Q’EQCHI’ MAYAS AND DEFENSE OF TERRITORY: LEARNING THROUGH THE CONTENTIOUS POLITICS OF LAND IN “POST-CONFLICT” GUATEMALA

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY in THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES (Educational Studies) THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA (Vancouver)

December 2016

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Abstract

My study explores how indigenous Q’eqchi’ Mayas in Guatemala draw political cohesion from their cultural relationship to their ancestral territories when responding to violent dispossession by extractive mining corporations and mono-crop agriculture. Drawing upon participant observation and 39 interviews conducted in the municipalities of Panzós and El Estor in 2013 and 2014, my research considers Q’eqchi’s defense of territory (defensa del territorio) as a salient, culturally specific collective action that draws continuity from centuries of conflicts over control of land and natural resources in Guatemala. Throughout Spanish colonization, independence, entry into the world capitalist market, and 20th century political upheavals, conflicts over land have featured consistently. In more recent history, the 36-year internal armed conflict (1960-1996) was a focal point of Q’eqchi’ research contributors’ testimony on their longstanding and interminable suffering for their lands.

As a result of favorable conditions for international investors since the signing of the 1996 Peace Accords, the Guatemalan government has opened up the country, and indigenous lands in particular, to large-scale investment and development. Based on my findings, and building on Liza Grandia’s (2012) framing of three “conquests” of Q’eqchi’ lands, my study offers the term “fourth conquest” (Knowlton, 2016), a conquest by corporation, to explain the unique conjuncture of forces Q’eqchi’s face today when defending their lands. Their current tactical focus on land titling and juridical certainty is a response to the renewed invasion of extractive corporations into their ancestral territories.

Through applying informal and social movement learning theories, this study considers Q’eqchi’s political encounters in defense of land as moments of learning which shape them as political actors and subjects. For Q’eqchi’s, land represents the confluence of cultural and
spiritual bonds, material sustenance, and struggles to end political marginalization. A study of the labors involved in defense of territory provides valuable insights into the culturally specific learning processes that both structure and result from myriad political interventions into community, municipal, national, and international politics. Q’eqchi’s are strategically forming short and long-term alliances, and adopting identity claims based on indigenous rights, human rights, Guatemalan citizenship, and their cultural ties to their ancestral territory.
Preface

The fieldwork reported in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 was approved by the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board: Certificate number H13-00552; Principal Investigator: Dr. Claudia Ruitenberg.

A section of Chapter 4 has been published:


A version of the data presented in Chapters 5, 6, and 7 has been published in Spanish and English:


Knowlton, A. (2014). “Aun seguimos sufriendo, tal vez en otras estrategias”: un desafío al mito de la época pos-conflicto en comunidades q’eqchi’s [“We continue suffering, perhaps through other strategies”: A challenge to the myth of the post-conflict era in Q’eqchi’ communities]. Espacios políticos, 7(11), 29-42.
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<tr>
<td>CDD</td>
<td>Departmental Development Council (Consejo Departmental de Desarrollo)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CEH</td>
<td>Commission for Historical Clarification (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CGN</td>
<td>Guatemalan Nickel Company (Compañía Guatemalteca de Níquel)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COCODE</td>
<td>Community Development Council (Consejo Comunitario de Desarrollo)</td>
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<tr>
<td>COMUDE</td>
<td>Municipal Development Council (Consejo Municipal de Desarrollo)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CONIC</td>
<td>National Coordinating Committee of Indigenous Peoples and Peasants (Coordinadora Nacional Indígena y Campesina)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CPM</td>
<td>Improvement Committee (Comité Pro-Mejoramiento)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CUC</td>
<td>Peasant Unity Committee (Comité de Unidad Campesina)</td>
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<tr>
<td>EGP</td>
<td>Guerrilla Army of the Poor (Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres)</td>
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<tr>
<td>FAR</td>
<td>Rebel Armed Forces (Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes)</td>
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<tr>
<td>FONTIERRAS</td>
<td>Land Fund (Fondo de Tierras)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FTN</td>
<td>Northern Transversal Strip (Franja Transversal del Norte)</td>
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<tr>
<td>IACHR</td>
<td>Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (Comisión Interamericana de los Derechos Humanos)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ILO</td>
<td>International Labour Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILRC</td>
<td>Indian Law Resource Center</td>
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<tr>
<td>INCO</td>
<td>International Nickel Company of Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTA</td>
<td>National Institute of Agrarian Transformation (Instituto Nacional de Transformación Agraria)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acronym</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>MALR</td>
<td>Market Assisted Land Reform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPRA</td>
<td>Revolutionary Organization of the People in Arms (Organización Revolucionaria del Pueblo en Armas)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PGT</td>
<td>Guatemalan Communist Party (Partido Guatemalteco de Trabajadores)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PNC</td>
<td>National Civil Police (Policía Nacional Civil)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REMHI</td>
<td>Recovery of Historical Memory (Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAA</td>
<td>Secretariat of Agrarian Affairs (Secretaría de Asuntos Agrarios)</td>
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<tr>
<td>URNG</td>
<td>Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca)</td>
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Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not have been possible without the generous support of family and friends in the U.S., Canada, and Guatemala.

Students, staff, and professors at UBC have offered me so much encouragement over the past six years. I am lucky to have mentors among faculty members at the Department of Educational Studies, including Michael Marker and Ali Abdi. Thanks to staff members Shermila Salgadoe, Roweena Bacchus, and Jeannie Young for their help navigating administrative issues within Educational Studies. Thanks to the staff, faculty, and students in the Department of Sociology at UBC, who have shaped my professional path as an inter-disciplinary educator.

At the Liu Institute for Global Issues I created my own ragtag community, relying on Jon Beasley-Murray, Magdalena Ugarte, and Tal Nitsán for encouragement. Special thanks to Tal for her enthusiasm for all things Guatemala.

I have relied on many PhD colleagues at UBC. Thanks to my dear friend Gabriella Maestrini, who has seen me through the ups and downs of the PhD process, offering sage advice and a shoulder to lean on many times. Thanks to the members of my cohort: Gang Li, Masa Iwase, Dorothy Christian, Sopheap Phan, and Pari Ghazinejad. In our writing group Joel Heng Hertse and Andrée Gacoin showed me the way ahead by example, gently nudging me forward when I needed it. Thanks to Shayna Plaut, Hanna Dahlstrom, Omer Aijazi, and Ricardo Chaparro-Pacheco, for their friendship and clarity of thought at key moments in this journey.

Claudia Ruitenberg has been an exceptional supervisor, always keeping me on track and pushing me to think and write more deeply. My other two committee members, Juanita Sundberg and Pilar Riaño-Alcalá, have been role models for balancing the demands of teaching, research, and social justice with integrity, compassion, and grace. Thanks to Jo-Anne
Dillabough, my mentor and supporter no matter where in the world she is. I carry these four women’s examples with me as I attempt to follow in their footsteps.

My thanks to Armstrong Wiggins, my mentor at Indian Law Resource Center, who encouraged me to pursue academic research as one way to support the struggles of his indigenous brothers and sisters. He showed me why anyone concerned with truth and justice should care about Q’eqchi’s’ fight for land.

Thanks to mi familia chapina, who has always made me feel at home in Guatemala, starting with my first visit in 2009. Each time I arrive at their home it is harder to leave again.

Meeting Marlon García in the Central American Archives in Guatemala City in 2013 was fortuitous, and my work has greatly benefitted from his insights and support these last three years.

To the Q’eqchi’ Mayas who have shared their stories with me, I will forever remember their strength and courage. Thanks to my interpreters Analisa and Rafael, who have been so generous and patient in our work together, and to Analisa for collaborating with me throughout the writing of my dissertation.

Thanks to my parents, Karen and Rick Rodabaugh, who have supported me time and time again as I returned to the university and forfeited a stable income. Thanks to my brothers Lee and Ricky, my sisters-in-law Holly and Melissa, my nephew Jaison, and my nieces Lily and Merit for introducing much-needed levity on many occasions. Thanks to my dear Uncle Bob, who did not live to see me finish this dissertation but was one of my biggest cheerleaders.

Thanks to my best friend Kirsten for her support and our giggling fits, which have given me the energy to keep going many times.
Last but not least, my deepest thanks to Philippe Brunelle, who has sacrificed pursuing his own goals for many years so that I could pursue and attain mine. I could not have done this without him.
Chapter 1—Introduction

In 2009, as a Master’s student in International Education in Washington, DC, I began an internship at the Indian Law Resource Center (ILRC), a non-governmental organization (NGO) offering “legal assistance to Indian and Alaska Native nations who are working to protect their lands, resources, human rights, environment and cultural heritage” (Indian Law Resource Center, 2010). Through ILRC, I spent six weeks in 2009 in El Estor, Guatemala as a volunteer at the local NGO El Estor Association for Integral Development (Asociación Estoreña para el Desarrollo Integral, or AEPDI in Spanish). I accompanied AEPDI to community forums, training events, and other public meetings in the surrounding areas. As part of advocating for government transparency, AEPDI organizes meetings with local elected officials so communities can formulate requests for infrastructure, follow up on promises made on previous projects, and generally establish a face-to-face relationship (AEPDI, n.d.). In addition to state-organized judicial processes, AEPDI also supports traditional Q’eqchi’ Mayas’ practices for conflict resolution and mediation, as well as traditional decision-making processes (AEPDI, n.d.).

During my six weeks in El Estor, the NGO professionals and community members I met introduced me to the Q’eqchi’ culture, and to their daily concerns about regaining or maintaining control of their ancestral territories.¹

¹ The Q’eqchi’ people trace their ancestral roots to the highlands of Cobán, Alta Verapaz. Before Spanish colonization, Q’eqchi’s mainly inhabited the present-day departments of Alta Verapaz and Baja Verapaz, in what Liza Granidia (2012) describes as “a strategic zone between the northern lowland forests, the Atlantic Ocean, and the densely populated western Guatemalan highlands” (p. 30). Q’eqchi’s first inhabited the lowlands near the Polochic River during the Preclassic Era (Kahn, 2006, p. 35).
Over two years later, on November 6th, 2011, former Army General Otto Pérez Molina of the Patriotic Party won the presidency of Guatemala with 55% of votes (Al Jazeera, 2011). I wondered if Pérez’s election by a majority indigenous electorate reflected what Víctor Montejo (Jakaltek Maya) (2005) calls the “state of political amnesia” (p. 64) in Mayan communities since the signing of the Peace Accords on December 29th, 1996. Pérez was publicly recognized as a general in the department of Quiché (Al Jazeera, 2011 & O’Reilly, 2012) during the military’s “scorched earth” campaign in 1981-1983 as part of the country’s armed conflict (1960-1996). This campaign represented the peak of genocidal violence against Mayas, in which 70-90% of villages in the Ixil Triangle in the western highlands were razed to the ground (Bird et al., 2011, p. 2). After Pérez’s election, I sought to understand how and if individuals and communities had adapted their expectations of political change to the liberal, “post-conflict” conceptualization of democracy in Guatemala. For those who supported the guerrilla movement or participated as members, how did they view their previous political program of revolutionary change through armed struggle? Had they wholeheartedly adopted the ideal of promoting change through electoral politics or NGO projects? Or did they identify a need to overhaul the structures of inequality that culminated in the armed conflict (Commission for Historical Clarification, 1999)?

My initial experience in 2009 led me to develop a doctoral research project to engage with Q’eqchi’s’ struggles in El Estor today, and the ways in which Q’eqchi’s conceptualize

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2 To emphasize the contributions of indigenous authors to the methodology and theory guiding this study, I indicate in parentheses any indigenous nation with which the author identifies.

3 Throughout the dissertation I employ the term “post-conflict” in quotes to indicate my critique of adopting the term in the midst of multi-faceted forms of violence since 1996, such as gang violence, drug trafficking-related violence, and the violent expulsion of indigenous peoples from their ancestral territories.
possibilities for political change in relation to past and present experiences, especially experiences of conflict. Originally I conceived of my study as an exploration of Q’eqchi’s’ radical political subjectivities in Guatemala in El Estor since the guerrilla movement demobilized in 1996. However, once I arrived in El Estor for my fieldwork in 2013, I quickly realized my questions about political participation could not be extricated from Q’eqchi’s’ concerns with exercising control over their ancestral territories, which is vital for maintaining their cultural, political, juridical, and spiritual practices intact. So I shifted my study to focus more explicitly on activities related to political participation, rather than discursive political imaginaries. In this way I was able to adopt a broad, constructivist conception of political participation, driven by research contributors’ activities rather than following my initial idea of a researcher-driven search for traces of Marxist ideology among guerrilleros or sympathizers. I work most often from a Marxist perspective, so I brought to the research a particular sensibility about the origins of social inequalities in Guatemala in the structures of the profit-driven capitalist system. It became clear that my original conception of political participation and ideology, organized along a left-right spectrum, did not line up with Q’eqchi’ modes of participation, even among those who participated in the guerrilla movement. Q’eqchi’s’ motivations to join the guerrillas, as well as much of their political activity since the armed conflict, clearly aligned with defending the land. In some instances research contributors’ comments mirrored my understanding of the economic and material sources of Q’eqchi’s’ marginalization; however, in many other interviews, research contributors’ accounts would not be well-served by using a Marxist lens. So

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4 Throughout the study I refer to “research contributors” rather than “informants” because each person contributed to the vision, depth, and scope of the research project itself; they did not just provide “information.”
while my analysis is ultimately influenced by my own Marxist lens, I chose not to use Marxist concepts as the organizing framework for my analysis, in order to allow for Q’eqchi’s’ perspectives to guide the terms of my analysis. In particular, their defense of territory extends well beyond a Marxist-materialist preoccupation with land as a site of production, and focuses more often than not on cultural and spiritual relations that bind them to their ancestral lands.

Consequently, I focus this study on Q’eqchi’s’ current collective action in defense of territory, paying special consideration to continuity and ruptures in forms of political participation from the armed conflict. As a people Q’eqchi’s are united by their shared identity as “Children of the Earth” (aj ral ch’och’⁵ in the Q’eqchi’ Maya language) and peasants (campesinos). In the following pages I paint a picture of the structures of inequality and violence that permeate Guatemala’s history while showing the breadth of agency exercised by Q’eqchi’s individually and collectively, as evidenced in their opposition to colonization, exclusion, dispossession, and assimilation.

### Goals and Structure of the Project

In one sense, the abundance of literature on the armed conflict (1960-1996) and the “post-conflict” period (1996-present) makes the process of designing a unique research study in Guatemala difficult. Accounts by anthropologists and other researchers carefully record the experiences of indigenous people and communities, recounting firsthand violence and trauma

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⁵ I have seen this phrase written as r’al ch’och (Alonso-Fradejas, 2015) and ral ch’och (Permanto, 2015), but my independent translator employs the spelling ral ch’och’, so that is the spelling I use throughout, except when directly quoting others.
through interviews and ethnographic research conducted during and after the conflict. Other literature details the emergence of “new violence” (Benson et al., 2008; Mayo, 2011; Sieder, 2011) in Guatemala since the signing of the Peace Accords, especially in relation to drug trafficking (Ybarra, 2012 & 2015), gangs (Burrell, 2009; Levenson, 2013; Rodgers & Muggah, 2009), and forms of vigilante justice such as lynchings (Burrell, 2013; Sieder, 2011; Snodgrass Godoy, 2006). My study builds on literature about the armed conflict and “post-conflict” forms of violence, as well as literature specifically about Q’eqchi’ Mayas.

However, my study fills a gap in these literatures by bringing Q’eqchi’s’ experiences of defense of territory into discussion with my conceptual framework, composed of three central concepts: contentious politics, territorial defense, and social movement learning. My term “conquest by corporation” (see Chapter Seven), builds on anthropologist Liza Grandia’s (2012) three conquests of Q’eqchi’ territories. By situating extractivism as an activity that impacts the economy, power relations, and governance structures on a local and national scale (Alonso-Fradejas, 2012; Veltmeyer, 2014), the idea of a possible fourth “conquest” indicates continuity with earlier forms of colonization. J. P. Laplante and Catherine Nolin (2014) employ the term “fourth invasion” to specifically describe the impact of the mining industry in Guatemala. My analysis is unique to the specific history of Q’eqchi’ territories and does not extend to all of Guatemala, as Laplante and Nolin’s concept does. In addition, my description of a fourth

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6 For example, see Green, 1999; Hale, 2006; Manz, 2002; Nelson, 1999 & 2009; Nolin Hanlon, 1999; Sanford, 2003 & 2010; and Zur, 1998.
7 For example, see Grandia, 2012; Kahn, 2006; Permanto, 2015; Viaene, 2010a & 2010b; and Ybarra, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, & 2013.
8 The fourth “conquest” is a possible conquest rather than a conquest in fact, because the outcome of conflicts between Q’eqchi’s and corporations has yet to be determined in any decisive way. Q’eqchi’s may succeed in limiting the impact of these corporations in the long run, or in driving some of them out of their territories.
(attempted) “conquest” includes extractive industries beyond mining, such as African palm and sugar plantations. While I have developed this idea in the context of Q’eqchi’ territories specifically, these ideas are relevant throughout Latin America where indigenous peoples are undergoing similar struggles to defend their lands, especially from extractive corporations. My study combines ethnographic detail of Q’eqchi’ cultural practices with an explicitly political lens that examines Q’eqchi’s’ strategic engagements with the Guatemalan state to meet the current political contingencies of defending their territory. In my exploration of territorial defense, I rely on and contribute to work in indigenous studies, taking guidance from Mayan authors from Guatemala, as well as global indigenous studies.

While some Q’eqchi’s acquire a substantial amount of their political socialization and education through schools (Bellino, 2015; Cotjí Cuxil, 2002), many develop their political identities and perspectives through ceremony (Ybarra, 2013; Permanto, 2015), indigenous knowledge practices (Montejo, 2005; Ixmatá, 2010), grassroots political and social movements (Solano, 2013), and political parties (Montejo, 2005). My study offers an analysis of the learning processes inherent in Q’eqchi’s’ collective organizing in defense of territory, a struggle rooted in historical and ongoing conflicts with elites over control of land and resources (See Chapter Two). Moments of mobilization provide productive opportunities to reflect on and analyze the broader social forces shaping Q’eqchi’s’ struggle, as well as the knowledge systems sustaining the struggle. My analysis draws from and contributes to educational studies through

10 In this study I only indicate an author’s national identity if they are from Guatemala or if they identify with an indigenous nation.
11 For example, see Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Blaser et al., 2010; Calderon, 2014 & 2016; Corntassel & Holder, 2008; and Escobar, 2001, 2007, 2008 & 2010.
its focus on social movement learning (Choudry, 2010 & 2015; Choudry & Kapoor, 2010; Kapoor, 2009) and informal learning theories (Schugurensky, 2000 & 2006). The data and analysis I present in this study helps to ground informal learning theories in a specific cultural and geographical context, highlighting the complex yet everyday processes of knowledge creation and learning. Recognizing a wide variety of moments as political learning can enrich scholars’ and activists’ appreciation of Q’eqchi’s’ unique existential, cultural, and political values. I hope this study will play a modest role in contributing Q’eqchi’s’ ontological and epistemological understandings of land to broader discussions on extractive industries in Guatemala.

Because of my interest in looking at Q’eqchi’s’ moments of learning in the context of the contentious politics of land and natural resources in Guatemala, I aim to answer two research questions:

1. How do Q’eqchi’ Mayas in El Estor and Panzós, Guatemala link their current political activities in defense of territory with the armed conflict (1960-1996) and previous expropriations of their territories?

2. How and when do moments of learning occur as part of Q’eqchi’s’ organization in defense of territory?

Due to the preoccupations contributors shared in their interviews, this study considers Q’eqchi’ Mayas’ collective action in defense of territory (en defensa del territorio) in northeastern Guatemala as a culturally specific response to evictions by corporations and structural violence (Farmer, 2004) by the state related to the increase in extractive industries. Now I provide context on dominant and post-colonial conceptions of ethnicity in Guatemala (Del Valle Escalante, 2008), as well as situating Q’eqchi’s within Guatemala in order to introduce this study’s interest
in Q’eqchi’s’ collective defense of their ancestral lands in the northeastern departments of Alta Verapaz and Izabal.

Situating Q’eqchi’ Mayas in Guatemala

Guatemala’s 14 million inhabitants are identified in relation to four ethnicities, listed in order of highest percentage of the population: Mayas, Ladinos, Garifunas, and Xinkas. In spite of these four categories, identity is generally organized around a binary of indigenous and non-indigenous (Warren, 1998, p. 10). “Maya” refers to the 21 Mayan peoples, while the term “indigenous peoples” is broader and includes Mayas, Xinkas, and Afro-descendant Garifunas. As of the 2002 census, 41% of the population in Guatemala is indigenous (World Bank, 2015, p. 25). Ladinos, who identify as non-indigenous, are still generally associated with privilege; anthropologist Charles Hale (2006) argues that Ladinos position themselves as superior to indigenous peoples, explaining that they view themselves “as closer to an ideal of progress, decency, and all things modern, in contrast to Indians, who are regrettably and almost irredeemably backward” (p. 4). However, the ethnicity binary in Guatemala has blurred slightly with the rise of the pan-Maya movement (Warren, 1998 & 2008).

Hale (2006) suggests that with the increased participation of Mayas in mainstream politics, a layer of Ladinos has “ceded some ground, assumed a self-critical stance towards the overt racism of the elder generation, and repositioned themselves as cautious advocates of

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12 According to Guatemalan historian Arturo Taracena (2011), Garifunas, who live on the Caribbean coast across Central America, spanning Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, and Nicaragua, have become “invisible in the conceptualization of Guatemala’s ethnic reality” (p. 98) due to the dominant binary conception of identity. Garifunas have roots in Africa and the Caribbean island of St. Vincent, and they maintain their own language and customs. The Garifuna population in Guatemala is concentrated in the municipality of Livingston, Izabal, where they made up 10% of the population as of 2004 (Kahn, 2006, p. 19).
multicultural equality” (p. 4). Multiculturalism is the Guatemalan government’s discourse for managing the country’s ethnic diversity. However, Guatemalan historian Santiago Bastos (2009) critiques the policy as “cosmetic multiculturalism” because “‘the Maya’ remains tied in an almost exclusive way to cultural difference, while the rest of the dimensions of exclusion lived by ordinary Mayas are barely taken notice of” (p. 6, translation mine). While liberal multiculturalism discourse officially recognizes the cultural rights of all Guatemalans, its apolitical approach creates obstacles to Mayas’ challenges to structural inequalities.

Some Ladinos have adopted the identity of mestizo to recognize their shared heritage with Mayas (Hale, 2006; McAllister & Nelson, 2013), and to express their “dissent from the existing racial order” (Hale, 2006, p. 168) that privileges Ladinos. Drawing on data from the National Institute of Statistics (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, or INE in Spanish), as well as their own research, Megan Ybarra et al. (2012) note that 69.5% of Guatemalans speak Spanish as their primary language. However, this percentage includes 58% who self-identify as Ladino and 7.2% who self-identify as Mestizo. Ybarra et al. found that “identification as a Mestizo ranges in meaning from a synonym to Ladino, an overt rejection of ‘Ladino’ identity, or a way to express that one has both a Maya and Ladino parent” (p. 17). Víctor Montejo (Jakaltek Maya) lauds the adoption of Mestizo as salutary because it emphasizes that Mayas and Ladinos share elements of a common history. According to Montejo (2005), “Maya must realize that not all ladinos belong to the elite and that they cannot be treated as outsiders either, since they share Maya blood” (p. 72). Montejo emphasizes the violence and exclusion poor Ladinos suffer at the hands of the state as well. Montejo stresses dialogue and unity between Mayas and Ladinos as the cornerstone of the country’s newfound “multicultural” identity.
However, multiculturalism has its critics among Mayan intellectuals, such as Emilio del Valle Escalante (K’iche’ Maya) (2008) and Demetrio Cotjí Cuxil (Kaqchikel Maya) (1999). Cotjí Cuxil questions if mestizaje can create a more inclusive society, or if it would merely be super-imposed over the current “pigmentocracy” (p. 202), or stratification by skin color. According to Cotjí Cuxil, mestizaje negates or erases indigenous identity, so it is necessary for indigenous peoples to continue fighting for political space, independently of the pressures to consolidate a unified national identity.

Q’eqchi’s, the focus of my study, are one of the country’s 21 Mayan peoples seeking to carve out space in the “multicultural nation” for greater access to education, health care, political representation, and economic opportunities. At 66%, Q’eqchi’ Mayas have the highest percentage of monolingual language speakers among the Maya peoples in Guatemala (Ybarra, 2011b, p. 1031), which is a factor in their marginalization from state-run services and institutions, which are all conducted in Spanish, the official state language. Q’eqchi’ Mayas number about 865,000 (Grandia, 2012, p. 21) and their ancestral territories extend over four departments (similar to a province or state) in northeastern Guatemala (Petén, Izabal, Alta Verapaz, and Quiché), as well as the Toledo District in southern Belize (See Figure 1 below for map). Between 1999 and 2009, the proportion of Q’eqchi’ Mayas rose from 21% to 28% of the country’s total population (Ybarra et al., 2012, p. 17). The Spanish colonizers were unable to

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13 According to Cotjí Cuxil (1996), mestizaje is a continuation of the colonization of indigenous peoples: In the absence of equality between languages and cultures in a society seeking to construct a single national culture there cannot be equal contribution to the desired common culture, and therefore the synthesis will consist only of the consolidation of the hegemonic language and culture and the disintegration of the subordinate languages and cultures. (p. 25)

14 Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, Q’eqchi’s left the highlands around Cobán and settled in greater numbers in the lowlands. The colonization programs of the 1940s and 1950s, as well as the violence of the armed conflict, dispersed Q’eqchi’s to less populated areas, including the remote jungles in the department of Petén (Grandia, 2012).
conquer the Q’eqchi’ region after several attempts, and they named the region the Land of War, or Tezulutlán (Grandia, 2012). As I explain in Chapter Two, Spain’s failed conquest of Tezulutlán led to governance of the region by the Dominican priesthood, who intended to show the possibilities for religious conversion of indigenous peoples in the Americas (Grandia, 2012).

I conducted fieldwork over five months in 2013 and 2014 in the neighboring municipalities15 of El Estor, Izabal and Panzós, Alta Verapaz (see Figure 1). As of 2010 the municipality of El Estor had 56,651 inhabitants, 91% of whom are Q’eqchi’ (Consejo Municipal de Desarrollo de El Estor, 2010, p. 10), with the other 9% non-indigenous, Garífuna, or from other Mayan peoples. These two municipalities have long functioned as administrative centers for Q’eqchi’’s conducting official business with state institutions, such as acquiring birth and death records and official government-issued identification. Research contributors recounted how, in the not too distant past, their parents made the journey between the two towns on foot, walking for a full day through brush, forests, and stifling heat; now these urban centers are separated by an hour and a half bus ride along a major road.

El Estor and Panzós (highlighted in Figure 1 below) are situated in the tropical lowlands, with El Estor located along the shores of Lake Izabal, and Panzós in the Polochic River Valley. Before the arrival of Central American Highway 9, waterways provided the principal connection between neighboring communities in Alta Verapaz and Izabal. Canoes can still be seen skimming the waters of the lake as fishermen and women work, and other Q’eqchi’’s transport goods from one village (aldea) to another for trade, sale, or personal consumption. Besides small-scale agricultural production and fishing, economic activity in the area is dominates by the

15 Municipalities are towns with corporate status that include outlying villages.
Guatemalan Nickel Company (Compañía Guatemalteca de Níquel, or CGN in Spanish), as well as the mass production of sugar cane, bananas, rubber, coffee (in the cooler highlands near Cobán, Alta Verapaz), and African palm on monocrop plantations (fincas).

Figure 1. Administrative map of Guatemala with department boundaries (Courtesy of Michael Babb)

Q’eqchi’ territories have been targeted for economic projects since the mid-19th century, when the Guatemalan government encouraged German immigration to transform lands Q’eqchi’s “unproductively” occupied into economic powerhouses for the national economy through extensive coffee and banana plantations (Grandin, 2012). The political and economic disparity between German elites, the Ladino management class, and Q’eqchi’ peasants has a deep legacy
in the region, where Q’eqchi’s have struggled throughout centuries to maintain a degree of independence from state regulation in their communities.

El Estor received its name from the English words “the store,” since the town’s population grew through a trading outpost run by British merchants Skinner and Klee along Lake Izabal in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century. El Estor became an official municipality on November 5\textsuperscript{th}, 1890 (Consejo Municipal de Desarrollo de El Estor, 2010, p. 12). Present-day El Estor is divided into 154 communities, of which 127 are organized into Community Development Councils (Consejos Comunitarios de Desarrollo, or COCODEs in Spanish) (p. 9). In urban El Estor the poverty rate is 50\%, while in the rural areas it reaches 77\% (p. 10). Only 20\% of the population of El Estor has a reliable source of water, and 23\% of families have access to electricity (p. 17). Between 75\% and 89\% of working-age adults in El Estor do not have employment in the formal sector (p. 42). The Municipal Development Council of El Estor (Consejo Municipal de Desarrollo, or COMUDE in Spanish) (2010) also notes the high levels of agrarian conflict in El Estor, with six of the municipality’s seven micro regions acting as sites of agrarian conflicts (p. 58).

In his work on agrarian politics in the northern lowlands of Guatemala, political scientist Simon Granovksy-Larsen (2011) refers to the department of Alta Verapaz as “a microcosm of agrarian change and campesino struggle” (p. 34). Present-day Panzós, Alta Verapaz was the site of settlement attempts by the Spanish in the early 1600s, as well as by the British in the 1800s (Grandin, 2011, p. 140). Q’eqchi’s escaped to the scarcely populated area in the Polochic River Valley from the highlands in the 1860s in order to avoid forced labor on the expanding coffee plantations. In the 1880s the Guatemalan government started titling large tracts of land, and by 1915 the government handed out deeds to almost 300,000 acres to foreigners and Ladinos (p. 140). Panzós became a commercial hub, with German immigrants constructing their own
railway, known as the German Verapaz Railroad Company, to facilitate the transportation of coffee and other crops for export (p. 140). The period of rapid expansion of mainly foreign-owned fincas (plantations) during the late 19th century is the predecessor to the conflicts over land ownership in the El Estor and the Polochic Valley. Since the 19th century, the government’s orientation towards concentrating land in the hands of a few individuals has continued.

In Chapter Two I explore the history of conflicts over land in Guatemala in more detail. After outlining the three conquests of Q’eqchi’ lands (Grandia, 2012), I give an overview of the events of the 36-year armed conflict that took more than 200,000 lives (Commission for Historical Clarification, 1999). In Panzós tensions over land culminated in the Panzós Massacre on May 29th, 1978, when at least 53 Q’eqchi’ individuals were killed by the army.16 The violence reached its zenith in Guatemala during the “scorched earth” (tierra arrasada) campaign of 1981-1983, which most deeply affected Mayas in the Western highlands, about 300 miles west of El Estor. The CEH declared Q’eqchi’ the second most affected group in terms of human rights violations during the armed conflict (Viaene, 2010a). Residents of El Estor also experienced the conflict in several ways, although no large massacres have been identified. In addition to oral accounts about the military’s “counter-insurgency” campaigns in nearby communities, those living in El Estor recount the presence of the military in and around town in bases, the display of executed “subversives” on town streets, and repeated attempts to recruit young men into the military (see Chapter Five).

During today’s conquest by corporation, conflicts are taking place between Q’eqchi’

16The final numbers of those killed in the massacre are still disputed; 53 individuals have been exhumed from the mass burial site, but Montejo (2008) cites the number dead at 100 (p. 75). Schirmer (1998) cites 150 massacred (p. 41), while some survivors claim that the victims number in the hundreds (Grandin, 2011, p. 1).
peasants and African palm plantations, sugar plantations, and mining companies. This study focuses on Q’eqchi’s’ responses to these conflicts as they fight to exercise control of their ancestral territories. Now I outline the conceptual framework I employ throughout the study, which is composed of the concepts of contentious politics, territorial defense, and social movement learning.

**Preview of the Conceptual Framework**

In the current context of violence and dispossession at the hands of mining and mono-crop agriculture, Q’eqchi’s draw on traditional forms of resistance, while also devising new ones, in order to take advantage of new possibilities for alliances with local, national, and international forces sympathetic to their struggle. The current period is marked by the “post-conflict” contentious politics (Tarrow, 1998) of extraction, but it is also marked by Q’eqchi’s’ response: to defend and expand their control of their ancestral lands and natural resources. Territorial defense offers a unifying lens for considering how Q’eqchi’s’ strategies simultaneously support cultural, political, and economic aspirations to self-determination. All of these aspirations are connected within the Q’eqchi’ relational worldview, which encompasses Q’eqchi’s, the spirits who own the land (*tzuultaq’as*), ancestors, and other non-human inhabitants.

Learning theories offer a productive lens through which to view the cumulative weight of historical memory, lessons learned during recent and past struggles, and the persistence of Q’eqchi’ cultural traditions over centuries. Social movement learning theory in particular provides conceptual tools for appreciating the continuity of elements in Q’eqchi’ organizing as repertoires of contention (Tarrow, 1998), which are passed down through generations. Q’eqchi’s’ learning encompasses their individual experiences at home, their community’s
traditions, their interaction with formal institutions of the state, and their participation in a myriad of political forms of organizing, those originating in their communities as well as those originating in external labor or other grassroots organizing. This study is thus positioned through a framework of three key concepts: contentious politics, territorial defense, and social movement learning. This framework appreciates both the incipient and the centuries’ long forms of organizing employed by Q’eqchi’s in their defense of their ancestral territory.

My first concept, contentious politics (Tarrow, 1998), takes its inspiration from the field of social movement theory (Scott, 2008 & 2012). Political scientist Sidney Tarrow (1998) identifies social movements are “sequences of contentious politics that are based on underlying social networks and resonant collective action frames, and which develop the capacity to maintain sustained challenges against powerful opponents” (p. 2). I identify three elements of Q’eqchi’ collective identity (Melucci, 1995) as central to their defense of territory: as sons and daughters of the earth (aj ral ch’och’), as indigenous people, and as peasants (campesinos). The first identity operates in relation to a local land-based identity, the second operates in relation to global discourses of indigeneity, and the third operates as a class identifier that indicates Q’eqchi’s’ economic relationship of subsistence from the land. I draw on social movement theory (Scott, 2008 & 2012) because it provides a cohesive lens for examining Q’eqchi’s’ defense of territory. Although Q’eqchi’s do not have any centralized governance or decision-making processes, social movement theory helps to account for the cultural cohesion that have helped Q’eqchi’s to make gains in their struggle.

Second, I examine territorial defense, differentiating territory from conceptualizations of land as a commodity (Alonso-Fradejas, 2012 & 2015). I consider Q’eqchi’s’ push to legalization occupation of their lands as a transposition of capitalist relations onto their
worldview (Woolford, 2011). I draw on authors from the inter-disciplinary field of political ecology (Moore, 2005; Robbins, 2012) in order to contextualize the material and cultural roots of struggles over land. However, political ecology literature falls short of capturing indigenous worldviews that approach land through a relational ontology, which political ecologist Arturo Escobar (2010) describes as “a different way of imagining life (socio-natural worlds)” (p. 4). As a result, I go beyond political ecology to examine work from Mayas (Del Valle Escalante, 2008; Montejo, 2005; Cotjí Cuxil, 2007) as well as global indigenous studies (Blaser et al., 2010; Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Corntassel & Holder, 2008). I adopt the definition of indigenous territories put forward by James Anaya (Apache and Purépecha) (2013), United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. According to Anaya, indigenous territories should be construed to include:

- lands that are in some form titled or reserved to them by the State, lands that they traditionally own or possess under customary tenure (whether officially titled or not), or other areas that are of cultural or religious significance to them or in which they traditionally have access to resources that are important to their physical well-being or cultural practices. (p. 9)

Political ecology and indigenous studies both provide useful frameworks for framing the concept of territory. I look at the idea of defense in this study through focusing on how Q’eqchi’s frame their resistance by drawing on their relationship with land as a mother that deserves respect and care. In this sense, they are defending a member of their community, as well as fighting for their cultural and political self-determination as a people.

My third concept, social movement learning, draws on literature from informal learning (Schugurensky, 2000 & 2006), as well as social movement learning theory (Choudry, 2015;
Choudry & Kapoor, 2010; Kapoor, 2009) to show how Q’eqchi’ collective action extends community-based forms of knowledge and organization to the national and international scale, creating new strategies and forms of knowledge in the process. Political interventions are acts of knowledge creation and learning (Choudry, 2015), which in effect constitute a political praxis (Jaramillo & Carreon, 2014). Along with Lynette Shultz (2013), I “take seriously the decolonial movements to include indigenous knowledges as legitimate epistemic contributions” (p. 47). My focus on social movement learning is intended to develop a framework for Q’eqchi’s political action based on the unique identity-based and cultural issues that impact their political choices and strategies, which, I argue, revolve around defense of territory above any other single issue. The three elements of my conceptual framework tie directly to the methodological choices I have made throughout this dissertation, all of which is designed to put Q’eqchi’s’ forms of knowledge, engagement, and practices at the center of my analysis. Below I provide an overview of the methodology that has guided my study.

**Preview of the Methodology**

In their work on community engagement, Lynette Shultz and Tania Kajner (2013) state: “To be part of the lifeworld of the scholar is to be engaged with something and to be engaging some community, the question becomes ‘which one?’” (p. 3). In my case, I am engaged with Q’eqchi’ communities in the municipalities of El Estor, Izabal and Panzós, Alta Verapaz. For my qualitative study I spent five months in 2013 and 2014 living in El Estor, Guatemala, conducting interviews and carrying out participant observation with Q’eqchi’s. Following Shultz and Kajner (2013), I do not aspire to observe Q’eqchi’ communities from a distance, but rather I view my scholarship as “an explicitly recognized and articulated positioning of the scholar within that
lifeworld” (p. 3). My methodology draws broadly on three influences: oral history, testimonials (testimonio), and ethnography, and my chosen research methods—oral history interviews, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation at community events—all support my goal of highlighting Q’eqchi’ experiences.

I conducted 39 oral history and semi-structured interviews with 27 indigenous Guatemalans (25 Q’eqchi’ Mayas and two Achi Mayas) from ages 25 to 73. I use pseudonyms for all research contributors in this study, as I explain in more detail in the methodology chapter. I conducted between one and four interviews with each individual, with each interview lasting between 20 minutes and two hours. Ten research contributors were women and 17 were men. I was able to interview three individuals each from two different families, which allowed me to incorporate an inter-generational analysis in the case of Máximo and his two daughters Analisa and Maida. In another case, I was able to interview Valerio, Abel, and Gloria, three siblings who are Q’eqchi’ professionals.

Translation and interpretation between Spanish and Q’eqchi’ played a large role in my fieldwork and data analysis process. I am fluent in Spanish, so I was able to carry out 20 interviews entirely in Spanish by myself, mostly with Q’eqchi’ professionals, such as NGO workers and educators, that I already knew or was able to meet easily through an acquaintance. My dissertation could have easily been limited to interviews with Q’eqchi’s who speak Spanish and have higher levels of education. Two interviews were conducted in a combination of

17 Throughout the dissertation I identify each person by one pseudonym (more on this in Chapter Four). After each excerpt I indicate the language of the interview and which interview it is from. After an individual’s first quote, I indicate the contributor’s age at the time of the first interview. Appendix A lists each individual, their age, their occupation, and the language of the interview.
Spanish and Q’eqchi’. I only learned a few phrases of Q’eqchi’ while in El Estor\textsuperscript{18}, so I was unable to arrange or carry out Q’eqchi’ language interviews by myself. As a result, I conducted 17 interviews with monolingual Q’eqchi’ speakers with the indispensable help of two interpreters, Analisa and Rafael, community organizers and Q’eqchi’-Spanish interpreters. Their influence and contacts substantially shaped the directions my research took during the course of the study.

My study is not a full ethnography because my fieldwork was limited to five months total, which was not enough time to thoroughly understand the community contexts I explore in my study. However, my study draws on the ethnographic method of participant observation. In the context of her study with Guatemalan army officers, anthropologist Jennifer Schirmer (1998) states: “Ethnography is a methodology that tries to capture, by way of lengthy, systematic interviews, the perceptions, categories of thought, and systems of meanings of the informants themselves rather than imposing an outside frame of reference” (p. 3). I have employed this interpretation of ethnography as a guide in carrying out my fieldwork and in analyzing interviews and participant observation data. As much as possible, I rely on a Q’eqchi’ frame of reference for making sense of my interviews and field notes.

Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation is divided into eight chapters. Following this introduction, Chapter Two offers an overview of the centuries’ long struggle of Q’eqchi’s to defend themselves and their

\textsuperscript{18} I attempted to arrange a series of 12 private Q’eqchi’ lessons in the first month of my fieldwork, but was only able to take four lessons in all.
territory, through three periods of conquest, by Christianity, commerce, and colonization (Grandia, 2012). Chapter Two situates today’s struggle over land within a broader trajectory of conflict over land in Guatemala, drawing on literature about Guatemala’s colonization and its formation as a nation, including the ethnic divisions formed so decisively in the new republic’s opening decades (Grandin, 2011; Taracena, 2011). I also outline the events of the armed conflict and the “post-conflict” period, focusing on responses to violence by different sectors in society, as well as the construction of historical memory as a political activity (CEH, 1999; Nelson, 1999, 2009 & 2013; Nolin Hanlon, 1999; Sanford, 2003 & 2010; Tischler, 2005 & 2010). Finally, I end my literature review by describing the current configuration of forces involved in the fourth conquest of Q’eqchi’ territories (Grandia, 2012; Knowlton, 2016; Nolin & Stephens, 2010).

This chapter lays the groundwork for later addressing my research question on the ways Q’eqchi’s link their defense of territory today with the armed conflict (1960-1996) and previous expropriations.

Chapter Three outlines the conceptual framework for my study, which draws on the concepts of contentious politics, territorial defense, and social movement learning to explore Q’eqchi’s’ defense of territory as a collective action. Contentious politics helps to identify the cultural and political components that Q’eqchi’s draw on in their defense of territory. I identify three principal components of collective identity for Q’eqchi’s: as sons and daughters of the earth, indigenous people, and peasants; these identities revolve around relationships to the land. The three-part collective self-identity is central to the purposes and tactics Q’eqchi’s employ in defense of territory, which rely on Q’eqchi’s networks in and among communities, as well as with outside forces. Their organizing also takes shape in the face of identifying corporations as a common enemy. Moments of organizing and participation have concomitant moments of
learning, which I examine through the framework of social movement theory. All three concepts are part of the framework for developing my findings in Chapters Five, Six, and Seven, where I answer my two research questions.

Chapter Four describes my research methodology, which draws on oral history and ethnographic methods. I outline my three principal methods: semi-structured interviews, oral history interviews, and participant observation. I examine the prominence of testimonial-style narratives in research contributors’ interviews, and suggest why this might have occurred. I also comment on the ethical challenges I faced in conducting my field work, and the ways I addressed these challenges in the field and in the writing of this dissertation. I dedicate space to reflecting on the challenges of conducting research across three languages: Q’eqchi’, Spanish, and English. Finally, I consider the implications of disseminating my research through adopting the position of becoming-witness (Emberley, 2014), reflecting on how I have carried this out thus far, as well as my plans for the future.

Chapters Five, Six, and Seven are findings chapters based on thematic strands that emerged in the interviews and participant observation. In Chapter Five I draw on contributors’ narratives about the armed conflict and joining the struggle in order to show how processes of learning have occurred through processes such as socialization (Schugurensky, 2006), political formation in the guerrilla movement (Arias, 2011), inter-generational learning (Ixmatá, 2010), and the transmission of oral traditions (Montejo, 2005). I also frame moments of violence during the armed conflict as teaching-learning (Martinez Salazar, 2008) that has informed Q’eqchi’s’ current experiences of violence. By focusing on my interviews with three former members of the guerrilla movement, this chapter shows how research contributors relate their experiences in defense of territory today to the armed conflict and previous conflicts over land.
In Chapter Six, I focus on the role of Q’eqchi’ s’ multi-faceted collective identity in their collective action within and across communities and villages (aldeas). I draw on interviews and field notes to elucidate Q’eqchi’ s’ framing of territory as community member, mother, source of sustenance, and site of self-determination. I draw on their narratives about participation in political processes initiated within their communities in community assemblies and Elders’ Councils, as well as those coming from or responding to state institutions, such as Community Development Councils. I consider how experiences of non-formal education in NGO-sponsored workshops, as well as partipation in elections, are integral moments of learning.

Chapter Seven develops my framework of the “conquest by corporation,” which I describe as a new incursion by mining and agricultural extractive industries into Q’eqchi’ territories since the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996. Through contributors’ experiences of threats, harassment, and eviction, their narratives demonstrate the human toll that processes of “development” have on individuals and communities. Defense of territory, and in particular their focus on land titling, is the way they frame their response to the current “post-conflict” expansion of extractive industries. This chapter builds on research contributors’ narratives about the armed conflict in Chapter Five to show their perspectives on the continuity of their struggles over land over decades. I also show the specific forms their resistance takes today, in the form of land occupations, protests, and international collaborations with NGOs, filmmakers, researchers, and others.

I conclude in Chapter Eight by explaining my contributions of my study to the fields of Latin American studies, indigenous studies, and educational studies. Q’eqchi’ Mayas’ experiences of defense of territory are relevant for other contexts in Latin America where indigenous peoples face a similar drive to dispossess their land and natural resources for
commodification. This study also contributes rich details of Q’eqchi’s’ worldview and cultural framework to indigenous studies as a field, building on the work of scholarship on and by Mayas in Guatemala. Finally, my grounded analysis of Q’eqchi’s’ learning through processes of social movement organizing and experiences of informal education adds to the field of educational studies. I offer my analysis to the scholarly community, but I also intend for this study to be of value for Q’eqchi’s as they continue their struggle.
Liza Grandia (2012) refers to land as “an idiom of power” (p. 117) in Guatemala. According to the 2002 census, the top 3.2% of Guatemalan landowners controlled 66% of total land (p. 118). The Guatemalan elite—composed of large landholders, military officers, the industrial elite, and the political ruling class—acts as the political and economic muscle within Guatemala, opening up the exploitation of land and resources (often currently occupied or otherwise claimed for cultural, economic, or other activities by Guatemala’s indigenous peoples) to foreign corporations (Solano, 2013). The country’s low 1% royalty rate\(^\text{19}\) for mining functions as a lure to attract investors to Guatemala over its Central American neighbors with similar natural resources (Dougherty, 2011). The state interprets the “land problem” as conflicts over the land’s functionality in small and large-scale agrarian production (Alonso-Fradejas, 2012; Granovksy-Larsen, 2013; Ybarra, 2011). The Guatemalan state’s approach to land as a commodity and marker of class status is intricately bound up with the colonization of indigenous peoples. In a context of ongoing dispossession and violence, Q’eqchi’ Mayas have been forced to seek legal title to the lands they occupy (Alonso-Fradejas, 2015), which contrasts with their long-standing relationship with land as mother and community member (Permanto, 2015; Tischler, 2005).

This chapter provides an overview of conflicts over land throughout Guatemala’s history in order to better situate the social, political and economic forces at play in today’s “conquest by

\(^{19}\) In 1997 the Energy and Mining Ministry (Ministerio de Energía y Minas de Guatemala) passed a Mining Law that reduced the amount of royalties mining companies paid the government out of their net profits from 6% to 1% (Dougherty, 2011). The highest previous royalty rate I found was 10% in 1935 (Gómez Grivalva, 2013, p. 46).
corporation,“ as well as the actors involved in conflicts over land over centuries. I review relevant literature, guided in the first section by Grandia’s (2012) framework of the three “conquests” of Q’eqchi’ territories20. In the second section I proceed to an outline of the events of the armed conflict in Guatemala (1960-1996), also known as la violencia, in which agrarian conflict and related economic inequality featured centrally (Van Leeuwen, 2010). Then I consider the ways individual and collective memories of the armed conflict reverberate in Guatemalan politics today, addressing the reverberations of state terror in the armed conflict as ongoing “teaching-learning” (Martinez Salazar, 2008) for Guatemalans on the repercussion of disagreeing with the state. Finally, I close the chapter in the third section by outlining the current land tenure situation during the conquest by corporation, especially in relation to large-scale development projects by transnational mining and agricultural enterprises. Through this review of relevant literature I lay the groundwork for the continuity between past invasions and colonization and the incursion of extractive industries in Q’eqchi’ territories today. I foreground land as a site of struggles over knowledge, power, self-determination, and cultural survival, in addition to its significance for material sustenance (Moore, 2002 & 2005; Robbins, 2012).

