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## The Democracy Development Machine

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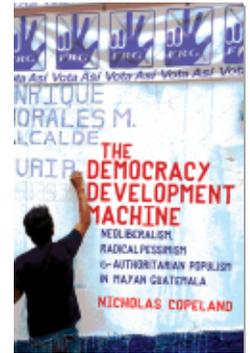
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## “THEY COMMITTED NO CRIME”

### *Developing Democratic Memories*

It hurts a lot to carry [these bones]. It's like carrying death. I'm not going to bury them yet. Yes, I want him to rest, and I want to rest myself, but I still can't. They are the proof of my declaration. I will not bury them yet. I want a paper that tells me “they killed him, and he had not committed any crime, that he was an innocent . . . ,” then we will be able to rest.

TESTIMONY TO THE COMMISSION FOR HISTORICAL CLARIFICATION  
(CEH, 1999, MY TRANSLATION)

Kill me if you want, but I know that I haven't done anything.  
They're going to kill me, and I am an innocent.

SAMPEDRANO VILLAGER'S SPEECH AT  
THE MILITARY BASE IN 1982

Postwar elaboration, working through an event after the fact, is necessary to stay sane and is always political, an effect of struggle, an assumption of identity.

DIANE NELSON, *RECKONING*

One morning in September 2004, several hundred Sampedranos convened in the town salon, a large, sparsely constructed event space atop the market building with unevenly affixed, rusted *lamina* (corrugated zinc sheeting) walls. They had come to witness the inauguration of a local development organization, Maya-Mam Nej-Ta, whose title evoked the

indigenous name of the town, signaling the recent interest in Mayan identity. Mariano Díaz, the newly elected Mayan FRG *alcalde* (mayor), had been invited to speak. We all listened as his address, delivered through a microphone with the energy and cadence of a campaign speech, wandered into historical narrative:

For thirty-five years there was war. We ruined this country. And why? [pause] I don't know! But now we are at peace. How do we achieve peace? Being at home, with the family. As parents we give good educations to our children, and they develop in the future. San Pedro Necta has a hospital, it has a bank, it has various development associations—now it has one more—there will be a road with asphalt. Everything is going to bring more money, more business to San Pedro.

In this framing, whatever happened in the past is irrelevant in the present. Peace is embodied in private acts, such as in raising children, in “business,” and in an NGO whose bland mission statement was a vague desire for “projects,” undoubtedly destined to be a political vehicle for its founder, an educated indigenous dentist from the town center who was respected for good works but not taken seriously as a candidate. No one in the audience reacted publicly to this display of what appeared to be a case of either historical ignorance, a willful whitewashing of the past, or some mix of both.<sup>1</sup>

Soon after the inauguration, I met with Paola, a Mayan woman in her late fifties who was visiting from Mexico, where she had fled in 1982 after the army kidnapped several of her family members whom she maintained were innocent. I wanted to talk to her about what had been happening in San Pedro between 1978 and 1982. Closing her eyes, as if preparing to feel something intensely painful, she began to tell me about her former best friend, Natividad Ramírez, a young, educated indigenous woman:

She worked with the nuns. . . . We went to school together. She was from here in the town center. She got married, and I did not. She was very beautiful. They [the army] killed her. Why? “I don't know!” as Mariano Díaz says! And why are you here, an indigenous man as mayor?! Why are people paid a decent wage now on the *finca* (plantation) if you don't know?

Paola had attended the meeting where Díaz spoke earlier that day. She snapped with disgust at his comment, which she recalled spontaneously

as she remembered the murder of her dear friend. Linking Natividad’s death to better wages on the *finca* and to indigenous political power spoke to deep interconnections between indigenous and revolutionary struggles. To her mind, Díaz had trivialized Natividad’s death, one of a multitude of extreme sacrifices that had improved conditions for indigenous people and that he had benefited from personally. She continued, “I was very mad [at Díaz]. Some of [the people] don’t know why. ‘I know why’ I would have said. I should have stood up. *Cae mal* [I don’t like it].” Although she saw his discourse as inexcusable ignorance, it reflected the different narrative worlds in which they had lived since 1982. Her reticence at the meeting spoke to the continued difficulty of expressing her beliefs in public.

We know that memories fade, but can they die or be replaced? What is the connection between memory and political agency? How does memory become a target of development during a transition to neoliberal democracy, and what happens when activists, historians, and ordinary people try to bring alternative memories back to life? This chapter examines the politics of memory in San Pedro and in so doing wades into polarized polemics about memory in postwar Guatemala, particularly regarding the nature and extent of indigenous participation in the revolutionary movement. After a brief review of indigenous politics in San Pedro from 1944 to 1983, I examine the conditions under which depoliticized versions of this past circulated as truth, how other narratives of collective politics became marginalized, and how these patterns of remembering and forgetting informed Sampedranos’ orientation to neoliberal democracy. I show how the discourse claiming that indigenous Sampedranos were neutral during the war and “trapped between two armies” was a critical reaction to state violence that was then selectively promoted by the army in the name of development and became embedded in postwar identities, affects, and forms of reasoning. This quasi-resistant, postrevolutionary “landscape of memory” (Kirmayer 1996) was the result of heterogeneous efforts to develop proper democratic subjects and a central component of neoliberal democratic governance. It opened space for Mayan criticisms of state violence but excluded radical demands from postwar political thought and sowed uncertainty that rationalized support for the FRG. I also examine emerging possibilities for an encounter with the past not restricted by counterinsurgency truth.

## A History of Struggle

Indigenous Sampedranos have a long history of acting in concert, locally and nationally, succumbing to and overcoming intra- and intercommunal divisions, and forming alliances with and against external groups, fighting simultaneously to be included in a political and economic system based on racial domination and violence and to transform it, often in contradictory ways and with uneven results.<sup>2</sup> Elderly indigenous Sampedranos, men and women, described their childhood as a time of “slavery” when indigenous people were treated “like animals” by Ladinos, planters, and state officials. They did what they could to avoid the tax and labor demands of the colonial state, often seeking protection from the Catholic Church. Since the 1870s, the dawn of Guatemala’s liberal era, Creole elites who wanted to plant coffee and have it harvested for a pittance forced villagers off fertile land and instituted mandatory labor drafts.<sup>3</sup> In the 1930s, the dictator Jorge Ubico ended an interlude of reform and mass politics in the 1920s and instituted debt-peonage systems and vagrancy laws to coerce villagers to work on coastal plantations and in infrastructure projects—such as cutting a path for the Inter-American Highway—for starvation wages in wretched conditions.<sup>4</sup> Some joined labor organizations to fight for better wages and working conditions on the South Coast.<sup>5</sup> After the revolution of 1944, indigenous Sampedranos and many working-class Ladinos rallied behind nationalist governments that abolished forced labor and enacted social democratic policies. In the early 1950s, numerous villagers joined peasant leagues that pressured President Jacobo Arbenz into passing a far-reaching land reform law.<sup>6</sup>

Fearing a communist revolution, the CIA fomented a coup in 1954 that toppled Arbenz, reversed land reform, ended democracy, and unleashed death squads in the countryside. With land activism criminalized, a modernizing stratum of indigenous Sampedranos opted for incremental advancement in their own communities, bucking the will of town Ladinos and villagers employed as labor contractors. Many found a chance in Catholic Action (CA), a church organization formed to promote economic development in Indian communities as an alternative to communism and to undermine *costumbre* (folk Catholicism). Maryknoll priests preached development and the new Catholicism to indigenous catechists who were drawn to the idea that all of God’s children are equal, and

who were seeking relief from the economically burdensome *cofradía* (religious brotherhood) system. Religious conversion and market production empowered younger, modernizing leaders to displace age-based community hierarchies and curtail dependency on town Ladinos.<sup>7</sup> Development was also marked by rising class divisions among villagers.

