



THE GOOD ROAD

A K'iche'
Revolutionary Theopolitics

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Carlota McAllister

THE
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FRONTIS Milpa (cornfield) in Chupol, close to harvest time,
1998. Photo by the author.

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To Francesca and Joaquin,
the best companions on this journey

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Abbreviations

AAAS	American Association for the Advancement of Science
ASMODECHI	Asociación Maya de Desarrollo de Chichicastenango (Maya Development Organization of Chichicastenango)
CALDH	Centro para la Acción Legal en Derechos Humanos (Center for Legal Action in Human Rights)
CASODI	Coordinadora de Asociaciones y Organizaciones de Desarrollo Integral (Coordinator of Associations and Organizations for Holistic Development)
CCL	Comité Clandestino Local (Local Clandestine Committee)
CEH	Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico (Historical Clarification Commission)
CERJ	Consejo de Comunidades Étnicas “Runujel Junam” (Council of Ethnic Communities “We Are All Equal”)
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency (US)
CONAVIGUA	Coordinadora Nacional de Viudas de Guatemala (National Coordination of Widows of Guatemala)
CUC	Comité de Unidad Campesina (Committee for Peasant Unity)
EAFG	Equipo de Antropología Forense de Guatemala (Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Team)
EFOP	Equipo de Formación Política (Political Formation Team)
EGP	Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres (Guerrilla Army of the Poor)
FAFG	Fundación de Antropología Forense de Guatemala (Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation)

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FAR	Fuerzas Armadas Rebeldes (Rebel Armed Forces)
FGACS	Frente Guerrillero Augusto César Sandino (Augusto César Sandino Guerrilla Front)
FGL	Fuerzas Guerrilleras Locales (Local Guerrilla Forces)
FIL	Fuerzas Irregulares Locales (Local Irregular Forces)
GAM	Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo (Mutual Support Group)
MINUGUA	Misión de Verificación de las Naciones Unidas en Guatemala (United Nations Verification Mission in Guatemala)
NGO	nongovernmental organization
NORC	Nueva Organización Revolucionaria de Combate (New Revolutionary Organization for Combat)
ODHAG	Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala (Guatemalan Archbishop's Human Rights Office)
ORPA	Organización Revolucionaria del Pueblo en Armas (Revolutionary Organization of People in Arms)
PGT	Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo (Guatemalan Workers' Party)
UFCO	United Fruit Company
UN	United Nations
URNG	Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity)

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Note on Terminology

Ethnic/racial labels in Guatemala, as in all countries with histories of racialized inequality, are fraught with controversy. The two main ethnic/racial categories mobilized in this book are those associated with the labels “Indigenous” (*indígena*) and “Ladino” (*ladino*).

The most common contemporary term for people identified as Indigenous in general is *indígena*, and I most often use the term *Indigenous* in this context. But Guatemala has many different Indigenous communities—twenty-four Maya peoples, as well as Xincas and Garifunas—each with its own language and history. In the new millennium, members of Maya communities have increasingly chosen to use the label *maya* to identify themselves, alongside or instead of the label *indígena*. I use it in this way at some points in the book, but this usage would be anachronistic for much of the historical period the book covers, so I use *Indigenous* more. I also sometimes use the word *Maya* to refer to preconquest Maya communities.

Chupolenses belong to the Maya-K’iche’ community, and sometimes I identify them as K’iche’, when speaking about the specificities of that language and history. But Chupol also borders the area where Maya-Kaqchikel speakers have historically lived, and the dialect of K’iche’ Chupolenses speak is closer to Kaqchikel than that of most other K’iche’ speakers. Indeed, they insist that they and their neighbors in Tecpán both speak *pa qatzij* (in our words), despite ostensibly belonging to different linguistic communities. This sense of commonality likely speaks to older formations of community geographies. The K’iche’ words used in the book are spelled as they are pronounced in the Chupolense/*maxeño* dialect, which differs somewhat from the standard K’iche’ orthography established by the Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala (Guatemalan Academy of Mayan Languages).

There are also a series of racist terms in use for Guatemalan Indigenous people, the most common and most wounding of which is *indio* (Indian). I use that term in contexts where it appeared historically; it refers to the identity projected by the colonial and modern state onto Indigenous people rather than to their own identity. Chupolenses also invoke this term to index critiques of their own history of racialization, so it appears in those contexts as well. A less wounding term, still used by some older Chupolenses, is *naturales* (naturals). This term only appears in direct quotations.

The word *ladino*, while referring to the dominant rather than the dominated, also has the power to wound its bearers. In Spain, *ladino* referred to Jews expelled after 1492 and to the language they developed as they spread out to the Balkans and the Middle East. It can thus mean something like “linguistically fluent.” In colonial Guatemala, as discussed in chapter 1, it referred to mixed-caste people, and it carries some of the Spanish suspicion of mixing in its connotations as sharp, sly, and cunning but also thieving or lazy. In the national period, it came to refer to people who identified more closely with whiteness than Indigeneity, eventually meaning “non-Indigenous.” For Indigenous people, however, the term retained its pejorative connotations.

At the same time, the term *ladino* has also never sat quite right with those to whom it ostensibly applied—perhaps because it also identified them as not quite fully white, and thus as subordinate to the economic elite. Such people (including my own Guatemalan family) might refuse to recognize themselves as *ladinos*. In the new millennium, many people who might fall into this category are also choosing to identify instead as mestizos or mixed, as a way to acknowledge their own Indigenous ancestry and resist the demand for whitening, and thus to refuse these thorny legacies. But during the historical period covered by this book, *ladino* was the name for this category and also what Chupolenses used, so I continue to use it here.

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MAP FM.1 Overview of Guatemala showing the Pan-American Highway, with inset showing the location of Chupol in the municipality of Chichicastenango.

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INTRODUCTION

The Good Road

THE ROAD AND THE SEED

Chupol, a rural canton of the majority Maya-K'iche' township of Chichicastenango, is not out of the way.¹ Straddling the Pan-American Highway 110 kilometers from Guatemala City, it lies at the navel of the Americas. But except for its church, which sits on a high bluff above the highway, it does not immediately announce itself to passersby. Like many rural Indigenous communities across Guatemala's Western Highlands, it consists mostly of small adobe or concrete dwellings surrounded by cornfields, scattered on either side of the highway across valleys and hills in what seems like an undifferentiated stretch of countryside. Only on Sundays, when the market held in the plaza beside the church spills out onto the road and slows traffic, do most passersby notice that it is a place.

Chupol's unremarkable appearance belies its notoriety among those who lived through Guatemala's bloody civil war. Between 1960 and 1996, the Guatemalan state killed or disappeared more than 250,000 civilians and tortured, raped, and displaced many more in its brutal counterinsurgency campaign against leftist guerrillas. Both the United Nations (UN) and national courts have deemed these acts, which disproportionately targeted Indigenous communities, to be genocidal. The worst violence occurred between 1981 and 1983 when special army units called "Task Forces" waged an annihilating offensive on the highlands where the guerrillas were most entrenched—and where Guatemala's Indigenous population is most concentrated.

The first of these, Task Force Iximché, swept up the highway in October 1981 to seize Chupol. The army then established a base in Chupol's church and forced Chupolenses into hiding in the surrounding high, cold mountains. For the next two years, soldiers detained suspected guerrilla

supporters at checkpoints on the highway and sent patrols out into the mountains to root out Chupolenses while firing on their hiding places. Travelers passing through Chupol during those years confronted lurid spectacles—dead bodies, burning homes, severed heads, ghostly apparitions. Those unlucky enough to be taken into the church were often tortured, and many disappeared forever. For a time, Chupol was a *centro de matanzas* (killing center), an important spatial node in the state's perpetration of genocide.

I came to Chupol because of this history. In the late 1990s, as Guatemala began its transition from war to peace, the homegrown human rights organization Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo (GAM, Mutual Support Group) asked for seventeen mass graves lying on the church grounds to be exhumed as part of a broader effort to lay Guatemala's violent past to rest. I planned to observe the exhumation process—before, during, and after—to understand how those who bear the violent past in their own flesh engaged with the transnational projects for human rights and transitional justice supporting this effort.

As the date of the exhumation approached, the two American nuns living in Chupol's church invited me to a mental health workshop designed to help the community remember and mourn its violent past. One of the workshop exercises asked participants to draw a mural of their history on a long sheet of paper. The artists began with the 1976 earthquake that killed around twenty-seven thousand mostly Indigenous Guatemalans, depicting the destruction as upside-down houses and prone figures. Next came a scene of lumpy objects—"aid," the artists explained—streaming from the doors of the church where we sat. This was followed by a sea of stick figures, some much bigger than others, accompanied by guerrilla acronyms: "In the year 1978 came the organization CUC and also the Peasant League / in 1979 came the organization EGP ORPA PGT PAR."

