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Indigenous Women at War: Discourses on Revolutionary Combat¹

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Official analyses of the Guatemalan civil war (1960-1996) shift between those that proclaim massive and/or enthusiastic indigenous participation on guerrilla organizations and those claiming that there was a manipulation of innocent, or ignorant, “indigenous masses,” as conservative voices have argued.² This never-ending production of labels to designate cultural dominants about the war is not an innocuous fact. It is intertwined with the act of interpreting who won and who is to blame for the process. In other words, it is a struggle for cultural memory. Still, in the Guatemalan case, global and local actors submerged in opposing academic power fields continue to drown themselves in generalities. In the midst of

¹ A short version of this article titled “Letter from Guatemala: Indigenous Women on Civil War” was published in *PMLA* in 2009. Another appears in *Meanings of Violence in Contemporary Latin America* (Palgrave, 2011) under the title “*Txitzi’n* for the *Poxnai*: Indigenous Women’s Discourses on Revolutionary Combat.”

² See Stoll’s *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of all Poor Guatemalans, Guatemala, la historia silenciada* by Carlos Sabino, as well as recent interviews by

their mudslinging, neither side has, for the most part, spoken of gender when making their claims, nor have they allowed the voices of ex-combatants to be heard. Their experiences have been more stereotyped than explored. As a result, perfunctory phrases such as “indigenous masses,” “indigenous combatants,” or “indigenous ex-URNG members” continue to circulate in most papers written about the subject without any serious problematization of the meaning of these vague notions.³ Indeed, very few people have actually interviewed indigenous ex-combatants, or else articulated their explanations for choosing to engage in revolutionary war, perhaps one of the most dramatic limit-experiences, and demonstrations of agency, that an individual can engage in.

Part of this obscurity is attributable to the fact that the Maya uprising in Guatemala happened before cyberspace became a means to disseminate alternative information to official (and officially censored) news. Yet this cannot be the only possible explanation. The latter appears to be more in line with what Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano has named “the coloniality of power,” a theory which emphasizes how the grid of colonialism continues to frame social, political, economic and cultural relations in Latin America. Quijano is especially attentive to the efficacy of colonial racial categories and relations, given how they reproduce unequal political and economic power. They have thus constituted a framework whereby inequality reproduces itself. Gustavo Lins Ribeiro argues that it is also necessary to explore a parallel category that he labels “nationality of power” in interim fashion.⁴ This would account for the structuring effects of national elites when articulating social relations reflecting the coloniality of power within a given nation-state, where they most often find their natural

Ana Monroy with Mario Roberto Morales, “Verdad y veracidad de un testimonio,” for conservative viewpoints on the Guatemalan war.”

³ URNG stands for Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity in its Spanish acronym. It grouped all three guerrilla organizations, the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP), the Revolutionary Organization of People in Arms (ORPA) and the Rebel Armed Forces (FAR), and included a symbolic presence of the Guatemalan Workers Party (Communist).

⁴ See “World Anthropologies: Cosmopolitics for a New Global Scenario in Anthropology.”

ground and stability, their space of emplacement. Finally, it would coincide with what Boaventura de Sousa Santos labels “abyssal thinking,” one where subalternized peoples become non-existent in the eyes of Westerners exercising hegemony.⁵

Even for Marxist revolutionary cadres, the coded elements imposed by the coloniality of power, and displayed by abyssal thinking, implied that indigenous discursivity was a space where their world was violently displaced. Even if Marxism represented for many the maximum of possible consciousness at a given time and place, it remained anchored in European Enlightenment and was logically articulated with all forms of Western modern thinking. Indigenous discursivity problematized Marxist certainty, transforming it into merely a Eurocentric point of view that privileged class struggle. It thus unstabled and decentered this singular form of Modern certainty. It showed Ladino revolutionary leaders that they did not live in a homogeneous and coherent space, but rather, in a thoroughly phantasmatic one. It is my contention that Ladino revolutionaries and analysts have, as a result, refused systematically to account for the compatibility of Ladino and Maya cultural forms, i.e., of accepting the reality of other conceptual systems within the nation-state. (Mestizos are historically known in Guatemala as *Ladinos*; however, contemporary Mayas are making the distinction between both terms: for them, a *Ladino* is a racist subject, whereas a Mestizo is a non-racist subject of mixed Indigenous / European descent.)⁶ In my view, this accounts for the lack of sources documenting indigenous accounts on the war. *Memorias rebeldes contra el olvido: Paasantzila Txumb'al Ti' Sortzeb'al K'u'l* (forthwith *Memorias*) itself states that no other text gathers the lived experiences of gendered and ethnicized subjects within a clandestine military structure.⁷ In this article, I intend to bring to light indigenous discursivity about the war, focusing on women ex-combatant testimonials to shed light on its meaning and implications.

⁵ See “Beyond Abyssal Thinking: From Global Lines to Ecologies of Knowledges.”

⁶ See *Emma Chirix conversa con Ana Cofiño*, 37.

⁷ See 18.

Very little has been published on women indigenous combatants and the effects of war on them. In 1998 Norma Stoltz-Chinchilla published in Spanish *Nuestras utopías: Mujeres guatemaltecas del siglo XX*, a series of interviews of women involved in the Guatemalan revolutionary war. Stoltz-Chinchilla's book has the merit of being the first one to rescue women's participation in Guatemalan political and historical events. Whereas not all interviews were about indigenous combatants or even about combatants as a whole, a few were. In 2006, Susan A. Berger published *Guatemaltecas: The Women's Movement 1986-2003*, where she detected a counter-discourse to globalization slowly emerging within the Guatemalan women's movement. Again, this book is not primarily about combatants and less so about indigenous women, but it necessarily touches marginally on some of these experiences. Finally, in 2008, Ligia Peláez edited *Memorias rebeldes contra el olvido: Paasantzila Txumb'al Tí Sortzeb'al K'u'l*. Whereas Peláez directed the project, she co-wrote it with Rosalinda Hernández Alarcón, Andrea Carrillo Samayoa, Jacqueline Torres Urizar and Ana López Molina. I will use Peláez's book as a primary source to analyze this topic.

¿Qué pensamos las ex-combatientes?

