

---

## Nothing to See Hear

Peter Benson  
*Harvard University*

Anthropological Quarterly 77(3):435–467  
2004

### Abstract

*In this paper, I recount narratives of two violent events, and of enduring feelings of blame, guilt, and complicity in Tecpán, Guatemala, a mostly Maya town in the highlands. Many locals had followed all the coverage of September 11. Just months later, this city that always sleeps witnessed its own arresting moment, the “tragedy of June 10 (2002),” an anti-tax demonstration that began peacefully but became violent when, it is said, local gang members tried to assassinate the mayor. In this emerging democratic public sphere, being seen or heard can be politically empowering and potentially dangerous. Social experiences of the protests had to conform to “post-war” idioms that increasingly privilege ideals of compromise, equality, and harmony. But, casting those ideals against televised experiences of 9/11, locals produced ways of seeing and hearing violence—and conceptualizing blame—that differ from both the discourses of retaliation and innocence that overwhelm the U.S. and the flattening idiom of democratic compromise that dominated so-called “reconciliation meetings” with the mayor. The protests speak to a number of contradictions involved in processes of economic and political decentralization in Guatemala. Silently embedded in local claims that “there is nothing to see here” is a history of vio-*

*lence, ongoing forms of social suffering, and the hard feelings that continue to link this sleepy little town to “decentralized” agencies. That Guatemala is not yet decentralized enough emerges finally as the dream of one local daykeeper, who already saw the tragedy of June 10 in his sleep months prior, who didn’t warn his friends since they would not have believed him, and who still feels guilty.*

## **Nothing to See Hear**

Have you ever heard in a crowd mutterings of /blame/ that will not modulate that will not rise?

—Jorie Graham (1995a:66-67)

The silence which occurs does not put a stop to the rustling.

—Emmanuel Levinas (1989c:154)

In June 2002, while in Tecpán, Guatemala, I went to visit Don Domingo, a local day keeper, farmer, artist, and grassroots activist. Don Domingo is simultaneously reserved and gregarious—cloaking personal opinions in irony, using non sequitur to keep friends a bit off balance. On this occasion, his greeting parodies and reverses the equation of terrorism and otherness. After opening the front gate, he asks: “Do you have anthrax? I need to ask before you enter. I’m worried because all the *canchitos* [“little blondies,” here a playfully derogatory reference to foreigners] are the ones with anthrax.” He seems satisfied when I assure him that the anthrax letters in the United States were a case of domestic terrorism. He shows me to a dim living room, candles burning, coffee already boiled down. We sit at a squat table on fine wooden chairs, carpentry being one of his many hobbies, and he wants to talk about September 11.

We saw everything. No one could miss the news from the biggest country on the planet. I had the television on the whole day. At first I didn’t realize the size of the towers, so it wasn’t so incredible, except that two buildings had fallen. But then a neighbor told me of their size. The whole event became almost too terrible. I felt for the sufferers, but I also wondered why the hijackers did this. I realized that they had political concerns, very serious ones.

Tecpán witnessed its own arresting moment just months later, the so-called “tragedy of June 10 (2002),” an anti-tax demonstration that began peaceful but became violent when, it is said, local gang members tried to assassinate the mayor. Over the next few weeks I saw and heard this event find its way into local conversations. There were the bits and pieces culled from immediate memory, the snap-shots and slight recordings of locals busting through front doors that first week to a whole series of “Did you hears?” and “Listens!,” families dwelling around the hearth to learn what participants in the protests saw and heard. One night a man wearing sunglasses—strange, as it was already quite dark—came to the home in which I was living. We were finishing dinner and discussing the protests. But Don José, the father of the house, quickly cautioned: “Stop talking about it. We can’t say a word about what happened,” the stranger still occupied at the door by the family’s more curious children. “He was there. He works for the mayor and he was hurt. How embarrassing is that, to have been there on the side of the mayor? That is why he is wearing sunglasses, to cover over his injuries so that no one can see that he was involved.” That Don José, who did not witness the event, was nonetheless aware of the man’s participation speaks to the decisive and dangerous role, as we will see, that rumor would play in popular conceptions of the protests.

Other narratives provoked broader questions about cultural politics, transnational linkages, and ongoing histories of state violence. “June 10 was already waiting to happen,” Don Domingo went on. “It was meant to be. You can’t treat people the way we are treated in this town and expect things to remain *tranquilo* forever. This is a quiet town, but the people have anger inside of them. This is why the protests became violent.” Suddenly he takes a line of flight, a seeming non sequitur that effectively folds together global and local situations of violence, using the one to make sense of the uncanny appearance of the other.

The hijackers were not terrorists. This is the problem here in Guatemala. They were guerillas, they were revolutionaries, but there developed a discourse of who is to blame and who are the victims. The history talks about guerrillas terrorizing towns, killing women and children, but it never discusses the complications involved, the violence committed by the state, the difficult choices that people, my friends, needed to make, the fears people faced. Terrorist is a name, a way of disqualifying a critique, creating an enemy that poses some threat and is totally different. Their critique is never heard because it is based on violence.

In the weeks after June 10, many Tecpanecos would compare that event to the hijackings, mainly local activist types who, like Don Domingo, are proud of their cosmopolitan perspective and closely followed all the television news on September 11. A few Tecpanecos working in the New York City area at the time actually witnessed 9/11 firsthand, and I recount some of their stories here. Although, in Guatemala, the fear of being seen too clearly or heard too loudly—by the state, for example—limits what people are willing to say about violence (Warren 1998:93), many locals wanted to discuss September 11. The creative appropriation of discourses on terrorism here at the margins of an emergent west versus rest dichotomy is especially relevant to the context of what is being called post-war Guatemala.

Don Domingo watched the same television news broadcasts as the mainstream American viewer. He gets CNN, too. But his impressions are figured against a different moral background. He knows the ambiguities and dangers involved in facile notions of blame and unilateral restitution. He refuses to see June 10 or September 11 as a parochial eruption of madness dissociated from larger political and economic designs. “The people have been made angry since the 1970s,” he said of the protests. “It was coming because of the poverty and crime, and then they ask for more taxes.” Now he shifts again: “It is the same with September 11. The hijackings were crazy, of course, but I was really not surprised. People have had different opinions about the United States for a long time. This is a lesson to be learned, if your country can learn anything, especially since animosity has made it impossible to communicate.”

The pedagogical imperative emerges precisely where there is nothing to see or hear, here at the limits of dialogue, at the extremities of power and the ends of compromise. Don Domingo is witness to two violent events, certainly, but he is also witness to the event of witnessing itself, to the imperative of acknowledging or taking notice of the “difficult choices” and “serious concerns” of others, even or, as he emphasizes, especially, where it is impossible to communicate. Even where literal others—hijackers, for example—are on another plane altogether, Don Domingo, without ever having decided to be involved, becomes bound, in the televised face of others suffering, to their motives. This spectacle becomes an ethical plateau (Fischer 2003), an occasion to reflect critically on the complications involved in the violence done by his own friends and to question the very idea of a post-war phase. In the next section, I too use the ambivalent position of being between viewpoints as an occasion for cultural critique, and abstract from this ethnographic locale to reflect generally on the global war on terror.<sup>1</sup>

I begin, however, by setting a historical backdrop for the June 10 protests, situating the event within an emerging democratic public sphere where being seen or heard can be politically empowering and potentially dangerous. This frames a subsequent discussion of the actual protests and the reconciliation process that left many protestors feeling blindsided. The tear between what can and cannot be seen or heard emerges over again throughout this paper, and produces an ambivalent discursive space in which the truth about critical events remains up in the air. In the wake of the protests—and in televised view of 9/11—various kinds of discourse interacted, circulated, and were used against one other. Experiences of the protests were shaped by locally prevailing idioms that increasingly privilege democratic ideals. Officials were able to use rumor, ironically under the banner of dialogue, to incite blame and limit popular criticism of corruption.<sup>2</sup> But the narratives of protestors and other locals, by casting those ideals against global events, were able to get beyond the dominant framing and respond to experiences of menacing new modes of social control and violence that have arisen in the post-war phase. Much of this ability had to do with the creative use of collage or montage. For example, Don Domingo’s narrative of the two events is a collage, with its juxtapositions, although it only approximates the form of montage, which, as I demonstrate, more explicitly points to the narrative framing itself, not simply the various spliced contents. In the final section, I recount the telling of a dream, which does achieve a montage effect, by Don Aq’ab’al, a daykeeper, friend, and apprentice to Don Domingo. Don Aq’ab’al saw the June 10 tragedy in his dreams one month prior to the actual event, and yet was not able to “give warning” to his “friends that participated” because they would not have believed him. But to tell them now that he saw it coming would be an insult, for they would ask: “Why didn’t you warn us?” So I track this aporia between acknowledgement and avoidance, between giving warning and taking notice in the dream. His telling, I argue, does not “refer” to the protests but allegorizes this very process, since his re-telling literally is this process, this belated ethical intervention in the future anterior. “The dream has not yet left me,” Aq’ab’al intones, “and I still feel guilty.”