The decline of the traditional hierarchies and new conceptions of development and equality incited local challenges to Ladino dominance in the 1960s and 1970s. Educated indigenous leaders ran for mayor in progressive parties, ended municipal labor drafts, and fought against the Ladino takeover of communal land.<sup>8</sup> Indigenous activists found further encouragement from Maryknoll priests who, after 1968, were influenced by liberation theology, a political reading of the New Testament as a message of advancement for the poor. Politics in San Pedro after 1975 cannot be understood without appreciating the influence of the guerrilla movement. The Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP) was the first guerrilla organization to arrive in San Pedro, followed soon after by the Revolutionary Organization of the People in Arms (ORPA).<sup>9</sup>

I knew that it was impossible to measure precise levels of participation or sympathy almost twenty-five years after the fact, but through persistent and patient questioning it became clear that large numbers of indigenous Sampedranos across class and social divisions and some Ladinos saw the guerrillas favorably, at least at first, although more for their aims than their tactics.<sup>10</sup> This was most pronounced among the CA activists and developmentalists who saw the revolution as consistent with new Catholic teachings. Many Sampedranos interpreted the revolution as a continuation of the *lucha de los pobres* (the struggle of the poor) from the 1940s. Sampedranos with little or no land could not meet their subsistence needs or access the cash economy, and who thus depended on annual labor migrations to plantations on the South Coast, were enthusiastic about guerrilla demands for higher wages and land reform. The guerrillas tapped into a burgeoning “will to improve” to expand their following among rural villagers (Li 2007b). As the guerrillas held *charlas* (chats) about capitalist exploitation and plans for a socialist government, sympathetic villagers hid combatants, served as their lookouts, helped dig underground shelters, and prepared them food. Sampedranos favorable to the guerrillas were mainly sympathizers, not combatants, but many joined the Peasant Unity Committee (CUC), an indigenous-led peasant

organization formed in 1977 that was linked to the guerrillas.<sup>11</sup> By 1980, the poorest and most remote villages, especially those in the northern *finca* zone, where most villagers only rented land from *patrones* (bosses) to grow corn, had become *territorio libre* (liberated territory) where the guerrillas held open meetings. In villages nearer the town center, organizing remained more secretive. The guerrillas carried out several major actions in San Pedro, most notably a shootout with police in the marketplace that left one EGP combatant dead; the execution in 1979 of Gilberto Herrera, a *finquero* and local leader of the reactionary National Liberation Movement (MLN); and the burning of the municipal building in 1981.

Local perceptions of the guerrillas were never uniform and were shaped by class, religion, and livelihood. Certain evangelicals were notably critical of guerrilla rejections of state authority, and many otherwise sympathetic villagers objected to the use of violence, some fearing reprisals based on their experiences after 1954. Moreover, some indigenous military commissioners spied for the army, and *contratistas* (labor contractors) sided with the planters, as did some relatively well-off villagers who had gotten ahead growing, buying, or reselling coffee and who worried that the guerrillas would take their land or business. Landowning Ladinos, in general, saw the guerrillas as a threat to their property and workforce, if not their lives. Certain guerrilla actions, such as destroying electricity posts and bridges, strained their relationship with otherwise sympathetic villagers. But the largest criticism was of violence. One evangelical indigenous critic of the guerrillas was assassinated after threatening to report neighboring families to the army, hardening his extended family's opposition to the movement.<sup>12</sup> Divisions between guerrilla factions further worried sympathetic villagers, and local combatants chafed about Ladino dominance and misallocation of resources in the organization.<sup>13</sup> Despite this uneven reception, the guerrillas' message and presence transformed local political imaginaries, even among some detractors, and injected new energy into local struggles that preexisted and aided their arrival.

Considering democratic movements in twentieth-century Latin America, Greg Grandin (Grandin and Klein, 2011) identifies an "insurgent individualism . . . deeply rooted in the institutions and experiences of mass radical politics" (182):

Mid-twentieth century democracy offered a venue in which individuality and solidarity could be imagined as existing in sustaining relationship to

one another through collective politics directed at the state to demand justice. . . . Local political struggles related to other global conflicts and historical events allowed many to experience the world not in its illusionary static present but as evolving, as susceptible to change through action. (196)

This passage captures the zeitgeist in San Pedro, where revolutionary organizing was galvanized by modernizing indigenous leaders whose individual reputations were forged in collective struggles for empowerment. This amplification of agency was evident in indigenous challenges to a Lladino mayor's effort to sell communal land: an issue that exceeded guerrilla objectives and that guerrilla commanders likely viewed as a distraction or a strategic error. In 1978, for the first time since Arbenz, optimism for local and national struggles converged, at least momentarily, at the ballot box. Restive energies focused on the presidential campaign of Manuel Colom Argueta, who was the popular former mayor of Guatemala City and an advocate for labor rights and land reform who founded the United Front of the Revolution (FUR), a reformist party associated with the revolution.<sup>14</sup> Their hopes shattered with Colom Argueta's assassination prior to the elections. As regional guerrilla organizing and activity steadily increased in Huehuetenango from 1979 to 1981, driven in large measure by the intensification of death squad violence under the dictator Lucas García, many Sampedranos imagined themselves on the edge of a revolution, a perception heightened by the Nicaraguan revolution in 1979 and CUC's massive 1980 strike in the cane fields on the southern coast. This moment would not last.<sup>15</sup>

General Ríos Montt took power by coup in March 1982, announced amnesty for guerrillas willing to surrender, and started a “scorched-earth” campaign. Hoping to drive a wedge between the guerrillas and their civilian base, the army targeted entire villages for massacres that made no distinction between civilians and combatants. Dozens of massacres in Huehuetenango in 1982–1983 killed and displaced thousands. Army attacks in San Pedro increased dramatically in March 1982.<sup>16</sup> In addition, Ríos Montt ordered all male villagers ages 16–60 to join self-defense patrols (PAC). Resisters were doused in frigid water, imprisoned, tortured, and even killed.<sup>17</sup> Round-the-clock patrols instilled panoptic control, pressed fear into the minute crevasses of daily life, and forced villagers to take sides.<sup>18</sup> Rather than fight it out, local sympathizers abandoned the guerrillas and joined the patrols for protection.

Intense repression instilled fear and uncertainty as the army extended its tentacles by establishing permanent deployments in every highland town and continued to terrorize villagers. The army set a curfew, ran a village dragnet, tortured suspects to “confess” and name names, and ordered townspeople to dump disfigured bodies in the Selegua River. Many family members of the deceased fled, fearing for their lives.<sup>19</sup> Some Ladinos took advantage of the situation to denounce as guerillas indigenous leaders who threatened their authority; others were denounced over land disputes and personal grievances. The army installed a Ladino *alcalde* in 1982 and began to saturate villages with counterinsurgency dogma. Although local violence was ghastly, several Sampedranos felt lucky to have avoided the harsher atrocities suffered by other *municipios*, where a stronger guerrilla presence led to intra-village violence and more army massacres.<sup>20</sup> At the time, most indigenous Sampedranos hated Ríos Montt, both for the massacres and for establishing the patrols. The army commanded respect but was the embodiment of terror and racial oppression in the eyes of most villagers.

