

ONE

Introduction

Body Politics and Quincentennial Guatemala

In interviews Guatemalans speak of their nation as a wounded body.¹ When asked about Mayan cultural rights activism, both nonindigenous Guatemalans (ladinos) and Maya say that it is a “finger in the wound” (*un dedo en la llaga*), suggesting that attempts to address ethnic difference are painful proddings, irritating interventions. The metaphor was frequently deployed in conversations and in the press in the years surrounding 1992, the Columbus Quincentennial, a watershed for indigenous organizing. An editorialist in the newspaper *La Hora* warned against “enthusiasm for indigenous languages . . . because this is a dangerous political game against national unity. . . . It is a finger in the wound” (11 August 1990).² The Mayan activist Pop Caal makes a similar point: “The ladino [nonindigenous] tries to erase and put a veil over the problem, not because he is convinced that discrimination does not exist, but because he is afraid that putting a finger in the national wound will stir up conflicts between both groups” (Bastos and Camus 1993, 27).

This metaphor suggests that the wound afflicts a body politic, a nation that exists but is not whole or complete.³ Is the wound ethnic difference

1. I have identified some people by their generic position rather than their name, usually at their request. Whenever I quote someone without a citation, this was a personal communication in an interview or informal conversation. I rarely taped formal interviews, instead taking handwritten notes, which were later transcribed and fleshed out. For less formal talks, I typed up notes from memory. All of the interviews with Guatemalans were conducted in Spanish, and all translations of spoken and written words are mine unless otherwise noted, with copious translation assistance from José Fernando Lara, especially with the jokes.

2. Enrique Sam Colop (1991) has analyzed this editorial, as has Kay Warren (n.d.).

3. It is a nation which is not one—a term I borrow from Luce Irigaray (1985b) to mean it is not one in the sense of singular and undivided, nor is it necessarily a nation at all. The met-

draining the body politic of its vitality, and is Mayan organizing a finger in the wound because it reminds that body of its racism? Or is racism itself the finger in an always existing wound caused by stress fractures along gender, class, geographic, and cultural lines (lines, I argue, that are necessary for the body's very intelligibility)? Because there is a body in the metaphor, but a body that is deeply contradictory—scarred and wounded by violence—I think the metaphor is useful for describing the body politic of the Guatemalan nation. Guatemala is emerging from a civil war that displaced one-eighth of the population and left some one hundred and twenty thousand people dead or disappeared: the wounded body is thus also terribly material.

Now, the transnational system that undergirds current processes of globalization is grounded in the building blocks of whole, homogeneous, and functioning “modern nations,” and Guatemala cannot be understood outside this framework. Where such a body politic is lacking (as in ethnically diverse postcolonial countries), this lack is blamed on “primordial” identifications that hark back to the premodern era. Tradition and ethnicity are found guilty of holding nations back, denying them the benefits of civilization and modernization. Or worse, these timeless and apparently irrational identifications rip the nation apart through the actual wounding of bodies in civil war and counterinsurgency.⁴

This book critically examines such notions of the nation and of ethnic identification. I argue that ethnicity and tradition are not always already there, nor are they naturally opposed to the modern nation relying on the homogenizing state to repress these differences. Instead, in the wounded body politic of Guatemala, modernity and tradition, nation and ethnicity are interpenetrated on every side—and the state, rather than trying to erase multiple identifications, is a productive site for their articulation.

This term *articulation* condenses many of the concerns of the book. I use it to mean a relation, a joining that creates new identifications and social formations (as in the *relational* identifications of Maya and ladino—a.k.a.

aphor of the wounded body is also deployed by Chicana(o) theorists to discuss the nation which is not one (neither singular nor technically a nation) of border cultures. Gloria Anzaldúa says, “1,950 mile-long open wound dividing a *pueblo*, a culture, running down the length of my body. . . . The US-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again” (1987, 2–3). Similarly, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, writing on border culture and deterritorialization, signs off “from the infected wound” (1987). The Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka (1996) also evokes the metaphor of the wounded body to describe his postcolonial nation.

