

Introduction

AGROTROPOLIS A HISTORY OF YOUTH, STREET, AND NATION

A LITTLE BLUE-AND-WHITE BOAT called a *lancha* crossing Lake Atitlán is not an obvious setting in which to contemplate the global urban landscape. Yet that's what I'm doing in August 2016, looking at one of the most stunning natural vistas, not just in Guatemala's Mayan highlands but in the world. I'm here studying urbanization and cultural change since a baby boom that began in the 1980s made "Guate" one of the youngest countries on earth. With two companions I am on the way to San Pedro La Laguna. There we will meet Ijatz Crew, Tz'utujil Maya-speaking B-boy rappers, break-dancers, DJs, and graffiti artists. The *lancha* wallows, overloaded, toward the southern shore's skyline of three-and-a-half volcanoes. "Tono," my taxi driver and friend, points at the half volcano—bell-shaped Cerro de Oro. There's a road around it, he reminds me. It could be cool to check it out. Hugo, this book's amateur photographer, quashes this idea, using exactly the urban slang I'm studying: "Nel vos, na' que ver, allí te roban hasta los pelitos!" (Nope, dude, no way, they'll rob you down to the pubes there), he says. *A la gran puta*.¹

Tono is from a town near Antigua, about four hours away. Hugo is local; friends call him Gokú, after a character in the anime Dragonball series. Both in their twenties, these young men are members of a polyethnic, nonagricultural working class that exploded in size with the nation's 1980s baby boom. They're from Kaqchikel Maya families, but, unlike other members of their generation, neither learned his parents' still-very-living language. Tono's wife, whose brother is a B-boy, is from San Pedro. She speaks Tz'utijil with their daughters; Tono can catch only a phrase or two.

The speaking of twenty-two Mayan languages with thousands of local dialects is just one of countless reasons that Guatemala epitomizes what Raymond Craib calls a "fugitive landscape" that escapes both the control and

the gaze of the state.² There are no accurate population statistics or up-to-date maps; place-names are wrong on Google Earth. In the municipalities around the lake—Kaqchikel speaking on the shore we left, and Tz’utujil where we are headed—as in others around the nation, overlapping layers of authority and opaque structures of power make it difficult to know who, if anyone, is in charge.³

This mysterious landscape is due in part to Guatemala’s history of war. Marxist guerrillas fought the right-wing state from 1960 to 1996. From the *lancha* I try to pinpoint the location of one of the last local guerrilla encampments, but I can’t. The army base where people were tortured and murdered in the years around the 1981–83 genocide was just outside the departmental capital of Sololá, up the mountain and behind us. It became a university campus in 1998. Until roughly the same time, there were military garrisons in the towns. An exception to this rule was Santiago Atitlán, ahead and to our left. After soldiers committed a massacre there in late 1990, the townspeople drove the garrison out and took over “security” themselves. Security remained an issue after the war ended. As in all of Guatemala, many of today’s lakeside population centers have homegrown security patrols, supposedly to combat gangs and crime rings.

Danger and celebration, like tradition and transformation, seem to be in constant friction in this land of contrasts. There are curves on mountain roads where bandits in balaclavas stop cars, swarming out of the cypress forest with AK-47s and bad intentions. Sometimes, at night, mountainside caves flicker with fire; it’s a Maya holy day, and rites are being held. Tourists flocked to the lake on 13 Baktun, the end of the Maya calendar’s last long count, when the world was supposed to end on 21 December 2012. They were there for Maya culture but also packed the discos. As our boat crosses the Kaqchikel Tz’utujil–language line, I show my friends the shore where all-night raves were the rage when they were just young teens. That must have been a tourist thing, Tono mused. *Nel*, said Hugo. The partiers were mostly *chapines*, slang for Guatemalans. At this moment a *lancha* passes heading the other way. We wave to the mix of tourists, artisans with bags of tools, schoolkids, and men and women commuting to work—some wearing Maya traditional dress, called *traje*. It’s morning, but half the tourists look *súper pero súper* high. There’s a reason locals call San Pedro “San Pedro,” Saint Stoned.

Tono and I are on the last leg of a road trip through Guatemala’s *occidente*, the Maya-majority west. We started in Kaqchikel-speaking Chimaltenango. Every day “Chimal” looks more like the country’s capital, Guatemala City.

