

After the Peace: The Contagion of Violence at the Margins of the Guatemalan State

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ABSTRACT

For many of the international experts, humanitarian professionals, and newly appointed state workers determined to implement peace in Guatemala between 1996 and 2006, the imperative was clear: prevent further killing and protect human lives. For many Guatemalans, who continued to live with death as a part of their ordinary lives, this sort of peace was simply unimaginable. This article illuminates how powerful institutional forms of the state—dirty wars, the work of activism and impunity, and neoliberal reform—reconfigure deadly struggles and their aftermath. I conclude that an alternative way to evaluate peace processes is to consider their relationship to life, after the peace, where violent death is accepted as a condition of being. [Keywords: Guatemala, violence, Peace Accords, state, humanitarianism, social reform, post-conflict Ixil]

Between 1960 and 1996, the violence in Guatemala resulted in killing, disappearance, hundreds of massacres, and one-quarter of the nation's population displaced by government armed forces. Under pressure to stem ongoing violence, on the cusp of a new year inside of the National Palace in the capital city the UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, government representatives, and leaders of the revolutionary forces signed the *Accord for a Firm and Lasting Peace* on December 29, 1996 that negotiated an end to more than three decades of violence. The UN-brokered settlement included significant constitutional reforms, with international oversight, that provided a "global solution" to the problems in Guatemala (Jeffrey 1998). This agreement has been the framework for reshaping politics, public life, and indigenous rights on the contested grounds of a nation in the aftermath of genocide.

The 1996 peace agreement was intended to provide sanctuary in the aftermath of a 36 year war. For some, this sanctuary was constituted by immunity from punishment. For others, it promised a safe haven from violence. The Peace Accords provided refuge from the normal order of bloodshed. It was at this time that peace first emerged as a problem, rather than an illusive possibility, in Guatemala. For many of the international experts, humanitarian professionals, and peace workers who arrived in Guatemala to ensure peace, the imperative was clear: prevent further killing and protect human life. For many Guatemalans who continued to live with death as a part of their ordinary life, this sort of peace was simply unimaginable. Here, anthropology of the margins (Das and Poole 2004) illuminates powerful institutional forms—dirty wars, terrorism, humanitarian aid, tribunals, and truth commissions—that undo the state in particular ways.¹

The literature on the state and armed conflict (Skocpol 1979, Starr 1999, Walter and Snyder 1999, Keohane 2002, Pásara 2003) has neglected tensions after peace accords are signed by evaluating humanitarian interventions only in relation to international standards for human rights, presuming that life itself will be valued above all else. Projects and policies are judged on the basis of how many lives can be counted as saved, or the number of people who can be categorized as reformed or rehabilitated. For years, anthropologists of the state attempted to explain these changes in terms of the evolution of political society² or as a particular form of political economy.³ More recent anthropological literature describes regimes of truth and power that discipline both meaning and practices in everyday life, entering the debate on both methodological (Ong 1999, Holston 1999,

Caldeira 2000) and theoretical grounds (Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994; Barry, Osbourne, and Rose 1996; Rose 1999; Rabinow 2002).⁴ Much work has focused on the cross border circulation of everyday cultural meanings and commodities, and the extension of normative technologies into daily life (Herzfeld 1992, Gupta 1995, Povinelli 2002). But the field has only begun to examine supranational institutions (Riles 2001, Merry 2006, Cowan 2007) and democracy promotion (Coles 2007, Paley 2008) along with various encounters at the state's margins—clandestine violence, the distribution of aid, and economic restructuring—that shape how people experience the state in the aftermath of war.

There is a persistent perception that mass participation in atrocities makes people violent, rather than ordinary. In this view, it is impossible for people—both survivors and perpetrators—to live together again. Yet, these arguments redefine violence in a way that erases, rather than addresses, harms that have come to communities in the Ixil area. In 2006, the UN Human Rights Commission Report, drawing its work to conclusion, explained that “spoilers are successfully undermining the peace agreement”⁵ (OACNUDH/MINUGUA 2006:2). Here, I hope to show that in the Ixil town of Nebaj in the Western highlands of Guatemala, peace does not have such clear winners and losers. Victims and perpetrators—human rights violators and activists for social justice—live together with the crimes of one blending into the suffering of the other. To understand these harms that Ixiles call *mal cuxh tenam as tijmaret tib' lab'*—or the contagion of violence—I turn to an examination of the ways in which the everyday practices of Nebajenses challenge the Peace Accords implemented by the state. This article suggests that an alternative way to evaluate peace processes is to consider the refashioning of their relationship to life—after the peace—where violence and death are accepted as a condition of being. These are the doings and undoings of violence.

Dirty Wars: Violence is Contagious

La violencia or *la situación* has long been cited as the term most commonly used to describe the armed conflict in Guatemala (Manz 1988, Stoll 1993, Warren 1993, Zur 1998, Green 1999). In Ixil, war is most specifically termed *ch'a'o*, as in “*b'a'n va la ya' ok ch'a'o tu kutenam*” (“hopefully in our country the war will come to an end”). However, when referring to the ongoing violence which has pervaded the town, people more often say,

“*mal cuxh tenam as tijmaret tib’ lab*” which describes the way in which the war began in one place and spread like a contagion (*ijmib*). This contagion is never absolute. But it is a pestilence that might be avoided, where fear of death is always preceded by an indifferent world.