4. Guatemala, Peru, Northern Ireland, Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and Sri Lanka form a short list of world “hot spots” where, despite nods to histories of colonization and class-based antagonisms, popular (and too often social-scientific) understandings rely on the notion of primordial hatreds.

non-Maya).⁵ Articulation is recombinant. As Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe argue, it changes as it joins, creating “a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice” (1985, 105). What I am naming Quincentennial Guatemala might also be termed “postcolonial” in the sense that after five hundred years we have no access to a moment before the articulations among Europe, the Americas, Africa, capitalist modes of production, *milpa* (corn) culture, Christian god, Mayan gods, Spanish and the array of indigenous languages, and so on: in another word, all of the relations joined into Columbus’s mistaken coining of *Indian*. There are no identifications in Guatemala that were not formed *in relation*. In chapter 2, I suggest that an analytics I call “fluidarity” may be appropriate for dealing with such identifications in flux.

To articulate also means to join words together to make sense (common and otherwise), a meaning that foregrounds the struggles over representation that so engage Maya and ladino in Guatemala. In turn, *to be articulate* means to speak well, to express oneself clearly, a characteristic that many ladinos find quite uncanny when wielded by the traditionally disempowered: for example, Mayan women represented by Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú.⁶ *Articulation* also carries the sense of “coupling”: with all the pleasures and dangers of such an intimate activity—as well as the generational hopes and fears of miscegenation or “race improvement” that link the coupling of individual bodies with the reproduction of the body politic. In Quincentennial Guatemala, the state is increasingly engaged in articulating these various processes.

This book is an ethnography of that state as it emerges from thirty years

5. Stuart Hall says,

By the term “articulation,” I mean a connection or link which is not necessarily given in all cases, as a law or a fact of life, but which requires particular conditions of existence to appear at all, which has to be positively sustained by specific processes, which is not “eternal” but has constantly to be renewed, which can under some circumstances disappear or be overthrown, leading to the old linkages being dissolved and new connections—re-articulations—being forged. It is also important that an articulation between different practices does not mean that they become identical or that the one is dissolved into the other. Each retains its distinct determinations and conditions of existence. However, once an articulation is made, the two practices can function together, not as an “immediate identity” . . . but as “distinctions within a unity.” (1985, 113–114)

See also Gramsci 1989; Hall 1986; Morley and Chen 1996; Slack 1996; Althusser 1971; and Laclau and Mouffe 1985.

6. Ms. Menchú received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992, an honor announced just a few days after October 12, 1992—hour zero of the Columbus Quincentennial. She is well known for her testimonial, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, written in collaboration with Elizabeth Burgos-Debray (1984), and for her tireless efforts for human and indigenous peoples’ rights (discussed in chapters 2 and 5).



Figure 1. “*Encuentro de Dos Mundos, 1492–1992*” (Clash of two worlds, 1492–1992). Postcard. Copyright Daniel Hernández Salazar. Published with kind permission.

of civil war and military dictatorship, and as it relates to—and thus helps to constitute—an emerging ethnic identity: the Maya. But the book is also about the emerging *ladino* identity. Traditionally defined only negatively—as not-Indian—and assumed to control the state and the economy, this identity cannot help but change as the Maya transform what it means to be Indian and as the state increasingly becomes a site and stake of struggle.

So what I am calling Quincentennial Guatemala is the sickening fear, the fierce exhilaration, and the doggedly persistent hope of these intricately articulated emergings. *Quincentennial Guatemala*, a term that refers to the five-hundred-year anniversary of Christopher Columbus’s 1492 voyage, encompasses these anxieties and aspirations in the context of the country’s recent history while emphasizing the still painful wounds of the Conquest. *Quincentennial Guatemala* is a condensed way of talking about complex processes like the election of a civilian government in 1985, the decade-long peace process that culminated in December 1996 with signed peace accords, struggles on the terrain of the state over what postwar Guatemala will look and feel like for non-Maya and Maya alike, and the explosion in organizing around Mayan identity—galvanized in part by global reactions to 1992, which produced a flurry of hemispheric meetings, Rigoberta Menchú’s Nobel Peace Prize, and the United Nations declaring first a Year and then the Decade of Indigenous People.

