



**MEANINGS OF
VIOLENCE IN
CONTEMPORARY
LATIN AMERICA**

**EDITED BY
GABRIELA POLIT DUEÑAS
AND MARÍA HELENA RUEDA**

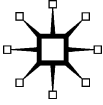


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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2011 978-0-230-11378-7

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First published in 2011 by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN®

in the United States—a division of St. Martin's Press LLC,
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN 978-1-349-29554-8

ISBN 978-0-230-12003-7 (eBook)

DOI 10.1057/9780230120037

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Meaning of violence in contemporary Latin America / edited by
Gabriela Polit Dueñas and María Helena Rueda.
p. cm.

1. Violence—Latin America. 2. Political violence—Latin America. I.
Polit Dueñas, Gabriela. II. Rueda, María Helena, 1964—

HN110.5.Z9V555 2011

303.6098—dc22

2011005473

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: August 2011

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book would have not been possible without the generous contributions and the extraordinary patience of our contributors, to all of them our deepest gratitude. Both the Spring 2008 conference that originated this project and the preparation of the volume itself relied a great deal on institutional support. From SUNY Stony Brook, we are indebted to the FAHSS research fund, the Departments of Sociology and Hispanic Languages and Literature, the Humanities Institute, and the Stony Brook-Manhattan campus, where our meeting took place. At Smith College, we received support from the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, PRESHCO, and the Committee on Faculty Compensation and Development. In the University of Texas at Austin, we would like to give a special thanks to the Teresa Lozano Long Professor of Sociology, Javier Auyero, for his unconditional support throughout this project. Thanks also to Paul Firbas, and Ibtissam Bouachrine, for their assistance during the conference; to Rachel Price for her crucial support in both the initial and latest stages of production of this book; to Pamela Newmann and Joseph Pierce, for their translations; and to Julia Marley for her editorial work. Juan Manuel Echavarría has a special place in the backstage of this production. The night before the conference that led to this volume, he opened his Manhattan studio and shared with us his work on violence in Colombia, providing an inspiration that marked all subsequent discussions.

A note on translations: unless otherwise indicated, quotes from Spanish and Portuguese throughout the book were translated to English by the author of each chapter.

INTRODUCTION

Gabriela Polit Dueñas and María Helena Rueda

The primary goal of this volume is to address a situation now described among the most pressing issues faced by Latin America in our times: the proliferation of increasingly complex forms of violence. The shadow of violence has become an inescapable part of everyday life in many places of the region. It is a reality with multiple ramifications for the population, marking the sociopolitical landscape in decisive and long-lasting ways. This book includes contributions by scholars from various fields—the social sciences, journalism, the humanities and the arts—whose work offers insightful and innovative ways to understand this situation and its effects on society. As an interdisciplinary endeavor, it also provides an array of perspectives that contribute to ongoing debates on the study of violence in the region.¹

Broadly speaking, studies on the subject tend to approach violence within two general paradigms. Some of them perceive it as a pathological phenomenon that disrupts an established social order. Others understand it as a structural problem that shapes a social order, at both the individual and collective levels. With an interest in both symbolic and physical instances of violence, the authors included in this volume challenge such categorical approaches, by examining the value systems, forms of representation, and structures of meaning that underlie different forms of violence.

The interdisciplinary approach offered in this book goes beyond characterizations of structural violence and discussions of its legitimacy—or lack thereof—to study violence through the logic of its practices. Understanding violence from this perspective implies examining not only its explicit manifestations and effects but also the social acts that precede it, provoke it, and name it. This view also involves studying the practice of violence as not limited to intentional acts, with precise motives and objectives, or to seemingly spontaneous, isolated incidents that interrupt the presumed regularity of everyday

life. Violence here appears as one of the natural yet dramatic manifestations of how individuals interrelate and organize themselves in society.

For some of the authors included in this volume, violence is an intrinsic part of the social order, a reality that encompasses both the individual and collective aspects of daily life. For others, violence is rather a force that defies and destructures a given social order. In their approach, violent practices are seen as forms of resistance, emerging both from individuals and from communities as a whole. Still other contributors deal with the representation of violence, tackling the problems implied in this process, and the aesthetic and political implications of such representations.

