aroused emotions. The act of giving testimony about what happened led many people to relive, in some form, their pain. Many tears accompany these testimonies, tears that we were unable to transcribe in the report. The interview format, the outreach worker training, and the information-gathering tools were all designed to create a space, albeit limited, that acknowledged and supported the witnesses. (ODHAG 2003; my emphasis)

Judith Zur, an anthropologist and clinical psychologist, likewise found that eliciting Guatemalan Maya widows’ memories of the violence often led them to re-experience the original physical and psychological torment (1998). The focus of providing a supportive space for these testimonies was one of the defining characteristics of the TRCs, as compared to other forms of testimonio such as legal proceedings or, to varying degrees, the data-gathering practices of journalists and social scientists.

Dori Laub, who survived the Jewish Holocaust as a child, has written about the relationship between witnessing and surviving, drawing on his own reflections and on numerous interviews with other Holocaust survivors. Laub argued that “survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their story; they also needed to tell their story to survive” (Felman and Laub 1992:78):

There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to tell and thus to come to know one’s story… no amount of telling seems ever to do justice to this inner compulsion. There are never enough words or the right words, there is never enough time or the right time, and never
enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in thought, memory, and speech. (Felman and Laub 1992:78; original emphases)

In Laub’s comments, we can clearly see the agentive force of remembering, specifically of the memory of violence that he and other survivors feel compelled to share. It is a project that can never be completed, owing to the trauma that the original experience entailed, and the permanent loss of those who were taken away.

Laub’s conceptualization of witnessing as an act of coming to know one’s self calls to mind Bakhtin’s framework for epistemology, in which all understanding is dialogic; even self-understanding relies on seeing oneself through “the eyes of another” (Bakhtin 1984:287). As I noted in chapter 2, the epistemic authority of the witness in testimony, as in all speech acts, is based largely on his ability to represent his intention in an understandable way, navigating the layers of meaning that become attached to his narrative through its circulation in a wider communicative sphere. Laub describes the witness’s view of this process quite eloquently:

This re-externalization of the event can occur and take effect only when one can articulate and transmit the story, literally transfer it to another outside oneself and then take it back again, inside. Telling thus entails a reassertion of the hegemony of reality and a re-externalization of the evil that affected and contaminated the trauma victim. (Felman and Laub 1992: 69)

Just as we noted in establishing a framework for conceptualizing collective remembering as an active process, an effort after meaning, we find that testimonio is summoned into existence intentionally and actively, through processes that call on dialogue between a witness and a wider public with the potential to act—at the very least, to affirm the truth of the witness’s testimony. This is the circumstance that allows for viewing testimonial narrative as a form of memory activism in itself, as
well as one of the primary resources that memory activists use in constructing alternative historical narratives.

**Testimonio in legal processes**

Despite the similarities in narrative content between a survivor’s personal interview with an anthropologist or journalist and her public testimony in a courtroom, the *experience of remembering* is likely to be very different. In some cases and contexts, recalling the memory may bring a sense of catharsis or even closure, as when one’s testimony is granted the status of truth and its public expression finally has agency to affect the outer social world. However, in other cases—as when a survivor is cross-examined in a disbelieving and disrespectful manner, or when structurally powerful voices persist in denying or misrepresenting knowledge that a survivor experienced as truth—the experience of remembering may be painful, and may leave new psychic scars and sensations of trauma, like “a finger in the wound” (Nelson 1999).

Carole Blackburn has researched the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Indian Residential Schools set up by the Canadian government as part of a settlement to lawsuits filed by former students, beginning in the early 1990s (TRC-Canada 2014). Blackburn found that there was a fundamental incompatibility between the witnesses’ deeply personal, traumatic memories of abuse and the required ‘objectivity’ within courtroom discourse:

Objectivity in the pursuit of truth is central to the law’s performance and representation of itself, and in residential school litigation plaintiffs’ memories were eminently subjective. If a plaintiff’s testimony could be shown to be inconsistent with itself, to contain errors of historical fact, or if it was too emotional and visceral, judges and defense lawyers questioned its entire legitimacy. This is particularly problematic for people with post-traumatic stress disorder. By definition, their memories no less than their selves are fragmented; the
perceived fallibility of their memories creates a crisis in their ability to witness. (Blackburn 2013)

In contrast, the truth commission established by the settlement provided the survivors with a forum for “narrativiz[ing] their trauma,” an experience that helped them “begin to find a way through it,” similar to the cathartic processes described by Dori Laub and by participants in the REMHI and CEH projects. As an observer of these performances, Blackburn noted the dramatic difference compared to the courtroom:

Former students speaking at the TRC are able to speak in a more supportive and sympathetic environment than a court setting. They are physically and emotionally supported at the microphone by friends and relatives, they are uninterrupted for the time it takes them to tell their story, and they are not questioned afterwards. People may not remember names and dates or conflate some events, but this does not matter. They speak metaphorically about their suffering in a way that would be unacceptable in litigation, speaking of weeping tears of blood, of having their feet nailed to the floor, of miracles and visions that happened after leaving the schools when they battled addiction, all of which speak to an experience of suffering that is not objectively verifiable. … The fallibility and fragmentation of memory through trauma is not penalized, neither are strong emotions. Their memories and the truth were one and the same; their testimonies speak for themselves. (Blackburn 2013)

In the Canadian case, both forms of testimony were ultimately necessary; there would not have been a TRC without the preceding litigation that forced the government’s hand, and the nature of legal discourse did not satisfy survivors’ needs for an environment in which to share their experiences.

Similar contrasts exist in the Guatemalan context. During a trial just after the adoption of the Peace Accords, Patricia Foxen observed the obstacles that rural, indigenous citizens faced in pursuing justice for the crimes committed against them during the conflict. The witnesses’ lack of familiarity with conventions associated with literacy, combined with their memories being fragmented and disorganized by trauma, led to “contradictory,’ disordered … testimonies” that the
judge ultimately deemed unreliable and inadmissible as evidence (Foxen 2000:380). She observed that this case required additional retrials and the participation of international observers—including Amnesty International—before the Guatemalan courts took the witnesses’ testimonies into account. For each trial, the witnesses had to travel to the capital city, an experience that Irma Alicia Velásquez Nimatuj has described as “losing the cultural shield that protects us” and entering “the other Guatemala, ‘imaginary Guatemala,’ urban and capital-city Guatemala, where we are rejected by almost all the Ladinos who wield political and economic power” (Velásquez Nimatuj 2003). The polarized environments outside courtrooms can also produce stress, as when witnesses must pass through crowds of activists who support or oppose the trial, and who leave banners and other propaganda to support their arguments (see images in Appendix).

The experience of testifying can be daunting even for college-educated scientists who are called upon as expert witnesses. Daniel Guzmán, a statistical consultant for the Human Rights Data Analysis Group, provided expert testimony in a case against two former Guatemalan police officers for the 1984 forced disappearance of Fernando García, a student leader and activist.83 Guzmán wrote about this experience, which began with coaching sessions to prepare him for the ordeal:

The coaching sessions were grueling and focused on three tactics the defense might use to attempt to undermine my testimony. These included personal attacks on my experience, age, and professional degrees; discredit by association, citing earlier work by members of Benetech and the National Police Archive Project; and insufficient bureaucratic knowledge about the legal case. … Even with this kind of preparation, however, I did not anticipate the

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83 García’s wife, Nineth Montenegro, went on to found the Mutual Support Group (GAM), one of the oldest human rights organizations in Guatemala. Montenegro remains active in the national Congress as a member of the center-left Encuentro por Guatemala party.
personal and emotional process of testifying in a Guatemalan court of law for such an atrocious crime. … Then it was the defense attorney’s moment to question me. … Every question they asked me was inappropriate, raising objections from the prosecution and overruled by the judge. (Guzmán 2011)

Such tactics on the part of military and police defense teams are apparently common, as indicated by the focus of the coaching sessions. Similarly, during the trial against Ríos Montt and Rodríguez Sánchez in 2013, the defense attorneys focused almost exclusively on shutting down the trial through the use of technical appeals and “undermining the tribunal in the media, [rather] than presenting a vigorous defense” (MacLean 2013).

As an international observer during the Ríos Montt trial, Elisabeth Patterson noted several factors that may have adversely affected the “integration of Mayan perspectives” in the proceedings (Patterson 2013). The first was the setting within the Palace of Justice: “the gigantic room with high ceilings, the three judges placed high up in a towering position, the audience of 500 people, and the army of photographers and cameras from the national and international media,” an environment that would likely intimidate anyone not used to such a spectacle of attention (2013). Patterson also noted logistical problems with the translation of Ixil testimony into Spanish, such as differences in the construction of gender or plurality in Ixil and Spanish grammar, which led to miscommunications about dates and about who was being described in witnesses’ narratives (Patterson 2013). However, the most striking difference between this context of courtroom testimony and the supportive environment of the CEH or REMHI projects was in the public attention and cross-examination that survivors were subjected to. For example, women who testified about being raped were required to do so in public, before the eyes of the national and international media; many wore cloths draped around their shoulders to cover their faces as they spoke (Open
Society 2014). Patterson described the treatment that witnesses faced from the lawyers defending Ríos Montt and Rodríguez Sánchez:

No doubt on purpose, the defense lawyers added a great deal of intimidation. Rodríguez Sanchez’s lawyer, César Calderon, which I nicknamed “El Griton” (the yeller) consistently yelled out his questions whenever cross-examining the soft-spoken, timid Ixil witnesses. They also repeatedly tried to confuse witnesses by alleging that they had said certain things which in fact had not been said. Surprisingly, despite all the pressure, the victims were able to give their testimony very calmly, clearly and slowly. Some of the witnesses did cry silently during their testimony, which prompted a mad rush by photographers. I learnt afterwards that many of those who did not cry during their testimony had often broken down as soon as they stepped out of the courtroom.

In order not to be too terrorized by the presence of the former dictator and head of military intelligence, the victims had been told by their lawyers not to even glance at the accused. (Patterson 2013)

In their cross-examinations of many of the 90 Ixil witnesses who testified during the trial, the defense attorneys attempted to discredit the witnesses by exploiting their confusion about the questions—for example, by responding to testimonies that mentioned a context of ongoing warfare by asking the witness to specify who was involved in the war. The defense attorneys also mounted challenges over the court interpreter’s translation of Ixil testimony (Open Society 2014:23 March 2013). In the end, the witnesses’ testimony proved crucial in the tribunal’s decision to convict Ríos Montt of genocide and crimes against humanity (Sentencia C-01076-2011-00015:688). However, the forces of impunity prevailed when the conviction was annulled days later by the Constitutional Court, which ordered the trial to be rolled back to a point before the Ixil witnesses testified; the lawyers for the Ixil communities have indicated that their clients will continue their case until justice is delivered (Open Society 2014).
It is difficult to weigh the influence of any single testimony among the thousands collected by the truth commissions and entered into legal proceedings. The power of these collected narratives is in their commonality, that they share many features, such that any single testimony may seem nearly identical to another. The consistency in survivors’ accounts indicated that the perpetrators used a standard set of procedures for their interaction with civilians, procedures which were grossly out of proportion with the real danger that the troops faced or with the perceived crimes that the villagers could have committed. The near-uniformity of descriptions of the violence committed in some regions during some time periods was the feature that allowed the CEH—and the High Risk Tribunal ‘A’ during the Ríos Montt trial—to determine that the military was guilty of genocide. The influence and social force of the thousands of testimonies that went into the construction of the TRCs, or the hundreds that have already affected legal proceedings, may continue to grow if the Guatemalan justice system gains the stability required to root out corruption and impunity. In the following section, I move to focus on individual testimonial accounts, in order to examine specific examples of the features that define the genre.

**Víctor Montejo’s Testimony**

Although Rigoberta Menchú’s testimony has garnered by far the most attention—and stirred the most controversy (Arias 2001)—hers is hardly the only example of testimonio produced by a Guatemalan or a Maya. Víctor Montejo, a Jakaltek Maya anthropologist and writer, argued that scholars should cease treating Menchú as the sole representative of the armed conflict or of the Maya political and intellectual renaissance. As he put it: “Academia creates icons and talks about one
“voice,” one representation, and one Maya movement. But the Maya movement has multiple voices, multiple actors, and multiple expressions” (Montejo 2001:387). I draw on other testimonial accounts, including Montejo’s, which generally resist a totalizing, monolithic representation of Maya identity or political purpose by including the voices of diverse actors. Although I do not present Menchú’s account in detail, I will note below that the conservative reactions to her account—particularly the controversial debates over David Stoll’s response to Menchú’s account—are a useful index of the potential effects of changing epistemic authority, and how these changes appear threatening to those who benefit from the status quo.

Montejo is Jakaltek84 Maya, originally from a rural community just ten miles from the border with Chiapas. As a child, Montejo was afforded the rare opportunity to pursue education beyond primary school, and he later completed teacher training at an institute run by the Brothers of LaSalle, an organization that Montejo described as “inculcat[ing] in us great respect for ourselves, our people, and our culture” (1999:7).85 In 1972, Montejo returned to his childhood home to seek employment as a primary school teacher, a job he performed for ten years in several communities around Jacaltenango. He married a young woman from a Jakaltek community and they began a life together, raising three children who were all born in the municipio of Jacaltenango (1999:8). Up to

84 The language spoken by Jakaltek Mayas is called Popti’. It is one of the Mayan languages officially recognized by the Guatemalan Academy of Mayan Languages (Montejo 1999).

85 Guatemala’s LaSalle organization has long been particularly supportive of Maya cultural and linguistic revitalization projects. In 1989, the LaSalles founded the Santiago Project for Development (PRODESSA), and its corresponding Superior School for Integral Rural Education (ESEDIR), projects that were early and influential supporters of multicultural bilingual education reforms. PRODESSA and ESEDIR have published numerous textbooks under their own brand, Editorial Saqil Tzij (lit., “clear words”). I describe this work in more detail in chapter 8.
this point, Montejo’s life fit the profile of many young Maya intellectuals I have met and interviewed: he made the most of the opportunities available to further his education, and maintained close ties to his community of origin, seeking to share the knowledge he had gained in the centers of learning.

Like hundreds of thousands of their compatriots, Montejo and his family were deeply affected by the violence that swept the highlands in the early 1980s. Montejo’s brother was killed arbitrarily by soldiers in 1981; a year later, Montejo narrowly avoided a similar fate when a detachment of soldiers attacked the community of Tzalalá, the village where Montejo was working as a teacher (1987). After this experience, Montejo and his family sought refuge in the United States. With support and encouragement from Latin Americanist scholars, Montejo completed a Ph.D. in anthropology at the University of Connecticut and became a professor in the Department of Native American Studies at the University of California-Davis (Montejo 1999:8-9). In 2004, Montejo returned to Guatemala and won a seat in the Guatemalan Congress; he was later appointed as the Secretary of Peace, and oversaw the creation of the National Program for Reparations (Estrada 2005; NAISA 2013). The trajectory of Victor Montejo’s career after the violence—his exile, his growth as a scholar and as an activist for Maya rights, and his eventual return and successful bid to participate in national politics—are altogether a demonstration of the important changes that have taken place in the past generation.

As a result of his diverse experiences, Montejo’s epistemic authority extends from academic discussions of indigenous politics and cosmology to the implementation of policies for reparations. This diversity of knowledge is reflected in Montejo’s writing, which tends to push the boundaries of
traditional ethnographic monographs or of purely literary collections of poetry and folktales; he often combines elements of the two genres in his works, incorporating plentiful poetry and long excerpts of interviews—and throughout, Montejo builds upon the first-hand knowledge communicated by testimonial narrative. His first non-fiction work, *Testimony: Death of a Guatemalan Village* (1987), was Montejo’s own harrowing account of the events of September 9, 1982, when the poorly equipped, untrained civil patrol of Tzalalá mistook a detachment of soldiers for guerrillas and—following the orders left by the local military commissioner—they attempted to drive them away. The soldiers responded with brutal violence, killing several of the civil defenders in the gunfight and then executing the remaining men while the community watched helplessly.

Marc Zimmerman remarked that Montejo’s *Testimony* “co-opts the entire genre with its title, but ironically, it is not a testimonio according to all the categories suggested by the specialists in the matter” (1991:41). I respectfully disagree with the rejection of Montejo’s work as an example of testimonio. The sticking point, I suspect, is that Montejo himself served as both the narrator-witness and the listener-author of his *Testimony*, which violates the criterion of dialogic production (Beverley and Zimmerman 1990:86; see above). For example, Zimmerman introduced his discussion of *Testimony* thusly:
Finally, there is Victor Montejo’s *Testimony* (1987), a book which has only appeared in English\textsuperscript{86} and which, although written by a poor but educated “middle sector” Mayan, nevertheless captures much of the spirit and urgency of Rigoberta Menchú’s story in accounting the atrocity Montejo witnessed in the Quiché area [*sic*: Jakaltek/Popti’ or Huehuetenango, *not* K’iche’ or El Quiché]. (Zimmerman 1991:41; emphasis in original)

Zimmerman reveals in this sentence that he considers it unlikely and unusual that a narrative written by a “poor but educated” witness could match the “spirit and urgency” of a text prepared with the assistance of an anthropologist.

Montejo himself recognized the hierarchical nature of academia and sought to increase his legitimacy as a “first”-world scholar. He later wrote that, while he felt drawn to contribute knowledge about Maya culture, he felt that he “needed the tools and the academic training to do it well,” which drove him to become trained as an anthropologist (1999:10). He self-consciously spanned the usual divide between witness and author—or between anthropologist and “other”:

> I am a Maya, I was a refugee, I lived in exile, and as an anthropologist I returned to the refugee camps to investigate the situation of those remaining there. I have the advantage of a Western education *and* a Maya upbringing. I speak two Maya languages, Popb’al Tí [Popti’] and Q’anjob’al, in addition to Spanish and English. … Because of my double identity, this work is directed to two audiences… (Montejo 1999:11; emphasis in original)

Although *Testimony* preceded much of his academic training, it expressed a highly sophisticated understanding of the situation surrounding the violence, as well as very locally-grounded,

\textsuperscript{86} A Spanish-language edition of the text was published in 1993. In asking myself why Zimmerman felt it necessary to point out the book’s original English publication (translated with the assistance of the Guatemalan novelist Victor Perera), I suspect that he harbored unspoken doubts about the authenticity of the narrative; whatever the reason, Menchú’s testimonio is clearly treated as the archetype against which all other Guatemalan narratives are compared (Zimmerman 1991).
ethnographic details about how Montejo sought to avoid a terrible fate as an informer or victim of the military violence.

Another issue may be that Montejo’s account is not a leftist text in the mold of Menchú’s testimony. Rather, it presents a self-consciously Mayanist perspective that focuses on the negative effects of the conflict for his home community. Consequently, the reasons that Montejo felt “moved to narrate” his experience did not fit the critics’ expectations for a revolutionary triumphalist tone (Yúdice 1996:44; see above). Montejo has described the motivation for his writing:

Because I have been personally affected by the political violence against the Maya people and because I have experienced the bitterness of life in exile, perhaps “study” is not the correct word. Instead I find that I have a moral responsibility to make evident to the world the plight of my people in exile. (Montejo 1999:13)

Driven to narrate his testimony, like Dori Laub and other survivors of trauma, Montejo turned to writing. Although Montejo’s account is deeply critical of the soldiers, he carefully differentiated between those who killed because they were ‘just following orders,’ and those who appeared to thrive on the suffering they inflicted. He described how one soldier shared his breakfast with him while he was imprisoned in the barracks: “I thanked God that not every soldier was malevolent and devoid of human feelings. His gesture made me understand that in their own way—although they dare not say so—they too are victims of a violence that has become institutionalized” (Montejo 1987:88-89). Montejo was also critical of civil defenders who relished their new role, “overzealously … ferretting out suspects from their own neighbors … like a pack of wolves after a scent” (Montejo 1987:62).

However, Montejo does not write his *Testimony* from a Marxist perspective, and he certainly does not glorify the guerrillas. For the suspected subversives who are tortured and executed, he
apparently feels sympathy *despite* their possible ties to guerrillas, not because of it. Throughout the narrative, Montejo’s own repeated denials of attachment to the guerrillas or their ideology occur within the context of interrogation by military figures, and he clearly indicates that any other response would have likely cost him his life. The reader is thus left uncertain about Montejo’s real opinion of the leftist cause because, ultimately, he did not consider it relevant to his testimony. Rather, he intentionally and consciously sought to represent the armed conflict from the perspective of Mayas—particularly Jakaltek Mayas—rather than from a leftist or nationalist point of view. Montejo’s claiming of the testimonio genre for his work represents an example of the expansion of Maya epistemic authority: the encroachment of even “‘middle sector’ Mayans” on the territory of academic experts.

*Testimonial element #1: Authority of the eye-witness*

In *Testimony*, Montejo directly addresses the reader and recounts his memories of the events in exaggerated detail, including extensive passages of dialogue that must have necessarily been reconstructed or paraphrased from memory. One chapter of the text even merges Montejo’s testimony with that of a mother who watched her 14-year-old son die of army-inflicted wounds in her own house (Montejo 1987:29-34). Montejo begins the chapter with a description of how he encountered the grieving mother; then he launches into recounting what “she told me,” maintaining opening quotation marks for each of the following paragraphs but otherwise writing from the first-person. This chapter is filled with details and dialogue in the same style as the rest of the book, as if Montejo had tape-recorded the interview—and as if the mother in turn had tape-recorded her
dialogue with her dying son. At the end of the chapter, Montejo returns to his own voice, adding: “This is what the woman told me in Mayan language, while I watched with my own eyes the soldiers searching all the houses of the community, like hungry dogs” (Montejo 1987: 34).

This writing strategy is not uncommon in testimonies; Sklodowska noted several instances in Rigoberta Menchú’s text where her memories appeared to be merged with her mother’s recollections (2001:262). In Testimony, this aside functions like a nested testimonio, and the importance of conveying the mother’s pain over the unjust slaying of her child is more important than detailed considerations of the strict accuracy of the account. The eyewitness narrator—whether it is Montejo as himself, or writing ‘as’ the mother—is able to recreate the terrifying experience as if it were etched into memory. Many accounts include post-hoc reflection on the significance, or terrifying lack thereof, that victims found in the events. This focus on the affective power of description reflects narrators’ preoccupation with moral coherency, shaping a “usable past” (Wertsch 2002:31) through their testimony in order to inspire their audience to take action on behalf of the victims.

Eye-witness accounts in testimonios often include meta-narrative details that are intended to reinforce their truth value. Such details are especially noticeable in a testimony that Montejo gathered for his 1992 volume written with Q’anil Akab’: the testimony of Chilin Hultaxh, a former employee of military intelligence. Throughout his testimony, Hultaxh faced the difficult task of negotiating his moral and epistemic position: in short, how did he come to witness the horrible events if he did not partake in the crimes? He began by explaining that he “joined the army for financial reasons, out of financial necessity,” to escape from the poverty he was born into and to provide for the family he was about to begin with his fiancé (Montejo 1999:83). A childhood friend
convinced him to apply for an office job at the main barracks in El Quiché in 1978, and for a while Hultaxh enjoyed the mundane labor and his coworkers, who were “people from the same social class, from the same simple and humble background” (Montejo 1999:86). The armed conflict had not yet reached the highlands, and Hultaxh explained that “At that time I remember no problem at all with the counterinsurgency war… at this point in time we didn’t know of any such problems and there was no major news about them” (Montejo 1999:86). However, he could recall the exact moment when things began to change: noon on May 29, 1979, when the military began an operation to counter the growth of the guerilla forces in the rural, primarily indigenous regions of the country (Montejo 1999:86-87). With increasing frequency, guerrillas and suspected “subversives” were captured, interrogated, and often tortured before being killed, their bodies dumped on the side of the highway as a warning to others (Montejo 1999:93).

Hultaxh attributed this violence in part to the terrible racism that was rampant within the military at the time, and the forms of indoctrination and punishment that were meted out to the indigenous men who were forcibly drafted into the army:

> The punishments are so brutal … they make the indigenous soldiers believe that if their father is a *guerrillero*, then he is their enemy and they have to kill him. This is the truth, there are examples of this in Quiché and Huehuetenango that I know about. (Montejo 1999:89)

As an office worker, Hultaxh managed to avoid the worst of the abuse; however, he grew concerned when he was ordered to transfer to the intelligence department. Where his former job revolved around personnel files and other mundane paperwork, his new position put him in contact with violence.
At this point in his testimonio, Hultaxh broke for a brief soliloquy in order to pre-empt criticism that he took part in death squads or inflicted torture. He reiterated his own moral code: “Let me at this point explain why I mentioned my simple and humble family background. My parents are peasants. Those are my roots. I grew up with the Catholic religion. This background creates a strong sense in a person to respect others” (Montejo 1999:91). After re-affirming his moral position, he switches to reinforcing his epistemic position, the reason he was able to witness and know so much about the violence without directly participating: “In the intelligence section I was given access to the general archive” (Montejo 1999:91). Among other duties, Hultaxh was responsible for typing up the reports based on the information provided by soldiers and interrogators. At one point, a higher-ranking officer ordered him to come and witness the “interrogation” of prisoners who were captured in the Ixil region. Because Hultaxh’s level of access came from a higher authority, he was able to witness this event that normally would have fallen outside his line of sight. Hultaxh conveyed by this admission that he was not a hardened witness of violence, nor a privileged member of the higher military command.

Hultaxh’s description of his first impressions of the unfamiliar process of interrogation also served to simultaneously reinforce his moral position while highlighting that he was an eye-witness:

When I went that day to see these boys, they lay stretched out, face down, one hand of one man tied to one hand of the next man. I started to ask them their names. They looked very normal, but you could read the fear in their faces and sense the terror they felt. Behind me

87 The Ixil region was one of the areas where the CEH identified the military’s actions as genocide (CEH 1999); the recent conviction of Ríos Montt for genocide and crimes against humanity was based on a case brought by Ixil survivors of the conflict (Open Society 2014).
were several armed military men of the Mobile Military Police. … I went to the captives asking their names, even joked with them. “They’ll surely let you go, I just need to take down some information,” I told them, really not knowing what the army had planned for them. (Montejo 1999:91-92)

Hultaxh’s naïve suggestion that the men were only being held temporarily, for routine questioning, further establishes his distance from the perpetrators of violence. He tried to perform his role, which he never clearly defined, in a kind and sympathetic manner toward the prisoners; however, he also had to fulfill his own duties with the army: “Military orders were never questioned. I had to be there. They called me” (Montejo 1999:92).