This literature review begins to demonstrate how Q’eqchi’s’ current resistance to the fourth conquest is rooted in the same “repertoires of contention” (Tarrow, 1998) deployed in previous periods, such as land occupations, protests, and petitions to the state. Q’eqchi’s defend their relationship to the land as sons and daughters of the earth, drawing on their ties to their ancestors and the hill-valley spirits called tzuultaq ‘as. They also collaborate with national

20 It is important to note Grandia’s (2012) argument that Q’eqchi’ lands have been conquered, rather than the Q’eqchi’ people themselves.
peasant organizations such as the Peasant Unity Committee (Comité de Unidad Campesina, or CUC in Spanish), and National Coordinating Committee of Indigenous Peoples and Peasants (Coordinadora Nacional Indígena y Campesina, or CONIC in Spanish) in order to mobilize militant peasant identities. However, in the current period, Q’eqchi’s have consolidated their identity as indigenous people as they cultivate new alliances and networks, especially with international forces, in order to gain support for their struggles from outside of Guatemala.

By reviewing literature on the history of land conflicts, the specific causes and impacts of the armed conflict, and the current extractivist invasion, this chapter lays the groundwork for understanding Q’eqchi’s collective action in defense of territory today.

Three “Conquests” of Q’eqchi’ Territories

For indigenous peoples the struggle to maintain or regain control over their ancestral territories within Guatemala is marked by a broader, centuries-long struggle over their inclusion in the nation-building project in Guatemala. Since the arrival of the Spanish under the command of Pedro de Alvarado in 1524, the indigenous peoples living in the lands known today as Guatemala have been faced with incursions by foreigners. While Guatemala gained independence from Spain almost 200 years ago, Guatemala is still marked by internal colonialism, which continues to structure all matter of social, political, and economic relations according to a 19th century vision of a “modern” nation that prioritizes industrialization and progress. The economic, cultural, and political forms of exclusion that originated during Spanish rule continued after independence, and were crystallized within the boundaries of a nation-state, whose governance was structured around the exclusion of indigenous peoples. The elite have
profited off of the exploitative labor relations and resource extraction that indigenous peoples 
were forced into under a series of violent and oppressive regimes in the 19th and 20th centuries. 
Indigenous peoples were recognized as an irreplaceable source of surplus value as laborers, but 
their cultures and traditions were viewed as an obstacle to the nation’s efforts to modernize in the 
post-independence period (Taracena, 2011). However, struggles over land in Guatemala are 
over more than control of land as a material good; land is a site of continuously unfolding 
struggles over knowledge, power, self-determination, and cultural survival.

“Conquest by Christianity”

Indigenous peoples in Guatemala have been forced to defend their cultures, languages, 
and land in order to ensure their survival since Spanish colonization in 1524. During 
colonization indigenous peoples were “distributed,” along with the lands they occupied, as part 
of the Spanish encomienda (estate) system, along with the requirement that they contribute a 
specified amount of labor to the “owners.” In lieu of payment, they received a small plot of land 
for growing staple crops to feed themselves and their families, although this land rarely proved 
adequate to meet the family’s dietary needs.

The lands that are now Guatemala were not colonized in a homogenous way. The 
Spanish were unable to conquer Q’eqchi’ lands, which they labeled the Land of War, or 
Tezulutlán. Bartolomé de las Casas, the Dominican priest who publicly chronicled abuse of 
indigenous peoples in the Americas at the hands of the Spanish, petitioned the governor of 
Guatemala in 1537 for permission to peacefully convert the indigenous peoples of Tezulutlán. 
By 1545 the Q’eqchi’s were “pacified” under a model that focused on religious conversion by 
the Dominican brotherhood (Grandia, 2012), and in 1547 King Charles V authorized the 

Dominican brotherhood to oversee administration of Q’eqchi’ territories. In this year the Dominicans changed the name of the area from the Land of War to the Land of Peace (Vera Paz) (Grandia, 2012). Grandia (2012) refers to the Dominicans’ initial enclosure of Q’eqchi’ lands as “Conquest by Christianity.” The Dominican-controlled territories were exempt from the system of encomiendas established by Spanish colonizers in the rest of the country (Grandia, 2012), and indigenous leaders were able to maintain their position within their communities.

Although the methods employed by the Dominicans were typically less violent than their Spanish counterparts, Q’eqchi’s were still forcibly coerced into new territorial, religious, and political arrangements. The Dominicans reorganized the inhabitants of Vera Paz into 15 separate reducciones (reductions, or settlements) by 1574 (Grandia, 2012). According to Grandia, “forced resettlement became a common colonial administrative practice for facilitating indoctrination of the indigenous population, tribute collection, and seizure of native lands” (p. 33). Q’eqchi’s often attempted to return to their original villages after being “resettled,” which resulted in harsh punishment such as burning down their homes or stealing their crops, meted out with collaboration from the Spanish authorities. These tactics have been repeated throughout Guatemala’s history, from the resettlement and model villages of the armed conflict to the forced evictions taking place on Q’eqchi’ lands today (Ybarra, 2011a). Anthropologist Hilary Kahn (2006) posits that Q’eqchi’ migration away from reducciones was a way of “making themselves invisible through migration, thus removing themselves from the colonial gaze” (p. 37). This is a tactic Q’eqchi’s have employed in the centuries since.

Reducciones were bound up with the establishment of religious brotherhoods, called cofradías, which served as the basis for organizing religious festivals and collecting tribute beginning in 1562 (p. 34). Q’eqchi’s resisted the imposition of the tribute and cofradía system,
but the *confradías* remain a mobilizing source of identity among Q’eqchi’s to this day (Grandia, 2012). Kahn (2006) describes *cafradías* as a system under which “everyone was connected through obligatory ties that enforced respect to saints, the Church, deities, and the community” (p. 50). These obligations, based on reciprocity and respect, are central to Q’eqchi’ social relations today (Kahn, 2006).

At the time of Central American independence from Spain in 1821, big changes were already occurring in the organization of land and social relations in Guatemala. However, Guatemalan sociologist Figueroa (2011) explains: “During most of the nineteenth century, Guatemalan society was a sort of continuity from the colonial regime, even when the Spanish metropolis had disappeared” (p. 98, translation mine). Figueroa goes on to posit that the independence movement was divided into two main factions, one made up of *criollo* (Latin American-born Spaniards) landholders who wanted to eliminate Spanish control, and one that aimed for a more equal distribution of land; the former were successful, and their conservative economic and political policies maintained those largescale holdings intact (p. 98). The policies of the Spanish had proved more progressive than those of the conservative ruling class post-independence, however, in terms of the autonomy experienced by indigenous people, many of whom still lived in their own communities in the years following independence. The liberals who eventually took power proved even more dangerous to indigenous peoples, since their land policies resulted in the expropriation of indigenous communities’ lands in favor of medium-sized land holders (Figueroa, 2011).

The political ascendancy of Ladinos began after independence, accompanied by changes in ethnic relationships between indigenous peoples and Ladinos. By the beginning of the 19th century most reducciones had disappeared, and in 1824 the Dominicans lost administrative
control of Alta Verapaz altogether (Kahn, 2006). In 1839, the government reinstated colonial-era laws, thus returning a degree of autonomy to indigenous communities, while formalizing a high level of separation between indigenous people and Ladinos (Grandia, 2012). As historian Taracena (2011) explains: “Under the rubric of tutelage, the state certainly promoted and protected local indigenous power. Yet this practice also deepened the asymmetry between the assimilation of Ladinos and the segregation of Indians” (pp. 98-99). Indigenous people regained some local autonomy in their governance. In addition, the government offered titles for communal lands, which helped communities to control their status as peasants and laborers. However, in spite of these advances, indigenous peoples’ status as second-class citizens became firmly entrenched through the state’s colonial, segregationist approach to administration.

During colonial Spanish rule and into the post-independence period after 1821, indigenous peoples represented an irreplaceable source of labor, but their cultures and traditions were viewed as an obstacle to the nation’s efforts to modernize the economy. Anthropologist Linda Green (1999) explains, “The contradiction, of course, lies in the disjuncture, the simultaneous ideological rejection of the Mayas and their crucial inclusion in the political economy of Guatemala” (p. 26). Mayas were viewed as racially impure and a hindrance to modernization efforts, but their labor powered the country’s key’s industries. In the next period of conquest, the conquest by commerce, Q’eqchi’s were integrated into the economy through legislation that mandated forced labor and forbade indigenous peoples from pursuing economic activities outside of the feudal plantations they were forced to labor on. This racialized labor regime was formative in the creation of Guatemala’s binary ethnic stratification, which privileged European landholders above all others, but gradually came to incorporate Ladinos into local governance and economic opportunities as mid-level administrators.
“Conquest by Commerce”

The “conquest by commerce” marks the expropriation of Q’eqchi’ territories in the period between independence from Spain in 1821 and the liberal reforms of the 1870s, commonly called the Liberal Revolution. Q’eqchi’ territories in Alta Verapaz were particularly affected by the redistribution of their lands to German immigrants for large-scale coffee production. For example, by 1862 there were 39 coffee fincas in Cobán, Alta Verapaz (Kahn, 2006, p. 38). Until this period, the government’s neglect of those far-flung departments had allowed Q’eqchi’s to maintain their communities largely intact culturally and economically.

The Liberal Revolution in 1871 prioritized the political and economic aspects of nation-building, developing modern infrastructure and labor relations in order to deepen the capitalist character of the economy. Figueroa (2011) describes how these reforms, the liberals’ attempts to reject centuries of colonial influences in Guatemalan society, “deepened and broadened the afflictions of huge sectors of the population” (p. 104, translation mine). The Liberal Revolution marked capitalism’s definitive arrival into isolated rural indigenous communities that had previously maintained independence from state institutions. Historian Greg Grandin (2011) characterizes this period as one in which, “Guatemalan liberalism institutionalized the collective nature of exploitation” (p. 26), drawing indigenous peoples into the burgeoning capitalist economy, often through forced debt peonage (Grandia, 2012, p. 41). These reforms simultaneously recast ethnic and economic relations. However, while Q’eqchi’s gained experience in negotiating control of their territories directly with the state, this period was also marked by resistance to the expropriation and sale of their lands and their forced labor. Common tactics included burning down plantations, writing petitions, and escaping to the lowlands.
In state discourse indigenous peoples were stigmatized and excluded as a hindrance to the country’s progress, even while they provided much of the labor that fueled the country’s economy (Kahn, 2006). Taracena (2011) articulates that during the second half of the 19th century: “Contemporary Indians were simultaneously viewed as a hindrance to progress and the unity of the nation, as an impediment due to their ‘decadence’—and praised as skillful and submissive workers of the land” (p. 104). While the project of modernizing the Guatemalan economy was (and is) impossible without the exploitation of indigenous labor, indigenous peoples’ insistence on maintaining their languages, religious practices, and forms of law and governance was viewed by the elite as an inconvenient administrative by-product of the nation’s diverse population.

In the largely Q’eqchi’ department of Izabal class identities for Ladinos and Q’eqchi’s were codified during this time. In late 19th-century registries Q’eqchi’s were automatically listed as laborers while Ladinos were farmers; Q’eqchi’s only began to be listed as farmers in the mid-20th century (Grandia, 2012). Throughout the 19th century social, economic, and political categories were created to define class and ethnicity, and the legacies of such categories are still in force today.

At the same time that the Guatemalan government refined its approach to ethnic relations, it also promoted the immigration of Europeans, Germans in particular, to buy extensive tracts of land and “modernize” the economy via large-scale agricultural projects such as coffee plantations. An 1887 treaty assured German immigrants that they and their children would maintain their German nationality, while granting them unlimited access to buy or rent Guatemalan land (Kahn, 2006). By 1897 German-owned lands produced one third of Guatemala’s coffee (Kahn, 2006). The influx of foreign elites led to even more indigenous
people losing their territories and their local forms of communal governance in the face of the rising power of the Ladinos and European immigrants (Grandia, 2012). In Alta Verapaz in particular, few Q’eqchi’s had previously acquired titles to their lands so these areas became wastelands (baldíos) the government was able to sell to individuals, among whom numbered many German families whose names are still among the elite in Guatemala.

In order to procure the workers needed for the labor-intensive coffee industry, in 1877 the government extended the colonial system of mandamientos (Grandia, 2012) to extract free labor from indigenous people, who resisted working for others on the lands they had controlled only a few years before. In 1878 the government enacted the Vagrancy Law, which required indigenous people to work 100-150 days per year on coffee plantations with pay of one real for day for men and half that for women (REMHI, 1999, p. 181). In 1894 legislation was passed that addressed economic peonage, prohibiting “vagrancy” while indigenous peoples were obligated to be working for someone else (Permanto, 2015), thereby making it difficult or impossible for indigenous peoples to tend to their own land off of the encomienda. In 1920 mandamiento was officially abolished, replaced by debt peonage and vagrancy laws. By 1921 40% of Q’eqchi’s lived on coffee plantations as indentured mozo-colonos (worker-serfs), severing them from an independent life in their communities (Grandia, 2012).

Throughout Guatemala’s history, even modest attempts to reform widely disparate land ownership on a national scale have been met with violent resistance by the ruling class. Grandia (2012) offers the following table which provides a concise overview of the various attempts at land reform in Guatemala throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. These reforms changed the distribution of land ownership via large scale expropriation, as well as adopted administrative approaches to actively incorporate indigenous peoples into the economy as small landholders.
Table 1. Phases of land reform in Guatemala (Grandia, 2012, p. 199)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Initiated</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Beneficiaries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>Late 19\textsuperscript{th} century</td>
<td>Seizure of lands held by Indigenous peoples and the Catholic Church</td>
<td>Foreign investors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second</td>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>State-led expropriation and redistribution of land, preempted by U.S. intervention</td>
<td>Peasants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third</td>
<td>1960s</td>
<td>Counterreform, colonization</td>
<td>Elites, military, cattle Ranchers, some peasants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth</td>
<td>1980s-90s</td>
<td>Land banks as “market-assisted land reform” under structural adjustment</td>
<td>A limited number of landless families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth</td>
<td>1990s onward</td>
<td>Emphasis on juridical security through a national cadastral registry</td>
<td>Remains to be seen</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Guatemala class and ethnicity became intertwined as mutually reinforcing forms of exclusion and exploitation during the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century. Mayas were forced to forfeit their identity as indigenous in order to participate as citizens until 1944, when the state finally recognized indigenous people as citizens of Guatemala (Casaús Arzú, 2007). While Ladinos faced exclusion compared with criollos, or those born of Spanish descent, they assimilated more easily than indigenous people, since they already spoke Spanish, the language of the elite, and did not wear traditional indigenous clothing. Ladinos ascended socially and politically starting in the 1850s, gradually becoming the ruling class as specific capitalist ideals related to consumption and private property became dominant. According to Taracena (2011), “the ideal citizen was a landowner or free laborer who could speak Spanish, be a consumer, acquire private property (land and buildings), and produce goods for the world market” (p. 97). The term
“Ladino” evolved out of the specific economic and political context of Guatemala’s incorporation into the world capitalist market but some continuity remains between its original referent and its meaning today. Thus, anthropologist Kay B. Warren (1998) offers, “It was through the process of state intervention that the Ladino-indigenous contrast took on its characteristics contemporary form as a mutually exclusive and hierarchical class-like distinction” (p. 11). Ladinos today still represent the nation-building ideals of the 19th century, which prize individualism, land ownership, and speaking Spanish.

In the decades immediately following independence from Spain in 1821, indigenous peoples were effectively excluded from developing the country’s identity, as well as participating in governance at a local and a national level (Taracena, 2011). Taracena (2011) argues “the above-mentioned forms of institutionalized subordinations, essentially excluded Indians from participating in constructing an imagined national community in Guatemala” (p. 95). Indigenous exclusion was both formally legislated and informally enforced through multi-layered social, economic, and political relations. For a brief ten-year period (1944-1954) Guatemala would later break with its history of feudal economic and social relations during a period of democratization and socially inclusive modernization.

“Conquest by Colonization”

Guatemala’s history of authoritarianism and exclusion ruptured in 1944 when Juan José Arévalo (1944-1950) became the country’s first democratically elected president, marking the start is known as the Ten Years of Spring (1944-1954). The country embarked on a period of modernization and development based on inclusion of the poor, rather than the elite rule that had marked Guatemala’s history since Spanish colonization. This period of political openings and
reforms proved that Guatemala’s toiling classes were capable of contributing to the project of nation building. Guatemala’s indigenous peoples glimpsed the possibility of the return of their ancestral lands, which had been expropriated by successive waves of European immigrants and Ladinos throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. From 1944-1954, the majority of the country mobilized around a series of reforms that removed obstacles to broader participation by indigenous peoples in the official and informal structures controlled by the state, from guaranteeing free elections to abolishing forced labor (to which many Mayas were subject at that time) to establishing a minimum wage (Grandin, 2011). These reforms did not challenge capitalist political and economic relations in Guatemala, but they opened the way for workers and peasants to engage in a previously unknown measure of participation in the state.

Land reform was a central platform of the presidency of both Arévalo and his successor, Jacobo Arbenz (1950-1954). Passed by the Guatemalan Congress in 1952, Arbenz’s Decree 900, the Agrarian Reform Law, was aimed at promoting a modernization of the Guatemalan economy through expanding access to land for peasants. Grandia refers to this process of settling jungle and remote areas during the Ten Years of Spring as “colonization” in her framework of three conquests in order to explain how Q’eqchi’s were impacted by the redistribution of land during this period. Through her use of “colonization” in this way, Grandia does not negate the impact of colonial processes beginning in the 16th century. Rather, this phrasing helps to situate the continuity of the impacts of outsiders’ “modernizing” projects in Q’eqchi’ lands from Spanish colonialism to Guatemala’s post-independence governments. Central to carrying out this legislation was the establishment of local agrarian committees, which allowed many peasants their first opportunity to participate in local decision-making processes, including Q’eqchi’s (Sanford, 2003). Sanford (2003) describes the land reform and its attendant local political
processes as “a significant and memorable shift in public space and political action” (p. 57), based on her interviews with Q’eqchi’ elders in the 1990s who remembered the impact of the reforms on their lives. Decree 900 mandated the distribution of idle *latifundio* lands over 85 hectares (Trefzger, 2002, p. 35). Alta Verapaz, where 93.4% of the population in 1950 was indigenous (p. 39), was the site of 16% of land expropriations for the whole country (p. 39), whereas Izabal was the site of 14% of the country’s expropriations (p. 40). The U.S. Fruit Company’s fallow land was redistributed to 100,000 peasants during this period (Grandia, 2012) as well.

However, despite Arbenz’s popularity among the beneficiaries of the land reforms and other democratic reforms, his reforms alienated the elite minority of large landholders, who aligned with the U.S. government to organize the coup that successfully overthrew President Arbenz in 1954 (Grandia, 2012). Colonel Carlos Castillo was installed as president, and the government immediately reversed all of the progressive measures implemented by the previous two presidents (Grandia, 2012). Concurrently, the government set out on a course of political repression that contributed directly to the organization of armed guerrilla resistance in the following years. As Sanford (2010) states regarding the counterrevolution in the wake of the coup, “in the rural memory, the counterrevolution is another moment in a historical *continuum* of dispossession of the land and different forms of debt peonage” (p. 47, translation mine). The colonization policy continued after Arbenz’s overthrow, focusing on settling the northern lowlands of Petén and the region of the Northern Transversal Strip (Franja Transversal del Norte, or FTN in Spanish) throughout the late 1950s (Permanto, 2015). Q’eqchi’s migrated north during this period, escaping difficult work conditions on *fincas* and seeking unclaimed public lands to settle and cultivate. In 1962 the Guatemalan government established the National
Institute of Agrarian Transformation (Instituto Nacional de Transformación Agraria, or INTA in Spanish) to facilitate the titling process and construction of roads and other infrastructure associated with colonization (p. 39).

In summary, Q’eqchi’s and other indigenous peoples in Guatemala have been obliged to engage with various elites throughout centuries in order to defend their lands from invasion, expropriation, and other attempts to impose foreign models of governance. Beginning with Spanish colonialism, Q’eqchi’s have resisted conquest and resettlement. Even after Guatemala won independence from Spain in 1821, the large landholding elites governing the country excluded the country’s indigenous peoples from participating in forging the country’s new identity (Taracena, 2011). The country assumed a Ladino identity, which has not been overturned in two centuries. While huge tracts of Q’eqchi’s’ traditional lands were sold to German immigrants and others for coffee plantations in the 19th century, Q’eqchi’s worked as forced laborers, deprived of their communal economic and cultural activities. Between 1944 and 1954 the narrative of indigenous expropriation and exploitation was interrupted as Guatemala pursued more participatory forms of land ownership and governance during the Ten Years of Spring. In 1954, when authoritarian rule resumed, land ownership was reorganized to benefit the elite. The closing up of political space after the Ten Years of Spring was met with organized opposition through church organizations, agricultural cooperatives, and, eventually, a guerrilla movement.

The land reforms associated with the three conquests are bound up with forms of exclusion and violence yet to be undone in Guatemala. The waves of expropriation of lands in the wake of the Liberal Revolution left many indigenous people as mozos on lands that had been theirs only years before. With the exception of the Ten Years of Spring, the Guatemalan state
consistently organized land relations to encourage foreign investment and deepen Guatemala’s involvement in the world economy. These economic motives were co-constituted with the creation of ethnic and class divisions between Mayas and Ladinos, which survive to this day. Now that I have outlined each of the three conquests as they relate to Q’eqchi’ territories specifically, I move to a description of the 36-year armed conflict, commonly known within Guatemala as “la violencia.”

I paint the broad strokes of the origins of the conflict and follow it through to the signing of the Peace Accords between the Guatemalan military and the guerrilla movement in 1996. The conflicts over land the preceded the Ten Years of Spring reopened with the takeover by Castillo and a series of military dictatorships. Below I show how conflicts over land were central to key moments during the conflict, such as the 1978 Panzós Massacre. Later my research contributors share how the failed promises of the Peace Accords in relation to huge disparities over land have contributed to their defense of territory today.

“La Violencia” (1960-1996) and the Aftermath

The 1954 coup that thrust Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas into power ushered in a period of severe repression, establishing a stranglehold of political participation by a tiny elite and denied participation by the country’s majority, the masses of workers and peasants. Peasant (campesino) cooperatives, Catholic Action and other church groups, labor unions, and political parties were all prohibited from organizing on a small or large scale (Grandin, 2000). On November 13th, 1960 a coup opposing the authoritarian regime, originating with support from one third of the army, was unsuccessful in its attempt to take power. Instead, the failed coup instigated a wave of military repression, which effectively reduced the space of political
participation even further, so that indigenous people and poor Ladinos were excluded from any input in the functioning of the institutions of the country (Grandin, 2013). As Taracena (2011) states, “if there had been any political opening whatsoever between 1963 and 1966, there would have been no guerrilla movement” (as cited in Grandin, 2000, p. 406). However, the reversal of the 1944-1954 reforms, as well as the intensification of military oppression, inspired the formation of a variety of organizations that challenged the military’s hold and opened the way for a vision of a radically transformed Guatemala.

**The Beginnings of the Armed Conflict**

Various popular organizations sprung up throughout the first years of the military repression after 1954. In the 1950s, leading up to the outbreak of the armed conflict in 1960, localized forms of resistance were so strongly discouraged by the authoritarian dictatorship. Political scientist James Scott (2012) has pointed out,

> Under authoritarian rule it seems patently obvious that subjects who have no elected representatives to champion their cause and who are denied the usual means of public protest (demonstrations, strikes, organized social movement, dissident media) would have no other recourse than foot-dragging, sabotage, poaching, theft, and, ultimately, revolt. (p. 16)

Given the lack of political space for even small-scale acts of resistance or protest, guerrilla organizations formed in different parts of the country in the 1960s to press for demands for elections, opportunities for political participation by all citizens, and economic inclusion (Grandin, 1997).
With the exception of a few attempts at merging organizations in the 1960s and 1970s, the principal armed groups operated largely in isolation in different departments of the country until February 7th, 1982, when they announced their merger into the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca, or URNG in Spanish). The three groups that merged were the Rebel Armed Forces (Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes, or FAR in Spanish), the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres, or EGP in Spanish), and the Revolutionary Organization of the People in Arms (Organización Revolucionaria del Pueblo en Armas, or ORPA in Spanish). Grandin (2000) identifies the EGP, originally founded in 1972 by historian Arturo Taracena among others, as “the strongest and most confrontational of the rebel groups” (p. 405). The guerrillas spent the 1970s training in rural and jungle areas, fought in open combat with the Guatemalan army, worked to recruit members in the capital and with indigenous communities, and collaborated with unions and the student movement in Guatemala City. The Guatemalan Labor Party (Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo, or PGT in Spanish), the party of former president Jacobo Arbenz, whose overthrow in 1954 ended the Ten Years of Spring also joined the guerrilla organizations to form the URNG. Upon unifying, the URNG published its five point program, in which they proclaimed their goals for the revolution: the end of repression, an end to economic and political domination by elites, equality between indigenous peoples and Ladinos, the creation of a representative government, and self-determination in international affairs (as cited in Rothenberg, 2012).

The Commission for Historical Clarification (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, or CEH in Spanish) (1999) ultimately noted that, in spite of their years of organizing, recruiting members, and fighting against the army, “The number of insurgent combatants was too small to be able to compete in the military arena with the Guatemalan Army, which had more
troops and superior weaponry, as well as better training and co-ordination” (p. 22). According to the CEH, the guerrilla movement represented more of a symbolic threat to the dictatorship than an actual challenge to the government’s grip on power.

Mayas participated as rank-and-file members in the guerrilla movement but did not often occupy leadership positions. A common critique heard among Mayas and leftists in Guatemala is that the guerrilla movement was dominated by Ladinos (Arias 2007-2008; Hale, 2006; McAllister, 2010), even as indigenous participation was essential to the guerrilla’s political program and military victories. Ladino literary scholar Arturo Arias (2007-2008) posits that the guerrilla movement’s understanding of the participation of indigenous peoples to the ranks stems from the movement’s adoption of Marxist class terminology that associated indigenous peoples with Guatemala’s backward feudal economic relations. According to Arias, “The traditional Ladino-led revolutionary leftists saw themselves as the intellectual architects of the revolution” (p. 21), which Arias associates with Ladinos’ monopoly of leadership positions, as well as privileged access to knowledge and power that were largely denied to Mayan guerrilla members. Arias describes a current of Mayas organizing within the guerrilla movement in order to further Mayas’ goals. Arias reflects on changes in his own thinking about Mayas’ participation in the guerrilla movement, ten years after the end of the armed conflict: “Rethinking the Maya narrative from the Maya perspective, we observe decentralized sites of struggle where subjugated peoples contest hegemony, recovering local voices; we discover alternative struggles for agency and self-empowerment” (p. 22).

Montejo (2005) fills out elements of Arias’ critique by directly referencing some Mayas’ disagreements with aspects of the guerilla ideology and organization, arguing.
The Marxist ideology promoted by the guerrillas was not fully accepted by the indigenous inhabitants, who resisted the displacement of their traditional leaders by the revolutionary ladino leadership imposed on them, leading to trouble, fear, and confusion in the Maya communities that were nonparticipants in the popular, proguerrilla movement. (p. 124)

Montejo posits that Mayas were forced to abandon their local, traditional leadership practices in order to participate in the nationwide movement against the dictatorship alongside the guerrillas. He argues that Mayas know better than anyone else the terms of their own liberation, so they should be free to follow indigenous models of leadership, without the imposition of models from outside their communities. In Chapter Six I return to the topic of Mayan models of leadership when I discuss Q’eqchi’ decision-making bodies, such as the community assembly and the Elders’ Council.

According to Figueroa (2011), between 1973 and 1980, the working classes in Guatemala were at the head of the resistance to the dictatorship (p. 147). As he phrases it, “In those years there was a clear tendency for the working class, particularly in urban areas, to be the heart of the antidictatorial resistance and the vanguard of the popular demands” (p. 147, translation mine). This is visible through a number of factors, including the visibility of the union leadership and the number of strikes, particularly in the industrial sector, which more than doubled between 1966 and 1978 (p. 148).

One outcome of this surge of working-class political mobilization was the formation of the Peasant Unity Committee (CUC in Spanish), which was officially founded on April 15th, 1978 (Grandin, 1997). Grandin (1997) describes how the CUC “developed a revolutionary ideology that rejected the legitimacy of the state and place a united Indian-ladino peasant
movement squarely within the growing popular movement” (p. 13). In its first newsletter the CUC describes itself as “an organization of all workers in the countryside, individuals, associations, leagues, committees, who want to fight valiantly to get rid of oppression, with our strength united with that of all the other exploited people of Guatemala” (as cited in McAllister, 2010, p. 282). The CUC organized confrontations with the state during the armed conflict, such as a May Day demonstration in 1978 (McAllister, 2010), the occupation of the Spanish embassy in 1980, and large scale strikes in the 1980s (Grandin, 1997), including a mobilization of 100,000 plantation workers in 1980 (McAllister & Nelson, 2013).

Even though in some regions the CUC membership was majority indigenous, the CUC employed a class-based discourse rather than an ethnic one, which Grandin (1997) labels “class-based pan-Indianism” (p. 25), in order to emphasize the common economic interests of all poor Guatemalans, regardless of whether they were Ladino or indigenous. Grandin describes that “for the vast majority of its constituency the organization was not a union or a party that one joined but more of an advocacy group that they flocked to during specific moments of crisis and struggle” (pp. 19-20). Along with rhetoric of class warfare adopted from Marxism, CUC also drew on liberation theology to create a unique identity that attracted a variety of Guatemalans for its religious, political, cultural, and class discourses (p. 22). The rhetoric of the CUC resonates with comments my research contributors made about how the rich have power over everything in Guatemala. Grandin (1997) cites CUC leader José González’s recruitment pitch for potential new members of the CUC, as recounted to him in a 1994 interview:

If we are God’s children why do we not eat like the rich eat? Who were the owners of the land before the Spanish came? We were, Los Guatemaltecos. So when they come
and say we are invading the land, we say no, you are the ones who invaded the land, the land is ours. (p. 17)

During the armed conflict Mayas participated in various organizations—from religious to cultural to labor rights’ organizations—and joining the armed guerrilla movement was often a last resort, rather than a first one (Grandin, 1997; Scott, 2012).

**The Panzós Massacre (1978) and Its Antecedents**

The military’s massacre of Q’eqchi’s on May 29th, 1978 represents a flash point in the armed conflict as a whole. Grandin (2011) describes the Panzós Massacre as “a breaking point in state-society relations, where a long-standing peasant tradition of protest, negotiation, and concession gave way to direct confrontation” (p. 132). For several of my research contributors, it was pivotal in their own political awakening, marking a turning point in their own or their community’s participation in the struggle. The massacre had antecedents in ongoing struggles over land in Panzós, but it also marked a moment where the Guatemalan military severely escalated its use of massacres as a tactic against opposition forces. The Panzós Massacre represented an escalation of the army’s violence to a new level, initiating a period of massacres in indigenous communities which Cotjí Cuxil (Kaqchikel Maya) (1996) has called an “Indian holocaust” (p. 25).

Before I paint a picture of the events of the massacre itself, it is important to provide context about the events leading up to the massacre. In 1965 the Guatemalan Communist Party (Partido Guatemalteco de Trabajadores, or PGT in Spanish) advised a group of 40 families in the community of Soledad in their negotiations over the land with INTA. By 1975 the families petitioning for the land had expanded to 66 and the size of the land concession was lowered from
the original demand of 4,400 acres to less than 300 acres (Grandin, 2011, p. 144). INTA approved the concession in June 1975 but many families were unable to afford the 96 quetzales (approximately 96 dollars at the time) (p. 145) demanded on a yearly basis to maintain their collective payment current. By 1977 twenty families were unable to pay and were forced onto the worst lands in the community, which led to further conflict within the community, as well as with INTA and the municipal government. The conflict over the land, and the presence of two Ladinos with political influence among the grantees of the best parcels of the Soledad land, directly contributed to the events leading up the massacre.

Luz Méndez Gutiérrez and Amanda Carrera Guerra (2014) from the NGO Team for Community Studies and Psycho-Social Action (Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Acción Psicosocial, or ECAP in Spanish) (n.d.), analyze the unique relationship that existed between the military and large landowners (finqueros) during the armed conflict:

In the Polochic Valley State repression during the armed conflict had its own characteristics. There the finqueros were front-line actors, they did not just support the army politically and ideologically but instead were involved directly in its repressive operatives, either by doing intelligence work, lending tractors and trucks, or even giving away lands in order to establish military bases. (p. 59, translation mine)

In the 1960s the military had established a base in Panzós to combat the guerrilla forces, which were based in the Sierra Las Minas mountain range outside of Panzós (Sanford, 2003). By 1978 the base continued in the same spot and soldiers’ living quarters had been moved to the community hall on the town plaza (p. 56). The governor dispatched 30 troops to Panzós on May 27th, 1978 (Grandin, 2011) as part of a permanent detachment of troops to be stationed in Panzós.
By the time Q’eqchi’s arrived to the town plaza on May 29th, it was surrounded by at least 60 soldiers (Sanford, 2003).

The Panzós Massacre took place in the context of unresolved and escalating conflicts over land between Q’eqchi’s and large landholders in Alta Verapaz. The sequence of events during the massacre itself on May 29th, 1978 is still contested, with some eyewitnesses claiming the military opened fire unprovoked while others claimed the hundreds of Q’eqchi’s who arrived in the town plaza that day were armed and prepared for a confrontation (Grandin, 2012). The army, in collaboration with local landowners, opened fire on Q’eqchi’s gathered in the town plaza to demand land. Guatemalan psychologist Carlos Paredes (2006), also of the NGO ECAP, collected and published extensive testimonies from Q’eqchi’s about the armed conflict. He asserts: “It is not hidden to anyone that the Panzós Massacre that occurred on May 29th, 1978 has its origins in the fight for access to land ownership that the Q’eqchi’ people have maintained and continue to maintain” (p. xxxii, translation mine). The number of Q’eqchi’s killed that day is still disputed. Thirty-five skeletons from the massacre were exhumed from a mass grave in 1997 (Sanford, 2003, p. 84), but the Commission for Historical Clarification report listed 53 victims, including those killed during the massacre as well as those whose deaths in the following days could be connected directly to the violence they experienced during the massacre (p. 85). The Panzós massacre signaled the escalation of the military’s genocidal tactics in Maya communities, drawing thousands of civilians into military duties through civilian patrols and forcefully restructuring the daily lives of Mayan communities through model villages and development poles (Ybarra, 2011b).
The Devastation of “Scorched Earth” (1981-1983)

During the 1970s the government increased the intensity of its “counter-insurgency” campaign, forcibly recruiting young men into the army in order to enact forms of surveillance and social control throughout the country, especially in the majority indigenous Western highlands. The military’s bloody campaign targeted community organizers, church leaders, Mayas, and anyone suspected of being an ally of the guerrilla movement. However, the army’s “counter-insurgency” brush painted all indigenous peoples as subversive or potentially subversive. This campaign meets the description of state violence offered by Guatemalan sociologist Edelberto Torres-Rivas (1999), who designates it as “the use, tolerance, or threat of force by agents of the state, or its representatives, carried out in an organized manner and expressing itself directly or obliquely, practically or symbolically” (p. 289). The comments of a spokesman of military dictator General Efraín Ríos Montt, one of the leaders of the March 23rd, 1982 coup and later president during the scorched earth campaign, provide insight into the rationale of state violence:

The guerrillas won over many Indian collaborators, therefore, the Indians were subversive, right? And how do you fight subversion? Clearly, you had to kill Indians because they were collaborating with subversion. And then they would say, ‘You’re massacring innocent people.’ But they weren’t innocent. They had sold out to subversion. (Manz, 2002, pp. 293-294)

This quote shows the reasoning employed by the Guatemalan army, which facilitated large scale and long-term violence targeted at Mayas in particular.

Between mid-1981 and 1983 the military implemented a “scorched earth” (tierra arrasada) campaign, especially in the majority Mayan Western highlands, which completely
annihilated 440 villages (Jonas, 2000, p. 24). In 1983 the military commissions established mandatory paramilitary “civilian self-defense patrols” (*patrullas de auto-defensa civil*, or PACs in Spanish). At its height, one million peasants were enlisted in the PACs (p. 24), largely in their own communities of residence, under orders from the military to detain, torture, and/or kill anyone they suspected of being a guerrilla member or sympathizer. Later the Commission for Historical Clarification (1999) identified the acts against Mayas during the scorched earth campaign—including burning whole families alive, destroying homes and community property, torturing suspected guerrillas or sympathizers, and committing individual murders—as genocide (pp. 38–41). Mayas were forced to move to resettlement camps, called “model villages,” which subjected Mayas to close, continual surveillance by the military in order to prevent any activities in support of the guerrilla movement (Jonas, 2000; Commission for Historical Clarification, p. 31). The military’s scorched-earth campaign “was designed to brutally cut off the indigenous population from the insurgency and break down the communal structures which analysts identified as seedbeds of guerrilla support” (Grandin, 2000, p. 399). Jeff Corntassel (Cherokee) & Cindy Holder (2008) tie the scorched earth policy to the political elite’s need to eliminate ethnic and cultural difference, and consolidate control over even the most remote communities in the country. Corntassel and Holder describe scorched earth as

an exceptionally ruthless and brutal attempt to secure the conditions that Guatemala’s elite had since the nineteenth century taken to be an essential element of political modernization: national unity, understood as the identification of all segments of the population with a single, European-inspired ideal. (p. 484)

The “counter-insurgent” policy marked continuity with the elites’ discourse, beginning in the second half of the 19th century, blaming Mayas for the country’s lack of development. By
eliminating indigenous economic and social practices, the scorched earth policy aimed to eradicate indigenous ways of life through both physical and cultural violence.

The army unleashed brutal violence on hundreds of communities, especially in the 1981-1983 period (Commission for Historical Clarification, 1999; Jonas, 2000). The guerrillas did not have the troops or resources to protect all of the communities targeted by the military’s counter-insurgency campaign (Jonas, 2000), and the guerrillas’ popularity waned during these years. Grandin (2011) pinpoints 1983 as a watershed year in the calculated retreat of the guerrilla movement:

After 1983 the rhetoric of the left changed. The struggle was no longer a progressive, historically inevitable fight for a more socially just nation—a fulfillment of the expectations offered by the 1944-1954 democratic spring. It became a rearguard fight for survival, an attempt to establish the rule of law and respect for basic human rights. (p. 166)

The guerrilla movement was not able to maintain enough popular support in the face of the military’s terror campaign, so its leaders had to adjust their expectations for the outcome of the armed conflict. Anthropologist Diane Nelson (2009) dubs this military victory “the peace of the graveyard” (p. 40).

The scorched earth campaign also marked a period of electoral frauds and coups that left Guatemala an international pariah for its failure to restore civilian rule and establish even a pretense of democracy in the country (Jonas, 2000). The year 1985 marked two noteworthy events: the election of a Constituent Assembly to write a new Constitution and the first fraud-free election of a president since the military takeover in 1954 (p. 100). However, only rightist and centrist parties that had reached an agreement with the military beforehand were allowed to
present candidates. Carlota McAllister and Diane Nelson (2013) refer to this civilian Vinicio Cerezo, the president elected in 1985, as “on a short leash held by the military” (p. 17). Torres-Rivas has called the post-1985 period an “authoritarian transition to democracy” (as cited in Jonas, 2000, p. 101), while Jonas (2000) calls it “the top-down liberalization of an authoritarian regime” (p. 101). Consequently, President Vinicio Cerezo’s administration did little to initiate a genuine transfer of power from military to civilian rule. By the late 1980s it was clear the URNG would be unable to win the conflict militarily, but the Guatemalan military was unable to make a decisive military victory either (Jonas, 2000).

The Guatemalan government and the URNG made initial strides in ending the conflict throughout the late 1980s, in a process fraught with contradictions resulting from the competing goals of internal actors in the conflict, as well as the intervention of outside forces throughout the negotiation process. During the negotiations of the Peace Accords the representatives of the URNG pushed for the adoption of rights-based language appealing to the international mediators (Short, 2007), making it difficult for the military negotiators to deny demands for broadly democratic reforms. Grandin (2000) signals an important division between the official rhetoric of reconciliation after the war and the reality of the two sides’ intransient differences when he states:

While the guerrillas may have won the international public relations campaign (of which Menchú played a crucial role) by successfully painting the Guatemalan military and state as repressive and corrupt, the military won the battle over the limits of the nation’s future. (p. 405)

Outside of Guatemala, the armed conflict was recognized as an act of genocide against Mayas, but that did not determine the internal dynamics after the armed conflict. The Guatemalan
government was forced to make concessions in order to secure the authority of the Peace Accords and their own place as legitimate governors of the nation.

However, Short (2007) argues that even in cases where the inclusive language of individual accords has been lauded, as in the case of the Indigenous Rights Accord, “patterns of implementation have been consistent with reasserting elite privilege in their emphasis on security, the guerrilla, and certain economic structures, while neglecting demilitarization of the state and the Indigenous Rights Accords” (p. 100). As such, inequalities and conflicts continue into the “post-conflict” period. Below I look at the report of the Commission for Historical Clarification (1999) on the armed conflict, and consider the report’s reception by different groups and individuals within the country as an indication of the tensions that have continued into the “post-conflict” period.

The Transition into the “Post-Conflict” Period

As post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha (1990) states: “Remembering is never quite an act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present” (p. 206). In Guatemala, historical memory of the armed conflict is an ongoing process, reflecting deeper conflicts raging between the government and those pushing for deeper, lasting democratic reforms. Individual testimonies challenge official narratives of the armed conflict, which the military elite still insists was a valiant effort to defeat subversive elements and defend the country (Schirmer, 1998). According to Sanford (2003),

For rural Maya survivors, both victims and victimizers, La Violencia represents more than an event or a historical marker of a discrete period of extreme state violence. It
represents the continuum of lived experience. It represents not only the actual violent
events (indeed most Maya begin their testimony of La Violencia with the first act of
violence in their community, an act that typically foretold a wave of extreme and
widespread violence) but also the experience of that violence and its effects. (p. 15)

Even after the Peace Accords were signed, the lived experience of the violence of the armed
conflict persists.

The establishment of the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH), organized out
of the June 23rd, 1994 Oslo Accord, marked a significant moment in the negotiations between the
military and the URNG. Both parties agreed to the composition of the three-person Commission,
which included German human rights expert Dr. Christian Tomuschat and two Guatemalans,
indigenous educator Otilia Lux de Cotí (K’iche’ Maya) and Ladino lawyer Alfredo Balsells
Tojo. The CEH (1999) was established,

in order to clarify with objectivity, equity and impartiality, the human rights violation and
acts of violence connected with the armed confrontation that caused suffering among the
Guatemalan people. The Commission was not established to judge - that is the function
of the courts of law - but rather to clarify the history of the events of more than three
decades of fratricidal war. (p. 11)

The publication of the CEH’s 1999 report, Memoria del silencio (Memory of Silence), marked a
moment when the country as a whole publicly reflected on the causes and impacts of the
violence. The CEH report drew on the analysis of 14,000 personal testimonies collected through
two projects in the country, the Recovery of Historical Memory project (Recuperación de la
Memoria Histórica, or REMHI in Spanish)\textsuperscript{21} and the Commission. The CEH identified 42,275 individuals who died during the armed conflict, among whom 83\% of fully identified victims were Maya and 17\% were Ladino (CEH, p. 17). The CEH found the military committed 626 massacres (p. 34) and was responsible for 93\% of the human rights violations that occurred (p. 33). The guerrillas, on the other hand, were found to have committed approximately 3\% of the violations (p. 42) and 32 massacres (p. 43). In total, the CEH found that over 200,000 people died and a million people were displaced during the course of the civil war. One of the most significant findings of the CEH was that the Guatemalan military had perpetrated genocide against Mayas:

The massacres, scorched earth operations, forced disappearances and executions of Mayan authorities, leaders and spiritual guides, were not only an attempt to destroy the social base of the guerrillas, but above all, to destroy the cultural values that ensured cohesion and collective action in Mayan communities. (p. 23)

The CEH recognized the armed conflict as the state’s heightened response to its inability to incorporate suggestions from citizens in the face of military dictatorship and deepening restrictions on freedoms. The report states:

Faced with movements proposing economic, political, social or cultural change, the State increasingly resorted to violence and terror in order to maintain social control. Political violence was thus a direct expression of structural violence. (p. 18)

\textsuperscript{21} REMHI was a project organized by the Catholic Archdiocese of Guatemala, in which over 6,000 testimonies were collected by project staff from survivors of the armed conflict, including victims and perpetrators of human rights violations. The final report of the project, entitled Guatemala: Nunca más (Guatemala: Never Again) was presented publically by Bishop Juan Gerardi, who was assassinated on April 26, 1998, just two days after his presentation.
The Commission boldly asserted the connections between the armed conflict and the state’s historic pattern of violence against indigenous peoples in Guatemala.

The report’s public presentation on February 25th, 1999 was met with a mixed response from the Guatemalan government, the general public, the media, and the military. President Alvaro Arzú did not personally receive the report himself when it was presented publically, and instead the Secretary of Peace received the report on his behalf (Grandin, 2000; McAllister & Nelson, 2013). President Arzú subsequently refused to follow the CEH’s recommendations, including one to set up a commission to investigate charges against the military. Arzú also rejected the report’s assertion that at least parts of the armed conflict could be considered genocide (Jonas, 2000) because, in his words, “genocide is the desire to exterminate an ethnic group, and this was not the cause of the conflict” (as cited in Grandin, 2000, p. 408).

Anthropologist Judith Zur (1998) offers the idea that the repression of people’s individual memories through the official narrative of the armed conflict, represented by the Guatemalan state, also acts as a kind of violence. She states that official memory is distorted by the variety of political and social purposes it is made to fit. The ‘official truth’ undermines alternatives, deliberately violating people’s memories. The violence to people’s memories, though less tangible than the physical violence from which it is not entirely separate, affects victims for years because the violence is internalized. (p. 170)

Zur’s understanding of the violence of memory adds to the spectrum of violence (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004), wherein violence extends beyond physical acts and includes damages done to a person on a psychological level as well. The attempt to impose an official narrative has the potential to violate a person’s internal defenses and perpetuate new forms of harm even after the end of the physical violence.
The hostile responses by the military brass and the Guatemalan government stand in contrast to the ways the report was received by the URNG and the international community. The URNG followed the Commission’s recommendation and on March 12th, 1999 unconditionally apologized for the atrocities it had committed. The government’s chilly response also contradicted the welcome the report received by individuals and communities whose testimony informed its creation. In addition, the international community lauded the report’s historical analysis as a model for truth commission work elsewhere (Grandin, 2000; Jonas, 2000). However, the fact that the Commission’s findings are not binding within the Guatemalan legal system has been one of the biggest critiques leveled against the CEH (Jonas, 2000).

According to the CEH, the violence of the armed conflict was a continuation of colonial policies that excluded Mayas from participating in the creation of a common political imaginary of the nation (Taracena, 2011). The CEH report (1999) states:

The proclamation of independence in 1821, an event prompted by the country’s elite, saw the creation of an authoritarian State which excluded the majority of the population, was racist in its precepts and practices, and served to protect the economic interests of the privileged minority. (p. 17)

The 1954 overthrow of Jacobo Arbenz ended the Ten Years of Spring, and subsequent military dictatorships prompted Guatemalans to organize into civic, religious, and political groups to insist on their rights, even as their participation was construed as a threat to national security. In the absence of any space for political organizing, a guerrilla movement formed to challenge the foundations of the Guatemalan state.

The publication of the report three years after the official end of the armed conflict fomented a public space within Guatemala in which to challenge the military’s official history of
the conflict. Sanford (2010) affirms that the “giving of individual testimony represents an expansion of both potential and real individual agency that, in the collectivity of testimonies, creates new political space for local community action” (p. 72, translation mine). The CEH report publically claimed a space for Mayas and other Guatemalans to remember the armed conflict in diverse ways, which contributes to their engagement in diverse political projects as indigenous peoples, citizens, and Guatemalans.

