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WHOSE PAST, WHOSE PRESENT?

Historical Memory Among the "Postwar" Generation in Guatemala

In Gladis's social studies classroom, rows of uniformed 10th graders concentrated on the blackboard at the front of the room, where I displayed a photo of the mural that was painted on the walls outside their school.[i] The mural depicted Mayan history, from ancient times to present day, and it stretched nearly 200 feet from the neighboring cemetery to the school entrance, an intentional crossroads between youth and their Mayan ancestry. The students in the room walked by the mural every day, yet many of them never understood its meaning, especially the illustrations of Guatemala's *Conflicto Armado*, 36 years of "armed conflict," including ethnic genocide. With me as their class guest, we began talking about why this conflict took place, who was involved, and whether this past was relevant to their lives today, nearly 15 years after its official end.

The conversation that ensued encompassed evasions and silences, but also bold proclamations about accountability and long-term consequences. One student claimed that Guatemalans were "more violent back then," while another insisted that Guatemala had always suffered a "culture of violence." One girl noted that the state was responsible, while another rushed to defend the state's actions on behalf of national security. Gladis turned their attention from their open textbooks, a four-page spread about the postwar peace process with little mention of the conflict's causes, and asked the class what they knew about the internal armed conflict, perhaps from their parents. Finally, Luis Fernando, a small boy in the back, raised his hand and asked, "What is the *Conflicto Armado*?"

In the aftermath of mass violence, history education is increasingly considered an essential element of transitional justice processes, clarifying the historical record, reestablishing moral frameworks, promoting social reconciliation, and acknowledging past atrocity for future generations (Cole, 2007; Cole & Murphy, 2007; Minow, 1998; Cole & Barsalou, 2006). Education and transitional justice researchers consider historical narratives a critical site of collective identity formation through which both shared national identities and individual civic competencies are realized (Cole & Barsalou, 2006; Freedman, Weinstein, Murphy, & Longman, 2008). But for all of the potential civic promises to deliver a "culture of peace" or a "culture of human rights," history education remains reliant on the connections that learners make to their own lives (Bellino & Selman, 2012; Boix-Mansilla, 2000).

When Guatemala's *Conflicto Armado* ended, negotiators of the Peace Accords recognized education's instrumental role in sanctioning racism, both in terms of unequal access and treatment of indigenous students, as well as discriminatory curricular representations of indigenous populations and cultural practices. Attempting to redress these issues while promoting social reconciliation, representatives envisioned a shift toward human rights education that would emphasize the nations' pluricultural identity and a "culture of peace," placing particular attention on the rights of women, children, and indigenous communities (Peace Accords, 1996). Though many aspects of educational reform remain controversial (Poppema, 2009), the culture of peace framework is pervasive in contemporary curricula (Ministry of Education, 2010; Oglesby, 2007a), inscribed within the broader human rights agenda of human rights education (Instituto Interamericano de Derechos Humanos, 2007). This combination of educational approaches is promising in its potential for developing student knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about human rights and responsibilities while enhancing adolescents' capacity for civic action, especially following conflict (Davies, 2004; Tibbitts, 2008). Nevertheless, the state has yet to settle on a national curriculum for the history of the conflict, with an emphasis on social studies and civics supplanting historical content and disciplinary inquiry (Oglesby, 2007a, 2007b).

Following such divisive violence, a lack of consensus about historical events themselves—not to mention the articulation of a narrative that is inclusive and accountable to the variety of lived experiences—can prompt

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competing accounts within, and outside, formal educational institutions (Barton & McCully, 2010; Wertsch, 2002, 2006). As a result, historical silence and compromise narratives that assign equal accountability to all members of society are frequently invoked in official spaces, in the name of peace and reconciliation (Cole, 2007; Kaiser, 2005; Weldon, 2010). Even when Guatemalan educators are willing to critically engage with the past, in most cases absent of particular training and resources, conflicting family and community narratives often contest schools' "official" historical accounts. Instead, families argue for the "recovery of historical memory" (rhetoric derived from the Recovery of Historical Memory Project, 1999) and the agency to construct their own recollections. Unlike official tropes that generalize about the past, "historical memory" emphasizes individual memory narratives based on direct testimony, often linked to the lived experience of victimization (Oglesby, 2007b; Wertsch, 2006). Historical memory is less about "what happened" and more concerned with what is remembered and the meaning made through that memory act (Portelli, 1990).

But how do individuals and communities construct memories of war when violence continues or reemerges outside the formal declaration of war? Guatemala's "postwar" context is defined by ongoing violence and impunity for past and present crime. Understanding Guatemala's violent past in the context of ongoing violence presents a critical dilemma for history education: What should educators teach young learners about the world when contemporary crime overshadows recent genocide, and when memories of violence are sometimes perceived as threats to peace? How do teachers' and parents' conscious and unconscious decisions to educate the "postwar" generation about the *Conflicto Armado* reinforce, complement, and contradict one another? And how do adolescents interpret these various perspectives in judging the role and relevance of this history in their present lives?

In this paper I begin with a brief history of the *Conflicto Armado* and a description of the violence in contemporary Guatemala, the context within which the past is constructed. I then describe some of the main aspects of the "official" and "unofficial" historical narratives of the recent civil conflict, drawing on the voices of educators and parents to explain their preferences, challenges, and practices in transmitting this past to the postwar generation. Studying memory necessitates attention to hidden narratives conveyed through intentional and inadvertent silences (Jelin, 2003; Kaiser, 2005); thus, throughout the analysis, I trace the role of education through both voice and silence. Finally, I close with a discussion of the consequences of displacing the violent past from the realm of formal history education to the role of informal memory, where divisive memory communities diverge on the role of the past in the present, a discord that complicates reconciliation in the "postwar" period.

