

OPTICS AND THE CULTURE OF MODERNITY
IN GUATEMALA CITY SINCE THE LIBERAL REFORMS

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By

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ABSTRACT

In the years after the Liberal Reforms of the 1870s, the capitalization of coffee production and buttressing of coercive labour regimes in rural Guatemala brought huge amounts of surplus capital to Guatemala City. Individual families—either invested in land or export houses—and the state used this newfound wealth to transform and beautify the capital, effectively inaugurating the modern era in the last decades of the nineteenth century. This dissertation considers the urban experience of modernity in Guatemala City since the 1870s. It argues that until the 1920s and 1930s, modernity in the city was primarily influenced by aesthetic modernism in the form of shopping arcades and department stores with their commodities, sites of bourgeois pleasure and pomp such as the hippodrome and Temple to Minerva, society dances, expositions, and fairs. After this point, the social fallout of economic modernization increasingly defined the experience of urban modernity in Guatemala City. Capitalist development altered the social relations of production in the countryside, precipitating massive urbanization that characterized urban life in the second half of the twentieth century.

My analysis helps to account for shifting perceptions of Guatemala City; regarded during the *fin-de-siècle* as the “Paris of Central America”—owing to its wide boulevards, dawning consumer culture, and cosmopolitan nature—the capital today is considered one of the most dangerous cities in the Americas. I argue that, since the Liberal Reforms, urban Guatemalans learned to see, act, and think as modern subjects. The idea of the “optics of modernity” is introduced to understand epistemological shifts in perception associated with technological, scientific, religious, social, economic, and cultural changes. The optics of modernity denote both the markers of modernity (such as trains,

department stores, and new social types like dandies) and new subject positions that altered the experience of the modern world. With these optics of modernity, I argue that urban Guatemalans learned to acclimatize themselves to living in a modern city.

The culture of modernity during the Guatemalan Belle Époque (roughly from 1892 until 1917) is of particular interest. This dissertation proposes that the economic expansion of the period was frequently punctuated by recessions and depressions as the prices of export agricultural commodities dropped and rebounded on global markets. These economic crises constrained the bourgeoisie's visions of liberal utopia. A unique cultural phenomenon known as the *cultura de esperar* (the culture of expecting, hoping, and waiting) is introduced in this work to describe the epistemological predicaments that arose when the hopes and expectations of modernity were stifled by economic gluts. The analysis explores a wide variety of topics from nineteenth-century séance culture, bull fighting in cinema, the modernist avant-garde, and the dawning of consumer culture to the contrast between verticality in urban architecture and the expansion of urban slums.

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DEDICATION

Much to my pleasure, living in Saskatoon placed me approximately one hundred kilometers to the east of the homestead where my grandparents lived and where my mother was raised, just north of the small hamlet of Ruddell, Saskatchewan. In the early days of my doctorate, I frequently visited my grandparent's farm for long weekends and holidays, and they always welcomed me with love and offered me respite from my academic work. My grandfather, David Rowland Wood—or simply Rollie—passed away in 2009 while I was researching this dissertation. His everyday life speaks to the tensions described within this work, even though he lived worlds apart from Guatemala. But, as I argue, the experience of modernity is a global phenomenon with which we are all forced to contend. My grandfather always had an uneasy relationship with change: in anticipation of rural electrification, he purchased electric kitchen appliances for my grandmother before their house had electric power. He also liked new trucks.

Nevertheless, he was reluctant to bear witness to the decomposition of old buildings on his small homestead and would patch holes in roofs to slow the rotting of his farm. He passed innumerable hours trying to get the rusted engines of his old tractors to turn over. He also was comforted by routine and habit, and frustrated by how quickly things often moved. As Walter Benjamin understood, modernity is a maelstrom: sometimes we can turn our backs and resist it, while at other times it sweeps us away despite our protests.

I dedicate this dissertation to my grandfather, Rollie, and to my grandmother, Elizabeth Jane Wood.

When we can, let's embrace our curse and ride recklessly like Machojón from Asturias' *Hombres de Maíz* alongside the fireflies through the burning cornfields of

Ilóm—all else be damned. But let's also return like the ants after the harvest, finding our way back to the places we know best.

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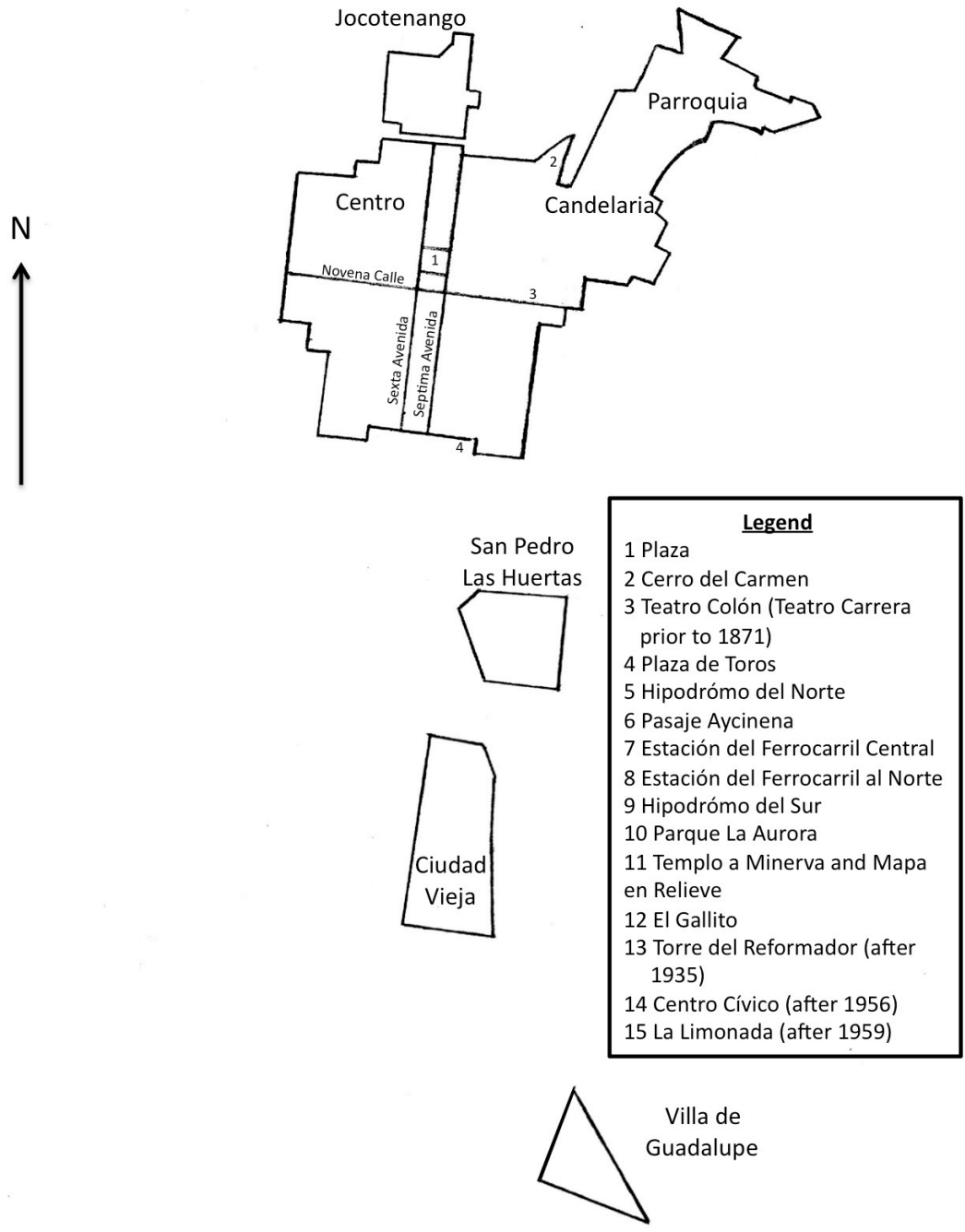
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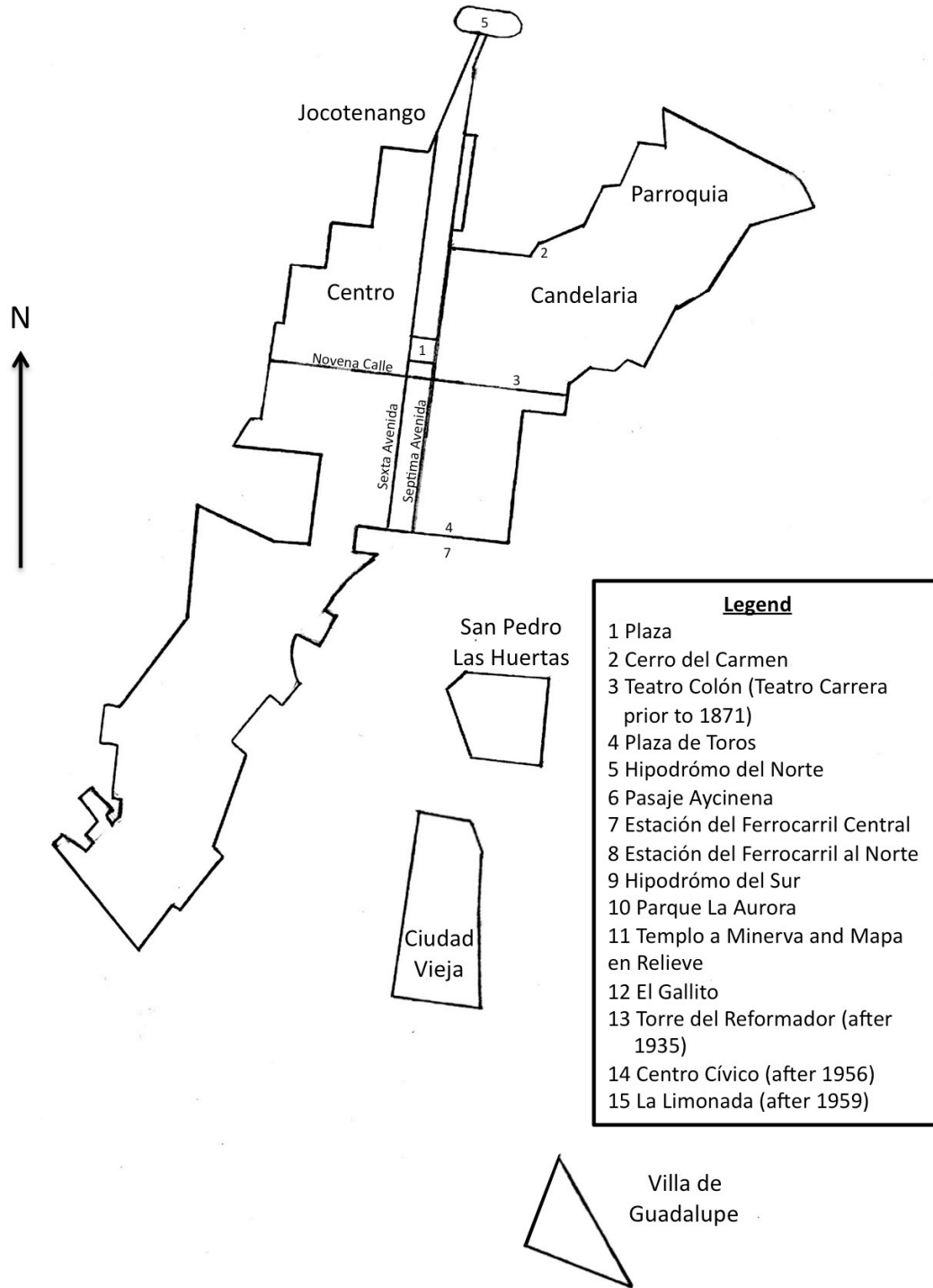


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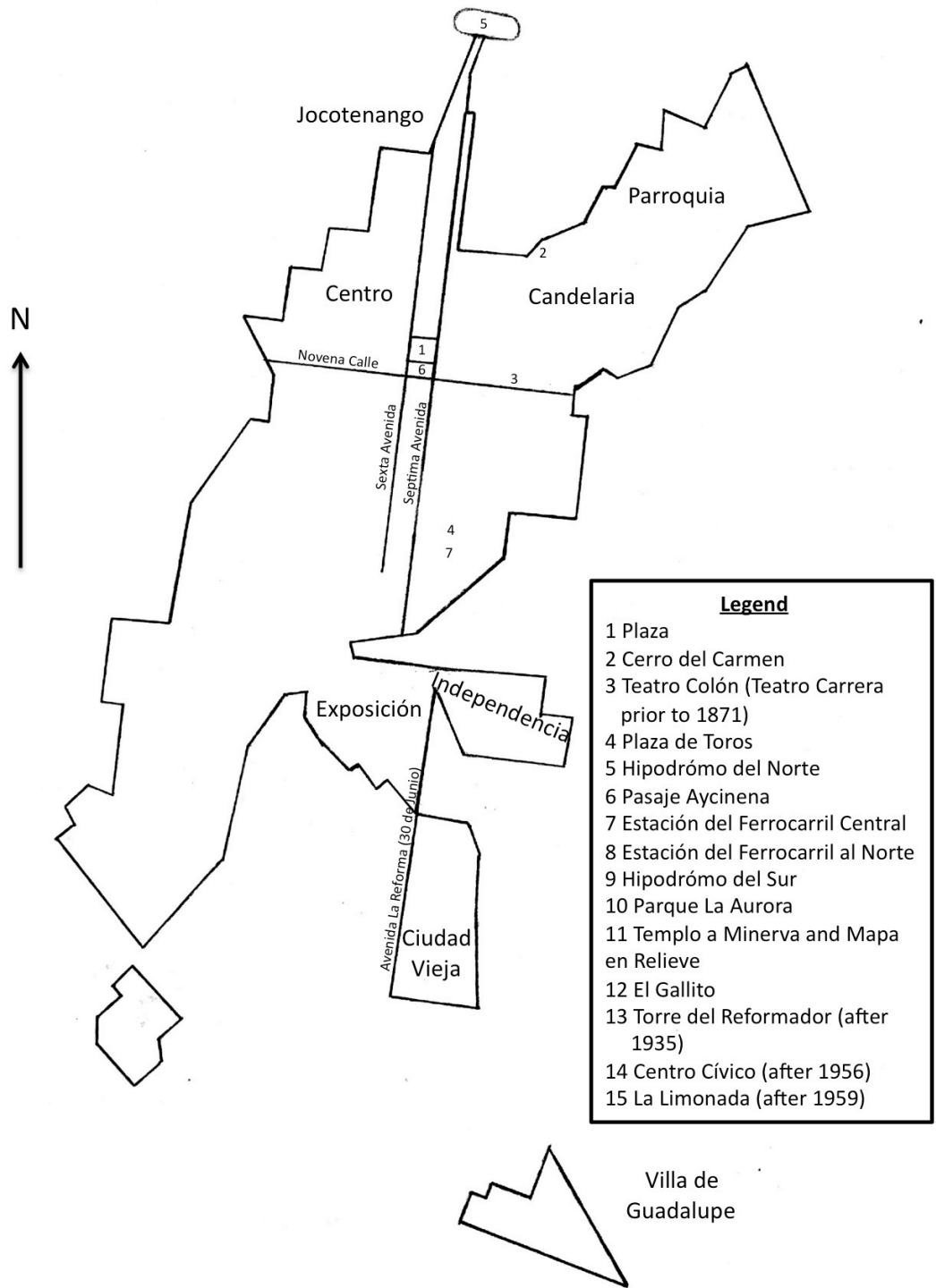
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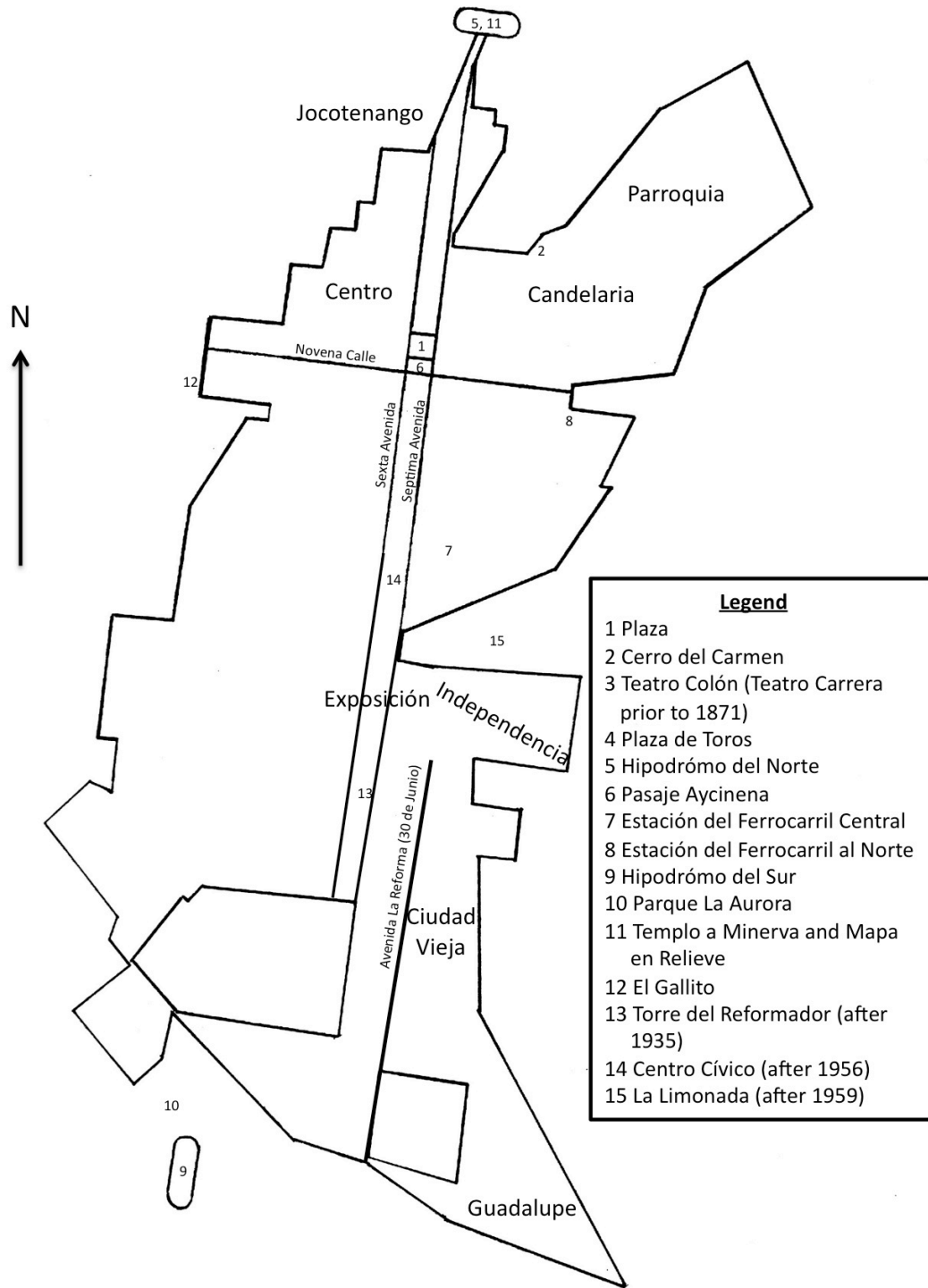
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Introduction

The Place Between the Ephemeral and the Eternal: Modernism and Modernization in Guatemala

Examining the catalog of Guatemalan artist Carlos Valenti's posthumous 1928 exhibition in his country's capital, one may be startled by the bourgeois cultural references found within his sketches and paintings.¹ The collection hints at a blossoming urban culture in Guatemala City during the Belle Époque that scarcely can be imagined given the profound social, economic, and political dislocation characteristic of contemporary Guatemala.² The urban culture of the Guatemalan capital one hundred years ago appears to be one of decadence and pomp, complete with referential nods to the modern lifestyles of European metropolises.

In Valenti's 1911 work, *El Dandy*, the artist captures the essence of bourgeois hedonism. Here the subject—a well-dressed, if campy, petty-bourgeois gentleman—stands before his audience, the viewer, as a performer of fin-de-siècle capitalist society, thus insinuating the thespian-nature of his cultural spectacle. Despite the haze that enshrouds him, the dandy appears to be adjusting his tailed coat, cane in hand, in ritual

¹ Dirección de la Academia Nacional de Bellas Artes, *Exposición Póstuma Carlos Valenti*, (Guatemala: Imprenta De la Riva Hnos., 1928).

² This dissertation will repeatedly make reference to the Guatemalan the fin-de-siècle and Belle Époque. European historians have consistently used these terms to discuss the decades between roughly German unification and the First World War. See, for example, Carl E. Schorske groundbreaking *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1980). For this dissertation, both monikers refer to the years between 1892 and 1917. The first date represents the rise to power of President José María Reyna Barrios who initiated the aesthetic modernization of Guatemala City. The period concludes with the earthquakes that commenced in late December 1917, which effectively destroyed Guatemala City. More specifically, the phrase turn-of-the-century will be used to describe the years immediately before and after 1900. For an account of conditions in Guatemala City over the past decade and a half since the signing of the 1996 Peace Accords, please see Kevin Lewis O'Neill and Kedron Thomas (eds), *Securing the City: Neoliberalism, Space, and Insecurity in Postwar Guatemala*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011) and Deborah Levenson, *Adíos Niño: The Gangs of Guatemala City and the Politics of Death*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

celebration of his fine fashion sense and lackadaisical character: nonchalance in an increasingly tenuous social world. As Frankfurt scholar Walter Benjamin writes of the Parisian *flâneur*, so too it is true of the dandy: “He is merchandise.”³ And like



FIGURE 1 Carlos Valenti, *El Dandy*, 1911. Courtesy of the Museo de Arte Moderno “Carlos Mérida.”

Benjamin’s iconic figure, the dandy is a buyer and consumes that which the modern world provides. Yet, despite his earnest pauses—indeed his conviction that he stands outside of time—the dandy’s social world moves too quickly around him as spatial-temporal structures that hitherto seemed immutable now appear to be collapsing under the weight of rapid social and cultural change. Herein lies the contradiction of the dandy: the modern world that he willed and nursed into being, that he drunkenly toasted and

³ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Rolf Tiedemann (ed.), Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (trans.), (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2002), (A3a,7), p. 42.

celebrated, now surpasses him, abandoning him in its wake as an artifact of an age gone by. That which was fashionable has become unfashionable and the social world of the dandy has become ephemeral.

In contrast to the dandy and the maelstrom of his social world stands an omnipresent state of inertia, one aspect of what will be called the *cultura de esperar*, the culture of expecting, hoping, and waiting. The stagnation that characterizes the *cultura de esperar* can be tracked throughout the experience of modernity in Guatemala City from the 1870s until the 1930s, serving as a damning testament to the promises that modernity failed to deliver in Central America. Briefly, the *cultura de esperar* describes the epistemological crisis generated amongst the Guatemalan bourgeoisie when their expectations for progress were interrupted by periods of economic crisis. Stasis best describes this condition that generated severe anxiety for those who deeply desired modern movement, whether culturally or economically. The *cultura de esperar* was the steadfast foil to liberal ideology and faith in progress, and constantly cast a shadow of doubt into the minds of the Guatemalan bourgeoisie about their modern project.

Gilberto Valenzuela—collector of all things ephemeral, whose extensive hoarding of books, pamphlets, speeches, and kitsch today forms the Colección Valenzuela at the Biblioteca Nacional—rarely left traces of his musings amidst his amassed material. Nevertheless, his handwriting can be found on documents from the programs for the opening of the 1897 Exposición Centro-Americana é Internacional (International Exposition of Central America) as he shared his frustrations with the inability of the Expo's planners to complete the project in time for its inauguration. Despite the copious amounts of champagne poured at the grand opening, Valenzuela lamented that people

were lured with guarantees of novelties on display only to discover at the exposition grounds that the majority of the buildings remained unfinished and, as Valenzuela wrote, “There is still nothing being exhibited.”⁴ So delayed was the construction of the Expo that a second grand opening was held about two months after the first. Students at the Universidad de San Carlos in the capital mocked the organizing committee by welcoming foreign dignitaries and exhibitors to “the *second* inauguration of the *first* International Exposition of Central America”.⁵ For Valenzuela, the byword of the Central American Expo was the short phrase affixed to countless installations around the fair grounds that constantly thwarted the expectations of visitors: “coming soon.” In an endless battle against stagnation, the urban bourgeoisie were forced to contend with the *cultura de esperar*, which exemplified their discarded aspirations.

The experience of modernity created a plethora of temporalities that co-existed across the spaces of Guatemala City. Some temporal regimes appeared to move too quickly, constantly modifying themselves and in search of newness. The aesthetic logic employed by Carlos Valenti was that of capturing a brief moment in time, with the minutiae of everyday life blurred by its fleeting nature. Through his art forms, Valenti conveys the pace of modern life—the arrival and departure of the train, the passing of Guatemala’s first automobiles, the rapid succession of fashions, and the circulation of commodities—speeding to dizzying rates so that moments could only be detained by wide brushstrokes. The resulting blurred margins leave the space around the subject

⁴ “Programa de las Festividades con que se Celebrará en este Capital la apertura de la Exposición Centro-Americana, el 15 de Marzo de 1897,” (Guatemala: Tipografía Nacional 1897), Colección Valenzuela, Biblioteca Nacional de Guatemala [Hojas Sueltas no. 1989, Year 1897].

⁵ “Exposición Centro-Americana é Internacional se abrirá al público el domingo 9 del corriente á las 12 M.,” Colección Valenzuela [Hojas Sueltas no. 1989, Year 1897], p. 2.

indistinguishable, as if he cannot be extricated from his social world. The dandy is portrayed as both belonging to the modern world and being swept up in its movement.

Other temporalities, however, were perceived to be stagnant and, too frequently, associated with being arrested within a pre- or non-modern past. The stasis described by Valenzuela, for example, counterbalances the dandy's movement by unveiling the tendencies towards dormancy that temper the rapidity of the modern world. Cultural tension, then, arises from these competing temporal trajectories within Guatemala's experience of modernity. Spaces viewed as the embodiment of modernity were all too frequently transformed into moribund and derelict locales owing to the instability of export agricultural markets and the capital's lack of substantial consumer base until well into the twentieth century. Consider the Pasaje Aycinena, a Parisian-style shopping arcade on the reverse side of the central plaza, constructed in the 1890s from the property of the Aycinena family to house fine imported wares characteristic of Belle Époque culture. Contradicting the logic of commodity circulation, however, the Pasaje Aycinena soon became less a center for consumer culture, instead functioning as office space for the city's abundance of lawyers. For decades during the twentieth century, the arcade was rendered obsolete as a quaint relic of its own barely-existent consumer past.⁶ It remained to the bourgeoisie to put some congruency to the asymmetry of this social world within Guatemala City. In so doing, the bourgeoisie attempted to remake the capital in their image.

⁶ The point here is not that consumerism did not exist; rather, I merely illustrate that spaces designated for consumption did not always fulfill their purpose.

Commentators across the globe have long identified the tension between the ephemeral and the eternal as a central motif within the experience of modernity.⁷ Karl Marx famously discussed the fleeting nature of capitalist society, writing,

All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.⁸

Modern life, according to Marx, was characterized by impermanence and change because of the need of the bourgeoisie to constantly revolutionize the means of production.

Social and cultural dislocation is the product of the tendency towards the ephemeral.⁹

But there is complementary movement towards permanence as communities are re-forged in modern ways. Institutions such as the state attempt to create a semblance of intransigence by codifying particular social practices, creating legal systems, solidifying national languages and erasing dialects, and standardizing time.¹⁰ Beyond this, everyday people attempt to establish routine, habit, and familiarity to counter the fleeting nature of modern life. The act of collecting as practiced by the Valenzuela family—whose

⁷ Many scholars have turned to nineteenth-century Parisian writer Charles Baudelaire who understood modernity in these precise terms. See, for example, Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, Jonathan Mayne (ed. and trans.), (London: Phaidon Press, 1964), pp. 3. See, too, David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry Into the Origins of Cultural Change*, (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

⁸ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, (New York: International Publishers, 1948), p. 12 and Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982).

⁹ Sharing this perspective, historian Jim Handy writes of Guatemala, “If modernity means anything concrete,” he explains, “it must mean a mix of social changes distinguished by the disembeddedness of social and productive relations, the ‘freeing’ of labour from the social, communal, and cultural bonds which gave it meaning in a pre- or non-modern context.” See Jim Handy, “Democratizing What? Some Reflections on Nation, States, Ethnicity, Modernity, Community, and Democracy in Guatemala,” *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 53 (2002), p. 65.

¹⁰ Eric Hobsbawm, among others, has written extensively about such “invention of tradition” in which certain social practices are treated as eternal. See Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

materials provide much of the evidence for this dissertation—represents nothing short of a longing for a historical record, for something, in a word, eternal. Considering these two processes alongside one another— after twisting and writhing together, at times complementing one another and, at others, negating—it should come as no surprise that historian Marshall Berman describes the social processes of modernization as being kept “in a state of perpetual becoming”¹¹ as social worlds are constantly made anew.

This dissertation seeks to locate the place between the ephemeral and the eternal—metaphorically encapsulated by the concerns of Valenti and Valenzuela—in order to detail the culture of modernity in Guatemala City from the Liberal Reforms of the 1870s until the mid-twentieth century. It examines both the rapid succession and stunting immobility that characterized the social and cultural world of Guatemala City. The importance of this culture of modernity cannot be overstated; it was the basis of hegemonic consent in Guatemala City. That is, to the extent that the liberal dictators from 1871 until 1944 could claim to represent popular will and aspirations—to the degree that they held the consent of the population—they owed their successes to the culture of modernity. The modern social world in the Guatemalan capital succeeded in seducing various sectors of the population with the triumphs of science and technology, aesthetics, fashion, and consumer culture. These palpable markers of modernity—and the phantasmagorias that they spun—were the foundations of the liberal project since the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

Particular themes are reiterated throughout: the tension between the aforementioned ephemeral and eternal nature of modern life, continuity versus transgression, order and asymmetry, urban contrasted with rural, and the competing

¹¹ Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, p. 16.

temporalities that complicate these binaries. The aim is to describe how the bourgeoisie experienced modernity in Guatemala City since the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the manners in which they tried to make sense of their world, their attempts to create a modern metropolis, and why they were unsuccessful in crafting a liberal utopia in Central America. The work that follows will principally explore perceptions of the modern experience as elucidated by what Uruguayan literary critique Ángel Rama famously referred to as “the lettered city”: the collection of oligarchic, bourgeois, and/or professional men of letters who conjoined their roles of governance with their economic clout, cultural importance, and high social standing to forge a unique perspective on their contemporary realities.¹²

But who composed the ranks of the lettered city in Guatemala and the bourgeois culture of modernity from the 1870s until the mid-twentieth century? Of course, the individuals changed over the roughly eighty-year period covered by this dissertation. Men like Francisco Lainfiesta, Rafael Spínola, Carlos Valenti, Salvador Falla, Juan Fermin Aycinena, Máximo Soto Hall, Alberto Valdeavellano, Enrique Gómez Carrillo, Carlos Novello, Ramón A. Salazar, David Rosenberg, and Federico Hernández de León can be listed by name. But, more generally, this dissertation speaks in broader terms of the bourgeoisie and their urban culture, most readily identified by their social composition and class position. This included the traditional elite, those with vested interests in rural Guatemala but who inhabited the capital. But it was also composed of a nascent middle-class of professionals who functioned as the bureaucratic corps of the liberal state as it expanded after the 1870s.

¹² Ángel Rama, *The Lettered City*, John Charles Chasteen (trans), (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

By the 1890s, this group of civil servants consisted of administrators, diplomats, secretaries, officials, public safety planners, mail and telegraph operators, public educators, trustees from charitable organizations, and hundreds of military officers. But it also included the professionals who catered to the swelling government bureaucracy like journalists, editors, lawyers and notaries, doctors, photographers, pharmacists, dentists, department store owners, and bankers.¹³ Later, during the long dictatorship of President Manuel Estrada Cabrera from 1898 until 1920, a veritable who's who of Guatemalan bourgeois society was published in the so-called *Libro Azul*, a self-congratulatory celebration of Guatemalan modernity.¹⁴ Few of these occupations warrant the moniker "bourgeois" in a strict Marxist sense of the word; however, the social position of these people and their place within the modes of production placed them in a uniquely privileged position within Guatemala City whereby they could enjoy and consume the fruits of modern culture. More fundamentally, the political convictions, personal preferences, and social consciences found within the ranks of this group may have differed marginally but its members overwhelmingly held nationalist sentiments that championed liberal capitalist development within Guatemala, a strong desire for markers of modernity, and a nearly unshakeable faith in progress.

Obvious and often intentional silences existed within the culture of modernity described by this dissertation. Glaringly, women were both included and excluded from bourgeois culture in Guatemala City. Their participation was most frequently mediated by their roles as consumers, prostitutes, mothers, or educators in relation to men.

¹³ For a breakdown of professionals in Guatemala City during the 1890s, please see the *Censo General de La República de Guatemala*, (Guatemala: Tipografía y Encuadernación Nacional, 1894), pp. 196-198.

¹⁴ *El "Libro Azul" de Guatemala*, (New Orleans: Searcy & Pfaff Ltd, 1915).

Newspapers did periodically discuss women's issues, whether regarding political suffrage, access to education, and the responsibilities of motherhood. But, more commonly, they were peripheral to the discussion of modernity, assumed to be a part of the social landscape but seldom addressed directly with the exception of noting whose wife wore what gown to a particular social event.

The working classes were similarly ignored within discussions of urban culture, at least until the 1920s. There were, no doubt, pretenses of inclusion as public festivals and events in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century were said to be for all Guatemalans. This was true both of the 1897 *Exposición Centro-Americana* and the *Minervalias* (Festival to Minerva) of the early 1900s and 1910s (these celebrations are discussed in Chapters Three and Five, respectively). Advertisements for consumer goods during this period often addressed the issue of class as efforts were made to mold workers into consumers. But again, the working class was not intended to shape the experience of modernity, rather to respond to it. This tendency began to shift significantly after the mass mobilization of the 1920s as the bourgeoisie became more inclined to address the working class and include them in discussions of Guatemalan nationality.

Perhaps most hidden within the margins of discussions about urban culture, however, were indigenous Guatemalans. To the extent that the Maya were discussed in the literature of the period, they were assumed to be from rural Guatemala or hailing from regional capitals such as Quetzaltenango. Writings from the period contained massive silences on indigenous people living within Guatemala City, perhaps with the exception of noting that the northern suburb of Jocotenango had once been a Mayan village prior to its annexation into the capital. These silences were betrayed, however, by travelogues

written by foreign visitors who described the presence of indigenous residents, often in relation to the market. Beginning in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, photographs of the capital, too, revealed its diverse indigenous population. Images from Alberto G. Valdeavellano's Guatemala City collection from the fin-de-siècle demonstrate the capital's ethnic heterogeneity.¹⁵ Mayan women and their children are seen walking down Septima Avenida while others appear to be carrying goods on their heads as they make their way to the market. Moreover, police reports and court records show individuals with typical Mayan surnames who hailed from the capital or from nearby towns such as Canalitos and San Juan Sacatepéquez being tried in the capital.¹⁶ Nonetheless, the city's newspapers and periodicals were silent on this segment of the population in the day-to-day discussions of urban life and modernity.