The eclectic approach to the uses and practices of violence included in this book raises ethical concerns with regard to the foundation and purposes of violence, and also to the way societies deal with it, in aspects such as the rule of law (or its absence), the notion of justice in both individual and collective terms, and the legitimate ways of processing traumas and articulating discourses on memory. The common ground of these essays, however, is that they offer new ways of confronting and understanding the slipperiness of violence: they show its many faces, its gray zones, its blunt manifestations, and the multiple ways in which these forms of violence are represented.²

Meanings of Violence in Contemporary Latin America continues a line of analysis set forth by Susana Rotker in *Ciudadanías del miedo* (2000) (*Citizens of Fear*, 2002), one of the first books to synthesize various scholarly concerns regarding the new forms of violence that lacerated daily life in Latin America during the last two decades of the twentieth century. Rotker's book responded to the emergence of new agents and forms of violence, which could no longer be approached within traditional paradigms. In the post-Cold War era, and with the advent of neoliberal reforms, it became more and more problematic to think violence within the traditional separation between the state and its hegemonic institutions on the one side, and the armed actors that fought against it on the other. Rotker discussed how violence became ubiquitous, manifesting itself as a constant threat, and creating a reality in which anyone could be a victim or victimizer. Cities became the primary site of this new landscape of violence, and fear its defining characteristic.

The means for accessing knowledge about violence had also changed. The proliferation and ubiquity of threats and aggression led to a crisis of meanings, and traditional narratives seemed no longer able to address such ubiquity. Analyses of violence were increasingly presented

through accounts of individual experiences and subjective representations, to which journalists, intellectuals, writers, and artists appealed in various ways, in attempts to understand violence as it happens.

Cities formerly structured through fluidity and exchange became increasingly segregated, as inhabitants constructed barriers in search of greater security. Narratives that emerged with regard to crime became intertwined with these urban transformations, leading to new social practices and structures of meaning. New categories emerged, such as those equating violence with marginality, which legitimize behaviors and perceptions that reinforce the current landscape of social fear.

Such situations, coupled with a widespread weakening of the state, gave greater legitimacy to those seeking individual protection or personal justice. This led to a diversification not only of the modalities of aggression, threats, and fear but also of the personal ways of resisting them. Today, for instance, private violence is granted impunity in virtually all sectors of society. The distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate violence, oppression and resistance, victims and victimizers are increasingly blurred in this context.

Current reflections on urban violence critique the hegemonic discourses that helped develop this landscape of violence, which equated poverty with criminality.³ By presenting poverty as a serious threat to society, these discourses implicitly cultivated fear and the desire for greater protection. Behind the pretexts of such discourses, the levels of poverty and social exclusion widened, making economic inequality the main form of violence in the region. Inequality and the diverse forms of aggression, however, must be understood against specific local histories: contexts of war and postwar, dictatorships and postdictatorships, increasing power of the drug trade and its violent machinery, mass migration and the experience of immigrants. The authors of this volume address these issues by offering their views on the new modalities of violence, together with reflections on memory, trauma, and its various expressions, as well as the links between violence and its representation.

Meanings of Violence is a contribution to the study of emerging practices of violence in Latin America. It reflects on violence as a continuum that links individual acts and responsibilities to their collective expression, connecting state interventions with the actions of communities. The perspectives laid out here link violence and its common manifestations with peaceful or violent responses to them. This book puts in perspective current practices of violence, connecting them with their remote origins, and with their lasting effects.

By bringing together the work of sociologists, anthropologists, journalists, ethnomusicologists, and literary and cultural critics, our aim is to offer an interdisciplinary perspective onto a constantly changing phenomenon, one that continues to modify our societies and the ways we understand them. While we acknowledge the risks, challenges, and limitations of a book that addresses the complexities of contemporary practices of violence in the region, we believe violence has to be understood in its contexts, both local and global, as well as in its subjective and collective forms.

The first three chapters in this volume deal specifically with testimonial representations, a genre that has received much attention, as a privileged means to access firsthand accounts of the experience of violence.⁴ Arturo Arias and María Victoria Uribe open the first section of the book focusing on trauma and memory. In “Against Violence and Oblivion: The Case of Colombia’s Disappeared,” Uribe considers various ways of coping employed by rural Colombians suffering from the social wounds left by the disappearance of bodies. She describes various personal and collective strategies for dealing with trauma, reflecting on the forms of memory they help configure. While in structural terms the violence inflicted by the guerilla, the state, or the paramilitaries may be similar—from an ethnographic perspective—Uribe explores the dissimilarities in how various groups process these experiences of war and death, to better understand the ways in which they give meaning to the present.