More than a decade after the Peace Accords were signed, Guatemala has been qualified by most international and humanitarian organizations as a “transitional democracy” in Central America. The state seems to have effectively negotiated various impediments to its democratic transition after decades of civil conflict. Refugees are officially resettled, and the Guatemalan government has almost doubled its budget for education and health services. Two separate truth commissions have been released. Both accuse the military of gross human rights violations during the war, which was once an unimaginable claim. Yet the death rate in Guatemala—17 murders per day according the nation’s leading daily newspaper⁶—exceeds the current toll in Iraq. The military base in Nebaj, with its atrocities catalogued, continues to operate and justifies its presence as a preventative force that curbs widespread mob killing, robberies, and generalized crime. It is “impossible to separate good violence from bad violence” the Governor of the Department of Quiché—a Nebajense political neophyte—tells me. Nowhere is this more in evidence than Guatemala’s recent genocide trial. A torrent of motions, technicalities, and annulments has resulted in a guilty verdict, which, at this writing, was overturned. In the courtroom, a seemingly fearless judge displayed a bulletproof vest in the heat of the day. On trial, former president, General José Efraín Ríos Montt, and his intelligence chief, General Mauricio Rodríguez, claimed that they liberated the Ixil area from pro-Communist rebels while witnesses repeated well-worn testimony of sexual violence, burned homes, destroyed schools, and dead children. Then—as now—the past, the peace, and any reckoning with it are marked by death—and its denial—on fraught terrain.

International activists,⁷ early childhood educators, rural health promoters, and development engineers working with a bevy of agencies like the UN Mission in Guatemala, Save the Children, the International Rescue Committee, and Catholic Charities that dominate the Guatemalan countryside do not classify violence as good or bad. They uncover mass graves, seek to protect the living from extermination, and reject inaction when faced with death. In this article, I show that when folded into the aftermath of genocide, this model for morality is easily put to the service of violence. These efforts are situated within a landscape of global rights production,

marked by the increasing predominance of private-public cooperation, the development of new international legal codes, and the importance of internationally sanctioned mediation in post-war reconstruction efforts. While peace workers focus on the potential to create conditions in which human lives are preserved, guarded, and protected, Ixiles are less certain about the meaning of that security.⁸ Three ethnographic vignettes show how war is being waged in the Ixil area by other means: 1) the 2004 election of a former *génocidaire* as town mayor, 2) the work of human rights advocate Eulalia and her relative Don Vincente who terrorized the town,⁹ and 3) the management of this violence through the distribution of fertilizer by non-governmental organizations. Here, I demonstrate that through the “contagion of violence,” Ixiles have forged their understanding of the human experience by way of fear and threats met with grief and love for their town. As they say, “The law is the law, and no one is greater” (see Figure 2). Ixiles do not eschew the violence of a dirty war; they teach one another how to live with pain.

In his *Critique of Violence* (1968), Walter Benjamin attempts to give this problem more exact conditions by establishing a taxonomy of different expressions of violence which separate the legal from illegal and legitimate power from absolute force. He writes:

The meaning of the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence is not immediately obvious. The misunderstanding in natural law by which a distinction is drawn between violence used for just and unjust ends must be emphatically rejected. A hypothetical distinction between kinds of violence must be based on the presence or absence of a general historical acknowledgement of its ends. (1968:238)

Benjamin’s attempt to provide a transcendental critique of violence was premised on the possibility of creating a diacritical model by which violence could be distinguished from its inauthentic counterparts. By showing the mutual contamination of violent means with violent ends from mythic times, in statutory law, and in naturalism, Benjamin frames violence as non-instrumental. This quandary of legitimacy—the possibility of separating genuine from disingenuous violence—remains contentious in Nebaj, where it is “impossible to separate good violence from bad violence.” This is particularly the case given the current willingness of the



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Figure 1: "Against the manipulations of the mayor."

nation-state to create emergencies that cause fear and amnesia among the civilian population.

In Nebaj, free elections are the front for violent politicians pitted against, and alongside, a riotous populous. That same population holds the memory of state neglect and violence in its grasp, while also disavowing it. In the spring of 2005, for example, a state of emergency was declared in Nebaj by the national government, special police forces circled the town in an attempt to restore order, and Guatemala's president arrived to announce the construction of new roads in an attempt to reinforce national authority and investment in the region. Why then, only a few months later, was the mayor alleged to have had his head "cut off"?



Figure 2: "WITHOUT IMMUNITY!
The law is the law and no one is greater."

Approximately one year after his election in 2004, a large, public demonstration was organized to show support for the mayor in the face of growing criticism and claims that he was a corrupt killer (Figure 1). Young people responded by papering the streets with fliers (Figure 2).

One week later, following national media coverage, a larger march was organized “in favor of the rights of the town” that demanded the mayor admit his personal and political corruption and leave municipal office (Figure 3). The separation of the “rights of the town” from “the leadership of the mayor” might be understood as a precursor to the events that would lead to a municipal coup five months later. Such demands are not new in Nebaj, and

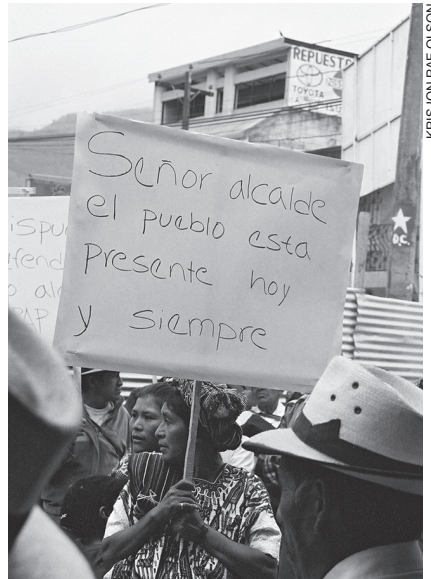


Figure 3: “Mr. Mayor the town is present today and always.”

have been noted by many who worked in the region (Colby and Colby 1981, Stoll 1993). However, most scholars and despondent activists have come to a single conclusion. As one departing human rights monitor who worked for the UN in the region told me, “It is impossible to have true protest here. People are for, and against, everything. No one tells the truth. There isn’t any chance for meaningful change in this place. Not without the truth being out.” Many, like Sara Johan who had worked for the UN Development Program (UNDP) for a year in the Ixil area after having served in Chile and Mozambique, argue that aid projects should work to bolster justice and accountability but determine that in Guatemala they have not led to notable breakthroughs. So I began to pay close attention to the form of demonstration that Nebajenses employed as they supported the mayor, and then the form used to defend the rights of the town.