### Memory Politics in Postrevolutionary Guatemala

Control of the truth surrounding armed conflict, particularly Mayan memories of their role in this history, was a central aim of the counterinsurgency.<sup>21</sup> According to the army, Mayas never wanted the guerrillas in the first place; supporters were either coerced or tricked. Very few villagers were involved in guerrilla organizations, and those who were, for the most part, were the ones who were killed. In addition, army violence was the guerrillas’ fault for placing Mayas between “two armies.” In this version of the narrative, after inviting military repression the guerrillas, true cowards, fled, leaving the population defenseless. The army also claimed that the guerrilla movement never had a prayer of changing power at the national level, and even if they had, their goal of communism was utterly bankrupt. Killing subversives was thus deemed necessary to protect Guatemala from becoming “another Cuba.” Democracy and human rights were reframed as *babosadas* (stupid ideas) that would “bring consequences.” The army called guerrillas “subversives,” “terrorists,” “atheists,” and “delinquents” who stole and vandalized. Moreover, the civil

patrol was completely voluntary, an expression of popular repudiation of the revolution. The army “defended” Mayas from ideological manipulation, moral perdition, wrongheaded policies, and crime. Ladinos often voiced these sentiments, as did many Mayas.

In completely disqualifying revolutionary desire or demands, this framing ignores the popularity of guerrilla demands among indigenous villagers while normalizing the social and economic conditions that led many to entertain or embrace these politics. Furthermore, it blames illegitimate violence on the guerrilla presence and frames army attacks on Mayan communities as legitimate, ignoring that the violence often made no distinction between civilian and combatant, followed no due process of law, and involved torture, kidnapping, rape, and the killing of children and the elderly. It also depicts Mayas as infantile, weak-minded creatures who were easily misled and unable to make responsible decisions about their future. It portrays them as having no politics at all.

During over a decade of counterinsurgency, the army used the civil patrol system to hammer these resolutely depoliticizing and contradictory “truths” about political reality and history into the hearts and minds of indigenous villagers, a form of psychological development to prepare villagers for democracy.<sup>22</sup> One former village-level patrol captain showed me the book used to record the minutes of the village civil patroller meetings. The ledger recounted how villagers were routinely forced to denounce the guerrillas and to repeat admonishments about the dangers of human rights, communism, and democracy. Military officers and Ladino patrol captains from the town lectured them that under communism everyone would have to give up half of their land, no matter how much or little they owned, and they would be forced to bring everything they produced to the *alcalde*, who would ration out everyone’s food.

Traumatized villagers were reluctant to discuss not only the guerrillas but also the democratic revolution in the 1940s: the “silence on the mountain” was deafening (Wilkinson 2004). When they did speak, as with many Mayan communities the majority of Sampedranos publicly narrated their position during the armed conflict as having been “caught between two armies” and spoke publicly about people killed by the army, especially indigenous leaders, as having no relationship to the guerrilla movement. Even the most strident and moving public criticisms of the military erased any trace of local politics.

David Stoll (1993, 2009) takes Mayan expressions of the “two armies” discourse at face value. In *Between Two Armies* he describes the Ixiles as “dedicated neutralists,” and he provides Mayan testimony about guerrilla extortions of aid, recruits, information, and other forms of loyalty. His later work criticizes Rigoberta Menchú’s *testimonio* as guerrilla propaganda and scolds solidarity scholars who assert widespread popular support for resistance movements. Yves Le Bot (1995) similarly attributes Mayan reticence toward revolutionary politics to their communal orientation. Stoll concludes that in Ixil territory a small guerrilla presence led to military attacks, which led to increases in guerrilla support, forcing the military to resort to extreme violence.<sup>23</sup>

Human rights activists and scholars have criticized Stoll for blaming the violence on the guerrillas, echoing army discourse, and contradicting the Truth Commission’s core conclusion that colonial inequality, state violence, and racism sowed the seeds of conflict.<sup>24</sup> Most galling is Stoll’s refusal to acknowledge any influence of extreme violence and Orwellian social control on public memories of the revolution.<sup>25</sup> Recent historical and ethnographic research affirms widespread indigenous participation in the guerrilla movement, even if this participation was later disavowed.<sup>26</sup>

But even some criticisms of Stoll inadvertently rehearse some aspects of the “two armies” frame. For example, Sanford (2003) denounces Stoll and Le Bot for blaming the guerrillas for attacks on Mayan communities, an interpretation that she sees as an act of symbolic violence complicit with military attempts to whitewash genocide as the “killing of communists” (202–3). Alliances with the guerrillas, she contends, are not sufficient to explain the army’s targeted killing of civilians, including the elderly and children.<sup>27</sup> Sanford argues that Mayan “survivors who give testimony are speaking truth to power—whether the power of the army, guerrillas, local and national governments or the international community” (181). In framing Mayas as occupying a pure space outside of and in opposition to power, this formulation coincides with Stoll’s, especially when Mayas echo the “two armies” discourse.

McAllister (2003) describes how Maya Chupolenses fought hard for the guerrillas but disavowed their participation after their military defeat. Hale (2006b) also examines the conditions under which these “official” memories took root and continue to flourish among Mayas. He adopts a framework advanced by Rolph-Trouillot (1995), who distinguishes between two

types of historicity: what “actually happened”—“historicity one”—and the narrative frames through which past facts are organized and interpreted—“historicity two.” Events do not present themselves in narrative form with meanings intact; their contours and meanings are constituted in the present through different narratives and memorial practices that are constrained and enabled by power relations. Rolph-Trouillot further sees historical narrative as an important condition of possibility for political agency.

Hale (2006b) locates the ascendance of the “two armies” frame in relation to the rise of neoliberal multicultural governance. Around 1983, the military, eager to establish a veneer of legitimacy in the newly razed highlands in preparation for democratization, opened space for criticism of military excesses. Maya survivors, he argues, had a strong desire to process the terrifying experiences of the violence:

Many civilians—Mayans and Ladinos alike—find in the *dos demonios* image a resonance with previous experience and a source of solace: as victims rather than protagonists, they have less burden of responsibility for the problems spawned by the violence, greater claim for redress and more room for maneuver in the present. (108)

However, according to Hale, framing Mayas as victims rather than revolutionary agents also fulfills the desire for managed inclusion of indigenous groups within existing political economic structures. Although San Pedro was not a revolutionary stronghold like Chupol, a certain disavowal nevertheless approximates processes in San Pedro after the violence and through the peace accords. However, it does not fully capture the forces through which these denials were maintained almost a decade after. As I will recount below, I found a number of factors—fear, shame, investment in “innocent” identities, depoliticized conceptions of human rights, evangelical historical narratives, and campaign rhetoric—that fostered an atmosphere of public amnesia and uncertainty and new forms of agency that reinforced individual and collective disavowals, not only of participation in the guerrilla movement but of any traces of revolutionary or radical desire or politics in San Pedro’s past. I also encountered incipient challenges to this frame.

