

Adoring Our Wounds: Suicide, Prevention, and the Maya in Yucatán, México

By

Beatriz Mireya Reyes-Cortes

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Committee in Charge:

Professor Stanley Brandes, Chair

Professor William F. Hanks

Professor Lawrence Cohen

Professor William B. Taylor

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Abstract

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The first decade of the 21st century has seen a transformation in national and regional Mexican politics and society. In the state of Yucatán, this transformation has taken the shape of a newfound interest in indigenous Maya culture coupled with increasing involvement by the state in public health efforts. Suicide, which in Yucatán more than doubles the national average, has captured the attention of local newspaper media, public health authorities, and the general public; it has become a symbol of indigenous Maya culture due to an often cited association with Ixtab, an ancient Maya “suicide goddess”. My thesis investigates suicide as a socially produced cultural artifact. It is a study of how suicide is understood by many social actors and institutions and of how upon a close examination, suicide can be seen as a trope that illuminates the complexity of class, ethnicity, and inequality in Yucatán. In particular, my dissertation –based on extensive ethnographic and archival research in Valladolid and Mérida, Yucatán, México— is a study of both suicide and suicide prevention efforts. As such, the first half of my dissertation focuses on how suicide is produced in public and state discourse. The second half of my dissertation considers how foreign mental health treatment models are applied in local clinical settings as part of state suicide prevention efforts. These programs, however, are entangled in a complex web of regional and national politics, very often to the detriment of the programs and the populations they purport to help. This research deconstructs the idea that suicide is due to a Maya cultural predisposition and suggests that chronic poverty, addiction, class inequality, and unique local worldviews contribute to the phenomenon in a decisive way. My thesis calls into question the viability of a Maya-centered research approach, arguing that such an approach creates a false research object and excludes a large segment of the local population from study. I conducted ethnographic research in the town of Valladolid (pop. 45,000) and the city of Mérida (pop. 1,000,000). My research methodology included “traditional” participant observation research with members of both communities as well as institutional ethnography at the *Ministerio Público* or public ministry of Valladolid, and Hospital Psiquiátrico Yucatán, the regional public psychiatric hospital. I conducted extensive archival research with the Valladolid police suicide

case files and studied representations of suicide in newspaper media. By studying 1) how suicide is produced in state and local discourse and 2) how suicide prevention methods are deployed, I demonstrate the production of new subjectivities in a population that continues to struggle with numerous social and economic challenges.

For Ron and Aydin, the loves of my life

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Introduction: The Myth of the Suicidal Maya

El intento de suicidio en Yucatán no es un intento de muerte. Es un intento de vida.

Dr. Gaspar Baquedano López

Mérida, Yucatán, Summer 2007

January 4, 2008

Mérida

It is a hot, muggy morning. At least, it feels hot and muggy to me, but considering I arrived just a few days ago from a frigid New Jersey winter, it is hard to tell. I know that in a week or two the heat and the mugginess will fade into the background and become invisible. My cousin, Claudia, invited me to accompany her to a cultural function at the Escuela de Artes de Yucatán (ESAY), her employer. A belly dancer from India is giving a presentation. ESAY is located in the building of the now-defunct Mérida train station. Across the street, I spy a hotel that rents rooms by the hour. Facing the hotel, a fruit vendor is selling citrus fruits, oranges and grapefruits cut up, bagged up with jicama, a sweet root known as the Mexican potato, drizzled with lime juice and sprinkled with red chili powder. The building has been beautifully restored, the crown jewel of a flurry of spending on education that characterized the recently ousted PAN (Partido Acción Nacional) administration.

I have been in Yucatán for three days now. I am anxious to start my work. But today, I am enjoying the performance. The audience, Claudia tells me, is made up of students, ESAY employees, and their families. When the event ends, Claudia introduces me to a man whose name I forget almost immediately. This is the first and last time I will ever see him. Claudia explains to me that he is a sociologist at the local social science research center of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). He is a *waach*, a *chilango*, a man from México City. He is a foreigner, and he represents all that my Yucatecan friends despise: the fast speech, the swagger, the gregarious attitude that in other parts of México and in the United States would be interpreted as friendliness but here is seen as arrogance and a false sense of entitlement. Yucatecans are quiet people. They don't like false friendliness. They don't appreciate people who make themselves comfortable before they are invited to do so. They especially don't like *waaches* from México City, who move to the quiet Yucatán and bring with them their crime, their unruliness, and their despicable driving habits.

He shakes my hand firmly and Claudia introduces me. "This is my cousin, Beatriz, she's doing her thesis research on suicide."

The *waach*'s eyes light up. "Really? That's a great topic! Did you know Yucatán occupies the first place nationally in suicides? They say it's something about the local Maya culture."

As a good *Yucateca*, I cringe at his sing-songy accent. As an anthropologist, I remember that this man cannot control the fact that he is a *waach*. As an ethnographer, my interest is piqued. This is probably the fifth time in three days that someone shares this mistaken bit of data with me.

Nosotros ocupamos el primer lugar, sabes?[did you know we hold the first place?] People would be quick to say. As though they had won some sort of prize. I seldom corrected my interlocutors—in actuality, though Yucatán’s suicide rate more than doubles the national average (9.2 per 100,000 as opposed to 4 per 100,000 people in 2008),¹ it is not the state with the highest suicide rate in the country. According to the Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía, e Informática (INEGI), México’s census bureau, Yucatán follows the state of Campeche (9.5 per 100,000) in suicides. Comparatively speaking, Yucatán’s suicide rate is lower than the national average in the United States (about 10 per 100,000),² and much lower than so-called suicidal nations such as Japan (24 per 100,000), Russia (34 per 100,000), and Lithuania (38 per 100,000). According to the World Health Organization, Nunavut, Canada, has a suicide rate of 70 per 100,000,³ the highest in the world. Hence, the idea that in Yucatán, México, there is some sort of mental health crisis due to its elevated suicide rate is a matter of perception.

Suicide is locally framed as a crisis in public health. Moreover, within the framework of my research, it also emerged as an ancient indigenous problem. The idea of Yucatec Maya people⁴ as suicidal is particularly powerful because there is historical and archaeological evidence of prevalent suicide shortly before, during, and following the Spanish subjugation of the Peninsula in 1547. In the first decade of the 21st century, an aggressive campaign by the State government mainly aimed at making the Yucatán and its Maya heritage attractive to national and international tourism climaxed in 2007 when the Great Pyramid of Chichen Itza, a Classic Maya city, was voted as one of “the New Seven Wonders” during the New7Wonders contest. Suddenly, all that is Maya is fashionable: from spiced chocolate to honey soaps to allegedly authentic shamanistic rituals, the Maya exotic is being embraced by middle-class, city-dwelling Yucatecans who conveniently forget that the descendents of the Ancient Maya, who number nearly one million and form one of the largest language groups of the Maya world, cannot even afford the park entrance fees to see many of the archaeological sites constructed by their ancestors. Suicide, often called the “cult of Ixtab” in reference to the ancient Maya deity of suicide, is suddenly embraced by the media and the public as part of the grand narrative of the Maya exotic. My research topic is fashionable indeed.

A Compelling Red Herring

I must admit that I ate it up. After years of studying Ancient Maya civilization and reading ethnographies about the Maya, when I heard about Yucatán “suicide problem” I immediately thought of Ixtab, the famed “suicide goddess” I had read about in Diego de Landa’s *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán* (1978), “[there] were many who in times of lesser troubles, labors, or sickness, hung themselves to escape and go to that paradise, to which they were thought to be carried by the goddess of the scaffold whom they called Ixtab” (58). Surely, I thought, there must be a special disposition, *something* that endures of Ixtab to warrant such a high suicide rate. What I discovered after conducting fieldwork and extensive reading, however, was that we know surprisingly little about Ixtab. Her most popular representation is taken from the depiction of a goddess in the Dresden Codex (Figure 1) (Schele). However, this image is not

¹ INEGI (2008).

² World Health Organization (2011).

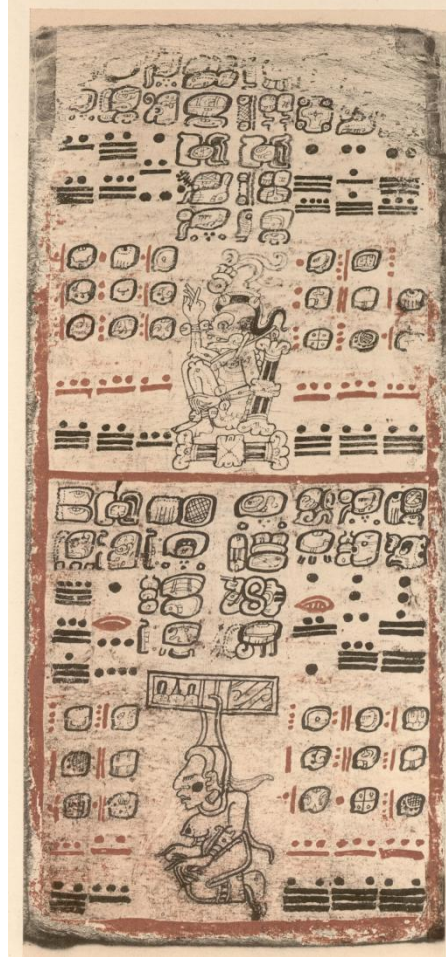
³ World Health Organization (Pulver et al. 2010).

⁴ “Yucatec” is a dialect in the Mayan language family. In Yucatan, speakers of this dialect are often referred to as “Yucatec Maya”. In Chapter 1, I will discuss the question of Maya vs. non-Maya identity in depth.

accompanied by a glyph or any identification of her as Ixtab. Her image is part of what epigraphers call the “Lunar Eclipse Sequence” of the Dresden Codex (figure 2).



(Figure 1) Drawing/(Photograph) by Linda Schele, © David Schele, courtesy Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc., www.famsi.org.



(Figure 2) Drawing/(Photograph) by Linda Schele, © David Schele, courtesy Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc., www.famsi.org.

The Lunar Eclipse sequence of the Dresden Codex is a series of astronomical predictions. Nowhere in the codex is there a glyph-name identifying the goddess depicted as Ixtab; nor is there, beyond the fact that the deity is shown hanging by the neck, any reference to suicide. Despite popular belief and depiction in both newspaper media and the internet, there is no evidence linking the goddess depicted in the Dresden Codex to Ixtab, the alleged “goddess of the gallows” described by Landa.

Ethnographic accounts speak of a female demon known as the *Xtabay* that phonetically approximates Ixtab. According to legend, the *Xtabay* lives inside a Ceiba tree and appears at night in the guise of a beautiful woman to lure drunken men walking in the *monte* on their way home. As legend has it, she takes men away and they are never seen again. If there is a connection between this legend and suicide by hanging, however, it has faded from memory. The more time I spent in the field, the more I came to realize that while suicide was a fascinating subject to study in the context of Yucatán, it was not because of Ixtab.

Artifacts in the Archaeology of Knowledge

Conducting research on suicide clearly poses a methodological challenge. As a believer in the anthropological tradition of participant observation research, it is obvious that I could not conduct participant observation research on suicide per se: I did not physically observe someone commit suicide, nor could I raise the *suicida*⁵ from the dead and ask him about his experience. Although a braver, more insane anthropologist might have actually experimented with hanging him or herself in the spirit of phenomenology, I did not physically experience the feeling of the rope around my own neck, the jerking of my limbs as my body struggled for air, or the moods and motivations that might have brought me to that moment. All I have to go on are the memories, words, photographs, and written texts of others. My research is an archaeology of knowledge in the Foucaultian sense (Foucault 1972). Using the language of archaeology, which Foucault calls a “differential analysis of the modalities of discourse” (139), suicide is an archaeological artifact.

Suicide is the discursive artifact taken from the monument of the contemporary, the present, which is nonetheless shaped by the events of the past. Unlike Foucault I am not conducting an archaeology of knowledge in the sense that my object exists in the past. Foucault notes that an important characteristic of his archaeology is that he does not look at the future of a particular object of study when he examines it⁶. In this sense, my object of study has no future. It is taking place in the here and now. Foucault’s archaeological methodology allows me to call my object of study an artifact. Its meaning, its reason-to-be as an object of study, is defined by its context. As in real archaeology, if I remove this artifact from its context it will become meaningless. Suicide is nestled in a sedimentary context of history accumulating over time. This sediment is made up of many things, of which I identify five: 1) a historicized and racialized class hierarchy, 2) the production of discourse about suicide created by mass media outlets, 3) the state apparatus whose function it is to create a sense of order in a chaotic environment⁷, 4) the sense of self of individual actors and communities, and 5) the structures of health and care seeking to address the issue of suicide in the population. Each of these elements itself has a context that must be examined and analyzed, a context that is composed of historical trajectory, intersubjective relationships, and emotions. In each chapter, I tease out each of these aspects.

“Artifact” as a conceptual metaphor can be problematized. One could argue, in the style of critical anthropological critiques of the culture concept (Clifford 1988; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Rabinow 1986) that calling suicide an “artifact” in fact turns it into a static object and does not take into account the processual and ever-changing aspects of this phenomenon. However, by simply encasing this phenomenon within the confines of a dissertation I am turning it into an object: the phenomenon of suicide becomes frozen in time and place, limited by the writing on these pages to the year 2008 and the towns of Valladolid, Mérida, Xulha, Xulab, and Cuncunul. It is an artifact de facto. While the phenomenon itself is ever-changing and processual, this particular study of it is grounded in time and place.

⁵ Suicide victim.

⁶ Let’s not forget, after all, that Foucault’s entire body of work focuses on the past.

⁷ In this sense I am reminded of the Spanish accounts of the conquest of the Aztecs that described human sacrifices to Huitzilopochtli in the thousands. These accounts fail to hold up to archaeological scrutiny. For example, archaeological digs at the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan, yielded remains from 107 individuals sacrificed between 1440 and 1502 (Chávez Balderas 2007). See Weiss-Krejci (2002) for a critical analysis of archaeological claims to human sacrifice in the Maya context. Weiss Krejci argues that archaeological bias towards human sacrifice may have lead to an over-interpretation of skeletal remains as victims of human sacrifice.

Facing Suicide

To reduce suicide to the status of an analytic artifact in an archaeology of knowledge without acknowledging the fact that at the end of the day, someone takes his or her own life would be to do a tremendous disservice to the subject at hand. For everyone who is touched by it, suicide is not a metaphor or an analytic category, but *really real*. Although thinking of suicide as artifact conceptually is a useful analytical tool, I recognize that good anthropology is not about analytics, but also grapples with profound ethnical questions (Scheper-Hughes 1992, 1995, 2000, 2004; Robins and Scheper-Hughes 1996; Farmer 2004; Bourgois 2004; Binford 2004).

In her classic essay, “The Primacy of the ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology”, Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995) notes the profound conundrum faced by anthropologists who work in murky ethical terrain:

In each case I have had to pause and reconsider the traditional role of the anthropologist as neutral, dispassionate, cool and rational, objective observer of the human condition: the anthropologist as “fearless spectator,” to evoke Charles McCabe’s (un)felicitous phrase. And I am tempted to call anthropology’s bluff, to expose its artificial moral relativism and to try to imagine what forms a politically committed and morally engaged anthropology might take (410).

Scheper-Hughes suggests that cultural relativism, which she reads as moral relativism, is no longer a viable or acceptable tool in the anthropological “toolkit”. Labeling cultural relativism a “sacred cow” that keeps anthropologists from becoming ethically and morally engaged with the communities they study under the banner of objectivity, she calls for a “militant anthropology” that is politically engaged.

What does it mean to “do the right thing”? In her dissertation on Inuit youth suicide, Stevenson (2005) found that in order to carry out her research she had to “bracket” her own desire for her subjects to live. For Stevenson, the crucial question in conducting fieldwork with suicidal Inuit youth became whether it was possible for bonds to form that presumed “neither the absoluteness of life as ultimate value nor the modern western discreteness of life and death” (14). In my own work, this “bracketing” or suspension of my own ethical or moral positioning was not nearly as challenging as it appears to have been for Stevenson: ultimately, all of my living subjects, particularly those who had survived highly lethal suicide attempts, wanted to live. They simply wanted their lives to be better.

When I first became interested in studying suicide and suicide prevention in Yucatán, I was introduced to Gaspar Baquedano Lopez, a psychiatrist and anthropologist who has been studying suicide in Yucatán for nearly 30 years. On our first meeting, Gaspar said something to me that I came to understand in the course of my fieldwork: *El intento de suicidio en Yucatán no es un intento de muerte. Es un intento de vida.* [In Yucatán, suicide attempt is not an attempt to die. It is an attempt to live.] Gaspar’s experience had taught him that the vast majority of patients who attempted suicide would thrive if given the opportunity to improve their quality of life. “We don’t tell people not to kill themselves,” Gaspar explained to me, describing his approach and its implementation into the state Psychiatric hospital suicide attention program, “we ask them why they want to die. We don’t judge them, or tell them they are mistaken for having this desire. We try to figure out what is making their lives unbearable. Usually, there’s a good

reason.” Rather than pathologizing suicidal ideation, Dr. Baquedano always assumed there was good reason for a person to attempt suicide. As an “old-school” psychiatrist, his preferred approach to treating patients is to listen to them. Unlike Ludwig Binswanger’s (1958) own grappling with Ellen West, I did not meet anyone who felt that their only way to achieve their most authentic self was through death.⁸ At heart, suicide was always the result of a desire for change.

What is the role of the anthropologist in this situation? My goals are by far more modest than those of Scheper-Hughes or Stevenson. On the one hand, this dissertation is an attempt to produce knowledge that might be of use to mental health professionals in Yucatán. Social scientific studies of the Yucatecan mental health system are nearly nonexistent. Much of today’s Anglophone and locally written ethnographies on Yucatán focus almost exclusively on “Maya” culture in the form of music, dress, language, food, and ritual. Although physicians and psychologists may have to take an anthropology course during their studies, this course is likely to contain an over-representation of folkloric material. As I describe in chapter 5, many well-intentioned efforts to provide mental health services to the population have failed simply because mental health professionals are not trained to treat Yucatecan⁹ people and in fact know very little about them. This dissertation is part of an attempt to generate information on this topic. Eventually, chapters from this dissertation will be translated and published in local Yucatecan media. This is how I respond to “the primacy of the ethical.”

On the other hand, I am also trying to contribute to anthropology that is driven by data rather than a commitment to a specific theoretical tradition. Like Rodriguez (2010) and Castillo Cocom (Rodriguez and Castillo Cocom 2010; Castillo Cocom 2005), I am interested in epistemologies that emerge from the theorizing not of “great” thinkers and writers from our anthropological and philosophical traditions, but from the people I have worked with since 2003 when I conducted my undergraduate thesis fieldwork. The title of this dissertation, “Adoring Our Wounds,” emerged out of a conversation with a female patient at the state psychiatric hospital, who pointed to what would become central to my understanding of Yucatecan personhood: the self extends beyond the body and into a space that is at once physical and sacred, and “wounds” are born not only by the body or the “mind” in a Cartesian sense, but in the sacred dimension of personal space, what Rodriguez and Castillo Cocom call the *iknal*. Years ago, in my first year of graduate school, swimming in a sea of Foucault, Bourdieu, Hegel, Rousseau, Marx, Weber, Benjamin, and Agamben, a colleague, Shana Harris, asked, “Who gets to theorize and whose theories count?” It is not until now, when I am asked about my “theoretical orientations” on job interviews, that I am compelled to take up Shana’s challenge. As much as possible, I am interested in how my informants theorized and articulated their own interpretations of the world.

The Settings

From January 1 through December 31, 2008 I lived in the state of Yucatán, México. The first six months of my field stay were based in Valladolid, a town of approximately 74,000¹⁰

⁸ “The Case of Ellen West” formed the cornerstone of Ludwig Binswanger’s development of Existential Psychology. In his treatment of Ellen West, a woman suffering from what would today be considered an eating disorder, Binswanger concluded, after years of treating Ellen West, that her desire to die needed to be respected because it was only through death that she would be able to achieve the sense of completeness she longed for in life.

⁹ In this dissertation, the word “Yucatecan” refers to any person born in Yucatán.

¹⁰ INEGI (2000).

people located close to the Quintana Roo border. From January until April, I taught a course as a visiting professor at Universidad de Oriente (UNO) an (at the time) two-year-old public university. UNO's student population is nearly 100% first-generation college students. Most students in the Linguistics and Maya Culture Program with which I was affiliated were native Maya speakers and came from nearby rural households. The course, *Vivir en Dos Mundos* [Living in Two Worlds] gave me the opportunity to talk to my students about the question of identity and the multiple meanings of "being Maya." During my time at UNO, I developed close friendships and working relationships with several students and staff members, who later on invited me into their homes and villages.

In addition to teaching, I carried out institutional research at a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center and conducted structured interviews with local public health officials, including employees of the Hospital General, the public hospital, and the *Salubridad* office, which is in charge of administering public health programs. A few months into my research, I was able to take advantage of police contacts I made at UNO to gain access to the local police station, where I conducted archival and ethnographic research (see chapter 3).

For the second part of my research, from July until December, I moved to the capital city of Mérida (pop. approx. one million) in order to conduct field work at Hospital Psiquiátrico Yucatán (HPY). During this six-month period, I went to the hospital three to five times a week. On weekends and days that I did not go to the hospital, I would frequent the nearby village of Yaxha near the municipality of Muna or conduct other fieldwork outside the hospital. Towards the end of my stay (as will be described in chapter 5), I began conducting what my sponsor at HPY termed "psychosocial autopsies," in-depth personal interviews with surviving family members of people who had committed suicide.

Throughout my year in Yucatán, I spent a great deal of time traveling to communities outside of the urban areas of Valladolid and Mérida. Some of the villages I frequented included Yaxha in the *puuc* region of the state; Cuncunul, a municipality located about ten kilometers from Valladolid; and Dzitnup, a small town belonging to the municipality of Valladolid. Yaxha is a village I have been frequenting since girlhood. Family friends there opened their home to me when I conducted my undergraduate thesis research. Bety Poot, a librarian at UNO, lives in Cuncunul and generously invited me into her family home on many occasions. Likewise, a former student invited me to her village, Dzitnup, when my quarter at UNO ended. Although some might criticize this mobile approach to ethnography, I can only respond that I was as mobile as most people in Yucatán are: most people work during the week in one place and travel "home" on weekends.

Chapter Overview

In chapter 1, I introduce the complex web of social relations that mark the relationships between class and ethnicity in Yucatán. Focusing on Claudina's story, I present the classical academic Maya/non-Maya binary and argue this binary essentialized the research population and reduced the complexity of social context to questions of identity. This chapter serves to introduce the historical context of class in Yucatán, arguing against traditionalist Maya-centered approaches. By presenting ethnographic and historical data, I argue that treating the "Maya" population as somehow isolated and distinct from Yucatecan society at large has created some lacunae in our understanding of contemporary life in Yucatán and would obfuscate any attempt

to understand suicide as a social phenomenon. The construction of the Maya and the indigenous in the context of Yucatán becomes particularly important when considering the ways in which suicide has been framed on the ground by the media as an indigenous problem.

Chapter 2 focuses precisely on how newspaper journalism marks suicide as a Maya problem, using tropes such as Ixtab, to create a pseudo-anthropological story that portrays suicide as the actions of alcoholic young indigenous men who are either too indigenous or not indigenous enough. I consider the visual depiction of suicide victims that is so commonplace in Yucatecan journalism and the language used in accompanying newspaper stories. I then argue that suicide can be understood as a form of spectacle which obscures as much as it reveals about suicide in Yucatán. Suicide begins to take shape, now as an object of study in the sense of suicide as artifact in the Foucaultian sense. A discourse emerges that portrays suicide as a social phenomenon unique to a certain class of social misfit and obscures the realities surrounding actual suicides in favor of the melodrama of the spectacular narrative that entertains as much as it horrifies.

I continue to consider suicide in this artifactual sense in Chapter 3, where I explore the ways in which the state documents chaotic events like suicides in a process of ordering of bodies and citizens. Using Michel DeCerteau's (1984) framework of strategies and tactics, I explore the ways in which ordinary citizens negotiate this order-making by sabotaging, disrupting, and bargaining their own compliance with the law. As in the rest of México, interactions with the state in the form of its disciplinary institutions in the form of the various police and policing entities form an integral part of everyday life in Yucatán. These interactions have a long historical trajectory and a tradition of distrust, ridicule, and avoidance on the part of civilians, and corruption, swagger, and abuse of power on the part of the police. An escalation of violence in 2008 created a profound sense of insecurity and fear in an otherwise sheltered part of the country that continues still as of this writing in 2011. As such, the relationship between civilians and police continues to become increasingly complex (Cornelius and Shirk 2007). Suicide is a spotlight on the shape of every day interactions, negotiations, and demands for justice, depicting a Mexican state as preoccupied with conveying its own sense of order as any other modern state.

Shifting away from a structural portrait of suicide, in chapter 4 I return to a conversation started in chapter 1 at HPY. Focusing on Claudina¹¹, a 33-year-old woman who was hospitalized at HPY following a hanging attempt, I posit that in Yucatán, the self and its boundaries are fluid. Presenting data from my own ethnography and those of others, I argue that in Yucatán there is a different modality of personhood, one that sees the self as both embedded in the sacred and spread out over time and space. This view of the self can be traced back to both Ancient Maya bodily practice and Spanish Catholicism practiced by missionaries (e.g., the Franciscan Order). Moreover, as the aspect of the self that extends to physical space—called the *iknal* by Rodriguez and Castillo Cocom—is necessarily fluid, physical spaces can be occupied by several different *iknalo'ob*¹², creating an overlapping of selves that creates a need for tranquility and balance in community life. As I note in chapter 4, the emphasis on unity and avoidance of conflict in

¹¹ With the exception of Dr. Baquedano and other HPY staff who asked that their names be kept in the dissertation, all other names and some places (namely, the community of Xulab) have been changed to protect the privacy of those who generously allowed me to conduct fieldwork among them.

¹² In the Yucatec Maya language the *o'ob* ending serves to make words plural.

Yucatecan communities falls within this logic of self because the illness of one can become the illness of others.

This modality of personhood, however, is not recognized in current treatment strategies, which employ biomedical models of treatment derived from American mental health models. In chapter 5, I present how mental health treatment is deployed in rural and clinical settings with varying degrees of success. After describing the Mexican public health system, I consider the ways in which public mental health services are deployed in Yucatán, presenting two different examples of government-sponsored mental health programs. The first, a psychological intervention in the village of Xulab, had little success because the treatment model deployed by the psychology team and the assumptions on which this team operated did not incorporate local notions of personhood nor consider the importance of harmony in community. The second, an in-patient suicide attention program, has had great success because of its borrowing on the already successful 12-step program. This program is in turn successful because it makes sense within local logics of community, spirituality, and *compadrazgo*.

Full Disclosure: A Yucateca in Gringa Clothing

I was born in Mérida in December 1981. My father's family is from Izamal, a beautiful, yellow city located about 100 kilometers from Mérida. He has an extensive genealogy that can be traced back to days when his family had the word "de" in their last names. My mother is the daughter of a working class couple from Monterrey, a city in the state of Nuevo León close to the Laredo, Texas, border. Because of this mixed heritage, I have been jokingly called a *yucawaach*, half Yucateca, half *waach*. I am at once an insider and an outsider in a "genetic" sense.

When I was eight years old, my parents divorced. My mother and I moved to the United States, where I grew up and was educated. Culturally, morally, and intellectually, I feel American in some contexts, Mexican in others, and Yucatecan in yet others. My own fractured trajectory has made me an outsider everywhere I go. Whether I am in Yucatán or in the United States, I experience the strangeness of inhabiting several worlds at once and yet belonging to none. Like many of my colleagues, I've always believed this feeling of being an outsider is what drew to me to study anthropology.

In conducting fieldwork in Yucatán, I understood the unspoken codes of conduct and respect and I spoke Spanish with the right accent. I have siblings, cousins, and other relatives and their networks at my disposal. But it also created some obstacles, the largest being the ideas that people would create in their minds about who I was and what my background was: for example, although I studied Maya before beginning fieldwork, many Maya speakers I tried to speak to in Maya insisted on speaking to me in Spanish. When people first met me, they would think I was a *gringa*: I spent 2008 in jeans, sandals, and simple t-shirts or locally produced blouses. Real Yucatecan women dress up. They wear makeup, heels, and spend a lot of time in front of the mirror. They put on their best clothes when they go out. In contrast, *gringos* and anthropologists are notoriously scruffy. When I explained that although I lived and had grown up in the United States, I was actually born in Mérida, I entered the world of ambiguity.

This ambiguous identity worked to my advantage. As a Yucatecan, my interlocutors understood that I was "one of them." By dressing in gringo clothing, however, I showed not only

that I was enough of an outsider that I needed things explained to me, but more importantly, that I was enough of an outsider to sidestep the usually rigid hierarchies of class that are so intertwined with race (see chapter 1)¹³. The word *yucawaach* has taken on new meaning for me, and I think it apropos to my ambiguous ethnographic position. My identity conferred great flexibility, allowing me to work in a wide array of settings that included a psychiatric hospital, a police station, and a village.

Carrying out research in Yucatán, with its ethnic and historical complexity, was without a doubt a challenging and rewarding experience. During the course of my year living in Yucatán, I had to go through the anthropological experience of making the unfamiliar into the familiar and vice versa. The fact that I was born in my field site further complicated this process, but in ways that I believe were productive to my study.

The goal of this dissertation is to shed some light on a phenomenon that is broadly misunderstood and understudied. Suicide in Yucatán is a creation of local discourses that essentialize and exoticize poor Yucatecans and at the same time reassert hierarchies of power that identify them as indigenous, vice-ridden, and powerless. At the same time, the sense of personhood that is common among poor Yucatecans is overlooked and unaccounted for in local mental health treatment. Research of mental health and mental health services in Yucatán must take the unique sociocultural and historical context of the region and its people into account. This work, using suicide as a point of departure, is but a first step in that direction.

¹³ My light skin and European facial features would have immediately marked me as a member of the *gente bien*, the upper class that lives in luxury while the vast majority of Yucatecos struggle to make ends meet. Had I “dressed the part,” no amount of coaxing or explaining my own personal history would have convinced them otherwise. Of course, had I actually belonged to the *gente bien*, I would have never found myself conducting ethnographic fieldwork in rural and urban Yucatán.

Chapter 1
The Maya Question:
History, Identity, and Social Context

But there is an elegance that comes from being a professional, and another that comes from mestizaje. My grandmother is a great wise woman, who has always taught me how things should be done in order to do them well.

“Claudina,” Hospital Psiquiátrico Yucatán, July 2008

Introduction

This chapter presents the context of class and race relations in Yucatán dealing with historical inequalities and present power dynamics. I argue that focusing too deeply on the "Maya/non-Maya" racial binary is not the best way to understand the question of ethnic, social, and class relations in the Yucatecan context because identity, though situational, is defined by where one falls in a continuum of social hierarchy. Although these distinctions are certainly influenced by race, an understanding of the Yucatecan class system as a continuum of locally constituted forms of social and cultural capital is more useful than a lengthy polemic on the nature of Maya versus non-Maya identity. In my research, my "subject population" fell all over this spectrum of Mayan-ness. Many of my subjects would be considered Maya or indigenous in one context, mestizo, non-Maya, or non-indigenous in another. In this chapter, I seek to move beyond these simple dualities and show Yucatecan society as an intricate social web mediated by power. In order to move beyond these dualities, however, it is necessary to engage the rich anthropological tradition that created them.

Traditionally, anthropological literature of Yucatán has had a decidedly Mayanist bend (Bartolomé 1988; Campos García 1992; Freidel, Schele and Parker 1993; Bracamonte y Sosa 2001; Ciudad Ruiz et al. 2002; Green 2002; Barabas 2003; Clendinnen 2003; Hanks 2003; Castañeda 2004; Castillo Cocom 2006). This is understandable: in Yucatán today, there are about 750,000 speakers of Yucatec Maya, who possess a wealth of cultural and ritual knowledge and a unique way of interpreting and understanding the world. However, the drive to study “the Maya”, while producing a rich literature, has created an image of a people living in a certain degree of isolation. Thus, “Maya” society, “Maya” dispositions, “Maya” language, and “Maya” projects, have dominated the field to the point that non-Maya speaking, city-dwelling Mayas, non-Maya speaking Yucatecans with Spanish surnames but Maya phenotype, pale-skinned, light-eyed, light-haired Yucatecans and, of course, the wealthy, landed elite (always characterized as “Spanish”) have been simply grouped into a category called “non-Mayas” and to a great extent ignored.

In my early graduate career, I spent a great deal of time thinking about Maya as an academic construct. In my field statement, "The Anthropology of the 'Maya'" (Reyes-Cortes 2006), I studied the emergence of this construct and concluded that despite problems with the term, it was still a useful epistemic field. However, "Maya Studies" spans three countries, 29 dialects, and at least three distinct historical and ethnological trajectories. While much of this field has produced some rich ethnographic and historical studies that attend to the history of colonialism in Mesoamerica and the ethnic/structural violence that accompanies it, it has the effect of producing "The Maya" as a monolith, obscuring the many differences between different Maya languages, traditions, histories, and culture. Inversely, "non-Mayas" have also been portrayed as

a monolith: always "*ladino*", "*mestizo*", or "Spanish", always oppressive, always inhabiting different worlds than "The Maya". The "non-Maya" monolith is the antagonist in the drama protagonized by "the Maya". My work in Yucatán forced me to see beyond these monolithic categories because these constructs, to paraphrase Charles Hale (1999), simply did not "travel well".

In this chapter, I address the question of identity with a historical, theoretical, and ethnographic approach. I discuss my own conceptualization of race and class as interlocking continua within the broader Yucatecan social context, and provide an ethnographic description of the people I call *la gente bien*, the elite that stand symbolically opposed to the "Maya" and who are mentioned only in passing in most literature on Yucatán¹⁴. In most anthropological writing of Yucatán, *la gente bien*, --usually labeled "Spanish," "mestizos," or "ladinos"-- exist as a faraway, usually unsympathetic mass of people with whom the "Maya" have rare, usually unpleasant, encounters. *La gente bien* are characterized as powerful, racist, and far removed from the every day realities faced by Maya people. In reality, the people academics refer to as "Maya" live in a world inhabited and in many cases constructed by the *gente bien*. Furthermore, the *gente bien* themselves, as I discuss in this chapter, are not a homogenous group of people, but are in fact quite diverse and occupy the same continuum of locally constituted social and cultural capital as "the Maya." In this chapter, I discuss the broader implication of this conceptualization of identity and social relations to this dissertation.