Memorias rebeldes opens with the telling question *¿Qué pensamos las ex-combatientes?* (What do we, ex-combatants think?) It is a preamble signed by the ADIQ-Kumool Women Ex-Combatants Collective. ADIQ is the Spanish acronym for Association for the Integral Development of Quiché, the Guatemalan province with predominantly Maya descent located at the center of the country's civil war. While most of its indigenous population speaks K'iche', other Mayan languages include Ixil, dominant in the northern Ixil Triangle of the villages of Nebaj, Chajul and Cotzal, as well as Uspantek in the town of Uspantán area, and Sakapultek in Sacapulas. In this introduction they state that they are all Maya women, primarily Ixils, though a few are K'iche'. During the war they were all militants of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP, for its acronym in Spanish) in the "Ho

Chi Minh” Front that covered the entire Quiché area, but none of them were included in the official list of de-mobilized combatants that the URNG presented to the U.N. and the Guatemalan government in 1996. When the Peace Treaty was signed on December 28th of that year, they were all scattered in the jungle, distrustful, wary, and afraid. They were thus left out of the official peace process.⁸ It should be noted that they were *de facto* abandoned by the EGP, the organization to which they belonged, and for which they had sacrificed everything. When they returned to their hometown, about 600 of them agreed to meet in Nueva Esperanza, Nebaj, and they founded the Kumool Association in 1999. (“*Kumool*” means *compañera-compañero* in Ixil. A *compañero* is a fellow team member, a comrade, were it not for the overtly Communist connotation of the latter word. Comrade is actually translated as “*camarada*” in Spanish, and has a decisive Communist inflection.)

Trying to make ends meet and help their families survive, the Kumool women attended a meeting of the *Red de Mujeres* (Women’s Network) in Uspantán in May 2006. The “Women’s Network” includes Kaqchiquel, K’iché, Ixil and Mestizo women working within the Agrarian Platform. There they came in contact with Peláez, who was then working for the Association for the Advancement of the Social Sciences (AVANCSO, for its Spanish acronym).⁹ The ex-combatants complained at this meeting about their situation. Peláez perceived intuitively the epistemological decolonizing attitude rooted in the cathartic anger.¹⁰ From a purely alternative ethical stance devoid of any possible theorization, these

⁸ A peace-signing ceremony took place at Guatemala City’s National Palace of Culture on December 28, 1996. International dignitaries accompanied Guatemala’s president and URNG *comandantes* in the formal signing. Personalities such as Nobel Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú also participated.

⁹ AVANCSO was founded in 1986 as a private think tank to relaunch the Guatemalan social sciences after the army massacres had decimated social scientists in the country. Led since its inception by Clara Arenas, it suffered in 1990 the assassination of its top researcher, Myrna Mack, killed by members of the Presidential Guard for her research among Mayas living in the “communities of peoples in resistance.” Peláez moved in August 2008 to the Maya University in Quintana Roo, Mexico.

¹⁰ Personal communication. Nov. 24, 2007, 12:56pm.

seemingly plain indigenous women understood that there were two realms at work: “this side of the line,” where the upper echelon of the URNG stood in cahoots with the Guatemalan government and the Army’s High Command, all of them Ladino men perceived to be living in the wealthiest neighborhoods of Guatemala City, and the realm of “the other side of the line” where they had been dumped. Alternative ethics is used here in contrast to “mores” and its cognates “morality” and “moralism”, and in association with a tactics of boundary-crossing, political “incorrectness,” transgression against entrenched intellectual parameters and assumptions. However, it is also an alternative code of ethics articulated within the boundaries of Maya *cosmovisión* (“worldview”). In this division, their side vanished as reality in the eyes of the Ladino Westernized world. To make the personal benefits of the Peace Accord work for a tiny Ladino elite located on both sides of the war, and both sides of the traditional modern ideological scheme, right and left, there was a need to make this “other side” non-existent. As Arif Dirlik claims, “nationalism of the ethnoculturalist kind has always presented a predicament of easy slippage to racism” (1368), one where Mayas always end up essentialized as pre-Modern, inferior beings lacking reasoning. We cannot lose sight of the power dynamics of this labeling, nor of the coherence it does lend to racial thinking across Guatemala. To the Guatemalan state, Mayas had always been fragmented non-organic bodies coexisting and intermingling with modernity, non-subjects excluded from conventional discourse, deliria of the secret threads of coloniality, of what Boaventura De Sousa Santos has called a “sociology of absences,”¹¹ meaning by this an attitude whereby under the gist of rationality, ruling elites condemn those subjects that they label as “the ignorant, the residual, the inferior, the local, and the nonproductive” (2004, 17) to social forms of nonexistence: “They are social forms of nonexistence because the realities to which they give shape are present only as obstacles vis-à-vis the realities deemed relevant, be they scientific, advanced, superior, global, or productive realities.”

¹¹ See “The World Social Forum: A User’s Manual.”

Within this context, the Kumool women struggled to reclaim the dignity of their culture and their struggle, and did not want to be sacrificed at the end of a set of operations defined by Ladino men living in the city to which they had no access. They wanted the right to envision their own future. The attitude Peláez perceived led her to bring together journalists and activists to work with them recording their experience.

In June 2006, Peláez, Rosalinda Hernández and Andrea Carrillo, journalists from *La Cuerda*, a feminist weekly, Ana López, another colleague from AVANCSO, and Jacqueline Torres from the communications team of the Agrarian Platform, got together with 33 Kumool women in Nebaj between 35 and 45 years of age. Agrarian Platform is a political network concerned with building a social movement that struggles for structural change in the countryside and for rural development, linking local struggles with national agendas. It was created in 2000, and presently groups 19 peasant organizations. Among its founders were AVANCSO, the Indigenous National Peasant Coordinating Committee and the Inter-Diocese Pastoral for Land, a Catholic organization. The municipality of Nebaj is located in northwestern El Quiché department and, with the municipalities of Chajul and Cotzal, forms the Ixil region. It has a surface area of 607 square kilometers. The Population Census of 1994 placed the total population of Nebaj at 33,795 inhabitants (INE: 1995), of which 87.7 per cent were indigenous, nearly all of them of the Ixil socio-linguistic group.

In “Sebastián Guzmán, principal de principales,” written anonymously in the name of the EGP by Spanish priest Javier Gurriarán, for *Polémica* magazine, he stated that the Ixil region was virtually unknown to the rest of the country up until the end of the nineteenth century. This longstanding isolation was broken at the beginning of the twentieth with the arrival of a group of Spaniards, expelled after Cuban independence, who settled mostly in the Nebaj area. Some years later, as a result of the Mexican revolution, a group of Mexicans also settled in the region. From the outset, both groups monopolized political power and accumulated

wealth through their business ventures, and from the production and sale of coffee. It was this very region that was brutally “pacified” by General Otto Pérez Molina, at a great human cost to Ixil Mayas. In early 2011, Pérez Molina is running for Guatemalan President, under a democratic banner, making no allusion whatsoever to his past as an intelligence officer and strategist of massacres in northern Quiché. Ironically, it is an Ixil protestant pastor, Tomás Guzaro, who, in 2010, narrates these episodes from a conservative point of view, defending the campaign of his friend “Tito” and celebrating his genocidal achievements, in a new testimonio titled *Escaping the Fire*. Anti-Menchú anthropologist David Stoll writes an afterword to this book as well, celebrating the denunciation of Ixil guerrilla combatants.

