

***Pero, ¿dónde está el presidente ahora?: Developing Cultural Agency in Guatemala's Age of Neoliberal Multiculturalism***

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Each year Guatemala hosts *Rabín Ajaw*—a cultural pageant, which brings young Maya women from across the nation to display “cultural authenticity” through dress and performance. Scholars denounce the pageant’s inauthenticity – both aesthetically due to shifts in indigenous weaving and the use of traditional dress, as well as in terms of avoiding recognition of Mayas’ continued social and political subjugation, even after the genocide against their communities. Further, the contestants in *Rabín Ajaw*, who are tasked with the most authentic presentation of “Mayan-ness,” are atypical compared to the majority of Maya women living in Guatemala. While a great deal of Maya women suffer from poverty, lack of access to appropriate education, and are regularly denied opportunities to act as political or social leaders, *Rabín Ajaw* contestants are generally educated with stable jobs, bilingual, and far more financially privileged. Maya women’s image as a whole continues to be used as an archetypal, symbolic stand-in for Guatemala’s national culture. This appropriation is conducted by both the tourism industry to attract visitors and the male-dominated Mayanist indigenous rights movement to achieve each group’s aims with little benefit to the Maya women themselves. Given that the *Rabín Ajaw* pageant constitutes a multicultural spectacle that espouses to celebrate indigenous women and their culture while providing no material support before or after the event, there must be another factor motivating young Maya women to participate. Namely, this project investigates the ways in which Maya women exercise agency within a highly criticized event of superficial cultural appreciation, with aims to give voice to women frequently silenced by their symbolic status.

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## Preface

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*Dedico esta tesis a mis padres, Lisa D. Kite and Robert H. Kite, Jr., por mostrarme la importancia de la educación y por motivarme a seguir mis sueños.*

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I dedicate this thesis to my parents, Lisa D. Kite and Robert H. Kite, Jr., for showing me the importance of education and for motivating me to follow my dreams.

## 1.0 Introduction

This dissertation developed out of my Women's Studies Master's thesis, which focused on the division between an indigenous and a non-indigenous pageant in the same town of Cobán, Guatemala. As a master's student, my research interests involved female physical beauty and its connections with power and nationalism, particularly as manifested in formal beauty pageants like Miss World in which displays of cohesive national culture are required. Analyses of beauty pageants at these different spatio-political levels and their interactions have yielded important findings regarding the role of pageants in the construction of post-colonial gendered and racialized identities and their links to political-economic regimes. Regarding the former, scholars have examined the role of beauty pageants in constructing coherent national identities out of fragmented ethnic and racial groups. In constructing what Benedict Anderson argues are "imagined communities," post-colonial leaders must strive to create an authentic national identity, proving that they have indeed left their colonial legacy behind and have entered the modern world.

Some significant lines of variation noted in the literature include the purposes of the pageants and, not unrelated, the audiences to which they are addressed. On one hand, sub-national and national beauty pageants play a role in unifying diverse peoples into a nation through the creation of a national identity. This process involves highlighting or indeed constructing particular aspects of the culture that are both shared by members of the nation and

serve to differentiate them from other nations. On the other hand, pageants are directed toward staking out the place of the nation within the global system of nations and markets, including capital, commodities, and consumer services such as tourism (Balogun). Of course, identity and culture may be deemed social constructions, but the matter of authentic representation becomes much more complicated when aspects of culture are borrowed and presented by groups and individuals as if they are authors of those borrowed cultural elements, as in ladino use of Mayan culture to represent Guatemala. Beauty pageants present racial differences as extraneous, minor variances that add spice to life and serve as a celebration of diversity (Banet-Weiser 67). At the same time, racial differences continue to operate as social institution, exerting real effects (Ahmed 150).

Part of international beauty pageants' appeal is their presentation of a seemingly level playing field for all contestants, despite gross disparities in economic power and opportunity. Of course, the playful competition among contestants contributes to the overall sense of global sisterhood that international beauty pageants strive to cultivate, or at least to cultivate such an appearance. The intersection of the vectors of beauty and nationalism with characteristics like race and "authentic" displays of culture were doubly fascinating when considered alongside histories of European colonialism. In the post-colonial global south, the issue of feminine representation of the nation in international pageants is ethno-racially and politically charged (Barnes). While members of indigenous or folk cultures possess unique customs, fascinating traditions, or beautiful dress that would translate well into pageant "costumes," these women may not be digestible to an international audience and are rarely, if ever, considered as national representatives in international beauty pageants.

Scholars have observed that pageants serve a variety of purposes and target a variety of audiences, resulting in tensions (Balogun). One purpose involves promoting an internal national unity among a multiplicity of local groups. The other involves the need to present the nation as “modern” and attractive to the global community. This process requires choosing winners who can be comfortably inserted the vernacular of global pageants such as Miss World. This variation in purpose and audience creates tensions between various internal groups around ethno-racial difference which is linked to material and political inequalities. Further tension emerges from the fact that the international pageant Miss World’s desire to portray local flavor and domesticated difference, often results in symbolic aspects of oppressed sub-group culture being appropriated by dominant local groups.

Guatemala’s involvement in international beauty pageants does not stray far from that of other nations in the global south. Part of what initially piqued my interest in the division of ladina and indigenous pageants in the same town of Cobán, Guatemala was the advancement of ladina candidates to international competitions while participants in the indigenous *Rabín Ajaw* pageant both went no further and received no credit for the traditional dress that ladina candidates appropriated for the global stage. The victorious queen of the non-indigenous pageant, *Señorita Monja Blanca*, imitated other Western beauty pageants like Miss America or Miss World stood as a parallel to the goals of the Guatemalan nation to join other world players in the quest to modernize and engage in an increasingly globalized economy. All critiques of development ideology aside, the winners of the non-indigenous contest who advanced to the international stage appropriated elements of Guatemalan folk-culture to demonstrate the “authentic” cultural identity of the nation and to create their national “costumes.” Of course, the Mayan weaving that constituted the costumes of Guatemalan contestants was often denigrated on

the streets of urban hubs like Guatemala City – a literal visual marker that typically indicated the wearer’s ethnic origins and consequently facilitated any potential discrimination and oppression. This practice of borrowing cultural elements to present a cohesive veneer of national culture, while not uncommon in venues like international beauty pageants, grows all the more sinister when considered alongside twentieth century Guatemalan history, particularly its genocidal civil war through which hundreds of thousands of Mayas were tortured, murdered, and “disappeared” by government forces. As a result, the (unofficially) segregated pageants of *Señorita Monja Blanca* and *Rabín Ajaw*, the indigenous pageant, seemed all the more depraved and inviting of analysis.



**Figure 1** *Señorita Monja Blanca* winners and *Rabín Ajaw* contestant, 2018 procession  
*Source: Jillian Kite photography archive*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All photos in this dissertation are from my personal archive, taken during my field research in the summers of 2016 and 2018.

Eventually, a simple condemnation of the ethnic division of the pageants became analytically insufficient when confronted with continued research of *Rabín Ajaw*, Guatemalan cultural history, and the Mayanist indigenous rights movement during my doctoral studies. The more I researched the Guatemalan genocide of the civil war, the more perplexing it became to me that young Maya women would parade elements of their culture on stage that contributed to their oppression and overall social subjugation. During the genocide, while women's bodies were being mutilated or destroyed by anti-guerrilla forces, many still willingly participated in the *Rabín Ajaw* pageant. Still further, some past contestants in *Rabín Ajaw* who participated during the civil war were able to make use of their symbolic status as cultural representatives to express political dissatisfaction to the government and broader Guatemalan society.

In 1978, the government-led Panzós massacre occurred in response to the peaceful protest of 700 Maya individuals over land rights that were taken from them, resulting in 140 deaths and hundreds of significant injuries. Betsy Konefal wrote of the deadly incident in her book *For Every Indio Who Falls: A History of Maya Activism in Guatemala, 1960-1990*, noting that such a massive massacre was the first documented of its kind during the civil war, but certainly not the first. More importantly, however, Konefal reported that *Rabín Ajaw* contestants joined other Maya activists in protest of the National Folklore Festival and *Rabín Ajaw* pageant in response to the Panzós massacre because of the government's simultaneous control of the allegedly celebratory events alongside such anti-indigenous cruelty. Unsurprisingly for the tumultuous political period in which the massacre transpired, public figures associated with the festival and pageant "disappeared," though the contestants were not harmed. This protest over the Panzós massacre was the only official political endeavor on the part of *Rabín Ajaw* contestants who I encountered in my research. It seemed peculiar to me that the young

contestants would stand up for their culture and people during such a precarious time of social unrest and violence, but revert back to symbolic status again afterwards. If the contestants could exercise agency in such a meaningful way then, I saw no reason that they could not do so today, and perhaps in an even stronger way.

After deciding that I wanted my doctoral dissertation to also involve this indigenous pageant, I went on my first trip to Guatemala in search of answers which I could not locate in academic literature. I suspected that the “beauty pageant” label was a misnomer, especially in light of the founder’s espoused cultural education and preservation goals for the pageant noted in the literature. Perhaps *Rabín Ajaw* was called a beauty pageant only in official publications? My first field research enterprise in 2016 took me to the National Archives in Guatemala City, where I sorted through countless newspaper articles covering the event, dating from *Rabín Ajaw*’s inception to the present. Aiming to discover significant patterns in how the press described the contest, I uncovered little of consequence to my research.

Hoping for some other form of enlightenment, I traveled to Cobán to attend the pageant and hopefully speak to some participants. When I did gain access to the event, I was able to interview an organizer of the National Folklore Festival that hosts the pageant as well as several pageant participants. As a novice field researcher, I was unable to unearth quite as much information as I did during my second trip to Guatemala in 2018, but I did acquire a firm grasp on how contestants viewed the pageant. Specifically, my suspicions were confirmed when I discovered that the participants did not consider *Rabín Ajaw* to be a beauty pageant in form or function. Even contestants who told me *Rabín Ajaw* actually *was* a beauty pageant quickly rejoined that it was the beauty of Maya traditions and culture, the beauty of all Maya sisters in attendance, or another response which indicated that while beauty of some form may be involved

in the event, the pageant was not a conventional beauty pageant like that of *Señorita Monja Blanca* or Miss World. I admired the contestants' tendency to define beauty according to their own worldviews, but the conventional, superficial beauty pageant I had in mind certainly did not align with the *Rabín Ajaw* pageant and its purpose. With this new information, I adjusted my research agenda to both find out why participants were motivated to attend the pageant, but also to discern how they exercised agency in what seemed like a mere spectacle of multicultural "appreciation." If the *Rabín Ajaw* contestants in 1978 could exercise agency through protest during a time when their lives were at significant risk, I was certain that contestants today could too.

Between 2016 and 2018, my knowledge of the literature regarding multiculturalism as it operates in contemporary Guatemalan society and the organizing efforts of Mayanists to achieve greater indigenous rights grew substantially, which informed my field research in the summer of 2018 well. Similarly, my knowledge of and comfort level with international field research matured, lending itself well to conducting the second set of interviews and observations. Moreover, the 2018 pageant was the *boda de oro* [golden wedding], or 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Rabín Ajaw*, which meant the attendance of more influential figures as well as more people in general. In fact, as part of the celebration, entrance to the *Rabín Ajaw* pageant performance was free for all. As a result of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the event, Marco Aurelio Alonzo, the founder of the entire National Folklore Festival and *Rabín Ajaw* was in attendance and, recognizing him from photos I saw in my research, I approached him and asked for an interview. The reigning *Rabín Ajaw* was also more present at the pageant's events than I witnessed in 2016, and with luck I was able to interview her as well.



Without question, my conversations with pageant contestants and the founder and organizer were instrumental in bolstering my understanding of the event and answering my research question: How do *Rabín Ajaw* contestants exercise agency? Had these individuals, particularly the young women, not been so generous with their energy and time, writing this dissertation would have been impossible. No amount of literature could substitute the knowledge and perspectives so generously shared with me. I will be forever indebted to them and the many other Guatemalans who assisted me along the way, giving directions, providing advice, vouching for my validity as a researcher, or simply having enlightening conversations with me. In what follows I give brief descriptions of the four chapters constituting this thesis, hoping that in some way my work can begin to do justice to the people who helped me along the way.

Chapter One of this dissertation, “Challenging the Cultural History of Guatemala” broadly examines and questions the contemporary cultural history of Guatemala. In order to provide context for much of the discussion throughout this thesis, I explain the formation and interpretation of the ladino-indigenous social binary – a remnant of Spanish colonialism that has endured as a robust social force in Guatemala to this day. Certainly, the division between ladinos and indigenous citizens of the nation is not simply an ethnic distinction; rather, it is intricately intertwined with socioeconomic class and highly influenced by temporally specific politics. Instead of glazing over the ways in which ladino and indigenous lived experiences differ, I delve into the creation of inequality between the two groups and explain its complexities.

The “challenging” aspect of Chapter One enters in my discussion of Guatemala’s transition towards “modernity.” Inherent in this transition remained the denigration of Maya

indigenous groups, who were viewed by those in power as “backwards” and an impediment to the process of modernization. Jean Franco’s book *Cruel Modernity* has been a substantial influence on my work, as it encapsulates the connotative meanings and effects resulting from modernizing processes throughout the world and in Guatemala specifically. Linking the idea that indigenous peoples in the global south stood as detriments to modernization that had to be eliminated illustrates both the longevity of effects harmful binaries like barbaric/civilized hold, but also fleshes out the conundrums facing Mayas today, namely the authentic/modern double bind that directly parallels the barbaric/civilized binary, which arose out of Spanish colonialism in Latin America. Modernity and its inherent links to the development ideology Arturo Escobar explicates in his book *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*, provide invaluable theoretical insights to my project.

Before examining the most central political era to my project—the civil war and its genocide—I provide background information into the neocolonial intervention of nations like the United States and Germany in Guatemala’s economy. By neocolonialism, I mean that while the formal political structures of colonialism are largely dead, crucial aspects of colonialism’s economic and cultural systems remain visibly entrenched. Moreover, the demise of legal, explicitly racist colonial structures have rendered the neocolonial system more difficult to oppose. To ensure thorough understanding of the genocide, it is essential to comprehend the ways in which smaller injustices like the peonage system culminated in the genocidal crescendo of cruelty in the latter half of the twentieth century. Guatemala’s economy depended on the cultivation and exportation of coffee, which was an industry propped up by near-slave labor of Mayas and other peasants. Just when Mayas were beginning to see hope for social justice via the land redistribution of the Agrarian Reform Law of 1952, their aspirations were circumvented by

one of the most significant foreign interventions in Guatemala's affairs – the United States' 1954 overthrow of Guatemala's first democratically elected president.

Following the United States' overthrow of the Guatemalan government, repression of Guatemala's poor (namely indigenous) grew, resulting in protests and further conflict which quickly escalated to the point of civil war. Guatemala's civil war spanned from 1960-1996, with the height of the violence occurring in the late 1970s and 1980s. Government forces slaughtered and "disappeared" hundreds of thousands of people revolting against oppressive government forces and land distribution injustice, most of them indigenous. Even peaceful protests often resulted in the murder of large numbers of Mayas, as in the aforementioned 1978 Panzós massacre and others, contributing to a widespread sense of terror and protective secrecy throughout the nation, remnants of which can still be located today. Much of my analysis of the genocidal violence involves gender, be it through examination of rape as a tool of war or the influence of extreme masculinity and toxic homosociality in the military forces who brutally murdered Maya men, women, and children without discrimination.

Finally, I explore the politics of postwar Guatemala, from the exercises of the United Nations' Historical Clarification Commission (CEH) and the Roman Catholic Church's Recovery of the Historical Memory Project (REMHI) to the way everyday people reckoned with the devastation of a 36-year-long genocidal civil war. Interestingly enough, the gravity and complexity of the peace process motivated its early start in 1986, as changes were incremental and difficult to swiftly achieve. Of course, despite the official declaration of peace ten years later in 1996, tension and sporadic violence continued with regular frequency. Both the United Nations and the Roman Catholic Church produced reports which compiled innumerable testimonies from witnesses and victims of crime, as well as some military officials willing to

come forward and confess to the things they felt compelled to do. The collection of testimonies throughout a nation still partially silenced due to the widespread culture of fear engendered by the civil war was a difficult task, but both reports determined that the conflict was indeed genocide. In the final section of this first chapter I challenge the efficacy of post-trauma testimony like that collected in truth commission reports. I explore if and how these accounts, often collected by foreign workers from various different countries, could be truly cathartic, particularly given Elaine Scarry's theory that written language can never truly encapsulate bodily pain.

Chapter Two, "Multiculturalism, Mayanism, and *La Mujer Maya*," characterizes the onset of neoliberal multiculturalism in contemporary Guatemalan society, the Mayanist indigenous rights movement, and how the archetypal figure of the Maya woman has been unjustly used by male-dominated ladino and indigenous groups alike for their own gains. I utilize Diane Nelson's concept of *La Mujer Maya* throughout the chapter, acknowledging how the figure of the Maya woman is used as a symbolic stand-in for Guatemala's culture overall. Nelson aptly notes that women in general are frequently charged with cultural maintenance, particularly within their families. Upholding traditions like instructing children in dances of the culture in question, the use of culturally-specific traditional dress, reinforcing that culture's language(s) in the home, and so on fall almost exclusively on female shoulders. Maya women are no different in the (willing or unwilling) assumption of such cultural maintenance charges within their families and communities, but also occupies the space of an ideological, archetypal construct which serves as a stand-in for Guatemalan culture as a whole. The image of *La Mujer Maya* is employed in various ventures – her image is used in both the Mayanist indigenous rights movement and efforts of the tourist industry to demonstrate the cultural richness of Mayan

culture and Guatemala, despite the fact that the Maya woman still lacks rights and opportunities that her male and/or ladina counterparts enjoy.

Post-war indigenous involvement in Guatemalan politics led to the rise of neoliberal multiculturalism, which espouses an appreciation of diversity, but only actually benefits a privileged few. As a symbol of culture, *La Mujer Maya* and her image are used within multicultural efforts. Of particular use in discussing multiculturalism, Charles Hale's concept of the *indio permitido* [authorized Indian] denotes the sort of privileged Maya who benefits from multicultural state initiatives because he or she does not stand in the way of the state's larger priority to modernize. The obedient preserver of culture exemplified by *La Mujer Maya*, who does little more than instruct her children in the finer points of Mayan culture and smile in colorful traditional dress on the front of tourism brochures, could easily be determined an authorized indian of the sort Hale delineates. On the contrary, Mayas who are not *indios permitidos* enjoy no advancement in living conditions or rights. One critique of the *Rabín Ajaw* pageant's authenticity is that its contestants seem to be solely *indias permitidas* who are privileged and possess quite limited consideration and respect from the multicultural government, failing to represent the everyday Maya woman who do not possess the same opportunities and continue to live in extreme poverty, lack access to resources and proper education, and so on.

Similarly, the image of *La Mujer Maya* is also used within the Mayanist movement, which denies monoculturalism and seeks recognition of Mayan culture and the advancement of Mayas in Guatemalan society. The Mayanist movement faces the challenge of uniting Mayas across the nation, who hold different perspectives on the goals of the movement. Leaders of Mayanist efforts must strive to avoid essentializing Mayas while simultaneously attempting to

maintain a unified movement, despite in-group linguistic and cultural variations. Although it sparks disagreement, one significant tenet of the Mayanist movement is the need for bilingual and culturally sensitive education. Efforts for bilingual education at the conclusion of the civil war faced many challenges, particularly due to the 21 indigenous languages spoken throughout the country and the postwar migration patterns that resulted in various linguistic groups occupying the same locales. Correspondingly, the curriculum developed for centers of bilingual education was insufficient and indisputably ethnocentric in a way that disparaged Mayan cosmological perspectives.

Perhaps the most important cultural marker for Guatemalan Mayas along with *Rabín Ajaw* contestants, Mayan weaving and the use of *traje típico* [traditional dress] is perceived differently among Mayas as well. Weaving and wearing traditions have evolved over time, among individuals, and according to circumstance. *Traje* was, and to a certain extent still is, used to identify Maya women's municipality of origin, as its styles and designs differ from location to location. Thus, it is unsurprising that traditional dress has been used to identify and then discriminate against Mayas, but primarily Maya women given Maya men's tendency to wear more Western styles of dress in their daily public lives. *Traje* has also been used in efforts to promote tourism. Better stated, *La Mujer Maya* wearing *traje* has been misappropriated in efforts to promote tourism, without benefitting actual Maya women, much in the same way that international beauty pageant contestants from Guatemala "borrow" the image of *La Mujer Maya* for their own gains alone.

Chapter Three, "Claiming Knowledge: A Manufacturing," stands as an ethical reflection conducted prior to my fieldwork in Guatemala. I examine my positionality as a white, North American researcher attempting to make claims about indigenous, Guatemalan women,

especially in the way that my demographic identity might impact my analysis and how I can combat such unwanted impact. Instead of speaking *for* or *about* the pageant participants, I craft my analysis to be a conversation *with* the women, deferring to their expertise whenever possible. In the first part of this chapter I engage with the literature about academics speaking for and/or about others, noting the importance of taking speaker and listener identity and location into account, as well as the propensity for well-meaning scholars to unintentionally inflict harm or accidentally incite other forms of oppression. Specifically, I address the potential detriment inherent in research contexts in which the researcher is a Western feminist who studies less-privileged women in the global south, bringing to light the potential paternalism in such postures as well as the risk of creating false knowledge claims arising from viewing Third World Women as a homogenous category.

In this third chapter, I explain the onset of development ideology throughout the world following World War II and the ways in which it has invaded the global consciousness to detrimental effect, drawing primarily upon the work of Arturo Escobar. The development ideology which is now ingrained in the minds of world leaders and lay people alike has been especially harmful to nations deemed “undeveloped,” to the disadvantage of those nations and their people. Examination of “different cultures” must be conducted with explicit recognition of macro, meso, and micro contexts – acknowledging and questioning history, politics, demographic standpoints, and so on, with cognizance of the potential epistemological biases of the researcher. After all, colonialism is harmful in both its literal geopolitical interpretation and in its more assiduous discursive sense. Essentialist claims about “Third World Women” must be avoided at all costs to ensure an ethical research and analysis process. The development ideology I include in Chapter Three is intimately connected with Jean Franco’s theory about the

cruelty of the onset and development of modernity. Both ideologies strongly inform my work throughout this thesis because they not only structure the current world order, but also provide great insight into the positionality of my *Rabín Ajaw* interviewees and the demands upon their engagement with Guatemalan society and the rest of the world. Comparably, they also inform my positionality and how the ways that I interacted with interviewees in Guatemala might alter my work.

Though often difficult to define, I advocate decolonial labors and the recognition of an epistemological pluriverse as opposed to the general denigration of subaltern ways of knowing. As an alternative to the positivist, binary-structured society and mindset of much of the Western “developed” world, advocating a pluriverse could combat the effects of colonialism and its imposition of one sole, correct worldview as well as give much needed credence to other systems of thought. Much advocacy of decolonization and the recognition of a pluriverse can easily be dismissed as being too idealistic or so optimistic that its logistical establishment would be nearly impossible. Such concerns are valid and deserve consideration, but I ultimately position myself firmly in the pro-decolonization camp.

In the final section of my third chapter, I question whether agency is always resistance, comparing the liberal theoretical framework proposed by scholars like Michel Foucault with a nonliberal and non-Western perspective that refrains from defining agency as resistance to some oppressive force. To adequately explore the advantages of each approach and determine the best definition of agency for the purposes of my project, I first present Foucault’s theory about power as a juridically discursive network ingrained in societal institutions and always in flux. These relations in power, formed through juridical, discursive forces in operation, do open up the possibility of resisting them in an agentic way. Second, I employ Saba Mahmoud’s case study of



how women exercise agency within the Egyptian Mosque Movement by refraining from examining their involvement in Western terms and values such as “freedom.” To determine whether an individual’s actions are indeed agentic in a non-Western context, one must derive their definition from that particular context. I engage in this endeavor in order to determine a suitable definition of agency by which I can measure the actions of *Rabín Ajaw* contestants, and ultimately, answer my primary research question.

Chapter Four, “Fieldwork Findings,” constitutes the presentation and analysis of my 2016 and 2018 interviews with the *Rabín Ajaw* founder, organizer, and participants. First, I introduce the ethnic division of so-called beauty pageants in Cobán, Guatemala, site of the National Folklore Festival and *Rabín Ajaw* contest in more detail than this introduction. As previously mentioned, Cobán is also home to an exclusively ladina pageant that is, in fact, a conventional beauty pageant in form and intention. Winners of this pageant proceed to represent Guatemala in international beauty pageants like Miss World, often drawing upon Mayan traditional dress to exhibit cultural authenticity, despite the social subjugation of Maya women and the common disdain for the ethnic group and the use of *traje*. In the first iteration of my fieldwork in Guatemala, I discovered that both the *Rabín Ajaw* contestants and organizer did not consider the event to be a beauty pageant in the sense of Western-style pageant with evening gowns, sashes, and tearful tiara recipients. With my suspicions confirmed, I continued my investigation to discover their motivation for participation and the way(s) in which contestants exercise agency within the competition, as it is easy to perceive the event as a neoliberal, multicultural spectacle of “cultural appreciation.”

Throughout this fourth chapter, I provide substantial excerpts from my interviews so as to allow the Maya women to speak for themselves, or in the very least, to present our

conversations. Employing open-ended questions to encourage organic responses from my interviewees, I inquired about the nature of the event and the young women's participation in it. My questions spanned a number of topics significant to this thesis, from what *Rabín Ajaw* is and its purpose, to the significance of *traje* in the competition or the importance of bilingual education in their daily lives. Moreover, I address the controversial critique that the event has tourist ends and also trace the path of the "pageant" victor post-coronation. Eventually, I determine how *Rabín Ajaw* participants exercise agency and what that means.

## **2.0 Chapter One: Challenging the Cultural History of Guatemala**

*“In one of the first large-scale counterinsurgency assaults against Mayas, army soldiers fired into the crowd of men, women, and children, killing at least thirty-five and wounding dozens more. The violence did not end in the plaza. Campesinos fleeing into the hills and river were pursued by army helicopters, gunned down as they tried to escape the mayhem. It was a massacre on a scale not yet seen in Guatemala’s civil war, though such mass killings would become almost routine practice within a few years” (For Every Indio 83). – Betsy Konefal*

### **2.1 Colonial and Neocolonial Interventions**

#### **2.1.1 Spanish Rule and the Development of a Ladino Population**

Like many other nations in Central and South America, Guatemala suffered the invasion of Spanish colonists in the sixteenth century. Pedro de Alvarado, second in command to the better-known Hernán Cortés, was charged with the conquest of Guatemala in 1523. Despite being greatly outnumbered by the indigenous army who met Alvarado’s 435 men, the Spanish conquistador’s forces eventually triumphed against the Mayas’ inferior flint weapons (Calvert 56). Spain sought wealth in Guatemala, namely in the form of gold and silver, and justified their conquest through their efforts to convert indigenous peoples to Christianity to save their souls (Farriss 29-30). Shortly after arrival in Guatemala, however, Spanish forces soon found that there was little gold to be found, aside from a few artifacts taken from Mayan temples. Moreover,

Guatemala's climate was inhospitable to many crops. The Spanish did find silver and a bit of gold in the highlands, though, which justified remaining in Guatemala (Farriss 30-31).

In spite of the Spanish settlers' physical takeover of Guatemala, Guatemala's indigenous were able to maintain their identity to a certain degree as a result of Spanish administrative tactics. Carol A. Smith notes that Spanish settlers as well as their later Creole [ladino] offspring were gifted *encomiendas*, or Indians/areas of Indians over whom to rule ("Introduction" 14). While these Creole offspring did own rural property, they were still lesser elites than pure-blooded Spanish settlers (Lutz and Lovell 39). Smith reflects that the Spanish settlers' desire to generate order in their new colony resulted in the creation of *encomiendas* with borders around "preexisting territorial units...[which] helped Indians maintain their identity during their most difficult period, when as many as 80 percent of them died (see Lovell 1985)" ("Introduction" 14). However, "When the Indian population of the highland core, after a century or more of decline, began finally to stabilize and then to grow, with population recovery came increased pressure on land resources. The end result... was Indian landlessness and loss of Indian identity, or ladinoization" (Lutz and Lovell 39).

Spanish conquistadors strove to create a racial hierarchy in which those with Spanish blood maintained the most power and control, but racial distinctions were more complex than simply indigenous and non-indigenous (Grandin, Levenson, and Oglesby 40). Grandin, Levenson, and Oglesby explain,

Children born in the colonies to mixed-descent parents - Maya, Spaniards, and the Africans the Spaniards brought to supplement indigenous labor - belonged to many worlds at once. The Spaniards, however, ranked them into a racialized caste system that started with *blancos* (whites) at the top of the hierarchy and traveled through various combinations to *los indios* and *los negros* at the bottom (40).

The origins of the term ladino actually predate Spanish colonialism, originally used to refer to Jews in Spain during the 15th century and the Castilian Spanish they spoke, which other Spaniards labeled “Ladino” (Martínez Peláez 129). It is essential to note that “children born in the colonies to mixed-descent parents” almost always refers to children who were products of rape. After the Spanish conquest of Guatemala, many Spanish men raped indigenous women, which resulted in a mixed mestizo race, the Spanish-speaking members of which eventually were described as being “ladino.” However, not all non-indigenous people were described as being ladino. As time passed, the term mestizo fell out of favor in Guatemala and was gradually replaced with the term ladino (Martínez Peláez 130).

Martínez Peláez reflects that many Mayas consider ladinos as blanket adversaries, but he stresses the importance of recognizing the hardship that ladinos suffered under colonial rule (131). In fact, ladinos were just as much indigenous as they were Spanish, but they often took advantage of anti-indigenous legislation imposed by the Spanish to advance their social standing. For instance, some ladinos took advantage of the forced labor of Mayas on Spanish property to “to collaborate in the control of Indians” (Martínez Peláez 132). Peláez links the idea that all non-indigenous people in Guatemala are ladino to the 19th century rule of Justo Rufino Barrios, who played into the interests of elite coffee planters by crafting laws that subjected only Indians to forced labor on plantations. He stresses the recognition of class complexity and the idea that there are class variations within Mayas and ladinos alike (Martínez Peláez 132).

Indeed, the distinction between ladinos and Mayas in Guatemala is far from clear-cut. Still, public perceptions of the two ethnic groups are often loyal to socially polarizing binaries in which ladino identity is moored in modernity and forward progress whereas Mayas are identified with a near-mythical pre-Columbian past. Part and parcel of ladinos’ generally future-oriented,

modern “identity,” being monolingual and acquainted with Western technology and culture are paramount for ladinos as they pertain to the category “Ladino” (*A Finger* 78). The ladino identity is, of course, situated in relation to the also-archetypal social category of “Maya” – a relation that lends itself to the creation of harmful social binaries.

Where the ladino is identified with the modern nation state of Guatemala and its positionality as a global player with access to Western technology and goods, the Maya is considered the antithesis – speaking pre-Columbian tongues, lacking technology, and donning traditional *traje típico* in displays of “authentic culture” – an ontological artifice that is continuously exploited by others. Diane Nelson writes of the connections between identification and power, noting, “...identification is produced through constant repetition in sites of power that themselves are historically overdetermined, as well as through unconscious investments and resistances” (*A Finger* 5). Among these sites of power stand the most basic of social institutions – “the state, the school, and the family” (*A Finger* 70). As sites of power, these institutions also provide sites of resistance. Chapter Two of this thesis delves into the negotiations conducted at these loci of social power, namely by Mayas striving to better their social situations.

Jean Franco highlights the connection between the advent of modernity and the supposed culpability of the racialized “barbarian” for impeding the development of “civilization” in colonized nations (5). Hegemonic powers such as the United States pursued “the rationalization and simplification of global economic relations” (Franco 6) and Latin America found itself relegated to a relatively inferior position as an “undeveloped” territory, an obstacle to modernity (Franco 6-8). If indigenous groups throughout Latin America were deemed obstacles to national progress in the eyes of the state, they had to be eliminated. Contemporary history of Guatemala, unfortunately, demonstrates the pervasiveness of this sentiment and the extremity of actions

taken to mitigate the alleged “indigenous problem.” Tragically, “During the civil wars of the 1980s, the Guatemalan military targeted the indigenous, whose extermination or forced assimilation was deemed essential to the thorough overhaul of the state in the name of modernization” (Franco 8). This racial targeting conducted by the Guatemalan military forces resulted in a full-scale genocide that shook the Central American nation and left many questioning the possibility of such awful human cruelty. Cruelty as a theoretical concept has always existed, but it enjoys an intimate connection with modernity because the burden of “modernization” is often used to justify violent acts.

Understanding the plausibility of Guatemala’s genocide requires a brief foray into the historical events leading up to the conflict. The history of Guatemala is characterized by the intervention, be it colonial or neocolonial, of other nation states with economic interest in the region, ranging from Spanish colonialism to German appropriation of coffee plantations and the United States’ economic and political interference. It is imperative to examine the ways in which Guatemala’s sovereignty was challenged in order to understand the civil war and its effects on contemporary society. Command of historical context also allows for better comprehension of the current sociopolitical atmosphere in Guatemala, particularly the social dynamic between ladino and indigenous constituents, a dynamic that is the result of colonial and neocolonial intrusion into the affairs of the nation.

### **2.1.2 Guatemala and the United States: Twentieth Century Neocolonialism**

The United States’ involvement with Guatemalan affairs began full force in 1906 with

the arrival of the United Fruit Company. Guatemala was an extremely attractive option for the United Fruit Company's investment because it "...was able to acquire extensive plots of land at cheap prices, essentially tax free, to establish banana plantations on which the Indians were forced to work at slave wages. Landowners and local officials ensured that the peonage system continued to operate, and those who protested were incarcerated or assassinated" (Shea 8-9). The company created the International Railways of Central America to aid its efforts, "...which made the export of bananas from the Atlantic valley lowlands a practical proposition" (Calvert 68-69).

Later, Guatemalan President Jorge Ubico strengthened the nation's ties with the United States government. In order to maintain a strong relationship with the United States, Ubico obeyed all instructions given to him by U.S. authorities (Calvert 70-71). Given the nature of this intimate relationship, Guatemala expressed its support of the United States and the Allied forces in World War II, an expression which grew problematic considering the German foothold on a great deal of Guatemalan coffee plantations – a source of pronounced economic income for the nation (Shea 10). Thus, "...in 1944 Ubico moved to expropriate the German-owned plantations, only to find that Guatemalans were by then asking why they might not do the same with other foreign interests" (Calvert 71). During this time, "Indians were not regarded as warranting political attention from the government. Their political invisibility assured their virtual enslavement to the coffee farmers requiring labor for the production of their export crops" (Adams 141). The forced labor of Guatemala's poor population was nearly akin to slavery, as laborers suffered harsh working conditions, many endured violence at the hands of landowners, and wages were highly insufficient, leaving many starving (Forster 31-35). As aggravation amped up, public protests and a labor strike broke out, motivating the resignation of Ubico in October of 1944 (Calvert 71).



The period of time between 1944 and 1954 is often called the period of the October Revolution by historians, but was treasured as “the time of freedom” by male peasant workers in Guatemala due to significant advancements in their labor rights and opportunities to acquire land (Forster 1-2). Nevertheless, freedom during this time did not extend to all Guatemalans. Cindy Forster notes, “Nonliterate women...were explicitly excluded...and as far as revolutionary programs were concerned, women often remained invisible” (2). Poor women especially were subject to continued degradation, sexual assault, and abuse from landowners and family members alike (Forster 7).

Following the resignation of Ubico, Dr. Juan José Arévalo Bermejo became the next president in the nation’s first set of free elections in 1944 (Calvert 75). Arévalo was swift to implement a great deal of positive political and social changes in Guatemala, but he also “...forced each male citizen to carry a work card showing how many days he had worked in the past year. Those not having an adequate number formed a convenient supply of forced labor for the plantation owners” (Calvert 70, 75). Control of the indigenous population became a major concern of the government because Indians supplied the labor necessary to maintain coffee as an important national export (Adams 153). Richard N. Adams identifies five popular strategies utilized by ladinos to control Indians:

...(1) a constant depreciation of Indian society and culture... (2) a constant effort to best Indians in the market economy, manipulating state support by whatever means to reduce Indian control over land and share of the market; (3) using both legal and illegal devices to inhibit Indians from full political participation...(4) periodically exercising force to remind the Indians that they must accept political, economic, and cultural subordination; and (5) hiding the constant fear of Indian violence, treachery, and rebellion that enabled ladinos to work directly with Indians on farms, in labor gangs, in the kitchen, and so forth (154).

On the contrary, the indigenous people of Guatemala possessed few strategies to combat ladino domination and abuse (Adams 157).

Towards the end of the 1940s, the United States' apprehension regarding communism and Marxist thought in general grew substantially, motivating the implementation of several political policies aimed at limiting any perceived enactment of Marxist doctrine in Latin America (Chasteen 262). Of course, the other side of the communist coin was American free-market capitalism, which John Charles Chasteen notes, "was viewed as 'American,' and US prosperity depended on it, at home and abroad. Any kind of Latin American economic nationalism was therefore 'un-American,' something to be combated" (263). Thus, while economic expansion in Guatemala and throughout Latin America was encouraged, its realm was circumscribed to United States' corporations, excluding the possibility of prosperity for Latin American nations themselves.

In efforts to curtail the perceived spread of communism throughout Latin America, the United States encouraged the creation of the Organization of American States (OAS) in 1948, whose stated aim was to "...strengthen the peace and security of the Western Hemisphere" ("Organization of American States"). Guatemala witnessed a different reality, when social rights advances established by democratically elected presidents were quashed due to their supposed communist character. In a watershed legal act, the Agrarian Reform Law of 1952 intended to redistribute parcels of land to the peasants who previously farmed it under the suffocating power of exploitive plantation owners. This reform law aimed to abandon the feudal organization of Guatemala's agricultural system, giving plantation landowners government bonds in order to facilitate the growth of capitalist competition among agrarian workers. Effectually, the reform law would serve as a liberating measure for many indigenous peasant workers who accrued unjust debts under their *patrones* and suffered slave-like living and working conditions. Not only did Árbenz redistribute parcels of land to Maya peasant workers from general plantations, but he

commandeered some of the United Fruit Company's land for reallocation as well (Chasteen 265). With the threat that the land reform posed to United Fruit Company's dominance over Guatemalan farm land in mind, the United States' CIA posed a coup to overthrow Árbenz and replace him with a dictator privy to U.S. interests.