VIOLENCE IN GUATEMALA, PAST AND PRESENT

The year 1960 is commonly cited as the start of the *Conflicto Armado*, but its roots took hold long before then, spanning more than a century of structural inequality and racism. Though Guatemala's population is more than half indigenous, made up of mostly Mayans, a colonial period of foreign and postcolonial ladino (nonindigenous) domination has resulted in the social, political, and economic marginalization of Mayans. At various points in time, indigenous Guatemalans have been forced into labor and indentured servitude or denied basic human rights. Although today they are visibly celebrated as Guatemala's multicultural "wealth," the country's indigenous populations are among the poorest and most poorly educated in Latin America (Poppema, 2009).

From 1960 to 1996, Guatemala was entrenched in a civil conflict that some warily renamed a "war against civilians," underscoring that the majority of the casualties were innocent noncombatants killed at the hands of the state (Torres-Rivas, 2006). During an exceptional decade of social-democratic rule from 1944 to 1954, Guatemalan President Arbenz proposed a program of land redistribution, and the country seemed on the cusp of rectifying some of its underlying structural inequality. Immersed in Cold War ideology and policy, the United States denounced the reform as communist and authorized a Central Intelligence Agency–backed coup, leading to a series of military governments and a dwindling space for political opposition (Cullather, 1999; Schlesigner & Kinzer, 2005). Guerrilla

organizations began to emerge as a voice for the poor and excluded, a civic effort that the state dismissed as "subversive delinquency." Meanwhile, by the mid 1960s, death squads operating as covert arteries of the military began to make urban intellectuals and leaders of land and labor reform movements "disappear," spreading a culture of fear concerning political involvement (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico [CEH, Commission for Historical Clarification], 1999; Recovery of Historical Memory Project, 1999). From the 1970s to 1980s, guerrilla organizations gained popular support among some Mayan communities, but they could not protect their supporters, causing indigenous leaders to become targets of political violence and often provoking army invasions in villages that supported the "internal enemy." As the guerrillas focused their efforts on capturing army officials and collaborators, often committing public executions in the name of "revolutionary justice," the military forcibly recruited civilians, particularly indigenous males, to participate in the state army and the civil defense patrols, local paramilitary forces that both militarized and divided communities (CEH, 1999).

As violence escalated in the early 1980s, the military began its "scorched earth" campaign, systematically massacring inhabitants of 626 Mayan villages in an effort to destroy the guerrillas' popular base and the food and land that sustained the insurgency movement and to maintain a culture of terror (CEH, 1999; Sanford, 2008a). At this point, in the eyes of the army, *indigenous* became synonymous with *insurgent*. Fusing ethnic identity and political ideology, the military mobilized a genocide that targeted rural indigenous populations as the guerrillas' natural ally. Despite the ethnic nature of the conflict's most brutal period, the designation of genocide remains contentious nationally, and the *Conflicto Armado* is largely absent from global discussions of 20th-century genocides. This is, in part, because of the alleged relationship between ethnicity and political alliance, because indigenous actors were both victims and perpetrators, and because the geography of ethnic division was steeped in the country's landscape (CEH, 1999; Rothenberg, forthcoming). It is likely also related to the insidious role of the United States, protecting both economic and political interests (Cullather, 1999; Schlesigner & Kinzer, 2005).

Following the height of violence, a decade-long peace process ensued between the state and the guerrilla umbrella organization, the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity, during which punishing human rights violators became the main stumbling block. The peace process culminated in 1996, establishing a truth commission led by the United Nations to investigate human rights violations and causes of the violence, as well as make recommendations for reconciliation. With extensive historical and forensic research, the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH) determined that the *Conflicto Armado* left 200,000 disappeared and 1,000,000 displaced and attributed 93% of the human rights violations to the state military and paramilitary, 3% to guerrilla forces, and 4% as undetermined (CEH, 1999). Further, the CEH concluded that the conflict constituted genocide of particular indigenous populations, with indigenous Guatemalans constituting the vast majority of victims (83%).[ii]

This "official" historical narrative posits the state political and military powers as the chief perpetrators of violence and authors of genocide. Though reports that claim "truth" and "historical clarification" could easily be (mis)taken for the "official" past, truth commissions are themselves negotiations with the past in the context of their present and "will continue to be vigorously contested after their existence" (Hamber & Wilson, 2002, p. 36). Explicit state dismissal of the commission's findings (Oglesby, 2007b), sanctioned immunity for war criminals, and the "privatization" of the historiographic process meant that the CEH report was largely ignored by the public.

With the emergence of new forms of "postwar" violence, the memory of the *Conflicto Armado* has been further diluted. Contemporary Guatemala is plagued by a spectrum of violence, including feminicide, social cleansing, delinquency and gang violence, petty crime, organized crime, drug trafficking, vigilante justice movements, and political assassinations (Bellino, 2010, 2010/2011; Peacock & Beltrán, 2003; Sanford, 2008a, 2008b). As "postwar" homicide rates escalate to one of the highest in the contemporary world (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2010), some actors proclaim that Guatemala is experiencing a "new war."

Victims and their families contend with extensive corruption throughout local and state institutions and widespread impunity for perpetrators of violent crimes (O'Connor & Portenier, 2007). Guatemalan human rights

activists endure daily death threats, attacks, and attempts to delegitimize or incriminate not solely the individuals seeking change but also social justice issues themselves. Further, everyday experiences with corruption, injustice, and impunity send a clear message: Safety and justice are not human rights, but rather privileges for those with economic and political power. In recent years, for example, privately employed bodyguards have outnumbered national police officers by more than three to one (Torres-Rivas, 2010/2011), and it is not uncommon for children (within families of status) to attend school with one, or even 10, bodyguards.

If there exists such a condition as "post-conflict" (Davies, 2004), Guatemala's is a complex and tenuous one. While some Guatemalans theorize postwar violence as intimately connected to actors, techniques, or ideology borne from the *Conflicto Armado*, others regard these as new forms of violent expression that emerged after the conflict ended, taking advantage of a weak state, a surplus of weapons, and growing crime networks. In the case of Guatemala, then, memories of the *Conflicto Armado* cannot be understood without recognizing their contemporary embeddedness in "postwar" violence. It is only at this complex interface between past and present violence that we can understand how the larger collective of Guatemala's postwar generation reconciles with its history.

