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# The Struggle for Historical Collective Memory and Epistemic Creativity from Below

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## Introduction

In environments made violent, the struggles of the marginalized and persecuted organizing for revolutionary historical memory contribute to the formation of social and political consciousness. For this praxis, memory is neither static nor trapped in the conception of time as linear and abstract—core characteristics of global, capitalist coloniality of knowledge and of being. The struggle for revolutionary historical memory is also a struggle for justice through the praxis of epistemic disobedience. Walter D. Mignolo coined the latter notion to denote a process whereby subjugated, racialized, and oppressed people delink from Westerncentric coloniality of knowledge and being by asserting their dignity through the generation of independent, systematic thinking and knowledge (*The Darker Side of Western Modernity*). Cognitive disobedience as a praxis of decolonial social justice is necessary, for, as Mignolo argues, "...geo- and body-politics of knowledge has been hidden from the self-serving interests of Western epistemology and... a task of de-colonial thinking is the unveiling of epistemic silences of Western epistemology and affirming the epistemic rights of the racially devalued" ("Epistemic Disobedience" 4). Epistemic disobedience, thus, is part of the process towards decolonial humanity in that it questions who counts as human, who counts as a knower, and whose knowledge counts as knowledge. These are central interrogations in Indigenous Peoples' knowledges and movements. Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith succinctly captures the profound dehumanization of the imperial and colonial cognitive project by pointing out that:

One of the supposed characteristics of primitive peoples was that we could not use our minds or intellects. We could not invent things, we could not create institutions or history, we could not imagine, we could not produce anything of value, we did not know how to use land and other resources from the natural world, we did not practice the "arts" of civilization. By lacking such virtues we disqualified ourselves, not just from civilization, but from humanity itself. In other words we were not "fully human"; some of us were not even considered partially human. (*Decolonizing Methodologies* 25)

Coloniality of knowledge and of being, as part of the modern/coloniality of power, “worked as an epistemic mechanism that classified people around the world, by color and territories, and managed (and still manages) the distribution of labor and the organization of society” (Mignolo *The Darker Side* 216). Rolando Vazquez’s contributions to the building of decolonial memory are pertinent here, as they shed further light on modernity/coloniality’s obsession with promoting a temporality based on the oblivion of the suffering of the oppressed, and on confining the past to the “objectivity” of the present through a future-oriented mentality (“Modernity Coloniality” n.p.). As Vazquez says:

The modernity/coloniality tandem is seen as the institution of a politics of time that is not only geared towards the control of historical narratives (Chakrabarty, Fanon, Mignolo), but also towards the production of specific economic and political practice oriented to sever the oppressed from their past, their memory.... The destruction of memory as a result of the modern politics of time produces invisibility. In turn, invisibility is tantamount to de-politicization. In this context it is possible to say that the struggles for social justice are struggles for visibility... a project... that rescues memory as a site of struggle, one that involves the possibility of inhabiting and rescuing the past. (“Modernity Coloniality” n.p.)

By focusing on the efforts of H.I.J.O.S. (see below) and their creative work, including murals and poetry, this work argues that, while it is important to focus on strategies for political mobilization of people, especially youth, in transnational contexts, the epistemic creation of youth in struggle, though often neglected, is equally relevant, because knowledge is also a site of transformative praxis. As Tischler (2005), Tischler and Navarro (2011), Gómez-Barris (2009), Vazquez (2009), Lacy and Riaño-Alcalá (2006), and Jelin (2002) rightly point out, it is possible to understand memory as a potential site that keeps social relations of struggle and historicity in conflict with the present continuity of domination, exploitation, and discrimination, and as a site that produces an oppositional subjectivity. From different schools of thought and contexts of research, these authors see memory as a relational process that bridges the past, present, and future; as an individual-collective action; and as “a never-ending source of collective positioning” (Alcalá, Medellín, Colombia 100).

A collective, active subjectivity can also be an expression of disobedience when it delinks from Westerncentric and bourgeois universal abstracts. This perspective, Castro Conde notes, enables subaltern peoples to express their subjectivity through, for example, the production of grassroots community arts, and within social movements. By doing so, the oppressed “Others” generate ruptures in the dominant order (*El uso político de la memoria contra la dominación*).