At the demonstrations, their voices, in favor of and against the mayor, are clear and magnified by several loudspeakers. Punctuated Ixil follows shouts of affirmation in both cases. Bodily movement mirrors the mechanical postures of forced paramilitary service that obliged men to police their neighbors in civil patrols sponsored by the Army during the genocide

(Carmack 1988, Montejo 1992). As people shout and move through town, they lift their hats and bow at the waist. They hold sagging placards, marching and chanting, with scripted Spanish words. The outward appearance of the two demonstrations is one of similarity. Is this simply a case of Marxian false consciousness in a place where it is, indeed, “impossible to have true protest”?

Instead, I suggest that by focusing on both the doings and undoings of violence, we might come to understand atrocity, oppression, and systematic domination of the state in a different way. Here, violence arises in the body—the jerks and pulls of a group in motion, heads bowed in affirmation, the amplification of voices. It emanates from the ways in which people occupy public space in protest, yelling out and chanting their claims to have the mayor’s head cut from his body. In beheading the mayor, they claim to have separated his leadership from the corpus of the town. “*B’ooq’ol tenam mox sotzya*” (“the head of our town disappears”), protestors proclaim. Violence also becomes a “way in which people are made to suffer,” a young demonstration leader tells me. People of the town experience violence, while violent acts become an indispensable instrument of political participation. Both followers of the mayor and rights defenders ask for “order and authority to be restored.” Both groups ask, “[f]or the head, the thinking, of the town to be recognized.” We must work towards a theory that acknowledges the extent and variety of violent practices of the state and how they are both remembered and forgotten, given the way in which violence is instrumentalized by formidable economic, social, and ideational structures. As Robin DeLugan (this issue) points out, it is the memory of these violent acts which ultimately refashions the conditions of belonging, in this case in the Ixil area. It follows that questions must be raised about the inadvertent, but foreseeable consequences of such violence. How would violence, without direct bodily physical harm, be manifest in a place like Nebaj? Is the rumor of the mayor’s beheading sufficient to render him politically powerless? Is the rumor itself violent?

Rumor and secrecy often shroud areas affected by armed conflict (Green 1999, Sanford 2003, Manz 2004, Moodie 2009). Secrecy, a basic tenet of state military policy in war, both silences and defines the nation. National security becomes the secret rationale and extends into everyday life (Yurchak 2005). In wartime Guatemala, secrecy is a social tactic knitted into local political strategies of extermination. Back in 1982, the

same mayor was appointed by the populist military leader Efraín Ríos Montt,¹⁰ and began to carry out his genocidal mandate. During that year alone, there were more than 100 documented massacres and the town cemetery was bombed. One year later, the mayor fled town in the quiet of night. It was often said, even a few years ago, that he was disappeared or dead. Only when Ríos Montt returned to national power in 1999 did the mayor reappear in Nebaj. He arrived without fanfare, and began to build a large home near the center of town. In the intervening years, he had amassed a small fortune doing post-war rebuilding through his two construction companies headquartered in the state capital.

Four years later, he resurfaced on the local election ballot, and returned to the mayorship in 2004. Together with the national government, the mayor promised his voters, in numerous public political speeches, cash payments for their participation in the civilian patrols.¹¹ The first payment of \$650 USD, nearly half of a beginning teacher's salary in Nebaj, was issued in 2003 before the state was enveloped in an embezzlement scandal that suspended the program. Nevertheless the mayor, as a member of Ríos Montt's *Frente Republicano Guatemalteco* (FRG) party, promised compensation to those that would help him rule Nebaj with a *mano dura*, or hard-handed fist. His promise to use overwhelming violence to end crime turned back on itself "when he took advantage of our suffering, and wishes to improve our lives, and only returned with more violence." For several months, the rumor circulated that the mayor was in fact dead, though most folks confided that his houses stayed in good condition under the circumstances.

What remains is the persistent phrase: "He is no longer the head of the community. Because he had a bad head," Doña Rosa tells me. The status of his body, dead or alive, is immaterial. "Who can say where he is? They keep it a secret. We could never discover him anyway. Not if he is hidden away. All of those years he was gone, and then we believed he was reborn. But his head was still rotten," the mother of six affirms when I ask about the leader's status. Over the next few months, the mayor slowly reappeared in town as he mounted a new campaign for mayoral office, which he won in 2006. In the aftermath of war, secrecy is a routine practice that extends into political interventions and public debates. Here, the violence of rumor may be as empowering as any violent act itself.

The rumor of the beheading, then, is both a single act and a common-sense way of understanding the world. I insist that our capacity to

understand any kind of state atrocity lies with our ability to distinguish war from politics, while at the same time being able to recognize the conflation of politics with war. And this has been particularly true in cases of genocide that always, after the bodies are counted, chronicle death foretold. In light of the bodies piled up deliberately in the name of genocide, it is not adequate to couch all violence in terms of the documented and intentional extermination of people, as the generalized violent mechanism of state control. It must, at the least, be understood with some degree of specificity as some part of the historiography of violence. It is, perhaps, equally important to acknowledge the dangers of divorcing material forces and power relations from fragmented and individualized histories of genocide. Like people anywhere who have endured such violence, those who remain in the end are often most concerned with the collaborators and bystanders, their neighbors and friends, whose complicity in the violence is more difficult to evaluate.

Cousins of the mayor, who are alive today because he protected them during the genocide, are said to have led the charge and demanded his beheading in the municipal building. To ask whether their violence is legitimate or illegitimate, as international monitors and donors often do, is difficult indeed.