### ***A Sleepy Little Town / Wish You Were Here***

In the night, where we are riven to it, we are not dealing with anything. But this nothing is not that of pure nothingness. There is no longer *this* or *that*; there is not “something.” But this universal absence is in turn a presence, an absolutely unavoidable presence... There is no discourse. Nothing responds to

us, but this silence...*There is*, in general, without it mattering what there is, without our being able to fix a substantive to this term.

—Emmanuel Levinas (1989a:30)

Tecpán is popularly regarded as a “sleepy little town” throughout Guatemala and in tourist guidebooks. One instructs: “There is really nothing to Tecpán...It is the closest place to Antigua where you can buy lamb’s meat.”<sup>3</sup> Many locals will tell you the same thing, that “there is nothing to see here.” Informants regularly use the phrase to describe the general social climate in town, probably serving, like *luchando por la vida*, more of a phatic than a referential function. In this section I take this common phrase, heard in small towns everywhere, as an occasion to reflect on the fabric of political relations in post-war Guatemala and—since both are related, the promise of the one, a new beginning, and the endless, indefinite scope of the other—the global war on terror. I don’t claim that my reflections jibe with informants’ perspectives and admit that I may read into the claim a bit, detaching it from concrete speech contexts. Rather I use the claim to discuss tangentially some of the political and cultural forces that have already individuated this city that always sleeps as a “context” for ethnographic and governmental investigation. Don Domingo does something similar when he points to the town’s peaceful character in order to understand the tragedy of June 10, as if asking “why me?” or “why this town?” that is otherwise so peaceful and quiet. Don Domingo joked with me, knowing almost too well the ironies and problems that his statement entails, “Tecpán is a nice and peaceful place. There is nothing going on. The government likes it a lot—that’s why they are so often here.” I justify my intervention as a “theoretically-informed political practice” that, in Hall’s definition, elaborates an articulation amid various discourses and social forces, an articulation that emerges through scholarly practice “precisely because it is not guaranteed by how those forces are constituted in the first place” (1985:95).

Academic and popular accounts of *la violencia* in the Maya highlands echo this sense of social life constituted around nothingness. In these accounts fear and uncertainty characterize everyday existence. There is always a dearth of information, a lack of trust, a loss of family or community, an inability to make meaning or to make sense, and you’re never quite sure who your neighbors or family members are fighting for.<sup>4</sup> “There’s just nothing here,” says one fictional account of the violence, an online posting that relates the Guatemalan situation to more recent episodes of the war on terror in

Afghanistan, “no more information on the defense patrols and where they were headed, just that they were headed to Paquip, Tecpán.”<sup>5</sup>

During the late 1970’s and throughout the 1980’s, the military almost completely usurped local authority in Tecpán. Practices of surveillance, quarantine, censorship, and mandatory military enlistment increasingly characterized everyday life. Like most other highland Maya towns, Tecpán has more recently become the target of heightened bureaucratic attention and neoliberal economic reforms, the contentious tax hike being a prime example (Fischer 2001:57-61). This historical backdrop conditions the interesting irony which is that the autonomy now demanded by community leaders depends upon a certain juridical recognition by some increasingly nebulous and decentralized administrative Other. Tecpán must become an object of administrative gaze in order to emerge as a recognizable subject of enunciation. To be publicly recognized—to be seen or to be heard—is especially crucial for communities long plagued by clandestine warfare. Silence or speechlessness is one effect of violence, but political and legal agencies demand “words (or other signs) so that justice may be done” (Daniel 1996:121). But the closer one looks into the space of everyday terror the more one encounters “epistemic murk” (Taussig 1987).<sup>6</sup> As inspection intensifies so can, paradoxically, the deferment or transposition of the so-called source of the problem, the dodgy thing, like a weapon of mass destruction, generating a cycle in which the governmental gaze chases an impossible object-cause of terror and, accordingly, produces a context in which anyone can be considered a potential threat.<sup>7</sup>

When people in Tecpán insist that “there is nothing to see here,” they may be doing more than describing their reality. After all, it is not all boring in town; residents also point tourists to the nearby archaeological ruins as something to see, brag about the new internet café and luxury spa, and take pride in the thriving local woven sweater and textile trades. Asking what the claim “means” locally is already barred, since it functions precisely as an epistemological border, marking cultural intimacy, the privileged and protected domains of local knowledge that only locals can access, in relation to curious tourists, ethnographers, bureaucrats, and other outsiders (Herzfeld 1997). The phrase may encode a fear that within the current post-war context were there indeed something to see it might bring stigma, blame or an occasion for heightened surveillance and control. Immediately after June 10, locals, although aware that the media had come to town because of the protests, still insisted that reporters and photographers were wasting their time. “What do they want?” one older woman asked. “They should forget it. There is nothing

to see here.” “They will say that we, the town, are to blame for the violence,” a man responded. “But they are making this up.” The claim recites what will be the inevitable conclusion of investigation: Of course, there is always something going on, but no matter how hard you look or listen, you will never find the thing itself, so, really, there will have been nothing to see here. “Yes,” the old woman spoke up again, “they already know what they want to say, ‘the town is to blame,’ so why do they need to come here and ask us what happened during the tragedy?”

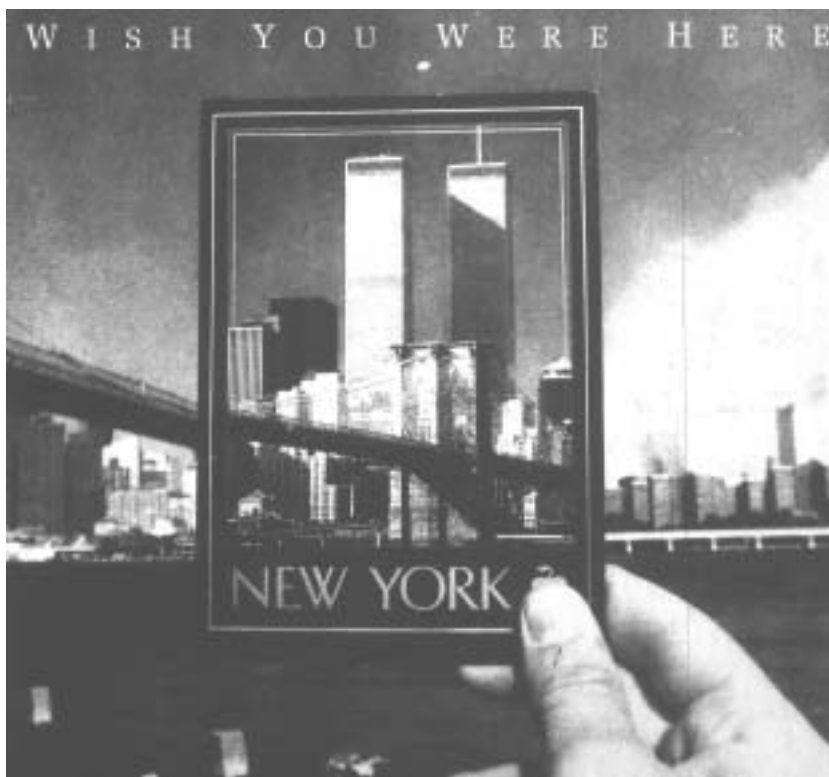
The claim negates and highlights the genuine reality of social suffering in the highlands—a reality evidenced in poverty, illness, substance abuse, stories and specters of state violence. A silent preface is not heard in the claim: “*Excepting all that stuff*, there is nothing to see here.” And if suffering and violence signal, in their overriding residual presence, the impossibility of nothingness (Levinas 1989b:40), then the claim becomes arresting, at least to the ears of an ethnographer studying experiences of political violence in the highlands. It produces a surreal effect where image and caption relentlessly contradict each other. The local world is literally defined by nothing in particular, but also by the impossibility of nothingness given the silent rustling of social suffering. So the claim does exactly what it says, referring not to the lack of some thing specifically, no thing, but rather performing or miming “nothing” as such (see Ulmer 1983:101, Derrida 1981:206). The characterization of community, of what exists “here,” remains infinitely open, like a blank line after “there is” (Levinas 1989a). Martial technologies of governmental surveillance and the media’s ability to categorize the local context as lawless get remade into an elliptical “aesthetics of ethical existence,” allegorizing the anonymous practice of “seeing without being seen” and emphasizing, instead, what is patently seen and felt but not talked about (de Certeau 1986:197). The protests only become reducible to the local context of parochial unrest described in national media coverage of 6/10 if the silent presence of violence that already and still bring the “local” out of context and into histories of relating is tragically forgotten.<sup>8</sup>

I am reading the claim as a dialectical or montage image (Taussig 1987: 369), suspending meaning between image and caption, here and there, presence and absence. In montage two or more unlike figures are brought into a zone of proximity such that inconsistencies emerge from the invisibility and silence gleaned between the lines. This is different from collage, the “transfer of materials from one context to another,” since it disseminates or remakes “these borrowings through the new setting.” While there is nothing essentially subversive about montage (Ulmer 1983:94-97), storytellers can use it to

bring hegemonic formulations of meaning and reference into relief. This force lies in a unique capacity to produce “change or variation in the whole,” in the very form of the narrative (Deleuze 1995:55). Montage can alter frames of reference by disclosing or referring to the act of framing itself. Sign and meaning can come unstuck through the discordant proximity of unlike images. There emerges a pure relation, the being *of* the middle as such (Massumi 2002:70), a simultaneous joining and separation, prior to epistemological or ontological differences. This relation runs “parallel without ever crossing the dialectic” (Daniel 1996:208). The claim that “there is nothing to see here” is marked by the internal contradiction, the spectral presence of all that stuff, the silence that occurs but does not put a stop to the rustling.

