

THE PREDICAMENT OF MAYA TEXTILES IN THE SOUTH HIGHLANDS OF  
GUATEMALA: WHAT IS AUTHENTICITY AND WHERE CAN I BUY IT?

A Thesis

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by

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## ABSTRACT

The primary objective of this thesis is to illustrate the complex socioeconomic networks of Maya women through the historical and material analysis of typical garments worn today in the South Highlands of Guatemala. Maya textiles and garments have a long history and decades of shifting political economies have produced material and symbolic changes in the dress of Maya people. Through the lens of fashion theory, this thesis discusses the pre-colonial and colonized Maya, Maya mythology, textile production histories, weaving on the back strap loom, economic change, and state violence. As the tourist economy grew during the twentieth century, the value of Maya *huipiles* (blouses) increased. Today, handwoven *huipiles* are a signifier of wealth. Much of the Maya population in Guatemala lives in poverty and are unable to afford such garments. Mass-produced, machine-made *huipil* replicas are emerging in marketplaces throughout the region. Is there a *huipil* that is more Maya?

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

In 2011 Amanda received her BFA in Textiles from Kent State University. In the fall of 2015 she began graduate study at Cornell University.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The hill which Cornell University occupies is Cayuga Nation land. This land and the colonized isthmus known today as Central America are the two spaces in which this research has developed. The acknowledgement of this land and the people to whom it rightfully belongs are of utmost importance. I am indebted to the Maya and Cayuga people.

It is impossible to mark the beginning of this, or any, project. Many moments and people have contributed to what is more a culmination of ideas than a singular, linear trajectory. One particularly salient moment was an early morning skype call between Guatemala and Ithaca, NY. Without Professor Denise N. Green's encouragement, foresight, and continuous belief in this project it may never have been printed, bound, and shelved. She saw the potential for a project when I could not see beyond my own nose and she reminded me of the ground when I had forgotten it beneath my feet. A deep thanks are owed to Professor John S Henderson with whom I could always count on a quick coffee and conversation that would be mulled over until our next coffee.

In 2009, I declared to Janice Lessman-Moss that, with her guidance, I would pursue a Bachelor's degree in textiles. Janice remains one of the greatest mentors with whom I have studied. It is her insight on the materiality of cloth, clothing, and textiles that led to this project. She demanded her students look to what is readily available, after all no weaver can access anything beyond their own means.

Harriette Roadman is a mathematician, weaver, and childhood neighbor. Importantly, she was my math tutor in high and, later, for the GRE. She helped me re-learn algebra, geometry, and the relationship between decimals and fractions as "an investment in the future of textiles," for that I am humbled.

My parents, Ron and Sally, who unconditionally supported every step leading up to and those taken during this project. I am a first generation college and graduate student. My parents did not have access to the education I have earned and they are endlessly proud of my accomplishments.

Lastly, my dearest friends and lovers who have been as much a community and family to me during the years of this endeavor. To Sergio, my dearest and sweetest friend. A person that made all of the hardships of graduate school worthwhile because, at minimum, our lives conjoined. To James for challenging the early ideas of this project and assisting in some of the final edits of this manuscript (though any and all errors are entirely my own). To Athan's probing questions, eager ears, and loving smiles. Natalie's encouragement and commiseration only anthropologists-in-training can muster. To Natasha's joy and insistence on reading Donna Haraway. To Lisa Avron who would come over at a moment's notice to discuss Latour late into the night. My comrade Alana, we are a tiny niche of Marxist fashion scholars. To my day-to-day with my fellow FSAD graduate students: Kelsie, Sarah, and Kim. To Sean, the person that said, "I'm taking the credit for this," when I made the move to Ithaca. It was he who shoved Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* in my hands years ago and who does deserve some credit, although not too much. And finally, the person that has been there day in and day out; a person I trust most and adore most; since before and after this project, my dear Chelsey.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### **Biographical Sketch**

### **Acknowledgements**

### **List of Figures**

### **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Thesis Structure

Who is Doña Lidia Amanda López López?

Research Methods

Literature Review

### **Chapter 2: Historical Context**

Popol Vuh

Pre-Colonial & Colonized Maya

Dye Industry

Men's Wear, Coffee, and War

Class, Gender, and Ethnicity in Textiles

Economy in Transition

Sompopo de Mayo

### **Chapter 3: The Loom: An Ontological Tool**

Back Strap Loom Origins and Mythologies

Techniques & Motifs

Weaving with the Back Strap Loom

Gender & Technology

Anthropomorphizing the Loom

The Loom & the Body

Social Ontology

### **Chapter 4: The Cloth**

Fiber

Cultural Value

In the Market

Regionalisms

Traje Típico

Object Analysis

Who Wears Which Huipil?

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

A Story of Huipiles

## **Works Cited**



## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. View of San Antonio Aguas Calientes. Sacatepéquez, Guatemala. Photo by author.

Figure 2. *Traje tipico* (typical dress) from San Antonio Aguas Calientes. Photo by author.

Figure 3. Regionally non-specific *traje tipico*, selected by Lidia. Photo by author.

Figure 4. Lidia Amanda López López weaving at home. Photo by author.

Figure 5. *Trazando el Camino*. Rodolfo Morales. 1990. Oil on linen 100x 80 cm (Federici, 2012:4).

Figure 6. Detail shot of *doble*. Photo by author.

Figure 7. Detail of single-faced brocade. Photo by author.

Figure 8. Two-faced brocade. Photo by author.

Figure 9. Detail of back strap loom. Photo by author.

Figure 10. Back strap loom. Photo by author.

Figure 11. Lidia unrolling a Back Strap Loom. Photo by author.

Figure 12. The heart and lung of the loom. Photo by author.

Figure 13. Author weaving. Photo by author.

Figure 14. *Huipil* in process. Photo by author.

Figure 15. Yarns purchased from Tecpán. Photo by author.

Figure 16. Example of *doble*. Photo by author.

Figure 17. *Huipil*. Photo by author.

Figure 18. Flat *huipil*. Photo by author.

Figure 19. Detail of wear. Photo by author.

Figure 20. Three belts. Bottom is machine produced, Middle is handwoven *doble*, back is handwoven mimic of *doble*. Photo by author.

Figure 21. Flat *huipil*. Photo by author.

Figure 22. Machine-made, mass-produced huipil purchased from Santa Maria de Jesus. Photo by author.

Figure 23. Front and back of *huipil* from Santa Maria. Photo by author.

## Introduction

“Each season brings, in its newest creations, various secret signals to come. Whoever understands how to read these semaphores would know in advance not only about new currents in the arts but also about new legal codes, wars, and revolutions...”

Walter Benjamin, 1999: 64

“The eternal is in any case far more the ruffle on a dress than some idea.”

Walter Benjamin, 1999: 69

On June 9, 2016 Lidia and I went to the town of Tecpán, Chimaltenango, Guatemala to buy weaving supplies. Tecpán is near Lidia’s native home, San Antonio Aguas Calientes (Figure 1), and, like San Antonio, Tecpán is lauded for its textiles. In the days leading up to our trip, Lidia spoke of the availability of beautiful yarns, the *huipiles* (blouses) of the local women, and the authenticity of goods at the weekly market. It was not a marketplace for tourists, she said, but a market for Maya people to buy or sell handmade goods and agricultural products. Upon arrival, Lidia was surprised to encounter almost no *hecho a mano textiles* (handmade textiles). To her dismay, almost everything was machine-made and yarn proved difficult to find. Confused and disappointed, we walked up and down the narrow stalls searching for anything *hecho a mano* - the only handwoven textiles we found in the citywide market were being sold beyond the other vendors out of a plastic garbage bag. It was not just the availability of items that confused us but what was being *worn* by the local women. I asked Lidia why would Maya women in a highly regarded weaving town be wearing knockoffs of their traditional dress? The price, she said. Handwoven garments require a high level of skill, are time consuming to produce, and have an ever rising price tag. *Huipiles* can take anywhere from three to six months to produce and today

they can cost up to 1,800 Quetzal or 250 US dollars. “*Antes* (before),” as Lidia said, “*huipiles* were not things to be bought” (Personal Communication, Lidia Lopez, July 14, 2016).



Figure 1. View of San Antonio Aguas Calientes, Sacatepéquez, Guatemala. Photo by author.

Clothing is not representative of identity, it *is* the actual materialization of myriad intersecting social, political, and economic positions. Evidence of structural change manifests in clothing on the street. The materiality of dress, according to Susan Kaiser (2012), intersects and becomes entangled “with the feminist cultural studies concept of articulation through ideas/concepts that are cultural, political, and social in nature” (193). Citing Marjorie Garber, Kaiser (2012) goes on to say that is necessary to historically contextualize fashion through the

embodiment of “subject positions, cultural discourses, and power relations” (193). The material and the abstract are confronted in fashion (Kaiser, 2012: 193). What can be gleaned from fashion when complex positionalities are considered in the contexts of culture and power, as Walter Benjamin (1999) suggested, fashion can materialize the “new currents”?

As the ethnographic vignette indicates, this thesis discusses the textiles produced by Maya people, particularly *huipiles*. *Huipiles* are the blouses worn by Maya women. As previously found and corroborated during my field research, it is not common for Maya women to strictly wear *huipiles* specific to their community (Green, 2009: 6; Hendrickson, 1992: 65). The practice of wearing *huipiles* from other regions signals a Pan-Maya identity and acts as a signifier of social mobility and particular class identity (Hendrickson, 1992: 65).

*Huipiles* are active, communicative, and animated agents of history, politics, social status, ethnicity, gender, and class. The garment is a materially responsive lens. Neither an anomaly nor a static relic of the past. Clothing and its relationship with the body and to the social world are universalities; therefore, Maya dress is a microcosm. Both historically and today, economic, political, and social change remains in motion as does the clothing we wear.

As the cog has turned, so has *traje típico* (Figures 2 & 3). Today, a complex issue has presented itself in the South Highlands of Guatemala. A social relation manifested in the clothing worn by Maya women has emerged out of a long, complex history. As the ethnographic vignette suggests, handwoven *huipiles* are rather expensive, so much so that many Maya people living in poverty are unable to afford the handwoven garments associated with Maya tradition.



*Figure 2.* Traje típico (typical dress) from San Antonio Aguas Calientes. Photo by author.





*Figure 3. Regionally non-specific traje típico, selected by Lidia. Photo by author.*

In response, lower cost, machine-made *huipiles* have grown in popularity. Does this economic reality threaten the livelihood of Maya weavers? Weavers like Lidia are saddened by the less expensive alternative and even sneer at the less expensive option while other Maya women celebrate the new, affordable *huipil*. The resulting class tension between these groups of Maya women evokes familiar cultural questions concerning what authenticity means and who gets to decide.

### **Thesis Structure**

The introductory section of this thesis orients the reader with a predicament of Maya textiles in the South Highlands of Guatemala as it stood upon the completion of my field research in April, 2017. In the subsequent sections of this introduction I briefly discuss the body of the thesis, introduce the reader to my primary interlocutor, outline the method of research, and present a brief literature review.

Chapter two offers historical, political, and economic context of the region. I begin with a brief introduction on the pre-colonial and colonial time periods and then present the textiles, processes, and their materials in relation to a sociopolitical history. In the late 19th Century, the coffee industry boomed in Guatemala; a few decades later the state entered a genocidal civil war using arms, training, and propaganda from the United States (Grandin, 2011). Each of these events, the investment in agricultural exportation and state violence, had significant impacts on the expectations of daily dress for Maya families (Grandin, 2004). Later, as the war surged activist Rigoberta Menchú-Tum emerged as a controversial international figure and drew humanitarian attention to the region. The resulting increase in aid and attendant growth of



tourism facilitated the market for Maya textiles as commodity (Green, 1999: 131, Menchú-Tum 1984).