The recuperation and construction of collective-historical memory of the oppressed and dehumanized, as Vazquez notes, “is not a conservative or essentialist move; it is a rebellious move” (“Modernity Coloniality” n.p.). Drawing on Mignolo, who points out that “the silences and absences of history are speaking their presence” (*The Idea* 157), Vazquez reminds us that “Memory is the past as a site of experience; it is a rebellion against the future[-]oriented reason of modernity, against the reason that idealizes and disguises. Memory stands up against the rational utopias that have brought oblivion and violence” (“Modernity Coloniality” n.p.). Thus, struggling for memory is fundamental to the process to reclaim the human dignity, both of the oppressed and racialized, and of those who, because of their revolutionary and progressive sociopolitical participation, have been demonized as politically abject social pariahs and therefore sentenced to persecution, torture, rape, and death. Dignity here, and as the Zapatistas have made clear (*The Darker Side*), is integral to children’s, women’s, and men’s bodies, land, territory, spirituality, and creativity, therefore linked to respect. However, both dignity and respect have been violently extracted by the modernity/coloniality tandem, whose multiple institutional and individual agents have taught the racialized and colonized to believe they/we are indeed inferior (Mignolo, *The Darker Side*; Vazquez “Modernity Coloniality” n.p.). Mignolo also notes that dignity

...shall not be taken, under any circumstance (even if that circumstance is the French Revolution), as an abstract universal, but as a connector of similar colonial experiences in different colonial histories.... [And] therefore one of the engines that moves the decolonial option and the shift from zero point epistemology to border epistemology and decolonial thinking. (*The Darker Side* 214, 217)

But in order to trace the epistemic creations from below it is necessary to apply decolonial theoretical-methodological tools. Cherokee scholar Andrea Smith argues for the need to put into practice intellectual ethnography,<sup>1</sup> in order to recognize Indigenous Peoples’ [and, I would add, other grassroots intellectuals’] cognitive contributions as theorists in their own right. Smith says:

I have come to see the importance of documenting the theory produced by Native women’s organizers as theory. I see this research methodology as intellectual ethnography. In my ongoing research projects on Native American feminisms, I focus on documenting and analyzing the theories produced by Native women activists that intervene both in sovereignty and feminist struggles. (“Dismantling” 86)

It is in this spirit that I apply intellectual ethnography to trace some of the epistemic creativity of the Guatemalan grassroots organization named H.I.J.O.S. (henceforth HIJOS): *Hijos e Hijas por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio* (Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice against Oblivion and Silence). This work was part of a long-term research project from which the book *Global Coloniality of Power in Guatemala. Racism, Genocide, Citizenship* (2012) emerged. For this paper, I

specifically applied, decolonial content analysis as part of intellectual ethnography to collect and analyze several visual and written texts from HIJOS since 1999, when they first organized in Guatemala.<sup>2</sup> I also followed, online, public hearings at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, as part of the case of forced disappearance and torture revealed by the Guatemalan's Army's dossier of death—its military diary. For this project, I also studied other important legal documents produced by the Guatemalan state, by international human rights organizations, and other governmental and non-governmental organizations. In the second section, I focus on the birth of HIJOS, some of their mobilizing activities, and their reflections, to illustrate how the political and epistemic realms are mutually constitutive of social justice. In the third section, I examine more directly the multiple ways through which HIJOS put into practice disobedience towards epistemic justice, and in the fourth section, I show the importance of community arts, not only in reclaiming the humanity and dignity of those vilified as “subversive delinquents and enemies of the state” (Martínez Salazar, *Global Coloniality*), but also in reclaiming public spaces.

### **HIJOS, the Organization of Children of the Killed and Disappeared**

The struggle for historical, revolutionary memory by the Guatemalan organization named HIJOS,—formed by daughters and sons of the forcibly disappeared, who were killed during the worst years of genocidal state terror (the 1980s)—illustrates that the political and epistemic realms are mutually constitutive of social justice. Members of HIJOS were young children when their parents and other relatives were abducted, tortured, disappeared, and killed; some witnessed the brutal rape and torture of their mothers, and were themselves raped. In 1999, after the launching of the report *Guatemala: Memory of Silence, Never Again* by the United Nations-backed Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH), HIJOS was born under the principle “to fight for memory, truth and justice for our parents and also for the Guatemalan youth and for all those who struggled for social justice” (Wendy Méndez in Mendoza Guatemala. Entrevista con Wendy Méndez, 46-47). Crimes against humanity, and their human-social impact, are one of the main motivations for youth organizing and struggling for historical memory. As Méndez says:

My decision to work for historical memory started when I was 9 years old when my mother [Luz Haydée Santizo] was kidnapped and disappeared. Then I began to search for my identity and for the reconstruction of the memory of my mother and it was at this moment that I was finding sense to the reconstruction of the memory of the struggle of the fallen.... In HIJOS we developed the program we called Alternative Education, whose main purpose was the recovery of the historical memory of the youth, and for the youth. The foundation of HIJOS was also encouraged by one of the recommendations of the report by the

Commission of Historical Clarification (CEH) and the Project for the Recovery of Historical Memory (REHMI).<sup>3</sup> (in Guatemala. Entrevista con Wendy Méndez 46)<sup>4</sup>

