

# Collective wings: Mayan women in Guatemala shaking up impunity

Guatemala (“place of many trees” in Nahwiki language) is a country inhabited by 22 indigenous groups descendant of the Mayan, which represent around 40% of the population. A coup in 1954, orchestrated by the CIA, was followed by a series of military dictatorships, always backed up by the United States. The three documentaries by Pamela Yates are a wonderful tool to understand Guatemalan history (starting in 1983 with “When the Mountains Tremble”, followed by “Granito,” until “500 años” in 2017), featuring among others the works of Kate Doyle or Irma Alicia Velázquez Nimatuj.

In *Beyond Repair? Mayan Women's Protagonism in the Aftermath of Genocidal Harm Beyond Repair*, Alison Crosby and Brinton Lykes accompany and document the voices, the survival experiences, and the mutual support processes of indigenous Mayan women in Guatemala. In so doing, their new book raises probing questions about representations of violence, racialized and gendered approaches to knowledge, and colonial transitional justice methods, while also re-examining mainstream beliefs about structural power and the praxis of solidarity.

It should be noted from the start that the richness of the material in the book is not lost in translation. I first read *Beyond Repair* in Spanish and found the language very clear and accessible despite the presence of some complex theoretical concepts. I then read it in English and found it equally engaging, though English is not my first language.

In reading *Beyond Repair*, it is immediately striking how the authors and the Mayan “protagonists”—a term that overcomes the limits of both “victims” or “survivors”—have been able to find the time and energy to successfully nurture a process of common knowledge and mutual accompaniment. It is clear that they have respectfully adapted the opportunities provided by their differing backgrounds to produce shared experiences that anticipate and give meaning to a better world.

The book's foundations are based on careful consideration of the diverse processes involved in social justice work, feminist participatory action research, community approaches to decolonization, and critical reflexivity. The authors' research emphasizes respect for the collective autonomy and the transformational experiences of the protagonists as these indigenous women move between their individual loneliness and the positive surviving emotions that bring them together. The “candor” (Farmer, Gardner, Hoof, & Mukherjee, 2011) in this book, refers the readers to the needed focus on the process and the respect for the accounts of the people, when doing work in settings impacted by death and the purposeful humiliation and extermination (applicable to genocide).

This community praxis—based on pathways that the Mayan women and the authors traveled and explored over a period of decades—serves to advance important local agendas and leads to learning for everyone. Critical to achieving these goals were the underlying negotiations that took place around issues of trust and ethics. It is important to note that many of these women—from several ethnolinguistic groups—were involved in the Sepur Zarco trial, a historic criminal case against soldiers accused of sexual violence and enslavement during Guatemala's years of armed conflict.

Both authors have a long and impressive history of work in Guatemala. For decades, they have reflected on genocide, sexual violence, and the impact of war on the different groups of Mayan people living in the country and in exile. Their book demonstrates how deeply they care about how to listen, how to avoid damage-centered research, and how to enable the voices of protagonists to be heard. Both of them are also well known for the

support they offer younger generations of scholars. I have heard from Alison Crosby's students of her masterful educational use of shadowing in the field. I have watched Brinton Lykes present approaches to "photovoice," and I have seen the projects she inspired with Otomí women in Queretaro, México and with migrant women from the Middle East in Athens, Greece. Nowadays, Borja Gonzalo's work at Melissa's Network in Athens (2018) follows this path and fuels the consideration about the need of qualitative and creative methods to describe complex emotional processes of support in women's communities that are symbolic and material spaces of resistance.

The comparative perspective in *Beyond Repair* is enriched by the authors' consideration of the challenges of truth commissions and reparations practices in several other transitional justice initiatives (e.g., South Africa, Chile, Argentina). Many of the colonial practices present in these processes are questioned and compared with the protagonists' own views on justice-seeking tools and essential reparations. Here the image of the torn cloth is powerful and illuminating: it can be sewn back together, but it never loses the signs or scars of having been ripped apart in the past.

In this light, the collaborative work with *Unión Nacional de Mujeres Guatemaltecas* and *Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Acción Psicosocial* also speaks to the fact that community bottom-up approaches are indispensable for developing the processes and outcomes that the protagonists find meaningful. Creative and experiential participatory tools are crucial for understanding the spoken and nonspoken narratives of horror: painting, drawings, dramatization, dance, massage, and herbs used as healing resources.

I wish I could have read this book when I was much younger. Doing so would have helped me move toward more effective partnership in my fieldwork, with a greater awareness of the risks of inadvertently causing harm. But then I also wonder, paradoxically, whether I could have understood back then the depth of care that is necessary as fully as I do now—after having made so many mistakes in over 25 years of practice! Regardless, the continuing conflict between the interpretations and goals of academia on the one hand and activism on the other contributes to disillusionment for many young professionals. They discover that bridges between meaningful theory and grassroots processes cannot so readily be crossed freely, productively and without harm. For them, *Beyond Repair* represents a potential antidote to despair.

In sum, Crosby and Lykes offer readers a unique opportunity to hear the voices of Mayan women who come together around pain and justice, and to learn about their mixed emotions and their experiences of poverty, peril, fear, and resiliency. We must recognize that, almost 25 years after Guatemala's 1996 Peace Accords, many people in the country still live in situations of defenselessness, searching for visibility, public acknowledgment, and long overdue justice in regions of state and corporate violence. Sadly, neocolonialism, foreign interests, patriarchy, extractivism, and racism remain pervasive.

The protagonists use poetic expressions to convey complex feelings, and yet I am also reminded of the poem "Tal vez Mañana" ("Maybe Tomorrow") by Guatemalan poet Humberto Ak'abal, which includes these lines:

En su corazon	In (his) her heart
la esperanza no se apaga:	hope does not die out:
"wene' chweq kuk'ex uwech wa"	"wene 'chweq kuk'ex uwech wa"
(Tal vez mañana, esto cambie).	(Maybe tomorrow, this will change).

They capture well a primary lesson of *Beyond Repair*. In this collective praxis in pursuit of a brighter future for their people, Mayan women are engaging together to give meaning to their ideas of justice—ideas that for too long have been dismissed, discredited, or ignored. Crosby and Lykes, with the help of the interpreters for the different languages, valuably share this undertaking with them—and us—also interpreting and bringing to a broader audience the protagonists' stories of horror, suffering, survival, and hope.

**REFERENCES**

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