By the second meeting, in July of the same year, the Kumool women, offered by their visitors the opportunity of recording their story in a series of journalistic articles, a series of pamphlets, or a book, chose to have a book written about their trajectory, one that would finally recognize their struggle in the mountains and preserve their experiences for posterity. The book was financed by the Lutheran Federation. It was one of the last mini-financing projects destined to this part of the country. They themselves stated that they wanted to do it so “the youth of the country can know it, and they can form themselves an idea of how things happened” (9).¹² In other words, these women wanted to exist in a relevant and comprehensible way. They were implicitly demanding a theory that was more or less enabling of constructive action on behalf of subalternized peoples, empowering their knowledge to contest the dominant discourse of the post-war elite, and making a decolonial turn in the process.

The women in this meeting spoke of *txitzi'n*, an Ixil word that means “deep pain.” However, the idea articulates not only physical suffering, but also “a wounded soul,” conceptualizing an image in which a part of the subject is dead. It is a topic at the epistemic borders of modernity, a different paradigm to convey the unnamable condition of

¹² All translations to English are mine.

surviving genocide (14) that anchors a discourse articulating a new relation between violence, survival, ethics and politics. Feeling *txitzi'n* did not preclude agency. On the contrary, it was a prerequisite for meaningful agency, one that contextualized their struggle and constituted them as comprehensible subjects. The need to talk about profound pain, never previously articulated discursively by any of them, or by most Maya women under Western eyes, was followed by the joy of being together again, the memories of their deeds and achievements, of their courage and of their capacity for decision-making and executing. They had to name the past as a way of talking about the future. It made them fully conscious of their identities as ex-combatants, and as women who continue their political struggle as fully-conscious indigenous subjects and as organized women who refused to self-racialize. As they themselves stated, they lost their fear in the mountains. Whenever they were in a social gathering in a village they recognized females who were ex-combatants. They were always the ones who did not stand quietly and meekly behind their husbands, but who spoke out with assurance and without fear:

What the heart says we speak out; there is no fear, there is no trembling, we feel our heart is alive; it's strong because it's not fearful. I lost my fear because I rose with the rebels in the mountains, where everyone talked, where we were not mute, and here it's the same; I talk with everyone. (16)

Txitzi'n is analogous to trauma, but with a difference. Whereas trauma implies suffering fear or helplessness as a result of an event involving actual or threatened death, the Maya women's response has not included those effects. This is because for them, *txitzi'n* is also a mystical or inner experience. Though described in simple, plain words, it is for them another space for the production of knowledge—an “other way of thinking” in the words of Arturo Escobar, pointing to the very possibility of talking about “worlds and knowledges otherwise.”¹³ Mayas believe that there are words too deeply embedded to come up to the surface and make conceptual

¹³ See “‘Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise’: The Latin American Modernity / Coloniality Research Program.”

understanding possible, words that anthropologist Dennis Tedlock conceives of as “words that are ‘in the belly’ of a person” (268). That is, words that a person is unable to bring to his/her consciousness and articulate. Nevertheless, the sensorial perceptions of these words operate as a defense mechanism against violence and oppression. *Txitzi’n* encompasses both aspects: trauma and healing. Ancestral principles and historic struggles of indigenous peoples have begun to disrupt, transgress and traverse Western thinking, and this disruption, transgression and traversing, advancing new notions of interculturality and decoloniality becomes evident when we contrast trauma and *txitzi’n*.

Building Identities

Peláez argues that memory is a site of struggle where indigenous women ex-combatants are demanding a right to express themselves (24). At the same time, they have to contend with a certain essentialized perception in Latin America of nostalgia for a life in the mountains as a guerrilla combatant. It is an image pregnant with romantic images of heroism and integrity, such as those compiled in *Guatemala, escuela revolucionaria de nuevos hombres* (1982; Guatemala, Revolutionary School of New Men). This vision has had a profound impact on guerrilla representation, and ex-guerrillas themselves have provided idealized images of lived experiences that fetichized combatants. Thus, it was necessary to expose the gap between the experience of lived reality and the perceived ideal to witness the contradictions that shaped the representations of women combatants and define the process of their subject-formation. After all, these ex-combatants represented new forms of witnessing. They were simultaneously participants, and survivors, struggling to record their suffering and to create a record of their destroyed communities.

Peláez’s book has in the middle of it full color photographs of the women combatants in their present state, without highlighting the aestheticizing tendencies present in most visual representation. All women

appear middle-aged and dressed in traditional indigenous clothes, often with husbands or family members. Only one picture shows a woman combatant in military fatigues when she was young, Lorenza Cedillo Chávez, out of a total of 28 women photographed. Following this logic, the book exists in a contact zone of translation between the genres of testimonio, reportage, community photograph album, and national history, producing a more permeable and multiple text that may recast the problematics of testimonio.¹⁴ We have here a similar representation but a different intent (who is speaking and why?), and appropriateness (content and form). Thus the debate shifts from the nature of form (testimonio) to the nature of memory—or to one of forms of representation and forms of memory. I would argue that discourse on representation must be accompanied by discussions of the civil war memory: not just how the war itself is represented (i.e. Stoll, Morales, Sabino) but also, how it is remembered. In this latter sense, we can always ask what the role of discursivity is in preserving the civil war memory, and nuancing remarks about testimonio made in the 1990s, we should move on to how testimonialists themselves might problematize their community and gender, adding depth and heterogeneous complexity to the category of testimonio itself, as does, for that matter, Guzaro's as well. This would go more in the direction of a form of memory representation, and as a way of illustrating the complex demands of portraying the memories of the Guatemalan civil war. We could conceivably ask ourselves, along the lines of Vinebaum, what forms should retrospective witnessing and remembrance take, and how events can transfer from history to memory.¹⁵ Ultimately, this points the way in the direction of the overall nature of indigenous discursivity as a whole, an issue I plan to address prior to my conclusion of this article.

¹⁴ Perhaps, to recall the debate on testimonio, the best texts to illuminate the issue would be Georg Gugelberger's edited volume *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America* (1996) and my edited one *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy* (2001).

Peláez's book traces both the women subject's constitution in the family and in the nation as well as in their combatant experience, while also making the reading of photographs central to its project. Nonetheless, it is the women themselves who affirm the need to remember as a vital responsibility of the subject, and concede that written knowledge has a role to play (albeit a challenging one) in preserving the memory of genocide. They thus introduce agency, while not distancing themselves from their lived reality nor leaving space for others to doubt their remembrance. Most likely, this is the result of their situation as one of temporal and spatial exile from the site of their experiences, one that needs simultaneously to build and to mourn.

