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# The Presence of the Past in Three Guatemalan Classrooms: The Role of Teachers in a Post-Conflict Society

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Latin American Studies Honors Thesis  
Honors Advisor Professor Steve Volk  
Oberlin College  
2013

*Que la historia que pasamos  
quede en las escuelas,  
para que no se olvide,  
para que nuestros hijos la conozcan.*

*Un testigo ante la CEH<sup>1</sup>*

*That the history of our past  
remain in the schools,  
so that it is not forgotten,  
so that our children come to know it.*

*A witness before the CEH*

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<sup>1</sup> Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico (CEH), *Conclusiones y recomendaciones: Guatemala memoria del silencio*, (Guatemala: F & G Editores, 1999).

## **Acknowledgements**

This work would not have been possible without the generous support of my dear friend, Shirley Yancor, whose inspiration and guidance was invaluable throughout this process. Were it not for our conversations about the transformative power of education I would never have had the inspiration to undertake this work.

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I want to thank all of my professors, in particular Emanuela Grama, Claire Solomon, and Ari Ofengenden, for challenging me to think critically and reflectively about the purpose and value of education.

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### **Conclusion**

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## Introduction

During my first visit to Guatemala, I was told never to speak about the war. “Everyone has memories,” my Spanish instructor told me, “but better not to ask.” It was in this way that I was introduced to Guatemala’s culture of silence—to a conditioned gaze that looks at the past without *seeing* it. On January 14, 2012, I was reminded of this silence as I listened to the radio broadcast of the Presidential inauguration of General Otto Perez Molina.<sup>2</sup> Twelve days later, on January 26, 2012, Guatemalan news sources announced the indictment of General Efraín Ríos Montt for acts of genocide and crimes against humanity.<sup>3</sup> The confluence of these events was stunning.

As active members of the military during the Guatemalan civil war (1960-1996), and trainees of the “School of the Americas,” both President Molina and General Ríos Montt have been implicated in the genocide that was perpetrated by the Guatemalan state against the indigenous population between 1981 and 1983. Both leaders have publically denied that this genocide occurred. Guatemalans simultaneously elected a man who denies that the genocide occurred and indicted one of the highest-ranking perpetrators of the genocide. What histories had enabled this election and indictment, and how could Guatemalans reconcile the two events?

In this paper, I look at these questions through the lens of the educational system in Guatemala. Are the histories of civil war and genocide taught in Guatemalan schools? If so, what narratives have students been taught and *how*? Have these histories of war and violence informed the classroom in other ways? To answer these questions required both a top-down and a bottom-up approach, looking at education as both a state-driven project and a collection of individual

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<sup>2</sup> “Perez sworn in as Guatemala’s President,” *AlJazeera*, January 15, 2012. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/americas/2012/01/201211503339978833.html>.

<sup>3</sup> “The Trial of Efraín Ríos Montt & Mauricio Rodriguez Sanchez,” *Open Society Justice Initiative*, accessed April 26, 2012. <http://www.riosmontt-trial.org/trial-background/>.

teachers and teaching moments. This approach also necessitated that I employ an interdisciplinary methodology, one that would use historical scholarship to explore Guatemalan history and the history of its educational system, as well as ethnographic approaches to examine the rich discourses taking place in individual classrooms.

Between June 2012 and January 2013, I spent four months in Guatemala conducting a series of classroom observations in three secondary schools in Quetzaltenango, where I focused on social studies education at the *nivel básico*. In the United States, *nivel básico* would align roughly with 7th, 8th, and 9th grade. I spent over a hundred hours in the schools, observing classes, interviewing teachers, and speaking with many students. This thesis, the result of these observations and my analysis of secondary sources on Guatemalan history, seeks both to understand individual teaching moments and to place them within the greater context of the Guatemalan civil war (1960-1996) and the genocide during that war (1981-1983).

The civil war and the genocide have left Guatemala traumatized and divided. It is within the context of this history that the Guatemalan state mobilized education in order to establish a common history and build consensus regarding the country's future. The state's plans to cope with this traumatic past have been carefully outlined in publications by the Ministry of Education and through the development of a national curriculum. Ultimately, the success of this project depends on the actions of individual teachers and how they choose to teach the curriculum. The state's intention of using the educational system as a means of addressing and resolving the issues which generated both war and genocide is incomplete and halting, but it does create a possibility for addressing Guatemala's past. Whether that possibility is realized depends fully on Guatemala's teachers.

In the chapters that follow, I will examine the complex interaction between state and teacher, past and present, history and narrative. In chapter one, I will explore Guatemala's recent history of war and genocide, highlighting the ways that these events have been silenced through discourse and have become subjects of contention. In chapter two, I will examine how the educational system has been used to establish a dominant narrative of this past while creating spaces for teachers to create their own narratives. Finally, in chapter three, I will examine three moments in which teachers took the space allowed them and engaged with the contentious subjects of diversity, unity, racism, and regional difference, at times supporting and at times challenging the state's narrative. In this chapter, I will also situate these moments within a growing body of scholarship on the role of history education in post-conflict societies, particularly well developed in the context of post-Holocaust Germany, Rwanda, and Chile. As yet, Guatemala is underrepresented in this scholarship, though several works have been published in the last several years. It is my hope that my work will open new avenues for further historical and anthropological work on the subject.

### **History and Memory: A Theoretical Framework**

A central argument of this paper is that the past pervades and informs every action that takes place in the Guatemalan classroom. This argument takes issue with the traditional, positivist approach to history, which sees history as a series of "fixed" and "true" narratives of the past.<sup>4</sup> In order to challenge this approach to history, and think about history education in a different way, I will draw upon the work of prominent memory theorists Maurice Halbwachs and Michel-Rolph Trouillot. Placed in dialogue with one another, these two theorists create a valuable framework for analyzing the construction of memory and the production of history.

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<sup>4</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 5.



Known for his influential work *On Collective Memory*, French philosopher Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945) was the first theorist to challenge the established view of memory as recollection, arguing instead that memories are the product of the present. By this Halbwachs meant that memories relied upon context and were informed by all of the events and factors that took place before and after the event that was remembered. This theory suggests that memories are always subject to change, and can be influenced (both consciously and unconsciously) by the actions of others. On the subject of history Halbwach's writes, "History is neither the whole nor even all that remains of the past. In addition to written history, there is a living history that perpetuates and renews itself through time and permits the recovery of many old currents that have seemingly disappeared."<sup>5</sup> With this statement Halbwachs encourages his reader to pay attention to the active role that individuals play in constructing historical narratives.

While I cannot overemphasize the importance of Halbwachs' contribution to the field of memory studies, his text lacks a discussion of the influence that power and repression can exert over the processes of memory construction and the production of history. In order to produce a useful framework for the study of history in Guatemala, a post-colonial, post-conflict country, I will consider Halbwachs in conjunction with Michel-Rolph Trouillot, whose work calls attention to the relationship between memory, silence and power in the post-colonial context.

In his work *Silencing the Past*, Haitian theorist Michel-Rolph Trouillot points to the West's classification of all non-Western societies as non-historical (meaning both without a sense of history and without historical documentation) as an example of the relationship between power and history.<sup>6</sup> "Tracking power requires a richer view of historical production than most theorists acknowledge," Trouillot writes, "we cannot exclude in advance any of the actors who

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<sup>5</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 64.

<sup>6</sup> Trouillot, 7. The seminal study of this theme comes from anthropologist Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press), 2010.

participate in the production of history or any of the sites where that production may occur.”<sup>7</sup>

With this statement Trouillot encourages a broader approach to the process of narrative construction. In the post-colonial context, one must not only acknowledge, but actively search for, the ways in which the power structures that colonialism established have allowed or disallowed certain narratives of the past.

Trouillot’s exploration of this intersection between power, memory and history is crucial for the discussion of education and history in post-war Guatemala. Read in conjunction, the works produced by Halbwachs and Trouillot provide a theoretical framework that views history as a product of the present, subject to past and present power structures and influenced by pre-existing frameworks that have conditioned our approach to social categories and historical events. In addition, their texts require a fundamental shift regarding temporality that blurs the line between “past” and “present.” On this distinction Trouillot writes,

...the past does not exist independently from the present. Indeed, the past is only past because there is a present, just as I can point to something over there only because I am here. But nothing is inherently over there or here. In that sense, the past has no content. The past—or, more accurately, pastness—is a position. Thus in no way can we identify the past as past.<sup>8</sup>

By viewing the “past” and the “present” as concepts that are dependent on one another, Trouillot allows his reader to cross between the two temporalities, and to sit in the crossroads where they intersect. It is in this space, between “past” and “present” that I will situate the social studies classroom as a site in which “past” and “present” bleed into one another.

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<sup>7</sup> Trouillot, 25.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 15.

## Chapter One: The Past Beneath the Silence

*In the frenetic escalation of painful memories, there is always more. It seems each time, when I thought we had reached the final ebb, when I felt overwhelmed with their memories of terror, when there just could not possibly be more horror that a human being could suffer and endure, these new friends who accepted me as their confidante would say, "There is more."<sup>9</sup>*

### Introduction

Each time that I try to write about the Guatemalan civil war I am tempted to use the words *unimaginable* and *unthinkable* to describe the violence that took place throughout this conflict. The decision to murder an entire village, for example, or burn a woman's body beyond recognition are unimaginable, and yet my use of the word unimaginable is misleading, for not only were these acts imagined and thought, they were also realized. In his work *The Century*, French philosopher Alain Badiou addresses this point, arguing that the categorization of a major event or action as "unthinkable" in fact protects the perpetrator(s) of the act and increases the likelihood that similar events will take place in the future. Using the Holocaust and the violence committed by the Nazis an example, Badiou writes, "to maintain that Nazism is not a form of thought, or, more generously, that barbarism does not think, is to abet a process of surreptitious absolution."<sup>10</sup> To truly understand an event, according to Badiou, we must understand the forces that made the event possible as well as examine "what was thought in the century that was previously unthought—or even unthinkable."<sup>11</sup>

The task that Badiou outlines is difficult. In the case of Guatemala, to understand what made the genocide possible requires careful examination of more than five centuries of ethnic

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<sup>9</sup> Diane M. Nelson, *A Finger in the Wound: Body Politics in Quincentennial Guatemala* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 94.

<sup>10</sup> Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 4.

<sup>11</sup> Badiou, 3.

and cultural conflict between Guatemala's indigenous and non-indigenous populations. Of the massacres that took place during the Guatemalan civil war and genocide, Guatemalan anthropologist Ricardo Falla wrote the following, "The root causes of the massacres are from many centuries ago. The accounts of the witnesses gathered together in this book bear a great resemblance to the massacres carried out by the conquistadors 500 years ago. As we commemorate the fifth-century anniversary [of Columbus' original landing], we should not conceal the continuing effects of the violence of the conquest."<sup>12</sup> Falla's statement is useful in that it expands the context of the civil war and establishes a direct line between the Spanish treatment of the indigenous population and the genocide perpetrated against the indigenous in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. What Falla's comment leaves out, and what must be addressed, are the processes that took place during the 500-year period that maintained and complicated the relationship between the indigenous and ladino populations. Why did the war escalate as it did *when* it did, and how has Guatemala tried to understand the experience of genocide in the years following the war? These are the questions that I will work through in this section as I set the stage for a larger discussion of the role of education in post-war Guatemala. With Falla's remark in mind, I will trace back several of these ethnic and cultural tensions, though not quite as far as Falla suggests, to the colonial period, even though the conquest itself is the logical starting point.

### **The Roots of Ethnic/Cultural Conflict**

The colonial period that followed the Spanish conquest of Guatemala established a framework of structural violence against the Indigenous Maya. This violence was carried out by the Spaniards with the cooperation of a growing number of racially "mixed" Spanish/Indigenous

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<sup>12</sup> Falla, 4.

individuals referred to as ladinos.<sup>13</sup> Through systems of forced labor (*encomienda*, *repartimiento*, *tanda*) and a legal system that separated Spanish and native peoples, creoles and ladinos, ladinos effectively collaborated on a framework for the continued exclusion and exploitation of the indigenous people that limited indigenous access to land, education and resources.<sup>14</sup> To a great degree one can see the remnants of these policies today, though they have changed in name and form. In some ways ironically, many scholars have argued that the situation for the indigenous population was actually better during the colonial period than after independence since communal native land rights were (often, but not always) honored by the Spanish. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, as Guatemala increasingly turned toward Liberal reform which valued individual land ownership titles over collective titles (*ejidos*), those protections were removed and the native peoples' lands were increasingly squeezed.<sup>15</sup> In a recent article published in the *Prensa Libre*, one of Guatemala's primary newspapers, Sandra Valdez argued that the structural exploitation of the indigenous has continued through the appropriation of indigenous land for government projects of resource extraction such as hydroelectric mining and poor funding for education and health care in rural, indigenous communities.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Standard nomenclature refers to Spaniards born in Spain who migrated to the New World as "españoles," Spaniards born in the New World as "criollos" (creoles), and, children of Spaniards and the indigenous population as "mestizos." The use of the term ladino is localized in Central America, particularly Guatemala, and will reference not just racial "mixing," but indigenous people who have become more culturally similar to the Spanish. For a good account of this see Cecilia Menjivar, *Enduring Violence: Ladina Women's Lives in Guatemala* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Angela B. Anthony, "The Minority that is a Majority: Guatemala's Indians," in Susanne Jonas and David Tobis, eds., *Guatemala* (Berkeley: The North American Congress on Latin America, 1974), 28. For an excellent background on the subject see David McCreery, *Rural Guatemala, 1760-1940* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 1994. The anthropological works of Richard N. Adams are also valuable. See his *Crucifixion by Power: Essays on Guatemalan National Social Structure, 1944-1966* (Austin: University of Texas Press), 1970.

