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# Dynamics Between Weavers and Voluntourists in Guatemala: Giving Ideas, Taking Photos

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# Dynamics Between Weavers and Voluntourists in Guatemala: Giving Ideas, Taking Photos

Rebecca Lee Nelson, PhD

University of Connecticut, 2015

Drawing from 20 months of ethnographic fieldwork in the voluntourism program of a women's weaving cooperative based in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, this dissertation argues that voluntourists and their cooperative hosts developed more globally-oriented subjectivities through their daily information exchanges. Voluntourists shared their knowledge of tastes and practices in their countries; in return, the cooperative leaders offered them exposure to Mayan customs and weaving classes. At the same time, these interactions highlighted the hosts' anxieties about sharing such knowledge. The cooperative leaders utilized their association with tourists to develop cosmopolitan competencies, pursue alternative gender relations, and push the boundaries of relationships with the state and international clients in which they have historically been subordinated. They drew from transnational rights-based discourses to envision themselves as actors in the public sphere. In their presentations to visiting tourists, the cooperative officers recounted stories of victimhood in the civil war (1960–1996), to appeal for tourists' financial support. However, they sought to restrict these narratives to foreign humanitarian audiences, concerned about the potential for renewed violence in post-conflict Guatemala.

With prompting from voluntourists, the cooperative leaders embraced the idea of commodifying their Mayan "culture" to promote their products in international markets. This dissertation argues that learning to "mobilize" culture as a resource (both in the sense of deploying it and of translating it for ease of travel across various borders of understanding) is a form of cosmopolitanism. However, this mobilization of local knowledge made weavers anxious that voluntourists were establishing "Mayan" weaving schools in their home countries.

Rebecca Lee Nelson – University of Connecticut, 2015

Voluntourists for their part became connoisseurs of cultural difference. They struggled less with the contradictions between belonging to a place and adapting to global citizenship than indigenous Guatemalan women because their knowledge had already been made transferrable. Through volunteering they imagined a more empowered role within global capitalism in which they could make an individual impact, however slight. This study unites the critical turn in tourism studies—focused on intangible shifts in consciousness—with the recognition that the traffic in culture has made abstractions such as cultural authenticity crucial to people's political and economic realities.

Dynamics Between Weavers and Voluntourists in Guatemala: Giving Ideas, Taking Photos

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B.A., SUNY Potsdam, 2007

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APPROVAL PAGE

Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation

Dynamics Between Weavers and Voluntourists in Guatemala: Giving Ideas, Taking Photos

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## Introduction

On December 21<sup>st</sup>, 2011, I sat in on a meeting called by the leaders of a Mayan women's weaving cooperative to welcome a pair of volunteers from Poland and discuss the young women's ideas for new development projects for the cooperative, TelaMaya.<sup>1</sup> I was present both in my capacity as a researcher and as the volunteer coordinator, tasked with facilitating their projects. The meeting started at 9:20AM, when everyone arrived at the organization's central office in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala. The president of the cooperative, María, bustled in, delayed on her morning bus commute, and they pulled up folding chairs into a circle in a corner of the office. Given the floor, the young volunteers immediately jumped into discussing their strategies for raising funds and attracting new business to the cooperative's fair trade shop, without formal introduction or preamble. They were brimming with ideas and energy, seeking the officers' input and approval for projects they could begin to implement during the eight weeks they would spend volunteering.

The vice president, Roxana, was only half listening. When the volunteers came to a stopping point in their proposals, Roxana interjected, speaking formally: "Good morning, girls. Thank you for your help here in TelaMaya. I'm going to tell you something, and it's not to offend you, because I like the ideas you have and we are always happy that you've come."<sup>2</sup> I leaned in and started paying closer attention: Roxana was laying the conversational groundwork to say something a bit confrontational to the volunteers. She continued,

Thank you for your support. The truth is that what you're saying is very nice. I like it. Hopefully it gets carried out, then, because the truth is that many volunteers have come but have not finished [their projects]. [...] Even if you only do one thing, but you should leave it finished and not halfway. Even if it's only a little project. It's not to offend you.

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<sup>1</sup> "TelaMaya" is a pseudonym, as are the names of all individuals mentioned in the dissertation aside from public political figures.

<sup>2</sup> Buenos días, chicas. Gracias por sus ayudas aquí en TelaMaya. Voy a decirles una cosa, y no es para ofenderles, porque me gustan las ideas que tienen y siempre estamos contentas que han venido.

Many volunteers have come and have left their projects half-finished. [...] The idea you have, I like it. That's why we really like to work with you, because you have ideas we don't have. [...] Well, that's what I say, then.<sup>3</sup>

Roxana ended this short speech by offering institutional support to the volunteers to help them finish their projects. After she finished, María assumed control of the meeting. For the next fifteen minutes, she recounted the history of how the cooperative came to rely upon the labor of foreign “volunteer tourists” like the Polish women who offered their labor to the organization while visiting Guatemala. She closed this history—and the meeting—by saying, “Thank you girls. We don't pay you anything, and we can't make demands. What we're going to provide, the only gift we give you, is the [weaving] course. To the success of your projects!”<sup>4</sup> After this conversation, the voluntourists expressed the sense that nothing had been accomplished, in the absence of a tangible product or outcome: “I'm not sure what the point of that was!” They had entered the meeting hoping to discuss their projects in a sustained and practical way, and they were surprised that the officers wanted to pause the brainstorming session to tell them about the history of the cooperative's interactions with foreigners.

### **Dissertation Themes**

Such events made the differences between cooperative members and voluntourists apparent. In business meetings like this, the officers were attentive to the formalities of meeting structure to cultivate an atmosphere of mutual respect within the volunteer program, controlling the encounters by making speeches to welcome new volunteers or thank outgoing volunteers.

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<sup>3</sup> Gracias por apoyar. La verdad es que lo que ustedes están diciendo es muy bonito. Me gusta. Ojalá que se lleve a cabo pues, porque la verdad es que muchos voluntarios han venido pero no han terminado. [...] Aunque solo una cosa hagan, pero que lo dejen terminado y no a medias. Aunque solo es un proyectito. No es para ofender a ustedes. Muchos voluntarios han venido y han dejado a medios sus proyectos. [...] La idea que tienen, me gusta. Por eso es que nosotros nos gusta mucho trabajar con ustedes, porque tienen ideas que no tenemos. [...] Pues eso es lo que yo digo pues.

<sup>4</sup> Gracias chicas. No les pagamos nada, tampoco podemos exigir. Lo que vamos a brindar, el único regalo que les damos, es el curso. ¡Que sean exitosos sus proyectos!

Their purpose in holding meetings, to establish their position in relation to volunteers, was often opaque to the volunteers, who viewed meetings as brainstorming sessions that should communicate what they would define as important information or produce concrete plans. This short interaction encapsulates several of the themes I examine in this dissertation: the friction between different approaches to doing business that it highlights has led to a gradual evolution in the cooperative's practice as well as a transformation in the attitudes of the individual volunteers who have passed through the program. Roxana's speech also underscores a major structural issue with volunteering: that projects tend to correspond to voluntourists' skills, needs, and lengths of stay rather than the cooperative's priorities. The discussion of the cooperative's history provided the voluntourists with background information in understanding why volunteers are important to the organization and what issues the cooperative has previously had with them.

María's comments exemplify the consensus between cooperative members and volunteer tourists that their relationship was primarily an exchange of information: voluntourists' main role in the cooperative was to share their knowledge of the tastes, expectations, and practices of their home countries with the officers; in return, the cooperative leaders offered to give them insights into Mayan customs and weaving classes. The weaving classes that María mentioned were a source of conflict that disrupted the free interchange of information in TelaMaya: the cooperative members were anxious that voluntourists could carry away their local knowledge to exploit it in other spaces and contexts—for instance, by establishing imagined “Mayan” weaving schools in their home countries. Such daily information exchanges contributed to the production of a more globally-oriented (“cosmopolitan”) subjectivity for both tourists and the cooperative leaders with whom they worked. At the same time, these interactions highlighted the limitations of what the

organization's members wanted to share, in the context of global trends towards defining culture as something to be managed, protected, legislated, and exploited.

### **Cosmopolitanism: Elite Project or Subaltern Transformation?**

While globalization refers to the movements of people, technologies, goods, ideas, and media, "cosmopolitanism" refers to more internal transformations based in transnational connections and projections (Swain 2009:507). Cosmopolitans are global citizens: the term "cosmopolitan" unites the Greek words for "world" (*cosmos*) and "citizenry" (*polis*).

Cosmopolitanism has been variously described as a socio-cultural state of being, an outlook on the world, a political project for constructing transnational institutions and creating a space for plurality, a disposition towards others, and a set of skills that allow people to move across the globe (Vertovec and Cohen 2002:8–14).<sup>5</sup> According to Szerzynski and Urry (2006:114-5), cosmopolitanism comprises some of the following characteristics: mobility, whether physical or imaginative; connoisseurship in the consumption of other cultures and places; curiosity and knowledge about others; openness to the practices and beliefs of other groups and willingness to take risks in engaging with the Other, and skill in understanding one's place in the world and interpreting the imagery of other cultures. These various descriptions within the literature sketch out an image of cosmopolitanism in three senses that will be important for this study: as an orientation towards cultural difference, as a form of subjectivity within the world, and as a form of competency that individuals can cultivate.

Some identify cosmopolitanism as a Western notion promulgated by "transnational capitalists and associated elites that praise a borderless neoliberal world" (Ribeiro 2005:19). In his influential essay "Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture," Ulf Hannerz (1990)

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<sup>5</sup> It differs from multiculturalism in being primarily focused on how individuals transcend cultural boundaries, rather than on how cultural groups coexist (Rapport 2007:225).

established a dichotomy between “cosmopolitans,” those with a worldly outlook, and “locals,” who concern themselves with their own communities (Hannerz 1990:237). Hannerz concluded: “there can be no cosmopolitans without locals” (Hannerz 1990:249). However, James Clifford challenged this simplistic opposition: “the notion that certain classes of people are cosmopolitan (travelers) while the rest are local (natives) appears as the ideology of one (very powerful) traveling culture” (1992:108). “Locals” are the people that tourists and anthropologists travel to visit. In this dissertation, I have preferred the term “host” to refer to the people visited by tourists to avoid reifying the idea that there are such groups as “cosmopolitans” and “locals.”

Cosmopolitanism has also been critiqued for its association with privilege more generally. It can theoretically be developed through any form of contact with other ways of life, ranging from immersive travel to media and the consumption of goods, making it potentially available to anyone but practically easier for certain people to achieve than others. Some may lack the financial means, formal education, or leisure time to participate in the kind of activities that would develop their cosmopolitanism. Differential access to cosmopolitanism constitutes a form of social inequality, especially when viewing mobile citizenship as a characteristic of which people can have more or less (Cass, Shove, and Urry 2005). It is valued as a mark of distinction among certain communities of elites. However, Hannerz (2006) points out that elite status and mobility do not guarantee cosmopolitan experience: in many cases, privileged Westerners have actually been able to insulate themselves by carrying their own cultures with them when they travel, whereas people from peripheral global regions have had to confront and manage cultural difference more directly through diasporic communities, transnational networks, and globalized mass media. A number of studies have suggested that cosmopolitanism is not merely the province of the elite (Ferguson 1999; Notar 2008) but also accessible to “discrepant

cosmopolitans” (Clifford 1998), “working-class cosmopolitans” (Werbner 1999), and “Caribbean cosmopolitans” (Wardle 2000). According to Hannerz (2006:17), cosmopolitanism as an etic analytical term must be separated from people’s emic identification with it. He uses the term “subaltern cosmopolitanisms” to describe people who may not be inclined to “identify themselves self-consciously as cosmopolitans” but who nonetheless demonstrate cross-cultural competencies and orientations (Hannerz 2006:22). Within this research, volunteer tourists were more inclined to describe themselves as global citizens than their hosts, because they have been encouraged to think of themselves in those terms, whereas Mayan weavers have not.

Perhaps especially for such subaltern populations, cosmopolitan projection into other worlds can create room for change, as feminist economists J. K. Gibson-Graham (2006:xxx)<sup>6</sup> claimed: “Traversing the distance from a more familiar world (one perhaps structured by stable and inherently reproducible relations of domination) to this emergent one relies on ontological reframing as a technique of thinking. Reframing can create the fertile ontological ground for a politics of possibility, opening the field from which the unexpected can emerge, while increasing our space of decision and room to move as political subjects.” Because an awareness that the status quo is not inevitable is necessary to believing that change is possible, a broadened consciousness of alternatives can help people combat inequalities. According to Margaret Byrne Swain, cosmopolitanism “connects human mobilities, information webs, and commodity flows in ways that can be celebrated for challenging various racialized, ethnocentric, sexist, national narratives” (2011:176).<sup>7</sup> As this dissertation shows, the emancipatory potential of cosmopolitan thinking does not negate the material realities of inequality and structural violence; Gibson-

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<sup>6</sup> J.K. Gibson-Graham is the pen name of Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson, who write together.

<sup>7</sup> ...”but critiqued for associated global rootless hybrid cultural forms, standardized mass commodities, images, and practices” (Swain 2011:176).

Graham signal, “we should affirm that our orientation toward possibility does not deny the forces that militate against it – forces that may work to undermine, constrain, destroy, or sideline our attempts to reshape economic futures” (2006:xxxix). This study closely examines the lived realities of disparate groups of people who are struggling to develop border-crossing skills, enacting and embodying ways of being that encompass more than one geographic locale, and at times challenging cosmopolitan tendencies to gloss over entrenched power differentials in the preexisting global terrain.

### **Culture as a Resource**

Scholars like Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006) have presented cosmopolitanism as a universal good, and those who practice “segregation and seclusion” as parochial. However, culture has increasingly become a site of contestation. George Yúdice (2003) asserted that even as scholars of the globalized era have embraced the idea of culture as free-flowing and hybridized, the popular use of the concept of “culture” has become more ubiquitous and politically significant. The notion of culture began in anthropology as an analytical shorthand to describe “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by [humanity] as a member of society” (Tylor 1871). Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2003) stated that culture developed as an “anti-concept” in the context of American racial thinking. By design, Franz Boas and others formulated culture as blind to race—and by extension, class and history. However, this blindness led to a certain theoretical weakness, a lack of recognition of power and inequality. The three fundamental concepts of “culture” are that human behavior is patterned, that the patterns are learned, and that the patterns can be studied to reveal new information about a population. None of these are inherently essentialist, but over time, culture shifted from a convenient way to describe patterns to a different ontological category, as an entity with causal powers. Cultures were viewed as



functionally complete and structurally logical, and change was deemphasized, in part because the one-researcher, one-site model of anthropological fieldwork promotes this perspective (Trouillot 2003).

Adam Kuper (1999) observed that this “striking efflorescence of culture talk” in recent times is not a new phenomenon but one that follows deep-rooted trends of thought that blossomed in the 1920s and 1950s. The essentialized view of culture as something that can be appropriated, revived, guarded, separated, and identified has again become popularized over the last few decades and taken up by tourists and indigenous people alike. According to Yúdice, “culture-as-a-resource is much more than commodity; it is the lynchpin of a new epistemic framework in which [the] management, conservation, access, distribution, and investment—in ‘culture’ and the outcomes thereof—take priority” (2003:1). In the context of globalization, utility has become the main argument for projects to develop “culture,” which is proposed as a panacea for social issues. He points out that proper management of “culture” has come to be the favored solution for socio-political and economic projects as the state has disengaged from the provision of social services (Yúdice 2003:11). Yúdice noted that, as cultural capital has superseded other development models, the “culturalization of the economy” has been effected through specific political actions, such as the development of intellectual property law (2003:14-17). Michael Brown (2003) discussed how the conflicts that have erupted around cultural appropriation and the growing anxiety over cultural preservation over the past three decades are the product of this redefinition and reification of the concept of culture. Thinking of culture as a resource, and potentially a limited one, makes it a site of contestation. This concept of culture as a resource has given rise to both identity politics and cultural rights (Yúdice 2003). It is the basis for indigenous social movements such as the pan-Maya movement, a community of indigenous

intellectuals and activists, which has sought to support the preservation of Mayan language, cosmology, and dress in Guatemala and Mexico.<sup>8</sup>

Here we have two perspectives on culture within the recent literature in the social sciences that roughly map onto universalizing and particularizing orientations: whereas cosmopolitanism apparently opens up possibilities and invites cultural comparison and potentially change, the resource view of culture places restrictions and establishes traditions. However, there are arguably points of convergence: viewing cosmopolitanism as a set of competencies fits well with the viewpoint that culture is a resource, and volunteers and organizations alike seek to become masters of it. Learning to “mobilize” culture as a resource (both in the sense of deploying it and in the sense of translating it for ease of travel across various borders of understanding) can itself be a cosmopolitan form of knowledge. This dissertation contributes to anthropological thought by exploring these points of convergence to understand how, depending on how the scholarly perspective is tilted, entanglement with other worldviews can be simultaneously emancipatory and disempowering.

### **Cosmopolitan Competencies and Cultural Conservativism in Guatemalan Voluntourism**

While relatively planted in the geographic sense, Guatemalan Mayan women have taken on transnationally circulating discourses of human rights<sup>9</sup> to reformulate their identities as rights-bearers and therefore people of value. They have drawn from the victim language that appeals to the international humanitarian community to attract foreign buyers and volunteers. Their

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<sup>8</sup> Kay B. Warren (1998) stated that the pan-Mayan movement has promoted Mayan cultural revival despite resistance from local Ladinos, uncomfortable at how the shift from class-based movements to an ethnic movement has exposed the deep racism in Guatemala, as well as from the international scholarly community, which has responded to having its monopoly on representations of Mayans threatened by accusing the movement of political opportunism and strategic essentialism.

<sup>9</sup> According to Katherine O'Donnell, while Western human rights activists tend to base their activism in an individualistic model of human rights, Mayan activists (located in Chiapas, Mexico) tend to articulate a different vision of collective rights in statements such as the Beijing Declaration of Indigenous Women at the NGO Forum of the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China (2010:53).

exposure to other modes of gender relations has arguably moved the “limit points” of what they see as possible. This has paved the way for repositioning their personal and professional lives as they reclaim the public sphere, using geographic mobility (expressed by the Spanish verb *salir*, “to go out”) to assert their value. Guatemalan Mayan women are gazing back at tourists with curiosity and using their imaginaries about tourists’ Western cultures to think critically about Guatemalan beliefs and practices. However, their desire for cross-cultural exchange has limits. They have staked a claim for worth on a global scale based in their knowledge of Mayan culture, the value of which is evidenced by the desire of foreign tourists and buyers across the globe to consume it. Having based their importance to the organization on their cultural heritage, the cooperative members and particularly those involved in the cooperative administration feel the need to defend their intellectual property and their right to be the ones distributing this knowledge. They are concerned that their culture might be a limited resource, something that, once shared, is gone past recovery. Mobility of outlook and practice is not necessarily just a right; it can also be a risk, as forms of knowledge once rooted in a place become mobile and potentially ripe for theft. In addition, post-conflict Guatemala is overshadowed by contestations over the memory of the conflict and new configurations of violence, which adds additional stakes and risks to the politics of representation for marginalized indigenous women.

Voluntourists partake in cosmopolitanism as intensified cultural tourists. Most claim that engaging with real cultural difference is one of their primary motives for traveling. They seek a life-changing experience from which they will emerge transformed through their contact with an Other. They seek to become connoisseurs of cultural difference, broadening their horizons and learning to consume the products and ideas of other places. Like the cooperative members, they seem to use their contact with another culture to work through their ideas about what they

appreciate about their own culture and what they might want to reject in favor of other ways of being. Through their volunteer work, they are imagining a different role within global capitalism, one in which they are empowered to make an individual difference, however slight. An increasing involvement with other people in other places brings the entire world within their realm of responsibility. People only feel morally responsible for other people they consider to be within their sphere of influence (Chouliaraki 2010a; Huiberts 2013), and thus an emerging cosmopolitan worldview is necessary for (and, arguably, necessitates) forms of ethical consumption such as volunteer tourism and fair trade. This expansion of people's imaginative reach to encompass people in other geographic regions makes them feel that their choices may be affecting other people and they might bear some responsibility to help them. Voluntourists struggled less with the contradictions between belonging to a place and adapting to a sense of global citizenship than indigenous Guatemalan women because their knowledge had already been mobilized and made transferrable.

### **Voluntourism, Fair Trade, and the Neoliberal Episteme**

While service in travel has a long history, the current explosion in volunteer tourism dates back to the 1970s, as tourists dissatisfied with mainstream tourism sought to engage more closely and sustainably with the people and places they visited (Wearing 2001). The definition of “voluntourism” that I am using here—people who leave home to engage in volunteer projects or who decide to volunteer on vacation—is broad, encompassing people who spend a week on site or who make a full-time commitment for six months. This definition would theoretically include Peace Corps volunteers and short-term mission trips; however, the typical volunteer at TelaMaya was independent, secular and interested in comparatively long-term volunteering. This type of volunteer has not yet been well described in the literature, in part because independent development volunteers represent a relatively small portion of voluntourism: “community

development volunteering” was only the seventh most popular search on a popular voluntourism website, after “medical volunteering,” “volunteer teaching,” and “conservation volunteering” (Salvesen 2014).

Since the mid-twentieth century, anthropological research in tourism has gone from being marginalized as a dubious pursuit to being recognized as an important area of study, and scholarly analyses of tourism have burgeoned. In that time, tourism as a phenomenon has also expanded and differentiated into a range of categories, following the trajectory of post-Fordist capitalism towards diversification of commerce and the exploitation of a variety of niches. Popular and scholarly critiques of tourism as an inauthentic, superficial experience and a source of cultural commodification<sup>10</sup> have stimulated the development of alternative forms of tourism, including ecotourism, pro-poor tourism, slum tourism, and volunteer tourism, which attempt to alter the structures of tourism to promote environmental preservation, economic development, and solidarity between hosts and guests.

Forms of ethical consumption<sup>11</sup> such as alternative tourism and fair trade have become particularly popular recently because of their compatibility with neoliberal ideologies (Harvey 2005): their individualistic, entrepreneurial approaches to aid privilege individual acts of cosmopolitan global citizenship rather than the systematic group pursuit of social justice, or

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Jackson defines “commodification” as “the extension of the commodity form to goods and services that were not previously commodified” (1999:96). In 1977, Davydd Greenwood began the conversation about the commodification of culture in tourism when he asserted that tourism threatens the social order and “authenticity” of a community, as public displays of culture are stripped of their internal meaning, becoming primarily a commodified performance for tourists. Over time, authors like Erik Cohen began to call for a more nuanced approach to commodification, arguing that commodification could potentially have positive outcomes for the hosts of tourists depending on the conditions of production and consumption and the vitality of the cultural traditions (Cohen 1988, 1989).

<sup>11</sup> The ethical consumption movement, in which consumers express their political and moral beliefs through their purchasing decisions, encompasses positive purchasing movements (such as fair trade, organics, and alternative tourism), boycotts, political lobbying and protesting, and corporate social responsibility, and dates back over two centuries.

engagement with or claims against the state (Princen et al. 2002; Butcher 2003).<sup>12</sup> While authors such as Gianluca Brunori (2000) and Marie-Christine Renard (2003) contend that this threatens to make ethical consumption nothing more than a “degraded form of social action” (Gendron et al. 2009), Rochelle Spencer (2010) views this individualization of responsibility as a benefit. She argues that it gives people a sense of individual agency, that they have the power to create change on their own by spending their money in responsible ways, and that this agency can spill over into other endeavors. A central tension within the idea of ethical consumption is that the strategy of working within existing systems of exchange to make them more equitable and sustainable provides support to these systems and precludes radically overturning the structures that have kept them unequal. Ethical consumption, as a response to the potential for pervasive commodification of domains such as cultural heritage or the environment, always faces the threat of cooptation by market logics, given that it is largely based upon them.

One of the first researchers to recognize voluntourism as a unique form of tourism was Stephen Wearing. Wearing defined voluntourists as “those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organized way ... that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments, or research into aspects of society or environment” (2001:1). According to Wearing, many earlier forms of travel, such as voyages of exploration or the educational “Grand Tour” undertaken by Western elites, were a means of discovering the unknown. However, the advent of mass tourism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century turned travel into a commodity to be consumed and eroded its potential to transform the tourist as an individual. Wearing presented voluntourism as the solution to this problem of

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<sup>12</sup> The idea that people are responsible for themselves and by extension, each other, coincides with TelaMaya members’ understanding of the Guatemalan government as a failed state. The cooperative officers expected nothing from the Guatemalan state and viewed volunteers as their primary source of assistance in developing their organization.

commodification, a cross-cultural interchange in which both hosts and guests benefit. He suggested that voluntourism could serve as a rite of passage for young people, allowing them to develop confidence in their capabilities, a clear sense of their goals and aspirations in life, and an expanded sense of self in a new geographic location. It could also allow voluntourists to donate their time and money to community-based development projects: “What volunteer tourism appears able to offer is an alternative direction where profit objects are secondary to a more altruistic desire to travel in order to assist communities” (Wearing 2001:12).

Wearing advocated volunteer tourism as a new paradigm in host-guest relations, which can serve as a model for reimagining mass tourism. Wearing and Jess Ponting (2009) claimed that mass tourists pay large amounts of money to keep themselves insulated from the inconveniences of contact with locals and do not experience their destinations as a “space,” a place with cultural meaning and context, but as a place that could be anywhere in the world. Voluntourism, which facilitates contact with locals, has the potential to make tourists aware of the location they are visiting as a space, inhabited and shaped by other people (Wearing and Ponting 2009). Like Dean MacCannell with his image of “the tourist,” Wearing seemed to assume that “the volunteer tourist” is a monolithic figure. Wearing suggested that voluntourism is one of the only ways that tourists can transform themselves into “Boorstin’s ‘traveler,’ ‘working at something’ as he breaks the bounds of all that is pseudo and penetrates, finally, into a real back region” (MacCannell 1976:106). Rather than engaging with the perspectives in the literature that have pointed to the power relationships among hosts, guests, and other agents that complicate all forms of tourism, including alternative tourism, Wearing displaced all of the scholarly critiques of tourism onto mass tourism and advocated voluntourism more or less uncritically.

Wearing's approach to volunteer tourism is representative of the dominant scholarly discourse on the emerging phenomenon of voluntourism. The literature coming out of tourism and hospitality studies has often celebrated voluntourism, and most criticisms have been geared towards determining best practices to refine existing voluntourism programs. For example, Shalini Singh and Tejvir Singh (2004) considered voluntourism a way of recovering a more idealized, intellectual form of travel, from an era before elite travel gave way to mass tourism and its accompanying commodification. They romanticized the experience of voluntourism, as in this typical quote: "The simplicity and innocence of the mountain folks, the freshness of the place, the enlightening jubilation of community compensability and a divine omnipresence together create an idyllic effect" (Singh and Singh 2004:187). While Singh and Singh admitted that locals are skeptical of tourism and can clash with voluntourists, they wrote, "Being devoid of ulterior motives of such volunteering activities of hosts and guests alike, the negative impacts of tourism are largely obliterated" (2004:191). Singh and Singh (2004) advanced the image of voluntourism as a harmonious interchange between hosts and guests, uncomplicated by structural issues or relations of power.

However, some scholars have questioned such essentialized narratives about voluntourism. Richard Butler (2004) suggested that many academics favor alternative tourism so strongly over mass tourism out of a form of class prejudice, because they nostalgically identify alternative tourism with more elitist forms of travel from the past. Voluntourism has been criticized for taking employment from local residents, straining community carrying capacity, and undermining the dignity and autonomy of locals (McGehee and Andereck 2008). While his work is not typically cited in the literature on alternative tourism, John Hutnyk (1996) argued that international volunteers in aid work are the "soft edge" of the expansion of the neoliberal



commodity system, which maintains those in the global South in a state of need and delivers humanitarian charity rather than social justice: “Volunteers who thought their activity was significantly different from mainstream tourism would seem to be mistaken. ‘Alternative’ travel, just as much as the alternative trade promoted by many organized aid groups, works as a reassuring front for continued extension of the logistics of the commodity system” (1996:215).

Hutnyk united Marx’s focus on commodification with the literature on cultural production to show how touristic discourses “occlude” the global inequalities created by capitalism.

While volunteer tourism may bring hosts and guests together in some ways, it can also underscore the differences between them. Kate Simpson (2004) suggested that gap-year volunteer tourism creates a “geography of need” in which Southern countries are seen as “needy” and Northern volunteer tourists are seen as meeting that need, reinforcing voluntourists’ sense of cultural difference rather than a sense of shared issues. This difference between their homes and their hosts is made more palatable by using “culture” as a panacea; many agencies and tourists use the “poor-but-happy” excuse that the hosts are rich in beautiful scenery and cultural resources and do not miss what they do not have. The gap-year voluntourists she studied glossed over the structural inequalities between world regions in favor of a discourse of “luck,” a “lotto logic” that absolved them of complicity with the programs that have disempowered countries in the global South: their experiences made them feel lucky for having been born in a wealthy, powerful country, but they maintained that anyone could have been as lucky, which naturalizes the material inequalities between themselves and citizens of less fortunate countries. Writing about ecotourism, Rosaleen Duffy (2002) argued that tourism is a system driven by local agencies that are tied into the international tourism industry, which means that individual tourists are relatively powerless to affect the structures, and thus the impact, of touristic activity. While

not all such impacts are negative, they are complex and difficult to control, such as the “demonstration effect” that encourages locals to imitate Western consumption practices (Duffy 2002:52).

Wanda Vradi (2013) recently published the first major critical analysis of voluntourism: *Volunteer Tourism: Giving Back in Neoliberal Times*. Vradi argued that “volunteer tourism helps young adults from the Global North assume a type of political subjectivity [faithful] to neoliberal injunctions” (2013:6). The recent trend towards requiring emergent citizens to be cosmopolitan humanitarians, in addition to the pre-existing neoliberal mandates of entrepreneurship and individual responsibility, has only made achieving effective global citizenship less accessible to many people. A class of overeducated, underemployed youths, most visible in the US but growing in numbers in Europe, increasingly need to pass through a stage of indentured labor to begin their careers, and voluntourism meets this need. “In dedicating their time and money to helping the global poor, volunteers display precisely the types of qualities needed to assume a privileged subjectivity: an ability to operate in distant and diverse settings, a desire for social change and an interest in experimenting with one’s self and the world around it,” Vradi (2013:42) wrote. While Vradi (2013:229) harshly critiqued the global political-economic structures that have shaped voluntourism as a phenomenon, she viewed voluntourists as pure of intention: “Volunteer tourism expresses a genuine desire for community, mutual aid and cosmopolitan sociality that neoliberal government does not know how to accommodate, other than by packaging it as a luxury commodity with feel-good value.” In one of her two case studies, focusing on an environmentalist volunteer program in El Petén, Guatemala, she found that voluntourists quickly became disengaged from a program whose loose structure made them feel useless and unmotivated. Instead, they spent their time satisfying their desire to become

immersed in local culture, taking on a multiculturalist perspective that tended to romanticize locals' material privation: "This is romanticism at its worst: a rejuvenation of consumer capitalism through Orientalist fantasies of difference that earns white middle-class people additional social capital" (Vrasti 2013:237).

As important as it is in revealing the neoliberal underpinnings of the voluntourism phenomenon, Vrasti's book continues to focus on the figure of the voluntourist, privileging touristic experiences and subject formation processes over their interactions with locals or locals' perspectives on the exchange. The literature on voluntourism to date has focused on the tourists' motivations and personal development during their projects, including self-satisfaction, a sense of usefulness, responsibility, and good citizenship, and to a lesser extent, how their work concretely affects their hosts (e.g. Wearing 2001; Simpson 2004; Palacios 2010; Baillie Smith and Laurie 2011). Such scholarly attention—which mirrors voluntourism's orientation to satisfying volunteer tourists' expectations and professional development goals (Baillie Smith and Laurie 2011)—obscures how host communities understand their engagement with volunteers. To move beyond the focus on volunteers, Wearing and Neil (2004:291) suggested that more research should focus on the "micro-social dynamic exchanges" between voluntourists, host organizations, and the surrounding community: "Such an approach allows incorporating the interaction of cultural or social influences, such as those between the host community, the participant and the site." Hutnyk (1996) claimed that he chose to focus on the tourists rather than the poor they were attempting to help in light of Gayatri Spivak's critique of ethnography's tendency to make the poor its subjects. He wrote that while he could have studied "the relationship between workers and locals in the clinic," he declined to do so in favor of studying those with more power in the relationship (1996:12). Hutnyk's political commitment to

“studying up” is admirable; however, in the context of tourism research, the typical situation is reversed: the vast majority of the literature has focused on tourists, seen as a powerful force shaping communities, while a smaller subset of the literature has focused on how communities react to and resist this shaping force. My research shifts the focus to the interactions and relationships between international volunteers and their hosts, concentrating on cross-cultural volunteering as a process and how volunteer tourists and local actors negotiate the process of redefining “Mayan culture” together.

### **The Case: TelaMaya, a Mayan Women’s Weaving Cooperative**

Here, I use a weaving cooperative in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, as a paradigmatic case to examine the interpersonal dynamics of voluntourism. TelaMaya is a cooperative that brings together 400 women from seventeen weaving groups in five regions in the western highlands of Guatemala: Sololá, Huehuetenango, Sacatepéquez, Quetzaltenango and Quiché. Founded in 1988 by a Belgian social entrepreneur with aid from the Dutch government to help victims of the Guatemalan civil war (1960–1996) support themselves financially, the cooperative became independent in 1995 and has come to be managed by a Mayan board of directors with elected officers. The officers estimated that approximately 80% of the members were widows and single mothers through the violence of the civil war or subsequent social instability; the other members were young unmarried women. While it is not a religious organization, the cooperative’s administration and weaving group leaders expressed their mission to help others using religious idioms. Based on informal estimations, the organization’s religious demographics matched the general population of Guatemala, where the Roman Catholic Church has claimed 65–70% of the population as members and the Evangelical Alliance of Protestant churches (locally grouped together under the term *evangélicos*) has claimed 35–40% (US Department of State 2012).

The cooperative helps weavers to access markets for their products, operating a retail shop for tourists in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, and exporting to fair trade shops in the global North. Its volunteer program attracts approximately 50 volunteer tourists a year—typically female college students from the United States and Europe—who act as knowledge brokers between the producers and consumers because of their presumed familiarity with clients' tastes. The voluntourists translate between the weavers and foreign clients (who usually do not speak Spanish), help with weaving classes, and handle the cooperative's website and export orders, often deciding how to market the cooperative to clients and setting long-term goals for the organization. This puts young, foreign women in the position of representing, and at times essentializing, indigenous Guatemalan women.

In this case, I would argue that the commodification of both Mayan handicrafts and their producers has had a variety of tangible and intangible benefits for the cooperative members, enhancing their pride in their cultural heritage, helping them preserve their weaving traditions, and increasing their economic independence. At the same time, a pervasive sense of discomfort colors the interactions between the Mayan weavers, who know how easily their cultural property can be exploited, and the cooperative officers and voluntourists who are collaborating to commodify their work. Voluntourism has been a mixed blessing for TelaMaya: the experiences of the cooperative members show that the traffic in intangibles leads to anxiety about what is inalienable and what can be appropriated, at multiple levels. The cooperative was an ideal environment to study the overlapping incursions of various forms of ethical consumption because it attracts clients and volunteer tourists from all over the world who assume a variety of shifting roles in the commodification of Mayan weavings and cultural values, creating and consuming narratives. Anna Tsing (2000:349) suggests that one of the most effective approaches

to understanding transnational engagements is to examine “close encounters,” the moments of interaction that produce “collaboration, misunderstanding, opposition, and dialogue.”

Investigating the encounters between Mayan cooperative officers and voluntourists from the global North entails examining how their identities and interests shape and are shaped by their collaborative activities, and that is the goal of this dissertation.

### **Tourism in the Local Context**

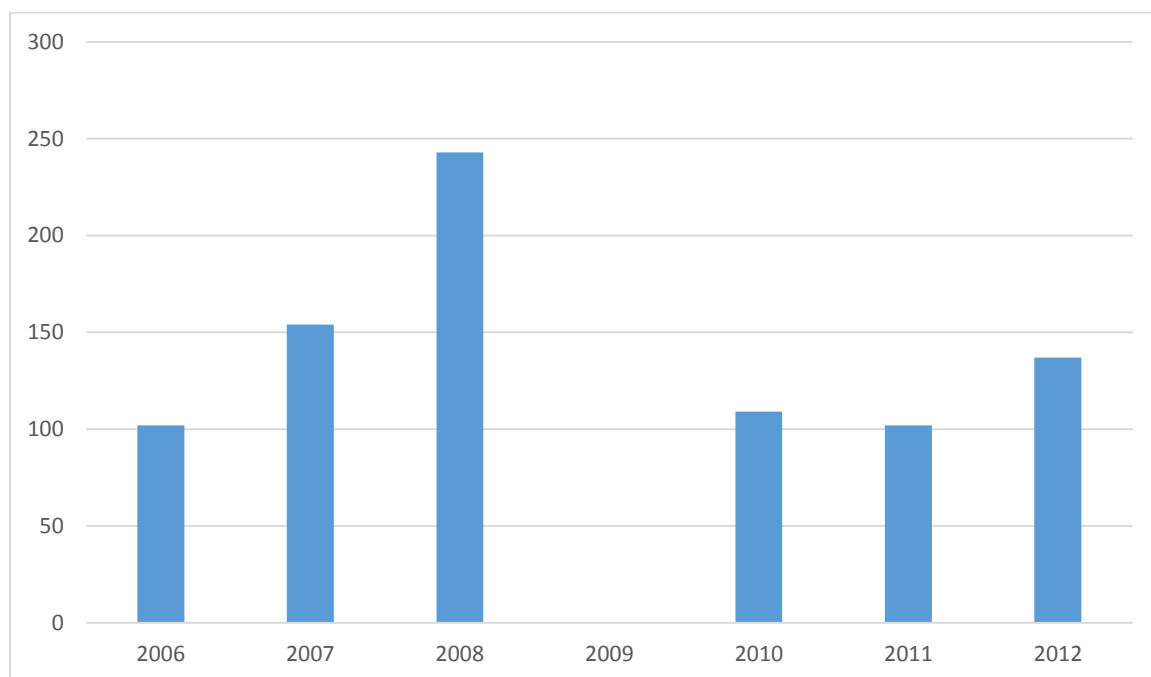
Diane Nelson wrote, “Guatemala, because of its proximity to the United States, its physical beauty and cultural traditions, the buying power of the dollar, the ease of acquiring visas, and the pathos and emotion of the war, has become intensely crowded with foreigners” (1999:53). During the civil war, tourism numbers fell (Hinshaw 1988:197), but have since rebounded. Today, tourism ranks just behind coffee as Guatemala’s leading industry: in 2012, a total of 1,951,173 international tourists and US\$1.42 billion entered the country (Castañeda 2013). Because the leaders of TelaMaya were so dependent on international tourism, they noticed fluctuations caused by a variety of factors, including global economic instability, the H1N1 virus, and an increase in reports of serious crime in Guatemala. Roxana explained that in 2010, with Hurricane Agatha and the resulting rains and flooding, tourism was low. It was also low for a time in 2011, as tourists feared the tensions surrounding the contentious presidential election and gang violence flared on the border with Mexico. Roxana felt that 2012 was better, despite a destructive earthquake off the Pacific coast and ongoing global economic instability. Roxana’s perceptions map fairly well onto the official statistics on visitation, as shown in Table 1.1.

**Table 1.1 International tourism**

	North America	% of total	Europe	% of total	Asia	% of total	Total Visitors
2009	604,813	34%	173,057	9.7%	20,022	1.1%	1,776,868
2010	645,521	34.4%	179,824	9.6%	26,412	1.4%	1,875,777
2011	604,596	33.2%	173,074	9.5%	25,636	1.4%	1,822,663
2012	631,947	32.4%	185,871	9.5%	25,458	1.3%	1,951,173
2013	652,275	32.6%	177,994	8.9%	24,200	1.2%	2,000,126

The table is derived from the national tourism board INGUAT's Annual Bulletin of Tourism Statistics (INGUAT 2010; INGUAT 2011; INGUAT 2012; INGUAT 2013). The categories are drawn from the report; the total foreign tourism numbers also include a large number of Central American visitors and some South American visitors; however, as far as TelaMaya is concerned, "tourism" means "extra-regional international tourism."

The Guatemalan government does not keep statistics on voluntourism; however, the expansion and professionalization of NGO coordination organization EntreMundos' volunteer program serves as a rough proxy for the state of voluntourism in the Western Highlands of Guatemala. Founded in 2001 with headquarters in Quetzaltenango to create discussion about social issues and help local NGOs coordinate with each other, EntreMundos began focusing on volunteer placement a few years later. In response to growing demand, the organization expanded its mission to include volunteer information services and capacity building programs for local non-governmental organizations. EntreMundos maintains a database of volunteer opportunities and hosts consultations with potential volunteers. According to the organization's annual reports, it has helped place over 100 volunteers each year since 2006 (data for 2009 is unavailable); Table 1.2 displays this data.

**Table 1.2 EntreMundos volunteer placement interviews**

The development of EntreMundos points to the growing recognition of the importance of voluntourism in Quetzaltenango.

Quetzaltenango has emerged as an internationally recognized "development tourism destination" (Becklake 2014). Quetzaltenango is the second-largest city in Guatemala, with a population of approximately 127,569 according to the 2002 census.<sup>13</sup> Situated in what was historically Mam Maya territory, the city was conquered by the K'iche' Mayan empire in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and held until the Spanish conquest that began in 1523. The Spanish conquistador Pedro de Alvarado gave the city the name Quetzaltenango ("place of the quetzals," emerald-colored birds, in Nahuatl, the language of his Mexican allies) (CODEDE Quetzaltenango 2006). Known locally as Xela from the K'iche' name for the city, *Xelajuj N'oj* ("Below the 10 Wisdoms"), which refers to the ten mountains that surround the city, the city was already a significant

<sup>13</sup> However, the population swells on a daily basis through commercial activities to as much as 200,000.



multiethnic center by the 1700s (Grandin 2000:237). The Spanish colonial government managed it as a *pueblo de indios*, a resettled indigenous community that nonetheless hosted a growing community of non-indigenous Ladino (mestizo, creole, and Spanish) industrial elites. Greg Grandin (2000) states that the city has a long history of complex, fraught political alliances between its indigenous and Ladino leaders. From 1838–1840, it was briefly the capital of the *Estado de los Altos*, the Sixth State of the Central American Federation, an independent republic that separated from Guatemala shortly after it achieved independence from Spain in 1821 (Grandin 2000:238). Xela thus came to be the economic and political capital of the Western Highlands. Today, Xela is home to a diverse urban indigenous population, approximately half the population in total—predominantly K’iche’ Maya (CODEDE Quetzaltenango 2006).

While Guatemalan tourism advertising typically focuses on archaeological ruins, hiking opportunities, sun and sand, and indigenous markets, Xela occupies a distinct space within Guatemalan tourism, attracting longer visits from international tourists with its language schools, international development programs, and volunteer opportunities (Willett 2007). It became a voluntourism destination by accident, as Spanish schools began offering volunteer placements to their students to provide them with additional cultural immersion. Local tourism promotion boards, including CENAT and INGUAT, have not marketed the city for its volunteer opportunities. The typical tourist narrative identified it as a city clearly rooted in everyday Guatemalan life, with industries and activities besides tourism, but with the kind of international tourist presence that also supported businesses attractive to foreigners. One former volunteer wrote, “It’s a great place to live, combining the amenities that help travelers out (such as Internet cafes, vegan restaurants, etc.) with a grounding in the local community that some travelers feel is lacking in tourist centers like Antigua or Panajachel. It’s also a good base for weekend

excursions to local indigenous villages and natural attractions.” Volunteers often contrasted the city favorably with Antigua as providing the perfect balance of authenticity and cosmopolitanism: “The city retains its rough and original edges, giving it a very different feel from postcard-perfect Antigua. Nevertheless, long-term volunteers will have plenty of recourses to fight off homesickness: a couple of American-style bakeries, at least three English language bookstores, and restaurants specializing in every cuisine from French to Texan.” Another former volunteer described Xela as “a city packed with a wide variety of low-cost, high-impact opportunities. Indeed, if anything outnumbers Xela’s legion of language schools, it is volunteer organizations. Add the international cuisine, tour companies, nightlife and bookstores, all of which coexist with a fully functioning Guatemalan city, and you will find there is little Xela does not offer.” The TelaMaya volunteer manual includes the following description of the city:

Volunteers often ask us how much it costs to live here, what the weather is like, whether it is safe, and where they can stay or study Spanish. If you’re considering spending several months here, you can probably find an apartment for around US\$100 a month and plan to spend around \$5 a day on food, including occasional restaurant meals. There are two main seasons in Xela: rainy season, which lasts from around June-October, and dry season, which lasts from around November to May. Because of the altitude, Xela can be quite cold, but the sun can be strong, so pack your sweaters and sunscreen. While volunteers do not typically feel unsafe in Xela, common-sense precautions are warranted.

On April 12<sup>th</sup>, 2013, the day of a festival celebrating the city’s anniversary, *Xelajú Es...* (“Xelajú Is...”), several residents had a debate on social media about how they would define Xelajú that started with the following post questioning the importance of the sponsors of the event to the city’s identity: “XELAJU IS NOT ONLY Quetzalteca, Gallo, Telefónica, DX Cable, much less the banks that put the people in debt. XELAJU IS also Armadillo Puppet Theater, Metaphor Quetzaltenango, First Steps, New Horizons, Artisan Café, Café RED. XELAJU IS pure

rebelliousness.”<sup>14</sup> This quote suggests that, according to residents, the city should not be characterized by its major beverage and technology corporations, but by the local NGOs and small businesses that are also the organizations providing volunteer opportunities to foreigners and locals.

The seasonality of voluntourism in Xela tends to follow that of tourism as a whole: peak months include December–January and June–August, with lulls in February and September (INGUAT 2012). Because TelaMaya relies on volunteer labor, this makes staffing the organization a challenge during the low months; however, they also have fewer clients in the store during these months. The difficulty is handling a different schedule for exports, as wholesale clients make large orders three months in advance of their deadlines and the sales in the online shop take off for the holiday season. To date, while the officers place a high importance on exports, sales in the store are TelaMaya’s largest source of income. However, as exports continue to grow, TelaMaya may have trouble using exclusively volunteer labor to manage international sales.

On an annual basis, the cooperative generated between Q.250,000.00 (\$31,250), the net income from 2010, and Q.258,600 (\$37,000), the net income from 2013, for its members.<sup>15</sup> Their monthly costs were high, including Q.2,500 in rent (\$320) plus Q.900 (\$115) in electricity. Because TelaMaya did not equally distribute its income among its members, for an individual family, this could represent as little as Q.100 (\$12) or as much as Q.10,000 (\$1295), depending on the success of their products. For most of the weavers, the cooperative federation represented

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<sup>14</sup> XELAJU NO ES SOLO la quetzaltequita, ni gallito, ni telefónica (que es española), ni cable de ekis, mucho menos los bancos que endeudan a la gente. XELAJU ES también Teatro Títeres Armadillo, Metáfora Quetzaltenango, Primeros Pasos, Nuevos Horizontes, Artesano, Café RED. XELAJU ES rebeldía pura.

<sup>15</sup> See Appendix Two for a more detailed discussion of how the cooperative was organized, how money was redistributed, and how members interacted with each other.

a preferred outlet for their weavings, which they also sell to intermediaries at greater volume and lower cost, in addition to working part-time without compensation in their families' *milpas* (corn plots) and gardens to piece together a livelihood. In her investigation of women's economic strategies in the Western Highlands of Guatemala, Cecilia Menjívar (2006:92) found that over half were professional weavers and sold their weavings in local markets or to exporters; in addition, they "cleaned houses, worked as clerks in stores, made tamales for sale, worked as teachers and comadronas [midwives]; one owned a pharmacy with her husband, and one made clandestine liquor for sale. A few had worked in maquilas [factories] or as domestics in Guatemala City." Women viewed weaving sales as one of their limited income-generating options due to their lack of formal education and mobility.<sup>16</sup>

Guatemala established a national "general poverty" line, based on an annual food budget of less than Q.9,030.93 (\$1,160) per person within a household. In the region that TelaMaya serves, up to 81% of the population falls below the general poverty line (INE 2011). The

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<sup>16</sup> Immigration also represented a significant economic opportunity for some women, as well as a source of information about foreign ways of life. Guatemala receives more money in remittances than any other Central American country, due to the fact that it is estimated that 11% of Guatemala's population lives abroad, of whom 97% live in the United States (Rosales 2009). During the civil war some Mayans sought asylum in the US, and others followed illegally for economic reasons. Their remittances have allowed their relatives to build small businesses, buy land, and raise their standards of living. After agricultural exports, remittances are the greatest source of income for Guatemalans, many of whom are Mayans (Montejo 2005:3). Remittances represented almost 4 billion US dollars in 2008 (Banco de Guatemala 2008), and over half of recipients live in rural areas and indigenous communities (Rosales 2009). Though the economic crisis and reduced opportunities for migrant workers have lowered this amount, remittances remain Guatemala's main foreign income source, totaling as much as 50% of exports and 10% of its GDP (CIA 2015). However, in general, the women in the cooperative seemed to be involved in weaving sales because they were not receiving significant remittances from the US. During the 20 months I spent in the field, I heard three stories of people close to the cooperative leaders who went north (*hacia el norte*) illegally. One, a 15 year old girl from Sololá, was detained and sent back to her parents; another, a woman in her late twenties from Quezaltenango, died of exposure in the desert. Her married lover had gotten her pregnant, and she borrowed money to help him pay his passage with a *coyote* and paid 4,500 quetzales to a *coyote* who took her as far as the border. The next *coyote* asked her for 10,000 quetzales to take her across and she could not pay. María also shared the story of a young man from her community who died and was buried in the desert. Andrea commented, "It's even worse now that they're talking about the Zetas. What if they grab me and kill me? I prefer to live here" ("*Peor ahora que hablan de los Zetas. ¿Que tal si me agarren y me maten? Prefiero vivir aquí*").

Western Highlands has the lowest measures of educational attainment and literacy, wealth, adequate housing, access to services, job satisfaction, and health in the country (INE 2011).

María and Roxana described the typical Guatemalan family's economic plight in more personal terms. "You know what the economic situation is like here in Guatemala. A hundred quetzales a month does not pay for anything,"<sup>17</sup> stated María. Roxana observed that Guatemalan households usually have eight or nine members, and some as many as fifteen, not including grandparents.

The parents typically got married at 14 or 15 years old and may not have been prepared to start managing a household. Her household consists of five people, by her count, although she often played host to her mother and sisters. María said, "We have four things in the house: corn, beans, sugar, and coffee. Those are the essentials. Sometimes they have their potatoes, their herbs."<sup>18</sup>

Roxana interjected, "Goodness knows how,"<sup>19</sup> and María continued, "But it is rare the person like that."<sup>20</sup> Given this level of poverty, TelaMaya represents an important source of income and hope to its members.

### **Research Methodology**

It may seem simplistic to suggest that, through contact, hosts and voluntourists are rethinking their lives, as a precondition to taking action; however, anthropology is fundamentally a utopian search for viable alternatives. The process of observation, comparison, and expanding awareness is fundamental to the anthropological project. While in certain ways, anthropology is by definition a "situated" discipline (Werbner 2008:1), what develops out of ethnographic fieldwork is "inevitably cosmopolitan knowledge; that is a construction that emerges out of the

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<sup>17</sup> Sabe cómo es la situación económica aquí en Guatemala. 100 quetzales cada mes no paga nada.

<sup>18</sup> Son cuatro cosas que tenemos en la casa: maíz, frijol, azúcar, y café. Estos son las esenciales. A veces tienen sus papitas, sus hierbas.

<sup>19</sup> Ay saber cómo.

<sup>20</sup> Pero es rara la persona así.

encounter between representatives of different cultures” (Kahn 2003:411). Local communities, as the “cosmopolitan hosts [of both tourists and anthropologists] enable the emergence of a shared cosmopolitan dialogue” (Werbner 2008:25).

The recognition that tourism and ethnography are parallel pursuits is a theme in the tourism literature. Tourists and ethnographers have historically jostled for discursive space with the accounts of foreign practices that they bring home from their travels (Badone 2004: 186). MacCannell (1976) made an important connection between ethnography and tourism, suggesting that both tourism and ethnography are ways of making sense of the dislocations of modernity, and arguing that the main difference is the self-consciousness with which ethnographers approach their task. Both tourists and ethnographers have historically been invested in moving beyond the public image of places to encounter an underlying reality, even if some scholars have sniffed at the idea of tourists presuming to pursue cultural engagement: “Wanting to get away from appearances and to penetrate the profundity of native life is a pursuit best left to anthropologist, and not tourists” (Grünewald 2006). Edward Bruner claimed, “Wherever ethnographers go or have gone, tourists have already been or are sure to follow. And wherever tourism establishes itself, our traditional anthropological subject matter, the peoples and culture of the world, becomes commercialized, marketed, and sold to an eager audience of international tourists” (2005:191). Along the same lines, Hutnyk noted that, because his position in the site was analogous to that of the tourists, and because the ethnography that he produced was “another circulating commodity,” it became difficult to “engage politically with the exploitation and inequalities of imperialism and colonialism of which international tourism is a major part” (1996:32). Bruner stated that as a tour guide, he was responsible for shaping tourists’ experience, and thus found himself slipping in and out of touristic and ethnographic roles, and in essence,

studying himself (2005:23). According to Bruner, “Tourist tales are not fixed, self-contained entities. Our stories merge with theirs, genres become blurred, the border between tourism and ethnography becomes porous, and the line between subject and object become obscure” (2005:23). This was particularly the case in my research on tourists who sought to become deeply engaged in processes of cultural production. Diane Nelson (1999:53) declared that the struggle to “disassociate ourselves from gringo tourists” has become more imperative for anthropologists in recent decades, as tourists have become more common in previously less-accessible places and their roles have become more solidarity-oriented, blurring the boundaries and threatening our monopoly. “I am ‘confused’ with tourists, hippies, missionaries,” and “hundreds of students who want an interview and are never heard from again,” stated Nelson (1999:53). The last comment points to one of the ways that cultural anthropologists often differentiate themselves from other outsiders: their ongoing commitment to the people with whom they work.

It is therefore necessary to problematize my position as a tourist-ethnographer. As a *gringa*, a category defined by the crossing of a national boundary between the US and a Latin American country and marked by gender identification (Adams 1998; Nelson 1999), I was always perceived and treated as an intermediate figure. I spent a total of 20 months in participant observation in the office between July 2010 and January 2013, in two three-month preliminary visits and one continuous 14-month visit. During that time, I engaged in participant observation, volunteering with the cooperative as a way of taking on a recognized role in the site and giving back to my participants. For most of my fieldwork, as needed, I served as the bilingual volunteer coordinator and program manager for TelaMaya. The volunteer coordinator’s responsibilities include recruiting and training volunteers, facilitating volunteer projects, maintaining the

cooperative's website, email, and online shop, and working with international wholesale clients. This role gave me privileged access to the process of commercializing Mayan weavings, and working as an intermediary put me in an excellent position to study the interactions between the Mayan weavers, their foreign volunteers, and their international clients. I was responsible for establishing, maintaining, and reevaluating the program standards I was supposed to be studying; however, I also had the opportunity to observe several other volunteer coordinators in action. While I would explain my research goals to new acquaintances, my appearance, national origin, and role in the cooperative positioned me as a voluntourist, and this is how the majority of cooperative members and voluntourists related to me. Anthropological knowledge is inherently "partial," both in the sense of being incomplete and taking a side (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Nelson 1999). In my field notes, I was equally likely to write "we" identifying myself with the cooperative leaders and the voluntourists, depending on who I was working with at the time or whose position I supported in a debate. This high level of entanglement with the cooperative is visible in several moments throughout this dissertation: when I went to the police on behalf of the cooperative during an extortion threat (**Chapter One**), when the cooperative leaders brought me and my white privilege along as backup to a meeting with a government official (**Chapter Five**), or when the cooperative leaders dreamed of me sharing their humiliation when they (we) were accused of intellectual property theft (**Chapter Six**). My involvement with the daily practices of the cooperative made it challenging at times to step back and take a less immersed (not "objective") look at what was happening. Many ethnographers studying NGOs have taken on solidarity roles in the organizations, working alongside the members, translating and advocating for them, and representing them, and their close collaboration in the field can exacerbate the contradictions and tensions of doing fieldwork (Mendez 2005). Constructivist



perspectives on NGOs may conflict with their members' essentialist strategies and understandings of their work, which poses a serious problem for anthropologists who feel themselves accountable to both local and scholarly understandings.

One of my other biggest challenges was balancing my anthropological research with my work with the cooperative and service to the organization. Working as a volunteer with the organization gave me a recognized role within the site and access to its members and other volunteers. However, I often found myself overwhelmed by my responsibilities as the volunteer coordinator/program manager/export logistics facilitator. I found that it was difficult for me to set boundaries when the cooperative leaders needed something from me; for example, I was planning a follow-up visit to San Martín Sacatepéquez for one weekend, when the president of the cooperative asked me to stay in town to work with a weaving student in the school.

My primary mode of data collection was participant observation, based in the work taking place in the central office from 9AM–5PM as well as excursions with the voluntourists and independently to the communities. I was also present at special events, including meetings with volunteers; meetings with government officials in the former office of the cooperative, customs office, and post office; Skype meetings and visits with wholesale clients; the annual meeting of the board of directors; the biennial gathering of the general assembly; benefit events for the cooperative; training programs in industrial sewing for the members; artisan fairs and weaving demonstrations; the filming of several documentaries about TelaMaya; a pair of visits from a group of students in a service-learning course with a US university, and research visits from other scholars interested in the cooperative. I learned to weave a traditional *huipil* (blouse with woven designs) from the members of the San Martín Sacatepéquez weaving group, working with the president of TelaMaya and a woman around my age, Fabiola. The women from the group

commented that I was “becoming a woman” by making my own *huipil*, a rite of passage that would usually take place at 12–13 years old. Fabiola’s mother was impressed with the professional quality of my work but concerned that, by teaching me, the weavers were threatening their own livelihood, because I would take the knowledge back to the US and reduce their customer base. Learning to weave made me a full gendered person in the eyes of the TelaMaya members, who otherwise viewed me as a childless and therefore aberrant female.

Within anthropology, globalization has called the notion of “the field” into question: rather than only viewing field sites as geographic locations, anthropologists are consciously examining how sites are historicized and constructed as localities, as places defined by their human content. Multi-sited ethnography is one response to critiques of bounded fieldwork (Marcus 1995). However, simply adding more locations to the research design does not answer the challenge of the localization-globalization paradigm; what is important is the shift in thinking from taking places for granted to being attentive to how the movements of people and objects, and the process of fieldwork itself, create places (Trouillot 2003; Tsing 2005). In this study, I looked at how the TelaMaya office as a space has been shaped according to the needs of the cooperative and the voluntourists over the past decade. George Marcus (1995:83) suggests that, in some “strategically situated” localities, multi-sited research can be “foreshortened,” with the researcher physically remaining in one location while retaining a focus on comprehending a global system. Some of the typical concerns about multi-sited fieldwork are that it attenuates the power of fieldwork, or causes a loss of identification with the subaltern. An advantage of this research site is that, while remaining in one geographic area, I was able to observe flows of people and ideas, giving me the benefits of both locally-rooted experience and broad global perspective. Within the TelaMaya office, international, national, regional, and local forces are

collapsed into one locality, allowing me to apply some of the insights of multi-sited ethnography to a limited space. TelaMaya may be geographically fixed within Guatemala, but it makes use of constantly circulating international labor and produces representations and objects that also circulate globally.

I conducted semi-structured interviews in English and Spanish with volunteer tourists, weavers, clients, and representatives from other organizations in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala. While the foreign volunteers are accustomed to research procedures, informed consent, tape recording, and a series of semi-formal questions, I found that the whole process was extremely off-putting to the cooperative members. I shifted my strategy to having more informal, group conversations centered around a topic of interest with the delegations of women who came in from the rural weaving groups, and doing life histories with the women in the board of directors. I found that method successful, because I was most interested in the experiences and attitudes of the women who had had the most contact with volunteers, clients, and other foreigners, and the group representatives who made deliveries to TelaMaya were a naturally selected group that met that criterion. In the end, I interviewed 23 of the 99 volunteers who spent more than one week at the cooperative. Given that TelaMaya sometimes had as many as 15 volunteers at a time, this pointed my attention to how many people volunteered for very short periods or became what other volunteer coordinators called “volunteases”: people who offered to work for an organization and left quickly without accomplishing anything. I also interviewed one client and five community members involved in voluntourism and conducted life history interviews with five members of the board of directors.

In addition to compiling field notes and interviews, I did close readings of volunteers’ application essays, online public photo albums, and blog posts to analyze how they understood

their experiences. To understand the touristic and nationalistic images of Mayans and Mayan weavings that have developed over time, I examined websites, brochures, and other materials designed to attract tourists and promote the national image of Guatemala, as well as guidebooks. Together, these materials helped me understand how volunteer tourists and cooperative members frame their experiences within a broader discursive context.

TelaMaya hosted lectures on their history, mission, and craft in their central office and fair trade store in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, to attract visiting groups of international tourists from local Spanish schools or organizations. In these presentations, the cooperative's leaders would describe the history of the cooperative, present themselves as victims of the Guatemalan civil war, assert their identities as legitimate representatives of Mayan culture, downplay the strength of their connections to foreign clients, and educate visitors on the difference between the democratic structure of their association and the sale of textiles by intermediaries in markets. These were complex performances that did a great deal of work in concisely establishing the image that TelaMaya wanted to present to passing groups of tourists. Analyzing these lectures presented a challenge. The president and vice president would deliver similar performances every time: they would welcome and thank the group for its support, discuss the history of the Guatemalan civil war and the founding of TelaMaya, describe the cooperative's structure, and work to differentiate between the quality and ethical standards of TelaMaya and those of other cooperative stores and street vendors. I wanted to find a way to present the repeated elements in these presentations, which represent the essential rhetorical points that the officers were eager to make, while providing room for some of the important divergences and variations that they delivered to some groups. I used the notes I had taken on 31 iterations of the presentations to construct a composite. To preserve the flavor of the original presentations, I pieced together

example quotes from the transcribed presentations; however, some of the pauses and repetitions have been smoothed out. The resultant composites are more detailed than the typical presentation, including the fullest elaborations of each topic that the officers ever presented. The histories of the cooperative and the members' experiences in the civil war are presented in **Chapter One**, and the bulk of the composites are presented in **Chapter Six**.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

One of the threads I will be tracking through the dissertation is how the reverberations of the genocidal civil war, and the continuous interventions of foreign humanitarians, have structured the experience of living and working in Guatemala for both the cooperative members and voluntourists. **Chapter One** reviews how the displacement and subsequent intermingling between different Mayan ethnic groups caused by the civil war, coupled with the structuring power of the international humanitarian gaze, shaped the emergent sense of pan-Mayan ethnicity. It recounts the formation of the cooperative—based on international perceptions of the geographic distribution of the violence of the civil war—through the eyes of the founding members. It also addresses the narratives of victimhood in the civil war that the cooperative officers used to encourage tourists to support the cooperative with their purchases and labor. **Chapter Two** traces the importance of gender-based organizing to advocate for human rights in the creation of the relatively new women's rights movement. The traces of the genocidal civil war appear in **Chapter Three** in tourists' expressed motivations for volunteering, and voluntourists' sense of Guatemala as a place of lack in **Chapter Four** can also be attributed to its post-conflict status. **Chapter Five** examines how the policies of the civil war turned community members against each other, causing rents in the social fabric that have shaped Guatemalans' perceptions of their own people as well as outsiders. It also analyzes how the post-conflict insecurity of Guatemalan society impinges upon the voluntourists who intervene in this situation.

**Chapter Six** points to the ongoing distrust cooperative members felt towards local people, NGOs and government institutions, and foreigners, given their past experiences with exploitation, oppression, and persecution.

In **Chapter One**, titled “**Histories of Trauma and Politics of Suffering**,” I examine the cooperative leaders’ narratives of their history as a story of both corruption and redemption, from their founding through an initiative of the Dutch government in 1988, through the departure of their Dutch supporters and the crisis in 1995 that led to their reorganization. Grounded in the narratives, I discuss how suffering is built into Guatemalan women’s gender subjectivities. This chapter moves beyond typical definitions of “dark tourism” to speculate whether Guatemala itself could be regarded as a dark tourism destination for some tourists, who are motivated to learn more about the civil war and visit TelaMaya to hear the women’s stories about their experiences.

**Chapter Two: “‘We Have the Same Rights’: Women’s Activism and New Subjectivities”** analyzes how some Guatemalan Mayan weavers are drawing from foreign discourses and examples to expand their perception of what is possible in terms of gender relations. It tracks how Guatemalan Mayan women are coming to see themselves as rights-bearing subjects and encouraging each other to leave the private sphere and take on leadership positions.

I deliberately chose to focus on the history of the cooperative and the members’ developing sense of worth before formally introducing the volunteers in **Chapter Three**, to de-center the volunteers’ experiences, given that the cooperative operated for nearly a decade without foreign volunteers. Positioning the introduction to the volunteer program in this way emphasizes that this is not a study of volunteer tourists but rather an examination of the

dynamics between a local organization and the volunteer tourists it hosts. **Chapter Three: “Prioritizing Voluntourists: Organizations’ Experiences”** addresses voluntourists’ demographic characteristics and backgrounds, their motivations and expectations for volunteering, and their preconceptions of Guatemala and Mayan culture. It sets up the analysis of how voluntourists’ preferences and typical time commitments structure the kinds of projects that get accomplished that continues in **Chapter Four**.

**Chapter Four: “Friction Between Voluntourists, Clients, Cooperative Members, and Community Members”** analyzes the micro-social interactions between the volunteer tourists and cooperative members, focusing on instances of culture clash and friction. It focuses on how voluntourists and cooperative leaders position themselves as people who have different kinds of knowledge that make them useful to the cooperative. Finally, I discuss the structural problems that reliance on volunteer labor may cause for organizations, despite the good intentions of all involved.

**Chapter Five: “The Production of Cosmopolitanism in Voluntourism”** examines volunteer tourists’ anthropological gaze and the return gaze from their Guatemalan coworkers. The cooperative leaders use foreigners as leverage with Ladinos (non-indigenous Guatemalans) to gain social capital within a system that privileges their cultural products while ignoring their needs and voices. Finally, it analyzes how the cooperative officers have developed a cosmopolitan appreciation of tourists’ cultures that they use to critique and reflect upon Guatemalan culture.

**Chapter Six: “Competition Over (and Through) Information: Information Politics Within the Cooperative”** analyzes the representations of Mayan experience and the cultural and aesthetic productions that emerge from the volunteer program. I discuss the debates among and

between the volunteers and cooperative leaders over how much information about the cooperative and its members should be shared online, what to reveal to clients and what to conceal from them, and how to present the products in the store. The power to withhold and demand information emerges as what is fundamentally at stake in the reciprocal exchange between voluntourists and cooperative members.

The **Conclusion: “We Are Entering a Globalized World”** discusses how the imperative to think of themselves as members of a culture and their practices as cultural heritage is one of the forms of cosmopolitan knowledge that indigenous hosts glean from their interactions with tourists and other outsiders. It also ties together the themes of suffering and cosmopolitanism that have been entwined throughout the dissertation by showing how scholars have grounded their approach to recognizing people’s shared humanity across various forms of borders in their capacity for suffering, making cosmopolitanism a basis for ethical action.



## **Chapter One: Histories of Trauma and Politics of Suffering**

Blanca Blanco and Lorna Hayes (2007) argued that gender-based violence “is destabilising development initiatives in Guatemala, by impeding the capacity of women, their families and communities to participate in the social, cultural, economic and political life of the country. Nevertheless, while placing it on the global human rights agenda, national and international organisations do not identify this violence strongly as a development issue.” Wendy Harcourt (2009) claimed that the discourse on gender in development has focused on women’s productive and reproductive capacities rather than their subjective experiences. She wrote, “It is politically important to refocus attention on the personal experiences of the women and men who are subjects of development [...] as they feel and experience political, social, economic and cultural change” (2009:34, 202). Scholars have recently begun paying attention to the impact of gender-based violence on development in Guatemala. This chapter addresses how various forms of violence (gender-based, institutional, structural) are experienced by TelaMaya’s members on a daily basis and how this violence has obstructed the development of the cooperative. In the face of these challenges, TelaMaya’s longevity is remarkable: it has lasted over 25 years where many other cooperatives have failed, a tenacity that can be credited to the leaders of the cooperative and weaving groups.

