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# **Stories About Past, Present, And Future:**

## **Memory and Narrative between Refugee Pasts and Migrant Futures among Young People in Chiapas, Mexico**

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### **Abstract**

*This article explores processes of memory among diasporic children and grandchildren of Guatemalan refugees, by reflecting on a postmemorial theatre project in Southern Mexico. The theatrical performances enable me to analyse how young research participants perform their 'postmemorial repertoire' and how their performances are being evaluated by older residents. The encounters and clashes between eye-witness accounts and postmemorial mediation and imagination are both conflictive as well as productive. In a second step, the postmemorial processes are put in conversation with the ways young people participate actively in the creation of other types of memory, which are anticipatory and contain narratives around migration.*

## Introduction

Yeni (sixteen years old) and Ivan (seventeen years old) enter the stage. It is not your typical stage with stairs but rather a 360-degree circle of chairs and benches. The crowd consists of the two performers' fellow students from the local middle- and high-school, as well as the wider public of older residents, many of whom are either family-members or neighbours of the young actors. Yeni carries a ball with her, puts it on the ground and the two start passing the ball back and forth. 'What have you been up to my friend?' is Yeni's question to which Ivan responds by telling her that he will soon leave town. 'Where are you going?' asks Yeni, 'Up there *pa'l Norte*<sup>1</sup>, you know how it is.' Yeni nods and they keep on passing the ball. 'I am leaving with a huge doubt though,' Ivan says suddenly. 'I am leaving without knowing the history of my people.' Yeni looks at him with astonishment and replies that she has heard from her granddad that it is the water which tells these stories from the past, but only if one listens. Ivan laughs and says that it sounds like her granddad is a bit *loco*, he looks at Yeni more serious and says, 'but hey why not, go on then, tell me this story.' The two disappear and the other ten actors enter the stage which is the beginning of a theatre play telling the story of La Gloria, the town they all grew up in. The young actors portray the persecution that their parents and grandparents suffered during the Guatemalan civil war and the plight of the first years in Chiapas, when they lived here as refugees during the early 1980's. The play ends with the founding of their hometown, where the performance takes place. The young actors, who were all born more than fifteen years after these events (La Gloria was founded in 1984) get together in a circle after the last scene and yell '*Muchas – Muchas gracias*'. (Fieldnotes 05/06/2018)

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<sup>1</sup> Literally 'The North', a frequently used phrase throughout Central America to refer to the United States of America.

This article is based on fieldwork I carried out in Chiapas throughout 2017 and 2018 with young people who are children and grandchildren of refugees from Guatemala living in South-eastern Mexico. My background in youth work means that the entire project was shaped by considerations driven not only by ethnographic research, but also by creative, participatory and performance-oriented youth work<sup>2</sup>. I interacted with research participants in a variety of forms: by teaching English at the local high-school, facilitating creative workshops and projects in after-school hours, but also by hanging out during our free-time. We worked on a number of creative projects throughout fieldwork. One of them was the production of the theatre play which constitutes the point of departure for this article. The play resulted from my fieldwork-initiative of starting a youth group for various types of informal learning. The play was developed during the months of April and May 2018 together with two Guatemalan theatre artists and first shown to the wider public in La Gloria on June 5<sup>th</sup> of the same year. The play gives an insight into the young group members' active participation and engagement in the telling and re-telling, making and re-making of memory in La Gloria. Young people mediate, adapt and perform the narratives of La Gloria's past (events that predate their own birth). However, as this article argues, the young participants are equally invested in narratives and aspirations in relation to contemporary migratory movements to the US (and elsewhere). Before engaging in the narratives and the play itself, I will briefly summarise the historic background.

### **La Gloria and Its Historical Background**

La Gloria is a town of about 2300 inhabitants (Ruiz-Lagier 2013: 113<sup>3</sup>) located in Chiapas just thirty kilometres from the Mexico-Guatemalan border. In the years following its foundation in 1984, US-bound migration quickly became a common pattern. Nowadays,

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<sup>2</sup> The overlaps between youth work and anthropological analysis are underexplored in anthropology, as I show elsewhere (Gembus 2017).

<sup>3</sup> This is based on government statistics, however, from conversations I had in town, it is likely that this number was significantly higher during my fieldwork and now in 2020.

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remittances from the US or money being sent from other parts of Mexico (especially from the tourist destinations of the *Riviera Maya* in Quintana Roo) make up the subsistence of most families. At the same time, the majority of households maintain some small-plot farming for their own consumption, as well as other small-scale economic endeavours such as providing local taxi services, running small convenience stores, selling food or working locally as builders or handymen.