METHODOLOGY

From 2005 to 2011, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the departments of Guatemala, Quetzaltenango, Chimaltenango, Sololá, and Sacatepéquez. I collected data via participant observation, classroom observation, facilitated discussions, open-ended surveys, and semidirected interviews with social studies teachers, high school students, and parents or grandparents of school-aged adolescents. In addition, I analyzed three social studies textbooks for content relating to the *Conflicto Armado* and the Peace Accords. Though this is not a substantial sample of curricular resources, I also relied on existing literature about educational texts in Guatemala (e.g., Oglesby, 2007b).

Interactions with adolescents centered on their knowledge of the *Conflicto Armado*, with emphasis on the historical sources and social processes that influenced their engagement with these memories, accounting for formal and informal educational experiences. I also asked students whether they felt the *Conflicto Armado* was important or held personal relevance to their lives today. In total, the adolescent sample included 140 participants (62% rural, 38% urban; average age, 16.6 years).

With social studies teachers (n = 22; 68% rural; 32% urban), questions focused on preparedness and interest in teaching about the *Conflicto Armado* and student responses to the material. Many teachers urged me to talk to parents and community members to gain a better sense of the in-between space that unofficial historical narratives occupy. In talking to parents and grandparents (n = 31; 54% rural; 46% urban), my interviews considered whether, how, and why family members discussed the violent past intergenerationally, as well as their impressions of how schools handled the material.

Throughout the research process, I relied on grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) in an effort to capture how participants construct, situate, and narrate their orientations to the *Conflicto Armado*. Grounded theory coheres with ethnographic methods and "mediated action" (Wertsch, 2002), recognizing that collective remembering is "textually mediated" by human agency and cultural "texts" (oral and written), both of which are socioculturally embedded (p. 5).

FORMAL CURRICULUM'S OFFICIAL NARRATIVE: TWO DEVILS, ONE STORY

Textbooks play an important role in establishing "schematic narrative templates" for remembering the past (Wertsch, 2006). In turn, these templates set parameters for the way history is integrated into the collective consciousness, particularly histories of conflict among postwar generations (Kaiser, 2005).

Most high school–level textbooks in Guatemala include only a few passages that recount the *Conflicto Armado*, in varying degrees of detail. These official historical narratives often attribute equal culpability to state and guerrilla armies, citing a conflict between "two devils" (Oglesby, 2007a). The two devils account, employed as an "intermediate" explanation of conflict and accountability in other postconflict states, has been critiqued for portraying an inevitable past (e.g., Kaiser, 2005, p. 8). Bad things just seem to befall the Guatemalan people over time, and no one is accountable. For example, a typical textbook refrain notes the conflict's consequences for the civilian population while eluding agency, motivation, and accountability: "During the long 36 years of armed struggle (1960-96), between the guerrilla groups and the army, there were more than 50,000 indigenous assassinated and thousands of others forced to flee . . . in order to save their lives" (Contreras et al., 2008, p. 186).

In another textbook, a fictional conversation between a young indigenous girl, Julia, and her Mayan grandparents suggests that individual testimonies of the *Conflicto Armado* similarly evade agency, preserving the template of two devils. When the war "exploded" (Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 325), Julia's grandparents were forced to flee their village and take refuge in Mexico. The story bravely touches on the experience of war and displacement, though the narrative perpetuates the notion that most civilians were effectively caught between two devils. Following Julia's story, the authors may have opted to expand outward, noting that Guatemalans endured and participated in a range of experiences during the conflict, but instead the story endorses a normative template for national memory: "The story of Julia's past is very similar to that of many Guatemalan families. For 36 years (1960-1996) there was an armed conflict in our country that confronted all Guatemalans" (p. 325). While the story reflects an indigenous experience, there is no indication that there were disparate levels of perpetration or protection among groups during an identity-based conflict.

As both texts move forward, neither clarifies how the civilian population became threatened by a conflict that seemingly took place between two distinct armies. In part, these official accounts obscure agency by not making clear causal links between historical agents and the internal and external motivations guiding their actions. For example, "At that time Alberto Fuentes Mohr and Mauel Colom Argueta were assassinated, and the guerrilla, for their part, also assassinated General David Cancinos . . . of the army" (Contreras et al., 2008, p. 158). Presumably, the state military was responsible for the first deaths mentioned, but there is no clear subject to delineate agency. Motivation is not apparent for either party, but in later passages the war is characterized as a political or ideological conflict that "confronted the government forces with the armed insurgency" (p. 260), obscuring the motivations and historical context of the insurgent movement while depicting a state forced into violence in order to defend its citizens. In keeping with the "two devils" narrative, these constructions portray Guatemalan citizens as trapped within "an apparently insulated conflict between the military and the 'extreme left terror'" (Kaiser, 2005, p. 25).

Across textbooks, the causes of the *Conflicto Armado* are particularly convoluted. Even when recommended discussion questions focus on identifying historical triggers, the curriculum tiptoes around deep-rooted social, political, and economic causes. One chapter ends with a prompt to describe "the origins and development of the civil war in Guatemala" (Contreras et al., 2008, p. 167). Yet the closest this chapter comes to a causal explanation is a mention that guerrillas identified ideologically with communism. In a later chapter, this text notes that the war began with the state response to a guerrilla uprising, but without exploring the root motivations for the uprising or why either party resorted to violence. The explanation offered here is not only linear and monocausal, but also decontextualized and tautological, even though identifying "the causes that motivated the *Conflicto Armado*" (p. 259) is stated as one of the objectives of the chapter.