Identity: Mayas and Non-Mayas

Broadly defined, the word *Maya* refers to "those people whose communities of residence or reference resemble one another in their differences from the national societies of México and Guatemala," who speak 30 related languages and share cultural practices (Watanabe and Fischer 2004:353). The field of Maya studies has its origins in the ventures of early archaeologists like Edward H. Thompson (1897, 1932) and the widely read travel writing of John Lloyd Stephens (1841). These works focused on the ruins left behind by an ancient, vanished civilization, and generated a vast archaeological and ethnographic field encompassing several regions, countries, and languages.¹⁵ This rich archaeological tradition was complemented by a wealth of ethnographic writing on three roughly definable geographical Maya regions: Yucatán (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1962; Villa Rojas 1978; Cauik 1987; Bartolomé 1988; Hanks 1990; Everton 1991; Castañeda 1996; Barabas 2003; Castillo Cocom 2005; Ayora Diaz 2007), Chiapas (Nash 1970, Nash 2001; Benjamin 1989; Bricker 1989, 2004; Boremanse 1993; Field 1994; Womack 1999), and the Guatemalan Highlands (Annis 1987; Fischer and McKenna-Brown 1996; Fischer 1999; Carlsen 1997; Nelson 1999).

In the first decade of the 21st century, literature in Maya studies began to call into question academic understandings of "Maya" as a concept. Quetzil Castañeda(2004), in his introduction to a special issue of *The Journal of Latin American Anthropology* focusing on Yucatec Maya identity, noted that "the term 'Maya' is itself an embattled zone of contestation of

¹⁴ A recent example is "'s essay on the Lebanese population of Yucatán, who comprise a significant percentage of the Yucatecan elite.

¹⁵ See Robert Sharer's *The Ancient Maya* for an exhaustive, current bibliography of Maya archaeology (1994) and Alfred M. Tozzer's translation of Diego De Landa's *Relación de las cosas de Yucatán* (1941) for a complete annotated bibliography of early writing on the Maya.

belonging, identity, and differentiation”. The Pan-Maya movement in Guatemala (Nelson 1999:427; Warren 1998) and the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas (Nash 2001:303; Womack 1999) exemplify how “Maya” has taken on a highly contested and politicized meaning in Guatemala and Chiapas, in a markedly different way than it has in Yucatán. Castañeda (2004) asks why the Maya of Yucatán, unlike the Maya of Chiapas and Guatemala, “didn’t . . . have a globally transnational, media-attended identity politics movement on a par with those of their neighbors?” (38). His answer is that people called Maya in Yucatán not only have another politic with an historical trajectory different from their Guatemalan and Chiapaneco counterparts, but also another modality of identity. By “modality of identity,” Castañeda challenges the reader to think beyond traditional binary understandings of ethnicity and race towards a more inclusive understanding of Maya culture. While the special issue certainly challenges traditional academic notions of ethnicity, race, and the Maya category, Castañeda falls short of describing exactly what this modality of identity actually is, focusing, to a large extent, on what it isn’t

Who is not Maya in Yucatán? Castañeda (2004) notes that while many North American anthropologists use the term “white” to refer to Yucatán’s “non-Maya, non-Criollo, non-Mestizo, non-Mayero, urban or rural Yucatecan peoples” (53), the people who are labeled as “white” do not utilize the term for self-identification¹⁶. Thus, we have a discourse of Mayas who do not call themselves Maya, and whites who do not call themselves white. And Watanabe adds, in his assessment of Yucatán in the nineteenth century, that not only did many “non-Maya” speak Maya but as many as half those called *vecino*¹⁷ in nineteenth century Yucatán may have had a Maya mother or grandmother (Dumond 1997). In the 21st century, the unique challenges posed by Yucatán’s inhabitants present anthropologists and other social scientists with an opportunity to re-think and perhaps re-formulate anthropological understanding of identity, community, and ethnicity. Indeed, Gabbert and Restall’s (Gabbert 2004; Restall 2004) discussions of Maya ethnicity and ethnogenesis bring one to question whether ethnogenesis has taken place at all in Yucatán. Rather than falling into ladino/*indígena* binaries, those termed *indígena* by anthropological discourse are as difficult to identify as those who are not. Ladino is a socio-ethnic category commonly used in Central America, particularly Guatemala, to label mestizo or hispanicized people. Often, the term stands symbolically opposed to *indígena* [indigenous]. Although the ethnic term Ladino is also situational (Hale 1999)¹⁸, Guatemala presents a very different modality of identity than that of Yucatán. In Guatemala, like in Chiapas, the term *indígena* is used for self-ascription by indigenous people, and the term Ladino is used for self-ascription by Spanish-speaking people of mixed descent. Neither of these categories exists in Yucatán.

Juan Castillo Cocom (2004) critiques Gabbert’s arguments regarding Maya ethnogenesis in Yucatán precisely because of his reliance on the term Ladino to identify non-Mayas.

Nevertheless, *nunca falta un pelo en la sopa* (“there is always a hair in the soup”)[*sic*]. I refer to [Gabbert’s] use of the term ladino. . . . No one in Yucatán uses “ladino”. . . . It seems that despite Gabbert’s intent to make a tour of

¹⁶ I would also add that while *mestizo* and *mayero* are used on the ground and terms of self-identification, *maya*, *criollo*, and *indígena* are not.

¹⁷ *Vecino* referenced Spanish and Criollo men in the Spanish colonies.

¹⁸ e.g., indigenous people will sometimes adopt western dress and “pass” for Ladinos Guatemala

experiential categories he imposed a map, a very foreign scholarly map, in his analysis. Maybe I too, am lost in the map when I use the term *dzul*... (183).

This is because *dzul* in Yucatán is a word that is used in many different ways and tends to be referent for wealth more than it is specifically a racial marker: a *dzul* is a person with wealth just like an *o'otsil maak* [poor man] is a poor person. A person, like Castillo Cocom (2006), for instance, can be a *dzul* in his village, Xocenpich, but in the city of Mérida he encounters racism and exclusion marking him as "indigenous" (13). As such, "race", "class", and "ethnicity" exist in specific, variable, locally constituted geographies.

In his insightful essay, "Travel Warning: Elite Appropriations of Hybridity, Mestizaje, Equality, and Other Progressive-Sounding Discourses in Highland Guatemala", Charles Hale (1999) studies the adoption of seemingly progressive language in Ladino discourse about ethnic relations. Hale argues that the term "mestizaje" is being used as a "preemptive strike"(305). In other words, Ladinos address the issue of inequality by calling for an embracing of indigenous heritage shared by all Guatemalans, but by doing so de-legitimate the claims being made by Maya activists. As such, his "warning" is that terms such as hybridity and mestizaje do not "travel" well from one specific context to another.

Where do the terms "hybridity" and "mestizaje" in fact come from? The answer to this question sheds unique insight into Yucatecan modalities of identity because both of these terms have salience in the Yucatecan and nationalist Mexican context. This salience can be traced to México's own particular historical trajectory, and can be attributed to the work of two men: Nestor Garcia Canclini (1989) and Manuel Gamio (2010[1916]). Following Hale's coinage of Raymond William's Militant Particularism (1989), I conclude that while *hybridity* and *mestizaje* are highly salient terms in the Yucatecan context (and not salient in the same way in the highland Guatemalan context, as Hale rightly points out), a mistake made by Mayanist cultural anthropologists has been to assume that the *Ladino/indígena* binary is as salient in Yucatán as it is in Guatemala when in fact, these terms --for whatever reason-- do not "travel well." A position respectful of militant particularism recognizes that in the unique social and historical context of Yucatán, the main source for the vocabulary of identity stems from understandings of wealth and social class that are not explicitly (though they may be implicitly) linked to colonialist constructions of ethnicity and race.

The "slippage" we identify in the continuum of class and ethnicity¹⁹ stems from subjects' ability to move within the spectrum. However, the implicit association of skin tone with class lurks beneath the surface, never spoken about but always present. In December 2010, my family and I visited Yucatán. While we were in Valladolid, I ran into my great friend, Bety Poot, who had recently completed her Master's degree in education and had been promoted to the position of *directora de carrera* [academic major] director at Universidad de Oriente. Bety, my anglo-American husband, toddler son, and I sat down for lunch at *Doña Hermelinda*, an iconic *loncheria*. A pair of women, dressed in *huipiles*, sat behind us, and soon my young son, encouraged by the Yucatecan love of children, was flirting and cooing his way onto their laps.

¹⁹ Note that I am making an explicit use of the term "ethnicity" and *not* race. As Hale points out, the Ladino/indígena distinction in Guatemala is racial in the sense that these categories are understood by many to have a biological foundation. Thanks to the foundational role of boasian anthropologist Manuel Gamio in the construction of México's ethnic identity, this biological understanding of race does not exist in the Yucatecan context.

As we got ready to leave, one of the women asked Bety something in Maya. She spoke rapidly, but I understood the gist of her question.

Bety shook her head and responded in Maya, "*Ma.' Cheen in waamigos. Estados Unidos u taal.*" [No, they are just my friends. They live in the United States].

As we walked away, I asked her what the woman had wanted to know.

Bety chuckled, her eyes glinting with amusement. "She wanted to know if I was your nanny."

Bety's amusement comes from the fact that she is used to breaking barriers. She was the first woman in her village to run for mayor (and lost by only 30 votes); she is the first member of her family to earn an advanced degree –she and her sister being the first to have college educations. I don't know if she would have been equally amused if the woman asking had been a woman of *La gente bien*, but for her, being mistaken for being a nanny by some local Maya-speaking, huipil-wearing women, had as much to do with her gender as with her skin color.

"Mayan-ness," Politics, and Social Structure

Castillo Cocom's work (2003, 2004, 2005, 2006) contextualizes the epistemology of the term *Maya* as an academic and political construct, articulating it in terms of the K'ichee creation myth in the Popol Vuh.

[Creation is] like a large quincunx of four sides at right angles... In the Popol Vuh, it is on this plane that the gods created creation, including Earth and the People of Corn. Anthropologists call these people 'Maya.' As a Yucatec Maya, I do not know the language and un-translated meaning of this K'ichee' Maya text [the Popol Vuh], and so I, too, as an anthropologist, like other anthropologists must rely on translations in Spanish and English made by the experts (2006:132).

Basing himself on the K'ichee Quincunx of Creation, Castillo Cocom models what he refers to as the fifth creation of the Maya, where other deities –anthropologists, archaeologists, sociologists, linguists, business people, the tourist industry, the state, and politicians- have created the Maya on the axes of anthropology, history, linguistics and archaeology (134). But there is more:

I return to my role as Chilam Balam. When the Chilam Balams before me described the world created by the gods, they represented it as quincunx, as I described above. Nevertheless, is it not possible that they indeed knew the world was round? ... When I say that the Maya have no political movements, I am not implying that they lack political beliefs, opinion or views. Our vision of politics is the same as the scientific reality that the world is round (146).

For Castillo Cocom (2006), this quincunx of Mayaness exists as an ideal layer above the material reality of Yucatecan politics: while the construct of "Maya" is appropriated by the state, the politicians, and the media, lay Yucatecans living in rural Yucatán –people who may speak Yucatec, or dress in a way that marks them as "Maya" in the ideal quincunx, continue to think of themselves as *priista* or *panista* when they go to the polls, not as Maya (140). The Yucatecan "modality of identity" thus eludes binary understandings of ethnicity, identity and race. It cannot be understood without a serious consideration and problematization of our understandings of

class and socioeconomics alongside race and ethnicity. Yucatecan identities represent a valuable opportunity to think about how power dynamics and relationships operate in situations of ambiguity. Here, I build on Castañeda (2004) and Castillo Cocom (2000) to argue that the best way to talk about people in Yucatán is to use the word that all Yucatecans use to refer to themselves. Regardless of what language they speak, whether their last name is Maya, Spanish, or Lebanese, where in Yucatán they live or were born in, whether they are light or dark-skinned, the word my interlocutors used when talking about themselves was the word that I will use to refer to them: Yucatecan. While I encountered a great deal of identity markers in my work such as *mayero*, *campesino*, and *pobre*, the Yucatecan identity holds remarkable salience among all social classes and groups with whom I worked. As a regional ethnic category, it is the most useful to define my subject population.

This dissertation deals with all Yucatecans, not only the group of people known in anthropological literature as The Maya. Most of my research subjects identify themselves in terms that fall somewhere in between the traditional academic Maya/non-Maya duality. If I had focused my attention exclusively on the Maya, I would have found (and did find) some fascinating evidence of unique Maya worldviews and perceptions of suicide, but I would have missed much of the rich data generously provided by those affected by suicide who did not fall into this academic category. Furthermore, I would have created a false distinction, propagating the pernicious idea of suicide in Yucatán as a particularly Maya phenomenon.

Changing my focus in this way allowed me to see that in order to understand Yucatecan society, I had to grapple with two distinct but related categories: race and class. Race and class in Yucatán can be understood as continua where a person can achieve some measure of mobility. However, these continua could be understood as interlocking axes on a graph. While a person may move back and forth on both continua, ultimately his or her starting point constrains just how far he or she can actually go. When I speak about continuum I am neither reinventing nor reformulating Robert Redfield's (1962) urban/folk continuum: the continua I am describing are not limited to geography; nor do they carry any of the broader implications of Redfield's model (vis à vis religious vs. secular, order vs. disorder, civilization vs. folk culture)²⁰.

Ethnographic Vignette

On a continuum of race and class, the person must be contextualized in a history of colonialism, post-colonialism, repeated upheaval, indentured servitude, revolution, and repeated political turmoil. As mentioned in the introduction, being Yucatecan and growing up in Yucatán gave me a unique vantage point because I was exposed to the inner workings of class and race in my personal experiences before I began studying anthropology. In 2008, these two axes, class and race, met at the crossroads of a tiny *Programa Integral de Atención al Suicidio* (PIAS) group therapy room and became suddenly visible in a single, poignant morning.

July 14, 2008, 9:30 a.m.

²⁰ However, these continua must be contextualized within the broader fields of religion, economics, history, and culture. The model I am using is not intended to substitute or encompass any of this, it is simply a tool I use to conceptualize the complexity of ethnic identity of Yucatecans.

Two weeks into my six-month research stint at the Hospital Psiquiátrico Yucatán, I witnessed an extraordinary group therapy session. The following excerpt, taken from my fieldnotes, illustrates the setting of this event.

Diana [the volunteer psychologist who leads the small inpatient group therapy sessions] and I are preparing for today's session. Diana is a woman in her forties who appears to fit into the Mexican stereotype of *la gente bien*: she is tall, probably about 5'9", with long, flowing raven-black hair and white skin. She carries a Gucci purse and wears Nine West high heels. Her nails match her silk blouse and her black slacks flatter her figure. Her gold bracelets match her necklace and earrings. She always appears to be perfectly groomed and made-up, and next to her I look plain and unglamorous, or, worse yet, like an anthropologist: leather sandals, a cool, white cotton blouse with colored embroidery inspired by the local *huipil*, my long hair tied back in a ponytail at the base of my neck, my nails short and unpolished, no makeup or jewelry save for a small gold St. Christopher medal around my neck. Today is the third session in which we are joined by Claudina, a young, brilliant, and engaging patient from Kinil, a village close to the town of Motul, Yucatán.

The first time I met Claudina and introduced myself as an anthropologist, she immediately understood the nature of my work: during our first session, she talked about "the book I was writing," and about how my studies "were about how and why people do the things they do." This was particularly surprising to me because during my stay in Yucatán, most of my interlocutors did not really understand what it was that I did. Although Claudina was from a village and had very little formal education (she did not finish high school), she was well read (often citing authors such as Vargas Llosa during sessions). Above all, she had a critical mind with its own keen take on the world. On July 14, Claudina had already been hospitalized for two weeks following a hanging attempt. In this session, Claudina listened intently to the other three patients participating in the session and offered them her advice. When it was her turn to speak, she had just heard another patient's story of his struggles with alcoholism. In a heartbreaking moment, she articulated something that I believe lies at the heart of class relations in the Yucatán:

When my father drank, he would tell us we were whores, or that we were poor, or that we were good-for nothings. That made my self esteem very low. I had a boyfriend, and he would take me *anywhere*. And he would take me there in his *car*. And I say it this way because it isn't worth anything, it's just bread. "You want to eat, Claudina? Let's go eat something good." But he didn't care about me. He didn't love me. What he wanted was sexual satisfaction. And what happened was that I was in awe of what he had... I grew up in a very humble home. And when I say humble, I don't mean that I only ate tortillas and beans, or that I only ate tomato and chile like my grandmother does. But with him, I started to see new things. I saw people that go into Costco. People that go into Walmart. People that buy their things at Plaza Altabrisa. And this made me sad. [her voice breaks] You know why? Because I can't go to those places. I can only go look at the things they have, but I can't buy anything. I'm used to buying second-hand clothes. My

underwear, I buy it at the *tianguis*²¹ and I wear it. I'm not ashamed to say it because I am used to poverty. But then I read a letter that my boyfriend had written to another woman, where he said all kinds of beautiful things. But me, he just told me I was dumb, or that I was useless. Or that I was an *india*²². "You say you read?" [he would say] "What do you read? Look how fat you've gotten." And because he told me I was fat, I joined a gym. What I didn't understand was that he didn't want that, he wanted something else. He wanted someone with an intellect. And you know who he loved? You know who he cared about, with a deep love? A doctor. And now, every time I see a car I think that it's him, and I feel panicky and scared. Scared that he will see how sad I am. That he will see how I have nothing... He made fun of me because I wanted to read *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville. He said I wasn't going to understand it. But when I read it I found that Melville used a language that wasn't exactly difficult. It was explicit. It was elegant. I am always drawn to things which are elegant. But there is an elegance that comes from being a professional, and another that comes from *mestizaje*²³. My grandmother is a great wise woman, who has always taught me how things should be done in order to do them well.²⁴

Claudina's narrative is frenzied. She seems to express many different ideas at once, articulating thoughts as quickly as they occur to her. Although it seems scattered, I chose to

²¹ *Tianguis* refers to a street market where one is able to purchase used clothing and goods at low prices.

²² *India* (*m. Indio*) was originally used by Spanish conquistadors to refer to the indigenous people living on the American continent at contact. Presently, the word carries a pejorative connotation of racial inferiority. In Yucatán, the word *indio* is always a racial epithet. The more neutral *indígena* is sometimes used by government agencies, but is not prevalently used for self-abscription.

²³ In contrast, the word *mestizaje*, which refers to the mixing of Spanish and Indigenous bloodlines, is frequently used by Maya-speaking people to describe themselves.

²⁴ Mi papa cuando tomaba, no nos bajaba de putas, no nos bajaba de pobres, de inútiles. Y eso me dejo con el autoestima muy bajo.... Yo tuve un novio, que me llevaba a pasear en donde *sea*, y me llevaba en *su auto*. Y lo digo de esa manera porque solo es pan, no vale nada. "Que si quieres comer, vamos a comer una comida rica." A mi me tenía, este, no me quería, ni me amaba, lo que buscaba era nada mas una satisfacción sexual. Y que pasa, que yo estaba deslumbrada por lo que el tiene... yo crecí de una manera muy humilde. Y cuando digo "humilde," no quiero decir que yo coma tortillas con frijol, o solo coma yo tomate con chile como lo hace mi abuelita. Pero yo veía cosas diferentes, a personas que entran en Cosco, a personas que entran en Walmart, a personas que entran a comprar a las plazas. A mi me daba tristeza y sabe porque? Porque yo no puedo ir a esos lugares.... Solo puedo ir a ver. Porque yo, yo estoy acostumbrada a ropa de segunda, mi ropa interior, la uso y no me da pena decirlo, porque yo estoy acostumbrada a la pobreza. Yo leí una carta que el le había escrito a su novia, donde le decía muchas cosas lindas. En cambio a mi no me bajaba de tonta, no me bajaba de inútil, no me bajaba de india. "Dices que lees? Y que lees? Mira que gorda ya estas." Y como me dijo que estaba gorda, me metí a un gimnasio... ya que me dijo eso, quería yo demostrarle que no soy cualquier persona. Pero lo que yo no entendía que él no quería eso, él quería otra cosa, él quería a una persona que tuviera un intelecto. Y saben a quién amaba? Saben a quién quería, con un amor fuerte? A una doctora. Así que mi autoestima bajó mucho. (starts to cry) Y ahora, cada vez que veo pasar a un carro, me imagino que es él, pero un pánico, con un miedo. De que el se siga burlando de mi. Que me vea triste, que me vea que no tengo nada. Como sabe el mucho, veo y tiene el un montón de libros. Y le digo, "quiero leer a Moby Dick, quiero leer a Melville." "Hasta crees que vas a leer Moby Dick? No lo vas a entender. Pero ten, te lo regalo." Y lo que me llamo la atención es que Melville usaba palabras muy, no complejas, elegantes. Tiene un lenguaje muy explícito, un lenguaje elegante. Y a mi me llaman mucho la atención las personas que tienen una elegancia. Pero hay una elegancia que viene por medio de la profesionalidad, y hay otra que viene por medio del mestizaje. Mi abuelita es una gran sabia, que siempre me ha explicado como se hacen bien las cosas.

reproduce it here because the ideas that she expresses have manifested themselves to me in my conversations, interviews, and observations of life in Yucatán throughout the years.

This passage is revealing for several reasons. In the following pages, I will break down her narrative and analyze it, teasing out the nuances of Claudina's life and heart, and how through her words we can understand the lived experience of everyday life in Yucatecan society.

When my father drank, he would tell us we were whores, or that we were poor, or that we were good-for nothings.

Class, race, and power dynamics are intrinsically connected: Claudina's father would insult her, her mother, and her sisters of being "poor" alongside of being whores or good-for-nothing. Furthermore, he was only abusive when he drank. Claudina points out that this abuse hurt her self-esteem, but she does not see the disconnect between the insult of being "poor" and that of being a prostitute or useless: all three are equally hurtful and offensive. Her father, too, did not seem to see a conflict in insulting his wife and daughters by calling them poor.

Why is poverty itself an insult? The distinction between rich and poor, and the stigma of being poor, is a part of Mexican national culture. For example, Mexican *telenovelas* invariably present the motif of a beautiful, poor girl who falls in love with a wealthy, handsome man. The young man's family and friends humiliate her for her poverty and sabotage the relationship, which at the end always prevails. While she is never attacked for being *India*, the heroine of the soap opera is always referred to by her enemies as a *pobre diabla* [poor devil, a common derogatory term for the poor], *salvaje* [savage], *mosca muerta* [dead fly, another derogatory term that carries similar meaning to the English "gold-digger"], *verdulera* [literally, "vegetable seller", referring to the occupation of selling vegetables at a local market]. Likewise, the classic film *Nosotros los Pobres*, starring Pedro Infante, is the tragic story of a poor family struggling to survive in a world that despises it for being poor. While both films such as this and *telenovelas* such as *Rosa Salvaje*, *Simplemente Maria*, *Maria la del Barrio*, *Maria Jose*, and a myriad of others convey a moral lesson against the discrimination of people based on their poverty, the fact that this is the message conveyed and that these stories continue to inspire *telenovelas* today speaks to the salience and continuing relevance of discrimination on the basis of socioeconomic status.

I had a boyfriend, and he would take me anywhere. And he would take me there in his car. And I say it this way because it isn't worth anything, it's just bread.

Claudina emphasized two words in her story, *anywhere* and *car*. She emphasized these words by inflection in her spoken language, but also by taking her index finger and pressing it to her palm when she said these words. The freedom to go anywhere, as we see later on in the passage, meant the introduction of Claudina to a new world. Previously unknown places to her, markers of prosperity such as Costco, Wal-mart, and the new, gleaming, exclusive, Alta Brisa shopping mall, created a contrast to the life she had known before this relationship. Furthermore, car ownership carries tremendous status in rural Yucatán. The fact that not only could her boyfriend take her into places she would never ordinarily enter on her own, but that he took her there in his car, and the emphasis that Claudina uses when she shares it is deeply significant and indicative of the enormous socioeconomic gap between her and her boyfriend.

And what happened was that I was in awe of what he had... I grew up in a very humble home. And when I say humble, I don't mean that I only ate tortillas and beans, or that I only ate tomato and chile like my grandmother does.

Claudina recognizes the liminal space that she occupies: although she is poor, she is not truly “poor” in the way that her grandmother is poor. Claudina’s grandmother is “poor” in a different way than Claudina because she eats things that are indigenous markers: tortillas, beans, tomatoes, and chiles. As such, the equation of indigenous with poor begins to take shape. However, the kind of poverty suffered by indigenous people is somehow categorically different than the kind of poverty suffered by someone like Claudina, who does not consider herself a mestiza. As we see later on in her narrative, even Claudina’s indigenous grandmother is a “great wise woman,” imbued with the elegance of being a *mestiza* because being a mestiza carries with it a certain degree of prestige, a prestige that Claudina is denied because she occupies a liminal space between being a mestiza and simply being poor. In this sense, the poverty of being *mestiza* is offset by the symbolic wealth of having *mestizo* culture.

And this made me sad. You know why? Because I can't go to those places. I can only go look at the things they have, but I can't buy anything. I'm used to buying second-hand clothes. My underwear, I buy it at the tianguis and I wear it. I'm not ashamed to say it because I am used to poverty.

Claudina says that she is not ashamed of her poverty. But she recognizes the pain of knowing herself to be only a spectator of her boyfriend’s world. She can “go” to places like Costco, Walmart, and Plaza Altabrisa, but she can never belong there. In her world, she must buy even her most intimate clothing from a second-hand market.

But me, he just told me I was dumb, or that I was useless. Or that I was an india. “You say you read?” [he would say] “What do you read? Look how fat you've gotten.” . . . He wanted someone with an intellect. And you know who he loved? You know who he cared about, with a deep love? A doctor.

Claudina’s abusive boyfriend called her an *india*. The term *indio* was originally used by Spanish conquistadors to refer to the indigenous people living in the American continent at the time of contact. Presently, the word carries a pejorative connotation of racial inferiority. In Yucatán, the word *indio* is always a racial epithet. The more neutral *indígena* is sometimes used by government agencies, but is not commonly used for self-ascription. In contrast, the word *mestiza* is never used as an epithet and commonly used for self-ascription by Maya-speaking, huipil-wearing women²⁵. The fact that Claudina's boyfriend calls her an *india* is significant because it further illustrates the insurmountable social distance she perceives between them. This distance solidifies when Claudina recognizes that she is in competition with a woman who she understands to be her own antithesis: an educated doctor.

I am always drawn to things which are elegant. But there is an elegance that comes from being a professional, and another that comes from mestizaje. My grandmother is a great wise woman, who has always taught me how things should be done in order to do them well.

²⁵ However, this term is not used by Maya-speaking women who do not wear the huipil. These women are called and call themselves *catrinas*, though I have heard the term used with far less frequency than the term *mestiza*

Because Claudina did not finish high school and was a stylist, she felt intellectually inferior to her boyfriend and the woman he ultimately left her for. She cannot acquire the “elegance” of the other woman, because she lacks the social capital to acquire it. What is worse, she also does not have the other kind of “elegance,” that which comes from being a mestiza. She lacks cultural capital as well. Claudina’s feelings of inferiority are closely tied to her poverty and ethnicity: the loss of her mestiza identity leaves her in a limbo from which she cannot escape: she is too india to belong to the class of people that her boyfriend belonged, but not humble enough to be considered a mestiza and aspire to the greatness of her grandmother.

What is Claudina referring to when she speaks about “elegance”? I am reminded of a woman I knew many years ago, when I was a young girl of 12 or 13 living in Mérida. Doña Fidelina was one of the kindest souls I have ever known. She was an elderly mestiza who had learned Spanish when her mother brought her to Mérida to work at the age of 12. She remembered the days when the road to her village, Yaxha, was not paved, and she and her children had to walk more than five kilometers down a dirt road to get to the highway to Mérida. One day, Doña Fidelina came to visit us. My grandmother had given me some parakeets as a gift and they lived in a cage outside. Doña Fidelina stepped into our garden, and the parakeets, which had been chirping in their cages, suddenly fell silent. All of the sudden, a momentary hush fell over our little yard and all we could hear was the sound of the wind. Doña Fidelina turned to me and smiled.

“You know why they’ve gone silent?” She asked me, gesturing at the parakeets.

I shook my head.

“Because they know a mestiza is here. I am one of the *antiguos*. They can sense that.”²⁶

As a child, I didn’t understand what Doña Fidelina was saying, although over the years I have heard these ideas expressed many times. The idea the mestizas possess a kind of state of tranquility has been explored by Christine Kray, who posits a connection between tranquility and ethnicity. In my own work, I also find that mestizo identity is associated with a personhood marked by equilibrium²⁷. This sense of equilibrium can also be interpreted as a kind of belonging in the world, the same kind of belonging experienced by a young woman on the other end of the spectrum: a young, intelligent doctor. I interpret Claudina’s use of the word “elegance” to signify the kind of confidence that comes from having a “complete” sense of self. This elegance comes from possessing capital, be it symbolic or economic.

Los antiguos, called the *uchbe’n maako’ob* in Maya, literally means “the ancient people²⁸,” is a word that refers to a generation of people whose primary means of survival was agricultural. The *uchbe’n maako’ob* possess specialized knowledge about nature and the beings that live in it. Although some survive, it is understood to be a generation that is slowly dying off, representing a lifestyle that is no longer desired by the present generation²⁹. “Elegance” as

²⁶ “Sabes porqué se callan?... Porque saben que hay una mestiza. Yo soy de los antiguos y ellos se dan cuenta.”

²⁷ In chapter 4, I explore how this sense of person is not limited to the human body but extends to physical space. This may be why Doña Fidelina interpreted the hushing of the birds to her own mestiza presence due to the sacred nature of this sense of “presence.”

²⁸ According to the Cordemex Maya dictionary, *uchbe’n* is defined as “an ancient thing, something very old.” The word *mak* (pl. *maako’ob*) means “person, or man.”

²⁹ I have, however, met middle-aged people who identify as being *antiguos*. In Yaxha, I have heard people refer to themselves as belonging to “*los antiguos*” when their lifestyle is primarily agricultural. Although increasing

described by Claudina refers to the possession of specialized knowledge and the empowerment that accompanies it. As such, the elegance of the doctor comes from her years of education and professional practice. The elegance of her grandmother comes from the unique knowledge and sense of self that she, as a member of the *uchbe'n maako'ob*, possesses.

Class Relations: An Ethnographic Approach

Although few expressed themselves as eloquently as Claudina, the rigidity of Yucatán's class system was a frequent motif in my conversations and interviews with research subjects. Bartlomé Alonso Camaal, a teacher in Yucatán's bilingual public school system, talked about this rigidity early on in my research in Valladolid:

Sometimes I have reflected that the lack of an adequate relationship between non-indigenous society and indigenous society places young men and women in a sociocultural and even socioeconomic conflict. Especially the boys. I think that the girls are more psychologically stable. I would even argue that a young Maya woman is more psychologically and emotionally stable than a young city woman... Even though the indigenous community has harsher socioeconomic conditions, I think that the culture in which young people grow allows them to have emotional stability and equilibrium. Young men, though, go through a more difficult conflict. I feel that young men, men at the end of their adolescence and early adulthood are living through an extremely painful conflict when a young man is born to a Maya family, in a Maya community, and he looks at the other culture –urban culture, non-indigenous culture, as a life-model with a higher value than his community life model. The young man internalizes many prejudices, believing that his condition as indigenous, as Maya, his marginal social and economical conditions, will keep him from realizing his potential. In the other society, the young man sees the model that he prefers, but he cannot fit into it. He leaves school at a young age and incorporates himself into the labor market. But then, he lacks the education to get a decent wage, and winds up working in manual labor, where the pay is low, and his dreams of joining the non-indigenous world are frustrated...

In other words, the young indigenous man who goes into the city loses himself in a web of complex relationships where his identity conflict and marginal economic situation keeping him from integrating in his own society or in the other society.

Based on available literature (Terry et al. 2010) and ethnographic research, I would venture to say that there are several strata placed along a continuum of poverty and wealth that have a loose correlation with phenotype and language. On the wealthiest side of the spectrum we have the people I call *gente bien*, those Yucatecans who are the most prosperous (including Lebanese descended families). On the other side of the spectrum are the poorest of the poor, who do not necessarily live in the rural environment. In fact, the most disadvantaged members of society are those described by Alonso Camaal: the urban poor. In Yucatán, poor families who live in rural settings have some real advantages over those who don't: closer networks of extended family and friends, their own land, a relatively egalitarian community, and self-employment. The urban poor may or may not have a close network of family and friends, but they almost always rent, are exposed on a day to day basis to the profound inequalities between themselves and people in the wealthier classes, often don't have the ability to speak Maya or any of the cultural

numbers of young people are turning towards a cash economy, subsistence agriculture is still widely practiced throughout the peninsula. As such, although much of the specialized knowledge allegedly possessed by los *antiguos* is spoken of as being somehow "lost," my own ethnographic experience and years of working in the region tell me that this idea of loss is inaccurate.

capital possessed by older generations and the rural poor (such as agricultural, ritual, and medicinal knowledge), and work mainly for other people, usually in an informal labor economy where they are at the whim of their employers.

On the continuum between the extremely wealthy elite and the urban poor are large upper middle, middle, and lower middle classes. The people in these classes have varying degrees of education and engage in different kinds of work. They may be small business owners, teachers, university professors, and young or lesser successful doctors and lawyers. Many of these people live in or can trace their ancestry back to rural Yucatán, and have at least one Maya-speaking grandparent.

A person's position within the hierarchy of social class defines understanding of the self as well as expectations and hopes for the future. It can also afford the resources to protect self and loved ones from public scrutiny. People in the elite are unlikely to ever use the services of the state psychiatric hospital or other public health services, so gathering data on mental health and suicide among the elite is especially difficult³⁰. This is significant to the rest of the dissertation because class is central in thinking about power and identity, and understanding power and identity is key in understanding the place every social actor holds when it comes to suicide be it be actors in the media, the state, the institution, the city or the village.

La Gente Bien

La Gente Bien lives in a world at once present in and removed from Claudina's universe. Its ranks are made up of old and new wealthy Yucatecan families, the newer wealth reflecting the influx of Maronite Christian Lebanese immigrants who flooded the area during World War I. *Chapur*, a chain of department stores, and *San Francisco de Asis*, a chain of super-markets, are owned by the wealthy Chapur and Abraham families. Originally scorned as *los turcos* by established Yucatecan society, these and other prominent Lebanese-Yucatecan families now represent much of the upper class (Baklanoff 2010).

People in the upper class derive a great part of their sense of self from their perception of being above –and therefore better than—the lower class. Therefore, a great deal of their time is spent finding ways to make their world increasingly exclusive.³¹ They send their children to exclusive schools such as Colegio Mérida, Instituto Gotwin, and Colegio Teresiano; live in exclusive neighborhoods such as La Ceiva, colonia Montecristo, and colonia México; and eat and drink at exclusive restaurants and bars such as Trotter's, La Trato, and el Cielo.