After the conclusion of the Revolution of 1954, many of the civil rights advancements won by past president Árbenz were reversed. For instance, with the support of the United States in the form of about \$80 million, the new president Castillo Armas was able to reinstate the plantation system of agriculture, forcing the peasants to relinquish any land they received under the Árbenz administration. Guatemala suffered a new recession and amped up political oppression during and after the rule of Castillo Armas (Calvert 80-2). Certainly, this political oppression coupled with the United States' financial aid to Guatemala was no coincidence; political efforts focused on eradicating any form of communism in Guatemala. While much of the United States' suspicion of communist activity in Guatemala could be characterized as extreme, Marxist thought did become appealing to some Guatemalan nationalists, especially those in favor of land reform (Chasteen 265). Still, the United States' intervention in the political affairs of the nation provoked conflict which eventually escalated to full-scale genocide against Guatemala's Mayan population.

### **2.1.3 The Guatemalan Genocide: Early Stages**

Arturo Arias recognizes the substantiality of the conflict that resulted: "Following the 1954 coup that returned Guatemala to military rule, the army maintained its authority through

fraudulent elections and death squads. In response, a small, urban guerrilla movement arose and sought its base among the hungry and landless ladino peasants of eastern Guatemala” (231). The CIA’s coup of the government resulted in corruption and repression of Guatemala’s citizens, who reacted through protest and activism. The military revolted against the new regime in 1960, spurning two reactions: an increase in state repression and an increased involvement of the United States in the affairs of the nation (Levenson, et al. 199). Striving to maintain control, “In 1966, US advisors set up and trained a death squad that kidnapped and assassinated more than thirty opposition leaders...” (Levenson, et al. 199). With continued support from the United States in the late 1960s, Guatemala’s military continued increasing repression and, consequently, the death toll (Levenson, et al. 200).

Moreover, as repression rose in the 1970s, the indigenous began considering joining the guerrilla movement (Arias 252). By 1978, organized violence gained great force in its attack of guerrilla groups and other indigenous perceived as sympathizers – a distinction that, in the eyes of the Guatemalan government, merited little attention (Franco 49-50). Government-led military forces directed the slaughter and forced disappearance of hundreds of thousands of indigenous Mayas. Ignoring threats from international powers, the Guatemalan government continued sponsoring countless human rights violations, such as the Panzós massacre of 1978.

In her book *For Every Indio Who Falls: A History of Maya Activism in Guatemala, 1960-1990*, Betsy Konefal describes the role of the *reinas indígenas* from *Rabín Ajaw* in protesting the Panzós massacre of 1978. Despite the fact that the group of 700 Mayas of Panzós, Alta Verapaz were protesting their lack of land rights peacefully, soldiers attacked the Mayas, slaughtering 140 and injuring over 300 (Calvert 85). Konefal describes the details of the atrocity:

In one of the first large-scale counterinsurgency assaults against Mayas, army soldiers fired into the crowd of men, women, and children, killing at least thirty-five and

wounding dozens more. The violence did not end in the plaza. Campesinos fleeing into the hills and river were pursued by army helicopters, gunned down as they tried to escape the mayhem. It was a massacre on a scale not yet seen in Guatemala's civil war, though such mass killings would become almost routine practice within a few years (*For Every Indio* 83).

During this time, many Mayan activists, including contestants for the indigenous *Rabín Ajaw* pageant, publicly condemned the government-controlled National Folklore Festival and pageant for its appearance of indigenous support coupled with actual discrimination against the Mayas.

After the massacre itself, many indigenous figures associated with the *Rabín Ajaw* pageant “disappeared,” although the contestants themselves lived (“Subverting Authenticity” 70). The *reinas*' boycott of the indigenous pageant is significant not only because of their exercise of political agency, but also because it stands as an isolated example of such exercise of agency. As Konefal notes, the Panzós massacre was one of the first incidents of unprovoked, large-scale cruelty in the civil war, which may have contributed to the impetus for boycotting the pageant.

For the next four years after the 1978 Panzós massacre, a “war of attrition against the Indian community at large” followed, resulting in more murders and countless cases of brutal torture (Calvert 85). Diane Nelson offers one estimate of the casualties over a six-year span: “Between 1978 and 1984, an estimated seventy thousand (primarily indigenous) people were killed, forty thousand disappeared, and over one million displaced out of a population of eight million” (*A Finger* 9). For instance, a group of Mayas journeyed to the capital of Guatemala in 1979, intending to ask the president to cease the oppression and military brutality in the Ixil area. When President General Lucas García and the congress both rejected the Mayas' request to speak, “Desperate due to the seeming futility of their efforts, the group peacefully occupied the Spanish Embassy on January 31, 1980, with the hope of thus finding international recognition

and relief for their situation” (Arias 253). Unsurprisingly, the government failed to respond to this effort as well, but in an especially gruesome act, government forces burned the embassy with the Mayan protestors inside (Arias 253).

## 2.2 Genocide and Gender

Following the massacre at the Spanish Embassy in 1979, most Mayas recognized the need to join revolutionary forces against the Guatemalan government (Arias 253-54).

Government forces “...correctly saw danger not in the guerrillas' military capacity, but rather in the enormous mobilization of the Indians in the highlands” (Arias 255). As a result, a stronger genocidal effort against the Mayan population began in 1981 (Arias 255). When Efraín Rios Montt gained control of Guatemala following a 1982 coup, the indigenous genocide strengthened further (Franco 49-50). Franco emphasizes the colonial rhetoric used by Rios Montt at the time: “Rios Montt, while admitting that it would be necessary to kill those who collaborated with the guerrillas, stated, ‘It is not the army’s philosophy to kill the indigenous but to *reconquer* and help them’” (Franco 50, emphasis mine). Rios Montt’s choice of the word “reconquer” indicates the conquering of indigenous peoples, with all of its accompanying colonial connotations, to create an ethnically pure, modern nation without the stain of its “primitive” indigenous population (Franco 50).

### 2.2.1 Rape as a Tool of War

Women suffered especially during the genocidal civil war. Rape was used as an instrument of war to terrorize and intimidate indigenous and dissenting women across Guatemala. González Izás notes, “Through rape, the army and civil-patrol commanders also sought to denigrate the women and destroy them physically and mentally. In this way, they assured the silence of these women in the face of what was going on” (405). As a tool of war, the rape of women also serves to emasculate a nation’s men, who are powerless to protect “their women”. Many women were left alone because their husbands, fearing government violence, fled to the mountains to hide. This phenomenon rendered many women vulnerable to government efforts that used them to lure their husbands to capture and consequent torture (González Izás 407).

Jean Franco acknowledges that much of the violence in Guatemala’s civil war was gendered. She introduces her term “extreme masculinity” to explain the concept that torture often took the form of masculine violence through rape, with the prudent, anti-essentialist emphasis that not all men are violent (Franco 15). Rape was a frequently used instrument of war in the Guatemalan genocide, exercised both physically and symbolically. Much of the genocidal violence intended to destroy indigenous culture, and a great deal of this work was executed through regulation or destruction of the body. Many pregnant females were targeted for torture or death along with rape.

More than one account in the truth commission’s report *Guatemala: Never Again!* illustrate a scene of torture in which the pregnant woman’s belly is kicked or simply cut open to obtain the baby, which might be tossed around like a ball, hung from a tree, or face some other

morbid fate. In these cases, the military's mutilation or destruction of new life block the continuance of indigenous life and culture, both literally and figuratively (*Guatemala: Never Again!*). The men who raped indigenous women during the Guatemalan genocide exercised extreme masculinity by publicly displaying their dominance and communicating to witnesses the inferiority and sterilization of the indigenous population (Franco 15). In fact, "Even when the woman was left alive, the birth of the child of rape was intended to shame her and, among the indigenous, to separate her from the community" (Franco 16). Dismantling the sense of community within the indigenous population was paramount in the government's effort to create a unified, modern Guatemalan nation state.

That women were the victims of wartime rape in Guatemala was no mistake; women, and particularly indigenous women who constituted the majority of raped women, were considered less than human by their aggressors (Franco 79). Many times the victims of military rape were then killed, finishing the symbolic robbing of humanity with the literal. Franco reflects,

To rape and then kill suggests more than an act of warrior triumph. Is it too exaggerated to suggest that it is a reenactment of the Conquest itself—that...it attempted to finish the work of the conquest? Soldiers and police often used guns, which they thrust into the vagina or anus in a kind of symbolic reversal of impregnation. Such symbolic acts of violence combine the utmost cruelty with extreme misogyny (79).

In parallel fashion, the inability of the families of many indigenous victims to bury their loved ones in keeping of Mayan tradition served not only as a source of mental torture for the survivors, but also a disruption of culture – the literal removal of the indigenous body from Guatemalan society. Mayan culture was also intentionally offended by the use of fire to destroy Maya bodies, a method that editors claim destroyed the "...*mwel* or *dioxil*, the principle underlying the continuity of life, among other things" (*Guatemala: Never Again!* 41) according to their cultural beliefs. The use of fire was clearly a pointed strategy employed by the army,



operating on the literal and figurative levels of cultural destruction through the body  
(*Guatemala: Never Again!*).

To be clear, the rape that was so common throughout war-stricken Guatemala was not simply an unfortunate byproduct of the overall violence, but rather an intentionally employed tactic of war that demonstrated the masculine dominance of the military. Actually, prostitutes were utilized to train members of the Guatemalan military in the skill of rape, with the intended outcome of “...the degradation not only of the woman but also of her family and offspring, who were often forced to witness the rape” (Franco 79, 80). Various forms of sexual assault and rape were frequently committed in front of females’ fathers or husbands who were powerless to defend their families and communities. The act of rape was a display of dominance and extreme masculinity, and gang rapes demonstrated the hegemonic, masculine dominance of the military over the indigenous female body specifically and the indigenous community broadly.

### **2.2.2 Ladino Masculinity and Toxic Homosexuality in the Military**

While much has been written about the genocide in Guatemala, attention to masculinity and homosociality remains insufficient. In this section, I aim to assess various levels of masculinity. First, the extreme masculinity of mostly ladino troops and feminization of Maya men and their communities was instrumental in the mobilization of forces against indigenous guerrilla fighters. Second, and most importantly for this section, truth commission reports collected after the genocide reveal the significance of homosociality in the creation and maintenance of cohesion in the mostly ladino government military forces. Academic analyses of

the military's reign of terror that take gender into account tend to focus on the prevalence of violence against women without taking the forces of masculinity conducting this violence into adequate account. First-person accounts by the few military personnel willing to take part in post-genocide truth commissions provide invaluable information regarding the instrumental role of male homosociality in the creation of government forces willing to commit horrific acts of genocide. Homosociality is often portrayed in a positive light, but given its potential for contributing to terror, its toxic underside deserves examination. I argue that toxic homosociality was instrumental in creating the military unity necessary to conduct such atrocious genocide.

One especially disturbing aspect of the Guatemalan genocide was the military's exercise of cannibalism. During Spain's conquest of the territory which is now Guatemala, the colonizers accused the indigenous of the area of practicing cannibalism, a charge that was intended to indicate the utmost primitiveness (Franco 45-46). In an interesting inversion of this colonial accusation, when the Guatemalan military was not forcing indigenous citizens to engage in cannibalism during the Civil War, they themselves committed cannibalism as a symbol of domination (Franco 52). In fact, "The Commission on Historical Clarification documented numerous acts of cannibalism in which 'the aggressors ate the viscera of victims or forced the victims to drink their own blood or eat their own members,' often in public" (Franco 52). Testimonies after the genocide brought to light the military's tendency to force cannibalism in their training procedures. Often times, the ladino military made indigenous participation in the military's cause mandatory, forming civil patrols known as *Patrullas de Auto Defensa Civil* (PACs). By 1982, approximately half of the country's indigenous males were forced to join PACs and inflict violence upon their own people, the horror of which many times included murdering their own families and eating indigenous victims (Franco 51).

Franco reflects upon the power of feelings of vulnerability associated with military practices of cannibalism. She posits, "...vulnerability creates an incentive to destroy everything that can be considered human in others by making them devour their own flesh, while atrocity merchants prove their own supremacy by eating the enemy and drinking the blood of dogs" (Franco 55). Similarly, in her article "Violence, Mourning, Politics," Judith Butler asserts that "...each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies—as a site of desire and physical vulnerability, as a site of a publicity at once assertive and exposed" (10). In other words, because each of us has a body that is socially constituted, and thus exposed in its relationships with others, we are vulnerable. Butler argues that denial of our vulnerability "through a fantasy of mastery" can serve in the execution of violence and war and that awareness of our vulnerability can help us achieve nonviolent solutions to conflict (18). In the midst of this atrocity in Guatemala, "Cadavers became objects for transmitting messages to the civilian population or to the enemy" (Franco 14). The consumption of these cadavers helped to construct Butler's idea of "a fantasy of mastery" and denial of vulnerability.

### **2.2.3 A Brief Overview of Homosociality**

To facilitate my discussion of the homosocial relations that took place within the military and contributed to the genocide in Guatemala, it is prudent to clarify the definition of homosociality that I employ. Eve Sedgwick remains one of the best known theorists of homosociality among men. In her book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Sedgwick aims "To draw the 'homosocial' back into the orbit of 'desire,' of the

potentially erotic...” which consequently, “...is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual...” (1). While the link between homosocial female relationships and the potentially lesbian erotic stands as easily identifiable, the significance of homophobia in broader social and more personal definitions of masculinity eschews the possibility of recognizing the continuum of homosocial desire without resorting to direct associations with male homosexual sex.

Discussing Sedgwick’s thoughts on homosocial interactions among men, Todd Reeser explains the fear that many heterosexual men hold of appearing gay if they were to express positive emotions toward another man. He expounds, “This inability to express emulation results from a fear of losing in the rivalry, but it is also based on a perceived homophobia since expressing adulation might be seen as expressing a form of homoerotic desire” (Reeser 57). Instead of expressing adulation, many men choose to express this sentiment through rivalry, which, Sedgwick claims, often takes the form of a heterosexual love triangle in which two straight men desire the same straight woman. Reeser discusses the desire in Sedgwick’s love triangle as being mimetic in character, which is to say that Man A imitates Man B’s desire for the woman because, in fact, Man A admires Man B but is prohibited from expressing his admiration by his own homophobic views (60-61).

Hammarén and Johansson’s article “Homosociality: In Between Power and Intimacy” takes issue with what the authors view as an over-generalized use of the term “homosociality”. They explain, “In the literature, this concept is mainly used as a tool to understand and dissect male friendships and men’s collective attempts to uphold and maintain power and hegemony” (Hammarén and Johansson 5). In an effort to mitigate this overgeneralization, Hammarén and Johansson specify two types of homosociality: vertical/hierarchical and horizontal. Vertical or

hierarchical homosociality represents forms of homosocial interaction among men which intend to uphold hegemonic forms of masculinity and/or patriarchy whereas horizontal homosociality can be likened to female homosociality, or "...relations that are based on emotional closeness, intimacy, and a nonprofitable form of friendship" (Hammarén and Johansson 5). However, the authors are quick to clarify that the two forms of homosociality they name are not mutually exclusive and possess no firm boundaries.

Still further, Hammarén and Johansson contest the intersectional ignorance that comes in conjunction with the over-generalized use of the term "homosociality". When analyzing homosocial relations, many theorists entirely ignore intersectional factors such as sexuality, age, and class. Hammarén and Johansson argue:

These variables influence the individual at the same time and constitute flexible and often complex processes of belongings and power relations...An intersectional framework acknowledges the multidimensionality of societal factors, identities, and power (as opposed to focusing on class or gender individually). It also attempts to capture how social factors influence one another (7).

As with all analyses of gender, understanding the complex intersectionality of the subjects involved and the full context of the analysis content is of the utmost importance to gain true understanding and reach valid conclusions.

In light of Hammarén and Johansson's preoccupations, I strive to be contextually sensitive in my analyses of homosocial relations. Yet, pinning down a specific and concise definition of masculinity/masculinities in Latin America or even Guatemala alone is difficult at best. Of course, much has been written about the prominence of machismo in Latin American nations like Guatemala, but even the definition of machismo is highly unstable. For instance, in their article "The Myth of Sameness among Latino Men and Their Machismo," authors Torres, Solberg, and Carlstrom use evidence gathered in a ten-month study of one hundred forty-eight

Latino men to make their central claim that definitions of *machismo* vary greatly among cultures and individuals. They note the stereotypical hypermasculinity characterized in popular conceptions of *machismo* and its relations to dominance over women, aggression, little display of emotion, and other like traits (Torres et al.). The article concludes, “Our findings provide evidence of multiple dimensions of machismo among Latino men that embrace polar conceptions, encompassing positive and negative elements, not necessarily exclusive of each other (De La Cancela, 1991; Mirandé, 1997; Torres, 1998)” (Torres et al.). To provide an overview of masculinity in Guatemala is beyond the scope of this thesis, so I reserve my claims to the realm of homosociality as described above.

#### **2.2.4 Extreme Masculinity and Rape as (Vertical) Homosocial Activity**

One of the post-genocide testimonies illustrates the horror of rape as a tool of war:

There was also a couple. They took her aside to a room adjoining where the husband and the rest of us were. The soldiers said, “Don’t worry, we’re going to take good care of your wife.” The poor man had to watch everything they did to her, torturing the poor woman, [until she] couldn’t take anymore. The soldiers raped her one by one... Case 710, Santa María Tzejá, Ixcán, Quiché, 1982 (*Guatemala: Never Again!* 78).

By claiming that they would carefully attend to the woman in question, the soldiers were not only being cruel, but exercising extreme masculinity and stressing the inability of the woman’s husband to take care of her, highlighting his failure as a man. The truth commission report clarifies, “Using the female body is a central feature of violence against women; it serves to underscore who must be dominant, and who must be subjugated” (78). Many times the rapes Maya women suffered were continuous, with women sequestered in houses where they were

forced to both be available for sexual relations with the military and provide their rapists with domestic services like cooking (*Reckoning* 96). Within the context of rape conducted in front of male family members or Maya communities more broadly, *both the indigenous women and men* were subjugated.

Quite frequently, a woman's body would be used as a reward for the achievement of a group of male soldiers, a process that rendered the typically indigenous, female body objectified, turned into a thing that would be abused until destroyed and then regularly disposed of. One testimony particularly highlights the homosocial aspect of gang rape. After being detained naked in a room and questioned by the military, one woman recalls:

...And I remember clearly that about twenty men raped me...And the only thing I remember is that while one was having relations with me, right, others were masturbating. Some other ones were rubbing me, right? They put their hands on my breasts. I lost consciousness several times. That was when they hit me. They slapped my face and others put cigarettes on my breasts, and each time I started to come around, I saw a different man on top of me. And I remember when I could no longer feel that someone was with me. I was in a pool of urine, semen, I guess blood too. It was truly humiliating, incredibly humiliating...Case 5447, Guatemala City, 1979 (152-153).

The act of rape was a display of dominance and extreme masculinity, and gang rapes demonstrated the hegemonic, masculine dominance of the military over the indigenous female body specifically and the indigenous community broadly. That many rapes-as-rewards were gang rapes indicates the importance of the homosociality of the experience for military troops. Indeed, it would not be far-fetched to claim that there is an element of Sedgwick's homosocial triangle at play here. Within the context of the military, and particularly the military during times of extreme violence, the horizontal homosociality that Hammarén and Johansson describe would never be socially acceptable. Soldiers were expected to be emotionless, to execute orders without question, no matter how horrific. Expression of intimacy among soldiers in the Guatemalan army would undoubtedly have been unacceptable regardless of the current socio-political context, but

the expression of admiration for each other for enduring such violence and committing gruesome acts could be expressed through sharing in sexual relations with the same woman. Sadly, the combination of extreme masculinity and shared vertical homosociality via gang rape of indigenous women was highly successful in cultivating a culture of fear among indigenous communities.

### **2.2.5 Mayas in the Military: Compulsory Civil Patrolling**

While leaders in the military were generally privileged ladinos, the military employed a disturbing tactic of terror in their efforts to establish an environment of fear: forced participation of Mayas in the military patrolling of their own communities. Quite often, Mayas were forced to join the military efforts to control their own villages through compulsory assignments as civil patrols. In this position, Maya civil patrols were faced with a choice between their own torture and death or participation in the regulation of their community, which included the torture and murder of fellow community members, friends, and sometimes even their own families (*Guatemala: Never Again!* 22). Just as in the above example of indigenous men being forced to watch their family members be raped, in this practice indigenous men were robbed of the ability to protect their families and communities.

By either rupturing the Maya civil patrols' connections with their communities via their new, antagonistic military identities, or physically relocating Maya civil patrols to other villages, the Guatemalan military strove to fracture community-based identification among indigenous peoples (*A Finger* 91). Moreover, the tendency to feminize Maya men as they contrasted with



ladinos, was employed strategically within the military:

Reports of the brutal barracks training suggest that internalized racism is a tool used to break the boys down so they can be remade as soldiers, in part by promising them marks of the ladino (modern, bourgeois practices like wearing shoes and eating meat) and of masculinity. Mayan men are often feminized in relation to traditional practices and in their limited power vis-à-vis the ladino. Richard Wilson suggests that the hyper-masculinizing techniques of the body to which young Mayan men are subjected through training may be “designed to inculcate...the state’s regulatory norms and values” (1995, 253) and leave their marks on the boy’s hair, gait, posture, hygiene, and sexual practices—in part through the links between barracks and brothel (see Enloe 1983) (*A Finger* 91).

The military’s inscription on Maya male bodies simultaneously served as a unifying force for troops, but also an erasure of culture.

The truth commission report *Guatemala: Never Again!* explains the disciplinary role of civil patrols, “As part of the strategy of guilt, the army took advantage of any minor infraction of military order to justify a punishment that would serve as an example to others; this was a way of maintaining control over the population and commanding absolute obedience” (22). In one particularly disturbing report, the exercise of ladino military officials’ dominance over Maya civil patrols was used as entertainment, presumably to facilitate bonding within the higher, ladino ranks of the military:

We don’t do the killing now. Instead the patrollers from here in this community, they are the ones who will kill them. These people here, twelve men are going to die...So they made them begin and some of the patrollers carried knives and others sticks. And with just sticks and knives they killed those twelve men they referred to there. After they had killed the twelve men—they killed them and they tortured them, and they went to get gasoline and they gathered them together. They sent the patrollers to pile them up together, and they said to them: “You are going to burn them yourselves.” “They told us to put them in two stacks of six. We went to get sticks and pine needles, and they put gasoline on them and burned them to ashes right in front of us.” That is what the man who saw it said, and he told it to me. When they were all burned up, everyone applauded, and they began to eat. *Case 2811, Chinique, Quiché, 1982. (Guatemala: Never Again!* 23).

Not only did this strategy provide a cruel sort of entertainment for the troops watching, but it also

placed the guilt of torture on the civil patrols. Significantly, civil patrol members were rarely given weapons such as guns, but made to use whatever tools of violence they had on hand, such as the sticks and knives in the above example. While civil patrol participation in genocidal actions was compulsory, it was always conducted in such a way that army officials could maintain their masculine dominance over indigenous participants who were deemed lesser men. Further, obligating local civil patrols to conduct some of the genocide's torture itself served as a way of "replacing feelings of grief with a new type of group revelry" (*Guatemala: Never Again!* 24). In this quote, the analysis from the truth commission report itself precisely references a homosocial practice without explicitly naming it.

Observing the effects of their own dominant power, army officials were able to enjoy violence as entertainment in the process of implementing the military's genocidal practices. In the same Case 2811 mentioned above, army members in control of directing the murders were rewarded for the civil patrols' atrocities: "When we left Zacualpa, they gave a big pig to the patrol chief, and to us too. And the lieutenant said: 'You're going to make a stew when it is the ninth day of mourning for those twelve men; prepare a big stew there in Chinique. This is for the patrollers because the Chinique patrollers 'have balls'..." (*Guatemala: Never Again!* 24). The Mayan civil patrols were remunerated for displays of violence, both materially and in terms of verbal affirmations of their masculinity. Still, indigenous participants in the military could never achieve the high status that ladino officers could, and rarely shared in the ladinos' homosocial bonding experiences. Although the bonding experiences of the ladino troops in this example are not wholly horizontally homosocial, they certainly served to unite the troops in a positive way. Not only did these ladino troops not have to commit the murders themselves, but they enjoyed the manifestation of their masculine power over indigenous civil patrols together and

transformed the event into a source of group merriment.

One rare testimony given by an indigenous member of the higher ranks of the intelligence sector of the military elucidates the intersectional nature of Guatemalan military homosociality. The REHMI's truth commission collected extensive records of testimonies from individuals affected by or involved in the terror of the civil war, but in order to facilitate the compilation of a comprehensive document, testimony necessarily was shortened and organized by theme. In contrast, scholars Victor Montejo and Q'anil Akab' assembled a collection of six testimonies of moderate depth in *Brevísima relación testimonial de la continua destrucción del Mayab' (Guatemala) [A Brief Testimonial Relation of the Continual Destruction of Guatemala, my translation]*. While *Guatemala: Never Again!* details the entire span of the thirty-six year civil war, Montejo and Akab's work represents testimony collected in 1982 after an onset of brutal massacres resulted in the forced refuge of many Guatemalans in Mexico—a group that was able to provide the scholars with valuable insight in the midst of the height of the state-sponsored violence from a secure space outside of the Guatemalan nation state.

Of particular interest in Montejo and Akab's collection of testimonies, indigenous soldier Chilin Hultaxh provides chilling accounts of his time in the military and the atrocities he witnessed. Coming from a small village with a high concentration of Mayan peasants, Hultaxh had limited educational and economic opportunities, which motivated his participation in the military. After graduating from high school in the late 1970s, Hultaxh found it difficult to find quality work, and at a friend's reassurance that he could join the military but work only in the office sector, he enlisted and acquired a position in the intelligence sector as a result of his skills (39-41). Military training strove for the quick indoctrination of Hultaxh, and he found that he assimilated quickly, even making friends: "*Hice amigos desde la esfera militar, en cuanto a los*

*mismos especialistas. Nos tomamos mucho cariño, pues eramos gente del mismo estrato o condición humilde y sencilla, pero que también teníamos ganas de ganarnos un dinero* [I made friends in the military sphere, at least with the same type of specialists. We were very affectionate, well, we were of the same humble, simple background, but we all wanted to earn a little money]” (41, translation mine). Not only does Hultaxh’s quote reveal the existence of homosocial relationships within the military, but it also clarifies the ethnic constraints of such relationships. Those of a humble, simple background like Hultaxh were almost certainly of indigenous origin as well, which must have assisted the creation of his homosocial bonds within the military. He never relates evidence of friendships with other individuals in the military who did not share his “humble background”.

Despite the brief mention of homosocial bonds with similar male specialists in the military, elsewhere in his account, Hultaxh speaks of the isolation he felt within the military. At one point during his time in the military, a friend of Hultaxh asked him to visit a group of prisoners of war and help document their personal information with several other military officials. Hultaxh assumed that the young prisoners would be released unharmed, a belief he allegedly held so strongly that he told the prisoners they would be sent home, but was astonished to see his army friend tie a tourniquet around one of the young prisoner’s necks and hang him when he claimed he knew nothing about the guerrilla forces’ whereabouts. In a likely effort to bond with Hultaxh, his friend invites him to “try one” and murder one of the prisoners, but overwhelmed and disgusted, Hultaxh begins to vomit. As each of the group of prisoners is hung, the captain scolds Hultaxh and orders him to cope with it. Clearly, showing disgust was a sign of weakness that did not fit into the culture of dominant masculinity and violence. Afterwards, Hultaxh is forced to help strip the bodies, remove all signs of the prisoners’ identities, and place

them in a military vehicle for disposal. Perhaps his unwillingness to disguise his disgust in virtue of appearing dominant or to engage in homosocial activities of torture and murder in which all were equally culpable contributed to the fact that Hultaxh was the only unarmed military member present at the questioning and torture of the young men. After Hultaxh intentionally abuses alcohol to motivate his own discharge from the military, he is accused of being a guerrilla and forced to flee the country.

Analyses of both the academic literature regarding the Guatemalan Civil War and personal accounts of the events of the genocide alike provide valuable insight into the social dynamic among the members of the military at the time. Utilizing Eve Sedgwick's conception of male homosociality located along a continuum of desire along with the possibility of a homosocial love triangle helps to elucidate, sadly, the ways in which male troops in the Guatemalan military were able to express admiration or affection for one another in a highly tense atmosphere of war through the collective gang rape of indigenous female bodies. The comprehension of gang rape as a group homosocial bonding experience is aided by Jean Franco's understanding of such actions as extreme masculinity—a hyperbolized version of the quotidian gendered violence in Guatemala. Moreover, acknowledging Hammerén and Johanssen's qualms about the lack of attention to homosociality's intersectional aspect helps to reveal that the homosociality so prevalent in the Guatemalan military was especially impacted by the vector of ethnicity, which relegated indigenous troops to inferior positions that only served to emasculate them and their broader local communities. Recognizing the ways in which masculinity studies are instrumental in understanding how such atrocities were committed can only serve to help prevent such horrors from occurring again.

### 2.3 Post-War Politics: The Truth Commission and *Reckoning*

The commencement of the peace process occurred in 1986, despite continued conflict throughout Guatemala. Kevin Lewis O'Neill partially attributes the beginning of the peace process to Guatemala's need to remain on good terms with other states in the international community who, growing increasingly aware of the atrocities occurring in Guatemala, might become reluctant to supporting continued financial aid to the nation. Granted, the steps toward peace were measured and gradual in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but eventually motivated the United Nations' peace process mediation that lasted from 1994 until the signing of the peace accord in 1996 (O'Neill 333). Marking the beginning of the United Nations' peace process mediation, the 1994 Oslo Accord granted authority to a truth-seeking body: the Historical Clarification Commission (CEH), which aimed "...to investigate human rights violations and to make recommendations on how to promote peace in post-war Guatemala" (O'Neill 333).

Although various sources have cited continuing ethnic tension and violence in Guatemala following the end of the war, December 29, 1996 marked the official end of state-sanctioned military violence with the signing of the "*Acuerdo de Paz Firme y Duradera*" [Firm and Lasting Peace Accord] (*Reckoning* 39). Diane Nelson describes the scene of the event: "...there was a really big party on Sexta Avenida in the main square of Guatemala City. In a scenario impossible for thirty-five years, guerrilla commanders stood next to army officers in a public

space inside the nation. Exiles returned from all over the world, and young people came down from the hills to rejoin their families” (*Reckoning* 39). Following the official recognition of supposed peace at the end of the armed conflict, two organizations endeavored to collect information and testimonies about the violent conflict: the Roman Catholic Church and the United Nations. Both the United Nations’ and the Roman Catholic Church’s reports utilized a variety of sources and analytical strategies to reach their conclusions: “...first-person testimonies, statistical analysis, charts, graphs, case studies, and historical periodization” (O’Neill 340). First, the Roman Catholic Church’s Recovery of the Historical Memory Project published their truth commission report entitled *Guatemala: Never Again!* in 1998, shortly followed by the publication of the United Nations’ Historical Clarification Commission’s report entitled *A Memory of Silence* in 1999 (O’Neill 331).

*A Memory of Silence*, the United Nation’s report, consists of twelve volumes that reflect extensive investigation into the civil war. Analyzing thousands of interviews and other research, the UN Commission organized their findings into these twelve volumes by theme:

...causes and origins of Guatemala’s civil conflict in Volume one, human rights violations in Volumes two and three, the consequences and effects of violence in Volume four, conclusions and recommendations in Volume five, and case studies in Volumes six through eleven. The twelfth volume presents annexes that include findings on specific events and brief descriptions of each case presented to the Commission. To date, the report’s fifth volume is the only translated section; it contains in total 84 specific recommendations. The recommendations address Guatemala’s government and suggest how Guatemala can create a culture of mutual respect and democratic process (O’Neill 339).

Although the UN truth commission’s research was extensive, the investigation lasted just over a year. Foreign governments footed the \$9.5 million bill that assisted researchers, lawyers, and other specialists who took part in the process, many of whom were not Guatemalan citizens (O’Neill 340). Jean Franco affirms the foreign nature of the initial United Nations truth

commission, which was met with resistance from laypeople and officials alike (48). Perhaps contributing to the resistance, “Unlike its counterpart in South Africa, the CEH was empowered neither to identify or punish individual perpetrators nor to provide any sort of reparations to the victims, but the findings and recommendations were meant to be taken into account in government policies...” (*Reckoning* 51).

Similar to the United Nations’ Historical Clarification Commission (CEH), the Roman Catholic Church’s Recovery of the Historical Memory Project (REMHI) also pursued the truths of the atrocities committed in Guatemala’s civil war. O’Neill describes the aspirations of the REMHI as goals to “...establish the history of Guatemala’s civil conflict and to serve as a basis for justice and national reconciliation” (333). *Guatemala: Nunca más!*, the Church’s 1998 truth commission report, consists of four volumes that tackle similar issues to those examined in the United Nation’s investigation. In 1999, the publication of a further edited, English language version (*Guatemala: Never Again!*) potentially allowed greater global accessibility to the truth commission’s report (O’Neill 334). O’Neill delineates the four core themes of the Church’s report: “...(1) the suffering of the Guatemalan population, (2) how state repression functioned, (3) the consequences of repression, and (4) demands for the future” (334). Nearly every text has an intended audience in mind and the Catholic Church’s truth commission report was no different, written with the Guatemalan population as well as foreign governments and donor organizations in mind. Despite maintaining an intended audience, the Church’s report lacked an author, per se. That is, a broad collection of individuals and organizations took part in the truth-seeking process, broad in both the sense of field of expertise as well as nationality, as in the CEH report (O’Neill 340).

Although the Catholic Church’s and the United Nations’ truth commissions operated



individually, both efforts eventually asserted that genocide did indeed occur during Guatemala's civil war (O'Neill 333). Both reports cover the period of conflict in some depth and breadth, yet each "...establish that the Guatemalan state committed acts of genocide against Mayan people from 1978 to 1985" (334), or what is often considered the height of the civil war violence. The numbers generated by each report vary slightly, but the accusation of state-led genocide remains the same. O'Neill presents each report's numerical findings, explaining that the United Nations' truth commission report determined:

[...] more than 200,000 people died or disappeared as a result of the armed conflict, of which more than 80% were Mayan; [...] 93% of these human rights violations can be connected to the state. The Catholic Church, similarly, asserts that 150,000 civilians were killed, that another 50,000 disappeared, and that 90% of the perpetrators were members of Guatemala's Armed Forces or the army-commissioned Civil Defense Patrols. Moreover, both reports agree that roughly one million people were displaced during the country's civil conflict and that members of Mayan groups were "systematically killed, occurred serious bodily or mental harm, and deliberately subjected to living conditions calculated to bring about the group's physical destruction (CEH, 1999, Vol V, p 38) (334).

Of course, wartime institutions like the compulsory Civil Defense Patrols contributed to the aforementioned murkiness of who—or rather, which ethnic group—committed each violent act. Still, however, both the United Nations' and the Catholic Church's investigations were able to gather sufficient evidence to conclude that the state sponsored efforts to wipe out the Maya population in Guatemala.

In her book *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Elaine Scarry examines the inability of language to capture physical pain on a theoretical level. Expanding upon the relationship between human language and pain, Scarry claims that pain is either without speech, "...or else the moment it first becomes articulate it silences all else; the moment language bodies forth the reality of pain, it makes all further statements and interpretations seem ludicrous and inappropriate, as hollow as the world content that disappears in the head of the person

suffering” (60). To discuss other aspects of pain, such as how the extreme pain of genocidal torture violates universal human rights, fails to truly represent it. Language cannot express what it is to be in pain, and “...it [bodily pain] is also invisible because its own powerfulness ensures its isolation, ensures that it will not be seen in the context of other events, that it will fall back from its new arrival in language and remain devastating. Its absolute claim for acknowledgment contributes to its being ultimately unacknowledged” (Scarry 61). Clearly, all attempts to verbalize bodily pain fall flat and cannot truly convey the concept.

Scarry notes that while pain is just as much a constitutive factor of the human bodily experience as hearing, touch, fear, and hunger, it differs from perceptual states such as these because it lacks an object. In other words, one does not just hear or touch; rather, they hear or touch something – an object, a physical entity outside of the body. Similarly, one experiences fear of and hunger for something outside of the body. Alternatively, pain has no external object (Scarry 161-62). Scarry explains, “This objectlessness, the complete absence of referential content, almost prevents it from being rendered in language: objectless, it cannot easily be objectified in any form, material or verbal” (162). She acknowledges that the object of other perceptual states like fear and hunger are, in a sense, an expression of the state. For instance, for a human afraid of the night, the night is an expressive extension of the individual’s state of fear (162). Pain both cannot be adequately expressed through language, such as in the testimonial accounts of the genocide in Guatemala, and cannot be expressed through the image or understanding of an object.

John Beverley and Marc Zimmerman assess the *testimonio* [testimony] genre in the “Testimonial Narrative” chapter of their book *Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolutions*. They claim, “The general form of the *testimonio* is a novel or novella-length

narrative, told in the first-person by a narrator who is also the actual protagonist or witness of the events she or he recounts. The unit of narration is usually a life or a significant life episode (e.g. the experience of being a prisoner)” (Beverley and Zimmerman 173). Moreover, Beverley and Zimmerman highlight the legal and/or religious aspect of much of Central American *testimonio* narrative, underlining the difference between “simple recorded participant narrative” and politically or religiously driven testimony (173).

Beverley and Zimmerman emphasize the often indirect manner by which testimonial narratives are collected. Due to the ubiquitous illiteracy in Central America, many times the collection of *testimonio* narratives are marked by the participation of a transcriber and/or editor who prevents the truly direct relation of the individual’s testimony in question (Beverley and Zimmerman 173). Often, as in the case of the collection and assembly of the truth commission reports in Guatemala, there is both a transcriber and editor of the testimony, which further detaches the text production from the lived experiences of the individual(s) providing the testimony. Not only were the testimonies collected by transcribers in Guatemala, but they were compiled and edited by individuals hailing from outside Guatemala, distancing the first-hand nature of the accounts to an even greater degree.

