

ARTICLES

ARTURO ARIAS*

Reconfiguring Guatemalan Historical Memory: The Lived Experience of Maya Women at War

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Official discourses on the Guatemalan civil war shift between proclaiming indigenous participation on the part of guerrilla organizations, or manipulation of “indigenous masses” on the part of Marxist-Leninist cadres, as David Stoll and other conservative voices have argued.¹ Neither side makes, for the most part, any gender or any other identitary classifications, nor do they subjectivize any combatant voices. As a result, vague notions such as “indigenous masses,” “indigenous combatants,” or “indigenous ex-URNG members” continue to be kicked around without further serious

* Tomas Rivera Regents Professor, Latin American Literature, Department of Spanish and Portuguese, University of Texas at Austin. He is a well-known expert on Central American literature, indigenous literature, and critical theory. Prior to Texas, he was Greenleaf Visiting Professor of Latin American Studies at Tulane University. His latest books include *Taking their Word: Literature and the Signs of Central America* (2007), and *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy* (2000). 2001–2003 President of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA), Professor Arias was given the Miguel Angel Asturias National Award for Lifetime Achievement in Literature in 2008 in his native Guatemala.

¹ DAVID STOLL, *RIGOBERTA MENCHÚ AND THE STORY OF ALL POOR GUATEMALANS* (1998).

analysis or problematization of any of these notions. Indeed, few people have actually interviewed indigenous ex-combatants, or else articulated their voiced explanations for engaging in revolutionary war.

Part of this obscurity is attributable to the fact that the Maya uprising in Guatemala happened before cyberspace became a means to disseminate alternative information to official (and officially censored) news. Yet this cannot be the only possible explanation. The latter is possibly more in line with what Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano has named “the coloniality of power,” a theory which emphasizes how the grid of colonialism continues to frame social, political, economic and cultural relations in Latin America.² Quijano is especially attentive to the efficacy of colonial racial categories and relations, given how they reproduce unequal political and economic power.³ They have thus constituted a framework whereby inequality reproduces itself. Gustavo Lins Ribeiro argues that it is also necessary to explore a parallel category that he labels “nationality of power” in interim fashion.⁴ This would account for the structuring effects of national elites when articulating social relations reflecting the coloniality of power within a given nation-state, where they most often find their natural ground and stability, their space of emplacement. Or, we may have to consider what Marisol de la Cadena labels “Indigenous Cosmopolitics,” a claim stating that “culture” is insufficient, even an inadequate notion, to think the challenge that indigenous politics represent, because indigeneity, as a historical formation, exceeds the notion of politics as usual, what she defines as an arena populated by rational human beings disputing the power to represent others vis-à-vis the state.⁵ De la Cadena claims that indigeneity’s current political emergence challenges the separation of nature and culture that underpins the prevalent notion of politics and propose a different political practice, plural not because of its enactment by biological bodies by themselves, but also

² Aníbal Quijano, *Colonialidad del Poder: Eurocentrismo y América Latina*, in *LA COLONIALIDAD DEL SABER: EUROCENTRISMO Y CIENCIAS SOCIALES: PERSPECTIVAS LATINOAMERICANAS* 201 (Edgardo Lander ed., 2003).

³ *Id.*

⁴ Gustavo Lins Ribeiro, *World Anthropologies: Cosmopolitics for a New Global Scenario in Anthropology*, 26 *CRITIQUE OF ANTHROPOLOGY* 363 (2006).

⁵ Marisol De la Cadena, *Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual Reflections beyond “Politics,”* 25 *CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY* 334 (2010).

conjuring nonhumans (i.e., mountains, rivers) as actors in the political arena.⁶

Indeed, scholarship on indigenous issues would seem to have changed in radical fashion from the 1980s to the present. That should explain why, even for Ladino Marxist revolutionary cadres, the coded elements imposed by the coloniality of power implied that indigenous discursivity was a space where their world was violently displaced.⁷ Indigenous discursivity represented a non-acknowledged challenge to Marxist revolutionary cadres. It problematized Marxist certainty, transforming it into merely a point of view that privileged class struggle. It thus unstabled and decentered from within its own ranks this singular form of modern certainty. It showed Ladino revolutionary leaders that they did not live in a homogeneous and coherent space, but, on the contrary, in a thoroughly phantasmatic one. It is my contention that Ladino revolutionaries and analysts have, as a result, have been unable, or else refused systematically, to account for the compatibility of Ladino and Maya cultural forms, i.e., of accepting the reality of other conceptual systems, and that this accounts for the lack of sources of any kind documenting indigenous accounts on the war.⁸ In this paper, I intend to problematize this very discursivity, to shed light on its meaning and implications by examining one text in particular.