What are the implications of these denials for contemporary Mayan politics? McAllister argues that only by recognizing the prevalence of

Chupolense investments in the revolution can we appreciate them as full, historical agents. She sees the contemporary dilemma confronting Mayas as the question of how to affirm their role as both protagonists in and victims of the armed struggle in a political culture in which admitting involvement justified violence. The price of innocence is high indeed. Hale concurs. He identifies three dominant narrative frames through which Mayas encounter the past—"Mayanista," "two armies," and "revolutionary triumphalism"—and argues that none of these explain the heterogeneity and fluidity of Mayan political participation that he uncovered in Chimaltenango. The revolutionary frame, now "anachronistic," glosses over substantial problems with the guerrillas, especially divisions between indigenous intellectuals and leftist groups that grew as the war raged on. The Mayanista frame affirms Mayan agency after the conflict but not before or during, a move that Hale (2006b) calls a "Faustian bargain that runs the risk of undermining points of substantial overlap between these two political vectors, as well as some of the credibility, complexity and wisdom of these same Mayan actors in the present" (107). These narrative frames undermine the possibility of imagining how Mayas can pursue radical politics and still be Mayan, and under which Mayas and Ladinos can work together in a unified movement for common class interests without marginalizing ethnic concerns.<sup>28</sup> The solution for many politically engaged anthropologists and historians has been to recover obscured histories of Mayan revolutionary agency in order to reinvigorate postwar politics.<sup>29</sup> To *not* recover this history would be to treat the fruits of a genocidal counterinsurgency as untainted. In the end, there is no neutral way to talk about historical memory. But what about Mayas who did not identify with the guerrillas for a variety of reasons but nonetheless shared many of their demands? Treating revolutionary agency as a *sine qua non* of radical desire conflates rejection of the guerrillas with rejection of their objectives: a central goal of the counterinsurgency deployment of the "two armies" frame.

Diane Nelson (2009) warns against rigid categories of victim and victimizer that oversimplify fluid and multiple identities assumed by indigenous Guatemalans, especially in light of forced collaboration. She highlights emerging postwar identifications that transcend wartime binaries (the evil state versus good civil society) and open new spaces for political agency. Likewise, many Sampedranos have developed powerful attachments to

the “two armies” narrative and its associated denials of revolutionary agency and desire precisely because of the spaces that it opened. But these spaces were highly compromised.

### The Slow and Uneven Thaw of Imposed Memory

After the scorched earth and the establishment of the civil patrols, the simple accusation of guerrilla involvement carried a death sentence. The most ardent supporters fled or were killed, and many sympathizers fell into despair. Terrified villagers, regardless of prior involvement, began to publicly and desperately denounce the guerrillas and their demands in order to survive, even within their own families. Clandestine support for the guerrillas lingered in a few villages, then disappeared completely. Although some succumbed to the army’s pressure to *delatar* (betray one another), most villagers bound together in silence. One evening I listened on as male village leaders with different religious and political affiliations, including a former military commissioner, recounted proudly how they told the military nothing and kept their neighbors alive. One put his finger over his lips, said “*Shhh*,” and smiled.

Nevertheless, most community members became to some degree complicit in the violence against neighbors and even relatives who did not follow army orders. Some were more zealous and enthusiastic, but even those who harbored an ideological allegiance with the guerrillas and patrolled with *doble cara* (two faces) became agents of repression. Some revised past allegiances or sympathies toward an interpretation within which their actions caused less cognitive dissonance. These revised feelings were reinforced by the sense that the PAC was defending villagers from the army as well as the guerrillas, maintaining unity and organizing villages in pursuit of development.<sup>30</sup>

Fear continued to play a significant role in shaping public memories, even a decade after the peace accords. Many villagers worried that their names would appear on a list that could fall into the wrong hands.<sup>31</sup> Some were unwilling to discuss wartime events and told me so in no uncertain terms, having been accused for decades of guerrilla involvement, their lives repeatedly threatened, and having witnessed the torture and murder of friends and family. One person who eventually agreed to talk after avoiding

me for months told me that there were still townspeople—mostly Ladinos but also indigenous *orejas* (ears) and former military commissioners—who continued to spy for the army. He warned that my digging into local history would bring problems. Members of Antulio Morales' political coalition had formed a partial alliance with Ladino patrol leaders who enjoyed impunity and were still feared.<sup>32</sup>

The state monopoly of the truth and imposition of silence was never absolute, however, and peace negotiations heightened public desire to clarify the past. The exhumations of massacre sites and truth commissions that followed prompted numerous local memorializations of the victims and denunciations of victimizers. Although these have been publicized internationally by numerous human rights organizations as well as via postwar ethnographic accounts,<sup>33</sup> most towns in the indigenous highlands, San Pedro among them, have not carried out a public confrontation with the past. Nevertheless, postwar political transformations allowed new historical narratives to germinate and gain ground in a fledgling public sphere, provoking significant challenges to counterinsurgency understandings of politics and history. With the local military apparatus dismantled, fear was not the factor in shaping public memory that it once was. Privately and in hushed tones, some individuals told different stories.

Adherence to official narratives was noticeably slipping, not reverting to previous forms of thought but loosening the hold of imposed truths on public discourse. One sign of this change was that a growing number of Sampedranos who were opposed to the guerrillas in the 1970s had begun to believe that the guerrilla movement had been integral to the signing of the peace accords, an event that almost all Maya Sampedranos saw in a positive light.<sup>34</sup> Pedro Lopez, an evangelical and a former village leader of the civil patrols who had been steadfastly opposed to the guerrillas because he believed they murdered his father, expressed his reappraisal of the guerrilla movement succinctly. He stopped short of endorsing the guerrillas completely but recognized some positive outcomes of their struggle: "Today we can see that the guerrillas did something good. Everything is backward. Today things are better for indigenous people. There is space for us. Before, there was a lot of discrimination. Now there is more respect."

Although most Maya Sampedranos did not see the guerrilla movement or revolutionary ideology as a viable political position in the present, there

was a growing appreciation of the gains they made for indigenous people, particularly regarding treatment by Ladinos. Several individuals, including some who had vehemently denied guerrilla activities previously, later admitted privately, often proudly, their participation in or sympathy for the guerrillas, an indication that a different historical narrative might emerge. Nevertheless, revalorizations of the left outside of leftist parties and organizations typically provided a selective memory of revolutionary goals, conflating them with the far-more-moderate peace accords. And most “alternative” postwar visions of history—such as those echoed by many human rights and Mayan organizations and the Catholic Church—stayed within the “two armies” narrative frame.

Next to the truth commission reports, the most radical challenge to official history during the postwar period was the URNG (Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity), formed in 1982 and now a legal political party. The URNG was a significant political force in San Pedro, as evidenced by its third-place finish in the 2003 elections. An unabashedly revolutionary version of history was central to this party’s identity. It affirmed local support for the guerrillas, criticized the fundamental injustice of the state, denounced and sought retribution for state violence, and opposed mining concessions and the Free Trade Amendment. However, the leftist counter-narrative had not, by 2009, come close to displacing the denials that saturated the public sphere. If such denials were not empirically accurate and the guerrillas now constituted a legal political party, what other factors sustained these denials in the face of postwar challenges? Disavowals of the revolutionary past *and* the demands associated with that past found sustenance in a new landscape of memory marked by trauma, guilt, and humiliation; a desire for legitimate victimhood; depoliticized conceptions of human rights; and evangelical narratives.