Despite the varying degrees of indirectness that *testimonio* narratives may possess, all share the characteristic of representing or being on behalf of a particular social or political group. Beverley and Zimmerman stress that the narratives of the *testimonio* genre must be “...representative of a social class or group...” and that the narrator “...speaks for or in the name of a community or group...” (174). Further, they acknowledge that while *testimonio* may traditionally be considered the relation of events by one person, it often takes the form of various testimonies from a collection of different individuals who all experienced the same event

(Beverley and Zimmerman 175). However, one significant characteristic of *testimonio* is “...the integrity and importance of the individual subject in the face of dehumanizing experiences” (Beverley and Zimmerman 175). Nevertheless, Beverley and Zimmerman maintain that identification with a certain group is a core aspect of the definition of *testimonio*; without this link between the individual and the oppressed group they represent, a *testimonio* text would simply be an autobiography of sorts (177-78). Hanlon and Shankar echo the assertions of Beverley and Zimmerman regarding the collective nature of *testimonio*, especially in Guatemala. Indeed, they cite the use of *testimonio* among Maya communities in Guatemala for centuries, almost always used in a collective sense “...to reveal their struggles against outside forces” (Hanlon and Shankar 268). The prevalence of violence against indigenous communities in the genocide and the subsequent frequency of indigenous testimony in the truth commission reports support Beverley and Zimmerman’s prescribed need for group representation as well as the emphasis on individual experience, affirming the classification of the truth report as *testimonio*.

Beverley and Zimmerman recognize the weight of giving voice to individuals whose spoken perspectives may typically be subsumed by the authority that written literature enjoys in a world culture dominated by Western values. They explain how lesser considered oral expressions of testimony gain authority:

As, generally, a textual representation of actual speech, *testimonio* implies a challenge to the loss of the authority of orality in the context of processes of cultural modernization that privilege literacy and literature as a norm of expression. It represents the entry into literature of persons who would normally—in those societies where literature is a form of class and/or ethnic privilege—be excluded from direct literary expression, who have had to be represented by professional writers (Beverley and Zimmerman 175).

Recognizing the legitimacy of oral communication, particularly in testimony that recounts human rights violations, is of the utmost importance in the process of eliminating such violations. Without acceptance of the legitimacy and importance of oral communication, the

events that such communication relates cannot be taken seriously.

In contrast to other Latin American literature, Beverley and Zimmerman note that the narrator(s) of *testimonio* do not strive to present “...the magisterial or omniscient point of view of an author” (176). Rather, the focus tends to be on establishing a connection between the narrator(s) and their audience. Hanlon and Shankar note the importance of *testimonio* as a means of communicating personal accounts of injustice that otherwise would remain unknown. They elucidate, “A significant aspect of *testimonio* is its ability to open up areas of lived experience that might otherwise remain invisible to those outside the circle of confidence” (Hanlon and Shankar 270). Of course, this process is complicated by the frequent presence of a transcriber, editor, or other form of interlocutor who aids in the production and distribution of the first person testimony (Beverley and Zimmerman 176). However, Beverley and Zimmerman admit that the interlocutor does not possess all of the power to construct the representation of individual experience through testimony (Beverley and Zimmerman 177). In any case, as Hanlon and Shankar warn us, “Without *testimonio*, the upper hand of terror remains silence and shame. With silence comes the complicity that enables terror and impunity to coexist” (270). I affirm the importance of advocating for the collection and distribution of testimonial narratives, while still maintaining the ability to recognize its limitations.

To explain the dynamic of collaboration between the individual providing the testimony and his or her interlocutor, Beverley and Zimmerman cite the globally-recognized Guatemalan indigenous activist Rigoberta Menchú as an example and conclude that she “...is also in a sense manipulating and exploiting her interlocutor in order to have her story reach an international audience, something which, as a political activist, she sees in quite utilitarian terms” (177). Ultimately, through the combined work of Menchú and her interlocutor Elizabeth Burgos,

Rigoberta Menchú's testimonio narrative *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*<sup>2</sup> brought a great deal of international attention to the suffering of Guatemala's indigenous population (Hanlon and Shankar 266). Hanlon and Shankar note the power of Menchú's testimony and claim that her book "...is viewed by many as having contributed significantly to the peace process and the resulting Truth Commission" (266). Part of the power of *testimonio*, according to Hanlon and Shankar, is not only the reflections that come about from delivering testimony, but also its potential for affecting future social change (268).

Finding and publicizing the truth of what happened in the Guatemalan genocide is absolutely worthwhile, but it may not have been enough to move forward peacefully. Jean Franco concludes, "...the 'reconciliation' proposed by Truth Commissions is difficult to put into effect when lasting prejudices and divisions remain in place and sectors of the population are still subjected to discrimination" (248). If bodily pain can never be communicated through language, the attempts to communicate the level of pain that the indigenous population of Guatemala suffered during the genocide can never be completely productive or successful. Although I do not contend that *testimonio* is powerless or that post-conflict testimony collection is not worthwhile, I do declare that it has significant limitations.

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<sup>2</sup> Rigoberta Menchú Tum remains one of the most widely-acknowledged and widely-disputed figures of contemporary Guatemalan history. Her autobiographical novel *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* attracted both global repute as well as harsh criticism and the accusation of presenting false claims. The content of Menchú's initial publication as well as the public and academic debates it engendered deserve further exploration within the context of the twentieth century Mayanist movement in Guatemala.

### 2.3.1 Post-war Recovery and Restoration

Diane Nelson's description of post-war Guatemala reveals the continued conflict despite the signing of the peace accords and publication of two truth commission reports. Following the conclusion of the war, the truth commissions may not have been granted punitive powers, but the United Nations' CEH report laid out a series of recommendations for Guatemala moving forward:

It calls on the government and the guerrilla to take full public responsibility for the acts they committed and for the state and society to "commemorate victims through 1. a nationally recognized, annual day of remembrance 2. construction of monuments and public parks throughout the country 3. assigning names of victims to schools, public buildings and roads 4. acknowledging the multicultural character of the nation by raising monuments and creating communal cemeteries in accord with the collective memory of the Maya" (1999:5:61-62). Other recommendations include reparations for victims, trials of perpetrators, the establishment of a commission to investigate the role of the armed forces and purify them of criminal elements, exhumation of clandestine cemeteries, and clarification of the whereabouts of the disappeared (*Reckoning* 75).

Future respect for all Guatemalan cultural groups and post-war commemoration recommendations aside, the social reality in Guatemala following the end of the genocide was far from the United Nations' idyllic aspirations. Granted, monuments and memorials were established to encourage public remembrance, but much of the public remained occupied by personal concerns and the necessity to survive as opposed to peaceful contemplation (*Reckoning* 80).

Furthermore, once a culture of fear is established, it is difficult to wholly dismantle. Prevalent throughout much of Guatemala, this culture of fear was not unfounded. *Guatemala Nunca Más!*, the Catholic Church's truth commission report guided by bishop Monsignor Juan Gerardi, was presented to the public in 1998; though its presentation was two years after the

signing of the peace accords, Gerardi was killed shortly after (*Reckoning* 50). Such tragedies were not limited to public figures, contributing to the anxiety plaguing much of Guatemala's general population. Nelson characterizes the ubiquitous distress in Guatemala following the war: "[...] constant fear, long nights worrying if your children will be okay, wondering if every phone call or footfall heard passing by your home brings a threat. Since 1997 activists have been killed while walking to their fields, while driving in their cars down busy urban streets, while eating lunch in a small restaurant" (*Reckoning* 50). Following Jean Scarry's reasoning, one would be hard pressed to find words truly able to express such pain and horror.



### 3.0 Chapter Two: Multiculturalism, Mayanism, and *La Mujer Maya*

*“Identity — ethnic or otherwise — is always a particularly motivated representation of cultural difference — in short, culture in social action” (12). — Edward Fischer*

#### 3.1 *La Mujer Maya* as Post-war Prosthesis

In her 1999 book *A Finger in the Wound: Body Politics in Quincentennial Guatemala*, Diane Nelson portrays post-civil war Guatemala as a wounded body politic. Ethnic difference between non-indigenous ladinos and indigenous Mayas has characterized the landscape of Guatemala since Spanish conquistadors took control of the territory in 1523. Often recognized as the peak of this ethnically-motivated violence and one of the largest atrocities of the twentieth century, Guatemala’s thirty-six year long civil war conflict (1960-1996), from shortly after the CIA-led coup to the signing of the peace accords, was ultimately determined to be genocide against the nation’s indigenous population. Following the violence, a truth commission was established to document the breadth and depth of the atrocities indigenous Guatemalans suffered during the civil war, and as a means for the nation to attempt to reconcile what occurred. Although the truth report *Guatemala: Nunca Más!* [*Guatemala: Never Again!*] contains various testimonies that prove to be highly informative, most Guatemalan victims of violence were

extremely hesitant to speak openly about what happened due to the extreme culture of fear that spread as a result of the war.

Acknowledging the culture of fear and extreme social disruption that the genocide caused in Guatemala, Nelson typifies the post-war environment as a wounded body. She explains that she uses feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz' literal concept of "body image," an individual's perception of their own body, to make claims about the sociopolitical atmosphere in post-war Guatemala (*A Finger*). Citing Grosz in *A Finger in the Wound*, Nelson explains:

...the body image is the way in which a person's corporeal exterior is psychically represented and lived, an imaginary anatomy—it is what gives a subject her sense of place in the world and her connection to others (Grosz 1994, xii). The body image is necessary for posture, movement, and tactility and is linked to the model that the subject has of other bodies and that other bodies have of the subject's body (1994, 68) (29).

For example, an amputee can experience the mental phantom limb sensation that their amputated limb still exists through their conception of their own body image. That is, one's conception of themselves through their physical body, whether actually there, or not in the case of phantom limb sensation, is often key to enabling physical success with a prosthetic limb. In essence, Nelson links the real neurophysiological phenomenon of prosthetic success via the concept of body image to the wounded body politic of Guatemala using the "traditional" Maya woman as a prosthetic to be able to address the nation's need to be both traditionally cultured and modern (*A Finger* 29-30). In this metaphor, the wounded amputee needs a prosthetic limb to function in the physical world just as the wounded body politic of Guatemala needs the image of *La Mujer Maya* to function as a modern nation that still possesses valuable, "authentic" culture.

Nelson extends her "wounded body politic" metaphor to emphasize the perception held by some Guatemalans that Mayan cultural rights organizations act as an irritating finger in the wound of the nation, causing further discord. Yet, in the case of Guatemala, the ethnic and

social conflict of the nation have caused huge rifts in the possible unity of the nation, creating sundry fragments that leaders of various groups strive to piece together into a unified whole. Not only is Guatemala ethnically divided in the sense of the traditional ladino/indigenous binary, but Guatemalan Mayas themselves are "...one of the largest concentrations of indigenous people in the Americas, but they are also one of the poorest and most divided. More than 80 percent live in rural areas inadequately served by public services, and almost 60 percent live in conditions of extreme poverty (UNDP 1999)" (Fischer 6). I maintain that the conflict is not a wound without a suture, as Nelson argues, but incongruent pieces that countless governmental and cultural groups try to place in a completed whole through organizational efforts. Nevertheless, her idea of the image of *La Mujer Maya* as a national and cultural prosthesis certainly aids analysis of post-war, liberal multiculturalism in Guatemala.

Nelson notes that culture enjoys an intimate connection with women, citing the responsibility many women endure to sustain sources of culture such as traditional practices within the family, encourage the use and appreciation of cultural artifacts like traditional clothing, and ensure that these cultural elements withstand the passage of time and the growth of new generations ("The Cultural Agency" 93). The "Traditional Woman" described here, Nelson writes, is "a powerful ideological construct, if sometimes also real" ("The Cultural Agency" 93). Specifically, Nelson explains how Guatemala employs the figure of the Maya woman to represent its national culture. Intentionally capitalizing "*La Mujer Maya*," Nelson emphasizes the non-existence of this mythical, cultural figure and stresses the use of Mayas as symbols of the nation, with the Maya woman serving as the ultimate symbol of Guatemalan culture, given the aforementioned association of women with cultural maintenance. Moreover, throughout Guatemala, most Maya men tend to wear Western clothing while most Maya women wear *traje*

*típico* [traditional dress] (“The Cultural Agency” 102). Analyzing Nelson’s figure of *La Mujer Maya* in juxtaposition with the lived reality of Maya women in Guatemala today would be enriched by adding an economic component. *La Mujer Maya* and actual Maya women alike are necessarily involved in Guatemala’s economy and the economic aspect of *Rabín Ajaw* itself, weaving the *traje típico* that serves as a marker of cultural authenticity and cooking and selling the food displayed in stands outside of the event. Thus, the economic role that those involved in *Rabín Ajaw* play must be considered in the search for the individual and collective agency of Maya women.

Of course, in order to require the use of prosthesis in the metaphor Nelson created, Guatemala must be missing something. Through clever employment of a pun, Nelson explains that given the continuing adjustment of post-war Guatemala, “National, ethnic (Maya and nonindigenous), gender, and trans-Américan identities are stumped, in the sense of being incomplete, wounded, and rudimentary as well as being baffled and unsure” (“The Cultural Agency” 94). As stumped identities, these various demographics lean on the support of the prosthetic *Mujer Maya*, who serves a twofold purpose. First, the image of *La Mujer Maya* serves as proof of the existence of a legitimate Guatemalan culture, which distinguishes Guatemala from the rest of the world’s nations. Second, the identification of a Maya woman as symbolic of Guatemala’s identity supposedly demonstrates the peaceful coexistence of ladinos and Mayas within the post-war nation (“The Cultural Agency” 101).

### 3.2 Multicultural Politics and the Mayanist Movement

Multicultural politics, often utilizing the prosthetic image of *La Mujer Maya* as representative of indigenous culture, stress respect for diverse cultures. In Guatemala specifically, Mayanists<sup>3</sup> began to fight against the idea of monoculturalism in the 1970s, and after the official conclusion of the genocide in the late 1990s, the Mayanist movement strengthened (Bastos 156). Of course, Mayas have traditionally identified with their local communities as opposed to the greater Maya population within Guatemala. Even post-civil war, “State-level political and economic systems are dominated by a relatively small Spanish-speaking ladino elite...” (Fischer 6). In order to further participate in all levels of Guatemalan government, fragmented local communities of Mayas must somehow come together and unite their efforts to achieve social and political parity with ladino Guatemalans. While some sectors of the Mayanist movement in Guatemala undoubtedly struggle for increased individual rights and recognition of indigenous political issues, others aspire to a renewed appreciation of Mayan culture and difference (Bastos 157). It should be noted, however, that not all Mayas agree with the Mayanist platform. For those who do support the Mayanist movement, particularly the leaders of the endeavor, each of these concerns must be prioritized and addressed while also avoiding cultural essentialism.

Charles R. Hale discusses the rise of contemporary multiculturalism in Guatemala as a result of indigenous efforts in national politics. However, Hale does not applaud these efforts,

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<sup>3</sup> I use the synonymous terms “pan-Maya movement” and “Mayanist movement” interchangeably to designate the struggle of (some) Mayas to achieve greater social, political, and economic rights in twentieth and twenty-first century Guatemala.

claiming, “Far from opening spaces for generalized empowerment of indigenous peoples, these reforms tend to empower some while marginalizing the majority...”<sup>4</sup> (518). Much of Mayan identity centers around local communities, stemming from the separation of indigenous people from the broader community following colonialism (Bastos 163). Unfortunately for Mayanist leaders, at the same time, “...politics has had a national dimension: political activism is carried out beyond the locality and by institutions that have little or nothing to do with ethnic identities: political parties, churches, unions, and peasant and revolutionary organizations” (Bastos 162). Thus, Mayan multicultural activists must engage the non-indigenous sector of the population in order to reach their political aims (Bastos 162). Fischer concurs, stating, “Maya identity politics are actively shaped by both the larger context in which they exist and the lived experience of individuals living in rural Maya communities” (7). Hence, the Mayanist movement is compelled to acknowledge a nationally-bound pan-Mayan ethnic identity for organization efforts, despite the traditional local ties that have historically undergirded Mayan identities.

The mere fact that Mayanist leaders must address the challenges of uniting distinctive Mayan communities throughout Guatemala demonstrates the multidimensional complexity of the cultural group. In terms of social movements, such diversity can hinder harmonious accord, as

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<sup>4</sup> Mayanist movement leaders generally constitute the empowered few who Hale describes. Edward Fischer describes the demographics of most contemporary Mayanist leaders: “State-level pan-Maya leaders come from a growing class of professional Maya scholars, businesspeople, and activists. In many ways, these leaders represent an atypical sector of the Maya population: they are well educated, with most at some stage of university studies; they are overwhelmingly urban, with most living in Guatemala City, although an increasing number reside in Quetzaltenango (Guatemala’s second-largest city) and in departmental capitals such as Chimaltenango; and they are relatively affluent, increasingly so as the market for self-identified Maya professionals grows, fueled by demand from international organizations and even a few Guatemalan state agencies such as the Ministry of Education. There are, of course, exceptions to this ‘essentializing’ trait list of characteristics of pan-Mayanist leaders, but it well describes the general pattern found in leaders’ biographies (cf. Warren 1998)” (102).

different lived experiences frequently result in equally different needs and sociopolitical agendas. On the other hand, presenting a unified, hackneyed indigenous veneer is counterintuitive to the goals of the Mayanist movement; Mayas today may share an ancestral heritage with the mythically-portrayed pre-Columbian Mayas, but possess the same quotidian concerns that any Guatemalan would – but with the added pressures of structural inequality. Harkening back to a mythical past to define “The Maya” risks committing essentialist analyses in which one may “... reduce the rich diversity of lived experience to social categories that are manageable both intellectually and politically” (Fischer 9).

Mayanist leaders face the conundrum of avoiding reductive or essentialist portrayals of their ethno-cultural group while still portraying a unified front to those outside of the movement. However, by using the emblematic pre-Columbian Maya as a point of shared heritage, one risks “...a form of archaeo-romanticism that in many ways supports neocolonial relations of dominance (Hervik 1992; Castañeda 1996; Montejo 1999)” (Fischer 10). Nevertheless, leaders of the movement also realize the need to present a more or less organized front of a cohesive cultural group with common traits providing the structure for action driven by identity politics. Fischer aptly describes the paradox within which Mayanist leaders and scholars act, who often:

...turn to discourses of modernist essentialism rather than to multiculturally sensitive constructivism to justify their reconstructions of ethnic identity. The scientific exactitude of modernist discourse helps Maya activists legitimate claims on the Guatemalan state, claims largely based on positions of cultural authority and authenticity rendered through cultural continuity...As the former subjects of colonial and neocolonial governments seek to recover and assert their ethnic distinctiveness, they quite naturally turn to those elements that are perceived as being most authentic, the apparent essences of their culture (Fischer 11).

In sum, Mayanist leaders are obligated to confront the reality of the diverse, Maya population today while still highlighting shared characteristics across the fragmented pan-Maya community

in a way that avoids essentialist portrayals<sup>5</sup>. Still, Fischer is clear that “They [Mayanist leaders] strive to remain true to a self-conceived vision of the past, and they do not take lightly their role as cultural bricoleurs” (117).

While Fischer outlined the way Mayanist leaders must construct their own image in a way acceptable to the broader pan-Maya community, Hale uses the term *indio permitidos* [authorized Indian] to describe how the Guatemalan government accepts only a certain form of Indianness, thus maintaining control of the nation (Hale 519). Moreover, *indio permitido* “...refers to the identity category that results when neoliberal regimes actively recognize and open space for collective indigenous presence, even agency” (Hale and Millamán 284). The phrase *indio permitido* is analytically useful not only because it indicates a particular type of Maya who generally enjoys greater social privilege, but also due to its allusion to another entity that dictates the authorization of such privilege and acceptable “Mayan-ness,” namely the neoliberal state. Importantly, Hale highlights the significant distinction “between cultural rights and political-economic empowerment” (Hale 519). The expansion of amorphous “cultural rights” may result in various forms of digestible “cultural appreciation,” but fails to share a

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<sup>5</sup> Fischer explains the risk of cultural essentialism that Mayanist Leaders face: “Pan-Mayanist efforts to supplant community and linguistic group affiliations with a broader Indian identity have largely focused on (re)constructing and mobilizing a number of cultural markers of Mayaness. Tellingly, these markers often mirror classic essentialist trait lists: language, dress, religion, and even hieroglyphic writing. While trying to remain faithful to a Maya past, activists are also self-consciously working to redefine meanings and connotations associated with these cultural symbols...” (116).

<sup>6</sup>Although Hale is the most recognized scholar for the use of this term, he attributes its inception to Bolivian scholar Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, who created the label ad hoc during a 2001 workshop at the University of Texas (Hale and Millamán 284, 302). The cultural moment during which this term was created is significant, fittingly poised at the relative end of the neoliberal turn and the rise of multicultural politics in Latin America.



causal connection with both the growth of indigenous political recognition and the improvement of socioeconomic status for Mayas in Guatemala.

There are two principles under Guatemalan neoliberal multiculturalism, Hale posits, that limit the amount of freedom and power that indigenous people can achieve. First, “...indigenous rights cannot violate the integrity of the productive regime, especially those sectors most closely linked to the globalized economy” (Hale 520). Second, “Neoliberal multiculturalism permits indigenous organization, as long as it does not amass enough power to call basic state prerogatives into question” (520). Hale’s two principles of Guatemalan neoliberal multiculturalism bring to mind the adage that “money talks,” brought forth by the significance of state prerogatives and the resulting role that the state plays in the aforementioned globalized economy. In this case, when money talks, it is certainly speaking in Spanish—not one of the sundry indigenous languages spoken throughout Guatemala. Ultimately, advances in indigenous rights and recognition of their culture(s) can only occur in small increments that refrain from affecting the modernization<sup>7</sup> of Guatemala as a whole.

The Maya who engages in activism and obediently falls within the scope of the two principles Hale outlined is the *indio permitido*. Of course, there must be a negative complement to the socially praiseworthy *indio permitido*: “Its Other is unruly, vindictive and conflict prone...Governance proactively creates and rewards the *indio permitido*, while condemning its Other to the racialized spaces of poverty and social exclusion” (Hale 521). In other words, when not of specific use to the ladino state, Mayas typically occupy a subaltern social position. Of course, even when “Mayan/Guatemalan Culture” as such proves beneficial to the government,

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<sup>7</sup> The modernization referred to here is best thought of as it pertains to Jean Franco’s conception of “cruel modernity,” in which modernizing nation states seek to eliminate *all obstacles* to economic success in the globalized milieu of the twenty-first century.

Mayas are still relegated to “racialized spaces of poverty and social exclusion.”

Compounding the problematic nature of the concept of *indios permitidos*, McNeish adds that “Neoliberal multiculturalism structures the spaces to be occupied by the cultural rights activists. It also defines the language of contention (Joseph & Nugent, 1994), deciding which rights are legitimate, what forms of political action are appropriate and even arbitrating basic questions about the meaning of being indigenous” (46). Accordingly, even those Mayanists who productively work for significant cultural recognition and the acquisition of greater social rights are working within a system specifically created as antithetical to their goals. Any demonstrated source of agency is one that is necessarily curtailed, as is the sociopolitical efficacy of said agency. Moreover, within the already regulated realm of political possibility, Mayanist activists must act within cultural constraints as well. Fischer explicates the connection between individual cultural and political limitations:

...individuals actively construct their own cognitive and cultural worlds, and yet all these idiosyncratic constructions dynamically articulate with certain structural givens...individuals exercise creativity, but only within certain cultural constraints that are intimately related to the larger processes...of national political structure, the world system, and globalization (8).

Contexts of all levels, be they micro or macro, inform and shape the possibilities of agency and change.

The diversity characterizing the Mayan population as a whole stands as another challenge to organization, because “...Indian leaders are constrained in their creation of a pan-Maya identity, for they must remain true in spirit, if not in form, to the cultural norms that emerge through quotidian lived experience in the rural communities where most Maya live” (Fischer 6). According to Fischer, though, the Mayanist movement is self-aware in the sense that its leaders understand they speak only for those Maya who choose to get involved in activism (103).

Moreover, “All sectors of the Maya population are not proportionally represented in the pan-Maya movement’s leadership... Among the organized Maya, K’iche’ and Kaqchikel speakers predominate in terms of both numerical majority and influence” (Fischer 103). Fischer traces this unbalanced representation of K’iche’ and Kaqchikel speakers to the history of the movement, despite the fact that K’iche’ and Kaqchikel are two of the most commonly spoken indigenous languages in Guatemala today (103).

Fischer appreciates the unique challenges of Mayanist cultural organizing in contemporary Guatemala, explaining: “Leaders of Guatemala’s pan-Maya movement seek to unite the country’s Indian groups, which have long been divided by language, rugged terrain, and local custom” (5). Indeed, these are no paltry obstacles. Although Mayas constitute roughly half of the Guatemalan population, they are often secluded in impoverished, rural communities that are essentially isolated, be it through lack of bilingual competency and illiteracy or simple topography alone. Furthermore, not only does a lack of Spanish-language competency tend to separate some Mayan communities from others, but the heterogeneous linguistic landscape of the pan-Maya population in Guatemala also interferes with cultural organizing. One unification strategy that Mayanist leaders employ to unite various communities is to, “...promote associations based on linguistic groups, which they hope will then foster broader pan-Maya identification” (Fischer 84). Through connecting disparate local Mayan communities that speak the same indigenous language, activist leaders anticipate that the recognition of similarities among these groups will serve as proof that the larger pan-Mayan community throughout Guatemala shares commonalities as well, thus justifying their association in united struggles for recognition and greater rights. Communication challenges notwithstanding, agreeing upon the means and end goals of the Mayanist movement renders action all the more challenging.

Fischer outlines three distinct generations of contemporary Mayanist leaders. Beginning with what he terms the “elders” of the movement, Fischer identifies the first wave of activists as those born in the 1940s and 1950s, who were exposed to many foreign Christian missionary groups seeking to help the Mayan population of Guatemala. Many of these groups, such as the Catholic Action organization, promoted education and literacy initiatives for the rural Mayas they served (Fischer 105). Fischer writes, “The goal was modernist: development through education. The result was postmodern: appropriating the tools of Western education for ethno-nationalistic ends through indigenous seminars, political parties, beauty pageants, and other cultural events” (105). Through the support of such education initiatives, many of these so-called elders of the movement were able to obtain higher education abroad, “. . .and these experiences are often credited with galvanizing an Indian ethnic consciousness. They [the elders] often recall the ethnic awareness that accompanied living abroad, a context that both accentuated difference and romantically valued the novelty of being Maya” (105). These first generation Mayanist activists brought both the foreign appreciation of their culture and the heightened awareness of their ethnicity back to Guatemala, which ultimately proved useful to the social movement.

Mayanist activists born in the 1960s and 1970s constitute the second chronologically organized generation delineated by Fischer. Understandably, countless “second generation” activists were encouraged by the previous generation to pursue education as a means of resistance since the education promoted by Christian missionary groups and higher education abroad proved so useful. Encouragement to obtain education carried extra weight for many of these second generation activists because it came from their older siblings, the first generation “elders,” who also informed them of opportunities to pursue higher education abroad in North

American or European universities. Second generation activists established several Maya organizations that continued the struggle throughout the height of the genocide in the 1980s. While the first generation of activists tended to be male, the second generation witnessed a *slight* expansion in female activist leaders (Fischer 106).

Pan-Maya activists born in the 1970s and 1980s form what Fischer determined to be the third generation (106). Due to the fact that many of these third generation activists are actually the children of the first generation activists, “This is the first generation of children to come of age being exposed from their earliest years to the philosophy of pan-Mayanism” (Fischer 106). Granted, not all children of the first generation activists are involved in the Mayanist movement, but those that are often occupy governmental or non-profit jobs throughout the country (Fischer 106). Inevitably, there is now a fourth generation of activists waiting to be characterized.

As in other social movements, pan-Maya activist efforts vary in scope and reach from the national down to the local levels, but differ from other movements in that they are not necessarily connected with one another in a hierarchical organizational structure. That is, activists at the local level do not necessarily answer to any overarching national organization or governing body (Fischer 110). Still, the multitude of cultural rights activist organizations that comprise the pan-Maya movement as a whole are frequently connected to other similar organizations, “...many, but not all, of which are formally tied to one or more umbrella groups” (Fischer 101). Such formal ties lead to the institution of informal liaison networks that assist in multilevel communication (Fischer 110). The three generations of activists outlined by Fischer share characteristics of national leaders of the movement. National pan-Maya organizers are generally more privileged than local activist leaders, enjoying better socioeconomic standings and, consequently, higher levels of education. Conversely, local activists are lesser-educated and

less wealthy, but enjoy greater demographic diversity as a whole. However, pan-Maya activism as a whole is generally male-dominated, including that at the local level. Fischer describes, “Those who seem most attracted to the movement’s ideology, and thus those most likely to actively participate in cultural activism, are young men, and to a lesser extent women, in their twenties, thirties, and forties” (110). Unfortunately for local leaders of the pan-Maya movement, “Their youth, and in the case of women, their gender, is a serious impediment to their effectiveness as local leaders” (Fischer 111). The belief in the importance of ethnic equality does not necessarily translate to a belief in gender equality.

### **3.3 Bilingual Education**

One of the tenets of the pan-Maya/Mayanist movement highlights the significance of implementing indigenous language education as a multicultural right and a way of preserving culture. Still, “...for many Mayans their main concern is to abandon the conditions of ‘backwardness’ and poverty that they live in, and for them education should help to modify the traits that prevent them from ‘progressing’ (Adams & Bastos, 2003)” (Bastos 159). Thus, the political tension among Mayas themselves renders it both difficult to unify in aim of achieving a better future and offensive to some that the population is represented in such an essentialist way via the aforementioned cultural markers.

Bastos indicates that the multicultural nature of Guatemala was recognized by the

government following the civil war peace accords and that there have been governmental efforts to address this multiculturalism. Nevertheless, he accentuates the superficiality of those efforts and their failure to implement any actual social change:

Since 2000, the State has enacted a series of ‘cosmetic’ multicultural policies (Bastos & Camus, 2003) that have created spaces to address cultural matters, like bilingual education, sacred sites, or making other languages official, but do little to address structural or poverty-related problems that affect a majority of Mayans (Cojtí, 2005; AVANCSO, 2008; Bastos & Brett, 2010) (Bastos 157).

Of course, it is already clear that efforts such as the promotion of bilingual education do not address the desires of all Mayas in Guatemala. Despite this reality, leaders of the indigenous population in Guatemala continue to speak of idyllic indigenous freedom - a tendency that Hale claims supports the harmful idea of the *indio permitido* and produces “authorized spokespeople, increasingly out of touch with those whose interests they evoke” (521). In this way, only select Mayas (*indios permitidos*) enjoy superior freedom and prosperity, while the rest of the population realizes no advancements in quality of life.

Bilingual education received greater attention during the post-genocide/post-civil war peace process from 1996 onward than it had in past times. Fischer names the 1996 post-war Peace Accords along with the 1985 Guatemalan Constitution<sup>8</sup> and international treaties as instrumental in Mayanist activists’ claims for legal recognition (98). Of particular importance, the *Coordinación de Organizaciones del Pueblo Maya de Guatemala* (COPMAGUA) [Coalition of Mayan People's Organizations] was charged with drafting the Accord on the Identity and Rights of the Maya People as part of the official 1996 Peace Accords, which affirmed and

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<sup>8</sup> “The Constitution ensures the right of individuals and communities to have their own customs and languages (Article 58); promises to protect the cultures of native ethnic groups, especially the Maya (Article 66); and notes that, though Spanish is the official language of the country, indigenous languages are part of the cultural patrimony of the nation (Article 143) and should be taught in schools in areas populated mostly by Maya (Article 76)” (Fischer 98).

expanded the indigenous peoples' rights first established in the 1985 Guatemalan Constitution (Fischer 100). Indigenous languages are highlighted in the goals of the Accord on the Identity and Rights of the Maya People:

...the Accord mandates that Mayan languages (at least a few regional languages — and this remains a volatile and unresolved topic) be made co-official with Spanish in matters of state. More radically, the Accord calls on the state to support and promote land-reform policies that will benefit the largely Maya rural peasantry and to take affirmative action to ensure that Maya gain proportional representation in political offices (Fischer 100).

Following the drafting and implementation of the Peace Accords, Guatemala's Ministry of Education transformed the pre-existing *Programa Nacional de Educación Bilingüe Bicultural* (PRONEBI) [National Bilingual Bicultural Education Program] into the more permanent *Dirección General de Educación Bilingüe-Pluricultural* (DIGEBI) [Directorate of Intercultural Bilingual Education], which was to be headed by Mayas. Not only did the leadership and title of the government program change, but its goals shifted as well. Instead of working to integrate Mayas who spoke indigenous languages into the Spanish-speaking education system, the new DIGEBI strove to incorporate indigenous languages fully into a bilingual curriculum. While DIGEBI is directed by Mayas, not all employees identify as such (Maxwell 84). Nevertheless, "Employees, regardless of ethnicity and descent, are encouraged to speak Mayan languages in the workplace to one another and to greet the public in a Mayan language. Classes and teaching materials are provided to help nonspeakers acquire a modicum of understanding of a Mayan language, if not fluency" (Maxwell 85). The shift from PRONEBI to DIGEBI reads as optimistic, but was not without many obstacles to come.

Many of the efforts to establish a fully bilingual education system in Guatemala were not executed well or encountered problems along the way. Educators received bilingual education instruction and accompanying cultural sensitivity training a few times a month in which "Mayan



culture and snippets of Mayan languages were taught in an effort to increase respect for the Mayan culture among the non-Mayas and pride in that heritage among the Mayas as well as to counteract disinformation, negative stereotypes, and common misconceptions held by all” (Maxwell 86-87). Unfortunately, instructors of these workshops were often ill-trained or misinformed and there were frequent supply shortages in classrooms across the country that prohibited the application of any curricular expansion gleaned from the workshops. Some Maya instructors even reported cases of condescension from their non-indigenous counterparts during the process (Maxwell 87). Furthermore, with 22 government-recognized Mayan languages in Guatemala, acquiring bilingual teachers capable of implementing and developing a bilingual curriculum further that is appropriate both linguistically and culturally is incredibly difficult (Maxwell 89).

In 2003, DIGEBI realized a new curriculum to try to address some of the previously experienced problems. Judith Maxwell, one of the participants in the development of neologisms and other necessary materials for the new bilingual curriculum, characterizes many of the 2003 changes as ethnocentric: “While celebrating cultural diversity, it relegates Mayan elements to the range of folklore and cultural patrimony” (89). Such a relegation is reminiscent of the government’s employment of and lip service admiration for “authentic” Mayan culture for its own ends. Maxwell explains the curriculum’s ethnocentrism through an illustrative example drawn straight from instructional materials:

The first kindergarten book, a pre-reader, showed pictures of rural scenes with certain elements anthropomorphized. There were no esoteric words to be cataloged for re-creation as neologisms; the text was wordless. But the teacher’s manual instructed the teacher to have the children circle that which was *absurdo* (absurd) ... The intent was to have the children circle trees, rocks, the sun, and other natural elements that seemed to be showing emotion. Mayan cosmology holds that all things in nature are sentient, are living beings. At home, Mayan children are instructed via aphorisms not to leave the *comal* (griddle) on the fire as it will burn and feel pain; they are taught to ask permission of the

*rajawal juyu*’ (the spirit or owner of the mountain) before chopping wood or hunting animals. To teach the children in school that seeing nature as composed of sentient beings is “absurd” contradicts the basic tenets of their traditional worldview (89).

Indeed, despite the incorporation of indigenous language in this pre-kindergarten reader, the activity demonstrates a near total disregard for Mayan cosmology in general, but particularly as a legitimate worldview<sup>9</sup>. As with other ladino encounters with Mayan culture in Guatemala, “... the structure and content of the lessons still presuppose a Western, European cultural base. The respect offered Mayan culture is a nod to a historic past, a patrimony, rather than an ongoing vibrant element in the national society” (Maxwell 91). Time and again, Mayan culture is portrayed as temporally fixed in a mythical past— a static element of “authenticity” to be referenced or employed when needed, not a recognition of the way half of the country actually lives and views the world.

Following the full implementation of the new DIGEBI bilingual education curriculum in 2006, there were, and still are, substantial difficulties to overcome. Although CDs were created to aid in indigenous language instruction, the materials “...never got beyond promotional distribution to AID, the U.S. embassy, UNICEF, and a few of the regional education directors” (Maxwell 91). Consequently, schools that lack bilingual instructors may lack bilingual instruction altogether. Maxwell, however, noted a change in the attitudes of many instructors,

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<sup>9</sup> Not only did these lessons misinterpret Mayan conceptions of ontology, but, “Lessons showing Mayan cultural institutions and practices as folklore Mayan stories are not included in kindergarten or grade 1 lessons, though a section of *pura leyenda* (pure legend) does relate several Guatemalan based tales. In grade 4, a section on music shows instruments from the precontact period, conch shell trumpets, long carved horns, drums; it also discusses the marimba. But it limits the Mayan contribution to music to ancient or folkloric pieces. Lessons on Mayan religion as polytheistic and supplanted All supernaturals are labeled *dioses*. Ancestors and spirit-owners of natural features are conflated. Reference to the flourishing modern practice of Mayan spirituality, under the guidance of *ajq’ija*’ (day-keepers), is notably absent” (Maxwell 90).

recognizing a stronger drive to acquire indigenous language proficiency for the areas they served. Rural areas of Guatemala are especially wanting due to the higher indigenous population levels outside of city centers (Maxwell 91).

One of the numerous long-lasting effects of the genocide was the migration pattern of indigenous groups within Guatemala. Granted, “migration pattern” seems far too innocuous a term to describe the absconding of families fearing for their lives. Maxwell describes the linguistic effects of this phenomenon, “Those who fled napalm, death squads, and civil patrols to lose themselves in the capital generally tried to erase the outer markers of their ethnicity. Most did not teach their mother tongue to their children. The children of these internal refugees are just now receiving attention from DIGEBI” (91). Cultural detachment was a frequent survival mechanism for Mayas in late twentieth century Guatemala, but has led to challenges in the education system following the war. Internal refugees fled to safety wherever they could find it during the genocide, which sometimes resulted in the mixture of different Mayan cultures and languages in one local area. The municipality of Ixcán, for example, is now home to nine different spoken Mayan languages, which makes bilingual education for all children in one classroom nearly impossible. Lacking training to deal with plurilingual education, let alone bilingual education, instructors in Ixcán tend to teach solely in Spanish (Maxwell 92). Maxwell concedes that students are no longer punished for speaking in their indigenous language(s), but “Education within Ixcán is largely limited to primary school education, though not all communities have access to even these first grades. Official estimates place the illiteracy rate at 47 percent within this district” (92). Undoubtedly, high levels of illiteracy compound the challenges Mayas face in “racialized spaces of poverty and social exclusion” and are certainly not isolated to the municipality of Ixcán.

### 3.4 On Traditional Dress

Although there are debates about whether the indigenous/ladino binary in Guatemala is divided along racial or ethnic lines, the most important takeaways are the resulting disparity in socioeconomic standing and rights between the two populations. Hendrickson elucidates the ways in which the indigenous/ladino distinction is drawn:

As they are most commonly used, the terms point to a division of people according to (1) certain overt markers (dress and language are regularly mentioned); (2) actions that have ethnic significance, with *costumbre* used to refer to Maya customs; (3) one's blood, heritage, or historical roots (as in ties to Maya ancestors or European stock); and (4) a history of relations between the conquering and conquered that still holds true today (30-31).