La Gloria's foundation in 1984 is closely linked to Guatemala's thirty-six years of civil war (1960-1996) between insurgent groups<sup>4</sup> and several *juntas* of military dictatorships, embedded in cold-war dynamics. Especially the early 1980's saw an intensification of the military's counter-insurgency campaigns in the countryside. It was assumed that the *guerrilla*-groups were gaining vast support from the mostly indigenous rural population. The military regimes of Lucas Garcia (1978-1982) and Ríos Montt (1982-1983) responded with brutal 'scorched earth' campaigns, including massacres and mass-disappearances.<sup>5</sup>

These years of escalating violence and persecution are known throughout Guatemala as *la violencia*. At the same time in Chiapas, on the Mexican side of the border this period is remembered as *el refugio*, stressing the fact that between 150,000 and 250,000 people – mostly speakers of pre-hispanic languages from the Guatemalan highlands – crossed the border into Mexico. La Gloria is one of the towns that resulted from the processes designated as *la violencia* and *el refugio*. After the UNHCR-administrated camp, *El Chupadero*, was attacked by the Guatemalan military in 1984, a group of mostly Akateko-speaking refugees (who originated from the Guatemalan region of San Miguel Acatán) decided to abandon life in the camps and found a town of their own. The refugees' trajectory took many different forms in the late 1980's and early 1990's: while some

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<sup>4</sup> There were several revolutionary groups throughout the years, however, they are often subsumed under the overarching label *la guerrilla*.

<sup>5</sup> The full scale of atrocities and human rights violations committed by the military during these years are laid out in detail in the REMHI (Recovery of Historical Memory) report published at the end of the 1990's (REMHI 1999). Both dictators were persecuted for crimes against humanity in the 2000's. Lucas Garcia died in his Venezuelan exile in 2006, while Ríos Montt was sentenced for genocide in 2013. The sentence was revoked a couple of days later under dubious circumstances and Ríos Montt died in 2018 before the trial was completed. For a more in-depth analysis of the trials see Struesse et. al. 2013.

migrated further into the Mexican north and subsequently to the United States, others returned to Guatemala<sup>6</sup>; others again settled permanently in Southern Mexico.

The past and the ways it is remembered play a major role throughout this article. However, its focus is not on the Guatemalan civil war, *el refugio*, or the foundation of La Gloria as historical events. Instead, I explore the ways in which these are imagined, mediated, and performed by the young research participants (and others), especially in form of the mentioned theatre play, the development of which I document in the next section.

### **The Play and Its Background**

The process of developing a theatre play together with young participants in La Gloria was a central part of my fieldwork experience that directly exposed me to the ways in which my young interlocutors perform and (re)imagine their town's and family's history. Having started out field research by teaching English at La Gloria's local high-school, after a couple of months I proposed to carry out creative activities outside school-hours. I called for an initial meeting, which was attended by twelve young people who were eager to get involved. La Gloria's past was a shared topic of interest among the attendees, and we started exploring it by interviewing older residents and carrying out a photography project. A process was initiated, based on considerations and methods from creative, participatory, and performance-oriented youth work, which the group called "*Yetu'-Nanik-Satajtoj*" (the Akateko words for 'past', 'present', and 'future') and which lay the foundations for the theatre play we developed a couple of months later.

Throughout the months of April and May 2018, two Guatemalan theatre artists came to La Gloria (upon my invitation) to work on the play. The group gave itself the name

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<sup>6</sup> This happened on a government-sponsored returnee programme established after the 1996 Peace Accords between the URNG (Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unit or *la guerrilla*) and the Guatemalan military.

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*Jocox*<sup>7</sup> and decided to showcase their work in form of an event commemorating the town's foundation. Later, the play was shown in other parts of the region (mostly those with a similar historical background) and in various parts of Guatemala as part of a cultural festival called *FicMayab*'.

The play itself is about 30 minutes long and consists of eight scenes which are tied together by the narration of the town's history, as it is collectively told during the annual patron-saint celebration. This is an important aspect for the analysis to follow. The *Feria de San Miguel*<sup>8</sup> in La Gloria lasts three days and to a certain degree marks the beginning of a new cycle, since local representatives are re-appointed after the *feria* each year. The town's history is publicly told annually on the first day of the celebration. The narration starts with the 'ethnogenesis'<sup>9</sup> of the *Akateko/Miguel* people: the appearance of Saint Michael to a young woman called Maria by the river Acatán. This is followed by the narration of the Akatekos' persecution during *la violencia* (early 1980's in Guatemala), their flight from Guatemala, and their arrival in Chiapas during *el refugio*. Finally, the narration finishes with the founding of La Gloria. I will refer to this exact sequence of narrations as the 'La Gloria-story' throughout the article.

When discussing the possible content of our play with the group, the decision was taken quite quickly. It had to be the story of their town's foundation, or 'our story', as Yeni, one of the *Jocox* members, called it. The group decided to invite Don Matias, a

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<sup>7</sup> The group's name refers to a species of Atta leaf-cutter ants that only appear once a year in this region after the first heavy annual rainfalls in May/June. This marks the beginning of the rainy season and young people often 'collect' bags full of these ants which are considered a local delicacy (fried and served with chilli powder and lime juice). The hiding and migrating that these ants do annually reminded the young people of their (grand-) parents' history. Coincidentally, the last phase of rehearsals and the first public showing of our play in La Gloria on June 5<sup>th</sup> 2018 took place exactly during the weeks that the ants were appearing.