An exception exists to this observation, however, in the form of the Instituto de Indígenas (Indigenous Institute). This residential school was opened in Guatemala City in the early 1890s. Its founding was part of the commemorations for the quatercentennial anniversary of Christopher Columbus' voyage to the Americas and the desire by liberals in the capital to "civilize" Guatemala's indigenous population. Considerable attention was paid to the school by the capital's press for the first several years of its existence. But this exposure was an exception that proved the rule: indigenous people living or working in the capital were often perceived as a threat to liberal modernity unless they were being subjected to assimilation or "regenerated through instruction" as one

¹⁵ See the Colección de Alberto G. Valdeavellano in the Archivo Histórico-Fotográfico de la Academia de Geografía é Historia de Guatemala.

¹⁶ See, for example, *Juicios Criminales Correspondientes al Juzgado 3ero. De 1era. Instancia de lo criminal antes juzgado 6to. De 1era Instancia de la Ciudad de Guatemala, 1892-1925*, AGCA, Índice No. 45.

periodical described the boarding school.¹⁷ Indeed, the press celebrated the young pupils who had made the greatest strides in shedding their indigenous culture and adopting Ladino worldviews.¹⁸ In contrast, the rest of the capital's indigenous were assigned to the periphery and largely ignored as antithetical to modernity.

Culture and the Experience of Modernity in Guatemala City

Early in its history, Guatemala City was marked by its propensity to relocate. In 1524, Pedro de Alvarado, the Spanish conqueror of Guatemala, founded a city at Iximché, the one-time capital of the Kaqchikel before relocating to the Valley of Almolonga due to an indigenous rebellion in November 1527. Santiago de Guatemala, as the city was known, was constructed at the base of a large volcano and was inhabited by the likes of Francisco Marroquín, the first bishop of Guatemala when the territory was first recognized by the Catholic Church in 1532. Less than a decade later, in 1541, heavy rains filled the crater of the volcano that towered over the city—henceforth called Volcán Agua—before bursting and inundating the settlement with rocks, mud, and debris.¹⁹ The calamity inflicted upon the populace led colonial powers to once again move the capital, this time to the Valley of Panchoy with the first town meeting being held in March 1543. Less than thirty years later, it was made the see to the Royal Tribunal of Guatemala, thus becoming the capital city of a kingdom that included what is now Central America and Chiapas.

¹⁷ “Los indios que se redimen,” *La Ilustración Guatemalteca*, Jan. 1, 1897, p. 168. See, too, “Opiniones sobre el Instituto de Indígenas,” *El Progreso Nacional*, Oct. 26, 1894, p. 84.

¹⁸ The term Ladino has a mixed legacy in Guatemala, often changing significance over time and space. Here, it refers to non-indigenous people with Europeanized culture and worldviews.

¹⁹ Among those killed was Beatriz de la Cueva, the governor and Alvarado's widow. Elisha Oscar Crosby, *Memoirs of Elisha Oscar Crosby: Reminiscences of California and Guatemala from 1849 to 1864*, Charles Albro Barker (ed), (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1945), p. 79.

In 1773, however, Santiago de los Caballeros de Guatemala, as the city was denominated, was struck by a powerful earthquake. Shortly afterwards, Don Martín de Mayorga, the President of the Royal Tribunal and one of the most influential men in the kingdom, abandoned the city and established a provisional government in the Valley of La Ermita. His deeds fomented a clash between colonial forces in Santiago de los Caballeros—with the merchants and Church figures allying against the Crown—which was only resolved through royal decree that resettled the capital effective January 1, 1776. Officially named La Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción, the new capital is more commonly referred to as Guatemala (or Guatemala City to foreigners), whereas Santiago de los Caballeros became La Antigua Guatemala (or simply Antigua). The Valley of La Ermita offered a capacity for irrigation through aqueducts, fertile soil, woodland resources for building, consumption, and combustion, in addition to spatial reserves to accommodate the expansion of the city. Colonial officials also believed that the new zone would be less affected by earthquakes given its greater distance from the volcanoes that surrounded Antigua and, erroneously, that the deep ravines that carved through the valley would cushion seismic shocks. Finally, the few inhabitants of the valley confirmed that the climate was agreeable, sealing the transfer of the capital to its new location.²⁰

²⁰ One amenity that the valley lacked, however, was a reliable labour force. Small settlements such as the one that surrounded the small chapel on Cerro del Carmen did not permit colonial administrators to secure labour. Thus settlements were erected around the new capital and entire indigenous populations were relocated. Old place names were transferred to the site of the new towns and thus Jocotenango, the largest labour settlement took its name from the indigenous town of the same name from which its population was drawn. Given the resistance to relocating offered by the Jocotecos (who often returned to their traditional home), colonial officials transferred the community's most important symbols and practices to the new location. To this end, they raided the church for icons and refounded the village's annual fair in the Valley of La Ermita. During the first several decades, this and other labour was used to construct the Santa

From here, the city was constructed upon a grid design typical of many Spanish-American cities with a central plaza flanked by four secondary churches and plazas equidistant from the core. The city maintained its social segregation as indigenous and *Ladino* labourers were restricted to peripheral zones such as La Parroquia in the city's northeast corner. The colonial, mercantile, and clerical elite, in contrast, filled the space that surrounded the core, which also housed the most significant administrative, religious, and commercial institutions. Despite serving as the capital of the Kingdom of Central America (1609-1821) and maintaining regional dominance through Independence and the period of the United Provinces of Central America (1823-1838), Guatemala City was characterized by its provincial disposition. The population of the capital in the 1820s was estimated to be approximately 28,000 people, only growing to about 40,000 by the mid-century.²¹ When compared to other cities of the former Spanish Empire like Mexico City, Lima, Buenos Aires, and Caracas, the Guatemalan capital was frequently disparaged as backwards. It was this backwardness that the liberals aimed to remedy when they took power in 1871 and began altering the urban physiognomy of the capital. The population of the capital began to grow more rapidly after the Liberal Reforms. The census of 1880 listed the population at 55,728 people, growing to 71,527 people by the early 1890s. In the census of 1921, there were 120,708 inhabitants, which more than

Catarina Pinula and Mixco aqueducts that provided the capital with water, in addition to important government buildings, private residences, churches, and convents. Nevertheless, construction was slow, with the Cathedral being completed only in 1815 and without its towers and façade. See Ofelia Columba Déleon Meléndez, *La feria de Jocotenango en la ciudad de Guatemala: una aproximación histórica y etnográfica* (Guatemala: Editorial Universitaria de Guatemala, 1983), pp. 20-23 and Gisela Gellert, *Ciudad de Guatemala: Factores determinantes en su desarrollo urbano (desde la fundación hasta la actualidad)*, (Guatemala: FLACSO, 1995), pp. 19-21.

²¹ Ana María Urruela de Quezada, "Siglo XIX: Luces y sombras en el surgimiento de la ciudad," *La Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción: 230 años de historia*, Ana María Urruela Villacorta de Quezada (ed.) (Guatemala: Grupo Financiero de Occidente, 2006), p. 99.

doubled to 284,276 people by mid-century.²² It was within this growing social space that the liberals attempted to construct their ideal urban center.

A series of arguments are proposed and explored throughout this dissertation. First, I argue that the experience of modernity in Guatemala City was primarily informed by aesthetic modernism rather than economic modernization in the first decades after the Liberal Reforms. By roughly the 1920s, however, capitalist modernization and its social fallout was the defining feature of the capital city. One implication of this argument is that the city's bourgeoisie began constructing the modern city based on their impressions of European metropolises. To this end, they constructed boulevards, shopping arcades, and buildings featuring Art Nouveau-style architecture. That is, they anticipated modern culture before the social relations of production for such a culture were in place. Thus, when consumer capitalism, in particular, developed in Guatemala City, it found suitable spaces already in existence. Commodity culture appeared then as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Secondly, through the use of the optics of modernity, I argue that urban Guatemalans learned to see, act, and think as modern subjects. The optics of modernity comprise two related concepts: first, they include markers of modernity, that is, physical objects such as trains, arcades, or commodities that provided credence to the proposition that Guatemala was indeed modernizing. Secondly, optics of modernity refer to the new subject positions that altered the experience of the modern world. With these optics of modernity, I propose that urban Guatemalans learned to acclimatize themselves to living in a modern city. My final principal argument is that liberal worldviews gave rise to

²² Ibid., p. 99; Dirección General de Estadística, *Censo General de la República de Guatemala*, (Guatemala: Tipografía Nacional, 1894), p. 12; *Censo de la República de Guatemala 1921*, (Guatemala, 1924), pp. 26-31; José Florentín Martínez López, *El proceso de urbanización en Guatemala: Un enfoque demográfico 1950-2002*, (Guatemala: Centro de Estudios Urbanos y Regionales, 2006), pp. 137-145.

certain expectations of the modern world owing to linear conceptions of history and progress. I introduce the idea of the *cultura de esperar*—the culture of expecting, hoping, and waiting. The *cultura de esperar* describes the epistemological interruption that occurs when visions of liberal utopia were disrupted. This cultural phenomenon proved to be a constant source of anxiety through much of the broader culture of modernity in Guatemala City. Each argument warrants further consideration.

The years immediately following the Liberal Reforms of the 1870s inaugurated modernity in Guatemala City.²³ But this was not a modernity predicated on the capitalist mode of production in either the capital city or the Guatemalan countryside. Rather, the culture of modernity manifested in a historically different way in Guatemala than in the capitalist cores of Europe and the northeastern United States. In *Myths of Modernity*, historian Elizabeth Dore asserts that an essential feature of modernity is the existence of capitalist relations of production, which she convincingly argues did not exist in many parts of Nicaragua prior to the Sandinista Revolution of 1979. From this position, Dore denies that modernity prevailed in Nicaragua because the social order impeded the development of capitalism, particularly in how labour was organized.²⁴ In many aspects, her argument parallels Karl Marx's contention from *The German Ideology* that he had inverted Hegelian dialectics to understand the process of cultural formation, a reversal

²³ Modernity was not a moment. Guatemala did not become modern during a historical rupture that clearly demarcated the non-modern from the modern. Rather, the coming of modernity was a process or a gradual transition that occurred variedly across spatial boundaries in Guatemala. Modernity was experienced in a fundamentally different manner whether one was in the capital or in other centres. Even within the capital, the experience of modernity contrasted based on whether one lived in working-class neighbourhoods in the city's northeast versus inhabiting the core region or suburban enclaves like Jocotenango. Modern experience owed a great deal, then, to geography or to one's class position, ethnicity, and gender.

²⁴ Elizabeth Dore, *Myths of Modernity: Peonage and Patriarchy in Nicaragua*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 3-4.

that has informed Marxist cultural theory and has served as a basis for dialectical materialism. In a widely celebrated quote, Marx writes,

In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven. That is to say, we do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. Mortality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.²⁵

For Marx, capitalist culture does not exist independently of the capitalist mode of production. Similarly for Dore, modernity does not exist without capitalist relations of production. But modernity and the modern experience should not be reduced to a determining economic base and a determined cultural superstructure that cannot function independently and in isolation from one another. The riddle of modernity, then, should include questions of geography, for as geographer David Harvey recognizes, capitalism has given rise to uneven geographies of development.²⁶ That is, elements of capitalism—and the cultural formations they spawn—function differently across different spaces with unique features developed in various locales. This is a basic point of departure for this dissertation.

²⁵ Karl Marx, “The German Ideology,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, Robert C. Tucker (ed), (New York: Norton, 1972), pp. 154-155.

²⁶ David Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism: Towards a Theory of Uneven Geographical Development*, (New York: Verso, 2006).

With Harvey's geographic considerations in mind, it may be more instructive to analyze modernity in Guatemala in a different way than simply being tied to the relations of production. A much more nuanced understanding of modernity in Guatemala can be formulated by considering the arguments put forth by Marshall Berman in *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*.²⁷ He posits that the experience of modernity is the product of the dialectical relationship between modernization and modernism, permitting a fluid, complex, and continuously shifting understanding of modernity. In so doing, he brings an added dimension to discussions of modernity that recognize the contributions not only of the capitalist development (or modernization) that bookends Dore's analysis but also of the aesthetic contributions of modernism in understanding how the modern world was experienced and perceived by urban Guatemalans. Thus, I argue that for much of the period examined in this dissertation, the experience of modernity in Guatemala City was characterized primarily by aesthetic and material modernism rather than economic modernization. In regions peripheral to the industrial and manufacturing centers of nineteenth-century capitalism, their first encounter with modernity was bound to have been imported from abroad. Stated plainly, in Guatemala City, the cultural superstructure of modernity was in place prior to capitalist modes of production.

With these considerations, I contend that the Liberal Reforms of the 1870s did not inaugurate capitalism in Guatemala per se; instead, through decrees and new institutions,

²⁷ Scholars of Latin America have generally been unkind to Berman's work and he has received criticism from the likes of Walter D. Mignolo and Sibylle Fischer, among others, for ignoring "the darker side of the Renaissance." Further criticism could be leveled at his focus on the Global North and the simplicity with which he approaches the Global South. Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization*, (2nd Ed), (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003 [1995]), p. 317 and Sibylle Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 34.

the liberal project accelerated a complicated process of what Harvey called “accumulation by dispossession” in the countryside that enriched the landed oligarchy and bourgeoisie by way of land ownership, the gradual capitalization of coffee production, and the nascent export industry.²⁸ New banking institutions provided finance capital to aspiring coffee cultivators in the coffee-belt through San Marcos, Huehuetenango, and Quetzaltenango to secure land, establish infrastructure, and aid subsistence while coffee plants matured.²⁹ After ascending to the presidency, Justo Rufino Barrios created the Ministerio de Fomento (Ministry of Development) to promote coffee cultivation, improve transportation, and foster general economic expansion. Inadequate trails appropriate for ox-drawn carts were replaced in time by the technological hallmark of modernity: the railway. The locomotive was celebrated as human mastery over nature, equilibrium between technological ingenuity and engineering

²⁸ Accumulation through dispossession essentially mirrors the process of what Marx called “Primitive accumulation.” David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, (Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 178-179. How much the spread of coffee after the 1860s and seizure of state power by liberal-minded finca-owners from Los Altos in the 1870s altered Guatemalan history is constantly being debated. In earlier histories by Jim Handy, David McCreery, and Ralph Lee Woodward, the Liberal Reforms were viewed as a break with the past as an omnipresent modernizing state came to penetrate indigenous communities, restructuring how labour was allocated, and breaking links between small-scale farmers and the land they worked. The reforms led to conditions that pressured communities onto less land, fostering the emergence of a subsistence crisis. Coupled with coercive systems of securing labour, communities relaxed the land pressures by surviving a portion of the year working on coffee *fincas*. More recent scholarship has challenged this narrative. Generally, the new historiography did so by emphasizing unique aspects of localized community studies. These works were also more likely to incorporate in depth analyses of the politics of ethnicity in specific communities. So, for example, Greg Grandin’s *The Blood of Guatemala* showed how a K’iche’ elite in Quetzaltenango came to strongly influence local politics and control over land resources surrounding the city. Elsewhere, while intended to place Rigoberta Menchú’s testimony in disrepute, David Stoll’s attack on her actually did more to show how land disputes in Uspantán pitted members of one community against others, implicitly suggesting that the liberal’s work in the 1870s was still incomplete one hundred years later. See Greg Grandin, *The Blood of Guatemala: A History of Race and Nation*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000) and David Stoll, *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999).

²⁹ Over a half dozen banks were founded before the twentieth century. Victor Bulmer-Thomas, *The Political Economy of Central America Since 1920*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 4.

resourcefulness. It was part purveyor of development through its ability to reduce space through time as well as a mechanical incarnation of progress, rhetorically imbued with magical powers to transcend stages of human history. Likewise, telegraph stations and postal offices—and later, telephone—which aided the coordination of train schedules, rapidly indicated the availability of labour markets, alerted authorities to civil unrest, and signalled a modestly expanded state were founded and proliferated in the liberal era to the benefit of promoters of both coffee and progress. The perceived value of such devices in terms of communication and supplying modern amenities to the paying public exceeded the annual shortfalls that they registered.³⁰

The point then is not to engage in polemics about the origins of capitalism in Guatemala per se.³¹ Suffice to say that during the period from 1871 until 1954,

³⁰ Annual reports through the 1890s show how expenses for postal outlets and the telegraph service grossly outweighed their earnings, leading to enormous deficits. See, for example, Francisco C. Casteñeda, “Informe de la Dirección General de Cuentas por el año de 1894,” *Memoria con que el Secretario de Estado en el Despacho de Hacienda y Crédito Público da cuenta á la Asamblea Nacional Legislativa de los trabajos efectuados durante el año de 1894*, (Guatemala: Tipografía Nacional, 1895), p. 8 and *Memoria de la Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público correspondiente al año de 1898 presentada á la Asamblea Nacional Legislativa de 1899*, (Guatemala: La Tipografía Nacional, 1899), p 28. Also see F. Aguilar, “Circular dirigida á los Señores Ministros del Gobierno, con fecha 11 de septiembre del corriente año 1891,” in *Documentos relativos á Hacienda Pública*, (Guatemala: Tipografía y Encuadernación El Modelo, 1891) for shortcomings associated with the inability of much of the population to afford cables.

³¹ Within the historiography of Guatemala, scholars have sought to analyze the origins of capitalism with some tracing it to as far back as the colonial period, whereas others argue that capitalism originated with the Liberal Reforms. Finally, some argue that capitalist development is as recent as the ten year democratic interlude from 1944-1954 while the guerrilla groups of the 1960s and 1970s rationalized their armed struggle against the state by maintaining that feudal conditions persisted in the countryside. For a summary of these debates, see Eduardo Antonio Velásquez Carrera, *La cuestión del origen y el desarrollo del capitalismo en América Latina: El caso de Guatemala*, (Guatemala: CEUR, 1997). For a discussion of the guerrillas and their perspectives on rural underdevelopment, see See Manuel Galich, *Guatemala*, (La Habana: Casa de las Américas, 1968), Orlando Fernández, *Turcios Lima*, (Havana: Tricontinental, 1970), and Michael D. Kirkpatrick, “Manufacturing the *Nueva Guatemala*: Guerrilla Re-Imaginations of the Modern Guatemalan Nation During the 1960s,” (Master’s Thesis, University of Manitoba, 2006).

Guatemala transformed from a society with markets to a market society.³² Rather, the goal is to illustrate that between banks, infrastructure, and the usurpation of land in certain areas by a conglomerate of independent coffee farmers and *finca* owners, wealth grew rapidly through the 1870s and 1880s with much of the surplus extracted from labour flooding into the capital city. This was a watershed period for Guatemala City. With their newfound wealth, the elite sought to remake Guatemala City, altering the urban physiognomy of the capital by forging the modern city. They did so in a number of ways, importing goods and ideas from abroad and rendering them distinctly Guatemalan. In so doing, the liberals set out to create spaces of modernity in their capital erecting, for example, the hippodrome in the northern suburb of Jocotenango and a train station to the city's south, building consumer arcades in the business district, constructing modern boulevards and parks, screening films, filling shop windows with merchandise, and engaging in modern behaviour. And they did so without the domination of capitalist relations of production but by tapping into global markets. Herein lies a fundamental point: the transformation of the state to service the desires of coffee growers and the infrastructural changes this wrought, in addition to a gross expansion of capital and wealth in the capital city, altered the way in which Guatemalans saw the world. And with the capital's decadent modernism, it is hardly any wonder that the fin-de-siècle was characterized as a time when the wine flowed freely.

Appendages accompany my argument that aesthetic modernism rather than economic modernization dominated urban culture in Guatemala City from the 1870s until the 1920s. Owing to the fact that the Guatemalan bourgeoisie and the state modeled their

³² To borrow Karl Polanyi's description. See *the Great Transformation*, (New York: Octagon Books, 1975 [1944]).

city space based on European and North American fashions, the spaces of modernity came into being prior to capitalist modes of production. Significantly, when capitalism and consumer culture came to fruition in the Guatemalan capital, spaces already existed for them to flourish. Consumer modernity, then, appeared as a self-fulfilling prophecy as the infrastructure to house commodities and foster their circulation lay dormant, ready to be activated. Modernism, then, played an important role in aiding the rise of consumer culture. The transmutable nature of modernism—where, as an aesthetic, it could easily be superimposed on different social situations and spatial locations—can be seen clearly in early twentieth-century Guatemala where modern architectural forms emerged in the city and had to be adapted to local uses independent of their intended purposes. Vacant arcades from the 1897 Exposición Centro-Americana on Fifth Avenue, for example, were later employed as the city's secondary Mercado Municipal del Sur (Municipal Market of the South) over a decade later.³³

Writing in a different context, Stephen Greenblatt speaks of relating mimesis to capital in what he calls “the production and circulation of mimetic capital.”³⁴ Greenblatt explains that like capital, mimesis proliferates and is circulated, accumulated, and a social relation of production. This is not unique to Latin America, as European modernists honed their craft in a dialectical dance with emerging technological challenges pertaining to the reproducibility of everyday life (especially in regards to photography and film), the new spatial optics of modernity,³⁵ and, ironically, the legacy of colonialism as most

³³ *Memoria en que el Secretario de la Municipalidad de la Capital da cuenta a la Corporación de 1906 de los trabajos verificados por la de 1908*, (Guatemala: Imprenta “La República,” 1909), pp. 106-109.

³⁴ Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 6.

³⁵ That is, new manners of perceiving and conceiving of alterations in time and space.

notably seen in African cultural influences on Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* and the advent of Cubism. Similarly, Guatemalan aesthetes, like their Latin American contemporaries, also transposed modernism to a new locale. The significance of this latter type of mimesis lay in the fact that the spaces required by capitalism came to flourish prior to capitalist modes of production and consumer society. As such, Guatemala City was spatially predisposed to the culture of capitalist modernity.

It should not be a surprise that in zones peripheral to the European capitalist core, admirers awestruck by the wonders of industrial consumerism—and imbued with the teleological presuppositions of positivism and liberalism—sought to mimic cultural manifestations wrought by capitalist expansion and celebrated by their social counterparts in Europe. Antonio Partegás' bookstore and stationers on 8th Avenue South, for example, sold subscriptions for the Barcelona-based weekly magazine, *La Ilustración Moderna*, during the 1890s, which regularly instructed Guatemala City's bourgeoisie on the latest Parisian fashions, complete with both descriptions and illustrations of styles.³⁶ Through the Guatemala City elite's style of dress and art, their manners and rhetoric, and their urban planning and architecture, it becomes apparent that modernism came into existence in urban Guatemala prior to the emergence of a market-dominated society. Wealthy citizens in Guatemala City—desiring capitalist modes of production—searched for markers of modernity (discussed below) and found them buried within a modernist aesthetic, transforming their city and fin-de-siècle culture accordingly; however, the

³⁶ *La Ilustración Moderna*, 1892, p. 4.

modernist faithful trapped themselves in a state of cultural limbo—a uninterrupted state of becoming—as they earnestly awaited to be swept up by the tide of industrialization.³⁷

By the 1920s and 1930s, change was afoot, however, and the experience of modernity began to transform. As consumer society flourished, the capital increasingly encountered capitalist modernization and the social dislocation that accompanied it. While not within the timeframe of this dissertation, by the late twentieth century, Guatemala City increasingly came to be viewed as dirty and dangerous, a perspective abetted by the prejudices that supplemented the rapid urbanization of mostly indigenous rural dwellers. By this time, the experience of modernity was principally influenced by the social repercussions of economic modernization in the place of modernism. The legacy of this shift has witnessed, amongst other things, an abundance of social discord evidenced by the rise of gangs within the social imaginary of the city.³⁸

The second major thesis of this dissertation is that the regimes of the primitive accumulation of capital that became firmly rooted in the 1870s wrought profound cultural change in the Guatemalan capital as technology, new urban spaces, and nascent

³⁷ Yet relatively few entrepreneurs were willing to invest capital into industrial establishments, the Castillo Brother's brewery and the Novello cement factory being some of the few notable exceptions. Still, the elite fetishized progress and indicators of modernity, captivated by the technological marvels of the age, while denying the social dislocation caused by communal disintegration in rural zones and remaining unprepared to speculate or invest. I will argue, then, that the Pasaje Aycinena, La Sexta Avenida (Sixth Avenue South, colloquially referred to as La Sexta), and countless other monuments to progress should not be seen solely as an emblem of modernity, but also of a modernism transplanted, at least initially so. The marvel that Guatemala's bourgeoisie held for modernism pre-empted the social relations that embody modernity. For example, we accept that certain modern aesthetics were inspired by the expansion of modern modes of production—that is, as mentioned, Impressionism was largely a response to rapid social change and the challenges posed by photography—and we believe that certain modes of thinking or expression are not restricted to given spaces. But in so doing, aesthetics and spaces normally associated with capitalism developed which then hastened the expansion of capitalist enterprise in urban Guatemala.

³⁸ See Levenson, *Adíos Niños* and J.T. Way, *The Mayan in the Mall: Globalization, Development, and the Making of Modern Guatemala*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

commodity culture altered perceptions of modern life in the city. At base, there is little new to this argument. Historians of the city such as J.C. Pinto Soría, Gisela Gellert, Luis Alvarado, and Oscar Peláez Almengor have all argued that the 1870s were watershed years for Guatemala City. They explain that historical processes were set into motion during those years that witnessed the capital city transform from a culturally and demographically large town to an enormous and vibrant—if unpredictable and dangerous—regional capital.³⁹ Often drawing upon foreign travelogues, these scholars detail how prior to the 1870s, Guatemala City had no service amenities, few shops and cafes, and hardly any retail outlets; in a word, it was a city that left visitors and residents with little to do. After the consolidation of the coffee market, however, the character of Guatemala City began to change. To these historiographic positions, I add that through associated technological, scientific, religious, spatial, and economic modifications came a thorough epistemological shift in how urban Guatemalans—*capitalinos*⁴⁰—understood and experienced their social world.

While it is tempting to label such cultural, political, economic, and spatial alterations as historical ruptures with the past, it would not be prudent to do so.⁴¹ Rather, what will be demonstrated throughout this dissertation is the way in which the early

³⁹ See Gisela Gellert, *Ciudad de Guatemala: Factores determinantes en su desarrollo urbano (desde la fundación hasta la actualidad)*, (Guatemala: FLACSO, 1995); Gisela Gellert and J.C. Pinto Soría, *Ciudad de Guatemala: dos estudios sobre su evolución urbana (1524-1950)*, (Guatemala: Centro de Estudios Urbanos y Regionales, 1990); Luis Alvarado C., *Desarrollo capitalista de Guatemala y la cuestión urbana*, (Guatemala: CEUR, 1983); Luis Alvarado C., *El proceso de urbanización en Guatemala*, (Guatemala: Centro de Estudios Urbanos y Regionales, 1984); Oscar Peláez Almengor, *El pequeño París*, (Guatemala: CEUR, 2008); Oscar Peláez Almengor, “Ciudad de Guatemala 1776-1954: Una Panorámica Histórica,” (PhD diss., Tulane University, 1996).

⁴⁰ Throughout this dissertation, the term *capitalinos* will be used to describe the general population of Guatemala City.

⁴¹ In this regard, my analysis mirrors the theoretical approaches of geographer David Harvey in his work on the Parisian revolutions of the nineteenth century. See *Paris, Capital of Modernity*, (New York: Routledge, 2006).

republican era and conservative interlude of the early and mid-nineteenth century informed the manner in which the post-1870s world was experienced. As compelling as the changes from the Liberal Reforms were, the continuity between the historical epochs was noteworthy. For example, as will be illustrated in Chapter Two, the anticlerical measures of the Liberal Reforms and the rationale of scientific inquiry did not spell an end to everyday spiritual life in Guatemala. It did, however, force a re-evaluation of Catholic dogmas in Guatemala City and facilitated the transposition of religious ritual and thought onto secular objects such as the commodity form. That is, I try to understand the manifold methods with which Guatemalans attempted to acclimatize themselves to the modern world—to make themselves feel at home—in a seemingly more unstable social world. Appropriating the rhetoric and frames of reference from the past helped to ease the anxieties that arose amongst the bourgeoisie during the transition to the modern world.

To understand the manner in which perception was reconfigured after the 1870s, I introduce the notion of the optics of modernity, or the new practices of seeing developed by modern subjects. The optics of modernity hold a two-fold significance. First, modern optics refer to the markers of modernity that came into existence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that characterized what it meant to be modern. Trains, shopping arcades and the commodities that filled them, wide boulevards, technological innovations, and the social practices of the performers of modern urban life all serve as examples of these markers. Markers of modernity often shared a symbiotic relationship with one another, which may explain their appeal. Spatial-temporal collapse brought by the transportation revolution—specifically railroads, telegraphs, and steamships—

facilitated and reduced the costs on the importation of foreign-manufactured commodities, for example. Similarly, the large display windows of shopping arcades and department stores along La Sexta Avenida provided the infrastructure to house merchandise. Indeed, consumer goods showered the urban landscape as importers opened stores to hock the latest wares and fashions from the European and North American cultural capitals such as London, Milan, Barcelona, New York, and Madrid, commencing during the fin-de-siècle. These markers of modernity were often imbued with near-magical qualities, seducing *capitalinos* into dream-worlds of modern bliss. As Walter Benjamin suggests, modernity had not brought societal disenchantment as sociologist Max Weber contended. Instead, capitalism had intoxicated people with marvel, swelling them with a re-enchantment of the new mythos of the modern world. As Benjamin explains, with capitalism “a new dream-filled sleep came over Europe, and, through it, a reactivation of mythic forces.”⁴² So, too, was it true of modernism in Guatemala City.

Whether watches and jewelry or bicycles, Guatemalans were intrigued by possessing and showing off their “newness” as a cultural marker that not only emphasized class distinction but also made them “modern.” Conjoined with the rise of commodity culture was the expansion of marketing and new forms of advertizing that forwarded an image of abundance and the wonders of consumer capitalism. Forms of print media—newspapers and journals—relied on advertisements for their livelihood, while an avalanche of placards, neon signs, and other advertisements increasingly obscured particular streets in the capital. Like the goods themselves, advertisements sold

⁴² Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, [K1a, 8], p. 391.

an image of modernity to Guatemalans whether individuals had the necessary finances to purchase such commodities or not.

Guatemala City itself was restructured to accommodate the needs of commodity circulation and latent capitalist growth. Particular foci in the city, from the Pasaje Aycinena to the shops of La Sexta Avenida aimed not only to service the rising consumer demands of the emerging coffee oligarchy and traditional elite, but also fulfilled a symbolic and ideological function as a badge of modernity and progress for the country's fledgling export-agricultural elites. Beyond shopping centers, other signifiers of urban modernity existed such as parks, boulevards, architecture, exposition grounds, one-way streets, and manifestations that facilitated both modern consciousness and the circulation of commodities. Such sites of consumption and progress were located within a social imaginary that—together with other markers of modernity in Guatemala City—conscripted the individual wonders of a collective modernist dream-world and assembled them within lived urban space. Markers of modernity also included a thespian element of performance. Commodity culture produced new social types who frequented the plazas of the city and visually embodied modernity like Valenti's dandy. These social characters forged new forms of social performance in the Guatemalan capital, related to the expansion of consumerism. As commodity culture became more accessible to the working class, the staging of consumption transformed. Thus, the art of *sextear*—the promenading and window-shopping that occurred along La Sexta Avenida—functioned as an important aspect of social and cultural life in the capital principally from the 1930s until the 1970s.

The second aspect of the optics of modernity refers to the new ways of seeing characteristic of bourgeois society; that is, how urban Guatemalans learned to see as modern subjects. Referring specifically to the perceptive, ocular faculty, this use of modern optics refers not to *what* was seen but to *how* the modern world was seen. Principally, I discuss the new subject positions of *capitalinos* brought through the compression of time and space. To illustrate this new modern worldview, I look at descriptions of the panoramic perspective introduced by locomotives, the aesthetic views developed within art forms such as painting and photography, and the ability of cinema to dissect time and space. A series of innovations, often imported from abroad, influenced how urban Guatemalans viewed and experienced their social world. In some regards, modern optics were developed as a way to cope and understand rapid social and cultural changes stemming from spatial-temporal turbulence. They generated both cultural curiosity and anxiety, as the old, pre-modern world appeared to be passing. Through these optics, *capitalinos* were able to cope with the modern world, helping give rise to new epistemologies suitable for the modern age. During the period examined, I argue that urban Guatemalans learned to see as moderns.

New technologies, as Walter Benjamin was wont to point out, offered new opportunities to re-examine that which was at once familiar but, through the lens of technology, was strangely foreign. While often regarded as a founder of literary magical realism and a proponent of *indigenismo*, Guatemala's Nobel laureate for literature, Miguel Ángel Asturias, was nothing if not a modernist and apt commentator on modern life in Guatemala. From his great dictator novel, *El Señor Presidente*, Asturias provides a simple but telling example of the modern optic in action and how perspective was

altered by the spatial-temporal collapse associated with, in this case, train travel. Near the climax of the novel, the protagonist, Miguel Cara de Ángel, attempts to escape the panoptic gaze of the President and flees the capital by rail. Asturias describes the world as it flies past Miguel Cara de Ángel's window as objects—affected by modern technology and the protagonist's view—appear to chase one another:

One behind the other, one behind the other, one behind the other. The house chased the tree, the tree chased the fence, the fence the bridge, the bridge the road, the road the river, the river the mountain, the mountain the cloud, the cloud the cornfield, the cornfield the labourers, the labourers the animals...⁴³

While subtle, the description of a new modern optic is illustrative. Whether animate or inanimate, objects outside of the train window *appear* to move and not vice versa; from this new subject position, the modern passenger (or viewer) is ostensibly static while it is the world outside that hurries in and out of view.

Beyond Asturias' example, analyses of modern optics in Guatemala show the way in which scientific breakthroughs, such as x-rays, suggested that hitherto impenetrable bodies and spaces could be transgressed. Film, meanwhile, offered an aesthetic that challenged assumptions—through such simple devices as scene changes—of how space and time are ordered. Rapid forms of communication that dissected distances—centralized mail services, then later telegraph and telephone—raised questions about the possibility of transdimensional communication between the living and the deceased. The reproducibility of photography, meanwhile, and its seeming ability to capture the essence of everyday life was perceived as a threat to cultural workers in the plastic arts, such as the Guatemalan Modernists, who responded by creating aesthetic perspectives that could

⁴³ Miguel Ángel Asturias, *El Señor Presidente*, Frances Partridge (trans), (New York: Atheneum, 1963), p. 264.

not easily be replicated by photographers. Herein lies the essence of the optics of modernity.