If we understand violence as entirely physical, the infusion of physical violence with the symbolic significance of ideas and ideology might be lost. Some Ixiles, for example, acknowledge the physicality of death by offering to labor on a widower's plot. The personalization of mourning and the emotional force of death are also challenged by the anger of those widowers, who feel that the laborers may be complicit in secreting away their land. In the human sciences, we have not sufficiently explored the social force of emotion, especially when confronted with death. Yet if violence is defined as essentially symbolic, the singular ramifications of bodily injury are easily overlooked (Scarry 1985, Feldman 1991, Daniel 1996). Just as the symbolic violence of discourse has real consequences for bodily practice (Fussell 1975, Comaroff and Comaroff 1991), physical violence and violation can produce symbolic resignification, or the destruction of significance altogether (Reynolds 1990, Herman 1992, Blanchot 1995, Finnegan 1996, Das et al. 1997, Hinton 1998). Perhaps, then, violence is best understood in an interstitial space between the materiality of embodied practice and the structural forces that produce dismemberment.

This is particularly the case given the current willingness of the nation to create emergencies that cause fear and cultural amnesia among the civilian population. In my estimation, there are dangers implicit in understanding state violence as either sovereign or historically arbitrary. Yet, it is as important to recognize the hazards of portraying violent conditions and forces in the protests as autonomous and separate from the meanings Ixiles ascribe to violence.

This quandary of legitimacy—the possibility of separating genuine from disingenuous violence—remains contentious (Gurr 1986, Bourdieu 2000). As Michel Foucault (1980) demonstrated, the form and content of such distinctions emanate from social regimes of truth. Returning to the problem of defining violence, Benjamin also poses an important question in this regard, “[w]hat light is thrown on the nature of violence by the fact that such a criterion or distinction can be applied to it at all, or, in other words, what is the meaning of this distinction?” (1968:268). His essay proposes a messianic exploration of revolutionary violence that seeks to end the violence and counter-violence which have made and unmade human history. He explains, “[i]f the existence of violence outside the law, as pure immediate violence, is assured, this furnishes the proof that revolutionary violence, the highest manifestation of unalloyed violence by man, is possible, and by what means” (1968:300). In his view, it was this violence, neither law-making nor law-preserving, that escapes the social norms of legality and justice and establishes the non-instrumental providence of violence. He writes, “[o]n the breaking of this cycle maintained by mythical forms of law, on the suspension of law with all of the forces on which it depends as they depend on it, finally therefore on the abolition of state power, a new historical epoch is founded” (1968:299). Benjamin argues—in contrast to Hannah Arendt (1969)—that a politics of non-instrumental means will adequately challenge the dominant historical-philosophical view of violence as instrumental.

Non-instrumental violence is not located with the executioner or his victim, not beside the perpetrator or her pursued. Benjamin writes that any suspicion of violence turns into “certainty of the perniciousness of its historical function” whether it be divine or legal in constitution (1968:299). He thereby rejects any politics founded on violence, for to do so would risk establishing violence as an absolute end in itself. This insight, Benjamin writes,

is uncommon because of the stubborn prevailing habit of conceiving those just ends as ends of a possible law, that is not only as generally valid (which follows analytically from the nature of justice), but also as capable of generalization, which as could be shown, contradicts the nature of justice. (1968:298)

War is then understood as a violent means with violent ends which does not reproduce the possibility of justice in the social order, but instead reproduces social suffering and sovereign violence (Benjamin 1968). His conclusion forces us examine the degree to which the phenomenon of violence, in the form of violent struggle, for example, demonstrates the limitations of any liberal ideology that forwards violence as an instrument of justice or the law.¹² Does Benjamin offer anthropology a convincing differentiation between legitimate and illegitimate violence?

By focusing on both the doings and undoings of violence, we might come to understand atrocity, oppression, and systematic domination in a different way. Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (1999) suggests that it is the very possibility of deciding on this disjunction between defacement and its revelation that defines violence. Agamben probes the shame of violence which makes witnessing possible. He writes, “[w]hoever experiences disgust has in some way recognized himself in the object of his loathing and fears being recognized himself in an alterity that cannot be assumed—that is he subjectifies himself to an absolute desubjectification” (1999:107). He concludes that, “[t]he only way forward lies in investigating the space between these two options” (1999:13). Certainly, one cannot overestimate the importance of this paradoxical nexus between the state of exception and the way in which people make sense of the past. What does it mean to be involved in the sort of protracted violence prevalent in the world today, which extends from times of war into crimes of peace?

Often, upon close examination, I found that peace workers and human rights activists in Nebaj were related by blood or marriage to those same men and women who, during the years of armed conflict, are rumored to have killed, intimidated, and put fear in the hearts of townspeople. Parcels of land are divided among them; they attend the funeral services of respective family members, and sometimes greet each other on the street. Violence has long been used by ordinary, well-meaning folks to punish and challenge existing loyalties that both reproduce and resist the Guatemalan state. Opposition, enmity, and collusion (Cohen 1995) are counterpoints to

and constitutive of Ixil community. In their everyday interactions, people adopt strategies and tactics (de Certeau 1984) that allow them to reclaim themselves from violence, while still being bound up in it.

It Was Our Work: Activism and Impunity

One afternoon, I spoke to a woman named Eulalia and her brother-in-law Don Vincente. I had known them both for a long while, but had never seen them together. So I was surprised when one afternoon, while I was tending to the garden of a friend who was away in the capital city, they showed up on her doorstep together. The woman who rented the house worked in the municipal government and had been helping the pair document their claims to land in a village outside of Nebaj. Eulalia worked for an organization that promoted women's rights by sustaining a small textile cooperative a couple of miles away. Don Vincente was, for many years, a driver for the UN. Don Vincente, in particular, had always drawn my attention. He seemed to know everyone well, even those in the most remote communities. For most of the years I knew him, I had imagined that it was because of his travels over wide terrain in the white UN Land Rover that he had gained the affection and friendship of villagers. He was an average man, of very modest means, who attended an Evangelical church near his house weekly, and grew seedlings in small plastic bags to sell at the Saturday market. He had two daughters, a house furnished with a few pieces of wooden furniture, and no telephone.