<sup>8</sup> Literally 'Saint Michael Fair'. This is the most common name for the annual patron saint celebration as in many towns of the Guatemalan and Chiapan highlands the annual celebration of a patron-saint is the highlight of the annual event calendar. People in La Gloria celebrate Mekel/San Miguel or Saint Michael, which refers back to their origins in San Miguel Acatán.

<sup>9</sup> I use the term 'ethnogenesis' here as a practical term; an exploration of the controversies around its concept would extend the scope of this article, hence, I use it in quotation marks.

40-year-old local *promotor cultural*<sup>10</sup> who has been narrating the La Gloria-story during the patron-saint celebration for a number of years. His narration was going to accompany the action on stage. While the content of the play is mostly made up of La Gloria's past, the *Jocox* members decided to add an extra scene where they metaphorically represent La Gloria's contemporary social divisions (economic, political, etc.). The group further decided to frame the entire play with a beginning and end scenes which tell the 'side story' of two young people saying goodbye to each other as one of them is about to migrate to the US.

Throughout the process, my relationship with the young interlocutors was marked by the dynamics between facilitator and workshop participants. Despite my constant attempts to maximise the young people's participation (in accordance with the common youth work principles<sup>11</sup>) I was clearly being seen as somewhat in charge of the activities, linked to my role as a teacher in school, as well as to my broader status of being a privileged outsider (a white European adult male in a setting where relationships are framed by the continuum of coloniality). Friendships developed among the *Jocox* members but also with me as I was getting to know the twelve regular participants better over time. Especially during various excursions, overnight trips, and other activities outside of La Gloria, I was able to form a strong bond with the group members whom I was getting to know in a variety of settings, including their familial space.

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<sup>10</sup> Cultural promoter (my translation) a position created in the UNHCR camps alongside health and educational promoters (*promotores de salud, promotores de educacion*). Camp residents with basic education were trained to assume leadership positions in these fields. While the programme officially ended in 2004 there are a couple of local *promotores* who continue their work on a voluntary basis up to the day.

<sup>11</sup> My practice is specifically informed by the British urban context where youth work is considered a distinctive practice of informal education based on young people's voluntary participation and a 'commitment to tipping these [power] balances in young people's favour' (Davies 2015, 103).



### **Storytelling, Memory and Postmemory**

The play represents a specific overlap between memory and storytelling, which is relevant to the young interlocutors' relationship to the past. Remembering, forgetting, and reproducing memory often appears as a site for many intersecting (often contemporary) issues. These temporal imaginings of the past can tell us a great deal about the present, especially, when they are 'remembered' by young people who were born many years after the events occurred. The intersubjectivity of memory is stressed by Halbwachs: 'all memories are [...] linked to ideas we share with many others [...] A memory occurs to us because we are surrounded by other memories that link to it' (1992 [1925]: 38-39). He describes a dialectic relationship between individual and collective memory where personal experiences are couched within collective narratives of past events. These personal memories are oftentimes re-produced for the consumptions of others in the form of a story. Similarly, Jackson reminds us that 'no story is simply an imitation of events as they actually occurred' and that 'by constructing, relating and sharing stories people contrive to restore viability to their relationship with others' (Jackson 2002: 16, 18). The relational and intersubjective understanding of storytelling resonates with the young participants' imaginations and performances of La Gloria's past: potentialities of interaction are created through these performances. Memory and storytelling work together and to a certain extent can be seen as interrelated parts of the same process. The intersubjectivity of storytelling bears possibilities of constituting individual and collective memory as 'stories are inevitably revised in memory and reworked as they pass through the hands and minds of a community' (Jackson 2002: 231).

Young La Gloria-residents do not only relate to others (peers as well as the older generation) by performing the past but also contribute to the collective memory processes by re-telling and mediating the uniformly told La Gloria-story. These memories are not based on eye-witnessed first-hand experiences of events but rather constitute themselves in the act of listening to stories from older community and family members. As Bellino points out, young people in Guatemala 'did not live the violence but inherited its legacies

[...] the symbolic remnants of the conflict [...] and the uncertainty about whether and when the future might get better' (2017: 5), and this seems to be the case also for young people in the Guatemalan diaspora in South-Mexico. Marianne Hirsch's conceptualisation of postmemory resonates further with the case I am describing, where 'descendants of survivors [...] of massive traumatic events connect so deeply to the previous generation's remembrances of the past that they have to call that connection *memory*' (2008: 105-106).