Then people disappeared from the mural. Three words spanning the height of the paper—"REPRECIÓN/REPUJIADO/DESPLASADO [*sic*]" (repression/refugeed/displaced)—represented the year 1980. A messily scrawled, filled-in black circle labeled "81" widened out to become an empty ring labeled "82," at the apex of the army's onslaught. The next year appeared only as a date, "83," above a blank space that the artists glossed as *nada*, nothing. The following year, 1984, appeared as two circles, blue and green—colors that stand for the sky, the water, the earth, and its fruits in Maya cosmologies but which here, the artists noted, also stood for "hope."



1.1 A “mural” painted on a roll of paper during a 1998 mental health workshop in Chupol’s church, depicting episodes in Chupol’s recent history. Photo by the author.

This book covers the same events as the mural and it, too, revolves around the nothing at the heart of these events. But it understands this void differently than the workshop that produced the mural. Its framework of trauma and recovery treated “nothing” as a failure of narrative, produced by violence of such magnitude that it strips its victims of the capacity for representation, needing filling in with words and images for healing to begin.² But the nothing to which the mural’s artists gestured was a negation, not an emptiness. It calls for justice, not healing.

To hear this call, the listener must first learn more about this place than its history of genocide. As the mural showed, Chupol was a base of support for the Comité de Unidad Campesina (CUC, Committee for Peasant Unity), the mass organizational wing of the Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres (EGP, Guerrilla Army of the Poor). Although most Chupolenses did not take up arms, they endorsed the EGP’s revolutionary struggle to seize the Guatemalan state from the rich and reorganized everyday life to support it. As the EGP cadre responsible for the area told me, “In Chupol

there was clarity that the system was oppressive, exploitative. . . . People had reached a very high level of *conciencia*.” The word *conciencia*—Spanish for both consciousness and conscience—named Chupolenses’ capacity to understand and will to overcome five centuries of colonial and capitalist oppression.

The state made Chupol a center for killing to disable this capacity. But despite its best efforts, *conciencia*—a word I will keep in Spanish to mark its historical and ethnographic specificity—remains a central category of Chupolense political and moral life. To explore its persistence requires taking a still wider view of Chupol in time and space. To do so, I refer *conciencia* to María Jacinta Xón Riquiac’s discussion of the K’iche’ concept of the zero, which the Maya “discovered” long before Europeans did.³ “Zero is not a synonym of emptiness,” she notes. “Zero is that which is but at the same time is not, and one of its representations is the seed. The seed or the zero, according to this perspective, is already what it could be. But it is not yet because it has not yet been able to be.”⁴

Xón Riquiac’s account of the zero/seed as a void in which potentialities await fulfillment has affinities with contemporary theories of “affirmative negativity.” Rejecting the “fetishized positivity” of an unjust or banalized present, an affirmative negativity seeks out the traces of that which was negated to sustain this fetish, as resources that may yet shape a different future.⁵ Conversant with these theories, Xón Riquiac instead cites her grandfather, a K’iche’-speaking worker of the land. Representing zero as a seed thus opens onto the potentialities and negations emergent within a specific form of life: that of the Maya as “people of corn.”

Maize is the central food in rural Maya diets: The word for corn food, *wa*, is also the word for food in general. But it is also more-than-food. The corn plant is a “fleshy, living person,” whose parts have the same names as human body parts and whose cycle of production and consumption organizes space, time, and gendered relations.⁶ In rural Maya homes, women’s daily work at the hearth, transforming corn into food and those who eat it into people of corn, is the center of everyday life and the activity that makes them women. Men’s yearly work in the milpa, or cornfield, producing the corn that women transform into food and people, makes them men. These have never been the only activities (or genders) Maya people pursue, but corn remains constitutive of Maya personhood.

One source for this account of Maya being and becoming is the *Popol Wuj* (Book of Power), a K’iche’ mythohistorical text. Opening with the line “This is the root of the ancient words [*ojer tzij*],” it tells how Tz’aqol,

the Creator, and B'itol, the Shaper, spoke with other gods to create the world.⁷ In the primordial silence, they “came together and shared their words and ideas,” and “just through their words” the earth, the waters, the mountains, and many creatures were made.⁸ But soon the gods realized that nothing they had created could speak back to praise their work. After a few missteps, which produced monkeys and other creatures who could speak, but only “senselessly,” hungry animals led the gods to the corn plant, “the food [that] would become the flesh of the created people, the shaped people.”⁹ The first four people of corn “talked and conversed, they saw and heard, they walked and grasped things. . . . They understood everything there was in the world.” At last, the gods were praised: “Truly, twice thanks, three times thanks, that we were created!” the people of corn said.¹⁰

The seed of Maya potentiality conjured by these ancient words “holds all the information necessary,” as Xón Riquiac puts it, to grow into people of corn. But as the *Popol Wuj* also shows, germinating this seed takes collective labor, coordinated among people and many other more-than-human entities, including both ancient and everyday words.¹¹ And as the *Popol Wuj*’s own history suggests, this labor has repeatedly faced negation. The text we now read was compiled by a Spanish priest in the eighteenth century, from sources that may or may not include the sixteenth-century transcription of a preconquest pictographic text, brought to Chichicastenango by K’iche’ aristocrats fleeing the razing of their city by the Spanish and hidden in the walls of the new city.¹² The *Popol Wuj* also survived through oral storytelling and calendrical practices, which may or may not have been another source for the priest. Like the story of their creation, people of corn have repeatedly worked to re-create the conditions for their own becoming, conditions that have changed each time their being was cut back to nothing—in the 1980s genocide as in the conquest. But everything necessary for people of corn to grow again, including information about centuries of struggle against annihilation, still abides within the zero/seed.

The flowering of this seed as revolutionary *conciencia* is the subject of this book. The book’s title, “the good road” (*ri utz b’è*), is borrowed from Chupolense debates about how to coax *conciencia* to flower in this form. The notion of a good road points to the K’iche’ notion of the “road of life” (*ub’è k’aslemal*), which refers to a person’s moral biography. It also refers to the Pan-American Highway, built through the community in 1956 as a key infrastructure for Cold War counterinsurgency but sparking

an unprecedented insurgency. Finally, the good road indexes an ancestral theory of organizing, embodied in the figure of the *k'amol b'e* (road knower), a spiritual guide. Under the right conditions—including the right moral biography, the right infrastructures, and the right words—the *k'amol b'e* can draw on the potentialities within Maya forms of life to coordinate collective journeys, including ones that move toward revolution.

But Chupolenses did not make their revolutionary travels alone: companions from the armed Left and the liberationist Catholic Church also joined them along the way, each party bringing along its own traditions of critique of the modern state, its embedding in colonialism and racial capitalism, and its claims on the future.¹³ On their journey, a call for justice arose that transcended not only the horizon of the state and its political transitions but also the horizon of the human, summoning the divine to account for its role in the conquest and the ensuing annihilation. *Conciencia* was the sounding box of this revolutionary theopolitics, but even after genocide negated its revolutionary call, *conciencia* has retained the theopolitical power to sound in new forms. “The good road” thus also names the ongoing struggle of Chupolenses to articulate those forms, moving toward justice on new journeys with new companions.

THE MYSTERY OF CONCIENCIA

A key concept for the revolutionary tradition is that of consciousness. As Charles Taylor argues, consciousness is the capacity that defines the modern self, enabling us to “stop simply living in the body or within our traditions or habits, and, by making them objects for us, subject them to radical scrutiny and remaking.”¹⁴ The powers of self-transparency and self-mastery that consciousness confers are also tightly linked to the modern “sense of history” as a question of perceiving and effecting “transitions between past, present, and future.”¹⁵ Hinged to the events of the French Revolution, which claimed to break not only with the past but also with older cyclical and eschatological reckonings of time, this metahistorical concept makes revolution what Reinhart Koselleck calls “a regulative principle” of the relationship between knowledge and action in modernity, casting consciousness as the organ of history’s mastery.¹⁶

As a revolutionary science, Marxism seeks to cultivate this organ’s capacities. But its cultivation does not only happen in the mind; it unfolds through the sensual, embodied work of organizing collective action.

Marxist pedagogies differ, sometimes radically, on their organizing strategies, but they all agree that the task of revolution is to transform the people who make history along with history itself.¹⁷ For Third Worldist Marxists such as the EGP, this meant that the “people without history”—rural peasants, mired in tradition and remote from centers of capital and political theory—were in fact those best placed to master it, if they could learn to act together on their power.¹⁸ Claiming “a very high level of *conciencia*” for Chupolenses thus located them at the world-historical vanguard of a longer revolutionary struggle, linking them to the revolutionaries of France, Russia, Mexico, and especially their heroic contemporaries in North Vietnam.¹⁹ Chupolenses took up this position so eagerly that urban revolutionaries nicknamed Chupol the “Vietnamese village.”