## **The Democratic Landscape of Memory**

After living in the town center for several months and making extended trips to various villages, I took up residence in the village of Los Altenses, the birthplace of the first post-1982 indigenous political coalition. Before my arrival, I was informed about its political divisions, which followed largely along the lines of the three largest extended-family groups and were

related to, although not reducible to, different stances toward the guerrillas. I was told that one evangelical family, the Lopezes, had opposed the guerrillas; one Catholic family, the Ruízes, had supported, housed, and hid them, and recruited fellow villagers; and another Catholic family, the Bravos, most associated with development, had remained neutral (I later learned differently). All families publicly denied any participation in the guerrilla movement in 2004, and as far as I know continue to do so until today. Conflict between families during the war abated somewhat after the violence but had reemerged in a different form through party politics. All three families were united with José Antulio Morales' coalition since its emergence in the mid-1980s until 1999, when the family rumored to have had the strongest connection to the guerrillas split to join the FRG. Members of Antulio Morales' coalition criticized Ríos Montt as an assassin and could not understand why so many of their neighbors could support a man who had done so much violence to indigenous people and who they themselves had once hated so fervently.

One afternoon I arranged a meeting with the patriarch of the Ruíz family, who was an active member of Mariano Díaz's FRG coalition in the 1999 and 2003 election cycles. Upon my arrival to Rodrigo Ruíz's house, I was surprised to find all the adult male members of this family seated together. The sons, two of whom were teachers, were waiting for me and told me that they wished to participate in the interview alongside their father. I was excited that they were so eager to participate but was concerned that the interview might stay at the surface level in a group this size. They began the discussion by describing recent political divisions in the village. Although their candidate had won, electoral wounds were still fresh, and tempers were hot. After that discussion, I asked the question that had baffled their neighbors from a rival political coalition: why it was that this family, which had once supported the revolution, now supported Ríos Montt and the FRG? They quickly and testily informed me that the premise of my question was inappropriate. The eldest brother, a farmer in his late thirties, responded defensively:

We didn't have any part in the guerrillas. At least my uncle didn't participate. My father, no, he didn't participate either. They didn't carry a weapon. Those that did participate only gave them [the guerrillas] tortillas. But to go and fight? Not at all. Why are they in favor of Ríos Montt now, those that

participated? In that time, a person doesn't forget. When a person participates, they never forget. We're talking about the URNG and those that are still around. They are never going to help Ríos Montt. They had weapons. They already did that. But in our particular case here, we didn't have anything. What I mean is that we didn't take it [the revolution] into account. And then later, like my uncle said, it calmed down after Ríos Montt. [The PAC] was a good thing for the people. And then Ríos Montt himself thought about paying the people a little for their work. We gained our compensation. Who doesn't want money? That's why we wanted that candidate.

In the same breath, he denied his family's sympathy for the guerrillas, defined "participant" as "combatant," and praised Ríos Montt for "calming down" the violence with the PAC and now for paying them for their service. A few weeks later, one of the other sons, who was at that meeting but had not spoken, approached me privately. He told me that not only his family but also the other Catholic families had all participated in the guerrilla movement, not as combatants but as village-level collaborators and sympathizers, and that they had suffered greatly as a result. Choking back tears, he wanted me to know that his family had lived through fear of assassination, torture, and ridicule by their neighbors even though they too were collaborators. His family had borne the shame, and it was all for nothing.

Perhaps the most determinative element in the Ruíz family's contemporary denial was the then-obvious fact of the military defeat of the guerrillas: military criticisms of the guerrillas as doomed to fail seemed like indisputable facts. Another villager told me that the people had been "traumatized and humiliated" by the army and that they now refused to talk about the past. Much like what McAllister (2003) saw in Chupol, many villagers felt foolish for having ever having believed in the first place and felt guilty about the tragedy that ensued. Such sentiments relied on reading history backward, as if violence and failure were the only and inevitable results of revolutionary desire. Bitterness, recriminations, and shame stifled meaningful discussions about what the guerrilla movement or its signature demands meant to villagers at the time; misgivings calcified into long-standing rifts.

One of the most emphatic discourses of revolutionary disavowal came from family members and friends of individuals who were killed by the military; these emblematic deaths were key sites for the construction of

public memories. Surviving family members denied any involvement that their loved ones might have had with the guerrillas, insisting that they were innocent of the crime for which they had been assassinated. This was evident in the way that Juana Solares, a war widow, mourned her deceased husband, Raúl, a locally famous and respected indigenous leader who was killed by the military in the early 1980s. “She’s a widow, a victim. Go talk to her!” one prominent Ladino told me when I told him I was interested in town history during the war. Juana had a good-natured, somewhat irreverent humor. As we began to meet and talk about town politics and history, our conversations often turned toward her husband. I had already heard of Raúl from others and hoped Juana might tell me more about what he had hoped for and believed in.

One of the first indigenous primary school teachers in the town, Raúl was well-known throughout San Pedro as an outspoken and fearless indigenous leader. He had a strong personality and was fairly intimidating because he was tall and spoke with a booming voice. As a teacher and in public life, Raúl adamantly and vocally supported the then-radical idea that indigenous people were equal to Ladinos: that they could become just as smart and educated as Ladinos and should be treated and carry themselves accordingly. After normal school hours he stayed on and taught men from the village to read and write, always encouraging them and talking about politics and advancement.

Unsolicited, Juana told me how the army grabbed Raúl and that neighbors heard his screams all night emanating from the military base in middle of town. She described in unsettling detail how the soldiers cut out his tongue and lacerated his broken body. His terrified and heartbroken siblings fled to Mexico and Canada, but Juana remained. As she lamented the cruelty and arbitrariness of Raúl’s fate, she insisted that “*El no tenía delito*” (“He had committed no crime”), in reference to his involvement in the revolution. That this statement was intended to give an additional emotional charge to her story was evident in her trembling speech and the silence that always followed. In Juana’s narrative, powerful Ladinos had Raúl killed to keep control over town politics. In her telling, Raúl was a martyr, “working for the community,” the opposite of Antulio Morales, who was a *chucho por pisto* (a dog for money).

Many Mayan Sampederanos I spoke with deviated from Juana’s narrative. Several insisted that Raúl had been with the guerrillas and that

he was in fact a local guerrilla leader. One young man personally blamed Raúl for ordering the assassination of his grandfather, a military commissioner and labor contractor. As a widow, it was Juana’s obligation, and perhaps compulsion, to uphold the reputation of her deceased husband, to defend him as a good person. This caretaking proceeded according to her estimations of community expectations about proper behavior. It was not simply his memory at stake; her identity and honor were deeply entangled in her deceased husband’s reputation. Like many Guatemalan war widows, Juana was incredibly brave. She had at the time publicly denounced the killing to the authorities, to no avail. Central to her claim was that the state had no evidence and that Raúl never had a trial; they had violated due process. Since the peace accords, she sought compensation from the state. At first she was denied his teacher’s insurance policy, but she eventually received it. She tried repeatedly to get a *resarcimiento* (restitution) payment and asked if I could help take her case to an institution. She seethed at the state’s renegeing on its promise of *resarcimiento* and the politicization of the process—the latter being a key point of contention among leftist organizations in the post-accords period.