I began thinking about the claim in this way after seeing the postcard photo that appeared on the cover of the *Village Voice* after September 11, entitled “Wish You Were Here” [Figure 1]. I began reading the claim as dialectical, arresting, contradictory because of its resonance with this postcard, a more obvious example of montage. The postcard presents, as an apparition, the Twin Towers, immediately recognizable as that familiar part of that familiar skyline. With the intrusion of the postcard frame inside the photo the towers—in their earth-shattering absence, precisely because within this frame there is nothing to see here—these lost giants simultaneously do (not) signify the great thereness of being. The image both says that there is nothing to see here and fills in “nothing” with a spectral referent. Like a phantom limb or an invisible hand (Nelson 2001), these incorporeal giants now literalize that virtual, decentralized agency for which they once stood. “Seeing Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center,” de Certeau observed, “the tallest letters in the world compose a gigantic rhetoric of excess” (1984:91). They are now themselves commodities, surreal speculations, futures, dreamy souvenirs, wish-you-were-heres. Through destruction and loss the giants have accrued magnificent surplus value, not only because that empty space is now worth more than ever, but also in the desire to fill in the excessive political and economic absence indexed in the giants by extending an invisible hand—on one hand, through global gestures of amity, assistance, decentralization, and thus, conveniently, (on the other hand,) severing the retaliatory sword from the amicable and innocent body politic wielding it.

Within current U.S. discourse on the war on terror there are two predominant ways of seeing things. In both cases, “they” hate “our” way of life. Those on the right obviously disagree with the terrorists, or, more generally, critics of United States policy and see them as standing in the way of universal



**Figure 1: Portion of the cover of the *Village Voice*, September 25, 2001.**

Photo by André Souroujon. Reprinted with permission of the photographer.

goods. Those on the left often sympathize with these critics and see them as standing in the way of the global flow of goods, that is, as valiant opponents of capitalism and empire. But what if anti-American sentiment expresses something more radical—a “wish you were here”? Perhaps, it is not simply about hating the American way of life, but rather: we hate your way of life so much that we demand you share with the rest. Read thusly, the postcard is not stating that the twin towers were here yesterday and gone today. A wish, the image operates in the future anterior, coming between the past and the present. The ruined towers allegorize the wishful, virtual operations of global capitalism,<sup>9</sup> enigmatic, opaque, distancing, deterritorializing, “[a] moonless enterprise consisting of towers not there to the naked eye.”

Consider also Jorie Graham’s poem “Untitled” (1995b). Written a few years before, it uncannily conjures images of September 11 and provides a second caption for the postcard.

In the city that apparently never was,  
 where the hero dies and dies to no avail, [...]

Outside, flashing lights, deep gloom.  
 A moonless enterprise consisting of towers not there to  
 the naked eye [...]

Does it seem to you, stranger, that something died?  
 Something we could call the great *thereness* of being,  
 the giant,  
 he who was a wrong idea but was,  
 the end the singleness like a gazelle could fly into? [...]

Leaned against the window in the dark  
 closing my eyes to see that dark,  
 then opening again to see *that* dark,  
 opening and shutting to feel them rub against each other in here now  
 (only in here),  
 the shut dark, the open dark —  
 and in between the \_\_\_\_\_ where the suspicion of meaning  
 begins [...]

and then the city that apparently never was,  
 the wanting-to-have-really-been

Various oppositions run parallel but never achieve reconciliation: open and shut, this dark and that dark, here and there, now and then. In the figural between space a magnetic line emerges, literalized by the silent blank where the suspicion or suspension of meaning begins. The political force of dialectical images has to do with ability to wedge the future between past and present (Taussig 1987:443). The city exists only as a wish articulated in the future anterior, wanting to have really been. I sense this ambivalent time in Tecpanecos' claims that there is nothing to see here. The June 10 protests demonstrated the "complications involved" in being recognized. Political recognition does violence to ethics where it renders citizens impersonal and anonymous. It does violence to a face. I am reading the claim as a hailing, then—not political interpellation but an ethical call. In the classic formulation the agent doing the hailing is the state in the form of the police, development officials, the mayor, or other functionaries. "The government likes [Tecpán] a lot," Don Domingo joked, "that's why they are so often here." By negating this surveillance—there is nothing to see here—the claim gestures toward a form of recognition that is prior and more personal than political

relations, a feeling of wanting-to-have-really-been acknowledged. The claim becomes an everyday rustling of this wish, the longing of a public marked by the overwhelming absence of those that disappeared during the violence and now regularly accused, when it protests, of stirring things up, keeping a “finger in the wound” (Nelson 1999). This demand cannot be made, is impossible, must remain a wish, else it risk being reduced to resentment or blame, which is exactly what occurred, as I demonstrate below, during the reconciliation meetings after the protests. The desire to give warning about “all that stuff” meets the impossibility of taking notice, demanding an acknowledgement without recompense, a recognition or responsibility justified by no prior commitment (Levinas 1981:127), an impartial ethics of nothing in particular. But this demand must remain silent, rustling within the assertion that there is nothing to see here, no recognition necessary—why...would you take notice if there were?

### ***Two Days in Tecpán***

No he said, tell them *no concessions*.

His voice above the fire as if there were no fire—  
language floating everywhere above the sleeping bodies;  
and crates of fruit donated in secret;  
and torn sheets (for tear gas) tossed down from shuttered windows;  
and bread; and blankets, stolen from the firehouse.

—Jorie Graham (1995c:112)

The 1990s in Guatemala saw the historic signing of the Peace Accords, an aggressive program of privatization and liberal economic reform, a new attitude toward Maya peoples providing new opportunities for an historically excluded class, and a sharp decline in massacres and other large-scale military actions. Amidst these changes there has also been famine brought about by droughts and declining coffee prices, a sharp increase in street crimes, gang violence, kidnappings, robberies, the rise to power of a former dictator, and a resurgence of right-wing political activity. These and other changes are more than just ominous rumblings or glitches in the democratic system—they are mutually entwined with its more progressive moments.<sup>10</sup> Considering the post-war peace process in terms of “successes” and “failures” therefore becomes a dubious task,<sup>11</sup> for it must proceed according to certain typologies and hierarchies of violence. The waning of a certain type of violence might be read as a “success” even where new and subtler forms of economic and sym-

bolic injustices have emerged. Likewise, the strengthening of indigenous political rights might imply a “success” even as bureaucratic authority is extended. It all depends on where you are standing.<sup>12</sup>

The morning of June 10 found protestors standing along the Pan-American highway just outside Tecpán. Eyewitness estimates range from 3,000 participants to 45,000, but the number most often cited is around 10,000, virtually all adult men. The protest leader and organizer was not from Tecpán, though he is Maya and works as a human rights advocate for the *Defensoría Indígena* near Chimaltenango. He began organizing support in Tecpán back in 2001, an effort to fight against increases in the locally administered *Impuesto Unico sobre Inmuebles*, IUSI, a property and estate tax hike affordable for only an elite few in Tecpán. This is a tax instituted as part of the Peace Accords, an attempt to devolve some taxing authority back to municipal governments and to improve accountability. But despite the efforts of local officials to convince people that decentralization is good for them, there has been great ambivalence and resistance, evidence of the Peace Accords’ lofty ideals breaking down in practice. Many Tecpanecos will tell you that local government is no less corrupt than at the national level—probably even more corrupt since it is more readily visible: the mayor’s new house, his shiny red BMW. Said Don Ruiz, a community leader who did not participate in but observed the protests from atop a friend’s house in town:

The mayor treated us poorly. We tried to discuss the tax with him. We told him it was impossible to afford, but he was rude and would not hear our demands. I don’t discount that the mayor was robbing money from the *pueblo*, but all I know is what I have seen: he didn’t have a car before he assumed office and just afterwards he has a new, nice car, one of the nicest in town.