Chapter Three is an intimate look at production of Maya textiles. Here I will discuss the social and ontological role of weaving on the back strap loom in the south highlands of Guatemala. In this section I will problematize the notion that clothing and dress are merely women's work. The back strap loom, or *telar de cintura* (belt loom), is so named because it must be bound to the body of a weaver. It is an anthropomorphic tool which embodies and produces complex syntheses to be worn. Looms similar to the back strap loom used by the Maya can be found in parts of South America and Asia (Bird, 1964: 99; Hernandez, 2004: 718; Holland, 1978: 169). For the purposes of this discussion, however, I will focus on this loom as it relates to the Maya of Guatemala. The production of cloth and ontology between weaver and loom is intrinsic to this weaving process.

Chapter Four focuses on cloth and the *huipil*, I will go over the material changes - shifts in fiber content, design, color, and manufacturing - as well as symbolic changes. These shifts are largely connected to the political and economic changes first outlined in chapter two. I will present the textiles made and worn by Maya women as complex indicators of class and region, as materialized identities, and as commodity objects. To do so, I will analyze three garments purchased with the guidance of my weaving teacher and interlocutor, Lidia, to illustrate the material and value changes these objects have undergone over the past 40 years. Through such an analysis, the complexity of the predicament of Maya textiles will come to light.

“The map of the world is reflected in the provenance of *traje* materials” (Hendrickson, 1995: 50). One can only weave with available resources. If we accept that one can only make from the things they can access, textiles can be seen as complex maps of maker, laborer, region,

state, and economic system. Clothing is more than fiber and seams: it is the result of power structures, trade agreements, social conditioning, and class position.

### **Who is Doña Lidia Amanda López López?**



*Figure 4. Lidia Amanda López López weaving at home. Photo by author.*

Lidia Amanda López López (Figure 4), is not a pseudonym. Doña Lidia is a person, weaver, woman, and primary interlocutor for this research. With Lidia's consent, I use her real name in lieu of a pseudonym. Lidia Amanda López López is a Maya woman living in Guatemala. The identities of indigenous people have too often been erased from their own stories and this research project could not have happened without her and her expertise.

Lidia and I met prior to this project in the fall of 2014 while I was living in Antigua. While there I met other members of the local textile community and when I expressed interest in learning the back strap loom I was pointed in the direction of Lidia.

Typical of the region, Lidia's mother tongue is Kaqchikel. Of the 25 languages spoken today in Guatemala, Kaqchikel is the second most common with approximately 400,000 speakers. Its similarities to the most common language, K'iche with approximately 1,000,000 speakers, allows many Maya to converse easily. The Mayan languages spoken today are descended from the Proto-Mayan language and can be divided into five subgroups each with multiple languages (Campbell & Kaufman, 1985). K'iche and Kaqchikel are different languages in the Qichean subgroup (Ibid.). Though Kaqchikel is her first language, Lidia primarily speaks in Spanish. During my seven weeks of field research I noted her using Kaqchikel only to communicate with her husband or when negotiating prices with other vendors in the market.<sup>1</sup> Towards the end of my field research I discovered that Lidia also spoke English quite well, a fact she hid from me to encourage me to practice my Spanish. She learned to speak English while living briefly in the United States and has been able to travel the country teaching and doing weaving demonstrations.<sup>2</sup>

Through weaving opportunities, she and her mother were able to travel to Paris and Berlin. Taking her mother, Margarita López, to the Eiffel tower is a particularly special memory for Lidia. Through these opportunities she has ascended class. The story often told of Maya weavers is that of cyclical, devastating poverty. Those stories are as true as Lidia's story. Some Maya weavers throughout Guatemala and parts of Mexico have been uniquely able to support themselves through their craft. Although Lidia is not an anomaly, she and other weavers like her are exceptional.

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<sup>1</sup> The only word I picked up in the language is *utz*. Its Spanish equivalent is *bueno* (good). When eating a particularly delicious meal, Lidia and I would laugh while we said "very *utz*," a marriage of English and Kaqchikel.

<sup>2</sup> She says her favorite American city is Asheville, North Carolina because terrain reminds her of Guatemala. She knows Ithaca as well and thinks it is a very beautiful place though she has never visited during the winter.

## Research Methods

Prior to entering the field, my research was directed at gendered divisions of labor in Maya textile production. Ethnography is an important tool which can reveal unforeseen, nuanced data. I arrived in Guatemala City the evening of June 1, 2016 and by June 5, 2016 I realized I had not considered the possibility of class division among the Maya. In hindsight, I am surprised at my reductive assumption. Close, critical participant observation research brought to light the aim of this thesis and project.

Over the course of seven weeks, with the approval of Cornell University's Institutional Review Board (IRB),<sup>3</sup> I lived with Lidia's family in San Antonio Aguas Calientes, Sacatepéquez, Guatemala. I participated in the family's daily activities, took weaving lessons from Lidia each morning and spent nearly every evening with her in her booth at the *Mercadito artesano* (Small Artisan Market) in Antigua, Guatemala. The market is located on the east side of the *Parque central* (Central Park), a Spanish colonial square typical of many others throughout the regions conquered by Spain. Today, the *Parque central* and Antigua are hubs for students, travelers, tourists, and the Guatemalan elite.

In addition to our daily tasks, Lidia and I would travel to nearby cities and towns known for their textiles and weaving supplies. We would chat with vendors and other weavers and Lidia would proudly introduce me as her weaving student. With support from the Human Ecology Alumni Association (HEAA) grant I collected film which will be presented in conjunction with the defense of this thesis.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Protocol Number: 1602006122

<sup>4</sup> <https://vimeo.com/195554285>

When Lidia and I first met in 2014, before I could speak any Spanish, weaving was our primary means of communication. My background in weaving and her mastery of the craft fostered our relationship. When this project began, the best way to answer questions concerning the production and significance of traditional Maya dress was through participant observation research, conducting interviews, gathering film footage, and visiting historical archives. Data collection in this manner satisfies

## Literature Review

The Oxford English Dictionary defined fashion as both a verb and noun. It is doing, making, building, appearing, shaping, and forming (“Fashion,” 2017). Fashion theorists have discussed dress as a kind of visual, non-linear language (Barthes, 1967; Bogatyrev, 1971; McCracken, 1989). When sociologist Petr Bogatyrev studied the Moravian folk costume he concluded that clothing is a series of socially meaningful codes (Bogatyrev, 1971). He argued that cloth alone was not intrinsically meaningful but instead accrued meaning.

If we take a stone, paint it with lime and place it on the boundary between two farms. That stone will take on a certain *meaning*. It will no longer simply be itself - a stone, a part of nature it will have acquired another, new meaning. It will refer to something beyond itself (Bogatyrev, 1971: 80).

During the same era, semiotician and structuralist Roland Barthes used fashion to explicate semiology. Semiology, simply put, is the study of signs and communication. Fashion, for Barthes and Bogatyrev, is a coded language (Barthes, 1967; Bogatyrev, 1971). Barthes went further by describing three separate categories of fashion: there are photographs, drawings, or images of clothing; there is writing about clothing; and there is real, actual clothing (Barthes, 1971). Linda Asturias de Barrios (1985), anthropologist and curator of Guatemala’s textile museum *Ixchel*, cited Barthes and explained that Maya *huipiles* are signifying garments which “transmit

messages to people who can decipher the code” (4). Contrastingly, Grant McCracken (1989) recognized fashion as a tool of communication and asked scholars of material culture to consider how fashion and language differ, so to push the metaphor to its breaking point. He does not discredit the comparison of fashion and language but instead asks future scholars to consider their differences (McCracken, 1989).

To move beyond semiotics, I suggest that fashion is more than a language, it is an active social process. In this thesis I emphasize the production of cloth for clothing. Weaving cloth and wearing garments are two processes of cultural production and reproduction. Weaving and wearing are material processes yet the former is an ontological process of production while the latter is a social process of reproduction. Susan Kaiser (2012) posed fashion as an ontology, an embodiment of *being* and *becoming* (1). To expand this notion, I consider the social, ontological, and political significance of cloth production.

The dress and culture of the Maya as a visual and cultural codifier is supported by Daniel Miller (2005) in his introduction to *Materiality*. He discussed the strength of sociological and anthropological analyses when the emphasis is on the cyclical relationship of making and being. Here he looked at “how people internalize and externalize the normative... how the things that people make, make people” (38). Through dress and its production, the Maya remain visible to themselves, the greater population of Guatemala, and the world. The materiality of their identity and culture is produced and reproduced through the making and wearing of these textiles.

As Eduardo Galeano (1992) said, "Identity is no museum piece sitting stock-still in a display case but rather the endlessly astonishing synthesis of the contradictions of everyday life" (196). Though Galeano is referencing identity in the abstract, this study views identity as a social process that exists in the ethereal space between body and world: the clothed self or what

Terence Turner (1981) termed the “social skin” (486). Clothing is not merely representational or symbolic, it is the actual materialization of culture, history, politics and economy.

Though her work is not specifically concerned with fashion or dress, Anna Tsing’s (2005) ethnography elucidates the friction between the local and the global. She critiqued the notion that globalization creates flattened singularities and instead argued that while the world expands the local does not constrict but instead absorbs the global with a localized, cultural specificity (Tsing, 2005, 4). Clothing worn in the streets of the South Highlands of Guatemala display a synthesis of a local/global dichotomy. Most glaringly, young women frequently wear T-Shirts with recognizable Western global brands like Old Navy, Abercrombie, or Coca-Cola atop their Maya skirts or *cortes*.

Kedron Thomas (2016) wrote that “highland Guatemala rightly belongs to the global arena of fashion and style” (13). Whether a Maya person wears a Coca-Cola T-shirt or a handwoven huipil, they’re nonetheless participating in the global fashion industry. Thomas (2016) wrote that to deduce familiar, global fashion brands as mimicry of North American or European fashion is to ignore “that branded fashion are part of regional processes through which class, gender, race, and ethnicity are being expressed and contested in the highlands” (13). Her work, focused in Tecpán, analyzed intersections of intellectual property law, industrial production, and street style in the South Highlands. Garments not associated with traditional Maya dress are commonly worn by Maya people, as Thomas’ work addressed, although this thesis will focus on the *huipil* that too “rightly belongs to the global arena of fashion and style.” That is not to insinuate that *huipiles* are or should be worn by any person. Instead *huipiles* should be regarded as materialized agents living in the nebulous space between the local and the global.

## Chapter 2: Historical Context

“The Maya - many of whom were killed during Guatemala’s internal armed conflict because they exhibited visible signs of ethnic difference, which were read as communism to justify a genocidal military campaign - and their textiles are now the primary means by which Guatemala attracts foreign investment and tourism dollars and elaborates a fantastical image of itself as having a ready-to-consume cultural heritage.”

Kedron Thomas, 2016: 19

“We have kept our identity secret because we have resisted.”

Rigoberta Menchú-Tum, 1984: 220

Lidia’s husband came into the kitchen one morning with a barely living, rather large flying insect in his hand. He and Lidia were excited to see the creature they called *Sompopo de mayo*. “*Es comida típica de los antepasados* (Its a traditional food of our ancestors),” they said, but the delicacy their ancestors knew is disappearing (Personal Communication, Lidia López, June 8, 2016). *Atta laevigata* is a leaf cutting ant endemic to Central and South America (Wheat, 1959: 56). May marks the beginning of the rainy season in Guatemala and the pregnant queen *Sompopos* were once found flying in the early morning looking for a location to establish their next colony, hence the name *de mayo* (of May). Maya people throughout Central America would catch the plump bug then roast their egg-filled bellies with salt and lime and to be eaten with fresh tortilla - the flavor reminiscent of fried pork skin or *chicharrón*. They used to “fall from the sky like rain,” Lidia said, “no one ever needed to buy them” (Personal Communication, Lidia López, June 8, 2016). *Sompopos* live in large underground colonies and, according to Lidia, as the infrastructure of Guatemala developed *Sompopos de Mayo* went from a common food to a rare treat. She blames the scarcity of the *Sompopo* on concrete trapping the insect underground.