The *capi* bears significant blame for why the nation appears in reports in the United States, where I am from, as one of the most dangerous countries in the world. Paradoxically, Chimal's similitude with the *capi* is in part attributable to the fact that its working-class sprawl is fringed with *centros comerciales* (malls) where armed men guard the parking lots. Besides malls, Chimal is girdled by a dwindling number of maquiladoras, or factory sweatshops, most of which followed cheaper labor to Asia. Still lining the one-lane highway are brothels, where women in *traje* pose in front of cheap bead curtains. Also along the traffic-jammed highway are auto-parts and tire stores, office-furniture workshops, and agroindustrial fertilizer and seed outlets serving the surrounding farmland. Seeking shortcuts to that farmland, I have driven on dirt roads through *fincas* (plantations) in the middle of the night, only to emerge in poor neighborhoods full of alleys and dead ends. Night or day, however, no one looks at me funny when I drive through Chimaltenango. It's a city. Strangers are to be expected, and nobody cares who you are.⁴

The same cannot be said of the residents of Tecpán or Nahualá, the next stops on my road trip with Tono. Every time I go to these places, people *notice* me. These Kaqchikel-speaking population centers fall somewhere on the scale between "big town" and "small city," making them fascinating laboratories of urbanization and cultural change. Tecpán is an emerging city that grows broccoli and manufactures counterfeit brand-name clothes, but it is not so much of a city that people do not pay sometimes-scary attention to strangers. The people of Nahualá are even more vigilant. Nahualá is not quite as much of a city as Tecpán, which is not quite as much of a city as Chimaltenango, but it is coming to have a similar feel. Tono and I commented on Nahualá's urban ambience and youthful population. Teenage girls in heels and form-fitting *traje* and boys sporting NBA jerseys and electric-blue fauxhawks looked up from their cell phones to stare at us as we made our way to the center, where *reggaetón* and other *música urbana* blasted, and three-wheeled *tuc-tucs* (motor rickshaws) zipped around the streets.

Our next stop was a "real" city. We crossed into areas where K'iche' and Mam are spoken and hopscotched towns to Quetzaltenango ("-tenango" means "place of," and the quetzal is the national bird as well as the name of the currency). The historical center of the nation's "second city" still feels quiet, but Quetzaltenango is circled by suburbs, commercial districts, and poor *barrios* where the population is dense and engine noise and music fill the air. From there we were off to Huehuetenango, a smaller but still-sprawling city near the Mexican border, and neighboring, gang-tagged

Chiantla, which had grown to join “Huehue” in a metro region. Then we circled back east. We traversed sylvan peaks to commercializing towns like Aguacatán, where people peered at us suspiciously, but half smiling . . . not many gringos make it up this way. We were en route to Santa Cruz del Quiché, a place with a mazelike street market packed with informal vendors’ stalls right in its center, a city-within-a-city so fascinating to both of us that we unexpectedly stayed three nights.

Tono and I stopped in Chichicastenango and Sololá before we returned to my home base in Lake Atitlán’s Panajachel and then across the lake to meet the B-boys. “Chichi” is home to the Americas’ oldest pre-Columbian market still in its original location. A third of the market is for tourists, but the rest serves the local population, as do the surrounding cantinas, brothels, and barrios. Next to the market is the Catholic Church. The army had turned its rectory into a torture chamber in the early 1980s. People still remember hearing the screams at night. Our last stop was Sololá, high above Lake Atitlán. In the *parque central* teenage Kaqchikel students were finishing marching-band practice and shedding their uniforms for fashionable clothes, buzzing in anticipation of a rock concert. *Feria*, the town’s fair, was coming up, and the government had been sponsoring games and shows for weeks. For a moment the music helped people forget the kidnapping rings, the lynchings, and the rage that drove mobs to burn down the police station. Sololá seemed youthful, fun, and happy on the day we visited.

A HISTORY OF AGROTROPOLIS

These places, like many others in agrarian-yet-urban, provincial-yet-urbane Guatemala, form what I call an “agro-urban” landscape, this nation’s variant of an emerging, global “Agrotropolis.” This concept—country on one side and city on the other—is meant to encapsulate a wide range of slippages and contradictions that manifest in the nation’s built environment, in ideas and discourses about it, and in its residents’ changing subjectivities, identities, aspirations, and cultural expressions.⁵ *Agrotropolis* is the first urban history of contemporary Guatemala to consider not just the capital city but also provincial centers and their hinterlands. Its scope is deliberately provocative. Guatemala, for decades *the* exemplar of ongoing Latin American rurality, still has a very real agrarian landscape peopled by a Maya-majority *campesinado* (poor farming sector). It has also profoundly urbanized since the 1980s.

