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Transnational Ties: Weaving Communities Between Guatemala and Chicago

In Memory of Fausto Leonel Otzín Poyón, 32 Years Old, Human Rights Lawyer Brutally Killed in Chimaltenango, October 2009 and Rodolfo Gandara.

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Guatemala is a strikingly beautiful country with a complex history and a troubling present. If you believe in cataclysmic predictions based on the Mayan calendar or subscribe to daily Google alerts on Guatemala, you might be understandably hesitant about visiting. Nevertheless, I enthusiastically encourage you to venture out and experience the rich cultural heritage of the Land of Eternal Spring for yourself.

I first traveled to Guatemala as a child because my mother is from Zacapa, an arid area in the eastern part of the country where people have a reputation for being hot tempered. My mother emigrated to Los Angeles when she was very young and met and married my Mexican father. Two of her sisters have lived in Guatemala City for decades and I always loved visiting my relatives there during summer vacations. I delighted in my extended family's warm hospitality and numerous stories, especially their vivid accounts of growing up by the Motagua river and surviving the devastating 7.5 earthquake of February 1976. I enjoyed wandering around the central market stalls in downtown Zone 1 and taking boat rides on Lake Amatitlán during weekends at the family chalet just outside the capital. Later when my relatives abandoned Catholicism and became born again Pentecostals, I happily attended the raucous evangelical worship services filled with heartfelt singing and dramatic testimonies of conversion and salvation. I also recall my family talking about la situación but it was only years later when I began to study Latin American literature and history that I came to understand that la situación and la Violencia were code words for a bloody civil war that lasted thirty six years, left 200,000 civilians dead and 50,000 people missing (Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico 1999). Over the years, each visit to Guatemala has been more enlightening yet also disconcerting as I acquired a better understanding of the socioeconomic realities outside the protection of my family environment.

Not surprisingly, contact with the indigenous population during summer visits with my mother's side of the family was limited to touring the bygone splendor of archaeological sites such as Iximché, Quirigua and Tikal or being served by their live in maids. Perhaps that is why I felt overwhelmed by the testimony of Rigoberta Menchú in graduate school and wrote a dissertation on this Latin American genre that denounces the history of inequity and racism I was oblivious to as a child visiting Guatemala.

On my visits to Guatemala in later years I'd discuss Menchú's account with my relatives but I was often surprised and disappointed by their negative reactions to this Maya activist and Nobel Peace laureate. Their comments and racist jokes about her annoyed me but I'd often voice my disapproval more strongly in the pages of my journal than openly debate my loving hosts. I struggled to understand why my family, like many other Ladinos of their socioeconomic standing reacted this way towards indigenous peoples. Victoria Sanford explains the hostility this way: "By asserting the political consciousness, self-expression, and political action of Maya women, Menchú challenged official histories of Guatemala and romantic representations of Maya women, which, each in distinct ways, negated the dynamic and varied political responses of Maya women to Guatemalan state violence ... Rigoberta came to represent the antithesis of stereotypes in the world community as silent, traditional, static, without politics, and without agency. Indeed, in I, Rigoberta and in her life, Rigoberta demanded recognition of Maya women as more than pawns of political processes designed and led by others. Rigoberta obliged the world to recognize Maya women as agents of their own history whose participation in political movements shaped those very movements regardless of their initial catalyst" (2003: 51). My questions about Ladino identity and Maya ethnicity led me to study the human rights abuses and politicized violence that took place during the civil war. After the signing of the peace accords in 1996, the Truth Commission reports revealed the horror that indigenous communities endured in the highlands and U.S.
involvement in the atrocities. In March 1999 after the independent Historical Clarification Commission published its findings, President Bill Clinton issued a long overdue apology: “It is important that I state clearly that support for military forces or intelligence units which engaged in violent and widespread repression of the kind described in the report was wrong. And the United States must not repeat that mistake. We must and we will instead continue to support the peace and reconciliation process in Guatemala.” Menchú’s testimony and the hundreds of other first person accounts challenge the reader and visitor to listen actively to their lived experience and confront the terror with thoughtful reflection.