This vanguard was embodied in the CUC, an organization that brought urban guerrillas and Indigenous peasants together in a shared struggle, thus integrating elements meant to be binary opposites. For five centuries, a small class of people who identify with what Ángel Rama calls the “lettered city,” the colonial planned metropolis inhabited by the Latin American educated elite, have held both power and land in Guatemala.²⁰ The wealth of this elite has historically depended on the labor of poor, rural Indigenous masses with little access to literacy, education, or formal power, living well outside the lettered city. Ladinos—a Guatemalan ethnic moniker meaning “non-Indigenous”—claim proximity to whiteness, modernity, and urbanity to differentiate themselves from the Indigenous masses, but the practical fragility of those claims has tended to leave Ladinos subordinate to the elite. The social imaginary legitimating this racial hierarchy identifies Indigeneity with “closed corporate community”—reproduced through tradition, endogamy, mechanical solidarity, and uniformity of will—in opposition to the modern, organic, and disputatious social life of the nation.²¹ Bringing modernity and community, the lettered and workers “with the hoe, with the machete,” into a single political formation, the CUC challenged the foundations of Guatemala’s quincennial system of domination and exploitation.²²

In so doing, it also challenged a prior embodiment of the mastery of history. The rationality of “Maní,” the name Sylvia Wynter gives to the European political subject of consciousness, was conditional on Europeans being “overrepresented as being isomorphic with the being of being human itself” through their domination of the planet.²³ Like the Haitian Revolution, whose claims on history making from the racial and colonial margins so confounded the premises of this overrepresentation

that both contemporaries and later observers failed to hear them, the CUC's political subject was so improbable as to be almost unthinkable.²⁴

The CUC used its unthinkability to strategic advantage. To organize under the nose of its enemies, the organization adopted methods of recruitment and mobilization that depended on a hermeneutic of secrecy and demanded strict disciplines of clandestinity and compartmentalization from its members.²⁵ These disciplines meant that the CUC's *conciencia* always dwelled more in organizational praxis than doctrinal statements. The canonical text of Guatemalan Indigenous revolution is K'iche' CUC organizer Rigoberta Menchú's *testimonio*, whose subtitle in Spanish is "this is how my *conciencia* was born." She lingers on the difficulties of its birth:

I went through a sort of painful change within myself. It wasn't so difficult for the rest of them at home to understand what was real and what was false. But I found it very hard. What did exploitation mean to me? . . . Why do they reject us? Why is the Indian not accepted? Why was it that the land used to belong to us? Used our ancestors to live here? Why don't outsiders accept Indian ways? This is where discrimination lies! . . . I finally began to see all this clearly. And that's when I started working as an organiser.²⁶

Only when organizing articulated its expression, in other words, could her *conciencia* finally make good on its offer of clarity.

But unlike Haiti's revolution, which succeeded in establishing the world's first Black republic, the CUC's political project was crushed before it could fully pronounce itself. In the wake of its crushing, *conciencia* has continued to resist clarification, not only for external observers but often for its own subjects. The Chupol where I spent two years off and on between 1998 and 2001 was no longer the united revolutionary village of the 1980s; on the contrary, Chupolenses described it as "divided." Monthly meetings showcased these divisions. Local authorities called *q'atb'al tzij* (word cutters) worked to build consensus about things like community projects, but debates were bitter, full of ad hominem jeers and catcalls, and meetings could drag on for days. "I never go anymore," one man told me. "They're like parrots, chattering without making sense."

Chupol's main division was between *organizados* (members of human rights groups born from the ashes of the CUC) and *no-organizados*, who rejected those groups and often repudiated the revolutionary past. Other

cleavages deepened this one. Practitioners of different religious traditions disagreed not only on liturgical matters but also on the proper relationship between religion and politics. Literate, working-age men who earned cash as itinerant merchants and were the canton's primary mediators with the outside world clashed with dependents over these responsibilities. A persistent division between men and women cut across all the others. These fault lines pointed to different moments of the community's history than revolution but also overdetermined positions on organizing.

During Guatemala's transition to peace, commentators pointed to divisions like these as evidence that armed conflict was essentially alien to Indigenous communities, casting the army and the guerrillas as equally guilty of exploiting Indigenous political naivete for their own nefarious geopolitical purposes.²⁷ Even the report of Guatemala's Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico (CEH, Commission for Historical Clarification), a UN-backed truth commission investigating wartime human rights violations, while providing a thorough account of Indigenous revolutionary mobilization, reverts to the language of closed corporate community to discuss the mobilization's aftermath. Violence, the CEH states, "deconstruct[ed] the mechanisms of identity and social cohesion," damaging "Maya community structures and their material and cultural mechanisms of reproduction."²⁸

Intellectual disenchantment with the shibboleths of modernity has shored up this framework. The worldwide collapse of revolution at the end of the Cold War was read as evidence that claims to make history were always illusory, even a fraud, perpetrated by "conscripts of modernity" who refused to understand that time resists mastery, especially by those on the global margins.²⁹ This move theoretically evacuated the possibility of an Indigenous revolutionary *conciencia* in places like Guatemala even as genocide eliminated those who embodied this possibility.

But Chupolenses did not themselves attribute the postgenocide complexities of collective action to the impossibility of *conciencia*. Instead, they blamed other people's failure to live up to its possibilities: "¡No tienen conciencia!" (They have no *conciencia*!), enemies regularly complained about each other. Even the non-organized—who, given the links between *conciencia* and revolutionary organization and their own repudiation of that history, might be expected to stake their claims elsewhere—would specify, "I am not organized, but I am *consciente*." Everyone agreed that *conciencia* demanded collective action and that collective action demanded

conciencia; they only disagreed about how to organize the relationship between the two. The expression *xaq jolom jun mundo* (every head is a world) gestured at the infuriating opacity of others' judgments on this question.

The judgments of *conciencia* could be opaque even to those acting on them. I lived in the home of a family whose twelve-year-old son, Mingo, was kidnapped by soldiers in 1982, never to reappear. In 1985, along with many of their neighbors, this family organized with GAM to demand Mingo's return. But rather than taking strength from this collective struggle, the family patriarch Tat Max spoke of his neighbors with deep bitterness, and soon I learned that many of them shunned him, too. Eventually he told me that in 1992 he had complained to the community authorities about the soldiers who were always watching his house. They accused him of provoking the army with his human rights work, at which, he confessed, "I lost my head." He took out his machete and said that if the authorities wanted him dead, one or two of them would go too. In the end, no one was hurt, but Tat Max was forever tainted by this failure of judgment. On Sundays he often drank to "calm the pain" of his double loss—of a son, and of a head to guide his search for justice.

The persistence of painful mystery at the heart of *conciencia* calls not for judging its failure to enable the self-mastery attributed to Mani, but rather for multiplying its genealogies beyond conscription into modernity. Many revolutions frame rupture in terms other than those of European modernity, and even revolutions that fail to make the rupture they seek have consequential political afterlives.³⁰ Understanding how revolutions orient their subjects toward history should thus compel us to ask what histories the subject turns to and what forces shape (and limit) her capacity to act on the sense of history she comes to in the process.

THE POLITICAL THEOLOGY OF THE WORD AND THE THEOPOLITICS OF WORDS

A key history toward which Chupolense subjects of *conciencia* are oriented is that of Christian empire. The concept of consciousness, like all modern political concepts, has a theological shadow, neatly flagged by *conciencia*'s double meaning in Spanish as the conscience. In Christian theology, the conscience is associated with the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit or "breath of God." At once human and divine, it abides

within God's children as a "spark [*scintilla*] of divine love."³¹ This spark allows them to bear witness to God's plan for salvation as "a kind of living law inscribed in [their] nature," aligning their will with God's will—at least when the conscience is working correctly.³² But the acts of the conscience, unlike those of consciousness, cannot be judged against an objective standard. The medium of the Holy Spirit is grace, a gift that arrives unbidden and unmerited by its recipients, so at the heart of the conscience lies a sacred mystery.³³

Christians have fought for millennia about when and to whom grace is given. These questions have also driven centuries of Christian warfare against non-Christians, culminating in the conquest. Directed by the pope to "subdue and bring to the dominion of our faith" the inhabitants of the New World, the Spanish Crown enlisted the mendicant orders of the Catholic Church to keep the conquistadors on track.³⁴ Faced with the threat of conquistador violence eliminating the population they were meant to evangelize, the mendicants drew on Thomas Aquinas's reading of the Aristotelian notion of *logos*, the "word," to defend their mandate.³⁵

For Aristotle, *logos* meant intelligible speech—that is, Greek—but also the capacity to reason, a definition condemning those lacking Greek as barbarians, fit only to be ruled by force. Aquinas acknowledged that civil community required mutual intelligibility, but for him *logos* also meant the Word of God, implicating the mystery of the Holy Spirit. His account of the Word's divinity drew on another creation story: Genesis, which opens with God speaking the world into being and then giving the gift of words to Adam as a sign of his mimetic likeness to his Creator. This gift, however, was a "double-edged sword."³⁶ As Eve's susceptibility to the serpent showed, its mysteries meant it could be fumbled, forever imbuing human speech with the potential for lies, misunderstandings, and silences flowing from the forbidden knowledge of the flesh.