During the summer, the wealthiest families move to their beachfront properties in Progreso and other nearby beaches. Likewise, most of the restaurants, bars, and country clubs they sponsor also open up beachfront versions of themselves from May until the end of August. They have last names such as Molina, Barbachano, Ponce, Dajer, and Chapur. The Yucatecan elite, made up of old money (Spanish) and new (Lebanese) fashion themselves as royalty. How much money one has is more important than anything else. It is a small and scantily studied

³⁰ See chapter 2 for an account of a suicide in the elite class.

³¹ This impulse for separation by the elite is not unique to Yucatán. See a similar example in Teresa Caldeira's book *City of Walls* (Caldeira 2000:487) where even small spaces such as apartments have a separate servant's quarters and bathroom, and neighborhoods are increasingly gated

group of people (Folan 1967; Margolies 1969; Joseph 1979; Joseph and Wells 1986; Wells 1988; Rivero 1999; Loewe 2007) who live their lives in isolation from the rest of the population.

Mérida's thriving economy is evidence to the prosperity of *la gente bien*: the city successfully sustains Mercedes-Benz, Land Rover, and BMW dealerships. Its sparkling new malls house high-end designer stores such as Nine West, Bershka, and Sfera. Starbucks and its Mexican competitor, The Italian Coffee Company, are thriving. As an anthropologist on a Fulbright-Hays fellowship, I was shocked at how expensive life could be in Mérida: if I had trouble making ends meet on dollars, how in the world did people afford to pay American and European prices while earning Mexican pesos? For those with the cultural and economic capital, these are good times in Yucatán. For people like Claudina, these times, like all times, are hard.

Class Relations: A Historical Approach

A multitude of books, in English and Spanish, have been written on Yucatán's history (Farriss 1984; Rugeley 1996, 2001, 2009; Restall 1997; Bracamonte y Sosa 2001; Gabbert 2004; Hanks 2010). A careful consideration of how historical events have shaped the way in which social class and race are constructed in contemporary Yucatán could fill several volumes and doctoral dissertations. In this chapter, I briefly touch on three historical periods (Spanish colonial period, the Caste War, and Mexican Revolutionary Reform) to trace the development of race and class as we understand them today. In particular, I focus on the collective memory of *esclavitud* as a product of the Mexican revolution and its transformative effects on both the construction of class and race in contemporary Yucatán.³²

The Colonial Period: 1547-1810

Pre-Columbian Maya society was highly stratified and had a long historical trajectory of warfare and conquest (Sharer 1994). After the Spanish conquest of 1542, Maya members of the ruling class retained a great degree of their power. Farriss (1984) describes the indigenous elite-*macehual* [commoner] relationship as a type of "formalized, large-scale patron-client relationship: obedience and material support in return for protection" (174). This patron-client relation is not unlike Spanish *padrinaje*; the Spaniards at first represented an addition to the pre-existing social order. In this sense, Yucatecan society was never egalitarian: as Farriss notes, "The native elite in particular were the fixed center of each community, stable socially as well as geographically.... [they] did not merely represent the community; in many ways they *were* the community" (227).

Hanks (2010) considers the concept of *reducción* as key to understanding the ways in which Maya society changed through Franciscan missionization. The first instinct in understanding the word *reducción* and its verb form *reducir* one is tempted to equate the term with the English word *reduce*, which, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is defined as "to make or become smaller in amount, degree, or size...to bring to an undesirable state or action." However, closer scrutiny of the word reveals its complexity: the term *reducción* has its roots in the Latin *reducere*, "to lead back," and originally carried the connotation of "restore." The Spanish *reducción* as used in colonial texts was a Franciscan strategy of colonization and

³² Due to space constraints, this historical discussion is necessarily brief. For further reading in English please see the work of Nancy Farriss (1984) and William F. Hanks (2010) for the Colonial Period, Terry Rugeley (1986, 2009) for the Caste War, and Terry et. Al (2010) for revolutionary and post-revolutionary Yucatán.

conversion. To Hanks, the term has a sense of putting something “in order,” or of convincing someone to come back to a belief. Furthermore, the choice of this word, which implies a previous enlightened position which the person in need of *reducción* has abandoned, is telling: the presence of crosses and baptismal practices in post-classic Yucatán (de Landa 1978:162) created a fascination among the Franciscan missionaries, who speculated that perhaps Christianity had preceded the Church into the new world (Hanks 1997).

The *reducción* of space translated into the institution of the *pueblo reducido* in the form of the *cabildo* as a form of governance. Over and over, we see Spanish anguish over the fact that the Indians are scattered and highly mobile, making them difficult to control and keep track of (de Landa 1964, Farriss 1984, Hanks 2000, Sanchez de Aguilar 1937). Inside the *pueblo reducido* lived *indios reducidos* who were living in *policía cristiana* [Christian civility]. The “civilizing process” referred to the proper management of the body in society, and this code of “proper conduct” is most clear in Tomás López Medel’s *ordenanzas* (de Landa 1964), where the population is banned from planting inside the town, gathering at night (drinking and reading hieroglyphic texts), and moving from one place to another. Conduct was further *reducida* through governance. The *cabildo* was headed by a *gobernador* who supervised *escribanos* [scribes], *maestros* [teachers], and *regidores* [councilman]. The central *pueblo* was called the *cabecera* [head], and this is where the *gobernador* and the main church were located. The surrounding *pueblos reducidos* were called *visitas* [visits], because the parish priests would visit the *pueblo* but were not based there. *Reducción* became the catalyst for change, though not necessarily in the way that the Spaniards had intended: instead of turning the Indians into idealized replicas of Spanish peasantry, *reducción* transformed certain realms of Maya language and belief into new, interpenetrated processes that the Maya seized in order to claim a stake in the new order³³. This unexpected turn of events dismayed the Franciscans. By 1633, secular Dean Pedro Sánchez de Aguilar (1996) complained to the crown of continuing indigenous apostasy (return to previous beliefs) and idolatry. In his *Informe contra Idolorum Cultores*, Sánchez de Aguilar asks the crown for help in implementing more punitive measures and punishments against an indigenous population still legally considered neophyte. The friars, he conveys in dismay, failed at the apostolic mission of converting the Indians of the province of Yucatán.

Moreover, Mayas and Spaniards did not live in isolation from each other. Farriss notes that just as there was a “Hispanization” of Maya culture and people during the colonial period, there was also a definite process of “Mayanization” on all levels of society. In his assessment of Yucatán in the 19th century, Watanabe (2004) notes that not only did many “non-Maya” people speak Maya but as many as half those called *vecino* (people considered by Spanish law as Spaniard or Creole) in 19th century Yucatán may have had a Maya mother or grandmother, which suggests sustained intermarriage between the two populations. Like Hanks, who sees language as the main vehicle of *reducción*, Farriss (1984) also emphasizes the importance of language, noting that “more than a *lingua franca*, Maya was the primary language of all the colony’s native-born inhabitants of every caste” (112). Rather than simply seeing the domination of one colonizing culture and language over another, Farriss poses that it is more useful to think of “tangential change” than to consider the process of colonization as one-

³³ See chapter 4 for a detailed analysis of the role of *reducción* in the formation of Yucatecan notions of self and person.

directional. In other words, changes initiated by a shift in the power structure “ricochet” in unpredictable and multi-directional ways³⁴. This simultaneous mayanization *and* hispanization of Yucatecan society represents the beginnings of what I call Yucatecan culture, a system of shared values, worldview, and language that can be found in nearly all social groups, classes, and levels.

The long years of Spanish rule created a colonial order that at first replicated existing social hierarchies: elite indigenous families maintained much of their power and intermarried with the Spaniards, while indigenous *macehuales* [commoners] continued to occupy their place at the bottom. Farriss describes the first two centuries of Spanish colonial rule as a “long, relatively quiescent period [that] followed the first post-conquest decades of adjustment to the imposition of Spanish rule” (355). Ethnic categories called *castas* were supposed to divide the population according to their racial makeup, but these were so fluid and complex that it is likely that they had little practical application beyond the basic categories of Spaniard, Indian, Mestizo (the product of Spaniard and Indian), Negro, Mulatto (the product of Spaniard and Negro)³⁵.

This order of things changed in 1786, when a general reorganization of colonial administration called the Bourbonic reforms was implemented. Inspired by Enlightenment ideology that espoused rationality, science, and modernism, the reforms sought to create a leaner colonial administration that ran more efficiently than the existing bureaucracy. The imposition of Bourbon reforms in New Spain thrust Yucatán into what Farriss calls the “neo-colonial era,” a period of time spanning the last decades of Spanish rule and extending into the early independent eras. This era was marked by an accelerated assimilation of Indians into Creole-dominated society. When in the first two centuries of colonial rule the Spaniards in Yucatán were content to collect tribute and largely leave Indian communities to their own devices, the Bourbon reforms introduced direct Spanish rule into Maya towns. The power exercised by Maya elites was displaced and substituted by representatives of the Crown. Not only did these new representatives appropriate Indian revenues, they were “no longer content to take the money and run. They sought to protect the Indians from their own waywardness and incompetence. And [they]... were able to achieve a level of control over the Indians that the sixteenth-century friars would have envied” (Farriss 1984:365).

Moreover, a declaration of free trade within the empire sought to stimulate economic growth. In this context, the landed estate or Hacienda institution, which had existed in Latin America from the beginning of the colonial period, began to expand. The subsequent struggle over land represented a permanent break with the past and upset the existing order because it introduced new colonial administrators directly reporting to the Crown and eliminated the existing semi-independent governance structure known as the *repúblicas de indios*³⁶. The elimination of *repúblicas de indios*, which had maintained a great degree of the old elite’s power, left the elite with no officially recognized status (Farriss 1984).

³⁴ For a more in-depth discussion of the transformation of Yucatec Maya in the colonial period, see William F Hanks’ (2010) book *Converting Words: Maya in the Age of the Cross*.

³⁵ For further reading on the *castas* and Spanish ethnic categorizations during the colonial period, see Kamen 2003 (Kamen 2003:609).

³⁶ The *repúblicas de indios*, which had allowed for the continued existence of the hierarchical organization of Maya society and the official recognition of the *castas*, were officially abolished in 1812, granting Indians full citizenship.

As the ethnic boundary between indigenous, creole, and mestizo people in Yucatán became increasingly blurry, rigid social class hierarchy persisted, accommodating new groups into the existing order. The hierarchies of power and wealth that had been in place since before the arrival of the Spaniards persisted, but new faces, skin tones, and surnames were added to the mix. The categories by which people classified society changed, and became increasingly complex.

The Mexican war of independence began on September 16, 1810, and lasted for 11 years. After independence was formally granted on September 27, 1821, the following century was marked by ongoing upheaval throughout México: the Mexican-American war (1846-1848), a reform war in the 1850s and 1860s, the Franco-Mexican war that resulted in the Maximilian Affair (1862-1867), and finally, the Mexican Revolution of 1910. For much of the century following independence Yucatán remained a backwater to the rest of México, on several occasions using generalized unrest in the rest of the country to move forward its own ambitions for regional independence. In this context of national and regional upheaval and instability the Caste War erupted and transformed ethnic and class relations in Yucatán (Rugeley 1996, 2009; Chuchiak 2000; Gabbert 2004;).

The Caste War: (1847)1836-(1876)1880

The year 1847 was marked by skirmishes between the Yucatecan army and a rebel group that was organizing in the eastern part of the peninsula near the town of Valladolid. Nominally, the rebel group had organized to fight taxes that were being levied against their communities, but much of the buildup to the caste war was related to the expansion of the Hacienda system. A sugar boom and the discovery of henequen, a fibrous agave plant used to make industrial rope had caused a sudden expansion of the Hacienda system which resulted in the encroachment of Haciendas on local community land. On July 30, 1847, an army under the command of Cecilio Chi and Jacinto Pat, local *batabo'ob* [leaders] of the Valladolid area, attacked the town of Tepich in retaliation for a series of attacks on villages in the region. What made this attack different from the others was that Chi and Pat ordered the execution of every single non-Indian person in the town. The Tepich massacre, which marked the beginning of a coordinated attack by the rebel forces that by the spring of 1848 had them in control of most of the peninsula, was described by the Yucatecan media as a race war. Since that time, the Caste War of Yucatán has since been understood as an ethnic conflict. Recent research by Gabbert (2004) and Rugeley (2009) suggests that the struggle was more complex than that.

Although the Caste War did not officially begin until 1847, Rugeley (2009) traces the origins of this movement to Santiago Imán y Villafaña's federalist revolt against the government of President Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna in 1836. Imán armed the Maya peasants of *oriente*, the eastern wilderness of the Yucatán Peninsula from which he emerged, triumphed over the Mexican forces, and, outmaneuvered by Mérida politicians (who ridiculed his Maya accent and published satires urging him to go back to his rancho) to which he eventually returned (2). The peasantry, seeing its promises of lower taxes rescinded, withdrew to the countryside and bode its time.

Gabbert (2004) argues that the perception of the Caste War as an ethnic conflict was not shared by all Yucatecans. "The fact that many Maya speakers (Indians as well as non-Indians) fought against the rebels or became victims of their attacks, questions the characterization of the

Caste War as a ‘race war’ or the ethnic struggle of ‘the Maya’... instead of promoting Indian unity it caused a deep rift between Maya speakers (92). To Gabbert, ethnic identity in the 19th century was difficult to pinpoint, falling along the continuum of race and class much in the same way it does today:

physical traits were not important for the categorization of individuals as such but only in combination with other features, including wealth, dress, occupation, and descent. The owner of a hacienda, with a fine suit and a gold watch, and perfect Spanish was, of course, considered a wealthy vecino even if he had a dark skin and a round skull (95).

Gabbert supports this notion when he argues that “regional society [in 19th century Yucatán] was not composed of two separate ethnic communities,” noting that language, the preferred criterion for ethnic classification, was of no use in defining the Indian section of the population (92).

Both the rebels and the forces fighting against them were comprised of people legally defined as Indian and vecino. Gabbert (2004) argues that the conception of the Caste War of Yucatán as a race war was not advanced by the *cruzob* rebels but by the Yucatecan elite against whom they were rebelling. Thus, the origins of the war as a social struggle against taxes were forgotten in the characterization of the war as racially motivated.

It is interesting that the depiction of the Caste War as a racial struggle was so readily taken up but the local media. A closer look at one of the most influential Yucatecan journalists and writers of his generation, Justo Sierra O’Reilly, is revelatory of where some of this ideology may have emerged. Unexpectedly, this ideology can be traced back to 1857 Louisiana. Chuchiak (2000) compellingly argues that one possible source for the depiction of the Caste War as an ethnic struggle could be the legacy of American racism on the influential Yucatecan intellectual Justo Sierra O’Reilly.

On September 12, 1847, Sierra O’Reilly, embarked on the U.S.S. *Essex* in Campeche and departed for New Orleans. Sierra O’Reilly, like many of his cohort—a generation of writers and intellectuals known as the Generation of 1840—had often written about the Yucatecan Indian as philosophical representations of Rousseau’s man in the state of Nature: simple, docile, and harmless. Moreover, Indians were seen as ignorant and helpless beyond repair. Case in point is Sierra O’Reilly’s introduction to the Spanish edition of his good friend John Lloyd Stephens’ *Incidents of Travel in Yucatán*.

In the book, Stephens (1841) had clearly stated his belief that the ancient ruins had been built by the ancestors of present-day Maya-speaking Indians in Yucatán. “[the great ruins] are not the works of people who have passed away, and whose history is lost; but... there are strong reasons to believe them the creation of the same races who inhabited the country at the time of the Spanish conquest, or of some not very distant progenitors” (50). Sierra O’Reilly, with whom he shared a good friendship, respectfully disagreed with colleague when he translated the book into Spanish. “[The Indians] would not have been capable of building these great monuments... due to their profound ignorance” (111). Prior to the Caste War, O’Reilly saw and wrote about the Indians as docile representations of Rousseau’s man in the state of Nature. When the war broke out, Sierra O’Reilly travelled to the US seeking help. Shortly after, his brother was murdered by Indian rebels. His view of indigenous people was transformed.

Chuchiak (2000) studied Sierra O'Reilly's year in the United States, and argues that the profound transformation in Sierra O'Reilly's view of Indians was heavily influenced by American racism. "In the eyes of the U.S. press, Yucatecans were merely a little lighter than the Indians..." In other words, Sierra O'Reilly, who was heavily attacked in the American press and routinely reminded of his non-white status, was influenced by this racist ideology and readily adopted it after the death of his brother in the Caste War struggle. Seeking to create an image of the Yucatecan elites that was distinct from that of the Indian rebels, Sierra O'Reilly used the adopted the language of civilization, creating the image of a civilized Yucatecan elite fighting for survival against the threat of the barbaric Indians. According to Chuchiak, Sierra O'Reilly spent the rest of his life researching and writing on what he perceived to be the origins of the Caste War: a innate hatred of the Indians toward the whites brought on by 300 years of colonial oppression, and a premature granting of citizenship and equality to a group of people neither prepared for nor appreciative of it (69).

By 1853, the worst of the violence of the Caste War was over. The rebels retreated to the wilderness of *oriente*, the Eastern part of the peninsula, and founded their own, independent communities (Villa Rojas 1978; Sullivan 1991; Wells and Joseph 1996; Rugeley 1996, 2009). In 1901, President Porfirio Diaz sent Mexican troops into the recently annexed territory of Quintana Roo, and brought the last rebel communities under Mexican control. Meantime, Yucatecan landowners had discovered henequen, and in the years after the Caste War, the Yucatecan entered a period of unparalleled prosperity, a period known to *campesinos* throughout the land as the *epoca de la esclavitud* [the time of slavery].

Seasons of Upheaval: 1915-1937

In 2003, while conducting ethnographic fieldwork in the village of Yaxha, I had several conversations with villagers who talked about their grandparents' youth as "the time of slavery." This was the first time I heard about the time of slavery, but it was not the last. La época de la esclavitud is remembered by all rural yucatecans as a time of technological and social hardship. The first time I heard anyone talk about the time of slavery, it was at the community mill of Yaxha—one of the women who came to grind her *nixtamal*³⁷ told me about how in the época de la esclavitud, women had to grind their nixtamal using a grindstone.

Esclavitud is conceptualized not so much as slavery to another person, but slavery to a system: people in Yaxha do not remember the name or character of the landowner who ran the henequen hacienda that was located on what is now the village proper, but they remember the long hours of labor, the absence of land ownership, the financial and technological poverty and the absence of infrastructure. People remember the railroad and the Yaxha train station, the ruins of which continue to fall apart down a dirt road at the end of town. Slavery lives in collective memory of all rural Yucatecans, young or old. It feeds present day notions of land ownership and *campesino*[peasant] rights, and the sense of entitlement to certain agricultural government assistance programs. It lies at the root of the profound distinction between rich and poor, the core of campesino identity. Few things can ostracize a family in Yaxha from the rest of the community more than financial success.

³⁷ Nixtamal is the corn that has been partially cooked with lye. When it ground, it makes a dough that can be shaped into tortillas.

The memory of esclavitud and the beliefs and attitudes spawned by it can be clearly traced back to the Mexican revolution. The *Porfiriato*, the period of time encompassing Porfirio Díaz' 30-year dictatorship, was marked by significant advantages to wealthy landowners. It was a boom time for *latifundio*, the practice of appropriating vast expanses of land and subjecting its inhabitants to a form of debt peonage not unlike true slavery. Henequen, which briefly made Yucatán's economy globally competitive, was a windfall for the Yucatecan elite, particularly for the Montes and Molina oligarchies, who benefited from a close relationship with the centralizing government of Díaz.³⁸ Moreover, these and other powerful families were able to hold on to a great degree of their control over Yucatán's land and resources until well after the Mexican Revolution. While the revolution outlawed indigenous servitude in 1914, rural Yucatecans would continue to toil in the henequen fields until the arrival of Lázaro Cárdenas in 1935 (Fallaw 2010).

There is more to this vivid memory of esclavitud, however, than meets the eye. When Salvador Alvarado arrived in Yucatán in August of 1915, he brought with him the ideology of the Mexican Revolution. "By 1917, under Alvarado's rule Yucatán had already earned the reputation of being a social 'laboratory' for progressive social reforms that later would be applied throughout México" (Eiss 2004). Among his reforms, which included radical state intervention into labor and land use as well as the provision of social services, was a commitment to providing Yucatán's children with a revolutionary education. According to Paul Eiss (Eiss 2004), who studied Alvarado's educational reforms and writing to state propaganda agents, "the teachers would prepare [their students] transformation from slaves into free workers by instilling in them a sense of the sharp historical break between the times of slavery and the times of liberty" (132). It is entirely possible that the "time of slavery" narrative was successful in transforming how Yucatecan campesinos understood their own position in society because the narrative itself found echoes in their everyday lives. However, it is important to understand that this narrative did not emerge organically in the collective memories of Yucatán's indigenous poor, but that it was in fact part of a broad revolutionary agenda.

Lázaro Cárdenas' agrarian revolution of 1937 brought a change in how peasants related themselves to the land. In the henequen region of Yucatán, land that once belonged to the *dueño* in the epoca de la esclavitud became communal property through agrarian reform³⁹. Boasian anthropologist Manuel Gamio's⁴⁰ social program of *indigenismo* promoted the values of communal land ownership and praised those markers of indigenous culture that were perceived as most useful to the "forging of a new nation." As such, Gamio "simultaneously positioned the indigenous population as symbols of historical greatness and contemporary objects of paternalistic reform" (Smith 2010). Because in the time of slavery people were called indios, the word became associated with anachronism and oppression. Thus, the use of campesino, peasant, replaced the Porfirian indio: campesinos were empowered; they were landowners; they were the

³⁸ For further reading and analysis of Yucatecan society and politics in the Porfirian era, Wells & Joseph's *Summer of Discontent, Seasons of Upheaval*, presents a systematic analysis of the politics and society of what they call Yucatán's "extended *porfiriato*."

³⁹ For example, Hacienda Yaxha for the better part of the 20th century was a henequen-producing communally owned plantation.

⁴⁰ See Gamio's book, *Forjando Patria*, for a detailed description of his social program. Gamio's work transformed social policy in México and had a lasting impact of racial and ethnic construction.

future of the new Mexican nation. Indios were backwards relics of a time of suffering. By the end of the 20th century, the word *indio* had become a racial epithet as powerful as the word *nigger* in the United States.

Conclusion

Present day ethnic and class relations in Yucatán are the product of a long historical trajectory of simultaneous hierarchical inequality and murkiness. In this chapter, I have taken an ethnographic and sociohistorical approach to think through this murkiness in an attempt to tease out some aspects of the social context of Yucatán that are not immediately obvious to someone who is not Yucatecan. Appreciating the complexity of race, class, and socioeconomics is crucial to understanding the problem of suicide in Yucatán, particularly the framing of the problem as an indigenous problem because the very positing of the problem falls within the broader cultural logics of hierarchy, ethnicity, and difference. The representation of suicide as an indigenous problem and its portrayal in the media is considered in the following chapter.

Chapter 2: “He Followed the Funereal Steps of Ixtab” Representations of Suicide in the Yucatecan Media

“Morbo” – a ghoulish fascination.
Oxford Spanish Dictionary

morbo acquires the quality of a “calming nightmare.” The taste for the bloody –induced horror and controlled pleasure—is poured into frightening stories where Decency Outraged (the reporter shocked on behalf of society, the conversations of fashionable crimes that act as biblical parables) combines real boogeymen with joyful storytelling.
-Carlos Monsiváis

No “we” should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people’s pain.
-Susan Sontag

Introduction

Often during the course of conducting research, I encountered a familiar trope in my interactions with people on all echelons of society: when I said that I was studying suicide in Yucatán, many people would invariably remind me that *nosotros ocupamos el primer lugar, sabes?* [you know we occupy the first place, right?] As I explain in my Introduction, the idea that in Yucatán, México, there is some sort of mental health crisis due to its elevated suicide rate is a matter of perception. Nevertheless, suicide is locally framed most often by interlocutors on the as a crisis in public health but more importantly as ancient indigenous problem⁴¹. Suicide, often called the “cult of Ixtab” in reference to the ancient Maya deity of suicide, was embraced by the media and the public as part of the grand narrative of the Maya exotic.

This chapter examines the role of newspaper mass media in transforming suicide from the tragic ends of the lives of people trapped in daily struggles with addiction, alcoholism, poverty, domestic violence, sexual abuse, mental illness or a combination of all of these to mass entertainment and the creation of an invented crisis in large part fueled by local demand. I consider the portrayal of suicide in Yucatecan *nota roja* [tabloid] journalism as an artifact of journalistic production that both constrains and allows for the recreation and reiteration of subjectivities in its publics. The making of suicide into spectacle generates and maintains the idea of suicide as a public health crisis while keeping entertainment as a primary goal: suicide turned crisis, crisis made spectacle. The spectacle of suicide falls within local cultural logic even as the graphic images disturb and disgust middle-class Yucatecan sensibilities.

From early on in my research, I was perplexed by the way in which different people framed the question of suicide in Yucatán. My interlocutors would often be happy to inform me that Yucatán “occupied the first place” nationally for suicides and offer their favorite pet theory as to why the suicide in Yucatán was “so high.” These conversations proved to be extremely valuable in understanding how Yucatecans framed their own society. Often, suicide was

⁴¹ The idea of Yucatec Maya people as suicidal is particularly powerful because there is historical and archaeological evidence of prevalent suicide shortly before, during, and following the Spanish subjugation of the Peninsula in 1547 (see chapter 5).

understood by my interlocutors as simultaneously a symptom of changing times, who offered explanations like “these young men don’t want to work the *milpa*, they want expensive televisions and fancy cars. They drink too much and abuse drugs and then they kill themselves.” Once they had framed suicide as a problem of modernity and changing values, some of my interlocutors, knowing I was an anthropologist, would ask, “but the Ancient Maya, they had a suicide goddess, right?” thus, positing the other possible explanation: a cultural, ancient Maya predisposition⁴².

The young men who committed suicide were then either not indigenous enough, committing suicide after the hubris of denying their traditional heritage, or too indigenous, following an ancient tradition passed down from the ancestors. Suicide was almost always discussed as a problem among indigenous men. When these ideas weren’t explicitly influenced by race, they were always affected by class. The narratives were so similar to each other that I began to wonder why this particular perception of suicide existed. Early on my research I noticed the ubiquitous presence of newsstands throughout the peninsula. They were present in many town and city corners, at corner stores and bus stations and, always prominently displayed, were the color photographs on the covers (Figure 1).



(Figure 1)

Front pages of tabloids, such as the one featured in Figure 1, catch a person’s eye as one walks down the street. They are usually displayed at eye level on the sidewalk, and newsstands feature them facing traffic. For the many Yucatecans who call one place home but during the week work elsewhere, these newspapers, sold alongside popular graphic novels and magazines, represent a cheap form of entertainment for the sometimes hours-long trip home. The discourse produced by these media is material as well as symbolic: The papers are brought home, shared among family members, who look at the pictures and read the stories, sometimes aloud so that family members who can’t read can hear them. Once read, the old newspapers are kept around the house for many other uses: lighting fires, lining chicken coops and bird cages, cleaning

⁴² See chapter 4 for a thorough discussion of disposition, indigeneity, and suicide.

messes, wrapping objects. Eventually, the images on those papers make it into children's games and into the way people understand violence, suicide, and their own society.

In this chapter, I consider news stories published in two major Yucatecan newspapers, *Por Esto!* and *De Peso*, during my field stay in 2008. *Por Esto!* is an established, relatively prestigious newspaper that covers news all over the Yucatán Peninsula. It often borders on so-called “red journalism” and is a left-leaning publication. *De Peso* is an inexpensive tabloid publication that only features news on police events, sports, and entertainment. The newspaper's name, *De Peso*, is a play on words itself, referring to the fact that the cost of the newspaper is only a peso (which was the case at the start of the paper's circulation) but also its low level of import in subject matter.⁴³

Concurrently with conducting ethnographic research, I saved and collected stories concerning suicides from both of these publications. Subsequently, in 2010, I returned to Merida and examined stories concerning suicides in both papers spanning from 2004 to 2009. This analysis considers visual representation (photographs) as well as the written word.

The chapter is structured as follows: a theoretical examination of the anthropologies of mass media and spectacle and what they can tell us about the ways in which mass media represents and shapes cultural values within a given society and vice versa; a description of research methodology that forms the basis for the central argument of this chapter; the central findings from data culled from ethnographic observation and public discourse; and finally, an argument that suicide is a cultural artifact used by all social participants—including the *suicidas*⁴⁴ themselves (as we shall see later on in the dissertation)—to comment on, re-create, and constrain the many meanings of society, identity, and social hierarchy. I deconstruct examples of suicidal portrayals culled from published newspaper reports and photographs, and examine the ways in which Yucatecan tabloid media portrays suicide in Yucatán in terms of race and class. Before moving into a thorough discourse analysis of suicide within mainstream media, I first offer a narrative from my field notes to illustrate how suicide becomes embedded in and constituted as part of “ordinary, everyday life” within Yucatán.

Why examine mass media? An Ethnographic Vignette

Hanal Pixan [literally translated as Feast of Souls]⁴⁵, the month-long return of the dead to the world of the living, began on a weekend in November 2008. In the village of Cuncunul, this meant that relatives who worked in Merida, Cancun, Valladolid, or elsewhere would be able to return home for the initial *Hanal Pixan* meal on November second and the *Biix* meal the following weekend. Bety Poot, a woman I befriended at the Universidad de Oriente, invited me to spend the *Biix* with her family. *Hanal Pixan* practices and traditions vary across Yucatán. In Cuncunul, the meal opening the month of the dead is celebrated with *mechado*, *relleno*, or

⁴³ The second connotation is fairly tongue-in-cheek.

⁴⁴ I use the word *suicida* to refer to a person who commits suicide. The Oxford Spanish Dictionary (OSD) defines *suicida* as “suicide victim.” I would argue that this is not an exact translation of the term: *suicida* allows for more agency precisely because the word does not carry connotations of victimhood. For reasons outlined in chapter 5, I found the term *suicide victim* and the implication of victimhood in people who commit suicide problematic.

⁴⁵ *Hanal Pixan* coincides chronologically and culturally with *Día de los Muertos* in México, All Soul's Day in the Roman Catholic Calendar.

another Yucatecan dish not exclusive to the occasion, but during the *Biix*, *nohwah*⁴⁶, breads baked in the ground traditionally associated with *Hanal Pixan* and other equally sacred occasions are the featured dish. Bety's grandmother and aunt come from a long line of *yerbateras* traditional healers who work with medicinal plants, massage, and bone adjustment to cure physical and spiritual ailments. The Poot family takes *Hanal Pixan* and other sacred occasions very seriously, and so in 2008 all 12 Poot siblings and their extended families gathered for the preparing, cooking, and consumption of the meal.

The *piib*, the pit in which the breads are baked, was dug in the back of the family *solar*. The Poot *solar*, a patio shared by several Poot family households, is located on a rocky, hilly part of town, and in order to reach the *piib* we had to make our way down a small hill about two hundred feet from the main house. Having been invited to spend the weekend with the Poots, I arrived early on a Saturday morning and helped with the preparation of the meal. While the women prepared the *nohwaho'ob*, the men dug the pit at the bottom of the hill. Around three o'clock in the afternoon, when the breads were ready for baking and the pit oven lit, all of us made our way down to the *piib*. I was holding a tray of *nohwah*, each wrapped in banana leaves, which felt heavy in my arms.

The atmosphere was jovial. There were children everywhere, and they ran around, up and down from the house as the adults busied themselves with the filling of the *piib*. As one of Bety's brothers took the tray from me, he nodded towards something behind me and said with a chuckle, "The rabbit was depressed." Not sure what he was talking about, I turned around. A lemon tree was right behind me, and from its branches dangled a dirty, weatherworn, stuffed animal. It was a pink rabbit that looked like Bugs Bunny, long ears drooping and broad, cartoonish smile frozen on its face, hanging by the neck on a rope.

"Who did that?" I asked.

Bety, who was standing next to me with her own tray of *nohwah*, looked around. Spotting her ten-year-old brother, she asked him who had hung the rabbit from the tree.

"We did," he said.

"Why?" I asked.

He shrugged. "We were just playing," he said, and soon he and his cousins, nieces and nephews were off again to play.

Bety saw her brother go and turned to me. "It's what they see in the papers. I don't know why children play at those things. They just do."

I knew what Bety was referring to. The image of the rabbit suspended from a tree reminded me of countless pictures on the covers of *De Peso* newspapers I had seen. It is the cheapest so-called "mainstream" newspaper, sold at every newsstand in the state. By the time the Suicidal Bugs Bunny incident happened, I had been in Yucatán for ten months, and during this time I had spotted this paper at nearly every home I visited.

⁴⁶ For a detailed analysis of food symbology during *Hanal Pixan* and the parallels between *nohwah* and the human body, see Strupp-Green's (2000) *Tamales, Souls, and Resurrection*.

Anthropology and Mass Media

In 1993, Debra Spitulnik (1993) raised some significant questions about the study of mass media and its integration into anthropological analyses:

How, for example, do mass media represent and shape cultural values in a given society? What is their place in the formation of social relations and social identities? How might they structure people's senses of space and time? What are their roles in the construction of communities ranging from subcultures to nation-states, and in global processes of socioeconomic and cultural change? (294).

Similar questions crossed my mind as I pondered my experience in Cuncunul. How were media representations of suicide constructed and interpreted? Rather than simply assuming that mass media in some way "creates" a reality that reinforces the interests of a ruling class through a one-way transmission of a message (Horkheimer and Adorno 1947; Hall 1977, 1982; Lazere 1987). I see these representations and their audience involved in a process of subject formation and re-signification. The media create a message which is in turn interpreted in various ways by a variety of intended and unintended audiences. By the same token, audience demand for these messages assures their continued production (Bourdieu 1984).

McLuhan (2002), in his seminal article, "The Medium is the Message," argues that the "electric speed," and the emergence of media technology as we know it, has transformed the way in which people living in the world today understands themselves and their societies. Print journalism and the speed and way in which messages are presented create "imagined communities" where none existed. The newspaper, an affordable, accessible medium (particularly papers with proportionally small amounts of text and high number of photographs), has a long history in Yucatán (Menendez 1931; Canto Lopez 1947; Chuchiak 2000), as does the public's apparent preference for stories containing violent or bloody material (Monsiváis 1994:96). McLuhan is clearly troubled by the power of the media:

If the formative power in the media are the media themselves, that raises a host of large matters that can only be mentioned here... Namely, that technological media are staples or natural resources, exactly as are coal and cotton and oil. Anybody will concede that society whose economy is dependent upon one or two major staples like cotton, or grain, or lumber, or fish, or cattle is going to have some obvious social patterns of organization as a result... Cotton and oil, like radio and TV, become 'fixed charges' on the entire psychic life of the community. And this pervasive fact creates the unique cultural flavor of any society (26).