As indigenous women, most of them had no childhood proper. They have no memories of playing or of enjoying leisure time. Their childhood memories are mostly about working at home, in the cornfields and on the coffee plantations of the Pacific coast, thus evoking many aspects of Menchú's narrative. Often they had to get up at 3 in the morning to haul water, make firewood, clean the hut, cook the food that all members of the family would take with them to the workplace, and then head out themselves to work on the fields, or, else, to sell the family products at the local market, a job that implied carrying huge loads on their backs while walking for miles on mountain paths towards town. If this was the case, they would head out at 2 in the morning and walk for about three or four hours to be in the town by daybreak.

Many also claim that they were not allowed to go to school because they were girls (54-56). Their brothers did go, however, and they had to wash their clothes and prepare their food for when they returned from school. Most of them were beaten by their fathers. Another common factor is that they were still children when the war started. Some remember their parents stating that war had come to Guatemala because there were too many poor people. Others recall their parents crying because their few

¹⁵ See Lisa Vinebaum's "Holocaust Representation From History to Postmemory."

animals had been shot by the soldiers, or their fields burnt. Whenever they heard rumors that the soldiers were coming, they would head out and hide in the fields. One recalled her parents being arrested and told afterwards that they had been killed. One woman who did go to school recalled that the soldiers came while she was in class, kicked the students out and shot the teacher. When she returned home, her family had disappeared. She found two brothers, and the three drifted in the mountains seven or eight months before being captured by the army. Luckily for her, the guerrillas attacked the army patrol, liberated her and her sisters, and invited them to join their ranks (58).

Peláez states that the narrative of their lives was not easy for them to verbalize. Many cried when they recalled their first menstruation or how they lived it during the war, or else when they talked about being pregnant while waging war in the mountains. Again, *txitzi'n* was invoked. They were able to deal with it because their minds were flexible and they quickly learned the inner grid of their new environment. Following this logic they lived the wartime period more as a learning process of the inner self. It was one of self-constitution and an unconventional acquisition of knowledge, rather than in the more conventional sense of death and destruction on the battlefield. For them, it transformed the sites of the atrocities into sites for the memory of the construction of their subjectivities. In this sense, their narratives portray a world that was lost, and convey the magnitude of what was lost.

In his essay, Escobar asks himself if the processes of Eurocentered modernity subalternized local histories and their corresponding designs, could there be a possibility that radical alternatives to modernity were not foreclosed? (5). For Escobar, this is merely a hypothesis. But in the experience of Maya women at war, this becomes a concrete possibility indeed. We witness an interstitial transitional space where their subalternized local history is challenged by the emerging visibility of a radical alternative as a result of the procedures of social emancipation. In this sense, this logic fits more with the present-day analysis of Javier

Sanjinés in *Rescaldos del pasado: conflictos culturales en sociedades post-coloniales* (2009), which takes as a point of departure the problem of modernity and the crisis of Western models of development in the present. According to Sanjinés, Aymara and Quechua cultures display a different mode of dealing with time. For these ethnic groups, history is not ruled by the homogeneous time of modernity, but by the intermingling of diverse ancestral histories with singular times that, while informing their identity and subjectivities, clash with the time of modernity. As a result, present-day subaltern movements insist on raising issues that apparently have nothing to do with Western logic, generating what Jewish philosopher Ernst Bloch labeled as the “non-contemporaneous contemporaneity” of subaltern aspirations. These issues, which include ancestral claims and religious practices among others, nonetheless give rise to a new politics of culture, as subalternized indigenous peoples in Latin America attempt to decolonize their respective Nation-States and re-found them in alternative fashion to Western-centered nationalism.

Fear Triggers Combat Experience

The phantasm of rape was a significant force in pushing Kumool women to the mountains. Many claimed that they joined the guerrillas out of fear of being raped by the soldiers (50). Margarita said that her village was attacked by the army and her brother was killed.¹⁶ She then decided to “*alzarse*” (the common term they all employed, akin to “rise up” or “revolt”):

My thought was that the armies (sic) had to pay because they killed my brother. I was like 15 years old... My thought was also that I had to defend my life, though I knew that the same thing that happened to my brother could happen to me, but if I died, it wouldn't be like him, my brother did not know how to use arms... But if I was to die I wanted it to be for something, for defending my life, or that of other children and young people. (76)

Eva, who spoke only Ixil, also declared that she joined when the army came

¹⁶ When speaking of the war, the women used only their pseudonyms. When speaking of the present and future, they used their legal names.

to her village. She saw them burning houses and killing people in Chajul, one of the three towns of the Ixil triangle. The Ixil Triangle is a name given to three towns in the northern part of the department of Quiché in the western highlands of Guatemala. The towns are Nebaj, Cotzal, and Chajul. The population is mostly Ixil. The origin of the name comes from the fact that, when viewed on a map, the three Ixil towns appear to form a triangle. Both her parents were killed. She then decided to fight for her life. Both her first and second husbands were also killed in combat, as was one of her sons. Maricela adds:

We headed for the mountain to save our lives. I was three years as a combatant, in that time we only ate weeds, I think I was 13 years old. I went to the guerrillas with my father and a brother, but they died in the war, they were combatants, only I was saved. (77)

Rita added that her parents approved when she joined at age 12 or 13 with her three brothers, because fellow villagers had been killed. Lucía said she feared being raped in a model village. Antolina claimed that it was a dignified war, which they fought for dignity. Estela joined when her village was massacred and the church was burnt (78). Irma also joined when the army entered her village and she feared being raped (80).

Kumool women stated that for most of them, it was a new experience not only to shed their traditional clothing, but also to have to wear pants. Others explained this heavily charged symbolic transformation as a result of their gradual politicization or even as a result of family discussions where their parents already showed sympathy for the guerrillas' cause. But for all, it was a momentous decision, symbolized by their shedding of their traditional clothes and the embracing of a military uniform. For all it was the first time they wore pants. As one explained: "At first I felt bad in pants, because I had never dressed like that; I only used a *corte* (indigenous skirt). I felt kind of ugly in pants. But little by little I got used to it. I came to like it" (51).¹⁷ It was also the first time their duties were

¹⁷ *Corte* is a wrap-around woven skirt, typical of Maya women, made on treadle looms. As used, the two ends of long panels 35-50 inches wide are seamed together to form a tube. The woman steps inside this tube and folds the material in

the same as those of the men, since they were treated exactly the same during training exercises. They were surprised to discover that some men were more afraid than women, or that some women were better shots than men. One of them added that at first they could not run as fast as men nor carry as much weight on their backs, and that she wished she had been a man. But with training, she realized that a woman's strength is the same as that of a man (53). This transfiguration removed something of the horror of the violence they witnessed and ameliorated the circumstances of extreme traumatic dislocation they underwent, it alleviated the *txitzi'n*. It also justified for them their need to see themselves represented in writing.