The ethnographic vignette of the *Sompopo* is illustrative of the *time before the past*<sup>5</sup>, the impact of infrastructural development of an agriculture based economy, violence committed by the state, and an increase in tourism. With an overview of Spanish colonization, an analysis of UN data, secondary historical accounts, and ethnographic research I will illustrate and contextualize how economic and political shifts have historically materialized in Maya dress.

## Popol Vuh

To historicize the significance of textiles in Maya communities, I look to the *Popol Vuh*, one of the few Maya texts having survived the Spanish conquest. The *Popol Vuh* describes the origins of the earth and humanity. The text deals with mythology, time, space, epistemology, and origins. Through this text, beliefs held by the *antepasados* are able to be glimpsed and the ontological formations of the Maya contextualized.

Written in a Latinized version of the most common Mayan language, the *Popol Vuh* illustrates an understanding of the relationships between language and cultural roles in the K'iche and Greater Maya. The opening lines of the text, as translated by Dennis Tedlock (1996), are as follows:

This is the beginning of the Ancient Word, here in this place called Quiché. Here we shall inscribe, we shall implant the Ancient Word, the potential and source for everything done in the citadel of Quiché, in the nation of Quiché people (63).

In K'iche, the word “implant” has a dual meaning. *Tz'iba* and *tiqui* refer to actions which include the creation of woven design particularly the brocade techniques practiced by Maya weavers (Maffie, 2014: 258). In a second, equally reliable translation that sentence would read: “Here we

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<sup>5</sup> *Antepasado* means ancestor though if you break the word into its two parts, *ante* and *pasado* it means “before past.”

shall design, we shall brocade the Ancient Word” (Maffie, 2014: 258). To brocade is a specific weaving technique and one frequently used throughout many Maya weaving communities. It refers to the process in which a secondary, non-structural thread is used to create a decorative design or pattern. Here the K’iche describe the world as being woven with intent. When one considers the term “implant” and “brocade” simultaneously, the dualities of the two terms become apparent. The ancient world of the Maya is lauded for its sophisticated agricultural production, the term’s double meaning further reinforced that weaving and agriculture were essential to the earthly Maya universe.

### **Pre-Colonial & Colonized Maya**

The Maya people first encountered one of Columbus’ expeditions in 1502 when their two boats met near the Bay Islands off the coast of Honduras (Henderson, 1981: 29; Morris, 1987: 19). It was not until 1511, however, that the Yucatán Peninsula was inhabited by shipwrecked Spanish sailors (Henderson, 1981: 30; Morris, 1987: 19). Approximately seventeen men at sea, on their way between Panama and present-day Haiti, washed ashore where they were captured by Maya warriors (Henderson, 1981: 30; Morris, 1987: 19). Two of the shipwrecked men survived sacrifice and disease. Eventually one, a friar, rejoined his countrymen while the other, Gonzalo Guerrero “was leading Maya warriors against his own people” (Morris, 1987: 19).

On the volcanic isthmus of what is now Central America, the Maya civilization was nestled between the great Olmecs and Aztecs. In the introduction of archaeologist John S. Henderson’s (1981) text, *The World of the Ancient Maya*, he discussed the complexity of the term civilization<sup>6</sup> and that the word itself deserves of its own tome (23). Despite inadequate

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<sup>6</sup> “The general public and theorists alike almost universally view civilizations as urban phenomena and focus on cities as their most prominent features...The question of an appropriate definition of civilization

definitions of the term, he argued that whatever the definition of civilization may be it cannot “obscure the fact that in many ways Maya culture is the most complex ever to arise in the New World” (Henderson, 1981: 23). The Maya regional states featured art, architecture, written language, a vast understanding of the cosmos, and comprehensive political networks (Henderson 1981: 24).

Six years after the shipwreck, in 1517, Fernando Hernandez led a military expedition to the Yucatán Peninsula during which the Maya marched the Spanish into an ambush led by Gonzalo Guerrero (Morris, 1987: 20). A year later, Juan de Grijalva attempted to conquer the Maya in 1518 followed by Hernán Cortéz in 1519 (Morris, 1987: 20). By 1600, 80% of the Maya population had died due to Spanish violence or disease (Schevill, 1993: 43). Up until Guatemala’s independence from Spain in the 1820s the region was under an *encomienda* system which was characterized by forced labor (Schevill, 1993: 45).

## **Dye Industry**

Prior to the invention of aniline dye in 1856, every fiber color was naturally derived (Schevill, 1993: 61). The industry for natural dye was extremely lucrative and Guatemala exported the largest amount of cochineal, *Dactylopus coccus*, in the world until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (Hecht, 2001: 12). Cochineal is a cactus dwelling insect endemic to Central America and is still used today as a natural dye offering hues from light pink to deep magenta and purple. In the 1850s cochineal reached its peak export value with approximately 3,000,000 pesos circulating in the Guatemalan industry alone (McCreery, 1994: 129). However, with the invention of aniline dye in 1856 and wider dye production in the Canary Islands, agricultural

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might easily occupy a volume. A simple working definition recognizes civilization as a complex variety of culture, with considerable elaboration in many areas, involving full-time specialists of various sorts.” Henderson, J.S. (1981). *The world of the ancient Maya*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca: NY. 22-23.

investors began transitioning capital to different agricultural industries like sugar, cotton, and, most predominantly, coffee (McCreery, 1994: 129).

Other dyes commonly used were indigo and purpura (Hecht, 2001: 12; Schevill, 1993: 61). Indigo was and still is the most widely used dye in Guatemala and the story of purpura is quite fascinating. *Patula pansa*, a mollusk growing along the gulf of Tehuantepec, Mexico, the coast of Nicaragua, and Costa Rica produces a lovely mauve from its foamy, yet colorless secretion (Hecht, 2001: 12; Schevill, 1993: 61). After the secreted dye is produced, the mollusk would have been released back into the ocean entirely unharmed (Hecht, 2001: 12).

In the late 19th Century, the coffee industry boomed in Guatemala; a few decades later as the country was entangled in Cold War politics the region entered a three-decade civil war. Each of these events, the investment in commodity exportation and state violence, impacted expectations of daily dress for Maya families (Grandin, 2000: 6). Later, as the war surged activist Rigoberta Menchú Tum emerged as a controversial figure who drew international humanitarian attention to the region. This increase in aid and tourism created the market for Maya textiles as commodity (Green, 1999: 132; Little, 2004: 268). Will Maya textiles find themselves in a fate not unlike the *Sompopo*?

### **Men's Wear, Coffee, and War**

Three Centuries after Guatemala's lush terrain was colonized for global agricultural production, the second half of the nineteenth century saw the coffee trade develop as Guatemala shifted its agricultural capital investments away from the production of cochineal (McCreery, 1994: 161). As coffee trade developed, economic and social pressure was placed upon Maya elites of Quetzaltenango (Grandin, 2004: 22). Forced to navigate emerging economic terrain,

Maya elites had to either assimilate or abandon the available economic leverage (Grandin, 2004: 22). When the cochineal industry was in full swing, farm owners deliberately expressed racist beliefs for their Maya and Dominican workers (McCreery, 1994: 167). The general belief the farm owners held was that the Maya and Dominican people were lacking in morals, were vagrants and swindlers (McCreery, 1994: 168).

This overt racism forced the elite Quiché Mayas of Quetzaltenango to alter the expression of their ethnic identities (Grandin, 2004: 26). Through dress they created an alternative approach to Guatemalan nationalism and Maya identity; Quiché Maya patriarchs moved forward politically by embraced this combination and forging the two identities. It became common for men seeking to access political leverage to adopt western styles of dress while emphasizing the need for their wives to maintain dress associated with traditional Maya clothing. Such a power dynamic meant patriarchs did not compromise their own ethnicity; instead they had the privilege of shifting the role of bearing their ethnic identity onto women. Feminist Anne McClintock (1993) defines this division of gender as a “temporal anomaly” (66). In an attempt to embody nationalism, women’s bodies become atavistic, a vessel forced to carry nostalgia, while men charge forward.

Santiago Coyoy, one of the wealthiest Quiché landowners of the late 19th Century, has a headstone in the racially divided cemetery of Quetzaltenango (Grandin, 2004: 1). Adjacent is his wife’s portrait which reinforces her role as the bearer of their Maya heritage. Michaela Pisquiy de Coyoy is depicted wearing the *traje* typical of the Quiché people. “Even in death, Quetzaltecos could not escape an unjust and racially divided existence” (Grandin, 2000: 4). Class, ethnic, and gender divisions were reinforced through clothing. During the Coyoy patriarch’s political career he wore “Western-styled lapelled jackets and buttoned shirts, Michaela’s

sepulchral bust presents her in an intricately woven Quiché tunic and hair wrap” (Grandin, 2000: 4). According to Greg Grandin (2000), the balance between their culturally distinct modes of dress was crucial to a male’s political and economic saliency during this era (4).

The Euro-modern garments adopted by elite Maya men have a lineage in the ‘unmarking’ of men’s fashion. Discourses surrounding European men’s wear was framed by the social and political history of the region (Kaiser, 2012: 126). Styles were fostered to support and express masculine national citizenships and so, “bourgeois men, at least, moved away from color; silk; pattern; ornamentation; wigs; knickers; and tights; in favor of darker, more somber, businesslike clothing” (Kaiser, 2012: 126). This construction of masculine professionalism was brought to Guatemala and stood in stark contrast to the colorful, billowing dress of the Maya.

In the mid twentieth century, during the years of extreme violence that engulfed Guatemala, gendered divisions of identity were reinforced through a different political charge: many Maya men, not necessarily insurgents or those involved in leftist politics, choose to discard their traditional clothing (Lovell, 2010: 142). Instead, they opted to wear Western styles during these years as “‘Indians’ and ‘guerrillas’ were often considered synonymous; the abandonment of traditional community dress was a self-protective, not an assimilationist, measure” (Lovell, 2010: 142). Earlier in the century, Coyoy was assimilating to a mode of dress which posited a role of political prominence. During the war that ensued during the latter part of the twentieth century, men were not assimilating; rather, they jettisoned the only items which could empirically classify them as Maya and thus an enemy of the state (Lovell, 2010: 142).

Throughout the 36 years of violence in Guatemala, it was the Maya who remained most vulnerable. Established by the Accord of Oslo in June of 1994, the Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH), reported that over 40,000 men, women, and children were victims to human

rights violations and acts of violence. Nearly 24,000 of those people were “arbitrarily executed” while over 6,000 were “disappeared” (Tomuschat, 1994). Of those fully identified, 83% were Maya (Tomuschat, 1994). This data combined with other reports collected by the CEH estimate the total number of lives lost at 200,000 (Tomuschat, 1994). The CEH cites generations of racialized economic injustice as one of the many catalysts of war (Tomuschat, 1994).

### **Class, Gender, and Ethnicity in Textiles**

The production of textiles in contemporary Guatemala is reflective of class, gender, and ethnicity - however it has been dubiously presented otherwise. During the reign of the Maya civilization, research suggests that the production of textiles on the back strap loom was a status symbol among the Maya elite (Brumfiel, 2006). Archeological objects have left clues allocating the role of weaving within the Maya civilization prior to colonial rule (Brumfiel, 2006: 863). Archaeological findings in Mesoamerica suggest that weaving tools are not evenly distributed among homes but are only found in the homes of the ruling class (Brumfiel, 2006: 863). The Maya civilization reigned from approximately 3000 BCE until its eventual decline in the 16th Century CE. The earliest textile fragments date from 1000 - 800 BCE (Brumfiel, 2006: 863). Archaeologist Elizabeth Brumfiel (2006) argued that, historically, weaving has signified three separate social groups: class, gender, and ethnicity. The Pre-colonial imagery depicts men and women dressed in elaborate clothing. These carvings are evidence that supports that the the production and wearing of luxurious fabrics was a privilege practiced by wealthy Maya men and women alike (Brumfiel, 2006: 863). She argued further that during Spanish colonization the process of weaving was relegated to Maya women: what was a symbol of class fell victim to gendered labor roles. Today, Brumfiel argued, weaving is a symbol of Maya ethnicity. However,

in my field research I found Brumfiel's arguments to be an oversimplification. Brumfiel viewed class, gender, and ethnicity as separate categories in the social production of material culture. However, these terms are deeply intersectional. Class, gender, and ethnic identities not only influence the subjectivity of an individual but are too embedded in the social fabric of a community.