Since joining the faculty at DePaul, I’ve been fortunate to teach courses on Latin American testimonies and Central American literature. The themes of gendered and politicized violence abound in this body of literature, as does the call for social justice and standing in solidarity with the poor that is central to the university’s Catholic and Vincentian mission. After receiving a research fellowship from the Center for Latino Research I traveled to Guatemala in 2005 for academic reasons. I knew that in order to research visual and textual representations of the Maya I’d have to venture out of my family’s gated community. I spent a few days reuniting with my relatives and then began my trek to what I considered “the real Guatemala.” My first stop was the colonial city of Antigua. This city, just a quick ride from the capital, has become a “must see” for tourists because of its picturesque ruins, cobblestone streets lined with trendy shops and bars and well stocked bookstores - quite a comfortable way to get a glimpse of “reality.” As authentically Guatemalan as I felt in my heart, I relied on my Lonely Planet guidebook like all the other tourists and backpacked around the villages surrounding Lake Atitlán, hiked up the Pacaya volcano, and visited Momostenango, Chichicastenango, Quetzaltenango and other sites for three weeks. My breakaway from the family was accepted with warnings to be careful and call home with a cell phone that they provided. This research trip marked my privilege given that I had a U.S. passport and dollars to travel around freely and comfortably on my own. While I didn’t see it then, I was clearly the “other” in terms of privilege and power. My outsider status and academic credentials served me well when conducting interviews with museums curators, textile vendors and local authors.

Upon returning home to Chicago, the fellowship further supported my research by providing a space for the newly created Guatemala Now Reading Group. Each month I’d gather with a group of MayaWorks volunteers, community members from Casa Guatemala and DePaul students to discuss current events and literature about Guatemala. This was an interactive space where it was safe to raise challenging questions about the stark inequalities of the country while learning from the local community, sharing resources and growing in awareness. We attended the photographic exhibit Our Culture is Our Resistance: Repression, Refuge, and Healing in Guatemala by Jonathan Moller, viewed the feature film El silencio de Neto by Guatemalan director Luis Argueta and discussed documentaries. We read I Rigoberta Menchú's The Long Night of White Chickens. We were joined by guest speakers such as Julie Coyne who runs Education and Hope, an after school program in Quetzaltenango, Olegario Velasquez, a Mayan linguist and Board Member of Casa Guatemala, and Lic. Mario Morales, an attorney and representative of the National Indigenous and Campesino Organization in Guatemala (CONIC).

The reading group opened a space for dialogue where people with diverse personal, political and professional ties to Guatemala shared their experiences and opinions. For me personally it represented a shared space in which to reflect on my multiple roles of participant observer, teacher and socially engaged researcher. This gathering of individuals who were critical of U.S. involvement in Central America and deeply concerned about those on the margins also voiced the danger of romanticizing the Maya or limiting oneself to an attraction towards difference represented in the intricately woven "huipiles" and cortes worn by Mayan women.

Fortunately the opportunity to delve deeper into the issues of representation and commodification arose when I was invited to participate in the tenth anniversary journey to Guatemala with MayaWorks, a non profit fair trade organization that creates a marketplace for an array of products (January 27-February 5, 2006). I was asked to translate and lead reflections for the group. We visited the communities of the artisans, entered their homes to hear their stories, visited the schools where their daughters receive scholarships, and listened to the impact that selling their weavings through MayaWorks has had on their lives and the economic development of their families. Of all the experiences we had on this journey, two particular moments stand out for me even after all these years. The first was standing in front of the cemetery to witness the mural in San Juan Comalapa and listening to the detailed, insightful views of the human rights attorney Fausto Otzín. I took copious notes of his explanation of Maya cosmovision and the belief that everything is sacred. He highlighted that Abuela Ixchel interweaves our lives while explaining the weaving process on backstrap looms, stressing that there weaving is part of life and that every community has a unique traje with original designs and colors. Clearly these designs have been changing over time as artisans are dependent on what is most marketable. The images of the mural, however, caution the viewer not to essentialize the Maya by seeing only the colorful tipica clothing for sale – we must also face the history of violence depicted in bright colors and acknowledge their struggle for survival. In a similar vein, the devastation we witnessed in Panabaj in the aftermath of Hurricane Stan also spoke volumes. This was the site of one of the most deadly mudslides that left perhaps as many as 1300 dead and has since been declared a national graveyard. As a group we walked through what had once been a thriving community and felt that we were on sacred ground. It was moving to see the outpouring of donations from MayaWorks volunteers and friends all over the country and witness how the organization was standing in solidarity with the artisans by providing for families in need.