Another textbook offers four explicit contributors to the conflict: (1) the discrediting of authoritarian regimes, (2) general corruption in state affairs, (3) foreign intervention, and (4) social inequality and poverty (Ministry of Education, 2003, p. 326), but there is no discussion or integration among the causes. Nor does the text map these factors onto particular historical events or the motivations of various agents over time. Other texts explicitly direct this conversation into the realm of informal education, assigning homework for students to ask their families and

neighbors: "Why did the *Conflicto Armado* take place in Guatemala? Who were the groups who participated in the *Conflicto Armado*? and How did the *Conflicto Armado* affect my community?" (Ministry of Education, 2001, p. 17). (It is unclear, however, whether teachers and students take advantage of these opportunities to integrate formal and informal historical narratives. The teachers with whom I interacted suggested that this is rarely the case, partly due to the burden this method places on the student and his/her family.)

Textbooks portray the historical significance of the *Conflicto Armado* through an invisible narrative thread. In one textbook, for example, the chapter covering the 20th century catalogs the terms of Guatemala's presidents, where the conflict emerges intermittently but without an explicit narrative of its own. President García's term is described as a time when "the problems derived from the civil war continued" (Contreras et al., 2008, p. 158), and later, President Arévalo "encountered a country struck by the long civil war" (p. 161). Some presidents specifically garner praise for the way they managed violence, so that President Osorio "acquired fame for his struggle against the guerrilleros" (p. 157), and President Montt "energetically combatted the guerrilla" (p. 160). Even though President García is described as running "one of the most repressive" governments, his use of force was justified because he was able to "recover" regions that were "under subversive power" (p. 158). Language here explicitly privileges the perspective of state actors, and the escalation and scope of violence is left unapparent.

While some textbooks acknowledge that the state army committed more violence than the guerrillas (e.g., Contreras et al., 2008; see Oglesby, 2007b), the level of disproportion is often underemphasized. The word *genocide* is rarely, if ever, present in curricular accounts. Textbooks often recognize indigenous populations as the principal victims of the *Conflicto Armado*, but they neglect to explore the ethnic dimensions of the conflict in order to explain why this might be the case. One text even crudely describes the *Conflicto Armado* as an opportunity that "stimulated indigenous participation in political life" (Contreras et al., 2008, pp. 185-186).

In some cases, students are presented with the peace process before—if not in place of—content on the *Conflicto Armado*. Across all textbooks and curricular guidelines, representation of the Peace Accords is more substantial than representation of the conflict (Oglesby, 2007b). The Peace Accords are often summarized as applications of human rights to indigenous populations, highlighting "different aspects that favor Mayan people" (Contreras et al., 2008, p. 188), again provoking unexplored questions about the conflict's ethnic components. However, the Peace Accords are adamantly framed as a national achievement rather than a concession to any particular group, making explicit that postwar Guatemala is a peaceful, democratic, and pluricultural nation. Here emerges another narrative template: one in which prewar, war, and postwar are identified as distinct periods in a progressive historical trajectory.

Julia's grandparents' testimony synopsizes this plot well, as the story ends with the family's triumphant return from exile (Ministry of Education, 2003). The family now inhabits a safer Guatemala where Julia's father drives a bus (ironically, one of the most unsafe positions today) and where Julia—even as an indigenous woman—has an opportunity to become educated so that she can actively contribute to the culture of peace. The narrative template of "before-during-after the war" is further outlined in chart form where students are instructed to compare Julia's grandparents' experience over time (p. 326). Many textbooks make explicit use of the "culture of peace" framework while discussing the Peace Accords, positioning youth, such as the character of Julia, as active agents in constructing peace (e.g., Ministry of Education, 2001; see Oglesby, 2007a, 2007b).

Both the Guatemalan Ministry of Education and nongovernmental human rights groups have authored resources that embrace a more critical and rigorous history of the *Conflicto Armado* for inclusion in the national curriculum, but all have been rejected by either state or nonstate actors who view these attempts as unconstructive or as promoting biased interpretations of the past (Oglesby, 2007a; Sandoval, 2011). This ongoing curricular debate suggests that the past remains too charged to address in schools. There are, however, emergent efforts to incorporate the *Conflicto Armado* more extensively in the national curriculum, largely motivated by concern that the postwar generation is ignorant of the recent past (Sandoval, 2011).

TEACHERS' FACILITATION OF HISTORICAL MEMORY: HISTORICAL ACCURACY AND THE RESPONSIBILITY OF SCHOOLS

In my research, nearly every teacher contended that learning about the *Conflicto* was important for the postwar generation, but they ranged in terms of their readiness to incorporate historical content about the recent violence into their classroom practice, as well as their attitude toward the permissible boundaries of historical inquiry. Teachers and principals frequently asserted, "We don't really talk about that here," yet educators' interpretations of historical silence varied across actors. For example, one rural teacher said the existing curriculum on the *Conflicto Armado* was so bland that it comprised "history without memory." By this, he meant that the content emphasized "facts and dates" at the expense of "people living the past." Although this teacher addressed the *Conflicto* in his classes, he considered himself relatively silent on the topic because he relied on the "neutral" textbook account. In this way, rural educators sometimes referred to their role in representing the conflict through the lens of "two devils" as a form of contributing to historical silence. Meanwhile, many urban educators contended that they devoted a significant amount of class time to the *Conflicto Armado*, but it was not always clear whether they were in fact teaching the same, allegedly "silenced" narrative while revealing different attitudes toward the two devils template, or whether the environment itself permitted more critical inquiry.

Educators working in both rural schools, with majority indigenous student populations, and urban schools, with more heterogeneous student populations, lamented the lack of interest that contemporary adolescents expressed toward national history and cultural identity, attributing their indifference to everything from pop music to state hegemony. "I have students who don't know there was a war here. . . . When we talk about it, they think it is a tragic fiction," one teacher of an urban private school explained, a recurring comment made by educators about the postwar generation and one that earned recent headlines (Sandoval, 2011). Other teachers identified the challenge of historical distancing: "This past has nothing to do with them—they think, it's not my story, because it didn't happen to me."