While the Commission report relied heavily on individual testimonies of violence during the armed conflict, it detailed the structural causes of violence, rather than identifying it solely through individual experience. The report concurs with critiques of the structural roots of exclusion in Guatemala:

The structure and nature of economic, cultural and social relations in Guatemala are marked by profound exclusion, antagonism and conflict—a reflection of its colonial history. The proclamation of independence in 1821, an event prompted by the country's elite, saw the creation of an authoritarian State which excluded the majority of the population, was racist in its precepts and practices, and served to protect the economic interests of the privileged minority. The evidence for this, throughout Guatemala's history, but particularly so during the armed confrontation, lies in the fact that the violence was fundamentally directed by the State against the excluded, the poor and above all, the Mayan people, as well as against those who fought for justice and greater social equality. (p. 17)

The Commission identified a continuity between the violence and exclusionary practices of Spanish colonization, through Guatemala’s independence under the leadership of elites, and tied those practices to the eventual outbreak of the armed conflict in 1960. Throughout their report,
the Commission characterizes the Guatemalan state as based on the exclusion of the poor, indigenous majority.

Schirmer’s (1998) ethnographic study of the Guatemalan military during the armed conflict further develops the Commission’s claims to the structural roots of violence in Guatemala. Schirmer’s research contradicts the military’s claims that the “counter-insurgency” resulted from patriotic passion when she asserts:

Without a structural analysis of violence as intrinsic to the logic of counterinsurgency, a regime that violates human rights seems to occur simply because of the uncontrollable, bloodlusting commanders or poorly disciplined peasant recruits who need to be given a code of conduct—a view that ironically serves as an essentialist rationale by militaries for why they cannot control their own forces. Rather than being irrational and out of control, many of these Latin American militaries are precisely in control and acting in their own best interests. (p. 4)

Violence was integral to the military dictatorship’s attempts to resolve social and political contradictions during the armed conflict. Official narratives minimize Guatemala’s history of large-scale human rights abuses as an aberration, posing it as a momentary lapse in civility and order. However, the Commission for Historical Clarification (1999) attributed the armed conflict to centuries of racism and structural exclusion, in which indigenous peoples were denied any significant level of cultural, political, and economic participation (p. 17).

Guatemalan sociologist Egla Martinez Salazar (2008) argues that the violence perpetrated by the state during the armed conflict has learning dimensions, since it was employed systematically to cultivate a fear of violent repercussions to any form of political resistance, especially by targeting Mayas for genocide (Commission for Historical Clarification, 1999).
Martinez Salazar (2008) asserts state terror aims to “not only physically exterminate all those who aspire and struggle for material and cultural social justice, but also to eradicate forever the collective memory of resistance and struggle, a heritage of Indigenous peoples’ anti-colonial rebellions” (p. 204). So while the CEH and academics trace the violence of the Guatemalan government to its colonial antecedents, my study also traces the forms of resistance of indigenous peoples through generations. Indigenous peoples’ tactics represent teaching and learning processes (Martinez Salazar, 2008) transmitted over centuries through oral histories and other cultural practices.

In his introduction to Sanford’s (2010) book on the Panzós massacre, Guatemalan sociologist Sergio Tischler (2010) heralds the book as a space for speaking out against the terror imposed on Mayas during the armed conflict. In his words, Sanford’s book “allows for a collective reappropriation of history in open defiance of the culture of terror; that is, it permits the production of memory from the dignity of the ‘here and now’” (p. 18, translation mine). Sanford’s account provides public space for survivors to tell their version of the events leading up to, during, and after the massacre, while emphasizing the impact of the massacre on their ongoing conflicts over land.

Drawing on Zur’s (1998) work with Mayan widows after the armed conflict, I consider the terror of remembering, especially in light of the ways the state continues to try to shape the ideological framing of those memories to conform to their “counter-insurgency” narrative. Zur (1998) suggests that the repression of people’s individual memories through the official narrative also functions as a kind of violence, stating: “The ‘official truth’ undermines alternatives, deliberately violating people’s memories. The violence to people’s memories, though less tangible than the physical violence from which it is not entirely separate, affects victims for years
because the violence is internalized” (p. 170). Zur adds to the understanding of violence as a spectrum (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois, 2004), wherein violence includes psychological as well as physical damages. The attempt to impose an official narrative can cause new kinds of harm.

In the following section I consider violence in the “post-conflict” period, especially in relation to land titling and development. I focus on the structural and physical violence surrounding natural resource extraction in Guatemala’s northern lowlands.

**Land and Development in Guatemala from 1996 to the Present**

During Ybarra’s (2011b) fieldwork in the lowland town of Yaab’alhix, a model village during the armed conflict, Q’eqchi’s reported that until the 1960s land tenure was worked out among community members, and Q’eqchi’s did not feel the need to seek legal title (p. 796). The violent displacements during the armed conflict and into the present have forced Q’eqchi’s to seek legal titles as a mechanism for controlling their ancestral territory. However, Q’eqchi’ land has been distributed and managed traditionally according to a system of usufruct rights, in which the land goes to those who use it. Once an individual has cleared the land of trees or other vegetation, he or she has “officially” claimed that land as their own, even if they wait weeks or months to plant anything (Ybarra, 2011b). Often the community or chosen representatives decides who receives the land, since land ownership is not hereditary.

Within communities a certain amount of labor is performed communally, with planting and harvesting carried out by large groups. Individuals exchange labor on their milpa (plot of land for subsistence crops) with community members, especially those related to each other through spiritual or other ties (Permanto, 2015). As Permanto explains: “Ideally to ensure that the crops grow well the actual planting should be conducted in a relaxed manner full of joy and
happiness which is easier to do when people know each other” (p. 178). Also, the entire community is expected to contribute financially to preparing the communal *mayejak* before planting begins (p. 177). However, while some responsibilities are carried out on an individual basis, some forms of individual “ownership” are recognized. For example, the individual whose land is being worked is responsible for carrying out the ceremonial acts on the land beforehand and for providing meals for the laborers who are contributing to his family’s subsistence (p. 178). Permanto observes that the sharing of food is part of maintaining good social relations among community members (p. 178).

However, now land titling is a major goal of Q’eqchi’ communities, especially in the face of what is commonly referred to as “agrarian conflictivity” (*conflictividad agraria*) in Guatemala. Van Leeuwen (2010) describes agrarian conflictivity in Guatemala this way:

This generic but also highly politicized term refers to the historical and structural character of land conflicts in Guatemala. Conflictividad agraria encapsulates a discontent with the extremely unequal distribution of agricultural land, past usurpation of territories of the largely indigenous rural population and a system of exploitative labour relationships. (pp. 97-98)

I look at how land tenure both structures and reflects the relationships the government and local elites cultivate with transnational corporations, focusing on two corporations at the center of local conflicts: the sugar refinery Chabil Utzaj and the nickel mine CGN. In this chapter I examine human rights abuses at the hands of CGN, including cases of evictions, rape, and murder (Imai et al., 2014; Méndez & Carrera, 2014). In Chapter Seven, drawing on research contributors’ experiences of violence as well as academic and NGO literature, I provide a
detailed picture of the scope of human rights violations. In Chapter Seven I also detail Q’eqchi’s’ repertoires of contention in dealing with these violations.

**Land Titling and the Expropriation of Indigenous Lands**

Since the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996, the Guatemalan government has received funding from the World Bank to promote a Market Assisted Land Reform (MALR) process, which matches up willing buyers and sellers in order to address internal agrarian conflict and to modernize Guatemala’s land tenure system (Alonso-Fradejas, 2012). The government established a Land Fund (Fondo de Tierras, or FONTIERRAS in Spanish) to grant subsidized credit for land purchases by landless families and to provide technical support. Between 1997 and 2008, FONTIERRAS redistributed 4% of the arable land to less than five percent of families in need of land (p. 514). However, according to political scientist Simon Granovsky-Larsen (2013), land purchased through FONTIERRAS is still associated with poverty, as the land is often from large commercial farms that lack infrastructure (p. 330) to sites such as schools and health care centers. The northern lowlands where I conducted my study exemplify this pattern, since rural villages (*aldeas*) in the region are typically isolated from transportation and infrastructure. According to Granovsky-Larsen, 31% of land sold through FONTIERRAS was in the northern lowlands (p. 330).

FONTIERRAS also works with the National Catastral Registry (Registro de Información Catastral, or RIC in Spanish) to regularize the land registration and titling system. This program has resulted in many *campesinos* selling their land to commercial farms for agro-fuel crops (Granovsky-Larsen, 2013). In fact, Granovsky-Larsen quotes his 2010 interview with Abisaias Gómez of the umbrella group Plataforma Agraria (Agrarian Platform), who states that:
These days, large landowners feel even stronger [el terrateniente ha sentido más fortalecido]. And they are showing it. Look at the Franja Transversal del Norte [a northern highway megaproject], mining, African palm, the mass firings of banana workers in Izabal. And it is the Fondo de Tierras that is strengthening them. The Fondo de Tierras has strengthened them. (p. 330)

For many individuals and organizations, the work of FONTIERRAS in the Northern Transversal is associated with profits for large landowners and corporations. FONTIERRAS’ collaboration with RIC has been successful in breaking up community commons in favor of individual land titles, but these individual landholdings are often sold afterwards. For example, Laura Hurtado Paz y Paz (2008) found that 22-63% of campesinos in seven communities in Chisec, Alta Verapaz sold their land after the title regularization process (pp. 160-165), which means that FONTIERRAS’ programs have been generally ineffective in resolving conflicts over land tenure in Q’eqchi’s favor.

The federal government office responsible for addressing agrarian conflict and land tenure is the Secretariat of Agrarian Affairs (Secretaría de Asuntos Agrarios, or SAA in Spanish). In the land schemes outlined above, in collaboration with FONTIERRAS and RIC, the SAA matches up finqueros willing to sell with campesinos looking to purchase land. Granovksy-Larsen (2013) is critical of both the SAA and FONTIERRAS as state institutions that work to arrange land sales that offer maximum profit to large landowners but minimal long-term benefits to Q’eqchi’s mired in poverty. Granovsky-Larsen explains:

In fact, the Secretariat is as emblematic of neoliberalism as is the Fondo de Tierras: under both institutions, the demands and tactics of the rural poor have been coopted to further the agenda of wealthy Guatemalan and transnational actors. On the one hand,
FONTIERRAS has turned demands for agrarian reform into a system that helps large landowners rid themselves of unwanted land while acquiring new property, and, on the other, the work of the SAA with community struggles has had the effect of limiting broader demands and legitimizing violent repression. (p. 346)

Between 1997 and 2009 the SAA reported 4883 agrarian conflicts, of which 1511 were still outstanding as of 2009 (Granovsky-Larsen, 2013, p. 335). The SAA divides all agrarian conflicts into five categories: “disputes over rights, occupation, land title regularization, territorial borders, and prevention” (p. 334). These categories point to the Secretariat’s technical approach to identifying and resolving conflicts, which ignores claims to land on cultural and political grounds. The SAA employs the term “occupation” to describe the settlement and use of land registered to others by anyone other than its owners. Q’eqchi’s, on the other hand, use the term in a more specific law, to describe knowingly settling on land that has a private owner (p. 342). Q’eqchi’s largely opt to settle on lands that they believe to be state-owned wastelands (baldíos), since these can be legally occupied and eventually purchased.

Broken Promises: Development through Resource Extraction

Extractive industries are one of the bases for capitalist accumulation in Guatemala (Gómez Grijalva, 2013). Between 2002 and 2012, there was an 18.9% annual increase in extractive industries in Guatemala (Méndez & Carrera, 2014, p. 28). These corporations claim to benefit Guatemala, including indigenous communities (Gómez Grijalva, 2013; Méndez & Carrera, 2014). According to Guatemalan journalist and political analyst Francisca Gómez Grijalva (2013), this message by extractive industries is disseminated by the government and media, in addition to the corporations themselves (p. 43). Gómez Grijalva states that these
messages all convey the idea that transnational mining, petroleum, and hydroelectric companies “exploit non-renewable natural resources because they are interested in generating well-being and development. They are ‘philanthropic’” (p. 43, translation mine). For example, Chabil Utzaj (2011) claims to be creating jobs and building associated infrastructure such as health facilities and schools for local communities. HudBay Minerals claims to have invested more than $20 million and installed a paved road in El Estor as part of its claim to “corporate responsibility” (Jimenez, 2016a).

However, journalist and economist Luis Solano (2013) critiques these promises, instead situating the intensive development of the FTN in the “post-conflict” years as a “kind of internal neocolonialism in which transnationals, governments, and economic and military elites are allied in search of the biggest profits, while sustainable development and social needs remain missing in action” (pp. 124-125). Solano (2013) argues that transnational corporations rely on their connections with national elites in order to successfully establish a work force and acquire land for their operations within Guatemala. In return, national elites consolidate their economic and political power within Guatemala as key players, and they also forge connections that can benefit their own enterprises in international markets. My study focuses on the establishment of two transnational corporations on Q’eqchi’ lands through such collaboration between local elites, the government, and transnational capital: the Guatemalan Nickel Company (Compañía Guatemalteca de Níquel, or CGN in Spanish) and Chabil Utzaj, a sugar refinery. These two corporations serve as case studies of contentious politics during the fourth conquest, chosen because research contributors mentioned them almost exclusively in our interviews. However, I could have focused this research on any of myriad development projects on Q’eqchi’ lands, such as the Xalalá hydroelectric dam (Article 19 et al., 2016; Sieder, 2015; Solano, 2007), petroleum
corporations in Livingston (Izabal) (Solano, 2013; Solano & García, 2012), and African palm plantations in the departments of Alta Verapaz (Mingorría et al., 2014) and Petén (Instituto de Estudios Agrarios y Rurales, 2015; Solano, 2015).

Tarrow (1998) defines contentious politics as organizing collective challenges based on social networks, solidarity, common purposes, and collective identities (p. 4). In their response to land grabbing and evictions, Q’eqchi’ collective identity as sons and daughters of the earth (*ajral ch’och’*), as indigenous people, and as peasants (*campesinos*) is mobilized. In addition, these corporations provide a common antagonist against which many communities have united to fight. Third, their common enemy has forced a more coordinated effort at mobilizing. Q’eqchi’s have made progress on their goal of winning title to their ancestral lands, for example in the Polochic Valley (Centro de Informes Reportivos sobre Guatemala, 2016). They have advanced their goal of winning “juridical certainty” (Alonso-Fradejas, 2015; Méndez & Carrera, 2014), through building networks across Q’eqchi’ communities, in Guatemala more broadly, and through collaboration with the international community, such as NGOs, the Organization of American States, and the United Nations. Their identity as indigenous people is also structured and formed through their contact with international discourses of indigeneity and human rights.

In order to situate Q’eqchi’ conflicts with these corporations today, I provide background on the beginnings of the nickel mine in El Estor in 1960, as well as the expansion of megacrops (*megacultivos*) (Solano, 2007) like sugar cane and African palm in the Northern Transversal Strip (Franja Transversal del Norte, or FTN in Spanish) since the end of the armed conflict. The FTN, which includes the northern lowlands where I conducted my study (See Figure 1), accounts for 20% of the national territory and 10% of the total population (Solano, 2013). This geographic area, also known as the generals’ zone (*la zona de los generales*) (Solano, 2007, p.
is a key referent for the processes of development and land ownership within which Q’eqchi’ communities are embedded. Solano (2007) describes the FTN as “an escape valve for the different military regimes that governed the country since the 1960s and 1970s, who avoided at all cost that an agrarian reform affect the antiquated agrarian structures of the country” (p. 4, translation mine). The elites in this region were among the stongest opponents of agrarian reform, and the region became a stronghold for the combined might of large landowners and the military. The International Nickel Company of Canada (INCO) took full advantage of the strength of the military regime in the FTN, as well as the reactionary political thrust of the landed elites, when it decided to establish an open pit nickel mine in Izabal in 1960. In 1965 the Guatemalan government granted EXMIBAL (Exploraciones y Explotaciones Mineras Izabal SA) a 40-year exploitation concession for its lands in El Estor (Nolin & Stephens, 2010). INCO had an 80% stake in the mine, while United States-based Hanna Mining Company owned 20% (Nolin & Stephens, 2010). In 1971 the Guatemalan government acquired 30% of EXMIBAL, from then the Guatemalan government and INCO jointly owned EXMIBAL. Colonel Carlos Arana Osorio, president of Guatemala from 1970 to 1974, used the military to clear indigenous peoples out of INCO’s projected zone of development in the late 1960s and 1970s, killing between 3,000 and 6,000 people (Imai et al., 2014). In 1974, once the lands around the proposed site were largely cleared of occupants, INCO and the Guatemalan subsidiary began construction.

The mine only operated for a few years, and it ceased production in 1981 (Nolin & Stephens, 2010) due to the declining value of nickel on the world market. For decades the mine’s facilities sat unused, until Canada-based Skye Resources, Inc. acquired INCO’s 70% of EXMIBAL on December 15th, 2004; the remaining 30% stayed with the Guatemalan government (p. 41). At the time of that acquisition EXMIBAL was renamed the Guatemalan Nickel
Company (Compañía Guatemalteca de Níquel, or CGN in Spanish) (Amnesty International, 2014) and the mine was named Fénix (Phoenix). The Fénix mine is the fifth largest nickel reserve in the world, with 8.674 million tons of nickel (Nolasco, 2011, p. 32).

In January 2007 Skye Resources carried out a series of violent evictions to clear out occupants who had reoccupied lands around the mining operation, which Skye Resources referred to as “land invasions” (Imai et al., 2014). Five Q’eqchi’ communities were violently evicted by hundreds of National Police (Policía Nacional Civil, or PNC in Spanish), soldiers, and private security on January 8th and 9th, 2007. Q’eqchi’ homes and belongings were burned or otherwise destroyed (Imai et al., 2014). On January 17th, 2007 another set of evictions occurred during the day, when women and children were at home and the men were working on nearby lands. Women from the community of Lote Ocho came forward afterwards to bring negligence charges for their rape against HudBay Minerals in Canadian courts22, based on the actions of the Guatemalan subsidiary’s private security in El Estor during the January 17th evictions (Imai et al., 2014). On March 28th, 2011, 11 women filed a case in Ontario, the Canadian province where HudBay’s corporate headquarters is located. On July 22nd, 2013 the Ontario Superior Court of Justice agreed to hear the case of the women of Lote Ocho against HudBay Minerals (Imai et al., 2014); at the time of this writing the trials have not begun in Ontario. These cases are the first time a Canadian company is being held liable in Canadian courts for the actions of a subsidiary company operating overseas (Jimenez, 2016b).

22 HudBay Minerals merged with Skye Resources and acquired the mine in 2008 (Imai et al., 2014), so HudBay Minerals is implicated in these evictions.
In addition to the case of the 11 Q’eqchi’ women, two other negligence claims are being heard against HudBay Minerals, for the murder of teacher Adolfo Ich Chamán and the shooting and subsequent paralysis of German Chub by CGN’s private security forces in the community of La Unión, close to the mine, on September 27\textsuperscript{th}, 2009. Chub was shot while watching a soccer game in the neighborhood of La Unión; he testifies he was not involved in any protests (Imai et al., 2014). The events leading up to Ich’s murder and Chub’s paralysis are still disputed, but according to testimony admitted for the case against HudBay, Ich went outside after he heard about protests against the departmental governor as she tried to deliver eviction orders from the mine to the community of Las Nubes (The Clouds) (Jimenez, 2016b). In her interview with Toronto Star reporter Marina Jimenez (2016b), Ich’s widow Angélica Choc says, “I didn’t want Adolfo to go out but he felt it was his duty to try to calm things down. The last thing he said was ‘I will be back.’” Ich was assaulted by mine security and then allegedly killed by the mine’s head of security, former Coronel Mynor Padilla. Ich’s widow, Angélica Choc, states:

HudBay, both in Canada and Guatemala, was negligent in deploying security forces into the community of La Unión and in authorising the use of excessive force in response to the peaceful opposition, despite the corporation’s knowledge that the security personnel were unlicensed, using illegal weapons and had in the past used unreasonable violence against local Mayan populations. (Imai et al., 2014, p. 290)

Choc was cross-examined by HudBay’s lawyers in Toronto in winter 2013 and she returned to Toronto in May 2015 for HudBay’s annual shareholder meeting (Jimenez, 2016b). The civil cases against HudBay have drawn international attention to the impunity with which private security guards are allowed to operate in Guatemala (Rights Action). The cases represent a significant and novel use of a foreign court by Q’eqchi’ to claim justice for the activities of
foreign corporations in their lands (Jimenez, 2016b). Choc has also filed murder charges in Guatemalan courts against retired Coronel Mynor Padilla, CGN’s head of security at the time of Ich’s murder. As of August 2016 this case has lasted over a year and a half and is still being heard in the departmental capital of Puerto Barrios (Communities in Resistance and Struggle for the Land, 2016). In the early hours of September 17th, 2016, just days before Choc was scheduled to appear in court in Puerto Barrios for her husband’s murder case, a gun fired at her house at night as she was asleep with two of her children (Rights Action, 2016).

In September 2011 HudBay sold the mine concession to Swiss Solway Investment Group after carrying out several violent evictions of Q’eqchi’ communities (Imai et al., 2014). CGN, which is 98.2% owned by Solway Group and 1.8% by the Guatemalan government (Amnesty International, 2014; Solway Group), holds a 25-year renewable license for exploitation at the Fénix site in El Estor. Since acquiring the mine in 2011, Solway has invested over $600 million (USD) in the mine, as well as the development of the on-site power plant and processing facility (Solway Group, 2016a). The mine’s operations are currently composed of an open pit mining site, a processing plant, and a 250 km² concession of land authorized for mineral exploration by the Guatemalan government (Méndez & Carrera, 2014, p. 78). Solway began operations at the mine in 2014, and claims to employ 1,770 employees and hundreds of local contractors (Solway Group, 2016a).

Similarly to the mine’s previous owners and the owners of the sugar refinery Chabil Utzaj, Solway claims to be committed to investing in local infrastructure and social development programing in the areas of health, training, and sports, as well as protecting the environment on behalf of local communities (Solway Group, 2016a). As they claim on their website, “At Solway, we derive great satisfaction from bringing a community and a project back to life”
According to El Estor mayor Romy Mendez, the mine’s relations with the surrounding communities are more peaceful under the new ownership of the Solway Group (Jimenez, 2016b). However, reports from research contributors contradict this idea. In Chapter Seven I discuss a stand-off between CGN private security and the community of Lote Ocho during my fieldwork in June 2014 (field notes).

The reactivation of the Fénix mine coincides with a period of intense productivity on established flex-crop monoagricultural plantations in the FTN. According to data Alonso-Fradejas (2015) cites from the Secretariat of Agrarian Affairs from 2012, 76.4% of land conflicts were concentrated in the northern lowlands region (p. 502). Alonso-Fradejas (2012) documents a rise over the last ten years in corporate land grabbing by sugarcane and palm oil agribusinesses that buy or lease large tracts of land to convert into monocrop plantations. Following Borras et al., Alonso-Fradejas (2012) defines land grabbing as “capturing control of relatively vast tracts of land and other natural resources through a variety of mechanisms that involve large-scale capital that often shifts resource use orientation into extractive character” (p. 510). 11% of total peasant households in the Northern Lowlands lost their land tenancy rights in the last decade (p. 518) due to land grabbing practices, especially by sugar cane and African palm companies. Land-grabbing is “embedded in a historical continuum of indigenous territorial dispossession by, and subordination, first to colonial powers, then to post-colonial, non-indigenous landed classes and political elites and currently to the latter and to the (financialised) national and international capital” (p. 510). Territorial dispossession is closely tied to agrarian conflicts between corporations and Q’eqchi’ peasants.

The combination of reinitiation of the Fénix mine in El Estor with land-grabbing for sugar cane and African palm production has led to the increasing dispossession of Q’eqchi’
peasants in the past ten years. The state mechanisms responsible for resolving agrarian conflict, such as the Secretariat of Agrarian Affairs and the Land Fund, have been largely ineffective in addressing the root causes of the conflict. Land distribution is still widely unequal, and Q’eqchi’ peasants are being forced to abandon subsistence agriculture for seasonal, wage labor (Alonso-Fradejas, 2012 & 2015; Granovsky-Larsen, 2014). The promises of development through extraction made by large corporations such as Chabil Utzaj and CGN have been largely unfulfilled for Q’eqchi’ peasants.

In fact, rather than being associated with communities’ development, these extractive projects are associated with higher levels of human rights violations against Q’eqchi’s and other indigenous communities in Guatemala. In his report to the United Nations Human Rights Council (2011), James Anaya, Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Indigenous Peoples, mentions the conflicts between Q’eqchi’ communities in El Estor and Panzós and the Compañía Guatemalteca de Níquel. Anaya describes as “particularly alarming, in this sense, the numerous cases in which the implementation of projects has affected areas over which legitimate claims of indigenous property exist” (p. 16). He specifically references the forceful eviction of communities in these two municipalities as examples of a troubling pattern he witnessed in areas with these kinds of economic projects. According to the Guatemalan Human Rights Commission (GHRC), environmental human rights defenders in Guatemala are susceptible to threats and violent attacks. The GHRC reported that “in the decade between 2000 and 2010, 118 environmental human rights defenders in Guatemala were murdered and over 2,000 assaults occurred against groups of protesters” (Article 19 et al., 2016, p. 4).

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), based in the Organization of American States, has granted precautionary measures (medidas cautelares) to several
individuals and families in Guatemala due to threats or acts of violence against them related to opposition to mining. These measures require the Guatemalan State to prevent irreparable harm to persons or to the subject matter of the proceedings in connection with a pending petition or case, as well as to persons under the jurisdiction of the State concerned, independently of any pending petition or case. (Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, 2011)

One highly publicized case of such precautionary measures is related to the June 13th, 2012 non-fatal shooting of anti-mining activist Yolanda Oqueli Veliz, leader of the North Metropolitan Peoples in Resistance Front (IAHRC, 2012). Oqueli has been a vocal opponent of the El Tambor mine, operated by Canadian-owned Radius Gold Inc. in San José del Golfo and San Pedro Ayampuc in the department of Guatemala at the time of the attack. 100% stakes in the mine were bought by U.S. corporation Kappes, Cassidy & Associates in August of 2012. Oqueli’s case has received support from many NGOs, including Rights Action (2012) and Amnesty International (2012). Two other high-profile attacks in Guatemala against anti-mining activists were the July 2010 shooting of Deodora Hernández and the February 2011 attack on Aniceto López, both opponents of the Canadian Goldcorp-owned Marlin Mine in San Marcos (Amnesty International, 2012). Opposing transnational corporations and mega-infrastructure projects is a dangerous activity in Guatemala, in spite of claims to expanded rights in the “post-conflict” era. What is more, those who perpetrate crimes against anti-mining activists and environmental defenders are almost assured of impunity under the current judicial system in Guatemala (Daley, 2016; Jimenez, 2016a & b). Q’eqchi’s continue to face forms of both structural and physical violence today.
Concluding Thoughts

In their work on “new violence” in Guatemala, based on their ethnographic research in the western department of Chimaltenango, Benson et al. (2008) caution: “The very notion of a postwar era can have the effect of deflecting attention from the existence of subtler forms of violence and persistent linkages of violence to politics and the state” (p. 39). Following this caution, I look to apprehend the forms violence takes in the “post-conflict” period since 1996.

Medical anthropologist Paul Farmer’s (2004) concept of structural violence helps to theorize how a range of experiences—from exclusion from schools and other social services, to death threats against participants in the struggle, to forced evictions and memories of the armed conflict—can be understood as forms of violence on a “spectrum of violence” (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004). Farmer’s (2004) words on the “materiality of the social” are especially instructive: “Social life in general and structural violence in particular will not be understood without a deeply materialist approach to whatever surfaces in the participant-observer’s field of vision—the ethnographically visible” (p. 308).

Consequently, while official government discourse presents Guatemala as a democratic nation that has broken with the exceptional period of violence of the armed conflict, I am reminded of Walter Benjamin’s (1940/1968) statement in *On the Concept of History*: “the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule” (p. 257). Benjamin penned these words as a response to the rise of fascism in Germany in the 1930s, but they resonate with the anxiety of Guatemalans today about whether democracy is a feasible political project, or whether the ruling elite will continue to justify “exceptions to the rule,” thereby falling back on authoritarian practices indefinitely.
Many Guatemalan scholars question whether there has been a definitive break with the country’s centuries-old tradition of authoritarianism (Bastos, 2009 and 2012; Del Valle Escalante, 2008; Cotjí Cuxil, 1996, 1999 & 2007; Manz, 2008). Tischler (2005) counters the state’s claims to a democratic transformation of its institutions by pointing out that “the discourse of representative democracy is an attempt to convince that violence is not constitutive of the state form, but is an exception, a kind of necessary antecedent to modern politics” (p. 45, translation mine). However, Cotjí Cuxil (2007) argues the Guatemalan state is “structurally colonialist and racist” (p. 124), such that violence is always a potential instrument to enforce exclusion at any time. Because of the contradictions in lived experiences of the expansion of democracy, alongside continued structural violence and exclusion, the Guatemalan state is simultaneously the object of apprehension, fear, and hope. Nelson (2009) contends that after the end of the armed conflict the Guatemalan state may still “seem to have two faces because it is the carrier of both suffering and benefits. Both perpetrator and succor, it dispenses death and life” (p. 23). The state was a signatory to the Peace Accords that officially ended the conflict, but the potential for structural and physical violence remains woven into the exclusionary fabric of the state. Wide disparities in land ownership, along with political repression against indigenous rights’ defenders, were vital in the eruption of the armed conflict in 1960, and they persist today. Many Guatemalans still struggle to put the violence of the armed conflict behind them, searching for proof of the democratic principles the government committed to in the 1996 Peace Accords.

In the next chapter I outline and connect three concepts key to answering my research questions about Q’eqchi’s’ collective action in defense of their ancestral lands: contentious politics, territorial defense, and social movement learning. I highlight elements of their collective identity as sons and daughters of the earth, indigenous people, and peasants in relation
to Tarrow’s (1998) concept of contentious politics. I also consider how experiences of expropriation and conflict have led Q’eqchi’s to participate in regional, national and international networks in service of their goal to win the legal title to their lands. Political ecology aids me in framing the relationship of land to broader political struggles involving the state, local elites, and foreign corporations. Tarrow’s idea of repertoires of contention help to situate Q’eqchi’s’ present-day tactics within the historical continuity of Grandia’s (2012) conquests outlined at the beginning of the present chapter. Finally, I consider the elements of learning that stem from and strengthen Q’eqchi’ organizing around the contentious politics of land using theories drawn from social movement learning and informal learning.
Chapter 3—Conceptual Framework

In the previous chapter I situated the historical continuity of conflicts over land in Guatemala between indigenous peoples and the economic and political elite since Spanish colonization. Q’eqchi’ communities exemplify indigenous peoples’ historical and contemporary struggles over land in Guatemala. The Q’eqchi’ are currently in the throes of a potential fourth “conquest” of their territories (See Chapter Seven), a conquest by corporation, a term I elaborate by building on Grandia’s (2012) three “conquests.” This study focuses on Q’eqchi’s’ defense of territory as a culturally specific collective response to the Guatemalan state’s capitalist approach to land and social relations. Defense of territory signals Q’eqchi’s’ aspirations for self-determination, which is bound up with maintaining control over their lands and natural resources, as well as the ability to exercise self-governance.

Q’eqchi’ activities in defense of the land combine local governance and cultural traditions, such as the Elders’ Council and general community assembly with mechanisms originating from the Guatemalan state, such as Community Development Councils (See Chapter Six). My study examines a variety of forms of political participation, including marches, electoral campaigns, work in non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international collaborations. In order to be able to systematically analyze participation in these activities, I have developed a three-part analytical framework, broadly drawn from critical and post-colonial theories, composed of contentious politics, territorial defense, and social movement learning.

While Q’eqchi’s do not organize into a centralized social movement in their defense of territory, social movement theory is helpful for identifying factors underlying the continuity of Q’eqchi’s’ collective actions across communities and throughout time. For that reason, I draw
on Tarrow’s (1998) contentious politics, as well as social movement learning theory, to frame my study. Tarrow’s theory offers conceptual building blocks for comprehending the labor Q’eqchi’ individuals and communities contribute to sustaining a long-term collective action across communities, confronting the state and corporations as antagonists. Q’eqchi’s’ respond to their marginalization by the state by positioning themselves locally, nationally, and internationally to win and expand rights through indigenous identity claims. I consider research contributors’ narratives on internal community institutions and Q’eqchi’s’ engagement with state institutions through the lens of contentious politics, offering answers to my first research question on how Q’eqchi’s link defense of territory to previous expropriations of their lands. Research contributors trace the line of continuity between today’s violence and the past to their inter-generational experiences of violence in the original encounter with Spanish colonialism five centuries ago. Q’eqchi’s individual memories of conflict, as well as their communities’ historical memory, combine with ongoing, lived experience of colonization and conflict in their daily lives, which shape possibilities for working for change in their communities, and for the country as a whole. In Chapter Seven I situate defense of territory in the contemporary period of extractivism through the elaboration a potential fourth “conquest” of Q’eqchi’ lands.

In order to situate the symbolic, cultural, and political significance of territory as a site of contentious politics, I draw on political ecology (Moore, 2005; Robbins, 2012). According to Moore (2005), contrasting views of land are tied up in what he labels micropractices, “the diverse ways land comes to be inhabited, labored on, idiomatically expressed, and suffered for in specific moments and milieus” (p. 2). In order to fill out consider the ways that Q’eqchi’s inhabit and suffer for land (see Chapter Four for more on suffering), I complement political ecology’s framework for land with concepts drawn from indigenous studies, from inside
Guatemala (Cotjí Cuxil, 2007; Del Valle Escalante, 2008; Montejo, 2005; Tzul, 2014) as well as outside (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Blaser et al., 2010; Corntassel & Holder, 2008). Territory is not just a context for, but a participant in Q’eqchi’s’ relational ontology (Escobar, 2010). In her research on Q’eqchi’ oral traditions, Adriana Estrada Ochoa (2004) describes land as “a sacred space that provides life, food, and medicine, as well as refuge for the living and the dead” (p. 157, translation mine). Q’eqchi’s’ political activities in defense of the land are bound up with demands for cultural self-determination (Alonso-Fradejas, 2015).

The third section of this chapter focuses on the contentious politics of defense of territory as productive of moments of social movement learning, which includes non-formal education by NGOs (McAllister & Nelson, 2013), informal learning within families and communities (Schugurensky, 2000 & 2006), as well as social movement learning through organizing for political change (Choudry, 2015; Choudry & Kapoor, 2010; Kapoor, 2009). My focus on detailing informal learning practices through indigenous peoples’ political organizing is a contribution my study makes to the field of educational studies. I explore narratives of social movement learning in all three findings chapters in order to answer my second research question on where and how learning takes place. I focus on research contributors’ political formation in la lucha (the struggle) during the armed conflict in Chapter Five, in Chapter Six I explore the learning involved in Q’eqchi’ political bodies such as the community assembly and Elders’ Councils, and in Chapter Seven I look at the moments of learning that result from organizing

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23 Although I do not operate from within this Q’eqchi’ worldview that positions land as a subject with agency, I am committed to using the Q’eqchi’ worldview to frame my analysis as much as possible.
communities’ self-defense in the face of violent evictions by the sugar refinery Chabil Utzaj and the nickel mine CGN.

**Contentious Politics**

In *Power of Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (1998), Sidney Tarrow developed his theory of contentious politics to trace the rise of social movements in the Western world since the 18th century, which he locates as the era of its inception (p. 4). Tarrow’s narrative traces historic events stemming from clashes over contentious politics have transformed into social movements that rallied substantial sentiment around an issue, rather than remaining as isolated political outbursts of rage or social despair. For Tarrow, collective action becomes contentious when “it is used by people who lack regular access to institutions, who act in the name of new or unaccepted claims, and who behave in ways that fundamentally challenge others or authorities” (p. 3). While his work primarily analyzes social movements in Europe (including Russia) and the United States, Tarrow’s work offers conceptual tools for considering the evolution of the Q’eqchi’s’ defense of territory in the Guatemalan context because of the contentious nature of struggles over land.

Although Q’eqchi’s lack the centralized organizational structures to clearly identify them as a social movement, Tarrow’s concept of contentious politics offers analytical tools for understanding defense of territory. Q’eqchi’s are political actors who lack representation in the Ladino state, and they are collectively organizing to challenge the capitalist land relations imposed by the Guatemalan state. Tarrow’s (1998) definition of contentious politics pivots around three processes: “first, mounting collective challenges; second, drawing on social networks, common purposes, and cultural frameworks; and third, building solidarity through
connective structures and collective identities to sustain collective action” (p. 4). Q’eqchi’s defense of territory is bound together through social cohesion even while it lacks the organizational cohesion of a social movement.

Social movement theorist Alberto Melucci (1995) describes collective identity as “a learning process that leads to the formation and maintenance of a unified empirical actor” (p. 49) called the social movement. Based on how Q’eqchi’s described themselves in their interviews, I propose a three-part collective identity as: indigenous people, children of the earth (aj ral ch’och”), and peasants (campesinos). According to Melucci, collective identity is “an interactive and shared definition produced by several individuals or groups at a more complex level and concerned with the orientations of action and the field of opportunities and constraints in which the action takes place” (p. 44). Sharing an identity provides a source of cohesion and delimits both the membership in the group and, implicitly, those who are excluded from the group.

In their interviews Q’eqchi’s emphasized their status as indigenous peoples, which is a term drawn from international rights-based discourses. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention #169 (1989), indigenous peoples are descendants of the populations which inhabited the country, or a geographical region to which the country belongs, at the time of conquest or colonisation or the establishment of present state boundaries and who, irrespective of their legal status, retain some or all of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions. (Article 1(b))

The ILO definition of indigenous peoples is formulated in relation to the ongoing, lived legacy of colonialism. Q’eqchi’s deploy these identities to mount collective challenges by drawing on local, national, and international networks. Taiaiake Alfred (Kahnawake Mohawk) and Jeff
Corntassel (Cherokee) (2005) define indigenous peoples as active agents against colonialism, which they identify as a historical and ongoing present-day process central to indigeneity:

Indigenous to the lands they inhabit, in contrast to and in contention with the colonial societies and states that have spread out from Europe and other countries of empire. It is this oppositional, place-based existence, along with the consciousness of being in struggle against the dispossessing and demeaning fact of colonization by foreign peoples, that fundamentally distinguishes Indigenous peoples from other peoples of the world. (p. 597)

Alfred and Corntassel’s framing of indigenous identity as oppositional lends itself to using sociologist Manuel Castells’ (1997) idea of resistance identities. Mario Blaser et al. (2010) describe these identities as constructions by communities “devalued and possibly stigmatized by the logic of domination. In response, they build ‘trenches of resistance and survival’ on the basis of principles different from, or opposed to, those that permeate the institutions of society” (p. 20). Q’eqchi’s defend the land against violent incursions by corporations (see Chapter Seven) on the basis of their close cultural, spiritual, and economic ties to the land, as children of the land and its protectors. It shapes their analysis of the objective and subjective constraints and opportunities the movement faces (Choudry, 2015), which provides the basis for organizing collective action. I will return to an analysis of collective organizing in detail in this chapter’s third section on social movement learning.

In the Q’eqchi’ worldview, land is a member of the family that deserves the same respect as human family members; thus, the second identity Q’eqchi’s’ described as aj ral ch’och’ acts as a unifier for their collective action. According to Alonso-Fradejas (2015):
Defense of territory for Q’eqchi’ lowlanders is rooted in their self-representation as R’al Ch’och (Sons and Daughters of the Earth). This shared ethnic identity intertwines with one of a traditional sort of (self-sufficient) peasant class for itself (even if often no longer ‘in itself”) to dignify, encourage, and justify Q’eqchi’ collective action in defense of territory. (p. 500)

Ral ch’och’ undergirds Q’eqchi’s common, locally rooted effort to defend their ancestral territories. The presence of ancestors and sprits links the past to the struggle to keep indigenous cultures alive today (Permanto, 2015; Tischler, 2005) in the face of ongoing acts of assimilation and displacement by state institutions.

The previous two forms of collective self-identification are tied closely to Q’eqchi’s’ class identification as peasants. Economic sustenance and self-determination are two common purposes of defense of territory, directly linked to peasant identities. I find it productive to consider Scott’s (2012) term “infrapolitics” (p. xx) in relation to Q’eqchi’s’ tactics to resist domination. These techniques, which rely on “divisibility, small numbers, and dispersion” (p. xx), are applicable to Q’eqchi’s struggles against elites. Guatemala’s elites have taken various forms over the centuries (see Chapter Two), from the Spanish colonizers to large landholders to the army, but now they principally take the form of corporations who work with the Guatemalan state to legally dispossess Q’eqchi’s of their ancestral lands. Scott describes the tactics of the elites as reliant on their control of the institutions of the state, while “peasants and subaltern groups, having to no access to such heavy machinery, have instead relied on techniques such as poaching, pilfering, and squatting to contest those claims and assert their own” (p. 12). Scott identifies insurgency and rebellion as last resort mechanisms for these groups, when small-scale
infrapolitics fail to produce results. The armed conflict in Guatemala can be considered a last resort mechanism when political change was inaccessible through infrapolitics.

Q’eqchi’s are marginalized from the machinery of the state, so they pursue both defensive and offensive strategies (Alonso-Fradejas, 2015) through small-scale resistance in the form of infrapolitics (Scott, 2012). Alonso-Fradejas (2015) defines defensive strategies as those that “maintain and control access to land resources revolve around community self-determination in the ideologico-political and economic realms” (p. 503). In contrast, offensive strategies seek to expand Q’eqchi’s’ current land occupations to encompass more of their ancestral territory and to acquire terms more favorable for Q’eqchi’s if and when resources are exploited on their territories, such as nickel, sugar cane, or African palm. Alonso-Fradejas frames these offensive strategies as “struggles for repossession, for access to land resources, and for better terms of incorporation into the agrarian extractivist project” (p. 504). Both strategies are often undertaken simultaneously, with Q’eqchi’s deciding in a given moment how much may be gained or lost by emphasizing one strategy over the other.

Tarrow (1998) describes identifiable challenges to refer to obstacles that unite group members beyond episodic forms of intervention such as protests and into longer-term episodes of contentious politics. In our interviews Q’eqchi’s identify two antagonists in relation to the current waves of expropriation in their communities: corporations and the Guatemalan state. In particular, my study looks at the Guatemalan Nickel Company (Compañía Guatemalteca de Níquel, or CGN in Spanish) and the sugar cane refinery Chabil Utzaj as two corporations inciting current conflicts.

In terms of Q’eqchi’s’ relationship with the Guatemalan state, defense of territory can be understood as contentious politics because it represents a collective action “used by people who
lack regular access to institutions, who act in the name of new or unaccepted claims, and who behave in ways that fundamentally challenge others or authorities” (Tarrow, 1998, p. 3). The state represents the only possible venue for land titling, which is Q’eqchi’s’ main solution to solving their dispossession, so they make strategic decisions about when and how to engage the state as an antagonist in their struggle. Therefore, Q’eqchi’s selectively challenge and reinforce the legitimacy of the state in order to present demands for self-determination within the national and international arenas. Gladys Tzul (K’iche’ Maya) (2014) brings the question of the state in Guatemala back to Maya peoples’ struggles for territory. Tzul states: “State models have a premeditated goal of making people forget what struggles for territory have meant. There’s a hegemonic project that is forced, and it’s natural that there be resistance” (as cited in Hernández, 2014, p. 4). Mayas have consistently organized resistance to attempts by the Guatemalan state and its colonial predecessors to force Mayas to compromise their relationship to land. Now, in order to have a clear understanding of what is at stake for Q’eqchi’s, the Guatemalan state, and corporations in contemporary political, cultural, and economic struggles over land, I move to explaining my conceptualization of territory, drawing on the fields of political ecology and indigenous studies.

**Territorial Defense**

For Mayas, land is imbued with cultural and spiritual meaning because of its connections with the ancestors, as well as the ways that land unites people, spirits, and other non-human beings into a reciprocal and dialogic relationality (Escobar, 2010). According to Montejo (2005), for Mayas the landscape represents “sacred geography, the resting-place or sanctuary of the ancestors” (pp. 145-146). Following Granovsky-Larsen’s (2013) work with Q’eqchi’s,
territory “encapsulates these social characteristics by highlighting the importance of land for the social and cultural reproduction of people based in small-scale agriculture and rural life” (p. 327). I situate Q’eqchi’s’ defense of territory as a practice of resistance which is not largely practiced individually, but rather embedded in social relations, which include relations with humans, spirits, and ancestors. Thus, following sociologist Nick Crossley (2015), I conceive of defense as a relational activity that “affords primacy, both ontological and methodological, to interactions, social ties (‘relations’), and networks” (p. 66). The relational nature of resistance shapes Q’eqchi’ social and political expectations in relation to community-based cultural norms, mirroring what social movement theorist Klaus Eder (2014) recognizes as “the structures of social relations as constitutive elements for organizing social action” (p. 40). In Chapter Six I detail the social values in Q’eqchi’ communities, including the importance of respect, reciprocity, consultation, and dialogue. Defense as an activity is organized using the same principles that organize everyday life.

The concept of contentious politics works well with political ecology as an analytical lens to focus on the political elements of Q’eqchi’s’ struggles over land. Political ecology and indigenous studies help to structure my analysis on the political and cultural elements at stake in control of land and natural resources. According to Paul Robbins (2012), political ecology is “a field that seeks to unravel the political forces at work in environmental access, management, and transformation” (p. 3). Political ecology foregrounds the political implications of Q’eqchi’s’ experiences of dispossession and conflict over land and natural resources by analyzing “ecological systems as power-laden rather than politically inert” (Robbins, 2012, p. 13). The political ecology framework accounts for a wide range of impacts on Q’eqchi’s as they organize to defend and advance their political interests.
I draw on two of political ecology's main critical theoretical influences, Marxism (Moore, 2005) and postcolonial theory (Battiste, 2008; Del Valle Escalante, 2008; Escobar, 2001, 2007, 2008 & 2010; Robbins, 2012), in order to consider land as a site of both material and symbolic struggles for Q’eqchi’s as marginalized peoples. Q’eqchi’s self-identify as peasants because of their relationship to land as independent producers. From a Marxist perspective, their involvement to production and access to the means of production is significant, especially at a time when this access is threatened by extractive industries. However, as Marcelino’s narrative in Chapter Five underscores, Marxism is not necessarily a lens Q’eqchi’s themselves use. Thus, while I am a Marxist, my main reference to Marxism as a theory comes through my use of a political ecology framework to help situate the material basis of Q’eqchi’s’ relationship to land. Robbins (2012) identifies production, or the means by which people make a living, as a “key social-environmental process” (p. 28) that is not just an economic transaction between two actors but part of a network of actions that sustain people as well as their environment. As political ecologist Derek Moore (2005) emphasizes in his ethnographic work on land in Zimbabwe, “acts of cultivation at once transform terrain and subjects, both of them imbued with value as bodies of work” (p. 22). Production occurs on various scales on Q’eqchi’ lands, from subsistence family farming and gathering to large scale production of monocrops like African palm and sugar, which leads to the expulsion of Q’eqchi’s from their homes and communities and employs Q’eqchi’s as laborers (Alonso-Fradejas, 2012 & 2015). The industrial extraction of nickel also interrupts subsistence activities through conflicts over land ownership, and has also converted some Q’eqchi’s into laborers at the local mining processing facility.

However, the cultural and spiritual relationship between Q’eqchi’s and the land exceeds economic understandings. Political ecology often adopts a grounded approach through an
interest in local forms of environmental knowledge and its “concentration on the landscape as an object of explanation” (Robbins, 2012, p. 28). Land represents a material as well as an affective landscape, associated with suffering, pain, harmony, and well-being for both present and future generations. Postcolonial theory provides tools for challenging hegemonic conceptions of knowledge and power by analyzing non-Western cultures’ intimate relationship with land as a site of local cultural knowledge. Educator Marie Battiste (Mi’kmaq) (2008) argues: “A postcolonial framework cannot be constructed without Indigenous people renewing and reconstructing the principles underlying their own worldview, environment, languages, communication forms, and how these construct their humanity” (p. 508). Mayas view the land as a sentient force that deserves respect and honor through ceremony and struggle (Permanto, 2015; Tischler, 2005). Escobar (2001) emphasizes indigenous peoples’ relational ontologies in his work on culture and place, when he asserts that in many non-Western contexts, such as for the Afro-Colombians with whom he collaborates, “living, non-living, and often times supernatural beings are not seen as constituting distinct and separate domains—certainly not two opposed spheres of nature and culture—and social relations are seen as encompassing more than humans” (p. 151). Blaser et al. (2010) agree with Escobar’s erasure of boundaries between the human and non-human in indigenous worldviews, as these “take account of and care for the multiplicity of relations that exist between the elements of creation, all of which are endowed with life and agency” (p. 9). For Q’eqchi’s the landscape (valleys, hills, rivers, creeks, and lakes) carries knowledge that informs and impacts human activities (Permanto, 2015); therefore displacement is an act of spiritual and cultural violence.