This book traces how urbanizing rural regions, their politics, and their cultures evolved in dialogue with the changing global and national political economy as the increasingly cosmopolitan baby-boom generations grew up. It explores the dialogical and mutually constitutive ties between structural socioeconomic change, local politics and crime, discourses of identity and belonging, and cosmopolitan urban youth cultures and countercultures in the capital and the provinces.

The centers of today's urban/urbane Guatemala include not only the capital, Quetzaltenango, and tertiary cities such as Huehuetenango but also far-flung municipal seats—towns that were by any standard “rural” at the time of the genocide in the early 1980s but that were beginning to urbanize by the time the thirty-six-year war ended in December 1996.⁶ Today, as diverse as they are, they have a similar look, one both common to global urban poverty and specific to Guatemala and its history. Concrete-block buildings line central streets, where formal shops, businesses, and banks (blazoned with ads: *the best place to save your remittances!*) abut informal vendors' tarp-covered stalls. Smaller *calle*s (streets) and *callejones* (alleys) form warrens that lead to barrios with handmade huts and humble cinderblock homes. Around these dense central settlements is farmland, which is itself interspersed with outlying villages that duplicate the center's built environment on a smaller scale. The pattern then repeats; the agrarian fields around the villages are peppered with even poorer hamlets that are in the process of urbanizing in similar ways.

Inseparable from this expanding network of small cities is a contested yet common field of discourse about what it means and feels like to be *from* these places. This discursive field is what Tono and Hugo would call a Guatemalan *forma de ser*, or “way of being.” It arises from the lived experienced of the built environment, of its poverty, and of its registers of violence that manifest in local politics and in organized and street crime alike. This book traces the physical, social, and cultural roots of this lifeworld from the end of the genocide in 1983 to the “end of the world” on 13 Baktun in 2012. Mapping urban development and the spread of globalized popular youth cultures, such as *rock nacional*, and subcultures such as the Ijatz B-boys' rap and break-dance, it insists that places relegated to rurality, like provincial Guatemala, must be entered into the equation if we want to understand the global urbanization that scholars and policy makers around the world are noting.

In exploring this history, this book makes a series of arguments, elaborated through a set of interrelated dialectical tensions—urban/rural, transformation/continuity, creation/destruction, and inclusion/exclusion. First, this

work contends that one of the planet's most iconographically rural regions, without losing its agrarian backbone, has in fact profoundly urbanized, physically, socially, and culturally. Second, it maintains that this happened as part of complex processes that both from above and below melded "new" and "old"; the constellation promoting capital expansion and neoliberal multiculturalism drew on older developmental policies and militarism, and poor people who engaged in new economic activities drew on a history of "informality" and grassroots ingenuity. Third, the book argues that culture, and particularly youth cultures, took on new importance through and after the end of the Cold War—a period when visions of communist revolution were crushed, when models of capitalist development failed to lift up the poor and middling classes, and when criminality came to pervade the body politic at all levels. Fourth, it argues that despite (and in dialogue with) ongoing marginalization, Guatemala's new, young generations have upturned age-old codes of status, identity, and belonging. In the context of an urbanizing nation and a rapidly changing global political economy, they have done so by drawing on a heritage of resistance and by tapping into and retooling cultural forms that range from the "traditional" to the global. Wittingly and unwittingly, youth are rewriting what it means to be citizens both of Guatemala and of an increasingly interconnected world. While joining a wide body of scholarship that decries the tragedies of the Cold War and its neoliberal aftermath, this work unearths a positive and overlooked achievement of Guatemala's recent generations. *Agrotropolis* culminates with the contention that the nation's urban and agrotropolis youth have overturned a system of *castas* (castes) that dates to the Spanish Conquest. They have rejected what Guatemalans call "servility" as a cultural form and have cocreated a bottom-up idiom of national identity, giving rise to an alternative popular nationalism.

This historic achievement is bittersweet. It shows the hydraulic cultural force of Guatemala's poor majority, but it has not ended poverty, exclusion, racism, sexism, or classism. Given the state of geopolitics, it is completely unrealistic to expect young, poor, baby-boom Guatemalans (that is, people of ages corresponding to Generation Xers, millennials, and Gen Zers in the United States) to have been able to change the terms of the system on their own. It is time to rethink the historical contributions of Guatemala's new generations of impecunious, "everyday" youth. Their militant and activist elders—including Marxist guerrillas, right-wing military types, 1960s-style counterculture participants, and even academics—dismiss them as vapid, apolitical consumers. An elite national and generalized global public sphere

paints them as gang-banging *mareros*, criminals, and libertines who pump out “unaccompanied minors” and other brown-skinned “surplus humans.”⁷ A “humanitarian” institutional and commercial universe insists that they be ideal representatives of indigenous purity or national tradition or rags-to-riches ingenuity and relegates them to perfect-victim status even as it works to convert them into consumers of goods and loans. At the same time, their productive cultural expressions, confected in dialogue with global, national, and local conditions not at all of their own choosing, bear evidence to the many ways in which they have been challenging and rewriting age-old codes of exclusion and marginalization.