Despite educators' shared concern that students lacked critical knowledge about the civil conflict, many insisted that they did not have the materials or the training necessary to facilitate discussions of the *Conflicto Armado* in classrooms. In rural areas, educators were often working with outdated textbooks and few other material resources. A principal of a rural school said they had been waiting for the revised curriculum for over a decade. Though teachers, administrators, and textbooks invite educators to supplement lesson plans with external materials, the lack of clear guidelines, the absence of professional training, and the sensitivity of the content have prevented teachers from easily incorporating this material. One teacher noted that she "would talk about it, but it is not in the curriculum. And I don't have any books or videos about this topic to use with students." Other teachers suggested that "authorities should connect all teachers and give them a lot of support to pursue work on historical memory," and that it is "the responsibility of the Ministry [of Education] to ensure that the theme gets covered in class . . . because many teachers do not know how to approach the subject and do not have the necessary information to teach it."

In the absence of material resources, oral history and testimonial narrative have become critical primary sources for teaching the past. Rural educators in particular expressed that authenticity, assured through direct experience, connoted accuracy. Indigenous teachers, then, became the authentic educators of this past, because indigenous actors participated in the *Conflicto Armado* in greater numbers on both sides, because there were many more indigenous casualties, and because the violence took place principally in rural regions inhabited by indigenous populations. In some cases, educators constructed authenticity around access to historical knowledge gained through lived experience or direct testimony; for example, one teacher noted, "I can [teach the *Conflicto Armado* effectively], because my [indigenous] family was affected, and they have transmitted their story to me, so that I can now transmit it to others." In other cases, educators more essentially linked indigenousness to a particular orientation toward the

past, claiming that indigenous educators were more willing and qualified to teach about the conflict, while some ladino educators "resisted." One urban teacher commented that all educators should discuss the *Conflicto* in the classroom, but indigenous teachers had an advantage, because "what is missing from the curriculum is the native voice." Although I did not hear ladino teachers say they felt incapable of teaching the *Conflicto Armado* because of their ethnicity, both indigenous and ladino teachers and principals commented that indigenous people "know" more because they "lived it." This link between ethnicity and authenticity was more prevalent in rural areas, where ladino teachers were sometimes working in schools with 100% indigenous student populations.

Another motivation for educators' silence on this subject was the belief that remembering the recent past would "open wounds" that had already been "healed" (see Nelson, 1999). Rather than focus on past wrongdoings, these educators contended that Guatemala needed a "usable past" that would reinforce national unity (Cole, 2007; Wertsch, 2002) and provide an opportunity to overcome a "culture of violence" and "moral poverty." These actors insisted that "we cannot live in memories," and "we need to let go of the past in favor of positive changes," "promoting a culture of peace."

Educators also chose to omit the *Conflicto Armado* from classroom discussion because of fear. Physical security was mainly a concern for individuals in rural villages that had been affected during the *Conflicto*, due to local impunity for former war criminals. Indigenous teacher Luis, who lost family members during the conflict, noted that "those who killed still greet us as if nothing happened." Ladino teachers in rural areas also expressed concerns about safety, stating, "The causes of the *Conflicto* still grip the country." Veronica, an urban ladina teacher, clarified that it was not the mention of the *Conflicto* that was dangerous, but the critique of the state that it may lead to: "It is still too soon for us to see the injustice; we only see tragedy." Veronica's words reveal the limits of historical thinking in the "postwar," offering a justification for schools' promotion of the neutral "two devils" interpretation.

Across diverse school districts and communities, teachers agreed that most of their students did not learn about the *Conflicto Armado* at home with their families; what little knowledge they came to school with, however, often proved problematic in the conveyance of historical accuracy. On one hand, teachers noted that their work became more difficult when students had never heard of the *Conflicto Armado*. The recent violence came as a "shock," "because it is such a significant event but has been so silenced." Other teachers confirmed that when students first heard about the violence in school rather than at home, the conversation proved too emotionally charged. Rodolfo noted,

> Some of my students lost their aunts, uncles, parents, grandparents. But when they ask their parents how these relatives died, their parents don't explain the war. . . . They come into school and ask me. . . . It is one thing to teach about the past, but it is very difficult when I am telling them what happened to their family.

Some teachers were more concerned with outside sources serving as background knowledge in order to establish historical context. Leonardo, who taught in a private rural Mayan school, said, "It would help teachers a lot if students knew part of our history coming in. Even if we disagree with how parents recount the past, it would still give the youth some context that we could develop in school."

On the other hand, the various narratives coming from school and family actors sometimes sharply conflicted in the classroom. Gladis, a public school teacher in the same village as Leonardo, said that prior knowledge often encouraged students to resist new information.

> They [students] already have their version from their parents or those who raised them. And this makes it more difficult for them to accept other versions of the past that are more clearly told. . . . What I mean is that it is harder to interpret a past when it has already been made personal and political for you.

Another teacher at a public urban school said that students' outside knowledge of the *Conflicto Armado* influenced classroom discussion in positive and negative ways: "It is relative. What parents teach their kids can help

facilitate our teaching at school. But it can also block different interpretations." Overall, educators placed emphasis on teaching the past "objectively" and "without bias," so that students had an opportunity to understand the "real history . . . told with truth."

According to teachers, the "real" or "objective" history ranged from the textbook depiction, underscoring the detrimental acts of both state and guerrilla armies, to the truth commission account, emphasizing historical racism and state repression. Luis described the narrative confrontation between school and family discourses as a reminder that schools needed to emphasize the "safe" narrative, even if it forced him to modify his individual viewpoint: "The challenge is they are from families with very different political beliefs. Some were on the side of the military, and some the guerrillas. How can we have an open conversation when at home they learn something very different?" Though he believed every citizen should identify the *Conflicto* as genocide, he would never use the term in the classroom, insisting, "Since you don't know who is in the room, the textbook is safe." While Luis articulated clear limits on educators' abilities to convey historical truth, nearly all educators believed that the role of schools was important in countering biased narratives that existed outside the classroom.

Across all spaces, teachers held strong opinions about their role as educators charged with responsibility for shaping a culture of peace, even when they differed on the role of historical memory in cultivating this vision.