The moment of crisis arrived when Hultaxh’s coworker, Lito, began to scream at one of the prisoners, demanding information about the location of guerrillas from the prisoner, who claimed ignorance:

[A]t that moment Lito put a rope around the peasant’s neck and with a stick tightened it and throttled him till he was dead. This was the first shock I got. I was shaking. I wanted to defend this man but couldn’t. Very close to me stood a captain by the name of P. Pérez, a native from Tecún Umán, San Marcos. He was armed. So was Lito. And there were two other policemen. I was the only one there without a weapon. (Montejo 1999:92-93).

Hultaxh explicitly declared his desire to help the victim; yet his next comments reveal exactly why he could not, and why his position was potentially and morally different from the other military figures in the room: he was unarmed. As the only actor without a weapon, Hultaxh’s complicity in the crime was qualitatively different from the others’, who could have acted to stop the violence. In Hultaxh’s framing, the behavior of the armed guards blurs the line between complicity and perpetration. Their very presence made resistance impossible.
Hultaxh was careful to articulate his position—spatially, morally, and politically—throughout his entire testimony. Hultaxh saw the invitation to witness this torture and execution as a test of his commitment to the military, and a step toward initiation into the violent work: “they wanted to ease me into this gradually and slowly make me into a member of the Squad of Death. Thank God, they didn’t succeed. After what I’d seen and experienced, I knew I had to leave the army” (Montejo 1999:95). This terrible experience crystallized Hultaxh’s commitment to escape to Mexico, before being called on to perform an execution himself. Through his careful articulation of his own position, his thorough descriptions of the actors involved, their agency or complicity in the actions, as well as the suffering of the victims, Hultaxh presents a powerful and effective testimony that may even function as evidence against the named military officials.

**Testimonial element #2: Urgency of history**

The second element of testimonio—the expression of the moral and historic significance of the events being described—is indicated by the violence: the unexpected, unprovoked destruction of life and property, as well as the threatened annihilation of Maya culture. Moreover, as the perpetrators were acting under orders from the State, the victims frequently felt that they had to turn to outsiders for relief. Their testimonies held the warning that similar violations of rights could occur anywhere, without warning, and without recourse to justice. As one survivor put it: “The soldiers did not say, ‘This is your crime, and here is the proof.’ Nobody had done anything. Who knows why this happened? They did not accuse anyone of any crimes. They just killed them, that was all” (Hodson et al. 1983:24).
In order to communicate the horrors of the violence they witnessed, Victor Montejo and Q'anil Akab’ adopted the strategy of invoking Bartolomé de las Casas, whose chronicles of the horrific treatment of indigenous peoples led to reforms in the Spanish colony. Montejo and Akab’ mimicked the form and even the title of Las Casas’s most famous text in their *A Short Testimonial Account of the Continued Destruction of the Maya* (1992), a book collecting several testimonies from Maya refugees in a camp on the Mexican side of the border in 1982-1983.\(^8\) Like Las Casas, the authors began their account with an address to the King of Spain, calling on him to witness the destruction recounted in the following pages “not because we still remain under your dominion, but because our situation of poverty and plunder is the product and consequence of the Spanish empire that reigned over our lands” (1992:10). By sharing their testimonies, the authors and their fellow collaborators hoped to call the world to attention, in memory of all those who did not escape the violence (Montejo and Akab’ 1992:3).

It is not surprising that Montejo and Akab’ chose to represent history as a continued pattern of violence against indigenous communities. As the schematic narrative template that I proposed in chapter 5 described, and as the specific narratives that informed my proposal illustrated, there are concrete examples as well as broader patterns that suggest such a reading of Guatemala’s history. Indeed, it is remarkable and jarring to consider how the testimonies of survivors of the internal armed conflict correspond to those recorded by Las Casas at the beginning of the 16\(^{th}\) century. The

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\(^8\) In this choice of title, Montejo and Akab’ call to mind Las Casas’ influential *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, written in 1542 in defense of the indigenous peoples of the Spanish colonial empire (2008).
correlation is highlighted throughout Montejo and Akab’s text through strategically placed dramatic details, such as brief excerpts from Las Casas at the beginning of each chapter, along with drawings by children who witnessed the destruction of their communities (1992; see image above). For example, they recount Las Casas’ assertion that Alvarado “had the custom” of not bringing food for the 10,000-20,000 indigenous warriors who accompanied him in his campaigns, “consenting that they should eat the Indians” they defeated in battle (Montejo and Akab’ 1992:62). This draws comparison to a rumor that circulated during the armed conflict alleging that Guatemala’s elite kaibil soldiers routinely engaged in cannibalism, eating the hearts of the guerrillerros they defeated in battle (Morales 1994). A survivor of the kaibil-led massacre of the village of Dos Erres recounted how a lieutenant commanded a subordinate to carve “meat” from a living prisoner; the soldier complied with the order, but the lieutenant did not eat the flesh (Rotella and Arana 2012).

Other tragic similarities are found in Las Casas’ descriptions of the methods used by the Spanish to massacre entire communities—women and children included:

[After tricking the nobility of a ‘kingdom’ on the island of Hispaniola into crowding into a wooden barn, the Spanish governor] ordered that they be put to the fire and they were burned alive. All the rest, a countless number of people, were either lanced by spears or put to the sword. And the queen, Anacaona, they honored by hanging. And it happened that some Christians, either out of piety or greed, took hold of some children to protect them

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89 Although some testimonies recorded by the CEH and REMHI included such claims of cannibalism, it is possible that the idea originated in a training song used by the kaibiles themselves, which includes the line: “What do kaibiles eat? Flesh. What kind of flesh? Human. What kind of human? Subversive guerrillas” (Morales 1994; Wright 2000:66). More well-documented is that the kaibil training regimen required the recruits to raise puppies, only to kill the animals and consume their raw flesh and blood upon graduation from the course; if the soldier vomited upon doing so, he was expected to consume his vomit as well (CEH 1999:58; Newman 2011).
rather than kill them, placing them on the rump of their horses, only for another Spaniard to come from behind to run the child through with his lance. (Las Casas 2008:19-20)

[The Indians] were all made to squat down on their haunches like tame sheep. When they were all placed close together they were bound and tied. At the closed doorways armed guards took turns to see that none escaped. Then, at a command, all the Spaniards drew their swords and pikes and while their chiefs looked on, helpless, all those tame sheep were butchered, cut to pieces. At the end of two or three days some survivors came out from under the corpses (as there were so many), wounded but alive, and they went, weeping, to the Spaniards, imploring mercy, which was denied. (Las Casas 1974:60; 2008:34)

The atrocities described by Las Casas reoccurred with uncanny likeness during the internal armed conflict. The indiscriminate murder of people who were unlikely to be or could not possibly have been combatants—including newborns and young children—has been well-documented in numerous testimonies and forensic investigations (Schirmer 1998; REMHI 1998; CEH 1999; Sanford 2003). One of the common methods of violence was to forcibly congregate men and women into separate buildings, such as the church and school, and then burn the building or toss a grenade into the crowd. However, as with the cases described by Las Casas, on some occasions the piles of bodies were so large that a few individuals would survive the grenades or gunshots by being shielded beneath the bodies of others; they would emerge afterwards, to find that they were the sole living survivors of the destruction of their communities (Hodson et al. 1983).

In some cases, the only survivors of counterinsurgency violence were children who were abducted by soldiers to be raised as their own. Less information has been uncovered about the extent of this practice, though in 2004 a national commission registered over 1,000 cases of children who disappeared during the height of the conflict in indigenous regions (1979-1984), and estimated that at least 500 of those children were later adopted—including by families in foreign countries.
(Reuters 2004). Among these was Dominga Sic Ruiz, who was 9 years old when the military attacked the village of Río Negro, killing her mother and abducting Dominga; she was later adopted from an orphanage by a family from rural Iowa and renamed Denese Becker. Her fragmentary memories of her childhood eventually led her to uncover her past, and to return to Río Negro to meet extended family who remembered her as a child (Flynn & McConahay 2003).

Another pair of abductions followed the Dos Erres massacre, in which two of the soldiers who perpetrated the violence abducted young boys and raised them as their own children (Rotella and Arana 2012). Although Dos Erres was not a Maya community—it was founded by landless Ladino campesinos in 1978—the events that unfolded there on December 6, 1982 were representative of the patterns of violence experienced in the indigenous highland regions during the armed conflict. Dos Erres became one of the most well-documented cases of massacre, including testimonies by the single known survivor and by several members of the squadron of troops that perpetrated the violence, through research conducted for the CEH and multiple court cases in Guatemala, Canada, and the United States (CEH 1999b:398; Rotella et al. 2012). The community of Dos Erres was suspected of harboring “subversives” because in the fall of 1982 a guerrilla ambush in the area succeeded in killing 21 soldiers and recovering a number of their weapons (CEH 1999b:398). In response, the military high command dispatched a special unit composed of instructors from the elite kaibil academy—i.e., the men who trained other soldiers to serve in the most prestigious unit of the Guatemalan military—with orders to “register the village, kill the occupants and recuperate the 19 lost weapons” (CEH 1999b:399).
The CEH report, drawing on interviews with ex-kaibiles who took part in the massacre, described the subsequent events in graphic detail:

As soon as they arrived [at 2:30 am] the kaibiles began to violently kick people out of their homes. They went house by house. They concentrated the women and children in the two churches and the men they enclosed in the school. These [the men] they went interrogating one by one and they made a search of every house, without locating any weapons nor [guerrilla] propaganda nor other signs of the presence of the guerrilla. Between four and five in the morning, there were heard “screams for help; a girl or a young woman, approximately about 14 years or age, was crying behind the church where the people were gathered … at dawn my companions [fellow kaibiles] told me that the sergeant or the lieutenant … had raped the girl behind the church.” [quoted from testimony of ex-kaibil]

After gathering all of the population, at about six in the morning the officers consulted by radio with the high command and, once they received their orders, they informed the rest of the troops that they would begin to “vaccinate” the villagers after breakfast. At noon, the kaibiles began to “vaccinate” the children. They gathered them… At two in the afternoon they tossed a newborn, of 3-4 months of age, into a dry well. This initiated the massacre… (CEH 1999b:400-401)90

Beginning with the children, the massacre was a prolonged affair, spread out over more than 48 hours; the troops took their time, killing groups of civilians between meals and resting. They raped women, then commanded them to prepare food, then killed them and put their bodies into the well along with the rest of the community (Rotella and Arana 2012; Rotella 2014). All told, the CEH identified 178 victims of the massacre of Dos Erres (1999b:406). The Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team—in their first visit to perform exhumations in Guatemala, an event that would initiate the creation of Guatemala’s own forensic team—identified 67 skeletons of children, with an average age of seven years old; the majority of victims’ hands and feet were bound with rope, and the

90 The massacre of Dos Erres appears as “illustrative case #31” in the CEH report, pp. 2143-2157 in the combined document hosted at http://www.anthropo.org/s/ceh

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recovered bullet casings were from Israeli Galil rifles—the weapon of choice for the Guatemalan military (CEH 1999b:406).

The investigative journalists Sebastian Rotella and Ana Arana, drawing on the CEH as well as more recent court documents and their own interviews with ex-kaibiles, described the fates of the children who somehow avoided the initial slaughter:

Five prisoners had also survived the annihilating fury of the Kaibiles. It was a fluke: The three teenage girls and two small boys had apparently been hiding somewhere. They wandered into the center of the hamlet at sunset, when most of the villagers were dead. Commandos took them to a house that had been converted into the command post. The lieutenants decided not to kill the newcomers right away.

On the morning of Dec. 8, the squad set off on foot into the jungle hills, captives in tow. The commandos dressed the girls in military uniforms. Lt. Ramírez took charge of the 3-year-old boy; Santos Lopez Alonzo, the squad’s baker, carried the 5-year-old.

That night, three commandos took the teenage girls into the brush and raped them. In the morning, they strangled and shot them.

The squad spared both little boys. Both were light-skinned and had green eyes, prized features in a society stratified along racial lines.

Lt. Ramírez told Pinzón and the others that he was going to bring the younger boy to his hometown of Zacapa, in eastern Guatemala, and outfit him in the style of the region.

"I’m going to dress him up sharp, like a cowboy," Ramírez said. "Cowboy boots, pants and shirt." (Rotella and Arana 2012)

The boy—now 31, and named Oscar Alfredo Ramírez, after his adopted father—did not learn of his biological family or connections to Dos Erres until 2011, when the Guatemalan attorney general’s office contacted him to solicit his participation in a trial against the ex-kaibiles who had perpetrated the massacre (Rotella 2014). Oscar was living proof.

91 In the CEH report, an ex-kaibil indicated that the girls were dressed up and taken along in order to give the appearance that their squadron was a group of guerrillas, as everyone knew that “the guerrillas always take along women” (CEH 1999b:405).
The Dos Erres massacre is one of the few that has been prosecuted to completion in Guatemala: in August of 2011, a court sentenced several of the former kaibiles to 6,060 years in prison—60 years for each of the 201 murders that were investigated as part of the trial (GHRC 2012). Two other ex-kaibiles have been prosecuted in Canada and the United States for falsifying their applications for immigration—they were each sentenced to 10 years in federal prison, and will likely be deported to stand trial in Guatemala afterwards (Rotella and Kjellman 2012; Rotella 2014). One of the former officers in charge of the kaibil squadron, César Adán Rosales Batres, remains at large. When they went to arrest him, police found that his house, in an affluent neighborhood populated mostly by military families, was equipped with an escape tunnel (Rotella 2013). Investigators suspect that Rosales is still present in his old neighborhood—he even served as the neighborhood association’s president for years, despite being a wanted fugitive—but so far the police have been unable or unwilling to take him into custody—another reminder of the frailty of Guatemala’s justice system (Rotella 2013).

Testimonial element #3: Truth & agency

The final element of testimonio has often been the most problematic: the issue of truth. Montejo has criticized intellectuals for becoming preoccupied about the veracity of minor details instead of acknowledging the general truth that testimonies convey. Reflecting on his own testimonial writing, Montejo explained:

I recognize the difficulties of writing and presenting the facts of such a violent and genocidal war to the general public, … In this process of forcing the self to relive those moments of desperation, pain, and death, the mind tries to recall the strongest images of death and destruction experienced collectively. This may explain why Rigoberta Menchú added images
of cruelty to her own account that by itself was already so dramatic. For those who lived those moments of despair and massacres, this is an effort on the part of the unconscious mind to ensure that one’s voice is effectively heard—that the voice elicits a strong commitment and solidarity from those who may respond immediately to these human rights abuses. (Montejo 2001:372-373)

The survivor’s obligation to be heard, to effect change in a pathological social system and forge a ‘usable past’ for the survivors’ future, appears to outweigh the concern for strict accuracy in testimonial writing. Truth is not discounted from the formula at all; rather, in testimonio the focus is on the greater “narrative truth” (Wertsch 2002) rather than specific details.

Rigoberta Menchú’s testimonio was rather famously subjected to an exposé written by David Stoll (1999), and the ensuing controversy over the accuracy of her testimony seemed to generate as much international attention as its original publication. There were fundamental differences in the way that Stoll and Menchú interpreted the historical causes of violence in the Ixil region—primarily on the issue of the degree of support for the guerrilla among the local Ixil communities—and this remains a major focus in Stoll’s more recent scholarship challenging the idea that genocide occurred in Guatemala (Stoll 2014). However, debating historical details did not appear to be the primary motivation for Stoll’s exposé; certainly he could have found ample takers for such a debate among other academics, many of whom have challenged his interpretation of Guatemalan history (see Arias 2001, e.g., C. Smith 2001; Warren 2001).

Rather, Stoll intervened because he felt that Menchú’s interpretation of history had gained more epistemic authority than it deserved. As he saw it, the book’s effectiveness at convincing audiences was derived from “the first-person nature” of its narrative, which “provided an immediacy and creditability that no other narrative style would have achieved” (Stoll 2001:392). However,
Stoll challenged the legitimacy of the narrative as an eyewitness account, based on his own research with experts and military collaborators, as well as other Ixil Mayas who saw the army as their protector during the conflict, including some who even today remain loyal to Ríos Montt and traveled to the capital to protest against his genocide trial (Stoll:2014). John Beverley argued that this strategy of highlighting the heterogeneity of Maya experiences functions to maintain “intact the authority of the ‘outside’ observer (that is, Stoll) who is alone in the position of being able to both hear and sort through the various testimonies. It also leaves intact the existing structures of political military domination and cultural authority” (Beverley 2001:225).

The crux of the dilemma was that Menchú’s account became something more than the usual life history compiled by anthropologists:

> Anthropologists have long collected life histories from people. Ordinarily we do not dwell on whether the results are true or not. The very idea of refuting a life story sounds journalistic. More important is the narrator’s perspective and what this tells us about the culture. (Stoll 1999:11)

What, then, drove Stoll to “dwell on whether the results are true” in this case? He explained that “aside from being a life story,” Menchú’s testimonio “was a version of events with specific political objectives” (Stoll 1999:11). Had Menchú’s account stopped at the boundary of discussing ‘culture’—the prescribed domain for indigenous peoples’ expertise—then presumably Stoll would have had no objections. Once Menchú’s story took on greater significance, however, Stoll felt that it trespassed on theoretical terrain best left to the (usual) experts. John Beverley addressed the role that epistemic authority plays in such debates over truth:

> As noted, the truth claims for a testimonial narrative like I, Rigoberta Menchú depend on conferring on the form a certain special kind of epistemological authority. … Against the
authority of testimonial ‘voice,’ Stoll wants to affirm the authority of the fact-gathering procedures of anthropology and journalism, in which testimonial accounts such as Menchú’s will be treated simply as raw material that must be processed by more objective techniques of assessment. (Beverley 2001:226-227)

More disparagingly, Carol Smith charged that “Stoll basically produce[d] a polemic about Rigoberta [Menchú] … which comes less from scholarly conviction and more from personal frustration about losing a monopoly on authority” (2001:153-154). She recommended reflection on “situated knowledges,” namely that “everyone is positioned and situated in the world with bias so that they cannot fully see the reality of another world,” and consequently perspectives like Menchú’s add to our understanding in ways that a foreign anthropologist cannot, regardless of his preferred narrative form (Smith 2001:151-152).

In relation to the present chapter and the reflection on the genre of testimonio, Stoll’s critique was notable in that he set a definition of testimonio that made unrealistic and unrealizable claims to truth. He oscillated between explicitly recognizing the ‘composite’ nature of Menchú’s account, and critiquing her claims to be an eye-witness. Consider the vacillation in this opening paragraph of the final chapter of his exposé:

That Rigoberta turned herself into a composite Maya, with a wider range of experiences than she actually had, is not a very serious problem. Certainly, it should be known that her 1982 testimony is not a literal account of her life. Yet she was explicit that this was the story of all poor Guatemalans. … factuality is a legitimate issue for any narrative claiming to be an eyewitness account, especially one that has been taken as seriously as Rigoberta’s. (Stoll 1999:273)

Stoll’s ostensibly reasonable open-mindedness about the conventions and limitations of testimonio are betrayed by his preoccupation with the eyewitness flavor of Menchú’s speech. In short, he misinterpreted the form of her narrative as an invitation to read it in ways that even he recognized
were unsustainable. Unable to mount an argument that negated the historical truth that Menchú’s testimonio presented, he focused his efforts at tearing down the witness. The similarity between this approach, and the standard tactics employed by lawyers defending former military officials against war crimes, is disheartening.

In the past, powerful figures were able to silence opposition with threats of violence. Victoria Sanford recorded the testimony of a survivor of a massacre at Plan de Sánchez, who told her that the soldiers returned to the community afterwards and warned them to keep quiet:

“Look here, what happened in Plan de Sánchez … no one is going to complain about it because whoever complains,” [the army official] said holding up his machine gun, “this is what you get.” By then he was really red in the face. He said, “Forget about everything that has happened. Your mothers, your fathers are dead. Leave it at that. Forget it.” – From the testimony of “Pablo,” survivor of the massacre at Plan de Sánchez (Sanford 2003: 226).

Pablo’s account echoed the words of the song that began this dissertation: Pedro de Alvarado, the conquistador, ordering a young Maya scribe to “forget all of that, you.” Today, the proliferation of Maya voices in the public sphere has altered the context. Testimonios like Montejo’s and Menchú’s have played a role in this change—Carolina Escobar Sartí remarked that “In a society in which many Ladinos still call all Mayas ‘my son’ or ‘my daughter,’ ‘boy’ or ‘girl,’ [Rigoberta Menchú] has opened up new spaces, new opportunities unthinkable before her time” (Escobar Sarti 1999). The thousands of testimonios incorporated into the CEH and REMHI reports have also been influential. These narratives are reproduced, combined, teased apart, commented upon, debated, and interacted with in countless ways in people’s daily lives. In the process, new truths are imagined and adopted, and new identities and possibilities of identity are the result. Reactions against this epistemic shift, like David Stoll’s in the last decade or pro-military movements in the present day, are even clearer
examples of the stakes of including and excluding voices. As testimonios shift to courtroom testimonies, as in the trial of Ríos Montt for genocide, the results of extending epistemic authority to disempowered groups become even more consequential, even when that knowledge has to be translated across epistemological registers.
Chapter 7: Memory Offensives and Offensive Memories: The “Recuperation of Historical Memory” as Activist Practice & Objective

In this chapter, I examine the memory activism of urban popular movements that employ historical memory as a resource for organizing and imagining new forms of national identity. Although the groups I describe are primarily composed of young Ladinos in the capital city, they draw on indigenous experiences of the armed conflict in their interpretations of history and in constructing powerful symbolic images and discourses about ‘memory, truth, and justice.’ Ultimately, each of these groups articulates a different vision for the nation or public they are attempting to create through their activist practices. In the text below, I juxtapose their practices of memory activism, focusing on the role of indigenous images in their discourse and in the new Guatemalan publics that they propose and call into being (Warner 2002).

Context: Origins of activism & the need to remember

In the preceding sections of the dissertation, I described the current state of historical memory in Guatemala in both its official, State-sponsored capacity—represented especially by history textbooks, museums, and the monumental landscape—as well as its more vernacular forms, particularly the personal ideas about history held by young Maya intellectuals and recorded in testimonies. The contrasts between these historical narratives are jarring. Whereas the official versions usually focus on the Guatemalan State—its mythic origin story, an unbroken chain of political leaders, and various symbols of nationalism—the historical narratives of my K’iche’ and Kaqchikel colleagues tended toward a much longer view of history. The stories they told began long
before Guatemala: before independence, before colonization, before the arrival of the Spanish. Although their individual narratives differed in the details, a common theme was the recurrence of violence against Maya communities by the highest authorities, be they representatives of crown, colony, or State. Academic scholars have offered similar viewpoints: the political historian Raúl Molina Mejía has suggested that the Maya civilization has experienced three genocides: the initial conquest, the liberal reform period, and the internal armed conflict (Molina 1999;2009).

The internal armed conflict was a period of horror for Guatemala: during the thirty-six years that the violence lasted, over 200,000 people were killed, and over a million citizens were displaced—often from lands that had been occupied by their families for generations—and many spent several years as refugees in relocation camps or in neighboring countries, or migrated permanently to Guatemala City as part of the massive wave of urbanization that gave shape to the sprawling barrios that characterize the city’s landscape today (CEH 1999b:4366; Moller and Bazzy 2009; Way 2012). In sum, the sheer enormity of the armed conflict, and the extent to which violence permeated every level of society, would seem to warrant commemoration on a grander scale than the community shrines discussed in Chapter 3. For many Guatemalans, especially among the millions who were directly affected by the violence, the State has not fulfilled its responsibilities to acknowledge the military’s role or to make reparations to victims.

Although some leaders have taken steps to ameliorate public demands for greater accountability, the government’s response typically varies by institution and can change dramatically from one presidential administration to another. The election of the left-of-center presidential candidate Álvaro Colom in 2007 led to a temporary thaw in the State’s relationship with memory
activists and other victims of the internal armed conflict. On February 26, 2008—the “National Day of Dignity for the Victims” of the armed conflict—President Colom offered a public apology on behalf of the State for the violence inflicted on civilians. He vowed to declassify a series of documents that outlined the military’s counterinsurgency plans during the conflict as a gesture toward historical clarification, promising that the government would use “all the efforts necessary to arrive at the truth” (Rodríguez and Alvarado 2008). Colom added that he lost four members of his own family during the war, but he couldn’t imagine losing a close relative like a parent or sibling: “For that reason it is important that these files are known, so they may contribute [to] the families that are still searching for answers” (Rodríguez and Alvarado 2008). Under his administration, Colom’s Secretary of Peace established a national Peace Archives to organize, digitalize, and provide public access to these files as well as the millions of records recovered from the National Police archives and declassified files from the U.S. military (Doyle 2012).