Jesus's incarnation as the Word made flesh, both fully divine and fully human, was God's promise to repair His broken dialogue with Creation. But humans still tethered to the postlapsarian world continue to face the challenge of discerning the true Word of God within all-too-fleshy utterances. As a Christian, Aquinas could thus neither deny speakers of strange tongues access to the Word of God nor endorse all forms of reasoning as equally aligned with the Word. To resolve this dilemma, he split *logos* into two distinct capacities—*synderesis*, a basic inclination toward the good common to all people, and *conscientia*, the capacity to reason in alignment with divine order—with the action of grace mediating the passage from

the one to the other. The mendicants seized on this distinction as a guiding principle for differentiating those imprisoned by the flesh from those able to transcend it in New World Christian communities. In the words of Bartolomé de las Casas, the Dominican friar whose articulation of this distinction would shape the Crown's approach to governing its new subjects, "the law of grace perfects the acts of nature," liberating those visited by the Holy Spirit from enslavement.³⁷

Vicente Rafael argues that organizing Spanish rule to align with the law of grace "embedded the structure" of New World sovereignty in the speech act of conversion.³⁸ Understood as a "matter of receiving and responding to God's call," conversion happens through the passage of the Word from the voice of the priest to the ear of the so-called *indio*, making the space between the voice and the ear critical for the sovereign to secure.³⁹ The *reducción*, a new urban form in which dispersed Indigenous populations were forced to gather, was the instrument of its securing. Planned and built on a Latinate grid, these lettered cities boasted a church for teaching doctrine and a gallows for punishing backsliders at their heart. Often erected on and with the rubble of Indigenous ceremonial centers to drive the point home, they established a new behavioral matrix consolidating "built space, the care and presentation of the body, a code of conduct, and the orderly relation among the three" under the law of grace.⁴⁰ The *reducción* thus made Aquinas's *conscientia* a key political-theological infrastructure for the New World body politic, situating the development of the *indio*'s moral capacities at the temporal, spatial, and relational points where "Catholic *humanitas* (as a notion of being human) is short-circuited into a *civitas humana* (as a notion of a . . . common civilization)."⁴¹

Among the many malign consequences of this short-circuiting was the creation of an imaginary of sovereignty as God-like freedom from any obligation other than to the sovereign's own will, constituted by what Nazi political theologian Carl Schmitt calls the decision on the exception.⁴² The term *jurisdiction*—a synonym for sovereignty—literally means "speaking the law," as Rachel Sieder notes. For the modern state, she argues, jurisdiction "first connotes authority and then is an act of speaking or enunciation of the law."⁴³ But to hold, that enunciation requires a prior ordering of the grounds on which authority is exercised, establishing what Schmitt calls a "*nomos* of the earth," a universal consensus on how "measure, order, and form constitute a spatially concrete unity."⁴⁴ By mapping European measures and forms into the New World's very earth, the *reducción* usurped the action of grace to overrepresent its style

of jurisdiction as isometric with authority itself, rendering New World spaces as real-world instances of the exception, devoid of any order.⁴⁵

But both the voice and the ear participating in the forging of the New World were always made of flesh, and the space between them was always already ordered. As William Hanks argues, priests hoping to work in this space had to traffic in Indigenous words, which conjured non-Christian universes of meaning needing reduction as much as pre-Columbian built forms.⁴⁶ The Franciscans who evangelized the Yucatán addressed this problem by “commensurating” Mayan speech genres with scripts of colonial governance. But the traces of older sovereignties lingering in these genres resisted full commensuration, making Indigenous speech acts an enduring object of Spanish suspicion. The mysteries of grace, in short, could never be fully disentangled from the materialities of New World flesh.

These entanglements have engendered their own creation stories. My neighbor in Chupol, Tat Xwan, was a respected *k'amol b'e*, often called upon to perform marriages and other acts of mediation for fellow Chupolenses. When I asked him how he did his sacred work, he answered with a familiar-sounding tale: “Before, Jesus, he wandered forty days, forty nights, without eating anything or water or food, but after he won, he made some mud, like a plant for people. When Chichicastenango was filled with pure people, our ancestors say he blew in their faces, and that’s when their voices came out, when they began to talk.” Tat Xwan then described the birth of Adam and the creation of Eve and how bad people tempted the couple into eating fruit. For this error, he told me, they were sentenced to “planting” all the peoples of the world—peoples who, like corn, come in different colors. “That’s why things are as they are; there’s a lot of words of God in that,” he concluded. “One woman and one man, children of God, only their voices change but all are children of God and all made of corn.”

Like Aquinas, Tat Xwan invoked Genesis to explain how words of God order the world. But he diverged from Genesis at a critical juncture, locating Jesus, Adam, and Eve in Chichicastenango rather than the Garden of Eden and claiming the substance of the people they “planted” and indeed all people as made of corn, not dust. These details harken to the *Popol Wuj*, in which flesh of corn is the medium of communication between people and the divine, not the condition of its impossibility. Rejecting the eschatology of the Fall even as he affirmed the earthliness of human nature, Tat Xwan reclaimed the space between the voice and the ear for other speech

acts than conversion, and modes of sovereignty other than deciding on the exception.

Contemporary Maya political life also claims this space. Edgar Esquit and Carlos Fredy Ochoa argue that the Maya concept of the word—*tzij*—is both immanent to and constitutive of social structure, as a living “form of transmission, expression, and existence” that is rooted in orality and diffused through the norm of “respect for the word.”⁴⁷ The notion of *tik*—“to sow, plant, nail in, be upright”—integrates respect for the word into human development.⁴⁸ Sown by parents, the seed of respect grows *tikaal* (bit by bit) through household routines like a child giving thanks for her meal, starting with her grandfather and moving through the rest of the family according to age and gender. Respect for the word thus offers a kind of “grounded normativity,” described by North American Indigenous scholars Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson as an ethical framework whose “practices and procedures, based on deep reciprocity,” are housed in Indigenous places.⁴⁹ But Maya words are also *q’jer tzij* (ancient words), emanating from “the ancestors and the divinities.”⁵⁰ The word for thanks, *maltiox*, incorporates *tiox*, the word for God. Respect for the word thus weaves communion with the divine into everyday Indigenous routines, upending Christian empire’s insistence on the Word’s transcendence.

Maya theories of jurisdiction build out this ethical framework. Chupol’s monthly meetings treated both authority and the law as immanent to what Sieder calls “intensely contextual” place-based speech acts, lengthy verbal exchanges using an audibly distinct rhetorical style, that aim “to establish the truth, construct consensus, and restore communal balance and harmony.”⁵¹ The K’iche’ term for community authorities—*q’atb’al tzij* (word cutters; literally, “where the word is cut”)—names the form of these exchanges as well as those who preside over them.⁵² Word cutting generates “heterarchy” rather than hierarchy, or what Diego Vásquez Montemroso calls “a constellative, multiple form of organization, where elements participate in relations of equality—or something close to equality—among themselves.”⁵³ As a form of jurisdiction, it can generate a *nomos* of the earth, but only by drawing its order out of place and time, not by imposing it from above. Word cutting is both the germ of the seed of Maya potentiality and the mode of its germination.