Initially, the use of such “overt markers” as dress and language to distinguish between the indigenous and non-indigenous sectors of Guatemalan society appears to be a reductive form of categorization. Utilizing the visible marker of *traje típico* to classify an entire ethnocultural group certainly would be an oversimplification of Maya culture; in reality, *traje* is simply one element of material culture that, used in varying degrees and considered in varying degrees of importance according to the Maya individual in question. Still, Fischer clarifies that although “Culture is symbolic,” it “...does not imply a negation of its material aspects, for just as the material world is symbolically organized by culture, so too is the symbolic organization of culture realized through the lived dialectic between ideational constructs and ‘real world’

circumstance” (12). Thus, material culture is imbued with meaning through a dialectical relationship with the real world and the lived circumstances within which cultural actors exist.

Fischer aptly characterizes culture as being both “dynamic while remaining continuous” (13). That is, culture changes and adapts but remains continuous, never stopping. As in the case of Mayas employing *traje* as a symbol of indigenous solidarity, the traditional dress (along with the wearer) changes and adapts to societal circumstances, new technology, and other factors, yet all uses and adaptations of *traje* contain a common thread of cultural continuity. Fischer clarifies, “Cultural symbols are continually construed and reconstrued through practice... continuity is maintained by giving old forms new meaning and giving new forms old meaning” (13).

Obviously, one of the easiest ways to distinguish Mayas from ladinos in Guatemala, aside from language, is through the use of traditional dress, or *traje típico* (often just referred to as *traje*). Though this distinction seems to separate Mayas and ladinos on an equal basis, women suffer discrimination from the greater ladino-dominated society<sup>10</sup> at much higher rates due to their tendency to wear *traje* in public, whereas men tend to dress in Western styles of *vestido*. This propensity may even be found within the same heterosexual couple, as Hendrickson notes: “...different Maya women have told me that they would feel positively naked if they had to wear *vestido*; they would be scorned by their family and friends and feel great alienation. At the same time, the husbands of these very same women do not wear *traje*, and most never have” (31).

Hendrickson posits that Mayas insist on recognition of the ethnic differences in society

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<sup>10</sup> In Guatemala, “Unless an institution or object is labeled ‘Indian’ or qualified by a term that serves the equivalent function, it can generally be assumed that it has little or nothing to do with the indigenous population per se” (Hendrickson 30).

that result in their relative subordination and social detriment. For instance,

...Maya will charge ladinos with prejudicial actions based on ethnic considerations (the low level of government farm credit to Indians is one example), while non-Maya, talking about the same situation, will disclaim indigenous charges and contend that the division is based on contextually appropriate and racially unbiased criteria such as wealth, the size of land holdings, or the number of votes... (Hendrickson 31).

Whether or not the ladinos truly believe that such inequities result from impartial criteria, history demonstrates a clear pattern of discrimination against Mayas in Guatemala, particularly where land rights are concerned. According to Hendrickson, the indigenous population believes that "...it is *because* they are Indian that they are confined to the lower socioeconomic rungs and therefore can always be separated out by classificatory schemes that divide according to elements of power" (31). Indeed, if Mayas feel compelled to second guess the implications of their use of *traje* in public or professional settings, there is a power disparity at work.

Earlier, we recognized Guatemalan Mayas' penchant for identifying intimately with their local villages and municipalities as opposed to the broader nation as a whole. Understandably, then, *traje típico* styles usually differ among municipalities, with different designs and weaving styles characterizing each municipality. As with all social phenomena, however, this tenet of Maya *costumbre* [custom or tradition] is not absolute. Drawing upon her own fieldwork in Tecpán, Guatemala, Hendrickson explains, "In a town like Tecpán, there are a number of different styles of *huipiles* [indigenous blouses], *cortes* [indigenous skirts], belts, and other articles worn at any one point in history, and each of these items has its own history of changes and contexts of use" (51). So, a certain style of *corte* [skirt] may have originated in Tecpán, for example, but was used only in a certain time period and has fallen out of use. Moreover, "...not all the items that make up the *traje* of a particular town are equally marked as being 'from that town.' In Tecpán and other communities in the area, the *huipil* is maximally marked as being

from a particular *municipio* and the ‘leading indicator’ of the municipal identity of the entire outfit” (Hendrickson 51). Interestingly enough, although generally municipal-specific, *traje* is also often employed as a placeholder for Maya culture entirely (Hendrickson 63). Not utilized in such a widespread way as women’s *traje*, Maya men’s *traje* is not as municipality-identified or diverse (Hendrickson 52).

Furthermore, with advancements in technology, transportation, communication, and the wider availability of new weaving materials, the distinction of *traje* by municipality of origin is not always crystal clear<sup>11</sup>. For instance, in contemporary Guatemala, “...weavers occasionally borrow ideas from other towns and create pieces that have strong visual affinities to the *traje* of these other places” (Hendrickson 52) or, “...these developments [better communication, transportation, etc.] mean that now individuals are able to obtain items of *traje* from more distant towns, ones not usually represented in the local market” (Hendrickson 59). Hendrickson notes other factors that may influence the decision to wear *traje*, or a certain type of *traje*: “...economic factors (cost), weather (the heat or cold), a general pride in being Maya, and what I will call the ‘*al gusto*’ rationale. When I asked why a particular person wore the dress of another town, the response was often ‘*Es al gusto de uno*’ (It is a matter of one’s personal taste)” (56).

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<sup>11</sup> “While the use of *traje* to signal municipal identity is a central function of Maya clothing, it is not always the most important one. Municipal *traje* is neither a necessary uniform nor a mode of dress uniformly worn at all times and by all local *traje* wearers. In order to play upon other possible meanings of dress, people purposely select articles of *traje* that originate in or are associated with other highland towns and they do so for very specific, culturally motivated reasons” (Hendrickson 55).

### 3.4.1 Dress and Power

Just as Mayas occupy the lower parts of the ethnic hierarchical power structure in Guatemala, so too does *traje* when compared with other styles of dress, particularly the Western-influenced *vestido* [dress] (Hendrickson 66). Although some ladinos don *traje* either in support of greater appreciation of Mayan culture or simply for reasons *al gusto*, the majority wear *vestido* in their daily lives. As elements of material culture, pieces of *traje* are imbued with certain cultural power, or as is often the case of the *traje* worn by Guatemalan Mayas, a lack thereof. Alternatively, *vestido*, whether manufactured in “the West<sup>12</sup>” or simply mimicking Western clothing styles, occupies a higher position in the power hierarchy of dress. Hendrickson explains, “While the geographical reference points explicitly associated with *traje* are confined to Guatemala, those signaled by *vestido* are regularly and, often, enthusiastically attributed to Europe and the United States” (67). Such enthusiasm supports the idea of a hierarchy of dress, which, “Expressed in the extreme, once the foreign wellsprings of fashion are identified, all other places can be arranged hierarchically, with more status accruing to clothes that come from places ‘higher up’ on this scale and less status to items from ‘lower down’” (Hendrickson 67).

This power hierarchy in dress is far from arbitrary; rather, the structure stems from the power differentials existent in the international sphere, made increasingly evident in a globalized economy. Hendrickson cites the geographic sites of dress as being instrumental in the determination of relative worth of dress, explaining, “...ordered ranking of sites are relational

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<sup>12</sup> I put “the West” in quotations to signify its existence as a Western-centric concept that embodies the “First World” mentality, which portrays global powers such as the United States and European nations as occupying the center while other supposedly “less developed” countries are relegated to a relational, subjugated geographic periphery.



considerations: a particular place may take on the role of the mecca of fashion relative to other, less privileged spots. Comparisons are made between locations in terms of how *civilizado* (civilized) or *abandonado/retirado* (abandoned/distant) each is considered to be” (67). Here, the civilized-versus-abandoned binary Hendrickson presents is strongly reminiscent of the civilization-versus-barbarity binary that has been instrumental in the colonization and neocolonization of Latin America by European and United States forces, respectively. Further, the concept of civilization versus barbarity brings to mind Jean Franco’s characterization of “cruel modernity” and its resultant subjugation of supposedly barbaric native peoples that stood in the way of “modernization”.

Aware of the desire for foreign clothing goods, foreign companies from the United States often sell unwanted items in Guatemala to gain further profit (Hendrickson 72). Again, seeking out the Guatemalan market for unsold goods is not an arbitrary practice, but one steeped in knowledge of the relative (perceived) powerlessness of Guatemala compared to the relative global hegemony enjoyed by the United States. Hendrickson affirms the significance of this practice, stating, “That these are not wanted in the United States but are considered good enough for Guatemala is seen locally as further evidence of the central American nation’s position in the *western* hierarchical scheme” (72, emphasis mine). In this way, both *vestido* and *traje* are saturated with meaning and differing degrees of power depending upon the context in which they are assessed and interpreted. *Vestido*, though frequently worn by Mayas in combination with pieces of *traje*, is generally associated with ladinos in Guatemala. Some Mayas may reject *traje* altogether in efforts to pass as ladino and potentially enjoy better social or professional opportunities (Nelson), or for individual reasons. Thus, when Mayas reject traditional dress and take up more Western-influenced styles of *vestido*, their actions may be deemed as complicit

with the unjust power relations undergirding patterns of dress. That is, “Abandoning *traje* means that a Maya is thrown into the ranking system of *vestido*, where people who are Guatemalan Indians are *doubly damned* on *national and ethnic* grounds, for economic and cultural reasons” (Hendrickson 74, emphasis mine). Given the political nature of *traje*, its central role in the pan-Maya movement makes sense. *Traje* serves as a stand-in for both local municipalities and, particularly to the broader Guatemalan society that may be unfamiliar with municipal distinctions in Maya dress, the Maya population as a whole (Hendrickson 75). On the other hand, from a wider scope, Mayas and *traje* are seen as representing Guatemala entirely: “Non-Indians from the national level on down embrace Indians as ‘us’ in expressions of Guatemalan national identity” (79). As we will witness in the following section, this embrace lacks interpersonal execution; rather, embracing Mayas as a Guatemalan national identity is actually a surface-level attitude with ulterior, economic motives.

### **3.4.2 *Traje* and Tourism**

Writing from within the context of neoliberal multiculturalism, Irma Alicia Velásquez Nimatuj discusses the Mayan *traje típico* and how Guatemala has misappropriated its use to further its economic goals in a globalized, transnational economy. Velásquez Nimatuj argues how the *traje típico*, particularly that produced and worn by indigenous women, has been culturally appropriated and utilized as a symbol of Guatemala in the international sphere, despite its lack of acceptance on the streets of Guatemalan cities. Expressing her concern, Velásquez Nimatuj clarifies,

Guatemalan embassies and consulates all over the world commonly display photographs, posters, or paintings of indigenous girls and women in regional dress, all smiles and perfect silhouettes: native people are presented as Guatemala's biggest tourist attraction, belonging to the past yet living in the so-called modern world (527).

She further explains that the culture presented to Western tourists is one that seems removed from time, immune to change – a presentation that I would argue can be characterized as a form of *indigenismo*. Bastos affirms this temporal ignorance in the representation of the truly “authentic Maya,” which, as a static representation, can never truly exist. Undoubtedly, the temporally-ignorant, authentic Maya and *La Mujer Maya* as symbols are one and the same – prosthetics used to affirm cultural authenticity without stepping beyond the bounds prescribed for the *indio permitido* and jeopardizing Guatemala’s status as a modern nation state and women’s participation in that state.

One would not be hard-pressed to locate tourism materials marketing Guatemala as a paradise full of exotic natives. Indeed, much of the tourism material produced, both by the *Instituto Guatemalteco de Turismo* (INGUAT) [Guatemalan Institute of Tourism] and other independent organizations, features Mayas as a central selling point of a vacation in Guatemala. Posters, pamphlets, and other publications are strewn with “...attractive photographs of Indians [who] introduce potential visitors to the warm and friendly people of Guatemala—‘pleasant people,’ ‘smiling people,’ as the brochures point out—who welcome foreign tourists to their country and Guatemalan tourists to the exotic reaches of their own land” (Hendrickson 83). International travelers seeking excitement and “authentic” difference find it in tourism promotions that commodify the pan-Maya culture more broadly, and the (female) Maya individual specifically. Mayas in tourist literature may appear as friendly and helpful employees in the service industry, smiling and making eye contact with the camera. Alternatively, other tourist literature depicts Mayas as practitioners of “authentic culture,” “...worshiping at stone

altars or in dark, candle-filled churches; weaving on backstrap looms; and carrying water jugs, large baskets, or other unwieldy objects on their heads” (Hendrickson 84). Without the personal connection established through the eye contact of Mayas looking at the photographer taking their picture, images of indigenous people performing supposedly authentic cultural activities like weaving become objects for the traveler’s scopophilic enjoyment (Hendrickson 85).

Hendrickson claims that such efforts “...convince outsiders that Indians as “all Guatemalans” are excitingly different and, at the same time, extremely approachable (cf. Albers and James 1983). Simultaneously they function to counter news reports of violence in the country and to convince the would-be visitor of the peace of the people and the land” (84). After all, the authentic culture sought by travelers must be delivered in a digestible and sheltered way that minimizes the violence plaguing Guatemala.

The display and sale of *traje típico* benefits the government and tourism industry while the Mayas whose images and artwork are used are given no artistic credit and enjoy no financial gains (Velásquez Nimatuj 527). Velásquez Nimatuj condemns, “While Maya culture is commodified in these images, they bear no relation whatsoever to the Maya men, women, children and elders who eke out a living in these exclusive districts, working as labourers or servants, selling woven fabrics, furniture or sweetmeats, or even begging” (528). Many international travelers seek out *traje* as mere souvenirs, exotic costumes from a foreign land (Hendrickson 84). It should be noted that the tourism industry establishes a connection between the Maya culture/people and the mythical past, which not only fails to recognize the changes in contemporary Maya culture, but also creates an “... adherence to the past that is automatic instead of conscious and purposeful. Indians are not seen as having a vision of society that is equally valid to (although different from) that of non-Indians; rather they are seen as different,

puzzling, and essentially limited beings” (85-86). In the end, the primary motivator is money.

Velásquez Nimatuj blames the government, elites, and the necessity for Guatemala to depend on international tourism for economic stability for this tendency to “folklorize” Mayan weaving (528). However, Velásquez Nimatuj makes it clear that neither she nor a great deal of indigenous people are against the tourism industry. Rather, there are ways of conducting tourism business that could benefit the indigenous community. She suggests,

...small-scale foreign or local investment in the tourism industry can be regulated by indigenous communities so that the profits made from tourism can benefit the communities where such tourism is located and in ways where the tourism industry does not harm the dignity of the Maya people or harm or privatize the biosphere (Velásquez Nimatuj 530).

These reflections only further reinforce Hale’s complaints regarding neoliberal multiculturalism in Guatemala and illustrate how both multiculturalism and the way in which Guatemala is active in the transnational economy harm indigenous communities in general, but particularly women.

To be clear, the representation of the archetypal “authentic Maya” is not an endeavor conducted solely by ladinos; rather, Mayanists themselves often “...have clung to a more essentialist notion of their ‘Mayanness’ in order to defend their political legitimacy (Fischer, 1999)” (Bastos 49). Diane Nelson argues that Mayanists themselves use the image of *La Mujer Maya* in order to satisfy both sides of the modern, but culturally traditional double-bind (“The Cultural Agency” 111). Although *La Mujer Maya* is an archetypal concept, the employment of her image to merely satisfy the “culture requirement” of being a modern Maya has roots in reality. Nelson explains, “*La Mujer Maya*, who lives in the rural villages, raises children, is monolingual and illiterate, weaves her own clothing, retains the Mayan calendar, pats out tortillas by hand, and maintains the milpa (corn crop) while her husband or brother is in the city agitating for indigenous rights...” (“The Cultural Agency” 111). Despite claims from Mayanists

of both genders that there is no gender hierarchy within the movement, reality proves otherwise. After all, “Mayan women are almost completely absent from the upper echelons of the urban-based Mayan organizations, where it is most essential to look modern...” (“The Cultural Agency” 111). Contestants in *Rabín Ajaw*, then, must be rare examples of *indias permitidas* in Guatemala. If participants achieve little parity in neither mixed ladino-and-indigenous society nor in the Mayanist movement, there must be something else at play rousing their involvement.

#### 4.0 Chapter 3: Claiming Knowledge: A Manufacturing

*“Western feminist writing on women in the third world must be considered in the context of the global hegemony of Western scholarship—i.e., the production, publication, distribution and consumption of information and ideas. Marginal or not, this writing has political effects and implications beyond the immediate feminist or disciplinary audience”* (336). – Chandra Mohanty  
“Under Western Eyes”

The study of people is not a sector of academic inquiry exclusively reserved for anthropologists. Academics across a wide variety of disciplines study people, be they people in the form of individuals, groups, or nations. When researching others and potentially publishing said research, it is crucial to curb one’s subjective opinions in order to present the most accurate and academically useful information possible. In an ideal world, one would theorize and speak about others in a completely objective manner, but it requires little scrutiny to conclude that true objectivity is impossible to achieve. All academics approach their research with different experiences, knowledge, and attitudes, which, whether intentionally or not, affect the claims they make. Thus, if some degree of subjectivity in academic discourse is inevitable, academics speaking about others must strive for informed subjectivity. The question remains, however, of how best to inform one’s subjective perspective.

In the case of my own study of *Rabín Ajaw* and its contemporary participants, it would be easy to dismiss my analysis when considering my positionality. As a white, North American academic of relative global privilege, whatever my actual localized socioeconomic status, my

interest in the topic and motivation for writing could be critiqued in a number of ways. There is the clichéd stance of the anthropological researcher-as-subject and researched-as-object, which not only entails an inflated sense of ego, but an inaccurate and unethical approach to investigation. Alternatively, one could interpret my interest as an exoticization of the Maya people and culture – an academic tourism of sorts that barely reaches beyond a travel brochure-esque fascination with “the natives.” In any case, my lived experiences differ greatly from those of the women with whom I spoke. Though I speak Spanish and have researched both Guatemalan culture and sociopolitical history more broadly and *Rabín Ajaw* specifically, I am neither Latina nor Maya and will never truly understand their experiences in a visceral sense. Furthermore, even if I were capable of such comprehension, to make claims on the behalf of these women, however well-intentioned, reeks of the patronizing, white knight tendency of some academics to attempt to “*speak for* the subaltern<sup>13</sup>.” Instead, my contribution in this thesis is to present my *conversation with* the *Rabín Ajaw* participants in light of the available, published history within which the contest is situated. In the chapter that follows I delve into the politics and ethics of speaking about others both in general and with respect to my own studies.

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<sup>13</sup> For clarity’s sake, I want to note that I myself am wary of using the term “subaltern” altogether. Utilizing the prefix “sub” indicates an established order of things in which a privileged group (likely of the global north) is recognized as the norm from which all others deviate. This deviation, in my estimation, is far too similar to the concept of “colonial difference” (Mohanty, Mignolo) which I address later in this chapter. History has demonstrated time and again that colonial difference(s) can be used as justification for domination and subjugation.



#### 4.1 Avoiding the Pitfalls of Academic Address: Speaking about Others

Linda Alcoff brings to light the ethical and epistemological obstacles inherent in speaking for others. Alcoff investigates the issue of speaking for and about others in both social and academic venues, as well as the criticism that speaking for others has garnered. Condemnation of speaking for others spans a wide range of academic disciplines. Feminist scholars censure the potential arrogance and lack of ethics that speaking for others risks, while anthropologists fear the creation of an “us versus them” dichotomy (Alcoff 6). Alcoff identifies two prominent reasons for the growing criticism of speaking for others: 1) the acknowledgement that one’s location affects the truth and meaning of what they say and 2) the recognition that speakers of relative privilege can often do more harm than good when speaking for others of less privilege (Alcoff 6-7). Of course, speakers within academic discourse do not always speak *for* others, but rather attempt to speak *about* them. Alcoff permits, “Thus I would maintain that if the practice of speaking for others is problematic, so too must be the practice of speaking about others, since it is difficult to distinguish speaking about from speaking for in all cases” (9). Academics speaking about others risk both the same distortion of truth and meaning and the potential for committing inadvertent harm, and thus must pay special attention to speaking about others in the right way.

Alcoff’s article is indeed laudable for fleshing out some of the concerns behind speaking for and/or about others. Examining the situations in which one is tempted to speak for others, Alcoff surveys the sundry factors that contribute to the subjectivity integral to academic discourse about others. She gestures towards an inclusive strategy in which people speak directly to or with others to avoid the misunderstandings and paternalism rife within such

discourse. In some arenas, this accommodating form of dialogue may function effectively, but academic publications rarely cater to this sort of cooperative communication. Certainly, no scholarly article can *do everything*, so denigration for a lack of thorough follow-through is not in order. However, the loose ends of Alcoff's assessment invite further theorization regarding the best practices of speaking about others. I attempt to continue where Alcoff left off, affirming the problematic nature of speaking about others, but through recognizing the inescapability of speaking about others in academia, offering tactics for how best to speak about others. I draw from the work of scholars such as Chandra Mohanty and Uma Narayam, utilizing the case of postcolonial feminist discourse to explore the pitfalls of speaking about others and the best approaches to avoid them. Expanding upon the tenets of Alcoff's prescriptive warning, I suggest the strict examination of what I term the macro, meso, and micro levels of context to most ethically and successfully speak about others in academic discourse.

#### **4.1.1 The Risks of Speaking about Others**

Linda Alcoff emphasizes the importance of speaker identity and location in the creation of speech meaning. She writes, "Who is speaking to whom turns out to be as important for meaning and truth as what is said; in fact what is said turns out to change according to who is speaking and who is listening" (Alcoff 12). Speech content can never be neutral, as its meaning changes depending upon the person(s) producing the speech as well as the person(s) receiving the speech. By its very essence as a performative act between subjective individuals or groups, speech cannot achieve objective neutrality. In my personal case, my privileged position as a

citizen of the “global north” interrupts the objective veracity of my speech. Yet, my contextual location as a feminist researcher committed to global social justice who extols the gravity of conducting ethical research and is also educated in the context of the *Rabín Ajaw* pageant complicates that position. I would be remiss if I failed to address claims of undue influence or negligent subjectivity in the assumption of a feminist stance. I highlight my commitment to responsible feminist research to communicate my acknowledgement of the socially constructed nature of gender and other demographics that have been used as forms of oppression as well as my commitment to social justice. Accusing someone of biased research for openly advocating a feminist approach can easily be likened to accusing someone of biased scientific research due to their adherence to a positivist scientific method, as positivism is a masculinist tool of the “civilized” societies of the “West” and has been used to discount alternative epistemologies that have been demonized due to an imposed sense of colonial difference and its accompanying value judgments. In essence, consideration of context at all levels is crucial.

Examination of even the most elementary of speech situations affirms Alcoff’s statement regarding the identity of speakers being as important as the actual utterance itself in the creation of speech meaning. For example, an ethnic pejorative takes on an entirely different meaning when uttered by a member of the ethnic group versus when wielded by an outsider. These meanings are further complicated by the identity of the listener. While Alcoff defends that the location of the speaker and the audience influences the meaning of the speech, she does not go as far as to claim that location *entirely constitutes* speech meaning (16). Yet, the epistemic value of speech acts does *vary* according to the context and location of the person(s) involved. In the ethnic pejorative example, it is always understood on some level that the term carries offensive or negative connotations, but these connotations can be muted or subverted when the term is

used between members of the ethnic group itself. Alcoff asserts, "Certain contexts and locations are allied with structures of oppression, and certain others are allied with resistance to oppression. Therefore, all are not politically equal, and, given that politics is connected to truth, all are not epistemically equal" (15). The privilege of the speaker, or lack thereof, can bear significantly on the meaning of the utterance. Academics possess not only the privilege of higher education, but the privilege of social respectability and intellectual credence, which grants them a certain authority that must be exercised with caution.

Speaking for and/or about others is often viewed as necessary for a group to achieve its goals to stop the abuse of others, fortify justice, or resolve social conflict. Unfortunately, intense focus on the disadvantaged group in question can often result in the development of other, unanticipated forms of oppression. For instance, in the twentieth century, Western feminism found itself forced to address the ways its speech for and about others engendered new forms of oppression. While many white, Western feminists were well-intentioned in their struggle for the political and social equality of American women, their all-encompassing claims about women actually only addressed the lived realities of white, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-class women.

As this covert form of oppression came to light, efforts were made to consider context more carefully. Uma Narayan asserts,

In recent decades, feminists have stressed the need to think about issues of gender in conjunction with, and not in isolation from, issues of class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, and have forcefully illustrated that differences among women must be understood and theorized in order to avoid essentialist generalizations about "women's problems" (Anzaldúa 1987; hooks 1981; Lugones and Spelman 1983) (80).

Gender essentialism, which in this case groups all women together into one, homogenous entity for examination, risks ignoring other factors that further oppress more marginalized sectors of

the gender group, such as class and race. Certainly, this essentialism further erases important distinctions among women due to its restriction to the demographic diversity of *women in the West*<sup>14</sup>.

Moreover, the hegemonic generalizations inherent in gender essentialism tend to take the privileged women's problems as representative of all women's problems (Narayan 80). Chandra Mohanty identifies the danger of grouping women together, even in efforts to prove that they are an oppressed group. When Western feminists speak for other oppressed women throughout the globe in terms of a very Western-specific oppression of women, "...we see how western feminists alone become the true 'subjects' of this counter-history. Third-world women, on the other hand, never rise above the debilitating generality of their 'object' status" (Mohanty 79). Mohanty shares Narayan's concern regarding generalization: "... the category of woman is constructed in a variety of political contexts that often exist simultaneously and overlaid on top of one another. There is no easy generalization in the direction of 'women' in India, or 'women in the third world'..." (Mohanty 73). Recognizing the risk of injury and divisiveness that was intrinsic in essentialist claims about gender, Western feminists sought a way to avoid speaking about others in homogenous terms.

The example of Western feminism is particularly informative because it shows how in trying to avoid one form of oppression when speaking about others, one must be careful to not inadvertently engage in another form of oppression. Specifically, Western feminist efforts to

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<sup>14</sup> I capitalize the "West" intentionally to acknowledge its duality as a marker of geographic distribution (again, problematically derived from a Eurocentric norm from which all places are measured) as well as a conceptual entity of privilege. Of course, my intention is not to create a villain out of "Western" countries, but rather to simply facilitate dialogue about global inequities and forms of injustice – both blatant in the form of past and present egregious actions of those political entities and subtle in the form of discursive missteps with far-reaching implications.

avoid harmful gender essentialism in their speech about other women often ends up committing cultural essentialism, which is a clear detriment to the group's goal of equal rights for all people.

Narayan explains the conundrum:

The project of attending to differences among women across a variety of national and cultural contexts then becomes a project that endorses and replicates problematic and colonialist assumptions about the cultural differences between “Western culture” and “Non-western cultures” and the women who inhabit them. Seemingly *universal* essentialist generalizations about “all women” are replaced by *culture-specific* essentialist generalizations that depend on totalizing categories such as “Western culture<sup>15</sup>,” “Non-western cultures,” “Western women,” “Third World women,” and so forth (81).

Considering the West's involvement in colonialism, this exercise of cultural essentialism becomes even more problematic. By addressing culture-specific sectors of the population, one engages with cultural essentialism in a way that is both harmful to research and serves as a divisive force in the international feminist movement. While the tendency to make essentialist claims about women from cultures different than that of Western feminists reveals the importance of exercising caution when creating or participating in social movement discourse, it stands as a specific example of a broader issue at hand: insufficient attention to context.

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<sup>15</sup> “The development discourse inevitably contained a geopolitical imagination that has shaped the meaning of development for more than four decades. For some, this will to spatial power is one of the most essential features of development (Slater 1993). It is implicit in expressions such as First and Third World, North and South, center and periphery. The social production of space implicit in these terms is bound with the production of differences, subjectivities, and social orders” (*Encountering Development* 9).

### 4.1.2 Colonial Context

Even the most seemingly benign values attributed to “Western culture” constitute a part of the socio-politically constructed façade of the West and how it differs from “Other cultures.” For academics raised in the West, the necessity of championing virtues such as equality is so ingrained in the theoretical framework operating in the background of their daily lives and research that it often escapes critique or critical analysis. Narayan notes that the creation of a flattering “colonial self-portrait” is paramount in the creation and maintenance of colonial power, not just because it praises the colonizing state and its subsequent culture, but because it aids in the establishment of difference (83-84). She explains,

The colonial self-portrait of “Western culture” had, however, only a faint resemblance to the moral, political, and cultural values that *actually pervaded* life in Western societies. Thus, liberty and equality could be represented as paradigmatic “Western values,” hallmarks of its civilizational superiority, at the very moment when Western nations were engaged in slavery, colonization, expropriation, and the denial of liberty and equality not only to the colonized but to large segments of Western subjects, including women. Profound *similarities* between Western culture and many of its Others, such as hierarchical social systems, huge economic disparities between members, and the mistreatment and inequality of women, were systematically ignored in this construction of “Western culture” (Narayan 83-84).

Thus, it makes sense how damaging exercises of cultural essentialism can be given the use of absolute cultural difference to legitimate colonial power and abuse.

Narayan emphasizes the importance of taking history, part of what I would call context, into consideration when speaking about other nations and their politics. Highlighting the necessity to contemplate all representations of “culture” critically, she suggests, “A useful strategy for resisting cultural essentialism is the cultivation of a critical stance that ‘restores history and politics’ to prevailing ahistorical pictures of ‘culture’” (Narayan 86). Culture is not a

static, timeless entity; rather, culture is socio-politically constructed and maintained, and must be analyzed as such. We have seen how the portrayal of Mayan culture, albeit sometimes flattering, is one removed from time. Consequently, such a portrayal is also removed from history and politics, as well as the complex, lived social realities of Mayas in Guatemala today. To consider and speak about Mayan culture is not just a practice strengthened by the incorporation of history and politics, but one that *requires* it. Were one to speak about Mayas in Guatemala today without reference to Spanish colonialism in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, neocolonialism on the parts of Germany and the United States in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries respectively, and the genocidal civil war of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, every claim made would be hollow and misinformed. For instance, the subjugated position of Mayas in today's Guatemala is not simply an ethnoracial issue, but one intertwined with class and Eurocentric values regarding non-Western epistemologies and cosmovisions, not to mention the intricate relationship of second-class citizens in a neoliberal state striving to adjust to a globalized economy.

One important aspect of history that must enter into assessment here is the ideology of development and its resultant politics. Following World War II and heavily influenced by the Truman doctrine, developmentalism became top-of-mind, a goal for which impoverished countries “should” strive (*Encountering Development* 3-4). Explaining the rapid adoption of the development ideology throughout the world, Arturo Escobar identifies the key goals of the endeavor:

The intent was quite ambitious: to bring about the conditions necessary to replicating the world over the features that characterized the “advanced” societies of the time—high levels of industrialization and urbanization, technicalization of agriculture, rapid growth of material production and living standards, and the widespread adoption of modern education and cultural values (*Encountering Development* 3-4).



Escobar's use of quotation marks around the word "advanced" indicate the subjective nature of the term. That is, supposedly advanced societies of the time were simply advanced when measured against their own self-established criteria – industrialization, material production, and so on. The idea of development held such a firm grip on the global consciousness that even those who criticized it did so using development terms. Escobar mentions critiques on the capitalist nature of the development ideology, noting their advocacy for alternative forms of development, but development nevertheless (*Encountering Development* 5).

As the development ideology took root in so-called "undeveloped" territories, the results were often negative, leading to a lesser quality of life for inhabitants. Still, world leaders strove for development. Escobar reflects,

The fact that most people's conditions not only did not improve but deteriorated with the passing of time did not seem to bother most experts. Reality, in sum, had been colonized by the development discourse, and those who were dissatisfied with this state of affairs had to struggle for bits and pieces of freedom within it, in the hope that in the process a different reality could be constructed (*Encountering Development* 5).

Interestingly enough, there was no consideration of alternatives to development. Throughout "underdeveloped" nations like those in Latin America, people in general, and women in particular, suffered great disadvantages due to the imposition of development ideology upon their ways of life. The inundation of development discourse, Escobar posits, served as a veritable "colonization of reality," citing Foucault's work<sup>16</sup> as "...instrumental in unveiling the mechanisms by which a certain order of discourse produces permissible modes of being and thinking while disqualifying and even making others impossible" (*Encountering Development* 5). Certainly, development's discursive colonization throughout the world was a manifestation

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<sup>16</sup> Here, Escobar references Foucault's conception of power as a discursive network, which is explained in detail in a later section of this chapter.

of historically specific power, specifically that of self-declared “advanced” or “developed” nations.

The far-reaching effects of the development doctrine have been acknowledged by many scholars, including Chandra Mohanty, who informs much of my research ethics regarding “Third World Women<sup>17</sup>.” Escobar advances the claim that development literature directly contributes to unjust and oppressive categorizations such as “First World” and “Third World,” detailing the ways in which this sort of discourse contributes to negative perceptions of individuals inhabiting “underdeveloped” spaces (*Encountering Development* 8-9). Acknowledging Mohanty’s critique of the homogenous “Third World Women” designation, expanding that her criticism

...applies with greater pertinence to mainstream development literature, in which there exists a veritable under-developed subjectivity endowed with features such as powerlessness, passivity, poverty, and ignorance, usually dark and lacking in historical agency, as if waiting for the (white) Western hand to help subjects along and not infrequently hungry, illiterate, needy, and oppressed by its own stubbornness, lack of initiative, and traditions. This image also universalizes and homogenizes Third World cultures in an ahistorical fashion. Only from a certain Western perspective does this description make sense; that it exists at all is more a sign of power over the Third World than a truth about it. It is important to highlight for now that the deployment of this discourse in a world system in which the West has a certain dominance over the Third World has profound political, economic, and cultural effects that have to be explored (*Encountering Development* 8-9).

In this case, the development ideology serves to enhance paternalistic tendencies in those from “the West” towards individuals and groups occupying “underdeveloped” spaces. The ahistorical

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<sup>17</sup> “The development discourse inevitably contained a geopolitical imagination that has shaped the meaning of development for more than four decades. For some, this will to spatial power is one of the most essential features of development (Slater 1993). It is implicit in expressions such as First and Third World, North and South, center and periphery. The social production of space implicit in these terms is bound with the production of differences, subjectivities, and social orders” (*Encountering Development* 9).

nature of this discursively formed “Third World” subjectivity is divorced from sociopolitical context but reinforces “First World” perceptions of dominance.

Moreover, it should be stressed that the concept of “different cultures” retains strong ties to colonialism and the use of difference to justify exploitation and various forms of colonial cruelty. It is essential to remember that the supposed borders between “different cultures” are socially and politically constructed, and that they continue to serve myriad political purposes (Narayan 86). Both Mohanty and Narayan stress the necessary incorporation of historical knowledge in assessing culture and its inhabitants. Mohanty informs us,

When “women of Africa” (versus “men of Africa” as a group?) are seen as a group precisely because they are generally dependent and oppressed, the analysis of specific historical differences becomes impossible, because reality is always apparently structured by divisions between two mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive groups, the victims and the oppressor (68).

Narayan similarly advises that we interrogate “scripts of ‘cultural difference’” that are employed in the creation of stark binaries, warning, “Such interrogation will reveal both sides of the binary to be, in large measure, *totalizing idealizations*, whose Imaginary status has been concealed by a colonial and postcolonial history of ideological deployments of this binary” (95). In sum, history and the politics within it deserve a great deal of attention when speaking about others, particularly when such speech examines “other cultures” because researchers must strive to avoid reinforcing colonial power structures that subjugate “others.” In my own research and reflective analysis of my field work in Guatemala, I always endeavor to eschew any form of totalizing ideation, actively examining any claims I make for evidence of such aforementioned bias.

Chandra Mohanty reminds us that colonialism<sup>18</sup> can also take place in the intellectual realm, noting its tendency to create homogenous analytical constructs, particularly that of the “Third World Woman” (“Under Western Eyes” 61). She clarifies, “The definition of colonization I wish to invoke here is a predominantly *discursive* one, focusing on a certain mode of appropriation and codification of ‘scholarship’ and ‘knowledge’ about women in the third world by particular analytic categories employed in specific writings on the subject which take as their referent feminist interests as they have been articulated in the U.S. and Western Europe” (“Under Western Eyes” 61, original emphasis). I recognize the perils of both the homogenous categorization of women in the global south as a singular entity as well as analysis conducted through the lens of Western feminist interests. Scholarship, in the case of that regarding the monolith woman of the global south, is reductive and essentialist. Scholarship conducted via the subjectivity of Western feminist interests runs the risk of being just that – subjective. Still, however well-intentioned that feminist subjectivity might be, it remains inherently coupled with the assumption of “the West,” as both a rough geographic region and a conceptual entity, as occupying the center and relegating all others to the insignificant periphery. To be fair, Mohanty avoids essentializing “Western feminist interests” as well, explaining: “Clearly Western feminist discourse and political practice is neither singular nor homogeneous in its goals, interests or analyses. However, it is possible to trace a coherence of *effects* resulting from the implicit

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<sup>18</sup> “It ought to be of some political significance at least that the term ‘colonization’ has come to denote a variety of phenomena in recent feminist and left writings in general. From its analytic value as a category of exploitative economic exchange in both traditional and contemporary Marxisms (particularly contemporary theorists such as Baran, Amin and Gunder-Frank) to its use by feminist women of color in the U.S. to describe the appropriation of their experiences and struggles by hegemonic white women's movements, the term ‘colonization’ has been used to characterize everything from the most evident economic and political hierarchies to the production of a particular cultural discourse about what is called the ‘Third World’” (“Under Western Eyes” 61).

assumption of "the West" (in all its complexities and contradictions) as the primary referent in theory and praxis" ("Under Western Eyes" 62). It is this assumption of "the West" as primary or central that I wish to side-step in my own scholarship about the global south, working to produce self-aware scholarship that is cognizant of global power differentials and the dangerous assumptions that Western-focused scholarship often makes.