Colom was succeeded by Otto Pérez Molina, the first former military commander to gain the presidency since the signing of the 1996 Peace Accords. In stark contrast to Colom, Pérez Molina has expressed his view on multiple occasions that “there was no genocide” in Guatemala (Carlsen 2012). Pérez Molina’s executive policies and appointments have demonstrated hostility toward the work of memory activists. Perhaps the clearest example of this hostility was his selection of Antonio Arelas to serve as the Secretary of Peace, a position that was originally created to ensure that the government fulfills its obligations under the Peace Accords to promote harmony between diverse social sectors. Arelas has stated that he is “outraged by the assertion that there was genocide” in Guatemala, arguing that “During the more than 20 years that [Guatemala] was closely scrutinized
by the international community, Guatemala was never accused of genocide,” and heavily implying 
that the CEH accused the military state of genocide in order to bypass amnesty laws and provide a 
way to prosecute military leaders (Colmenares 2012). As Secretary of the Peace, Arelas dismantled 
the Peace Archives and gutted his secretariat’s entire independent research unit, claiming that he 
sought to “cancel contracts for which I see no justification and end the functions of an office that I 
find makes no sense” (Díaz 2012). Kate Doyle, Senior Analyst of George Washington University’s 
National Security Archive, responded to this news with a description of the important work that the 
Peace Archive accomplished during its short existence, including the digitalization of over two 
million documents, the publication of nine reports on issues of contemporary relevance, and “expert 
testimony for the Public Ministry in several key human rights cases, including the current 
indictment against ex-chief of state Efraín Ríos Montt for genocide” (Doyle 2012). Given that Pérez 
Molina has publicly expressed his disapproval of the prosecution of military leaders for war crimes, the closing of the Peace Archives seems rather like an attempt to provide political cover to other 
figures—including Pérez Molina himself—who might be found liable in the future for actions 
during the war.

While the Colom and Perez administrations may represent the opposite extremes of State 
support for the recuperation of historical memory, the general situation is that private citizens are left 
to do much of the work of remembering. Carol Gluck found that this is the case in Japan, as well,

92 Under the blanket amnesty of the Peace Accords, combatants on both sides of the conflict were immune to 
prosecution for their actions; however genocide is a crime against humanity, exempt from amnesty (Sanford 2003). 
Sanford (2003) and Oglesby (2007) provide descriptions of their own participation in research for the CEH report, the 
significance of its findings, and their explanations for why the charges of genocide were warranted by the evidence.
where a “large and contentious civil society of memory activists has played a particularly important role precisely because the government has done so little of the memory work itself” (2005:4). As detailed in chapters 3 and 4, Guatemalan schools and museums—the institutions most associated with informing citizens about history and national identity—have largely exempted themselves from this task, or maintain narratives that have not been adequately revised over the past 30 years to reflect the diversity of Guatemala. Consequently the tasks of recuperating and preserving collective memory have fallen to a great degree on civil society organizations.

In Guatemala, the most visible campaigns for preserving collective memory are carried out by the groups H.I.J.O.S. and Caja Lúdica, as well as the artist Daniel Hernández-Salazar. These memory activists are all based in Guatemala City, though their activities have taken them to other communities throughout Guatemala. Their activist practices tend to draw on many symbols and tactics that are traditionally associated with leftist political movements in Latin America, and a prevailing stance of resistance against authoritative institutions like the military. However, the groups also draw on more contemporary sources of aesthetic and political inspiration, including hip-hop and b-boy “breakdancing,” international human rights and indigenous rights legal frameworks, and collaboration with wider activist networks like Amnesty International and the Guatemala Solidarity Network. In the following pages, I will describe the work of these young activist groups in order to illustrate how and why their campaigns revolve around memory, and what this can tell us about the changes unfolding in Guatemalan youth society.


Contrahuella: Street theater as cathartic device

The name chosen by the members of Caja Lúdica, literally “Playful Box,” reflects the group’s philosophy that “where war and violence plant terror and fear, art and playfulness germinate value and respect for life, happiness, and solidarity” (Caja Lúdica 2013). The group was created by two of the founding members of a similar Colombian organization called Barrio Comparsa, or “Parade District” (J. Escobar 2013). Barrio Comparsa began in 1989 as a community organizing project aimed at countering the violence plaguing Medellín. The group’s goal was to use a “participatory Ludic Methodology” to inspire people to take back the streets by joining in impromptu comparsas, which in the Colombian tradition are not just mundane parades but “a carnival troop of music and dance … [a] carnivalesque procession … a collective and public mobile street festival with music, mythical and caricatured figures, rituals, dancing, and singing” (Behrens 2009). In 2000, Julia Escobar and Doryan Betoya of Barrio Comparsa came to Guatemala to participate in the month-long street festival “Blue October,” a historic commemoration of the October Revolution and the fall of the Arbenz government (Behrens 2009). After a hectic three-week period of organizing participants, training them in acrobatics and stilts and costume and face paint design, Escobar describes the festival and its outcome:

Dance, rhythms and choreographies overthrew walls of silence, fear and distrust. People started vibrating with the dance. The inner selves, crouched inside, turned into boisterous, volcanic kids, willing to freely express the diversity of dances, their personal inner rhythms, the most sacred aspect of themselves. The established rules were transgressed, the playful spirits that remained numb within the souls awoke from a long night of war and silence. This huge parade, or ‘convite’ (invitation), as it is called in Guatemala, was the artistic activity that gave place to the Festival. This activity contributed to the recovering of public space. And above all, they recovered a traditional aesthetic expression, with roots in the ancient and ancestral Mayan culture. After this magic event, a collective of young creatives gave birth to
Caja Lúdica, a meeting place for a new generation of artists … who exchange methods and experiences about art and culture, opening a window towards the diversity of artistic expressions from Guatemala and other neighboring countries. (J. Escobar 2013)

The newly formed Caja Lúdica immediately set out to work with youth in the “most problematic barrios” of Guatemala City, as Betoya put it, as well as in communities of returned refugees where they worked with children who had been profoundly affected by the violence of the armed conflict (Behrens 2009). The fruits of Caja Lúdica’s labors, as with Barrio Comparsa’s beforehand, are multiplied by the creation of new artistic groups as young members grow up and take what they’ve learned to other communities.

Today, most of Caja Lúdica’s activities continue to be focused on educational programs for children in Guatemala City, including teaching artistic skills, theater, dance, and acrobatics. Memory activism is not one of the explicit goals of the group, but their goals of helping communities learn to express their historical memories have consequently led to many spontaneous examples of memory activism. Whereas H.I.J.O.S. emphasizes resistance to authority and skepticism toward foreign governments, Caja Lúdica as an organization thrives on collaboration with state and international allies—including relationships with diverse groups and funding agencies such as USAID and the U.S. Embassy. In addition to frequent participation in activities organized by H.I.J.O.S., such as the Memory March described below, Caja Lúdica joins other groups to help bring citizens out into public spaces to interact with one another. They are known for forming impromptu drum lines with acrobats and clowns on stilts, parading up and down the pedestrian boulevard of the Sexta Avenida on any given weekday afternoon, simply to break up the monotony of urban life and labor.
Weaving together myth and history

My first experience with the creativity of Caja Lúdica was in mid-May of 2008, in the western highland city of Quetzaltenango. More commonly known by its Mayan name, Xela is considered Guatemala’s “second city,” but its history and demography are quite dissimilar to the capital. The population of Xela is over 55% indigenous, primarily K’iche’, with a Mam minority from the northwestern area of the department (CODISRA 2010). The K’iche’ anthropologist Irma Alicia Velásquez Nimatuj has written about the unique bourgeois class that emerged among Xela’s indigenous citizens in the early days of the republic, and who continue to exert strong influence on local politics (2011). Although there are still visible signs of ethnic inequality and discrimination in Xela, they do not tend to occur as frequently as in the capital; consequently, indigenous citizens typically identify themselves publically as Mayas—for example by wearing traje, for women, or by speaking in Mayan languages openly. The upshot of all of this is that Caja Lúdica must have expected their audience to include Mayas as well as Ladinos.

On the day after I arrived in Xela, I encountered a large crowd of spectators gathered along the eastern side of the central plaza, in front of the departmental government building.93 Ladinos and Mayas of every class and age were engrossed by the performance before their eyes. Usually the park is filled with boisterous communication—laughter and shouts between groups of teenagers and

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93 As I would learn afterwards, the performance of street theater that I encountered was titled Contrahuella: La Senda de los Ancestros, and it was written and directed by the Colombian writer Juan Carlos Moyano. The literal translation of contrahuella is riser, as in the vertical portion of an individual stair—in pre-Columbian Maya architecture, messages were often carved on these architectural elements. La senda de los ancestros means the path of the ancestors.
young adults, even during marimba concerts or political stump speeches—but on this occasion the spectators were observing very quietly in order to hear the voices of the performers. I suspected that the street theater was somehow associated with the international poetry festival that was winding down over the weekend, but I wasn’t certain who the performers were or what their agenda might be. I had simply never seen anything like this performance or the elaborate setting in which it unfolded.

A section of the street, measuring perhaps 20 x 30 meters, was roped off for the performance. The ground was covered in brightly colored sand and sawdust of several shades, beautifully and painstakingly arranged in intricate patterns. This artistic technique replicated the famous alfombras94 that cover streets during Holy Week in communities throughout Guatemala, though instead of Christian iconography the creators had formed shapes similar to the illustrations carved and painted on ancient Maya temples and woven into indigenous huipiles still today. The zig-zag-like depictions of serpents and mountains were slightly scattered and blurry in the center of the performance area, but remained immaculate along the edges when I first arrived to join the spectators. At one end of this “stage,” a man with a mohawk-like tuft of bright red hair, pasty white face paint, and a menacing larger-than-life painted grin (a fresh take on masks of Europeanness?) represented the lord of Xibalbá, the mythological underworld. Opposite him stood the principal protagonist: a young actor whose stage makeup and costume identified him as a blind old man and a Maya aj q’ij, a “day

94 Lit., “carpets,” but I feel that the English gloss fails to adequately convey their ephemeral quality (see images in appendix).
keeper” and spiritual guide. While these characters remained constant in their positions, periodically addressing each other across the expanse of the stage, over a dozen supporting performers wove in and out of the narrative, changing their costumes between scenes in order to depict a variety of characters from mythological history as well as the more recent past. The central characters in the play, though their roles were speechless, were a group of actors wearing traditional Maya dress typical of the communities surrounding Lake Atitlán.95

As the play unfolded, a menacing general in an over-sized grey uniform barked orders to his troops, commanding them to attack the defenseless villagers. In the next scene, a group in military uniforms crossed the stage in lockstep, kicking the colored sands of the alfombra as they marched, and then surrounded the villagers to begin a brutal assault. As the villagers screamed and ran in circles, or knelt and covered their heads in panic, the soldiers struck them with their rifles or shot them, all the while carelessly trampling the colorful lines and shapes formed from the sand and sawdust. By the time the violence ended, the villagers’ bodies were piled in a heap near the center of the stage, and the landscape of the stage was irreversibly transformed from beautiful order to chaotic swirls and mixes of colors. The symbolism of this massacre was not likely to be lost on the captivated audience: images of bodies piled in such a manner were distributed as propaganda by both the military and the guerrillas during the armed conflict, each claiming that the other party had committed the atrocity. More recently, the exhumations of mass graves by forensic anthropologists

95 The Tz’utujil Maya communities around Lake Atitlán are among the few in which men continue to wear distinctive clothing, thus visibly marking themselves as indigenous along with the women in *traje*. By choosing to represent these communities, the actors were able to indicate the indigeneity of both men and women.
have entered the communicative sphere through powerful images of uncovered remains and the large burial ceremonies that follow (see image below). Despite their death, the villagers’ role in the play had only just begun: they continued to participate as the spirits of the ancestors, crossing through the underworld. Where their antagonists in life were soldiers, they now faced the horrific servants of the lord of Xibalbá: men and women on stilts wearing brightly-colored costumes. Their ally was the old aj q’ij in the mortal plane, who communicated with other ancestral and mythological characters to defend the villagers as they crossed through Xibalbá.

At the conclusion of the performance, a genuine—as in, not an actor—aj q’ij came to the center of the stage, where throughout the performance a small fire had been gently burning, and was now nearly extinguished. He addressed everyone in the crowd, as the actors hurriedly passed out small candles to the spectators. The aj q’ij asked everyone to take part in a closing ceremony, to commemorate all of the ancestors who were victims during la Violencia and to pray for peace in Guatemala. He then proceeded to transform the dying flames into a newly rekindled fire for an offering. After placing pom and fragrant bark in the fire and spraying aguardiente from his mouth, he invited the crowd to come forward and place our candles in the fire as an offering to the real ancestors. Few spectators declined to participate; our candles—perhaps two hundred altogether—left brightly-colored puddles of melted wax alongside the disturbed rainbows of sand and sawdust.

The experience of witnessing the performance of Contrahuella was certainly emotionally charged. I saw that many people, myself included, were in tears by the time they came forward to place their candles in the fire, and the near-silence of the crowd during and even after the performance made the solemnity of the occasion palpable. I heard parents shushing young children
as they waited for their turn to approach and leave their candles on the fire. Groups huddled together afterward and spoke in low voices, faces somber. Several elderly women wearing the distinctive *huipiles* from the nearby community of Almolonga, visibly shaken by the performance, knelt by the fire afterwards and spoke in broken voices to the *aj q’ij* in K’iche’.

**Interpreting Maya cosmovisión**

To understand why *Contrahuella* was so compelling and emotional for spectators, we must consider how the play fit within established genres of discourse, as well as how the narrative resonated with Maya interpretations of history. *Contrahuella* clearly drew from the living traditions of Maya dance and street theater, such as the *Dance of the Conquest* that is still performed in various communities, or the *Rabinal Achi* dance that Brigittine French describes as giving shape to the local identity of Achi-speakers:

> More than a mere reminder of events in the remote past, the play [*Rabinal Achi*] enacts what, within Maya notions of time, is seen as a force in the present. The contemporary enactment of a past drama, then, shows more than a people’s effort to give current significance to their history … for many Achi speakers, the play enacts dramatically a historical experience that informs local ideology… (French 2010:68)

These dramatic performances are treated as rituals by local communities, and the performers themselves are afforded higher status. As Blanca Estela Alvarado described: “the dancer is a person who merits respect in the community; he is no longer a common, ordinary person. He is a trained [*preparada*] person” (2004:118). In her research comparing different communities’ interpretations of these ritual dances, Irma Otzoy found that the dancers themselves saw their practices as an important form of commemoration:
For the dancers, the Conquest Dance not only situates Tecún Umán as an important historical agent, it also fulfills cultural expectations regarding continuity. They claim the Conquest Dance “is a commitment to remember our ancestors, the ancient customs… to represent how the conquest was when the Spaniards came.” … The performance of the Conquest Dance in [Santa María de Jesús, a K’iche’ village near Xela] is a conscious act to remember and sustain resistance. (Otzoy 2011:54)

Reflecting the authority and popularity of these traditional dramas in many Maya communities, younger cultural rights activists created new forms of theater in the early years of the Maya movement. In a book describing the characteristics of Kaqchikel literature—one of the earliest Maya-authored publications, later published by Cholsamaj—Manuel Salazar described “Denunciatory Theater,” which young Maya actors used to present realistic portrayals of the dilemmas and forms of oppression that Mayas encounter in their daily lives (1995:34).

All of these forms of indigenous theater, with varying local expressions, formed the universe of “speech genres” (Bakhtin 1986:93) that many audience members would have drawn upon to interpret Contrahuella. The play’s blending together of mythic time, 16th century violence of the Spanish Invasion, and the 20th century violence of the armed conflict may also have resonated with the views of history held by some spectators. This specific narrative would have fit well with the schematic narrative template I identified at the end of chapter 5. The villagers were attacked by powerful outsiders, but in the end they triumphed—in the afterlife—because their solidarity and communal values spanned generations and brought the united power of the ancestors to guide them to safety.
H.I.J.O.S.: Re-inscribing memory in the urban landscape

Guatemala’s H.I.J.O.S., the Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice against Forgetting and Silence,\(^96\) shares its name and general purpose with the original Argentine organization founded in 1995, as well as several other regional and national branches across Latin America and Spain (H.I.J.O.S.-Guatemala 2013a; Contreras 2009). The groups’ name alludes to the founding members being the children of victims of state violence, namely the *desaparecidos\(^97\) of the Argentine or Guatemalan conflicts. H.I.J.O.S.’ Guatemalan roots also included the “Casa Bizarra” art group, whose members organized a protest of the June 30, 2000 Army Day parade in the historical center of Guatemala City (Acevedo 2011:494), a tradition continued by H.I.J.O.S. and described below. The signature practices of H.I.J.O.S.’ memory activism are the marking of urban spaces throughout the capital city with graffiti, stenciled art, and *empapelados*: the pasting of dozens of photocopied black-and-white sheets of paper containing the images, names, and short biographical details of individuals who were disappeared during the internal armed conflict. These protest artworks created by H.I.J.O.S. are visible in many highly-trafficked thoroughfares—chosen in order to reach a large audience—as well as in specific, strategic locations. For example, the image below employs *empapelado* to spell out “memory struggle [*lucha memoria*]” along the walls of a building in zone 1 of the capital, just a block from the National Congress and across the street from a coffee shop frequented by members of the legislative body and other elites on their way to do business with the

\(^{96}\) *Hijos y Hijas por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio*; their acronym signifies “Children” in Spanish.

\(^{97}\) Literally, “disappeared.”
government. This larger message is clearly visible to anyone walking along the busier side of the street, while passersby on the near side will see that the sheets are reproductions of a poster for a documentary film about the internal armed conflict and the search for the disappeared. Image (x) illustrates the more common form of *empapelado*: photos of the missing with the slogans “for memory, truth, and justice” and “for all the [male and female] disappeared, neither oblivion nor pardon.”

21: In the historic downtown area of Guatemala City, H.I.J.O.S. placed empapelados strategically in order to deliver an immediate message to any passersby. The “memory struggle,” or fight over/for memory, continues to influence political possibilities in Guatemala.
The effect of the massive repetition of these images is to impart on viewers a sense of the true scale of loss during the internal armed conflict. In describing a similar memory project in Argentina, Fernando Reati wrote that the result of reading so many images is that:

What is presented before the eyes is a material object, a physical support for collective memory (or at least one of the possible collective memories) which functions with the characteristics of a traditional monument, and at the same time as an anti-monument. It is a monument not constructed with the imperishable material of stone or metal but with the more ephemeral newspaper, a monument without a concrete physical space extended in time, a monument that is not motionless but dramatically dynamic, born not of the State but from a group of citizens: in sum, what I name a paper monument in order to allude to its intrinsically paradoxical condition. (Reati 2007:160)

For the majority of the images in empapelados, Guatemalan activists use photos from the desaparecidos’ government-issued ID booklets, or cédulas, a choice which is layered with significance. For most viewers, the provenance of these photos is immediately apparent: cédulas have been virtually unchanged since they were originally created in 1931 (RENAP 2014). Because these photos originated in a government-issued document, their reappearance in empapelados serves to index the state’s responsibility—in both the life and death of the missing person. Aesthetically, the portraits take on a grainy appearance from being photocopied at a larger size than the original. Typically the subjects do not smile, but face the camera with a sober expression. When dozens of the photos are reproduced to form a complete display of empapelados or to create a cloth banner, the result is a wall of faces, unsmiling, arresting the viewer’s eye and calling for attention (see image xx). Unlike family snapshots displayed prominently in loved ones’ homes, these are images that people would not normally see, unless they had reason to access a person’s ID booklet. Research into the recently discovered police archives has confirmed the long-held suspicion that State security forces
surveiled many of their victims, collecting dossiers that often included these very same photos (AHPN 2011).

In addition to the *empapelados* posted by H.I.J.O.S., there have been other experiments with “paper monuments,” or public commemoration of a less permanent nature. The Guatemalan photographer Daniel Hernández-Salazar created an iconic image of an ‘angel,’ which was used as the cover image for the REMHI reports (ODHAG 1998). The idea for the image originated in the photographer’s work with the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation (FAFG): the ‘wings’ of the angel are actually a photo of a shoulder blade marked by a bullet hole, recovered in the exhumation of a clandestine grave. Hernández-Salazar superimposed these ‘wings’ over the image of a young man enacting the proverb “I don’t see, I don’t hear, I remain silent [No veo, no oigo, me callo].”98 The fourth image—the one that changes the significance of the series—reacts against this attitude of silence: “still bearing the weight of the dead on his back, this angel screams memory, ‘So that all shall know [Para que todos lo sepan]’” (Hoelscher 2008).

On the night of April 25, 1999, as an act to commemorate the first anniversary of the murder of Bishop Juan Gerardi, Hernández-Salazar and collaborators pasted nearly three dozen large-scale reproductions of his iconic artwork in locations around Guatemala City. Composed of paper and ink, these monochromatic images were never meant to last; on the contrary, the fragile impermanence of the images was part of their aesthetic power. Some were erased by the proprietors

98 This proverb is sometimes translated as the more familiar “See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.” I choose to translate it more literally in order to emphasize the transformational effects of the fourth angel.
of the buildings they occupied almost immediately; others lasted for months, and Steven Hoelscher reported that even in 2008, nearly a decade later, traces remained of some of the angels.99 Hernández-Salazar explained the criteria that he and his collaborators used to choose the sites for installing the images: “a) that the place by symbolic in relation to the crime and the lack of clarification; b) that the site be a place where many passersby would see the mural; and c) that the place have its own particular ‘magic’” (2000). The images were installed all in one overnight session, “so that [they] would surprise the public on the morning of April 26, the first anniversary of the murder of Bishop Gerardi” (Hernández-Salazar 2000). The images posted on or near military buildings provided the most telling public response: initially ignored, once the high command realized that the images were a critique, the military dispatched soldiers to erase them. Hernández-Salazar noted to Hoelscher, “with no small degree of irony, that many of the installations were made to disappear by the same people responsible for the disappearance of thousands of Guatemalan citizens during the war years” (in Hoelscher 2008).

The Contested Meanings of June 30th

While empapelados and impromptu graffiti tend to appear periodically throughout the year, the busiest period for H.I.J.O.S.’ efforts are in the final weeks of June each year, leading up to June 30th, which is officially recognized in Guatemala as Army Day. In the past, on this date each year the Guatemalan military would parade through the streets in a nationalistic show of force and pride.

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99 I also saw fragments of Hernández-Salazar’s “So That All Shall Know,” the shouting fourth angel in the series, as late as 2011 on streets in Zone 1 of the capital; however, I could not say with certainty whether these were among the original images, or if they were pasted at a later date.
For over a decade, H.I.J.O.S. has responded by organizing public demonstrations that they call “memory offensives [ofensivas de memoria],” a play on military terminology. The events culminate in a “Day of Heroes and Martyrs” on June 30, including a public march and concert designed as a direct counter-response to the Army Day parades. In the first few years, these marches brought the memory activists face-to-face with armed soldiers in dramatic displays of civil disobedience. In 2007, members of H.I.J.O.S. tried to block the military parade route and were met with violence by pro-military spectators. In response, memory activists circulated a petition to President Colom calling for an end to the Army Day parades once and for all. Since 2008, the State has limited official Army Day festivities to the confines of military bases and academies, and H.I.J.O.S.’ Memory March gained exclusive use of the Constitutional Plaza in the heart of Guatemala City (Contreras 2009:182; H.I.J.O.S.-Guatemala 2013b).

The contest over the meaning of June 30th offers a uniquely evident sign of the shifting parameters of public debates about history in Guatemala, and the changing epistemic authority of memory activists compared to military officials. The holiday has a long tradition—originally commemorating Justo Rufino Barrios’ Liberal Revolution of 1871—and along with parades during the Christmas season and the Independence Day events on September 15, June 30th is marked by school marching bands performing in the public spotlight. As an official holiday enshrined in the public calendar, Army Day also provides a day free from work for most government and formal sector employees. For the vast majority of Guatemalans who live in rural areas or work in the informal economy, the holiday is hardly noticeable aside from the closure of local banks and schools. However, in the capital city it has greater salience and symbolic weight, which is why urban memory
activists have led the growing movement to reform or cancel the celebrations, particularly as long as
the military is seen as harboring human rights violators. The prominent human rights activist Lucía
Escobar summarized the view of memory activists in 2008: “There is nothing to celebrate [about] an
army guilty of the disappearance of more than 20,000 and the massacring or sending into exile of
500,000 Guatemalans, [for which it] still remains to be judged.” She applauded the efforts of
H.I.J.O.S. and their allied organizations in creating an alternative form of commemoration to honor
the victims, rather than a group that they see as the perpetrators, of violence (L. Escobar 2008).

What exactly do these competing commemorations promote? What memories do the
organizers of each hope to revitalize and lead their participants to appropriate as constitutive of their
identities? I draw from my observations and participation in several events to illustrate that not only
are the narrative truths divergent, but the very form of each commemorative practice represents
dramatically different views of the significance of memory, activism, and citizenship.

Army Day: The Future in Order

In the late 2000s, I witnessed several Army Day celebrations in Xela. These small-scale
celebrations featured students from local schools, marching along the main thoroughfare of the
historical district, then parading around the central park while passersby watched and applauded. I
remember being struck by the children’s grim, bellicose bearing during their performances. Most
carried mock rifles, though at least one school group was handling what appeared to be actual
firearms. This same group, students from a boy’s academy, wore grey uniforms and marched in
Prussian-style Stechschritt or goose step, their legs swinging a full ninety degrees out at right angles,
following a steady, precise cadence set by snare drums. They occasionally punctuated their movement with shouts “for the homeland! (patria)” and fists raised to the air. As I looked around the central park at the expressions of other spectators, I noted that most of the crowds nearest the street, cheering, were ostensibly parents and relatives of the performers, identified by their matching t-shirts featuring the names of the schools or drum-and-bugle corps. Although the militaristic presentation of the students was unfamiliar and somewhat unsettling for me, for these Quetzaltecos the event seemed ordinary—rather like any parent witnessing their children’s athletic or musical performance. Although the event was explicitly linked to Army Day—via its timing, the banners carried by the students, and some preliminary announcements—the actual commemorative practices did not articulate a narrative about the military. There were no speeches during these events, nor participation by armed forces. Aside from the increased emphasis on the militaristic aspects of their marches—the rifles and exaggerated marches of most schools—this parade was essentially a pared down, children-only version of the larger Independence Day and Christmas parades that typically include local businesses and adult civil groups.

