Legacies of Violence

The diminutive indigenous woman in her bright embroidered blouse waited proudly for her grandson to receive his engineering degree. His mother, also dressed in a traditional flowery blouse—a huipil, took photos with a top-of-the-line digital camera.

As each student in the small graduating class at Guatemala’s San Carlos University Engineering School briefly presented his thesis project, the grandson showed how water systems could both bring potable water and create recreational spaces for his hometown in rural Guatemala.

Then Alejandro Valle Rosal praised another grandmother—the courageous journalist Irma Flaquer—in his acceptance speech, citing her as inspiration. She had been kidnapped and her son—Alejandro’s father—had been killed when he was a toddler. My first book, Disappeared, A Journalist Silenced, was about Alejandro’s grandmother. I hadn’t expected him to mention her when he received his degree. The silence had been broken. The legacies of violence were slowly being overcome.

After the graduation, Irma’s sister, Anabella Flaquer, and I went to see the Guatemalan Police Archives (see Kate Doyle’s article, p. 10). Anabella lives in Miami, and this was the only chance we would get to visit them. “I feel my sister is here,” she told me. “There is no silence here.”

It was a day of many emotions. Watching the young indigenous man willing to return to his community instead of seeking an engineering job in Guatemala City or Mexico; listening to Alejandro thank his grandmother; looking at the piles of records diligently being processed in the archives—all these things made me think that Guatemala was changing.

Yet Guatemala faces serious new challenges, most of which have emerged from the legacies of violence of both the distant and recent past. Drug trafficking, youth violence, environmental damage, loss of remittances from the United States, corruption and impunity, natural disasters and their consequences: the list is exhausting.

For days now, friends, acquaintances and sources had been telling me that Guatemala was a basket case, a failed state, with both organized and common crime permeating every aspect of life. Yet all throughout my visit, I thought of the old proverb about the glass being half empty or half full. I decided it was half full, and returned to Cambridge to work on this issue of ReVista.

Almost that very week, Nancy McGirr’s Fotokids studio in Guatemala was robbed of all its computers and cameras (see p. 44). Then terrible news came: my friend journalist Felipe Valenzuela had been shot through the head. It was not clear if it was an attempt on a valiant journalist’s life or a bungled robbery. No one knew if Felipe would survive. And then there was a volcanic eruption with ashes clogging the drains, piled high like drifting snow. And then came the hurricane, washing away crops, destroying housing.

Then Carlos Castresana, the head of the United Nations group that had helped extradite former president Alfonso Portillo on corruption charges, resigned (see Paul Goepfert’s article on p. 41). Political scandals deepened. Drug trafficking was said to escalate.

The glass was half empty, I thought. As my friend and ReVista author Edelberto Torres-Rivas once observed, Guatemala suffers not from a lack of reality, but from too much of it. The articles for this issue began to arrive. Felipe went back to work without any grave permanent damage; the investigation concluded it was a bungled robbery, and journalist friends concur. And as I read the incoming articles, I wondered, is the glass half full or half empty? Guatemala is exploding with projects and ideas and filled with brave men and women intent on transforming society. It is also filled with sadness and corruption and underdevelopment and inequalities and all the legacies of violence that it has inherited over the centuries. I don’t know. Dear reader, I leave it to you and these pages to decide about Guatemala and the proverbial glass.
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On the Cover
Guatemala’s many legacies of violence must be overcome for the future of Guatemala’s children... Photograph by Carlos Sebastián/Prensa Libre.
Guatemala, Guatebuena, Guatemaya

BY EDELBERTO TORRES-RIVAS

“GUATEMALA IS MORE OF A LANDSCAPE THAN A
nation,” a friend observed in 1996 when I
returned to the country after thirty years
of on-and-off absence. I knew as much as
anyone could know about events in the
country in the pre-Internet era: massa-
cres, democracy, military groups, guer-
rillas, elections, and yet that particular
remark lingered in my mind. Just before
my plane landed in La Aurora Airport in
Guatemala City, I glanced down at a tour-
ist pamphlet and a novel by Miguel An-
gel Asturias I was holding. The pamphlet
showed a beautiful reality transformed
into commerce to attract foreigners, while
the book evoked a fantasy built by Asturias’
words to reach another reality, the indige-
nous world. In the tourist pamphlet, Lake
Atitlán looks glued by its green water to
its three volcanos, Tolimán, Atitlán and
San Pedro, all features that make it one
of the most beautiful places in the world.
And not far from Panajachel, in San Mar-
tín Chile Verde, on this very same lake, the
novel describes the life of Celestino Yumi,
a Quiché Indian who sold his wife to the
Tazol devil, only to get caught up in the
clutches of “that mulata woman.” Mulata
de tal is perhaps our Miguel Angel’s fin-
est novel. Then, shortly after my arrival,
I learned that on these verdant shores
of the lake and in San Martín, there had
been many, many deaths, those of local
peasants, guerrillas and soldiers.

“THE GUERRILLA MOVEMENT
THAT DOES NOT LOSE, WINS”
That particular year of 1996 was a special
one; “the internal armed conflict,” as of-
ficial history would keep calling it, was
coming to an end. Some cite 1954 as the
year it all started, when President Jacobo
Arbenz was forced out of government
through the betrayal of his fellow colo-
nels and U.S. pressure; for others, the pe-
riod of strife began in 1964, when Cuban
influence stimulated the rise of the guer-
rilla movement, and hundreds of young
people with more convictions than arms
took to the mountains. I experienced this
period myself, and I would place its be-
ginning with the fratricidal urban riots in
March and April 1962. The military po-
lice and the army killed more than fifty
demonstrators in the streets of Guatema-
la City. Lieutenant Marco Antonio Yon
Sosa made his appearance during this up-
heaval, and one has to remember that the
first guerrillas were military men, young
rangers who organized the Revolu-
tionary Movement November 13 following an
unsuccessful uprising against President
Miguel Ydígoras.
Thus, in 1996, I waited with several friends in the Plaza of the Constitution. The ceremony for the signing of the Firm and Lasting Peace Accord was taking place in the National Palace, and we watched generals, politicians, guerrilla leaders, and a select public as they arrived. December 29, 1996, was a chilly night. We didn’t mind the cold: 34 years and two generations of Guatemalans wounded by terror were being left behind. The terror cannot even be conveyed by the statistics, some 150,000 dead. The startling figure makes me think of Stalin’s criminally cynical remark that the murder of one person is a crime, but the murder of many is just a statistic.

It is painful but certain that when one counts death in the hundreds of thousands, precision no longer matters. Perhaps percentages tell us more: 92% of the victims were non-combatant civilians; 54% were younger than 25 years old, and 12% were women raped or physically attacked in various humiliating ways.

I believe that there was no civil war in Guatemala, and I’ve allowed myself to express this dissenting view both in writing and in oral debate. What happened here was a permanent repression by the state, punishing everyone who was considered as part of the political opposition in thought or deeds. This imbued military action with the logic of war—a military campaign to destroy “subversive” opposition—and what resulted was the systematic destruction of hundreds of union leaders, peasants and students. This went on for three decades.

During this historic time, there were two moments of guerrilla insurgency. The first occurred between 1965 and 1968 and ended quickly in the middle of great confusion. This movement followed the foco theory developed by Che Guevara, calling for vanguard actions of guerrilla cadres leading to general insurrection. The other movement, ten years later (1980-83), advocated the strategy of “the prolonged popular war” in the style of Vietnam. The 1981 guerrilla offensive was smashed by the better organized and more heavily armed Guatemalan army.

The Guatemalan National Revolutionary Union (URNG) suffered a military defeat from which it never recovered, I believe. The military life of the guerrilla insurgency was quite brief, but its political life was long. Its polical presence allowed it to survive until 1996, negotiate with three successive governments, and sign a substantive and wide-ranging peace agreement. How can one evaluate what happened between 1962 and 1996? It is fitting to remember U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger’s comment in the January 1969 issue of Foreign Affairs: “The guerrilla wins if he does not lose; the conventional army loses if it does not win.”

THE AUTHORITARIAN TRANSITION TOWARD DEMOCRACY

And here’s another paradox, about which there is no agreement either, namely, that democracy was achieved before peace. I have argued that this transition was contradictory, for the construction of a democratic regime took place even when the repression was still fierce. In 1983, the illegitimate government of General Efraín Ríos Montt laid down electoral and political party laws.

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First, the elections formed part of a counterinsurgency strategy, conceived of and applied by U.S. policy; the objective was to legitimize the regime against which the armed insurgency was fighting. After the elections, the guerrillas would be taking up their arms against a freely elected civilian government and not against a military dictatorship.

Second, the army had destroyed the guerrillas’ headway, which it termed a strategic defeat for the insurgents. Finally, the military leadership suffered internal decomposition, with military coups in which generals were pitted against one another in March 1982 and August 1983. On both occasions, coup leaders offered, as a pretext for their taking power, a “plan for immediate democratization.” The military had lost prestige because of their well-known human rights violations and open corruption. Several officials had amassed wealth through common crime, particularly crime linked to drug trafficking.

TAKING THE “FISH OUT OF THE WATER”
Guatemala is a nation with an important indigenous population of Maya origin. Perhaps what most impressed me on my return to Guatemala were the crowds of indigenous people on the streets of the capital, their social participation and an abundant documentation that went much further than folklore. I worked for the Historical Clarification Commission and spent my days reading about the genocide that had been committed by the army. These were killings with racist roots and, some colleagues say, they were preceded by an indigenous rebellion. If that really did occur, it would be as a result of an awakening of indigenous consciousness, the mobilization of several communities and the decision of those communities to join the struggle alongside the guerrillas.

The guerrillas modified their program to recognize that indigenous people had their own cultural ways and their own struggles, that they weren’t just peasants. The terror cannot even be conveyed by the statistics, some 150,000 dead. The startling figure makes me think of Stalin’s criminally cynical remark that the murder of one person is a crime, but the murder of many is just a statistic.
comandantes did not foresee the massacres, and therefore could not stop them.

Although many do not agree with me, I firmly believe that there was no indigenous rebellion; there was a slaughter of indigenous people. In the second half of 1981, the armed forces put into effect an operation they called “scorched earth.” It was a victory of the army over unarmed peasants. Again, it is difficult to calculate the number of victims. The UN Historical Clarification Commission counted some 80,000 dead, more than 600 villages destroyed; more than half a million refugees and displaced people.

Certainly the massacres of the 1980s were a continuation of colonial genocide. It is shocking that 51% of those killed were in groups of more than 50 persons and that 81% of these were identified as indigenous. General Héctor Alejandro Gramajo, Army Chief of Operations in 1982, explained the operation by saying: “We only wanted to take the fish out of the water...we think we were successful; we left the fish without water.”

SICK STATE, FAILED STATE?
All that I have described ever too briefly in the previous paragraphs has made it very difficult for Guatemala society to function. The legacy of violence is all too apparent. At the beginning of May 2010, there was a riot in Boquerón, a high-security prison in a southeast region of the country. The prison was seized by 200 gang members serving prison sentences. Interior Ministry authorities had to negotiate with the chief of the “maras,” as the gang members are known, giving in on several points and recognizing the maras’ power. More or less around the same time, the Finance Ministry negotiated a fiscal reform for the millionth time with the board of CACIF, a conglomerate of powerful businessmen. And at the end of the same month, the rector of the University of San Carlos and its Superior Council had to negotiate with a student faction that had impeded the operations of the state university for ten days.

There is heated discussion about whether present-day Guatemala can be considered a failed state. In the rhetoric of those who combat violence internationally, a state fails when it has lost control over the legitimate monopoly of violence, or when social relations are ruled by an anti-state logic.

In effect, in Guatemala, the forces of “narco-business” controlled several municipalities in regions sharing a border with Mexico, such as San Marcos and Huehuetenango, or sparsely populated regions such as Petén. Various forms of criminal power have emerged there, as well as in regions that have experienced recent agricultural modernization such as Alta Verapaz and Zacapa. Since 2001, criminal organizations with their own “legality” and peasant support have replaced the authority of the state. It seems inevitable that in the face of the current insecurity that plagues citizens, they would respond with another rationalization: to confront private crime, we need private security. There is now a free market of 140 security agencies, most of them legally registered, with at least 65,000 guards, bodyguards and watchmen, all of them armed and poorly trained. At present, the National Police have 20,000 police officers.

In Guatemala, the symptoms of collective anomie—normlessness—are emerging, predicting that this will become a sick society, with elementary sociability decomposing in an extreme form. It is not easy to explain why twenty people are killed every day when there is no civil war; that 750 cars are stolen every day—where are they all hidden? Some 8,000 extortions take place daily in the marginal neighborhoods, proving that the poor prey more on their equals than anyone else.

And yes, with urban robberies, highway assaults, kidnappings, the number of crimes increases, the number of delinquents increases, and no one imagines that there’s an end to it. Carlos Castresana, then director of CICIG, a UN agency that helps with criminal investigations, declared in a March conference in the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO) that Guatemala had the greatest per capita concentration of firearms in the world, with the exception of the Middle East.

In the last five years, the dark figure of the hired hit man has appeared. These are people—often poor youngsters—who are contracted in the free market to kill for a price. On April 28, a 15-year-old boy killed a woman with a single shot. For this job, he was paid the equivalent of $13. Only 3% of crimes denounced to the Public Ministry ever get to trial. The serious thing about this rampant crime wave is the inability of the state to control it. In the last two years, two high-ranking officials of the National Police have been publicly dismissed and brought to trial for participation in drug trafficking rings. About a quarter of the police force has been dismissed for various types of corruption. One moves about in a very insecure society with a weakened public authority and a citizenry that is losing its confidence in the government and in the future.

Lake Atitlán, that I gazed upon with so much amazement when I returned to Guatemala in 1996, is now polluted with bacteria as a consequence of climate change. Tourism no longer comes to one of the most beautiful spots in the planet because of the pollution. But there are hopes for making the lake healthy again; all is not lost. Guatemalan society too may become healthy again. Many of us are struggling to make sure this happens. Here, in the pages of ReVista, you will find some of their voices.

Edelberto Torres-Rivas is presently a consultant in the area of Human Development in the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and a professor in the Graduate Program in Social Sciences of the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO); he was Secretary General of FLACSO from 1985-1993. He has published extensively on politics, violence and development in Central America. Torres-Rivas was a 1999-2000 Central American Visiting Scholar at Harvard’s David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies.
Never Again

A PHOTOREFLECTION BY JEAN-MARIE SIMON

I TRAVELED TO GUATEMALA FOR THE FIRST TIME IN LATE 1980, BELIEVING, with the breezy confidence of a 20-something, that my photographs of Guatemala’s war—army, guerrillas and terrified civilians—would bring me photographic stardom. Soon afterward, I imagined, I would make my mark in Serbia, Panama or wherever as Girl Globetrotter. Despite my cocky assumptions, I was not naïve regarding Guatemala’s pariah human rights status. I had read the requisite human rights reports, acquired triple-A contacts, and even got a letter from my parish priest, pronouncing me a practicing Catholic. When I landed at Guatemala City’s Aurora Airport just before Christmas, the soldiers on the runway and the intelligence agents doubling as customs officers already existed in my imagination.

What surprised me, however, were three realities I did not foresee: the challenge of taking pictures in a country where almost no one wanted to be photographed; the apathy of U.S. newsrooms with respect to Guatemala; and the difficulty of putting a face on terror.

The first circumstance—dealing with a list of contacts who did not want attribution in a caption, much less a photo of themselves in the newspapers—was at first discouraging, particularly when my colleagues in El Salvador described how they would go out with the FMLN guerrillas and be back the same day, in time for cocktail hour.

The reason for the second circumstance was transparent: Guatemala was the third player in a triptych of events that, by 1981, editors back home viewed as the latest in an amorphous regional blur. The overthrow of Somoza in Nicaragua, followed by massacres and the death of Archbishop Óscar Romero and four U.S. churchwomen in El Salvador precluded any reporting on Guatemala, as these events were dramatic and directly tied to U.S. political and economic interests.

The third element was the most unnerving: at first blush, Guatemala seemed normal. Planes to Miami and L.A. departed like clockwork, Christmas vendors were out in full force, and pre-dawn firecrackers announced birthday celebrations. Even outside the capital, travel was not impossible: American Express continued its excursions to the Chichicastenango market; hippies sold bird-sound cassettes on Calle Santander in Panajachel; and Time magazine ads trumpeted the magic of Tikal’s Mayan ruins.

At the same time, however, Guatemala was riven by irrefutable, state-inspired violence: “civil war” to some and “internal armed conflict” to others. Amnesty International, in 1981, accused the military regime of overseeing a “government program of political murder.” Normally, moreover, was skin-deep
Clockwise from top left: Wake for Héctor Gómez Calito, founding member of Mutual Support Group for the Families of the Disappeared (GAM), Amatitlán, 1985; military coup, March 1982; washing clothes in the now-polluted Lake Atitlán; civil patrol member, renouncing patrol system, holding a copy of the 1985 Guatemalan Constitution, Santa Cruz del Quiché.
because Guatemala was living in an undeclared state of terror. U.S. flights took off and landed, but they were nearly empty; those birthday firecrackers were indistinguishable from machine-gun fire; and films with a liberal political slant were de facto forbidden. In 1983, when the Cine Capitol showed Missing—the story of the abduction and torture of U.S. reporter Charlesorman, during the 1973 military coup in Chile—a professor friend joked that Guatemalans were so hungry for such movies that the army could have eliminated half the urban guerrilla leadership by dropping a bomb on the opening night at the movie theatre.

Moreover, and in some ways worse, I became accustomed to this climate of terror. It was normal for friends to have a pseudonym, or even two. It was tantamount to an insult if your telephone was not tapped, since it implied that your work was cursi, or useless. And even newcomers to Guatemala soon learned how to interpret the news: “delinquent” meant guerrilla and “disappearance” meant extrajudicial kidnapping. In truth, the only news related to the constant kidnappings during that time were paid announcements published by the relatives of the victims: fuzzy black and white photographs paired with a terse description of the victim and the assertion that he or she had no political connections.

Perhaps the most insidious truth about living in Guatemala during the 1980s was its effect on relationships with your colleagues and even family, and the gnawing doubt it inexorably created with respect to whom you trusted, including your most intimate circle of friends. Guatemalans wondered aloud if the person plucked from the street at midday, by plainclothes men with rifles, could be a common thief, or whether the young professional forced into a Jeep without license plates had committed a crime. ¿A saben en qué estará metido?—“Who knows that he might be mixed up in?—was the mantra.

Between 1980 and 1989, when I lived in Guatemala, my goals changed; the idea of being a rock-star photographer faded as I did more interviewing and consulting along with the photography. I went on contract to Human Rights Watch and wrote four paid announcements published by the relatives of the victims: fuzzy black and white photographs paired with a terse description of the victim and the assertion that he or she had no political connections.

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Jean-Marie Simon’s original book, Guatemala: Eternal Spring, Eternal Tyranny (WW Norton, 1988), recently re-issued in Spanish as Guatemala: eterna primavera, eterna tiranía, contains over 150 color photographs, including 50 previously-unpublished images. Her book is available through amazon.com. It has been nominated for the 2010 Wola-Duke Book Award. Simon is a graduate of Georgetown University and Harvard Law School (JD 1991) and a former Fulbright scholar. She lives in Washington DC with her husband and their daughter.
The only thing worse than the hundreds of thousands of victims of *la violencia* in Guatemala was the horrific silence. The endeavors of nongovernment organizations and progressive churchworkers, the accidental discovery of a treasure trove of government records, books, photographs, testimonies and films are now all breaking through that silence.

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ANA LUCÍA CUEVAS DESCRIBES LIVING FOR more than 25 years with the pain of her brother’s disappearance as torture, “as though you are hooded and someone is beating you with a club.” Now the shroud of secrecy is being lifted.

Carlos Cuevas Molina was abducted at gunpoint on May 15, 1984, when he was 24 years old and Lucía was 21. He was a sociology student pursuing a degree at the country’s national University of San Carlos when he and a friend were seized off a street in downtown Guatemala City by a group of armed men and taken away in a car. He was never seen again.

He was one among a quarter of a million victims of the counterinsurgency campaign waged by Guatemalan security forces during and after the cold war. The government forces targeted not only armed guerrilla groups but hundreds of thousands of unarmed civilians in the countryside and urban centers who were considered suspect by association.

After Carlos disappeared, his family filed writs of habeas corpus, demanded meetings with government officials, and gathered what evidence they could. Witnesses described the vehicles used in the operation, including license plate numbers, and linked the abduction to the vicious DIT police unit, the Department of Technical Investigations, known to be behind many of the thousands of abductions that took place in Guatemala City during the early 1980s. But their efforts to investigate ended abruptly in April 1985, when the corpses of Carlos’s young wife, Rosario Godoy de Cuevas, their infant son and her 21-year-old brother were found in the wreck of a car, arranged to look like an accident. Human rights defenders who saw the bodies reported that the child’s fingernails had been torn out.

After those killings, “there was a huge silence,” remembers Lucía. “Everyone was terrorized so there was no way to communicate.” The military government of General Óscar Mejía Victores denied having information related to either crime. The family fled Guatemala in the face of death threats, settling in Costa Rica.

When Guatemala’s civil conflict ended in 1996, a United Nations-sponsored Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH) was convened to examine the causes of a 36-year war that killed an estimated 200,000 unarmed civilians and disappeared some 40,000 more. Over the course of 18 months, investigators gathered thousands of testimonies from survivors of the conflict, reviewed the data produced by exhumations of secret mass grave sites around the country, analyzed news accounts and dug through human rights reports. What the commission was unable to obtain were records from inside Guatemala’s death machine.

The commission’s final report found government forces responsible for 93 percent of the massacres, abductions, assassinations, cases of systematic torture and other human-rights crimes documented by CEH investigators. But it reached those conclusions without the benefit of the state’s files. Despite a mandate that gave them the right to collect the internal archives of the parties of the conflict, investigators were stonewalled by military and police officials at every turn.

The astonishing and wholly accidental discovery of a treasure trove of government records five years ago has demolished the government’s ability to pretend that it does not continue to possess and protect archives of the war. The discovery was made in July of 2005, when a small team of inspectors sent to a sprawling police base by the Guatemalan Human Rights Prosecutor’s Office, in response to concerns about the improper storage of ammunition, stumbled upon the documents in the course of its visit. The archive belonged to the former National Police, an institution intimately linked to some of the worst atrocities committed during the war. The force was abolished by the peace accords and rebuilt as the National Civil Police in 1997.

The commission presented its report to the public in a revelatory ceremony held in the cavernous National Theater in downtown Guatemala City on February 25, 1999. As President Álvaro Arzú Irigoyen listened, scowling, from the front row, CEH lead commissioner, Christian Tomuschat—a German jurist accustomed to the wealth of documentation available on his own country’s bloody past through the Nazi files and the records of East Germany’s Stasi intelligence service—stood before the audience of thousands and openly berated the government for preventing the commission from gaining access to Guatemalan archives.

More than ten years later, the stony silence of Guatemala’s secret-keepers is coming to an end. The astonishing, unexpected and wholly accidental discovery of a treasure trove of government records has demolished the government’s ability to pretend that it does not continue to possess and protect archives of the war. The discovery was made in July of 2005, when a small team of inspectors sent to a sprawling police base by the Guatemalan Human Rights

Guatemala’s Police Archives

Breaking the Stony Silence BY KATE DOYLE
The inspectors understood the significance of their discovery instantly, and within days the Human Rights Prosecutor obtained a judge’s order granting his office the right to secure the site and examine the documents. The task was daunting. The police records had been stored in a state of almost total neglect, piled haphazardly on every available inch of space inside several crumbling buildings on the edge of the base, where they became infested with bugs and bats, molding under the drip of water from broken windows. Yet through years of dedicated work and deliberation, and with the help of funding from half a dozen European governments, a staff of some 150 men and women has slowly restored the mass of damp, filthy paper to something resembling a proper archive. Teetering piles of documents tied together with string have been separated, dried, cleaned, described and scanned into a vast database of 10.7 million images. The records themselves are boxed and stored in a secure site on the base; the images are now available to any researcher who wishes to visit what has become the Historic Archive of the National Police.

Gustavo Meoño Brenner is the archive’s director. He has overseen not only the rescue phase of the project but the current investigative phase, in which teams of staff researchers review the records for evidence of human rights crimes. He is the first to admit that managing an operation of this magnitude has called for unusual tactics. “We have had to find creative and audacious solutions in order to be able to respond,” he explained in an interview. Within weeks of entering the site, investigators realized that the files represented the entire archive of the former National Police, dating from the 19th century, when the police force was created, to the institution’s final year. To identify the most important human rights information among the estimated 8 linear kilometers of paper, photographs, audio tapes and computer files, the staff has focused its efforts on the documents produced during the most violent period of Guatemala’s conflict, from 1975 to 1985.

One of the creative solutions employed has been to invite researchers to review files pertinent to their work. These “external investigators,” as Gustavo calls them, can also flag documents relevant to other human rights cases. That way each researcher brings added value to the broader project of hunting down human rights evidence. Another practice has been to let external investigators come outside normal working hours. That lets family members with day jobs search for information about their loved ones. Above all, it is the policy of total public access that the archive has created that represents the project’s most startling innovation. Gustavo considers it “one of the most important advances that we have made.” The policy was crafted in July 2009, just after the government of President Álvaro Colom took the protective step of transferring formal control of the police archive from the Ministry of the Interior to the Ministry of Culture. The
move dispelled a lingering fear among the staff about the independence of their project and freed it to reach out to the public more fully than had before. In July, the archive’s new “Access to Information Unit” opened its doors to the public. Since then, according to statistics compiled by staff, the archive has received 3,447 requests for information, to which they have responded with 55,628 document pages.

For Guatemala, any access to government information about the civil conflict is extraordinary. The archive went a step further. After examining models of public use proposed by similar “archives of repression” in Latin America—in Paraguay, Mexico and Argentina, for example—the Guatemalans chose to place no restrictions on the access enjoyed by outside researchers. That means that not only family members but journalists, students, prosecutors, historians and human rights investigators, Guatemalan or foreign-born, can request records related to any individual, organization or incident and expect an uncensored response. Gustavo calculates the estimated returns on requests so far to be 80% positive, with 20% of requests resulting in no documents. The contrast to other, similar archives in the region is striking; in Argentina’s Comisión por la Memoria, for example, a collection of important records from the La Plata secret police, the names and other pertinent information about victims of the dirty war are withheld from everyone but family members, leaving most researchers in the dark about the social impact of repression.

The investigations under way inside the police archive coincide with a new interest on the part of the government. The Public Ministry is now actively pursuing evidence for a set of human rights cases. Cases now under investigation include the horrific massacre of more than 250 residents of the tiny settlement of Dos Erres in the northern department of the Petén in 1982; the disappearance of a well-known labor leader, Edgar Fernando García, from a street corner in Guatemala City in 1984; a series of dozens of kidnappings and executions of suspected militants and their family members during 1983-85, chronicled in a leaked army intelligence document known as the “Military Logbook” (Diario Militar); and the torture and murder of Efraín Bámaca, guerrilla leader and common-law husband of U.S. citizen Jennifer Harbury.