<sup>15</sup> The transition between the presidency of the Conservative leader, Rafael Carrera, a mestizo who rose to the presidency in 1844, and Justo Rufino Barrios, a Liberal who became president in 1871, is an important one. See Ralph Lee Woodward, *Rafael Carrera and the Emergence of the Republic of Guatemala, 1821-1871* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press), 1993.

<sup>16</sup> Sandra Valdez, "Persiste racismo y exclusion contra pueblos indígenas," *Prensa Libre*, May 29, 2012 ([http://www.prensalibre.com/noticias/justicia/Persiste-racismo-exclusion-pueblos-indigenas\\_0\\_708529386.html](http://www.prensalibre.com/noticias/justicia/Persiste-racismo-exclusion-pueblos-indigenas_0_708529386.html)).

One result of these exploitative and dehumanizing colonial practices was the manipulation of the indigenous identity, which was crafted by those in power in a way that authorized and explained their (creole and ladino) need to dominate the native peoples, much as was the case in the United States vis-à-vis blacks during and after slavery. The very term “indigenous” was imagined with extreme prejudice, perpetuating the myth of the “slow,” “incompetent,” and “lazy” Indian. In opposition to this identity, the term “ladino” came to be defined as strictly non-indigenous.<sup>17</sup> In recent years, both of these terms have been contested, with some scholars opting to use the term *Maya* instead of indigenous. Few, however, have moved away from the use of the term ladino, though some authors have explored the problems associated with continued use of the term. While acknowledging the arguments in favor of the term *Maya*, I have decided to use the terms “indigenous” and “ladino” in my account because these were the dominant terms used in Quetzaltenango where I conducted my research.<sup>18</sup>

To further deconstruct these identities, it is important to explore how the distinction between the indigenous and the ladinos has been misconstrued as an ethnic difference. Over the last thirty years this difference has been challenged and re-defined as a much more complicated identification having to do, in *addition* to ethnicity, with issues of culture, identity and geographic location. “Racially, most of the Guatemalan population is to some degree of mixture between Indian and early conquerors or later immigrants. Culturally, however, there are

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<sup>17</sup> In many Latin American countries this issue was referred to as the “Indian Problem,” which saw the indigenous population as a problem to be solved, either through social exclusion or integration i.e. *ladinization*. For more on this subject see Jim Handy, *Gift of the Devil: A History of Guatemala* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 91.

<sup>18</sup> Anthropologist Diane Nelson argues in favor of the term *Maya*, as opposed to indigenous, because use of the term “Maya” has become one component of the movement to create “new, pan-indigenous identification.” Nelson, 5. For more information about the terms used to identify Guatemala’s different ethnicities see René Reeves, *Ladinos with Ladinos, Indians with Indians: Land, Labor, and Regional Ethnic Conflict in the Making of Guatemala* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 2006; Greg Grandin, *The Blood of Guatemala: A History of Race and Nation* (Durham: Duke University Press), 2000; and Diane Nelson, *A Finger in the Wound: Body Politics in Quincentennial Guatemala* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1999.

differences in dress, language, and customs that set the indigenous population apart from the others.”<sup>19</sup> Still, despite the complexity of these issues, many historical and anthropological works on Guatemala have divided the country into two ethnic groups: “Indigenous” meaning native and “Ladino” meaning of both Spanish and Indigenous descent. While these terms are undeniably useful for writing about the civil war and Guatemala’s extensive history of violence, it is important to recognize that the terms are fraught with tension and are subject to debate.

The tension between the indigenous and the ladinos is best illustrated by anthropologist Diane Nelson in the introduction to her ethnographic work on Guatemala, *A Finger in the Wound*. In this work, Nelson describes a powerful metaphor that is used in Guatemala to describe the emotional impact of discussions on ethnic difference. “In interviews” Nelson writes, “Guatemalans speak of their nation as a wounded body. When asked about Mayan cultural rights activism, both non-indigenous Guatemalans (ladinos) and Maya say that it is a ‘finger in the wound’ (*un dedo en la llaga*), suggesting that attempts to address ethnic difference are painful proddings, irritating interventions.”<sup>20</sup> Though Nelson complicates the metaphor with multiple readings, the implication is clear: that the history of ethnic difference in Guatemala is painful and deeply contentious for all involved. In addition, the metaphor speaks not only of an antagonistic history between the indigenous and the ladinos, but also of a present fraught with tension that is best left unexplored.

It is this history of conflict, inequality and tension that forms a primary part of the context for the Guatemalan civil war. It also illuminates part of the foundation for the genocide that was perpetrated against the indigenous population from 1981-1983. Regarding questions of causality, we must remain conscious of this history of conflict as we try to wrap our minds around the scale

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<sup>19</sup> Anthony, 28.

<sup>20</sup> Diane M. Nelson, *A Finger in the Wound: Body Politics in Quincentennial Guatemala* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 2.

and horror of the civil war and genocide. Furthermore, we cannot forget that this “past” is always “present,” particularly when we consider the treatment of history in Guatemalan schools and the role of teachers in the post-war period. Because these tensions between the indigenous and the ladinos have not been resolved, we must look for them in different, and sometimes unexpected ways.

While it is important to acknowledge the history of conflict between the indigenous and ladinos, we must be careful not to craft this relationship as one between victim and victimizer. Narratives that treat the indigenous as mere victims of unequal and prejudicial policies perpetuate the myth that throughout the colonial and post-colonial periods the indigenous were both complacent and silent. Quite the contrary, indigenous organizing has a strong history in Guatemala, particularly among the lowest classes (sometimes referred to as the peasant [*campesino*] class).<sup>21</sup> These narratives of struggle and opposition are important, not only because they complicate the histories outlined in the previous sections, but also because they provide a context for the Guatemalan revolution and the civil war. In the case of the Guatemalan civil war, and in the Latin American Cold War on the whole, the indigenous from all classes, and the rural peasantry in particular, played a central role by challenging established power structures and demanding the opening of political and social spaces.

### **The Latin American Cold War**

Rather than view the war in Guatemala as an isolated event in Latin American history it is useful to situate this conflict within the context of the Cold War and specifically the Latin

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<sup>21</sup> Jim Handy, *Gift of the Devil: A History of Guatemala* (Massachusetts: South End Press, 1984), 15.



American Cold War.<sup>22</sup> This period, beginning in 1945 with the end of World War II, can be broadly characterized as a period of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary movements, many of which were inspired by the success of the Cuban revolution and the installation of a Socialist government under the leadership of Fidel Castro. Driven by similar desires to increase political and social spaces and depose regimes of power and privilege, these movements were composed primarily of the peasant and urban working class and varied in nature and scale, some driven by nationalism, some socialism and some Communism.<sup>23</sup> While the “Latin American Cold War” saw some moments of impressive and (momentarily successful) popular successes (Chile from 1970-1973; Nicaragua in 1979), it was no less marked by the vicious repression which many of the revolutionary movements encountered, as in El Salvador, Chile (after 1973), Argentina (from 1974-1983), and, of course, Guatemala.

As with many of the conflicts listed above, the Guatemalan conflict began with a revolution. However it is set apart by the sheer scale of the violence (an estimated 200,000 were killed in Guatemala, as opposed to 50,000 in El Salvador and 3,000 in Chile), the nature of the U.S. intervention and the war’s descent into an ethnically (or identity) based genocide.<sup>24</sup>

### **Revolution, Repression and Civil War**

The importance of the Guatemalan Revolution (1944-1954) cannot be emphasized enough, particularly when one contrasts the hope that the revolution inspired with the scale of

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<sup>22</sup> I first encountered this term, “Latin American Cold War”, in Greg Grandin’s text *The Last Colonial Massacre* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pg. 5. See, as well, Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniela Spenser, eds., *In from the Cold: Latin America’s New Encounter with the Cold War* (Durham: Duke University Press), 2008, and Hal Brands, *Latin America’s Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 2012.

<sup>23</sup> Grandin argues that the Latin American Cold War did not begin with the 1954 CIA coup in Guatemala, nor in 1959 with the Castro’s rise to power, but instead in the years immediately following World War II with the ousting of dictators, particularly in Central America, and the expansion of a mobilized, working class. Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre*, 5.

<sup>24</sup> Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre*, 74.

repression that followed. Commonly referred to as the “Ten Years of Spring,” the revolution began with the 1944 overthrow of the dictator Jorge Ubico by a coalition of university students, professionals and young soldiers. This coalition fought to create a new nation in a country in which the popular classes had never had a say.<sup>25</sup> During the two governments that followed the revolution, led by Juan José Arévalo (1945-1950) and Jacobo Arbenz (1951-1954) respectively, the state instituted broad reforms including the abolition of forced labor, a guaranteed minimum wage, the stipulation of workers’ rights and increased social welfare. In addition, this period was marked by Jacobo Arbenz’ attempt to institute an extensive agrarian reform in 1952, a decision which can be understood as the straw that broke the camel’s back.<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, this period was, for many Guatemalans, a time of hope that was defined by an increase in social and political participation, particularly noticeable among Guatemala’s indigenous population who, for the first time, were extended a series of rights under the state.<sup>27</sup>

What would have happened, we can ask, if Arbenz had been allowed to remain in power and effectively implement his agrarian reform of 1952? Would political and social participation have continued to grow? Would indigenous and ladino relations be unrecognizable from what they are today? The questions are endless, and pose many interesting counterfactuals, but as we know, these questions cannot change the events themselves, as much as we would like them to. In 1954 Jacobo Arbenz was deposed by a military coup led by the United States, and the political spaces recently opened were closed once again.<sup>28</sup> The threat to Guatemalan elites and U.S

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<sup>25</sup> Handy, 103.

<sup>26</sup> Susanne Jonas, *Of Centaurs and Doves: Guatemala’s Peace Process* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), 18.

<sup>27</sup> Handy, 104.

<sup>28</sup> Quite an extensive historiography has been developed on the 1954 coup in Guatemala. See, among others, Nick Cullather’s *Secret History: The CIA’s Classified Account of its Operations in Guatemala, 1952-1954* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 1999; Richard H. Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala: The Foreign Policy of Intervention* (Austin: University of Texas Press), 1983 and Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit: The Untold Story of the American Coup in Guatemala*, rev. and expanded ed. (Cambridge, MA: David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, Harvard University), 2005.

corporate interests had become too great, inciting the U.S to lead the overthrow of the Arbenz government and install Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas in his place. The significance of this coup cannot be overstated, for, as Nick Cullather writes, “the overthrown Arbenz government... offered perhaps the last chance for progressive, democratic change in the region.”<sup>29</sup> While I agree with the significance that Cullather attributes to the 1954 coup, I would challenge him on one point. Rather than view Arbenz as “the last chance for progressive, democratic change,” we should approach Arbenz through his own political framework and therefore argue that Arbenz was the last hope for the development of a strong Socialist state in Guatemala.

The length of the war, which many scholars argue began in 1954, and the alternation between periods of intense repression and periods of relative calm, make it difficult to synthesize the events that took place during the war and the dynamic between forces of revolution and counter-revolution that drove the conflict. In his text, *Massacres of the Jungle*, Ricardo Falla provides a helpful summary of these periods in which he divides the 40 years of conflict into four main periods, each characterized “by the ebbs and flows of the great forces in conflict.” “The flow,” Falla writes, “is the wave of popular unrest and political activity in search of a more just society. The ebb is intense repression that once again drowns these expressions into passivity.” The four periods that Falla describes are; first (1944-1954) or the “Ten Years of Spring” which began with the “flow” of popular organizing and was met by the “ebb” of the 1954 coup; second (1954-1966), which witnessed the birth of the Guatemalan guerrilla movement, itself inspired by events in nearby Cuba, and the state’s repressive counterinsurgency response; third (1966-1982) marked by increased indigenous participation in the guerrilla movement and a state-initiated scorched earth campaign; and finally, the fourth (1982-1996),

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<sup>29</sup> Nick Cullather, *Secret History: The CIA’s Classified Account of Its Operations in Guatemala, 1952- 1954* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 8.

marked by an escalation in violence followed by peace talks between the revolutionary forces and the government.<sup>30</sup> Though history is always more complex than periodization suggests, Falla's distinctions between the ebbs and flows of the war are useful in that they help us consider the relationship between popular organizing and state repression. With this in mind, I will briefly examine these ebbs and flows in more detail, focusing in particular on Falla's final two periods and the events of the genocide.