In this sense, word-cutting enacts a K’iche’ theopolitics. The term *theopolitics* comes from Martin Buber and Walter Benjamin, philosophers who drew on Jewish prophetic and messianic tradition to counter Schmitt’s capture of the divine for his authoritarian political

theology.⁵⁴ These traditions summon a “God otherwise,” not to shore up the order of the present but to point to the absence of justice from that order, putting history itself on trial.⁵⁵ For Buber, theopolitics takes the form of a refusal to “provide a permanent dwelling for God,” inviting the divine to participate in the everyday,⁵⁶ while Benjamin’s theopolitics summons the divine to liberate justice from the law, breaking with the profane logic of historical time and ushering in the messianic kingdom.⁵⁷ Whether affirmative, negative, or oscillating between these poles, their accounts of theopolitics “question the borders” of both the political and the theological.⁵⁸

In the Americas, as I and others have argued, theopolitical questions are posed not only to the form of the state but also to the history of conquest and the messy divine–human formations arising from its failure to fully “unmake” preexisting sovereign orders.⁵⁹ The promise of divine justice enfolded in these formations has enabled colonial violence but also hailed those who suffer it.⁶⁰ A New World theopolitics responds to that hailing by calling on the divine to participate in performances of the historical-material flesh that enact “the power to constitute and the power of that which is constituted” in the same movement, refusing to cede the ground on which Christian empire claims sovereignty. Staged for an audience that may include the state, but not exclusively, and never as the final decider, these performances both make visible and push back against the political-theological formation of the New World and the global order it undergirds.⁶¹

The theopolitical force of Maya word cutting thus derives from the style in which it poses its questions: by fostering what Charles Hirschkind calls an “ethical soundscape,” operating on the affects and senses to enflesh specific modes of attunement to the call for justice.⁶² This soundscape works through resonances. Conjuring oscillation and reverberation, movements through which one rhythm responds to the frequency of another, resonance is an “intertextual, poetic process” that generates a feeling of mysterious correspondence between events, allowing people “to cast a new story about powers that seem too big to name.”⁶³ Resonance questions the borders of the lettered city sensorially as well as thematically, as an aural “formation and a force that seeps through its crevices.”⁶⁴ Speaking the law with Maya words, in short, enacts a refusal—in Audra Simpson’s sense of an enunciation with the “ability to signal Indigeneity and couple it with sovereignty”—of the *reducción*’s misappropriation of the divinity of words and the Word.⁶⁵

The revolutionary *conciencia* of Chupolenses was born from such a refusal. The good road (*ri utz b'e*) names the form of this refusal as well as the site of its enunciation. To explain, I'll return to the difficulties of enacting *conciencia* in the wake of genocide.

When I first sought permission to conduct my research in Chupol, with Tat Max as my sponsor, Julio Morales—one of the authorities involved in the 1992 altercation with Tat Max—scolded me for living with someone he called *desprestigiado* (discredited). Tat Max himself branded Julio a traitor to the organizations. So I was surprised when Julio intervened on my behalf the next time I presented myself to a community assembly. Met by increasingly vocal skepticism, I had begun to panic when Julio strode forward to advocate for me at great length. Telling the assembly, among other things, that I would bring the community “good ideas,” an idiom harkening to *conciencia*, he won me enthusiastic applause and thus permission to proceed.

But despite his skillful use of this idiom, Julio later described his moral and political trajectory to me in terms that echoed Tat Max's accusations against him:

I participated in the CUC. Those movements used to do good work. The organization was massive here. I was also on the directorate of the church—I trusted myself then. Our philosophy was to accompany communities, resolve their problems, their projects. I was a *k'amol b'e*, a guide. But in 1989 I had a personal problem: I took two wives. I didn't feel right anymore. How could I? I would capacitate other people, give workshops, *concientizar*, tell them not to drink alcohol, or do other bad things—like take two wives! Leaders can make mistakes, but they have to show their *conciencia*.

Like his nemesis Tat Max, Julio lost his head after revolution. His words could still sound, but they no longer resonated as before.

And as their resonances faded, Julio suggested, so did his capacity to act as a *k'amol b'e*. Often translated into Spanish as “witness” or, as Julio glossed it, “guide,” this K'iche' term literally means “road knower.” Roads are a key metaphor for organizing space, self, and opportunity in Maya imaginaries, Abigail Adams explains: “Over the course of a life, people develop ‘roads’ as they aspire to expanded morality and power. A person's life is measured by the quality of the roads that they build and by their

success in maintaining balance as they travel.”⁶⁶ Roads carry a similar metaphorical weight in Christian imaginaries, where the demands they place on travelers make them stand both for the difficulties of leading a principled life and as sites for transformative encounters with the divine. For Chupolenses, these dense metaphorical entailments make roads sites of moral danger as well as possibility: Travelers can suffer accidents, falling or being pushed off the road by shadowy forces, if they make poor life choices. A road is thus the infrastructural manifestation of the mysterious interior of a head, offering some purchase on a person’s *conciencia*. Road knowers, in turn, are people whose own life journeys are of such quality that they can survey the general landscape and determine the best way through it for others as well as themselves.

K’amol b’e was one of the titles given to community authorities in the colonial period, tying road knowing to Maya place-based jurisdiction.⁶⁷ Now the term refers to a variety of roles, including spiritual counselling and conflict mediation. The paradigmatic work of the *k’amol b’e*, however, is to officiate marriage ceremonies. In its fullest form, the marriage ceremony over which he presides (all the *k’amol b’e* I knew were men) involves three visits by the boy’s family to the girl’s family to ask for her hand. At each visit, two *k’amol b’e* speak, one on behalf of each party. They exchange lengthy meditations, often in matched couplets, on the nature of marriage and the community’s history and landscape, punctuated by less poetic negotiations over bridal gifts and timelines for the marriage itself. At the end of the final visit, the bride leaves her birth home with her husband and his family, taking the first steps on their new road together. If this road is good, it will lead to the formation of a household—the community’s basic (patriarchal) unit—and eventually branch out into the life roads of the couple’s children, offering a model for the organization of collective action over time at other scales.

Words are thus critical to the kind of organizing the *k’amol b’e* does, but they never take the decisionist form of a pronouncement of marriage. As Tat Max once told me, the couple is there to learn that marriage is “not a whim, not a toy; it’s for life.” This lesson comes from listening to the two *k’amol b’e* word-cut, gradually guiding the couple and the wider community in which they participate toward the future together. Julio’s invocation of this role to describe his work as a revolutionary organizer identifies road knowing as a word-cutting theory of history making.

But tying revolution to road knowing also indexes the history of the birth of *conciencia* in Chupol, where revolution travelled on a specific



1.2 A wedding in Chupol, presided over by a *k'amol b'e*, 1999. Photo by the author.

road: the Pan-American Highway, built through the community in 1956.⁶⁸ First proposed at the 1923 Pan-American conference in Santiago and later championed by Franklin D. Roosevelt, the highway was imagined as a continuous artery linking the Americas from tip to tip in a smooth stream of vehicles carrying tourists and commodities to expanding hemispheric markets. Bringing together “engineering expertise, political will and economic ambition” and facilitating some journeys over others, roads like this embody the modern state’s promises of progress and development and stabilize its territorial claims, making them among the infrastructures most emblematic of state sovereignty.⁶⁹ But the Pan-American Highway was less an instrument of individual Latin American states than of a “US imperial vision that presented technology as an instrument for hemispheric integration.”⁷⁰

Latin American states dragged their feet on implementing this vision until Guatemala’s 1944–54 “October Revolution” motivated the United States to insist that the highway be built.⁷¹ Under Presidents Juan José Arévalo (1944–50) and Jacobo Árbenz (1950–54), the Guatemalan government enacted far-reaching democratic and redistributive reforms for the first time in its history, threatening domestic elites and US interests just as the Cold War was gearing up. When Árbenz passed an agrarian reform law targeting large landholdings, including those of the Boston-based

United Fruit Company (UFCO), the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) colluded with factions of the army and local elites to portray Guatemala as a Soviet beachhead in the hemisphere.⁷² After orchestrating a coup against Árbenz, the United States rewarded Guatemala for returning to its fold by funding the highway's completion within its territory.

The highway's passage through Chupol thus situated the canton firmly on capitalism's Cold War margins. Chupolenses, who had worked for centuries as porters of the goods produced and exchanged within the network of highland Indigenous markets that predates the conquest, accepted the new road's offer to deepen their integration into capitalism, leveraging their ancestral marketing skills to sell on wider and non-Indigenous circuits, particularly after third-class buses began running in the 1960s. But the highway was also a conduit for actors imagining futures other than the triumph of the market.

Chief among these was the Catholic Church, drawn to places like Chupol by Vatican II's call to shift theological authority from the magisterium to the conscience, as "man's most secret core, and his sanctuary" where "he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths."⁷³ In Latin America, church personnel heard this call as an invitation to retrace God's historic routes into the continent and reframe the geographies charted by the lettered city as a hierarchy of center and periphery, which needed rebalancing for God's Word to be heard. Chupol's church—an outpost of the Chichicastenango parish constructed by its priest in the 1960s—was one of many modest post-Conciliar infrastructures built across the continent in this period. Like other such infrastructures, it became a platform for new projects aiming to reshape New World moral capacities, now using the Marxist pedagogy of *concientización* developed by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. These projects taught Indigenous Catholics like Julio to read the Bible as a prophetic text of liberation.

But the new journeys enabled by the Pan-American Highway also crossed older roads on which Chupolenses had long traveled. For centuries, Chupolenses had used what they called *puros extravíos* (pure shortcuts) to porter their goods. These footpaths afforded the traveler a sensory experience of the landscape's shape and meaning that was implicated in ancestral practices of placemaking.⁷⁴ They were also traversed by the colonial *camino real* (royal highway), which linked Chupol to Chichicastenango on its way to linking Guatemala's colonial capital with that of Mexico. Built for the equestrian travel of priests and officials, it embedded movement in the racialized and sacralized hierarchies of colonial space.