Very little has been published on women indigenous combatants and the effects of war on them. In 1998 Norma Stoltz-Chinchilla published in Spanish *Nuestras utopías: Mujeres guatemaltecas del siglo XX* (Our Utopias: Guatemalan Women of the 20th Century), a series of interviews of women involved in the Guatemalan revolutionary war.⁹ Whereas not all interviews were about indigenous combatants, or even about combatants as a whole, a few were. In 2006, Susan A. Berger published a book, *Guatemaltecas: The*

⁶ See *id.*

⁷ *Ladino* is a word originating in colonial times, designating someone who spoke Latin (and, thus, worked at the service of the local priest, an interstitial space and positioning between the West and its Other), but which is synonymous with Mestizo, persons of mixed indigenous and European blood who, nonetheless, consider themselves “white.”

⁸ ROSALINDA HERNANDEZ ALARCÓN, MEMORIAS REBELDES CONTRA EL OLVIDO: PAASANTZILA TXUMB’AL TI’ SORTZEB’AL K’U’L (Ligia Peláez ed., 2008). This book itself states that no other text gathers the lived experiences of gendered and ethnicized subjects within a clandestine military structure.

⁹ Norma Stoltz-Chinchilla, NUESTRAS UTOPIAS: MUJERES GUATEMALTECAS DEL SIGLO XX (1998).

Women's Movement 1986–2003.¹⁰ Again, this book is not primarily about combatants, and less so about indigenous women combatants, but it necessarily touches marginally on some of these experiences. Finally, in 2008, Ligia Peláez edited a book titled *Memorias rebeldes contra el olvido: Paasantzila Txumb'al Ti' Sortzeb'al K'u'l*.¹¹ I will use Peláez's book as a primary source to analyze this topic.

I

¿QUÉ PENSAMOS LAS EX-COMBATIENTES?

Memorias rebeldes opens with the telling question *¿Qué pensamos las ex-combatientes?*¹² (What do we, ex-combatants think?) It is a preamble signed by the ADIQ-Kumool Women Ex-Combatants Collective.¹³ In it they state that they are all Maya women, primarily Ixils.¹⁴ Ethnic affirmation has always been important in Guatemala, where, prior to 1980, a strict bipolarity between Indigenous and Ladino subjects existed to organize social relations. 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 Quiché area. However, none of them were included in the official list of de-mobilized combatants that the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG, for its acronym in Spanish) presented to both the U.N. and the Guatemalan government. When the Peace Treaty was signed, the Kumool women were all scattered in the jungle, distrustful, wary, and afraid. They were thus left out of the official peace process. It should be noted that they were abandoned by the EGP, the organization in which they nominally militated, and for which they had sacrificed everything. When the Kumool women returned to their hometown, about 600 of them agreed to meet in

¹⁰ SUSAN A. BERGER, *GUATEMALTECAS: THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT 1986–2003* (2006).

¹¹ ALARCÓN, *supra* note 8. Whereas Peláez directed the project, she co-wrote it with Rosalinda Hernández Alarcón, Andrea Carrillo Samayoa, Jacqueline Torres Urizar and Ana López Molina.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ ADIQ is the Spanish acronym for Association for the Integral Development of Quiché, the Guatemalan province with predominantly Maya descent located at the center of the country's civil war.

¹⁴ While the dominant language of the indigenous population of Guatemala is K'iche', especially in the region where the Kumool women operate, other Mayan languages include Ixil, dominant in the northern Ixil Triangle of the villages of Nebaj, Chajul and Cotzal, as well as Uspantek in the town of Uspantán area, and Sakapultek in Sacapulas. ALARCÓN, *supra* note 8, at 7–9.

Nueva Esperanza, Nebaj, and they founded the Kumool Association in 1999.¹⁵

Trying to make ends meet and to help their families survive, the Kumool women attended a meeting of the *Red de Mujeres* (Women's Network) in Uspantán in May 2006.¹⁶ 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).¹⁷ The ex-combatants complained at this meeting that they had not been taken into account when the peace treaty was signed, and had been abandoned like trash without any recognition of their years of service in the name of the cause. Peláez perceived intuitively the epistemological decolonizing attitude rooted in the catharsis of their anger.¹⁸ From a purely alternative ethical stance devoid of any possible theorization,¹⁹ these seemingly plain indigenous women understood that there were two realms at work: "this side of the line," where the upper echelon of the URNG stood in cahoots with the Guatemalan government and the Army's High Command, all Ladino men presently living in the wealthiest neighborhoods of Guatemala City, and the realm of "the other side of the line" where they themselves had been dumped. In this division, their "other side of the line" vanished as reality in the eyes of the Ladino Westernized world, became non-existent, and, to make the personal benefits of the peace accord work for a tiny Ladino elite placed on both sides of the war, there was a need to indeed transform this "other side" as non-existent.

¹⁵ "Kumool" means *compañera-compañero* in ixil. A *compañero* is a fellow team member, a comrade, were it not for the overtly Communist connotation of the latter word. Comrade is actually translated as "*camarada*" in Spanish, and has a decisive Communist inflection.