As Ricardo Falla illustrates, among other influences the Cuban Revolution of 1959 played a critical role in the formation of guerrilla forces in Guatemala. While not necessarily the result of direct support from Cuba, although there was some, the guerrilla movement in Guatemala was influenced by the "foco" (guerrilla) theory developed by Ernesto (Che) Guevara and Regis Debray, as well as a widespread belief that rural guerrilla warfare (more than urban organizing) had been the critical element in securing a rebel victory in Cuba.<sup>31</sup> Inspired by the victory of Communism in Cuba, and angered by the six years of counterrevolution that had followed the 1954 coup, small pockets of discontent began to coalesce into a larger opposition movement throughout the early 1960's. By 1962, several of these groups had come together to form the Rebel Armed Forces (FAR), a group that began to push for the development of guerrilla warfare in rural regions of Guatemala. Particularly important was the FAR's decision to establish "guerrilla fronts," areas identified as the most effective sites for the success of concerted rebel activity and sabotage in conditions where government forces outnumbered insurgents. These fronts were located in the rural, mountainous regions of Izabal, Zacapa Granadilla, and Zacapa Sierra de las Minas, and depended largely on the support of rural peasants for their operations.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Falla, 4-8.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>32</sup> Louise Frank, "Resistance and Revolution: The Development of Armed Struggle in Guatemala," in Susanne Jonas and David Tobis, eds., *Guatemala* (New York: North American Congress on Latin America, 1974), 181.

Although, as mentioned earlier, indigenous support for the guerrilla movement did increase throughout the war, it is important to note that the strategy of the early guerrillas was based, in large part, around the support of rural, indigenous communities. This has led to some dispute about the role of the indigenous throughout the war and the argument, articulated by historian David Stoll, that the indigenous were “caught between two armies,” the guerrillas and the military.<sup>33</sup> While there certainly may have been moments in which (and individuals for whom) this was true, Stoll’s argument denies the indigenous agency as actors in this war. Indeed, a large body of scholarship has been developed that contradicts this claim and highlights the critical role of the indigenous in the guerrilla movement. Susanne Jonas is among these authors, and she highlights support for the guerrilla army in rural, primarily indigenous regions. By 1980-81, Jonas notes, the guerrilla uprising had reached its peak with 6,000-8,000 armed fighters and an estimated 250,000-500,000 collaborators and supporters, many of whom were from indigenous communities in the western highlands of Guatemala.<sup>34</sup> It is worthwhile to note that it was also the communities located in the western highlands that experienced the worst acts of violence and terror during the genocide.

Though the numbers that Jonas cites tell a powerful tale of resistance, they also illuminate a devastating story of repression that made such resistance necessary. Beginning with the coup of 1954, the U.S. government made its support of the military regime in Guatemala a priority, citing it as the only force that could stop Guatemala’s move towards communism. As a result, the CIA assisted the Guatemalan military in developing horrifically violent and repressive strategies of counterrevolution, key among them strategies of torture, disappearance and targeted

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<sup>33</sup> David Stoll, *Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 95.

<sup>34</sup> Jonas, *Of Centaurs and Doves: Guatemala’s Peace Process*, 358

assassination.<sup>35</sup> With the support and training provided by the CIA, the Guatemalan army became a fine-tuned, counterinsurgency machine, capable of silencing all threats, real and imagined. Of these strategies, two deserve particular attention because of their effectiveness in spreading terror and because of the deep wounds that they left in their wake: the use of death squads in urban centers and the development of Civil Defense Patrols in rural regions.

The death squads in Guatemala were unique in that many of them, such as the *MANO Blanca* (White Hand) and *Ojo por Ojo* (Eye for and Eye) were sanctioned by the government, which was often well aware of their activities. These squads, which became particularly prevalent in the cities, were known for their acts of targeted torture and disappearances.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, because these squads functioned covertly, they helped to create a culture of fear and suspicion in Guatemala, where any suspect could be abducted during the night.

The second counterinsurgency strategy was the creation of the *Patrullas de Autodefensa Civil* or Civil Defense Patrols, a central component of President Ríos Montt's counterinsurgency policy, *Fusiles y Frijoles* (Guns and Beans; a policy that linked rural aid to participation in counterinsurgency operations). These patrols, which were made up of fifteen to thirty men, were charged with patrolling their own villages and the surrounding areas. At the root, the system of civil patrols was designed to hold the communities themselves responsible for counterinsurgent violence, thereby dividing them from within and (it was hoped) separating the guerrillas from the support of the civilian, indigenous population. These patrols, Garrard-Burnett writes, “accomplished the goal of ‘draining the sea in which the fish swim’ by isolating the guerrillas

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<sup>35</sup> Declassified documents that provide evidence of the CIA operation in Guatemala can be accessed through the National Security Archives website. To read a CIA cable that addresses these covert actions, see the declassified document, Agency for International Development, “U.S. Counter-Terror Assistance to Guatemalan Security Forces” (January 4, 1966), <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB32/vol2.html>.

<sup>36</sup> Death squads, though operating throughout the country, were particularly present in the cities and were known to target the “petty bourgeoisie,” especially students, professors and other professionals. Susanne Jonas, *The Battle for Guatemala: Rebels, Death Squads and U.S. Power* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), 62.

from their base of indigenous support and thereby weakening them nearly to the point of capitulation.”<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, because participation in these patrols was mandatory for all men in rural villages, involvement in the patrols reached an almost staggering 700,000 by 1983, making it one of the largest and most successful counterinsurgency strategies employed in Guatemala.<sup>38</sup>

The patrol system was also terrible because of the extent to which rural, civil patrollers took the power given to them and employed it, often coercively and violently, within their communities, sometimes using their positions to denounce neighbors, sow doubt amongst families, or take vengeance for preexisting disputes.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, perhaps more so than any other force, the patrols helped to fracture indigenous communities from within by instilling terror and giving power to local forces. On the subject of patrols Virginia Garrard-Burnett writes, “Without doubt, one of the most lasting effects of the civil patrol system was its effect on community cohesion, a consequence—perhaps unintended but perhaps not—that in either case helped to advance the government’s expressed goal of achieving *unidad nacional* [national unity] at the expense of indigenous and community identity.”<sup>40</sup> As Garrard-Burnett illustrates, the patrols were a part of a larger process to “un-make” indigenous communities (and, one could argue, ladino communities as well).

## Genocide

While each of the four periods that Falla outlines were marked by violence and state repression, it is the latter half of the third period (1966-1982) that is characterized as a state-

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<sup>37</sup> Virginia Garrard-Burnett, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit: Guatemala under General Efraim Rios Montt, 1982-1983* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 101.

<sup>38</sup> In 1983 Guatemala’s population was 7.6 million, meaning that roughly 11% of the population was involved in the rural patrols, a staggering figure. World Bank, “Total Population of Guatemala” (World Bank: 2013), <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/views/reports/tableview.aspx>.

<sup>39</sup> Garrard-Burnett, 102-103.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

initiated genocide perpetrated against the indigenous population. During this period, General Benedicto Lucas and his successor, Ríos Montt carried out a state-sponsored scorched-earth campaign in the rural highlands. According to the Historical Clarification Commission report, published after the war in 1999, this campaign resulted in 626 massacres of indigenous communities.<sup>41</sup> It is from this period that some of the most terrifying testimonies of violence emerged; testimonies that have led, in the years following the terror, to the characterization of this period as a genocide against the indigenous Maya.<sup>42</sup> According to the Historical Clarification Commission report, 83.3% of the victims were classified as Maya, including 32% who were K'iche, O'eqchi' (13%), Ixil (11%), Kaqchikel (10%) and Mam (11%).<sup>43</sup>

The history of the term “genocide” in Guatemala is both powerful and contentious. In her work, *Terror in the Land of the Holy Spirit*, Virginia Garrard-Burnett writes that the term “genocide” was first used to refer to repression in Guatemala in 1982 by the guerrilla force, the Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres (EGP), to describe the violence that was taking place in the highlands. The same year, a group of Guatemalan bishops published a condemnation of the violence in which they also used the term “genocide.”<sup>44</sup> It was not until the publication of the Historical Clarification Commission report in 1999, however, that the term *genocide* was used in a formal, political context. In this same work, Garrard-Burnett also highlights the importance of the pan-Mayan movement towards the creation of a genocide narrative. Garrard-Burnett writes, “rejecting the interpretive lens of the Cold War and anti-communism, indigenous leaders, with strong support from people outside their communities, particularly anthropologists, began to

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<sup>41</sup>CEH, *Guatemala: Memoria del Silencio*, Chapter 2, Volume 3, #715 (<http://shr.aaas.org/guatemala/ceh/mds/spanish/cap2/vol3/masacres.html>).

<sup>42</sup> Garrard-Burnett, 88.

<sup>43</sup> CEH, *Guatemala: Memoria del Silencio*, Chapter 2, Volume 2, #102 and #104 (<http://shr.aaas.org/guatemala/ceh/mds/spanish/cap2/vol2/sint.html>).

<sup>44</sup> Garrard-Burnett, 14.



reinterpret the recent violence in terms of racism and genocide.”<sup>45</sup> This widespread effort to re-craft the narrative as one of genocide is crucial, particularly given the Guatemalan government’s efforts to silence testimonies of genocide in the years following the war.

### **The Peace Accords**

The brutal conditions of the civil war went a long way in destroying villages and communal solidarity, but neither the government nor the armed opposition could impose a military solution on the other. After more than thirty years of war, Susanne Jonas notes, “The implicit admission that the war could not be ‘won’ militarily by either side created the conditions, for the first time beginning in the spring of 1990, for the negation of the war: serious discussions about ending it.”<sup>46</sup> After the failure of multiple attempts to organize talks between the two forces, the peace process finally began in earnest, a process that would take six years to accomplish, and would require the unceasing efforts of human rights advocates within the country and abroad. By the end of the process, forty-three accords had been drafted and signed by the guerrilla forces (under the leadership of the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemala, or URNG) and the government.<sup>47</sup> These accords included the Comprehensive Accord on Human Rights (March 1994), the accord on the Identity and Rights of Indigenous People (March 1995) and the accord on the Strengthening of Civilian Power and Role of the Armed Forces in a Democratic Society (September 1996). It was this last accord, many felt, that marked the end to the war and held the potential for a lasting peace.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Garrard-Burnett, 15.

<sup>46</sup> Jonas, *Of Centaurs and Doves* 31.

<sup>47</sup> Margriet Poppema, “Guatemala, the Peace Accords and Education: a Post-conflict Struggle for Equal Opportunities, Cultural Recognition and Participation in Education,” *Globalization, Societies and Education* 7 (November 2009): 383.

<sup>48</sup> Jonas, *Of Centaurs and Doves*, 71-86.

Without denigrating the peace accords, it is important to recognize that despite their influence in bringing the war to a close, few, if any, of the conflicts were resolved by the accords and most have continued into the present, particularly the conflict between the indigenous and ladino populations. Since 1996, when formal peace was established, a particularly intense conflict has developed around the question of whether or not genocide occurred in Guatemala. While the evidence of the genocide is, I would argue, overwhelming, several members of the government, including President Molina, have denied that it occurred. Such acts of denial have had a significant effect on Guatemala's approach to history and memory.

In his work, *Silencing the Past*, Trouillot writes, "What happened leaves traces, some of which are quite concrete—buildings, dead bodies, censuses, monuments, diaries, political boundaries—that limit the range and significance of any historical narrative. This is one of the many reasons why not any fiction can pass for history."<sup>49</sup> With this statement, Trouillot calls attention to the materiality of history and the way in which an object can evince a lived experience. For those who are willing to recognize them, the material traces of the genocide are undeniable. They are the burnt houses in the western highlands, the skeletons preserved in the depths of wells now exhumed, and the words of covert military documents piled high in formal detention centers in Guatemala City.

In addition to these traces, the report published by the Historical Clarification Commission leaves little to the imagination by describing, in detail, the acts of murder, rape and torture perpetrated throughout the war. The Commission's report, published in 1999 also confirmed what had long been argued—that between 1981 and 1983 a genocide was carried out by the state against Guatemala's indigenous population.<sup>50</sup> Again, for all who are willing to *see*,

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<sup>49</sup> Trouillot, 29.

<sup>50</sup> Jonas, *Of Centaurs and Doves*, 155.

the evidence that the genocide occurred is readily available. And yet, some histories, particularly unwelcome histories, will always be contested, and some acts, no matter how horrific, will resist labels derived from other historical moments.

### **The Production of Silence**

One way of dealing with an unwelcome history is to silence it. In this context I will draw upon Trouillot's notion of *silence* as "an active and transitive process." "One 'silences' a fact or an individual as a silencer silences a gun," Trouillot argues, "One engages in the practice of silencing."<sup>51</sup> Trouillot's reference to silencing as a "practice" is particularly interesting because it suggests that silencing can be a process of repeated, systematic acts, perpetrated with intent. Furthermore, his approach to silence as an action gives agency and responsibility to the individuals(s) who engage in acts of silencing, either by writing historical accounts that fail to illuminate certain events, characters or forces, or by refusing to listen to survivors who try to make their voices heard. Trouillot's theory can also be taken one step deeper and applied to the act of "forgetting," whereby an individual may purposefully erases his own memory of an event. To see both "silencing" and "forgetting" as practices allows for a more complex reading of the ways in which individuals interact with their pasts and enable or disable the production of certain narratives.