Precisely here lies the arguments of my article. Young people in La Gloria not only reactivate and re-embody the past in the present through the telling of 'their (his)story', but also become active participants in the making of anticipatory memory. The term 'anticipatory memory' will be used throughout the article referring to the young interlocutors' engagement in the acts of storytelling about contemporary (US-bound) migration. Their own biographies (and those of their parents and grandparents) are interlinked with the present since they feed the young interlocutors' expectations, aspirations, and the futures they imagine. The constant telling and re-telling of narratives around a specific trope constitutes something that could be called 'memory'. Young people are engaged actors in the process of creating memory through retrospective (postmemorial), as well as anticipatory storytelling around the topic of migration. The relation between the past and the future will be explored in the second part of the article, showing how La Gloria is situated as a transitional, yet stable location between the two temporalities, and inhabited by youths who negotiate both notions narratively and include them in their project of self-making. As Bellino puts it, young people 'interpret, reconstruct and place themselves within these narratives' (2017: 8), which make the past relevant in the present as well as in the future. The young actors express their postmemorial repertoire aesthetically and creatively through the play in which they become active participants in the social making of memory. The telling creates new forms of inter-subjectivity with others (inter and intra-generational), which has further implications not only for the retrospective postmemorial processes but also for the anticipatory story-telling and memory of migration. The young interlocutors mediate and negotiate their very own ways of remembering and aspiring (past, present and future), which through storytelling and memory become shared and collective processes; 'once verbalized the individual's memories are fused with the

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inter-subjective symbolic system of language and are, strictly speaking, no longer a purely exclusive and inalienable property' (Hirsch 2008: 110). These forms of sociality and inter-subjectivity through memory and storytelling are equally found in postmemorial and in anticipatory memory processes. Neither of these processes are without conflict, as we can see in the following instance when lived memory and the storytelling of postmemory collide:

A week has gone by since the *Jocox* theatre troupe presented their play for the first time in La Gloria and today is my first day back. I get dropped off by the *combi*<sup>12</sup> at the main road, people greet me friendly and I am keen to know what they thought of the event. 'Good, very good, we liked it,'<sup>13</sup> I hear some of them saying, but nobody really wants to go into details. I walk a bit further and run into Don Gonzalez, a cordial, slightly older man whom I know from the local high school. He is an active member of the parental committee, always around doing maintenance work or talking to the head-teacher. He is also well known in town for having been involved with the *guerrilla* back in Guatemala in the 1980's, as have many others. However, he is one of the few that I have heard speaking about it rather openly. 'How did you like the play?' I want to know. He thinks for a moment and then says: 'Yeah it was alright, but you guys really should've mentioned the names of the towns in Guatemala where massacres happened and why were they all dressed in black? They didn't look like soldiers, *guerrilleros* or *campesinos*<sup>14</sup> at all, they were all wearing the same thing and that is not what people looked like back then. I know what they looked like; I saw it with my own eyes.' (Fieldnotes 12/06/2018)

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<sup>12</sup> This is a term commonly used in Chiapas referring to mini vans used for public transport.

<sup>13</sup> The phrases that appear here in quotation marks are paraphrased adaptations of what people said as they appear in my fieldnotes.

<sup>14</sup> 'Farmers' (my translation).

Marianne Hirsch notes that 'postmemory is not identical to memory' (2008: 109) and precisely the distinction between lived memory and staged postmemorial display becomes clear when Don Gonzalez insists on the play's failure to authentically represent 'what really happened'. Don Gonzalez's account takes issue with what he deems to be a 'misrepresentation' of the events he saw 'with his own eyes'. The young actors' postmemorial mediation and imagination suddenly stand in contrast to the claims of truth and authenticity made by Don Gonzalez. These clashes between contemporary witness accounts and the staged postmemorial performances showcase the work that postmemory does and how it engages young people in a process of making, imagining, embodying, and performing the past rather than factually remembering an experience; 'the index of postmemory (as opposed to memory) is the performative index, shaped more and more by affect, need and desire as time and distance attenuate the links to authenticity and "truth"' (Hirsch 2008: 124).

The dispute about the 'authentic' representation of the past brings other contemporary conflictive dynamics to the forefront, especially regarding the social dynamics between older and younger residents in La Gloria. During an interview, Ivan, one of the young actors, said:

The older people here don't think much of us young people [...] I think the majority of them would say that we young people are not like back then anymore [...] that we are just out there smoking and drinking [...] that we don't give a damn about anything and don't even care about working and I think they would even say that the youth here is going to shit.<sup>15</sup>

I came across these conflicts in many different domains of everyday life in La Gloria. It was common for young people to feel misunderstood by the older residents, and for older residents to lament over the younger people's failure to uphold their customs. In numerous conversations young residents expressed how they felt excluded from town-wide decisions

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<sup>15</sup> Interview 05/09/2018 (my translation).

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and that older residents dismissively talked about them as the ‘good-for-nothing’ generation. These tensions are present in Don Gonzalez’s lament of the young actors’ failure to represent history ‘in the right way’, as he seems to have misunderstood their artistic interpretation and mediated performance of the La Gloria-story. These conflicts give way to questions that inquire the ownership of history – more specifically, ‘What do these tensions between different generations’ ways of knowing and representing the past tell us about their relation to history, to the future, and to one another?’

