

*Excerpt from dissertation by Luisa Rivera
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Preface

On a warm, bright day in the summer of 2017, I guided a group of predominantly Maya women in a small community in rural Guatemala in a drawing exercise meant to help them express the hopes and dreams they have for their children. I am there to conduct pilot research for my dissertation project exploring intergenerational trauma and resilience in Nueva Esperanza Chaculá, one of several “repatriation villages” founded by former refugees of the Guatemalan Civil War, a genocidal conflict that has deeply impacted the lives of all the women in the room and indeed everyone in the surrounding borderlands in highland Guatemala. Hoping to help overcome their (and my own) shyness, I tried using a technique I had read about in Jennifer Hirsch’s work on intergenerational relationships and hopes in Mexican-American immigrant communities (Hirsch & Philbin 2016). On large sheets of paper, I drew a horizontal line. I asked the four women in the room to draw a picture of their own life, and on the other side of it, the life they hoped their children will have.

I wasn’t quite sure what I had hoped for, but as the session went on, I found myself worried that the exercise was not revealing very much I had not already learned from having worked in the community for several year as a volunteer midwifery trainer. The lives women drew for themselves and their children were linked by flowers and signs of nature, and while their “side” emphasized their homes, gardens, and children, the side representing their hopes for their children were very similar, features suns, flowers, and sports, and school. The drawings were cheerful, and women described hoping that their children would be able to enjoy education, exercise, natural beauty, and have large families and colorful homes of their own someday, most indicating that they would prefer it if their children could stay in the community and raise their grandchildren there.



Only one of the drawings stood out to me, drawing made by a woman I had known for several years, Doña Cheli. Unlike the other mothers, Doña Cheli focused only on her side of the drawing, using gray pencil and no colors. She drew herself encased in a box with no roof, a wiggle on the ground indicating grass or rough terrain. She drew her hair as if it was blown, and while she

made eyes, arms, and fingers for herself, she drew no mouth or feet. As we talked, her young son Jairo came up and drew a heart next to his mother, giving her a small yellow mouth. I joked with Cheli that the amateur psychoanalyst in me was curious about her choices in self-representation—but she told me they were intentional. She had meant to represent herself as unable to speak, unable to flee, and trapped.



Figure 2. Cheli's drawing

The next day, I went to her house to talk more, bringing with me the packet of questionnaires and trauma indices I had prepared for my biosocial research study on intergenerational trauma and mental health in mothers and grandmothers in the community. Cheli endorsed experiencing many war-related traumatic events, but by far the most painful part of her story was her recounting of the dehumanization she felt when she was denied the ability to learn to read by her father. There was no item for this in my packet and so I simply coded it under “other”. Her body rigid with emotion, she told me of her father’s refusal to let her go to even primary school. “My father told me women who learn to write just write letters to boyfriends. That’s what he said. Just to boyfriends.” She began to weep, describing feelings of being stupid, left behind, and worthless. “Once I was older, I knew that great need in myself, the need to be able to read and write. I went and got school myself. I was so happy when I learned there were teachers for adults, I would work all day and go to school at night. I went and got it myself.”

In this chapter, I argue that what Cheli described—her subjective experiences of gendered discrimination and violence—help illuminate how ongoing structural violence in the wake of the Guatemalan Civil War continues to impact the lives of survivors of the war and their descendants today. As such, I advance the argument that, in contrast with biosocial and psychological models of intergenerational trauma transmission that emphasize behavioral or biological inheritance, intergenerational trauma is better understood as an ongoing process of social reproduction and perpetuation. This chapter links scholarship on intergenerational trauma, the continuum of violence against women and Maya peoples in Guatemala, and anthropological theories of subjectivity in revealing processes of intergenerational transmission and resistance. In it, I analyze how life histories of women in Nueva Esperanza Chaculá reveal the sociopolitical embeddedness and recapitulation of intergenerationally shared experiences of trauma and loss—but also agency, hope, and resilience—from past to present.

Excerpt from interviews: Ways of caring

Mutual understanding through emotional intimacy, care, and rational resolution of conflict was a way many families enacted their desires for peace despite constrained material and emotional resources. One of the ways this was described most frequently was with the value of talking, *hablando de las cosas*. Mothers and grandmothers described the importance of talking and coming to understanding rather than hitting children, partners, or *mueras* out of anger. While many described feeling that their children could test the edge of their tempers, few endorsed the idea that physical punishment was generally acceptable or that children didn't benefit from gentle, compassionate, discursive approaches. Similar ideas around how to foster a good family life and maintain connections with romantic partners and other families were also described by my interlocutors. Emotional intimacy and connection also extended to non-human aspects of the world, such as emotional connections with the Holy Spirit or with Maya gods, as well as the pleasures of connection and harmony with the land itself. Cultural anthropologists call this "intersubjectivity" and are often most concerned about its possibility between themselves and the people they study (Hollan & Throop, 2008). But intersubjectivity— a sense of shared visceral feelings, moral orientations, and lifeworlds— was described as an important part of the everyday pleasures of sociality in Chaculá as well.