Here, McLuhan argues that the media contribute to the homogenization of society, eventually leading to the creation of "imagined communities" and having the potential of becoming the reliable and invaluable tool of the state in its drive towards nationalism. This is a powerful argument. However, this is not the sole purpose or use of newspaper media. In the Yucatecan context, individual newspapers cater to their own political agendas, using the police events sections to create either a sense of order or chaos, depending on the particular paper's own political stance (are they for or against the municipal and state governments?) as well as their target audiences. For example, *Diario*

de Yucatán, the largest, oldest Yucatecan newspaper, is a staunchly *PANista*⁴⁷ publication. Its “Police Events” section is likely to feature stories that are heavily skewed against any PRI-led police force. However, regardless of its political position, the paper is unlikely to publish photographs of corpses because its intended audience is the enlightened *gente bien* (see chapter 1).

On the power of the photograph

What exactly is it about these images of suffering that is so powerful? The images are powerful to their Yucatecan audience, who purchase these newspapers and ensure their continued production. They are powerful to the local mental health professionals and volunteers who see a connection between these images and Yucatán’s increasing suicide rate. They are powerful to academics who choose to study these images and their trajectories. Sontag (2003) notes that in the present, people living in the contemporary world are beset by nonstop imagery from television, streaming video, and movies. This is certainly the case for Yucatec Maya-speaking people living in contemporary Yucatán. Even the most remote villages have electricity and televisions, and most Yucatecan youth I know, even those who live in relatively remote places, know how to use cell phones for text messaging and capturing and sending images. Cyber cafes can be found in every Yucatecan municipality so that even people who live in outlying villages can have access to a computer when they go into town. Almost all of my interlocutors in their teens and twenties have a Facebook account and know how to use Youtube. Today, it is safe to say that any Yucatecan youth who completes the required basic education (*secundaria*, or Junior High School), has some working knowledge of the internet, social networking, and access to a cell phone and a television. Young people today, the group identified by INEGI as the most at-risk for suicide, are surrounded by non-stop imagery.

Sontag (2003) argues that photographs have a special place in the contemporary mindset. “When it comes to remembering the photograph has the deeper bite. Memory freeze-frames; its basic unit is the single image. In an era of information overload, the photograph provides a quick way of apprehending something and a compact form for memorizing it” (22). In his essay “The Ambiguity of the Photograph,” Berger (2002) also argues that in the world of visual media the photograph has a special place.

Every photograph presents us with two messages: a message concerning the event photographed and another concerning a shock of discontinuity... Discontinuity always produces ambiguity. Yet often this ambiguity is not obvious, for as soon as photographs are used with words, they produce together an effect of certainty, even of dogmatic assertion. In the relation between a photograph and words, the photograph begs for an interpretation, and the words usually supply it. The photograph, irrefutable in evidence but weak in meaning, is given a meaning by the words. And the words, which by themselves remain at the level of generalization, are given specific authenticity by the irrefutability of the photograph (47-49).

⁴⁷ *PANista* refers to a supporter of the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) party, one of three major political parties in México. Most closely associated with the right, it won Presidential elections in 2000 and 2006. In 2001, PAN candidate Patricio Patrón Laviada won the Yucatán Governor’s seat. In 2007, Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) candidate Ivonne Ortega Pacheco won the gubernatorial race.

Berger's essay concludes that the photograph, with its claim to truth and objectivity, has been co-opted by late capitalism and transformed into a tool for the commoditization and quantification of the world. The inherent ambiguity of photographs –that the “truth” that they transmit is in fact a very limited one—is denied.

Berger's disillusioned interpretation of the photograph fails to take into account that which I found to be most interesting regarding the visual depiction of suicide victims: it is not only that there is a market for this kind of representation, but rather *why* there is a market for this kind of representation. The key lies in Sontag's (2003) plain observation that although in contemporary times

[Mainstream media] may think it more correct morally to make the spectacular not spectacular...the spectacular is very much part of the religious narratives by which suffering, throughout most of Western history, has been understood...[Bataille's view on suffering] is a view of suffering, of the pain of others, that is rooted in religious thinking, which links pain to sacrifice, sacrifice to exaltation –a view that could not be more alien to a modern sensibility, which regards suffering as something that is a mistake or an accident or a crime.” (98-99).

The Passion play, well documented throughout the Catholic world and very much alive and well in México, is perhaps the best known example of the spectacle of suffering (Brandes 1988). Suffering as spectacle, with its long history in the region, normalizes the appearance of the images of the dead. Many people in Yucatán do not shy away from images that elite sensibilities would find distasteful: from passion plays to grisly tabloids to the annual spectacle of the *pueblo* bullfight, there is nothing that is, from a local perspective, “inherently distasteful” about violence as spectacle. The assumption that the suffering of others is distasteful lies within the modernist traditions of humanism and human rights (Asad 2003), and pathologizes something that is actually quite logical within this local context.

Why was Bety's reaction to her younger brother's play so nonchalant? I think the key lies in the way in which poor Yucatecans see life as one continuous hardship after another. Ethnographically, I have often observed poor Yucatecan parents and adults treating their children in ways that middle class Yucatecans would consider cruel: teasing them, pretending to abandon them in strange places, mock-threatening to sell them on the highway. Many children grow up with an emotional hardness that probably contributes to a great degree to the distrust that adults have for just about everyone outside of their immediate family. Considering Yucatán's long colonial history of oppression, this is hardly surprising. Life is hard. Life is unstable. Life is fleeting. Life should not be taken too seriously⁴⁸.

⁴⁸ The subject of Maya child-rearing in Yucatán from this perspective has not been well-documented or studied. Most published studies regarding Maya children focus on more “indigenous” markers such as the *hetzme* ritual and other markedly “Maya” practices. I argue in this dissertation that current mayanist scholarship does a disservice to its subject of study by focusing on cultural evidence of continuities with Ancient Maya practice and disregarding research questions begging to be asked.

Anthropology and Spectacle

In his analysis of the anthropology of spectacle, Beeman (1993) defines spectacle as “a public display of society’s central meaningful elements. The meaningfulness of a spectacle is usually proportionate to the degree to which the elements displayed to the public seem to represent key elements in the public’s cultural and emotional life” (380). An anthropological approach that understands media coverage of suicide as spectacle can help us to better understand the ways in which the portrayal of suicide at once mirrors and models society. Moreover, as Goldstein (2004) argues, spectacle is an instrument for maintaining social order and producing social change. More importantly, while spectacle renders things dramatically visible, “it is also, by extension, an attempt to render other things invisible. The spectacle is as much about obscuring what performers wish to conceal as much as it is about putting on a display”(16).

The ways in which newspaper media –particularly vulgar newspapers such as *De Peso*-- construct their public can be interpreted from the manner in which they present their stories. The graphic images, meant to stir an emotional response from a horrified public, combined with journalistic notes that poke fun at the suffering of other human beings, is also representative of a uniquely Yucatecan use of humor to convey painful truths. What does red journalism convey to us about this particular public’s “cultural and emotional life”? Conversely, how does this journalism shape and affect said public’s cultural and emotional life?

The Data

*“Suicides shoot up: three people took their lives in their homes in less than 12 hours and the number of cases in Cancun grew to 48/ Two hung themselves with rope and one with a hammock/ Another symptom of social decay”*⁴⁹

Por Esto! Quintana Roo, August 10, 2008

The Quintana Roo edition of *Por Esto!*, a peninsular newspaper known for its coverage of “yellow” stories, printed two full pages of detailed photographs of the deceased and their bereaved families. On August 10th, 2008, the article covering the three suicides also included photographs of a homeless man who had asked for lodging at a private home and died in his sleep. “Death began to roam starting around midnight on Friday night, when the first report was received of a person who had taken their own life,”⁵⁰ wrote reporter Yecenia González, “taxi driver Carlos Francisco Balam Ramírez followed the funereal steps of *Xtab* [sic] in his home in region 95.”⁵¹ The article describes in lurid detail the reports of the four deaths in the vicinity of Cancun over the weekend of August 8, 2008. In less than twelve hours, the reporter marvels, the number of suicides in Cancun went from 45 to 48. No other mention is made in the article of the “social decay” referred to in the headline, but the reader is able to see in vivid, color photographs

⁴⁹ “Se disparan los suicidios: tres personas se quitaron la vida en sus hogares en menos de 12 horas y el número de casos aumentó en Cancún a 48/ Dos se colgaron con cuerda y uno con hamaca/ Otro síntoma de descomposicion social.”

⁵⁰ La muerte empezó a rondar desde la media noche del viernes, cuando se recibió el primer reporte de una persona que se había quitado la vida.

⁵¹ El taxista Carlos Francisco Balam Ramírez siguió los pasos fúnebres de *Xtab* [sic] en su casa de la region 95

the images of the three young men who died by hanging on the back cover of the paper. In the two-page photo layout inside the newspaper, a close up of the homeless man's face, eyes half open and unseeing as he lies in a hammock, appears alongside a photograph of the *suicidas*, his unrelated death suddenly relevant because it took place within the same twelve-hour period. Death, we are left to conclude, indeed was roaming Cancun that night.



(Figure 2: Front Cover of *Por Esto!* Newspaper. August 10, 2008)

Por Esto! is a mainstream media newspaper, and the language and images that appear in its suicide coverage are relatively muted. The tabloid newspaper *De Peso* offers another example of the way in which suicide is graphically depicted in the media and how *suicidas* and their loved ones are exploited for entertainment. For example, the January 21st issue of *De Peso* contained two different suicide stories. The first, appearing under the “Zona Rural” [Rural Zone], was a short note with no photograph:

For unknown reasons, Diego Leonor Chablé Dzib ended his existence, hanging himself inside his home in Motul, even though this was not the first time he attempted to end his own life, as was explained by his mistress, who is eight years older than him and was drunk when she spoke with the authorities... [she] explained that on Saturday night she left the house to work at a bar, and the guy was still alive, but when she returned in the first minutes of Sunday, she saw that the door was locked, and when she looked through a window she discovered that Diego had committed suicide... [she] also commented that it was not the first time that her lover attempted to end his own life, as every time he got drunk he would threaten to kill himself (A27).⁵²

⁵² Por motivos que se desconocen, Diego Leonor Chablé Dzib acabó con su existencia, ahorcándose en el interior de su vivienda en Motul, aunque ésta no era la primera vez que atentaba contra su vida, según explicó su amasia, ocho años mayor que él, y quien se encontraba ebria cuando habló con las autoridades... explicó que la noche del sábado ella salió la [sic] casa para ir a chambear a un bar, y el chavo todavía estaba vivo, pero al regresar en los primeros

The second note, which appears in the following page under the heading, “Alerta Tizimin,” features a photograph of a young man hanging from a rope. He sits on the ground with his back to camera, his first name, Ilman, tattooed on his back. The headless body of a reporter stands above him, holding a camera (a color picture matching the camera man’s position graces the front cover under a bright, red headline: “Catastrophes in Tizimín”⁵³). Next to the photograph, a warning caption: “when someone dedicates himself too much to drinking, one never knows when he will make the fatal decision to take the false door, as happened to Ilman Enrique.”⁵⁴



(Figure 3: “Ilman worshipped Ixtab”)

minutos del domingo vio que la puerta estaba cerrada con llave, y al asomarse a [sic] una ventana descubrió que Diego se había suicidado... Asimismo, comentó que no era la primera vez que su amasio atentaba contra si mismo, pues cada vez que se ponía borracho amenazaba con suicidarse...

⁵³ Catastrofes en Tizimín.

⁵⁴ “Cuando una persona se dedica mucho a la bebida no se sabe en que momento tomará la fatal determinación de salir por la puerta falsa, como sucedió con Ilman Enrique.”

The report goes on to say that following a heated argument with his wife, Ilman Enrique Interián Cen, “Chose to worship Ixtab.” His family members discovered him after they noticed that he had suddenly stopped making noise.

Over and over, the story is always the same: a young indigenous man who hangs himself during an alcoholic binge⁵⁵. The language of the note, particularly the use of the derogatory term “*amasia*,” roughly a Spanish equivalent of “lover girl,” portrays the young man and his older, drunken partner as social deviants. Stanley Brandes (2002) points out that although “it is not shameful for a Mexican man to get drunk... inebriation is very shameful for a Mexican woman...” (100). Citing a study by the Mexican Institute of Psychiatry, he notes that “Alcoholism impedes a woman’s fulfillment of the traditional role expected of her... it is associated with sexual promiscuity and with the inability to provide a good example for her children” (101). Likewise, an age disparity in which the woman in a partnership is older than the man is seen as abnormal by many Yucatecans. The mention in the press that Ilman Enrique’s partner is first, not married to him, second, older than he is, and third, drunk, marks Ilman as socially abnormal not only because of his own alcoholism (hence the warning caption next to his picture), but also because of his choice in partners. It is also revealing about the paper’s intended audience: slang words like *amasia* [lover-girl] and *chavo* [guy, dude], appeal to an audience that is perceived to be uneducated.

Occasionally, a story about the suicide of a non-indigenous person is published. The way in which non-indigenous, middle class people who commit suicide are portrayed often contrasts sharply with that of indigenous, poor, peasant men. A *Por Esto!* article covering the suicide by gunshot wound to the head of Jorge Arturo Abad Cardeña in Merida exemplifies this difference:

From a gunshot wound to the head Jorge Arturo Abad Cardeña, 42 years old, deprived himself of his own life, inside his home situated on 43rd and 18th streets in the Sol Campestre neighborhood. The now deceased, who was depressed, alerted the neighbors when he shot the gun. They alerted the police and his family, who found the lifeless body inside the home. At the scene, the authorities could not ascertain the gauge of the firearm with which Abad Cardeña, who according to the neighbors was homosexual, took his own life. The suicide was last seen alive around nine in the morning, when he returned to his house, marked with the number 458 of 43rd street in the aforementioned neighborhood, and put his Ford EcoSport truck, with license plate number YXE 6060, in the garage. The neighbors said that he would go running every morning and treated everyone kindly, but that he took things very seriously and apparently when his partner left him he fell into a deep depression that led him to commit suicide⁵⁶.

⁵⁵ The image and perception of indigenous people has a long history in México and Yucatán in particular. Claudio Lomnitz (Lomnitz 2005), writing on the adoption of death as a national totem in México, notes that “the association between evolutionary inferiority and intimacy with death was... commonly deployed... by the great colonial powers” as well as within nascent nation-states in the nineteenth century, “The lack of regard for human life was a key characteristic of savagery” (17). Concern with popular bloodlust and indifference to death also became a part of 19th century Yucatecan discourse. Chuchiak (Chuchiak 2000:59-72) and Gabbert (Gabbert 2004:90-118) trace the change in the way in which indigenous people were perceived and depicted in public discourse to the Caste War (see ch.1).

⁵⁶ De un balazo en la cabeza se privó de la vida Jorge Arturo Abad Cardeña, de 42 años de edad, en el interior de su domicilio situado en la calle 43 por 18 de fraccionamiento Sol Campestre... El ahora occiso, que se encontraba

Although in this article a trope of social deviance recurs (this particular man happened to be gay), the tone of the piece is almost respectful. The reporter notes that Abad Cardeña had a kind disposition and was depressed. The article contains no mention of Ixtab, alcoholism or overly passionate personalities. The deceased is merely pictured in a body bag being loaded into a SEMEFO (Forensic Medical Service) truck, and the caption beneath the pictures once again notes that Abad Cardeña was known among his neighbors for his “trato amable,” a gentle or kind disposition. Abad Cardeña possessed several markers of white middle-class identity: ethnic Lebanese and Spanish surnames, a home in a middle class neighborhood, a car. He ran every morning and though he had a kind nature, he tended to take things too seriously. He was also middle-aged. This narrative stands in stark contrast with the narrative of the young, passionate, drunken *campesino* who hangs himself during a binge following a fight with his wife/girlfriend/lover/mother.

Nevertheless, Abad Cardeña is not a fully “normal” member of society: his neighbors maintain that he is gay, and killed himself after being left by his partner. He lives in a “fraccionamiento,” a subdivision of homes known in the city for their affordability. The article is quick to point out that he is not a good son: upon hearing of his death, his mother suffers a nervous breakdown. Suicide as such remains the recourse of the eccentric. A person who commits suicide must therefore be an outcast, but above all an outcast who allows his passions to carry him to the grave. Even rarer still is the journalistic coverage of suicides among the upper echelon of Yucatecan society, not because these do not happen, but because people in the upper echelons of Yucatecan society tend to know, be related to, be friends with, or be friends with someone who is friends with the owners and upper management of the Yucatecan newspapers.

In 2007, when Marina Montes⁵⁷, a Merida socialite, hung herself from a hammock hook⁵⁸ in her home in *Colonia Campestre*, a higher-class neighborhood in northern Merida, the news of her death only appeared as an obituary. Her body was cremated the same day it was found, and the following evening her ashes were present at the Mass held in her honor at *Maria Inmaculada* church, a wealthy parish in the *Campestre* neighborhood. No graphic photographs of her cadaver were published. No article appeared in any of the papers. Her father, a family friend of *Por Esto!* owner Mario Renato Menendez Rodríguez, made sure that the cause of death was kept out of publication. The news reached the villages of the domestic employees who discovered her body, but her death did not become the entertainment of the masses. The suicidal deaths of the upper

deprimido, al detonar el arma de fuego alertó a los vecinos, los que dieron aviso a la policía y a los familiares, quienes hallaron en el interior del inmueble el cuerpo sin vida. En el lugar las autoridades no precisaron el calibre del arma de fuego con la que se quitó la vida Abad Cardeña, quien según los vecinos era homosexual. El suicida fue visto con vida por última vez a eso de las nueve de la mañana, cuando retornó a su predio marcado con el número 458 de la calle 43 del referido fraccionamiento, y metió su camioneta Ford EcoSport, placas YXE 6060, a la cochera. Los colonos indicaron que salía a correr todas las mañanas y que era de trato amable con todos, pero tomaba las cosas muy a pecho y tal parece que al dejarlo su pareja cayó en una profunda depresión que lo condujo al suicidio

⁵⁷ Pseudonym. I became privy to this case through personal experience. I knew Marina personally and obtained all information related to her case through private conversations with her friends and family.

⁵⁸ All Yucatecan homes have hammock hangers built into bedroom walls. These hangers are usually a metal loop through which a metal “S” hook is looped. Every room has at least two hooks on opposite walls. When a hammock is going to be used, each end of the hammock (called “arms”) is hung from each hook. When the hammock is not being used, it is wrapped up and hangs from one hook. Very often, *suicidas* use these hooks to asphyxiate themselves.

class remain hidden, absent in the media and in public discourse. Thus, the idea of suicide as a primarily indigenous action is reinforced as the only suicides to enter the public sphere are those of the poor, the indigenous, or (rarely) the eccentric.

Analysis

The journalistic genre that produces these stories is known as *nota roja*, or “red journalism.” José Parga Sánchez (1997) defines *nota roja* as a genre of journalism that focuses on police information and events, justice, security, or prevention. Information that becomes red news “tends to define in our days the priorities of the journalistic agenda... criminal news are no longer enough, now the journalist needs to bloody it with narrative details, photographic front pages in which the victim, his body, his cadaver, substitute rather than complete the news” (5).

Repeatedly, historians of the *nota roja* characterize it as a particularly Mexican genre. In her analysis of the production of *nota roja* in Guadalajara, Alvarez Rodríguez (2002) notes that the *nota roja* possesses two distinct characteristics: first, the presence of civilian voices and absence (or dismissal) of the authorities’, and second, the centrality of the criminal as the main character of the narrative. Alvarez Rodríguez traces the origins of the *nota roja* to the Spanish Inquisition in México, suggesting that the term *nota roja* emerges from *noticia roja*, the term used to describe messages conveyed to the laity regarding crimes against faith or “good customs.” This term in turn originated from *sello rojo*, the red seal symbolizing ecclesiastical authority on Inquisitional sentences.

The *nota roja* attracted the attention of Mexican intellectual Carlos Monsivaís, who connects the red news to the Mexican obsession with death (Brandes 2003, 2006). Monsivaís (1994), in *Los Mil y Un Velorios*, chronicles the genre in *porfiriato*⁵⁹, revolutionary and post-revolutionary México City and analyzes the ways in which this literature functions to reflect, challenge, and reinforce societal norms and values. Monsivaís analyzes the work of Mexican engraver José Guadalupe Posada. Posada’s (1972) portrayals of violent crime scenes, which included drawings of suicides such as *El ahorcado de la calle de Las Rejas de Balvanera. Horrible Suicidio del lunes 9 de enero de 1892* [The hangman at the Las Rejas de Balvanera Street. Horrible suicide of Monday, 9 of January, 1892], marked a profound transformation in public culture. Preserved by Posada’s visual representations, Mexico City’s most heinous crimes became urban myths and were absorbed into and transmitted through oral culture. The simultaneous function of the red note, to frighten and to entertain, persisted into the twentieth century. With the birth of the national journal *Alarma!* in 1969, an updated red journalism lets loose what Monsivaís calls an aesthetic of “morality that does not take itself seriously” (31).

De Peso, Yucatán’s own version of *Alarma!* fits perfectly within this genre. However, while in central México *Alarma!* focuses on grisly murders, decapitations and other transgressions on the bodies, *De Peso* (while not exempt of featuring murders and other forms of violence) primarily features stories of car accidents and suicides. This reflects the realities of violent death in Yucatán: my archival research in Valladolid’s police records revealed no murders whatsoever between 2005 and 2008. All violent deaths were suicides or car accidents. With the exception of the execution and decapitation of 12 men with drug ties that rocked Yucatán in September 2008, murder is rare in Yucatán.

⁵⁹ See chapter 1.

The haunting images of the dead on the front cover linger in the reader's mind. In Monsiváis' (1994) words, the "corpses glorify their abandonment or their putrefaction, the prostitutes face the camera, the disapproving gaze of society" (31). The suicidal body at once challenges conventional society and is defeated by it. Its presence on the front page, unavoidable regardless of whether or not the passerby buys and reads the paper, assaults the senses, creates discomfort and reminds its public that Death, anthropomorphized and conceived as a grim reaper wandering the town, can be just around the corner. By the same token, the *suicida* appears exposed in a final humiliation, the broken, twisted body, stiffened in position of the final throes, for all to see: his mother, wife, girlfriend, and the thousands of strangers, readers and passersby.

"The price of sin is death," wrote the inflexible Saint Augustine; and, also, the price of sin is the conversion of intimacy into scandal, of scandal into intimacy that is shared by listeners and readers... above all, the red note is a (negotiable) handbook of customs and an exorcism against violence. Assimilated our sympathy for the victims, the most resounding crimes stimulate oral culture, irreplaceable components of sentimental tradition." (Monsiváis 1994:13)

De Peso gives the suicidal body a social life as the images are shared, talked about, and reflected upon. Children play at what they see, hanging a stuffed animal from a tree, or, tragically, hanging themselves and ending up on the front page⁶⁰. The corpse faces the camera, at once frightening and entertaining, while the captions remind us how the suicide was not unlike ourselves. As Monsiváis notes, the public is the poor, as are the majority of the subjects featured in its pages. The red note turns the intimacy of suicide into scandal. At the same time, the scandal of suicide is brought into the intimacy of home as the stories and images are shared. I witnessed many of these conversations among my friends in the villages of Cuncunul and Yaxha. Invariably, the talk would turn to a family member with a drinking problem, or one who had expressed a desire to die.

Since the end of PRI single-party rule in 2000, newspaper media enjoys considerable freedom of expression when it comes to criticism of the state. In Yucatán, the *Diario de Yucatán*, colloquially referred to simply as *Yucatán*, is firmly allied with the PAN political party and is locally understood the newspaper of *la gente bien*. Their police reports section, though generally critically skewed for or against police actions depending on the current administration, tends to only occupy about half a page and never contain photographs.

In contrast, *Yucatán*'s main competition, *Por Esto!* originally a *priista* publication, now supports the PRD party (which in Yucatán remains a minority) and so continually criticizes whichever administration is in power. *Por Esto!* was founded by Mario Renato Menendez Rodríguez, part of the Menendez family which founded, owns, and edits the *Yucatán*. *Por Esto!* historically has been a combative, polemic paper prone to covering so-called yellow stories⁶¹. *Por Esto!* routinely devotes several pages to violent crime and typically publishes large, color photographs of these events.

In contrast, *De Peso* is a small paper with no clear agenda or particular political position. Underneath its title, its front cover reads "Police News, Sports, and Entertainment." It is

⁶⁰ See ch.4 and conclusion.

⁶¹ In 2006, following coverage that unearthed connections between the then-governor Patricio Patron Laviada and organized crime, its Merida office was the target of a terrorist attack when two grenades were thrown into the front vestibule.

published by a smaller mainstream newspaper that historically has remained politically neutral, *Milenio Novedades*⁶². *De Peso* exclusively publishes stories of violent crime and vehicular accidents, along with some national entertainment and sports news. It often carries centerfold color photographs of models in sexually explicit poses. Indeed, the paper itself is colorful, with an extremely high ratio of images to text, nearly all of its photographs are produced in color, its heading, which dominates its cover page, in bright blue text. It is also the most inexpensive of the three –although no longer its original \$1 peso price tag (hence its name, *De Peso*), the paper only cost about \$3 pesos in 2008, roughly 30¢ American, which at the time was well within the budget of most Yucatecans.

Articles such as the *Por Esto!* publication of four suicides in Cancun, using language such as “Death was roaming,” creating a sense of chaos, uncertainty, and fear in its readers. The State is absent in its reports, the “epidemic” spins out of control, the faces of the dead stare out of the page in living color. Monsiváis (1994) suggests that red journalism functions as a moralistic model for Mexican society, without identifying who the actors or the public in the spectacle of the Mexican *nota roja* really are. “Society” is clearly divided into upper and lower echelons, but Monsiváis vision over-simplifies the complexity of Mexican society/ies, treating “the poor” and the “enlightened” as homogenous groups, and leaving the intricate connections between the media and state out of his discussion, choosing instead to focus on *nota roja* as literary genre.

Monsiváis’ chronicle can be enriched if considered alongside Claudio Lomnitz’ (2005) history of death in México, *Death and the Idea of México*. As Goldstein (2004) suggests, “spectacle is not simply the way society speaks to itself, but a critical technique in modern state formation; it is through spectacle that national political communities are imagined and projected, indeed created, and their reality persuasively communicated to their subject-citizens” (18). Thus, despite local police officer’s complaints that the press always seems to get to a crime scene before their own arrival, the *Departamento de Averiguaciones Previas* (DAP), the state agency in charge of police investigations routinely leaks news to the media that facilitate quick and continuous coverage of suicidal deaths and other violent occurrences throughout the region. The state and the media closely collaborate with one another to maintain the spectacle of suicide alive and well in Yucatecan public consciousness.

Moreover, the public constructed by newspapers like *De Peso*, has changed little since the origins of red journalism in the 19th century, a public in which that the higher echelons of society (the people who like to read *Diario de Yucatán*, for instance) can take disgust. In Carlos Monsiváis (1994) words, “the enlightened or semi-enlightened sectors of society condemn the publication of red journalism, not for its mistakes... but for its most notorious consumers, the poor, whom they suppose complacent in their degradation: *they read that because they enjoy it. They are what they read*” (29). The 19th century argument mentioned by Monsiváis persists: the poor are perceived as having an unnatural appetite for what is distasteful. The problem is articulated in simple supply and demand economics: lower-end newspapers cover suicide because there is a market for stories about and images of suicide.

⁶² Arguably, this neutrality has also made it a less viable business: in 2002, *Novedades*, locally owned by the Garcia Gamboa family but part of the *News* family of newspapers, ceased to exist as such. It is currently published as *Milenio Novedades*, part of the *Milenio* media conglomerate. Nevertheless, day-to-day operations and edition is still under the control of the Garcia Gamboas.

Conclusion

The portrayal of suicide in the media at once reveals and obscures suicide in Yucatán. It reveals the inner suffering of individual families who fit into a pre-conceived, fabricated notion of who a *suicida* is while at the same time obscuring the realities of suicide as an act that occurs in all social strata to people with all kinds of backgrounds. Furthermore, by emphasizing only one story about who commits suicide and why, repeating the single trope of the indigenous, alcoholic jilted lover, the complex series of events and circumstances behind every story is overshadowed, hidden, or obscured.

The journalistic display of suicide in Yucatecan media reflects the cultural and emotional life of the Yucatecan public(s), both the direct perceived audience (the poor) eagerly consuming *De Peso* and *Por Esto!*'s red journalism, but also the "enlightened" and "semi-enlightened" sectors of society that readily defines itself in opposition to the poor. The journalistic portrayal of suicides and the framing of suicides as the actions of poor, deranged, socially inferior people serves to reiterate Yucatán's rigid social hierarchy and reinforce beliefs about suicides themselves, but more importantly, about Yucatecan society's ways of understanding itself. Paper media functions to create two separate publics that exist in sharp contrast to one another: a base, ignorant society with a taste for others' suffering ("they are what they read") and an enlightened *sociedad* of gente bien, people who find red journalism distasteful not only because of its content, but because of its audience. The spectacle of suicide in the media thus functions as a revelatory device that places Yucatán's cultural and emotional lives in sharp relief. However, the relative normality of violence as spectacle in Maya communities does not suggest in any way a Maya fatalism, stoicism, indifference to suicide, or lack of empathy towards the suffering of others. In the following chapter, I present the reality of suicide in Yucatán. When suicide happens close to home, the pain, disruption, and crisis that accompanies it is not in any way stoic, indifferent, or "normal."

Chapter 3: Documenting Discipline

*Entre el primer silencio y el postrero,
entre la piedra y la flor,
tú caminas. Te ciñe un pulso aéreo,
un silencio flotante,
como fuga de sangre, como humo,
como agua que olvida.*
“Entre la Piedra y la Flor,” Octavio Paz
Yucatán, 1937⁶³

Introduction

The poem I chose to open this chapter, Octavio Paz’s (1938) “Between Stone and Flower,” was written in 1936 while Paz was working as a school teacher on a henequen plantation; 1936 was the final year of what people in Yucatán refer to as the *época de la esclavitud*, the period of indentured servitude that in Yucatán persisted after the end of the Mexican Revolution and until governor Lázaro Cárdenas carried out the project of agrarian reform in 1937 (Fallaw 2001). As I state in chapter 1, the memory of *esclavitud* remains vivid for all rural Yucatecans. In Fallaw’s words, Yucatán was a prime location for the project of agrarian reform precisely because “the division between the so-called Divine Caste, a small number of white families that still dominated the state’s economy, and the poor, Maya-speaking majority gave the Cardenistas the opportunity to mobilize a revolutionary social base along ethnic and class lines” (3). The differences between haves and have-nots, then as now, were vast. For Paz, the horror of life on the henequen plantations translated into the strong language of “Entre la Piedra y la Flor,” whose vivid descriptions of the hardship of life henequen plantations made this one of his most famous poems.

One of the defining characteristics of Cardenismo and the early Mexican revolutionary state was the incorporation of dissent and the transformation of subaltern groups into corporate constituencies (Armstrong-Fumero 2010). This incorporation introduced a new player into Yucatán’s political and social structure: because the state sought to incorporate the subaltern (in the case of Yucatán, the “poor, Maya-speaking majority”), a lasting tension was formed between the existing elites and the new state. By the same token, the broad base of support that the subaltern were supposed to become also engaged in processes of negotiation, manipulation, and the giving or withholding of support for own purposes (Fallaw 2001). This is the historical backdrop of “the state” as we know it in Yucatán today. Recognizing that this is the backdrop against which the drama of everyday interactions between subject–citizens and the state in the form of the *Ministerio Público* [Public Ministry] takes place is crucial to our understanding of what it means to be a citizen in contemporary Yucatán.

In chapter 2, I argue that in many ways the idea that suicide represents a crisis in public health is a matter of perception, and that this perception is shaped in no small part mass media

⁶³ Between the first and final silence/between stone and flower/you walk. An aerial pulse grabs you,/a floating silence/ like leaking blood, like smoke/ like water that forgets. “Between Stone and Flower,” one of Octavio Paz’s earliest poems, was written in Yucatán in 1937 about the hardship of life on henequen plantations even in the aftermath of the agrarian revolution.

textual and photographic representations of suicides. The graphic photographs of *suicidas* operate as windows into an other's tragedy, but the tragedy depicted and described in newspaper coverage is "really real": every week, on average, four people take their life in Yucatán today (INEGI 2008). Each time this happens, the state, in the form of the Yucatán Ministerio Público, follows an established bureaucratic protocol as each death is investigated, recorded, and finally forgotten. The necessarily close encounters between police and citizens are, more often than not, full of conflict and resistance, deception, manipulation, and negotiation centered on the suicidal corpse.

On the one hand, these encounters are revealing of the ways in which citizens and state deploy tactics and strategies in a continual struggle for the management of everyday life; on the other hand, they serve as a reminder that suicide in Yucatán does not happen in a cultural space devoid of politics or government, but is embedded within an efficient and uniform bureaucratic apparatus of control subject to the greater. This apparatus exists within the continuum of class described in chapter 1. People with the "right" kind of social capital in the form of connections and wealth can sidestep this bureaucracy in ways that the ordinary citizenry cannot.

Although Yucatán and México have a large and relatively efficient state, federal, and judicial police force, these elements often seem to be absent in ethnographies of both. This chapter illustrates the importance of the relationship between police and local communities in the context of the profound disparities in language, social capital, and power between them. Ethnographic investigation reveals something that otherwise would be difficult to trace historically. Information preserved for posterity is "disciplined" in police files to create a semblance of order that sometimes does not correspond to reality. This "order", in reality, is only tenuously maintained. This tenuously maintained image of order easily falls apart when one studies the interaction between citizens and public ministry workers⁶⁴ as well as by studying the ministry itself. Here, the files of the criminal investigations do not stand alone.

The relationship between "citizens" and "state" as exemplified by a study of the interactions between bereaved family members and local representatives of the state *Departamento de Averiguaciones Previas* (DAP⁶⁵) is neither wholly trusting nor wholly exploitative; rather, it is complex, scripted, and illustrative of how Yucatecos understand citizenship and readily make use of police services. To illustrate this point, I introduce archival research conducted at the Valladolid Police Department in the spring of 2008 as well as an ethnographic account of a suicide crime scene investigation I shadowed in May 2008. Finally, I consider the process of bureaucratization and the transformation of narrative into police report through my own experience as a victim of crime in September 2008.

Getting Access

⁶⁴ By "public ministry workers," I am referring to policemen, investigators, and bureaucrats that all interact with and provide services for the general population.

⁶⁵ DAP's purpose within the *Procuraduría General de Estado* (PGE) is the investigation of allegations of criminal actions. The PGE represents the judicial branch of the state government of Yucatán and is in charge of investigating, prosecuting, and preventing crime.

Thanks to my Universidad de Oriente (UNO) connections in Valladolid, I was able to obtain permission from DAP director Andres Ortega⁶⁶ in Mérida to work with the Valladolid police, access their case files, and follow them on a crime scene investigation. *Licenciado* Ortega gave me a piece of advice before I left him in Mérida that turned out to be quite useful: if I wanted them to keep me in mind when a suicide happened, I should make myself visible and strike up rapport in the police station.