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100 The exception is the drum-and-bugle corps of the boy’s academy, which performed in the same militaristic manner in every parade in which I witnessed them; their staccato shouts “for the homeland” are far less intimidating when accompanied by the loud cacophony of reggaeton and marimba music from neighboring Christmas floats.
The official Army Day celebrations carried out by the Guatemalan military are viewable in a series of promotional videos shared by the Pérez Molina administration on the Gobierno de Guatemala YouTube account. The honor parades are held at the headquarters of the Mariscal Zavala military brigade. Although this site is just two miles from the historical center of Guatemala City, it rests within a large, wooded area restricted to military personnel for training and recreational purposes. The celebrations in 2012 and 2013 appeared to follow similar patterns: soldiers formed columns and marched across the field while the president and other distinguished guests observed from a 20-foot long couch at the top of a stage. Each of the short videos featured international military allies of Guatemala. In the 2012 Army Day celebration, the visiting general commander of the military forces of Colombia presented Pérez Molina with a distinguished award for his leadership as president of Guatemala; in 2013, General John Kelly, Commander of the U.S. Southern Command, was thanked for his participation and presence in the festivities.
The highlight of the events seemed to be the entrance and honor parade of each branch of the armed forces. The videos featured numerous scenes of various specialized units marching by—including troops wearing bright red replicas of colonial era uniforms, elite *kaibiles* in their distinctive black-and-red face paint, and soldiers wearing camouflage fit for swampy terrain. Military vehicles also made an appearance, as well as ceremonial artillery fire. Altogether, the official Army Day commemorations appear to be a self-congratulatory affair, as the small audience in attendance consisted primarily of high-ranking officials and diplomats. In his speech for the 2012 Army Day celebrations, President Pérez Molina reminded everyone that he was himself a soldier, and that his role as president was defined in relation to the military: “As the president of the Republic, I have the honor of being a member of the greatest hierarchy, and as general commander of the army, to know the labors that it has carried out over the length of the institution’s history, and I am sure that it will continue in the future. The army’s permanence is guaranteed” (Gobierno de Guatemala 2012).

These official Army Day celebrations reflect the military’s predominant concern with order and modernity. The troops, equipped with state-of-the-art tactical equipment, performed their choreographed entrances—including a paratrooper arriving in the center of the parade grounds via air drop—and passed by the parade stage in lockstep. The highest officers received formal commendations from the President, who in turn accepted honors from visiting dignitaries. Guatemala’s national identity and history are not questioned, much less critiqued—they are simply celebrated. From the President’s speech to the singing of the national anthem and the Hymn to the Guatemalan Soldier, the principal purpose of the events was to glorify the military’s contributions to Guatemala’s security and future development, and to reassure the troops that their service is
recognized and appreciated—despite the continued practice of holding the celebrations in a private location, where the general public could not interrupt or suggest a different message. In Bakhtin’s terms, the official Army Day celebrations follow a script written in authoritative speech, with absolutely no room for idiosyncrasy, alterity, or even dialogue in the common sense of the term.

**Day of the Heroes & Martyrs: From la Sexta to the “Seed of Rebellion”**

I participated in the 2011 Memory March with members of H.I.J.O.S. and over a hundred other memory activists. Early on the morning of June 30, I made my way north along Sexta Avenida into Zone 2 and the meeting point at Parque Morazán, passing dozens of construction workers who were busily busting apart the concrete surface of the street and replacing it with cobblestones. Like the stretch of Sexta Avenida to the south, in Zone 1, the city leaders had decided to convert this avenue into a pedestrian district. This urban renovation project was rooted in the nostalgic memories of an elite urban class for a time when Sexta Avenida was said to be the jewel of the city: modernist and colonial architecture intertwined, with burgeoning storefronts selling the latest in imported consumer goods—a role model for the entire nation. Later, the political crises and state repression of the 1950s and 1960s left their mark. Sexta Avenida served as the preferred route for protest marches by various organizations with the courage to show dissent: teachers, labor unions, students, journalists. As the conflict dragged on into the 1970s and 1980s, the urban population swelled with a massive influx of refugees immigrating from the rural communities that were being targeted by counterinsurgency campaigns. In search of a livelihood, many of these new urban dwellers set up shop as informal merchants. As the formal economy suffered, the informal
The economy grew: Sexta Avenida transformed into a street market filled with vendors of various inexpensive goods and second-hand items. The first time I traveled to Guatemala City, in 2006, this avenue was densely filled with vendors selling goods under tarps, identical to the formal markets in provincial cities and villages on market days. By the end of the decade, Mayor Arzú had promised to restore Sexta Avenida to its former glory, first by forcing these street vendors to move into a sweltering, dark, cramped building several blocks away. Afterwards, the city began converting the street into a pedestrian boulevard. Rumor among many of the remaining merchants with storefronts along la Sexta was that Arzú’s family and close friends owned most of the properties along the avenue, and stand to reap the rewards if the renovation succeeds.

Sexta Avenida represented a highly symbolic choice as the route to the national plaza. On the one hand, this avenue served as a path for former protests, no doubt including some of the very individuals whose political activities led to their disappearance by state authorities. These disappeared individuals, desaparecidos, were thus made doubly present: they were returned to this place in the memories of their loved ones, who came to march in their honor. And many of them were present as images on the massive hand-drawn banners carried by marchers—banners that asked “Where are they?” and stated “No peace without justice. Demand trials for genocide.” They were also represented on the papers that teams of young activists quickly pasted to the walls of homes and businesses as we march along Sexta Avenida, each and every block on both sides of the street being marked by graffiti and empapelados. Countering the efforts of nostalgic elites to transform la Sexta into a space of commercial and capitalist ‘success,’ H.I.J.O.S. marked the landscape with evocative images to trigger the historical memories of passersby and, hopefully, foment discussion.
When I arrived at Parque Morazan nearly an hour ahead of the meeting time—nervous about finding my way to the spot for the first time—there were no signs that a large political gathering would soon take place. The park itself was nearly empty, as I discovered after wandering the extent of it in search of anyone who might be a participant in the march. I noticed, apprehensively, that a bus full of uniformed military students was idling for a while at the intersection between the park and the nearby thoroughfare—likely on their way to Army Day festivities elsewhere. Around 10 minutes past the scheduled meeting time, an initial gathering of people began to meet around the gates outside the park, in a section of the street that had already been closed to vehicular traffic as part of the renovation of Sexta Avenida. Vendors appeared shortly thereafter, selling hats with the H.I.J.O.S. slogan as well as plastic “trumpets” and other noisemakers left over from the World Cup. Finally, at around half past 10, a few young men carrying marching drums joined the growing crowd. As the drummers began to warm up, the crowd gathered its energy. Small groups that had hung back chatting among themselves moved closer to the drummers in the center. Groups of women arrived carrying long banners featuring the faces of victims of disappearance and genocide (see images in appendix). The crowd soon swelled with young teenagers walking on ten-foot stilts, others wearing clown costumes or juggling bean bags and batons, all members of Caja Lúdica who came to lend their support to the event. The addition of the brightly colored young people uplifted the mood of all participants and lent the event a more playful aesthetic.

Once the crowd reached a critical mass, the drummers were warmed up, and reporters from national and independent media were on the scene, the organizers turned on a PA-system hooked to
a generator in the bed of a pickup truck. A young man with his long hair pulled back in a ponytail took the microphone and began to read a prepared statement:

The history of Guatemala presents itself to us as the sum of rigid events, where the hero and winner of the tragic battles is a white man of good family and customs, who claims to make homeland and development on the backs of the great majority of the population. From this history of fire and blood, the usurpers of life planted the seeds that they hoped would germinate in the construction of a “Guatemalanness” disguised as civilization, but which is no more than the latent dynamics of dispossession and subjugation, what results in the extraction and exploitation of the land for the accumulation of a few and the misery of the many.

From here, the narrator described how “militarism has always been the tool” used by the ruling classes to control the population, including through terrorism and genocide. I want to note a few details about the Marxist-inspired historical narrative provided in these preliminary remarks to the Memory Offensive. First, the story begins with “the cross and the sword, with the encomienda and Pueblos de Indios.” Like the official narratives offered by the state, history began with the arrival of the Spanish, ignoring the pre-existing civilizations who also must have had histories of their own. The narrative also implies that the colonial system played a role in creating indigenous community. I have heard young ladino leftists speak disparagingly about Maya identity as a false consciousness, a division created by the ruling elites to keep the masses from recognizing their common interests. While this view isn’t explicitly represented in this narrative, neither is indigenous culture or identity invoked. The emphasis throughout is on class relations, presenting as a binary of oppressors and oppressed.

Second, the narrative is told in the third-person, and often the subjects of verbs are left undefined or ambiguous. For example, references to “the pueblos of Guatemala” offering resistance
to oppression leave the impression that all Guatemalans have resisted, without specifying the unique historical experiences of indigenous communities, urban labor movements, etc. Similarly, the antagonist of this history is the “wealthy creole” class that own the land and control the military. Common variants of this narrative often include the United States as an imperialist power, which then reframes the local elites as puppets carrying out orders from above. Wherever the blame is assigned, the emphasis is typically directed toward the large-scale political economic system of exploitation; specific agents are addressed only as representatives or components of the larger problematic structures, e.g. corrupt politicians or genocidal military officers.

Third, the narrative goes on to reference a recent decision by the Guatemalan Attorney General and court system to proceed with a case against a former general for the crime of genocide, noting that this was a departure from the traditional pattern of impunity:

With the negotiation of the peace accords, they wanted to impose a discourse in which democracy and justice would put emphasis on eradicating structural impunity. However, little by little it has become clear that the judicial system is used as one of the mechanisms of persecution…

On the other hand, the recent conquests within the judicial system, such as the cases over forced disappearance and the recent opening of the process for genocide, with the capture of a General of the National Army, demonstrates to us that a trial and punishment is possible, thanks to the courage and work sustained for more than two decades by the survivors.

Finally, I want to share the description of memory offered by this H.I.J.O.S. representative, in order to compare it to the visions of other memory activists we have encountered:

Our memory is not a pure, static record. Our memory does not obey the interests of groups or elites. Our memory is not guarded in a box, or institutionalized in a proselytizing act of pain and immobility. Our memory is alive … Our memory is the seed of rebellion, the voice, the word, the action, the idea that reveals itself before so much oppression.
As with “Lupe” and the other members of ODHAG’s research team, described at the end of the second chapter, memory is invoked as an agentive force that leads to action and activism. However, to an even greater degree than ODHAG, memory activism for the members of H.I.J.O.S. tends toward resistance to authority for its own sake. The motto of H.I.J.O.S., which has been criticized for presenting a stance of uncompromising inflexibility, is “We don’t forget. We don’t forgive. We don’t reconcile.” The ability of the group to expand its campaigns, such as the annual Memory Offensives, seems to be rooted in the appeal of this leftist rhetoric for maintaining support within the university student population, combined with the more popular appeal brought by the arts and music within the Offensives themselves. The form of the protests is engaging and especially draws in younger crowds, who are then exposed to the content provided by speakers, poets, and other narrative performers.

The form of the march contrasted markedly with the official military parades, to be certain. Yet it also differed significantly from the historic 1998 popular demonstrations that followed the assassination of Bishop Gerardi, founder of ODHAG. Whereas the commemoration of Gerardi took the form of a “March of Silence,” the present day Memory March adopted a tone of defiant triumphalism—described by the organizers as a “celebration of the life [of the] heroes and martyrs” who had been lost in the violence. With their drumming and singing and other booming expressions of celebration, participants in the Memory March intended to leave an impression on witnesses, hopefully calling to mind their own memories of the internal armed conflict.

The Memory Offensive left its mark on the city in a more permanent way, as well. While most of the participants marched in the center of the street, carrying banners, flags, or drums, small
teams of three to five people worked along either side of the group, marking buildings with graffiti and stenciled artwork. These memory activists wore bandanas around their faces—both as a shield against the fumes of spray paint and glue, and to help protect their identities, due to the illegality of their artwork. The teams worked quickly, completing their stencils and pasting *empapelados* to walls in the short time it took for the larger group to march by, providing cover. For the most part, no bystanders or police officers intervened in the work of the teams. However on one corner, as a group began stenciling an image onto the side of a two-story house, a woman appeared on the balcony overhead with a bucket of water. She attempted to dump its contents on the memory activists, succeeded in splashing their shoes and pants, while screaming for them to stop vandalizing her walls. The team shrugged off the incident and moved on to the next building, leaving their stencil half complete. This was not the first time that members of H.I.J.O.S. had encountered resistance from unsympathetic property owners. The incident recalled a photo from an earlier stencil by the group: “Why do you become outraged when I stain your *wall* with my cry, while the rich with their army have stained our *history* with blood?” (CPR-Urbana 2013a; adapted translation).
Most of the graffiti that was stenciled during the 2011 Memory March made reference to recent events in the Valley of Polochic, in eastern Guatemala. Just a few months earlier in March of 2011, hundreds of Q’eqchi’ families were violently evicted from lands they had occupied, following a series of legal and financial maneuvers by a wealthy and well-connected family that planned to use the land...
to grow sugar cane to meet the rising demand for ethanol in the U.S. (Solano 2013). Bishop Gonzalo de Villa wrote in the Prensa Libre soon after the events: “Those poor Q’eqchi’ campesinos lost months of work and all of the necessities that enabled them to survive. They remain condemned to hunger, to plundering, and to finding themselves strangers and illegals in their own ancestral lands” (2011). He condemned the Guatemalan state for selectively responding to this particular act of illegality—the occupation of land titled to a wealthy family—while ignoring countless other acts of crime that affect more people, and in more disastrous ways:

My insistence today is in saying that the evictions of Polochic depict the urgent needs of the honest people who want to work to sustain themselves and their children, and that in the midst of a society where there are abundant rogues and ruffians, criminals of white collar or long arms, drug runners, assassins and gangsters, it is them, and only them, the hardworking Q’eqchi’ campesinos who have felt the weight of the law. Ay, poor Guatemala!

The photographs that circulated after the event, primarily in online and alternative media, depicted hundreds of police officers and soldiers—including a front line in full riot gear and soldiers with heavy weaponry—covering the roadways leading to the occupation settlement in a sea of black uniforms. In contrast, the peasant families, most of whom were dressed in second-hand clothing

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101 Luís Solano echoes the work of Marta Casaús Arzú in tracing the connections between this family—Carlos and Walter Widmann—and influential political and economic figures on the Guatemalan and international stage. In particular, the business venture that led to the evictions—the re-opening of a failed sugar mill—was funded by a loan from Banco del Quetzal, which was directed at the time by Oscar Berger Widmann, the son of Carlos and grandson of Walter; the family also drew on kin relations with the Marroquín family, “who own and operate the most important newspapers in Guatemala” (Solano 2013:135), likely a factor in the relatively sparse coverage of the evictions in the mainstream media.
sent to Guatemala through U.S. donation drives, stood by and watched as their makeshift homes and milpa fields were burned or bulldozed (UNOHCHR 2013). The evictions left one man dead, and several wounded. In a reproduction of strategies used during the armed conflict, the security forces employed hundreds of campesinos from neighboring communities to wield machetes and chop down the crops growing in the fields (GHRC 2011). In some cases, the National Civil Police lent uniforms to these contracted field hands; in nearly all cases, Carlos Widmann was on site to supervise the evictions (GHRC 2011).

This “Polochic reality” was prominently represented in the graffiti and empapelados produced by H.I.J.O.S. and their collaborators during the Memory March (see images). In one variation of the message, this phrase was spray painted alongside photocopies showing the wounds received by the evicted campesinos. One of the stencils prepared by the graffiti teams depicted a burning house beside a tree and an image of a young girl (see images). After spray-painting each element of this image in a different color, the activists added “no more evictions” (lit., “no+desalojos”) and other references to Polochic. In some cases, photocopies from Polochic were pasted alongside scenes from the armed conflict. This link between past and present violence was further emphasized by graffiti specifying that “Evictions continue genocide … Civil or military government, history repeats itself.” The reference to ongoing events also helped to give the March a focused energy. As the H.I.J.O.S.

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102 Many Q’eqchi’ women wear traje as a marker of indigenous identity, similar to members of other linguistic groups. However, this traditional clothing is relatively expensive—far more costly than the garments distributed in paca—lit., “packages” or “bundles,” large shipments of clothing sent from the U.S. and offered for less than a dollar per item. That the occupants of Polochic were unable to afford traje may be read as indexical of the extreme poverty in which they lived, a situation certainly exacerbated by their eviction and the destruction of their goods (UNOHCHR 2013).
organizers’ comments made clear, historical memory is seen as an ongoing affair rather than something belonging to the past; in particular, they call for present-day judgment of the unpunished crimes of the past. Polochic provided a reminder of the kinds of community-level destruction that was commonplace during the height of the armed conflict, and supported the argument that impunity and inequality are legacies of the conflict and its amnesty.

Notably, Sexta Avenida offers other reminders of the conflict and its victims: the social science institute AVANCSO features a commemorative plaque for Myrna Mack, the murdered Guatemalan anthropologist—theirs was one of the few buildings that was not marked by graffiti—and further along the street, the church of San Sebastián, with its attached parish house—the site of Bishop Gerardi’s murder, after publishing the REMHI report (Goldman 2008). Just across the street is an unmarked building that houses Caja Lúdica. When the participants reached this point, the drums halted and everyone gathered in a semi-circle around the entrance to the building. In the center of the doorway, a microphone stood waiting for a couple of speakers—both of whom were drummers in the march—to make rousing comments to the crowd. The first speaker reminded the marchers that they were gathered to celebrate the dignity of the victims and martyrs, and that their very lives were a testament to survival. The delivery of this speech began in the same style as the preliminary remarks that launched the march, but quickly turned to a celebratory tone. By gathering to show solidarity with one another, simply being alive was an act of defiance:

For several centuries they have held us down. They have smashed our opportunities. We are still standing! Compañeros, the heroes and the martyrs, their memory will never die, because all of these honorable people [gesturing toward the crowd] are alive today. And it’s for that they we are here, to dignify their memory. With the dance, with the drums, with our shouts,
reclaiming that life! So an applause for all the compañeros, for everyone. Alive! Alive! Alive!
We’re alive!

After the crowd’s applause quieted, the second speaker stepped forward to read a poem, handwritten on a piece of paper:

Life is life and we respect it. … No more war! No more war against nature, against our brothers and sisters. We want peace, love, to be and to belong. … We are the historical memory. We respect and we feel the melodies of the ancestors. No more death! No more iron fist [mano dura]103 … Less police and more poetry! We dignify … the memory and the life and the death of the victims of the genocide, the hate, and the racism. We accompany this manifestation by H.I.J.O.S. and we constructed this altar to dignify the life, to dignify the memory, because we are alive and we continue living! Let’s have a shout, compañeros. … Compañeros let’s continue with force, with all happiness because it is a march, but one of life, of respect and love. With graffiti, with flags … let’s celebrate life!

The “altar” mentioned by the speaker was a display arranged along the façade of the building, representing a mock Maya (re)burial ceremony. I recognized many of the objects as props from Caja Lúdica’s street theater performances. A burning ceremonial offering [ofrenda] with rose petals was arranged on an iron comal, a large plate usually used for toasting tortillas. On the other side were sets of the traditional clothing worn by the performers in Contrahuella, laid upon the ground with fake skulls placed at their tops. A couple of wooden caskets stood open on either end of this display. I noted that these were the small caskets that are typically used in reburial ceremonies by Maya communities, after the excavation of unmarked, mass graves containing the victims of genocide.

103 Also translatable as “firm hand,” the mano dura comment was an allusion to the Patriot Party (PP), the right-wing political party founded by Otto Pérez Molina in 2001. The logo of the PP is a clenched fist, which several of my Guatemalan colleagues saw as a reference to the primary concern of the PP: bringing an end to gang-related violence through “tough on crime” policies, heightened security spending, and harsher penalties including capital punishment. Many critics of the PP were wary that, especially given Pérez Molina’s military background, the party would usher in another period of military rule. At the time these comments were made, Pérez Molina was the front-runner for the presidential election. He was later elected in the second round of voting.
(Moller and Bazzy 2009). Curious, gigantic corn cobs made of foam were propped against the wall behind these “bodies,” awkwardly playful props amid such a dramatic scene.

The construction and display of this altar alongside the microphone provided a very dramatic backdrop for the speakers’ performance—a sign of Caja Lúdica’s eye for theatrics, no doubt. Several of the participants in the march left their red carnations on top of the clothing as if leaving an offering to the dead. Many members of the crowd took photos of the display. I took photos as well, and photos of people taking photos, because it struck me that this scenery was intended to be recorded and reproduced. Similar to Caja Lúdica’s performances in Contrahuella, this “altar” in the middle of the Memory March was the group’s attempt to incorporate Maya experiences of violence into the commemorative activity in which we were all engaged. Personally, I felt that the display was unintentionally insensitive and inappropriate. Although I could not express the reasons for my feelings of unease at the time, in later reflections I came to realize that these piles of clothing—obvious representations of “the Maya”—were the only indigenous Guatemalans involved in the entire Memory March. Of course, they were not real. The representation of the experiences of indigenous Guatemalans during the conflict, which reached the level of genocide in several regions, as a prop for a photo opportunity struck me as an expression akin to a “pornography of violence” (Bourgois 2001), and moreover as a reminder of the lack of indigenous participation in the Memory Offensive—issues I take up further below.

After the interlude at Caja Lúdica’s altar, the march continued to the national plaza, where a large sound stage had been set up in front of the Metropolitan Cathedral. To the left of this stage, members of ODHAG had arranged large poster-board displays documenting the biographies of
several individuals who had worked for human rights and paid the ultimate price, including Bishop Gerardi. In the area immediately in front of the stage, a large rectangular space was covered in pine needles, with red carnations forming a border and the shape of a flower (see image). Along the outer edges of this space, photocopies of the portraits of desaparecidos were pasted on poster boards; participants who carried cloth banners covered in similar images laid their banners down alongside, while other marchers fastened their banners to the stage. During the speeches and musical acts that followed, the audience crowded around the edges of this temporary memorial area in order to see what was happening on stage. The best spots were reserved for the missing heroes and martyrs that we had gathered to commemorate; from any angle, the presence of their absence was visible to the spectators. The concert that followed included a wide variety of musical genres and continued the upbeat, triumphant “celebration of life” that speakers had called for; however, the unsmiling faces of the desaparecidos reminded me that the underlying cause for the event was to commemorate loss.

**Carnivalesque aesthetics and the forging of mnemonic community**

Despite being the hallmark of a ‘Memory Offensive,’ the H.I.J.O.S. march was far from militant. Rather, the Memory March was a festive occasion, evoking the carnivalesque atmosphere that Bakhtin described as being “ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives” (1968:12). Although the demands of the participants would no doubt be threatening to some, the medium they used to deliver their message was attractive and disarming, and I noticed bystanders joining the procession or stopping to watch with smiles on their faces. Most of the participants carried red carnations, which Anabella Acevado
has identified as a symbol of “Guatemala’s repressive past” (2011:494). Several people wore red H.I.J.O.S. t-shirts and bandanas, which were available for purchase at low cost before the march began, but the majority of participants wore everyday clothing without any political messages displayed. At least half of the participants were young, including dozens of children and teenagers who were probably too young to personally remember even the signing of the Peace Accords, much less the forced disappearances, assassinations, or massacres that plagued Guatemalans during the war. Many of these younger participants—members of Caja Lúdica—came dressed as clowns, or walked about on tall stilts. Bass drummers occupied the center of the march, pounding out spontaneous rhythms that many participants used as a rhythm for dancing. A group of young women, wearing t-shirts and tank tops that declared “We’re beautiful, we’re smart, and we’re anti-military” and that “Women’s bodies are not spoils of war,” danced to the drums while singing about sending Ríos Montt to jail.

Bakhtin held that carnivalesque atmospheres provide participants with a “temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” (1968:10). These brief periods were marked by both respite and upheaval, celebrations of ambiguity and change, and they “were the second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance” (Bakhtin 1968:4-11). They were also important sources of communitas, with the corresponding potential for political consciousness-raising and mobilization. The shared memories of participation in such events are potent material for the forging of group identity. Popular carnivals contrasted remarkably with the official celebrations sponsored and organized by the State,
which were precisely ordered and choreographed spectacles of military might. The rigidly defined protocols of military commendation and recognition were designed to uphold and fetishize the stability and immutability of the status quo, especially the archetypically hierarchical military.

Bakhtin described such official festivals as: “the triumph of a truth already established, the predominant truth that was put forward as eternal and indisputable. This is why the tone … was monolithically serious and why the element of laughter was alien to it” (Bakhtin 1968:9). Where the Memory Offensive drew on parody, the official celebrations demanded rigid formality. Where H.I.J.O.S. and their allies imagined alternative futures, the military vowed to protect the status quo. Altogether, the contrasts in these two events and the discourses they present for interpreting Guatemalan history and identity suggest that the official state celebrations are more genuinely invested in the past. Memory activism, despite the connotations inspired by its name, seems focused primarily on the future.

Publics, nations, and dilemmas of representation

The final juxtaposition I offer in this chapter concerns the different publics and corresponding nations imagined by Caja Lúdica, H.I.J.O.S., and to a lesser extent by the organizers of the official Army Day events. I draw from Michael Warner’s definition of “public” in this endeavor:

A public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself. It is autotellic: it exists only as the end for which books are published, shows broadcast, Web sites posted, speeches delivered, opinions produced. It exists by virtue of being addressed. (Warner 2002:50)
I also include Warner’s consideration of the dialogic character of public discourse, which reflects Bakhtin’s ideas as well:

A public is a social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse. ... No single text can create a public. Nor can a single voice, a single genre, or even a single medium. All are insufficient to create the kind of reflexivity that we call a public, since a public is understood to be an ongoing space of encounter for discourse. It is not texts themselves that create publics, but the concatenation of texts through time. Only when a previously existing discourse can be supposed, and a responding discourse be postulated, can a text address a public. (Warner 2002:62)

In Guatemala, discourses about historical memory always enter into such “concatenation of texts”; in my descriptions of the key events in this chapter, I have outlined the contexts and pre-existing discursive fields that have shaped the interventions of the actors, so that we may better understand the publics that these texts call into being and address.