The challenges of everyday life in Chaculá have consequences for harnessing the material and emotional resources for talking, relating and loving. Clarita, a Chuj mother of two describes the way her husband Mario's periodic absences to work in Mexico have impacted her and her children. Her seven-year-old son Jairo is especially affected, throwing lengthy tantrums and lashing out at Clarita in the weeks after a visit from Mario has come to an end. These tantrums unnerve her deeply, especially because Jairo behaves well with his father and expresses that only his father loves him during his absences and refuses to obey her. She describes a time Jairo went through his room, throwing everything out of the window, except the things that his father had bought him, until only a few sandals, books, and toys were left. Clarita described how humiliating his rejection of her authority and identification with his missing father— when she spent all her time caring for him and his sister— overwhelmed her emotionally, resulting in her sometimes spanking him, a decision she felt deeply ambivalent about. When I asked her how she wanted to treat her children, she responded:

Clarita: I want to treat them the same way my mother would treat me, loving them, educating them. My grandfather would say, "There's bread in one hand and a belt in the other. Which one are you going to choose." Back in the day it was like that. It's different now. Now you have to love them, you have to talk to them the right way, it's no good to hit kids.

Interviewer: Why do you think things have changed?

Clarita: Maybe because we know that kids actually understand more than we thought, or maybe it's because once they're grown up, they'll understand. You give them so much love, and they hold on to all the love you give them as they grow up. But when they're big they'll do whatever they want anyway. Maybe our grandparents were right, I don't know.

Sometimes you have your weaknesses, because kids misbehave, and you don't know how to guide them and so sometimes you end up hitting them and it doesn't have to be that way. I'm very nervous, it's hard for me to see that sometimes. Sometimes I don't even understand why I hit them. My husband will say to me, "My love, you have to control your temper, because with kids it can't just be hitting them and hitting them, you have to talk to them."

He's really calm. When Jairo was little, he was always here and he'd never hit him, he would just lovingly tell him, "Don't do this because it's wrong." He would explain things to him.

Clarita's reflections here are especially poignant to me because I had also interviewed her several years earlier during pilot fieldwork. It was her first separation from Mario, and she had been deeply sad and emotional in her interview. When I had asked her what the hardest part of her life was, she responded that she felt ugly, and was certain Mario would abandon her for someone else while he was away. She breastfed her one-year-old daughter throughout the interview, even as she wept profusely, and I thought about Maria Tapias' work on embodiment and Bolivian cultural beliefs transmission of maternal emotion through breastmilk, mirrored in the biological anthropology of maternal stress and breast milk composition (Miller, 2017; Tapias, 2006). Clarita expressed no beliefs that her sorrow would reach little Perla through her milk. She breastfed her continuously in the same way most of the women in the community continue to provide on-demand breastfeeding and carry their young children as normative forms of childcare.

When I asked Carlita how her relationship with Mario was going, remembering that she had struggled so much during the early years of separation, her body visibly relaxed. She responded: How are we now? We're so good, we get along so well, we talk a lot. Even if he isn't here, I feel something deep inside me that what he tells me is true. I feel like he loves me the way I love him. We get along really well. I feel like I couldn't have found a better man. I feel like we are happy. He changed a lot, for the better. Maybe we don't have a lot of stuff, there are no fancy things in our house. But I'm happy with what we've managed to get. Having love between us is the most important thing. We talk every day, we talk about all of our stuff, everything that happens to us. Things that don't matter, we're always talking about them, we laugh and joke all the time. It's hard because sometimes you just get to thinking that you just want them to be here, you want to hug him, kiss him, and you can't. That part is hard.

Clarita's desires for emotional intimacy and pleasure, physical affection, and recognition that familial love is more important than material wealth was reflected in the other interviews I conducted in Chaculá and in my observations of everyday life there. Many participants described the importance of a fluidly intermingled sense of physical and emotional life for creating peaceful, joyful families. Almost all the participants I interviewed experienced and practiced extended co-sleeping, breastfeeding, and child-carrying. Several who resided with their mothers and who didn't have current partners co-slept, with grandmother, mother, and grandchildren in the same bed. These features of Maya childcare have been documented in many different ethnographies and are not novel to report, although their near-universal persistence despite other cultural changes is notable. Still, I find it interesting that, particularly in biological anthropology and cross-cultural psychology, the idea that Maya emotional attachments are mediated through physical, rather than verbal, proximity (Cristia et al., 2019). While I think there are important insights from this research, it can also occlude the goals and desires of Maya caregivers. I would not generalize from my findings in Chaculá that all Maya mothers feel the same way about the importance of emotional intimacy, talking, and compassionate conflict resolution with children and family, but I would suggest that my findings add nuance to the diversity of how we talk about and essentialize what Guatemalan mothers think of as good mothering and good partnering.