The relationship described by Diana Taylor (2003) between the archive and the repertoire as modalities of memory comes to mind here. The archival forms of remembrance ‘from the beginning sustain power’ since they are linked to myths of endurance (transcending time and space), as well as possessing a supposed nature of incorruptibility, being ‘immunized against alterity’ (Taylor 2003: 19). In contrast, ‘repertoire’, refers to the embodied acts of memory that are considered ephemeral and nonreproducible types of knowledge which could be prone to manipulation. Taylor describes how these two modalities of memory ‘exist in a constant state of interaction’, however, also how ‘the tendency has been to banish the repertoire to the past’ (2003: 21). Coming back to our example, we can understand Don Gonzalez’s statement about historic authenticity as a claim to his direct eye-witness accounts being the type of archival memory which supposedly is resistant to change. Don Gonzalez stresses a certain authority that his account, as an eye-witness, has over the way in which young La Gloria-residents imagine the past. His claim is that what he saw with his own eyes cannot be changed and that any attempt of representing it, will have to strive to come close to his account. The insinuated authority of the archive is juxtaposed with the seemingly subordinate embodied forms of knowledge and memory (which Taylor describes as repertoire) and their representation through the *Jocox*-group’s performance. However, Don Gonzalez is not the only person making claims of authenticity.

It is the last week before the first showing of the play and one of the first times Matias joins us for a whole session to rehearse how his narration will fit in with the scenes already developed by the group. We are in the middle of

rehearsing a scene that shows the re-building of livelihoods in the UNHCR camps in 1982-1983 immediately after the first mass-exodus. In pairs the young actors are creating images with their bodies representing different tasks such as lighting a fire, making *tortillas*, and most importantly, re-building houses. A couple of weeks earlier we had a conversation with the group about how to display these actions. It was agreed that the use of props would complicate many of the procedures on stage and we decided that this scene would mostly rely on gestures and bodily expression. Matias looks at Danny and Ivan who use their invisible hammers and nails to construct an equally invisible house. The scene stops and the young people turn to Matias to say hello. We form a circle and I point out that with Matias, we now have someone here amongst us, who lived exactly these experiences *en carne propia*<sup>16</sup>. Matias must have been two or three years old when people were living in the camps. Everyone is looking at Matias now and he explains: 'Well yes, you're doing well, but pay attention to the details of what you are showing.' He turns to Danny and Ivan: 'Look, for example, in the camps people were living in tents not in houses, there was no wood, there were no nails, it was all plastic sheets and branches; that's how we lived.' (Fieldnotes 01/06/2018)

Matias's role as a narrator within the play meant that he became an integral part of the creative process itself, which further opened up analytical spaces that illustrate notions of the relationships between eyewitnesses and those born after the events. Matias's claim is similar to Don Gonzalez's: he also appeals to an authentic representation of the events. However, he is doing so from a genealogically different perspective. Matias himself (genealogically speaking), belongs to what could be called 'the generation in-between'. He experienced *la violencia* and *el refugio* as a very young child, most likely having been too young to actively participate, and potentially remembering very little of the events' details. His role as an intermediate in the genealogical tapestry of memory in La Gloria, creates links within the sometimes-tense relationships between the generations. Within the process

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<sup>16</sup> Literally 'in one's own flesh' (my translation). This is a frequent phrase in Spanish meaning 'first-hand experience'.

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of the play's development Matias often took on the role of a 'bridge' between the eyewitnesses that experienced the violence and fled as adults, and the young participants who were born many years after. This is reiterated by his role as narrator of the annual re-telling during the patron-saint celebration, which Matias himself calls a 'reminder' and an appeal directed at the younger residents to give continuity to the telling of this narrative.

The young actors who have heard Matias tell the La Gloria-story multiple times throughout their upbringing, decided to make his narration a central part of the play. It is exactly here where the seemingly archival (historical) eye-witnessed memory (in form of Matias's narration<sup>17</sup>) and young people's postmemorial repertoire of imagination and mediation collide, interact, and sometimes clash with each other. The participants decided to include Matias in the play as a narrator, representing the generally-accepted and reproduced La Gloria-story, which can be read as an effort to maintain a certain connection to the archival 'authenticity' and social authority of former generations. It seems that the young group-members felt a need to validate their 'version' of the La Gloria-story by connecting it to the already approved and commonly accepted historic account that initiates the most important festivity in town.

The La Gloria-story starts with the 'Akateko-ethnogenesis' (the appearance of Saint Michael a narrative that has been circulating since the evangelisation of the region in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century). In their play the *Jocox*-members portray the appearance of Saint Michael, thus, establish a metaphysical and perennial link to their predecessors. This link goes further than relating to those who were alive in the 1980's, many of whom the young actors will still have met in person. The link to the 'ethnogenesis' rather creates an ontological connection to the whole tempo-spatially disperse spectrum of *antepasados*<sup>18</sup> and the very origins of the Akatekos as a people. It is a claim of specific importance in a cosmological landscape where ancestral connectivity plays a major role. Pre-hispanic *costumbre*<sup>19</sup> is rarely

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<sup>17</sup> That is based on what has been told as history in La Gloria since the first *Feria de San Miguel* in 1985.