The Pan-American Highway thus situated Chupol at a crossroads where newer and older sovereignties, economies, and embodied norms could meet, along with the different “enchantments” each of these offered.⁷⁵

This situation empowered Chupolenses not only as subjects of the market or God, but also as road knowers. Meanwhile, organizers from the CUC and the EGP were also traveling the Pan-American Highway, meeting Chupolenses where they were, and inviting road knowers like Julio to help them articulate the potentialities of this encounter into a good road for revolutionary action. The Indigenous revolutionary *conciencia* that they helped to unfold worked heterarchichally, allowing different accounts of the past and the coming future to gather resonance and shape a forceful call for justice.

The resonances among these accounts were dispersed when Task Force Iximché reclaimed the Pan-American Highway from revolution and for the state, making *conciencia* more difficult to heed. Julio’s mistrust of his own road-knowing capacities stems from this difficulty. But calls for justice can still gather force if *conciencia* is able to do its work. Here I ask readers to attune themselves to the resonances of words and roads over more than five hundred years of Chupol’s history, so that they can learn to hear what Chupolenses have to say about remaking the world after genocide, more than five centuries into its routine practice.

(PARTIALLY) CONNECTING ROADS

Conciencia can take many roads. My own road began long before I ever stopped in Chupol. On all sides, I descend from settlers. Some of them did their settling in Guatemala, where they became agents of Guatemalan state formation. During my research, I would occasionally encounter my ancestors’ signatures, sometimes literally. Seeking Chupol in the archives, I found a box of letters my great-grandfather sent in the 1920s when he was military governor of the Quiché, laconically allocating the labor of Chupolenses’ ancestors to various state infrastructural projects. I glimpsed another great-grandfather, the head of the Carnegie Institution of Washington’s Maya project, in the acknowledgments of Ruth Bunzel’s ethnography of 1930s Chichicastenango and in Sol Tax’s letters about the challenges of his own Chichicastenango fieldwork.

As a child, growing up in Canada but visiting Guatemala regularly, I had an episodic experience of the war. My grandfather, an army surgeon

with the rank of colonel, had suffered profoundly disabling brain damage right before I was born, and during my childhood he lived at the military hospital where he had once worked. He received our visits in a pleasant garden among officers recovering from more visible wounds, tended to by devoted Indigenous nurses and guarded by friendly young Indigenous soldiers. At the well-appointed houses of my grandparents' landowner friends, attended by silent Indigenous servants, I overheard stories about guerrilla kidnappings and assassinations that grew more grotesque over time. On other occasions I overheard my mother's cousin, the daughter of the exiled head of Guatemala's Communist Party and not a member of those other social circles, whispering to my mother about the acts of violence my grandparents' friends were tacitly endorsing.

In the early 1980s we stopped visiting because the war drew closer. The EGP bombed a bank near my grandmother's building, blowing out the windows of her twelfth-floor apartment, and we could no longer visit the beautiful countryside, for, as my mother told me bluntly, "they have shut off the North and are killing all the Indians." Later in the decade, I began returning to Guatemala, and through reflecting on the worlds of my childhood I found my anthropological vocation. I have long known that critique is an act of treason to those worlds; the work I present here consummates my transformation into a class and race traitor, a role I joyfully embrace (*así me nació la conciencia*).

But this change within has sometimes been painful. In my efforts to write about Guatemala's Indigenous revolution, I have often been seized by the horrifying nothing in the middle of the story and the problem of rendering it in words. Tat Max told me the story of his son Mingo's disappearance so many times that I could tell it myself almost word-for-word and came to dread its repetition. It was not until I had lived with his family for nearly a year that my listening finally seemed to offer some comfort. One day he told me that Mingo, who would have been my age if he survived, was a smart boy, good at school, and had wanted to continue his studies beyond what the canton could then offer. Indeed, he had used the small table where I kept my books and papers for the same purpose. "Now I know that you have come to be my witness," Tat Max announced, and soon after he stopped telling me Mingo's story, at least until after I returned from a long absence. It was not the story but our slowly developing familiarity, in all senses of the word, that allowed me to serve Tat Max—for a time—as a witness.

And yet Tat Max's words were not gratuitous to my coming to inhabit this role. Telling me about Mingo again and again was how Tat Max

came to “feel with me”—the idiomatic expression for being on the same wavelength that he would transpose from K’iche’ into Spanish (*me siento mucho con Ud*) to lay claim to my ear—and I to feel with him. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues, “The reasons why a specific story matters to a specific population are themselves historical.”⁷⁶ The story that mattered to Tat Max was about a smart and hardworking son who sought to escape the routines Guatemala imposes on Indigenous life, pushing back against Tat Max’s own genocidally enforced return to those routines. Perhaps I was finally able to serve as Tat Max’s witness because he first served as my *k’amol b’e*, his words opening my ears to the call for justice.

The enemy’s efforts to annihilate *conciencia* can make it unsettling to revisit: Sometimes attempts to discern its call can raise the specter of a return to violence, destabilizing the present as well as the past. So I do not try to “break the silence” impeding the recognition of *conciencia* but rather to attune my own and my reader’s ears to the refraction of its call through the violence of genocide as well as the passage of time. I have tried to learn from Chupolenses to center this attunement as the condition of possibility for exercising *conciencia* and thus for the flowering of something new from its seed.

This book emerges out of conversations with Tat Max and others in Chupol and beyond over many years. Julio’s early promise to the community that I had “good ideas” enrolled me in certain threads of those conversations, which took me time to understand, but in which I hope to continue to participate. For this work I draw on recent literature on the partial connections,⁷⁷ incommensurabilities,⁷⁸ and equivocations⁷⁹ shaping Indigenous experiences of coloniality and modernity in the Americas.⁸⁰ Yet the vectors of difference that interest me most have less to do with the ontologies or cosmovisions often taken up in this literature and more to do with reckonings of history and its relationship to justice.⁸¹ I take conversational moves like Tat Max’s or Julio’s as theorizing how words nudge people into action, something I am also trying to theorize. Different people’s words nudged me in different directions, hinting at multiple partially connected historicities. So I try to let the differences among these theories linger, exploring resonances among different projects for knowing the world and transforming it to walk an ever-shifting good road.

The book begins with the community and the highway. Chapter 1 contextualizes the Cold War birth of *conciencia* within Christian empire. As the Cold War intensified, imperial powers turned to rural peripheries—revealed by the Chinese revolution as repositories of insurgent agency as

well as resources and labor—as proxy sites for struggles over the world order. In Chupol, US-led Cold War modernization, embodied in the Pan-American Highway, articulated the threat of revolution to the potentialities already abiding within rural ecologies formed in the colonial encounter, implicating God as well as the state and racial capitalism in the problem of injustice.

Chapter 2 traces the CUC's emergence through encounters among development-minded Indigenous communities, the armed Left, and the liberationist Church. Set against the background of a Guatemalan state increasingly captured by Cold War counterinsurgency, it focuses on debates over the problem of understanding the relation between the past and the present. From these debates, an Indigenous revolutionary *conciencia* emerged as a faculty for discerning and acting on history's prophetic dimensions, one whose relevance to everyday life snapped dramatically into focus after the devastating 1976 earthquake.

Chapter 3 describes the fleeting rise of an Indigenous revolutionary sovereignty in Chupol and its brutal crushing by the Guatemalan state. I analyze the experience of acceleration that led to the moment Chupolenses depicted as “nothing” and show how the negation of this experience challenged the capacity for discernment that defined *conciencia* as revolutionary. I also trace the new roads Chupolenses began to walk in the face of these challenges, insisting on the ongoing importance of discernment.

Chapters 4 and 5 explore facets of the “peace process” meant to end Guatemala's war. Peace brought a flood of international money, human rights advocates, and development experts to Guatemala to repair the violent past, but some of the targets of their interventions—mass graves and patriarchal norms—struck at core arenas of Indigenous theopolitics, namely relations with the ancestors and within households. Both chapters show how Chupolenses navigated the demands these interventions, which often intensified their surveillance by a state long dedicated to Indigenous annihilation, placed on *conciencia*.

Chapter 4 situates Chupol's exhumation within long-standing Indigenous debates about the theopolitical agencies of the dead. Because revolutionary *conciencia* emerged from specific positions in these debates, the exhumation's demand that the wartime dead tell their truth risked reviving older conflicts. Chapter 5 turns to gender and the household as intimate spaces for organizing. It shows how the peace process reduced the question of how to gender justice to a problem of sexual violence, offering

women a novel platform for exercising their *conciencia* that also risked subjecting them to tighter articulations of patriarchy.