Regardless of whether or not Juana was willfully obscuring aspects of Raúl’s past, if one were to believe the denials of all those whose family members were killed by the military, one would have to conclude that no indigenous leaders supported the guerrillas. There were certainly many reasons why Juana might have wanted to deny Raúl’s revolutionary past. One was a conception of legitimate victimhood that formed during the period of intense violence and was transformed by the threat of violence and the postwar associations sutured to the idea of the guerrilla movement. These new meanings required the deceased be understood as “innocent” when killed in order to be legitimate and worthy of mourning, and focused on the state’s negligence according to standards of evidence and procedure. Conceding the army’s logic of criminality enabled family members to speak of the injustice of their loved ones’ deaths. Insistence on innocence subtly balanced the peculiar needs of this situation: it allowed public criticisms of the military but avoided state reprisals, it avoided recrimination for local guerrilla excesses, and it maximized the possibility of material benefits for the family members. Most importantly, denying Raúl’s participation allowed Juana to remember him as a martyr for indigenous rights and a hero, not a “criminal” who “deserved” to die.

The emergence of human rights discourses during militarization and their rise in prestige after the peace accords and truth commissions gave official weight to criticisms of state violence. Quite controversially, human rights offered the only available language with which to criticize state violence in the decade between 1985 and 1996. Although associated with the left, the dominant human rights discourse, at least as it was articulated in San Pedro, reinforced the “two armies” narrative and a restrictive, ahistorical conception of politics. Human rights denunciations of both factions on the grounds that each committed abuses, while technically true, obscured significant differences regarding the extent and nature of acts committed by each group. Human rights criticisms focused more on the army, especially after the truth commissions, but typically erased the historical causes of the armed conflict and replaced the political project of the revolution with an appeal to proceduralism. Human rights often had no politics except human rights.

The goal of human rights was not political transformation but the marking and punishing of offenders to bring their actions into accord with a norm of conduct that was nonviolent and democratic: disagreements, in this project, should be resolved through nonviolent democratic means. Violence was justified in this conception *only* in the name of defending legal procedures and the rule of law, and such violence was not seen as political. Violence became a problem *only when it exceeded reasonable and necessary limits or did not follow legal procedure*. Poverty, social suffering, inhumane conditions—these ordinary features of a political system based on class and race hierarchies—were not marked as violence or as problematic, but as ordinary background without history. Violence became political, antidemocratic, and illegal when it was used to change these background conditions and challenge the legitimacy and sovereignty of a political order that defined them as normal and legal. The dominant focus on political rights ignored social or material rights entirely and did not recognize a relationship between structural and political violence, a core conclusion of the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH).

Rather than a wholesale critique of political violence, human rights discourse in San Pedro dovetailed with the military definition of guerrillas as criminals. This was made clear by Arnulfo Bravo, a community leader and former candidate for mayor, in response to my question about whether the army’s actions during the war were justified. Answering slowly and

deliberately with a gravitas honed by serious consideration, Arnulfo said that human rights should have guided military violence:

[The violence] was not justified. Because the people they killed, some of them had not committed a crime. One time in Chemiche [a village] there was a man from Santiago Atitlán [a town in the department of Sololá]. He was mentally ill. He would go house to house asking for food, clothes, somewhere to sleep. Who knows how the army found him? They said he was a guerrilla and hung him under the bridge. He wasn't a guerrilla, and that was unjust. Neither the government nor the guerrillas alone are responsible for the violence. Neither was justified. Figure out who are the people involved in the guerrillas. They should have done it like that. Make a diagnostic. Who are those who are most involved with the guerrillas? Look closely; justify it well. In the same way that they do it in *derechos humanos* (human rights). Look clearly at the individuals who are the guiltiest and pull them up by the roots. But [the army] grabbed whomever—those who had committed crimes, those that didn't—the same.

Instead of assuming their guilt, Bravo thought there needed to be a trial and a process of gathering evidence until incontrovertible proof was found. This was an explicit critique of the indiscriminant tactics deployed by the army for decades but not of counterinsurgency in general. In his view, human rights were needed to accurately identify people to kill! Bravo thought that the guerrillas should have used reason: “How great it would have been if [the guerrillas] had gone directly to the government to debate in order to improve the situation. . . . No one worried to say, ‘Look, men, let's not kill anymore. It would be better if we quit.’”

This notion that moral individuals calling for a parley could have prevented this tragedy is undercut by the fact that the Guatemalan army murdered thousands of nonviolent dissidents without remorse. It also asserts that the point of war was violence itself rather than a struggle between incompatible alternatives. Bravo's adoption of a “neutral” human rights stance equated guerrilla and army violence, bracketed their political projects, and merged democratic and counterinsurgency definitions of illegality. Local interpretations of human rights such as Bravo's summarily excluded guerrilla demands from legitimate democracy and justified the routine violence of the state to preserve order, provided that it followed procedure, using democratic means to fulfill counterinsurgent ends. Assessing the toll

of decades of state and para-state violence against working-class politics in Barrancabermeja, Colombia, Lesley Gill argues that “a limited conception of individual ‘human rights’ has replaced more ambitious dreams of social transformation. More generally, political terror has led to the atrophy of working class consciousness and solidarity, while individual rights and actions have become the new, narrower political horizon for working people” (2016, 24). Narrow conceptions of human rights enacted similar antipolitics to reinforce counterinsurgent and neoliberal aims in San Pedro.

Protestant missionary work in Central America has its roots in the mid-twentieth century and was driven in large part by conservative US evangelicals, many of whom were supportive of militaristic foreign policy, adhered to a prosperity gospel, and sought converts among poor peasants, often with CIA assistance.<sup>35</sup> After the extreme violence, and with the Catholic Church tainted by association with the guerrillas, many Mayas joined evangelical churches for protection. Virginia Garrard-Burnett argues that villagers were drawn to protestantism because it “promised solace and peace and helped reorder the lives of people whose families, communities, and psyches had been ruined by violence” (2010, 136). Most Pentecostal sects in Guatemala were independent and had a decentralized, lightly institutionalized model focused on personal revelation and Bible study that spread rapidly after the worst of the violence. Pentecostals were usually united around a more apocalyptic vision born out of wartime desolation, beliefs that were “congruent with the existential reality of the era” (134). Pentecostalism also fit Ríos Montt’s narrative, which cast the counterinsurgency as a trial out of which will emerge a new Guatemala based on morality, law and order, and respect for God.<sup>36</sup>

I found echoes of this discourse among protestants in San Pedro, especially Pentecostals. Ernesto Rivas was a lay indigenous preacher who led Sunday worship services at a small new Pentecostal church in his village. A learned man who had studied the Bible, he had a self-assured attitude about his faith. He was also a FRG supporter in 2003. When I asked him how he rationalized, as a Christian, supporting Ríos Montt, given the allegations of violence, he made recourse to Biblical prediction:

Doesn’t the Bible say that there is going to be war, nation against nation, and neighbor against neighbor? The only thing that people can do in times

of war is to try not to get involved and to pray to God for it to end. Ríos Montt is not responsible. It was his job. He had no choice. This is going to happen. He should not be judged. They can't do anything to him anyway. Ríos Montt is *fuerte* [strong]. This case [his indictment for genocide] is political.