First, I can offer a few comments on the public imagined and addressed by the State, in the context of the official Army Day celebrations. The Colom administration’s decision to cede public spaces to H.I.J.O.S. and hold official celebrations at a relatively isolated military base—and the Pérez Molina administration’s decision to uphold this policy as well, despite their significant ideological differences—represents an acknowledgement that the historical significance of the nation’s military is controversial. Pérez Molina’s promise, during the ceremony, that “The army’s permanence is guaranteed,” may be read as another example of hidden dialogicality: a response to the ongoing down-sizing of the military, of calls to withdraw soldiers from daily policing duties, or the more radical option—exemplified by Costa Rica—of disbanding the military altogether. However, the official meaning of June 30th will likely remain Army Day for the foreseeable future, despite the practical exclusion of the general public from the festivities. To an extent, the paring down of the
audience to the nation’s highest-ranking elites and diplomatic corps represents a poignant symbolic validation of H.I.J.O.S. leaders’ argument that the military is an instrument of the rich and powerful, rather than the people.

Second, in the case of the Memory Offensive, H.I.J.O.S. draws on traditional leftist sources of inspiration, and addresses its diverse intended audiences with a blend of confrontation—toward the intransigent military-state and the “chafas” who support it—and carnivalesque jubilation for participants and allies. The message that H.I.J.O.S. conveys in its writings, logos, slogans, graffiti, and other artworks is uncompromising and demanding, as attested in their controversial motto: “We don’t forget, we don’t forgive, and we won’t reconcile.” However, their approach—the aesthetics of their movement—is welcoming and engaging even for younger Guatemalans. The Memory Offensives are celebratory events, and their intention, as Ana Yolanda Contreras explains in her description of H.I.J.O.S.:

[is] to recuperate a memory that pertains … to those who have historically been relegated to the margins; … Those events and facts that the dominant group would prefer to remain forgotten, on the contrary, H.I.J.O.S. fights to preserve. (Contreras 2009:172)

Significantly, though its membership and base of operations remain limited primarily to Guatemala City, H.I.J.O.S. seeks to include and to represent the experiences of all Guatemalan victims of the war, a philosophy succinctly represented in another of the group’s slogans: “We are all children of

104 One of H.I.J.O.S.’ ongoing campaigns, primarily by way of internet social media, is to appropriate the term chafa, which loosely means “cheaply / poorly made” or “useless,” but also pejoratively refers (in Central America) to members or supporters of the military. H.I.J.O.S. calls on people to describe what “chafa” means to them, and features photos of people smiling with captions explaining why they are not chafa, for example: “I’m not chafa because I love my country, I love its people, and I search for justice” (H.I.J.O.S. 2011).
the same history.” However, there are limitations to the perceived demographic or ideological constituent of H.I.J.O.S.’ imagined public. As I noted above, the specific narratives evoked during the Memory March referred to a class-based view of the historical struggle in Guatemala; the specificity of the actors is left abstract, at the level of “the pueblos” and “wealthy creoles.” The discourse of indigenous rights is not explicitly rejected by H.I.J.O.S., but neither is it embraced; the Maya majority is simply ignored qua Maya, and encapsulated within the proletariat-pueblo dimension.

H.I.J.O.S. represents the sectors of the population who have been “relegated to the margins” (Contreras 2009:172), and the schematic template they offer corresponds in many ways to the interpretations of history offered by my Maya colleagues, especially in the crucial assignation of blame to the dominant sectors. Their view of historical memory as a resource for social change is inspiring to many Guatemalans, as evidenced by the popularity of their public events. However, their binary view of the dialectic of struggle, and their virtually exclusive focus the capital city, have restricted their discursive reach within the wider public—a circumstance most clearly demonstrated by the limitation of H.I.J.O.S.’ membership to urban ladinos. I suspect that many of the young Maya intellectuals I worked with would not have felt adequately represented in the events and discourses that unfolded during the Memory March. The nation imagined by H.I.J.O.S., most clearly visible in their activist practices and rhetoric, is no more pluralist than the present-day Guatemala. In short, their movement reproduces the earlier struggles between leftist revolutionaries and early indigenous rights campaigners, which led to fractures within and between different revolutionary fronts during the armed conflict (Hale 2006:100-101; Cojtí 1997).
Third, Caja Lúdica’s memory activist practices clearly draw on indigenous sources of inspiration. *Contrahuella* follows close readings of the *Popol Wuj*, the *Rabinal Achi’,* and other more contemporary examples of Maya dramatic performances and spiritual practices (Otzoy 1999; Escobar 2013). The Maya poet Rosa Chávez was also involved for several years, lending her talents to the portrayal of the lead female role in the performance. *Contrahuella* sought to offer catharsis by placing the senseless violence of the past into a meaningful frame of reference. The performance clearly had an impact on the audience members around me, spanning every age, class, and ethnicity. Significantly, the play accomplished this without absolving the perpetrators of their guilt.

On the other hand, I noted my critical interpretation of the “altar” produced by Caja Lúdica during the Memory March, which I felt was an inappropriate appropriation of Maya experiences. This may be an unfairly harsh reading; the *intention* of the altar, as a speaker pointed out, was to dignify the life and memory of the departed, and the incorporation of symbols of Maya peoples into the event via the altar contrasted with the focus on urban experiences of the armed conflict throughout the rest of the March: the faces on banners and posters of *desaparecidos* were almost invariably ladino, unlike the majority of victims of the violence. Maya experiences of the internal armed conflict provide a rich semiotic field from which memory activists often draw inspiration. The strategy of memory activism is to make experiences of the past come alive, become visceral, and similarly to *testimonio*, the most evocative images are often the most convincing. At other times, memory activism provides a measure of catharsis to participants, for example by providing a meaningful context for remembering and honoring the dead: the space reserved for the banners
featuring the faces of loved ones at the center of the national plaza during the Memory Offensive, or the shared act of burning candles at the closure of *Contrahuella*.

The Guatemalan publics that are brought into being by the practices of memory activism described in this chapter are far more committed to social reform than the status quo suggests. It remains to be seen whether groups like H.I.J.O.S. and Caja Lúdica will be able to extend their influence and effect change on a national scale—for example, by changing the meaning of June 30th at a more popular level, if not officially. On the other hand, recent convictions of officials and perpetrators of human rights violations during the armed conflict are signs that the circumstances of debating the past have shifted in historic ways. It is difficult to imagine that these judicial processes have not been supported, informally as well as in more tangible ways, through the practices of memory activists. In the vision of Guatemalan nationhood proposed by H.I.J.O.S. and Caja Lúdica, the promise of living together “under the same history” would be realized partly through the truth-making practices of law and justice. The groups also recognize the necessity of drawing on more diverse experiences of the conflict to arrive at the truth—Caja Lúdica, especially, has shown a willingness to incorporate more indigenous perspectives and experiences. Ultimately, the projects of social justice promoted by memory activists will require the participation of broader segments of the population, and in particular on building alliances with and including Maya citizens.
“Alterity is thus swallowed in the process of writing history, for it posits itself as the point of necessary departure and death in order to enable history to be further written. But is it possible to write a history which includes alterity—otherness, memory, even—without ‘cannibalizing’ the Other, or radicalizing differences?” (Fabri 1995)

Chapter 8: Institutional Commemoration: New Cartographies of History

“In the 1970s, the guerrilla entered in the highlands and the State responded with repression, massacring entire communities, above all the indigenous, causing throughout the country more than 200,000 dead and disappeared.” (IIARS 2007:123-124)

“The study of the country’s recent history is urgent, especially the period of the war, as the effects of that disaster … have made Guatemala a society that is in the majority indifferent, untrusting, and passive before the inequality and oppression. These days violence forms everyday life, and according to some experts this has been generated in large part by the terrorism that the State of Guatemala practiced during 36 years of war…” (Cosmovisión 2010:5)

“When one begins to think about the history of our people, to mind come various events, stories, images, places, cities, dates, and endless other facts that are like the thin, multicolored threads that have been woven into the great tapestry of culture that is the life of the Maya people. … To whom is it interesting, for example, to know how the scientists who perfected the Maya calendar worked, and what they spoke about? … [This book] tries to discover that history in order to … resume the protection of our ancestral lands, our natural resources and our cultural practices.” (Domingo López 2010:9; emphasis original)

The quotes reproduced above—drawn from textbooks published in recent years—present the history of Guatemala from the perspectives of indigenous citizens to a greater degree than ever achieved in previous generations. These books are intended to fill the gaps in history education within the National Base Curriculum, the guidelines established by the Ministry of Education for every school—public and private—in the country. In some cases, education reformers are working directly with the Ministry to meet expectations and influence policy about the next round of curriculum updates. Others have chosen to bypass bureaucracy and work directly with students and
teachers. The overall impact of new curricular materials remains to be seen, and the publishers and authors still face many obstacles in their campaigns to teach this difficult, controversial history to children and the wider public; yet the very possibility of such perspectives being published—and contending for nation-wide adoption in schools—is a remarkable development in itself, an important sign of the broader shifts in epistemic authority that accompanied the end of the armed conflict and a result of the earlier battles for Mayan language rights.

In this chapter I examine the production strategies and the narrative contents of several new textbook projects, as well as new forms of museum exhibitions. These narratives have enjoyed varying levels of support and legitimation from the state. By comparing these new institutionalized forms of commemoration with the previous examples (described in chapters 3 and 4), I present another means of evaluating the expanding claims to epistemic authority by Mayas and memory activists. I draw on interviews with authors and editorial teams, and careful attention to the narratives conveyed in their published and drafted texts, in order to examine the differences between their proposals, previous official narratives, and my research participants’ own understandings of history. These alternative visions of Guatemala’s past may offer us a glimpse of Guatemala’s future.

Textbook cases II: The emergence of Maya authorship

Kaqchikela’ and the difficulties of publishing in Guatemala

During each of my visits to Guatemala from 2006-2011, I was able to attend the International Book Fair of Guatemala (FILGUA), an important trade show held on the cusp of July and August each year in the capital’s opulent and under-utilized Parque de la Industria exposition
space. Since its inauguration in 2000, FILGUA has grown into an annual week-long affair that draws every major publisher and bookseller in Guatemala, as well as important regional publishers like Mexico’s Fondo de la Cultura Económica, the Cuban Book Institute, and U.S.-based McGraw Hill Financial. FILGUA attracts Guatemala’s upper-middle class, charging a modest entrance fee and featuring food and drink vendors from the pricier fast food chains that cater to people with disposable income—including wine and espresso bars in the 2011 edition. However, for the small segment of Guatemalans with the income and interest for purchasing books, the discounted prices and convenience of having all of the vendors under a single roof make the event very popular: each year that I attended, the number of participating vendors appeared to grow, and by 2011 the primary exposition was moved into a larger space and individual book presentations and special events were held throughout the Parque in satellite buildings. My colleagues at Cholsamaj reported that their book sales had increased over time, and by 2010 they finally recouped enough profits to make up for the cost of participating. More mainstream presses such as F & G Editores maintained a steady stream of customers, and Guatemala’s three largest booksellers—Piedra Santa, Artemis Edinter and Sophos—leased multiple booths in order to recreate their entire store inventories. FILGUA also featured special events for young children and groups of visiting students from schools around the capital city, including puppet shows and live musical performances. In 2012, FILGUA organizers recorded over 32,000 visitors and over 400 special events, including presentations and educational activities (FILGUA 2013).

FILGUA has also become a space for the Guatemalan intelligentsia to mingle and browse the annual offerings of the country’s small but enthusiastic publishers. For my purposes, FILGUA
provided a convenient opportunity to meet the personnel in each of Guatemala’s publishing houses and to stay abreast of what titles they had published in the preceding year, as well as browsing back catalogs of volumes that are rarely available in bookstores. Virtually every book published during the preceding year will be ‘presented’ again at FILGUA, and these book presentations invariably include commentary from the authors and small panels of academic experts. Often, publishers will offer free copies of the text to the audience.

During the 2008 FILGUA, I attended the presentation of a new book published by Editorial Cholsamaj titled *Kaqchikela*: *Episodios de la Nación Kaqchikel* (Episodes of the Kaqchikel Nation). This textbook, with glossy full-color illustrations and photographs, was co-written by Guillermo Paz Cárcamo, a historian whose wide-ranging scholarship has extended from the agrarian reforms to the question of whether Tecún Umán really existed, and Saqilk’u’x Ajpwaq, who works regularly with Cholsamaj as an editor and copywriter of texts. *Kaqchikela* represented the culmination of a collaborative effort to combine Paz Cárcamo’s previous research\(^\text{105}\) with Ajpwaq’s “pedagogical and Maya cultural mediation” in order to create a textbook suitable for late primary and early secondary-level children “in Guatemala and other parts of the world” (Paz & Ajpwaq 2008). The plans to create *Kaqchikela* were underway in 2007 when I first met with Cholsamaj’s Director, Ulmil Joel Mejía. As late as 2009 the editorial team still hoped that it would be the first in a series of textbooks introducing other ‘heroes of the Maya nations,’ figures who were “hidden during the last five

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\(^{105}\) Specifically, the text draws from Paz Cárcamo’s work on the history and archaeology of the Kaqchikel site of Mixco Viejo or Chwa Nima Ab’aj (Paz & Ajpwaq 2008).
centuries of national history” (Paz & Ajpwaq 2008). Edgar Esquit was also familiar with these plans for Maya-centric textbooks, and he described their intended impact:

These representations can be synthesized as the construction of a historical base, which recognizes the principles that unite the actions and knowledge of the ancient Maya with those that nourish the contemporary Maya. By examining these sorts of ancient texts as well as works by archaeologists, anthropologists, linguists, and historians, Mayanists try to rebuild a version of their past that specifies the particularity or essentiality of Maya culture. (Esquit 2011:200)

However, these plans were suspended indefinitely following the global economic crisis in 2008. Foreign aid for indigenous education projects dried up, and Cholsamaj’s publishing schedule slowed dramatically.

24: Ulmil Mejía, Cholsamaj’s director, sketched this representation of the various “parts” of Cholsamaj, illustrating the many issues that he and his coworkers have to balance.
I saw the effects of the funding crisis in the daily labor at Cholsamaj, and it was often at the center of conversations between my colleagues. One of the possibilities for increasing revenue was to find a way to sell books directly to customers in the United States—I mentioned that at the very least, there must be several dozen academics who would love to have easier access to Cholsamaj’s publications. During one of my discussions with Ulmil Mejía, he took a post-it note and began sketching a representation of the overall dilemma that Cholsamaj faced on a regular basis, and how recent events had exacerbated the situation. In the figure above, the large oval (#1) corresponds to the Editorial, the primary component of Cholsamaj.¹⁰⁶ Even within this section, there are decisions that reflect the economic realities of publishing. #2 represents a continuum or scale, in which some services or books are “100% economic,” represented by the “E” to the left; examples of this include posters prepared for different companies, which typically have little to do with politics or rights but nonetheless bring in revenue to keep the organization running. At the opposite end are books and services that are “100% ideological,” things that “promote the Maya Movement,” represented by the “MM.” The profitability of these books is typically very low—many copies have to be donated to the agencies that helped fund their production, and these as well as additional copies are usually given away to communities, NGOs, and political representatives. The remaining copies are distributed to bookshops that carry Cholsamaj’s production line, yet due to the low purchasing power of readers in Guatemala, a large portion of stock usually ends up in long-term storage.

¹⁰⁶ Technically, the Editorial is one component of a larger Fundación Cholsamaj, which has its own board of executives. The larger foundation has goals of supporting original research and “civic-political education,” though given the financial situation many of these initiatives remain on the back burner. Most of the day-to-day operations of Cholsamaj—and the labor that has earned the group a high reputation in Guatemala—are constituted in the practices of the Editorial.
Ulmil explained that “nobody joined Cholsamaj in search of wealth, [because] publishing and bookselling are simply not profitable in Guatemala.” Rather, they were all driven by their desire to help “systematize” and share Maya culture through the editorial process. Ulmil pointed out that in reality any given activity is somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, so there is balance in their work—for example, despite the potential financial boost of preparing campaign posters for political parties, Cholsamaj rejected these clients in order to remain above the fray of electoral politics; most of the editorial team members were also skeptical that any of the mainstream political parties were genuinely concerned with the issues that mattered to indigenous communities. However, Ulmil concluded that economics (#3) ultimately trumps ideology: if the Editorial cannot pay its bills, it can no longer function at all.

For many years, Cholsamaj focused on publishing books and left the distribution and sales to other organizations; in fact, Ulmil explained that whenever he or his coworkers received invitations to participate in conferences and workshops, they were more likely to attend if they were not expected to bring books: the hassle of transporting boxes and managing sales was not worthwhile (lit., “no vale la pena”). As he put it, their strengths were in editorial practices and in helping to articulate the discourses of the Maya movement—they simply did not have the “spirit of salespeople.” However, item #4 illustrates how this led to the recent crisis at the time of my fieldwork: Cholsamaj had “put most of its eggs in one big basket,” namely in the bookstore Nawal Wuj just a couple of blocks down the street. The relationship between the two groups, which were once virtually united, suffered a profound breakdown shortly before I arrived in the capital for my fieldwork. The first task I was given as Cholsamaj’s interim webmaster was to post comunicados
clarifying that Nawal Wuj and its director were not affiliated with Cholsamaj.\footnote{http://cholsamaj.org/comunicados.php; the director of Nawal Wuj, Raxché Demetrio Rodríguez Guaján, was formerly a member of Cholsamaj; by the time I ended fieldwork, Nawal Wuj was publishing its own titles in a style that appeared very similar to Cholsamaj’s work, and many foreign (U.S.) anthropologists were unaware that the two organizations were distinct, e.g., referring to Nawal Wuj as Cholsamaj. Despite the financial burdens and complexity derived from this separation, Ulmil Mejía remarked that competition was a sign of progress, and that having two Maya-centric publishing houses was better than one. Only time will tell whether either press will survive without greater funding.} More immediately, it meant that most of Cholsamaj’s stock of inventory was lost to a competitor and they would have to develop new distribution channels. Item #5 refers to one possibility that we discussed: “G” for Google Books, which already had many of Cholsamaj’s most popular publications scanned and accessible for previewing. The cost and complexity of international shipping put a damper in these plans, but Ulmil expressed hope that e-books might become a revenue stream in the future.

Although Editorial Cholsamaj owns an important and expensive component in the means of production—a Computer-to-Plate printing machine—and has some savings from the various donations it has gathered over the years, the operating budget was stretched to the limit during my time there; the editorial staff often went without pay for months on end. My time with the publishing house led me to realize how important bilateral aid funding has been for much of the seminal production by Maya intellectuals in the past generation. It also taught me how thrifty my colleagues had been to accomplish so much labor with so little funding, and how tightly bound are the several organizations that collaborate on indigenous rights issues. Ulmil illustrated this point by selecting a book at random from his bookshelf and pointing out the various logos printed on the back: not only the logo of Cholsamaj, but also CIRMA and FLACSO—two important social science
research institutions—and the logos of the Dutch and German bilateral aid agencies. He added that two branches of the Guatemalan government also chipped in some funds for the cost of printing this title. In short, any publication requires the commitment and support of an entire network of people and institutions. Although this crucial means of knowledge production has now been opened to indigenous intellectuals, its future remains in jeopardy as long as the primary intended audience—Maya readers—remain unable to afford the time or money needed to read their books.

**Epistemic Shifts to Maya History**

For now, *Kaqchikela’* remains the only published volume in Cholsamaj’s planned series of textbooks on Maya history. However, during the 2010 FILGUA I learned that Editorial Saqil Tzij (lit., “clear words”), a publishing outfit affiliated with the Catholic La Salle organization, had just produced a new textbook specifically on Maya history. Like Cholsamaj, Editorial Saqil Tzij has established a very recognizable style for their publications, including the use of Maya numerals alongside Arabic and occasional inclusions of Mayan language, typically K’iche’ or Kaqchikel. For example, title pages often include Mayan translations or introductory phrases, as do chapter headings in several volumes, while the rest of the content is written in Spanish. However, whereas Cholsamaj produces books of diverse shapes and sizes, Saqil Tzij’s volumes are virtually identical in format: they are roughly 8.5 x 11 inches and are printed in greyscale, with full-color bindings. Their books commonly include distinctive hand-drawn images depicting Maya people and objects—for example, classical Maya architecture and the glyphs representing the days in the ceremonial calendar.
I have collected several of Saqil Tzij’s publications, including their influential *Pedagogía Maya* (Recanjo Mendoza & Recancoj Mendoza 2002), as well as their “Introduction to Anthropology,” *Y fueron formados* (Monterroso et al. 1999), which creatively combines Darwinian evolutionary theory and cultural relativism with ideas from the *Popol Wuj* and Maya cosmology. Throughout these texts, the narrative point of view is explicitly Maya: the authors discuss “our language” in reference to Mayan languages, and they critique colonialism and capitalism for their negative effects on indigenous cultures. The 2010 volume, *Historia del pueblo maya*, principally authored by Daniel Domingo López, furthers the group’s support for Maya autonomy and political organization. At 115 pages of text, with a few small photographs interspersed throughout, the book provides a higher word count than most of the textbooks published by mainstream presses with the backing of the Ministry of Education (such as the examples reviewed in chapter 4). As the excerpt at the beginning of the chapter demonstrated, the intended objectives of the text are not simply to provide historical information for its own (academic) sake, but to provide deeper understanding of “the causes of the situation in which we live, in order to then be able to analytically and consciously have an impact on it” (Domingo 2010:5).

*Historia del pueblo maya* is divided equally into 4 chapters: 1) Origin and constitution of the Maya pueblos; 2) Discovery or invasion?; 3) Spanish colonization; and 4) The new colonialism (Domingo 2010). Compared to the Guatemalan history textbooks described in chapter 4, the scope of *Historia* is more extensive in both temporal directions, covering pre-contact indigenous social development from hunter-gatherer groups of 12,000 B.C. through the Spanish invasion, and ending with an overview of the internal armed conflict and the current challenges of establishing a
pluricultural state. There are no extraneous descriptions of nationalist symbols, nor maps of the Central American region (aside from one illustrating the extent of the “Maya territory” throughout Mesoamerica), nor does the book attempt to describe the makeup of the family; for these reasons, it probably would not meet the current curricular standards for use as a primary textbook. However, for teachers who adopt it as an additional source material, Historia del pueblo maya makes a strong case for reversing the previous standard of excluding indigenous perspectives. By focusing on the experiences of Mayas—and thus on the roles that colonialism, forced labor, land theft, and racism have played in history—the text effectively conveys the enormous challenges that these Guatemalans have faced and overcome. Whereas the official narratives available to earlier generations—and still reproduced today in the National History Museum—present Guatemala’s past as a triumph of liberalism and a march of progress despite the backwardness of the indigenous population, this Historia contextualizes Guatemala’s recent and ongoing violence as the bitter legacy of exclusion and inequality. Nonetheless, like the narratives offered by my research participants, Domingo argues that the survival of indigenous culture through five centuries of oppression gives hope for the future, and that the Peace Accords brought an opportunity to finally construct a “democratic, equal, just, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and pluricultural” society (2010:108). By rejecting the nation’s past as it is usually portrayed, the narrative reverses the trajectory of progress in order to present the future as more promising, a potential golden era.

Although the book could potentially serve as a textbook for national history—in the sense that the history of the Maya is Guatemalan history, to a large if conventionally unrecognized extent—it is explicitly framed as belonging and being addressed to an indigenous audience. This is
not only made apparent in the obvious editorial decisions, such as the title, the inclusion of Mayan words, and explicit references to “our” Maya ancestors in contrast to “European” Others. The narrative also displays signs that it was thoroughly influenced by the voices of preceding texts and ‘conventional’ interpretations of history, though these are not visibly present—in other words, like the historical memories shared by my colleagues (described in chapter 5), *Historia del pueblo maya* illustrates “hidden dialogicality” between its authors and other ‘speakers’ such as those books we reviewed in previous chapters (Bakhtin 1984:197; Wertsch 2002:91).

Notably, the influential yet absent voices correspond to both Eurocentric, conventional representations of Guatemala as a Ladino-criollo nationalist project as well as to what we might call ‘fundamentalist’ Mayacentric perspectives that would reject all European influences as inauthentic corruptions. For example, the text begins to address the origins of the Maya by calling on both ancient Maya literature as well as 20th century anthropological research. Domingo notes that the ancient texts claimed that the Maya originated “in the East, specifically in Tulán, as the origin city… Oriente [East] and Tulan, then, are two keywords for explaining the origin of the Maya people, from a historical perspective that is very much our own” (Domingo 2010:10). In the very next paragraph, Domingo describes the Behring Strait theory of migration, referencing scientists such as Alex Hrdlicka, who “formulated the theory that the arrival of man [in the Americas] proceeded from Asia,” and concluding with more recent research on multiple migration waves which “is the theory most accepted these days” (Domingo 2010:10). This maneuver presents the *Popol Wuj* and biological anthropological research as being in agreement on the fundamental idea that Mayas originated in “the East,” which is redefined not simply as a cardinal direction but as a *place.*
reflecting Anglo-American conventions of dividing the globe and thus glossing *Oriente* in a manner more akin to “Orient” than “East.”

Domingo rejects any simplistic insistence that scientific theories of ancient migration are incompatible with the creation myths presented in indigenous cosmology. Instead, his narrative strategically positions scientific discourses as buttressing the authority of the ancient texts. Excerpts from the *Popol Wuj*, *Chilam Balam* and other colonial-era records of Maya narrative are interspersed throughout the textbook, as are references and quotations from various foreign “experts” whose writings complement the vision of the world expressed through Maya cosmology—for example, Rodolfo Stavenhagen on the compatibility of indigenous rights with democratic nationhood, and Raphael Girard’s note that “On the level of scientific analysis, the mythology of the *Popol Wuj* is susceptible to multiple understandings. History, ethnography, religion, cosmology, theology, ritualism, science, society, economy, symbols, material culture, etc.” (in Domingo 2010:25; emphasis original). This interweaving of traditional / indigenous and scientific / modern forms of knowledge appears quite intentional and rather masterfully written.