Of course, not all of the children of the abducted and killed decided to, or in fact could, fight back in organized ways. The price one pays to do so is very high in genocidal environments where there is an ongoing, violent expropriation of Indigenous lands and territories and a constant criminalization of social movements and activists, as is the case of Guatemala. In contexts like this, the culture of terror established by transnational, Cold War regimes (another euphemism, as these were hot and devastating wars and machineries of death for millions) is an expression of how repressive pasts are deeply linked to exploitative and persecutory presents. The genocidal coloniality of power of earlier modernity enacted through conquest and direct colonial rule has changed hands and discourses, but not its targets: heterogeneous subjects who have organized in revolutionary and social justice movements, and racialized and gendered, subalternized collectivities. These subjects, who were decimated, and whose bodies and remains were destroyed, nonetheless left countless social traces (Gómez-Barris and Gray, *Toward a Sociology*), social traces that HIJOS struggle to make visible. These are not usually registered in dominant institutional records, and/or even in most critical scholarship, but they are “evidenced by actors sacrificed in the name of war, [genocide, and torture,] landscapes emptied in the name of progress, comfort promised in the name of security, and memories refashioned in the name of unity” (Gómez-Barris and Gray *Toward a Sociology* 9). As these authors, drawing on Antonio Gramsci’s work (1971), point out, “The making and unmaking of the social world is a mode of engaging disappearing social realities. Hence, power operates as much through the bodies of subjects as through the form and registers of their attachment to social worlds” (*Toward a Sociology* 7). The destruction of Indigenous Peoples’ social worlds, and the enslavement of Black Peoples (in the Americas), were the first grotesque and cruel colonial acts of erasure, linked to the subsequent rational-racial classification of the victims as subhumans and non-humans, incapable of epistemic creativity (Mignolo, *The Darker Side*). Later on, this systematic erasure targeted those who embraced socialist, communist, liberation theology, feminist, and decolonial ideals of a just world, many of whom began their participation when they were in their early teens. Avery Gordon points out that, this complex personhood (*Ghostly Matters*) has been perpetually attacked and demonized. Even so, it has remained resilient, for, as Gordon adds: Those who live in the direst circumstances possess a complex and oftentimes contradictory humanity and subjectivity that is never adequately glimpsed by viewing them as victims or, on the other hand, as superhuman agents. (*Ghostly Matters* 4)

This complexity, denied to those invented as inferiorized and politically abject “Others,” was also denied to the disappeared and killed in Guatemala and in other colonized places. Their complex personhood was reduced to a well-crafted, bourgeois production of illegality and criminality. Their reduction to *nobodies* implied the parallel invention of the dominant, memorialized figures of the heroic soldier, the patriotic business man, and the abnegated, national, and obedient woman, as images to be memorialized and honoured. The creation of these dominant memory figures and symbols is possible because state and capitalist terror “is itself so involved with knowledge-making” (Gordon *Ghostly Matters* 79). Thus, knowledge is not always positive and peaceful, even while it is a site of progressive struggle.

The struggle for historical, revolutionary memory by politically conscious youth might surprise those who think that being young means living “in the present,” and who construct youth as the leaders and adults of tomorrow, turning them into hegemonic, capitalist, futuristic figures. In this dominant view, memory is objectified as something that represents the past, and as such it is the domain of adulthood. It is a common saying in Spanish that “*los recuerdos pertenecen a los viejos*” (“remembering belongs to the old”). The work of HIJOS challenges these mentalities and demonstrates that historical, revolutionary memory must be central in the struggle for planetary, decolonial, and anti-capitalist social and epistemic justice.

HIJOS have, for more than a decade, organized marches that they accompany with music and artistic banners. Theirs is a struggle as well for the recovery of public spaces where they perform, applying tools from the theatre of the oppressed. Aside from releasing position papers and communiqués, HIJOS also write expressive poetry. In all of these media, they generate new thinking and draw fresh, decolonial meanings from Westerncentric and neoliberal concepts. The struggle of HIJOS is a “... position from which to carve out a livable life when everything is organized to prevent you from doing so...” (Gordon, *The Prisoner’s Curse* 18). This is a stance that John Berger named *undefeated despair* (Gordon, *The Prisoner’s Curse* 18), an appropriate notion that explains the tension and contradiction of feeling pain without being paralyzed, consumed, and defeated by that pain. For, as Berger describes, the stance of undefeated despair involves a familiarity with every sort of rubble, including the rubble of words; it is that grief, over cruelty and injustice, which is without fear, without resignation, without a sense of defeat. And it is that stance towards the world that is the basis for the will to carry on, regardless of what the struggle for emancipation and happiness requires (Gordon, *The Prisoner’s Curse* 18). As HIJOS declare:

The internal armed conflict that lasted more than 36 years was the scenario of the cruelest violations of human rights that involved directly and indirectly several generations of girls and boys who have been forgotten and ignored and simply left out from fundamental decisions towards the construction of peace in our country. This is why it is absolutely necessary that young people who lived that bitter experience unify our efforts and support each other to find the truth of what happened with our parents, relatives and friends who were victims of repression because they fought for justice. (HIJOS Guatemala n.p.)