This perspective on history removes agency from the actors and places it in the hands of God. Everything is a part of God's plan, in which his son would return after a cataclysm. For Ernesto, this divine agency operated through Ríos Montt, exonerating him for his actions, however evil. From this perspective, dwelling on the violence or prosecuting Ríos Montt was pointless, as was avoiding the FRG based on his role in prior events. This nihilistic stance engaged in a kind of “two armies” narrative in that it depicted both sides as equally flawed players in a preordained end-time drama whose specific outcome was of no real consequence in relation to planetary cataclysm.

Guided by such perceptions, the vast majority of evangelicals participated in worldly politics for the same mundane reasons as their neighbors: to get “projects” and personal assistance. In fact, condemnations of the worldly wickedness of all politics and politicians doubled as a blanket response to accusations of hypocrisy leveled against any participants in electoral politics, not just evangelicals. Although I expected that Ernesto and other Pentecostals would be particularly loyal to Ríos Montt, they were scattered among various parties, and the ones I spoke with did not view his candidacy as the path to a New Guatemala. Instead, evangelical discourses shaped political conceptions in that refusal to make exceptions between people gave moral force to criticisms of the unequal exchanges and unfair distributions of development and other resources associated with party politics. They formed part of an emergent democratic imaginary that was a reaction to the failures of neoliberal democracy and development.

### **Amnesia, Uncertainty, and Opportunism**

Sampedranos were quite aware of the monumental changes in the decade after the peace accords. The violence had touched nearly every family,

and they had endured immense suffering. But many indigenous Sampedranos, especially younger ones, were less clear about specifics: What had caused the war? Who killed who and why? How had Sampedranos participated? Such topics were rarely discussed publicly, and when they were it was often in a contradictory fashion on this new landscape of memory. A sustained critical public confrontation with events in the recent past had never happened in San Pedro, and perhaps never will. I attempted to coordinate a public memory project there in 2009, soliciting collaboration from villagers and rural teachers with the assistance of the director of the local high school, a Ladino in his thirties. The idea was to gain a more comprehensive view of events in each village and to share the information with the town. We quickly abandoned the plan when he began receiving death threats over his cell phone.

This silence contributed to widespread confusion and uncertainty about the past, the sowing of which had been a core counterinsurgency objective.<sup>37</sup> One example of the implications of this lack of historical information was Jeremías Lopez, a young Maya who was finishing high school in 2004. He was a quiet but serious person, a good student who had been active in party politics with the right-wing PAN Party. We spoke on September 15, 2004, Guatemala's National Independence Day. That morning, schoolchildren had paraded through town, marching to military-sounding drumbeats; carrying posters with images of the national flag, the *quetzal* (the nearly extinct national bird, also the name of the national currency); singing songs; and reading poems. When I asked what Independence Day meant to him, he said that he only recently learned about indigenous dispossession from reading a book assigned in a high school history class:

Five hundred years of exploitation and slavery!? When I read this, it was like the mountain fell on top of me. Five hundred years? Why hadn't anyone ever told me? We never studied anything like that in *primeria* or *basica* [elementary or middle school]. I was so angry. I think they should teach these things at a younger age. And then we read poems about Guatemala Linda [a nationalist poem]. We don't even know what Guatemala is. It's terrible.

It was jarring to see someone as mild-mannered as Jeremías so incensed, but his sense of having been cheated and betrayed was understandable.

In our subsequent conversations, I found that he was equally uninformed about the armed conflict and its local manifestations.

Following the dominant human rights narrative of the post-accords period, few Sampedreros believed that the violence of the early 1980s was justified. Most felt strongly that it was a grave violation of human dignity and a manifestation of deep-seated racism against indigenous people, but locals seemed divided on the question of who was responsible. Many voiced considerable anger toward Ríos Montt. The Catholic Church echoed this critique, along with many human rights organizations and social movements, and argued that carrying out multiple crimes against humanity rendered him unfit to be president of a democracy that supposedly respected human and indigenous rights.

Anticipating these allegations, and assisted by irreconcilable interpretations of the past, the FRG circulated a whitewashed version of Ríos Montt's historical role. They portrayed Ríos Montt as a benevolent leader who ended the violence by forming the civil patrols and later remembered to pay the patrollers, not as the general who gave the order for genocide.<sup>38</sup> They instead blamed the massacres on the previous dictator, Lucas García. The FRG campaign thus blended Ríos Montt's counterinsurgency discourse with military concessions to critiques of excessive violence. While accurate for some places, this chronology did not fit events in most of the highlands, or events in San Pedro, where the most intense wave of military violence happened after Ríos Montt took control of the state by coup in 1982 and where villagers at the time blamed him for the violence. Non-FRG supporters denounced this exculpatory narrative as craven opportunism, whereas FRG supporters denounced allegations against Ríos Montt as political smears. It was a testimony to the central role of historical memory and political identity that disputes about tragic events from twenty years before figured centrally into heated debates about party alignments. Although both criticisms and defenses of Ríos Montt assumed that killing Mayas en masse during the war was immoral, neither asserted that these massacres thwarted a political movement in which their town had played a part.

Uncertainty regarding the past left many young politically active Sampedreros with few tools to discern between competing claims swirling about Ríos Montt during the campaign season. I asked Rogelio Martínez, a thirty-four-year-old Maya who was a soldier in the late 1980s and later a local organizer for the FRG, what he thought about Ríos Montt's alleged

involvement in genocide. He spoke while his wife nodded and smiled in agreement, turning her head to make eye contact while she also cooked, served us coffee, and entertained their three young children:

In that time there was war. The military and the guerrilla. When Ríos Montt was governing Guatemala, the thing was calming down. When he made the law that the people patrolled, so that they took care of themselves, of each other. And that is where the war went calming down. But the people say that that was by Ríos Montt's doing when many were killed. I had a very young age in that time, but I have learned many things—that it wasn't Ríos Montt; it was Lucas García. When Ríos Montt came in, the thing calmed down. Perhaps some people were killed in this time, but it wasn't his doing. Rather sometimes between themselves. There are times they sell us out in another *municipio*, and from there they come and grab us. They say it was Ríos Montt, but I don't believe it, with the little opportunity that I have. The other thing is that I didn't see it. The one who knows the most is our God. I could perhaps easily say that it was [Ríos Montt]. But I didn't see anything. We don't have any proof. How are we going to judge our neighbor?

Rogelio was a true believer in Ríos Montt. I found it interesting, however, that although he had served in the army several years after the peak of the counterinsurgency, he did not defend the army's use of violence. Like others in the FRG, he blamed the violence on Lucas García and credited Ríos Montt for "calming things down" with the civil patrols. He added that the media invented lies about Ríos Montt, saying that he had personally attended a rally where the press had falsely reported that Ríos Montt had been booed. Martínez echoed the official party discourse while professing ignorance about the actual events of the past, claiming that they were beyond knowing. In the absence of a clear, disinterested truth, he subscribed to the standard army-FRG propaganda line. Ultimately, his response to allegations against Ríos Montt devolved into extreme skepticism and abdication: "But I didn't see anything. We don't have any proof. How are we going to judge our neighbor?" Obviously, he had a personal interest in this whitewashed interpretation, but the fact that he could publicly adopt this perspective, believe it, and not be subject to constant ridicule was a testimony to widespread uncertainty about the past, generated in part by the counterinsurgency, reinforced by ongoing denials of revolutionary politics and through party politics.