The final major argument of this dissertation is that, as mentioned, a new *cultura de esperar*—a culture of expecting, hoping, and waiting—developed in Guatemala City that profoundly shook the confidence of the bourgeoisie. The *cultura de esperar* describes the condition of teleological interruption, when a linear conception of history and progress is rendered intermittent, and when results do not coincide with expectations. This cultural phenomenon is the fulfillment of social anticipation and disappointment. Liberal thought in the mid- to late-nineteenth century Guatemala was beset by the ideology of positivism, the philosophic product of French thinker Auguste Comte. The philosophy emphasized progress without compromising law and order. It was popularized in Guatemala City, if not introduced, by Cuban migrants to the capital who were heavily involved with the educational system, including the likes of Cuban patriot José Martí. Liberal philosophers such as Lorenzo Montúfar who preached the importance of positivism in the new liberal state also had particular influence over the drafting of the liberal government’s Constitution of 1879.⁴⁴ Targeting the influences of the clergy, Montúfar exercised great influence as the Rector of the Universidad de San Carlos, which he fought to turn into a post-secondary base of positivist education. Elsewhere, after the Ley de la Instrucción Pública of 1882 (Law of Public Instruction)

⁴⁴ Wayne Foster Anderson, “The Development of Export Transportation in Liberal Guatemala, 1871-1920,” (PhD diss., Tulane University, 1985).

was instituted, the guidelines for public education in Guatemala were essentially “positivist in spirit and in word.”⁴⁵

When aligned with liberalism, positivism helped give rise to teleological assumptions about progress, the forward march of history, and stages of human and economic development. In so doing, positivist thinkers helped to privilege a modern temporality over alternative temporal regimes, either real or imagined. The most obvious example here is that of interpretations of the rural Maya who were invariably described in the late nineteenth century as backwards, timeless, existing outside of the modern world, and operating on their own temporality.⁴⁶ For privileged members of the Guatemalan coffee oligarchy, positivism inflated an ideological superstructure that accommodated the incessant chatter of those who subscribed to liberal paradigms, while maintaining a larger hegemonic vision for society without necessarily alienating conservative voices (though certainly offending their Catholic sensibilities). Positivist thought helped buttress faith in progress and led to anticipation over what the modern world would provide. Heightened expectations of the future, however, threatened to provoke negative backlash when promised achievements failed to materialize. More often than not, economic instability was responsible for provoking the *cultura de esperar*. When government coffers were drained, projects such as rail construction were put on hold much to the irritation of exporters and producers. Moreover, as mentioned, the *cultura de esperar* explains the anxiety and frustration present in Gilberto Valenzuela’s descriptions of the delays at the 1897 Exposición Centro-Americana. I will argue, then, that the *cultura de esperar*

⁴⁵ Jesus J. Amurrio G., “Influencias Filosóficas: El Positivismo,” *Historia General de Guatemala, Tomo IV*, Alberto Herrarte (ed.), (Guatemala: Asociación de Amigos del País, Fundación para la Cultura y el Desarrollo, 1994-1999), pp. 742-743.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Antonio Batres Jáuregui, *Indios: su historia y su civilización*, (Guatemala: Tipografía La Unión, 1894).

haunted the bourgeoisie from the outset of the Liberal Reforms and continued to rear its head throughout the first decades of the twentieth century.

Methodological, Historiographic, and Theoretical Considerations

Histories of Guatemala City have generally focused on broader structural tendencies such as urban physiognomy and mass urbanization in the second half of the twentieth century or specific social movements such as working class activism and the growth of urban street gangs.⁴⁷ While cognizant of these important histories and the economic structures that gave rise to them, my analysis is different. I consider both the aesthetic and economic aspects of the experience of modernity to develop a unique understanding of Guatemala City's history. As such, the focus of my research has considered sources that have often been overlooked or ignored, especially cultural evidence, to draw an original picture of the Guatemalan capital and its history.

This dissertation pulls evidence from an array of print media sources. Newspapers, journals, and magazines mostly found in the Hemeroteca of Guatemala City's Biblioteca Nacional helped bring to light everyday life in the capital of the Republic, emphasizing everything from economics and politics, fashion and theatre to commodity culture and social anxiety, technology and linguistics. Newspapers and

⁴⁷ See Alvarado C., *Desarrollo capitalista*, Alvarado C., *El proceso de urbanización*, Manuela Camus, *Ser indígena en Ciudad de Guatemala*, (Guatemala: Editorial FLACSO, 2002), Theodore Caplow, "The Social Ecology of Guatemala City," *Social Forces*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (Dec 1949), pp. 113-133, Cindy Forster, *The Time of Freedom: Campesino Workers in Guatemala's October Revolution*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), Gellert, *Ciudad de Guatemala*, Gellert and Pinto Soria, *Ciudad de Guatemala*, Levenson, *Adíos Niño*, Deborah Levenson-Estrada, *Trade Unionists Against Terror, 1954-1985*, (Chapell Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), Martínez López, *El proceso de urbanización*, Amanda Morán Mérida, *Condiciones de vida y tenencia de la tierra en asentamientos precarios de la ciudad de Guatemala* (Guatemala: Centro de Estudios Urbanos y Regionales, 2000), O'Neill and Thomas, *Securing the City*, Peláez Almengor, *El pequeño Paris*, Flavio J. Quesada, *Invasiones de terrenos en la ciudad de Guatemala*, (Guatemala: Centro de Estudios Urbanos y Regionales, 1985), Urruela Villacorta, *La Nueva Guatemala*, Way, *The Mayan in the Mall*.

periodicals held an essential role in framing discussions about modernity in Guatemala City as editors selected or ignored what they viewed as pertinent or insignificant to their modern social world. Modernity was an amalgamation of sentiments, material objects, interpretations, and discussions, something best described by historian Raymond Williams as a “structure of feeling.”⁴⁸ In many regards, the collages and dense social matrices constructed within the pages of newspapers have informed my understanding of modern experience. Consider the front and back pages of editions of newspapers such as *La República* from January 1900, which construct an imagined social world of commodities. Advertisements for Biscuit cognac, Canadian Club whiskey, Dutch candles, and the program for short films being screened on Salon Valenti’s cinematograph tell us a great deal about how a world of commodities and other cultural forms, otherwise unrelated, were distinctly ordered and placed alongside one another as if to form a coherent social whole.⁴⁹ While fulfilling an economic imperative by selling advertising space, the newspaper also inadvertently assembled disperse objects and ideas into a broader conversation about what it was like to live in the modern world.

The optics of newspaper advertisements offered me a methodological framework—and, perhaps more importantly, the courage—to arrange historical material and evidence in ways that did not necessarily make obvious sense. If properly considered, cultural history should not be neat and tidy, but rather—like the ads in *La República*—it should be thrown together to incorporate the contradictions and diffusion of material available to the historian in order to produce an image of a once existing social world. The diverse evidence drawn from newspapers that informs this dissertation

⁴⁸ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 128-135.

⁴⁹ See *La República*, Jan. 18, 1900, p. 1 and Jan. 27, p. 6.

has both nothing and everything in common. While outwardly unrelated, advertisements offer a way of organizing an otherwise incomprehensible world. More explicitly, they reveal the logic and asymmetry of capitalist modernity.

To this end, categories were drawn up to catalog and organize the diffuse material that appears in this dissertation. In many regards, they mirror the various convolutes that organize Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* and included roughly ninety classifications such as Allegory, Bohemians, Cinema, Electricity, Hippodrome, Lumpenproletariat, Minervalias, Opera, Plaza de Toros, Superstititon, Trains, Urbanity, Verticality, and Women. From there, I then began to conceptualize daily life in Guatemala City and pair different categories together where it seemed appropriate (considering, for example, the relationship between allegory, superstition, and science when thinking about the nature of telecommunications in the 1880s). Much of the dissertation was conceptualized in this manner.

Beyond newspapers, the Biblioteca Nacional also houses one of the most underutilized but insightful collections for nineteenth-century Guatemala and the first half of the twentieth century in the Colección Valenzuela. In an impressive undertaking that stretched over a couple generations, patriarchs of the Valenzuela family from Guatemala City amassed a collection of books, pamphlets, kitsch, manuals, theses, speeches, and *hojas sueltas*.⁵⁰ Perhaps most unique are the *hojas sueltas*—literally “loose leaves”—which are bundles of manifestos, government decrees, public denunciations and debates, funeral notifications, advertisements, event announcements, schedules, and other items that were distributed by street pamphleteers and colour everyday life across the

⁵⁰ For more on the collection, please see Todd Little-Siebold, “The Valenzuela Collection in the Biblioteca Nacional de Guatemala,” *Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (1994), pp. 143-152.

country but, most specifically, in Guatemala City. From the Colección Valenzuela, we garner insight into a host of organizations and social practices that may otherwise be overlooked by other archival collections. The Valenzuela family's meticulous commitment to cataloguing and documenting Guatemalan social life is illustrated by the depth of the collection which includes inventories, regulations, lottery tickets, and reviews of the 1897 Exposición Centro-Americana, kitschy souvenirs from the inauguration of the Northern Railway in 1908, telegraphs from the 1890s, theatre programs and event schedules from the Teatro Colón, Hipodromo del Norte, and Plaza de Toros, and copies of speeches from the turn-of-the-century annual Minervalias in Jocotenango.

Aesthetic production and its analysis, as evidenced by the examination of Carlos Valenti's work for example, is also a recurring source for this dissertation. The transition from classical landscape paintings and portraits that had hitherto filled Guatemalan art collections to something approaching modernism in the first years of the twentieth century was a watershed moment for aesthetic creation in Central America. Catalan art connoisseur and educator—confident of Pablo Picasso and later his secretary—Jaime Sabartés arrived in Guatemala City in the early 1900s and attracted much attention from youth described as “anxious for new horizons.”⁵¹ Between Sabartés, art director D. Santiago González at the Academia de Bellas Artes in Guatemala City, and the infiltration of European journals, mostly from France, that heralded the developments of European aesthetics, a new generation—the first to be called “modernist” by Guatemalan historians—flourished in the first decade of the twentieth century. This group, of whom

⁵¹ Walda Valenti, *Carlos Valenti: Aproximación a una biografía*, (Guatemala: Serviprensa Centroamericana, 1983), p. 24.

Carlos Valenti, Carlos Mérida, and Rafael Yela Günther are the most recognized and celebrated, contributed to a “revolution” of sorts in the Guatemalan plastic arts that fueled the inspiration of subsequent generations such as the so-called Generación de 40 (Generation of 1940) composed of Roberto González Goyri, Dagoberto Vásquez, and Roberto Ossaye. Together, these works demonstrate not only new manners of perceiving the modern world but the new ways in which the artists imagined themselves as a modern artistic vanguard.

But modernism in the plastic arts was not limited to private collections or museums. Indeed, the work of graphic artists and photographers dating from 1890s showed the reproducibility of modern art in journals, print collections, and newspapers. As visionary as the works of Valenti et al, and even more immediately and widely disseminated were the advertisements and kitsch circulated throughout the city, promoting new artistic movements such as Art Nouveau. While the “modernists” were still in preparatory school, city photographer Alberto G. Valdevellano had already renamed his photo studio “Arte Nuevo” in homage of European fin-de-siècle trends. Such kitsch and aesthetic development helps us to understand the relationship between art and everyday life in the Guatemalan capital.

Further evidence is pulled from architecture and urban design. Guatemala City experienced its first major renovation at its current location in the 1890s under the tutelage of President José María Reyna Barrios and his team of engineers that included the much-celebrated Claudio Urrutia. Shortly before the turn of the century, the Exposición Centro-Americana served as a pretext for changing the physiognomy of the capital to imitate post-Hausmannian Paris. From this period, Guatemala City was

regularly recreated both in terms of architecture and urban design to meet the desires of modernizers and the needs of consumer capitalism. The construction of Parisian-style arcades, first at the Pasaje Aycinena in the 1890s and later at the Pasaje Rubio in the 1930s are illustrative examples that were later displaced by shopping centers. As well, the evolution of public entertainment and recreation required the city to alter its character as interest was lost in the Plaza de Toros, Teatro Colón, and Hippodrome, for example, and refocused on facilities for soccer and cinema.

Literary works contribute much to this dissertation. In different ways, both Stephen Greenblatt and John Beverley have considered how literature reflects society and vice versa. For Beverley, literary cultural production functions as a hegemonic or—depending on who is doing the writing and for what ends—a counter-hegemonic force in society that echoes the social relations of production. Greenblatt, however, is wary of such totalizing cultural projects, opting to describe what he calls “cultural poetics” that rejects holistic schema in making sense of cultural production.⁵² My analysis falls somewhere between these two positions. I view literature—as well as what Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno described as the culture industry⁵³—as strongly identified with political economy. However, Greenblatt’s hesitancy to embrace such a view is understandable as culture does not always so rigorously adhere to such logic. Thus, for this study, literature was one method in which Guatemalan minds articulated their desires for the future and their faith in progress. Dr. Francisco Lainfiesta’s *A la*

⁵² See John Beverley and Marc Zimmerman, *Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolutions*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990) and Stephen Greenblatt, “Towards a Poetics of Culture,” *The New Historicism*, H. Aram Veesser (ed), (New York: Routledge, 1989) or Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*.

⁵³ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, John Cumming (trans.), (New York, The Continuum Publishing Company, 1972).

vista de pajaro suggests the privileged position afforded to verticality within optical discussions whereas Enrique Gómez Carrillo's *Bohemia Sentimental* is instructive in the honoured esteem afforded to Bohemians in the Guatemalan Belle Epoque, at least in the eyes of some.

More than any other literary source, however, the works of Guatemala's Nobel Laureate in Literature, Miguel Ángel Asturias, have most influenced my thinking of the culture of modernity in Guatemala City. In particular, his two most acclaimed novels, *El Señor Presidente*—written throughout the 1920s and completed in the 1930s though unpublished until after the fall of President Jorge Ubico's government in 1944—and *Hombres de Maíz*—first published in 1949—have indelibly marked this dissertation. Asturias is commonly regarded as a “founder” of magical realism in Latin American literature and *El Señor Presidente* is a work that literary scholars would point to as the prototype of magical realism in their search for origins. Many scholars have suggested that the book is a Parisian tale, essentially that Asturias' experiences in the French capital renders the work a Latin American dictator novel set in Paris. I disagree. The work is at its base about the experiences of modernity in the Guatemalan capital. From the spaces and locales described in the novel—the plaza, La Parroquia, the cinema found in Las Cien Puertas—to the way local mythologies are weaved into the narrative—the cries of Rodas' imprisoned wife as her child dies echoing the weeping of La Llorona to the descriptions of monks walking the city's streets by night with candles—the novel is beset by localized knowledge specific to Guatemala. As such, I feel more than justified in using the work as a description of Guatemala City in the first decades of the twentieth century. At no point is Miguel Ángel Asturias' writings directly examined without

interruption—there is no chapter dedicated to his insights into modern life—yet he will be constantly called upon to illustrate particular points.

Besides sources, my methodology has been greatly influenced by a series of scholars, many of whom were steeped in the Marxist tradition. It might go without saying that Marx’s insights into capitalist production and circulation, and the fetishism of commodities has inspired countless theoretical positions in my work. Moreover, the relationship of cultural production to the means of production has forced a reconsideration for its significance in zones peripheral to European capital which nevertheless shared many cultural norms with their European class allies. Thus I follow the suggestion that modernism—whether as a product, kitsch, aesthetic sensibility, epistemological or architectural style—can be as widely circulated as much capital and commodities.⁵⁴ The cultural analysis of my dissertation, then, can be said to emanate from the tradition of dialectical materialism. As a methodology the dialectical frame of mind helps to flesh out cultural contradiction and elucidates the complexity of culture as a historical concept. Further, while I try to complicate simple base-superstructure models of culture, there is a rather obvious correlation between economic production and cultural formation. This relationship is made abundantly obvious during periods of economic recession and depression in Guatemala City when consumer society was adversely affected. Indeed, my discussion of the *cultura de esperar* clearly demonstrates my methodological indebtedness to dialectical materialist cultural history.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ See Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Ben Fowkes (trans), (London: Penguin Classics, 1976) and Marx, “The German Ideology.”

⁵⁵ Beyond the aforementioned Marshall Berman and David Harvey, both of whom are interested in the convoluted legacy of nineteenth-century modernity, I have taken much from the insights of Walter Benjamin and one of his most devoted disciples, Susan Buck-Morss. Benjamin’s ability to relate diverse topics and evidence—often the debris of history—into a multi-layered and

Chapter Outlines

Chapter One: “Restlessness and the New Spirit that Animates: The Coming Modern Optic” commences with a discussion of the suitability of visual metaphors for describing the modern world. It argues that optics are appropriate not only to describe the bourgeois culture of modernity in a theoretical sense but also empirically sound, too, given the emphasis during the period in question on vision. Indeed, by the turn-of-the-century, Guatemala City boasted an ocularcentric culture. In understanding visual artistic media, I introduce the *cultura de esperar*. I argue that the cultural logic of expecting, hoping, and waiting reverberated with broader anxieties of the bourgeoisie such as their concern over the completion of the rail line that was to connect Guatemala City with the Atlantic Coast. The waiting that they endured cast a shadow over bourgeois notions of progress and time.

Chapter Two: “Transcendence and Continuity: Cultural Change in an Age of Spatial Temporal Collapse” examines the nature of modern cultural change, rejecting the idea that modernity served as a fundamental rupture with the past, but rather borrowed similar language, symbols, and traditions. I dissect the cultural logic of a new séance culture that emerges in the capital in the 1880s, relating it not only to technology such as

complex cultural narrative serves as inspiration. His unfinished *Arcades Project* at times reads like a grocery list of irreverent nineteenth-century Parisian culture. But the work comes to provide a much deeper insight into cultural processes than so many other historical works. Benjamin problematizes the classical Marxist discussion of the fetish by relating it not only to commodities but also to how people view and experience the world, chiefly in the relationship he draws out between technology and its reproducibility to magical thinking and capitalist production. See Benjamin, *Arcades Project*; Walter Benjamin, “Paris Capital of Modernity,” *Arcades Project*; Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Illuminations*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968). For examples of Buck-Morss’ contributions, see *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectic of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, (The MIT Press: Cambridge, 1991), and Susan Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered,” *October*, Vol. 62 (Autumn, 1992), pp. 3-41.

the telegraph but its interaction with organized religion. I conclude that liberals and the Catholic Church were not binaries as is commonly assumed but both appropriated language from one another in order to rationalize their respective projects.

Chapter Three “Mimetic Grandeur and Other Delusions of Modernity: The 1897 Exposición Centro-Americana é Internacional” traces the ill-fated 1897 Central American Exposition, viewing it as a point of departure as the focus of modernity for the bourgeoisie shifted from financial capital to a focus on commodity culture. The Expo appears as one of the first instances in which the spaces of modernity were created in Guatemala City. I argue that these spaces were ultimately premature and ill-suited for a pre-consumer society. The debacle of the exposition cemented the legacy of the *cultura de esperar* in the capital as preparations for the fair were interrupted by a significant economic depression that lasted over a decade and derailed the hopes and expectations of the bourgeoisie.

Chapter Four “Enchantment, Fetish, and the Accumulation of Useless Things: The Coming Dominance of the Commodity Form” details the constantly disrupted advent of consumer culture in Guatemala City. It repeatedly invokes discussions of magic to understand how the bourgeoisie came to understand consumerism in their capital and its association with “fables of abundance.”⁵⁶ The chapter examines the relationship between advertising and the civilizing impulse attributed to commodities during the first decades of the twentieth century. In time, commodities gave rise to new consumer practices and focused attention away from the plaza and onto La Sexta Avenida as the site for public culture and performance.

⁵⁶ T.J. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America*, (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

Chapter Five “Right Angles and Dream Sequences: The Manufacturing of Urban Dream-Worlds Since 1871 and the Collective Awakening of 1917-1918” examines the social evolution of the capital since the Liberal Reforms. It considers the tension between things that were considered traditional and the new impulses of modern culture. It plays with motifs of dream-states and drunkenness to describe how the liberal regime lulled the population to sleep. Indeed, a frequent metaphor invoked in discussions of the city was that the 1917-1918 earthquakes awoke the capital from the dreams of order and civilization that it had enjoyed.

Chapter Six: “Jorge Ubico on a Motorcycle: Circulation, Phantasmagoria, and the Weakening of the *Cultura de Esperar*, 1920-1944” considers the legacy of the collective awakening of the late 1910s. It argues that the 1920s witnessed mass mobilization in the political culture of Guatemala City. The government of Jorge Ubico, however, was able to co-opt much of this activism by the two-fold process of resolving the *cultura de esperar* and reanimating modern phantasmagorias. Where other governments had succumbed to the frustrations of expecting, hoping, and waiting, Ubico’s regime overcame the shortcomings of economic instability by instituting a tax structure and system of forced labour to construct low-cost roads throughout Guatemala. Thus, in the depths of the Great Depression, infrastructure continued to be built and the *cultura de esperar* appeared to be put to rest. But Ubico’s policies also generated new illusions of prosperity in the capital as commodity culture was celebrated both at street festivals and at the Feria Nacional de Noviembre (National Fair of November). But as the street protests of the 1944 and the coming of the October Revolution of that year demonstrated, not all were seduced by the commodity culture that solidified during those years.

Chapter Seven: “The Stars are Holding Hands: Optics and the Politics of Verticality in Guatemalan Urban Space” approaches the discussion of modernity in Guatemala City through a discussion of verticality. This chapter demonstrates how the experience of modernity in Guatemala City gradually shifted from modernism to modernization by considering the manner in which verticality transformed from something associated with nature to a symbol of capital accumulation. It concludes with the expansion of what has been called “the vertical city” in suburban Guatemala City, characterized by a densification of skyscrapers and the dialectical growth of shantytowns in ravines in Guatemala City as evidence of negative verticality. I suggest that by the mid-twentieth century the phantasmagoria of modernity has been unveiled in the city, revealing the social relations produced by capitalist growth.

The modern world presented a host of cultural possibilities for life in Guatemala City; however, the desire for capitalist development at the expense of the majority of Guatemalans ensured that particular cultural forms would come to fruition. This dissertation examines the varied responses of urban Guatemalans, chiefly the bourgeoisie, in coming to grips with the rapid cultural change associated with modernity based on export agriculture. Expectations and hopes were frequently left waiting, desires were seldom fulfilled, and visions of grandeur were often interrupted; nevertheless, the bourgeoisie continued in their quest to make Guatemala City in their own image. This dissertation attempts to understand how this process unfolded and shed light on its consequences.

Chapter One
Restlessness and the New Spirit that Animates:
The Coming Modern Optic

Camila, the young daughter of General Eusebio Canales and love interest of Miguel Cara de Ángel, is the most thoroughly modern character in Miguel Ángel Asturias' *El Señor Presidente*. Through her, Asturias makes countless observations about the modern nature of early twentieth-century Guatemala. In a domain that was—as this dissertation will show—so thoroughly dominated by masculine voices, thoughts, and speculations, Camila's youthful insights stand out as the most imaginative meditations on Guatemala's experiences with modern change.¹ The adolescent is fascinated with optical transformations that amend her perceptions of the world and alter her expectations. She recalls her first trip to the ocean with her extended family where her uncles persuade her to share her thoughts of viewing the power of the sea. Her surprise, however, is muted and she explains that she is unimpressed by nature's spectacle having already “known it from heart” after viewing photographs. Indeed, earlier in the book, she had previously commented on the collapse of time afforded by photography, which allowed her to see images of younger versions of elderly acquaintances. With this insight provided by photography, Camila passes judgment on her father's friends for aging and not remaining youthful. She silently castigates them:

You'd better have stayed as you were in the photograph. You'd have looked old fashioned and people would laugh at your museum outfit, all

¹ It is possible that Asturias chose Camila to voice his ideas about modern experience not because of her gender, however, but for her youth. In a motif that recurs throughout his work, Asturias privileges children as authentic witnesses uncorrupted by the world. As he writes in *Hombres de Maíz*, “Madmen and children speak the truth.” Miguel Ángel Asturias, *Men of Maize (Critical Edition)*, Gerald Martin (trans.), (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993), p. 43. That being said, childhood also has a long history as a feminine trope.

the same you wouldn't have been pot-bellied and bald with your cheeks blown out as though you were sucking bulls-eyes.²

Fashion, photographs, and aging: Camila is concerned with the contrast between preservation and the lack of continuity in life. While some aspects of change are natural, such as the life-cycle, Camila becomes more acutely aware of them through the optical aid of technology. Both expectations and perception are irremediably altered by new visual aids that transform the young girl's experience in the modern world. But she is not prepared to stop with photography for her imagination and infatuation with technology are too great. When persuaded by her cousin at the beach to envision the cinematographic views being displayed at Las Cien Puertas in the capital, her imagination comes to describe something that, for her, not only embodies early film but also adequately encapsulates the nature of the modern world in which she lives and of which she contemplates:

Everything in motion. Nothing stable. Pictures mingled with other pictures, shifting, breaking in pieces to form a new image every second, in a state that was not solid, not liquid, nor gaseous, but which was the state of life in the sea. A luminous state. Both in the sea and in the moving pictures.³

Movement characterizes both Camila's world and that inhabited by Carlos Valenti's dandy (as discussed in the Introduction) and it was visual metaphors that came to define such movement. The modern world altered forms of vision and gave rise to new ways of seeing that tried to bring the ephemeral nature of life to account. In essence, Camila describes Guatemalan modernity as she encountered it.

² Miguel Ángel Asturias, *El Señor Presidente*, Frances Partridge (trans.), (New York: Atheneum, 1963), p. 79.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

This chapter explores the dawning of modern culture in Guatemala. The Liberal Reforms of the 1870s instigated a gradual epistemological shift that forced the inhabitants of Guatemala City to reconcile themselves with the at-times rapidly evolving social world that enveloped them. Guatemalan observers were intrigued and confused as the introduction of locomotives, new mediums in the plastic arts, cinema, and the dawning of consumer and celebrity culture compressed, elongated, and otherwise altered their perceptions of time and space. Fascination and uncertainty tempered one another. Prior to the normalization of these changes, cultural observers and regular *capitalinos* struggled to negotiate with, and acclimatize themselves to, what appeared as an increasingly unstable world. In so doing, they modified their existing language, adopting new discursive metaphors, frames of reference, and descriptions to make sense of the modern experience. Thus, urban Guatemalans created new ways of encountering their social world, employing strategies to accommodate both minor and far-reaching cultural changes. That is to say, in the decades after the Liberal Reforms, *capitalinos* learned to see and act as moderns.

I argue that during the course of the nineteenth century, a cultural shift in sensory perception occurred that gave rise to both visual metaphors and the privileging of optics within the social world of the Guatemalan Belle Époque, once described as that “bohemian age of romance and red wine.”⁴ Whereas urban life in Guatemala City had been characterized by a balanced sensory regime, vision became dominant in the modern era. The increased reliance on optical faculties within the culture of modernity is an operative motif for this chapter. If the experience of modernity was principally characterized by urban modernism during the fin-de-siècle, then this modernism

⁴ Héctor Gaitán, *Memorias del siglo xx, Tomo I*, (Guatemala: Artemis Edinter, 1999), p. 20.

demanded to be seen. Indeed, the cultural logic of consumer society that began to expand in the 1890s relied upon visual dominance. Through optics, we can understand the cultural significance of modernity and the ideologies that informed it; that is to say, it becomes apparent that the Guatemalan bourgeoisie attempted to create their social worlds based on their understanding of what a modern metropolis should be. The advent of modernity forced *capitalinos* to reconsider their subject positions and to view their city through new lenses. The optics of modernity were, then, the strategies through which modern subjects re-conceptualized their perceptions of social, cultural, and technological changes.

Secondly, this chapter argues that the culture of modernity in Guatemala City, the ideology of positivism, and faith in progress gave rise to particular cultural formations such as the *cultura de esperar*. Upon seizing power in the 1870s, the liberal regimes promised palpable social and economic results through the modernization of the export economy and investment in infrastructure. The early years of liberal rule produced impressive achievements in communications and transportation such as the establishment of telegraph services, renovations to shipping ports along the Pacific coastline, and the inauguration of the locomotive age as the capital, the coffee-producing highlands, and the coast were placed into contact. Such developments appeared to confirm the teleological trajectories promised within the liberal rhetoric of progress, namely that economic modernization guaranteed a linear march forward into the future. During the course of the next several decades, however, economic turmoil became the norm and state projects were repeatedly stalled or aborted. The hopes for a modern society similar to Paris, London, or New York were constantly quashed. The *cultura de esperar* describes, then,

the social experience of teleological interruption, when the expectations of a linear worldview become intermittent, when social, economic, and cultural developments fail to coincide with anticipations, and when waiting characterizes the bourgeoisie's disposition. The *cultura de esperar* embodies the sense of temporal dislocation and the endless disappointment in which modern desires were constantly betrayed by the limits of export agriculture and the volatility of foreign markets.

In *El Señor Presidente*, modernity was understood to be increasingly tenuous and ephemeral. The optics of modernity should be understood as the attempts by urban Guatemalans to make sense of this change. Conversely, the *cultura de esperar* describes the anxiety generated when expectations of change remained unfulfilled. This chapter commences with a discussion of the Nicaraguan modernist poet, Rubén Darío, and his effort to produce a vocabulary to describe the emerging modern world in Guatemala City. Darío's *modernismo* coincides with the formation of new modern subject positions and the ascendancy of optics within modern society, documenting shifts in the perceptive faculties of the urban bourgeoisie. The second half of the chapter examines two anecdotes that tease out the nuances of modern optics and the *cultura de esperar*. The first examines the arrival in Guatemala City of Spanish bull-fighter Luis Mazzantini, detailing the creation of a culture industry around his celebrity and how the cinema at Salon Valenti—the first movie theatre in Guatemala City—altered expectations of the matador. The second episode analyses the brief career of the modernist painter Carlos Valenti, the son of Salon Valenti's proprietor. Discussion of the painter's restlessness—when placed alongside the quarter-century wait for the completion of the Northern Railway—illustrates the operations of the *cultura de esperar*.

Modernismo and the Search for an Appropriate Lexicon

It has been suggested that modernism, denoting a “school” of thought to describe the aesthetics of the modern world, was coined in the streets of Guatemala City in late 1890.⁵ By his mid-twenties, Rubén Darío, a Nicaraguan-born man of letters, had secured himself an impressive reputation as a poet and essayist throughout Central America and parts of South America. Guatemalan President Manuel Lisandro Barillas recruited Darío to edit *El Correo de la Tarde*, a semi-official publication printed by Dr. Francisco Lainfiesta (discussed in Chapters Two and Seven), a few months after the Nicaraguan arrived in the Guatemalan capital in June 1890. During his year in Guatemala City, Darío set upon composing prose, poetry, and biography in a variety of Guatemalan journals and newspapers. It was during his tenure in Guatemala that the Nicaraguan man of letters wrote of *modernismo* for the first time as an identifiable aesthetic school of thought (though he may have spoken of the concept as early as 1888). The term first appeared in *El Diario de Centro-América*, the official government newspaper in an article about Darío’s encounter with the Peruvian scholar, Ricardo Palma. Darío writes in the article of “the new spirit that today animates a small but triumphant and sovereign group of writers and poets from Spanish America: modernismo.”⁶

On first glance it might appear peculiar that modernism—either as a particular movement or a general trend—was not christened in the great art schools, academies, or coffee shops of the great imperial and cultural cities of fin-de-siècle Paris, London, Madrid, Barcelona, Vienna, or Munich. And modernism has generally been treated as a European phenomenon and experience, as suggested in Peter Gay’s recent opus on the

⁵ Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, (London: Verso, 1998), p. 3.

⁶ Rubén Darío, “Ricardo Palma,” *Obras Completas Tomo II*, (Madrid: Afrodisio Aguado, 1950), p. 19.

subject, which all but excludes Central and South America as well as the Caribbean from his narrative.⁷ In fact, historian Perry Anderson has gone to lengths to emphasize the seeming absurdity of this fact writing, “Modernism” was coined by “a Nicaraguan poet, writing in a Guatemalan journal, of a literary encounter in Peru.”⁸ Yet, given the transnational circulation of ideas, concepts, and modern modes of seeing, it should not be entirely surprising that modernism was codified in a geography considered peripheral to European styles. The vast cultural changes wrought by industrial capitalism spread throughout the world and impressed the minds of Latin Americans as much as those of Europeans.

The context of Darío’s description of *modernismo* needs to be revealed, for there is great debate about the nature of the concept and the manner in which Darío’s *modernismo* related to European modernism of the early twentieth century. Ilan Stavans asserts that Darío was describing not a new literary school but an appropriation of Symbolism and French Parnassianism.⁹ Perhaps, aesthetically-speaking, this is true. But more than an aesthetic, Darío was describing a mood specific to the final decades of the nineteenth century. As the European modernists would later do, Darío viewed his movement as representing a fundamental shift from the past, embodying something different. His interaction with Ricardo Palma in Lima represented a generational transfer of cultural authority from the old guard to the vanguard. Darío admired Palma, viewing

⁷ While he acknowledges the influence of Gabriel García Márquez on post-1945 literature, Gay has no time for the likes of Darío, the Mexican muralists, Frida Kahlo, Oscar Niemeyer or others. See Peter Gay, *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy From Baudelaire to Beckett and Beyond*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008).

⁸ Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, p. 3.

⁹ Ilan Stavans, “Introduction,” Rubén Darío, *Rubén Darío: Selected Writings*, Ilan Stavans (ed.), Andrew Hurley, Greg Simon, and Steven F. White (trans.), (New York: Penguin Classics, 2005), p. xxxii.

him as a beautiful heart, jovial conversationalist, and “a genius in whom, with deserved justice, America saw its own glory.” Nevertheless, Darío characterized the classical school of literature—which he believed the modernists superseded—as rigid and bland. In contrast, modernism represented “the triumph of beauty over the compulsory in prose,” which “gives colour and life, air and flexibility to ancient verse suffering from ankylosis, sandwiched between hoarse iron molds.”¹⁰ The essence of Darío’s demand was later captured in the great modernist dictum pronounced by Ezra Pound, “Make it New!”¹¹ Darío’s desire for a break with the past echoed the imperative of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century consumer capitalism. Economic modernization and its associated cultural production was the spirit of which Darío spoke.

Later in the decade, Darío sought to downplay the perceived unity of aesthetes under the rubric of “modernism,” arguing that in Spain (where he relocated after his Central American foray) no such cohesive movement existed. He asserted that traditional formalism and entrenched Hispanicism “have prevented the inflowing of any cosmopolitan breeze, or liberty, or (let us say the consecrated word and be done with it) anarchism in art—which is the basis on which any modern or ‘modernist’ evolution must be founded.” He continues, criticizing the lack of cosmopolitanism that formed stagnant pools of thought within contemporary Spanish literature, with the exception of the Catalans who have acted “to add their bit to the progress of modern art”. He follows,

In Latin America, we had this movement before Castilian Spain, and for reasons of the utmost clarity: our immediate material and spiritual commerce with the many nations of the world, and also because there is, in the new Latin American generation, an immense desire for progress and an intense enthusiasm, which is that generation’s greatest potential and by which, little by little, it is triumphing against the obstacles of tradition, the

¹⁰ Darío, “Ricardo Palma,” 19-20.

¹¹ See Gay, *Modernism*, p. 143.

walls of indifference, and the oceans of mediocrity that confront it at every turn.

While he could not necessarily place his finger on what was transpiring or the implications of the new modern world, Darío could sense that change abounded in the 1890s and that there were some elements of *truth* to “the reality of a new life, the certificate of the intense *force vital* of a continent.” And if Castilian Spain had failed to embrace this “edge,” it certainly flourished in Barcelona, in particular, at the café known as *Quatre Gats* (Catalan for *Four Cats*), a locale that—although Darío did not know it at the time—a young Pablo Picasso would later frequent.¹²

But Darío’s frustration was not mere generational spite whereby the new supersedes the old. As Ilan Stavans has acknowledged, “*Modernismo* was an ambitious way of reappraising the world.”¹³ And this cosmopolitan world, full of hope and potential, uncertainty and lack of spirituality, motivated Darío who felt fit to draw a distinction between the two cultural forms of the era: the bourgeoisie with its lack of aesthetic sensibility and the tragic artist, who through decadence tries to breathe life into the modernizing world. Nowhere else was Darío’s distinction between the two more explicit than in his tale of *The Bourgeois King* whereby a poet is placed in the service of the eponymous character. The King owns all forms of art but knows nothing of beauty and neglects the poet by assigning him to turning the hand-crank of a music box in exchange for food. From exposure to the wintry elements, the poet freezes to death with hand still gripping the crank, his final thoughts idealizing “that art would not wear wool pants, but a mantle of gold, and flames...”¹⁴

¹² Rubén Darío, “Modernismo: November 28,” *Rubén Darío*, pp. 369-373.

¹³ Ilan Stavans, “Introduction,” p. xxix.

¹⁴ Darío, “The Bourgeois King,” *Rubén Darío*, p. 225.