At nine o’clock the cohort marched into town and quickly inhabited the central park in front of the municipal building, carrying signs and banners and documents demanding the resignation of Mayor Chepe Morales, a member of the FRG. In front of his office they were met by a phalanx of local police and were not allowed to get closer than a stone’s throw away. Even if the crowd was growing frustrated and anxious, no one anticipated the violence about to erupt out of left field. A youth, said by all to be a gang member, hurled a rock through one of the muni’s windows. Other protestors immediately followed suit. “The only thing certain was that nothing was certain,” said

one, “and I heard the first window shatter, then others, and all of a sudden it was out of control. I mean, no one knew what was going on.”

Many participants abandoned their pacific intentions and torched the municipal building, the police station, and the mayor’s home. His car was flipped on its head and set ablaze in the street. As in New York, firefighters and police acted quickly. The *bomberos* were already there because the mayor had called them, and when buildings began burning they sent trucks to a neighborhood where there is a water storage tank. The police reacted by throwing tear gas bombs into the crowd, and protestors just as readily recovered those bombs and returned them to their senders. Many already had knowledge of these weaponry; especially those from the *aldeas* [hamlets], having had extended military training with the Guatemalan army years before as part of the notorious Self-Defense Patrols (Fischer 2001:58, Carmack 1988, Montejo 1992). One could also notice so-called weapons of the weak (Scott 1987). Protestors used cell phones to provide family members back home with live reports of the action, or as walky-talkies to contact one another, organize movements on the spot. Rumor has it that protestors used their phones to coordinate looting and relay information about the location of police, who were eventually stripped naked, their firearms stolen, their bodies beaten and bloodied, dragged through the street, and, as the mayor hurried to his get-away vehicle, flanked and protected by his bodyguards, rioters pegged him with stones—some trying their best to kill him. Morales is the first mayor in Tecpán’s history with a bodyguard service. They carry pistols and dress like the mayor himself, polished boots, sombrero, crisp Hilfiger jeans and denim or plaid shirts. One protestor joked: “He’s the first with body guards and the first with a burned out house.”

Despite the creative ways that protestors subverted police authority and established, if only momentarily, control of the town center, it would be dangerous to read this event strictly as the celebration of agency too often implied by the weapons of the weak analysis. No one wanted June 10 to turn violent, except perhaps those eager to steal televisions, computers, appliances, and food from houses around the park. But it is also clear that “gang members” were not the only ones looting and torching. One organizer recounted the following rumor:

I only know this from a friend. I wasn’t there to hear it directly. Many say that the mayor mistreated the protestors when they wanted to talk to him, that he was rude and would not hear their demands. That is why

the people got angry. Many say that it was just the gangs that were acting violently during the protests. But if the mayor was treating the protesters badly when they went to see him, the pacific protestors and even the organizers, then they had their own reasons for becoming violent.

The storyteller skillfully distances himself from any complicity, denying that he was even there (when on another occasion he and other observers admitted the opposite), and at the same time vindicates the sudden use of violence among angered protestors. Yet it is as if the rumor itself violently commands this skeptic to insist that he saw and heard nothing in particular. This central trope of protest experiences—“nothing was certain” (not a thing [*ninguna cosa*] but precisely the positivity of “nothing” [*nada*])—enables the projection of blame onto the impersonal category, street gangs. If *maras* and youth culture are blamed for much of the everyday violence emerging in the post-war era, in Tecpán there is still not much of a public transcript regarding gangs—maybe fear, maybe epistemic murk, gangs discussed privately but always without skepticism. Locals seem certain of their activities. Some have an idea about their members; some have witnessed their vandalism; all have seen the graffiti signatures (*Diamantes, Salvatruchas, Batos Locos, Patojos Locos*) that increasingly demarcate territorial hegemonies. There are wild rumors of gangs robbing shoppers and vendors. On one Tuesday, market day, just after June 10, I heard stories that gangs were out taking advantage of the narrow passageway running alongside the cathedral where fruits and vegetables are sold. One woman was taken for 700 *quetzales* (about 85 dollars) and spent the afternoon sobbing on the church steps, attended to by relatives and friends. She didn’t see or hear a thing coming, they said. And this is not really surprising, a veteran fruit vendor tells me, as there is just nothing to do in Tecpán. The paradox being: “It is just too quiet and peaceful all the time, so what else than to hang out in the streets or the stores and look for fun or violence, and while at it they can make money.”

Rumor dismantles relations of trust at times of communal riot and becomes productive of skepticism—the failure to take notice or the feeling that our sensations are not real. In both rumor and skepticism the signature and context of action are removed, absent, often anonymous. The danger is that these modes or moods can enable the abdication of responsibility and partition social relations (Das 1998). It is likely that the nominal “gang member” category serves as a generalized and immediate container for popular feelings of complicity and resignation, a way for protestors to remain skepti-

cal about, abdicate, and yet silently make sense of their own participation in the violence. Protesters lamented that the *Prensa Libre* later dubbed their well-planned and well-intentioned event “chaotic”; that they were portrayed in popular media as incorrigible and undemocratic. Despondence festers in this space where what is seen does not jibe with what is said and heard—the genuine motives and peaceful intentions of protestors treated skeptically in subsequent media reports. Inversely, popular rumors distance what is said and heard from what is seen—rumors that gangs are solely to blame covers over the reality of popular participation in violence. In this chiasmus such rumors become understandable, if also dangerous, given a desired, perhaps willed, disbelief regarding complicity—a convenient inversion that allegorizes the post-war process of political decentralization, where circumscribed communities are set apart, such that shared responsibilities are disavowed, skeptically, and blame incited through rumor. “We were interested in resolving real political issues,” said Don Domingo, becoming noticeably upset:

The gangs are to blame, not the protestors. But everyone ended up losing. The worst is that only one percent of the participants were *ladinos*. It was *indigena* against *indigena*. We didn’t start the violence in this town, the violence has been here, but we are blamed and we are the ones who suffer.

Many who observed but did not directly participate on the ground, such as Don Ruiz, nonetheless felt a similar sense of resignation. Don Ruiz was watching from his friend’s rooftop. He remembers: “I saw smoke bombs going back and forth in front of me. I knew right away that this was more than a problem of the mayor. It had become a problem for the whole *pueblo*. I thought, here I am again on a rooftop, with smoke rising up from the ground, and I cannot do anything but watch.” Don Ruiz, a Maya farmer who grows nontraditional crops for export to the United States and works closely with importers in New York City, was actually staying with another friend in Newark when the two planes hit the towers:

When the first hit we got a call telling us to get up to the roof. Just a few flights of stairs, looking across the river. Smoke rising. We assumed it was an accident. Then we saw another plane flying low to the ground, it passed the towers initially, then *dar la vuelta* [turned around], it came back straight into the second tower. Wow. Ok, that is no accident. A few

days before I was down near the towers. We have some flower vendors down there. And a few days after I was in the subway with some friends. We were coming back from a meeting in Yonkers. The subway stopped, lights went out, couldn't see a thing. We thought it might have been another attack. We stayed in the subway for an hour, waiting, not knowing what happened. We found out *that* was just an accident. There I was less than a year before watching something that would appear again in my own community. They were different, but almost too familiar. On June 10 it seemed like I already knew what was going to happen. I was right there in the middle of what I saw from a distance. Now I felt what it was like around the towers.

Toggling back and forth between the local and the global, the distant and the intimate, Don Ruiz acquires a personal double vision, a strange and uncanny feeling all his own that, simultaneously, prompts an acknowledgement of and sense for the suffering of others, such that experience becomes social, interpersonal, attached to transnational affective flows. For Don Ruiz, perhaps more than others, June 10 is directly related to September 11. Not only because he witnessed both events, but also because he attributes the eruption of violence in Tecpán to local economic decline after the hijackings.

September 11 affected us a lot. We depend on the U.S. economy so much. When ports closed down after September we had difficulty exporting produce. The problem was timing. I call it the "coincidence of June 10" rather than the tragedy. Most of those protestors grow export crops and so when the U.S. economy sunk, there was nothing to do but take up against decentralization, the new tax. But how can we make political demands without funding?