FAMILY NARRATIVES: MY STORY, MY TRUTH

Because formal education largely silences critical discussion of the *Conflicto Armado* (Oglesby, 2007a, 2007b; Sandoval, 2011), historical narratives have been forced into "unofficial" spaces. In this context, numerous informal educational influences shape young learners' knowledge and attitudes toward the past. Adolescents indicated that intergenerational exchanges with family members were significant influences on their historical understanding, whether through narratives or silences.

Like educators, parents diverged on their stance toward educating their children about the *Conflicto Armado*, ranging from purposeful or inadvertent silence to the active, albeit cautious, shaping of their children's historical memory. Some parents openly denied discussing the conflict with their children because it was too painful, reiterating that to remember was to put a finger in a wound. Although in many cases this wound belonged exclusively to the survivor generation, in some cases, parents were concerned that painful memories would become their children's vicarious "postmemories" (Hirsch, 2008). Mario, a ladino father who had been active in labor rights movements, spoke passionately about wanting to keep his son ignorant of what he endured: "Why should I let him feel the pain I felt? I want him to live in a safe world where he doesn't have to worry about me and what I lived through." In other families, parents' purposeful silence centered on issues of safety. "We can talk about the *Conflicto* at home, but . . . we tell our children not to say anything outside this house. . . . [During the conflict] we were divided, and these divisions continue to exist."

Other parents chose not to discuss the *Conflicto Armado* with their children for very different reasons, stating that they either lacked the knowledge to sufficiently explain the past, or they did not feel that it was their story to tell. This perspective stood out among ladino parents who were less likely to directly experience the conflict and were less likely to be educated about it. One ladina mother stated simply, "I don't know how I would tell my son about this history, because I don't know what happened." Another ladina mother noted that, despite her ethnicity precluding firsthand knowledge of the *Conflicto*, she was able to educate herself, with some difficulty. "I am ladina, so I did not live the war. . . . I had to do a lot of research in order to learn about it independently." Several other ladino parents were similarly explicit about their ethnic identity impeding not only access to knowledge, but also authenticity and a right to narrate the past. Claudia's words captured this sentiment, "I am ladina, so it is not my history." Sometimes, parents' fundamental miscomprehension of the conflict lent support to the idea that the *Conflicto Armado* was an "indigenous history" in which ladinos were not implicated; for example, Regina explained

that her uncle "was tortured during the war. But they must have mistaken him for someone else, because he is not indigenous." Other times, even indigenous parents denied their authenticity as historical narrators, positing direct experience as more salient. As one indigenous mother said, "It would be important, but I did not live the *Conflicto*. My village was not really affected."

Yet another reason why many parents silenced or evaded opportunities to talk to their children about the *Conflicto Armado* was that the "past was past" and did not resonate with the needs of contemporary Guatemala. Recognizing that past and present violence often competed for economic, political, and social resources (ranging from material investments in state institutions to prominence in public discourse), parents applied this friction to knowledge resources as well. The words of one father resonated with the perspective of many ladino parents living in urban centers where postwar violence is most acute: "It does not make sense to talk about the past violence when there is so much violence today. . . . We are at war today again, and this violence is happening now." Along similar lines, both ladino and indigenous parents expressed concerns that intergenerational transmissions would transfer not only memories of violence, but also tendencies toward violent behavior. One urban ladina shared, "To discuss the *Conflicto Armado* and its causes, and to do so without bias, is not possible. And to what benefit? To agitate, to foment more hatred?"

In some families, the act of historical distancing verged on nostalgia for dictatorship control, since "at least back then, you knew who would be targeted . . . if you were 'involved in something.'[iii] Today anyone can be a victim." Because today's Guatemala is experiencing a convergence of political and social violence, these parents taught their children that the *Conflicto Armado* was "safer" than the present day.

On one hand, then, parents played a decisive role in reinforcing historical silence. On the other hand, many parents actively countered the bland historical narrative that their children learned in school, insisting that their lived experience of violence demanded a more critical interpretation. In some instances, these parents preferred that schools not teach about the conflict at all, since "the version they promote . . . is so impotent that we could call it historical silence." Recognizing that "at schools there is a distortion of the facts," one mother actively told her children about her experiences as an "indigenous victim" during the *Conflicto Armado*. "If I did not talk about what I lived, the suffering that I endured, they would not understand. They cannot understand that from any document." An urban indigenous father commented on his role as a parent educator in the face of competing memories:

> They tell the state's version of the history in schools. That's all teachers have permission to tell. But we know that the state has not admitted there was genocide here. . . . So the version of the *Conflicto Armado* that my children learn there [at school] is very different from the story I tell.

Similarly, parents who educated their children about the past frequently reacted to the discourse that remembering the past would "promote rancor," instead connecting justice to the "reclamation of historical memory." For Sandra, memory was a pathway toward imagining a just future. "They don't teach it in schools because they think it will promote hatred, but I don't have hatred, I just want justice. And part of justice is that Guatemala knows its past." In some cases, parents made explicit links between the past and present, in order to communicate its relevance to their children. Marcelo, for example, noted that learning about the *Conflicto Armado* "helps explain why Guatemala is the way that it is," allowing his children to recognize "the poverty that the *Conflicto* left . . . and to understand that discrimination and racism, unfortunately, are not new." In many ways, parents regarded historical memory as part of their social responsibility, "so that my children can know the truth and relay it to future generations" and "so that our suffering is not forgotten." Here, intergenerational memory of past suffering became deeply connected to collective identity, sometimes at the level of ethnicity, other times at the national level. One urban ladina grandmother spoke passionately about the role of all Guatemalans in promoting historical memory: "It is part of our past, part of who we are. . . . We are all responsible for educating about it." Another ladina grandmother similarly linked the memory

act to the nation moving forward: “It cannot be treated simply as . . . a stain on the nation’s history. It needs to be understood as an opportunity to change and never return to such violence.”