Uribe prioritizes the feminine voice in the articulation of memory, as does Arturo Arias in his analysis of discourse in “Txitzi’n for the Poxnai: Indigenous Women’s Discourses on Revolutionary Combat.” Arias reflects on women’s experiences during the Guatemalan war, based on material from three books of interviews and testimonials. Arias’ work calls attention to the importance of gender in processes of memory formation, by recovering women’s stories that contrast with the official truths offered by political parties, the state, and resistance groups. Women reveal a nuanced view of trauma, articulating it in a particular way. Using a postcolonial framework, his analysis opens a space in which to reflect on the value of memory as a cultural instrument of resistance.

In “Facing Unseen Violence: Ex-combatants Painting the War in Colombia,” María Helena Rueda, in collaboration with Colombian artist Juan Manuel Echavarría, registers and reflects on a specific instance of work done to preserve the historical memory of violence. Rueda describes how Echavarría conducted a series of artistic workshops in Colombia, in which former combatants from the guerrilla, the

paramilitaries, and the army narrated their war experiences through paintings. Some of the paintings were then shown in museum exhibits in Bogotá and other Colombian cities, displaying forms of violence that usually remain hidden from urban dwellers. The process involved a series of limitations on what was said or shown, drawing attention to the complexities of preserving memory in a context of aggression. It also problematized our traditional understanding of the separation between victims and victimizers, while at the same time presenting a profound exploration into art as a vehicle to evoke memories of violence and trauma.

Victor Vich in “Ricardo Wiese’s Cantutas” reflects on the staging of memory, and by extension on the implications of representing trauma. Vich analyzes the aesthetic and political dimension of a performance by Peruvian artist Ricardo Wiese, who painted giant *cantuta* flowers on the Cieneguilla hill (located on the outskirts of Lima), where the bodies of nine students and their professor were found after their assassination in the university known as La Cantuta. Vich analyzes the significance of this performance, which happened during the repressive government of Alberto Fujimori, right after an amnesty treaty was signed, and was preserved only in pictures taken by photographer Herman Schwarz. The flowers Wiese painted, eventually erased by the wind, symbolize the missing bodies, and Schwarz’s photographs represent an attempt to recover their memory in an act of resistance. As such, they were later incorporated in a poster that mobilized people against the abuses of Fujimori’s regime. In this portrayal of the double resistance to oblivion, Vich explores the esthetic representation of violence as an event that alters language and inaugurates new meanings in the social landscape.

For Hermann Herlinghaus, an aesthetics of “de-intoxication” can be what defines the ethical value of a cultural product. In “Considerations on Violence, the Global South, and an Aesthetics of Sobriety,” he examines the violence immanent in globalized societies, and explores the potential of an ethics that is inspired by Walter Benjamin’s thoughts on the dialectics of ecstasy and sobriety. From there, Herlinghaus develops the concept of a global “aesthetics of sobriety.” This aesthetics describes an ethical option in narratives from the Global South, which challenge “affective marginalization.” He questions the idea of a culture of fear in Latin America and points to artistic expressions whose undermining of ecstatic (“intoxicating”) violence communicates this aesthetic of sobriety, such as the narcocorridos that have been made a cultural and affective force by Los Tigres del Norte. For Herlinghaus, these ballads are

an example of an aesthetic that is “de-intoxicating,” with a potential for subversion.

Representations of violence can also be calls for a truth or for the legitimacy of a certain version of the truth. Analyses on how hegemony plays a part in the representation of violence abound, some related to aesthetic productions and others dealing with views on the uses of violence. These approaches typically question the criteria used to establish a truth or a series of truths about acts of violence and their agents. In “Urban Violence and the Politics of Representation in Recent Brazilian Film,” Marta Peixoto focuses on film production in Brazil since the 1990s, commenting on controversial fiction features such as *City of God*, *The Trespasser*, and *Elite Squad* and on the documentaries *News from a Personal War* and *Bus 174*. Peixoto deconstructs the supposed redemption of the poor transmitted in the film *Elite Squad*, in order to reveal how it reinforces stereotypes in subtle ways, celebrating an order established by military-trained forces. She then shows how the commercial success of certain works is proportional to how they reflect a hegemonic vision of the situation in the *favelas* (shantytowns) and their inhabitants. She contrasts this to how the same situation is portrayed in lesser-known documentaries, which include the point of view of those living in the *favelas*: *News from a Personal War* and *Bus 174*. Peixoto argues that in the process of representation certain norms are developed around the conventions used to portray violence and designate its culprits.