While he grappled to find the lexicon to describe it, Darío perceived that something was anew in the late nineteenth century that forced an aesthetic reevaluation of the world. Thus, in many ways, Darío's desire for cosmopolitanism echoed modern phenomena such as the circulation of capital, or better yet, commodities that carried with them a foreign, elegant air and all the inherent assumptions when displayed in the windows of Rosenthal é Hijo's Guatemala City shop under the signage: *importado de Paris* or *hecho en Inglaterra*.¹⁵ As new modes of transportation, photographs, telegraphs, and telephones all transcended time and space in different ways, so too did "the new spirit that today animates" described by Darío. New ways of thinking and modern epistemologies that reinterpreted the world were taking form, fusing with older systems of understanding, and displacing antiquated thought. The denotation is instructive: modernism indicated that there was something new about the world for which it strived to encompass a burgeoning body of literature describing the conditions of modern life. New words and phrases, allegorical frameworks, terms of reference, and customs were necessitated to make sense of new sensations, new experiences, and a new "structure of feeling."¹⁶ Put briefly, the modern world required new cultural assumptions and points of departure. Modernism described the advent of a new subject position. Herein lies the essence of the modern optic that slowly opened onto Guatemala City in the closing decades of the nineteenth century.

¹⁵ Imported from Paris and made in England, respectively.

¹⁶ María del Carmen Melendez de Alonzo, "La Literatura de Fin de Siglo: el Modernismo," *Historia General de Guatemala, Tomo IV*, Alberto Herrarte (ed.), (Guatemala: Asociación de Amigos del País, Fundación para la Cultura y el Desarrollo, 1994-1999), pp. 733-734.

The Coming Modern Optic

Urban modernity in Guatemala City was a principally ocular experience during the fin-de-siècle, though I do not wish to suggest that visual metaphors did not exist prior to the modern age nor argue for the cessation of other forms of sensory perception. After all, the Guatemalan capital was rife with visual markers throughout the nineteenth century in painting and architecture, for example. Moreover, centuries-old cultural tropes that centered in vision—such as the evil eye—continued to carry much resonance.¹⁷ However, prior to the interspersed arrival of modern optics, everyday life in Guatemala City was characterized by a more complete excitation of sensory perceptions. Long-standing cultural practices such as Sunday mass were not primarily a visual experience nor were customary house calls from guests that were so important to mid-nineteenth century urban culture. In the 1850s, one foreign visitor to the capital complained that a distinctive feature of the city was that his ears were “tormented by the melancholy jangle of its bells, which is prolonged from church to church, and convent to convent, for the entire day.”¹⁸ Along similar lines, the urban condition that most agitated residents prior to the Liberal Reforms of the 1870s in Guatemala City—and that was all too frequently commented upon by visitors to the city—was the rank stench that permeated urban corridors during the rainy season due to poor drainage. Human waste thrown on the streets along with garbage and animal refuse literally formed cesspools in low-lying areas as stagnant waters coupled with the warm late afternoon sun fermented into indescribable

¹⁷ See “Supersticiones: La fascinación ó mal de ojo,” *Diario de Centro-América*, April 10, 1905, p. 2. Asturias mentions the evil eye frequently, as well. See *El Señor Presidente*, p. 57 and *Hombres de Maíz*, Chapter Two.

¹⁸ Arthur Morelet, *Travels in Central America*, (New York: Leypoldt, Holy & Williams, 1871), pp. 391-392.

odors.¹⁹ In fact, it is arguable that the streets of the capital served as a hindrance to the spread of visual culture and were undoubtedly unbecoming of a slowly modernizing city. With improved drainage systems, however, *capitalinos* began to venture into the streets and the flourishing of urban culture commenced with trepidation.

Along with filthy streets, pre-existing codes of conduct characteristic of the colonial and early republican eras in practices such as urbanity, for example, continued to challenge the optical desire for sensory dominance. That is to say, even in the late-nineteenth century, urban culture insisted on tempering visual perception and balancing the senses. Bodies and minds in Guatemala City were disciplined to engage in what was deemed appropriate or proper behaviour, the conduct of which was instilled through the educational system and custom. While discussions of urbanity had much to do with publicly justifying class position and privilege, they also functioned to relay sentiments of social obligation to the public and enhance spiritual well-being. Concerned utmost with the senses, guidelines were published to direct public behaviour away from conducting oneself too loudly in polite company, picking one's orifices, or offending the sense of smell of others with tobacco or strongly scented perfumes. The disciplining of vision was important to such virtuous protocol. An 1861 *Manual de urbanidad y finos modales* insisted that while strolling in public, one should be aware of not holding the gaze of others that they encounter, that it is offensive to look into windows or up at the balconies that stare down at the promenade, or to turn to glance at someone who has passed by.²⁰ In short, mid-nineteenth century urban culture appears to have been concerned with a balanced sensory regime to the point of castigating optics. The experience of modernity,

¹⁹ See, for example, *El Ferrocarril*, March 6, 1894, p. 3 or *Las Noticias*, Dec. 16, 1891, p. 3.

²⁰ D. Antonio Silva, *Manual de urbanidad y finos modales, para el uso de la juventud centro-americana*, (Guatemala: La Oficina de Luna, 1861).

however, was about to severely contest and eventually upset the equilibrium distributed to the senses so important to mid-century urbanity.



FIGURE 2 Guatemala City (circa 1877) as seen from Cerro del Carmen in the capital's northeast corner. "Vista General de Guatemala, ca. 1877" by Eadweard Muybridge. Source: Fototeca Guatemala, CIRMA. Colección: Álbum Recuerdo de Guatemala, Familia Taracena Arriola.

In contrast, the mantra of the modern sensory experience in the Guatemalan Belle Époque was “look!” In fact, it was not an uncommon marketing ploy in 1890s newspaper advertisements to coax readers with instructions to look (using the exclamation “¡ojo!”) to draw attention to a given promotion, often even accompanied with an illustration of an eye for emphasis.²¹ The experience of modernity in Guatemala City by the turn of the century was dominated by the visual to the point of being ocularcentric; while aural desires could be satisfied listening to newly-penned waltzes at the Teatro Colón, a dated medium in an antique venue, one went to Salon Valenti in the

²¹ Such marketing strategies were commonplace, though for example, please see the ad for Singer sewing machines in *Diario de Centro-América*, Dec 13, 1890, p. 3.

Pasaje Aycinena to watch recent Lumière Brothers silent motion pictures or browsed the photographic collection at Albert Valledaveano's shop *Siglo XX* to excite both their visual sense and their wonder at the possibilities of modernity. The twisting of iron for railings on balconies and street lamps or the publication of illustrations in newspaper advertisements both in fashions that recalled European Art Nouveau were ocular gratifications.

Juxtaposing the disciplining of optics, one visitor to the city in the early twentieth century reported, "The windows and balconies furnish convenient seats for the young women of the house, who, forbidden by custom to walk the streets unaccompanied, plant themselves there and inconsiderately stare at all who pass, and especially the men. You can look in return," he continues, "for it is only properly gallant and polite to stare at them as frankly as if they were pictures or flowers. To the foreigner it is quite embarrassing to pass this gauntlet of curious eyes."²² Indeed, it was not until the emergence of radio in the 1920s that modernism began the widespread satisfaction of aural desires beyond the auditory refuge heaped upon ears by the arrival of the train, the passing of the Decauville, the sound of bells on bicycles, or the tone and resonance of the marimba playing bourgeois anthems like *Flor del Café*. Those concerned with the experience of modernity even attempted to share its dominance of vision by creating cinematography for the blind, much to the amusement of Guatemalan publishers.²³ But, at base, advertisements and commodity culture demanded that would-be shoppers pore over commodities that sat in oversized shop windows on La Sexta Avenida or in the

²² Nevin O. Winter, *Guatemala and Her People of To-Day*, (Boston: L.C. Page and Company, 1909), pp. 111-112.

²³ "Un cinematógrafo para ciegos" *Diario de Centro-América*, July 11, 1902, p. 4. This article boasts of a French electrician who created a device to procure in the blind "something of the sensation of sight."

city's shopping arcades. Vision was an essential facet of modern public performance and fulfilling "fables of abundance." Indeed, by the turn of the century, visual culture was imperative to the thriving of consumer capitalism and central to the logic of capitalist modernity.

Moreover—and this is historically important—those who witnessed the proliferation of modernism in Guatemala City understood societal and cultural shifts far more in terms of visual metaphors. Equally important, they were enchanted more by visual signifiers than by other sensory perceptions that inform experience. This is not to say, of course, that sound, taste, touch, or smell did not matter as concerns about the maintenance of the streets can attest. Yet, the sight from the train window proved more compelling to Guatemalan observers than its sound or smell and less so the vibratory sensations produced by its rumble. And so, we see Rubén Darío using ocular metaphors and imagery while writing in Guatemala City's newspapers during his brief tenure in the country in 1890 and 1891. In a biography that he penned about his acquaintance, Valero Pujol, Darío headlined the piece with *Fotgrabado* (as he had with his article on Ricardo Palma). The title means quite literally a photogravure (a type of printmaking that produces an etched quality common in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) but used more familiarly as English-speakers might use the idea of a snapshot—a captured moment in time—as a metaphor for biography.²⁴ I wish to demonstrate then the ways in which everyday life came to be animated by such references to the modern experience and how Guatemala City's inhabitants familiarized themselves in their rapidly changing city.

²⁴ Rubén Darío, "Fotgrabado," *Diario de Centro-América*, Oct. 1, 1890, 1.

This dissertation continually references the motif of modern optics as an organizing principal to make sense of the culture of modernity in Guatemala City. This is appropriate both in a concrete sense—given the plethora of visual markers in modern culture—but also as something perceptive, similar to how a lens distorts view. Thus, optics will be used to refer to two aspects of modern experience in Guatemala City, not mutually exclusive to one another. The first is reserved for markers of modernity: those material cultural forms that populated the urban social world and came to signify a modern subjectivity through their objective existence. Their real presence convinced the bourgeoisie that urban Guatemala was a central locus within the modern world and worthy of comparisons to the great European capitals. These markers include modern architecture such as the shopping arcade, commodities and advertisements, urban planning as seen through widened avenues, and one-way streets. But it also comprised technology and consumer goods such as trains, bicycles, automobiles, and other commodities as well as, human characters in the form of the dandy, bourgeoisie, urban pauper, and prostitute.

The second facet of optics was new, novel ways of seeing produced from the altered subject position of moderns. Modern changes provided a different manner of perceiving the world that defined the experience of the Belle Époque. Honed intellects were trained through modern optics associated with spatial-temporal conflation to engage in the practice of modernity. Not to be confused with ideology, examples of this aspect of optics include modern art, photography and cinema, and the experience of urban life commencing in the 1870s. Learning to view the bourgeois world was a strategy of modern life. But modern optics also generated assumptions about what could be

expected from the modern world, setting the bourgeoisie up for disappointment when their hopes failed to materialize. Optics can be used, then, as a methodological caveat to understand the thrills, anxieties, and expectations of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Guatemalan bourgeois culture and society.

It is important to note, the modern optic was neither universal nor objective but rather came to reflect the importance of locality and the bourgeois ideology of progress. That is to say, while optics shaped the modern worldview, they were themselves molded by evolving cultural traditions in Guatemala City. Above all else, modern optics were the product of what cultural critic Ángel Rama called the “lettered city”—the men of letters with social prevalence and clout in Latin American cities²⁵—who seized advantage of low rates of literacy to elevate their social standing as a quasi-priestly caste within the machinery of the colonial and later post-colonial state. The intellectuals of the lettered city used their class privilege to envision their respective nationalities and the urban culture of the region’s capitals while maintaining the social hierarchy. By the turn of the last century, the lettered city, according to Rama, was undergoing significant changes due to increased literacy and the expansion of newspapers and other literature, thus forcing it to accept new members amongst its ranks; however, the class, ethnicity, and gender of the lettered city largely remained intact, a reality reflected in how modern Guatemala City was both conceived and perceived. Thus, in alignment with the composition of the lettered city, modern optics principally evoked masculine sentiments, exposing the dominance of wealthy, white or *ladino*, male voices, thoughts, and actions. The social

²⁵ See Ángel Rama, *The Lettered City*, John Charles Chasteen (trans.), (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

vision held by these men differed by varying shades but virtually all subscribed to local notions of progress, civilization, economic development, and order.

The terms of masculinity during the period appear to have been less concerned with manliness, than has been described for the United States in this period,²⁶ focusing instead on class, refined mannerisms, and industriousness. A labourious nature contributing to social improvement was preferred with special colourful reservations held for those perceived to be shirking social responsibility. Disdain for a lack of utility was as true for paupers as it was for privileged sons, though the latter were spared social humiliation and prison because of their social status. Typically, while female deeds were present in the culture of the Belle Époque, they were often mediated through male interlocutors and it was privileged men who established the terms of the discussion. This was also true of matters pertaining to ethnicity. Those who owned capital, had access to newspapers and journals, and participated in bourgeois cultural life also subscribed to regimes of whiteness. Marta Casaús Arzú has written extensively on the ethnic makeup of the Guatemalan elite and their attempts to preserve non-indigenous blood quotas.²⁷ During the liberal era, great lengths were undertaken to attract immigrants from Europe and the United States in order to whiten Guatemalan society in the name of civilization. Indeed, immigration was a primary concern for the hosting of the 1897 Central American Exposition and completing the railroad to the Atlantic during the following decade.

In contrast, modern optics described the backwardness of the countryside, employing keywords that conflated backwardness and indigenous lifestyles while contrasting nature with the spoils of modern technology. For example, during the period

²⁶ See Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

²⁷ Marta Casaús Arzú, *Linaje y Racismo*, (Guatemala: F&G Editores, 2007).

from approximately 1895-1910, it became fashionable for Guatemalan journalists to travel on trains into rural areas. The narratives that they generated usually unfolded as meditations on the ability of progress to penetrate untamed nature for, as the locomotive heralded civilization by passing through spatial barriers, so too did rationalized agriculture that supplanted the “foliage of lianas and parasites.”²⁸ The indigenous population—viewed simultaneously with indifference and unease—often appear as merely part of the landscape,²⁹ at times as primitive peons and others as lazy *indios*. By the 1930s, Mayan populations were treated as objects of anthropological interest at national fairs, the antithesis of progress, portrayed as remaining unchanged since time immemorial. Optics, then, were not unbiased but products of their age and cultural traditions.

In certain spheres, optical transformation was immediate and buttressed the supposition that the liberal era presented something new. The first experience of the train or of viewing a film immediately altered one’s subject position—albeit to varying degrees, of course. Other optical experiences, those related to urban transformation for example, took longer to come into being and afforded urban observers with a long period of acclimatization. Sometimes subtlety prevailed. Indeed, simple images could provide profound insight into modern consciousness and experience. In 1890s Guatemala, as elsewhere, locally-published illustrated journals became fashionable ways for privileged members of society to demonstrate their affluence, social power, as well as their modern character. Personal photographs taken in studios in Guatemala City such as Alberto Valdeavellano’s “El Siglo XX” were then later published in such journals often with a

²⁸ José María Moncada, “El Tren y el Río,” *Electra*, Aug. 1908, p. 113.

²⁹ See Ramon A. Salazar, “Vistas de Guatemala,” *La Ilustración Guatemalteca*, Dec. 1896, p. 138.

brief description of the subject of interest. From these images, we can trace the import of fashions that suggested to the reading—or viewing—audience new practices of style reserved by the national bourgeoisie and oligarchy. But more than this, the optics of modernity offered new perspectives on the world seen from various subject positions. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the revue *Electra* published an image featuring a young girl holding a cat. The editors of the *revista* described the feline not as a living, breathing creature, but as “un juguete animado”—a lively or animated toy.³⁰ While simply a play-on-words or shrewd comment to pass unnoticed, the description also alludes to the commodity culture and relationships as it concerns childhood and toys. But more than this, *Electra*’s juguete animado suggests new forms of perception.

Luis Mazzantini at the Cinema: Celebrity, Consumption, and Spatial-Temporal Collapse

The 1905 bull-fighting season saw cause for great excitement in the Guatemalan capital. In the weeks and months prior to the annual running of the bulls, *hojas sueltas* circulated the city with the simple but foretelling notification that “Mazzantini is coming.”³¹ No further explanation was required. Indeed, rumours had spread of the famous Spanish matador Luis Mazzantini y Eguía’s impending arrival in Guatemala for years following negotiations between his company and promoters in Mexico.³² For the matador, his visit to Central America was significant as his 8 March 1905 bullfight at the Plaza de Toros in Guatemala City was the last of his long and illustrious career. The untimely death of his wife, Leocadia Concepción Lázaro Sánchez, while he was preparing to depart from Guatemala for Mexico helped prompt his sudden retirement

³⁰ *Electra*, Dec. 1908, pp. 202-203.

³¹ “Mazzantini viene,” Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas No. 1994, Year 1904].

³² Héctor Gaitán suggests as early as 1902; see Gaitán, *Memorias de siglo XX*, p. 20.

from the sporting entertainment that had made him famous unpredictable. What was seen in Guatemala City during February and March 1905 was nothing short of modern celebrity worship in a manner the capital had never beheld for a secular, non-state actor, yet something that would be reproduced countless times henceforth. Such was the excitement in the capital that visitors were encouraged to attend one of his bullfights and its associated spectacle.³³ The Mazzantini affair signaled that the mechanical drive of the Guatemalan culture industry had been spurred to life.

La corrida—bull-fighting—was not itself a modern spectacle, drawing on various Iberian and European cultural practices dating back centuries, yet the welcome given to Mazzantini was unique in the annals of Guatemalan cultural history. The worship of celebrity was elevated to a new level, cultivated in part by Mazzantini's self-promotion through modern advertising techniques and partly by the local bourgeoisie who sought to capitalize on the nascent commodity culture growing in the city. The events of the last great *corrida* of Mazzantini's career signaled that the template for the modern optic in Guatemala that informed cultural trends for much of the twentieth century was basically established during the Belle Époque of the last century. The Guatemalan obsession with Mazzantini centered on a number of modern cultural formations that characterized much of the fin-de-siècle experience of modernity: the reproducibility of art as kitsch, the rise of culture as a commodity in and of itself, and the coalition of celebrity worship, media, and advertising. More than that, the spectacle demonstrated how the optics of modernity produced new expectations.

Mazzantini was recognized in Europe as a master of public relations and did much to foster his own celebrity cult. He broke many of the sport's sacred traditions with his

³³ Winter, *Guatemala*, p. 69.

self-aggrandizing stunts. Indeed, he was regarded as simultaneously “cultured and arrogant” and a man who “aspired to be a *torero* in order to live well and die even better.”³⁴ His reckless showboating afforded him the nickname “el señorito loco” as a young man before age and grace afforded him the more respectable moniker “Don Luis.” Perhaps aiding his celebrity was a brief affair that he shared with renowned—though scandal-laden—French actress Sarah Bernhardt while the two were in Havana during the first months of 1887, which provided much fodder for the Parisian press.³⁵ Perennially the focus of scandal and gossip, wealth and celebrity, by the time of his arrival in Guatemala, Mazzantini’s reputation and legacy had preceded him. Hence, the usage of vague notices, merely announcing that he was coming to Guatemala City that relied on his emphatic celebrity status.

Accompanying the *Mazzantini viene* advertisements were regular updates about the bullfighter’s pending arrival from Mexico, dutifully printed in leading Guatemalan newspapers in late December 1904 and January 1905. His company, Empresa Mazzantini, generated further excitement by dispatching notices to the telegraph stations in Guatemala City to report their journey from Mexico. One notified Guatemalans that the steamship carrying a *picador* named Ortega and some bulls was now en route and that Mazzantini would arrive shortly afterwards.³⁶ About a month later, news arrived from the Puerto de San José, south of the capital, that Mazzantini’s steamship had anchored and that he would arrive in the city the following day on an express train in preparation

³⁴ Juan Miguel Sánchez Vigil and Manuel Durán Blázquez, *Luis Mazzantini: El Señorito Loco*, (Madrid: Librería Gaztambide, 1993), p. 59.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

³⁶ “Empresa Mazzantini,” *Diario de Centro-América*, Dec. 23, 1904, p. 1.

for his first bullfight, a little over a week later.³⁷ Moreover, articles discussed the high costs of Mazzantini's time in Guatemala, which warranted a refurbishing of the capital's Plaza de Toros including a new bullpen to protect spectators.³⁸

Mazzantini afforded the local media opportunities to produce stories about his persona and legend, inviting journalists to dine and converse with him. The results of such encounters heightened his celebrity as he was described as the perfect gentleman, possessing "the finesse of a Renaissance artist" while being "well-advanced in political and religious ideas".³⁹ The conflation of matador with artist and showman mirrored the portrayal that Mazzantini sought to cultivate for himself. He wrote in an article for the *Heraldo de Madrid* that was subsequently carried by the Guatemalan government newspaper, that his trade was less a type of work and more an art form. For the matador, the distinction also carried other connotations as he was at the time being criticized for working on Sunday, and for forcing bullring employees also to work on the Sabbath, a so-called conspiracy that Mazzantini credited the Spanish socialists with formulating.⁴⁰

Further, heightening the anticipation was a series of pieces reproduced from Spanish publications about the vitality of bullfighting, a sport that it claimed, "is a circus for an entire people."⁴¹ The article noted, as did historian William Beezley in his study of sports and clubs in nineteenth century Mexico, that the spectacle of bullfighting also manifested social divisions within Iberian and Latin American societies whereby the wealthy were afforded the privilege of being seated in the shade whereas those of

³⁷ "Mazzantini en Guatemala," *Diario de Centro-América*, Jan. 20, 1905, p. 1.

³⁸ *Diario de Centro-América*, Dec. 20, 1904, p. 4.

³⁹ "Mazzantini en Guatemala," *Diario de Centro-América*, Feb. 4, 1905, p. 1 and "Una visita a Mazzantini," *Diario de Centro-América*, Feb. 4, 1905, p. 1.

⁴⁰ Luis Mazzantini, "El descanso y los toros," *Diario de Centro-América*, Feb. 4, 1905, p. 1.

⁴¹ "Las Corridas de Toros," *Diario de Centro-América*, Jan. 28, 1905, p. 1.

moderate or lower income were restricted to the seats that bore the brunt of the sun's beams.⁴² While bullfighting itself was a memento of colonial social ordering and metaphorically served as such, Mazzantini's arrival represented something more: the adaptation of old social forms and practices by modernizing tendencies; if the seating arrangement continued to reflect social privilege, the old oligarchy could not prevent the rising middle-class from sitting nearby them. And to the extent that Mazzantini's celebrity tickled the bourgeoisie, they were even keener to profit from the spectacle that he generated.

Though Guatemalan commodity culture in 1905 was yet immature, there existed a desire to render the spectacle into commodity form and business owners were keen to commoditize the Mazzantini spectacle. The very person of Mazzantini was placed on display as he was paraded around the city to attend cultural events at the urging of business proprietors who advertised his presence. The director of the original dramatic production, Manuel Valle's *Flor de Café*, debuting at the Teatro Colón in February, used Mazzantini's attendance as a promotional tool.⁴³ Elsewhere, the local martial band played for the benefit of Mazzantini and premiered some recently composed orchestral pieces including Manuel Gonzalez G.'s "Mazzantini en Guatemala" and R.A. Castillo's "Mazzantini."⁴⁴

In February "La Exposición", a photo vendor in the capital, commenced selling portraits and images of Mazzantini in action during a bullfight. Advertised in the newspaper as having been taken from the luxury box suites in the Plaza de Toros, the

⁴² See Ibid., p. 1 and William H. Beezley, *Judas at the Jockey Club and Other Episodes of Porfirian Mexico*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), p. 6.

⁴³ "Teatro Colón," Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas No. 1995, Year 1905].

⁴⁴ "El beneficio de Mazzantini," *Diario de Centro-América*, Feb. 17, 1905.

photographs served not only as souvenirs but also provided a different perspective of the event for those in less costly seats—the opportunity to see as the wealthy see.⁴⁵ Here, representation trumped reality: although financial restrictions prevented direct cultural participation, the reproducibility of kitsch in the form of photographs allowed for a new form of cultural authenticity. Images of Mazzantini could be placed in the home, even if the viewer’s personal experience differed from the optic of the photograph. Moreover, reproducibility allowed for new optical forms that allowed altered perspectives. In this sense, the one-time rigid social ordering that the bullring metaphorically represented could be figuratively transcended—the public now had the opportunity to view Mazzantini from the luxury suites. While some dissenting voices existed—J. Arzu Batres derided the best bullfight as comparable to the worst in dramatic theatre⁴⁶—the overall consensus held that Mazzantini’s presence confirmed what many had believed: namely that Guatemala City was a vogue, cosmopolitan, and modernizing capital.

As mentioned earlier, one aspect of the Mazzantini spectacle related to Carlos Valenti Sorié and his cinematograph. The history of film in Guatemala commenced modestly enough with a subtle advertisement in the newspaper of record, *Diario de Centro-América*, announcing the cinematographic experience “For the first time in Guatemala!!!” on the evening of 26 September 1896.⁴⁷ Responsible for introducing the cinematograph was Don Carlos Valenti Sorié who had migrated to Guatemala City in 1888. He had been convinced to immigrate to the Central American isthmus and establish the barbershop *Peluqueria Valenti* in the city’s core district after meeting José María Reyna Barrios during the soon-to-be Guatemalan President’s tours in Europe. A

⁴⁵ *Diario de Centro-América*, Feb. 24, 1905, p. 4.

⁴⁶ J. Arzu Batres, “Vida Social,” *Diario de Centro-América*, Feb. 4, 1905, pp. 1 and 4.

⁴⁷ *Diario de Centro-América*, Sept. 26, 1896, p. 3.

modern showman, Valenti Sorié drew much attention to his establishment through a series of innovative advertising techniques in the 1890s that often left the Guatemala City intellectual class puzzled.⁴⁸ Valenti Sorié, obsessed with technology and modern aesthetics, frequently returned to Europe to buy luxury consumer goods—furniture, a Victor gramophone, and of course his cinematograph—with which he furnished his home and barbershop.⁴⁹

Towards the end of the rainy season in 1896, Valenti Sorié announced to the Guatemalan public that he was to hold the first cinematographic exhibition at the Pasaje Aycinena, a modern Parisian-style arcade located on the reverse side of the central plaza. The Lumière Brothers, who held the patent on the cinematograph, had only debuted the device before public audiences in Paris in late December 1895, while the London premiere was held the following February, a mere seven months before Valenti Sorié exhibited it in Guatemala City. The barber's initial advertisement did not describe the cinema, instead attempting to sell the prestige of the device to attract audiences, noting its ability to bridge the arts and sciences, praising it as the “surprising scientific and artistic novelty for which so many honours have been granted to its inventors.”⁵⁰ Excitement for the short film clips screened in Valenti Sorié's converted barbershop drew a diverse array of spectators to the “marvelous invention,”⁵¹—especially after Valenti Sorié lowered the

⁴⁸ Such advertisements, including publishing announcements upside down or bizarre proclamations “demanding heads” will be more closely analyzed in Chapter Four.

⁴⁹ Walda Valenti, *Carlos Valenti: Aproximación a una biografía*, (Guatemala: Serviprensa Centroamericana), pp. 14-16.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵¹ *Diario de Centro-América*, Oct. 2, 1896, p. 1.

initial admission cost—including no less than the wife of President Reyna Barrios accompanied by the Jefe del Estado Mayor, Coronel Toledo.⁵²

In an advertising strategy that later became formulaic in newspapers internationally, Valenti Sorié began publishing a schedule of his theatre's programme shortly after opening his business. Now audiences knew beforehand which cinematic vistas were to be screened each week and when new short films premiered. From within the walls of the Pasaje Aycinena—itsself a testament to modern aesthetics—audiences watched footage of a French military parade, Spanish artillery, children playing, the arrival of a train, the Russian Tsar entering the Kremlin, elephants in an acclimatizing garden, and scenes from Hyde Park in London.⁵³ The world was seemingly brought to Guatemala City for the audiences' viewing pleasure.

Perhaps more than any other aesthetic medium, film possesses the remarkable capacity to transcend time and space, to offer heretofore unseen perspectives, altering narratives and images through splices and editing. The manner in which film presented a new visual experience perplexed Guatemalan commentators as they first encountered the new modern optical experience. Indeed, we can see how the proprietors who marketed the new perception of reality struggled to find the language that not only appropriately described film but also communicated to an audience by way of advertisements the cultural significance and the *modus operandi* of such marvels. Given the limited textual space provided by advertisements, only a few words could be employed to describe the oracular spectacle of film, which could easily filled paragraphs with apt descriptors.

⁵² *La República*, Nov. 14, 1896, p. 3.

⁵³ For example, see *Diario de Centro-América*, Oct. 2, 1896, p. 1 and *Diario de Centro-América*, Oct. 10, 1896, p. 1.

The lack of adequate language led Valenti Sorié to market his “surprising scientific and artistic novelty” as “animated photographs” shortly before its premiere performance in Guatemala.⁵⁴ A month later, another ad for Cinematógrafo Valenti described film as “photographs alive in motion,” a base description that weighs heavy on utility, whereas some months later, the newspaper *La República* simply described film as “fotografías en movimiento,” the Spanish equivalent to motion pictures.⁵⁵ The notion of photographs in flux, altering their nature before the audience’s eyes in a way that captured the essence of motion heralded a profoundly new format for depicting the world. However, the ability of film to either compress or elongate time and space—in any case, manipulate them—had heightened significance during Mazzantini’s visit to the Guatemalan capital.

While Camila Canales of Asturias’ *El Señor Presidente* remarks about how much the film at Las Cien Puertas reminded her of real life, the experience of the cinema had unintended consequences for Mazzantini due to its ability to manipulate perceptions. As part of the effort to profit from the promotion of Mazzantini’s celebrity, Valenti Sorié advertised and screened footage at his then-named Salon Valenti of “el valiente diestro Don Luis Mazzantini” bullfighting in Mexico City.⁵⁶ On one special night, the great matador himself presided over the viewing of two of his recent fights from Mexico and Barcelona.⁵⁷ However, some of the footage of the bullfighter had been recorded some years earlier and, by the time Mazzantini came to Guatemala, he was nearly fifty years of age, well past his prime, and no longer in good shape. Nevertheless, by compressing time

⁵⁴ *La República*, Sept. 7, 1896, p. 12.

⁵⁵ *La República*, Oct. 10, 1896, p. 13 and *La República*, April 3, 1897, p. 11.

⁵⁶ *Diario de Centro-América*, Jan. 23, 1905, p. 4.

⁵⁷ “Por Mazzantini,” *Diario de Centro-América*, Jan. 25, 1905, p. 4.

and space, the images shown in the Salon Valenti showed a younger version of the matador, thus heightening expectations of the Guatemalan public. Like Camila's father's friends in *El Señor Presidente* mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Mazzantini had ceased to be the slim younger man that graced the film shown in Guatemala City. Indeed, the Guatemalan popular historian Héctor Gaitán relates that all the celebrity hype of the bullfighter abetted by the films shown in Valenti Sorié's theatre only served to disappoint bullfighting *aficionados* as the obese, older man who sluggardly moved around the ring in the Plaza de Toros did not meet their expectations.⁵⁸

The Mazzantini affair represented the consolidation of modern optics in Guatemala City that later altered perceptions of the world throughout the twentieth century. With bourgeois culture came a host of anticipations about consumption and experience forcing *capitalinos* to amend their subject positions. The dawning of celebrity culture, the reproducibility of art as kitsch, and the ways in which advertising and media changed expectations all came together, most notably in the events surrounding Carlos Valenti Sorié's theatre, in cultural formulations that characterized the modern culture of the next century. The advance of linear worldviews owing to local faith in progress transformed how the bourgeoisie understood the future; when reality failed to match expectations, crises of varying severity erupted. In the case of Mazzantini and Salon Valenti, concern was benign, manifesting as mere disappointment. In other circumstances, however, serious anxieties were produced amongst the bourgeoisie and ruling class of Guatemala, most visible in the *cultura de esperar*.

⁵⁸ Gaitán, *Memorias del siglo xx*, p. 20.

Carlos Valenti: Restlessness and the *Cultura de Esperar*

The second episode related to Carlos Valenti Sorié was the life and experiences of his son—also named Carlos Valenti—the young painter who was briefly discussed in the Introduction of this dissertation. The significance of Carlos Valenti regarding the optics of modernity grows from his role in the Guatemalan modernist avant-garde, for the ill-fated painter documented both the new subjects of modernity using an aesthetic that itself represented a new way of seeing the modern world. Such an optic was informed by a host of modern shifts in the modes of production, urban spatial transformations, aesthetic trends emanating from Europe, and rapid technological innovations that all altered perceptions of the emerging social, political, cultural, and economic world as it dawned in Guatemala during the fin-de-siècle. These alterations in social organization all interacted with one another and were constantly in flux, as the modern world seemed to speed up. But further, and related to the idea of motion was the incessant belief that Valenti and his generation suffered from acute agitation generated by the backwardness of Guatemalan aesthetics, manifesting in a form of restlessness. The impatience of the early Guatemalan modernist painters when paired with the decades-long construction of the Northern Railway aptly encompasses a notable feature of the Guatemalan culture of modernity: that of waiting, hoping, and expecting or what can be called the *cultura de esperar*.

Carlos Valenti was born in Paris in 1888, the third child of Carlos Valenti Sorié and Helena Perrillat-Bottonet. As mentioned earlier, Valenti Sorié immigrated to Guatemala that same year, while the rest of the Valenti clan followed the patriarch to Central America in 1891. Like many middle-class youth of his generation, Valenti attended the

Instituto Nacional Central de Varones (National Central Institute for Boys), the prominent preparatory school in Guatemala City. There, and amidst the upbringing afforded by his parents, the values of modern etiquette and urbanity were instilled in Valenti who grew proficient as a pianist; soon afterwards, however, he followed his older brother Emilio to the Academia de Bellas Artes (Academy of Fine Arts) where the young Valenti blossomed as a painter.

Valenti possessed exceptional talent; nevertheless, he was reputed to suffer from cultural anxiety and was said to bear the pains and frustrations of inquietude. In this regard, his impatience for new aesthetics characterized a general *cultura de esperar* that perennially perplexed the Guatemalan bourgeoisie in their longing for modernity. Posthumous declarations following his suicide at age twenty-four were thoroughly permeated with descriptions of his artistic restlessness. His good friend Carlos Mérida—and arguably the most influential Guatemalan artist of the twentieth century—spoke of his “tortured restlessness.”⁵⁹ A prominent artist from the Generación de 1940 (generation of 1940), Roberto González Goyri, mentions Valenti’s “searing restlessness.”⁶⁰ For art historian Luis Luján Muñoz, the condition of severe inquietude was not limited to Valenti but shared among others of his generation, including Mérida.⁶¹ Valenti’s niece and biographer, Walda Valenti, attributed the anxiety to the generation of the epoch, those “restless, tormented youth in those fateful first years of the century.”⁶² However, unlike the other commentators, she offers more, as she seeks to identify the source of such

⁵⁹ Carlos Mérida, “Carlos Valenti,” *Exposición Póstuma: Carlos Valenti*, (Guatemala: Imprenta De la Riva Hnos., 1928).

⁶⁰ Roberto González Goyri, “Carlos Valenti,” *Reflexiones de un artista*, (Guatemala: Serviprensa, 2008), p. 103.

⁶¹ Luis Luján Muñoz, *Carlos Mérida, Rafael Yela Günther, Carlos Valenti, Sabartés y la Plástica Contemporánea de Guatemala*, (Guatemala: Serviprensa Centro América, 1983), p. 14.