In Guatemala today, it is unusual to see Maya men in the Southern Highlands wearing traditional clothing outside of important ceremonies. Maya men typically wear secondhand American clothing and T-shirts distributed in the streets by the car load (Lovell, 2010: 140). Traveling in bulk from Miami to Guatemala, second hand clothing, *ropa barata*, is extremely accessible and, as the Spanish name denotes, inexpensive.<sup>7</sup> There are major economic factors that contribute to this commonality. Because women are expected to bear the identity of their Maya community, more money is allocated for their clothing (Little, 2004: 145). Whether that means a family sets aside money to construct handmade garments, or if machine made *huipiles* are purchased, these costs are significantly higher than the mere pennies needed to buy *la ropa barata*. Just as in the 19th Century, a woman's body remains a carrier of ethnic identity.

### **Economy in Transition**

In 1971 the Institute for Guatemalan Tourism (INGUAT) began aggressively researching and investing in a tourist economy (Levy, 1976: 20). Two modes of development happened simultaneously: there was an accumulation of data, increase in international promotion, and reduction in cost of airfare while the Guatemalan government supported incentives and tax privileges to support the preservation of historical sites and investment in tourist facilities like

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<sup>7</sup> "Dos piezas por un quetzal," at the time of publishing one quetzal is equivalent to about 20 US cents.



hotels and restaurants (Ibid.). Over three years, tourist arrivals increased by 137.5% (Levy, 1976: 10). By May of 1975, development plans foresaw a 20% annual growth rate through 1979 (Levy, 1976: 24). Today, increases in tourist based development remains ever present.

According to data collected by the United Nations, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Guatemala in 2014 was valued at \$58,827,000,000 (UN Comtrade, 2013). In 2014, 60.8% of Gross Value Added (GVA) relied on “services and other activities. GVA is the measurement of value output within a region and helps to determine GDP. Industry and agriculture respectively account for 28.1% and 11.2% of Guatemala’s GVA (Ibid.). From 2011 to 2013, accounting for an average of about \$912,00,000, coffee was Guatemala’s largest export commodity. Followed by cane or beet sugar at an average of approximately \$794,000,000; precious metal ores and concentrates at \$641,700,000; bananas at \$582,200,000; and women’s or girl’s blouses at \$441,300,000 (Ibid.). These top five export commodities (coffee, sugar, precious metals, bananas, and women’s clothing) all fall into the significantly smaller GVA categories of industry and agriculture while the vague, ambiguous 60% of GVA remains “services and other activities.”

The UN defines services as

...outputs produced to order and which cannot be traded separately from their production; ownership rights cannot be established over services and by the time their production is completed they must have been provided to the consumers; however as an exception to this rule there is a group of industries, generally classified as service industries, some of whose outputs have characteristics of goods, i.e. those concerned with the provision, storage, communication and dissemination of information, advice and entertainment in the broadest sense of those terms; the products of these industries, where ownership rights can be established, may be classified either as goods or services depending on the medium by which these outputs are supplied.

These services and other activities, as the UN defines, accounted for the consumption of non-object commodities and, of our three primary GVA categories, is the only growing sector of

employment. In 2014, services and other activities employed 50.2% of persons aged 10 years or more, up from 42.2% in 2005 of the same age demographic. Comparatively, agriculture and industry employment have seen a significant decrease. Employment in agriculture has diminished from 38.3% to 32.7% in 2005 and 2014, respectively, and in industry from 19.5% down to 17.1% during the same period (Ibid.). What these numbers ultimately illustrate is a rather precarious economic situation, the five largest exports occur in the two decreasing sectors of agriculture and industry while the largest employer and only growing economic category refers to non-object commodities. Non-object commodity directly refers to the burgeoning tourist economy.

Guatemala's tourism was not always the primary economic support. After the Spanish realized what is now Guatemala did not contain the gold and other rich minerals initially anticipated, the colonizers turned to agricultural trade (McCreery, 1994: 50). Agricultural trade remained Guatemala's primary economic force until the 1970s when infrastructural development made way for commerce and tourism (Levy, 1976: 7; McCreery, 1994: 336).

### **Sompopo de Mayo**

As my opening ethnographic vignette in this chapter suggests, the development of infrastructure in Guatemala over the past century has had an enormous impact on the daily life of the Maya. The Maya, an enormous indigenous group of Central America, were colonized by the Spanish nearly 500 years ago. Though the state of Guatemala is independent from Spanish rule today, the Maya are still systematically and institutionally viewed as second class citizens of the Republic of Guatemala. Their culture, language, and identity have been under attack time and time again. Today, as the state continues to invest in a tourist economy, Maya-ness is re-

presented as an easy-to-buy exoticism. As this thesis develops, I do conflate intersections of Maya identity and dress as an active process of self-representation. Stuart Hall (1997), discussed the process of meaning through making as a cultural practice (3). Entrenched in complex hierarchies of power are the state's re-presentation and the Maya's self-representation are separate yet two social processes which inform one another.

The cloth produced by Maya people in Guatemala has been used as a carrot-on-a-stick to attract visitors since the mid 1970s (Levy, 1976: 7). There are countless billboards between the airport terminal and arrival in San Antonio Aguas Calientes. In the airport the posters feature titles like *El Mundo del Maya* (The Maya World) accompanied by images of smiling women wearing *traje tipico* sitting in lush forests with volcano-filled horizons. While driving through Guatemala City, billboards typically feature fair-skinned, ethnically neutral people listening to music, drinking Pepsi, and smiling at their cellphones. Based simply on the billboards, the Maya are not consumers but are objects of consumption.

### Chapter 3: The Loom: An Ontological Tool

“By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism. In short, we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics.”

Donna Haraway, 1991: 292

“She stands alone in the twilight, in an empty space, holding in her hands a skein of blue yarn that weaves around her to embrace a cluster of homes, which, because of this, appear almost as a continuation of her body (Figure 5).”

Silvia Federici, 2012: 4



Figure 5. *Trazando el Camino*. Rodolfo Morales. 1990.

*Oil on linen 100x 80 cm (Federici, 2012:4).*

Field note excerpt: Tecpán, Chimaltenango, Guatemala: June 9, 2016:

*Lidia introducing me as a weaver has legitimized my presence. Buying thread, she told las vendedoras (the vendors) that I can weave. They looked at me differently. They asked where I was learning and Lidia said, "San Antonio." They were impressed, they said that the huipiles in San Antonio were "muy caro (very expensive)." They were equating the monetary value with the quality. One woman said it was time for me to learn Kaqchikel, we laughed and I said "Tengo que aprender español primero (I need to learn Spanish first)."*

The above excerpt from my field notes and epigraphs indicate the social and ontological roles of weaving in the south highlands of Guatemala. During this day in Tecpán, three things happened: I watched my social status change, I realized that weaving skill was determined by its marketable value, and witnessed the casual conflation of weaving, language, and ethnicity. This moment was significant because it was indicative of the intersections of class, gender, social status, and ethnicity tightly wound within the practice of weaving. Social and class statuses, and their fluidity, are imbued within, and produced through, the process of weaving.

### **Back Strap Loom Origins and Mythologies**

The peak of Maya civilization occurred between the third and ninth centuries (Brumfiel, 2001: 862; Hecht, 2001: 8). According to analyses of pottery figurines, sculptures, pottery, and codices the loom itself has remained mostly unchanged since 600-800 BCE (Hecht, 2001: 19) and has been in use for nearly two millennia (Schevill, 1993: 55). Weaving is one of the oldest worldwide practices, yet there are no exact origins; however, it is speculated that the felting or

matting of fibers predates weaving (Hernandez, 2004: 714). It is possible people were weaving during the Paleolithic period while others contest that weaving began only 5,000 years ago (Bendure & Pfeiffer, 1947: 305; Hernandez, 2004: 712) With regard to the Maya, it is speculated that they began weaving between 300 BCE and 300 CE the exact date is difficult to establish due to wars, looting, trade, and climate (Hernandez, 2004: 715).

In her essay, *Snakes & Vines and the Backstrap Loom in Mesoamerica*, associate professor at the University of Texas, Leila Hernandez (2004), discusses two speculative histories on the origin of the back strap loom in Guatemala: Evolutionary Theory and Religious Theory. Citing Mendez Arturo Cifuentes' *Nociones de Tejido en Guatemala* (1967), she explains that the Evolutionary Theory purports the origins of weaving as a common moment between textiles, ceramics, and architecture (714). At this moment, when early humans needed to build shelter, they may have inserted sticks into the ground and woven long grasses to create a wall (Hernandez, 2004: 712; Lamprey 1939: 3). Ceramics, similar to such woven walls, may also have been born out of woven grasses. When baskets were woven, some may have been lined with mud or clay to ensure water impermeability. Eventually, it is speculated, that one of these woven, clay-lined baskets would have made its way onto a fire pit for cooking (Hernandez, 2004: 713). Alas, the clay interior hardens as the dry-grass exterior burns away.

As the understanding of weaving continued to develop so too did the technology to facilitate more and more complex tools (Hernandez, 2004: 715). Working in the framework of evolutionary theory, we can assume that fixing both ends of the warp would have been an important moment in the advancement of weaving technology, furthermore the development of a mechanism to separate warp threads would have been significant and likely to have followed the former (Hernandez, 2004: 715).

Religious theory uses the Popol Vuh to support the claim that the back strap loom was inspired by nature (Hernandez, 2004: 717). Hunahpu, a Maya creator god, first spun thread by twisting, caressing, and rolling a cotton ball in his fingertips. “The thread sprung from Hunahpu’s hands, since the constant movement of the fingers turned the cotton into strands of thread (Hernandez citing Cifuentes, 1967: 13). Hunaphu wove ideas and thoughts in his head, they then reached his hands and with them wove visions of colorful cloths” (Hernandez, 2004: 717). More specifically, Hernandez ties Garcia’s mythological, nature-based rationale to the intertwined mosses and branches composing Guatemala’s jungle canopy and covering the floor (Hernandez, 2004: 717). The story of Hunahpu, woven vines, and mossy, cloth-like encapsulation of trees inspired the back strap loom (Hernandez, 2004: 717).

There were many gods that assisted weavers but it was Ixchel - Goddess of the Moon, patron of weaving and weavers, and patron of childbirth - who has been recognized as the original Maya weaving instructor (Hernandez, 2004: 717; Miller & Taube, 1993: 101; Morris, 1984: 3). Many of the motifs seen in *huipiles* are symbolic of Maya mythology, yet it is increasingly uncommon for contemporary Maya weavers to identify them as such (Green, 2009: 3). Anthropologist Walter F. Morris, Jr. (1994) has been working with the Maya in Chiapas, Mexico since 1972 and has written on the cosmological and symbolic meaning embedded within the brocaded designs of *huipiles* from southern Mexico. He referred to the motifs as sacred designs and are comprised of four basic forms: diamonds, undulating linear forms, vertical lines, and representational figures (Morris, 1984: 10). Morris (1984) explained that the design variations are representative of a unity between earth and sky; fertile land; foundations of the community; and patron saints, respectively (10). The sophistication of these motifs increase with life stages (Hecht, 2001: 18). According to Ann Hecht (2001), many of the figurative animals

found in some *huipiles* are also present in the Popol Vuh: animals such as lions, jaguars, opossums, monkeys, quetzals, peacocks, owls, and bats (17).