The unique life-stories I heard from the artisans and the North American volunteers became the lens through which I reexamined my privilege and conflicted feelings towards Ladinos and the structural inequality of the global marketplace. While I felt more in tune with the politics of solidarity of the tour group than with traditional upper class Ladino views, I was also an outsider in this setting and when I served on the board of directors as a native Spanish speaker and only person of color. Yet it was precisely my cultural and linguistic connections to Guatemala that granted me authority and authenticity in these groups. Similarly, the access I gained into the homes of the artisans was granted to me because of my connection to MayaWorks. This experience of being simultaneously an insider and outsider serves as a reminder that our social locations of marginalization and privilege are constantly shifting in relation to others. Perhaps my family's stereotypical

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views bothered me precisely because I was repeating the same behavior of benefiting from a privilege that I accepted blindly. This journey helped me to honestly question my assumptions in dialogue with others and to work on maintaining ties when I’d prefer to walk away.

The stories of pain and courage that I heard in the communities of the artisans not only brought my readings to life but taught me that a fair trade organization such as MayaWorks creates a marketplace for handicraft products while providing an opportunity for much more than economic exchange. To really have a lasting impact this relationship must also exchange knowledge and critical insight towards the conditions that led to the economic inequality in the first place. Otherwise we risk just purchasing products and romanticizing the weavers without fully recognizing their own agency or learning about the greater political and socioeconomic context. MayaWorks’ motto of Interweaving Lives, Discovering One World helps us to see the weavers as mothers, widows and leaders that gain self-esteem through their work while emphasizing the importance of community. That is why it is important to tread carefully in this transnational relationship so as not to perpetrate the “othering” process.

This lesson was delivered to my doorstep when a group of artisans came to represent their communities in Chicago for the second phase of the tenth anniversary celebration in September 2006. Now the U.S. Americans had the privilege of hosting the artisans in our homes and sharing our stories and lifestyles with them, as they had shared with us just months earlier. The socioeconomic inequalities that separate us were apparent when we visited the Chicago lakefront, the Lincoln Park Zoo and a welcoming reception at the DePaul campus. The anniversary celebration didn’t attempt to gloss over our differences; instead we were challenged to ask hard questions, risk digging deeper and search for meaning in community because the power of reflection lies in looking inside and outside ourselves.

My connection to MayaWorks mediated my experience and understanding of Guatemala. It introduced me to a part of the country and people that I hadn’t encountered in a family setting. This understanding has enriched my teaching and research, and the insight I’ve gained from the artisans has challenged me to work on deepening my local and transnational ties. As disquieting as it might be to uncover our privilege in relation to others or to feel disempowered in certain relationships, these spaces of contradictions can be so enriching, particularly in a transnational context when we have a community in which to unpack our beliefs. Given the current global economic crisis and increasing levels of inequality and violence in Guatemala, we might be understandably apprehensive about leaving our comfort zone. Whether we find ourselves abroad or at home, we have much to gain by reflecting on our multiple roles, engaging in difficult conversations and confronting contentious issues. Not shying away from matters of difference while working to create safe spaces where all are willing to take risks is part of the deeper learning process that we can all benefit from. We all want to feel connected to something larger than ourselves but while the tourist industry publicizes Guatemala’s volcanoes, ancient pyramids, and colorful villages – local organizations with ties to Guatemala strive to situate this beauty within a more complex socioeconomic context where indigenous people and Ladinos struggle to survive, and fair trade and solidarity can have a very real impact on people’s lives.

Now that I’ve completed my term and stepped off the MayaWorks board I’m not sure when my next visit to Guatemala will be. But I look forward to spending time with my extended family and reflecting on all the changes we’ve witnessed over the years. Fortunately for now our lives are interconnected thanks to our friendship on Facebook.

NOTES
1 Based on the CEH report of 1999, Julie Stewart states, “Despite the state’s best efforts to blame insurgent forces for the violence that engulfed rural Guatemala in the 1980s, testimonies and forensic evidence have since proved that the Guatemalan military and paramilitary forces were responsible for approximately 93% of civilian deaths” (231).

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