Agrotropolis is the poor, creative, pained, productive space in which we can trace the confluences between top-down and bottom-up forces. In this history, agrotropolis emerges from a predominantly “rural” weave of population centers to become an agro-urban space marked by a real-and-imagined *calle*. The growing, physical network of streets and the idea of popular “street culture” came over time to link Guatemala City and provincial centers in a new urban fabric and a new kind of national commons. This discursive national commons, in turn, evolved in dialogue with and became, and is still becoming, part of a fluid global commons. A study of agro-urban Guatemala is essential to developing a fuller understanding of global phenomena—the barrio, the hood, the shantytown, the megacity, and the terms and conditions of an urbanizing, mediatizing, financializing world that subsumes and threatens all of us. Such a study also reveals overlooked but historically significant cultural assertiveness. Guatemalan cultural critics write that their nation’s poor majority of indigenous and mixed-race citizens have a centuries-long tradition of coping with their marginalization not only with a valiant history of rebellion, resistance, and revolution but also, on an everyday level, with performances of subservience, with bowed heads, evasive statements, and averted gazes. Today’s working-class Guatemalans do not hesitate to look anyone squarely in the eye. This book looks squarely back.

BLURRED LINES AND HISTORY FROM BELOW

The majority of Guatemala’s population is poor, and for heuristic purposes that majority can be conceived of as basically consisting of two broad groups: mixed-race, brown-skinned mestizos and the Maya. The word “Maya,” however, was not historically used as an identifier. Instead, people referred to

themselves as *naturales* or *indigenas* (indigenous people) or used the name of their language group; Hugo's grandparents called themselves "Kaqchikeles," for example. A diverse and not-always-in-agreement body of groups summed up as the Mayan movement popularized the identity-related term "Maya" in the 1990s.⁸ An important 2008 volume on multiculturalism in Guatemala explored the process of "Mayanization" as people began to adopt this new term. Instead of covering political leaders, intellectuals, or cultural activists, this volume broke new ground because it focused on "everyday people [*personas de a pie*], those in the cornfields [*milpa*] and on the street [*calle*], to whose identity and culture, directly or indirectly, this ideological proposal relates."⁹

Agrotropolis salutes the scholarly turn toward studies of everyday life. It explores how ordinary, de a pie people came to self-identify not just as "Maya" or "not-Maya" but also in new ways as *Guatemalans* and chapines in the context of an increasingly neoliberal political economy and an urbanizing and globalizing landscape. This landscape included often violent "street realities" that manifested in urbanizing towns with new forms of poverty unrelated to agricultural peonage, spreading crime, and vigilante-like "security." People expressed the lived experience of street realities through evolving, creative popular youth culture—in particular, popular music produced by and for Guatemalans. In *Agrotropolis* I use this popular music as a means to sketch the contours of changing vernacular identities, styles, and subjectivities and *not* as a means to attempt to define them. To trace this polyvalent cultural history means grappling with the blurred lines between putatively opposed categories: binary structures of class (rich/poor), race (Maya/not-Maya), space (rural/urban), political economy (state-led/neoliberal), and culture (traditional-folkloric/globalized-degenerate). From a de a pie perspective, these categories are endlessly muddled by ambiguities and slippages, and it is in these gray areas that much of the meaning of having been alive during these dehumanizing times can be excavated.¹⁰

Agrotropolis uses a mix of archival and ethnographic research to excavate such gray areas. It maps the physical and cultural urbanization of rural population centers against a history of popular music and youth cultures and countercultures in both the capital city and the provinces, continuously rejecting clichéd understandings of *rural* and *urban*. Remaining attentive to the evolving political economy, it uses this methodological approach to analyze changing actions, perceptions, and ways of identifying one's self and others among a diverse population kept invisible by its very conditions of marginalization.