The notion of “suffering” is a thread that united TelaMaya members’ understandings of their experiences and their mission in the cooperative. Composed of weaving groups from areas that international observers considered the most heavily affected by the 30-year Guatemalan Civil War, the cooperative has received international aid and support based on the degree of suffering its members have experienced. Their suffering makes them legible to foreigners with a humanitarian orientation, such as the Dutch government, which sponsored the cooperative in its

formative years (1988-1995). The cooperative hosted presentations to visiting groups of foreign tourists designed to solicit their sympathy and economic collaboration, in which the cooperative officers recounted their personal stories of suffering during the war. However, suffering is not merely a discursive strategy in relating to foreign clients and supporters but the symbolic touchstone of an entrenched gendered cultural framework in the region that positions women as sufferers and men as the causes of their suffering. This cultural complex has been theorized as *marianismo* (“Marianism,” from the Virgin Mary), which I would argue suffers from a certain reductionism but nevertheless has relevance to women’s emic understandings of their roles in life. This entanglement of suffering and gender identity has become complicated by the intervention of foreigners, who disrupt the rigid binary construction of gender in Guatemala by presenting alternate models of femininity and masculinity to the women in the cooperative (see **Chapter Two**).

This chapter begins with a brief history of some of the key events and outcomes of the genocidal civil war, followed by a review of the transnational and regional discursive spaces that have made suffering the thematic thread connecting TelaMaya’s activities and its members’ experiences. The next section analyzes TelaMaya’s history (or “creation myth”) as its founders understood it and the meanings with which they imbued it. In their oral histories about the creation of the cooperative, they positioned themselves as women who had to become leaders, pursuing paths that are non-traditional for their gender to provide for their family members and communities and struggling for the good of all suffering women and their families. The founding members constructed foreigners as their saviors, and local people (including non-indigenous business associates and former cooperative members) as the villains in their stories. Such narratives shed light on one of the most striking aspects of TelaMaya’s volunteer program: the

reflexive distrust with which they approach Guatemalan associates, as discussed in depth in **Chapter Five**.

### **Guatemalan Civil War (1960–1996)**

Scholars have tended to use the 36-year Guatemalan civil war (1960–1996) as the dominant analytical framework for understanding the past decades in the nation's history, perhaps to an unwarranted extreme. However, it is undeniable that the armed conflict transformed ethnic and gender relations and the expression of Mayan identity. Truth commission estimates suggest that around 200,000 people were killed and another 40,000 disappeared during the war, most between 1982 and 1985 (Davis 1988; Green 1999). The civil war left behind an estimated 80,000 widows and 250,000 children who were orphaned according to Guatemalan conceptions of the term, which refers to the loss of at least one parent (Green 1999:4). Much of the violence targeted indigenous Mayan groups, seen as enemies of the state; during the course of the war, more than 440 Mayan villages were completely destroyed (Green 1999). The army particularly targeted Mayan women, as Linda Green writes: "Widespread use of rape during counterinsurgency war was a gendered way in which the military attacked the social fabric of family and community life" (1999:32). Green (1999) argues that structural violence has become embedded in the daily experience of life for rural Mayan widows and has shaped their strategies for survival. Writing during the conflict, Shelton Davis (1988:26) stated, "Although there is little doubt that the scope of army violence against civilians was greater than that of the guerrillas, the local population views both institutions as creating a situation of generalized violence and making it impossible for them to carry on their traditional ways of life." In retrospect, many have come to consider the term "civil war" a misnomer in the Guatemalan context, characterizing the conflict as genocidal (Jonas 2000).

In the 1970s, guerilla activity in the Western Highlands intensified, and in 1978, General Romeo Luca García (1978–82) began escalating military repression, not only against the guerillas but also the indigenous people who were seen as their supporters. The Guatemalan army targeted the towns with cooperative leaders and members to suppress the emerging rural development movement, which the state saw as a threat to its authority. When General Efraín Ríos Montt (1982–83) became President of Guatemala, he instituted the infamous “beans and bullets” program, a system of rewards in the form of government development assistance and punishments in the form of civil patrols and long-term military presence, to flush out the guerrillas (Davis 1988). The civil patrols turned neighbor against neighbor and exacerbated existing tensions within villages. While this second wave of counterinsurgency in the 1980s was designed to use fear to prevent indigenous communities from aiding the guerrillas, the government’s repressive attempts to reestablish control had the contrary effect of driving many into the arms of the guerrillas to defend their families and livelihoods (Davis 1988; Wilson 1993).

The widespread social upheaval from the civil war led to new configurations of Mayan identity. In the 1980s alone, over one million people (one-eighth of the population) were displaced from their homes (Davis 1988; Green 1999; Blue 2005). Through internal displacement and movement to refugee camps along the Guatemala-Mexico border, groups of Mayans from different areas began intermingling and building a sense of common cause (Montejo 2005). Since displacement prevented them from maintaining their traditional subsistence practices and local religious rituals, many new groups of people from mixed traditions turned for guidance to Catholic catechists, whose practices were more universalized

and less tied to the land (Wilson 1993).<sup>21</sup> According to Kay B. Warren (1998), these catechists and other indigenous intellectuals were the precursors to the activists who founded the pan-Maya movement. Religion became a force in promoting local organizing and indigenous leadership to address social issues through the rise of the Catholic Action movement. However, in attempting to incorporate Mayan communities into the national economy, this religious program challenged traditional community authorities such as the *cofradías* (religious brotherhoods) and caused internal conflict (Green 1999; Little and Smith 2009:3). Foreign missionaries sought to create non-revolutionary social change by establishing development programs such as agricultural cooperatives, in an attempt to forestall broader social upheaval (Watanabe and Fischer 2004).

The peace negotiations of 1991–96 brought together class-based populist advocacy groups and culture-based Mayanist groups. Some authors argue that this process made the populists more amenable to non-class-based organizing, as ethnic identity became the basis for rights claims and solidarity (Vanthuyne 2009). On December 29, 1996, President Álvaro Arzú, the military high command, and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) guerilla commanders signed a peace accord arranged through the United Nations. The government and URNG agreed to allow the United Nations to create the Historical Clarification Commission (CEH) to investigate the individual violations that had taken place during the 36-year conflict. It was prohibited from identifying or punishing individual perpetrators (Green 1999), a weakness that led it to pursue a deeper explanation of the social structures and institutions that caused the violence. Drawing data from interviews, focus groups, historical research, and forensic anthropology, the report documented 42,275 victims, 83% of whom were Mayan. The CEH

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<sup>21</sup> In the 1970s, through a “second evangelization,” the Catholic Church reasserted its presence, and many young men became catechists as a faster route to social status than the gerontocratic and labor-intensive Catholic *cofradía* brotherhoods (Wilson 1993).

concluded that 93% of the violence was directed by the state against Mayan people, assuming a genocidal character among certain groups, particularly in the Ixil region. Despite these strong conclusions, impunity has been the general rule in the decades since. In the November 1999 elections, only a few months after the CEH presented its report concluding that Ríos Montt's government was responsible for the most serious human rights violations of the 1980s, his political party, the Guatemalan Republican Front (FRG), was elected by a landslide (Chapman and Ball 2001).

The memory of the civil war has been heavily contested. The official government position since the peace accords has been that both sides were at fault and that the war did not constitute genocide, a highly politicized term that requires evidence of intent as well as practice. The conclusions of the CEH have been disputed by state and military officials (Oglesby and Ross 2009). Some scholars have noted that it tends to gloss over Mayan involvement in revolutionary activities in the 1960s and 70s, positioning Mayan people as neutral in the conflict, "indigenous subject[s] inhabiting a space untainted by the stain of a (failed) revolutionary past" (Oglesby and Ross 2009:23). Even communities that were directly affected by the violence have disputed the nature of what took place and the appropriate approach to addressing it. For instance, evangelical Protestants in Nebaj have opposed the incursion of international human rights investigation task forces or the exhumation of mass graves to identify victims (Philpot-Munson 2009:48–49). Resistant to a peace process they view as external, they have preferred to focus on the task of healing from the trauma of the war within their own religious communities and to leave justice to a higher power.

Rachel Sieder and Jessica Witchell (2001) argued that the intervention of international human rights forces in the Guatemalan peace process shaped local Mayan identity as an

“indigenous people.” They pointed out that the term “indigenous” refers to a relationship between people who were first in a place and their colonizers; as pan-Mayan indigenous movements began to advocate for their rights as indigenous people, they (re)constructed a continuous tradition from the past (Sieder and Witchell 2001:205). Sieder and Witchell stated, “Indigenous identities in Guatemala are effectively being narrated or codified through dominant legal discourses, specifically those of international human rights law and multiculturalism. This has resulted in the projection of an essentialized, idealized atemporal indigenous identity” (2001:201). One Guatemalan NGO, the *Centro para la Acción Legal en Derechos Humanos* (Center for Human Rights Legal Action), has encouraged indigenous communities of massacre survivors to identify as “Maya” in an effort to make their suffering collective and raise their consciousness of victimhood to hold the Military High Command responsible for its crimes (Vanthuyne 2009). They are actively constructing a pan-Mayan identity by holding talks and workshops on the commonalities between Mayan languages and spiritual beliefs and encouraging survivors to emphasize a shared Mayan identity in their narratives as a legal and therapeutic strategy.

Warren (1998:200) suggests that the war also shaped emerging forms of Mayan activism by discouraging them from manifesting as an overtly political movement: “The decision to stress ‘cultural’ issues – language, education, religion, community leadership, and ecologically sensitive ‘development’ strategies – reflects the pan-Maya analysis of cultural difference, Guatemalan racism, and state violence.” Beginning in the 1980s, Mayans—most prominently men, but increasingly women—have been working for “recognition of cultural diversity within the nation-state, a greater role for indigenous politics in national culture, a reassessment of economic inequities, and a wider distribution of cultural resources such as education and literacy

in indigenous languages” (Warren 1998:37). While some scholars have argued that the Maya movement arose primarily through the efforts of university students and other relatively elite academics, Kay B. Warren (1998) argues that its members are a diverse group of rural and urban intellectuals. Using the fact that Mayans have historically become Ladinos by changing their customs, Mayan activists pointed to the continuing indigenusness of many people who today count as “Ladino” (Nelson 1996; Montejo 2005). One of the main challenges for the Maya cultural revitalization movement has been to articulate a sense of shared pan-Mayan identity to carve out political space for themselves nationally and internationally.<sup>22</sup>

The armed conflict also disrupted and structured the growth of the civil sector in Guatemala. NGOs began proliferating in Guatemala in the 1960s, with the Alliance for Progress sponsored by the US Kennedy administration that financially supported community development organizations (Streeter 2006) and the surge of rural organizing led by Catholic Action, a movement led by foreign priests that sought to re-establish conservative Catholic practice and improve material well-being in Guatemalan villages (Beck 2011). These forces came together to attempt to provide a viable alternative to communism (Fischer and Brown 1996), establishing a model of non-governmental organizing “where small, community-based organizations, usually with the guidance of foreign advisors, successfully competed for international funds” (Rohloff et al. 2011:427). The 1976 earthquake is also frequently identified as a turning point for

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<sup>22</sup> Mayan scholars and activists have turned to a form of strategic essentialism to gain the authority to deal with the state and Ladino critics. Scholarly notions of anti-essentialism, hybridity, anti-racism and constructivism have become a way for Ladino critics to discredit pan-Mayan identity as essentialized and “undermine indigenous claims to authenticity” (Hale 1999; Fischer 2001:10). Victor Montejo (2005) says that while Mayas are accused of being essentialist when they work to create an ethnic identity, it is important to preserve the distinction between Maya and Ladinos, to hold the Ladinos accountable for their repressive activities. Representation has also been a challenge for the movement, whose most recognizable representatives have been relatively elite, educated Mayan men, who can be seen as more closely connected with international advisors than with other Mayans. While some have argued that pan-Mayan leaders centered in Guatemala City are separated by class and regional differences from the rural Mayans they seek to represent, Fischer (2001) uses their shared cultural logics with rural Mayans in Tecpán and Patzún to overcome (or gloss over?) this issue.



Guatemalan NGOs, sparking an influx of additional international lenders. In the wake of the earthquake there were 510 cooperatives with more than 132,000 members, and over half were located in the Western Highlands (Brockett 1998:112).

During the most violent period of the civil war in the 1980s, the rate of civil-sector growth faltered. However, the signing of the peace accords set off an explosion of NGO activity (CEIDEC 1993) that was largely unfettered or supervised by the state. According to Monica DeHart (2009), the international humanitarian response to the state-led violence and atrocities of the 1980s fostered the growth of grassroots organizations and created intimate transnational connections between community groups and international organizations:

As the civil conflict ended and a process of national reconstruction began, these translocal relationships between aid organisations and grassroots communities proliferated and intensified to the point that it became a running joke among people with whom I spoke that “everyone and his brother” was involved in some proyecto [project] or was running their own non-governmental organization [2009:69]

Despite the strong democratic rhetoric surrounding the reconstructed post-conflict government, state power has increasingly weakened while the penetration of transnational political-economic institutions has grown (Chase-Dunn 2000). Some scholars estimate that there are over 10,000 NGOs in Guatemala (Beck 2011, cited in Rohloff et al. 2011:427). Within this emergent civil society landscape, NGOs like TelaMaya that were established to provide economic opportunities for civil war widows have occupied a primary position (Zur 1998; Green 1999). Severed from their sources of financial support and their familially-understood roles in society, war widows were the most visible victim group in need of NGO assistance, and a patchwork of international as well as local NGOs arose to aid them using frameworks based in human rights and women’s economic and political empowerment.

### **The Space of Social Suffering as the Quintessential Human Experience**

“Structural violence” refers to the repressive societal institutions (political, economic, and cultural) that prevent groups from realizing their potential. These social structures are typically accepted as normal and thus pass unnoticed in daily life (Farmer et al. 2006). Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992) emphasized this normalization of violence by describing the poverty and starvation in a small town in Brazil as “everyday violence.” Similarly, Veena Das (2000) argues that the violence of the partition of Pakistan and India became incorporated into daily life in numerous imperceptible ways, informing people’s subjectivities as a form of “poisonous knowledge.” Das differs from Scheper-Hughes in that she focuses on how violent events distort social experience, transforming extraordinary violence into daily routine. By contrast, “everyday violence” is not based in violent events but quotidian and ongoing. Normalized violence comprises the “institutional practices, discourses, cultural values, ideologies, everyday interactions, and routinized bureaucracies that render violence invisible and produce social indifference” (Bourgois 2009:19). Arguably, these forms of ordinary, everyday violence were the source of the extraordinary violent events in the 1980s; today, poisonous knowledge and everyday violence intertwine to shape Guatemalan realities.

Suffering has become a significant discursive space into which the members of TelaMaya insert themselves. In *The Empire of Trauma*, Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman (2009) argue that over the last few decades, trauma has become one of the grand narratives of human experience. Where previously survivors of trauma were viewed with suspicion, the notion of trauma has emerged as a moral equalizer that diffuses difficult political situations into an array of symptoms. This shift in valuing the importance of suffering in human life has also made bodily experience the foundation of postcolonial anthropology. Joel Robbins (2013) argues that suffering has become the dominant anthropological mode for understanding human nature,

replacing anthropology's earlier focus on the Other. As the "savage slot" has become increasingly problematic for its ties to colonializing frameworks, anthropologists have shifted from focusing on cultural difference to focusing on humanity's "shared vulnerability to suffering": "Over the last twenty years or so, that is to say, it has often been the suffering subject who has replaced the savage one as a privileged object of our attention" (Robbins 2013:450). Suffering provokes an empathetic response that coincides with the anthropological turn towards engaged fieldwork; the universality of suffering confirms the humanity of the "suffering subject" in an important corrective to the dehumanizing tendencies of treating people as "savage subjects." However, this emerging preoccupation with suffering has problematic implications: when people are endowed with humanity and singled out for attention and aid based on their capacity to suffer and degree of suffering, how does that distort our holistic understanding of them? As Fassin and Rechtman (2009) and Robbins (2013) point out, using suffering as the dominant lens through which to view other people has a totalizing effect that tends to blur historical and cultural differences. In this chapter, I ground my analysis of what suffering means within a specific historical and cultural context, particularly focusing on the regional gender ideology of *marianismo*.

### **"Men Don't Suffer": *Marianismo* and Gendered Dimensions of Suffering**

One of the foundations of gender relations in Guatemala is the notion that women are morally superior, long-suffering, and self-sacrificial, caring for their families and enduring the peccadillos and betrayals of their husbands. Scholars have named this celebration of women's martyred position in the household "*marianismo*" (Stevens 1973), an approximate counterpart to *machismo* (Gutmann and Viveros Vigoya 2005), suggesting that men's unfettered masculine virility and irresponsibility is the cause of women's suffering. According to political scientist Evelyn Stevens (1973), who originated the concept, while it has its roots in the Catholic

idealization of the Virgin Mary, *marianismo* is a secular notion. After watching many families enact the trope of *macho* irresponsibility and female endurance, Ehlers argues that, through *marianismo*, women are socialized “to fulfill their subordinate, long-suffering roles passively” (1990:152). As a concept, it may be oversimplified but it illuminates certain aspects of Mayan women’s experience and is therefore worth addressing.

Several scholars, including June Nash, Tracy Ehlers, and Marysa Navarro, have critiqued the notion of *marianismo* as a rationalization of men’s oppression of women and a form of victim-blaming. They suggest that women embrace the status of domestic martyr not out of an acceptance of this ideology but out of economic necessity, given their lack of access to cash income. These critics have also called attention to the historical and materialist specificities of how this overarching belief system has manifested itself in particular women’s lives (Navarro 2002). They caution that *machismo* and *marianismo* are broad terms describing trends towards culturally-sanctioned male dominance and female seclusion, and should not be accepted as women’s only reality, especially given women’s involvement in social movements. However, such critiques should not lead us to dismiss the importance of prevailing gender ideologies to women’s understandings of their own lives. As Ehlers (1991:13) noted, “*Marianismo* has been widely accepted as an ideological explanation for why Latin American women endure abuse. Although clearly inadequate, *marianismo* appears to ring true because [...] many women respond to it.” For indigenous Guatemalan women *marianismo* has become a framework for understanding gender relations. The notion of victimhood has become synonymous with femininity, a natural condition. The members of TelaMaya often used the terms “woman” and “victim” interchangeably (see also **Chapter Two**). In a speech to the board of directors, motivating a new member to join, vice president Roxana said, “Sometimes we ... keep silent

about the things that happen to women. We don't denounce them; we don't say anything, why? Because we're afraid, so we have to get rid of the fear, little by little, right? Because the truth is that women... we've been the sufferers. By contrast men do what they want."<sup>23</sup> President María agreed: "They don't lose anything; they don't suffer."<sup>24</sup> In recounting their life histories, two of the members of the board of directors launched into their narratives by saying that they had suffered greatly in their lives. They framed their interpretations of the course of their own lives as histories of suffering and trauma, a condition they considered to be shared by all Guatemalan women.

This local mode of expression of gendered suffering has been validated within the new international "moral economy," as Didier Fassin (2011) described it, in which "suffering and misfortune are privileged, and those with the proper narratives of adversity are better situated to access resources that would otherwise be outside their reach." The position of groups like TelaMaya in relation to international clients, volunteers, agencies, national government, and local civil society has become contingent on their ability to produce compelling narratives of trauma to be consumed. Christopher Colvin (2006) argues that the globalization of psychiatric understandings of trauma has paralleled the expansion of humanitarian political interventionism. Colvin (2006:172) states that these narratives of trauma circulate within systems of production, exchange and consumption – what he refers to as the "global political economy of traumatic storytelling." He claims that "traumatic storytelling" has become commodified and shaped as a genre by journalists, aid workers, politicians, documentarians, and psychologists who jet from

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<sup>23</sup> A veces nosotros—tal vez a uno le ha pasado—callamos mucho las cosas que nos pasan las mujeres. No denunciamos; no decimos nada ¿por qué? Porque tenemos miedo pues, entonces eso... hay que sacar el miedo, ¿poco a poco verdad? Porque la verdad que nosotros las mujeres pues somos las más sufridas pues. En cambio los hombres ellos hacen lo que quieren.

<sup>24</sup> No pierden nada; ellos no sufren.

one post-conflict area to the next harvesting survivor narratives. Acceptable narratives tend to frame survivors' experiences within psychiatric terms, emphasize moments of spectacular suffering, and eliminate ambiguities and ambivalences.

In her study of survivors of human rights abuses in post-Aristide Haiti, Erica Caple James (2004) argues that experiences of suffering have become commodities through the process of bureaucratic validation: testimonies and affidavits concretize survivors' experiences and consolidate their identities as sufferers. She claims that suffering has become a "currency" that can be traded for humanitarian aid and other resources:

In this era of traumatic citizenship, an era in which individuals and groups seek recognition, agency, political and economic power, and security through attempts to seek justice and restitution for past wrongs or experiences of victimization, we must ask ourselves what is at stake when we recognize and materially compensate others because of a single attribute – their suffering, their injury or trauma, their gender, or their race? (2004:141).

While TelaMaya is not fair trade certified, its members' stories have currency in fair trade markets, which trade as much in imagery and ideology as in product quality and usefulness. As survivors of Guatemala's genocidal civil war, the members of TelaMaya gain visibility in a saturated international humanitarian "idea market" that privileges easily-grasped moments of suffering over more complex forms of suffering caused by the myriad global intersections of economic and political oppression. According to Benjamin Willett, the discursive strategy of recounting individual members' personal war experiences in a similar weaving cooperative in Quetzaltenango emerged organically over time, as they discovered that "many tourists were interested in hearing the often tragic personal histories of the indigenous women involved in the cooperative. Therefore, the women started to tell their personal stories of tragedy during their demonstrations and classes" (2007:82). The attention of foreign audiences has encouraged TelaMaya members to draw from their past suffering and share their stories of pain and loss.

Sally Engle Merry (2003) writes that vulnerability to suffering is fundamental to human rights intervention, while agency and activism disrupt the image of people as helpless victims of human rights abuses. Women in particular tend to be represented in such a condition of victimhood, which can reinforce the image of women as dependent.<sup>25</sup> The cooperative members may represent themselves as victims because it is one of the most effective ways to legitimate their concerns in the Guatemalan context, where advances in obtaining women's civil rights at the national level have been tied to their victimhood (**Chapter Two** focuses on the development of rights consciousness and the women's movement in Guatemala from a different perspective, as part of their process of empowerment). In Guatemala, human rights violations have sparked women's activism: "State terror and the experience of survival pushed women to take up non-traditional roles beyond the household domain and have helped make women leaders in the reconstruction of Guatemalan society" (Ball et al. 1999:83). For example, indigenous widows from Quiché formed CONAVIGUA (The National Coordination of Guatemalan Widows) in the late 1980s to search for justice for their murdered or disappeared relatives (Berger 2006; Sieder 2013). Women have taken a leading role in seeking justice and testifying in court against the perpetrators of the violence. In the databases of the International Center for Human Rights Research (CIIDH), Guatemalan women represent only 15% of the recorded victims of state violence, but over 40% of witnesses providing testimony (Ball et al. 1999:84). Speaking out against the terrible violence that they have suffered and witnessed has ignited women's activism and given their words a symbolic weight that has finally begun to bring women's concerns to public attention.

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<sup>25</sup> Women's testimony and victimhood is a widespread trope in Latin America. Social movements and human rights groups often enact roles just as the government enacts a particular role in relation to them: the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo assumed the role of suffering matriarchs to demand that the state honor its paternal obligations, becoming the most visible symbol of the victims of Argentina's Dirty War (Yúdice 2003:74).

However, women's voices have also been silenced and their testimony discredited, as in the case of indigenous activist Rigoberta Menchú, whose widely-read testimonial autobiography *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (1985) was famously undermined by historian David Stoll (Sanford 2004). Social activists in Guatemala and the international human rights community encouraged other indigenous women to emulate Menchú, making her into an international symbol for personal testimony; as a symbol, she has been attacked. Diane Nelson (1994) wrote that as a transgressive figure, a woman who speaks articulately and publicly like a man, Menchú has threatened masculine and Ladino privilege.<sup>26</sup> Menchú's political opponents have sought to undermine her status as a victim, a direct sufferer of violence, by focusing on her involvement with the Guerilla Army of the Poor (Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres). By treating her as an agent in the civil war, rather than a bystanding witness, they have sought to discredit her testimony and status as spokesperson. As Berger (2006) wrote, "In many ways, Menchú and indigenous women throughout the country have become the targets of constant revictimization as detractors try to destroy their victim/survivor status – a status encouraged by the larger world community as a means of obtaining some type of moral, legal, and/or financial assistance." Nelson (1994) argued that Mayan women's testimony has ripped open a crisis of national identity, revealing tensions surrounding the destabilization of categories of gender and ethnicity.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Jokes about Menchú that circulate widely among various communities in Guatemala make a play on the double meaning of the word "articulate" (*desenvuelta*) to strip Menchú "naked" and disparage her as a woman and a public figure. In response to this anxiety, in 1992, security agents forcibly stripped the *trajes* from two young Mayan women from CONAVIGUA shortly after the organization hosted Menchú and left the women naked on a public street in a "blatant re-assertion of masculine power" and a symbolic negation of their indigenous identity (Nelson 1994:6). Nelson analyzes the attack as an attempt "at reducing the threat of indigenous women who are *desenvuelta* (verbally articulate) to women who are vulnerable, embodied, *desenvueltas* [naked]" (1994:6).

<sup>27</sup> However, Ghassan Hage (1996:130) points out that the destabilizing Other, the barrier to nationalist unity, is actually necessary to sustain the fiction that the desired nationalist unity is actually possible: "If the threatening other is an element that provides the fantasy structure with its stability and by the same token the stability of the communal subject constituted by it, what happens if this threatening other, 'threatens' to disappear?" If the



Recent moments have made it clear that testifying is still a courageous political act, which can have serious consequences. The trial of 86 year-old former general and president Efraín Ríos Montt was the first real challenge to impunity in Guatemala, and the annulment of the guilty verdict on May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2013 vindicated the widespread cynicism about the trial. He had been under house arrest since January of 2011 and finally came to trial, thanks in part to the efforts of activist former Attorney General Claudia Paz y Paz (Weld 2013), who issued indictments and warrants against other leaders of the armed forces before being driven out of office seven months before her four-year term was supposed to end through legal maneuvering and a manipulated reelection process.

In November of 2011, former general Otto Pérez Molina was elected president on the basis of his policy of *mano dura* (“firm hand), which advocated the remilitarization of Guatemala.<sup>28</sup> On the campaign trail, Pérez Molina (who has been accused of war crimes during the civil war) gave interviews stating that he did not believe that genocide took place in Guatemala. He asserted that they were never ordered explicitly to kill people based on their ethnicity, that the army killed women and children because the guerillas were incorporating entire communities in their ranks, and that many of the soldiers in the army were themselves

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boundaries separating indigenous from non-indigenous, and male from female, erode, Ladino masculinity will no longer be able to define itself against these marginalized categories.

<sup>28</sup>During a speech in Xela on June 18, 2011, the Patriot Party candidate presented himself as a more strong, masculine president than the last one, Álvaro Colom, who would stand up to the drug cartels and gangs. He also constructed his rival, Sandra Torres de Colom, as an improper woman for her politically-motivated decision to divorce her husband to bypass a law preventing family members of presidents from running for office. He said that the “señora” wanted to call herself a “señorita” now and marry the entire nation of Guatemala. He asked the crowd, “Does Xela want to marry her? No!” The leaders of Tela Maya were impressed that Beatriz Concepción Canastuj, the Patriot Party candidate for congress member, was an indigenous woman dressed in the full *traje* from Quetzaltenango. Both María and Roxana, and their husbands Miguel and Irving, told me that they were planning to vote for Pérez Molina because, given his military background, they viewed him as the only candidate capable of handling the most pressing issue facing Guatemala—insecurity—and a much better option than his main rival.

indigenous, giving the conflict the character of a civil war rather than a genocide. He made denial his government's official position. In a trial at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights on June 20th, 2012, Guatemala's peace secretary, Antonio Arenales, declared, "In Guatemala no one was killed for belonging to an ethnic, racial, or religious group."<sup>29</sup> The state has worked to absolve itself of culpability for the violence that the military inflicted on indigenous people by casting the war as a conflict between relatively equal opposing forces rather than a centrally-led campaign of violence targeting a particular ethnic group. To do so, it has attempted to discredit indigenous women's testimonies like those shared by the members of TelaMaya to attentive groups of visiting tourists.<sup>30</sup> The TelaMaya officers' personal testimonies gained urgency from this official position that genocide did not take place during the civil war.

### **“I’m a Victim of the Conflict”: Stories of Suffering for Foreign Consumption**

Within this discursive space of victimhood, trauma, and suffering that has become so important to humanitarian intervention, representing themselves as victims was a conscious strategy for the women of TelaMaya. When María, Roxana, and Paula composed a letter to the Ministry of Economy together, asking them to formally donate some sewing machines that had been loaned to the organization, María dictated to me, “Let’s say that they are women affected by the violence that took place here in Guatemala, to touch their hearts a little. And add that we don’t have help from the Guatemalan government or abroad.” They knew that their suffering gave them cultural capital, one of their only sources of leverage against implacable government

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<sup>29</sup> En Guatemala nadie fue muerto por pertenecer a un grupo étnico, racial o religioso.

<sup>30</sup> This framing of the war was prevalent throughout many sectors of society: M. Gabriela Torres (2014) argues that journalistic photographers and newspaper editors in Guatemala framed the images they took and displayed of the war based on what they knew to be their audience (primarily Ladino) and the political context of their work, showing images of Ladino victims, government aid services, and anonymous indigenous bodies without agency. Some of the images photographers took that ultimately were not published depicted more graphically the violence against indigenous people and humanized the victims of violence.

institutions. I say this not to make the women seem calculating in their grief but to point out their resilience and agency in crafting a resource out of such a destructive event.

The volunteers also adopted this approach, viewing the story of suffering as an integral part of TelaMaya's history and mission. A group of volunteers had an extended discussion over whether they should put the word "disappeared" in the new product tag they were designing. The original text said, "Many of [the members'] husbands, sons, and brothers were disappeared during Guatemala's violent civil war." US volunteer Jennifer objected that using "disappeared" in this way would be grammatically incorrect. Others explained that this was the correct technical term for forced disappearance, and they did not want to de-emphasize the forced nature of the disappearances by changing the grammatical structure of the sentence. US volunteer Dan said, "It's not just that they disappeared. They were made to disappear by somebody. They were killed but their bodies were never found." They settled on using the word "killed" to communicate the violent nature of the crimes to people unfamiliar with the history of Latin American violence.

María would begin her presentations to visiting tourists by recounting TelaMaya's history, focusing on the suffering the founders endured:

Thanks to you for coming, because we do not have aid from the government or other countries. I'm going to tell you a little of the history of TelaMaya and the processes that we do and who we are, what we are doing. We are a women's association that began in 1988 because of the war that there was here in Guatemala. The places we are helping were the most affected by the violence. Many women were left without husbands, without brothers, without children, widows and with scant resources through the encounters between the military and guerrillas. And those that were youngest were left without parents, without houses; they set fire to the houses, and we were left with nothing. So that is why we are helping these women to sell their products. We had meetings together. In Huehuetenango they told us that they burned the parents and filled them with bullets in front of their own children. They say that they [the soldiers] would kill their husbands in front of the children. "They would pour gasoline on our husbands," they said. "They would toss gasoline and then a match."

In her introduction, María often sought to convey to visitors that they are TelaMaya's only source of aid, making them feel important and special. Her history of the cooperative always began with the civil war and the suffering of the women that led to the formation of TelaMaya. She would also frequently relate some of her own experiences in the war, emphasizing the immediacy of her account and the personal nature of what she witnessed.

In my village, the soldiers would come on Fridays at midnight and kidnap the husbands, or if there weren't husbands, they would take the oldest sons, and we would never see them again. They came for my husband one night. They pounded on the door but they couldn't enter, because we had blocked the door. They took two other people. But they kidnapped him a week later. They kidnapped three men. My husband survived, thanks to God, because we went to the captains' office here in Xela. Sixty people from the village went to the office to reclaim them. They brought sticks and machetes. If we had not gone to get him, they would have killed him. They tied his hands and feet. He was thirsty, and they asked him for money to drink. They didn't give him anything the whole night and morning. They took his money but they didn't give him water. They drank the water and urinated on his face and chest, and kicked him. After getting him out, he had uncontrollable diarrhea for a week from the blows. One of the three men that we reclaimed died from the blows some days later.

In one conference, she told the visitors about how her village was used as a mass grave for the bodies of the disappeared. Her decision to share more details about the war seemed to be dictated by her own state of mind and the degree of attention that the audience was paying her:

There was a great massacre in my village, in which many husbands disappeared. Some 18 or 20 men were lost and didn't appear again. In my village there was a place that they called *Las Lunas*. There was a big landslide and when they went to fix the highway they saw many human bones that had been in the highway, like heads, arms, that were in the highway. So they thought that maybe there was where they had buried the men that were lost in my village. We don't know because they were only the bones, but it was too many. Maybe not only the people they kidnapped in my village but maybe others, because it was too many, and people were crying, picking them up, and opening a hole to bury them, because it's a pity that the buses will pass over them and crush them.

The vice president Roxana's version of the introduction always included her own victim story:

The association started after the war that took place here in Guatemala more than 25 years ago. So many women were left orphans. Here is not like the US; women live in their parents' houses until they get married. When their parents died, they were left on the street. It was very hard for us, including me—I'm a victim of the conflict. I was six years

old when the war happened. I was very small. I lost my aunts, grandparents, and cousins in the violence. Because my mother was pregnant, they told her to leave for the hills early when they heard the soldiers were coming. The soldiers burned my grandparents and aunts in their house, and we saw the smoke coming up over the hill. We were three days in the mountains without eating anything, just drinking water from the river. I remember these experiences, because I was seven at the end of the war.

Suffering was an important element of the discursive strategies that the cooperative's officers used to appeal to tourists and attempt to convince them to support the cooperative through their purchases or labor. They told versions of their own stories of victimhood, polished through repetition. By sharing their personal tales of suffering, they constructed themselves as authoritative spokespeople for an organization whose original mission was to help war victims. As Colvin (2006) points out, the commodification of trauma narratives has tended to shape the structure and content of the stories as victims find out through trial and error how their audiences react to their experiences. People learn how to respond to the kinds of questions that human rights activists and representatives of humanitarian organizations tend to ask about their victimhood, which has led to "the idea that victims have a single story, 'my story,' a unitary, bounded and unchanging narrative that incorporates all that is essential in the 'story of a victim'" (Colvin 2006:176). Their stories tend to become condensed into readily absorbable units. In particular, the cooperative's vice president, Roxana, always mentioned one aspect of her experience in the war and described it in a similar way, which is hardly surprising given that she was so young when violence touched her life.

María and Roxana often seemed to feel the need to preempt criticism of their stories, emphasizing that they were sharing their own personal testimonies. Aware that women speaking out about the violence and injustice suffered by Guatemalan women have often been either

silenced, disparaged, or ignored,<sup>31</sup> they drew from the legitimacy afforded by their eyewitness status. María said, “The reason why the cooperative was founded was sad. It was because of the massacres that the military committed against us. We recount what we saw with our own eyes. It’s true. It’s real. They killed the parents in front of the children. They set them on fire in front of the children. They were traumatized.”<sup>32</sup> On another occasion, María used the stories she had heard from other women in the regional cooperative to give weight to her account: “It is the reality that I am telling you. It is not a lie, because we have looked into it a lot in the groups.” Roxana also emphasized the veracity of her testimony: “It’s not a lie. I tell the truth, because this happened to me and one remembers these things. It sometimes comes to my mind when I’m not thinking about other things.” In the face of the Guatemalan government’s official denial that genocide took place, the women’s testimony took on a political significance that it would not have had in a less contentious situation. They typically shied away from overt political language, an unsurprising rhetorical choice considering that their conferences were intended to appeal to the sympathy of foreign tourists. However, at times, the officers would directly implicate the Guatemalan government in their account of the civil war. “It was above all the fault of the government. It was the government before, it’s a different one now. The government soldiers killed many innocent people,” Roxana once declared. The officers insisted that their stories were true in the face of official government denial and touristic ignorance of the events of the war. They delivered their stories as a form of testimony, personal witnessing and remembering, to an

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<sup>31</sup> Historically, indigenous women’s testimony has been discounted in the Guatemalan justice system, as when the testimony of 30 eyewitnesses, many of whom were K’iche’ speaking widows, was insufficient to convict Cándido Noriega Estrada, a former military commissioner, of arranging for massacres in El Quiché (Ball et al. 1999).

<sup>32</sup> La razón porque se fundió la asociación es una historia muy triste. Fue por las masacres que nos hicieron los militares. Contamos lo que vimos con nuestros propios ojos. Es cierto. Es real. Mataban a los papas enfrente de los niños. Les prendían fuego delante de los niños. Fueron traumadas.

audience (foreign Spanish students and their Guatemalan teachers) that they could expect to be sympathetic to their presentation of the conflict as arising from government aggression.

While the narratives of trauma were part of a conscious marketing strategy for the cooperative, telling their stories could also be cathartic for the women. María would often cry when sharing her stories of suffering, saying, “Forgive what I’m saying, it’s really sad, but I feel better when I’m telling it. If I keep everything inside it hurts.” She often said that her experiences had left her traumatized: “These things don’t leave one’s mind.” The officers may also have been channeling some of the ongoing stress and grief from their daily lives into their accounts, translating issues with drinking and straying spouses, sick children, rising debts, chronic pain, and family drama into an easily understandable, historicized form and gaining release, sympathy, and comfort from visiting tourists and volunteers. Their readiness to open up about their personal experiences seemed to vary from day to day, as their tears seemed to shift in register from emotion work to catharsis, but they always shared some part of their stories.

The emotion that the women felt in recounting their experiences was appropriate and necessary in this touristic context. “Emotion work” (Hochschild 1979) has long been recognized as an important element of performance for tourists. In doing emotion work, tourist industry workers attempt—to some extent—to actually feel an emotion appropriate to their socially-constructed understanding of what is called for in this situation, either suppressing an inappropriate emotion such as frustration or working to inculcate a positive emotion such as cheerfulness: “What is sold as an aspect of labor power is deep acting... an acting that goes well beyond the mere ordering of display” (Hochschild 1979). In “dark tourism,” a form of special-interest tourism that draws visitors to tragedy-stricken areas, the appropriate emotion to express is not amiability but grief and sadness. The officers’ genuine suffering became one of the most

memorable parts of the weaving conference for the students, who felt as though they had been given a privileged glimpse into the events of the war. The next section explores how tourists tended to react to the stories, as well as the cooperative members' concerns about the possibility of losing control of their stories as they shared them with different audiences.

### **“How Was the War For You?”: Tourists’ Receptions of the Narratives of Suffering**

Suffering is one of the things that makes the members of TelaMaya attractive and interesting to economically and politically powerful outsiders such as tourists and international organizations. The cooperative leaders generally assumed that the audience for these conferences would be foreign tourists. Their sense that personal stories about their own experiences of victimization would appeal to tourists was founded in observation. Currently, one of the only systematic theorizations of the role of violence in tourism is the concept of “dark tourism” (Lennon and Foley 1996), also known as “thanatourism” or “atrocities tourism,” which refers to a form of tourism focusing on sites where suffering or tragedy have taken place. Dark tourism typically has a more overt political or educational motivation than other forms of tourism—in many cases, tourists explicitly seek to learn lessons from the past. The literature has tended to treat dark tourism as pertaining to narrowly-focused sites with one dominant symbolic valence (Stone 2013; Hartmann 2014). However, there is a latent possibility of viewing dark tourism in another way: Gregory Ashworth has stated, “there are no dark sites, only dark tourists,” people who seek out troubled histories and moments of suffering (Ashworth 2009 cited in Hartmann 2014).

Visitors’ curiosity about the genocidal conflict in Guatemala could potentially qualify as a form of dark tourism; its national image has been tinged with a touch of the somber that is an important part of many tourists’ expectations and experiences. The violent events of the civil war captured the world’s attention, creating a “stigmatized” national image for Guatemala. While



much of the literature on peace and reconstruction processes has focused on the creation of narratives for internal audiences, rehabilitating a spoiled national image on the international stage can be just as important for countries that rely on tourism and foreign financial involvement (Rivera 2008). Mark Piekarz (2014) used “hot” and “cold” terminology to describe the temporal nearness of the violent events that create dark touristic spaces and the corresponding level of risk assumed by tourists who visit them. Tourist sites marked by violence “cool off” not just with the passage of time but with the intervention of layers of security, management, commemoration, and interpretation. As the primary events that created these sites of violence recede into the past, tourists’ motivations in visiting them tend to shift as well, from thrill-seeking, morbid curiosity, direct survivor guilt or ancestral heritage, to a more detached form of contemplation and remembrance (Bigley et al. 2010). To date, the historic violence in Guatemala has not been condensed into specific memorial sites or packaged for touristic consumption in a significant way compared to other locations with more developed dark tourism industries.

Despite this lack of institutionalization, the violent past colors some tourists’ perceptions of Guatemala, while others are almost entirely unaware of the atrocities of the 1980s. Given the multivalent nature of something as slippery as national image, it makes sense to refer to the former as dark tourists as long as we view dark tourism as referring to the motivations of the tourists rather than a simplistic association between a site and one particular signification. Guatemala may not be a battlefield or memorial, but for many it evokes strong associations with tragedy and injustice that attract them to visit, learn what happened, and try to make a difference. Diane Nelson (1999:53) wrote that Guatemala is crawling with “exhumation teams whose work implicates community members in histories of violence and brutality” and “well-meaning

political tourists who have read [indigenous Guatemalan activist Rigoberta] Menchú's book and want to learn about suffering." Guatemala's history of suffering has attracted waves of economically and politically powerful outsiders, including tourists.

The cooperative members claimed to have responded to tourists' interest rather than their own desire to recount their stories of suffering. Many tourists seemed eager to learn more about the war but reticent about discussing it for fear of offending Guatemalans. They viewed the weavers' stories about their suffering in the war as an invitation to satisfy their curiosity. A TelaMaya volunteer coordinator commented, "I've noticed that the students who come for the conferences tend to be really interested and ask a lot of questions about the civil war, because they've never really heard about it." An American woman shopping at TelaMaya said she had visited Nebaj to learn more about the genocidal civil war: "My sister was really interested in learning about the war, and we had heard that they were some of the most affected by the war." However, she found that spending only a few days there did not tell her anything new about the war, and she was too shy to ask anyone about it. She laughed, "You can't just go in and say, *'How was the war for you?'* And we definitely felt intrusive because there were no other tourists." One of TelaMaya's volunteers said, "I'm kind of a civil war geek, so I really wanted to go to Nebaj, because I heard that that's a place where a lot of it took place." Some tour guides prodded their charges to take advantage of the rare opportunity to hear about the war from people who directly experienced it, taking it as their mission to raise tourists' awareness about the events of the civil war. Of course, many tourists only began to learn about the civil war once they arrived in Guatemala. Their Spanish teachers often worked to inform them about Guatemalan history and current political events connected to the conflict, and used visits to TelaMaya to enhance their presentation of the history of the war. TelaMaya thus became a source of

information both for people with a preexisting interest in the violence and people who were just discovering the topic.

When voluntourists wanted to film some of the members' stories from the war, Roxana said they would be afraid to testify on video because she had heard of former military personnel taking personal revenge on witnesses. While the women spoke freely about their experiences in the war to visiting tourists, they did not necessarily want to share them with other audiences. In 2008, students in a filmmaking course from a university in California made a documentary about TelaMaya using some of the stories described above. When the officers learned that the video was publicly available on the Internet, they became concerned that one of the ex-military men who had committed atrocities in their villages would see the video with their names. Roxana exclaimed, "We thought, '*Ay, it's online and we're talking about the soldiers.*' It's one thing to show the video to the students, because we know who they are, but it's another thing if it's public..."<sup>33</sup> They were opposed to having the video publicly available because the civil war remains so contentious and they did not want to "come off badly to society."<sup>34</sup> The diffuse, decentralized nature of violence and insecurity in post-conflict Guatemala (Benson et al. 2008; Offit and Cook 2010) made them paranoid about how their stories of victimhood could spiral out of their control, especially in the context of the remilitarization of Guatemala under former general Otto Pérez Molina's administration. They were concerned that speaking out would make them a target, given that the civil war was so recent and cooperatives were a target for the government. An anthropologist who visited with a tour group, Hetty, who said that she had lived in an indigenous village in Guatemala in 1974, claimed that at that time, no one wanted to take a

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<sup>33</sup> Pensamos, '*Ay, está en línea y estamos hablando de los soldados.*' Es una cosa mostrar el video a los estudiantes, porque sabemos quiénes son, pero es otra cosa si es público.

<sup>34</sup> quedar mal con la sociedad.

leadership role in a community organization: “During the war, the ones who stuck their necks out were the first to have them chopped off.” Any kind of communal organizing was suspect, so even today the members of the board of directors are not comfortable being shown as the leaders of an organization. The cooperative members are wary of telling stories of trauma while the perpetrators of the violence—many of whom have never been punished—are still lurking nearby, and they want to control the audience and context of their testimonies.

The volunteers tended to respect this reticence. For instance, US volunteer Rosalyn was particularly interested in talking to women because she felt that telling their stories, especially stories about the civil war, would be the best way to get people interested in buying from TelaMaya. I said that she would need to find someone who was willing to talk about that subject, and Rosalyn said, “When I came in for a talk they were quite open about their own experiences. The one woman was telling us about how they burned her family alive in their house.” She wanted to accompany the interviews with artistic photography to obscure the women’s identities: “If you can see their arm and the skin is all weathered, that tells you something about their lives, or their hands... Sometimes you can blur out their faces and focus on their traditional dress.” Another volunteer listened to the finished interview with María and said that at one point, María spoke at length about the war and then said that she did not want that material to go on the Internet. We discussed a couple of possibilities with María, including focusing on the parts about her childhood and leaving the war out of the finished interview, or publishing the interview anonymously, without her name or town.

Aware that their status as victims added value to their products, the cooperative members guarded their narratives jealously, stating that some other newly-formed cooperatives in Quetzaltenango had begun appropriating their narratives. María declared, “It hurts that many are

stealing TelaMaya's idea. They all have their groups that were harmed by the violence, which wasn't like that— instead, their idea is to steal our idea because we're directly helping women affected by the war, we've been struggling for twenty-five years, and now there are people that started two or three years ago" who claim to help war victims. Roxana also rejected the idea that other local cooperatives are helping war victims, stating,

It's not true. It's false. [...] The victims have already survived. [...] It's a lie that they're saying that they are supporting women from the war, it's false, because they just got started, while the war ended over twenty-five years ago, so imagine, if I start an association now and say that I'm helping women victims? Well, they were affected but like the women that are in TelaMaya now, they already have children, their children are already grown up, their children are already working, they've already married, they already have husbands.

Roxana's statement reveals how the cooperative members constructed victimhood: rather than viewing it as an ongoing psychological or structural condition, they place it within a delimited historical context. The officers of TelaMaya use this concept of victimhood to deny the legitimacy of other weaving cooperatives. This proprietary attitude towards traumatic narratives coincides with Colvin's (2006) argument that stories of victimhood have become a kind of inalienable intellectual property that victim groups guard jealously.<sup>35</sup> This possession, trauma, is tied in with their personhood and identity, something that cannot be appropriated by other people without a sense of loss (Weiner 1992).

### **“We Have Suffered Greatly”: An Oral History of TelaMaya**

I spoke on many occasions with founding and long-term members of TelaMaya, including María, Roxana, Andrea, Paula, Mercedes, and Joselyn, and pieced together an

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<sup>35</sup> They also connect the state of victimhood strongly with the loss or lack of family relationships, and consider the process of recovery to have taken place through family regrowth (Zur 1998:297). Claire Kahane argues in the context of Holocaust remembrance that “trauma at its most fundamental has been defined as a break in the maternal object relation” (2001:163). Familial loss serves as a synecdoche for the trauma of the genocidal civil war, a way of reinvesting in broader social or national suffering and maintaining an embodied connection to suffering that not all cooperative members may have experienced directly. However, Miriam Hirsch (2008) points out that equating trauma with familial loss can obscure the larger structural dimensions of genocide.

approximately linear oral history of the cooperative. While dates were blurry, their accounts meshed well with one another as well as with TelaMaya's archives and local newspaper reports. In "narrativizing" their story as an organization, the TelaMaya members were also drawing meaning from it. As Hayden White (1980:18) pointed out, "every historical narrative has as its latent or manifest purpose the desire to moralize the events of which it treats." The cooperative leaders' narrative of their history is a story of corruption and redemption. Their stories of the past have a moralizing flavor: their history is littered with villains and angels, and these roles have consistently been occupied by locals and foreigners respectively. As María phrased it, "We have suffered greatly. By luck, by luck we are still alive. We have suffered too much, too much. We did not even have enough to eat. But yes, people have helped us a lot."<sup>36</sup> They stated that the people who exploited and hurt them in the past were Guatemalans, while the people who helped them were foreigners (an attitude discussed further in **Chapter Five**).

TelaMaya is a regional federation of weaving cooperatives whose explicit mission is to help survivors of Guatemala's civil war make a living. The composition of the organization, with 17 groups spread over five states of Guatemala, reflects international observers' perceptions of victimhood in Guatemala. The organization took its current form because interviewers from the Dutch and Belgian governments assessed the violence that women in Guatemala had experienced and identified states that were highly affected by the war. A Belgian man invited the women to a meeting to discuss the possibility of creating a cooperative to provide them with a sustainable income. Once during my fieldwork, a visiting Spanish teacher asked the cooperative president why TelaMaya does not include groups from local communities around Quetzaltenango, such as Zunil or Almolonga. She answered, "Right, as a matter of fact, no. Because they looked for us.

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<sup>36</sup> Hemos sufrido mucho. De suerte, de suerte estamos vivos nosotros. Hemos sufrido demasiado, demasiado. No teníamos ni que comer. Pero si, las personas nos ayudaron bastante.

They visited us on behalf of the Netherlands and Belgium. So when we joined they had already selected who were the most affected by the violence so then they were the ones who took us into account. So that was the idea then; we didn't look for each other but they looked for us.”<sup>37</sup> Given the slightly challenging tone of the question, this response gently disclaimed responsibility for the geographical coverage of the cooperative and indicated that the members' suffering had been legitimized through international recognition. In her presentations to visiting tourist groups, María would discuss how the cooperative came together:

We had visits from people in our village to see what our life is like, if we had work, or what we were doing, and everything. Some people from Switzerland and Holland came to invite us to a meeting in Xela. So we came here to Xela, here we met each other from the other states. We shared our suffering and cried. They had all suffered a lot, because they came from the most affected *departamentos*. The Dutch people brought us together, because before we were humble/poor and afraid of the city. We had to ask our husbands for permission, or if they didn't have husbands, their children encouraged them to go to the meeting. We shared our experiences, ideas, and sufferings in the war. We said, “*How beautiful are the weavings from HueHue! How beautiful are the weavings from Chajul! How beautiful are the weavings from San Martin!*”

This statement points to the source of the energy that went into the founding, which was initially external but became more internal over time. The version of the founding that Roxana would present to tourist groups was similar:

We had help from foreign countries. The country of the Netherlands donated money to start the association. It's not easy starting an association – there is paperwork to do, it takes a lot of money, you have to be registered, buy the furniture, rent a place, and then the women were at zero; they didn't even have food. The one who founded the association was a Belgian man named Jack; he's the one who went to the most-affected places. So he said, ‘*We're going to make an association, a cooperative, right, to help women affected by the war.*’ So the women got together to make the association to work with weavings because the truth is the women only know how to make weavings, they don't know anything else; they don't know how to read or write. So that's why the association came about.

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<sup>37</sup> Si pero fíjese que no. Como a nosotros, a nosotros nos buscaron pues. A nosotros nos visitaron de parte de Holanda, y de Bélgica, entonces ya cuando nosotros nos integramos pues ellos ya habían seleccionado quienes eran las más afectados por la violencia entonces ahí ellos fueron los que nos tomaron en cuenta. Así eso fue la idea pues, no nosotros nos buscamos si no que ellos nos buscaron a nosotros.

Out of those meetings emerged a large, regional cooperative comprised of speakers from five different mutually incomprehensible Mayan languages, a fact that has led to communicational and organizational difficulties for the cooperative over time. The emergence of TelaMaya, a regional association of weaving groups, fits into larger narratives of pan-Mayan cultural development and conscientization (Freire 1972) in Guatemala: the mixing of groups after the genocidal civil war through displacement and social organizing has promoted awareness of the commonalities among Mayan groups. The women related that they became aware of other Mayan ethnic groups when they came together to share ideas during the initial meetings of the association. In those early days they built a spirit of camaraderie and hope by comparing their regional styles and sharing ideas for how to develop weavings into commercial products.

During the Guatemalan civil war and peace process, international aid from countries such as the Netherlands flowed into Guatemala to promote stabilization, democratization, and economic development. Before the 1980s, the Netherlands did not have particularly close ties to Guatemala. Public interest in the humanitarian crisis prompted the Dutch government to provide development aid (Verstegen 2000). The Dutch government attempted to maintain a position of political neutrality in the process of selecting aid projects to fund. However, the Guatemalan government considered foreign aid directed to survivors of violence to be subversive, because it classified the communities targeted by the military's attacks as potential supporters of the guerillas.<sup>38</sup> The contentiousness over the definition of the violence that took place, with the

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<sup>38</sup> The government counterinsurgency effort treated indigenous communities differently based on how it categorized them: "red" communities, those considered to be in league with the guerrillas, were subjected to intense violence, while the army's goal in communities of lesser threat was to separate the guerrillas from the other inhabitants and deter them from joining. "Green" communities were largely spared direct attacks (Davis 1988). Given the Guatemalan government's persistent characterization of the conflict as a civil war, in the post-conflict era it has tended to treat the "red" areas that were most victimized during the conflict with the most suspicion. The denial of genocide is based on the contention that entire communities were targeted because entire communities were involved in the insurgency.



government denying that indigenous Mayans were targeted during the war, made the foundation of TelaMaya to aid war victims a political act. From November 21, 1990 to March 31, 1994, the *Textielproject AMDA* (Asociación de Mujeres Para el Desarrollo Artesanal), managed by the UN Development Program and administered by the International Labor Organization, sent trimonthly payments totaling an investment of 1,311,232 Netherlands guilders (approximately \$655,616 in US dollars at that time) (Verstegen 2000 Annexe 9). This substantial influx of foreign funding apparently attracted local employees who were not committed to helping rural weavers.

The cooperative had a non-indigenous director and full-time staff appointed by the Dutch government in addition to the board of directors drawn from the member groups. María recounted, “Before, TelaMaya was very big. There were clothing manufacturers, an accountant, there were people who did the cleaning; we were around 20 or 15 employees.”<sup>39</sup> Roxana reminisced wistfully about the times of plenty: “Before, we had staff for all that. They knew exactly how many skeins a pillowcase would take. There was an accountant, lawyer. There was someone just to keep an eye on the workers. But now we don’t have that.”<sup>40</sup> The majority of the employees were Guatemalan, with one Dutch employee. When the organization was still receiving regular influxes of money from the Dutch government, the employees at the time seemed unconcerned about operating the cooperative as a sustainable retail business or developing its capacity. The current officers claimed that because the employees were not weavers, they had no understanding of quality control. Employees also over-ordered the products and used up the start-up capital for the cooperative. María would tell tour groups,

At the beginning, they trained us because we only knew how to weave. We didn’t know anything about the sizes to sell the products in national and international markets. They

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<sup>39</sup> Antes TelaMaya era muy grande. Había confeccionistas, había un contador, habían personas que hicieron la limpieza, éramos como 20 o 15 empleados.

<sup>40</sup> Antes tuvimos personal para todo eso. Supieron exactamente cuántas madejas llevaba un cojín. Hubo contador, licenciado. Hubo alguien solo para vigilar a los trabajadores. Pero ahora no tenemos.

helped us with funding to buy desks, files, and set up the association. But unfortunately people were working there who weren't members of the association. There were men and some women, but professionals: they didn't know anything about textiles. They didn't care if the colors ran; they would pay for everything. So they had a good salary but they managed all the money that came from Holland badly. They stole a lot. They had salaries of 112 thousand quetzales monthly from the Dutch. I told them, *100 quetzales is nothing to you and for that you're stealing from the women*. Imagine.

María and Roxana remembered with other members of the board of directors how an older man who worked in the office would sexually harass them. He grabbed Roxana by the shoulders, but she elbowed him in the ribs and sent him away. María described how the employees would waste time, eat food at the cooperative's expense, and otherwise abuse their power: "They would come in every day with their Pollo Campero. I brought my tamales, a little beans from my house, and they would all laugh at me."<sup>41</sup> The employees mismanaged the funding from the Dutch government, making extravagant expenditures and keeping sloppy records. María said that the employees would speak about her behind her back, because they resented her presence and were concerned that she would discover that they had been embezzling money. According to the cooperative's archives from December of 1995, approximately \$60,000 was reported missing. Paula said, "They had their three-story houses and did not think to buy a place for TelaMaya."<sup>42</sup>

Faceta Central—an auditing organization—started investigating the cooperative, and María was appointed by them in her role as board member to monitor the employees' activities. During these tense times, María came in to the office after hours once when no one was supposed to be there. A pair of masked intruders entered and attacked her, beating and kicking her. She told me, grasping her neck, "They had already tied up the rope to hang me."<sup>43</sup> She had

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<sup>41</sup> Venían cada día con su Pollo Campero. Yo traje mis tamales, un poco de frijolito de mi casa, y todos se reían de mí.

<sup>42</sup> Tenían sus casas de tres niveles, y no pensaron en comprar una casa para TelaMaya.

<sup>43</sup> Ya habían amarrado el lazo para colgarme.

given up the possibility of surviving the attack, but she crawled under a table and was able to reach an alarm button that scared away the thieves and brought the police. They took her to the hospital, where she was “between life and death,”<sup>44</sup> according to Roxana. María suspected that some of the former employees had been involved in the attempted robbery and that her presence had been unexpected. This experience was deeply traumatizing for María and affected how she responded to later threats.

The investigation into the corruption at TelaMaya may have had deadly consequences for Lucina Cardenas, a Mexican consultant brought in by the Dutch government to help the cooperative become self-sustaining. During the corruption investigation, Cardenas began receiving death threats in Quetzaltenango from a group calling itself the Urban Commando. Due to the threats, she decided to leave the country. On November 27<sup>th</sup>, 1995, she was returning to Guatemala to pick up her belongings when her truck was driven off the road and she was kidnapped. Her body was found on December 2<sup>nd</sup> half-buried on the side of the road in San Martín Sacatepéquez with three bullet wounds, evidence of sexual assault, and cigarette burns on her arms and legs. The Guatemalan press treated her murder as a truck theft, the work of army security forces whose training in torture accounted for the brutality of their attack. Some articles also raised the possibility that the car thieves had been contracted by the TelaMaya employees who had been stealing the organization’s money, to cover up their activities and halt Cardenas’ investigation into the cooperative’s finances. Cardenas’ passenger and the only witness to her abduction, Oto Leonel Hernandez, was detained as a suspect; however, in June, he was also apparently kidnapped and tortured for six days in Quetzaltenango. The incident evokes June Nash’s (1993) article describing the murder of Petrona Lopez, the president of a pottery

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<sup>44</sup> entre la vida y la muerte.

cooperative in Chiapas, Mexico, whose assumption of a prominent community leadership role provoked gender-based tensions in the context of women's increasing economic leverage relative to men through their work with artisan cooperatives.<sup>45</sup> I asked long-term cooperative member Paulina whether Cardenas' death was a robbery or personally motivated, and she said, "It was jealousy, because they stole [the truck] but they left it elsewhere. And after that AMDA was over."<sup>46</sup> She explained that the organization in its original form came to an end, because the employees had left over the embezzlement scandal.

The cooperative was dealt an additional blow when the store in Antigua was robbed of approximately \$4,000 in 1995, and the current officers suspected that it was an inside job, because none of the alarms were tripped and the door was not forced. They suggested that the thieves were relatives of the cooperative president at the time from Chirijox. María explained, "The ex-president's sister was the manager, and [the police] said that they had used a key. They found the key in the cobblestones of the street where they had thrown it. And there was an alarm, *wiu wiu wiu*, but it didn't sound."<sup>47</sup> After the theft, they decided to drop the Antigua store, but two neighboring boutiques asked if they could continue offering TelaMaya products.

The Dutch government began transitioning out of funding the organization over the next year, paying consultants to create plans to make the cooperative financially self-sufficient. As the ILO/Dutch support was withdrawn, the paid Ladino (male, non-indigenous) employees started quitting: first the coordinator and accountant on October 20<sup>th</sup>, 1995, then the production manager

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<sup>45</sup> Women in leadership positions in Guatemala have often paid for their political activism with their lives, including journalist and outspoken critic of the government Irma Flaquer, whose hand was injured by a hand grenade thrown into her car before she disappeared in 1980; Mutual Aid Group (Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo) leader Rosario Godoy, tortured and killed with her brother and son in 1985; anthropologist Myrna Mack, stabbed 27 times by members of the presidential guard in 1990, and CONAVIGUA group president María Mejía, shot and killed at home in 1990 by a military official (Zur 1998; Ball et al. 1999).

<sup>46</sup> Fue por envidia, porque se lo robaron pero lo dejaron en otro lado. Y después de eso se terminó AMDA.

<sup>47</sup> La hermana de la expresidenta era encargada, y dijeron que usaron la llave. Encontraron la llave entre las piedras de la calle donde la habían tirado. Y había un alarma, *wiu wiu wiu*, pero no sonó.

on May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1996, then the employee named director after the coordinator's departure on August 9<sup>th</sup>, 1996. María intoned, "One by one, they all left, and we were left without aid."<sup>48</sup> The director's departure points to another form of violence that the cooperative has experienced that can be considered gender-based. When TelaMaya was founded, the Ministry of the Economy had promised to give the organization a space rent-free for ten years in Zone 3 of Quetzaltenango. As the founding members tell it, the Ministry evicted TelaMaya from this location in order to give the space to a private boys' boarding school. The director of TelaMaya at the time worked with the Ministry of the Economy to facilitate the transfer, and in return, they gave him a new position there. "They kicked us out of there, because they knew that we were women, they kicked us out,"<sup>49</sup> Andrea insisted. They resented this corrupt action from the former director but continued to call him at the Ministry to ask for favors.

When he left, the ex-director appointed one of the members from Chirijox, Prudencia, president of TelaMaya, but the other cooperative members resented her for what they perceived as mismanagement: she would refuse to write checks or buy products when group representatives came in to make their deliveries. According to volunteers who worked with TelaMaya while Doña Prudencia was president, all of the stock was kept in the shop, and it tended to be jumbled up. The products were also unappealing to tourists: mainly traditional blouses and cushions, and not the scarves and small, conveniently-sized bags TelaMaya sells now. When Prudencia left, the cooperative owed \$500 to associates, three months of rent (\$650), and \$261 in products to the groups from Huehuetenango.

On August 30<sup>th</sup>, 1996, María and Roxana took over the cooperative as president and secretary respectively, transitioning to working full time in the office but without receiving

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<sup>48</sup> Uno por uno, se fueron todos, y nos quedamos sin ayuda.

<sup>49</sup> Nos sacaron de allá, porque sabían que somos mujeres, nos sacaron.

wages apart from their weaving sales.<sup>50</sup> To relate to new volunteers, the officers would sometimes invoke this history of volunteerism, as María did: “I would steal money from my husband [to pay for my costs working in the city]. When he gave me my spending money I stole fifteen quetzales. Sometimes we would not have money; we would pay for two quetzales of bread to eat with the children. And all to help the women. Because TelaMaya came about because of the war. So everything comes to its conclusion. Like Roxana says, we have to keep going going going.”<sup>51</sup> Roxana said that they had made many sacrifices to work in TelaMaya: “It was hard. We suffered a lot. Sometimes I only had bananas to give to my children.”<sup>52</sup>

María was relating the sad history of TelaMaya to a new volunteer, Jolene. After hearing of the death of Lucina, the loss of the government building, and the struggles with debt, Jolene asked briskly, “Can we skip a little of the suffering to arrive at the better times?”<sup>53</sup> I had heard the story before and said, “It was when the angel of TelaMaya came.”<sup>54</sup> María nodded. Jolene asked me, in English, “Why do I get the feeling that she’s going to die?” I replied, “She does die. Just wait for the story.” María told Jolene, “The Lord sent an angel.”<sup>55</sup> Lucy had arrived at their darkest hour, around 2006 when they moved to the current location. The cooperative was in debt, owed four months’ rent on their store, and the Dutch backers and former president had left, leaving María and Roxana to decide what to do. Lucy was a sixty-year old US missionary visiting Guatemala who learned about their financial situation and wrote to all of her friends back home to get donations. According to María, “She started, then, on the Internet to make

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<sup>50</sup> An official from the labor ministry visited in 2010 and encouraged them to establish minimum-wage salaries at least for the two officers who worked full-time in the cooperative.

<sup>51</sup> Yo robaba dinero de mi esposo. Cuando me dio mi gasto robé 15 quetzales. A veces no teníamos dinero; pagamos 2 quetzales de pan para comer con los niños. Y todo para ayudar a las mujeres. Porque TelaMaya surgió por la guerra. Entonces todo eso viene a su conclusión. Como Roxana dice tenemos que seguir seguir seguir...

<sup>52</sup> Fue muy duro. Sufrimos mucho. A veces sólo tenía bananos para dar a mis hijos.

<sup>53</sup> ¿Podemos saltar un poco del sufrimiento para llegar a los tiempos mejores?

<sup>54</sup> Fue cuando llegó el ángel de TelaMaya.

<sup>55</sup> Mandó un ángel el Señor.

applications, to request donations and donations.”<sup>56</sup> They came through with around Q.15,000–20,000 (about \$2,000), enough to pay the back rent, the advance on the new place, and have a bit of extra capital left over. After arranging for the new office and store, Lucy complained of stomach pain and went to the hospital, where they operated on her digestive tract and she died suddenly of complications from the surgery. María said, “It was like our TelaMaya mama had died.”<sup>57</sup> Lucy’s tragic accidental death made her a martyr in the officers’ eyes. They maintained the office layout in her memory, because she helped them organize the new space.

These were good times for TelaMaya, as they settled into their new location and began receiving more volunteers. But in February 2012, the cooperative faced a terrifying extortion threat. Two men on a motorcycle left a letter on the doorstep on February 20<sup>th</sup>, purportedly from the Mara 18, a well-known national-level gang, requesting Q.5,000 (\$650) in return for the safety of the cooperative’s members. I was in Connecticut when the first threat came, and the TelaMaya officers concealed it from me because they were concerned that I would be too frightened to return. The board of directors convened in a safe location and decided to pay the extortion money. A week later, I was back in Xela and the extortionists returned with a demand for Q.10,000 (\$1,300), saying that they would throw a grenade into the office if they were not paid. The officers were hysterical; María was sobbing and shaking, unable to contain her body’s movements in reaction to the fear. In response to the second extortion threat, María and Roxana considered changing the name, changing the location, or changing the staff of TelaMaya, because they were worried it might be a personal vendetta against one of the officers. Roxana asked, “Why are they doing this to us? We’re women...”<sup>58</sup> They suspected that the former

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<sup>56</sup> Comenzó pues en Internet a hacer solicitudes, pedir donaciones y donaciones.

<sup>57</sup> Fue como si nuestra mama de TelaMaya había muerto.

<sup>58</sup> ¿Por qué nos están haciendo eso? Somos mujeres.

president, Prudencia, might have arranged the extortion, because she had visited them the day before the first extortion to ask for money. They also suspected a technician who had come to look at their sewing machines the day before and commented that their antique broken machines could be worth money.

They debated whether to go to the police or find a way to pay for the second extortion demand. I begged them to let me go to the police. María said that she was quitting and she planned to go to a friend from the US, the cooperative's long-term Internet service provider, to ask him to help get her out of the country. María told me that if I went against the instructions in the letter they would kill her grandchildren. This was one of the most ethically difficult moments for me in my fieldwork: while I was convinced that not paying the money was the right course of action, it was devastating to go against the wishes of someone I had come to love and respect, and I worried that the incident would rend apart the cooperative. María left Xela for her home in San Martin and left the situation in our hands. Roxana and the other board members supported me in going to the police, saying, "Women can do it."<sup>59</sup> Because they were concerned about their children's safety in their apartment in the TelaMaya office, Roxana and her family spent the night in my apartment. Roxana's husband told her angrily that it was her fault that they were at TelaMaya and attracting people's attention. TelaMaya's foreign allies wanted to help. Lindsay, a wholesale client, called from the US and said that she had contacted an acquaintance in the State Department to see if there was anything they could do, such as paying for a security guard for TelaMaya so they could keep working.