A United Nations-supported team of international investigators has added to the pressure for justice in Guatemala since January 2008. Their job is to ferret out corruption and expose organized crime. Under the leadership of Spanish jurist Carlos Castresana, the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala, or CICIG, was designed to work with Guatemalan police, prosecutors and judges to assemble some of the most sensitive criminal cases, often targeting the country’s most powerful and well-connected figures. CICIG has gone after members of the police and army, former defense ministers and one former president on charges ranging from embezzlement to drug trafficking to running death squads.

Last May, the commission’s successes appeared briefly to imperil its own survival, when a newly appointed Attorney General, Conrado Reyes, began firing prosecutors involved in the corruption investigations, threatening to undo the hard work that CICIG and the Public Ministry had achieved over two years. Castresana retaliated by abruptly announcing his resignation during an explosive press conference in which he revealed evidence linking Reyes to organized crime, and in a second press conference days later by exposing a nasty smear campaign directed against him. Within a week of Castresana’s resignation, Guatemala’s Supreme Court had removed Reyes and ordered a new selection process to begin for his post. The United Nations named Francisco Dall’Anese, a former Costa Rican Attorney General with experience in government corruption cases, to take over CICIG in late June.

Guatemala’s incipient fight against impunity has weathered the crisis for now. The Public Ministry has rehired many of the attorneys dismissed by Reyes and their joint investigations with CICIG into corruption and organized crime continue. Work has also resumed in earnest on the human rights cases from the past, including efforts by prosecutors to locate hard evidence of state violence among the millions of pages of the police archives. In March 2009, prosecutors used records from the archive to indict four former police officers for their role in the 1984 forced disappearance of labor leader Fernando García. The case...
was presented to an investigating judge in July of this year—the first one to head for trial in which the government’s own historical archives will be part of the evidence used to charge human rights violators. Today Public Ministry requests for documents represent almost a third of all inquiries submitted to the archive’s Access to Information Unit.

When the police archive opened in 2009, Lucía Cuevas was among the first family members to arrive seeking information about their loved ones. She hoped to find something, anything, which would help her understand how her brother disappeared. What she received was beyond her wildest expectations. In addition to surveillance and operational reports relevant to Carlos’s case, archive staff found a list of license plate numbers assigned to undercover police cars.

Among them was the license number reported by an eyewitness to Carlos’s kidnapping filed more than 25 years ago. The effect on Lucía’s life has been dramatic.

“We always knew who was behind what was happening to us,” she says now. But when the documents arrived, “it was as though the hood had been suddenly lifted.” She has ended her long silence and is completing a documentary about her brother’s abduction, named after a poem that her mother wrote shortly after he disappeared: “To Echo the Pain of Many.” Lucía feels now that her life has been transformed. “Until two or three years ago I had lost my identity,” she explains. With the re-opening of the case, “my life has come back to me. My Guatemalan life came back to me. It has been incredible. This is the importance of recovering memory.”

Kate Doyle is a senior analyst and director of the Guatemala Documentation Project at the National Security Archive, a non-profit library and research institute based at George Washington University. The Guatemala Police Archive will receive a Special Recognition Award at the 34th Annual Letetier-Moffitt Human Rights Awards: http://www.ips-dc.org/about/letetier-moffitt.

A History of Violence, Not a Culture of Violence
Finding Historical Consciousness in Guatemala

BY MICHELLE BELLINO

KENDYL TUCKS HER SLEEVE OVER HER HAND and wipes the bus window. “Why are you so interested in war memories?” she asks, catching me off guard. “If you are interested in violence, you don’t have to go into the past to find it. Violence is everywhere.” I hesitate over my response. Why does insisting on remembering the war suddenly feel arrogant?

Outside the window, women roll barrels of corn on stones rough as their heels. “What’s so bad about forgetting? What’s wrong with not wanting your kids to know the fear you lived, to want a life for them where they aren’t held responsible for the past?” Maybe she has a point. Maybe selective forgetting is a conscious choice passed on to the postwar generation—but with what consequences?

In the aftermath of ethnic violence, historical consciousness can frame critiques of ongoing systems that reinforce social inequalities and suffering. But there is a history of silence here. And with the emergence of new forms of “postwar” violence, the memory of La Violencia, the thirty-six year civil war and genocide, has been pushed to the middle pages of newspapers or re-framed in Plexiglas posters claiming peace and multiculturalism at city bus stops. School textbooks mask this era of internal violence as a conflict between “two devils,” as if the state and guerrilla armies played equal roles. Before coming to Guatemala, I had wondered what kinds of memories would surface from a submerged recent past. As contemporary violence escalates, my perceptions have turned like marbles on a wood floor.

Since that warm day on the bus with Kendyl, I have struggled to find out why studies of past violence warrant a place alongside discussions of present-day violence. Hundreds of Guatemalans have helped me see the past and present through varying prisms of memory and meaning. Guatemalan activists have insisted on critical historical consciousness as a postwar imperative, exposing to me the dialectics between silence and violence, history and culture, and impunity and empowerment.

Raúl, who asked that his name not be published for security reasons, for example, tells me about ongoing campaigns to raise consciousness about impunity for wartime crimes in the Hijos por la Identidad y Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio (HIJOS) office. When I ask whether HIJOS activism now extends to contemporary crime, he says yes and no, describing the topology of past and present violence like the twist of a Mobius strip. He explains that the same people who orchestrated past genocides still operate in unconcealed political and military positions of power, or more discreetly in the shadows of paramilitary forces, death squads or organized crime. “There are clear examples that the military still presides in Guatemala,” he says. “Ríos Montt continued his power in Congress; death squads still exist, eliminating hundreds of young people; social movements are repressed... forced disappearances against peasants or indigenous people also continue to exist. It’s a violence or repression that we can’t view as new—rather, it’s a result of the political repression that was used in the war against our parents.” I nod, watching Raúl’s eyes flicker over the poster of hundreds of faces of the disappeared, their photographs lined up like mug shots. “The mechanisms that made the genocide possible
are the same mechanisms of control and repression, now much stronger and more dangerous, because today we can no longer identify only one group responsible.” This web of simultaneous forces creates a more dangerous contemporary network. Many of these dark forces collaborate, strengthen, and protect one another—or compete for power—thereby escalating the number of victims, he says. His critique emphasizes the connections between past and present violence, identifying a commonality between actors, modes of violence, and impunity.

When Guillermo, who also asked that his last name not be published for security reasons, and I go for after-dinner walks to the nearby soccer field, no more than 200 feet from his home, his parents await our return nervously. Relative proximity does not imply safety. “That gate doesn’t make you safe,” they warn me. Even living in a gated community with 24-hour security guards, as does one out of every ten families in Guatemala City, does not guarantee protection from the violence that defines present-day, “postwar” Guatemala. Guillermo’s backpack rattles as he comes through the open hallway, a dead giveaway. His parents unzip his bag in a panic, searching for cans of spray-paint that he uses for poverty, drug, and violence awareness messages, desperate words on the walls of buildings. They argue about the kind of person Guillermo is becoming, someone who vandalizes buildings, a common delinquent with secrets. He does not tell them the truth, that their sadness is heavier than the oak furniture that fills their dead daughter’s preserved bedroom. She left one night and never came back. Her body was found less than two miles from their house.

Legal impunity for the criminals of the past has engendered a “culture of impunity” that penetrates Guatemalans’ everyday lives, diminishing trust in the government, justice system, and the role of seemingly powerless citizens, conditions that have earned Guatemala the name “Killer’s Paradise.” For many, civic impotence leads to apathy toward violence, exhibiting a resignation that implies, past or present, you’re not safe here, because Guatemala is Guatemala. All over the country I hear the same narrative from adults and adolescents, Mayans and ladinos: Guatemala is a violent country with a violent culture. They cite the war and present-day violence as two examples from a historical continuum of turmoil, meaning that a history of violence implies a “culture of violence.”

The official rationale for much contemporary crime is that learned violence is an unfortunate social remnant of past violence, notably the recent civil war. Though thousands of young people were forcibly recruited into the state or guerrilla army and trained in methods of inflicting violence and invoking fear, the idea that contemporary crime can be so simply understood as a consequence of historical violence is misleading. Unlike
Raúl, who holds powerful institutions and individuals responsible, many attribute Guatemala’s experience to an ingrained culture of violence. In this reading of history, though, power continuity and structural inequality go undetected. Like all “postwar” crime, socialized violence has been given room to fester because of conditions of impunity.

Jorge Velásquez enters the Ministerio Público investigator’s office after rescheduling his meeting for the fourth time. Once every week, Jorge dresses up in a suit, drives through Guatemala City traffic, pays a parking attendant, and waits in the public prosecutor’s office or his lawyer’s office or the human rights ombudsman’s office or some state institution to see whether they have made any progress on his daughter’s case. It has been three years since Claudina Isabel’s brutal rape and murder, but his devotion to her case is unwavering, even in the face of state ambivalence and outright resistance toward his pursuit of justice. Jorge begins, “I am not here to complain, but to request a change. I am here today, three years after my daughter’s death, and it is as if she died yesterday. I have been to meeting after meeting, and the case never moves forward.” Behind his glasses, tears gather in Jorge’s eyes.

The investigator listens with distanced composure. He leans over and adjusts his socks so that they rest evenly on his calves, then returns to Jorge. Jorge’s face is red and swollen, his shirt collar tight around his neck. He goes on. “There are six suspects, and none have been interrogated. There are mistakes in the forensic report. The case has not moved forward. The loss of a child is incomprehensible. No one’s stomach has been the same since Claudina Isabel was killed. They insulted my daughter’s character—her character! Do you know what the police said? The police said they thought she was a prostitute because she was wearing sandals. Do you know what it’s like to identify the body of your daughter? You are the third investigator to have this case in your hands. Every time I come in here looking for progress, I move backwards and have to start over. Ya no voy a ensuciar el nombre de mi hija.” Most victims of contemporary violence cannot do what Jorge does. They fear retribution, opting for silence as a mode of protection. They do not live near enough to the capital to register continuous complaints. They cannot afford to take time off work to pursue justice. They do not know the middle-class protocol required to be taken seriously. Though Jorge does not articulate his devotion to justice for these victims, he is simultaneously fighting for justice for past and present crimes by demanding an end to impunity, the salient connection between La Violencia and “postwar” violencia. He shoots the investigator a face stiff with rage. “Impunity was an invitation to kill my daughter.”

Lack of accountability for past and present violence has cre-
ated an environment in which violence is permitted, if not provoked, by the implicit guarantee of impunity. And present crime often involves past criminals who have been granted legal amnesty. Fear of postwar violence, aggravated by impunity, may silence those who would otherwise make their memories known.

Postwar violence is also perhaps a consequence for a citizenry whose critical reckoning of the connection that its past has with its present has been silenced. The war is relegated to a history disconnected from the present. For many, the dangers of the present do not resonate with memories of the war. Postwar violence is dismissed as gang-related delinquency indicative of a “culture of violence,” even when crimes are noticeably politically motivated. The assertion about Guatemalan nature as inherently violent surrenders to discourses of power that situate contemporary violence as cultural rather than structurally caused, reinforced, and pardoned: “it negates the political character of the conflict and implies that there can be no political solution” (Victoria Sanford, “Learning to Kill by Proxy: Colombian Paramilitaries and the Legacy of Central American Death Squads, Contras, and Civil Patrols,” Social Justice 2003 p.15). This reductive excuse asserts that violence is endemic because it is intrinsic.

Guatemala’s national memory of La Violencia cannot be understood without recognizing its contemporary embeddedness in “postwar” violencia—violence provoked, protected, and perpetuated by impunity. The absence of critical analysis of ongoing violence is entrenched—not in the culture of Guatemalans, but in the sparse and sterile representations of the past by those in power. Despite its now leftist government, Guatemala’s Ministry of Education has yet to institute a history education that confronts the recent violent past. Perhaps the lack of critical inquiry into violence has contributed to a tolerance of violence. It also seems possible that the deficiency of critical historical consciousness is, in part, a consequence of postwar violence. In this context, it is no surprise that postwar crime overshadows the war.

Creating meaningful and sustainable peace requires critically confronting violent pasts: interrogating the conditions that allowed conflict to take hold, while holding individuals and institutions accountable for their actions. Critical historical consciousness of past violence has everything to do with understanding—and challenging—postwar violence in Guatemala.

Michelle Bellino is a doctoral student in Culture, Communities, and Education at Harvard Graduate School of Education. Her main research interest is history education that follows mass violence, particularly identity-based conflicts. She studies how Guatemala’s postwar generation engages with histories of violence and constructs their identity through vicarious “postmemories,” as part of the social memory processes that characterize transitional justice societies. This work was funded in part by Harvard University’s David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies summer and term time research grants.
I am not afraid. I am not ashamed. I am not embarrassed. I cannot tell lies because I saw what happened and other people saw it, too. That is why there are so many widows and orphans here...the blood of our mothers and fathers ran in the streets. They tried to kill me, too. I had to throw myself in the river. I lost my shoes. The current carried me away. My body hit rocks in the river. When I finally got out, I was covered with mud and thorns. But this happened to many people. The army and the plantation owners did this because they don’t like us. They took advantage of us. But we are still alive. They thought they could always treat us like animals, that we would never be able to defend ourselves. But we also have rights. We have the same rights and laws as they do. I decided to speak today because I was in the plaza the day of the massacre. Today, I make my testimony public. We must tell everything that happened to us in the past so that we will not have fear in the future. We speak because we are not afraid. We speak from the heart.

—María Maquín, May 29, 1998

As an engaged anthropologist and human rights advocate, I accompany people seeking justice in the communities where I work, seeking to make scholarly contributions to help them in their endeavors. That’s why in 1997 and 1998, I directed the historical research to reconstruct four army massacres for the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation’s (FAFG) report to the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH, the Guatemalan truth commission). The FAFG investigation of the 1978 Panzós plaza army massacre of Q’eqchi’ Maya peasants began in September 1997. We gathered nearly 200 testimonies from massacre survivors and witnesses, reviewed municipal archives and death registers, and conducted an exhumation of the mass grave of victims.

Twenty years after the massacre, on May 29, 1998, we returned the remains of the victims to the community for reburial and participated in the two days of community commemoration, Catholic mass, and Mayajek (Maya religious ceremony). At the reburial, I was struck by the words of María Maquín, who was 12 years old at the time of the 1978 army massacre. She survived because her grandmother, Mamá Maquín, fell on top of her when hit by army fire. As one of the neighbors, doña Manuela, remembers: “La señora Rosa Maquín (Mamá Maquín) was with her granddaughter. She was on the municipal steps. She ended up there on the ground. The old woman took a bullet. They blew her head off.”

At the 1998 reburial, the words of María Maquín and others broke a silence that had reigned in Panzós since the massacre. Over the past 12 years, I have written extensively about both the Panzós massacre and the silencing of Maya women—the way in which the army makes use of gender inequality and racism in Guatemala to create a climate of suspicion around the testimony of women survivors like María Maquín and Rigoberta Menchú. I have also carried out extensive research on the history of land tenure in Panzós, as well as archival research on media coverage of the massacre. In November 2009, with support from Fundación Soros Guatemala, I published La Masacre de Panzós—Etnicidad, Tierra y Violencia en Guatemala (F&G Editores).

In March 2010, my publisher Raúl Figueroa Sarti and human rights advocate Iduvina Hernández presented the book at the Centro Cultural de España in Guatemala City. At the end of the presentation, two teachers from Panzós approached Raúl and Iduvina to ask if the book could be presented in Panzós on the 32nd anniversary of the massacre. Without hesitation, they both agreed to...
make the eight-hour trip to rural Panzós for the occasion. Three weeks later, the teachers contacted Raúl to let him know that they had confirmed participation of more than 400 people and would like the author (me) to attend the event.

This invitation was both an honor and a challenge. I had not been in Guatemala since 2007 after a series of threats against my life. Moreover, Raúl is also my husband and we have a five-year-old daughter. We travel as a family or one of us stays with her in New York. This book presentation required his presence as publisher and mine as author, so it also meant taking Valentina with us. As parents, this travel raised security and health concerns. It is a long drive for a little girl who gets motion sickness. Panzós, in an isolated region, is not a tourist site. There is no relief from the humidity and sweltering heat. Malaria and tuberculosis continue to be major problems. Poverty is widespread; land tenure remains inequitable. Corrupt local elites continue to use violence to marginalize Q’eqchi’ Maya peasants throughout the region, despite the provisions of the Guatemalan Peace Accords signed nearly 14 years ago.

Despite these concerns, we decided to accept the invitation and invite friends and colleagues to join us. Our 25-year-old daughter Gabriela, who lives in Costa Rica, volunteered to accompany us on our trip as well. As Gabriela was a child of the Guatemalan diaspora, Panzós also resonated with her. So, on May 28, 2010, we arrived in Panzós with a caravan of five vehicles with 26 people from the United States, Canada, Costa Rica and Guatemala. I met people who traveled to Panzós from afar, such as Guatemalan exile Byron Titus, who traveled from Massachusetts with his 8-year-old son so that he might better understand his father’s exile and ongoing commitment to justice. On this day, we were all accompanied.

The presentation was held in Panzós’ cavernous municipal hall built of cement blocks. In all, some 650 people attended the event, which was presented via live feed in Spanish with translation to Q’eqchi’. We donated copies of the book to the library and local schools. Still, dozens of local Q’eqchi’ Maya stood in line to buy 260 copies of the book and then waited patiently for me to sign it. Sold at less than cost for 30 Quetzales (less than $4), the book cost more than most Panzós residents earn in a day. Several people asked to have the receipt for their purchase written for “massacre survivor.” Renowned Guatemalan poet Carolina Sarti and Iduvina Hernández commented on the book. Both Carolina and Iduvina had been in Panzós as journalists shortly after the massacre. They spoke about the marches in Guatemala City and the wave of terror that followed the massacre. Then, María Maquín spoke. It was the first time I had seen her since 1998, when she was 32 years old, thin, brave, but hesitant to speak in public. Now, at 44, she is heavier and stands solidly before her community. She does not equivocate when she speaks. She is a leader.

Carolina, Iduvina and I each read some of the words of María Maquín’s testimony from my book. As we spoke, I wondered how she felt about our appropriation of her words as she listened to Bernardo Caal translate what we said to Q’eqchi’. María is a peasant leader. She is also illiterate and a monolingual Q’eqchi’ speaker. I looked at her hands and wondered how many thousands of tortillas she had hand-patted since 1998, how many thousands of pieces of clothing she had scrubbed and wrung out by hand. Today, she lives in the same poverty her grandmother was protesting when she was killed in 1978. Though some things have changed in Guatemala in the past three decades, much has not.

During the ceremony, María gave me a somewhat rumpled piece of paper. I unfolded it to find a photocopy of her grandmother’s cédula (national ID) photo—the only known photo of Mamá Maquín. In the hallucinatory heat on the auditorium stage in front of hundreds of local peasants, teachers and students in Panzós, I remembered Ariel Dorfman’s writing about photos of the disappeared in Chile. One poster bearing images of many disappeared had two blank spaces above the names, as two of the men were too poor to even have a photo.

And then María Maquín stands up to speak. She thanks us for the event. “Today’s event is important so that no one ever forgets what happened on May 29, 1978,” she says. “Everything they said is truly what happened.” And I see that rather than appropriate her words, we have validated her experience. My book, our presence, this event reminds everyone that the massacre happened and that it was awful. She directs her comments to the youth and teachers. She says: “Know the truth. Read this book and share this book so that everyone knows this history so that it does not happen again.” She stands firmly and says, “I am going to repeat my own words. I am not afraid. I am not ashamed. I am not embarrassed. I am telling you what happened because I am alive. It was land problems that provoked this massacre and we continue to be abandoned in our villages. We do not have enough land to feed our families.”

With great emotion, she continues, “I saw what the army does. I lived through what the army did. We should never agree to an army post here in Panzós.” Then, she challenges the youth. “The
many times colleagues have challenged the “authenticity” of speakers like María. They question a peasant woman’s capacity to develop her own ideas. They assert that someone else is speaking through her, as they refuse to believe that the human rights discourse she presents could possibly belong to her. I remembered John Beverly’s work on testimony in which he suggests that scholars should worry less about how they appropriate Rigoberta Menchú and concern themselves more with seeking to understand and appreciate how they themselves might be appropriated by her. I smiled as María Maquín appropriated the occasion of my book presentation to condemn the proposed construction of a new military base in Panzós, although to be fair, I knew she would do this, as the community had asked for our approval to include their petition in the book presentation.

María Maquín and her 667 neighbors are right to oppose this new army base. As they state in their petition, neither the intellectual nor material authors of the massacre or any of the other violence meted out against the Panzós community have ever been brought to justice. The claims of the victims and survivors of this violence languish in the courts, as do their claims for the return of their lands. The 514 thumb prints are a testament to the enduring suffering of Guatemala. The petition has 10 pages with 668 signatures—514 of which are thumb prints with names printed upon them. Each page of signatures carries a circular stamp—Comité de Víctimas de la Masacre, Panzós 29-05-1978—and includes the name of the village or hamlet (Cahaboncito, Tinajas, La Esperanza, Chichim, El Cacao). These are the names of the small, isolated communities on the outskirts of the municipality of Panzós. These are the communities that lost hundreds of people to La Violencia in the late 20th century. The 1978 massacre was the beginning, and it was followed by waves of selective violence that today has diminished, but not ended.

María Maquín is right about their land battles. The Q’eqchi’ who live in these communities lost their property to local elites who took advantage of Cold War ideologies and made alliances with the army and national elites, naming anyone who spoke for justice or land reform a communist—a death sentence during La Violencia. Such was the climate of injustice during the internal armed conflict (1964-1996) that led to genocide, (1980-1982) and ultimately to the razing of 626 indigenous villages, leaving 200,000 people dead or disappeared.

As I watched María Maquín speak in Q’eqchi’ and then listened to Bernardo’s translation in Spanish, I thought of the ongoing economic and cultural marginalization that denies the most basic of rights to the majority Maya in Panzós and throughout Guatemala. The installation of an army base in Panzós would violate the ILO Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, which establishes the obligation of the state to consult with indigenous peoples on decisions that affect their development and territory. Further, it would violate Article 30 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which states: “Military activities

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shall not take place in the lands or territories of indigenous peoples, unless justified by a relevant public interest or otherwise freely agreed with or requested by the indigenous people concerned.”

The people of Panzós, like survivors of genocide throughout Guatemala, need to be heard. On an individual level, they need to have the veracity of their lived experience of survival validated. On a national level, Guatemala as a society needs to come to terms with the massacres, disappearances and assassinations that happened in the late 20th century. Guatemala needs to move beyond blaming the victims and recognizing the responsibility of the state and the army for the violence. It is important for the country to come to terms with the truth today as we move into the second decade of the 21st century, because the intellectual and material authors of genocide and other crimes against humanity have yet to be processed in a court of law. The violence in which Guatemala lives today is derived from the impunity established by these war criminals who continue to hold power in local and national political structures, as well as in clandestine groups. María Maquín and her neighbors deserve our support as they continue to struggle for justice for massacre survivors and seek to halt the building of a military post in Panzós.

Victoria Sanford is Associate Professor of Anthropology and Director of the Center for Human Rights and Peace Studies at Lehman College, and a member of the doctoral faculty at the CUNY Graduate Center. A Bunting Peace Fellow at Radcliffe (1999-2000), she is the author of Buried Secrets: Truth and Human Rights in Guatemala, Violence y Genocidio en Guatemala, and Guatemala: Del Genocidio al Feminicidio. She is currently writing Journey through the Land of Pale Hands: Feminicide, Social Cleansing and Impunity in Guatemala.

The entire Panzós presentation is available for screening at http://www. ustream.tv/channel/panzos-guatemala.
Telling the Story
A Journey Back to Guatemala  BY EMILY CALLIER SANDERS

WHEN WE FINALLY PULL INTO SAN LUCAS
Tolimán, after a winding drive through the Guatemalan highlands, I immediately notice the kids. Two small boys giggle as they roll motorbike tires down the road. A gaggle of schoolgirls in traditional fabrics walk linked arm-in-arm. A young girl holds an apple-cheeked baby. Boys play soccer in the dust of an abandoned store.

The children exude happiness everywhere. They are a testimony that life can be beautiful, even in the poorest settings. But under the surface, it only takes a scratch or two to uncover a sad history here. And it’s a bloody one.

I spent my own childhood in Guatemala City, a USAID (United States Agency for International Development) “brat.” I was totally unaware of the country’s history—even though it was then a daily reality for other children. I lived a carefree life, fairly oblivious to the violence—the last four years of a bloody war—just outside the spike-covered metal gate that surrounded our home. And so, 14 years later, I decided to return to my adopted homeland in an attempt to learn about the “real” Guatemala I was shielded from as a child.

My task at hand was to conduct a needs assessment in San Lucas Tolimán as part of a practicum for my master’s degree in Public Health at Harvard. I wanted to learn about the causes and experiences of mental distress in the community and what existing resources can be used to help ease suffering. Perhaps more importantly, however, I wanted to learn about and to tell the story of la violencia.

Nestled at the foot of the Tolimán volcano on the shores of Lake Atitlán, arguably the most beautiful lake in the world, San Lucas is a bustling town of roughly 15,000 people, surrounded by 22 small rural communities that are home to another 20,000. The Kakchiquel Maya, who have resided in the region for centuries, make up nearly 90 percent of the population.

This picturesque landscape was the site of some of the bloodiest atrocities committed during la violencia—the civil war in Guatemala that spanned over three decades. During this period, a vastly outnumbered guerilla force clashed with the military, which waged a bloody campaign against suspected “communist subversives.” The indigenous peoples of Guatemala, the objects of discrimination by the Spanish-descendant elite for centuries, were easy targets.

At war’s end, around 200,000 people (more than 80% of them Maya) had been killed, many in mass executions. Thousands more disappeared. The area surrounding Lake Atitlán was particularly hard hit. Encarnación “Chona” Ajcot, a Kakchiquel Mayan from San Lucas, recalls that guerrillas fighting against government soldiers would come into San Lucas offering money, houses and land to entice the Maya into joining them. “Instead of finding these things,” Chona told me, “the people found death.”

It is the women who keep things going in San Lucas, and the women who suffer the most. You can see it in Chona’s face and the faces of countless other women, young and old. My interviews reveal that the only outlet for expressing their distress is physical: what is known here as an “attack of the nerves.”

An “attack” happens when worry, sadness or fright—often specters of extreme poverty—weakens the nervous system, causing aches and pains and sometimes even diabetes and stroke. Treatments for “nerves” range from Tylenol to locally manufactured “neurotropics”—vitamins that are either injected or taken orally to “calm the nerves” and build immunity. Traditional herbal remedies are widely used, especially by those who cannot afford to pay for treatment.