After presenting additional evidence of the biological, linguistic, and cultural links between Mayas and Asia, Domingo notes that when the first migrants arrived in the Americas as early as 40,000 years ago, “The culture and civilization of the Maya as such did not yet exist. They conceived / gestated it” (2010:11). He notes through a citation that “Many traditions are invented

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108 Including “the existence of common last names between Mayas and Asians such as Yat, Chen, Lux, Pu, Chan, etc.” (Domingo 2010:11)
and reinvented over the length of history, with the intention of maintaining the potentiality of identity and the cohesion of communal elements” (in Domingo 2010:11). Thus a very defensible position is established for both embracing the idea that Mayas originally migrated to the Americas from elsewhere, while acknowledging that through the extensive historical processes over the intervening dozens of millennia they have established a unique claim to their lands and to the cultural practices that constitute their collectivity as a people. This argument in the opening pages of the volume anticipates and deflects several critiques commonly launched against Maya rights activism: that the Maya were not really indigenous owing to their presumed migration from Asia, that their cultural identity is a recent invention driven by political or economic machinations, and that claims to cultural uniqueness or difference are a setback for the nation’s modern development.

Domingo turns these arguments on their head by asserting that, to the best of our collective human knowledge, all traditions are fluid and dynamic, and the future development of Guatemala will depend on the capacity of all citizens to adapt and learn to embrace the ideas that indigenous peoples have recognized all along. Indeed he concludes the textbook by referring to the Maya organizations that clamored for influence over the Peace Accords, despite being excluded in any formal sense—another mark of resistance to the longstanding colonial shape of power in Guatemala:

As of the Accords, the Maya people have demonstrated through their work and commitment—together with the Garífuna and Xinka peoples—that effectively the indigenous peoples are the ones who are most interested in peace and the recuperation of a life of equilibrium and harmony in Guatemala as a State. (Domingo 2010:109)

All things considered, Historia del pueblo maya does not attempt to stand in as a historical narrative for all Guatemalans, and it likely would alienate many readers who refuse to interpret the Spanish
Arrival / Discovery / Invasion as “one of the most shameful and degrading pages in the history of humanity” (Domingo 2010:57). However, the text serves effectively as a means of sparking dialogue and debate—as a counter to the glorification of Columbus and Alvarado, and a powerful reminder of the rising epistemic authority of alternative claims to knowledge about the national past.

**Reconciling competing histories: Comparing two approaches**

**Guatemala: Never Again as curriculum**

In addition to publications by Cholsamaj and Saqil Tzij that help to balance historical scholarship by providing Maya perspectives, there have recently been attempts to construct national historical narratives that can serve for *all* Guatemalans. One project has been under development by ODHAG, the team of researchers who prepared the Catholic Church’s REMHI truth commission report. In May of 2011, I met with “Lupe,” a member of ODHAG’s pedagogical development team, to learn more about their campaign. Over a decade ago, ODHAG prepared a “popularized” version of the REMHI report (2000), featuring hand-drawn illustrations by Alfredo Burgos (see image 21, in chapter 5), an artist who also worked with the Myrna Mack Foundation to prepare a popularized version of the CEH report (2002). The format of these popular editions is somewhere between a comic book and a textbook, with much of the content presented as dialogue between characters, while boxes on the side provide additional details. As Lupe explained to me, these texts were designed to be used in a workshop setting. They allow a coordinator, who may be the only literate participant, to read the text while others observe the accompanying images. ODHAG’s popularized report includes advice for leading discussions, as well as questions such as “How does it
serve us to remember the past?” with accompanying comments on the meaning of Memoria Colectiva (ODHAG 2000:182). Lupe told me that their new history textbooks would be similar to this text, as components of the REMHI project’s final phase, of “returning to society all that we have been told.”

When I met with Lupe in 2011, she told me that ODHAG’s textbook project was nearing the final stages of preparation for use in schools, a collaborative project with the National Program for Reparations (PNR)—a government institution—under the guidance of the Ministry of Education. She pointed out that the PNR was providing the funds for the publication, and thus if the Ministry did not approve the project it could not be written off as a financial decision but would be “because they don’t want it” to be published. However, she was optimistic about their campaign’s progress, and told me that the Ministry had supported their efforts to include a discussion of the armed conflict. Indeed, “their only comment so far” had been to include “more description of the historical causes and origins of the conflict,” in addition to the details that ODHAG and PNR had already provided about the consequences and effects of the violence. Lupe hoped that the project would be expedited and approved in advance of the national elections, which were already expected to bring former General Otto Pérez Molina into power. Her feeling was that Pérez’s right-wing party would not favor more extensive discussion of the internal conflict, much less from the perspective of the communities who suffered the greatest burdens of the violence.

109 In this instance, collective memory is equated with history and historical memory; the authors commented that “When history is very painful, many recommend forgetting. This means to begin from zero, without anything, to leave ourselves without the possibility of learning from our mistakes and from the good that we accomplished. … It is important to recuperate historical memory in order to avoid that evil repeats itself” (ODHAG 2000:182).
Whatever the outcome, she was certain that ODHAG would continue to push for inclusion of the more recent history in school curricula because “it is part of the legacy of Monseñor Gerardi, for which he gave his life.”

Altogether, ODHAG’s experience demonstrated the advantages and risks of working hand-in-hand with government agencies to accomplish curricular reforms. On the one hand, the PNR was established primarily to assist refugees and survivors after the Peace Accords, thus the personnel of that institution were likely sympathetic to the goals of memory activists to develop a curriculum that addressed the periods of history that have typically been excluded from schools. Moreover, PNR controlled a budget that could facilitate the actual publication of the textbooks. On the other hand, Lupe’s commentary revealed the uncertainty surrounding the actual approval of their project by the Ministry of Education. Without the Ministry’s official accreditation, the materials could only be adopted as extra texts at the discretion of individual teachers. This conflicted with ODHAG’s goals of having the textbooks contend for adoption at a nation-wide level, with the backing of the State and the symbolic and material support that this would bring. The rush to finalize the project before the election also illustrated the mercurial nature of politics in Guatemala, where each presidential administration typically involves a changing of ministerial appointments across the board, and uncompleted projects may be scrapped altogether or reformed to meet the agenda of the new ruling party.

*Rescuing Our Memory: A collaboration between memory activists*

In contrast to ODHAG’s approach, the group Equipo Cosmovisión eschewed government alliances and bureaucracy, preferring instead the strategy of working directly with teachers and
students in schools across the country. They developed a short discussion guide to accompany the photography of Jonathan “Jonás” Moller and Derrill Bazzy, presented in the book *Rescatando Nuestra Memoria* (2009). The guide was originally prepared by Cosmovisión’s coordinators, Sergio López and Claudia Sánchez, young memory activists who informed me that they were alumni of USAC’s anthropology program. Final revisions were made by Moller along with Francisco Sánchez, a member of H.I.J.O.S., and Rubén Mendoza, a member of PRODESSA (the La Salle-sponsored project behind Editorial Saqil Tzij). The guide thus represented a collaborative product by several memory activist organizations, expanding on photography that presented the experiences of Mayas affected by the armed conflict—especially the Communities of Population in Resistance (CPRs) during their time in refuge. Moller and Bazzy also photographed the processes of exhumation of mass graves by FAFG, and the subsequent reburial ceremonies by the surviving community and family members (2009; Moller 2004).

Similar to the popularized versions of the truth commission reports, Cosmovisión’s *Guía Educativa* is intended to be used by adults as well as children. Its explicit function is the “socialization” of Moller and Bazzy’s book, reflecting the widespread phenomenon of adult & lifelong education through “capacity-building workshops” which have become increasingly familiar in rural communities following the proliferation of NGOs in the past generation. At less than 40 pages, the guide is printed on glossy, high-weight paper abundant with black-and-white photography; thus it is stylistically similar to the book it is meant to augment and accompany, though likely less expensive to print than the 196-page glossy photo book. For the final publication of the guide, Cosmovisión benefited from the support of DED, the German Service for Social-
Technical Cooperation. However, Moller explained that the initial funding to get the project underway began with “repeatedly hitting the pavement in Guate and knocking on doors and getting endorsements and commitments and funding from numerous offices,” which included small grants “from the Soros Foundation, the Danielle Agostino Foundation, private donations through Rights Action, and my [own] savings.” Moller’s impetus for spearheading the project came from the idea of popularizing his first book, Our Culture is Our Resistance (2004), producing “something simple and self-produced to give back to communities and families,” in recognition of his “use of and success with fotos I’d taken in that context, [and the] belief in the importance of historical memory and truth.” When I first met Jonás Moller at an Amnesty International event in St. Louis in 2008, the proceeds from sales of his book were being channeled into the preparation of materials for the later (2009) volume and the accompanying educational guide. The same arrangement was set in place for the proceeds from his second book when it was presented at FILGUA in 2009.

Moller and Bazzy’s book of photography is not organized into chapters. Rather, the contents are wide-ranging, including essays by social scientists and activist-intellectuals as well as excerpts from the CEH report, and the lack of an overarching narrative allows readers to open the book on any page and begin reading and viewing the powerful photographs. In contrast, Cosmovisión’s accompanying educational guide is organized into four thematic sections, each of which presents a straightforward narrative description of the corresponding phase of the violence. Each section ends with a list of discussion questions and recommended pedagogical activities: these “strategies for action” prompt readers to consult the photographs and essays in Moller & Bazzy’s volume and to reflect on them and discuss their reactions. For example, the first exercise in the guide prompts:
Carefully read the essay … by Irma Alicia Velásquez Nimatuj, pages 175-77 of the book… and then identify expressions of racism or discrimination against indigenous groups in your daily context (family, neighborhood, community, groups of friends, work companions, etc.).

(Cosmovisión 2010:15)

The corresponding essay by Dr. Velásquez discusses the rise of indigenous rights activism in the past 30-40 years, and how Maya actors are now influential in national policy-making despite the persistent low levels of development in rural communities. She remarks that “Today, in 2009, the history of this small country could not be written without the presence of the Maya peoples as actors and protagonists of its past, constructors of its present and visionaries of its future” (Moller & Bazzy 2009:175). She presents various statistical measures of the inequality suffered by rural and indigenous citizens and argues that “the war, formally, ended in 1996 but it continues killing Mayas” (Moller & Bazzy 2009:177).

Altogether, Equipo Cosmovisión’s educational guide presents a fairly conventional left-wing interpretation of history, combined with the indigenous rights activism of the well-organized CPRs. Cosmovisión’s project is not intended to provide a complete account of Guatemalan history—their narrative begins in 1492 with the arrival of the Spanish, but only to explain the context for inequality and discrimination that enabled the violence of the civil conflict to reach such heights. Rather, their intentions are to fill in the details about the period most often ignored in historical curriculum. As such, the educational guide works as intended, as a secondary resource to be adopted by individual teachers or schools. In a twist that even Moller did not expect, the guide was granted accreditation by the Ministry of Education in late 2013, which means that Cosmovisión and other NGOs who use the materials now have “license to work in any and pretty much all public schools in the country” (Moller, personal communication 2014). The success of the campaign for the
Ministry’s approval is due to the perseverance of education reformers, and ultimately a reflection of the rising agreement over the necessity of teaching students about the country’s recent history.

Reimagining the role of museums

*Museums of memory & community museums*

Just as the contents of textbooks are being debated by more diverse actors than in the past, so are public museum exhibitions being (re)developed to tell new stories about history—including especially the internal armed conflict. In May 2011, I met with the then-Director of Museums and Cultural Centers within the Ministry of Culture and Sports (MCD), Fernando Moscoso Möller. Originally trained as an archaeologist, in 1992 Moscoso began to use his knowledge of excavation practices to help uncover the material remains of victims of the massacres in highland Maya communities. He became a founding member and president of the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation (FAFG), an organization that has carried out nearly two thousand exhumations of victims of the violence, as well as being “the first NGO that collected testimonies in
a systematic form.” Moscoso later earned a licenciatura from USAC’s School of History, writing his thesis on the development of forensic archaeology (Moscoso 1999), and was awarded a Fulbright to complete an M.A. in Latin American Studies at Stanford University, where he wrote a thesis on “museums of memory” as tools for peace-building in post-conflict countries. Upon his return to Guatemala, he became the director of the National Museum of Archaeology & Ethnology, the flagship of Guatemala’s national museums, and he helped to organize the Central American and Guatemalan Networks of Museums.

Alongside his public service, Moscoso created an NGO called Historia para la Paz (lit., “History for the Peace”) in order to attempt to meet the challenges of creating museums of memory in Guatemala. Among their projects was the creation of a community museum in Panzós, Alta Verapaz:

It’s a community that the CEH considered emblematic for the type of violence that occurred there during the internal armed conflict. This was the site of the first collective and public massacre, because it was carried out in the central plaza of the community, following a protest soliciting land from the government. The army shot into the crowd and 35 people died there, and others later as a result of their wounds... [Our NGO] created a museum of

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110 The team conducted standardized interviews before and during exhumations, designed to gather information about the “osteological biography” of the individuals they expected to recover (Sanford 2003:32). Details such as height, shoe size, and whether the person experienced any broken bones or other physical trauma could prove decisive in the later process of identification. The FAFG also collected information about victims’ participation in “groups that worked for the benefit of the community,” such as peasant cooperatives or religious organizations, as these were often viewed as subversive activities by military officials (Moscoso Möller 1999: 137). Finally, survivors and witnesses were interviewed about the events surrounding the murder or disappearance of their loves ones—questions such as “Was the person threatened a short time before the event?” and “Who were the people that committed the aggression or the massacre (name, institution, rank or responsibility)?” (Moscoso Möller 1999:141). This information, along with the results of excavations and laboratory analysis, would be incorporated into the final reports prepared by FAFG for judicial processes underway, as well as for redistribution to the community in the form of a workshop and/or low-literacy monographs (Sanford 2003:36).
memory in Panzós, a commemorative monument as well, baptizing a street as the “Calle de la Paz,” and other projects: commemorative plaques in some communities, workshops for training multiple persons; … so they could recuperate their historical memory and create their own databases [of memories].

The Panzós museum enjoyed early successes and built enthusiasm, but Moscoso lamented that the project ultimately fell victim to local politics and the overall lack of funding that plagues many non-profit endeavors in Guatemala:

Sadly, [although] the project is now in the hands of the community, it hasn’t had much financial success. They continued working on a voluntary basis in the museum but, little by little, perhaps because of the fundamental economic necessities … they haven’t been able to continue the museum. And this situation was exploited by the mayor, who is of the FRG, the party of General Ríos Montt. He dismantled the museum and put everything in storage and got rid of the space. Now the museum is dismantled, there isn’t yet any possibility to re-open it. … [T]his means that for our strategy, it wasn’t sufficient to give training and try to raise people’s consciousness about the importance [of history]. … Obviously, it’s not enough, according to our experience in Panzós. There must also be an economic support, at least for a long enough time for the museum to stabilize and not have to close its doors because of a lack of salaries for the people who administer and curate it.

Moscoso referred to a dramatic change in the funding landscape between the 1990s and today. Before, in the international aid boom following the Peace Accords, “dozens” of community museums seemed to open overnight with support from foreign donor agencies. Now, even the most acclaimed examples of the remaining museums—including the Museums in Rabinal Achí and Río Negro—have fallen on hard times and are open only by appointment, typically for foreign tourists whose donations help to keep the projects running.

While community museums provide valuable information about local experiences of the armed conflict, I asked Moscoso what was preventing the State from creating a national-level
museum or exhibition on this topic. Could any of the existing museums be converted or amended to address the internal armed conflict? He replied:

It would have to be the National History Museum, yeah? ... Right now there is no other museum of the State’s that could include it as one of its chapters. There are no other historical museums in all the country, neither public nor private. The National History Museum here in Guatemala City is the only historical museum in all the country. There are museums of archaeology, ethnology, art, natural history, an endless number of themes, but for history, strictly speaking, we only have the one for all the country. In reality, they should create a museum specifically for that theme, a museum of the State.

Doc: Do you think it’s more difficult because of a lack of political will?

M: Absolutely, that is the principal reason, right? There hasn’t existed in any government a political will to realize it. Because it isn’t necessary to begin with such a grand museum as the ‘Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington,’ right? Obviously, we could begin with something much more in accord with the national reality, of a much more moderate cost. And with time, it could grow, yeah?

Moscoso explained that regardless of ideas for new or renovated museums, the limiting factor remains “the economic reality” of Guatemala: the Ministry of Culture and Sports—like all of the government’s ministries—is chronically under-funded. “It has to do with the fact that the state is a poor state. And it has other priorities—other priorities like education, health, and security are more important than culture, yeah? The funds assigned to the Ministry of Culture are considerably less than what we should receive to function in an optimal manner.”

I asked Moscoso what sort of project he would launch to address the lack of historical memory within the State’s museums, if money and political will were not objects. He only paused for a moment before answering:

A national-level database of interviews about the internal armed conflict. It would be an electronic and physical archive of the memory of the conflict. This would be like my life
project. And this would come to constitute the soul of any future museum. It would be like the collection of an archaeological museum; as an archaeological museum could not exist without artifacts, this would be the artifacts of a museum of memory: the testimonies.

He further clarified that such a museum and database would include the perspectives of “all the sectors of society,” which would allow for a more complete picture of the past than any one narrator could possibly provide. “Everyone has to be involved, and each one contributing, so that the academics can try to disentangle it as much as possible from the ideologies in order to provide the most objective outline / script [guión] possible.”

Although Moscoso’s dream of a State-backed museum of memory remains unrealized, in February of 2014 the Center for Legal Action for Human Rights (CALDH) opened a “House of Memory” in Guatemala City. A spokesperson for CALDH indicated that the objective of the small museum “is to teach the youth what the history books have not taught them,” noting that they hoped to “resignify the meaning of historical memory” in Guatemala by presenting the perspectives of the survivors of genocide (HispanTV 2014). The wall and ceiling of one room in the house is covered in hundreds of hand-woven patches embroidered with the names of disappeared and murdered victims of the violence; there are also dove-shaped cards available on which visitors can write the names of their own departed loved ones (Sebastián 2014). Also on display in the house is a large printed and bound copy of the entire 740-page final sentence that pronounced Ríos Montt guilty of genocide.111 It is notable that CALDH’s exhibition includes in its narrative references to

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111 CALDH is one of the plaintiffs in the case against Ríos Montt and Rodríguez Sánchez for genocide and crimes against humanity (Open Society 2014).
the forced labor and oppression experienced by indigenous communities under colonialism. In this manner, the vision of historical memory presented corresponds closely to the narratives offered by my research participants. CALDH does not, however, attempt to present the perspectives of “all sectors” of Guatemala as Moscoso envisioned.

*Museum: ‘Why we are the way we are’*

Another recent experiment in museum development has been provided by the International Institute of Learning for Social Reconciliation (IIARS), a group composed primarily of Guatemalan and foreign academics. Today, IIARS is chiefly involved in hosting and maintaining an interactive exhibition on ethnic diversity in Guatemala’s past and present, titled *¿Por qué estamos como estamos?* (“Why are we the way we are?”). The initiative traces its roots to a research project developed by the Center for Regional Investigations of Mesoamerica (CIRMA) shortly after the Peace Accords. Led by historian Arturo Taracena and the anthropologists Santiago Bastos and Richard Adams, the project sought to analyze Guatemalan history and society through social science in order to address two matters of concern: “The forms by which the State has helped to shape and reproduce the system of ethnic relations with which we continue to struggle in the present; and the manner in which diverse social sectors have handled the themes of ethnicity, identity, and inter-ethnic relations over the last few decades” (CIRMA 2013). This research grew into a multi-year project that involved over a dozen academics and activist-intellectuals at its height, the publication of “5 books and 16 ethnographies,” and an international conference in 2003 that included the participation of national and world political leaders (CIRMA 2013).
Despite the great success of the *Por qué* initiative as an academic endeavor, its public impact was minimal until the formation of IIARS in 2007. Composed of several researchers from the original project and a team of pedagogical and museum design specialists, IIARS set to work creating an interactive exhibition designed to be portable. In 2011 I met with Vivian Salazar, the Executive Director of IIARS and General Coordinator of the *Por Qué* exhibit. She told me that the first iteration of the *Por qué* exhibition began in the capital, and then traveled to Quetzaltenango for 16 weeks, followed by 6 weeks in Cobán, Alta Verapaz. Although the organizers hoped to continue visiting regional cities and helping to make the exhibit accessible for more Guatemalans, the financial difficulties of maintaining an itinerant exhibit convinced them to seize upon an opportunity to secure a more permanent space at a low cost, in an under-utilized storage bodega attached to the Guatemalan Train Museum. The aid agencies and NGOs that financed the creation of the project—and the preceding research campaigns—were no longer willing to foot the costs of transporting and installing it in additional cities.

Even CIRMA, the primary institution responsible for the initial planning and development of the exhibit, was no longer willing or able to continue managing it. Although CIRMA maintains the formal ownership of the intellectual property that constitutes the bulk of the exhibit—a point reiterated in every publication about *Por qué* issued by IIARS (e.g., IIARS 2007)—the day-to-day maintenance of the exhibit and further development of pedagogical materials has rested solely in
IIARS’ hands for years. Vivian Salazar explained how these difficulties led the team to reconceptualize the purpose and scope of the exhibit:

The project was enormous—and we hoped to bring it to Huehuetenanango, to Chiquimula, and to Retalhuleu, but it wasn’t possible. There were never sufficient funds to be able to do it. When we finished with the first tour, in Cobán, the prevailing option was to close the exhibit. At that point, there was no longer enough interest or financial cooperation to continue it, nor other possibilities in that moment. So we thought it would be better to search for a strategy to make it sustainable for a longer time—if not for ten years, then for five. And so we saw to install it permanently like this (she gestures to our surroundings). And so we changed the conception from ‘traveling’ to something more permanent, and lowered our expectations from taking it to the national level to focusing on the [metropolitan] area.

Salazar was quick to point out that, despite the change in focus, being based in the capital presented its own advantages and worthwhile challenges:

We see that the [metropolitan] area could be a very important area because it’s an area of great ethnic diversity, though at times this isn’t recognized. But moreover it’s where the ideas of ethnic superiority … speak, it’s where they take form [se materializan]. Maybe it’s not part of the everyday discussion—the theme of ethnic relations—but this is where ‘the normal,’ as in ‘the white,’ ‘the western,’ operates, right? … So we see that this could be a very strategic area. It could be interesting to take the discussion to other places, but here it was necessary to make visible this other, unseen Guatemala.

Por qué has certainly succeeded in drawing the public to see the vision of Guatemala it presents—Salazar informed me that the exhibit is more popular than any other museum in the country, having attracted over 117,000 in its first, traveling phase alone. She explained that since transforming it

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112 While ceding management of the Por qué exhibit to others, CIRMA did not entirely abandon public-facing pedagogical work. CIRMA has been developing an online “virtual museum of historical memory” (CIRMA 2014) for several years, though unfortunately there does not appear to have been any recent progress in the site. The staff at CIRMA were enthusiastic about the project, as well as a related initiative to equip a minivan or school bus with computers to form a traveling “bus of historical memory.” However, the contents of the database—either for buses or online—remains empty for now. Memory activists at other institutions were familiar with the project but expressed skepticism that the site would ever be completed.
into a permanent exhibition, IIARS had shifted the focus to offer a “more pedagogical” methodology rather than offering visitors just “a run” through the exhibit; consequently the total attendance has slowed, but each group now spends more time and has the opportunity to interact with the trained guides and researchers who make up the IIARS team.

During all of my visits, Por qué was crowded with groups of students of various ages, from primary-school to late secondary. Typically, clusters of about a dozen students and a teacher would take advantage of the large open spaces in each ‘room’ of the exposition to gather in a circle and listen to the explanations offered by the teacher, or by one of the young IIARS personnel who serve as guides. In a space just outside the entrance, tables and chairs were set up for school groups to meet before or after touring the exhibit. On one visit, I saw primary school teachers leading their students in an exercise that involved drawing pictures that illustrated their ideas of “diversity in Guatemala.” Inside, the first space begins the exhibition with questions about ethnic diversity and discrimination. Large portraits of Guatemalans of different ethnic backgrounds hang on one wall, and each portrait can be spun around or lifted to reveal the first name and hometown of the person depicted, along with a quote from the person explaining how they identify themselves ethnically or linguistically. The opposite wall features short narratives from people who experienced discrimination because of their race or ethnicity, along with an excerpt from Law 57-2002 of the Republic, which criminalized discrimination against indigenous peoples. Other segments of Por qué that seem especially popular with students include a cross-section of a school bus in which students sit and watch a video depicting scenes of everyday discrimination encountered by indigenous peoples.
and women, and a bank of telephones that play conversations featuring common expressions that draw on racist stereotypes.