Relationality between indigenous peoples, the land, and the elements of creation is directly tied to the political movement of indigenous peoples to assert political self-determination over
their territory as well. In their work on social movement learning, critical educators Nathalia Jaramillo and Michelle Carreon (2014) tie together the exclusion of indigenous knowledge with other forms of dispossession that indigenous social movements challenge: “The exclusion of non-Western and non-Eurocentric knowledge, human and natural relations, and cosmovisions, form part of an overarching system of dispossession that social movements contest simultaneously” (p. 395). Q’eqchi’s’ movement is a defense not just of the land itself, but of the cultural relationships inextricably linked to territory.

Defense of territory is Q’eqchi’s’ popular, grassroots response to an episode of contentious politics initiated through the Guatemalan government’s shift to neoliberal economic policies, and extractivism in particular (Veltmeyer, 2012). Alonso-Fradejas (2015) identifies the discourse of defense of territory as focused on “strengthening ‘peoples’ sovereignty’ over their life territories” (p. 500) through exercising self-determination as it relates to governance, access to land resources, and food sovereignty. Alonso-Fradejas characterizes Q’eqchi’s’ defensive actions as those “aimed at developing and strengthening their abilities to maintain and control access to land resources” (p. 502). In this sense, “defense” references the mindset Q’eqchi’s do not intend to establish new or unprecedented rights, but represent Q’eqchi’s’ response to invasion by corporations in their communities. As Alonso-Fradejas argues, “Q’eqchi overt and structured struggles around land are no longer so much about securing land property rights, but about developing and strengthening their own abilities to control and use land as a means of production, and as territory” (p. 502). Q’eqchi’s frame themselves politically as defenders of territory, united by their experiences of violence and expropriation related to mining and other forms of extraction. This study focuses on territory in relation to Q’eqchi’s governance, cultural self-determination, and access to resources, as well as its role in economic sustenance.
In Chapter Six I consider how Q’eqchi’s’ conceptions of land as commodity and territory impact their forms of political participation. They recognize and participate in the capitalist framing of land as a commodity in their attempts to gain legal title as peasants. However, in their cultural relationships, land is occupied but never owned (only spirits called *tzuultaq’as* own the land) (Kahn, 2006; Ybarra, 2011). Occupation of the land is only appropriate as long as Q’eqchi’s invest the appropriate cultural and social labor into the land. As I have explored through the lenses of political ecology and indigenous studies, land simultaneously represents a site of production, local knowledge, and political self-determination.

**Social Movement Learning**

Processes of meaning making and local knowledge are central to the learning elements I identify in Q’eqchi’s defense of territory. Throughout this study I relate moments of learning described by research contributors to concepts from non-formal, informal, and social movement learning. In this study I do not focus on formal schooling but rather identify non-formal and informal learning as more relevant lenses for answering my second research question on when and how political learning occurs as part of Q’eqchi’s’ defense of territory. I focus on non-formal learning (e.g., through workshops offered by NGOs) as well as informal learning within families and communities, both of which I group under the category of social movement learning. Following Mario Novelli (2010), the political economist of education, I frame social movement learning as popular learning, understood as not only involving formal educational events, but also as part of much bigger processes, which, though appearing ‘informal’ and ‘arbitrary,’ is very deliberate. In this definition, both ‘popular education’ events and the actual practice of ‘strategy development’ and
‘protest actions’ can be seen as examples of popular education, whereby the ‘school’ (the social movement) learns. (p. 124)

While Q’eqchi’s did not largely employ an educational framework when explaining their actions, the process of organizing defense of territory is deliberate, and encompasses strategy and analysis, as well as taking action.

I employ the term informal learning as a way to develop ideas of learning outside of the context of state-run or private, formal educational institutions. However, the forms of learning taking place within Q’eqchi’ families and communities are based in traditional forms of knowledge and cultural institutions that are well established. I do not use the term “informal” in order to imply that these forms of learning are unstructured, spontaneous, or less important. In line with Gary Malcolm (2011), I consider informal learning to be a process of “coming to understand one’s place in the world largely by analyzing and integrating [one’s] cultural, economic, political, and historical spaces and places” (p. 166). For Schugurensky (2006) informal learning includes “a wide variety of learning, such as patterns of authority or democracy, dynamics of discrimination, and other elements of the hidden curriculum ranging from the architectural design and classroom seating arrangements to rituals and routines” (p. 165). Because informal learning encompasses several contexts and purposes, it is necessary to identify which kinds of informal learning my study examines. Schugurensky identifies three main categories of informal learning: self-directed, incidental, and socialization (p. 166). The first category, which describes learning projects undertaken with outside supervision or facilitation, has learning as an intended outcome, so it does not describe the forms of informal learning I explore in this study. Incidental learning is an unintended consequence of an activity, but afterwards the participant recognizes they have learned something in the process (p. 167).
My research contributors’ comments reflect many moments of this type of informal learning. Finally, socialization refers to the way individuals learn and internalize values and behaviors in the course of their everyday activities (p. 167). The impact of these everyday experiences on Q’eqchi’ Mayas can be understood by drawing on Mayan indigenous knowledge systems to see the culturally embedded nature of certain kinds of learning. According to Ajpub’ Pablo García Ixmatá (Tz’utujil Maya) (2010), in Mayan worldviews “knowledge is sown by means of dialog, counsel, discussion, guidance, and the life example between two or more members of a family and within the community” (p. 222). Chapter Five looks at the role of socialization in research contributors’ decisions to join the guerrilla movement as teenagers, strongly influenced by their families’ participation in the movement. Chapter Six focuses on socialization through Q’eqchi’ cultural practices and participation in community-based and other political processes.

In the process of organizing to defend themselves and their territory, Q’eqchi’s are involved in moments of learning and meaning making. Escobar (1992) describes how such meaning-making is integral to the daily practices that make up larger processes of struggle:

Everyday life involves a collective act of creation, a collective signification, a culture. It is out of this reservoir of meanings (that is, a ‘tradition’) that people actually give shape to the struggle. Put in a more abstract and general manner, daily life is located at the intersection of processes of articulating meaning through practices, on the one hand, and macro processes of domination, on the other. (p. 71)

In the daily functioning of their communities, Q’eqchi’s organize collectively through internal institutions, such as the general community assembly (asamblea) and the Elders’ Council, in addition to articulating political demands through public protest at times as well. In Chapter Six
I consider the role of these forms of participation in Q’eqchi’ collective action, in particular in relation to defense of territory.

Choudry (2015) also emphasizes “building a social analysis that informs and is informed by grounded practice” (p. 34) through social movement learning, which combines various forms of education, including popular education, informal learning, and incidental learning (pp. 34-35). Choudry describes the combination of more structured processes of formal and informal education with incidental learning in social movements as “ideas, insights, and visions produced in the course of people collectively trying to change things and reflecting on their experiences, the knowledge about systems of power and exploitation developed as people find themselves in confrontation with states and capital” (p. 1). Social movement theorist John Holst (2002) describes the processes of knowledge creation and learning that take place in the process of organizing in social movements as a “pedagogy of mobilization” (p. 87). In other words, social movements offer participants analytical and practical skills (pp. 87-88) they can apply within the context of their political activities, or extend to activities in other areas of their lives. Holst recognizes the unique value of social movements as learning contexts because knowledge is generated and tested through firsthand, lived experiences of struggle.

Choudry and Holst’s ideas of social movement learning can also be viewed using Tarrow’s (1998) concept of repertoires of contention (p. 30), which refers to the collection of tactics and methods learned and accumulated by a social movement in the course of their organizing. According to Tarrow, “the repertoire is at once a structural and a cultural concept, involving not only what people do when they are engaged in conflict with others but what they know how to do and what others expect them to do” (p. 30). Changes in the repertoire reflect the outcome of short term and long term learning processes, at times over decades, as the movement
adapts to “major fluctuations in interests, opportunity, and organization” (p. 31). The repertoire can be viewed as an educational archive of tactics and knowledge accumulated over generations. While social movements often appear transitory, Tarrow points out how forms of contention are often passed down and embedded in the movement’s history, representing knowledge transmitted from the movement’s predecessors to participants today. In the case of Q’eqchi’s, some of the tactics they use today are the same ones their ancestors deployed in colonial times, as is the case with burning down plantations or fleeing to resist unfair labor relations (see Chapter Two), while new routines have also developed in order to address today’s particular power relations, such as street protests.

Perhaps as relevant as the analytical skills cultivated through political organizing is the inspiration and self-confidence gained through taking responsibility for the success or failure of the movement’s activities. Many social movements are composed of workers, peasants, indigenous peoples, and other marginalized individuals and groups who have been excluded from mainstream political processes, and thus from opportunities to develop and exercise leadership skills. This very exclusion from social structures has led them to join social movements to press for demands to improve their everyday quality of life. The capacity-building elements of social movement organization offer validation to the kinds of knowledge that marginalized peoples already possess in relation to their own life experiences and cultural background.

Participants in social movements also develop what Jaramillo and McLaren (2008) assert as “the creative capacity of all individuals to develop democratic social formations able to address local needs by means of political transformation” (p. 195). Participants are transformed through their involvement in the movement, leading to an enriched self-understanding as agents.
of change, worthy of making their demands against their powerful political antagonists. Elsewhere such self-understanding is referred to as “political efficacy,” the belief that “individual political action does have, or can have, an impact on the political process” (Schugurensky, 2006, p. 171). In Chapter Six I explore electoral politics as one arena where Q’eqchi’s develop a sense of the limits and possibilities of their participation as a force for shaping the outcomes of political processes.

In addition to individuals’ capacity for participating in transformative political processes, social movement learning considers the activities and impact of groups on learning. Locating learning on an individual and collective level is essential for identifying different kinds of learning moments, some of which can be more productively analyzed on an individual level while others can be better conceptualized as part of a collectivity. Kilgore (1999) argues for “understanding learning in social movements requires not only a concept of the group as a learner and constructor of knowledge, but also an understanding of the centrality of the group’s vision of social justice that drives it to act” (p. 191). Individuals have different levels of commitment to the collective purpose(s) of the group, but common goals must be articulated that are relevant to all member of the group.

Given the focus of contentious politics on action by marginalized groups in society, interactions with the state offer learning moments to participants, in which the repositories that Tarrow refers to can develop and expand. While these interactions with the state occur in the course of daily activities, such as acquiring government identification, as times these interactions are framed by “moments where the state reveals its politically repressive side” (Choudry, 2015, p. 112). State harassment, repression, and persecution provide feedback social movements can utilize in their ongoing analysis of the local power dynamics. In the case of Guatemala, Salazar
Martinez’s (2008) concept of state violence as teaching-learning hints at some of the educational aspects of violent encounters with the state (Torres-Rivas, 1999).

**Concluding Thoughts**

In this chapter I have outlined the three concepts that constitute the framework for my analysis. Tarrow’s (1998) social movement lens of contentious politics makes visible the organizing work Q’eqchi’s are engaged in on a daily basis. Their struggle for land is not limited to “lighting moments” (Zibechi, 2010), although the struggle may only be visible to many Guatemalans in those moments. The social movement lens allows us to consider different forms of work Q’eqchi’s invest in the everyday communal infrastructure that is activated in more acute moments of crisis or confrontation. I share Q’eqchi’s’ descriptions of this labor in Chapter Six, where they explain the role of culture in their political activities, from ceremony to collective decision-making in community assemblies to participation in electoral campaigns, such as their decision to support Rigoberta Menchú’s campaigns for president of Guatemala.

The lenses of political ecology and indigenous studies aid in situating the political, ecological, and cultural stakes of my second concept, territorial defense. As a particular sub-set of contentious politics, ecological movements waged by indigenous people bring to the forefront issues of political and cultural self-determination that are entangled in the land. In the Q’eqchi’ worldview, land requires intense and ongoing relationality with Mother Earth, the spirits, and the other-than-human elements of the natural world. Struggles over land represent struggles over meaning-making and the acknowledgement of Q’eqchi’s’ unique forms of knowledge. *La lucha* encompasses a defense of land as a site of economic production as well as cultural production.
The third element of my framework also draws on concepts from social movement theory to consider moments of learning that occur while Q’eqchi’s engage in political organizing. Informal learning theory broadly addresses the learning that takes place outside of formal educational institutions, such as within community self-governance or through oral traditions. The social movement learning lens helps to locate patterns within and across different forms of organizing. In my findings chapters my interview excerpts highlight moments of learning during the armed conflict (Chapter Five), during everyday political organizing in Q’eqchi’ communities, and in response to the evictions of current period (Chapter Seven).
Chapter 4—Methodology

What are the limits and possibilities of this research for advancing my goal of challenging the academy’s assessment of who “creates” knowledge (Choudry & Kapoor, 2010; Shultz and Kajner, 2013; Smith, 1999)? How can my research further the aspirations of Q’eqchi’ research contributors in Guatemala who requested I share their stories with the world? What kinds of protocols must be in place to protect the security of indigenous research contributors, who face grave and on-going threats to their lives as a result of their political activities in defense of their communities in the municipalities of El Estor and Panzós in Guatemala? These are questions I have asked myself when considering the unavoidable juxtapositions between my position as an outsider, embodying racial and economic privilege, and the local context of violence and struggle from which research contributors cannot escape. I have traveled to Guatemala multiple times and stayed for months at a time, leaving after my interviews and observations, while research contributors do not enjoy the same levels of mobility; they cannot simply leave their homes and families for many reasons: because they lack resources, they are committed to the struggle, and they maintain close ties to family and the land.

In this chapter, after explaining my methodological influences in oral history and ethnography, I explain my interview and participant observation methods for carrying out and analyzing my research. Then I summarize the multi-faceted interview experiences at the center of my research process. I focus on the testimonial elements of their interviews, and speculate as to why their interviews so often took that form. My methodology revolves around my relationship with research contributors, as well as with my Q’eqchi’-Spanish interpreters Analisa and Rafael. My research process was driven by my desire to capture Q’eqchi’s’ perspectives by
examining their own “interpretive grid” (Blaser et al., 2010, p. 9). After outlining my methodology and the methods I employed during fieldwork, I address the challenges associated with conducting research across three languages (Q’eqchi’, Spanish, and English), and focus on attempts to translate the term suffering in my interviews, highlighting the incommensurability of concepts across languages (Ruitenberg, Knowlton, & Li 2016). I also explain the logistical details of transcription, the consent process, and ethical considerations related to my contributors’ security and well-being. Finally, I close by outlining my position as a becoming-witness, explaining the actions I have taken, as well as future plans, to share contributors’ experiences with various audiences. I invite the readers of this dissertation to learn about the lives of my 27 research contributors, each of whom contributes to the larger narrative of struggle and resistance I weave throughout this dissertation.

**Planting the Seeds, Growing the Relationships: Methodological Orientations**

Following Max Van Manen’s (1990) idea of methodology “as the general orientation to life, the view of knowledge, and the sense of what it means to be human” (p. 27) my research study design and methods reflects my aim to conduct ethical and research that recognizes the “interlocking systems of domination” (Razack, 1998, p. 12) research contributors experience as indigenous people, as peasants, as women, as a racialized majority within Guatemala, and as survivors of violence and trauma. Social movement theorists Aziz Choudry and Dip Kapoor (2010) advise scholars to carefully examine relations of power as part of knowledge production, stating:

Academic scholarship that seeks to understand social movement and NGO networks and the education, learning, and knowledge production associated with them must attend to
questions emerging from social movements and activist research with respect to relations of power and the ways in which certain forms of knowledge are valued over others. (p. 3)

As a scholar committed to reflecting on the production of power and knowledge through my research practice, my methods rely on interviews, thus situating indigenous contributors’ subjectivity and knowledge at the center of the research process itself, as proposed by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Māori) (1999).

My study is influenced by the ethical and political imperatives of decolonizing theories developed as a response to academia’s long history of conducting exploitative research involving indigenous peoples. Eve Tuck (Unangax̂) and Michelle Fine (2007) describe decolonizing methodologies as both theoretical and practical methods, productive for constructing “a framework of ethical responses to forced removal, dispossession, invisibility, and dual status nature of disenfranchised people within systems of domination” (p. 159). Following Waziyatawin (Dakota) and Michael Yellow Bird (Mandan, Hidatsa & Arikara) (2008), decolonizing research accords special consideration to indigenous peoples’ resistance to subjugation in three realms: the mind, the body, and the land. Dolores Calderon (Pueblo) (2014) describes recognition of the political struggle over land as central to conducting decolonizing research in settler states. In her work on land education Calderon states, “All places were once Indigenous lands and continue to be” (p. 27). Throughout this dissertation I trace ways this resistance has been mounted in the realms of the mind, the body, and the land through centuries of dispossession, assimilation, and, quite recently, genocide during the armed conflict. Razack (1998) also urges that “this interlocking effect could only be traced in historically specific ways” (p. 12), so in the historical overview in Chapter Two, I address the colonial structures of power
that seek to erase indigenous identity in Guatemala (Cotjí Cuxil, 1996; Del Valle Escalante, 2008).

**Oral History and the Value of Subjectivity**

Oral history facilitates the ethico-political labor of witnessing (Kurasawa, 2009) as a grassroots form of history in which average people take their place as historical subjects, not objects, as happens so frequently in research with indigenous people. Oral historian Linda Shopes (2011) explains oral history’s emancipatory potential as stemming from its interest “in a more expansive sense of what counts as history and who counts as historians, but also in a progressive politics, an interest in using history to inform and at times to intervene in movements for equality and justice” (p. 456). Mary Larson (2006) also emphasizes the emancipatory potential of oral history in her definition of a critical theory approach, which “revolves around the concept of representing the underrepresented and giving voice to their views, particularly as regards gender, class, race, and ethnicity” (p. 115). Larson’s definition mirrors my interest in oral history as a means for accessing collective Q’eqchi’ conceptions of political change. Oral history works well with the decolonizing elements of my critical paradigm outlined above.

While empirical research is often considered in terms of data collection, oral histories are not collected but rather created in a dialogic process in which researchers are learners and oral history informants are “sites of knowledge” (Field, 2008, p. 182). An oral history interview combines elements of narrative form and dialogue between the interviewer and the narrator in which “two worlds, or subjectivities, are colliding” (Abrams, 2010, p. 10). The oral history interview is the product of a collaboration between researcher and research contributors, capturing narratives that would not be explained the same way in a conversation with any other
person or at any other moment. As Shopes (2011) states, oral history is “not simply someone
telling a story; it is someone telling a story in response to the queries of another” (p. 451). In the
case of my own research, I came to the interviews prepared with themes to address, such as
experiences with the electoral process or personal accounts of the events of the armed conflict.
However, for me it was more important to follow the cues of interviewees about topics they
wanted to explore or avoid.

Oral history specifically engages with the past (Abrams, 2010, p. 2). Oral historian
Alessandro Portelli (1997) argues that oral history can potentially make a unique contribution to
our understanding of the past: “Oral history tells us not just what people did, but what they
wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did” (p. 67).
Historian Philip Gardner (2006) also emphasizes the centrality of temporality in oral history
practice, explaining that oral history “seeks to open novel routes for understanding the past, the
relation of past to present and the lives of others through time” (p. 206). The act of narrating
one’s life maintains the speaker in a multi-temporal zone, where they are reflecting on the past,
constructing and re-living the moment in the present, and considering an imagined future. The
past and future are both intertwined in the act of telling a story, and point toward the continuity
between contributors’ past experiences and projections for the future.

Oral history interviews cultivate the narrator’s space to account for their subjectivity in
the research process. Van Manen (1990) describes that the researcher can commit to subjectivity
as part of research practice by being “as perceptive, insightful, and discerning as one can be in
order to show or disclose the object in its full richness and in its greatest depth” (p. 20). By
including the rich details of the research context, we commit to providing the audience with their
greatest opportunity for meaning-making from our research. He goes on to define subjectivity as
a reflection that we, as researchers, “are strong in our orientation to the object of study in a unique and personal way”—while avoiding the danger of becoming arbitrary, self-indulgent, or of getting captivated and carried away by our unreflected preconceptions” (p. 20, italics in original).

One way I attempt to carry out this guidance in practice is to include extensive excerpts from interviews in order to preserve the narrative integrity of contributors’ subjectivity. For example, Chapter Five focuses on multiple interviews conducted with two women who were members of the guerrilla movement. Through my focus on their life histories, the reader can better contextualize the women’s interpretations of their lifelong participation in the struggle (la lucha).

As Ruth Behar (1990) affirms:

A life history should allow one to see how an actor makes culturally meaningful history, how history is produced in action and in the actor's retrospective reflections on that action. A life history narrative should allow one to see the subjective mapping of experience, the working out of a culture and a social system that is often obscured in a typified account. (p. 225)

The oral history interview is a valuable space for research contributors to “speak back to power” and validate their current struggles over land and dignity to a broader international audience. Contributors often elaborated a desire for readers of the research to learn about their suffering in their own words, and to be aware of the complicity or active participation of the Guatemalan government in the violence, poverty, and ongoing exclusion that they face.

In the following sections I explain my interview process, identifying some of the testimonial elements that characterized them, and speculating about the testimonial structure of contributors’ responses.
The Interviews

My fieldwork experience played a central role in shaping the structure and themes I elaborate on in this dissertation. My fieldwork consisted of three visits to the departments of Izabal and Alta Verapaz in Guatemala between April 2013 and July 2014, totaling five months on-site. I originally intended to focus the study on the relation between memories of the armed conflict and political imaginaries today, and for that reason I initially planned to interview Q’eqchi’s at least in their early thirties, old enough to potentially have memories of the armed conflict itself, even if only in its waning years. I sought to interview individuals with myriad political, educational, and work experiences in order to look for diverse experiences of the armed conflict and its aftermath. However, once I broadened the scope of the study to include conflicts from any time period and to consider political participation broadly writ, my sample expanded to include individuals in their twenties, who did not have any personal memories of the armed conflict. In the end, research contributors were between the ages of 25 and 73.

My research relied on the willingness of individuals to speak frankly with me and in some detail, often about parts of their life that they hold in deep reserve: stories of the murder of loved ones—at times right in front of their eyes—acts of sexual and physical violence committed against them, poverty and hardship I have never experienced or witnessed myself. As an outsider, I was poorly positioned to achieve a goal as lofty as frankly conversing with these individuals about their critiques of the Guatemalan government, their experiences of violence and conflict, and their political activities. I was richly rewarded by their generosity and openness, thanks in large part to the cultural bridging and commitment of the interpreters to Q’eqchi’ communities.
I interviewed 27 indigenous Guatemalans (25 Q’eqchi’ and two Achí Mayas), which included ten women and 17 men, for a total of 39 interviews. I carried out 20 interviews entirely in Spanish. A team of two interpreters, Rafael and Analisa, accompanied me for a few of these Spanish language interviews they arranged but they were essential during the 17 interviews I conducted with monolingual Q’eqchi’ speakers. The interviews focused on experiences of political participation in community and state-sponsored arenas, but also include intimate accounts of surviving massacres and participating in the guerrilla organization the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca, or URNG in Spanish).

Of the 20 interviews conducted entirely in Spanish, I arranged most with individuals I already knew or was able to meet easily through an acquaintance. Spanish-language interviews were predominantly with Q’eqchi’ professionals, such as NGO workers and educators. My dissertation could have easily been limited to interviews with Q’eqchi’ who speak Spanish and have higher levels of education. For example, I interviewed Valerio, Abel, and Gloria, three siblings from the same family who are all Q’eqchi’ professionals in different professions. The Spanish-language interviews with urban bilingual Q’eqchi’s highlighted the complicated nature of (re)claiming a Q’eqchi’ identity outside of the rural village (aldea) context. Q’eqchi’s living in more urban areas have greater educational opportunities, which lead to professional careers in teaching, the law, or in NGOs, but they still have to navigate the sometimes contradictory relationship between indigenous identity and Guatemalan citizenship. Some research contributors are struggling to create “bridges between authorized and condemned ways of being...

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24 See Appendix A for complete listing.
Indian” (Hale, 2000, p. 20), pursuing careers that highlight their indigeneity, as advocates for other Q’eqchi’s in the NGO or education sectors.

Instead, thanks to Analisa and Rafael’s contacts in Q’eqchi’ communities, I conducted interviews with several Q’eqchi’s involved in defense of territory in rural villages (aldeas). The interpreters bridged my privileged world as a U.S.-born researcher with the lived experiences of violence, conflict, trauma, and daily insecurity faced by many research contributors, many of whom are no longer able to reside in their communities of origin due to violent evictions. My interviews and observations have been substantially shaped by Analisa and Rafael, who acted as gatekeepers, interpreters, and cultural bridges. Lisa Campbell et al. (2006) describe gatekeepers as “those who provide—directly or indirectly—access to key resources needed to do research, be those resources logistical, human, institutional, or informational” (p. 98). As gatekeepers they opened up their considerable knowledge and contacts in Q’eqchi’ communities to facilitate my research. Their involvement with the struggle to defend Q’eqchi’ lands resulted in a number of interviews with individuals who have been evicted from their communities by private security forces and the police on behalf of sugar cane and African palm plantations, as well as CGN. As interpreters, Analisa and Rafael were the only ones who understood the words of everyone present: the contributor, me, and each other. The contributors and I were each limited to one language (Q’eqchi’ or Spanish) but Analisa and Rafael understood every word spoken. Transcription of the interviews for analysis and independent translation are two methods for comprehending as much of the interviews as possible.

Finally, Analisa and Rafael acted as cultural bridges (Wadensjö, 2004), conveying elements of Q’eqchi’ culture and history to me and explaining my research project to contributors. I felt much like anthropologist Victoria Sanford (2003), who states, “In a sense, my
translators translated me, so that I was understandable to the community” (p. 21). I relied on Analisa and Rafael to provide context for both research contributors and me.

As mentioned, I conducted semi-structured interviews with all 27 of the research contributors. Some contributors began the interview with a testimonial style account of their experiences, often speaking for several minutes before I asked my first questions. Others preferred me to begin the interview with my questions. In the interviews during my first trip I had not yet built personal relationships with contributors, so I mainly stuck to thematic questioning on political participation. Although interviews varied—depending on my rapport with the individual, whether we began with my questions or their testimonies, and so forth—my questions addressed two main concerns: the participants’ understanding of political participation, and what they think the role of the Guatemalan government should be in improving the situation in their communities. In subsequent interviews, after initiating relationships of confidence and trust with research contributors, I elicited more personal details from contributors, such as stories about their childhood, how they met their spouses, and their families’ current situations; contributors often also offered these stories readily without any prodding on my part. Some female contributors said they felt free to say certain things to me, assuming that as a woman I could relate to at least some elements of their stories.

I identify three main factors to explain Q’eqchi’s’ willingness to share their often intimate accounts of violence and trauma with a stranger. The first is their confidence that Analisa and Rafael would arrange an interview with someone trustworthy (de confianza). Secondly, evictions (desalojos), rapes, and murders are events whose significance extends beyond their communities’ experiences, and are reproduced throughout Guatemala where indigenous peoples occupy lands containing minerals or other natural resources. They recognize
the value of sharing these stories in Canada, the site of the corporate headquarters of many mining companies in conflict with their communities, but also in the United States and elsewhere. Finally, contributors’ experiences are forever preserved in the interview recording and transcript.

**Testimonial Elements in the Interviews**

Indigenous peoples throughout the world maintain and transmit their history, knowledge, and unique ways of being through storytelling. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Māori) (1999) argues that for indigenous peoples, history represents “a very powerful need to give testimony to and restore a spirit, to bring back into existence a world fragmented and dying” (p. 28). In addition, as literary scholar Julia Emberley (2014) states about First Nations’ reparative practices in Canada, “testimonies are unsettling. Produced in order to verify, supplement, or provide a subjective narrative of what are traumatic and violent events, they account for the disruption of a sense of normalcy in the continuum of life experience” (p. 6). At times the stories of my research contributors are unsettling because they challenge my experience of relative political stability and freedom from violence. In addition, their stories have highlighted the ways that corporations from Canada and other countries benefit from exploiting Q’eqchi’ lands while not facing accountability for their responsibility for human rights violations.

In the Latin American context, *testimonio* is a politically laden storytelling genre that denounces a situation of injustice and repression (Nolin Hanlon & Shankar, 2000). As literary scholar Kimberly Nance (2006) explains, *testimonio* is significant not just as a descriptive text, but because of the creator’s intention for their story to combat an injustice in the world:
Testimonio is not only a text. It is a project of social justice in which text is an instrument. Testimonial narratives are doubly connected to the lifeworld, in their inceptions as responses to speakers’ real-life experiences of injustice and also by their intended outcomes in social action on the part of readers. (p. 19)

My interviews often elicited testimonial-style presentations from research contributors as they introduced themselves to me. Later in this chapter I recount ethical challenges associated with my research, contributors asked me to share their stories with the world, “not only to educate readers about injustice, but to persuade those readers to act” (Nance, 2006, p. 19). In some cases they hoped I could provide material aid such as medicine, but in other cases they framed their appeal towards my possible connections with others in the U.S. or Canada who could provide access to development projects for their communities or more substantial forms of aid.

One explanation for this narrative testimonial pattern could be rooted in Mayas’ storytelling traditions, which historians George Lovell and Christopher Lutz (2001) document in early native texts describing Spanish colonial encounters, such as títulos (titles) (p. 179) and memorias (memoirs or memorials) (p. 186). Lovell and Lutz (1998) compare these colonial documents with Rigoberta Menchú’s (K’iche’ Maya) 1983 testimonial when they state, “similar to these 16th-century appeals for justice, Rigoberta Menchú also cried out against even greater horrors perpetrated against her people by 20th-century equivalents of Pedro de Alvarado and Valdés de Cárcamo” (p. 195). Lovell and Lutz’s analysis points to the continuity in Mayas’ resistance to Spanish colonialism with present-day opposition to the government repression, such as was exercised during the armed conflict.

Menchú’s famous and controversial testimonio originated in a series of interviews Menchú granted to anthropologist Elizabeth Burgos during the height of the armed conflict in the
1980s. Part of the controversy over Menchú’s *testimonio* resides in Burgos’ claim to authorship of the text, even though Menchú’s story and words comprise the entire text. Instead, as Mary Louise Pratt (2001) argues, the *testimonio* should acknowledge both women as authors of the text. In describing the two women as “co-producers” of the text, Pratt states:

What binds the two together is an ethical commitment to the project of communicating the subaltern’s individual and collective reality to metropolitan audiences who are ignorant of it, in a discourse those audiences can decipher and with which they will identify. (p. 43)

Burgos and Menchú undertook the collaboration of producing Menchú’s *testimonio* with the intention of sharing Menchú’s story with audiences outside of Guatemala. Menchú’s *testimonio* is more than an individual account of harms experienced during the armed conflict; her story ties her experiences to those of family members, community members, revolutionary militants, and ordinary Guatemalans all at once. Emberley (2014) explains:

The cultural construction of the ‘self’ in an Indigenous epistemological framework, however, also places value on the individual’s relationship to community and its kinship filiations and affiliations. This does not mean that questions of individual rights are irrelevant but, rather, that the speaking subject is accountable to and implicated in a set of kinship and community relations that includes, but also extends beyond, the individual self. (p. 40)

The knowledge transmitted in Menchú’s story recognizes the agency and responsibility of the individual, but also references a collective “we” to validate the authority of the storyteller’s account. For Menchú, an indigenous Maya woman, “we” can refer to the guerrilla movement, to a family, or to a whole community.
While perhaps unfamiliar with Menchú’s written testimony, research contributors may have experience with judicial proceedings or providing testimony to truth commission-style reports produced in Guatemala in the 1990s (CEH, 1999; REMHI, 1999). McAllister and Nelson (2013) reflect on the impact of these reports, noting: “In their wake, the potential uses for testimonial evidence have proliferated as human rights documentation, evidence for court cases, reparations demands, and academic research; as tools for restoring mental health; and generally as touchstones for social justice activism” (p. 20). Many research contributors began their interviews with a testimonial-style presentation of violence or other harms they have experienced, without any prodding or requests on my part to structure them that way. By framing their interview in a testimonial style, they drew on their knowledge of testimony as a juridical genre to offer an “official” presentation of harms. Some may have also presented their interviews this way assuming I was a powerful person from outside Guatemala who could help to resolve injustices their communities are working to overcome, such as a lack of running water and access to health care. They were also seeking public recognition of the Guatemalan government’s neglect (such as the lack of food provisions), as well as its role in perpetrating violence against the community and its individual members.

Before going into the details of the interview process itself, I want to briefly comment on how participant observation provided a more cohesive understanding of what Q’eqchi’s’ political participation looks like among Q’eqchi’s. These observations served as a contrast to my preconceived notions of their political participation.
Immersion and Participant Observation

I was immersed in Q’eqchi’ culture during my five months of fieldwork, living with the same Q’eqchi’ family in El Estor during each of my three trips. Mi familia chapina (my Guatemalan family) shared local foods with me, and the parents of the family taught me a few words in Q’eqchi’. They introduced me to Mayan ceremony when they invited me to celebrate their son’s 13th birthday, the age Mayas recognize as the transition to adulthood for males. This was the only ceremony I participated in, although ceremony was an important topic of discussion during interviews, as I recount later. This middle-class Q’eqchi’ family speaks Spanish at home in their concrete block house and lives in town, not in a remote aldea (village). I spent my evenings with the family watching the Disney Channel, checking email on the Internet, and Skyping with friends and family. I attended birthday parties, went to the beach, and accompanied the family to the fair for the town’s Catholic patron saint. I consider all of these experiences part of my participant observation. In these moments and in conversations with family members I learned what it means to be Q’eqchi’, and the fact that it could mean many things at once. These experiences with mi familia chapina, which precede my doctoral research, imparted meaningful insights about Q’eqchi’s and about Guatemala. They provided me with a home base from which to conduct a research study in comfort and security, with the regularity of mealtimes and other shared routines.

However, when I left the house to work on my study I continued my informal observations and relationship building. I shared personal and intimate moments when I went to people’s homes, rode the bus with them, ate a meal with them, and met their children and spouses. I jotted down my casual thoughts, reflecting on challenges such as the heat or the bumpy bus ride,
or the pleasures of making new friends. Likewise, these experiences and reflections are part of my participant observation as well.

Finally, I also spent time during my fieldwork doing participant observation, collecting systematic notes related directly to Q’eqchi’s’ political participation. I collected field notes at local events, trying to capture “facts,” figures, and important contextual details that would jog my memory later as I was writing this dissertation. In this last category, I participated in several public meetings between Q’eqchi’s and various municipal and departmental authorities from the government, usually organized through a local NGO or a network of NGOs. I will return my observations from community events throughout the following chapters.

The Ethical Challenges of Fieldwork

Throughout the research process, the disparities between research contributors’ and my position, power, and access to resources required reflection and attention on my part. Concerns about security played a large role in the entire fieldwork process, as well as the ways I have chosen to present it here. Research contributors and the interpreters had concerns about the security of individuals who participated in my study. Leaders of Q’eqchi’ communities have faced all manner of harassment, intimidation, and violence due to their participation in activities to defend and regain their land. One contributor interviewed me when we met, to determine if I was associated with Chabil Utzaj, the sugar cane company that evicted him from his land and who had subsequently issued an order for his arrest. He was cautious about revealing information to anyone whose identity was unknown to him. I explained my role as a student and researcher at UBC, and we discussed the consent form in some detail; eventually we proceeded with the interview.
In another situation the interpreter signaled me to stop an interview in a restaurant when a man in torn, dirty clothing moved to stand close to our table. We stopped the interview until he walked away, focusing on eating our lunch. Once the man left, the research contributor explained the person was spying for the sugar company responsible for having his community evicted from their lands; the man spying knew Vicente was a community leader fighting to relocate the community to another piece of land. He explained to me, “They know me here already, they know who I am.”

These two examples hint at the security concerns of research contributors when they granted an interview. The original consent forms allowed contributors to choose whether to be referred to with a pseudonym or their real name. In the end, because of such incidents, I decided to assign pseudonyms to all contributors to avoid the risk their words could be cited by the government or representatives of corporations to harass or threaten them. In addition, one contributor who is active in the activities of Q’eqchi’s and a known figure in her own right, decided she did not want her name included in the study. I would have effectively given away her identity if I had included the names of contributors associated with her. She views her identification in this study as a threat to her personal security. In order to honor her request, I have employed pseudonyms for all research contributors.

Other researchers working with Q’eqchi’s have opted for pseudonyms in order to protect the security of their research participants. In their research with Q’eqchi’ communities, geographers Nathan Einbinder and Catherine Nolin (2010) employ pseudonyms, citing safety concerns for individuals, and Megan Ybarra (2010, 2011a & 2012;) has also used pseudonyms for individuals in her long-term ethnographic studies with Q’eqchi’ communities in the northern lowlands. Nolin and Stephens (2010) also note that Q’eqchi’s they interviewed in Chichipate,
outside of El Estor, about local mining conflicts did not want their comments recorded “as they continue to fear repercussions from both EXMIBAL representatives and the Guatemalan army” (p. 57). In their work with Q’eqchi’ women who were victims of sexual violence during the armed conflict and during violent evictions in 2007, Méndez and Carrera (2014) also use pseudonyms for the women whose testimonies they cite. Representatives of mining corporations and the government are cited as possible hostile actors against Q’eqchi’s.

Pseudonyms can be interpreted as weakening the agency of the contributors to make their own decisions about whether to use their real name. Since the methodology, methods, and presenting of findings are intended to facilitate research contributors’ agency, I have attempted to strengthen the voice of research contributors in other ways throughout this study. My excerpts from research contributors are substantial, maintaining “narrative linkages” (Chase, 2010, p. 222), including the inclusion of my interview questions at times, which helps to capture the dialogue as it was occurring. In particular, my focus on the stories of Magdalena and Filomena in Chapter Five highlight their individual experiences, as well as their participation in collective political organizing in the guerrilla movement. Their narratives represent an expression of research contributors’ agency.

Another ethical concern was the economic disparity between contributors and myself. I was mobile, traveling to and from Guatemala for three separate fieldwork visits through research funds from UBC that covered interview honoraria, food, travel, and housing expenses. Several research contributors requested financial and material resources in both indirect and indirect ways throughout the interview process. From appeals for funding for community agricultural projects to lists of medical supplies for the community health center, I was unable to enter into interviews without consideration of contributors’ expectations of me, and my expectations of
them. For example, during a series of five interviews in one community, the two representatives of the community health committee opened their interviews by describing the shortages of healthcare workers and supplies. Later, after the five interviews, Marcelino, the coordinator of the Community Development Council, presented me with a list of supplies and medicines the community needs in order to open a health station. Their testimonies acted as a kind of “proof” of the community’s great need. While only one community prepared such a list, during and after the interviews several research contributors asked for my help in soliciting development projects to benefit the community, or made requests for aid to relieve their communities’ material needs. Again, I was called on as a witness to their suffering (Kurasawa, 2009), and I was left to manage the ethico-political labor of weighing their requests against the university’s construction of my ethical responsibility as a researcher.

My supervisor and I decided I could not address demands for material aid while conducting the research so as not to inadvertently favor some communities over others, or encourage participation in my study, or solicit particular kinds of narratives, based on the expectation I could provide such aid. According to the Canadian Interagency Advisory Panel on Research Ethics (2014), which guides my study as a doctoral student at a Canadian university, the trust relationships established during the research process “can be put at risk by conflicts of interest that may compromise independence, objectivity or ethical duties of loyalty” (p. 95). My approach to financial compensation for individual research contributors was one aspect of the ethical conduct of the interviews. While the Interagency Advisory Panel on Research Ethics neither encourages nor discourages financial incentives for participating in research studies (p. 27), they caution that incentives “should not be so large or attractive as to encourage reckless disregard of risks” (p. 27). Consequently, I offered contributors a nominal honorarium of 50
quetzales (about six dollars) as a show of respect for their time, a sum small enough to not provide a substantial incentive to participate in the study for financial gain. Analisa initially told me that the way the issue of the honorarium was presented in the consent form hurt her (me duele), because she felt it implied that 50 quetzales could compensate contributors for their pain, which diminishes the profundity of their suffering. I took the conversation to heart and I removed that part of the consent form in Q’eqchi’, since I wanted the interpreters to be comfortable with the terminology on the form. I left the wording in the Spanish version because I was able to answer questions that arose during our conversation in Spanish. In addition to the honorarium, I also paid the travel expenses of each contributor (typically bus fare of two dollars) to and from the interview site and the site of the transcript review, and I often paid for a meal for contributors during our meeting.

However, now that this research has been completed, I must return to the question of my long-term relationship with individuals and communities in need. At the end of this chapter I address the actions I have taken since my last fieldwork trip in 2014. Now I move on to outline my data analysis process, guided by the above methodological considerations.

**Making Sense of Research Contributors’ Narratives**

Translation and interpretation were central to my considerations for putting indigenous voices and stories at the forefront of my research process and design. Marie Battiste (Mi’kmaq) has written extensively on decolonizing methodologies in research collaborations with indigenous communities. Battiste (2008) puts indigenous languages at the center of the researcher’s engagement with the community, as indigenous and non-indigenous researchers: “Researchers cannot rely on colonial languages to define Indigenous reality. If Indigenous
people continue to define their reality in terms and constructs drawn from Eurocentric diffusionism, they continue the pillage of their own selves” (p. 504). Battiste’s description of decolonizing research implies responsibilities for conducting research in an indigenous community whose language I do not speak. Language and translation tie together the paradigmatic concerns of decolonizing methodology with the logistical details of carrying out interviews and participant observation during fieldwork. I relied extensively on Q’eqchi’-Spanish interpreters and translators (all native Q’eqchi’ speakers) in all stages of the fieldwork process, from elaborating a culturally relevant translation of the consent form to arranging and conducting interviews.

I dedicate substantial space below to the role of language in my research process, interview transcription, coding, and data analysis. Language is not just a technical issue to be resolved, but represents a significant element in relation to the unique social and cultural context of research contributors (Ruitenberg et al., 2016).

**Conducting Research across Three Languages**

The interpreters did not take notes during interviews, and sometimes contributors spoke for several minutes when answering a question; only when they were done did the interpreters relay their comments. In order to alleviate my concern about missing details during these uninterrupted periods, I contracted an independent translator to transcribe the Q’eqchi’ language portions of the interviews. After listening to and transcribing each interview, he provided a translation into Spanish of the Q’eqchi’ portion of the interviews. These two layers of translation made it possible to conduct interviews in Spanish in real time and still allow access to some of the rich details left out of the original interpretation.
The alternate translation made visible the work the interpreters had done during the actual interview to provide a cultural bridge between the research contributors and me, as a foreign interviewer. While it is easy to attribute a certain mechanical quality to the interpreters’ work as they listen in one language and render meaning in the other, it is more accurately understood as a constructivist activity. In her work on dialogue interpreting Cecilia Wadensjö (2004) describes interpreting as “characterized by the fact that meaning is in the process of being established, between subjects, in the context of a specific, socio-cultural situation” (p. 106). The act of interpretation reflects a series of conscious and unconscious decisions to generalize the interviewee’s comments in specific moments, or to convey more specific details, or to pause and make an explicit aside to the researcher in order to explain something to understanding their comments. Therefore, the interpreters were constantly filtering and synthesizing during the interviews.

Equally important as what interpreters include is what they omit, because it would be inexpedient to explain words or concepts, or because they may be altogether incomprehensible to someone who is not Q’eqchi’. The split second of actualizing an interpretation reflects a series of decisions the interpreter makes about what to include, what to omit, and what to explain further. Anthropologist Pedro Pitarch (2008) describes this as “an effort to make compatible two distinct logics by domesticating the unknown and making it familiar” (p. 188); the interpreters decide on the spot when the logics of Spanish and Q’eqchi’ are so distinct as to require specific efforts to Q’eqchi’ familiar to a non-Q’eqchi’ person. In addition, I attempt to make familiar the logics of Q’eqchi’ and Spanish to English speakers reading this study, which is challenging given that I am not a native speaker of Q’eqchi’ or Spanish.
One example of interpretation work combined with cultural bridging was the consent process. Many research contributors were unable to read and write in either Spanish or Q’eqchi’, so the interpreters had to explain my study and the consent process to them verbally, in Q’eqchi’. The consent form was already translated into Q’eqchi’, so the interpreters did not have to search for the words in Q’eqchi’ to convey these details on the spot. However, the academic tone and purpose of a consent form also had to be interpreted for contributors, to put them at ease about the future use of the interview data. The consent process itself mandated that research contributors maintain control over what parts of their interview I could include in my dissertation and in other publications or documents. I did not want fear of negative consequences from the government or other parties to inhibit their comments during the interview.

In the transcript review process individuals approved transcripts that were interpreted to them from my Spanish transcription back into Q’eqchi’. In some cases I read aloud the interpreted, Spanish portions of the transcripts and the interpreters did an interpretation on the spot. In other cases the interpreters worked one-on-one with contributors and translated the text directly from Spanish to Q’eqchi’. The already-established relationship of trust between the interpreters and the contributors dictated I not introduce new interpreters just for the transcript approval process. Instead, I relied on the same individuals to re-translate the interviews they originally interpreted for me. According to Elizabeth Peña (2007), for example, back-translation is one way to ensure linguistic equivalence between different languages. This technique requires a second translator to translate materials back into the source language in order to compare the original version with the translator’s version. I was unable to arrange back-translation during the transcript review process, which possibly opened up the transcript approval process to inaccuracies.
The process of trying to understand and explain research contributors’ comments across languages has unavoidably led to the glossing over of some of the intricate details of their experiences. I proceed to a small explanation of the challenges of translating the Q’eqchi’ word rahilal (pain, suffering) as an example of the richness in exploring seemingly small details in the interviews.

**Suffering and the Difficulties of Translation**

The independent translator and I discussed the difficulty of translating certain phrases or linguistic structures from Q’eqchi’ into Spanish. One example of these challenges is the Q’eqchi’ term rahilal (pain, suffering). Many interviews centered on accounts of pain and suffering, especially in relation to experiences of violent desalojo (eviction) from their land through private security forces hired by corporations or landowners, the police, and the military. An exploration of the challenges of translating rahilal into Spanish and English points to the systematic challenges inherent in this project, whose analysis spans three languages.

The translations in my data analysis benefit from ethnographies by researchers who extensively studied Q’eqchi’ language and culture during their fieldwork in Guatemala. For example, Ybarra (2010) and Lieselotte Viaene (2010b) reflect on the Q’eqchi’ word rahilal, which each author assigns a slightly different significance. For Ybarra, rahilal refers to a time of great sadness, specifically the armed conflict (p. 35). For Viaene, the word connotes suffering and pain which, in conjunction with the word nimla (large), indicates a ‘final’ loss that cannot be recuperated (p. 294), such as the death of a loved one in the context of the armed conflict or in another context. Ybarra also recounts mention of cha’ajkilal, which roughly translates as “the troubles” (p. 35), to refer to the armed conflict. In Spanish the armed conflict is described as el
conflicto armado interno (the internal armed conflict) or la violencia (the violence). As explained by Ybarra and Viaene, rahilal is central to Q’eqchi’s’ understanding of the armed conflict, but in my interviews the word also appeared to explain the impact of more recent violence, namely forced evictions.

The independent translator’s explanations of Q’eqchi’ syntax and vocabulary conveyed concepts or phrases without an equivalent in Spanish (or English, for that matter). For example, I initially understood the interpreter’s repetition of certain phrases up to three times as a lack of skill, rather than recognizing this feature of Q’eqchi’ as a spoken language. Once the independent translator explained this pattern, I was able to contrast how one interpreter included the repetitions and the other left them out, reflecting their individual decisions about how to convey the speaker’s comments most accurately.

In one interview Pablo, a representative of the community’s health committee, responded to my request to describe his experiences in his community by repeating the word rahilal three times, in order to emphasize the ongoing effects of experiences of suffering that resulted from the community’s desalojo from their lands. In each reference, rahilal emphasizes the community’s collective suffering, specifically in the context of the eviction. In his first mention of rahilal Pablo expresses that they have only seen pain and suffering as a result of the eviction. In his second mention, he states that they have lived through a lot of pain because of the eviction. Finally, in the third reference, rahilal is a synonym of the eviction itself, because of the pain and suffering it caused his community (correspondence with independent translator, August 31, 2014). These comments segue directly into his comments about the illnesses and lack of medical attention in the community, which he directly correlates to their experiences of violent eviction.
The syntactic and vocabulary examples above, spanning Q’eqchi’, Spanish and English, point to the delicate work of translating research conducted in an indigenous language without a Latin influence into Spanish, eventually conveyed via English. The untranslatability of interviewees’ experiences of violence and suffering into English serves as a powerful reminder of the privilege of never experiencing a traumatic experience of the scope or scale of *li nimla rahilal* or *la violencia*. At every step of the fieldwork process, I balanced logistical obstacles with ethical concerns about security, power inequalities between myself and contributors, interpretation and translation, as well as the challenges and rewards of building relationships.