Religion, including both Catholicism and evangelical movements, is another source of comfort. It is difficult to talk about San Lucas without mentioning the San Lucas Mission. Founded by the Franciscan order of the Catholic Church in 1584, the Mission is part of a long-standing Catholic tradition dating back to Friar Bartolomé de las Casas, who convinced the Spanish king to legally recognize Mayans as Spanish citizens and condemn mass slaughter. Much of the success of the church in Guatemala is attributed to its work in social justice, incorporating traditional Maya beliefs and practices and providing education in indigenous languages. Father Greg Schaffer, a diocesan priest from Minnesota, has led the San Lucas Mission since 1962.

Today Fr. Greg continues this humanitarian tradition through his commitment to liberation theology, a school of thought within Catholicism that defines the mission of the Church as bringing justice to the poor and oppressed (Preferential Option for the Poor).

“Fr. Greg helps people in need, regardless of their culture, race, sex, or religion,” says Chona, who has worked with him for decades. In 2007, he was awarded the Order of the Quetzal, the highest award bestowed by the Guatemalan president, for his commitment to the poor of San Lucas.

When Fr. Greg arrived, San Lucas was the poorest city in Guatemala. Land ownership was highly concentrated; only two percent of the population was literate. Over the years, he purchased land from plantation owners and returned it to the people. In Maya culture, land is identity and corn is everything. To them, corn grown on your own land is thought
Clockwise from top: a wooden pier leads to the lake; a local family poses in the doorway; a group of children in traditional dress beam at the camera; a community health worker explains with a simple poster how malnutrition causes other types of sickness; a cross marks the memory of those lost to violence.
to taste better and be better for you. “Without tortillas we die,” says Chona. Since the 1960s, literacy levels in San Lucas have risen to 85 percent; parish scholarships have enabled many Maya children to pursue studies at universities and technical schools.

One of these children was Dr. Marcos Tun, the head of the parish clinic for the last 12 years. The first in his family to achieve an education of any kind, Dr. Tun returned to San Lucas after completing his medical training, despite offers to earn a much higher salary at a hospital in the city. “I wanted to give back to my community,” he tells me. As a local, “I know the community and so that helps me be able to find the best treatment for patients,” he says. However, this also comes with “responsibility: because I know a patient can’t afford the medicine he needs I have to find a solution. I can’t just assume they’ll work it out on their own.”

Despite these success stories, however, the big picture is less than rosy. Today Guatemala has the highest malnutrition rate in the western hemisphere (higher than Haiti, even) and poverty and socioeconomic disparities have remained unchanged.

As a guest at the parish for a month, I eat humble meals in the company of a seemingly endless influx of volunteer groups from the United States who spend a week working side-by-side with the locals on various hard-labor projects. It is heartening to see their cross-cultural interactions, but I can’t help but wonder: why aren’t there any Guatemalan volunteers?

Today I am lucky enough to have stumbled upon an impromptu talk on the history of San Lucas by Chona and Father Bill Sprigler, another Minnesotan priest returning to San Lucas for the first time since 1989. The talk quickly turns to la violencia. Chona lived la violencia; Father Bill experienced it in pieces.

Chona’s story begins in 1981 with the assassination of Father Stan Rother, a U.S. priest and good friend living in the nearby town of Santiago de Atitlán. Fr. Stan was conducting mass with several nuns from his parish when he spotted the military approaching. He told the nuns to go into his room and lock the door. As they hid, the nuns witnessed military troops beat Fr. Stan and shoot him in the head. “In that time you couldn’t help poor people, the Maya, because the military would accuse you of being part of the guerrillas,” says Chona.

Liberation theology, which incorporates Paulo Freire’s ‘conscientization,’ “was perceived as communist,” Fr. Greg tells me afterwards. “Our own government vouched that this was an attempt at communist takeover.” The mission was constantly under surveillance with sermons monitored daily for any sign of subversion.

Fr. Greg and Chona were committed to helping people from the community accused by the military of being “subversives.” They would hide and smuggle people out of the region, including young orphans.

Chona’s husband worked at the parish, helping arrange land titles for community members. On December 1, 1981, a day she remembers as if it were yesterday, he disappeared. On his way to the city of Sololá to deal with paperwork, he was captured by the military. “We don’t know how they killed him or what they did with the body,” Chona says.

During the next year she and her three young children moved from house to house, staying with different relatives and friends for their own safety.

The nights, she says, were the hardest. “At night we were frightened, very frightened...the soldiers would come to your house to find you and kill you...always at night.”

“I am just one of many women, wives, mothers and grandmothers who suffered,” says Chona. “Those were very difficult times.”

It is hard to calculate the toll of la violencia in San Lucas. To give you some idea, all but three of the first graduating class of the parish school—around 20 students—were executed.

The violence and tragedy continue with major earthquakes and mudslides. Narcotrafficking and gang violence, as well as high rates of alcoholism and domestic violence, now plague Guatemala. In San Lucas, young gang members loiter by the lakefront at night. I’m told it’s unsafe to venture out after 9 p.m.

Here, as Fr. Bill notes, they live the mantra “keep your eyes on the sky.”

“One has to think about the good, the beautiful in life and not about the difficult things,” Chona tells me later.

The total destruction of social capital is one of the lasting legacies of la violencia. People were displaced, neighbor betrayed neighbor, and a generation was slaughtered. Now, trust is hard won in this community. Few people feel comfortable sharing their more intimate sorrows and fears.

Still, there are those who want, and need, to tell their stories.

Chona begins to weep after recounting the death of her husband. “We’ve covered enough,” Fr. Bill explains to the audience, himself overcome with emotion. “There are too many memories here.”

But Chona begins telling another story, about smuggling orphans out of Quiche. When she pauses to wipe her eyes, Fr. Bill gently urges: “We can stop. It’s very difficult.” “No,” Chona replies. “I want to tell the story, how it was.”

So much has changed in the last decade in Guatemala. Little by little the stories emerge, and the injustices are brought to light. Yet the small children I see laughing and playing on the church steps still face an uphill battle in a country that wants to forget their existence. Indigeneous Guatemalans like Chona share the brave task of retelling the terror they faced during la violencia, but the same question remains: who will listen?

Emily Sanders completed her Master of Science at Harvard School of Public Health. She has lived and worked throughout Latin America and is interested in health sector reform. She traveled to Guatemala in July 2009 with a DRCCLAS summer research travel grant. Contact: cesanders@gmail.com.
Indigenous people are a majority in Guatemala, but they have been subject to racism, discrimination and even genocide. The 1996 Peace Accords recognized Guatemala as a “multicultural, pluri-ethnic and multilingual” nation. Much has been accomplished in terms of preservation of language and identity, but many challenges still lie ahead.

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Indigenous Rights and the Peace Process

Beyond Cosmetic Multiculturalism  BY SANTIAGO BASTOS

THE GUATEMALAN GOVERNMENT AND THE GUERRILLA UMBRELLA GROUP

URNG (Guatemala National Revolutionary Unity) signed the long-awaited Acuerdo de Identidad y Derechos de los Pueblos Indígenas (Accord on Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples) in March 1995. Fellow anthropologist Manuela Camus and I were just finishing research on the actions and demands of Maya organizations in the context of the country’s incipient “democracy” and the peace process. As a result, we got to see first-hand the surprise and illusions that the text aroused, and the possibilities it opened for the rights and opportunities Mayas had been seeking.

The Accord was no gift. It came about in response to the struggles engaged in by organized indigenous groups over a long period of time.

When Manuela and I first arrived in Guatemala in 1987, we were struck by the fact that in a country that had “recuperated its democracy,” indigenous people were not officially recognized—except perhaps as a tourist attraction. We found the socio-political organizations of these same indigenous people (officially considered inexistent) sought to establish that they had been the targeted subjects of repression (also officially considered inexistent).

In 1992, we began to analyze this mobilization, which had gained even more steam in the context of the 500 Years of Resistance Campaign and the utopian enterprise of awarding the Nobel Prize to Rigoberta Menchú—a woman, an indigenous person, a peasant. Guatemalan indigenous organizations were demanding more and more forcefully that they be recognized as The Maya People, and, as such, that they had the right to participate in the peace negotiations between the Guatemalan government and the URNG. With the negotiations, the fact that there had been an armed conflict was finally being recognized, and the situation of the indigenous people was one of the “substantive” themes that had to be discussed and resolved. But the indigenous people did not consider this discussion adequate. “We want to be present in this discussion. None of the parties represent us; they are not Mayas.”

We could not forget how these same people had so recently experienced so much death and destruction. These indigenous peoples had been the objects of the greatest and most systematic massacre committed by a Latin American army in the 20th century, with 150,000 Guatemalans killed after little more than a year of Efraín Ríos Montt’s “scorched earth” campaigns.

Over the years, indigenous activists have confronted civilian and military authorities both physically and politically—critiquing Guatemala’s new democracy.

Indigenous activists have confronted civilian and military authorities both physically and politically—critiquing Guatemala’s new democracy.

Mayan intellectuals who wrote the document—justified the demands by explaining, “These are the same rights that ladinos [non-indigenous or mixed-race Guatemalans] have enjoyed for years and that we wish for our own culture.” In invoking the word “people” in the Accord, the Consejo was underlining the Spanish use of the word (“pueblo”) which means a collective body that shares a history and culture and thus merits official recognition and political sovereignty.

The Accord on Identity offered the possibility that Mayans (along with the Xinca and Garífuna) could leave behind subal-
ternity and develop their own identity, while being recognized as part of what was now defined as a “multicultural, pluri-ethnic and multilingual” Guatemalan nation. But it did not mention the autonomy, the “Specific Rights of the Maya People” they had demanded. Autonomy aroused fears and frictions among ladinos, though no one quite understood what it meant. Nor did the Accord deal with the question of more just distribution of the land or the effects of the repression on the indigenous communities. “It is not everything,” a Mayan leader commented. “It is a good beginning. Now that we have recognition as a People, we can fight for everything else.”

And they fought. During the following four years, organized Mayas applied all their energies to achieving the possibilities contained in the Accord. In 1994, leaders and activists of all sorts of political tendencies, men and women of different generations and people from all social classes joined together in the Coordination of Organizations of the Maya People of Guatemala (COPMAGUA). Mayas with ties to the URNG who returned from exile or emerged from clandestinity joined with those indigenous activists who were already working in Guatemala City. Regional and local leaders who had made the mobilizations of previous years possible also joined forces.

These were the golden years of Mayan politics. Mayan organizations had reached sought-after unity and were negotiating directly with the Guatemalan state, with international recognition and support. It seemed that the historical subordination and exclusion of the indigenous communities in Guatemala was being done away with.

However, things didn’t happen that way. The referendum (Consulta Popular), needed to approve the constitutional changes that arose from the Peace Accords such as the Accord on Identity, was repeatedly delayed. When it was finally held on May 16, 1999, fierce racist and fear-driven campaigns against reform had begun to dominate the national scene. The enthusiasm of the Mayan organizations did not manage to fill the breach that separated the peace process from the dynamics of the majority of the population: only 18% of Guatemalans voted. Slightly more than half of them voted against the constitutional reforms. With the arrival of General Efraín Ríos Montt’s reactionary Guatemalan Republican Front to power at the end of 1999, all illusions of peace and unity vanished.

In the new period of “post-conflict normalization” which followed, the Guatemalan government became more concerned with finding a place in the global neoliberal economy than with the reconstruction of the Guatemalan society and nation. The Maya people became distressed at the dashing of their expectations. In 2000, COPMAGUA disbanded. When Manuela and I returned to the theme of indigenous rights in 2001, there was a sense of incomprehension in the atmosphere, as if it were the end of an era, filled with uncertainty about the future. What we termed cosmetic multiculturalism was taking shape—a construct that has since shaped Guatemalan government policy and actions. On the surface, it seems that the transformation of the Guatemalan state is advancing. Subsequent governments have appointed Mayan figures to important positions, among them Culture Minister, General Director of Bilingual Education, and Secretary of Peace. Specific spaces for themes raised by indigenous activists—usually Mayas—have been opened—the Academy of Mayan Languages, the Fund of Indigenous Development, the Defense Council for Indigenous Women, the Presidential Commission Against Discrimination and Racism, and the multitude of small offices within ministries that make indigenous women are in the forefront of street protests.
Nevertheless, things are not so simple. Year after year, reports indicate that the Accord on Identity has been the accord with the least of its stipulations fulfilled. The involvement of Mayan institutions in the state represent “institutional incrustations” dependent upon international cooperation “in a state that “thinks mono-ethnically”, as Demetrio Cojtí observed after serving as Vice-Minister de Education for four years. “The Maya issue” is no longer on the table, having been resolved through the existence of these offices, with the use of multicultu-

tural terminology such as “interculturality,” “cosmovision” and “multilingualism,” and with the ubiquitous Mayan ceremonies in which presidents and other officials continually participate. Almost all the activists and leaders who had been in COPMAGUA took up government posts. Maya politics were now being exercised from within the state itself and international organizations rather than from indigenous organizations. Maya activists were transformed into public policy managers. Those who had seen the Accord on Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples as a “good foundation” had to join the government so that this good foundation could be laid. Once the foundation had been instated, however, the state closed the matter—“the indigenous problem was resolved.” The more radical and questioning demands of the accord were forgotten. Further, the state appropriated the capacity to define who was or was not “Maya,” using the definition for its own benefit—it did not apply the concept of “indigenous peoples” or the rights obtained from this status beyond the “politics of recognition.” Instead of reducing the historical breach between the poor and rich, Guatemala’s new neoliberal policies have led to an increase in inequality. Guatemalans, especially the Maya, have been forced to enter into the international migratory circles in order to survive. When Mayans seize farmland that had previously belonged to them; when they protest against the mining companies that have destroyed their landscapes, their property and even their lives; when they protest against having their wallets emptied by transnational electricity companies, they are not considered Mayas with a millenary culture, like the few who hold government posts but rather “peasants” or sometimes even “terrorists.” Their protests against the marginalization they face in the global economy are criminalized. They suffer from a repression that has certainly not disappeared—even if the armed conflict has.

The actors that put all their effort in ending the conflict and its causes have become obsolete as protagonists, subsumed in marginality. The creole oligarchs have returned to power after the armed conflict, even under “social democratic” parties. Uninterested in resolving the socioeconomic problems of the country’s majority population and even less in the fact that racism is a defining factor in the society, they have supported neoliberal ideologies that approve of their form of understanding the relation between politics and economy. They play the card of indigenous rights as a way of stemming off further conflict:
Flight 795
A Tale of Structural Racism

BY IRMA ALICIA VELÁSQUEZ NIMATUJ

GUATEMALA TODAY FACES A LACK OF PROGRESS IN FIGHTING THE COMPLEX RACIAL OPPRESSION OCCURRING DAILY: THE SMALL COUNTRY HAS FAILED TO CONFRONT THE LONGSTANDING RACISM THAT CONTRIBUTES TO THE CONTINUING DISENFRANCHISEMENT AND POVERTY OF THE COUNTRY’S INDIGENOUS POPULATION, 75 PERCENT OF WHICH LIVES BELOW THE POVERTY LINE. THIS IS A WORRISOME PHENOMENON FOR A COUNTRY IN WHICH MORE THAN HALF OF ITS ESTIMATED 13 MILLION PEOPLE IS INDIGENOUS. THE SIGNIFICANT STEPS TAKEN TO ALLEVIATE THESE PROBLEMS ARE, WITHOUT A DOUBT, THOSE PUSHED FOR BY THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES THEMSELVES. DESPITE CONSTANT RACIST ATTEMPTS TO ANNUAL INDIGENOUS PEOPLE’S DIGNITY, TREAT THEM AS SECOND-CLASS CITIZENS, INCREASINGLY DEPRIVE THEM OF THEIR TERRITORY, AND SUBJECT THEM TO SEVERE IDEOLOGICAL, MATERIAL, AND INSTITUTIONAL PRESSURES, INDIGENOUS GROUPS HAVE NOT CEASED THEIR ONGOING DEMANDS TO MAINTAIN AND REPRODUCE THEIR CULTURAL IDENTITY. YET RACISM CONTINUES TO MANIFEST ITSELF IN NEGATIONS OF CULTURAL IDENTITY THAT SOME MIGHT EVEN CONSIDER TRIVIAL.

As a K’iche’ anthropologist and journalist I have been able to document and analyze the few steps taken to fight racism and the complexities of moving forward at a national level. I see Mayan dress, for example, as a validation of our cultural identity and I have fought and won court battles to wear that clothing on all occasions, and yet indigenous people are excluded from some restaurants and other public venues because of their clothing (although often other reasons are invented).

My experience shows me that Guatemala is not the only country lagging in the struggle against racism, however; nearly all of Central America has issues with racism. For example, on March 31, 2010, I sent a letter of complaint to the chairman of Copa Airlines, Pedro Heilbron, alleging racial discrimination against indigenous passengers. This complaint was based on a personal experience of mine on March 15, when I took flight 105 from Guatemala to Panama and flight 795 from Panama to Costa Rica. On flight 105, I was upgraded to first class and assigned to seat 4A: as soon as I arrived in Panama, the airline’s assistant handed me my new boarding pass, again first class, seat 3F.

I was the first person to board flight 795, and by the end of the boarding process two men and I were the only ones sitting in first class. The airline began upgrading passengers who were in economy class, all men. About two minutes before shutting the door, the woman who gave me my boarding pass instead of violence, neutralization.

Moreover, the issue of indigenous rights served to drum up international support. It is paradoxical that in the United Nations, Guatemala supports the new Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, while in the country itself, bilingual education takes up only 5% of the Education Ministry’s declining budget. The international stance also contrasts with the fact that the right to hold referendums, spelled out explicitly in Agreement 169, which was ratified more than ten years ago, has consistently been denied by the Guatemalan government to the communities that have asked for legal validation for the consultations they have held on open-pit mining in their territory.

In the face of this situation, the Mayas are once again showing their capacity for pressure and protest. But it is very difficult to mount a resistance, perhaps even more so than before the Accord. Neoliberal policies are doing away with many of the possibilities for collective action. And the shadow of the conflict is seen much more clearly than ten years ago, when we believed that we had won. Communities are disarticulated; a complete generation of leaders is missing, and those who remain are involved on a national level, neglecting their local communities. What has been achieved is that now everyone talks about indigenous rights and Mayan culture, but there is not a narrative that justifies those who fought against inequality and racism. Indeed, demands for social justice are continually met by repression, renewing the idea that the status quo can never be changed. Leaders, once they assume roles in the state, often become separated from the population; the lack of votes for presidential candidate and Nobel Laureate Rigoberta Menchú is one example of how indigenous leaders in the national government fail to maintain a grassroots base.

However, popular protests against mining companies, cement firms, agro-industry and other projects shows that the indigenous people are keeping up the struggle for their rights beyond those granted by the government. By taking to the streets, indigenous activists are insisting on more than cosmetic multiculturalism; they are seriously questioning the foundations of the country’s social structure and the socioeconomic rights from which they have been historically excluded.

Santiago Bastos is a Spanish anthropologist who lived in Guatemala since 1988, dedicating himself to research on diverse aspects of the life of indigenous Mayas—from their subsistence in cities to political mobilizations and changes in concepts of identity. He has lived and worked in Guadalajara, México, since 2008. He has recently edited a volume with Roddy Brett, El movimiento maya en la década después de la paz, 1997-2007 (F & G Editores, 2010). Other books, all co-authored with Manuela Camus, include Quebrando el silencio: Las organizaciones del Pueblo Maya y sus demandas, 1986-1992 (1993), Abriendo caminos: Las organizaciones mayas desde el Nobel a la Paz (1995), Entre el Mecapal y el cielo: Desarrollo del movimiento maya en Guatemala (2003).
at the counter approached me and asked me to move to economy class because my seat belonged to a late-arriving passenger. I replied that I had my seat assignment since the moment I arrived and asked why they wanted to move me and not someone from the group that received an upgrade? She replied that the captain’s orders were to move me in favor of the man who had arrived late.

She left and a steward from the airline came over with the passenger who arrived late. As they both stood in front of me, the Copa employee told me to move by order of the captain since that seat had been allocated to a passenger who arrived late. The flight was already delayed but I asked him to go and tell the captain, since these were apparently his orders, to come over and tell me himself to change seats. He replied that was not possible because the cabin door was already closed.

I had two options: I could not get up and further delay the flight, or I could move and make this claim and public denunciation. I chose to get up, and moved to a seat in economy class. It was clear to me that they decided to move me because I am an indigenous woman and I travel wearing my traditional dress, my everyday outfit. This is how racism operates, affecting those of us who are indigenous and who suddenly occupy spaces that society has decided we should not be in.

When the airline issued the boarding pass, my last name, Velásquez, told them nothing about my racial identity. However, when they saw me with my Indian garment, it was decided to force me to cede my first class seat to a white executive wearing a Western suit, despite the fact that I was the first to board the flight. For the airline and its employees, the norm is that white executives, not indigenous women like me, should occupy spaces like first class seats. It is how the racial hierarchy operates in most institutions.

My complaint to Copa’s chairman stated how the airline had violated my rights by racially discriminating against me for dressing as a Mayan woman. I explained to him that the racist actions of the employees violated Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization (ILO—the highest legal body at world-wide level in the matter of the rights of indigenous peoples), as well as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (specifically the articles that are applicable to the rights of indigenous women) and other human rights international instruments guaranteeing the right to indigenous men and women to live, speak and move freely in any public or private space.

I expressed my outrage because, in my experience, this company does not respect indigenous peoples. Instead, the company exposed itself as an institution that lacks a policy of ethnic neutrality and racial respect towards all paying passengers, indigenous or otherwise, who use the airline’s services.

In the letter I stated the following questions: “What makes us, as indigenous people, different from other men and women? Are not we entitled to the same services? Why do we need to stand these public violations, which are offensive and demeaning, and hurt our dignity and our lives as human beings? Where do equality, professionalism, and good customer service stand for indigenous peoples? Or is it that these elements do not apply to the indigenous population?”

Moreover, I expressed my outrage at “the grossest level of ignorance of both the flight captain and desk attendants, who do not know the racial diversity of the population they must serve in Latin America, home to over 30 million indigenous people, not including people of African descent. If Copa Airlines practiced a policy of racial equality, it would not foment an atmosphere of racial discrimination that began with the captain of the aircraft and ended with the desk attendants and stewards responsible for
attending to the passengers. This company should review seriously and with humility, their conditions of service if they do not want to end up in court facing a racial discrimination suit. It is irreconcilable for Copa to use indigenous peoples in their publications to promote their company, but outside of the public eye to humiliate us, the same way I was humiliated by its staff. This act of self-reflection includes the captain who should be the first to analyze the consequences of taking the seat away from an indigenous woman to give it to a man. How does one name this act? It is not only racism, but also a deeply sexist act.”

On May 4, I received by email, through Diana Mizrachi Koper, the response of Copa chairman Pedro Heilbron. In the response, Heilbron expressed his concern regarding my letter, “where you complain of discrimination in a Copa Airlines flight, due to a change of seats inside the aircraft. I have ordered a thorough investigation of what happened, so I can review the reasons that caused this change and give a satisfactory answer to your complaint.”

He added, “Copa is a multicultural company, which respects all races, creeds, genders, and human and political orientations. Our success lies partly in our human diversity and we recognize that this is one of the principal assets of the region where we live. Therefore, not only do we not discriminate, instead we promote and celebrate the inclusion [sic] and the success of all people. These are personal values of mine, in both parenting and life, and which I assure you are shared across the company.”

In his letter he also stated: “until we investigate and I receive a report on what happened, I will not know the reasons behind the events. Nevertheless, I assure you I do not believe that a case of discrimination was the cause, since in my 22 years with the company this has not happened. But I assure you that if anyone in the company acted improperly, you will be the first to know as we take the necessary measures to correct this.” (my translation).

As I have not received the investigation report that Mr. Heilbron offered me, on June 22, I sent a new email to Koper, with copies to several Guatemalan lawyers who have taken several cases involving racial discrimination to court. However, at the time of the writing of this article, I still have not received a response to the questions raised in my letter and it is possible I never will. This leads me to conclude that in a globalized world, “celebratory,” neoliberal multiculturalism, although slowly dying, still attempts to dilute, confuse and deny racism and its everyday acts of oppression.

Irma A. Velásquez Nimatuj is executive director of the organization, Mecanismo de Apoyo a los Pueblos Indígenas (Support Mechanism for Indigenous Peoples). She received her Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Austin. She is author of La pequeña burguesía indígena comercial de Guatemala: desigualdades de clase, raza y género (AVANCSO, 2002).
Guatemala’s brilliantly colored textile tradition is one of the important threads that has united Maya civilization throughout its long history. Weavings for both ceremonial and everyday use continue to be important to Maya culture, society and ethnic identity.

Unlike Tikal’s temples and the beautiful painted classic Maya pottery one sees in museums, Maya textiles did not survive the Pre-Columbian era. They were too fragile for the humidity of the lowlands and the dampness of the tombs. Yet painted images from the past show the beginnings of the Maya textile work and ceramic figurines depict Maya women weaving with backstrap looms in the same manner that women work today.

Today the Maya, who make up over half the population of Guatemala, are still weaving and some are still wearing their traditional dress. The colorful blouses, skirts, belts, hair ribbons and ceremonial cloths have myriad designs in brocade, embroidery and jaspé—birds and butterflies, animals, geometric forms.

These stunning weavings inspired a committee of the Tikal Association, a non-profit created to support the archaeological site of Tikal, to document and conserve this textile tradition. At that time, in the early 1970s, each village had its own costumes for daily wear and for ceremonial occasions but no one outside the area knew which huipil, or blouse, went with which skirt and on which occasion they were worn. To create a record, artist Carmen Pettersen painted exact watercolors of the costumes; her Norwegian husband, Leon Lind Pettersen, published the paintings and gave the book to the textile committee to raise funds for a museum. In 1976 the Ixchel Museum of Indigenous Dress opened in a rented house in the hotel district of Guatemala City.

And, in 1993, after consulting extensively with textile curators at the Metropolitan Museum of New York and after years of fundraising for the construction of a large, textile-specific building, the Ixchel Museum moved into its new building on the campus of the Francisco Marroquín University. The museum is apolitical, non-profit and independent and it supports itself which, at times, is no easy thing.

That is where my work comes in. As a member of the Board of Directors I enjoy overseeing the research and fundraising for research grants and donations. Our friends and local companies have been generous in supporting us, given that there is much need in Guatemala. For years I was also on the board of Friends of the Ixchel Museum, an American foundation that funds the museum as well as exhibiting and promoting Guatemalan textiles in the United States.

Today, the Ixchel Museum has a collection of over 6,000 woven pieces of Maya clothing from more than 115 weaving villages. The pieces date from the last days of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century to the present.
The oldest surviving textiles are made of hand-spun cotton, silk, and wool, dyed with natural dyes, and are very fragile. Years ago villages were isolated, and traditions of weaving the same designs continued for generations in each town. The women in a village all wore the same costume and daughters wore what their mothers wore; the men also had their own attire.