Across families in urban and rural areas, parents ranged in their claims that schools taught “nothing” or “very little” about the *Conflicto Armado*. They were, however, polarized regarding the “compromise” narrative that schools did promote. While some parents insisted that the conflict was too personal for schools alone to handle, others maintained that it was too political for families to manage without schools. Many indigenous parents, such as Sandra, openly contested the neutrality of two devils: “Yes, guerrillas committed violence, but it was not the same level. . . . They did not have the weapons and resources that the army had.” But several indigenous families also defended the actions of the state and even expressed nostalgia for an era when the government had a handle on violence. Eva, whose husband served in the military during the *Conflicto Armado*, believed that schools vilified the state army, while portraying the guerrilla “as if they were innocent . . . but in reality, they [guerrillas] instigated the violence in our village.” From her position of authority as a firsthand witness, Eva claimed truth in her version of the past, in which guerrillas incited violence in her home, while the military protected her.

Finally, some parents expressed practical concerns about the connection between historical knowledge and civic action: “If we don’t talk about the past, we will keep electing [former genocidaire] Ríos Montt and other military officers into our government. They are there in the first place because we don’t know our past.” Generally, this attitude rested on the assumption that creating peace required recognition of a violent past in which people were held accountable for wrongdoings, at least rhetorically if not legally: “How will we avoid repeating the past if we don’t know our past?” For these parents, historical consciousness of the *Conflicto* offered a critical opportunity to break the cycle of impunity, violence, and silence.

ADOLESCENTS: THE PAST IS PRESENT, THE PAST IS PAST

Though the easily accessible official history reveals little about the nature of the crimes committed, the ideology that drove genocidal violence, and the actors who were accountable, many young people expressed a profound sense of blame and victimization by the way the *Conflicto Armado* was nationally remembered or silenced. Young people were often caught in the web of conflicting interpretations of the past, as well as fierce debates about its relevance. In talking with youth from rural and urban areas, I observed three distinct perspectives among the postwar generation: one group was virtually ignorant of the *Conflicto Armado*, another portion believed the past to be deeply relevant to their lives, and the third faction believed the presence of this past to be irrelevant and even harmful.

Though the majority of postwar adolescents knew of the *Conflicto Armado*, many openly denied having deep knowledge about the conflict, citing a lack of discussion in private and public settings as an impediment to their learning. Nearly all adolescents struggled to identify causes of the *Conflicto Armado*, and sometimes they could not recall the principal actors who took part in the violence. Some, like Luis Fernando, had extensive knowledge about the Peace Accords, but did not recognize the violence by name and time period. Though most adolescents mentioned both some formal schooling (“I think we saw a movie about that in class”) and informal exposure to the *Conflicto Armado* (“My grandmother told me there were guerrillas”), in some cases, they claimed they had no exposure to this past, even when they were in classrooms where teachers reported discussing the *Conflicto* for a significant amount of class time.

In some cases, adolescents assumed that the absence of dialogue about the *Conflicto Armado* implied that this history “must not be important.” These students noted that schools “ignore this theme,” and adults “don’t tell you about the violence unless you ask.” Young learners were also cognizant that there was a lack of public knowledge about the *Conflicto*, similarly concluding that if “the majority is ignorant of what happened,” this “historical memory is not important to Guatemalans.” Youth’s impressions of historical silence, then, did not always correspond to adults’ intentions.

In other cases, students expressed concern that such a significant portion of the recent past was being silenced: "I don't know much about the *Conflicto Armado*, because they don't tell us anything. . . . If there were more opportunities, I would like to learn more." Another student said, "They should teach us more in school. They should not keep the past a secret." Adolescents were more likely to want to learn about the *Conflicto Armado* when they saw the recent past as relevant to their current lives. Sometimes relevancy took the form of linking history and identity, and often these identity links privileged the indigenous perspective: "We need historical memory to . . . learn more about our Mayan culture." Other responses gravitated toward the need to learn about the past as a mode of cultural protection: "History is a space . . . to fight for the Maya life."

Like the teachers and parents who assumed that these memories were more relevant to indigenous rather than national identity, students picked up on the role of ethnicity in establishing authenticity and hence relevance. One rural adolescent put it simply, "In the pueblo, history is considered important, but in the city I don't think it matters." Urban adolescents echoed this divide: "This history matters to the pueblo, because it was about them." This social disparity regarding the past's relevance also mapped onto the variation among indigenous communities, as some indigenous students believed that adolescents in Quiche Mayan villages more acutely affected by the conflict had more learning opportunities than they did in their own Kaqchikel Mayan village.[iv] Many ladino youth subscribed to the notion that the *Conflicto Armado* was an "indigenous history," at times believing that its memory placed too much blame on the ladino population. One ladino teenager lamented, "Studying the past reminds everyone that ladinos are the oppressors. But indigenous are racist too." Others echoed this concern, reinforcing the discourse that remembering only produced rancor.

The *Conflicto Armado*'s tentative relationship to contemporary violence forged another trope about the role of the past in the present, as adolescents constructed relevancy around historical connections. When they regarded contemporary violence as an outgrowth of the *Conflicto Armado*, adolescents were more likely to interpret the past as relevant. For example, many adolescents actively refuted the narrative templates in textbook accounts that described a sequential chain of prewar-war-postwar: "I think the *Conflicto Armado* didn't end. On the contrary, violence in Guatemala increases every day." In other instances, adolescents drew causal connections between the *Conflicto* and the "postwar": "The *Conflicto Armado* was the root of all the violence today." These views upheld the idea that the past was, in fact, present, and therefore important to the postwar generation.

In contrast, a number of adolescents regarded memories of the *Conflicto Armado* as an impediment to justice, peace, and social reconciliation. Occasionally revealing deep frustration toward this history's alleged prevalence despite its contemporary irrelevance, these youth positioned history as a barrier to managing present concerns such as security and impunity: "The only human rights groups that exist fight for justice in the past. What will we solve with this struggle? We need justice in the present." One urban teenager believed that activists' annual protesting of National Army Day was redundant and "pointless," since "it cannot help us today. It is in the past." The rhetoric of "the past is past" was poignant among urban adolescents, in particular.