The extortion exacerbated existing tensions within the cooperative. Andrea and Roxana agreed that they never should have paid the money the first time, and blamed María for insisting

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<sup>59</sup> Las mujeres si pueden.



that they deliver the money without negotiating, and for turning the board against the plan of going to the police. A former TelaMaya volunteer from Canada, Lenore, commented on María's response to the situation: "It's terrible how disempowered they are. María is the most disempowered of all of them in a lot of ways." The officers called a meeting of the board of directors to discuss what had happened. Roxana told the representatives from Huehuetenango privately that she cared deeply about María but she had to take over making decisions during the crisis, because María was driven mad with fear: "It doesn't matter if she's my friend or my mother, we have to think about the association."<sup>60</sup> María urged the member groups to help out in the store to keep it open over the next few months, as the officers would be keeping irregular schedules for fear of retaliation from the extortionists: "What TelaMaya needs is brave people, not just when there is money."<sup>61</sup> María also suggested to the assembled group that local government might protect their interests as a female-operated business: "What we need to do is send a letter with Rebecca to the public ministry that says that we are women and we are struggling to earn money."<sup>62</sup> As disempowered subjects, they hoped to receive help. In **Chapter Two**, I discuss this tendency to represent themselves as women and therefore deserving of sympathy.

In the wake of the extortion, security became their priority and they considered investing much of their remaining capital in a high-tech security system. Even seemingly innocuous interactions took on a menacing character. The women working in the office would flinch when an unknown Guatemalan man walked by the entrance, and if he stopped to look in they would hide. A Guatemalan girl came to ask about a sign advertising rooms to rent on the wall outside,

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<sup>60</sup> No importa si sea mi amiga o mi madre, tenemos que pensar en la asociación.

<sup>61</sup> Lo que quiere TelaMaya aquí es gente valiente, no solo cuando hay pisto. Nosotros trabajamos cuanto tiempo.

<sup>62</sup> Lo que tenemos que hacer es entregar una carta con la Rebecca para el ministerio público que dice que somos mueres. Estamos luchando para ganar el dinero.

and by the time the story reached Roxana, the incident had become a woman who was suspiciously inquiring about the inhabitants of the building. María's husband commented that they were all feeling paranoid: "When you are traumatized, you do not know..."<sup>63</sup> Almost a month after the extortion, Roxana was still traumatized: "I am getting better, but when my *compañera* is so afraid, it disheartens me. When someone says '*Let's work/struggle!*' it encourages me."<sup>64</sup> Roxana drew energy and strength from the positive attitudes and cheerfulness of international volunteers. María drew comfort from her faith: "I know that God is going to transform us into other people when these people draw near."<sup>65</sup> She enjoyed the thought that the extortionists would suffer the consequences of their actions in the next life: "God knows. As they sow, so shall they reap."<sup>66</sup>

Processing what had happened to them, the leaders of TelaMaya turned to religious authorities and the interpretation of dreams. María dreamed of abundant food and customers who bought all of the products in the shop: "How good it would be if all of the blights became blessings."<sup>67</sup> To forestall criticism from the other board members for having left the cooperative during the extortion, María pointed to the work that she had done at home by seeking the spiritual aid of a member of her evangelical church known for her prophetic abilities, a woman who had advised María when her own son was extorted. She also invited some brothers from her church to pray in the TelaMaya office and determine who had caused the extortion, and their declaration that the extortionists were three poor university students without violent tendencies

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<sup>63</sup> Cuando uno es traumatizado, no sabe...

<sup>64</sup> Me estoy animando... pero cuando la compañera tiene tanto miedo, me desanima. Cuando alguien dice, *Luchemos* me anima.

<sup>65</sup> Yo sé que Dios nos va a transformar en otra persona cuando vayan cerca esa gente. El espíritu santo nos va a cuidar.

<sup>66</sup> Diosito sabe. Como siembran, así cosechan.

<sup>67</sup> Qué bueno fuera si todas las maldiciones se convertirían en bendiciones.

heartened María to the point that she decided to continue working full-time at TelaMaya. Not all dreams were reassuring, however: Roxana dreamed that the extortionists had returned, but she tried to dismiss it, saying, “Well, they are only dreams.”<sup>68</sup>

Roxana told the detective assigned to follow up on our case that the extortion worried her because the voluntourists might be at risk: “The truth is that we are worried too because a lot of foreigners come here with us, volunteers like Rebequita [...] and it bothers us that they might be in danger.”<sup>69</sup> María agreed that they were worried about the volunteers, who were perceived as wealthy and vulnerable in a strange country. The detective stated that assaults against tourists were on the rise. Roxana thanked him for following up with the cooperative “because we are women and women get more scared.”<sup>70</sup> He replied, “But they say that women have the stronger characters.”<sup>71</sup> Everyone laughed and agreed. A month later, when a Guatemalan magazine distributor visited TelaMaya, the officers told her about the extortion. The Ladina woman commented, “But it seems odd to me that they settled on you, a women’s association. You are helping people. Instead of stealing from or taking advantage of people, you are helping.”<sup>72</sup> María agreed that it was strange and the work of the devil. She said that she had been against me going to the police for fear of violence against her family, and the magazine distributor declared, “In Guatemala we need foreign people like you, who strengthen us.”<sup>73</sup> Similarly, the cooperative’s landlord told the officers, “It’s a shame the *gringa* was not here, because she would have

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<sup>68</sup> Pues, solo son sueños.

<sup>69</sup> La verdad es que estamos preocupadas también porque vienen muchos extranjeros acá con nosotros, voluntarios como la Rebequita. Ella está con nosotros por meses, y algunos vienen por 3 meses, un mes, y nos da mucha pena que estén en peligro.

<sup>70</sup> Gracias por venir porque somos mujeres, y las mujeres se asustan más.

<sup>71</sup> Pero se dice que las mujeres tienen el carácter más fuerte.

<sup>72</sup> Pero me parece raro que se fijaron en ustedes, una asociación de mujeres. Pero ustedes están ayudando a la gente. En lugar de robar o aprovecharse de la gente, están ayudando.

<sup>73</sup> En Guatemala necesitamos gente extranjera como usted, que nos refuerza.

encouraged you.”<sup>74</sup> The extortion has become incorporated into the mythology of TelaMaya. María told volunteer Jolene what had happened and said, “The truth is it scared me because of everything that had happened to me before. But I’m still here. We are surviving.”<sup>75</sup> Jolene said, “Women are strong. And more flexible than men.”<sup>76</sup> María nodded in agreement.

My entanglement with TelaMaya’s extortion is a fitting climax to a long history of foreign interventions in the cooperative. The officers clearly sought to ingratiate themselves with foreign tourists by casting them as the heroes of their stories. It is striking that the good characters in the story, such as Jack, Lucina, and Lucy were foreigners, while the villains of the piece, such as the former employees, the Ministry of the Economy, the TelaMaya ex-president, and lately the extortionists, were Guatemalan. The way that the officers presented it, no Guatemalan outside their organization ever helped them. They also smoothed over some of the issues they have had with foreign voluntourists, which are described further in **Chapter Four**.<sup>77</sup>

## Conclusion

The ubiquitous violence in Guatemala has shaped the course of the leaders’ lives and their history with the cooperative. In addition to their fears of extortion, kidnapping, disappearance, mugging, or arrest, the women of TelaMaya have faced institutional violence, as when their building was appropriated for private use, and structural violence—hunger, illness, and poverty. The leaders’ personal histories of trauma have also affected their business decision-making processes, as they have come to favor security over other concerns. For the women of TelaMaya to have overcome such challenges for over a quarter of a century is remarkable. The

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<sup>74</sup> Lástima que no estaba la gringa, porque ella las hubiera animado.

<sup>75</sup> La verdad es que me asustó por todo lo que me había pasado antes. Pero todavía aquí estoy. Estamos sobreviviendo.

<sup>76</sup> Las mujeres somos fuertes. Y más flexibles que los hombres.

<sup>77</sup> I had the same impression when talking to the officers about the Guatemalan civil war (see also **Chapter Five**), when I was apparently the first person to tell them about the US government’s involvement in the events leading to the genocidal civil war.

notion of women's martyrdom may be a resource for them in understanding and coping with the various forms of violence they experienced on a daily basis. While many argue that *marianismo* provides a social and scholarly rationalization for women's victimhood, viewing suffering as women's natural state may have given them the strength to continue fighting: the leaders of TelaMaya typically connected the verb "to suffer" (*sufrir*) with the verb "to struggle" (*luchar*). This chapter has addressed how Guatemalan women interpret their experiences of suffering through the lens of historically-rooted gender ideologies based in their region, but it should not be taken to suggest that Guatemalan women are somehow static or passive in their understandings of gender relations. The next chapter focuses on how women are drawing from transnationally circulating human rights discourses to change their narratives.

Given the current climate of insecurity and violence against women in Guatemala, it becomes difficult to place the suffering of TelaMaya cooperative members within a delimited historical context, but their contemporary forms of suffering are more nebulous and difficult to package than war-related atrocities. Using narratives of instances of victimhood to pull in international audiences is somewhat limiting. As the genocidal civil war recedes into the past, future generations of TelaMaya members will need to find new ways to connect to their clients. Miriam Hirsch refers to the intergenerational transmission of trauma as "postmemory": "the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (2008:107).

TelaMaya members' tendency to site their notions of victimhood within particular historical contexts may also make it more difficult for them to critique the broader forms of institutional, structural, and post-conflict violence they are currently experiencing. Fassin and Rechtman refer to victim narratives as "histories without history," because they tend to treat violence as an isolated event rather than a phenomenon with historical roots and causes:

Both before and after the tsunami, the survivors in Aceh were already victims of political domination, military repression, and economic marginalization. Both before and after Hurricane Katrina, the people of New Orleans were already victims of poverty and the discrimination that reinforced class inequalities through racial distinctions. Trauma is not only silent on these realities; it actually obscures them. [Fassin and Rechtman 2009:281]

The members of TelaMaya have experienced a wide range of different forms of oppression throughout their lives, but in response to their tourist audiences' expectations, they limited themselves to discussing the more easily expressed violence they suffered during the civil war.

TelaMaya's officers tried to use their unique resource—the suffering they had experienced in the civil war—and its appeal to privileged outsiders to gain economic and political traction as Mayans and as women within a society that has historically oppressed them. Their personal stories of suffering drew in tourists and voluntourists with some level of interest in dark tourism. Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman (1996) argued that gazing at suffering from a safe distance allows Westerners to feel superior to non-Western societies and justifies intervention: "This 'consumption' of suffering in an era of so-called 'disordered capitalism' is not so very different from the late nineteenth-century view that the savage barbarism in pagan lands justified the valuing of our own civilization at a higher level of development, a view that authorized colonial exploitation" (Kleinman and Kleinman 1996) and today, cultural appropriation, as discussed in **Chapter Six**. Stories of trauma thus provide a motivation and

justification for voluntouristic involvement in TelaMaya, because they present Guatemala as a disordered society and a place of lack, particularly for women.

## Chapter Two: “We Have the Same Rights”: Women’s Activism and New Subjectivities

A conversation between two non-indigenous Guatemalan women struck me as speaking to how being exposed to other ways of life can be liberatory for women. Chatting after salsa class, a divorced woman in her fifties, Edith, stated emphatically that she never planned to have another romantic relationship because any prospects would treat her like her ex-husband had, expecting her to cook and clean in addition to earning income. Another friend in her forties, Rosa, held a similar sentiment towards older Guatemalan men, but added that gender relations among younger generations were becoming more equitable. I asked Rosa how she explained such generational differences, and she suggested that Guatemalan women were changing their expectations about gender relations based on what they had seen among foreign women and men: “It’s from spending a lot of time with *gringos*. I’ve spent 15 years working with *gringos* and I prefer your way. It’s from seeing how you are, because before we didn’t know that there’s another way, but now we see that there are other possibilities in this world.”<sup>78</sup> This idea that exposure to foreign models can open up new spaces for change in social relations is fundamental to the notion of cosmopolitanism and it was an idea that I wanted to explore from the beginnings of my dissertation research. This chapter examines how direct experience with foreign ways of being and ideas might offer Guatemalan women, especially indigenous women, important alternatives to their marginalized, devalued position within their families and the nation. More specifically, I analyze how these foreign interventions have advanced or impeded indigenous Guatemalan women’s efforts to convince themselves, their fellow community members, and the state that they have value as people.

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<sup>78</sup> Es por convivir mucho con gringos. He pasado 15 años trabajando con gringos y me gusta más su forma de ser. Por ver cómo están ustedes, porque antes no sabíamos que hay otro modo, pero ahora vimos que hay otras posibilidades en este mundo.



Voluntourists brought Euro-American middle-class notions of feminism to their approach to volunteer work; however, this was not inherently detrimental to their goal of helping indigenous Guatemalan women empower themselves. The relatively new movement to explicitly address women's issues in Guatemala has drawn inspiration and tactics from other Latin American and global feminisms. Ladina and increasingly indigenous Guatemalan women have incorporated international human rights discourses in their assertions of their worth as the bearers of rights and their legitimacy as citizens of the nation.<sup>79</sup> In their own turn, the leaders of TelaMaya have begun working to raise their members' rights consciousness, becoming one of the organizations carrying the circulation of transnational discourses of human rights to rural areas that might not otherwise be reached. Tal Nitsan (2014:73) states that for Guatemalan women's organizations, participation is key to asserting the agency of women; just being present is a way of making a claim that women's issues matter, that women's lives matter. Through participation and presence in women's organizations, Guatemalan women who have contact with NGOs and foreigners have been actively carving out a place for themselves in the public sphere and many foreign volunteers wanted to be a part of this process.

The daily work of participating in an association with other women is the foundation of women's activism in Guatemala. Given the extreme challenges and limitations that women have faced in simply assembling, being present is a revolutionary act. The first section of this chapter

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<sup>79</sup> Some indigenous organizations criticize "quienes pretenden homogeneizar y equiparar a todas las mujeres al modelo occidental de 'mujer,' dejando de lado particularidades propias de cada contexto específico, con la justificación de que la dominación patriarcal es el elemento que unifica a las mujeres" [those who try to homogenize and equate all women to the Western model of "woman," leaving aside the particularities of each specific context, with the justification that patriarchal domination is the element that unifies women]. Mayan feminists argue that such essentializing feminism fails to take into account the particular context each woman faces, structured by "la religión, la clase, la edad, la etnia, la sexualidad y la cultura" [religion, class, age, ethnicity, sexuality, and culture] (Hernández Cordero 2008:9). Ladina and non-Guatemalan women who have critiqued indigenous women's gender-based subordination have been criticized as ethnocentric outsiders, while Mayan women who pointed to the same problems have been criticized as "etnocidas" (race-traitors) (Camus 2002:1-2).

will examine how the TelaMaya leaders came to consider and represent their organization (primarily composed of women) as directly addressing gender issues. The next section analyzes how foreign volunteers and clients responded to such representations and how they were motivated by the idea of working towards Guatemalan women's empowerment. The following topic focuses on retracing the steps that indigenous Guatemalan women have already taken towards participating in public life, a journey that they understand in spatial terms as beginning with their first steps over the thresholds of their households. The chapter closes with an analysis of how women were encouraged to take on leadership roles within the cooperative, and came to understand themselves as subjects who could come together to make a difference in their own lives and the lives of women like them.

### **“We’re Women Who Have No Help from Anywhere”: Gendered Representations**

To attract the solidarity of international clients and volunteers interested in women's issues, the leaders of TelaMaya increasingly emphasized the gendered aspects of their mission. TelaMaya did not always explicitly identify itself as a women's organization. Brochures from the 1990s state that the cooperative includes both men and women. A website created in 2002 described the cooperative as “a collective of 350 backstrap loom weavers, 98% women, from five ethnic groups.” While men continued to serve a limited role in the cooperative, over the years, TelaMaya came to express its mission as helping and empowering women. Given the highly gendered nature of Guatemalan backstrap weaving, it is unlikely that TelaMaya ever had a significant percentage of male weavers, but the rhetorical emphasis on gender evolved over time in response to international audiences' interests.

The officers of TelaMaya consistently described themselves as a “women's association,” with the understanding that that would make others sympathetic to them and their mission. When

presenting TelaMaya to a new person, María, Roxana, Paula, or Andrea would lead off by calling it a “women’s association,” whether they were writing a letter of introduction for some of their members attending a class at a technical institute, speaking with local newspaper reporters, meeting a potential new client, buying advertising space in a magazine for tourists, or interacting with government officials. Roxana told an official from the Ministry of the Economy “that he needs to help us, because we’re a women’s association.”<sup>80</sup> Being a women’s organization was their trump card in negotiating their power relations with government authorities, other organizations, and clients. They also used their status as a women’s organization to excuse themselves from contributing to other organizations: when an association for elderly people called asking for assistance, Roxana hemmed, “The thing is that we’re an association. We’re helping the women most affected by the war.”<sup>81</sup> María added, “That’s why we don’t offer help.”<sup>82</sup> They defined themselves as helping working women, providing “trade not aid” in the neoliberal vein of capitalist humanitarianism, which meant that they were not philanthropists like other international associations. Placing such limitations on the scope of their activities helped them understand themselves as constituting a group with a mission. As **Chapter One** shows, the women and their Guatemalan associates understood the extortion of their organization as particularly unjust given their mission to support women.

TelaMaya members also used their gender-based mission to define boundaries and maintain control over their space. Once, a Guatemalan passerby asked for information and María turned him away, saying, “Here it is a women’s association. It’s not for men, not even to give information.”<sup>83</sup> They told an ambulatory carpet vendor that he could not sell within TelaMaya’s

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<sup>80</sup> Le dije que tiene que ayudarnos, porque somos una asociación de mujeres.

<sup>81</sup> La cosa es que somos una asociación. Estamos ayudando a las mujeres más afectadas por la guerra.

<sup>82</sup> Por eso no ofrecemos ayuda.

<sup>83</sup> Aquí es una asociación de mujeres. No es para hombres, ni siquiera para dar información.

patio, because it is not a place for men. María snipped, “I don’t like him. I told him that it’s women’s, not men’s. He can make his sales, but not at the expense of TelaMaya’s sales.”<sup>84</sup>

While male foreign volunteers easily entered this feminine space, often accompanied or ushered in by female partners, the officers viewed Guatemalan men with suspicion, to the point of refusing to acknowledge the rare Guatemalan men who entered the store as potential customers, perhaps due to distrust of men’s motives or fear of violence.

This definition or branding of TelaMaya as a women’s organization resonated with clients. A Canadian fair trade industry professional filming an amateur documentary about Central American fair trade organizations visited TelaMaya and described it using gender as the primary frame:

It’s a weaving cooperative, so since the late 80s they’ve offered women at least somewhere where they can come and- and have some solidarity with uh with each other. There’s lots of problems in Guatemala with the Civil War disappearances. [...] They’re— I would call fairly traded and work on fair trade principles of equity and gender, promoting women’s rights. Guatemala has really distinctive gender differences... I guess the women do the weaving and the men work in the fields.

Similarly, TelaMaya’s major Swedish client, Ingrid, featured stories about violence against women in Guatemala on her website and stressed that handicraft sales provide women greater status and independence. She wrote that TelaMaya “gives these women a chance to find a market for their products, further away than just their own village. This is to create economic opportunities and a stability that does not exist in their often isolated communities. [It] gives the women an opportunity to talk and share each other’s experiences as well as to develop their design and practice their writing, reading, and their problem-solving.” Major US-based wholesale client Lindsay expressed her mission as bringing “aid to women around the world.” At

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<sup>84</sup> Me cae mal. Le dije que es de mujeres, no es de hombres. Puede hacer sus ventas, pero no sobre la venta de TelaMaya.

one point, the weavers of TelaMaya had a hard time delivering enough fabric for a 1,000-piece order for Lindsay. The officers proposed contracting the work out to a professional (male) foot loom weaver who could produce fabric faster, cheaper, and more consistently than the backstrap weavers who belong to TelaMaya. They asked me to cautiously assess whether Lindsay would be open to this method of producing her fabric. I broached the topic with her, and her reaction was very negative: “Oh no, no, that wouldn’t work at all. The whole point is to provide a sustainable income to women in Guatemala.” Her gut-level rejection of providing work to male Guatemalan Mayan handweavers from economically depressed rural villages suggests that gender was one of the most important considerations for her in working with TelaMaya. Clients and volunteers wanted to use their support to help Guatemalan women empower themselves, which is what made the framing of the organization as gender-based effective.

### **“Kind of Sexist Against Men”: Volunteering and Gender**

Volunteers also embraced the idea of TelaMaya as a women’s space. Polish volunteer Katarzyna proposed hosting a benefit party to raise money for TelaMaya and promote its programs among the local community of expatriates and locals. The event theme would have to fit with the organization’s image and mission: “It could be a day for women, with weaving, massage classes, desserts, yoga, and henna.” I suggested that focusing the event on women would exclude half of the potential audience base. She replied, “Of course men can come too, but it’s designed more for women.” She viewed such an event as more appropriate for a female-identified organization than the typical benefit party for Xela NGOs hosted by a local bar.

Gender issues were central to how many volunteers understood their work. A female volunteer from the US stated in her application to work with TelaMaya, “I especially agree in the importance of women, going hand in hand with microfinance, where they believe that women are

more likely going to take care of their families, as opposed to spending money on optional entertainment. In Guatemala specifically, I feel it is truly a good cause to help the women support themselves, given the past circumstances of civil war (not to mention US interference).”<sup>85</sup> A US volunteer commented that what she thought was “really cool about TelaMaya” was “that the women are in charge.” Male volunteers sometimes identified as feminists and stated that they were drawn to the mission of helping women. One male volunteer wrote, “I decided to volunteer [at TelaMaya] because I really liked that it supported women.” Many voluntourists viewed their volunteering as a small part of the solution to problems facing women in the developing world. US volunteer Jacqueline came to Guatemala to help women, because she felt that helping women is one of the best ways to help the community: women take care of children, and thus they influence societal values at the most fundamental level.

Some volunteers were influenced by reading Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn’s book *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*, which recommends international volunteering as “a path that more young Americans should consider – traveling to the developing world to ‘give back’ to people who desperately need the assistance” (2009:88). Kristof and WuDunn advocate longer-term voluntourism as a means for potential activists from privileged backgrounds to gain a first-hand and grounded understanding of complex issues affecting women such as sex trafficking, poverty, or femicide. They present voluntourism as an educational experience that will pay off in future development projects and activism on behalf of women: “To tackle an issue effectively, you need to understand it – and it’s impossible to understand an issue effectively by simply reading about it. You need to see it firsthand, even live in its midst... If more Americans worked for a summer [in a non-

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<sup>85</sup> Other examples of volunteers mentioning their interest in issues of gender and violence are presented in **Chapter Three**.

industrialized country] our entire society would have a richer understanding of the world around us. And the rest of the world might also hold a more positive view of Americans” (2009:88).

Proposing voluntourism as one of the solutions to the problems confronting women worldwide, Kristof and WuDunn inspired some of TelaMaya’s volunteers to see themselves as part of a movement to empower women, converging with the message that the TelaMaya board members were also articulating. However, as Nelson (1999:57) notes, the positive intent behind these projects can be used to gloss over or rationalize the problems associated with them: “Recourse to the politics of solidarity can offer a space of innocence for the gringa, a site cleansed by good intentions and activist ‘politics,’ from which we can still speak unproblematically of the Other.”

Volunteers often expressed excitement at working with other young women. Sheryl, the volunteer coordinator in 2010-2011, got a thrill from the international nature of the volunteer team. She described a brainstorming meeting with her new group of volunteers:

I was surrounded by 6 amazing, educated, independent, under 30 women who each represented various countries and cultures. It was like a mini-UN in an all-natural café in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala! There were 3 women from Europe representing France, Germany and Belgium. The other four *chicas* all represented North America [:] From Canada there was an Indian (from India) girl and representing the US was a European/Caucasian American, a Guatemalan American and yours truly, an African American. Here I was with women from all over the world who were all interested in working with women in Guatemala. It was one of those moments too good for my brain to pass over.

Wendy enjoyed the thought of an all-female volunteer team: “I think it would be fun to have a bunch of girls here volunteering.” During the summer of 2010, the volunteers took to calling themselves the “TelaMamas,” expressing a sense of camaraderie and girl power that was also tied into their youth and appeal with local men.

“A group of women is different from men. Whenever a guy gets involved in a group,” US volunteer Wendy commented, “he’s looking for the leader. He may not have to be the leader,

but...there has to be one.” She continued, “In some Native American cultures they’re matriarchal. When women have the power, they don’t need to be as oppressive as men. I’ll admit it, I’m kind of sexist against men.” A middle-aged woman named Maureen who teaches English as a second language in the US said that she was very impressed by TelaMaya and was planning a volunteer trip for the next year: “I would particularly like to teach women’s literacy so that they can know their rights.” Wendy replied, “I love that you’re focusing on women’s literacy. I’m actually going to be starting grad school in the fall for International Studies to work on something similar. What I think makes this place really different is that it’s run by women. I think women have a totally different mentality.” Maureen grew animated, almost shouting: “I think that the *world* is run by women.” Wendy continued, “My friend gave a speech on the Mayan calendar and what we can expect, and he said that it’s going to be time for the women. The men have already done their part, and now it’s time for women to fix what they can. I don’t know if that’s sexist to say...” Maureen agreed, “I don’t think it’s sexist, I think it’s realistic.” One day, María, Roxana, and the volunteer coordinator at the time, Sandrine, were talking about their problems with male professionals. “That’s why it’s better to work with women and not men,”<sup>86</sup> declared Sandrine, frustrated with her experiences with male associates’ tendency to pass their problems along to others and never admit to their mistakes.

In many cases, female volunteers expressed a sense of solidarity or sisterhood with Guatemalan women that had motivated them to volunteer. Sarah, a girl from Germany, claimed she was drawn to TelaMaya particularly because it was an organization run by women for women. She was looking to build an international database of women’s organizations: “I would like to visit women-owned organizations and make a website to connect them to each other. The

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<sup>86</sup> Es por eso que es mejor trabajar con mujeres y no con hombres.



idea would be that if they want to look for something to buy for presents to support these women, they could search in the website.” The audience for this website would be Euro-American women: “Yes, I think that women in the West are going to be the ones who are particularly concerned to look out for other women. I think that Western women need to help other women to be strong, because sometimes they don’t know how to be strong.” At times their approach seemed to illustrate what Gayatri Spivak (1988) might call “white women saving brown women from brown men.” Their desire to know and help women that they identified as the “Other” was shaped by a number of complicated factors, including disillusionment with their own lives in industrialized nations and a sense of Western privilege that drove them to contribute resources and wisdom to women they considered less fortunate. Chandra Mohanty (1984:335) writes that Western feminism has trained a colonial gaze on the oppression of women in non-industrial countries and produced a simplistic, homogenous diagnosis of “Third World Difference”: “It is in this process of homogenization and systematization of the oppression of women in the third world that power is exercised in much of recent Western feminist discourse.” However, voluntourists’ impulse to model progressive gender relations may not have been completely misguided; one of the questions grappled with in this chapter is whether their mere presence may create possibilities for indigenous Guatemalan women to rethink their own gendered positionings, just as Guatemalan women’s mere presence in cooperative organizations is a way of presenting themselves as people with value.

Volunteers presented alternative models of gender roles and relations to the TelaMaya members who had the most contact with them. Roxana encouraged her boys to spend time with male volunteers to learn another mode of masculinity. Cooperative members would sometimes congratulate couples who volunteered together on their respectful dynamics and egalitarian

sensibilities. The cooperative members were often curious about how women live in other parts of the world. I originally expected the comparisons the officers made between their own lives and those of the foreign women who spent every day with them to radically change their own orientations to their family lives and gender relations. However, while they fiercely advocated independence and careerism for their female volunteers, they did not view this lifestyle as an option for them. TelaMaya secretary Paula explained to a group of tourists that women in Guatemala are not as independent as foreign women: “Here in Guatemala, it’s different... people’s lives are different. For example, a woman, if she doesn’t get married at, say, 20, 30, or 40 years old, she stays with her parents, right, she doesn’t leave.”<sup>87</sup> Fischer and Benson (2006:14) theorize that such statements indicate the “limit points” that constrain the potential for radical social change because they make people content with obtaining goals that are considered achievable within their social contexts, something that they identify in the Guatemalan ethnographic context with the phrase “at least” (*por lo menos*). The alternative models of womanhood presented by voluntourists did not seem to immediately open up a sense of new possibilities for cooperative members or their daughters. However, Paula’s recognition that gender roles and the meaning of womanhood are different in other countries may be a necessary stage towards shifting these “limit points,” as described by Edith and Rosa at the beginning of this chapter. Exposure to other ways of life and other ideas may be giving Guatemalan women the tools to challenge oppressive norms, as described in the next section.

### **“Now Women Have Our Rights”: Women’s Empowerment and Rights Activism**

A tourist visiting TelaMaya once asked me, “I read in Lonely Planet that you guys support women’s empowerment. How would you say you do that?” At the time, I told him about

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<sup>87</sup> aquí en Guatemala es diferente – es diferente la vida de las personas. Por ejemplo una mujer si no se casa a los que sea 20, 30, 40 años, sigue allí con su familia, con sus padres verdad y no sale, ella no sale.

TelaMaya's mission to promote women's economic independence and the (essentially defunct) scholarship program for girls. I felt that my answer was inadequate, and I would like to take the opportunity to explore the question further here. "Empowerment" may be a slippery and embattled concept, but I think it is worthwhile to take it seriously. Empowerment became a buzzword in the 1980s. Scholars typically refer to it as both a dynamic process and a desired outcome of that process. For example, Julian Rappaport (1984:3) defines empowerment as a process through which "people, organisations and communities gain mastery over their own lives," conveying "both a psychological sense of personal control or influence and a concern with actual social influence, political power, and legal rights" (Rappaport 1987:121). Lorraine Gutierrez (1990:149) defines empowerment as "a process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals can take action to improve their life situations." Both of these definitions emphasize empowerment as comprising internal and external processes that reinforce each other, in which people come to have a new understanding of themselves as people that corresponds with increasing agency in their relationships with other people, communities, and the state.

Guatemalan women's need for mastery over their own lives is chillingly clear. Structural violence has constrained and devalued women's lives in ways that can go unnoticed only because they have been made routine and legitimate through their codification in law. Women—especially indigenous<sup>88</sup> and impoverished women—lack access to education, health and family planning services, and land ownership in a way that is systematic and self-perpetuating (Scheper Hughes and Bourgois 2004:1). The government organization Defensoría de la Mujer Indígena (DEMI) report from 2007 indicates that rural indigenous women like those who make up

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<sup>88</sup> Manuela Camus (2002:1) argues that the intersectional oppression that indigenous women face makes them "*más indias*" (more Indians) than males in their communities.

TelaMaya show the lowest indices of human development in the country. Approximately 75% of indigenous women in Guatemala fall into the lowest 10% income group (DEMI 2007:28). For over a hundred years, women were excluded from the formal civil and political rights that men enjoyed: *mujeres analfabetas* (illiterate women) only gained the right to vote in the 1965 constitution (UNDP 2006:11). While the 1985 constitution technically extended equal citizenship rights to all, in practice, “different laws, policies and practices maintained women’s inferior legal, political and socioeconomic status” (Nitsan 2014). The Guatemalan civil code officially kept women at a disadvantage in questions of property and marital relations until 1998, and these provisions remain the default in rural areas. The criminal code did not punish men for sexual assault if they married or were pardoned by their victims until 2005 and did not criminalize marital rape until 2009. As these recent legal gains indicate, Guatemalan women, particularly indigenous women, have been systematically disempowered for centuries in a way that I will briefly illustrate before discussing the emergence of the women’s movement.

Guatemalan women’s bargaining power relative to men has shifted over time. According to June Nash (2001), ancient Mayan tradition and mythology reinforced an egalitarian orientation to gender, race, class, and nature. Their production of cloth, a gender-linked handicraft in Guatemala, paralleled men’s production of agricultural crops, and both used “planting” metaphors that ultimately linked to the process of childbirth, reinforcing the complementarity of gendered roles (Schevill et al. 1991; Green 1999).<sup>89</sup> Men’s and women’s economic and social interdependence within the traditional gender division of labor, both in subsistence and petty commodity production, historically gave women economic value and social leverage (Bossen 1984; Schevill et al. 1991; Hamilton 1998; Zur 1998; Green 1999;

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<sup>89</sup> Men historically have woven professionally, but on foot looms, making women’s traditional skirts.

Ehlers 1991, 2000; Batzibal Tujal et al. 2000:26; Carter 2004; Foxen 2007; Bastos and Cumes 2007:162). Without over-romanticizing the precolonial Mayan past, it seems clear that the Spanish colonization of Guatemala disrupted these relatively balanced gender roles by instituting new structures of institutionalized discrimination, new divisions of labor and power, and ideologies of honor/shame and gender subordination. As Aura Cumes (2007:164) stated, “Puede ser que el patriarcado se vea solo como una herencia colonial, pero desde el momento en que los hombres indígenas lo reproducen, lo apropian y se benefician de ello, también lo sostienen y lo normalizan” (Patriarchy might be seen as a colonial legacy, but from the moment that indigenous men reproduce, appropriate, and benefit from it, they maintain and normalize it).

Women have historically contributed to household subsistence through weaving sales and other cottage industries, which gave them some autonomy over economic decisions (Carey 2006a; Carey 2006b; Goldín 2009; Kistler 2014). However, the decline in the local markets for weaving and other handmade products has considerably reduced women’s economic options over the last half-century (Ehlers 1990; Green 1999). Following Esther Boserup’s hypothesis that women’s status erodes as their economic contributions decline, Laurel Bossen (1984) suggested that increasing reliance on men’s wage labor and new development programs giving men opportunities to join the market economy have shifted the gender balance of power. Green (1999) writes that, with the weakening of community and family structures, the position of women in relation to men also weakened, because family relationships and responsibilities traditionally protected wives. Tracey Ehlers argues that Guatemalan women “put up with abusive and irresponsible men because their own productive efforts are so minimally rewarding” (Ehlers 1990:xxxv). Rather than viewing households as a cooperative economic unit, and men’s and women’s production as complementary, Ehlers suggests that men and women have different (and

frequently competing) agendas, because women are ultimately responsible for household subsistence. Providing for their families has prevented them from reinvesting in their production and accumulating capital and personal gain, as men do. Through economic development, the relative equality and gender interdependence of traditional Mayan production have given way to women's dependency. Men often constrain women's participation in both formal and informal labor markets (Berger 2006:24; Goldin and Rosenbaum 2009:70; Hendrickson 1995:132).

This literature suggests that women's relative economic contributions are the most important factor influencing household power dynamics. However, other scholars have noted that where women's income generation is seen as less significant or meaningful than that of other household members, as may be the case in informal or household-based production, they may not have the same leverage (Safa 1996). In a transnational study of Guatemalan women's labor roles and attitudes towards work, Cecilia Menjívar (2006) found that attitudes towards gender roles expanded only when it became necessary: whereas, in Guatemala, women were more likely to take on household responsibilities for other women, in the US, all women were likely to be occupied working, forcing men to take on some activities identified as feminine. Menjívar concluded that "structural rearrangements may not necessarily prompt shifts in gender ideologies in the home" (2006:102). Menjívar (2006:102) wrote that women's leverage within households is not mechanistically dependent on their ability to earn a wage and argues that "women's social position—dictated by class and ethnicity—informs perceptions of paid work so that differentially-positioned women have dissimilar perceptions and 'experiences' of apparently similar activities—paid work outside the home." While more economically advantaged Ladina women found working outside the home liberating, and gained new identities through work,

lower-class women found it a necessary chore that they understood in solely economic terms. As this study shows, economic production alone is insufficient to empower women.

When I asked Roxana what life was like for women in the past few generations, she recounted, “Before, the life of a woman was horrible. Women had no value, only men. They exploited them a lot.”<sup>90</sup> The stories that her mother told her about her past in Sololá provide glimpses into this past:

When Roxana’s grandmother was young, women would wear long sleeves up to their wrists and long skirts, and covered their heads with cloths. They would only look straight ahead, because if they looked at a man, their parents would hit them.

Her grandmother married her grandfather when she was 11, and at 13 she was already pregnant when her menstruation came. When she bore a female child, her family was angry because it was not a boy.

Parents rarely allowed their girls to study. Roxana’s grandparents hid their children in the *temascal* (sauna) when the teachers came looking for them and claimed they had no children, because they wanted to keep them at home to work in the fields, make weavings, and collect firewood. Her mother had to carry coal seven kilometers uphill, and she could hardly bear it.

The exploitation was not limited to the family: women had to put on their *suutes* and dance, at the government’s behest. The girls had to marry by the age of 13, or the municipal government in Sololá would force them to grind lime for building projects, paralleling men’s forced military service.

María explained to a group of shocked foreign tourists why Guatemalan women traditionally weave on their knees: “Before, women did not have the right to sit in chairs, only men.”<sup>91</sup> Many women still feel ashamed to sit in chairs. At mealtimes, women sit on the floor near the fire with the children, and the boys and men sit at the table: “They say that it’s disrespectful to a family if a woman sits at the table.”<sup>92</sup> When a foreign couple came to San

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<sup>90</sup> Antes la vida para una mujer era horrible. Las mujeres eh no tenían ningún valor, pues, solo los hombres. Las explotaban mucho.

<sup>91</sup> Antes las mujeres no tenían derechos de sentarlas en sillas, sólo los hombres.

<sup>92</sup> Dicen que es una falta de respeto para la familia si una mujer se sienta en la mesa.

Martín to learn to weave with María, they both sat at the table to eat. The women from the town came to get her to sit apart with them: “And she was a foreigner! Can you believe it?”<sup>93</sup> The rules of gender subordination were strong enough to overcome foreign privilege in this case. When I visited Roxana in Pujujil II for Holy Week in 2012, they directed me to the table first with my plate of food. I sat down happily, only to notice that all the men of the family joined me at the table, while all the women crouched on the floor near the stove. It was one of the moments in my fieldwork that reinforced my awareness of my outsider status. These attitudes have been changing recently, because young people are learning about their rights in school, and saying, “We all have the right to sit at the table.”<sup>94</sup> María stated that many Guatemalans have also gone to the US and seen how men and women eat together, and questioned the practice of eating separately when they returned to Guatemala. The TelaMaya board told the group representatives to speak with the heads of households and tell them that women should be able to sit at the table with men.<sup>95</sup>

TelaMaya leaders have also held meetings with mothers in their towns, telling them that girls want and deserve an education. María often discussed women’s issues in Guatemala during her presentations to visiting tourists. She would say, “Unfortunately, in rural areas, that is to say in small towns, there is a lot of *machismo*, because they don’t want women to study; they only give the opportunity to men.”<sup>96</sup> Large families often make the difficult decision to prioritize only a few of their children, leaving the others without education, and those children are almost always male. They say that educating girls is a waste of money, because any benefits from their

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<sup>93</sup> ¡Y era extranjera! ¿Puedes tú creerlo?

<sup>94</sup> Todos tenemos derecho de sentarnos en las mesa.

<sup>95</sup> Kaqchikel anthropologist and activist Aura Cumes (2007:162-3) has a different perspective on this tradition, arguing that it is not a sign of male privilege but a recognition that women are closer to the earth.

<sup>96</sup> Lamentablemente en las áreas rurales, es decir en los pueblitos, existe mucho el machismo, porque no quieren que las mujeres estudien, solo le dan oportunidad al hombre.



studies will go to their husbands' families: "It's a shame, but that's how they think."<sup>97</sup> María considered financial independence central to women's advancement: "Women need work; they need to learn to weave."<sup>98</sup> Young girls learn to weave at around eight years old and are already earning money for their families or even themselves, which makes the young boys jealous because they cannot earn money yet. María in particular talked frequently about working on behalf of the young women in her hometown. Paula shared that in Huehuetenango, parents would offer their daughters in marriage while they were still in their first years of school (*primaria*). Many families would give their very young daughters in marriage to men who have gone to work in the US, because with families of eight or nine, they could not afford to feed them. According to María, she sometimes advocated for these girls in her town, saying, "She's only a baby. She's a child. She shouldn't have to marry a boy. She can weave and earn her own money."<sup>99</sup> She would reference a photograph of a young girl from her village in her speeches to tourists, saying that the poor thing had been forced to marry at 14 because her parents no longer wanted to pay for her. At 15 in the photograph, she already had a six-month old baby.

Marriage is a bleak prospect for many of the women in the cooperative. Roxana, María, Andrea, and the other women in the cooperative would give me marital advice predicated on the notion that husbands may become violent if angered. When my ex-husband was visiting they told me repeatedly that I had to go make lunch for him, or meet him for dinner, or he would get angry and punish me. Roxana pointed to her husband: "Sometimes men are crazy, like this one."<sup>100</sup> At times, they would talk about women they knew from their hometowns who were suffering domestic abuse, like the girl from San Martín whose husband threw a stone at her and

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<sup>97</sup> Es una vergüenza pero piensan así.

<sup>98</sup> Las mujeres necesitan trabajo, necesitan aprender a tejer.

<sup>99</sup> Ella todavía es una nena. Es una chica. No tiene que casarse con un chico. Puede tejer y ganar su propio dinero

<sup>100</sup> A veces los hombres son locos, como este.

split her head open because she did not make breakfast for him. He took her to the hospital claiming that a stone had fallen off of the roof onto her head. When the girl woke up, the first person she asked for was her husband, saying, “I love you! I love you!” María thought she was confused from the blow to the head, while Roxana thought it was out of fear. When Paula saw a woman with an exploded blood vessel in her eye, she commented as though it were the most normal thing in the world that it looked like when a woman gets beaten by her husband. A visiting Spanish teacher expressed surprise that Roxana and María could be married and lead the weaving cooperative; she had had boyfriends but never married, because she knew that a husband would not let her live independently. Roxana maintained that that was better, because “it is a big commitment when you get married.”<sup>101</sup> Fabiola, a cooperative member from San Martín, has valued her independence over creating a family and has remained single into her late 20s, earning a living through her weaving and industrial sewing for the cooperative.

These moments from the lives of cooperative members are instances of the “socio-cultural structures of power and local meaning of gender that legitimate, justify, and even motivate violence against women” that have impelled the creation of a women’s movement in Guatemala (Nitsan 2014). They also point to the rise in women’s activism in addressing these issues through gender-based organizations like TelaMaya. Susan Berger argues that the initially fragmentary women’s movement in Guatemala, which began in urban centers with a “tenuous” connection to rural areas, has begun to coalesce around gender identity and the rights pertaining to it: “Guatemaltecas are building a strategic identity founded on rights rather than on needs or interests” (Berger 2006:15). Women, including famous rights activist Rigoberta Menchú, participated in the struggle for social justice—without an explicit focus on women’s issues—

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<sup>101</sup> es mucho compromiso cuando uno se casa.

during the revolution as part of leftist organizations. The peace process that culminated in the Peace Accords in 1996, mediated by international bodies and shaped by international policies and agreements, recognized women as full participants with their own needs. According to Berger (2006),

The rising influence of international feminism on development and regional discourses within this atmosphere of global restructuring encouraged some Guatemalan women to demand inclusion in the democratization and economic restructuring processes. They insisted on their participation in the peace accords, called for legislative and educational reforms to enhance gender equality, held forums on domestic violence and the rights of women workers, fought for the engendering of state policymaking, and lobbied for the establishment of women's studies programs in the universities.

Thus, the peace process also produced women as political subjects. They have shifted from revolutionary tactics to reform tactics, attempting to use their new status as political subjects to influence government policy rather than overthrowing it (Nelson 1999:46). Like many women's organizations around the world, Guatemalan women "strategically chose transnational, neoliberal human rights discourse to articulate and represent their demands over the socialist discourse they had engaged with in earlier struggles" (Nitsan 2014:21). Because the 1985 Constitution gives precedence to international conventions ratified by the Guatemalan government over national legislation (Article 46), the women's movement has been able to use the language of international human rights conventions such as 1979's CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women) and Belém do Pará (the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women), adopted by the General Assembly in 1994, to make claims against the government. Drawing from international funding also means that their projects have to fit the paradigms and terminology of international funders.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Mayan movement organizations might dispute the association of their struggle for their rights with Westernized discourses of human rights. Ana Lucía Hernández Cordero wrote that indigenous Guatemalan women "están

Sally Engle Merry (2006) argues that legal reforms have the power to shape gendered subjectivities, producing what she refers to as “rights-defined selves.” Judith Butler (1990:2) claims that gender is performative and that the judicial system is one of the contexts regulating the performance of gender: “Juridical power inevitably 'produces' what it claims merely to represent.” Merry uses this argument to question how women come to understand themselves as rights-bearing subjects, defining what happened to them as a violation of their human rights that deserves recognition by local, national, or international agents. She argues that by seeking legal or other forms of redress, women are performing new selves and reshaping their relationship with the law: “Gendered subjectivity is redefined by doing legal activities: through acting as a legally entitled subject in the context of these injuries” (Merry 2006:186). The women of TelaMaya have come to define themselves as rights bearers, and by extension full members not only of the nation of Guatemala, which they continue to view as a failed state, but also in more vaguely-defined international communities.

María invokes rights-based legal institutions to describe how women gained leverage in their social relationships: “Before, women had to give the money to their husbands, because if they didn’t give it to them, they wouldn’t give them permission to go to the city. But a law of legalization was passed, which gave rights to women. People came to the towns to say that the money belongs to the women who earn it and they can save it.”<sup>103</sup> Roxana also noted that the government had granted equal rights to women under the law within the last decade: “Recently

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trabajando por una serie de derechos propios como mujeres, pero entendidos éstos dentro de la lógica de la cultura maya. Dentro del Movimiento Maya se ha privilegiado la exaltación de dos elementos centrales: 1) la mujer como guardiana de la naturaleza y tradición; y 2) la complementariedad y dualidad entre los géneros” [are working for a set of their own rights as women, but understood within the logic of Mayan culture. Within the Mayan Movement two central elements have been privileged: 1) woman as guardian of nature and tradition; and 2) the complementarity and duality between genders] (Hernández Cordero 2008).

<sup>103</sup> Antes, las mujeres tenían que dar el dinero a sus esposos, porque si no les daban, no les darían permiso para ir a la ciudad. Pero se realizó una ley de legalización. Esta ley dio los derechos a las mujeres. Vinieron personas a las pueblos a decir que el dinero pertenece a las mujeres que lo ganan y pueden guardarlo.

the government is helping women more; now there's rights for women, now there's a law where women have the same rights as men. The legislators, what do you call it, all the people in the government made a law where woman has the same right as man. Children have rights.”<sup>104</sup> This kind of rights language is especially striking given that an investigation by MINUGUA (the United Nations Verification Commission) found that “fifty-four percent of all indigenous respondents... could not define ‘human rights,’ except to say that they thought it might be an office on the other side of town” (Philpot-Munson 2009:51).

Asserting their “right to have rights” (Arendt 1951) is an important discursive move for Guatemalan women as they claim a place within public life. The process of coming to think of themselves as the bearers of rights is part of a broader step towards exercising their citizenship. Margaret Somers (2008) argues that citizenship is not simply a legal status but forms in the “public sphere” from the interplay between states, markets, and civil society. She argues that “internally stateless” people may technically belong to the state (*de jure* citizenship) but through practices of social exclusion and economic inequality are denied access to the right to have rights (*de facto* citizenship). This condition of internal statelessness aptly describes the status of the women who belong to TelaMaya, who have been systematically disenfranchised through intersectional forms of repression. Thus, by asserting their right to enter the public sphere and act as full members of the nation, they are claiming their right to have rights, perhaps the most fundamental human right.

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<sup>104</sup> Últimamente el gobierno está— está ayudando más a las mujeres, ya hay un derecho de la mujer, ya hay ley donde la mujer tiene los mismos derechos que el hombre. Los diputados, como se llama, toda la gente del gobierno hicieron una ley donde la mujer tiene derecho igual como el hombre. El niño tiene derecho.

The notion that citizenship is enacted in the “public sphere”<sup>105</sup> gains additional resonance when considering that, as scholars such as Seyla Benhabib (1996), Ruth Lister (1997), and Raia Prokhovnik (1998) have argued, citizenship is gendered and people have differential access to membership status. In 1990, Charlotte Bunch made the bold claim that women are human and that women’s rights should be considered human rights, arguing that the distinction between the public and private spheres built into the notion of human rights has deprived women of their human rights. Bunch noted that the framers of human rights, as men of privilege, were concerned about protecting their rights in the public sphere, because they considered themselves sovereign in their own homes (Bunch 1995:13). That means that they have focused on establishing mechanisms for protecting rights exercised in public, such as civil and political rights, while neglecting the violations that women experience in the private sphere that may not be directly

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<sup>105</sup> Michelle Rosaldo created the seminal theory of the “domestic-public dichotomy” to provide an overarching framework for understanding women’s subordination: “insofar as woman is universally defined in terms of a largely maternal and domestic role, we can account for her universal subordination” (Lamphere and Rosaldo 1974:7). Similarly, Louise Lamphere stated, “The confinement of women to the domestic sphere and men’s ability to create and dominate the political sphere thus accounted for men’s ability to hold the greater share of power and authority in all known cultures and societies” (1993:8). Louise Lamphere interpreted Rosaldo’s argument as a primarily structural one, in which the construct of domestic and public spheres was a cultural framework used to rationalize subordination rather than an underlying cause of women’s oppression. The public-private dichotomy is a spatial metaphor and description of functional differences. It can be circular, defining women’s activities as belonging to the private sphere and suggesting that women are confined to the domestic sphere because they are subordinated, and are subordinated because they are confined to the domestic sphere. It has also been criticized for over-generalizing from the experiences of certain groups of women without sensitivity to cultural historical specificities. Some scholars have criticized the notion of a gendered dichotomy between public and private as a patriarchal fiction, an oppressive discourse used by misogynists and perpetuated by academics (Stephen 1993). However, Christopher Chiappari (2001) defends the notion of the public and private spheres as a useful analytical concept and a real cultural phenomenon in the context of Guatemalan households. He claims that scholars have rejected the public-private dichotomy based on the assumption that the two spheres are rigidly distinct and do not interact, and that the two spheres are separate but equal. Chiappari (2001) argues that rather than seeing men as patriarchs dominating the household, they should be seen as alienated from the household and uninvolved in its decisions. Ehlers (1990) writes that the isolation of women in the domestic sphere is more of a culturally powerful framework for a traditionally agricultural people than a reality, since many women have been forced to leave the home for economic reasons. Both men and women associate female dependence and seclusion in the home with high status and a sign of upward class mobility. Men’s economic insecurity and disadvantaged class position may aggravate the tensions within households and increase their need to exert dominance over women (Chiappari 2001; Ehlers 1990).

attributable to state action. Bunch (1995) argues that human rights abuses in the home are masked by the exclusion of the private sphere from public scrutiny. Scholars such as Susan Okin (1998) and Raia Prokhovnik (1998) have proposed a broader definition of citizenship that encompasses more of the practices that would ostensibly take place within the private sphere and takes into account that people's gendered subjectivities are carried between the spaces traditionally defined as public and private.

Guatemalan women are limited in their ability to enter the public sphere through formal legal mechanisms—for example, until 1998, women were only allowed to work outside the home with approval from their husbands (Berger 2006:51)—as well as *de facto* constraints on women's mobility such as confinement and fear of violence (Nitsan 2014). Tal Nitsan (2014) claimed that public spaces in post-conflict Guatemala have been marked by violence that disciplines women by violating their bodily integrity: “Women are often blamed for the violence enacted against them in public spaces, emphasising popular views that they stepped ‘out of their place.’ As fear (of violence) is a powerful tool, such practices limit women's participation in the public sphere.” For this reason, femicide—the killing of females for being female—has become an important touchstone for Latin American women's movements in the past decade as they have tried to shift the political theorization of violence against women as a “private” matter to one of public importance.

The members of TelaMaya use the Spanish verb *salir*, “to go out,” to express what it means to them to exercise their citizenship: participating in public meetings with other women and men, traveling outside of their home villages, earning and controlling their own money, and voting in elections. It strikes me that the sum of these activities might be something that we could term “empowerment.” According to the manifesto of a group of Guatemalan women's

activists, “Since the fifties, the Indian women of Guatemala have begun to awaken little by little, and to participate in activities contributing to their development. ... Women began to venture outside of their homes, to participate in courses, [...] to organize and to demand participation in community activities, to fight for dignified treatment from men, to become interested in public activities, to aspire to better lives” (Rappaport 1988:31). Andrea described how women’s lives have changed since her mother’s generation:

My father didn’t let my mother go out, my mother had to wash, had to make the food, that’s what she was there for, but to go out, she wasn’t there to go out. But now in my life, I go out, I participate in meetings, in training, and if my husband isn’t there and there’s a community meeting I go, I go. And I speak. I give my opinion in the meetings. I’m seeing the change, truly. And the men no longer say, ‘*It’s not right to let a woman speak,*’ the men listen to what a woman says. It’s that before it wasn’t like that. If a woman spoke in the community meetings the men started to laugh. They mocked the woman. But now ... if anyone says anything about a woman, the women defend each other.

I asked why it had changed. Andrea replied, “Maybe partly because of the laws, and partly because women didn’t study before when they were young but now there are women who are studying, so many people are becoming literate. So little by little they’re losing their fear and shame. Now they have something to say.” Andrea argues that legal empowerment, increased educational access, and solidarity have combined to begin changing the status of indigenous Guatemalan women. Paula agreed that through legal changes following the armed conflict, women have begun understanding themselves as people with rights. They are exercising and claiming their rights by participating in public meetings: “Almost all women are understanding their rights, because they participate in meetings. [...] Now they can’t discriminate against me because I know my rights.”<sup>106</sup> Like Andrea, she stated that women were accustomed to staying in the house, and initially afraid of speaking in public, but two simultaneous processes began taking

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<sup>106</sup> Casi todas las mujeres están entendiendo su derecho, porque participan en las reuniones. Participan en las reuniones. Y a uno no se deja. Ahora no me pueden discriminar porque yo sé mi derecho.



place: spaces for their participation opened up in public meetings in schools, churches, and local government, and they began understanding themselves as people with a voice.

Such an understanding of women as rights-bearers has come about through the sustained efforts of governmental and non-governmental organizations that give women leadership training. Andrea affirmed, “Many organizations come to the communities with indigenous woman and say that they shouldn’t think that for being indigenous women that they don’t have rights. Indigenous women have rights. We have the same rights as those who live in Guatemala City. We have the same rights.” In training indigenous women to be community leaders, these organizations hold educational sessions at every meeting with a different topic, such as women’s legal rights or health. Women are also getting these messages of empowerment from popular culture, such as religious radio programs. Roxana urged a cooperative member with an alcoholic husband and mortgage to keep trying, saying, “Yes women can. I heard a man on the radio who said that yes, everything comes out well. If we work, if we exert ourselves, we are going to move forward. But if we wait for someone to come bring the things, we will not have anything. We have to keep fighting. What else can we do?”<sup>107</sup> Roxana found these messages motivating because they placed women’s empowerment in a religious context. I would suggest that cooperatives are another type of local organization in which women are learning to organize, participate, and think of themselves as people with rights. By working with other women, women can find their voices and learn to assert themselves in “skills traditionally reserved for men,” such as running meetings (Nitsan 2014:244). They can also identify common issues, learning to view their problems as shared and structural rather than individual and personal.

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<sup>107</sup> Las mujeres si pueden. Escuché un señor en la radio que dijo que si todo sale bien. Si trabajamos, nos esforzamos, vamos a seguir adelante. Pero si esperamos que alguien vaya a dejar las cosas, no vamos a tener nada. Tenemos que seguir luchando. ¿Qué más podemos hacer?

The women who have come to assume leadership roles as weaving group representatives, members of the board of directors, and officers in the cooperative were simultaneously exemplary and exceptional among indigenous Guatemalan women. The issues they faced within their rural home towns in the Western Highlands region—intersectional discrimination, poverty, illness, violence, and constraining gender roles, for example—were representative of the condition shared by many Guatemalan indigenous women, but their contact with Westerners and urban life in Xela also made their situations exceptional (personal communication from Meghan Farley Webb, March 3, 2015). As their life histories show (see Appendix One), they came to occupy these leadership positions in the first place through their exceptional status within their communities, as particularly educated, bilingual women who have had sustained contact with outsiders and NGOs at various moments throughout their lives. Their work within the cooperative gave them a space to try out some of their emerging ideas about gender roles. Their inclination to discuss women’s empowerment was still uncommon within their rural communities, although this might be changing as they have attempted to spread their rights-based feminism to their fellow cooperative members.

## **Conclusion**

Catherine Russell (2014), US State Department ambassador-at-large for women’s issues, recounted the following story: “I recently traveled to Guatemala, which ranks among the world’s highest for the murder of women, and I met a woman who told me very frankly that *being a woman in Guatemala is a courageous act*” [emphasis added]. I want to close this chapter with a story illustrating how “empowerment” operates as a verb within local organizations like TelaMaya. When a woman who had recently been elected to the board of directors of TelaMaya, Juana, failed to show up to a meeting, the other women called her to ask her why she had not

come. Juana's husband answered the phone and explained that he had not been aware of the meeting and that his wife would be afraid to travel to the city on her own. María asked to speak directly to Juana. She began lecturing her on her responsibilities as a new board member and telling her that she should not have agreed to the position if she was not prepared to travel. Then she and the other members gave Juana a motivational speech about how she needed to understand herself as a person with rights: "Now women have our rights. [...] Maybe you are not accustomed to going out in public but I encourage you. I encourage you."<sup>108</sup> She passed the phone to the cooperative's treasurer, Joselyn, who said, "You have to learn to go out. You have to leave the house. [...] Me, when TelaMaya started I didn't go out: *I'm afraid, I'm afraid of my husband, I can't go out. I fear my husband, let's see what he says.*"<sup>109</sup> Joselyn related that a representative from TelaMaya had offered to speak with her husband, to explain to him the importance of her work and its respectability. At that point he had backed down and agreed to let her attend the meetings. Now, she does not ask her husband for permission to attend the meetings; she informs him when there will be a meeting and tells him when she will be home. Andrea took the phone and told Juana that she needed to assert herself to earn her husband's respect:

You participate, even if it's only in your community, participate in the meetings with the women, because every woman has an idea, so you're going to get exposed to other people's ideas, and like the *compañeras* say, it's not because we're lecturing you, but you also need to think about how in all of life Don Josué is the only one who has the right to go out, the right to talk, but no, you too have your rights as a woman... And you can do things. If you say you can do it, you can do it. If he says, '*Ay no, Doña Juana doesn't know how to do anything,*' but you show that you can do things. So one day he's going to say, '*This woman does know how to do something.*'<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Ahorita las mujeres tenemos nuestro derecho. [...] Tal vez usted no está acostumbrada a salir así pero yo la animo. Yo la animo.

<sup>109</sup> Hay que aprender a salir. Hay que dejar la casa. Si porque yo así soy. Yo cuando empezó Trama aquí yo no me salí. Tengo miedo tengo miedo de mi marido, no puedo salir yo. Me da miedo mi marido, a ver que dice él.

<sup>110</sup> Entonces, si como están diciendo las compañeras, usted no tiene que dejarse. Usted participe, aunque sea en su comunidad, participe en las reuniones con las mujeres, porque cada mujer tiene una idea, entonces usted va a

To encourage Juana to take an active role in the cooperative, the other women told their own stories of increasing public activity and exhorted her not to let her gender limit her involvement. María shared wisdom from her own mother: “*“Get up, because the more you’re like that, that you’re afraid of your husband, the more the men set themselves to not letting you go out.”* [...] You shouldn’t give him this place.” They told Juana not to tell her husband what they had been saying, and to get her own cell phone so that she could communicate with them directly, rather than working through Don Josué. Through day-to-day interactions like these, I would argue that women’s involvement in TelaMaya has been empowering in itself because it is an exercise in leadership and public participation. By opening with a discussion of how the interventions of foreign tourists and foreign ideologies have influenced Guatemalan women and closing with a scene in which Guatemalan women urge each other to participate in public life, I want to emphasize that Guatemalan women are taking in these foreign influences and making them their own. Ultimately, it is up to them to empower themselves, and they are doing so every day in ways little and great, creating “Mayan feminisms” (Hernández Cordero 2008).

Despite the transnational feminist critique that the concept of “global feminist sisterhood” stems from older notions of humanitarian aid from First World women to Third World women (Naples and Desai 2002), both the cooperative’s leadership and female volunteers often expressed the sense that TelaMaya was and should be the domain of women. Over time, they have increasingly emphasized the gendered aspects of TelaMaya’s organizational focus, at least

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sacar una idea de otra persona, y así como dicen las compañeras, no es porque la estamos aconsejando, pero usted también tiene que ponerse a pensar, en lo que por toda la vida Don Josué solo él tiene derecho de salir, tiene derecho de hablar, tiene- no, usted también tiene sus derechos como mujer, tiene sus derechos también. Y usted puede hacer las cosas. Si usted dice puedo hacer, puede usted hacer. Si él dice ‘*Ay no, es que Doña Juana no sabe hacer nada,*’ pero usted demuestra de que usted puede hacer las cosas. Entonces usted, algún día va a decir, ‘*Sí esta mujer sí sabe hacer algo.*’

partly in response to the positive feedback from international clients and volunteers. The leaders of the cooperative were fulfilling this gendered mission by encouraging cooperative members to take on leadership roles and think of themselves as rights-bearers and thus, people of value.

Nitsan (2014) argues that, “as women assume a rights-worthy subjectivity, they are better positioned to generate the implementation of legislation, policies, and institutions in favor of women’s rights,” entering and thereby changing the public sphere. Thinking of themselves as people with rights has been an extremely powerful discourse for the members of TelaMaya. As women’s citizenship in Guatemala has increasingly become legally formalized, organizations such as TelaMaya have become part of a network of non-governmental organizations and associations that are spreading rights awareness and educating and training women to become leaders in public spheres (Cumes 2007:170-171).

### **Chapter Three: Prioritizing Voluntourists: Organizations' Experiences**

Anna, a young American volunteer coordinator at a health clinic in Xela, said that she was struggling with her volunteers: “We have a word for someone who comes in and says they’re going to volunteer and then you never hear from them again. That’s what we call a ‘voluntease.’ We were also trying to think of something to call volunteers who don’t show up when they’re supposed to work. We were between ‘flaketeer’ or ‘voluntard.’” The clinic charged volunteers \$250 each, making the volunteer program an important source of funding for the organization. Because this was the only local clinic that accepted volunteers, they had a monopoly on medical volunteering in Quetzaltenango. However, the problem with this organizational structure was that international volunteers became the program’s clients, and Anna needed to spend too much time worrying about how to make the volunteers happy. The volunteer program at TelaMaya suffered from some of the same issues with volunteers—it had its share of volunteases and flaketeers—but its different structure also made it susceptible to different problems. This chapter analyzes the issues with prioritizing volunteers’ needs and development over organizational goals, examining what those needs are and how organizations like TelaMaya work to meet them. Nicole Berry (2014) argues that short-term mission volunteerism in Guatemala emphasizing a “charity mentality” has put the focus on volunteers as agents, allowing them to give what they want, “rather than commit to meeting particular needs” (Berry 2014:6). The unquestioned assumption that organizations were benefiting from volunteer labor underlay most volunteer programs in NGOs: “The NGO/mission system that has been set up inherently values foreign involvement and ‘doing something’ over no foreign involvement” (Berry 2014:7).

The first section presents the characteristics of the volunteer tourists who come to TelaMaya, followed by a section analyzing their stated motivations for volunteering. This is followed by an examination of volunteers' preconceptions of Guatemala and paths to volunteering at TelaMaya. One of these paths to volunteering was an academic service learning project that fostered learning but applied an extremely broad definition of "service." The next three sections analyze the perceptions of voluntourists and voluntourism from the perspectives of three groups of people with a stake in the system: the officers and members of the cooperative, the volunteer tourists themselves in moments of introspection and self-analysis, and members of the community at large, including both foreign and local people who work in the tourism industry in some capacity as well as some people outside that sphere. The last section broadens the conversation on volunteer tourism beyond the case of TelaMaya with interviews from volunteer coordinators at other organizations.

### ***“¡Hola y Adios!”: The Volunteer Program at TelaMaya***

The volunteer program at TelaMaya grew organically over the years. In the emerging Spanish school industry in Quetzaltenango, schools sought to differentiate themselves by providing quality volunteer opportunities to their students. According to María, the first volunteers were a couple who came to work in TelaMaya in 1996 from a small local Spanish school. TelaMaya worked to create partnerships with many of the major Spanish schools in Quetzaltenango, inviting them to send volunteers and weaving students, and to bring groups of Spanish students for a group activity in which the students learn about the history of the cooperative and the steps in making a backstrap weaving (described in **Chapter Six**). The directors of most of the schools were Ladinos, but the TelaMaya leaders maintained respectful business relationships with them. They only had a problem when they were seen as associated

with one Spanish school and the others stopped coming for a time. In 2003, the volunteer program became formalized and self-sustaining with the creation of an unpaid position for the volunteer coordinator, who would be responsible for recruiting and managing other volunteers. In 2004, they received their first year-long volunteer, a woman from the US whose boyfriend was working with another local organization. The NGO coordination organization EntreMundos began sending them volunteers in addition to the Spanish schools around this time.

The norms and standards of the program began to emerge through conversations between the volunteer coordinators and the officers of the cooperative, eventually becoming codified in the volunteer manual. Each volunteer coordinator typically selected and trained his or her successor, transmitting not only information about the daily operations of the cooperative but also attitudes and standards for practice. The current officers remembered only a few of the hundreds of volunteers who had passed through the cooperative. Volunteers often seemed to blend together, as when two brunette women from the US named Lauren and Laura came to volunteer in quick succession. After weeks of being confused with Lauren, Laura wryly quipped, “We all become one, infinite volunteer.” However, at times the officers got sentimental about past volunteers. María wanted to keep part of an old display because it reminded her of a volunteer who was very nice to them: “Maybe TelaMaya is not mine, but I am here, and I preserve the memories of the people who help us.”<sup>111</sup> María worked with me to edit a flyer seeking volunteers for TelaMaya and asked to alter the imperative form that I had used in English (“Volunteer with a women’s weaving cooperative!”): “We can’t demand that they help us.”<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Tal vez TelaMaya no es mío, pero estoy aquí, y conservo los recuerdos de la gente que nos ayuda.

<sup>112</sup> No podemos exigir que nos ayuden.



A bilingual volunteer coordinator managed the volunteer program at TelaMaya. Though the coordinator reported directly to the cooperative leadership, he or she had some discretionary power. The volunteer coordinator oversaw the program funds<sup>113</sup> and volunteers strategized and communicated with one another in English. The volunteers often generated their own projects, seeking approval from the officers to proceed. Volunteers brought their work experiences and perspectives into the conversation, proposing new designs, outlets, contacts, or fundraising strategies for the cooperative based on what they had seen and done before in their home countries. For example, given the strong tradition of Fair Trade organizing in Europe, European volunteers often wanted to pursue international Fair Trade certification for the cooperative.

During the 20 months that I spent in the field, there were 99 volunteers who spent more than one week in TelaMaya. Since the women who ran the cooperative preferred to have as many volunteers as possible, they did not require a minimum time commitment or level of Spanish fluency from potential volunteers.<sup>114</sup> However, Roxana noted that the longer-term volunteers, those who spent 3-4 months in TelaMaya, have had a greater influence. She dismissed their more ephemeral help: “The volunteer who’s here for a week doesn’t matter.”<sup>115</sup> María agreed, stating that that was the reason why volunteers were not included in the meetings of the general assembly: “because sometimes they come for a week, or two weeks, and they’re not going to know what we need.”<sup>116</sup> The organization’s Facebook album with photographs of

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<sup>113</sup> Raised through local fundraising events and online crowdfunding.

<sup>114</sup> In their applications, 9.1% of volunteers claimed no experience with Spanish. Most volunteers (35.5%), reluctant to say that they had no experience whatsoever, claimed a “beginner” level. The next biggest category was “intermediate,” at 26.5%, a wide-ranging category encompassing people who feel confident holding a basic conversation in Spanish as well as people who lived and worked in Spanish-speaking countries for six months. Some 16.9% of applicants claimed advanced or near-native fluency. There were several applications from native Spanish speakers (7.8%), which is striking because only one native Spanish speaker actually volunteered for TelaMaya. Some volunteers did not share their Spanish fluency (3.9%).

<sup>115</sup> el voluntario que esta una semana no importa pues.