Being young and politically conscious is seen as a dangerous threat to transnational imperial orders. Members of HIJOS, since their formation, have been harassed and persecuted. Members of the military establishment follow them in marches and have even thrown poisonous substances onto their faces. HIJOS have also received death threats by phone; the perpetrators have played funeral music during the calls. HIJOS's office has been broken into twice, and important data on cases they are pursuing or supporting has been stolen.

The work of HIJOS has met with some resistance even in progressive and non-governmental organizations. HIJOS were "counselled" that opening "past wounds" would not do any good to anyone, for it would cause more pain—a well-entrenched mentality, which bourgeois camps have instilled and reproduced through mainstream media, the educational system, and other elitist institutions. The idea that struggling for historical, revolutionary memory would open unnecessary wounds is part of a "peacetime" bourgeois narrative that selectively creates a sanitized version of history, using human rights and Indigenous Peoples' rights discourses. For example, all "peacetime" governmental administrations have paid lip service to the Guatemalan Peace Accords, all the while remilitarizing society, deepening social injustices, and criminalizing social movements. Andrés Cabañas rightly notes:

The Peace Accords are for some sectors, tools that consolidate their power through a reconfiguration of a model of exploitation. [In this sense], exclusion and violence get consolidated as channels of this model; inequality gets consolidated as a consequence, and the hegemony of *Criollos* (families directly descending from White Europeans, corporations, and businesses) prevail, making more palpable [for the marginalized] the dominance of the 2% of the population over the remaining 98%. (Por Mayra n.p.)

Under these conditions, the mere existence of HIJOS and other similar organizations challenges the ideal predicated by the genocidal triumvirate of power (the Guatemalan dominant classes, the state, and external powers), i.e., that they are the defenders of the nation, the family, and the "future" represented by the youth. HIJOS evidence the brutality of the heteropatriarchal, capitalist, Christian mentality, which used the figure of youth as a justification to hunt down parents (many of whom were young) and families they invented as "subversive delinquents" (Martínez Salazar *Global Coloniality*). By justifying genocide and torture as the defense of "future generations," agents of power subsumed the majority of marginalized and racialized children and children of revolutionary collectivities into a well-crafted figure of a racially and economically privileged national child.

Amidst confusion about the reasons why their parents were so violently taken from their lives, young children of the revolutionary disappeared were subjected to further social ostracism. As



a member of HIJOS recalls, “Forced disappearance became like a contagious disease; a disease that we supposedly carried, which made us unwelcome in the homes and gatherings of our relatives. This was unbearable because we had just lost our parents and we were so young” (HIJOS Ofensiva de la Memoria n.p.). Members of other chapters of HIJOS have shared similar socio-political stigmatization and persecution. Eva, who was born in Argentina, from parents involved in grassroots social organizing, and who as young adult sought political asylum in Canada in the 1990s, recalls that, in Argentina, children “were not even able to say out loud the names of their parents because they were ashamed of them. The militaries made society believe that our parents deserved what they got because they were the ‘enemy,’ the ‘subversives,’ and the ‘terrorists’” (Sundberg “Reconfiguring” 149). To instill, in entire societies, a collective condemnation of the right to rebel and to struggle for a dignified life is the main objective of transnational, militarized, bourgeois projects. As Gordon points out, in the case of forced disappearance, “a key aspect of state-sponsored disappearance is precisely the elaborate suppression and elimination of what conventionally constitutes the proof of someone’s whereabouts. The disappeared have lost all social and political identity: no bureaucratic records, no funerals, no memorials, no bodies, nobody” (*Ghostly Matters* 80). Cabañas also points out that forced disappearance, because of its dreadful and lasting consequences, is perhaps one of the most degrading practices within the structure of violence, (Por Mayra n.p.). Furthermore, “it was the most barbaric method used by the Guatemalan intelligence that was massively deployed at some moments during the internal armed conflict. Forced disappearance generates extreme uncertainty about the whereabouts of the victims and their physical and psychological well-being” (Cabañas Por Mayra n.p.). Lucrecia Molina, a survivor of state genocidal terror in Guatemala, intellectual, and activist, also points out that “When the Latin American militaries began to use the practice of the forced disappearance of people as a method of repression they believed they had discovered the perfect crime: from their inhumane logic, there are no victims, in turn, there are no perpetrators, therefore there is no crime” (*La Desaparición* 1).

Paraphrasing Michael Taussig, I think that forced disappearance under genocidal state terror deeply challenges, if not obliterates, the otherwise philosophical problem of representation (the dualities of reality and illusion, certainty and doubt), for it becomes decidedly more than a “merely” philosophical problem of ontology, epistemology, hermeneutics, and deconstruction (*Shamanism, Colonialism* 121). Rather, it becomes a high-powered medium of domination. For children, this type of domination is felt in the spaces they are most familiar with. At a very young age, they are treated as little social pariahs, carriers of a contagious political disease. Children of the killed and

disappeared, like those of the racialized Other, are forced to accept guilt by association, when many are still developing ways to understand the meaning of guilt, betrayal, love, and care. Their worlds are turned upside down, in the briefest space of time, by the alliances of the gun and the letter. As “marked” children, they are told that their parents are responsible for their own demise and for leaving their own children orphaned. Most destructively, they are prohibited from remembering their relatives as dignified human beings. As Scraton and Chadwick show, in the parallel case of Indigenous Canadian men who die in custody, “...it takes a ‘formidable alliance’ of law and medicine to produce the outcome where ‘speaking ill of the dead’ marks marginalized populations as authors of their own demise” (*Speaking Ill* 109, qtd. in Razack, “*Timely Deaths*” 4).