**Coding and Data Analysis**

My commitment to maintaining the narrative integrity of my interviews guided my approach to coding and analyzing the interviews. Following Amia Lieblich, Rivka Tuval-Mashiach, and Tamar Zilber (1998), I view my own research as narrative because I rely on narrative materials (oral history interviews and field notes) for my analysis (p. 2). As such, following Lyn Richards (2009), I approach qualitative coding as integral to “rethinking the data” (p. 95) after completing the interviews. Coding helped me to notice recurring themes I failed to notice during individual interviews. I followed Saldaña’s (2009) two-cycle coding process (p. 3), completing a first cycle of coding of my interviews after returning from each of my three fieldwork trips. During my first cycle I coded a variable amount of text, from just one word to an entire uninterrupted set of interview comments (organized into a continuous paragraph on the transcript). I assigned in vivo codes using contributors’ words (King, 2008) in Spanish and Q’eqchi’ as codes. Examples of in vivo codes, taken directly from contributors, include *escalera* (ladder) (see Chapter Six), *ofrecimientos* (offerings) (see Chapter Six), *mayejak* (Mayan...
ceremony) (see Chapters Five and Six), and *desalojos* (evictions) (see Chapters Five, Six, and Seven). I also assigned descriptive codes in English and Spanish to summarize the topic in the highlighted text (Saldaña, p. 3). Examples of descriptive codes include: “before and after” to describe narrative arcs that revolved around a particular moment or incident; “non-governmental organizations” to refer to any participation with or in an NGO; and “development,” which included direct or indirect references to development, either integral development or state-sponsored. I only used descriptive coding with my field notes. I intended for both in vivo and descriptive codes to “represent and capture a datum’s primary content and essence” (p. 3). In large part I relied on contributors’ words to guide my codes. However, in addition to handwritten in vivo and descriptive codes on the printouts of the transcripts, I marked interviews with different colors to indicate three codes that reflected my initial thematic interests: references to the armed conflict and the Peace Accords, references to me as the researcher, and contributors’ autobiographical details.

After multiple read-throughs of the interviews I moved to second cycle coding, which involved “a reconfiguration of the codes themselves developed thus far” (p. 3). I consolidated several specific codes under broader thematic categories such as education (See Chapter Six), electoral politics (see Chapter Six), armed conflict (see Chapters Five and Six), and Maya (see Chapters Five, Six, and Seven). In the second cycle I uploaded all the interviews and my field notes into the qualitative data software ATLAS.ti. I approached ATLAS.ti along the lines advocated by Ryan (2009), “in ways that support and enhance the methodological concerns of the study (p. 142). In my case, ATLAS.ti was a tool for quickly identifying the narrative elements of the interviews in order to keep the contributors’ own words at the center of the coding and analysis process.
Once I began to write up the study, after reading the interviews multiple times and considering the codes, I considered various ways of combining the themes into chapters. This final version of the study has the findings divided into three separate chapters dedicated to: the armed conflict and narratives of joining la lucha, collective identity and political participation, and the fourth conquest of Q’eqchi’ territories.

In my presentation of the interview material throughout the dissertation, I heavily rely on the words of contributors alongside my own analysis. Research contributors’ comments guide the themes I develop, and I hope that the long interview excerpts indicate the richness of their stories.

**Limitations of the Study**

My findings are limited by my relatively short fieldwork totaling only five months, my lack of Q’eqchi’ language fluency, and the small number of people I spoke with during my interviews. Prior to starting my fieldwork in April of 2013, I had only spent seven weeks total in El Estor during two visits in 2009 and 2012, which is not a substantial amount of time to become familiar with community contexts or to make contacts. I only knew a limited number of people when I began my fieldwork and, as a result, my interpreters’ decisions about who to interview were fundamental to shaping the outcomes of my research process. The 27 individuals I interviewed do not represent an intentionally selected sample of Q’eqchi’s, and their experiences are not representative of all Q’eqchi’s.

I am also constrained by not speaking or understanding the Q’eqchi’ language beyond a few phrases. I did not attend any ceremonies with research contributors, which are conducted in the Q’eqchi’ language. As a result, I relied on interpreters for all communication with many of
the research contributors. I am fluent in Spanish, Guatemala’s official national language, which is best understood as a colonial language that marks indigenous peoples’ exclusion from the structures of the state (Cotjí Cuxil, 2002, p. 104). In addition, the main readers for the present document are English speakers, so my research has been through at least two stages of interpretation and translation.

I supplement my data from participant observation and interviews with secondary sources in English and Spanish, such as documents originating from the United Nations (Anaya, 2011 & 2013) and the Organization of American States (Inter-American, as well as international NGO reports on human rights violations in Guatemala (Article 19 et al., 2016; Amnesty International, 2014; Mining Watch, 2015; Oxfam International, 2015). These additional sources provide analysis of the human rights violations Q’eqchi’s face, especially in relation to extractive industries, which enriched my data analysis process and helped to mitigate some of the limitations of my data collection process.

**The Responsibilities of the Becoming-Witness**

I adopt Emberley’s (2014) position of “becoming-witness” as a relationship of ethical accountability to my research contributors. My privileged access obliges me to share these stories with others, without minimizing or reinforcing the material, psychological, cultural, and other harms already perpetrated:

The role of *becoming-witness* is that of being subsequently tied to a history of events that may or may not affect one personally but to which one can no longer remain unaccountable. The *becoming-witness* is also used here to signify a self-reflexive form of
solidarity that is always in the process of learning from those who have personally or collectively experienced the violence of imperialism and colonialism. (p. 7)

Fuyuki Kurasawa (2009) suggests thinking of “bearing witness as a globalizing mode of ethico-political labour, an arduous working-through produced out of the struggles of groups and persons who engage in testimonial tasks in order to confront corresponding perils across various situations in global civil society” (p. 95). I view this dissertation as an ethico-political labor originating from my privileged location as a witness.

Once I began the interviews in June 2013, multiple research contributors expressed the imperative of sharing their words in the U.S. and Canada. While I had contemplated the ethical implications of my project when designing the methodology, the contributors’ requests impacted how I interpret my responsibility to disseminate their stories. Critical educators Michael Apple, Wayne Au, and Luis Armando Gandín (2009) reposition the researcher as a potential part of the political project to make visible the power relations at work in everyday practices and relationships, including privilege as researchers. They urge us to “see the world through the eyes of the dispossessed and act against the ideological and institutional processes and forms that reproduce oppressive conditions” (p. 3). We must not only witness inequality but also be compelled to witness and write about the counter-hegemonic projects that are already challenging exploitation and domination. Apple et al. envision research as a way to act “as secretaries to those groups of people and social movements who are now engaged in challenging existing relations of unequal power” (p. 4). I consider my research a way of being “secretary” for the Q’eqchi’ Mayas who shared their stories with me, sharing their stories and unique forms of knowledge within Guatemala and in the broader international community. Shultz (2013) refers to this form of engaged scholarship as a “pluriversal publicness” (p. 51), a decolonizing
practice that challenges the hegemony of academic knowledge through solidarity towards multiple forms of knowledge in public debate and discussion.

I carry out the wishes of research contributors to make their stories known outside of Guatemala through this dissertation but also through other public venues. I plan to circulate this research in Guatemala on my next visit, among academics, policy makers, communities, and activists. My main attempt at publicizing contributors’ words to date has been through publishing three articles on my research, one in Spanish in a university magazine in Guatemala and two in English language academic journals. I have shared my Spanish-language article with some research contributors who can read Spanish. I have also presented my research informally at gatherings at the University of British Columbia, as well as at academic conferences in the U.S., Canada, and Guatemala. In addition, my research has been integral to the content of four Sociology courses I have taught in Canadian universities since returning from my last fieldwork trip in 2014. Finally, I participated in or co-presented at three events during the 2015 British Columbia speaking tour of Angélica Choc, a Q’eqchi’ plaintiff in a case against HudBay Minerals in Canada (See Chapter Two). However, an important audience for my findings is research contributors and their fellow community members in El Estor and Panzós. My plans to share my research with contributors and community members at community, local, or national events are still pending my return to Guatemala.

Q’eqchi’ interviews highlight the oppression shaping their lives, but they also point to the projects they are involved in to challenge oppression. Apple et al. (2009) highlight the importance of “keeping alive the dreams, utopian visions, and ‘non-reformist reforms’” (p. 4) in traditions of resistance, which is at the center of my own project; I bring forward Q’eqchi’ Mayas’ visions of change and try to present these political imaginaries as research contributors
frame them. As a result of my obligation to my contributors, my research project has become an ethical and political project to share stories of Q’eqchi’s’ defense of territory.

**Concluding Thoughts**

My study’s methodology, inspired primarily by oral history and ethnography, was designed to reflect my interest in Q’eqchi’s’ subjective experiences of political participation, blurring the boundaries between “public” and “private” forms of engagement. I was influenced by oral history methodology as a narrative, contributor-driven engagement (Portelli, 1997), in which the interviews directed the eventual focus of my research on contentious politics of land in Guatemala, and Q’eqchi’s’ defense of territory as the current phase of resistance. From ethnography, I chose semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and field notes in order to build my analysis from Q’eqchi’s’ words and my observations of their lived experiences of conflict, especially over control of land and natural resources.

Throughout the semi-structured interviews, I aimed to engage each contributor with specific questions on politics, such as their experiences with the electoral process and their expectations of the Guatemalan government in terms of the challenges facing their communities (infrastructure, opportunities for political representation in formal state structures, etc.). However, in later interviews, once we established personal relationships, I encouraged research contributors to share life histories, allowing me to apprehend the forces shaping them as individual and collective actors within their communities, and within the national landscape of the armed conflict and “post-conflict” politics. Many contributors presented their narratives as testimonials, thus bringing this narrative form in as my third methodological influence. Now that
I have become a witness to Q’eqchi’s’ struggles over land, it is my responsibility to share their stories with others.
Chapter 5—Narratives of Joining the Struggle for Land (*La Lucha*)

In this, the first of my three findings chapters, I focus on the armed conflict as an event that propelled several contributors into the fight to defend the land. I open by sharing stories of the impact of the armed conflict on the development of political consciousness among Q’eqchi’s, even those who did not join the armed struggle. This chapter highlights experiences of joining the struggle in defense of territory (*la lucha en defensa del territorio*), which I will refer to as *la lucha*. I consider *la lucha* as a process of learning that is generated through interactions among community members, with state institutions, and through experiences of violence, in the armed conflict as well as under today’s conditions of threats and evictions by corporations. In order to show how learning and the struggle to defend the land are inextricably bound up, I include extended narratives from research contributors about their personal histories of joining the fight to defend the land, tying it to their participation in the struggle as adults.

The inter-generational transmission of political and cultural beliefs is a salient strand of contributors’ stories about their participation in *la lucha*. The struggle to defend the land is centuries old among Q’eqchi’s, and many research contributors connect their struggle today with the struggles of their ancestors, grandparents, and parents. While these inter-generational forms of transmission of knowledge, skills, and beliefs can be considered informal learning using the distinction between formal education, non-formal education and informal learning (e.g., Schugurensky, 2000), it is important to note that they are rooted in Q’eqchi’ cultural institutions that date back centuries, in some cases. Filomena and Magdalena both joined the guerrilla movement because of their families’ involvement in the struggle and as part of their response to the massacre of loved ones during the armed conflict. Magdalena and Filomena were
guerrilleras during the armed conflict. Both women describe how their upbringing weighed in on their decision to join the guerrilla movement, following family members’ examples of joining the struggle. Their experiences of massacres during the armed conflict were formative moments of teaching-learning (Martinez Salazar, 2008), which both women link to their participation in defense of territory today. In the course of his work with Ixil Maya women guerrillas, Guatemalan literary critic Arturo Arias (2011) comments,

They lived their wartime period more as a learning process of the inner self. It was one of self-constitution and an unconventional acquisition of knowledge, rather than one of death and destruction on the battlefield, as it is traditionally conceived. (p. 18)

Magdelana and Filomena’s stories dwell on such moments of self-reflection and personal growth, rather than narratives of combat with the military. Their stories show careful consideration of the impact of their formation on their political activities today, in their local communities as well as in electoral campaigns for municipal office or Rigoberta Menchú’s presidential bid. In this chapter I also focus on the story of Marcelino, who joined the guerrilla movement as a teenager in 1992, in the final years of the armed conflict. He identified the decision as driven by the necessity of securing land for his future sustenance rather than ideological considerations. He also explained how his time as a guerrilla is reflected in his political activities today as the leader of his community’s COCODE.

The stories of Magdalena, Filomena, and Marcelino demonstrate how cultural and political elements intertwine in their understanding of what is at stake in their decades’ long struggle to defend the land. In this chapter, I begin to answer my first research question: How do Q’eqchi’s link the movement in defense of territory today with the armed conflict and previous expropriations of their territories historically? The testimonies in this chapter facilitate a focused
analysis of connections between Q’eqchi’s’ struggles for the land today and the violence research contributors have experienced throughout the past 40 years. Through exploring contributors’ narratives about surviving massacres, participating in the guerrilla movement, and struggling to make advances in the “post-conflict” political context, the salience of today’s defense of territory is clear as core element of their political praxis and learning.

Memories of the Armed Conflict

For five centuries Q’eqchi’s have been subjected to waves of invasions by outsiders laying claim to their territories in order to exploit them as laborers, and to exploit the productive and mineral-rich lands they occupy (Grandia, 2012). I analyze research contributors’ narratives about the impact of the historical trajectory of dispossession described by Grandia (2012) as the three conquests (See Chapter Two) on their struggle over land today. Each wave has been accompanied by short-term and long-term measures of economic, political, and cultural subjugation, as well as physical violence. Land is a consistent priority in spite of the changing political regimes attempting to regulate their lives; it is inextricable from Q’eqchi’ political subjectivity.

While many research contributors are too young to have taken sides in the armed conflict, they shared memories of the presence of the conflict in their communities in both rural and urban settings. As adults, contributors have worked to situate the violence they witnessed or heard about in their youth within their current knowledge of the trajectory of the armed conflict. Rafael describes a particular childhood memory from when he was approximately 12 years old, living in a village just outside of the town of El Estor:
There was an assembly, a general assembly, on a Sunday in my community. I was still a child…I only saw the community full of the army. The whole community was gathered. And what did they say there? They carried their lists with them, they began to call the names of people that were going to be carried from the community to a meeting. They say, “Fulano [John Doe] X, come here” and that is how they gathered people up and they carry them in a pickup or in the same truck that the army uses. And those people, they never returned. There are others also, they knew what was going to happen. They left running from that meeting. And what did the army do? They had the community surrounded. When someone wants to leave, once and for all they kill him. Because of that I say it is very sad to hear all that, because it was not only confrontations between the army and the guerrillas, not in all of the communities. That is what I remember. (40 years old, 2nd interview, in Spanish)

Rafael’s story illustrates the military’s practice of tracking community’s activities, such as general assemblies, as a way to easily locate individuals they suspected of guerrilla activities or even just sympathy for the guerrillas. Community gatherings were no longer a safe space for Q’eqchi’s to meet up, as individuals could potentially be massacred or taken away for torture by the military. Rafael identifies this meeting as an example where the military acted not as part of a confrontation with the guerrillas, but in an action against unarmed civilians.

As a child, Analisa took note of the disappearance of classmates’ family members, as well as the appearance of bodies on the streets of El Estor, but now, as an activist engaged in the struggle to defend the land as an adult, she is clearly able to see the continuity between the violence against Q’eqchi’s during the armed conflict, and what is occurring in communities fighting to defend their land today. Analisa shared the following story from around 1980, when
the army killed several individuals during a town fair and she witnessed them collecting the bodies later. Individuals from rural communities often travel to the town fair to participate in the festivities and, as in Rafael’s story above, the army took advantage of knowing communities’ habits in order to murder individuals suspected of being guerrillas or guerrilla sympathizers.

At that time I did not know anything. Until now, when I hear about the history of those communities, that is when it is born again in my mind what I lived, what I lived in those years. Because they cannot deny it, or the authorities cannot say that those things are made-up, that they are lies, no, because I saw it. But as I say, in those years, hearing all those stories now, I remember what I lived here in my town. During a fair, in a fair here in El Estor, I believe it was in the year 1980 maybe, along the shore of the lake here dead people appeared, but many of them. There in the halls of the municipal building there were 15 or 20 dead bodies that they had brought from the communities and here they had brought them to kill them. Since, for the fair, people come here for the party, they came to kill them here, they brought them from there and here they killed them. In the morning during those days, I heard about it in the house, so I escaped. Yes, I went, with my mom. I was a good girl, but also I did what I wanted to do, secretly, but I did it. I heard people say there were many dead people, the adults said that. My mom was talking to me but very quickly when she was looking away I disappeared in order to come and see. I was passing by and a huge truck passed by, like those they use to pick up trash, the soldiers got down, they threw the people in, as if they were picking up trash. That, well, it stayed in my mind, every time I remember the shore of the lake. (47 years old, 3rd interview, in Spanish)
Later in her interview Analisa explained the government’s denial that the military committed such murders during the armed conflict as a reason to continue distrusting the government.

As I mentioned in the introduction, a recent event in Guatemala that piqued my interest in the ongoing legacy of the armed conflict was the election of Otto Pérez Molina, former general, in 2011. In international coverage of his election (Al Jazeera, 2011), Molina’s military past as a general during the scorched earth campaign in the Ixil Triangle was emphasized. When I asked 39-year-old Gloria, an elementary teacher in El Estor, why she thought he was elected with a large number of Mayan votes even with his military record, she was puzzled:

Gloria: When he did…when there were a lot of massacres, there were a lot of deaths. I do not know, we also ask ourselves why, if these people lived in blood, in their own flesh, all of that death? We lived it here, we did, I remember when I was small and my mom closed us up in the house, we heard those jeeps that were…

Interviewer: The army?

Gloria: The army and you heard the shots, I was small, I remember it well. One morning, we went out the following morning and there were many dead people in the street, yes, that is to say, one is left, if we choose with maturity and we think it through well, how can I support someone who killed many people, who ordered the army to kill and kill? I do not know how, why they act that way. Perhaps they give them money, because unfortunately money affects everything.

Interviewer: So you remember a little bit about the armed conflict?

Gloria: At some point because I was small. I remember well because my mom came and it was already about 8:00 at night, we had already finished eating dinner. She only said to us, “Duck, duck” and we threw ourselves on the floor. But why? Because there were
cars, they passed by and there were shots. I was small but I remember this well. At 5:00, 6:00 in the morning, people were running, seeing the bodies, of men, more than anything of men in the streets across the street there, below. I remember because I went to see. That image cannot be erased because I went to see, as children we are so curious. I escaped from my mom, because people were running, everything was running that way, since it was close to the house here. They are images that will not be erased. (1st interview, in Spanish)

Living in town, Gloria was not an eye-witness to the violent executions the army was carrying out with greater frequency in rural communities. However, this particular experience marked her as a child and stayed with her into adulthood, teaching her about how little protection any one individual could experience during a period of violent upheaval. At the time the violence seemed random to her because she did not understand the political causes of the conflict, but she was impacted by the proximity of the murders in her neighborhood. She now knows enough about the armed conflict to situate the violence she witnessed as part of the nation’s history, with repercussions still being felt today.

Gloria’s brother Valerio, four years her senior, remembered his experiences as a teenager in the streets of El Estor during the armed conflict. Here I have split one continuous section of his interview into two sections in order to more closely examine the different themes he discusses. He shared memories that relate to Gloria’s observations above, about the presence of dead bodies in the streets of El Estor:

We have to be careful when we go out on the street, so the soldiers would not carry us away for military service. Also, in the street, sometimes at dawn there were two, three dead people that had appeared, that had been killed at gunpoint at night. Maybe they
were guilty of something, they were stigmatized for collaborating with the guerrillas, because in each community, in each village there was a military commissioner who was, we use the word oreja, the spy for the army.

‘Over there is a collaborator with the guerrillas.’

The army kidnapped them, they killed him and then they left them lying that way. (1st interview, in Spanish)

Valerio reflects on the fact that he needed to be watchful, and that others were always around to watch him as well, to identify whether he was a guerrilla sympathizer. In these comments, he mentions that he had to be concerned about possible recruitment by the army, since he was an able-bodied young man who could be forced to serve in the armed forces against his will. Green (1995) writes of witnessing truckloads of young Mayan men packed into trucks during her fieldwork in Chimaltenango, “the soon-to-be foot soldiers packed in like cattle” (p. 112).

Valerio’s explanation for the appearance of dead bodies on the streets references the state’s discourse that individuals killed by the army had done something to deserve their death. As a young man he learned the lesson that a perceived association with the guerrilla movement in any way was fatal.

In the next section of this interview, Valerio remembers about massacres occurring in nearby villages. He mentions a massacre in the nearby village of La Llorona and then the Panzós Massacre. He describes how individuals injured during the massacre came to the health center El Estor’s municipal building to seek medical attention.

25 Ear
A lot was heard about a massacre in La Llorona, a village that is very close-by, I do not remember the year but it was during the armed conflict. But the one I remember best is the Panzós Massacre, many widows, many children, many men as well, came to hide here in El Estor. I remember that the municipal building, here in the municipality, for various days there were families located in the town hall because they came injured. In the health center some people were attended to. I remember this a little, during the armed conflict, that there were confrontations between the guerrillas and the army. In the urban area not really, only in the villages did you hear about confrontations between the guerrillas and the army. The massacre in Llorona and the Panzós Massacre, it was public what happened in Panzós, there were more than one hundred dead people, and some families came to live in El Estor to hide. Many people died in nearby villages because of persecution by the army. They are facts that I remember that happened in the distance, and I remember because we were always in the market where, from a young age, they [our parents] took us to the market to work with them, there we heard about it all, that there were dead people in Panzós, some families were in the town hall. I remember that we went to look but we were not able to see anything. It was not until later that I understood what had happened, a massacre. (1st interview, in Spanish)

Even though the Panzós Massacre occurred at a distance from his home in El Estor, Valerio noted the violence was occurring. He was also old enough to pick up on the army’s message, conveyed through public murders on the streets of El Estor as well as in the Panzós Massacre: the individuals killed deserved to die because they were involved in subversive activities.
Narratives of “deserving a violent end” have continued into the “post-conflict” period. In her work on citizenship education in Guatemala today, including fieldwork in the department of Izabal, Michelle Bellino (2015) observes:

One need not organize a resistance movement to be cast as a radical political actor; claiming basic rights and even participating in community service can be perceived as meddling and intrusive, outside the scope of one’s ‘civic’ duty. Civic action has been so politicized through the experience of authoritarianism that participation in public spaces is regarded as fundamentally dangerous, disruptive, and violence provoking. Although these tropes stem from the past, they take on new resonance in the ‘postwar’ landscape.

(p. 121)

Mayas’ sense of inclusion as rights-bearing Guatemalan citizens is consistently undermined through the persecution of human rights activists (Anaya, 2011), evictions, other forms of violence, and exclusion and marginalization from state institutions.

In summary, the memories offered by Rafael, Analisa, Gloria, and Valerio provide three individual entry points for considering key narratives circulating in El Estor about the “who, what, and why” of the armed conflict. Analisa’s memories of the armed conflict contribute to her mistrust of the Guatemalan government today. Gloria does not have the same suspicions of the government today as Analisa, but she does note the contradictions between the violence of the armed conflict and the current political system in Guatemala. Based on her memories of the violence, and others’ personal experiences with the death of loved ones, she is skeptical of the election of former military officers such as former President Pérez. Gloria’s older brother Valerio perhaps paid more attention to events outside of his neighborhood, and was conscious that being in the wrong place at the wrong time could put him or his loved ones in harm’s way.
I end this section on contributors’ memories of the armed conflict with a quote from McAllister and Nelson (2013) that reflects on the ongoing impact of the pervasive violence in Guatemala. Individuals frame their losses differently, depending on their perspectives on the factors that contributed to the violence in the first place:

Our understanding of the aftermath in Guatemala is ineluctably shaped by the enormous absence of all those who were killed, displaced, or irreparably damaged. But it is also shaped by their continuing presence, in part through ongoing struggles over what their loss means. For some, the dead were dangerous subversives, killed in the defense of society. For others, they were their own children, forcibly recruited into the army. For many, they were simply victims. Or they were fools caught up in forces they didn’t understand. And for still others [ ], they were not engañados, they were not mistaken. They were murdered, and the perpetrators of this crime remain at large. (p. 4)

While Rafael, Analisa, Gloria, and Valerio are not commenting on the loss of loved ones in their stories, they are stories of loss and witnessing. Each memory reflects a loss of innocence, a moment that forever changed their understanding of the consequences of losing a high-stakes political argument with the state. The knowledge that they or their loved ones could have turned up dead on the streets of their town is a permanent reminder of the subjectivity guiding decisions taken during the armed conflict. No matter one’s political affiliation, the perception of guilt or innocence could be life-saving or fatal. In the next section research contributors recount their participation in the guerrilla movement in various periods, leading up to the scorched earth campaign (Magdalena and Filomena), in the waning years of the guerrilla movement (Filomena), and during the negotiation of the Peace Accords (Marcelino).
Growing Up in the Struggle (*La Lucha*)

The testimonies of Magdalena and Filomena reflect the importance of fighting against injustice, a value instilled in them by their families. Haunted by traumatic memories of the murder of family members by the army, they carry into their current political activities the militant messages of the URNG about fighting oppression by the rich and powerful. I draw on Schugurensky’s (2006) concept of socialization as part of informal learning theory, to explore Magdalena and Filomena’s reasons for joining the guerrilla movement. Their upbringing in peasant Q’eqchi’ families committed to the struggle to defend the land was integral to their decisions to join *la lucha* themselves. Both women were marked in their adolescence by witnessing and surviving massacres of family members, and they view those massacres as violent responses by economic and political elites to Q’eqchi’ communities’ just struggle to defend their land. Both women’s narratives are replete with reflections on recommitting to the struggle to defend the land, time and again, and their hopes for a better future for themselves and their children. Both women are active in the struggle today, since in the intervening years they are still unable to win the legal title to the lands they occupy. For decades Filomena and Magdalena have actively resisted the “interlocking systems of domination” (Razack, 1998) that shape them as indigenous women and peasants. They seek out opportunities to share their experiences of resistance with other women victimized by violence by the government, landowners, and corporations.

Below I focus on the murder of Magdalena’s grandmother in the Panzós massacre as pivotal in her lifelong commitment to defend the land. Magdalena reiterated the lessons she learned from her grandmother during her childhood, such as the centrality of ceremony in sustaining Q’eqchi’s in *la lucha*. 
The Panzós Massacre as Catalyst for Magdalena

Magdalena, a 49-year-old mother, is a respected leader in her community in the municipality of El Estor. She was 14 when she accompanied her grandmother to the Panzós town plaza on May 29th, 1978, where the army opened fire on 500-700 Q’eqchi’s of all ages who had arrived to present mayor Walter Overdick with a letter about negotiations in Q’eqchi’s’ ongoing land claims (Grandin, 2011, p. 1). Magdalena was able to escape after her grandmother was killed during the massacre. During our four interviews Magdalena frequently returned to the massacre as a turning point at which her whole life changed.

In describing her childhood memories before the massacre, Magdalena focuses on the Q’eqchi’ culture that sustained her and her grandparents in their home. One way she honors her grandmother today is by showing the proper respect for Q’eqchi’ culture through ceremony and other acts to respect the land. She narrates her family’s celebration of the planting of the corn just days before the massacre:

Well, my life before the Panzós Massacre was very nice with my family, with my grandmother because she is the one who raised me and she taught me good habits. Well, those days, before the massacre, well, everything was happiness, they had just finished planting the cornfield. My grandmother sent off for it to be planted and there was a wonderful party for the planting. There were many people in our house. There was food, enough food for all the planters. There was harp music in my house, with my grandmother, when the invitation arrives for the meeting in Panzós about the land. So we hurried to go there. I never imagined nor did my grandmother imagine what was going to happen that day. (1st interview, in Q’eqchi’)
Magdalena regularly accompanied her grandmother for political events, so it was not unusual that she accompanied her grandmother the day the massacre took place. Magdalena had exposure to political organizing in the municipality and beyond, including the URNG, by way of her grandmother’s leadership in the struggle. When her grandmother was murdered, Magdalena felt compelled to join the URNG to defend the values her grandmother lived and died for.

Remembering my grandmother, in those days, she was instilling in me the value of our culture, of our ceremony, Mayan ceremony. I already, already had it in my blood. Me, this experience with my grandmother, I still have it today, because every time that May 29th arrives, the date of the massacre, if no one remembers that date, and I begin to knock on doors, to motivate people, so that we do not forget that date. (1st interview, in Q’eqchi’)

Her own commitment to winning the land is bound up with her memory of her grandmother’s commitment to la lucha as a Q’eqchi’ woman.

When they went in to town for the meeting on May 29th, Magdalena’s grandmother believed they were moving towards a resolution to the land conflict. They had no idea that she and at least 52 other people (Grandin, 2011) would die at the hands of the military that day. Magdalena views the massacre not as an isolated incident triggered by the military’s overreaction (Grandin, 2013) but as a premeditated action initiated on behalf of the large landowners in Panzós who deployed the military to defend their holdings in the area. Magdalena identifies that her family lived on baldío, or state-owned wasteland, without a private owner. Q’eqchi’s occupied the land with the intention of gaining the title, but the landowners wanted that same land:
I had already heard that the *finqueros* [large landowners] there in Panzós had gotten together, but they said that they had gotten together to look for a way out, to benefit the situation of the defense of the land, but I realized afterwards that it was not true, they met in order to see how they were going to massacre those in the fight, since they had figured out that the land where we were, my grandmother and all the community, was the state’s. The *finqueros* wanted it for themselves, that is why they wanted to exterminate us. After that, well, was when they called us for that meeting but it was the massacre of Panzós. I am not going to forget. (4th interview, in Q’eqchi’)

Magdalena’s interviews blend elements of the past and present, as her memories of the days leading up to the massacre are interwoven with her later analysis. Magdalena now believes that the elite of Panzós, with the backing of the army, had premeditated the massacre of Q’eqchi’s in order to obtain control of Q’eqchi’-occupied lands.

Magdalena views the massacre in sharp contrast with happy memories from her childhood, such as the party to celebrate the planting she recounted above. It is difficult for her to convey the events surrounding the massacre to her children today:

If what happened to me, to us, in the Panzós massacre had not happened, perhaps we would be peaceful in our lands, perhaps we would be as we were living before, we had everything. I cry when I remember this, when I tell the tale to my children, they cry when they hear what I lived because I am a survivor. I do not know how I saved myself from that massacre and that is why I am here now. (1st interview, in Q’eqchi’)

She tries to impart the impact of these experiences to her children, and to share with them the dreams she still carries for the peaceful life she remembers from her childhood.
Magdalena fled Panzós after the massacre, seeking refuge with various family members. She recounts this conversation with her grandfather (who she refers to as her father, since she was raised by her grandparents) after the massacre, in which Magdalena shares that she felt compelled to leave her community to explain the events of the massacre. She explained to her grandfather her decision to join the guerrillas:

He cried with me, I cried with him, we met up after the massacre in Panzós. Then the time arrived for me to get going, since I had to integrate into the organized group, which is the URNG [Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity], at my young age. I made the decision, I said, “I have to leave.”

My father said to me, “You are leaving?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know where you are going?”

“If there is space for me to tell what we suffered here in our land, I am going to tell the story.”

“Does it not scare you to tell the story? All of a sudden they will kill you.”

“Fall what falls, come what comes, do not be afraid and do not be ashamed. If they already started to disappear us for doing good, for defending our territory, I will do it again myself. Do not worry.” (3rd interview, in Q’eqchi’)

Her grandfather was understandably hesitant about her decision to join the guerrillas, given that his wife was killed and Magdalena was almost killed. Since Magdalena was a witness to the military’s brutality in Panzós in the face of Q’eqchi’s’ demands to resolve land ownership (Grandin, 2011), her grandfather feared retribution from the military would silence Magdalena
permanently. She views her subsequent participation in the guerrillas as motivated in part by finding an audience to receive her eyewitness account of the atrocities of the massacre.

Magdalena’s narrative today shows a confidence in her decision-making and a clarity of thought that may not reflect her thoughts in the weeks and months directly after the massacre, as a 14-year-old joining the URNG. Perhaps her present account indicates the strength she gained through recounting the story of the massacre to the guerrilla leadership, Q’eqchi’s, other Guatemalans, and international audiences. Magdalena’s account reminds me of Portelli’s (1997) characterization of oral history: “Oral history tells us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did” (p. 67).

How many times has she felt obligated to justify the decision to join the guerrillas and take up arms in defense of the land? How have her experiences sharing the story with others shaped the way she presents it today?

When Magdalena and I discuss the end of the armed conflict, she observes that violence continues against Q’eqchi’ communities and individuals today. She had expected the Peace Accords to resolve conflicts over land titling, such as the one that led to her grandmother’s murder in the Panzós Massacre. Instead, Magdalena comments that the violence against Q’eqchi’ communities is so recurrent that one cannot categorize the current times as peaceful:

Up to here there is no change. Instead, I hear about the assassinating of indigenous compañeras, of girls, of compañeros that are in the struggle. So there is nothing, nothing has been seen of the signing of the Peace. There is no compliance. But still we continue on, but our lives are not safe, we always run a risk. (1st interview, in Q’eqchi’)

Magdalena’s expectations of the Peace Accords have been dashed as military violence during the armed conflict has been transformed into violence at the hands of corporations, supported by the
Magdalena emphasized the continuity of the violence she experienced during the armed conflict through the evictions sweeping their communities today. Violence during and after the armed conflict represent “teaching-learning” moments (Martinez Salazar, 2008), designed to reinforce Q’eqchi’s’ status as second-class citizens in Guatemala.

In the face of ongoing conflicts over land and natural resources, I asked Magdalena to explain her political vision for Guatemala today. Magdalena describes herself as a leftist, explaining, “I have always wanted a government to arrive, but for the poor people. I am not right wing, I am a leftist” (1st interview, in Q’eqchi’). When I questioned Magdalena on what it means to her to be a leftist, she responded,

I want all of the human rights abuses to end, the human rights of women, so that we are all taken into account, what our rights are and how they should be complied with. I think that if a person like this arrives, I think it will be a change. It will be a change. (1st interview, in Q’eqchi’)

Guatemalan state. Magdalena compares the violence of the armed conflict with the influx of foreign companies to their territories today:

As I say, before it was the army and everything was very clear, but now those who are harming us, the foreign companies that have arrived to our communities, their form of discriminating against us is by evicting us, that is the form of what they are doing. Or disappearing leaders individually: they killed them and no one knows what happened. That is the form they are using now. I realize, although the Peace Accords have been signed, they keep violating our rights, the abuses continue against our rights, and I realize that it seems we are arriving to the way things were before. That is how I see it. (4th interview, in Q’eqchi’)

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Magdalena would view a politician who upholds human rights as a welcome exception to regimes dictated by the interests of the country’s elite.

In contrast to her support of leftist political programs, Magdalena critiqued then-president Otto Pérez Molina. Since his role as a general in the armed conflict was well known (Al Jazeera, 2011), she saw his election as a reflection of Guatemalans being bribed by politicians (more on this in Chapter Six). She posited that Mayas overlooked his role in the armed conflict when electing him because his party made promises to bring security and increased prosperity to all Guatemalans. She explains:

But what can I say about my president of my Guatemala now if he is a general and that general was in charge during those years of the armed conflict? He knows about the massacres, about the scorched earth. He has knowledge, he participated also. I am not going to say he did not. And why did he become part of the government? It is also a mistake on the part of us the people because we allowed ourselves to be deceived, we let ourselves be carried away by the offerings. So it is our fault that he has arrived there because now that he is there, he forgets who brought him there. For him our right does not exist, for him we do not exist. (1st interview, in Q’eqchi’)

In a certain sense, her comments reflect a critique that Mayas continue to make some of the same mistakes, supporting politicians who do not have their best interests in mind.

However, she frames her participation not solely in terms of trying to advance political change through elections, for example as the women’s representative in the COCODE, but through sharing her own experiences throughout the country, and in her interviews with me. Violence is not the only narrative circulating among Q’eqchi’s, even in the current period of violent expropriations. Magdalena’s choice to share her story can be interpreted as a counter-
narrative to the teaching-learning of violence (Martinez Salazar, 2008) because she embodies a counter-teaching of peace and hope. She explains:

I am part of the COCODE in my community, in my village. I will say why I participate, it is because I have a knack for being able to go where I want. I have had participation in many parts of the country, in Cobán, in the capital, in distant municipalities. And why do I go? Because I like to share with brothers in the fight that it is not just today that indigenous peoples suffer, but for a long time. I also go because I have the courage I had since the moment they killed my grandmother. And why have I not looked for another path? No, I wanted to continue the fight. (1st interview, in Q’eqchi’)  

Her participation has taken various forms during her lifetime, but her goals have consistently centered on defending the land. Since her childhood, she describes herself as a confident individual who contributes her own experiences to discussions whenever possible.  

Magdalena mentioned one notable advance from the time of the armed conflict, namely that Q’eqchi’s can participate openly as Mayas in political life in Guatemala today. Mayas have found the space to incorporate their traditional knowledge and forms of participation in the post-Peace Accord era, which is a marked difference from the period of the armed conflict. As a guerrilla who was persecuted by the military, she was forced to hide her political identity and to downplay her cultural identity for fear of being labeled subversive. In addition, it weighed on her to hide the wealth of Q’eqchi’ knowledge her grandmother passed on:

There was a reason to leave, because when we lived that suffering that occurred with the massacre, it was the first time that blood was shed in Panzós. After that similar events happened in other places. There was a reason I went, I did not leave for no reason. As we always say, we are indigenous people, although there were people who promoted
participation, but they did it underwater, but thank God now we do it publicly. In the past you did not see what we are seeing now, not anywhere, because it was only underwater that people used their knowledge or ideas. (3rd interview, in Q’eqchi’, independent translation)

Magdalena’s narrative of life-long participation in the struggle to defend the land shows the integration of her identity as a Q’eqchi’ woman into her participation in a wide range of political venues, from her community to outreach work among Mayas in other parts of the country. She has not been silenced by the violence she experienced directly, and she strives to bring her knowledge to bear on supporting a leftist political program that can benefit all poor people in Guatemala. Magdalena also notes the significance of being able to share her experiences openly with others now, as an indigenous Q’eqchi’ woman who was also in the guerrilla.

Through almost four decades of participation in the struggle, she has witnessed changes in forms of political engagement, from armed resistance to the military during the armed conflict to state elections and community venues as sites of resistance today. However, Magdalena and other Q’eqchi’s expressed continuity in the violence of expropriation from their lands to the present, as well as continuity in their communities’ resistance. Perhaps the changes in vocabulary — from Marxism to leftism to human rights—that I initially sought to isolate and examine have been less relevant within Q’eqchi’ communities. Magdalena and others skillfully employ these different discourses, but their action in defense of territory shows a consistency that transcends words.
“My dad was a great leader, a defender of the territory”: Filomena’s Story

Fifty-one-year-old Filomena, wife and mother of seven children, opened her interview by describing the massacre of her entire family in their home just after winning the title to their community’s land in 1982. I will share her narrative as a “defender of the territory” with this starting point as well, with the moment when her parents and her siblings were massacred in their home. In our interview Filomena is not talking about a closed chapter in her life; her pain is fresh as she cries speaking to me about the massacre of her family in both of our interviews. When she speaks about her father, over 30 years after his murder, he remains an example she tries to follow, as she defends the land.

I remember a lot today, my dad fought so much for the land but I as his daughter did not benefit from it. But that does not mean that I am going to set aside my father’s example. I continue the fight for the land, and I follow it in order to have the right to land for my children and for my grandchildren in the future. My dad, well, he was a great leader, a defender of the territory. (2nd interview, in Q’eqchi’)

As the coordinator of their community’s Improvement Committee (Comité Pro-Mejoramiento) in the municipality of El Estor, Filomena’s father spearheaded efforts to gain legal title to their lands. He was successful, but in the process he made an enemy of EXMIBAL, the local subsidiary of the nickel mine owned by the International Nickel Company of Canada (INCO), which wanted control of the same lands for their operations.

In the months leading up to the massacre, 18-year-old Filomena overheard people warning her father that he needed to leave his house and his land because the mining company wanted him dead. One day Filomena overheard a conversation between her father and a compañero (comrade) who arrived to the house. He advised her father to leave, and she recalls
her father responding, “‘No, I am not leaving. I know that for them [EXMIBAL] it is bad that I won the lands, but for all the people it is good. If they want to kill me, well, I cannot leave my land’” (2nd interview, in Q’eqchi’). When Filomena asked him about these visits, her father explained that his photo had appeared in a press release, so EXMIBAL knew what he looked like and was looking for him in order to kill him.

In many ways Filomena’s path mirrors Magdalena’s: both women were integrated into the movement to defend the territory from a young age, because of their families’ participation. In that way, both women’s experiences reflect socialization, or what Schugurensky (2006) refers to as “the internalization of values, attitudes, behaviors, skills, etc., that occur unconsciously during everyday life” (p. 167). For both women, joining the guerrilla movement was a logical step in their families’ commitment to defending Q’eqchi’s through whatever means necessary. Filomena traces her participation in the fight for the land to her childhood, remembering that she started to pay attention as a ten-year-old when she heard her family’s discussions. She recalls,

I remember when I started to discover, I learned to listen and I was discovering. Because I listened to the talk about the fight and I became fully involved, I was, at the age of ten years old. So I heard about the fight to defend the land and I listened about its importance, about why they were doing it. (2nd interview, in Q’eqchi’)

At 15 Filomena joined “our organization” the URNG, because “my parents were from there. So we defended the land, they defended the territory. That is what they did and that is what I did. And today that is what I do, defend our land” (1st interview, in Q’eqchi’ and Spanish). Participation in activities in defense of the land was integral to Filomena’s childhood formation. For example, Filomena shared her own memories of how hearing about the Panzós Massacre in 1978 led to her family to step up their participation, in the URNG, in anticipation of future
massacres. Filomena described how they trained to be prepared to defend other Q’eqchi’s from future massacres: “When the Panzós massacre was done we still went to train in the jungle, we went to train in order to go and support the brothers there” (2nd interview, in Q’eqchi’).

When Filomena was 16, her community finally won the legal title to their land. However, she now remembers the victory as bittersweet because it is intertwined with her memories of the massacre of her entire family afterwards.

Well, it is true, at 16 years old the juridical certainty was won. But as I say, it is not like I am describing it right now, that simple, no, it was quite difficult. It was very hard for us when the juridical certainty was won because it was during the years 1980, 1981, when, well, there were still many massacres. So because of that victory, well, my parents were also massacred. And because of that I remember a lot and when I remember it, well, it hurts me so much. Yes, I cry because my dad worked so much to look for juridical certainty but I never imagined that they were pursuing him, I never imagined that they were going to kill them, to massacre them. But that did happen, but I will never forget that pain I lived because a few months after winning juridical certainty my dad was killed, massacred. I, well, I fled, afraid, I went to hide for six months. In the course of those six months, the land where my father lived and other lands he had, other people had taken ownership of those lands. And I was left with nothing, my family was left with nothing. And until today I remember a lot, my dad fought so hard for the land but as his daughter I have not benefitted. But that does not mean that I will leave the example of my father aside. I continue the fight for the land, and I continue it to have the right to land

\[26\text{ Legal title to the land}\]
for my children and my grandchildren in the future. My dad, well, he was a great leader, a defender of the territory. (2nd interview, in Q’eqchi’)

After the massacre of her family, Filomena hid for six months and participated in trainings with the URNG to prepare her to engage in armed combat. Her family was massacred during the military’s scorched earth campaign, so massacres of Mayan communities happened around her, especially in the western highlands. Magdalena trained in order to defend others who faced violence at the hands of the military, who acted on behalf of landowners and corporations. She recalls her training after her family’s massacre:

I met up with the brothers organized into the URNG where we also received orientations, preparations, trainings, because the soldiers at that time, well, they were massacring and as a result we also needed to prepare to defend ourselves. I remember my training with the brothers in the URNG organization. We all went to train, they gave us arms. When I first touched weapons it was not actually a weapon, but a piece of wood in the shape of a gun. So with that I was training, well, that is how we were preparing ourselves. (2nd interview, in Q’eqchi’)

After Filomena fled her community in the aftermath of her family’s massacre, she was incorporated into the mobile operations of the guerrillas. Finn Stepputat (2001) characterizes the guerrilla’s mode of self-governance this way: “Unlike the ‘real’ state, the guerrilla state was a portable, partly invisible state with a minimum of physical infrastructure and an unlocatable center somewhere in the wilderness, from where authorization of representatives, rituals, actions, and ideas emanated” (p. 294). Filomena was incorporated into this mobile, structured organization governed by its own rules and code of conduct.
After the period of intense training and participation, Filomena gradually moved away from the URNG to focus more on raising her seven children with her husband. Even though her affiliation with the URNG diminished over time, Filomena’s sense of obligation to defend the land has never gone away. The pain of her family’s massacre remains a daily reminder of the vivid connections between the violence and marginalization of the past and the present. However, after the Peace Accords officially ended the armed conflict in 1996, Filomena found she was left with the same issues she faced as a teenager: she was unable to live in peace and security without the title to her own land. As her children grew older, she was compelled to consider the real possibility they would similarly be left without land.

After everything, I made my home, I made our house, I had seven children. Afterwards when I saw my seven children growing up, ‘Where are they going to live? Where will my children be some day?’ The struggle that my father had, that struggle was for his children and for so many other families and I should also carry on that struggle. But, anyway, I did not stay quiet. After everything I went telling the history of what we suffered. So that is how it went but until right now, well, I am again fully in the struggle to defend the land that we have. (2nd interview, in Q’eqchi’)

Like Magdalena, Filomena has taken on the role of a teacher, sharing her story with other indigenous peoples in Guatemala, and women in particular, so they can organize collectively to defend the land. Her words act as a testimony to the impact of the armed conflict on multiple generations: her father, herself, and her children. She is committed to sharing history so that others can learn the origins of their struggles today.

Part of Filomena’s trajectory in the struggle is the evictions she experienced in her current community on the outskirts of El Estor on January 9th, 2007. Her testimony is as follows:
“I was present when 700 antiriot police and military arrived, and the district attorney read the eviction order…They are the most forceful evictions, the most violent, that I have seen” (2nd interview, in Q’eqchi’). Journalist Dawn Paley (2007b) reports that the homes of every villager were burned to the ground by CGN private security in front of them during the evictions. Public prosecutor Andrade Escobar stepped aside while the homes were burned, even though the Public Ministry was supposed to carry out the eviction order. Escobar stated, “I handed authority over that section of the area over to a [CGN-Skye Resources] lawyer, therefore those responsible for this are company employees, not the Public Ministry” (Paley, 2007b). Paley also quotes Ceasar Bora of the National Coordinating Committee of Indigenous Peoples and Peasants (Coordinadora Nacional Indígena y Campesina, or CONIC in Spanish), who compared the tactics employed during the community’s eviction with those employed by the military during the armed conflict.

Like Magdalena, Filomena has been repeatedly drawn into the struggle to defend the land throughout her adult life. She does not view her participation as optional, but rather considers it a necessity structured by her desire for herself and her children to have a better life. She also ties her participation to the legacy of her massacred family, and will not rest until she achieves the goal her father set out: to win juridical certainty of the land.

“We can elect a leftist government”: Marcelino’s Political Vision

Thirty-six-year-old Marcelino, husband and father of two, is a former guerrilla and a current community leader in the municipality of Panzós. He continues to be politically active, transitioning from armed struggle to maneuvering within the electoral system to try to elect a leftist politician on a municipal or national level. In his second interview Marcelino, the elected
leader of his Community Development Council (COCODE), recounts a recent visit from his ex-commander that led him to reconnect with the political vision he adopted in 1992 when he joined the guerrilla movement.