Mohanty maintains that scholarship, whether feminist or not, can never be entirely objective ("Under Western Eyes" 62). Rather, "It is best seen as a mode of intervention into particular hegemonic discourses (for example, traditional anthropology, sociology, literary criticism, etc.), and as a political praxis which counters and resists the totalizing imperative of age-old 'legitimate' and 'scientific' bodies of knowledge" ("Under Western Eyes" 62). Like all academic scholarship, scholarship done by feminists does not exist in a vacuum; it takes place within pre-established relations of power ("Under Western Eyes" 62). Thus, "...western feminist writing on women in the third world must be considered in the context of the global hegemony of western scholarship - i.e., the production, publication, distribution and consumption of information and ideas" ("Under Western Eyes" 64). Mohanty joins Alcoff in highlighting an "urgent need" to think about how Western feminist scholarship has political implications and can sometimes be viewed as a form of imperialism by women in other countries (64).

#### **4.1.3 Decolonization and Border Thinking**

Although not specifically feminist-oriented in scope or audience, Walter D. Mignolo acknowledges the discursive reaches inherent in political colonialism. Early on in his book *Local*

*Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, Mignolo

explains his thesis:

That colonial modernities, or “subaltern modernities” as Coronil (1997) prefers to label it, a period expanding from the late fifteenth century to the current stage of globalization, has built a frame and a conception of knowledge based on the distinction between epistemology and hermeneutics and, by so doing, has subalternized other kinds of knowledge is the main thesis of this book (13).

In order to better understand this thesis, it is necessary to examine other aspects of Mignolo’s thought. Western colonialism created what Mignolo terms the “colonial difference,” a space in which the “coloniality of power” is enacted. To legitimate the absolute subjugation of another people, colonizers emphasized the difference between themselves and their epistemology and that of the colonized people. Western thought was privileged over all other forms, so specific, privileged local histories implemented hegemonic global designs. For instance, the local history of Christianity enjoys privilege due to its connection with the Western colonial powers, and therefore creates a dominant global design. Other supposedly lesser local histories, like the indigenous cosmology of the Maya, do not possess the power to implement global designs.

Whenever the West encounters a difference elsewhere, or defends the existence of an alleged difference, it is transformed into a value. In simpler terms, whatever is not Western is immediately regarded as inferior, which upholds the colonial difference and supposed justification for colonial rule. Mignolo explains, “My understanding of coloniality of power presupposes the colonial difference as its condition of possibility and as the legitimacy for the subalternization of knowledges and the subjugation of people” (*Local Histories* 16). This transformation of differences into values constitutes the story of modernity. Spanish colonizers encountering the Maya culture and epistemology, for instance, viewed their thought system as different, barbaric, and highly inferior to European modes of thought. The story of modernity is

always, Mignolo highlights, coloniality<sup>19</sup>. As we have seen before, there is a cruelty to modernity<sup>20</sup> that also exists in histories of colonialism (Franco). Clarifying his theory, Mignolo informs us that local histories are not just those of colonized nations and global designs are not just those of colonizer nations. Rather, “Global designs, in other words, are brewed, so to speak, in the local histories of the metropolitan countries; they are implemented, exported, and enacted differently in particular places (e.g., in France and Martinique, for instance, in the nineteenth century)” (*Local Histories* 65). Thus, although Guatemala is not a colonizing nation, its interaction with the rest of the world has led to an adoption of Western thought in some instances, particularly in economic efforts. This Western thought then becomes a discursive and ontological form of colonialism.

In his complementary article “Delinking - The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-coloniality,” Mignolo also discusses how to go about the project of decolonization. He begins by acknowledging the importance of Anibal Quijano’s assertion (much like Chandra Mohanty’s assertion) that knowledge itself is colonized and must, therefore, be decolonized. To be clear, Mignolo emphasizes that decolonization is not the same

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<sup>19</sup> Modernity also entails colonialism of the discursive sort, particularly as it is linked to the post-World War II onslaught of development ideology throughout the world. Arturo Escobar explains the connection between this sort of colonialism and the violence of modern regimes of power, stating, “The development discourse...has been the central and most ubiquitous operator of the politics of representation and identity in much of Asia, Africa, and Latin America in the post-World War II period. Asia, Africa, and Latin America have witnessed a succession of regimes of representation—originating in colonialism and European modernity but often appropriated as national projects in postindependence Latin America and postcolonial Africa and Asia—each with its accompanying regime of violence. As places of encounter and suppression of local cultures, women, identities, and histories, these regimes of representation are originary sites of violence (Rojas de Ferro 1994). As a regime of representation of this sort, development has been linked to an economy of production and desire, but also of closure, difference, and violence” (*Encountering Development* 214).

<sup>20</sup> See Chapter One for an in-depth explanation of Jean Franco’s concept of “cruel modernity.”

as postcolonial critique: “The de-colonial shift, in other words, is a project of de-linking while post-colonial criticism and theory is a project of scholarly transformation within the academy” (“Delinking” 452). Border thinking constitutes a significant part of this proposed de-linking process, recognizing the colonial difference from the perspective of the colonized subaltern. It is “...the connector between the diversity of locals that were subjected as colonies of the modern empires (Spain, England, the US) or that as empires had to respond to Western expansion (e.g., China, Russia, the Ottoman Empire until 1922). Border thinking is grounded not in Greek thinkers but in the colonial wounds and imperial subordination” (“Delinking” 493). Acknowledgement of these colonial wounds is key.

In his advocacy of border thinking, Mignolo cautions against the dominance of any universal system of thought. To replace a Eurocentric, hegemonic epistemology with an epistemology arising from the subaltern would not be an improvement. However, Mignolo refrains from proposing a form of cultural relativism, suggesting a *pluriversality*<sup>21</sup> instead. He explains, “...the pluriversality of each local history and its narrative of decolonization can connect through that common experience and use it as the basis for a new common logic of knowing: border thinking” (“Delinking” 497). Arturo Escobar, in his article “*Más allá del desarrollo: postdesarrollo y transiciones hacia el pluriverso*” [“Beyond Development: Postdevelopment and Transitions Toward the Pluriverse”] (my translation), explores the various responses to the development ideology, many of which stemming from indigenous groups in Latin America. In an abstract sense, Escobar defines the pluriverse, or what it could be: “...*el pluriverso indica las luchas por lograr ‘mundos y conocimientos de otro modo’—es decir,*

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<sup>21</sup> For a literary interpretation of the pluriverse, see Ernesto Cardenal’s book *Versos del Pluriverso*.



*mundos y saberes contruidos sobre la base de los diferentes compromisos ontológicos, configuraciones epistémicas y prácticas del ser, saber y hacer*” [“...the pluriverse indicates the fights to achieve ‘worlds and knowledges otherwise’—that is, worlds and knowledges constructed on the base of different ontological compromises, epistemic configurations, and practices of being, knowing, and doing”] (“*Más allá del desarrollo*” 49, my translation). The hope, with pluriversality, is that many different but valid forms of knowledge can coexist.

Recognizing that “we cannot have it all our own way,” Mignolo determines that the implementation of pluriversal thought universally will be difficult (“Delinking” 500). Given the entrenchment of the development ideology throughout the world, as Arturo Escobar discusses, achieving a true pluriverse certainly would be difficult. Still, I too advocate the project of decolonization and the encouragement of pluriversality, despite its accompanying difficulties. That is, I am aware that my own scholarship is conducted within the context of a Western academic institution and I have been trained in positivist logic and argumentation since the beginning of my education, but I recognize the productivity of decolonial efforts and the acknowledgement of border thinking’s legitimacy.

Still, I do not support border thinking that supports the abuse of human rights. If subaltern thought in one region of the world allows impunity for rape, for example, common sense seems to dictate that this thought should not be granted the same level of respect as other alternative epistemologies, but Mignolo’s system provides no strategy with which to confront this issue. Of course, to create universal criteria that determine acceptable thought would run counter to the goals of the decolonization of thought, but there must be prudent discrimination somewhere in a productive theory of decolonization. To determine the method by which alternative epistemologies should be assessed may be impossible. Perhaps Mignolo and other

like scholars would support a pluriversality in which all border thinking is encouraged but judgment of individual thought systems is permitted, as in the case of the fictitious society that permits rape through a lack of castigation. Whether the pluriverse Mignolo imagines is one in which there is some as-of-yet undeveloped strategy of judging inappropriate border thinking, or the ideal pluriverse permits the critique of potentially harmful epistemologies, but such critique would be grounded in a certain epistemology and logos. Nevertheless, in my estimation, any efforts towards decolonization are worthwhile.

#### **4.1.4 How to Speak about Others: Macro, Meso, and Micro-level Contexts**

Faced with the seeming impossibility of producing material about others that is not in some way flawed, some choose what Alcoff terms “the retreat response.” One exercising the retreat response chooses “...simply to retreat from all practices of speaking for and assert that one can only know one's own narrow individual experience and one's ‘own truth’ and can never make claims beyond this” (Alcoff 17). Considering the significant influence that context and location can have on the production of discourse, avoiding making claims beyond one’s own experience may seem a legitimate strategy for avoiding the pitfalls against which Alcoff cautions. However, particularly when dealing with subject matter pertaining to human rights concerns, failing to speak can have greater negative ramifications than speaking. When one chooses not to speak, the potential political efficacy of their silenced speech is lost (Alcoff 17). Of course, an academic may strive to avoid producing material that is vulnerable to criticism, but Alcoff warns that this practice of avoidance is objectionable on both political and moral grounds

(22). She clarifies, “The desire to find an absolute means to avoid making errors comes perhaps not from a desire to advance collective goals but a desire for personal mastery, to establish a privileged discursive position wherein one cannot be undermined or challenged and thus is master of the situation” (Alcoff 22). Given the pressure put on academics to continually publish material, this fear of criticism is understandable, but the creation of a hierarchical discursive situation in which the academic is “master of the situation” cannot be advocated because it contributes to inequality and the hierarchy of power already existent throughout the globe. Instead, Alcoff supports an inclusive, dialogue-led approach that is led by speaking *with and to* others (23). Despite the fact that my fieldwork and its accompanying conclusions are inevitably mired by my demographic identity as a white, North American academic, I employed ethical research and interviewing practices to facilitate a dialogue-led approach. By allowing the *Rabín Ajaw* contestants and organizer to speak for themselves and direct the conversation much of the time, I intended to highlight their expertise and downplay the presumed expertise that others may assume I possess due to my educational certifications.

While Alcoff does not provide a thorough account for *how* she thinks one should speak with others, she does emphasize that one should scrupulously consider the effects of speaking for others and whether one should do it at all. Academics especially, Alcoff posits, should think critically about whether to speak about others at all (24). After all, Chandra Mohanty reminds us that scholarship can never be apolitical (62). Indeed, prior to conducting my first round of field research in Guatemala, I found myself hesitant to speak about the women involved in the Maya pageant. What right did I have to speak on their behalf? How would I evade coming off as paternalistic, however pure my intentions? After several conversations with peers and professors, I concluded that indulging in Alcoff’s “retreat response” could be harmful as well,

and that questioning past scholarship on the pageant and providing a forum for these women to tell their own stories was the best academic effort I could make. Granted, my positionality could deter my interviewees from sincere discussion, opening the door to strategically crafted narratives. Still, remaining self-aware throughout the process and giving up the lectern, as it were, to the actual participants of *Rabín Ajaw* seemed the most ethical way to conduct my research and eventual scholarship. Due to the fact that location and context are heavily influential in the production of meaning, one must delve into how and to what extent his or her location and context affects what they are saying or writing, and do so explicitly (Alcoff 24). Evaluation of what is said or written is of the utmost importance: “In order to evaluate attempts to speak for others in particular instances, we need to analyze the probable or actual effects of the words on the discursive and material context” (Alcoff 26). One must always be held responsible for his or her speech and remain receptive to criticism of said speech (Alcoff 25-26). In so doing, academics can aid in the production of more ethical, productive discourse and dialogue.

The contexts deserving of attention can greatly vary, but perhaps most prominent among these factors are the contexts of time and place. I would argue that these macro-level concerns are usually the first to garner contemplation. Considerations of time and historical factors must be granted thorough attention. Narayan explains, “...analyses that trace women's subordination to their confinement to domestic roles and the private sphere can constitute problematic essentialist generalizations if they ignore the links between femininity and the private sphere are not trans-historical but have arisen in particular historical contexts” (80). In this instance, without a thorough understanding of how female subordination and the domestic isolation that often results from it formed in a particular historical context, one cannot truly understand the issue of women’s forced social inferiority and degradation, and consequently, cannot mitigate the

issue, however sincere his or her intentions are. Moreover, well-meaning academics can often unknowingly augment social strife due to inadequate attention to contextual factors.

While the importance of considering macro-level contexts such as time and place is apparent, I advocate placing comparable attention on meso and micro-level contextual factors. By meso-level context I mean within-group variations. For instance, Narayan points out Western feminists' tendency to commit cultural essentialism by speaking about groups as exclusive entities, stating, "They depict as homogenous groups of heterogeneous people whose values, interests, ways of life, and moral and political commitments are internally plural and divergent" (82). For this reason, I dedicated the second chapter of my thesis to examining the intricate differences within the Mayanist movement in Guatemala – from its inception to the current day. Certainly, the internal plurality of groups merits much greater attention, as ignorance of it can lead to the production of binaries, which can be used in the affirmation of power and economic disparities. As Carol Gilligan warns us, one cannot identify difference between or among groups without assigning a value to that difference (14).

In terms of the development ideology, that it guided social formation in the latter half of the twentieth century and the twenty first century could be deemed a factor of macro-level context. Certainly, this factor enters into my analysis of the *Rabín Ajaw* pageant and the way(s) in which its participants exercise agency. Perhaps occupying a position somewhere in-between macro and meso-level contexts, it is necessary to recognize the way(s) in which the development ideology has impacted Latin America, with its history of colonialism and strife amongst cultural groups. Escobar defends,

Neither on the way to the lamentable eradication of all traditions nor triumphantly marching toward progress and modernity, Latin America is seen as characterized by complex processes of cultural hybridization encompassing manifold and multiple modernities and traditions. This hybridization, reflected in urban and peasant cultures

composed of sociocultural mixtures that are difficult to discern, “determines the modern specificity of Latin America” (Calderón 1988, 11). Within this view, the distinctions between traditional and modern, rural and urban, high, mass, and popular cultures lose much of their sharpness and relevance (*Encountering Development* 218).

The cultural hybridization referenced here is undoubtedly characteristic of contemporary Guatemalan society and the negotiation of identity in which current day Mayas must engage. Within the *Rabín Ajaw* pageant specifically, contestants are faced with a need to preserve the cultural traditions of their grandparents and ancestors, but also must survive in a “modern” society that is accompanied by discrimination and real-world consequences for expressing a Mayan cultural identity.

Clearly, the hybridization of cultures makes it so that individuals and groups cannot be neatly catalogued into either end of the countless classification binaries. Is a Maya woman who wears a traditional *corte* with a t-shirt “traditional” or “modern”? Should traditional indigenous weaving belong to “high” culture now that it has its own museum<sup>22</sup> in Guatemala City? Escobar refrains from such classifications, but invites inquiry, “The question that arises is how to understand the ways in which cultural actors—cultural producers, intermediaries, and the public—transform their practices in the face of modernity’s contradictions” (*Encountering Development* 219). Of course, he acknowledges that “...inequalities in access to forms of cultural production continue, yet these inequalities can no longer be confined within the simple polar terms of tradition and modernity, dominators and dominated” (*Encountering Development* 219). Thus, answering either of my above questions is inconsequential. *Understanding*, as it applies to all levels of context, is what matters.

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<sup>22</sup> *Museo Ixchel del Traje Indígena* [Ixchel Museum of Indigenous Dress]

Additionally, I support the examination of micro-level contexts in the process of speaking with others, which I interpret as contextual information that affects the academic herself. Not only should the researcher assess his or her own potentially hegemonic ideas and relevant contextual information about particular subjects they investigate by this prescription, but should, to the best of his or her ability, examine theoretical frameworks and systems of thought operating in the background of their thought production. Sandra Harding underscores the influence that academics have on the world:

How research disciplines conceptualize the world they study changes those worlds-in the natural as well as the social sciences, we now know. The activities of sociologists and political philosophers are complicit with different activities of the dominant institutions; thus changing conceptual frameworks in those disciplines can affect how women are served by, say, a welfare system and a legal system (198).

Given the impact of academic research upon the world, intellectuals must engage in analysis of micro-level contextual factors influencing their work. Indeed, this self-reflexivity is a difficult task, but by including at least an attempt to embrace analysis of dominant theories that assist in one's production of thought, more careful scholarship can emerge.

In approaching the charge of performing this micro-level contextual analysis, it is impossible to forget the influence of colonialism, in all of its forms. Especially when speaking about other nations and/or politics, one must be cognizant of the influence of colonialism upon the establishment of dominant theoretical frameworks and the thought production that originates from these frameworks. In her condemnation of culturally essentialist discourse, Narayan considers auxiliary points of caution for postcolonial feminist academics:

A postcolonial feminist perspective that strives to be attentive to differences among women without replicating such essentialist notions of cultural differences needs to acknowledge the degree to which the colonial encounter depended on an "insistence on Difference"; on sharp, virtually absolute, contrasts between "Western culture" and "Other cultures" (83).

This manufactured difference, she notes, was a social construct upon which colonists' power rested (Narayan 83).

In her article "The Sharia Debate in Ontario: Gender, Islam, and Representations of Muslim Women's Agency," Anna C. Korteweg navigates this need to analyze theoretical frameworks operating behind the production of individual thought and its subsequent communication. Korteweg situates the controversial practice of Muslim women wearing the veil in the context of the 2003 announcement that the Islamic Institute of Civil Justice would offer legal arbitration "in family and business disputes in accordance with both Islamic legal principles and Ontario's Arbitration Act..." (435-36). Canadians in opposition to this measure thought that Islam created gender inequality and limited Muslim women's agency, feeling that the Canadian courts were sufficient to deliver justice to all. To frame her discussion, Korteweg recognizes that "Feminist critiques of Western understandings of women's agency focus on false universalisms and the damage their unthinking application can do to the political struggles of women in the global south" (435). Undoubtedly, Korteweg champions the careful consideration of context when speaking about others. She introduces the concept of "embedded agency," which stands in opposition to many "feminist theories, such as those articulated by Judith Butler (1993), in which agency is understood as the capacity to resist dominant understandings of right action. Approaches like Butler's link agency to resistance and liberal subjectivity to freedom or autonomy..." (Korteweg 483). Embedded agency presents avenues for personal independence and the exercise of agency that are embedded within other contexts, such as the Islamic faith. Korteweg stresses that "...Muslim women's agency is shaped by local and national social, cultural, and political struggles that intersect with, but also move beyond, religion per se..." (439). By taking agency to mean only the Western, Butlerian notion of resistance to dominant



forces, Western feminists risked "...a narrowing of possible policy responses to concerns of immigrants from the global South to the North" (Korteweg 448). Perhaps worse, this assumption of Western understandings of agency and gender (in)equality invited the racialized othering of Muslim women in Canadian society. Korteweg reflects, "By associating gender inequality with Muslim communities, gender equality was discursively linked to majority society. In doing so, the debate positioned Canadian Muslims as racialized others" (449). This study is particularly illustrative of both the risks inherent in speaking about others as well as the importance of examining micro-level context and the theoretical framework(s) operating in the background of an individual's assessment of "foreign" places, cultures, and peoples.

Nevertheless, individuals speaking from different epistemic locations are entitled to produce knowledge claims about others, but these claims must be pronounced with great attention to all levels of context. Korteweg describes a case in which some Canadians claimed knowledge of the equality of their broader Western society, and the complementary inequality of the Muslim sector of that society. The racialized othering of these Muslim immigrants that resulted from the creation of knowledge claims without adequate consideration of micro-level context demonstrates the need for such consideration. In his article "Standpoint Theories Reconsidered," Joseph Rouse contemplates the role of knowledge claims and their effects, implicitly stressing the importance of context consideration:

Knowledge claims and their justification are part of the world we seek to understand. They arise in specific circumstances and have real consequences. They are not merely representations in an idealized logical space, but events within a causal nexus. It matters politically as well as epistemically which concepts are intelligible, which claims are heard and understood by whom, which features of the world are perceptually salient, and which reasons are understood to be relevant and forceful, as well as which conclusions credible (201).

One does not produce thought or knowledge in a solipsistic space. Rather, there is always a speaker that makes claims about others in particular circumstances and to a particular audience. Both the speaker and the listener's identity and location bear upon the meaning of what is spoken or written and lead to "real consequences," as Rouse affirms. He articulates the concept that certain aspects of the world are interpreted differently by different individuals and groups, and that one aspect of the world could be judged significant by some and not others. All of these thoughts are applicable to speaking with others. Rouse explains, "Knowers may not have the same repertoire of concepts to articulate those features inferentially... Yet such differences provide occasions for conversation and education, rather than mutual incomprehension" (202). Rouse clearly stands in agreement with Alcott's advocacy of a dialogue among speakers and understands the influence that location lords over speech meaning.

It is not difficult to identify the ethical and epistemological obstacles that pertain to speaking about others. As Alcott and other scholars have sufficiently communicated, one's physical, demographic, and epistemological location significantly affects the meaning of his or her speech, a meaning which is further shaped by the identity of the speech recipient. Academics, occupying a space of specific epistemic privilege, must speak with particular care when addressing the lives of others. Indeed, carefully speaking *with* others may introduce new ways of knowing. Whether it is individuals, groups, or nations that occupy the subject of academic discourse, intellectuals must pay thorough attention to context at the macro, meso, and micro levels. When examining issues of national or international interest, history and politics should be highlighted. The literature on speaking about others addresses the need for contextually grounded analysis, but seldom emphasizes the grave importance of identifying the micro-level context of theoretical frameworks operating in the background of thought

production. Seldom too, does the literature on speaking about others address the challenge of speaking *with* them. As producers of knowledge claims, academics must understand the relative power they hold and conduct their research with caution and substantial devotion to context. Of course, this section of my third dissertation chapter is by no means an exhaustive account of either the dangers of speaking for/about/with others or the correct strategy to employ when doing so. It is, however, a step in the right direction. It is my hope that others will begin where I have left off, as I have with Alcoff's theory.

#### **4.2 Is Agency Always Resistance?: A Comparison of Theoretical Frameworks**

Although the debate between freedom/free will and determinism has generated prolific academic attention within both the broader philosophical tradition<sup>23</sup> as well as to notions of autonomy and agency within the field of Gender Studies, it remains an area of scholarly contention (O'Connor and Franklin). Is humanity invested with agency and free to pursue our own wills? Or, are our futures predetermined by existing social structures, divine fate, or other factors? When examining any social phenomenon to identify spaces of (female) agency, it is essential to first *define* agency—a concept inherently linked to the free will vs. determinism debate due to its links to liberal ideas of freedom as a universally-held value. Additionally,

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<sup>23</sup> See Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Renee Descartes, David Hume, Baruch Spinoza, etc.

many of these ideas of freedom are connected to the idea of resistance – that one must resist power structures in order to be free to act according to one’s own will.

The concept of agency is variously defined among different academic fields and even among authors within the same discipline. In this section I aim to explore agency via two theoretical frameworks: first from a Foucauldian perspective that privileges the agency-as-resistance stance and then from a nonliberal and non-Western perspective that refrains from defining agency as resistance to oppressive power structures, drawing upon the work of Saba Mahmood. In so doing, I aim to shed light on what each theoretical framework contributes to the understanding of agency, and ultimately, arrive at a definition of agency suitable for the task of analyzing a non-Western space of possible female agency, as in that of the *Rabín Ajaw* Maya pageant.

#### **4.2.1 Agency, Resistance, and Freedom: A Foucauldian Framework**

In his renowned work *The History of Sexuality*, Volume I, Michel Foucault posits an analytics of power that locates power as ingrained in society itself. That is, power cannot be located in one institution, governing body, or leader; rather, power is invested in juridical discourse throughout every level of society. Within this watershed text, Foucault explores the free will vs. determinism debate as well as the intrinsically related concept of agency, but often without explicit reference to those terms. After all, power can be a restricting or enabling force that impacts the level of freedom and agency an individual may have. According to Foucault, power plays a juridical discursive role, but cannot be located solely within the law or something

as simple as a certain individual or group's rule over others (84-85). Rather, these phenomena are singular instantiations of power. Foucault explains the dynamic and relational character of his power structure:

... power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations and in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies (92-93).

In other words, power is not an entity, but is discursive, relational, and always in flux. One cannot simply identify, for example, a leader who exercises power and his or her subjects who are oppressed by the exercise of that power. Rather, power is a network of interactions of inequality at various social levels with ramifications that extend throughout society that "...then form a general line of force that traverses the local oppositions and links them together; to be sure, they also bring about redistributions, realignments, homogenizations, serial arrangements, and convergences of the force relations" (Foucault 94). Foucault clarifies that the relations of power constituting "major dominations" are simply the effects of multiple force relations, which, of course, are constantly in flux (94).

Power, however, is accompanied by resistance – a concept associated with the achievement of freedom and often synonymous with agency in Western texts. Instead of being an exterior force attempting to combat power, resistance is actually a part of the network of power relations itself (Foucault 95). Thus, resistance is also relational in nature and cannot be located in any single entity or interaction. The network of power inequalities and resultant resistances are mutually constitutive and ever-changing. Discourse within this power network-in-flux, Foucault reminds us, "...can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a

hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (101). In sum, the role of juridical discourse that forms relations of power forms prospects for resistance as well.

Despite the fact that Foucault’s analytics of power leaves room for agency, albeit solely agency-as-resistance, David Halperin recognizes the pessimistic reception of *The History of Sexuality*, Volume I by many Western liberals. Essentially, many liberals felt discouraged by Foucault’s theory because if power is relational and ubiquitous, it is consequently very difficult to resist or combat (Halperin 16). Furthermore, Western liberals disliked Foucault’s “...dark vision of modernity, of the liberal state, and of progressive, Enlightenment-era values (such as *freedom*, truth, and rationality) that it expresses” (19, emphasis mine). Following Foucault’s theory, the liberal state and areas touched by highly regarded values like freedom were not actually free, but rife with power relations with the potential to restrict individual liberties (19). Given the prevalence of freedom as a revered value in much of Western society, I would argue that such an initial distaste for Foucault’s theory of power may be warranted. Still, a network of power relations provides a wide range of possibilities through its various nodes of potential intervention.

However, expounding upon Foucault’s theory of power, Halperin states that power can be negative and restrictive, as in a law prohibiting a certain action, but it can be positive and generative of opportunities for freedom as well. Perhaps most importantly for Halperin, Foucault’s model of power engenders the opportunity for exercising freedom and resistance (Halperin 17). Through this recognition, Halperin is able to make the case for a Foucauldian model of political organizing and resistance to systemic homophobia that guides his greater work

*Saint Foucault*, but the connection between agentic action and freedom and resistance remains valuable to any conception of power dynamics. Moreover, "...freedom, correspondingly, is not freedom from power-it is not a privileged zone outside power, unconstrained by power-but a potentiality internal to power, even an effect of power" (Halperin 17). Even in this Western-oriented framework, freedom is never total; the nature of freedom is a constitutive part of the very power network that may curtail said freedom.

Foucault positioned resistance as part of the innumerable relations of power in a given society, and Halperin argues that in the end, Foucault actually aspired to resistance, not freedom or liberation (Halperin 56). In reference to the sexual politics upon which Foucault's first volume of *The History of Sexuality* is based, Halperin contends that Foucault aligned his goals with resistance as opposed to liberation because liberation "...does not express his theoretical position on the issue-it is not an enunciation of some cardinal principle or abstract law-but reflects his understanding of a specific historical situation, of concrete political realities and techniques of power: 'a complex strategic situation in a particular society'" (Halperin 59). There is much insight to glean from Halperin's quote, particularly the need to consider context when analyzing power structures and the potential for individual and collective agency. If, as Halperin declares, Foucault advocated resistance due to his consideration of particular historical, political, and social contexts and failed to advocate liberation/freedom because it did not adequately address the particular context at hand, one cannot reasonably conclude that Foucault viewed agency as strictly resistance *or* liberation/freedom. Additionally, Halperin acknowledges that Foucault strove to resist "...specific forms of social domination effected and legitimated by specific apparatuses of power/knowledge, and his characteristic tactic was to attempt to reverse the subject- and object-positions typically assigned by those apparatuses to the empowered and

the disempowered, respectively” (56). Again, Halperin notes Foucault’s attention to context in his aspiration to resist particular forms of domination resulting from power inequalities.

#### **4.2.2 Agency without Freedom?: Saba Mahmoud and the Egyptian Mosque Movement**

Saba Mahmoud’s work reaches the concept of agency through her ethnographic study of women’s involvement in the Islamic revival movement in Cairo, Egypt. Her consideration of both gender politics and definitions of agency as they operate outside of “the West” make this case worthwhile to analyze with aims of understanding how these factors play out in the case of *Rabín Ajaw* participants. Acknowledging that many feminists harbor a contentious relationship with religious traditions, Mahmoud investigates female participation in the Cairo Islamic revival with a focus on “...the conceptions of self, moral agency, and discipline that undergird the practices of this *nonliberal* movement...” (203, emphasis mine). Further, she clarifies that while the neoliberal feminist conception of agency certainly possesses analytical utility, her study attends to how this particular conception can constrain sufficient comprehension of women’s lives outside of neoliberal contexts. Previously over-simplified portrayals of Middle Eastern women as submissive victims of patriarchal power did grow more multidimensional with the advent of analyzing Middle Eastern women’s agency, but these analyses were primarily based on a Western, neoliberal idea of the concept of agency as resistance (Mahmoud 205). Considering definitions of agency other than the neoliberal understanding of agency-as-resistance may facilitate more productive and thorough analysis of non-Western social phenomena such as



women's participation in the Egyptian mosque movement (Mahmoud 203), or the participation of young Maya women in Guatemala's *Rabín Ajaw* pageant.

#### **4.2.3 Feminism as an Analytical and Politically Prescriptive Endeavor**

Not a neoliberal thinker herself, Mahmoud identifies feminism as "...both an *analytical* and a *politically prescriptive* project..." (206, original emphasis) and freedom as an essential element in feminist, neoliberal theories of agency, such as that discussed above. Feminism, then, prescribes that women resist anything dominating their opportunity for autonomy or limiting their freedom (Mahmoud 206). Further, Mahmoud distinguishes between negative and positive freedom. Negative freedom, she explains, is the lack of any obstructions to the exercise of autonomy, while positive freedom is the ability to exercise autonomy according to one's own will (Mahmoud 207). Freedom, whether positive or negative, individual or collective, is not necessarily a universal value or aspiration shared by all societies, yet it is frequently used by feminist scholars to define agency in resistant and emancipatory terms regardless of historical, cultural, or geographical context (Mahmoud 208).

Seeking a new theory of female agency not rooted in resistance to domination, and also not rooted in neoliberal frames, Mahmoud assesses Judith Butler's theory of *subjectivation*, which actually developed out of Butler's interpretation of Foucault. Butler advances the idea that the very things that contribute to one's oppression also aid in the formation of an identity, or subjectivity, that can then potentially resist oppressive forces (Mahmoud 210-11). Mahmoud applauds Butler's identification of "...the possibility of resistance to norms within the structure

of power itself rather than in the consciousness of an autonomous individual...” (211), but contests Butler’s reliance on emancipatory resistance as the main site or form of possible agency.

Like many other feminist theorists, Butler treats the desire for freedom as a natural universal, which limits understandings of the concept of agency to resistance against anything curtailing one’s freedom (Mahmoud 211). As an alternative, Mahmoud argues for a contextual understanding of the concept of agency in which acts of agency are interpreted through the contexts that created the oppression in the first place, a la Butler’s *subjectivation*. Such an alternative would allow for actions “...that aim toward continuity, stasis, and stability...” to also be deemed agentic (Mahmoud 212). In order to best understand an action as an exercise of agency or not, the action must be interpreted through its own context. Although allowing for actions that aim for stability goes against the constantly-in-flux instability of Foucault’s analytics of power, the intention to interpret actions within their original contexts is the same.

#### **4.2.4 The Mosque Movement**

In order to understand Mahmoud’s theoretical perspective on the concept of agency, it is essential to briefly explain the Egyptian mosque movement she analyzes. The women’s mosque movement seeks to combat the Western secularization of Egyptian society that denies the influential role of Islam in Egyptian society and politics, by educating other Muslims in Islamic doctrine and piety (Mahmoud 204). Mahmoud recognizes the tendency to associate Muslim values like piety and modesty with the patriarchal subordination of women, noting the unique position of the women participating in the Cairo mosque movement. That is, while these Muslim

women propagate supposedly passive behaviors like piety, shyness, and modesty, they are simultaneously intervening in the traditionally male-dominated mosque space in a novel way (Mahmoud 205).

In her ethnographic study of the Egyptian women's mosque movement, Mahmoud found that the women put forth considerable effort to instruct others in the practice of piety, but also to cultivate the skill in themselves. For these women, both external actions and internal discipline constituted the practice of piety, requiring substantial physical and mental effort (Mahmoud 212). Shyness is an element of pious behavior required of Muslim *women* in particular – a part of the gendered nature of Islamic doctrine that draws critical attention from many Western feminists. Still, the intentional effort of the women to exercise and instruct in piety in tandem with their intervention in a predominantly male space hardly seem like entirely passive endeavors.

Comparing a pious Muslim woman involved in the mosque movement with her secular peer, Mahmoud locates a conception of agency shared by the women in the mosque movement that privileges individual responsibility, albeit a responsibility bound by both divine fate and social constraints. In one example, she shares the differing approaches that both women take in response to the extreme pressure Muslim women in Egypt face to marry very early in life. Sana, a secular, unmarried woman copes with both the pressure to marry and the resultant social stigma for being unmarried in her thirties by nurturing strong self-esteem within herself. By developing a positive self-esteem, Sana believes she will be empowered to pursue her own goals, particularly in her career. Alternatively, Nadia, a pious Muslim woman who married in her mid-thirties, advocates the cultivation of *sabr*—roughly, the ability to patiently endure life's hardships—as the best strategy for dealing with the pressure and stigma that normative early

marriage engenders.

As a significant element of Muslim piety, *sabr* is a form of self-discipline and patience that may happen to make hardships easier to bear, but the motivation for *sabr* is not to make things easier for oneself. According to the Islamic doctrine Nadia espoused, although an individual's fate is divinely ordained, that individual still possesses the ability to choose how to respond to that fate. Whereas agency equated to the cultivation of self-esteem in order to act according to her own will professionally for Sana, Nadia viewed agency more as individual responsibility (Mahmoud 220-22). Mahmoud clarifies, "...*sabr* in the sense described by Nadia and others marks not a reluctance to act; rather it is integral to a constructive project, a site of considerable investment, struggle, and achievement" (222). Indeed, agency for Nadia was not a form of emancipatory resistance, but an exercise of individual responsibility. However, Mahmoud stresses that rejection of the value of resistance to oppression does not follow from the recognition of other forms of agency. In other words, resisting oppression remains a valuable form of agency, but understanding how agency functions in other, nonliberal contexts is equally valuable. Essentially, "...the analytical tools that attend them [the women's mosque movement versus actions of the Islamist political parties controlling the state] should also reflect the different projects each enables" (Mahmoud 223). Here, Mahmoud aligns with the Foucauldian practice of attention to context when she identifies agency.

To be clear, Mahmoud is neither arguing for a conception of agency like that witnessed in her ethnography of the Egyptian women's mosque movement, nor necessarily calling for a complete suspension of judgment or evaluation of women's actions. Returning to her recognition that feminism is at once analytical and politically prescriptive, Mahmoud concludes that a contextually-founded consideration of women's actions and their potentially agentic nature

would have positive ramifications in both the academic and political realms. She states,

...in order to explore the kinds of injury specific to women located in particular historical and cultural situations, it is not enough simply to point, for example, that a tradition of female piety or modesty serves to give legitimacy to women's subordination. Rather it is only by exploring these traditions in relation to the practical engagements and forms of life in which they are embedded that we can come to understand the significance of that subordination to the women who embody it (Mahmoud 225).

Analytically, this academic practice definitely points to a more exhaustive evaluation of women's lives in all contexts. Additionally, Mahmoud deems this a responsible political practice in that it does not assume that the individual or society in question shares the same political perspectives as the academic investigating that individual or society. Potentially agentic practices within nonliberal contexts cannot be assessed solely within liberal parameters.

At the outset of this assessment of two different theoretical frameworks' understandings of the concept of agency, I imagined each perspective to provide wholly disparate insights on how best to understand agentic practices. Indeed, the Foucauldian framework from *The History of Sexuality*, Volume I seemed to represent the liberal privileging of freedom as a universal value and to propagate an understanding of agency as defined by resistance to power, particularly given David Halperin's interpretation of Foucault's theory. Similarly, Saba Mahmoud's critiques of the hegemony of the liberal understanding of agency as freedom and resistance seemed to draw a direct contrast to Foucault's theoretical framework. However, one characteristic of the seemingly contrasting accounts of agency actually united them: the prominence of attention to context. Foucault's analytics of power certainly apply to various contexts, but his advocacy of resistance arose from contextual consideration of the subject at hand: the politics of sexuality. Likewise, Mahmoud's critique of the liberal tendencies to highlight freedom as a universal value and conceive of agency as merely resistance to a certain power structure was a contextually driven critique. She advocated adequate consideration of

context at all levels as opposed to imposing a Western, liberal framework of agency in a non-Western, non-liberal context. Moving forward with my analysis, I still lack a solid definition of the concept of agency in the context of the *Rabín Ajaw* pageant, but I see this as a benefit to my project. Determining a definition of agency before fully investigating every contextual layer of information surrounding my project would be a disservice to my work. Instead, I intend to follow in both theorists' footsteps by considering structures of power contextually and determining whether agency can rightfully be defined as resistance or otherwise *according to the context of Rabín Ajaw*.

One area reserved for cautious optimism remains the hybridity of cultures experienced by Guatemalan Mayas today. Members of indigenous cultures today must engage in constant negotiation with contemporary, “modernized” societies and governments, leading to a truly hybrid culture. Chapter Two showed the many difficulties that Mayanist leaders face in the struggle for advancing indigenous rights, namely avoiding cultural essentialism while uniting a heterogeneous Mayan population in Guatemala directly affected by development ideology. As part of the National Folklore Festival, *Rabín Ajaw* stands as a strong example of “authentic” indigenous culture as it intersects with and is influenced by popular culture. As for the optimistic element of this hybrid categorization, Escobar hints at the potential for the exercise of cultural agency by such hybrid populations. Rather than avoiding the “development” and “modernization” forces guiding national governments and international politics, members of hybrid cultures confront them directly, along with their native culture(s). Escobar explains this practice:

Caught between conventional development strategies that refuse to die and the opening of spaces in the wake of ecological capital and discourses on cultural plurality, biodiversity, and ethnicity, some of these groups respond by attempting to craft unprecedented visions of themselves and the world around them. Urged by the need to come up with

alternatives—lest they be swept away by another round of conventional development, capitalist greed, and violence—the organizing strategies of these groups begin to revolve more and more around two principles: the defense of cultural difference, not as a static but as a transformed and transformative force; and the valorization of economic needs and opportunities in terms that are not strictly those of profit and the market. The defense of the local as a prerequisite to engaging with the global; the critique of the group’s own situation, values, and practices as a way of clarifying and strengthening identity; the opposition to modernizing development; and the formulation of visions and concrete proposals in the context of existing constraints, these seem to be the principal elements for the collective construction of alternatives that these groups seem to be pursuing (225-26).