Brave pachita Warriors

While in the mountains, the Ixil women took special pride in being *pachitas* (74), very short, but extremely brave.¹⁸ They were not shy about describing their ability to handle weapons, to organize resistance activities or teamwork, or to display the aptitudes that made many of them *jefas de escuadra*, squadron leaders, which meant they had seven combatants under their charge, though none became platoon leaders, which would have meant having four squadrons under their charge. They also participated in medical services, political formation or in recruiting future combatants.

One of the issues on which all women take pride is that during the war, there was parity between man and woman combatants. Interestingly, their one demand when they joined was that they be able to participate on equal terms with men, evidencing already a high degree of consciousness on their part. Even though some were assigned to less front line activities such as medical services, radio communication, or political formation, this did not mean that they did not fight as well. They also shared evenly chores traditionally associated with women such as cooking, cutting firewood, washing clothes, or sentry duty (74-75). Concerning actual combat, the only

a complicated manner to form the skirt. This results in a fairly thick and heavy garment.

¹⁸ Due to chronic malnutrition, most indigenous women seldom reach five feet in height.

criterion to which they were submitted was physical ability, because it was the hardest. Some women were not chosen for combat, but many others were, and they were proud to have been chosen over men considered not strong enough for combat duty.

Following this logic, Isabel stated that she was proud of having been a good shot. Olivia remarked that she was able to join a platoon because she was one of the *chispudos*, sharp ones (81). Lucía was a squadron leader in Ixcán. She was a good shot and knew how to lead. She went from using a Mauser, to an M-16 (U.S. infantry rifle), a Galil (Israeli infantry rifle with munitions manufactured in Guatemala), to an AK-47, Russian rifles considered the best because they could be used even under water (82). Telma also learned Spanish, besides learning to read and write. Rita was in charge of raising the villagers' consciousness and also taught young children to write. But she also trained other combatants on how to prepare weapons for combat, and explained to civilians how to defend themselves from the army. Irma, whose father is K'iche' and her mother Ixil, learned both K'iche' and Spanish, as well as to write a bit in this language. She also used M-16s, Fals (Belgian rifles), carbines and revolvers, though her main job was transporting grenade boxes and machine guns, which she carried with another woman. She also specialized in fixing weapons that got stuck and in infiltrating army bases to pass messages along:

If there is combat I go and see if all have returned, if no one was wounded; if someone is, I run to notify and help carry the wounded person... As a liaison, when we reached our campground, the commander would write a letter and I would carry it... I would go alone, with the risk of finding the army on the road, I went with a bit of *pinol* (toasted corn) if not with weeds or cooked sweet potatoes. Sometimes there was nothing, only pepper, and that's how we'd go into combat. (83)

Lina mentioned that she never felt alone because she had her gun with her and this calmed her down. She felt free in the mountains. She was also a combatant and learned Spanish. Flora also learned Spanish with the guerrillas, carried a weapon and was trained to work using the book *Where There Is No Doctor*. She became a health instructor, and later coordinated

17 “communities of peoples in resistance” (CPR) living in the jungle (84-85).¹⁹ Feliciano was bombed by helicopters and learned to avoid getting hit by running around big trees in the opposite direction of the helicopter’s flight path. Roselia mentioned that she was not afraid of weapons, and how when she engaged in combat she had a big surge of adrenalin, and was always happy to be in a battle and to discover the thrill of coming out alive. She claimed the best thing she ever did was to fight (87). Telma, on the contrary, preferred being a nurse and giving public speeches in community rallies. She remembered vividly the smell of blood the first time she had to dress the wounds of an injured combatant. She added:

I spent 20 years in the mountains. What we learned there was not for nothing, we didn’t win, but we learned a thing or two. For us, the struggle left us something, I think it would no longer be easy for them to push us around; we’re ready to fight and participate all over again. (88)

Despite her preference, she was a good shot and even got to carry and handle an RPG-7, a portable, shoulder-launched, anti-tank rocket propelled grenade weapon (93). She claimed the male *compañeros* would say of the women combatants, “ustedes son buzas” (you gals are sharp). Despite her love of nursing, she loved to shoot: “We practiced military harassing, search-and-destroy missions and arms recuperation. I know how to do all of that” (93). Her father was captured by the army and killed.

Lidia liked military instruction because she learned not only how to handle weapons but also what was happening to the Guatemalan people and what was happening elsewhere in the world. She also gave talks about how to handle wounded combatants in Ixil, K’iche’ and Spanish. She loved it so much she never forgot the languages she spoke. Lucía, an Ixil speaker, besides learning to speak Mam, Kaqchiquel and K’iche’, also learned how to

¹⁹ When the Army conducted its massive offensive against the Maya villages, hundreds of thousands of peasants fled to all corners of Guatemala and to the neighboring countries. A relatively small percentage of totally dispossessed people escaped into the Guatemalan jungle. In these inhospitable areas that 23,000 people went into hiding and endured a decade of hardship to survive. Gradually, they organized themselves into groups of communities, calling themselves “communities of peoples in resistance” (CPR).

read and write in Spanish. She explained that during combat, fear and loneliness vanished. She focused exclusively on confronting the army. Her mouth dried up, and she shivered because of nerves, but when she began shooting she felt a gush of heat invading her body. It was almost like a mystic experience, an ecstasy in the midst of terror. Her best friend was killed on International Women's Day, so Lucía now commemorates both every year. She was always chosen for the front lines of her platoon because of her bravery, together with 4 other women (88-89).

Like Lina, Antolina also felt free in the mountains where she lived 12 years despite the fact that the army burnt everything, there was an inordinate amount of deaths and two of her brothers were killed (89). When Amalia was captured in 1989, she was told by military officers, "We want to see you as a woman and not as man. Take your pants off" (90). She was forced to go back to wearing a *corte*. Though she was not raped, she claimed she felt as if she had because they took her pants and boots. Only Angelina emphasized the sadness of having been on the mountains, perhaps because she joined when she was only 10 years old, after her entire family had been wiped out (91). For her, the catastrophe of war's destruction of life weighed much more than the excitement of self-empowerment. Margarita did enjoy her inner experience though, expressing what she lived as if it were a sovereign moment of all desiring subjects. She claimed that when they had a brief moment to rest, they got very sad because they remembered all the dead, but they were so busy and hungry most of the time, eating only a couple of spoonfuls of *pinol* a day and exhausted from walking in the muddy jungle and carrying heavy weight in the backpack on top of the weapon and munitions while sleeping in the muck and often going without drinking water, that they had no time to think about themselves (91). As a result, *txitzi'n* was an unproductive expenditure. She added that she fought hard from 1981 to 1986. Then, her strength diminished, but she still went to the jungle by Ixcán, near the Mexican border, and on to the Cuchumatán Mountains as squadron leader. In her mind, the hardest combats were those fought at night (92).