Through a decodification of official discourses on the killing of women in Ciudad Juárez, Socorro Tabuenca analyzes, in “Ciudad Juarez, Femicide, and the State,” the tensions and conflicts over who legitimately speaks for the city’s hundreds of dead women, and the various and contradictory ways in which they are represented by diverse societal actors—the media, politicians, bureaucrats, and non-governmental organizations. In a detailed revision of the multiple accounts that have been told over the last fifteen years about these crimes, Tabuenca shows how the survivors of such violent experiences become objects of an often-terrifying symbolic violence that confuses, threatens, and ultimately eliminates their capacity to protest or resist through political action.

A significant portion of the acts of violence that occur today in Latin America are directly or indirectly linked to illegal drug trafficking. At the national level, drug-related violence has to do with the search for inclusion and social mobility, as well as with the fragility of state institutions and their clandestine relationship with crime. Most of the victims of the war on drugs in Latin American countries

come from marginalized populations or are lower-ranking members of security forces, legal and illegal. But drug trafficking has also given rise to new rituals of violence, in which dead bodies become messages and threats. In contemporary Mexico, even the narration of drug trafficking is a dangerous challenge. In “Chronicles of Everyday Life in Culiacan,” Gabriela Polit looks at the work of reporter Javier Arturo Valdez, a founder of the weekly newspaper *Riodoce* who writes about the everyday threats and aggressions experienced by Sinaloenses. His short chronicles depict the human suffering associated with normalized violence, and the many and absurd ways in which society copes with it. Avoiding stereotypes, Valdez successfully and sometimes humorously, recreates the sinister and naïve characters of the region. While drug traffickers and their assassins are not the protagonists in these narratives, their codes and value systems permeate their language and the rules that determine their fate.

The last three chapters of this volume explore ethnographic approaches to the practice of violence. Samuel Araújo writes about his work as an ethnomusicologist in Maré, one of the oldest favelas in Rio de Janeiro. “The Sounds of Violence: Critical Perspectives from Contemporary Brazil,” offers a unique contextualization for the idea of violence as a continuum. The sounds of violence, Araújo argues, cannot be explained only as a socially orchestrated phenomenon. By including the perspective of favela residents, he suggests that violence can be best understood as a form of personal survival. Writing from his experience as an advisor to analysts and scholars living in a favela, Araújo suggests that there is a lack of dialogue between academic knowledge and local wisdom. He thus goes beyond normative explanations of violence, and challenges readers by illustrating a practical way to be actively involved in marginal areas like favela da Maré.

For more than ten years, Javier Auyero has been studying the intervention of the state as a crucial agent in the repertoire of collective action in contemporary Argentina. In the chapter he cowrites with Matt Mahler for this book, the authors refer to the “gray zone” as that space where the practices of political culture blur the lines between state coercion and collective violence. This gray zone, as the authors define the area of clandestine connections between established power holders and perpetrators of violence, is a region of social and political action that needs to be closely scrutinized, both theoretically and empirically, if we are to understand the dynamics of collective violence.

The last chapter of the volume includes a chronicle about Fuerte Apache, one of the most dangerous slums of Greater Buenos Aires, written by Cristian Alarcón. The chapter is composed of two chronicles

that were published a few weeks apart in *Diario Crónica*, Argentina, where Alarcón reported on the murder of a police officer in Fuerte Apache. As the story evolves, the killing of the policeman turns out to be an act of revenge by the local youth for the murder of one of their friends. The order of events certainly alters the outcome, thus showing how, in media portrayals of life in marginal areas, violence always has a very specific meaning. As Alarcón's story makes clear, violence in a slum emerges in response to aggression by the state. This chronicle provides a final contextualization for the conceptual theme that guided most of these essays, that is, to consider violence in its continuity.