Only after nearly five years of knowing Don Vincente did he tell me that he had been involved in torture, *yatz'o' aama*, or "something that kills the soul." When most people imagine a torturer, they do not picture someone that they know, who has shared meals and celebrations with them. A torturer is conjured up as a monster clothed in military garb, a human capable of what is inhuman.¹³ However, a recent history of violence by soldiers enlisted in Abu Ghraib, Iraq, the prison experiments conducted by Philip Zimbardo at Stanford University in 1971 that turned students into violent guards, and the massacres in Kibuye, Rwanda where religious leaders and police forces turned against people who sought refuge in a church all suggest that torturers are not particularly different from the rest of us. Still, it was difficult to imagine Don Vincente as the perpetrator of crimes that he now carried human rights advocates to investigate throughout the Ixil countryside. We were in the car on our way out of town when men with

rifles approached and asked Don Vicente if he would be going to a meeting of civil patrollers. He mumbled that he would not, and drove quickly out of town. When I asked him about it, he gave long pause.

“I think it was my mentality. My mentality was the main issue, and at the time violence seemed like one way out of the whole problem. I admit that I went to the civil patrols with a certain mentality and they ordered it, made me disciplined and certain about the threats to the town. I opened my ears and did what was required of me.”

“What was required of you?” I asked Don Vicente.

“We brought in people who were under suspicion, whoever was identified as a person not to be trusted. When we arrived at their homes, people were made to eat their own land. We taped their mouths with the dirt inside of it. They could not speak; we locked them up in places, until they forgot where they had come from. People were very afraid. Our work was to intimidate them, beat them into submission. Others we opened up and let bleed. These were the tactics. They were signs to the others, of what to expect.”

I asked him how he felt about this work: “It spread. It started out slowly and accelerated. I had never killed people before that, and I can’t imagine that I would again. I don’t think about it much anymore. It was a way to defend ourselves, and what belongs to us. But I can’t say that it was correct, or fair. That I could not say. It is hard to know if it was right or not. I do not feel anything about it.”

Don Vicente was not unusual, as it turns out. Whatever aspect of his life I investigated—his training and obedience (Milgram 1974) in the civil patrols, his personality (Adorno 1964), his friends and relations, and the military rule that extended over his lifetime—I found him to be very much like other people in town. In *The Nervous System*, Michael Taussig explains this sort of exploration as

a question of distance—that’s what I’d like to say about talking terror, a matter of finding the right distance, holding it at arms length so it doesn’t turn on you (after all it’s just a matter of words), and yet not putting it so far away in a clinical reality that we end up having substituted one form of terror for another. (1992:11)

Certainly Don Vicente’s life was not unexpected, an artificial interjection of magic into violence. His are material experiences that explain the ways

in which people succumb to atrocity. To see human lives as nothing but a series of attempts to avoid the encroachment of external violence is to ignore those autochthonous versions of human existence that do find their way into the future.

When Eulalia and Don Vincente came to the house in Cantón Vipila, I asked whether they felt strange about their differing pasts as torturer and activist. Eulalia offered this:

It isn't so different, really. In as much as it is work. My work is one of convincing, not with tactics, but with practice. I follow plans and receive a salary for my results. How do our dreams end? They end in the same way, with obligations to each other. All of the work is on our emotions, trading good for bad and back again.

What I learned was that genocide and human rights work in the town of Nebaj were mutually constitutive. One existed because of the other, alongside the other, with the other. This is why any attempt to catalog violence in Guatemala (as political, criminal, or insurgent) as if the divide between these categories was not permeable, with exchanges and allegiances nearly impossible to unravel, is a disservice to Ixiles' own understanding of the war and its aftermath. On the one hand, as Tate (2007) artfully points out in the Colombian case, the Guatemalan state constantly recasts human rights policies and discourses to its own ends and creates particular forms of knowledge about past and present violence. Ariel Dorfman writes in his book *Exorcising Terror*,

It is members of the new government, often the very people who led the resistance against the dictatorship, who are all too often the ones who preach a selective amnesia, asking their citizens to focus on the future and not on what happened yesterday. Investigating the horror, they say, dragging up old crimes, putting former officials on trial, only diverts attention from the most urgent task at hand, the primary goal of national reconciliation. (2002:198)

Terror and its work map onto one another, in neighborhoods and relationships. They make both violence, and its opposite, possible. Terror normalizes "unspeakable acts" (Conroy 2000) by ordinary people that spread together with democracy and human rights (Rejali 2004) after World War II.

To find out why the state, that entity which humans make, has devoured its people has been a central concern for anthropologists. And yet in the face of violence, people still create some recognizable image of themselves. History is full of these contradictions. In this small town, the boundaries are exaggerated, brokering a violence experienced as if it were immaterial, something inhuman beyond the natural bounds of men and women. Ixiles explain to me that this is a question of suffering, and suffering well. Humanitarian work, Ixiles contend, peddled by peace workers and UN police, simply substitutes one form of violence for another. Through Eulalia Gomez, a local peace worker, and her brother-in-law Vincente Cobo, a torturer turned UN chauffeur, I learned about the essential role of violence in forming and transforming the humanitarian work at the heart of Guatemala's peace process. One cannot underestimate the ways in which the act of demanding peace alters people, problems, and places today. Relationships, like the one between Eulalia and Vincente, continue to raise questions about what it means to be human—even after the peace is signed.

Neoliberal Reform: Fertile Territory

Violence can no longer be understood as a synchronic fact that unfolds in time, outside of the awareness of people. It is a force that works on the margins of the Guatemalan state to do and undo social, economic, and political reform as laid out in the 1996 Peace Accords. The new neoliberal government in Guatemala—as in Former Yugoslavia (Coles 2007), other parts of Europe (Cowan 2007), and Rwanda (Strauss 2007)—recognizes human rights and multiculturalism while pursuing policies that exacerbate local poverty. In *Pascalian Meditations* (2000:95), Pierre Bourdieu explains that “it is the violence and the arbitrariness of the origin and, by the same token, the question of the justification of power that are brought back to the surface in the explosion, the violence, the shock of absolute force.” Understood in this way, violence is pervasive because it is created in and of the world. Violence, Bourdieu implies, instantiates and breathes life into structure, but is not itself explicitly governed by structural order. The work of violence preserves the state, but simultaneously destroys it. This is the transformation of invisible into embodied violence. Violence becomes the norm and nature of our world because it forms the limit of any political possibility for peace. Today's neoliberal Guatemalan state, ushered in by

terror, has uncoupled rebuilding from promises of well-being. The vision of democracy promoted by the state, Ixiles tell me, is a void. The social reforms implemented by hundreds of humanitarian organizations providing stoves, toilets, preschools, and agricultural tools are a form of terror that is a part of public life, violence that is exacted in ordinary trainings and invisible money.¹⁴ While this commences with historical exclusion of Ixiles from basic human and economic rights, the violence is not limited to segregation and discrimination. It spreads from one place to another, taking root in unexpected ground.