Even while he condemns a unilateral fight against decentralization, Don Ruiz suggests that an attack on the inequities of the global market—even if it takes the form of terrorism—is justifiable: "The hijackers had some reason and motive because of American business throughout the world. Look, there is a McDonald's in Antigua. More and more that town is becoming a little plot of the U.S. It was a good lesson for your country to have learned, if they have learned anything." It is interesting that Don Ruiz, who might be situated in Tecpán's middle to upper class, who has arguably benefited greatly from a liberalization of global trade, expresses latent sympathies with a broadly anti-

globalist position. Such irony is highlighted by the words of other Tecpanecos who take a very different view of the September 11 and the global economy. One local restaurant worker, Juan Gomez, complained:

I went to New York and saw the Towers right in front of me. I worked there and was there on September 11. Before that I worked for an Arab three years in Guatemala and he never paid me. Three years and never had money for me. But *he* had the money. He kept it all. Arabs are *mucho cabeza* [crazy, then in English], fucked up. In New York it's like this: one hour worked, one hour paid. You get the money right away and do whatever you want. I am angry about what happened in New York. I worked five years there.

Juan went on to tell a popular June 10 rumor that I had already heard on multiple occasions:

One guy was captured by the police and put in jail that day. People said it was for looting during the protests, and he was indeed looting. That is certain. People said he deserved it, being put in jail, *que recibió su propio*, not because he was looting but because he was the owner of a cantina on the central park known locally as a fence for prostitution and criminal activity.

Juxtaposing the two events in this pair of stories Juan elaborates a particular moral perspective on labor and entitlement in Tecpán, moral categories also invoked, although differently, in Don Ruiz's narratives. Both men admit dependence on the U.S. economy. But while Juan uses this as a means of critiquing local economic and moral conditions, Don Ruiz argues that the U.S. itself *recibió su propio*, got what was coming to it.

The June 10 protests point to a number of sometimes contradictory processes at work in the post-war Guatemala of places like Tecpán. There were as many intentions as the thousands who turned out to participate or observe, but even within this multitude there were significant group divisions: *campesino* farmers, teachers, curious onlookers, aspirant politicians, restless gang members. The protests demonstrate the emergence of new political spaces that people haven't felt comfortable or been allowed in for nearly a generation. This would seem to be an unruly "success," as the lingering hard feelings of the protests currently find reconciliation in a series of democratic town hall meetings in

Chimaltenango between the mayor, protest organizers, and the departmental governor. “We got what we wanted,” said one protestor organizer, “a chance at a meeting with the mayor, a chance to talk. At least we got that.”

Many of the protestors use this same term, *por lo menos* [at least], in describing the meetings: “The protests didn’t work out as planned, but at least we can sit down with the mayor.” The opportunity for meetings itself, regardless of the outcome of those meetings, becomes the object of desire. Political commentary stops at a certain “at least” point that demarcates the horizon at which desires seem satisfactory or “at least” somewhat fulfilled. Hegemonies become desirable insofar as they allow political and juridical subjects at least some sense of enfranchisement (“I’m proud to be an American,” a popular country music anthem proclaims, “where at least I know I’m free”). It is often just such a democratic or neoliberal concession that paradoxically limits the very terms of freedom that it purports to enable. “The discourse that makes people believe,” de Certeau writes, “is the one that takes away what it urges them to believe in, or never delivers what it promises...I call such a discourse a ‘local authority’” (1984:105-106).

Indeed, at the reconciliation meetings, the mayor, by acquiescing, was able to co-opt protestors’ sentiments and largely define the idiom through which social experiences could emerge. “We are all completely in agreement,” he said during one reconciliation meeting. “You have the right to protest. I helped write those laws, remember. But what about those honorable people screaming ‘kill him...kill him.’ I want to work with these honorable people but I don’t want to lose democracy.” One protest organizer responded:

We too want a dialogue, but with no direct accusations or blaming. Because when you look at the press, it says we have no law here, that there is chaos in Tecpán, and that we the organizers are to blame, that there is no difference between what we did and what the gangs did. The same problems we are discussing here right now, we already met with you about this—

Quickly the mayor stands up and moves toward the center of the meeting hall. The documents brought to him on June 10, he claims, were not official and so he could not sign them. Not only that, he insists that there is nothing he could do about the tax. It is his duty as mayor to carry out the task of decentralization, not to call it into question. “The law is the law and the tax is the tax,” the governor reinforces his position. “Look, the law is *bonito* because

it provides the mechanisms for our dialogue and equal exchange.” Indeed, here as always, local authorities in Tecpán must occupy a “tenuous position between constituent mandates and state authority” (Fischer 2001:57). It seems to Morales that the protestors are now laying the blame on him. The organizer must respond again: “We are not here to accuse you. When we’re talking here we are on an even level, in dialogue, it is a democratic process.” The protest organizers, themselves not wanting to be blamed by the mayor or the media for the violence, are forced through this kind of rhetorical toggling to limit their critique of the mayor so they themselves do not appear to have a finger in the wound.

The notion of democratic compromise grows seductive as a presumably flattened space of voice and vision, and yet can become disappointing in its own blindsided way. While discourses of harmony and reconciliation are ordinarily perceived as being advantageous to the “little guy,” providing at least a foot in the door, such gestures almost invariably favor established interests in a fashion that encourages active acceptance by the opposition (Nader 1997). The Mayor’s position becomes privileged through the democratic gesture itself, since the protestors, if they do not embrace his rhetoric, are seen as stubborn, unwilling to listen. This was their critique of Morales all along! The same protestor that was so enthusiastic about the meeting opportunity beforehand admitted afterwards: “I am disappointed. The mayor just kept talking about his bad character. Yeah, that’s a problem. But we all know that. That’s why we protested in the first place. What is he going to do about it?, that’s my question. Apologies are nice but so are results.”

If the post-war framing implies familiar binaries like success and failure, victim and perpetrator, war and peace, then between these poles there is a space where desires for a different future and social experiences of violence are not exterior to power but emerge through already conditioned political arenas. The reflections of Don Domingo and others are located in this in-between space, where local and global forms of violence are seen as interactive and reflective. They see counterinsurgency warfare as neither something altogether in the past nor something hermetically confined to “Guatemala.” In Don Domingo’s own words:

Democracy is something politicians say to win affection but this is often a lie. Before June 10, the mayor did not listen but talked a lot about democracy. He talks about it even more now, but how is this different? In the United States, there are problems—an elite class with money and

power, and there is violence. September 11 occurred for a reason. The hijackers had a problem with the government, not really with the people, just as the problem during the protests was with the mayor. And who suffered there? The people suffered, the protesters, shop owners, the community. The protestors wanted to be heard but it doesn't matter because it was violent. The political concerns are not taken seriously. Even if the United States has its problems the interests of the people are heard. So sometimes I wonder if it is better in the United States. There are social problems there, but *at least there is no war*. There is still a war here. Not a *war*, war [*No hay una guerra, guerra*], but there is a war that has been with us for years.

### ***A Good Night's Sleep***

Modern demolition is truly wonderful. As a spectacle it is the opposite of a rocket launch. The twenty-storey block remains perfectly vertical as it slides towards the centre of the earth. It falls straight, with no loss of its upright bearing, like a tailor's dummy falling through a trap-door, and its own surface area absorbs the rubble. What a marvelous modern art form this is, a match for the firework displays of our childhood.

—Jean Baudrillard (1988:17)

Something comes along. Something else comes along. They collide and stick. They stay together, perhaps combine with something else again to form a larger combination... Over time, under pressure, sediment folds and hardens into sedimentary rock...The connective syntheses that made the muck and turned it to rock were passive. No concerted action by an isolable agent was involved. The disjunctive synthesis that made it a building was active...It swoops down to capture connective syntheses, but also rises from them...block by block, a wall is built...A courthouse is more than a building. It is also a conjuncture of judges, handcuffs, law books, and accused.

—Brian Massumi (1992:48-50)

The title of this paper recalls Detective Frank Drebin's announcement in the spoof comedy film *The Naked Gun* (Zucker 1988). Standing in front of an exploding fireworks factory which has just been run through by a petroleum truck, Drebin urges a crowd of fascinated bystanders to disperse: "There's nothing to see here." Drebin denies the explosive spectacle while standing

directly in front of it, rendering the visible and the audible contradictory, such that both are highlighted and negated. Deleuze puts it nicely: “It is between the visible and its conditions that statements glide, as with Magritte’s two pipes. It is between the statement and its conditions that visibilities insinuate themselves” (1988:66). Text and image, sign and referent, in contradiction, appear as two highly charged magnets constantly attracting and rifting off one another, never collapsing to produce “a pipe” or “nothing” as either truth or non-truth.