Of course, it remains to be seen whether or not *Rabín Ajaw* participants engage equally with the constraints of “modernity” and their cultures. In the chapter that follows, I examine interviews with the participants, founder, and organizer to determine potential sources of agency.

## 5.0 Chapter 4: Fieldwork Findings

*“Es lamentable que después de tanto que las señoritas se preparan, analizan, suben a un escenario, exhortan a una población, sale una electa, la dejan sin ayuda... [It is a shame that after the young ladies prepare so much, analyze, climb up on stage, exhort a population, an elected leaves. They leave her without help.]”* (in-person interview, my translation<sup>24</sup>) – 2017-2018 *Rabín Ajaw* elect

During the summer of 2016, I found myself in Cobán, Guatemala to finally witness the indigenous *Rabín Ajaw* [Daughter of the King] pageant I had studied for some time—pouring over the few scholarly publications on the event, but never being able to complement them with my own experience of the spectacle. *Rabín Ajaw* is accompanied by a strong undercurrent of contention from scholars and laypeople alike, particularly given the context of the Guatemalan genocide and contemporary ethnic strife between and among ladinos and Mayas. The controversial perception of the pageant renders its origins all the more critically significant. As the Mayanist movement gained momentum in the late 1960s, Marco Aurelio Alonzo, a half indigenous-half ladino school teacher, decided that the folk culture of the Mayas had to be preserved, particularly because “...little could be achieved in the way of teaching the children or influencing the attitudes of parents unless one knew their language and ways of thinking” (Schackt 272). The sparse literature regarding the inception of the pageant credits Alonzo’s

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<sup>24</sup> All translations of interviews in this chapter are my own.



desire for cultural preservation as his motivation to found *Rabín Ajaw*, which eventually became the main event of Guatemala's National Folklore Festival (Schackt 272).

Although academic publications investigating *Rabín Ajaw* were relatively scarce, I was fascinated by the topics the pageant evoked regarding cultural authenticity and autonomy, post-war ethnic relations, and intersectional questions of gender. As a novice field researcher, by a random stroke of luck, the room I obtained for my stay in Cobán came with a fortunate surprise: my host's girlfriend happened to be volunteering with the pageant. Accompanied by my new ladina friend, I was granted greater access to people with whom I wanted to speak, substantiated by the greater legitimacy she, as a Guatemalan, provided me. After repeated assurances from my host's Maya café staff that I would not offend anyone, my friend and I donned a traditional, Mayan *huipil* and *corte* to attend the pageant. Waiting for cups of instant coffee at a food stand and reluctant to join the long line snaking along the front of the stadium where the pageant was held, my friend and I were approached by a man wearing INGUAT (*Instituto Guatemalteco de Turismo* [Guatemalan Institute of Tourism]) insignia, who asked to take my picture. A bit confused, I agreed, and when my friend asked him if we had to wait in the line to buy tickets to the event, the INGUAT agent pulled out two VIP passes that allowed us to enter the pageant's reserved seating immediately without paying. Certainly, the immediate manifestation of racial and nationality-based privilege from which I benefitted was guilt-inducing, especially in a poverty-stricken nation where the honorary cultural group of the event suffers in striking disproportion.

Considering the use of Mayan imagery to entice international tourists to visit Guatemala and attend the indigenous pageant, I found it interesting that the *traje* being identified by the INGUAT agent was that worn by a foreign *canchita* [blondie], as I was frequently called on the

streets of Guatemala City and Cobán. Wasn't this event supposed to be a celebration of *Maya* women and their culture? Clearly, there was more at play with the *Rabín Ajaw* than its surface-level cultural celebration if the image of interest to the INGUAT agent was a foreigner wearing traditional Mayan dress, particularly given the social subjugation of Mayas in post-war Guatemala—Mayas whose indigenous status is often identified through their *traje*. Given this continued subjugation of Mayas and the exploitation of the Mayan image through essentialist representations of diverse Mayan cultures for financial gain, I was curious to learn what motivated these women to participate in the pageant at all. Were these women simply “playing along” with the state’s multicultural agenda and its desire to present itself as both modern and culturally authentic to increase tourism profits? Or, was there another motivating aspect to the celebration that I, along with other academics, failed to understand? Seeking enlightenment, I attended the pageant in 2016 and 2018 and spoke to the contestants themselves.

### **5.1 Beauty, Race, and Nation in Guatemala**

My interest in Guatemala’s *Rabín Ajaw* pageant grew out of a fascination with the connection between politics, as broadly construed, and feminine beauty in the superficial, aesthetic sense. Beauty pageants, in particular, captivated my attention due to both their organized form and inherent connection to nationalism. Scholarship on beauty demonstrates that rather than something timeless and objective, images of beauty are historically and culturally

specific (Cohen, Wilk, and Stoeltje). In the modern world, feminine beauty is socially constructed through the intersection of gender, race, and nation, and as such, beauty is implicated with power (Cohen, Wilk, and Stoeltje 6). These factors are ritually put on display in beauty pageants which, scholars argue, represent the institutionalized engagement of concepts of beauty with politics, morality, and group values (Cohen, Wilk, and Stoeltje 2). As venues in which images of beauty, morality, and national identity are both reflected and produced, national and international pageants present a site for analyzing the intersecting power systems in the current era of globalization.

Initially, my interest developed through an examination of the Maya pageant *Rabín Ajaw* in conjunction with the ladina pageant *Señorita Monja Blanca*, as they were separate events, but usually held in the same auditorium in Cobán, Guatemala. Hendrickson found that local pageants have been held as a means to mend frayed relations between feuding Maya and ladino groups. Her observations found that in such pageants, both ladina and indigenous candidates don *traje*. She notes, “The appearance of all the girls in *traje* was seen to be a unifying statement expressing (as the emcee<sup>25</sup> proclaimed) ‘*nuestra Guatemalidad*’ – ‘our Guatemaleness’ or common heritage – in an era of deep social division” (Hendrickson). Hendrickson’s conclusion is hopeful, but unsubstantiated.

Furthermore, while the limited literature referencing *Rabín Ajaw* often referred to the event in traditional, Western beauty pageant terms, nothing about the competition seemed to warrant such terminology. After all, *Rabín Ajaw* resulted in a winner who best exhibited knowledge of Mayan customs and culture. Although a problematic endeavor, judges of the event sought the most “authentic” Maya woman to be crowned *Rabín Ajaw* [Daughter of the King],

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<sup>25</sup> Master of ceremonies

regardless of her physiognomy. Alternatively, the ladina pageant mirrored the Western beauty pageants I had known growing up in the United States, complete with competition segments judging contestants' (bodies in) evening gowns and bathing suits. Considering these realities, I wondered if *Rabín Ajaw* participants themselves considered the event to be a conventional beauty pageant, and what motivated them to participate.

Winners of the ladina pageant continue competing at the national level to eventually represent Guatemala as a whole in the international Miss World beauty pageant. Representations of Guatemala on an international pageant stage rely on a Mayan cultural veneer, often executed through inaccurate "costume," and always through the guise of *cultural appreciation*, never acknowledging the practice's egregious *cultural appropriation*. Moreover, the "costume" appropriated is conflated with the nation of Guatemala and Guatemalan culture, without recognition that most elements are taken from Maya women. According to Hendrickson, some see the appropriation as merely another way that ladinos exploit the nation's indigenous for financial gain: "they exploit Indians as laborers and they use the Indian image for the purposes of tourism" (Hendrickson). McAllister also asserts that the national indigenous pageant is a "hook" to lure in tourist dollars by increasing attendance at the nation's folk festival (112). Further, there is some demographic variation in attendance at the pageants. While the ladina pageants are generally attended by exclusively ladino audiences, the indigenous pageant is mixed (Schackt 277). This fact suggests that while the indigenous gaze is circumscribed, limited to the space of the indigenous pageant, the ladino gaze is universal, able to spectate at whatever event they please.

Still, the ladina pageant that takes place in Cobán is not a fair lateral referent; while the winners of the ladina *Señorita Monja Blanca* pageant do attend the *Rabín Ajaw* contest in a show

of goodwill and support, the two events are not at all on the same playing field and do not seem to be considered that way by participants. Claiming that Guatemalan ladinas tend to be the only portion of the population participating in beauty pageants disregards the fact that many academics utilize the misnomer “beauty pageant” irresponsibly when describing the Maya cultural event, which itself is part of a larger, celebratory folklore festival that encourages friendly and educational coexistence among the Maya participants, not competition. The ladina *Señorita Monja Blanca* pageant constitutes a beauty pageant as it is traditionally understood, in both form and function, while *Rabín Ajaw* can fairly be categorized as a pageant in form alone. Furthermore, the *Señorita Monja Blanca* pageant is “ladina” only insofar that it is not indigenous: “...although these beauty contests may at times include candidates with non-Spanish surnames or even non-Caucasian physiognomies, it is curious to note that they never seem to include candidates with an evident Indian identity” (Schackt 277). Although the image of the Maya woman and her *traje* is frequently utilized to express the authentic national culture of Guatemala as a whole, the Maya woman herself is viewed as unsuitable to represent the modern nation state on an international stage. Winners of the ladina *Señorita Monja Blanca* pageant later compete with other regional beauty pageant winners throughout Guatemala to win the title of “Miss Guatemala” and eventually compete internationally at the Miss World and/or Miss Universe pageants. On the contrary, winners of the *Rabín Ajaw* pageant do not advance to international competitions, probably because such competitions do not exist, but also due to the spirit of coexistence promulgated at the event.

Unsurprisingly, the establishment and rise of *Rabín Ajaw* brought conflict. Despite the original emphasis on regional Mayan culture, the pageant has become a national spectacle. And while some applaud its efforts to preserve and celebrate folk culture(s), others condemn the event

as a whole. Schackt notes that criticisms span the spectrum from the reactionary right to the multicultural left and include, “dislike of the attention it gives to Guatemala’s Indian heritage” and “a critique of the way it communicates a distorted and commercialised view of Maya culture.” Many “write it off as generally ‘non-authentic’ and mainly serving the interests of the tourist industry” (273). *Rabín Ajaw* remains contentious to some due to questions of (in)authenticity for a multitude of reasons, and while contestants do deliver speeches on sociopolitical topics, they do so within the confines prescribed to them by pageant organizers. Specifically, a group of officials select a group of topics from which the contestants are permitted to choose the topic for their speeches. Other such contestant expressions are equally circumscribed by pageant rules and organization. Nevertheless, since attendance was in no way compulsory, there had to be some other factor motivating over 100 young Maya women to attend each year, another way in which they demonstrated agency.

## 5.2 Fieldwork

Prior to the aforementioned interaction with the INGUAT (*Instituto Guatemalteco de Turismo* [Guatemalan Institute of Tourism]) agent outside of the formal pageant itself, I spoke with several contestants who had just delivered their bilingual speeches. With the help of my Guatemalan friend and the legitimacy her presence brought me, I approached contestants after they exited the stage and took staged photos with the handful of press present at the event. The

2016 deliverance of *discursos* [speeches] was orchestrated in the open area of the food court in Cobán's single shopping mall. Surrounding the rows of plastic lawn chairs set up for the audience, various fast food establishments ringed the outskirts. Aside from a few local fast food chains, Western chains like Pizza Hut and Taco Bell stood witness to the spectacle. Given the limited academic literature on *Rabín Ajaw* I had studied earlier, I thought it fitting that a pageant allegedly inciting international tourism held one of its main events in a seeming symbol of Western enterprise and capitalism, from which none of the contestants truly benefitted. Of course, it later became clear that this sector of the event must have been situated in the mall's food court in order to conveniently accommodate the crowd that grew to listen to each contestant's bilingual speech. In 2018, the speeches were held in a community center in Cobán, so my initial assumption that the location of that sector of the event held some significance was certainly false.



**Figure 2 Audience at the 2016 speeches**

Sitting on the plastic lawn chairs provided for the audience viewing the contestants' speeches, just outside of the makeshift stage area constructed in the commercial mall's food court, I sat with my Guatemalan friend and individual contestants. Although I explained to each interviewee who I was and my research purpose, a couple of the young women seemed to think I was some sort of foreign press, delivering soundbite-like snippets with a practiced rhythm. Others were more than willing to inform me about the pageant and their involvement in it in a relaxed manner. In order to discover more about the pageant, as well as how the contestants wanted the pageant to be viewed by the foreign audience I represented, I began most interviews by asking the contestants to describe *Rabín Ajaw* to someone unfamiliar with the event. The majority of respondents indicated that the pageant encouraged the exchange of culture and experiences among the Maya contestants, contributing to an overall sense of coexistence. Many women mentioned *convivencia* [coexistence] explicitly, and others gestured toward the concept with experiential examples taken directly from their time at the Folklore Festival in Cobán. The frequent mention of coexistence may initially seem coached, but the experiences related to me throughout all of my conversations, regardless of the question asked, supported the contestants' claims. Indeed, the structure of the festival itself facilitated such *convivencia* among the contestants. Interactions among the event's participants seemed sincerely friendly, as opposed to the artificial, saccharine exchanges one might witness at a Western beauty pageant. Further, the schedule of events, while open for public viewing, tended to cater to the facilitation of inter-community exchange and conviviality among the young Maya women present.





**Figure 3 Interview with a 2016 Rabín Ajaw contestant**



**Figure 4 Interview with a 2016 Rabín Ajaw contestant**

### 5.2.1 Is *Rabín Ajaw* a Beauty Pageant?

Since *Rabín Ajaw* had been labelled and characterized as a beauty pageant, in Schackt's publication and others, I still felt it essential to my research to directly ask the participants their opinion on the matter. Thus, my first iteration of field research in 2016 focused on the participants' definition and description of *Rabín Ajaw*. Yes, the contest loosely followed the format of a Western beauty pageant with different segments assessing dress, dance, and discourse, but the spirit seemed entirely different from Western beauty pageants. Did the contestants themselves view the event as a traditional beauty pageant?

The first interview I was able to obtain in the summer of 2016 was with one of the main National Folklore Festival and *Rabín Ajaw* organizers. As with the pageant aspirants, I first asked him to describe the event to someone unfamiliar with it (discussed later) before later inquiring about its beauty pageant status, or lack thereof. The separation of these inquiries was to both see what sorts of terminology organically arose and then to compare that description with responses to a more direct question about *Rabín Ajaw* and its characterization as a beauty pageant. It is important to represent this response in whole to facilitate comparative analysis with both this organizer's response to my more direct beauty pageant question and the response of contestants as well. When asked if *Rabín Ajaw* should be called a beauty pageant, the organizer positioned himself firmly in the negative camp. Clarifying, he stated:

*No es de belleza. Rabín Ajaw, el concurso, te lo puedo decir así, es un llamado a todas las etnias. No estamos viendo belleza; estamos viendo la utilización de los valores culturales mayas, saber el significado del traje - si nos damos cuenta cada traje tiene un mosaico filosófico de conocimientos mayas y eso es lo que estamos—no en exhibición, sino que lo conozca el mundo para que vea cada figura logográfica que aparecen, los gráficos, tiene un gran significado, ahí plasma—ahí plasmaron el conocimiento nuestros abuelos. Simplemente es de conocerlos e interpretarlo para encontrar los caminos*

*llanos, los caminos planos que nos resta el Popol vuh...* [It is not about beauty. *Rabín Ajaw*, the competition/pageant, I can tell you this way, is a call to all ethnicities. We are not seeing beauty; we are seeing the utilization of Mayan cultural values, knowing the meaning of *traje* – if we realize that each *traje* has a philosophical mosaic of Mayan knowledge and that is what we are—not in exhibition, but that all the world knows it so that they see each logographic figure that appears, the graphics, has a great meaning, there expresses—there they expressed the knowledge of our grandparents. Simply put, it is to know it and interpret it to find the straight paths, the level paths that remain for us of the Popol Vuh...] (in-person interview).

Confirming my suspicion that individuals involved in *Rabín Ajaw* refrain from considering it a beauty pageant, the organizer stressed cultural values, particularly the values symbolically represented in contestants' *traje*. As an element of material culture, *Maya traje típico* [traditional dress] is not simply a placeholder for Maya or Guatemalan culture, as it may be when (mis)appropriated for use before an international audience. Rather, it *is* culture – a cultural custom, symbolically reflective of a deeply held philosophy. I return to analysis of the importance of *Maya traje* to the *Rabín Ajaw* pageant later in this chapter.

My research assesses the way(s) in which *Rabín Ajaw* contestants exercise agency within the competition, but it is important to acknowledge the responses of officials like the pageant organizer to facilitate the holistic analysis of contestant responses. In other words, the ability to compare contestant responses, likely responses with varying degrees of sincerity and/or vulnerability, with what I expect is a more practiced response from the organizer may be enlightening. By “practiced,” I do not mean to convey any sense of falseness or misleading on the part of the organizer; instead, I refer simply to practice speaking about the event that would be inherent in long-term involvement. Contestants, on the other hand, never attend *Rabín Ajaw* more than once, as one of them informed me in 2016:

*La cuestión es de que cada año va teniendo una representación para hacer la máxima de todo el departamento, ya es un municipio. Las cuales son enviadas como representantes de cada uno de los municipios y aldeas, de los departamentos, porque de las aldeas, no, porque a menos de que se haga una competencia a nivel de municipio y venga la*

*máxima, sólo una tiene el privilegio de estar acá. Es un evento que todas, pues buscamos un propósito, verdad, pero creo que lo más importante es la convivencia, el compartir con los diferentes municipios. Es un momento de transmitir nuestros conocimientos, de aprender y sobre todo de conocer otras culturas porque así como estamos, a veces somos carentes de información y a través de éstos se alimentan nuestros conocimientos.* [The thing is that each year has representation to make the greatest one of all the departments, it is already a municipality. Those who are sent as representatives from each one of the municipalities and villages, from the departments, because from the villages, no, because at least there is a competition at the level of the municipality and the greatest, only one, has the privilege to be here. It is an event that all of us, well we look for a reason, true, but I believe that the most important thing is the coexistence, the sharing with the different municipalities. It is a moment of transmitting our knowledge, of learning, and above all of knowing other cultures because as we are, sometimes we are lacking information and through them we feed our knowledge.] (in-person interview).

Again, the importance of coexistence and the transmission of cultural knowledge is mentioned.

When I asked the same young woman why contestants could only attend once, she replied,

*“Porque debemos de darle espacios a otra señorita que tenga la misma capacidad de demostrar nuestras culturas, nuestras tradiciones y representar cada municipio.* [Because we should give space to another young woman that has the same capacity to demonstrate our cultures, our traditions, and represent each municipality]” (in-person interview). In this exchange, the contestant never mentioned winning the pageant or that returning for a second chance might give that individual an unfair advantage, highlighting instead the conviviality and the demonstration and spread of cultural knowledge among those in attendance.

The young woman referenced above clarified contestant repetition regulations, and in so doing at least partially explained the purpose of the event. When it came to the classification of *Rabín Ajaw* as a beauty pageant, she countered, *“No, no es un concurso de belleza porque si fuera concurso de belleza sólo calificaría el exterior, a diferencia de acá se califica las tradiciones y costumbres, comportamientos de las señoritas, el traje y sobre todo el idioma, su conocimiento. No sólo lo exterior.* [No, it is not a beauty pageant because if it were a beauty pageant it would only judge the exterior, unlike here where the traditions and customs, behaviors

of the young women, the *traje* and above all the language, her knowledge is judged. Not only the exterior.]” (in-person interview). Thus, even though physical elements like *traje* are of paramount importance in the selection of the “Daughter of the King,” it is the culture behind those elements that matters, not appearance – and certainly not when it comes to the appearance of contestants.



**Figure 5** A collective picture showing the diversity of 2016 candidates

A couple of the contestants with whom I spoke categorized *Rabín Ajaw* as a beauty pageant in their responses, yet even these positive categorizations indicated that the competition was not a beauty pageant in the Western, physical aesthetic sense. When asked if the competition should be called a beauty pageant, one contestant explained, “*Sí, en una parte sí*

*porque vemos una gran diversidad de mujeres y al igual como han asignado a esa forma debemos de respetar.* [Yes, in part yes because we see a great diversity of women and just as they have assigned it that form, we should respect it.]” (in-person interview). Here, she highlighted the diversity of women, despite the fact that they are all of Maya origin, as the rationale for considering the event a beauty pageant – a certain departure from the white-washed pageants of physical beauty in the West. Another contestant technically confirmed the event’s beauty pageant status, but through her own interpretation of the term “beauty” as well, stating: *“De hecho, es un concurso de belleza, la belleza de nuestras artes. Son nuestras tradiciones, de nuestras tradiciones, de nuestras costumbres.* [In fact, it is a beauty pageant, the beauty of our arts. They are our traditions, of our traditions, of our customs.]” (in-person interview). This quote hints at the unity of the diverse, municipal customs by highlighting the joint Maya ownership of such cultural elements through the repetition of “*nuestras* [our],” but it also emphasizes the significance of Maya cultures in the purpose of the event. Pointing instead to the beauty of the contestants’ spirits, one contestant expounded, *“Concurso de belleza, sí, pero belleza espiritual, no belleza, es decir, belleza física sino que espiritual. La belleza que tenemos por dentro porque por dentro podemos tener toda esa belleza que hoy podemos haber... Esa sería la belleza.* [Beauty pageant, yes, but spiritual beauty, not beauty, that is, physical beauty, but spiritual. The beauty that we have within because inside we can have all of that beauty that today we have been able to express... That would be the beauty.]” (in-person interview). Such classifications of “beauty” as the standard by which pageant contestants are measured indicate the importance of sincere spirituality, cultural knowledge, and a feeling of togetherness that precludes aggressive competition. Moreover, each of these young women took the liberty to define “beauty” as they pleased without relying upon previously established cultural constructs

to shape their answers to my questions.

Similarly, some contestants referenced the friendly spirit of the competition, condemning an event that would discriminate among the young women in a hostile way. For instance, one woman told me, “*No, porque realmente si sería un concurso de belleza, entonces como que si estuviéramos discriminando a las demás.* [No, because really if it were a beauty pageant, then it would be as if we were discriminating against the rest (of participants)]” (in-person interview). Thus, although *Rabín Ajaw* may technically classify as a competition with a resultant victor, its spirit remains convivial. In a direct comparison with other pageants that fit the mold of the Western, tiara-driven spectacles known as beauty pageants, another participant elucidated,

*Belleza no se refiere a nada de eso porque no estamos en otras competencias que hay en nuestra Guatemala. Aquí estamos viendo la capacidad y desarrollo de cada quien, no importando belleza, no importando conocimiento, no importando de que una sea más alta en estudio y otra más baja sino que estamos viendo humildad de corazón, humildad de lo que hemos visto en su municipio.* [Beauty does not refer to any of that because we are not in other competitions that are in our Guatemala. Here we are seeing the ability and development of each person, regardless of beauty, regardless of knowledge, regardless of the fact that one is higher in her studies and another is lower, but rather we are seeing humility of the heart, humility of what we have seen in her municipality.]” (in-person interview).

Interestingly enough, not only do contestants ignore physical beauty throughout the event, but there seems to be a lack of aggressive competition regarding capacities that the pageant *does* assess, like cultural knowledge. Rather, the transmission of cultural knowledge and the recognition of custom variations among Mayas in Guatemala reign supreme at *Rabín Ajaw*.

### 5.2.2 If Not Beauty, What Then?

The assorted responses regarding *Rabín Ajaw*'s status as a beauty pageant or something entirely different indicated that the event did not fit into the parameters of a traditional, Western-style beauty pageant. Granted, many of the participants affirmed that this ultimate part of the National Folklore Festival is full of beauty, but only of the sort that can withstand qualification. That is, the pageant measured beauty, but only beauty with an asterisk – the beauty of Maya culture, the beauty of transmitting cultural knowledge among the various Maya groups in Guatemala, and so on. Several of the contestant responses pointed to elements of importance like the conviviality among Maya women there, elements which are deserving of further analysis, but only after the actual definition and purpose of the event is firmly established. Throughout my field research in 2016 and 2018 I asked each interviewee to describe *Rabín Ajaw* to someone unfamiliar with the contest in order to identify its defining features. Of course, it is possible that respondents may have repeated press-worthy soundbites that they picked up along their week-long stay in Cobán. Even so, however, identifying similarities and differences, both among the contestants and as the answers of the contestants may differ from those of the organizer and founder, are enlightening.

In his description of *Rabín Ajaw* to someone unfamiliar with the event, the organizer reported:

*Sí, Rabín Ajaw es el Festival Folclórico Nacional, se basa en la reunión de todos los grupos sociales de origen Maya para elegir a una señorita que se denomina Rabín Ajaw, la hija del Rey. Es una manera que nosotros que valoramos el valor de la mujer. También estamos fortaleciendo los distintos valores culturales de nuestra cultura, valga la redundancia, ese es uno de los objetivos. Sin embargo, buscamos también la unión de los cuatro pueblos existentes en Guatemala: Maya, Calígula, Xinca y el no indígena, en una forma equitativa para que podamos vivir en armonía, en una multiculturalidad,*



*formar una interculturalidad donde podamos compartir nuestros valores y fortalecerlos para que no desaparezca nuestra cultura milenaria. Eso es uno de los objetivos que busca el Festival Folclórico Nacional.* [Yes, *Rabín Ajaw* is the National Folklore Festival, based on the reunion of all social groups of Maya origin to elect a young woman that is referred to as *Rabín Ajaw*, the Daughter of the King. It is a way that we appreciate women's value. We are also strengthening the distinct cultural values of our culture, it's worth the redundancy, that is one of the objectives. However, we are also looking for the union of the four existent communities of Guatemala: *Maya, Calígula, Xinca*, and the non-indigenous in an equitable way so that we can live in harmony, in multiculturalism, to form an interculturalism where we can share our values and strengthen them so that our thousand-year-old culture does not disappear. That is one of the objectives the National Folklore Festival seeks.] (in-person interview).

Understandably, the organizer situates *Rabín Ajaw* within the broader National Folklore Festival, and the organizer's mentions of multiculturalism and harmonious interculturalism among Guatemala's distinct indigenous and non-indigenous groups was unsurprising. Prior to conducting any field research, I knew that liberal multiculturalism was a strong social force in twenty-first century Guatemala as a whole, but particularly salient in cultural celebration events like *Rabín Ajaw*. Efforts to maintain and strengthen Mayan culture to prevent its disappearance were in line with the pageant founder's espoused goals and what I had previously learned about the event. Despite the lack of explicit mention of coexistence in this response, the organizer still gestures towards the concept when mentioning the sharing and strengthening of cultural values among the four social groups in Guatemala.

The summer of 2018 celebrated the 50-year anniversary of *Rabín Ajaw*, and to honor this significance, Marco Aurelio Alonzo, the original founder of the event, attended. Luckily, I was able to obtain an interview with him and asked him about the history of *Rabín Ajaw*, which he confirmed arose out of his primary creation - the National Folklore Festival. The Folklore Festival, Alonzo explained, was established in honor of the Patron Saint of Cobán: *Santo Domingo de Guzmán*. In 1969, with the help and collaboration of Cobán's *Santo Domingo de Guzmán cofradías*, Alonzo organized the first event of the Folklore Festival: a presentation and

walk from the central park of Cobán to the Verapaz stadium. The goal, Alonzo informed me, was to “...*dar a conocer al pueblo indígena de Alta Verapaz y de Guatemala su riqueza cultural...*[...to make known the indigenous community of Alta Verapaz and the cultural richness of Guatemala...]” (in-person interview). From there, Alonzo spoke with all of the municipal mayors in the department of Alta Verapaz, requesting their help to bring the regional dances of each municipality for a presentation in the Verapaz stadium. Most of the approximately 35,000 spectators were indigenous, including Mayas dedicated to the *cofradía* of *Santo Domingo de Guzmán* and other *cofradías* in Cobán. Alonzo describes the scene as an open party for everyone, preceded the night before by the first cultural night hosted at the *Instituto Nacional de la Juventud* [National Youth Institute] (in-person interview).

During this first cultural night, the first young Maya woman was elected, then known as the *Reina Indígena de Cobán* [Indigenous Queen of Cobán], but elected on the same premises and motives as those in action at *Rabín Ajaw* today: “...*[el] requisito indispensable que las candidatas se supieran hablar su propio idioma, [el] requisito indispensable que todas las candidatas se representaba con el traje autóctono, lo más auténtico posible. En otro requisito era que aprendieran y tuvieran ya ideas de sus antiguas costumbres ancestrales de los Mayas contadas por sus abuelos o por sus papas...* [(the) indispensable requirement that the candidates knew their own language, (the) indispensable requirement that all of the candidates were represented by their native dress, the most authentic possible. Another requirement was that they learned and had ideas of their old, ancestral customs of the Mayas told by their grandparents or their parents...]” (in-person interview). From that first instantiation of cultural enrichment onward, the competition took place each year at the end of July in Alta Verapaz and in the rest of Guatemala, with each municipality conducting their own local election in order to come and

present at the final event: *Rabín Ajaw*. Alonzo admits that these indigenous women worked more than he anticipated, learning how to speak in public, learning their constitutional rights as women, and even eventually occupying important political positions such as mayor – a source of great satisfaction for him (in-person interview).

Certainly, these accounts of the pageant from the founder himself and a current-day organizer are valuable in understanding the event as a whole, but such understanding is incomplete without the perspectives of the young women participants. As with my interviews with the founder and organizer, I approached the definition of *Rabín Ajaw* openly, without guiding the contestants' responses in any way. Each contestant with whom I spoke defined *Rabín Ajaw* slightly differently, but with many common threads throughout their collective answers, particularly emphasizing the peaceful and friendly coexistence of contestants and the cultural education they both gave to and received from the other participants at the event. One contestant explained *Rabín Ajaw* in terms of its structure of events within the National Folklore Festival. She informed me that though she did not know everything about it, she knew it was the election of the “Daughter of the King,” but refrained from speaking about the event in competitive terms, explaining: “...*la idea es de que nos reunamos todas las hermanas Mayas de diferentes pueblos, de diferentes idiomas para poder venir a convivir experiencias, poder aprender otros idiomas y poder convivir, compartir trajes.* [...the idea is that all of us Maya sisters of different towns meet, of different languages to be able to come and experience things together, to be able to learn other languages and to be able to coexist, to share (styles of) traditional dress.]” (in-person interview). Here, it is not the Maya women's similarities that are stressed, but their differences. In this quote, the contestant emphasizes the educational potential of a gathering of young Maya women so different from one another. Not only can this diverse

group of contestants share their regional and local variations of *traje* and inform themselves about the different indigenous languages spoken throughout the broader Maya population, but they are able to coexist and experience new things together as Maya sisters.

As this contestant's explanation of *Rabín Ajaw* continued, she emphasized the specific ways in which the participants were able to coexist and learn together. For instance, she discussed the mask ceremony preceding the delivery of speeches at which I met her:

*Sí, hubo un día eso de la Velada de las Máscaras. Esa actividad estuvo tan bonita que cualquiera de las hermanas, podíamos cambiar el traje, usar otro traje de ellas. Esa actividad me gustó bastante, ellas pueden utilizar nuestro traje. Entonces nos miramos diferentes con los trajes de las hermanas Mayas... Sí, entonces así está lo que es Rabín Ajaw, venir a compartir, a llevar experiencia y también llevar grandes experiencias de los pueblos que venimos a representar. [Yes, there was that day of the Evening of the Masks. That activity was so beautiful that any of the sisters, we were able to change traditional dress, use another traditional dress of theirs (the contestants). I liked that activity a lot. They were able to use our authentic dress. So, we looked at ourselves differently with the authentic dress of our Maya sisters... Yes, so that is what *Rabín Ajaw* is like, to come to share, to have experiences and also to bring great experiences to the towns that we come from to represent.]* (in-person interview).

Thus, although the mention of coexisting together may be a common strand throughout many interviewees' descriptions of *Rabín Ajaw*, it seems to be a large part of the purpose of the whole National Folklore Festival. That is, even if the term coexistence does not arise organically in the minds of contestants and is a learned term from their experience at *Rabín Ajaw*, the structure of the events ultimately comprising the pageant as a whole facilitate that experiential reality in the contestants. Learning the different customs and understanding the symbolism in items of material culture from different "Maya sisters" may happen naturally, but it also is encouraged through formally organized activities like exchanging forms of traditional dress.



**Figure 6** *Rabín Ajaw* candidates learning about each others' customs

Another young woman participating in *Rabín Ajaw* I asked to describe the event to someone unfamiliar with it responded, “*El evento es muy bonito. Es donde se conviven con diversas culturas, diversos idiomas y al ver una gran diversidad de colores... y una gran diversidad de sonrisa, de rostros, de señoritas que tienen el amor y el mismo cariño a nuestra patria Guatemala.* [The event is very beautiful. It is where diverse cultures and languages coexist, and to see a great diversity of colors...and a great diversity of smiles, of faces, of young women that have the love and the same affection for our homeland Guatemala.]” (in-person interview). Although this response does mention the coexistence of distinct sectors of Maya culture in Guatemala, I am not inclined to label it insincere or motivated by any sort of potential pageant propaganda. Rather, the mention of coexistence and diverse young women getting along comes with the mention of the diversity of their faces and smiles – a seemingly innocent comment that I feel moderately safeguards the participant’s response from suspicion of deception.

Indeed, the same contestant later reported the transmission of knowledge and experiences as a highlight of her experience in the event: “*Ser Rabín Ajaw es algo elegante, es donde uno obtiene grandes experiencias, grandes conocimientos, no sólo de la cultura sino de la riqueza que tiene nuestro país de Guatemala.* [To be *Rabín Ajaw* is something elegant. It is where one obtains great experiences, great knowledge, not only of the culture but of the richness that our great country Guatemala has.]” (in-person interview). To be clear, the spread of knowledge and sharing of local customs and traditions that were repeatedly emphasized in contestant responses were not experiences stressed for the public audience at any of the National Folklore Festival’s events; rather, the cultural education so celebrated was that of the contestants themselves. Such an educational focus among the young Maya women participating revealed a potentially agentic

space, but before drawing any conclusions, my research required further dialogue with the *Rabín Ajaw* contestants.

Overall, many of my interviewees expressed delight at their proclaimed defining purpose of *Rabín Ajaw* – cultural education. Reinforcing other young women’s denials of *Rabín Ajaw*’s beauty pageant status, one contestant explained that the contestants’ participation was simply that, participation. These young Maya women congregated *to participate* in the National Folklore Festival, *not to compete* in it. Replying to my invitation to describe the event, this contestant enlightened:

*Es una convivencia entre diferentes culturas que venimos a participar, no a concursar sino a participar y convivir diferentes etapas, de las cuales vamos conociendo diferentes personas que venimos de departamentos. Venimos de diferentes departamentos, pero nos separamos y vamos conociendo mucho más. Vamos conociendo cuáles son sus costumbres, sus tradiciones, conviviendo diferente. Esa es una alegría.* [It is a coexistence among different cultures for which we come to participate, not to compete but to participate and coexist in different stages, through which we meet different people that came from different departments. We came from different departments, but we separate ourselves and get to know much more. We get to know what their customs are, their traditions, coexisting differently. That is a joy.] (in-person interview).

Chapter Two of this dissertation considered the obstacles to Mayanist organization, including the barriers created by multiple indigenous languages throughout Guatemala and the dividing force of the nation’s topography. Certainly, the obstacles to Mayanist organization across the nation similarly contribute to the dearth of knowledge regarding local cultural variations across the Mayan community<sup>26</sup> as a whole. The joy described by this *Rabín Ajaw* contestant is rooted in

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<sup>26</sup> I cautiously use the term “Mayan community” here to indicate the Maya population in Guatemala, not necessarily united by Mayanist aims. In utilizing this term, I remain aware that referring to the various and distinct local communities of Guatemalan Mayas as one community can be egregious, as in the arbitrary unification of “Third World Women” that Chandra Mohanty critiques (see Chapter 3 of this thesis). My use of “community” to describe this diverse population is simply to highlight the local variance among Maya groups when considered together as a “community.”

the sharing of different traditions and customs as they diverge among indigenous communities – traditions and customs that may never disseminate past their local instantiations were it not for a cultural event such as the National Folklore Festival.

Yet another contestant affirmed the above statements regarding the lack of competition and spread of cultural knowledge that underscore *Rabín Ajaw* as a whole. Some of the interviewee responses I obtained possessed an eloquence that could be useful in press communications, and for the skeptical reader, could be deemed coached or considered too over-practiced to express candor. While not ineloquent, this candidate's explanation of the event lacks the sound-bite quality exhibited in some other responses – a potential indicator of more sincerity arising from an ad hoc account:

*Rabín Ajaw es un evento ya declarado patrimonio intangible de Guatemala. Es una competencia pero muchos la toman como competencia, pero no tiene que ser así porque todas somos ahora 112 candidatas de las que estamos conviviendo con todas, o sea, estamos conociendo a personas que no conocíamos, culturas que no conocíamos. No teníamos conocimiento siendo nosotras representativas pero como a veces no nos podemos conocer, y éste es un evento en donde se presta para que todas convivamos y gracias a Dios hemos aprendido muchas cosas durante estos ya finalizando casi tres días. [Rabín Ajaw is an event already declared intangible heritage of Guatemala. It is a competition, but many take it as competition, but it does not have to be like that because all of us are now 112 candidates, of whom we are coexisting with everyone, or rather, we are meeting people we did not know, cultures that we did not know. We had no knowledge as representatives, but sometimes we cannot meet each other, and this is an event that lends itself to all of us coexisting and thank God we have learned many things during these already-ending, almost three days.] (in-person interview).*

Still, this contestant's description of *Rabín Ajaw* runs parallel to those coming from other participants, at least in a conceptual sense. She highlights the lack of competition in an event with an inherently potentially competitive structure, underscoring the importance of meeting other contestants and learning about their various cultures and customs that were previously foreign. Again, coexistence is mentioned, but within the context of explaining how only an event with such a structure of coexistence is able to facilitate these invaluable cultural



connections cited by *Rabín Ajaw* contestants.