Raúl Nájera was only three years old, and his brother Vladimir (both members of HIJOS) one year old, when they and five other cousins (ten to fifteen years old) were violently orphaned. It was in early November, 1982, when their father was not at home, that “the forces of darkness took advantage of the night to pull out the heart and life of my family,” as Raúl recalls. They took their sisters, their grandmother, and their uncle and his wife, and left them, Raúl continues, “innocent children, unjustly crushed with grief and uncertainty.... The monsters not only snatched away the family, but with it, a village, a school, a friend...and entire life” (HIJOS Guatemala). Now, says Raúl, “I am in my twenties and I know what happened. I can see the importance of fighting back to punish the monsters that cut short the life of thousands and thousands of people and still have yet to be tried for their crimes” (n.p.). And, as he and his brother Vladimir remark, “As young people, we see the importance of breaking the silence, of stopping these criminal acts, supporting each other, finding our disappeared relatives and demanding justice and punishment for those responsible for genocide.... We joined HIJOS for every Guatemalan and for all those who died hoping for a better country, with democracy, social equality, equality of rights, hoping for life, peace, freedom” (HIJOS Guatemala n.p.).

Forced disappearance is, after all, “... a state-sponsored procedure for producing ghosts to harrowingly haunt a population into submission” (Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*. 115). This, however, is not always achieved, as the struggles of HIJOS demonstrate. Nonetheless, Gordon’s point is important. Along with the imposition and consolidation of economic repressive power, and the struggle over capitalism and democracy, there is “a lethal contest for the mastery of people’s passions, their thoughts, their dreams and nightmares, and their very capacity to imagine within, against, and beyond the constricting stranglehold of a militarized, patriarchal, Christian, oddly feudal modern capitalist polity” (Gordon, *Ghostly Matters* 115). As Gordon emphasizes, “the very essence of

this contest constitutes the fault lines and the lived culture of contemporaneity (our relations to the past and the operating conditions of social life), which occur at a certain remove from the coldness and emptiness of big words, for, in the end, one did not even need to be a believer to disappear” (*Ghostly Matters* 123-24).

Founding and participating in a youth organization has not been easy for the children of the disappeared and killed. For example, in their quotidian lives, when they least expect it, their bodies may respond to unexpected triggers, such as the music that a raped, revolutionary mother had loved, but which was then played during sessions of torture that her children were forced to witness. Some of these youth have developed severe mental illnesses. Many are hyper-alert. These conditions are exacerbated by an environment where exploitation, organized crime, and the criminalization of social movements and activists go hand in hand with the stigmatization and killing of impoverished youth, especially those who wear baggy pants and have tattoos (Samayoa *Las ejecuciones extrajudiciales de jóvenes estigmatizados*). This kind of killing is deemed “social cleansing”—a term introduced by militarized state agents in the 1980s to designate what death squads and paramilitary groups inflicted on homeless people and petty delinquents who were dragged from the streets and jails and then killed. In contexts like this, it is really extraordinary that young women and men who have directly experienced genocidal state terror organize and become socio-politically conscious.

### **Epistemic Disobedience, and the Remaking of Meanings in Struggle**

Epistemic creativity in struggle is a practice of cognitive disobedience moving towards independent and autonomous thinking, a crucial endeavor in environments made very violent. For, as Gordon points out, “These fugitive, outlaw, insurrectionary knowledges are not hidden in the institutions of official knowledge and are not derivative by-products of these institutions but are their disqualified secrets” (*Ghostly Matters* 19).

Decolonial, insurrectionary knowledges unveil, as Mignolo says, “the rhetoric and promises of modernity, showing its darker side, advocating and building global futures that aspire to the fullness of life rather than encouraging individual success at the expense of the many and the planet” (*The Darker Side* 122). Epistemic struggles by the racialized, persecuted, and oppressed deter the danger of suppressing memory in what has become a dominant trait of contemporary political and economic regimes (Tzvetan Todorov in Strejilevich, *El arte* 3). Progressively organized youth play an important role in these knowledge struggles, though their contributions are either not recognized, or are treated only as ephemeral street protests, “as befits their (the protestors’) age.” (Todorov in

Strejilevich, *El arte* 3). Youth create important knowledge, but, like other subaltern and racialized collectivities, they are often seen and treated as givers of testimony for others to analyze, and even when they articulate a series of conceptual tools, their expertise is not acknowledged.