Today, however, with bright synthetic threads and synthetic dyes, with glittering metallic threads, with paved roads and buses careening between formerly isolated villages, the traditional dress of the Maya has been changing with great rapidity and, in some cases, disappearing entirely.

Santa Catarina Palopó, on the shores of Lake Atitlán, changed its huipil colors from red to turquoise in the 1970’s. Now the neighboring village of San Antonio Palopó, long known for its bright red textiles, is also weaving in turquoise. San Juan Atitán is changing the colors of its traditional dress as well. In Sumpango no one wears traditional clothes, and in Santiago Sacatepéquez there are no weavers left.

It can take months to weave a huipil, and there are jobs in factories that pay far more. The bundles of clothes that arrive from the United States with jeans and T-shirts make non-indigenous clothes cheaper. The modern way of life seems to be leaving weaving behind!

However, weaving remains a way of life for many Maya and, even as weaving patterns and colors change with fashion, many continue to wear spectacular textiles, but in a new way: young women no longer feel bound by the constraints of their parents and their own villages. They are reaching out to borrow what they like from weavers far away. Thus, for scholars and for the Maya themselves, it is important to conserve, document and make available to weavers and scholars the finest pieces of this age old tradition.

The Ixchel Museum exhibits the weavings, funds extensive field research and photography by staff and associated anthropologists, and publishes scholarly monographs on weaving towns. The museum has published eight technical monographs, five catalogues, and twenty information sheets on weaving towns, the Ixchel Museum in Guatemala City has a collection of more than 6,000 woven pieces of Maya clothing from more than 115 weaving villages.

The oldest surviving textiles are made of hand-spun cotton, silk, and wool, dyed with natural dyes, and are very fragile. Years ago villages were isolated, and traditions of weaving the same designs continued for generations in each town. The women in a village all wore the same costume and daughters wore what their mothers wore; the men also had their own attire.

Today, however, with bright synthetic threads and synthetic dyes, with glittering metallic threads, with paved roads and buses careening between formerly isolated villages, the traditional dress of the Maya has been changing with great rapidity and, in some cases, disappearing entirely.

Santa Catarina Palopó, on the shores of Lake Atitlán, changed its huipil colors from red to turquoise in the 1970’s. Now the neighboring village of San Antonio Palopó, long known for its bright red textiles, is also weaving in turquoise. San Juan Atitán is changing the colors of its traditional dress as well. In Sumpango no one wears traditional clothes, and in Santiago Sacatepéquez there are no weavers left.

It can take months to weave a huipil, and there are jobs in factories that pay far more. The bundles of clothes that arrive from the United States with jeans and T-shirts make non-indigenous clothes cheaper. The modern way of life seems to be leaving weaving behind!

However, weaving remains a way of life for many Maya and, even as weaving patterns and colors change with fashion, many continue to wear spectacular textiles, but in a new way: young women no longer feel bound by the constraints of their parents and their own villages. They are reaching out to borrow what they like from weavers far away. Thus, for scholars and for the Maya themselves, it is important to conserve, document and make available to weavers and scholars the finest pieces of this age old tradition.

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Children from Santiago Sacatepéquez and Mixco came to the Ixchel museum to exhibit their weavings. Most no longer wear indigenous dress, but are learning to appreciate their Maya heritage by weaving.
as well as children’s books in Spanish and two indigenous languages, children’s workbooks, and CDs of art projects. The museum also has a large photo archive and a textile library.

Reaching out to the community, the museum has a support program to buy the work of the more than 200 weavers who weave with natural brown cotton. It also has an education program in the city and in rural communities to teach 5th graders the value and beauty of their weaving heritage and raise their self-esteem.

The Ixchel Museum has won the highest civilian awards in Guatemala as well as the Premio Reina Sofia from Spain. It has received many grants for its conservation, research, and education programs.

When the museum is alive with school children who are learning about the textile tradition, trying on costumes and making small weavings, when a bus of tourists comes in and spends much needed money in the museum store, when a research monograph is presented at last after years of work, when the weavers come in to bring their work—it is exciting to be part of it all.

All of us who have worked with the museum feel it is very important to make young Guatemalans proud of their extraordinary weaving heritage. A struggling, developing country wants above all to modernize and leave the past behind, but when there is an absolutely beautiful weaving heritage that is disappearing, it is vital that tradition be valued and saved.

Holly Nottebohm ’62 has lived in Guatemala since 1963, and has worked much of that time with the Ixchel Museum of Indigenous Dress. She edited “Radcliffe in Latin America” about alumnae in Latin America for ten years, was one of the founders of the Harvard Club of Guatemala, and was the Latin American Representative to the Harvard Alumni Association.
pects of the Maya culture. We have been entrusted with disseminating this cultural knowledge, and our work is shown in the permanent, temporary, traveling, and interactive exhibitions of the museum.

Because of the urgency caused by the growing loss of ancestral knowledge and thus of identity, we sought a more direct way to return this cultural heritage to the communities in which it originated. As a result, in 2002, a grant from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) allowed us to launch the Textile Tradition Revitalization Program. Giving priority to the high plateau communities where the textile tradition is seen as being at high risk, the idea is to set up a system of apprenticeship for the craft and to incorporate knowledge about weaving textiles into the national education system. With a focus on teaching, this approach frames weaving in terms of national cultural patrimony and sets it up as an important matter in the diversity of Guatemalan society. Groups of children between 11 and 13 years of age learn about textile weaving, with instruction adapted as needed for each community. With the constant support of the museum, teachers have committed themselves to following students for the length of the school year, using select teaching materials, making visits to the Ixchel Museum in Guatemala City and maintaining direct contact with a master weaver in the area. This experience is complemented by dynamic discussion workshops, awareness and sensitization, all to achieve the appreciation of Maya culture through the weaving tradition and specifically through textiles as works of art.

Nine years later, the Revitalization Program has become enormously enriched with the contributions of each community in which it takes place. The results are palpable. The program has reestablished generational bridges, it has fortified the identities of children, their families, and their teachers, and above all, it has managed to present weavings as transcending purely economic importance and approaching a dimension that is human, aesthetic, and cultural. The representation of all this is the last exhibit in the galleries of the museum, where participants in the program created each textile on display.

Fabiana Flores Maselli is the Education Director of the Museo Ixchel del Traje Indígena in Guatemala City.
I was walking back to my hostel in San Cristóbal Verapaz, Guatemala. Following a morning of classes in the Poqomchi’ Mayan language, I automatically greeted the indigenous hostel owner (dueña) in Poqom— K’aleen, tuut. Suq na ak’ux?—literally, “Hello, ma’am. Is your chest well?”— the Poqomchi’ way of asking “How are you?” Just as she began to reply, her twenty-year-old daughter burst into the room to ask a question in fluent Spanish. The dueña’s immediate, chastising response was: “Adam’s been here for a week and he’s already speaking Poqom. We should speak in Poqom, too!”

I’d waited to hear these words since the summer of 2007, a full year before I began my research in Guatemala. The country’s twenty-two Mayan languages make it a linguist’s paradise. Some, such as K’ichee’ or Q’eqchi’, have hundreds of thousands of speakers and enough social standing to ensure their prominence for several more generations. Less fortunate tongues, like Itzá, will disappear when their few remaining speakers, all elderly, pass away. Poqomchi’ and Tz’utujil, the two languages which I researched, lie somewhere between these extremes. With tens of thousands of speakers each, they are assured of immediate survival but not of long-term vitality.

Mayan languages here owe their uncertain futures to Guatemala’s brutal history. In the 16th century, conquistadors subjugated indigenous polities and imposed Spanish as a new, elite lingua franca. During the country’s Civil War (1960 - 1996), the military and paramilitary forces wiped out whole indigenous towns and ethnolinguistic communities, using the threat of leftist insurgents as a pretext to target ethnic Maya.

Reversing the age-old “Spanish Only” language policy, the 1996 Peace Accords acknowledged that Guatemala is a multilingual nation. Today, the official government-supported Academia de Lenguas Mayas is busy producing high-quality grammars, dictionaries, and text collections, and it runs regional offices in each Mayan ethnolinguistic community. Despite this progress, however, the replacement of indigenous languages by Spanish continues to sever indigenous communities’ ties with their own past. The mentality that Spanish is somehow “superior” to Mayan languages remains common. How can the rich cultural heritage passed down via these languages endure if so much of Guatemalan society thinks them worthless?

Change in communities’ attitudes must come, first and foremost, from the communities themselves. But my fieldwork experiences taught me that a well-intentioned outsider can encourage positive attitudes toward local languages. In the hillsides surrounding the town of Uspantán, Department of El Quiché, elderly locals expressed astonishment that a non-Maya would ever greet them in K’ichee’. In response to my cheery greeting of K’aleen, jaw! (“Hello, sir!”), a fruit vendor in San Cristóbal Verapaz started to teach his Spanish-speaking grandson to address passersby in Poqomchi’. And in San Pedro la Laguna, the Tz’utujil town where I lived and conducted the bulk of my research, a group of young men reacted with enthusiasm and amusement when I stopped to say Qaq’ij, “good afternoon.” Used to the many tourists who come for the great views of Lake Atitlán and the cheap marijuana, these Sampedranos had probably never known any outsider who considered Tz’utujil more than, as it is pejoratively called on the street, mere “dialecto.” One woman asked me, with evident pleasure on her face, how I had come to find an interest in “nuestra lengua.”

I wouldn’t dare to suggest that my three research trips have in any significant way changed the prospects for the Mayan languages. But speaking with Maya people atop the Uspantán hills, on the street in San Cristóbal, and next to Lake Atitlán in San Pedro, I saw how the genuine interest of a field linguist can help reinforce the notion that all languages have worth.

Adam Singerman ’09 is currently the Prep Program Fellow at the Instituto de Liderança do Rio (Rio Leadership Institute), based in Rio de Janeiro. At Harvard, he designed a special concentration in “Linguistics & Latin America.” He spent the summers of 2007 and 2008 and Christmas 2008 in Guatemala with funding generously provided by DRCLAS, the Office of International Programs, the Harvard College Research Program, and the Committee on Special Concentrations. Contact: adamsingerman@gmail.com
Violence is a word all too common in Guatemala: *la violencia*, the civil conflict that engulfed the country in the 80s; the violence of nature and frequent natural disasters; the violence of poverty and discrimination; the everyday violence now fueled by common and organized crime. The legacies of violence permeate the fabric of society.

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A Key Player

Postcards from a Drug-Trafficking Country  BY JULIE LÓPEZ

NEWS ABOUT DRUG TRAFFICKING IS OFTEN associated with Mexico and Colombia. However, the countries in between also bear the brunt of the war waged among traffickers and against authorities to transport drugs to the United States. Guatemala is one of the hinges supporting the transactions between South Americans and Mexicans to move large shipments up north. It is also dubbed a favorite warehouse for drugs and a transit point for proceeds returning by land from the United States and Mexico. Just as Guatemala once found itself in the middle of the violence spawned by U.S. policy and the Cold War, it now finds itself as a key player in yet another type of war.

SNAPSHOT ONE: WE ARE IN THIS TOGETHER.
Former presidential candidate Alejandro Giammattei is touring the Guatemalan countryside—exploring the political ground again before jumping on the 2011 election bandwagon. His next stop: Cobán, Alta Verapaz, in the northern highlands of the country. On the way there, he and his driver/adviser stop at a restaurant on the outskirts of the town. It’s a cottage-style building surrounded by a pine forest. They are the only clients and have just ordered lunch when two stereotypes enter the restaurant: they don cowboy boots and thick gold chains. The adviser leans over. “That is the number one Zeta [an organization of hit men working for drug traffickers] around here, and the other is his main lieutenant,” he says, lowering his voice. “Let’s just eat quickly and leave.” They do, but as they are ready to go, the two other men are leaving as well. Giammattei, as a matter of courtesy, and self-preservation, lets them walk out first. He and his adviser follow at a prudent distance from which they can see the men getting into two large-size Hummers loaded with other men clutching machine guns.

The Hummers move ahead of them in the direction of Cobán. While driving, they pass a small police station flanking the road, in a live interview. It was 2008, the year the Zetas—which branched out from the Mexican Gulf Cartel—announced the body count of 11 that they had settled in Guatemala. In March, in Zacapa, a state bordering Honduras, “Juancho” León, an alleged drug trafficker from the area, was gunned down along with ten other people, three of whom were retired policemen. The casualties were some of the 20 bodyguards with whom León constantly surrounded himself. The official hypothesis: The Zetas wanted to eliminate León to take over his territory. The unofficial hypothesis: While the Zetas were taking over local trafficking routes, in this case they were taking revenge for León having killed two of their people in Honduras.

“The Zetas operate in 75 per cent of Guatemalan territory,” Counter-Narcotics Special Prosecutor Leonel Ruiz has said. In fact, they move freely over the entire country and are armed with massive amounts of weaponry and ammunition. In 2009 alone, nearly 1,000 grenades were seized from them, along with several thousand rounds of machine gun ammunition. So far, the Zetas are the new force to be reckoned with in drug trafficking, as they hold a power grip that other Mexican cartels lack in Guatemala, prosecution investigators said.

Before the Zetas entered the country, two families dominated the drug trafficking business as liaisons between Colombians and Mexicans. One of them, the Lorenzanas, has come under fire from the U.S. as three of their members have pending arrest warrants on drug trafficking charges in a District of Columbia federal court. So far, the Zetas have not meddled with their trafficking routes in northeastern Guatemala. Another family clan has been trafficking with the Zetas in the Cobán area, according to intelligence sources from the Counternarcotics Prosecution’s Office in Guatemala City. These sources estimate that some 800 Zetas roam the country and that one out of every three is Mexican.

SNAPSHOT TWO: DRUG MONEY FOR GRABS
In July 2000, nearly $5 million of drug money was allegedly stolen by 20 policemen. The money was concealed in a truck transporting plastic water containers. The driver, unaware of his valuable cargo, was stopped by a group of armed men, hurled out of the cabin, tied up, and abandoned in the middle of nowhere. After he managed to release himself, he reported the robbery to the police. The police searched for the truck, but strangely enough, the search had begun two hours before the robbery was reported. The truck was found; the money was unaccounted for—officially. In time, several police officers, disgruntled with how the money was divided, blew the whistle on their peers. The Police Internal Affairs Office included these details in an investigative report that never led to any arrests. Ten years later, in 2010, the money has yet to be accounted for.
In the last decade, most officers involved in the search were relocated. Some resigned or were dismissed from the force. One became chief of the National Police Department and another became adviser to Chief of Police Porfirio Pérez Paniagua, arrested last year for allegedly stealing at least 350 kilos of seized cocaine and $300,000 of drug money. His adviser has been on the run since then and has an outstanding arrest warrant. Another arrest warrant bears the name of Raúl Velásquez, the fourth Minister of the Interior appointed by the current administration. Velásquez is still on the run from corruption charges. Nearly two weeks before his arrest warrant was issued, both the chief of police and the head of the police counternarcotics unit were arrested in connection with the murder of five policemen and the theft of an unknown quantity of cocaine.

The plummeting of cocaine seizures in the last decade does not come as a surprise in the face of such corruption within the police force. And these are only the cases known from press coverage. The last year that at least 10 tons of cocaine were seized in Guatemala was 1999. Since then, an average of three tons has been seized per year. According to a U.S. Narcotics Affairs Service (NAS) conservative, outdated estimate from 2002, each year some 200 tons are sent through Guatemala is one of the hinges supporting the transactions between South Americans and Mexicans to move large shipments up north.

Central America to the United States. It has taken ten years (2000-2009) for Guatemalan authorities to seize only 16 percent of that amount.

SNAPSHOT THREE: ENTER “EL GORDO” PAREDES

Jorge Mario “El Gordo” Paredes sits in a courtroom in New York City on April 16, 2010, thousands of miles away from his native Guatemala. Judge Deborah Batts has just announced to him what is probably the worst news of his life: a 372-month jail sentence (31 years) for conspiring to import and sell cocaine on U.S. soil. Two years before that day, Paredes was in Honduras, unaware that in a couple of weeks Honduran police would arrest him and hand him over to Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agents assigned to that country. Within a few hours, Honduran authorities expelled him from the country, and the DEA flew him to Miami faster than you could say “drug trafficking.”

In the vicinity of the Brooklyn Bridge, the 26-story Southern District Court stands tall next to the dwarfed Metropolitan Correctional Center, a grey and brown bunker-like fortress where the only sky inmates see is covered by barbed wire, or gridded by iron bars. In January 2003 and eight subway stops from there, 265 kilos of cocaine were seized from a suspect whom the DEA linked...
Cocaine and Corruption

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton admitted on March 5 of this year, in Guatemala, that the United States has a drug addiction problem that needs to be addressed. The implication of her statement was that this problem was causing a steady drug supply from Latin America, passing through Guatemala and leaving a trail of violence. Clinton made a one-day visit to the country to discuss drug trafficking and corruption, two items on the security agenda of the Department of State and much cause for worry.

The greater the scope of drug trafficking and corruption in Guatemala, the more effective a bridge the country makes for the transport of drugs toward the United States. According to the U.S. Narcotics Affairs Service (NAS), Guatemala accounts for half of the trafficking routes in Central America that go to Mexico and the United States.

The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and the NAS estimate that in 2008 U.S. local authorities seized only 25 percent of the estimated amount of cocaine transported through Guatemala. That same year, Guatemalan authorities seized only one percent of the overall amount.

While the problem on U.S. soil mostly involves controlling consumption and the effects of addiction of people who willingly became addicts, Guatemala is dealing mainly with the violence trail that drug trafficking leaves behind. In 2008, the country witnessed for the first time large-scale drug-related killings that were quickly dubbed “narco massacres.” Two of these alone left 30 dead.

Quick and—apparently—easy money has lured dozens of Guatemalans into joining drug trafficking ranks. Horacio Botero, a Colombian sentenced to 16 years in jail for participating in a conspiracy to traffic cocaine from Guatemala to New York, testified in court last year that in 2003 a kilo sent just to Mexico was worth $8,000 dollars, but if sent to New York, the price doubled. This is the same price at which a kilo of cocaine is still valued in Guatemala by local authorities.

Guatemala’s predicament is double-edged. On the one hand, drug trafficking is stimulated by the steady demand for cocaine in the United States. On the other, the country has two self-made problems: weak institutions and rampant poverty. The weak institutions (the police, the prosecution system, the court system, the jail system) account for the widespread corruption, while the poverty creates an environment for people with lack of opportunities to take the easy route.

“There are no more institutions left to corrupt in Guatemala,” said Héctor Rosada, a Guatemalan expert on political issues, regarding the scope of the problem last year. “They apply Barbie politics, where everything is disposable, even the Barbie.”

The former head of the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG, its acronym in Spanish), Carlos Castresana, has said that in the last few years foreign aid has spent billions of dollars in Guatemala—money that, for the most part, has been lost or wasted (with lack of continuity of security plans). “There is no control,” he said. “It’s necessary to invest in security, strengthen justice institutions and invest in development, eliminating the gullies of misery that are the breeding grounds for criminal groups.”

Castresana, who was appointed by the United Nations, resigned earlier this year after constant attacks against him by groups that see the commission as a roadblock to criminal and corrupt activity. According to him, these attacks undermined CICIG’s work, and he thought the commission would be better off with a new commissioner in charge.

During her visit last March, Clinton vowed that the United States would cooperate with the Guatemalan government, providing more aid to strengthen the fight against drug trafficking. However, the local government will have to face the challenge of cleaning house before it makes sure that foreign aid will not be squandered, as Castresana candidly explained.

—JULIE LÓPEZ
test as proof of goodwill, but none of this changed his fate.

According to a former special agent who worked for a U.S. federal agency, Paredes admitted to trafficking 45 tons of cocaine in five years, but was adamant about not being responsible for the 265-kilo shipment (nearly 0.13 per cent of what is trafficked yearly through Guatemala). He was also willing to testify about a former informant for the DEA in Mexico who joined the Zetas in Guatemala. The source claimed that the DEA and the U.S. Attorney's Office were unwilling to admit publicly to having been double-crossed by this man, and turned down Paredes' offer. They also declined any requests for interviews about Paredes' case.

George's claim about poverty as justification for drug trafficking would mean that most of the population living in poverty conditions would turn to such illegal activity. Most do not. Many are lured into it, however, and pay with their lives. Paredes was arrested only five weeks before Juancho and ten other people were killed in March 2008. In 2009, one person was killed on an average of every 81 minutes. This year's numbers are close to reaching this level. According to President Alvaro Colom, 41 percent of violent deaths in Guatemala are related to drug trafficking—many of them innocent bystanders.

Julie López is a freelance journalist working in Guatemala, where she reports on politics and security issues for BBC Mundo, BBC World, El Diario La Prensa (New York-based Spanish-language newspaper) and Guatemalan daily Siglo Veintiuno. In May 2010, she won the Félix Varela Award for print journalism for her series “The Narco Empire,” which was published by El Diario La Prensa in October 2009. López coordinated the Spanish Language Journalism Master’s Program at Florida International University, in Miami, where she also taught between 2005 and 2007. She has had 12 years' experience in journalism.

Living Dangerously
Portraits of Daily Violence

MIGUEL PINTO IS 10 YEARS OLD AND YET HE TALKS WEAPONS LIKE A CONNOISSEUR.

A motorcycle speeds by the car in which he is traveling and he notices that one of the two riders is carrying a big gun. “Was that a Kalashnikov?” he asks eagerly. The adults in the car, not only at the biker's driving with what looks like a machine gun, but at the kind of knowledge that a 4th grader absorbs from living in Guatemala, one of the most violent countries in the world.

Not too long ago, a United Nations diplomat called Guatemala a “paradise for assassins.” That's because the numbers of dead bodies pile up as high as the rate of impunity, which stands between 97 and 99% (the exact percentage has actually become a subject for heated debate amongst Guatemalan authorities). Just for you to imagine how pervasive violence is, consider that last year alone, 6,500 people were murdered in this country. That is almost 2,000 more than the total of U.S. soldiers and coalition troops killed in Iraq since the beginning of the war.

In such an environment, the borders of what can be considered “normal” keep blurring. Violence is everywhere and people learn to live with it in ways that can be delirious, terrifying and sometimes even downright funny.

First of all, the news you hear in Guatemala will make your jaw drop. You wake up to the radio in the morning to learn that yet another dead woman was found in the city, hacked up in little pieces inside an abandoned suitcase. The radio anchor then reports that a 13-year-old boy—a gang member—was arrested after shooting a mother of two at a local market. And if that is not enough to make you want to stay in bed, the interview will do the trick. The young and sassy killer brags how this is his eighth hit and that he charged 100 quetzales for the job, a little more than 10 bucks. So now you can start a promising day, knowing exactly how life is trading in the Guatemalan market.

No wonder people have a tendency toward becoming paranoid. Some blame the media for spreading pessimism. Well, they do have help. Lots of it, actually. Word of mouth, the most effective and powerful means of communication, reinforces the scary perception that every time you go out in the street, you are being thrown into a game of Russian roulette.

Whenever someone you know becomes a victim, be it of a car theft, an “express kidnapping” or a shooting, you start wondering when it will be your turn. The sight of two guys on a bike can send chills down your spine, since this is the method of choice for professional hit men or “sicarios.” You wonder if the man sweating at the bus stop under a big jacket is hiding a gun. You end up carrying a “give away” purse with some cash, a pair of Chinese sunglasses and stale makeup. Going out with nothing at all then reports that a 13-year-old boy—a gang member—was arrested after shooting a mother of two at a local market. And if that is not enough to make you want to stay in bed, the interview will do the trick. The young and sassy killer brags how this is his eighth hit and that he charged 100 quetzales for the job, a little more than 10 bucks. So now you can start a promising day, knowing exactly how life is trading in the Guatemalan market.

Surviving an attack on the streets of Guatemala City can depend on something asickle as the mood of criminals on a given day. Pediatrician Edwin Asturias knows that at first hand. He was walking near the hospital where he works, when an SUV with dark windows started following him on a lonely street. A young man jumped out of the car with a gun in his hand and demanded everything: cell phone, money, watch. Asturias obeyed quietly. The SUV driver ordered the assailant: “Now kill him.” “But why?” asked Asturias, “I have done as you told me.” There was a long pause. Asturias felt the barrel of the gun pressing on his stomach. As a doctor, he began to imagine extent of his hypothetical wounds and guessed he would not
Violence is everywhere and people learn to live with it in ways that can be delirious, terrifying and sometimes even downright funny.

fellow journalist Patricia González could not stand to have her sister’s brand new Suzuki Sidekick jeep robbed. She had just stopped at a gas station to fill up the tank when she saw a gun pointing at her face through the window of the car. She did not think; she just followed her gut. And her gut told her to fake some kind of nervous fit: she started trembling, rolling her eyes and spitting foam. It worked. The robber got scared and left.

Violence is everywhere and people learn to live with it in ways that can be delirious, terrifying and sometimes even downright funny.

Just as violence corrupts the very concept of “normalcy,” corruption itself twists the dynamics that develop between people, cops and thugs in unimaginable ways. Take the case of what happened in engineer Alejandro Viau’s neighborhood near downtown Guatemala—a mostly blue-collar neighborhood where one-story painted buildings house small mom-and-pop shops. A car repair garage which the locals suspected of modifying stolen cars stood only a block away from his house. The owner ran his operation undisturbed until he accepted a stolen car that had belonged to a congressman. An arrest order was issued, but the garage owner ran away before a police patrol came looking for him. The squad car stationed itself in front of the shop on a permanent basis. After a few days, the fugitive’s mother thought it would be a good idea to fraternize with the cops, and she started giving them typical Guatemalan snacks. Word spread that the food was very tasty and soon other cops began to drop by. The lady opened a small diner out of her own kitchen, and every day at lunch locals would see four or five police patrols parked in front. After a few months the fugitive came back, and now he helps his mother in the diner.

Guatemalans smile at stories like these, but when violence hits them close enough, there is nothing to laugh about. A few weeks ago, the news director of one of the main radio networks and a good friend, Felipe Valenzuela, was shot in the head. In a country where hundreds of journalists and activists have been murdered, tortured or disappeared, an attack like this one can raise old ghosts. It was not clear if Valenzuela had been a victim of common criminals or if he had been targeted because of his profession. We were all hoping for the first hypothesis because otherwise, the bullet that pierced his jaw was in fact a bullet to all of us and to all that has been gained since the end of the civil war.

As the news circulated, colleagues, activists and political figures flocked to the hospital. The waiting room was filled with long faces that would not lighten up, not even as doctors assured the visitors that Valenzuela had been extremely lucky and that he would recover with no long-term physical damage. People would just sigh and shake their heads, until someone cracked up: “so now we can really tell Felipe he has a hard head.” And people smiled again because they wanted to cry.