The image of the Mayor’s burned out house in Tecpán achieves the same effect [Figure 2]. If critics of Morales found the arson itself ironic and somewhat amusing, even more hilarious was the slogan inscribed across the outside wall: “*Para Dormir y Descansar Bien*” (For a good night’s sleep). As with Drebin’s injunction, the text contradicts—is literally inscribed on—the detritus of burnt walls, broken windows, and hard feelings. Along with his wife and older children, the mayor ran a mattress and bedding business from out of his home. Some locals saw it all along as a front for the political corruption and money laundering that they knew was going on and heard lots about but could never really see. Others saw it as a symbol of increasing class polarization in Tecpán, consumer goods becoming a preoccupation and luxury of urban elites like the mayor. Class distinctions and corruption remain, many locals insist, despite the idiom of equality. “He keeps saying we are equal,” one protestor commented on the mayor’s behavior after a reconciliation meeting. “We are equal in some ways: we are flesh and blood, human beings. But we are not equal in many other ways.” “Look at the mayor’s house,” said another protestor, chuckling. “He won’t be sleeping so well anymore. We gave him something to think about, and whether he takes our demands seriously or not, he’s at least got something to keep him awake at night.” The constant disavowal of this nightmare, of inequalities and corruption, conditions the possibility for the post-war phase as a dream of a good night’s sleep, a wish you were here, a wanting-to-have-really-been.

Aq’ab’al, a daykeeper from Tecpán, tells of a dream he had forty days prior to June 10. Aq’ab’al and I met for a few hours one evening in July 2002, sitting in his kitchen on upside-down plastic buckets used just a few days before to store a potent homemade fruit concoction used in religious rituals. I still wonder whether his premonition really occurred prior to the protest. Part of my ambivalence has to do with the intensely playful way about him. Like Don Domingo, Aq’ab’al regularly destabilizes conversations through humor or seemingly illogical injunctions, and he prefers the power of image to the ver-



**Figure 2: House of Mayor Chepe Morales in Tecpán, June, 2002. “Para Dormir y Descansar Bien” (For a Good Night’s Sleep).**

Photo by Peter Benson

ity of evidence. It may be just such an undecideable reading effect, characteristic of montage (Ulmer 1983:99), which propels my uncertainty and which Aq’ab’al finds so relevant.

The event [*manifestación*] already happened in the dream but it was there even before that.<sup>13</sup> The dream has not yet left me and I still feel guilty. There is a meeting with thousands of participants. Their faces, their identities are hidden. There are expensive trucks around the central park, weighted down in the rear with anxious passengers. They circle the park again and again, *mucha gente* with bats and guns. They want to assassinate President Alfonso Portillo because he can do or say anything. “*Vamonos*,” say the people, “*Vamonos*.” I am there among the crowd but I am not a part of it. I observe and listen but I feel ill prepared, not ready for what is going to happen because I know something

is about to happen. I see the whole thing from the outside. I see it but am not participating. But the participants do not see what I see, the dangers and the people becoming angry. The mayor is not there. Instead, it is Portillo inside the Municipal building. He is playing the role of mayor, but this is not the mayor.

Let us first note that the mayor and the president become fractal aspects of a decentralized government. The dream suggests that although decentralization may enable local political autonomy the process has also provided more subtle paths for extending bureaucratic control. The notion of decentralization seems to gloss over this fact—that the president, whose authority often goes unseen and unheard, muffled in the exigencies of local politics, deflected around the corruption of local officials, is never not in a relation to the highlands. The dream imagines power as a diffuse flow traversing and bringing into distanced articulation “apparatuses and institutions, without being exactly localized in them” (Foucault 1978:96). The dream conjures the mayor and, as a caption, insists: this is not the mayor—creating a nightmarish gap between distraction and warning<sup>14</sup> in which a “third phenomenon” emerges, beyond the “two elements [seeing and hearing],” that “unknown, unseen and unsaid” mode of control (Deleuze 1988:81). The dream insists that, really, power in Guatemala is not decentralized enough. The local cannot be regarded as completely autonomous. The protests are irreducible to parochial unrest. The President remains accountable in this local world. To paraphrase Don Domingo, the local can become “a name, a title, a way of disqualifying a critique or creating an enemy,” of reifying “who is to blame and who are the victims.”

In his dreams, Aq’ab’al is (from) “there” (but who knows where?) and yet is “not a part of it.” He observes from an “outside,” as Don Ruiz had on the rooftops, as Don Domingo had on television, an outside that nonetheless grows close and murky, epistemically speaking. Aq’ab’al can see and hear things that the faceless and nameless participants cannot and is at pains to put a name or a face to this anonymity—impossible, for that would identify actors and perhaps impart or parcel blame. Already the dream echoes Levinas: “Violence can only aim at a face” (1969:225). Violence betrays an interpersonal relation more ancient than the individuation of anonymous and autonomous subjects, and then violence redoubles as blame is allocated along those lines. In his dreams, all politics is not local but remains open to

an outside. “I can see the participants meeting on the outskirts of town,” he continues, “very far away, but who knows where?”

I don’t know who the leaders are, but they want to talk with Portillo, with the mayor. He cannot hear them because he is not there, because he is not the mayor. But then I see *mucha violencia*. No one dies. I know that no one will die. The violence occurs because of emotion. It was not planned out [*no por pensamiento*].

An unseen line emerges between “there” and “he is not there,” between “the mayor” and “he is not the mayor,” effectively miming the work of decentralization, seeing without being seen, and deferring the assignment of blame by resisting identification. Protestors blamed the mayor. He blamed them. They blamed the gangs. Yet the dream does not know who was in charge or where the violence originated: “I won’t be able to name it, a seismic jolt that came from far away and that carried very far” (Derrida 1992:348). Aq’ab’al goes on:

The violence came from energies and emotions. It was coming already. I dreamed it and it was already occurring in the history. It came forty days before the protests but I sensed even earlier that people were becoming angry. The people came to talk at three or four in the morning because they work or have to travel and can’t meet at any other time. But Portillo could not hear them. The door was shut in their face. But he always said that we are all equals. This made the people even angrier. They burned his house. There are burning buildings and clouds of smoke fill the central park.

The dream thus does not “refer” to decentralization. It literally decentralizes—agency, subjectivity and blame. It is not an interpretation *of* an event but is itself an event, a testimony or witness, an eventual *manifestación* “that never took place as such” (Johnson 1980:142). It thus breaks from the logic of “recounting” and performs the very inability to see or hear that so compelled protestors and lingers. To the “disjunctive syntheses” of the reconciliation process—particular agents identified and accused—it actualizes “a larger combination” in which “no concerted action by an isolable agent [...is] involved” (Massumi 1992:47-49).

That the dream occurred before the event means that this telling produces, retroactively, a foreboding, confronting skepticism but eschewing rumor. “It is *as if*,” Derrida writes, “the narrative condition were the cause of the recounted thing, *as if* the narrative produced the event it is supposed to report” (1992:122). The dream becomes both allegorical,<sup>15</sup> referring simply and humbly to itself, to this impossible task of retroactive warning, and performative, actualizing in the very moment of utterance what will have already occurred. “I could not tell anyone, not even my friends who participated, about my dream,” Aq’ab’al laments, “could not give warning because they would not have believed me. But now, after the protests, I cannot tell them I saw it all beforehand since they will ask: ‘Why didn’t you warn us?’” There is nothing that can be said or heard: “The gift, like the event, as event, must *remain* unforeseeable, but remain so without keeping itself” (Derrida 1992:122). The warning is untimely, too early and too late, verified as such, as a warning, after the fact, canceling any anticipatory force. The dream has not now been corroborated, but remains precisely as a dream, a will have been, intervening at the level of the virtual, something to be seen. “The dream has not yet left me,” Aq’ab’al intones, “and I still feel guilty.”

Against the notion of a post-war Guatemala where state-sponsored violence has ended and where local voices are being empowered, the dream portends the dangers and unseen consequences of decentralization and related gestures toward peace and reconciliation. The dream concludes with a conspiracy theory, attributing the events to an unseen and unheard cryptic agency coming from very far away. “‘*Vamos a militarizar* Tecpán,’ said the government, ‘We are going to militarize the whole place,’” Aq’ab’al theorizes.

The protests made this possible, to have indigenous fighting indigenous. When there is in-fighting the government is able to come in with their armies to promote order and control. They set up agencies. They say, “We are here to make peace.” Then the press says that Tecpán is violent and the government peaceful. But the protests were prefigured from a distant place. I see the government paying people cash to loot and throw rocks. They are not gang members. I don’t know who they are. It wasn’t us that started the violence. The government is always trying to disrupt a movement. They make violence and then they make peace, or they promote peace and make violence. Everyone from different sides, outside the town, everyone is caught up in the excitement and is part of the event. There is a force in the air, a force we cannot see. It enters from far away.