Despite this well documented genealogy between motifs and Maya origins, other research has indicated that contemporary *huipil* designs are named after the physical world and may have less mythological resonance (Green, 2009: 3; Hecht, 2001:15). Art historian David B. Green's (2009) research further examined the names of motifs which appeared in multiple regions under various names and concluded that "it is the shape of the motif that often matters more than what it depicts" (4). When I asked Lidia about a triangular pattern called *los volcanes* (the volcanos), her response supported Green's observations: she said that people in San Antonio used that term because there were three volcanos which surround the town and because of the design's simplicity it would be common to see it reproduced elsewhere, under a different name (Personal Communication, Lidia Lopez, July 14, 2016).

### **Techniques & Motifs**

Maya weaving communities are known for the production of particular *huipiles* throughout Guatemala and Southern Mexico. Fragments from Chiapas, Yucatán, and Petén suggest that plain woven cloth featuring brocade and embroidery pre-dates Spanish colonization (Asturias de Barrios, 1985: 8). At one time, garments identified women to specific communities (Hecht, 2001: 9) and were "recognized locally as a key unit for Maya identity, with municipal style of *traje* important visual signs of local ethnic unity" (Hendrickson, 1995:32). In San Antonio, a region known for its intricate, tapestry-like weaving technique (Hecht, 2001: 15). The origin of this technique, which results in pixelated pictorial imagery (Figure 6), is believed to have emerged from European cross stitch patterns and can be found in





Figure 6. Detail shot of doble. Photo by author.

Chichicastenango and San Antonio Aguas Calientes (Asturias de Barrios, 1985: 76; Chandler, 2009: 3; Hecht, 2001: 15). The designs themselves are not frequently written down but remembered by weavers (Hecht, 2001:15). During my daily weaving lessons, Lidia taught me an enormous variety of geometric patterns without referencing any other cloth or drawing. However, we used existing textiles to create the more intricate designs. On our visit to the Maya textile museum, *Museo Ixchel*, we looked closely at patterns from other regions so to recreate the textures and designs we liked. Brocading designs that have been passed down while borrowing techniques from other *huipiles* further reinforces a sense of Pan-Maya traditionalism (Hecht, 2001: 15).

San Antonio and Chichicastenango are not the only regions which have borrowed from other, non-Maya resources. In addition to Chichicastenango, Chuarrancho, and Nahualá adopted a double headed eagle symbol during Spanish colonization (Hecht, 2001: 17). The symbol was originally associated with the Hapsburgs of the Holy Roman Empire and came to represent the inherent dualities of the Maya gods (Hecht, 2001:17).

Though stripes are commonly used in the ground fabrics in many regions, design techniques in *huipiles* vary significantly and include single-faced, two-faced (Schevill, 1993: 56), embroidery, weft wrapping, tapestry weaving, and a loosely woven gauze exclusively from Alta Verapaz (Hecht, 2001: 16). In single-faced brocade (Figure 7), supplemental weft threads are only on one side the cloth (Schevill, 1993:56). While two-faced brocade (Figure 8) has a distinct back and front, extra weft thread is floated between designs which creates a positive/negative effect (Schevill, 1993:56).



Figure 7. Detail of single-faced brocade. Photo by author.





Figure 8. Two-faced brocade. Photo by author.



## Weaving with the Back Strap Loom

The back strap loom (Figure 9 & 10) was not unique to Guatemala; similar iterations can be found in parts of South America and Asia (Bird, 1964: 99; Hernandez, 2004: 718; Holland, 1978: 169). The back strap loom goes by many English names: hip, body-tensioned, or stick loom (Hecht, 2001: 13), hip-strap, waist, belt, or girdle loom (Schevill, 1993: 55). In Spanish it can be called *palito* (little stick) or *telar de cintura* (belt loom) (Schevill 1993:55). In Kaqchikel, the loom is called *kiem* (Personal Communication, Lidia López, May 31, 2017). However, during my field research Lidia and I, speaking predominantly in Spanish, nearly always referred to the back strap loom as simply *el telar* (the loom). For consistency between citations and the language in which I am writing, I use the most commonly published English term which is the back strap loom.



Figure 9. Detail of back strap loom. Photo by author.



Figure 10. Back strap loom. Photo by author.

Some of the primary advantages of the back strap loom are its low price, portability (Figure 10), and produces no costly loom waste<sup>8</sup> (Anderson, 1978: 17; Holland, 1978: 169; Schevill 1993: 56). Though a small tool, its potential should not be overlooked. “The back strap loom is a complex device, more responsive to the weaver’s creative impulses than the modern treadle loom... The weaver is encircled by the loom and becomes a part of it” (Schevill, 1993: 56). The loom is comprised of anywhere from six to eighteen sticks held in place with a weaver’s body (Sheldon, 1987: 107). The most unique aspect of the back strap loom is the necessity for a weaver to use their body to create tension on the threads (Holland, 1978: 169). Writing from my perspective as a weaver, tension on the warp threads<sup>9</sup> is of utmost importance. One of the primary functions of the loom itself, whether it be a piece of cardboard at summer camp or an industrial jacquard loom, is to create and maintain the tension of threads for the purposes of weaving. Therefore, the fact that the back strap loom requires a weaver’s body to create and maintain tension on the threads, means that the loom is unable to produce cloth without the physical body of a weaver.

What can be gleaned when a Maya weaver living in Guatemala attaches their body to an object that will produce the very thing that is both embodiment and identifier? To begin answering this question and to grapple with Daniel Miller’s (2005) notion that “the things people make, make people” (38) my method of research was centered on a weaving apprenticeship with Lidia. Once the warp yarn is prepared the loom is attached to a post, wall, or tree and then to the body (Figure 11). The body comprises the loom just as the threads comprise the cloth. As the

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<sup>8</sup> Loom waste is necessary on treadle looms and refers to approximately 30 additional inches on any warp length.

<sup>9</sup> Warp threads are the threads held under tension by the loom. Typically, they are perpendicular or vertical in relation to the weaver’s body, depending on the loom. In the case of the back strap loom, the warp threads are both.





Figure 11. Lidia unrolling a Back Strap Loom. Photo by author.

weaver then pulls and pushes her weight, back and forth, working in rhythm with the thread moving from side to side, she creates the fabric to be worn against her bare skin.

### **Gender & Technology**

To problematize the notion of clothing and dress as mere women's work, it is necessary to meditate on how notions of gendered labor may have emerged. To explore this term, Judith K. Brown employed past suppositions regarding the often rigid delineation of gendered labor. From Durkheim to Levi-Strauss, Brown explained that these thinkers are either "naïvely physiological" or reductively economic (Brown, 1970: 1074). Brown historicized labor and explained the pre-existing conditions necessary for a form of work to be relegated to women. First and foremost, she posited, women's work must be accommodating to child-care. When caring for children, the work an individual can perform must be near the home; feature monotonous tasks; not require use of potentially dangerous equipment; and can be performed despite regular interruptions with the ability of being seamlessly resumed later (Brown, 1970: 1075). When considering weaving, a labor commonly associated with women's work in the western world, all of these characteristics hold true.

Today, there is a gender division in cloth production but the delineation is not so rigid. It is typically safe to assume that a male weaver weaves at a treadle loom while a female weaver sits at the back strap loom (Anderson, 1978: 13; Schevill, 1993: 57). Archaeological records are in disagreement about gendered labor divisions during the pre-colonial Maya period (Brumfiel, 2006) Machine and the cloth culminate in a strictly gendered division of labor. A male seated at a floor loom is probably at his place of employment, working as a hired weaver and working during set hours, filling orders (Anderson, 1978: 10; Schevill, 1993: 57) I frequently spoke with



men at regional market places selling large swaths of intricately dyed, treadle-woven cloth used locally for women's skirts. Contrastingly, a woman's participation in the activity, despite its potential economic benefits, carries the burden as "the image is related to the notion of females as guardians of Maya values and as the central domestic force binding families together" (Hendrickson, 1995: 151). She often weaves at home, during the brief moments in between her other domestic duties of cleaning, cooking, and child rearing (Hendrickson, 1995: 151)

### **Anthropomorphizing the Loom**

The cloth itself is "complete only when it is worn and the wearer moves into the space constituted by the textile" (Greene, 2009: 26) The cloth is a product of the body and for the body. However, political and economic developments over the past century have altered the relationship Maya women have with their clothing, its production, and the associations these may bear (Green, 1999: 133). *Huipiles* first and foremost signify Maya femininity and these positions, gender and ethnicity, have historically been a target of violence. To outwardly identify as a Maya woman today is political.

The back strap loom used by the Maya is often cited as simple (Green, 1999: 133) and best used to create body-sized rectangles of cloth (Hecht, 2001: 14). A series of carved wooden sticks are strategically placed in a length of yarn. Two sticks are the beginning and the end of cloth; where the design and heddle sticks intersect the cloth the "heart and lungs" of loom are created (Personal Communication, Lidia López, June 15, 2016).

From a frame loom to a jacquard, each loom has their own idiosyncrasies and distinct technological differences yet there are fundamental, strangely ubiquitous laws in the weaving process. One consistency is what weavers call the cross, or in Guatemala *la cruz*. The

translation, purpose, and process of the cross is the same between the United States and Guatemala. When preparing yarn for warp, the threads under tension on the loom, each thread is



*Figure 12. The heart and lung of the loom. Photo by author.*

crisscrossed using a simple technique that maintains the sequence of the threads. A vital step in the beginning of the weaving process, the cross is what Lidia's mother and their *antepasados* (ancestors) called the heart (Personal Communication, Lidia López, June 15, 2016).

If the cross is lost before the yarn is threaded on the loom, at risk of sounding hyperbolic, all is lost. The weaver must begin again and discard all of the yarn that will inevitably tangle. The next step is to create the *chicoy*, a Mayan word for which there is no Spanish term, in English would be called the string heddle. The *chicoy* is the lung of the loom, *los pulmónes*. With the *chicoy* every other thread is able to be lifted. A weaver uses the cross, the heart of the loom, to discern the sequence of the threads that then make the *chicoy*, the lung (Figure 12).

The anthropomorphizing of the loom has been observed by other historians and anthropologists alike. Art Historian David B Greene has discussed how the language used to talk about the production of the cloth uses the same description as for childbirth. In the United States I might say, 'I finished my weaving,' but Greene observed weavers saying, “‘My weaving came out’” (Greene, 2009: 35). This is not something I witnessed but each weaving community has myriad traditions, techniques, and terms to discuss their cloth and process. In Solóla, a Kaqchikel speaking community near the caldera lake Atitlan, weaving is viewed as a process of regeneration. In this community, literally and metaphorically, weaving reproduces a historically grounded identity while the loom parts assist in childbirth (Schevill, 1993: 65). In another community near the same lake, the Tz'utujil people of Santiago say that cloth woven on the back strap loom is born, infants are woven; while cloth woven on a treadle loom is simply made (Green, 1999: 133; Prechtel and Carlsen 1988: 132).

The intimacy with the production of cloth on the back strap loom immediately struck me at the beginning of my weaving apprenticeship. Once the loom is prepared, yarns stretched between the two rods, heart and lung in place, one end of the loom is attached to an upright pole, wall, or tree with a rope and the other end is attached the body of the weaver. The belt used to attach the body to the loom is either a coarsely plaited cellulose fiber or a leather strap which sits low on the hips of the weaver. Being physically bound to the loom is unique to the back strap loom and more so it means the body of the weaver *becomes* an essential part of the loom.



Figure 13. Author weaving. Photo by author.

## The Loom & the Body

Martin Heidegger (1996) observed a similar body-tool relationship at the workbench of a carpenter. While using a hammer, the worker is no longer aware of the hammer as the hammer is an extension of the body (98). This is also true in the instance of the back strap loom. Just as the loom is an extension of the body so too is the body an extension of the loom. The physical and metaphoric relationship between body and loom is important; it is through this phenomenological and material synthesis that produces both cloth and *being*.