The book concludes with an afterword by Mary Roldán, a scholar whose work on violence in Colombia has brought historical perspective to the nuanced ties between violence and social structures of power. In this text Roldán considers the ways in which every chapter in the volume establishes a dialogue with the others, and with the general context of current studies on violence in Latin America. She thus provides a thorough closing reflection on how this book can open doors to a better understanding of what is now seen as one of the most pressing issues in the region as a whole.

NOTES

1. Some recent books that discuss the new forms of violence in Latin America are the collections edited by Corona and Domínguez-Ruvalcaba (2010); Arias and Goldstein (2010); Jones and Rogers (2009); Ubilluz, Hibbett, and Vich (2009); Valenzuela Arce, Nateras Domínguez, and Reguillo Cruz (2007); Rojas and Meltzer (2005); and Frühling, Tulchin, and Golding (2003). See also the books by Rodríguez (2009) and Herlinghaus (2009).
2. The concept of *slipperiness of violence* is used by Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe I. Bourgois, in the introduction to their anthology *Violence in War and Peace* (2004):

Violence is a slippery concept—nonlinear, productive, destructive, and reproductive. It is mimetic, like imitative magic or homeopathy. “Like produces like,” that much we know. Violence gives birth to itself. So we can rightly speak of chains, spirals, and mirrors of violence—or as we prefer a continuum of violence. . . . Violence can never be understood solely in terms of its physicality—force, assault, or the infliction of pain—alone. . . . The social and cultural dimensions of violence are what give violence its power and meaning. (1)
3. Javier Auyero's ethnographies of urban destitution in the Great Buenos Aires are one of the best examples as attested in the article included in this volume. For Sao Paulo, see Teresa Caldeira's seminal book *City of Walls*

(2001). See also Rosanna Reguillo's works (1999, 2000), and Moraña's (2002) compilation of articles on urban space, communication, and violence in our times.

4. Discussions on violence in Latin America have been associated in many ways with the idea of testimony as an imprint of aggression. While some countries seek ways to address traumas left by experiences of war and repression, a complex debate has emerged over how to configure the memory of violence. The Truth Commissions in Guatemala and Peru, for example, have problematized the very notion of truth, opening a space for reflections on the precise meaning of stories generated by violence. Aside from giving a voice to the subaltern, the testimonial genre brings new insights into the nature of memory and its representation. *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy* (2001), edited by Arturo Arias, closed a chapter in academic discussions on this issue, but there is still a need to rethink the discourse of testimony in the current context of violence.

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TXITZI'N FOR THE POXNAI:
 INDIGENOUS WOMEN'S DISCOURSES
 ON REVOLUTIONARY COMBAT

Arturo Arias

Official analyses of the Guatemalan civil war (1960–1996) shift between those that proclaim massive and/or enthusiastic indigenous participation in guerrilla organizations and those that claim that there was a manipulation of innocent, or ignorant, “indigenous masses.”¹ 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 entire process. In the Guatemalan case, global and local actors from opposing academic power fields remain mired in generalities. As a result, perfunctory phrases such as “indigenous masses,” “indigenous combatants,” or “indigenous ex-URNG members” (URNG is the Spanish acronym for the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity) continue to circulate in most papers written about the subject without any serious problematization of the meaning of these vague notions.² What is more, in the midst of their mudslinging, neither side has, for the most part, spoken of gender, nor have they allowed the voices of indigenous ex-combatants to be heard directly. That is, very few people have actually interviewed indigenous ex-combatants to hear their own explanations for choosing to engage in revolutionary war, perhaps one of the most dramatic limit-experiences and demonstrations of agency in which an individual can engage.

Part of this obscurity is attributable to the fact that the Maya uprising in Guatemala happened before cyberspace became an alternative means to official (and officially censored) methods of disseminating information. Yet this cannot be the only possible explanation. Indeed,

the phenomenon appears to derive in part from what Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano has named “the coloniality of power,” a theory that 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 and thus constitute 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,³ a concept that would account for the structuring effects of national elites who articulate social relations reflecting the coloniality of power within a given nation-state, where they most often find their natural ground and stability, their space of emplacement. Finally, it would coincide with what Boaventura de Sousa Santos labels “abyssal thinking,” in which subalternized peoples become nonexistent in the eyes of Westerners exercising hegemony.⁴