Applied to the larger context of post-conflict studies and history, Trouillot's theory on silence is particularly useful because it draws attention to the systems of power that inform the production of dominant histories, particularly histories of conflict. Applied specifically to the case of Guatemala, Trouillot's work on silence allows us to identify the ways in which the narratives of the war, and of the events leading up to the war, have been effectively silenced

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<sup>51</sup> Trouillot, 48.

since the peace accords were signed.<sup>52</sup> In part, this silence can be attributed to the sheer scale of the government repression that made bearing witness to violence a crime unto itself. The post-war silence can also be attributed to the impunity granted the perpetrators of the violence, codified in the 1996 National Reconciliation Law which made it difficult, if not impossible, to legally punish most war crimes and extrajudicial killings.<sup>53</sup> In essence, this law extended a legal pardon to the perpetrators of the violence, an act that horrified the human rights community in Guatemala and abroad. What was stunning about this legal finding was not that those in power who were responsible for crimes against humanity would attempt to find ways to shield themselves from criminal liability, but that this was happening when the human rights community was beginning to reverse the impunity enjoyed by dictators in other countries and challenge existing amnesty laws.

In terms of public influence, one of the most notable beneficiaries of this law has been President Otto Perez Molina, who was elected President in January 2012 despite (or, quite possibly, because of) the role that he played in the civil war as a military general. President Molina, a student in the U.S.-backed School of the Americas and a trainer of Guatemala's most violent killing force, the *Kaibiles*,<sup>54</sup> has himself directly silenced the history of the war by publicly disputing that a genocide took place in Guatemala.

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<sup>52</sup> For an extensive and beautiful analysis of the production of silence around the Guatemalan War see Victoria Sanford, *Buried Secrets: Truth and Human Rights in Guatemala* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 2003.

<sup>53</sup> Jonas, 90.

<sup>54</sup> The Kaibiles, commandos trained in counter-guerrilla warfare, were known for their brutality and their involvement in many of Guatemala's most horrific massacres, including that at "Dos Erres". The CEH final report includes the following description of their training: "The substantiation of the degrading contents of the training of the Army's special counter insurgency force, known as Kaibiles, has drawn the particular attention of the CEH. This training included killing animals and then eating them raw and drinking their blood in order to demonstrate courage. The extreme cruelty of these training methods, according to testimony available to the CEH, was then put into practice in a range of operations carried out by these troops, confirming one point of their decalogue: "The Kaibil is a killing machine." CEH, *Guatemala: Memory of Silence*, par. 42: <http://shr.aaas.org/guatemala/ceh/report/english/concl.html>.

Though Molina's attempts to silence the history of the war and genocide have taken many forms, one of his most direct acts of silencing took place in July 2011 during an interview with the Guatemala-based, online news agency, *Plaza Pública*. That Molina agreed to this interview six months before the election is interesting, especially given *Plaza Pública's* reputation for producing critical and probing articles (on their website, *Plaza Pública* describes itself as a news agency that "focuses on the power dynamics of interest to the public and on the dynamics that undermine the dignity of the people").<sup>55</sup> This is not necessarily the source with which one would imagine that Molina would engage.

Given the timing of this interview, it must be assumed that Molina was conscious of the image that he wanted to project to the public, and therefore accepted the interview as a politically strategic move. Furthermore, Molina must have known that the interviewer, Martín Rodríguez Pellecer, would ask him about his role in the civil war, and would challenge him on the issue of the genocide, both topics frequently addressed throughout the campaign. With all of this in mind, Molina's statement regarding the genocide is a potent example of the acts of silencing that Trouillot addresses. On the genocide, Molina was quoted as saying the following:

Exterminio de una población por razones de etnia o una religion. Eso no sucedió. Eso no sucedió, de verdad. Aquí lo que sucedió fue porque había gentes que estaban involucradas dentro de las acciones y dentro del campo de batalla. Pero aquí no se fue a decir "todos los kakciqueles o los kichés o los ixiles van a ser exterminados." O "usted como es ixil va a ser exterminado". Eso no pasó. Y se lo puedo demostrar. Yo quisiera que me demuestre, así como yo puedo demostrarle que no sucedió, que nos demuestren por qué dicen que hubo genocidio. Yo personalmente no lo voy a aceptar porque yo sí estuve en el enfrentamiento armado interno.

The extermination of a population on the basis of ethnicity or religion. This did not occur. This truly did not occur. Here what took place happened on the field of battle. But no one said that "all of the Kakciquel or the K'iche or the Ixil should be exterminated." No one said "you, because you are Ixil, should be killed." This did not happen. I can prove that this did not occur. I would like them to prove to me that genocide did occur, as I can

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<sup>55</sup> "Quiénes estamos en la plaza," *Plaza Pública*, April 21, 2013, (<http://www.plazapublica.com.gt/content/quienes-somos>).

prove to them that it did not. Personally, I am not going to accept this [accusation] because [what I took part in] was an internal armed conflict.<sup>56</sup>

Of this statement two questions must be asked; first, to whom is Molina speaking and second, for whom is he speaking?

Though at first obvious, this question, to whom is Molina speaking, is not so easily answered. Superficially of course, Molina is speaking to the interviewer, Martín Rodríguez Pellecer. Molina's rhetoric, however, suggests that he is also speaking to the readers. In one moment in particular, Molina addresses an "*usted*" (you) that is not the interviewer, arguing that no one ever said, "you, because you are Ixil, should be killed." In this statement Molina directly addresses an unspecified witness who claims that such a statement was said and that it led to a specific consequence. The second time that Molina addresses another subject through an undefined pronoun it is in the form of a request, in which he demands that "they prove to me that genocide occurred, as I can prove to them that it did not." In this example, Molina speaks directly to the group of people who claim that genocide occurred. In this way Molina directly challenges the witnesses of genocide and the truth of their account.

The second question, for *whom* was Molina speaking, highlights that Molina assumed several voices in this brief statement. When Molina says, for example, "no one said that 'all of the Kakciquel or the K'iche or the Ixil should be exterminated,'" he assumes two voices; the voice of the soldier and the voice of the witness who heard the soldier speak. In a subsequent comment, Molina uses his own voice when he says, "I would like them to prove to me that genocide did occur, as I can prove to them that it did not. Personally, I am not going to accept this [accusation] because [what I took part in] was an internal armed conflict." With this

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<sup>56</sup> Otto Pérez Molina, as quoted in Martín Rodríguez Pellecer, "Quiero que alguien me demuestre que hubo genocidio," *Plaza Pública*, July 25, 2011, (<http://www.plazapublica.com.gt/content/quiero-que-alguien-me-demuestre-que-hubo-genocidio#tres>).

statement, Molina asserts his occupation of two roles as a participant in the war and as a witness to the war.

Molina's ability to rhetorically situate himself in relation to the war is fascinating, for he both claims the authority given him by the evidence of experience and then discounts the experiential evidence of all others who testified to having witnessed the genocide.<sup>57</sup> With just a few words, Molina asserts his truth above all others by declaring that he was there, that he saw what occurred, and that he defies all other witnesses to challenge his own testimony. In this way, Molina asserts himself as the dominant witness and as the voice of truth, an act which silences the voices and testimonies of everyone who might challenge him by claiming that a genocide took place.

In addition to asserting his testimony of the war, Molina also used this interview to invalidate the findings of the Historical Clarification Commission by asserting that the commission had published inaccurate findings. "La Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico no logró recoger y no dice la verdad de lo que pasó en el país," Molina said, (The Historical Clarification Commission has failed to [either] find or convey the truth about what happened in the country). By invalidating the primary source of evidence that would contradict him, Molina deepens his assertion that he, alone, speaks the truth. (Given the sheer volume of evidence that documents the genocide that took place, Molina's argument that the CEH "has failed to...find...the truth" is a remarkable act of arrogance, since it is he who knows but will not reveal what happened.)

Read in conjunction, Molina's outright denial of the genocide, as well as his invalidation of the CEH report, silences the voices of the witnesses to the atrocities. In addition, this act

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<sup>57</sup> One of the clearest arguments about using personal experience as historical evidence is in Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17:4 (Summer 1991): 773-797.

suppresses Guatemala's extensive history of ethnic, economic and legal discrimination against Guatemala's indigenous population, an act that plays into a much greater history of silence. "Estoy de acuerdo con buscar justicia, pero no que se parcialice" (I support the search for justice, but not a justice that is partisan), Molina said in the same interview, making his priorities clear.<sup>58</sup> National unity must take precedence over justice, even if, as I would argue, it is an artificial unity, constructed in absence of a large part of Guatemala's historic and contemporary population. Historically, Molina is not the first to establish this priority. Writing on post-conflict governments, and the Guatemalan government in particular, Victoria Sanford calls attention to this tactic, describing how "Justice is viewed as an individual concern whereas social peace is perceived as a collective condition having priority over justice."<sup>59</sup> By calling for a justice that unites, rather than divides, Molina demonizes testimonies of violence as something that hinder the construction of a unified nation. In addition to engaging in an act of silencing, this statement also evinces Molina's choice not to *listen* to testimonies that contradict the dominant narrative he has crafted and disseminated.

### **Listening Without Hearing**

In his article, "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening," Dori Laub, M.D emphasizes the importance of the listener in the testimonial process. Only by *listening* to the testimony of trial can an experience become a story, Laub argues. Without the listener, he writes, the story of the testimony cannot exist:

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<sup>58</sup> Otto Perez Molina, as quoted in an interview with Martín Rodríguez Pellecer, "Quiero que alguien me demuestre que hubo genocidio" (Plaza Pública, July 25, 2011), <http://www.plazapublica.com.gt/content/quiero-que-alguien-me-demuestre-que-hubo-genocidio#tres>.

<sup>59</sup> Victoria Sanford, *Buried Secrets: Truth and Human Rights in Guatemala*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 252.



The absence of an empathetic listener or more radically, the absence of an addressable other, an other who can hear the anguish of one's memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates the story.<sup>60</sup>

Though Laub wrote specifically about bearing witness to individual trauma, I believe his discussion can be applied to the subject of societal trauma and the ways in which it is acknowledged and dealt with on an institutional and personal level. This idea links to a much larger discussion and debate regarding the existence of collective memory and the possibility of collective trauma.

In the literature on Guatemala, the country has often been referred to as a traumatized country that is still reeling from the violence of the war. Writing on the intersection between trauma and silence in Guatemala, Victoria Sanford writes, "Genocide resting fitfully in the collective unconscious was an officially silenced national trauma reverberating throughout the society."<sup>61</sup> There are many arguments for why Guatemala remains a traumatized nation seventeen years after the conclusion of the war, among them the importance of the state's choice not to *listen* to and thereby validate the accounts of suffering and trauma. If, once again, we look at the statements made by President Molina we can see how he at once acknowledges and invalidates the conflict and testimonies to genocide. In this sense the mere fact that the conflict is mentioned does not necessarily mean that the effects of the conflict are recognized. Furthermore, Molina's comments illuminate the extent to which the historical framework of the state differs from the historical framework of human rights observers. The denial of genocide denies that ethnicity and prejudice were factors in the war, thereby eliminating the possibility for the state to *listen* to or *empathize with* the survivors. It is, to return to Laub, the Guatemalan government's decision not to function as an "empathetic listener" for the victims of trauma that has kept many

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<sup>60</sup> Dori Laub, "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening," in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, M.D., *Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 68.

<sup>61</sup> Sanford, 212.

Guatemalans, and arguably Guatemala as a country, from moving through and beyond the trauma of the genocide.<sup>62</sup> Though this failure to acknowledge the trauma should not be surprising for a state that is, itself, implicated in the violence, it is nonetheless useful to consider the difference between listening and hearing on an institutional level. This approach allows us to consider education, particularly social studies education, as a site where the state's choice not to *listen* has become apparent.

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<sup>62</sup> I am grateful to Emanuela Grama for her support in developing these ideas. It was through our conversations of Dori Laub's text, and specifically the importance of the empathetic listener, that I was able to apply this text to the Guatemalan context.

## Chapter Two: The Battle Over Education

*History is the fruit of power, but power itself is never so transparent that its analysis becomes superfluous. The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots.*<sup>63</sup>

In post-war Guatemala the education system has functioned as a stage upon which are re-enacted “past” and “present” conflicts, conflicts rooted in the issues of ethnic difference, prejudice and violence that I explored in chapter one. While Guatemala’s pre-conflict education system did not necessarily generate the wars that followed, these conflicts have given rise to extensive post-war reforms to the Guatemalan education system that include the production of a national curriculum. According to the Guatemalan Ministry of Education, this latter reform was intended to prepare students for a “better future.” In my opinion, however, this reform is best seen as a state-initiated campaign to disseminate a dominant narrative of the past using Guatemalan schools as the vehicle and teachers as the instruments of this dissemination. Nevertheless, within the context of this campaign and given the efforts of Guatemala’s leaders to silence the past, the teaching of history (or social studies, as is the case in Guatemala) must be seen as a critical site for the revision and re-articulation of Guatemala’s past, present and future.