Interestingly enough, throughout the sundry references to the cultural education so prominent at *Rabín Ajaw*, few interviewees explicitly mentioned the education of attendees like myself. One woman stated,

*...y creo que Rabín Ajaw es un gran evento en donde además de unas culturas que no son Maya también participa así como en su caso. Participan porque quieren saber más sobre lo que es cultura, tanto como guatemalteca porque también hay mesoamericano. Entonces, eso quiere decir que si hay mesoamericano eso se fomenta tanto en lo que es esta cultura. [...and I believe that Rabín Ajaw is a great event where cultures that are not Maya also participate, like in your case. They participate because they want to know more about what culture is, as much Guatemalan as it is Mesoamerican. So, that is to say that if there is Mesoamerican that is as much encouraged as what is this culture.] (in-person interview).*

That my mere attendance was labeled participation in the event may demonstrate a sense of inclusivity present throughout the festival, but certainly demonstrates the importance of cultural education. After all, in a pageant that celebrates the sharing of cultural elements such as dance and dress among members of the same ethnic group, it makes sense for its participants to value the educational participation of cultural “outsiders.” Yet, at least in this quote, placing value upon “outside” participation does not necessarily signal that the event is externally oriented or aimed at educating others. However, this quote reveals the participant’s awareness of an external gaze; though the event’s focus is internal, its structure necessarily involves external non-Mayas – a factor that adds an additional level of interest and meaning.

Images of peaceful coexistence and cultural education may initially read as idyllic, bordering on naïve, but some contestants with whom I spoke also acknowledged the past and present oppression of Maya women in Guatemala. For example, one young woman immediately referenced the lack of sociopolitical rights possessed by Maya women in the past when I asked her to define the event’s purpose:

*El propósito es porque dicen que es la hija del rey o la representante de la mujer indígena a nivel nacional porque anteriormente por ser mayas nos discriminaban tanto, entonces no había voz y voto de la mujer indígena. El propósito de este evento es luchar para que nosotras como mujeres mayas nos reconozcan y que también nos den la oportunidad de participar en lo que es la política, económico, social y también en lo que es la cultura para que tengamos incidencia porque anteriormente no se tenía. Ése es el mayor propósito y por eso es un cargo a nivel nacional y también internacional para ir a representar a las mujeres mayas en otros países. [The purpose is because they say that she is the Daughter of the King, or the representative of the indigenous woman at the national level because previously they discriminated against us so much for being Mayas, so there was no voice or vote for the indigenous woman. The purpose of this event is to fight so that they recognize us as Maya women and that they also give us the opportunity to participate in what is political, economic, social, and also in what is cultural so that we have an impact, because previously that was not had. That is the greatest purpose and that is why it is a national and international position to go to represent Maya women in other countries.] (in-person interview).*

Undoubtedly, this quote reads as far from naïve. While also giving credence to the simple goal of cultural representation, this contestant wisely connects that representation to sociopolitical representation and its consequent rights in Guatemalan society. Indigenous people, and indigenous women more specifically, suffered great discrimination in the past – strong remnants of which are still in play today – and as a result, were accorded insufficient political rights by those non-indigenous people in power. The Maya woman’s political voice remained unheard, her social voice disrespected, her economic voice smothered, and her cultural voice appropriated by those within and without her ethno-cultural group. By garnering national and international respect, or at least attention, this candidate expresses hope that *Rabín Ajaw* will enable indigenous women to have an impact in society. Of course, from this response, the impact that the candidate desires persists undefined.

Perhaps one such impact that indigenous women participating in *Rabín Ajaw* can have is the strengthening of their own culture(s). In the spirit of the cultural education so frequently mentioned in contestant interviews, one participant articulated that the goal of the event was to let others know about their cultures, customs, and traditions due to the daily erosion of Maya

culture. This contestant failed to specify whether the cultural education she mentioned was intra-group focused, as in the education of diverse local customs among Maya contestants that many others discussed, or focused on a broader Guatemalan or international audience. Still, given this goal, she explained: “*Entonces, es muy necesario hacer actividades pluriculturales, interculturales para poder seguir luchando con nuestra cultura que no se pierda.* [So, it is very necessary to do pluricultural, intercultural activities to be able to continue fighting so that our culture is not lost.]” (in-person interview).

Other contestants similarly confirmed the need to preserve and strengthen an ever-disappearing Mayan culture. Unambiguously declaring *Rabín Ajaw*’s purpose as cultural salvation and preservation, one contestant explained the goal of the National Folklore Festival and pageant as:

*...poder rescatar nuestra identidad, de todo lo que nos hace únicos, de todas las culturas y las tradiciones de los diferentes municipios y departamentos que hoy se reúnen aproximadamente más de 110 candidatas. Entonces éste es el objetivo, fortalecer a través de estos eventos lo que es nuestra cultura.* [...to be able to rescue our identity, of everything that makes us unique, of all of the cultures and the traditions of the different municipalities and departments that today united approximately more than 110 candidates. So, this is the objective, to strengthen through these events that which is our culture.] (in-person interview).

Here, the contestant alludes to the weakening and/or disappearance of elements of Maya culture, because a goal of rescuing an identity necessarily signals its previous loss. While this contestant does not directly point to discrimination against members of her ethnic group, she does highlight the significance of and need to rescue the unique variety of cultural elements that brought over 110 participants together. Another contestant accentuates these “unique cultural elements” in her definition of the event and its purposes, delineating that it operates, “... *para convivir, para enaltecer nuestra vestimenta, nuestra forma de pensar, nuestro idioma, que es lo más importante para nosotros, nuestras costumbres y tradiciones, nuestra forma de bailar, de comer y todo.*

[...in order to coexist, to exalt our clothing, our form of thinking, our language, which is the most important thing for us, our customs and traditions, our form of dancing, of eating, and everything.]” (in-person interview). Upon first glance, this list of cultural elements seems innocent enough, but features such as traditional Maya dress are rife with past contention. Maya women, as upholders of culture, have suffered discrimination and oppression to the point of genocide over cultural markers like *traje*. Of course, Maya men suffered discrimination and oppression as well, but the tendency for Maya women to don overt markers of culture like *traje* while Maya men tend to wear more Westernized clothing, potentially leaving their ethnicity ambiguous. Thus, the preservation and honoring of seemingly inconsequential things like dress, language, and food is of the utmost consequence, particularly for those involved.

### 5.2.3 Traje

One would certainly be remiss if in investigating *Rabín Ajaw* he or she neglected to inquire about the contestants’ traditional dress. Unquestionably, the display of over 100 regional variations of colorful, authentic dress was a core part of the National Folklore Festival spectacle, and an element of *Rabín Ajaw* in which the young women participating appeared to take great pride. Although I had seen several versions of *traje* both during my time in Guatemala before attending the pageant and in scholarly research about the event, the vibrancy of so many weaving styles and intricate designs displayed side by side by the pageant’s aspirants was impactful. Learning a bit more about the significance and symbolism imbued in each design rendered some

Maya women's decision to continue wearing *traje* despite the discrimination so much more powerful to me as a researcher and a person.

One contestant with whom I spoke explained the meaning of each feature of her ceremonial *traje*. When asked what the importance of *traje* is to the pageant, she responded:

*El traje es muy importante porque si nos damos cuenta hay una gran diversidad y tienen diferentes significados, si se da cuenta con nuestros trajes la cinta tiene—significa la autoridad de la mujer y el huipil, cómo es de color rojo es la sangre que corre en nuestro cuerpo y el perraje es de color rojo y blanco significa igual. El rojo es la sangre que corre y el blanco es la paz, y la honestidad de una persona. [The traje is very important because if we realize there is a great diversity and they have different meanings, if one realizes that with our trajes the belt has—means the authority of the woman and the huipil<sup>27</sup>, how it is the color red is the blood that runs in our body and the red and white perraje means something too. The red is the blood that runs and the white is the peace and the honesty of a person.] (in-person interview).*

In essence, this contestant described the physical embodiment of her specific community's cultural values through *traje*. Thus, each form of *traje* was not just a representation of the cultural art of weaving and embroidery so prominent in Maya culture, not just an art form and tradition, but a representation of certain parts of the Maya community's worldview and cosmovision.

Another contestant affirmed the importance of local identification for Maya communities, part of which can be done, to an extent, through *traje*. As discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis, each local community tends to have particular styles of *traje*, though they have changed through the years. Due to developments in technology, transportation, and communication, the once highly divided "Maya community" started to blur the lines of local differences in dress, often borrowing styles from other areas of Guatemala – sometimes for efficiency and ease of

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<sup>27</sup> Here I refrain from trying to translate the specific names of each part of this woman's *traje* [traditional dress] so as to not over-simplify or white wash something so culturally specific and significant.

obtainment, other times for aesthetic preference. When I spoke with this young woman, I asked her to clarify the level of importance of *traje* in *Rabín Ajaw*. Was it one significant element among many, or the most important of all? She responded,

*Pues, eso sería lo más importante ya que cuando a una la miran entonces uno mira el traje y ya uno conoce, “Ah, ese es de tal municipio o es de tal aldea.” En cambio si uno se pusiera de otro traje no lo reconocería. Entonces se considera que el principal, el traje ya que puedes visualizar desde que uno ve a la persona de que traje está portando la señorita.* [Well, that would be the most important because when they look at one (woman) then one looks at the *traje* and one already knows, “Ah, that is from this municipality or that village.” Or, if one were to put on another *traje*, they would not recognize it. So, it is considered the main thing, the *traje* that you can already visualize since one looks at the person, at what *traje* the young woman is wearing.] (in-person interview).

The importance of *traje* for this woman was linked to a form of local identity. Since different Maya communities possess different styles of traditional dress, one could hypothetically identify where a Maya woman was from simply based on the design of her *traje*. Granted, the hybridization of traditional dress engendered throughout time by new weaving material availability and the aforementioned advances in technology, transportation, and communication do render this task more difficult.

With such exquisitely detailed *trajes* on display, I was reminded of the criticism that these traditional forms of dress do not reflect what Maya women wear each day or the changes in weaving patterns throughout time. I asked contestants whether they donned this garb on a daily basis. Many answered simply that, yes, they wore *traje* every day. Others clarified that they mixed in other elements of clothing with traditional *huipiles* or *cortes*, or that they wore *traje*, but nothing quite as intricate as the ceremonial *traje* featured throughout the National Folklore Festival. One pageant hopeful explained, “*Sí llevo [traje]. Sólo que éste es el más artístico. El que usamos es un poco moderno.* [Yes, I wear it (*traje*). It is only that this is the most artistic. The one we use is a little modern.]” (in-person interview).



**Figure 7 Candidates showcasing their more "artistic" traje**

Another clarified contestant clarified,

*Sí, pues principalmente digamos lo que es el huipil, lógicamente no lo vamos a llevar. Pues, es algo más, algo más moderno, pero sí, la idea es tenerlo siempre, no perderlo. Como de mi persona, yo no llevo el huipil porque ahorita nos estamos modernizando, verdad, la tecnología, entonces uno como señorita se da cuenta de todos y si por este huipil se van a reír de ti, si vas a ponerte huipil, van a empezar a burlarse. Entonces, tampoco uno tiene que avergonzarse, pero yo no llevo el huipil conmigo todos los días porque eso es ceremonial, pero ya lo moderno sí. A veces llevo mi corte rojo con otra, o mi huipil con otro corte, así siempre llevo mi traje... [Yes, well mainly let's say that that which is the huipil, logically we aren't going to wear it. Well, it's something else, something more modern, but yes, the idea is to always have it (traje), to not lose it. As*

for me, I do not wear the *huipil* because right now we are modernizing, right, the technology, so one as a young woman takes note of all of them and if for this *huipil* they are going to laugh at you, if you are going to put on the *huipil*, they are going to begin to make fun of you. So, one doesn't have to be ashamed either, but I don't wear the *huipil* every day because that is ceremonial, but the modern one, yes. Sometimes I wear my red *corte* with another one, or my *huipil* with another *corte*, so in that way I always wear my *traje*...] (in-person interview).

This contestant's comment is significant for two reasons. First, she confirms that she refrains from wearing the fancy ceremonial *traje* worn at *Rabín Ajaw* in her daily life and that she utilizes more modern styles or a mixture of styles. Second, she mentions the social repercussions for wearing *traje* and the impact they have on her decision to wear *traje* or not. If she were made fun of for wearing a particular *huipil*, for instance, she would substitute it for something else or another style of *huipil*. That there are social consequences for electing to wear traditional dress even in current day Guatemala demonstrates how deeply ingrained anti-indigenous bias is throughout the nation. Discrimination against Mayas was not a phenomenon isolated to the civil war. Rather, even the simple choice to use traditional dress remains impactful in Maya women's lives due to oppression, be it discursive or otherwise.

Despite the potentially negative consequences of wearing *traje*, some contestants were firm about the importance of preserving the traditions of their ancestors. Explaining the decline in Maya use of *traje* in her municipality, one contestant advocated the strengthening of this particular tradition, explaining, "*Realmente en el municipio al que yo represento, lamentablemente el traje se ha perdido muchísimo, entonces lo que nosotros pretendemos ahora es fortalecer eso y que nuestros trajes se siguen usando, que ya no se pierda, que lo vuelvan a usar como lo usaban anteriormente.* [Really in the municipality that I represent, unfortunately *traje* has been lost a lot, so what we are trying to do now is strengthen that and that our *trajes* continue being used, so that it (*traje*) is not lost, so that they return to using it like it was used



previously.]” (in-person interview). Though some Maya women may not adhere completely to the use of the traditional form of ceremonial *traje* exhibited at *Rabín Ajaw* in their daily lives, contestants expressed a desire to preserve those traditions of their elders before they disappeared forever.

The creation and maintenance of interpersonal connections among Mayas is necessary to prevent the eternal disappearance of Mayan cultural customs like the use of *traje*. Transcripts of my interviews with pageant contestants and the founder of the event reveal the importance of intracultural exchange among Guatemala’s disparate Maya communities to combat the dilution of emblems of Maya culture, particularly the regionally distinct *traje típico*. Another contestant explained how this ceremonial garb has plentiful cultural symbolism and connection to an ancestral past:

*Representa variedades porque, por ejemplo la de Tecpan, Guatemala, ese traje representa de nuestros ancestrales pasados porque ahí fue la primera capital y el blanco representa la pureza de la mujer indígena, el listón rojo representa la sangre que recorre por nuestras venas porque somos todos hermanos mayas, y sobre el huipil representa que antes no existían los rebozos, simplemente sobre el huipil ellos conservaban a los bebés. La faja es el sustento de la mujer indígena. El corte representa que la mujer no está sola sino que está constituida por varias partes. También como lo es el arete que representa la belleza de la mujer indígena, los collares representan los huesillos pequeños de los hermanos mayas y que estamos unidos por una sola red. Es muy importante porque a través de eso se va transmitiendo de generación en generación. Las personas nuevas que están ahora quieren ser otra copia de otras culturas, en cambio si existiera tan solo que es eso se transmitiría de generación en generación. [It (*traje*) represents varieties because, for example, that of Tecpan, Guatemala, that *traje* represents our past ancestors because there was the first capital and the white represents the purity of the indigenous woman, the red ribbon represents the blood that runs through our veins because we are all Maya brothers, and the *huipil* represents that before there weren’t shawls, they simply kept the babies on the *huipil*. The sash is the livelihood of the indigenous woman. The *corte* represents that the woman is not alone, but that she is constituted by various parts. Also the earring that represents the beauty of the indigenous woman, the necklaces represent the small bones of Maya brothers and that we are united by a single network. It is very important because through that (network) it is transmitted generation to generation. The new people now want to be another copy of other cultures, but if only it (*traje*) existed that it would be passed down from generation to generation.] (in-person interview).*

In both this specific description and others, the symbolism imbued in *traje* reflects Maya cosmology overall, but with particular emphasis on Maya women. The sibling-like network among Mayas this candidate describes may be true of both genders, but the imbalance in both sociopolitical treatment as well as cultural representation through the actual use of *traje* in women's quotidian lives makes the sisterhood bond all the more powerful.

Current day contestants of *Rabín Ajaw* are not necessarily harkening back to a mythical, pre-Columbian past, but often to the temporally-bound era of their grandparents. Criticisms regarding the fixed temporality of the *traje típico* ignore the fact that pageant contestants today strive to preserve the regionally-distinct ceremonial dress from the era of their grandparents prior to the civil war and genocide. Indeed, weaving traditions have shifted, with most *traje* consisting of pan-Mayan elements that are not regionally-bound in design or weaving material. Moreover, most Maya women combine pan-Mayan weaving with contemporary, Western styles as suits their daily needs. The ceremonial *traje* on show at *Rabín Ajaw* serves as material culture that not only highlights the importance of regional distinctions within the broad pan-Mayan community, but also stands as a physical marker for various elements of Maya cosmology represented in weaving details. Essentially, *traje* functions as a sort of text, which if read, reveals innumerable cultural experiences and knowledge. To compete in the pageant, contestants must prepare by consulting elders in their communities to brush up on the aforementioned cosmology, regional traditions, and indigenous language expertise.

#### 5.2.4 On Language

Arguably, the most important portion of the pageant is the contestants' speeches, which, blood quantum notwithstanding, must be delivered in both Spanish and their indigenous language. The speech is held to reflect contestants' indigenous pride and knowledge of their culture—all aimed at preserving authentic Mayan culture (Schackt 279). While seemingly innocent, this portion of the competition is actually quite problematic. In reality, "...most candidates are rather untypical representatives of their culture, gender and age group: few are 'authentic' in the sense of being peasant girls from the rural zones of their townships. Village girls rarely complete primary school and will as a rule marry at an early age" (Schackt 280). Education levels in particular expose how atypical contestants are. While some contestants are university students, most indigenous girls do not finish primary school and over ninety percent indigenous Guatemalan women are not literate (McAllister 114). My fieldwork affirmed the fact that *Rabín Ajaw* contestants were, as a whole, more educated than their everyday Maya counterparts. Most of the young women I spoke to confirmed that they were either students, teachers, or professionals of some kind.

Despite the atypicality of *Rabín Ajaw* contestants' education levels and bilingual language abilities in comparison to other Maya women, the contestants stressed the importance of bilingual education to foster communication *among Maya women*, who may speak one of the sundry indigenous languages prevalent in Guatemala. In so doing, the contestants were able to access and distribute information that monolingual Maya women in their communities may need. Furthermore, the contestants' bilingual ability cultivates intracultural communication among Maya women at the pageant, regardless of mother tongue. Contestant speeches about hot-button

issues such as the need for Maya women to exercise their right to vote, the importance of protecting the environment, or resisting gender discrimination and interpersonal violence were able to resonate with everyone in attendance due to a shared fluency in Spanish, and their respective home communities due to a shared fluency in their indigenous language.

As noted in Chapter Two of this dissertation, the “Mayan community” retains mixed opinions about the need for bilingual education for the indigenous citizens of Guatemala. On the one hand, educational instruction in both Spanish and the indigenous language of the area in question both facilitates communication of all forms and serves as a method of cultural preservation. Moreover, for those with Mayanist inclinations, bilingual advocacy is one part of collective efforts to unify Guatemalan Mayas. Not only does language constitute a cultural element in and of itself, but language shapes and reflects cultural perspectives and cosmovisions. Yet, on the other hand, some see the desire for educational instruction in indigenous languages to be a contributing factor to the poverty and isolation facing the nation’s Maya population (Bastos 159). In their eyes, if the Spanish language dominates the majority of Guatemalan society, particularly the sector of society deemed to be modern and progressive, then the promotion and use of indigenous language must be a factor in their inferior sociopolitical status.

While the National Folklore Festival (and *Rabín Ajaw*) espouses neither allegiance to nor rejection of Mayanist aims, I found it essential to my project to ask contestants their opinion regarding the significance of bilingualism. Of course, it is important to acknowledge that the event does possess a bilingual structure – with announcements and speeches made in both Spanish and some of the indigenous languages most spoken throughout Guatemala. Given that structure, it is possible that some contestants might feel it necessary to express support for bilingualism in general. Still, in the spirit of presenting a dialogue with the contestants to

prevent inaccurate or paternalistic analyses given my positionality as a white, North American researcher, I am compelled to present the findings of our conversations.



**Figure 8 The incense-filled room and stage where the 2018 speeches were held**

When I inquired as to how contestants prepared for the pageant, a couple women specifically indicated the need to practice and refine their skills in the indigenous language of their ancestors and municipality. One contestant mentioned the primacy of language in her preparations for the event when I asked her how she equipped herself: “*En primer lugar, practicar el idioma. Me ayudaron varias personas para poder realizar un discurso ya que tiene*

*que ser un discurso muy bien realizado...* [In the first place, practice the language. Various people helped me to be able to carry out a speech that has to be a very well-made speech...]" (in-person interview). Similarly, another young woman told me she got ready by, "*Pues, leyendo, investigando, practicando siempre los discursos, tomando el tiempo, pero más que todo, leyendo porque eso es lo que lo ayuda a uno para tener una mejor dicción.*" [Well, reading, researching, always practicing the speeches, taking the time, but more than anything, reading because that is what helps one to have a better diction.]" (in-person interview). In this quote, the contestant refrains from specifying if she sought better diction in Spanish or her particular indigenous language, but since the speeches were always delivered in both languages, it is safe to assume that her efforts to read and improve her diction were equally devoted to the two languages in question.



**Figure 9 Audience, primarily contestants, at the 2018 speeches**

In light of such responses as those above regarding the need to prepare and practice their bilingual skills, I wondered how frequently these women spoke an indigenous language in their normal lives. I asked one contestant whether she actually did speak her particular indigenous language (*Kaqchikel*) in daily life, to which she responded:

*Hablo en kaqchikel, pero no lo hablo 100%. Curiosamente mis papás no me enseñaron desde pequeña, pero ahora estoy aprendiendo con el tiempo y también estoy ahora en un grupo organización de todo eso, en dónde estamos aprendiendo a donde varios jóvenes quieren aprender. Entonces, me integré con ellos y estamos superándonos cada día. Ya que mis papás pueden hablar, entonces con ellos practicamos, ya que dicen que para aprender en la práctica necesitamos estudiar. [I speak in *Kaqchikel*, but I don't speak 100%. Curiously, my parents did not teach me from when I was little, but now I am learning with time and I am also in a group organization of all of that, in which we are learning, where many young people want to learn. So, I joined with them and we are overcoming each day. As my parents can speak, we practice with them, since they say that to learn in practice we need to study.] (in-person interview).*

Accordingly, it is accurate to declare that not all contestants at *Rabín Ajaw* grew up bilingual, whether by coincidence, or perhaps by family preference. Still, the women with whom I spoke seemed to demonstrate a strong interest, if not a passion, for being bilingual and the community benefits such a skillset could bring.

In all of my interactions with the pageant aspirants, I strove to avoid asking leading questions; instead, I aimed to ask questions that provoked natural responses. Nevertheless, I did ask more direct questions about bilingualism as it was a topic that arose effortlessly due to the event's structure and bilingual speeches. When asked whether being bilingual was important to her as an individual, one contestant responded in the collective plural, explaining, "...*lo bilingüe para nosotros es muy importante ya que ayudamos a la población, ayudamos a las mujeres para que puedan acceder a información. Por ejemplo, nosotras podemos ser traductoras, si la mujer no sabe hablar el idioma español. [...bilingualism for us is very important as we help the population, we help women so that they can access information. For example, we (women) are*

able to be translators, if the woman doesn't know how to speak Spanish.]" (in-person interview). Clearly, this contestant viewed her bilingual capacity as an advantage in the pursuit of educating and helping other Maya women who may not speak Spanish. In a similar sense, another contestant explained that being bilingual was an advantage to her personally, but also in understanding and transmitting information to others. In terms of the importance of being bilingual, she held, "*...es muy importante porque uno tiene muchas ventajas en lo laboral, en lo académico o en cualquier ámbito que uno se quiera desarrollar. Tiene sus ventajas porque a largo plazo nos beneficia y podemos entender de otras personas, de otras culturas y podemos compartirlo. [...it is very important because one has many advantages in work, in academics, or in whatever field that one wants to develop. It has its advantages because in the long term it benefits us and we can understand other people, other cultures, and we can share it.]*" (in-person interview). Being bilingual, for this woman, was useful in both the professional and personal spheres.

One contestant used those bilingual skills to establish a career in bilingual education, becoming a teacher at a bilingual, intercultural school. Although this contestant learned the indigenous language *Chuj* first in the home, she was dedicated to learning Spanish later in school. When I learned of her profession, I inquired whether being bilingual was important to her personally, and she told me that learning Spanish in addition to *Chuj* was very important simply because it was a means of communication, explaining,

*Si no sabríamos hablar el español o castellano, no nos podríamos comunicar con las demás culturas porque Guatemala es rico en cultura y por lo tanto hay muchos idiomas. Entonces, cada quien tiene su propio idioma sin la cual no nos entendemos o a través del español nos podemos intercambiar nuestras culturas, costumbres y tradiciones. [If we didn't learn to speak Spanish or Castellano, we wouldn't be able to communicate with the other cultures because Guatemala is rich in culture, and because of that there are many languages. So, each one has its own language, without which we wouldn't understand*



each other, or through Spanish we are able to exchange our cultures, customs, and traditions.] (in-person interview).

The politics of Spanish language dominance in Guatemala did not seem to factor into this young woman's view of bilingual education. Rather, Spanish was a tool used for communication, be it in general or among the various Mayan groups in Guatemala. Although she intimated the cultural importance of the various indigenous languages spoken throughout Guatemala, this contestant recognized that a shared knowledge of Spanish, albeit a colonially imposed language, was incredibly useful in the exchange of cultural elements throughout the "Maya community." Indeed, without the common linguistic thread of Spanish, the many distinct sectors of Mayas represented at *Rabín Ajaw* would be inherently prohibited from sharing their culture and experiences with others who did not speak their specific indigenous language, thus barring the cultural exchange so highly praised at the event and preventing the culturally educational coexistence that characterizes the National Folklore Festival as a whole.

Considering the primacy of bilingualism within the structure and values of the *Rabín Ajaw* event, it may seem as though the bilingual speeches delivered by each candidate could be an area inviting the exercise of agency. To an extent, they are. Indeed, Jon Schackt describes the socio-politically characterized speeches as one way in which contestants utilize agency by "...redefining the significance or profile of their Indian identity" as they "...emphasise [sic] their Maya (rather than Indian) identity and heritage to the point of condemning the folkloric paradigm on which the festival and pageant was founded" (270). Schackt recognizes that the fight for civil rights and cultural recognition by Mayanists is heavily dominated by men and presents *Rabín Ajaw* as an agentic space in which contestants are able to deliver speeches on social and political issues (270). In other words, although contestants acknowledge that the pageant has folkloric roots that treat Mayan culture as mythical folklore and present it in an

inauthentic way, they are able to use the speech portion of the event to authentically express their political viewpoints.

The speeches I witnessed at *Rabín Ajaw* covered a multitude of hot button issues, like the need for Maya women to vote, violence against women, and destruction of the natural environment in the contestants' communities. Although the format of speech delivery grants contestants some room for expression, the ways in which that expression is necessarily curtailed prevents me from characterizing their speeches as a way in which contestants truly exercise agency. In both my 2016 and 2018 fieldwork, I noticed that all of the candidate speeches hovered among a handful of concepts, learning through my conversations with the women present that they were given a list of topics from which they could choose the subject of their speech. Certainly, it would be difficult to approve the speeches of over 100 candidates each year to ensure that the content was appropriate to the cultural preservation aims of the pageant. Still, I found the list of topics to be limiting – a limitation that I soon learned was rather egregious.

My conversation with the reigning 2017-2018 *Rabín Ajaw* elect was incredibly enlightening. I discussed the speeches with her as we sat in a crowded room growing hazy with the wafting smoke of incense utilized in some candidates' speech presentations. Responding to my question about how the speech themes were elected, she answered:

*Bueno, en base a la problemática que se tiene en Guatemala porque si bien es cierto, aunque es un país multicultural, aunque es un país lleno de riquezas culturales, tradiciones, medio ambiente. Por ejemplo, la igualdad de género, no hay. A los hombres se les da más oportunidad y a las mujeres no, peor en las comunidades. A raíz de eso se plantea ese tema. Es difícil que sea igualdad de género. El medio ambiente, nosotros hemos visto que como Mayas, nuestras cosas nosotros las llevábamos en una canastita, en algo, verdad, sin utilizar mayor cosa. Hay una problemática que hay que darle solución. Por tercero, vamos a hablar sobre la política. ¿A qué nos referimos con política? Tenemos gobiernos corruptos. Tenemos gobiernos sin principios ni valores, y las señoritas hacen el llamado pero no les entra en la cabeza. Entonces por esas problemáticas nosotras damos a conocer esos temas.* [Well, based on the problems that Guatemala has because although it is true, although it is a multicultural country, although

it is a country full of cultural riches, traditions, environment. For example, gender equality, there is none. Men are given more opportunity and women are not, worse in (local) communities. As a result of that, that theme is brought up. It is difficult to have gender equality. The environment, we have seen that as Mayas, we carry our things in a basket, in something, right, without using a bigger thing. There is a problem that has to be addressed. Third, we are going to talk about politics. What do we mean by politics? We have corrupt governments. We have governments without principles or values, and the young women make the call, but it doesn't enter their heads. So, for these problems, we make those issues known.] (in-person interview).

The response of this “Daughter of the King” was simple enough – the themes elected addressed the social and political problems facing Maya women in Guatemala today.



**Figure 10** The 2017-2018 *Rabín Ajaw* elect

Yet, the reigning queen failed to tell me *how* exactly those themes were chosen, so I inquired further. Of course, bringing social ills and sources of injustice to the simultaneously literal and figurative stage of cultural appreciation is laudable, but in my quest to determine the way(s) in which contestants exercise agency at the event, I knew it was important to advance our discussion. Continuing, I asked her who exactly decided, to which she responded:

*Aquí hay un comité que es apoyado por instituciones, las cuales son del gobierno, también. Muchas veces nada más quieren el show. Aparentan mucho eso, y uno ha visto verdad. Soy un poco realista en ese sentido [...] Bueno, tenemos estos temas y ellos lo deciden. Hay 48 Rabines antes de mí. Sólo 3 de ellas participan para decir cuáles son los temas.* [Here there is a committee that is supported by institutions, which are from the government, too. Many times they want nothing more than the “show.” They pretend a lot, but one can see the truth. I am a little realistic in that sense. Well, we have these themes and they decide them. There are 48 *Rabines* before me. Only three of them participated to decide on the themes.] (in-person interview).

That governmental institutions desired a spectacle was unsurprising, particularly considering the nature of the liberal multicultural undercurrents guiding much of ethnic perception in contemporary Guatemalan society. If the government supports the National Folklore Festival in some way, they must seek return, perhaps in the form of a “show” provoked by contentious speech topics.

However, the most concerning element of this *Rabín*’s reply remains the lack of ownership that women directly involved in the event and its reputation possessed in determining the most pressing social and political issues for public discussion. In an event celebrating Maya culture, and its (sometimes involuntary) female upholders, it is both nonsensical and negligent that they should be excluded from such a dialogue. Their exclusion parallels the exclusion of Maya women in broader society and within the Mayanist indigenous rights movement – an exclusion that is coupled with both a “responsibility” to maintain Mayan culture and the appropriation of their image without permission. I asked the 2017-2018 queen her opinion on

the matter, and she answered matter-of-factly, “*Bueno, digo, ¿por qué se toman esas libertades, de ellos tomar esa decision? ¿Por qué no lo consultan con un pueblo, cuáles son sus necesidades o algo así? Están bien esos temas. Lo malo es que el gobierno no escucha. Invitémoslo, participemos, pero si los invitamos ni siquiera vienen.* [Well, I say, why are these liberties taken, of them making that decision? Why do they not consult with a village to find out what their needs are, or something like that? Those themes are good. The bad thing is that the government doesn’t listen. Let’s invite them, let’s participate, but if we invite them they don’t even come.] (in-person interview). Certainly, if these governmental institutions supporting the event truly cared about the injustices Maya women face, the ability to truly help them, discursively via speech topic freedom or otherwise, was readily available. Thus, I cannot declare the speech portion of the event a source of agency in which contestants could express their political thoughts. It may be, in part, but the firm grasp of the multicultural government on the endeavor prohibits truly free expression.

### **5.2.5 Tourism**

Prior to my fieldwork in 2016, I found it strange that a cultural contest modeled after a Western beauty pageant could draw so many young Maya participants. After all, young women who would be most likely to celebrate their indigenous roots and traditions seemed dissimilar to those that would be likely to take part in a spectacle praised in lip-service style by the neoliberal multicultural government and propped up by corporate sponsors. From her fieldwork, McAllister asserts that the pageant’s authenticity is undermined by corporate sponsors.

McAllister remembers, “Televisiete (a Guatemala City television station), Pollo Camero (a Guatemalan fast-food chain), and Pepsi-Cola got the biggest applause of the evening, far bigger than any of the queens” (115). Additionally, McAllister reported the questionable nature of the crowning ceremony, “The outgoing Rabín Ahau came out tearful, made-up, and teetering on four-inch heels (to universal disapproval) and relinquished the silver-and-jade crown to Soloma [the new winner]. Soloma’s rather pointed prize, a Spanish dictionary, was presented to her by the master of ceremonies” (116). Certainly, these assertions would be troubling to one seeking cultural authenticity at *Rabín Ajaw*, but is the pageant still the same as when McAllister encountered it? My field research encountered no high heels or pointed prizes like Spanish dictionaries. How could the participants of *Rabín Ajaw* truly exercise agency if they were presented as living-and-breathing “friendly natives” of the sort plastered on travel brochures?

I spoke with Marco Aurelio Alonzo, the founder of *Rabín Ajaw*, about the tourism aspect of the pageant. When I asked him how he would respond to criticism that the event was based on tourism, he spoke at length:

*Yo le puedo decir que la gente que tiene criterios así, nos enloquece el turismo, están muy equivocados. El turismo es una fuente de industria que ha ido creciendo [...] El turismo es una fuente de ingresos muy buena pero ninguna de las personas que participan en el festival folclórico, o sea, no son unas exhibicionistas. No están vendidas. Las que quieren trabajar pueden trabajar y todos los artesanos se han beneficiados, Cobán ha perdido mucho porque no se ha trabajado eso. Yo lo trabajé bien todo el festival folclórico. Cuando se realizaba en Cobán no había lugar para recibir turistas. Estaba lleno, lleno ésto y el turismo venía de jardineros, en los hoteles y las gasolineras, y en los comedores, y a los espectáculos, y le daba una gran imagen a Guatemala en el exterior. Entonces, el turismo siempre fue bueno. Nunca tuve yo un centavo ni de los comedores, ni las industrias, ni de nadie que me ayudara a realizar el festival folclórico porque no me dio tiempo de pedirle porque tenía que pedirle que llegaran a una fuente que estaba dando el dinero por tantas personas que vienen a ver y es una lástima porque es una fuente, una fuente de ingreso, tienden a dejar plata y es una plata que necesitamos todos. [I can tell you that the people who have criteria like that, that we are crazy about tourism, are very wrong. Tourism is a source of industry that has been growing (...) Tourism is a very good source of funds, but none of the people that participate in the folklore festival, that is, they aren't exhibitionists. They are not sold.*

Those who want to work can work and all of the artisans have benefitted. Cobán has lost a lot because they haven't worked on that. I worked well the whole folklore festival. When it was done in Cobán, there was no place to receive tourists. It was full, this full, and the tourism came from gardeners, in hotels and gas stations, and in eateries and at shows, and it gave a great image of Guatemala to the outside world. So, tourism was always good. I never had a cent from the eateries, or the industries, or from anyone who helped me make the folklore festival because I didn't have time to ask because I had to ask them to get a source that would give money so that so many people could come to see, and it's a shame because it's a source, a source of income. They tend to leave money and it's money we all need.] (in-person interview).

In Alonzo's estimation, then, tourism is more of a byproduct than a foundational motivator for *Rabín Ajaw*. Although the folklore festival and pageant did and still do draw some tourists who spend money at local establishments in Cobán, economic gain was far from the basis of the event's goals. Rather than reaping a personal financial benefit from funding sources, Alonzo and his contacts strove to find funding to include people in the event.

Though the founder's assessment of tourism's degree of involvement in the cultural event served as valuable insight into the intentions of the pageant, I wondered how the perspective of someone who actually participated in the event might differ. Having participated in *Rabín Ajaw* as a contestant and experienced a year of life as the nationally recognized Maya "Daughter of the King," I knew the 2017-2018 winner of the pageant would likely also have precious insights to share. She explained,

*Pienso que, yo no rechazo el turismo pero digo que si muchas veces nuestros hermanos extranjeros son los que valoran más nuestra cultura, más no nuestro gobierno [...] usted está aquí preguntándome, analizando, se interesa. Pero, ¿Dónde está el presidente ahora? ¿Dónde están nuestros gobiernos? Solo algunos hay. Veo como una, dos, tres personas. Y si los escuchas, pues agradecen desde la televisión. Ah pero si los insultamos, ahí sí, reclaman verdad. Entonces yo pienso que eso es de compartir. Yo lo miro más de esa manera, de compartir, de que las personas que vengan demuestran su cultura y nosotras la mostremos. Pero hay algo muy importante que a mí me gustaría y siempre ha pasado por mi mente, que el turismo alcance esas áreas. Es decir, que es fuente importante porque nos da a nosotras la fuente económica, pero si fuera más nos gustaría que los turistas hicieran algo por nosotros. Nos gustaría que hicieran algo para que el evento no sólo quede en el discurso. El que ya se eligió, más bien que le den el seguimiento, en como está, como camina, cuál es su vida, qué lugares recorre, como está*

*la otra población, si le pudiesen brindar un proyecto y así a través de ella porque si es a través del gobierno es lamentable. El dinero lo acaparan ellos y a nosotros no nos lo dan.* [I think that, I don't reject tourism but I say that many times our foreign brothers are those who value our culture more, not our government. (...) you are here asking me, analyzing, it interests you. But, where is the president now? Where are our governments? There are only some. I see like one, two, three people. And if you listen to them, they give thanks from the television. Ah, but if we insult them, they complain. So, I think that that [tourism] is sharing. I look at it more in that way, as sharing, as the people that come demonstrate their culture and we show it. But there's something more important that I would like and that has always passed through my mind, that tourism reaches those areas. That is, it is an important source because it gives us an economic source, but if it were more we would like that the tourists do something for us. We would like that they do something so that the event doesn't stay in discourse. The one that's already chosen [to be *Rabín Ajaw*], it's better to follow up with them in how they are, what their life is like, where they travel, how the other people are. If they [tourists] could provide a project, through her, because if it is through the government it is shameful. They hoard money and don't give it to us.] (in-person interview).