Just a little while ago a commander came, our ex-commander came to visit us and he summoned us to a small meeting, where he manifests everything that they feel and everything that they want to arrive at. So they told us that we had to organize ourselves, not only, now that we are not in the guerrilla, but it is not the idea that you all only came to live here in the community but that we work as a team, we train people, we speak with the COCODEs and that way, well, we can elect a leftist government in the future. I believe that was the idea that he came to tell us but it seems very important to me. That is what we have to do, to organize ourselves, and then we can elect a municipal or a central government that is leftist. (2nd interview, in Q’eqchi’)

After learning of Marcelino’s experiences as a guerrilla member during our first interview, I took up the topic in our second interview, with the hope of pinpointing elements of the URNG political program that attracted his participation in the movement as a teenager. I understand the URNG as a Marxist political organization, but Marcelino was not familiar with the term “Marxist” when I broached the topic with him. Instead, he asked me to explain the term to him, for which I was totally unprepared. Through our conversation I came to appreciate that “leftist” was a more meaningful term to describe his political affiliation, which ultimately pointed to the problematic nature of me imposing my political assumptions on the political imaginaries of Q’eqchi’s.

Marcelino spoke in a matter-of-fact manner about the life-or-death commitment of joining the guerrilla movement during the armed conflict. Marcelino conveyed this decision as a
practical one, determined largely by his material circumstances and his interest (perhaps more specifically articulated during his time as a guerrilla) in defending the land. He joined the guerrillas after being rejected by the Guatemalan military, who told him he was too young to enlist. Consequently, when he encountered the guerrillas near the plantation (finca) where he lived, he enlisted in the URNG. Had events transpired differently during his meeting with the army, he could have ended up as a military man rather than a guerrillero; he was not committed to a particular ideology when he met guerrillas, but was motivated by survival.

However, Marcelino is deeply impacted by his experience as a guerrilla. Marcelino draws on a discourse of “leftism” to show the continuity between his time as a guerrilla in the URNG and the political work he is engaged in today in the COCODE:

For me they are important ideas that they give to us in the guerrilla movement. Well, for now, I think more that we can organize ourselves. Just like our jefe told us a little while ago, that we had to organize ourselves in order to be able to talk about a leftist government. We are not going to elect a capitalist government anymore. (2nd interview, in Q’eqchi’)

Marcelino’s former commander reiterated taking advantage of the institutional structures in place to promote a leftist political agenda in Guatemala. His account of his visit with his former URNG commander highlights the continuing reverberations of his time as a guerrilla on the way he frames political action today. While his time in the URNG ended with the handover of the guerrillas’ arms to the Guatemalan government, Marcelino is still compelled to respond to a call from his former commander to mobilize for political action today.

The political vision Marcelino maintained of transforming Guatemalan politics through armed struggle has changed to an emphasis on working within the structure of the COCODE to
advance political reforms to benefit the Q’eqchi’ Mayas in his community in Panzós. The Law of Development Councils (2002) established five levels of councils: national, regional, departmental, municipal, and community-level (p. 1), constituting a “permanent instrument of participation and representation for the Maya, Xinka, and Garifuna peoples and the non-indigenous population” (p. 1). COCODEs are structured without reference to specific culturally-based political traditions within the country’s four ethnic groups; however, in their default mode they operate in the political language of the Ladino-dominated state (Casaús Arzú, 2007; Stepputat, 2001), in which conceptions of representation revolve around elections.

Similar to Filomena and Magdalena, Marcelino explained parallels and continuity between the violence of today and his experiences during the armed conflict when he analyzed: “They have continued discriminating, they have continued threatening, killing, assassinating indigenous compañeros, more than anything in the evictions in the lands. They keep removing us, so I see that there is no peace, there is no Peace Accord” (1st interview, in Q’eqchi’).

Marcelino stated, once the Peace Accords were signed, they should no longer use guns to demand land, but negotiate with the state instead: “They told us we no longer had to ask at gunpoint, now we had to ask with our mouths, that is how they will hear us, that is how arms were no longer used here and now is the time to use our mouths to ask before the State” (1st interview in Q’eqchi’, independent translation). Marcelino accepts the transition since the armed conflict to negotiating directly with the state without weapons, but he had hoped that the end of the armed conflict meant that no one would use weapons to achieve their goals, which has not been the case. He went on to say:

In the same way we ask the government that it respect and recognize the indigenous peoples because we are here occupying this land. Of course, we are not asking for
anything to be given to us, that is why we are asking that they give over the land to us, because we want to pay for it, but that they turn it over to us in peace because I remember how the guerrillas acted, when they left their weapons and started to use dialogue, that is what we want to say to the government, although what the government does is act a different way and they come to kill indigenous peoples and that is what we do not want anymore. (1st interview, in Q’eqchi’, independent translation)

While Marcelino does not advocate for a return to armed resistance to the Guatemalan government, he expresses frustration with the limitations of the government’s current approach to the land management system. His experiences as a teenage member of the guerrilla movement are still influential in his leftist political framework, and he strives to incorporate the lessons he learned then into his current political activities.

**Concluding Thoughts**

For Filomena and Magdalena, their political participation was originally inspired by their father and grandmother respectively. Their socialization into the politics of defense of the land began with their childhoods, and they honor the legacies of their families by conveying those same values to their own children today. The conceptions of leftist politics outlined by Magdalena points to ending the marginalization of poor indigenous people through land evictions, economic exploitation, and violence. Consecutive mayors, presidents, and other politicians have violated their human rights to live in peace on their ancestral territories and to provide their children with food. Both women shared experiences of traveling to other communities to teach others about their experiences of resistance and survival during the armed conflict. In contrast to the dominant “teaching-learning” (Martinez Salazar, 2008) associated
with state violence, Magdalena and Filoma offer teachings based on hope and solidarity. They extend the web of teaching-learning to as many people as possible, in order to offer hope to indigenous peoples and women for their future in Guatemala.

Marcelino, on the other hand, joined the guerrilla movement as a teenager in the waning years of the armed conflict. Even though his political formation contrasts with Filomena and Magdalena’s initiation into politics via their families, all three individuals draw similar conclusions about the current struggle to defend the land in Panzós and El Estor. They all identify a need to participate in the legal titling process in order to attain ownership the Guatemala government will recognize as legitimate. Their goal is to secure the land for their children and for future generations, and to escape the cycles of violence and poverty they have experienced throughout their lifetimes.

The interviews in this chapter led me to reconsider blind spots in my mapping of the Guatemalan political landscape, and how my assumptions about a left-right political spectrum structured my understanding of politics in Q’eqchi’ communities. Marcelino views COCODEs as a possible outlet for leftist political projects inspired by the guerrilla movement, even though it is a state-established institution. Q’eqchi’s find ways to make state bodies work in tandem with culturally rooted governance mechanisms already in place. The ideological motivations behind participation in the armed conflict were not the same for everyone, and provoked different kinds of political mobilization. As such, participation in the guerrilla movement has left a multiplicity of political legacies in Guatemala. Their strategies and forms of engagement have evolved to adapt to the current political climate in Guatemala, which allows more space for indigenous people to defend themselves through legal mechanisms and citizens’ rights.
However, the challenges facing Q’eqchi’ communities demonstrate more continuity from the time of the armed conflict than I had assumed. In the next chapter I explore the common thread over time, Q’eqchi’s’ cultural relationship with land, which proved to be more influential than more abstract ideological motivations. While land is the central element in a literal survival strategy, it is also key to maintaining the Q’eqchi’ collectivity in action, in the assembly (asamblea) and Elders’ Council (Consejo de Ancianos). Land also recurs in conversations about whether electing individual politicians advances Q’eqchi’s’ interests as indigenous peoples, poor people, peasants (campesinos), or Guatemalan citizens. Q’eqchi’s are engaging in political decision-making through the lens of defense of territory, and this takes a multitude of forms.
Chapter 6: Collective Identity and Political Mobilization

In this chapter, I consider how Q’eqchi’s conceptualize political participation through cultural activities such as ceremony, community-based decision-making, electoral processes, and working in or with NGOs. These forms of participation relate to Q’eqchi’s’ engagement with various conceptions of land circulating in Q’eqchi’ communities simultaneously, but not deployed as synonyms. Each representation of land—as sacred territory, community member, and commodity—surfaces in relation to a particular audience(s), be it the Guatemalan government, corporations, international NGOs, or Q’eqchi’ internal community workings. Corporations are looking to take advantage of favorable investment conditions through securing legal rights to land in order to extract high volumes of minerals and agricultural products. In the past Q’eqchi’s relied on customary use of their territory, in combination with the state’s official ownership of much of those lands, as a basis for legitimate ongoing occupation of land, even without a legal title. The transposition of a capitalist vision of ownership onto a communal relationship with land (Woolford, 2011) is associated with physical and structural forms of violence. Since corporations are displacing dozens of Q’eqchi’ communities in the process, Q’eqchi’s are forced to operate according to the rules of capital, pushing to acquire formal legal title.

Collective Identity and Claims to Land

Land is not just the material foundation for economic subsistence but is also indispensable for maintaining Mayan cultural traditions. As identified in Chapter Three, based on my interviews and observations, Q’eqchi’s unite around three main components of their
collective identity: as sons and daughters of the earth (*aj ral ch’och*), indigenous people (*pueblos indígenas*), and peasants (*campesinos*). I open this chapter by examining Q’eqchi’s’ cultural relations to Mother Earth (*Madre Tierra*) as an entry point into all three layers of their collective identity. Depending on which aspect of the earth is being spoken about, different Q’eqchi’ and Spanish words describe the Earth, such as

*Ruuchic ch’och* (Face of the World), *Loq laj na’ ch’och* (Our Sacred Earth), *Loq laj Che’k’aam* (Our Sacred Mother Nature), and *Q’ana’ Ch’och* (Lady Earth), while in Spanish people variably call it *Diós Mundo* (World God), *Santo Mundo* (Holy World), and *Tierra Madre* (Mother Earth). Taken together, all these different terms imply the Earth is conceived of as an animate, parental, sacred, and divine being. (Permanto, 2015, pp. 55-56)

The earth is represented as a maternal and sacred figure, which requires Q’eqchi’s to offer proper tribute and respect in their daily interactions with the earth. In this chapter I pay special attention to the cultural labor communities pour into the land as a respected mother and source of their livelihood, identity, and well-being.

**Sons and Daughters of the Earth (Aj ral ch’och’)**

Mayas consider the soil and the subsoil to be an inalienable part of *Madre Naturaleza* (Mother Nature), not a commodity to be bought and sold. Sergio Tischler (2005) explains Mayas’ affinity with the land, describing, “in that relationship nature is not external, it is not an object, but instead ‘mother,’ a part of the definition of a communal we” (p. 64). For Q’eqchi’ Mayas, who call themselves “sons and daughters of the earth” (*aj ral ch’och*), land is central to their relationships with human and non-human beings. During anthropologist Stefan Permanto’s
(2015) research in Chisec, Alta Verapaz, Q’eqchi’ elders shared their relationship with the earth as their mother. One elder, Don Santiago, described the earth as alive and ever-present in their daily lives:

The Earth is our mother who, just like any mother, cares for and sustains her children from when they are born until they are adults. If a mother did not care for her children they would not grow and eventually die of hunger. When a child is hungry they always ask their mother for food and it is the same way for us, when we are hungry we ask Mother Earth for food. If it were not for our Mother Earth we would not survive in our communities. The Earth is very precious to us because without her we would die, and because of this the Earth is alive. (p. 56)

The earth provides physical sustenance, but Don Santiago also expresses an emotional bond through the mother-child explanation. In my interviews, the role of the land as a mother and protector came up several times. For example, Ronaldo, a community leader and pastor in a community outside of El Estor, explained a similar idea.

For us the land is, to say it in other words, the land is our mother, we live because of the land. From the land comes everything that gives us life, for example, corn, beans, and everything. Because of that there are communities, there are sacred places, because there is where the land is given a lot of importance. (57 years old, 3rd interview, in Spanish)

When Q’eqchi’s have adequate food, water, and shelter, it reflects they have upheld their responsibilities to the land and the spirits.

Land represents a mother figure for Q’eqchi’s, but it also plays a central role in Q’eqchi’s’ ability to carry out their obligations to their human children. Forty-five-year-old
Marco from an evicted community in Panzós stated at the start of his interview that he lives from the land. He continues in *la lucha* so he and his children will be able to eat:

> From a personal point of view, I continue fighting in order to defend our land in my community. Besides that, we have seen huge problems in terms of that fight. But I do it because I know that I have children and my children need somewhere to live, we also need someplace to cultivate our crops because we live from the land. And for that same reason, I continue fighting, on a personal level I keep fighting, in order to be able to win our lands. (*1st interview, in Q’eqchi’*)

Marco and others are driven by the practical necessity of needing have for land to live on and cultivate, as a source of subsistence. Acquiring the title to the land assures Q’eqchi’s access to adequate food and shelter for their children. Without legal title, Q’eqchi’s face potential evictions, which often include the destruction of their crops, homes, and personal possessions.

Maco, also evicted from his community in Panzós, described how Q’eqchi’s rightfully occupy their lands, and that their rights are under attack from foreigners who come to Guatemala to take their land. Maco’s words reflect the different levels of his collective identity, as a Guatemalan citizen and as an indigenous person rightfully occupying ancestral land:

> We have the right to live and to occupy the lands where we have always been, but many times other people, principally the rich and powerful that come from other countries to take away that right, a right that is not theirs and they do not have anything to do with coming here to Guatemala, because that right belongs to us and not to them, due to the fact that we live here in Guatemala and it is right to occupy the lands located in national territory because we are Guatemalan, because we come from the original indigenous peoples of these lands. (*1st interview, in Q’eqchi’, independent translation*)
Maco also emphasized the leftist rhetoric expressed by other research contributors, in which the rich and powerful foreigner takes advantage of Q’eqchi’s. While not invoking an explicit class identity, Maco’s comments points to his identity as an embattled indigenous peasant.

One of the ways that Q’eqchi’s establish their right to occupy land is through *mayejak* (ceremony), which honors the ancestors and the spirits of the land, reaffirming their connections. Claims to the land are upheld and honored through offerings made to the Earth and its spirits as part of maintaining a relationship of care and reciprocity.

**“Through Mayan ceremonies we can have more energy”: Giving Back through *Mayejak***

In her ethnographic research with Q’eqchi’s, Ybarra (2013) describes that during Mayan ceremony (*mayejak*), “religion, politics and party are all together in an overnight bash” (p. 585). Both Analisa and Magdalena made clear connections between their practice of Mayan ceremony (*mayejak*) and the struggle to defend the land. El Estor community leader Analisa states: “The struggle for us has a very important value in our Maya Q’eqchi’ culture” (3rd interview, in Spanish). Magdalena ties her observance of ceremony to her literal survival through the violence of the armed conflict, and her life-long struggle defending the land. She views ceremony as integral to sustaining those in the struggle:

> Through Mayan ceremonies we can have more energy, more strength to keep going forward in the struggle. And why do I do it? Because I respect it a lot. Because my grandparents, our ancestors, they lived from that and I also live from that. I respect our

27 I did not request to participate in any ceremonies during my fieldwork, both because of my lack of knowledge of Q’eqchi’ and because of the sacred nature of those events for Q’eqchi’. Therefore, my accounts of ceremony come from interviews with research contributors and ethnographic research (Permanto, 2015; Ybarra, 2013).
culture a lot and I give it value in my life also, not losing that culture…So I do my ceremony, I say, I say to my god, to the god of the hills, of the rivers, that they protect me, because it is not fair that anyone does me harm. If it was that way I would have died at once in the massacre alongside my grandmother. And if they gave me life it is so that I keep fighting. (2nd interview, in Q’eqchi’)

Her survival after the Panzós massacre indicates to Magdalena she is meant to participate in the struggle. Ceremony sustains her energy and renews her commitment to the land. Importantly, maintaining a vital connection with her ancestors and the spirits of the hills allows her to live. She learned these values from her grandmother, and to here these practices are vital to her identity as a Q’eqchi’.

Mayan worldviews are an example of Escobar’s (2010) concept of relational ontologies, which “are not built on the divides between nature and culture, us and them, individual and community” (p. 4). Reciprocity and dialogue are key elements of relationality in Mayan knowledge systems, as well as in their social relations. Ajpub’ Pablo García Ixmatá (Tz’utujil Maya) (2010) extends agency to human and non-human participants in Mayan knowledge systems, recognizing the ability of both to participate in dialogue and reciprocity:

The gift of knowledge is not obtained through the level of formal education, but instead by having the intelligence to develop and receive experiences from others with different missions in life and by submerging oneself in the gift in order to find the great awareness that nature is communicating. (p. 230)

The human being is just one actor among many in the community’s social relations. Thus, learning occurs between humans but also through relations with the land, the spirits, and other non-human beings. Again, while these forms of learning can be classified as informal
(Schugurensky, 2000), they are deeply embedded in Mayan knowledge systems that have been transmitted over generations. In her comments on the value of ceremony Analisa expressed appreciation of the inter-connectedness of humans and other-than-humans, as well as the unique value of every being. She relates experiences of ceremony with her in-laws, who are spiritual guides, and with her father Máximo, who is a spiritual guide as well.

Each thing, each resource that we have has a spiritual value. And they have gods that protect them so you ask them permission…at the end of every year we do a big ceremony with my family, but really, really big, we are not talking about a small thing. Only the family, each one brings their offering, their offering is whatever comes from their heart, whatever they want to bring, whatever they want to share to eat as an act of thanksgiving to Mother Nature who gave us one more year and that we are going to receive another year. (3rd interview, in Spanish)

Making an offering is an intimate, personal expression of respect for the land, but ceremony also represents a social and cultural event that provides cohesion for Q’eqchi’s as a people.

Borrowing from anthropologist Eduardo Kohn, Permanto (2015) designates Q’eqchi’s’ relationships with their environment through a “logic of sociability” (p. 123), in which people learn to treat every human and other-than-human being around them according to their specific nature, which dictates the role they play in the group’s life. As Permanto (2015) explains:

Environmental knowledge is first and foremost relational and experience-based which also holds true for the Q’eqchi’ elders. To recognize beings as persons and to become aware of their specific nature is something that primarily relies on a practical engagement (i.e. dwelling) in the world, a process of ‘learning by doing.’ (p. 122)
An understanding of each being’s unique characteristics is learned through hands-on experience in the community, and these experiences of relationality form part of the cultural and environmental knowledge transmitted from generation to generation. Analisa explains the value of respecting the natural world, through ceremony and other daily practices that show respect for the earth:

My departed husband’s parents were Mayan spiritual guides. They taught us the value of respecting our natural resources, the river, the lakes, the mountains. Each thing, each resource that we have has a spiritual value, and they have gods that protect them. So it is to them that one asks permission in the case of, for us, getting in the water is not just a matter of going to get in within our culture, if I put my foot in and that is it, no. You have to ask for permission, ask for permission before in order to be able to enter. (3rd interview, in Spanish)

Younger generations do not always adopt Q’eqchi’ traditional cultural practices, but it is clear that the inter-generational transmission of knowledge is influential among Q’eqchi’s in la lucha.

When interviewing Analisa’s 73-year-old father, a spiritual guide, I inquired about the significance of ceremony in his life. Máximo responded by asking why I wanted to know about ceremony. Later he explained that he wondered if I asked the question because I wanted his support to carry out a ceremony in order to undertake a specific task, such as planting. He explains:

When someone asks another person about ceremony it is because they bring a mentality, maybe they are going to sow seeds…so they need the support to do a ceremony, more than anything in the sowing season ceremony is used a lot. (1st interview, in Spanish and Q’eqchi’)

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Later he returned to my question on his own and answered it by sharing a time when ceremony was especially productive in his life:

If someone asks me about the value of ceremony, for me it is difficult to talk about it because it is very sacred in our lives. But yes, it has a lot of importance, as I say, going back a little, how I came, when I left my community, I came at a young age…By myself, all alone, all alone I said to myself, “I am going, I am going, I am leaving here, I am going to look for work. But how do I go so that nothing happens to me?” So I thanked Mother Nature in my community a lot, where I asked permission that I was going to come here. I kneeled down, I got on my knees, I lit my candle and I told everything, that I was coming here, where I was going or where I would be, that nothing should happen to me, that everything should go well, should be great…What I asked for, that is what happened. Nothing, nothing, nothing happened to me. (1st interview, in Spanish and Q’eqchi’)

Máximo views his ceremony as successful because he was able to find work and support himself, and his continued practice of ceremony enabled him to provide for the wife and eight children he later had in El Estor. Máximo’s initial hesitance to share his experiences of ceremony with me is one example of how my outsider status limited my access to contributors’ experiences and opinions.

*Mayejak* honors, shares with, and makes requests of the land, the *tzuultaq’a* and other spirits. Since the *tzuultaq’a* are the owners of the land, they are responsible for ensuring that the crops grow well. Permanto (2015) recounts Q’eqchi’ elder Don José’s explanation of the *mayejak*:
The *mayejak* began with our ancestors crying out and asking how to increase their crops. They began to investigate who was in charge of the Earth. When they received the answer through dreams they also found out that the *tzuultaq’as* were responsible for the harvest and that they wanted us to perform a *mayejak* in order to enjoy bountiful harvests. Since then they perform the *mayejak* everyday in order to increase their crops. (pp. 163-164)

When Q’eqchi’s describe that they are children of the earth, they refer to their relationship to the *Tzuultaq’a*28 “the living Earth-being in its entirety” (Permanto, 2015, p. 53), which research contributor Magdalena refers to as the Creator of the Universe. *Tzuultaq’as* (known in Spanish as “*Señores y Señoras Cerro-Valle*”) (Grünberg, 2000) imbue their physical surroundings with sacred meaning, as Q’eqchi’s combine their forms of spirituality with Christian beliefs (principally Evangelical or Catholic) in syncretic ways (Permanto, 2015). The mother-child relationship Q’eqchi’s experience with the earth extends to their relationship with the *Tzuultaq’a*. As Permanto (2015) explains, “While people perceive themselves in a sense to be an organic part of the Earth they also see themselves as the offspring of the *Tzuultaq’a*” (pp. 53-54). Permanto further explains the idea of reciprocity between Q’eqchi’s and the *Tzuultaq’a*, when he says:

> Since the *Tzuultaq’a* is the owner and custodian of everything that exists upon and within the Earth, to use any of these resources means that one is taking away something that belongs to the *Tzuultaq’a*. Therefore, to alter anything that belongs to a particular

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28 Following Permanto (2015), I adopt *Tzuultaq’a* when contributors refer to a singular Earth-being and the lower case *tzuultaq’a* to reflect the earth-being’s plural manifestations “as innumerable *tzuultaq’as* residing predominantly in caves within specific hills” (p. 53). Ybarra (2011a) refers to each *tzuultaq’a* as “a territorialized spirit that inhabits a specific landscape and is often centered in a cave or a hilltop” (pp. 806-807).
tzuultaq’a, whether it be cutting down a tree, hunting animals, or planting crops, people are obliged first to reciprocate and ask permission to do so. (p. 66)

Q’eqchi’s can only exercise their right to land as long as they meet the conditions of the Tzuultaq’a, the land’s owner. Magdalena and Máximo were among the research contributors who stressed paying homage to both their Q’eqchi’ and their Christian spiritual beliefs in their practices. Magdalena from El Estor explained her relationship to the Tzuultaq’a this way: “I also ask our Tzuultaq’a, the Creator of the Universe, according to the nawal of each person, I ask for everything so that we are able to live in peace” (1st interview, in Q’eqchi’, independent translator version). When describing the significance of ceremony in his life, Máximo emphasized to me: “God and here in the hill, the tzuultaq’a, with the two things you have to talk… I am seeing that doing these ceremonies, with God and the hill, the tzuultaq’a, is the best way” (1st interview, in Spanish and Q’eqchi’). As Kahn describes it, based on her work with Q’eqchi’s in Livingston, Izabal: “While Tzuultaq’a is the owner of the land, the Christian God has ultimate power because God created Tzuultaq’a” (Kahn, 2006, p. 57). Máximo makes a point of making requests to the Christian God as well as the tzuultaq’a/Tzuultaq’a in order to live in an ethically and spiritually sound way.

Ceremony is a culturally embedded practice that sustains moral and spiritual engagement with the land and other community members. It is viewed not as an exceptional and occasional activity but as a part of daily life that maintains balance among individuals, communities, and with the earth. According to Montejo (2005), “there are prayers and ceremonies that precede each activity in which the earth and life on it may be affected” (p. 153). Maida, Máximo’s youngest daughter, also emphasizes this point:
When we talk about Q’eqchi’ ceremonies there are different ceremonies. In the moment that a baby is born, you do a ceremony that today is lost, you thank the *ajaw*, nature, because you know that a human being is coming, as my parents say, who is going to live together with the trees, the trees are sacred, you speak with the trees...Animals are sacred, you have to do a ceremony especially for them. When you build your house, you have to do a ceremony because you are going to live under that roof and you are going to thank Mother Nature because from Mother Nature you cut the trees to build your roof that will protect you. Then when it is time to plant you will do a ceremony, to ask for permission, because you are working the land so that it will give you good harvests. And you see the results, you see the results, because if you do a sacred ceremony, so special, you will see your harvests, it will give you profits. And also your house, because your children will not get sick. (34 years old, 1st interview, in Spanish)

Maida’s explanation of ceremony came as a response to my question about its role in her own life. Ceremony contributes directly to her quality of life, and she worries Q’eqchi’s are losing knowledge of specific ceremonies, such as the one performed after childbirth. She ties the loss of Q’eqchi’ practices to the adoption of foreign attitudes that she finds destructive, such as the drive to become consumers. Ceremonies promote a culturally specific notion of health and well-being that Maida values.

*Mayejak* reinforces claims about the value of upholding Q’eqchi’ beliefs, and explicitly connects humans and other-than-humans. According to research contributors, claims to land are just and morally defensible as long as the proper protocols are followed. However, the government of Guatemala and corporations demonstrate no respect for the culturally specific ways Q’eqchi’ ask for permission to occupy lands; instead, for the Guatemalan state the regime
of private property is the ultimate arbiter of correct and rightful appropriation of land as a commodity (Ybarra, 2011b). Since relationships with the land and spirits are carefully nurtured and maintained through ceremony and other ritual practices, evictions of Q’eqchi’s violate sacred relationships cultivated with the land and the spirits living there. Evictions also deeply impact Q’eqchi’s’ ability to sustain themselves materially, since they struggle to feed themselves and their children until they are established on new lands.

**Peasant (Campesino) Identity and Social Mobility**

Multiple research contributors referenced the transition from mozo (serf) to independent peasant through narratives about their parents leaving conditions of extreme exploitation on fincas. They often focus on their parents’ interest in acquiring their own piece of land or their desire to live in an urban area where their children could take advantage of infrastructure such as schools. In response to my inquiry about how his parents arrived in their village in the municipality of El Estor, Rafael recalls:

They [my parents] worked a lot in the coffee fincas. And their boss says that there is no rest and there was a lot of exploitation and all that so my father, well, he already said, ‘I left, I left that place because I could not take it anymore and I wanted to rest. And for us there is no weekend, no Friday, no Saturday, no Sunday, one day after the other.’ (2nd interview, in Spanish)

According to Alonso-Fradejas (2015), the colonato (feudal) labor regime established during the 1870s in the Polochic Valley “generally combined wage labor with in-kind or labor payments to the landlord (patron) in exchange for the colono family’s right to live and farm (only) self-sufficient crops in the patron’s hacienda” (p. 494). This labor regime survived largely intact
through the middle of the 20th century, and only after the Ten Years of Spring (1944-1954) did many Q’eqchi’ peasants transition out of work on plantations (fincas) and into small landholdings or wage labor. One elder Alonso-Fradejas (2015) interviewed in 2007 in Panzós stated:

Sometimes I wonder if we have advanced at all. As colonos in the estate the patron forced us to work for almost nothing. Still, we had a patch of land to grow our maize. If anything went wrong with the harvest he would never let us starve. He looked after us because he needed us. Now we are free labor, they say. Free to starve, I say. The rich people do not need us and so do not care about us anymore. (p. 498)

While the colonato regime was based on a paternalistic and exploitative relationship between serfs (mozos) and the finquero, it represented a stable social contract that Q’eqchi’s relied on.

Arturo, a former NGO director living in El Estor, also recounts his parents’ experience of leaving a finca in order to come to a town, where they could provide opportunities to their children to study and pursue a better life.

So then we already, we already see things another way, not as our parents saw them, working away on fincas like slaves, since they did not even pay them and all that and they exploited them. That generation, well, maybe they helped us in that they gave us a little bit of education, but we are seeing something else, we want another change for our children and a change for the country. (48 years old, 1st interview, in Spanish)

Later he explained how the rise of professionals among his generation is the result of their educational opportunities. His parents’ decision to move to town allowed him opportunities to pursue an education, and now he can push his children forward, in the hope that they will all
complete their university education. Arturo’s narrative reflects how over the course of only three generations, Q’eqchi’s have more opportunities to achieve a higher status as professionals.

Maida’s parents Máximo and Naya also left exploitative work on fincas, and she traces opportunities in her life as stemming from her parents’ decision to move to a town and reject relations of servitude. Leaving the finca is an example of Scott’s infrapolitics (2012), a form of resistance to the exploitation and oppression of indigenous peoples rooted in the legacies of the country’s feudal economic relations. Maida traces her family’s roots to this particular

My parents worked for a long time with powerful families on fincas, they were slaves, exploited. So today, we say to my dad, it is good that he woke up and wanted to leave there and that is why we have arrived here to this point. He wanted a bit for us to get ahead academically, right, because that was his idea.

‘I am going to leave this abuse that we are receiving, my children and I, I am leaving for town, I am going to see how it works, so that my children get ahead academically.’

So here we are now. (1st interview, in Spanish)

As the youngest in her family, Maida was able to take advantage of the long-term benefits of her parents’ decision to leave servitude in fincas. Subsequently, she was able to complete her education as a schoolteacher, which is recognized as a substantial educational achievement among many Q’eqchi’ families. Now that I have explored research contributors’ reflections on their identity as r’al ch’och and campesinos, I move to a consideration of how these identities play out within the context of Q’eqchi’ leadership and decision-making bodies.
Community Cohesion and Q’eqchi’ Leadership Models

My conversation with Ronaldo clarified how Q’eqchi’s conceive of rights and responsibilities within the community. He emphasized the significance of carrying out tasks prioritized by the group, as well as the normative effects of participation (the community falls apart if you do not follow the rules):

When we talk about the community’s regulations it is that the communities have an order. For example, if the COCODE says, ‘We are going to work,’ everyone works. If the COCODE says, ‘We are going to work together,’ those are the regulations that we have. ‘No one leaves the community,’ that is a regulation. But it is that you subject yourself to the regulations, you obey. (2nd interview, in Spanish)

Ronaldo’s quote makes visible the overlap between state institutions, such as the Community Development Council (COCODE), and Q’eqchi’ internal community regulations (reglamento). The community is the main unit of social organizing for Mayas (Alonso-Fradejas, 2015; Urkidi, 2011), and is a significant political referent in Q’eqchi’ discourse about identity, governance, and self-determination. However, the community’s elected body is the state instituted COCODE. As the leadership body, the COCODE organizes the community to carry out responsibilities in between general assemblies. Q’eqchi’s are not organized in a centralized way across their lands, so the community is the highest unit of governance, with shared structures such as Elders’ Councils and general assemblies in each community.

In addition to illuminating the functioning of the COCODE, Ronaldo’s comments make visible the significance of respect as a Q’eqchi’ cultural value. In her research with Q’eqchi’s in Lívingston, Izabal, Hilary Kahn (2006) also noted the multi-faceted connotation of the term “respect” in the Q’eqchi’ language and culture. According to Kahn,
Respect is not an object; there is no single noun in Q’eqchi’ that translates into respect. Rather, respect is understood as an active process—as obedience, belief, labor, paying debts, and buying esteem. Respect is expressed and given meaning through relationships between people, land, deities, owners, and institutions. (p. 64)

Amayo, employed by local NGOs for over a decade, reflected on the impact of witnessing traditional Q’eqchi’ practices, remembering visits to local rural communities whose lifestyle was somewhat foreign as an urban Q’eqchi’:

The other thing that communities did is that, there they call it… what do they call it? *pajínik*, it is a word, literally in Spanish I would not know how to say it, but it would be like a communal labor, like a common labor, more or less. So when that happened, let us say, ‘Today we are going to go and we are going to make, let us change the roof on the school.’ No, everyone had to go, they did not go to their job. Or ‘We have to go and clear the road, our road to the village, because it has a lot of vegetation now.’ All the men come down and each one takes on a section and they leave it clean. (1st interview, in Spanish)

Both Ronaldo and Amayo emphasized the internal norms conducive to the smooth functioning of the community, outlining a clear distribution of power everyone is expected to respect. In this portrayal of community life, the leadership valued by Q’eqchi’s take form as well.

When I asked Ronaldo to explain the characteristics of those chosen for the Elders’ Council (*Consejo de Ancianos*), he responded with qualifications applicable for any leader in the community: “For example, a person that qualifies, like obedience, that is also from a good family, then, that does not get involved in problems, then that is the requirement, for example, in order to occupy a position” (2nd interview, in Spanish). Ronaldo’s comments mirror leadership
traditions found among indigenous peoples in other parts of Latin America. In his work with the Aymara in El Alto, Bolivia, Uruguayan political theorist Raúl Zibechi (2010) describes a leader’s representation of a community’s interests with the phrase “to lead by obeying” (p. 15). In contrast with Western ideals of leadership that favor individuality and strong opinions, leading an indigenous community requires patience, listening to the point of view of others, and taking action only after the community has carefully considered its options.

In their work with Q’eqchi’s, Luz Méndez Gutiérrez and Amanda Carrera Guerra (2014) identified three central principles in Q’eqchi’ conceptions of justice: dialogue, consultation, and consensus (p. 97). Q’eqchi’ leaders are responsible for taking the initiative to bring together the whole community but decisions are taken by the whole community. Social anthropologist Stener Ekern (2011) situates Q’eqchi’ leadership through oppositional relationships with an exclusionary state:

In maintaining a sovereign body at the margins of the Guatemalan state, the role of leadership has been crucial because it is a dialectical, mutually supportive relationship, or in the words of one Mayan leader, ‘a thing that the community bestows upon you once it sees that your guidance is truthful.’ (pp. 115-116)

This dialectical relationship between the community and its leaders develops as a form of dialogue, which can also be understood as “a creative exchange in which new understandings are generated” (Choudry, 2015, p. 102). García Ixmatá (Tz’utujiil Maya) (2010) positions the individual in constant relation to the community, with elders and family members representing especially rich sources of knowledge: “Everything that surrounds me is my other Self. Whatever learning I gain from the elders, from my family or from the community will, one way or another, come back to me and to others, whether positively or negatively” (p. 225). No one individual
holds the answers to all of the community’s concerns, but in the process of discussing them the whole group creates the possibility for resolving them. Ekern (2011) labels this relational leadership as a “feedback loop”:

The ‘feedback loop’ perspective gives equal weight to community and leadership by stressing their interaction and analysing the social practices involved in connecting them. It sees an ‘internal legitimacy’ produced by living in the community and partaking of its collective self as well as an ‘external legitimacy’ produced by maintaining the boundary against ladinos. (p. 118)

Leaders are expected to have a holistic approach to the well-being of the community, since individual members can potentially disrupt the community’s overall harmony.

Elders play a unique role in community leadership, from maintaining accountability for criminal and other offenses, to leading ceremonies, to educating community members on local governance traditions. Elders are often the first line of defense for correcting unacceptable behavior while keeping local (read Ladino) authorities out of the community’s business. Rafael told an example of consultation with elders when he, as a young mayor of his village, solicited advice in the case of a young man believed to be stealing from community members. Rafael preferred not to involve the local police or courts in minor cases, so instead he sought the advice of the elders, who suggested the young man be responsible for cleaning around the school and other areas of the community for a week, without pay, as a way to make amends for his behavior. Rafael reflects, “I liked it a lot. I believe that it is a new idea that they give you and that, yes, there are results” (2nd interview, in Spanish). The community was able to deal with the young man’s criminal activity without involving the external criminal justice system in their internal
affairs. The qualities of dialogue, consultation, and consensus are essential to Q’eqchi’ leadership models.

Amayo recounts his experience working for an NGO at the time of the national transition to the standardized COCODE governance model: “We saw that it was a more viable issue and easier to manage, but without leaving the elders behind because, let us say they are like advisers, they see them as a sort of adviser” (1st interview, in Spanish). Amayo has a clear vision of maintaining traditional respect for the elders as advisers, but also introducing new forms of governance in the communities in the form of the COCODEs. However, while Amayo recognizes the valuable role elders have traditionally played in communities, he also critiques the judgment exercised by elders at times in their dispensation of justice. He points to an example where a young community member was lazy, not contributing during designated work days, and the elders coerced him into taking more responsibility by making him the mayor for a year. Amayo describes the outcome of this experiment:

Really they were punishing themselves because he was a mayor who did not do anything, he was lazy and since he did not want to go, he sent the deputy mayor to go instead. We had to influence in that part a little so that they did not take that action because it was not a punishment for him. (1st interview, in Spanish)

Amayo questions elders’ abilities to successfully balance individual and community interests under today’s conditions, where young Q’eqchi’s are growing up with the influence of more elements from outside Q’eqchi’ culture. Perhaps his urban upbringing allows Amayo to express doubts and critiques of Q’eqchi’ governance mechanisms that would be difficult for Q’eqchi’s living in isolated rural communities.
Respect for elders is still an important cultural norm for Q’eqchi’s, even if their role in politics is changing. Twenty-nine-year-old Rosalía from Panzós emphasized the cultural significance of respecting elders, telling me: “They taught me to respect the elders and value them and not to lack respect because some times when one meets them in the street…I cannot pass by like that, directly, I have to speak to them, I have to greet them with a lot of respect. They are people that have lived. They have a lot of knowledge. So speaking with them is very important, and also respecting them” (2nd interview, in Q’eqchi’). Similarly, Gloria told me that, although she was not raised speaking Q’eqchi’ at home, she learned many Q’eqchi’ values and traditions growing up, including respect for elders. She attempts to pass on those values to her own children:

I feel that the advice of older people is very important for me. And I try to transmit that to my children. Being Q’eqchi’ is respecting, above all, people, older people, their way of thinking, their way of acting, in the Q’eqchi’ person it is very valuable, it is very valuable. And I do feel that we try to follow what they taught to me as a child. (1st interview, in Spanish)

Elders’ life experiences and wisdom earn them respect in Q’eqchi’ culture, so elders still occupy a position of authority, even though this position has shifted from the institution of the Elders’ Council to more informal social mechanisms in many communities. Permanto’s (2015) research also finds that nowadays Q’eqchi’ elders do not feel they receive the respect they granted to their elders when they were young (pp. 204-206). While the functions of Elders’ Councils have been at least somewhat supplanted by the COCODE in recent years, the community assembly maintains its significance in rural Q’eqchi’ communities, as I recount below. It is ultimately a place where the community builds consensus on its most pressing issues.
“That is how we are as leaders, depending on the community assembly”: Consensus-Building and Leadership

When he was 24 years old, Rafael was elected mayor of his village in the municipality of El Estor. He was a rather unassuming young man, so he was surprised at the nomination:

The people said, they started to talk about the elections of leaders. And the people called to me, ‘Rafael, come up here, come up to the front, okay?’ They gathered together about ten of us. Then the assembly began to elect the leaders…And they started to say, ‘What do you all say if Fulano [John Doe] is going to be the leader of our community? Raise your hand,’ he says. And that is how they do it. There are people that say ‘no’ and sometimes three or five or ten people raise their hands, so there’s not much support. They start with the next one the same, the next one the same.

Since I was the last one I thought, ‘Oh God, what can I do?’ ‘What do you think, Don Rafael?’ ‘Yes, it will be him!’ And that is how I began governing in the community. (2nd interview, in Spanish)

Each person nominated is discussed by the group and approved or discussed down. I use the phrase “discussed down” rather than “voted down” because members of the assembly do not vote; decisions are made by consensus. Unless there is unanimous agreement, a person does not come to occupy a position of authority.

Rafael’s election is an example of organizing in Q’eqchi’ communities, combining elements of traditional structures, such as the assembly and decision-making by consensus, with organizational structures imposed by the government, such as the COCODE. Traditional forms of organizing are most visible when examined in community spaces and decision-making practices that brush up directly against state structures. These spaces demonstrate how Q’eqchi’s
adapt generic government institutions such as COCODEs (designed for governance of indigenous and non-indigenous communities alike) to Q’eqchi’ forms of decision-making.

In his research with Mayan communities in the department of Totonicapán, anthropologist Ekern (2011) noted the value Mayas place on consensus-building:

In local parlance, this consensus-ensuring aspect of truthful leadership is known as *unificando criterios*, ‘unifying [the] criteria [of competing proposals]’. The conversion of Chuatroj into a Mayan community lies in the way in which the reformers maintained the equilibrium between the ‘self’ of the leader and the ‘self’ of the community as much as in the content of their propositions, for it is this balance that makes everyone realise how the proposed activity actually benefits the entire community rather than ‘only a little group’ (*sólo un grupito*), as the expression goes. (p. 111)

Leaders are not expected to have all the answers, but they are relied on to know when to bring the community together in an assembly to seek solutions. Vicente, the leader of a community evicted by the sugar refinery Chabil Utzaj in Panzós, explained the challenges associated with leading, especially in the case of evicted communities:

It is difficult, being a leader is a responsibility to all of the evicted communities. For example, right now, the food that the government hands out, well, as leaders we are seeing ourselves that is not enough for the month. All the families, well, we are all suffering as I said, right. So as a leader we have to see ourselves how things are, will it be enough or will it not be enough? That is how we are as leaders, depending on the community assembly. (1st interview, in Q’eqchi’)

Given the shifting political landscape in “post-conflict” Guatemala, Q’eqlchi’ leadership models have adapted to the current demands of representing communities’ interests. The context of
evictions has forced many community leaders into a more public role, as they work on behalf of their communities in land negotiations with *finqueros* and state institutions. Leaders take on additional risks as the public face of their community, easily identifiable to those who would do them harm, such as police and private security forces. They bear the weight of looking after others while they suffer from the same poverty and trauma as their neighbors. The COCODE has replaced some leadership functions previously exercised by elders, but elders continue to occupy a respected role as the carriers of wisdom passed down from previous generations. Q’eqchi’s with greater access to formal education or even non-formal education such as workshops are better able to communicate their communities’ needs to outsiders. Outside intervention is not new in Q’eqchi’ communities, since in the past the colonial government, the Catholic Church, and German plantation owners have also shaped their communities. However, the forces with mediating impacts in communities today are more often foreign corporations and NGOs.

**Mapping Power Relations**

Q’eqchi’s are constantly assessing opportunities and obstacles in their struggles in defense of territory. Drawing on social learning theorist Aziz Choudry’s (2015) idea of the mapping of power relations in social movements, I consider two activities through the lens of social movement learning below: non-formal learning and participation in state-organized political venues such as elections. In each of these activities, Q’eqchi’s bring their collective identity as *aj ral ch’och’,* indigenous people, and peasants to bear in different ways. These activities are part of a process of setting goals, strategizing, identifying opponents, and allocating resources according to the challenges at each juncture. Choudry (2015) focuses on the
educational labor taking place in social movements, arguing “most struggles emerge from the hard work of organizing, incremental learning, lineages of earlier movements, and efforts to organize together” (p. 9). I begin by exploring non-formal learning opportunities such as workshops and short courses where Q’eqchi’s become familiar with critical analytical concepts from feminism and Marxism, as well as rights-based language drawn from human rights and indigenous rights discourses.

**Building Skills and Confidence: “No one can take our rights away from us”**

While many research contributors have had little or no formal education, they take advantage of access to non-formal educational opportunities resulting from the proliferation of NGOs and international donors in Guatemala (McAllister & Nelson, 2013) to acquire skills with practical economic applications, such as sewing or weaving, as well as expand knowledge of discourses and practices related to human rights, such as indigenous rights, worker’s rights, women’s rights, and formal justice mechanisms (p. 34). Taking on the Spanish acronym for non-governmental organizations, ONGs (*organizaciones no-gubernamentales*), McAllister and Nelson (2013) describe the post-Peace Accords influx of multi-faceted international aid as the “ONG-ización of the peace process, with its accompanying training, lobbying, legitimizing, and simple human solidarity, as well as its paternalistic meddling” (pp. 33-34). As one element of the international aid that has flooded Guatemala in the last 20 years, NGO-organized courses and workshops have both positive and negative aspects. They provide Guatemalans with access to resources, in addition to helping them to build national and international alliances, but they may come with ideological strings, intended to convince Guatemalans of the efficacy of channeling
experiences of struggle into the neoliberal world order, which prioritizes individual efforts and accomplishments over the collective good.

In his work on subaltern social movements (SSMs), Dip Kapoor (2009) addresses how these movements incorporate discourses, generated outside of their local context, as one tool in achieving their movements’ goals. Kapoor states that SSMs incorporate elements of the local and the global, tying “globally debated issues such as feminism, ecology, and human rights (essentially subjects that have not emerged from subaltern communities) to the economic, social, and cultural specificities of their own locations, engaging in strategic deployments of these rights and vocabularies” (p. 81). The discourse of “indigenous rights” is an example of a powerful discourse that can strengthen marginalized peoples’ bargaining position. In the context of contested indigenous identity in Indonesia, Anna Tsing (2007) argues that adopting the discursive “voice” of indigenous people is a strategic deployment of a globally recognized language to articulate demands that are intelligible within those venues. For Q’eqchi’s, conversations about indigenous identity occur on multiple scales, as local responses to historical and present-day colonialism, through attempts to exercise Guatemalan citizenship, and through participation in international venues that promote indigenous rights as human rights.

Q’eqchi’s have moved beyond appealing solely to the state for justice; they have learned how to structure their claims “without or against the State” (Quijano, 2008, p. 117, translation mine), appealing to a broader, international audience for support of local struggles over control of land and resources. In their interviews Q’eqchi’s highlighted their strategic use of community, state, and international venues for defending their land rights. In their work on citizenship education, critical educators Ali Abdi and Lynette Shultz (2008) argue for extending human rights beyond the nation, as a truly universal right “inherent to all individuals and groups
in all places and times” (p. 4), thereby developing a “broader set of definitions of the problems so as to consciously create new spaces of social and educational possibility for enfranchising the disenfranchised” (p. 4). The discourse of human rights has become a tool to communicate demands internationally as indigenous people, providing external recognition of their rights and holding the state and corporations accountable for violations.

However, as Donna Deyhle (Choctaw) et al. (2008) caution in their work on the role of curriculum in indigenous resistance and renewal, “Globalization requires new vigilance and a renewed commitment to fight the loss of distinct cultural systems, Indigenous ways of knowing, and language death” (p. 343). The call for universalism under a global world order can have deleterious effects, erasing local identities, languages, and knowledges. Q’eqchi’s’ incorporation of human rights discourses, for example, could reflect the influence of potential funders, such as NGOs and foreign governments. Rogelio, the former director of the Q’eqchi’ run-NGO AEPDI, told me, “We are always working under pressure, yes, yes, as much from the communities as from the donors” (1st interview, in Spanish). Political scientist Clifford Bob (2009) addresses the challenges of dealing with donors’ demands on local movements or organizations:

To improve their chances of gaining support, local movements also conform themselves to the needs and expectations of potential backers in Western nations. They simplify and universalize their claims, making them relevant to the broader missions and interests of key global players. (p. 355)

Working with international organizations can condition the ways social movements frame their demands, in order to appeal to a particular audience. Choudry (2010) warns that many NGOs practice “an ideology of pragmatism,” which significantly limits the aspirations to which affiliated groups aspire. As Choudry explains it, this form of pragmatism “assumes the most that
can be hoped for in terms of social changes are limited gains as opportunities within existing structures” (p. 20). Any project more radical than minor reforms is expected to be taken up in other venues. Through their exposure to internationally sponsored trainings, Q’eqchi’s may have adapted their demands, both consciously and unconsciously, to various audiences, some of which have a conservatizing impact on more structurally oriented critiques or demands.