Dina Fernández is an anthropologist and a journalist. She has worked as a reporter, editor and as columnist for more than fifteen years. She was a Nieman Fellow in 2002, writes a bi-weekly op-ed article at elPeriódico and co-hosts a TV news show “A las 8 y 45” on Canal Antigua. She also serves as the Chair of the Board at the Soros Foundation in Guatemala.
The International Commission Against Impunity In Guatemala

Undoing the Legacy of Violence and Corruption  
BY PAUL GOEPFERT

ON MAY 10, 2009 A PROMINENT GUATEMALAN attorney, Rodrigo Rosenberg, was gunned down in broad daylight while riding his bicycle down a busy, tree-lined boulevard in a wealthy residential district of Guatemala City. But this wasn’t just another killing in a homicide-plagued country. On May 11, 2009, Guatemalan television aired a pre-recorded video in which Rosenberg declared, “If you are viewing this video, it is because I have been assassinated by President Álvaro Colom.” Rosenberg went on to accuse close associates of the President, including the President’s wife, Sandra Torres de Colom, of involvement in his murder and in the earlier murder of two of his clients, prominent businessman Khalil Musa and his daughter Marjorie, purportedly over fears of revelations of corrupt narco-money laundering at the highest government levels in the semi-state bank Banrural.

The nation polarized immediately, with mass demonstrations in the capital for and against President Colom and his wife. The anti-Colom demonstrators, calling for his resignation, were mostly urban, educated professionals and university students, who had spontaneously organized through the social networking systems of Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. Pro-Colom supporters were primarily rural people, bused in from the countryside, where potential presidential candidate Sandra Torres de Colom’s programs of Social Cohesion and My Family Progresses have been lavishing huge amounts of the federal budget on rural aid programs.

It was not until January 12, 2010, that one man stepped forward to the microphone to cut the Gordian knot of the case. He was the head of the United Nations International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala, Carlos Castresana, Spanish judge and professor of international jurisprudence. With a plethora of investigative proof, Castresana astonished a habitually incredulous nation by showing how Rosenberg had planned his own killing.

The case brought the United Nation’s Commission against Impunity (CICIG in its Spanish acronym) to the attention of the entire country. In December of 2006, the Guatemalan government had signed an agreement with the Secretary General of the United Nations to allow the formation of this special commission. The task requested of the Commission was to investigate what in Guatemala are called “parallel powers,” clandestine criminal groups with tentacles into the security forces and the judicial system of the country that became linked to the counterinsurgent army intelligence during the armed conflict. These criminal groups had for years influenced the judicial system. The Commission’s job was not only to bust these “parallel powers,” but also to crack their influence within the judicial system. Its mandate also included suggesting changes in existing laws or drafting new ones that might help eradicate the rampant criminality in the country. The Commission was unusual because it was obliged to work through the Attorney General’s staff in any prosecutorial case. As The Journal of International Criminal Justice from Oxford University points out, the Commission’s prosecutorial independence was limited by its partnership with a judicial system that it was mandated to reform, but on the other hand it was embedded in the system it needed to reform. As Castresana said in a recent interview with this writer, however, “None of the institutions here is completely corrupt. So it’s possible to find people in the police, in the prosecutor’s office, and in the judicial system who are ready to be converted into our partners.”

The average Guatemalan on the street was not feeling the benefits. The only thing that the average citizen knew was that every day his or her life was ever more fatally precarious. Since the signing of the December 1996 Peace Accords, ending 36 years of internecine warfare between leftist guerrillas and the Guatemalan army, Guatemala has been descending into a maelstrom of civilian violence far surpassing the years of war.

The sociologist and one-time government Peace negotiator, Hector Rosada, observed in the press, “The peace is more violent than the war. The peace process never prepared us for the country we are now living in.”

Luis Linares of ASIES (Association of Investigation and Social Studies) put it this way: “We are living in a psychosis. The citizen leaves home in the morning and doesn’t know if he will come home.
alive. This is a cost that we assume every day, but it is difficult to quantify."

Nevertheless, some data do quantify this cost. From the year 2000 to 2009, the homicide numbers have risen from 2,904 per year to 6,451, with only 230 or 3.58% prosecutions.

Guatemalan journalist Cristina Bonillo, citing the United Nations Program for Development, has measured the cost of violence in this way, “Although it is difficult to quantify the cost of the violence in the economy of the country, it has been estimated that in 2006 alone it had reached 7.3% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), double the amount assigned to the Ministries of Agriculture, Health, and Education all together.”

Violence has also taken a tremendous toll on commerce. According to a World Economic Forum study, Guatemala has dropped down 11 places owing to the effect of the violence on commercial interests. The Foundation for Guatemalan Development (FUNDESA) has pointed out that crime, violence, and extortions have placed the nation at number 69 among 125 nations evaluated. The indicator of the level of costs for businesses to protect themselves from crime, violence, and extortion places Guatemala almost at the bottom, at 124. The level of confidence of businesses in the police places Guatemala at number 118.

Most of the violence is carried out by and between gangs, but as the Interior Minister Carlos Menocal has said, “The gangs are the armed arm of the clandestine groups.” They are sub-contracted to carry out the hits.

COCAINE AND DERIVATIVE CRACK
What fuels the gangs and their violence and enriches the clandestine groups are cocaine and its derivative crack. Guatemala, neighbor to Mexico, is the ideal transshipment point of cocaine from South America. Drug-war experts say that 90% of the cocaine that reaches the United States comes through the Central American Corridor, of which Guatemala is an integral part. And these experts say that the toll-fee for passing through Guatemala in part is also paid in cocaine, which filters down to the gangs.

But the Commission Against Impunity isn’t in Guatemala to clean up street crime. It seeks to eradicate impunity in governmental institutions and in clandestine parallel groups dedicated to organized crime. Castresana has indicated to the press, “The government structures have been maintained on a base of clandestine structures. Structures that are infiltrated by criminal groups.”

President Álvaro Colom’s government has had five different Ministers of the Interior, a department that controls the police. Two of them are charged with crimes, one is still a fugitive from justice. Since 1997, there have been 17 different police chiefs. The last two fired in the Colom administration were accused of seizing cocaine shipments for resale. Of the last five, four have been accused of various crimes. Police sub-directors have mutually accused one another of running death squads within the police. Numerous other police officials have been found running criminal mafias within the police. Norma Cruz, Director of the Foundation of Survivors, put it in a historical perspective, “Our past still weighs heavily on us. In the war the police were used to eliminate the enemy of the state, to kidnap, to torture, and to kill with impunity. This will not change overnight.”

TARGETING THE COFRADÍA
One of the important clandestine groups that the Commission is targeting was identified by the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) in its report Hidden Powers in Guatemala as La Cofradía (fraternity). La Cofradía was a group of former and active military intelligence officers, who in Guatemala’s climate of impunity, turned their cold-war counterinsurgency skills into criminal riches. This group first came to light in 1996, when the administration of President Alvaro Arzú broke a contraband ring within the customs agency later dubbed the Moreno network, after its purported head Alfredo Moreno. When the investigators began going through Moreno’s computer and photos in his house, they found links to many former military intelligence officers such as General Francisco Ortega Menaldo, Colonel Jacobo Salán Sánchez and Major Napoleón Rojas Méndez. Also found in the photos was the president-to-be Alfonso Portillo, arm in arm with Ortega Menaldo at a barbecue. Later it would be reported that Alfonso Portillo was a paid political advisor to the Cofradía.

FORMER PRESIDENT PORTILLO ARRESTED ON CORRUPTION CHARGES
One of CICIG’s great successes was aiding local law enforcement in the arrest of former President Portillo as he was trying to flee to Belize. The former president is charged with embezzling $2.5 million from a donation from Taiwan and $5.5 million in a transfer from the Ministry of Defense, aided and abetted by his heads of security, Colonel Jacobo Salán Sánchez and Major Napoleón Rojas Méndez. Rojas has been apprehended, while Salán Sánchez remains a fugitive. Portillo is also charged in the Federal Court for the Southern District of New York with money laundering of his ill-got gains. There is a U.S. extradition order against him for money laundering, which has been approved by the Guatemalan courts. The key to the case against Portillo was a former Portillo-appointed head of the state National Mortgage Credit bank (CHN), Armando Llort Quinteño. Llort had sought witness protection in New York and confessed to participating in the embezzlement scheme. He sang for all to hear in the court, and it was heard in Guatemala as well. Llort claimed that the Cofradía and General Ortega Menaldo were behind the whole embezzlement scheme and that Salán and Rojas actually carried out the plan. In 2000 the National Security Archive in Washington presented declassified United States intelligence documents that confirmed the existence of the Cofradía. In 2002 the State Department revoked the visas of these military officers, who in the past
had worked closely with the CIA and U.S. Defense Intelligence.

Castresana summed it up in a press statement, “What before was counterinsurgency now is organized crime.” The arrest tally so far is ex-President Portillo, Llort in New York, ex-Finance Minister Maza, former Defense Minister Eduardo Arévalo Llacs, head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the Army Enrique Ríos Sosa, son of one-time military dictator, Efraín Ríos Montt, and the former intelligence officer Major Napoleón Rojas. Colonel Jacobo Salán Sánchez is still a fugitive. Five other army officers from the Defense Ministry were arrested along with Ríos-Sosa for the theft of $55 million from the ministry. This situation never could have taken place before the CICIG came to Guatemala.

Yet the alleged head of La Cofradía, General Ortega Menaldo, still walks free. In an interview with this writer, Castresana commented with a wry smile, “Each case has its own time. The case is open. We have to gather the appropriate evidence to make a case. We don’t speak more about it for obvious reasons.”

But Castresana points out that the Cofradía is not the only clandestine mafia. “Now there are many groups, not just one. There has been an evolution. It has shot up everywhere and multiplied like a contagion. Our analysis suggests that the violent crimes of today are the offspring of the violence of the past.” Some of these new groups moving in, like the Zetas, are Mexican drug traffickers. The drug traffickers are taking and holding territory all over rural Guatemala. It appears that they may be making alliances with local mayors and their communities.

JUDICIAL REFORM

CICIG has proposed changes in the law to accelerate the judicial process, but Congress, mired in a corrupt battle for spoils, has been slow to pass the necessary legislation; only four of fifteen suggested changes have been passed. The suggested law against illicit enrichment of government officials has been tied up in Congress since November 2008. Also still pending is the law for confiscation of property obtained through illegal means. So is the law to modify congressional impunity from legal charges that states 2/3 of the Congress must vote against a member to send him or her to trial. Other proposed changes concern search and arrest warrants and a change in mandatory time limits for holding arrested persons before they can be charged before a judge. Castresana has implored Congress to pass a law to limit the use of frivolous legal injunctions in courts that delay legal proceedings. In addition, he has raised the issue of constitutional reform.

But Castresana’s biggest challenge has come from the process of choosing the Attorney General. The framers of the 1985 Constitution intended to depoliticize the office by having the rectors of the various universities, along with the president of the national lawyers guild and a member of its tribunal of honor, come up with a list of suitable candidates from which the President could choose. This has only served to politicize the elections of the university rectors, who appoint those deans. The large electoral campaigns for rector are costly and are financed now from obscure sources in order to get those votes for the candidates not only for Attorney General but also for the Supreme Court and the Constitutional Court, where the same system prevails.

This process didn’t turn out the way the framers intended. Instead, the process has allowed obscure interests to influence the choice and thus influence the courts and the Attorney General’s office.

CICIG played the role of ombudsman in the selection of the Attorney General, an office to which the organization is tied by the need for a national prosecutorial arm. Investigating the backgrounds of the six candidates chosen by the nominating committee, it found that only two of them had a clean record. Castresana informed the President and then went public with the information. Agreeing with Castresana, the Constitutional Court ordered the selection committee to reopen the search, examining closely the records of the nominees. Nevertheless, the selection committee just sent back the same list of the six, and the President chose one of the candidates with a tarnished record. Castresana resigned in protest, stating that he was not getting sufficient cooperation from the executive and legislative branches to help achieve the rule of law in Guatemala. The Constitutional Court annulled the selection and ordered that a new selection committee be formed. Publicly embarrassed, the President begrudgingly accepted the court’s decision and dismissed his new Attorney General after fifteen days. A new selection committee was recently formed.

Castresana had said earlier, “At times I feel tempted to just throw in the towel, but the truth is that this kind of a mission has to come without a towel.” But President Colom’s choice of a known tarnished candidate for Attorney General was the last straw for Castresana. It was like having that towel thrown right in his face. He lamented: “The patient won’t take his medicine, and a sick man who won’t take his medicine often ends up dying.”

A NEW CICIG COMMISSIONER

The UN Secretary General has appointed a new Commissioner for CICIG, the Attorney General of Costa Rica, Francisco Dall’Anese, known for having investigated and tried two former presidents for corruption and for his tough stand against drug traffickers. He is slated to assume leadership on August 1, with a year and a few months before CICIG’s mandate expires. It could be renewed by the Guatemalan government.

U.S. Ambassador Stephan MacFarland, a strong supporter of CICIG, worried in an interview, “A year and a few months is not whole lot of time to advance enough so that success against impunity is guaranteed…but ultimately it depends not on the imposition from outside but an acceptance by the Guatemalans.”

Paul Goepfert is a former correspondent for The Baltimore Sun and The Chicago Tribune from 1982 until 1989 in Managua, Nicaragua. He has been a resident of Central America for eighteen years.
Cyclones of Violence
A Photoessay about Determination and Survival

BY NANCY MCGIRR AND THE FOTOKIDS TEAM Adapted from the Fotokids quarterly newsletter, June 2010

A FRIEND WROTE, “NANCY, I GUESS LIVING IN a place like that for so long gives you a different outlook on what constitutes a crisis. We’re all sitting here spellbound and worried, and you’re always ‘well, we got up, had some coffee, walked the dog, cleaned up ash from the volcano, had some lunch, then we had a hurricane, and then it was time for dinner...’”

Although I have lived in Guatemala for 21 years and experienced my share of crises, it seems to me that we are now pretty high on the Misery Meter. (Misery Meter in June: code orange). Giving in though is not an option.

As life goes on, the young people who are part of Fotokids try to take an active role in making Guatemala a better place. With younger and younger children being recruited by gangs, two of our university students Werner and Abdias have started a new photography class teaching five to seven year olds. We have found that by giving them cameras to document their surroundings, the children learn to express themselves both visually and verbally at an early age, and this is the first step in our youth leadership program. Having older Fotokids be the teachers insures empathy and trust, as well as providing good role models from their own neighborhoods.

It’s been a challenging time for us here in Guatemala City. You may have heard that our photography/graphic design school was robbed of 20 Mac computers and photo equipment this spring. The robbery, combined with the Pacaya volcano spewing ashes two inches deep throughout the City, followed rapidly by tropical storm Agatha that left more than 165 dead and 18,700 homeless from flooding and landslides, leaves me seriously worried about supporters compassion fatigue.

The ash from the volcano Pacaya resembled little pebbles, ranging from tiny pieces up to corn kernel size in our neighborhood. The bigger pieces came down sizzling and burned the arms of some people. There were big flaming rocks as well that landed on houses in villages on the skirts of the volcano and set them on fire. The lava shot up a mile into the sky. The ash was almost three inches deep in most places.
Then the rain started. At first it seemed like a good thing because it kept houses from igniting and kids from inhaling ash into their lungs. Then we realized that ash + water equaled cement that had to be swiftly swept up so it wouldn’t clog all the street drains. Tin roofs collapsed under its weight. Today as I came into work, hills of black ash as tall as me (5’5 1/4”) lined the streets. Fotokids’ Evelyn, Berlin, Abdias, Werner, Gerardo and Vivi worked all day, sopping wet, to fill 30 garbage bags from our patios and terraces.

As the rain came down heavily all that night and the next morning, I began to get nervous because it looked like hurricane rain. I recognized it from Hurricanes Mitch and Stan; at first steady, then heavier, then too much for our soil to absorb. Three days of rain, rain, rain. Besides sweeping away homes, it destroyed bridges and left 107 communities nationwide without sufficient help and many without communications.

Marta from Tierra Nueva Dos called late Saturday night. Her backyard had collapsed into a ravine, leaving the tin house perched precariously close to the yawning chasm. Her neighbor who lives directly above her had used sandbags to shore up her foundation. The bags slid off and crashed onto Marta’s tin roof. Her usually calm mother anxiously demanded that they move out. Marta called reluctantly to ask to borrow money to buy a piece of land in a more secure area.

Fotokids and former Fotokids have been sending in photos of the volcano eruption and Tropical Storm Agatha. You can see them on the Fotokids or Fotokids Santiago page in Facebook or online at www.fotokids.org.

Although natural disasters are horrible, I think the cyclone of violence we are living with here in Guatemala is even more depressing.

Kids we know, some as young as 14, have their own gangs; they are armed, and have motorcycles. One of the Fotokids’ mothers heard that a boy named Coco and Benito’s younger brother were involved and had robbed neighbors in the dump at gunpoint.

“Did you tell the mom?” I asked. “Yes,” she said, “I told Coco’s Mom. I said as a mother I knew she would want to know that her son had assaulted a neighbor.” Coco’s mom had looked at her and said, “Who are you? Where do you live?” She then slipped her hoodie off a shoulder to show off her gang tattoos, and asked again where she lived.

For me the saddest story of all was that of Maritza’s brother Walter. Maritza is no longer with Fotokids, but years ago, she was one of the kids that lived with her family as squatters on the railroad tracks. Her older brother Walter was always her protector and a truly kind, upstanding, good-looking boy.
Always religious, he became an Evangelical pastor. One of the only ways that the gangs will let you go is if you are in your twenties, get married and take up religion. Walter was living in Santa Faz, one of the most dangerous areas of the city where walking across from one street to the other can get you killed. There he was “saving” a lot of gang members, enabling them to leave the gangs. I guess he was way too successful.

One Thursday night, while he was praying alone in the church, a man entered, put his arm around him and shot him dead.

The moral fabric here has been ripped to shreds. The only thing that I know we can do, and have done pretty well for the last almost 20 years, is take the little kids and start teaching them values right away, creating a safe space for them. Their taking photographs provides them with not only a creative outlet but a sense of pride and group identity.

I admire the young people I work with and they inspire me to think that, with their determination and compassion, they can make a change, a change that will bring Guatemala out of the storm.

Nancy McGirr is Founder and Executive Director of Fundación de Niños Artistas de Guatemala/Fotokids www.fotokids.org.

The Fundación de Niños Artistas de Guatemala, FOTOKIDS, now in its 19th year, continues giving young people from some of the poorest barrios in Guatemala the opportunity to have a voice using photography and graphic design as tools to promote self-expression, critical thinking, and leadership, and as a means of employment. Fotokids also provides traditional education scholarships through private donors. To make a tax deductible donation on PayPal, to receive quarterly newsletters like the excerpt above or view our Gallery, visit our website www.fotokids.org or contact us at info@fotokids.org.

Securing the City
The Politics and Business of Postwar Security

BY KEDRON THOMAS AND KEVIN LEWIS O’NEILL

GUATEMALA IS EXPERIENCING A NEW ECONOMIC stimulus: the security industry. The internal armed conflict may have ended more than a decade ago, but everyday life for many Guatemalans continues to be fraught with violence. The country has one of the highest homicide rates in the Americas (about seventeen murders per day) and one of the lowest rates of incarceration. The average criminal trial lasts more than four years with fewer than two out of every hundred crimes resulting in a conviction. As one international observer remarked on the BBC News in 2007, “It’s sad to say, but Guatemala is a good place to commit murder because you will almost certainly get away with it.” Postwar peace now seems little more than a bloodied banner.

The number of private security guards working in homes and businesses is now estimated at 80,000, compared to 18,500 police officers nationwide, according to the U.S. Agency for International Development.

The employment of private security forces by businesses and individuals is just one of many responses to escalating crime and violence. Other private solutions include the formation of community associations and, in the most extreme cases, vigilantism and lynching, as well as the growth of gated communities to keep violence out. These responses represent a new trend: instead of being a public right, law enforcement has largely migrated from state institutions to the private sector. Indeed, the growth of private security firms in the last decade is astounding.
In a recent study, Avery Dickins de Giron, an anthropologist at Vanderbilt University, shows that a growing number of rural Guatemalans have come to see private security work in the capital city as a viable, albeit dangerous, option for upward mobility. Over the last century, changes in rural areas have led to several waves of migration into Guatemala City. Economic restructuring since the early 1990s exacerbated this trend, undermining what remained of the subsistence farming system upon which rural inhabitants historically relied. For an increasing number of Maya men moving into the city, finding work in private security is an attractive prospect.

Security guards from the department of Alta Verapaz, just north of the capital region, are generally landless indigenous men from impoverished communities. They seek work as guards for neceidad (out of necessity), hinting at the structural conditions of poverty and unemployment in their hometowns. These men provide a flexible, low-wage workforce for the hundreds of authorized and unauthorized security firms operating in Guatemala City. Generally viewed by their employers as expendable laborers, they are housed in substandard conditions and paid relatively low wages for what can be a deadly job. At the same time, the men use the flexible nature of this work to their advantage. Working when they need cash income to supplement other earnings, they quit when the exploitative conditions or dangers of the job become too much to bear. They may only take a short break before continuing security industry work, or they may attempt to capitalize on social networks in the city to move into a more desirable occupation. Many of the men with whom Dickins de Giron spoke reported that employment in the security industry offers a chance for them to experience both the best and worst of urban life. Excitement and opportunity draw them to the city. At the same time, discrimination, exploitation and dangerous conditions characterize their migrant experience.

The private security industry is perhaps the most obvious example of how citizens respond to growing fear in Guatemala City. A more understated but nonetheless related trend is the growth of urban renewal projects, aimed at creating safe enclaves for middle- and upper-class residents. Clusters of private condominiums, shopping centers and entertainment districts cocooned by guns, dogs and guards now speckle Guatemala’s highways. Fortified enclaves segregate Guatemala City’s exclusive zones from the more popular ones. Zone 1, for example, is the capital’s oldest and most historic zone, home to the national cathedral, high courts, and national palace. Anthropologists Rodrigo J. Veliz and Kevin Lewis O’Neill note that Zone 1 has become dangerous in recent years, with a disproportionately high rate of violent murders taking place there. Upper classes have relocated to peripheral zones built up over the past two decades. These areas comprise fortified homes, upscale shopping malls and protection by private security forces.

Responses to urban crime such as private security forces and urban renewal projects address only the immediate security concerns of the most affluent sectors of the population.

A number of wealthy Guatemalans are trying to reclaim Zone 1, however. Plans include ridding the historical city center of less desirable elements, including street vendors and the working-class clients who depend on their cheap goods. The program would create heavily secured retail and recreational spaces where the city’s elite can engage in forms of conspicuous consumption that are well beyond the reach of many Guatemalans. Although Zone 1 street vendors have organized, staging a series of protests and engaging in negotiations with the government planning commission, redevelopment plans continue to move forward without them.

One might expect that the spike in violence seen over the past decade would prompt public debates about the social and economic conditions that permit violence to thrive in the first place. By and large, this has not been the case. Responses to urban crime such as private security forces and urban renewal projects address only the immediate security concerns of the most affluent segments of the population.

On a national level, political strategies that exploit themes of personal insecurity and fear have defined the conversation. The most prominent political feature of the post-conflict period has been the popular call for mano dura (strong hand or iron fist) solutions to violence. Otto Perez Molina, a former military general, ran on this platform in the 2007 presidential election. He won handily in the metropolitan region and, at the national level, finished a very close second to Alvaro Colom, whose left-centrist platform helped him to carry the rural regions.
Excitement and opportunity draw rural men to the city to work as security guards.

concerns in moral rather than material terms. They lament widespread problems of delinquency and cite character faults among the nation’s youth as key social issues. The most obvious and alarming public responses to these problems include military intervention and social cleansing campaigns. More subtle, yet perhaps more sinister responses include outreach programs in which security officials and development workers focus on changing young people’s attitudes and building their self-esteem. The latter response personalizes postwar security concerns, shifting the focus from structural conditions to issues of individual character and responsibility.

The structural conditions for so much postwar violence are as predictable as they are painful: the widespread availability of arms, government corruption, lack of police protection, and organized crime linked to the drug trade. Violence is also rooted in a set of social and structural conditions that limit life chances for many Guatemalans. In terms of the most basic of social services, much of the capital city has simply fallen off the grid. Lack of sufficient housing, limited access to water and sanitation services, and vulnerability to environmental hazards characterize life for many residents who live in high-crime zones and the urban periphery. Many residents also rely on an unstable, informal economy and face institutional and everyday forms of discrimination, especially when it comes to indigenous people, women and the poor.

Mano dura responses to rising crime rates and other security concerns look quite different from the sweeping social, economic and political promises made in the 1996 Peace Accords. The peace negotiations, it was hoped, would usher in a new era of democratic process and economic growth. Disparate groups sat at the table to voice their concerns and contribute to a new vision of Guatemalan nationhood and the realization of new opportunities for employment, education and entrepreneurship. The accords included important endorsements of human rights in general and indigenous cultural and political rights in particular, including education reforms to enhance rural achievement and political reforms to expand civil society. As scholars have repeatedly pointed out, however, increasing disparities have defined the post-conflict era, and these disparities have diminished the prospect of full democratic participation of all citizens.

The shortfalls of the Peace Accords are rooted in the structural conditions of discrimination, inequality and corruption that post-conflict economic policies and institutional reforms have failed to address. In fact, policy approaches in the last decade have actually permitted the escalation of violence beyond war-era proportions, with the annual number of homicides now exceeding the average number of Guatemalans killed each year in the internal armed conflict. Violence is not new to Guatemala, but its spatial coordinates have now shifted from the rural highlands—the scene of the scorched earth policies of the 1970s and 1980s—to the streets of Guatemala City. The kinds of violence taking place in Guatemala and public responses to it have also changed. The state no longer controls either the means or aims of force. Instead, public agencies and private individuals employ violent means for a variety of ends, including political and economic gain. The personalization and individualization of security through the language of delinquency allows politicians, the media and ordinary citizens to simply point fingers.

A more effective set of responses would address the conditions of poverty and inequality that make everyday life difficult for most Guatemalans, as well as the criminal organizations and corrupt political institutions that foster violence and benefit from popular discourses that focus blame on street gangs and poor youth. Official and popular narratives that do not address these conditions will likewise continue to neglect the promises of peace.

Kedron Thomas is a doctoral candidate in anthropology at Harvard University. Kevin Lewis O’Neill (MTS 2002) is an assistant professor in the Department and Centre for the Study of Religion and the Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies at the University of Toronto. Their forthcoming edited volume, Securing the City: Neoliberalism, Space, and Insecurity in Postwar Guatemala (Duke University Press, 2011), offers the first comparative historical and ethnographic analysis of Guatemala City.
One of the legacies of violence is that a country at war finds its process of development at a standstill. Guatemala, a country of spectacular modern buildings and lush rain forests, is experimenting with different development strategies from small community organizations to social enterprise. But sometimes nature and violence still get in the way.

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A Beauty That Hurts

A PHOTOESSAY BY CARLOS SEBASTIÁN

THE RED HOT ASH FROM THE PACAYA VOLCANO practically swirls out of the photo, burning the page.