The local political subject becomes passive, shaped by and given to this very far away agency, but not indifferent or powerless. This is perhaps only to de-center dominant formulations of blame and their reliance on the binary of intentional perpetrators and their guiltless victims. This “radically passive” (Wall 1999) subject forebodes an interhuman encounter that exists prior to social contracts, reconciliation meetings. “The interhuman,” according to Levinas

lies in a non-indifference of one to another, in a responsibility of one for another, but before the reciprocity of this responsibility, which will be inscribed in impersonal laws, comes to be superimposed on the pure altruism of this responsibility...It is prior to any contract that would specify precisely the moment of reciprocity. [2000:100]

This passivity is thus prior to the collective identity politics articulated through pan-Maya activism, which, if always contextual, multiple, and open to change, is nonetheless predicated upon certain disjunctive syntheses (Fischer 2001, Fischer and Brown 1996, Warren 1998). The difference emerges in the move between the promise that “we are all equals, flesh and bones” and the particular significance of “indigenous fighting indigenous,” as Don Domingo noted. Between these planes there emerges that invisible line, unseen and unheard in current discourse on violence and peace in Guatemala, ethics as neither fundamentally about ethnic difference and corrupted by in-fighting nor a demand of universal equality and quickly subverted by the fact that “we are not equal in many other ways.” Ethics becomes an unequal relation to others before identity. That the “indigenous men fighting indigenous men” are anonymous reveals violence aiming at a face, rendering relating impersonal: “their faces, their identities remain hidden.” In his dreams, the fabric of relation is not balanced, neither flattened nor polarized, but is “unassumability” itself (Levinas 2000), “ill preparedness,” as Aq’ab’al puts it, the impossibility to assimilate or assume the other, but also the impossibility of simply assuming and not witnessing, a rather ethnographic quandary. Aq’ab’al himself can only assume total responsibility for the violence, for the “friends that participated,” saying that he still feels “guilty.” “But what passes and what comes to pass,” citing Derrida again, “is that the event has been created in the life of the narrator himself; it has affected the fabric of *relation* itself...but first of all the relation *between* the narrator and his friend” (1992:120).

So this passivity does not mean that collective or cultural identities are betrayed or spoiled. But to take such formulations as primordial, not already

split by “an alterity in me,” as Levinas puts it—or, as Aq’ab’al puts it, “I see the whole thing from the outside. I see it but am not participating”—is to risk reproducing violent cycles of blame and retribution. As Levinas explains in an interview, this passivity in the face of the other is “like that sentence in Dostoyevsky: ‘We are all guilty of all and for all men before all, and I more than others.’” The guilt is “not really mine” and the offenses are not ones “that I would have committed.” It is an infinite, rather de-centered guilt that renders any local allocation of blame dubious and precipitates, in the face of violence aiming at a face, the impossible but necessary process of giving warning to and taking notice of the other. It is a guilt that occurs “because I am responsible for a total responsibility, which answers for all the others and for all in the others, even for their responsibility” (Levinas 1985:98-99). It is the kind of guilt that admits: “There are no innocent collectivities in the present war, despite the powerful deployment of the figure of ‘innocent’ killed on both sides of the divide” (Das 2003:106). It endures in the wake of attempts at democratic compromise or reconciliation, this often silent guilt that will not put a stop to the rustling, that keeps you up at night, or keeps you from waking, and restless stirs dreams of a good night sleep.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research for this paper was made possible by the generous support of the Harvard Graduate Society and a Helen and Benjamin Buttenweiser Fellowship at Harvard University. Ted Fischer introduced me to this sleepy little town and has provided unmatched guidance along the way. Tim Smith and Diane Nelson organized the AAA panel in which the ideas in this paper were first presented, and I thank them for their comments and support. Thanks to André Souroujon for use of the photograph. Thanks to Ted, Tim, Carlota McAllister, Clara Han, Arthur Kleinman, Kay Warren, and three anonymous reviewers for extensive and extremely helpful comments on earlier versions of the paper. But thanks especially to Aq’ab’al, Don Domingo, Pakal B’alam and family for sitting and sharing.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Anthropologists have laudably weighed in on the cultural politics of September 11, as seen in recent volumes of *American Anthropologist* (2002; esp. Lutz; Mattingly, Lawlor, and Jacobs-Huey; Mamdani; Abu-Lughod) and *Anthropological Quarterly* (Howell and Shryock 2003, Nader 2003, Ghosh et al. 2002).

<sup>2</sup>We can think of this emerging world of democratic ideals, mandates, expectations, and desires in Guatemala as a “social imaginary,” “an enabling but not fully explicable symbolic matrix within which a people imagine and act as world-making collective agents” (Gaonkar 2002:1). Michael Warner (2002) provides a nice outline of recent debates about the concept of “publics,” as well as the argument that publics must be conceived of as plural and interactive, as opposed to the idea of a unitary public sphere. On the historical formation of post-war Guatemala, and a more detailed explication of its ideals and discourses, see Fischer and

Brown (1996), Nelson (1999), and Warren (1998). The diverse work of certain publics, such as the Pan-Maya activists, language advocates, human rights advocates, labor organizers, religious leaders, and development specialists has converged in the current social imaginary. The basic characteristics of this terrain include economic liberalization, political decentralization, the idea of guaranteed equal rights under the law regardless of racial, ethnic, cultural, and other differences, popular discourses on pluri-culturalism and democratic representation, and a global discourse on human rights that brings Guatemala into articulation with an international public of journalists, monitors, ethnographers, development and humanitarian workers whose project is tensely caught between a solidarity for a particular segment of the population, the Maya, a solidarity grounded in histories of violence and discrimination, and the premise of a nation-state that must partly dissolve racial and cultural differences, and in many ways neglect that past, in order to guarantee equal rights and protections.

<sup>3</sup>*Henry's Hint\$ on Guatemala*, cited in Fischer (2001:31).

<sup>4</sup>The following passage gives a sense of the very mundane force of this nothingness in shaping social experiences of suffering and violence in the highlands:

“*Por miedo*,” out of fear, people stayed in their homes. Kidnappings occurred most often in outlying hamlets...Some victims vanished and were never seen again; others wandered back, frightened and mistreated, after being held for several days. Some surprised mourning relatives...[S]plintered families fled their distant villages for the municipal center and shelter from dangerous army sweeps (Warren 1998:9).

The counterinsurgency war was fought between military and guerilla forces. It began in the 1960's in eastern Guatemala, the state coming to believe that a battle against “communism” was necessary. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, particularly under the command of General Ríos Montt, the warfare intensified, mainly throughout the western highlands. Kay Warren (1998) provides a comprehensive overview of the war, later truth commissions and the peace accords process.

<sup>5</sup><http://www.mojober.com/JAG/casualties.html>

<sup>6</sup>I draw on Žižek who points out, following Hegel, that as Being it moves from the abstract to the concrete, it passes over into Nothing. It is not that the two are strictly opposed. Rather, “Being reveals itself as Nothing at the very moment when we endeavor to grasp it in its pureness, as radically opposed to Nothing” (Žižek 1993:123).

<sup>7</sup>Alan Klima (2002) makes clear this double-binding nature of public spheres in his ethnography of meditation practices and death rituals in Thailand. Public displays of and meditations over violent imagery have been politically efficacious for Thailand's radical democratic movement. Much like the testimonies of violence in highland Guatemala, these religious practices garner media sympathy, international recognition, and so provide something of a buffer against recurring state-sponsored violence. But they quickly dull the cutting edges of gore and death imagery, as the mass media thrives on facile renderings of victimization and blame. The political efficacy of this death or violence aesthetic gets disseminated—the message dispersed, and yet the very histories of violence that such images seek to invoke are effaced through commoditization (see also Kleinman and Kleinman 1997).

<sup>8</sup>I am drawing on the work of Levinas on the philosophical concept of an open relation to others that precedes self-identity and promises an escape from circumscribed or reduced identities and the logic of self autonomy. See Handelman (1991) for an excellent overview.

<sup>9</sup>The “virtual operations” of capitalism and empire are discussed at length by Žižek (2003), where virtual describes a force that operates on a particular situation but without actually being seen or heard, such as the “invisible” workings of the free market. The virtual is not a force yet to emerge but a force producing real effects without any explicit organization.

<sup>10</sup>There are similarities between this framing and the analysis of contemporary political and economic struggles among Mayans in Chiapas, Mexico analyzed by June Nash (2001) where

the idea of autonomy, related as it is to new international political formations, had ambivalent implications for local communities. Precisely in providing a channel that could bypass the nation, the autonomy of the local community within the milieu of globalization also meant more diffuse and insidious economic relations with distant powers.

<sup>11</sup>This paper stems from conversations begun at the 2002 annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association. Here, I am writing with regard to the task set out at the panel of which I was a part: "Struggling to Put the Post in Post-war Guatemala: The Successes and Failures Six Years after the Peace Accords."