¹⁶ The "Women's Network" includes Kaqchiquel, K'iche', Ixil and Ladino (mestizo) women working within the so-called Agrarian Platform.

¹⁷ AVANCSO was founded in 1986 as a private think tank to relaunch the Guatemalan social sciences after the army massacres had decimated social scientists in the country. Led since its inception by Clara Arenas, it suffered in 1990 the assassination of its top researcher, Myrna Mack, in September of that year. She was killed by members of the Presidential Guard for her research among Mayas living in the liberated areas of the jungle.

¹⁸ Personal communication with Ligia Peláez (Nov. 24, 2007, 12:56 PM) (on file with author).

¹⁹ Alternative ethics is used here in contrast to traditional ethics. Alternative ethics relates to morality and moralism, and in association with the tactics of boundary-crossing, political "incorrectness," transgression against entrenched intellectual parameters and assumptions. However, it is also an alternative code of ethics articulated within the boundaries of Maya *cosmovisión* ("worldview").

As Arif Dirlik claims, “nationalism of the ethnoculturalist kind has always presented a predicament of easy slippage to racism” one where Mayas always end up essentialized as pre-Modern, inferior beings lacking reasoning.²⁰ We cannot lose sight of the power dynamics of this labeling, nor of the coherence it lends to racial thinking across Guatemala. To the Guatemalan state, Mayas had always been fragmented non-organic bodies coexisting and intermingling with modernity. They were considered non-subjects excluded from conventional discourse, deliria of the secret threads of coloniality, and of what Boaventura De Sousa Santos has called a “sociology of absences.” This is an attitude where, under the gist of rationality, ruling elites condemn those subjects that they label as “the ignorant, the residual, the inferior, the local, and the nonproductive”²¹ to social forms of nonexistence: “They are social forms of nonexistence because the realities to which they give shape are present only as obstacles vis-à-vis the realities deemed relevant, be they scientific, advanced, superior, global, or productive realities.”²²

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

A month later, in June 2006, Peláez, Rosalinda Hernández and Andrea Carrillo, journalists from *La Cuerda*, Ana López, another colleague from AVANCSO, and Jacqueline Torres from the communications team of the Agrarian Platform, got together with thirty-three Kumool women in Nebaj between 35 and 45 years of age. By the second meeting, in July of the same year, the Kumool women, offered the chance of having the city women write 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

²⁰ Arif Dirlik, *Race Talk, Race and Contemporary Racism*, 123 PMLA 1363, 1368 (2008).

²¹ BOAVENTURA DE SOUSA SANTOS, *THE WORLD SOCIAL FORUM: A USER’S MANUAL* 17 (2004), available at http://www.ces.uc.pt/bss/documentos/fsm_eng.pdf.

²² *Id.*

posterity.²³ The Kumool women stated that they wanted to do it so “the youth of the country can know it, and they can form themselves an idea of how things happened”.²⁴ In other words, these women wanted to exist in a relevant and comprehensible way of being. They were implicitly demanding a theory that was more or less enabling of constructive action on behalf of subalternized peoples, empowering their knowledge to contest the dominant discourse of the post-war elite, and making a decolonial turn in this process.

The women in this meeting spoke of *txitzi'n*, an Ixil word that means “deep pain.” However, it 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 concept at the epistemic borders of modernity, a different paradigm to convey the un-namable condition of surviving genocide²⁵, anchoring a discourse that articulates a new relation between violence, survival, ethics and politics. Felling *txitzi'n* did not preclude agency, but, on the contrary, it was a prerequisite for meaningful agency contextualizing their struggle and constituting them as meaningful subjects. The need to talk about profound pain, never previously articulated discursively, was followed by the joy of being together again, the memories of their deeds and achievements, of their courage and capacity for decision-making. They had to talk about the past as a way of talking about the future. It made them fully conscious of their identities as ex-combatants, and as indigenous women who continue their political struggle as fully conscious indigenous subjects, and as women. As they themselves stated, they lost their fear in the mountains. Whenever they are in a social gathering in a village they recognize women who were combatants: they are always the ones who do not stand quietly and meekly behind their husbands, but the ones who speak out 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

²³ The book was financed by the Lutheran Federation. It was one of the last mini-financing projects destined to this part of the country. ALARCÓN, *supra* note 8.

²⁴ ALARCÓN, *supra* note 8, at 9. In the original Spanish, “. . . es importante que la juventud la conozca y así tenga una idea de cómo pasaron las cosas.”