<sup>116</sup> porque a veces vienen por una semana, o dos semanas, y no van a saber que necesitamos.

volunteers was entitled “*¡Hola y Adios! Gracias Voluntarios,*” which indicates that the program consists of a revolving door of volunteers.

**Table 3.1 Demographic Characteristics of TelaMaya Voluntourists**

	American	Canadian	European	Asian	Other	<b>Total</b>
Female 18-30	34	4	22	0	5	65
Male 18-30	9	2	3	1	0	15
Female 30-50	3	0	7	1	0	11
Male 30-50	2	0	1	0	0	3
Female 50+	2	0	1	1	0	4
Male 50+	1	0	0	0	0	1
<b>Total</b>	51	6	34	3	5	99

Approximately half of the volunteers were from North America (57%) and a third from Europe (34%), with the occasional volunteer from Asia, Australia, or Latin America. During her stay, US volunteer Ashley was impressed by the diversity of the volunteer crew, commenting, “TelaMaya attracts volunteers from all over the world; currently our volunteers represent the countries of France, Germany, Belgium, England, Japan, Sweden, Denmark, Canada and the United States. Although we have different backgrounds (and sometimes language barriers) the common goal of advancing TelaMaya bonds us together and makes for a dynamic group.” The typical TelaMaya volunteer was young: the majority of volunteers were women under the age of 30 (65%), and the second-largest category comprised men under the age of 30 (15%). They were

also overwhelmingly (80%) female, and male volunteers tended to volunteer with their female significant others. Unlike other volunteers I encountered during my fieldwork, TelaMaya volunteers were not likely to profess any religion or to mention religious motivations for volunteering in response to open-ended interview questions about their reasons for volunteering.

Volunteers were often in a transitional period in their lives; many had recently graduated from college and decided to volunteer before graduate school or beginning their careers. Others, including several volunteer coordinators, wanted to use their volunteering to gain experience that would help them switch careers. One volunteer coordinator wanted to transition from editing to sustainable development, while another wanted to move from logistics management in the US to overseas merchandising. Some wanted to apply the theoretical knowledge they had acquired from their college classes and gain a practical understanding of Latin American Studies, international development, or fashion marketing. The next section addresses the motivations they expressed in their applications and exit interviews in more detail.

### **Growing, Gaining Experience, and Giving Back: Volunteer Motivations**

A common thread among TelaMaya's volunteers was their rejection of mainstream tourism. Tourists are famous for despising other tourists and not wanting to self-identify as tourists—as Crick (1989:307) observes, “many tourists claim that they are not tourists themselves and that they dislike and avoid other tourists”—but voluntourists may be the most vocal and detailed in their differentiation between what they are doing and classic tourism. In this way, they constitute “anti-tourists” whose relationship to tourism is characterized by role distance: they seek to separate what they are doing (touring) from the accompanying identity (tourist), which has negative connotations for them based on their positionality in their home environments (Jacobsen 2000). Jens Kristian Steen Jacobsen (2000) notes that tourists can

always find other tourists who are “more touristy” than they are, a differentiation that he refers to as a kind of stratified consumption, in which tourists strive for the higher cultural capital of more rarefied, “less touristy” tourism. I asked a young newlywed couple why they spent their honeymoon volunteering at TelaMaya, and the wife answered, “It lets you see another side of a place, meet locals and get involved. Why would we want to go on vacation and just go to all the sights to see the other Americans on vacation?” Austrian volunteer Valentina echoed, “I think you can see a lot more of a country if you really try to get into not just visiting sites, travelling around with other Europeans or Americans.” Elena, a volunteer from NY City, was also looking for “travel with a purpose”: “I’ve always just partied and drank when I traveled, but this time I wanted to come with a definite purpose in mind.” She came to Guatemala on a whim as part of a larger search for meaning in her life: despite her lucrative job, she felt stifled and uncreative in her daily life. Similarly, Jolene, a semi-retired textile industry professional, commented, “When I realized that I was no longer interested in traditional tourism, I began checking out volunteering opportunities.” Voluntourism makes it easier for tourists to distance themselves from mainstream tourists by giving them another identity, that of the volunteer.

Voluntourists’ histories reveal that volunteerism is linked to this search for purpose in travel. Some of the volunteers have traveled extensively and participated in other cross-cultural volunteer projects. For example, Alyssa, a young volunteer from the US, stated, “I’ve worked in NGOs before and I wanted to do something that was resonant with my values. I’ve been volunteering in Nicaragua for six months on a permaculture farm and then this is just my last chance to quickly see other parts of Central America. I like to go somewhere and stay there for a while and get to know people, not just pass through.” However, a surprising majority stated that this was their first volunteer experience and that they do not volunteer regularly in their home

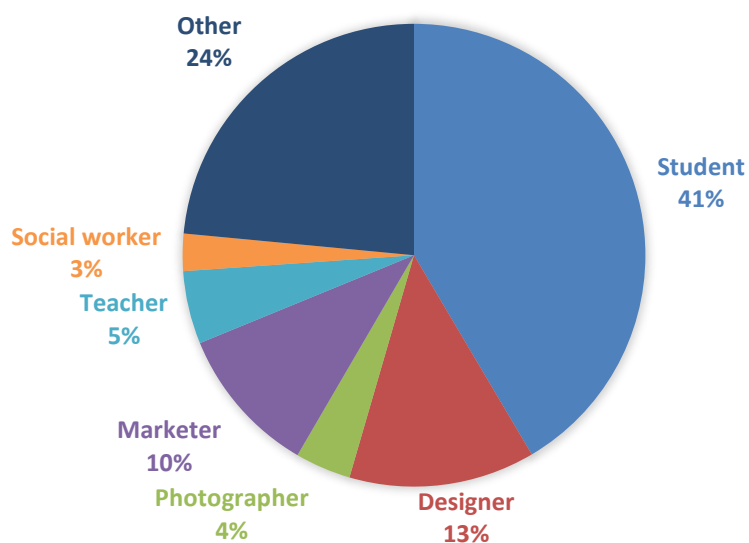
countries, a finding that fits with previous research (McGehee et al. 2009). The fact that they only decided to start volunteering at an international destination suggests that they viewed volunteering as a form of touristic activity, or that their geographic imaginaries positioned them as the helpers and Guatemalans as the helped (Simpson 2004; McGehee et al. 2009; Baillie Smith and Laurie 2011). An instance of this mentality was the Canadian high school student who wrote to TelaMaya that he was looking for “volunteering work in Poor Countries for this Easter break.” In his application, he actually wrote that he was interested in volunteering in an African country, which suggests that he was re-using language from other volunteer applications or that he imagined Guatemala to be in Africa: “My motivation to apply for volunteering in African [sic] is every time, I see African children who are living in terrible condition through media like TV, I am eager to help them seriously. I guess this vacation would be perfect timing to challenge myself to actually visit to bad conditional place, like Africa.” This young student clearly viewed “Poor Countries” as areas of need to be served by people in positions of privilege.

Many voluntourists did seem to be attracted to TelaMaya because of the ethnic and gender identity of its members, and the possibilities for greater intimacy with women of a different cultural and economic background. TelaMaya asked volunteers to submit an application in which the volunteers described their reasons for wanting to volunteer with TelaMaya, the personal benefits they expected to get from volunteering, the skills and services they could offer the organization, and their past experiences with volunteering and cross-cultural interactions. I built a database of anonymized data from 77 volunteer applications that TelaMaya received. Some of these applicants never actually arrived to do a volunteer project, and TelaMaya also accepted walk-in volunteers, so the numbers do not exactly coincide with the reality of the volunteer program. However, the applications speak to volunteer intentions and motivations. I

also conducted semi-structured exit interviews with volunteers who spent at least a month in TelaMaya.

Of the 77 total applications, 64 were from women, and 13 from men. The most common occupation that the applicants listed, “student” (32 applicants or 41.5%), indicates that the majority of TelaMaya’s volunteers were young people starting their careers. The creative professions were also well represented: “designer” (10 applicants or 13%), “photographer” (3 applicants or 3.9%) and an “artist.” Eight people mentioned “marketing” in their job title (10.4%), while there were 4 teachers (5.1%) and 2 social workers (2.6%). A professional translator and tourism industry professional also viewed their occupations as relevant to their work in TelaMaya. Others had occupations fairly different from the kind of work they proposed to do in TelaMaya, including a building supervisor and an estate agent.

### VOLUNTEER OCCUPATIONS



Voluntourists typically expressed a desire to make a meaningful connection with people from a different culture, pursue self-discovery and personal development, apply their knowledge

in a practical way, and gain professional experience in international development. These motivations were often blended and intertwined. The following statements from volunteers are fairly representative: a female student studying sociology/pre-med and women's studies hoped to gain "an enriched knowledge of the country and people of Guatemala as well as insight into how a cooperative functions. I am going into international health in the future and would love to gain experience working with a group that focuses on empowerment and the value of women within a community." Similarly, a female student from the US stated, "I am interested in working in international development, and hope to gain relevant experience working with an NGO. Women's empowerment is important to me, and I would like to work for a cause I support. Furthermore, I am interested in learning more about Guatemala from a non-touristy perspective and improving my Spanish." Voluntourists often mentioned various motivations of varying importance in their applications and exit interviews. However, in the following paragraphs I tease out some of the main themes they discussed.

Twenty-six volunteers mentioned "cultural immersion" as their primary goal. For example, a volunteer from NY City, Jacqueline, stated that she had worked in social communications and marketing for the last eight years, but that she could not directly see the people that she was helping. She wanted to find the sense of connection she was missing by volunteering face-to-face with TelaMaya members.

"Mostly, I hope to gain cultural immersion. I've never been out of my little bubble of America; I want to experience other cultures and traditions first hand. I hope to learn more about backstrap loom weaving traditions and Mayan history as well." (Male student at Florida Gulf Coast University, July 2010)

"In volunteering with TelaMaya, I hope to be able to contribute what I can to the cooperative while learning about the weaving traditions of Guatemala and the women who keep them alive. I am looking to volunteer because I hope to become immersed in the culture in a way that merely travelling through the area would not provide. I want to learn the stories of the women who make up TelaMaya from their own mouths, and learn

about their craft from their own hands. I want to become truly steeped in the tradition of these textiles so that when I return home, I may bring a deep appreciation of these women's work and culture with me. I hope that the richness of the designs and the skill of the craftsmanship will inform my own artwork, and that the stories of their lives broaden my own, and my understanding of the world at large." (Female visual arts student from Brown University, April 2012)

"All my life I have wanted to experience how people live in other areas of the world; not just visit and be a tourist, but live and work along with the everyday citizens of different places and understand their problems, their goals, what makes them happy. Working for an empowering organization such as yours has been my dream for many years. Now that I have the freedom and means to volunteer and experience people and their stories, I want to do everything I can to help. If I am chosen as a volunteer, I will bring anything I can from the US to help the organization and the people. I hope to gain an understanding of what women in third world countries must go through to make a living and to keep their families close. I want to explore another culture and make connections with people who have had very different lives than me." (A female student from the US, January 2013)

Volunteers delighted in discovering more about Mayan culture. They made a game of learning and studying their "*nahuales*," an element of the Mayan cosmovision whose calendrical aspect maps easily onto tourists' understandings of their zodiac symbols and horoscopes. They read aloud the characteristics for people born under their *nahual* signs and some even identified with their *nahuales* to the extent of buying jewelry with their *nahuales* or getting them tattooed on their bodies. US volunteer Jennifer found that the personal connection that she made with María and Roxana transformed them from objects of the touristic gaze into real people in her eyes:

When I first came here, seeing the Mayan women with the traditional dress walking down the street, like I wasn't really sure what the social situation was like, like were they really separate from the rest of society or were they just like normal people who wore different clothes? It was very weird for me because I didn't realize that I held that assumption. Then getting to know María and Roxana, they are people who I had previously seen as people who were running the store and trying to get me to buy their things like the street vendors in the *mercados* and stuff, but actually they're like, they're actual people.

Several volunteers mentioned Guatemala's post-conflict status as a draw for them to provide assistance, like this female student from the UK: "The idea of women's cooperatives is also fascinating, particularly set against the background of civil war. I believe that by giving



opportunities to women to support themselves and their families is hugely important to the development of Guatemala.” Guatemala has a reputation abroad as a place of machismo, compound forms of oppression, and violence against women, a reputation that both attracts and repels international tourists and voluntourists. Many visitors were drawn to Guatemala to learn more about its troubled past or attempt to help people rebuild their shattered society. Diane Nelson (1999:54) writes that it is uncomfortable to recognize that “all of us gringos are drawn to Guatemala through the attractions of similar imaginings—of traditional Indian culture, unpaved roads, dangerous hygiene practices (‘Don’t drink the water!’), war, poverty, and a weak currency that makes it really cheap.” A number of TelaMaya volunteers, particularly female university students, expressed a sense of obligation to Guatemalan women rooted in this perception of violence. In describing their motivations to volunteer, they focused on issues such as women’s economic independence and the reconstruction of their lives after the violent events of the genocidal civil war.

At the same time, potential visitors shied away from the rising tide of violence. When a visiting professor of social work asked María and Roxana how the civil war had affected their organization, Roxana replied, “The war affected us a lot, because the tourists didn’t want to come. Tourism is very low right now. Tourists are the ones who buy our products.”<sup>117</sup> María echoed, “And because there’s no tourism, we don’t have as many volunteers as before.”<sup>118</sup> She was very concerned about the effect of the violence in Guatemala on the tourism industry: “Tourism is way down, everything is way down... because of the violence?”<sup>119</sup> A professor at a midwestern US university contacted TelaMaya to propose a study abroad service-learning

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<sup>117</sup> La guerra nos afectó mucho, porque las turistas no querían venir. El turismo está muy bajo ahora. Las turistas son las que compran nuestros productos.

<sup>118</sup> Y también como no hay turismo, no tenemos tantos voluntarios como antes.

<sup>119</sup> Está muy bajo el turismo, está muy bajo todo, ¿por la violencia?

project with the cooperative. However, several months later, she wrote back with bad news: the university rejected her application for the project. She explained:

The university was always asking about the security in Xela and in Guatemala and despite my documenting for them that the project sites would be safe for the students, the university provost's security office was still worried and asked me for another document. In the end, before they canceled my project completely in December, I suggested to them that if I looked for another site to do it they could evaluate the possibilities. I proposed three different sites and they accepted Peru without any reservations.<sup>120</sup>

She was disappointed at this outcome, because she wanted to show her students the beauty of Xela and the highlands region. When the other TelaMaya volunteers at the time heard this news, they reacted defensively that Peru could easily be as dangerous for the students as Guatemala.

Approximately 10 applicants mentioned personal development and growth as a primary goal, seeking to expand their horizons, challenge themselves, and feel satisfaction and accomplishment.

"I would be honored to provide any type of help that I can to help the Guatemalan women... and I look forward to growing both mentally and spiritually through hard work and this beautiful culture." (Female teacher from the US, 2012)

"I hope to get a sense of accomplishment. I've been a volunteer in my community for many years now, and I realized I need to reach out globally. I want to help others, while learning life lessons myself. Though I am young, I am very determined to help others in ways that many people will not. I want to leave knowing that I made a difference in someone's life." (Female student from the US, June 2012)

"[I] want to get abroad for new adventures and experiences. Furthermore I hope I find out more about myself, what I can achieve with my commitment and what are my personal strong points." (Female student from Germany, December 2012)

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<sup>120</sup> La Universidad estuvo siempre preguntando acerca de la seguridad en Xela y en Guatemala y a pesar de que les documente que los sitios del proyecto estarían seguros para los estudiantes, la oficina de seguridad del provost de la universidad seguía inquieta y me pidió otro nuevo documento. Al final, antes de que me cancelaran el proyecto por completo en diciembre, les sugerí si yo buscaba otro sitio para hacerlo ellos evaluarían las posibilidades. Les propuse tres sitios diferentes y me aceptaron Perú sin ninguna reserva.

Thirteen applicants said that they wanted to learn more about fair trade, international development, and cooperative management. In many cases, they took a more academic, theoretical approach to volunteering, discussing issues such as sustainability, empowerment, and gender. They wanted to apply concepts and skills that they had learned in their university courses and gain a first-hand understanding of how development and women's organizing works on the ground.

“Whilst volunteering for the project, I would hope to gain a variety of skills in helping to understand, organise and manage the production of ethical, fair-trade textiles in a developing country. I hope to build upon my existing knowledge of global fashion networks. Additionally I hope to gain an insight into possible solutions to the divide between countries producing clothing and those that buy and use them. I also look forward to establishing relationships with local people and embracing Guatemalan culture. I am also interested in the sustainability of traditional weaving patterns, practices and culture, and the issues for preserving these today and in the future. (Female student from the UK, 2012)

“I hope to gain a better understanding of the social and economic culture of the women in Guatemala. I hope to learn about free and fair trade in the context of the US's relationship with other countries. I want to better understand how free trade solutions improve the lives of women, and men, all over the globe and how individuals and governments can improve programs or policies to encourage and promote fair trade. I also hope to build relationships with local individuals and learn from them and their situation. I believe they understand their needs the most and I hope to gain an understanding of those needs to help improve small and hopefully large institutions.” (Female graduate student in social work from the US, May 2012)

“In the fall I will attend the Josef Korbel School of International Studies with concentrations in administration and women studies in developing countries. I am inspired by the various communities of women that I have encountered throughout my life who have overcome so much when given the proper resources and support systems. I hope to work closely with these communities in my profession and would love the opportunity to share my time and efforts with such an extraordinary organization.” (Female graduate student from the US, June 2011)

“The two things I have always known I wanted to surround myself with and give my time and energy to are art and humanitarianism. Weaving and female empowerment have gone hand in hand for centuries. I feel that not only would I expand my knowledge of textile craft, I would also gain so much knowledge from some of the most intelligent, dedicated, hardworking women who are truly keeping the ancient ways alive. Being able to do what you love is a true privilege, and the fact that I would be improving the lives of others

while doing and learning what I love is better than any material gift I could ever receive.” (Female student at California College of the Arts, May 2012)

“I hope to gain an understanding of cooperative organizing, artisan crafts, and the culture of women in Guatemala. I love the arts and have been an instructor of crafts for many years, working with children of all ages. I want to work with master craftspeople to really learn the art, and assist in any way that I can. I go to an all-women’s college, and have learned the power of being with all-women, and the needs of women’s empowerment all over the world. I hope to talk with the women that are a part of the cooperative, and learn about their lives, hopefully sharing my knowledge with my community in the United States.” (Female student from the US, June 2012)

“On the one hand I am eager looking forward to work interdisciplinary in an international team in which everyone can support, inspire and enrich the others through contributing their expertise to create innovative approaches for sustainable focused products and textiles. Furthermore, I am looking forward to gain some experience in traditional Mayan weaving techniques and pattern making. I really would like to support the women at TelaMaya with earning their daily income that allows them to assure their independency and helps them to preserve and develop the traditional Mayan weaving techniques. I further think that this helps creating an awareness to issues surrounding ethical and ecological design and production methods.” (Female design student from Germany, May 2012)

Many also viewed their work as professional development, a step towards becoming productive, cosmopolitan neoliberal subjects. Many voluntourists took on a volunteer project as a transitional step from university education to employment. For example, US volunteer Charmaine writes, “I wasn’t ready to settle into the 9–5 after college, but I still wanted to learn and use my degree. So I found an amazing organization in Guatemala that fulfilled those requirements: TelaMaya... Spending a month working in your field in another country is so helpful career-wise especially if you want to do anything international.” Others were using an extended volunteer tenure or “internship” at TelaMaya to gain experience and transition into new careers.

“I hope to gain experience working with development-oriented organizations while serving the community around me. I am interested in pursuing developmental economics in graduate school, and this volunteer opportunity would provide me with valuable hands-on experience in working with people to support fair wages while getting involved in the community.” (Female student from the US, July 2012)

“I hope to gain transferable skills in the areas of weaving methods; knowledge of textile processes and further improve my skills in Spanish while volunteering my time and positive energy in a creative, supportive environment. Also, I feel that it would be valuable to learn more about international development cooperatives while helping to support the local livelihood of Guatemalan weavers.” (Female artist from Canada, May 2012)

“I hope to gain experience in coordinating and managing projects and people, becoming a more skilled leader and better communicator. At the same time, I hope I can learn about the workings of a business such as TelaMaya. I study Economics and Management, and I feel that this position would be very profitable for me, since I am considering a career either in development economics or human resources management. I also hope to considerably improve my Spanish.” (Female student from the US, July 2011)

“I am currently looking to transfer my marketing skills into international development and believe working overseas for an NGO on a project such as TelaMaya would be highly beneficial for my experience.” (Female UK publishing professional, September 2011)

One of the main professional skills that voluntourists hoped to hone at TelaMaya was Spanish.

For example, Wendy observed that without grades, she was not very motivated to study Spanish, and that she was glad she was working at TelaMaya, because this gave her an incentive to learn to be able to speak with the women.

Some volunteers described giving back as one of their primary goals, expressing a strong sense of the material inequalities between them and the members of TelaMaya.

“I am not looking for anything out of the volunteering, as I will not be doing this for school credit.” (Male student from a university in Florida, 2012)

“I hope to be able to contribute to a community less privileged than my own.” (Female student from the UK, 2011)

“To do something that really matters for other people. To learn something from, and to other people. To better realize that we cannot complain of our lives here in Europe.” (Female textile professional from Belgium, 2011)

People thinking along these lines tended to see themselves as privileged and people in Guatemala as disadvantaged, and they wanted an experience that would make them more aware of their own

privilege. While this could be viewed as part of the process of developing a more cosmopolitan subjectivity, it could also be seen as exploitative, because these voluntourists were seeking an experience in a non-industrialized country to make more grateful about the privileged position to which they were planning to return after their volunteer vacation. With the concept of “economies of affect,” Analiese Richard and Daromir Rudnyckyj (2009) note that the high emotions experienced by volunteer tourists have been “mobilized to produce [neoliberal] subjects.” In certain spaces such as international volunteer projects, people’s communicative, interpersonal expressions of emotion serve to constitute them as subjects and as citizens.

### **Volunteer Tourists’ Imaginaries of Guatemala**

When I began this research, I expected that volunteers would have been drawn to Guatemala by a vivid mental image of what they would find there. Some volunteers did have a preexisting image of Guatemala. For example, a German volunteer settled on TelaMaya partially for its convenient geographic location but also because she was intrigued by Mayan culture. She wrote in her blog:

My friend Aimee from France and I wanted to volunteer somewhere this summer – the only question was, where? After a comprehensive Internet research we decided to go to Guatemala. Why? Because the Mayan culture of Guatemala seemed quite interesting, it was not too far from the States (where I will be studying abroad soon) and on top of that we were offered the opportunity to travel to Belize and Mexico after our volunteer work. After some research about good places to volunteer, we finally came across an interesting company: TelaMaya, a weaving organization run by women in Quetzaltenango, a big Mayan city.

Sometimes their perceptions of Guatemala were projections based on what they perceived as failings in their home countries. Volunteer Frank argued that people in the US were overly regulated and unfree, unaware of the energy needs of the world, and oblivious to the impacts of the foreign policies of their country: “All of that sent me to the Third World, the real world, out of the plastic world of the US.”

At times, their perceptions of Guatemala made them less inclined to volunteer. For example, one volunteer commented that she wanted to do the WWOOF (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms) program in France. She had considered doing a program with volunteering in organic farms in Guatemala, but did not want to “work like a *campesina*.” She stated that the work would feel different, less arduous, if she were working in France.

However, most volunteers stated that they had no clear idea of what to expect in Guatemala and claimed that their only plan was to learn Spanish. For instance, volunteer Christina said, “Coming to Guatemala was a last-minute thing— my friend was planning on coming here, and I decided to come with [her].” Christina had read Rigoberta Menchú’s memoir in a postcolonial literature class: “I didn’t even know I was coming to Guatemala then. I’m so glad I actually read it and didn’t just skim it.” Some had learned about Guatemala in their college classes, or visited tourism websites about Guatemala to prepare for their trips, but most stated that they had no expectations. My interviewees might have been ashamed to admit what their ideas about Guatemala had been, for fear of sounding geographically unaware or naïve. I tried to share my own (mistaken) preconceptions of Guatemala to put them at ease, but there could still be some bias there. Their preconceptions about Guatemala might also have been inchoate and based in circulating images of vague origin. As Carol Hendrickson (1996) states, images and ideas about Mayan weaving are shaped on a global scale through media representations and commercial imagery. Most voluntourists had no “good” idea of what Guatemala might be like, but some did express surprise that the climate was not tropical, that “Western-style” services such as Internet cafés were available, or that Guatemalans seemed to live lives that were not

always markedly different than their own, suggesting that exoticization was at work in their preconceptions of the nation.<sup>121</sup>

In many cases, deciding where to volunteer was quite a simple process for voluntourists, and many stumbled across TelaMaya in the course of their travels. One young couple told me, “We had decided that we wanted to go to Latin America and take Spanish lessons and volunteer. [...] We ended up deciding that we would study in Guatemala because it was by far the cheapest place to go.” A young US volunteer, Daniel, was initially interested in “a children’s home, a daycare facility, and a women’s support organization.” He met with the director of the children’s home and got a positive response, but later learned that the organization prefers longer-term volunteers “to provide a more stable atmosphere for the kids.” He was also interested in a tree-planting program that turned out to be exclusively available to students at a specific Spanish school. He finally found a good fit with his third choice, TelaMaya: “I could start the next day, there were no fees involved, the short time span was no problem, and the hours were flexible. Moreover, there was no shortage of things to do: over the next fortnight, I posted publicity, edited a history of weaving, organized the computer’s file system, tended the cooperative’s store, and designed benefit party tickets, among other activities.” Daniel’s circuitous path to volunteering illustrates how, for many voluntourists, the actual mission of the organization and content of the volunteering are only one concern among others, including length of placement, language requirements, and fees. The lack of a fee or minimum time requirement attracted many volunteers. As volunteer Jen noted, “It’s hard to find short-term volunteer opportunities where you don’t have to pay. It’s not that we mind being asked to do it, it’s totally reasonable to ask

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<sup>121</sup> Of course, Diane Nelson (1999) writes that some of the signs of transnational circulation (Mayan scholars with doctorates presenting at the same conferences as anthropologists, up-to-the-minute American pop culture appearing in the most seemingly remote villages) can create a false sense of the “domestication” of differences and obscure the ongoing power disparities between foreigners and Guatemalans.



people to pay, but the time and money... It makes sense to ask people for money to make sure that they're committed, or even if you just make them answer a detailed email or something else that makes them work. I'm sure otherwise you have volunteers wandering in and out."

While many voluntourists stumbled into TelaMaya, many others were drawn to Guatemala specifically to volunteer at the cooperative. Approximately one-third of volunteers claimed that their decision to volunteer at TelaMaya determined their travel plans... most often, these were the volunteers with specific professional goals for their projects. In some cases they had a regional focus ("some Latin American country") and in some cases they were completely open to any geographic area and were more interested in volunteer programs with certain characteristics, such as the mission to help women or volunteer projects in desirable areas such as social media or fashion design. For instance, Danish volunteer Rikke found TelaMaya's website by searching for weaving cooperatives with volunteer programs. Her main criterion was that she wanted a volunteer project other than the archetypal projects of teaching children or conserving the environment. When she found TelaMaya, she came to Guatemala with the intention of lending her fashion expertise to the cooperative and potentially creating a line for her fledgling design company.

Rather than distinct categories, "volunteer tourist," "fair trade purchaser," and "wholesale client" can be viewed as different forms of engagement. For some, volunteering abroad was a culmination of a commitment to social justice that began with ethical purchasing; for others, it was just the beginning of an interest in fair exchange. A few volunteer tourists followed up their experiences by purchasing TelaMaya products to resell in their home countries. TelaMaya's major wholesale clients became interested in helping the organization connect to fair trade markets through their travels in Guatemala and first-hand experiences with weavers. US client

Melissa described working with TelaMaya for around a decade. She came to Guatemala as an observer, following the signing of the peace accords in 1996, which stipulated that Guatemala had to allow international UN-sponsored peace observers. Her business grew gradually, as she brought back gifts for her friends. Everyone was asking her to bring something back for them, and then she smuggled a suitcase full of scarves to the US. Today, she said, she makes enough to earn a living, going to fairs and selling out of her home and website. Volunteers, either working directly with TelaMaya or with other local organizations, were one of the biggest sources of clients for the fair trade products. For example, a woman from Texas and her two daughters, 15 and 19, came into the store to browse: “We came to do some shopping. We’ve seen several handicrafts stores in our journeys, but we were specifically looking for a Fair Trade store.” They had been volunteering at an eco-cooperative called La Finca Florida. This family who had come to Guatemala to volunteer had also sought out a fair wage cooperative to make purchases resonant with their values.

The common thread in these shifting forms of engagement with ethical consumerism was a desire to exert more personal agency and gain a feeling of power in the face of a sense of alienation produced by the typical relations of capitalism. Many volunteers were seeking ways to reshape their identities in a new place. Just as the cooperative members were coming to have a new understanding of themselves and their ability to create change in the world through their work with the cooperative, as described in **Chapter Two**, voluntourists came to Guatemala as part of their struggle to view themselves as empowered within a neoliberal world system.

### **“This Will Not Be a Vacation”: Hosting a University Service Learning Class**

In September of 2009, a professor from a university in Florida wrote to the volunteer coordinator of TelaMaya proposing a service-learning trip with a group of students as an

alternative spring break. The volunteer coordinator wrote back, commenting that a large group for a short period of time might create more work than benefit for the organization and suggesting that the students could support the cooperative and learn about local culture by paying for weaving classes. The professor agreed to the weaving classes and acknowledged that a group of volunteers could be a mixed blessing; however, she argued that the students would be carefully vetted, prepared, and supervised. From July 18<sup>th</sup>–28<sup>th</sup>, 2010, a group of seven students visited TelaMaya for the service-learning project. The students stayed with local host families, arranged through the Spanish school where they were also taking language classes. The professors leading the trip, a married couple from the department of anthropology, were often absent during the time that the students were in TelaMaya; they told us that they were having coffee, sight-seeing, and making arrangements for the students. They held meetings with the students in their hotel at the end of every day to discuss their experiences.

The least successful part of the study abroad trip was the one that the professors and students emphasized the most: the volunteer work for TelaMaya. As the volunteer coordinator at the time they arrived, I was charged with finding an activity for a large group of non-Spanish speaking students for a few hours a day. The professor was fairly specific in her description of the kind of project they were anticipating: “We are hoping that their work will be meaningful to the organization and to their academic training as well... and most importantly something that allows students to interact with the organization’s members and community it serves— our students hope to get exposed to the language and culture, so this will not be a vacation *per se*.” The walls had recently been painted with a mural, which would have been an excellent project for them, so I asked the students to provide input into a questionnaire that we were planning on administering to the group members and to brainstorm ways of reaching out to university

bookstores. However, they were dissatisfied that their volunteering was not bringing them into contact with the local weavers.

In her final report to the donors who subsidized the trip, one of the students spoke about how the group “volunteered their time and assistance” at TelaMaya. However, this is her account of the trip:

Facing the struggles of culture shock and communicating in a foreign language, we also took weaving classes at TelaMaya’s weaving school. The Mayan women were excited to pass on the ancient Mayan tradition of backstrap loom weaving. Each of us made a handmade scarf and walked away with an incredible experience. Our host families welcomed us in with classic home-cooked meals such as tortillas, eggs, beans, and fried plantains. We took a traditional cooking class and learned how to make some of these favorites we grew to love. A few of the group members traveled to visit a village outside Lake Atitlan, the highest elevated lake in the world. The village of San Juan la Laguna, only accessible by boat, is nestled between tall mountains and volcanoes. The villagers shared a unique tradition with us. The indigenous women in this area practice the ancient methods of spinning yarn from locally grown cotton. The women also demonstrated the ancient dying method of silks and cotton using natural plants and herbs. The other group members traveled to the small village of San Martín, the hometown of TelaMaya’s President, María. She welcomed us into her home as we listened to stories the women told about the symbolic meanings behind their beautiful weaving patterns and designs. Others spoke of how they began to work for TelaMaya and the importance of weaving in their life. They told us they need things like pots to dye fabrics, and eyeglasses to help them weave. Before we departed from Xela our group collected school supplies and other necessities to donate to the weavers and their families. It was a way for us to show our gratitude for sharing such an amazing talent and ancient knowledge with us.

The student experienced a strong sense of immersion in a foreign way of life, but what she describes sounds like classic cultural tourism followed by a charitable donation. Missing from her account is a description of any work done on behalf of the cooperative!

The university sent another group of students from December 1<sup>st</sup>–10<sup>th</sup>, 2012. When the professor described her plans, she stated that the group would have “the same intention: to provide service during our stay.” While the professors continued to express a commitment to service learning, the students’ schedules included no time explicitly intended for service work. They were divided into two groups, alternating between weaving half the day and studying

Spanish half the day. This study abroad trip worked more smoothly than the first because the service element was largely abandoned in favor of support in the form of paid weaving classes and a small donation of money and office supplies. However, the students were still made to understand that what they were doing was service learning. As one student described her first day in her final report, “We arrived at the school where we met half of the group of students on our trip to walk together to begin our service at TelaMaya. The women at the cooperative gave us a background on the organization before putting us to work.” The rest of her descriptions of her time at TelaMaya focus on her weaving classes, like the student from the first group. She seemed to view her weaving classes as a sort of labor on behalf of the organization. The university’s visit did contribute financially to the cooperative, and the students’ reports and blogs, published online, may have joined with other tourists’ websites, blogs, and reviews to raise the organization’s profile. However, compared to the students’ and professors’ ambitious rhetoric, their actual activities were quite limited. A gap between ambitious rhetoric and actual results was a fairly common occurrence at TelaMaya. The next section examines how volunteers assessed their own impact on their host sites.

### **“Colonialistic? I Don’t Know If That’s the Right Word”: Voluntourists on Voluntourism**

While news stories decrying the rise of voluntourism suggest that voluntourists are rarely self-aware about their activities, I found that some voluntourists did think critically about voluntourism. A few entered their trips concerned about their potential impact on TelaMaya, while others began considering their roles more thoughtfully through their exposure to the community in Xela, in which voluntourism is frequently discussed and critiqued. Towards the end of her three-week stay, US volunteer Danielle commented, “That’s such an American thing to do— to think that you can save the world.” She said that this trip had made her more aware of

the potential issues with voluntourism and made her question her plan to do a volunteer project in Belize after leaving Guatemala: “Even right before I came here, I was just thinking, *Oh, I’ll go to Belize and help people install a water purifier and it will just be great.* But being in Xela made me realize that it’s more complicated than that— the people have to be on board with the idea for it to work. What people don’t realize is that so much depends on the people. What we do is not even 50% of the whole thing. Volunteers come and go; we’re only here for a few months at a time, but it’s the people who stay.” Similarly, volunteer Marina stated that she was from New Orleans, “a city that’s untrusting of outsiders. We’ve seen heaploads of people come and we’re like, *‘Let’s see how long you stay!’* It’s really hard to have something long-term, because people are always coming and going. I’ve been volunteering here, and having to kind of approach things campaign-based, what is feasible in my time here, that I could continue with in the future if it gets established.” US volunteer Wendy mused, “I think it’s good to have people like us who are coming for our own reasons or for academia, since we’re not looking to make money off of it. It could be good to have professionals too, because they would work harder since they’re getting paid. As tourists we want to get to know Guatemala better, and sometimes that gets in the way of our work.”

Many voluntourists came away with a raised awareness of the challenges of using voluntourism effectively, and sought to pass their thoughts along to others considering a voluntourism trip (see also **Chapter Five**). A young couple wrote on their blog, “Don’t make volunteering the focus of your trip if you can’t speak Spanish, don’t have a relevant skill to pass on or aren’t planning to stay for several months. Rachel and I were naive about this before we left, but it’s very hard to find a meaningful way to volunteer unless you have at least one of the traits I listed above. Many organizations struggle with eager volunteers who come for a week or

two, but don't speak Spanish and don't have anything to contribute besides their good will.”

Similarly, Ashley cautioned potential volunteers to be thoughtful about the appropriateness of their volunteer placement.

Whether or not it is actually a good idea to participate in certain volunteer programs is a question that is sometimes overlooked. In Xela there are so many opportunities to volunteer that it's enough to make your head spin. When you meet someone new and ask them how they will be spending their time here it is common to hear, “Oh I might volunteer somewhere for a few weeks.” I came here with a specific purpose in mind, but many people just show up and have a hard time deciding where to dedicate their time.

She went on to discuss a conversation with a friend who had become concerned that his volunteering at an orphanage was giving him a sense of fulfillment at the expense of the orphans, who were becoming attached to him and would be distressed when he left. He eventually decided to leave and volunteer at Habitat for Humanity, feeling that constructing a house was making an unambiguously positive contribution to the local community. She closed by pointing to some concrete factors that might make the difference between a productive trip and a counterproductive one:

So the question to consider is: will the volunteer project at hand create a sustainable difference or is it a way to pass the time that also happens to make you feel good? People with the best intentions can forget to focus on the true needs of a community rather than just what they *want* to do to be “helpful.” Don't get me wrong, I applaud anyone who donates their used clothing or chooses to spend their time while traveling working on a volunteer project. However my opinion is that how many people choose what to get involved needs deeper consideration past what sounds good on the surface. Important factors to consider are: whether or not a specific project is linked with a sustainable organization that has roots in the community and whether or not you are qualified for the job as a volunteer. Many organizations are so eager to take volunteers that it will be up to you to determine where your skill set and availability can do the most good. In my case, my educational background (which includes knowledge of textiles, clothing construction, marketing, public relations, sustainable fashion, women's studies, etc.) and the amount of time I have to volunteer made TelaMaya a good fit. Some people are pretty harsh critics of “volunteer tourism” but I cannot encourage others enough to travel and to give back to the places where they are traveling to whenever possible. Just remember that while it is right and necessary for your work to provide meaning to you, it is also necessary for your work to provide results for the people you are serving. Today you cannot do everything, but today you can do something.

While approaching voluntourism critically, Ashley felt that her training justified the time and energy that the volunteer coordinator and officers had to invest in working with her.

Two US volunteers, Annie and Jessica, had a conversation about the potential drawbacks of voluntourism. Jessica observed, “You don’t want the communities to rely on people that come in and help them.” Annie added, “You can run into problems because a lot of people want to work in disaster relief, but if you’re not experienced it can be hard. And you can be taking the place of people who actually have the experience— the professionals.” Annie continued, “I met some people who were working on a project where they raised money and were working to build a school. They were working with local people, but I thought, ‘*How much did your plane ticket cost? How many local people could you pay to build this school?*’” A weaving student, Caroline, told me that she was actually planning to work on that project, building a school out of recycled plastic bottles in a town northwest of Antigua. She said that some of the volunteer projects she had looked at had been really expensive, but that in this case it seemed reasonable: \$1000 for a week’s worth of transportation, activities, lodging, and food. They had also asked each volunteer to raise \$250 for the project. Caroline worried, “I’m not sure if it’s going to be... colonialistic? I don’t know if that’s the right word.” Ultimately, she felt that the money they raised and the fact that they were partnering with local people made the project a worthwhile one.

This model of using volunteer labor and money for building projects could be effective but it came with certain surprising practices. A local NGO would bring in brigades of volunteers to build stoves, and the organization would pay local masons overtime to fix the volunteers’ work. It was worthwhile to them to use volunteer labor to do a mediocre job, because otherwise there would have been no money to build the stoves. Volunteer coordinator Lenore told me that she met a woman who had her house built by a non-governmental organization and asked her if



it was built by volunteers. The woman seemed shocked and said that it was built by professional masons. To Lenore it made sense that she would want her house made by professionals, especially since she was paying to have it done. As with the example of the clinic that began this chapter, the volunteers working on stove building in Guatemala were actually primarily a source of funding rather than labor, and they were paying for a packaged version of commodified development work. Similarly, TelaMaya volunteer Lauren linked the challenges of international development with the potential pitfalls of cross-cultural volunteering, sharing the story of a stove-building project in Africa that went awry when the development workers realized that the stove smoke had actually been repelling malarial mosquitos. She commented, “That’s the problem with volunteer tourism—it’s almost impossible to think through every possible consequence of what you’re doing.”

Volunteers in TelaMaya would also contrast their experiences with more commercialized, packaged forms of volunteer tourism. Like almost all of TelaMaya’s volunteers, US volunteer Jen came to volunteer with TelaMaya independently. She said, disgusted, “It amazes me that people think they can charge for volunteering. They slap together a site, and get organizations to sign up, and then make people pay to help other people.” For-profit volunteer placement agencies and even volunteering scams are becoming increasingly common in Guatemala. I spoke with Claudia, the Guatemalan volunteer coordinator for an organization that provided educational programs to children living in extreme poverty. She told me that a for-profit agency used to drop European volunteers off at their center with little explanation, and they would find volunteer work for them. Their organization did not charge a fee to volunteer, but they did periodically ask volunteers for voluntary contributions to buy supplies for special projects. When they approached these volunteers for a small donation, they responded, “Oh, you

should just take it out of our donation.” Claudia found out that they had paid \$1,000 a week to the volunteer placement agency, assuming that a large portion of the fee went to the host organization. Shocked, Claudia considered this agency to be exploiting both the well-meaning volunteers and the host organizations.

A US volunteer named Jade discussed a previous experience in which she felt that voluntourism was warping the focus of community development:

I actually did an abroad program with my university in South Africa. It quickly became apparent that the program was serving the needs of the volunteers, and not the community. The local people were so accommodating, but the program had been going for years and nothing much had come of it. It was just a big party trip for most of the students. They made so much space for us.

For example, one volunteer intended to start a community arts center with classes and discovered that the area already had a vibrant musical and artistic community and no need of his musical expertise. Jade continued:

While we were there, we actually wrote a letter to the university telling them that the program was not helping anyone. We couldn't change the fact that we had already come, but we wanted to do something. The university took it really seriously. We didn't know at the time, since we were there for months, but they were taking steps to make it go away. When we got back we held a discussion about it. At my school, students can teach courses, so we made it part of a course on racism on campus. As a person of color, going to South Africa and dealing with my Americanness and the local situation, I learned a lot about myself. The whole experience helped me figure out a lot about how systems work.

In the end, Jade was actually empowered by the experience of protesting against a volunteer program that she found colonialistic and misguided. Her volunteering fostered personal growth and critical thinking as she originally thought it might, but it was through the process of critiquing the project rather than the project itself.

Some volunteers had such negative experiences that they became cynical about the concept of voluntourism. Frank, a volunteer coordinator whose frictions with the TelaMaya officers are documented in **Chapter Four**, opined, “I’m a lot less sold on volunteering than I

was when I came here. I was helping sell indigenous-made crafts, and there are so many intermediaries between the artisan and the buyer. They can call it Fair Trade all they want to, but if the woman that wove the thing made 20 cents an hour, they're full of shit. I ended up getting disillusioned, which is often what happens when you set out to do something for someone else." Frank's experiences left him unconvinced by ethical consumerism and less inclined to volunteer his time or money in the future. Voluntourists were not the only ones contemplating the outcomes of volunteer tourism, of course. The next section examines the perspectives of members of the community in Xela, both expatriate and local, both inside and outside of the tourism industry, on international volunteers and volunteering.

### **“Volunteers Come and Go”: Perceptions of Voluntourists in Xela**

Deborah Root (1996) argued that entitlement is a sickness in Western culture: Westerners have retained the colonial attitude that non-Western culture is theirs to experience, appreciate, critique, and appropriate. Many of the volunteer coordinators and other NGO actors with whom I spoke felt that entitlement was endemic among voluntourists. Canadian Lenore, who worked as the volunteer coordinator for a large and multifaceted NGO, said that a volunteer wanted to set up an online rating system so that volunteers could rate programs, like on TripAdvisor or Lonely Planet. Lenore commented, “The problem is that the volunteers aren't the clients, so how can they be rating the programs' services?” In addition, she was concerned that one negative evaluation from a volunteer could deeply impact an organization for a long time, and she was concerned that volunteers who had not made an effort would cast the blame on the host organization. Based on her objections, the volunteer amended the idea to add a feature in which host organizations could rate the volunteers as well. But we agreed that it would be impractical to think that a weaver or a clinic visitor would fill out an online feedback form on a volunteer,

especially when they do not necessarily have a lot of contact with the individual volunteers.

Lenore listed the types of volunteers she found most difficult to manage: “Some of the volunteers I hate the most are doctors, because they’ve been educated and empowered and feel that they have a lot of skill to bring and should be doing important work. Doctors, photographers, psychologists, and social workers. I don’t understand how psychologists can think that they can just start work here without knowing the language, because they know better than anyone how fragile peoples’ mental states can be.” A factor in common among these difficult volunteer tourists was their sense of professional expertise—or entitlement—that often led them to feel that they deserved accommodation, attention, and access to local organizations. After two years of working with hundreds of volunteers, Lenore had become somewhat jaded about the whole enterprise. She cited the example of a volunteer who wanted to create a health care program for impoverished people at a local clinic. The volunteer’s plan for reaching out to impoverished people was to hand out flyers to people in the street who look poor. She had been in Guatemala for a few weeks so she felt like she had a good sense of who should count as “poor”—for example, children who walk around outside without shoes. Lenore commented, “If you make ‘not having shoes’ the criteria for getting free health care for your kids, you’re just going to make sure that there are lots of barefoot kids running around.”

Sophie, the volunteer coordinator at a local Spanish school that places medical students with clinics, noted that a number of people came to volunteer because they got fired from their jobs and wanted to develop their job skills and help people at the same time. She described one nightmare volunteer who arrived at his homestay, asked what kinds of fruit and coffee they had, ordered the host mother to cut up some watermelon, told her that the coffee she made him was not to his liking, and said that they would have to change his sheets and blankets because they

probably had fleas. He did not actually want to work, and they ended up practically begging him to do something. Similarly, the volunteer coordinator at a children's after-school program commented that one of their supposed volunteers spent most of his time on social media posting photographs and status updates about how he was volunteering with the street children. However, he never actually came in to work. He complained that the altitude was making him sick, so he had to have classes in the afternoon, but because that was also when the volunteering took place, he never attended any of the volunteering sessions.

Canadian coordinator Emily, who worked for a volunteer placement company, said that she was astounded at how volunteers came to Guatemala with such a high opinion of themselves and their abilities. They primarily served medical students, who often wanted to work directly with patients, despite not speaking the language: "They will complain to me and say, *'I've been trained in this this and this, and I should be able to do this with the patients, and could you please explain this to [the local doctors],'* because they don't speak enough Spanish to tell these people in their own language!" She commented that it was reasonable for volunteers to expect to get a lot of practical experience because they had paid the volunteer placement company \$400, and that the company needed to manage their expectations better. "If you don't speak Spanish, realistically, you're mostly going to be observing," she concluded. A pair of young American women who were volunteering with a hospital did complain to me about this while they wove scarves at TelaMaya: "They don't let us do anything! We just watch." The second one said, "We love everything except our few hours at the hospital. The first day no one talked to us. We tried to say *hi* but they didn't respond." They felt that what they were doing at the hospital did not count as volunteering and wanted to be trained in simple tasks to make themselves useful there.

Fernando, the founder of a local sustainable development NGO, Red Internacional en Solidaridad para Educación or RISE (International Network in Solidarity for Education), called a meeting with the TelaMaya leadership to discuss the possibility of selling TelaMaya products in the RISE fair trade shop. Roxana sent the volunteer coordinator at the time, Sandrine, and me to the meeting. Fernando said that he had really been hoping for a meeting with the officers, but that he knew that volunteers were important at TelaMaya. Sandrine commented, “There are always many volunteers but they come and go.”<sup>122</sup> He continued, “It’s not that I want to say that you guys are coming along behind us, but at first we had many volunteers but only for a second.”<sup>123</sup> He explained that they found it impossible to find the kind of committed, long-term volunteers that they would need to do the work they do, and philosophically they found it problematic to use foreign volunteers rather than building local capacity. Similarly, TelaMaya’s tailor stated that he had worked with a textile cooperative that relied heavily on volunteer labor. “It’s good to have volunteers to check the email and translate the English because Roxana and María don’t really understand it. But in that organization as well, they always came and went,”<sup>124</sup> he commented.

Jacobine, the Belgian founder and leader of another weaving cooperative in Xela, Ixchel Handicrafts, remarked that TelaMaya always had a large volunteer crew. She used to work with the volunteer program in EntreMundos, and her experience working with volunteers soured her on volunteers: “There are many bad ones and some good ones.”<sup>125</sup> According to Jacobine, many

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<sup>122</sup> Siempre hay muchos voluntarios pero vienen y se van.

<sup>123</sup> No es que quiero decir que ustedes vienen detrás de nosotros, pero al principio tuvimos muchos voluntarios pero solo por un segundo.

<sup>124</sup> Es bueno tener voluntarios para chequear el correo y traducir en inglés porque Roxana y María, no mucho comprenden. Pero también en esta organización siempre vinieron y se fueron.

<sup>125</sup> Hay muchos malos y algunos buenos.

volunteers made a number of demands for their work without having the skills to actually be useful to a host organization. Another employee of Ixchel Handicrafts stated,

Sometimes it works to work with volunteers and sometimes you lost a lot of energy and at the end you don't gain a lot. I think [Jacobine] is pretty open for everyone that comes inside, but at the end you always have to check a little bit. There is a lot of work and you cannot waste all that energy because of volunteers who come there. You speak to someone and you see if they have some kind of a background and what they have in mind of doing there and if it's something that is needed, then you can go from there.

Ixchel Handicrafts pursued a different strategy for gaining foreign knowledge and skills than TelaMaya. Jacobine did occasionally agree to work with particularly motivated or committed volunteers, but her primary approach was to hire foreign (and local) employees.

Reflecting the importance placed on the volunteer community in Quetzaltenango, the NGO capacity-building organization EntreMundos hosted a workshop on best practices in volunteer administration from April 13<sup>th</sup>–May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2012. The workshop attracted 17 participants from 14 organizations in Xela and the surrounding areas, including TelaMaya, several community tourism projects, several agricultural development programs, two children's educational programs, a mission service program, a youth development and anti-violence program, a reforestation program, a program that placed medical volunteers, and a clinic that received medical volunteers. While some of the organizations, like TelaMaya, had been receiving volunteers for years, many of the representatives were interested in learning how to attract and manage international volunteers in order to create a successful program.

In one of the workshop exercises, the volunteer coordinators shared stories about issues they had had with volunteers. Sometimes volunteers would make decisions without consulting the organizations' leadership. For example, Lenore described a person renting a room at EntreMundos who bought a number of pots for the kitchen on his own initiative and then expected to be reimbursed. A volunteer building a stove in a community gave some food to the

neighbors' children, perceiving them as malnourished. The children's parents were angered by this intrusion and contacted the organization to complain. Even something as simple as hanging posters could be challenging: once, a volunteer stuck a poster to a business' bulletin board with glue and the business got annoyed with the organization.

Sometimes the issue was poor communication or mismatched expectations between the volunteer and organization. A professional chef who had written cookbooks wanted to volunteer with a women's organization to help them form a cooking business. They wanted her to pay the gas, food, and rent for the project, which she was not prepared to do. She also refused to give them full recipes directly, as they had anticipated, because she did not want to create dependency. A Guatemalan organization also had an issue with a licensed US psychologist, because they expected her to have clinical experience but her degree was more theoretical than practical. Sometimes the problem was a poor fit between what the volunteer could offer and the local situation. A volunteer at an agricultural development organization had the idea of raising goats for dairy products, but they did not thrive in the coastal environment where the organization was based. In the clinic, local women did not want exams from male volunteers.

Sometimes the problem was that volunteers would get frustrated with the situations that they were trying to alleviate. A volunteer with a women's shelter in 2010 complained about the survivors of domestic abuse. Lacking a sensitive understanding of chronic poverty, she became frustrated that they did not do more to alter their situations. A volunteer teaching classes to vulnerable children grew annoyed at their disruptiveness after three days and left the class in anger without informing the organization. We talked about how to resolve issues between volunteers and staff; for example, if a volunteer complains that a staff member's behavior was sexually inappropriate, or if a group of volunteers representing a particular organization are rude,



drunk, or loud in public during their free time. The existence of this workshop, hosted by a major local coordinating NGO, as well as the strong attendance numbers, indicates that while the community in Xela may have been skeptical about volunteer tourism, locals were also eager to reap its benefits and pursue best practices to make it more effective for their own organizations.

## **Conclusion**

A quote from Peter Redfield (2012:370) describing expatriate medical volunteers strikes me as well-phrased and extremely applicable to TelaMaya's volunteers: "They would arrive in a flurry of eager energy and new ideas, carrying a delicate web of connections beyond the horizon." As the example that began this chapter illustrates, reliance on volunteer labor has occasioned a shift in focus for NGOs from outcomes for organizations to outcomes for volunteers and their professionalization. This chapter put TelaMaya's volunteer program into perspective within the larger context of volunteering and volunteer tourism in Xela, focusing on the structure of the program and the particular characteristics and motivations of the voluntourists who came to work at TelaMaya and how they resembled or differed from those of other organizations. Two of the main reasons that applicants mentioned for wanting to volunteer in Guatemala were getting the chance to see how the development work that they had learned about in their college classes played out in practice and building their own resumes in international development. Young people were using volunteering to build their individual social capital and raise their value in the current hypercompetitive job market.

Another major motivation for volunteers was to discover a different culture on a deeper level, and perhaps thereby discover something new about themselves. While few voluntourists cared to admit it, some of their comments suggest that they held an exoticized view of Guatemala before arriving and were surprised to find that people there also use cell phones and

eat Chinese food. Longer-term volunteers sometimes became so accustomed to life in Guatemala that they suffered from reverse culture shock upon returning to their home countries. One former volunteer coordinator was overwhelmed by the experience of grocery shopping in the US and the number of choices: “I was in the produce section and there it was: a sign for scallions ‘Made in Guatemala.’ And I lost it. I started crying in the produce section!” Another volunteer wrote on social media that she had “left her heart in Guatemala” and that she was already planning a return trip.

This chapter shows that many voluntourists came to TelaMaya with unformed ideas about Guatemala and development work and left with both a raised awareness of relevant issues and a reinforced sense of their own entitlement. This attitude of entitlement tended to aggravate the people most directly involved in working with them, including the officers of the organizations and the volunteer coordinators responsible for ensuring their satisfaction. **Chapter Four** takes up the thread introduced in this chapter that volunteers can be problematic, addressing the kinds of daily conflicts that arise between cooperative members and volunteers.

#### **Chapter Four: Friction Between Voluntourists, Clients, Cooperative Members, and Community Associates**

John, a young volunteer coordinator from the US, was working with the officers of TelaMaya and an international client to develop a long-term strategy for the organization. He stated, “The ladies currently don’t think about business and growth the same way we do. It seems like their idea of growth is doing the same thing they’re doing now on a larger scale... I think the lack of suggestions [for future development] comes from a lack of understanding about how things work on the other side of the business relationship.” John identified a need for the cooperative leaders to develop a more cosmopolitan acquaintance with ways of doing business in their clients’ home countries. He claimed they had “not yet grasped the idea” that long-term development could be funded through profits: “They seem to have the mindset that any additional projects must be covered by donations and outside money. I’m working to instill the idea that TelaMaya can increase profits and use that money to reinvest in the business.” John wanted to shift the officers’ conception of their organization from being “aid”-focused to “trade”-focused, a more appropriate neoliberal attitude. John’s emphasis on the fundamental difference between his conception of doing business and that of the cooperative leaders, and his articulation of the need for voluntourists to reshape these ideas, provides the perfect entry point to this chapter about the frictions between groups of people from different knowledge communities and how they have affected the business of doing business in TelaMaya.

Grassroots development is generally discussed as a form of “globalization from below,” whereas international tourism is seen as a form of “globalization from above.” If studies of voluntourism have tended to focus on the volunteers and their experiences, studies of development have focused on local communities and how they have been impacted by and responded to development initiatives. This chapter attempts to move beyond either of these

perspectives by examining the mutual influences among cooperative members, voluntourists, clients, and local community residents. It analyzes in detail the interactions between the volunteer tourists and cooperative members, focusing on instances of culture clash and friction (Tsing 2005). During my fieldwork, a number of scandals and conflicts highlighted the different value systems and assumptions that the voluntourists, Mayan weavers, and foreign clients were bringing to their work. Voluntourists typically attempted to introduce new systems and attitudes towards business and competition, while cooperative leaders attempted to teach volunteers about relationship and expectation management. Continuing the line of thinking from **Chapter Three**, this chapter examines how “making space” for voluntourists structured the development of the organization.

The first section situates TeleMaya within the literature on cooperatives and other non-governmental organizations, which suggests that one of their main activities is to create, interpret, and disseminate meaning. It also suggests that they are constituted by the everyday actions and interactions of the agents within them, who are working to discursively position themselves to their advantage in various contexts. This section introduces the notion that the interactions between people from different backgrounds produces friction, while cautioning against simplistic divisions between Western and non-Western knowledge. The next section explores how the volunteers made a space for themselves in TelaMaya, which was dominated by intellectual rather than physical labor, by presenting themselves as people with a mindset that differed from the cooperative members—and perhaps more business acumen. It examines how their friction with cooperative members has influenced organizational policy. The following part focuses on how the cooperative leaders shared their knowledge about doing business in Guatemala with volunteers—thereby positioning themselves as experts as well, albeit with a

knowledge fetishized yet largely undefined within development work. The discussion then shifts to analyzing the kinds of activities that volunteers preferred: activities that utilized their special skills and thereby reinforced their own sense of specialness, brought them into contact with Mayan people in their natural environments, and enhanced their professional development or constructed self-representation on social media. This section closes by arguing that prioritizing these preferences can cause organizations to accomplish only those projects that appeal most to voluntourists. The final section further develops that idea, focusing on the problems that reliance on volunteer labor can cause for organizations like TelaMaya.

### **Negotiating Meaning: The Role of Intermediaries**

Thomas Carroll argues that the idea that non-governmental organizations either provide top-down services or work independently to create social change from the ground up is a false dichotomy in the literature. Carroll writes that the “bridge between these positions is local capacity building,” which enables service provision to be successful and sustainable and reinforces local institutional capabilities (1992:178). Organizations’ most important work is often to build networks and partnerships: they may have complex relationships with both states and markets, which do not necessarily erode the integrity of their programs. For instance, Jennifer Bickham Mendez (2005) described how a Nicaraguan women’s labor organization used international human rights language drawn from civil society organizations to hold the state accountable for protecting its workers. It also strategically invoked Nicaraguan conceptions of gendered citizenship that privileged family values to make the claim to the state that women needed special protections in the workplace.<sup>126</sup> In many cases, NGOs’ primary function is to

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<sup>126</sup> As sites of information politics, NGOs also highlight the representational challenges of ethnography and force researchers to think explicitly about their roles and responsibilities in relation to their participants. Mendez wrote that while she “cannot claim that this book escapes the politics of representation and its accompanying contradictions,” the power relationship was not as unidirectional as some feminist critics have claimed: “These

serve as cultural brokers, disseminating, translating, and consuming knowledge, to create connections between people and groups across international or micro-cultural boundaries (Naples and Desai 2002).

I have been influenced in my approach to analyzing TelaMaya by constructivist, interactionist approaches to development that use notions of discourse to explain how organizations understand their roles and construct the meaning of their work in relation to values and goals circulating locally, nationally, and transnationally (Wing 2002; Schuller 2009). For example, Thea Hilhorst (2003) wrote that many scholars have investigated what makes NGOs “non-governmental” by examining their relationships with state governments. However, fewer scholars have looked at what makes them “organizational”: how they are formed as institutions through the interactions of the people who make them up. Hilhorst claimed that actor-centered analysis brings together both agentic and more structural explanations by focusing on how people’s daily practices work within and create structures, focusing on processes of identification rather than identity as a fixed entity. This approach presents organizations as a process, a fluid nexus of the personal interactions, social networks, cultural practices, and discourses that constitute them and give them meaning.<sup>127</sup>

Within organizations, workers may use discourses strategically to position themselves in relation to different audiences. Aradhana Sharma (2006) claims that development workers in a

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women were not merely objects of my research, but active subjects who did exert quite a bit of control over me as an ethnographer and over my relationship with the organization” (2005:23). Her relationship with the women of MEC brought her to a new understanding of feminism outside of scholarly contexts.

<sup>127</sup> However, over the period of her research, the organization’s leadership had come to define their mission as a single truth, and they were outraged at her portrayal of their NGO, because she claimed that they constructed their sense of shared realities. They also claimed that her ethnographic perspective, which foregrounded theoretical considerations rather than their official mission and goals, was damaging to their organization, neocolonialist, and unethical. While she had obtained consent to conduct the research, she could not seek prior consent or acceptance for the account she constructed from it, and she found that the NGO’s ideological rigidity precluded dialogue between them.

government-organized NGO addressing women's empowerment in rural India used their liminal position as state-sponsored yet non-state actors to legitimate themselves in different contexts. The organization's leaders strategically employed their status as a government program to facilitate working with other government agencies and threaten members into compliance, and used their NGO status to justify their limited resources, connect with other organizations, and unofficially align with the people against the government. Similarly, Analiese Richard (2009) argued that development workers in the provincial city of Tulancingo, Mexico tried to distance themselves from the image of *caciques*—self-serving social entrepreneurs who use their connections to create patron-client relationships—and position themselves as indigenous intellectuals: civic-minded middle-class martyrs who advocate for their own communities. They presented themselves as downwardly accountable to their organization's members, rather than upwardly accountable to political elites, using idioms with traction at the local level.

These authors present non-governmental organizations as global intermediaries whose main work is to transfer, appropriate, apply, translate, subvert, or otherwise manipulate discourses. They draw from local idioms, nationalistic rhetoric, and global civil society ideologies to advance their causes, gain authority, and legitimate themselves to their donors, their bases, government institutions, and other organizations. They are made up of individuals who discursively construct their work and its meaning in relation to transnationally circulating norms and goals.

My approach to understanding the micro-power relations within TelaMaya's volunteer program draws from such constructivist, interactionist approaches to understanding development organizations. This perspective makes it clear that, as TelaMaya's source of foreign support shifted from being the Dutch government to being individual voluntourists, its standards,

practices, and expectations shifted from being structurally defined to being more fluid, the product of the congealed daily interactions between the cooperative's leaders and its constantly evolving volunteer population. While support from a foreign government or international non-governmental organization would be more institutionalized, voluntourism in the case of TelaMaya has varied depending upon the personal relationships between the leaders and volunteers, which means that it can (and must) be constantly renegotiated depending on the cooperative's needs at a given moment. Like many non-governmental organizations, the cooperative members have not historically operated from a structural economic perspective. Instead, they viewed their interactions with clients and volunteers as contingent. Rather than figuring out or transforming long-lasting structures or systems, they were interested in figuring out their position in relation to other people and testing how far they could push the boundaries in their social relationships.

Voluntourists, clients, and cooperative members differed in their approaches to doing business and their opinions on how to manage intellectual property. This caused "friction" between them that could, as Anna Tsing (2005) signals, be productive as well as destructive: friction creates movement, but also heat. Tsing uses the concept of "friction" to understand "the grip of global encounter" (2005:1). Thinking of global interconnections as a form of friction disrupts simplistic narratives of globalization as a new era of unimpeded flows of people, products, and ideas around the planet, and draws attention to how globalization operates through the interactions of people. It also points to the complexity of the production and disruption of relations of power: "Hegemony is made as well as unmade with friction" (Tsing 2005:6). Viewing the interactions between voluntourists, clients, and weavers through the lens of friction helps to resist easy characterizations of the power relationships between them as "global



hegemony” or “local resistance.” I use the metaphor of friction to understand how these daily interactions produced both “motion” (which in this case could represent a productive, long-term change in the participants’ values or practices) and “heat” (unproductive interpersonal conflict and issues with volunteers and clients). “Friction” also describes the tensions and negotiations between these people with differing values and expectations better than terms such as “conflict” or “struggle,” because the overall tenor of the interactions within the volunteer program is caring and constructive.

To extend the metaphor, voluntourists often served as “ball bearings” in TelaMaya, mediating between clients based in Western countries and TelaMaya’s administrators and group leaders—thus reducing the friction within the system. In most cases, wholesale clients had limited experience working in Guatemala or other foreign countries. Their inability to speak Spanish, and the representatives’ inability to speak English, made misunderstandings inevitable and made the volunteers a vital link in the communication chain. To produce an order, the client would relay information in English to volunteers, who would translate it to Spanish for the officers, who would relay it to group representatives, who would translate it to a Mayan language for the group members. Volunteers translated the clients’ requests into understandable terms, converting color names like “stormy” and “celery” into concrete Spanish words, or preferably numerical color codes. Volunteers also produced the types of receipts and invoices that clients expected and exhorted the weavers to work hard to meet their deadlines, while explaining local conditions to clients.

The officers also mediated between the group representatives and the clients. For example, a group representative tasked with a particularly difficult rush order told María that

they would be unable to meet the deadline because “we women aren’t weaving machines.”<sup>128</sup>

While clients tended to view themselves as working on behalf of the cooperative, and few were personally benefiting from their exporting work in any substantial material way, the cooperative members often felt exploited by them. In frustration at what she viewed as an unreasonable demand, Roxana said, “They think that because we are needy we’re playthings.”<sup>129</sup> María described one wholesale client as being demanding “like a husband,”<sup>130</sup> in that she required constant attention. This comment fits with their tendency to relate to foreign women like local men, and shows how they were used to managing demands and conflicts within their homes, interpersonal skills that they brought to their professional relationships. Thus, translation on multiple levels was arguably the main work of the cooperative.

The literature suggests that while NGO workers are “brokers of meaning,” they are not necessarily filling a preexisting gap between the incommensurable discourses of development professionals and local people—instead, they are successful at convincing others of meanings, creating spaces for themselves to act and accomplish their goals (Hilhorst 2003:223). For some time, development organizations have sought to elicit and incorporate indigenous knowledge in their programs, seeing this as a more participatory and “bottom-up” approach than universalizing, “top-down” technocratic solutions. Scholars have critiqued the notion that Western and indigenous knowledge are dichotomous (Lewis and Mosse 2006); however, Thomas Yarrow (2008) suggests that it is more useful to investigate how and when people invoke the idea of a binary between Western and indigenous knowledge. Examining how people claim knowledge or the ability to translate between fundamentally incompatible worldviews

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<sup>128</sup> Las mujeres no somos máquinas para tejer.

<sup>129</sup> No somos juguetes para ellos. Piensan que porque tenemos necesidad somos juguetes.

<sup>130</sup> Es como un marido.

points to how the cooperative leaders (administrative officers and weaving group leaders) and volunteers needed to justify their value as intermediaries and their role in translating between divergent epistemologies. They used discourses of development strategically to position themselves as those with knowledge and resources and those they helped as lacking something (Hilhorst 2003:83). They defined their roles in relation to each other through the lens of their different bases of knowledge: one rooted in the local context, and one that travels.

Rosalva Aída Hernández Castillo and Ronald Nigh (1998) argue that as the global economy traffics in signs and symbols, it creates a dialogical relationship between global forces that tend to homogenize and local responses that tend to differentiate. They illustrate this process using the story of a Mexican Mayan coffee producer's cooperative, modeled on the international principles of cooperativism, that adopted organic farming practices not simply to appeal to Euro-American values but also to return to traditional forms of agricultural practice. This case of convergence suggests that even when NGOs partake in seemingly hegemonic global discourses, such as Euro-American organic farming practices, they may be doing so from indigenous roots. Yarrow (2008) points out that, because indigenous or "traditional" knowledge has been defined as inherently different from development or "modern" knowledge, moments of convergence are dismissed as not representing an authentic indigenous voice. The next section will examine how volunteers and cooperative leaders understand the differences in their forms of knowledge.

### **"Anything Goes Here in Guatemala": Differing Approaches to Business and Labor**

At the intersection between cultural tourism and development work, voluntourism is ambivalent in its orientation towards local culture. As **Chapter Three** shows, local culture was one of the main attractions for voluntourists, who viewed voluntourism as a way of becoming immersed in local culture. However, development has historically had a different approach to

local culture. Under the influence of the ideology of modernization, many development workers initially saw their mission as one of combating non-Western practices: “Cultural diversity—or at least the ways in which local, indigenous, non-Western cultures differed from those of Western industrial capitalist cultures—constituted a central ‘problem’ or obstacle to development, to be overcome by large-scale, technologically driven aid and investment programmes.

Homogenization on the Western model was the implicit and explicit objective” (Simon 2006).