There is a great deal at stake here. Taking a bottom-up approach unearths important dimensions of the human experience of this period—making visible the “invisibilized” lives of people like Hugo, Tono, and their families. As such, it sharpens our understanding of subaltern history and of everyday practices of accommodation and resistance as armed rebellion ended and dreams of revolutionary victory took on more diffuse and sometimes subtle forms. Looking at these processes from a *de a pie* perspective is now possible in never-before-seen ways, thanks to spreading literacy, new media, and online self-publishing. The view from below also highlights the ramifications of the life-changing policies and programs promoted by some of the most powerful institutions on earth. Tracing the evolution of social space in this corner of the world can amplify our understanding of an urbanizing planet, of the Cold War’s legacy, and the messy processes of neoliberalization. This history illuminates the securitization of society at all levels and changing senses of self, community, and nation in a new phase of capital expansion.

Capital expansion, the rise of agro-urban space, and the spread of cosmopolitan cultural expressions in Guatemala form an important part of what scholars call “planetary urbanization.” This new scholarship asks us to discard the epistemology of an urban/rural divide altogether and insists, in Neil Brenner’s words, that “the meaning of the urban itself must be fundamentally reimagined.”¹¹ Faced with a vastly transformed national territory, Guatemala’s government came to a similar conclusion in 2014. This was a complete about-face. For decades the state had demarcated territory and designed development plans using population-based definitions of *urban* and *rural* that defined most of the nation as the latter. Thus, one could stand with one foot in an urban center and the other in a rural village, as if straddling the equator. The 2014 national development plan, *K’atun* (a Mayan term for “the time it takes to bring a project to fruition”), recognized rapid population growth and rethought these categories. It claimed that terms such as “periurban” and “ruruban” better described what had become a contrast-filled, country-city “continuum.” Provincial population centers had matured into a “diffuse” landscape marked by “complex and fluid processes that partially transform rural environments into urban ones.” These processes, *K’atun* held, entailed new kinds of social, economic, and cultural behaviors. *K’atun* dated the nation’s transition from predominantly rural to predominantly urban to approximately 2009–10 and forecast the emergence of a national megalopolis by 2032.¹²

Part of my work in this book is to convince readers that “rural” Guatemala in fact has an urban history, and that said history forms part of a still-to-

be-written chapter in widely read urban studies—a body of scholarship that focuses on megalopolises so enormous that not even Guatemala City, the largest city in Central America, qualifies for inclusion. Physical and cultural urbanization in small countries such as Guatemala deserves to be considered in a vast literature referenced by texts such as Richard Florida’s works on creative communities and city life and Mike Davis’s on a “planet of slums,” along with studies of global cities by scholars such as Saskia Sassen.¹³ Guatemala’s capital city, studied by several anthropologists and historians, is now, I argue, joined by the nation’s provincial centers in meriting a place in conversations about urbanization around the globe and around Latin America.¹⁴ These growing, increasingly urban and culturally cosmopolitan webs of villages, towns, and small cities came into being as an agrarian modality of what the urban theorist Emilio Pradilla Cobos describes as a Latin American variant of the “city-region”—an urban system that includes and integrates peripheral and rural areas “in a dense but not continuous weave.” The emergence of city-regions implies a process of change that, as Pradilla writes, is “not just demographic or physical, but fundamentally structural, including all the spheres of economic, social, and cultural life.”¹⁵

Few factors played a greater role in shattering and realigning Guatemala’s “spheres of . . . life” than the Cold War, the crucible from which the contemporary agro-urban landscape emerged. An invasion, planned and led by the CIA, overthrew the nation’s modernizing, democratic revolution of 1944–54, ushering in right-wing military rule. In the wake of the Cuban Revolution, Marxist guerrilla resistance arose in 1960. Over time, a constellation of never-united revolutionary armies battled a U.S.-backed national-security apparatus whose state-terror tools of war included torture and death squads. The war intensified in the Mayan highlands in the 1970s. The army responded to widespread grassroots resistance and organizing with unspeakable violence. Troops went from Maya village to village from 1981 to 1983, indiscriminately massacring human beings from infants to the elderly, mostly in remote areas that remain agrarian to the present day. A “return to democracy” followed with the rise of civilian rule in 1986, but peace was not declared until the end of 1996. By the turn of the millennium, two truth commissions, one led by the Catholic Church and the other by the United Nations, released voluminous documentation of the horrors. Together with the growing body of forensic evidence from excavated mass graves, these testimonials formed the evidentiary base for human rights and genocide trials, several of which continue at the time of this writing.¹⁶ Neither civilian rule nor new attention to