Q’eqchi’ linguist Valerio comments that indigenous people are more able to demand those rights with local state authorities after such trainings. He refers to the potential for communities to enforce their rights with more training, drawing on their own cultural models:

Although they do not have an academic formation, they see the necessity of community organizing, which is to say that we can have the power to influence, in some way to oblige the authorities, the municipality, to work or do their work with cultural pertinence so they can serve the communities, right, let us say, taking into account their culture. (1st interview, in Spanish)

While the acquisition of knowledge and skills facilitates work as community leaders, the gain in confidence encourages Q’eqchi’s to continue challenging the injustices they face. Pelayo, leader of a community in Panzós evicted by Chabil Utzaj, explained how evicted communities in the Polochic Valley have made advances in learning their rights in recent years, through the fight to defend the land:

Thank God yes, now we have something that is giving us more ideas, that our rights, no one can violate them, no one can take our rights away from us. No one can take advantage of our rights. Each one has the right to fight for their life. So, thank God, now we know, already we are very knowledgeable that we do have rights, that no one can take them away from us, right. So that is what we have right now. I thank God that there are
some comrades who know about the law….Before, we did not know. Five years ago, we did not know what or where we had rights, us as peasants, right, that we have the right to fight for land, right, since the gringos, right, as I said, the businesspeople, the landowners, will not tell you, ‘Look, you have the right to have a little bit of land.’ (1st interview, in Spanish and Q’eqchi’)

Pelayo’s comments point to the significance of expanding non-formal and formal education for Q’eqchi’s. Because some Q’eqchi’s have acquired training on human rights or the law through workshops or higher levels of formal education, they are better able to defend the community’s interests. Access to a variety of learning experiences generally entails more exposure to Spanish, which is invaluable in negotiating with the state or demanding their rights with other actors, such as corporations. For example, Pelayo spoke Spanish for most of our interview, which allowed him to express himself without interpretation. His ability to speak Spanish is a considerable asset for representing his community’s interests to outsiders.

Filomena, who was in the process of learning Spanish throughout the six months between our two interviews, recalls her training on women’s rights, focusing on her participation in the workshops as an opportunity for women to get together and strategize:

When they bring us to trainings on the violence that young women and men suffer, and also us, the older women, what we think is that we women should get together in order to advise and analyze the best ways and strategies for ourselves, for how we can raise ourselves up, how we can develop in order to demonstrate our values. (1st interview, in Q’eqchi’ and Spanish, independent translation)

Filomena recognizes the wealth of knowledge she and other Q’eqchi’ women possess, based on their life experiences as guerrilla members, mothers, and defenders of the land today.
Workshops provide a semi-structured space for those with little formal education to share their experience and brainstorm with others actions to improve their lives.

During our first interview Rafael, a former employee at a local NGO, pronounced that in Guatemala “there is a lot of capitalism and the bourgeoisie have all the power” (1st interview, in Spanish). His terminology led me to ask if he became familiar with that particular vocabulary because of participation in a political party or other political organization. He responded that he learned those terms during trainings and workshops in Guatemala City while working at the NGO. According to Rafael, in those workshops,

they explained to us that the people who have power are those that have money, the ones that keep governing Guatemala and all that and we, the indigenous peoples, so many times we have had discussions, we have had get-togethers to be able to analyze all that.

(1st interview, in Spanish)

These trainings have provided Rafael with terminology to explain the class and ethnic barriers keeping indigenous peoples from participating in the political system in Guatemala. Such non-formal educational opportunities provide Rafael and other Q’eqchi’s’ access to political vocabulary and critical conceptual tools to facilitate interventions in local, national, and international forums, strengthening their ability to make legible claims based on culture, class, and ethnicity in arenas populated by human and indigenous rights discourses. I see Rafael’s adoption of class terminology as an example of “mapping power” (Choudry, 2015) because Rafael makes use of Marxist discourse, because it allows him to “uncover, explain, explore, and analyze the ways in which capitalist relations—through global and local institutions, corporations, financial instruments, processes, and policies—shape our lives and those of others with whom we share this planet” (p. 23). Learning this “universal” discourse potentially
provides Rafael and others with weapons to advance their struggle. However, as Choudry cautions above, adopting such a framework may limit Q’eqchi’s’ to demands that are acceptable within the logic of human rights discourses.

One negative outcome of participation in such trainings in that attendance at NGO-sponsored events is one indication an individual has taken on leadership responsibilities within their community. Consequently, in Q’eqchi’ communities involved in conflict with corporations, these individuals become targets for speculation or persecution. They are targeted by others attending these events or otherwise keeping track of individuals’ participation, such as fellow community members, or representatives of the corporations their communities oppose. I return to a discussion of these kinds of intimidation in the next chapter when I discuss the possible fourth conquest occurring today.

Below I explore contributors’ narratives about local and national electoral campaigns, looking at the election of mayors as well as the presidential campaigns of Mayan politician Rigoberta Menchú. In these examples contributors reflect on their political efficacy (Schugurensky, 2006), or their ability to affect the outcome of political processes. Their experiences of serving as a “ladder” for politicians to win office has led them to be more critical participants in local elections.

“We indigenous peoples only serve as ladders”: Learning to Climb (Or Be Climbed)

The situation is that since Q’eqchi’ people do not live in towns, Q’eqchi’ people live isolated, and so where they are there is no education, there is no electricity, there is no running water, people struggle to live, and they do not have any education. So that is where the people who want to get in power take advantage because people do not know
about laws, they do not know about ‘Vote for me, I will give you this, vote for me and I will help you.’ Then you say, ‘Okay.’ But in the end, when they have been elected to their post, they do not fulfill their promises. So we are used so that others can climb, that is what I meant to say. That is reality. (Ronaldo, 1st interview, in Spanish)

Ronaldo offered this response to my request to clarify a phrase I heard him say previously, that Q’eqchi’s are used by politicians as ladders (como escalera). I noticed this phrase in Spanish in the middle of Ronaldo’s comments in Q’eqchi’ during a meeting of COCODE leaders from El Estor and the surrounding communities in May 2013 (field notes), about six weeks before our first interview. At the meeting, which was organized by a local NGO, several people brought up that the mayor promised a particular community a paved road into the community but it never happened. Later I heard others employ the phrase escalera, so I was curious to learn its significance. In our interview Ronaldo expanded on the role of possessing legal title to the land in getting politicians to recognize communities’ rights. Finn Stepputat’s (2001) research in Guatemala confirmed that politics and local development are intimately related, “In practice, only settled communities that are not engaged in conflicts are eligible for the development projects, in particular for the development infrastructure (schools, clinics, roads, water, etc.)” (p. 300). Due to this dynamic, politicians court votes during the election season, but then cite the lack of legal title to the land to justify breaking their promises to provide schools, housing, and other material needs. As Ronaldo explains,

Once they win, there is nothing anymore, the excuses begin,

‘No, because you do not have judicial certainty for the land.’
But we already voted, that is the big problem, you are a citizen but in name, you do not have rights. If you go to ask, they impede that right because it is not legal and it is not convenient, a mountain of excuses. (2nd interview, in Spanish)

Maida similarly commented, “We indigenous peoples only serve as ladders, so that someone can gain power and then afterwards they forget about us” (1st interview, in Spanish). Q’eqchi’s’ impact on elections has come to be recognized by campaigning politicians as pivotal to winning office in the municipality, but Q’eqchi’s daily concerns as citizens are negated because they do not hold the title to the land they occupy.

Another term commonly describing politicians’ manipulatation of Q’eqchi’s during election season is offerings (ofrecimientos) to communities in exchange for their votes. For example, part of Maco’s response to my question about development was: “I have begun to think that my Guatemala is shameful because when there are elections, the offerings arrive, the government arrives and then when they are already there they forget about the people” (1st interview, in Q’eqchi’). Later in the interview Maco went on to say:

What we should see is the necessity, the commitment that person gives to our community about all of the necessities that you see in each community. That is my idea but unfortunately we do not all think the same way and we let ourselves be carried away by things, like I said, because they are handing out a T-shirt I will be there but I do not stop and think what is the most necessary for our communities. (1st interview, in Q’eqchi’)

In particular Maco referred to his experiences campaigning for Rigoberta Menchú, the presidential candidate for the pan-Mayan party Winaq. He lamented that Menchú lost the election over many factors, such as discrimination against her as an indigenous woman, but also
that other political parties won votes through small bribes and promises for support to communities after winning office.

When I asked Analisa how Q’eqchi’s can participate in politics more effectively, she responded by pointing out how people in remote communities are “opening their eyes” to manipulation by politicians to win elections. According to her, people in the communities are already saying, ‘It is not so easy for them to come and trick us. We already started to realize that they use us as a ladder. We will see, next time they come back, we want to see an agreement because that way we will sign it, and that way we are going to be able to make demands when they are in power.’ (1st interview, in Spanish)

Analisa and Ronaldo’s comments indicate some of Q’eqchi’s’ reflections on the limited outcomes of their participation via electoral campaigns thus far. They are becoming savvier in thinking through advancing their communities’ interests beyond the elections.

**Learning Your Place: Q’eqchi’ Women in Departmental Politics**

Through an invitation from AEPDI, in May 2013 I traveled to Puerto Barrios, the departmental capital of Izabal, with a group of 20 or so mostly Q’eqchi’ women, mostly monolingual from what I observed, with the exception of two Ladinas and me (field notes). Women’s organizations from four of the five municipalities in the department of Izabal (the fifth municipality did not have any registered women’s organizations, so they did not participate) gathered to elect a representative for the Departmental Development Council (Consejo Departamental de Desarrollo, or CDD in Spanish). Because this meeting included women from various municipalities, the racial and ethnic diversity in the group was greater than I usually experienced in Q’eqchi’-only communities. The department of Izabal has a population of
approximately 400,000 people (Consejo de Desarrollo Departamental de Izabal, 2010, p. 15) and a quarter of the inhabitants of Izabal are indigenous (p. 16), the term the Guatemalan government uses to describe Xinkas, Mayas, and Garífunas (an ethnic group of African descent that lives in northern Guatemala, northern Honduras, Belize, and Nicaragua). 91% of the inhabitants of El Estor are indigenous and 52% of those in Lívingston are indigenous (p. 16), while Puerto Barrios, Morales, and Amates are 94% Ladino, 98% Ladino, and 97% Ladino, respectively (p. 16). The women gathered for this meeting in Puerto Barrios represented the ethnic diversity of Izabal in a way I had not previously experienced.

Because it was an ethnically diverse group, I was able to observe inter-ethnic dynamics I normally had not seen in El Estor. As in every other event I attended in Izabal, the meeting opened with a prayer, which was delivered in Spanish but all the Q’eqchi’ women prayed in Q’eqchi’. A delegate also delivered a Garifuna song or prayer after the Spanish-language prayer, so there was some attempt to make it a multicultural event by representing the cultures of the diverse women participating (Bastos, 2012).

Later, as women were called up to cast their vote, one of the Ladina delegates from El Estor discreetly mentioned to the Q’eqchi’ women that she would help them cast their vote if they were unable to read and write in order to vote on their own. This seemed a significant accommodation to me, a way of recognizing Q’eqchi’ delegates might have lower levels of formal education. However, as each Q’eqchi’ woman went to the front to vote the Ladina announcer (not from the El Estor delegation) asked over the mic if each woman was able to read and write, or if she needed help voting. While this may have been a mere act of insensitivity and not intended to be humiliating, the public disregard for the Q’eqchi’ women’s privacy had a real impact on me. I could not tell if the Q’eqchi’ women were embarrassed but I was.
The other incident that stood out to me at this event was when one of the Garífuna delegates was calling the delegates to the front on the microphone. She was pronouncing some of the delegates’ names with hesitation, and a couple of Ladina women in the front row repeatedly corrected her pronunciation. These two incidents led me to wonder about the role that Ladino privilege played in the dynamics I observed. Were these Ladinás intentionally treating Q’eqchi’ and Garífuna women in an infantilizing way, minimizing their political agency? Or were their responses a reflection of class differences, as they tried to assert an elevated status as professional women?

Campaigning for a Mayan Woman for President

For research contributors Maco and Filomena, the presidential campaigns of Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú (K’iche’ Maya) in 2007 and 2011 represented an opportunity to break from a cycle of supporting local candidates, both Mayas and Ladinos, who betray the promises they make during their campaigns. Since Menchú lost both elections (she only won 2-3% of the total votes) it is impossible to say with certainty that she would have kept all of her promises. However, Maco and Filomena both reflected on their participation as an affirmation of the importance of their Mayan identity to politics. Menchú’s candidacy gave them an entry point for participating in electoral politics without feeling on the margins, as they have felt in other electoral processes where they felt like “ladders” for others’ political aspirations. The Menchú campaign offered an affirming experience of Mayan participation in elections. Maco explains that during the 2007 campaign he “fully supported the party of Dr. Menchú, Winaq… I gave all my time in order to do things in the communities because I wanted an indigenous person to arrive to be able to govern” (1st interview, in Q’eqchi’). Maco was committed to Menchú’s
campaign as by and for indigenous peoples, and he viewed his participation as a concrete alliance from which Q’eqchi’ communities could benefit. In exchange for their support of her campaign, Maco and others anticipated that Menchú would redistribute the balance of power in Guatemala in favor of the country’s poor and indigenous peoples.

Filomena shared similar experiences when she campaigned for Menchú in her first run for president in 2007:

Yes, [Menchú] arrived in my community, when we were there we did a great Mayan ceremony in the countryside there near my community and it was really lovely. But, well, it was like her fight disappeared within the political party. Already you did not hear much in the last campaign. I did not participate either, but in the previous campaign I did participate and I supported her a lot. If she wanted to, if she again became a candidate, well, why would I not support her? Because I know that she is a great woman, a fighter who has a lot of knowledge about all of us poor people, who have suffered as she suffered. I would be there to support her again. (1st interview, in Q’eqchi’)

I interpret Filomena’s statement that Menchú’s “fight disappeared within the political party” as a comment on the homogenizing effect of the electoral system, which ultimately negated the value of Menchú’s struggle as a Mayan woman and political activist, two elements of Menchú’s identity that were not welcomed by the country’s political elite. I do not believe Filomena’s comments reflect the relevance to her of the Winaq political program or the idea of a pan-Mayan party. Menchú’s experiences resonate with her own; both are Mayan women who lived through the atrocities of the armed conflict and choose to fight today to advance indigenous peoples’ rights.
In the figure of Menchú, the confluence of Mayan traditions and current political institutions in the electoral process becomes visible. For example, Filomena describes a reciprocal relationship between Menchú and Mayan communities: Menchú and her supporters participated in a ceremony, and she demonstrated her fluency in Mayan cultural norms by incorporating those events into her campaign. Menchú’s electoral failures in 2007 and 2011 represent dashed hopes for many Mayas about the possibility of electing an indigenous president in the near future. However, Menchú’s campaigns also had the effect of encouraging Mayas to participate in the electoral process, some for the first time, such as Maco and Filomena, who had previously felt on the outside of state-sponsored politics.

In response to my question about the perceived legitimacy of Menchú’s Winaq party among Q’eqchi’s, the comments of Valerio, Q’eqchi’ educator, hint at various roadblocks to meaningful recognition of Mayas’ cultural and political claims within Guatemalan society:

I say that if 500 years of history of discrimination, racism, exclusion, marginalization, if we bring together standards, maybe we can wait 30, 40 more years to be able to construct a political party, or perhaps to construct proposals for autonomy from the point of view of Mayan communities, no, in order to be able to have that right, to demand that right, of having power, but so that we have conscience. Because the majority of Mayan politicians that have had a certain role as protagonists in the current period, are Mayan politicians that do not have credibility, they do not have prestige, no. They have belonged to other political parties, and people realize that. (1st interview, in Spanish)

Valerio did not express confidence in the political legitimacy of the Winaq party, composed of many old-guard Mayan politicians from throughout the country. In this way, Valerio agrees with Montejo’s (2005) statement that “the competing agendas of personal advancement and the
distancing from their home communities have meant that these people are not providing effective political or intellectual leadership. These Maya compete with middle-class ladinos in Guatemala” (p. 127). Mayas recognize that Mayan politicians’ ambitions may outweigh their loyalty to advancing causes important to broader sectors of the Mayan population.

However, rather than focusing on the shortcomings or gains of the Mayan political leadership, especially as it relates to the pan-Mayan Winaq party, Valerio’s comments situate the current pan-Mayan movement within the 500 year history of Mayas’ fight against colonialism. While he is critical of the current configuration of political actors speaking as the Mayan movement, he expresses the need for patience in constructing a movement up to the historic nature of the tasks Mayas face in relation to the Guatemalan government. In response to my questions about Mayan intellectuals’ proposals for autonomy or other forms of uniquely Mayan governance, Valerio pointed to the need for Mayan leadership to develop more over the coming decades. He does not specify what the movement’s goal should be, but he mentions constructing a cohesive political party, autonomy for Mayan peoples, and taking some measure of political power as possible goals of such a movement.

According to Hale (2004) and Montejo (2005), the future strength and cohesion of the Maya movement depends on addressing more quotidian concerns among the majority of Mayas, who live without access to running water, electricity, healthcare, or secondary school. Until these daily concerns are resolved, Maya leaders tend to blend in with Ladino politicians and academics, reaping personal material rewards and prestige while Maya communities suffer (Hale, 2004; Montejo, 2005). According to Hale (2004), “a crucial facet of resistance, then, is rearticulation, which creates bridges between authorized and condemned ways of being Indian. Political initiatives that link indigenous peoples who occupy carrying spaces in relation to the
centers of political-economic power are especially promising” (p. 20). Hale suggests the necessity of deconstructing uni-dimensional understandings of indigeneity and considers the variety of identities that can co-exist under the category of “indigenous.”

For Valerio, one of the most important tasks is to achieve an equal level of formal education between Mayas and Ladinos. According to information from 2010 from the Guatemalan National Institute for Statistics, the average years of schooling in Guatemala is 5.6 years, and on average indigenous children complete three fewer years than their non-indigenous counterparts (Pop & Organismo Naleb’, 2013, p. 44). Through greater access to education, Valerio was hopeful young people would be able to generate viable options outside of the current electoral framework, revitalizing Mayan political traditions rather than relying solely on the structures inherited through 500 years of colonialism.

Menchú’s presidential campaigns bring to the surface tensions and contradictions related to barriers to indigenous peoples’ participation, from discrimination against indigenous women, to interpretations of the proper “qualifications” for politicians, to Mayas’ limited access to the resources and funds necessary to campaign for political office.

**Concluding Thoughts**

The political interventions I outlined in local and national electoral politics highlight moments of social movement learning Q’eqchi’s experience during the defense of territory today. Contributors’ comments on electoral politics were particularly instructive as I attempted to unravel the complicated decisions Q’eqchi’s make about when to participate in state institutions, and when to bypass them and focus on community mechanisms. The term *escalera* (stair) to describe Q’eqchi’s role in the electoral system reflects a disjuncture between campaign
promises and disheartening experiences with local Ladino and Q’eqchi’ politicians. As a decisive majority of the population of El Estor, Q’eqchi’s’ votes are decisive in local elections. Through experiences in municipal elections Q’eqchi’s reflect on how to maximize their power as voters in order to meet their communities’ goals, especially in relation to legalizing their land. While their experiences related to municipal elections were generally negative, three research contributors explained in detail how their local participation in Rigoberta Menchú’s 2007 national presidential campaign represented a source of hope in relation to electoral politics. They saw the possibilities for a Mayan politician to alter the relations of power between indigenous communities and the state.

While Mayas challenge ongoing exclusion and violence by seeking redress from the state—through the electoral process, COCODES, and appeals to other state institutions—they also formulate decolonized alternatives to the legitimacy of the state, based on their own traditional governance practices. Elders’ Councils and practices such as consensus-building, dialogue, and consultation help to maintain Q’eqchi’ governance intact, in spite of the impact of the state on communities. Although Q’eqchi’s do not organize themselves through a centralized social movement, the collective identity and networking highlighted through the lens of Tarrow’s (1998) contentious politics helps to show the social and cultural cohesion enhanced through defense of territory.
Chapter 7—Conquest by Corporation: The Extractivist Invasion

In this chapter I build on the previous two chapters to more fully answer how Q’eqchi’s link defense of territory today with previous expropriations of their territory. Building on Grandia’s (2012) three moments of enclosure or “conquest,” as well as work by Laplante and Nolin (2014) on mining as a fourth invasion in Guatemala, I propose that the current stage of enclosure and commodification of Q’eqchi’ territories constitutes a fourth “conquest”, a “conquest by corporation.” However, while Laplante and Nolin focus on mining and address their analysis to Guatemala as a whole, my framework focuses on Q’eqchi’ territories more specifically, and extends the analysis to include large agricultural enterprises as important actors in this attempted conquest. This attempted conquest is spearheaded by national and transnational corporations who systematically exploit rich mineral deposits and fertile soil in the northern lowlands of Guatemala. Anthony Bebbington and Jeffrey Bury (2013) argue in their work on the political ecology of the subsoil that the rapid growth in extractive industries is accompanied by a concurrent “process of accelerated and extensive enclosure” (p. 11) in order to facilitate that expansion. According to Bebbington and Bury, enclosure is part and parcel of the growing commodification of the landscape, which also transforms relations of access to lands and resources (pp. 11-12). With Bebbington and Bury’s idea in mind, I consider the impacts of these transformations by transnational extractivist forces on the Q’eqchi’ territorial landscape.

Defense of territory is Q’eqchi’s’ popular, grassroots response to an episode of contentious politics initiated through the Guatemalan government’s shift to neoliberal economic policies, and extractivism in particular (Veltmeyer, 2012). In his theory of contentious politics, Tarrow (1998) identifies that “contentious politics is triggered when changing political
opportunities and constraints create incentives for social actors who lack resources on their own” (p. 2). Since the end of the armed conflict, the Guatemalan government has attracted foreign investors with the promise of a stable government, combined with rich soil and plentiful mineral deposits. The government actively pursued foreign investment through economic incentives, such as lowering the royalties foreign mining companies pay in Guatemala from 6% to 1% in 1997; this measure increased the motivation for companies to invest in Guatemala over other Central American nations. As a result of the favorable economic conditions for mining, metal exploration and mining licenses in Guatemala increased 1000 percent between 1998 and 2008 (Dougherty, 2011, p. 405). According to James Anaya (2011), the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2008-2014), between 1997 and 2011 the Ministry of Energy and Mining granted 398 licenses for exploration and exploitation of minerals in Guatemala, of which 262 were already in the exploitation phase in 2011 (p. 6).

The human rights violations accompanying the rapid expansion of the mining industry since the end of the armed conflict are well documented in academic and NGO literature (see Chapter Two for an overview). For example, in his report to the United Nations Human Rights Council, Anaya (2011) expressed his concern about “the high level of conflictivity that exists in many regions of the country, which has, in turn, led to numerous violations of individual human rights and to the disproportionate repression of legitimate acts of social protest” (p. 10). When a latent conflict erupts into an active one, the state and private security forces tend to resort to strong-arm tactics rather than dialogue to temporarily quash the conflict in favor of private capital, which usually takes the form of large landowners or corporations.

While contributors note continuity in forms of violence from the armed conflict, the current conquest marks a paradigm change in the Guatemalan government’s development and
investment model. Research contributors identify large-scale agricultural and extractive enterprises as the principal antagonists in the fourth “conquest” (Grandia, 2012), the conquest by corporation, which dates from the signing of the Peace Accords. Concurrent with the reactivation of mining operations at the Fénix plant in El Estor is an influx of flex-crop corporations that buy or lease large tracts of land in Q’eqchi’ territories in order to convert the land into monocrop plantations (See Chapter Two). The state supports this conquest by providing police and military troops to aid corporations’ private security guards as they evict entire communities, destroying Q’eqchi’’s’ homes, crops, and modest possessions (Alonso-Fradejas, 2015; Imai et al., 2014; Méndez & Carrera, 2014). Security guards act with impunity during evictions, knowing that the state will not prosecute them for defending their corporate bosses’ private property (Paley, 2007b).

In addition to sharing Q’eqchi’’s’ perspectives on the impacts of violence in their daily lives, I will explore the repertoires of contention (Tarrow, 1998) Q’eqchi’’s deploy in order to confront the ever-present threat of eviction. These actions include land occupations and the 2014 march they organized from Cobán to Guatemala City in order to present the president with their demands for land. I also comment on Q’eqchi’’s’ international collaborations with researchers, NGOs, and filmmakers to win solidarity for their defense of territory. Through protest actions, networking, and alliance-building with peasant organizations and others, Q’eqchi’’s draw unity and strength from their collective identities as sons and daughters of the earth, as indigenous people, and as peasants.
Land Titling: A Capitalist Transposition onto the Q'eqchi’ Cosmovision

A recurring phrase in interviews was contributors’ strategy for acquiring an official title of ownership from the Guatemalan government, thus acquiring “juridical certainty” for their ancestral lands. Alonso-Fradejas (2015) describes Q’eqchi’s’ goals in pursuing juridical certainty as “achieving juridico-political status as subjects of collective rights in their territory” (p. 502). Emphasis on land titling today reflects a defensive posture in the face of centuries of expulsions, expropriations, and relocations. Q’eqchi’s attempt to adhere to the Guatemalan government’s bureaucratic procedures for legally formalizing occupation, though they have not internalized the logic of the commodification of land. I posit that Q’eqchi’s’ adoption of the language of juridical certainty reflects a transposition of capitalist land relations (Woolford, 2011) onto the Q’eqchi’ cosmovision. Indigenous peoples’ intimate spiritual relations to land contrast sharply with the individual private ownership that is the hallmark of capitalist social and economic relations. In his research on the British Columbia Treaty Process in Canada, Andrew Woolford (2011) argues the treaty making process is a source of symbolic violence because it “fosters, in this sense, a forcible or coercive transposition, in that it compels Indigenous persons to adopt and bring into treaty processes the habits and dispositions of actors in the non-Indigenous economic field” (p. 71). Similarly, Q’eqchi’s are forced to negotiate control over their land and resources using an imposed framework that only recognizes land as a commodity.

Concepts from the field of political ecology help to frame my theory of the fourth conquest, since land in Guatemala is a site of battles over natural resources, local knowledge, and political power (Robbins, 2012). However, the political ecology framework is further enriched through a focused consideration indigenous knowledge and ontology from Mayan perspectives. Political ecology helps to situate struggles over land through a language of power, domination,
and resistance, but indigenous contributors’ analysis underlines the cultural stakes in defending territory. As a member of an agro-ecological association shared during Leire Urkidi’s (2011) research with activists opposing the Marlin Mine:

In the Maya *cosmovisión*, everything is considered as a unity. For instance, the human being, the water, the air, and every element of life are inside a circle. Therefore, the human being cannot be superior to other elements. We are conscious that every natural element is life. They say for instance that if royalties increase they will give us the 10 per cent. If we are going to have ill children and the whole population ill, what do we want the 10 per cent for? We see that the movement is defending life, not so much the environment. (p. 572)

This quote expresses the inter-related aspects of indigenous peoples’ relationship with the land: the political, the cultural, the economic, and the ecological. The imposition of capitalist approaches to land is just one example of the subordination of indigenous knowledges and customs to techniques originating with the Ladino state.

Del Valle Escalante (2008) posits that the subordination of Mayan knowledges is often internalized among both Mayas and Ladinos, in the contention “that Mayas should be the ones ‘modernizing themselves,’ the ones who should adapt themselves to modernity, the ones who should make use of modern Western techniques, while Ladinos remain absolved of learning from us” (p. 196, translation mine). Mayas are battling not just for control over land and resources, but over their very existence and representation as distinct peoples within the political, economic, and social structures of the capitalist framework imposed by the Guatemalan government. Below NGO worker Martín identifies that Q’eqchi’s do not view land for its monetary value:
They are going to defend their land, their resources, because it is their own mother, it is their own life. Ah, but for the kaxlan29, Westerner, they turn everything into a commodity. So they are educating people to charge for a tree, to charge for something, or to sell their land. (1st interview, in Spanish)

Land titling is a means to achieving a modicum of security in their occupation of their ancestral lands, but the goal continues to be maintaining a harmonious and productive relationship to the land. Land is a member of the community to be defended, and Q’eqchi’s’ relationship to the land precedes claims by the Guatemalan government, landowners, or corporate interests. In this interview Martín went on to contextualize the issue of historical possession (posesión histórica) (Granvosky-Larsen, 2013) of the land for the communities struggling to win legal title today:

The fact that he is Don Juan Caal [common Q’eqchi’ last name] who is there, it is understood that he is a native because a Q’eqchi’ cannot have come from China or Japan, no. He is native, so the historical possession [of the land] is already there. The ancestral right is there. So, what do we have to do in this case so the ancestral right and the historic possession takes effect? We only have to work the political side of things—and that is political—so that the legalization of the land does not have any impediments. So the authorities, they say to us,

‘Well, you there, where are you from?’

We have to understand that he is Q’eqchi’, we do not have to ask where he is from. He is Q’eqchi’, it is his land, so what we have to do, the idea of the inscription, registering

29 According to Kay Warren (1998), the Ladino, “the twentieth-century ‘outsider’ and hated racist within national society” (p. 20), is the key referent for kaxlan, which is a term used to describe any outsider.
indigenous communities, this is the question. These are the mechanisms that are strengthening the registration of the community already. They are also basic elements for the registry, for the adjudication of the lands so that the government institutions, the Guatemalan State, does not impose any more “buts.” No. This also gives indigenous communities strength. So these are aspects we are working on in order to eliminate the State’s discrimination towards indigenous peoples. (1st interview, in Spanish)

Martín interprets denial of Q’eqchi’s historical possession of the land as a form of racism deployed by the Guatemalan state to deny indigenous peoples the ability to maintain their cultural and traditional governance practices on their ancestral lands.

Here Martín refers to Q’eqchi’s’ option of declaring a Collective Agrarian Patrinony (CAP) for their community’s land, rather than adopting individual titles. CAP allows Q’eqchi’ communities the right to access and withdraw resources on titled lands, but the state maintains exclusive control of management, exclusion, and alienation (Ybarra, 2011b). According to Ybarra (2011b), the Agrarian Institute (Instituto para la Transformación Agraria, or INTA in Spanish) assigned CAP titles for the vast majority of indigenous communities because INTA “did not believe peasants could manage their lands profitably” (pp. 1027-1028). According to Ybarra, many of these titling processes were never completed, which has contributed to the number of land conflicts taking place over indigenous lands today. Communities began the process of titling their land but it was often interrupted because they fled during the armed conflict, or because the titling process was otherwise interrupted.

Because Q’eqchi’s are being displaced from their lands by corporations looking to extract minerals and monocrops, Q’eqchi’s have adapted their defense of their lands to meet current
contingencies. When I asked evicted community leader Marco his vision for his community, he responded:

Well, my biggest vision, well, my desire, is to see my community newly reunited, that there is tranquility, that there is peace and that we have our land to cultivate our food, as we were doing before. For that same reason, according to my thoughts, it is to see my community, as I already said, I keep working, I will continue to work. For that same reason I ask and I have asked that more organizations join our fight, and that we should have visits to our community and have reinforcement in front of the government in order to be able to demand our rights to the land and our possession and for the legalization of our lands. That is my way of thinking. (1st interview, in Q’eqchi’)

Marcelino told me during our second interview, “The most necessary thing, what we want, our only goal, our mind, is to win juridical certainty of our land” (2nd interview, in Q’eqchi’).

Q’eqchi’s hope that possessing legal title to their land will end once and for all the pervasive feelings of insecurity and their fears of violence against themselves or their loved ones. Their experiences with CGN and Chabil Utzaj show the necessity of adopting such a course.

**The Price of Nickel: Eviction by the Guatemalan Nickel Company**

The distrust and violence cultivated by the Guatemalan government during the armed conflict has been compounded by intense, protracted disputes over control of Q’eqchi’ ancestral territories between Q’eqchi’s and corporations during the fourth conquest. The nickel mine on the outskirts of El Estor has been at the center of ongoing battles between Q’eqchi’s, the state, and private business interests since 1960 (García Arriaga, 2011). In this section I develop a narrative of evictions of Q’eqchi’ communities by the Guatemalan Nickel Company (Compañía
Guatemalteca de Níquel, or CGN in Spanish) between 2007 and today, based on contributors’ first-hand testimony to me, other local and national research, and NGO documents. I focus on the community of Lote Ocho (Lot Eight) as exemplary of the complications of land titling, the violence of evictions, and the company’s ongoing threats to community leaders who oppose them.

Rosalía, a 29-year-old from Lote Ocho, joined the fight to defend the land as a young married adult, with the influence of her husband’s parents:

Rosalía: So, well, the fight for the land…when I began, when I got together with my husband, my in-laws, they are, they have maintained the fight in defense of the territory. So that was what they started to instill in me, when I moved there and I started to understand that defending the land is very important because that is where we work. And this is what they taught us. Together with my husband, we began to think: Where are we going to work if we do not have land? So, because of that, they also said to us,

‘You both should take care of the land so that also some day you do not lack a place to grow crops.’

Since I got together with my husband that is how I am fighting to defend my land.

Interviewer: So in your family, in your childhood, your parents did not talk about the fight? It is only when you arrived at the house of your in-laws that you began to get involved?

Rosalía: Well, my parents, they lived in that community but when the fear began in those years, then they decided that it was better to leave their land, they came down from the hills and they came here.

Interviewer: The armed conflict?
Rosalía: Yes, yes, the armed conflict. That is how it was, they were not integrated into
the fight anymore. (2nd interview, in Q’eqchi’)

As Rosalía indicates, her parents had been involved in the fight to defend the land, but they
moved away from their lands during the armed conflict in order to avoid the violence. In some
ways, Rosália’s family is like many others, who are picking up the struggle that was abandoned
due to necessity during the armed conflict. While her narrative opens with the influence of her
in-laws, by the end it is clear that she is reclaiming the legacy of her family’s struggle for land.
Even though she is too young to remember the armed conflict, the conflict has a legacy within
her struggle to defend the land today.

As Q’eqchi’s see it, they have the right to live and work on the land, the same as their
parents and grandparents. In her testimony to Méndez and Carrera (2014), Tania Chub from
Lote Ocho ties her community’s fight today to defend the land from CGN to Q’eqchi’s’
longstanding connection to the land:

The evictions started because of the land. They did not want us to build our houses here,
because they say that the land is theirs. But we came here because we have worked here
since the time of our grandparents and great-grandparents. (p. 85, translation mine)

Skye Resources, majority owener of CGN, carried out a series of violent evictions in January
2007 to clear out occupants around the mine in order to explore mineral deposits. Five Q’eqchi’
communities were violently evicted by National Police (Policía Nacional Civil, or PNC in
Spanish), soldiers, and private security on January 8th and 9th in 2007. On the morning of
January 8th, 430 policemen and 200 soldiers arrived to issue the eviction notice to the 70 families
living in La Unión neighborhood (Paley, 2007b). Evictions also took place in four other
neighborhoods where CGN claims ownership of the land; during the process Q’eqchi’ homes
and belongings were burned or otherwise destroyed (Imai et al., 2014; Paley, 2007b). In a press release issued on January 10th, 2007, Skye Resources President and CEO Ian Austin was quoted as saying,

We are grateful to the Guatemalan Public Ministry and the National Police Force for the professional manner in which this unfortunate situation was resolved. We also would like to thank the stakeholders on both sides of this dispute for maintaining a peaceful atmosphere during this action. We regret that our previous attempts at settlement of this issue through dialog were unsuccessful, but we also reaffirm our commitment to continue our discussions on matters of concern with the local communities in the El Estor region.

(Skye Resources Inc., 2007)

According to the press release, approximately 155 individuals total were present in all five communities during the evictions, and that 15 “squatters” initiated a confrontation with the police (Skye Resources, Inc., 2007). Skye Resources’ account of the evictions directly contradicts the testimony Q’eqchi’s offered to the news media (Paley, 2007b) and to me.

The evictions of these five communities was followed on January 17th, 2007 by evictions in the community of Lote Ocho (Lot Eight) during the day, when women and children were at home and the men were working on nearby lands. The community had anticipated the eviction, so they decided that the women should remain in the community, based on the assumption that “with their presence the women could stop it [the eviction], since they would be respected as women. For that reason, many of the women stayed in the community in a conscious way, as a form of defending the territory” (Méndez & Carrera, 2014, p. 79, translation mine). The idea of communitarian feminism proposed by Lorena Cabnal (Xinka) (2010) helps to situate this intimate moment of defense of the land by Q’eqchi’ women as a decision informed by both
culture and politics. Cabnal describes communitarian feminism as “a feminist proposal that integrates the historic and quotidian struggle of our peoples for the recuperation and defense of the territory, as a guarantee of concrete territorial space where the life of bodies is expressed” (pp. 22-23, translation mine). The Q’eqchi’ women of Lote Ocho stayed behind to defend the land, but they had no idea of the violence that would be directed against them and their lands as a result.

Community members present during the evictions have testified that 100 or so heavily armed military and police (Jimenez, 2016b) used tear gas to force people out of their homes. They tried to set fire to Q’eqchi’s’ homes and personal belongings but they were unable to set fires immediately since it had recently rained. Some of the armed men returned in the afternoon, at which time they used a combination of chainsaws and fire to destroy the homes and personal belongings of the community of Lote Ocho (Méndez & Carrera, 2014). Through its practice of hiring ex-military for their private security forces, HudBay draws on the repertoires of military training, including those used more recently during the armed conflict, to secure the company’s control of indigenous lands (Méndez & Carrera, 2014; Rights Action, 2015).

Current forms of violence mirror those employed from colonial times to the armed conflict in order to displace, reorganize, or dispossess indigenous peoples from their homes and their lands. Guatemalan scholar Egla Martinez Salazar (2008) argues that the violence perpetrated by the state during the armed conflict has learning dimensions, since it was employed systematically to cultivate a fear of violent repercussions to any form of political resistance, especially by targeting Mayas for genocide (Commission for Historical Clarification, 1999). Martinez Salazar labels state terror “a teaching-learning process, the main goal of which is to
forge a long-term socio-cultural fear and political paralysis” (p. 202). She identifies state terror as a teaching-learning process in which:

Not only the common and cruel physical expressions of violence known as genocide, torture, rape, kidnappings and individual assassinations, but also a set of well thought-out discourses and technical strategies through which the political, social, and cultural gendered, racialized and degenerate ‘other’ is constituted and reproduced, even after state terror has decreased through peace accord treaties. (p. 202)

These strategies have continued as police and military, as well as military-trained private security, target indigenous communities with a range of violence. While the elite has a slightly different composition than during the armed conflict, the lesson they are teaching to Q’eqchi’ peasants is the same: to submit to capitalist appropriation of their land and resources, or pay the price through physical and structural violence committed against their bodies and lands.

Along with the destruction of their food, homes, and other belongings during the evictions, many women reported being raped, some times by multiple men and in front of their children (Méndez & Carrera, 2014). On behalf of the Guatemalan NGO ECAP, Méndez and Carrera (2014) compiled the testimonies of Q’eqchi’ women of Lote Ocho about the rapes that occurred during the evictions. Méndez and Carrera’s analysis emphasizes the role of sexual and other forms of violence as tools of corporate and state agents to control Q’eqchi’ lands (p. 86). As they explain,

[Sexual violence] constituted an aggression that was exercised on the bodies of the women in order to shatter the resistance of the community of Lote Ocho and force it to abandon the disputed lands, as well as to subdue the collective struggles of the Q’eqchi’ peasant communities for access to land in the Polochic Valley. (p. 86, translation mine)
The women attempted to defend the lands with their bodies, and their bodies were violated as a result. Méndez and Carrera describe the men who carried out sexual violence against the women as representing “the economic power of transnational capital, the political and military power of the State, as well as patriarchal and racial power” (p. 105). The fear that resulted from these events is ongoing, not isolated to the day of the evictions. As Margarita Caal Caal, one of the violated women, said to *New York Times* reporter Suzanne Daley (2016), “The fear is not over. I still fear, all the time.”

In a presentation I attended in El Estor in November 2013 to a Canadian delegation organized by Breaking the Silence and the United Church of Canada, María Choc, a Q’eqchi’ community organizer in El Estor, recounted to the delegation the local history of the mining company (field notes). In attendance were several representatives of Q’eqchi’ communities affected by evictions and threats and violence at the hands of CGN over the years. After describing the history of CGN, she explained to the delegation the experience of eviction. Her comments were directed to the Canadians present in the delegation, who were almost all women:

> And if we talk about evictions, briefly I am going to tell you, there were violations of our rights all over again, principally against the women. They take away our lands. We have to go, gathering our children from one side to the other, to save ourselves from the bullets, from the tear gas, pepper spray, we have to see if we have food, we have to see to our children. They burned our clothes, they burned our little houses, our food. And the question I ask is: Is that not a violation? How would it be for you all, without knowing anything, with you in your homes preparing food, that they come to evict you? That you have to grab your children, that you all hide yourselves, that you spill your food? That is where the grave violations begin again. (November 26, 2013, field notes)
Adela Quim testifies to the death of her two children as a result of the evictions, showing how multi-faceted the damages are for her to this day:

When they tried to rape me I attempted to flee, but they followed me. My daughter was with me when the soldiers grabbed me, when I suffered the rape. I was left there lying and unconscious since I do not remember anything. My husband came to look for me and my three-year-old daughter showed him where I was. I do not remember anything. I was nine months’ pregnant, my son was born dead. When I woke up I no longer had my son, the people in the community had buried him. I did not see him again. My three-year-old daughter got sick after the eviction and she died from the shock. It [the shock] gave her a fever, we looked for medicine but she did not get better. That is why it hurts me a lot to remember because I lost my two children because of the fight we are waging.

(p. 84, translation mine)

Beyond the trauma of the women and their children, who were forced to be witnesses, the community as a collective suffered from the violence associated with the evictions. The community was forced to relocate two kilometers up the mountain, even further from schools, health care, and other social services that were located closer to their original community site. In addition, they face the repercussions in the form of harassment of leaders and attempts to divide the community into pro and anti-company factions.

The Aftermath of Evictions: “We live with that dread in our bodies”

Even years after the concentrated wave of evictions in 2007, tensions simmer and erupt on a regular basis between CGN and the communities living on lands claimed by the mined. Just days before my second interview with 32-year-old Marta from Lote Ocho in June 2014, her
community was involved in a stand-off with CGN security. Her community had scheduled a meeting on Saturday morning to discuss with a neighboring community rumors they had authorized CGN to start working on their community’s land. On Saturday morning the community of Lote Ocho awoke to find CGN’s private security had occupied the community hall overnight. Marta had not yet made the long trip up into the community in the mountains, so she and several other women remained at the main road where vehicles turned up towards her community in order to monitor all of the vehicles coming and going. On Sunday the judge and attorney general arrived and ordered the company’s security to leave. After explaining the story Marta told me: “It is very risky, very strong, very, very strong what they have caused us because they fill us with fear, they fill us with dread. So we always, well, we live with that dread in our bodies” (2nd interview, in Q’eqchi’). In addition, Marta mentioned that members of the community are collaborating with CGN and providing inside information. In the case of her community, she remarks that those who are collaborating with the Company are the COCODEs, they are in the current COCODEs and some that have already been in the COCODEs that allow themselves to be carried away by the company. Why are they doing it? Because they feel they are the authorities. That is how they are putting themselves on the side of the company and supporting them. For me it is not convenient that they do this because they are our compañeros and what they are doing does not work. (2nd interview, in Q’eqchi’)

Conflicts between CGN and Q’eqchi’ communities are representative of broader patterns of resource extraction taking place during the fourth conquest. They also demonstrate the internal workings of communities as members take opposing sides in the conflict. While some would argue that CGN poses a danger to everyone in Marta’s community, individuals in state-
recognized positions of authority negotiate on behalf of the community, deepening divisions between community members.

Q’eqchi’ leaders representing evicted communities or communities engaged in long-term conflicts with corporations or finqueros face many pressures. Not only do they bear the responsibilities of fulfilling their community’s expectations as leaders, they also face the elite’s attempts at bribing and threatening them (Méndez & Carrera, 2014). Analisa connects efforts by indigenous peoples to demand their rights with attempts at intimidation by the ruling elite. In her words, “when indigenous peoples demand their rights, what follows is persecution, the threats come, or buy-offs of leaders” (3rd interview, in Spanish). Similarly, Ronaldo explains:

When the powerful realize that a leader is moving forward, he knows the other communities, he starts to do trainings, if they do not kill him they pay him, right.

‘I will give you so much but do not go anymore. I will pay you but do not say that.’ (1st interview, in Spanish)

Méndez and Carrera (2014) also heard accounts of harassment and intimidation by CGN in their interviews with the women of Lote Ocho. For example, in a meeting with the community’s land committee, from which the women claimants were excluded, CGN offered to reopen negotiations over disputed land with Lote Ocho if the women would withdraw their legal claims against the company (p. 94).

Local elites seek to take advantage of high levels of poverty in Izabal and Alta Verapaz to try to divide and conquer community leaders. Ronaldo’s community in El Estor also has a long-standing conflict with CGN over control of their community’s land, which they have occupied since the 1970s. In his interview, Ronaldo recounted becoming the leader of his community, and he remembered how previous leaders in the same position were killed for being too vocal.
Q’eqchi’ leaders have learned through life experience that taking on a leadership role places an individual in the line of fire of the local economic elites. Below Ronaldo explains an incident in which the mining company attempted to threaten and co-opt him, to discourage him from fighting for the title to land the nickel mine also claims.

Already when they named me leader of the community the situation started up stronger, in my case because, because of the company, they wanted to convince me, they offered me work, they offered me help, for example, to travel to Guatemala City to take care of paper work about legalizing the land.

They told me, ‘We will pay your bus fare.’

‘No,’ I told them. But they insisted, but I did not pay attention to them. Seeing that I did not pay attention, they all set themselves against me, they spoke out against me, that I am a liar, that I am a usurper, that I am a leader of invaders and many things. (2nd interview, in Spanish)

Marta from Lote Ocho conveyed her experience of conflict with the mining company, as they have defamed her character and sowed doubt among fellow community members about her intentions. She testifies:

I see that in my community there exists a lot of misinformation through the Company [CGN] because the Company has sent someone to say to our leaders, or to say to “X” person, that the land, that we are not the owners, that the Company is the true owner, but that is not how it is. What the company uses is a strategy in order to lie to people, to misinform our leaders. That is where divisionism enters. When I have gone out for trainings, they speak badly about me, that they are going to have someone kill me, that they are going to do that. So then I have a lot of doubts. Is it that they are going to kill
me or are they only rumors? My fight, no one can stop it, I see that our necessity is to win the land, because there are no other options. (1st interview, in Q’eqchi’)

The threats from CGN Marta faces within her community is a reminder of the constant dangers of trying to defend their territory from powerful outsiders. Similarly, Rosalía from Lote Ocho testifies:

They [the mining company] have offered us money, they have offered us everything, work, but in my way of thinking about it, well, I have seen that that was there is no, it will not give me any results because if they give me money I spend it and it does not benefit me at all. Well, the land yes, it will benefit us because it never runs out and that is why it remains about the land we are fighting for. It is ours, and there we eat, there we are, that does not have a price, so for that reason, well, I have fought to win our lands. (1st interview, in Q’eqchi’)

Being a leader of a community involved in a land conflict involves undertaking risks as an individual, as well as knowing how to manage threats to the community coming from a variety of directions. In most cases, Q’eqchi’s have to rely on small-scale infrapolitics (Scott, 2012) in their resistance, but the corporations operate with the support of the state. As Q’eqchi’ community organizer María Choc stated in her comments to the Canadian delegation I mentioned above: “We are fighting against monsters, Q’eqchi’ women fighting with powerful foreign monsters. But we are defending our territory” (November 26, 2013, field notes).

**The Bitterness of Sugar: Eviction by Chabil Utzaj**

Another major incident brought up during interviews was the eviction of 769 families from 14 communities in the Polochic Valley on March 15th, 2011 by the Chabil Utzaj sugar
refinery (Granovsky-Larsen, 2013; Oxfam International, 2014, 2015 & 2016; Solano, 2013). Since 2002, Q’eqchi’s had been negotiating with the owners of individual fincas in the Polochic Valley in order to acquire legal title to the lands many were living on and working as colonos (Alonso-Fradejas, 2015). For example, contributor Jorge, a mozo on the finca Bella Flor, reported his community was involved in such negotiations before their eviction. However, when the Widmann family decided to move Chabil Utzaj’s operations to the Polochic Valley, starting in 2005 they offered immediate payment and higher sums to the finqueros for the land the campesinos were trying to buy. Chabil Utzaj was able to legally acquire 5400 hectares of land (Alonso-Fradejas, 2015), which led to the displacement of thousands of Q’eqchi’s. In 2009 the Widmanns declared bankruptcy and abandoned the refinery, so many communities hoped to reopen negotiations to purchase their land (Solano, 2013). Instead, the Widmanns received new financing and reopened the refinery. On April 1st, 2011 the Pellas Group from Nicaragua, which owns the largest sugarcane and ethanol operation in Central America (Call & Savage, 2011), bought an 88% share of the refinery (Spalding, 2013, p. 13).