This discussion of the education reform and social studies courses in Guatemala is rooted in a broader discussion of history teaching in post-conflict contexts. Throughout the last decade this field of study has grown, leading to the production of works that focus on “post-conflict” education and the role it can play in re-crafting the post-conflict state. While these studies vary in their approach, most highlight the powerful and contentious role of history education and history curriculums. Of particular interest for my study are two articles that examine the teaching of

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<sup>63</sup> Trouillot, xix.

history in post-conflict Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Because both Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina experienced identity-based conflicts characterized by attempts at what has been called “ethnic cleansing,” they have helped shed light on the role of education in post-war, post-genocide Guatemala.<sup>64</sup> Both of these articles call attention to the significance of the history that is taught in schools, a process that is often steeped in struggle between post-war factions to exert their “truth” over the “truths” of others. This, as I will illustrate, has been the case in Guatemala, where the government has used the education system to craft a dominant narrative of the past and to establish guidelines for what must be done to create a peaceful future. Though many leaders and groups have exerted their influence over the education system in the years following the war (1996-present) I will pay particular attention to the impact of the education reform that resulted from the peace accords and to the curriculum reform that followed.

### **Education Reform**

In the years after the peace accords were signed it was unclear how the accords would impact Guatemala’s legal and social structures. Indeed, seventeen years later, what Susanne Jonas once referred to as the “implementation wars” (the legal and social battles to implement the accords) are still in process in the sense that Guatemalans continue to fight for the promise of justice that the accords extended. Unlike the judicial and economic sectors, however, Guatemala’s education system is one area in which the effects of the accords have been both substantive and visible, making education a valuable point of access into the process of rebuilding the post-conflict state.

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<sup>64</sup> See Sarah Warshauer Freedman, Harvey M. Weinstein, Karen Murphy and Timothy Longman, “Teaching History after Identity-Based Conflict: The Rwanda Experience,” *Comparative Education Review* 52 (July 2008): 663-690 and Pilvi Torsti, “How to Deal with a Difficult Past? History Textbooks Supporting Enemy Images in Post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina,” *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 39 (2007): 77-96.

In the Agreement on Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the 1995 accord called for a dramatic reform of the country's education system, citing it as an integral instrument of post-war transformation.<sup>65</sup> Part G, of the section entitled "Cultural Rights," states the following:

The educational system is one of the most important vehicles for the transmittal and development of cultural values and knowledge. It must be responsive to the cultural and linguistic diversity of Guatemala, recognizing and strengthening the cultural identity of indigenous peoples, the values and educational systems of the Maya and other indigenous peoples, and the need to afford access to formal and non-formal education and to include the educational concepts of indigenous peoples in national school curricula.<sup>66</sup>

Immediately following this passage the accord outlines the necessary elements of a national education reform, which included the decentralization and regionalization of the system; incorporation of information on the Maya and other indigenous peoples into the curricula; expansion of intercultural bilingual education; recruitment and training of indigenous bilingual teachers, and a budgetary increase for the Ministry of Education. Finally, the reform demanded that the new education system "Include in educational syllabuses programs that strengthen national unity through respect for cultural diversity," a statement that reflects a much broader initiative to use the education system as a means of promoting cultural unity.<sup>67</sup> A careful reading of current documents published by the Ministry of Education demonstrates how effectively this phrase "unity through respect for cultural diversity" has been integrated into the national discourse, both in the years following the accord and in the present day.

Because the peace accords functioned as a framework for the peace process, rather than as a series of enforceable laws, it took several years for the reforms outlined in the accord to lead to structural and legal change. It wasn't until 1998 that the Joint Committee on Educational

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<sup>65</sup> The Agreement on Socio-Economic Aspects and the Agrarian Situation (1996) also addressed the funding of the education reform and the extension of intercultural, bilingual education as outline by Linda Asturias de Barrios and Verónica Mérida Arellano, "The Process of Developing A New Curriculum for Lower Secondary Education in Guatemala," *Prospects* 37 (June 2007): 249-266.

<sup>66</sup> United Nations Mission for the Verification of Human Rights in Guatemala, *Agreement on Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, trans. United States Institute of Peace (Mexico City: USIP Library, 1998).

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

Reform published the Education Reform Plan, which identified seven areas for reform based upon the suggested modifications articulated by the accord.<sup>68</sup> Interestingly, this Joint Committee on Educational Reform was the result of another stipulation in the Accord on the Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples that called for an educational steering committee comprised of members of the government and indigenous organizations. As a result, this Educational Reform Plan represents the efforts of both “sides” to create a new educational system for post-war Guatemala. Ideally, such a committee would have ensured that the education reform would advance on the basis of a “bipartisan” agreement. However, as I will mention in the following section, it remains unclear whether both the government and the indigenous organizations shared equal influence over the drafting and implementation of these reforms; particularly in the writing of the national curriculum.<sup>69</sup> While sources do not reveal which of these two has been more powerful in this process, I will argue that one can read in the national curriculum an effort to forge national unity from the fragments of the war; a project that I believe is of particular interest for the government. Thus, I will argue, we must pay particular attention to the rhetoric surrounding issues of *unity* and *diversity* espoused by the national curriculum, while remaining cognizant of the ways in which these topics are addressed in the classroom.

### **The National Curriculum Reform**

Of the many projects outlined by the Education Reform Plan, the “Transformación Curricular” (Curricular Transformation) has been one of the most influential. This reform has also been one of the most time-consuming projects undertaken by the Ministry of Education, lasting well into the present. While the pre-primary and primary curricula were drafted first, it

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<sup>68</sup> Linda Asturias de Barrios and Verónica Mérida Arellano, “The Process of Developing A New Curriculum for Lower Secondary Education in Guatemala,” *Prospects* 37 (June 2007): 252.

<sup>69</sup> USIP: “Agreement on Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples.”

was not until 2005-2006 that a proposal for the *ciclo básico* curriculum was published (the age group that I focused on through my observations).<sup>70</sup> Thus, we must understand this curriculum conversion as a transformation in process, with varied results in each school. Furthermore, although schools are not required to implement the curriculum, its production is quite significant, and can be read, as I argued above, as evidence of the state's effort to produce a cohesive version of the country's past. In addition, the curriculum can also function as a stage on which the struggles of the war are re-enacted in a discursive fashion.<sup>71</sup>

This effort is clearly articulated in a section of the Guatemala's National Curriculum entitled "Vision of the Nation" which says:

Guatemala es un estado multiétnico, multicultural y multilingüe, que se está desarrollando como una nación justa, democrática, pluralista y pacifista. Está cimentada en la riqueza de su diversidad natural, social, étnica, cultural y lingüística y en la vivencia permanente de valores para la convivencia y la consolidación de la cultura de paz, en función del desarrollo equitativo y del bienestar personal y colectivo de todas las guatemaltecas y los guatemaltecos.

Esta Nación se organiza en el marco del Estado de Derecho que promueve políticas y acciones orientadas a erradicar estereotipos y prácticas culturales que han favorecido la discriminación. Para el efecto se han derogado todas las leyes que tienen implicaciones discriminatorias.

Guatemala is a multiethnic, multicultural, multilingual country that is developing as a just, democratic, pluralist and peaceful nation. This process is based in the richness of Guatemala's natural, social, ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity and in the permanent reliance on values necessary for the coexistence and the consolidation of a culture of peace, founded on the equitable development and personal wellbeing of the every individual Guatemalan and of the collective as a whole.

This Nation adheres to a State of Law that promotes political approaches and [concrete] actions that can eradicate stereotypes and cultural practices that have fostered discrimination. To this effect the state has removed all laws that have discriminatory underpinnings.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Asturias de Barrios and Arellano, 253.

<sup>71</sup> Warshauer Freedman, Weinstein, Murphy, and Longman, 684.

<sup>72</sup> Ministerio de Educación Guatemala, *Curriculum Nacional Base: Segundo Grado Nivel Medio-Ciclo Básico* (Guatemala: Ministerio de Educación, 2008), 8.

What is noteworthy about these passages is the way in which the document acknowledges, however cautiously, Guatemala's history of ethnic inequality and discrimination. In light of the Guatemalan government's calculated (and long-standing) efforts to silence this history the clear acknowledgement of this contested territory is significant. Though every effort has clearly been made to focus the reader's attention on the creation of a positive future, rather than a flawed past, the very fact that the curriculum *responds* to this past is critical.

In her article on the presentation of contemporary history in Chilean textbooks, Teresa Oteiza argues that that the production of a history curriculum requires a certain level of consensus regarding the past that is taught. In post-conflict Chile, Oteiza states, this consensus has been fostered "with the purpose of establishing a conciliatory discourse about the dictatorship and the democratic transition."<sup>73</sup> Though the conflicts in Chile and Guatemala were quite different in many respects, they were similar in that both were deeply contentious and resulted in a fundamental lack of consensus about what caused the conflict and what forces shaped the authoritarian state. Obviously, this would lead to significant divisions on the question of how to represent that past as history. The point made by Oteiza is therefore applicable to the case of Guatemala, where the writing of a national history curriculum has also been used as a tool to craft a common and conciliatory narrative of the country's recent history. Although the curriculum produced for *nivel básico* only briefly addresses the conflict, the rhetoric cited in above from the "Vision of the Nation" is evidence of a state-initiated project to recognize that Guatemala is no longer the country that it once was and that it now values diversity, inclusion and unity where it once disregarded these issues. In this sense, the curriculum has functioned as a

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<sup>73</sup> Teresa Oteiza, "How Contemporary History is Presented in Chilean Middle School Textbooks," *Discourse & Society* 14(5) (2003): 642.



means of crafting a single, dominant narrative of the past out of the many narratives that were in contention.

Because it is difficult to identify the process by which the “Transformación Curricular” was written, it is difficult to trace the power dynamics that informed the transformation. We do know that the curriculum was commissioned at the highest level, likely in the executive branch, that it was produced by the Ministry of Education, and, because of this, that it can be viewed as a reflection of the state’s efforts to craft a narrative that would serve its interests. This is hardly a radical claim. Mariana Achugar, who writes on the construction of memory through institutional frameworks, focusing on military discourse in Uruguay, suggests that “Members of an institution share beliefs, values, rituals, and ways of making sense of the world... An institution transmits these values and beliefs through a socialization process in which the mentalities of its members are shaped.” Furthermore, she adds, “Groups with the most power within the institution are those authorized to present the *official memory* of the institution and those that have access to the channels of diffusion that legitimize this version above others.”<sup>74</sup> In these passages Achugar points to the process by which memories are not only made *official*, but also indisputable, hegemonic. By legitimizing one version of history, an institution, if powerful enough, can effectively sideline other versions while normalizing its own. This, I believe, is one of the central projects of the Guatemalan education system, to craft a dominant version of the recent past that attributes the conflict to problems that Guatemala has (supposedly) moved beyond: racism, prejudice and exclusionary practices. By constructing the conflict as having relied on antiquated systems, the state can craft a present in which it is possible to garner the support of all citizens, including the support of the marginalized indigenous population.

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<sup>74</sup> Mariana Achugar, *What We Remember: The Construction of Memory in Military Discourse* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2008), 17.

## The Development of Social Studies Education

In the scholarship on post-conflict education, the trend over the last ten years has been to focus on how recent history is taught in the classroom. In Guatemala, however, this notion of “teaching history” does not apply because there are not “History” classes in the primary or secondary education system, at least not in the form that it exists in the United States. Instead, the course that we would label history is entitled *Ciencias Sociales y Formación Ciudadana* (Social Science and the Formation of the Citizen).<sup>75</sup>

A careful look at the title of this class is key to understanding its role in Guatemala and the intentions of the course that it speaks to, a focus on the lessons and values that are necessary components of Guatemalan citizenship or even, one can argue, Guatemalan identity. Such a project does not necessarily require the teaching of a formal, chronological history—indeed all three of the teachers I interviewed noted that they found history the “least relevant” subject to their students, while lessons on core values were viewed as both more relevant and meaningful for the students.<sup>76</sup> The teachers’ opinion that history was irrelevant to their students lives is evidence of the post-war education system’s attempt to create a Guatemalan citizen who is separate from history, particularly given the country’s history of (unresolved and unheroic) war, and whose emerging values will seek to promote a culture of peace. Furthermore, through the interviews it became clear that the purpose of Social Studies and Citizenship was to prepare Guatemala’s youth for the future by focusing on the values and attributes that they would need to

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<sup>75</sup> It is difficult to discuss education in Guatemala on a national level because of the disparities in the access to education and the quality of the schools. In Guatemala, this disparity often follows regional and ethnic lines, with rural, primarily indigenous communities having significantly less access to quality schools, supplies and teachers than urban centers. Linda Asturias de Barrios, Pamela Escobar, and Eva Sazo de Méndez, “El Estado de Guatemala: avances y desafíos en material educativo,” *Cuaderno de Desarrollo Humano*, (Serviprensa: United Nations, 2011), 13-20.

<sup>76</sup> Margaret Paulin, Interview with Señor Heydi, Quetzaltenango, Guatemala: August 12, 2012.

be successful and peaceful citizens.<sup>77</sup> Though I cannot use the results of four interviews as evidence for the sentiments of all Guatemalan teachers, the perceptions of these four forced me to call into question my own assumptions about what it means for a teacher to “teach” “history” to their students.