While few voluntourists would explicitly claim that the local culture that drew them to visit Guatemala was an obstacle to development, they did tend to try to remake TelaMaya in the image of business models from their homes. I asked a pair of European volunteers in an interview about what they considered to be the role of volunteers, and this was their response:

Polish volunteer Katarzyna: Add uh new points of view, like the things we learn from our countries, but I think that nobody is interested about our experience but we know some other ways to, for example promote, but I feel the problem, and I spoke to other girls, that the problem in Guatemala and also in the South American countries, is that they feel they know the best, and I think that that is the reason that they are developing so so slow. [laughs] I don’t think that I know the best, but I want to, you know, show some other ways, maybe it works here.

Rebecca: So you find that people are constantly saying *that’s not how we do it in Guatemala*.

Katarzyna: Yes, like this, *it’s impossible, it’s too expensive, nobody will come*. They don’t want to try anything.

French volunteer Françoise: Yes, it works like this and *finito*.

They also tended to view volunteering as a chance to apply theoretical knowledge learned in college business or international studies classes. Matt Baillie Smith and Nina Laurie (2011) suggest that Euro-American volunteers imagine the South as “a global playground” in which they can develop the skills and professionalization that they need to become productive citizens in neoliberal technocratic regimes. Many viewed Guatemala as a space where they could gain

practical experience by experimenting and applying their ideas, because organizations gave them more responsibility than they would have been given in internships or practica in their home countries. Nelson (1999:54) states, “Guatemala is rife with the signs of third-world backwardness that allow us to deny coevalness (Fabian 1983) and thus give us the magic frisson of going back in time, the hope of maybe lending a hand as they step over into modernity.”

Voluntourists felt confident that they could make a positive impact in Guatemala because they saw it as a vacuum, where any help, however inexperienced, is better than nothing at all. The voluntourists always wanted to innovate, which sometimes led them to pursue projects without thinking through the steps necessary to achieve them or their potential unintended consequences. As Redfield states in connection to volunteers in an international NGO, “Although effectively guarding against stasis and ossification, the turnover rate also assure[s] an overabundance of initiatives” (2012:370). By contrast, the officers of the cooperative tended to be conservative, which slowed their progress but also provided a reasonable check on volunteer activities. The cooperative officers were concerned with being the subjects of experiments that could fail, and they needed to plan for longer-term outcomes than the voluntourists. The friction with voluntourists who have attempted to change the cooperative’s practices has resulted in a long-term evolution in their approach to doing business, but it has also wasted time and resources, as the voluntourists instituted short-lived new systems.

As in the example that began this chapter, many volunteers claimed to have a different mindset from the TelaMaya officers. They had models of good business practices in their heads, and sometimes expressed frustration at what they perceived as a lack of initiative, reliance on known methods, failure to plan ahead, and looseness towards commitments on the part of the cooperative members or other business contacts. For example, a former volunteer coordinator

from the US, Martha, responded to a cash flow problem by saying, “I think anything goes here in Guatemala. How do you expect to have any money if you don’t send out bills?” Several volunteers, including Martha, viewed the officers’ tendency to process orders sequentially, handling each stage of production in order rather than planning all stages at once, as a problem. Voluntourists also expressed frustration at the officers’ attitudes towards change. “In Guatemala people just want to do it and they want to keep doing it the same way but companies change and fashions change and so it has to be changed,” observed Belgian volunteer Katrien. A volunteer coordinator from New York City, Dan, said, “I think it’s frustrating because we work hard to get more work for them, because that’s what they say they want, and then when we get an order they say, ‘*No, I don’t want to do that, that’s too hard.*’” The idea that Mayan people are anti-development has a long history in the scholarly literature on Guatemala,<sup>131</sup> and viewing local people’s attitudes as the source of the problem that organizations are attempting to solve fits with broader colonialistic tendencies in development.

Volunteers tended to define “professionalism” as something belonging to foreign ways of thought and practice. In the case of TelaMaya, whose business was with foreigners, they may have been right: anything that appealed to foreigners was by definition more professional. Professionalism in Guatemala was focused more on formal dress and presentation, whereas to Euroamericans, it was more centered around punctuality and implementing procedures/systems. As an article about voluntourism in the English-language, expatriate-oriented Guatemalan

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<sup>131</sup> Many scholars have questioned whether indigenous Guatemalans behave rationally in the marketplace. Sheldon Annis (1987) argued that indigenous Maya have historically embraced an anti-development “milpa logic,” based in their subsistence corn farming practices, in which individual wealth is considered an inappropriate goal. Elsewhere, Eric Gable (1997) has referred to this socially-enforced material equality as “nightmare egalitarianism.” Annis linked this attitude to religious belief: while Catholics assume that they will be able to produce a living off a plot of land, Protestants look elsewhere to earn a living. However, scholars such as Sol Tax (1953) and Scott Cook (2004) have argued that indigenous Guatemalans are economically rational, “penny capitalists” working on a small scale.

magazine *Revue* stated, “Personal appearance is very important in Guatemalan culture.” It went on to quote a Peace Corps volunteer as saying, “Our jobs are professional, you should be the example of what you want to see...” and an NGO director as saying, “Most places you go in the world, how you present yourself reflects to most people how you respect them” (Sethna 2014:36-37).

Voluntourists often tried to remake TelaMaya according to their standards of organization and efficiency, proposing new systems for bookkeeping, sales analysis, and invoicing. Many of these proposals would probably improve TelaMaya’s daily operations if the officers adopted them, but others may represent a form of “development theater” that fetishizes the appearance of organized and technologically savvy business practices, or at least business practices recognizable within a Euro-American vision of what a “Third World” business should look like. The term “development theater” is adapted from Bruce Schneier’s (2003) concept of “security theater”: in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Transportation Security Administration established a series of procedures intended to create the impression of improved security. The main critique of security theater is that it diverts much of the funding allocated to keeping travelers safe to spectacular measures that may do little to actually prevent terrorist attacks. Similarly, development theater may divert resources such as volunteer time and energy towards projects that enhance the appearance of orderliness and professionalism in an organization’s systems (such as product codes, stock-keeping unit numbers, and sales spreadsheets) rather than significantly improving function. For example, a Spanish merchandiser suggested making a detailed business plan: “To me, this organization is a beginner. It’s like a baby. You don’t let a baby drive a car, it has to learn to walk first.”<sup>132</sup> However, he was

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<sup>132</sup> Para mí, esta organización es una principiante. Es como un bebé. No dejas que un bebé maneje un coche, tiene que aprender a caminar primero.

concerned that a business plan would not actually be implemented, given his prior experience of creating a business plan for a Nepalese organization and discovering that they were not following it a year later.

Similarly, a young social entrepreneur, Charmaine, wrote in her personal travel blog (now defunct) about her efforts to design a more organized-looking computerized spreadsheet for the cooperative to track inventory and sales:

At times it is frustrating working in a developing country because things are so disorganized, especially in this organization. The women don't want the company to grow yet they want to make more money. They won't let people look over their finances (understandable) but still. Add to that an organization based on volunteers who have different skills, levels, and time commitments and you are starting to see what we are working with.

The officers told her they would not use a digital system without keeping a hard copy because they had lost files when a previous volunteer helped them transfer their system online; they asked her to help with the biannual store inventory instead. She blogged that her time at TelaMaya had taught her “to do what people need vs. what I think they need and want to do.” She claimed to be humbled because she had “learned that what people need and are actually going to use will be much more useful than trying to do things my way. They operate differently than I am used to and I have learned to respect that.” Charmaine’s realization fits within an established genre of writing on development work, in which a young person’s practical experience leads to grounded insights and a humbler attitude towards Euro-American intervention. Though this form of self-realization was glib, the experience did seem to teach her about working in a different cultural context. Another US volunteer, Laura, stated that her experience had changed her approach to development work: “When I started I had all these ideas of how we could change the website and make online shopping and loads of different things that you think are essential but then you think *actually no*, because you need to make money right



now. I think you come with the idea of forward planning a lot, but then you realize it's a lot more reactive." Laura concluded that the ideal approach would be for volunteers to focus on projects they could achieve in one month while maintaining a sense of the organization's longer-term goals. The friction that voluntourists experienced working with TelaMaya has challenged their approaches to development, their inclination to attempt top-down strategic planning giving way to more responsive approaches.

Volunteers donated technical skills that the association could not otherwise afford. Just as in English, the Spanish word for "work" extends to both volunteering and employment, with no distinction between unpaid and paid labor. The officers were highly conscious that even volunteers with no special training in business, fashion, or exports were still usually college-educated and computer literate, skills for which local employees would expect fair compensation. María commented, "The pillar of TelaMaya has been the volunteers in three ways: first, in the English language, because the translations have been very important for us; second, for the contacts, because they have experience, or sometimes their training is in business, or in opening markets."<sup>133</sup> Roxana stated that every person has a gift, and that they are complementary: "You speak Spanish and also English, because I don't speak English. I speak Spanish, Kaqchikel, and K'iche' because you don't speak them. God puts us together because we can help each other."<sup>134</sup> María echoed this sentiment, "They all have their own minds to help us: you have your mind, and others have their minds. Some know how to paint walls, others arrange

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<sup>133</sup> El pilar de TelaMaya ha sido los voluntarios en 3 aspectos, primero en el idioma inglés, pues, por las traducciones han sido muy importantes para nosotros, segundo por los contactos, porque ellos tienen experiencia, o a veces sus prácticas es para el comercio, o para abrir mercados, y todo esto es una gran ventaja para la asociación.

<sup>134</sup> Hablas español y también inglés, porque no hablo inglés. Hablo español, Kaqchikel, y K'iche' porque ustedes no los hablan. Dios nos une porque podemos ayudarnos.

the store.”<sup>135</sup> The presence of volunteers energized and motivated the officers. “You are the ones that give us the strength to go on. Because just the two of us couldn’t do it,”<sup>136</sup> said María. She told the volunteer coordinators that the priorities for the board of directors were attracting volunteers, for their “creativity,” and weaving students, to help cover their overhead costs.

María addressed a volunteer meeting, saying, “It’s very important to speak English, it’s the main thing [laughs bitterly] and it’s what we know least about. But like I say to the *compañeras*, ‘You shouldn’t feel bad if you don’t know how to speak Spanish, if you only speak your languages; don’t feel bad because you are masters of weaving.’”<sup>137</sup> In the face of the need for volunteers and their expertise, due more than anything to their dependence on the fair trade market and foreign clients, María made the claim for the importance of her own expertise and knowledge. She recognized that, in a world that has valorized literacy, technical skills, flexible thinking, and transferrable knowledge over more rooted, time-intensive practices, not all forms of knowledge are created equal, and asserted her identity as an artisan: “So it’s part of our culture, then, the designs and the backstrap weaving.”<sup>138</sup> Once, María explained to visiting weaving group representatives that Roxana was not in the office because she was going to be trained in computer programming. María continued, “On the other hand, I am an artisan. I am very stupid and these things do not stick with me. That is why they do not take me into account.” Roxana paid for the training herself, because María would not approve of her using TelaMaya money for it: “She does not want me to learn anything new.”<sup>139</sup> When Roxana sought to learn a

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<sup>135</sup> Todos tienen sus propias mentes para ayudarnos: tú tienes tu mente, y otros tienen sus mentes. Unos saben pintar las paredes, otros arreglan la tienda.

<sup>136</sup> Ustedes son los que nos dan la fuerza para seguir. Porque solo nosotros dos no podríamos.

<sup>137</sup> es muy importante hablar inglés, eso es lo principal [laughs bitterly] y es lo que menos nosotros sabemos verdad pero como digo yo a las compañeras *ustedes no se sientan mal si ustedes no saben hablar el español, si ustedes hablan solo su idioma, no se sientan mal porque ustedes son maestras en el tejido*.

<sup>138</sup> Entonces es parte de nuestra cultura pues los diseños, y el telar de cintura.

<sup>139</sup> Ella no quiere que aprenda nada nuevo.

skill dominated by volunteers, María reasserted the distinction between their local knowledge and the foreign knowledge that computing represents. Her association of computing skills with foreignness was a way of defining her role within the cooperative that may have been partly strategic, to avoid the expectation that she learn these skills, but was also part of the broader process in which these groups linked their skills and their identities.

One of the business attitudes that the volunteers and other associates attempted to change was the cooperative members' attitudes towards competition. Because the weavers viewed the market for handicrafts as a zero-sum game, in which any gains made by another artisan group became losses for TelaMaya, they were reluctant to coordinate with other weaving cooperatives. When Fernando from local development organization RISE invited TelaMaya to sell products in the organization's fair trade store alongside other weaving cooperatives, Roxana was skeptical of the venture. Fernando told Roxana that he wanted to foster a new climate of cooperation among community organizations to support local industries: "The thing is to differentiate yourself." He used the example of local chocolate sellers who try to undercut each other in selling to his NGO: "That is the way to lower the price and we lose the market."<sup>140</sup> Fernando told Roxana that he considered his organization an ally to both Ixchel Handicrafts and TelaMaya. He stated that while a healthy competitiveness is good for innovation and quality control, an unhealthy approach to competition means that your rival "kicks the leg out from under you, copies a design, says, '*I like this, I'm going to make it.*'"<sup>141</sup> He suggested that instead, she should think that there is enough business for all if they work together as a team. In his vision for local artisan cooperatives, each cooperative would become known for creating a product in a particular niche and work together to build up the market for Guatemalan artisanal goods.

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<sup>140</sup> La cosa es diferenciar. [...] Pero así baja el precio y perdemos el mercado.

<sup>141</sup> le traba la canilla a uno, le copia un diseño, dice '*esto me gusta, lo voy a hacer.*'

Months later, a volunteer, Jacqueline, who was working as an independent marketing consultant, started working with both TelaMaya and another two local weaving cooperatives. She said, “I’m starting to realize that there is a lot of cattiness between the groups and that’s a pity, because there is a lot that they could do if they worked together.” Jacqueline scheduled a meeting with TelaMaya’s leaders to discuss the possibility of creating a marketing packet with product information for all three cooperatives that she could send to major home décor companies, to increase the possibility that the company would decide to order from at least one of the cooperatives. She argued that companies love it when they see that people are united: “I don’t care about politics, I just want to help as many women as I can. If I can help 400 women in TelaMaya, and 100 in another organization, and 250 in another organization, it’s fine by me.”<sup>142</sup> Roxana responded that unfortunately, Guatemalan people have become accustomed to competing fiercely for everything they can get (see **Chapter Five** for an extended discussion of the cooperative members’ attitudes towards other Guatemalans). The officers ultimately told Jacqueline that they were not comfortable with her sharing their product information with other local cooperatives or raising confusion among potential clients for their goods.

Partly through experience with running a business and partly through the influence of volunteers over time, the officers of the cooperative have shifted their attitudes toward production, sales, and networking. Over time, the cooperative members who have worked most closely with volunteers have absorbed some of their collective wisdom. For example, according to María, a former volunteer told them that they were losing money by charging the actual exchange rate. He explained that they had to fix the exchange rate at 7.5 quetzales to the dollar, not the less favorable actual rate, which varied from 7.75 to 7.9 quetzales to the dollar. They

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<sup>142</sup> No me importa la política, solo quiero ayudar a tantas mujeres como puedo. Si puedo ayudar a 400 mujeres en TelaMaya, y 100 en otra organización, y 250 en otra organización, está bien para mí.

have held to the idea ever since, even when converting catalog prices back from dollars into quetzals, which actually made the rate less favorable to them.

Volunteers who worked with the cooperative in 2003 and returned to visit in 2012 said that they were impressed by the “professionalization” of the cooperative and its leaders, as evidenced by the increased standardization of the store hours and products and capacity to fill large export orders. They credited the volunteers with having convinced the officers to keep the store open during its advertised hours, maintain standard sizes and colors in their products, and present a limited number of examples of each product in the store rather than displaying the entire stock. Volunteer Jolene insisted that the TelaMaya leaders needed to improve the state of the building to show visitors that it was a business and not a private house. Later, María pointed out some toys that had been left out in the office: “It looks really bad. Like [Jolene] told us, we have to be professional.”<sup>143</sup> Volunteers’ ideas have thus become incorporated into the daily practice of the cooperative.

It can be difficult to speculate what TelaMaya would be like without volunteers, but groups with less sustained contact with volunteers did not share their level of preparation to receive foreign tourists. When Jolene visited the independent storefront of one of the groups affiliated with TelaMaya in San Juan la Laguna, she was struck by their disconnection from clients. She felt that the leader, Mercedes, was unaware of the tourist market and overproducing the wrong kind of products. They also told her stories about a wholesale client who left a check that bounced and a volunteer who promised to make them a website but never delivered. Jolene contrasted the San Juan group’s lack of capacity to capitalize on visits from foreigners with TelaMaya’s more developed volunteer program, which has allowed them to benefit from

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<sup>143</sup> Se ve muy mal. Como nos dijo, hay que ser profesional.

longer and more productive associations with foreigners. Thus far I have traced how voluntourists have left their mark on TelaMaya; I now discuss the influences flowing in the other direction.

### **“Learn Something About Guatemala”: Relationship Management and Other Lessons**

Colin McFarlane wrote, “Often, accounts of the politics of knowledge in development studies fail to adequately address how subaltern knowledge is translated and used in development strategies” (2006:36). This may be because subaltern knowledge does not look like what counts as knowledge to development professionals. While voluntourists have worked to bring TelaMaya’s operations in line with their notions of organized and professional practice, the officers have trained voluntourists in the vagaries of international development. Arguably, the greatest impact of any particular volunteer project tends to be experienced by the voluntourist, rather than the cooperative.

One of the local officers’ main concerns that the voluntourists generally did not share, at least initially, was that the cooperative members would become “*malacostumbradas*” (“spoiled”) by handouts. Worrying about their long-term relationships with their members, they tried to distribute windfall orders and charity so as to manage their members’ expectations. They needed to maintain control over the complex politics within a 400-member organization in which the fortune of each of the 17 member groups was tied to the whims of foreigners who bought their group’s particular products or donated scholarships or gifts for their group. The officers sought to avoid the appearance of favoritism for their home groups and family members. However, Roxana did feel tension with María because a major client gave work to the women in her home group rather than María’s group.

While they have become more “professional” (or perhaps, at times, simply more Westernized) in their dealings with clients and volunteers, the officers continue to run their internal operations with their member groups along Guatemalan lines. Relationships are essential to doing business in Guatemala. When Roxana brought volunteers shopping for thread, she made new lists for each shop to avoid revealing through the crossed-out purchases that she had visited other stores first, to show loyalty to their business relationships. Similarly, María explained to the volunteers that it would not be possible to work with new shops in Antigua: “They are jealous. The people at Colibrí do not know that we sell with Ojo Cósmico, and the people at Ojo Cósmico do not know that we sell in Colibrí.”<sup>144</sup> The officers also took advantage of the fact that volunteer coordinators were fleeing to save face with their local contacts. When they wanted to criticize the work done by their long-term tailor, Jorge, they attributed their criticisms to their “more demanding” foreign associates. Volunteer coordinator Sandrine was frustrated by business contacts like Jorge performing the same dance to save face with the cooperative: “I’m going to be really general here and say that Guatemalan men seem to have... amnesia. They have trouble remembering exactly what they promised you and what they said they would do.” Another volunteer coordinator, Sheryl, also conflicted with Jorge over a large export order: “The shop owner made a major mistake with the order and instead of being open to fixing the problem he decided to blame me and then insist that he did not want to work with me anymore.” The cooperative members treated volunteers with the same tact, valuing their relationships with volunteers over resolving minor disputes: when some money went missing after a volunteer had

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<sup>144</sup> Están celosos. Las personas de Colibri no saben que vendemos con Ojo Cosmico, y las personas de Ojo Cosmico no saben que vendemos con Colibri.

been working in the store, María told me not to ask the volunteer about it: “Better not to tell her anything, in case she gets angry.”<sup>145</sup>

María and Roxana trained their volunteers, the coordinators particularly, in how to do business in Guatemala. Once, when I was pressing Jorge the tailor to get an order done on time, I told him that client would be inclined to pay extra for a rapid delivery. María scolded, “You need to learn something about Guatemala. Guatemalans always want more. They want to take advantage of you.” Roxana explained that the tailor would expect his bonus, and that it would be better to offer a surprise bonus after some deliveries to keep the tailor motivated. They also rejected a previous volunteer coordinator’s offer to source fabrics to help facilitate an order on the grounds that the tailor could get a special discount with fabric stores. Jorge argued that Lindsay, TelaMaya’s major non-Spanish speaking client, needed to visit Guatemala herself to make her orders in person, rather than relying on volunteers to relay her information: “You are not going to be here in five years or 10 years. I have worked with some of these partners for 12 years. The Dutch and Swedes visited us; they came to get to know the store. They really know what it’s like here... You can’t speak [for her], because you don’t have the money; you’re just the intermediary. We need a work system. We need to communicate well.”<sup>146</sup> Jorge hoped to communicate to this client through the volunteer coordinators how he felt business should be done in Guatemala.

Hospitality was also an important aspect of business in Guatemala. Roxana admonished me that refreshments would not be sufficient for a meeting of the board of directors or general assembly: “You are not from here, but we know the people and they are not like you

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<sup>145</sup> Mejor no decir nada a ella, en caso de que se enoje.

<sup>146</sup> Usted no va a estar aquí en 5 años o 10 años. He trabajado con algunos de estos socios por 12 años. Las Holandesas y Suecas nos visitaron, vinieron a conocer la tienda. Saben bien como es aquí... Usted no puede decir, porque no tiene el pisto, solo es intermediario. Necesitamos un sistema de trabajar. Tenemos que comunicar bien.



[foreigners]. You fill up with a little cake, or maybe have other things to eat, but indigenous people are very hungry. They expect a big lunch when they are celebrating an event.”<sup>147</sup> In addition to meeting the minimum standards for hospitality, the indigenous officers took family relationships into account much more than foreign voluntourists in implementing programs.

When the voluntourists collected online donations to pay for an industrial sewing machine and training in product construction for cooperative members, the officers knew from an earlier failed attempt that the key to a successful training program would be convincing young, single women without family commitments to spend extended periods of time in the unfamiliar city of Quetzaltenango, and convincing their families to allow them to go. They offered the young women room and board during the training, because according to María, “TelaMaya spoiled the women in the past, and now they do not want to pay anything.”<sup>148</sup> However, they worried that they would provide free training to someone who would be unsuitable, or who would not work exclusively for TelaMaya. “Excuse me for saying it, and pardon me God, but we are not going to train a *paisana* [“peasant/country girl”],” María said. “It has to be someone who already knows a little about the technique.”<sup>149</sup> They promised to protect the young women’s safety and reputations, to address their mothers’ concerns. They also used religious idioms to exhort the young women to be grateful for the instruction and loyal to the organization. On completion, the officers planned an elaborate graduation ceremony for the families of the girls in the training program, who had been reluctant to let them participate.

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<sup>147</sup> No eres de aquí, pero conocemos a la gente y no son cómo ustedes. Ustedes se llenan con un poco de pastel, o tal vez tienen otras cosas que comer, pero la gente indígena tiene mucha hambre. Esperan un almuerzo grande cuando están celebrando un evento.

<sup>148</sup> TelaMaya las malacostumbró en el pasado, y ahora no quieren pagar nada.

<sup>149</sup> Discúlpame por decirlo, y perdóname Dios, pero no vamos a capacitar a una *paisana*. Tiene que ser alguien que ya sabe un poco de la técnica.

The management of the sewing training program illustrates how voluntourism in TelaMaya tended to work: the voluntourists brought in revenue and other resources, while the cooperative officers managed those resources using their knowledge of local expectations and concerns. The next section continues discussing the types of projects that voluntourists tended to pursue in TelaMaya, to analyze how placing organizational focus on voluntourists' motivations and goals can shape the kinds of projects that an NGO can accomplish.

### **Gaining Career Experience, Avoiding the Sun: The Gamut of Volunteer Projects**

Kate Simpson (2004) writes that voluntourism agencies tend to focus on good intentions and personal development (or individual advancement) rather than explicit development outcomes: the focus is on what voluntourists can do, and not on strategic planning to meet internally-determined needs. They talk of “making a difference” rather than using the word “development” per se, making the claim that what Third World places need is unskilled, short-term, foreign labor. The kind of projects that TelaMaya voluntourists generally took on reflect this attitude.

In a typical volunteer orientation meeting at TelaMaya, the volunteer coordinator attempted to ascertain the kind of work the volunteer would be happy doing. Through hundreds of hours of conversation with volunteers, I developed a clear impression of the kinds of projects volunteers were seeking. For many, the ideal volunteer project would contribute to their professional development by using their skills, bring them directly into contact with domains of indigenous life inaccessible to mainstream tourists, and produce a concrete product within the typical time frame for volunteering, approximately one month. For these reasons, the archetypal volunteer project was visiting the villages to photograph the women weaving or interview them about their lives. While most volunteers did not begin with a clear idea of the work they would

be doing, they seemed to have preconceived images of what that work would look like. Satirical online newspaper *The Onion* tackled this form of volunteer image-making with an article entitled “6-Day Visit To Rural African Village Completely Changes Woman’s Facebook Profile Picture.” The piece quotes a fictitious volunteer as saying that the experience of volunteering was transformative... of her self-

representation: “‘As soon as I walked into that dusty, remote town and the smiling children started coming up to me, I just knew my Facebook profile photo would change forever,’ said Fisher, noting that she realized early in her nearly weeklong visit just how narrow and unworldly her previous Facebook profile photos had been”



**Figure 4.1 My voluntourist profile picture**

(The Onion 2014). The dig is well-observed: TelaMaya volunteers were eager to take photographs that would look good on their social media profiles, embracing the cooperative’s leaders or adorable Guatemalan children or trying on indigenous dress.

Many volunteer projects involved online research, social media work, or client outreach, but since TelaMaya could not afford Internet service in the office, online work could be isolating. While computer work was highly beneficial to TelaMaya, voluntourists sometimes found it dissatisfying because it did not provide them with personal contact with Mayan weavers. Given voluntourists’ identities as “anti-tourists,” as discussed in **Chapter Three**, they sought to make a deeper connection with local people than would be possible doing mainstream tourists.

Spending time in cooperative members' home villages would verify the tourists' cultural immersion in a way that working on a computer in the office would not.

Many volunteers found routine errands such as mailing packages or buying materials exciting because they allowed them to explore their unfamiliar new environment. A French volunteer, Adeline, was delighted to go shopping for supplies for a sewing workshop. She said, "I love getting involved in the life of a people like this." It was also a sign of their importance when they were given the responsibility to make purchases on behalf of the cooperative. For instance, US volunteer Laura stated, "The women have come to trust me very quickly. I was sent on an important errand to buy thread, and I only came back with half of the order because I didn't think the other color was right. They took my word at that." However, seemingly basic errands were difficult for volunteers with limited language skills or local knowledge. As a German volunteer stated, "Planning an event in a country that is new to you presents many challenges. Something as simple as knowing where to buy streamers (or what streamers are called in Spanish!) becomes an obstacle." Activities that would be simple for local employees challenged foreigners daily. Volunteer coordinator Sheryl saw these stresses as part of cross-cultural work: "Living and working abroad takes the regular stresses of life and magnifies them. And no matter how long I am international, how many countries and cultures I live in, the various jobs I hold, or how adjusted I get to being an ex-pat there is always one bad day that makes me think of going home early and burning my passport." Sheryl pointed out that, while volunteer work may be a touristic activity, it can also be stressful. Volunteers seeking to benefit professionally from their work by taking on greater responsibilities also took on the stresses associated with professional work.

Viewing volunteering as an opportunity for professional development, many voluntourists were eager to have defined responsibilities and roles. They wanted their work to easily translate into “resumé-speak,” with titles other than “volunteer” and specific accomplishments that they could highlight during their time with TelaMaya. Volunteers were happier and more productive when they had the sense that their work was important to the cooperative, and especially when they could use special skills and training from their educational or professional background to contribute to the organization. Volunteer coordinators particularly viewed their commitment to TelaMaya as a serious, professional one. French volunteer coordinator Sandrine felt it was a high-stress position:

I started on Monday and the Volunteer Coordinator i.e. the boss, left on Wednesday. After a couple of days of training which involved a lot of discussions about the problems TelaMaya encounters (finance, management, lack of training, communication issues...), I became the new Project Manager. My job is simple: find solutions to all these issues so TelaMaya can survive... No pressure though, it's Guatemala!

While she thought of her work as a job, Sandrine’s closing remark references the attitude common among volunteers that Guatemala is a place where they can learn, experiment, and make mistakes without consequences.

Volunteers became frustrated when they felt they were not given enough to do. A new volunteer, Alissa, related that she went to Nicaragua to volunteer with an organic farm for a month. She had the idea that she would be given important responsibilities, such as developing a website for the organization; however, when she arrived, they said that she was welcome to work alongside the other farm workers if she was so inclined, weeding and harvesting vegetables, but did not appear to need help in that area. Disillusioned, she left the organization early, coming to work with TelaMaya. A middle-aged volunteer, Jerry, grew bored with his first volunteer placement in an afterschool program and was directed to TelaMaya by the staff at volunteer

placement organization EntreMundos when he asked for a volunteer opportunity where he could make a substantial contribution in a short time.

The officers observed that some of the volunteers were averse to certain kinds of work. Once, an inaccurate zipper inventory created problems for a wholesale export client. Roxana admitted that she had left the task up to volunteers: “I’m not telling you to offend you, but it seems to me like foreigners don’t like to count. I’ve seen when they’re warping looms and they don’t want to count the threads,”<sup>150</sup> she said, imitating a weaving student reluctantly and inattentively counting. On another occasion, Roxana griped that a pair of young female volunteers had refused to post flyers around town, saying that “their skin is very delicate and they can’t go out in the sun.”<sup>151</sup> While Roxana and María considered flyer-ing the quintessential volunteer activity, and it was always their first suggestion for short-term volunteers with limited skills, many volunteers considered it a low-prestige activity and preferred other tasks.

There were some exceptions to the rule that volunteers prefer to use their skills: in one case, an engineer from the US asked for a boring project that would take advantage of her tolerance for mindless, repetitive tasks. Similarly, a Dutch designer’s gaze began drifting out of focus when she heard about TelaMaya’s design goals. She was on vacation and did not want to feel like she was back home at the office; she wanted to do mindless physical labor that would be a welcome change from her usual creative work. A US volunteer named Laura described herself as a “Jack of all trades, ace of none,” stating that she spoke Spanish and would be happy doing anything that needed doing around the office: “I don’t want to do this just to feel good about myself. If there’s something that needs doing and somebody has to do it, even if it’s boring, I

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<sup>150</sup> Es culpa también de nosotros, porque dejamos otros a contar. No te digo para ofenderte, pero me parece que a los extranjeros no les gusta contar. He visto cuando están hurdiendo y no quieren contar los hilos.

<sup>151</sup> que su piel es muy delicada y no pueden salir en el sol.

don't mind." Some volunteers viewed flexibility in their expectations for a project as part of their ethical commitment to the organization.

Given TelaMaya's reliance on volunteer labor, volunteer preferences and aversions tended to shape the projects and initiatives that got accomplished and those that did not. They have tended to privilege information-gathering trips to members' villages, rather than the more intensive and less immediately rewarding project of systematically making new business contacts. For TelaMaya, the advantages to using volunteer labor included their mobilizable technical skills and their transported local knowledge about customers' tastes and expectations in their home countries; however, voluntourists' lack of knowledge about Guatemala made seemingly basic tasks difficult and time-consuming for them. As the examples described here suggest, labor falls into the nether zone between work and volunteering typically occupied by internships (in which work is both taken seriously as a professional experience and dismissed as unimportant, and the focus is on the development of the individual worker). The professionalization or "NGOization" of aid work may reduce this space that voluntourists occupy between tourists and development workers. However, the expansion of the demand for the civil sector as a whole under neoliberalism ensures that there is plenty of demand for voluntourists.

### **"I Don't Trust People Anymore": Issues with Volunteers and Clients**

The most pervasive issue that the cooperative administration had with volunteers was their tendency to waste resources on unfinished projects. The officers have grown weary of having their expectations raised by well-meaning volunteers who have promised to raise funds, contact new clients, or create new publicity, leaving them to deal with the aftermath of half-finished and constantly repeated projects. This history of disappointment has led the cooperative administration to take a conservative approach to new ideas and to encourage volunteers to

“think small” in their projects. For example, US volunteer Rosalyn said that she wanted to do five projects: enhancing social media, grant writing, blogging, writing publicity articles, and gathering member information. She was planning to volunteer for a total of 36 hours over a month, and I said that focusing on social media might be an appropriate plan for that amount of time. Disappointed, she asked, “Is that not a lot of time?” Rosalyn’s ambition for her volunteering was extreme, but many volunteers underestimated the difficulty of the projects they were undertaking. The fair trade certification process was a case study in duplication of effort. In 2012, Serena, a French volunteer who had volunteered in Bolivia for three months helping a cooperative get fair trade certified to sell potatoes, offered to take on the certification process for TelaMaya as well. Roxana told Serena that they had tried three times before to get fair trade certification but that each time they had fallen short because the volunteers had had to leave without seeing the project through, often because they did not speak Spanish.

This lack of follow-through in projects and the endless cycle of volunteers damaged relations between the TelaMaya administration and the 17 weaving groups. In the summer of 2010, a group of volunteers sought to update the cooperative’s information about its membership, to move beyond the estimate of “400 weavers” to actual numbers to use in grant applications. The volunteers considered this project imperative to raise money for the cooperative and to make the organization conform to their understandings of an effective organization (how could an organization be effective without knowing how many members it has in this era of data-driven management?). A volunteer named Ashley described their goals for the project in a note on social media:

Knowing the true facts and figures about our cooperative would enable TelaMaya to receive money from grants (as it currently does not) and help us with becoming fair trade certified by different organizations around the world. Our objectives for the day were to



perform a sort of mini-census to satisfy those requirements and also inquire about more emotional issues; the things that customers of TelaMaya ask us about the weavers.

While the volunteers were very clear on their goals for the project, they had a difficult time communicating these goals to the women in the villages. As Ashley writes, a group of five volunteers, only one of whom spoke Spanish at a high intermediate level, visited the “relatively isolated” village. They asked individual women for demographic information, as well as statements about how they felt about backstrap weaving and belonging to TelaMaya. The voluntourists found the language barriers a challenge, as they needed to relay the questions in Spanish to the group representative, who would translate them into K’iche. The women were also self-conscious about being asked about their language skills and education.

During their visit, the volunteers experienced an encounter that is common in voluntourism: a woman told Ashley that she was “very poor” and asked her for money. Ashley stated,

It’s really hard when something like that happens because we want that these women understand that our goal as volunteers is to support them in whatever way we can through our work for TelaMaya and to increase their business. It was important for us to explain that we were asking them all of these questions for the purpose of getting them more funding and making TelaMaya more successful overall; especially since them talking to us meant time away from their work and family responsibilities. Sometimes it’s difficult to see the big picture, but TelaMaya is meant to be a sustainable way for these women to earn a living wage. Putting all of our energy towards supporting TelaMaya is what will help these women, not a one-time act of giving them some cash.

The direct request for money made Ashley feel uncomfortable because she was confronted directly with the difference between her situation and that of the woman that she was helping. Money is not supposed to enter directly into the voluntouristic relationship: while everyone knows that the volunteers have spent money to travel, and are investing their time, and often money, in unpaid activities, the mention of money is taboo. Volunteers pride themselves on their

generosity but feel that community members are taking advantage of their goodwill when they ask directly for money.

Ashley felt that the visit was a success: “Overall the women were very gracious and appreciated our visit. They seemed eager to share their experiences and opinions and they told us that being a part of TelaMaya has been positive and rewarding. We hope that we are helping them find a voice.” While the volunteers viewed the interaction as a positive one, they were unaware that, because they visited some of the groups that are the most accessible from the cooperative’s central office in Quetzaltenango, they were retreading ground that had recently been covered by other volunteers who had attempted and failed to complete the information-gathering project. These groups were bemused that teams of voluntourists would periodically arrive to ask them questions, seemingly unaware that they had recently answered similar questions; they began doubting that their interviews were being put to good use. Due to their proximity to the central office and their ties to the organization’s officers, the groups in San Martín Sacatepequez, Nahualá, and Sololá have received the most attention from volunteers; representatives from these groups contacted the officers to ask them to stop sending volunteers to interview them. A lack of follow-through and communication, and subsequent duplication of effort on the part of the volunteers, led to tensions between the groups, the central administration, and the volunteers.

Communication between volunteers and cooperative leaders and members often failed. A volunteer from the Czech Republic, Lucija, took photographs of children from a local afterschool program modeling TelaMaya products for the new catalog. María and Paula complained about Lucija removing so many products from the shop to take pictures and returning them dirty. Paula asked, “Why is she taking all the pictures with children? We’re going to have a catalog full of

children. How ugly!"<sup>152</sup> I replied, "If you don't like the photos or style, you have to say so. It's your catalog."<sup>153</sup> María asked, "Is it hers?"<sup>154</sup> and Roxana clarified, "No, it's ours."<sup>155</sup> María said, "We can't say anything, because Sandrine [the volunteer coordinator] will get angry."<sup>156</sup> The officers were totally disconnected from this volunteer project, to the extent that they were unaware of the purpose of removing products from the store to photograph them. The volunteers at the time were convinced that they had effectively discussed their plans for creating a new catalog with the officers, but María felt that they could not even mention their concerns about the project to Sandrine, the volunteer coordinator, for fear of offending her. The officers were also frustrated with the lack of communication with a fashion design volunteer, who cut up finished products rather than lengths of fabric and did not leave behind patterns for the cooperative: "She was a designer but on her own account, not for TelaMaya,"<sup>157</sup> complained Paula. Roxana concurred: "You shouldn't trust people. I don't trust people anymore."<sup>158</sup> Through their inexperience with development work in Guatemala or their haste to achieve results, volunteers sometimes made understandable but costly errors, as when a volunteer coordinator pressed TelaMaya's tailor for an estimate of how much fabric he needed for a product and miscalculated how much to order for a client. María attributed the error to volunteers' urgency: "Sometimes the volunteers want things quickly quickly."<sup>159</sup>

The rotating population of volunteers also made it difficult to maintain long-term relationships with other organizations in Xela, as volunteers have created contacts that have not

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<sup>152</sup> ¿Y por qué está tomando todas las fotos con niños? Vamos a tener un catálogo llena de niños... ¡Qué feo!

<sup>153</sup> Si no les gustan las fotos o el estilo, tienen que decirlo. Es su catálogo.

<sup>154</sup> ¿Es de ella?

<sup>155</sup> No, es de nosotros.

<sup>156</sup> No podemos decir nada, porque Sandrine va a enojarse.

<sup>157</sup> Era diseñadora pero para su propia cuenta, no para TelaMaya. No dejó nada.

<sup>158</sup> No hay que confiar en la gente. Yo si ya no confío en la gente. Mira los voluntarios dijeron que iban a hacer el inventario y sólo se quedaron baboseando en la tienda.

<sup>159</sup> A veces los voluntarios quieren cosas rápido rápido.

been maintained after they leave. In addition, volunteers have made promises on behalf of the organization that it has been unable to keep. Roxana recounted, “[A Spanish school] said that once a volunteer with TelaMaya deceived them and that they don’t want anything more to do with us.”<sup>160</sup> The volunteer had promised that a TelaMaya representative would go to the school to show a movie and bring the students to the TelaMaya office, but this service was interrupted when she left. When volunteers representing an organization like TelaMaya are unreliable, they can damage its reputation permanently.

The volunteer program has also created dependency, because the officers have relied on volunteers to speak English and use the Internet. Roxana came to realize that her interest in learning English was low, because she had not learned the language despite volunteers’ offers to teach her. Volunteers also encouraged the officers to use the Internet to expand their horizons and gain a better sense of the contours of the international market for handicrafts. US volunteer Jolene told María, “When we speak with clients, we’re going to say that we’re not fools, that we know that Indians are charging x amount. Information is power.”<sup>161</sup> María agreed that it would be “good to know”<sup>162</sup> but using the Internet was not a priority for her, because the volunteers were the ones who knew about such things. Jolene moved on to exhorting Roxana, as the younger officer, to use the Internet: “You need to learn to use the Internet to do research. The Internet is the great equalizer, because we can know how they are selling in other places.”<sup>163</sup> Despite the volunteers’ occasional urgings, María and Roxana viewed the Internet as primarily

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<sup>160</sup> [A Spanish school] dijo que una vez una voluntaria con TelaMaya les engañó y que ya no quieren saber nada de nosotros.

<sup>161</sup> Cuando hablamos con clientes, vamos a decir que no somos tontas, que sabemos que los indios están cobrando eso. La información es poder.

<sup>162</sup> Es bueno saber.

<sup>163</sup> Ustedes tienen que aprender a usar el internet para hacer investigaciones. El internet es el gran equalizador [sic], porque podemos saber cómo están vendiendo en otros lados.

the domain of the volunteers. The cooperative's dependency on volunteers to coordinate with foreign wholesale clients also made it vulnerable to cooptation by volunteers that did not share its operating philosophy, as described in the following section.

### ***Así Son Los Hombres* (“That’s What Men Are Like”): Identity-Based Conflicts**

In several incidents, the dynamics between foreign male volunteers and the cooperative's female indigenous officers underscored how patriarchal and imperialistic attitudes tend to be intertwined. Holst-Petersen and Rutherford (1986) refer to these intersectional forms of oppression as “double colonization,” arguing that women experience both male domination and colonial domination. The most striking example of how patriarchy and empire can structure voluntouristic relationships was Frank, a retired contractor for the US military, who served as the volunteer coordinator for two months in May and June of 2011. I met him one month into his tenure when I came back to the field after my first research trip. Frank was a complex person, whose belief in radical social justice and market equality coexisted with an imperialistic approach to aid. A tall, wiry, deeply-tanned Texan with an intense gaze, Frank had an aggressive physicality and confrontational manner that intimidated me and cowed the officers. He loomed over us, leaning slightly into our personal space and always standing even if the person he was addressing was seated. Frank declared that in his first month as volunteer coordinator, he had solved the two main problems at TelaMaya: the inability to receive money from PayPal and the high cost of shipping small orders. Without informing the cooperative administration, he was funneling online payments through his personal PayPal account. He explained, “I don’t have to tell them what I’m doing, because it’s in their best interest. They’ll be happy enough when they

get the money.” He also created an independent wholesale website called Xela Direct to aggregate small orders, where he would be “the captain of the boat.”<sup>164</sup>

On my first day back at TelaMaya, María pulled me aside: “You should know that we have a problem with Frank. He does not understand that we need help. He has rejected people who wanted to be volunteers... I told Frank but he did not listen to me. We are a bit afraid of Frank. Please speak with him.”<sup>165</sup> Guatemalan women like the TelaMaya officers tend to take an indirect approach to conflict, hesitating to openly criticize the work of volunteers. The cooperative leaders often asked me and other foreign women they trusted to confront people for them, because we had “strong personalities.” They sent me to collect a bill from a delinquent local client because they felt that I would be able to pressure him more effectively than they would. They did not necessarily mean it as a compliment: the officers also referred to problematic volunteers—like Frank—who were overly aggressive or brusque for the local context as having a “strong personality” (*un carácter fuerte*). Some of these “strong” volunteers, male and female alike, intimidated the TelaMaya officers with their aggressive personalities. According to María, African-American volunteer coordinator Sheryl, who had an energetic and brash demeanor, was “harsh”<sup>166</sup> and had “a very strong personality.”<sup>167</sup> Sheryl would get annoyed if they bothered her when she was working on her computer. One day she came in to the office in a bad mood and yelled at them, returning later to apologize. María commented, “The other volunteers did not have patience; they would scold us, saying, *You messed up*.”<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Soy el capitán del barco.

<sup>165</sup> Fíjate que tenemos un problema con Frank. El no entiende que necesitamos ayuda. Ha rechazado personas que querían ser voluntarios... Le dije a Frank pero no me hizo caso. Tenemos un poco de miedo de Frank. Por favor, habla con él.

<sup>166</sup> amarga

<sup>167</sup> un carácter muy fuerte

<sup>168</sup> los otros voluntarios no tenían paciencia, estaban regañándonos, diciendo *te fallaste, no es así*.

When I told a fellow volunteer coordinator at another organization that the TelaMaya officers did not seem to mind working with domineering volunteers, she replied, “Well, of course they didn't mind, because they're Guatemalan women and they've been bossed around their whole lives.” In her organization, the “natural order” of gendered power relationships was disrupted when young female, foreign volunteers attempted to give orders to older, male Guatemalan employees, causing tension within the organization.

Similarly, in this case the dynamic between Frank and the cooperative's officers and volunteers was structured by his identity as a retired, white, Texan, businessman with a domineering personality, and his perception of the officers as indigenous Mayan women with little business experience, and the volunteers as naïve young girls (the other volunteers all happened to be under 25 and female at that time). He described himself as “old and crotchety” and impatient with idealistic volunteers who would only come for a week, with no special skills. This attitude drove away a volunteer who had been designing a webpage for TelaMaya: “Poor thing, that girl. She left for fear of Frank,”<sup>169</sup> shared María. With the volunteers, whom he viewed as ineffective, bothersome partners, he was authoritative and dismissive; with the cooperative's officers, whom he viewed as clients of the NGO rather than partners, he was gentle and paternalistic. As a businessman he claimed the expertise to decide what TelaMaya needed, and dismissed the cooperative officers' decades of experience running the cooperative: “I'll respect the opinions that deserve respect. They don't know anything about business— that's why they've been around since 1988 and they still haven't gotten anywhere. María, she's political— she manipulates people. But she's no businesswoman and she doesn't understand anything about how to sell. Roxana is quite frankly smarter and better able to handle the business.” Frank argued

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<sup>169</sup> Pobrecita la chica. Por miedo de Frank se fue. Por pena de Frank.

that the best political system for the world would be a “benevolent dictator” who would enforce equality, but assured the volunteers, “I don’t want to make myself the King of TelaMaya or anything like that.”

His actions caused tension with Ingrid, a Swedish wholesale client who had been working with TelaMaya for five years. She often became frustrated at the need to work through volunteers as intermediaries, because the officers did not check the email. She spoke Spanish and had always wanted to work directly with the cooperative leaders. Frank stated, “Ingrid and I have a tenuous relationship at this point because she knows I don’t approve of the women working for less than slave wages.” Frank and María both told me that he had had an email altercation with Ingrid, in which he expressed his disapproval of her pricing scheme, calling it exploitative. She told him that he did not understand what it takes to run a sustainable fair trade business, given the competition from lower-priced Asian markets, and encouraged him to work with her towards their common goal of creating business opportunities for TelaMaya. He showed me an email that she had written to him:

Promise me that you will do nothing, until you first have spoken to Roxana and María about it. One problem that we have had during the years are volunteers at TelaMaya doing what they think is right, or a good idea, and in reality they don’t have neither the knowledge of what will happen to the women nor the right to make such things. You have to remember that it all has to be sanctioned within the coop, because they are the ones who need to make it last, and make it work for all 400 women. What María and Roxana need are people to support their efforts to run TelaMaya, and come up with good ideas and solutions that they can implement in running TelaMaya, as I think that you have an idea to do. Many of the other volunteers have run their own race and then there has been many mistakes and trouble that could have been avoided, if they just had spoken to María or Roxana (and please ask them if you don’t believe me... there are plenty of stories). So that is all I ask of you, to keep them in the loop, and be sure that they know, and support, everything.



Roxana recounted that Ingrid called her directly and swore, “*It’s shit. The volunteers always change, and I am tired of always explaining things.* She says that we need to learn to use the Internet.”<sup>170</sup>

I confronted Frank about my concerns that he was making unilateral decisions for the cooperative without informing them of his actions. He told me to let someone with business experience do the thinking. I found his attitude towards the cooperative imperialistic, and Frank retorted,

You’re damn right it’s imperialistic, and I don’t see a problem with that. My goal is to help the rural women who are making 22 cents an hour, and the best way to do that is to make the decisions for them. I’m not going to consult with them on the marketing and merchandising. They don’t know anything about that. That’s not how it’s done in the business world.

At the heart of Frank’s conflict with the officers of TelaMaya was his focus on helping “Mayan weavers” as a social category, rather than respecting the organization as an institution with its own practices and goals. María’s main concern with his business plan for Xela Direct was that he was planning on passing the majority of the sale price on to the weaver, giving only 10% of the money to TelaMaya as an organization for their overhead costs. Frank responded, “I didn’t come here to work for TelaMaya, I came here to help Guatemalan Mayan weavers. There’s plenty of other Mayan weavers who need my help... I’m a volunteer; I don’t need this.” This essentialized view of Mayan women shows the categorical thinking that structured Frank’s relationship with the TelaMaya leaders, a form of paternalistic interventionism rooted in both colonialism and patriarchy.

My interference in this situation on behalf of the officers reveals the many layered, gendered power relations between Frank and me, Frank and the officers, and the officers and me.

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<sup>170</sup> ‘*Es una mierda. Siempre cambian los voluntarios, y estoy cansada de siempre explicarles las cosas.*’ Dice que tenemos que aprender a usar el Internet.

He sought to intimidate me by placing his years of experience in the textile industry against my youth and lack of business-oriented knowledge. He also invoked his relationship with the women by claiming that my interference would cause him to take the help he was offering elsewhere. I confronted him based on my conversations with the officers and our preexisting relationship, as well as the thought that Frank would see my criticism as more worthy of attention than the subtler attempts of the officers in a language whose nuances he had not mastered. My instinct to speak for the TelaMaya officers was a problematic one that speaks to the difficulty of stepping back and giving historically oppressed people the space to do their own speaking.

María comforted me after my conflict with Frank, using a phrase that I would hear repeated many times during my fieldwork: “*Así son los hombres*. [That is what men are like.] As women, we have to bear them.”<sup>171</sup> This recurring phrase speaks to women’s tendency to resignation in the face of male transgressions. María told me and a professor from North Dakota visiting the shop that she did not like his attitude: “It’s different to work with men than with women... I told him that we understand each other as woman to woman.”<sup>172</sup> The professor agreed, “Businessmen can be like that. They always think about efficiency and push and push. It’s very *gringo*, isn’t it?”<sup>173</sup> A volunteer named Wendy also viewed Frank as having a mentality incompatible with fair trade principles: “I think he’s just a businessman, and he thinks in capitalist terms. He doesn’t understand that this is a different type of business.” This differing mindset to which they referred was a focus on narrowly-defined economic priorities of efficiency

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<sup>171</sup> Cómo mujeres, tenemos que aguantarlos.

<sup>172</sup> No me gusta su actitud con nosotras. Le dije, no tienes que chocar con ella [me] en la calle, porque ella es muy buena con nosotras. Me duele mucho el corazón por eso. Mejor que digamos, *Gracias por el tiempo que estuviste con nosotras, nos vayamos y mandemos otras personas a trabajar en la oficina*. Es muy diferente trabajar con mujeres que con hombres. Le dije a Frank que confiamos en ti y tu confías en nosotros. Le dije que nos entendemos entre mujer y mujer.

<sup>173</sup> Los hombres de negocio pueden ser así. Siempre piensan en la eficaz y empujan y empujan. Es muy gringo, ¿no?

and production. Despite its seeming neutrality, this capitalistic perspective has a highly gendered dimension. While women have been positioned as the ideal neoliberal subjects whose productive capacity can be perfected through their docility and adaptability, those whose ethnic difference makes them difficult to discipline become subject to “the exclusionary politics of neoliberal subjectivities” (Scharff 2014). According to Christina Scharff (2014), “this positioning rests on processes of abjection of those who are regarded as insufficiently ambitious and autonomous [that] tend to privilege particularly classed and racialised subjects, thereby reproducing existing power hierarchies.” By rejecting the officers’ authority over their own cooperative on the basis of their lack of professionalism—their unsuitability as neoliberal subjects—Frank was enacting these processes of exclusion.

While the leaders of TelaMaya were intimidated by Frank, they were not stripped of their ability to act. María passively resisted Frank. Saying “Frank thinks that I am ‘*inefficient*,’ that only Roxana can do business,”<sup>174</sup> María pretended not to know where to find the purchase orders from TelaMaya’s biggest client when he asked for them. She also told me with a twinkle in her eye, like she was doing something naughty, that she would tell him that they did not have enough money to continue paying for his Internet USB. Her strategy of small acts of obstruction was also one that the cooperative members would use with their male household members, expressing non-cooperation through incomplete performance of household tasks or incommunicativeness, the “arts of resistance” used by subordinated people (Scott 1990). The subtlety of this veiled resistance was largely lost on Frank, who did not spend much time in the office. María was losing sleep over the situation, but stated that, “as president of the cooperative, I have the responsibility to look out for the women of the organization.”<sup>175</sup> Acting on behalf of

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<sup>174</sup> Frank piensa que soy ‘*ineficiente*,’ que sólo Roxana puede hacer el negocio.

<sup>175</sup> Como presidenta de la cooperativa, tengo la responsabilidad de velar por las mujeres de la organización.

the other women, Roxana and María told Frank about these concerns. In the end, he decided to leave TelaMaya on his own, saying he did not believe in their work anymore: “They aren’t helping 400 women, there’s no way: maybe they’re helping the women in the groups from Sololá and San Martín, but the numbers just don’t add up.” María dismissed Frank as an ineffective volunteer: “He wants to do many things, but in the end he did nothing for us. Nothing.”<sup>176</sup> The experience confirmed her inclination to work with female volunteers: “Women understand each other, but a man, no. Him, worse.”<sup>177</sup>

The incident with Frank highlights how the cooperative’s power structure, which left many vitally important duties, including marketing and international client relations, to the volunteer coordinator, made it vulnerable to exploitation. Despite his good intentions, his interactions with the cooperative members were ultimately detrimental to their organizational mission. He wanted to import what he considered to be an effective business model—efficient compartmentalization in which he would be given a significant amount of leeway for initiative—into an organization that had historically operated through consultation and consensus. However, I would argue that this conflict was not simply ideological in nature but based in patriarchal and colonial domination: Frank’s intersectional privilege based in his masculinity, Americanness, and whiteness left him convinced that his decisions would be the best ones for the cooperative and blinded him to the officers’ doubts and worries.<sup>178</sup> The tense situation with Frank outstripped the officers’ usual methods for controlling their volunteers, including informal conversations, formal meetings, and emotional appeals, and left them asking foreign volunteers to intervene; it

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<sup>176</sup> Quiere hacer muchas cosas, pero al final no hizo nada para nosotros. Nada.

<sup>177</sup> Las mujeres nos comprenden, pero un hombre, no. Él, peor.

<sup>178</sup> Of course, it is important to point out here that the TelaMaya officers have had good working relationships with male voluntourists whose personalities fit well with their indirect approach to conflict.

also forced them to use a more confrontational approach than they usually use and to consider formalizing procedures for dismissing a volunteer.

## **Conclusion**

As the preceding examples show, TelaMaya's frictions with international voluntourists arose from differing systems of value, differing understandings of business, and differing attitudes towards organization, growth and development, and competition that cannot be reduced to epistemological differences between Western and non-Western cultures. Sometimes these interactions have been productive for the growth of both the cooperative and volunteers; at other times, they have been frustrating and destabilizing to the point that Roxana says that she "doesn't trust [her] own shadow" anymore. The comparative lack of structure in the volunteer program may actually have been an advantage in some ways, in that it could respond flexibly to the needs of the Mayan women in charge of the cooperative. Due to its simple structure and low level of institutionalization, the volunteers were accountable directly to the cooperative's leaders, and the Mayan women exerted their influence over the volunteers through their everyday conversations. As long as their relationships with volunteers were functional and respectful, this gave them more agency within their organization than they would have had if they were partnered with an international NGO to fulfill the same needs. The cooperative's officers managed a complex set of power relationships between themselves, the voluntourists, the clients, and the members. While this balancing act was often successful, they sometimes came up against the reality that none of the other groups were under their control. This chapter used the story of a conflict with a problematic volunteer to highlight the complexity of the day-to-day interactions between cooperative officers and voluntourists. The incident with an older, white, Texan male volunteer

who quit before being fired is an extreme case of some of the power dynamics that constantly operate on a less dramatic level within the volunteer program.

Many authors have suggested that neoliberalism transforms the relationship between people and their labor. Trevor Parfitt and Jay Wysocki (2012:40) claimed, “Under neoliberalism work becomes labour, just another commodity in the global market... Work has no normative, social or emancipatory value, its only utility to the worker being the wage that s/he earns from it.” The notion that neoliberalism has stripped work of its connection to human relationships and social meaning would seem to be rather an overstatement in TelaMaya. Voluntourists at TelaMaya invest their work with meaning because it is essential to enacting the identities they have chosen as volunteer tourists and fulfilling their goals of having a transformative experience. One of the meanings being (re)negotiated in these interactions was professionalism: volunteers attempted to be professional as they understood it (e.g. showing up to meetings on time) just as the cooperative leaders attempted to be professional according to their own understandings (e.g. conducting meetings formally). In doing so, they were establishing their identities as professional people and not simply tourists or beneficiaries of the organization.

## Chapter Five: The Production of Cosmopolitanism in Voluntourism

TelaMaya vice president Roxana tended to use comparisons with foreign volunteers to reflect upon her relationships with people in her own community: “The majority of people (*la gente*) are [selfish], but as I see it, with foreigners it’s really different and that’s good, right? Because as I’ve seen... we’ve shared with people like that and the truth is it’s very different.” Her work with the cooperative had given her a chance to interact with foreigners and observe them directly on a daily basis. From the connections she has made with her foreign coworkers, she has drawn conclusions about foreign cultures that have allowed her to visualize alternatives, just as the anthropological project has always been a utopian search for humanity’s possibilities. Constructing an imaginary of foreigners as more giving, more supportive, more oriented towards global issues, or more egalitarian in their gendered relationships was a way of thinking through the aspects of her own culture that she found stifling or unproductive. It was also a way of seeing her own culture through new eyes, given her observation that foreigners tended to appreciate Mayan culture more than locals: “They also really value what we, the women, do. They really like to know about the culture, what the ancestors did, what life was like, what life is like now, before, and the truth is that that’s really good. However, Guatemalans, what does it matter to them? Sometimes they don’t want to hear what has happened to someone. [...] Like I say sometimes to my children, to people, the ones who’ve helped TelaMaya the most are foreign people.”<sup>179</sup> Like Roxana, volunteer tourists were also gazing upon the practices of the Other and

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<sup>179</sup> La mayoría de la gente es así [egoísta], pero como yo miro con los extranjeros es muy diferente y eso es muy bueno ¿verdad? Verdad. Porque como he visto... hemos compartido con gente así y la verdad que es muy diferente. Valoran mucho también lo que nosotros las mujeres hacemos. Ellos les gusta mucho... saber sobre la cultura, que han hecho los antepasados, como fue la vida, como es la vida de ahora, la de antes, la verdad eso es muy bueno. En cambio nosotros los Guatemaltecos, ¿qué le importa? ... A veces no quieren escuchar lo que a uno ha pasado pues. ... Así como digo yo, le digo yo a veces a mis hijos, a la gente va, que más lo que han apoyado a TelaMaya es gente extranjero. Aquí Guatemaltecos, no creo.

reflecting upon what their similarities and differences might mean as part of their endeavor to gain knowledge through their touristic experiences. This chapter will examine these intersecting gazes and how Guatemalan Mayan women and international voluntourists alike used their contact to develop more cosmopolitan subjectivities.

The first section briefly reviews literature on tourism as an ethnic encounter. The second section examines volunteer tourists' ethnographic impulses and their critiques of Guatemalan culture as well as their own. An analysis of the cooperative members' return gaze follows, focusing on how their modes of gazing resembled and differed from those of tourists. The next section deals with how voluntourists were inserted into preexisting local power relationships and how cooperative members attempted to imbue themselves with some of their privilege by proxy. The last part analyzes how TelaMaya members used their acquaintance with tourists to critique Guatemalan culture, picking up the theme that the lasting echoes of the civil war have led to a mutual distrust and internally-focused prejudice. It also passes briefly through the concept of colonial mentality to look at how auto critique is part of the process of comparative analysis and openness to cultural difference that comes along with developing cosmopolitanism.

### **The Formation of Ethnotouristic Communities and Cosmopolitanism**

Scholars argue that ethnic differentiation takes place through "collective self-reflexivity" as groups distinguish themselves—at the group level in distinction to other groups—through their choices of dress, speech, belief, and other signals (Barth 1969:15; MacCannell 1984:377). Rodrigo de Azeredo Grünwald (2006:142-143) wrote that this process of ethnic differentiation and boundary creation is crucial to the branding of place for the purposes of tourism: "The construction, promotion, or strengthening of distinguishing features that characterize and define culturally a people, is the very stuff of what ethnicity is made of[:] the various ways that



boundaries are built between social groups in a manner that come to be defined as ethnic.”

Liesbeth Valkeners argued that tourism constitutes an ethnic interchange between groups that coalesce as “Western tourists” and “locals” (2007:51). While they may differ significantly in their backgrounds and trajectories, tourists are unified by their position in relation to the host culture and often prefer to band together for comfort in the face of an unfamiliar situation. In the Guatemalan context, *gringos* working with Mayan communities often define themselves against Ladinos (especially privileged Ladinos) and believe that their good intentions give them more of a right to access Mayan communities than Ladinos should have: “This identification in turn includes solidarity among gringos, a collective identity of sameness that partly absorbs the shock of relating with so much difference” (Nelson 1999:50). My understanding of these usages of the term “groups” is not that such groups are internally homogeneous nor that they are necessarily pre-existing; rather, that certain markers that differentiate the group from other groups are invoked to create an identity that may be temporary and linked to this particular time and space, such as that of the “volunteer” or “cooperative leader.”

Mary Louise Pratt (1992:4) applied the term “contact zones” to “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination—like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today.” Within contact zones, the groups who come into contact mutually constitute each other through “co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt 1992:7). She adopts the term “transculturation” (Pratt 1992:6) for these processes of mutual influence and co-production, which differs from “transnationalism” in belonging to a particular space and time. Voluntourism in TelaMaya created such a contact zone, a shifting, fluid space of encounter in

which voluntourists and the Mayan cooperative leaders who had the most contact with them defined themselves and their groups through processes of contrast and differentiation.<sup>180</sup>

Grünewald (2006:157) argues that tourists and the locals who regularly interact with them come to constitute an emergent “ethnotouristic community” with its own norms and practices. His observation that the changes that tourism causes to ethnicity may not extend to all members of an ethnic group, instead registering primarily among those who have the most sustained contact with them, resonates with my observations in TelaMaya. One of the effects of the creation of a micro-ethnotouristic community within the organization was to constitute two groups (voluntourists and cooperative members) out of otherwise heterogeneous collections of people. The cooperative as an organization was cross-cut by interpersonal conflicts, ethnolinguistic group tensions, and shifting allegiances at different levels of leadership (see Appendix Two). However, in relating to tourists/voluntourists, they often identified as “weavers,” with their commonalities coming to the fore more often than their differences. This tendency was even more noticeable among the team of voluntourists, marked through the exclusionary aside, when voluntourists would shift from speaking Spanish to speaking their shared language, English, to

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<sup>180</sup> Within the literature on tourism, spaces of contact have been referred to as touristic “borderzones” (Bruner 2005). However, Bruner focuses on borderzones as spaces of performativity, spaces through which people move that are separated from daily life. He argues that the touristic borderzone is a constructed “performative space within which tourists and locals meet” (Bruner 2005:232). While he draws from Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1987) notion of the borderzone, he focuses not on the metaphorical geographic border between countries but the space created by a constant but ever-changing flow of tourists. Borderzones comprise any sites in which tourists and hosts interact, such as artisan markets, hostels, and festivals. Through his concept of the borderzone, Bruner attempts to move beyond Dean MacCannell’s notions of authenticity, arguing that what is created in touristic performances is real, local culture. Both Bruner’s concept of the borderzone and Urry’s concept of the tourist gaze (the shaping force of tourists’ expectations) suggest that the touristic relationship is something outside of ordinary, routine experience. Bruner (2005:192) writes, “The natives have to break out of their normal routines to meet the tourists: to dance for them, to sell them souvenirs, or to display themselves and their cultures for the tourists’ gaze and for sale... The natives too, then, move in and out of the touristic borderzone.” However, there are important differences between how tourists and local people employed in tourism experience the borderzone. Bruner (2005) characterizes a borderzone as a space with no defined occupants that is outside the realm of normal routine, and for tourists, this is usually the case. However, Walter Little (2004) argues that vendors’ borderzone interactions with tourists have become an important part of their lives. When people spend more time within a borderzone than outside of it, their performances in the borderzone become their daily lived realities.

make comments that were meant only for other voluntourists.<sup>181</sup> In other moments, the cooperative officers aligned themselves with the voluntourists (for instance, in some of the conflicts over intellectual property described in **Chapter Six**), defining themselves as sophisticated organizational professionals accountable to a rural client base with different understandings and priorities.

While the presence of tourists is constant, individual representatives come and go in an endlessly renewed flow; by contrast, the host population is relatively fixed. It is simplistic to view Guatemalans as fixed in a geographically bounded space, accessible to visitation by constantly mobile cosmopolitan foreigners, which echoes the anthropological treatment of “native people” as frozen in an ethnographic present outside of history or geography (Friedman 1997; Salazar 2010). However, there is a disparity in the relative ease with which voluntourists and Mayan weavers move, and the kind of access that they have to flows and circulations of ideas and goods. Peter Redfield (2012) described international volunteers’ mobility as a privilege that fundamentally contrasts with the rootedness of their local colleagues. Volunteers tread lightly over the globe, engaging little with local people and leaving few traces of their presence behind. This differential mobility, where “only some were free to travel and others held in place,” evokes a colonial history, in which the waves of invading foreigners resemble previous imperial incursions (Redfield 2012:373).

While mobility is certainly a privilege, the literature suggests that this literal geographic mobility of tourists may not be completely coterminous with cosmopolitanism. As described in the **Introduction**, cosmopolitanism is the quality of global citizenship, a condition or mindset in which people partake of other cultures. In many cases, tourists may move through foreign spaces

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<sup>181</sup> See the example in Chapter One when voluntourist Jolene commented on the story María was telling her in Spanish in a kind of parenthetical English aside to me.

that have been deliberately shaped to make them feel more at home, and may never seek or come into contact with real cultural difference (Swain 2009). Several scholars (Abu-Lughod 1997; Swain 2009; Salazar 2010) have suggested that just as mobility does not necessarily confer tourists with cosmopolitanism, remaining in place does not necessarily preclude it. People who play host to regular flows of international tourists can exhibit the same qualities of curiosity, openness to cultural difference, and tolerance, learning and transforming themselves through their developing understandings of other ways in other places: “Through personal contacts with tourists, other foreigners and the mass media, they can build up their knowledge of foreign experiences, ways of life and social conditions. The cultural capital accumulated from their knowledge of foreigners and foreign countries is a constitutive part of their identity” that also lets them approach their own cultures with a more critical, comparative perspective (Salazar 2010). When local hosts use their contact with foreigners through tourism to develop more cosmopolitan outlooks, one of the insights this brings with it is the knowledge of what tourists expects from “locals.” Increasing cosmopolitanism may ironically make the hosts of culturally-oriented tourists more aware of how to position themselves as people rooted in authentic traditional cultures. Their acquisition of cultural knowledge about Euro-American tourists, which helps them to gain access to the material signs of cosmopolitanism such as Western goods,<sup>182</sup> also makes them aware of the need to conceal such signs of “modernization.”

### **“It Reminds Me of *Slumdog Millionaire*: Volunteers’ Thoughts on Guatemala**

Noel Salazar (2010:65) writes, “Global tourism marketing encourages tourists to think that the very act of travel and encounter with cultural others guarantees a broadened

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<sup>182</sup> Consumption of global goods and media alone is not cosmopolitanism: “Indeed, such consumption does not automatically lead us to expect such things as democracy on a global scale, successful accommodation of immigrants, or respect for all human rights” (Swain 2009:513).

cosmopolitan horizon – a fashionable commodity in and of itself – and greater intercultural understanding.” As “amateur anthropologists,” voluntourists sought cultural exposure and immersive learning experiences, and their ability to draw conclusions about what Guatemala was “really” like was a validation of the strength of the connection that they had made: “Volunteers show themselves capable to assume a flexible subjectivity that can live fully in the global moment, bypassing the difficulties and constraints that govern the lives of racialized and impoverished bodies” (Vrasti 2013:155). Approximately a fifth of the volunteers, whether they spent a month or a year in the country, reflected back on their experiences to extract insights about Guatemalan culture. They tended to oscillate between two of the primary modes of representing the Other in the history of Western thought, either critiquing their hosts as atavistic, socially repressive (towards women, for example), and economically backward, or romanticizing local people as closer to nature, purer of heart, and more content with their simple lives than Westerners. Sally Price stated, “The Noble Savage and the Pagan Cannibal are in effect a single figure, described by a distant Westerner in two different frames of mind; portrayals of Primitive Man can be tilted either way in their recognition that he is at once a ‘brother’ and an ‘other’” (1989:37). These representations are not politically neutral: representations of groups as primitive have been used to justify land grabs and colonial administration, while projecting nostalgic images of a past that never existed onto modern groups tends to undermine their claims to social justice and economic equality. A patronizing attitude is visible in some volunteers’ writings, as when one volunteer referred to the leaders of TelaMaya as “my little Mayan bosses” in a blog post, or in some of the comments about their attempts to improve the cooperative in

**Chapter Four.** Mayans were, of course, small in stature compared to most volunteers, but the

remark also diminished and infantilized them, like the tourist who referred to them as emerging from the forest like “Munchkins” in *The Wizard of Oz*.