When I returned to Valladolid the next day, the director of the local *Ministerio Público*, William Cauil, was expecting me. *Licenciado* Ortega had called him right after our meeting and given him permission to grant me access to the suicide case files and to follow the crime scene investigation unit in case of any suicides. I also discovered that I had some uncanny luck: *Licenciado* Cauil's right hand man, Raymundo, was a family friend to the Tun family from Muna. The Tun family has been in my life for as long as I can remember and generously allowed me to live in their home while I was conducting ethnographic research for my undergraduate thesis in 2003. In 2007, I had attended the funeral of Raymundo's mother's sister. When we realized we shared this connection, Raymundo took me under his wing and proved to be a valuable ally.

Archival work

In the following pages, I explore the role of the police record as a normalizing narrative by presenting a transcript of a case file as an example of how the state records suicide events. In my work, I reviewed over one hundred files dating from 2006. These case files included suicides, homicides, and accidental deaths. The case presented below is typical of suicide case files, with the exception that it was a very complete file that included photographs of the crime scene and autopsy. Most of the suicide case files I worked with in Valladolid were missing photographs or statements. I chose this case because it was at once typical and exceptional. It was typical in that the document narratives followed the same formula in terms of descriptions and apparent witness statements. It was exceptional because the level of detail available in the file, from the photographs to the statements from the deceased's current and past spouses, reveals a story that, despite the uniform bureaucratic language in which it is written, is emotionally charged and poignant.

The Case of Eugenio Xooc Un

On July 14, 2006, at approximately 9:30 pm, Maria Aida Mis Cocom asked her partner, Eugenio, for money to buy their two-month old son diapers. As she and her children walked toward the store to buy the diapers, her four-year-old son, who wasn't wearing shoes, started crying because the asphalt was hurting his feet. Maria Aida turned around to get her son's shoes, and when she got home she found the house shuttered. Since Eugenio had had a failed suicide attempt 30 days earlier, she feared the worst. She forced her way into their home and when she entered their home she found her partner already dead. It had been a matter of minutes.

Xooc Un's file was one of few that actually contained crime scene and autopsy photographs. The pictures reveal a man on the ground and a woman wearing a black skirt and a

⁶⁶ All names and identifying characteristics of elements in the Valladolid government and in the state police have been altered. The names of the deceased remain the same, as they are already in the public record.

blue shirt demonstrating to authorities how she had found her husband. She kneels on the ground with the hammock wrapped around her neck. Her eyes are red. In other photographs, she is visible standing with the investigators. XooC Un's body is at the center, but Maria Aida can be seen looking down at him, her face contorted with pain and disbelief. But then, a break: a man dressed in jeans and a beige polo shirt is kneeling on the ground, the blue hammock around his neck, and he looks up at her, a small smile on his face. Maria Aida is standing above him, smiling as though he had just said something funny.

I have translated the case file transcript. In the translated text, I have kept some of the original Spanish that illustrates the bureaucratic language used.

Case File # 1159/13/2006. July 14, 2006

Phone call at 22:30. Eugenio XooC Un. Hanged.

In the aforementioned home, which faces north. It is a location surrounded by a low hedge with a wooden fence. It is about 10 meters in the front, a cement block home with two metal windows with curved tops. Here it is asserted [*se da fé*] that it has a wooden two-paneled door... going into the interior it is asserted that the one-room house measures four meters wide by seven meters long, with a back door facing a yard, also wooden, measuring one meter in width and two meters in height. Here it is asserted that on the floor and precisely at the center of the room, below a blue hammock, and covered with a gray and green plaid blanket, is the cadaver of a person. Because of this, this authority deems it necessary to remove said blanket, and once this is done it is asserted that the body mentioned above belongs to a male laying on his back [*en posición cubito dorsal*], his head facing southeast, his feet facing northwest and his arms outstretched semi-parallel to the length of this body. He is *moreno* in coloring, with a long face, black eyebrows, brown eyes, straight nose, prominent cheekbones, small mouth, sparse mustache, clean-shaven, of medium build, measuring about 1.6 meters tall and of about 29 years of age. At this time it is asserted that he had two dental pieces made with gold-colored metal, apparently gold. Next, it is asserted that he is only wearing black and white briefs, and is barefoot. Likewise, it is asserted that there is a deep crevice completely around his neck, that he has linear lesions on both outer arms. This authority has not found a single belonging on his person at this moment.

The amount of detail in this report creates an image of what the investigator saw when he conducted the investigation. However, from reading this report, we do not know anything about who was at the crime scene, how many police officers and forensic specialists, how long the investigative unit was on the scene, or any of the interactions that took place between Maria Aida and the authorities. The photographs tell us that Maria Aida demonstrated how she found her partner, and that there were, at the very least, three people present at the scene (Maria Aida, the photographer, and the unnamed man she is speaking with in the photograph). Without the photographs, we would not even have this information. The crime scene report presents the reader with a picture devoid of people. It is self-contained and static. It is more an attempt to present an image than a recording of events. It is also constructed: the report says that the corpse "appears to belong to a 29-year-old man." We find out from Maria Aida that her partner, Eugenio,

was indeed 29 years old. However, the report was written probably several hours if not several days after the events actually took place. The person who wrote the report already knew Eugenio Xoooc's age, yet, by choosing to write the report in the present tense, he or she creates the impression of a static snapshot existing in the present. Nothing has happened yet. We know nothing about this man save for the fact that he is dead.

Following the initial crime scene report in the file is a statement from Maria Aida. The typewritten document was signed by Ms. Mis Cocom in simple block letters⁶⁷.

Citizen Maria Aida Mis Cocom (single, domestic employee, 24 years old) declares:

I have lived with Mr. Eugenio Chooc Mis for one year. He is 29 years old, I was a single mother when I started to live with him, and from the conjugal union that I shared with same person we procreated the minor named Luis Eugenio Chooc Mis, who is now two months old. My named concubine [*concubino*] worked as a driver and carrier for the commercial business named "Materiales de Construcción Candelaria," with a known domicile in the barrio of Candelaria of this city. The case is that today, around 21:30 hours my aforementioned concubine⁶⁸ came home in an inebriated state and I told him I didn't have *Kleen-bebé*⁶⁹ for the baby, so he gave me five pesos for me to go buy diapers for the baby. Holding my baby, and taking my four-year-old son by the hand, I left for the store. But then my older son started crying because he wasn't wearing shoes, so I turned around and went back to the house. When I went back to the house it was completely shuttered. I banged on the door, but because my concubine didn't answer, I went to the front, and that door was also shut, which made me think my concubine was doing something bad, because about a month ago he tried to hang himself with a rope in the kitchen, and I convinced him not to. That's why I forced the door open, and when it opened I saw my concubine had strangled himself with the mid-section of his hammock. I dropped the baby and ran to help him, thinking he might still be alive, and when I removed the hammock from around his neck I lay him on his back and tried to wake him up, but when he didn't move I started screaming for help. Several neighbors came and notified the municipal police from this city and requested an ambulance from the Red Cross. When the Red Cross personnel arrived and examined my concubine, they determined that he was dead. I want to declare that my concubine's parents live in the locality of Francisco May of the municipality of Leona Vicario of the state of Quintana Roo; I also want to declare that my concubine was married to a woman whose name I do not know and that I know he has two minor children.

⁶⁷ In other case files, these statements can also be "signed" with a fingerprint from a given witness, usually when the witness is illiterate. There is an obvious paradox here, as people who are illiterate clearly would not have been able to read the document themselves. There is no notation in the declaration that anyone else read the statement to the witness. However, in cases when the witness does not speak Spanish, the name and identifying details of the translator are recorded.

⁶⁸ This may seem like an odd term to use. However, the original Spanish word in the record is *concubino* and I felt it necessary to translate the text as closely as possible to the original, particularly because the word *concubino* is not used in everyday speech.

⁶⁹ *Kleen-bebé* is a brand of disposable diapers.

Maria Aida's statement to the police is a fascinating document. First of all, the language used in the document is extremely convoluted, falling into a narrative style that is at once obscure and redundant. Second, the information presented in the document is interesting because of what it reveals about what the authorities consider relevant information⁷⁰. Third, it is revealing about human relationships and the relationship between citizens and the state.

The uniformity of the statement when compared to other case files means that these statements follow the formulaic pattern of a genre. The statements are not written by the witnesses, but by *Ministerio* officials who translate the individual narratives of witnesses into the language of bureaucracy.

Autopsy Room Report: Irma Noemi Koh Tun

[Ms. Koh Tun states that] the cadaver that is in front of her belongs to her husband, who in life responded to the name Eugenio Chooc Un. He was a *natural y vecino*⁷¹ of this city of Valladolid, Yucatán... that the now deceased procreated with the witness two children named Angel Gustavo and Diandi Arturo Chooc Koh, who are 9 (nine) and 6 (six) years old, respectively. His parents are Jose Reyes Chooc Canche and Florencia Hun May; vecinos of the locality of Francisco May in the Municipality of Isla Mujeres, Quintana Roo. And that the now deceased separated from me three years ago, and a year ago began to live in concubinage with Mrs. Maria Aida Mis Cocom, with whom in their conjugal union he procreated a boy by the name of Luis Eugenio Chooc Mis, who is two months old... likewise, in this statement [Ms. Koh Tun] requests that the cadaver of her deceased husband be surrendered to his present concubine named Maria Aida Mis Cocom, following the lawfully mandated autopsy, for his funeral and burial.

I was drawn to this case precisely because of the unusual relationship between Eugenio, Maria Aida, and Irma. Eugenio's death brought his estranged wife, Irma, into his partner, Maria Aida's, life. Because Irma was the legal spouse, Eugenio's body legally belonged to her once the cause of death had been established and the death certificate signed. However, Irma relinquished her claim to Eugenio's body in favor of Maria Aida. Whether it was out of compassion or to saddle her with the expenses of a funeral, the future historian will never know. The contrast between what remains on the record in the archaeology of knowledge investigated by those who rely on records for their data and the reality of the actual events that lead to the creation of those documents is exemplified by my own ethnographic research.

Ethnography of a Suicide Event

When a person commits suicide, a series of events unfold through which the Mexican state normalizes and takes ownership of the suicidal body. By law, no body may be legally interred without a *necropsia de ley*, or lawful autopsy performed by the state forensic physician. Hence, when a person dies outside of a hospital, particularly under violent circumstances, the state takes ownership of the body, performs an autopsy, and returns the adulterated body to the

⁷⁰ More on how these reports are written and filed is considered below.

⁷¹ *Natural* is a term used for birthplace, and *vecino* is a term used for residence. *Natural y vecino* implies that Eugenio Xoooc Un was both born in and resident of Valladolid.

bereaved family. On paper, this process appears to be fairly smooth. In practice, the suicide crime scene represents a mine field for crime scene investigators.

A Hanging in Xulha: The Case of “Don Gregorio”

On May 1, 2008, I was contacted via text message by Raymundo the *secretario* of the local public ministry of the *Procuraduría General del Estado*. The *secretario* occupies the second in command position at the Valladolid ministry, and in conjunction with the judicial police, is in charge of supervising crime scene investigations. “A hangman has fallen in Xulha,” the text message read, “we expect you here in half an hour.” This scenario had been rehearsed many times in my head: thanks to a colleague at the Universidad de Oriente where I had taught the previous quarter, I had been granted the extremely rare opportunity to accompany the local forensic team to observe a crime scene investigation. I had also been granted permission to read over the crime scene investigation reports at the ministry, and these afternoon trips to the ministry office had allowed me to build a relationship with the people who worked there. As promised, when a suicide finally happened, I was contacted.

When I arrived at the ministry office, Raymundo was calmly giving instructions to a group of four men. I soon learned that these men made up the investigative team: the local forensic physician, the forensic photographer, and two judicial police officers⁷². I was introduced to the group and, as we headed out the door, Raymundo called back to a young woman to come with us. She turned out to be a secretary who was studying law and who happened to enjoy coming on these trips. The drive to the nearby municipality of Xulha took all of ten minutes, long enough for the forensic photographer, Josué, to fret about the fact that we had been directed to the municipal building instead of a private home. Usually, he said, this meant a hike through the *monte* to wherever the body had been discovered. Raymundo and Josué wondered about whether we would “have any trouble.” When I asked them what they meant, Raymundo explained that often families do not want the police to take the body, and Josué chimed in with an anecdote about arriving in a village to find all the *albaradas*, the low hedges surrounding people’s homes, painted red. That day, Josué explained, they had to sneak the body away in the trunk of the forensic photographer’s car, because the villagers had surrounded the van.

When we arrived, we were directed to a house just around the corner from the building. Sitting at the corner of the road, this home was much like any Maya home: what appeared to be a single-room, cement structure with a traditional, thatched-roof house, probably used as a kitchen, next to it. There seemed to be people everywhere: on the street, in the *solar*, coming in and out of the homes. Like many apparently single-room homes, this one had another room built directly behind the one that faced the street. A local policeman led us to this room and from the doorway I caught a glimpse of a silhouette leaning against a wall, covered by a white sheet. Raymundo motioned us in and asked everyone else to clear the room. Three older women dressed in *huipiles* stayed behind to watch the process, and just as quickly as the other five people had left, I saw them come to the window and look in.

⁷² *Policía Judicial* operate under the umbrella of the *Procuraduría General del Estado*, the state prosecutor’s office. They are charged with investigating crimes and are similar to detectives and beat cops in the United States. They are always in plain clothes and drive unmarked cars. In contrast, uniformed police officers are employed by municipalities and charged with maintaining order and protecting the public from crime.

Josué pulled out his manual single-lens reflex camera at the same time that the physician, Antonio, pulled out a small, point-and-shoot digital camera. Both men followed a similar pattern of taking photographs, first photographing the room, then the person covered by the sheet. Raymundo, not wearing gloves, pulled the sheet off, and the body of a man who appeared to be in his 70s was uncovered. He was leaning against the wall, a nylon rope connecting him to an S hook in the wall that in all Yucatecan homes serves as a hammock hanger. His legs were stiffly straight and slightly angled to the wall, and Raymundo explained that the man had put the rope around his neck and slowly eased himself down so that his air circulation was blocked. His back was flat against the wall, his eyes closed. He appeared to be sleeping. As the sheet came off, I heard a sob escape one of the women. She was a tiny Maya lady, her huipil embroidered with red flowers, her salt-and-pepper hair pulled tightly into a braid.

After Antonio, Josué, and I had taken all the pictures we wanted, Raymundo asked the two plain-clothed judicial policemen who had entered the room while this was happening to cut the man down. The policemen cut the rope and gently laid the deceased on the ground, where Antonio, the physician, took more close-up photographs. I still did not know the man's name. As he was lowered to the ground, the three women began to cry in earnest, but stood away from us, watching the scene unfold without a word. None of these women spoke Spanish, and when Raymundo tried to address them they met his gaze briefly and simply looked away. The policemen left the room and returned with a stretcher.

Suddenly, the woman in the red huipil, who had apparently not spoken a word of Spanish before this point, rushed to Raymundo, her 4'10" frame making an almost comical contrast to his nearly six feet. "*¡No te lo vas a llevar!*" she said, loudly and firmly, using the informal *tu* form, "You will not take him!" She looked up at him fiercely and as she said this about 30 people burst through the *solar* door and filled the room. The two policemen, who had transferred the man to the stretcher, stood up, their faces reflecting fear and alarm.

Raymundo turned, looked at me, the young woman who had come to watch, and I felt Josué hand on my arm as I was led out of the room through the door that connected this room to the front room. We made a quick exit and someone shut the door behind us. We waited outside with a group of neighbors who had come out to watch the events and I heard Raymundo's muffled yelling, making promises to bring the body back, pleading, explaining that the law required an autopsy. Other male voices called back, insisting that the body would be going nowhere. Suddenly, things settled down, and after about 20 minutes the judicial police carried out the stretcher with a black body bag on it, put it in the SEMEFO van, and started driving. Raymundo followed them out and gestured for us to get in our vehicle. As we left, a young girl called out to us, asking whether the event would be appearing in the newspaper. Raymundo called back no.

"I had to lie to them," he explained excitedly once we were safely on the road back to Valladolid, "I had to tell them that I would personally guarantee the return of the body back to Xulha." He explained that at one point, things had gotten so out of hand that the villagers had taken the stretcher, body and all, to the back of the property. The two policemen, who had come to guarantee the safe retrieval of the corpse, had been blindsided by the community's response and panicked. "I don't know why," remarked Josué, "this sort of thing happens all the time. They don't want you to do the autopsy."

When we arrived back to base in Valladolid, Raymundo reported to his superior, William, what had transpired. “I didn’t even have time to get the vital statistics,” he explained, “I don’t even know the street address of the place, or the age of the old man. I had to swear to them that returning the body would not cost them anything... I got them to let me take him because I told them that they would not be able to bury him without a death certificate and the only way to get that was with an autopsy.” Josué remembered another death where the family had refused to let the authorities take the body. “That time,” he told me, “we just left the body there. Three days later the family came to us and begged us to let them bury it. Then we took the body and did the autopsy. It was horrible.”

I stepped out of the police offices and spotted the woman in the red huipil. Next to her sat a *catrina*, an indigenous woman around the same age wearing conservative western clothes. When the woman in the red huipil spotted me, she said something to the *catrina*, and the woman smiled at me and explained that the woman in the huipil was the widow, that the family was very poor and was worried about the costs of returning the man’s body to the village for burial. She also explained that the old man had been very sick and upset because his sons had taken some land from him. The anger and defiance that had erupted in the village seemed to have vanished; now, the widow just seemed like a sad, grief-stricken old woman, and she looked around her to the other people in the waiting area with sadness and bewilderment. Both women looked at me as though they expected me to have answers, but as I thought of what to say Raymundo came out and told them that the local funerary had agreed to donate a casket. Then, a man who had been sitting in the waiting area spoke up. He was middle-aged, wearing brown slacks and a beaten button-down shirt. “But the casket they will give us will be plain wood,” he complained, “can we have something nicer?”

Raymundo referred him to his superior, knowing quite well that the family would not get what it wanted. It was time to go to the autopsy facilities, located next to the Valladolid cemetery. I followed the body of Don Gregorio from Xulha until the end of the autopsy. The forensic physician concluded that the cause of death was asphyxia due to strangulation, but also discovered that he was dying of lung cancer. As we were getting ready to leave, the doctor and his assistant flipped the body so that the cavity fluid could leak out of the sewn-up Y-shaped incision, as a courtesy to the family. “Otherwise he’ll leak,” he explained. He called me back as I was climbing into the SEMEFO van and pointed to a trail of ants that had found its way to the top of the tiled counter where the body was laying. They gathered around a clear, blood-streaked fluid that pooled at the man’s feet. “See that?” he said, “ants usually stay away from the fluid; they usually prefer the urine. But these are looking for the blood. This man is diabetic.”

For the purposes of the necropsia de ley, or state-mandated autopsy, Don Gregorio’s torso was opened with a Y-shaped incision. Subsequently, his scalp was removed and his cranium serrated open with a hand saw, his brain weighed and placed back in his head. His throat was also opened once the contusions on his neck were carefully documented, and the damage to his trachea clearly revealed how he had suffocated. The cause of death was strangulation; he put the rope around his neck, leaned against the wall, and slowly inched his feet forward until the rope gently cut off his ability to breathe.

Mexican law mandates that all deaths occurring outside hospitals be thoroughly investigated, and that no cadaver can be buried without first undergoing the so-called necropsia

de ley⁷³. Sometimes the requirement can be waived, but this is almost never the case when it comes to violent deaths. The autopsy itself is violence on the body and it is interpreted by the bereaved as violence against themselves, both emotional and economical, because the family is subsequently burdened with transporting the body home. As I described in the preceding ethnographic vignette, violent encounters between bereaved family members and the authorities are commonplace. In the case of Don Gregorio, his body was physically yanked away from the authorities and carried as far away as possible. The family was only persuaded when they were told first that they would be unable to bury him, and then when Raymundo promised them a speedy return of the body.

Months later, the official police report was finally filed. The autopsy report mentions nothing of the lung cancer the physician found, nor do any of the other police documents. No mention of the altercation between the police and Don Gregorio's family appears. The many photographs that had been taken by the forensic team were missing. When I read the report, it was so different from what I had witnessed and recorded in my field notes that I double checked the date and place to make sure I had the right event. The report was listed as May 1, 2008, in Xulha. It was the only suicide that month.

Autopsy Room Report: "Margarita Couo"

[the witness, speaking through an interpreter, made the following statement]: the cadaver I have before me belonged to my husband, who in life responded to the name Gregorio Maas. My husband was a natural and vecino of Xulha, Yucatán, with the same domicile as mine. He was married, a campesino, and at the time of his death he was 74 years old. During our marriage we had three daughters whom we named Magda, Elisa, and Silvia, all with the last name Maas Couo, who are now 51 years old; 49 years old, and 42 years old, respectively... On May 1, 2008, at 07:00, I had to go to my husband's monte because said was going to be measured. I left my husband at home with my nephew Juan Pech and my daughter Magda because my husband suffers from depression⁷⁴ and refused to leave the house. The point is that around 11:00, still on May 1, 2008, when I was leaving the aforementioned monte, at that moment I see my nephew Juan running, who immediately informs me that my husband Gregorio had hung himself inside our home. Because of this, I rushed home and when I reached my domicile I realized that he was hanging from an S hook for one of the hammocks. I realized that he was already dead and told my daughter Magda to notify the rest of our family. I want to make clear that I don't know why my husband took his life in this way, he never told me that he wanted to hang himself, although he was depressed because of some problems he was having with one of my nephews, which made him stop eating, but we never thought he would come to do what he did... knowing that my

⁷³ Artículo 185 del código de procedimientos penales de México.

⁷⁴ Here, the text in Spanish is somewhat confusing. Margarita's statement reads: "ya que mi esposo padece de presión y se negaba a salir de la casa," which could be translated into "my husband suffers from (blood) pressure and refused to leave the house." However, "de presión" (from pressure) and "de depresión" (depression) are similar enough that I interpreted the space between "de" and "presión" as a mistake on the part of the writer of the text simply because low or high blood pressure would not make someone refuse to leave their home, but depression could.

husband died by his own will and acted alone, I release the *Procuraduría General de Justicia del Estado* from any responsibility, as well as the personnel from the 23rd investigative agency who participated in the *levantamiento* and lawfully mandated autopsy. I also ask that the body of my deceased husband be returned to me once the lawfully mandated autopsy has been practiced...

The Mexican state takes ownership of the suicidal body and introduces suicide into its bureaucratic system, symbolically deploying what Foucault calls *anatomo-politics of the population* (1978). This attempt is met with resistance from bereaved family members, who will go to great lengths to prevent the state from taking physical possession of the corpse. The body becomes a site of contestation in a process that seems organic but ultimately always results in the same end: the state is always successful in taking possession of the corpse, though the terms of the return of the corpse to the family are negotiable. None of these negotiations, however, appear in the bureaucratic paper trail, which normalizes the narratives into legal language. In preserving certain details of the suicide narrative and excluding others, the state, through its bureaucratic representatives, creates a sense of order that seems largely absent on the ground.

Analysis

What this encounter tells us, however, is that the transformation of experience into genre is indicative of an attempt by a fractionalized state to create itself as whole and orderly in the face of chaos and disorder. To borrow DeCerteau's (1984) terminology, the state is deploying a *strategy* in order to represent itself as whole, uniform, and consistent. In contrast, the family of Don Gregorio, struggling to pick up the pieces left by his loss, deployed its own *tactics* in order to, first, get his body back and, second, have his funeral expenses covered. Both the state's strategy and the family's tactic succeed in their processes: without my presence, the details of the conflict between the state police and Don Gregorio's family would never have been known. The record would have reflected the same uniform narrative that appears in every other state file and no one, save for those physically present, would have been the wiser. Meantime, Don Gregorio's family, though they did not have the body of Don Gregorio back in two hours as promised, succeeded in having the body transported home at no cost and were able to obtain a free coffin. Both parties are involved in a process of self-representation.

However, one wonders if Raymundo would have felt as willing to openly lie to a bereaved family of more means than Don Gregorio's—or, if Don Gregorio's widow and children might have been able to avoid the autopsy altogether had they possessed some of the trappings of the middle class. As described in chapter 2, suicidal bodies can be hidden from public view and bureaucratic process if one has the right social, symbolic, and actual capital in the form of social connections, position, wealth⁷⁵. Every interaction between citizens and state takes place within the broader context of the continuum of class and ethnicity (see chapter 1). Money, light skin, college education, Spanish-speaking ability, the "right" surname, the possession of some or all of these directly affects the ability of the bureaucratic apparatus to make even the most apparently rigid rules flexible.

The State and the Suicidal Body

⁷⁵ In the case of Marina Montes, whose story is presented in chapter 2, the family was able to obtain a cause of death from a physician who was a friend of the family and avoid the lawfully mandated autopsy.

Who owns the suicidal body? The care of the body, what Foucault (1978) termed *biopolitics*, appears to translate into its reverse: while individuals are charged with the care of their bodies under the guidance of the state through capillaries of power, what Foucault terms “governmentality,” the body of the dead is claimed by the state. Suicide represents the failure of biopolitics of the individual. The strict adherence to the law, the rules, regulations, and procedures followed indicates the deployment of anatomo-politics of the population. To Foucault, death is the limit of power. For the Mexican state, affirming its sovereignty in increasingly uncertain times, the administration of death is also a symbolic deployment of power. Control over the body of the dead, from *levantamiento* to autopsy to authorizing burial in the cemetery, is one long symbolic affirmation of the state of its power over its citizens. After all, what is death to a nation that chose it as its national totem (Lomnitz 2005)? Death is not the limit of power; it is the ultimate subjection of the citizen to the power of the state.

However, what is the state? What are we talking about when we talk about the power of the state and of its limits? How are the procedures followed in by Mexican and Yucatecan police different from those of any other “western” nation? Is it truly appropriate to apply a Foucaultian analysis to a society in a nation that has undergone tremendous upheaval roughly every 50 years since it came into being? México and Yucatán can be called post-colonial. They can also be called post-revolutionary and post-dictatorial. Sharma and Gupta (2006) note that anthropology offers a particularly unique way of understanding how the state and its boundaries are socially constructed. Through its particular attention to specific branches and levels of state institutions, anthropology “enables a disaggregated view of ‘the state’ that shows the multi-layered, pluri-centered, and fluid nature of this ensemble that congeals different contradictions” (10). The transformation of events such as the ones surrounding Don Gregorio’s death into organized case files like Eugenio Xoooc Un’s is precisely the sort of cultural process through which the state is “instantiated and experienced... [creating] an illusion of cohesion and unitariness... [that] is always contested and fragile” (11). The bureaucratic regime serves to legitimize the power of the state in the same way that government offices create the illusion of surveillance by placing photographs of the Yucatán governor (but not the Mexican president) on their walls.

Sharma and Gupta (2006), in writing about the need to re-think theories about the state, note that in existing literature the relationship between the state and the nation has been reduced into the concept of the “nation-state.” Sharma and Gupta question this relationship vis-à-vis the challenges posed by globalization and transnationalism. However, the Yucatecan case, due to Yucatán’s own history of regional separatism (Rugeley 1996; Chuchiak 2000; Gabbert 2004; Castillo Cocom 2005; Rugeley 2009; Terry et al. 2010; Smith 2010) presents a clear example of the fractured lines in the nation–state concept. Sharma and Gupta (2006) point to a perceived relationship between nationalism and theories of the state “Theories of the state always have implicit in them theories of nationalism; similarly, theories of nationalism assume some theory of the state in that nationalism is often seen as a state project” (7).

Without a doubt, the project of nationalism has been a significant project of the Mexican state⁷⁶. However, perhaps more importantly, party politics have always created inroads in the relationship between the Mexican and Yucatecan states. During the PRI party’s 71-year domination of Mexican national politics, local politics in rural and urban Yucatán had a

⁷⁶ See Lomnitz’ (2005) epic genealogy of the Mexican Nation, *Death and the Idea of México*.

decidedly oppositional bend. Now, with PAN control of national politics, Yucatán elected a PRI governor in 2007, and Mérida, a PAN municipality for over 20 years, elected a PRI mayor in 2010.

Understanding México and Yucatán's unique histories⁷⁷ is fundamental to understanding the ways in which the contemporary Mexican and Yucatecan states operate and interact internally and externally. The Mexican state exists as a larger federal system that encompasses the small, regional Yucatecan state. However, in so far as day to day operations go, regional state authorities play a much larger role in influencing citizen's everyday lives than the federal government. The allocation of resources, the primary responsibility of the Mexican welfare state, is carried out primarily by Yucatecan authorities. As such, the decisions they make regarding the ways in which these resources will be allocated depends almost entirely on local, village-level politics (Reyes-Cortés 2004). Hence, the federal state and the local state must be understood as two separate, often conflicting entities. In 2008, the President of México was Felipe Calderón, a member of the PAN party. The governor of Yucatán was Ivonne Ortega Pacheco, a member of the PRI party.

In the Procuraduría General del Estado (PGE), changes in regional governance are extremely significant. One day, during my time doing archival research in Valladolid, I arrived at the *Ministerio* to find that all the sheetrock cubicle dividers, which had been painted blue when I first started working there, had been painted green. William Caulil, the director of the *Ministerio*, was on his way out, and he greeted as he came in.

“How do you like the new color?” He asked, “*Es verde-Ivonne*⁷⁸.”

Ivonne-green referred to the fact that, while the PAN party colors were blue, PRI party colors (red, white, and green) were reflecting the local office's new political alliance. The painting of the office's walls representing a marking of the space as the territory of the local state government. The only photograph hanging in the office was of Ivonne Ortega, not the Mexican president. This space was, thus, part of Yucatecan regionalist project, not Mexican nationalism, despite the fact that bureaucratically the investigation and denunciation of crimes are identical from state to state. Bureaucracy itself has become entangled in the competing projects of the Mexican nation and the Yucatecan state.

The institution of bureaucracy is a marker of late modernity and a manifestation of the state's nationalistic project. After all, bureaucratic procedures in a given country and its overseas diplomatic posts are uniform: the procedures for obtaining a birth certificate for a Mexican child are the same regardless of whether that child is in Mérida, Muna, Morelia, Monterrey, or New York City. The *Registro Civil*, the civil registry, the legacy of President Benito Juárez (1861–1872), exists in every Mexican municipality and overseas diplomatic posting, and operates in nearly identical ways. In the 19th century, the creation of the *registro civil* represented the emergence of México as modern, enlightened state because it indicated a complete break from the Catholic Church, which until then had been the only institution that maintained records of births, deaths, and marriages. However, local interests have a decided impact on the administration of bureaucracy. Political affiliation, wealth, and personal connections all affect

⁷⁷ See chapter 1.

⁷⁸ “It's Ivonne-Green.”

the deployment and operation of state agencies. With the right connections, bureaucracy can be bypassed or limited.

Following Max Weber's (2006) observations on the nature of bureaucracy and bureaucratic leaders in particular, most lower- and mid-level bureaucrats enter state and federal employment and remain there through the duration of their careers. Directors and management are appointed by the governor or president and change with every change in administration. Thus, career bureaucrats were among the most politically neutral and cynical observers of Mexican and local politics that I met. The main concern of the bureaucrat is to complete the task at hand and follow the orders given by whoever happens to be giving them.

In his essay "Society, Economy, and the State Effect," Mitchell (2006) notes that many theories about the state make a clear distinction between two objects of study: the state-system and the state-idea. Mitchell argues that these two objects of study are better understood as two parts of the same process. Mitchell uses a Foucaultian analysis to show how citizen-subjects are produced through the *disciplines*. "Discipline... works not from the outside but from within... not by constraining individuals but by producing them" (178). Foucaultian analyses of present-day governance are usually elegant narratives about "power" and the "production of subjects."

Bureaucracy has long been a subject of study for social scientists. In his classic essay, Max Weber (Weber 2006) said that bureaucracy in modern states was self-sustaining, efficient, and dominating, "Where administration has been completely bureaucratized, the resulting system of domination is practically indestructible... because of its increasingly rationalized inner structure" (64). The tactics deployed by common citizens like the bereaved family of Don Gregorio show how apparent resistance—exemplified by the family's initial refusal to allow the removal of Don Gregorio's body—gives way to negotiation (over a free coffin) and acceptance. Raymundo himself was unable to "squirm out of the apparatus" (Weber 2006:62), working outside of protocol with the explicit purpose of complying with the bureaucratic process that demands an autopsy even when the cause of death is clear.

The limits of these eloquent analyses become evident in the messiness of everyday life in México. Bourdieu (2000) would dismiss the bereaved family's actions as misrecognition, opposed to what he calls the "the political action of subversion [that] aims to liberate the potential capacity for refusal which is neutralized by misrecognition, by performing, aided by a crisis, a critical unveiling of the founding violence that is masked by the adjustment between the order of things and the order of bodies" (188). I find, however, that this dismissal may be premature, particularly when we consider these events through the theoretical lens of De Certeau's (1984) work. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, De Certeau presents the example of the French *perruque* as an everyman's tactic of "making do" in contemporary modern society. *La perruque* is a playful "getting over," originally used when a worker used his time on the job for his purposes (25). For De Certeau, however, *la perruque* exemplifies the ways in which people "make do" with the hardship of everyday life. Just as workers resist the order imposed by the factory, so do people use *la perruque* to resist the order imposed by the bureaucratic apparatus of the state.

In this sense, every actor in the drama over Don Gregorio's body was engaging in their own *perruque*: the bereaved family, by creating an obstacle for Raymundo that eventually resulted in a free coffin; Raymundo, by subsequently writing a police report that "forgot" to

mention the scuffle. Without “squirming free” of the bureaucratic apparatus (Weber 2006) or engaging in “political struggle” following a “critical unveiling” (Bourdieu 2000), Raymundo manages to be more than “a small cog in a ceaselessly moving mechanism” and Don Gregorio’s family manages to obtain a small victory that likely would not have been afforded them had they passively allowed the state to remove their loved one’s corpse. By the same token, the playful *perruque* is augmented by the mentality of *Los Hijos de la Malinche* in Octavio Paz’ *Labyrinth of Solitude* (Paz 1950).

Despite criticism leveled at Paz for his sometimes overly simplistic representation (Brandes 2006; Brandes 2003:127-144) of “the Mexican mentality” (Garcia Canclini 1989; Brandes 2003,2006), I find his glib analysis of Mexican subject-citizens to hold some profound truth (Paz 1950):

The word *chingar*⁷⁹, with all these multiple meanings, defines a great part of our life and qualifies our relationships with the rest of our friends and compatriots. For the Mexican, life is a possibility of *chingar* or being *chingado*. In other words, of humiliating, punishing, and offending. Or the reverse. This conception of social life as combat fatally generates the division of society into strong and weak... Another consequence, no less degrading, is the adhesion to people instead of principles... and in a world of *chingones*, of hard relationships mediated by violence and jealousy, where no one opens up or backs down, ideas and work matter very little. The only thing that matters is manliness, personal worth, and the capacity to impose oneself. (9)

The disorderly, fractured state creates disorderly, fractured subjects. In Paz’s view, everyone is trying to find some way of “getting over” on everyone else.