While the FRG retains moderate control on the national scene, it is the reigning power in Nebaj. Ixil is known as fertile territory for *las malas manitas* or “the bad little hands.” As one drives along the road toward the Ixil area, past the military encampment at Quiché and toward San Juan Jocopilas, a large painted sign reads: “You are now entering FRG territory.” And, perhaps for this very reason, on May 7, 2004, Oscar Berger—formerly of the National Advancement Party (PAN) and mayor of Guatemala City, and then of the Great National Alliance (GANA)—made his third appearance in the Ixil area since taking presidential office in January of that year. For several days prior, rumors of the presidential visit circulated in town. And while aspiring heads of state are likely to visit the region during election campaigns, elected leaders rarely appear.

I was somewhat surprised to hear the clatter of a helicopter overhead as I left the house one morning. The central park was blockaded by trucks filled with fertilizer. The mayor, with his ever-present bodyguards, was welcoming President Berger to a third visit. I found workers from a large NGO in the center of the square and stood alongside them. Jacinta told me, “these are pure *manitas*,” meaning that they were supporters of the FRG, like the town mayor. I looked around and noticed folks from Chajul, Cotzal, and the villages around Nebaj. 300,000 pounds of chemical fertilizers will be gifted by the Ministry of Agriculture (MAGA) vis-à-vis a number of NGOs over the next month through a donation from the government of Japan. People from throughout the region have arrived in hopes that they will be beneficiaries of this political largess.

For the past several years, government subsidized fertilizer (*abono*) was an integral part of the populist facade of the Portillo Administration.¹⁵ Municipalities used the military to deliver abono in rural communities throughout Guatemala, further blurring civilian and martial rule. In February of 2000, the Ministry of Agriculture imported approximately

935,000 sacks of fertilizer at a cost of \$13,000. During this time, the government was heavily criticized because the product was distributed in areas where the FRG held municipal power. As such, fertilizer became the focus of clientelistic corruption common in Guatemala. In 2002, a farmer could buy the fertilizer “Urea” for \$6, while “Tripe 15” and “20-20-20” were available for \$8. This was a 14 percent increase from the previous year. Since that time, there has been a persistent call for transparency in the fertilizer industry, leading the UN Office on Human Rights and other international organizations to intervene in the program. Despite these efforts, fertilizer distribution was linked to civil patroller movements in the 2003 election year. In the last four years, an estimated 9.31 million sacks of fertilizer have been distributed throughout the country, corresponding to a constantly increasing price in distant areas like Nebaj. On the day that Berger came to inaugurate the fertilizer program for his administration, party functionaries distributed bits of paper which assured residents that the political faithful would receive their due share in Nebaj. This trafficking of influence is commonplace. But Berger insisted that fertilizer would no longer be “what the rich send their poor employees off to carry back.” As of this writing, a bag of fertilizer costs \$13. Fertilizer at a low price is still enough to buy votes in town.

Berger stands in front of the crowd, sporting a red *coton* jacket typical of men in the region. He says that on this landmark visit he should remind people of an important fact. He reminds them of their importance to his administration. In other parts of the country, he tells them, people are complaining “that this president only loves the Ixil, he only does for the Ixil. We want him to visit us in Huehuetenango and Aguacatan.” With a triumphant smile, he proclaims that, for the first time, the distribution of fertilizer will not be politicized. “It will not carry the name Berger, it will not have the mark of my administration. Because fertilizer should not be a bribe. What we want is for you to sow, grow, and be productive. Not to stay in the same, caught in never ending patterns of bribery.” This comment is not lost on Jacinta, who bitterly remarks, “[o]ur lives are comprised of nothing but bribery, corruption, and stupidity these days. I hope that they have something else to offer, but I doubt it.” Corruption is a constant of late. Each day, in the newspaper and on the nightly news shows, a new and horrifying story of the excesses of the previous Portillo administration comes to light: millions of dollars drained from the public coffers, leaving the state virtually without

funds. Each day, new plans appear in the press, with the unenviable task of rescuing the state from permanent destitution.

Yet Berger appears not as the beleaguered leader of a penniless nation, but confident. He proclaims, as have his predecessors, that

[w]e are going to asphalt the road from here to Chajul, from here to Cotzal. You'll see. You're going to arrive in ten minutes. You, and your sick. You, and your hungry. You, with your products. Tourists will arrive so that you make good money here. This is one of the most beautiful parts of our country. The tourist will come and buy your goods, bring you clean money. We want your life to improve. Last week I went to the United States and I talked with representatives from Quiché. And I am here to tell you that we collaborate with the United States to move forward and make life better here.

Placards announcing the completion of the regional roads went up at least a year before this visit. But the funding was ferreted away in yet another scandal, the workers were never paid, and the roads remained unfinished. The crowd listens to Berger in a duplicitous sort of silence.

Then a man from Chajul shouts out, "I hope what you say is true. I wish that you come here to say the truth, and that soon we will have our road. Because things here now, they are worse than before." Berger nods his head and waves his hands in emphatic confirmation of what everyone suspects. This is nothing more than hand-waving and politics. Nevertheless, people shout and holler. There is definite enthusiasm for free fertilizer.