Amanda fought for 18 years. First she was a courier, when aged 13. She was intercepted in a bus once, in San Marcos, but the soldiers did not realize she was the person carrying the *embutido* (secret document), and was let go, though they searched all people on the bus. By age 14 she was in the medical services and trained to assist in operations. She became a combatant at age 15. She said that “there was a tailor who sewed the clothes that were needed, olive green suit, pants, shirt, hat, backpack, everything” (93). Once she was in a patrol that rescued eight men and five children being tortured by the army. They took them back and cured them. The soldiers were also captured. They claimed they had been forced to do those vile deeds and joined the guerrillas as well. Amanda concludes: “For myself, when we turned in our rifles I feel (sic) that one no longer has any strength. I don’t feel very good without a weapon...” (93).

As Peláez herself points out, it is revolutionary for women in Guatemala, and especially for Maya women, to speak from the positionality of their gender without having as referent exclusively the culturally-defined activities women are supposed to perform. The added strength that it means for all of them to consciously know that being women was no impediment for the realization of tasks allegedly reserved for men, cannot be underestimated in this context.

Sex and the Mountains

Once in the mountains, indigenous women combatants often found male companions. However, to avoid promiscuity and anarchy, the guerrillas forbade sexual relations except among married couples. After all, they all had to sleep together, men and women next to each other, though wearing their clothes and combat boots. Women also stated that they wore no panties and no bra, simply because they were out of their reach (51). There were some who did not know what menstruation was until another comrade-in-arms explained it to them, because the tradition in their community was never to name it until it happened, and then, they were simply told that they were ready to be married and have children without

further explanation. Most learned about sexual hygiene in the guerrillas, where they had workshops explaining the human body and the nature of female sexuality to them. They were, for the most part, thankful for all they learned regarding sexual matters in the mountains, a taboo subject in Maya village life.²⁰ Women were friendly and complicit with each other in discouraging younger indigenous recruits from encouraging male companions to have sex with them, encouraging them to tell their commander right away if any man made an inappropriate advance. Most acknowledged that their male companions were supportive when they had their menstruation. None deny that at least a few did try to take advantage of women's bodies though; even some commanders. They qualified them as *dirigentes abusivos* (52), abusive leaders. But they also pointed out that the women in question never accepted it, got tough, and avoided getting raped and/or acquiescing to the male's advances. Most learned the meaning of sexuality in the mountains: "Some showed knowing smiles when they admitted that they know what sexual pleasure is; others made it explicit that sexual relations are also to be enjoyed, and are not only to have children or to give in to their husband's desire" (53).

In the end, most of them got married, though aware of their body's worth and having learned to label it a "personal territory," a few chose to remain single, a significant breach with indigenous tradition which traditionally pressured women to marry. Those who married also transgressed tradition though, given that they chose their partners instead of having them chosen by their fathers as in the past. Many of those who got married also tried to avoid pregnancy to extend their combat duty, and learned birth control methods. Nevertheless, they had no access to pills or any other form of contraceptives in the mountains. Indeed, they often had no access to hygienic control of their menstruations either, having at times to march in the jungle while bleeding, wearing the same pair of pants day in

²⁰ Other Maya women have taken to teaching sexuality and documenting it among Mayas. The best known is Emma Chirix's book *Alas y Raíces: Afectividad de las mujeres mayas. Rik'in ruxik' y ruxe'il Ronojel kajowab'al ri mayab' taq ixoqi'*.

and day out. Still, they all claimed they learned their rights regarding sexual and domestic violence, equality between genders, and their right to choose the number of children they wanted to have. The dichotomy of appropriation / violence generated by the subalternization process of the community as a whole became one of regulation / emancipation within the framework of the guerrilla organization, as alternatives became visible in the eyes of the citizen.

Society Has a Debt with Us

When these women turned in their arms, they all did it individually, and at different moments and times. It was not an organizational or a structured decision. Some had lost contact with the guerrillas, or chose to abandon their structure after it was decimated. Others could no longer stand the fatigue of decades of war and malnutrition. Often they ended up in opposite corners of the country of where most combatants were concentrated. Others joined the “communities of peoples in resistance” (CPR), where they spent as little as 3 years and as many as 13. All had great difficulty readapting to civilian life, besides being in miserable economic conditions and fearing reprisals from the army. Some stated that the community mocked them, harassed them or even threatened them.

Neither the government nor the URNG came to their aid, as should have been the duty of both institutions per the Peace Treaty agreement. Lucía argued that real combatants like them who spent over a decade in the mountains and jungle as combatants, were often wounded, had their feet destroyed by the long marches, the broken boots and the constant humidity, and they no longer had the strength for combat, requested their release just short of the end of the war. Younger combatants took their place, and they were lucky enough to be serving when the peace accord was signed. They then received a bonus and scholarships for studies as the “official” combatants listed by their respective organizations. About 3,000 combatants in Lucía’s condition demanded that the URNG recognize them as official ex-combatants, but nothing was done by the high command. As a

result, they were abandoned and left destitute, as well as full of rancor, resenting the ex-commanders' villas in gated communities (96). One of them stated: "We had nothing, no clothes nor *corte*, we were barefoot. When I returned to the village, some friends gave me clothes, some *güipiles* and ribbon for the hair. We had neither blankets nor a grindstone for *nixtamal*" (95).²¹

They built houses by cutting down trees and scraping to buy aluminum sheets for the roof. They had no medical or psychological support of any sort, despite the war trauma, and the trauma of returning to civilian life after years underground. As one of them stated, "When I came out, I am (sic) no longer anybody, I have nothing" (96). Lucía adds:

...When Kumool was founded, people from other countries came to ask our word, to take our time, but what was the use, who knows... It makes me feel sorry because we have not all been recognized as ex-combatants. It hurts a lot... When I remember what happened I get sad and disappointed, I'm crying and that sucks. (96-97)

Margarita was captured by the army. They took everything from her, tied her hands behind her back, and tortured her. She was not raped, but they threatened her with it. After eight days, she escaped, and in the wilderness found traces of the guerrillas. Though, in her words, she skinned her hands, feet and legs trying to catch up with them, when she finally found the guerrillas they did not believe her story. She was sent to the CPR without a weapon, "though I wanted to be armed to defend myself" (97). She felt rejected by the URNG. Nonetheless, she said she enjoys talking with other women ex-combatants about their feats.