My friends—many of them authors in this issue—have written me as ashes clogged their streets and dirtied their car windows. They wrote me as the rain began to whirl around, becoming Hurricane Agatha, lashing through buildings and fields. Then a huge sinkhole opened up in Guatemala City; floods and mudslides plagued the countryside—all in less than a month.

As I look at the evocative pictures of Carlos Sebastián, I am reminded of the disasters’ impact on Guatemalan life. According to Guatemala’s National Emergency Commission (CONRED) and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), almost 200,000 people were affected by the disasters, with an estimated 174 dead. Crop damage was extensive.

Health officials worried about the outbreaks of malaria, dengue and acute malnutrition. The economic and social effects of these natural disasters are expected to last into 2011, according to USAID.

More disasters are likely to come. The United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction’s Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction (2009) states, “Guatemala is among the top 10 countries with the highest mortality risk index due to natural disasters. Guatemala is at high risk for climate-related hazards such as landslides, droughts and earthquakes that provoke physical and economic vulnerability.”

The power of nature is spellbinding, as these photos testify. Its consequences are sad and eloquent. I glance at a book in my Guatemalan collection, A Beauty That Hurts by W. George Lovell. I couldn’t have said it better. —JUNE CAROLYN ERLICK
In Petén, Interesting Times
The Vast, Breathing Rainforest is Changing

BY MARY JO MCCONAHA

I FIRST CAME TO PETÉN IN THE 1970S, READING a found paperback of The Exorcist to pass a long, dreary bus ride on pocked roads from Belize. Stepping off at Tikal, breathing the jungle air, I immediately felt the rainforest’s richness, its promise of discoveries to come. Later, the night called mysteriously with cries of birds and unseen animals, “There is no place like this on earth,” I thought. Archaeologists and workmen outnumbered tourists like me, who had come to see remains of ancient Maya civilization. 

The Petén of those days is gone. Since the 1990s I have reported on the region, drawn by its persistent frontier character, the beauty of still-extant jungle, and most recently, the sensation of being a witness to history in a key corner of the continent. Petén is the center of the largest tropical lowland forest north of the Amazon, a continental lung stretching from Mexican Chiapas to western Belize. It is one of the earth’s remaining safeguards against radical temperature variation. What becomes of its verdant carpet, the concentration of trees that absorb heat-trapping carbon dioxide, links Petén directly to global concern about climate change.

When I arrived more than 30 years ago, tomb-robbing and animal poaching worried Petén. Today it faces challenges so much more fundamental, that failing to meet them means Petén is likely to disappear in the near future as the unique jungle outland of Guatemalan history.

Since 1998, according to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), Petén’s geography and lack of law enforcement has made it a key transit corridor in the international drug trade. Always a pioneer destination, so many peasant farmers continue to arrive, pushed out by Guatemala’s dramatic imbalance in land ownership elsewhere, that forest goes up in smoke at an increasing rate and precious species, some unique to Petén, face extinction. Ranchers destroy forest for pasture. In addition, likely unintended consequences of proposed tourist megaprojects disenfranchise the community and threaten to further upset ecological balance. Official corruption and traditional impunity mean more of Petén each year is sold to highest bidders or crooks who trade in serious threats. Drug-trafficking families are rooted in patches of land they call their own. Petén is presenting a challenge to governability and rule of law.

The spirit of the 1996 Peace Accords that ended the 36-year civil war remains less than fully implemented nationwide. In Petén, the failure takes a special character. Entire communities claim violations of the right—guaranteed in the Accords—to consult on government-granted projects that affect their lives and livelihoods. One example is the recent extension of the Perenco Oil Company concessions in the Laguna del Tigre area. Another is President Álvaro Colom’s multi-million dollar mega-tourism project, Cuatro Balam, involving the region’s biggest private companies, but lacking local input, according to Peténeros.

For all its strategic importance and place in the Guatemalan imagination, the Petén region has been the most hidden in the country’s history. Petén covers a full third of national territory, 23,000 sq. miles, but for the first century and a half of independence, it was the Wild North, the ultimate unknown. Roadless tropical forest infested with deadly vipers, ruled by the kingly jaguar. Better to stay home.

Novels by Virgilio Macal Rodriguez, for instance, still taught in Guatemalan schools, portray the northern jungles as lands of mystery and raging beauty, their inhabitants wise with forest knowledge and instinct, but not always trustworthy. As a young boy, Guatemalan-born writer Victor Perera recalled seeing Lacandón Maya, who once lived from Petén to Chiapas, exhibited in a cage at a fair in the capital. Later, Perera wrote of their yearly culture and developed cosmovision.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Petén’s military governors regarded the Petén’s largely unpopulated tracts as an ideal social safety valve. Landless peasants nationwide had been left with little hope after the 1954 U.S.-orchestrated coup against democratically elected President Jacobo Arbenz; the end of the “Ten Years of Spring” had also reversed land reform. Encouraged by the military, peasant farmers in cooperatives, or individually, moved to the North, where they were given titles to parcels but little or no support. Nevertheless, along the Pasión and Usumacinta Rivers, and inland at places like Dos Erres, some cooperatives and communities grew and thrived, despite the jungle soil’s shortcomings for agriculture.

Not incidentally, the existence of population along rivers marking the border...
was intended to act as a weight against Mexico’s hydropower plans, including a dam that could flood Guatemalan land. In the 1960s, Guatemala City also distributed concessions for oil production to foreign companies under a post-coup petroleum law. The recognition of Petén as a land rich in natural resources, besides hardwoods, had begun.

Tropical rainforests cover only five percent of the earth, but nurture half of all animal and plant species. Petén is home to endangered species, some found nowhere else. When Vinicio Cerezo took office in 1987, heading the first civilian government in a generation, he wanted to be seen as the “green President.” National and international NGOs arrived to help save the rainforest. In 1989, the Law of Protected Areas aimed to prevent timber companies, cattle ranchers and farmers from destroying trees. The following year’s creation of the four million acre Maya Biosphere Reserve aimed to protect jungle, stop new settlements and provide development assistance to already-resident communities, giving them a stake in conservation. A new entity, the National Council of Protected Areas (CONAP), was created to keep watch over Guatemala’s reserve of global genetic patrimony.

Those were heady days. International journalists, including myself, reported on a new kind of no-go territory, at least for migrants. The northernmost third of Petén became devoted to parks, biotopes and multiple-use zones. We watched an influx of environmentalists, scholars and scientists. I visited communities where artisan families, supported in business methods by outsiders, learned to live for a year from products of a single tree, instead of slashing and burning dozens to plant corn. I met women trained to use solar ovens and easily made, low-smoke stoves that replaced open cook-fires, saving not only the forest, but the women’s eyesight as well. In multiple-use zones, communities received concessions for sustainable forestry projects.

In the wake of all the investment and hopes, Petén’s 21st century began with the unexpected—the bolder presence of a global drug trade feeding the U.S. market. Petén has also become clearly marked by the inevitable consequence of Guatemala’s own irrepressible history of violence, and historic imbalance in land ownership: struggles for land are taking place, mostly on the part of poor farm families.

Recently, talking informally with a CONAP official, I mentioned a 1990s visit I had made to the Biosphere’s Laguna del Tigre National Park. The park is among the most important sweet wetlands in Central America, a paradise for bird watching and home to puma, jaguar, and a scarlet macaw sanctuary. I recalled that I had a peaceful run-in at the time with a coyote secretly crossing an Asian client into Mexico, and also that someone had just burned down a CONAP guard station. The official laughed bitterly.

“I wish those were the problems we had today,” he said.

A visit to Laguna del Tigre revealed what he meant. Entering the park area by car, I saw no forest in two hours of driving, only tree stumps sticking up from the ground like amputated thumbs. Stunningly healthy-looking Brahman cattle roamed, eating spiky pasture grass. A new CONAP building, a handsome one-story cabin-like structure, stood whole, but empty.

In Laguna del Tigre, ranchers abound, and drug families use the cattle spreads as a screen for runways to transport drugs. The small planes may be damaged on landing or simply abandoned once a drop is made, leading Drug Enforcement Agency Operations Chief Michael Brun to characterize northern Guatemala as “an aircraft graveyard.” A vast majority of the cocaine destined for the United States now transits Central America, reports a 2010 U.S. Army Strategic Studies Institute monograph. In a hearing of the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere of the Committee on International Relations, Rep. Robert Menendez (D. NJ) asked, “What will happen to the people of Guatemala if 75 percent of the cocaine arriving in the United States continues to pass through Guatemala?” Between 2006, when that hearing took
Cuatro Balam is set to be anchored by the sprawling El Mirador archaeological site, with the Maya world’s largest pyramid, Danta, and many smaller sites. Deep in thick rainforest seven miles south of the Mexican border, El Mirador is reached by three-day trek from the nearest town, or by helicopter. By 2023, however, Cuatro Balam expects to run a train at ten miles per hour on jungle tracks, with noise “imperceptible,” to El Mirador, Piedras Negras, Tikal and Uaxactun. Critics suggest tracks may interrupt some animal trails, maintenance access roads will destroy more forest, and question to whom the train’s noise will be “imperceptible.”

Details are hard to pin down. “There is much yet to get concrete,” said Alexander Urizar, director of the Institute of Anthropology and History. “The vision of the Maya Biosphere was protection. Cuatro Balam is a way to conserve it, to make sure people know about it, and make sure it generates resources.”

The Global Heritage Fund has named the Mirador project area as one of the most important endangered world cultural heritage sites. It is indisputably the country’s highest profile archeological enterprise. An executive director of the foundation that sponsors the Project is actor and director Mel Gibson, who produced the 2006 film, Apocalypto, controversial among Maya scholars. Archaeologist Richard Hansen, the project director who has worked in Mirador for thirty years, emphasizes the need to preserve Mirador’s rainforest environment, not simply the Maya Biosphere was protection. Cuatro Balam plans include a university specializing in environment studies, a belt of hotels and resorts, and an agricultural sector to keep farmers out of the core area.

Critics say such development by private companies will destroy much of what is left of the Petén rainforest. Local residents complain they are not consulted about plans that may change their lives considerably. It remains a question whether Peténeros, traditionally farmers, cattlemen and others who work with the land and forest, will easily become a tourism workforce, or even be interested in the jobs.

The sign says the community was established before the area was named “Protected,” implying its right to stay in place.
some economic gain for a nation and its people. Colom has emphasized partnership with private enterprise; already supporting the El Mirador “centerpiece” are major partners such as Wal-Mart Central America, construction material giant Cementos Progreso and several banks, with the Inter-American Development Bank matching private funds.

Residents of Laguna del Tigre worry. “Cuatro Balam is the biggest monster,” said one long-time area farmer. He was attending a meeting with 25 men and women in La Libertad, to discuss challenges to their vulnerable situation. “What they want is to eliminate our communities, but we will defend life.”

A government video describing Cuatro Balam in the year 2023 (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pt3EPvuk8Qk), calls its land “free of invaders,” operating under the “rule of law.”

On the feast of St. Amelia, patron of one Laguna del Tigre community, a Catholic priest baptized babies, asked a blessing for wild forest animals, and addressed the congregation’s concerns in a homily. “First before all is the human being,” he said, “and then companies. We can join with other groups in the monte to make our situation known.”

Petén will continue to be a promised land for Guatemalans looking for work and land. It will be a proving ground for commitment to the Peace Accords, a test of will and capacity to fight drug traffic and corruption. Guatemalan and international visitors, meanwhile, will come as I once did, for the love of sites of ancient Maya civilization, the adventure found on Petén’s rivers and in its wildlands, and the chance to know Central America’s own enchanting rainforest, vast stretches of jungle that exist much as they did at the time of creation.

Mary Jo McConahay is co-producer of the documentary, Discovering Dominga. Her book, Maya Roads, a thirty-year narrative of a journalist’s travel in Chiapas and Petén, appears August, 2011, from Chicago Review Press. www.chicagoreviewpress.com

Two Paths to Development

Distinct but Convergent? BY DAVID DAEPP

SOME TWENTY MILES DOWN A ROUGH COBBLESTONE path through the forests of rural Guatemala, visitors like myself will find a community-based organization (CBO) called Sindicato de Trabajadores Independientes de la Finca Alianza, El Palmar (STIAP). Its self-constructed office is equipped with internet and displays development awards for achievements from alternative energy to coffee exports. Another CBO, the Comité Prosol lar Sector Sibinal (CPSS), lies 125 miles in another direction, tucked in the small village of Sipacapa, San Marcos. What this small community has accomplished became evident to me only after carefully listening to the stories of the CBO members.

Both CBOs, operating in impoverished remote areas, have taken on projects in environmental sustainability such as reforestation and production and management of alternative energy. Each has traversed a distinct path. Despite distinctions, could it be that their paths are parallel, even convergent? I recently had the opportunity to take a firsthand look at the routes these two organizations took to arrive where they are now.

Did these two CBOs start from the same point? Defining ‘point’ as ‘capability’ in the development context coined by Harvard economist Amartya Sen, STIAP and CPSS seem to have started from unequal positions in preparing for the projects they intended to accomplish. STIAP’s leadership exudes practical hands-on knowledge that suggests expertise in getting things done. Projects blossom across their land while new ideas ripen in the minds of its able leaders. CPSS’ guiding members don’t have the same directional drive. The difference is in education, past and current alike.

STIAP had the foresight to build a school within its finca and shape its educational curriculum. Children have access to both formal teaching and trade...
skills such as production of hydroelectric energy, recycling of fuels and hotel administration. This dual track system has produced a cadre of highly educated and focused youth who will someday succeed the current leaders of STIAP. The syndicate's proven system is transferred to the next generation over the course of years, even decades, by working together on an array of projects.

At CPSS, by contrast, children must walk a considerable distance to reach the school where they are taught reading and writing. While CPSS adults (including the CBO leadership) do have some background in trades, most of them lack elementary skills of reading and writing, a distinct disadvantage for the community.

Yet not long ago, these two organizations found themselves in similar circumstances. The current success of STIAP, an organization which to my untrained eye seemed to have no trouble in turning sustainable development ideas into realized projects, is in fact the product of an entire generation tested by bank struggles and economic strife. Sitting down with Javier Amado, the syndicate manager, I learned how the organization faced, and managed to overcome, the obstacles in its path.

Amado explained how STIAP members averted seizure of their land in 2002 by a Panamanian bank to which they were temporarily indebted. The next year, they established contact with Fondo de Tierras, a state-run organization that agreed to act as a mediator, helping them through credit negotiations, and subsequently becoming their angel creditor. In a fortunate turn of events, the Panamanian bank went bankrupt and relinquished the land claim to the Banco Industrial de Guatemala, which, in collaboration with Fondo de Tierras, returned the land rights to STIAP.

A month later, STIAP signed a Memorandum of Agreement with The Small Grants Programme (SGP) for a grant of $21,073.65. SGP is funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) as a corporate program, implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) on behalf of the GEF partnership, and executed by the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS). To date, program funding from the GEF totals approximately $401 million, with UNDP and UNOPS collaborating to administer more than 6,800 small grants to local Community Based Organizations.

The grant money was for a project focusing on the production of hydroelectricity to power both the homes of local families and machines used to process the macadamia nuts grown on STIAP’s lush hillside. SGP helped STIAP attain the technical expertise to set up the hydroelectric generator and link it to the local grid. They also helped the women of the community to become the financial managers of the grant funds. Today STIAP is a shining star of GEF's Small Grants Programme, which currently provides grants of up to $50,000 to community-based organizations seeking to undertake projects in the Global Environment Facility's focal areas of biodiversity conservation, prevention of land degradation, climate change adaptation, protection of international waters, and reduction of persistent organic pollutants.

Speaking with steady enthusiasm, Amado depicted the syndicate's history: the acquisition and operation of a biodiesel generator and hydroelectric plant, the water purification plant, coffee and macadamia processing operations and an ecotourism hotel with stunning views. He proudly showed me the syndicate's awards for export of macadamia and coffee. STIAP earned its impressive array of accolades in large part because of its ability to collect, store, distribute and utilize hydroelectricity. The times when coffee price fluctuations made it impossible for STIAP’s management to pay its workers were almost distant memories.

Today STIAP is a shining star of GEF’s Small Grants Programme, which provides grants of up to $50,000 to community-based organizations seeking to undertake projects in the Global Environment Facility's focal areas of biodiversity conservation, prevention of land degradation, climate change mitigation, protection of international waters, and elimination of persistent organic pollutants.

Today, SGP is working with CPSS to help their community reach the level of self-sufficiency and expertise displayed by STIAP. Local SGP staff Alejandro Santos and Liseth Martínez spent 12 days assessing the community's needs, formulating a plan and budget for a project, and training community members to
bring CPSS to the stage of project initiation. Working with community leaders who had never considered mapping out a project before commencing, let alone drafting a project proposal, Santos and Martínez provided the leaders with guidance on the best ways to turn vague ideas into a concrete plan.

Following the standard SGP process, CPSS’s project proposal was reviewed and approved by the National Steering Committee, and the CBO signed a Memorandum of Agreement with SGP for $19,098 that would be paid out in smaller disbursements over a one-year period. Their project included training the community’s adults to install a solar panel on each of the community’s 36 mud huts. Solar energy from the panels would be used to power five LED light bulbs per hut, displacing the use of environmentally harmful fuels such as diesel for generating electricity. These solar-powered lights would allow CPSS children to study at home at night after a long day of school and work in the fields.

Following the solar panel installation, CPSS members, with the help of SGP, diversified their environmental initiative by reforesting nearly five acres with 8,000 native trees, thus helping to reduce land degradation.

Santos spoke to the group about its priorities for the project in its final phase. He probed group members for ideas on how they would utilize the final grant disbursement to achieve the best possible results in the realm of reforestation and climate change mitigation. When their responses drifted from the central premises, he guided them back on course with helpful suggestions.

The SGP team also addressed the treatment of women in the community. Aware of a history of domestic violence and mistreatment of the women in the community, Santos talked with the group about the importance of gender equality and respect for women, making it clear that abusive practices were unacceptable.

Much work still needed to be done to bring the individual and collective capacities of CPSS to a level at which its members could design and carry out their own projects without SGP’s careful guidance. As we drove away, my colleagues once again emphasized the challenges faced by a largely illiterate leadership and what a triumph it was that such a group is now capable of sustaining fruitful environmental projects. Thinking back to Amartya Sen’s development concept of “capability,” it was clear that the learning tools made accessible by SGP had proved catalytic in shifting CPSS’s vision from one of mere subsistence to one of enriching both the environment and the potential of its youth. Though it is not immediately obvious, CPSS is as much a star of the Small Grants Programme as STIAP. There, people without access to financing, expertise, or training were provided credit and empowered through practical hands-on education.

The projects I visited in the Guatemalan highlands with my colleagues both faced challenges of access to resources and tools for development. And while they both were assisted greatly by SGP, their paths to the present are undoubtedly distinct.

Looking to the future, we anticipate that the youth of STIAP will be the ones to manage the ecotourism hotel and expand the export, hydroelectricity and ecotourism operations of the syndicate. The youth of CPSS will become literate and learn valuable life skills currently foreign to their parents. And sometime in the not-too-distant future, they are likely to manage their own micro-development projects without the need for the outside assistance from which their elders benefited. Despite the clear distinctions between these projects, the transition to the next generation may bring a convergence in its achievement of the exact brand of self-sufficiency that is the aim of SGP’s programs in 123 developing countries worldwide.

David Daepp is Associate Portfolio Manager with the Small Grants Programme of the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), where he manages the Latin America & Caribbean portfolio. He holds a B.A. in Economics from the College of the Holy Cross and an M.A. in Development Economics from Fordham University. He has written previously for ReVista as well as Américas magazine (published by the Organization of American States) and The Long Term View (Massachusetts School of Law at Andover). He can be contacted at ddaepp@gmail.com.
Making of the Modern
An Architectural Photoessay

BY PETER GIESEMANN

THE POSTWAR RETURN OF SEVERAL YOUNG GUATEMALAN ARCHITECTS like myself, graduates from mainly Mexican and U.S. universities (including the Harvard Graduate School of Design) gave rise to the development of what would be known as Guatemala’s modern architecture.

Like the country’s traditional architecture, modern buildings are inspired by the country’s privileged climate and luxurious vegetation, favoring a style that integrates interior space with the outside and permits greenery and light to assume a very important role in diverse environments.

Our architecture has slowly evolved from its pre-Columbian heritage represented by massive stone constructions richly decorated with bas-reliefs and stucco masks, and stelae inscribed with delicate carvings of noblemen and Mayan glyphs.

The Spanish Colonial Period brought in churches and important buildings influenced by the Renaissance and European Baroque, along with domestic constructions which consisted, basically, of a central courtyard surrounded by rooms and roofed with clay tiles.

Both tendencies produced in our architecture a very strong
aesthetic base and a very particular sense of proportion reflected in most of its magnificent examples of modern buildings.

The 20th century brought us movements that were flourishing in the Western world, particularly in Europe. These were exemplified by Art Deco, the principles of the “Nouveau Esprit” of Corbusier and the dictums of the Bauhaus School.

Since the early 1960s, Guatemala’s young architects have produced a very rich array of building styles. One example, where the Mayan textile design blends in with a central courtyard scheme, is the Museo Ixchel at the Francisco Marroquín University in Guatemala City.

Here, in this photoessay, you can see the legacies of the past and the shaping of a modern future of modernity.

Peter Giesemann, a member of the Harvard Club of Guatemala, graduated from Harvard College in 1961, received his Master in Architecture from the Harvard Graduate School of Design in 1965 and became affiliated with the Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala in 1968. A practicing architect, he has published widely in magazines and books.
Central America Competitiveness Project
A Harvard Legacy  BY EMMAUUEL SEIDNER

HARVARD UNIVERSITY HAS PLAYED A KEY ROLE in developing a “culture” of competitiveness in the Central American region and especially in my country, Guatemala.

The 1996 Guatemalan Peace Accords were a turning point in creating an environment of peace for the first time in more than one hundred years, and bringing hope for social change and economic growth in our region. With the war over, it was time to face the challenges of achieving a sustainable economic development and protecting the natural environment while advancing social and human development.

The Central America Project began in 1996 under the sponsorship of the Harvard Institute for International Development (HIID). Led by senior faculty members at the university, the project aimed to provide research, analysis, and policy recommendations that focused on the long-term growth and economic integration vital to Central America’s development. The three-year initiative was led by HIID, along with other Harvard faculties, and the Instituto Centroamericano de Administración de Empresas (INCAE), a Central American business school founded in the early 1960s by Harvard Business school faculty members.

Through short-term research and analysis on urgent problems of the region, the project members collected data and built the understanding necessary to form policy recommendations. These were delivered to the regional governments and formed the basis for a series of studies that explored the strength of the economy, the prospects for the tourist industry, the ecologically sound use of natural resources, and the judicial system with a focus on property rights.

Guatemala was the only country of the region to implement a joint public-private effort in the spirit of these studies, the National Competitiveness Program (PRONACOM), founded in 1998 and continuing under three different democratic governments. This has been an initiative I have followed very closely since its inception: I was the first Executive Director (1998-2000) of the Program and was Presidential Commissioner of Competitiveness and Investment during the Berger administration (2004-2008).

With the understanding that competitiveness involves all sectors of society, the initiative to develop a National Competitiveness Agenda for Guatemala needed the active participation of government entities, manufacturing and labor sectors, academic institutions, journalists, civil society groups and the international community. Accordingly, we held 19 dialogue workshops bringing together Guatemalan men and women from every social sector and every region. The resulting report, the National Competitiveness Agenda 2005-2015, pulled together the vision, feedback and expectations of almost 500 Guatemalans from all sectors of the society. It incorporated the input of many studies and proposals made previously by individual leaders or institutions, and was especially inspired by the methodology that the Central America Project from Harvard University and INCAE brought to our region in the late 1990s.

The National Competitiveness Agenda of Guatemala (2005-2015) is based on the cooperation of the private and public sectors. It seeks to achieve a healthy,
Development Strategies and the 1996 Peace Accords

Promising Peace and Perpetuating Violence?

BY LEAH AYLIWARD

The civil war ravaged Guatemala’s social and political fabric for over three decades. It came to an official end with the signing of the 1996 Peace Accords and a sense of anticipation for the country’s future. The Accords gave rise to optimism that a reduction of violence and social injustice could be achieved through development. Yet, more than a decade after the signing and the implementation of subsequent national and international development frameworks, extreme levels of poverty, inequality and violence continue to mark the lived experience of many Guatemalans.

When I first visited Guatemala in August 2003, I saw some of the effects of the country’s insecurities and inequalities at first hand. The contrast between the city’s high-rise buildings and gated communities complete with heavily armed security guards and the simple dwellings along the road in rural Guatemala was sharp. What I remember most clearly from the trip were the impressions from the bus ride I took from Antigua to Lake Atitlán.

Emmanuel Seidner, a John F. Kennedy School of Government Mason Fellow (MPA 2001), is president of the Harvard Alumni Association of Guatemala and vice-president of INCAE in Guatemala. With more than 12 years of experience in areas of sustainable development and competitiveness, he now heads up his family’s pharmaceutical company in Central America and coordinates the Guatemala chapter of the Business Council of Latin America (CEAL).

Educated, trained and inclusive society; modernization and institutional strengthening; balance and environmental sustainability; decentralization and local development; technological and productive infrastructure; and strengthening production and export.

The Agenda presents proposals for action and economic and social policies in the short, medium, and long terms on the national, regional, and municipal levels.

Local economic development is a key element in the strategy for social and economic development of Guatemala. It can only be achieved if the country moves forward in its decentralization, strengthening local governments and encouraging social participation. This process requires investment and making institutional adjustments that strengthen rural development in an integrated manner and improve the ties between different cities around the country in a framework of equity and respect for cultural and ethnic diversity.

Harvard University began an effort 15 years ago that has contributed to develop a “culture” of competitiveness in the Central American region that is meant to reduce many existing gaps and promote a sustainable development for all the citizens of our region. Competitiveness is not a sprint of 100 meters! ... It is a marathon and we need to keep going and continue on the right direction!
As I peered out the bus window, I watched many indigenous men and women in brightly woven clothing with bundles of sticks, flowers and corn walking alongside the road. I was mesmerized by the beauty of their textiles and the landscape of their home land. And distressed by the conditions of poverty in which they lived.

“If only they had increased access to markets to sell the products they are carrying,” I thought to myself, “their lives would unquestionably improve.” As an undergraduate at Harvard and at EARTH University in Costa Rica, I had been taught that development was the panacea for many social problems, and that the lack of market integration was a key obstacle to bettering the lives of small-scale farmers throughout Central America. I thought that the problems of poverty, inequality and violent conflict in Guatemala could be solved through further development. And, increased economic growth and enhanced market opportunities would improve the standards of life for the rural indigenous populations of these countries.

It has now been seven years since my first visit to Guatemala, a country I’ll remember to turn before the year is out to conduct fieldwork for my Ph.D. studies. But this time, I find myself completely challenging my previously held beliefs that Guatemala’s problems can be solved through mainstream development practices. My research aims to develop a critique of mainstream development practices and that includes ethnographic fieldwork, I hope to gain a more nuanced and better understanding as to why high levels of violence and socioeconomic inequalities persist in Guatemala despite more than a decade of development strategies aimed at overcoming these problems.