Conclusion

I spent a great deal of chapter 1 describing Yucatán’s unique history, portraying Yucatán from a highly particularistic perspective. In many ways, Yucatán is categorically different from the rest of México in historical, linguistic, and cultural terms. However, there are many ways in which Yucatán is very much like the rest of México, particularly in its bureaucratic apparatuses and in the distrusting, opportunistic, and abusive relationships between the state and its subject-citizens. In my own research, I see that the state-system—represented in this particular case by the bureaucratic recording and investigation of crime—is the *how* of the state-idea. The state-idea is an idea of order that is only skin deep precisely because the bureaucratic recording, despite the best efforts of the bureaucrats, is so unreliable. Chaos always seems to be just around the corner and is only partially hidden by the uniform portrayal of the ordering actions of policemen on the disordering effects of suicide. The chaotic “messiness” of the Mexican state can be read “between the lines” of the suicide case files when the researcher finds incomplete, missing, or contradictory records. And this happens often.

In this chapter, I explored the role the state plays in the management of suicides. Particularly, I focus on the ways in which suicides are depicted in the bureaucratic record and

⁷⁹ Although the word *chingar* can be roughly translated to the English “fuck,” I chose to leave the word in Spanish because the English “fuck” does not capture the multiplicity of meanings encased in the Spanish *chingar*.

contrast this record to the reality of what I believe is a fairly common suicide investigation. The contradictions that emerge between what is reported and what actually takes place is a manifestation of the complex relationship between subject-citizens and the state. In the following chapter, I move away from these considerations of structure toward a more nuanced look at the ways in which suicide is locally produced and understood.

Chapter 4

Adoring Our Wounds: The Murky Limits of the Self

Introduction

The day Claudina talked about her wounds was a lot like any other. The little office of the Programa Integral de Atención al Suicidio (PIAS) was either unbearably hot with the air conditioner turned off and no draft to speak of (even with the windows open), or the old air conditioner in the window made so much noise that we were unable to hear each other speak. But Claudina, whose sharp wit and insight had earned my undivided attention, was in an optimistic if reflective mood. A week prior, she had been devastated to receive a bipolar diagnosis⁸⁰. Today, with her release from Hospital Psiquiátrico Yucatán (HPY) imminent, she was more interested in finding meaning in her physical and spiritual wounds.

She looked around the room at Diana, the psychologist leading the discussion, at me, the anthropologist, and at the three other patients participating in the group that day: Rodrigo, a 25-year-old man who had survived a hanging attempt after his wife turned the police on him⁸¹, Ismael, a 45-year-old man who suffered from alcoholism and had just survived his fourth—and most serious—hanging attempt, and Irma, a 42-year-old woman with a sweet disposition but extremely reduced mental abilities, who was permanently committed to HPY⁸². Rodrigo had just finished sharing with the group his anxiety about the future. Claudina started at him raptly. Then she moved her head slightly forward and squinted her eyes. I saw she was looking at the red mark on Rodrigo's neck, the imprint of the rope still fresh. When he finished speaking, Diana asked her if anyone wanted to respond to Rodrigo's sharing. Claudina gingerly raised her hand and cleared her throat.

"We all have wounds," Claudina mused, looking around the circle. She turned toward Rodrigo, smiled, and pointed at his neck.

You, Rodrigo, have a wound from the rope around your neck. I gave myself wounds by letting ants sting my hands and feet. I did that so I could hide my wounds, so nobody could see what I was carrying with me. But now I say we must adore our wounds. We must carry them proudly, we must love them. Our wounds make us who we are.

Adoring our wounds I scrawled in my notebook, hanging on to her every word. I had never heard that phrase before, and yet it was hauntingly familiar.

I thought of Claudina's word choice: *adorar*, such a meaning-laden word with such a profound history. The Christian missionaries who first came to Yucatán used it often when they described Indian apostasy in the 16th and 17th centuries (Sánchez de Aguilar 1996a; Lopez de Cogolludo 1971:481). The maya word for *adorar*, *k'ul* is one of the most polysemous in the Cordemex Maya dictionary. In the Cordemex, *k'ul* is defined as follows:

⁸⁰ In the following chapter, I will discuss Claudina's case in more detail.

⁸¹ The nature of the charges never came up, though Rodrigo spoke of his ill temper and his inability to control his outbursts.

⁸² At some point in her admission process, someone had written that she had suicidal ideation, and she was enrolled in the PIAS program. None of the PIAS staff knew whether or not Irma actually had attempted suicide, though it was certainly possible, but she enjoyed leaving the ward to attend sessions, even though she never shared anything other than that she was going to give her husband the divorce he wanted.

1 K'UL 9: adoración (eng. adoration) **2 K'UUL** 8: idem 8,9: reverencia (reverence) **3. K'UL OLIL** 8: adoración del espíritu o corazón (adoration of/from the spirit or the heart). (420)

The third variation of *k'ul*, *k'ul olil*, made up of *k'uul*, “to adore” and *ool*, “heart, spirit,” is of particular relevance. As will be discussed below, the *ool* is the part of the self that has been called the “figurative heart” because although Maya speakers refer to it as heart, the beating muscle is referred to as the *püksical*. *Ool* is more profound than the heart, although it is absolutely necessary for life to exist. It is the spirit that exits during sleep. At death, the *ool* leaves the body, but it doesn't go to a Christian heaven or hell, like the *Pixan*, but is simply reabsorbed into the earth and eventually makes its way into someone else (Hirose 2008). *K'ul olil*, then, is an introspection, an adoration of the self within the self. In this sense, Claudina's statement belies an understanding of the body deeply rooted in the divine: the body not only as an instrument (Mauss 1973) but as a manifestation of the sacred.

In this chapter, I argue that in Yucatán there is a different modality of personhood, one that is subject to fewer boundaries than traditional Western European notions of the self. Particularly, the person should not be understood as a self-interested individual but can be better understood by his or her linkages to other people and other realms. Key in understanding how the person is constructed is to consider local understandings of the body. We can trace these understandings to both Ancient Maya bodily practice (Sharer 1994, 2009) as well as Catholic mysticism and penance (Asad 1993). The remembrance of pain, the honoring of pain, and its connection to an affinity for the spiritual realm are all key in understanding the way in which the person is constructed. To do this, I will first describe some classical theories of the self and review recent literature on personhood among the Ancient Maya. Subsequently, I present ethnographic data as well as research on Yucatán by others who have observed similar phenomena and have thoroughly analyzed it. Then, I trace the possible roots and historical origins of this form of disposition. Finally, I relate the significance of this argument to the dissertation as a whole and the question of suicide in particular.

Back to Basics: Person, Personhood, and Cultural Logic

In “*Anomie*,” Durkheim (Durkheim 1951:405) talks about the relationship between financial meltdowns and increased suicide rates. “Is life more readily renounced as it becomes more difficult? The explanation is seductively simple...” (242). Durkheim goes on to explain that even when change in a society is materially better for the population, suicides go up in the same way as if things were getting worse. “If therefore industrial or financial crises increase suicides, this is not because they cause poverty, since crises of prosperity have the same result; it is because they are crises, that is, disturbances of the collective order. Every disturbance of equilibrium, even though it achieves greater comfort and a heightening of general vitality, is an impulse to voluntary death” (246).

Durkheim's student Mauss (1973) also has a Durkheimian tendency to reduce all individual agency to “society.” In “Techniques of the Body,” Mauss introduces the idea of *habitus* as a way of understanding the connection between individual and social bodily practice. But, before we jump to an attack on Mauss, I would like to introduce Asad's (1993) discussion of Mauss's “Techniques of the Body”, where he notes “the concept of *habitus* invites us to analyze the body as an assemblage of embodied aptitudes... I think that Mauss wanted to talk, as

it were, about the way a professional pianist's practiced hands remember and play the music being performed" (76). To take this a step further, Mauss, in his own work, teases out the connection between bodily practice and what he terms "Magico-religious action" (75), because ritual is performed by the body, the boundary between the physical and spiritual realms is nonexistent.

There are several reasons that I believe a theoretical approach that considers individual actions as embedded within a larger field (*doxa*) is particularly fruitful when we consider suicide in Yucatán. First, suicide can be understood as the ultimate individualistic act. However, Durkheim's (1951) classic *Suicide* dispels the notion that suicide per se truly is the result of individual agency but that in fact suicide is a socially constituted phenomenon. In this vein, Mauss's (1985) work on the notion of the person can illuminate the interplay between individual aspirations and social disposition. In order to understand how suicide is understood by people on the ground, I find Mauss's concept of the person and Fischer's (2001) work on cultural logic based on Bourdieuan practice theory particularly useful.

Fischer (2001) argues that cultures, broadly conceived as "overlapping distributions of cognitive and behavioral patterns" are marked by logics of internal organization. Building on constructivist theory (Warren 1998), Fischer presents cultural logics as dynamic, shared dispositions that cannot predict action but can lend a sense of regularity and continuity to behavior (Fischer 2001:15). These logics are learned through socialization and social interaction but are also in a constant process of redefinition and reconstitution. According to Fischer, cultural logics can be understood to produce what Bourdieu (1977[1972], 2000) calls *doxa*, the realm of what is taken for granted that is continually delimited through the practice of social interaction.

So how can we understand a Yucatecan cultural logic? Yucatecan cultural logic can only be arrived through understanding Yucatecan personhood. I argue in chapter 1 against the Maya/non-Maya distinction. Some would argue that it is in personhood and how the person is constructed that the Maya/non-Maya distinction I abandoned in chapter 1 is most important⁸³. However, focusing on the alleged Mayan or non-Mayan-ness of my research subjects would have turned my work into an investigation of identity and identity formation. Although identity is certainly an important area of study, such a focus would have missed other aspects of Yucatecan personhood that are significant. One of these is the relationship between person, physical space, and the realm of the sacred.

⁸³ For example, language is an integral part in the construction of the self. According to this logic, Maya speakers, because they speak a nonwestern language that can be traced back to Ancient Maya civilization, necessarily differ in their world view from Spanish speakers. There are problems with this logic. First and foremost, the vast majority of Maya speakers today are bilingual or have children who are monolingual Spanish speakers. Second, as William Hanks's (2010) work has shown, the Maya language has sustained profound change from the time of the conquest and a study of language ideology reveals a Maya disposition that, while being unique, is far more complex than the above logic portrays. Finally, linguistic research and circumstantial evidence (Suarez 1945) shows that the Maya language has had significant impact on Yucatecan Spanish. Because many monolingual Spanish speakers come from Maya-speaking backgrounds, the distinction in the construction of the Yucatecan person should not be reduced to whether or a person speaks Maya, but should take into consideration family history, socioeconomic background, and place of residence as well language spoken.

It is no wonder that fieldwork in Yucatán inspired Redfield and Villa Rojas's (Redfield and Villa Rojas 1933[1962]) conception of the folk/urban continuum: in my own work, I noticed the marked contrast in how people conceptualized the village and the city: the village is a place of tranquility, quiet, and magic. The city is a place of noise and absence of the possibilities of magic. The further one gets from the *monte*, the further one moves away from the narratives of magic in nature.

A young man at San Carlos (a rehabilitation center in Valladolid) once said to me, when he talked about *Hanal Pixan*⁸⁴ traditions in his life, that in his village everyone made sure to light candles on the roads so that the *animas* would find their way back to the cemetery. In Mérida, that wasn't really necessary because "the streetlights will guide the dead." In focus group interviews with residents at San Carlos, the prevalence of magic and magical occurrences in villages as opposed to the presence of technology in cities was repeatedly expressed and discussed by the group. The city was not conceptualized as vulnerable to the entities of the *monte* in the same way as villages like Xulab. That said, certain parts of the city that are still wild—such as *terrenos baldíos* or undeveloped lots—still contain a potential for magical inhabitants such as the *Aluxo 'ob*⁸⁵. However, most Yucatecans do not spend their entire lives living in a city. Yucatecans, particularly bilingual and Maya speaking Yucatecans or those who belong to the lower and lower middle classes, are extremely mobile people. Moreover, as will be explored below, then relationship between self and space, and the ways in which the self can extend into space, are crucial to understanding Yucatecan personhood.

Some of the most interesting theoretical work on personhood has come out of Mayanist archaeology. In her groundbreaking essay, Gillespie (2001) presents us with a critique of archaeological theory, presenting a polarizing problem between methodological holism and individualism in archaeology based on inferences drawn from mortuary sites.

The critique of the early mortuary archaeology points to the need for a perspective that relates the individual bodies archaeologists excavate to other persons within the multidimensional contexts of social dynamics beyond the grave itself. The social persona cannot be considered an essentialized attribute of a single individual—a terminal status—but must take into consideration enacted links to other persons (78).

Understanding of the burials excavated had to expand beyond a simple construct of the individual as reflection of society (Pearson 1982; Joyce 1999; Gillespie 2000; Gillespie 2001).

The frequent occurrence of finding individual bodies in separate graves facilitated the development of a framework based on Euro-American practice that assigns social identities to individuals and interring them in separate graves (Gillespie 2001). In the case of multiple burials, a centrally located "principal" surrounded by human "sacrificial victims" also emphasized this focus on an individual of certain status in society (Weiss-Krejci 2002). Agency theory focused on actors' intentions, in some cases adopting individualistic, rational, self-interested and pragmatic actor from interest theory (Marcus and Flannery 1996). A lack of consistency in social theory has led to an archaeological theory that calls itself "agency" but

⁸⁴ See chapter 2 for a description and discussion of Hanal Pixan.

⁸⁵ According to the *Diccionario Maya Cordemex*, an *Alux* is a "genie of the forest." *Aluxo 'ob* are thought to be valuable allies, dangerous enemies, and notorious pranksters. When properly attended with various ritual offerings, an *Alux* can ensure healthy crops and bountiful harvest.

which is closer to methodological individualism; this is evidenced by recent calls to a microscale biographical analysis of individual “lived lives” approach to archaeological interpretation. This inability to reconcile structure and agency, Gillespie (2001) argues, reflects a Western fascination with the individual, a concept that is historically contingent, a “quintessentially modern social and political construct” (72–73). In the process, the actor’s role as a contextually relevant construct was forgotten. Gillespie argues that these agency theories represent a step back to methodological individualism, and that they are part of a paradigm shift in Anglo-American archaeology from deterministic to rational actor approaches.

Gillespie’s call for an archaeology that understands the Ancient Maya as social persons is useful for understanding present-day Yucatán. This is not because of some deeply rooted continuity to a glorious archaeological past, but because “individuality,” as Gillespie notes, is a product of modernization and the Enlightenment, but moreover of a uniquely northern European and North American Protestantism (Weber 2002[1905]). Archaeology’s “inability to reconcile structure and agency,” Gillespie (2001) argues, “reflects the contemporary Western fascination with the individual as an autonomous, self-interested actor” (75). Her starting point is Mauss’s notion of the person.

In Durkheimian fashion, Mauss’s “person” is an individual manifestation of society. To Mauss, what is significant is the particular role played by the person. Drawing on ethnographies of naming practices of the Zuni Pueblo of the American southwest and Kwakiutl of the Pacific northwest, and tracing a genealogy of the “self” in western philosophy, Mauss concludes that the concept of the individual as a unique, unreplicable “self” is the final product of a long evolution from societies where selves can be reduced to the specific role they play within society at any given time. Our own concept of the self (*moi*), which is at once a category and a value, can only be traced back as far as Immanuel Kant and Johann Gottlieb Fichte. “The one who finally gave the answer that every act of consciousness was an act of the ‘self’ (*moi*), was Fichte” (Mauss 1973:22). In other words, the idea that a rational, agentive “self” was driving force for every act of consciousness can only be traced back to the 19th century.

According to Mauss, *personnage*, the role played by individual *personnes*, exists perpetually in society. *Personne*, akin to the Greek *persona*, the mask and role worn by actors in Greek drama, is framed by status, filled at different times by different individuals who in the course of their occupying this social role transform it. Mauss’s evolutionary perspective notwithstanding, his ideas on the importance of the role that individual persons fulfill in society is important to understanding what Fortes (1973) calls “the perennial problem of how individual and society are interconnected in mutual regulation” (287).

Revisiting Mauss’s (1985) concept of “person,” Gillespie (2001) argues that incorporating the notion of personhood is a means for better understanding the constitution of society and individual (83). The social person is capable of negotiating, acting on, and reflecting on his or her place in society and his or her relationships within it; he or she is capable of doing this without having to become the essentialized western individual—rational, calculating, and separate from the social world (84). We are not looking at self-motivated individuals, but at persons who are firmly situated in a social world and who actively engage in social relationships, and negotiate, replicate, and transform social processes in their political, socioeconomic, and academic contexts. Furthermore, this approach provides a critical sociocultural context for understanding relationships between people and groups.

Yucatecan Personhood

The concept of person in Yucatán is characterized by a certain fluidity of boundaries. This fluidity has profound historical roots, not only in precolombian Maya culture (McAnany 1995; Gillespie 2001) but in the mystical Catholicism practiced by those in charge of Yucatán's so-called "Spiritual Conquest" (Lizana 1995[1633]). Rodriguez and Castillo Cocom (2010) call attention to this extension of the self into the spaces it occupies through the concept of *iknal*. "Speakers of *Maaya t'aan* or *maya Yucatecan* have a commonsense reference to this quality of 'being present' known as one's *iknal*, is at the same time the *context* and *product* of relationships... The *iknal* concept is an understanding of one's bodily space, and one's perceptive opinion and attitude" (7). Hirose's (2008) groundbreaking work on the body in the Chenes region of Campeche does not mention the *iknal* concept outright, but focuses on relationship between body and space, emphasizing the possibility of occupying several physical spaces at once, and linking a necessary equilibrium in the relationship between person and space to health:

According to the ideas of a traditional doctor from the state of Campeche regarding the body and its relationship with the universe, the spaces occupied by the human being in the cosmos—the home, the *solar*, the *milpa*, the town, and the world—constitute extensions of the body, while the spatial-temporal location of the human being in relationship with these spaces determines the condition of illness or health⁸⁶." (1)

It is this fluidity of boundaries that creates a person deeply connected to place.

In her article on tranquility in Dzitnup, Kray (2005) explores the relationship between bodily practice and the production of ethnicity⁸⁷. The morality of poverty echoes to Catholic piety dating to the colonial period and revolutionary socialist zeal that can be traced back to the ideology of the Mexican revolution and its aftermath. This is not to discount the primary argument that tranquility is enacted through bodily practice. Tranquility, humility, peace, and silence go hand in hand.

According to Kray (2005), tranquility "implies consensus, evenness, balance, and equilibrium" (340). In Dzitnup, sameness is used to describe village life, emphasized as a source of village unity. However, as Kray notes, the integration of many Maya communities into the cash economy is transforming the desires and wants of an entire generation of young Maya people. Maestro Bartolomé Alonso Caamal, who teaches in México's Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas (CDI)⁸⁸ bilingual public education program made the following observation:

Even though the indigenous community has harsher socioeconomic conditions, I think that the culture in which young people grow allows them to have emotional stability and equilibrium. Young men, though, go through a more difficult conflict. I feel that young

⁸⁶ All translations of Hirose's text are my own.

⁸⁷ The only problem with Kray's otherwise rich and complex analysis is the clear boundary she draws between Maya speakers and non-Maya speakers. She, like others, falls into the trap of assuming that speaking Maya is the same as being Maya. In chapter 1, I suggest that it may be more productive to see language and ethnicity on a graduated continuum. Her observations on the morality of tranquility in Dzitnup are similar to my own observations with people in other villages who are bilingual or predominantly Spanish speaking.

⁸⁸ Formerly Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI).

men, men at the end of their adolescence and early adulthood are living through an extremely painful conflict when a young man is born to a Maya family, in a Maya community, and he looks at the other culture—urban culture, non-indigenous culture, as a life-model with a higher value than his community life model. The young man internalizes many prejudices, believing that his condition as indigenous, as Maya, his marginal social and economical conditions, will keep him from realizing his potential. In the other society, the young man sees the model that he prefers, but he cannot fit into it. He leaves school at a young age and incorporates himself into the labor market. But then, he lacks the education to get a decent wage, and winds up working in manual labor, where the pay is low, and his dreams of joining the non-indigenous world are frustrated... the young indigenous man who goes into the city loses himself.

To Maestro Bartolomé, the young men who join the market economy run a great risk of becoming “lost” in alcohol or drugs.

Kray’s (2005) work on equilibrium in the village of Dzitnup reaches similar conclusions, but where Castillo Cocom and Rodriguez (2010) as well as Kray find a natural theoretical framework in Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*, Hirose (2008) chooses to focus on how his informants articulate these relationships, with fascinating results:

As my research progressed, more and more pieces began to appear and arrange themselves into an increasingly neat image of how Maya people conceive the human being... This conception begins with one concept: the *center* [emphasis in original] as the beginning of order and spatial and temporal equilibrium which enables communication with the creators and allows for the preservation and recovery of human health.

Castillo Cocom and Rodriguez (2010), Kray (2005), and Hirose (2008) all note that local understandings of body and soul defy classic Cartesian conceptualizations of mind and body. Hirose notes that the Maya person is a single entity that expresses five elements (earth, water, fire, wind, and light) that are projected in a sort of corporeal aura. The actual body is but a “wrapping” (*kukut*) for the spirit, made up of the *pixan* (soul) and the *ool* (breath of life). The *pixan* inhabits the entire body, the *ool* is primarily located in the blood (Redfield 1962). In his thesis, Hirose carefully and exhaustively catalogues the myriad of Yucatec names and terms for various body parts including internal organs, bones, and external characteristics as well as biological states such as pregnancy. Subsequently, he explains the ontological understanding of the body as *yaan* (right side, male, translates to “there is”) and *yuum* (left side, female, translates to “lord”) together forming a single concept: *yaan yuum*, “there is the Lord.” Hirose argues that the natural equilibrium forming the concept *yaan yuum* is in fact a state of health, in other words, that not only can the cure of illness be found in a Creator, but that the Creator itself can be found within the human body in proper equilibrium.

Hirose (2008) conceptualizes profound connections between health, body and space. I found many of the same kinds of logic expressed in my own work. Although I am not as quick to embrace his analysis equating current conceptualizations of the human body to the sacred Ceiba tree in Classical Maya cosmology, I do find the connections he draws between beliefs about the body, equilibrium, and space extremely compelling, particularly in light of my own data.

The Case of Xulab

On the evening of March 23, 2008, Ana, a 16-year-old girl from Xulab, a village belonging to the municipality of Tizimin, played basketball with her girlfriends in the village square. She went home, got a drink from the family's refrigerator, and vanished into the bathroom. An hour later, her father discovered her lifeless body hanging from the shower head. Almost exactly a month later, on April 24, Ana's 17-year-old best friend, Maria, was discovered hanging from an S hook in her bedroom.

These two deaths shook the small community to its core. Xulab, with a population of less than four hundred people, usually saw one or two deaths in a given year. The village did not even have its own cemetery. The deaths of Ana and Maria came as a devastating shock. Lidia, a community health technician, is trained by the state public health administration to administer over-the-counter medication, first aid, and address nonemergency health concerns. It was Lidia's responsibility to contact the physician in the nearest health clinic when both girls passed away. Like other residents of Xulab, Lidia did not think that the two deaths were a coincidence nor a freak occurrence. Lidia believed that these deaths came as a punishment to Xulab for its deep internal strife. "We contacted a *hmeen* [a local ritual specialist] to tell us what was going wrong in our village," she explained, "the *hmeen* told us that the town needed to be bound. We needed to perform a *loh cah tab*, a ritual 'tying' of the village. When the village is untied, we are open to the beings that live in the *kax*, the monte. The winds descend upon us in our dreams, they enter our bodies, they make us unwell. They can make us commit suicide." The *hmeen* warned Lidia and her neighbors that if the ritual was not performed, others would also die.

July 30, 2008. Village of Xulab, part of the municipality of Tizimin.

There are those who speak of the evil winds. It was the *hmeen* who said the children were going to kill themselves at the well, he said they would do it because it has been too long since the *loh cah tab* ritual was done. There is something else: the wind started banging on my niece's door. Every time the wind bangs on her door someone dies. When she saw that the *loh cah tab* ritual wasn't done, she left... the *Yuum Balam*, his whistles are usually heard before the rainy season. This year they were heard after the raining season. My sister heard him whistling in her house. Behind her house they do the *ch'ach'aak*. I think that's why the whistling was heard in her house, when the winds of the saints and the animals come down into town⁸⁹.

This prophesy triggered what psychologists who later came to Xulab called "mass hysteria." Mothers began to keep their children indoors. People became afraid to leave their homes. Village life came to a complete halt. Lidia desperately began to try to build enough consensus in the community to hold the ritual. She immediately came to a roadblock: nearly 50% of Xulab had converted to Presbyterianism. A Presbyterian temple was already being constructed. The protestant half of the village agreed that Lidia and Maria's deaths were no coincidence. But they interpreted the deaths as divine punishment for the Catholic half of the

⁸⁹ The *Yuum Balam*, whose name literally translates into English as the "Lord Jaguar," is a hairy, bipedal creature thought to live in the forest. Every village has a *Yuum Balam*, and the *Yuum Balam*'s purpose is the protection of the village against forces of nature such as winds and spirits as well as the maintenance of a balance in nature that allows for the stability of the agricultural cycle. When there is danger, the *Yuum Balam* whistles a warning to the village that can be heard as a high-pitched whistle coming from the woods. In some instances, the *Yuum Balam* also whistles warnings against moral transgressions. For instance, according to Lidia, in another village, the *Yuum Balam*'s whistle was heard by a group of young men playing cards in the town square. They interpreted it as an admonishment for gambling, and were scared enough to stop what they were doing.

community's refusal to recognize that they were practicing idolatry. The devil had entered the village, and a ritual like the *loh cah tab* would only encourage him to stay⁹⁰. Seeing that she would be unable to secure the consensus necessary to hold the ritual, and seeing the state of panic in the village, Lidia finally went to the local sanitation office in Tizimin and asked for help⁹¹.

Regardless of their spiritual beliefs, people in Xulab interpreted Ana and Maria's suicides as physical manifestations of a deeper illness. In Yucatecan communities, illness of the body and illness of the spirit are one and the same. There is a directly proportional relationship between physical and spiritual health. Furthermore, a lack of consensus and balance in community life can be a source of illness. Kray's (Kray 2005:pp. 337-355) work on tranquility in Dzitnup, a town in the same region as Xulab shows a similar desire for consensus. Kray alludes to the kind of disagreements created by religious and political differences, noting that in Dzitnup "tranquility indicates the ideal state of affairs, one in which everyone is in agreement, everything of value is evenly distributed, and respect and respectability characterize human relationships" (340).

People in Dzitnup take pride in the tranquility of their town⁹². In Xulab, people despaired from the lack of it. The responsibility of Ana and Maria's suicide was carried by everyone in the community. Suicide is not understood as a decision that is made by an agent, but as the result of a complete loss of power over oneself: the devil physically ties the rope around the *suicida's* neck. As such, anyone is vulnerable to suicide and other kinds of social illness. This belief is shared by both Protestants and Catholics.

If one's *iknal* or sense of personhood extends to physical spaces, as Rodriguez and Cocom (2010) argue, and if the key to bodily and spiritual health lies in a harmonic relationship between these physical extensions of the self and the individual "wrapping" represented by the human body, as described by Hirose (2008), then it is reasonable to say that one physical space can be occupied by the *iknalo'ob* of several people. It follows, then, that every person extends into every other person that occupies the same place. Thus, the key to the health of the entire community is that everyone is to be in harmony with each other because everyone is linked with one another in a both metaphorical and physical way.

The self is not only a part of the community, but the entire community is a system of selves connected in space and time. A lack of consensus, or *tranquility*, to borrow Kray's term, is dangerous to the physical and spiritual health of everyone in the village. Clearly, this is not say that in every village and town there are no breaks in tranquility, consensus, or harmony. In fact, squabbles over political party, religion, and other scandals are commonplace everywhere in the Yucatán. These, however, are seen as extremely negative events.

⁹⁰ It is interesting to note that most Yucatecan Protestants do not deny the existence of winds or other beings belonging to the realm of the natural. However, they view these beings as manifestations of the demonic that are encouraged by the rituals of specialists like the *hmeeno'ob*. A study of Yucatecan Protestantism is beyond the scope of this dissertation and begs future attention.

⁹¹ Chapter 5 contains a description and analysis of this medical intervention in the village of Xulab.

⁹² While conducting fieldwork in Valladolid, I had the opportunity to spend some time in Dzitnup, and my own observations echoed those of Kray. People also expressed their pride in the town's tranquility and in the way in which everyone "got along" with each other.

The Role of History: Catholicism in Colonial Yucatán

Without a doubt, the colonial encounter is the single most transformative moment in the history of Yucatán. The encounter between the Spaniards and the people we now call the Maya created a social order that has maintained remarkable continuities during the last five hundred years. This is not to minimize the transformative impact of other historical events described in chapter 1. However, the kind of profound transformation brought by the colonial encounter is unique in its enduring legacy and depth. William Hanks's (2010:439) groundbreaking book, *Converting Words: Maya in the Age of the Cross* studies just how deeply this transformation went. Moreover, it illustrates the remarkable complexity of the Franciscan enterprise of conversion, otherwise known as the "Spiritual Conquest."

Body and Space

The following pages seek to understand the interaction and interpenetration of Franciscan and Yucatec Maya worldviews in terms of the Franciscan mission of *reducción*. Hanks (1997) notes that during the first century and a half of colonial rule "appears to have had a formative impact on the development of hybrid cultural practices that have persisted to this day" (273)⁹³. The process of *reducción* was the tactic engineered by the Franciscan missionaries in their effort to transform indigenous people into Hispanized Indians. This process, as discussed by Hanks (Hanks 2003; Hanks 2005; Hanks 2010) plays out in three spheres: space (field), conduct (*habitus*), and language. In these spheres, the Franciscans, as the primary actors in the process of turning the Maya into Spanish peasants, used violence, wit, and charisma to "convince" the Maya to submit to this transformation. What the Spaniards were not counting on, however, is that the Maya would seize the tools they were given in the process—especially writing—and use them for their own gain and in their own way.

It is important to understand what the Franciscans really intended to transform the Maya into, because it betrays the fact that Yucatán would come to function as a social experiment of its times: Farriss (Farriss 1984) argues that the Spanish missionaries wanted to transform the Maya into replicas of idealized Spanish peasants: pious, docile, submissive, sober, sexually subdued, thrifty, and industrious—in other words, good servants (91). Further, Hanks (2005) tells us that the colonial pueblos were not replicas of Spanish pueblos, but ideal models of what the Spaniards at the time thought pueblos should be like. The original priests were seeking to build an orderly, symmetrical "city of God on earth," that sprang from the theorization of urban space much more than from reality.

Thus, *reducción* became the catalyst for change, though not necessarily in the way that the Spaniards had intended: instead of turning the Indians into idealized replicas of Spanish peasantry, certain realms of Maya language and belief became a part of a new, interpenetrated processes that the Maya seized in order to claim a stake in the new order. This concept, therefore, is useful in understanding the encounter between Franciscan and Yucatec belief. The colonial literature on which I base the following analysis hinge on de Landa's *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán*, de Alvarado's *Informe Contra Idolorum Cultores*, Lizana's *Devocionario a Nuestra Señora de Izamal y Conquista Espiritual de Yucatán*, and Lopez de Cogolludo's *Los Tres Siglos de la Dominación Española en Yucatán o sea Historia de Esta Provincia*. Readings

⁹³ See chapter 1 for a more in-depth discussion of *reducción*.

on the problem of idolatry and what is perceived by Franciscans as an incomplete conversion are revealing of what Maya spiritual belief may have been at this time.

The complexity of *reducción* and its pervasiveness in Maya cosmology becomes evident in Campos García's (1992) description of the use of space during the Canek rebellion of 1761. On November 15, 1761, after Sunday mass, Jacinto Uc de los Santos, led a rebellion in Cisteil protesting the abuses of Spanish rule. "In the town of Cisteil, part of the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of Sotuta, after Sunday Mass, Canek spoke to the village, which had gathered in the adjacent cemetery" (112). Taking on the name Jacinto Canek Chichan Moctezuma, he decried the harsh treatment of the Indians by the Spaniards. Among the complaints raised against the Spaniards as a justification for his uprising was the lack of attention given to the indigenous communities by the priests (113). This brief description is telling: first, that the aim of the uprising was not the overthrow of the Catholic religion—in fact, his claim to monarchy is justified by both the use of the Itzá surname "Canek" (Farriss 1984:68) and the Aztec name "Moctezuma" (Campos García 1992:113), but he is crowned by his supporters with the crown and blue overcoat of Nuestra Señora de la Concepción, the Virgin of the Conception. The Spaniards who, upon his capture, accused Canek of "rising up against God and the King," were only half right. Canek, having been raised by Franciscans and having studied moral theology and Latin with them, was using the tools of *reducción* to claim a space of legitimacy within the world of the Catholic Church. Another example is found in Sanchez de Aguilar's (Sánchez de Aguilar 1996) own report: he presents as one of his most bitter examples of the failure of Yucatán's conversion the case of one Alfonso Chable and one Francisco Canul, who

Made themselves known among the Indians, one as Pope and one as Bishop, and deceiving the ignorant they made the poor Christians honor their doctrines, celebrating Mass at midnight with the ornaments consecrated to God Optimum Maximus, profaning our chalices, abusing the sacred oil and chrism, baptizing children, hearing confession, administering communion, adoring idols and venerating them with incense, ordaining priests to serve the idols, anointing their hands with the holy oil and sainted chrism, using Miter and crosier, and preaching great heresies. (154)⁹⁴

Rather than apostasy, Chable and Canul's actions point to interpenetrative religious beliefs among the Maya of Yucatán. Chable and Canul were not rejecting Catholicism, but displaying a different understanding and new innovation of it.

The Spanish colonial mission was based on the idea of *reducción*, which in principle can be understood as transformation of the physical space inhabited by the Maya subjects. Key to *reducción* is the physical relocation of entire villages into new *pueblos*. I have outlined above the way in which in contemporary Yucatán space is seen as an extension of the self, and harmony with the spaces inhabited by the person is important to physical health and well being. We know from archaeological evidence that prior to the conquest the Ancient Maya lived in urban centers

⁹⁴ se dieron a conocer entre los indios, uno como Papa y otro como Obispo, y engañando a los ignorantes hicieron que los honraran los pobres cristianos de su doctrina, celebrando a media noche la Misa, con ornamentos consagrados a Dios Optimo y Máximo, profanando nuestros calices, abusando del santo oleo y crisma, bautizando niños, oyendo confesiones, administrando la Comunión, adorando los ídolos que se veneraban en el altar con incienso, ordenando sacerdotes para servir a los ídolos, ungiéndoles las manos con oleo y crisma santo, usando mitra y báculo, mandando colectas y ofrendas, profiriendo grandes herejías (154).

and were a highly stratified and complex society with a long and equally complex history⁹⁵. There is a vast archaeological literature devoted to Ancient Maya uses of space (Artigas 1993; Sharer 1994; Houston 1996; Gillespie 2000; McAnany 1998, 1999; Joyce 2000; Ciudad Ruiz et al. 2002; Weiss-Krejci 2002), but whether current conceptions of person and space as extensions of each other existed in the 16th century or not is more difficult to determine.