Feliciana recognized that war is costly and painful, but she also thought it was useful, because they learned Spanish, and people learned to

²¹ A *güipil*, or huipil consists of 2 back-strap woven panels with geometric and zoomorphic designs in vibrant colors. A decorative *randa* joins the two pieces. Maya women wear them instead of Western blouses. *Nixtamal* is the treated corn that is used to make masa and hominy for tortillas, the basic food-staple for Mayas. Nixtamal is dried field corn soaked in, and then heated in a solution of slaked lime and water. Slaked lime, calcium hydroxide, is generally available in the form of "builder's lime"—not to be confused with unslaked lime, calcium oxide. Unslaked lime cannot be used for making nixtamal. It is the lime that contributes to the unique taste and texture of corn tortillas.

raise their heads. Nonetheless, she resented that some villagers call people like her *poxnai*, the name of a weed that grows in the mountains. The army used that name to insultingly name all those villagers who had joined the guerrillas. To defend themselves, they now joke about being *poxnai*, turning the word's meaning inside out as has been done with other insulting epithets elsewhere.

Feeling ignored by all sides, the ex-combatants founded the Kumool association to press their rights. Amalia plainly stated that they were ignored during demobilization and that they felt the URNG used them "as a ladder," that is, their commanders stepped on them to get to the highest positions of power in the country.²² Feliciano stated this about Kumool:

We are like in a family and we make petitions for everyone, although not much comes, we only receive a little. Here we get happy (sic) because we see each other again, we all fought against the armies (sic), we call each other *compañeros*, the same as in the guerrilla, because we are equal. (98)

Kumool has expanded its base to include not only men, but also ex-civil patrolmen and even ex-soldiers recruited by force into the army ranks.²³ All the members interviewed by Peláez's team spoke of wanting to be recognized as *alzadas* amidst feelings of frustration when they remembered that late-comers to the guerrillas were given a credential and compensation as part of the official demobilization process. As they understand it, they sacrificed the prime of their lives for the betterment of Guatemalan society, and they all felt that they are owed a minimal recognition for their efforts as

²² Indeed, since 1996, numerous ex-commanders have been government ministers, congressmen, or run for president, though the two most important ones, Ricardo Ramírez of the EGP and Rodrigo Asturias of ORPA, both died of various health complications. Most surviving commanders do live in the most exclusive areas of Guatemala City.

²³ According to Victoria Sanford, the Civil Patrols themselves constituted an integral part of the army's counterinsurgency campaign. Forced participation in the civil patrols often took the form of torturing, assassinating and massacring innocent people under army order. Those civil patrollers who refused to comply were always tortured and often killed. See "Civil Patrol Massacres and the 'Gray Zone' of Justice." Regarding indigenous soldiers, there was no official draft in Guatemala prior to the peace accords. Soldiers were forcefully recruited in Guatemalan villages in the aftermath of local *ferias* (yearly festivities dedicated to honor the town's emblematic saint), often when they were passed out drunk.

an act of justice. One of them even drew a radical conclusion: “The war isn’t over yet, it just calmed down, because the poor people are still there, and so is the army; it’s true that our situation changed a little, because before they were persecuting us, and now they are not” (101).

Assessing the present situation, Tomasa Jorge Ajanel stated emphatically that “without women there is no revolution” (103). María Itzep Acabal added that in the guerrillas they developed their thirst for knowledge. They did not have time to study because of all the military activities, but they came to appreciate it, and are transmitting that to their children. She claimed that “la guerrilla nos despertó” (the guerrilla woke us up; 104), and added that if women have the freedom to fight, they then have the rights to participate in all activities, anywhere. To her it means freedom for women, and time to do constructive tasks beyond the traditional chores assigned to women. Santa Anastasia Tzoc Velásquez claimed they now do some of the work men used to do, but men never do women’s work. Catarina Matom Velasco added that for her the war was worth it because discrimination was worse before, especially against indigenous children that spoke no Spanish. She also claimed that now women have the right to belong to organizations, and that all children—boy and girls—go to school, whereas in the past only boys went (106). Juana Santiago Chel said that now, they have to see things with their own eyes, prior to giving their consent. Elena Cobo Gómez stated that women have to be autonomous, and that she explains to her daughters their rights and their freedom to be whoever they want to be.

As Kumool, they demand access to jobs, to health resources, scholarships for children, housing, fertilizers and land, so as to be able to emerge as communities from their present economic state and fully develop their capacities. For women specifically they demand a literacy campaign, weaving materials, workshops to learn miscellaneous crafts, scholarships for activists to professionalize their leadership qualities, training in community health and in remunerative activities to be able to generate their own income. The Kumool project asserts a logic of difference and

possibility against the hegemonizing forces that Ladinos, right and left, have exercised during the decade after peace was signed, in complicity with neo-liberal ideology. In Arturo Escobar's words, they are trying "to make visible a landscape of cultural, ecological and economic differences" (18), that, by its very seemingly uncanny nature, comes together with alternative projects of feminism around the politics of place, themselves anchored in ethnic identity. This phenomenon alone points to the necessity of reading ethnicity in different registers to accommodate its very heterogeneity.

As I have argued elsewhere, demands such as those presented by the Kumool women make it evident that alternative knowledge producers were transforming themselves and becoming the providers of a self-generated cognition, one originating in sites that were neither traditional nor conventional.²⁴ Their symbolic imaginaries have successfully problematized the colonial nature of Latin American nation-states and evidenced the existence of conflictive historical processes that could not be solved within a diversity of homogeneous ethnic cultures, but instead ensured aporetic conflicts and alterities.

Discourse Itself

A short reflection should be made in the end on the nature of the Ixil women's discursivity. Whereas all the quotes cited on Peláez's book are in Spanish, and are also the direct transcription of these women's words, it should not be forgotten that they are Ixil women, for whom Spanish is their second language, if not their third or fourth. Their own Spanish is the product of an intercultural dialogue, and of the intersubjectivity of Mayas and Ladinos; that is, their relationality in questions of inter-ethnic dialogue, one that is mediated by the phantasm of race. In the eyes of many Ladinos, the grammatical mistakes made by Mayas when speaking Spanish chart the effects of racialized difference in the production of their own imaginary. In their eyes, Maya Spanish is quaint, when not "cute" or

²⁴ See "The Ghosts of the Past, Human Dignity, and the Collective Need for Reparation."

mocked, but it is also always wrong.²⁵ Its reading, therefore, should be complemented with an analysis of the subject formation of Ladinos themselves. Maya discursivity in Spanish is one in which racialized subjects and Ladino-ness are conjointly produced. When reading the Maya use of Spanish, it unfolds an inter-affectivity and inter-corporeality of Indigenous and non-Indigenous subjects, one already embedded within the cultural and historical specificity of Latin American *indigenismo*. This repudiation both of the continuity and the persistence of “bad Spanish” is also a product of unresolved Ladino anxiety. But these traces of oral performativity also remind us of the transactional and transitive nature of “telling testimonio”—the fact that it constitutes a social exchange of telling and listening. The original performativity of the text foreshadows its re-animation in the act of reading, convening Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples alike. Thus some of its alleged charm, and my justification for translating it with its grammatical mistakes, a “border” which, as Taussig suggests, emits rather than contains turbulent social, historical and psychic forces.