<sup>12</sup>I borrow this phrase from Kathleen Stewart, who argues that the political uses and moral implications of nostalgia all depend on "where you are standing" (1988). Nostalgia, that is, is not always reactionary or bourgeois. It takes different forms and with different social implications. Like nostalgia, what violence means and what forms of violence matter is also a matter of perspective and cultural location. The common framing of violence as reactionary, immoral or unethical is a situated one that depends upon and in turn reinforces dominant contours on vision, speech, thought. Butler makes this point with regard to the current war on terror: "The articulation of this hegemony takes place in part through producing a consensus on what certain terms will mean, how they can be used, and what lines of solidarity are implicitly drawn through this use. We reserve 'acts of terror' for events such as the September 11 attacks on the United States, distinguishing these acts of violence from those that might be justified through foreign policy decisions or public declarations of war. On the other hand, these terrorist acts are construed as 'declarations of war' by the Bush administration, which then positions the military response as a justified act of self-defense" (2002:178-179). This theorization echoes Don Domingo's comments, mentioned earlier, about the possibilities that the hijackers had a "very serious political critique." Don Domingo is curious about such possibilities both because he could not stop watching the televised coverage on September 11 and because he understands that the hijackings emerged into a global discursive field already conditioned to "hear," as Butler puts it, or recognize only certain forms of political activity as such.

<sup>13</sup>On this year (2002), June 10 fell on the date 11 Aj in the highland Maya lunar calendar. This is an auspicious date in Kaqchikel Maya history. On May 20, 1493 a revolt occurred at the ancient Kaqchikel Maya capital of Iximche, which also coincided with 11 Aj in the Maya calendar. For 110 years 11 Aj provided an anniversary date in relation to which all entries of historical events in the native Annals of the Kaqchikels were benchmarked (Smith 2002).

<sup>14</sup>"Nightmares in public," writes Stewart, "walk a line between the anesthetized shell-shock of anxious, mind-numbing distraction and another kind of shock that gives pause and throws up a warning" (2000:256).

<sup>15</sup>See Ulmer (1983:107-113) for a discussion of the relation between montage and allegory. Ulmer indicates that if "allegoresis," which had long been practices to transcend the text and refer to external, metaphorical meanings, then "narrative allegory" explores the literal, actualizes the event in the very process of narration.

## WORKS CITED

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. 1999. "The Interpretation of Culture(s) after Television." In *The Fate of Culture*, Sherry Ortner (ed.), 110-135. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2002. "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others." *American Anthropologist* 104(3):783-790.
- Baudrillard, Jean. 1988. *America*. Chris Turner, trans. London: Verso.
- Benjamin, Walter. 1963. *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*. John Osborne, trans. London: New Left Books.

- Butler, Judith. 2002. "Explanation and Exoneration, or What We Can Hear." *Social Text* 72, 20(3):177-188.
- Carmack, Robert, ed. 1988. *Harvest of Violence: The Maya Indians and the Guatemalan Crisis*. Norman: Oklahoma University Press.
- Daniel, E. Valentine. 1996. *Charred Lullabies: Chapters in an Anthropography of Violence*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Das, Veena. 1998. "Wittgenstein and Anthropology." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 27:171-195.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2003. "Violence and Translation." *Anthropological Quarterly* 75(1):105-112.
- de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Steven Rendall, trans. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1986. "The Laugh of Michel Foucault." In *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, 193-198. Brian Massumi, trans. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1988. *Foucault*. Seán Hand, trans. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1995. *Negotiations 1972-1990*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1981. *Dissemination*. Barbara Johnson, trans. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1992. *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*. Peggy Kamuf, trans. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fischer, Edward F. 2001. *Cultural Logics and Global Economies: Maya Identity in Thought and Practice*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Fischer, Edward F., and R. McKenna Brown, eds. 1996. *Maya Cultural Activism in Guatemala*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Fischer, Michael M.J. 2003. *Emergent Forms of Life and the Anthropological Voice*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1978. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. Robert Hurley, trans. New York: Vintage.
- Gaonkar, Dilip Parameshwar. 2002. "Toward New Imaginaries: An Introduction." *Public Culture* 14(1):1-19.
- Ghosh, Gautam, et al. 2002. *Civilization, Vulnerability and Translation: Reflections in the Aftermath of September 11th*. Gautam Ghosh, ed. *Anthropological Quarterly* 75(1):92-203.
- Graham, Jorie. 1995a. "What The End Is For." In *The Dream of the Unified Field: Selected Poems, 1974-1994*, pp. 66-69. Hopewell, NJ: Ecco.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1995b. "Untitled." In *The Dream of the Unified Field: Selected Poems, 1974-1994*. pp. 110-111. Hopewell, NJ: Ecco.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1995c. "The Hiding Place." In *The Dream of the Unified Field: Selected Poems, 1974-1994*. pp. 112-114. Hopewell, NJ: Ecco.
- Hall, Stuart. 1985. "Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-Structuralist Debates." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 2(2):91-114.
- Handelman, Susan A. 1991. *Fragments of Redemption: Benjamin, Scholem, and Levinas*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Herzfeld, Michael. 1997. *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State*. New York: Routledge.
- Howell, Sally and Andrew Shryock. 2003. "Cracking Down on Diaspora: Arab Detroit and America's 'War on Terror.'" *Anthropological Quarterly* 76(3):443-462.

- Johnson, Barbara. 1980. "The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida." In *The Critical Difference*, 110-146. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Kleinman, Arthur. 1999. "Experience and its Moral Modes: Culture, Human Conditions, and Disorder." In *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, Vol. 20*. Grethe B. Peterson (ed.) Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press.
- Kleinman, Arthur and Joan Kleinman. 1997. "The Appeal of Experience; The Dismay of Images: Cultural Appropriations of Suffering in Our Times." In *Social Suffering*. Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, and Margaret Lock (eds.), 1-24. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Klima, Alan. 2002. *The Funeral Casino: Meditation, Massacre, and Exchange With the Dead in Thailand*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1969. *Totality and Infinity*. Alphonso Lingis, trans. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1981. *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. Alphonso Lingis, trans. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1985. *Ethics and Infinity*. Richard A. Cohen, trans. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1989a. "There Is: Existence without Existents." In *The Levinas Reader*, 29-36. Seán Hand, ed. Oxford: Blackwell.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1989b. "Time and the Other." In *The Levinas Reader*, 37-58. Seán Hand, ed. Oxford: Blackwell.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1989c. "The Servant and Her Master." In *The Levinas Reader*, 150- 159. Seán Hand, ed. Oxford: Blackwell.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2000. "Useless Suffering." In *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, 91-101. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav, trans. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lutz, Catherine. 2002. "Making War at Home in the United States: Militarization and the Current Crisis." *American Anthropologist* 104(3):723-735.
- Mamdani, Mahmood. 2002. "Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism." *American Anthropologist* 104(3):766-775.
- Mankekar, Purnima. 1999. *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Post-Colonial India*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Massumi, Brian. 1992. *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2002. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Mattingly, Cheryl, Mary Lawlor, and Lanita Jacobs-Huey. 2002. "Narrating September 11: Race, Gender, and the Play of Cultural Identities." *American Anthropologist* 104(3):743-753.
- Montejo, Victor. 1992. *Testimonio: Muerte de una Comunidad Indígena en Guatemala*. Guatemala: Editorial Universitaria, Universidad de San Carlos en Guatemala.
- Nader, Laura. 1997. "Controlling Processes: Tracing the Dynamic Components of Power." *Current Anthropology* 38(5):711-737.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2003. "Iraq and Democracy." *Anthropological Quarterly* 76(3):479-483.
- Nash, June. 2001. *Mayan Visions: The Quest for Autonomy in an Age of Globalization*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Nelson, Diane. 1999. *A Finger in the Wound: Body Politics in Quincentennial Guatemala*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- \_\_\_\_\_. 2001. "Phantom Limbs and Invisible Hands: Bodies, Prosthetics, and Late Capitalist Identifications." *Cultural Anthropology* 16(1):303-312.
- Scott, James C. 1987. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Smith, Timothy J. 2002. "Skipping Years and Scribal Errors: Kaqchikel Maya Timekeeping in the Fifteenth, Sixteenth, and Seventeenth Centuries." *Ancient Mesoamerica* 13(1):65-76.
- Stewart, Kathleen. 1988. "Nostalgia—A Polemic." *Cultural Anthropology* 3(3):227-241
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2000. "Real American Dreams (Can Be Nightmares)." In *Cultural Studies and Political Theory*, Jodi Dean (ed.), 243-257. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Taussig, Michael. 1987. *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ulmer, Gregory L. 1983. "The Object of Post-Criticism." In *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Hal Foster (ed.), 93-126. New York: The New Press.
- Wall, Thomas Carl. 1999. *Radical Passivity: Levinas, Blanchot, and Agamben*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Warner, Michael. 2002. "Publics and Counterpublics." *Public Culture* 14(1):49-90.
- Warren, Kay. 1998. *Indigenous Movements and Their Critics: Pan-Maya Activism in Guatemala*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Žižek, Slavoj. 1993. *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2003. *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences*. London and New York: Routledge.