I have established that the body of the weaver is necessary for the creation and maintenance of the tension of the warp threads. Without the body controlling the tension of the threads, cloth could not be woven and the intricate sequence of yarn and wood would be nothing more. Entering this space, body becomes machine but a machine whose limit is determined by the size and shape of the physical body of the weaver (Hecht, 2001:14). Prior to entering the field, initial research concluded that the width of a weaver's body and the length of their arms would dictate how wide a cloth could be, however, during my weaving apprenticeship Lidia and I realized bodies can have other limiting impacts on the cloth produced

As I was working on my third piece of cloth and first garment (Figure 14), I noticed what should be a perfectly perpendicular intersection between the warp and weft threads was askew. Lidia and I inspected the tension of the warp, the length of the ropes and belt, the quality of the hand carved tools but nothing seemed out of alignment. Lidia bound my loom to her hips and suddenly the cloth was straight yet when I would sit at the loom the threads would be at a strange





Figure 14 Huipil in process. Photo by author.

angle. Then I remembered: my left leg is about one inch longer than the right. An issue first discovered by a chiropractor during my adolescence, it means my hips are not parallel to the ground and causes my back to have a slight bend. My body's shape had never caused any long term issues other than one: I will never be able to create a straight piece of cloth on the back strap loom. The cloth literally embodies the weaver who made it so much so that my hips distorted the fabric. The anthropomorphizing of the loom and its cloth is hardly metaphor but a recognition that the cloth is an actual extension of the body. There is poetry in a tool having a heart and lung but the naming of these parts after essential organs acknowledges that the cloth is alive. When weaver moves from the world outside of the loom to the loom that space her hips enter is the same space as the *antepasados*. It is a direct link to a long gone past. After all, *antepasado* translates literally to "before the past." The Maya ancestors Lidia speaks of existed in a time before time and through weaving Lidia transcends both time and space.

### **Social Ontology**

In the epigraphs opening this chapter, Silvia Federici (2012) described a painting which depicts a woman bound by thread to a series of homes (Figure 5). Federici uses this image to elucidate women's central role in building community, she opens the text by describing the central figure as "she stands alone in the twilight, in an empty space, holding in her hands a skein of blue yarn that weaves around her to embrace a cluster of homes, which, because of this, appear almost as a continuation of her body" (Federici, 2012: 4). The purpose of her text is to historicize and explicate the economic structures that have framed some women as witches. Federici discussed capitalism as a hegemonic system which holds "'industry' as the main source of accumulation, capitalism could not take hold without conducting a historic battle against

anything that posed a limit to the full exploitation of the laborer, starting with the web of relations that tied the individuals to the natural world, other people, and their own bodies” (Federici, 2012: 5). Her argument is centrally focused on capitalism’s impact on the social standing of women who may have “achieved a certain degree of power in the community” (Federici, 2012: 6). This woman’s work and her social position are indicated by the thread in her hands, her body, and the home. Prior to the increase in tourism during the 1970s weaving was done between women’s daily tasks and the resulting objects, their textiles, carried cultural and symbolic value traded between community members (Green, 1999: 24; Hendrickson, 1995: 145; Little, 2004: 262). *Huipiles* were not goods that were efficiently produced and sold at their highest price. *Huipiles* and their production indicated a social standing based on material and cultural production instead of monetary value. The economic rupture of global capitalism and tourism impacted the production, consumption, and exchange of *huipiles* from a localized object to a wholly commodified product.

As Donna Haraway (1991) said, “we are all chimeras” (292). Cyborg; body and machine; a transformative hybridization that embodies histories, presence, and futures. A body and machine which produces its politics and its being. For Haraway, (1991) a body is a map “of power and identity” (315). The *huipil* is that map, that power and identity, manifested and worn. Maya weavers have always been and will continue to be cyborgs.



## Chapter 4: The Cloth

“A garment can magically transform the person, but the person also transforms the garment and is expressed through it. Thus there must be a dialectical exchange between person and garment, an awareness of the self and the transformed self simultaneously, representing the performative powers of dress in a ritual context.”

Margot Blum Schevill, 1993: 14

“But which body is the Fashion garment to signify?”

Roland Barthes, 1967: 258

On April 4, 2017 Lidia and I visited Santa Maria de Jesus, a community known for a very specific pink and green *huipil*. Lidia was trying to find one to purchase for a client, yet, in the market outside of the town’s church, no quintessential Santa Maria *huipiles* could be found. That is not to say there were not plenty of clothing and textile options but, like Tecpán’s market, this market had few handwoven options. The pink and green *huipiles* of Santa Maria are more economically valuable in markets like Antigua, Chichicastenango, or Panajachel – marketplaces with higher volumes of tourists (Hecht, 2001: 20). The marketplace in Santa Maria de Jesus was just as much a community social space as it was a place of commerce. It was obvious that many of the vendors were working collectively at different locations throughout the square. The women were negotiating with one another, sending customers to their friends for different products, and teaching young girls how to make a sale. Lidia brought me along to try to find the elusive *huipil* that we never found. Instead, the only purchase I made that day was one of the most recent iterations of a controversial, machine-made *huipil*.

Unlike the handwoven *huipiles* typical of Santa Maria, machine-made *huipiles* were everywhere. I have travelled to Guatemala a number of times over the past few years and seeing machine-made, mass-produced *huipiles* is not necessarily new but there is a particularly new

breed of these garments which made Lidia feel uneasy about the future of her craft. According to Ann Hecht, anthropologists have been predicting an end of times for indigenous Maya weaving since the 1930s (Hecht, 2001: 20). Although artist and British Academy Research Grant recipient, Ann Hecht (2001) is optimistic that “the new sense of cultural identity, coupled with the cross-fertilization of ideas” (20) will be enough to maintain the rich tradition of weaving that has existed for centuries, I am not so convinced.

In this chapter I will discuss the material changes in fibers, design, and techniques in relation to the domestic market and tourist economy. Although Ann Hecht is correct in her observation of prideful Maya people she fails to acknowledge the realities of the existing economy. Capitalism is not concerned with “cultural identity” or the “cross-fertilization of ideas,” the primary concern for capitalism is making money when and where there is money to be made.

## **Fiber**

Spanish colonization brought more than just disease, violence, and forced labor – new garment construction, clothing design, weaving technology, and fibers came as well (Anderson, 1978: 10). The conquistadores introduced wool into the cooler regions of the country where sheep are still raised, cultivated, and processed for domestic use today (Anderson, 1978: 10; Hendrickson, 1995: 44). In the warmer regions of the country it is difficult to find sheep’s wool. Many people use the same word, *lana*, to refer to natural wool and its acrylic counterpart (Hendrickson 1995: 46). Acrylic yarns are embraced by weavers because their color does not run nor fade plus the fiber is inexpensive and warm (Chandler & Senuk, 2009: 43).

There are two varieties of cotton endemic to Central America: *Gossypium hirsutum* and *Gossypium mexicanum*. The former is a white fiber with a long staple length while the latter is a

naturally brown fiber with a short staple length (Hecht, 2001:11; Schevill, 1993: 60). The brown cotton, often used in ceremonial *huipiles*, is unique to the region and goes by the Mayan names Ixcaco, Cuyuscate, or K'aqo'j (Hecht, 2001: 11; Hendrickson, 1995: 46; Schevill, 1993: 60). The short staple length of the brown fiber makes it nearly impossible to manufacture on an industrial scale so thread made from this fiber is handspun to this day.

Today cotton is still the most widely used fiber for textiles and much of the raw fiber is imported from Nicaragua and the United States to be spun at the Cantel factory in Quetzaltenango (Hecht, 2001:11; Hendrickson, 1995: 44; Schevill, 1993: 60). To fully satisfy the demand for cotton thread, industrially spun yarns are also imported from domestic and international regions: Guatemala City, Colombia, Mexico, United States, England, France, Spain, and China (Hendrickson, 1995 :44). When Lidia and I traveled to Tecpán, I purchased yarn to weave a *huipil* (Figure 15). Pictured in the box are colorful cotton threads manufactured and distributed by DMC. According to their website, the founders Jean-Henri Dollfus, Jean Jacques Schmalzer, and Samuel Koechlin “were the first to manufacture hand-painted Indian prints in Europe” (The World of DMC, 2017). Later, Dollfus junior “discovered” mercerizing, a process that was invented by John Mercer (The World of DMC, 2017). In 1749 the company opened its first factory in Mulhouse, France and today “has employees around the globe” (The World of DMC, 2017). After searching their website for the same product I purchased in Tecpán, I found the same size eight, pearl cotton I purchased was manufactured in France and is available for shipping to the US and Canada.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> <https://dmc-usa.com/pearl-cotton-balls-size-8.html>



*Figure 15. Yarns purchased from Tecpán. Photo by author.*

## **Cultural Value**

Much of the published literature on the topic of Maya textiles woven on the back strap loom discussed Maya textiles as objects woven in the home almost exclusively for the family (Hecht, 2001: 9). At one time, that was true. Though today, that is not quite the case. Handwoven

*huipiles* are, as we have seen, quite valuable objects. An ethnographic vignette told by anthropologist Linda Green (1999) is an all-too familiar story of two *huipiles*. Green's interlocutor, Doña Marta, has her grandmother's *sobrehuipil* (over blouse) made entirely of silk. This family heirloom is worn on only on special occasions and, in the year of Green's research, doña Marta worries she must sell it to buy fertilizer for her families' *milpa*.<sup>11</sup> The second *huipil* Green discussed is one Doña Marta has woven for her own burial. Marta was anxious and conflicted because she needs money to buy corn yet she worries she will not have time to make a new burial garment (130).

I repeat this story here to illustrate the monetary value of *huipiles* today. Sentimentality does not ward off death. To wear a handwoven *huipil* is femininity and Pan-Maya identity materialized. More so, it is deeply indicative of complex class stratifications. Linda Green (1999) cited the cost of *huipiles* between 15-20 US dollars (128). In her research, Green (1999) discussed *huipiles* a status symbol particularly for the upper-class Latina women living in Guatemala City (145). To offer more nuance to these racial and class distinctions, it is important to note the separate class identities within Maya communities themselves.

### **In the Market**

If a woman weaves to sell her textiles, which in today's economy is more likely than doing so simply for personal use, it behooves her to weave at the markets as well. The back strap loom can easily be rolled up and carried to a marketplace. Walter Little (2004) discussed this weaving-as-performance which can create a living history museum in which "culture is both constructed and negotiated by agents of the tourism industry, tourists, and hosts" (62). Weaving

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<sup>11</sup> Agriculture system common throughout Guatemala and Mexico. The word is derived from the Nahuatl word *mil-pa* which translates to maize field.

at the back strap loom offers a visual signifier of authenticity, vendors know that tourists are more likely to purchase from women in *traje*, weaving at their looms (Little, 2004: 62). Tourists' gender expectations support women distributing textiles as vendors in regional markets while their male counterparts are often expected distribute textiles internationally (Little, 2004: 97).

### **Regionalisms**

The blouses worn by Maya women in Guatemala, *huipiles*, are associated with particular communities or municipalities (Green, 2009; 1; Hendrickson, 1995; 11). "Municipality is recognized locally as a key unit for Maya identity, with municipal styles of *traje* important visual signs of local ethnic unity" (Hendrickson, 1995: 32). Each weaving community, typically delineated by indigenous language groups, have a lineage of techniques and patterns and shifting trends in color and design. For example, in Lidia's home of San Antonio Aguas Calientes, dark blue is a common color for the ground of the cloth used for *huipiles*. A town known for its intricate technique called *doble* creates a highly detailed, pixelated image (Figure 16). At present, flowers and birds are very popular motifs while in the 1970s fish, bugs, and fruit were *en vogue*. The term *doble*, meaning double in English, refers to the fact that these patterns are the same on the front and back of the woven cloth. A difficult, time-consuming technique requiring great skill and larger quantities of thread than textiles with patterns only on one side of the cloth. In addition to changing trends in motif, the amount of *doble* on a given *huipil* has increased over time. Lidia and I were examining a *huipil* that was worn by her grandmother, she speculates it is



about 100-150 years old, featured no *doble* but is intricately embellished with colorful geometric patterns.



Figure 16.. Example of doble. Photo by author.