The book closes with the recent past. In January 2024, Bernardo Arévalo—son of the October Revolution’s first president—assumed Guatemala’s presidency with a mandate to end entrenched corruption. But he was only able to take power thanks to a massive Indigenous mobilization. Along roads throughout Guatemala, including Chupol’s stretch of the Pan-American Highway, ancestral authorities mounted blockades preventing normal circulation until Arévalo took office. I end my account of the good road by reflecting on the resonances of this event with five hundred years of Indigenous challenges to and hopes for Guatemala and on the liberatory projects still awaiting germination from that history.

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Notes

INTRODUCTION. THE GOOD ROAD

- 1 In Guatemala, the term *cantón* refers to the submunicipal administrative districts of certain predominantly Indigenous municipalities and connotes some degree of autonomous Indigenous governance. I use the English *canton* in this text as a near equivalent.
On K'iche' and other ethnic terms used in this book, see the "Note on Terminology."
- 2 See Leys, *Trauma*, for a discussion of this complex notion and a critique of its rough-and-ready application to problems of violence.
- 3 See also Nelson, *Who Counts?*
- 4 Xón Riquiac, *Entre la exotización*, 139. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.
- 5 Gordillo, "Luminescence of Rubble," 125. For anthropological renderings of the problem of affirmative negativity, see also Navaro, "Aftermath of Mass Violence"; Napolitano, "Anthropology and Traces"; Stoler, *Imperial Debris*; Collins, *Revolt of the Saints*; Gordillo, *Rubble*; Kernaghan, "Time as Weather"; Hirschkind, *Feeling of History*; and Rozenal, *Absent Stone*. Lurking within these moves is the ancient problem of apophasis: the philosophical and theological attempt to reckon with what is unthinkable, unspeakable, and ineffable but nonetheless immensely consequential, like a God whose refusal to pronounce Himself leaving the divine open to human speculation and elaboration. See Caputo and Keller, "Theopoetic/Theopolitic"; C. Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*; and McAlister and Napolitano, "Introduction." The appeal of affirmative negativity becomes especially clear in times of catastrophe and genocide like the present: With Walter Benjamin's Angel of History, we dwell in the apophatic, facing only ruins, absences, and silences from which to make a life. See Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History."
- 6 Yates-Doerr, "Does Meat Come from Animals?," 312.
- 7 Mondloch and Carmack, *Popol Wuj*, 26.

8 Mondloch and Carmack, *Popol Wuj*, 29, 31.
 9 Mondloch and Carmack, *Popol Wuj*, 37, 155.
 10 Mondloch and Carmack, *Popol Wuj*, 155, 157.
 11 David Carrasco describes this as “an extensive religious performance that the Maya today believe is still being carried out.” D. Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica*, 32. But I prefer to situate this performance in the realm of labor “in the field and the hearth,” following Michael D. Carrasco: “It was through [Maya] myth’s clear reference to domestic activities that the metaphors expressed therein had the potential to speak to a wide segment of society and became a useful medium for political and religious propaganda and, more importantly, an explanatory model for life’s mysteries.” M. Carrasco, “Field to Hearth,” 601.
 12 Quiroa, “Popol Vuh.” The fact that the Guatemalan state declared the *Popol Wuj* to be its “national book” in 1971, just as it was gearing up for genocide, adds a further layer of complexity to its story.
 13 My use of the word *tradition* here and in what follows is indebted to Talal Asad. For Asad, who draws on Michel Foucault and Alasdair MacIntyre, tradition is not the opposite of modernity but rather a kind of ongoing conversation, embedded in and referring back to a particular form of life, giving rise to specific possibilities for critique in the process. The concept “stresses embodied, critical learning rather than abstract theorization.” Asad, “Thinking About Tradition,” 166.
 14 Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 175. Of course, debates about the ontological status of the concept of consciousness far exceed this context, but they also fall outside the scope of the specific genealogy I offer here.
 15 Keane, *Christian Moderns*, 116. See also Hirschkind, *Feeling of History*.
 16 Koselleck, *Futures Past*, 46–47. For fascinating revisions of these claims, see Edelstein et al., *Power and Time*; and Lazar, “Historical Narrative.”
 17 In the “Theses on Feuerbach,” Karl Marx defines revolutionary practice as “the coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing” (112). Vladimir Ilich Lenin saw teaching workers to “apply in practice the materialist analysis” as itself a “training of the masses in revolutionary activity.” Lenin, *What Is to Be Done?*, 42, 43. Frantz Fanon, who argued that Lenin needed to be “slightly stretched” for anticolonial revolution, placed his pedagogical bets instead on armed struggle, which, “when it arises out of the war of liberation, introduces into each man’s consciousness the ideas of a common cause, of a national destiny, and of a collective history.” Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 5. The Latin American Left, both in and outside the armed struggle, often turned to Paulo Freire’s pedagogy of *concientización* to teach the oppressed to “problemiz[e] their situation in its concrete objective reality so that being critically aware of it, they can also act critically on it.”

Darder, “Concientização,” 48.

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In a recent essay, China Miéville argues that despite their interest in forming revolutionary consciousness, Marxist theorists have been remarkably resistant to considering the deeper metaphysical question “*Why is there consciousness full stop?*” He labels the assumption that this question is unimportant for understanding political consciousness as “folk Marxism.” Miéville, “Beyond Folk Marxism.”

18 Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History*.

19 See Mayer, *Furies*; Donham, *Marxist Modern*; Cherstich et al., *Anthropologies of Revolution*. Or, for the same point more poetically, see Langston Hughes’s 1932 poem “Lenin”: “Lenin walks around the world / Black, brown, and white receive him / Language is no barrier / The strangest tongues believe him.”

20 Rama, *Lettered City*.

21 See Tax, “Municipios of the Midwestern Highlands,” for an account of the closed corporate community as the natural sociocultural unit of analysis for Mesoamerican anthropology. See Wolf, “Closed Corporate Peasant Communities,” for a critique of Tax that situates these units within the global political economy.

22 The poetic expression quoted here was how Chupolenses gestured to their agrarian livelihood.

23 Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being,” 330.

24 Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*.

25 McAllister, “Testimonial Truths”; Mazariegos, “War of Proper Names.”

26 Menchú, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, 122.

27 The most aggressively articulated academic version of this argument comes from anthropologist David Stoll, in his books *Between Two Armies* and *Rigoberta Menchú*. But many American anthropologists working in Indigenous communities have neglected to consider what the history of Indigenous revolutionary mobilization meant there, whether because of disciplinary attachments to the notion of community as *Gemeinschaft*, fear of exposing their informants, misreading their informants’ silence as evidence that there is no story to tell, or all of the above. (Historians are, unsurprisingly, far less likely to ignore this critical aspect of Guatemala’s recent past.) Anthropologists and scholars from adjacent disciplines who have given thought to this history, many of them Guatemalan, include Nelson, *Finger in the Wound*, *Reckoning*, and *Who Counts?*; Copeland, *Democracy Development Machine*; McAllister and Nelson, *War by Other Means*; González-Izás, *Se cambió el tiempo*; Manz, *Paradise in Ashes*; Bastos and Camus, *Sombras de una batalla* and *Movimiento maya*; Bastos and Cumes, *Mayanización*; Gramajo Bauer et al., *Lucha campesina y trabajo pastoral*; Mazariegos, “War of Proper Names”; Batz, *Fourth Invasion*; Casolo, “Unthinkable Rebellion”; Flores Aguilar, “Entre Ilom y el bicentenario” and “Mirada alzada”; Palencia

Frener, “Movimiento maya estatal”; Vela Castañeda, *Guatemala*; and Oglesby, “Politics at Work.”

28 CEH, *Guatemala, memoria del silencio*, 3:191.

29 Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*.

30 C. L. R. James, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, and Susan Buck-Morss made this point some time ago in the context of the Haitian Revolution. See James, *Black Jacobins*; Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*; and Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*. Anthropologists and historians have since developed it further for other revolutions. See, e.g., Salomon, *For Love of the Prophet*; Odabaei, “Outside (*Kharij*) of Tradition”; Holbraad et al., *Ruptures*; Cherstich et al., *Anthropologies of Revolution*; Al-Khalili et al., *Revolution Beyond the Event*; Wilson, *Afterlives of Revolution*; Edelstein et al., *Power and Time*; and Doostdar, “God and Revolution in Iran.”

31 Delhay, *Christian Conscience*, 85.

32 Delhay, *Christian Conscience*, 88–89.

33 See Pitt-Rivers, “Place of Grace,” 425, for a discussion of grace as an anthropological concept, denoting “always something extra, over and above ‘what counts,’ what is obligatory or predictable.”

34 Castro, *Another Face of Empire*, 22.

35 This account of sixteenth-century theological debates draws on Pagden, *Fall of Natural Man* and *Spanish Imperialism*.

36 Ong, *Presence of the Word*, 12.

37 Las Casas, *In Defense of the Indians*, 43.

38 Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism*, 17.

39 Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism*, 41.