⁶² Valenti, *Valenti*, p. 13.

agitation. The answer for her was stagnation and the immutable appearance of all hitherto existing artwork in Guatemala. The mantra of inquietude recited so methodically by those who described Valenti placed the young artist into a cultural conversation not only about Guatemalan aesthetics during the fin-de-siècle but also larger cultural anxieties about the nature of waiting for modernity.

With regards to the Guatemalan art world, already in the early 1900s, Valenti was “like a volcano about to erupt in internal explosions, already vibrant”.⁶³ The perception was, of course, that tradition weighed heavily on aesthetics in the isthmus and that artistic circles were paralyzed by the repetition of established aesthetics until Valenti “awakened new aesthetic currents and different techniques”⁶⁴ that his contemporaries and subsequent generations seized. This impulse speaks to the creative urge of Darío and the literary modernists through their desire to shed the past.

During much of the nineteenth century, classical portrait and landscape artists characterized Guatemalan painting. The growth of European modern painting aesthetics during the 1870s and 1880s created no such contemporaneous departure from academic styles in Guatemala, at least not until the opening years of the twentieth century. Art historians suggest that Modernism did not arrive in Guatemala until the immigration to the Guatemalan capital of a Catalan painter named Jaime Sabartés in 1904. This is a mere partial truth, however. It seems, rather, that Modernism in the plastic arts first appeared in advertisements in 1890s newspapers and journals in the form of Art Nouveau. While advertising will be examined more thoroughly in Chapter Four, it is worth noting here the aesthetics of European Art Nouveau featured regularly in various

⁶³ Ibid., p. 30.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 13.

advertisements, often in ads for imported European goods and commodities for women. A notice for Andrés F. Porcile's jewelers features a heavily stylized Liberty bringing forth a chariot and, ostensibly, a collection of fine watches and "all types of jewelry".⁶⁵ Moreover, Alberto Valdeavellano used Art Nouveau in decorating the borders of photographs that he sold in his store. Indeed, the influence of the European aesthetic was such that Valdeavellano changed the name of his establishment from "El Siglo XX" to "Fotografía Arte Nuevo" in the early twentieth century. Moreover, the twisted iron railings with which balconies and fences throughout the city were equipped, too, possessed referential nods to European modern styling.

Notwithstanding the evidence of modernism in other art forms, it is true that Guatemalan painting was largely of a classical style until Sabartés began to tutor ambitious young art students, Carlos Valenti amongst them. While living in Barcelona, Sabartés frequented Les Quatre Gats—mentioned by Rubén Dário as the focal point of the Catalan Modernist movement in the 1890s—and was part of Pablo Picasso's inner circle (indeed, he later emigrated from Guatemala back to Europe where he served as Picasso's personal secretary). Meeting at the Gran Hotel or at the Hotel Unión in Guatemala City, Sabartés educated young Guatemalan painters "anxious for new horizons" on the influence of European Impressionism and Picasso's cubism. Such was his pupils' fascination that Sabartés "turned into a wizard from a magical world" in their minds.⁶⁶

Sabartés may have released Valenti and his peers of their restlessness but their inquietude was enigmatic of larger cultural trends. In tracing the echo of such motifs,

⁶⁵ *La Nación*, Jan. 31, 1897, p. 2.

⁶⁶ Valenti, *Valenti*, p. 24.

otherwise heterogeneous material can be seen as part of a broader cultural logic. Cultural theorists have long grappled with the implication of what was popularly referred to as “underdevelopment” since the 1960s and the underlying cultural trends that preceded it. Antonio Candido, for example, has drawn from the writings of Mário Vieira de Mello and his efforts to draw the distinctions between “the new country” and “the underdeveloped country” in Brazilian literature, pluralizing it to incorporate a more regional perspective.⁶⁷ In essence, as Candido points out, the notions of “the new country” preceding “the underdeveloped country” conjure the sentiments that were associated with particular eras within a national literature, or less inclusively, national culture. “The new country” alludes to the national enthusiasm and hopes for a better future—the ambitions that grew out of independence—whereas the pessimism of “the underdeveloped country” crept into the cultural consciousness with the economic collapse of the 1930s as the awareness spread that development was not occurring.⁶⁸ While such pronouncements threaten to look past the cultural nuance specific to each age, they do correspond with a generalized “structure of feeling.”

Retrospective accounts of the pre-Liberal Reforms era spoke of a “type of paralysis” that restricted economic development. Harnessed by the conservative order, the argument went, “the activity demanded by the future was unable to procure itself.”⁶⁹ The enterprising spirit of capitalist growth and export agriculture was said to have only been unleashed by the Liberal Reforms. The liberal effort to boost coffee production produced notable results; however, the national economy was increasingly placed at the

⁶⁷ Antonio Candido, “Literature and Underdevelopment,” *The Latin American Cultural Studies Reader*, Ana del Sarto et al. (eds.), (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 35.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁶⁹ *Exposición Centro-Americana 1897, Souvenir del Correo de Guatemala*, (New York: The Albertype Co.), p. 2.

whims of global markets, subjecting Guatemalan modernity to the turbulence of economic cycles. The economy expanded while coffee prices remained high and fulfilled the expectations of positivist-minded *capitalinos* and government planners.

But economic recessions and collapses tested the faith the bourgeoisie held in progress. This uncertainty and aborted expectations produced unique qualities within the culture of modernity in Guatemala. Certainly amongst the lettered classes, optimism for the future was dominant during the *fin-de-siècle*; however, there was much more at stake than mere optimism and, indeed, the agitation that described Carlos Valenti hinted at the more turbulent implications for utopian hopes. Perhaps this is best captured by the diffuse, yet complementary, meanings of the Spanish word *esperar*. Meaning to hope, the polysemous verb *esperar* has an additional dual signification indicating to wait and to expect. These joint connotations encapsulate the mixed frustration with progress that accompanies desire. For expectations may heighten hopes the longer one must wait. In this regard, the inquietude of Valenti and his generation encompasses the varied meanings of *esperar* and the culture of expecting, hoping, and waiting. This longing for the future was a generalized sense of temporal dislocation—accounted for through teleological epistemologies—concurrent with the *fin-de-siècle* culture of modernity in Guatemala City. Would-be modern subjects waited to be swept up by the maelstrom of modernity. The *cultura de esperar* can be seen clearly in the discourse pertaining to the construction of the Ferrocarril del Norte, the Northern Railway, a wait that speaks to the restlessness experienced by Valenti and his generation.

In early August 1883, President Justo Rufino Barrios issued a decree calling for the construction of a rail line from Guatemala City to the Atlantic coast, approximately 320

kilometers northeast of the capital (at what is now Puerto Barrios). The decree ordered a small annual tax to finance construction, declaring, “This work is the greatest inheritance that we could possibly leave to our children because it embodies the wealth of the future.”⁷⁰ Much of the liberal dream of progress relied on locomotives, which, it was hoped, would carry coffee grown in the mountainous interior to ports where it could be exported and, conversely, consumer goods could be imported and European immigration aided. For this reason, trains were heralded both as emblems and harbingers of modernity and civilization.⁷¹ Given geographic and topographical restrictions, in addition to preferable sanitary conditions, the Pacific coast was the seaboard initially favoured for export via railway.

The first train entered the city of Escuintla—an important crossroads that connected the capital to the coastline and the coffee-growing regions to the northwest—in 1880, whereby a solemn ceremony was preceded over by President Barrios. Four years later, and nearly a year after Barrios announced the goal of a northern railroad, the train from the Pacific coastline arrived in the capital. While the Pacific port at San José connected Guatemalan coffee producers to global markets by way of Mexico, the western United States, or around the Southern Cone of South America, the construction of a railway to the Atlantic Coast was desirable and preferred for its more immediate access to European and the eastern markets of the United States.

Initially it was expected that the line would be completed by July 1888; however, a lack of capital—both governmental and foreign—and an inhospitable and unforgiving terrain of mountains, rainforests and swamps that produced fever amongst workers

⁷⁰ J. Rufino Barrios, “El Decreto,” Colección Valenzuela [Hojas Sueltas No. 1984, Year 1883].

⁷¹ Alejandro Bermúdez, “El Ferrocarril,” *El Ferrocarril*, March 5, 1894, p. 1. Bermúdez speaks of “an eminently progressive, human, rational, and civilizing revolution” wrought by the rail.

perpetually hampered the construction of a Northern Railway. The laying of the line was an arduously slow process with William T. Penny, a civil engineer employed by the project, reporting that “The history of the whole sixty miles [then completed] is one of sickness, misery, and death, the mortality being mainly caused by fever, diarrhea, and liquor.”⁷² By the mid-1890s, however, the project was approached with rejuvenated spirits and the end appeared to be in sight. Understood as a feat that would dissect space through time, the “generous daydream” of the rail was poised to place Guatemala in “immediate contact with the United States and Europe.”⁷³ Indeed as one editorial had it, “Everything indicates that that which until recently was considered to be utopian is in the process of being transformed into a beautiful reality.”⁷⁴ With its completion, the editor of another piece in the aptly named *El Ferrocarril* announced, “the redeeming locomotive engine shall bring the breath of European civilization to us and soon provide us with the facility to hear the majestic roar of the Atlantic’s waters.”⁷⁵

By 1896, the rail stretched 163 kilometers from Puerto Barrios on the Atlantic to Zacapa, and newspapers excitedly announced that an additional 55 kilometers were close to completion meaning that the track would be done in the foreseeable future.⁷⁶ The crash of coffee price in 1896-1897, however, brought a dramatic halt to construction and concerns that it would remain unfinished. Liberal publications challenged naysayers, denouncing those individuals “motivated by malevolence,” who are “interested in convincing others that the venture will not be realized and that the respective works are

⁷² Quoted in Wayne Foster Anderson, *The Development of Export Transportation in Liberal Guatemala, 1871-1920*, (PhD diss., Tulane University, 1985), p. 346.

⁷³ *El Progreso Nacional*, Aug. 14, 1894, p. 1.

⁷⁴ “Ferrocarril al Norte,” *El Progreso Nacional*, Aug. 21, 1894, p. 12.

⁷⁵ Bermúdez, “El Ferrocarril,” p. 1.

⁷⁶ “Ferrocarril del Norte,” *La Ilustración Guatemalteca*, Dec. 1, 1896, p. 140.

imaginary.” “Those who feel it should soften their distress,” one editorial suggests, “with the certainty that by the end of the year you will find the works sufficiently advanced.”⁷⁷ Unable to convince domestic capitalists, Estrada Cabrera—President after a bloodless coup in 1898—turned abroad with lucrative promises to attract foreign capital to complete the line.

The stifling of the Northern Railway enterprise was finally resolved in 1904 when Estrada Cabrera’s administration penned an agreement with North American capitalists to complete the track, including Minor C. Keith, William Van Horn, and T.H. Hubbard at a cost of about \$4.5 million.⁷⁸ The syndicate received profit guarantees, access to land, low-cost labour, and tax exemptions as added incentive to owning and operating the rail.⁷⁹ When the train from Puerto Barrios on the Atlantic Coast finally rumbled into Guatemala City’s Estación Ferrocarril (Train Station) in January 1908, the city erupted in feverish elation. Pedro Pérez Valenzuela, who witnessed the event, reported, “No one had ever seen Guatemala City so elegant.”⁸⁰ Elsewhere, it was written that the city adorned itself in flowers and decorations “with a spontaneity never seen before until now”.⁸¹ A Central Committee was struck to plan the inauguration ceremonies, encouraging participation from the German, English, French, Belgian, Swiss, Spanish, and North American communities in the capital. Society dances were held, parades marched throughout the streets of the capital, speeches were recited, soccer matches were

⁷⁷ “Ver y tocar,” *El Ferrocarril del Norte*, May 4, 1901, p.1.

⁷⁸ “Inauguración del ferrocarril transcontinental de Guatemala,” *La Locomotora*, April 29, 1908, p. 9; reprinted from the Bulletin of the International Bureau of the American Republics.

⁷⁹ Rafael Pérez Riera, “Transportes, Comercio y Servicios Públicas,” *Historia General, Tomo V*, p. 162.

⁸⁰ Pedro Pérez Valenzuela, *Don Martín de Mayorga y otras Calderillas Históricas*, (Guatemala: Academia de Geografía e Historia de Guatemala, 1983), p. 121.

⁸¹ Felipe Estrada Pariagua, “El 19 de Enero de 1908,” *La Locomotora*, Feb. 9, 1908, p. 25.

played, and an Exposición Nacional to display domestic advances in the arts and sciences was judged.⁸²

Plaudits were heaped upon President Estrada Cabrera, the railway, and the nation for the project's completion. For many, the inauguration brought together commentary on Guatemala's past, present, and future, as it was difficult not to detail the long history of the Northern Railway's construction and be hopeful for the future with its termination. At the inauguration, the Ministro de Fomento (Minister of Development), Joaquin Méndez opened his speech with a salutary "Welcome to the future of the Republic!" though he acknowledged that before the "cry of the Locomotion" arrived "to awaken the entire country," the nation had endured a difficult twenty-five year wait.⁸³ The military claimed that the dream of all good Guatemalans has been converted into a glorious reality" while the Catholic Church described the train as the "Dream of our beloved nation".⁸⁴ Literally hundreds upon hundreds of letters of praise arrived in the capital from throughout Guatemala and abroad as mayors and dignitaries in even the smallest towns expressed their glee to President Estrada Cabrera.

Yet, amidst the celebrations and, indeed, in reflection of such joyful outpourings, there existed lingering tensions and doubts. The ecstatic celebrations indicated the great strain that the quarter century of incompleteness had placed on the national psyche. The long periods of silence within the national press that echoed hollowly in the pages of the

⁸² For examples, see, *Boletín del Comité Central de Festejos, para la inauguración del Ferrocarril de Guatemala*, Nov. 12, 1907 and "Programa de los festejos que tendrán lugar en el Hipódromo el domingo 26 del corriente, con motivo de la inauguración de la vía interoceánica de Guatemala," Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas no. 1998, Year 1908].

⁸³ Joaquin Méndez, "Discurso del Ministro de Fomento don Joaquin Méndez en la solemne Inauguración del Ferrocarril Interoceánico de Guatemala," *La Locomotora*, Feb. 9, 1908, 3-4.

⁸⁴ "Manifestación del Ejército," *La Locomotora*, Feb. 9, 1908, p. 25 and "Del Jefe de la Iglesia de Guatemala," *La Locomotora*, Feb. 9, 1908, p. 14.

national newspapers and periodicals spoke volumes to the frustrations of expectation and waiting. Perpetual disappointment became a cultural characteristic and perhaps few expressed it as clearly as President Manuel Estrada Cabrera. At the railway's inauguration, he declared, "So many sacrifices were made to commence and continue [the railroad] that one is able to say that there has been almost no national calamity from 1883 until the present that has not complied with the attempt at obstructing or destroying it." Continuing, he asserted, "And now that we have succeeded in reaching what for so many years we have desired with the greatest vehemence, and by virtue of not seeing it fulfilled, it appears a utopia".⁸⁵ That is to say, the perpetuation of a *cultura de esperar* so wounded national confidence that the fulfillment of a task seemed illusory. The phantasmagoria of modernity, in a sense, had been inverted: no longer did illusion convince of an artificial reality but reality itself had been rendered unlikely.

Letters compiled in a collected album published after the event spoke of the "trying hours" and "the epoch of incessant struggle" that permeated 25 years of the nation's history.⁸⁶ While some tried to gloss nicely over the wait and insist that the long completion time indicated the strength of national resolve and perseverance, others could not help but speak of the psychological impact of successive failures. One such commentator was Antonio Barrios who wrote that the railway was completed but only "after so many dreams had faded, so much energy poorly employed, and such abject failure that it grieves the mind, sowing doubt and discouragement in the national soul". He continues bearing his lamentations of longing; "During 25 years we have rowed through the unfathomable sea of doubt, encountering innumerable obstacles and

⁸⁵ Manuel Estrada Cabrera, "Manifiesto," *La Locomotora*, Feb. 9, 1908, pp. 1-2.

⁸⁶ Antonio González Saravia, "Ferrocarril Interoceánico," p. 6 and A. Vidaurre, "Una Página," p. 5 from *Álbum de Ferrocarril Interoceánico*, (Guatemala: Tipografía Nacional, 1909).

floggings from all tempests. We have seen many times during this period the rise and shattering of our most beautiful hopes.”⁸⁷

Disappointment, frustration, and the yearning for the progress promised by liberal ideology were well established within the cultural rationale of fin-de-siècle Guatemala. The quarter-century that it took for the Northern Railway to be constructed was merely emblematic of the *cultura de esperar*, which existed in tension with other elements of the culture of modernity. For while the prospect of modernity created much excitement for its possibilities, the pessimism of the *cultura de esperar* grounded it in the realities of the agro-export economy. The experiences of hoping, waiting, and expecting help us to understand Carlos Valenti’s restlessness. Prior to the arrival of Jaime Sabartés, Valenti and his peers consumed the aesthetic expression of European modernism found in imported journals to satiate their inquietude. Indeed, the immobility of classical artistic production, which characterized the *cultura de esperar*—like the stasis of an uncompleted railroad—stood in dialectical contrast with the culture of motion that ostensibly accompanied modernity as described by Asturias’ Camila when she first viewed film. That fluidity of the modern world came to represent Valenti’s personal aesthetic and was the binary opposite of the waiting and restlessness of the age.

As mentioned in the Introduction, Valenti’s body of work, especially as he came of age, was exemplified by motion. While moments were captured on canvas, they were caught as blurs. If it were true that, once completed, the Northern Railway “initiates a new era, an era of movement,”⁸⁸ then so too did Valenti’s paintings. Indeed, one critic

⁸⁷ Antonio Barrios, “Interoceánico de Guatemala,” *Álbum de Ferrocarril Interocéánico*, pp. 3-4.

⁸⁸ Vidaurre, “Una Página,” p. 5.

described a painting that “whirls and at times seems as if it were being torn to shreds.”⁸⁹ With his paintbrush, Valenti produced a new way for the Guatemalan eye to see the modern world. Commentators and his fellow painters alike argued that Valenti defined a new optic in Guatemalan aesthetics. Iriarte called him a “rebel” from then academic art, whereas Guatemalan art historian, Guillermo Monsanto referred to him as the “visionary artist of his generation”.⁹⁰ Through the influence of Sabartés and European journals, Valenti developed a technique that mimicked elements of European Impressionism, then Expressionism. His embrace of these styles forced an optical reconsideration of the modern world in the same manner of photography. The representation of reality detailed the movement inherent in the culture of modernity and Valenti, once liberated from his restlessness, both produced evidence that the world was visually changing and of a new aesthetic for viewing this transformation. Through his work, the stasis of classical portrait painting was infused with dynamism, reflective of the movement of the age.

It was not solely in his style that Valenti contributed to the optics of modernity in Guatemala City, but also in his subject matter, as the young painter represented the new subject types of modernity: not only the bloated, well-dressed bourgeoisie but also the city’s dispossessed. Of the former, Valenti documented the characters of the Guatemala City during the first decade of the twentieth century. His painting, *El Dandy*, analyzed in the Introduction, depicts a social being specific to the Belle Époque, which in popular discussion went under different names such as Bohemian, the egoist, and decadent. At the risk of conflating several characters, the holistic treatment of these urban social types

⁸⁹ Lionel Mendez Dávila, *Art in Latin America Today: Guatemala*, (Washington: Pan American Union, 1966), p. 7.

⁹⁰ See Augustín Iriarte, *Exposición Póstuma* and Guillermo Monsanto, “Del ‘Pequeño Paris’ a la Generación de Carlos Mérida,” *Joyas Artísticas del Banco de Guatemala*, Ricardo Martínez (ed.), (Guatemala: Banco de Guatemala, 2001), p. 25.

rests on a dual significance. First, they were fashionable beings whose emergence can be tied to Guatemala's late nineteenth-century culture of modernity and dawning capitalist modes of production. Secondly, the dandy, the Bohemian, the egoist, and the decadent all hailed from a bourgeois or petty bourgeois social position—they were mostly the sons of the middle class—but were the subjects of mockery. Thus, Valenti's dandy should not be confused as bourgeois but seen as derivative of the bourgeoisie: as a slightly comical, kitschy version of the liberal man of society.

There was also a vagabond element inherent in the dandy, permitting them to hold contradictory attributes: middle class, interested in fashion, but part social pariah and leech, a man of letters but with poor grammar. The dandy was seen as an inadequate imitation of authenticity and something unbecoming of one's class. During the 1890s and 1900s, there was near obsession with these characters, and critics called them out by name; Domingo Estrada, Ramón A. Salazar, Manuel Valle, J. Francisco Azurdia, and Rafael Spínola, for example, were chastised for being dandies.⁹¹ An 1899 editorial, suggests that fathers in the Republic have “the unwavering propensity to create public men from every child,” and when this fails, they would rather see their child live “a life of elegant idleness” rather than see them as labourers.⁹² Thus, the city had been populated by the “elegant idler who, through his aversion to work, converts himself into a defamed jester, mocking the honour of others and becoming a social burden.”⁹³ Herein lies the essence of the dandy.

⁹¹ Felipe Estrada Paniagua, “Una Bohemia Ilustre,” *Pasatiempo*, (Guatemala: La Tipografía Nacional, 1902), p. 129.

⁹² “La Vagancia,” *El Porvenir de Guatemala*, July 10, 1899, p.1.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

Another modern social character portrayed by Valenti was the bourgeoisie proper. Perhaps more than any other painting, *Trio Callejero (Trio Out-on-the-Street)* best captures the essence of the new Guatemalan bourgeoisie in Valenti's eyes. Characteristically obese, decked out in a top hat and tuxedo with a woman hanging from each of his arms—wife and mistress or prostitutes, perhaps—Valenti's bourgeoisie is emblematic of the excesses of the Belle Époque. The society pages of Guatemalan newspapers were never short of descriptions of the social life of the elite and who wore what to the latest dance. Like Valenti's dandy, the trio is wrapped up in the movement of the modern world, a swirl enshrouds them and blurs their social world in its rapid succession. And also like the dandy, there is an element of social performance to their appearance.

Timothy Mitchell has written extensively on the history of modernity, seeking to understand “how the modern comes about” by pluralizing the singular history of European modernity into a more complex global history.⁹⁴ He argues that modernity was not a product of the West but was “produced *as* the West,” implying that much of the modern experience has been the history of representation or the “staging” of modernity.⁹⁵ At the risk of simplifying the complexity of Mitchell's understanding of modernity—especially his analysis of the temporalities of modernity—he comments on the thespian nature of staging modernity arguing, “To claim that the modern is always staged as representation is not to argue that modernity is concerned more with image-making than

⁹⁴ Timothy Mitchell (ed), “Introduction,” *Questions of Modernity*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. xi.

⁹⁵ Mitchell, “The Stage of Modernity,” *Questions of Modernity*, p. 15.

with reality.” He continues, “It is to argue that the colonial-modern involves creating an effect we recognize as reality, by organizing the world endlessly to represent it.”⁹⁶

The dandies and bourgeoisie in Valenti’s work—whose actions were documented in the society pages—actively cultivated their modernity. Through their actions, dress, and language, they engaged in a class-based performance of how they understood their social roles in fin-de-siècle Guatemala City. Their staging of modernity was remarkably similar to what historian William Beezley describes as the “Porfirian persuasion” in turn of the century Mexico City.⁹⁷ Whatever the source of the compulsion, newly formed social elites acted out their modern-ness and placed Guatemala City within a broader transnational discussion of modernity through their actions. Documented in oil and canvas, they demonstrated a new cultural temporality emerging in the Guatemalan capital that was cosmopolitan, fashionable, and, above all, modern.

Conversely, Valenti also painted other social types that frequented the streets of Guatemala City. While paupers, vagabonds, and prostitutes were not new urban characters—nor were they a creation of modernity—the process of primitive accumulation accelerated by liberal economic, legal, and social policies greatly increased the presence of the urban poor. Moreover, the post-Enlightenment propensity to monitor and discipline social outcasts cast more attention on them. While this will be analyzed more thoroughly in Chapter 5, the proliferation of newspaper articles from the 1880s until the 1910s incriminating the deeds of an urban underclass suggests that their numbers expanded rapidly as Guatemala urbanized. Those who had been derisively dismissed as

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 17.

⁹⁷ See Beezley, *Judas at the Jockey Club*, p. 6.

the *lumpenproletariat* became the subjects of Carlos Valenti's modern optics as he set images of the urban poor to canvas.

Lacking the funds to hire proper models, Valenti was known to paint portraits of the “dirty and ragged beggars who passed by asking for alms,” whom he paid with a cup of warm coffee and a muffin.⁹⁸ Indeed, one of his more famous paintings, *Cabeza de anciano (El viejo)* (Portrait of an Elderly Man [The Old Man]), depicts one such personality, his gruff exterior appearing to turn away from Valenti's discerning gaze, shamefully hiding his eyes from the artist and viewer with the brim of his hat. In one of the most astute studies of Valenti, Antonio Gallo examines Valenti's concern for “hombre contemporáneo,” that is, “The child, the mother, the sickly, the poor, the pretentious are like small keys for opening the door into the secrets of existence.”⁹⁹ The secrets of existence are precisely the contradictions of modernity, whereby dandies and the bourgeoisie inhabit the same social world—and may even walk the same streets—as those who represent the antithesis of their ambitions and, indeed, are the very byproduct of those same ambitions. Gallo continues,

His personages are loners, even when in groups of two or three: each one plays their own game of life. The more engrossed and repulsive, the more they communicate with the world through a sixth sense. Seated or on foot, describing grandiose gestures, or abandoned in silence, they are a constant term of reference for society. In it, they search for their place without finding it, look for a truth that they do not discover...¹⁰⁰

Herein lies the great significance of Valenti's catalog: he detailed the complexities of urban life during the Belle Époque, depicting the social elite and their subaltern

⁹⁸ Valenti, *Valenti*, p. 34.

⁹⁹ Antonio Gallo, “Carlos Mauricio Valenti,” reprinted in Valenti, *Valenti*, pp. 55-57.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 65-66.

contemporaries, the terms of reference for Guatemala City during the first decade of the twentieth century.

It is tempting to view Carlos Valenti as Guatemala's quintessential modern man, tortured by restlessness, forging a new optic, and detailing the social types that illuminated the experiences of modernity during his short life. It is equally alluring to view him as a modern tragedy. Carlos Valenti shot himself in the chest within months of moving to Paris, the "capital of modernity,"¹⁰¹ in late 1912. Within the historiography, there are two accounts of his death, one fabled and the other tragic, both stemming from Valenti's impending blindness. Lionel Méndez Dávila suggests, erroneously, that as a result of manipulating the equipment of his father's cinematograph at Salon Valenti, Carlos began to go blind. In this narration, Valenti is the victim of his own modern ambitions, tragically unleashing the forces that caused him "to withdraw from the world and to delve into the hidden recesses of his own tormented personality."¹⁰² Like a modern Icarus, Valenti delighted in the wonders of modernity, unaware of the dangers that lurked within them, only to be haunted by what he saw. More accurately, the second narrative explains that Valenti suffered from diabetes and his eyesight gradually diminished over time. This explanation has been coupled with discussions of his restlessness and communicates the urgency of his artistic production in the last years of his life.¹⁰³

Regardless of the cause of his blindness, both narratives reflect the trauma of a personal tragedy. This chapter has argued that the culture of modernity in Guatemala City was ocularcentric and that a new manner of seeing the world came into being during

¹⁰¹ David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity*, (New York: Routledge, 2006).

¹⁰² Lionel Méndez Dávila, *Guatemala*, (Washington D.C.: Pan American Union, 1966), p. 7.

¹⁰³ Valenti, *Valenti*, pp. 31-32.

the final decades of the nineteenth century and the opening decades of the following century. The optics of modernity served as a new way of seeing and representing the world that permitted modern subjects to locate themselves in the maelstrom of modernity. But they also consisted of the new sets of signifiers, social realities, and practices to which Guatemalans were forced to accustom themselves. The manner in which expectations were dashed by the compression of time and space in the case of Mazzantini at the cinema, or Camila's mockery of her father's friends for aging from when their portraits were taken, or Rubén Darío's efforts to unearth an adequate vocabulary to describe the world as he saw it, or the endless wait for the Northern Railway, or Valenti's utilization of a new aesthetic to communicate the daily lives of the city's new social characters, all account for the peculiarities of the optic and how it changed the way Guatemalans viewed their social world. The centrality of vision to the culture of modernity is tragically communicated through Valenti. Without his vision, the world that his modern aesthetic sought to capture was enshrouded in darkness and, lacking ocular gratification, was not worth experiencing: the modern optic was interrupted.

Chapter Two
Transcendence and Continuity:
Cultural Change in an Age of Spatial Temporal Collapse

Dr. Francisco Lainfiesta—one-time presidential candidate and distinguished life-long civil servant within various government ministries—relates in his memoirs the occurrences that came to pass in the home of Ramon Murga during the 1880s in Guatemala City. Murga was a government functionary, the Ministro de Educación Pública (Minister of Public Education) under “the Great Reformer” President Justo Rufino Barrios. He devoted his professional life like many of his class and in his generation to striving towards the liberal ideals set forth by the Revolution of 1871, those of progress, civilization, and order. Indeed, Murga presided over the ministry that emphasized teaching the philosophy of positivism in public schools, later codified in law. In addition to his commitment to progress and rationality, Murga also believed in the existence of incorporeal intelligence and that it was possible, by way of a spiritual medium, to transcend the borders that separated the material realm from the spiritual; that is, Murga believed that it was possible to communicate with the dead.¹

In one notable instance, Murga asked President Barrios to participate in a Spiritist session in the first months of 1885, shortly before the President was set to depart for El Salvador as part of his campaign to attain Central American unity. While deeply skeptical of the process and mocking the prospect of interacting with spirits, Barrios obliged his friend’s request. After meeting privately with Murga’s daughter—a young girl of about twelve, described as “delicate but nervous”—the girl’s nurse, and a small group, Barrios emerged a shaken man. He reported that the spirit of Francisco Morázan,

¹ Francisco Lainfiesta, *Apuntamientos para la historia*, (Guatemala: Editorial J. de Pineda Ibarra, 1975), pp. 380-381.

a liberal hero from the mid-nineteenth century, had confirmed that Barrios' impending campaign would ultimately end in glory. Barrios quietly confided in his ministers, however, that he had not spoken a question to the spirit of Morázan. Nevertheless, the spirit had read his mind and addressed the President's concerns. Moreover, following the Spiritist session, Barrios was convinced that he would not live to see the completion of his military venture. Indeed, within weeks, the great liberal caudillo lay dead on the field of battle near Chalchuapa, El Salvador.

Ramón Murga was not alone in his belief in spirit communication; in fact, societies such as La Nueva Era formed in the Guatemalan capital during the 1870s and 1880s and ignited cultural debates that lasted through the 1890s and into the twentieth century. Such debates surrounded not only the possibility of communication with the dead, but also related to reincarnation, the science of theology, and the idea of infinite progress. What became known as Spiritism was, according to its practitioners, a moral philosophy steeped in Christian theology that attracted a large following throughout Europe and the Americas. It drew on the thought of French pedagogue Allan Kardec (Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail)—a druidic name bestowed upon him by spirits with whom he communicated—who composed a series of books in the mid-nineteenth century based on dictations from spirits who responded to his inquiries, including those of John the Baptist, Plato, and Benjamin Franklin.² Initially, Spiritism was an upper class activity, reserved for well-educated elites but the appeal of séances eventually saw it spread to the general population, as was the case in places such as Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Brazil where the belief in spirits often complemented popular practices.

² David J. Hess, *Spirits and Scientists: Ideology, Spiritism, and Brazilian Culture*, (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), p. 60.

The belief in ghosts, spirits, and phantoms—that is, an afterlife that transgresses the boundaries that separate the world of the living from that of the dead—is neither a modern phenomenon nor one that is restricted to any one culture. Indeed, quite the opposite is true. To the extent that independent cultures have existed in Guatemala, the principle ones all share a belief not only in eternal life after death but of interaction between the material and immaterial realms or between the living and the dead. Catholicism, Mayan cosmology, and the Afro-Caribbean influenced Garifuna adhere to belief structures that permit the existence of interaction between the living and non-living realms. What is interesting, however, in the context of Guatemala was the commitment to séances and the philosophy of Spiritism by the country's fledgling bourgeoisie and the urban oligarchy, especially given their commitment to Enlightenment rationality and the anti-theological positions of those who championed progress after the Liberal Reforms.

This chapter proceeds in a two-fold manner. First, it examines the Spiritist phenomenon in Guatemala City in the context of large technological and cultural waves that spread through the Central American isthmus in the final decades of the nineteenth century. The technological revolution that arrived in Guatemala during this period altered how people perceived space and time. New cultural practices emerged in light of spatial-temporal collapse wrought by breakthroughs in transportation and communications. From the arrival of rail, steam transportation, and the possibilities of electricity to the introduction of modern mail services, telegraphs, and telephones, Guatemalans were forced to interact within a social world that appeared to have condensed. In a word, the world appeared to be a smaller place. The Spiritist phenomenon was placed amidst the cultural anxieties and curiosities arising from the compression of time and space, as

religious scholars and scientific-minded liberals alike began to question the relationship between the material and immaterial realms. The possibility of spirit communication came to resonate with cultural shifts such as anxieties associated with telecommunications and their abilities to transcend space. The telegraph and telephone not only appeared to dissect time and space, they also opened up new categories of transmission to interpretation. Scientific or pseudo-scientific elements such as radio-waves, magnetism, ether, and electricity became part of public discourse and provided a seemingly rational and empirical explanation for a host of phenomena. The ability to harness radio-waves or electricity confirmed existing beliefs in the unseen and helped to reinvigorate belief in spirit communication. Put briefly, technology and science not only opened the avenues of possibilities for spirituality but also provided rationalizations and a remarkably similar rhetoric for justifying the existence of communication with spirits. Scientific explanations, then, were applied to effectively complement emerging faith systems.

Secondly, this chapter examines how divergent epistemological systems converge and interact, arguing that continuity prevails over ideas of historical rupture within the ideological sphere, Spiritism spoke to a number of liberal concerns and was well-placed within the emerging cultural logic of the dawning liberal state thus permitting practitioners to be modern without abandoning spirituality. In particular, the Spiritist belief in reincarnation attempted to bridge theology with liberal concerns about progress. As such, the Spiritist phenomenon can be seen as part of a larger cultural conversation that confirmed teleological conceptions of time and was, above all else, eminently modern. Rather than signify a cultural rupture, Spiritism represented one aspect of the

transformation and transfer of mysticism and wonder from organized religious institutions such as the Catholic Church to secular forms of worship such as the fetishism of the commodity form. Cynics may suggest that liberal adherents of Spiritism were concerned with weakening the social clout of the Catholic Church, an analytic perspective common among scholars of Spiritism in Latin America. No doubt there is some truth in this assertion. This chapter suggests, however, that Spiritist proponents were more concerned with reconciling competing worldviews, which were increasingly thrown into conflict with one another by technological shifts and the coming of the modern world. The first public debate about the precepts of Spiritism in Guatemala City in 1882 reveals not a movement determined to ouster Catholicism's social dominance but a group of spiritual practitioners who frequently defer cultural authority to the hegemony of the Church.