²⁵ *Id.* at 14.

mountains, where everyone talked, where we were not mute, and here it's the same; I talk with everyone.²⁶

Txitzi'n is analogous to trauma, but with a difference. Whereas trauma implies suffering fear or helplessness as a result of an event involving actual or threatened death, the Maya women's response has not included those effects. This is because for them, *txitzi'n* is also a mystical or inner experience. Though described in simple, plain words, it is for them another space for the production of knowledge: an "other way of thinking" in the words of Arturo Escobar, pointing to the very possibility of talking about "worlds and knowledges otherwise."²⁷ Mayas believe that there are words too deeply embedded to come up to the surface and make conceptual understanding possible, words that anthropologist Dennis Tedlock conceives of as "words that are 'in the belly' of a person."²⁸ That is, words that a person is unable to bring to his/her consciousness and articulate. Nevertheless, the sensorial perceptions of these words operate as a defense mechanism against violence and oppression. *Txitzi'n* encompasses both aspects: trauma and healing. Ancestral principles and historic struggles of indigenous peoples have begun to disrupt, transgress and traverse Western thinking, and this disruption, transgression and traversing, advancing new notions of interculturality and decoloniality becomes evident when we contrast trauma and *txitzi'n*.

II BUILDING IDENTITIES

Peláez argues that memory is a site of struggle.²⁹ At the same time, life in the mountains as a guerrilla combatant can lend itself to the idealized image of the lived experience. This vision has had a profound impact on guerrilla representation, and ex-guerrillas themselves have provided idealized images of lived experiences that fetishized combatants. Thus, it was necessary to expose the gap between the experience of lived reality and a perceived ideal to witness contradictions that shape the representations of women

²⁶ *Id.* at 16.

²⁷ Arturo Escobar, *Mundos y Conocimientos de Otro Modo: El Programa de Investigación de Modernidad/Colonialidad Latinoamericano*, 1 TABULA RASA. 51 (2003).

²⁸ POPOL VUH: THE MAYAN BOOK OF THE DAWN OF LIFE AND THE GLORIES OF GODS AND KINGS 268 (Dennis Tedlock trans., 1996).

²⁹ ALARCÓN, *supra* note 8, at 24.

combatants to define the process of 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. Pelaez's book, which has in the middle full color photographs of the women combatants in their present state, all middle-aged women dressed in traditional indigenous clothes, often with husbands or family members.³⁰ Only one picture shows a woman combatant in military fatigues when she was young, Lorenza Cedillo Chávez, out of a total of 28 women photographed.³¹ In this logic, the book exists in a contact zone of translation between the genres of testimonio, reportage, community photograph album, and national history; it traces both the women subject's constitution in the family and in the nation as well as in their combatant experience, while also making the reading of photographs central to its project. We have here a similar representation but a different intent (who is speaking and why?), and appropriateness (content and form). Thus the debate shifts from the nature of form (testimonio) to the nature of memory—or to one of forms of representation and forms of memory. I would argue that discourse on representation must be accompanied by discussions of the civil war memory: not just how the war itself is represented but also, how it is remembered. This would go more in the direction of a form of memory representation, and as a way of illustrating the complex demands of portraying the memories of the Guatemalan civil war. Nonetheless, we should not forget that it is the women themselves who affirm the need to remember as a vital responsibility of the subject, and concede that written knowledge has a role to play (albeit a challenging one) in preserving the memory of genocide. They thus introduce agency, while not distancing themselves from their lived reality or leaving space for others to doubt their remembrance. Most likely, this is the result of their situation as one of temporal and spatial exile from the site of their experiences, one that needs simultaneously to build and to mourn.

As indigenous women, most of them had no proper childhood. They have no memories of playing or of enjoying leisure time. On the contrary, their childhood memories are mostly about working at home, in the cornfields, and on the coffee plantations of the Pacific

³⁰ *Id.* at 47.

³¹ *Id.*

coast. Often they had to get up at three in the morning to haul water, make firewood, clean the ranch, cook the food that all members of the family would take with them to the workplace, and then head out themselves to work on the fields, or else, to sell the family products at the local market, a job that implied carrying huge loads on their backs while walking for miles on mountain paths towards town. If this was the case, they would head out at 2 in the morning and walk for about three or four hours to be in the town by daybreak.

Many also claim that many were not allowed to go to school because they were girls.³² Their brothers did go, however, and they had to wash their clothes and prepare the 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 told afterwards that they had been killed. One woman who did go to school recalled that the soldiers came while she was in class, kicked the students out and shot the teacher. When she returned home, her family had disappeared. She found two brothers, and the three drifted in the mountains seven or eight months before being captured by the army. Luckily for her, the guerrillas attacked the army patrol, liberated her and her sisters, and invited them to join their ranks.³³

Pelález states that the narrative of their lives was not easy for them to verbalize. Many cried when they recalled their first menstruation or how they lived it during the war, or else when they talked about being pregnant while waging war in the mountains. There were some who did not know what menstruation was until another comrade-in-arms explained it to them, because the tradition in their community life was never to name it until it happened, and then, they were simply told that they were ready to be married and have children without further explanation. Most learned about sexual hygiene in the guerrillas, where they had workshops explaining to them the human body and the nature of female sexuality. They are, for the most part, thankful for all they learned regarding sexual matters in the mountains, as this

³² *Id.* at 54–56.