After her experience volunteering with TelaMaya for a month, one US student, Charmaine, wrote a post in her personal travel blog entitled “Musings on Guatemala.” She and her friends claimed that they were misdirected on the bus while they were traveling and sent hours out of their way, which prompted the following analysis:

Guatemala is a Third World, recently war-torn country, which shows through the attitude and perspective of the natives. They aren’t any friendlier towards tourists than towards their own, partly due to the fact they are so poor they can’t afford the extra time to help tourists or even each other. If they can rip tourists off they will and they will exploit their children and their poverty to get more money. ... It’s very sad, but it does work. They pull on people’s heartstrings. In a way it reminds me of *Slumdog Millionaire* when they blinded the child so people would pity him and give him more money. Same concept. It’s a very fend-for-yourself country. People on buses don’t give up their seats for women with children or the elderly, if someone gets hurt people keep walking and don’t help... Families live together not out of want but out of necessity.

Charmaine’s understanding of Guatemala as a place of hardhearted savagery fits with some of the standard tropes of exoticism. Writing about Mexico, Deborah Root states that Western thinkers have characterized it as inherently paradoxical, a space of both danger and beauty. They have imagined modern Mexico as a romantic but lawless place of degeneracy and failure (1996:51-53). A similar paradox seemed to exist in the minds of voluntourists in Guatemala, who described the country as vibrant, colorful, and tantalizingly dangerous, a place where anything was possible and little was regulated. A Norwegian volunteer described her preconceptions of Guatemala as follows:

I knew that it would be a lot of colors, and a lot of guns in front of the banks. [...] I heard a lot of— and read a lot of bad stories as well about Guatemala, that it’s dangerous, and there’s a lot of robberies and... things going on. But I haven’t experienced that. Yeah, so I sort of had a feeling of uh... traveling to something friendly, maybe dangerous, but also beautiful and colorful and actually I’m surprised that uh that it is so colorful and there’s all these Maya women everywhere dressed in beautiful fabrics and traditional outfits.

Many volunteers were aware of the risks of visiting Guatemala, or were warned by loved ones.

In her blog, volunteer Lauren from Ohio wrote, “I would [...] be ignorant if I were to choose not to think about the danger factor. We constantly hear about how dangerous South and Central America are. While many of the incidents are isolated, it's good to be aware. The Peace Corps has actually chosen to withdraw volunteers from many locations in Central America... I find that being aware is better than being afraid, so I'll be taking my knowledge and acting more sensibl[y] than I do here.” Belgian volunteer Katrien stated that she prepared for travel by getting opinions from other travelers: “I’ve been talking to people who lived in Guatemala, and I know yeah of course it’s also a little bit dangerous but people are friendly and nice and I knew that.” Volunteer Jean-Lucien from Montreal joked, “When my friends and family heard that I was going to Guatemala, the one thing that everyone said was ‘*Be safe.*’ I didn’t know at the time that it has like the second-highest murder rate in the world, right?” Canadian volunteer Kristy’s father regularly sent her reports with statistics on the violence in Central America while she was volunteering. US volunteer Jake wrote in his blog,

The travel advisories for Guatemala can be scary. Everyone in my family was scared for my life when I first went. I have spent two summers down here now and nothing has happened to me. Don't get me wrong, Guatemala can be dangerous; the newspapers are filled with murders and robberies every day. Sometimes I wonder why Guatemalans don't get bored of seeing the same body bags on the front page of the newspaper, but if you use your head and don't do anything stupid, you'll most likely be safe.

Charmaine requested that I personally meet her at the airport in Guatemala City (a four-hour bus trip from Quetzaltenango) to escort her to Xela. When I told her that that would be impossible given my responsibilities with the organization, she asked whether TelaMaya could pay for a shuttle service. Violence was almost always part of voluntourists’ preconceived notions about Guatemala, but those I met and interviewed were those who had decided to come anyway, and they often seemed to feel that the experience meant that they were or had become savvier

travelers who could share their street smarts with potential tourists who had not yet passed through such a trial.

Aware that she sounded judgmental, Charmaine ended her post on a more understanding note: “All this being said, loved the country and many of the people I met. Keep in mind there are so many good people here like anywhere else. I also understand their reasoning behind why they act the way they do. They have families they need to support, the country is very poor, and many people still (understandably) have so many issues because of the war (physically and mentally). You see addiction everywhere because people are in pain.” By virtue of her volunteer work, Charmaine considered herself qualified to assess Guatemala’s national character despite the limited length of her stay. The dominant norms of political correctness in the US made her work strenuously to not appear biased against Guatemalans when her actual experiences with locals were quite negative for her. Demonstrating tolerance of cultural differences was one way that Charmaine could show that she had become more cosmopolitan through her volunteer work.

Volunteers often came away with ideas about “what’s wrong with Guatemala.” Liza, who had an undergraduate degree in family psychology, stated that her volunteer work at a clinic was primarily observation, but they also asked her for opinions she did not feel qualified to give. She saw a lot of failed home abortions, as in the case of one woman whose husband had kicked her in the stomach to try to provoke a miscarriage. Liza declared, “I think we should just put birth control in the water.” Unsure whether she was joking, I commented that that was perhaps a bit extreme, and she insisted, “I don’t.” Volunteer Melinda contemplated sustainable development and the challenges facing Guatemala, stating that in Mexico, they always say “*si*” to everything, even when they have no intention of doing it, whereas in Guatemala, their automatic reaction is



to say “there isn’t any” or “it can’t be done.”<sup>183</sup> According to Melinda, “This defeatism is what’s holding Guatemala back,” because many Guatemalan people seemed to see foreigners as the source of economic and social development. She also talked about how malnutrition was keeping children’s brains from developing, and how that, coupled with their lack of schooling and poor pedagogy, was making them ill-equipped to deal with the challenges facing them: “In Guatemala they need all the brain power they can get just to deal with the situation they’re in.” Some volunteers were more positive in their evaluations of Guatemalan culture. Australian volunteer Zoe admired Guatemalans’ ability to endure long bus rides and inconveniences: “In Guatemala they’re really good at just settling in and bearing things, like waiting in line. In Australia, usually you can pay extra to sort it out or you just can complain [...] about stuff that doesn’t work out for you. If you don’t expect that everything’s going to be exactly like you want it, I think it’s a better attitude. I think it’s more realistic. They are better able to handle it when something is outside of their control.” Zoe viewed the same resignation that frustrated Melinda as a practical and healthy response to the vagaries of their environment and an antidote to the sense of entitlement common in the Global North.

Visits to communities prompted voluntourists to compare their lives to those of the people they visited. On a documentary filmmaking excursion to interview families about their educational needs, volunteers were shocked to hear how difficult it was for rural families to send their families to school. They heard stories that affected them, such as the woman with an alcoholic husband who was the sole earner for her family, or the deaf girl whose family had given up on providing her with the special education she needed. Charmaine commented, “I was astounded at how much I took education for granted and how badly these children wanted it.

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<sup>183</sup> No hay... no se puede.

They realized at a young age what I didn't realize until now: education is an equalizer. If you have an education you can be anything you want to be." Another US volunteer, Lauren, remarked, "In Xela, it's easy to forget how simply many Guatemalan families are forced to live. We watched some kids just have tortillas and hot water for breakfast." She was particularly touched to hear that many of the children had ambitions to be lawyers, doctors, or accountants, positions for which they would need more formal education than they were likely to get. Lauren blogged, "I really just sat around, watched, and listened all day. What I got out of it is that these kids need education, and it's just not very accessible. School is something that we learn to dread, but we are truly so fortunate to be able to take it for granted." As Kate Simpson (2004) writes, these comparisons stopped short of a full analysis of the social and historical factors that have created the differences between the US and Guatemala. While the stark comparison between their material realities and those of the people they came to help made them contemplate their own advantages in life, voluntourists used these comparisons for their own personal development, reminding themselves not to take their own privileges for granted, rather than taking a more radical stance on social justice.

Voluntourists felt the pressure to extract lessons and morals from their travel experiences even more strongly than mainstream tourists, because their role in the site was to aid, work, and learn more about development. Many voluntourists wrote online posts to pass along their hard-won wisdom about traveling and volunteering to future tourists. Their pronouns often shifted from the personal "I" or "we" to the generic "you," to extend or universalize their experiences. This pronoun shift projected their experiences onto their online readers' potential future experiences and engaged their readers in the narrative. A German volunteer wrote the following pieces of advice on a group travel blog:

**Bargaining** – we all love to bargain and get the product for the cheapest possible price – but sometimes it’s better to spend a Euro more, supporting the community. What is not a lot to you, can mean an extra meal to some of the sellers. As I have been volunteering for a clothing company I know that people are mostly investing the money they earn in food and the education for their children.

**Kids** – there are lots of them going around begging. To ensure a smile here and there, don’t give them money, but maybe a banana or a piece of candy, the type of stuff any child loves.

**Photos** – It can be tempting to take photos of the indigenous people with their gorgeous costumes and their beautiful children. However, you’re best advised to either ask permission or take them from a far distance as many natives believe that been photographed is an act of hell. It is not recommended to pay anyone for having their photo taken.

**Stealing** – Beware of pickpockets. Markets are a fantastic place for stealing your valuables. Make sure you have a tight grip of your bag at all times. Also, stay away from cotton tote bags, as these have been known to be easily cut a hole into from behind...

Ex-volunteers also encouraged potential volunteers to immerse themselves in local culture, advocating eating street food and using collective buses. US volunteer couple Rachel and Jake advised:

**Try to eat the food from the street stands.** People told us that it was too dangerous or dirty to eat the food from the stands. We did it, but just tried to avoid eating lots of meat from there, making sure it was relatively freshly prepared and being choosy about which street food we ate. Your stomach will most likely hurt for the first week regardless of your food choices. Be choosy, but don't skip it over entirely!

**Do what the locals do!** Our main method of transportation while in Guate were the infamous chicken buses, or *camionetas*. These crazy school buses pile anywhere between 50 and 100 people into one ride and take corners way faster than is safe, but you get a real feel for Guatemalan life. While sometimes nauseating, sweaty and long at the time, we both look back with only fondness for the hours we spent en route.

Using chicken buses gave volunteers a frisson of danger and the sense that they were living as locals do. Volunteer coordinator Sandrine wrote, “You know you're in Guatemala when you get on the bus and the bus driver says: ‘*Wear your belt because you have to, but be warned if we have an accident it's more dangerous if you do so.*’”

Social media has democratized tourism information, allowing each tourist to act “as a journalist, reporter, producer, influencer, social advisor, or marketing pioneer”... or

anthropologist (Huang et al. 2010). Studies of how tourists share information with each other (Huang et al. 2010; Munar and Jacobsen 2014) have found that tourists are motivated to provide advice and travel narratives by the community-oriented desire to disseminate information and help other tourists avoid risks, and the ego-oriented desire to manage impressions and curate their online presentations of themselves. Voluntourists shared their expertise with their social networks and broadcasted what they considered to be valuable and travel-tested information about their experiences to the public on their blogs.

### **TelaMaya Members' Perceptions of the US**

In **Chapter Four**, I discussed how volunteers tended to have knowledge that could travel, while cooperative members tended to have knowledge rooted in a geographic area. Here I return to the question of mobility and how it structures the gaze of tourists and hosts. Wanda Vradi (2013:160) considered mobility to provoke a cosmopolitan curiosity, a voracious desire to know, consume, and understand other cultures: “Volunteers are free to move at their heart’s desire (and are baffled when local people do not share their interest in foreign cultures and languages).” The following excerpt from a semi-structured interview with a Polish volunteer, Katarzyna, and a French volunteer, Françoise, exemplifies their frustration with Guatemalans’ “fixed” perspectives:

Katarzyna: Oh, I find it hard to work with Guatemalans. It’s a good country to explore but very different from Europe. I don’t know why they are so crazy about their language, the Spanish. Even if they know, they don’t want to use... uh... English. I don’t believe they don’t know English. Everyone knows the basics from the movies. [laughs]

Françoise: She doesn’t like Spanish.

Katarzyna: I don’t like Spanish. Everybody force me to learn Spanish but I don’t like it... And I find it... uh... very sad that they don’t speak their tribal languages. I would love to see the Guatemalan people speaking K’iche. It would be better if they would keep to the traditional languages.

Rebecca: So what did you think Guatemala was going to be like before you came?

Katarzyna: More... uh... interested in our cultures. They are not... completely not interested in our languages, our countries.

Françoise: Maybe it's special here for— for Xela because they are used to... uh... see a lot of volunteers from America.

Katarzyna: But not from Europe.

Françoise: Yes, but they... they thought that we are American also.

Katarzyna: But every time in the street, we hear *gringa gringa* but we are not, yes, *where are you from?*, you know, *I am from Poland*, that's it, they are not so curious about the... in Europe when you travel, you— a lot of times there's a lot of people [who] want to compare the cultures, you know try something. Now I know what it has meant to be European. But I miss [it] a little bit.

They found Guatemalans inhospitable, compared to their experiences in Morocco and Turkey.

Katarzyna grumbled, "I feel that they are not interested in us at all. They are friendly but not interested." These European volunteers expected the Guatemalans they encountered to reciprocate their curiosity and eagerness to learn about new customs and approaches to business. They did not consider how their expectations as travelers, with a cultivated "tourist gaze," might be different from those of local people in their own homes.

Studies using the theoretical perspective of the "tourist gaze" have tended to treat it as highly asymmetrical, presenting locals as responding to the hegemonic tourist gaze rather than gazing back at tourists. This is partly because John Urry presented the gaze as situational, part of what separates a touristic experience from one rooted in the locale. When Urry's tourists return home and go back to work, they no longer apply the same kind of gaze to their surroundings. Scholars have noted how locals resist the penetration of the tourist gaze by creating spaces of "staged authenticity" (MacCannell 1976), false fronts that give tourists the impression that they have penetrated into non-staged settings, and by creating "commodified personas" (Bunten 2008), public personalities that conform to tourists' essentialized expectations of their culture. However, some authors have used Foucault's statement that "power is everywhere and comes from everywhere so in this sense is neither an agency nor a structure" to explore how the gaze in tourism is not unidirectional, siting power in the process of gazing itself (Foucault 1998:63).

Darya Moaz (2006) argues that the unequal power relations between tourists and hosts do not prevent hosts from engaging tourists in what she terms “the mutual gaze.” For Moaz, the quality of the local gaze is not the same as the tourist gaze. While it is constant, Moaz claims the local gaze does not affect tourists as strongly as their gaze affects locals because their sense of privilege allows them to ignore it: “As opposed to the locals, who supposedly feel constantly gazed upon, even if they are not, most tourists are hardly aware of this gaze, mainly because they arrogantly dismiss its presence” (2006:229). Tourists do tend to unwittingly conform to their hosts’ stereotypes, playing out preexisting scripts in a way that is subtly shaped by their hosts, who have made available to tourists what they think they want: “They tend to live up to the expectations and images the locals have of them and play out an imagined Western culture on a stage they are not aware of. The tourists, like the locals, tend to internalize the local gaze” (Moaz 2006:229). Moaz’s presentation of the local gaze has a tendency to portray it as monolithic, but it is better to think of them as plural gazes.

Moaz (2006) writes that the local gaze tends to be more rooted in prior encounters with tourists than circulating media imagery. While they were not as eager to draw quasi-anthropological conclusions as the voluntourists were, close proximity to volunteers gave the administrators of TelaMaya theories about foreign countries and their inhabitants that expanded on, or sometimes contradicted, the ideas they had gotten from popular media or the reports of family members who had traveled or lived abroad.<sup>184</sup> On a physical level, they would note the

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<sup>184</sup> I want to be clear here that I am not presenting tourists as the TelaMaya members’ only or even primary source of information about foreign ways of life. Given how many Guatemalans live in the United States—approximately 10% of the total population of the country (Rosales 2009)—and how residents of Quetzaltenango can eat at Wendy’s, watch Mexican shows on TV, and buy Hannah Montana backpacks, international tourism is just one of their many sources of information about lifestyles in other countries. Influences flow along migration chains in what has been termed “social remittances” (Levitt 1998). What tourism does do is provide a unique motivation for Guatemalans who want to capitalize on tourist dollars to learn more about other cultures, particularly US culture, in order to adapt to tourists’ expectations.

differences between themselves and their visitors, who were often much taller and paler-skinned. Seeing a visiting tourist visibly suffering from traveler's diarrhea, Roxana asked me, "You guys are a bit frail, no? I don't know if it's because of your pale skin that lets the diseases in, but you're always getting sick."<sup>185</sup> I theorized that the white people they typically saw were tourists who had been traveling and experiencing new kinds of food, but Roxana objected, "When we went to the United States, we didn't get sick. And it used to be even more so. Our Mayan ancestors, like my grandparents, they were never sick." Rather than attributing this difference to the disparity in infrastructure and public services in the US and Guatemala, Roxana attributed it to the racial differences between tourists and locals. Roxana's observation disrupts the seemingly unlimited mobility of tourists, since they become sick when they enter other people's territories. While they may seem to move lightly across borders, this does not exempt tourists from the bodily process of adapting to the local environment as their guts become accustomed to local bacteria.

In many cases, TelaMaya members' return gaze fell on the obvious economic gulf separating them from voluntourists. This comparison has been termed "the demonstration effect" in the scholarly literature—the notion that people in host communities may come to desire the goods and lifestyles of foreign tourists and attempt to imitate their consumption patterns, to the detriment of their own traditional practices and production of goods. However, this viewpoint has been critiqued for assuming that "local cultures" need to be sheltered from the corrupting influences of tourists' cultures and for presenting host communities as passive recipients of globalizing change rather than agents who make their own consumption choices (Fisher 2004). Arguably the demonstration effect also operates on tourists, who travel to a place based on their

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<sup>185</sup> Ustedes son un poco delicados, ¿no? No sé si es por la piel pálida que deja entrar a las enfermedades, pero siempre están enfermos.

images of it, have an experience structured by their relations with locals and other tourists, and carry away material culture to represent how this contact changed them (Smith 1993).

James Ferguson (2006:21) notes that criticisms of globalization as a homogenizing force often seem irrelevant in the global South, given that the vaunted free flows of commodities, money, and technologies have tended to bypass them. Scholars have celebrated the demise of the notion that Westernization is the only measure of success for Third World countries; however, the inequalities that modernization noted and theorized are still present, and such shifts in theory could lead to naturalizing and ignoring inequality. As much as many non-affluent Guatemalans might aspire to participate in the homogenizing global culture that tourists symbolically represent, they may lack the means to consume goods from global markets. Vrasti (2013) argues that the materially poor but culturally rich local subjects who proudly reject the fashions of the global North in favor of defining their own modes of success are a postcolonial academic fantasy of “the new noble savage.” Edward Fischer and Peter Benson (2006) argue that scholars need to get away from the idea the people in economically impoverished areas are motivated by “need” while people in positions of relative privilege are motivated by “desire.” While there is a significant difference in their situations and positions within global power structures, both groups strive for something better as defined by their locally-situated and globally-structured orientations and motivations.

Whereas, as discussed in a previous section of this chapter, voluntourists directly compared their economic situations and those of the TelaMaya members to draw morals about their own privilege and how much they should appreciate the advantages they had been given in life, they considered it inappropriate for TelaMaya members to directly confront them with this difference. However, the obvious material divide occasionally prompted the members to



comment (for example, when they asked voluntourists for money as described in **Chapter Four**). Though they generally refrained from commenting on the material disparities between their lifestyles and those of the volunteers, María once described her sense of the (un)fairness of the distribution of wealth. María said that some people work hard and get what they deserve, in reference to Jolene, a semi-retired volunteer whose pictures of her country house in Spain had impressed them. María asked, “How can one compare?”<sup>186</sup> She started contrasting their lifestyles to those of people in the US, who earn more and can save more money, saying, “They all have their two or three story houses,”<sup>187</sup> one of her primary measures of material wealth. While María began the conversation with the neoliberal talking point that wealth is a reflection of hard work and efficacy, she closed by delicately implying that somehow, given their material results, everyone in the US seems to work harder and better than people in Guatemala. María also met with local schoolchildren on a trip to Columbia, Missouri in 2009. The children were curious about how Guatemalan children live, asking whether they eat cornflakes or wear pajamas, and the assumptions built into their questions made María feel sad about the gulf of inequality between them:

I was listening and it made me a bit emotional, because I was saying that our Guatemalan children, not until they wear out one pair of shoes are they bought another, if we even buy them, and if we don't buy them, they go around barefoot until we get money to buy others [...] “Ayy *no*,” they were saying. And in the end they felt sorry for them. So they understood us, the neediness and poverty of here.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> ¿Como se compara uno?

<sup>187</sup> Todos tienen sus casas de dos o tres niveles.

<sup>188</sup> yo escuchaba y me daba un poquito de sentimiento, porque yo decía que nuestros niños en Guatemala hasta que se terminen un par de zapatos se compra otros si acaso compramos y si no compramos andan descalzos hasta que conseguimos dinero para comprar otros [...] ayyy no, decían otros. Y ellos al fin les daba lastima. Entonces ellos nos comprendieron, las necesidades y las pobreza de acá.

The US children sent a package with shoes and toys for the Guatemalan children a few months later for International Women's Day, which María took as evidence that they pitied Guatemalan children.

Some locals critiqued the tendency to look to the US as the source of economic possibilities, charity, and fresh ideas. Fernando, a “reverse migrant” who returned to Guatemala after spending 14 years in the US and founded RISE, an NGO dedicated to local economic development and cultural revitalization, held a meeting with Roxana to discuss the possibilities of coordinating with other cooperatives for local or export business. He asserted that the global economic crisis of the past few years was coinciding with the Mayan understanding that the world would undergo a transformative evolution in December 2012 (what international media tended to call “the Mayan end of the world”). In this moment of crisis, those who were not prepared to adapt to the new cycle that was beginning would perish, while those who adapted would thrive: “When I came [to Guatemala] four years ago to open [RISE], everyone had the idea of exporting, exporting, exporting, because it's said that *‘this is the solution for how I'm going to get out of poverty,’* and sometimes it's not the solution,” and he laughed somewhat bitterly, “because really people in the US that I know, that are my friends, before they would say, *‘yes, let's help Guatemalan people,’* but now they can't.”<sup>189</sup> Fernando noted that his US friends used to buy organic coffee, but, while they were still concerned with sustainability, they could no longer afford to make the same conscientious purchases as they did before the onset of the global economic crisis.

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<sup>189</sup> Cuando vine hace cuatro años a abrir [RISE], toda la gente tenía la idea de exportar, de exportar, de exportar, porque dice que esta es la solución como voy a salir de pobre, y a veces no es la solución [laughs] porque realmente la gente... en los EU que conozco, que son mis amigos, antes decía, *si, ayudemos a la gente de Guatemala*, pero ya no se puede.

For this reason, Fernando argued vehemently that Guatemalan businesses should try to become less dependent on foreign purchasers: “What we need to have are classes about identity with young people, with those in the university and everything, because really they shouldn’t buy in Walmart, but things from here in Guatemala.”<sup>190</sup> He always saw the McDonald’s near his house full of local people, whereas the café run by his NGO was struggling, with few local customers. Roxana agreed, “Yes, who knows why they don’t value what we make here?”<sup>191</sup> This trend is visible worldwide, with wider national communities showing a total disinterest in native cultures, and a growing need to consume goods from large corporations, to the detriment of local industries.

He told Roxana that they needed to revitalize their culture and identity, starting with their own families and the choices and purchases they made, to “create this matter of fair trade between us”<sup>192</sup> He listed some of the products he bought from local cooperatives and companies instead of more expensive imported goods: “I might be buying it from a wealthy Guatemalan, but at the very least it’s someone from here in Guatemala; I’m not buying it from the Chinese.”<sup>193</sup> Fernando also pointed out that tourism tends to come in waves, and Guatemalans needed to be prepared to weather the lean times, in the spirit of their ancestors: “Because really, the Mayans, we’ve been business people for more than 3,000 years, right, but now we just have pictured the North and Europe as the only places, when among ourselves there was always business.”<sup>194</sup> He went on to describe some of the local and regional markets that his organization

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<sup>190</sup> Pero entonces lo que tenemos que tener son clases de identidad con los jóvenes, con los de la universidad, y todo, porque realmente ellos deberían de no comprar cosas en Walmart, sino cosas de aquí en Guatemala.

<sup>191</sup> Si, ¿saber porque no valoran lo que hacemos aquí?

<sup>192</sup> crear esta esta cuestión de comercio justo entre nosotros

<sup>193</sup> Yo lo estoy comprando tal vez de un rico de Guatemala, pero por lo menos es de aquí de Guatemala, no lo estoy comprando de los chinos

<sup>194</sup> Porque realmente los Mayas hemos sido comerciantes por más de 3000 años, verdad pero ahora solo tenemos pintados el Norte y Europa como los únicos lugares, cuando entre nosotros siempre había comercio.

was planning to enter in Latin America, which he considered a vibrant and growing economic region.

### **Using Volunteers As Leverage in TelaMaya Business**

Tourists insert themselves into preexisting power structures and long histories of interaction between ethnic groups, which both shape and are shaped by flows of tourism. At times their presence may reproduce or reinforce existing inequalities. For example, Robert Jarvenpa (1994) argues that Gold Rush-inspired tourism created a stratified heritage market in Dawson City, Canada, that reinforced the value of white heritage and de-valued native Han heritage, because they did not fit touristic fantasies about the rugged entrepreneurial spirit of the Gold Rush miners. By introducing outsiders with resources to an area, tourism can exacerbate historic inequalities. However, tourists' presence can also disrupt these inequalities and allow for social change by shifting the balance of power in favor of marginalized indigenous communities.

Hegemony in Guatemala is derived from a hierarchical racial system instituted by the Spanish colonial elites that has persisted in systematic Ladino discrimination against the Maya, intercut by class divisions (Montejo 2005). As in other regions of Latin America, the Spanish colonization of Guatemala created a division between marginalized indigenous people and Ladinos that persisted through the nation's independence from Spain in 1821. Many authors have argued that the racial boundary between Mayans and Ladinos is fluid, and that the distinction is primarily cultural and linguistic (Tax 1953; Nelson 1996), referring to Ladinos as "redressed Indians" (Smith 1990). While other Latin American states adopted an ideology of *mestizaje*, the promotion of racial and cultural mixing, and sought to appropriate elements of indigenous identity in forming a national identity, in Guatemala, *mestizaje* has never had the same political weight (Hale 2002). The Guatemalan government has fluctuated between ignoring its indigenous

population and, during certain Liberal regimes, pursuing assimilationist policies to promote “ladinization” (Watanabe and Fischer 2004; Vanthuyne 2009). To control Mayans, Ladinos denigrated their “racial” and cultural heritage, used state means to seize their lands and take over their markets, prevented Mayans from holding public office or participating in government, and periodically used force to intimidate them and deter uprisings (Adams 1990). Victor Montejo (2005:4) argues that Ladino discourses crystallized in the concept of “*el indio*,” a backwards group of people who need to be controlled or assimilated. Theories of modernization and development influenced some Western and Ladino scholars to propose that Mayans would inevitably integrate themselves economically and culturally into the nation by “passing” as Ladinos (Warren 1998; Watanabe and Fischer 2004). However, Smith writes, “Each attempt by the modern Guatemalan state to eradicate cultural divisions in order to create a unified nation has been either brutal or half-hearted, such that the attempt has merely recreated the division between Indians and non-Indians in stronger form” (1990:6). In Guatemala, the state’s nation-building policies have tended to maintain distinctions between ethnic groups, contributing to the formation of “ethnaclass” inequalities between Mayans and Ladinos (Cook 2004).

Many scholars have claimed that certain aspects of Mayans’ cultural heritage, particularly their rich handicraft traditions, serve as an economic and political resource that can attract international tourists, buyers, and NGO aid. Guatemalan elites valued tourists’ presence, and the attention of these powerful outsiders validated Mayan weavers’ cultural identities. As Edward Fischer (2001:239) asserted, “New modes of direct articulation with transnational markets have also placed rural Maya in contact with foreigners who hold Maya culture in esteem. No matter what misguided or romantic notions this valuation may stem from, it has provided crucial external validation of the importance of cultural heritage in the face of long-standing ladino

derision.” During my fieldwork, a tourist asked Roxana what she thought of foreign people wearing traditional indigenous dress. She replied, “For me, I’m thrilled by it, because you like my clothing. I feel good when I see that someone has my *traje* on. But there are some who say, ‘*Why are they dressed like that? What do they want with that?*’”<sup>195</sup> According to Walter Little (2004; 2005), Kaqchikel Maya handicraft vendors in Antigua, Guatemala, strategically deploy their identities in order to convince international and national tourists to buy their wares, appealing to tourists’ sympathy or desire for an exotic experience. While they identify as Maya, they choose not to identify with the Maya movement, because they do not want political uses of their Maya identities in social movements to threaten their economic uses of their identities to sell their products. Caught between racist Ladino notions that they are ignorant and backward and the romanticized expectations of foreign tourists, they do not wish to commit to one identity, so that they can use different deployments of their identity strategically to relate to different groups of people. Mayan vendors emphasized their indigenousness in their dealings with tourists, to appeal to their image of exotic local people and thereby sell them artisan crafts, and minimized the signs of their cultural difference with Ladino officials, to make it easier to negotiate with the bureaucracy.

While Little (2004; 2005) describes how Mayans navigate between conflicting racist and touristic valuations of their ethnic identity, others have argued that international tourism can influence relationships between Mayans and Ladinos. Montejo stated that, as in many nations with indigenous populations, the Guatemalan state uses Mayan imagery to create the idea of a nation: “Although poor Mayas are considered inferior and not equal to ladinos, their crafts and artistic production are prized and consumed by some ladinos and tourists, thus giving some

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<sup>195</sup> Para mí, me emociono, porque ustedes les gusta mi ropa. Me siento bien cuando veo que alguien tiene mi traje puesto. Pero hay algunos que dicen, ¿por qué se visten así? ¿Qué quieren con eso?

recognition to the value of modern Mayas as creative and productive people” (2005:15). In the context of southern Mexico, Pierre van den Berghe (1994) argued that while Ladinos controlled the majority of tourism services, because of their language skills, social capital, and historic power over local Mayans, tourism also made Ladinos realize that Mayans had value. He claimed that because powerful foreigners were interested in “their Indians,” they went from thinking of local Mayans as signs of backwardness to valuing them at least as an economic asset. Similarly, Benjamin Willett (2007) argues that tourism in Quetzaltenango has improved the political and economic standing of Mayans both directly, by providing concrete resources and support, and indirectly, by creating positive representations of indigenous Guatemalans that can be used to challenge racist stereotypes. Guatemalan tourism advertisements and guidebooks focus heavily on the nation’s Mayan heritage, mentioning Ladinos only rarely, and in a negative light (Willett 2007). Based on surveys of Ladinos and Mayans of various classes, he concluded that tourism has positively affected Quetzaltecos’ perceptions of Mayans. Similarly, Charles Hale wrote that “ladinos commonly perceive the West as the source of civilization and gringo travelers in Guatemala as admirers (if not advocates) of Indians,” and this has encouraged them to reevaluate their attitudes towards them (1999:306).

Mayan weavers thus saw voluntourists as a resource, a form of leverage in a social structure in which they were marginalized yet celebrated. At times, the TelaMaya leaders wanted me to be their official spokesperson, to use my whiteness to advocate for them. When I was visiting Roxana for Holy Week, we took one of the government-issued pickup trucks from TelaMaya’s earlier days for a day trip. They were afraid of getting hassled by the police because the cars were unlicensed: “If they stop us maybe you can do us the favor of explaining to the

police that we are an association.”<sup>196</sup> In 2010 they took me with them to see the old TelaMaya location and speak with a representative of the Ministry of the Economy about getting some of their items out of storage there. I thought that I was there to take care of Roxana’s daughter, Gabriela, while the officers took care of business, but I soon realized that my presence was a form of accompaniment. They introduced me to the administrator as a visitor from the United States, invoking my power as an external witness in their ongoing struggle with the Ministry, which had revoked their right to occupy the building (see **Chapter One**). At other moments, they also asked me to accompany them to speak with the customs office about the cooperative’s status as an exporter, to attend the tourism industry meeting in Xela about increasing the numbers of tourist police, and to go to the municipal office with Roxana and other neighbors to ask for the streetlights near the office to be replaced.

The officers also used volunteers as witnesses in maintaining their relationships with other volunteers and group members, mitigating potential disputes. I initially wondered why the officers often sent volunteers to deposit the cash from the week’s sales in TelaMaya’s bank account. María explained, “It is so that the volunteers know that the money goes to the bank. Sometimes they do not trust us. I do not want to go to jail.”<sup>197</sup> The volunteers were not their only audience in this case; in case the TelaMaya members had any doubts about whether their elected leaders were embezzling money like the former employees, the leaders were using the volunteers as apparently impartial witnesses due to their outsider status.

The presence of tourists, influential outsiders with economic and cultural resources, has the potential to disrupt entrenched power disparities within a tourism destination. The leaders of

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<sup>196</sup> Si nos paren tal vez nos puede hacer el favor de explicar a la policía que somos una asociación.

<sup>197</sup> Es para que las voluntarias sepan que el dinero va al banco. A veces no tienen confianza en nosotros. No quiero ir a la cárcel.



TelaMaya used tourists as leverage in their dealings with business associates and government officials.<sup>198</sup> By virtue of their foreign (and usually white) privilege, tourists represent the critical international gaze ready to expose corruption, confer the untouchability of their privilege on the indigenous cooperative leaders, and serve as outside witnesses lending the appearance of transparency to the organization. Victoria Henderson (2009) argues that “the interposition of privileged foreign bodies in a highly volatile, (post)conflict landscape” communicates to potential aggressors that their actions are being monitored and will have consequences for them, and communicates to oppressed people that they have the support of people with access to international resources. Their mere presence thus constitutes an attempt to symbolically transfer their privilege. However, taking advantage of foreign (usually white) privilege in this way also reinscribes the differential valuation of human life rooted in colonialism and furthers the erasure of non-Euro-American, non-white contributions to NGOs and movements. It reinforces and naturalizes rather than challenging the privilege of the foreign humanitarians. Can tourists (specifically voluntourists) transfer their position within an imperial system to marginalized indigenous people in Guatemala simply by inserting their privileged selves into a context with a complex history? Patrick Coy (1997:269) wrote of a Sri Lankan accompaniment program, “As long as the organization continues to field largely uninformed white volunteers from the north [in the south], it risks structuring the context of political action in such a way that the primary dynamics and symbols it activates are those associated with racism and classism.” The risks of such forms of privilege transfer are not limited to the level of the framing of activism. By

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<sup>198</sup> However, voluntourists were more than empty white vessels to the cooperative’s leaders, who also saw foreigners’ personal characteristics as an asset: as discussed further in **Chapter Four**, officers would use voluntourists with their “strong personalities” as go-betweens in their negotiations with Ladino businesspeople.

interposing their bodies and their privilege into a complex social situation characterized by violence, particularly against women, voluntourists were also personally exposed to risk.

### **“The Land of Impending Doom”: Volunteering in a Climate of Insecurity**

The experiences of TelaMaya volunteers were shaped by an omnipresent sense of violent chaos just outside the cooperative’s doors, which made their volunteer work feel authentic and urgent. When the insecurity that is an inevitable part of living and working in Guatemala touched their lives—through anecdotes from the cooperative members, stories in the local news media, rumors that flashed through the expatriate community, or their own close encounters with danger—it often reinforced their desire to help and reconfirmed the reality of the need for volunteers. Insecurity made the adventure real. Daniel Boorstin (1964) traced the roots of the word “travel” back to the word “travail,” arguing that in its early days, traveling meant enduring real hardship, risk, and labor, which made the experience more worthwhile. Dean MacCannell (1976) argued that the difference between adventurous historic “traveling” and modern “tourism” is that tourists are insulated from any of the real travails that travelers used to encounter and more exposed to other travelers than to local people. Boorstin (1964) and MacCannell (1976) argue that smoothing out the inconveniences of travel, and the potential for encounters with real difference, has made all tourist destinations interchangeable for the tourists. Alternative tourists sometimes seek out such inconveniences; in these cases, intentional self-deprivation can actually be a form of indulgence, proving to themselves and their friends that they are charitable and tough (Duffy 2002). Tourists can use the “darkness” associated with some places to jolt themselves out of their complacency and make themselves feel connected to a place and, by extension, people. Kristin Lozanski (2014) claims that tourists who seek cultural engagement are attracted by the possibility of real risk to themselves; they see chaos and

unpredictability as characterizing cultural Others, given that violence has been hidden from sight and managed in their own, more “civilized” countries. While this kind of danger, which she terms “potential violence,” legitimates the reality of their experiences, they are shocked to experience “manifest violence” in the form of muggings or assaults (Lozanski 2014:34).

Volunteers were prepared to find danger. The *Rough Guide to Guatemala* declares the nation “a young democracy with a turbulent and bloody history that’s beset by deep-rooted inequalities” (2009:6). Between my first preliminary research trip in June, 2010 and my departure from the field in January, 2014, I heard reports of escalating violence in Central America, Guatemala, and Quetzaltenango in particular. At times, the violence was attributed to increased gang activity: in May 2011, Mexican drug cartel Los Zetas massacred 27 farmworkers and beheaded 26 of them in Petén, sparking fears of a drug war characterized by escalating violence. At other moments, the increasing militarization of the government seemed to be at fault: on October 4, 2012, the army fired into a crowd of protesters in Totonicapán, killing six and wounding forty. One protester also disappeared and was later found dead. In December of 2011, after a Peace Corps volunteer was shot and wounded in Honduras, the US Peace Corps announced that it would stop sending new volunteers to Guatemala and withdraw all 158 volunteers that were in Honduras. The US Department of State (2014) travel recommendations describe Guatemala as a “critical” site of violent crime: “Violent crime is a serious concern due to endemic poverty, an abundance of weapons, a legacy of societal violence, and weak law enforcement and judicial systems.” The State Department (2014) states that while tourists are typically not involved in the worst of the violent crime, criminals may target them in the belief that they are more affluent than average Guatemalans, and “U.S. tourists have also been victims of rapes, physical assaults, armed robberies and murders.” Tourists in Quetzaltenango often

shared horror stories about a few legendary violent incidents that had taken place against foreign tourists to warn newcomers about the dangers of complacency.

The current level of interpersonal violence can be attributed to the genocidal civil war, which disrupted the fabric of social life in Guatemala and left an enduring legacy of suffering and insecurity, as well as to the underlying sources of this conflict: poverty, class inequality, gender inequality, and racism. Benson et al. (2008) argued that while suffering is generally understood as an individual psychological phenomenon, in cases like the Guatemalan one it needs to be understood as shared, social, and structural. “Post-conflict” Guatemala is overshadowed by new configurations of violence. While for many the source of the violence up until 1996 was clear, violence has become dispersed and privatized as part of a larger phenomenon known as “insecurity,” which encompasses gang activity, drug and arms trafficking, kidnapping, extortion, rape, and murder, while still serving the needs of a government that can disguise its activities amidst the chaos (Benson et al. 2008:110). The perception of violence looms even larger than the reality, and the priority becomes attributing blame, which is usually associated with social categories such as “gangs.” Unfortunately, despite the continuing high levels of violence in Guatemala,<sup>199</sup> insecurity is not as “marketable” in gaining foreign interest and aid as state-led genocide. Much of this violence has begun centering on women and other vulnerable populations. Philip Alston (2007) reported that between 2001 and 2006, the homicide rate for women more than doubled while the population of women in Guatemala grew by only 8% (see **Chapter Two** for more discussion of femicide). At the local

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<sup>199</sup> Victoria Sanford writes that there were 20,943 recorded murders in the five years after the signing of the peace accords (2008:108). According to Sanford, “If the number of murder victims continues to rise at the current rate, more people will die in the first 25 years of peace than died in the 36-year internal armed conflict and genocide” (2008:108). Guatemala’s murder rate places it in the top ten (#9) out of all world countries (38.5/100,000 population according to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime in 2012), and the State Department (2014) identifies it as “one of the most dangerous countries in the Western Hemisphere.”

level, many perceive violence as having escalated over the past decade. TelaMaya secretary Paula had heard that violence in Quetzaltenango was increasing because the government was cracking down on gang activity in the capital, driving many gangs to send their members to Quetzaltenango.

Voluntourists sometimes reflected on their own perceptions of the violence in Guatemala and how they had changed through their experiences volunteering there. In 2011, US volunteer Ashley had her cell phone stolen from her purse, while her friend's bag was slashed. "I was reminded that many Guatemalans still struggle for freedom from poverty," she commented. This experience led Ashley to reflect on how the image and reality of insecurity in Guatemala coincide but do not fully overlap:

Being back here again I am struck by the stark contrast of the Guatemala that is in the news and the Guatemala that I know... In the midst of all of the bad news that surrounds current events in this country I am constantly thinking of how genuinely good and generous the huge majority of the Guatemalan people are that I meet... There is a true atmosphere of community here which is a factor that pulled me to return... The people here who don't have "a lot" are quick to give you some of whatever they do have... When we pass old men begging on the street with their hands cupped or women huddled in corners surrounded by hungry children, it is my Guatemalan friends who are the first to give them a few coins. It is embarrassing to see them do this right away when unfortunately my impulse is to avoid eye-contact and ignore most of them because that is what people do in the United States. Obviously giving a homeless person a few quetzales (the local currency) is not going to lift them out of poverty or create any sustainable change, but I think the point is a show of solidarity and that's important... I don't mean to oversimplify the people of Guatemala or proclaim this "The Land of Saints." However it is still "The Land of Smiles" and not "The Land of Impending Doom Around Every Corner" as the US Government's Travel Advisory website might lead you to believe.

Ashley's regular trips to Guatemala to volunteer with TelaMaya and develop a handicrafts exporting business have prompted her to try to reconcile image with reality, and to understand the contradictions of a generous people who are also, apparently, brutally violent at the same time. Wendy expressed a similar sentiment when I asked her how volunteering at TelaMaya had changed her perceptions of Guatemala:

What I did know about Guatemala had everything to do with politics before. There is like a 99.75 or 95 percent impunity rate and there is so much violence and all of this and really the people are just really warm and kind and just going about their daily lives just like we do at home you know, just in different ways of course. So I guess I just have an idea of what the people are like here independent of... drug cartels and all that fun stuff.

Ashley and Wendy both responded to their perception of Guatemala as a “dark” place with an increased motivation to understand and help Guatemalan people overcome their violent past.

The violence from which they were largely insulated seemed to attract certain tourists and voluntourists.

Casual everyday sexual violence against women, foreign and local, is common in Guatemala, and violent, random attacks on males, foreign and local, seemed to be an increasing trend during the time I spent there. The US State Department cautions women to protect themselves: “Women should be especially careful when traveling alone and avoid staying out late without an escort” (US Department of State 2014).<sup>200</sup> María sometimes warned volunteers, particularly female volunteers, to not even leave the house at night, alone or accompanied: “You should only walk in places where there are people. You shouldn’t walk in very quiet places. It’s not to scare you but it’s necessary to prevent it. If you went to Chajul, let’s say you two [young, white females], they would kill you.”<sup>201</sup> Paula commented that she tried not to carry anything valuable that would attract attention: “It’s better to lose your camera than your life, but now they take the things and kill the people as well. I’ve heard stories.”<sup>202</sup> Despite the officers’ warnings, female volunteers often went out drinking at night; many experienced quotidian sexual violence.

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<sup>200</sup> Of course, violence is not limited to women: when my ex-husband was visiting me, he was assaulted by a group of 5 young men when he was walking home with another tourist around 1 am. He was beaten with a broken bottle and rock to the point that he needed stitches and a crown on one of his front teeth.

<sup>201</sup> Sólo hay que caminar en lugares donde hay gente. No hay que caminar en lugares muy silenciosos. No es para asustarlos pues pero hay que prevenirlo. Si ustedes fueran a Chajul, digamos ustedes dos, las matarían.

<sup>202</sup> Es mejor perder la cámara que la vida, pero ahora toman las cosas y también matan a la gente. He escuchado historias.

US volunteer Rachel wrote in her blog, “Girls— you don’t need to be as paranoid about your clothes as some travel sites make it to be, but it will make you more comfortable to wear casual, loose fitting clothing.” Similarly, US volunteer coordinator Sheryl wrote,

Many people express their disbelief about we single women who travel, work and live abroad and the dangers and risks we face being international. The truth is there are dangers everywhere and I often point this out in my defense of living abroad and working in post-war, developing countries. Yet every once in a while I have to acknowledge when dangerous situations arise and when my being a foreigner is a disadvantage.

To illustrate this point, she described a situation in which she decided to hike from San Marcos la Laguna to a neighboring village and a local man with a machete accompanied her to protect her from bands of thieves who had been attacking tourists on that trail, an anecdote that actually points to how the attention her identity attracted was protective. French volunteer coordinator Sandrine recounted that a former volunteer had left Guatemala early because she had been assaulted in San Juan La Laguna: “A man just jumped on her from behind and started punching her. He didn’t want money, he just wanted to beat her face. After that she said she’d had it with Guatemala and she wanted to leave.” When Roxana heard the story, she was dumbfounded and stated that this kind of immoderate violence explained “why tourists don’t want to come to Guatemala.”<sup>203</sup> María thanked tourists for coming to Guatemala despite the insecurity: “It makes me sad... you come from other countries and over there none of this happens.”<sup>204</sup>

During my fieldwork, I was subject to groping, indecent exposure, and attempted sexual assault, as were many of the female volunteers in TelaMaya. On May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2012, when I was walking back to my apartment around 7:30PM, a man grabbed me from behind. He lifted me in the air while I screamed and struggled, attracting the attention of some passers-by who approached and frightened off my attacker. I gained an embodied wariness of strangers

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<sup>203</sup> Es por eso que las turistas no quieren venir a Guatemala.

<sup>204</sup> Me da mucha pena... vienen de otros países y allá no pasa nada de eso.

approaching me rapidly from behind in the street that persisted when I returned to the US. These direct transgressions of my bodily integrity, as minor as they might be compared to the violations experienced by Guatemalan women on a daily basis, challenged the sense of security I tended to wear as a privileged citizen of the US. Anthropologist Diane Nelson (1999:52) admitted that, while she was trained to think of herself as a powerful figure and admonished to minimize the potential harm she could do in the field, her gender made her feel vulnerable: “My ethnic and national identifications feel brutally crosscut by my gendered subject-position.” An attack on a fellow American woman in the field in 1994 made Nelson aware of the fragility of her privilege as a *gringa*: “My body image of a gringa as solid, guilty perhaps but powerful, was suddenly confronted with the gringa as wounded, open” (1999:47). Foreigners may be able to use their privilege to support the efforts of historically marginalized people in places like Guatemala; however, instances of violence challenge the apparent stability of these relationships of solidarity—solidarity may not be so “solid” after all, as Nelson points out.

Voluntourists’ perceptions of Guatemala as a site of machismo and discrimination against women figured into their thinking about helping women at TelaMaya. American volunteer Wendy put a photo of herself working at TelaMaya on a social networking website with the caption, “Xelaaa The day I was flashed...” This was an important moment for her in her experience of machismo in Xela, as she associated the indecent exposure with her work with local women. Experiencing violence provided female volunteer tourists with a way to connect to Mayan women across a gulf of difference, because their bodies had been violated in the same ways. Female voluntourists would often commiserate with the women of TelaMaya about the depredations of Guatemalan men, their experiences of harassment and sexism making them feel closer to their Guatemalan sisters despite their privilege in having the ability to leave this



situation whenever they chose. Nelson (1999:52) suggested that the “gringo *güera* phenotype” and the “eagle passport” are markers of difference that protect their bearers; they may not be able to shield *gringas* from experiencing any violence, but they do indicate the possibility of exit as the ultimate privilege. The next section takes up the idea that Guatemalan society has become disordered by the conflict and subsequent interpersonal violence, examining how the cooperative members used comparisons with US culture to critique their Guatemalan milieu.

### **“The Problem with Guatemalans”: Attitudes Towards Guatemalans and Foreigners**

In her work with a voluntourism organization in Honduras, Sharon McLennan (2014:59) notes that the organization and volunteers alike tend to “frame Honduras as a problem that requires the input of outsiders.” On both the individual and institutional level, the organization considers Hondurans an impediment to development, “unable or unwilling to help themselves.” The “very low level of trust or expectations of Hondurans” that McLennan notes in this study resonates with my observations in Guatemala. According to McLennan (2014:59), “the problematization of Honduras seems to be an effective rhetorical device that establishes the moral imperative to intervene.” The organization viewed volunteers, with their outsider status, as the solution to the problems posed by inefficient or ineffective Honduran organizations and institutions, a way of bypassing problematic locals in favor of foreigners. She considers this orientation towards foreigners illustrative of the paternalistic nature of voluntourism, which positions voluntourists as those with ideas and resources and local people as those with needs and failings. McLennan does not interrogate the source of the organization’s attitude towards local people beyond referring to volunteering as “neocolonialistic,” seeming to imply that these attitudes arise from volunteers’ need to justify their presence and the local staff’s need to placate volunteers.

However, in the case of TelaMaya, negative attitudes towards Guatemalans did not originate directly with the voluntourists. Some of this negativity can be attributed to the thirty-six year civil war, which set community members against each other. The civil patrol system instituted by the army, which required local men to police their own communities, was originally intended to control guerrilla activity. However, it came to be a means of controlling indigenous populations, and some used their power within the patrols to play out local conflicts (Davis 1988:29). The trauma of the conflict continues to reverberate throughout Guatemala as a form of “poisonous knowledge,” the brutal awareness of “the possibility of betrayal coded into their everyday relations” (Das 2007:218). The knowledge that their fellow community members could be driven to turn against them has continued to shape Guatemalans’ most intimate relationships, making them more distrustful of each other.

One of the most striking aspects of working with the members of TelaMaya was their intense aversion to working with Guatemalan volunteers, employees, or business associates. At times, local associates and volunteers alike suggested that TelaMaya hire a bilingual non-indigenous Guatemalan woman to perform the tasks of the volunteer coordinator. Roxana’s response was always that a Guatemalteca would want Q5,000 (\$655) a month to do that kind of work; however, the objections ran much deeper than a simple inability to recompense a Guatemalan at a professional rate. They often referenced their history of difficulties with Guatemalan employees, as discussed in **Chapter One**. The issue did not seem to be primarily one of indigenous resentment of Ladino racism. When I asked the officers about incidents of racism they had experienced in working with TelaMaya, Roxana maintained that they did not face discrimination. Ladino businesspeople wanted to work with them professionally and Ladino customers rarely entered the shop. On one occasion, a Ladino had entered the shop and asked

them if this work was all done by “*indios*,” an offensive racial term for indigenous people, but they shrugged it off. Roxana commented, “There are some on the coast who call us “*indios*” but I told [my husband] Irving that they don’t know what they’re talking about, because we work to earn a living. We speak two languages.”<sup>205</sup> María nodded, “We are professionals.”<sup>206</sup> From my non-indigenous Guatemalan informants, I heard that “*indio*” was used to describe any idiotic or lazy person, while a gaffe was referred to as an “*indiada*.” María and Roxana responded to such racist descriptions by redefining themselves as working women with a skill set that demanded respect (as established in **Chapter Four**). Emphasizing their education, training, and diligence countered the stereotypes of indigenous people as uneducated and lazy. However, this racism seemed to be restricted to private settings rather than overtly expressed in the TelaMaya office. In addition, the leaders of TelaMaya used inclusive pronouns when critiquing Guatemalan culture, suggesting that they identified themselves in this sense as Guatemalan women. This prejudice against Guatemalans was not limited to TelaMaya. Based on her time managing the volunteer program at EntreMundos, Canadian NGO worker Lenore stated, “They can be more inclined to open up to foreign people, because they have the impression that all foreign volunteers have disposable income.” The perception that foreigners (particularly Euro-Americans) who volunteered had significant personal resources led organizations to view them as free of ulterior motives, while the majority of local organizations did not trust Guatemalans or other Latin American volunteers.

Sometimes TelaMaya members and other Guatemalan women would diagnose the “problem” with Guatemalans: a tendency not to cooperate. When one of the members of the

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<sup>205</sup> Hay algunos de la costa que nos dicen “indios,” pero le dije a Irving que no saben que están diciendo, porque trabajamos para ganar la vida. Hablamos dos idiomas.

<sup>206</sup> Somos profesionales.

board of directors arrived an hour late for a meeting in 2011, and they heard that she was taking advantage of the trip to Quetzaltenango to do a little shopping, Mercedes commented, “This is why we Guatemalans aren’t growing, because one doesn’t show up and the others leave. They don’t show up when they need to be present.”<sup>207</sup> Two women who were not members of TelaMaya in María’s hometown of San Martín Sacatepéquez told me separately that “the problem with Guatemalans” is that they are *creídas*, “conceited.” One woman told me, “Here in Guatemala we are stuck up. Instead of living together with people, they want to talk about people. It’s custom here in Guatemala.”<sup>208</sup> Another woman echoed that, when someone is trying to do some good, everyone else just criticizes rather than helping them out. By associating the word “*creído*” with gossip, they were identifying what they saw as a tendency for Guatemalans to view their own concerns as more important than the concerns of others, and a tendency to work against rather than with each other. Roxana said that when her brother died, some foreign volunteers had helped her cope. That was something she had noticed about foreigners: that they helped each other out in a crisis, whereas Guatemalans did not.

Guatemalans also frequently compared Guatemalan culture unfavorably with US culture. Roxana particularly had a favorable impression of the United States from her visits there on TelaMaya business and her interactions with US volunteers. I asked Roxana how she felt about the fact that the US government orchestrated a coup that sent her country into a spiral of violence and insecurity for half a century. I commented that it was surreal that the US had shifted from sending CIA spies to sending volunteers to Guatemala. Nonplussed, she said that she had never heard about the US having a role in the conflict: “The one thing I do know is that the United

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<sup>207</sup> Es por eso que no crecemos los chapines [Guatemalans], porque uno no viene y los demás se van. No se presentan cuando hay que estar presente.

<sup>208</sup> Aquí en Guatemala somos creídas. En lugar de convivir, quieren hablar de la gente... Es que aquí en Guatemala es costumbre.

States sent us aid and supplies to recover from the conflict, and accepted those of us who had to flee.”<sup>209</sup> The US involvement in the civil war does not seem to be emphasized in Guatemalan schooling. Roxana also rooted for the US in a soccer match between the US and Guatemala, explaining, “Those who’ve supported us the most are from the United States.”<sup>210</sup> Once when a client was interested in holding a meeting with the TelaMaya administration, Roxana asked me her nation of origin. Hearing that the client was from the US, she said, “Then yes. If she were from Korea, China, Italy, or Panama, it would be different, because they all work differently.”<sup>211</sup>

Roxana often remarked on what she saw as a contrast between foreign volunteer tourists’ openness and willingness to share and Guatemalans’ self-focus and reluctance to share: “I see that the people from the US, from other countries aren’t selfish.”<sup>212</sup> She largely excepted herself and some of the other women who worked closely with foreigners in the association from this characterization, but said that they reported to a board of directors that could be jealous of their ideas. She described foreigners as more generous with their knowledge and innovation: “They have ideas, share ideas... they are not people who say, *‘Ah no, I’m just saving this for me; I’m saving my idea for me... I’m not giving it to another person.’* They’re not like that. By contrast, we Guatemalans only want it for ourselves.”<sup>213</sup> She attributed this difference to the fact that foreigners had what they needed, whereas Guatemalans had to struggle for what they wanted: “For them, everything is fine... they see everything as the same, right? But for us Guatemalans, we aren’t like that... we’re, let’s say, jealous, selfish, uh— we don’t want them to take what’s

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<sup>209</sup> Lo único que sí sé es que los Estados Unidos nos mandó ayuda y bolsas para recuperar del conflicto, y nos aceptaron algunos que tenían que huirse

<sup>210</sup> Los que más nos han apoyado son de los Estados Unidos.

<sup>211</sup> Entonces sí. Si fuera de Corea, China, Italia, o Panamá, sería diferente, porque todos trabajan diferente

<sup>212</sup> ellos no son egoístas, no son- no son como nosotros los guatemaltecos, la verdad que nosotros somos quizás envidiosas... Yo miro que las personas de EU, de otros países no son egoístas.

<sup>213</sup> Ellos tienen ideas, aportan ideas, como te digo, no son personas que dicen, *ay no, solo guardo esto para mi guardo mi idea para mí, no doy a otra persona*. Ellos no son así. En cambio nosotros los guatemaltecos solo queremos para nosotros.

ours.”<sup>214</sup> Despite her need to speak diplomatically about voluntourists, Roxana noted that it was privilege and economic security that allowed them to share their ideas freely, while poverty made Guatemalans cling desperately to what they saw as theirs.

The TelaMaya officers also considered foreigners more honest and economically disinterested than locals. When a tourist returned to TelaMaya to pay the difference on a small item they had given him in lieu of change, Roxana commented, “That’s what you are like, you foreigners. You worry when you owe something. Instead, we Guatemalans are different. When you give us a discount, we say, *Thanks!* We want cheap things.”<sup>215</sup> When they discovered some items missing from the store, they were more inclined to believe that a Guatemalan woman who entered the store had done it than the foreign tourists. Chatting with Roxana, long-term client Melissa shared that she had been collecting signatures for a recall of Wisconsin governor Scott Walker, who had been accused of misconduct. Used to corruption in Guatemala, Roxana was surprised to hear about a corruption scandal in the US.

The officers also perceived Guatemalans as less inclined to volunteer their time than foreigners,<sup>216</sup> although my observations of other local organizations would suggest that this is not universally true. A Chilean volunteer complained to Roxana that she had tried to get Guatemalans involved in a benefit event for the cooperative but only foreigners had helped her: “Guatemalans didn’t want to help us, but they should have, because it’s their community. It’s their women.”<sup>217</sup> Roxana agreed, “TelaMaya is alive because of foreigners. They value our

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<sup>214</sup> para ellos todo está bien ellos miran las cosas igual, verdad. Pero en cambio nosotros los guatemaltecos no somos así ... somos pongamos celosas, egoístas, eh no queremos que nos quiten lo nuestro

<sup>215</sup> Así son ustedes, los extranjeros. Se dan pena cuando deben algo. En cambio, nosotros los guatemaltecos son diferentes. Cuando nos dan un descuento, decimos, *¡Gracias!* Queremos cosas baratas.

<sup>216</sup> Expecting volunteer work from local people has caused ethical dilemmas for international NGOs like Doctors Without Borders: at times, their ethos of voluntarism can conflict with the imperative to pay local staff members a fair wage (Redfield 2012).

<sup>217</sup> Los guatemaltecos no querían ayudarnos, pero tenían que hacerlo, porque es su pueblo. Son sus mujeres.

work.”<sup>218</sup> Roxana estimated that 90% of the aid came from foreigners, and 10% from Guatemalans, although she did acknowledge the role of local Spanish schools in bringing tourists to TelaMaya’s weaving conferences. During the 20 months that I spent at the cooperative, there was never a Guatemalan volunteer. The closest cases were Gloria, who was born in Guatemala but grew up in the US; Sofia, a second-generation Guatemalan immigrant from the US; and a woman from Xela who offered her services as a volunteer but never followed up.

The TelaMaya administrators treated these ethnically Guatemalan volunteers differently than foreign volunteers. The officers cautioned me to keep a close watch on Gloria and not allow her to handle money, because they were unsure whether she should be regarded as Guatemalan or American with respect to her trustworthiness. For a month, TelaMaya hosted a pair of Guatemalan secretarial interns, and their orientation for these young women differed from the one they gave to foreign volunteers. They told them not to be too proud to do whatever tasks were necessary, including mopping the floor, and warned them that TelaMaya is no place for gossip. “Gossip... that’s something that has happened to us a lot. If you see something, it’s better to just shut your mouths and say nothing,”<sup>219</sup> admonished Roxana. María also impressed the importance of security and controlling information upon them: “Don’t let just anyone in and don’t mention our names... Because right now these are troubling times.”<sup>220</sup> The officers were concerned that the Guatemalan women would consider their duties demeaning or gossip about other staff members; they may also have been more open about their concerns about security with locals than with foreigners because they worried about frightening foreign volunteers away.

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<sup>218</sup> TelaMaya está vivo por extranjeros. Valorán nuestro trabajo.

<sup>219</sup> Los chismes... esta es una cosa que a nosotros ha pasado mucho. Si miran algo, mejor cerrar la boca y no decir nada.

<sup>220</sup> No dejar entrar a cualquiera y no mencionar nuestro nombre. Si llaman por teléfono, *¿De parte de quién?* Porque ahorita está muy delicado el tiempo.

TelaMaya administrators consistently turned away Guatemalans who were interested in learning to weave on the backstrap loom. Paula informed a Guatemalan man, “Please understand that we’re a women’s association. We teach here, but it’s only to show a little of the steps. The real technique is for the women who work in their small towns.”<sup>221</sup> Similarly, María told a local woman, “We only do demonstrations for tourists so that they can see a bit of weaving; it’s not exactly a school.”<sup>222</sup> When a local woman in typical dress inquired, Roxana’s sister explained that they did have a weaving school “but it is only for tourism, only foreigners. It’s not for just anyone.”<sup>223</sup> I assumed that their unwillingness to teach Guatemalans had something to do with their fear of competition. However, Roxana explained it differently: “It’s because Guatemalans don’t value our work. They aren’t particularly interested in weaving,”<sup>224</sup> and they were reluctant to pay for the classes. María and Roxana hesitated to receive a young Guatemalan student, while Paula was more inclined to take the work. Though they typically charged tourists the full price upon completion of the weaving, they made the girl bring her government ID card and contact information and pre-pay by the hour.

The idea that foreigners appreciated Mayan culture more than Ladinos was a constant refrain in the cooperative. Cooperative leaders assured the volunteers that they were advertising the products and volunteer program for an exclusively Euro-American audience. The officers would complain that Guatemalans did not appreciate the kind of high-end products they made or the heritage behind them: “They only look at the price, not the quality.”<sup>225</sup> They linked this

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<sup>221</sup> Fíjese que somos una asociación de mujeres. Aquí enseñamos, pero es solo para mostrar un poco de los procesos. La verdadera técnica es para las mujeres que trabajan en sus pueblitos.

<sup>222</sup> No apartamos clases directamente. Sólo hacemos demostraciones para las turistas para que miren algo de tejer, no es una escuela exactamente.

<sup>223</sup> Pero solo es para el turismo, solo los extranjeros. No es para cualquier persona.

<sup>224</sup> Es porque los guatemaltecos no valoran nuestro trabajo. No les interesan mucho el tejido.

<sup>225</sup> No nos compran los guatemaltecos. Solo miran el precio, no la calidad.



devaluation of weaving to a broader devaluation of women in Guatemala: “How sad that here, among the indigenous people, well, sometimes they don’t value women’s work; they don’t value women’s lives,”<sup>226</sup> María observed. Paula agreed, “Foreigners are the ones who value our Mayan culture.”<sup>227</sup> Italian volunteer Benedetta was invited to a dinner with some local Ladina women: “They told me that they don’t know anything about weaving, that only the foreigners learn something about weaving and traditional culture: ‘*The foreigners know more about our culture than we do!*’”<sup>228</sup> Roxana commiserated with NGO leader Fernando on this topic. He related how he and other expatriate Guatemalans who had lived in other parts of the world had come together to establish the NGO: “So we have returned to Guatemala with other ideas, right? But also we don’t want to change our culture; that’s very important. But really, for us having entered Guatemala, the market is new, because it’s hard to get a Guatemalan to buy our own things, right?”<sup>229</sup> María thought that perhaps for non-indigenous Guatemalans, familiarity has bred contempt for Mayan culture:

In my conferences I always value... what the foreigners have done for us, I value it because they value our Mayan culture. Guatemalans come to the store just to look. And sometimes I ask myself, ‘*Why don’t Guatemalans buy? Or sometimes they come just to steal, you know? So why don’t they buy? Why aren’t they like the foreigners?*’ But sometimes I get to thinking, maybe they don’t buy because we’re making the products here in Guatemala. And well, they don’t use the typical dress. Maybe they use a few scarves that match their Western-style clothes, pants, and everything; that’s why they don’t buy, or because it’s expensive. I don’t know why it would be so but there are many people who discriminate against us.<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>226</sup> qué triste de que aquí entre la gente indígena pues a veces no valoran el trabajo, no valoran la vida de las mujeres.

<sup>227</sup> No les importa la calidad. Son los extranjeros que valoran mucho nuestra cultura Maya

<sup>228</sup> me dijeron que no saben nada de tejido, que solo los extranjeros aprenden algo sobre tejidos y cultura tradicional: *Los extranjeros saben más de nuestra cultura que nosotros.*

<sup>229</sup> Entonces nosotros hemos regresado a Guatemala con otras ideas, ¿verdad? Pero también no queremos cambiar nuestra cultura, eso es muy importante ¿verdad? Pero realmente para nosotros haber entrado Guatemala el mercado es nuevo, porque aquí en Guatemala es muy difícil que un guatemalteco compre nuestras propias cosas ¿verdad?

<sup>230</sup> En mis conferencias yo siempre valoro... lo que los extranjeros han hecho para nosotros pues, yo valoro porque ellos valoran nuestra cultura maya. ... Guatemaltecos vienen a la tienda solo a mirar. Y yo a veces me pregunto, ¿por qué los guatemaltecos no compran? o a veces vienen solo para robar, ¿verdad? Entonces ¿por qué no

Some of the non-indigenous Guatemalans with whom I spoke shared María's assessment. One Ladino stated that they were constantly surrounded with the material productions of Mayan culture, whereas to foreigners, everything was exotic. Another Ladino, a long-term friend to TelaMaya, commented that he was tired of the widespread discrimination against indigenous people among his community: "I've started thinking that our country is recognized worldwide for their dress, beautiful landscapes... I got to thinking how other people from other places have come to value what's ours, and now we're so close and we don't value it, in fact, we laugh at them... enough already!"<sup>231</sup> Of course there were many dimensions—ethnic, class, economic—to Ladino rejection of Mayan culture.

Mayan cultural revitalization has been met with both accommodation and resistance from Ladino communities. In 1996, Rigoberto Quemé Chay's election as the first Mayan mayor in Quetzaltenango in recent history sparked a backlash that included racial slurs scrawled across buildings in the city (Warren 1998). Based on research with Ladinos in a town in Chimaltenango, a progressive area near Guatemala City, Charles Hale (1999; 2002) argued that Ladinos have responded to the Maya cultural revitalization movement by opening up a limited political space for Mayan advancement. The Ladinos expressed the sense that they were now treating indigenous people as equals, but were wary of indigenous reprisals and quick to react when they felt that Mayans were getting beyond their place. They rejected the existence of "pure Mayan culture" or Mayan cultural rights. They altered their approach to domination from

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compran? ¿Por qué no son como los extranjeros? Pero yo a veces me pongo a pensar quizás ellos no no compran porque aquí mismo en Guatemala hacemos los productos digo yo y ellos no usan el traje típico pues. Tal vez usan algunas bufandas que combinan con sus ropas así de vestido, pantalón, y toda la cosa, por eso no compran, o porque es caro verdad. No sé, no sé por qué será pero hay mucha gente que nos discrimina pues.

<sup>231</sup> Es más me he puesto analizar, que nuestro país es reconocido al nivel mundial, por sus trajes, bellos paisajes... me ponía a pensar cómo otras personas siendo de otros lados llegan a valorar lo de nosotros, y ahora estamos tan cerca y no valoramos es más nos reímos de ellos... ¡¡ya basta!!

outright repression to subtler forms of hegemony, in a concession to oppressed groups that recognized past wrongs but forestalled more revolutionary attempts to overthrow the existing power structure. To Hale (1999:307), Ladinos' admiration of indigenous customs or products evokes a "colonial nostalgia," in which folklorized performances and objects are valued as signs of a vanishing past, a viewpoint that occludes any modern indigenous political presence. This form of distant admiration also makes sense when considering Ladinos as "redressed Indians." Their dress may be the only overt sign distinguishing them from their recent ancestors who wore indigenous dress, provoking anxiety about the tenuousness of their ethnic identity. While Ladinos frequently expressed admiration for the textiles in TelaMaya's shop, and sometimes accessorized with a bag or shoes made with traditional fabric, they sought to distance themselves from the strong indigenous identity represented by *traje*.