In his dissertation, Hirose (2008) suggests that current understandings of the body can be traced back to classic and post-classic Ancient Maya civilization, and links current explanations regarding health, sickness, and the body to archaeological and epigraphic evidence. For instance, he notes that the contemporary concept of *kinam*, a type of hot energy that exists in human beings and which is found in greater amounts in people with strong personalities, can be traced back to the Ancient Maya *kinal* or *keinam*, a type of “heat” linked to personality⁹⁶.

I am cautious about ascribing contemporary interpretations to archaeological analysis. However, Hirose’s detailed descriptions of contemporary Yucatec bodily practice, when read alongside other ethnographies of Yucatecan bodily practice such as Kray’s (2005), and when compared to my own ethnographic data, ring true. If we accept that the present conception of the body is most likely the product of five hundred years of cultural contact, then it is important to understand to the best of our knowledge where the origins of these beliefs may lie, and what aspects of mendicant and Spanish spirituality would have found resonance with existing practices.

How did the theology, culture, and ideology of the Franciscans and their nemeses, the reviled Spaniards, mesh with those of the people inhabiting the land called Mayab? In *Converting Words: Maya in the Age of the Cross*, Hanks (2010) makes a compelling argument that I believe carries profound practical and cultural consequences.

The circulation of discourse over that boundary [between Indio and Español] was robust and consequential. Over time, across the main genres of colonial discourse, the doctrinal roots of *Maya reducido*, and the indexical grounding of many erstwhile native expressions in Catholic doctrine, would contribute to a process of semantic and grammatical reanalysis of Maya... [the language] was neither European nor Maya in any simple sense but a language produced of the joining of two languages already turned toward one another. (16)

Who were these Franciscans? What values and ideas did they bring with them to Yucatán? What was their understanding of the body, the person, and the self?

⁹⁵ See Farriss (Farriss 1984) for a detailed history of Yucatán. There is an enormous body of literature in Spanish regarding late Postclassic and early colonial history in Yucatán. See O’Gorman (O’Gorman 1958), Zavala (Zavala 1968), Bracamonte y Sosa and (Bracamonte y Sosa and Solís Robleda 1996:377), and Solís Robleda (Solís Robleda, Gabriela and Peniche, Paola 1996:231). Older histories of Yucatán were written shortly after the conquest and are required reading for any serious scholar of Yucatecan history. These are brought together in Lopez de Cogolludo’s *Historia de Yucatán* (López Cogolludo 1957). Another important historical source to consider is Diaz del Castillo’s *Historia Verdadera de la Conquista de la Nueva España* (Diaz del Castillo 1632).

⁹⁶ Unfortunately, in making this claim Hirose (2008) cites an unpublished Master’s thesis by M. I. Nájera Coronado titled “El umbral hacia la vida: el nacimiento entre los Mayas contemporáneos.” Therefore, I was unable to follow up on this claim or find out what archaeological evidence was used by Nájera Coronado to make this claim.

Lizana's *Devocionario a Nuestra Señora de Izamal y Conquista Espiritual de Yucatán*, a hagiography of the first missionaries in Yucatán, is illustrative of how the early Franciscans understood themselves and the world around them (Lizana 1995[1633]). For example, a reading of Lizana's narration of the death of de Landa exemplifies the values extolled by the priests, values that included mindfulness, strength, and bodily control:

After such exercises and having been a bishop for six years and a priest and apostle of Yucatán for thirty-one, and having been in the Religion⁹⁷ for thirty-eight, he found himself one day feeling a cold following a sermon, and he knew the hour had come. And that sermon was about the passion and death of the Creator. He contracted a fever, which fooled the Nurse of San Francisco... who bled him [to the point that] the holy man knew his own death. And, as his entire had merely been preparation for this hour of death, there wasn't much to do except get some papers in order and make some changes to his existing will. (200)⁹⁸

The narrative continues for several pages. We learn that Landa orchestrates his death to the last detail; he has one of his subordinates to make sure a cross and candle were placed in his hands as he makes the journey, another to stand by him and whisper to him, "my lord, see how you are dying⁹⁹" (201), and begs to have his habit, which had been removed while he was being treated, restored, saying "the enemies are coming near"¹⁰⁰ (Cogolludo 1971). Landa's death, as are the lives and deaths of all the missionaries lauded by Lizana, is an ecstatic experience of the sacred.

Whether de Landa's actual death was anything like what Lizana describes is ultimately irrelevant to the question of what Lizana's narrative reveals about Franciscan values and disposition. Asad's (1993) analysis of medieval Christianity connects the body and bodily practice to religion and religious practice in mendicant Christian orders, mendicant orders like the Franciscans who were responsible for the spread of Catholicism in Yucatán. In Asad's theory of ritual, the body occupies a central role precisely because he can avoid the Cartesian dualism of mind and "the objects of the mind's perception" (76). As Asad (1993) notes, mendicant orders like the Franciscans and the Dominicans carried the monastic regime of penance to a broader population, developing from their very beginnings the skills of preaching and oratory with the aim of winning over heretics, heathens, and other non believers. By 1547, the "official" conquest date of Yucatán, the Franciscan order had been perfecting these skills for nearly three hundred fifty years. The Franciscans learned to speak the Maya language, translated the Bible, and armed with guns, dogs, and charisma, set out to carry out the "spiritual conquest" of Yucatán¹⁰¹.

⁹⁷ That is, in the Franciscan Order.

⁹⁸ Después de tales ejercicios y (de) habuer(se) ocupado seis años de tiempo de Obispo, y treinta y uno de ministro de Yuctán y apóstol della y treinta y ocho de Religión, se halló un día como resfriado, de achaque de un sermon que predicó, y conoció ser ya llegada la hora. Y el sermon fue de passion y muerte del Criador. Acudióle una calentura y, engañado el enfermero de San Francisco... sangróle. Y, al punto, quell santo varón conoció su muerte. Y, como toda su vida no hauía sido preparación para aquella hora de muerte, no tuuo mucho hazer más que alistar algunos papeles y hazer, sobre el testamento que hecho tenía, un condicilo. (200)

⁹⁹ "señor, mirad que os morís"

¹⁰⁰ los enemigos ya se acercan"

¹⁰¹ More intriguing is how this piety might have been interpreted by the Postclassic Maya who inhabited the Yucatán peninsula at the time of the conquest. Archaeological evidence (Sharer, 1994) shows that bloodletting and other ritualistic practices of self-induced pain existed in post-classic civilization. The question of pain, physical and psychic, begs to be answered, and holds profound meaning if we understand suicide as an expression of unbearable pain.

Adoring Our Wounds

Body is itself a space occupied by the self, to paraphrase Hirose (2008), a “wrapping.” Adoring our wounds therefore is not unlike adoring a saint on an altar because the altar and its contents also have their own *iknal*, which flows into the spaces occupied by every person it comes into contact with. The body is occupied by the sacred through our connection with sacred space both constructed and feral. The human body as such is a physical place. When Claudina says, “We must adore our wounds,” she uses her body as a referent for a multitude of things: her person, her *ool*, her *pixan*, her *iknal*. Above all, the image of the “wound” is a referent to memory. Our self stretches out into space because of the memories these places (or the people who occupy these spaces) hold of us. Our *iknal* lingers in space and time through memory. In Rodriguez and Cocom’s (2010) words, “Our presence is forged within a proximity to our memories. The bond of one’s sensibility to selfhood and to those memories gauges a ratio of presence—a moving ratio of presence coalescing through the recent past and near future. This bond is a spatial presence understood as one’s *iknal*” (9). This bond gives meaning to place, and turns physical space into extensions of the self.

Pain is a difficult concept to explain. All human beings feel it. It can be physical or emotional. It can drive anyone into despair. At the same time, pain is understood in many traditions as conduit to the sacred. Yucatán’s history contains evidence of these traditions in both its Ancient Maya and colonial Catholic roots. Without exception, every single person I met who had survived a suicide attempt spoke about their experience of pain, but Claudina spoke of pain both as a driving force in her suicide attempt but also as opportunity towards a fuller sense of self. To echo her words, “*Our wounds make us who we are.*”

What can this modality of personhood elucidate about suicide in Yucatán? I am reminded of Roberto, a nine-year-old boy who was taken to HPY following a suicide attempt¹⁰². In his intake interview, Dr. Tut, the psychiatrist working in the emergency room, was able to get the frightened child to talk about his feelings. In the course of the conversation, she asked him this:

Mercy: Do you prefer being sad or being happy, Roberto?

Roberto: Being sad. When I’m sad I remember Sari.

Sari was a pet dog of Roberto’s who had been run over by a car and killed two years prior. Roberto’s grandmother later on remarked that it was as if the dog’s death “happened yesterday.” Roberto’s remembrance of his dog was extremely important to him. The relationship he had with the dog prior to its death was also part of his *iknal*, his sense of self. When his beloved pet was ripped away from him, this created a rift inside him so profound that he dwells in the sadness of his loss. I am decidedly *not* saying that Sari’s death was the reason the Roberto attempted suicide. What I am saying is that Roberto identified profound sadness with a upset of harmony within himself, a traumatic loss created by the death of his beloved pet, in many ways a traumatic loss of a part of himself. What is more, Roberto found that a remembrance of pain, in this case psychic, not physical, pain, brought him closer to the part of himself he had lost. Like Claudina, Roberto expressed a need for that pain to achieve a sense of completeness.

There is a connection between pain and suicide. Suicide is explained by survivors of attempts as a desire to escape unbearable pain. By the same token, within local logic there is also a connection between pain and experiencing the sacred. As such, there is a lot to be gained from

¹⁰² Roberto’s case will be further discussed in chapter 5.

bearing with pain. Moreover, pain extends well beyond the body to the physical places inhabited by our *iknal*, where it is shared by others whose selves overlap with ours. The pain of one can become the pain of others. It is possible for one person to be affected by the illness and pain of another. If left unchecked, it is possible for an entire community to become ill. In Lidia's account of the suicides in Xulab, the individual motivations of Ana and Maria were secondary to the effect of their deaths on the community and causal relationship she perceived between community illness writ strife and the suicides.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have tried to address the complex and nuanced construction of the person in Yucatán. I have argued for an understanding of Yucatecan personhood that looks beyond classical Cartesian understandings of the self or Maussian notions of society and self toward a self that is unbounded and deeply connected to place, space, and others. I have showed how this understanding of the self is well documented in other studies of Yucatán, and traced its historical roots not only to Ancient Maya civilization, but to the colonial encounter. Finally, I have argued that understanding this unique sense of self is indispensable to understanding suicide as a social phenomenon in Yucatán.

As I have shown throughout this dissertation, Yucatán is a place very much involved in all the trappings of the contemporary. Suicide has been called a “crisis of public health” by the media, and has been the focus of a great deal of attention. As such, efforts are being made by the state and grassroots organizations to address the issue of suicide and attempt to prevent it. These organizations, however, have a solid foundation in American and western European constructions of mental health. Many mental health professionals, particularly psychologists, are trained to diagnose and treat mental illness as if mental illness were expressed in a single, universal way¹⁰³. They assume that their clients are individuals guided by their own moods and motivations, and use treatment techniques that are not adapted in any way to local conditions. Psychiatrists, operating from a biomedical perspective that understands suicide as an expression of a physical illness, tend to focus treatment on administering medication and focus very little on anything other than their patients' pathology. The following chapter explores the nature of suicide prevention in Yucatán, focusing on the psychological intervention following the two suicides in Xulab and the Programa Integral de Atención al Suicidio (PIAS), the suicide prevention program of Hospital Psiquiátrico Yucatán (HPY).

¹⁰³ As early as 1977, Kleinman (Kleinman 1977) was writing about the vast differences between the somatization of depression in China versus the United States. In his article, “Depression, Somatization, and the New Cross-Cultural Psychiatry,” Kleinman concludes that although “disease” can be understood as a universal bodily affliction, “illness” is expressed in culturally relevant ways that vary greatly from place to place.

Chapter 5: “Recovery” Models in Mayaland

General objective: To offer in an interdisciplinary manner institutional resources and strategies to detect, attend to, and psychiatrically, psychologically, and socially rehabilitate people with suicide risk.

“Programa Integral de Atención al Suicidio (PIAS)
Hospital Psiquiátrico Yucatán

Introduction

This chapter addresses the ways in which “recovery” is approached by public health apparatus in Yucatán, how its targeted population responds to these recovery models, and the ways in which biomedicine and local cultural logic meet. Particularly, this chapter discusses the success of 12-step treatment models in Mexico and Yucatán in particular, arguing that key in this success is a blurring of boundaries between sacred and profane already prevalent in Yucatecan culture. In the previous chapter I have explored the ways in which existing notions of self contribute to an understanding of suicide that does not fall within classical psychoanalytic or psychiatric discourse. This chapter presents these discourses and how they take shape in the Yucatecan context; subsequently, I explore the delivery of mental health services to Yucatecan people considered to be at risk for suicide and describe the ways in which suicide prevention programs operate and health care is delivered. In particular, I focus on how different approaches have produced varying results with greater or lesser success.

In chapter 2, I showed how suicide as a social artifact is used by the media to construct an image of *suicidas* as indigenous, males, and alcoholics. In chapter 3, I presented the way in which the state apparatus responds to suicide as crime in the sense that suicide challenges order. The state uses bureaucratic language to create a sense of order where none exists, effectively creating a representation of itself that does not match actual practice. In this chapter, I turn once again towards a social institution, in this case, the Mexican health care delivery system. I show how suicide is used in the deployment of mental health care and in the production of subjects who see themselves as “mentally ill.” However, rather than simply arguing that new subjects are “produced” through the experience of hospitalization, I argue that the “new” subjectivity represented by biomedical approaches to mental health are assimilated and “made to fit” existing cultural logic rather than replacing, displacing, or repressing locally relevant worldviews explored in chapter 4.

The chapter is structured as follows: First, I describe the complex institutional and bureaucratic apparatus that is Mexico’s public health delivery system. Then, I present two different case studies of suicide prevention operated by the Dirección de Salubridad, the state Health and Wellness office which is in charge of Yucatán’s public health programs, including its mental health and suicide programs. One of these cases involves the intervention by psychologists in a village setting following the suicides of two teenage girls within a month of each other, the other is a suicide prevention program operating out of the regional psychiatric hospital, Hospital Psiquiátrico Yucatán. Although the methodology employed by the mental health practitioners in both examples bears some similarities, there are some striking differences that, upon closer inspection, reveal the ways in which psychiatry is adapted by interlocutors to their own existing logics.

The Mexican Public Health System

What are the models carried into the field by locally trained psychologists and social workers? Although Mexican psychology has early roots in European psychology, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis, as of the mid-twentieth century American psychiatric and psychological models have dominated Mexican psychological and psychiatric practice (Galindo 2004). The primary tool for diagnosis is the *Diagnosics and Statistics Manual IV (DSM-IV)* (2000) of the American Psychiatric Association. An important distinction, however, between American and Mexican treatment of mental illness is the fact that unlike the United States, Mexico provides socialized medicine to its population.

Mexico's medical bureaucracy is an extremely complex monster that would necessitate an entire dissertation's worth of writing to completely explain. However, every person I worked with in the field, whether in Merida, Valladolid, or outlying villages, used the public health system for nearly all their medical needs. Moreover, both public mental health programs described in this dissertation were created within the confines of this system and reached their targeted populations through this bureaucracy. For these reasons, it is important for the reader to have some idea of how public medicine operates in Mexico. I will do my best to disentangle some of this information in the following paragraphs.

The Mexican health care system operates as follows: private employers can usually purchase affordable insurance for their employees from the Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social (IMSS). State government agencies provide coverage for their employees through Instituto del Seguro Social para los Trabajadores del Estado de Yucatán (ISSTEY). Mexicans who belong to the military and their families use the services of the military health care system, which operates separately from the other three entities. Finally, local employees of federal government entities are provided coverage through the Instituto del Seguro Social para los Trabajadores del Estado (ISSTE). Students, the self-employed, *campesinos* practicing subsistence farming and anyone else who is not covered by IMSS, ISSTEY, or ISSTE can sign up for *Seguro Popular*, a free or extremely low-cost insurance option that allows people not enrolled in the other plans to use IMSS operated hospitals and clinics. IMSS and ISSTE run and operate separate hospitals, but IMSS's hospitals and clinics have the most presence in terms of infrastructure; as such, ISSTEY and *Seguro Popular* members use IMSS hospitals.

Seguro Popular operates the enormous network of free clinics in small towns and villages¹⁰⁴. However, in conjunction with these health services, the *Departamento de Salubridad* or Health and Wellness Department, a state agency, also provides a variety of health-related services, usually geared towards education and public health promotion. The Health and Wellness Department is the entity in charge of disseminating information in schools about safe sex and other potentially controversial subjects such as teenage pregnancy or child abuse. In Valladolid, for example, one person is in charge of directing the mental health, substance abuse, and domestic violence programs.

¹⁰⁴ All medical school graduates in Mexico must conduct a year of social service in Mexico's public health system. Usually, these young doctors are sent out to small towns and remote villages where they will live for a year, providing free medical services to community members. Usually, these doctors will live in the health clinic and as such are available to attend medical emergencies at any time.

Although the Health and Wellness Department does not belong to any of the other health providers, it alone is in charge of operating the only psychiatric facility in the peninsula, Hospital Psiquiátrico Yucatán. Patients who enter the hospital are funneled to it from every other health care system in Yucatán and other nearby states such as Campeche, Quintana Roo, Chiapas, and Tabasco. Usually, patients are only referred to HPY if they are showing symptoms so severe that 1) they are posing a danger to themselves or others, 2) their families are unable to care for them and they are unable to care for themselves, 3) they have received outpatient psychiatric treatment and have not responded, or 4) they have had repeated and increasingly lethal suicide attempts. In the case of suicide and the pathology most commonly ascribed to suicidal ideation, depression, patients who arrive at HPY have usually been in treatment for some time.

The chronology of psychiatric treatment in patients that end up at HPY is relatively predictable. In American fashion, mental illness is usually diagnosed by a physician. For example, a young woman in a village might be taken to visit the local clinic by her parents or husband, who most likely would have already taken her to see a traditional medical practitioner such as a *yerbatero*, a *huesero*, or a *hmeen*. The village doctor may or may not refer the young woman to a psychiatrist. If a referral is made, the young woman will most likely have to travel to the nearest largest town, which depending on where they live and what kind of insurance coverage they have, might be Tizimin, Valladolid, Oxkutzcab, or Merida. The psychiatrist will make a diagnosis and usually prescribe psychiatric medication. Fluoxetine, more commonly known as Prozac, is the most prescribed antidepressant and can be purchased anywhere in Mexico without a prescription. Then, the psychiatrist may or may not make a referral to a psychologist and will usually see the patient once a month. Treatment will usually end at that point unless the patient's symptoms worsen. If the patient does get a referral for talk therapy *and* there is a psychologist available close to home *and* there is a willingness by the patient to visit this psychologist on a regular basis, talk therapy will be usually be the extent of treatment.

My own ethnographic field work was possible thanks to the cooperation and interest of people within this system who were willing to give let me in. I gained access to Valladolid's Health and Wellness department thanks to the Universidad de Oriente, which provided me with letters of introduction to its director. Once I established rapport with Cecilia, the nurse who directs the mental health, substance abuse, and domestic violence programs, she made sure to include me in their local programs. When the case of Xulab was brought to her attention a few weeks after I departed Valladolid for Merida, she made sure to contact me. In Merida, I was introduced to Dr. Gaspar Baquedano Lopez by Juan Castillo Cocom in 2006. Subsequently, we established a dialogue. In 2008, Dr. Baquedano then opened the doors to HPY to me and included me in the PIAS program.

Intervention: Xulab Revisited

In July 2008, just as I was beginning research at HPY, I received a telephone call from Cecilia, a nurse working for the Yucatán public health office in the town of Valladolid. She asked me to visit Xulab, a small rural community outside the nearby town of Tizimin. She explained that the village had had two suicides in the space of two months and that they were dealing with some mass hysteria. "I've already sent a team of psychologists," she explained, "now I need an anthropologist." Cecilia put me in touch with members of the team and the next morning I was on the first bus back to Valladolid. The following data is based on interviews

conducted with some of the psychologists who intervened in Xulab as well as with Lidia, Xulab's community health technician. Although I did not conduct ethnographic fieldwork in Xulab beyond this single visit in July, the wealth of data in the interviews as well as my own fieldwork with the mental health unit of the Valladolid Health and Wellness Office suggests that the kind of intervention that took place in Xulab was typical. I present this example because it was particularly rich.

As described above, the Department of Health and Wellness provides mental health services for the Tizimin and Valladolid regions. Following Lidia's report of general panic in Xulab, it dispatched a team of psychologists to assess the situation in the village. When they arrived, the team focused on convincing the community that the spiritual unrest detected by the *hmeen* was nothing more than superstition. The young, enthusiastic psychologists focused on applying their recently acquired group therapy techniques. Lidia noted that while the psychologists had developed good rapport with the community children, their approach had had little effect on the community's overall well-being. The effort didn't just prove ineffective: it actually made things worse. "All they wanted to do was talk about these two deaths," Lidia explained, "it was very upsetting. And they tried to tell us that the problem wasn't because of what the *hmeen* said. They told us the *hmeen* was a charlatan."

One of the young psychologists to go to Xulab, Michelle, noticed that talking about the event, rather than functioning as catharsis, as they had expected, had increased the levels of anxiety in the community. It wasn't until they changed their focus from trying to hold group therapy sessions to encouraging families to let their children out of the house by organizing games that they began to see some success in getting members of the community to engage with them. "They don't want to talk about what happened," she said to me, "they think it's bad luck."

Silence holds profound and varied meaning in contemporary Yucatán. It is a legacy of colonialism because the imposition of Spanish language and culture effectively silenced monolingual Maya speakers. It is also a tool of resistance. Silence means the protection of knowledge and hence the preservation of power. Moreover, silence is a value: children are taught to keep silent in the conversations of adults as a sign of respect. Voicing a misfortune is seen as attracting it: for example, to talk about a hurricane, one of the most feared and destructive forces of nature, is to invite it. When a *hmeen*, a shaman, conducts a ritual, he calls out the names of Lords to invoke them. At any other time, to speak their names is forbidden. Tranquility, the ideal state of existence, is a necessarily silent state. In this tradition of silence, the sudden arrival of perfect Spanish-speaking strangers gathering the community together and asking its members to talk about the greatest tragedy in recent memory was seen as disrespectful at best and dangerous at worst. Moreover, as described in Chapter 4, the connection between space and self is profound, and the kind of unrest detected by the *hmeen* and manifested by palpable symptoms such as whistling and unusual animal behavior simply made sense to people in Xulab.

The psychologists also made some mistaken assumptions about local culture that were reflected in their group therapy methods. For example, in an attempt to make the group sessions age-appropriate, the psychologists separated community members into an adult group and a children's group. Both groups were mixed gender groups including both male and female participants. In separating the community into children and adults but not men and women, they

missed two crucial markers of identity. First, unmarried women are considered sexually innocent and are therefore seen as children, and so they joined the children's group. Secondly, the sessions held included men and women in a society that is largely homosocial. That is, men and women spend most of their time and establish friendship bonds with members of their own gender. To be thrust together and expected to participate in mixed gender group therapy sessions violated local conventions of gender relations.

Eventually, the psychologists were able to break through the fear felt by community members and get them to grudgingly agree to come outside. After this initial engagement, which took place over a long weekend, families began to relax. The shaman had prophesized that a death would happen thirty days after the death of Maria. The date came and went and no one died. Weeks passed and no one else died. By the time I made it to Xulab, life in the village resembled normality. And though Lidia fretted that they still had not gotten enough money together to hold the *loh cah tab* ritual, she admitted that people were not as frightened as they had been before. However, she did not think that the psychological intervention really did anything particularly useful to resolve what she maintains was the real cause of Xulab's misfortune: the profound mistrust and division within the community. "We can't agree on anything. We can't make any decisions. We aren't united. None of that has changed. As long as that doesn't change, we will remain unhealthy." Ana and Maria's deaths did not have to be explained, processed, or understood. For Lidia her neighbors (regardless of their spiritual beliefs), the vulnerability of the community was rooted in its internal strife. This perception that community health and individual health are intertwined has been noted by other anthropologists in Latin America (Foster 1987; Ennis-McMillan 2001; Hinojosa 2002) and, as explored in Chapter 4, also falls within the local logic of personhood and its extension into place and space.

In Sickness and in Health

Anthropological study of healing traditions among the "Maya" in Chiapas, Guatemala, and Yucatán has received close attention since the days of Robert Redfield (Redfield 1944; Redfield and Villa Rojas 1962; Paul 1976; Shuman 1980; Furbee and Benfer 1983; Houston 1996; Simon C. Comerford 1996; Ankli et al. 1999a; Ankli et al. 1999b; Collier et al. 2000; Hinojosa 2002; Nigh 2002; Ross-Ibarra and Molina-Cruz 2002; Amiguet et al. 2005; Bourbonnais-Spear et al. 2005; Kray 2005). Most of this work, however, has focused on the healers themselves. In this chapter, I am more interested in how the idea of illness is understood by common people, using traditional medicine merely as a point of departure. Traditional medicine, practiced in Yucatán by *hmeeno'ob* (shamans), *yerbateros* (herbalists), and *hueseros* (bonesetters), reflects an understanding of illness as a simultaneously physical and spiritual phenomenon. For example, in Cuncunul, where my friend Bety lives and where I visited often¹⁰⁵, I was able to observe Bety's grandmother, a bonesetter, at work. My observations paralleled those of Benjamin Paul (Paul 1976): Mamá Claudia, Bety's grandmother, was a sacred specialist as well as a medical practitioner. Bonesetting, like shamanism, is understood as a call. Thus, although some of the practical knowledge in traditional medical practice can be taught, both my own research and the ethnographic canon show that a great deal of this specialized knowledge is considered unteachable (Hinojosa 2002). With the exception of the *gente bien*, most Yucatecans visit traditional as well as biomedical healers regardless of whether or not they speak Mayan or

¹⁰⁵ See Chapter 2.

follow an agricultural lifestyle (see chapter 1 for an in-depth discussion of "Yucatecan" vs. "Mayan" identity).

Considering the fact that traditional healers have been practicing medicine in Yucatán since time immemorial (Farriss 1984; Sharer 1994), consulting a traditional healer as well as a biomedical physician is fairly commonplace. Traditional healers are understood to have abilities to cure both physical and spiritual ailments whereas physicians operate solely within the physical realm. There is a lot of room for the incorporation of local beliefs into psychiatric practice. A working knowledge of local culture and cosmology could allow mental health professionals to interpret the discourse of patient fantasies and understandings of self and personhood in ways that allow for the formulation of alternative strategies in the treatment of mental illness and suicide prevention with Yucatecan patients. For example, many of my one-on-one and group interviews have repeatedly come back to the idea of the demonic in suicide narratives. I am not merely referring to the idea of suicide as sin, in fact I have rarely heard it referred to as a sin. Nor I am merely referring to suicide as a temptation of the devil, though I have heard informants talk about suicide as temptation. Rather, my sense of these apparently malevolent spirits is that they are far more complex in nature than they appear on first sight. Often, the descriptions of these beings is punctuated by references to nature –specific insects, for instance, or the presence of water and cenotes, or winds entering and tormenting ordinary people.

Hospital Psiquiátrico Yucatán: PIAS

Hospital Psiquiátrico Yucatán (HPY) is located almost 100 miles and a world away from Xulab. It is an inpatient psychiatric facility that accommodates 160 beds. Its operation follows a biomedical approach: patients are treated with a combination of psychiatric drugs and individual and group counseling. However, within the facility, PIAS, a suicide prevention program, has taken a holistic approach to treatment that focuses on listening to what participants have to say. Its founder, psychiatrist Gaspar Baquedano Lopez, completed a Master's Degree in anthropology. Having studied suicide for over 25 years, he advocates for a prevention approach that focuses on improving patients' quality of life and involving family, friends, and neighbors in the effort. "We never tell people not to kill themselves," he explains, "we ask them why they want to die. Most of them have never been asked that question."

The reason PIAS has higher success rates than therapy and pharmaceuticals alone lies in the degree of control given to group members. Because of this, the group has implemented patterns from another successful self-help import: the 12-step recovery model.

PIAS combines a European psychotherapeutic approach with locally produced elements. The relationships that form between members of the fellowship come to parallel the traditional fictive kin relationship of *compadrazgo*. A *padrino*, or godparent, is fictitious kin established through a dyadic contract with a higher power. The *padrino* is a parent figure who takes on a spiritual responsibility to guide, discipline, and teach the *ahijado* or godchild. In PIAS, Dr. Baquedano and his volunteers take on the responsibility to guide, discipline and teach newcomers, who resemble *ahijados*. In turn, particularly successful group members take on the responsibility of guiding and supporting newcomers, creating what the group has come to call a "community of hope", or "grupo de la esperanza." When new PIAS members attend their first session, they are made to stand in front of a crowd of between forty to sixty strangers and share their story. Then, they are given advice, often berated or openly criticized by other PIAS members. In contrast to American-style group therapy sessions, cross-talk, the commenting by group members on

another member's sharing, and advice-giving are commonplace. Although participation is officially optional, patients are often not informed of this. In a place where cultural values stress silence, withholding, and privacy, the experience of a first PIAS meeting can be so jarring that first timers sometimes don't return. Those who stay, however, become comfortable public speakers, the first of several transformations in subjects' dispositions. Members become students, teachers, and patients sharing a common disease and begin to practice discipline in speaking, attending meetings, and taking their medication. New subjects are produced in the process.

The trope of suicide as a symptom of disease effectively *making* the user attempt suicide represents the medicalization of an existing logic of exteriorization of suicide. Instead of it being the devil that ties the knot, the *enfermedad* takes on this role. Although cultural narratives condemning suicide exist, my research on mortuary rituals following suicides suggests that the often mentioned "punishments" for suicide, such as the denial of a wake to the person who commits suicide, interment outside the cemetery, of the mutilation of the corpse, are not commonly employed. Instead, people who successfully commit suicide receive similar treatment as those who don't. The *suicida* is understood as a victim, sometimes of a physical *enfermedad* in city-dwelling families, sometimes of a demonic intervention in rural families, very often of both. The concept of suicide as manifestation of a disease not unlike addiction fits well within the cultural narrative and enhances it as users readily make use of the state psychiatric apparatus to gain access to cheap, potentially addictive medications such as Tafil, the Mexican brand name of Xanax. Thus, although the trope of suicide as a non-agentive action is reiterated in the biomedical narrative of mental illness, the shift in focus from suicide as an illness of the spirit -- thus treatable with spiritual means such as exorcism, prayer, and indigenous medicine-- to an illness of the body --thus treatable with psychotropic medications-- represents a subtle change in the subjects' relationship to their own bodies and the way in which the social subject is constructed.

The existence of 12-step recovery programs like Alcoholics Anonymous has also created a beneficial environment for the flourishing of the PIAS program. First, the cornerstone of Alcoholics Anonymous is the iteration of alcoholism as a physical disease. However, the treatment of this disease, i.e. the twelve steps themselves, is spiritual. As such, the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous posit a spiritual cure to a physical affliction, blurring the boundaries of body and spirit in a way that is not only compatible with local cultural logic, but sets the stage for a similar view of other forms of *enfermedad*, particularly the illness at the root of suicide, which is understood as simulatenously spiritual and physical.

The medicalization of suicide as mental illness is countered, however, by the content of PIAS group sessions, where the banality of human suffering is revealed through the stories shared by group members, each equally poignant yet similar to the next: subjects who attempt suicide and wind up in PIAS are predominantly women, predominantly poor, and predominantly abused emotionally, physically, and sexually. Interestingly enough, statistical data compiled by INEGI, Mexico's bureau of the census, reveals that most people in Yucatán who successfully commit suicide are men. Rather than simply accepting the truism that women attempt suicide more frequently and readily than men, and men succeed in committing suicide more frequently than women, one needs to consider how group members find themselves in this program to begin with. Like in many other parts of Latin America, women in Yucatán are seen as unstable,

emotional, and prone to suffer from *nervios* (II 1982; Hill and Cottrell 1986; Carey 1993; Rebhun 1993; Woodrick 1995; Byron J. Good 1997) . As such, they are more likely to be compelled by their families to seek medical attention for emotional disorders and to be committed to HPY. Predictably, many of the female patients at HPY had had fewer and less lethal attempts¹⁰⁶ than their male counterparts. In general, males committed to HPY had become unable to function outside the institution: their suicide attempts were highly lethal, and usually were battling severe alcoholism or drug addictions and were unemployable. It was not until their illness had progressed to the point that they were unable to fulfil the male role of provider and producer (Brandes 1988, 2002; Bacigalupo 2004; Goldstein 2004) that they found themselves forced to seek treatment.

PIAS was reinitiated in the fall of 2007 after more than ten years on hiatus by Dr. Gaspar Baquedano Lopez. As its information packet states

[PIAS' stated goal] is to offer through an interdisciplinary approach the institutional resources and strategies in order to detect and psychiatrically, psychologically, and socially treat people with suicidal risk and their families. In this way we seek a rapid biological, psychological, and social recovery of the user”.

In other words, Dr. Baquedano's vision for PIAS was a program that sought a holistic psychiatric treatment for people who had attempted suicide and their families. Typically, a patient is admitted for suicide attempt at the psychiatric hospital when the attempt is particularly lethal or is the latest in a series of multiple attempts. Patients are referred from public hospitals in the region once their injuries have been stabilized and will generally stay anywhere from three to ten days, although in my time there I saw several patients stay for longer than a month. During their stay, patients are introduced to the PIAS program, where they attend small, in-patient group therapy sessions twice a week and a weekly group meeting. Once the patients are released, they are invited to continue attending the weekly meeting with their families. In six months, nearly all of these patients returned to at least a few sessions.

Patients also continue using the psychiatric hospital's other services, usually seeing a non-PIAS affiliated psychiatrist as well as attending weekly PIAS meetings. Because the hospital is the only psychiatric hospital in the region, it serves people of all walks of life, though patients are predominantly indigenous, poor, and female. Ironically, although a majority of PIAS participants are women, the group is dominated by the male members, who tend to speak and direct meetings more than the female members. This ease of leadership on the part of men can be related to expectations of male dominance of public space as well as male group members' familiarity and participation in 12-step recovery groups, which function in Mexico as spaces for the creation and reiteration of masculinity (Brandes 2002).