My underlying assumption that social studies teachers would teach chronological, event-based, “factual” histories (such as the *history* of WWI, or the *history* of the Spanish Conquest) was based on my personal experience with History education in the United States, and therefore had to be re-examined in the three classes that I observed.<sup>78</sup> Through these observations I noticed that rather than teach “irrelevant” history (as they referred to history) the social studies teachers focused almost explicitly on teaching values and social issues that they considered relevant to their students’ lives. These topics included interfamilial relationships, the value of coexistence, environmental contamination, solidarity and cooperation and participatory citizenship, all of which are contained in the textbooks used by the schools. When I first realized that the history lessons I had expected were not being taught in the classes I was observing, I began to reevaluate my earlier exploration of the “the teaching of history in post-conflict Guatemala.” Because the teachers didn’t view their own classes as “history” classes I could not continue to refer to their classes in this way. Instead, it is important to reflect upon the title of the course, “Social Studies and the Formation of the Citizen,” and the insight that this title provides into the government’s educational project. On the one hand, the term “Formation of the Citizen” suggests that the fundamental components of Guatemalan citizenship and identity continue to be challenged,

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<sup>77</sup> When asked which units they enjoyed teaching, and which they disliked, three of the four teachers interviewed said that teaching history was their least favorite task, while they preferred to teach the units on values which were less boring and more relevant to the students.

<sup>78</sup> It is important to note that I spent four weeks observing the IMEBCA, two weeks observing the Pre-Universitario, and two weeks observing the Técnico industrial. As a result my study cannot claim that these “chronological” “fact-based” histories are not taught in general, but only that they were not taught during my observations.

despite the government's attempts to build a "unified" Guatemalan identity. Furthermore, the name of the course suggests that what students need to build this Guatemalan identity is an understanding (the state's perspective) of *current* social practices, trends, issues, ect. Thus we encounter classes that are deeply rooted in studies pertaining to the current state of Guatemala, rather than topics that directly teach the "past" as history.

Viewing Guatemala's educational system as a battle over contested history is useful in that it illuminates several levels of influence and power. First, is the influence held by those in positions of political power, the president, congress and the Ministry of Education. These actors have crafted institutional guidelines in the form of a curriculum that prescribes how the past, present and future ought to be addressed. Much farther down the line, indeed, one could say, on the "front lines" themselves, are the teachers who are charged with the implementation of the curriculum, but who must also realize the curriculum through their words and actions, have immense power inside the classroom to challenge or enable the narratives outlined by the curriculum. Could it be that their individual power is, within the classroom, greater than that of the state? It is certainly more direct, more immediate. Occupying the third level of influence are the students, who engage with the teacher, question or accept the content they offer and utilize what they have learned to craft a context within which they understand their world.<sup>79</sup> Though the power that each holds is relative to their goals, each "level" of influence is capable of opening up a space for the actors "above" and "below" within which to engage. By producing and distributing a national curriculum that highlights the topics of race, ethnicity and difference, the

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<sup>79</sup> One of Trouillot's key ideas is the importance of *context* for the process of memory construction; that is, that the context in which an event occurred and in which the event is remembered effect the construction of the memory.<sup>79</sup> This idea relates directly to the teaching of history, for it is 'History' that provides the context, or foundation, upon which individual memories are created and processed. This context, in the case of a post-conflict country such as Guatemala, can either enable or impede the acknowledgement of certain memories, and histories, that circulate through society.

Ministry of Education has created a space, whether intentionally or unintentionally, for teachers to explore and engage with these issues. In turn, the teachers, through their actions and their implementation of the curriculum, create a space for their students to engage with these same topics in a manner that is relevant and meaningful to them. The state can no more control the Guatemalan teachers' implementation of the curriculum than can the teacher control how the students process and apply what they learn in class. In this sense, education is as unpredictable as it is powerful, at once subject to the influence of the state, the teachers and the students.

## Chapter Three: A Glimpse into the Guatemalan Classroom

*In addition to engravings and books, the past has left many other traces, occasionally visible, in present-day society. We see it in people's appearance, the look of a place, and even in the unconscious ways of thinking and feeling preserved by certain persons and milieus. Ordinarily we don't notice such things. But we need alter our attention only slightly to see the outcroppings of the older strata underlying modern customs.<sup>80</sup>*

### Quetzaltenango, Guatemala

If you stand in Quetzaltenango's *parque central* (central park) and look to the mountains that surround the city, you'll see a white church on the nearest hillside. If you follow the cobble stone streets that lead to this church, you will reach a large plaza that overlooks the city. From this plaza the noises of the city become a distant reminder of the chaos below, a blend of honking horns, cackling roosters, and the cries of vendors in the marketplace. These details provide important insight into the city's unique history as a center for both indigenous and ladino activity, a history that informs many of the activities and conversations that take place within Quetzaltenango's schools.

Beginning in the early eighteenth century, Quetzaltenango experienced a dramatic increase in activity that transformed it, according to historian Greg Grandin, from a small, "colonial administrative backwater" town into a "thriving regional commercial, political, and military center with a rapidly growing indigenous population."<sup>81</sup> This shift, in addition to bringing wealth and infrastructure into the city, also created the context for a unique and complex relationship to develop between the cities' indigenous and ladino populations. Though the indigenous of Quetzaltenango were affected by the policies of the Spanish Crown, a small

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<sup>80</sup> Halbwachs, 66.

<sup>81</sup> Greg Grandin, *The Blood of Guatemala: A History of Race and Nation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 29.

group of K'iche indigenous leaders, known as *principales*, was able to establish strong structures of economic and cultural influence in Quetzaltenango through which they were able to accrue wealth and political power.<sup>82</sup> The existence of these *principales* is evidence that race and class were not always conflated in Quetzaltenango--that is, to be indigenous did not always mean to be lower class.

The dynamic between Quetzaltenango's indigenous and ladino populations that Grandin describes changed dramatically with the rise to power of Liberal leader Justo Rufino Barrios in 1871. Under the leadership of Barrios, the Guatemalan government made extensive changes to the systems of land tenure and labor relations, calling for the privatization of communal lands and an explicit focus on the production of coffee.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, it was the rise of a market in coffee and the fact that Quetzaltenango was ideal for coffee production that created the drive by Liberal exporters to claim lands which had, since the conquest, remained under communal ownership.<sup>84</sup> For many indigenous in Quetzaltenango and the surrounding region of the western highlands, these changes meant the loss of communal agricultural lands and a shift into the wage-labor economy.

As a result of these policies, the inequalities between the indigenous and ladino populations in Quetzaltenango became more pronounced. In particular, growing disparities in access to land and labor created greater class differences between these two populations. Based on the notion of the deficient "Indian" whose "backwardness" was rooted in his lack of education, ladino leaders found justification for the impoverished native class. This view prompted the Guatemalan state, under Barrios, to use primary education as a means of re-

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<sup>82</sup> For a more developed discussion of this topic, see Greg Grandin, *The Blood of Guatemala: A History of Race and Nation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

<sup>83</sup> René Reeves, *Ladinos with Ladinos, Indians with Indians: Land, Labor, and Regional Ethnic Conflict in the Making of Guatemala* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 3-4.

<sup>84</sup> David McCreery, *Rural Guatemala, 1760-1940* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 161-194.

educating and civilizing the indigenous population. According to a decree issued by Barrios in 1879, “only through an educational system ‘adequate to their character and special circumstances’ could Indians, ‘undoubtedly susceptible to improvement,’ be removed from the ‘backward and abject state’ forced upon them by the conquest.”<sup>85</sup> Barrios’ statement highlights one of the many dangers of education, namely that schools can become the vehicles for racist and prejudicial projects of “social advancement.”

Although the rhetoric surrounding education and the indigenous has changed dramatically over the past one hundred years, it is important to remember that racism once permeated the very roots of the Guatemalan education system and therefore the roots of the schools in which I conducted my observations. In the following section I will examine three teaching moments, observed in Quetzaltenango, in which teachers chose to engage with the issues of cultural diversity, racism, and regional difference. Their decision to engage with these topics is particularly significant when placed within the national and regional contexts that I have just described in which issues of race and ethnicity are engrained in histories of structural and physical violence.

I see these teaching moments as reason to hope that the classroom in Quetzaltenango can function as a space in which these histories can be addressed, sometimes intentionally and sometimes unintentionally. Furthermore, I will suggest that these moments be viewed critically and consciously without condemnation and without scorn. As a theoretical framework for understanding these moments I will briefly explore the significance of the Guatemalan classroom as a site of intergenerational interaction between the generation that experienced the conflict and the generation that was born after the war.

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<sup>85</sup> Rufino Barrios, 1879 decree on the assimilation of Indians, as quoted in Greg Grandin, *The Blood of Guatemala*, 168.



## “Postmemory”

In her work on memory and trauma, Marianne Hirsch coins the term “postmemory” to describe the experience of the generation born *after* a violent event, in other words, “the response of the second generation to the trauma of the first.”<sup>86</sup> “Perhaps,” Hirsch writes, “it is only in subsequent generations that trauma can be witnessed and worked through, by those who were not there to live it but who received its effects, belatedly, through the narratives, actions and symptoms of the previous generation.”<sup>87</sup> According to Hirsch, the task of the second generation is the production of a narrative that synthesizes and begins to make sense of the individual experiences of violence and trauma.

This notion of “postmemory” is particularly useful when applied to post-conflict education and the processes of teaching the history. In the case of Guatemala, where the conflict is relatively recent, the relationship between middle-aged teachers and young students bridges the gap between the generation that experienced the war and the generation born after. Thus, the classroom is a site for postmemory to take place, as students are exposed to the belated effects of the war through the narratives, anecdotes and behaviors of their teachers. This is not to say that all of the teachers who I observed were witnesses to violence or personally “traumatized” by the war. Rather the teachers can be understood as individuals whose experience was informed by the war itself, and are therefore members of a traumatized generation.

It is also important to highlight, as I briefly addressed in chapter two, that most of the teachers that I observed did not teach “formal,” “chronological,” or “event-based” histories on the war or on other topics, as I had assumed they would. When I began to place these topics in Guatemala’s context of civil war and genocide, however, I realized that the teachers I had

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<sup>86</sup> Marianne Hirsch, “Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14:1 (2001), 8.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

observed *were* teaching the history of these conflicts, though not in ways I had expected. In the following section I will explore three classroom observations in which Guatemala's histories of ethnic conflict, war, and genocide were indeed "taught" and engaged with through conversations and lessons, though these conversations and lessons can at first seemed unrelated. These moments point to the subtle ways in which these histories materialize, sometimes hinging upon the use of one term or a single anecdote. That the teachers engaged with these terms and provided these anecdotes is evidence that, though they are teaching their students, the teachers themselves are also working through the histories that have affected them. Applied more broadly to the study of education in Guatemala, and to post-conflict education in general, these observations serve as a reminder to look for the presence of silenced histories of war and genocide in the brief, seemingly unrelated discussions of current social issues or even through a school-wide celebration.

### **I. Observation of the Instituto de Educación Básica Por Cooperativa "Los Ajanel" (IMEBCA)**

The first observation that I will explore took place in the *Escuela Oficial Rural Mixta Los Ajanel* (referred to as IMEBCA) a secondary school located in a rural municipality of Quetzaltenango called La Esperanza. The school, which has a student population of one hundred and fifty students, is a cooperative, which means it receives one-third of its funding from the national government, one-third from the local municipality, and one-third from parent tuition. Despite this dynamic, the school employs the national curriculum and follows the public school calendar and norms.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Margaret Paulin, Interview with Licenciada Gaby, Guatemala: January, 2013.

During my observation of the IMEBCA social studies classes, I was witness to the schools' Indigenous Cultures Celebration that took place on August 9, 2012. At the time of my observation I was unaware that the United Nations had designed August 9th as an International Day of Celebration of Indigenous Peoples. I was therefore taken by surprise when I arrived at the school amid a flurry of excitement and activity. Though I had planned to interview the social studies teacher whom I had been observing for several weeks, I quickly realized that I would need to be flexible and shift my focus to the nature of the event itself. Still, I did try to undertake my interview despite the chaos, a decision that led to a fascinating interaction between the social studies teacher, the director of the school, and me. What follows is my brief narrative of this event.

### **Indigenous Cultures Celebration**<sup>89</sup>

“You can take the back room if you'd like,” the director said, pointing me towards the neighboring classroom and handing me a ring of keys. “The computers are back there but it should be a bit quieter than out here.”

I took the keys and walked to the computer classroom where I was forced to wrestle with the door until it opened. I did appreciate the space, the directory had been right, for the noise was quickly mounting outside. From below the office I heard the screeching, mechanical sound of a poorly connected speaker followed by a student's voice magnified through a microphone. “All student performers please come to the front,” the voice called. A large group of students surged toward the boy with the microphone.

From my vantage point on the second floor I watched as girls twirled in their colorful skirts, their high heels sparkling in the sun and clicking against the cement floor of the school.

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<sup>89</sup> Margaret Paulin, Personal Observation, Quetzaltenango, Guatemala: August 9, 2012.

Peering over the balcony I noticed four boys slip through the front gates and into a nearby cornfield. They returned with arms full of corn to add to their last-minute display, a booth strung with banners. Opposite them four girls huddled close to one another, whispering as they set up their own display of corn and streamers.