³³ *Id.* at 58.

is a taboo subject in Maya village life. Again, *txitzi'n* was invoked. They were able to deal with it because their minds were flexible and they quickly learned the inner grid of their new environment. In this logic they lived their war-time period more as a learning process of the inner self. It was one of self-constitution and an unconventional acquisition of knowledge, rather than in the more conventional sense of death and destruction on the battlefield. For them, it transformed the sites of the atrocities into sites for the memory of the construction of their subjectivities. In this sense, their narratives portray a world that was lost, and convey the magnitude of what was lost.

In his essay, Arturo Escobar asks himself that if the processes of Eurocentered modernity subalternized local histories and their corresponding designs, could the possibility that radical alternatives to modernity were not a foreclosed?³⁴ For Escobar, this is merely a hypothesis. But in the experience of Maya women at war, this becomes a concrete possibility indeed. We witness an interstitial transitional space where their subalternized local history is challenged by the emerging visibility of a radical alternative as a result of the procedures of social emancipation. Let's look at man/woman relations by way of an example.

Many women claim that they joined the guerrillas out of fear of being raped by the soldiers.³⁵ Margarita says that the village was attacked by the army and her brother was killed. 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.³⁶

Eva, who speaks only ixil, also claims that she joined when the army came to her village. She saw them burning houses and killing people

³⁴ Escobar, *supra* note 27, at 56.

³⁵ ALARCÓN, *supra* note 8, at 50.

³⁶ *Id.* at 76. In the original Spanish, “Mi pensamiento fue los ejércitos tienen que pagar porque mataron a mi hermano. Tenía como 15 años. . . . Mi pensamiento también fue tengo que defender mi vida, aunque sabía que me podía pasar lo mismo que a mi hermano, pero si muero no va a ser como él, mi hermano no sabía portar armas. . . . Pero si yo voy a morir que sea por algo, por defender mi vida, la de otros niños y jóvenes.”

in Chajul. Both her parents were killed. She then decided to fight for her life. 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.³⁷

Rita adds that her parents approved when she joined at age 12 or 13 with her three brothers, because fellow villagers had been killed. Lucía claims she feared being raped in a model village. Antolina adds that it was a dignified war, which they fought for dignity. Estela joined when her village was massacred and the church was burnt.³⁸ Irma also joined when the army entered her village and she feared being raped.³⁹

Kumool women add that for most of them, it was a new experience not only to shed their traditional clothing, but to have to wear pants. Others explained it as a result of their gradual politicization, or even as a result of family discussions where their parents already showed sympathy for the guerrillas' cause. But for all, it was a momentous decision, symbolized by their shedding of their traditional clothes and the embracing of a military uniform. For all 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".⁴⁰ It was also the first time their duties were exactly the same as those of the men, since they were treated exactly the same during training exercises. They were surprised to discover that some men were more afraid than women, or that some women were better shots than men. One of them added that at first, they could not run as fast as men nor

³⁷ *Id.* at 77. In the original Spanish, "Nosotros nos salimos a la montaña para salvar la vida. Estuve tres años como combatiente, en ese tiempo sólo comíamos hierbas, creo que tenía como 13 años. Yo me fui a la guerrilla con mi papá y un mi hermano, pero ellos murieron en la guerra, eran combatientes, sólo yo me salvé."

³⁸ *Id.* at 78.

³⁹ *Id.* at 80.

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 51. In the original Spanish, "de primero me sentía mal con pantalón, porque nunca me había vestido así, solo usaba corte. Me sentía como fea en el pantalón. Poco a poco me acostumbré. Me gustó." *Corte* is a wrap-around woven skirt, typical of Maya women, made on treadle looms. As used, the two ends of long panels 35–50 inches wide are seamed together to form a tube. The woman steps inside this tube and folds the material in a complicated manner to form the skirt. This results in a fairly thick and heavy garment.

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.⁴¹ 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 their need to see themselves represented in writing.

III BRAVE PACHITA WARRIORS

While in the mountains, the Ixil women took special pride in being "pachitas,"⁴² who are very short, but extremely brave. They were not shy about describing their ability to handle weapons, to organize resistance activities or teamwork, and displayed the aptitudes that made many of them "*jefas de escuadra*" (squadron leaders), which meant they had seven combatants under their charge (though none became platoon leaders, which entails having four squadrons under their charge). They also participated in medical services, political formation, and recruiting combatants.

One of the issues in which all women take pride is that during the war there was parity between man and woman combatants. Interestingly, their one demand when they joined was that they be able to participate on equal terms with men. Even though some were assigned to less "frontal" activities such as medical services, radio communication, or political formation, this did not mean that they did not fight as well as the men. They also evenly shared chores traditionally associated with women, such as cooking, cutting firewood, washing clothes, or doing sentry duty.⁴³ Concerning actual combat, the only criterion was physical ability, because it was the hardest to do. Many women were not chosen for combat, but many were as well, and they were proud to have been selected over men who were considered not strong enough for combat duty.