I argue that the public discourse between Magin Lláven—an early follower of the movement—and Presbítero Ricardo Casanova of the Catedral Metropolitana (Metropolitan Cathedral) not only illustrates the degree to which Catholic cultural hegemony persevered despite the efforts of liberal proponents but also, significantly, the manner in which mysticism was redefined. Both Spiritism and magical thinking within liberalism drew on Catholic beliefs and, as the debate between Lláven and Casanova makes clear, the Church held the cultural authority to define the parameters and substance of cultural discussion. Indeed, these examples reveal the manner to which even positivist-minded liberals in the 1880s and 1890s resigned to the discursive norms of language dominated by Catholic rationale. Subsequent chapters will reveal the degree to which new, emerging cultural formations usurped the language of the past, adopting a

discursive heritage that helped legitimize their political, economic, and social aspirations. Worship and praise once reserved for religious institutions were gradually directed towards secular institutions, beliefs in progress, and the commodity form. The Spiritist debate of 1882 anticipates commodity fetish and magical thinking regarding progress. This study illustrates the range of the deep cultural upheaval in Guatemala that, rather than being a moment of rupture, lasted generations and has yet to be resolved. The evidence employed in this chapter is derived from print media, scattered over a large historical epoch from the 1870s until the 1910s, thus demonstrating how a more systematic cultural ideology of progress came to dominate Guatemalan modernity culture by locating itself within existing cultural contexts such as religion.

Spiritism and Theories of Cultural Change in the Modern Era

Broad-ranging cultural histories such as Stephen Kern's *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918* have analyzed how technological changes precipitated a conceptual reorientation of time and space to the nineteenth and twentieth century European mind.³ Of particular interest to Kern was how rapid social and economic change associated with technological innovation severely disrupted societal organization and how communities—whether on a national, regional, or local level—perceived such alterations. A host of scholars have utilized methodologies similar to Kern.⁴ Histories of the occult in Europe—including the Spiritist movement—have focused heavily on the effects of technology and the cultural implications of the compression of time and space in the late

³ Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).

⁴ See, for example, Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century*, (New York: Berg Publishers, 1986). For a history of more contemporary cultural implications of the collapse of time and space, see, David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

nineteenth century. Carolyn Marvin examines, for example, the power dynamics associated with technology, suggesting that when technologies threatened to upset the social status quo, people in positions of social influence mitigated the potential disruption.⁵ Pamela Thurschwell approaches the subject more causally, aligning technological innovation in the nineteenth century to particular cultural movements such as the influence of the telephone and telegraph on new cultural formations such as interest in the occult and psychoanalysis.⁶

Interestingly, these historians of technology in Europe have neglected the analysis of existing belief systems as an intermediary that informed cultural discussions about technology. Conversely, though, it would seem the opposite is true of historians of the occult in Latin American and the Caribbean. Here the historiography—which includes historically-based anthropological studies—uniformly assumed that new religious practices merely grew out of old ones. Indeed, it is taken for granted that certain populations were predisposed to theological movements like Spiritism given earlier associations with organized religion. Thus, studies of the occult in Cuba, Brazil, and Puerto Rico assume that certain ethnic and cultural groups were vulnerable to Spiritist influences. The presence of mysticism in Iberian, African, or Caribbean cultures is used to explain such movements. Thus, whereas historians of Europe fail to see the influences of popular religion on nineteenth-century occultism, Latin American historians see it all too easily. Donald Warren Jr., for example, suggests that folk tales from the late-medieval period in Portugal transferred to Brazil and hastened the

⁵ Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

⁶ Pamela Thurschwell, *Literature, Technology and Magical Thinking, 1880-1920*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

acceptance of Spiritism amongst the otherwise scientific-minded Brazilian elite.⁷ A more common tendency, though, has been the effort to relate the popularization of Spiritism to practices such as umbanda or other animistic religions brought to the sugar colonies of the Americas by African slaves. Thus, both Reinaldo L. Román and Raquel Romberg suggest that the appeal of Spiritism in Puerto Rico and Cuba can be traced to pre-existing belief in mediumship and *brujería* (witchcraft) emanating from African sources.⁸ These scholars are careful to note that liberal-minded elites in the Caribbean also recognized the importance of Spiritism in limiting the powers of the Catholic Church, a position shared with Guatemalan liberals, albeit in different contexts as Cuba and Puerto Rico remained Spanish colonies until the late nineteenth century. In their discussions of technological influences, these authors are largely silent.

Considered together, European histories of the occult border on technological determinism whereas Latin Americanist interpretations promote religious explanations and the desire of nineteenth-century liberals to challenge Catholic hegemony. This chapter suggests an interpretation that lies somewhere between these two accounts. I propose a more nuanced understanding of cultural change whereby one form of belief does not simply displace another but, rather, becomes entangled within a network of conflicting theologies, worldviews, and ideologies, especially when confronted by technological change. The cultural upheaval from the 1870s to the early 1900s is best understood as a series of transcendences and continuities, of amalgamated ideas that

⁷ Donald Warren, Jr., "Portuguese Roots of Brazilian Spiritism," *Luso-Brazilian Review*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Winter, 1968), pp. 3-33.

⁸ Reinaldo L. Román, *Governing Spirits: Religion, Miracles, and Spectacles in Cuba and Puerto Rico, 1898-1956*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007) and Raquel Romberg, *Witchcraft and Welfare: Spiritual Capital and the Business of Magic in Modern Puerto Rico*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003).

acknowledge the collapse of time and space without rejecting spirituality, miracles, and mysticism as grounds that were continuously negotiated, reinterpreted, and practiced.

Pulling maxims from Marx's *The 18th Brumaire* and Saint-Simon, David Harvey suggests in his urban history of Paris that revolution does not so much facilitate historical rupture as we may commonly believe but, rather, that the means to change are latently present within the existing structure.⁹ The words of Marx are illuminating in this regard.

He writes,

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionising themselves and things, in creating something entirely new, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle slogans and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language."¹⁰

The inability to definitively break with the past is forever the foil of the cultural avant-garde and the insurmountable historical challenge for revolutionary movements. That is to say, the language required to define a new world can only be found in the existing world. Attempts to transcend the restrictions of a given cultural lexicon risk social upheaval and barriers to communication and exchange. The story of cultural change in Guatemala City, then, since the Liberal Reforms of the 1870s—particularly in its earliest phases—is as much a tale of continuity as it is of innovation abetted by technology.

Those who were anxious to redefine the Guatemala City social world in the wake of the

⁹ David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity*, (New York: Routledge, 2006).

¹⁰ Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd Ed. Robert C. Tucker (ed.), p. 595. Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who had a profound influence on the French Structuralists, similarly shared reservations about ideas of cultural rupture. See his *Course in General Linguistics*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966).

Liberal assumption of power were made to do so in a discourse borrowed from that which they sought to replace. However, this trend to re-codify the “common-sense” and cultural assumptions of liberalism in Guatemala was not solely the work of those who inherited the mantle of state power but of everyone attempting to make-do in a changing modern world.

In discussing Spiritism, one must be conscious not to negate that the modern world upset religious worldviews and threatened to throw spiritualism into disarray. Even among the most ardent liberals, there was resistance to modernity for its seeming ability to demystify the modern world. Such hesitancy is evidenced by the constant re-telling of allegorical urban tales that warned of the perils of improper behavior and the ghosts or supernatural entities that punished those who strayed from the path.¹¹ A particular ambivalence existed between the perceived death-throes of an old order and the emergence of a new one. This tension manifested itself in very different ways and in very different contexts. Of another place, historian T.J. Jackson Lears suggested that latent middle and upper-class cultural anti-modernism was symptomatic of concern with evolving technology and a new social world that was emerging through the nineteenth century.¹² While the label of anti-modernism should generate reservations, there is something to be said about efforts undertaken to prevent the complete abandonment of the old dying world to the tempest of modernity, whether in Guatemala or abroad.

The hesitation to embrace scientific thinking became apparent in the contradictory world that adults constructed for children. Liberal pedagogy stressed

¹¹ See Miguel Ángel Asturias, *Leyendas de Guatemala*, (Guatemala: Editorial Logo) and Héctor Gaitán, *Leyendas de Vivos, Espantos y Aparecidos: Ayer y Hoy*, (Guatemala: Editorial Artemis-Edinter, 1995).

¹² T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

secular educations for the “studious youth” with particular concern for the sciences, despite public laments that in neglecting the humanities, imagination was being overlooked. Nevertheless, a new dream-world of modern children’s toys was coming into being, stimulating imagination. Serving as an apt pictorial metaphor for the tension between scientific thinking and imagination is a turn-of-the-century photograph featuring young Alfredo R. Aragón seated on a tricycle consisting of a wooden horse on metal wheels. The image of the youth wonderfully captures not only the tensions between the old and the new but also the way in which they were forced to interact. In a piece written exclusively for *La República* in the mid-1890s from New York City, a Guatemalan correspondent contemplates “the future of the horse” which was clearly being replaced in North American streets by bicycles, electric motors, and automobiles, the latter being the “coaches of the future.”¹³ While the automobile generates noise, vibrations, the nauseating smell of gas fumes, and the risk of explosion, the writer concludes that the horse-drawn coach “is going to disappear” for “the creative spirit of man has given rise to a new invention.” Yet, as young Alfredo Aragón’s tricycle suggests, such changes were going to evolve slowly. Cultural change related to questions of faith also hanged gradually and were informed by the past.

Rather than just examine faith in nineteenth-century Guatemala City as a social practice that was rapidly becoming antiquated through rationalization, it is more instructive to understand the process through which it evolved. In the 1939 version of his exposé “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” Walter Benjamin discussed how

¹³ Hand, “El Porvenir del Caballo,” *La República*, Nov. 5, 1896, p. 1.

modernity created enchantment with the social world as much as it de-mystified it.¹⁴ For Benjamin, phantasmagoria represented the mass fetishism of modern society whereby illusion masks more than it conceals. The significance of Benjamin's treatment of modernity for this chapter is apparent: what appears as an abandonment of spirituality and miracles was merely the partial transformation from theological phenomena to an increasingly modern, secularized, but no less mystified, *modus operandi*. This dissertation is premised on the assumption that the emergence of the modern optic did not represent a cultural or social rupture per se, but rather an intermittent process—at times rapid, other times a slow, partial evolution—from one manner of viewing the urban world to another. New languages could not be instantly forged and commentators had to struggle to understand change with an existing, if limited, vocabulary. What changes, then, was not necessarily a shift from religious dogma to scientific rationale because this process was always partial and incomplete; rather, the transformation that occurred was actually a continuing metamorphosis of the nature of mysticism and the object and/or source of wonder.

The Compression of Time and Space in Liberal Guatemala City

Francisco Castañeda's *Guia del viajero* was a practical guide published in 1909 and intended for prospective foreign travelers to Guatemala. In discussing the ease of travel, Castañeda reflected on the possibility of Guatemala's inclusion in a pan-American railway. When completed, the line of rail track was to run through Guatemala City on its way between New York City and Buenos Aires in Argentina. "It would be superfluous to dwell upon the advantages of this stupendous improvement," declares Castañeda in his

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century, Exposé of 1939," *The Arcades Project*, Rolf Tiedemann (ed), Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (trans), (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2002), pp. 14-15.

anticipation of Guatemala being placed into direct contact with the United States via Mexico City, continuing “it is enough to say that by its means *Guatemala will be brought nearer and nearer to the centres of civilization.*” He adds, “Three and a half days to Mexico; seven to New York or Washington. *Distances almost disappear.*”¹⁵ The introduction of technology, such as that related to rapid transportation, altered how Guatemalans perceived time and space, an excitement that Castañeda could barely contain. His two-fold suggestion that Guatemala could be placed closer to civilized cities and that space would virtually cease to exist offer illustrative insights into how spatial-temporal compression impressed early twentieth-century minds. Of course, the distance between Guatemala and the cosmopolitan cities of the United States had not actually shrunk; rather, the experience of that distance across time was altered. The manner in which technology hastened a reconceptualization of time and space in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is essential in illuminating discussions of Spiritism in the context of cultural continuity and transcendence.

When President Justo Rufino Barrios divulged to his ministers that the spirit of Francisco Morázan had entered his thoughts and read his mind, he was expressing anxiety over the collapse of hitherto impenetrable boundaries. While charlatans may have been able to convince people that they could also read minds, scientific inquiry in the 1880s appeared to rationalize this prospect. Indeed, an emerging scientific cultural front began to materialize in the second half of the nineteenth century that fundamentally modified optics in the Guatemalan capital. Thus, whether or not Morazán’s spirit actually passed through the realm that separates the material world from the spiritual and

¹⁵ Emphasis mine. Francisco Castañeda, *Guía del Viajero en la República de Guatemala*, (Guatemala: Departamento de Artes Gráficas “Electra,” 1909), p. 176.

read Barrios' thoughts does not matter; rather, given the intelligentsia's obsession with science, such spirit communication seemed plausible and fit well into a relatively new—and quickly evolving—cultural motif. As part of this social logic, boundaries were being dissolved and thoughts seemed to be transmitted across time and space. Indeed, as an instruction manual intended for Central American telegraph workers explained, “Telegraphy, then, is the art of transmitting human thoughts over a distance by artificial means.”¹⁶ The understanding of penetrating technologies appeared balanced by mystery. Science, it seemed, appeared to be fulfilling miraculous deeds and opened the field of possibility within nineteenth-century minds. But similarly, science seemed to confirm the existence of things unseen as the line between science and pseudoscience blurred.

Since the 1870s, Guatemala City newspapers and journals were replete with global news of the latest discoveries, scientific inquests, and technological pursuits. “The triumph of science,” for example, was credited for the discovery of new methods of diagnosing typhoid fever and for advances in chemistry as they applied to photography; meanwhile, news briefs carried tales of a Canadian inventor who created a steam man who mechanically walked with the aid of a steam-powered engine while dressed as a medieval knight.¹⁷ By the 1890s, much attention was devoted to the seemingly weekly inventions of Thomas Edison, “el mago de Menlo Park.”¹⁸ “The celebrated Edison”¹⁹ was praised for his innovations with the phonograph and, by 1894, had “already put the

¹⁶ Manuel C. Mirón, *Cartilla Telegráfica para uso de los Telegrafistas de la América Central*, (Guatemala: Tipografía Nacional, 1902), p. 15.

¹⁷ “Un triunfo de la ciencia,” *La República*, Dec. 23, 1896, p. 1; “Un hombre de vapor,” *El Ferrocarril*, May 28, 1894, p 3; J. Rossignon, “El porvenir de la ciencia,” *El Porvenir*, Oct. 28, 1879.

¹⁸ The moniker of “the Wizard of Menlo Park” was regularly applied to Edison as suggested by this 1929 advertisement, Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas no. 2006, Year 1927-1929].

¹⁹ “Invento curioso,” *El Ferrocarril*, June 15, 1894, p. 3.

final touches of perfection upon his newest invention,” the kinetograph and kinetoscope, respectively capable of capturing and displaying short recordings of moving images, an immediate precursor to the Lumiere Brothers’ cinematograph.²⁰ “Admirable science,” suggested one poet, was an “emanation from Heaven.”²¹

Human management and deployment of electricity was of special interest within periodicals and scientific journals, conceived as a fluid or force that was to power Guatemalan progress. Its applications varied, but the introduction of electricity in Guatemala City immediately hinted at its capacity to diminish time over space. One of the first projects of the post-1871 liberal regime was to establish telegraph lines across the Republic to help coordinate the production and export of coffee. Such virtues were quickly appreciated, as telegraphs were understood to place principal cities into direct contact with shipping ports such as that at San José.²² An effort to establish a telegraph line between the capital city and Amatitlán pre-dated the liberal reform era. Baron Oscar du Teil of France worked alongside Guatemalan engineers in a venture that was abandoned by April 1867. Just under six years later, the first successful telegraph was wired between the two cities with A. Bertholin informing Don Garvacio Cuestas of Amatitlán that he had sent the Don’s saddle to the Hotel Amistad, requesting that he collect it.²³

Rapid communication commenced thusly in Guatemala, often in the service of commodity circulation. The disparity between earlier forms of communication was enormous. When the former Archbishop of Guatemala Ramon Casás y Torres passed

²⁰ “El Kinetografo y el Kinetoscopo,” *El Ferrocarril*, June 9, 1894, p. 1.

²¹ Vicenta Laparra de la Cerda, “A la ciencia,” *Diario de Centro-América*, Oct. 27, 1901, p. 3.

²² *El Museo de las Familias*, March 8, 1873, p. 1.

²³ *Informe que el Director General de los Telegrafos y Teléfonos Nacionales de la Republica de Guatemala presenta al Ministerio de Fomento, 1897*, (Guatemala: Tipografía Nacional, 1898)

away while in exile in Havana, Cuba on 9 November 1845, the news of his parting did not arrive in the Guatemalan capital until 13 January 1846, over two months later.²⁴ By June 1874, in contrast, it was announced that Guatemalan telegraph lines were linked with Salvadoran lines in Chalchuapa and that the President of El Salvador Santiago González sent a greeting to the people of Guatemala. The editorial reports, “The mysterious wire, animated by the fluid of electricity, instantly brings thought and words to the most remote regions.” Having done so, the telegraph would guarantee perpetual peace between the brother people of the two nations “through having salvaged the great distance that separates us in communications.”²⁵

The telegraph system was not without fault, however. Tempests, ocean currents, and collapsed vegetation presented obstacles to seamless communication. Service from the much-celebrated submarine trans-Atlantic telegraph cable was interrupted when fallen trees impeded lines and severed Guatemala’s communications with Europe.²⁶ Anxiety was also generated by the fallibility of telegraph services, often taking humorous tones. Juan Arzú Batres’ 1877 satirical piece in *El Porvenir*, for example, joked that a new system of telegraphs was being perfected that involved connecting a series of Bunsen battery cells to a string of people holding hands that, during experiments, produced quiet conversation and loud laughter.²⁷ Unreliable translation and poor copying of cablegrams generated much frustration for journals relying on telegraphs for foreign stories such as *El Ferrocarril* in the 1890s. The editors of the paper relayed comical anecdotes of

²⁴ Ralph Lee Woodward, *Rafael Carrera and the Emergence of the Republic of Guatemala, 1821-1871*, (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1993), p. 182.

²⁵ “El Telégrafo,” *El Progreso*, June 7, 1874, p. 2.

²⁶ For praise of the ill-fated trans-Atlantic line, see *El Porvenir*, Jan. 8, 1878, p. 256 and “Telégrafos,” *El Progreso*, July 12, 1874, pp. 2-3.

²⁷ Juan Arzú Batres, “Nuevo sistema de telégrafos,” *El Porvenir*, Aug. 21, 1877, pp. 108-109.

miscommunicated telegrams to readers: instructions to “send me the children’s account” were transformed into “send me fifty elephants,” whereas “Mr. Smith has come back; he arrives in good spirits” became “Mr. Smith has died; send his will.”²⁸ Of course, the expression of frustrations only signals the degree to which the telegraph dominated, if not Guatemalan lives, then certainly the attention of urbanites.

Similar tensions were shared with the introduction of the telephone. In part, this stemmed from frustration with the quality of service.²⁹ The government was anxious to maintain its monopoly and control over the telephone lines. Carolyn Marvin’s suggestion that the advent of the new technological era spawned a new class of professionals that functioned to defend a pre-existing power dynamic seems to hold true in this regard.³⁰ This concern with perpetuating control over new technologies was clearly outlined in a guide published by the Compañía de Teléfonos de Guatemala (Guatemalan Telephone Company) explaining the usage of telephone services. While some instructions were practical—ensuring that users hold the device to their finer ear, if one exists—others reflected power relations within modern telecommunications, prohibiting the curious or nefarious from tampering with the telephone and from connecting their phone with “other lines of which the Administration lacks knowledge.”³¹ Also similar to telegraphs, the telephone created humorous contexts due to unfamiliarity of the new forms of social interactions that they created. A short story written by the Spaniard Manuel Matoses and

²⁸ Respectively, “Mándame la cuenta de infantes” became “Mándame cincuenta elefantes” and “Mr. Smith ha vuelto: viene muy contento” arrived as “Mr. Smith ha muerto; venga su testamento.” See “Los errors,” *El Ferrocarril*, Sept. 18, 1894, p. 3 and *El Ferrocarril*, May 11, 1894, p. 2.

²⁹ *El Ferrocarril*, March 7, 1894, p. 2.

³⁰ See Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New*, Chapter One.

³¹ Compañía de Teléfonos de Guatemala, “Instrucciones para usar el teléfono,” 1894, Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas no. 1988, Year 1895-1896].

republished by newspapers in Guatemala City told of a budding relationship between two youths albeit a romance mediated by the telephone.³² Due to the public nature of early telephone calls whereby loud, audible voices were required, the narrator of the story was privy to the romance though he did not understand what was at first occurring. The narrator had seen the shadow of the young man in the throes of love-stricken torment as he held something to his head that the observer mistook for a pistol. Sure that the man's emotions had driven him to suicide, the narrator was surprised to see a re-enactment of the proceedings the following night; it was only then that he realized that the youth was not speaking to himself, nor did he hold a pistol to his head but a telephone receiver. Having forgiven the youth for his nightly public spectacles, the narrator instructs the boy to steal his girlfriend from her domineering mother and run away together. In this manner, old tales were recast under modern conditions, permitting new tensions to develop along the course of the narrative that arose from new technologies.

So it was that the Guatemala City bourgeoisie were regularly updated on the latest invention that penetrated boundaries thought to be inelastic. Indeed, the era of the liberal dictators from 1871 until 1920 was also a period of scientific infatuation when technological discoveries generated much discussion and coverage in Guatemalan print media. In June 1899, it was reported that doctors from Munich had succeeded in obtaining photographs of the interior of a stomach and "all the different details of stomach mucous."³³ A little over a decade later, a story appeared in the *Diario de Centro América* that reported "Science is just about to extend man's domain even more" by allying cinematography with a ultramicroscope to film "the invisible" within blood

³² Manuel Matoses, "El Novio del Telefono," *Las Noticias*, Oct. 9, 1892, p. 2.

³³ "Fotografías del estómago," *El Porvenir de Guatemala*, June 15, 1899, p. 3.

samples.³⁴ Through “this new miracle,” the French doctor M. Jean Comandón “precisely accounted for the movements of infinitely tiny microbes”. In other spheres, discussion of X-rays penetrating through bodies leached into marketing, with discussion of science serving as a ploy for advertising. Thus, Dr. Röntgen, a German physicist who was later awarded the Nobel Prize in his discipline, was reported to have used an X-ray to identify rifle bullets and other munitions lodged into bodies. Due to the risk posed to the patient’s life or from the tremendous pain of extraction, the bullets remained in their victims, invisible to the naked eye but not to the penetration of Röntgen’s X-rays. There was an even more exciting discovery, the article continued, suggesting that a learned Guatemalan had applied X-rays to beverages touted as healthy that were being sold in Guatemala City. Submitting these cocktails to X-rays revealed millions of microbes that were detrimental to good health. However, careful application of Röntgen’s device to the drinks and ice cream served by the “ladies of honour” at El Comercio found that they were chemically pure and, moreover, regular consumption of them proved to be “the panacea of life.” Through such inquiry, the researcher discovered that Señor Herrera’s refreshment establishment to be the finest in the world.³⁵

From the apparent ability of scientific wonders to penetrate boundaries believed immutable to regular human senses, it stood to reason that forces existed that could penetrate bodies, matter, and the consciousness. In the decades after the 1870s, discussion about *futuristas*, *pronósticos*, and the possibility of telepathy expanded, though it differed from earlier *brujería* in that it was rationalized by a purportedly scientific foundation. Not dismissing such phenomena, discussion of the evil eye in the Iberian

³⁴ “Cinematografía de lo invisible,” *Diario de Centro-América*, March 22, 1910, p. 1.

³⁵ “Los rayos X,” *La República*, Dec. 22, 1896, p. 10.

Peninsula in 1905 yielded anecdotal evidence of the manner in which a heavy gaze could disturb familial peace, serve as detriment to individual health, and disrupt the accrument of material wealth.³⁶ What was unique about such analysis relative to the times was that it was singularly bereft of scientific mention. More common than mere anecdotes was an attempt to render prophetic tales and telepathy empirical through historical verification. Prognoses of the future, for example, were possible in 1881 because, according to one author, prophecies that proved true dated back centuries—such as Moctezuma’s prediction of European arrival in the Americas—and were accepted by great minds such as Machiavelli.³⁷ The imminent end of the world was often justified on similar grounds in a literal sense,³⁸ but the language of prophecy was also complemented by scientific methodologies. Thus Dr. Koch predicted the extinction of humanity based on the tendencies of birthrates to decline among the civilized nations of the world.³⁹

Even more steeped in rationalized discourse that reflected empirical epistemologies were late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century understandings of telepathy. A September 1904 article speaks of telepathy through the now discredited existence of N-rays, a hypothetical form of radiation first reported by the French physicist Prosper-René Blondlot in 1903.⁴⁰ The article discussed N-rays emanating from our brains, muscular, and nervous fibers that could be translated and traced by a phosphorescent substance. While skeptics existed, the articles asserted, “these rays or vibrations are undoubtedly subjected to certain laws that, sooner or later, will fall under

³⁶ “Supersticiones: La fascinación ó mal de ojo,” *Diario de Centro-América*, April 10, 1905, p. 2.

³⁷ “Los Pronósticos,” *Diario de Centro-América*, June 18, 1881, p. 1.

³⁸ “Otra Profecía,” *El Porvenir*, Aug. 15, 1881, p. 340.

³⁹ “Profecias del Dr. Koch: La extinción de la humanidad,” *Diario de Centro-América*, July 6, 1910, p. 3.

⁴⁰ Antonio de Arcos, “Telepatia,” *Diario de Centro-América*, Sept. 27, 1904, p. 1.

the dominion of science.” The article further speculated that—as per many paranormal analysts—N-rays could function as a vehicle for psychic forces frequently produced by humans. “If these forces, by some circumstance, vibrate in unison between two people, they will combine themselves like two drops of water to form one. In this way,” the article continues, “they would obtain—without verbal communication—an accord of thought and a shared will between two beings, a fact that happens daily and that skeptics attribute to chance.” “But,” the article argues further, “chance never explains. When coincidences are so frequent, when repetition of the same fact has been observed one and a thousand times, one would need to look one way or another for a cause and effect relationship.” The article cites the experiences of Professor Augustin Charpentier, who argued that his experiments with radiation verified the existence of N-rays. Charpentier conducted a series of tests to link N-rays to telepathy and subconscious thought, focusing on the common belief that N-rays were incapable of passing through dampened cloth or paper. To provide evidence of N-rays, he had a hypnotist put a subject to sleep then propose a series of suggestions which the subject obeyed; however, when a screen of wet paper was placed between the hypnotist and the patient, the communication between the two was suspended, “as when between two telegraphic stations the wire conductor is disrupted.” From repeated experimentation, Charpentier concluded that hypnotic suggestion obeys laws analogous to N-rays.

Charpentier proceeded to set up a trial with telepathy whereby two individuals were placed across from one another. One subject was given a word, which they were told to transmit to the other telepathically. After a number of failed attempts in which the subjects attuned their psychic behaviors, the desired result was realized; while the

transmission was short, it was consistently transmitted, something the Guatemalan author of the article describes as “the human telegraph, without a wire conductor.” The description is instructive. Such a statement resonated with the dialogue spurred by analysts who discussed the prospects for wireless telegraph services and, later, radio.⁴¹ The article concludes with a discussion of a hypnotism society in Nancy, France and the vibrations produced by nerve-based psychic flows. Throughout, the author repeatedly speaks of receptors, vibrations, and magnetic energies, appropriated the language of telegraphic communication. Science and technology, it would seem, explained the occult and possessed a legitimizing factor that rendered the paranormal an empirical possibility. Moreover, communication innovations such as the telegraph were used as a metaphor to bolster the possibility of non-verbal exchange and *communiqués* that cross the boundaries of time and space.

In a similar fashion, tales abounded in Guatemalan print media about the most recent telepathic phenomena. Significantly these stories were often placed under the general umbrella of the paranormal or occult. Also—essential to the argument of this chapter—the fascination with telepathy, hypnotism, futurism, and—as will be seen—the existence of spirits was tied into a larger cultural discussion related to the technological compression of time and space and the transgression of accepted material and immaterial boundaries. That is to say, ideas about the occult were analyzed and understood in the same manner that the Guatemala City bourgeois intelligentsia made sense of telegraphs, telephones, X-rays, and other innovations of the modern era. Rather than demystifying the occult, science, in many cases, supplemented belief systems in Guatemala City by

⁴¹ Antonio Valenzuela Moreno, “Telegrafía sin alambres,” *El Porvenir de Guatemala*, June 9, 1899, p. 1. Also see “Telegrafía sin alambre,” *El Porvenir de Guatemala*, June 15, 1899, p. 1.

modernizing them and rationalizing them in a manner that appealed to the scientifically savvy. Science permitted the occult to be reinterpreted and rendered acceptable for a modern audience.

And so it was that the official newspaper carried reports from Italian journals about premonitions of familial tragedies and of wandering spirits in Dublin that drove a young girl into fits of hysteria while leading her to predict the return home of her long-lost, and presumed deceased, brother.⁴² What made such anecdotes significant were not solely the mind-boggling details that seemed to defy logic but the editorializing that attempted to rationalize such events. Of the aforementioned episodes in Italy and Ireland, the editors of the *Diario de Centro-América* queried, “Is it possible to accept the ingenious theory of a German doctor who affirms the existence of such moments, of a type of wireless telegraph—a spiritual telegraph—that places two souls separated by distance into communication?” Within this and similar rhetoric, a hybridization of cultural forms was seemingly occurring where technology was described using the discourse of the miraculous while, simultaneously, the language of science was adopted to explain the occult. Science and progress did not necessarily displace faith but, rather, transformed the manner in which spiritual matters were understood.

Electromagnetism was perhaps the Guatemalan intelligentsia’s greatest nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scientific curiosity. While knowledge of electromagnetism’s characteristics were understood by the ancients, only with the Enlightenment did European and North American thinkers come to understand its potential as a natural force capable of transforming scientific thought. By the end of the nineteenth century, new theories of electromagnetism propagated and spawned a host of

⁴² “La Telepatía: Fenómenos recientes,” *Diario de Centro-América*, Aug. 31, 1907, p. 3.

innovations such as the wireless telegraph, telephone, phonograph, and cinematograph. But it was also seized upon as an explanation for paranormal activity. Much to the excitement of the Guatemalan scientific community, then, electromagnetism not only provided a means to power machines, motors, and thermo-electric batteries but it also could be applied sociologically.

The reading of a dissertation by Don R. Figueroa before the Sociedad Guatemalteca de Ciencias (Guatemalan Science Society) clearly demonstrated the convergence of magnetic theory with social theory by way of Franz Mesmer's animal magnetism, hypnotism, and criminal suggestion.⁴³ Mesmer's thesis speculated that all animate and inanimate objects experienced the transference of natural energies through an impalpable fluid he denoted animal magnetism. Through the exchange of these fluids, humans could enjoy a series of benefits, not least of all the healing of infirmities. The dissertation presented in Guatemala City suggested that Mesmer's desire to draw attention to animal magnetism led him astray by orchestrating spectacles that ultimately led to denunciations of charlatanry. The author argued, however, that there was a scientific base to hypnotism—or at least a modern form of hypnotism that grew out of Mesmer's magnetism and was used synonymously—that should be returned to solid scientific standing.

At the base of the argument delivered by Figueroa was the belief that magnetism (under whatever moniker) should be used to relieve individuals of neurotic behaviors: hysteria in women, nervousness, and ultimately criminality. While grounding the research in scientific empiricism, the tendency to invoke the miraculous was all too

⁴³ R. Figueroa, "El hipnotismo y la sugestion criminal," *Sociedad Guatemalteca de Ciencias*, Year 1, Volume 06, (March 31, 1893), p. 170.

present. Indeed, as a point of departure, the work pointed to the ancients and the unison that their belief in magnetism formed with modern, scientific thought, chiefly, “The word magnet means, then, the magical influence of the spirit.”⁴⁴ Though not elucidated in the Society’s dissertation, such mysticism had scientific explanations.

Other works from the Guatemalan scientific community expanded on the transfer of energies across time and space, melding them with what is now accepted as erroneous concepts such as ether. In 1898, José Gallegos published a treatise, *Una Teoría sobre la Electricidad y el Magnetismo* both as a short monograph and in serialized form within the pages of the *Diario de Centro-América*. In the work, Gallegos establishes his belief that electromagnetic forces permeate all objects and are responsible for animating the world around us. While certain aspects of the theory coincide with accepted scientific truisms, other elements of the work suggest much about the culture from which the writing arose. Of particular interest is Gallegos’ use of ether to explain electromagnetic waves. The scholar insisted that in addition to solid, liquid, and gas states, matter could also further divide until it arrived at an ethereal state. Ether was, according to Gallegos and other scientists of the age, the limit of divisibility of matter, in essence, an imponderable state that filled the universe. While permeable to other forms of matter, ether possessed rigidity enough to carry electromagnetic waves.

While most scientists now agree that the theory of ether is unnecessary in understanding waves or vibrations, it conveniently allowed for and legitimized other forms of energy transfer. By way of ether, other fluidic forces flowed and permeated the universe. Gallegos evokes mystery in explaining how magnets exist in all things, binding them together as every molecule and atom is, at base, a magnet; however, due to their

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 170.

invisibility, he calls magnets which are not readily apparent “phantom magnets.”

Coupled with allowances permitted by ether, magnetic energies thusly crossed time and space. It was through ethereal means that charismatic people magnetized others. Indeed, he writes, “When a person fixes their penetrating look with another whom they wish to magnetize, they do not do anything more than transmit the vibration of their retina over the retina of the patient, who being unable to resist it; they fall asleep due to the exhaustion of the gaze.”

Gallegos sought in conclusion to demystify the forces of the universe: “We have given a different name to every manifestation of energy, making a special distinction for that which we have called electric fluid, giving it a truly mysterious air, admiring electric and magnetic phenomenon as supernatural things!”⁴⁵ However, in so doing, he engaged in further mystification by expanding the realm of supernatural possibility, only under the rubric of science. For it was upon this and other assumptions that new forms of spiritual belief were rationalized in late nineteenth-century Guatemala City. That is to say, rather than discrediting belief systems, science complemented them in different ways by permitting loose explanations to systematize the natural and supernatural worlds. The point to be taken should not be reduced to didactic cultural assumptions whereby the existence of scientific discourse precipitated into belief in spirits; instead, what I have hoped to illustrate is the manner in which a series of shifting conversations about the nature of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century science and technology generated an ever-changing culture that allowed for the rationalization of otherwise mystifying subjects. The collapse of time and space coupled with scientific inquiry opened a cultural

⁴⁵ José Gallegos, *Una Teoría sobre la Electricidad y el Magnetismo*, (Guatemala: Tipografía Nacional, 1898), p. 16. Also see *Diario de Centro-América*, May 25, 1898; May 26, 1898; and May 27, 1898.

space within which occult thinking could be legitimized. Thus, a new cultural formation that sought to make sense of such a collapse was forged during the decades after 1870, which opened the possibility of—and, indeed, provided scientific evidence for—communication with the dead.

The Spiritist Debate of 1882

“Yesterday in the Church Cathedral,” wrote Magin Lláven to Presbítero Ricardo Casanova, “I heard your sermon against Espiritismo of which I am a sincere and ardent supporter.”⁴⁶ Thus began, through the extension of a challenge in the pages of the governmental newspaper *El Horizonte*, the Spiritist debate of 1882. Spiritism likely entered Guatemala in the late 1870s by way of Mexico, appealing to the bourgeois intelligentsia not only in the Guatemalan capital but also in communities such as Cobán, Salamá, Retalhuleu, Malacatán, and Amatitlán.