The 2017-2018 *Rabín Ajaw* elect's response to the criticism that the event is based on tourist ends did not disappoint in its insight. Although she seemed grateful that her "foreign brothers" took interest in Maya culture(s), she advocated a relationship of reciprocity, recognizing that a relationship of the sort could never be established with the Guatemalan government. Indeed, though the government outwardly praises the event for its cultural display and celebration of diverse cultures in Guatemala, the praise is isolated to the realm of discourse, not action.

Earlier in our conversation, the 2017-2018 elect educated me on the ways in which the government's approval of the event was solely discursive. In her description of *Rabín Ajaw*, she identified the objective of the event as providing space for the year's *Rabín Ajaw* to speak so that her voice would reach the whole nation and "... *que la juventud sea escuchada porque no es escuchada por los gobiernos y es lamentable que después de tanto que las señoritas se preparan, analizan, suben a un escenario, exhortan a una población, sale una electa. La dejan sin ayuda.* [...that the youth is heard because the government doesn't listen to them and it is shameful that after the young ladies prepare so much, analyze, climb up on stage, exhort a population, an



elected leaves. They leave her without help.]” (in-person interview). She went on to tell me that she recognized over the course of her year as the 2017-2018 elect that discrimination against women truly existed. Despite being the fact that she was elected from among 120 young women and was the maximum representative of Maya women, she witnessed gender inequality, particularly against Mayas for being from a certain village and practicing their customs. The social contempt for Maya women she described was absent from the *Rabín Ajaw* space; instead, she viewed the event as an effort for women to have a voice and a vote that matter – something that she said the government should recognize, although they fail to do so.

The government’s lack of recognition is foolish, in the 2017-2018 elect’s estimation. She explained that the women involved in the pageant had been keeping records and figured out that if 2018 is the fiftieth anniversary and approximately 100 young women attend each year, that is about 5,000 participants in total, some of whom are already mothers, grandmothers, and great grandmothers. Continuing, the 2017-2018 elect reasoned,

*Imagínese, ahora hay personalidades que son diputadas, que son doctoras, que son trabajadoras, pero bueno, esos son espacios que se han ido ganando con el conocimiento. Algunas son embajadoras de la paz. Y hoy, por ejemplo, estábamos pidiendo ese espacio para la mujer porque decimos de balde: “Estamos aquí para hacer nuestra participación si no nos la reconocen”. Vino un ente del gobierno y la defensoría de la mujer indígena, dirigida por María Roselia Pop, pidió que se le diera un reconocimiento a las señoritas. Entonces, a mí se me ocurrió y dije: “Si yo estuve sola en este año, no quiero que la otra señorita esté sola.” Y yo, como a uno le cuesta acceder a los gobiernos, entonces sólo le dije a la señora: “Pero que de ese nombramiento se dé el seguimiento. Se les dé un carro, se les dé la atención porque no la hay, a pesar de que somos las princesas de toda Guatemala”.* [Imagine, now there are women who are members of parliament, who are doctors, who are workers, but well, those are spaces that have been won through knowledge. Some [women] are ambassadors of peace. And today, for example, we were asking for that space for women because we said in vain, “We are here to do our part if we are not recognized.” A government entity came and the advocate for indigenous women, directed by María Roselia Pop, asked for recognition of the young women. So, it occurred to me and I said, “If I was alone this year, I don’t want the other young woman to be alone.” And I, as one has a hard time accessing governments, so I only said to the woman, “But let that designation be followed up. Give them a car. Give them the

attention because there isn't any, despite us being the princesses of all of Guatemala.”] (in-person interview).

Again, my interviewee highlights the lack of follow through in the government's praise of *Rabín Ajaw*. After commending the event and the “winner” to the press, the government entirely neglects the needs of the *Rabín Ajaw* elect and Maya women alike. Despite direct pleas to entities designated to take care of indigenous women's needs from the maximum representative of that demographic, the government continues to provide only lip-service praise and no real-world aid to that segment of the population.

Unfortunately, without resources like a means of reliable transportation, little can be achieved by the reigning “Daughter of the King.” Nobody knew this more than the 2017-2018 *Rabín Ajaw*, who struggled during the course of her tenure as the maximum representative of Maya women in Guatemala. She recounted,

*Al momento de ser electa, a mí me invitan a comunidades para dar discursos, para exhortar a toda la población y seguir dando ese conocimiento de acuerdo a lo que nosotros hemos estudiado. Fuimos a las comunidades, vimos la problemática pero es lamentable que nosotros sólo podamos actuar con palabras más no con acciones y no darle algo a las personas, porque no tenemos ningún fondo. Rabín Ajaw no recibe nada. Aquí recibe un poquito de dinero, sí, pero no alcanza.* [At the moment when I was elected, they invited me to communities to give speeches, to exhort all of the population and continue giving that knowledge in accordance with what we have studied. We went to the communities, we saw the problems, but it is a shame that we can only act with words, not with actions and not give something to the people because we don't have any funds. *Rabín Ajaw* doesn't receive anything. Here she receives a little bit of money, yes, but it doesn't reach.] (in-person interview).

Thus the *Rabín Ajaw* elect is informally charged with being a representative and role-model for Maya women, yet denied the money to carry out those duties and denied opportunities to better her life and lives of those in her community. She gives speeches about the importance of maintaining indigenous culture(s) or condemning various social ills plaguing her demographic,

in efforts supposedly supported by the government, but can do nothing about it without financial support and a more indigenous-oriented public policy.

Additionally, even the government's *discursive* support of the National Folklore Festival and *Rabín Ajaw* is fleeting. The elect with whom I spoke reported a total lack of attention from the government, adding that in place of checking up on her throughout her tenure as "Daughter of the King," she only received discrimination. Citing the personal discrimination she suffered as a shame, the 2017-2018 elect identified foreign support from the United States, countries in Europe, and other institutions as being of great significance. In fact, with the help of foreign donors, she was able to execute two community projects as an intermediary actor, asking for the money to accomplish these projects and passing it along to others who she monitored along the way. One of the projects was educational and the other social-humanitarian, she explains:

*En las escuelas vimos la debilidad que no tenían balcones y que necesitaban computadoras. La aportamos ahí y eso fue aporte de la Unión Americana de hermanos migrantes que están allá luchando en el día a día y que han dejado a su país. En lo social vimos que habían abuelitas abandonadas que no tenían hijos, o personas discapacitadas, entonces todo eso. Todavía tenemos proyectos. Por ejemplo ahorita lo que sucedió con el volcán, sí, nos dolió y nos partió el alma. Tenemos en el micrófono que es nuestro trabajo, pidiendo la ayuda y yo sé que vino esa ayuda y se llegó. Todavía nos falta una parte de la ayuda pero todavía estamos esperando a que las personas lleguen a sus comunidades. Lo que no queremos es que esto pase en manos del gobierno. Sabemos que no van a tener nada las personas si pasa esto. [In the schools we saw the weakness, that they didn't have balconies and that they needed computers. We contributed that there and that was a contribution of the American Union of migrant brothers that are there fighting day by day and that have left their country. Socially, we saw that there have been abandoned little grandmothers that didn't have children, or disabled people, so all of that. We still have projects. For example, right now with what happened with the volcano<sup>28</sup>, yes, it hurt us and broke our souls. We have in the microphone that it's our job, asking for help, and I know that help came. We are still missing a bit of help, but we're still waiting for people to get to their communities. What we hope is that this does not fall into the hands of the government. We know people aren't going to have anything if this happens.] (in-person interview).*

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<sup>28</sup> Here the speaker references the deadly June 3, 2018 eruption of the Fuego Volcano in Guatemala, which wrought havoc on surrounding villages and left many dead in its path.

So weak is her trust in the government that the 2017-2018 elect does not have faith that the government will even help Mayas devastated by tragic natural disaster. Such distrust is not a symptom of radical skepticism; rather, a history of discrimination and government corruption demonstrates the futility of seeking help of any sort from the Guatemalan government. Still, this elect stressed the importance and impact of foreign aid. Perhaps the most striking finding from my conversation with this young woman was the employment of her *Rabín Ajaw* title as a means of garnering recognition from foreign authorities and obtaining supplies for community-betterment. In other words, as a so-called “winner” of the pageant, she utilized the ephemeral spotlight that the event gave her to establish projects benefitting local Mayan communities, albeit a spotlight based on the assumption of the digestibly-authentic, *Guatemalan* “Maya Woman” archetypal role.

To be clear, this community service undertaking is far from the post-coronation philanthropy tour that some Western beauty queens undertake; rather, the *Rabín Ajaw* elect is under no obligation to do anything with her title, tending to choose such efforts of her own volition. Marco Aurelio Alonzo, the founder, spoke about the responsibilities of the *Rabín Ajaw* elect:

*Bueno, nosotros no le imponemos nada. Ellas tienen libertad absoluta así como ha tenido de venir a participar para tocar todas las puertas que tienen porque ella tiene representación nacional, elegida democráticamente. Entonces ella ya que al momento que recibe su corona y que reciben su cetro, ella tiene autoridad para ir a tocar las puertas del Congreso de la presidencia de la República y de cualquier institución nacional e internacional pero cuando llega a tocar las puertas ella debe de llevar un programa, un proyecto. Si va a pedir ayuda, le dan un proyecto y a presentarlo y siempre ha tenido las puertas abiertas porque si está asesorada puede llegar.* [Well, we don’t impose anything on her. They [the “winners” of *Rabín Ajaw*] have absolute freedom just as she [the *Rabín Ajaw* elect] has had to come to participate to knock on all the doors they have because she has national representation, democratically elected. So, at the moment she receives her crown and scepter, she has the authority to go knock on the doors of the congress of the presidency of the Republic and any national or international institution, but when she gets to knock on the doors she must bring a

program, a project. If she is going to ask for help, they give her a project and present it and she always has open doors because if she is advised, she can come.] (in-person interview).

Alonzo confirms the 2017-2018 elect's statements' veracity, citing again that the "winners" of *Rabín Ajaw* receive no formal responsibilities upon assuming the "Daughter of the King" title. His response also paralleled the anecdotes the 2017-2018 elect shared regarding using her elected authority to garner financial support for community projects. Of course, however, no such support is ever guaranteed, but as my interview with the past victor indicated, the symbolic power of being the maximum Maya representative in Guatemala has the potential to open doors that would remain closed were she to lack the influence of her title.

As we continued to speak, Marco Aurelio Alonzo provided me with more assurances of the *Rabín Ajaw* elects' post-coronation opportunities. He regaled me with the magnificent achievements of past "Daughters of the King," including their occupation of government positions, a feat of which he seemed especially proud. Considering the exclusion of Maya women from much of the Mayanist movement, particularly their exclusion from positions of power, I wondered if Alonzo was cognizant of any sort of political slant the participants and/or winners might possess. When I asked him if the Maya women involved in *Rabín Ajaw* occupied a certain political platform, he answered emphatically, "*Ellas tienen libertad. Ellas tienen libertad. No les imponemos nada. Ellas tienen libertad de lo que sean capaces de hacer y han logrado y demostrado esa capacidad cuando digo ya lo tengo los testimonios de muchas mujeres que me han dicho que han logrado, haciendo bien las cosas han logrado superarse mucho.*" [They (the women) have freedom. They have freedom. We don't impose anything on them. They have the freedom of what they are capable of doing and they have achieved and demonstrated that ability when I say I already have the testimonies of many women that have

told me what they have achieved, doing things well they have succeeded in overcoming a lot.]” (in-person interview). Based on my interviews with *Rabín Ajaw* participants, that much was certainly true.

*Rabín Ajaw* being an effort to preserve the culture(s) of the Mayas in Guatemala, I also asked the founder if he considered himself to be a mayanist. When Alonzo failed to recognize the mayanist label I used, I instead asked if he considered himself to be a fighter for indigenous rights, to which he retorted,

*Sí, pero con conocimiento, con causa, sin ser una persona necia que hay que ser respetuoso de todas las culturas y yo debo de hablar de mi cultura, pero de una manera limpia, de dónde me siento yo muy orgulloso. Yo me siento orgulloso de ser de mi cultura autóctona de Guatemala y así lo he dicho en todas partes del mundo, a donde he ido. O sea, no por ignorante, tengo un conocimiento amplio y sigo estudiando.* [Yes, but with knowledge, with cause, without being a foolish person. You have to be respectful of every culture and I should talk about my culture, but in a clean way, where I feel very proud. I am proud of my indigenous culture of Guatemala and I have said so all over the world, where I have gone. That is, not for being ignorant, I have a broad knowledge and I continue studying.] (in-person interview).

Alonzo made it clear that his fight for indigenous rights was based upon knowledge – his own growing knowledge and the prideful sharing of the knowledge of his Maya culture with the rest of the world. Before our interview concluded, I asked him if he wanted to share anything else to the academic public about the event. Alonzo emphasized the uniqueness of the event and, in what I presume was a show of international validation of the value of *Rabín Ajaw* and the National Folklore Festival, concluded by recounting where he has been invited to speak: at the United Nations, the Inter-American Development Bank, in the Dominican Republic as a celebration of the international year of women, and in Washington (in-person interview).

Funnily enough, when I spoke with one of the organizers of *Rabín Ajaw* in 2016, he ended our conversation with the same references to foreign bodies. After thanking him heartily for taking the time to speak with me, the organizer responded, “*No, gracias a usted que pueden*

*difundir y llevar una partecita de nuestra cultura. Son bienvenidos. Tuve ya la suerte de estar con ustedes también en la Universidad de Nuevo México y en la Universidad de Georgetown, también estuve ahí.* [No, thanks to you they can spread and carry a little part of our culture.

You all are welcome. I already had the luck of being with you all also at the University of New Mexico and at Georgetown University, I was also there.]” (in-person interview). There is no way to know for certain, but I believe that both the founder and the organizer of the pageant and folklore festival utilized mentions of respected foreign entities like universities or the United Nations as a source of validity to support the truth of their statements. That is, not knowing if I, as a North American researcher, shared the same value system that they do, they drew upon the general respect such institutions tend to have to communicate the validity and gravity of what they reported.

### **5.3 Fieldwork Conclusions**

My 2016 and 2018 fieldwork in Guatemala confirmed my suspicion that there had to be some unreported draw to participate in *Rabín Ajaw*. After centuries of mistreatment, discrimination, and even genocide in which the bodies of Maya women especially were raped, murdered, and mutilated, there had to be some personal benefit to participants motivating them to take the stage publicly year after year. Research I previously conducted on beauty pageants was useless in determining the reason young Maya women worked so hard to prepare for the

events of the National Folklore Festival and *Rabín Ajaw* because they did not consider the event to be a beauty pageant, at least in the traditional, Western sense. Past academic contributions analyzing the pageant have disapprovingly cited the involvement of corporate or government-division sponsors of the pageant while overlooking the need for funding to account for the contestants' travel, food, and lodging during the week-long National Folklore Festival that leads up to the coronation of the next *Rabín Ajaw*. Though the contestants are more privileged than most Maya women, there are few that could afford such a journey on their own, and, as the original founder of the pageant informed me, none are under any obligation to act in accordance with any sort of agenda, sponsor-led or otherwise.

Some academic criticisms of the event did hold true in my field investigations. Despite the poverty and widespread illiteracy most rural Mayas face in Guatemala, *Rabín Ajaw* candidates tended to be relatively privileged and enjoy many more educational opportunities than the general Maya population. I heard divided sentiments in the public's perception of the pageant in my casual conversations with locals, and it remained true that the displays and celebration of traditional *traje típico* worn by pageant candidates did not reflect what they necessarily wore each day. Neither did the *traje* so celebrated at the event reflect the current styles of Maya weaving, but instead of this lack of accuracy representing an intention to mislead, it was actually the byproduct of a deliberate effort to preserve the traditional dress *of a certain era*.

Of course, the main goal of my research was to find out how *Rabín Ajaw* participants exercised agency, in direct opposition to their portrayal in the literature as veritable pawns, complicit in a multicultural spectacle with heavy influence from the Guatemalan government and corporate sponsors. As a whole, the pool of candidates at the pageant exercised and benefitted



from the cultural education embedded in the event's structure. Be it formally, as in the formal activity of swapping regionally distinct forms of *traje*, or informally through personal conversations with Maya sisters from other geographic locations throughout Guatemala, *Rabín Ajaw* contestants learned about the diverse cultures contained under the broader Maya umbrella. This educational experience benefitted contestants in a personal sense, but the contestants were also able to bring what they learned home with them and share it with their communities through their bilingual abilities. Despite the linguistic variation within the Mayan community, a shared knowledge of Spanish facilitated easy communication among all of the contestants, who left with the ability to educate monolingual Mayas – often women who continue to be subjugated within their own cultural group and subsequent organizations.

The greatest display of agency, however, came from my discussion with the 2017-2018 *Rabín Ajaw* elect, which was also confirmed by the founder himself, Marco Aurelio Alonzo. Borrowing Alonzo's words, the "democratically elected" *Rabín Ajaw* occupies a symbolic position as the maximum Maya representative that allows her to coordinate with various stakeholders to carry out community betterment projects. As it turned out, the government's involvement in the event was actually quite superficial. Government officials outwardly praised the event and its multicultural nature, but neglected to back up their praise with financial support that would help the group in question. So, although government funding was nearly impossible to obtain, *Rabín Ajaw* elects could communicate with foreign or international organizations who could grant financial support for the elect's project of choice. These projects involved local efforts, benefitting particular groups on a smaller, community-based scale as opposed to large, national efforts – a practice fittingly reminiscent of Maya identification with local municipalities and communities as opposed to the broader Guatemalan nation.

Moreover, despite claims that the Guatemalan government does not discriminate against Mayas, my interviews with *Rabín Ajaw* participants revealed the noteworthy perception that little progress has been realized. The women I interviewed indicated that Guatemala remains a nation without effective public policy in place to better the living conditions or safeguard the wellbeing of indigenous women. Yes, contestants in *Rabín Ajaw* can deliver speeches about the importance of Maya women voting before an audience. Even a few past *Rabín Ajaw* elects have achieved government representative positions, but the actual reality demonstrates that there are shamefully few opportunities for indigenous women to exercise political power or accrue the attention necessary to implement community change.

## 6.0 Conclusion

From a survey of the few academic publications engaging with the *Rabín Ajaw* pageant as well as my own findings from interviews conducted in my field research on the pageant, the event is clearly a performance, and not solely due to the fact that it is labeled a pageant and involves speeches and rituals on stage. Rather, participants in the pageant must perform their “Mayan-ness” to establish the ever-elusive “cultural authenticity”. Such performances run the gamut of carefully rehearsed bilingual speeches by atypically educated contestants to the display of local, ceremonial *traje típico* that both fails to represent contemporary trends in indigenous weaving as well as what Mayas throughout Guatemala actually wear on a day-to-day basis. Performative representations of the authentic Maya woman in *Rabín Ajaw* are indisputably essentialist and can reasonably be labeled a manifestation of contemporary multicultural politics by a group of privileged *indias permitidas*, which does little to improve the lived realities of Mayas in Guatemala. In this sense, the pageant cannot justifiably be labeled a unifying force in the ethnically divided post-war Guatemala. Still, the pageant participants’ responses to my questions referenced the value of educating themselves about the customs and cultures of the various, often-isolated, local Mayan communities throughout the nation and dispel the notion that *Rabín Ajaw* serves no productive purpose.

In the introduction to her edited volume *Cultural Agency in the Americas*, Doris Sommer writes of the agentic power of culture, particularly in Latin America: “Culture enables agency. Where structures or conditions can seem intractable, creative practices add dangerous

supplements that add angles for intervention and locate room for maneuver” (3). The contestants’ motivation to participate in *Rabín Ajaw* was not as simple as merely fulfilling the role of the obedient *indio permitido*. Rather, I located the room for maneuver in the pageant to understand the ways in which participants exercised agency. *Rabín Ajaw* itself is not clearly subversive, but many of its participants used it for their own purposes.

While the few academic sources investigating the pageant were informative and brought questions of authenticity and intention to the forefront of the discussion, I found them lacking in illustrating the agency of the participants, whether individual or collective. My initial 2016 field research in Cobán did confirm, at least in part, scholarly claims that the Mayan culture displayed at *Rabín Ajaw* performances contributed to limiting, static representations of the social group. Further, my observations of the pageant also aligned with much of the discourse surrounding it regarding Mayanist liberal multicultural political platforms from which privileged spokespeople benefitted as *indios permitidos* while most of the Maya population continued to experience poverty, illiteracy, and social subjugation. Yet, rarely are accurate interpretations of social phenomena so simple or polar. I endeavored to take this project further than simply denouncing its lack of cultural authenticity as a multicultural performance and question what forces may be operating beneath *Rabín Ajaw*’s pretty, multicultural surface and uncover sources of participant agency in this popular culture event. Considering the lack of female participation or opportunity for the few female participants in the Mayanist movement, the question of the contestants’ motivation for participation persisted.

Prior to conducting my field research, I surveyed the literature relevant to the cultural history in which *Rabín Ajaw* is situated. Chapter One, “Challenging the Cultural History of Guatemala,” not only presented pertinent history and politics as they are discussed in academic

circles, but challenged it at points. Appreciating Mayas' positionality in present day Guatemala required delving into the colonial and neocolonial interventions in the nation's affairs, including how colonial control created the ladino and indigenous categorizations and theoretical binary that remains influential in the nation's society to this day. Comprehending the ways in which global powers such as the United States interfered in Guatemala's government and politics and propped up a genocidal civil war through material and training support added an interesting layer to the current conundrum facing nations of the global south to modernize and develop if they want to be players in the global game of wealth and resource accrual.

A large portion of Chapter One analyzes Guatemala's genocide through an intersectional lens of gender and sexuality. Maya women, as both literal and figurative carriers of culture, were prominent targets for torture and other forms of cruelty during the 36 year long civil war. Indeed, rape was employed as an instrument of war, intending to cut off the indigenous cultural lineage, shame the Maya women victims, and emasculate the Maya men who were often forced to watch the atrocities. I include a theory that much of this rape and other displays of extreme masculinity by the military may represent a form of toxic homosociality. Including gender in analyses of sociopolitical phenomena is essential to my project and any holistic investigation. Following the chronology of the civil war, Chapter One ends with an exploration of post-war politics and the ways in which individuals and groups alike struggled to reckon with the cruelty that occurred.

Chapter Two, "Multiculturalism, Mayanism, and *La Mujer Maya*," characterizes the Mayanist indigenous rights movement from its inception to its current day operations. Looking at Mayanist leadership, one rarely finds women, whose archetypal image is used for Mayanist aims as well as those of the tourism industry or any government efforts to prove multicultural

consideration. Adding to the gender inequality within the indigenous rights movement, it is typically only Maya women who weave and wear the iconic *huipiles* and *cortes* that comprise *traje típico*, as wearing *traje* fell out of style for men decades ago. *Traje* is a distinct cultural and ethnic signifier, which means Maya women who do wear it are far more susceptible to public harassment or discrimination, all without the ability to significantly influence the Mayanist movement or society in the broad sense. Admittedly, both the production and use of *traje* have shifted to reflect the wider availability of materials and designs in the present, which constitutes a departure from the past practice of wearing the *huipil* of one's municipality alone. The use of pan-Mayan weaving styles and/or mix of traditional dress with more Western *vestido* reflects the social reality of a more connected society with access to a greater amount of different materials and resources, but contributes to the virtual condemnation of authenticity at *Rabín Ajaw*, where a large portion of the celebration focuses on locally distinctive dress and its present and future preservation.

Male Mayanist leaders are usually more privileged than most indigenous people in Guatemala, occupying a position of social advantage that, as we have already seen, Charles Hale calls the *indio permitido* [authorized Indian]. The subjects of this social denomination are as atypical as *Rabín Ajaw* contestants have been criticized to be— more educated and literate, with greater access to essential resources and opportunities, and more favorably considered by ladinos in power than most Mayas throughout the country. Yet, these *indios permitidos* who benefit from the lip-service multicultural policy are only able to because they do not intervene in the larger, modernizing/development agenda of the nation. As a whole, rights and opportunities for Guatemala's indigenous are still sorely lacking.

In this thesis, I aspired to discern and analyze the nuances of these women's involvement with the *Rabín Ajaw* pageant and how they found "room for maneuver" via exercise of agency. The pageant may not have been destabilizing in and of itself, but individual participants utilized the event for their own purposes, particularly the *Rabín Ajaw* elects. In Chapter Three, "Claiming Knowledge: A Manufacturing," I assessed the ways in which academics, even self-designated feminist scholars, can inadvertently contribute to the oppression of women in the global south, particularly in any consideration of "Third World Women" as a homogenous group with the same obstacles and interests. Both the literal, geopolitical colonialism of European powers or the United States and subtler forms of discursive colonialism unfairly attribute value to difference, which adds to the oppression of individuals and societies in the global south, even long after colonial forces may have physically left. In response to such injustice, efforts to recognize an epistemological pluriverse or engage in decolonizing activities and discourses have gained traction, despite the difficulty inherent in their implementation.

Of course, I identified those potential downfalls of speaking about others in order to consciously avoid them in my own investigation of *Rabín Ajaw*. Further, though, I advocated ethically responsible research that examined context at the macro, meso, and micro levels. By acknowledging and challenging the contemporary cultural history of Guatemala and its active social forces like multiculturalism in Chapter One, I could situate the pageant within its broader macro historical context. My examination of the Mayanist movement and issues of contention within the heterogeneous Maya community in Chapter Two allowed for understanding at a meso level.

Finally, recognizing the differences in lived experiences and standpoints between me as a researcher and the women with whom I spoke addressed a micro-level context that affected the

meaning of our interactions. I strove to present my research as it was performed, as a conversation with the Maya women in question that allowed them to take the stage, as it were, and reveal what *they* wanted to communicate. Certainly, I could never make claims about their lives as any sort of expert without being a part of that group and living the same sorts of experiences. Addressing all levels of context for these conversations meant acknowledging the power disparity between our respective nation states that could possibly influence what was said, how it was interpreted, or a number of other factors. Much of this disparity in power resulted from the dispersion of development ideology around the globe following World War II, which resulted in the assumption of first and third world designations and the entrenchment of a developed/undeveloped binary in the global consciousness. This ideological stronghold has had, and absolutely continues to have negative real-world effects in “undeveloped” territories like that of Guatemala.

In order to make claims about the agency of *Rabín Ajaw* participants, I needed to determine a definition of “agency.” A challenging term to pin down, I inspected the Western, Foucauldian understanding of agency as resistance to oppressive forces alongside a non-Western conception of agency used to analyze women’s involvement in the Egyptian Mosque movement. Although Egypt and Guatemala are not directly comparable, using an example of non-liberal and non-Western understanding of agency revealed the ways in which traditional Western understandings of key concepts like freedom, resistance, and agency can be irresponsibly ethnocentric. Eventually, I determined that possessing a predetermined definition of “agency” prior to conducting field research could be limiting. Alternatively, paying close attention to all levels of *Rabín Ajaw* context and placing the participants themselves in a place of



epistemological prominence, as I have tried to do in this thesis, was the most enlightening and informative strategy.

At the conclusion of my third chapter, I noted a space for potential exercise of cultural agency – the hybrid nature of Mayan culture(s) in constant negotiation with the increasingly modernized Guatemalan nation. Indigenous culture has existed for over a thousand years in Guatemala, and with such a long life has evolved along the way, but to demonstrate an “authentic” culture that adds to Guatemala’s global appeal, it is presented as static and removed from time. At the same time, Guatemala—fully indoctrinated in development discourse—must appear “modern” and “developed,” feats which are complicated by the existence of a culture that has spanned millennia. Strong desires for national development make that modernizing ideology difficult to evade. As noted in Chapter Three, Arturo Escobar identified that members of hybrid cultures like modern day Mayas “...survive through their transformative engagement with modernity” (*Encountering Development* 219). Certainly, this much was revealed by my conversation with the 2017-2018 *Rabín Ajaw* elect. She deemed herself a realist, acknowledging that Guatemala continues to suffer from corrupt and ineffective governments and that indigenous women continue to endure discrimination. That the maximum representative of Maya women in all of Guatemala personally experienced discrimination at the hands of the government speaks volumes about how Maya women of less privilege fair today. Nevertheless, there is no doubt in my mind that the 2017-2018 elect engaged with modernity in a transformative way by using her figure head power internationally to collect the resources necessary to execute local community betterment projects. In other words, aware of the limitations that the current modernization/development ideology guiding many of Guatemala’s national endeavors, along with contemporary displays of shallow multicultural “appreciation”, the 2017-2018 elect was

able to identify her own room for maneuver, like *Rabines Ajaw* before her tenure, and those that will come after.

Arguably, the remaining *Rabín Ajaw* contestants also engaged with modernity in a transformative way as well by utilizing the event for their own educational purposes. The pageant portrayed its contestants to the public as veritable cultural symbols, quite reminiscent of Diane Nelson's *La Mujer Maya* archetype. However, these participants used the pageant as an opportunity to educate themselves on the in-group differences within Guatemala's Maya population and foster a sense of *convivencia* [coexistence] among a group of previously divided Maya women who may never have met were it not for the opportunity to participate in the National Folklore Festival and *Rabín Ajaw* pageant. Given the passion and joy with which these contestants informed me of the cultural exchange that occurred through various *Rabín Ajaw* activities, their reports of how much they learned, and the general sense of amicable coexistence that they carried back to their respective municipalities, it is easy to see why young Maya women continue to attend the National Folklore Festival and pageant each year.

Such fostering of relationships among young Maya women could indicate new potentials for collective organizing within the demographic, given Maya women's general exclusion from the Mayanist movement. Were it not for the general opportunity of the National Folklore Festival and the *Rabín Ajaw* pageant, along with the financial opportunities given by the festival committee to actually attend those events, it is unlikely that many of these young women would have met. Indeed, even if they frequently crossed paths, the activities of the pageant's events such as the exchange of locally distinct *traje típico* among contestants and subsequent discussions resulting from the experience would not likely occur, or at least not with great frequency. Contestant speeches, while limited to the preset range of topics, provoked critical

thought and further research in candidate preparation, while the pageant events served as a forum for discussion of those issues and the establishment of connections among young Maya women. Further research into the effects of the relationships forged at *Rabín Ajaw* coupled with the cultural education and pride instilled at the event is necessary, but I consider this thesis to be an exciting first step in that process.

Finally, while I successfully identified how pageant victors directly exercise agency through their hybrid cultural status, my conclusion can only fairly be categorized as preliminary findings. My conversation with the 2017-2018 *Rabín Ajaw* elect was incredibly informative in its revelation of that young woman's perspectives, experiences, and opportunities as a reigning "Daughter of the King." Her specific experiences attaining funding for community aid and betterment projects demonstrated the inattention of the Guatemalan national government to Maya women in general, even to the point of discriminating against the maximum national representative of that cultural group. Moreover, though, the elect's determination to acquire the resources and financial support necessary to carry out such needed projects as aiding victims of the 2018 Fuego Volcano eruption who had lost most material possessions and many loved ones, or her efforts to obtain essential educational materials like computers for school classrooms (bilingual or otherwise) stood as strong evidence of agentic action within the macro, meso, and micro-level contexts in which she operated. Yet, further research is required to put pressure on that conclusion and see if it holds up among various *Rabín Ajaw* elects and over time. Additionally, joining the analysis of the pageant winners' actions with those of the rest of the contestants in conjunction with more indepth research into the Mayanist movement must be conducted to confidently produce a blanket conclusion about the agency of these young Maya women.

Although further research is required to solidify the theoretical hypothesis my thesis generated, one significant finding stands as a veritable call to action. The 2017-2018 *Rabín Ajaw* elect explicitly mentioned the need for foreign aid in order to execute projects of community betterment, be it through efforts to augment classroom resources or to pick up the pieces after a tragic natural disaster. My conversation with this particular elect indicated that while she and others like her were appreciative of the interest foreigners took in Maya culture, they desired a material outcome from this interest, namely in the form of financial support. Of course, collection of funds from foreign tourists would require much forethought and careful planning, but the need for a more ethical form of tourism persists. If international groups and/or individuals supporting cultural celebrations like the National Folklore Festival in Cobán would contribute to the financial resources available to pageant elects, a relationship of greater reciprocity could take hold, as opposed to a merely scopophilic orientation towards the material culture evidenced at *Rabín Ajaw*. In order to execute such an implementation of ethical tourism both responsibly and fruitfully, more research into the needs and desires of the women involved in *Rabín Ajaw* remains necessary.

### **6.1 *Por la alegría, la emoción* [For the Happiness, the Emotion]**

One of the final conversations I had with *Rabín Ajaw* participants in 2018 was quite poignant, albeit perhaps not the most saturated with analytical content. For that reason, I

neglected to include this exchange in Chapter Four, but I feel it is worth presenting as a potential source of closure to this academic paper and journey. This particular contestant informed me of how much went into her preparation for the event, despite the tiny size of her municipality—so small, in fact, that it fails to be recognized at the departmental level. Her preparation included consulting with knowledgeable community members, particularly in terms of refining her speech, and asking the mayor for financial assistance to enable her attendance in Cobán. Following these more logistical tasks, she also petitioned the approval of both her parents and ancestors, as well as a blessing from God for wisdom, intelligence, and safety from conceivable accidents while traveling and at the National Folklore Festival itself.

While chatting about her involvement in the pageant, she informed me of the great lengths many of the participants went to in order to travel to the pageant site in Cobán, including many 15-20 hour trips that were often partially or fully on foot out of necessity. The National Folklore Festival committee organized the funding for and arrangement of lodging, food, and transportation from festival event to event throughout Cobán, which aided the high attendance rate. Since many of the contestants were accompanied by family members or close friends, I was surprised to learn that this young woman from such a small village travelled alone to Cobán in whatever way she could – with some rides and also on foot. Her village is a four-hour drive to Cobán, so the entire mixed transportation method trip must have been quite lengthy and tiring. Granted, she wanted to bring a companion with her, but everyone she invited was either occupied with school or work or felt no strong desire to uphold the event – a lack of support that is unsurprising given the widespread loss of Maya culture exhibited in this young contestant’s village, a source of great disappointment to her. Of course, this participant encouraged education

and remembrance of the customs of her municipality so that the culture would not disappear forever.

As our conversational interview drew to a close, this contestant waxed poetic about the significance of her attendance at *Rabín Ajaw*, noting the inability to express the sincere joy in her heart, the uniqueness of the event, and that she would never experience anything like it for the rest of her life. She then asked me again where I was from and my name, and as I responded, she began to cry. In a gentler tone, I inquired about what provoked her tears, to which she rejoined: “*Por la alegría, la emoción. Sí, de hecho lloré ayer durante la procesión. Fue algo tan bonito y he trabajado mucho para llegar acá a este evento tan importante* [For the happiness, the emotion. Yes, in fact I cried yesterday during the procession. It was something so beautiful and I have worked a lot to arrive here at this very important event]” (in-person interview). I too witnessed the procession, a mix of music, dancing, earthy incense, fireworks, and an electric excitement crackling in the air as all of the participants walked throughout Cobán to reach the center of the town for a formal welcoming ceremony. There was something about the explicit display of cultural pride, the interest of the procession onlookers, and the sensory overload that contributed to a feeling that one was witnessing something monumental.



**Figure 11 The 2018 procession of contestants into Cobán**



**Figure 12 Dancers at the 2018 procession**

We conversed a bit more, with me offering the few bits of comfort I could and her lamenting that she could never experience something like *Rabín Ajaw* again. I reminded her that she would always retain the knowledge she learned throughout her stay in Cobán as well as the happy memories that she could continue to share when she returned home, but she replied,

“...*Me doy cuenta que la cultura es muy importante, que nosotros debemos de cuidarla... Hay quienes ya no quieren portar el traje. Eso es algo que lo estamos perdiendo nosotros. Por eso le decía que lo quería rescatar* [...I realize that the culture is very important, that we should care for it...There are those who already don’t want to use *traje*. That is something that we are losing. Because of that, I was telling you that I wanted to rescue it]” (in-person interview). Sharing in her sadness, I reminded her that everyone listening to contestant speeches around us shared similar sentiments and desires to preserve such a dynamic culture, including myself. It is my hope that in some small way, my project disseminates her message and brings some of this young woman’s aspirations to fruition.

Certainly, the ways in which *Rabín Ajaw* contestants are able to exercise agency within an event structured by limitations from social disapproval to the limited number of acceptable speech topics each year is laudable. Additionally, the candidates utilize their bilingual language skills, polished through *Rabín Ajaw* preparation, in communicating important information to monolingual women within their communities. These feats are rendered all the more praiseworthy when considering the fact that the National Folklore Festival and pageant appear to be a peculiar blend of ineffectual and tokenizing multiculturalism with the efforts of the generally divided, but male-dominated Mayanist movement. Though the national government in Guatemala provides little assistance to the event, its candidates, and especially its victors, elected *Rabines Ajaw* use their celebratory titles to acquire funds needed to execute projects with direct local effects, but from outside the confines of the nation state’s resources and restrictions.

In essence, my field research exhibited multiple ways in which the *Rabín Ajaw* contestants are “using the master’s tools,” to borrow a phrase from Audre Lorde, to achieve their own community-based needs while still fulfilling the mandates of a national performance of



neoliberal, multicultural politics. Instead of being pawns for manipulation, or even simply naïve, these young women possess a savvy far greater than that for which they have ever received (published) credit. Guatemala exemplifies the supposedly “undeveloped” nation, striving to achieve both “modernization” in a globalized economy as well as maintain the “authentic” culture that keeps the nation interesting and inviting to tourists with money to spend. Clearly, the key common denominator in these government efforts is the pursuit of financial gain. Curiously, the crowned “Daughters of the King” elected at the *Rabín Ajaw* pageant seek the same resource, but lacking opportunities even similar to those available to the state. Instead of simply complaining or reverting to apathy, these Maya women appeal to sympathetic foreign bodies for funding—funding that hypothetically *could* come coupled with paternalism, but funding that enables them to improve the lived realities of Mayas in their local communities. Again, this focus on the local is representative of the daily lives of many Mayas relegated to rural areas stricken with poverty, as well as the general tendency for Guatemalan Mayas to relate more to their local identities and customs as opposed to those of the nation.

Identifying spaces of female agency is of the utmost importance in any sector of the humanities, an area of study beleaguered with a previous legacy of androcentrism, but characterized by the pursuit of just and accurate accounts of the human experience. The difficulty of characterizing Maya women’s sociopolitical participation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century hints at the possibility of shifting ideological priorities for Maya women in the Mayanist movement – a possibility that may help to reveal further agentic spaces worthy of future research and academic analysis. In any case, the dissemination of updated accounts of the National Folklore Festival, *Rabín Ajaw* pageant, and the value of preserving and educating others about Maya cultures

would likely be a source of comfort and joy for the young woman who traveled so far alone and generously shared her time and perspective with me.

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