In this logic, Isabel is proud of having been a good shot. Olivia remarked that she was a member of a platoon, because she was one of the "*chispudos*" (sharp ones).⁴⁴ Lucía was a squadron leader in Ixcán.

⁴¹ *Id.* at 53.

⁴² *Id.* at 74.

⁴³ *Id.* at 74–75.

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 81.

She was a good shot and knew how to lead. She went from using a Máuser, to an M-16 (U.S. infantry rifle), a Galil (Israeli infantry rifle with munitions manufactured in Guatemala), to an AK-47, (Russian rifles considered the best because they could be used even in water).⁴⁵ Telma also learned Spanish, and learned to read and write. Rita was in charge of raising the villagers' consciousness, and teaching young children to write. She also taught the villagers how to prepare weapons for combat, and explained to civilians how to defend themselves from the army. Irma, whose father is K'iché and her mother Ixil, learned both K'iché and Spanish, and learned to write a bit in this language. She also used M-16s, Fals (Belgian rifles), carbines, and revolvers, though her main job was carrying grenades and machine guns, which were carried between two women. She also specialized in fixing weapons that were stuck, and in infiltrating army bases to pass messages:

If there is combat I go and see if all have returned, if no one was wounded; if someone is, I run to notify and help carry the wounded person. As a liaison, when we reached our campground, the commander would write a letter and I would carry it . . . I would go alone, with the risk of finding the army on the road, I went with a bit of *pinol* (toasted corn) if not with weeds or cooked sweet potatoes. Sometimes there was nothing, only pepper, and that's how we'd go to combat.⁴⁶

Lina mentions that she never felt alone because she had her gun with her, and this calmed her. She felt free in the mountains. She was also a combatant, and learned Spanish in the mountains. Flora also learned Spanish with the guerrillas, carried a weapon and was trained using the book *Where There Is No Doctor*. She became a health instructor, and later coordinated seventeen "communities of peoples in resistance" (CPR) living in the jungle.⁴⁷ Feliciano was bombed by

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 82.

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 83–84. In the original Spanish, "Si hay combate voy a mirar si ya vinieron todos, ninguno se quedó herido, si alguno está, voy corriendo a avisar y se va a cargar al herido. Como enlace, cuando llegamos a nuestro campamento, el mando hace una carta y yo la llevo. . . Yo pasaba solita, con el peligro de encontrar al ejército en el camino, iba con poquito pinol (maíz tostado) si no con hierba o camote cocido. Había veces que no hay nada, sólo chile, y así nos íbamos a combate."

⁴⁷ *Id.* at 84–85. When the Army conducted its massive offensive against the Maya villages, hundreds of thousands of peasants fled to all corners of Guatemala and to the neighboring countries. A relatively small percentage of totally dispossessed people escaped into the Guatemalan jungle. In these inhospitable areas that 23,000 people went into hiding and endured a decade of hardship to survive. Gradually, they organized

helicopters. Roselia mentions how she was not afraid of weapons, that engaging in combat gave her a big rush, and that she was always happy upon the thrill of coming out alive. She claims the best thing she ever did was to fight.⁴⁸ Telma, on the contrary, preferred being a nurse and giving public orations at town meetings. She remembers vividly the smell of blood the first time she had to dress the wounds of an injured combatant. She adds:

I spent 20 years in the mountains. What we learned there was not for nothing, we didn't win, but we learned a thing or two. For us, the struggle left us something, I think it would no longer be easy for them to push us around, we're ready to fight and participate.⁴⁹

Lidia liked military instruction because she learned not only how to handle weapons, but also what was happening to the Guatemalan people and what was happening elsewhere in the world. She gave talks about how to handle wounded combatants in Ixil, K'iche', and Spanish. She loved it so much she never forgot the languages. Lucía, besides learning to speak Kaqchiquel, Mam, K'iche' and Ixil, also learned how to read and write in Spanish. She explains that during combat, fear and loneliness vanishes; you focus exclusively on confronting the army. Your mouth dries up, and you shiver because of the nerves, but when you begin shooting you feel a gush of heat invading your body. Her best friend was killed on International Women's Day, so she now commemorates both every year. She was always chosen for the front lines of her platoon because of her bravery, together with four other women.⁵⁰ As Peláez herself points out, it is revolutionary for women in Guatemala, and especially for Mayan women, to speak from the positionality of their gender without having as an exclusive referent the culturally-defined activities women are supposed to perform. The strength that it meant for all of them to consciously know that being women was no impediment for the realization of tasks allegedly reserved for men cannot be underestimated in this context.

themselves into groups of communities, calling themselves "communities of peoples in resistance" (CPR).