### ***Traje Típico***

To describe the essential components of Maya dress I will use and expand upon the definitions as explained by anthropologist Carol Hendrickson (1995). There are three primary garments in *traje típico*: the *huipil*, *corte*, and *faja*. Depending on person, region, and purpose varied and specific accessories are worn. There are a variety of head and hair ornaments, shawls, and aprons, but the primary components of the Maya women's dress are nearly always comprised of these three items (Hendrickson, 1995: 156) As always there are regional variations

that stratify time, place, age, skill, and class. Today in Guatemala there are twenty-one ethno-linguistic groups (Greene, 2009: 18). Not all of these separate groups have weaving traditions yet many do practice the techniques that have been matrilineally passed through generations.

My field research was limited to weaving with Lidia in San Antonio Aguas Calientes, Sacatepéquez, Guatemala, a small town with a highly respected weaving tradition. This section will not analyze the multitude of *huipil* styles and techniques from various Maya communities but instead will illustrate the material changes in production and fiber content of *huipiles* over the past 40 years. To do so, Lidia and I selected three *huipiles* to illustrate this point. Together we selected garments that illustrated the changes in *huipil* styles with the knowledge that these garments would be written about and potentially publicly displayed. As a result, Lidia was careful in her selection.

## **Object Analysis**

Typically, despite fiber content and production, *huipiles* are often colorful blouses which prominently display dense patterning. They are usually handwoven on a back strap loom, though sometimes on a treadle loom, or, more and more, entirely machine made. *Huipiles* woven on a back strap loom are comprised of two or three panels stitched up the sides to create one large rectangle of cloth (Hendrickson, 1995: 150). In the center of the rectangle is an opening, sometimes reinforced with velvet or embroidery, is left for the wearer's head (Hecht, 2001: 16). Today, when a *huipil* is purchased the side seams are left open. The wearer will then stitch up the



sides to fit her body and create arm openings. This garment has the most social and monetary value of the *traje* ensemble.

To conduct this object analysis, I will use Jules David Prown's (1982) method of material culture analysis. Prown (1982) developed this theory as an attempt to eliminate subjective influence on objective analysis (Prown, 1982: 5). The first step is a detailed, measured *description*. Prown acknowledged that it is likely an object is being analyzed in a time different from when it was initially produced and that "time, weather, and usage will have taken their toll" (Prown, 1982: 7). The first phase of Prown's method is *substantial analysis*. The purpose here is to establish numerical values for the objects and is intended to be a "descriptive physical inventory of the object" (Prown, 1982: 7). For art and design objects, the next phase is *content* which Prown described as "the procedure [of] iconography in its simplest sense, a reading of overt representations" (Prown, 1982: 8). And, finally, analysts are left with *formal analysis* which draws conclusions based on gathered information. Prown (1982) warned that to be overzealous at any stage of the process, after all "the forest can be lost for the trees" (8).

The second phase of Prown's method is *deduction*. Here he opened the door for emotional responses where analysts are invited to use their imaginations to further understand the object as per their world view. He asked analysts to use sensory engagement, intellectual engagement, and emotional response to note that "a particular object may trigger joy, fright, awe, perturbation, revulsion, indifference, curiosity, or other responses that can be quite subtly distinguished" (Prown, 1982: 9). After completing the steps of object description and deduction,

the final stage is *speculation*. During the phase of speculation an analyst uses common sense coupled with creative imagining and free association to begin developing theories and hypotheses (Prown, 1982: 10).

This *huipil* (Figures 17 & 18) while lying flat, measures 29" x 25" on its longest edges. The openings for the head and arm holes are of a similar size, measuring from the top edge, they are 5.5" and 6" respectively. This blouse is comprised of two panels, each machine stitched at the edges to construct the full garment. On figure 18, the side seams suggest the body of the wearer. All of the machine stitching in this garment was done by Lidia in anticipation of this project. Noticeable areas of wear include the diagonal seams around the neck, the edges of the arm holes, and fading near the center seam (Figure 19).

Wear on the neck and arm holes is obviously from continuous use; however, the fading around the center seam is curious at first. The reason for such a regular and isolated region of the garment to have significant fading is because a previous owner had a larger center seam and the garment would be laid inside out in the sun to dry. This is a common way to preserve the rich colors of the *huipil*. The result, as evidenced in this *huipil*, bears the past life of the garment.

The pictorial area towards the top of the blouse is approximately 11.5" from the stop folded edge. The lower half of this particular *huipil*, which is mostly covered during wear, features geometric patterns which starkly contrast the imagery above. The woven ground of this garment is a plain woven, warp-face structure. Both warp and weft are the same maroon cotton, there are approximately 80 warp threads per inch and 30 weft threads per inch. These features



Figure 17.. Huipil. Photo by author.



Figure 18. Flat huipil. Photo by author.



*Figure 19. Detail of wear. Photo by author.*

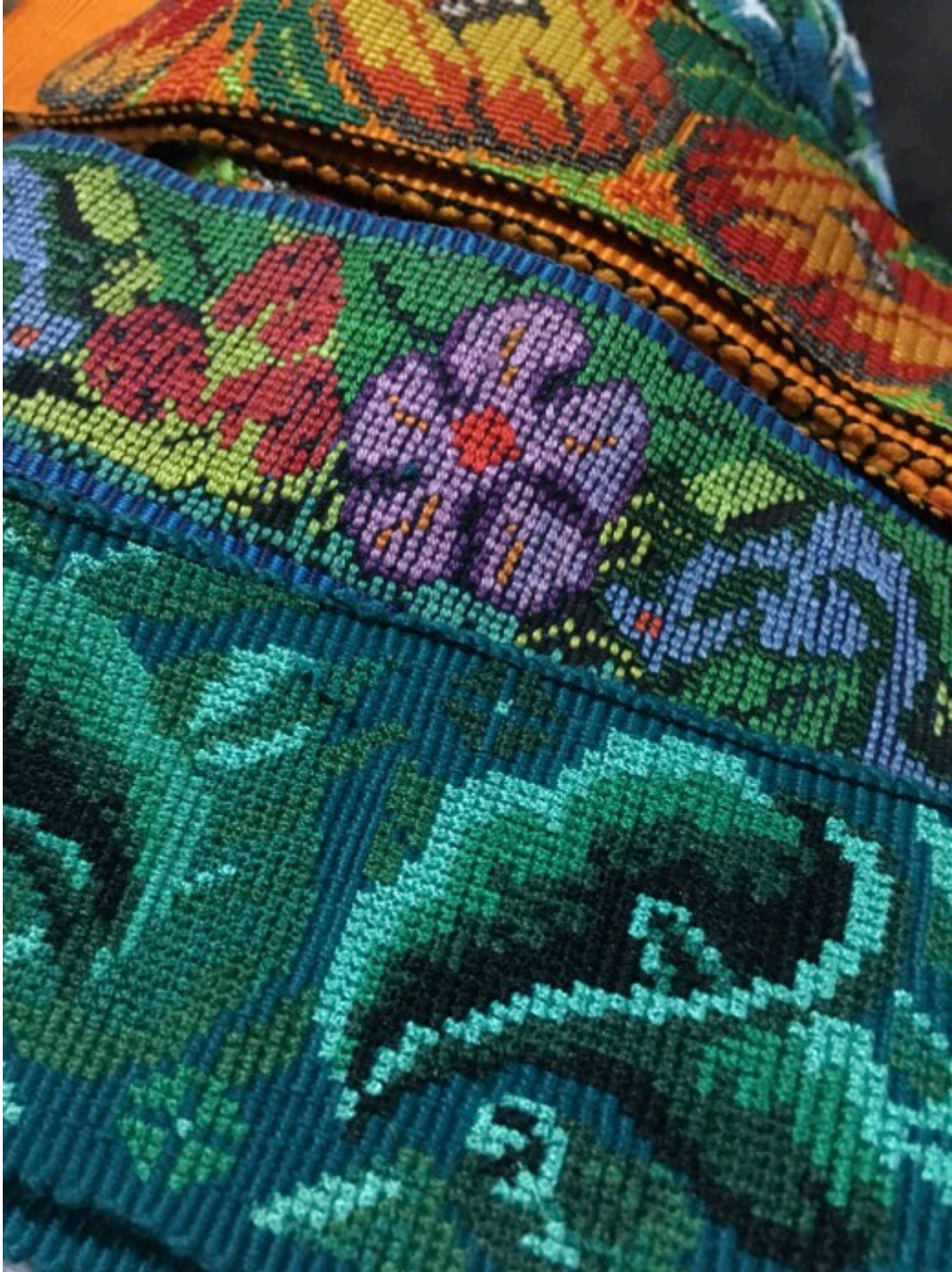
are typical of fabrics woven on the back strap loom though, more so than any other feature, each edge is uncut which means that each panel has four selvages. Two selvages exist on many woven fabrics but four-selvage cloths cannot be produced on typical floor looms. Four selvage fabrics can only be made on either a back strap loom or tapestry loom. Because this garment features separate panels, each with four selvages, the original weaver (who is unknown) would have completed one entire panel and then begun the second panel separately so as to follow her original pattern spacing. The patterns and design align on a well-woven huipil. Moreover, the upper pictorial imagery has an interesting symmetry between the two panels. Fruits, flowers, birds, scorpions, and angels are mirrored in orientation. This means the weaver was replicating

each weft pass as she went along. If it were truly symmetrical, for example, the angels would be facing opposite directions. Instead each panel is *almost* identical.

The combination of patterns, the pictorial and geometric, are unique to huipiles woven in Lidia's community of San Antonio (Personal Communication, Lidia López, July 14, 2016). Characteristic of *doble*, the pictorial pattern is on the exterior and interior of the blouse (Figures 20 & 21). Lidia would point out other textiles attempting to mimic this technique but, upon reversing the cloth, it was easy to see it was merely a replica. It is time consuming and requires slightly more yarn to achieve – I would speculate that because San Antonio is a relatively well-off community that this *huipil* and its techniques are emblematic of class status among Maya weaving communities. According to Lidia, these *huipiles* are the most expensive because of the labor hours required and amount of yarn needed (Personal Communication, Lidia López,, June 10, 2016).

The technique to create these patterns is called brocade. To an unknowing eye, one might assume the imagery is achieved through embroidery; however, that is not the case in this particular example. Embroidery is a process of adding non-structural threads to embellish the surface of a fabric. The colorful threads creating the geometric and pictorial imagery are classified as supplemental weft, a term used when weft is added that does not interfere with or reinforce the overall structure of a cloth but is present for the purposes of surface texture or embellishment.





*Figure 20. Three belts. Bottom is machine produced, Middle is handwoven doble, back is handwoven mimic of doble.  
Photo by author.*





Figure 21. Backs of belts in previous photo.

According to Lidia, this *huipil* was likely woven in the 1970s (Personal Communication, Lidia López, July, 13, 2016). She based her claim on the amount of pictorial imagery present and the elements of the imagery itself. Depictions of fruit and fish were en vogue in San Antonio during the 1970s but the angels were especially popular. New *huipiles* from San Antonio today feature almost no geometric patterns and are mostly floral (Personal Communication, Lidia López, July, 13, 2016). Although Lidia is unsure when the pictorial patterns emerged, it began as an embellishment on the top shoulder but as time went on the *doble* technique became a source of pride for San Antonio weavers and now dominate their *huipiles* (Personal Communication, Lidia López, July, 13, 2016).

The second *huipil* I analyze is the blouse shown in figure 3. This ensemble was selected by Lidia and I to display the technological changes that have occurred in the production of *traje*. When originally selecting the ensembles I wanted to purchase a second hand T-shirt similar to what many women would wear. It is very common to see women foregoing the costly *huipil* for cheaper second hand garments. Name brands like Old Navy, Abercrombie, or Coca-Cola were observed in my field notes. Lidia, knowing I would use these garments as a display of Maya dress, insisted I use a machine-made *huipil* (Figure 22). Compared to the T-shirt, the blouse, for Lidia, is more authentically Maya.