Maya Indigenous Discursivity

Needless to say, *Memorias* originality has to do with the topicality of women guerrilla fighters. Still, as indicated earlier in this essay, we have to place this text within a broader register of Maya indigenous discursivity. As I indicated in a previous book, *Taking Their Word*, one of the most important responses to the post-war period changes in Central America, to the exhaustion of Ladino/Mestizo discursivity as well as by the hybrid contradictions of representation of the subaltern subject by Mestizo *letrados*, was given by Maya literature. The latter introduced into the literary / symbolic process new linguistic and representational challenges, managing to provincialize Spanish as an organic vehicle in the constitution of symbolic imaginaries, and especially succeed in problematizing the

²⁵ Diane Nelson has an entire chapter on jokes about Menchú’s Spanish in her book *A Finger in the Wound*.

nature of the Nation-State itself. While exposing the nature of Latin American nation-states as artifices constructed from prefabricated symbolic codes, these scriptural processes could also be read as an expression of “the burden of representation” (Hall) and a belated embrace of the “lettered city” on the part of emerging Maya *letrados*, who also have to be concerned with not repeating the failures of their Ladino counterparts. Still, it would be a cultural artifact in the making, in a contact zone with “worldliness” (Said) that promises a bridging of the subaltern’s otherness.

Regardless of the various genres—there is poetry, fiction, testimonio and theater written in various Maya languages, translated into Spanish most of the time by the authors themselves—Maya literature reflects the changing role played by “literature” in subaltern societies. While their cultural practices include many other expressions, from traditional weaving to painting, theater and representational ceremonial forms such as the celebration of the Maya New Year in non-traditional sites like the Central Park of Guatemala City, literature has gained in importance as a literate practice and education has increased in Maya society.

Maya novelists, such as Luis de Lión, Gaspar Pedro González or Víctor Montejo, have gained international critical recognition and readership since the publication of their work. Poet Humberto Ak’abal is now known in many parts of the world. Many women poets such as Calixta Gabriel Xiquín, Maya Cú, or Rosa Chávez, have read their works in various countries of Latin America and Europe. We are indeed witnessing the birth of a process that testifies to the knowledge, skill, value, experience and authority of previously invisibilized subjects employing fascinating rhetorical devices to engage coloniality and rearticulate their subjectivities within a decolonial framework. The overall Maya textual archive in process of constitution is already a rhetorical monument to this effort, a counter-discursive strategy of the first order for the re-articulation of an alternative social imaginary within their scope, and a promise of peoples’ abilities to rearticulate their knowledges within the limits of the Eurocentric world, to

then deploy across borders, disciplines, ethnicities, epistemes or temporalities, creative frameworks to engage and confront centuries of subalternization and colonialized oppression.²⁶

Conclusions

Peláez's text clearly functions as a space for memory and for dialogue, offering a necessary space for personal remembrance. Ultimately, with the example of the Kumool women we are presented with a new framework within the geopolitics of knowledge, one demanding respect for pluralizations of subaltern difference anchored in gender and ethnic difference. This framework produces a place-based epistemology that offers a new theoretical and political logic. It confirms that heightening social conflict, new citizens' protagonism, and abandonment of traditional political party practices can lead to ontological-political de-centering of modern politics, in the words of Marisol de la Cadena (2007), conjoining what Arturo Escobar calls "an alternative modernization" with a decolonial project, where what is at stake is the end of coloniality.

Maya women, connecting with Ladino women through organic organizations such as Agrarian Platform or *Red de Mujeres*, but also analogically through webs of signification of which Peláez's edited book is a part, are quietly breaking down the coloniality of politics that censored the presence of subalternized indigenous subjects as validated citizens and granted the exclusionary monopoly of creating national imaginaries to lettered, preferentially upper-class, Ladino men. The exclusionary character of this monopoly is at the core of the modern epistemological disputes between Ladino and Maya regimes of truth and knowledge. The traditional Guatemalan left fell on the side of Ladinos in their understanding of modernity, while also enlisting and embracing Mayas for their cause. Mayas, however, were no innocent victims caught between two fires. They clearly understood the historical opportunity offered them to

²⁶ The idea of thinking "across" is articulated by Moraña, Dussel and Jáuregui, in "Colonialism and its Replicants", their introduction to their edited

undermine the pillars that sustained the system that oppressed them, and opened up a new epistemic perspective by showing that allegedly pre-Modern subjects were perfectly capable of grasping all the tools that modernity could offer them and asserting their difference to transform themselves and reimagine their communities within the framework of a legitimate political conflict. Their behavior evidences a simultaneous co-existence of modern and non-modern conceptions of the world, implying, as Sanjinés argues, that modern thought is not an indispensable condition for oppressed social sectors to enter the public sphere. These groups can also access modern traits through alternative projects that juxtapose secular and Maya-centered traits. In turn, these hybridized elements become transformative of those Western traits originally employed by Westernized urban elites to constitute the Nation-State in the first place. Again, as Sanjinés argues, the subalternized knowledge that enters into this configuration cannot be explained by Western space-time coordinates. Yet it impacts the present, giving it a “thickness” that sets it apart from the horizon of expectations of modernity. This has become an epochal marker for the country and for indigenous peoples in the Americas, initiating a systematic reconversion of the very nature and viability of Latin American nation-states. In the aftermath of 37 years of civil war and 14 years of alleged peace which offered them no benefits whatsoever, Kumool women gave flesh and blood to the colonial difference and global coloniality by coming up with a new post-war imaginary that, however tentative and economically precarious it may seem in its present conditions, enables effective and practical resistance to the seemingly overpowering logic of neoliberal globalization. They are evidence that subaltern subjects were not subsumed within the Washington neoliberal consensus, but sought alternative possibilities. Their blueprint is an alternative vision for the construction of potential post-capitalist, post-liberal, and post-statist societies. Finally, it shows us that testimonial traits have not entirely disappeared from the horizon of literary expectations, but, rather, have

taken new unexpected turns that distance them from their initial theorization in the mid-1990s.

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