40 Hanks, *Converting Words*, 1. See also Nemser, *Infrastructures of Race*.

41 Napolitano, *Migrant Hearts*, 11. See also Saldaña-Portillo, *Indian Given*.

As scholars of the Black Atlantic and of the Indigenous and Latin Americas have long argued, the deferral of personhood to Indigenous and Black people enabled the development of the Atlantic slave trade and capitalism and shaped the categories—race, gender, kinship, sex, religion, the body, and consciousness itself—that would organize modern thought. See, for example, Mariátegui, *Seven Interpretive Essays*; Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*; Dussel, *Encubrimiento del otro*; Wallerstein, *Modern World-System I*; Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*; Trouillot, “Anthropology and the Savage Slot”; Wynter, “1492” and “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being”; Quijano, “Coloniality of Power”; Robinson, *Black Marxism*; Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*; Mignolo, *Dark Side of Western Modernity*; McKittrick, “Plantation Futures”; Dunbar-Ortiz, *Indigenous Peoples’ History*; Lowe, *Intimacies of Four Continents*; and Oliphant, “Secular and the Global.”

42 This formulation of the modern problem of sovereignty comes from

Rafael, “Afterlife of Empire.” Schmitt’s is found in *Political Theology*, 5.

For discussions of how the New World shaped imaginaries of sovereignty, see Thomas, *Political Life in the Wake and Exorbitance*; Trouillot, "Anthropology of the State"; Bonilla, *Non-Sovereign Futures*; McAllister and Napolitano, "Introduction"; J. Hughes, *Church of the Dead*; Johnson et al., *Ekklesia*; An, *Coloniality of the Secular*; and Manrique, "Insubordinate Black Catholicism." For discussions of how political theologies other than the Schmittian shape imaginaries of sovereignty, see, for example, Singh, "Headless Horseman of Central India"; Salomon, *For Love of the Prophet*; McAllister and Napolitano, "Political Theology/Theopolitics"; Maunaguru, "Vulnerable Sovereignty"; Dew, "'The Stare Down'"; Crosson, *Experiments with Power*; Rosen, *Law in Light*; Dubilet and Lloyd, *Political Theology Reimagined*; and Bretherton et al., *What Is Political Theology?*

43 Sieder, "'To Speak the Law,'" 337.

44 Schmitt, *"Nomos" of the Earth*, 70. See also Blanco and del Valle, "Reorienting Schmitt's *Nomos*"; and McAllister and Napolitano, "Introduction."

45 Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 24.

46 Hanks, *Converting Words*.

47 Esquit Choy and Ochoa García, *Respeto a la palabra*, 19.

48 Esquit Choy and Ochoa García, *Respeto a la palabra*, 14.

49 Coulthard and Simpson, "Grounded Normativity / Place-Based Solidarity," 254. See also Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*; and L. Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*.

50 Esquit Choy and Ochoa García, *Respeto a la palabra*, 46.

51 Sieder, "'To Speak the Law,'" 337.

52 Sieder, "'To Speak the Law,'" 337.

53 Vásquez Monterroso, *Heterarquía y amaq'*, 23.

54 Svenungsson, *Divining History*.

55 Caputo and Keller, "Theopoetic/Theopolitic." See also Svenungsson, *Divining History*.

56 Brody, *Martin Buber's Theopolitics*, 140. See also Buber, "Prophecy, Apocalyptic, and the Historical Hour"; and Lesch, "Theopolitics Contra Political Theology," 199.

57 Benjamin, "Theological-Political Fragment." See also de Wilde, "Meeting Opposites."

58 Brody, *Martin Buber's Theopolitics*, 5. See also Lesch, "Theopolitics Contra Political Theology."

59 This phrasing comes from Johnson et al., *Ekklesia*, 15. For longer discussions of my own definition of theopolitics, see McAllister and Napolitano, "Introduction" and "Political Theology/Theopolitics"; and Bacigalupo et al., "Introduction."

60 Bacigalupo et al., "Introduction."

61 McAllister and Napolitano, "Introduction," 6; and De Abreu, "Acts Is
 Acts," 44.

62 Hirschkind, *Ethical Soundscape*.

63 Lepselter, *Resonance of Unseen Things*, 100.

64 Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality*, 5. See also Collins, "Sounds of Tradition";
 Hirschkind, *Feeling of History*; and Certeau, *Mystic Fable*.

65 A. Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus*, 23.

66 A. Adams, "Transformation of the Tzuultaq'a," 201. See also Ted-
 lock, *Time and the Highland Maya*; and Keller, "Road by Any
 Other Name."

67 Jones, "Chinamitales," 84.

68 In Central America, this highway is known as the Inter-American High-
 way, but I will use its more common designation here.

69 Harvey and Knox, "Enchantments of Infrastructure," 523. See also Har-
 vey and Knox, *Roads*; and Kernaghan, "Furrows and Walls."

70 Salvatore, "Imperial Mechanics," 677.

71 While this term is more commonly associated with the Bolshevik revolu-
 tion, in Guatemala the October Revolution refers to a popular uprising
 led by junior army officers that pushed dictator Federico Ponce Valdés
 out of power on October 20, 1944, paving the way for Guatemala's first
 democratic elections. For Guatemalan leftists, its resonances with the
 Bolshevik revolution are nevertheless audible.

72 See Cullather, *Secret History*; and Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope*.

73 Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, 16.

74 Fisher, "Walking Rural."

75 Harvey and Knox, "Enchantments of Infrastructure."

76 Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 13.

77 Strathern, *Partial Connections*.

78 Povinelli, "Radical Worlds"; Nadasdy, *Hunters and Bureaucrats*.

79 Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*.

80 Here I return to Marisol de la Cadena's account of the difficulties of
 anthropological translation. Hoping to work on a history of agrarian
 reform, she repeatedly heard stories about earth beings with no place
 in what she imagined as the archive of that event. Although she could
 register her interlocutor's relationships with these beings and sometimes
 asked him to explain them, de la Cadena notes that "no translation
 would be capacious enough to allow me to know" those relationships. De
 la Cadena, *Earth Beings*, 3. Resisting the temptation to commensurate
 earth beings with anthropological concepts or categories, she embraces
 the partial connections among different stories as the mark of their
 co-creation. I likewise return to the Trinh Minh-Ha film *Reassemblage*
 (1982), which calls for anthropologists to resist what she calls "the habit
 of imposing a meaning to every single sign."

- 81 See Winchell, “Afterword,” for a cogent discussion of the differences among these terms; see her ethnography *After Servitude* for a historical anthropology that is deeply informed by this discussion. See also Bacigalupo et al., “Introduction.”

CHAPTER I. CENTERING CHUPOL AND BIRTHING *CONCIENCIA*

Portions of this chapter first appeared in “Rural Markets, Revolutionary Souls, and Rebellious Women in Cold War Guatemala,” in *In from the Cold: Latin America’s New Encounter with the Cold War*, edited by Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniela Spenser (Duke University Press, 2008).

- 1 Woods, “Catholic Social Teaching.”
2 Rossell y Arellano, *Carta pastoral*, 1. Rossell y Arellano is often called simply Rossell, a usage I follow in this text.
3 Rossell y Arellano, *Conferencia*, 16.
4 McAllister, “Rural Markets.”
5 Cullather, ““Target Is the People,”” 30.
6 McAllister, “Rural Markets.”
7 Owens, *Economy of Force*.
8 Owens, *Economy of Force*, 11.
9 Owens, *Economy of Force*, 21.
10 Owens, *Economy of Force*, chapter 7.
11 Rossell y Arellano, *Conferencia*, 1.
12 Hanks, *Referential Practice*.
13 *Max* is the K’iche’ word for Tomás, so all *maxeños* carry the name of their patron saint.
14 Fr. Christomo Guerra, letter, November 18, 1689, AHAG, Archivo de la Curia, box 67, folder 19, fol. 6v.
15 Little, *Visual Political Economy*.
16 Chase et al., “Classic Maya City.”
17 Vásquez Monterroso, *Heterarquía y amaq’*.
18 Vásquez Monterroso, *Heterarquía y amaq’*, 22.
19 See Hill and Monaghan, *Continuities*; Carmack, *Quiché Mayas of Uatatlán*; Akkeren, “El chinamit y la plaza”; Jones, “Chinamitales”; Cojti Ren, “K’iche’ Nation”; and Braswell, “Problem of Ethnicity,” for further discussion of the *chinamit* and other units of Southern Highland Maya governance in the postclassic and colonial periods.
20 Hendon, *Houses in a Landscape*.
21 Hendon, *Houses in a Landscape*, 106.
22 See, for example, Clayton and Lantigua, *Bartolomé de Las Casas*; Hanke, *Bartolomé de las Casas*; and Grandin, *América, América*.
23 Moreiras, “Ten Notes,” 346. See also Castro, *Another Face of Empire*.
24 Cited in Castro, *Another Face of Empire*, 92.