In order to comprehend the cultural foundations that gave rise to the practice of Spiritism as well as its implications, it is important to understand not only how it relates to the culture of spatial and temporal collapse and the manner in which Spiritist beliefs confirmed scientific belief and ideological concerns, but also the theological politics of the liberal era. That is to say, in addition to the aforementioned discussion, Spiritism was also part of a much larger cultural conflict between liberal zealots and the Catholic Church over religious practice and the political economy of the modern age. Doubtlessly, adherence to Spiritist principles were not cynical attempts to merely recast the religious balance of power by undermining Catholic institutions, though opportunities to challenge the cultural and social influence of the Church no doubt appealed to some proponents.

⁴⁶ Magin Lláven, “Un reto,” *El Horizonte*, Jan. 22, 1882, p. 1.

The faith placed in progress and Enlightenment rationale did not negate the spiritual needs of the liberal establishment.

Even President Justo Rufino Barrios—despite his relentless assault on Church privilege, property, and cultural practices—was known to have participated in Catholic activities including having a religious rather than civil marriage and having at least one child christened by the Church. He was also reputed to have had cordial relations with several ecclesiastics such the Vicar General of the Archdiocese Dr. Juan Bautista Raúl y Bertrán and Father Ángel María Arroyo who gave Barrios’ funeral oration in a civil service.⁴⁷ Thus, the bourgeoisie’s belief in Spiritism was not merely opportunistic; rather, it must be recognized as ascribing to the logic of faith. Spiritism, then, was located within the realm of what Stephen Greenblatt called “the poetics of culture.”⁴⁸ Here Greenblatt speaks to the unpredictability of human action that renders it inexplicable. So, Spiritism was an alternative belief system in which cultural anxiety about the modern world could be expressed and wonder was given an opportunity to roam. Spiritual misgivings about progress were wrapped up in a suitably scientific discourse, ironically manifesting dormant anti-modern sentiment.

As suggested, the Spiritist debate of 1882 highlighted a number of cultural tensions that simmered in the post-1871 period over the cultural authority of the competing interests of conservatives and liberals. Given the prominence of the Church during the period of conservative rule from 1838 until 1871, religion was, understandably, a field of cultural conflict as the liberal regime aimed to dislocate the

⁴⁷ Mary Patricia Holleran, *Church and State in Guatemala*, (New York: Octagon Books, 1974), pp. 204-205.

⁴⁸ Stephen Greenblatt, “Towards a Poetics of Culture,” *The New Historicism*, H. Aram Veesser (ed.), (New York: Routledge, 1989).

Church's position in Guatemalan society. Of course, speaking of the contest as one between a non-Catholic liberal regime and a Vatican-backed conservative coalition is to grossly simplify matters as questions about President Barrios' faith illustrate. Nevertheless, whether individual liberals were secular, atheist, agnostic, or held Catholic beliefs, there is a clear trajectory post-1871 that sought to undermine the power of Catholic institutions in Guatemalan society.

The Catholic Church in Guatemala was not a static institution and was hardly devoid of internal differences, a fact reflected in its altering policies through the nineteenth century. The relationship between Church and state underwent significant change during the period of Spanish decolonization as different political factions vied for political and social influence. The Church was divided over the independence struggle. Loyalty to Spain contrasted within the ranks of the clergy with a desire to take a leading role in a post-colonial government. Some, such as Archbishop Ramón Casás y Torres, opposed the push for independence, opting to delay it in order to trace Spanish reaction against the Mexican anti-colonial movement. Others, however, like Father Juan José Aycinena, favoured independence because the liberal nature of the 1820 Spanish Constitution had weakened the Church's ability to save souls whereas an independent Guatemala would be at liberty to determine its own religious policies.⁴⁹ Regardless, the clergy felt heavily invested in regional autonomy as thirteen of the twenty-nine signatories to the Declaration of Independence in Guatemala hailed from the ranks of the Church.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ David Chandler, "Peace Through Disunion: Father Juan José de Aycinena and the Fall of the Central American Federation," *The Americas*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Oct. 1989), p. 138.

⁵⁰ Holleran, *Church and State in Guatemala*, p. 68.

After the isthmus' short-term annexation by Mexico, Roman Catholicism was declared the sole religion of the Confederation of Central American States. Nevertheless, liberal proponents sought to increase their influence within the union and pressed for limitations on the clergy, which strengthened their position through the 1820s. In attacking the Church, the liberals succeeded in undermining their allies, a group known as the Serviles that included both conservatives and moderates and enjoyed the support of a large portion of the clergy. J. Lloyd Mecham writes about the vicious relationship between pro- and anti-clericals through the nineteenth century in Guatemala and their inability to reach compromises with one another. He argues, "The extremists among the clericals and antireligionists alternated in control of the governments and, with a vindictiveness common to bigots, insisted on forcing their remedies down the throats of their adversaries."⁵¹ When the Liberals seized Guatemala City in April 1829 and instituted Francisco Morazán as President, they enacted some of the most extreme anticlerical measures witnessed in the hemisphere at the time. These actions included expelling the Archbishop, having already ended clergy privileges, terminated tithes, and ridiculed the Church. By the end of the 1830s, conservative reaction set in and the liberal regime was evicted from Guatemala City, thus initiating what Mary Holleran titled the "conservative interlude" from 1839 until 1871.⁵²

Ralph Lee Woodward insists that the rule of Rafael Carrera, a Guatemala City-born swine-herder from Mataquesuintla, who either directly or indirectly influenced Guatemalan political affairs from 1839 until his death in 1865, should not be viewed as a straight-forward realignment of Church-state relations. Rather, the *caudillo* guided

⁵¹ J. Lloyd Mecham, *Church and State in Latin America: A History of Politico-Ecclesiastical Relations, Revised Edition*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1966), p. 308.

⁵² Holleran, *Church and State in Guatemala*, p. 128.

himself through the power rivalries of different conservative cliques and strengthening or weakening the relative political clout of the Church when it suited his interests.⁵³ With that being said, certainly the Church enjoyed a restoration of sorts compared to the assault leveled against it by the liberals; its power and influence under Carrera, however, simply should not be assumed. It was only about a decade after seizing power that Carrera commenced what Woodward called his “new citadel of conservatism,”⁵⁴ though, even by this time, Guatemalan conservatives—with the exception of elements of the Church—were more inclined to accept the liberal economic canons of agro-export production. In part, the Church was able to enjoy popular support in rural Guatemala during the conservative period because of Carrera’s promotion of *cofradías*. These Catholic institutions were used to determine the regularity of masses and the celebration of local patron saints while also being used by indigenous communities as a manner to enhance village autonomy. Indeed, Douglass Sullivan-González argues that Carrera’s use of the clergy to pacify communities in the eastern highlands, with the partial aid of the *cofradías*, gave rise to Guatemalan nationalism, a claim that need not be analyzed here, but is worth mentioning.⁵⁵

When liberal coffee *finca*-owning *caudillos* from Los Altos reclaimed the Guatemalan state in 1871, they were prepared to irrevocably limit the political, economic, and social clout of the Catholic Church. They recognized that the Church had served as a bastion of support for Carrera’s conservative citadel and its institutions, by way of the *cofradía*, bolstered conservative temperaments in the countryside. Thus, a series of

⁵³ Woodward, *Rafael Carrera*, Part II.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

⁵⁵ Douglass Sullivan-González, *Piety, Power, and Politics: Religion and Nation Formation in Guatemala, 1821-1871*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998).

anticlerical initiatives were undertaken to limit the Church as a social force in Guatemala by extinguishing the privileges that the Carrera era had restored. When the relations between the Church and the liberal state are considered, governmental decrees of the early 1870s suggest that the Liberal Reforms served as a point of historical rupture that eliminated Catholic influence in Guatemala. These decrees aimed to fundamentally shift the focus of power by undermining the economic and political foundations of Catholicism in order to break the Church's dominance. Thus, over a couple of years, legislation passed that confiscated and nationalized much of the Church's land and properties.

Further measures were undertaken to close convents and ecclesiastical orders, to disrupt the Church's pedagogical monopoly through the introduction of state-sponsored secular education, and to negate the Catholic Church's position as the exclusive state religion.⁵⁶ Towards these ends, the Constitution of 1879, decreed by the National Constituent Assembly, stated in Article 24, "The exercise of all religions, without any favoritism, is guaranteed in the interior of temples; but that free exercise may not be extended to the execution of subversive acts or practices incompatible with peace and public order, nor does it confer a right to be opposed to compliance with civil and political obligations."⁵⁷ Emphasis should be placed not only on the termination of Catholicism's religious exclusivity but on tying the primacy of order to religious practice and guaranteeing that activities of religious sects not interfere with whatever constituted

⁵⁶ For a list of these decrees, please see: Comité General Pro-Centenario de la Revolución de 1871, *Indice general de las leyes emitidas por los gobiernos de la Revolución de 1871 (La Reforma)*, (Tipografía Nacional: Guatemala, 1971).

⁵⁷ "Constitutional Law of the Republic of Guatemala, Decreed by the National Constituent Assembly on 11 December 1879" in Silvert, K.H., *A Study in Government: Guatemala*, (New Orleans: Tulane University, 1954), p. 165.

order to the liberal regime, a legal artifact that the liberals were not shy of citing.

Virginia Garrard-Burnett has examined how the ideologies of liberalism, positivism, and Social Darwinism were used alongside Protestantism as a means to create a modern nation.⁵⁸

In upsetting Catholicism's monopoly on Guatemalan souls through the encouragement of Protestantism, the liberals were able to counter Catholic hegemony by promoting a religion that they viewed as a civilizing force with similar values to the Guatemalan bourgeoisie. Garrard-Burnett contends that the promotion of Protestantism simultaneously encouraged the immigration of much-desired German Lutherans while weakening the bonds that *cofradías* held in rural communities, essential to securing indigenous labour for coffee *fincas*.

The growth of Spiritism in Guatemala City, then, must be seen in relation to a series of aforementioned factors. While Spiritism was not endorsed by the state in the same wholehearted manner as certain Protestant denominations, it had the state's tacit approval as it was applauded within the pages of official government publications such as *El Horizonte* which published Magin Lláven's thoughts on the matter. The newspaper published a number of articles in late 1881 about the base principals—as the fundamental tenets were denoted within the Spiritist community—of the new moral philosophy. It was to these publications and the expansion of the Spiritist community in Guatemala City that Presbítero Ricardo Casanova reacted when he launched a series of three sermons at the Metropolitan Cathedral to his congregation in which he lambasted the philosophy as unbecoming of wholesome Catholics. Later, the priest claims to have said that Spiritism

⁵⁸ Virginia Garrard-Burnett, "Liberalism, Protestantism, and Indigenous Resistance in Guatemala 1870-1920," *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 24, No. 2, (March 1997), pp. 35-55.

was “a collection of erroneous teachings and strange practices that produce results outside of the natural order,” though Lláven remembered Casanova’s words to be more provocative.⁵⁹ Though, certainly, if provocation was the presbítero’s intent, the editors of *El Horizonte* were all too eager to respond in kind, rhetorically questioning whether the Catholic Church would respond to Lláven’s challenge and answering that they were skeptical of a response as the Church “interests itself in ensuring that its humble flock does not see the light of truth so that it may continue to exploit and humiliate them.”⁶⁰ While not commonplace, such lofty and disrespectful rhetoric should not be viewed as entirely rare either.

A carefully crafted discussion of contemporaneous religion, for example, appeared in the revista *El Porvenir* in Guatemala City, roughly two years prior to the Spiritist debate. Writing under the pseudonym Ygnotus (“unknown” in Latin), the author hesitantly breaches the topic of theology in the age of science, commencing with absolution and denying the responsibility of the journal for the important questions posed within. Much of Ygnotus’ discussion pertains to the weakening of faith through scientific inquiry and presents religion as an early attempt by humanity to explain the natural world. He takes exception to miraculous deeds as presented by organized religion—a position shared by the Spiritists—which “are like ghosts that one sees in the dark night but that disappear in the light of day” being “contemporaneous of gods, genies, fairies, sorcerers, and witches”. In the second part of Ygnotus’ critique, he argues, “Christian institutions are a hindrance to social progress and to the full development of

⁵⁹ Ricardo Casanova, “Primera Carta Al Señor Licenciado Don Magin Lláven,” Jan. 24, 1882, (Guatemala: Imprenta de P. Arenales, 1882), p. 1 and Lláven, “Un reto,” p. 1.

⁶⁰ Lláven, “Un reto,” p. 1.

human personality for which it yearns and demands,”⁶¹ a popular criticism leveled by Spiritists against Catholicism. The “atrophied intelligence” of the faithful contrasts with the rationalism exhibited by scientific minds. From this, Ygnotus concludes that free thought encourages civilization and progress in opposition to Catholicism, which is not motivated by the promotion of civilization but by converting barbarians into fanatics and slaves.⁶²

In his initial taunt of Casanova, Lláven argued that Catholicism had perverted Christianity, whereas Spiritism was the “genuine expression of Christ’s sublime teachings.”⁶³ Instead of representing a radical departure from Christian thought, Spiritism was presented as a modern and more pure interpretation of the Bible. As mentioned, while aspects of its practices were well-known and documented prior, Spiritism was systematically codified by Allan Kardec who published a series of books on the subject in the second half of the nineteenth century in France. Among the best known of the works was *The Spirits’ Book*, a monograph arranged as a series of questions posed by Kardec with the responses based on dictations from spirits who responded to his inquiries, including those of John the Baptist, Plato, and Benjamin Franklin.

Most Guatemalan publications of Spiritist texts mimicked this methodological structure of questions and answers, a sensible approach owing itself to Kardec’s background in pedagogical studies. One such example is the *Lecciones de espiritismo para los niños*, the fifth edition of which was published in Retalhuleu, a series of teachings intended for school-aged children which modestly hoped to be a “tiny grain of

⁶¹ Ygnotus, “Dos palabras mas sobre la cuestion religiosa,” *El Porvenir*, Oct. 8, 1879, p. 145-148

⁶² Ygnotus, “Dos palabras mas sobre la cuestion religiosa,” *El Porvenir*, Nov. 10, 1879, p. 178-179.

⁶³ Lláven, “Un reto,” p. 1.

sand serving to better solidify the grandiose tower of true light.”⁶⁴ The truth contained within Spiritism was purported to be of both Divine inspiration, communicated to humanity by means of pure spirits. Spiritists took the existence of God as a point of departure, imbuing Him as the masculine source of everything and supreme intelligence of the universe. Such was the nature of the base principals to which Lláven directed Casanova in his challenge that the presbítero saw no need to refute the first several teachings for they subscribed to Catholic worldviews, while others were simple philosophic truisms.

A recurring theme throughout the debate, however, harkened back to Lláven’s attempt to present Spiritism to Guatemalan readers as a palatable expression of Christian teachings—in fact, a purer form than that offered by the ostensibly corrupted Catholic Church—and, thus, explaining the philosophy through cultural assumptions which the Church dominated. In so doing, Lláven too often deferred to the authority of the Church rather than attempting to break free of Biblical passages when it suited his interests. Nevertheless, throughout the exchange between Lláven and Casanova, the former repeatedly appealed to Spiritism as more valid than Catholicism for modern Guatemalan minds. In large part, these arguments owed themselves to Spiritism’s advocacy on behalf of progress and how this reinforced the ideas of the increasingly secular urban Guatemalan bourgeoisie.

Of particular appeal for scientifically-minded Guatemalans was Spiritism’s reliance on medical discourse and advocacy of empirical rationale. While often flawed, the scientific philosophy resonated within the era’s discussions of chemistry, physics, and

⁶⁴ *Lecciones de espiritismo para los niños, quinta edición*, (Retalhuleu, Tipigrafo “Union Comercial”, 1920), p. 1.

biology. The interpretation of these sciences and their place within the natural world lent credence to how ideas of the unseen could be understood and rationalized. Kardec contended that the corporeal world was secondary to a pre-existing and eternal spiritual world, without which physical matter would not subsist. Three entities co-exist within humans: the material being or body, the soul, and the semi-material intermediary that binds the two, called the perispirit. Kardec believed that the perispirit functioned as an ethereal envelope for the spirit after it was discarnated from the body, being usually invisible but sometimes observable if not tangible in the form of an apparition. While vulgar amongst lower scale spirits, the perispirit becomes a finer and more brilliant fluidic wrapper in advanced spirits.⁶⁵ Bringing all matter and non-matter into unison is a universal fluid—something akin to the aforementioned substance once described as ether—which unites the material and spiritual worlds.

Some Spiritists came to understand the universal fluid as electro-magnetism, viewing it as a scientifically valid form of healing that mediums exercised to relieve ailments. Indeed, by 1920, J. Batres—a Guatemalan proponent of Spiritism and Spiritist healing—had conducted eight years of study into the healing powers of magnetic fluids and their relationship to health, well-being, and mediumship.⁶⁶ He thus suggested that—despite a relative decline in Spiritist healing—the science of Spiritism had much to reveal about health and its relation to electro-magnetic energies. Again, discursive indicators within such discussion reflected contemporaneous understandings of science and health, thus demonstrating their effect on transforming conversations of faith and wonder.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 18.

⁶⁶ See J. Batres, *Tratado de las curaciones por medio del Espiritismo*, (Guarda Viejo, Guatemala, 1920).

The significance of the scientific marvel at the behest of spiritual belief systems lay in the deeply-felt faith in progress that permeated the teachings of Spiritism. A fundamental belief within Spiritism was the acceptance of reincarnation, not simply as a concept through which there existed life after death, but as a principle that allowed for souls to exist across multiple incarnations. According to Kardec, the human soul was immortal and, through reincarnation, constantly seeking perfection. Of particular importance, especially for positivist-minded Guatemalan Spiritists, was the emphasis that Kardec placed on the idea of progress, for perfection through constant progress was the aim of souls and the *raison d'être* of reincarnation.

Predictably, the Catholic Church in Guatemala held grave misgivings about metempsychosis. For Lláven, the origins of reincarnation were to be found in the basic tenets of Kardec's thinking, chiefly, that God created spirits as neither good nor evil entities but as simple and ignorant beings. In so doing, he negated the existence of angels and demons, attributing them to the ruminations of the Catholic Church. Rather, Lláven posited to Casanova that spirits were in a constant state of progression, never receding but forever moving forward morally and intellectually across multiple lifetimes.⁶⁷ Lláven thus placed the transmigration of souls in contrast to eternal damnation as advocated by the Church, suggesting that the latter unfairly committed humanity to predestined fates by creating souls that were predisposed to good or, more problematically, evil. He contended thusly, "To not accept reincarnation of the spirit or the progressive transmigration of the soul as it were, is to protest against the justice of the Supreme

⁶⁷ Magin Lláven, "Segunda carta," *El Horizonte*, Jan. 29, 1882, p. 2.

Being”.⁶⁸ Put briefly, the ideology of Spiritism confirmed liberal worldviews, especially their thoughts on progress.

Casanova took exception to Lláven’s theories of spiritual transmigration, equating it with Pythagorean metempsychosis by arguing that it permitted the reincarnation of souls into inferior beings. He lambasted Lláven for the suggestion that the spirit of Dante could find itself in the body of a Dutch farmer or that the soul of Mozart and Bellini may be incarnated in a deaf person.⁶⁹ Moreover, he argued that denying damnation was an incentive for crime. “Have I reason in saying as I have now repeatedly stated that in such a system (injurious to God because he is the origin of evil) moral responsibility is left in tatters,” he queried, “that virtue and vice convert themselves into words empty of meaning and that the punishments applied by the laws to criminals are unjust and tyrannical oppression?”⁷⁰ For the presbítero, the essence of the argument was that souls did not progress, instead being created as pure, but fallible, beings. That is to say, even angels—the most pure of God’s creations—were created with liberty or free will and, as such, were susceptible to evil intentions. Indeed, the ignorance that Spiritism attributes to souls was not worthy of God’s work.⁷¹

While often finding expression in Biblical discussion and prose, the debate over reincarnation was, at base, very much a dispute about progress and what Magin Lláven viewed as the essentially regressive attitude that the Catholic Church held towards the modern world. The perfection of the soul—or the infinite progress of spirits as Lláven often described it—drew parallels with ideologies of improvement and accounts of

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁶⁹ Ricardo Casanova, “Tercera Carta Al Señor Licenciado Don Magin Lláven,” Feb. 8, 1882, (Guatemala: Imprenta: de P. Arenales, 1882), p. 6.

⁷⁰ Ricardo Casanova, “Segunda Carta,” (Guatemala: Imprenta: de P. Arenales, 1882), p. 1.

⁷¹ Casanova, “Tercera Carta Al Señor Licenciado Don Magin Lláven,” p. 2.

societal advancement in Guatemala City. It was from here that Spiritism held ideological appeal to positivist-minded Guatemalans. Dr. Francisco Lainfiesta, whose anecdotes of President Rufino Barrios' experiments with spirit communication opened this chapter, wrote about reincarnation in his 1879 novel, *A vista de pajaró*. In Lainfiesta's fictional account of the future, the protagonist, a mature man of sixty years, holds an obsession with progress and longs to see what Guatemala will become in two hundred years time. His desires are answered by a genie who explains that he can transfer the old man's soul to a more vigorous body "leaving this old body that today imprisons it".⁷² In so doing, the man would be able to view the fruits of progress as he desired. As Lainfiesta posited on an individual level, reincarnation held benefits for progress. Spiritism merely adjusted the implications of the transmigration of souls to a larger societal level whereby human society was subjected to infinite progress as a part of natural law, akin to the evolution of nature.

Drawing teleological lessons from history, Magin Lláven argued to Presbítero Ricardo Casanova that "If there is some honour more worthy of admiration in the work of the Universe, it is this harmony that prevails in everything, it is this immutable succession of facts and the advancement that come, revelling incessantly in the known law of indefinite progress."⁷³ Like nature and human development, souls progress through reincarnation limitlessly. Within human history, each subsequent generation has positively progressed, Lláven maintained, and each progression that carries humanity further from a natural state becomes increasingly significant. He explains that he does not understand why the natural laws that govern humanity cannot be applied to

⁷² Paulino [Francisco Lainfiesta], *Á vista de pájaro: Cuento fantástico*, (Guatemala: Tipografía "El Progreso", 1879), p. 18.

⁷³ Magin Lláven, "Cuarta Carta," *El Horizonte*, Feb. 19, 1882, p. 2.

discarnated souls when history demonstrates that human intelligence is clearly expanding. “While you don’t show that Catholic scholasticism is above rationalist philosophy, Señor Casanova, Indefinite Progress shall remain unscathed,” wrote Lláven, “prevailing and glorifying the work of human labour and signaling new horizons of activity, advancement, and happiness”.⁷⁴ Rather than condemning those who sin to eternal damnation, Lláven explained that reincarnation allowed for general improvement by which “we will see that progress will bring us closer to God.”⁷⁵

Lláven argued before the Guatemalan public that the Church stood in opposition to reincarnation and infinite progress of the soul because Catholic proponents were blinded by dogmas and the Catholic institution felt jeopardized by the ideology of progress and the palpable creations of the bourgeoisie in the modern world. Lláven reasoned that if the Church denied reincarnation, it was because they also refuted progress in defense of “Faith, that blind faith that condemns our most precious faculties and attempts to perpetuate ignorance is your battle horse, your favorite weapon heated in the fire of your illusory hell”.⁷⁶ Lláven continues, citing Pope Urban VIII who condemned those who insisted that the Earth revolves around the sun as lacking philosophic sense and faith. Criticizing Catholicism further, Lláven also held Pope Gregory XVI in contempt, particularly for his encyclical *Mirari Vos* of 1832 due to its anti-liberalism and for the Pope’s general condemnation of technology. Such criticism of progress from the Vatican led to an attempt to ban telegraphs and trains for fear that they would strengthen the bourgeoisie.

⁷⁴ Ibid., , p. 2.

⁷⁵ Magin Lláven, “Carta Sexta,” *El Horizonte*, March 12, 1882, p. 3.

⁷⁶ Lláven, “Cuarta Carta,” p. 1.

Lláven contended that the Catholic Church had repeatedly shown itself to oppose development and that infinite progress was a concept contrary to the interests of the Church for it threatened its monopoly on power, knowledge, and social authority.⁷⁷ He asserted that Catholicism had repeatedly placed itself in opposition to progress especially when it did not serve their interests. Had the phonograph—or any other technological wonder of the nineteenth century—been invented in an earlier age, Lláven purported, people would have said that it was miraculous or of diabolic inspiration unless, of course, the inventor had been Catholic.⁷⁸

Much of the Spiritist's argument balanced on the discourse of motion and circulation. Like many others, particularly the Guatemalan modernists such as Carlos Valenti and Miguel Ángel Asturias, Lláven alluded to progress and the modern world through a language of movement, juxtaposing it with the stasis of conservatism. Progress, he insisted, was not the product of immobility and permanence but that of ever-increasing development and individual action. Souls, too, are in motion, he argued, forever evolving and expanding their intellectual and moral capacity through reincarnation; to expect, as the Catholic Church did, that spirits come to be all-knowing after the death of the corporeal body, was to deny the laws of labour and create incentives for laziness while perpetuating ignorance.⁷⁹ Religious dogmas, he insisted, were sources of limitation for human development, pointing to republican countries where liberal ideas flourish as sites of excitement for human endeavors. To the contrary, he accused the Church of attempting to simply preserve its privilege at the expense of human thought,

⁷⁷ Ibid., pp. 1-2

⁷⁸ Magin Lláven, "Carta Tercera," *El Horizonte*, Feb. 5, 1882, p. 2.

⁷⁹ Lláven, "Cuarta Carta," p. 1.

for which Lláven provided Galileo and the Inquisition as evidence.⁸⁰ In short, reincarnation fit within the worldview of progress, demonstrating the extent to which natural laws of evolution extended not only to human civilization but to the human soul as well. The decadence of the Church and its obsession with power had limited its inspiration, contrary to scientific and biological principles. Spiritism, then, provided a belief system that complemented and intersected with the ideology of progress for the urban Guatemalan bourgeoisie.

Relating Spiritism to progress, science, and the inventions of the bourgeois world seemed a logical conclusion to many nineteenth-century Guatemalan liberals. Francisco Lainfiesta's tale of spirit communication within the upper echelons of governmental power in Guatemala City took place not in a social vacuum but amidst the encounters with the culture of modernity in the capital. His descriptions, then, are replete with noteworthy cultural references that convey the significance of modern change. For example, prior to describing President Barrios' encounter with General Morazán's spirit, Lainfiesta describes the advent of electric light and its debut in the Presidential manor, applauding it as "one of the advances that owes itself to the progressive genius of General Barrios".⁸¹ Suggestively—given the motifs shared by spirit communication and the compression of time and space as a result of rapid communication—Lainfiesta repeatedly refers to the telegraph that passed word to the government ministries from the front at Chalchuapa, El Salvador where President Barrios' troops engaged a Central American army.⁸² As sure as spatial boundaries were purported to have been transgressed by spirits

⁸⁰ Lláven, "Carta Sexta," p. 3.

⁸¹ Lainfiesta, *Apuntamientos para la historia*, pp. 380-381.

⁸² Francisco Lainfiesta, *Mis Memorias*, (Guatemala: Academia de Geografía e Historia, 1980), pp. 322-325.

who communicated with Spiritist practitioners in Guatemala City so, too, had the telegraph that announced Barrios' death on the battlefield curtailed traditional means of communication.

The *Diario de Centro América* carried a story in February 1885—mere months before Barrios' death—about a society of “psychic investigators” in London that studied animal magnetism and apparitions.⁸³ Dr. D'Assier, who published a work on posthumous humanity, led the group's investigation into the spirits of those who perished under violent circumstances. He contended that movement is never destroyed but merely transformed and that ghosts are the prolongation of existing vibrations and personalities. Equally based in contemporary scientific thought, D'Assier contended that their fluid constitution explains how ghosts pass through material objects, much like how hydrogen atoms penetrate platinum, the strongest of the elements. At the time of the Spiritist debate and Barrios' experiments with séances, a culture associated with the transformation of perceptions of time and space was rapidly evolving, owing to the communications revolution. Indeed, less than a decade later, *El Ferrocarril* published a report by a Venezuelan journalist, Nicanor Bolet Peraza, about the same Society of Psychic Investigations. Bolet Peraza explains that, because it is mysterious, manifestations of electricity have given rise to superstition and charlatanry. Where others had merely alluded to such comparisons, the author outright equates hypnotism with the telephone and the telegraph with telepathy.⁸⁴

The manner in which nineteenth-century Guatemalan minds understood cultural change associated with the modern world involved reference to existing cultural motifs.

⁸³ “Los fantasmas,” *Diario de Centro-América*, Feb. 12, 1885, p. 2.

⁸⁴ Nicanor Bolet Peraza, “El Gran Misterio,” *El Ferrocarril*, June 7, 1894, p. 1.

The prospect of spirit communication was placed within a cultural sphere whereby scientific innovation expanded the realm of possibility. It is perhaps not surprising that the issue of spirit communication was contentious in the debate only in substance if not form so that Lláven could proclaim, “You and I are in agreement in that there is intelligent communication with spiritual phenomenon.”⁸⁵ In his second letter to Magin Lláven, Presbítero Ricardo Casanova acknowledged that communication with angels and demons was possible though he added two caveats that it was gravely illicit and entirely dependent on God’s will.⁸⁶ The priest later expanded his position, adding that it was possible to communicate with malignant spirits whenever Spiritists surrender themselves to superstitious practices. He stated, however, “I don’t recognize this communication as normal, permanent, and above all *natural* as Spiritism pretends.”⁸⁷ He agreed with Lláven that men and women exist as both corporeal and spirit substance, though the presbítero argued that, once separated from their bodies, souls either already enjoy eternal happiness, are victims of divine justice, or experience the temporary purification of Purgatory; in any case, they are unable to communicate with humanity unless God demands it or they are entities of evil.

In his concluding letter, Casanova confirmed reports from Europe of Catholic observation of séances in which clergy have witnessed inexplicable events transpire. The Church, however, could only conclude from such events that the spirits who speak through mediums cannot be the angels that they profess to be; rather, said entities are agents of evil intent on misleading Spiritists. He terminated his exchange with Lláven by asserting that Spiritism believed that mediums could instigate communication with spirits

⁸⁵ Lláven, “Carta Sexta,” p. 3.

⁸⁶ Casanova, “Segunda Carta,” p. 2.

⁸⁷ Casanova, “Tercera Carta,” p. 2.

who may be of good or evil intent; from its research into the matter, however, the Catholic Church concludes that only evil spirits participate in séances in order to mislead practitioners: “Thus, the Spiritist practices are gravely evil. Error and sin: this is Spiritism.”⁸⁸

The Spiritist debate of 1882 holds particular significance to the broader discussion of the cultural change associated with modernity in two regards. First, it illustrated not only how new technological innovations that forced a reinterpretation of time and space operated but also how ideologies of progress interacted within the social world of Guatemala City. Secondly, the public discourse between Lláven and Casanova illustrates the degree to which Catholic cultural hegemony persevered despite the efforts of liberal proponents. Spiritism spoke to a number of liberal concerns and was well-placed within the emerging cultural logic of the dawning liberal state. The possibility of spirit communication resonated with other cultural shifts associated with the collapse of time and space such as the telegraph and also relied on vulgar scientific rhetoric whereby electro-magnetism provided an empirical explanation for said communication.

More significantly, Spiritist belief in reincarnation was rationalized by drawing on scientific and philosophical arguments related to the notion of progress. However—and this is the point—Spiritism also drew on many precepts embodied within Catholicism and, as the debate between Lláven and Casanova makes clear, the Church held the cultural authority to define the parameters and substance of the debate. Indeed, the Spiritist debate in Guatemala revealed the manner to which even positivist-minded liberals in the 1880s deferred to the discursive norms of language dominated by Catholic rationale. The debate also showed how emerging cultural formations usurped the

⁸⁸ Ricardo Casanova, “Segunda Carta,” (Guatemala: Imprenta: de P. Arenales, 1882), p. 15.

language of the past, adopting a discursive heritage that helped legitimize their political, economic, and social aspirations. The Casanova-Lláven debate, then, is an episode illustrating the range of the deep cultural upheaval in Guatemala that, rather than being a rupture, lasted generations.

Perhaps most telling of the perseverance of Catholic hegemony in Spiritist philosophy was the unwillingness of proponents to negate the theological truths of the Bible, instead opting to reinterpret them. Reliance on the Bible as, if not a sacred text, than a moral and philosophical work, forced spiritists to revise and construe passages through selective reading which they then attempted to reconcile with their worldviews. In so doing, they deferred cultural authority to the Church in defining the parameters of theological and moral discussions. Within the Spiritist debate of 1882, perhaps the most telling example of this was Lláven's attempt to deny the existence of miracles—a base principle of Spiritism—for which he chose the story of Lazarus of Bethany. Lazarus was deceased for four days when, according to the Gospel of John, Jesus arrived at his tomb and raised him from the dead, an event that Christians hail as a miracle. Rather than reject the veracity of the Gospel as written, Lláven opted to argue it on its own terms. He explained to Casanova that, in general, God did not produce extraordinary phenomena that historically had been regarded as miraculous; rather, those who lack a capacity to explain events deem these events miracles.

In the case of Lazarus, Lláven insisted that medical conditions such a catalepsy—a condition through which sufferers experience a paralytic state characterized by muscle rigidity—were unknown to the ancients and explain why Lazarus only appeared dead to the witnesses. Thus, Christ did not resurrect Lazarus from the dead but

merely cured him from his cataleptic state.⁸⁹ Science, not faith, explained this apparent miracle. Casanova was quick to attack Lláven's reasoning, suggesting the catalepsy does not produce states of decomposition or the putrid smell described by those close to Lazarus' corpse. Yet Lláven attempted to refute Casanova's suggestion based only on the narrow interpretation the descriptions found in the Bible, thus grounding his argument based on the particular assumptions held by the Church rather than outright rejecting the claims found in the Bible.

In attempting to defend the teachings of Spiritism against the attacks of the Catholic Church, Magin Lláven unintentionally demonstrated the hegemonic clout of the Church by defending his position based on his interpretation of the Bible. This fact was readily acknowledged by his opponent who concluded his portion of the debate by essentially dismissing Lláven as distorting Biblical truisms and polluting Christian pedagogy by denying its most sacred principles while selectively borrowing arguments and evidence when it suited his interests. Thus, rather than challenging the hegemony of the Church, the Guatemalan Spiritists instead merely reflected its continuing cultural authority.

The manner in which wonder and the miraculous was reconsidered amidst the maelstrom of modernity is a central concern of this dissertation. Subsequent chapters will examine how religious mysticism was increasingly applied to secular activities and objects, examining for example the role of commodity worship commencing with the 1897 *Exposición Centro-Americana*. Special attention will be placed on the character of Rafael Spínola, a government propagandist whose eloquent speeches applied near-miraculous qualities to progress and Guatemala City's nascent commodity culture.

⁸⁹ Magin Lláven, "Carta Tercera," p. 2.

Conclusion

This chapter has analyzed the transformation of the culture of modernity in Guatemala City by way of discussion of the miraculous, wonder, and religion to illustrate that modernity cannot be correlated with a specific moment or instance. That is to say, modern culture did not appear in Guatemala by way of a rupture or sudden shift; instead change was intermittent, non-linear, and involved a number of otherwise unrelated factors that altered how the Guatemalan bourgeoisie perceived the world. While technological change may have occurred in a more immediate, concrete moment—that is, a date can be ascribed to, say, the arrival of telegraph services in the capital—the cultural reconfiguration that its ascendancy brought was understood within a much larger context that relied on borrowed thoughts, images, references, and meanings. The terms and conditions of the modern world came to be defined by existing cultures and assumptions. Indeed, as discussion of the Spiritist movement suggests, rather than eradicating older cultural forms—such as the nature of the miraculous—the culture of modernity merely shifted the terms in which cultural constructs were understood. But more than this, the culture of modernity and its fetishism of science also opened a host of possibilities whereby scientific discourse and explanation could be applied to existing theories of the unseen. As such, science or pseudoscience could rationalize the occult and ease the transition from religious to secular worldviews. Rather than disenchant the modern world, ideas of progress and the wonders they brought could infuse the culture of modernity with a variety of possibilities.