¹⁰⁶ “High” vs. “low” lethality suicide attempts refers to how close the person attempting suicide came to success. In the case of suicide attempts in Yucatan, hanging attempts are considered more lethal than deliberately overdosing on prescription medication.

A stay at HPY carries with it a heavy stigma, and usually the men who do find themselves as patients and as PIAS group members are unable to function in society at large due to chronic addiction or repeated, highly lethal suicide attempts such as hanging. As such, many of the men in the PIAS program also have experience with 12 step recovery programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Neurotics Anonymous, and this experience has carried into the organization of the PIAS group itself, affecting the ways in which PIAS members related to other members, hospital staff, volunteers, and themselves.

There are many in which the PIAS approach is innovative and adapted to local conditions. The most significant way in which PIAS departs from traditional psychoanalytic approaches is by incorporating a holistic approach that includes family members, friends, and neighbors in patient treatment. Moreover, PIAS group therapy meetings have an important function in community building that allows patients to create a new social network. Thanks to these strategies PIAS has seen great success in its long-term treatment outcomes. There is also common ground between some aspects of biomedical psychiatry and local culture: because suicide is already understood as the symptom of a spiritual illness, the biomedical model of mental illness introduced by the hospital is readily adopted by the patients. For patients, the leap from believing that suicide attempt was a result of an evil wind to believing that the attempt was a result of excess serotonin levels in the brain due to a clinical depression or bipolar disorder was easy to make, particularly because the spiritual and biomedical causes are not mutually exclusive.

Every Thursday morning at Hospital Psiquiátrico Yucatán (HPY), a group of people gathers at the Sigmund Freud room for a group therapy session that resembles a twelve-step meeting more than a western psychotherapeutic model. Anywhere between thirty to sixty men and women fill the room and for the next hour and half the patients, who are called “usuarios” or “users” in hospital lingo, share their experiences with pain, despair and hopelessness. Usually one will stand and show the rest of the group the scars on her wrists or the deep, red indentation created by a rope during a hanging attempt and relate her story. These sessions offered tremendous insight into the ways in which survivors of suicide attempts make sense of their lives, and also about how the relationships between users and hospital staff and volunteers is manifested in the group. Six months of ethnographic research at HPY with the PIAS suicide prevention group revealed much about the ways in which this program functions to both transform and reiterate patients' relationships with the medical establishment, each other, and their own bodies.

Luis

Those who are able to take advantage of PIAS and its suicide prevention services find in the program a welcoming community of clients, volunteers, psychologists, psychiatrists and other mental health professionals who donate their time to what they consider an underfunded and necessary service. From the beginning of my fieldwork experience, I immediately noticed Luis, a youthful looking, soft-spoken man with a gift for words. The first time I met Luis he stood up in front of the group and declared, “I don’t want to live. I hate life. I have tried to kill myself since I was eight years old and I keep on failing.” Luis explained. Two weeks later, Luis signed himself in for inpatient treatment. During the time that I got to know Luis, I observed his

relationship with the doctors, staff, and volunteers at the psychiatric hospital. Luis had been a patient of Dr. Baquedano's for over ten years and had been an inpatient at the hospital thirteen times. During small group therapy, Luis often shared about what he called his *enfermedad*, his disease, as the main reason he wanted to end his life. One day, about two weeks into what became a nearly two month stay, Diana, the psychologist who conducted inpatient group therapy, asked Luis about his disease. "It doesn't matter what it is," she promised, "you will not be judged here."

Luis swallowed, paused for a moment, and said, "I have pedophilia." Without going into detail, Luis shared how his "disease" had destroyed his life. When Diana asked other group members for reactions, the other patients accepted Luis' story and gave him encouraging words. If anyone in the room had discomfort with Luis or his particular situation, it was never shared in the context of the group. Luis always referred to his sexual obsession with children as a disease. He believes that his condition is the result of a rape by a cousin when he was eight years old. His life was punctuated by suicide attempts from the time he was a child. Diana and Gaspar agreed that Luis was a danger outside of the institution. Luis also recognized this fact, and to a great degree preferred life inside the institution than outside it.

Luis lived in a village just outside of Merida. He was a native Maya speaker, and his discourse was often punctuated with references to wind and nature.

I dreamed about a black bull the other night. The *uuchben maako'ob* say that the black bull means death. Then I dreamt that a woman tied a rope around my neck. I think she is the Evil¹⁰⁷. In my house, there are doors that won't close. The wind blows them open.

Luis believes that he is physically ill. He also believes that he is cursed, that events in nature prophesize the future and that the visions he in his dreams are real struggles for his soul. His spiritual and physical afflictions are one and the same, they are both manifestations of one disease¹⁰⁸.

Luis' story was known by most of the doctors and staff at the hospital. It was never clear what his health insurance status was –Luis told me that when he was unable to pay his hospital expenses (which was most of the time), he was allowed to do yard work on the hospital grounds. When he was released, Luis left wearing a pair of hospital scrub pants. A week after his release, he asked to be readmitted. His siblings, concerned about the safety of their own children, locked him out of his home and asked him to leave. He spent the rest of the week at a local beer dispensary, drinking and becoming more and more suicidal. The hospital became the only safe place he knew. When he was readmitted, he was scheduled to receive electro-convulsive therapy. He was still an inpatient when I concluded my field research at the end of 2008. When I returned for a brief visit in March 2010, Luis had just been readmitted once again. Luis' conception of his condition as an *enfermedad* came from his years of psychiatric treatment. However, in some cases, biomedical discourse is far from everyone's mind.

¹⁰⁷ *El mal*.

¹⁰⁸ Arthur Kleinman (Kleinman 1986:499-509), in his article on somatic expressions of depression in China, notes that while we can understand "disease" to be an underlying physical cause, "illness" can be understood as the cultural manifestation of the underlying disease. In Yucatan. See chapter 4 for a discussion on personhood and disposition, particularly my discussion of Christine Kray's description of the concept of *ool* and bodily practice.

Roberto

Monday, September 8th, 2008 started off as any other day. At the time, I had been conducting ethnographic fieldwork at HPY for about a month. When I arrived at the hospital and went into Dr. Baquedano's office, I heard a child screaming. Outside the office sat a woman holding a boy of about eight or nine. He screamed and cried, tears rolling down his cheeks as he repeatedly said, "*no quiero, no quiero, mamá, llévame a mi casa.*" ["I don't want to, I don't want to, Mommy, please take me home"]

I greeted Feli, Dr. Baquedano's assistant, and she nodded towards the boy. "He's here to see Dr. Baquedano," she murmured under her breath, "he tried to hang himself a few days ago. He's only nine years old."

The hours that followed were among the most heart-wrenching of my entire field experience. Roberto, the little boy, became hysterical to the point that Dr. Baquedano decided to commit him. Soon, security guards took him, chair and all, to the psychiatric hospital's emergency room. HPY does not count with a pediatric inpatient ward. When minors are committed, they sleep, eat, and spend a great deal of their time with adult clients whose diagnoses range from addiction and depression to schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and mental retardation. The youngest I had ever seen as an inpatient in the hospital was a fourteen year old girl. I asked Dr. Mercy Tut, the psychiatrist heading up the emergency room, if I could sit in on the intake interview. With Roberto's mother's consent, I followed Dr. Tut into the examination room.

Roberto sat on a bed and continued to cry, begging his mother to take him home. His mother, a woman who appeared to be in her late twenties, was crying as well. The film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* crossed my mind and I briefly wondered if what was coming next was a thiorazine injection to subdue the screaming boy. Dr. Tut, who had stepped out for a moment, came in. She had taken off her white coat. Roberto looked up at her and continued to cry as she silently crossed the room, sat on the bed opposite him, and motioned to the guards to leave.

She spoke softly, with gentle tone. "I'm Mercy," she said, "and I promise we aren't going to do anything to you."

Roberto's sobs began to quiet down as Dr. Tut, who confessed to me later on that she had very limited experience with children and that this was the first time she did a psychiatric emergency intake with such a young child, began to ask him about his age and village, how many siblings he had, and whether he liked school. Gradually, as Roberto calmed down, Dr. Tut asked if she could sit next to him. He accepted. Over the next hour, I watched Dr. Tut's compassionate approach help a scared child to open up. By the end of the session, Roberto was able to go home and Dr. Tut was able to learn about the circumstances surrounding the hanging attempt of a nine-year-old child.

Mercy: Roberto, you look angry, but you also look very sad. Why are you sad?

Roberto: Because my dog died. Her name was Sari, from a movie I saw once about a witch who used magic.

Mercy: Is there anything you would like to change with magic?

Roberto: I don't know.

Mercy: How do you feel right now?

Roberto: Sad.

Mercy: Are you still scared?

Roberto: No.

Mercy: What do you prefer, Roberto, do you prefer being happy or being sad?

Roberto: Being sad. Because when I'm sad I remember Sari.

Mercy: Now that we've chatted for a little while, I want to tell you that I saw a little note that the doctor put in your file. It says that you tried to hang yourself. Why did you do it Roberto?

Roberto: Because my sister was saying mean things to me. She said nobody loves me, she told me to go away... I was sad when I did it.

Mercy: Do you love your mom?

Roberto: Yes.

Mercy: But when you are angry at her, you don't tell her you love her, right?

Roberto: No.

Mercy: So maybe the same thing happened with your sister, maybe she was just upset at you but that doesn't mean she doesn't love you.

Roberto: Maybe. It could be.

Mercy: Roberto, can I give you a hug now?

Roberto: all right.

Mercy: (hugs Roberto. He puts his head on her chest) Can you and your family promise to come back tomorrow? We are having a very important get-together, and I really want you to be there.

When the session ended and I shared my notes with Dr. Tut, I asked her how she had been able to know how to reach Roberto. "You know," she said to me, "the only thing I had to go on was my relationship to my own son. I spoke to him and treated him as if he were mine." Dr. Tut had invited Roberto and his family to attend the regular PIAS meeting the following day. The next day, Roberto, his mother, Marisol, grandmother, Guadalupe and ten-year-old sister, Lucia, attended the PIAS meeting. Mercy began by introducing Roberto and his family. She asked him if he wanted to tell the group what had happened the previous day. Roberto said no. Mercy asked if it would be all right for her, or his mother or grandmother to talk about what happened. Roberto told Mercy that she could talk about it.

Mercy: Roberto arrived at the Emergency room yesterday. He was very scared, and later he told us that he was very angry, and very sad because his puppy died. He is also very angry and very saddened by his sister because one day she yelled at him and told him to leave. He decided to put a rope around his neck to hang himself. When we talked yesterday he said he made a mistake... Roberto told me that his sister Lucia told him that nobody loved him and he should leave.

Gaspar: and Roberto understood that to mean that he should kill himself.

Mercy: Is that right, Roberto?

Roberto: Yes.

Gaspar: (to Marisol) How are you feeling, Marisol?

Marisol: (begins to cry) I feel very sad about everything that is happening.

Gaspar: What do you think is happening?

Marisol: I don't know what he's thinking. I wasn't with him when this happened and I feel very guilty about it. And I want my mother to know that even though it might seem like I don't love them, I do love them very much. I don't live with them, and everything I say and do is always wrong. For my mother, I am just a bother. Sometimes, when I go visit, I can't bring anything for them with me, or I don't pay enough attention to them. My mom thinks that the children should live

with her because I'm divorced and I made my life with a new partner. She thinks I am a bad example for my children. But my partner and I have a new baby, and I have to go home to them.

Guadalupe: I just tell her she has to take care of her children. If she's going to visit, she shouldn't be angry when she comes.

Gaspar: Can you tell me what happened to his dog? I think it's important.

Guadalupe: One Christmas day she ran into the street and got hit by a car. The children cried a lot over it. It was two years ago but the way he is constantly talking about it, it's as if it happened yesterday.

Gaspar: Has anyone in your family ever said they want to kill themselves?

Guadalupe: His father. Many years ago he tried to kill himself. And my son (his uncle), he had problems with his wife and he tried to hang himself.

I chose to present Roberto's story because of how it differed from other cases I observed at HPY. Roberto was the only child to be treated by PIAS, though some of the patients I came into contact with were in their late teens. Moreover, the way in which Dr. Tut and Dr. Baquedano approached his treatment differed radically from the way in which they approached other patients who had attempted suicide. Roberto was not put on any medication. Clinical terminology such as "depression," "mood," or "bipolar" was never used. Drs. Tut and Baquedano always assumed that there was a reason why Roberto had attempted suicide, and that the key to understanding Roberto was to understand what was happening around him. Roberto's story deeply affected Dr. Tut and Dr. Baquedano. We would continue to talk about his case for months to come, even after Roberto and his family faded from the program¹⁰⁹.

Claudina

The doctor, he's very nice. He says that the reason I do these things is that my brain has an excess of, of something called serotonin. And if I take this medicine, that is going to fix the imbalance in my brain.

I met Claudina after she had been committed by her parents at HPY following a suicide attempt. Claudina has a unique take on the world and a poetic way in which she expresses it. From the beginning, I was taken by her disarming honesty, charisma, and intelligence. Claudina was diagnosed with bipolar disorder at HPY about halfway through her month-long stay. Her psychiatrist was not affiliated with PIAS, but she enthusiastically participated in both the small and large group therapy sessions. Although she often spoke of her acceptance of her diagnosis, this did not in any way alter her belief that the visions and voices she had heard in what her psychiatrist considered a manic phase were real. When Claudina was committed, she had been having visions that she called simply *malas imágenes*. She was hearing voices in her head telling her that she was worthless, fat, and ugly, and encouraging her to hang herself. She was tormented

¹⁰⁹ Subsequently, though Drs. Tut and Baquedano encouraged Roberto and his mother to continue attending regular PIAS meetings and to follow up with psychotherapy, we never saw either of them again. Dr. Tut explained that Roberto was from a village more than an hour away with no mental health services. Although he had free health insurance with Seguro Popular, his family simply could not afford the transportation costs to get him back and forth for treatment in Merida. Soon, a new wave of people with suicide attempts flooded the hospital, and Roberto became one of the many patients who had free access to the hospital suicide prevention program but who could not take advantage of it

by what she referred to as “impure thoughts” about her father and brothers, for which she punished herself by allowing herself to be bitten by ants.

Back in July, I tried to kill myself. I wanted to die. I would say, everything that happens is only sadness. I would hurt myself, I would let the ants sting me because I felt that way I was getting closer to death. And one night I tried to kill myself and my parents brought me here. Coming here is like entering a monastery to find ourselves in silence, in nature, with clear sounds. I realized I was bringing great harm to my parents and my little siblings. I am not going to open doors that I can't close. I am opening doors that can take me somewhere where I can find happiness.

For Claudina, HPY came to represent a sacred place. For her, recovery meant finding a balance inside herself, a balance that was both physical (to produce less serotonin) and spiritual (to find meaning in the monastic silence of the psychiatric hospital). The leap from understanding her condition as a spiritual one to understanding her condition as a physical one was akin to flipping a coin, both are faces of the same condition.

Analysis

The idea of “recovery” takes root because it is planted in fertile ground, be it a 12-step spiritual program or a biomedical approach. People have never simply readily accepted a doctor's opinion. As in all things, authority figures are not considered to hold the final authority over knowledge. Patients rely on their own personal experience and judgment, and can reject medical opinion if their own experience shows them it is erroneous.

As described by Brandes in his study of Alcoholics Anonymous in Mexico City, the relationships that form between members of the fellowship come to parallel the traditional fictive kin relationship of *compadrazgo*. In the context of AA, the *padrino-ahijado* relationship maintains the spiritual component of a traditional Catholic *padrino-ahijado* relationship. Although the mental health models that make up the core of the PIAS program at the Hospital Psiquiátrico Yucatán originated in Europe and the United States, the way in which these models have been interpreted and implemented by program volunteers and participants replicates existing postcolonial relationships of *padrinaje* and *compadrazgo*. Robert Kemper (1982) defines *compadrazgo* as a set of ritualized personal relationships established between a *padrino*, or ritual sponsor, and an *ahijado* or ritual sponsee. He notes that this relationship, considered by George Foster to be “the first distinct aspect of social structure in Latin America to be discovered by anthropologists” (1969), has religious roots, symbolism, and function but moreover has significant social, political and economic functions as well. Furthermore, *compadrazgo* carries with it a distinctly postcolonial hue: oftentimes, people who are picked to become godparents hold a position of power over those who pick them. The *padrino* is all too often also the *patrón* (or boss). In this chapter, I trace how the *compadrazgo* relationship, which I choose to call *padrinaje* because the relationship in focus is not that of co-godparents, but that of sponsor and sponsee, functions to both transform and reiterate members' relationships with the medical establishment, each other, and their own bodies. In PIAS, *padrinaje* appears in a guise that parallels another kind of ritual sponsorship in a Mexican adaptation of an American recovery program: Alcoholics Anonymous.

In PIAS, Dr. Baquedano and his volunteers also take on the responsibility to guide, discipline and teach the many *ahijados* in the room. In turn, particularly successful group

members take on the responsibility of guiding and supporting newcomers, creating what the group has come to call a “community of hope”, or “grupo de la esperanza.” In a place where cultural values stress silence, withholding, and privacy, the experience of a first PIAS meeting can be so jarring that first timers sometimes don’t return. Those who stay, however, become comfortable public speakers, the first of several transformations in subjects’ dispositions. Members become students, teachers, and patients sharing a common disease –again, in parallel to AA and other twelve-step fellowships—and begin to practice discipline in speaking, in attending meetings, in taking medication. PIAS works because it adopts the successful elements of Mexican twelve-step fellowships, but at the same time it removes the spiritual component of recovery: the goal is not sobriety, it is a desire for life and a recovery from mental illness. That said, although the PIAS program itself is decidedly non-spiritual, PIAS members often bring up their own spiritual beliefs when sharing or commenting.

Stanley Brandes’ ethnography of Alcoholics Anonymous in Mexico City, *Staying Sober in Mexico City*, (2002) suggests that the 12-step recovery model and its tremendous success in Mexico and Latin America can be traced to its compatibility with Catholicism. Brandes points to powerful religious symbols such as the number 12, the spiritual nature of the 12-step program, the highly ritualized nature of meetings, the presence of images of A.A. founders Bill W. and Dr. Bob paralleling saints at meeting places, and the practice of sponsorship or *apadrinamiento* that facilitate this compatibility and enable its success. Similarly, in her study of an eating disorder clinic in Mexico City, Rebecca Lester (Lester 2007:pp. 369-387) notes that although staff are trained following American and European treatment models.

What does it mean to “recover”? Why has the 12-step recovery model, born out of a conversation between a stockbroker and a surgeon in the United States, taken root and flourished in Mexico and Yucatán in particular? The idea of bodily and spiritual illness happening simultaneously is an idea that patients are already bringing into the hospital. Therefore, *enfermedad* is a perfectly logical concept to embrace in both 12-step and psychiatric settings.

In Maya communities, illness of the body and illness of the spirit are one and the same. There is a directly proportional relationship between physical and spiritual health. Suicide is not understood as a decision that is made by an agent, but as the result of a complete loss of power over oneself: the devil physically ties the rope around the *suicida*’s neck. As such, anyone is vulnerable to suicide.

PIAS exemplifies how a mental health model following a Western model --in this case, group therapy sessions copying a similar strategy for suicide prevention in Europe and the United States—is interpreted, edited, and appropriated by mental health professionals, volunteers, and group members¹¹⁰. Elements of Latin American *padrinaje*, borrowed from traditional godparenting relationships but also from a Mexican interpretation of the Alcoholics Anonymous program, create a relationship between the volunteers, the group participants, and the medical staff who devised, implemented, and run the program. However, the degree to which a particular client can take advantage of the program is greatly dependent on a series of external factors: proximity to the city, economic conditions, and family support.

The PIAS program itself faces some obstacles: during my six month stay, our workspace was turned into a copy room. Patients were often brought in late or not at all. The effectiveness of the nursing staff seemed dependent on particular nurses’ relationships to PIAS staff. Several of the psychologists

¹¹⁰ Rebecca Lester’s (Lester 2007:pp. 369-387) work on an eating disorder clinic in Mexico City suggests a similar dynamic in other Mexican inpatient settings.

worked with patients on a volunteer basis. The other doctors who helped out did so out of a personal interest in helping suicidal patients. But these were the good days –for six years, from the time that Partido de Acción Nacional governor Patricio Patron Laviada took the governor’s seat in 2000, the program was effectively shuttered as the hospital leadership changed. PIAS was dismantled not because it was ineffective or expensive, but because the new hospital director was appointed by a governor from a different political party than the previous hospital director, who was affiliated with the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Compassion played no role in the decision to suspend PIAS, a decision that Dr. Baquedano calls “homicidal.” Overnight, the hospital went from providing a full range of suicide prevention services, including housing a 24 hour hotline, to providing nothing at all. The psychiatric institution, which is supposed to have a mandate of compassion, is constructed around politics.

Affect and compassion are genuine parts of the relationship between an organization and the people it purports to help. However, these manifest at an interpersonal level, the place where doctor and client meet in space ideally devoid of judgment. My experience at the psychiatric hospital reveals that in Yucatán’s public mental health sector, inclusion and exclusion is not about who is included and excluded in compassionate care. Those who provide mental health services show equal compassion to a nine year old child or a pedophile: both are treated and included in the program in the same way, though their ability to take advantage of services offered is greatly dependent on social structure, what Bourdieu calls “the foundational violence revealed in the adjustment between the order of things and the order of bodies” (2000). The inclusion or exclusion of the program itself within the public mental health sector, however, is divorced from any kind of pretense or mandate of compassion: there is no place for compassion politics. Inclusion and exclusion is based on Politics alone.

Although an effort is being made by PIAS staff, a promising next step in developing locally relevant treatment should include a serious engagement between psychiatric professionals and traditional healers. Although medical students in Yucatán are required to take an anthropology course in their studies, the overwhelming majority of Yucatán-trained doctors and medical students hold outdated and negative ideas about indigenous medicine and are loath to integrate anthropological approaches to their practice. Dr. Baquedano and the PIAS team represent an exception to the rule. However, due to the PIAS program’s successes, its socially situated approach is gaining attention and respect. This is a particularly fertile time to begin a dialogue between traditional and biomedical healers. Anthropologists, particularly medical anthropologists, could play an important mediating role.

Conclusion

In Closing...

Fieldnotes and interview transcript from December 8, 2008.

Juan got into a fight at school He pushed another boy and when the boy fell he broke his arm. It was not the first time he fought, and between the other boy's injury and his grades he got himself expelled. I went and fought with the principal, fought for my boy to get back in school, and I got him to agree. But I was so angry at Juan. I told him if he kept this up he was going to grow up to be a nobody. I told him if he wasn't going to go to school he had to clean the house while I was at work. The family I live with now, they have always been kind to us. They know I'm a single mom and I work all day, so they cook meals for us. Usually, Juan would come with me and I'd leave him at the little tienda down the road so he could play the games there. But I was angry that he got himself thrown out of school, so I told him he had to stay home and wait for me.

Bertha pauses, I catch my breath, waiting. It is the longest, most dreadful silence. I look at the 8 x 10 picture of twelve-year-old Juan on the wall. Patty, my new research assistant, sits quietly next to me. When Bertha speaks, she starts out quickly, as though saying the words rapidly would make it hurt less.

Gabriel walked me home that night. When we got back to my house, I saw the door was open, but I didn't think much of it. The television was on downstairs, but Juan wasn't there. I called out to him, but he didn't say anything back, so I went upstairs to his room. [sighs] He was hanging from the hammock hook on the wall. The hammock was hung on the other hook, and his hand was clutching the hammock, like he had been trying to raise himself up. The bed was next to his feet. Maybe he grabbed on to it because he had to climb on the bed to reach high enough to get the rope around his neck. I screamed. I screamed so loud. Then I cut him down and his skin was warm. Gabriel came running in and found us, and ran outside. We both did. I was holding my son and waving at cars and Gabriel got someone to stop. I begged him to take us to the hospital, that my son had hung himself. I held Juan in the car while it took us to the Red Cross. I touched his face, his body. "Wake up baby," I said, "wake up, sweetie." I kept begging him to wake up because his body was still warm and soft and I had hope that maybe it wasn't too late [Bertha speaks more slowly now, tears running down her cheeks]. When we got to the hospital they tried to resuscitate him, but he was gone. I told them that I didn't want them to cut him to do an autopsy, but the police said they had to do it. I was able to hold him before they took him away. I begged him to wake up. I begged him to be alive. I wanted to die. I still want to die sometimes.

Bertha's son, Juan, hung himself on May 17th, 2008. When I interviewed Bertha she had just been released from HPY following a third suicide attempt. She was living with the same neighbors who used to cook meals for her and Juan. After Juan's death, they had taken her in. Only six months had passed since Juan's death. Bertha, a single mom, was struggling.

With Gaspar Baquedano's guidance, I had decided to begin a project doing what he called "psycho-social autopsies", open-ended interviews with people he terms survivors (sobrevivientes), family members of people who committed suicide. A few years prior, Gaspar had directed a similar project out of the department of Anthropology at Universidad Autonoma De Yucatán (UADY). However, internal politics in the department had shut the project down and nothing was ever published from it. I copied Gaspar's original approach; using newspaper reports, I selected addresses of people who had committed suicide anywhere from six to twelve months prior. I followed Gaspar's rationale for this timing that anything less than six months would make the traumatic effect of the suicide too recent, and anything beyond the twelve months might interfere with memories of the event. I accepted this rationale because of Gaspar's years of work not as a researcher, mental health practitioner and medical professional, and because it made sense to me. Gaspar also suggested that I not go alone.

Armed with a letter of introduction from HPY and Patty, a volunteer psychologist who had taken an interest in my work, we set out to conduct these fascinating and heart-wrenching interviews. Ultimately, because this was so close to the end of my field stay, we conducted two such interviews and were rebuffed at one home. In the midst of this project, Gaspar handed me a piece of paper with Bertha's name and address. Gabriel, her neighbor, worked at HPY in a non-clinical capacity and had approached Gaspar for help. He asked me to visit Bertha and interview her, and encourage her to attend a PIAS meeting. I would be going as a researcher but also as a representative of the PIAS program. Patty and I set out that afternoon, but when we arrived at the home Gabriel told us that Bertha had just been taken to HPY –she had just attempted suicide. I introduced myself to Bertha while she was a patient at HPY. During her time there, she attended a PIAS open group meeting and thereafter became very involved in the program¹¹¹. When I finally asked her if she would be willing to sit down with me for an interview, she readily agreed.

I end this dissertation with Bertha's story because it contains of all the elements I've introduced in the writing of this text. As a single mother, Bertha is shunned as socially deviant by "respectable society." As a member of the working class, she has few resources to deploy in order to get ahead or protect herself or her child. The lack of support she found in the Merida public school system was symptomatic of the rigid hierarchies I describe in Chapter 1, what Pierre Bourdieu and others call "structural violence" (Bourdieu 2000; Bourdieu and Wacquant 2004; Bourgois 2004; Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004). To a great extent, Bertha was protected by Gabriel and his family who occupied a slightly higher position in local social hierarchies.

The media seized on Juan's suicide. The suicide was covered on May 17th, when it happened, by both *Diario de Yucatán* and *Por Esto!*¹¹² Though neither newspaper published photographs of the death, on May 22 and May 23, *Yucatán* editorials criticized Juan's elementary school's handling of the case and laid the blame for the suicide at the feet of the school

¹¹¹ As of December 2010, Bertha continues to be an active member of the PIAS community, frequenting meetings and speaking on their new radio show, "Aqui y Ahora".

¹¹² Hidden among other police events, it simply states his name, age, and that his mother arrived from work to find him dead. In 2006, however, a color photograph of a 14 year old boy who had hung himself at a street fair in another small town was published in the *Por Esto!* In my time in Yucatan, this was the second time I had heard of a child doing such a thing.

principal¹¹³. When Patty and I attempted to interview the principal, his experiences with the public outrage over the death and subsequent Yucatán Commission for Human Rights (CODHEY) investigation left him with no desire to speak with us. Explaining that he had already said everything he needed to say to the CODHEY, he told us he wanted to put the event behind him and asked us to leave. In chapter 2, I explore how media reporting of suicide functions to both construct a theory of suicide (and who commits it) and to mirror, reinforce, and propagate social mores. Juan's death was compelling in its tragic circumstances and took media reporting beyond the spectacle of suicide to a public chiding of all the actors involved—including Bertha, who was accused of not supporting her child (Pérez Rodríguez 2008).

Bertha's encounter with the law and her fight over her son's body exemplifies once again the ways in which suicide, like any other "non-natural" death, produces zones of contestation between the state, whose imperative is to bring a sense of order to a chaos produced by the unexpected event of a subject taking his own life, and the subject/citizens, who invest the body of the deceased with profound meaning. Juan's body, now an object rather than a subject, became property of the state. This break was particularly traumatic for Bertha because as a child, Juan's living body was under her charge.

In chapter 4, I spent a great deal of time discussing the construction of personhood and the ways in which the self is at once unbounded and dependant on a sense of balance and tranquility in order to maintain physical and psychic health (Kray 2005; Hirose 2008; Rodriguez and Castillo Cocom 2010). One aspect of this sense of tranquility is the relationship between members of a family. Although neither Rodriguez and Castillo Cocom nor Hirose talk about how the *iknal* or the person extends to the relationships between a subject and her family, particularly her children, it is not unreasonable to argue the sense that children belong to the parent—and therefore are part of the parent's own *self*—is present in nearly all filial relationships in Yucatán. In the same way that Roberto, the little boy I met at HPY, felt incomplete without his beloved pet, Bertha has lost a part of her own self. The pain of that loss was so intense, so overpowering, that Bertha felt unable to live with it. Bertha's loss is incommensurable not only to the anthropologist but to herself. Without Juan, Bertha felt that a part of her had been ripped away.

This incommensurable loss led to multiple suicide attempts, which eventually resulted in Bertha's commitment to HPY. While in treatment, she found the PIAS program's community to be a welcoming place where she could share her pain and experiences with others. Before she was committed to HPY, Bertha had been under the care of a psychiatrist who had prescribed Alprazolam¹¹⁴, and had sought treatment with a therapist. It wasn't until she came into the PIAS program that she began to show improvement. As of January 2011, Bertha continued to be involved with PIAS, making weekly meetings and speaking on their new radio show. Slowly, she has recovered from Juan's suicide.

¹¹³ Bertha's story raises the compelling question of why suicide seems to affect young people and even children. In chapter 2, I describe the way in which suicide was used in play, and related that event to media representations of suicide. We will never know why Juan did what he did or whether he was at all influenced by newspaper depictions of suicide. In this sense, Bertha's story is illustrative not only of the aspects of my research presented in this dissertation but of those questions that remain unanswered when all is said and done.

¹¹⁴ Sold commercially in the United States as Xanax. She purposefully overdosed on this medication during her last suicide attempt.

Studying suicide in Yucatán was very much like peeling layers of an onion: the more I studied the subject and peeled away layers of knowledge, the more layers I found within. Many questions remain to be answered, and many more remain to be asked. .

Other Directions for Future Research

First, following Arthur Kleinman's (Kleinman 1986:499-509) classic posit that "illness" is a cultural manifestation of biological "disease", I would like to continue to explore the way in which the most common pathologies associated with suicide attempts, bipolar disorder and depression, are constructed in the clinical setting of HPY and taken home by patients when they are released. This is the beginning of a longitudinal study that would follow a sampling of patients from their first admission into HPY over the course of five years and possibly beyond. I am primarily interested in treatment strategies and the use, disuse, or misuse of pharmaceuticals.

Second, the social autopsy research begun in December 2008 begs completion. Although I was only able to compile two of these interviews during my field year, Dr. Baquedano's team compiled several years' worth of such interviews in the early 2000s. Careful study of these interviews compared with a new sampling compiled in the future would generate a substantial body of knowledge that would create a more complete picture of suicide in 21st century Yucatán. Sporadic compilation of such interviews and their archival in a publicly accessible database would create an invaluable knowledge base to any student of anthropology, psychology, medicine, or other mental health practitioners.

Third, although I only briefly touch on the conflict generated by Protestantism in the village of Xulab in chapters 4 and 5, the ongoing influx of Protestant sects into rural Yucatecan villages continues to transform social relationships and village life. Thus far, research on the impact of Protestantism on Yucatecan society has been minimal, despite the fact that Protestant missionaries of various denominations have been in Yucatán since the mid 20th century. The impact of Protestantism on the mental health of people in Yucatán presents an interest direction for future research.

Finally, I turn to the question raised by Bertha's story at the beginning of this chapter. Why does it seem to be that those most compelled to attempt or commit suicide are young people? The reader may recall maestro Bartolomé Alonso Camaal's words in chapter 1:

I feel that young men, men at the end of their adolescence and early adulthood are living through an extremely painful conflict when a young man is born to a Maya family, in a Maya community, and he looks at the other culture –urban culture, non-indigenous culture, as a life-model with a higher value than his community life model.

What maestro Alonso Camaal is describing can be reduced to Durkheim's (Durkheim 1951:405) *anomie*, a general sense of disconnect between one's own personal desires and those of society. "Society", read what Alonso Camaal calls "the other culture" or mainstream Yucatecan culture, expects these young men to become agriculturalists or providers of cheap labor. The young men, in turn, desire an improvement in living conditions which given their social and cultural capital they are likely unable to obtain. This explanation, while reasonable, is somehow unsatisfying given the data that generated in the research leading to this dissertation. I am increasingly drawn

to questions of what it means to be young and poor in Yucatán and how Yucatán's integration into the global economy through the loss of a sizeable percentage of its young male workforce to migration to the Maya Caribbean and abroad, is transforming the way young people view themselves and their society. I said in Chapter 2 that when I talked to people on the ground about suicide the trope that emerged was that young people were either too indigenous or not indigenous enough. Adolescence and youth is a time of defining oneself. How does this play out on the ground? How do these conflicts get resolved as a young person enters adulthood?

Conclusion

Twelve months of research and over two years of sometimes excruciatingly slow writing have resulted in this dissertation. At the end of the day, I find myself with more questions than answers, but I believe this is the spirit of anthropological inquiry. The question of suicide in Yucatán is a highly relevant one not only because of the amount of attention it has received in recent years but because as I show in this dissertation it can be operationalized in highly revealing ways. In my work I have learned about the Yucatán social class system, its hierarchies, and its history. I have learned about the ways in which the shapes discourse to produce a false research object (the suicidal "Maya") and to create a "crisis" (suicide as an epidemic), while at the same time it obscures the everyday reality of suicide in Yucatán. I have learned about how the state bureaucracy operates and how this mechanism works to bring a sense of order to chaos. I've learned about how people view themselves and their bodies, and how these senses of self produce unexpected results when confronted with western approaches to psychiatric and psychological models. Above all, I've learned about the infinite strength, kindness, and generosity of the human spirit, the same strength, kindness, and generosity that enables so many to survive the un-survivable.

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