Berger is not content to promise only roads. He also offers up two motorcycles, financed by the EU, to combat delinquency in the area. He says, "[t]hese will keep you safe, protect you from delinquency. Here there will be no violence that goes unpunished. Luckily there isn't much crime to worry about yet." The crowd stirs, and shouts rise up: "You are wrong, there is. There are delinquents everywhere. There is violence everywhere. Gangs. You, you should take them away from here. Prove you can do something." With those hollers fading into the mid-morning, Berger drives away with his cavalcade. The fertilizer truck, filled with political devotees, follows close behind. It is not distributed, but stored in the municipal assembly room. I ask women watching the procession how they think the fertilizer will be dispersed.

An artisan, Juana, who sells her goods in the central park says, “[w]hat does it matter. I don’t have land to start with. I am a poor person. We, in Las Violetas, we are poor people. Fertilizer, what good does it do us. We don’t have any land to fertilize.” Another woman said, “[t]his is only symbolic. They won’t give any fertilizer now. To get fertilizer you have to take your identification card. You know.” The woman looks at me, with a blank stare. Another seller offers me additional explanation, “[y]ou know, you have to be able to show that you are one of them.” And Juana adds, “[t]o show that you are with the ones who have power.” The mayor and his bodyguards walk past. And the women say, “I wonder who he has to be afraid of here in Nebaj. Supposedly we elected him mayor. Why should he fear of us?” Politics here seem to operate, so often, on the threat of violence.¹⁶

Several days after Berger’s visit, rumors begin to circulate. Berger had not been in Nebaj to distribute fertilizer or combat delinquency. Three visits from the nation’s leader had to be more than a political scheme. Berger had not gone to Chajul, they said, to inspect the unfinished road work. He had gone, with his entourage, to inspect a lush parcel of land in a remote part of the region. “It is one of the most precious, productive plots we have left in this area,” said one woman. This tract is said to be protected by law as national forest. Berger is alleged to have illegally purchased the land with the intention of building a large hotel or mansion “for the wealthy people with helicopters, who will come to vacation on our land and take in the richness of our territory,” one artisan woman tells me. Nebajenses demonize material accumulation and individualism in order to explain the chaos caused by their loss of control over the means of production. Here, we might do well to do as Taussig suggests and “endorse the logic of the contradiction between use-values and exchange-value” which “entail a systematic critique of the encroachment of the capitalist mode of production” (1992:485). These violent forces do not escape mystification, and symbolization is not free of violent influences. The choice for Ixil is not an ideological one—between fair markets and free markets. Rather, it is a constant confrontation between kinds of violence, how that violence is regulated, and how they respond to it.

Conclusion

In the Ixil, there is not any form of peace, humanitarian project, trial, or moral orientation toward the prevention of death that can avoid the pervasive

mechanisms of fear, control, and exclusion that organize the Guatemalan state and its margins. The vast and contagious violence will neither disappear by way of the justice system, through humanitarian work, or efforts at deregulation and neoliberal reform. What this demands of Ixiles is a constant awareness of suffering: the rules governing distribution of humanitarian aid, refashioned property laws, new educational regulations, momentary apertures in the judicial system, and evolving military code. These are all the ordinary, often mundane, but frequently invisible forms of law that rule the state and its margins.

Of course, there are alternative accounts. Berger, others said, had come to examine the land and sell it to a Korean corporation. The Korean corporation was planning to put a factory in this isolated area. When I asked what the factory would manufacture, there was no pause: the factory would mass produce machine-made *huipiles*. Huipiles, the hand-woven blouses made and worn by Ixil women, are expensive, ranging in price from \$90 to \$200 USD. Foreigners could never afford such an extravagance. Hadn't I noticed the foreigners photographing women's huipiles? Surely, they would snap up the cheaper versions. Huipiles would become standard wear, sold in secondhand shops. When I suggested, optimistically, that a factory might provide jobs in the region, the response was quick: Ixiles would never be hired. Koreans were to be employed exclusively in the factory, making the blouses from copied Ixil designs. Berger had it all planned, they said. Apparel made in Guatemala City *maquiladoras*, sometimes by young Ixiles working in crowded factories, for export to the US is the country's leading export. It seemed only reasonable that modernity and progress would appropriate those very markers of cultural practice for Ixil women and turn them into a product to be bought and sold. "In this world, everything we love can be bought and sold," complained my neighbor Doña Rosa.

These rumors illustrate how self-conscious ideas of identity and culture, including the notion that such forms of life can be engineered or traded, have resurfaced in Ixil. Such concerns were exacerbated by the recent privatization of telephone and electric services that made energy and communication extraordinarily expensive for the average Nebajense. As if to confirm their fears, news of the negotiations for the *Tratado de Libre Comercio* (TLC)—known in the US as the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA)—arrived in Nebaj several weeks later. The purported aim of the agreement is to expand the free-trade zone similar to the

one between the US, Mexico, and Canada under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Proponents of the agreement, which is likely to undermine subsistence farming in Guatemala, argue that small farms are obsolete in the global economy. The effort to promote a culture of peace, grounded in *Ixil* love and concern for the other, is pitted against the commercialization of their values and bodies. My friend Ana put it this way, “[t]he remedy that they offer is one that promotes our identity—as *Ixiles*, as agriculturalists, as poor—at the same time that it erases our ability to sustain ourselves through the harvest of coffee and corn.” For people in Nebaj, this is simply war by other means. State economic and political decentralization are entrenched in such histories of violence. The peace process is not a matter of life over death. It is not a future of privatization and economic liberalism. Instead, for *Ixiles*, the peace process is about suffering through the possibilities of peace.