Violence in Guatemala is far-reaching. In the past few years, the country has experienced rising levels of diverse forms of violence: from politically motivated violence, drug-related violence, and violence against women to countless acts of killings and kidnappings. Guatemala’s homicide rates make it one of the most violent countries in Latin America. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime has concluded that Guatemala’s violence can be explained by the country’s high levels of socioeconomic inequality and poverty, which appear to be “linked to both crime and human rights abuses, because of justifiable resentment on the part of the excluded and justifiable fear on the part of the advantaged.”

Violence, inequality, and poverty persist despite Guatemala’s stable economy and continued moderate economic growth since the signing of the Accords and implementation of market-led “development as economic growth” initiatives. Sustained economic growth has not led to a more equitable distribution of wealth, however. Neither has it led to widespread implementation of social policies or to improved social indicators in health, education or nutrition. Indeed, income inequalities have increased over the past several years, and Guatemala continues to have one of the lowest per capita social spending rates in the region.

Searching for the causes of the Guatemalan Civil War that took more than 200,000 lives from 1954 to 1996, the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH 1999) concluded that the violent conflict was marked by antagonistic and discriminatory economic, political, social and cultural factors that had historical roots. The CEH determined that Guatemala’s political system was entrenched in an economic structure in which the concentration of wealth remained in the hands of the non-indigenous ladino minority. Moreover, the continued absence of an effective state social policy accentuated the historical dynamics of inequality and exclusion of indigenous groups during this time.

Conceived as a turning point in Guatemala’s history, the 1996 Peace Accords were supposed to help overcome these factors that fueled violence during the civil war. The Accords’ hundreds of substantive commitments sought to bring about significant changes to the social, economic and political structures of Guatemala. The Agreement on Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples (the indigenous agreement) and the Agreement on Social and Economic Aspects and the Agrarian Situation (the socioeconomic agreement) were two of the thirteen agreements that focused on overcoming socioeconomic inequalities and social exclusion in order to redress the country’s high levels of violence. These agreements spelled out the need for a more equitable distribution of wealth and resources, agrarian and land reform and increased participation of the population in development processes.

Both agreements maintained that the government had the responsibility to restore or pay compensation for plundered lands of indigenous peoples and to provide access to land for small-scale farmers. Likewise, they highlighted the importance of a more equitable distribution of wealth and of greater participation of the country’s inhabitants in development processes in order to generate political, social, and economic structures that could focus on the consolidation of peace. Though the agreements shared these development objectives, their strategies and polices put forth to achieve these aims differed greatly.
The indigenous agreement focused primarily on substantial legal reform. This legislative reform was considered necessary to protect indigenous peoples’ rights to manage their own internal affairs in accordance with customary norms, to own land collectively, and to determine their priorities with regards to social services such as health, education and infrastructure. The reform would provide a legal basis for wealth redistribution and for holding the government responsible for providing the funding to indigenous communities to achieve these goals. In contrast, policy prescriptions in the socioeconomic agreement shifted focus away from legal reform and redistribution of wealth and land in light of historical inequalities and exclusion. Instead, development strategies within the socioeconomic agreement centered on citizens “meeting their own needs” and on integration of the individual into the market.

Substantial land reform as conceived in the indigenous agreement was also rejected, as state-led land redistribution became reframed and undermined through market-oriented development prescriptions laid out in the socioeconomic agreement. Instead of compensation for or restitution of indigenous lands through legal and judicial reform, the socioeconomic agreement promoted the establishment of a transparent land market and a land trust fund to be set up within a national broad-based banking system that would provide credit and promote savings, preferably among micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises.

This adherence to market norms and market relations was also prevalent in policy prescriptions leading to increasing participation in development processes. Whereas the indigenous agreement anticipated a move away from market-based development mechanisms towards alternative social and economic frameworks, policy prescriptions set forth in the socioeconomic agreement focused on citizen participation in market-based terms. Individual market integration was deemed important in order to promote productivity, economic growth and wider use of the

Photographer Laura Blacklow captures the image of a boy on a boat and a Mayan girl with a woven ribbon.
Emphasis on development as growth and market-oriented mandates is problematic in the Guatemalan context with its socioeconomic inequalities.

People wanted change. The provisions of the indigenous agreement sought to transcend the existing order and to protect the rights of people to develop and participate in a range of social and economic development alternatives. Drafters of this agreement considered that new legislation and a shift away from the economic and political status quo would be necessary to ensure that indigenous lands, customary norms and rights to their own development and social processes would be protected. In other words, the indigenous agreement recognized that these objectives could not be achieved through minor reform of existing legal structures or through mainstream conceptions of development focused on market-relations.

Through my ethnographic fieldwork later this year, I hope to deepen my understanding of the linkages between development, social injustice and violence by giving a voice to people who are affected by violence in their daily lives. How do these people view the relationship between specific development policies, social and economic inequalities and violence? What are the complexities and diverse factors that influence their understanding of these issues? I also hope to articulate development alternatives offered by certain groups within the country. What sort of competing perspectives of development exist in Guatemala? Can links be drawn between these perspectives and areas of the country that are either more or less affected by violence?

The “development as growth” approach to solving the country’s social problems has not worked. Exploring development alternatives is critically important for Guatemala’s future and for bettering the lived experiences of individuals and communities throughout the country. What I have learned since that bus ride that sparked my interest in Guatemala’s social issues in the first place is that certain conceptions of development are not necessarily or always consonant with the reduction of social violence, socioeconomic inequalities and social exclusion. If competing claims of development, such as those articulated by groups involved with the drafting and signing of the indigenous agreement, are recognized and taken seriously, then social and political change that will lead to the reduction of violence and long-term peace just might be possible.

Leah Aylward, Harvard College ’05, is a Ph.D. Candidate in Political Science and International Studies at the University of Queensland, where she is writing her thesis titled “Development and Violence: Rethinking the Analytical Framework.” Her research focuses on Guatemala and Colombia. She can be reached at leahaylward@gmail.com.
The lives of immigrants are increasingly connected to their homelands. A declining global economy and traumatic family separations create new challenges. Guatemalan immigrants often have unusual circumstances as they are Mayas, often with little or no Spanish skills. The Postville immigration raid in Iowa drew special attention to these problems.

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Increasing Visibility of Guatemalan Immigrants

By Susanne Jonas

GUATEMALANS HAVE BEEN MIGRATING TO THE United States in large numbers since the late 1970s, but were not highly visible to the U.S. public as Guatemalans. That changed on May 12, 2008, when agents of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) launched the largest single-site workplace raid against undocumented immigrant workers up to that time. As helicopters circled overhead, ICE agents rounded up and arrested 389 undocumented immigrant workers at the Agriprocessors kosher meat-packing plant in Postville, Iowa. Of those arrested, 293 (three out of every four) were Guatemalans, the rest Mexicans. Although prior raids had affected many Guatemalans, seldom before had Guatemalans been so prominent in the United States as a specific national-origin migrant group. Also notable, a significant number of these Guatemalans were Mayas, for whom Spanish was a second language, and whose comprehension of Spanish was faulty.

After their arrest, buses from the Department of Homeland Security (the parent agency of ICE) took the undocumented workers in chains and shackles to the National Cattle Congress facility in nearby Waterloo, Iowa, which ICE had rented well ahead of the raid. This facility became a detention center, and the Electric Park Ballroom within the compound became a makeshift courtroom for expedited, “fast-track” processing of the hundreds of arrestees—in groups of ten, with nine of these groups being processed daily. ICE officials, supported by other federal and state enforcement units, pressured the arrested migrants to plead guilty to the felony crime of “aggravated identity theft” for their use of Social Security numbers not assigned to them. Pleading guilty to the slightly lesser felony of Social Security fraud would mean accepting a five-month detention (nearly the maximum sentence) in a U.S. federal prison, and subsequently being deported without a hearing. If they refused to plead guilty, they would spend an indefinite time (at least two years) in prison before facing trial on maximum charges and being deported. Because they were being processed in groups, at an unprecedented speed and without adequate access to legal counsel (the lawyers for their “defense” were criminal rather than immigration lawyers, and each lawyer handled some 17 cases), the immigrants had virtually no time to consider their options. Many of them did not even understand what a Social Security number was.

In the end, 270 of the original 389 arrestees (and of the 306 charged criminally) were found to have used the Social Security numbers of real people, and these were primarily the unlucky ones imprisoned. Most of the 270 convicted—232 of them (86 percent) being Guatemalans—pleaded guilty, in order to be deported as quickly as possible and reunited with family members back home. After being charged, over 40 of the arrested migrants, mostly women, were released from prison for “humanitarian” reasons, mainly to care for their children. But the conditions of their release were far from humanitarian: they were not permitted to work to provide for their children, and they had to wear heavy ankle shackles/GPS devices that required daily recharging while on their ankles. Moreover, many were separated from family members, who served prison time in other

Rosario Toj, a worker under house arrest, looks out the window at an Iowa winter’s day. She was saving up money to buy her father in Guatemala a new prosthetic foot when she was caught in the raid.
The realities of family separation and cross-border family disruptions became apparent with the Postville raid. Some of the deportees returned to Guatemala without their U.S.-born children and without work.

of this event was the en-masse accusation of the several hundred arrestees with a criminal violation of the law, “aggravated identity theft,” a felony rather than an administrative or civil violation of the law. (Almost none of the arrestees had a prior criminal background). From the perspective of ICE, the Postville operation was initially declared to be a major "success" (ICE Press Release, 5/23/08). It also upped the agency’s compliance with quotas for deportation under the

ICE program “Endgame,” designed in 2003 to find and deport as many deportable immigrants as possible. Longer-range, ICE had intended to establish the Postville raid as a precedent and model for future mass raids against immigrants using false Social Security numbers.

But it never became a precedent. Among various factors was the significant national publicity about the methods used in this raid—first exposed in the national spotlight when court translator Erik Camayd-Freixas went public in June/July 2008 with a detailed account of all that he had seen. This was followed by Congressional House Judiciary Committee hearings in July. In addition, many different aspects of the raid were kept in the national public spotlight for over two years by the New York Times both in news coverage (primarily by Julia Preston) and in editorials. In subsequent workplace raids (such as in Laurel, Mississippi, in August 2008), criminal charges were leveled only against undocumented workers who had actually committed crimes. In April 2009, a Colorado judge halted an investigation into ID theft charges against undocumented immigrant workers on the grounds that the investigation

excesses of U.S. “enforcement-only” immigration policies of the early 2000s, with its mass criminalization and deportation of undocumented workers. It revealed just how deeply exclusionary anti-immigrant measures had become embedded since the landmark 1996 laws—affecting Legal Permanent Residents as well as undocumented immigrants—that stripped away rights and services for all non-citizens. Furthermore, it highlighted the goals of ICE's "Endgame" deportation program that was part of the post-9/11 national security agenda.

THE VIEW FROM GUATEMALA

From the viewpoint of the Guatemalan immigrants, Postville revealed migration’s downsides in the beginning of the 21st century: the realities of family separations and cross-border family disruptions and damages. Some of the deportees were returned to Guatemala without their U.S.-born children. Such traumatic family separations and resulting damages were graphically shown in Public Broadcasting System's "Frontline" on May 11, 2010, in the segment "In the Shadow of the Raid" (made by Greg Boshnan and Jennifer Szymaszek, see next article). Many of the Postville migrants returned to Guatemala not as respected family members sending vital remittances to their hometowns, but humiliated and owing thousands of dollars they had borrowed to get to the United States in the first place. In two of the main towns of origin of the Postville migrants—El Rosario (Sacatepequez province) and San Andrés Itzapa/San José Calderas (Chimaltenango province)—there were still no viable jobs for the deportees, and they were forced to scramble for part-time work just to pay the interest on their loans. Obviously, they were unable to help family members pay medical and other expenses, as they had intended to do when they uprooted their lives and embarked upon the dangerous, life-risking routes through Mexico to get to the United States. Some were experiencing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder after the ordeal, especially those who had previ-
ously been victims of the Guatemalan army's great repression during the early 1980s.

Yet, as Guatemalan anthropologist Ricardo Falla pointed out, some of the victims were able to exercise “agency”: one Guatemalan worker at Agriprocessors, for example, escaped the raid by hiding in a refrigerator for 15 hours (Prensa Libre, 7/31/08). After the raid, others obtained protection at St. Bridget's Catholic Church, and support from various U.S.-based organizations such as the ACLU. In addition, a few Guatemalan agencies and foundations (e.g. “FUNDAGUAM,” linked to the Catholic Church) and Guatemala’s Foreign Minister denounced the raid; his Vice-Minister for Migrant Affairs later visited Postville. Guatemala’s Nobel Peace Laureate, Rigoberta Menchú, also went to Postville to show solidarity.

Meanwhile, the tale of the Postville raid is being preserved for current audiences and future generations. It has inspired films and plays in both Guatemala and the United States—for example, by Guatemalan-American film-maker Luis Argueta (AbUSAdos: La Redada de Postville) and Colorado playwright Don Fried (Postville). While the Postville Guatemalans will not benefit directly from these manifestations of solidarity, their trauma may spare other migrants such extreme violations of legal and human rights. And as a group, they will be remembered as an important collective social actor in Guatemalan/U.S. migration history.

Susanne Jonas, an expert on Guatemala for more than four decades, is working on a co-authored book on Guatemalan migration to the U.S. Her book, Of Centaurs and Doves: Guatemala’s Peace Process (Westview Press, 2000), was designated by Choice an “outstanding academic book.” She has taught Latin American & Latino Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz, for 24 years.

The Postville Immigration Raid

Like a Great Flood  BY GREG BROSnan

ONE SPRING MORNING TWO YEARS AGO, disaster struck a poor valley in the highlands of Guatemala. A local woman said it was like “a great flood.” Someone else compared it to an earthquake. But this was no natural disaster—it was man-made and happened thousands of miles to the north, in a small northeastern Iowa farm town.

On May 12, 2008, federal officials descended on the Agriprocessors kosher meatpacking plant in Postville, Iowa, in the biggest workplace immigration raid in U.S. history, arresting nearly 400 undocumented workers, most of them from Guatemala. Helicopters whirred over the sprawling plant as hundreds were driven off to the nearby cattle fairgrounds to be processed, jailed and eventually deported.

In the coming months, iconic images of orange-suited plant workers shuffling to detention in chains would place Postville squarely at the center of the U.S. immigration debate. But on this May morning, news of the mass arrests swept through the Guatemalan countryside long before hitting the U.S. nightly newscasts or even the blogosphere.

Most of the arrested workers came from El Rosario and San José Calderas—two neighboring villages wedged between misty volcanic peaks that tower over the colonial tourist town of Antigua. Young men and women from these villages had been making the risky journey north for years. For their families back home, their wages from the plant were an economic lifeline that suddenly had been severed.

“Twenty minutes after the raid everyone here knew we’d been caught,” William Toj, one of the first to be deported, told us after arriving in El Rosario. The father of four added, “People here cried here as much as in Postville.”

My co-director Jenn Szymaszek and I were first inspired to start a film proj-

Amputee Rafael Toj lost his foot crossing the U.S. border. His daughter Rosario was saving up money to buy him a new prosthetic foot when she was caught in the raid.
Postville, Iowa: “When you take 400 people out of a town of 2,000, it hurts”—hardware store owner.

When we followed their stories back to Guatemala, the emotional climate reminded us of the scenes of hurricanes or landslides we’d covered in the past. Everywhere we walked, people pulled us into their homes to show us how their lives had changed on May 12.

Guatemalans deported from the United States arrive several times a week, clutching little more than plastic bags, as they pour through a battered metal door in the rear of La Aurora Airport. We met William Toj there, rode with him on the back of a pickup truck to El Rosario, and watched as he rushed into his parents’ arms. He’d been working at the plant for only 20 minutes when he was caught. He was penniless and $7,000 in debt, mostly to a local moneylender who had lent him the money for his trip, taking his simple home as collateral. Over the coming months, as many as 200 of his Postville co-workers would return to El Rosario and San José, many of them similarly destitute.

But the raid’s economic devastation didn’t end at a winding dirt road in Guatemala. Postville, a local anomaly for its multi-cultural make-up, and prospering before the raid, saw its economy grind to a halt after losing a large chunk of its population and seeing the meatpacking plant go bankrupt. As a hardware store owner on the main street told us: “When you take 400 people out of a town of 2,000, it hurts.”

When people watch our film, they tell us they are moved by the stories of hardship from Guatemala. But it’s the scenes of local Iowans lining up at Postville’s food pantry in the snow, in what a local aid worker called “the heartland of America that feeds the world,” that may linger longest after the credits roll.

Greg Brosnan is the co-director of In the Shadow of the Raid, a documentary he made with his fiancée Jennifer Szymaszek about the cross-border economic impact of the Postville immigration raid. Brosnan is a former Reuters text journalist. Szymaszek is a freelance photojournalist. They pooled their skills three years ago to form production company StreetDog Media <http://www.streetdogmedia.com>. They live in Mexico City.

Former plant worker Rosita, under house arrest in Postville. Notice her ankle bracelet that she had to wear at all times. She was sending money back to her mother Alejandra in Guatemala before the raid, but had to stop sending after she was arrested.

Willian, depicted above, returned to Postville penniless. He had been working at the plant only 20 minutes when he was caught.
A Mayan Financial Crash
The Case of Nebaj  BY DAVID STOLL

Next to an ancestor cross, where Ixil priests make regular offerings, lives one of Nebaj’s better-known financial speculators. Doña Alfonsa (not her real name) has eight children and sells food in the market. She doesn’t own a motor vehicle but she does have a cell phone. Her story is well-known because she has repeatedly apologized for it. In 2005, Alfonsa and her husband began asking their neighbors for huge loans. They offered to pay interest of 10% and 15% per month and presented their house and agricultural land as collateral. Then they transferred the funds to four acquaintances who promised them interest of 15% and 20% per month. Of their four business partners, three were K’iche’ Mayas who said they were guiadores de préstamos (roughly, loan advisers) sending local men to work in the United States. The fourth, an Ixil village leader and former functionary of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor, said that he needed seed money to attract an international aid project. And so the couple borrowed circa Q500,000 (at 7.8 quetzals to the dollar, US$64,000) and turned it over to the four. They expected to reap millions.

What they didn’t know is that their partners invested the funds in, not emigrants or projects, but a Mam Maya priest who promised riches from the volcanoes of Quezaltenango. At last report, this spellbinding practitioner of Mayan tradition was the object of an arrest war among the local religious hierarchy. Back in Nebaj, the title to Alfonsa’s house fell into the hands of a bank, she was summoned to court, and she was about to lose her house when the bank agreed to refinance Q225,000 of the debt. She and her family will be able to keep their home as long as they make mortgage payments of Q3,000 a month. The only way they can generate Q36,000 ($10,000) a year is in the U.S. labor market, to which end Alfonsa’s husband has joined their son in Houston, where the two are washing dishes in restaurants but having trouble finding enough hours. If they hang on in the United States, and if they remit faithfully, their house will be in the clear as early as 2024.

If you had told me this story a few years ago, I wouldn’t believe you. How can Guatemalans with household incomes of $1500 or so per year make $10,000 loans? How can they charge each other monthly interest rates of 10%, 15%, even 20%? How can they believe that wealth comes from volcanoes? Last but not least, how can their scramble to earn dollars in the U.S. make them poorer? These are not easy questions, but the answers lead back to two sacred cows in the current pantheon of wishful thinking: 1) microcredit and 2) unauthorized border-crossing in search of a better life.

Nebaj was hit hard in Guatemala’s civil war (it’s one of the towns for which genocide lawsuits have been filed), and it has received more aid projects than any other Mayan town. Yet no amount of aid will address a basic problem. Thanks to vaccination campaigns and potable water projects, most children are surviving to adulthood. Nebaj parents have been slow to reduce their pregnancies, women still average six children and the population is approaching five times what it was before the Spanish Conquest. The land base has become so fractured that most Nebajenses do not inherit enough land for subsistence farming. Local jobs pay four to eight dollars a day, which is enough to feed a family but not enough to pay for the consumer goods that Nebajenses now admire and want.

So in the 1990s the aid agencies introduced the gospel of microcredit—why not just loan the Nebajenses money? This would avoid the many accountability problems of communal projects and enable each household to devise its own solutions. Loaning money seemed like such a good idea that, by 2008, Nebajenses could borrow from at least twenty-three different projects, microcredit agencies, savings–and-loans, and banks. One problem to which the lenders didn’t give enough attention was, exactly what were Nebajenses going to do with all that credit? Presumably they were going to become bold entrepreneurs, which is why Nebaj now features hundreds of retail outlets without enough customers.

Opening modest lines of credit to Nebajenses was a good idea. But pumping large amounts of credit into a crowded mountain environment with few agricultural or industrial possibilities was, in retrospect, not such a good idea. No one has been able to come up with a game plan for turning Nebaj into a high-productivity consumer economy. The most exportable
behind. For those who are too poor or too jenses has meant deep anxiety for others. Remaining faithful to the routines of peasant subsistence means being left behind. For those who are too poor or too old to head north, the most obvious beacon of hope is a pyramid scheme. This is what snared Doña Alfonsa and her husband. In Guatemala get-rich-quick schemes combine the language of non-governmental organizations and development projects with the ritual supplications of folk Catholicism. But the crux of many a scheme is human smuggling into the U.S. labor market. All told, the Nebajenses have sunk millions of dollars from loans, land sales and remittances into the $5,000 per head smuggling fees which Guatemalan-Mexican smuggling networks charge to bring them to safe houses in Phoenix, Arizona.

It is not just migrants who are lusting for the fabled riches of wage labor in El Norte. A less demanding way to partake of El Dorado is to stay at home and become a moneylender. I know five market women who have borrowed money from multiple credit institutions, typically at 2% interest per month, in order to lend it to migrants at 10% per month. They live off the difference until the migrants fail to repay. The chains of debt between migrants, moneylenders and other peasant investors extend deep into families because the collateral securing a loan belongs to a spouse, parent, or sibling. The “immigrant bargain” is how scholars refer to these transactions—a quid pro quo in which a family takes on debt to establish members in a more remunerative labor market. The financial stakes are so high that intimate kin relationships are monetized and the family takes on the attributes of an export business.

Once a kin network is in debt, the only way it can keep up with payments is by maintaining wage earners in the United States. If we widen the concept of debt to deficits real or perceived, including the relative deprivation that human beings feel when their peers outstrip them in consumption and status, remittances from the United States are an engine for economic recession, they were saturating the ethnic niches for their labor. When they can’t find enough work to pay back their debts, migration has the paradoxical effect of swallowing their assets back home. Since 2008 remittances have plunged. Judging from remarks at various agencies, remittances are roughly half what they were at the peak. Default rates have climbed into double digits and dozens of foreclosures clog the docket at the local courthouse. Nebajenses are still going north, but in smaller numbers. The price of real estate has collapsed, making it impossible for creditors to recover their capital. And so the bubble has turned into Nebaj’s own version of the global credit crisis. In an uncanny anticipation of the U.S. derivatives’ bubble and how it burst, Ixil speculators borrowed other people’s money to multiply their gains, but only by incurring risks that are now bankrupting them and their creditors.

Microcredit, we have been assured, enables the poor to make headway against poverty. But debt has long functioned as a way to encourage poor people to “capitalize” their activities and, when they fail, separate them from their property. We also would do well to question whether there is enough employment in the United States for all the people who want to come here. Whether or not it is a good idea for Guatemalans to come north depends on whether the U.S. economy can provide them with stable jobs. Without stable jobs, they will be unable to recoup the cost of getting here and living here, endangering whatever property they have used as collateral. We should stop assuming that coming to the United States is a benefit for Guatemalans and their families.

David Stoll is the author of Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans. He teaches anthropology at Middlebury College. For a more complete report on the Nebaj debt crisis, see his article in the January 2010 Latin American Perspectives. He can be reached at dstoll@middlebury.edu.
Making a Difference

Learning through Libraries

By Debra Gittler

At the front of the room, in large letters, appeared the question: “De dónde viene el agua?” Where does the water come from?

The room was filled with nearly fifty teachers and parents from Ahuachapán, the coffee-growing region of El Salvador. Divided into groups of four, they observed a cold can of Coke dripping with the moisture of condensation. They had eight minutes to draw a model explaining this scientific phenomenon.

This might not seem like a workshop about establishing libraries and developing literacy, but for the student facilitators from the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE), this was exactly the type of experience they hoped teachers and parents could recreate at school and at home, to promote student learning and use of books. After the eight minutes, recent HGSE graduates Rebecca Utton (School Leadership Program—SLP), Sara Yamaka (International Education Program—IEP) and Lisa Mulvey (IEP) read a children’s picture book about the water cycle, led a group conversation, asking the small groups to revise their drawings before presenting them to the room.

For Learning Through Libraries (LTL), a student organization started at HGSE by IEP students Jill Carlson, Nell O’Donnell and myself in September 2009, establishing school libraries at needy schools in El Salvador is not only about bringing books; the goal is also to help teachers and parents understand the diversity of ways texts can be used to promote critical thought.

LTL was intended to host a one-time book drive, culminating in a January visit to El Salvador to bring books to needy schools. However, LTL was able to raise nearly $35,000 in cash and in-kind donations to send over 4,000 books, establish 5 school libraries, and make significant book donations to 3 schools and 5 women’s shelters. In doing so, we worked with over 160 Salvadoran parents, teachers, principals, students, local artists and educators.

Before coming to HGSE, I had worked in El Salvador designing a national teacher-training initiative for the Salvadoran Ministry of Education (MINED), implemented by the local NGO FEPADE (Fundación Empresarial para el Desarrollo Educativo). Jill, who had taught in Latin America, Nell, who had worked creating libraries in needy communities in the United States, and I all share a love for literacy and language. My connections in El Salvador seemed like an obvious opportunity for us to pool
our passions and experience and use our time at HGSE to make a difference. We partnered with Scholastic Books to get 50% off children’s books in Spanish, Taca Airlines donated free transport for three different shipments of thousands of books, and FEPAPDE’s National Book Drive worked with MINED to waive customs fees and coordinate book distribution. Amigos Bilingual and MLK Schools in Cambridge hosted book drives, collecting over 700 titles. The Harvard community also donated generously throughout the year.

The HGSE administration, staff and students were an enormous component in LTL’s success. In addition to awarding small grants throughout the school year, HGSE showed its support at commencement, when students waved Spanish children’s books in the air.

In all, LTL facilitated two visits of 13 students and staff to El Salvador: one in January and another in June. During these visits, we led training sessions with teachers and parents about book use and care, and helped create libraries at schools.

LTL representatives worked with Salvadoran artists and educators to produce workshops for participating school communities on the topics of documentary photography, oral tradition, and mural painting. LTL sponsored gallery exhibitions in El Salvador and Gutman Library featuring photography by Salvadoran students from these workshops. A small exhibit is still on display on the second floor of Longfellow Hall on Appian Way.