Upstairs in the main office the teachers made their own preparations, joking with one another as their students readied themselves below. Most of the teachers had come to school wearing their work clothes, typically jeans or slacks and a collared shirt. A few had come wearing *traje típico*, the typical dress of a specific indigenous culture in Guatemala. Still rather confused as to what was happening, I asked the director the about nature of the celebration. She smiled, then gave me an affectionate hug. Today is the “Dia de los Indígenas” she told me as she rustled through a pile of papers.<sup>90</sup> Turning to the social studies teacher she asked whether she could borrow a *traje* for the celebration. The teacher, Seño Heydi agreed, and left to collect the clothing from her house located several blocks from the school.<sup>91</sup> Amidst the bustle of the office I settled in to wait for Seño Heydi, with whom I was supposed to conduct my interview. Ten minutes later she returned, clothing in hand, and we retired to the computer classroom.

The scene was a comical one, both Seño Heydi and I sitting with our knees knocking together on two small chairs in the dark and narrow classroom. Outside, the shouts of the children reverberated, overwhelmed by the throbbing beat of *reggaeton*. One of the students must have turned up the volume on the sound system, brought in for the occasion, for the school

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<sup>90</sup> On December 23, 1994 the General Assembly of the United Nations designated August 9<sup>th</sup> as an International Day of the Worlds Indigenous Peoples. The resolution also labeled 1995-2005 the Decade of the Worlds Indigenous People. See The United Nations, “International Day of the World’s Indigenous People,” April 23, 2012, (<http://www.un.org/en/events/indigenousday/background.shtml>).

<sup>91</sup> In most schools in Quetzaltenango teachers are referred to as “Seño” followed by their first name. This form of address carries great respect, though it can also be used to imply a difference in class between the speaker and the person addressed. Foreigners, for example, are often referred to as “Seño” at tourist sites and markets.

began to vibrate with pop music typically heard on the radio. My gaze met that of Seño Heydi and we both smiled, acknowledging the humor of our situation.

Five minutes into our interview the door opened roughly and Licenciada Gaby entered, holding a bag of clothing in her hands. “I’m so sorry to interrupt,” she gasped, “but I need somewhere to change. Please continue your interview.” Seño Heydi and I continued for a moment, however it soon became clear that the director was struggling to put on the *corte* (skirt) and *huipile* (shirt) that Seño Heydi had lent her. After watching her struggle for several moments Seño Heydi paused our interview to help the director change. As she wrapped and tucked the fabrics with a practiced touch I heard Seño Heydi playfully tease the director for not knowing how to dress in *traje*. Neither the director nor Seño Heydi seemed to find this situation odd, yet I began to feel uncomfortable as I watched the director exchange her boots, slacks and blouse for Seño Heydi’s traditional clothing.

The change complete, the director took her leave, allowing Seño Heydi and me to finish our interview and re-enter the bustling courtyard to take part in the celebration. Standing off to one side I watched as the students assembled in the middle of the school patio, the teachers beside them. Then, with a wave of her hand the director called an end to the music and announced the beginning of the celebration. Cued by the marimba music that played over the loudspeakers, eight students began a traditional dance, marking the beginning of the celebration.

### *Engaging with the Topic of Diversity*

There are two significant components of this celebration that must be addressed; first, why the school chose to structure the celebration as it did (by separating the students into groups and asking each group to present on an indigenous culture), and second, the director’s decision to

change into traditional *traje*. To address this first question on the structure of the celebration I asked the IMEBCA's director about the purpose of the celebration itself. In response, the director informed me that this was a celebration of Guatemala's rich diversity, then reminded me that in Guatemala twenty-two languages are spoken.

The director's comment that this celebration had to do with Guatemala's diversity can be situated within the history of Guatemala's post-war curriculum reform which, as I addressed in chapter two, emphasized the importance of fostering national unity through respect for diversity. What this celebration illustrated, however, was that acknowledgement of cultural diversity does not necessarily foster respect *or* unity. Instead, this exhibition of indigenous cultures exoticized the cultures on display; cultures to which, and this is the critical point, many of the students themselves belonged.<sup>92</sup>

When I asked the teachers how the students identified themselves ethnically, the teachers told me that most of the students were "a mix." In addition, I later found out that most of the students had brought their *trajes* from home and had produced traditional foods for the celebration with the help of their parents, who often made the same foods at home; dishes such as *Pepián* (a vegetable soup) and *Estofado* (a type of stew), commonly served in Quetzaltenango. Though I wanted to press the issue further, the teachers in the office seemed visibly reticent to discuss the cultural backgrounds of the students and immediately returned to their work once they had answered my question. Their reticence, however, proved quite illuminating in the context of the celebration, for it called attention to a silence within the school around ethnicity and difference. It is as if, in a California school with a population of more than 70% immigrant children, students were encouraged on one particular day to dress in their "native" costume and bring in something that represented their culture – only to ignore the identities that had been

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<sup>92</sup> I am grateful to Professor Steve Volk for his assistance in developing this perspective on the celebration.

disclosed for the rest of the year. Holding that day's celebration is a significant recognition of who the students are; ignoring that revelation for the rest of the year is a significant recognition of the work still to be done.

Given this silence surrounding the issue of ethnicity, one could argue that the Indigenous Cultures Celebration was an effort to break the silence by highlighting the unique beauty of each culture. Indeed, the students demonstrated visible excitement about the celebration and seemed to enjoy the opportunity to dress in *traje típico*. To condemn the event as a shallow exhibition would be too simplistic and would ignore the students and teachers' own experience of the event. At the same time, an event that focuses on the richness of Guatemalan diversity and the differences among its indigenous communities must be considered as part of the larger history of racial discrimination in Guatemala, addressed in chapter one. Within this context the celebration felt superficial, for it highlighted the importance of diversity without addressing the complicated relationship between races or the ethnic diversity of the student body. Without an understanding of the history of relations between Guatemala's indigenous and non-indigenous cultures, or a direct acknowledgement of the war, a celebration of diversity risks becoming a celebration of difference as oddity, without an understanding of those differences or, more importantly, the dark histories that they evoke. The differences one celebrates stand the risk of becoming celebrations of *other*, removed and exoticized cultures, rather than a means to understand one's *own* history and community.

### *Fluid Identities: Changing Clothes*

The second component of this observation that I will address is the director's choice to change out of her work clothing and into a traditional *traje*. For a ladino educator, particularly

the director of the school, to don the clothing of an indigenous community is significant, for through it the attempt to appreciate indigenous cultures manifested as an act of exoticization. To understand the significance of this action it must be situated within the history of the use of *traje típico* in Guatemala, which is both deeply tied to indigenous identity as well as to a history of prejudice and discrimination associated with such markers of ethnicity. Until recently, Señó Heydi told me, neither students nor teachers in Quetzaltenango were allowed to wear *traje* to school, evidence of pervasive and public discrimination against indigenous students and faculty.<sup>93</sup> In addition, the identification of an indigenous man or woman by his or her dress has a highly fraught and complex history tied to the history of the civil war and genocide. Consider this statement from cultural anthropologist Diane Nelson who writes that, during the war, “the army train[ed] soldiers in how to identify people by their *traje*, and through the mid-1980s, Civil Patrollers were instructed by the military to detain anyone wearing certain *trajes*.”<sup>94</sup> As Nelson makes clear, the dangers surrounding the use of traditional dress were particularly intense during the genocide, when being identified as indigenous automatically marked one as a rebel and a subversive. By using her clothing to mark the difference between the ladino and indigenous identities, the director directly engaged in a narrative of ethnic difference that has, as Nelson highlights, relied upon superficial markers of identity. In addition, the director’s choice to change her clothing evinced a desire to locate herself “within,” rather than “outside” the celebration by situating herself, through her dress, as a part of the indigenous communities that were celebrated.

At the same time one could take a different approach to the director’s use of *traje* by placing it within the context of a broader movement of Mayan activism to encourage the use of

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<sup>93</sup> Margaret Paulin, Interview with Señó Heydi, Quetzaltenango, Guatemala: August 10, 2012.

<sup>94</sup> Nelson, 182. Documentation of the use of *traje* to identify the indigenous during the war can also be found in Susanne Jonas, *The Battle for Guatemala*, 149.



traditional dress.<sup>95</sup> Though Nelson does not directly address the role that ladinos can (or do) play in challenging cultural discrimination against *traje*, she does highlight the existence of a movement within the Mayan community to retain the use of *traje* as a statement against discrimination and in solidarity with Mayan activism.<sup>96</sup> We might, therefore, see the director's choice to adopt *traje* as sign of this movement's progress, and as a sign that the discrimination against indigenous dress is eroding, however slowly. Alternatively, the director's action can be viewed within *both* frameworks, as an act that both exoticized indigenous cultures and evinced the gradual erosion of prejudice surrounding the use of *traje*. This complexity illuminates the difficulty of addressing diversity in an educational setting, as well as the potency of the curriculum's emphasis on recognizing and finding strength through Guatemala's multiculturalism.

## **II. Observation of the Colegio Pre-Universitario De Ciencias y Tecnología Moderna La Esperanza**

The IMEBCA celebration of indigenous cultures is evidence that the national curriculum's rhetoric of "unity through diversity" has had an impact on schools and students by encouraging teachers to teach the importance of multiculturalism. Furthermore, the director's choice to change her clothing, and "fully" participate in the celebration evinces her support for this project, and the extent to which she herself believes in the importance of highlighting Guatemala's diversity. It is important to recognize, however, that although his rhetoric has had an impact, the power of the curriculum is limited because it does not mandate *how* a teacher must to address a topic or unit. In other words, the state does very little to oversee the actions of teachers. As a result, teachers can choose to support the rhetoric espoused by the curriculum or to

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<sup>95</sup> Nelson, 139

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 138-139.

challenge it by inserting their own narrative into the classroom. During my observation of social studies classes in the Colegio Pre-Universitario I witnessed a class in which the social studies teacher, Seño Raquel, challenged the dominant narrative of the curriculum, rather than supporting it.

In terms of size and student body the two schools were comparable and like the IMEBCA most students of the Pre-Universitario were of ‘mixed’ decent (the children of both indigenous and ladino parents). The primary difference lay between the ethnicities (cultures) of the teacher in the Pre-Universitario, who identified herself as indigenous K’iche, and the director of the IMEBCA who was ladino. In addition, the Pre-Universitario teacher Seño Raquel occupied a unique position in the school as both the social studies teacher and the K’iche language teacher. As a result, she was in particularly interesting position to engage with issues of culture and language. In the following observation I will look at one class, in particular, in which Seño Raquel challenged the state mandated curriculum by inserting her own narrative into the class.

### **Tolerance and Respect**<sup>97</sup>

“Tienen vergüenza de su idioma” (they’re embarrassed of their language) Seño Raquel said to me, loud enough for the whole class to hear. She continued, “Many of them speak K’iche at home but here they pretend not to speak it or they speak it and then feel embarrassed.” Seño Raquel turned back to the class. “Sing her the anthem of *La Esperanza*,” she told them, and the students rose to their feet to sing the anthem of the municipality where they live.

Some of the students sang with strong, clear voices, others cast looks toward their friends on either side, their voices fading in and out. When they had finished the song the students

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<sup>97</sup> Margaret Paulin, Personal Observation, Quetzaltenango, Guatemala: August 23, 2012.

returned to their desks. “You see” Señora Raquel said, turning back to me, “they’re learning but they’re still embarrassed.”<sup>98</sup>

The next day Señora Raquel and I entered the same classroom. “Please take out your textbooks and read page 139,” Señora Raquel told the students. “We’ll discuss it when I’m done grading the homework.” The students pulled out their textbooks and began to read in pairs. A student on my right shared her book with me and together we read the page entitled “La Tolerancia y Respeto” (Tolerance and Respect). Before we were halfway through the passage, however, Señora Raquel put down her notes, picked up the textbook and read directly from the text:

La tolerancia es aceptar las críticas y critica sin lastimar a otra persona. Una persona tolerante es una persona respetosa. Igual una persona respetosa es una persona tolerante.

Tolerance is the ability to accept criticism and to criticize others without doing them harm. A tolerant person is one who is respectful. A respectful person is one who is tolerant.

She put the book down, then turned to the class and began to speak about the topic in her own words. “En una persona tolerante no existe el racismo” (Racism does not exist in someone who is tolerant), she said, then she asked if they had ever seen someone commit an intolerant act, following the script provided in the textbook.<sup>99</sup> Several students raised their hands. “Sí, en la capital” (yes, in the capital) one student answered, “por ejemplo si una persona llega a la capital con *traje* la gente no lo toleran. Ellos piensan que no puede ser profesional” (for example if a person wears traditional clothing in the capital the people will not tolerate him. They will think that he cannot be a professional). Señora Raquel nodded. “It’s true,” she affirmed, then she told a

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<sup>98</sup> Margaret Paulin, Personal Observation, Quetzaltenango, Guatemala: August 21, 2012.

<sup>99</sup> This question came from a small box of discussion questions located at the bottom of the page in the textbook. Although the Guatemalan government has disseminated the National Curriculum, the textbooks are not mandated. All of the schools that I observed used the Santillana textbooks, *Enlaces (6-9) Ciencias Sociales*, and the director of the IMEBCA informed me that this is the most popular textbook in the region. Margaret Paulin, Interview with Licenciada Gaby, IMEBCA: January 28, 2013.

story about a time when a woman had refused to sit near her during a conference but would not provide a reason. According to Seño Raquel, the woman would not sit near her because she was wearing *traje típico*. “Se sentaba sola porque era racista” (she sat alone because she was a racist), Seño Raquel said, then explained to the students that racism was prevalent in all of the universities in Guatemala. If they wanted to be professionals, Seño Raquel explained, they would have to learn to be tolerant.