In her discussion of voluntourism in Honduras mentioned at the beginning of this section, McLennan (2014) suggests that voluntourists' negative attitudes towards local people arose from the paternalistic nature of voluntourism and the need to justify the use of foreign rather than local labor. However, I argue that a broader and more systematic approach is necessary to understand the TelaMaya leaders' aversion to dealing with Guatemalans, which predated their association with foreign volunteers and was shared by other organizations and communities in Quetzaltenango. Rather than seeing voluntourists as the cause of TelaMaya's marked prejudice against Guatemalan employees or volunteers, I see them as a symptom. Because the leaders of TelaMaya saw outsiders as the source of progress, a source of leverage in their dealings with business associates and government officials, and a source of validation for their cultural beliefs and products, they turned to foreign voluntourists as their primary development strategy.

Ashis Nandy (1983:xi) argued that the social structures created by colonialism and postcolonialism insidiously induce colonized people to internalize their oppressors' dismissal of their cultures and values: "colonialism colonizes minds in addition to bodies. [...] In the process, it helps generalize the concept of the modern West from a geographical and temporal entity to a psychological category. The West is now everywhere, within the West and outside; in structures and in minds." Kwame Gyekye (1997:26-27) claimed that the "colonial mentality" leads people "to prefer European things—values, practices, institutions, and so on—[making] people look outside rather than inside for standards of judgment." Renato Constantino (1966) refers to the colonial mentality as making colonized people into "the willing dupes of predatory foreigners," but this explanation seems simplistic, and it also seems to deny them agency. How can we understand Guatemalan NGO leaders' prejudices against Guatemalans without assuming that they have been brainwashed into preferring Euro-Americans?

Something beyond colonial self-loathing was taking place in these intense criticisms of Guatemalan culture. With their critiques of Guatemalans and Guatemalan culture, TelaMaya members were making comparisons and drawing conclusions based on their exposure to Western and particularly US culture. They were showing their awareness that other ways are possible. A facet of Western culture that they particularly appreciated was ethical consumption itself, both fair trade purchasing and volunteer tourism, and its ambition to transform or at least soften the rough edges of capitalism. Just as Orientalism can operate as a form of self-criticism in which people project onto Orientalized foreign cultures the values they appreciate or despise about their own cultures, the cooperative members were using what they know and have observed about US culture to critique Guatemalan culture. This act of comparison and auto-critique is inherently cosmopolitan.

## Conclusion

The volunteer program in TelaMaya brought Guatemalan Mayan cooperative leaders and Euro-American voluntourists together into a contact zone or ethnotouristic community. Their contact led them to draw conclusions about who they were and who the others were, delineating boundaries and making deductions about the other group. When they noted similarities, they were working to build a temporary ethnotouristic community in which norms for interacting with each other were passed down through generations or cycles of volunteers. Noting and commenting on differences was a process of definition and differentiation, a way of reconfirming or challenging the values of their home cultures.

Voluntourists gazed upon Guatemalans: they were often driven to comment on Guatemalan culture to demonstrate their immersion in it, attempting to navigate the pitfalls of representing people from the global South without sounding judgmental or neocolonialistic. They tended to approach Guatemala through the tropes of colonialism that have constructed it as a “beautiful, yet dangerous” exotic place. They also wanted to draw lessons about tolerance or understanding from their observations about Guatemalan culture, reflecting upon its similarities and differences with their own cultures. While it should not be assumed that all tourists seek to become more cosmopolitan simply because they are physically moving from place to place, volunteer tourists almost universally seemed eager to immerse themselves in a foreign culture and come away changed and humbled by their experience. They have also used the power of their gaze as privileged foreign observers, with their implied connections to the international humanitarian community, to provide support to people who have historically been treated as invisible and disposable. The real inconveniences, discomforts, and uneasiness that volunteers experienced as they plunged into the violent swirl of Guatemalan life corroborated their “anti-

tourist” identities. Such tourists performed “cosmopolitan citizenship of risks, rights and responsibilities at both national and global registers of belonging, while displaying a cosmopolitan competence, knowing how to consume goods, places and cultures” (Swain 2009:516). Their subjectivity was marked by flexibility and adaptability, and they demonstrated their savvy by entering spaces of risk with a calculated confidence that is also based on their imaginaries of their homes as safe spaces that will always receive them (Germann Molz 2005).

Voluntourists’ own experiences of sexual harassment and quotidian violence in Guatemala became entangled with their understandings of their volunteerism and gave them a sense of solidarity and shared suffering with cooperative members, despite the wide disparities between their experiences as women. The suffering they experienced during their time at TelaMaya heightened the authenticity of their trip, given that many associate comfort with the falseness of choreographed touristic experiences and discomfort with the gritty reality of local people’s lived experiences (Dann 1998:5). Those who did not plan to encounter violence often found their experiences shaped by violence during their time at TelaMaya, which may reinvigorate their sense of purpose and their commitment to helping the women. Their shared experiences of quotidian (often gendered) violence gave them a basis for connecting with the women, who served as their guides in navigating the complex new terrain of interpersonal violence and insecurity in Guatemala. However, no matter how deeply they may integrate themselves into the local community for a time, their foreign status always gives them the option of mobility and insulates them from some of the political and personal risks carried by local actors.

Guatemalans gazed upon voluntourists: this kind of gazing was less likely to take on an imperative, analytical character, as cooperative members felt less driven than voluntourists to

extract moral lessons from their interactions. They generally refrained from openly commenting on the material gulf between their lifestyles and those of volunteers, because it made volunteers uncomfortable, but comparisons were inevitable. TelaMaya's leaders, particularly vice president Roxana, have come to view foreigners as the bearers of a culture superior to their own in several key ways; theirs is a cosmopolitan perspective that is open to difference and potentially change. When they criticized "the Guatemalan character," they generally seemed to be speaking broadly about certain basic tendencies that transcend some of the real differences between class and ethnic groups and including themselves in their criticisms. Their preference for Euro-American practices fits with postcolonial propensities to devalue the cultures of the colonized, but it is a much more complicated attitude than a simple colonial mentality. It seems to arise in part from a general orientation towards all things Euro-American, but also from a pragmatic assessment that these are the communities where Guatemalan cultural capital has the most traction, from positive experiences with earnest young Euro-American ambassadors, and from frustration with the endemic poverty that often pits Guatemalans against each other. The comparisons that they made between Guatemalan and US culture show that the practice of using the Other as a medium through which to reflect upon and project critiques of one's own culture is not limited to Orientalist Euro-American thinking.

## Chapter Six: Competition Over (and Through) Information: Information Politics Within the Cooperative

The secretary of TelaMaya, Paula, declared, “We realized that it’s very important to have the support of— of foreign people... because the fact is that they have many ideas... they’re people from other countries and they know their people, what it is they like when they come to Guatemala.”<sup>232</sup> Voluntourists and TelaMaya members engaged in a (somewhat) reciprocal exchange of information: voluntourists informed TelaMaya members about foreign tastes and business practices, and TelaMaya members informed voluntourists about Guatemalan and Mayan culture. Sarah Lyon (2006) critiqued fair trade marketing for providing rich information about producers to consumers, while failing to inform producers about consumers; this one-way flow is problematic because fair trade becomes an exchange of information for money and resources, rather than a reciprocal relationship between producers and consumers. However, this critique is complicated by the presence of voluntourists in cooperatives like TelaMaya, who provided information to the artisans about foreigners’ tastes and interests. The volunteers in many ways personified the marketplace for the Mayan women—they were buyers (contributing directly to the cooperative by selling products to themselves and their friends and family) and stand-ins for the buyers. While scholars, volunteers, and weavers alike have tended to view “the global marketplace” as a faceless and mysterious system (Gibson-Graham 1996), capitalist institutions are made up of individuals and sets of practices. For TelaMaya, volunteers *were* the market in a literal and figurative sense, standing in for imagined consumers and personifying a fickle and untrustworthy marketplace. This chapter will focus on the dynamics of the reciprocal flows (or stoppages) of information between cooperative members and leaders, voluntourists,

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<sup>232</sup> Nos dimos cuenta pues de que es muy importante pues tener la- el apoyo de de gente extranjera digamos si porque la verdad que ellos tienen muchos ideas. Como te digo son gente de otros países, conocen su gente, que es lo que ellos les gusta cuando vengan a Guatemala entonces



and clients, including the debates among and between the volunteers and Mayan cooperative leaders over how much information about the cooperative and its members should be shared online, and what to reveal to clients and what to conceal from them. I will also discuss the representations of Mayan experience and the cultural and aesthetic productions that emerge from the volunteer program. Volunteers have become incorporated in the process of cultural production in TelaMaya, (re)creating and maintaining a culture to be consumed. This process of representation created a push-pull dynamic between voluntourists and TelaMaya members in which the volunteers were driven to uncover and reveal deeper information about the Mayan weavers, who in turn sought to hold back intellectual possessions that were intimately linked to their identities.

In her nuanced analysis of reciprocity in the Trobriands, Annette Weiner referred to reciprocity as the “paradox of keeping-while-giving” (1992). She viewed reciprocal exchange as a field of struggle in which each group is aware that there is a fundamental distinction between their possessions and those of the other group, and this ultimate non-transferability of knowledge and goods “confirms the presence of difference in social identities”: “What motivates reciprocity is its reverse – the desire to keep something back from the pressures of give and take. This something is a possession that speaks to and for an individual’s or a group’s social identity and, in so doing, affirms the difference between one person or group and another” (Weiner 1992:43). Aware that the other group is holding back, exchange participants strategically angle to gain access to that which is not being offered in exchange. Weiner (1992:43) asserted that the differentiating power of inalienable possessions makes it impossible for a simple exchange to take place in which one good, idea, or service is given in return for another without participants being aware of the relationship between that possession and identity or concerned over “the

danger of its irreversible loss.” Weiner’s analysis illuminates this dynamic of reciprocity in TelaMaya, in which much is exchanged and much is held back.

However, voluntourists and cooperative members did not participate equally in this dynamic. Two attitudes towards knowledge were embedded in this tension: as communal and as intangible property. In part, these contrasting perspectives stemmed from divergent bodies of thought pertaining to knowledge: the universalist French Enlightenment tradition of “civilization,” in which knowledge is seen as a common good, and the particularist Germanic tradition of “*kultur*,” in which knowledge is unique to its place of origin and non-transferable. Voluntourists tended not to view their knowledge as regional or culturally-bound; instead, they saw what they knew as conforming to international professional standards and highly transferable, accessible to all. They were quite willing to share their skills and technical practices with others. Voluntourists’ knowledge was universalizing and not rooted to a particular place, and thus something they saw as a shared property to be freely circulated.

By contrast, local indigenous knowledge has come to be seen, in part through development work, as a special intangible property held and cultivated by people. Joanna Davidson pointed out in the context of Guinea-Bissau that the current trend towards incorporating local knowledge in development projects comes up against local attitudes towards knowledge as something to be kept and managed: “Development practitioners espouse many of the same assumptions that undergird scientific inquiry and progressive politics more broadly: that knowledge is an extractable resource, that more knowledge is better, and that democratized knowledge leads to progress” (Davidson 2010:2013). According to Davidson, cultures of secrecy are deeply rooted in the dynamics of rural egalitarian lifestyles; she connects the compulsion to conceal to the need for nominally egalitarian societies to maintain the appearance of parity.

While her participants experienced material poverty, they managed “information as a kind of currency one can generate, amass, and withhold,” and by concealing and controlling knowledge they could enjoy a certain leverage that placed them above other people in a way that their economic system did not allow (Davidson 2010:221). Davidson suggested that her participants’ “commitment to a particular scheme of information flow—based largely on secrecy, evasion, and restraint—challenges even the most culturally sensitive development policies and practices that privilege local knowledge” (Davidson 2010:213). This chapter argues that cooperative members managed information, causing friction with voluntourists who viewed knowledge as something to be shared.

The chapter begins by discussing how volunteer tourists turn their analytical gaze on themselves and other tourists, contributing to the cooperative by sharing information about international tourists’ tastes and expectations. The following sections examine how voluntourists and cooperative members attempted to present information to tourists to differentiate the cooperative from other sellers in local and global markets. The next section focuses on a conflict over control of the images of cooperative members caused by a volunteer photographer’s sense of entitlement to Mayan women’s images, and the cooperative’s low capacity for handling such disagreements. The following section focuses on similar anxieties that voluntourists could appropriate Mayan weavers’ cultural heritage, taking business information or creating weaving schools in their home countries. The theft of intellectual property is also the theme of the final section: the cooperative was accused of stealing textile designs from a Swedish company, and the resulting negotiations pointed to differing attitudes towards imitation and appropriation.

### **“Buying the Information, Not the Weaving”: Volunteers as Sources of Information**

Voluntourists in TelaMaya have become both consumers and producers of touristic imagery. One of the interesting aspects of this volunteer program is that it put voluntourists in the position of working in the tourism industry, attending to customers in the store and marketing the cooperative to other tourists as a destination for shopping, weaving lessons, and volunteering. Tourists, as volunteers, became intimately engaged with the process of representation in a way that disrupted classic dichotomies between “guest” and “host”. To theorize the representations that structure the relationship between hosts and guests, I find John Urry’s notion of “the tourist gaze” helpful. Urry, drawing from Foucault, defined “the tourist gaze” as the set of tourists’ expectations and perceptions that “orders, shapes and classifies, rather than reflects the world” (1990:2). He argues that gazing is a socially constructed practice framed by images, representations, and texts about a place, an interpretive filter for understanding sensory experiences that varies by social class and demographic characteristics (1990:2). Urry presents several examples of different styles of gaze, including the “anthropological gaze,” with which tourists seek to derive meaning from their experiences by situating them in a cultural and historical context. He argues that this gaze may be more penetrating and intrusive than a more “spectatorial” gaze that passes by rapidly. As **Chapter Three** indicates, voluntourists are an intensified form of cultural tourist, drawn by the appeal of getting to know local “cultures” on a deeper level, and they often employed an anthropological gaze to draw conclusions about Guatemalan culture, as shown in **Chapter Five**.

Given the economic power that tourists wield over locals, the tourist gaze disciplines hosts to reshape themselves and their representations of their locales to meet tourists’ expectations. Edward Bruner points out that “the way local peoples tell stories about their traditions to foreigners influences how they talk about and express their own culture to

themselves” (2005:22). According to Bruner, tourism creates a space of cultural production and reinvention in which local people “collaborate in a touristic coproduction” (2005:193). The intervention of voluntourists in this process of cultural (re)production has not yet been examined. Voluntourists as “anti-tourists,” position themselves as intermediaries between local people and more transient tourists. When they create representations for other tourists, they turn “the tourist gaze” in on itself, seeking to understand the expectations of tourists like themselves and shape their experiences in Guatemala.

Scholars have rarely considered how tourists gaze at each other. With his concept of “the questioning gaze,” Bruner (2005:95) argues that tourists do not passively accept the touristic representations of local culture presented to them but actively question, critique, and respond to these representations. Voluntourists took the “second” or “questioning” gaze a step further, becoming involved in shaping how they and other tourists perceived TelaMaya. While, as discussed in **Chapter Three**, many voluntourists considered themselves fundamentally different from mainstream tourists, to create local marketing materials they were forced to be introspective about what would appeal to tourists like themselves. These moments of self-awareness made it difficult to maintain their distance from mainstream tourists: “It is easy enough to claim, at a discursive level, the identity position of a ‘traveler,’ or ‘post-tourist,’ but it is more difficult to maintain this positioning in practice. There is often a contradiction between the identity positions which tourists claim and the practices they enact” (Gillespie 2006:24). Working for other tourists both allowed TelaMaya voluntourists to differentiate themselves from mainstream tourists and forced them to admit that in certain ways, they shared mainstream tourists’ tastes.

Voluntourists were a valuable source of information about distant systems of value to TelaMaya, communicating their understandings of what clients look for in their products and

representations of Mayan culture, as well as their ideas about how small enterprises should operate. Roxana and María exhorted a pair of Guatemalan administrative assistant interns to take advantage of the benefits of working with foreigners to practice their English and learn about foreign cultures. In an interview, Roxana stated, “To me, volunteers are very important because the fact is that since they have other ideas, and ... they know their people, and since they’re foreign volunteers, well, they know about foreigners’ tastes right, so... what it is that they like: for example with the colors, the bag designs, the— how they like to see a place look, and the whole thing.”<sup>233</sup> Roxana noted that some of the products that did not sell well, including the placemats from her home weaving group, might not fit with foreigners’ aesthetics or might be out of style: “Maybe they don’t like the colors because they’re more ours. I know that in the United States there’s autumn, winter, summer... some products have gone out of fashion.”<sup>234</sup> The officers and representatives took volunteers’ aesthetic opinions very seriously, consulting them about patterns and colors.

Volunteers shaped how TelaMaya presents itself visually and aesthetically. The following search keywords suggested by a volunteer setting up a storefront in an online handicrafts marketplace indicate how she was positioning TelaMaya’s products in the “hippie/ethnic” category: “traditional, hippie, patterned, Mayan, organic, funky, authentic, free spirit, hobo, gypsy, colorful, rich, vibrant, gaudy, psychedelic, jazzy, lively, graphic.” A volunteer who worked as a marketing consultant, Jacqueline, commented that to command higher prices, TelaMaya would need to break out of the category of “hippie/ethnic” backpacker

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<sup>233</sup> Para mí el voluntario pues es muy importante porque la verdad que así como ellos pues tienen otras ideas, y por ejemplo como se llama que – que ellos pues conocen sus gentes, y como son voluntarios extranjeros pues conocen sobre los gustos de los extranjeros va, entonces... qué es qué es lo que a ellos les gusta: por ejemplo con los colores, con los diseños de bolsas, de- como quieren ver ellos un lugar, y toda la cosa.

<sup>234</sup> Tal vez no les gustan los colores porque son más de nosotros. Sé que en los Estados Unidos hay otoño, invierno, verano... eso pasó de moda en algunos productos.

souvenirs, and that one of the ways to do that was to photograph the products in Western-style environments with other luxurious objects. Her concept note for these photographs emphasized the craftsmanship and exoticism of TelaMaya products: “Renaissance Tradition, Magical, Maya, and Put Something Handcrafted into Your Home.” A group of volunteers scouted locations for these photo shoots, agreeing that one local hotel was “so Anthropologie”<sup>235</sup> with its brightly-painted, flaking walls and air of decayed opulence, and that it would be perfect to visually make the case that TelaMaya products fit into Western settings. Voluntourists thus drew from their mental models of how ethnic products should be marketed to Euro-American audiences, using visual references from their home countries. These models occasionally varied: whereas US volunteers considered it acceptable to present a single photo of the range of variation in the naturally-dyed scarves and emphasize their “one-of-a-kind” character, European volunteers judged that their peers would prefer to select specific items.

When asked about the influence of volunteers in TelaMaya, Roxana gestured around the office: “Look at all they do... they put up the photos there, they painted...”<sup>236</sup> Volunteers worked to adapt it to the needs of visitors, making the public spaces more inviting and recognizable as a tourist destination. At first glance, the TelaMaya office looked like what the building had originally been: a house, with a set of stairs descending to a central courtyard. Volunteers fought a losing battle to keep laundry out of the courtyard, given that Roxana’s family lived in an on-site apartment. With no store in sight, visiting tourists often hesitated, and their doubts about having located the cooperative were addressed by a mural directly in sight of the door with the name of the organization. To the left was the fair trade store, with brightly-painted cream and yellow walls. To the right was a large room divided by a set of shelves into public space and,

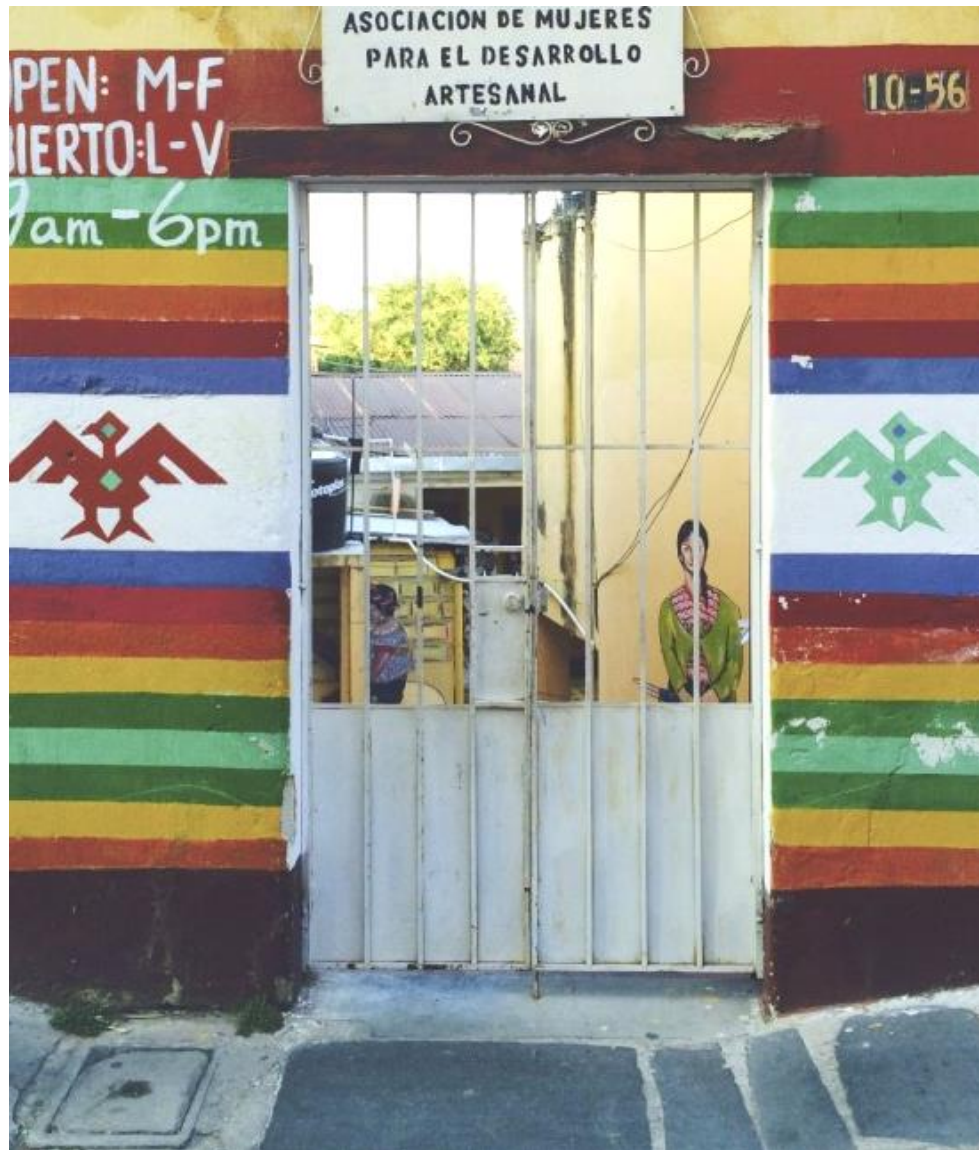
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<sup>235</sup> An American women’s apparel and accessories retailer known for its “ethnic” style.

<sup>236</sup> Porque mira pues, todas las cosas que hacen, ponen fotos ahí, que pintaron, ¿verdad?







**Figure 6.2 The painted entryway and other attempts to mark the space as a business**

The officers also commissioned a painting of a woman in traditional dress holding a weaving with an arrow pointing inwards to encourage visitors to venture down the stairs into the courtyard. A map of Guatemala showing the locations of the 17 weaving groups, painted by a pair of US volunteers, became a favored site for photographs at TelaMaya. Given that visitors were often surprised not to encounter 400 weavers busily weaving in the office, a volunteer made a display board to hang photographs of TelaMaya's weavers, to give tourists a sense of connection to the cooperative members.



**Figure 6.3 Top: Before the redecoration. Bottom: After the redecoration.**

Volunteers frequently suggested that the store layout was too cluttered, commenting that the presentation of the products piled in baskets, like in the outdoor markets, led customers to expect low or flexible pricing (Fig. 6.3). In December of 2012, a Dutch volunteer and the volunteer coordinators, a Canadian couple, decided to give the storefront a makeover during the Christmas holidays. They proposed painting the walls in lighter colors and rearranging the displays and products, placing many into storage to open up the space. María and Roxana

approved the paint colors and gave the volunteers free rein to redesign the store, with the caveat that the redesign would be a “first draft” that could be revised to suit everyone’s needs. María’s first reaction to the new layout was that the store looked “too empty,”<sup>237</sup> and she pointed out that removing some of the one-of-a-kind products would limit customers’ choices. However, with good customer feedback and some adjustments to the displays to reflect how customers were shopping, she became excited about it.

Voluntourists worked with Roxana to create a “weaving museum” to enhance visitors’ experiences and make the central office more of a tourist destination. They created a labeled wall display with examples of the typical designs from the five states represented in TelaMaya (Fig. 6.1). Roxana was particularly invested in this project, and took charge of collecting more *huipiles* (traditional blouses) from the 17 groups, especially old specimens, “because people like the antique *huipiles*.”<sup>238</sup> To visually represent the difference that thread quality makes to the final product, the volunteers commissioned a set of “before-and-after” samples to demonstrate that, although they initially appear similar, top-rate thread is colorfast while second-rate products look drab and muddled after coming in contact with water. US volunteer Anthony made a series of posters for the museum to address visitors’ most frequently-asked questions. Because TelaMaya was not fair trade certified, the poster on the organization’s fair trade practices made the case that the organization met certain fair trade standards, showing the percentage of the sale price that went directly to the weaver. A poster displayed near the natural-dyed products illustrated the steps in dyeing thread and the sources of natural colors. Two additional posters on the history of *traje* (traditional dress) and the symbolism of the designs were planned but not completed. The voluntourists advised the officers on how to use contextual markers to designate the TelaMaya

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<sup>237</sup> muy vacía

<sup>238</sup> porque a la gente le gustan los huipiles antiguos.

store as a fair trade space, including photographs of some of the members, displays about the organization's history and mission statement, and a standard store layout with price tags and labels to make tourists comfortable purchasing.

Voluntourists also informed TelaMaya members about the kinds of stories and images they found appealing; in many cases, this included information about Mayan culture. As voluntourists sought to use quasi-anthropological information to add value to TelaMaya's products, the end result sometimes reflected their expectations: their mode of depicting Guatemalan handicrafts fit with Carol Hendrickson's (1996) analysis of how international catalogs tended to represent "Mayan" or "Guatemalan" products. Hendrickson found that the descriptions emphasized the traditional processes used to hand-craft the objects and the objects' association with leisure activities and used personal pronouns to create a sense of connection between the producer and consumer. Most used "cultural bricolage" to convey a generalized sense of cross-cultural affinity, an image of a unified human family that tended to gloss over material inequalities and historic injustices between groups of people (Hendrickson 1996). When TelaMaya's volunteers added new products to the online catalog, they asked María for information for the new captions: "What do the designs in the weaving mean? What would this product have been used for traditionally?"<sup>239</sup> At first, she was at a loss: "This is a new item we started making. It does not mean anything; it's just something the weavers thought tourists would like."<sup>240</sup> Then a thought occurred to María: "You could just say that the designs are based in nature."<sup>241</sup> A volunteer took this idea and added, "And we could say that it is made using ancient

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<sup>239</sup> ¿Que significan los diseños de los tejidos? ¿Por cuanto tiempo han hecho el producto para que se usaría así, tradicionalmente?

<sup>240</sup> Es un producto nuevo que acabamos de empezar a hacer. No tiene significado; solo es algo que las tejedoras pensaron que les gustaría a los turistas.

<sup>241</sup> Podrías sólo decir que los diseños se basan en la naturaleza.

backstrap loom techniques. That's not a lie."<sup>242</sup> In this and other instances, the process of (re)constructing the kind of Mayan heritage that tourist customers might find appealing was a collaboration between the Mayan leaders and the voluntourists.

### **“Your Purchase is Woven into the Fabric of their Lives”: Marketing Locality**

TelaMaya's voluntourists saw it as their mission to market the weavers' stories along with their textiles in fair trade markets, in which commodities are enhanced through the creation of a sense of personal connection. As ethical consumers themselves, they knew what information would be appealing. Karl Marx argued that, just as people attribute mystical qualities to religious objects, people endow commodities with value through social exchanges, and this process becomes “mystified” when people come to believe that these values are inherent in the objects and not subjectively assigned to them. For Marx, commodity fetishism “conceals the social character of private labour and the social relations between the individual workers, by making those relations appear as relations between material objects, instead of revealing them plainly” (1990:168-69). Several authors (e.g., Hudson and Hudson 2003; Taylor 2005) claim that the ethical consumption movement, including fair trade and alternative tourism, is working to “de-fetishize” or make transparent the conditions of production and commodification, to highlight that the process of consuming creates a relationship between producers and consumers. Fair trade organizations use narratives that make commodity chains legible, telling stories about the “social lives” of commodities as they move from producers to consumers (Appadurai 1986).

However, Raymond Bryant and Michael Goodman (2004:359) argued that, while fair trade aims to de-fetishize commodities by exposing the processes of production and trade, “ironically, through the very act of revealing the production-commodity-consumer relationship in

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<sup>242</sup> Y podríamos decir que está hecho con las técnicas antiguas del telar de cintura. Eso no es mentira.

its 'full glory,' the effect is to commodify, in turn, the ethical relationship deemed to be at the heart of fair trade.” The relationship between the consumer and the product substitutes for the relationship between the consumer and the artisan (Cook and Crang 1996; Castree 2001; Fridell 2007). As Goodman (2004:902) stated, “The de-fetishizing move of these discourses can be construed as a deeper commoditization of people and place through the penetrating vision of the discursive fields of fair trade.” Sarah Lyon (2006:458) claimed that by using producers’ identities to sell products, fair trade organizations are not so much unmasking the conditions of production as heightening the mystical quality of the products: “Cosmopolitan fair trade consumers seek to immerse themselves in other cultures and engage with the ‘other’... In doing so, they make visible categorical differences between the consuming self and the producing other.” Ethical consumption encourages consumers to locate themselves within a moral geography that emphasizes cultural distance, separating them from producers, in spite of the intention to bring the two groups together.

Volunteers frequently proposed linking the products with images of the specific women who made them and providing more information about their stories and living situations. A US volunteer who had worked at Whole Foods suggested making a new product tag with photographs, first names, and a brief statement from each of the artists. One older Canadian woman suggested, “I think people would be a lot more interested in buying if they could see where it’s from and who’s making it.” “Maybe even the face of the woman who made it,” echoed volunteer designer Jackie. Sandrine stated that in San Cristobal de las Casas, there was a store where the products have tags listing the date, first name of the weaver, the time it took her to weave the product, and her village. She said that tourists, herself included, preferred to shop at this store because of the richness of the information it provided. A prospective wholesale client

spoke with me about the possibilities of working with TelaMaya, commenting that one of the factors in her decision would be the cooperative leadership's attitude towards producing publicity materials with her:

One of the things that would be important to us would be to tell the stories of the women. Could we visit them and take photographs? Other cooperatives I spoke to said that we couldn't have access to the indigenous women or speak with them until we had been working with the cooperative for 10 years. We wouldn't want to exploit them, we wouldn't be asking about their life histories... more about how they weave and what their lives are like now.

A student of documentary filmmaking from Montreal, Jean-Lucien, offered his services to make some promotional videos for the cooperative and its wholesale clients showing what daily life is like for TelaMaya members. María offered, "I know a little old widow who speaks Spanish well. Let's see if she wants to participate. She's very poor. She doesn't have a stove or a sink; she washes her clothing in the river on a stone."<sup>243</sup> Later, María backtracked and said that it was a bit "complicated," because the weavers do not always want to expose themselves. Roxana cut in, "They're poor but proud."<sup>244</sup> Jean-Lucien said that he felt uncomfortable going into people's houses and showing how poor they were.

A US wholesale client, Josie Anne, wanted to take advantage of Jean-Lucien's visit to make videos for her new fair trade company. They chatted over Skype but he was dubious about her ideas: "Josie Anne had some interesting ideas for the video. She wanted to have a handsome man walking down the road, holding a small child by the hand and saying, '*Oh, hi. I didn't see you there.*' Really your typical PSA stuff. She wanted a swooping shot over the village, and I was like, '*OK, but you do know it's just me and my camera, right?*'" Josie Anne sent a detailed description of the promotional video she had in mind:

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<sup>243</sup> Conozco a una viudita que habla muy bien el español, a ver si quiere participar. Es muy humilde. No tiene horno ni pila; lava su ropa en el río en una piedrita.

<sup>244</sup> Son humildes pero orgullosas.

Narrator: *"As part of our global effort to preserve indigenous weaving traditions and help the rural communities served by this textile art form, we are here in [X] Guatemala today. I am taking you on a tour to meet some of the gifted artisans that create the material for your hand woven garment"* [Walking through the village area to the specific weaver's home / weaving area; accentuate the rural aspect through film; very organic]... *Since we donate a portion of the profit directly back to these communities, we want you to meet and get to know some of the ladies directly responsible for your garment, knowing that your purchase helps not only their lives, but the lives of their families, while assisting in the preservation of this ancient tradition. This is [name of one of the weavers]. She grew up here in [place], and learned backstrap loom weaving at age of [yr] from [family member]."*

Josie Anne wanted to emphasize the direct relationship between individual purchasers and weavers within their home communities. Her suggestion to "accentuate the rural aspect" could have been a coded reference to the poverty many weavers experience, and was also likely intended to show the special relationship to the land that many in the Global North attribute to indigenous groups like the Maya. She wanted to film the profiled weavers showing how they practice their craft. In addition, she wanted immersive footage of other aspects of their lives:

Could film doing daily activity around family/eating; getting ready for school/lessons, other work, daily chores, etc... If they are comfortable, the idea is to create a personal connection with the audience based upon what daily life looks like, what their struggles are, what their hopes are.

She wanted my anthropological input to give the video more of a cultural weight. Josie Anne's vision for the promotional video was to profile a couple of weavers for each village, saying something "personal and relevant to them."

*"In [name of village / department], x% of the women of this village depend on their income from [weaving, (and anything rural or agrarian)] to support their families."* [Again, here, if you have input on stats specific to educational opportunities side for these ladies' children, I'd like to insert some telling facts here or some other aspect of their lives that could really benefit from funneling donations back]. X% of the population here is... Stats on illiteracy, developmental, health, etc... Then videographer could wind it up with something like: *"Each World Women's Wear garment has a QR code for you to learn more. Know your weaver and make a difference. Your purchase is woven into the fabric of their lives."*



Josie Anne's script exemplifies the kind of data-driven marketing typical of fair trade. She specified that she only wanted such potentially intrusive footage of the weavers' daily lives if they were comfortable with being filmed, and the group representative from the village of Todos Santos rejected her proposal: "People there don't want to."<sup>245</sup> Roxana proposed a compromise, filming the group representatives demonstrating their weaving and answering questions in the TelaMaya office when they came to deliver products.

The volunteers maintained an online catalog for the cooperative; product entries typically included a brief description of the group who made the item, the village where the product was made, the *departamento* (state) where the village is located, and their native Mayan language, as well as cultural information such as a description of the traditional meanings of any symbols in the products or the traditional uses for the product. The volunteers learned after finishing the catalog and getting the officers' approval on it that many of the products were incorrectly linked to villages, but neither the cooperative's officers nor the volunteers felt that this was something that urgently needed fixing. This speaks to the particular forms of knowledge that serve as currency in fair trade markets and the sense of intrusion that the weavers experienced when clients and voluntourists wanted to know about them for the sake of knowing.

While volunteers and clients typically valued the specificity of knowing which village the products came from, they frequently confused or misremembered them. Because the volunteers and clients generally had little knowledge of where particular Guatemalan weaving patterns originated, the idea that each design came from a small town and that its origin could be known seemed to matter more than geographic accuracy. Rather than representing a specific locality in the minds of volunteers and clients, the association of a product with a village was a token of

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<sup>245</sup> La gente ahí no quiere.

authenticity. Just as art gains value through the verification of the identity of the artist, an ethnic handicraft gains value through its identification with the village considered to be the source of the style. TelaMaya's clients often contrasted the specificity of Guatemalan weaving styles with the anonymity of mass-produced goods. One wholesale client from Tennessee stated that, in the current global market, people are not aware of where their products come from, and they like having something that anchors their products to a place. While this was a defetishizing move in the sense that knowing the geographic origin of a product is a reminder that it was produced by another person's labor, it reinscribed village location as a proxy for the notion of the unseen maker. Deborah Root argues that this kind of metonymic operation is inherent to exoticism, which "works through a process of dismemberment and fragmentation in which objects stand for images that stand for a culture or a sensibility as a whole" (1996:42).

The association's leaders preferred to be vague about the exact location of the weaving groups, which they considered proprietary information. Because they did not charge membership fees, product markup was TelaMaya's source of income. They were concerned that, having invested resources in making connections with international wholesale clients, nothing prevented the clients from bypassing them to work directly with the groups except their control over the contact information. María asserted that a long-term client attempted to order directly from a weaving group, and the administration only realized what had happened when the group asked for their exportation code to send the products. A volunteer setting up TelaMaya's blog, Stacey, said that María cautioned her against uploading information about new products or the groups that make the products. However, Stacey felt that if new clients located and worked directly with the weaving groups, it would benefit the women she was volunteering to help: "It's a question of what's more important: the organization or the people in the communities... And they're both

important.” TelaMaya officers also worried that other cooperatives might try to “poach” their groups, which they claimed happened once when the weaving group from Chirijox split and half of the members began working with another cooperative.

### **The Local Competition: Processes of Differentiation**

Information management was central to competing with rival cooperatives, a constant preoccupation for the TelaMaya board of directors. Roxana explained to me that the weaving market in Quetzaltenango had suffered in recent years due to increased competition, both from other fair trade cooperatives and street vendors: “Sales here have dropped off. It is because here there is a lot of competition and people do not know quality; for example, in central park, those who sell there— they see them as the same.”<sup>246</sup> To differentiate themselves from street vendors, they would discuss the association’s structure in their presentations to visiting tourists, which would typically last 30–40 minutes and include a description of key points in the cooperative’s history, mission, and structure as well as a demonstration of backstrap weaving. In the final stage of the presentation, the accompanying guides or Spanish teachers would herd the students into the shop and encourage them to buy TelaMaya products. These presentations developed over time in consultation with volunteers and in response to visitors’ questions. In the first part of the presentations, the officers would clarify the regional nature of the cooperative and the variety of cultural groups it serves: “Every woman speaks her Mayan language, and the product that each place makes is very different.” She would also establish her expertise in the languages and ethnic groups served by the cooperative, describing how the Mam spoken in her group was “second-grade Mam,” which incorporated more Spanish words than the Mam spoken by the groups in Huehuetenango.

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<sup>246</sup> Las ventas aquí han bajado mucho. Es porque aquí hay mucha competencia y la gente no conoce la calidad, por ejemplo en el Parque Central, las que venden allí ellos se miran igual.

Because TelaMaya was not a registered Fair Trade organization, one of the purposes of the presentations was to discursively establish that it followed fair trade principles such as transparency and fair compensation. The officers would describe how, given that most of the cooperative members are monolingual in one of five Mayan languages (Kiche', Kaqchikel, Mam, Tzutujil, and Ixil), the groups each elected two bilingual representatives who ferried money, orders, and products between the central office and weaving groups. The discussion of the cooperative's structure served to answer visitors' questions about how the production process worked, how the money was conveyed to the members, and how members communicated their concerns to the leadership. TelaMaya's quasi-democratic structure was one of the main characteristics the leaders emphasized to differentiate it from other local cooperatives or intermediary handicrafts vendors. María would continue, "Our idea is to give a fair payment to the women." If a woman asked for 90 quetzales for a new design, she stated, the cooperative would pay her and not negotiate the price down. Roxana sometimes injected humor into her presentations. She would say, "There are many people who ask, *where are the 400 women? Aren't they here?*" and she would pantomime looking for them around the office. "The women aren't here... they live in the smallest villages and far away from here," she would continue, and then go on to describe the groups and their designs.

Another important element of all presentations was the discussion of product quality, to justify the higher prices at TelaMaya and educate tourists on the higher-quality, more expensive materials that their products incorporate. They would lecture tourists on how to distinguish quality textiles from those made with cheap materials and poor construction. From María's presentation composite:

There are many stores [rival cooperatives] where there are lovely things but the sales belong to one person; they are not helping many needy women. There are people who see

that in the street there are many beautiful things, *let's buy it, but we don't know if it's a good product; we don't know if it's quality... if when we wash it the color will come out.* It's a shame. It's not to discriminate against people... everyone has their needs. But sometimes... it's that one harms oneself. Because after when the people wash their products they say, *ah, I brought it from Guatemala.* So it's better to use something even if it's a bit more expensive but surer, right? [...] So the idea then is to make a high quality product so that when someone comes to buy, they leave satisfied and if they come back to Guatemala again, they say, *I'm going to TelaMaya because the product was very good.*

María here was thinking broadly not only about the cooperative's reputation among tourists but also Guatemala's branding as an international destination for handicrafts. For Roxana, it was also important to differentiate TelaMaya from street vendors for both its fair trade principles and attention to quality. She would contrast TelaMaya's worker-owned structure with an elected board of directors with the practices of middlemen:

In Guatemala, there are many intermediaries, which means that they pay very little to the women and they get a big part. So who are these people? They are the ones who sell in the market, everywhere, in Antigua, Chichi[castenango]; they have their own stores, and it's their own business— only one person is the owner; they only buy from the women, but they pay them very little, very little for the work that the artisans do. But here in the association all the women are members: they get the money. That's why we don't go out to sell in the street, nor do we sell in the park, because we have a problem. We need to sell and make quality products. We don't compete with the intermediaries because they sell very cheap products but low quality.

In connection with product quality, María would often state that TelaMaya was “just starting” to export to foreign countries, to make TelaMaya seem capable of achieving international standards while still deserving of special aid and attention.

María's version of the narrative often focused more on women's issues in Guatemala and how the income that TelaMaya provided could help women become more independent. Roxana was more likely to comment on the importance of preserving indigenous weaving traditions, a particular concern for her. She told me, “So much has been lost in the villages. They don't want

to wear their traditional dress anymore. They look at other people and say, ‘*Why don’t they [have to wear traje], while I do?*’ They think they look better in pants.”<sup>247</sup>

For the association it’s very important that we conserve the weaving traditions so that they don’t die. We are losing much of our traditions in the cities. The men no longer put on their *traje*, and many women as well. My daughter doesn’t want to wear her *traje*... She says, *it pinches me*. And my son asks me, *why do you speak your language? Spanish should be spoken*. He prefers to speak Spanish. Sometimes the girls don’t want to learn to weave. We don’t want the weavings to stop, that one day the children don’t weave anymore; we want them to learn. We have a weaving school where we teach weaving to people like you, who want to bring something from Guatemala, make something with their own hands, and you can come learn to weave.

Through their presentations to Spanish schools and other tour groups, TelaMaya’s officers disseminated important information about their cooperative to their target demographic, to make the case for their uncertified fair trade status and differentiate themselves both from other cooperatives and from street and market vendors. Tourists often responded positively, accepting the higher price charged by TelaMaya as appropriate to their mission. One young female tourist remarked, “I’d rather buy it from here. The quality is a lot better. I like the atmosphere in here, because I don’t feel pressured to haggle.” A German exporter said that the products were more expensive than the ones he normally buys, “but I think if you want to protect an indigenous weaving tradition you have to pay a little more.” One tourist bargained with Roxana to buy two makeup bags at reduced cost and then said that he preferred to buy from an association rather than a street market because he knew it was supporting women.

To differentiate themselves from other local cooperatives in Xela, the TelaMaya leaders claimed that the other groups are not associations in which the members take part in making decisions. María explained to a visiting friend that one cooperative, Ixchel Handicrafts, belonged to its Belgian leader, Jacobine, and her Guatemalan boyfriend, and that they took the profits back

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<sup>247</sup> Se ha perdido mucho en los pueblos. Ya no quieren llevar su traje. Miran los demás y dicen, ‘¿Porque ellas no y yo sí?’ Piensan que se ven mejor con pantalón.

to her home country. María told visitors, “You should understand that Ixchel is not the women’s. The three Dutch women are the owners. It is not an association; it does not have an assembly.”<sup>248</sup> Roxana added, “Nor a board of directors... The women are workers and nothing more.”<sup>249</sup> Roxana said, “Sure, they give work to other people, but the earnings go to them. It is not an association in which the women are owners; they just buy like intermediaries, but they say that they are associations, but it is not true.”<sup>250</sup> Roxana scolded Jacobine’s boyfriend for working with her: “I told him, ‘*You are a man, not a woman. We represent 400 women. They are the owners. You are from here, but you are doing business with foreigners. [You people] have money from your own countries but we work to help the people from here.*’”<sup>251</sup> She felt that it was unfair for Ixchel to get regular influxes of money while TelaMaya lacked formal foreign support. María also argued that TelaMaya had been working with women longer and worked with more diverse weaving groups than Ixchel.

The leaders of TelaMaya had a personal conflict with Jacobine. They suspected that her volunteers had been taking down or covering TelaMaya’s flyers, and asked her directly to stop. They claimed that she became angry almost to the point of physically assaulting María. María recounted that the volunteer coordinator, Sheryl, met with Jacobine to clear up the situation, and “Jacobine filled her head. Afterwards she came and said, ‘*Why are you bothering Jacobine? She is a very good person. Foreigners are helping you a lot.*’ She was more ready to agree with

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<sup>248</sup> Fíjate que Ixchel no es de las mujeres. Las tres holandesas son las dueñas. No es una asociación, no tiene una asamblea.

<sup>249</sup> Ni una junta directiva...Las mujeres son trabajadoras y nada más.

<sup>250</sup> Claro, dan trabajo a otras personas, pero la ganancia va a ellas, no es una asociación en que las mujeres son dueñas, ellas solo compran como intermediarios, pero dicen que son asociaciones pero no es cierto.

<sup>251</sup> Le dije a él, ‘*usted es hombre, no mujer. Nosotros representamos 400 mujeres. Ellos son los dueños. Usted es de aquí, pero estas haciendo un negocio con extranjeros. Ustedes tienen dinero de sus propios países pero trabajamos para ayudar a la gente de aquí.*’

Jacobine, as a foreigner, than with us.”<sup>252</sup> María spat, “She’s a very bad woman, that Jacobine.

She’s a tiger, she’s a bitch, excuse the expression. But the volunteers here understand her more than us. When they speak with her, they say that she’s a lovely person, a good person.”<sup>253</sup>

Roxana added, “They think that she is innocent, and that we are hurting her.”<sup>254</sup> The officers of TelaMaya often remarked that foreign volunteers were more disinterested and trustworthy than local people, and they used foreign volunteers as allies in their confrontations with local government (as described in **Chapter Five**) but when their conflict was with a foreign person, they felt betrayed by their volunteers’ inclination to band together with other foreigners.

Periodically sending volunteers to investigate other cooperatives’ stores, they worried that other cooperatives were similarly investigating them and trying to steal their designs.

Roxana confided, “Sometimes we send people to check them out, to spy a little to see if they are copying our designs.”<sup>255</sup> They asked a volunteer to visit Ixchel’s shop and check out their designs and prices; she was excited to do a little industrial espionage. Selecting products to bring to a fair trade marketplace, Roxana and María were concerned because Ixchel Handicrafts also sold there, and they chose products with widely-known traditional designs. Roxana fretted, “Unfortunately, the same tailor works with them, and brings our designs to them.”<sup>256</sup> Once, an acquaintance offered Roxana the chance to buy the same carpets she was selling to Ixchel Handicrafts, but she refused them, saying, “the girl showed up one day to yell [at us], so it is

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<sup>252</sup> Sheryl tuvo una cita con Jacobine, tomaron un café, y Jacobine llenó su cabeza. Después vino y dijo, ‘*Porque están molestando Jacobine? Es una muy buena persona. Los extranjeros les están ayudando mucho.*’ Ella estaba más lista de acordarse con Jacobine como otra extranjera que con nosotros.

<sup>253</sup> Es una mujer muy mala esa Jacobine. Es una tigre, es una chucha, disculpa la expresión. Pero las voluntarias de acá comprenden más a ella que a nosotros. Cuando hablan con ella, dicen que es una persona linda, es una persona buena.

<sup>254</sup> Piensan que es inocente, y como que nosotros estamos haciendo daño a ella.

<sup>255</sup> A veces mandamos personas para controlarlas, para espiar un poco para ver si están copiando nuestros diseños.

<sup>256</sup> Lamentablemente el mismo sastre trabaja con ellos, y el lleva nuestros diseños a ellos.



better to keep it that we are going to have different things in TelaMaya and in Ixchel.”<sup>257</sup> The officers also felt that Ixchel was stealing their approach to handling volunteers and local promotion. “We have always done benefit parties with our volunteers, and she is doing benefit parties now,”<sup>258</sup> commented María. They noticed that both Ixchel and another local weaving cooperative had begun doing weaving demonstrations for visitors, something that they felt they had pioneered and could claim as their moral right. They also accused Ixchel Handicrafts of appropriating their narrative about helping survivors of the civil war (as discussed further in **Chapter One**).

### **“Making Money Off the People’s Backs”: Contestations Over Images**

Volunteers’ images of indigenous Mayan women sometimes led them to relate to TelaMaya members in a neocolonialistic way, treating them as members of a homogenous, essentialized group (“Mayan women”) rather than listening to their individual concerns or particular interests. By envisioning these indigenous people as part of a Culture (with a capital “C”), some volunteers related very differently to them than they would to a person whose primary characteristic is being a person rather than a representative of a Culture. A major example of this attitude was the US volunteer coordinator Frank, whose interactions with the cooperative are detailed in **Chapter Four**. He had come to Guatemala to help Mayan women weavers, and his perception of the members of TelaMaya as interchangeable with any other Mayan women weavers made him dismissive of their particular organizational structure and established practices.

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<sup>257</sup> La chica llegó un día para gritar, entonces mejor nos quedamos que vamos a tener cosas diferentes en TelaMaya y en Ixchel.

<sup>258</sup> Nosotros siempre hemos hecho fiestas de beneficio con nuestros voluntarios, y ella ya hace fiestas de beneficio.

Another prominent case was Turkish volunteer Mahmud, whose romanticized notions about indigenous people led him to reject their concerns about the privacy of their images. He mused, “I just love indigenous people because they’re very... clean. I think that their souls are more... pure. They aren’t going on the computer and checking the Internet. They’re separated from all that and I think that has kept them more pure.” He associated the modern indigenous people he encountered in Guatemala with his nostalgia for the lifestyle of his father’s generation in isolated villages in Turkey. His favorite Guatemalan villages were those with traditional adobe architecture and few signs of the incursion of global material culture. Mahmud’s projection of a nostalgic past onto a modern group of people and his sense that modernity was polluting to isolated, “pure” cultures is a classic manifestation of the Orientalist trope of the Noble Savage, the positive counterpart to the image of the primitive barbarian.

An amateur photographer, Mahmud took some gorgeous portraits of the women in the cooperative. When he first met with the cooperative leaders, they told him that the portrait photographs were intended to be printed for TelaMaya’s weaving museum and the women themselves, and the group photographs were for the website. He agreed not to publish or sell the photographs anywhere without the individual permission of the women in the photos. The president and vice president asked some of the group representatives to arrange photo shoots with the members of their groups and act as interpreters for Mahmud, pressuring them to volunteer their time to help the photographer for the benefit of the cooperative as a whole. However, communities began objecting after Mahmud’s visits. The women in San Martín did not like how he treated them, touching their faces to encourage them to pose or move in a certain way—a major violation of personal space in a conservative society. Fabiola from San Martín complained, “I’m too old, I’m not a doll that can be moved like that.” María joked that he went

as far as posing them “taking a crap in the bathroom.”<sup>259</sup> Three women left the session because they felt that their time was being wasted and that they were not in control of the situation. María felt foolish for pressuring the women to participate.

Mahmud refused to give TelaMaya all of the unedited images, because “a photographer never gives all of his photos away.” He felt that part of being treated professionally as a photographer was to retain his rights to the original images. This was an issue with the group members, because some of the women who had showed up to the photo session did not appear in any of the final pictures he delivered to the cooperative, and they were expecting a portrait. He was also concerned about protecting his intellectual property as a photographer, and asked for a watermark to be placed on any photos published online. Mahmud revealed that he was planning to try to publish the photographs in a Turkish travel magazine, arguing that since he was not planning on selling them in Guatemala, he had not violated the spirit of his original agreement with TelaMaya. He argued that they have limited connection with other parts of the world: “They don’t even know where Turkey is, how are they going to know that it’s being published over there?” The officers worried that the members’ children or migrant husbands in the US could come across the pictures on the Internet, and he responded that it would be in Turkish and most likely in print media rather than online.

Whereas other voluntourists viewed this as an issue of respect, the cooperative leaders were more focused on relationship management with their member groups. María stated that on a previous occasion, photographs taken of members of her weaving group in San Martín had later appeared for sale on commercial postcards, and that the group would react badly to a second case of exploitation. The officers agreed that it would be better not to alert the members, given that

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<sup>259</sup> Soy demasiada vieja, no soy una muñeca que se puede posar así. Hasta cagándonos en el baño nos posó.

the members were unlikely to see the published photos and ultimately, they would be unable to stop Mahmud from publishing them. Roxana's reaction to the episode was, predictably, "You shouldn't trust people."<sup>260</sup> Because TelaMaya only had an informal verbal agreement with Mahmud about what he would be allowed to do with the outcomes of his work, they had no recourse when he decided to publish the portraits of the cooperative members.

The issues with Frank and Mahmud played out similarly, because they perceived the members of TelaMaya not as individuals but "Guatemalan women" or "Mayan weavers." In both cases, they viewed working with the organization TelaMaya as a means to reach indigenous populations, and they were also actively pursuing other avenues of contact in order to help or photograph indigenous women; this led to a lack of interest in or commitment to the organization's standards of conduct and expectations. These incidents make it clear that TelaMaya relied heavily on the attitudes of volunteers, who tended to be college students fresh from lectures on neocolonialism and eager to show how much they respected the cooperative members' leadership. When volunteers came to TelaMaya with different attitudes and expectations, they caused conflicts that the administration was unprepared to handle.

### **Anxiety Displacements Over Volunteers Who "Steal the Idea"**

Given such experiences, it is unsurprising that the TelaMaya leaders were concerned about protecting their business information and cultural heritage from outsiders. While they viewed volunteer tourists as the "pillar" of their organization, the cooperative's board of directors also considered them a potential liability. For over a decade they have worked closely alongside foreign volunteer tourists. These relationships have benefited them greatly, allowing them to expand their exportations and work with international wholesale clients. However,

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<sup>260</sup> No hay que confiar en la gente.

through these relationships, voluntourists learned a wealth of personal and professional information about their business practices, their lives, and their families. The officers' anxiety about the intensity of their connection to voluntourists seemed to coalesce in a fixation with the idea that volunteers were establishing backstrap loom schools in their own countries and eroding TelaMaya's market, or that they were stealing proprietary business or design information.

Weaving is deeply linked with indigenous identity: Janet Catherine Berlo (1992) argues that textile production, food production, and reproduction intertwine to define indigenous Guatemalan women's identity; for example, Maya women use anatomical words for their looms, metaphorically linking weaving to giving birth. In addition to selling woven products, TelaMaya operated a weaving school to subsidize its operating costs, in which the cooperative leaders and volunteers taught foreign tourists the basic steps in backstrap weaving. The cooperative members were ambivalent about the school: it provided the cooperative with much-needed funds, but the weavers feared that they were reducing their market base by teaching *gringos* how to weave. Their concerns about opening access to their valuable knowledge were shared by other indigenous communities in Latin America: several weaving students considered TelaMaya's willingness to share their cultural heritage, even if somewhat reluctantly, unique. Juliana, a Chilean volunteer and weaving student, told Roxana that she had to be persistent to convince a woman in the only indigenous community in Chile, the Mapuche, to teach her to weave. Later, she sought to learn from the weavers in Teótitlan del Valle, Mexico, where they have a formal process with a community board to decide whether to allow outsiders to learn their weaving traditions. Suspicious of her motives, they asked, "Why does this *gringa* want to learn to weave?"<sup>261</sup> Juliana asked the women incredulously, "Do you really think that I have the

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<sup>261</sup> ¿Por qué esta gringa quiere aprender a tejer?

resources to create a business and compete with you?”<sup>262</sup> They allowed her to observe them weaving but were not interested in formally teaching her. Another weaving student, Caitlyn, shared that she came to Guatemala specifically to learn traditional backstrap weaving at TelaMaya: “Last summer I did a weaving tour in Peru. They said that you could live in an indigenous village and learn to weave. They didn’t really want to teach me to weave, so I was excited to find [TelaMaya’s] weaving school.” She viewed the Peruvian program as a scam, run by an upwardly-mobile family that was not well-connected with the rest of the community but had the resources to create a website and attract weaving tourists. They failed to deliver the formal weaving instruction and homestay she expected.

By providing comprehensive weaving instruction, TelaMaya gained a competitive edge over other weaving schools. They trusted that most weaving students would not retain enough of the process to replicate it at home. María noted that the weaving students often gained an appreciation for the difficulty of backstrap weaving and the expertise of Mayan weavers, and expressed an increased desire to buy TelaMaya products. María hesitated when a German design student wanted to spend three months in an intensive weaving apprenticeship, because the *compañeras* would not like it if a foreigner learned so much about weaving patterns. Roxana stated that a Mayan woman who did not belong to the cooperative had confronted her, asking, “*Why are you teaching the gringos to weave? You fools show the gringos how to weave and they’re going to go back to the US and make their own businesses, and they’re never going to buy from us again.*” María did not view one or two students who might copy backstrap weaving techniques as a threat, but the board of directors thought differently and some of them were “jealous/possessive”<sup>263</sup> of their traditional knowledge: “It’s because they’re worried that they’re

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<sup>262</sup> ¿Piensan de veras que tengo los recursos para crear un negocio y competir con ustedes?

<sup>263</sup> celosas.

going to steal their culture. Look how they reacted when we started to teach students to weave. How they scolded us! They said, *it's fine for you, because you're teaching in the weaving school, but it damages us because the students are going to set up their own weaving schools and not order from us anymore.*"<sup>264</sup>

A narrative I heard repeatedly during my time with TelaMaya was that volunteers and weaving students were studying backstrap weaving not to have a touristic cross-cultural experience but to steal Mayan women's heritage and set up their own weaving schools. In particular, they accused a former volunteer coordinator of exploiting the free weaving classes they gave her in exchange for her year of volunteer service to start a weaving school in Colorado. María declared, "And we have learned from other people as well that they have just come to take advantage of us, saying, *we are going to help you by inviting you [to the US]* and they all come to get more information from us. So that's what makes us sad, then, because people take advantage of our humble state, take advantage of the trust that we give them, right?"<sup>265</sup> The TelaMaya leaders heard from other volunteers that there were many backstrap weaving schools across the US but María felt they still had something special to offer: "I think that maybe some *gringos* do not want to pay for their flights and learn from other *gringos*, but I think that the majority prefer to learn from the actual indigenous women." In the face of what they saw as a serious threat of cultural theft, Mayan women held to the idea that they were the only ones who could provide an authentic experience by virtue of their ethnic identities, which cannot be

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<sup>264</sup> Es porque están preocupadas que van a robar su cultura. Mira cómo reaccionaron cuando empezamos a enseñar a los estudiantes a tejer. Cómo nos regañaron! Nos dijeron, *está bien para ustedes, porque enseñan en la escuela de tejer, pero nos hace daño porque los estudiantes van a crear sus propias escuelas de tejer y ya no van a pedir más de nosotros.*

<sup>265</sup> Y nos nos hemos enterado también por otras personas que nada más se han venido a aprovechar de nosotros se dice pues *nosotros vamos a ayudar con invitarlas allá* y todos vienen a sacar más información de nosotros. Entonces este es lo que nos da tristeza pues porque la gente se aprovecha de nuestra humildad se aprovechan de nuestra confianza que nosotros les damos ¿verdad?

appropriated. This claim suggests that, while they taught tourists to weave, they saw this knowledge as inalienable and non-transferrable because of its inextricable connection with their ethnic identity. Most tourists viewed their weaving classes in a similar way, as a touristic experience connected to their visit to Guatemala, and not a skill that they would continue practicing in their home countries. “When I travel I like to do things that I couldn’t do at home, like learning to make curry from an Indian woman. I mean, I could make a curry at home, but it wouldn’t be the same,” declared one student. Another weaving student gave this typical list of reasons for taking classes at TelaMaya: “I wanted to be productive and have a gift at the end. I wanted to do something different, not just buy from the *mercados*. It’s so different from what I normally do.” She discussed the class as a way to pass the time in Xela and create a souvenir, rather than a skill that she was planning to develop.

The TelaMaya leaders saw a greater threat in the tourists who saw weaving as something they had the ability and right to practice at home. TelaMaya volunteers made a booklet with hand-drawn pictures and step-by-step weaving instructions to sell to weaving students. I found the file on the office computer, with the folder title “Weaving Booklet: DO NOT SELL as per instructions of María.” The officers were shocked to find that the file still existed. The board of directors had strongly objected to the project and asked the volunteers to erase it. According to the secretary, Paula, “They say that this is the women’s sweat. They say that they are stealing our culture. ‘*We are women who do not know how to read or write, and they want to steal our weaving too, which is the only way we have to survive.*’”<sup>266</sup>

When the volunteers heard that the women were concerned that *gringos* would learn how to weave for themselves and stop buying textiles, they laughed. One German volunteer, a textile

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<sup>266</sup> Dicen que es el sudor de las mujeres. Dicen que están robando nuestra cultura. *Somos mujeres que no sabemos leer ni escribir, y quieren robar nuestro tejido también, que es la única manera que tenemos para sobrevivir.*



design student, pointed out, “It’s available in YouTube videos anyway.” “We’re not giving away your secrets,” US volunteer Emma agreed. In addition to rejecting the idea that knowledge of backstrap weaving was restricted to Mayan communities, volunteers from the global North rejected the idea that any tourists would go into production for their own use or for commercial gain: “I would say that approximately 0% of the people who would buy the kit would go into business.” In part, they were rejecting the idea that selling weavings or weaving classes in the US would be as significant an industry as it would be in Guatemala, given their knowledge of the opportunities open to women in the US labor market. On another level, the volunteers dismissed the weavers’ concerns because they did not consider backstrap weaving a proprietary form of knowledge, as so frequently happens with communally-held indigenous knowledge. A weaving student commented, “That’s another one of those where you’re like *‘I’m coming at this from another perspective and I totally didn’t think of it that way.’*” She had proposed making a video of backstrap weaving for the website, but the officers told her “they did not want to share their cultural knowledge with just anyone.”

When a local TV station wanted to use some of the cooperative’s photos to publicize the organization, Roxana reacted negatively: “Sometimes there are people with websites that steal our photos. There was a girl who took a lot of photos. She set up her own weaving school.” This quote shows how the women connected the misuse of their images with the exploitation of their heritage. They told the story of a woman named Cynthia who had taken photographs of the weaving classes and measurements of the tools, later setting up her own weaving school in New York City. I showed them her website and they recognized a Mayan woman pictured on the main page, who was not a member of TelaMaya but happened to visit the office when Cynthia was there. The officers felt this image was being used to sell a false connection with TelaMaya. They

were angered that Cynthia claimed to have created partnerships and fostered relationships with Guatemalan weavers, when they had never heard from her again after she left. When I contacted Cynthia to ask her about what had happened, she said that it was a misunderstanding, that she had indeed taken a weaving class at TelaMaya during her trip to Guatemala, but that her partners were Mayan women living in New York.

In addition to their concerns about losing their livelihood to voluntourists, María announced offhand one day that volunteers frequently steal USB drives from TelaMaya in order to get TelaMaya's information: "There are people who take advantage... because maybe in some 100 or so volunteers around 3 have failed us, who steal all TelaMaya's information, where they say that the USB got stolen but it's a lie, they've taken it."<sup>267</sup> Another time she declared, "It bothers me that the volunteers always take away TelaMaya's information, and how do they use it?"<sup>268</sup> During my time volunteering I was personally responsible for losing two USBs at Internet cafés, so I asked her if theft was the only explanation. María claimed that they caught a former volunteer coordinator in the office after work hours going through their papers. The incident led them to distrust him: "We didn't like that man because he was just secretly taking TelaMaya's information."<sup>269</sup> According to María, "He told me, *'If you trust me, what's the problem? Is it because I'm a foreigner that you don't trust me?'*" and I told him, *'We've had many other volunteers but they haven't done things like that.'*"<sup>270</sup> I pressed her about what kinds of "information" he might have been seeking. She felt that he was trying to find information to

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<sup>267</sup> Hay gente aprovechada... porque tal vez en unos 100 voluntarios nos han fallado como 3 que roban toda la información de TelaMaya, dónde dicen se robaron la memoria pero es mentira, ellos lo han llevado.

<sup>268</sup> Me molesta que los voluntarios siempre llevan la información de TelaMaya, ¿y cómo les sirve?

<sup>269</sup> Ese hombre nos cayó mal porque nada más escondido se sacaba información de TelaMaya.

<sup>270</sup> Él me dijo, *¿Si confían en mí, cual es el problema? ¿Es porque soy extranjero que no me da confianza?* y le dije yo, *Hemos tenido muchos otros voluntarios pero no han hecho cosas así.*

discredit the cooperative, because he did not believe that the cooperative had as many members as it claimed.

The officers claimed to be happy to share information about the cooperative with volunteers, because they knew what volunteers could do to help them. However, they were reluctant to give out important documents. A volunteer wanted to interview María about the cooperative's exports to understand its market position. She balked at the idea: "But why does she want to know that? That's something that's very much ours [to know]. The women [of the board] do not want to say everything about the cooperative's business to just any person."<sup>271</sup> Roxana added, "The women are very strict with us. They say, '*Yes, let's share everything, but how will they help us? Why do they want this information?*' Sometimes people come and get our information and don't do anything for us; we don't know why they want to know this."<sup>272</sup> When a professor of social work from the US interviewed Roxana and María about TelaMaya's business practices and fiscal situation, they were evasive, refusing to answer some questions and claiming not to know the answers to questions about income and expenses: "We can't say exact quantities because that's private."<sup>273</sup> He asked, "What types of problems are the weavers facing?"<sup>274</sup> María's answer was curt: "None. They're already trained in weaving."<sup>275</sup> When a volunteer from Washington, D.C., suggested analyzing TelaMaya's business strategies, we discussed their reticence to share their business numbers with outsiders. He replied, "So there's a cultural difference there to deal with." He agreed that it was probably strategic when they

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<sup>271</sup> ¿Pero por qué quiere saber esto? Es algo que es muy de nosotros. No hay que decir todos los números. Las mujeres [de la junta] no quieren decir todo sobre los asuntos de la cooperativa a cualquier persona.

<sup>272</sup> Si, es que las mujeres son muy estrictas con nosotros. Dicen, *Si, vamos a compartir todo, ¿pero en que van a ayudarnos? ¿Por qué quieren esta información?* A veces las personas vienen y sacan información de nosotros y no hacen nada para nosotros, no sabemos porque quieren saber esto.

<sup>273</sup> No podemos decir cantidades exactas porque es íntimo.

<sup>274</sup> Que tipo de problema enfrenta las tejedoras? [sic]

<sup>275</sup> Nada. Ya están capacitadas para tejer.

claimed not to have exact numbers: “I’ve noticed that the market women are pretty savvy when it comes to business.”

In the summer of 2010, a volunteer graphed traditional designs for the weaving school. The officers approved of this project and found fabrics for her to copy. When I came back the next summer, they said that the book had gone missing and that they suspected that the volunteer coordinator who replaced me had taken it with her, probably to set up her own weaving school in the US. It made me wonder why the officers were so sure that volunteers wanted to exploit TelaMaya’s information for their own purposes; I had met many of those volunteers, and it seemed out of character for them to have tried to steal the women’s business secrets. The officers’ certainty that volunteers regularly tried to “steal their information” seemed at odds with the generally high levels of trust that they placed in volunteers. It struck me as a displacement of their anxiety about their dependency on volunteers to manage their online sales and work with clients, and their general sense of vulnerability to exploitation. Many crucial aspects of their business—online marketing and sales, communication with English-speaking clients—were not under their control. With their organizational structure, they could only rely on their relationships with volunteers to manage their export business and maintain control over the representations that circulated about them.