Even for a Ladino, or mestizo, Marxist revolutionary, 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. Although 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 modern Western thinking. Indigenous discursivity, on the other hand, problematized Marxist certainty, pointing out that it implied merely a Eurocentric point of view that privileged class struggle. It thus destabilized and decentered this singular form of modern certainty. It showed Ladino revolutionary leaders that they did not live in a homogeneous and coherent space patterned after modern Europe, but, rather, one conceived of by Europeans as premodern. It is my contention that this blindness has led Ladino revolutionaries and analysts to refuse systematically to account for the coexistence of Ladino and Maya cultural forms, that is, of accepting the reality of non-Western conceptual systems within the nation-state, especially since these might problematize their class analysis. In my understanding, these factors account for the lack of sources documenting indigenous accounts on the war.⁵ In this paper, therefore, I intend to bring to light indigenous discursivity about the war, focusing on testimonials by indigenous women ex-combatants.

If indigenous accounts in general have been virtually ignored, even less 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*

(Our Utopias: Guatemalan Women of the 20th Century), a series of interviews of women involved in the Guatemalan revolutionary war.⁶ Not all interviews were with indigenous combatants or even about combatants as a whole, but a few were. In 2006, Susan A. Berger published *Guatemaltecas: The Women's Movement 1986–2003*, in which she argued that a counterdiscourse to globalization had slowly emerged within the Guatemalan women's movement. Again, her book is not primarily about combatants and less so about indigenous women, but it necessarily touches marginally on some of those experiences. Finally, in 2008, Ligia Peláez edited *Memorias rebeldes contra el olvido: Paasantz'ila Txumb'al Ti' Sortzeb'al K'u'l* (Rebel Memories Against Oblivion),⁷ a book that I will use as a primary source for analyzing 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?), followed by a preamble signed by the ADIQ-Kumool Women Ex-Combatants Collective.⁸ In it they state that they are all Maya women, primarily Ixils, though a few are K'iche', and that, 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. None of them, however, was included in the official list of demobilized combatants that the URNG presented to the UN and the Guatemalan government in 1996. When the Peace Treaty was signed on December 28 of that year, they were all scattered in the jungle, distrustful, wary, and afraid, and they were thus left out of the official peace process. It should be noted that they were de facto abandoned by the EGP, the organization in which they militated, 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 1999.⁹

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 2006.¹⁰ 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).¹¹ The ex-combatants complained at this meeting about their situation. Peláez perceived intuitively the epistemological decolonizing attitude rooted in the catharsis of their anger.¹² From a purely alternative ethical stance devoid of any theorization,¹³ these seemingly

plain indigenous women understood that the former combatants were divided into two realms: “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 other side of the line,” where they had been dumped, invisible to the Ladino Westernized world. In order to make the Peace Treaty benefit the Ladino elite who fought on both sides of the war, on the traditional modern ideological grid of right and left, the indigenous majority had to be invisibilized, exemplifying Arif Dirlik’s claims that “nationalism of the ethnoculturalist kind has always presented a predicament of easy slippage to racism” (1368). In this case, Mayas end up essentialized as premodern, inferior beings lacking reasoning. We cannot lose sight of the power dynamics of this labeling, nor of the coherence it lends to racial thinking across Guatemala. Within this context, the Kumool women struggled to reclaim the dignity of their culture and their struggle; they 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, but, rather, they wanted the right to envision their own future.

The dismissive attitude Pelález perceived led her to bring together journalists and activists to help them record their experience. In June 2006, Pelález, Rosalinda Hernández, and Andrea Carrillo, journalists from *laCuerda*, a feminist weekly, Ana López, another colleague from AVANCSO, and Jacqueline Torres from the communications team of the Agrarian Platform¹⁴ met with 33 Kumool women between 35 and 45 years of age in Nebaj.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ They themselves stated that they wanted to do this so that “the youth of the country can come to know it, and they can form for themselves an idea of how things happened” (*Memorias* 9).¹⁷ In other words, these women wanted to exist in a relevant and comprehensible way of being. They were implicitly demanding a theory that would more or less enable constructive action on behalf of subalternized peoples, empowering their knowledge to contest the dominant discourse of the postwar 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 for conveying the unnamable condition of surviving genocide (*Memorias* 14), one 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 the women as comprehensible subjects. The need to talk about profound pain, never previously articulated discursively by any of them, nor by most Maya women under Western eyes, was followed by a different emotion tied to agency, 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. By naming the past, they were able to talk about the future because it made them fully conscious of their identities as ex-combatants, and as women who could 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 mountain, so that whenever they were in a social gathering in a village they recognized females who were ex-combatants because 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” (*Memorias* 16).