But LTL is growing beyond Harvard. Thanks to overwhelming success and support, LTL has established the non-profit organization ConTextos to continue establishing school libraries in El Salvador, while providing training for teachers and parents.

ConTextos already has gathered a Salvadoran team that will work full time, starting January 2011, in 15 schools as part of a pilot phase to establish libraries and train parents and teachers about using books to promote literacy, critical thought and problem solving.

By continuing to bring high-quality books at a low cost and offering more community support, ConTextos aims to make a difference in the quality of learning for students in El Salvador.

Debra Gittler graduated from Harvard Graduate School of Education in May 2010 with an EdM. She is the founder and executive director of ConTextos, a non-profit that originated as the HGSE student group Learning Through Libraries. To learn more about Debra and ConTextos, visit con-textos.org

Next school year, LTL hopes to expand into other Harvard schools and work with DRCLAS to facilitate visits to El Salvador. To learn more about how to support LTL as Harvard student or staff, email learning.libraries@gmail.com

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**Everyday Tales of Colombia’s Civil War**

**A REVIEW BY CHRIS KRAUL**

*Country of Bullets: Chronicles of War*, by Juanita León, translated by Guillermo Bleichmar (University of New Mexico Press, 2010, 223 pages)

Of all the books I’ve read about Colombia’s unending agony of civil war, drug trafficking, massacres, kidnappings and mass displacement, *Country of Bullets* offers the most vivid portraits of the people caught in the crossfire: the poor, the small town officials, the civil society field workers and the grunts in the armed forces.

The power of Juanita León’s book comes from its context. She vibrantly shows how victims came to be vulnerable and, in doing so, sheds light on those circumstances at the roots of Colombia’s chaos and violence. The simple explanation is the absence of the state, so that citizens in remote areas are forced to submit to the hegemony, by turns, of right-wing paramilitaries, leftist rebels and criminal drug-running gangs.

But León digs deeper to show the complex web of human consequences that arise from the vacuum. She writes about the guerrilla recruit Oswaldo, who joins the rebels because he has no options, and small-town official Roberto Mira, who one day must confront 4,000 displaced peasants in the town square. The reader learns of the needless deaths caused by the lack of medical care in a pueblo in no man’s land, and the courage of an unarmed indigenous community that stood up to rebels.

The author takes us where the law of the gun prevails, providing gripping details of senseless collateral damage, including the killing of a scholarship student during a rebel takeover of a town called Puracé. She relates the slow spiritual death experienced by one of Colombia’s legion of kidnap victims, a world record 3,706 in 2002.

Author León is a former correspondent with
Semana, Colombia's independent weekly news magazine, and for the last two years, editor of La Silla Vacía, a political news and opinion website based in Bogota. She is intimately familiar with her nation's recent history and politics, a knowledge that informs her writing. First published in Spanish as País de Plomo in 2006, her book is, more than an assemblage, an elaboration of her magazine reporting over the previous five year period, a crucial time in Colombia’s history.

The book begins in 2001, when a demoralized and nearly failed state under President Andrés Pastrana was still in abortive peace negotiations with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), after giving rebels control over a Switzerland-sized swathe of land in the eastern jungle plains.

One of the book's most compelling chapters is her excursion into that short-lived mini-republic or “cleared zone” called Caquetania that was ruled by the FARC for three years. She describes the strange interaction between the strutting rebels and the journalists and civil society groups who came to look at them close up. She also sat in on a summary court set up by the FARC to settle local disputes, a common service provided by the rebels in areas they dominate. She details their arbitrary jurisprudence in cases ranging from alimony to paternity disputes and bad debts.

“As I heard the cases, I tried to remember my classes in law school to see whether I could guess the legal principles behind the judges’ decisions. I gave up. Evidently, here were no criteria, just a subjective preference for one party or the other,” León writes.

The FARC’s recalcitrance to negotiate—León said the rebels never sought peace, only to strengthen their grip on Colombian cities—led to the resumption of war in 2002 and the end of Caquetania. That same year, get-tough President Álvaro Uribe was elected, and soon government forces had regained the battlefield initiative, with $5 billion in military aid from the United States under Plan Colombia, the largest U.S. foreign aid program outside the Middle East and Afghanistan.

There is much to like in this brief dense book. Some portraits are worthy of a García Márquez short story.

Chris Kraul is a Bogotá-based freelance writer. His 22 years as a Los Angeles Times reporter included stints in the paper's Mexico City and Bogotá bureaus. He also covered the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He studied journalism at the University of South Florida and worked for many newspapers, including the San Jose Mercury News and the San Diego Union-Tribune.

There are no criteria, just a subjective preference for one party or the other.” León writes.

The brilliance of the chapter comes from images of suffering but also from the author’s analysis of how the warring parties function, how both use dubious informants to call out sympathizers, informants who try not to get caught, often by falsely incriminating others with whom they have scores to settle. We witness paramilitaries pillaging the local bank, looting the granaries and ordering young boys out to rustle cows so the animals may serve as living mine-sweepers.

One of the young boys enlisted for the task is Jaime Giraldo, and he said he cried as he was forced to steal from his friends. “I know how much effort it takes to buy an animal,” he told León. One of the losers was peasant cattleman Virgilio David, who lost 100 cows, “all my patrimony, earned over the course of 45 years.” Giraldo, David and other Peque portraits are worthy of a García Márquez short story.

My one quibble about this otherwise remarkable book has to do with the foreword by Cornell historian Mary Roldan. She rightly prais-es León’s courage and that of other Colombian reporters, but accuses the foreign press corps, “with scant exceptions,” of being timid consumers of government pamphlets who “rarely venture outside the confines of the capital city.” Speaking for my publication alone, I can assure her that the Los Angeles Times routinely ventured outside those confines. The Times’ then-bureau chief T. Christian Miller was briefly kid-napped in 2002 by the FARC as he reported a story in southeastern Putumayo state.

In 2003, the paper’s special correspondent Ruth Morris and freelance photographer Scott Dalton were kidnapped by the rebel group ELN for 10 days while on assignment in eastern Arauca state. I suspect other foreign news organizations have similar stories to tell.

Country of Bullets leaves unanswered the riddle of why Colombia continues to suffer, more than four decades after the FARC and ELN launched their insurgencies. What it does do is tell human stories that catalogue the countless ways in which the Colombian state, through its absence, failed its people. It will be at the top of the list of books read in those halcyon days to come when, dare we hope, the violence ends and future generations of Colombians turn to accounts like this one to learn how bad it was.
Out of the Glass Closet?

A REVIEW BY JAMES R. MARTEL


Has there been a massive “coming out” in Latin America for the LGBT population in the last decade? The authors included in The Politics of Sexuality in Latin America suggest that there may have been, but qualify both the success and extent of this change. The particular social, historical and economic conditions in Latin America provide a very particular context and set of challenges for LGBT people. In their introduction to the volume, editors Javier Corrales and Mario Pecheny explain that on the one hand, unlike many English-speaking states in the Caribbean and North America, Latin American states do not have as strong a legal tradition of criminalizing sodomy. On the other hand, social mores, imparted in part by the Catholic Church, still militate against open homosexual behavior. Instead of openness, one finds what the editors, citing Michael Musto, call a “glass closet” (p. 36), a status of active engagement in same-sex relationships from within a heterosexual marriage or another socially sanctioned position. That, and the fact that many young adults in Latin America still live with their parents, add up to a formidable barrier against the widespread, openly queer lifestyles that one increasingly finds in North America. Yet, since 2000 there has been a wide range of pro-LGBT legislation in countries from Argentina to Brazil to Mexico, producing new rights and possibilities. The sea change in attitudes, both political and social, as well as the ongoing challenges facing the LGBT population, is the focus of this new and worthy volume.

The overriding impression that the reader gets from this volume is that one cannot make generalizations about global phenomena, including LGBT lives and politics. Although there is something of what could be called a “queer international demonstration effect,” i.e. that “gay culture” is being produced in and exported from U.S. enclaves like New York’s Chelsea and San Francisco’s Castro, Latin American LGBT communities receive such influences in the context of their own histories, conditions and local and regional actions.

One of the most fascinating parts of this book is the section that considers what political strategies have proven most effective in establishing LGBT rights. While the right wing in Latin America has traditionally eschewed the LGBT movement altogether (with a few strange exceptions such as the opening of sewing schools for transvestites in Chile, as Héctor Núñez González describes), the left has not always proven receptive to LGBT issues either. That has been changing of late, at least on the left.

Democratization across the region and a rise in leftist parties help explain some of the changing legal status of LGBT people, but the actions of LGBT organizations and individuals are also key to success. Again, diversity rather than one common set of strategies prevails. In Mexico, as Rafael de la Dehesa notes in his essay, LGBT rights were largely pursued through alliances with particular political parties, while in Brazil, gay interest groups offered political support in exchange for favorable policies. Millie Thayer, in her analysis of lesbian movements in Central America, notes that in Costa Rica, lesbian politics and identity were largely a matter of protecting private and group spaces, carving out a terrain for lesbian identity amidst the extensive and stable networks of civil society in that country. In Nicaragua, given the turmoil of the revolution and its aftermath, lesbian politics were pursued with a more explicitly political goal; there, lesbian politics was engaged with the “larger polity...as messengers for a new way of thinking about sexuality” (p. 164). Here, we see that even as Latin America is itself a unique case, each of the societies that compose this vast region offers its own specific contexts and problems.

Another fascinating discussion for many people in Latin America is the extent to which the question of LGBT rights is itself redolent of a North American liberal political agenda. Rights are often seen as a middle-class concern, and even the concept of homosexuality itself is seen as an identity that smacks of bourgeois North American and European notions of personhood. As Renata Hiller states in her essay, “the image of the GLTBI community that the media disseminates [in Argentina] is based on the stereotype of the white gay man from the upper middle class. This...creates the impression that this is a privileged minority” (p. 216). Indeed, Eduardo J. Gómez notes that the very idea of homosexuality as an organizing concept does not necessarily have long roots in Latin America. He writes “it was not until the 1980s [in Brazil] that the term homosexual was adopted as a category of sexual identity. This definition was...adopted from the United States by Brazilian medical scientists and quickly adopted by upper-class intellectuals, gradually trickling down to
Multiple Windows on Mexico

Hilo de Pasion

A REVIEW BY NANCY ABRAHAM HALL

Hecho en Mexico, by Lolita Bosch, (Barcelona: Mondadori, 2007, 407 pp.)

A happy result of Lolita Bosch's decade-long residence in Mexico City is Hecho en Mexico, a compelling collection of short stories, essays, cronicas set to music, personal correspondence and poems written by others during the last ninety years. Made accessible to the general reader by Bosch's introductions and footnotes, the anthology also appeals to specialists, as the thirty-six well-chosen texts, in all sorts of registers, and accompanied by Alejandro Magallanes's startling graphic designs, cover a very wide range of important topics.

Bosch, who was born in 1970 in Barcelona and is a novelist in her own right, designed the collection to be an “hilo de pasion,” unconventional: “He hecho este libro sin pensar en mis amigos,” she writes in her prologue. “Sin pensar en la editorial. Sin pensar en los vivos ni en los muertos.” She explains that details of a writer’s era, gender, fame, rate of publication or residence—urban center, provinces, beyond the nation's borders—did not shape the selection, nor did she seek to create a panorama of “the best” of Mexican writing: “Este libro, si yo fuera mayor se llamaría biblioteca personal...es sobre todo, lo que yo leo, sigo y uso de la literatura mexicana para explicarme otras cosas.”

Those “otras cosas” echo the work of the late cultural commentator Carlos Monsivais, whose “En los albores de la industria heterodoxa” sits in the center of Bosch’s book. His interests, like hers, range from the stuff of headlines—drugs and unthinkable violence, sprawl and unbreathable air—to bits and pieces of culture: salacious slang, found objects, the politics of book fairs, an air-borne taxi and a delicate haiku crafted by José Juan Tablada in the aftermath of the armed Revolution. Together, Bosch’s selections offer multiple windows on the people, landscape and culture of modern Mexico, and are fueled by the yearnings, frustrations and considerable talents of those who composed them.

Certainly one of Bosch’s talents is the ability to sustain a natural, intimate tone while providing accurate, thoughtful, and often quirky background information to guide the reader through the collection. She does not assume that figures revered within Mexico will be automatically familiar, especially to those...
like herself who grew up elsewhere. On the other hand, she does assume that her readers are curious about all the arts, their respective traditions and major innovators. When in his performance piece titled “Misa fronteriza,” for example, Tijuana’s inimitable Luis Humberto Crosthwaite mentions José Alfredo Jiménez, Bosch supplies the following footnote:

Me hubiera gustado decir que José Alfredo Jiménez (Dolores Hidalgo, Guanajuato, 1926-Ciudad de México, 1973) era un mariachi, cantante y compositor muy popular en México, pero Luis Humberto Crosthwaite protestó: “Una mejor definición para José Alfredo debería ser así: el máximo compositor de la canción vernácula mexicana. Creo que no hay discusión en ello”. Y añadió: “Exijo que si se tiene que explicar quién es José Alfredo, también debería explicarse quien es Led Zeppelin”. (Véase la nota 12 de la página 46.)

And on page 46 we find the following “Nota para Luis Humberto Crosthwaite”:

Led Zeppelin es el nombre de una banda de rock and roll fundada en 1968 por Jimmy Page, John Paul Jones al bajo, Robert Plant como vocalista y John Bonham a la batería. Fue uno de los grupos fundadores de lo que se llama heavy metal y se disolvió en 1980.

Bosch’s sense of playfulness is always in evidence. How she ticks rising literary star and fellow dog-lover Mario Bellatín (“a referente de la literatura latinomeri- cana contemporánea [que] ha visto su obra traducida al francés, alemán y al inglés”) into supplying personal information to accompany his short story “Bola negra” (about a self-cannibalizing entomologist named Endo Hiroshi) is a case in point:

En febrero de 2000 le mandé nueve preguntas por email. En ese entonces ya éramos buenos amigos, y como sabía que le daria pereza contestar mis preguntas, le escribi con el nombre falso de Rita Jiménez y me hace pasar por una investigadora de la Universidad Complutense de Madrid. Durante un par de semanas Mario y yo nos comunicamos con cierta frecuencia sin que él supiera que estaba escribiéndose consigo. Finalmente mandó las respuestas y yo, de parte de Rita Jiménez, le di las gracias personalmente.

Bellatin is among the most critically acclaimed writers anthologized by Bosch. Other well-known figures include Tablada, Manuel Maples Arce, Xavier Villarrutia, Salvador Elizondo and Jorge Ibargiengoitía. Following a description of the latter’s diverse production—novels, short stories, essays, drama—and his death in a 1983 airline disaster at Madrid’s Barajas Airport, Bosch presents “El puente de los asnos,” a tongue-in-cheek recollection of Ibargiengoitía’s school days in 1930s Guanajuato. From the fifth-grade teacher, “el profesor Farolito, llamado así porque se le encendían las nároles cada vez que perdía paciencia, cosa que ocurría dos o tres veces diario,” to the history textbook that stated “La mezcla de español e indígena produjo en México una raza nueva que se ha distinguido por sus virtudes guerreras y por el aborrecimiento que le inspira todo lo europeo...,” readers are treated to a not-so-veiled critique of a system Ibargiengoitía considered well-intentioned yet absurd. This particular brew concocted by Ibargiengoitía—reminiscence tinged with pride, affection, exasperation and even ridicule—characterizes several of the best essays in Hecho en México, including Alma Guillermoprieto’s “Ciudad de México, 1992,” and Juan Villoro’s “El eterno retorno a la mujer barbuda.” But Bosch includes many starker visions as well. The fate of “El niño ki’andaba por aí” by painter Gerardo Murillo, aka el Doctor Atl, depicts a society indifferent to human suffering. In “Epílogo personal” from Huesos en el desierto (2002), journalist Sergio González Rodríguez writes of the mass murder of young women in and around Juárez. With regard to Mexico’s drug trade and associated crimes, Bosch includes lyrics by norteño bands Los Tigres del Norte (“Las mujeres de Juárez”) and Grupo Exterminador (“Cruz de marihuana” and “Las monjitas”). The intransigent machismo that has long proscribed the lives of Mexican women in general is also documented through popular song—Paquita la del Barrio’s “Rata de dos patas”—as well as “Tomate,” Sabina Berman’s chilling story of child rape and revenge. Berman’s interpolated variants on her piece’s short but vivid title bring into focus another thread that runs through Mexican culture as a whole and Bosch’s anthology in particular: the importance of words per se, and especially of language play. On this score, Café Tacuba’s “Chilanga banda” is a memorable entry, as is a slice of a dictionary of over a thousand mexicanismos compiled by former attorney general, Supreme Court Justice, Guillermo Colin Sánchez. Bosch’s excerpt from Colin Sánchez’s work starts with Albur (“Juego de palabras directamente, sin trabas, sin esfuerzo”), and Al chilazo (“con sinceridad, con claridad”). These last two descriptors can well be applied to the texts Bosch has selected and organized for Hecho en México, as well as to her own work as editor of this intriguing book.

Nancy Abraham Hall (Ph.D., Romance Languages and Literatures, Harvard University), grew up in Mexico City. She has been a member of the Wellesley College Spanish Department since 1989.
Am thoroughly enjoying the articles in your latest issue, Architecture (Spring/Summer 2010). Might you consider adding more photographs to the website to complement articles? Too, at some point, illustrative video clips would be terrific.

Richard Berger

Dear Richard:

Thank you for your thoughtful comment. Our website is a work in progress and eventually, we do hope to add more photos and perhaps video clips. That’s an interesting idea. But for now, we hope to make the site as interactive as possible, so I invite you to keep commenting!

MORE ONLINE: The following comments are from the online edition of ReVista: www.drcelas.harvard.edu/publications/revistaonline.

EDITOR’S LETTER

Beyond Buildings

Dear June,

What fun to have an entire ReVista about Architecture in Latin America. I found the Post-Unsustainability conversation with Mark Jarzombek thought provoking. I think the new printed layout is very successful, and the variation between column size works to break up the different articles visually (although the four column section at the end is a bit harder to read in the current font). The color page section openers help with locating items and thinking more cohesively about a section as it is read. Likewise, the contributors on the back cover are easy to spot. Although I prefer to read without a computer whenever possible, it is great to have it online for quick reference.

I wanted to comment about your last paragraph in the editor’s letter, which surprised me.

“As I walk to work every day, I pass the Harvard Graduate School of Design. As I peeped into a large glassed-in auditorium this morning, I saw that students were looking at slides of buildings. It’s not just buildings, I wanted to tell them; think about the way that all those buildings have shaped all those lives.”

I have worked with two GSD studio classes that came to Copan and sat in on their project presentations at the end of the class. What struck me most was how anthropological their approach was to the project. Upon arriving in Copan the first two days were spent collecting notes on peoples’ movements and use of public space and architecture. Students were sitting about the town and engaging people with questions and conversation along the way. I am under the impression that all the studios are taught this way and that studying how people over time use buildings and their connected space is really the beauty of what they are all about. Next time I encourage you to do what I do occasionally and walk through the GSD building to see the student projects on the walls. I believe you would discover that the conversations are in large measure about what people do, say, and think about the built environment.

Barbara Fash
Director of the Corpus of Maya Hieroglyphic Inscriptions Program
Harvard Peabody Museum

Dear Barbara,

Thank you for your extraordinary and thoughtful comments on the ReVista redesign.

As we often bump into each other just outside the GSD, I just wanted to clarify the comment in my editor’s letter and to say that I totally agree with you about the conversations about the built environment. I certainly do not mean by saying “think about the way that all those buildings have shaped all those lives” that they weren’t necessarily doing so already. It was merely a reflection on my own physical experience of walking past the GSD and seeing the flashing images of buildings on the screen.

Indeed, if you look through the architecture issue, you will find the proof of your well-made point. Pablo Allard, who writes about the reconstruction of Chaitén, about as much about peoples’ movements and use of public space and architecture as you can get, is a GSD graduate. So is Oscar Grauer, who writes compellingly both of lessons from Haiti and also of the need for good design in social housing. Not to mention Alejandro Aravena, who in his excellent work in both high-end and social housing, thinks constantly about the relationship between people and their built environment.

I could go on and on, Barbara: Lee Cott, Flavio Janches, Eduardo Berlin Razmilic, Fares El-Dahdah, José de Filippi, James Brown and many of the other ReVista authors who have called the GSD home as students, professors or fellows share my feeling—and yours—that buildings shape lives.

I would love to encourage debate in this cyberforum, Barbara, but in this case I happen to agree with you! I apologize for my ambiguous wording!!!!

LIVING THE ENVIRONMENT

Latinotopia

Puerto Rican Architects in New York

It is a well deserved recognition of the important contri-
bution made by Puerto Rican architects and all artists to the United States.

Carmen Ruiz-Fischler

Thank you for your thoughtful comment, Carmen. That’s why we included the article on Puerto Rican and Argentine architects in this issue. And we would be delighted to hear about other architects from Latin America working in the United States...or Europe...or the Middle East...and making a significant contribution to those cultures.

THINKING SPACES, URBAN PLACES

Viewing Rogelio Salmona

Paul Philippe Cret at the OAS

Great read, June. This was a great read, having been a little under a year since the OAS Art Museum of the Americas hosted the “Open Spaces / Collective Spaces” exhibit on the work of Rogelio Salmona. Following “Open Spaces / Collective Spaces”, and 2008’s exhibition on Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer, the OAS is now opening an exhibit on the work of the architect of its own headquarters building (formerly the Pan-American Union Building and also known as the ‘House of the Americas’), Paul Philippe Cret. The exhibition also marks the Centennial of the building. If anyone is interested, there’s more information here: http://www.oas.org/en/100/

Kristina Rosales
University of Miami

COLOMBIA

Dear Editor,

I recently discovered your excellent publication, and found that I can download the articles of the issue, Colombia (Spring 2003), from your website. Thank you very much for the service.

But is there any way I can order/buy that issue in print? Thank you,

Esben Grøndal, Denmark

Dear Esben,

We are all out of the Colombia issue (as several others such as Venezuela, dance, foreign policy and art). In general, however, we do welcome ordering back print issues for personal or classroom use on a pay-as-you-can basis. Thanks for asking!

Kristina Rosales

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Summer Camp in Las Terrenas, Dominican Republic

Educational Development in Las Terrenas

Thank you Gabriela for publishing your work in Las Terrenas. Similar to your story, I also began working in LT right out of high school in 2006 and have since then been very involved in that community. I travel twice a year to work directly with Lidia’s kids, a school established by a Dominican-American lady, Lidia Dickinson, in a very poor area of LT (El Manantial). For the past few years, we have been providing educational opportunities to unprivileged kids in the area allowing them to obtain sponsorship and attend private schools in town. We have so far put over 20 kids in school. At the same time, we organize summer camps and daily tutoring so they can progressively improve their education. Lidia knows very well the project of Meredith and Leonardo and we are very happy to see these sort of projects get recognized since many of these kids are in need of opportunities to attend school and improve their living conditions. Please visit our page and get in contact with us as we would like to have you visit next time you are in Las Terrenas.

Thank you!

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Thank you!

Kristina Rosales
University of Miami

COLOMBIA
CONTRIBUTORS

63 Leah Aylward. Harvard College ’05, is a Ph.D. Candidate in Political Science and International Studies at the University of Queensland in Australia. 24 Santiago Bastos is a Spanish anthropologist who researches indigenous Mayas. 13 Michelle Bellino is a doctoral student in Culture, Communities, and Education at Harvard Graduate School of Education. 70 Greg Brosnan is co-director of “In the Shadow of the Raid,” a documentary about the 2008 Postville, Iowa, immigration raid. 57 David Daep is Associate Portfolio Manager with the Small Grants Programme of the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS). 10 Kate Doyle is a senior analyst and director of the Guatemala Documentation Project at the National Security Archive. 39 Dina Fernández, Harvard Nieman Fellow 2002, is an anthropologist and a journalist. 60 Peter Giesemann ’61, M. Arch. Harvard Graduate School of Design ’65, a practicing architect, has published widely in magazines and books. 74 Debra Gittler, Harvard Graduate School of Education ’10, is the founder and executive director of ConTextos, a non-profit that originated as the HGSE student group Learning Through Libraries. 41 Paul Goepfert is a journalist and resident of Central America for eighteen years. 78 Nacy Abraham Hall (Ph.D., Romance Languages and Literatures, Harvard University), teaches in the Wellesley College Spanish Department since 1989. 68 Susanne Jonas is the author of Of Centaurs and Doves: Guatemala’s Peace Process, designated by Choice an “outstanding academic book.” 76 Chris Kraul is a Bogotá-based freelance writer. 46 Kevin Lewis O’Neill (Harvard Divinity School MTS 2002) is an assistant professor in the Department and Centre for the Study of Religion and the Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies at the University of Toronto. 36 Julie López, a freelance journalist working in Guatemala, received the 2010 Felix Varela National Award for Excellence in American Journalism on Latino issues. 77 James R. Martel, is a professor in the department of political science at San Francisco State University. 32 Fabiana Flores Maselli is the Education Director of the Museo Ixchel del Traje Indígena in Guatemala City. 54 Mary Jo McConahay is author of the forthcoming Maya Roads, a thirty-year narrative of a journalist’s travel in Chiapas and Petén. 44 Nancy McGirr is Founder and Executive Director of Fundación de Niños Artistas de Guatemala/Fotokids. 30 Holly Nottebohm Harvard College ’62 has lived in Guatemala since 1963 and worked much of that time with the Ixchel Museum of Indigenous Dress. 20 Emily Sanders, MS Harvard School of Public Health ’10, has lived and worked throughout Latin America. 17 Victoria Sanford, a Bunting Peace Fellow at Radcliffe (1999-2000), is Associate Professor of Anthropology and Director of the Center for Human Rights and Peace Studies at Lehman College. 62 Emmanuel Seidner, a Harvard Mason Fellow KSG 2001, has more than 12 years of experience in areas of sustainable development and competitiveness. 6 Jean-Marie Simon, Harvard Law School ’91, is the author of Guatemala: Eternal Spring, Eternal Tyranny, recently re-issued in Spanish as Guatemala: eterna primavera, eterna tiranía. 34 Adam Singerman Harvard College ’09, is the Prep Program Fellow at the Instituto de Liderança do Rio (Rio Leadership Institute). 72 David Stoll teaches anthropology at Middlebury College. 46 Kedron Thomas, a doctoral candidate in anthropology at Harvard University, is the author of the forthcoming Securing the City: Neoliberalism, Space, and Insecurity in Postwar Guatemala, co-edited with Kevin Lewis O’Neill. 2 Edelberto Torres-Rivas, DRCLAS 1999-2000 Central American Visiting Scholar, is a consultant in the area of Human Development in the United Nations Programme for Development (UNDP). 27 Irma A. Velásquez Nimatuj is executive director of the organization, Mecanismo de Apoyo a los Pueblos Indígenas (Support Mechanism for Indigenous Peoples). She received her Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Austin.

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