⁴⁸ *Id.* at 87.

⁴⁹ *Id.* at 88. In the original Spanish, "Yo estuve 20 años en la montaña. Lo que aprendimos no es en balde, no ganamos, pero algo fue lo que aprendimos. Para nosotras nos dejó algo la lucha, creo que ahora no es fácil que nos dejemos, estamos dispuestas a luchar y participar."

⁵⁰ *Id.* at 88–89.

Once in the mountains, they often found male companions. However, to avoid promiscuity and anarchy, the guerrillas forbade sexual relations except among married couples. After all, they all had to sleep together, men and women, next to each other, though wearing their clothes and combat boots. The women also stated that they wore no panties and no bra, simply because they were out of their reach.⁵¹ They were friendly and complicit with each other in discouraging younger indigenous recruits from encouraging male companions to have sex with them, and to tell their commander right away if any man made an inappropriate advance. Most acknowledged that their male companions were supportive when they had their menstruation. None deny that at least a few did try to take advantage of women's bodies, though—even some commanders. They qualify them as “*dirigentes abusivos*,”⁵² or abusive leaders. But they also point out that the women in question never accepted it, got tough, and avoided both getting raped and/or acquiescing to the male's desires. Most learned the meaning of sexuality in the mountains: “[s]ome showed knowing smiles when they admitted that they know what sexual pleasure is; others made it explicit that sexual relations are also to be enjoyed, and are not only to have children or to give in to their husband's desire.”⁵³

In the end, most of them got married, though aware of their body's worth and having learned to label it a “personal territory,” a few chose to remain single, a significant breach with indigenous culture, which has traditionally pressured women to marry. Those who married also transgressed tradition, though, given that they choose their partner, instead of having him chosen by the father as in the past. Many of those who got married also tried to avoid pregnancy to extend their combat duty, and learned birth control methods. Nevertheless, they had no access to pills or any other form of contraceptives in the mountains. Indeed, they often had no access to hygienic control of their menstruations, having at times to march in the jungle while bleeding, wearing the same pair of pants day in and day out. Still, they all claim they learned their rights regarding sexual and domestic violence, equality between genders, and their right to choose the number of children they wanted to have. The dichotomy of

⁵¹ *Id.* at 52.

⁵² *Id.*

⁵³ *Id.* at 53. Algunas mostraron sonrisas pícaras al reconocer que saben lo que es el placer sexual, otras hicieron explícito que las relaciones sexuales también son para disfrutar, y no únicamente para tener hijos y dar gusto al marido.

appropriation/violence generated by the subalternization process of the community as a whole becomes one of regulation/emancipation within the framework of the guerrilla organization, as alternatives become visible in the eyes of the citizen.

IV SOCIETY HAS A DEBT WITH US

When these women turned in their arms, they all did it individually, and at different moments and times. It was not an organizational or a structured decision. Some had lost contact with the guerrillas, or chose to abandon their structure after it was decimated. Others could no longer stand the fatigue of decades of war and malnutrition. Often they ended up in opposite corners of the country to where most combatants were concentrated. Others joined the “communities of peoples in resistance” (CPR), where they spent as little as three years and as many as thirteen. All had great difficulty readapting to civilian life, besides being in miserable economic conditions and fearing reprisals from the army. Some stated that the community mocked them, harassed them or even threatened them. About 3,000 combatants in Lucía’s condition demanded that the URNG recognize them as official ex-combatants, but nothing was done by the high-command. As a result, they were abandoned and left destitute, as well as full of rancor, resenting the ex-commanders’ villas in gated communities.⁵⁴ One of them stated: “We had nothing, no clothes nor *corte*, we were barefoot. When I returned to the village, some friends gave me clothes, some *güipiles* and ribbon for the hair. We had no blankets nor a grindstone for *nixtamal*.”⁵⁵

They built houses by cutting down trees and scraping to buy aluminum sheets for the roof. They had no medical or psychological support of any sort, despite the war trauma, and the trauma of returning to civilian life after years underground. As one of them

⁵⁴ *Id.* at 96.

⁵⁵ *Id.* at 95. A *güipil*, or huipil consists of 2 back-strap woven panels with geometric and zoomorphic designs in vibrant colors. A decorative randa joins the two pieces. Maya women wear them instead of Western blouses. *Nixtamal* is the treated corn that is used to make masa and hominy for tortillas, the basic food-staple for Mayas. Nixtamal is dried field corn soaked in, and then heated in a solution of slaked lime and water. Slaked lime, calcium hydroxide, is generally available in the form of “builder’s lime”—not to be confused with unslaked lime, calcium oxide. Unslaked lime cannot be used for making nixtamal. It is the lime that contributes to the unique taste and texture of corn tortillas.

stated, “When I came out, I am no longer anybody, I have nothing”.⁵⁶ Lucía adds:

When Kumool was founded, people from other countries came to ask our word, to take our time, but what was the use, who knows. . . It makes me feel sorry because we have not all been recognized as ex combatants. It hurts a lot. . . When I remember what happened I get sad and disappointed, I’m crying and that sucks.⁵⁷

Amalia plainly stated that they were ignored during demobilization and that they felt the URNG used them “as a ladder,” that is, their commanders stepped on them to get to the highest positions of power in the country. Feliciano stated this about Kumool:

We are like in a family and we make petitions for everyone, although not much comes, we only receive a little. Here we get happy [sic] because we see each other again, we all fought against the armies [sic], we call each other compañeros, the same as in the guerrilla, because we are equal.⁵⁸

All the members interviewed by Peláez’s team spoke of wanting to be recognized as “*alzadas*” as full-fledged recognition of their status as combatants in a war that is an epistemic marker.

FINAL WORDS

Peláez’s text clearly functions as a space for memory and for dialogue, offering a necessary place for personal remembrance. Ultimately, with the example of the Kumool women we are presented with a new framework within the geopolitics of knowledge, one demanding respect for pluralizations of subaltern difference anchored in gender and ethnic difference. This framework produces a place-based epistemology that offers a new theoretical and political logic. It confirms that heightening social conflict, new citizens’ protagonism, and abandonment of traditional political party practices can lead to ontological-political de-centering of modern politics, in the words of Marisol de la Cadena⁵⁹, conjoining what Arturo Escobar calls an alternative modernization⁶⁰, with a decolonial project, where what is at stake is the end of coloniality. Maya women, connecting with Ladino women through webs of signification of which Peláez’s edited

⁵⁶ *Id.* at 96.

⁵⁷ *Id.* at 96–97.

⁵⁸ *Id.* at 98.

⁵⁹ De la Cadena, *supra* note 5.

⁶⁰ Escobar, *supra* note 27.

book is a part, are quietly breaking down the coloniality of politics that censored the presence of subalternized indigenous subjects as validated citizens and granted the exclusionary monopoly of creating national imaginaries to lettered, preferentially upper-class, Ladino men. The exclusionary character of this monopoly is at the core of the modern epistemological disputes between Ladino and Maya regimes of truth and knowledge. The traditional Guatemalan left fell on the side of Ladinos in their understanding of modernity, while also enlisting and embracing Mayas for their cause. Mayas, however, were no innocent victims caught between two fires. They understood the historical opportunity offered them to undermine the pillars that sustained the system that oppressed them, and opened up a new epistemic perspective by showing that allegedly pre-Modern subjects were perfectly capable of grasping all the tools that modernity could offer them and could assert their difference to transform themselves and reimagine their communities within the framework of a legitimate political conflict. Their behavior evidences a simultaneous co-existence of modern and non-modern conceptions of the world, implying that modern thought is not an indispensable condition for oppressed social sectors to enter the public sphere. Indigenous groups also access modern traits through alternative projects that juxtapose secular and indigenous-centered traits. In turn, these newer elements become transformative of those originally employed by Westernized urban elites to constitute the Nation-State in the first place. This impacts the present, giving it a “thickness” that sets it apart from the horizon of expectations of modernity. It has thus become an epochal marker for indigenous peoples in the Americas, initiating a systematic reconversion of the very nature and viability of Latin American nation-states. This is the new challenge that indigenous populations bring now to bear. It is a cycle that commences.

Indeed, taking this challenge and this cycle as a point of departure, we should perhaps step away from well-rounded theoretical configurations whose rational logic works coherently, yet they ultimately articulate more the scholar’s ability to rationalize an empirical experience, than a coherent articulation of the experience itself. Modern Western thinking makes rational logic visible while leaving significant distinctions invisible because they do not easily submit themselves to the overall logic that scholars are yearning to achieve. Perhaps this is also a moment where we should cede the so-called “theoretical space” to non-theorists. To “knowledges otherwise,” to alternative knowledges, and take a step away from

pretending that Western-centeredness is capable of articulating a cohesive and comprehensive understanding of the whole of human comportment. We are better off if we acknowledge that we have to continue questioning events, and questioning our own explanations of those events, and offering incomplete answers. Prudent knowledge is better than a flashy theoretical scheme that canonizes scholars in U.S. institutions while usurping, once again, the protagonic role of subalternized, racialized subjects. As Boaventura de Sousa has already warned us, we have to have a better sense of what we do not know, not overestimate what we do know, and be aware that what we do not know is because we have yet to find the way to account for the manifold ways in which non-theorized knowledge, “raw” knowledge, the non-academic wisdom articulated by “the wretched of the Earth,”⁶¹ can make its ways to jaded Western ears.⁶²

⁶¹ FRANTZ FANON, *THE WRETCHED OF THE EARTH* (Richard Philcox trans., 2004) (1961).

⁶² DE SOUSA SANTOS, *supra* note 21.