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Co-Producing Healing in Post-Conflict Guatemala: A Case Study

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With support from CLAG I was able to spend this summer in Guatemala City researching Guatemalan NGOs who are working with survivors of sexual violence from the internal armed conflict to define justice and healing. How societies can and should address the legacies of violence and injustice wrought by conflict is the question at the center of the field and practices of Transitional Justice. Top-down mechanisms often fall short of making adequate repair for the complex lived experiences of trauma that are ongoing in survivors psyches, bodies and communities long after a conflict period has ended. My research sought to gain insight into these on the ground practices of reparations. I proposed to focus on the *Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Acción Psicosocial (ECAP)* as a case study, asking *how has their work filled in gaps left by state sponsored transitional justice approaches to support survivors' individual healing processes and the strengthening of communities?* Seven weeks of in-depth qualitative research lead to exciting preliminary findings and allowed me to deepen relationships that will prove invaluable for future research.

In my original proposal, I outlined a project in which I would spend 3 weeks in Guatemala City with institutional actors, and 2-3 weeks in communities where psychosocial support is being provided. Due to practical constraints, my time was spent mainly in Guatemala City, which did not change the larger goals of the project nor my methods. In Guatemala City I attended rallies, exhibitions, and lectures about historical memory and justice. I also conducted semi-structured interviews with NGO representatives, activists and artists. I attended the Guatemalan Scholars Network conference July 13-15th, which was an important opportunity to network with other scholars who live in or do research in Guatemala.

In conversing with contacts at ECAP about how to engage in non-extractive research, they requested that I share my skills as a facilitator of a mental health focused dance practice called Open Floor. I had the opportunity to offer a workshop to ECAP'S *Equipo de género* (gender focused team), and also a short training for psychologists and other professionals through *Proyecto de Desarrollo Santiago (PRODESSA)* a collaborating non-profit.

The *Equipo de género* is made up of 12 psychologists and accompaniers working in 5 different regions of Guatemala most impacted by the conflict. They attend monthly meetings in Guatemala City, commuting sometimes 7-10 hours on public transportation to report on their activities and discuss their work with survivors and community members around the issue of gender based violence. I attended the July meeting, first as a participant observer and then offering a 3 hour workshop focused on body-based practices for releasing tension. The rapport established with the whole team allowed me to interview two *Promotoras de salud mental* (mental health advocates) from the Polochic region. This is the region where sexual slavery, which occurred at a military base in the 1980s, was taken up in the emblematic Sepur Zarco trial.

The Sepur Zarco trial was the culmination of over a decade of sometimes contentious collaboration between NGOs, 15 women survivors and their families, lawyers, translators, and the Guatemalan legal system. ECAP was a central collaborator in providing what they call psycho-judicial accompaniment, along side a collective of feminist lawyers *Mujeres Transformando el Mundo (MTM)* and a different feminist NGO *Actoras de Cambio (Actoras)*. As I would learn, this collaboration did not extend beyond the trial because of different institutional perspectives of what justice and psychological accompaniment should mean in the Guatemalan context. I became interested in speaking to the different organizations involved in this process, and in weeks 4 and 5 of my research I was able to interview members of MTM and Actoras and access their systematized methodologies. I also interviewed other psychosocial workers who collaborate with ECAP, such as the *Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado*

de Guatemala (ODHAG). In this way I was able to see how ECAP's *Equipo de género* is called upon to fill in gaps in other psychosocial support team who don't have a gender focus.

In my last week in Guatemala City, I interviewed a psychologist/researcher at the Rafael Landívar University who is studying the transcripts from the Sepur Zarco trial. I also taught a workshop *Recursos Corporales: Técnicas para bajar los niveles de estrés y crear solidaridad para jóvenes y adultos a través del movimiento* (Body Resources: Techniques for lowering stress and creating solidarity with youth and adults through movement) to 15 psychologists and educators PRODESSA.

My preliminary findings show that the demands of survivors and organizations alike are shaped by the guarantees of the 1996 Peace Accords for justice, reparation, and non-repetition. However there exists an array of institutional approaches for deciding what this actually means in practice and how psychological or psychosocial support is provided to survivors. This depends on the training of the individuals that make up the NGOs as well as the institutional situatedness in human rights, feminist, and/or indigenous Maya frameworks. The ECAP team works from a human rights and psychosocial model derived from the work of Jesuit psychologist Ignacio Martín-Baró to engage NGOs in the communities where survivors of sexual violence live. They also engage victims organizations, community leaders, youth, husbands and families as well as survivors themselves in long-term therapeutic and leadership building processes to transform the context in which survivors live their daily lives. All organizations I spoke with emphasized the continuity of forms of patriarchal and racist violence that existed before the conflict, were exacerbated by the war, and exist into the present day. Many of the organizations to different degrees include some traditional knowledge and practices of the survivors with whom they work in creating therapeutic spaces. This might mean lighting ceremonial fires before or during trials, or the simple act of passing an egg or lime over the body during a group session to remove negative energy. This is part of an effort to work against a colonial legacy and acknowledge the limited usefulness of western psychological practices such as talk therapy. The ECAP team directed me to a project called *Médicos Descalzos* where indigenous methods of healing are practiced, systematized and taught. I was able to visit their project in the El Quiché region along with a visiting Psychologist Ursula Hausser who was conducting a training at PRODESSA.

In the larger Guatemalan context there is still an uphill battle for recognition of survivors' rights to repair and recognition of other pervasive inequalities that in part structure the lives of many Guatemalans. This manifests nationally as different narratives of history are still contested, and at the local level, for example in the town of Sepur, where the verdicts of national courts in Guatemala City are questioned and interpreted in different ways. However, there is a sense of hope in the current climate, particularly with the Sepur Zarco victory. This work is making meaningful strides forward, though no amount of reparation will ever be able to give back survivors what they lost.

This research was made possible in part by funding from CLAG, which helped cover lodging, some per diem expenses, and taxi transportation while in the field. During my 7 weeks in the field I conducted 15 semi-structured interviews, did participant observation, and collected pertinent institutional literature, which I am now in the process of analyzing for my MA thesis. I will present my findings at the UA Tinker symposium in November and at the American Association of Geographers Conference this spring. I received an open invitation back to do more workshops with ECAP, PRODESSA and other organizations, which will allow me to do a more in depth institutional ethnography of ECAP which will be the basis for my PhD research.



Recursos Corporales Workshop



Seeing systematized Maya healing practices at Médicos Descalzos



Taking in a exhibition of photos from the Sepur Zarco trial in Guatemala City