Many party members believed in this narrative, others were unsure, and some cynically toed the line to win the election. Confusion about the past, enhanced by the politically motivated rehabilitation of counterinsurgency psyops, gave Martínez and many others plausible deniability regarding Ríos Montt's past actions, a convenient agnosticism that figured into their democratic decision making. Several years later, Edgar Velásquez, a young, college-educated Maya and high-ranking FRG supporter, told me that "after the violence, the people were scared into silence, and that same silence helped the FRG." This "public amnesia" designed to sever grassroots connections to the guerrilla movement was an important condition under which participation in authoritarian populism became thinkable, at least publicly defensible with a claim to a legitimate and democratic social identity.

Involvement in politics created a significant personal interest in circulating certain narratives about the violence. After meeting and interviewing Mariano Díaz in 2009, I realized that he knew more than he let on in public and that he had been too involved with governing and later too invested in a future in politics to disengage from calculated impression management. It was hard to say if he was unaware of the stakes of past political struggles or if he simply thought that they were irrelevant in the present and that invoking them could jeopardize his relationship with party bosses. Several years after this campaign, Edgar Velásquez, an FRG leader, confessed to me that he had willingly misrepresented what he believed to be the truth of Ríos Montt's past on the campaign trail, explaining that national politics was irrelevant, adding that you never see the truth of a person's heart in politics. Lying, even about something so tragic and consequential, was a prerequisite for democratic success.

## **The Moral Function of Memory**

Counterinsurgency discourses about "two armies" continued to play a major role in shaping public memory in San Pedro, where, in addition to fear, they were supported by investments in identities that took shape after the violence. Denial of leftist politics—including support for leftist demands—allowed criticisms of the military in dangerous times and were crucial to the reconstitution of valorized subjectivities among victims and

survivors. These denials, configured by the landscape of memory in San Pedro since the 1980s, stunted the reappraisal of the guerrilla movement that was taking place after the peace accords and significantly limited indigenous democratic agency. For younger FRG supporters especially, public denials and uncertainty gave plausibility to a sanitized narrative about Ríos Montt's role in the violence.

Reflecting on the psychological dimensions of the army's political-military project, Jennifer Schirmer (1998, 24) writes the following:

Yet the very reason for the need for psychological warfare and social intelligence gathering is the military's implicit understanding of both their responsibility for the massacre campaign and their subsequent scurrilous image in highland communities brutally ravaged by the early 1980s campaigns. Given this legacy, gaining their hearts and erasing the minds of the Sanctioned Mayan may prove to be a more difficult task than the military bargained for.

Indeed, the "two armies" discourse was the supreme Mayan act of war-time resistance, a refusal of army denunciations of Mayas as guerrillas who deserved to die. It was based in part on real experiences; most of those killed during decades of counterinsurgency violence were indeed innocents, even by the army's own twisted standards, and certainly in the minds of most villagers at the time they were murdered. Moreover, the guerrillas made many errors, and many Sampedranos dissented from their methods and goals, misgivings that grew as the war went on and the defeat of the guerrillas became inevitable. With their enemy vanquished, the army shifted its discourse in response to local criticisms of the violence alongside efforts to reestablish legitimacy through providing development.

The "two armies" discourse drew from real experiences, but the counterinsurgency reduced and modified the memories of the past, cutting out the moment before the violence when villagers were emotionally connected to the revolution or at least in broad agreement with its central demands. Mayan efforts to construct socially approved but resistant identities under these restricted conditions smothered a more complicated understanding of the affinities and overlaps, both historical and possible, between indigenous and revolutionary politics. The codification of a sanitized critique of violence and its promotion through the civil patrol system were understood as a process of development. These counterinsurgency

memories and the identities invested in them revealed deep complicities between counterinsurgency and neoliberal democracy; legitimated sanctioned forms of resistance as democratic but disqualified more radical visions; and constituted a powerful relay within neoliberal governance. The army’s deliberate production of uncertainty further impaired villagers’ ability to discern among rival historical claims. Truth commission reports attempted to clear up this confusion, but their findings were not well-known at the local level and were often filtered through depoliticized notions of human rights that also excluded revolutionary politics without question.

Having conceded that guerrillas were criminals and claiming that no one participated in their movement made advocating political demands that seemed “revolutionary” exceedingly difficult even after the peace accords. While resistant to state violence, these new identities were forged within a narrative space of neoliberal democracy that excluded national political transformation. In 2004 and years later, discourses that explicitly linked local desires for well-being to change political and economic structures were marginalized to the point of indecipherability within official democratic spaces. Even the public criticisms of Ríos Montt in San Pedro focused only on the fact of his killings, not the *intentions* or *effects* of those killings, which were to crush rural political organizations and grassroots hopes for radical social transformation. Uncertainty about the past did more than elide potential alternatives; it also contributed to the conditions under which some villagers considered Ríos Montt a legitimate candidate.

Laurence Kirmayer writes that “it is a paradox of freedom that the moral function of memory depends on the constraints of social and cultural worlds to provide a limited range of narrative forms with which to construct coherent stories of ourselves” (1996, 193). All narratives entail situated perspectives and desires, and contain erasures and dangers. It is not a question of whether or not to adopt a perspective on the past or how to find a neutral truth, but which inevitably constrained perspective will prevail and to what effect. Counter-memories that challenged core tenets of counterinsurgency truth were emerging in San Pedro’s indigenous villages alongside political discourses that questioned imbalances of political and economic power at the heart of Guatemalan society. For many Ladinos, however, maintaining a positive identity required narratives that

downplayed their complicity (enthusiastic or reluctant) in repression or discrimination. For their part, many Mayan Sampedranos sought narratives that captured important parts of their experience, especially experiences with violence, while shielding them from reprisals and protecting them from criticism for their complicity.

Nelson (2009) asks what forms of commemoration might be appropriate for “the complexity of identifications and the agency of those killed and wounded” (109). While recognizing the importance of official memory projects, she warns against delving into the past to assign blame, to fix a stable image of victims and oppressors in order to punish the wrongdoers, noting that “struggles against impunity . . . alone . . . cannot fix Guatemala, or any other place” (113). Remembering the past differently may disrupt these identities, may reopen old wounds, and could lead to new conflicts—even violence—and should ideally happen in a way that allows space for individuals and collectives to rethink their identities. But forgetting may be no less painful than remembering, and the “two armies” narrative does its own violence, consigning communities to silence and shame while denying the existence of movements toward social democracy and redistribution for which many fought and died and whose defeat is part and parcel of their current malaise.

Recognizing widespread indigenous investments in the guerrilla movement does not imply that all supported it—they did not—and were thus responsible for or deserving of what followed—they were not—nor is it a call to return to violence. But acknowledging their historical connection to indigenous politics underscores the indispensability of revolutionary demands to any meaningful conception of democracy or indigenous autonomy. Repairing connections between indigenous and leftist politics need not involve fixing identities, drawing bright lines between good and bad actors, or imposing a “correct” politics from the outside, but it is folly to assume that all historical narratives are equally valid, ethical, or politically fertile. New thinking about the past in the process of contemporary struggles should not be limited to the confines of the revolutionary left, but excluding all trace of radical or revolutionary desire reflects and reinforces the foundational violence of Guatemalan democracy.