<sup>18</sup> 'Ancestors' (my translation).

<sup>19</sup> Literally 'custom'; the term encompasses ritualistic practice and cosmovisions that exist in Mesoamerica and are labelled 'Maya'. The pantheistic nature of *costumbre* puts the spiritual connection to 'mother nature'

practiced in town, however, ancestral authority continues to play a major role in many domains. Both older and younger residents in La Gloria refer back to the generations before them in order to justify decisions made in the present. It continues to be a strong argument for any type of situation to invoke the ways of *nuestros abuelitos*<sup>20</sup> – a term that is used to refer to the whole spectrum of ancestors. In this case the *Jocox*-members strengthen their case of telling the town's history from their perspective. Storytelling and memory interact with ancestral connectivity; 'Stories are thus like ancestors [...] so too in time do stories become ancestral, abstracted from our individual preoccupations so that they may articulate, as myths, a vision of a shared humanity' (Jackson 2002: 250).

It is important to clarify that the publicly and collectively told La Gloria-story should not be taken at face-value when it comes to memory. Neither Don Gonzalez's own account as an eye-witness nor Matias's intervention from the perspective of 'in-between', and even less so the La Gloria-story itself, are unmediated archival accounts and therefore, not unbiased or 'resistant to change' as Taylor describes it (2003: 19). Generations of postmemorial mediation through telling and re-telling are implicit in all of them. Especially the uniformly told La Gloria-story has been mediated, altered, and interpreted in its transmission from generation to generation, thus, forming 'a collective imaginary shaped by public, generational structures of fantasy and projection [...] a shared archive of stories and images that inflect the transmission of individual and familial remembrance' (Hirsch 2008: 114). The narration however is strategically treated as 'perpetual truth' in certain moments to reiterate contemporary hierarchies.

The questions this article started with involved the ownership of history. As we can see, the tense and productive relationship between postmemory and memory provides a helpful lens through which we can see and understand the young participants' postmemorial storytelling and performance. The analysis of the archive / repertoire binary has shown how young people actively participate in the making of memory through narratives. By

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and the *antepasados* into the centre of worship where for example, the moon, water, trees, animals, etc. are linked to and treated as ancestors (Cochoy Alva 2006: 63-67).

<sup>20</sup> Literally 'our grandparents' (my translation).



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expressing their concerns and critiques of the present embedded within the most important narrative of La Gloria's history (what I have called 'La Gloria-story'), they establish a connection between themselves and the past; thus reinforce their belonging to the recent as well as ancestral collective genealogy.

### **Storytelling between Ancestral Past and Contemporary Division**

At several stages of the creative process conversations within *Jocox* came to the topic of contemporary issues that exist within La Gloria. Just as the initial title of the project, Past-Present-Future (*Yetu'-Nanik-Satajto*), suggested, investigating the past naturally led to collective thinking and analysing of the present and future. The political, economic, and religious divisions came up frequently in our group-debates, which is why the young participants decided to incorporate them into the play.

The first public showing of the play almost reaches its end, the young actors are portraying the foundation of La Gloria by showing infrastructural advances of the 1990's (the building of the clinic, the water-well, schools and electricity-posts). This is usually the moment where the scope of the La Gloria-story ends; the young actors, however, remain on stage and form a circle. They drink a glass of water which represents the foundation of the water-well, then suddenly one of them steps into the circle and shouts the word 'politics', makes a gesture of pulling 'invisible strings' which leads the other actors to be pulled around on stage. Everybody ends up in uncomfortable body positions, dispersed randomly on stage. Another actor steps forward and yells 'Economy', again causing the other actors to be pulled around on stage. (Fieldnotes 05/06/2018)



*Jocox-group displaying the 'division scene' during the first public showing of the play in La Gloria.*  
05/06/2018 Copyright Octavio Hernandez

It is during this scene that the play deviates from the uniformly told La Gloria-story. Despite being the play's shortest scene, it is here where young actors make a direct statement which links their own theatrical production to contemporary issues that dominate La Gloria's day-to-day life. The divisions are felt by the young La Gloria-residents who are invested in the ways adults divide along a variety of lines. A range of socio-economic factors divide families and individuals, for example, households regularly split into different political party-fractions (intensely felt during the 2018 national election campaigns). There is also the division into different religious denominations (specifically catholic and evangelic), which is felt rather permanently. And economic differences that further cause separation and conflict, especially, between households which receive large sums of remittances and those who do not. Such divisions are oftentimes framed as 'adult problems' by the young people, which reiterates the tense relationships between the generations (as we have seen in the interaction with Don Gonzalez and in the opinion Ivan voiced that 'adults don't think much of us young people').