### **“Designs Do Not Stay in One Place”: An Intellectual Property Rights Scandal**

Cultural differences regarding rights to intellectual property caused friction with people within the communities of TelaMaya’s clients. Explanations of intellectual property rights infringement tend to construct Northern countries as the sources of innovation and demonize Southern countries on the basis of their “national cultures,” which are considered to be economically irrational and incompatible with free market capitalism (Bettig 1996; Coombe

1998; Husted 2000). The Guatemalan government has attempted to regulate copying and piracy to bring national-level laws in line with globalized intellectual property rights law as part of its program of neoliberal reforms that are intended to create a disciplined and rational citizenry. Intellectual property rights “protections are one set of legal mechanisms through which Guatemala is supposed to become a fully modern nation-state, demonstrating that the country is on the ‘progressive path’ toward development ... and its citizens reoriented toward formal, rational market participation” (Thomas 2012). Kedron Thomas (2013) argued that the people who create and sell knock-off branded clothing viewed copying differently. To them, it was a question of fidelity to the original, price point and competition, and access: higher-end stores had better and higher-end knockoffs than the markets. They were not copying specific brand logos with the idea of fooling the consumer or viewer of the clothing; instead, they were copying the overall look of the product (*ruwach*, the overall feeling or aesthetic impression of the product), which includes the logo. Thomas suggested that intellectual property rights laws are used to discipline and control certain groups of people in favor of others, and that Guatemalans have responded by interpreting copying in their own cultural terms.

In the spring of 2012, TelaMaya’s Swedish client Ingrid wrote to inform the officers that another Swedish designer had seen their striped bags at a craft fair in Sweden and claimed the fabric designs as her own. This designer worked for Moderna Maya, a design company founded by a group of six Swedish women who wanted to revive the international demand for Guatemalan handicrafts, which had lagged during the civil war. Their claim that TelaMaya had infringed on their intellectual property was complicated by the fact that they drew design inspiration for their simple stripe designs from traditional Mayan color palettes. As Moderna Maya designer Gudrun explained, “For example, these colors [gray with thin colorful stripes]

were inspired by a *huipile*. We looked and thought about the colors. But you have to change it too, for the European market. In Sweden they like things simple, and not with so much color. We're trying to add the color but keep it simple." The TelaMaya weavers reacted defensively to the charge of copying by asserting that Guatemala has no intellectual property laws and by claiming ownership of the fabrics on the basis that their labor produced it and that they had made minor design changes: "These fabrics are ours. We've been making this fabric for 13 years." María pointed to a white striped fabric: "These fabrics are traditional. This fabric is from the man's sleeve in San Martín." When I pressed them to figure out the exact source of the designs, it seemed like they were getting their story straight rather than working to figure out what happened.



**Figure 6.4 Left: Moderna Maya pillowcase. Right: TelaMaya tote bag.**

María told Roxana and me that she had dreamed that the three of us were relegated to the bathroom in the office while a man from the bank investigated their inventory; Roxana interpreted the dream as referring to the shame of being accused of stealing the designs.

TelaMaya's tailor, Jorge, said that they had been selling fabric, including Moderna Maya's exclusive patterns, "everywhere,"<sup>276</sup> for years, but that this was the first time that they had sold the same fabric in the same country. As long as the products remained in different national-level markets, he claimed that the clients would never realize that their designs had been copied: "People from the US believe everything... If we sell in Mexico, in Asia, there's no problem. They don't know anything. If I had known that your client is Swedish, I would not have done it." He argued that it only made good business sense for him to sell exclusive fabrics to other clients and asserted his right to do business his own way.

Ingrid said that she would try to work something out with Moderna Maya, to sell the products as a joint effort between the two companies, to recognize their right to the fabric but allow TelaMaya to sell the bags. This worried María, because the shape of the bag was exclusive to Ingrid, and she thought Moderna Maya might copy the bag design. For her, product shape was a more important element of the product design than the fabric pattern: "We have to say that they aren't the same products. We are making another class, another type of thing."<sup>277</sup> Jorge made dishtowels, makeup bags, and wallets for Moderna Maya, while Ingrid had ordered market bags. This focus on product design rather than textile design may stem from the way that their weavings were commercialized: designers created new products by using traditional fabrics for *huipiles* in new forms, such as glasses cases, handbags, and cushion covers. She also argued that TelaMaya was making the fabric in foot loom rather than backstrap loom fabric, so even though the end result was visually similar, the processes were different.

Two designers from Moderna Maya, Gudrun and Hilda, visited TelaMaya and asked the cooperative's officers about the source of the leak. "The problem is not so much that our designs

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<sup>276</sup> en todos lados

<sup>277</sup> Tenemos que decir que no son los mismos productos. Estamos haciendo otra clase, otro tipo de cosa.

are getting copied. We've seen versions of our designs in London and other places in Europe, and that doesn't bother us so much," Gudrun stated. Hilda went on, "But Sweden is very small." They wanted to figure out which of their Guatemalan partners was leaking their designs. María told them the story she had worked out with Roxana: "[Weavers] came to offer us the samples, because they know that we are supporting women. It's hard for us, because the women come with so much need and beg us to accept their product." Gudrun was relieved to hear that some individual weavers had been driven by economic need to try to sell off the designs, because she thought that the tailor Jorge or one of their logistics coordinators had been selling their designs.

María was deeply angered by the visit from the Swedish designers. The weavers considered the Swedish women's claims to ownership of their designs overstated, because their own aesthetic system privileges copying as a form of respect to community design traditions and past generations of weavers. As Carol Hendrickson (1995) states, traditional weaving practices create a space for innovation within the constraints of community-based genres; weavers make their *huipiles* their own by copying model weavings and changing the color schemes or design combinations. Their goal is for each piece to be unique while sharing an overall "look and feel" with the source material, a goal that directly conflicts with intellectual property rights regimes, which seek to protect the "look and feel" of a distinct good. The incident highlights the clash between different working practices and notions of business ethics. In response to the copying scandal, TelaMaya looked for a volunteer designer to create a new line of simple striped fabrics that could be made into market bags for Ingrid. A design student from Germany showed the officers and volunteers how to make sample fabrics. María worked on her own versions of the copied gray striped fabric. She thought that she had changed it enough so that it did not count as the same: she had made slightly different colors on a gray background, but added *peines*



(“combs”) to make it different, and was also planning to make the gray stripes wider. To my eyes, the design still owed a substantial debt to the Swedish designers’ fabric, but María considered that she had made it her own (Fig. 6.5).

Despite their assertions to their Swedish accusers that copying is inevitable in Guatemala, María and Roxana were concerned about maintaining control over their own designs and their international clients’ exclusive designs. They worried when Jorge the tailor began copying and selling the designs for a major US client. Roxana responded with a Kaqchikel phrase from her ancestors: “He’s giving us a blessing. He is taking our fabric, and thus is giving us luck, and instead of going down, we’re growing.”<sup>278</sup> They claimed that one of the biggest sources of design leaks was Libia, a group representative from San Juan Comalapa, who was selling to other stores. María chastised her, “It is not right to sell all over the place. They just steal the idea.” Roxana refused to sell Ingrid’s designs to another wholesale client: “She’s going to scold us, to say we stole her designs.”<sup>279</sup> Roxana also reprimanded a weaver for copying one of Ingrid’s designs in a smaller, cheaper version: “The world is so small now. The designs do not



**Figure 6.5 Left: Tote made from Moderna Maya fabric. Right: Maria’s updated samples**

<sup>278</sup> Nos está dando la bendición. Está agarrando nuestra tela, así nos está dando la suerte, y en lugar de bajar, crecemos.

<sup>279</sup> Va a regañarnos, decir que robamos sus diseños.

stay in one place; they run into each other,” and she bumped her fists together. She cited a volunteer’s advice that TelaMaya should focus on exclusive designs and not copy its own patterns to sell in other markets, because “the tourists do not see the difference.”<sup>280</sup> In 2012, a Salvadoran client sent TelaMaya a contract seeking to establish exclusive rights to an altered colorway of a traditional pattern of birds and chalices from San Martín Sacatepéquez; however, the language in her contract was broad and would have given her rights to any form of the design. When they refused to sign, she wrote that their attitudes were “anti-development” and threatened to take the issue to the Ministry of Culture.

## **Conclusion**

Some of the volunteers had the idea to sell some of the many beautiful photographs that voluntourists have taken of TelaMaya’s members as art prints or make a calendar. The cooperative leaders doubted that any women were likely to agree to publish their images, even with a monetary incentive. They explained that this was in part because many of the women felt that their images could be used to gain power over them through the principles of sympathetic magic. María explained, “It’s something that the ancestors left them.” She said that some women would keep their hair when it fell out and stuff it in the walls of their adobe houses, to keep track of it, and that they reported feeling a tugging on their heads when their hair went down the drain. While TelaMaya’s officers claimed to be “more civilized” and rejected the notion that hair or photographs posed a metaphysical danger, they respected such concerns. Roxana heard that in Huehuetenango, “they burned tourists just for taking photos.”<sup>281</sup> The board of directors also expressed anxiety that their images would be copied and resold by other people who would not give them a share of the proceeds. Mercedes commented that in her experience, photographs

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<sup>280</sup> Las turistas no miran la diferencia.

<sup>281</sup> Quemaron a turistas solo por tomar fotos.

taken by foreigners tended to appear later in advertisements. Roxana agreed, “It’s not like it was before. Now they don’t want to take photos or videos... They said that they’re selling the photos on postcards. They’re making money off the people’s backs.”<sup>282</sup> The incident with Turkish volunteer Mahmud indicates that these concerns were well-founded.

Weiner (1992:x) argues that in reciprocal exchanges, contests over “the kind of possessions that people try to keep out of circulation” establish social hierarchies and highlight the inequalities and inequivalencies between people, rather than their relatedness or solidarity. The ability to gain access to inalienable possessions or, conversely, hold back certain possessions in the course of exchange, demonstrates power inequalities between groups. Information exchange was a site of contestation between voluntourists and TelaMaya members. Voluntourists in TelaMaya brought their analytical gaze to bear on tourism itself in a way that both allowed them to distance themselves from other tourists and forced them to acknowledge that they shared certain tastes and expectations with mainstream tourists. The “inside” information that voluntourists provided may have helped TelaMaya to gain a competitive advantage over cooperatives with less access to sources of information about foreign tastes and expectations (although this is difficult to measure). However, to allow voluntourists to help them sell their products in fair trade markets, producers like the weavers of TelaMaya had to share more of themselves with them than they would with tourists who were simply passing through, and they responded with anxiety that voluntourists were trying to extract their images, ideas, and knowledge. This makes fair trade marketing more intrusive for producers than marketing that allows producers to remain invisible, just as scholars have noted that alternative tourism can have a higher economic, sociocultural, psychological, and environmental impact on local

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<sup>282</sup> Ya no es como antes. Ya no quieren tomar fotos ni videos. Dicen que están vendiendo las fotos en postales. Están sacando el dinero de las costillas de la gente.

communities than mainstream tourism (Butler 2004; Macleod 2004), because of the more intimate and long-term relationships it creates between the visitors and visited. At times, the cooperative members pushed back against voluntourists' and clients' expectations, and this process of revealing and concealing individual and cultural information about the cooperative members played out in the daily interactions between the members of TelaMaya and the voluntourists who were helping them commodify their products and package their culture for outsiders.

## Conclusion: “We Are Entering a Globalized World”

A Polish volunteer majoring in anthropology in college, Katarzyna, wanted to emphasize Mayanness more on the flyers: “It should say something about Mayan culture. Now it says ‘indigenous’ but it doesn’t say ‘Mayan’ anywhere.” When she saw the final draft of the flyer for approval, Katarzyna commented, “I like that it says ‘living art of Mayan backstrap weaving.’” Similarly, a French volunteer wanted to base a fundraising party around traditional Mayan activities: “What are the typical Mayan things that they do? What do they cook and wear?” RISE founder Fernando gave Roxana a speech about the importance of deploying cultural information to give TelaMaya a market edge:

We are entering a globalized world ... where we can quickly lose our identity through the market because the market requires many things. But that’s why it has been important for us to understand the past of weaving and our history, because we also say that a textile is not just a piece of fabric but rather a history, an identity that has much to say, right? So basically in this world the market demands information: he who controls the information is he who sells. So you have a product and you have information, [...] and the people are buying the information, not the weaving.<sup>283</sup>

A Xela native who lived in the US before returning to start the organization, Fernando is the living embodiment of cosmopolitanism, an intermediary figure who translates ideas and knowledge from one environment to another. His voice joined those of volunteer tourists who have encouraged the cooperative officers to become more cosmopolitan in how they capitalize on their cultural knowledge. Roxana reported on the meeting with Fernando to María: “He says that we need to offer more information about Mayan culture so that the people know who we are

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<sup>283</sup> Nosotros estamos entrando en un mundo globalizado, en un mundo globalizado donde podemos perder nuestra identidad rápido por el mercado porque el mercado demanda muchas cosas. Pero por eso ha sido muy importante para nosotros entender muy bien el pasado de los tejidos verdad y nuestra historia porque decimos también un textil no solamente es un pedazo de tela sino es una historia, una identidad que tiene mucho que decir ¿verdad? Entonces básicamente en este mundo el mercado demande informática: él que maneja la información es el que vende, ¿no? Entonces usted tiene un producto y tiene una información, entre más información tenga, y la gente está comprando la información, no el tejido.

and buy our products.”<sup>284</sup> While they primarily represented TelaMaya as a women’s organization, the officers would also respond with alacrity to volunteers’ and tourists’ inquiries about Mayan traditions.

The TelaMaya leaders’ embrace of the idea that they should emphasize their Mayan culture more in their representations of their cooperative fits with larger trends in the popularization of the culture concept. In the past few decades, indigenous groups have come to view themselves as people with a “culture”: Adam Kuper writes that where “culture” was once the purview of anthropologists, “now the natives talk culture back at them” (Kuper 1999). According to Marshall Sahlins, indigenous people’s discovery that they have a “culture” is a relatively new phenomenon spurred by neo-colonialism: “The cultural self-consciousness developing among imperialism’s erstwhile victims is one of the more remarkable phenomena of world history in the later twentieth century” (cited in Kuper 1999:2). Voluntourists, NGO associates, and human rights activists have encouraged TelaMaya’s leaders to represent themselves as the bearers of an important cultural heritage.

Beth Notar argues that the hosts of tourists can attain a cosmopolitanism that arises “not out of travel (although some of them have later traveled) or out of consumption (although they do that too), but out of their having to *produce* a cosmopolitan atmosphere for those who travel to *them*” (2008:639). Similarly, Sarah Taylor (2014) describes how Yucatec Mayan villagers attempted to conceal from tourists the visible signs of their connection to globalized material culture, stating that, while this act of portraying Mayan culture as locked in the traditional past is fairly commonplace and well-described in the tourism literature (Annis 1987; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Little 2004), it reveals an interesting level of sophisticated knowledge about

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<sup>284</sup> Dice que tenemos que brindar más información sobre la cultura Maya para que la gente sepa quiénes somos y compren nuestros productos.

tourists' preferences. Taylor (2014:219) claims that her aim in the paper is to examine "the articulation of local tactics to conceal cosmopolitanism," but what she does not explicitly draw out that I would like to emphasize here is that the act of reinscribing touristic conceptions of culture is itself a cosmopolitan act, as this quote suggests: "Knowledge of what the tourist expects to see and experience in this encounter is required to successfully set the stage, thus making [...] possession of this inter-cultural awareness a display of [...] cosmopolitanism" (Taylor 2014:224). Swain (2011) states, "Indigeneity reflects tensions between ideas of cultural fluidity and autochthonous claims to being the original people of a place, while cosmopolitanism means a consciousness of and engagement with the world outside one's home community." Taylor's construction of Yucatec Mayan villagers engaged in tourism as "forced into a space between cosmopolitan and indigenous" (2014:230) points to the ways in which the term "indigenous" is tied to the idea of a primordial occupation of a particular territory, which would seem to make "indigenous cosmopolitanism" an oxymoron. However, my research has indicated that it is not, that being geographically rooted to a certain place does not preclude imaginative projections into other ways of being that can have real material consequences. Such cosmopolitan competency may not necessarily take the form of more progressive social values; instead, it may be instrumental in facilitating global interactions (Notar 2008). For example, adopting globalized notions of culture as a political and economic resource is not necessarily either good or bad, but it may be effective for host organizations like TelaMaya.

Cosmopolitanism can mean different things to different people. For Guatemalan Mayan women, developing a more cosmopolitan subjectivity opened new horizons that inspired them to seek to change the parameters of their relationships with male family members, the state, and international clients. However, the potential for knowledge to travel made them uneasy. Within

the context of touristic, government, and activist versions of what it means to be “Maya,” Guatemalan Mayan women’s decisions about how to represent and market themselves to outsiders are part of a larger process of rethinking how to make themselves known. As Mayan women’s images are appropriated as national symbols in a country where tourism is the second-largest industry, such representations are particularly fraught. TelaMaya members saw very clearly that the distinctive value of their products rests in the intangible domains of identity, imagery, stories, and intellectual property, and this was where they focused many of their concerns. They were as upset about the unequal terms of intangible exchange between themselves and tourists, volunteers, and clients as they were about the more material inequalities in their exchanges. In their daily interactions with voluntourists, Mayan weavers revealed their ambivalence about ethical consumerism. Weavers wanted to benefit from their stories and images by participating in international fair trade markets, deriving pride from the recognition of prestigious international clients who “value our Mayan culture” more than the local non-indigenous population. However, they also wanted to protect their proprietary knowledge both as an inalienable form of cultural heritage and a market resource. Because ethical consumption ultimately rests on the benevolence of the consumer, it reproduces power inequalities between producers and consumers (Bryant and Goodman 2004).

For voluntourists, developing a more cosmopolitan subjectivity was an important prerequisite to assuming many roles in their lives, including their careers. This research suggests that volunteer tourists and other alternative tourists are reshaping their identities by imagining themselves as people who have power within global capitalist structures. However, this is not to suggest that markets allow people boundless freedom to express themselves using their consumption choices. While the volunteer tourists who visit TelaMaya and the fair trade



consumers who purchase their products from home are expressing their autonomy and self-actualization—within the bounds of acceptable market relations—other people may have been limited in their ability to practice ethical consumption due to socioeconomic inequalities (Bianchi 2009). As tourists and development workers, voluntourists have a special relationship to the concept of culture. With the ascendance of modernization theory, “culture” became an explanation for irrational adherence to traditional ways, a barrier to development that needed to be overcome (Kuper 1999:10). Although they have moved away from this attitude, the idea that development and indigenous knowledges exist in a binary relationship remains, and voluntourists sometimes find it difficult to articulate what they view as “local knowledge.” While, as tourists, cultural difference is one of the main factors that attracted them to Guatemala in the first place, voluntourists often view cultural difference as a problem to be solved in TelaMaya.

### **Contributions to Anthropological Theory**

As with other forms of alternative tourism, the popular and scholarly literature on voluntourism has swung from celebrating it as a solution to the unequal power dynamics between hosts and guests to dismissing it as a neocolonialistic enterprise that only benefits the voluntourists. Voluntourists are typically characterized as unaware of the potential impacts of their visits. My research provides a more nuanced examination of both how voluntourists’ presence provides (mixed) benefits to organizations in Xela and how voluntourists reflexively examine their own practices. Drawing from rich ethnographic data from over a year and a half of participation observation, I closely analyze the daily interpersonal interactions that constituted the work of the cooperative and their positive, negative, and mixed outcomes, using the framework of “friction” to grapple with the double-edged benefits and drawbacks of voluntourism.

A related goal of the research is to complicate and lend nuance to the often rigidly-defined roles of “tourist” and “host” by discussing how volunteers become involved in cultural production in organizations like TelaMaya. Tourism is often viewed as a form of consumption, given that the focus has historically been on the tourists as consumers and the process of consumption (Judd 2006). By contrast, this research project drew attention to the processes of cultural production as a means of attracting both tourist shop clients and volunteer tourists, and as the main work that was done on a daily basis within the volunteer program. As producers of touristic Mayan culture, voluntourists also train their analytical gaze on other tourists. At times they think introspectively about their own tastes in consuming culture (seeing tourists as a “we”) in a way that disrupts their cultivated “anti-tourist” identities. At other times they view themselves as apart from other tourists by virtue of their engaged roles in the cooperative (seeing tourists as a “they”). This kind of tourist-on-tourist gazing has not been well described in the literature, aside from a general recognition that tourists almost universally reject identifying with other tourists.

The tendency in tourism studies has been to view power as residing in the role of the tourist. However, critical tourism studies suggest that power is “contingent, and permeates the ‘micro-practices’ of everyday life” (Bianchi 2009). Volunteer tourists can become entangled in local webs of power themselves to the extent of becoming “targets” (Cheong and Miller 2000), lending their privilege as observers to situations of discrimination and structural violence and placing their gendered, raced bodies in situations of similar risk to express (or claim) solidarity with women in host communities. Raoul Bianchi (2009:491) points out that viewing tourists as becoming part of host communities, and assuming the risks that go along with that, serves as a useful corrective to the “trope of the disempowered host” in tourism studies, “it fails to

distinguish between the exposure of tourists to acts of criminality and perhaps violence at a micro-level, with the ability of powerful institutional actors in the tourism industry, underpinned by capital and the powers of the state, to shape the environment which constrains and enables myriad forms of agency.” Individual voluntourists’ deliberate move to place themselves in the same vulnerable state as their Guatemalan coworkers does not erase the structural privilege that they enjoy that allows them to exit should the situation become untenable, as several volunteers did.

This thesis also reexamines theoretical concepts such as the demonstration effect and colonial mentality, which can tend to present the hosts of tourism as lacking agency, and places them in light of how people are more broadly reimagining their place in the world and the limits of the possible. The demonstration effect is limited because it is premised on the idea that cultures are relatively stable entities, and rooted in the salvage mentality that sought to shield “local cultures” from outside influences, which were seen as inherently dominant. Using the lens of cosmopolitanism helps address this limitation by putting a greater focus on the process of comparison and selective adoption of aspects of foreign lifestyles described by the demonstration effect. It also places the emphasis back on agents within host communities who actively filter and adapt elements of the foreign ideas, practices, and materials they encounter. Similarly, the preference for voluntourists’ cultures that the TelaMaya officers showed could exemplify the colonial mentality. The concept of colonial mentality would seem to present colonialism as a process of brainwashing that has inveigled colonized people into devaluing their own cultural practices. Without dismissing the hegemonic power inequalities that structure the neocolonial relationship between the US and Guatemala, I would argue that when Roxana decided that she

preferred aspects of US culture, it was through her own considered comparison between the behaviors of the voluntourists and Guatemalans in her life.

The intersection between voluntourism and violence has not been explored in the literature, in part because the primary theory about tourists' relationship to violence—dark tourism—has been fairly narrowly defined as pertaining to clearly demarcated sites of past suffering such as prisons, concentration camps, or memorials. By shifting the perspective on dark tourism from being located in sites with a single main signification of tragedy to being located in tourists' approaches to multivalent sites, this research clarifies the connection between dark tourism and voluntourism. The majority of tourists had at least a vague sense of Guatemala as a “dark” place whose recent history of genocidal violence has created opportunities to help women reconstruct their lives and communities. This thesis contributes to the literature on tourism by broadening and refocusing the definition of dark tourism to focus on how tourists relate to a violent past that has not been packaged for their consumption.

I also want to take this argument a step further by pointing out that the notion of dark tourism, which has been used to refer to the visitation of violence that has safely receded into the past, is insufficient to account for the present unruliness of post-conflict zones like Guatemala. Violence in Guatemala has not only not been packaged, it has not been contained. As Hazel Andrews claimed, “The violence of tourism as ‘violence’ (that is stated as violence) has not been prominent in the study of tourism, rather being ‘hidden’ with different labels in discussions of ‘dark tourism,’ ‘terrorism’ and ‘crime’” (2014:5). In the only study I have encountered on voluntourism in dangerous areas, Rami Isaac and Vincent Platenkamp (2010) engage with violence only as spectacle, something that voluntourists in Palestine are exposed to visually rather than experiencing personally. The darkness of Guatemala, as evidenced by TelaMaya

members' testimonies about the past as well as volunteers' own perceptions and experiences of violence, verifies the need for voluntourists' help and provides them with the sense of authenticity and connection they seek in their travels.

Finally, the critical turn in tourism studies, which focuses on shifting imaginaries and emancipatory ideals, has been criticized for failing to be "critical" of power disparities: "In turning away from the interrogation of the economic and political relations of power within the manifold settings of tourism, it has little to say about the material inequalities, working conditions, ecological degradation and patterns of social polarization that are manifest in twenty-first century tourism" (Bianchi 2009:498). This thesis brings together the critical turn in tourism studies with a grounded analysis of the daily frictions and material issues of the hosts of tourists. It unites the intangible shifts in consciousness represented by cosmopolitanism with the notion that, in many ways, the traffic in culture has made intangible goods such as cultural authenticity the most crucial to people's political and economic realities.

### **Foreign Intervention and the Cosmopolitan Humanitarian Vision of Suffering**

Foreign (mainly Euro-American) intervention in Guatemala sowed the seeds of conflict, shaped the peace process, and continues in the post-conflict era through the interposition of the many foreign bodies currently crowding the nation, in capacities ranging from institutionalized to independent, like TelaMaya's volunteers. It seems unlikely that the relationship between foreigners and the Guatemalan state will become less charged in the future. In October 2013, the Guatemalan Minister of the Interior cautioned foreigners on tourist visas, "We are not going to permit your interference in Guatemala's internal affairs, as we have seen in different situations with all the foreigners with tourist visas, regardless of the flag you come under, whether you are ecologists, human rights defenders, that does not allow you to be in actions where what you are

doing is inciting the commission of crimes.’”<sup>285</sup> Pérez Molina has similarly decried the US Congress’ conditions on the renewal of military aid as an attempt to dictate the nations’ internal affairs (Davis 2014).

As one of the organizations created in response to the armed conflict in Guatemala, TelaMaya is part of the growing patchwork of local and international NGOs working to empower women economically and politically. This thesis contributes to the emerging discussion in the literature on this geographic area focusing on how transnational feminist and human rights-based notions are being translated and disseminated at the local level, diffusing from urban centers with a high degree of contact with foreigners to rural areas through the actions of NGOs like TelaMaya. Through their long exposure to volunteers as well as a myriad of other sources in popular media, political and legal discourse, and local and transnational activist organizations, the women in the cooperative have developed a broadened sense of their gendered subjectivity. They are also using their organizational structure, as a regional coalition of weaving groups with Spanish-Maya bilingual representatives, to disperse these alternative orientations to gender and family relationships to their rural client base. This part of the story about the “NGOization of womanhood” in Guatemala is still developing.

This dissertation has sought to answer a series of questions about the nature and outcomes of the friction within TelaMaya: How have voluntourists and association leaders influenced each other through their work together? In what ways has the voluntourism program created dependency or built capacity? While its results provide insight into issues at a global scale, this research was obviously quite limited in scope and its conclusions must necessarily be

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<sup>285</sup> De aquí para adelante es la advertencia para decirles que no vamos a permitir su injerencia en asuntos internos de Guatemala, como los hemos visto en diferentes escenarios para todos los extranjeros que estén con visa de turistas no importa bajo que bandera vengan, si son ecologistas, observadores de derechos humanos, eso no les permite estar en algunas acciones en donde lo que se está haciendo es incitando a la comisión de delitos.

limited as well in their generalizability. Researchers familiar with the rural Guatemalan women who make up the membership of TelaMaya might be surprised at the degree to which the members of the board of directors and the weaving group representatives have absorbed the language of NGOized feminisms. Future research could expand this narrow focus to encompass other types of non-governmental organizations in doing empowerment work for rural women and indigenous people on the ground in Guatemala and how they translate international discourses from urbanized centers to the areas less connected to globalized flows of information and ideas in the Western Highlands. It would also be useful to investigate further the role of wholesale clients and the final consumers of the products, to understand how their consumption of the images and representations created by the cooperative structures the work done by the volunteer program.

One of the paradoxes of globalization is that it even as it tends to marginalize people on the basis of their race and gender, it also tends to disrupt established forms of power and create new possibilities for alliances across borders (Naples and Desai 2002; Gunewardena and Kingsolver 2007). Judith Butler argues that cosmopolitanism, the recognition of political connectedness and interdependence, “is the condition by which a concrete and expansive conception of the human will be articulated, the way in which parochial and implicitly racially and religiously bound conceptions of human will be made to yield to a wider conception of how we consider who we are as a global community” (Butler 2006:90-1). She suggests that the commonality of suffering can be the basis for a cosmopolitan politics structured by transnational humanitarianism, the extension of empathy to distant people: “There is a geographical imagination invoked in Butler’s request: the ability to visualize and internalize this relationality across all kinds of psychic and material borders” (Mitchell 2007:5). Butler claims that all

humans are vulnerable to suffering but the experience of suffering is unevenly distributed, and argues that empathy should be based in a recognition of our shared humanity. Of course, focusing on other people as suffering subjects cannot blind us to the particularities of their historical and geographical experiences, and in this research project I attempted to maintain that balance between the universal and the particular.



## Appendix One: “Your Life is TelaMaya”: Personal Histories of Life, Work, and Suffering

The cooperative leaders’ personal histories are entwined with the history of the organization. As María put it, “I have been working with TelaMaya for twenty-eight years. My husband said, ‘*Your life is TelaMaya. You gave your youth for TelaMaya.*’ I do not want TelaMaya to die.”<sup>286</sup> The following section introduces four of the leaders of TelaMaya who have had the closest connection to the cooperative’s administration and the volunteer program. The cooperative officers’ lives and attitudes towards familial relationships and women’s role in society have transformed during their long association with foreign volunteers. Life histories with four of the members of the board of directors illustrate how women in Quetzaltenango are balancing their work and family responsibilities, how they came to take on leadership positions, and how they see themselves as working women and indigenous leaders.

### María from San Martín Sacatepéquez, Quetzaltenango

María was in her late 50s and wore soft acrylic sweaters embroidered with flowers and beads over printed blouses and long skirts, her black hair pulled back into a low ponytail. Her face was expressive and she had a hard time hiding her emotions. When she smiled her face became almost perfectly round, and when she was displeased, her face would screw up into a tight ball. Her voice shifted from caressingly sweet and high when she was speaking with a weaving student, to dramatic and sing-song when she was telling a story or speaking in public, to intense and rapid-fire when she was upset. With volunteers, María was motherly and caring, and she always took time to chat with group representatives when they visit TelaMaya to drop off products and take orders. María asserted her authority with volunteers and other cooperative members in a self-effacing way that one volunteer described as “that whole Jewish mother

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<sup>286</sup> Tengo 28 años de trabajar con TelaMaya. Mi esposo dijo, ‘*tu vida es TelaMaya. Regalaste tu juventud para TelaMaya.*’ No quiero que TelaMaya muera.

thing.” María often legitimated her leadership on the basis of her dedication to the cooperative: “I was the first to get involved in TelaMaya. That’s why the women love me.”<sup>287</sup> A tourist asked how María came to be president of the association and she responded, “I have always loved collaborating.”<sup>288</sup> She explained that she was elected vice president of the board of directors, and once she proved herself capable of working in the office, the group representatives asked her to be president.

María’s self-presentation of her identity was complicated, reflecting a complex history of ethnic mobility in the liminal spaces between Maya and Ladino. She identifies herself as non-indigenous in primarily Ladino contexts. When a Ladino man who had worked as a contractor under Doña Prudencia paid TelaMaya a visit, María told him, “We are helping indigenous people. I am not indigenous, but I speak the Mam language.”<sup>289</sup> In an interview with volunteers, she referred to Spanish as her first language. Others also tend to perceive her as non-indigenous. Roxana told me that a Dutch weaving student, Orlando, had stayed in touch with her after finishing his lessons and supported her family financially. He had always preferred her over Doña Maria; Roxana explained, “I think that he prefers to help indigenous people. There are people like that who like to help indigenous people.”<sup>290</sup> Because María spoke Spanish with her family and they wore Western-style clothing rather than indigenous *traje*, she occupied a non-indigenous social category.

However, María presented herself as more rooted in her indigenous community when she spoke with foreign tourists. After discussing traditional dress in a weaving conference to a group of tourists, María said, somewhat unprompted, “I like to put on my traditional garments but I

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<sup>287</sup> Yo fui la primera que me metí en TelaMaya. Por eso me quieren.

<sup>288</sup> Siempre me ha gustado colaborar.

<sup>289</sup> Estamos ayudando a las indígenas. No soy indígena, pero hablo el idioma Mam.

<sup>290</sup> Creo que prefiere ayudar a la gente indígena. Hay personas así que les gusta ayudar a la gente indígena.

suffered an accident and broke some ribs, and when I put on my belt it hurts. But I know how to weave perfectly, and I speak the Mam language.”<sup>291</sup> She used similar phrasings on other occasions: “Maybe you see me as wearing Western dress, but I know how to weave perfectly, I speak the Mayan language Mam, and I coexist a lot with my indigenous people. It’s that I suffered an accident and hurt my ribs, that’s why it bothers me when I put on my belt.”<sup>292</sup> Of course, none of her daughters or her granddaughter were wearing the traditional dress of San Martín either. Setting up a Facebook profile, María preferred photos of herself wearing Mayan dress.

María was the fourth child of five, and the only girl. Her father passed away when she was eleven years old, the same year she learned to weave on the backstrap loom in school. Her father left his sons an inheritance of land but María received nothing because she is a woman. The house she lived in had originally belonged to her grandmother, and her mother passed it on to her to provide her with some inheritance. She learned to support her mother and little brother by opening a small store and selling her weavings, making her own clothing to save money and express her personal taste. She developed difficulty with her vision because she used to weave from 6AM until 1AM, stopping only to eat and clean. In the past few years, María’s brothers have begun threatening her with legal action to take back the land where her mother’s house was built. This ongoing family dispute has blighted María’s hopes for improving her situation in life.

When María was younger, she dreamed about romance, but a former boyfriend got another woman pregnant and disappointed both her and his parents, who had hoped they would

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<sup>291</sup> Me gusta ponerme mi traje típico pero sufrí un accidente y me quebraron algunas costillas, y cuando me pongo mi cinturón me duele. Pero yo sé perfectamente tejer, y hablo el idioma Mam.

<sup>292</sup> Tal vez me miran de vestido, pero yo sé perfectamente tejer, hablo el idioma Maya Mam, y convivo mucho con mi gente indígena. Es que sufrí un accidente y me lastime las costillas, por eso me ofende cuando me pongo mi cinturón.

marry. After she married her current husband, when she was visiting Mexico with an organization of exporters, a Mexican man fell in love with her on the bus. She was traveling in Western-style clothing because of the hot weather and he had only seen her like that. María told me, “And can you believe his great disappointment to see me in *corte* [indigenous dress]? He only saw that I was dressed like that, and no longer paid attention to me.”<sup>293</sup> He explained to the secretary of the exportation group that “with this outfit I didn’t like her.”<sup>294</sup> At this point she was already married and not looking for a boyfriend, but his repulsion for her indigenous dress offended her. Experiences of racism like this have stuck with her and contribute to her ambivalence about her identity.

María told me that her husband, Miguel, was permissive: “Yes, he always trusts me like I trust him. He always supports me.”<sup>295</sup> He has learned to weave over the years, and sometimes helped with students in the weaving school at TelaMaya, sharing his opinions on design and color as well as instructing students on the steps. An illness (perhaps alcoholism) left him unable to continue working as a bus driver. Miguel has had problems with alcohol since he was taken by the military and tortured during the civil war. Despite his permissiveness, he also committed domestic abuse on several occasions, including one incident in which he attacked her in bed with a knife, striking the pillow next to her head, and another in which he hit her in the stomach with the handle of a machete. She left the house for two months and went to live with her brother, where Miguel found her and convinced her to take him back.

María was trying to use her salary from TelaMaya to support her family of nine. One of María’s daughters lost her husband, a taxi driver, when criminals assaulted and killed him. Her

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<sup>293</sup> ¿Y puedes creer su gran decepción fue verme con corte? Solo me vio que estaba vestido así, y ya no me hizo caso.

<sup>294</sup> con ese traje me cayó muy mal.

<sup>295</sup> Sí, siempre confía en mí, como confío en él. Siempre me apoya.

other daughter's husband abandoned her when he went to the US and started another family. María summarized the cares of a working Guatemalan woman for me, saying, "We have three very serious problems in life: first, sickness, second, problems with the family, third, the costs one has, and fourth, work."<sup>296</sup> She told me that her worries about money give her insomnia. As the matriarch holding the family together and the only family member earning a steady salary, María felt the weight of her responsibilities heavily on her sloping shoulders. Desperation occasionally drove her to ask for short-term loans and financial help from volunteers.

In August 2011, her son, Vincente, was extorted, six months before the organization itself was extorted. She said that Vincente was too afraid to go to the university, where he was studying to be a lawyer, and that she had spent a great deal of money on tuition. María asked me to write to the former volunteers to ask for money, like we did for Roxana's throat operation in 2010. She asked me, "Please, ask for help from the volunteers. It is my only hope."<sup>297</sup> She asked if it would be better to say that it was for a sickness, and I said that I did not want to lie to the former volunteers. She said, "Me neither, but how do we make them understand the situation?"<sup>298</sup> We came up with a brief explanation. I told Roxana that María had asked me to send the email to the mailing list. "If we send a letter to all the volunteers that says that someone is extorting the president's son, they will think that Guatemala is dangerous and not want to come visit us,"<sup>299</sup> Roxana commented, invoking the authority of the board of directors. While she had sent out a personal appeal for her throat operation, this request could damage the organization by frightening potential volunteers or clients. Trying to understand this misfortune,

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<sup>296</sup> Tenemos tres problemas muy serios en la vida: primero, la enfermedad, segundo, los problemas con la familia, tercero, los gastos que tiene uno, y cuatro, el trabajo.

<sup>297</sup> Por favor, pide la ayuda de los voluntarios. Es mi única esperanza.

<sup>298</sup> ¿Yo tampoco, pero como hacerlos comprender la situación?

<sup>299</sup> Mejor esperar un rato, porque si mandamos una carta a todos los voluntarios que dice que alguien esta extorsionando el hijo de la presidenta van a pensar que Guatemala es peligroso y no querer ir a visitarnos.

María said, “I don’t know why they are asking me for money. I’m not mean to people. Everyone in my town loves me. If I come to a house, they say, *Here is your food*. I don’t have enemies, all the people love me.”<sup>300</sup>

María would often talk about the support that she felt in her own group and her community, how they would come together in moments of crisis. When her son was being extorted, she said, “My San Martín community supported me. My house was not big enough because there were so many people.”<sup>301</sup> María’s community ties are important to her, and she sometimes missed work for events in her Evangelical church. Her religion was her anchor to her community and her source of strength in difficult times. However, her prominent position in the city led to some envy and gossip about her among her neighbors. María said that in San Martín, they suspect her of having a lover in the city, because she sometimes stays overnight on a cot in the TelaMaya office. A woman in San Martín whose husband is in the US and who has lovers herself asked María about her lover. María replied that she does have a special man, and that he is the love of her life and is a thousand times better than her husband. She said that he gives her gifts all the time. The woman wanted to meet him. María said that she should come to the city and wait in a certain spot and that she would take her to meet her man. “*But really? Really*. The woman was waiting there, can you believe it? What shamelessness.” María brought her to the church in town and said, “This is the love of my life, my Jesus Christ, who has always cared for me.”<sup>302</sup> We all laughed at this clever trick. María even told her granddaughter how she had tricked the nosy woman.

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<sup>300</sup> No sé por qué me están pidiendo dinero. Yo no soy mala con la gente. Todos en mi pueblo me quieren- si yo llego a una casa, dicen, ‘*Aquí está tu comida*.’ No tengo enemigos, toda la gente me quieren.

<sup>301</sup> Mi pueblo de San Martín me apoyó. Mi casa no alcanzaba porque estaban tanta gente. Ay señor yo me moría por mi hijo.

<sup>302</sup> Este es el amor de mi vida, mi Jesús Cristo, que siempre me ha cuidado.

The fluidity of María's ethnic identity makes sense as she navigates between different value systems. María's varied self-presentation can be seen as a transitional stage in ethnic mobility from indigenous to non-indigenous, fluid categories in Guatemala. It can also be seen as a case of a member of a disadvantaged group maneuvering to gain a better position relative to different groups with different agendas. Walter Little (2005) argues that while Mayans who work in multiple social contexts (indigenous handicraft vendors in Antigua, Guatemala, in his case) identify as Maya, they prefer to deploy their identities flexibly in various contexts. Caught between racist Ladino notions that they are ignorant and backward and the romanticized expectations of the foreign tourists who buy their products, they do not wish to commit to one identity. Like those handicrafts vendors, working in tourism places María between groups more powerful than her own. Her leadership position in Xela has made her stand out in her community as much as her Western-style dress and habit of speaking Spanish rather than Mam, a prominence that may have attracted negative attention, extortion attempts, and gossip.

### **Roxana from Sololá**

Roxana was in her mid-30s, a slim woman with a confident manner. She wore the indigenous *traje* from Sololá, saying that she continued to wear her *traje* "because it is our clothing that we have."<sup>303</sup> At night and when she was sick, she would wear yoga pants and a T-shirt, which make her look younger and smaller. She often spoke Spanish with her husband and children at TelaMaya, partially out of courtesy to the volunteers and partially to raise her children bilingual, but she also spoke Kaqchikel with them in private, and with her extended family. Her manner tended to be more business-like and direct than María's, which made her popular with foreign wholesale clients. During the week, Roxana and her family stayed in a

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<sup>303</sup> porque es nuestra ropa que tenemos.

series of rooms off the main courtyard at TelaMaya, for which she paid a low monthly rent, and on alternate weekends, they went to their house in Sololá. She attended Catholic church services in the large cathedral in Xela, the one associated with a more indigenous membership, and in a yellow-painted church around the corner from her house in Pujujil II.

She came from a large family in Sololá, with five brothers and four sisters. Her father was an alcoholic and left her mother to start another family on the coast. Her oldest sister took care of the younger siblings rather than going to school, but the rest of the siblings received a formal education. She began working with TelaMaya when she was a teenager. She was one of the interviewees who was invited to the initial meetings in Quetzaltenango, where she met María and some of the other women who would become members of TelaMaya. She joined and sold her weavings for a time with the cooperative before moving to Guatemala City to find work, where she cared for an elderly woman. There, she learned to speak Spanish fluently by watching telenovelas (Spanish soap operas) for four hours a day. She returned to her village when members of her home group in Pujujil II called on her to help them work with TelaMaya, because she could read, write, and speak Spanish.

On returning to the cooperative, Roxana became friends with Mexican consultant Lucina Cardenas, who invited her to work in the cooperative's new storefront in Antigua, Guatemala. She enjoyed living in Antigua and spent three years there, but left the store over conflict with a coworker from Nahualá. Offered the chance to move to the store in Quetzaltenango, she declined. She stayed on as a member of the TelaMaya board of directors until the employees left after the corruption scandal. She met and married her husband, Irving, who was setting up a store on the coast where her father also worked. When the board of directors assumed control of the cooperative, María called on Roxana to work with her in rebuilding the organization. Roxana and



Irving had been having marital problems, and the women in her weaving group were asking her to return to the cooperative to help them, so she went to Quetzaltenango. “Sometimes I think about leaving it all. I think it would be better to set up my own store and earn more. But I keep fighting out of love for TelaMaya. Because there are women who depend on it,”<sup>304</sup> Roxana told me. I asked her why she stayed, and she said, “The truth is we’re supporting people because here we aren’t earning much at all, right? What we earn doesn’t go far but we’re still fighting. Why? To help people.”<sup>305</sup>

Roxana’s relationship with her husband was often tense. Once when Roxana was washing clothes, she said mischievously, “I’m lazy; I do not wash my husband’s clothes.”<sup>306</sup> When another cooperative member, Libia from San Juan Comalapa, found out that her husband had a second family, Roxana comforted her and told her, “Men are like that. The same thing happened to me, and it was hard at first.”<sup>307</sup> She said, “Irving has told me, ‘*You prefer your work. You love your work more than me.*’ And maybe it is true.”<sup>308</sup> She said that he gets bored in Xela because he does not have anything to do, preferring to be in Sololá, at the house that he built next to his family home. One night Irving went out and got drunk, and did not come home until 6AM. Roxana went out to look for him at night in a taxi because their children were worried sick. She accepted the situation philosophically: “That’s what men are like.”<sup>309</sup> Irving would sometimes get jealous of the men with whom Roxana came into contact for her work: taxi drivers and group

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<sup>304</sup> A veces pienso en dejar todo. Pienso que sería mejor hacer mi propia tienda y ganar más. Pero sigo luchando por amor de TelaMaya. Porque hay mujeres que dependen en esto.

<sup>305</sup> La verdad que nosotros estamos apoyando a la gente pues porque así con nosotros ahora no estamos ganando gran cosa pues ¿verdad? No alcanza lo que ganamos pero estamos luchando pues. ¿Por qué? Para ayudar a la gente.

<sup>306</sup> Soy huevona, no lavo la ropa de mi marido.

<sup>307</sup> Los hombres son así. A mí me pasó el mismo, y fue duro al principio.

<sup>308</sup> Irving me ha dicho, ‘*Prefieres tu trabajo. Quieres más a tu trabajo que a mí.*’ Y tal vez es cierto.

<sup>309</sup> Así son los hombres.

representatives who complimented her or called her pet names like “princess” that he considered inappropriate.

However, she also appreciated his support. Because Irving owns a pair of small daily goods stores in Puerto San José, he has free time to stay in Xela and help Roxana with her work. A weaving student commented to Irving that Roxana is lucky to have a husband who cooks. He said, “Yes, I cook, clean, wash the dishes, sweep the floor, take care of the children... whatever is necessary.”<sup>310</sup> Roxana’s sisters-in-law asked her how she had managed to train her husband to help her around the house, complaining that her brothers did not do anything to help them. She said that it was difficult at first, because the expectation is that the women will do everything around the house, “even if the men are just sitting around,”<sup>311</sup> but that with time he came to accept this role. Roxana taught her husband to weave, so that he could help with weaving students when no one else was available.

Roxana had three children, two boys and a girl. Roxana said that young people do not want to learn to weave anymore, but in her family they are still teaching their children. Her sister-in-law’s seven-year-old daughter was already using the backstrap loom. She said that when her daughter, Gabriela, turns seven years old, she will start teaching her to weave. She already knows how to roll up the balls but she cannot do the second step. A volunteer asked Roxana’s second son if he knew how to weave, and Roxana said that she had not taught them but that her oldest son had been eager to learn. Gabriela has decided that she does not like to wear her *traje* because it is too heavy and pinches her uncomfortably. Gabriela is used to living in an apartment in Xela during the week, where she speaks Spanish and wears Dora the Explorer tee-shirts, and visiting her house in Solola on the weekends, where she speaks Kaqchikel with her extended

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<sup>310</sup> Sí, cocino, limpio, lavo los trastos, barro el piso, cuido los niños... todo lo que se necesita.

<sup>311</sup> incluso si los hombres solo están sentados ahí.

family. When I visited Roxana for Holy Week, Gabriela wanted to show me her collection of tiny *trajes*: some of them were hand-made or bought by Roxana. Others are from other areas of Guatemala, presents from Roxana's friends and relatives. We made six color-coordinated outfits. "No Rebe, it's not like that,"<sup>312</sup> she told me authoritatively when I tried to bundle the skirt around her waist. She proudly marched into the kitchen to put on a fashion show for her family and the effect was adorable, but for her, the outfits are for special occasions only.

Roxana found her leadership position taxing, saying, "I cannot bear this stress."<sup>313</sup> Her stress manifested itself in chronic colon ailments, headaches, and obsessive hair pulling. Roxana stated that the stress was making her sick because she did not think about her own body and its needs. She would wait to eat until her children had eaten and the errands had been run, because she could wait but the children could not. Roxana and María also felt the need to establish a formal lunch period from 1–2PM with the volunteers so that they could eat a full meal every day. She sighed, "There are people who can rest on the weekends, who are calm. But when can I rest?"<sup>314</sup> She would get jealous of women who could leave their houses messy and their dishes dirty, because she could not abide messiness.

A volunteer observed about both María's and Roxana's husbands, "It's really interesting how the husbands seem to be kind of exceptions to the masculine figures that I've seen elsewhere in Guatemala. I think they kind of help their wives. They are kind of helping them with their business." Roxana's history particularly shows that gender roles are becoming reshaped. However, this has taken place at personal cost to her. Her relationship with her husband has suffered as she pushes the boundaries of the typical marital power dynamic. Living

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<sup>312</sup> No, Rebe, no es así.

<sup>313</sup> No aguanto este estrés.

<sup>314</sup> Hay personas que descansan los fines de semana, que están tranquilas. ¿Pero cuando puedo descansar?

life between Sololá and Xela, she straddles different ways of thinking about gender roles and appropriate activities. It is perhaps unsurprising that Irving prefers their more traditional way of life on the weekends in Sololá, whereas Roxana enjoys the bustle of the city, where she is independent and important. While Roxana's indigenous identity is firmly established through her dress, language, and other daily social practices such as cooking local dishes and hand-washing her laundry, her children present much more fluid expressions of their identities. Roxana's family shows how, in only one generation, the most prominent markers of Mayan identity can be displaced, even though the traditions of her ancestors are important to Roxana.

### **Andrea from Sololá**

I asked Andrea to tell me about her life, and she responded, "My life... well, I think it has been a bit... sad, or maybe for some it's not so sad but for me yeah, it's been sad."<sup>315</sup> Andrea was in her early 40s, a tiny, outspoken woman with delicate features who expresses herself bluntly. She took pride in her skill as a weaver and her traditional clothing, working regularly to make herself new blouses in the style of her village, Nahuala. She walked and talked briskly, her energy, good humor, and optimism only rarely giving way to a certain underlying exhaustion. She would speak K'iche' to her son but also expressed herself fluidly and comfortably in Spanish. Andrea was proud that her house was her own, built on land her grandmother left to her with her own money. She said, "Thanks to God, then, I have a home: I have a family, I have a husband, I have a son, and I have my own house."<sup>316</sup> While she used religious idioms, Andrea was less likely than the other women on the board of directors to discuss her Catholic religion.

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<sup>315</sup> Mi vida... bueno yo creo que ha sido un poco... triste, o tal vez para unos no es tan triste pero para mí sí, ha sido triste.

<sup>316</sup> Gracias a Dios pues tengo un hogar: tengo una familia, tengo un esposo, tengo un hijo, entonces y tengo mi casa propia verdad.

Andrea was raised by her grandmother, along with her brother and sister. She had to leave school when her parents died when she was 11 years old. Fortunately, “my mother left me well taught in how to weave, how we sustain ourselves, say, here in the communities.”<sup>317</sup> Because her grandmother only knew how to weave plain fabric, she learned to weave patterns from her aunts and cousins. Later she began weaving for commercial weaving groups that worked like intermediaries, paying her for her time weaving. When she was around 17 years old, she said, “No, what for, I want to *participate* in the women’s group!”<sup>318</sup> The president of the weaving group said that she was welcome to join, but that she would have to be trained in standard sizes, because she would go from doing piecework to joining an exporting group. She received training in standard measurements and quality control in Artexco in Quetzaltenango and Tradiciones Maya in Panajachel. She also worked with a woman in Panajachel who hired her to finish the ends of weavings and make dolls in traditional costumes. This woman offered her a scholarship of 300 quetzales a month to pursue a short-term degree and Andrea decided to pursue a year’s training in assistant nursing. Later, her patron loaned her money for her practicum in the private hospital La Democracia in Quetzaltenango, which she paid off gradually through her weaving. Andrea no longer works in Panajachel, because her contact passed away, and when the Chirijox weaving group split, some members stayed with Tradiciones Maya, while Andrea’s group went with TelaMaya.

At 33 she married her husband, Julio, who has been a constant source of problems for her. He got another woman in town pregnant and failed to make his child support payments, causing the family legal problems when the other woman sued him for support. When she was single, her life revolved around her work, but married life brought more responsibilities: “For the

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<sup>317</sup> Mi madre me dejó enseñada como hacer los tejidos, como sostenernos digamos aquí en las comunidades.

<sup>318</sup> ¡No, para que, yo quiero *participar* en el grupo de... de las mujeres!

moment I keep going out, I keep working, I keep weaving, but my family life is not the same as single life.”<sup>319</sup> For someone who values her independence as much as Andrea, adapting to married life has been a challenge, but she views her son as a blessing.

### **Paula from Huehuetenango**

Paula, a weaver in her mid-40s, was born in Tuisnainá, a small town in Huehuetenango. When I asked her about her life, she said, “My life... ay, God! My story... I have so much. We suffered.”<sup>320</sup> Her features are soft and rounded and she keeps her hair carefully parted and tightly coiled in the traditional red hair wrap from Huehuetenango. She is attached to her cell phone, so much so that she got in trouble with the other members of the board of directors for texting while on the job. Paula is active in her local Catholic church, and she would enjoy playing guitar in her church group’s chorus, but cannot afford an instrument.

Her parents sent her and her two sisters to the local public school, which only went as far as elementary school, but they were unable to afford further formal education. She moved to San Rafael Petzal when she met her husband. He left her for another woman in town when she was three months pregnant with her youngest daughter. She became involved with TelaMaya from the early days when it was still AMDA, and in 2012 she said that she had been working with the cooperative for 20 years. Unlike other cooperative members, Paula told me that she and the other members of the San Rafael Petzal group generally do not sell their weavings outside of TelaMaya, instead piecing a living together from other economic activities, such as growing fruits and vegetables. Her two daughters live with her at home, and she managed to send them to

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<sup>319</sup> Por el momento yo sigo saliendo, sigo trabajando, sigo tejiendo, pero ya no es igual mi vida de soltera que mi vida ya con familia.

<sup>320</sup> Mi vida... ¡ay, Dios! Mi historia... cuanto tengo yo. Sufrimos.

the local private school, although the cost of uniforms, closed-toe shoes, school materials and tuition was difficult for her to cover.

Like many families in Huehuetenango, Paula had family members in the US. Her son moved to the US seven years ago and had not been back to visit, but they maintained frequent contact. I helped Paula print a photograph that her son had sent her of her newly-born grandson. He sent some remittances, but “only for the costs.”<sup>321</sup> Paula wanted to know about what it was like to visit the US, and asked Roxana how practicable it would be to skip out on a tourist visa. She said she had heard that if a tourist goes and comes back three times, Immigration Control and Enforcement no longer investigates her. Roxana said that they would still investigate her, and that if TelaMaya was going to help her go to visit her son, she could not skip out on the visa without harming the association.

Andrea and Paula punctuated the stories of their lives with instances of tragedy and loss. Their repeated references to their suffering suggest that the condition of suffering may well be fundamental to how they saw themselves as belonging to their gender and ethnic group. While they were drawn to involvement in the cooperative leadership, a lack of support within their households made it difficult for them to assume more prominent roles in the cooperative.

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<sup>321</sup> sólo para los gastos.

## Appendix Two: “The Women Do Not Want to Help”: Intra-Cooperative Conflicts

In this appendix, I describe some of the interpersonal conflicts between cooperative members that did not fit in the body of the dissertation. Women’s supportive relationships outside the home were key to developing a shared sense of their value as people. The group representatives of TelaMaya constituted a form of extended family, a relationship formalized when Roxana became the godmother to María’s grandson. As US volunteer Jennifer commented, “It definitely feels like we’re part of a big family as opposed to a tiered situation like a company that has a boss and workers.” For María’s birthday in 2012, we had a special lunch, with presents and a traditional chicken dish, *jocom verde*. She started crying: “Maybe my family would not have done all this for me.”<sup>322</sup> Another volunteer and I burst out, almost at the same time, “We are your family!”<sup>323</sup> María explained that she had a good working relationship with Roxana, although she occasionally complained about Roxana’s children, who would play in the office and the store. In turn, Roxana would get frustrated because María did not like to leave TelaMaya to run errands; once, she cried out, “I can’t split myself in two!”<sup>324</sup> The two women took on different roles in the daily leadership of the cooperative: while Roxana was more invested in maintaining positive relationships with the international wholesale clients, María focused more on maintaining relationships with the weaving group representatives.

Since TelaMaya’s profits were redistributed by sales, rather than shared equally among the member groups, it was always a challenge to maintain good relationships amongst the groups in the cooperative. As Roxana explained, some groups’ products were much more popular than others’: “Well, the truth is that there are groups that get orders and groups that do not. There are

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<sup>322</sup> Tal vez mi familia no hubiera hecho todo eso para mí.

<sup>323</sup> Somos tu familia.

<sup>324</sup> ¡No puedo partirme en dos!



products that people do not like, so we cannot do anything. What we are going to do in the future is train the women to make other products so that they all have work because sometimes ... there is jealousy.”<sup>325</sup> When the organization sold products on consignment, group representatives used to rearrange the store to highlight their own products every time they made a delivery. Group relationships became easier after the organization switched to buying and re-selling the products. However, the leaders still struggled with members’ expectations. A woman from María’s group in San Martín Sacatepéquez complained that she was being cheated because her cushions were being sold for a higher price than she had received in payment: “Sometimes they do not understand that we have daily costs in the association,”<sup>326</sup> María reacted.

Andrea, a member of the board of directors, wanted a change in TelaMaya’s leadership, because the current leaders favored their own groups. In her group, they saw little benefit to belonging to TelaMaya and felt that they were members in name only. They saw products from Sololá and San Martín in the store and thought that, while the leaders claimed to represent all the women, they were giving more opportunities to their home groups: “There should be more income, let’s say, for the women, for the groups in the towns, not just income for those who are in TelaMaya... there’s always going to be an income for them, they’re earning their salaries, but not the women.”<sup>327</sup> According to Andrea, while the current leaders claimed to have made sacrifices to serve the women, they would not continue in their posts unless they had secured some benefit for themselves. However, Roxana doubted that other women could fill these

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<sup>325</sup> Pues la verdad que hay grupos que tienen pedido y grupos que no. Hay productos que no les gusta la gente así que no podemos hacer nada. Lo que vamos a hacer en el futuro es capacitar a las mujeres a hacer otros productos para que todos tengan trabajo porque... a veces hay envidia.

<sup>326</sup> Ella quería el precio en que vendimos los cojines en la tienda. A veces no entienden que tenemos gastos diarios en la asociación.

<sup>327</sup> Que hayan, eh, más ingresos digamos para las mujeres, para los grupos de los pueblos, que no sólo haya ingreso para las que están ahí en TelaMaya, hay ingreso para las mujeres o no hay, siempre va a haber un ingreso para ellas, están ganando, ganando sus sueldos, pero para las mujeres no.

leadership roles without extensive training and an adjustment in their orientation from working for the good of their groups to balancing the good of all groups: “They do not think about the other women.”<sup>328</sup> According to María, Mercedes from San Juan la Laguna once spent a week at the central office and just sat there weaving, with her products out front. The group from San Martín had helped Juana from Santa María de Jesús get a loan, and María was personally forced to pay the interest because Juana had not repaid it. “The women do not want to help. Look at how they failed in their loans,”<sup>329</sup> she declared.

Board of directors’ meetings were opportunities to gossip, and the six- or seven-member group often featured shifting allegiances. Andrea, María, and Roxana started complaining after a meeting about how the others only looked out for themselves. “You see how no one wanted to do anything until we mentioned the salary,”<sup>330</sup> Andrea commented. María sighed to Andrea that she was the first to get involved in TelaMaya, back when it was a thankless job and no one wanted to do it: “When there was no money no one wanted to get involved.”<sup>331</sup> Andrea and María agreed that there was no place for gossip in TelaMaya. However, gossip was an important source of social information, and the leaders would sometimes make decisions based on it. For example, the officers bought some extra weavings from Doña Libia from San Juan Comalapa when they learned that her husband had been drunk for three months. Gossip made the TelaMaya leadership less inclined to buy products in another case when they found out that Mercedes, who claimed to be a widow, had a living husband. They viewed this as self-serving, especially considering that Mercedes also had her own weaving association in San Juan la Laguna and separate access to foreign tourists and volunteers visiting the lake. Through such interactions, they exchanged

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<sup>328</sup> No piensan en las otras mujeres.

<sup>329</sup> Las mujeres no quieren ayudar. Mira cómo fallaron en sus préstamos.

<sup>330</sup> Miren ustedes como no quería hacer nada hasta que mencionamos el sueldo.

<sup>331</sup> Cuando no hubo pisto nadie quería meterse.

information, gossip, and came to understand themselves as constituting a group. While the TelaMaya leaders viewed gossip as detrimental to group formation, anthropologists have tended to view gossip as a major social activity during which values are constructed, reproduced, and contested (Bell 2003). Both the leaders and members of TelaMaya complained that the others “only look out for themselves.” This complaint reveals how they saw their roles, how they constructed the concept of workers, of managers. Leadership was seen variously as a position of privilege and advantage, by those who did not have as much access to it, or as a position of responsibility, sacrifice, and service, by those who performed it.

Sometimes groups would distrust their representatives. Some of the women in the Chirijox group suspected that Andrea was keeping the orders for herself and her sister. María said that if they had issues with her, they should come to the General Assembly to see how business is done. Roxana told Andrea that they would support her: “I told them that the Assembly left her in her place, because she’s smart, and speaks in the board of directors.”<sup>332</sup> María called their complaints against Andrea unreasonable: “Even if they come to the Assembly they will not understand what we say, because they do not speak Spanish.”<sup>333</sup> By taking on leadership positions within their groups, some women assumed additional responsibilities and made themselves targets for accusations and complaints. Generally, their qualifications for leadership derived to some extent from preexisting socioeconomic advantages that gave them the education and free time necessary to take these roles, and so complaints also highlighted tensions within the weaving group communities. These leaders defended and supported each other, emphasizing their special qualifications for leadership as the best-educated, most appropriate people in their groups.

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<sup>332</sup> Les dije que la asamblea la dejó en su puesto, porque ella es inteligente, y habla en la junta directiva.

<sup>333</sup> Y si vengan a la asamblea ni van a entender que decimos porque no hablan español.

Several groups had male representatives, including the group from San Antonio Palopó and Todos Santos; they claimed that this was due to the risks of traveling in Guatemala, but the representative from San Antonio Palopó also took issue with his wife traveling unaccompanied to the city to attend the board of directors meeting. Don Josué would pressure the officers to buy additional products from his group. Sometimes Roxana refused to buy, saying that TelaMaya had no money to spare: “Because he’s a man, he wants us to always buy.”<sup>334</sup> Once there was a conflict between Don Josué and the officers. He claimed that he had not been paid for all of the scarves he delivered, while Roxana argued that she had already paid him. Roxana told him she would not budge on the issue, but in a light, self-deprecating way: “I’m like that; maybe it’s bad but I can’t change. Now I am very stubborn about these things.”<sup>335</sup> María continued the joke: “Before, she wasn’t like that. Before, she was very nice.”<sup>336</sup> Josué in turn responded gallantly, “I understand, because they say that men and women think differently.”<sup>337</sup> In this interaction with a male representative, Roxana had to use her full range of rhetorical strategies, including self-deprecation, appeals to the higher authority of the board of directors, and flirtatious joking, to navigate the tense situation. Josué also used the invocation of gender differences to save face and chivalrously grant Roxana the argument. Roxana complained that she tried taking a hard line with business associates like the tailor and the landlord, but María always said that everything was “fine,”<sup>338</sup> and so they exclusively wanted to work with María. In conflicts with female representatives, the cooperative leaders would typically use a combination of assertions of power—justified by the responsibility of managing the cooperative entrusted to them by the

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<sup>334</sup> Como él es hombre quiere que siempre compremos.

<sup>335</sup> Soy así, tal vez es malo pero no puedo ser otra. Ahora soy muy mula en estas cosas.

<sup>336</sup> Antes no era así. Antes era muy buena onda.

<sup>337</sup> Entiendo, porque se dice que los hombres y las mujeres tienen pensamientos distintos.

<sup>338</sup> está bien.

board of directors—and warm feminine solidarity, offering moral support and small favors to the representatives to assuage the pain of rejected products.

### **Appendix Three: Practical Considerations**

One of the goals of my research was to evaluate voluntourism's potential to support grassroots development. I also wanted to develop a set of best practices for volunteer programs that could be disseminated to help grassroots organizations maximize the benefits of voluntourism. This case study suggests that voluntourism can be a valuable source of energy and ideas for grassroots development organizations like TelaMaya that lack resources. Indeed, given global trends to individualize and privatize responsibility, shifting the responsibility for social services from the state to the civil sector and to individuals, individual voluntary labor will probably become increasingly important for grassroots organizations like TelaMaya. According to both the officers of TelaMaya and many of the volunteers, foreign volunteers bring in fresh ideas and energy to carry out projects for the cooperative that would not be possible without their labor. They bring their opinions about the market for textiles in their home countries and their experiences in various fields, suggesting new markets, new tools, and new strategies for TelaMaya. Because they often come from the same communities as TelaMaya's clients, voluntourists bring linguistic and cultural knowledge that is unavailable locally and they donate technical skills that the federation could not otherwise afford. Volunteers often remain in contact with the organization over the years, forming part of a transnational solidarity network that periodically produces major opportunities for TelaMaya, such as donations, sponsored visits to the US, or major new wholesale clients.

However, using primarily volunteer tourist labor can distort the projects carried out by the cooperative, skewing towards projects that use volunteers' special skills, conform to their length of stay, or fulfill them on a personal level, rather than projects that are priorities for the organization. Working as the volunteer coordinator at TelaMaya taught me that most

voluntourists' dream project is to visit the rural communities and take photographs, while the officers want voluntourists to put posters in local cafes and Spanish schools. Because they are volunteering part-time while on vacation, volunteer tourists sometimes work intermittently or unreliably, or fail to come through with their commitments. While voluntourists make many development projects possible by contributing their skills and labor, the cooperative leaders rarely acknowledge that volunteers also require time and effort to manage.

The biggest challenges TelaMaya faces are also related to its loose organizational structure. A lack of structure and control over voluntourists' activities leaves TelaMaya vulnerable to volunteer exploitation or mismanagement; a lack of continuity leads to the duplication of effort and may limit the effectiveness of future projects, and a lack of follow-through sometimes damages the organization's reputation and leaves projects half-finished. For grassroots organizations to take advantage of international volunteer tourists, they need to address these potential failings. One of the approaches that TelaMaya has developed to maintain both structure and continuity over the years has been to designate one volunteer as the volunteer coordinator, whose duties include corresponding with volunteers, facilitating volunteer projects, and maintaining records of volunteer projects for the future. Where TelaMaya differs from other organizations with more resources is that it has not been able to formalize this position as a professional opportunity with a living stipend, which would make it easier to get long-term, committed volunteers.

Dependency on foreign volunteers should be a major concern for organizations like TelaMaya that use volunteer labor, especially when the volunteers bring in special skills that the organization desperately needs, such as English language ability or computer knowledge. A closely-related concern is a sense of disconnect between the activities of the cooperative and the

activities of the volunteer program. The officers do not always take interest in the volunteers' projects and volunteers can be unaware of the important daily tasks of the cooperative that they are interrupting. Volunteer coordinators have historically nominated their successors. While TelaMaya has not yet had a major problem with volunteer recruitment, the leaders have periodically been forced to use interim volunteer coordinators who have little experience, or have allowed the duties of the volunteer coordinator to go undone until another volunteer arrives. Because there have always been bilingual volunteers, the cooperative's members have had no incentive to learn to use the email or translation programs to correspond with clients, even though these clients represent a considerable percentage of TelaMaya's current business. Some of the volunteers express the desire to pursue training for cooperative members in the tasks that are currently done by volunteers, but until it becomes a priority for the leaders as well, they will remain dependent on their volunteers.

My conclusion that voluntourism has been an important support to TelaMaya may not extend to all forms of volunteerism. In this case, voluntourists are particularly useful because they represent the same population as the buyers, making them a source of information about distant systems of value. This fluidity between the categories of "buyer" and "volunteer" makes TelaMaya's policy of requiring no minimum time commitments or Spanish fluency levels an effective one, because it expands their network of business contacts. When the voluntourists need in-kind donations or support for a crowdsourcing campaign, they turn to this network for support. However, based on my conversations with volunteer coordinators at a clinic, women's shelter, community radio program, community tourism program, agricultural micro-financing project, and children's after-school enrichment program, the model of voluntourism that works for TelaMaya is not universally applicable. Most programs need a more rigorous application



process and more stringent qualifications for their volunteers, and many coordinators are thinking about instituting policies for dismissing volunteers. If voluntourism is to achieve its potential as a resource for organizations and vehicle for the production for cosmopolitanism, it needs generally-agreed upon set of best practices that can be institutionalized in host organizations.

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