On the one hand, it may seem obvious to expect such discourses about ethnic and linguistic differences in the ostensible era of multiculturalism. However, in practice the more common response to multicultural reforms among urban, Ladino populations—especially the upper-middle classes—has been to simply ignore them, or to consider diversity a concern of the indigenous population. It is for this reason that the IIARS approach struck me as revolutionary, and the frameworks for presenting and interpreting ethnicity and collective identity struck me as profoundly anthropological—which is perhaps unsurprising, given the influential role that anthropologists have played in developing the *Por qué* exhibition and its underlying intellectual foundations. The exhibit seemed to resonate with the public in part because it addressed issues that people care deeply about, but often lack the vocabulary or familiarity to interpret in satisfying ways. Vivian Salazar pointed out that many visitors were affected by the idea that indigenous people could exist “as a social subject conserving his/her specificity in an egalitarian … or uniform Guatemala,” or in other words, that the “right to specificity” was not a contradiction of democracy or equality but a necessary prerequisite. *Por qué* achieves this pedagogical lesson without resorting to the heavy-handed authoritative discourse found in the National History Museum; rather it approaches the controversial topics of discrimination, colonialism, and the armed conflict by inviting visitors to draw on their own experiences and to reflect on the events from multiple points of view. As such it bears more in common with what Bakhtin labeled “internally persuasive discourse” which “is, as it is affirmed through assimilation, tightly interwoven with ‘one’s own word’” (1981:345).
The final room of the exhibition, added in 2011, provided a space for visitors to pause and reflect on their experiences—there are small benches included—and offered them an opportunity to leave their own comments—either about the exhibition specifically, or about their own experiences from a lifetime in Guatemala. Salazar explained that the “histories” that IIARS was collecting from this methodology were proving to be an invaluable resource for understanding and explaining Guatemala’s past, and that IIARS hopes to “systematize” them in order to present them in a published form in the future. The majority of the written comments pertained to the armed conflict, and while they often contained erroneous ideas about specific details, Salazar considered them to be examples of the type of historical memory passed down despite the lack of official accounts:

They do not teach the armed conflict. There is no information about the armed conflict. But everyone, down to the smallest child, has a memory of the armed conflict because they have been told in their families. Or sometimes they haven’t been told, but they still say something. “And you, how do you know that?” “Ah, because in my house that’s the topic they don’t talk about.” Or in other words, they learn something not because it is discussed but because it isn’t discussed. And so, that seems very interesting to us because we can say that it contradicts a bit the hypothesis that the people don’t know anything about the armed conflict, or that they don’t understand it with systematized information, right? They know it by experience, by the memory of their family. And these histories that we’ve gathered were really personal memories or family memories of the armed conflict.

As the interview drew to a close, I mentioned to Vivian Salazar that I planned to make another pass through the exhibition before leaving, as the final room for reflection and feedback had been added since my last visit and I wanted to experience it in context. She nodded and remarked: “Right now, I’m content because the [responses] that people are leaving us in the final room have more content.” When the response board first opened, visitors only left “really idealistic responses” that often called
for divine intervention to solve Guatemala’s problems; however “now I’m feeling that we have more concrete responses like ‘We try not to be violent with our children,’ ‘We try to not hit our children.’” Then Vivian stood and walked over to a wall to retrieve one of the comment cards that had been pegged to the board. “Look at this one that they left me here. The people write, but just look at this.” She handed me the card, on which a visitor had written: “I brought my children to the exhibition so that they will understand what I cannot explain.” As I read the message, I couldn’t help the tears that came to my eyes. Vivian nodded again and remarked “Yes, it’s powerful.”

**Final comments: Conflicting histories, multiple narratives**

Peter Seixas identifies three ways to deal with conflicted interpretations of the past: 1) an approach he calls “enhancing collective memory,” which entails teaching “the best story” as the gospel truth, or what really happened; 2) a “disciplinary” approach that presents each account and teaches the students to reach their own conclusions, based on the tools of historical inquiry; and 3) a “postmodern” approach that “reflects uncertainty about the notion of a ‘best story’” and instead introduces students to the present-day political ramifications of each account (2000:20). The context of Seixas’ argument was the late 1990s debates in British Columbia over the treaty rights of the First Nations Nisga’a community, who were demanding the rights to their own self-government. Many white British Columbians felt that the Nisga’a view of history was flawed, overdetermined by political ideology, while the Nisga’a countered that their demands were a response to the long legacy of political oppression at the hands of the Canadian settler State. There are obvious similarities in this context and the recent demands by Guatemalan indigenous communities for their own local determination of affairs; however an important difference is the temporal distance from the most
recent occurrence of massive violence in each context. Seixas’ dismissive opinion of uncertainty in historical narratives is thus based on a less volatile situation. In Guatemala, thousands of indigenous survivors of the conflict bear living memories of the genocidal violence that highland communities endured just a generation ago. Victims and perpetrators share communities and even neighborhoods, leading to a tangled situation of blame and suspicion that continues to destabilize local political development.

My purpose is not to defend postmodern historiographies or pedagogies—certainly, the activist-intellectuals I describe in this dissertation are engaged in labor to prevent such whitewashing of history by telling the stories of victims. Rather, I present Seixas’ typology in order to bring to mind the range of possibilities faced by educators and others involved in the preparation of curricular materials. In cases where the interpretation of the past is conflicted, issues of power come to the fore. Whose version of the truth makes it into the final draft is determined by epistemic authority at multiple levels of interaction, and in each one it requires the authors or editors to face choices with political consequences. For Seixas, the choice seems clear: He identifies some positive community-building prospects of the “enhancing collective identity” approach to history education, noting that “it is the power of the story of the past to define who we are in the present” (2000:21), while critiquing the Canadian national narrative for failing to include the Nisga’a people in a respectful and representative way (2000:22). The State seems to be limited in this endeavor because, he argues, “the serious inclusion of First Nations ultimately entails moving beyond Canada as the ‘nation’ whose development provides the governing narrative framework” (Seixas 2000:22). Yet he concludes that there are substantial drawbacks to this method: the inherent difficulty in deciding
“which is the right version of the past to teach”; and the risk of reducing historical inquiry into “catechism to be memorized” (2000:23).

The postmodern approach seems disastrous to Seixas: if the division between history and collective memory is eroded, then historians’ epistemic authority is called into question, which leads to “the problem of making a claim to knowledge recede infinitely” (2000:29). The scholarly intellectual’s prospects for critiquing power would be undermined by the proposition that “all historical knowledge is understood simply as a weapon in a power struggle… epistemologically equivalent” (Seixas 2000:30). In the case he describes, this would mean that “populist radio talk-show” hosts’ interpretations of history would stand on equal ground with Nisga’a activists, a situation that Seixas finds untenable.

Thus, for Seixas the winning choice is to adopt a “disciplinary” approach to history education, teaching students to distinguish “heritage” from “history,” in Lowenthal’s (1994) terms, to arrive at their own interpretations of the past. Perhaps somewhat idealistically, he argues that such an approach “is suited to the education of critical citizens in a liberal democracy… rather than promoting identity fissures in a multicultural, multinational, and multiply gendered world, it offers the promise of deliberative distance, which only a broad historical view can achieve” (2000:24-25).

While this approach likely overestimates the abilities of younger children, it offers a means for teachers to make use of whatever resources are available—an important consideration in Guatemala, where schools frequently lack books, and history in particular is undervalued. More problematically, the disciplinary approach does not address the practical issues of neutrality on the part of educators—neither at the philosophical level of the educators’ own biases and experiences, nor more
practical questions such as how assignments would be graded and materials and methods introduced in an objective manner. Seixas’s preferred method of history education provides, at best, for conflicting interpretations of history to gradually gravitate toward a common narrative, reached through “objective, disinterested investigation” (2000:24). At worst, presumably, students and teachers with different perspectives would sustain their conflicting interpretations of the past but would challenge each other’s views on the basis of objective “history” rather than impassioned “heritage.”

Perhaps a resolution can be found in Latour’s view of the relationship between skepticism and relativity, part of his reformulation of the nature of knowledge itself. Reacting to critiques that his work undermines the legitimacy of the practices of producing scientific knowledge, Latour countered that “relativity offers, in the end, a sturdier grasp than absolutism,” and that “It is only those who recognize the fragility of fact-making who may confide safely in [facts’] solidity” (Latour 2007:107-108). For many actors invested in the revision of historical narratives in Guatemala, the distinction between history and collective memory is blurry—in part because many individuals have their own personal memories to reconcile with the proffered historical narratives. In contexts where the history to be taught is still so recent and so raw that suppositions of neutrality appear impossible, perhaps the best we can hope for is to build flexibility into the curriculum itself. As this dissertation has attempted to illustrate, the history of Guatemala is undergoing revision in the present tense; the authors and editors of textbook projects are cognizant of these issues.
Another approach to the co-existence of competing interpretations of history may be to follow the method outlined by Fernando Moscoso, of inviting “todo el mundo” to participate and share their perspective. The NGO Impunity Watch refers to a “principle of Multiple Narratives”:

There can be no one truth after violence; the multiplicity of discourse, different understandings and the value of social dialogue should be acknowledged, respected and adapted to, but recognizing that this does not inevitably lead to reconciliation or require affected communities to give up their claims for justice. … Since memory is usually exclusive, the challenge for truth-telling after violence is how to facilitate between multiple narratives. (IW 2013:11)

Elizabeth Oglesby has suggested adapting some of the “illustrative cases” described in the CEH report into smaller case studies for school use; these would describe the actual experiences of individuals during the violence (2007).

Finally, it bears recalling that the CPRs and other Maya refugee communities embarked on experiments in pedagogical reform themselves, setting the stage for the types of counter-hegemonic discourses presented in the textbooks and projects described above. In the refugee camps, themes of ethno-cultural origin and proprietorship entered into Maya refugees’ discussions of territory, and the hegemonic curricular depiction of Guatemala as a product of European conquest was openly questioned (Montejo 1999). Equally important, refugees from different communities and even speakers of different Mayan languages lived together and shared their experiences, contributing to new “existential sovereignties” and social networks that spanned former spatial divides. As Montejo reflects, for refugees in the Mexican camps, education became “a valued tool in the struggle for survival in an ever-changing world,” providing a means to both defend Maya communities from exploitation and to provide new opportunities to younger generations (1999:174). The theme of
dynamism in and through tradition, central to the message of the Pan-Maya movement, was
developed in an early form in the revolutionary education of the refugee camps.

Likewise, in the post-conflict push for bilingual education reform, Maya authors and activists
made use of the new opportunities for education reform to plant the seeds for later indigenous rights
claims that are now beginning to bear fruit. Many indigenous pedagogical models seek to prevent
hegemonic appropriation of their discourses by explicitly challenging the individualistic, profit-
seeking values that they see as the basis of neo-liberalism. One of the key epistemological differences
with the dominant sector—once the military, now increasingly the agro-business elites—is in land
rights and the rightful beneficiaries of development projects. Maya educators and authors have
offered alternative visions of development—especially “development with identity”\textsuperscript{113}—in their own
discourses, often embedded within texts that would likely appear innocuous to uninformed
observers. For example, Bonifacio Celso Chaclán Solís, in a study of “Maya curricular foci in
bilingual education programs,” synthesized seven “anthropological and linguistic principles” that
characterized the EIB schools he observed (1995:18-21). Among these principles was the “Principle
of eco-development and ethno-development,” which includes the need to “restore the validity of the
ancestral corporate models, whose stability and suitability have been proved by the test of time over
many centuries” (Chaclán Solís 1995:20). As Chaclán Solís goes on to explain the benefits of local
autonomy, as contrasted with “coercive transformations” forced upon the Maya by the dominant
state with disastrous effects:

\textsuperscript{113} Lit., “desarrollo con identidad”, e.g. in Son Chonay and Rodríguez Guaján 2007:83
The new form of Intercultural Bilingual Education is situated at the center of new indigenist politics based in the concrete forms of daily chores of each community, in their own wishes, and in their own forms of resolving the future and defining their participation in the contemporary world. … Every coercive transformation is highly dangerous and has caused the disappearance and degradation of many societies, above all in recent years. [Coercive transformations] have brought, as well, ecological destruction, environmental deterioration, unstoppable contamination, and abusive exploitation of natural resources, including the slow death of fauna and flora. (1995:20-21)

Thus, as it was understood by the reformers that Chaclán Solís interviewed, this principle attributes to Maya themselves the right to direct their own transformations, legitimating the value of communal models of governance and development that may threaten representatives of the political status quo.

Bilingual education in Guatemala served as a platform for indigenous rights activists to develop broader political visions—some of which have been realized, and others which are still causes for mobilization today. As the incredible labors described in this chapter illustrate, similar struggles are now unfolding around the topic of historical memory. The alliances built between different groups fighting to incorporate their voices into official narratives may serve in the future to articulate new political identities and imaginaries—perhaps “a more truly pluralist Guatemala” as one of my Maya colleagues put it. There remain many obstacles, but the books and projects described above illustrate what can be accomplished through concerted labor and solidarity.
Epilogue: Unresolved History

On May 10, 2013, Guatemala’s First High-Risk Tribunal ‘A’ declared former President and General José Efraín Ríos Montt guilty of genocide and crimes against humanity, and sentenced him to a combined 80 years in prison. For the communities of survivors who brought the case, this ruling represented the conclusion of nearly thirty years of mobilization for justice. Journalists and observers around the world hailed the verdict as a victory for justice and a sign that Guatemala might finally be putting an end to corruption and impunity. International media trumpeted that this was the first time any country had convicted one of its own former rulers of genocide (MacLean 2013:3). Like many of my friends in the highlands of Guatemalan, I watched the historic judgment via a live internet video feed. When the verdict was announced, the courtroom erupted in cheers.

The legal scholar Mark Osiel has argued that the role of such trials in post-conflict contexts is not to “summon up a ‘collective conscience’ of moral principles shared by all,” but rather to build public trust in shared procedures of law, which can contribute to democratization (1999). He argued that the public display of mutual respect, even among proponents of competing narratives, will have a “pedagogic impact” for society at large. Osiel described the form that such trials adopt as narrative-making practices:

[Defense counsel will tell the story as a tragedy, while prosecutors will present it as a morality play. The judicial task at such moments, however, is to employ the law of evidence, procedure, and professional responsibility to recast the courtroom drama in terms of the “theater of ideas,” where large questions of collective memory and even national identity are engaged. … These events are both “real” and “staged.” In this regard, they seem to problematize the very distinction between true and false representations of reality. (Osiel 1999:3)
However, the trial against Efraín Ríos Montt and Mauricio Rodríguez Sánchez did not unfold in such an orderly manner. The conclusions reached by the judges did not meet the expectations or approval of the ruling political party—President Pérez Molina commented publicly before the verdict was issued that “there was no genocide” in Guatemala (Kaltschmitt 2013); nor did it please the country’s powerful economic elites—the Coordinating Committee of Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial, and Financial Associations (CACIF) launched a public relations campaign calling on citizens to renounce the verdict or face the personal humiliation of being branded a perpetrator of genocide (CACIF 2013). If the Ríos Montt trial and its aftermath left a “pedagogic impact” on Guatemalan society, the lesson was likely that powerful forces are able to manipulate the law, if not simply rise above it.

The defense strategy throughout the trial was to call for the case’s dismissal on procedural grounds, rather than countering the narrative that was constructed by the prosecution and its dozens of witnesses and expert testimonies. Emi MacLean described the disruptive and dishonorable behavior of the defense lawyers:

The defense strategy relied on preventing the trial from concluding, and undermining the tribunal in the media, more than presenting a vigorous defense. In response to “delaying tactics” of the defense, and vitriolic threats by Ríos Montt’s attorney directed towards the judges during public hearings, Judge Yassmin Barrios, the presiding judge of the three-judge panel, on two occasions read aloud and referred to Guatemala’s Professional Ethics Code for attorneys. (MacLean 2013:7)

While this strategy failed to sway Judge Barrios and her colleagues, it proved sufficient for stirring up public controversy over the trial and its potential impact for society at large. The tense days leading up to the conviction witnessed the emergence of a well-funded right-wing group, the Foundation
Against Terrorism (FCT), which espoused a revisionist history glorifying the patriotic sacrifices of military elites—including Ríos Montt and current president Otto Pérez Molina—in order to defend Guatemala from communism. In a series of multiple-page ads printed in national newspapers, the FCT claimed that “The farce of genocide is a Marxist conspiracy planned by the Catholic Church” (2013). The ads included personal attacks against several prominent academics who have played roles in combating impunity and discrimination since Peace Accords, including the anthropologists Ricardo Falla and Irma Alicia Velásquez Nimatuj.

Following the genocide verdict, CACIF published a commentary by Phillip Chicola, a professor of Political Studies at the private Marroquín University, who warned that “Guatemala has joined the select club of genocidal states, together with Nazi Germany, the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda and Cambodia” (2013). Chicola listed various parties who were ostensibly left exposed to future prosecution by the ruling: in addition to anyone in the entire military chain of command—which included current president Otto Pérez Molina—liability also included members of the press, neighboring communities that failed to intervene, and generally anyone who “supported the forces of security” during the conflict (2013). He concluded that “the election of courts and the attorney general in 2014 will be the mother of all battles,” as the upcoming justices will determine

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114 CACIF listed a number of implications of the ruling for Guatemala: “The world will see us as perpetrators of genocide. They believe that we Guatemalans are as despicable as the Nazis or the dictators of Rwanda and Yugoslavia. To accept that the State is a perpetrator of genocide, implicates all of us. Let me ask you: Are you a perpetrator of genocide? Does it please you that Guatemala is branded as a perpetrator of genocide, knowing that here there was no genocide?” (CACIF 2013).
whether the sentence would set a precedent or stand as an aberration; as he revealingly concluded, “the result of this judgment will depend on who controls justice” (Chicola 2013).

The backlash against the verdict came swiftly. Ten days after the verdict was delivered, the Constitutional Court stepped in to annul the verdict. In a divided ruling about technical issues during the proceedings of the case, the Constitutional Court reset the trial to a point preceding the testimonies of over one hundred survivors and expert witnesses, effectively erasing their voices from the official record. Ríos Montt was released to house arrest, and the rescheduled trial will not begin until 2015 (AP 2013). Adding insult to injury, over the course of the subsequent year, right-wing defenders of the military state succeeded in punishing two of the most influential women involved in the pursuit of justice in the case. The pioneering Attorney General, Claudia Paz y Paz, despite her unparalleled successes in reforming the Public Ministry and making great progress at combatting impunity, was ordered by the Constitutional Court to step down from her position fully seven months earlier than her original appointment stipulated (Plaza Pública 2014). The Court made this ruling in response to a request filed by a private citizen—conservative businessman Ricardo Sagastume—which several legal experts described as a violation of its Constitutionally-mandated objectives and jurisdiction; would they now accept requests for legal rulings from any private citizen?

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115 The Constitutional Court ruled that the Tribunal had violated Ríos Montt’s right to representation by continuing proceedings after his lawyer had been dismissed for disruptive behavior; in their dissenting opinions, Judges Porras and Chacon argued that this ruling “effectively rewarded a defense attorney’s intentionally disruptive behavior” (MacLean 2013:19), setting a dangerous precedent for future cases. They also wrote that the Court’s intervention in the matter was inappropriate, as there are already established appeals processes to handle the type of claims that led to the ruling.
More recently, on April 4, 2014, Yassmin Barrios was suspended from legal practice for one year by the Guatemalan College of Lawyers—a punishment that top legal officials have claimed is a gross overstepping of the College’s authority—for allegedly causing Ríos Montt’s lawyer, Moises Galindo, to feel “public humiliation” after he was ordered to leave the courtroom for being disruptive (Herrera 2014).

As the events surrounding this historic and controversial trial illustrate, much of the future of Guatemala’s history remains to be determined. On the one hand, the courage of women like Claudia Paz y Paz and Yassmin Barrios inspires hope that Guatemala’s judicial system will not only contribute to historical clarification, but may also lead to reparations for victims and an end to impunity for perpetrators. On the other hand, the repercussions that these women experienced are clear reminders that influential actors wield powerful tools to preserve the status quo. Nevertheless, the fact is that these challenges are playing out in the public arena, with the attention and participation of many Guatemalan citizens and foreign observers. Consequently, while the outcomes may not provide cause for triumphal celebration, they do reflect profound changes in epistemic
authority and historical memory, and the corresponding political possibilities enabled by these
resources. Just a few years ago, the idea that Ríos Montt could be put on trial and convicted of
genocide was considered unthinkable even among human rights activists (MacLean 2014:1). Today,
the scope of possibilities has changed dramatically. The sudden, heated struggle over “who controls
justice” may be a reflection of growing anxiety that the legal system has reached a point of autonomy
and stability that will allow prosecutions of the formerly untouchables—thus the more important
question may be: Who will justice control?
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Caja Lúdica  

Cali, Leonel  

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Certeau, Michel de

Chakrabarty, Dipesh

Chicola, Phillip

CIEN & PREAL (Centro de Estudios Económicos Nacionales & Programa de Promoción de la Reforma Educativa en América Latina y el Caribe)

CIRMA (Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de MesoAmérica)

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Code, Lorraine

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Coronil, Fernando

Cortés, Elsy de

Cosmovisión

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Cullather, Nick

Danto, Arthur Coleman

Deci, Edward L. and Richard M. Ryan

Díaz Zeceña, Leonel

Domingo López, Daniel

Doyle, Kate

Durkheim, Émile
Eber, Christine

Ekern, Stener

England, Nora

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Escobar, Lucía

Escobar Sarti, Carolina

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Fundación Myrna Mack

Galindo Arandi, Jorge Luis

Gamarro, Urias and Mynor Toc

Garro, Linda C.

Gates-Madsen, Nancy J.

Gellner, Ernest

GHRC (Guatemala Human Rights Commission)

Gidley, Ruth and Hannah Roberts

Gieco, León

Gluck, Carol
Gobierno de Guatemala

Goldman, Francisco

Gómez Grijalva, Francisco

Gramsci, Antonio

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Kaltschmitt, Alfred

Kansteiner, Wulf

Kintner, Max

Klein, Kerwin Lee

Kohler, Kimberly and Josh MacLeod

Landa, Manuel de

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Las Casas, Bartolomé de


Latour, Bruno


Lave, Jean


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Lowenthal, David

Lyotard, Jean-François

MacLean, Emi

Mallon, Florencia E., ed.

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Marcus, George

Martínez Paiz, Horacio

Martínez Peláez, Severo

Matthew, Laura E.

Maxwell, Judith

McAllister, Carlota and Diane Nelson
McIntosh, Peggy

Mineduc (Guatemalan Ministry of Education)

Mink, Louis O.

Misztal, Barbara A.

Molina Mejía, Raúl

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Morales, Mario Roberto

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Morley, Sylvanus G. and George W. Brainerd

Morrow, Raymond A. and Carlos Alberto Torres

Moscoso Möller, José Fernando

Moser, Caroline and Cathy McIlwaine

Museo Comunitario Rabinal Achi

NACLA (North American Congress on Latin America)

NAISA (Native American and Indigenous Studies Association)

Nance, Kimberly A.
Nash, Manning

Neier, Aryeh

Nelson, Diane

Newman, Lucia

Nobel Media

Nora, Pierre

Notife

ODHAG (Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala)

Oglesby, Elizabeth
Olick, Jeffrey K. and Joyce Robbins  

Olick, Jeffrey K., Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Daniel Levy  

Ong, Walter  

Open Society (Justice Initiative)  

Origgi, Gloria  

Osiel, Mark  

Orttoy, Irma  

Oxlajuj Ajpop (Conferencia Nacional de Ministros de la Espiritualidad Maya)  

Patterson, Elisabeth  

PaysDesVolcans  

Paz Cárcamo, Guillermo  
Piedra Santa, Irene

Plaza Pública

Pollack, Aaron

Pollack, Aaron and Arturo Taracena Arriola

Prensa Libre

Price, Charles, Donald Nonini, and Erich Fox Tree

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Rojas Lima, Flavio

Rosa, Alberto

Rotella, Sebastian

Rotella, Sebastian and Ana Arana

Rotella, Sebastian and Krista Kjellman Schmidt

Rotella, Sebastian, Ana Arana, Habiba Nosheen, and Brian Reed

Sagastume, Tania
Salazar Tetzagüic, Manuel de Jesús

Salguero, Manuel

Samuel, Raphael

Sanford, Victoria

Saussure, Ferdinand de

Scarry, Elaine

Schirmer, Jennifer

Sebastián, Sandra

Seixas, Peter

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Smith, Carol

Smith, Patrick

Solano, Luis

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White, Hayden

Wilhelm, Ronald W.

