Megan Ybarra, *Living on Scorched Earth: Violence, Conservation and Development in Guatemala*

I propose to broaden the scope of my current book project, which is a revised manuscript of my dissertation (filed May 2010). The book employs a political ecology approach to examine how conservation practice affects the politics of land tenure in Guatemala’s “Maya Forest.” During the civil war (1960-1996), the military conducted a genocidal counterinsurgency campaign, burning over 440 villages to the ground (CEH 1999). My ethnography hinges on explaining the radically different political trajectories of two former development poles, or massacre sites rebuilt as militarized communities. The book has two interventions.

First, Q’eqchi’ Maya territorial struggles were not won or lost on scorched earth battlefields, but are being decided in the contested politics of land ownership. Due to the unfinished nature of Guatemala’s Peace Accords and successive government legitimacy crises (Nelson 2009), the primary vehicle for land ownership recognition has become sustainable development projects. To the extent that development projects do not understand (or simply ignore) these war histories, they tend to reproduce the military’s bias and exacerbate land tenure inequalities. My work extends critiques of conservation as displacement (Chapin 2004; Brockington and Igoe 2006) to link historical counterinsurgency in the jungle with militarized conservation enforcement of the “Maya Forest” (Peluso and Watts 2001; Peluso 1993).

Octaviano’s project will flesh out a growing issue I encountered during field research: how do contemporary global efforts to fight climate change through reforestation affect Guatemalan land struggles? Specifically, my monograph includes the case study of Q’eqchi’ genocide survivors who claim they were displaced through a carbon sequestration project. Octaviano’s research will help me address the broader implications of “conservation refugees” in the context of climate change remediation.

Second, I explore how genocide survivors articulate a Q’eqchi’ Maya identity through their territorial claims. My work shows the difficulties Q’eqchi’ s face when joining up with the national Pan-Maya movement to advocate for indigenous rights. I argue that this assemblage obscures disparate effects amongst Maya peoples and recognition of their political claims. Likewise, Ellie will tackle an offshoot of my research, looking at how the Garífuna (Afro-indigenous people) articulate their territorial claims in Guatemala. Working through these new empirical questions will help me think through the broader implications of my work in terms of the production of postcolonial identities and the role of the borderlands in territorial claims.

Student researchers will develop their own projects in dialogue with our research community. Specifically, they will read and critique relevant book chapters at the outset of their literature review. As they develop their research projects, I will use the annotated bibliographies they produce to broaden the relevance of my book’s claims. They will also conduct new research using archival materials\(^1\) and court briefs, which they will use to develop their own research projects. As politics majors who are fluent in Spanish, Ellie and Octaviano have the potential to make a contribution to the academic literatures on the politics of conservation and indigenous territorial rights. Finally, I hope that our LARC community will facilitate my work to revise my book for an increased appeal to a multidisciplinary audience interested in Latin American landscapes.

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\(^1\) Students will use compiled documents from sources including the *Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamérica* and SEGEPLAN Centro de Documentación in Guatemala.