I see the work of HIJOS, not as a prototype of youth organizing and of the roots of political consciousness in reactionary environments, but as an illustrative, cognitive experience showing that to be both young, and a public intellectual preoccupied with progressive transformation, is no oxymoron.

The following examples demonstrate HIJOS' epistemic struggle for decolonial human dignity and knowledges otherwise.

In HIJOS' analysis, memory is neither pure nor static (*Ofensiva de la Memoria: Genocidio los Pueblos van a Juzgarte*):

Our memory does not respond to elites' interests. Our memory is not kept in a box or institutionalized in memorializing acts that only re-enact pain as something that immobilizes. Our memory is alive; it comes from the woman who resisted the sword and the cross [of the Spanish conquest]; from the grandfather who rebelled against a landlord in a German-owned coffee plantation; from the student, who in the face of misery and the pain of the people traded their pencil for a fusil. Our memory is the memory of the poet and the politically conscious intellectual who, from the social trenches, denounced injustice and committed themselves to a project of transformation. (*Ofensiva de la Memoria* n.p.)

HIJOS conceive memory in rebellion because

it is the voice, the word, the action and the idea that rebel against oppression. Because rebellion has been the song that sings in the memory of elders, of grandparents, of aunts, girlfriends and sisters, all of whom we dearly miss, and whose absence is painful, but which at the same time commits us to the construction of a political project where justice would be more than legality; it will be a legitimization of peoples' struggles for communal well-being, of just and necessary transformations. (*Ofensiva de la Memoria* n.p.)

Memory, from this perspective, Sergio Tischler and Mirna Navarro say, "is not a nostalgic and/or romantic gesture, but a way to resist that includes, in some experiences, the open rejection and negation of the most aggressive and predatory practices of capital, and the emergence of a new constellation of class struggles" ("*Tiempo y memoria*" 67).

Through active reflexivity, HIJOS have learned that memory is a relational process, in which time and space-place are interconnected phenomena. In their thinking, they are borrowing from the Maya Cosmovision, which sees time unfold in non-linear ways; in this view, time exists only through collective memory constituted by the living and the dead, both human and non-human. Furthermore, as the Maya Cosmovision and other Indigenous knowledges propose, the dead inhabit

the spirit world, which is deeply connected to the world of the living. Thus, immaterial presences count and can hurt, but can also inspire, and we must not forget that memory work is painful too, for, as a member of HIJOS notes, “the atrocities perpetrated on the bodies of your mother, father and other relatives appear in your entire self when you least expect, because it is not ‘normal’ to have a childhood full of absences; the absence of caring love, of guidance, of necessary disciplining, in short, the pain of not having the opportunity to live in a family” (Hijos inicia ofensiva DesmilitariARTE n.p.). But it is in the active stance of undefeated despair and critical hope “that we can find that present shared elements and pathways through social bodies and subjectivities get organized and articulated with the struggles of the past, and by doing so they enable collective memory, conceive communal resources and well-being, confront and resist material and immaterial dispossession of life, and generate alternatives to capitalism” (Tischler and Navarro, “*Tiempo y memoria*” 68-69).

HIJOS’ epistemic creativity sees memory as a relational process, in which immaterial political presences count, not only as the familial beloved, but as social subjectivities. These make possible a complex form of social justice, of which juridical justice is only one component. The point is not to dismiss the important role of demanding juridical justice for genocidal and other crimes against humanity, but to emphasize that rules of law are protectors of power as domination. HIJOS reject and critique the ideology that the rule of law is neutral and that juridical justice is sufficient to bring reparation and “national reconciliation.”

They say,

For many of us female and male youth, who for more than a decade have struggled for memory, truth, and justice, it is impossible to describe the way we feel about the juridical opening [they refer to opening of trials against some colonels and generals responsible for genocide] of some cases that have been stuck for years, and which now are getting moved forward as part of our demands and our claims for identity. This opening is possible because of the perseverance of many survivors and of communities which, amidst quotidian violence, continuous plundering of territories and resources, and of repression under a renovated, economic, liberal context, never gave up their commitment to “Justice for Genocide.”

However, it is cause for indignation that, behind the trials against the military responsible for genocide, the fact gets silenced that genocide had, as its core, the control and pacification of peoples, in order to enable the plundering of natural communal resources. We are moved and outraged by every dispossession and forced eviction, of each stealing of land, of each hungry child who is denied their voice within an economic system that accommodates greed and perversity very well. (HIJOS No Seas Chafa, n.p.)

The determination to eliminate those invented as “the internal enemy,” as Nora Strejilevich notes, “gets dressed in legal clothes” (Strejilevich, *El arte* 47). This is especially so in societies where

the figure of the political prisoner did not exist, such as Guatemala. Juridical justice, as important as it is, limits the rehumanization of peoples discarded and treated as disposable for centuries. When this justice is the sole objective for “national reconciliation,” the fact that access even to this limited justice is extremely constrained for the racialized working classes also gets lost. When a bit of this justice is achieved, proponents of the juridical process will say that “the system works,” meaning the system whose mentality is that “all are equal before the law.”