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Yúdice, George

Zagzebski, Linda Trinkaus

Zerubavel, Eviatar

Zimmerman, Marc

Zochrot.org

Zur, Judith N.
### Appendix 1: Pile Sorting Tables

**Selection 1: Positive / Negative / Neutral Evaluation**

#### Table 1: Lorena’s items and evaluations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive (ordered most to least)</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Negative (ordered least to most)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Our grandfathers, grandmothers</td>
<td>Spanish conquistadors</td>
<td>Right-wing governments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tecún Umán</td>
<td>Leftwing guerrillas</td>
<td>Execution of peasant leaders in Cantel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peace Accords</td>
<td></td>
<td>Guatemalan army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rigoberta Menchú</td>
<td></td>
<td>Social classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Conflict between right-wing and left-wing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Table 2: Q’anil’s items and evaluations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive (ordered most to least)</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Negative (ordered least to most)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>35: The 4 <em>Pueblos</em> of Guatemala</td>
<td>4: Development of Maya civilization</td>
<td>24: Revolution of 1944</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16: 1821</td>
<td>19: Cantel</td>
<td>12: Antigua</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28: 1949</td>
<td>30: 22 families in power</td>
<td>21: Justo Rufino Barrios</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27: 1947 (year that slavery ‘really’ ended)</td>
<td>31: Valley of Polochic</td>
<td>23: Expropriations of Maya lands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11: Kaji’ Imox</td>
<td>32: Drug trafficking</td>
<td>9: Massacres by the Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18: Atanasio Tzul</td>
<td>34: Peace Accords</td>
<td>8: Arrival of European diseases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: Abya Yala</td>
<td>36: Constitution of 1982</td>
<td>15: The colony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1: 1492</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7: 1523 (Year of Kaqchikel defeat)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6: The (Spanish) invasion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive (ordered most to least)</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Negative (ordered least to most)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Maya calendar</strong></td>
<td>Ajaw (lord)</td>
<td>ILO 169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tikal</td>
<td>Ixil Triangle</td>
<td>Interculturality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Los abuelos</strong></td>
<td>December 29, 1996</td>
<td>The homeland (<em>patria</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chilam B’alam</td>
<td>September 15, 1821</td>
<td>Christopher Columbus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B’elejeb’ Tz’i’</strong></td>
<td>Q’uma’rkaj</td>
<td>Christianization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maya ball game</td>
<td>Technological advances</td>
<td>13 values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tukuk Umam (Tecún Umán)</td>
<td>Iximche’</td>
<td>New World</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Classic Period</td>
<td>dehumanization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4: Daniel’s items and evaluations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive (ordered most to least)</th>
<th>Neutral (not ordered)</th>
<th>Negative (ordered least to most)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Most positive:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1: Antiquity (the time of “the ancient Mayas”)</td>
<td>9: Ixil Triangle</td>
<td>4: Changes in cultivation of earth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13: Tecún Umán</td>
<td>8: Iximché</td>
<td>16: September 15, 1821</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1b: Medicine (of ancient Maya)</td>
<td>7: Q’uma’rkaj</td>
<td>4b: Chemical fertilizers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3b: Recovery of Mayan languages</td>
<td>10: Tikal</td>
<td>16a: Independence from Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6: Recovery of language and culture</td>
<td>7a: sacred places</td>
<td>2a: Forced labor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5: Changes in spirituality</td>
<td>12: Juan José Arévalo</td>
<td>9a: Violencia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: Changes in education</td>
<td>6a: Types of dance (of ancient Maya)</td>
<td>15a: Ubico’s timetable (labor schedule)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1d: Mathematics (of ancient Maya)</td>
<td>1a: Astronomy (of ancient Maya)</td>
<td>15: Jorge Ubico</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1c: Form of clothing (of ancient Maya)</td>
<td></td>
<td>3a: Loss of language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4a: Organic fertilizers</td>
<td></td>
<td>14: Ríos Montt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4c: Tools for cultivation</td>
<td></td>
<td>2b: Destruction of temples and altars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9b: Otto Pérez Molina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5a: Prohibition of Maya spirituality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11a: Christopher Columbus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11: Pedro de Alvarado</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>13a: The (Spanish) invaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Most negative:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: The (Spanish) invasion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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### Selection 2: Participant-defined pile sorts

Table 5: Instead of a Positive / Negative / Neutral evaluation, María classified items as “negative, historical, or related to the conservation of Maya identity”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative (Most negative at top)</th>
<th>Historical</th>
<th>Conservation of Maya Identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2a: Invaders</td>
<td>6: Invasion of the Spanish</td>
<td>3c: mistaken routes (America as India)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6a: Imposition of the Spanish language</td>
<td>2b: Imposition of Catholic religion</td>
<td>3b: “indios”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7: Slaughters done by Spanish</td>
<td>10b: slavery</td>
<td>10d: 1 real/week (pay)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10a: forced labor</td>
<td>9: Discrimination against women</td>
<td>1b: Guatemalans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10f: rapes of Maya women</td>
<td>10g: Prohibition of marriage between creoles and Mayas</td>
<td>10: La Patria del Criollo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9a: Lack of rights to education for women</td>
<td>11: Lack of access to education</td>
<td>14: Elders as sources of knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9b: Domestic labors (discrimination)</td>
<td></td>
<td>13: Los abuelos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8a: A “real history”</td>
<td></td>
<td>3: Indigenous people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: Maya spirituality</td>
<td>1a: Children of Spanish born here</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10: Los Principales</td>
<td>8b: histories in the books</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3a: Maya people</td>
<td>8: histories that are agreed upon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: Spanish</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6: Daniel sorted items as “Important” or “Not important” for inclusion in a history textbook or classroom curriculum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Important</th>
<th>Not important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: Antiquity (the time of “the ancient Mayas”)</td>
<td>9: Ixil Triangle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1b: Medicine (of ancient Maya)</td>
<td>4: Changes in cultivation of earth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4b: Chemical fertilizers</td>
<td>2: The (Spanish) invasion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3b: Recovery of Mayan languages</td>
<td>2a: Forced labor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4a: Organic fertilizers</td>
<td>12: Juan José Arévalo</td>
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<tr>
<td>5: Changes in spirituality</td>
<td>7: Q’uma’rkaj</td>
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<tr>
<td>7a: sacred places</td>
<td>3a: Loss of language</td>
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<tr>
<td>6: Recovery of language and culture</td>
<td>10: Tikal</td>
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<td>9a: Violencia</td>
<td>16: September 15, 1821</td>
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<td>3: Changes in education</td>
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<td>1b: Medicine (of ancient Maya)</td>
<td>2b: Destruction of temples and altars</td>
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<td>2: The (Spanish) invasion</td>
<td>15: Jorge Ubico</td>
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<tr>
<td>1c: Form of clothing (of ancient Maya)</td>
<td>5a: Prohibition of Maya spirituality</td>
</tr>
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<td>9b: Otto Pérez Molina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9b: Otto Pérez Molina</td>
<td>13: Tecún Umán</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4c: Tools for cultivation</td>
<td>13a: The (Spanish) invaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13a: The (Spanish) invaders</td>
<td>2: The (Spanish) invasion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: The (Spanish) invasion</td>
<td>11a: Christopher Columbus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11: Pedro de Alvarado</td>
<td>11: Pedro de Alvarado</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>Forms of cultivation of the earth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2: The (Spanish) invasion</td>
<td>4: Changes in cultivation of earth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4a: Organic fertilizers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4b: Chemical fertilizers</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4c: Tools for cultivation</td>
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<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>K’iche’ Linguistic Community</td>
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<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16: September 15, 1821</td>
<td>13: Tecún Umán</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10: Tikal</td>
<td>1a: Astronomy (of ancient Maya)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2b: Destruction of temples and altars</td>
<td>8: Iximché</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1: Antiquity (the time of “the ancient Mayas”)</td>
<td>11: Pedro de Alvarado</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12: Juan José Arévalo</td>
<td>15: Jorge Ubico</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11a: Christopher Columbus</td>
<td>15a: Ubicó’s timetable (labor schedule)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16a: Independence from Spain</td>
<td>2a: Forced labor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13a: The (Spanish) invaders</td>
<td>14: Ríos Montt</td>
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<tr>
<td>9a: Violencia</td>
<td>2: The (Spanish) invasion</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Table 9: B’elejeb’ K’at classified items by “Maya, Ladino/Spanish, or Changes”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Maya domain</th>
<th>Changes</th>
<th>Ladino / Spanish domain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Technological advances</td>
<td>Guerrilla</td>
<td>Antigua</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Los abuelos</td>
<td>September 15, 1821</td>
<td>Rebels (during colonial period)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ajaw (lord)</td>
<td>Colonization</td>
<td>Interculturality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maya calendar</td>
<td>Creoles</td>
<td>Christopher Columbus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chilam B’alam</td>
<td>“Indios”</td>
<td>Pedro de Alvarado</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maya ball game</td>
<td>1492</td>
<td>Prehispanic slavery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iximche’</td>
<td>1944-54</td>
<td>December 29, 1996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ixil Triangle</td>
<td>Coups d’état</td>
<td>New World</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tikal</td>
<td>Militias</td>
<td>Christianization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q’uma’rkaj</td>
<td>Ríos Montt</td>
<td>Jorge Ubico</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classic Period</td>
<td>Genocide</td>
<td>Juan José Arévalo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B’elejeb’ Tz’i’</td>
<td>Slavery (after conquest)</td>
<td>dehumanization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tukuk Umam (Tecún Umán)</td>
<td>Kaibiles (elite military troops)</td>
<td>The Conquest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 values</td>
<td>1492</td>
<td>The homeland <em>(patria)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILO 169</td>
<td>Burning of books</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 10: Q’anil classified items as belonging to “either the Maya or Ladino side of society,” or “serving as a bridge between the two cultures”—there is substantial overlap between this table and his original evaluations, above.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Maya side of society</th>
<th>Bridges</th>
<th>Ladino side of society</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4: Development of Maya civilization</td>
<td>35: The 4 <em>Pueblos</em> of Guatemala</td>
<td>6: The (Spanish) invasion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: Maya territory</td>
<td>5: Maya calendar</td>
<td>16: 1821</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27: 1947 (year that slavery ‘really’ ended)</td>
<td>13: Iximché</td>
<td>15: The colony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11: Kaji’ Imox</td>
<td>10: B’elejeb’ K’at</td>
<td>8: Arrival of European diseases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18: Atanasio Tzul</td>
<td>2: Abya Yala</td>
<td>9: Massacres by the Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>31: Valley of Polochic</td>
<td>25: Massacre in Patzicia</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>36: Constitution of 1982</td>
<td>12: Antigua</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>29: Armed conflict</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>30: 22 families in power</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>23: Expropriations of Maya lands</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>21: Justo Rufino Barrios</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>37: CIA</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>22: Coffee plantations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Chapter 1: Introduction

26: Dr. Ricardo Falla presents “The Book of Meetings” and leads the Congress of the Popol Wuj in song, July 2010.
27: This plaque inside the regional campus of the national university, in Quetzaltenango, commemorates the anniversary of the publication of the final report by the Commission for Historical Clarification. “Historical memory is part of the social culture and inspiration for reconciliation and peace so that the acts that occurred will ‘never again’ come to be repeated. In memory of the victims of the violence.” Centro Universitario de Occidente, Quetzaltenango 2011.
28: Scenes from the 2011 Memory March, including the author. Photo credit: CPR-Urbana 2013a
29: The author enjoying a celebration with colleagues from the K’iche’ Linguistic Community. Chichicastenango, 2010.
30: Scene from the 2010 Columbus Day / Día de la Raza protest march. The banner calls “For memory, recognition/vindication (reivindicación), and the struggle of our peoples.” Avenida la Reforma, Guatemala City, October 2010.
Chapter 2: Theorizing an Anthropology of Memory

31: This Google N-gram shows frequency of the word or phrase “memory” from 1900 to 2008.

32: This Google N-gram shows frequency of the word or phrase “collective memory” from 1900 to 2008.
33: This Google N-gram shows frequency of the word or phrase “memoria histórica” in Spanish-language books from 1900 to 2008.

34: This Google N-gram shows frequency of the phrases “memory work” (in red) and “epistemic authority” (in blue) from 1910 to 2008.
Chapter 3: The Absence of History

35: Scene of the re-developed ballcourt at Q’uma’rkaj, outside Santa Cruz del Quiché, Guatemala, 2011.
36: Scale model of Q'uma’rkaj as it might have appeared in 1524, before the Spanish and Tlaxcalans razed the city. Guatemala, 2007
37: In this photo, the rear side of the Temple of Tojil is visible to the left; to the right-hand side, the original wall of the ball-sourt. Guatemala, 2011.
38: The iconic pyramidal temples at Tikal have become important symbols of Guatemalan national identity—for example, the Temple of the Jaguar, pictured above, is reproduced on Guatemalan license plates.
Wooden sign at Laguna Chicabal, a sacred lake west of Quetzaltenango in Mam territory. There are 20 altars located around the shores of the lake, one for each of the nawales—day signs, similar to zodiac signs—which are combined with energies (1-13) to form dates in the 260-day ritual calendar, or Cholq’ij. “Maya altar: We respect this place”
40: Anachronistic plaque left on site of the Monument to the Peace, which was dedicated in 2006. The Banco del Café is no longer in operation; “Gente de la ciudad” may refer to sculptures that occupied the site prior to the installation of the Monument to the Peace. Guatemala City, 2011.
Despite the dearth of new monumental architecture to commemorate the armed conflict, or other periods of Gutaemalan history, the country is not without large-scale, dramatic examples of “monumental” architecture of a different sort. The urban elite enjoy numerous up-scale shopping centers, including Oakland Mall in Zone 10 of Guatemala City, site of the eagerly-awaited Starbucks coffee shop, July 2011.
One of the more original public monuments, this figure stands guard in the central park of Chimaltenango. Wearing the characteristic skirt and blouse of local Kaqchikel women, she destroys an Israeli-made galil rifle, the Guatemalan army’s weapon of choice following the Carter administration’s arms embargo.
43: The memorial in Chimaltenango is dedicated “In memory of the thousands and thousands of martyrs that fought for the peace with social justice, of the people (both) Maya Kaqchikel and non-Maya, who were: Kidnapped, disappeared, tortured, massacred and murdered by the repressive forces of the last 36 years.”
Chapter 4: Mapping Historical Memory: Textbook Cases

44: An updated (1988) version of the 50 centavo bill. Tecún Umán is still featured prominently, though only by name—his status as national hero appears to have become uncertain during an era when indigenous Guatemalans were defined as the internal enemy. A stylized Maya pyramid now provides the backdrop.
45: This neglected monument to the “Supreme National Hero” Tecún Umán, in the municipal building of Quetzaltenango, “his community of birth,” should feature a never-dying flame—“that it should be extinguished when the homeland ceases to be free, sovereign, and independent.” It is unknown when the flame last burned. Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, 2010.
46: This iconic sculpture of Tecún Umán is one of at least three completed by the prolific Guatemalan sculptor, Radolfo Galeotti Torres. Erected in February 1967, it stands in the central plaza of the city of Santa Cruz del Quiché. Additional monuments stand in Quetzaltenango and Guatemala City.
47: The plaque at the base of Tecún’s statue reads: “Homage: From the Department of El Quiché to the National Hero Tecún Umán, son of this historic land, martyr of national sovereignty, example of refined patriotism.” The plaque above memorializes the re-naming of the plaza itself after Tecún Umán in 1969.
48: Rodolfo Galeotti Torres, the crafter of most of the extant monuments in Guatemala, unveiled this status of Atanasio Tzul in 1972. Today it stands in front of the Municipal building of Totonicapán, the city he helped lead in rebellion against the Spanish in 1820.
Chapter 5: The Burden of Memory

49: Close-up view of the memorial at Cantel. The inscription reads: “Their hatred of tyrants made them martyrs. Here rest the remains of a municipality (community), and patriots (who were) shot on September 4, 1884. Municipality of 1958.”
50: A tranquil town today, Cantel was the site of Guatemala’s first forays into mechanized textile production—a tradition continued today in the maquiladora economy (cf. Thomas 2009). In the photo above, the red roofs of the sprawling fábrica (factory) are visible. First opened in 1874, the Cantel fábrica remains in operation (though it ceased production from 2008-2010) (cf. Gamarro & Toc 2010).
Chapter 6: Testimonio in Guatemalan Remembering Practices

51: Nobel laureate Rigoberta Menchú Tum, receiving an award at the University of the Valley of Guatemala, 2011. My students were eager to attend the ceremony in order to hear Menchú’s speech.
Example of the types of propaganda posters hung outside the court building prior to the sentencing of ex-PAC members for the massacre at Dos Erres in 1982: “Captured. Massacre at Dos Erres. For more than 250 people, men, women, and children that were massacred in the parcelamiento of Dos Erres in 1982 we demand justice. No substituted measures.”
53: This poster supports one of the defendants: “Sirs of the Inter-American Court [for Human Rights] it is begged of you to investigate more deeply the record of Carlos Carías and that you realize his innocence…” The photo depicts the accused coaching a soccer team.
54: The Palace of Justice, site of the Supreme Court of Guatemala.
Chapter 7: Memory Offensives and Offensive Memories

56: The ‘villagers’ are left in a pile of bodies after their murder by the ‘soldiers,’ during a performance of Contrahuella. Photo credit Caja Lúdica.
57: The external wall of this building is completely covered by empapelados, along with graffiti proclaiming “Neither forgetting, nor forgiveness. 45 thousand detained / disappeared.” Photo credit CPR-Urbana.
58: Flyers such as this one were posted throughout Zone 1 of Guatemala City in anticipation of the June 2011 Memory Offensive. The slogan for that year was “Genocide: The peoples are going to judge you.”
59: Memory Offensive poster from a previous year, utilizing a photo taken during one of the dramatic standoffs between members of H.I.J.O.S. and the metropolitan police in full riot gear.
60: Map illustrating the route of the Memory March in 2011. Beginning at the entrance to Parque Morazan, we proceeded directly down 6th Avenue to the Constitutional Plaza, the central park of Guatemala City. Directly in front of the cathedral, event organizers had set up a stage for the concert that followed. At two points along the route—the Supreme Electoral Tribunal and the site of the Presidential House—we passed within a few meters of heavily armed members of the military and national police.
61: Banners carried during the Memory March, June 2011. “In your vote, don’t forget me.”
62: Faces of the disappeared and murdered, printed on a long banner and carried during the Memory March, June 2011.
63: One of the long banners being carried during the Memory March. June, 2011.
64: Graffiti artists created these portraits of disappeared/murdered citizens, including Rogelia Cruz Martínez, who won Miss Universe Guatemala in 1959. She was assassinated in 1968.
65: Scene of participants in the Memory March, June 2011. The red flags included portraits of disappeared/murdered loved ones.
66: Scene of the drumline from the 2011 Memory March. The man in the foreground was tossing a baton with sticks; members of Caja Lúdica are visible walking on their stilts.
67: Scene of one of the graffiti teams in action, quickly spraypainting through their stencil. There were various photographers recording the face-paced action.
68: One of the completed stencils – The text reads "No more evictions"
69: This photo was taken several months after the Memory March. Although the graffiti remains, the empapelados have been scraped away. The message reads “Evictions continue genocide. Widmann you go to jail. Civil or military government, history repeats. Polochic still in the fight”
70: A young man dressed in a clown costume sits to listen to the preliminary remarks before the Memory Offensive.
71: “Polochic Reality”—graffiti left during the 2011 Memory March. The photographs depict wounded villagers from the evictions at Polochic, just weeks before the March.
72: Scene of the mock reburial “altar” outside the Caja Lúdica building, during the 2011 Memory March.
73: Another scene of the altar, highlighting the attractive photo opportunity it represented for many of the participants in the march.
74: Bystanders and shopkeepers watching the Memory March pass along Sexta Avenida.
Before the Memory March began, a representative from H.I.J.O.S. read a prepared statement.
76: The area immediately in front of the stage was reserved for the banners, as well as flowers on a bed of pine needles.
Another image of participants in the 2011 Memory March.
As the marchers entered the central plaza, over a dozen uniformed police officers stood by, watching. Most seemed to be at ease. The participation of jugglers and clowns from Caja Lúdica lent the Memory Offensive a playful, disarming air.
79: Graffiti from the 2011 Memory Offensive. “Where are they?”
80: The concert stage in front of the Metropolitan Cathedral, during the 2011 Memory Offensive.
Chapter 8: Institutional Commemoration: New Cartographies of History

81: My autographed copy of *Kaqchikela* features this note from the author, Guillermo Paz Cárcamo:
“To Doc with appreciation for your interest in knowing these histories that are not the official versions. Guillermo Paz, Guatemala, August 2008”
82: In 2010-2011, under the Colom administration, the National Palace of Culture hosted an exhibition on the 1944 Revolution, a sign of engagement with a controversial period in history.
Students seated in a “bus” watch a video about racial discrimination in the IIARS exhibit.
84: This module from the IIARS exhibit recreates a scene from pre-contact Maya ceramics, along with the note that “The ancestors of the present-day indigenous people were the first inhabitants of what is today Guatemala.”
85: “The indigenous people identify themselves in various ways, but all are united by the recognition of their shared history.”
86: “Look at how many places present-day Guatemalans came from”
La colonia nos dejó una sociedad en la cual se valora a las personas por su origen y su color.

Españoles
Criollos
Castas
Indígenas
Negros

87: This module of the IIARS exhibit demonstrates the colonial-era racial hierarchy, as well as the proportion of population that fit into each group.
Several modules of the IIARS exhibit illustrated stories of racial discrimination suffered by indigenous and Afro-Caribbean Guatemalas (Garifuna). The text above reads: “When I had to supervise the employees of the Ministry, they wouldn’t let me enter the offices, despite knowing that I was to go (visit). When I managed to enter, all of the employees went and hid, but I could hear them laughing. When I had made the denunciation [i.e., filed charges of discrimination], they argued that they didn’t know that I was the vice-minister, and didn’t know me. But I am a human being and I deserved the attention I was owed.”
The IIARS exhibit was possibly the first Guatemalan museum to broach discussion of the 1944 October Revolution, the 10-year period of democratic rule that ended with a CIA-backed coup d’etat in 1954.
The dispute between dictatorship and democracy brought with it many social demands and armed conflict. All of this demonstrates the difficult history of our relationships. Armed conflict: When, because of competing ideas, organized groups and governments confront each other with arms to impose their will on each other.
91: A display of recent publications of the K'iche’ Linguistic Community, on sale during the Congress of the Popol Wuj.
92: A diverse panel of honored guests during the opening ceremonies of the Congress of the Popol Wuj.
Curriculum Vitae

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EDUCATION

2009- Ph.D. candidate, Washington University in St. Louis, Anthropology
Dissertation title: ‘So That All Shall Know’: Memory Activism & Epistemic Authority in Guatemala
Defense scheduled for April 2014
2008 A.M., Washington University in St. Louis, Anthropology
2005 B.A., Millsaps College, Sociology-Anthropology, summa cum laude with honors

RESEARCH

Research Interests

collective memory and the politics of knowledge production; language ideologies, literacy practices, and bilingual intercultural education; social movements; indigenous rights; nationalism and state sovereignty; citizenship, diversity, & discrimination; digital technologies & gamification; Mayan language activism; Guatemala; Latin America

Grants, Fellowships, and Awards

2013 Dissertation Fellowship, Washington University in St. Louis ($20,650)
2011 Wenner-Gren Dissertation Fieldwork Grant ($9,445)
2009 Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Grant ($25,927)
2009 Graduate Student Prize, Neureuther Essay Competition ($1,000)
2008 International Pre-Dissertation Research Grant, Department of International and Area Studies, Washington University in St. Louis ($1,000)
2008 Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowship, U.S. Department of Education ($6,500)
2008 Travel Award, Department of Anthropology, Washington University in St. Louis ($2,500)
2007  Travel Award, Department of Anthropology, Washington University in St. Louis ($2,500)
2006  University Fellowship, Washington University in St. Louis ($17,500)
2004  Freeman Foundation Award for Study in Asia, Institute of International Education ($5,000)

Publications

Book Chapters


Peer-Reviewed Articles


Book Reviews


Works in Progress


Presentations of Research

Invited Talks


Conference Panels Organized & Chaired

Conference Papers Presented


2013 “Re-encountering ancestral knowledge in the Popol Wuj: Historical memory and intercultural dialogue in Quiché, Guatemala.” Annual Meeting of the Central States Anthropological Society, St. Louis, April 4-6.

2011 “Paisajes Monumentales y las Políticas de la Memoria: hacia una perspectiva comparativa.” IX Congreso de Estudios Mayas (Congress of Maya Studies), Guatemala City, Guatemala, August 2-5. Available online: (English) (Spanish)


2009 “Prácticas y producción de libros de texto y otros materiales para la educación maya”, VIII Congreso de Estudios Mayas (Congress of Maya Studies), Guatemala City, Guatemala, August 5-7.


Campus Talks

Fieldwork Experience

Ethnographic Research Experience
2009  Pre-dissertation fieldwork, May-July. Santa Cruz del Quiché, Guatemala City, and Quetzaltenango, Guatemala.
2006  Independent language study, April-June. Quetzaltenango, Guatemala.
2004  Honors thesis research on Thai Family Planning Program, August-December. Chiang Mai University, Thailand.

**Archaeological Research Experience**

2002  Archaeological field school and independent soil chemistry research, Körös Regional Archaeological Project, Véstö, Békés County, Hungary.
2002  Archaeological field school, Blue Ridge Center for Environmental Stewardship, Loudoun County, Virginia.

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**TEACHING**

Teaching portfolio available online and as a document upon request

**Course Experience as Instructor**

**Washington University in St. Louis—University College of Arts & Sciences**

2012 Fall  Introduction to Cultural Anthropology (enrollment: 14) [Syllabus]

**Universidad del Valle de Guatemala—Facultad de Ciencias Sociales**

2010 Fall  Political Anthropology: State and Society through Historical Memory (offered in Spanish) (enrollment: 15) [Syllabus]

**Washington University in St. Louis—College of Art & Sciences**

2009 Fall  National Narratives and Collective Memory (co-taught with James Wertsch) (enrollment: 13) [Syllabus]

**Course Experience as Teaching Assistant**

**Washington University in St. Louis**

2013 Spring  Introduction to Cultural Anthropology (enrollment: 343)
2012 Fall  Vote for Pedro: A Critical Look at Youth and Popular Cultures (enrollment: 41)
2012 Spring  Anthropology of Modern Latin America (enrollment: 24)
2009 Fall  Introduction to Latin American Studies (enrollment: 33)
2009 Spring  Indigenous Peoples and Movements in Latin America (enrollment: 58)
2008 Fall  Anthropology and Public Health (enrollment: 87)
2008 Spring  International Public Health (enrollment: 58)
2007 Fall  The Works and Ideas of Great Anthropologists (enrollment: 72)

**Additional Professional Training**

2012  “Teaching with Technology” Teaching Center Liberman Fellow Workshop, Washington University in St. Louis
2007  “Responding to Student Writing” Teaching Center TA Training Workshop, Washington University in St. Louis

**Language Skills**

English: native language  
Spanish: speak, read, and write fluently  
K’iche’: intermediate speaking, reading, and writing  
Thai: elementary speaking and reading  
German: elementary reading

**Professional Affiliations**

2013-  Latin American Studies Association  
2012-  American Ethnological Society  
2012-  Anthropology & Environment Society  
2012-  Central States Anthropological Society  
2012-  Digital Anthropologies Interest Group  
2012-  Human Sexuality and Anthropology Interest Group  
2005-  Guatemala Scholars Network  
2005-  Society for Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology  
2005-  American Anthropological Association

**Service**

2013  Workshop on “Ethnographic Data Privacy and Protection” for Department of Anthropology, Washington University in St. Louis  
2008-  Member of Guatemala Scholars Network planning task force.  
2008-2009  Socio-cultural representative to Anthropology Graduate Student Committee of Three, Washington University in St. Louis.  
2007-2009  Planning committee, Ethics Night on Campus program, Center for the Study of Ethics and Human Values, Washington University in St. Louis.  
2006  Volunteer website coordinator and survey data analyst for Latino Memphis, a non-profit education and advocacy organization, Memphis, Tennessee.  