Here, the state of violence does not have a predetermined form; it is human lives that are made and remade. Habits of violence both innovate and perpetuate themselves with some sort of historicity. Therefore, violence cannot be the basis for history, but history is the foundation of violence. This mode moderates across and apart from the body in a social space. Purposefulness is aligned with capacity, which is more than a propositional attitude. The imperative to act when faced with the suffering of others may be a motivation for humanitarian intervention, but that certainly cannot be its justification in the case of Nebaj. At the very least, it becomes clear that to intercede in tragedy has unexpected consequences. What does it mean to “suffer with” when people are only trying to “suffer well”? Far from acting as uniform, homogenizing forces, state and non-state interventions exist in the midst of uncomfortable ambiguities and violence that challenge notions of forgiveness, forgetting, and punishment. ■

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Endnotes:

¹This includes work by Herbert Spencer (1981:7) and Lewis Henry Morgan (1877:61), and the descriptions of colonial encounters by Robert Redfield (1930:72).

²See Eric Wolf (1981) and others.

³This work has fallen under various rubrics including, but not limited to, anthropologies of: modernity, reason, globalization, and democracy. For the purposes of this article, I see these sub-fields as essentially intersecting, as each accounts for contemporary effects of the state.

⁴There is a wealth of literature which explores the violence in Guatemala that constituted three decades of armed struggle, including acts of genocide. See, for example, Zur (1998), Green (1999), Perlin (2000), Sanford (2003), and Manz (2004).

⁵Spoilers, in the parlance of international policy experts, are leaders and factions who use violent or non-violent strategies to alter the course and outcome of a peace process. Negotiated peace settlements, in this paradigm, have winners and losers.

⁶This figure is from a study that the newspaper itself conducted and was published in a special insert. The number was just reaffirmed by the Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo (GAM), replicated by Ministry of the Interior, and the Instituto Nacional de Ciencias Forenses (INACIF) and in reporting is considered common knowledge.

⁷Beginning in 1998, I worked with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) *Action for the Rights of Children* project and its subsidiary humanitarian organizations, where I was initially charged with explaining why a public vote failed to pass constitutional reforms needed to legalize civil liberties that were gained as the war in Guatemala came to a close. Often, work with UNHCR was one of movement—between areas of refuge and repatriation, from central offices in capital cities to rural outposts. UNHCR had originally planned for me to work as a program officer in Luanda, Angola, so I spent my final year of college dutifully studying Portuguese and reading John Marcum's book *The Angolan Revolution* (1969). However, when an impending peace agreement failed to materialize, I was notified, three weeks before I was to leave, that I would work instead in Guatemala "where the peace had more promise." My early exposure to the UN peacekeeping mission during my first sojourn in Guatemala suggested that reconstruction and reconciliation were not only intimate, domesticated projects. As an anthropologist, I have explored how the peace process moves across national boundaries—mapping new terrain as refugees returned from refuge—how Ixilites like those described here engaged in a social movement that promotes reconciliation, and how the future was re-imagined.

⁸See an extended discussion in "Youth without Sanctuary" (Olson 2007).

⁹All identifying information of individuals has been changed, unless otherwise specified.

¹⁰Ríos Montt ruled the nation between 1982 and 1983, and is currently on trial in Guatemala City for genocide and crimes against humanity. The charges against him have been brought by Ixilites for killing, displacement, and torture carried out by military and paramilitary forces. During his rule, Ríos Montt marked Ixilites as an "internal enemy" and base of "insurgent support" as documented in wartime papers and on film. According to the UN-sponsored truth commission, Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico (CEH), a state policy of mass killing was in place that resulted in complete devastation of the Ixil region. Death, displacement, and destruction wrought there between 1981 and 1983 comprise more than two-thirds of the violations reported by the CEH related to the 36-year armed conflict and nearly half (48 percent) of all reported violations occurred in 1982. The Ixil case is the first genocide trial of a former head of state in a national court.

¹¹The *Patrullas de Autodefensa Civil* (PAC) were created by the Guatemalan Army in 1981 as part of the counterinsurgency strategy that aimed to militarize everyday life. In the Ixil area, these groups have a complex history. Some members of the PAC in this region participated in the paramilitary organization voluntarily, while many were conscripted and forced to police their neighbors and friends.

¹²Benjamin concludes that "only mythical violence, not divine, will be recognizable as such with certainty, unless it be in incomparable effects, because the expiatory power of violence is not visible to men" (1968:300).

¹³See Payne (2009), Huggins et al. (2002), Civico (2006), and Tate (2007).

¹⁴For further discussion, see Olson (2012).

¹⁵Mr. Portillo, president from 2000 to 2004, is currently accused of laundering \$70 million through American banks during his administration. In 2010, the US lodged a complaint against him for "converting the office of the Guatemalan presidency into his personal ATM," among other violations.

¹⁶In 2009, the land was appropriated by the state in order to construct a hydroelectric dam.

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Foreign Language Translations:

After the Peace: The Contagion of Violence at the Margins of the Guatemalan State

[Keywords: Guatemala, violence, Peace Accords, state, humanitarianism, social reform, post-conflict Ixil]

Aya'xtzane' itzojpu u ch'aoe', ilax ve't un biil ivatz u b'anile' ti tichajil unq'a kumoole' naytzan: txakb'an tib' chajaaki svatz ti' iyolone', ni tx'iitib' ti' talat unq'a tzaq'ite' tan ye'xhib'il la ya'san

Terminar la guerra, sobrevivir la paz: La lucha Ixil frente memoria del silencio Guatemalteco

Depois da Paz: O Contágio da Violência nas Margens do Estado Guatemalteco

[Palavras-chave: Guatemala, violência, Acordos de Paz, Estado, humanitarismo, reforma social, Ixil pós-conflito]

和平之后：危地马拉国家边缘暴力的蔓延

关键词：危地马拉，暴力，和平协议，国家，人道主义，社会改革，后冲突的伊西尔族

После мирного договора: Распространение насилия в маргинальных пространствах гватемальского государства

[Ключевые слова: Гватемала, насилие, мирный договор, государство, гуманизм, социальная реформа, постконфликтный Ихиль]

بعد السلام: عدوى العنف على هامش الدولة الغواتيمالية

كلمات البحث: غواتيمالا، العنف، إتفاقيات السلام، الدولة، الإنسانية، الإصلاح الإجتماعي، لكسيل ما بعد النزاع

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