Twenty years ago, the only Maya in Guatemala were on thousand-year-old glyphs and in tourism literature. Until about the mid 1980s, the word *Maya* was primarily used in archaeological discourses to refer to the builders of Tikal (the “Classic” Maya city, probably abandoned by the ninth century A.D.), in linguistics (referring to Maya trunk languages), and in government tourism campaigns designed to lure foreigners carrying hard currency with the promise of an exotic ancient past. *Maya* was not used popularly, or by those self-identifying, to refer to existing indigenous people. But in Quincentennial Guatemala, indigenous activists are redeploing the term *Maya* to refer to members of Guatemala’s twenty-one distinct ethnic-linguistic communities, who have traditionally identified primarily with their communities of origin, secondarily with their ethnolinguistic group, and only distantly if at all as indigenous. The term has been appropriated to claim everyone related to the linguistic trunk that unites such disparately identified groups as the pre-Conquest K’iche’s, Kaqchikeles, and Tz’utujiles, whether or not these groups descended directly from the builders of Tikal. Mayan organizers refer to the work of creating activists and of salvaging their culture from five hundred years of destruction as to *formar* (to create). The new and increasingly hegemonic use of the term *Maya* is part of this practice of *formando*, making or forming this new, pan-indigenous identification.

However, I quite emphatically want to differentiate the sense of making—encapsulated in the words *formar* and *articulate*—from a facile view of identity as easily taken on or willfully discarded. Though I argue that identification is produced rather than primordial, this production occurs through the slow accumulation of the minute effects of orthopedic change. I use the term *orthopedic* in Foucault’s (1979) sense, from the Greek *ortho* (straight) and *paideia* (the training of children), to suggest the ways that powerful practices such as the law, schooling, and the use of language work with individual bodies to produce the body politic rather than simply repress an already-existing self. Thus identification is produced through constant repetition in sites of power that themselves are historically overdetermined, as well as through unconscious investments and resistances. The current success of the Mayan movement is not the result of a few people waking up one morning and deciding to become Maya. It grows out of half a century of organizing around linguistic rights (impossible to foretell back in the 1940s, when the indigenous activist Don Adrián Inés Chávez began his work); out of the crucible of five hundred years of Conquest and the last thirty years of catastrophe—civil war, earthquakes, and grinding poverty; out of political struggles, reversals, and shifting strategies; out of unexpectedly passionate attachments; and out of changes in the global information economy that produce employment for Mayan intellectuals and technological innovations now turned to Mayan ends (like high-speed networking

with transnational solidarity). In turn, there is no guarantee of the effects of these articulations.

Nor is my emphasis on the production of identifications (and I mean *all* identifications—Maya, ladino, Guatemalan, gringa [North American], and so on) meant to support the frequent and insidious suggestion that the Maya are duped or easily manipulated. Ladino discourse (of the left and right) is full of images of Indians as empty-headed, asleep or just waking up, or a sack of potatoes waiting to be hauled around. In the model villages (army-run resettlement areas), military intelligence officers told me that their job was to “change the cassettes” in indigenous peoples’ heads through hours of reeducation. Such discourses obviously seek to delegitimize Mayan demands by suggesting their inauthenticity and their external sources, and they also set up the ladinos who articulate them as saving the gullible Maya from those who would lead them astray. These discourses in turn mesh contradictorily with similarly popular images of primordial indigenous identity: the inherent Mayan backwardness that limits the nation’s modernization. As I explore throughout the book, such apparent contradictions often work simultaneously, in this case, perhaps, to assuage ladino anxieties about Mayan empowerment.