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 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.

In the middle of Peláez's book are full-color photographs of the women combatants in their present state that do not highlight the aestheticizing tendencies present in most visual representations of guerrillas or soldiers. All the women appear middle-aged and dressed in traditional indigenous clothes, often with husbands or family members. Only one picture out of a total of 28—that of Lorenza Cedillo Chávez—shows a woman combatant in military fatigues when she was young. The nature of the photos in the book therefore creates a contact zone 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*.¹⁸ We have here a similar representation of the voice and image of subaltern subjects but a different intent because these are not the passive informants of a Western subject but the architects of their own discourse. Thus the debate shifts from the nature of a genre or form (*testimonio*) to the nature of memory, or, rather to the forms of representation and the forms of memory. Indeed, 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. That is, we should always ask what the role of discursivity is in preserving civil war memory, and, nuancing remarks about *testimonio* made in the 1990s, we should move on to how testimonialists might problematize their community and gender. This would allow us to explore the representation of memory and to illustrate the complex demands of portraying the memories of the Guatemalan civil war. We could conceivably ask ourselves, along the lines of Vinebaum, what forms retrospective witnessing and remembrance should take, and how events are transferred from history to memory.¹⁹

Peláez's book traces the constitution of the women subjects, not only in the family and the nation, but also in their combatant experiences, while also making the reading of photographs central to the recovery 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 insist upon their own agency, without distancing themselves from their lived

reality or leaving space for others to doubt their remembrance. Their discourse thus marks a temporal and spatial exile from the site of their experiences, a simultaneous need to build and to mourn.

As indigenous women, most of the combatants had no childhood proper, as conceived by Western society. 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 Rigoberta Menchú's narrative. Often they had to get up at three 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 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 toward town. If this were the case, they would head out at two 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 (*Memorias* 54–56). Their brothers did go, however, and the girls had to wash the clothes of their male siblings 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 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 then being told afterward 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 wandered in the mountains for seven or eight months before being captured by the army. Later, the guerrillas attacked the army patrol, liberated her and her brothers, and invited them to join their ranks (*Memorias* 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 when they talked about being pregnant while waging war in the mountains. Again, *txitzi'n* was invoked. For some, this concept became somewhat of a mystical or inner experience. It was as if their heads contained opposing viewpoints at the

same time. They were able to deal with it because their minds were flexible, and they quickly learned the grid of their new inner environment. Though described in simple, plain words, it was 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.”²⁰ In this logic they lived their 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 one of death and destruction on the battlefield, as it is traditionally conceived. 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 and gained in a way that other discursivities or testimonios cannot.

In his essay, Escobar asks himself, if the processes of Eurocentered modernity subalternized local histories and their corresponding designs, could there still be a possibility that radical alternatives to modernity were not foreclosed? (5). For Escobar, this possibility is merely a hypothesis, but in the experience of Maya women at war, it becomes concrete. In this text, 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.

FEAR TRIGGERS COMBAT EXPERIENCE

The phantasm of rape was a significant force that pushed indigenous women to the mountains; indeed, many women claimed that they joined the guerrillas out of fear of being raped by the soldiers (*Memorias* 50). Margarita said that her village was attacked by the army and her brother was killed.²¹ 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)²²

Eva, who spoke only Ixil, also declared that she joined the guerrilla when the army came to her village. She saw them burning houses and

killing people in Chajul, one of the three towns of the Ixil 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" (*Memorias* 77).²³

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 war that 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 the important symbolism of changing their manner of dress. Some explained this heavily charged transformation as a result of their gradual politicization or even as a result of family discussions in which their parents already showed sympathy for the guerrillas' cause. It was a momentous decision, symbolized by shedding their traditional clothes and embracing a military uniform. For all of them 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*. I felt kind of ugly in pants. But little by little I got used to it. I came to like it" (*Memorias* 51).²⁴ It was also the first time their duties were 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 or carry as much weight on their backs, and that she wished she was a man. But with training, she realized that a woman's strength is the same as that of a man (*Memorias* 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*" (*Memorias* 74), very short, but extremely brave.²⁵ They were not shy about describing their ability to handle weapons, to