HIJOS, like Zapatistas, question the logic and the content of Westerncentric, bourgeois knowledge that naturalizes empty signifiers such as democracy, equality, justice, and citizenship. Wendy Méndez, on behalf of HIJOS, brilliantly and succinctly asserts that people like her mother, as well as thousands others, had the absolute entitlement to “exercise their citizenship in revolutionary movements if they so desired” (Audiencia Pública. Caso Gudiel Álvarez n.p.). This conceptualization of citizenship is a true act of decolonial delinking, because the figure of the human and of the citizen should not be placed in a hierarchy in which the citizen is more valued than the human; indeed, it is the human, in particular the racialized, exploited “Other,” which must prevail. In demonized spaces like revolutionary movements, to think of citizenship as an exercise of free will is a truly innovative re-signifying of the political and social worlds. Like that of Zapatistas and other subjugated collectivities, HIJOS’ questioning “contributes to the opening of new avenues to imagine democratic futures” (Mignolo, *The Darker Side* 234). What decolonial social movements reject, Mignolo states, is universality understood as an abstract universal grounded in mono-logic, or the diversity of the only option—the Western way (*The Darker Side* 234-35, 296).

### **Community Arts and the Reclaiming of Public Spaces**

Murals have played a role throughout the history of resistance in Guatemala, especially at urban sites such as the Autonomous University of San Carlos, where renowned national artists committed to social justice created beautiful and meaningful works of art, such as the one below by Arnoldo Ramírez Anaya, in the 1970s (in Saraguatue Cuando los de abajo piensan los de arriba tiemblan). HIJOS’ innovation in this tradition lies in their collective practice. Because, in contexts where racism and genocidal state terror go hand in hand, and “where artists have usually been professionals and outsiders, community mural production is an empowering and radical act (Valdez Ruvalcaba *Painting by Listening: Participatory Community Mural Production*, 106). Visual art, Gomez-Barris notes, “has the capacity to speak to, contest, elaborate upon, and produce collective

experiences that escape the domain of ‘politics as usual’” (*Where Memory Dwells* 78). And, she adds, “Visual art carves out new modes of representation that escape the binary logic of history and memory whose reductionist outcome expresses itself as erasure of the experience of violence” (*Where Memory Dwells* 79).



**Figure 1: “Woman in Our Struggle, the Rifle is Missing.” Painted by Arnolando Ramírez Anaya and photographed by Mauro Calanchina.**

HIJOS’ community and street arts reclaim public spaces and places that have become more prominently privatized in globalized, neoliberal times. This artistic work also destigmatizes sites that became vilified as communist and terrorist nests harboring anti-patriotic practices and ideas. In many of these places, massive kidnappings of union leaders took place. Community arts by HIJOS make visible the lives and dreams of revolutionary and progressive women and men whose memories have been suppressed and criminalized in national narratives, or sanitized in some progressive circles. The beautifully conceived mural-in-progress below represents intergenerational, revolutionary citizenship rooted in the Maya symbols of corn and clothes, interconnected with the power of Guatemalan mountains and volcanoes.



Figure 2: Women and men from different revolutionary generations. (HIJOS 2012)

The use of multilayered color is very important in HIJOS' work, for it, in part, signifies the making of their own lives and their own worldviews, while they celebrate and honour revolutionary historical memory. HIJOS' use of multicolor in their murals is a very significant step forward in their individual and healing process; a process they insist has been enabled by their collective work towards social justice. It also reflects their commitment to include joy and hope in their socio-political life and to challenge hegemonic discursive practices that pathologize survivors of genocidal and structural violence. Through community arts, HIJOS refuse the imposition of the universal claim in which "the present is the only site of the real, while dismissing the past as archaic." (Vazquez, "Modernity, Coloniality", n.p.). In this regard, Wendy Méndez notes:

The reconstruction of historical memory of the life and history of the Guatemalan youth makes sense when one understands the necessity of the struggle in the present. But moreover, when female and male youth learn that the curse of history can be changed to benefit their community and humanity at large.... The reflection about life is a great challenge, for it is not only about remembering, mourning, and flowers.... [We] have to activate our celebration of life, of the dignity of people, of the right to struggle; only then we will make it possible for our female and male heroes and martyrs to vindicate their memory.... Only then will historical memory be converted into a necessary tool in the anti-imperialist struggle that today is very important for the present and future of Latin America. (Mendoza, Guatemala. Entrevista con Wendy Méndez 49)

To struggle for the past and present dignity of oppressed, racialized, and persecuted women and men is a right whose deep meanings are captured in HIJOS' poetry. The following poem by Raúl Nájera demonstrates this poignantly, when he writes about women, mothers, and sisters who have practiced humanity and solidarity since they were little girls, and have fought against imperial and capitalist silences:

**An Eternal and Silencing Tie to Hope**  
The umbilical cord,



a secret behind an honest and sweet smile;  
the brownness of her hair,  
the blackness of her eyes,  
her unbreakable commitment;  
her honesty in pointing out what was incoherent;  
her conviction in victory,  
her anger in the face of dispossession.  
Her eternal passion for literacy.  
She, who devoured colorful *alborotos*<sup>5</sup>...  
All of that,  
...and her indomitable decision to dress in olive green clothes, and to go to the mountains;  
to swallow all the sadness at remembering her family;  
and her passion to give everything she had in herself to the future dawns of hopes!!!