In response to their displacement by the Widmann family, Q’eqchi’s occupied 14 estates in the Polochic Valley in November 2010 (Alonso-Fradejas, 2015). The sugar refinery responded by organizing the eviction of the almost 800 families with the participation of 1500 soldiers and policemen (Alonso-Fradejas, 2015, p. 505), as well as private company security. The community of Vicente, a leader from Panzós, was in active negotiations over the land they were occupying at the time of their eviction:

March 14th we were in the office of the Secretariat [of Agrarian Affairs] in Guatemala, in the capital. Already on the 15th right behind us came the eviction, they did not advise us
at all. The government knows full well what they did. We need the government to comply with the juridical certainty of our land. (1st interview, in Spanish)

Vicente described the eviction in detail, relating the destruction of their homes, crops, and personal possessions. He also identified the state’s active participation in his community’s eviction: “And it was the authority of the state, they were the police. At the same time they were there from the military, at the same time the guards from the company were there” (38 years old, 1st interview, in Spanish). Solano (2013) confirms the use of tear gas during the evictions and the burning of hundreds of hectares of crops, as well as the burning or destruction of homes with bulldozers (p. 119). At least six of my research contributors were evicted from their communities by Chabil Utzaj on March 15th, 2011.

Thirty-three-year-old Ronda recounted the murder of her husband during her community’s eviction. Initially the company promised financial help after his death, but as of November 2013, she reports they had only given her a small amount of money to start up a cornfield (milpa) but none of the additional money they promised, which she had planned to use to build a small house and to cover her children’s school expenses. For Ronda, the response of the company and the government demonstrates the impunity that corporations experience in their dealings with Q’eqchi’ communities:

As if they had killed an animal, that is what they did with my husband. They did not provide any information, they did not capture those who are responsible, they did not do anything. Everything stayed the same, as if nothing had happened. (1st interview, independent translation, in Q’eqchi’)

Other research contributors compared their treatment at the hands of corporations to being treated as animals, which is an example of the stigmatization Farmer (2004) associated with
structural violence. For example, Analisa explains, “And they come, they treat us like animals, violating our rights. We are human beings and they should not treat us that way” (1st interview, in Spanish). Marta from Panzós similarly states, “We are flesh and bone and they are too. Why do they not analyze things? That we are people, we are not animals so for them to keep doing all this nastiness, what the company has caused us” (1st interview, in Q’eqchi’). Marcelino also employed similar language in his interview, pointing to Q’eqchi’s’ experiences of structural violence at the hands of the state and corporations: “Because we are humans, we are not animals for them to keep doing this to us” (1st interview, in Q’eqchi’). These comparisons are aligned with ideas circulating in Q’eqchi’s communities about the need to defend their human rights, and indigenous rights more specifically.

In the wake of the evictions, the 14 communities evicted by Chabil Utzaj were granted precautionary measures (medidas cautelares) by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) on June 20th, 2011 (Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, 2011), which requires the Guatemalan State to prevent harm to the members of the 769 families evicted in the Polochic (Comité de Unidad Campesina, 2016). Acquiring these measures in the IACHR is an example of how Q’eqchi’s are drawing on their expanding knowledge of human rights discourses and mechanisms on an international level in order to back up their local claims to their ancestral lands.

In their October 21st, 2011 progress report on implementation of the precautionary measures, the Guatemalan state (2011) refers to the evicted Q’eqchi’ inhabitants as “groups of peasants that initiated occupation, invasion, or usurpation” (President of the Republic of Guatemala, 2011, p. 1). Research collaborators described feeling stigmatized when the government and private companies call Q’eqchi’ communities and leaders “usurpers” or
“invaders” because they occupy land whose ownership is contested. Jorge from Panzós told me: “They treat us like invaders. We are not invaders. They are taking our land from us” (emphasis mine) (53 years old, 1st interview, in Spanish). Q’eqchi’s reject the idea that they are invaders on lands their ancestors lived on for centuries. In addition, they feel rightful in their occupation of these lands because they have followed protocols with the tzuultaq’as and their neighbors in order to maintain good relationships.

Chabil Utzaj adopts a language similar to that of the Guatemalan state cited above, claiming an aura of respect for the rule of law in the face of unlawful invasions by Q’eqchi’ peasants. As a producer of sugar-based biofuels, Chabil Utzaj also frames their activities with a discourse of environmental sustainability. According to the Chabil Utzaj website (2011),

The reactivation of Chabil Utzaj, as a sustainable sugar project, is a great opportunity for the Valle de Polochic not only because it constitutes an important pole of development for a rural area with high poverty rates in Guatemala, but also because of its respect for the fundamental rights of the inhabitants of the area, its commitment to the protection of the environment and compliance with the legal framework of the country.

While portraying itself as an industry leader in terms of the environment, human rights, and the rule of law, Chabil Utzaj’s practices reveal the corporation as a powerful social and economic actor operating with impunity against Q’eqchi’ communities.

Q’eqchi’s’ repertoires of contention include marches and protests organized in Guatemala City and in departmental capitals. One such mobilization was “The Popular, Peasant, Women and Indigenous March” (Marcha Indígena, Campesina, Popular y de Mujeres), which went from Cobán to Guatemala City, arriving in Guatemala City on March 27th, 2012 (Prensa Libre, 2012). Some 15,000 people participated in the arrival on the capital (Alonso-Fradejas, 2015), where the
protesters handed petitions to President Pérez Molina as well as Congress. In his description of the Marcha Campesina Popular from Cobán to Guatemala City, Marco from Panzós stated:

Well, in view of all that, all the suffering that we have lived through, we took the initiative of a march, a popular peasant march from Cobán to the capital, to make it known what we the communities have suffered here in the Polochic Valley. For that reason we did the trek and the responses, well, from that walk the response from Señor President Otto Pérez Molina was that he promised to give us the land, to buy us the land but to divide the communities up into groups. (1st interview, in Q’eqchi’)

While La Marcha may have come as a surprise to others outside the Polochic Valley, it was the result of Q’eqchi’s’ network building and organizing over months. The eviction of 769 families in the Polochic spurred a larger-scale collective action in response. The organization of this protest has direct implications for the learning that takes place during social movement organizing. I see La Marcha as an example of what Zibechi (2010) refers to as “lightning moments,” which stimulate opportunities for considering the power of social movements. This power might otherwise remain hidden beneath the daily organizational tasks social movements have to undertake in order to sustain themselves over the long term. Zibechi states:

To take lightning—insurrectional—moments as epistemological moments is to privilege the transience of the movement and, above all, its intensity, in order to encounter what lies behind and below the established forms. During the uprising, shadowed areas (that is, the margins in the eyes of the state) are illumined, albeit fleetingly. The insurgency is a moment of rupture in which subjects display their capacities, their power as a capacity to do, and deploy them, revealing aspects hidden in moments of repose, when there is little collective activity. (p. 11)
Such a bold, public call for support was necessary in order to draw attention to the plight of displaced Q’eqchi’s in the Polochic Valley, which might otherwise remain unnoticed. The action emphasized the numerical strength and international support Q’eqchi’s had garnered, which surely impacted the Guatemalan government and led it to promise land to the landless peasants (Oxfam International, 2016).

I became aware of the conflict between Chabil Utzaj and campesinos when I attended a meeting in June 2013 between communities in Panzós organized by the Secretariat of Agrarian Affairs (Secretaria de Asuntos Agrarios, or SAA in Spanish) and a group of about 150 Q’eqchi’ peasants from the Polochic Valley (field notes). I interviewed Vicente immediately after the meeting, and he detailed his community’s demands of the Guatemalan government:

We ask the government that, since it evicted us, that is also resolve these problems in the Polochic. We hope that, right they are mentioning [in the meeting with the SAA] that from today, in three months, they will comply with the purchase of the land. Well, we hope they comply, we hope they comply. If they do not comply, well, we will make the decision as campesinos, we will occupy our Mother Earth again. (1st interview, in Spanish)

Vicente’s community is willing to comply with the government’s requirements in order to buy the land, however, if the government does not respect his community’s needs, he makes it clear they will be forced to occupy other land in order to survive. However, his claim to the land is not formulated in relationship to land ownership; the basis of his claims is his identity as aj ral ch’och’, as an indigenous person, and as a peasant who relies on the land for his livelihood.

In April 2013, after a petition signed by 107,000 people from 55 countries supporting the evicted peasants was submitted (Oxfam International, 2016), President Pérez Molina promised
each evicted family 3.5 hectares of land (Alonso-Fradejas, 2015) grouped together on *fincas* or other large tracts of land. As of February 2016, 578 of the 769 evicted families are settled on other lands (Centro de Informes Reportivos sobre Guatemala, 2016), but the remaining families continue negotiations with local state institutions and land owners in their attempt to resettle on local, agriculturally productive lands.

**Holding the State Accountable: Speaking out against Extraction-Based Development**

Discourses of “development” and “modernization” mark the conquest by corporation, reflecting expectations for ever higher levels of penetration from extractive industries, such as mining and large-scale agricultural production for export. Anthropologists Julie Skurski and Fernando Coronil (2006) state:

> The modern state’s discourse of historical progress is organized around dichotomies of progress and backwardness, law and criminality, reason and irrationality. These taxonomies define violence in terms of spatial and temporal locations, weaving violence into practices of social classification and economic differentiation. (p. 15)

Former President Pérez Molina championed development in the Guatemalan media along these lines, arguing that the “progress” that accompanies extractive industries would benefit all Guatemalans. For example, in his bid for the presidency in 2011, Pérez’s Patriotic Party ad announced he wanted “a country without violence, safe, with justice” (Patrido Patriota, 2011). However, Maco from an evicted community in Panzós challenged these assertions by the ruling party based on his own personal experience of the violence that accompanies such “progress.” When I asked him what “development” means to him, he responded this way: “Where the companies are that he [former President Pérez] has allowed to enter Guatemala, you have not
seen development, rather you have seen the destruction of our lands” (1st interview, in Q’eqchi’). However, the comments of Maco and others indicate that indigenous peoples experience violent evictions, while Guatemala’s ruling elites are the true beneficiaries of the much-lauded “benefits” neoliberal economic policies corporations boast about (HudBay Minerals, 2016; Chabil Utzaj, 2012). Q’eqchi’s do not view themselves as beneficiaries of those policies, but as its victims.

When I asked contributors what the Guatemalan government can do to make the situation in their communities better, a few commented that the government is so complicit in their suffering they are unable to formulate a demand in response. In many cases the Guatemalan military and the National Civilian Police (Policía Nacional Civil, or PNC in Spanish) legitimate evictions and other acts of violence against Q’eqchi’ individuals and communities by accompanying corporations (Alonso-Fradejas, 2015; Méndez & Carrera, 2014). Marta from Lote Ocho said, “I cannot ask the government for anything because, simply, they are the ones responsible for all of the destruction” (1st interview, in Q’eqchi’). Jorge, a leader of the community of Bella Flor evicted by Chabil Utzaj, described the state’s active role in his community’s eviction: “We were already there when the military and police entered. They took us from there, they burned our houses, they cut down our crops, the machinery entered, they picked up the house and they threw it away” (1st interview, in Spanish). The state is responsible for the destruction of the evictions, even if they were acting at the behest of corporate forces.

In her comments to the Canadian delegation from Breaking the Silence and The United Church of Canada (field notes) in November 2013, Q’eqchi’ community leader María Choc verifies the imounity rampant in Guatemala:
Unfortunately the Guatemalan state does not do anything. In Guatemala there is a great impunity, a great injustice. Just look how they send the police and the military to evict you. That is the state of Guatemala. Then you have to go and sue, and with whom do you file your suit? With the same ones who came to evict you, with those who came to abuse you. What kind of justice do we Guatemalan have? (November 23, 2013, field notes)

Q’eqchi’s feel unable to pursue claims for justice in the face of the state’s complicity or active participation in evictions by corporations. Courts, police, and politicians all conspire to defend the status quo, which protects the rights of corporations over those of Q’eqchi’s. Many people commented that the interests of big business are consistently more valued than communities’ needs.

However, individuals offered specific suggestions about what the government can and should do. For example, Magdalena’s solution is for the government to end its participation in evictions from lands they rightfully occupy. Her demand is this: “What I want is that this government, that it would have the consciousness of no more evictions, of no more murders against the poor people living in their communities” (2nd interview, in Q’eqchi’). Marcelino, former guerrilla member, suggested that today’s violence is in some ways worse than during the armed conflict, because in the past Q’eqchi’s found ways to defend themselves as members or allies of the armed guerrilla movement. Now communities are supposed to rely on the government to right these wrongs, all the while knowing that the government sides with foreign corporations in the land evictions.

Not only is the government implicated in the evictions, but neglect in implementing promised food rationing programs after evictions has contributed to widespread hunger after
losing their crops and food stores (Oxfam International, 2015). Q’eqchi’s are left to depend on scarce government handouts to feed their families, when they have been accustomed to growing the food to sustain their families independently. They also blame the government for their subsequent inability to relocate permanently to another piece of land with fertile soil and land for grazing animals. Maco recounts returning to his former community in Panzós and seeing rows of sugar cane and African palms where his community lived before their eviction:

But up to here it is only me looking from afar at my community. When I am seeing it, it is full of sugar cane, or where all of the communities were evicted, it is full of sugar cane, of African palm. And I ask myself, is it that we, the poor people, are going to live from the cane? Are we going to eat the cane and the palm? I do not believe so, but I do not know and I always say that those laws that protect us, why are they not enforced? Why do they not respect us? Why do they not let us live in peace where we should be? Because where else are we going to go? So I would like to see my community newly reunited, there working the land. (47 years old, 1st interview, in Q’eqchi’)

His narrative speaks to a prevalent form of violence research contributors described: the eviction of entire communities, often accompanied by the burning of their homes, crops, and personal possessions (Alonso-Fradejas, 2015; Imai et al., 2014). These evictions are often conducted so as to immediately convert the land for intense agricultural production or mineral extraction. Maco’s experience mirrors a rise in what Alberto Alonso-Fradejas (2012) labels “land-control” grabbing in Guatemala, which dovetails with the conquest by corporation. The Guatemalan government actively encourages Q’eqchi’s to lease out their lands or allows corporations to buy outright lands occupied by indigenous communities. Research contributors like Magdalena and Marcelino recognize the potential of the Guatemalan government to right the wrongs Q’eqchi’s
have experienced through violent evictions by corporations. Their demands consistently revolve around living in peace in their communities, without fear of invasion by private security forces, the police, or the military.

Twenty-five-year-old Gerardo from El Estor suggests the government deny permission to foreign companies that only leave a tiny percentage of their profits to benefit local communities or the central government, or for foreign companies to leave the region altogether. He states:

What we want, what I ask for is that they return to where they came from. Because we are in charge here, it is us, who are from our land, Guatemalans, we are indigenous people, Q’eqchi’, and our grandparents, in all that we are the owners here. No one else is going to come here from the outside to take our land, it is not fair. (1st interview, in Spanish)

Later in the same interview Gerardo pointed out the contradictions in foreign companies’ claims to bring prosperity to El Estor, since Q’eqchi’’s experience further dispossession due to companies’ presence in their ancestral territories. In his words:

The African palm companies, the sugar cane companies, that is another, is another problem. They say that they provide jobs but no, they do not provide jobs. What they want to do is take away the land, to plant other things that work for them or they look for ways that they can prosper, not for the communities to prosper, not for the communities and villages to get ahead. These are the lies they use, when they talk about prospering. But what is prospering? Instead of prospering they make things worse for us. (1st interview, in Spanish)

Research contributors expressed concerns about environmental contamination as a result of the activities of agricultural mega-businesses and extractive industries. They worry about the
availability and cleanliness of local water sources, which includes numerous small rivers and creeks, as well as Lake Izabal. In his analysis of the politics of land in the region Alonso-Fradejas (2015) confirms the detrimental effects of industrialized agricultural production on the local environment, focusing on how water from rivers is diverted to irrigate crops on plantations, rather than to provide drinking water or irrigation water for Q’eqchi’ crops. According to CGN’s estimates, the company uses 52,776,000 liters of water per day in their operations (Nolasco, 2011, p. 35). Research contributors also expressed alarm about the impact of industrial processes on the health of the soil, which affects their possibilities for growing crops for their family’s consumption or for sale on a small scale. Alonso-Fradejas’ (2015) study backs up these concerns, as he cites the influx of toxic elements into the water and soil due to the increase of large-scale industry in the area (p. 496). Q’eqchi’s are preoccupied with the short and long term implications of these extractive activities for their communities’ health and livelihood.

Now I share two alternatives Q’eqchi’s offered in their interviews as ways to prevent conflicts. One suggestion was for the Guatemalan government to organize community consultations before granting permits for development. The other was for the Guatemalan government to recognize Q’eqchi’s culturally-specific ideas of development, based on the idea of Living Well. In both cases, Q’eqchi’s proposed solutions require open and respectful dialogue between their communities, the government, and corporations.
“Everything is connected: It is like a thread you weave”: Calls for Consultation and Alternative Development

One solution I heard repeatedly to prevent conflicts between Q’eqchi’s and corporations was for binding community consultations before government authorities grant companies permission to exploit resources on Q’eqchi’ lands. Mayan linguist and educator Valerio says:

If there is a resource in the community that can be exploited, it has to be in consultation, I mean, they have to consult with the community, if the community accepts and is going to perceive a real benefit for that community, of course. But if they are only going to take something and the people or the community does not know what is happening, these companies will not be able to succeed anywhere…the community has to be aware of the harms, the pollution, to be informed of the probable benefits if there are any. That is why there is rejection. (1st interview, in Spanish)

In the process of attending NGO trainings, research contributors have learned about International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 169’s (1989) clause on “free and informed consent” (Article 16.2) to structure their argument. The human rights discourse presented in trainings mirrors the language employed in ILO 169, especially Article 15 which states:

In cases in which the State retains the ownership of mineral or sub-surface resources or rights to other resources pertaining to lands, governments shall establish or maintain procedures through which they shall consult these peoples, with a view to ascertaining whether and to what degree their interests would be prejudiced, before undertaking or permitting any programmes for the exploration or exploitation of such resources pertaining to their lands. (International Labour Organization)
Consultation and consent have been bound up with discourse on indigenous rights circulating in Guatemala for many years, and taken up through trainings and research by NGOs, academics (mainly foreign anthropologists), international financial institutions such as the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank, and the United Nations’ organizations (Nelson, 1999). Q’eqchi’s claim land as a right since the government became a signatory to ILO 169 in 1996, which dictates that the government has an obligation to protect indigenous communities from the evictions and exploitation of natural resources on their lands without their consent. Instead of honoring this convention, the Guatemalan government has handed over mining rights to extractive industries in several areas of the country occupied by indigenous communities (Dougherty, 2011). In addition to ILO 169, Guatemala was one of the original adopters of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007 (United Nations General Assembly, 2007). Article 10 of the Declaration states:

Indigenous peoples shall not be forcibly removed from their lands or territories. No relocation shall take place without the free, prior and informed consent of the indigenous peoples concerned and after agreement on just and fair compensation and, where possible, with the option of return. (United Nations, p. 6)

Throughout workshops offered by NGOs, Q’eqchi’s have learned about Guatemala’s obligations under these international agreements, and that language is reflected in their demands for consultation.

For example, Analisa from El Estor commented that the government does not “even bother to give a consultation in the communities. Here what they do is authorize, without the consent of the communities, of the people, and they go around granting permission” (1st interview, in Spanish). Analisa does not deny the possibility that indigenous communities might
agree to allow foreign companies in their territories; she does insist on a frank discussion between communities, the government, and corporations about environmental risks, economic compensation to affected communities, and respect for lands already occupied by Q’eqchi’s with homes, crops, and animals.

At a meeting of the leaders of the Community Development Council (Consejo Comunitario para el Desarrollo, or COCODE in Spanish) in El Estor in May 2013, Gisela, a local community representative in the municipality, brought up that the mayor of El Estor granted permission for the establishment of a fish farm on the shores of the local lake, with permission to operate for 30 years (field notes). According to Gisela, the mayor did not consult anyone in the surrounding communities, including fishermen and women who rely on the lake for their livelihood or individuals who participate in recreational activities such as swimming. This example illustrates the mayor’s decision to promote local business interests over those of community members. Calls for consultation over land and other natural resources at least partially reflect Q’eqchi’s’ knowledge of human rights discourses gained through participation in trainings with local and international NGOs.

Q’eqchi’s resist the Guatemalan government’s development model based on extractive industries, imposed without community consultations. Q’eqchi’s do not necessarily oppose these economic activities in general or on their lands more specifically, but they want to enter into those activities after dialogue between the government, corporations, and communities. Q’eqchi’s continue to develop their own models and proposals for advancing the development and well-being of their communities. Q’eqchi’s provided alternative conceptions about development in which they envision that Q’eqchi’s can live healthy lives, free of environmental
pollution, poverty, and deprivation. On the topic of development, Raxché (Demetrio Rodríguez Guaján) (Kaqchikel Maya) (1999) explains:

One should not only think of and approach development in material terms but also focus attention on developing the potential of all peoples and their respective cultures so that we may coexist in harmony with our Mother Earth and at the same time improve human coexistence on the face of the planet. (p. 77)

In Permanto’s (2015) ethnographic study of elders in Chisec, Alta Verapaz, he identifies the Q’eqchi’ term *tuqtuukilal* to describe the concept of Living Well, which denotes a harmonious co-existence between nature and people. *Tuqtuukilal* “emphasizes the importance of living in harmony, peace and tranquility with all living beings” (p. 198). For example, Maida explained that her idea of development is:

how to work the land, how to cultivate the land, how to wake up to a new day, how to give thanks for all that, Mother Nature, as we say, *ajaw*, how to give thanks. For us in the Q’eqchi’ cultures everything is connection, from the families, human beings on the earth to nature to the water. Everything is connected: It is like a thread you weave. (1st interview, in Spanish)

Maida demonstrates that development is relational for Q’eqchi’s, an integral process that involves cultivating the well-being of everything and everyone in the surroundings. When I asked Rogelio, director of a local NGO, what the “good life” (*buen vivir*) looks like for Q’eqchi’s, he analyzed:

Everything is integral, right, so the fact of recovering the land, well, you need a place to live, you need infrastructure to live, but you need a place to grow crops, you need a place in order to develop as such. (1st interview, in Spanish)
As Rogelio’s comments illustrate, while Q’eqchi’s do not reject all aspects of capitalist development models and discourse, they recognize it as a paradigm disconnected from their experiences and worldview. They seek to take advantage of what the state offers all citizens, such as roads and community health centers, in addition to promoting culturally relevant schooling, respect for traditional agricultural production, and a value for human and other life.

Arturo, former director of a local NGO, makes projections for a general improvement in the standard of living for Q’eqchi’s via education, which will contribute to a kind of development that benefits indigenous peoples in new and expanded ways.

I believe that our generation will not make the change. I feel that it will be our children or our grandchildren that make that change because, so that there is equality in conditions and rights for everyone. And so that development will be for everyone and there are no rich and no poor. (1st interview, in Spanish)

Valerio views tourism as one possible alternative to extractive industries, a way for indigenous communities to become financially self-sufficient without relying on the exploitation of labor or non-renewable resources in communities. Valerio proposes:

It could be an alternative development, tourism, the natural scenery that can be the object of visits by national and foreign tourists, the traditions and customs, the living cultures of Guatemala can also be a source of income for the communities. The valuing of knowledge, right, of the knowledge of indigenous communities in terms of food, in terms of a lot of work that they do, weavings, so many things. That can also be a source of industry that can be promoted, as an alternative to extractive industries. (1st interview, in Spanish)
Valerio offers that Q’eqchi’ economic development could result from the government promoting tourism that features Mayan communities carrying out traditional knowledge and subsistence practices. The comments of Rogelio, Maida, and Valerio illustrate Cotjí Cuxil’s (2007) critique that “the indigenous demand for development programs that speak to their distinct identities has not been heard by the leaders of the country” (p. 127). Development is currently treated as a “one size fits all” proposition.

**Building Networks across Borders: International Collaboration**

Q’eqchi’s take advantage of alliances with non-governmental organizations, journalists, researchers, and filmmakers to take their struggle to an international public. Afef Benessaieh (2011) conceptualizes global civil society, which includes NGOs and other international actors, as “an imagined community that is regional or planetary in scope,” because it “encompasses multilayered channels of transnational social action, intersecting beyond localities and national boundaries” (p. 71). Among the members of this imagined community (Anderson, 2006) is the NGO, which Benessaieh (2011) describes as “a local civil-society actor that acts as a primary intermediary between foreign aid donors and other local actors” (p. 70). Q’eqchi’s collaborate with U.S.-based Indian Law Resource Center, who has represented Q’eqchi’ communities in international forums such as the Inter-American Commision on Human Rights. They also work with Canadian-based Breaking the Silence (n.d.) and The United Church of Canada (2016). I was able to personally participate in events organized in El Estor in November 2013 for a joint delegation of Breaking the Silence and The United Church of Canada (field notes). The delegation traveled around Guatemala to witness and document the impacts of mining on communities. Q’eqchi’s have also collaborated with University of Northern British Columbia
professor Catherine Nolin (Nolin, 2016), alongside NGO Rights Action, to document the human rights abuses committed against their communities by mining corporations in particular.

Rights Action has been instrumental in linking Q’eqchi’ communities with legal representation from Canadian lawyers, material aid, and support for speaking tours in Canada to explain their case against HudBay Minerals (Rights Action, 2015). These collaborations with international organizations facilitate Q’eqchi’s’ quest for support from individuals and organizations with greater resources. In the case of Q’eqchi’ communities in conflict with CGN, the sequence of events reaches back even further, to the arrival of the corporation in El Estor in 1960. The eviction of the Lote Ocho community in 2007 is a watershed moment in communities’ conflicts with the mine. Now that 11 women have filed rape charges against HudBay Minerals in Canada, they have extended the visibility of their struggle to the world, and to Canadians in particular. The Guatemalan NGO ECAP collected the testimonies of the women of Lote Ocho, along with plaintiffs in a local case of sexual abuse dating back to the armed conflict, and published a book in 2014 (Méndez & Carrera, 2014). Angélica Choc and German Chub have also filed claims against HudBay in Canadian courts. Choc has traveled to Canada multiple times in recent years to publicize the Q’eqchi’s’ struggles and to advance her legal case. In the spring of 2015 she participated in a speaking tour in British Columbia, which I was a participated in through informal speaking engagements alongside Choc. All 13 plaintiffs, along with other Q’eqchi’ activists, have extended their networks to the Canada-based NGO Rights Action (2012, 2015 & 2016), which helps with their Canadian cases.

Q’eqchi’s’ struggles have been featured in documentaries and news articles in major international publications. Q’eqchi’s have participated in collaborations with foreign filmmakers such as Rachel Schmidt (2013) on her documentary Defensora (Defender), which features
interviews with Angélica Choc, German Chub, and a few of the women involved in litigation against HudBay Minerals for rape during an eviction (Imai et al., 2014). The documentary is a valuable tool for sharing Q’eqchi’ stories of defense of the land with an international audience, but it can impact Canadian audiences in particular because of HudBay’s status as a Canadian-based corporation publicly traded on both the New York and the Toronto Stock Exchanges (HudBay Minerals). In addition, Q’eqchi’’s’ struggles are featured in Álvaro Revenga’s (2012) *Sons and Daughters of the Earth: Eviction and Resistance in 21st Century Guatemala*. In addition, their struggle is recorded in numerous news footage in internationally-circulated publications such as *The New York Times* (Daley, 2016), *The Toronto Star* (Jiménez, 2016a and b), and *The Globe and Mail* (Gray, 2013a and b), in addition to smaller publications (Paley, 2007b; Cuffe, 2007; Call and Savage, 2011; García Soto, 2013; Ottawa Citizen editorial, 2013). National and international journalism and media-based networking have become integral to rallying support for Q’eqchi’’s’ defense of territory.

Q’eqchi’’s’ reflections on various collaborations show them to be savvy political actors who take seriously their ability to negotiate with state institutions in order to develop their own cultural and political institutions, and to work for external reinforcement of their claims (Tsing, 2007) in the international arena. Such external reinforcement is represented by their collaboration with me, a researcher from a Canadian university, as well as their relations with documentary filmmakers, international NGOs, journalists, lawyers, and others.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Once the Peace Accords were signed, Guatemala entered into a series of processes aimed at transitioning from armed conflict to a more democratic framework for governance and
political participation. The change in governance and political policy, combined with Guatemala’s new place in the international market, initiated what I term the fourth conquest, a conquest by corporation, building on Grandia’s (2012) three previous conquests of Q’eqchi’ lands. The violent, extractive character of this conquest has shaped the tactics employed by Q’eqchi’s in their defense of territory.

In this chapter I explored land occupations as both an offensive and defensive strategy, designed to gain direct and immediate control over resources. In the case of Chabil Utzaj, Q’eqchi’s November 2010 occupations took place after year of negotiations with local landowners were interrupted through the sale of the fincas to the sugar refinery. I consider these occupations to be defensive since Q’eqchi’s are fighting to regain lands they had already been living on and negotiating to purchase. When they were violently expelled in March 2011, Q’eqchi’s pursued a series of activities to rally support and publicize their plight through national and international networks. They won precautionary measures at the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. U.K.-based NGO Oxfam International, along with CUC and the Vamos al Grano-CRECE (We Go to the Grain-Grow) campaign, compiled a petition of signed by 100 networks and organizations, both national and international (Oxfam International, 2014). With the support of CUC and CONIC, two peasant organizations, they mobilized in a march from Cobán, Alta Verapaz to Guatemala City. Q’echei’ communities have also worked with Rights Action, in more recent years focused on the cases of 13 Q’eqchi’ plaintiffs against HudBay Minerals in Canadian courts (Rights Action, 2015).

Perhaps one of the most important outcomes generated through the evictions was the leadership and knowledge cultivated among Q’eqchi’ community members throughout the process of mobilizing. Choudry (2015) describes the expansion of the social imaginary that
occurs as activists acquire new knowledge in the process of mobilizing as a “kind of radical imagination glimpsed in moments of learning and action in organizing spaces and activism, including tensions and contradictions, mistakes, setbacks and losses, and the opportunities to reflect on them…keeps dreams and possibilities for a better and different world afloat” (p. 2). In addition to the 578 Q’eqchi’ families who have already won land, other members of those communities and other Q’eqchi’ communities in the area have learned strategies for strengthening their traditional forms of leadership while incorporating new alliances and tactics in the process.

As outlined in Chapter Three, Tarrow (1998) identifies three processes that transform contentious collective actions into social movements: identifying common purposes, creating collective identity, and identifying common challenges (p. 6). I close this chapter by showing the unique forms these three processes take during the fourth conquest. First, Q’eqchi’s’ common purpose driving their collective action is defense of territory. Contained within the demand for territory is insistence on maintaining the cultural and political self-determination that for Q’eqchi’s is synonymous with control of their land. Q’eqchi’s are focused on juridical certainty, so as to secure control of their lands in a way the private property regime will recognize as valid. Through acquiring legal title they can ensure their relationships with the tzuultaq’as and protect the resting place of their ancestors. Q’eqchi’s also tie their aspirations for culturally relevant, collective forms of integral development to the land. During the fourth conquest, contributors comment on the obvious clashes between their visions of development and the state’s projections for development, based on expanding the productive capacity of the land for profit. Second, Q’eqchi’s unite around a three part collective identity: as sons and daughters of the earth, indigenous peoples, and peasants. Q’eqchi’s see the land through a
relational ontology (Escobar, 2010), honoring the land as a mother and community member through ceremony and other cultural labor (Tischler, 2005). The third element of Q’eqchi’s’ defense of territory as a contentious collective action is the creation of an identifiable challenge. During the armed conflict, the Guatemalan military represented Q’eqchi’s’ main antagonist. Today, during the fourth conquest, Q’eqchi’s identify private corporations as the main antagonist. While the institutions of the state are complicit in their marginalization, the actors Q’eqchi’s most clearly identified were private corporations such as CGN and Chabil Utzaj, both foreign-owned corporations that have spearheaded the eviction of Q’eqchi’s in El Estor and the Polochic Valley around Panzós. By focusing on research contributors’ present-day experiences of expulsion, harassment, and massacres, especially in relation to CGN and Chabil Utzaj, I have shown the forms their suffering takes today. The reality of violence and persecution resonates with contributors’ memories of the armed conflict, and mirrors the unfulfilled promises of the 1996 Peace Accords throughout Guatemala.
Chapter 8—Closing Thoughts

When I initially envisioned my doctoral study, I intended to analyze Q’eqchi’ Mayas’ narratives of political participation in relation to the radical politics of the guerrilla movement during the armed conflict in Guatemala (1960-1996). These concerns were shaped by my own positionality as a Marxist interested in the guerrilla movement’s Marxist program. During interviews I expected to be able to bracket Q’eqchi’s’ material concerns about poverty and marginalization today, and to be able to focus on ideological discussions about the current political field, including electoral politics (specifically the 2011 election of former general Otto Pérez Molina), remnants of the guerrilla movement, and ideas of citizenship and civic participation. However, once I arrived in El Estor in April 2013, research contributors expressed overwhelming concern with daily security in the face of evictions (desalojos), leading me to reconceptualize my study. Research contributors framed their political interventions in municipal politics and national elections, as well as their collaborations with international NGOs, documentary filmmakers, and researchers, as means to one particular end: the defense of their ancestral territory.

The testimonials and stories they shared in our interviews, as well as my own observations at community events with state institutions such as the Secretariat of Agrarian Affairs, and my accompaniment of the local NGO El Estor Association for Integral Development (AEPDI, n.d.), all convinced me to dedicate this study to Q’eqchi’s’ defense of territory. While I began with analyzing external manifestations of the struggle (la lucha), contributors’ narratives led me to comprehend the epistemological considerations also at work in their defense of territory. Q’eqchi’s are situated in a relationship of reciprocity and obligation with the land and
the tzuultaq'as. Their communities are organized around protocols, forms of leadership, and collective identities that are forever intertwined with honoring the land. Thus, defense of territory is bound inextricably with the material and social fabric of Q’eqchi’ culture (Granovsky-Larsen, 2013). As such, my research findings undermined distinctions between the “public” and “private” sphere, and the privileging of the public sphere in discussions of politics and political participation, because Q’eqchi’s’ repertoire of activities, on a community and a national scale, embrace a multitude of elements. Maco’s story of conducting a large ceremony—normally a private community-based, cultural event—to support Rigoberta Menchú’s candidacy for president is one example where the two boundaries between the two “spheres” are invisible.

Once I began to situate the stories Q’eqchi’s were sharing within a large historical trajectory of resistance, I created a three part conceptual framework in my attempt to make sense of these narratives of struggle. Political scientist Sidney Tarrow’s (1998) theory of contentious politics, while situated to explain the success and failure of social movements in industrialized Western nations, helped to frame the continuity of Q’eqchi’s’ participation in the struggle over decades. Tarrow’s theory helped to make sense not just of Q’eqchi’s’ experiences during the current “post-conflict” period of contentious politics around land, but extended to their participation in previous political struggles during the armed conflict (1960-1996) and other contentious episodes in Guatemala’s history. My analysis of the defense of territory in relation to Tarrow’s contentious politics contributes a culturally specific frame for understanding Q’eqchi’s’ conflicts over control of land and other natural resources.

Contentious politics highlights three elements of Q’eqchi’ organizing in defense of territory that were salient during my fieldwork: collective identity, common enemies, and common purposes. Q’eqchi’s’ goals of self-determination and sustenance are tied directly to the
three collective identities commonly referenced in their interviews: as sons and daughters of the earth, as indigenous peoples, and as peasants. Each identity relates to the common purpose of defending the land, but emphasizes different aspects of collective identity. In Chapter Six, I showed how Q’eqchi’s relate their struggle for land to these diverse yet inter-related identities.

Continuing with the second process of contentious politics, identifying common enemies, Q’eqchi’s mobilize their collective identities in relation to the main antagonist they identified in la lucha today: corporations. Research contributors emphasized violence at the hands of two transnational corporations in El Estor and Panzós, the Guatemalan Nickel Company and the sugar refinery Chabil Utzaj. These corporations evict Q’eqchi’s from their ancestral lands in order to extract nickel and sugar cane for export to international markets. The current phase of extractivism, which I label the conquest by corporation, is rooted in three previous waves of expropriation of Q’eqchi’ territories (Grandia, 2012); the current situation should be understood in relation to a centuries-long history of colonization and dispossession.

Some research contributors also identified the Guatemalan state as an antagonist during the conquest by corporation. During the armed conflict the army perpetrated massacres and persecuted indigenous peoples as insurgents. During the potential fourth “conquest,” the Guatemalan military occupies a secondary role because they support corporations in carrying out violent evictions. The state is also an antagonist because its institutions remain an obstacle in issuing titles to Q’eqchi’s for lands they currently occupy and seek to occupy (Alonso-Fradejas, 2012 & 2015; Granovsk-Larsen, 2013; Ybarra 2011a, 2011 b & 2013). Q’eqchi’s have identified “juridical certainty” (Alonso-Fradejas, 2015) of their lands as a priority in response to large-scale and violent evictions. While I argue that juridical certainty is a transposition of a
capitalist framework for land onto Q’eqchi’s’ worldview (Woolford, 2011), it a strategic choice intended to maintain communities intact for decades to come.

Finally, Tarrow’s third process, common purposes, relates directly to the second concept in my conceptual framework: territorial defense. My framing of territorial defense, whose aims are economic sustenance and self-determination (Alonso-Fradejas, 2015), brings the narratives of Q’eqchi’ Mayas into conversation with indigenous thinkers from across the Americas. I situate Q’eqchi’ views on political organizing within the context of the expansion of resistance by indigenous peoples to resource extraction throughout the Americas. For example, the stand-off between the Standing Rock Sioux nation and the U.S. Army Corps over the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline is another example of a conflict between indigenous nations and corporations over control of natural resources and the protection of land with cultural and spiritual as well as material significance (Stand with Standing Rock, 2016). Q’eqchi’s’ strategies for resisting corporate take-over of their land are relevant for indigenous peoples in similar conflicts over land and natural resources.

Political ecology helps to bring in a discussion of the role of power in transforming relations between people, their environment, and forms of knowledge (Robbins, 2012). The violence associated with new appropriations of Q’eqchi’ territory by extractive corporations offers challenges and opportunities to reconstruct political engagement within communities, with the state, and with other indigenous peoples around the world.

Q’eqchi’s are developing strategies to seek redress for injustice as citizens of Guatemala, as peasants, as international-rights-bearing indigenous peoples, and as aj ral ch’och’ rooted in their ancestors’ ways of being and knowing. Their attempts to exercise self-determination are visible as they calculate the pros and cons of participation in political venues, from community
assemblies (asambleas) to electoral politics (as candidates or voters) to state-sponsored Community Councils for Development. In each of these venues, Q’eqchi’s debate the current political conjecture and decide how to allocate limited individual and communal resources based on shared priorities.

I also draw on social movement learning, my third concept, so as to explicitly analyze Q’eqchi’s narratives about la lucha as productive moments of learning and knowledge production. My framing of learning draws on concepts from informal learning theory (Schugurensky, 2000 & 2006) and social movement learning (Kapoor, 2009; Choudry, 2015; Choudry & Kapoor, 2010). In Chapter Five I focus on narratives about the armed conflict when, following Martinez Salazar (2008)’s concept of state terror as teaching-learning, Q’eqchi’s learned the limits of their inclusion in the nation-building project through firsthand experiences of genocide and persection. In Chapter Six, where I explore Q’eqchi’s collective identity and political participation, learning moments occur when Q’eqchi’s are engaged in making collective decisions about how to defend their interests as a people. Q’eqchi’s tactics are derived from the wisdom of ancestors and elders, human rights training, and collaborations with NGOs and other organizations. By analyzing the role of learning within defense of territory, this study links social movement theory and educational studies in new ways. Even though I have adopted informal learning concepts from adult education, my study also considers the trajectory and impact of Q’eqchi’s inter-generational forms of learning in the struggle.

One example of inter-generational learning is the relationship between research contributors and their parents and grandparents in relation to their participation as guerrillas during the armed conflict, as well as la lucha in the present. Chapter Five traced the experiences of Filomena, Magdalena, and Marcelino, from their stories about joining the guerrilla movement
as teenagers to their disappointment at the continuing need to participate in *la lucha* in the wake of the broken promises of the Peace Accords. Their reflections on their participation in the struggle over decades provided impetus for me to emphasize the continuity in forms of participation between the armed conflict and today. Q’eqchi’s’ emphasis on the similarities between the armed conflict and the violence they experience today is what led me to develop the notion of the fourth conquest.

**Contributions of This Study**

The use of work on social movements, social movement learning, and political ecology to analyze and frame my study’s empirical findings offers contributions to three fields of study: Latin American studies, indigenous studies, and educational studies. I am building on literature and theory from all three fields while addressing important gaps through considering them simultaneously.

My study contributes to Latin American Studies by building on literature on the political, ecological, and social impacts of extractive industries in Latin America (Bebbington & Bury, 2001 & 2013; Veltmeyer, 2012). In particular, I add to literature on Guatemala focused on mining (Einbinder & Nolin, 2010; Laplante & Nolin, 2014; Nolin & Stephens, 2010; Solano, 2005, 2007, 2013) and the land-grabbing associated with mono-crop agriculture (Alonso-Fradejas, 2012 & 2015; Granovsky-Larsen, 2013; Solano, 2007 & 2015). The political stability created by the end of the armed conflict, combined with neoliberal economic policies, facilitated favorable conditions for investors and foreign corporations to extract resources in Guatemala with minimal oversight (Dougherty, 2011). Chapter Seven provides the empirical basis for my idea of a possible “conquest by corporation” to designate the current period of extraction; I
demonstrate how processes of violent evictions of Q’eqchi’ communities, concurrent with the rise of extraction, are rooted in previous waves of dispossession (Grandia, 2012), but are the result of a unique configuration of “post-conflict” forces. The current conquest has forced Q’eqchi’s to mobilize to secure legal titles to their land as a way of achieving a modicum of security for current and future generations.

Although my theory is rooted in Q’eqchi’-specific experiences of expropriation, the fourth “conquest” contains elements relevant to Latin American studies as whole. I build on political ecology’s view of “ecological systems as power-laden rather than politically inert” (Robbins, 2011, p. 13). Extraction of natural resources on indigenous lands is occurring on a wide scale throughout Latin America (Veltmeyer, 2012). Considering conflicts over land and resources through the lens of relational ontologies (Blaser et al., 2010; Escobar, 2010) offers elements relevant for governments to consider all over the world as they authorize the dispossession of indigenous peoples to advance the commodification of natural resources.

My study contributes to indigenous studies about Mayas in Guatemala, as well as global indigenous studies. My study shows how Q’eqchi’s, like other indigenous peoples, are increasingly taking advantage of international conventions, alliances, and networks to advance local processes of political self-determination (Tsing, 2007). While drawing from literature on indigenous knowledges (Blaser et al., 2010; Escobar, 2001, 2007, 2008 & 2010), especially in relation to land-based knowledges (Calderon, 2014 & 2016), my study offers insights into Q’eqchi’s’ unique forms of governance such as Elders’ Councils. I draw on Mayan authors from Guatemala (Cotjí Cuxil, 1996, 1999, 2002 & 2007; Del Valle Escalante, 2008; Ixmatá, 2010; Montejo, 2005; Tzul, 2014) as well as other Guatemalan scholars who work in solidarity with indigenous peoples (Arias, 2006, 2007-2008 & 2011; Bastos, 2009 & 2012; Tischler, 2005 &
My interviews and participant observation build on other scholars’ work on Q’eqchi’ worldviews (Grandia, 2012; Kahn, 2006; Permanto, 2015; Viaene, 2010a & 2010b; Ybarra, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, & 2013) while contributing new insights into how this worldview structures Q’eqchi’s’ political decision-making processes in community, municipal, national, and international contexts.

My exploration of Q’eqchi’ forms of knowledge and learning also adds to the field of educational studies. I use concepts from social movement learning and informal learning in new ways by looking at Q’eqchi’s’ situated experiences of organizing in defense of territory. While Kapoor (2009) and Choudry (2010 & 2015) have developed social movement learning theories in relation to NGOs and social movements, my study applies this lens to Q’eqchi’s’ community-based organizing, which has no centralized leadership or governance. By conducting my analysis through the lens of social movement learning in concert with Tarrow’s (1998) theory of contentious politics, I have been able to highlight the continuity of Q’eqchi’s’ organizing over decades through emphasizing the elements of their cultural and political identity. Q’eqchi’s’ combination of cultural, class-based, and rights-based discourses and practices defies a typical Western conception of divided public and private spheres. Likewise, their practices of learning and teaching combine culturally specific elements with knowledge drawn from human rights training and international political engagements.

Q’eqchi’s’ ability to win juridical certainty is one way of measuring the success of defense of territory; however, social movement learning theory offers other metrics for understanding what Q’eqchi’s gain in the process of organizing defense of territory. For example, this field of theory offers analytical tools to account for the productive capacity entailed in Q’eqchi’ collective action, such as political efficacy (Schugurensky, 2006), power
mapping skills (Choudry, 2015), and knowledge in content areas such as local and international law. My study offers a substantive and grounded understanding of informal learning theory based on Q’eqchi’s’ experiences in defense of territory.

Now that I have outlined the contributions this study makes, below I suggest research directions I could take in order to build on the findings and analysis presented in this study.

**Future Research Directions**

In reflecting on the limitations of this study, as well as the rich opportunities it presented for understanding Q’eqchi’s’ lived experiences during the conquest by corporation, I am left considering possibilities for future research. I have conceived of three potential lines of research to build on the work of this dissertation.

As of February 2016, 578 of the 769 families evicted by Chabil Utzaj are settled on other lands (Centro de Informes Reportivos sobre Guatemala, 2016). I would like to conduct a long-term ethnographic study with one or more of these newly established communities to trace the way their collective identity evolves in their new community. Are these communities still so weighed down by daily survival that they are unable to expand their political participation in desired ways? Do their experiences with elections change once they have legal title and their rights are more enforceable through state institutions (Stepputat, 2001)? Are they able to pursue culturally relevant development models as they construct and govern their communities from the ground up? What tensions compound or supplement their previous concerns about security and well-being? By tracing these communities’ activities from their earliest days, this research can add substantial insight into the aspects of identity-formation, governance, and culture in relation to defense of territory.
A second line of inquiry only partially examined in this dissertation was Q’eqchi’s’ engagement with peasant organizations, namely the Peasant Unity Committee (CUC) and the National Coordinating Committee of Indigenous Peoples and Peasants (CONIC). In order to deepen my analysis of Q’eqchi’s’ defense of territory, I would like to conduct interviews with representatives of these two organizations that work with Q’eqchi’s. This research would also include participant observation at events, rallies, and protests organized by these organizations. Do CUC and CONIC impose specific narratives about campesino identity that Q’eqchi’s resist altogether or substantially alter? Do Q’eqchi’s have the opportunity to become leaders of these organizations? How do these organizations’ strategies and tactics coincide or clash with Q’eqchi’s’ strategies for defense of territory? By pursuing this line of inquiry, my study would incorporate more rich details about Q’eqchi’s’ campesino identity. I also expect this focus would lead me to explore the Marxist and militant political identities that initially stimulated my research study.

Finally, I would like to consult with Q’eqchi’ research contributors about lines of inquiry that would be productive to their communities’ agendas. Now that I have established relationships with individual Q’eqchi’s and with a few communities, I feel confident co-creating a more participatory line of research, with possibilities for co-publications or other joint endeavors. Part of all three potential lines of inquiry is my plan to learn Q’eqchi’ in order to be able to conduct at least some of my interviews and participant observation without interpreters. However, my collaboration with my interpreters is an element of my previous research that I would not trade for anything, and I expect my collaboration with those two individuals to continue even as I learn Q’eqchi’.
Closing Words

The responsibility for the knowledge I gained carrying out this study, and my relationships with individual research contributors and communities, does not end when this dissertation is defended at the University of British Columbia. I carry the ethico-political responsibility of the becoming-witness (Emberley, 2014), which obliges me to disseminate my research contributors’ words to audiences around the world. I also have the obligation to return to these Q’eqchi’ communities to share their words with each other, and to show my appreciation for their generosity. I consider this dissertation to be a humble beginning to carrying out my ethical responsibilities to the Q’eqchi’s who have shared their struggles, aspirations, and hopes with me. Q’eqchi’s’ ongoing resistance points towards building a world that respects multiple forms of knowledge and ways of being. Their stories show the enormous potential of humanity to advance social justice rather than profits, when we organize collectively.
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# Appendix

## Appendix A List of Research Contributors

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<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age at time of first interview</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
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<th>Language of interview</th>
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