The pan-Mayan cultural rights movement is one of the most vibrant sectors of the Guatemalan body politic, able to cajole and pressure the government to sign accords guaranteeing them rights to cultural difference. Their organizing acknowledges that the violence and erasures of the catastrophic colonial past make it impossible to trace a clean line to any primordial identity. Instead, I examine how the colonial process itself, even as it yearned for assimilation, has created Mayan activists, and how the state, as it responds to the Maya—and itself attempts to deploy culture to *formar* the nation—is itself changed in the process. Quincentennial Guatemala offers a case study of how national, ethnic, and gender identifications are constantly transformed through processes of articulation, and I suggest that the instability of these identifications—rather than their “primordial” nature—incites ambivalence and attempts to “fix” them (in both the sense of to stabilize and to repair). I am especially interested in those sites and processes of fixing—like the school, the law, the household, and the production of sexual desire—that link or articulate individual bodies with the body politic. For example, competing efforts to form a “whole” national body politic often lean on material bodies for their proof—on what those bodies wear, on their cultural practice, on their “racial” and “sexual” markings, and in the case of continuing counterinsurgency, on materially wounding those bodies.

However, unlike in many parts of the world, Guatemala’s war is ending, Mayan demands are being recognized, and ladinos and indigenous peoples are finding ways—complex, fear-filled, and often violent—to live together.

This book examines the roles in forming Quincentennial Guatemala played by transnational organizations, gringa anthropologists, Mayan activists becoming state officials, and ladino government functionaries studying to become Mayan shamans, and by events like the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize, the founding of the Ministry of Culture and Sports, the legalization of the Guatemalan Mayan Language Academy (ALMG), and the ratification process of the International Labor Organization's Convention 169.⁷ Drawing from these examples, I suggest that ethnic, gender, and nation-state identities are mutually constitutive, meaning that they do not exist outside their relation to each other, and that at this historic moment the Guatemalan state is an important matrix through which these relations occur.

AN INTRODUCTION TO QUINCENTENNIAL GUATEMALA

History as Catastrophe

The largest and most industrialized country in Central America, Guatemala has been at war for over thirty years. The country's indigenous population (estimated to be from 45 percent to over 70 percent of a population of around eleven million), itself divided among some twenty-three ethnolinguistic groups (twenty-one Maya and two others), has historically been disempowered on the national political and economic scene.⁸ Non-Indians, commonly called "ladinos" (although this is not a homogenous category either), tend to hold the institutionalized positions of power in the country.⁹

Like its present, Guatemala's past can be described as a traumatic wound,

7. "Convention 169" is the abbreviation for United Nations International Labor Organization's Convention 169 on the Rights of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries.

8. Guatemala is ethnically more diverse than is suggested by the categories of "Indian" and "non-Indian" (ladino). The Guatemalan Mayan Language Academy (ALMG) counts twenty-one Mayan linguistic groups in addition to non-Mayan indigenous peoples like the Xinka. In addition to the ladinos, there are the African-Caribbean *Garifuna* as well as vibrant Chinese and German communities.

9. *Ladino* is a complex term in Guatemala (see chapter 6) and has been employed for centuries of ambivalent border crossings. In the Roman Empire, it was applied to conquered peoples who learned Latin and began "passing" into roles of translators, as middle men and women. The term also applies to the Sephardic Jewish language of the Diaspora, a mixture of Spanish, Hebrew, Arabic, and other influences added in exile. Victor Perera, a Guatemalan novelist and journalist, brings together this strand with the common usage in Guatemala (*ladino* as "non-Indian") in his book *The Cross and the Pear Tree* (1994b). In Colonial Guatemala, *ladino* first meant those indigenous people who learned Spanish and left the community to live in the borderlands between Criollo colonizer and indigenous colonized. John Watanabe puts it quite concisely: "While the subtleties and ambiguities of actual relations between Maya and Ladinos belie such stark oppositions, these racist stereotypes pervade—and shape—Guatemalan life" (1995, 30).