The executioners will never understand this...  
Because what they were looking for was not in her head,  
Or in the Leninist books they burnt out;  
nor in the names they asked for or in the camp they were searching for!  
She carried it in her blood and in her soul since she was a girl... protecting little worms and  
ants;  
or when she was baking little mud cakes to give to everybody...

Everything stays intact in the bones that are now coming out to life,  
for in them there is an impenetrable secret... in small chains that unite us, in the tenderness  
and firmness of dreams.

Because hope is carried in the soul and in the blood;  
it is inherited in with rebellious genes!  
because in the advent of times there will always be poets, eternal guerrilla women and singers  
of truth. That is the DNA that binds us.  
To all the disappeared who will no longer remain unknown, for they never imagined so  
many lives would be born out of that silence.

—Raúl Nájera, February 26, 2012 (my translation)

**Un lazo eterno y silencioso de esperanza.**

El cordón umbilical,  
El secreto detrás de la sonrisa dulce y franca  
El castaño de su pelo  
El negro de sus ojos.

Su compromiso Inquebrantable  
Su desempacho en señalar lo incoherente  
Su convicción en la victoria,  
Su rabia ante el despojo.  
Su pasión de alfabetizadora eterna, devoradora de alborotos de colores.  
Todo aquello,  
...y su decisión inquebrantable de tomar el verde olivo y largarse a la montaña,  
de tragarse la tristeza con recuerdos de familia y darlo todo por las alboradas futuras de  
esperanza!!!!

Jamás lo entenderían los verdugos....  
No estaba en su cabeza ni en los libros leninistas que quemaron!  
Ni en los nombres que pidieron ni en el campamento que buscaban!  
Lo llevó en la sangre y en el alma desde niña...  
Protegiendo gusanitos, hormigas y lombrices,  
haciendo pastelitos de lodo para regalarle a medio mundo...

Todo quedó intacto en los huesos que hoy reviven,  
ahí quedó el secreto inescrutable...  
en cadenitas que nos unen la ternura y la firmeza de los sueños.

Porque la esperanza se lleva en el alma y en la sangre...  
Se hereda con genes rebeldes!  
para que al transcurso de los tiempos siempre nazcan poetas, eternas guerrilleras y cantores  
de verdades.  
Es el ADN que nos une.  
-Por los desaparecidos y desaparecidas que dejan de ser anónimas.  
Jamás se imaginaron y nacieron muchas vidas desde aquel silencio.

In light of these examples, we can plainly see that for HIJOS, memory is a territory in dispute, a contested place and space. Memory, they say,

is the common place where what happened, and what is happening as well what that can, happen.... Our understanding of memory can be compared to a fertile soil, where grandmothers and grandfathers planted the seed for our ways of being, doing, and seeing... it is where our origins, our being, our understandings and knowledges are kept.... That is why we not only have one language, one mother tongue. We have a way of saying that acquires true meaning --for those of us who share memory, origins, political experiences and knowledges, which we have been elaborating and recreating based on conviviality, shared work and community. (*Memoria Territorio en Disputa* n.p.)

The epistemic, political, and artistic contributions of HIJOS demonstrate that children and young adults who have decided, in the face of unimaginable pain and daily barriers, to fight to reclaim the humanity, dignity and respect of those whose lives and deaths have been shattered and demonized, are contributing step by step to decolonial justice. For, after all, as Vazquez reminds us, "...the memory of suffering cannot be burnt down, it cannot be totally erased... [because] the consciousness of the suffering of the previous generations is the source of strength for a politics of time of liberation. The liberation from the modern politics of time is a fight for a 'memory that looks for the future against oblivion'" ("Modernity Coloniality", n.p. ).



## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> HIJOS was first formed as a national organization in Argentina in 1995. Soon, chapters emerged in other Latin American Countries, Europe, and Canada (Sundberg 2007, 149).

<sup>2</sup>This project launched by the Catholic Church, under the leadership of Bishop Juan Gerardi, formed the basis for CEH's work and caused the assassination of Gerardi, two days after REMHI was made public in 1998.

<sup>3</sup> I have translated all the material from HIJOS-Guatemala from the original Spanish.

<sup>4</sup>A sweet food made of sorghum and unrefined brown sugar.

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