These adolescents' historical distancing was often motivated by their contemporary contexts of violence, as urban areas have been disproportionately affected by "postwar" crime. As the past is always constructed through the lens of the present (Halbwachs, 1952/1996), experiences with contemporary violence powerfully contributed to shaping the past as irrelevant in some cases and as nostalgic in others. But the assertion of the "past as past" or the *Conflicto Armado* as an "indigenous history" was also frequently informed by historical inaccuracy, racism, and civic disempowerment. For example, one urban youth blamed current state corruption on the guerrillas whose "goal was to eliminate the militia and fight for democracy." This student positioned the guerrillas as the unfortunate victors of the conflict, which brought about a corrupt democracy responsible for present-day violence. Further, this individual believed that current perpetrators were almost exclusively indigenous. This perspective was shared by other urban youth, who considered postwar violence a vengeful indigenous response to the *Conflicto Armado*.

Others collapsed past circumstances and present mara-phobia (fear of gangs) with misinformation and harmful stereotypes. For example, one teenager explained:

> The government during the *Conflicto Armado* protected us against delinquents and gangs. But that war ended. Today the violence is so bad . . . because indigenous people have too many children and don't take care of them. When these children grow up, they become delinquents.

This adolescent's understanding of present violence was guided by beliefs that poor indigenous were today's perpetrators, precisely because they were poor and could not take care of themselves. Some indigenous youth displayed similar levels of intergroup distrust, classifying ladinos as "*ladrones*" (thieves).

Finally, some adolescents concluded that the *Conflicto Armado* was not relevant to their present-day lives, because "there is nothing you can do about it." In the absence of critical and open historical dialogue about the conflict, the postwar generation's analysis of past and present injustice frequently fell back on uncritical dismissals of Guatemala as suffering a "culture of violence" (Bellino, 2010/2011). Oglesby (2007a, 2007b) has argued that the curricular emphasis on a "culture of peace" framework has created the tautological notion that a "culture of violence" provoked the war. The "culture of violence" discourse operates as a convenient justification for past and present conflict, dismissing critical inquiry into why violence took place in the past and why it continued after the Peace Accords. In the process, this discourse perpetuates the notion that "violence is endemic because it is intrinsic," that contemporary Guatemala is violent because it is at the mercy of its violent past (Bellino, 2010/2011, p. 16).

The curriculum's deficiency of historical accountability for the *Conflicto Armado* plays a role here, portraying an inevitable past that unfolded in the absence of historical agents or systems of power. But the bigger tragedy is that students were inadvertently taught that they too were exempt from responsibility for their own actions and that citizens were powerless to affect change. Teenagers assured me, "You can get away with murder in Guatemala. Our government does it, so everyone else knows they can too." And "Guatemala has always been violent. . . . That will never change, because we have a culture of violence." This diffused sense of powerlessness and changelessness among citizens led to purposeful distrust and disengagement, with the past erecting a wall between the state and its citizens.

CONCLUSION

At first glance, what I have presented here is a web of irreconcilable contradictions: teachers describe a generation of students who lack knowledge about the recent past, but they also argue that what students learn at home is biased. Parents report that their children learn next to nothing about the conflict in schools, but how schools describe this era is problematic. Teachers report devoting class time to the *Conflicto Armado*, but students insist that they have hardly studied the material. Adolescents seem to know little about this period of violence, yet they maintain strong viewpoints about its relevance to their lives today. These inconsistencies, however, are not uncommon in postconflict sites, where disputes over historical accounts are almost never merely about "what happened," but also about "what is" and "what is becoming" (Portelli, 1990; Wertsch, 2002).

In part, the lack of critical engagement with this history across formal and informal educational agents and institutions explains the prevalence of contradictions. Meanwhile, discrepancies reveal the various interpretations of what constitutes "silence" in the aftermath of mass conflict. Transitional justice research demonstrates the need for history education to emphasize individual agency and choices that led to conflict, while promoting active citizenship (Cole & Murphy, 2007; Davies, 2004; Cole & Barsalou, 2006). In some cases, then, historical accounts that lack accountability denote silence and selective forgetting, displacing the larger social need to acknowledge atrocity. In other cases, these accounts agitate memory's wound, provoke hatred and pain, or distract attention from urgent problems in the present.

The lack of Guatemala's official, public space to examine the violent past has relegated historical memory to the realm of unofficial spaces, where local memory communities have preserved preexisting social divisions between indigenous and ladinos and between army and guerrilla sympathizers, while also creating new fractures between those who are victims of past crimes and those who are victims of crimes committed in the present. These divisions, in turn, intensify the perceived opposition between the "official past" and "historical memory."

The forthcoming curricular reforms, involving various state and nonstate stakeholders, anticipate increased content on the *Conflicto Armado*, including a victim's testimonial narrative and resources for teacher guidance (Sandoval, 2011). Coupled with the existing human rights education framework, it is possible that these reforms, once authored, approved, and implemented, will begin a dialogue among rivaling voices, legitimizing multiple historical perspectives. For now, one thing is certain: Without addressing past violence directly and critically in formal school curriculum, an institution young learners rely on for authority and clarification, simplistic explanations in and out of school risk mystifying atrocity and the historical agents and forces responsible for it.

NOTES

[i] All participant names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

[ii] There are 22 linguistically distinct Mayan communities in Guatemala. The CEH determined that genocidal acts were committed against particular Mayan communities, although many activists contend that the army directed its repressive campaign toward the Mayan population in general. This discrepancy speaks to the distinction between legal and popular definitions of genocide (see Rothenberg, 2012).

[iii] Sanford (2008b) noted that blaming the victim is a historical pattern in Guatemala, facilitating a "lexicon" of blame (pp. 119–120).

[iv] In fact, the Quiche Mayans did suffer a disproportionate amount of violence in relation to other Mayan communities. This Kaqchikel village is located in the department that suffered the fourth largest percentage of human rights violations during the *Conflicto Armado* (CEH, 1999).

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