*Figure 22. Flat huipil. Photo by author.*

This blouse (fig. 22), lying flat measures at 23” x 21”. The circle around the head opening, measuring at 6.5”, is embellished with 3.5” of machine embroidery. According to Lidia, many Maya communities in Guatemala and Mexico do hand embroider hand woven cloth in lieu of the brocading for which her community is known. The tell-tale difference between hand embroidery and machine embroidery is the back (Figure 20). When you flip over the cloth there will be a white backing denotative of machine embroidery. At the beginning of my field research I was unable to distinguish the differences without peeking on the back of fabrics. Though through rigorous training with Lidia, I can now distinguish the various modes of embellishment.

The ground fabric is a machine produced eyelet mesh in nylon and is nude in color with occasional metallic threads – almost as if glitter had been spilt on the cloth. Lidia wasn't sure when these types of *huipiles* became popular but we each agreed, due to their lower cost, it was likely a response to the growing expense of handwoven *huipiles*. When I asked about who might wear a blouse such as these versus the previous huipil discussed, Lidia cited family values and class status as the primary distinctions (Personal Communication, Lidia López, June 15, 2016). She said, if a mother is a weaver and places value on weaving techniques (in the way that Lidia dresses) it is more likely that woman will have more wealth and demand her daughters carry on the same tradition (Personal Communication, Lidia López, June 15, 2016).

These two *huipiles* discussed above were purchased in July of 2016. As I have mentioned, other *huipiles* had emerged on the market which could threaten a weaver's livelihood in a different manner. This third *huipil* is comprised of synthetic fibers which are then printed with designs intended to mimic patterns and colors from specific regions. Figure 23 is not a copy of a *huipil* from San Antonio but is a clear reference to the designs and color ways typical of the region.

For research purposes, Lidia helped me purchase a garment in Santa Maria de Jesus (Figure 23). I paid the approximate equivalent of 6 U.S. dollars for the piece, whereas a handwoven huipil from San Antonio in the same size and style would cost at least \$250. Constructed with two identical panels and a poorly sewn center seam, the fabric is likely an



*Figure 23. Machine-made, mass-produced huipil purchased from Santa Maria de Jesus. Photo by author.*

acrylic/polyester blend. The warp is royal blue while the weft is the same blue at the bottom and top of the garment. The patterned area was printed on a white weft. It is likely this white weft is acrylic. I am certain about process of production for a few reasons. First, the pattern is too exact to have been printed on the threads prior to weaving. Second, there are registration errors at each end of one of the panels. On the patterned side, it is easy to see that the floral and geometric motifs were printed after the cloth was woven yet none of the dye transferred onto the white weft (Figure 24).





*Figure 24. Front and back of huipil from Santa Maria. Photo by author.*

These three *huipiles*, constructed generations apart, remain as present as the T-shirt in the streets of San Antonio and Antigua. Neither is more or less authentic but more so a direct response of the growing cost of handmade goods; a reflection of class status or familial values; or, I speculate, the changing climate. June and July, in Guatemala, are peak months of the rainy season (Personal Communication, Lidia López, June 15, 2016). Previous years saw cloudy days and evening rains. However, June and July of 2016, were very hot, dry, and sunny. The strange weather was often topic of conversation and concern was directed at corn and bean crops – each of which rely on the heavy rains. Daily dress is often determined by weather so I

found myself wondering how climate change had impacted individual's decisions to forego the heavy hand woven cloth to the lightweight t-shirt. An interesting question but, unfortunately, it will not be elaborated upon in this project.

### **Who wears which *huipil*?**

*Huipiles* are garments only to be worn by women, they indict Maya-ness, and are illustrative of class statuses (Hendrickson, 1995: 6). Anthropologist Carol Hendrickson (1995) has worked in Tecpán, Chimaltenango for over 20 years and upholds the belief that “*traje* is a powerful and densely meaningful expression of social identity and a vital element of life in the highlands” (6). She went on to say that though many changes have occurred in her two decades of research, the social and ontological role of *traje* remains constant (6). With close inspection of style, region, color, construction, or any other element of individual *huipil* the gender, ethnicity, and class of an individual is immediately evident. Lidia wore *huipiles* that displayed complex techniques from regions whose work she admired, this makes sense because her status is that of an accomplished weaver. For her, the *huipil* is a prideful expression of her Maya-ness, a symbol of her values as a craftsperson, and an indicator of her class privilege.

Though the selling of *huipiles* is a fairly recent occurrence (Anderson, 1978: 12). The shifting economy is readily apparent in the markets and street of the south highlands. As I have discussed, handwoven *huipiles* are extremely expensive. Anywhere from 15 to 250 US dollars (Green, 1999: 128) is an enormous amount to spend on a single garment when there are more

readily available, machine-made *huipiles* costing around 5 US dollars. Each market, at Santa Maria and Tecpán, catered to the surrounding Maya population and had very few handwoven garments. Clearly, handwoven garments have outpriced a part of the population for which *huipiles* were originally made.

In Kedron Thomas' (2016) ethnography she determined that the wearing of Hollister T-shirts or hoodies is “decidedly *other* than indigenous dress” (19). She cited Maya dress as a symbol for Maya cultural activists and a “basis for Guatemalan nationalism” (Thomas, 2016: 19). Handmade garments have been established as a status symbol for the Guatemalan elite and, simultaneously, a celebration of Maya ancestry and Guatemalan nationalism. Where then does the mass-produced, machine made *huipil* fit in?

The mass-produced machine made *huipil* emerged to satisfy a particular market of consumers. Namely, low-income Maya women who choose and want to wear *huipiles* but cannot afford to purchase, make, or keep the handwoven counterparts. Of *huipiles* worn on the streets today, these particular garments are particularly illustrative of class divisions and severe wealth disparities. Ethnicity, class, and gender are certainly not determined by dress but these myriad positions are materialized through the fashioning of our bodies.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

“Even if our own approach to things is conditioned necessarily by the view that things have no meanings apart from those that human transactions, attributions, and motivations endow them with, the anthropological problem is that this formal truth does not illuminate the concrete, historical circulation of things. For that we have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories.”

Arjun Appadurai, 1986: 5

To problematize the current situation of Maya textiles, I began with the stuff of history—that is, archives, photographs, and memories; moving then to the body—that is, a self and a flesh; and then finally to the social world. All of these places are sites of production and destruction; of naiveté and knowing; navigation and austerity. There are material and immaterial limits to all research, this very study included.

One of the most interpersonally troubling aspects of this work, one that has hung above my head since the beginning, is my position as a white middle class woman whose Spanish speaking is limited and Kaqchikel comprehension is nil. My background and enthusiasm for weaving and textiles was a kind of language, one that I can claim degrees of fluency, and became a fluency I often relied upon. I can read fabric: this is a lovely metaphor but it should not detract from my reality as yet another iteration of a white anthropologist conducting field research in an indigenous community. I can eloquently defend my work, my ethics, and my politics in this research but, separately from this work, my ethics and politics remind me that no matter the framework, anthropology of this sort has a troubled, ongoing history.

Another limitation was having only a seven-week fieldwork period, augmented by only four days a year later. I have yet to meet a colleague who has been satisfied with the length of their time in the field. This is likely because the nature of what anthropologists study: the world



is constantly in motion, it does not stop and say, “now write!” Regardless, seven weeks in a relatively unfamiliar place barely scratches the surface.

More so, during those seven weeks my experience was entirely determined, even curated, by Lidia. I have relied heavily on published literature to discuss the *huipiles* and the weaving traditions outside of the sphere of Lidia’s home. Textile production exists throughout Guatemala and Mexico yet I was unable to access much of that data first hand. Lidia knew I would write and share my research so there were times when she controlled with whom I spoke and the kinds of textiles I was able to purchase. This was most apparent when we were selecting the two full *traje tipico* ensembles. Because many young Maya women wear their *cortes* with T-shirts I expressed that I wanted to purchase a T-shirt from the second hand market to pair with a *corte*. Lidia disagreed and felt that I should show what she felt was more authentic. This is where I respectively disagree with Lidia’s opinion. I do not believe in a hierarchy of authenticity; I do not think either *huipil* or T-shirt is more or less Maya. For Lidia, however, the *huipil* is Maya and the T-shirt is or mass-produced *huipil* are symbols of an infiltration of global non-Maya culture. While this research was ongoing and in previous papers I have written on this topic I omitted information on the mass-produced *huipil* out of respect for the agency of my interlocutor. On my final day in the field, as I previously described, Lidia, to my surprise, helped me purchase the mass-produced *huipil* that is photographed and written about in this thesis. Even on my last day of my field research, one of the most salient aspects of this project was curated by Lidia.

I do believe this work is an ongoing project - as the body of this thesis has illustrated, the issue of textiles and emerging economies is continuous. What will Maya textiles *be* in another decade? Certainly they will not *be* what I have seen—like other forms of fashion and textiles, they are always *becoming*.

### **A Story of *Huipiles***

Through weaving with Lidia, I learned about the geography of Guatemala. Early on in my field research Lidia's family members joked I was in Guatemala looking for a husband, why else would I be learning to weave and make tortillas, they would say. The things Lidia was teaching me allowed me to construct a social standing in her family. It is important for people to develop senses of self within community which has historically been victim to severe violence and marginalization. Whether it be through the wearing or the production of textiles, both processes are just that: productive. Socially and materially, making garments and wearing garments are each responsive, dynamic processes.

The conversation about the *huipiles* worn by Maya women presents an interesting quandary on the representation of Maya identity, authenticity of dress, and socioeconomic power among the Maya. Stuart Hall (1997) argues that representation is an important aspect of cultural production (2). Cultural production produces meaning. Clearly, the loom is a tool of cultural production and so is the process of wearing garments. The question between the groups of Maya women is ultimately a class issue. Some Maya women are able to purchase and wear *huipiles* while others are forced to sell their family heirlooms, produce cloth only to be sold to non-Maya, or not participate in the weaving or wearing of *huipiles*. In the question of an item which has historically signified gender and ethnicity, who gets to decide what is the real or the original? This thesis has presented Maya textiles as a changing, socially responsive, economically malleable process of making and wearing. How can there be an original?

The back strap loom is a tool which connects past and present, transcending time and place. Through the process of weaving, women are able to make the objects which produce and embody their identities while connecting them to their ancestors. The materials that they use, the colors selected, and patterns reproduced are temporalities: moments in time woven, embedded into a garment. The machine-made *huipiles* have no less temporality or legitimacy than any other garment. Fashion is explicitly a process of subject formation (Kaiser, 2012: 193).

Maya cloth has experienced years of material change. The designs, colors, and materials which make *huipiles* have changed yet the social role persists (Morris, 1984). Communicating gender, class, social status, and ethnicity the *huipil* is necessary to the social reproduction of Maya identity.

Material and symbolic changes have occurred alongside shifting political economies. As the state of Guatemala continues to support its growing tourist economy, the rising cost of the *huipil* will mean fewer and fewer Maya women can afford to make and wear the traditions of their *antepasados*. What this means for the future of Maya weavers and the garments of their ancestors is uncertain and hence a predicament indeed.

In the interview I filmed with Lidia, she spoke about the century-old *huipil* that belonged to her grandmother. We talked about the designs, the dye, the wear; she spoke about why she still kept the worn item after all of these years and why she would never sell the item. For her, the *huipil* was both a source of inspiration and a story. She kept it so she could show it to people, to share the story of her family and of the *huipil* (Personal Communication, Lidia López, July, 15,

2016). Interestingly, Lidia also bought a machine-made, mass-produced *huipil* from Santa Maria de Jesus for the very same reason. She wanted to show it to people. Lidia values her work as a weaver and she proudly wears *huipiles* every day. For her the *huipil* is an embodiment of her identity and of her role in her family. Having the two *huipiles*, her grandmother's and the synthetic printed version of today, is simply a continuation of a multifarious story. A story that will not end but, as it always has, remain in motion.

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