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However, young people do not seem to think much of adults either, or at least during the play's development I heard a lot of critical voices about the ways La Gloria is run. In the play these observations are expressed in the short scene described above. The positioning of the scene about contemporary local hierarchies is important to highlight. The young actors' own opinions and contributions are placed right after the end of what the La Gloria-story would usually cover. Working the binary of the two memory-modalities that Taylor mentions (archive and repertoire), she concludes that 'the archive and the repertoire [...] usually work in tandem' (2003: 21); and this is precisely one of the main points of the article. The young interlocutors' postmemorial, performative repertoire is shaped by 'archival' memory and their performances are embedded in a collective repertoire of narratives. In their performances, the young actors fuse and mesh aspects from the domain of widely accepted and uniformly told memory-narratives (La Gloria-story) together with their rather ephemeral and present-oriented aspects stemming from their own observations, opinions, and critiques of their surroundings. The young people here actively participate not only in the telling and re-telling of their town's history but also in the making and re-making of collective memory, grounding their narratives in the 'archival' and accepted uniformities transmitted through genealogical lines, however, also adding their very own ideas and opinions to the account.

Ancestral connectivity allows the young actors to couch their own concerns and opinions within a continuum of ancestral storytelling. Through their active participation they manage to contextualise and situate themselves within the 'story of their town/people', thus drawing on their ancestors' authority to give weight to their own message. So when the young actors point out the political, economic, and religious divisions in town, after having portrayed their own version of the La Gloria-story, they are not speaking just as themselves anymore, but with the weight of history, tradition, and continuity behind them. Through postmemorial performance the young people's contemporary claims and concerns cease to be singular and isolated opinions but rather become collective claims that result from a shared history. Contemporary concerns and claims merge with the performances of postmemorial repertoires in order to create potentialities of collective identification with the action on stage.

## **Anticipatory Memory-in-the-making: Migration-gossip, Storytelling, and Future Aspirations**

The play ends with the two young people from the very first scene re-appearing on stage. One wears a backpack ready to go to the US and the other comes to say goodbye. Ivan asks Yeni to look after his mother and siblings while he is gone; Yeni tells him to take care of himself throughout the journey and hands him a bottle of water: 'Here, you will need it'. They hug and each one goes their way.



Two young actors from the *Jocox*-group displaying the farewell scene during a public showing in Nuevo San Juan Chamula (Chiapas) 27/08/2018 Copyright Malte Gembus

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Stories about past migration are present in La Gloria. However, an equally common trope in daily conversations are stories about present-day migration (to the US) which also made their way into the theatre play. In La Gloria friends, relatives, neighbours, and *conocidos*<sup>21</sup> regularly debate who just left and who came back, who is sending money from *El Norte* and who just lost their job, who is doing well and a *quien le va mal*<sup>22</sup>. Older people who came to Chiapas as refugees in the 1980's relate to these migration-narratives and stories through their own experiences. Younger La Gloria residents, most of whom reckon with leaving at one point or another, are exposed to and invested in the narratives and expectations regarding migration as a future prospect, trying to learn from successes and mistakes of the ones who left before them. Young people find themselves in an interesting position located between different layers and temporalities of migration. They are situated in between their grandparents' refugee experiences in form of postmemorial imagining and repertoire, while their own future-aspirations are continually shaped by the tales and stories that circulate about migrating and sending remittances.

Young people imagine retrospectively (postmemory), as well as anticipatorily, when they aspire to yet-to-be-lived futures within a continuum of migration as the principal source of their own and their family's subsistence. The young *Jocox* members playfully mediate the stories from the past and include them in their own project of self-making, while they also partake in the creation of new forms of memory through anticipatory storytelling – the memory of contemporary migration with all its inherent expectations and possibilities. The ambivalent notions and emotions attached to migration narratives are embedded in a wider system of economic necessity, however, develop a dynamic and importance of their own through consistent re-telling. Far from being static, unchangeable, or 'archival', memories are in constant creation and re-formation, engaged in the flux of real-life trajectories: a form of quotidian contemporary memory emerges that finds its expression and meaning in the play through the interaction between actors and audience, through telling and listening.

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<sup>21</sup> 'Acquaintances' (my translation).

<sup>22</sup> 'Who is not doing good' (my translation).