*“Speaking Truth to Power:” Engaging the Subject of Racism*

In this observation Seño Raquel challenged the curriculum’s narrative of tolerance and respect by inserting her own narrative on the prevalence of racism. The curriculum for this unit instructs the teacher to focus on the “practice of tolerance and respect regarding ideological, religious, cultural and political diversity,” with the overarching goal being “the valorization of social and cultural diversity in Guatemala.” Seño Raquel’s insertion of racism into this framework challenged the curriculum by highlighting what occurs when individual lack tolerance and respect. Rather than valorizing the social and cultural diversity of Guatemala, Seño Raquel’s argument that racism remains engrained in the higher education system served as a warning to her students that racism has not been eliminated.

Based only on observation, it is difficult to know whether Seño Raquel meant for this moment to challenge the curriculum, or whether she simply saw her anecdote as one that could enhance the conversation. Still, her insertion of racism into the conversation can be read as an intervention into the state-mandated curriculum on “Tolerance and Respect.” In her work, *Buried Secrets*, Victoria Sanford introduces the concept of “speaking truth to power” as an act by which an individual uses his or her voice to challenge the dominant narrative. In the context of

Guatemala, Sanford writes, “survivors [of the war] who give testimony are speaking *truth to power*—whether the power of the army, guerrillas, local and national governments, or international community.”<sup>100</sup> In a very small way, I believe that Seño Raquel’s anecdote constitutes a similar act of “speaking truth to power” by inserting the truth – her experience with racism— into the class on tolerance. Additionally, her decision to use a personal anecdote in this lesson is significant because it draws upon her personal experience with racism as an indigenous, K’iche woman. Rather than accepting the positive definitions of “tolerance” and “respect” Seño Raquel used her personal experience of racism to illustrate, and in a sense testify to, the fact that tolerance and respect have not eliminated prejudice and racism.

### *The Construction of Identity*

In addition to challenging the curriculum’s focus on respect and tolerance, this class also constructs a fascinating framework of identities. To examine this framework, it is important to remember that most of the students in this class were from “mixed” indigenous/ladino backgrounds, and that Seño Raquel identified herself as indigenous K’iche. With this information in mind, we can deconstruct the way in which she approached the indigenous identity in her class, both complicating and challenging the identities of her students.

When Seño Raquel called attention to her students’ reticence to speak K’iche in class she simultaneously addressed and criticized the process of *ladinization* in Guatemala whereby the indigenous moved away from traditional practices in favor of a more acceptable or “modern” ladino lifestyle. The history of the term “ladinization” (to adopt ladino practices of language, custom, dress, etc.) can be traced throughout the history of ladino/indigenous relations, and underlies the age-old construction of the indigenous identity as “backward” and anti-modern. As

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<sup>100</sup> Sanford, 181. Emphasis my own.

an indigenous woman, working as both the social studies and K'iche teacher, Seño Raquel was given the difficult task of preparing her students to be both citizens of a diverse and “unified” Guatemala (as the curriculum demands) and as members of the K'iche community, marked, in this case, by language.<sup>101</sup> By calling attention to her students’ refusal to speak K'iche, Seño Raquel highlighted their rejection of the K'iche community and of the indigenous community as a whole. At the same time, Seño Raquel’s position as the K'iche language teacher made her an example of an authentic K'iche woman, one who spoke the language and thereby engaged with the community. The lesson was further complicated by the fact that she herself, as a *professional*, stood before the students wearing slacks and a blouse and not her *traje*.

### **III. Observation of the Instituto de Educación Básica con Orientación Industrial de Quetzaltenango**

The third and final observation that I will explore took place in the Técnico Industrial, a state-run school located near the city center of Quetzaltenango. The Técnico Industrial differed from the IMEBCA and the Pre-Universitario in two significant ways—first, the Técnico Industrial was significantly larger than both the IMEBCA and the Pre-Universitario and second, most of the students who attended the Técnico Industrial identified as ladinos, while the majority of students in the other two schools were identified by their teachers as “mixed.” It is also important to note that the social studies teacher I observed in the Técnico Industrial was ladino, a factor that influenced my interpretation of her class on the “Rights of Children.”

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<sup>101</sup> For an interesting analysis of this tension in Rwanda see Sarah Warshauer Freedman, “Teaching History after Identity-Based Conflicts: The Rwanda Experience,” *Comparative Education Review* 52 (July 2008), 663-689.

## Discussion of The Rights of Children<sup>102</sup>

Seño Pamela entered the class with the measured walk of an experienced teacher. At the sight of her a young boy in the first row leapt to his feet and offered to take her books to her desk, an offer that she gratefully accepted. After leading the class in a brief prayer of thanks, Seño Pamela took out her book and began the lesson.

“Soy amante de la libertad” (I’m a believer in freedom), Seño Pamela declared, subtly directing her comment in my direction, “so today instead of a lecture we’re going to have a dialogue.” Without receiving a single instruction the students jumped to their feet and arranged themselves into two groups, filling the room with the hum of voices and the sounds of metal chairs scraping the concrete floor. From my position at the teacher’s desk in the front of the classroom I counted fifty-two students, arranged in two opposing groups stretching the width of the classroom.

Once the students had finished arranging themselves into teams, they looked to Seño Pamela for directions. “Turn to the page on the [Convention on the] Rights of Children,” she instructed, giving the students a moment to find their place. “Do you think that the Rights of Children and Adolescents have changed the attitude of children today?” she asked the class. A student in the front row raised his hand. “Pienso que los niños en las montañas tienen que trabajar entonces ellos no tienen muchos derechos” (I think that the children in the mountains have to work, so they don’t have many rights), the boy answered, then thanked Seño Pamela for the opportunity to speak and took his seat.

Seño Pamela called on another student who had her hand raised. “I think it’s the parents fault because they made the choice to have more children than they can take care of so the children have to work,” the student argued. Seño Pamela nods. “That’s true” she responded, “and

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<sup>102</sup> Margaret Paulin, Personal Observation, Quetzaltenango, Guatemala: July 19, 2012.

let me explain something to you. Do you know what children are sometimes referred to in the countryside?” The students shook their heads. “They’re sometimes called *manos de obra* (working hands), meaning that they are extra hands to help the family with work or to provide money. One time I met a man in the *campo* who had fifteen kids, all of them working. The man told me that the more kids he had to work the fewer workers he had to pay. Now you need to think about this because you are the future parents of Guatemala and you can’t just have children by accident. You need to be responsible.”

### *Engaging with Regional Difference*

The discussion led by Seño Pamela on the “Rights of Children” is an example of how the history of inequality between Guatemala’s indigenous and non-indigenous populations can erupt suddenly into the classroom, whether or not that is the teacher’s intention. It is important to remember that it was not Seño Pamela who first introduced the difference between urban and rural childrearing. Rather, it was her student’s comment, “the children in the mountains have to work, so they don’t have many rights,” that inspired the discussion. Nonetheless, Seño Pamela’s choice to reinforce the student’s comment with anecdotal “evidence” validated and reinforced the notion of difference. Though her anecdote highlights the actions of just one father, her question, “Do you know what children are sometimes referred to in the countryside?” suggests that the man’s approach to his children is emblematic of the way that all rural *campesinos* approach their children. If we apply Trouillot’s theories on narrative construction to this observation, it is evident that in this class Seño Pamela constructs and disseminates a particular narrative on rural parenting. By using the “true” story of the indigenous father to illustrate her



point, Seño Pamela identifies herself as a witness to these differences, thereby giving her account authority.

## **Conclusion**

The three observations that I have explored can be read as examples in which individual teachers construct narratives of the past through lessons that focus on the present. And while these narratives often reinforced established dichotomies between indigenous and ladino cultures and between urban and rural regions, they also ruptured the false, politically constructed boundary between Guatemala's violent past and its peaceful present. Through a careful examination of each teacher's actions and rhetoric, I have shown how the events of the civil war and the histories of prejudice and inequality in Guatemala continue to inform and guide the discussions and activities that take place in the classroom.

For all who hoped that Guatemala's new curriculum would directly address the history of the civil war and genocide, the teaching moments that I have explored may foster disappointment rather than hope. After the signing of the accords and the drafting of the educational reforms, many hoped that Guatemala's histories of violence and inequality would be addressed more directly through the social studies framework, both as an effort to understand these conflicts and to ensure that they do not happen again. And yet current events in Guatemala, such as the election of President Molina and the indictment of General Ríos Montt, show that Guatemala's history of violence remains subject to revision and reevaluation. Given the halting nature of this search for justice, and the efforts by those in power to silence all unwanted histories, the evolution of social studies education in Guatemala is a valuable process through which these issues *are* being addressed, however slowly and however subtly. That Seño Raquel spoke freely

about racism with her students, and that an indigenous cultures celebration was carried out in the IMEBCA are indications that a small space has opened in which these issues can be addressed. While these lessons did not clarify Guatemala's history, they did complicate it, and they brought contentious and painful subjects into the classroom. That the teachers took advantage of this space to grapple with these issues is reason enough to hope that the silenced histories, explored throughout this paper, have not remained silent in these three schools.

## Conclusion

In 1999, the Historical Clarification Committee published a report, *Guatemala Memoria del Silencio*, in which a witness made the following request: “Que la historia que pasamos quede en las escuelas, para que no se olvide, para que nuestros hijos la conozcan,” (That the history of our past remain in the schools, so that it is not forgotten, so that our children come to know it).<sup>103</sup> The witness's use of “conocer” (to know) is significant. *To know* a history is more than to remember it; it is more than to speak of it, write of it, or teach about it. *To know* implies not only listening to, but understanding and empathizing with the history, an idea that brings us back to Dori Laub’s “empathic witness,” and the importance of *listening* to trauma.<sup>104</sup>

The Guatemalan education system does not intend for its students to know their history. Instead, the government has used education to craft a narrative of national identity that is based upon a superficial recognition of diversity, but which lacks a deeper discussion of difference and intolerance. The superficiality of this narrative is captured in the national curriculum document, “Vision of the Nation” in which the state asserts, “Guatemala is a multiethnic, multicultural, multilingual country that is developing as a just, democratic, pluralist and peaceful nation.”<sup>105</sup> The use of the term “developing” in this context demonstrates the state’s intention to move children out of the violent past and into a peaceful present. By situating students within a “new” nation, one that is “founded on the equitable development and personal wellbeing of every individual Guatemalan and of the collective as a whole,”<sup>106</sup> the state pulls children away from the past and focuses their attention on the construction of a “culture of peace.”

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<sup>103</sup> CEH, *Memoria del Silencio*.

<sup>104</sup> Laub, 57.

<sup>105</sup> *Curriculum Nacional Base: Segundo Grado Nivel Medio-Ciclo Básico*, 8

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

Ironically, despite the state's efforts to separate students from Guatemala's history of genocide and violence, the post-war national curriculum has actually created an opportunity (however small) for individual teachers to engage with this history. By focusing on Guatemala's ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity as the basis for cultural "unity," the national curriculum has created a new space in which teachers can engage with current social issues of diversity, race, and regional difference. Despite the superficiality of the state's rhetoric, Guatemala's histories of ethnic tension, civil war and genocide are taught in schools through the words and actions of teachers, who were themselves affected, either directly or indirectly, by the war and genocide. Thus, the students in Quetzaltenango do, in fact, come to *know* their history.

The goal of this paper is to reevaluate what it means to "teach" the history of conflict in a post-conflict society. Rather than looking solely at the ways in which the civil war and the genocide are taught in Guatemala, I posit that we must broaden our approach to examine how these traumatic conflicts, and the histories upon which they are built, inform conversations that take place in the classroom. We cannot exclude discussions of current social issues (such as the treatment of Guatemalan children) or educational events (such as the Indigenous Cultures Celebration) from studies that seek to understand how the country's history of conflict is approached in the classroom. Each teacher's decision to address diversity, race and regional difference is a small step towards working through the conflicts that are founded and informed by these issues.

Retorno a la Sonrisa<sup>107</sup>

*Soy feliz por la niñez futura,  
cuya ágil estatura nueva  
la llevo guardada  
en mi corazón  
pobrisimo.  
soy feliz con mi alegría,  
porque nada puede impedir  
el nacimiento de los niños  
al finalizar mi siglo 20,  
bajo otra forma de vivir,  
bajo otro aire profundo.*

*Soy feliz for la niñez del mundo  
venidero, y, lo proclamo a grandes  
voces, lleno de júbilo universal.*

Return of the Smile

I'm happy for the children of the future,  
whose nimble new bodies  
I guard  
in my poor heart.  
I'm happy with my joy  
because nothing can stop  
the birth of the children  
at the end of my 20<sup>th</sup> century  
into another way of life  
into another purer air.

I'm happy for the children of the world to come  
and I proclaim it at the top of my lungs full of universal rejoicing.

-Otto René Castillo

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<sup>107</sup> Otto René Castillo, "Retorno a la Sonrisa," *Poesia*, (Cuba: Casa de las Américas, 1980), 149-150.

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