Bellino describes young Guatemalans as 'stuck' in a situation of 'wait-hood' in the 'liminal condition between *Guatemala at war* and *Guatemala after war*' (2017: 10). In this context, quotidian decisions of 'embracing or avoiding risk [...] when to act and when to withdraw' (2017: 12), as well as different forms of violence become expressions of their active participation. Young people in La Gloria experience wait-hood similarly in-between different temporalities of migration. They have neither come to Chiapas as refugees in the 1980's nor have they migrated to the US (yet)<sup>23</sup> in order to send remittances back to La Gloria. However, far from being passive, the liminal space of wait-hood is filled with young people actively invested in stories about past and future. The concerns about the future due to a lack of opportunities and hope is felt by young people in Guatemala and in the Guatemalan diaspora alike. The desires and expectations to counteract precarity by ways of migration specifically stems from growing up in a situation of wait-hood. The respective imagination and telling of such futures link different temporalities of migration. The young *Jocox*-members actively participate in retrospective storytelling when performing postmemorial repertoires about *la violencia* and *el refugio* (mediated with their very own contemporary concerns and opinions). However, their contemporary lives (and future aspirations) are also profoundly shaped by the omnipresent narratives around migration as one of the most pressing issues in the here and now.

Migration is not only a constant trope of conversation but deeply affects the material and social tapestry of town: individuals negotiate its significance differently according to their own experience (first or second-hand) and the context within which it is talked about. The complexities of these processes mean that migration narratives take different forms which can span from the genre of a warning-tale to the telling of an adventure-story. Among the many ways in which migration stories are narrated and negotiated one aspect is specifically relevant to our discussion of young people's role in the making and re-making of memory in La Gloria. I want to focus on the aspect of migration as a 'Rite of Passage' which speaks to underlying, intergenerational structures and relationships in town.

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<sup>23</sup> At least that was the case at the end of fieldwork in 2018; since then (as of March 2020) most of the 12 young people involved in the theatre play have left La Gloria.



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Migration is reflected in the play through the beginning and end scenes, which frame the entire story (the two young actors that say goodbye to each other). It was unthinkable for the group not to give the contemporary emigration some space within the play, however, instead of creating a scene of its own it was decided to use the farewell-story as a framing device that brings the stories from the past into the here and now. The topic of migration and the narratives around it formed part of the group's creative process since their lives as fifteen- sixteen- or seventeen-year-olds are constantly framed by migratory expectations and desires:

It is a weekday in March, the commemorative event and the first public showing of the theatre play are still at least eight weeks away. I am sitting on the *plaza* with Marco who has been one of the most regular participants in the creative workshops. We are waiting for the rest of the group to arrive and kill time doing a bit of chit-chat and cutting papers in half in preparation for an activity. Marco's face suddenly turns serious when he says: 'Malte, I have to tell you something.' I put the scissors down and look at him. He continues: 'I might not be able to participate in the event after all. It's not because I don't like what we do or anything, it's more that I don't think I will be here – like – I will soon leave to the "other side", maybe already after the vacations'. I am a bit disappointed since he had been an integral part of the group so far but also don't want to make him feel bad so I say: 'Well the school-holidays start in June, after the event so you could still take part.' 'Noooo', Marco exclaims, 'not the end of term holidays, I am talking about theese holidays, right now after Easter. You know both of my siblings have asthma and the medication is expensive, and well, we have a *conocido* who is reliable and organises these journeys, but he is leaving very soon so this my chance'.

I realise that Marco looks worried and am not quite sure what to do with the situation. Do I tell him about the dangers of the journey (things I have only heard but not seen for myself)? Do I remind him of the importance of finishing

his high-school degree? Or do I abstain from giving him any advice at all? I ask him how he feels about leaving. His face changes immediately. He smiles at me and now looks almost enthusiastic. 'Well I don't know what is going to happen, but I've heard so much about that place and I want to see it. Go there to see and experience different things, you know? But yeah at the same time I am sad about leaving everybody behind here; my family, friends and all the other people in town'. (Fieldnotes 12/03/2018)

Excitement plays a role in the way Marco talks about his anticipated journey, however, mixed with nervousness. Nervous-excitement seems to be a rather typical feeling for a young man in his last year of high-school, who is reckoning with different options for the future. In Marco's case this occurs within a framework of inter-family and town-wide pressures and expectations. Marco is the first-born of his family, which means that his desire to leave is initially driven by economic necessity. However, now being in a position where leaving becomes a real possibility, emotions of nervous excitement are invoked which make us think of general sentiments related to young adults leaving home for the first time. Despite the drastically different circumstances, I could relate to Marco's excitement which made me remember my own eagerness to explore other places when I was his age and left my family-home in Germany to work for an NGO in Guatemala.

Migration manifests itself in La Gloria in both concrete and pliable ways which are interconnected. Two (or more)-storey houses and large (and expensive) *trocas*<sup>24</sup> stand as material manifestations of remittances, fuelling the 'successful migrant' narratives that circulate in town. The re-telling of these stories together with the concrete material symbols are connoted with expectations towards young people growing up here. For many adults in La Gloria the departure of a young family/community member represents a certain *prueba de fuego*<sup>25</sup>, which shows their capability to provide for others. This is specifically

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<sup>24</sup> Spanglish word for 'pick-up truck' or any other type of SUV, used in Mexico particularly for large, new and expensive looking models.

<sup>25</sup> Literally 'trial of fire,' a phrase frequently used to describe an indicative or decisive test, similar to 'litmus test' in English.