Chapter Three

Mimetic Grandeur and Other Delusions of Modernity: The 1897 Exposición Centro-Americana é Internacional

Frenetic organizing and hasty construction characterized the 1897 Exposición Centro-Americana é Internacional. The vast assembly of goods, commodities, images, and ideas in the Guatemalan capital—recalling the glory of the countless World’s Fairs and Expos that had captivated modern minds since the mid-nineteenth century—was ostensibly a venue through which the modernizing efforts of the liberal regime in Guatemala were to be showcased to the industrial world. Numerous oversights through poor planning and dismal attendance, however, seemed poised to doom the Central American Expo to a mockery of epic proportions that revealed regional backwardness. Yet the calamity—while instructive for understanding Guatemalan modernity—should be placed within a broader understanding of liberal attempts to order modernity both spatially and experientially. By examining the friction between symmetry and disorder, the tensions that recurred throughout the modern experience in the Guatemalan capital can be placed within a larger cultural logic of capitalist modernity.

The antagonisms of the Central American Expo were unveiled at micro and macro levels, demonstrating both interpersonal agency and broader structural cultural contradictions. Consider the role of the police at the Exposition grounds. The director of police, Colonel Juan Alvarez, instructed his subordinates to evict disorderly attendees from the Expo’s restaurants, cantinas, and amusement park without calling public attention to any disturbances.¹ Ironically, however, it was the police detachment itself that was called out as the most significant threat to social tranquility. Rosendo Muñez

¹ See *Reglamento de Policía de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, (Guatemala: Tipografía Carles, 1897), p. 6.

Pérez, a *capitalino* who attended the fair later publicly denounced Colonel Alvarez's squad in a widely-distributed *hoja suelta*. Muñoz Pérez was frustrated by the undignified conduct of the police whom he claimed posed a threat to the public wellbeing.² The accusation continued, suggesting that the police service should not be utilized as a means for men "to satisfy their evil impulses," specifically decrying the deeds of the "notorious" Cervando Navas—a one-time convict—and officer Carlos Dávila. While the directives required that officers attest to earlier crimes and vices that may exclude them from employment,³ the accuser's letter hints at local knowledge of prior malfeasance; as such, Muñoz Pérez concludes his denunciation by castigating the police chief for giving these two men "the honourable post that they indignantly perform."

The ire highlighted in the *hoja suelta* was echoed through the city's press corps.⁴ At the inauguration, one editorial claimed that the police "exhibited their poor-rearing, and their uncivil and rude conduct."⁵ Elsewhere, one exposé revealed that police boorishly detained visitors with tickets from entering the fair grounds while it was closed, even though no signs were displayed to indicate the fair was not open.⁶ One piece specifically addressed police conduct at the Expo, rhetorically asking, "What punishment will the chiefs of the corps impose on the uncivil police officers," before resignedly proposing, "We shall see."⁷ This final news brief, however, also highlights the contradictions of order and exhibition, contrasting the act of exhibiting as the essence of the Expo with the exhibiting of poor manners by the police. Those who were responsible

² Rosendo Muñoz Pérez, "Denuncia," Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Seltas, No. 1989, Year 1897].

³ *Reglamento de Policía*, p. 15.

⁴ For a list of general complaints, see "Notas de la Exposición," *La República*, April 9, 1897, p. 1.

⁵ "Exposición Centro Americana," *La República*, March 16, 1897, p. 3.

⁶ "Visita al Campo de la Exposición," *La República*, May 4, 1897, p. 6.

⁷ "La Policía en la Exposición," *La República*, March 16, 1897, p. 4.

for guarding public order were the most inclined to jeopardize it. The liberal establishment's own stewards violated its hallowed creed of order.

This microcosm of police misconduct functions as a broader metaphor for the Expo's disorganization of the art of display. Amidst the chaos of the 1897 Expo, the halls of the exhibition grounds housed a rationalized display of commodities that informed the optics of modernity throughout the twentieth-century. The narratives of, and tension between, symmetry and disorder are the subjects of this chapter. Significantly, however, the Expo was plagued by delay owing to the economic depression of 1897. The *cultura de esperar* overshadowed the proceedings and compounded the frustrations generated by the fair's asymmetry while making order appear as an unattainable desire.

The 1897 Exposición Centro-Americana é Internacional was the denouement of modernizing efforts undertaken by liberal proponents throughout the preceding century and with special enthusiasm since the Liberal Reforms of the 1870s. More importantly, however, it functioned as a point of transition whereby the commodity form commenced its ascent through which it superseded capital as both the hallmark and end of the modernizing project. Whereas the attraction of capital, both domestically and foreign, had been the *raison d'être* of early liberal modernity, by the mid-twentieth century, enchantment with modernity coalesced around the commodity form. This is certainly not to suggest that desire for the magical powers of capital to proliferate disappeared with the 1897 Expo; rather, I suggest that its potential began to be realized and objectified through commodities, giving rise to new cultural practices. The Central American Expo

announced the arrival of the commodity form and the cultural inebriation of its mystical powers over the Guatemalan public.



FIGURE 3 General entrance to the Exposición Centro-Americana. Alberto G. Valdeavellano, “Kioskas de Música,” 1897. Source: P.J. Pierson Fils, *Catalogo Ilustrado: lista oficial de recompensas de la Exposición Centro-Americana é Internacional, 1897*, (Guatemala: Tipografía Nacional, 1899).

A second major argument of this chapter is that the culture of exhibition and display popularized by the Expo—along with its specific spatial ordering—came to define the culture of modernity throughout the twentieth-century. In one of the most widely read accounts of global expositions, Paul Greenhalgh memorably coined the notion of “ephemeral vistas” to describe the fleeting nature of both fair grounds and memories of the spectacles.⁸ In Greenhalgh’s estimation, the expos held around the

⁸ Paul Greenhalgh, *Ephemeral Vistas: The Expositions Universelles, Great Exhibitions and World’s Fairs, 1851-1939*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).

world from London's Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations in 1851 until the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, "briefly held the attention of the world before disappearing into an abrupt oblivion, victims of their own planned temporality."⁹

This chapter will challenge Greenhalgh's assertions in two regards. First, the 1897 Exposición Centro-Americana had a more enduring legacy within Guatemalan urban space than the transience that Greenhalgh suggests. Scholars have argued that the liberal reforms of the 1870s commenced an epoch of rapid urban transformation in Guatemala City.¹⁰ However, the expansion of the liberal state did not require a reformulation of urban space as the new bureaucracy merely displaced religious orders and usurped their space. It took nearly two decades of liberal rule before Guatemala City significantly expanded and spatially re-ordered. Among the modifications were the constructions of the Avenida 30 de junio (now called La Reforma), the opening of Parque de La Reforma, and erecting the Expo grounds, all in the south end of the capital city. In a direct sense, the grounds that housed the Central American Expo were not immediately razed but were subsequently utilized by National Expositions. Moreover, the fair solidified the cultural significance of the Canton Exposición, a sector of the city in which

⁹ Ibid., p. 1.

¹⁰ See Gisela Gellert and J.C. Pinto Soria, *Ciudad de Guatemala: dos estudios sobre su evolución urbana (1524-1950)*, (Guatemala: Centro de Estudios Urbanos y Regionales, 1990); Gisela Gellert, *Ciudad de Guatemala: Factores determinantes en su desarrollo urbano (desde la fundación hasta la actualidad)*, (Guatemala: FLACSO, 1995); Luis Alvarado C., *Desarrollo capitalista de Guatemala y la cuestión urbana*, (Guatemala: Centro de Estudios Urbanos y Regionales, 1983); Flavio J. Quesada S., *Invasiones de terrenos en la ciudad de Guatemala*, (Guatemala: Centro de Estudios Urbanos y Regionales, 1985); Theodore Caplow, "The Social Ecology of Guatemala City," *Social Forces*, Vol. 28, No 2 (Dec 1949), pp. 113-133.

diagonal roads are used—mimicking Paris—in place of the characteristic North-South system of streets and avenues. Symbolically, then, the Central American Expo afforded one of the first opportunities to renovate Guatemalan urban space as the city was altered to appeal to the culture of modernity. Indeed, the fair became emblematic of the desire to transform the capital to appeal to the sensibilities and demands of consumerism.

Secondly, Greenhalgh's descriptions of ephemeral vistas precisely negate the new views, optics, or ways of seeing that fairs and expos helped to forge. The ordering of

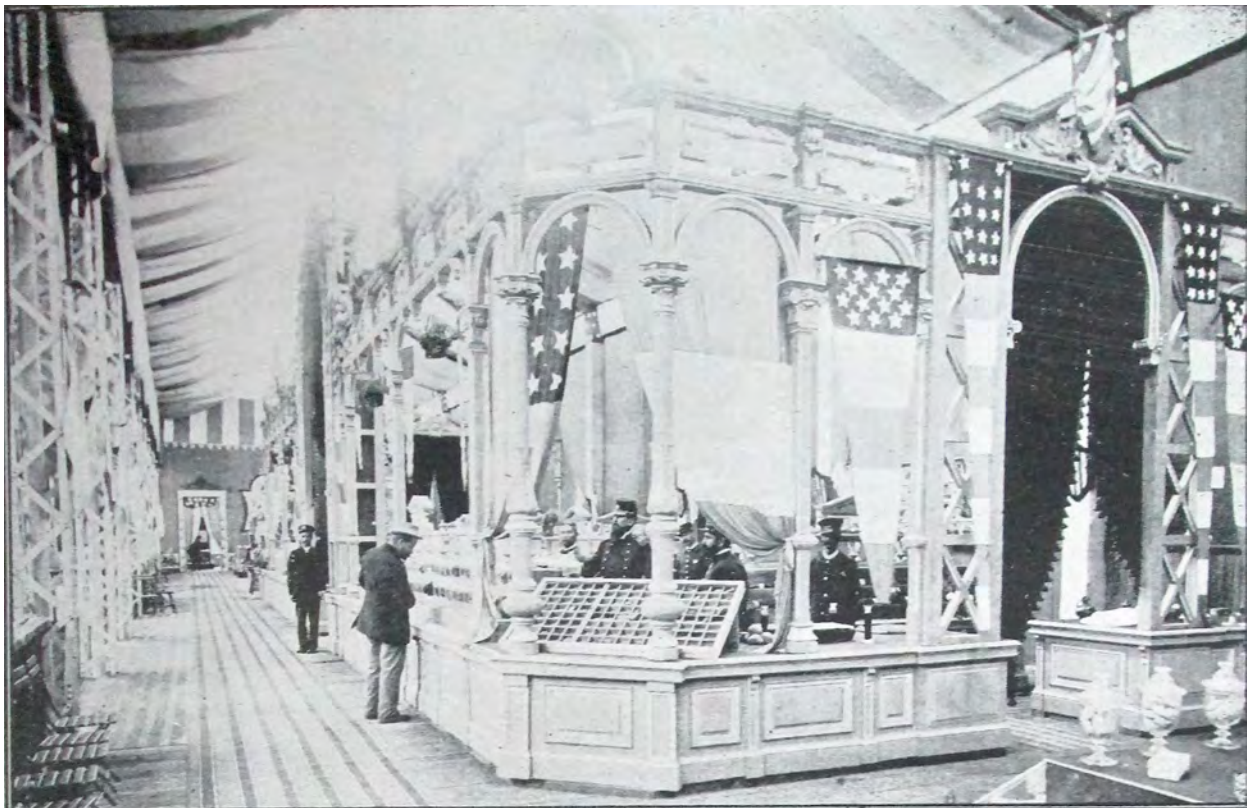


FIGURE 5 The optics of display. Alberto G. Valdeavellano, “Sección de El Salvador—Productos Industriales,” 1897. Source: Pierson Fils, *Catalogo Ilustrado*.

displays found in exposition halls disciplined modern eyes to view the dawning culture of commodities in a particular way. The rationalizing of consumer vistas, first developed with wholesale publicity in Guatemala City at the 1897 Expo, directed *capitalinos* to perceive consumption using specific visual techniques. That is to say, the optics of

modernity absorbed a dominant characteristic from the Expo, chiefly, how to see as a consumer. In this regard, the vistas produced in the exposition halls were anything but ephemeral.

A final argument of this chapter is that the Central American Exposition represented the crystallization of Latin American acts of mimesis in Guatemala. Whereas modernity offered a host of possibilities for social realization, the Guatemalan bourgeoisie chose to mimic an optic formulated in Western Europe rather than forge their own cultural formats. Such an argument risks reducing Guatemalan modern experience as merely derivative of other forms; however, the history of modernity in Guatemala demonstrates that this was not the case. Rather, I contend that the mixture of both broad economic and social structures along with individual and group agency created a unique Guatemalan encounter with the modern world. Nevertheless, the model employed by the Guatemalan bourgeoisie was one that, through its mimesis, sought a specific uniformity, a deliberate ordering of the local social world that privileged homogeneity over heterogeneity.

As Timothy Mitchell has suggested, some scholars have attempted to speak of “alternative modernities” which champion local or regional nuances that have shaped particular historical formations. Yet he cautions that it is important to recognize the role that imperial modernity—as a product of capitalism and European expansionism—played in shaping the modern world through “its phenomenal power of replication and expansion.”¹¹ Indeed, as Marx and Engels spelled out in the mid-nineteenth-century, the bourgeoisie “compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of

¹¹ Timothy Mitchell, “Introduction,” Timothy Mitchell (ed), *Questions of Modernity*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. xii.

production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image.”¹² Those resistant to arguments about Latin American mimesis would do well, then, not to lose sight of the fact that modes of social organization were necessarily borrowed to create the modern world. Regimes of capital accumulation follow a shared logic that limits agency in certain regards but is, by definition, essential to modern historical experience.

Crucial to understanding modernity in Guatemala is an appreciation of the role of optics in negotiating the tensions between marvelous consumption, ordered display, and rationalized urban templates and the sheer unpredictability and uncertainty of the export-economy market. Concurrent with the 1897 Expo was an economic depression of epic proportions that paralyzed exporting economies involved in coffee production. The collapse of the Guatemalan export economy can be accounted for in two regards. First, when liberal coffee planters seized control of the state in 1871 to initiate the liberal reforms, they reorganized the financial system, redeployed labour, expanded transportation infrastructure, and dramatically expanded land use for the benefit of coffee production. While there was some industrial development, specifically through the Cantél factories and Castillo brothers’ brewery, the export economy was largely dependent on coffee sales.

When confronted with the second major factor, the saturation of the coffee market with cheap Brazilian beans, the Guatemalan export economy was sent into a tailspin that endured for close to a decade. While domestic food production remained stable, the

¹² Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, (New York: International Publishers, 1948), p. 13.

state's coffers, usually filled by tariffs and taxes on imports and exports, were depleted. The modern phantasmagoria—a metaphor for illusion, mostly commonly associated with Marx and Walter Benjamin—reared its head through the Exposition of 1897 where commodities, spectacle, and enchantment were used to mask the economic woes of the era. Moreover, the Expo was used to conceal the political crises experienced by President José María Reyna Barrios who, in the early months of 1897, faced an open rebellion against his rule. Though, as will be shown, the phantasmagoria often revealed more than it concealed, as the shortcomings of the Expo were readily obvious to contemporary observers who decried the hypocrisy and wastefulness of the fair's organizers.

Inaugurating Consumer Modernity and the 1897 Expo

The 1897 Exposición Centro-Americana é Internacional was the most precious and ambitious urban project of President José María Reyna Barrios. At his insistence, the Ministerio de Fomento (Ministry of Development) began to petition for Guatemala to host an international expo. In April 1894, the Ministro de Relaciones Exteriores (Minister of Foreign Relations) appealed to the Asamblea Nacional Legislativa (National Legislative Assembly) to pass legislation to this end, explaining,

The most notable creations and the inventions of the nineteenth century all appear to have been directed towards bringing men, the population, and things closer together. After the telegraph which spread ideas and news across the surface of the earth and transmitted sentiments, and vapor was applied to the locomotion that shortened distances and rapidly satisfied the world's economic needs, none of the mediums placed into play to promote human progress has been as effective as the international expositions...¹³

The following month, the Asamblea emitted Legislative Decree 253 announcing the celebration in Guatemala City of an exposition of all Central American products, arts, and

¹³ Reprinted in "Documentos," *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, March 15, 1896, p. 1.

industry. The decree authorized the executive to organize the affair, inviting the peoples and governments of the isthmus to participate as an extension of fraternal merriment. Much of the discourse describing the event harkened to a new era of peace and tranquility for the Central American Republics, which had feuded regularly since the dissolution of the United Provinces of Central America in 1838. According to the official literature, the government of Reyna Barrios felt that the time had arrived for Guatemala to exhibit its agricultural advances, the expansion of its industry, and the products of the intelligence and imagination of its compatriots.¹⁴

To this end, a Central Committee was struck to coordinate the endeavour, headed by Juan F. Ponciano and Gustavo E. Guzmán among others. Guzmán, who lamentably passed away before the realization of the project under his charge reportedly after an argument with a foreigner who tried to renege on a contract pertaining to the fair,¹⁵ had served as a delegate at earlier expos on behalf of the Guatemalan state. In 1888 Guzmán appealed to the liberal government, in anticipation of the Exposition Universelle in Paris the following year, to participate in forthcoming fairs as a means to securing a bright future for Guatemala. He argued in a letter on behalf of Guatemala's delegation, "the modern spirit, always anxious to advance, in its insatiable thirst for progress, has created expositions as a powerful spring of universal fraternity and aggrandizement of the nationalities that take part in these competitions."¹⁶

¹⁴ "Exposición Centro-Americana" *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, Feb. 1, 1896, p. 1.

¹⁵ A. Macías del Real, "Dr. Gustavo E. Guzmán," *La Ilustración Guatemalteca*, Dec. 1, 1896, p. 137.

¹⁶ Gustavo E. Guzmán, letter on behalf of the Comisión de la Exposición de París del República de Guatemala dated 26 July 1888, Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas No. 1985, Year 1886-1888].

In 1893, Guzmán served on behalf of the Ministerio de Fomento at the Chicago World's Fair where he was profoundly impressed "after having gazed at the marvels with which the so-called White City dazzled the world."¹⁷ He concluded, "Nations cannot live in isolation; mutual contact favours them."¹⁸ Along with reports from the delegation came a deluge of press releases and articles that argued for the benefits of exhibiting the wonders of industry. While there existed dissenting beliefs that suggested monies directed to the Guatemalan foreign pavilion were excessive, promoters suggested that all expenses would be returned to the country in the form of expanded industry.¹⁹ Elsewhere, excitement for the World's Fair was generated through discussions of the plans of famed inventor Thomas Edison, described as "the scientific warlock of the century."²⁰ With such inspiration, the Guatemalan endeavour moved forward.

Within the Guatemalan capital, the "festival of civilization and culture"²¹ comprised of nearly 82,000 square meters of grounds in the city's south. Like expos abroad, the Guatemalan competition was divided into different classifications for would-be exhibitors, including Science and Letters, Education and Teaching, Fine Arts, Mechanics and Construction, Agriculture, Fauna and Flora, Ornamentation, Industry, Natural Products, Transport, Mining, and Immigration. Domestically, special invitations signed by Juan F. Ponciano were mailed, requesting participation from *capitalinos* of

¹⁷ Gustavo E. Guzmán, "Informe relativo a la Exposición de Guatemala en Chicago," written to the Minister of Development dated 15 March 1894, (Guatemala: Encuadernación y Tipografía Nacional, 1894), p. 4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁹ "La Exposición," *Las Noticias*, April 23, 1892, p. 2.

²⁰ "La Exposición Colombina," *Las Noticias*, Dec. 23, 1891, p. 2.

²¹ "A los expositores" *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, Feb. 15, 1896, p. 1.

high regard “to contribute however possible” to the Expo.²² Meanwhile, a call was put out to potential exhibitors through foreign newspapers and propagated by embassies abroad. A general invitation was published, requesting exhibitors to

bring together diverse objects in order to compare them; learn what we don’t know; improve what we know; communicate to others what we produce; awaken the stimulus in favour of human labour; erase localism and stinginess; widen the bonds of universal fraternity, and exhibit in Guatemala with dignity, inviting the people, especially the peoples of Central America, for a festival of civilization and culture; such are, among others, the beneficial results that may generally be offered by the Exposition...²³

Foreign delegates arrived in the Guatemalan capital from an array of participating countries that included El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Chile, Mexico, the United States, France, Italy, Germany and Switzerland, Belgium, and England. As the Honduran Minister of Development Carlos A. García explained, “The countries that don’t exhibit their progress, exhibit themselves as backwards.”²⁴ To ensure that European and US competitors would not dominate as prize recipients, special categories of adjudication existed in which only participants from Central America could partake.

Characteristic of the *cultura de esperar* discussed in Chapter One, the dates of the Expo were repeatedly altered. It was initially slated to be open for four months between mid-March and mid-July but logistical factors and poor attendance confounded the organizer’s plans. At noon on March 15th, President Reyna Barrios inaugurated the “Great Competition” before an audience of 5000 people comprised of all social classes

²² Letter dated 8 Marzo 1896 to Gilberto Valenzuela from Juan F. Ponciano and letter dated 12 March 1896 to Gilberto Valenzuela, Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas No. 1988, Year 1895-1896].

²³ “Reglamento de la Exposición Centro-Americana,” *Diario de Centro-América*, Feb. 21, 1896, p. 1.

²⁴ “Pensamientos,” *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, April 17, 1897, p. 2.

“from the most aristocratic to the most humble.”²⁵ Curious onlookers and the press toured the vacant, spacious salons of the principal exhibition halls while telegraphs buzzed word of the inauguration to foreign states. The previous night, an evening of lyrics and literature was held at the Teatro Colón, including a march of flag-bearing students who recited poetry and played instruments.²⁶

Construction delays meant that pavilions opened later than expected with some not being inaugurated until the onset of the rainy season in May when a second opening was held nearly two months after the first. Leading up to the event, newspaper editors spoke of their “supreme anxiety,”²⁷ reflecting concern for repeated disappointment from the delayed arrival of the Expo. Once again, President Reyna Barrios presided over the affair, which featured a symphonic concert headed by the celebrated violinist “princess” Lilly Dolgorouky.²⁸ Plaudits for the Expo after the second opening were more enthusiastic—reflecting collective relief that the project was near completion—even though only the Guatemalan, Chilean, Costa Rican, and Californian exhibits had opened. Even the editors of *La República*, who had been vocal critics of the delays, celebrated the day by reporting, “The movement and the noise, the lively colours of the sombreros and the outfits of the ladies, the chalets of the amiable people, all contributed to give a smiling and animated aspect to the work that was presented before our eyes.”²⁹

Beyond the repeat performances of Lilly Dolgorouky and the exhibits, the Expo also offered an array of amusements to entertain visitors. Advertisements spoke of the

²⁵ “Acta de la instalación del Gran Certamen” *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, March 20, 1897, p. 2.

²⁶ “Apertura de la Exposición,” *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, April 3, 1897, p. 2.

²⁷ “La Exposición,” *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, May 8, 1897, p. 1.

²⁸ “La Exposición,” *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, May 15, 1897, p. 2.

²⁹ “La Exposición,” *La República*, May 10, 1897, p. 1.

“Pabellón de Caballos de Vapor”—a steam-powered merry-go-round with horses that have “come at a gallop”³⁰—as well as casinos, cantinas, and Guatemala’s first rollercoaster, known as the *Montañas Rusas*, the Russian Mountains. While some warned that the amusements and diversions were only of secondary importance to the fair and that the Expo was intended to appeal to the “consumer classes,”³¹ others spoke of the wide appeal that the Expo held for people of all ages. Indeed, in writing about the inauguration, one editor announced, “we do not want to believe that even one Guatemala child may be excluded from participating in the excitement of which we’ve spoken.”³²

The Guatemalan exhibit offered both museum-worthy artifacts such as the table upon which the Act of Independence was signed and the throne of the Rey Tzul of Totonicapán, as well as, agricultural and industrial product from coffee, cacao, and legumes to perfumes, pharmaceuticals, and elegant shoes to be worn by a “millionaire señorita.”³³ Domestic companies such as Durini, Nueva Industria, Gallito, Sierra, Chocolá, the Compañía Nacional de Construcciones, and the Fábrica de Calzado Nacional all took advantage of the opportunity to promote their wares. Such was Guatemala’s potential that one observer reflected on “the brilliant future that destiny reserves for those that dwell in this fertile land, bathed by the waters of one or the other oceans and crisscrossed by roads that augment the vital forces of the Republic.”³⁴ Excitement soon waned, however.

³⁰ “Pabellón de Caballos al Vapor,” *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, April 24, 1897, p. 6.

³¹ “La Exposición y nuestro comercio importador” in *El Diario del Salvador* quoted in *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, March 27, 1897, p. 4.

³² “La Exposición,” *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, March 20, 1897, p. 2.

³³ “La Exposición,” *La Ilustración Guatemalteca*, May 15, 1897, p. 287.

³⁴ “Perspectiva del próximo torneo Centro-Americano,” *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, May 15, 1896, p. 1.

Karl Sapper—German topographer, antiquarian, and traveler who participated in the Expo and was awarded a \$5000 prize for his submission of maps—reported an initial surge in attendance that quickly trailed off. By mid-July, he reported that exposition officers probably outnumbered visitors five-fold, suggesting among other problems that



FIGURE 5 The Guatemalan exhibit. Alberto G. Valdeavellano, “Sección de Guatemala—Vista General á la Entrada,” 1897. Source: Pierson Fils, *Catalogo Ilustrado*.

the annual rainfalls had “reduced the road to the place of exhibition to a simply abominable condition, and rendered more difficult intercourse between the separate exhibition buildings.”³⁵ The delays in adorning the expo grounds and poor attendance persuaded the planners to extend the expo until the end of August. When the

³⁵ Karl Sapper, “The Central American Exhibition at Guatemala, 1897” *Miscellaneous Pamphlets, 1891-1906*, sn., n.d., p. 1.

adjudication remained incomplete, the grounds remained opened to the public for several days throughout September.³⁶

On Mimicry

Discussions of mimesis and the emulating faculty have concerned Latin American commentators since the nineteenth century. Diverse thinkers from Cuba's José Martí to Uruguay's José Enrique Rodó grappled with the relationship of the region to former colonial and neo-colonial powers in Europe and the United States to whom their countrymen turned for political, economic, and especially cultural inspiration. Rodó's widely celebrated *Ariel* charted a new cultural trajectory whereby Latin America—represented by the Shakespearean character of Ariel from *The Tempest*—rejects the detrimental influences of the United States.³⁷

Similar discussion resonated in the 1980s and 1990s within the field of Latin American cultural studies.³⁸ Cultural theories from *mestizaje*, syncretism, and transculturation to the more contemporary fascination with the notion of hybridity have all grown out of a concern for the colonial heritage of the Americas produced by the encounter of European imperialism and the indigenous peoples of the hemisphere amidst the context of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The general narrative that binds these theories explains that several different cultures converged in the Americas after the late fifteenth-century and through a complex interaction, new cultures were conceived. Shortly before his death, Peruvian literary theorist Antonio Cornejo Polar drew up his

³⁶ "Exposición Centro-Americana," *La Nación*, Sept. 6, 1897, Suplemento al numero 267, p. 3.

³⁷ See José Enrique Rodó, *Ariel*, Margaret Sayers Peden (trans), (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988).

³⁸ For the most complete assessment of regional cultural studies, see Ana del Sarto, Alicia Ríos, and Abril Trigo, *The Latin American Cultural Studies Reader*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

assessment of these theories, suggesting that the idea of *mestizaje* “falsifies the condition of our culture and our literature in the most drastic way.” He continues, “In effect, what *mestizaje* does is to offer a harmonious image of what is obviously disjointed and confrontational, proposing representations that deep down are only relevant to those for whom it is convenient to imagine our societies as smooth and non-conflictive spaces of coexistence.”³⁹

Cornejo Polar further contends that the notion of transculturation—most effectively elucidated by Ángel Rama—merely amounts to a slightly more sophisticated version of *mestizaje*. Instead he is obliged to endorse Néstor García Canclini’s loose descriptions of hybridity. García Canclini’s approach to hybridity aims to nuance cultural encounter, blurring the borders and distinctions inherent in dualisms. His preference for overlapping fractures and the production of a plethora of new cultural forms instead of more static treatments gives rise to an array of cultural possibilities. Thus, Latin American cultures are a heterogeneous conglomeration of fragments that are constantly splintering and reforging.⁴⁰

The theoretical contributions of Latin American cultural studies and their forbearers force us to reconsider mimesis. Rather than operating within a vacuum, the inclination to emulate operates within a complex, power-laden context of neo-colonial political economy and an associated nexus of symbols and meanings. There is no doubt that portions of the Latin American population mimicked the styles, lexicon, cultural markers, and symbols that operated in foreign countries, principally Great Britain,

³⁹ Antonio Cornejo Polar, “*Mestizaje* and Hybridity: The Risks of Metaphors—Notes” in del Sarto et al, *The Latin American Cultural Studies Reader*, pp. 760-761.

⁴⁰ Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, Christopher L. Chiappari and Silvia L. López (trans.) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995). See introduction to Part One and pp. 46-47.

France, Germany, Italy, and the United States but also within Latin America in the case of Mexico, Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and Brazil. Indeed, as will be argued, cultural imitation was a *modus operandi* of the 1897 Central American Exposition.

Nor was emulation a condition limited to Latin America or, more broadly, the so-called Global South; rather, mimesis exists as an operating feature of all cultures. One need only consider the copying of aesthetics by the early European modernist painters discussed in the Introduction or the recreation of cinematographic perspectives, styles, and motifs first developed by film pioneers such as Sergei Eisenstein during the first several decades of motion picture history. Certainly discursive formations coalesce around particular power dynamics when discussing mimesis. Distinctions are drawn between the acts of mimicry, copying, and emulating when placed alongside notions like inspiration, stimulation, and influence. Perhaps, herein lies the problem and from here discomfort with the notion of mimesis is generated: one lexicon invokes servility while the other esteems ingenuity. Guatemalan bourgeois analysts from the late nineteenth-century borrowed liberally from other cultures. In part, they hoped to transfer and capitalize on the social power granted to certain symbols, practices, and meanings. Rather than a sign of their servility, mimesis was a technique for consolidating status and reinforcing hierarchy. But, more than that, it was an unabashed strategy for progress as exemplified by the 1897 Expo.

The Guatemalan liberals made no secret of the fact that they actively sought to recreate conditions that they believed were conducive to the thriving of capitalism and, through this, progress. Emblematic of their teleological worldviews, they suggested that the European and US model of capitalist development was to be recreated in Central

America: progress was seen to be formulaic. Guatemala was perceived as especially fortunate, blessed, as previously mentioned, with “fertile land, bathed by the waters of one or the other oceans and crisscrossed by road”.⁴¹ Natural wealth coupled with technology, enterprising spirits, and capital was considered by the bourgeoisie as the beneficial ingredients that guaranteed future prosperity. However, the proper implementation of these means required instruction and the 1897 Expo was perceived as such an opportunity. As the official bulletin of the Expo bluntly asserted, “Emulation creates the spirit of improvement.”⁴²

As mentioned, the Central Committee responsible for carrying out the planning of the fair included members such as Gustavo E. Guzmán who had filed reports to the liberal government about his impressions of foreign expos in Paris and Chicago. He had argued from Paris that participation alone in “this festival of intelligence” could help “assure the future of the homeland.”⁴³ From Chicago, he communicated strategies for using the Expo to attract foreign capital investment as well as the art of display.⁴⁴ These insights and others provided a template for the Central Committee to follow. A similar logic prevailed concerning the benefits of fairs. One article argued,

One of the greatest advantages of Expositions is not only that they announce to all the characteristic products of each country and the level of advancement that one may find their different industries, arts, their science and literature, but also it awakens among them beneficial and prolific emulation that stimulates the progress of all in the different categories which we have mentioned.⁴⁵

⁴¹ “Perspectiva del próximo torneo,” *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, p. 1.

⁴² “Exposición Centro-Americana”; *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, p. 1.

⁴³ Letter sent by Guzmán on behalf of the Comisión de la Exposición de París del República de Guatemala dated 26 July 1888.

⁴⁴ Gustavo E. Guzmán, “Informe relativo a la Exposición de Guatemala en Chicago,” pp. 10-11.

⁴⁵ “Exposición,” *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, Jan. 9, 1897, p. 1.

Rather than a sign of subservience and inferiority, Guatemalan mimesis should be understood as part of a more dynamic strategy for economic, cultural, and social modernization.

A desire for European immigration was coupled with the emulating faculty. The ethnic implications of “whitening” Guatemala through immigration should not be minimized. Nevertheless, of concern here is not what European migrants displaced but what they offered which, no doubt, was imbued with racist ideologies and theories. One of the twelve classifications for submissions at the Central American Expo was Immigration. As explained in the General Regulations for the fair, the immigration group solicited studies into which race best served Central American interests and historical analyses of which races have best mixed with the indigenous population. Inquiries into the advantages of racial mixing from a physical, moral, and intellectual point of view were encouraged as were reports on the benefits and drawbacks of excessive immigration and whether the immigration of workers, engineers, artisans, men of letters, or scientists was more advantageous.⁴⁶ Among the more celebrated entries into the contest was a study submitted by the Colombian statistician Dr. Salvador Camacho Roldán titled *Notas de Viajes* where the author argued, “In modern times, foreign immigration has been the quickest means for a country’s progress.”⁴⁷ Dr. Camacho Roldán went further to explain that European immigrants like those who migrated to the US, Australia, South Africa, and the Rio de la Plata were most desired, in addition to detailing their motivations.

Ricardo G. Carrillo held similar views suggesting that the attraction of immigrants should be a priority of the Expo, which together will stimulate “the heart” of Central

⁴⁶ “Anexo al Reglamento General de la Exposición Centro-Americana,” *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, March 1, 1896, p. 6.

⁴⁷ Quoted in “Inmigración,” *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, June 20, 1897, p. 5.

America.⁴⁸ Mimesis of Europe and the US and the transference of knowledge from abroad both were targeted as means to incite progress. One of the aspirations of the Expo was to emulate regimes of capital accumulation and investment that the Guatemalan intelligentsia believed were essential to promoting progress.

Capital and the Commodity Form

Since the arrival of Enlightenment thinking to Guatemala in the late eighteenth-century, the establishment of regimes of capital accumulation has been the intent of Guatemalan liberals and merchants. Capital was instilled with magical properties that assumed its ability to proliferate and expand, encapsulating an entire social world within its modernizing drive. The desire for capital and the impulse to facilitate its growth was a central concern of those seeking capitalist modernization and explains much of the state's economic policy since the late colonial era. While this obsession hardly diminished during the twentieth century, it was made to accommodate the advent of commodity culture commencing in the 1890s. While the commodity form remained in its infancy until well into the twentieth century, its ascendancy was symbolically heralded at the 1897 *Exposición Centro-Americana*. Like capital, the commodity form was imbued with transformative power, functioning both as a marker of modernity but also as a means through which modernity was experienced and negotiated. In time, a new culture was fostered through the facilitation of commodity demands.

During the final decades of Spanish colonial rule, the Bourbon Reforms were implemented, in part, to stimulate economic activity, which had stagnated in the colonies. Seeking to break the economic clout of indigo growers and establish a monopoly,

⁴⁸ Ricardo G. Carrillo, "Exposición Centro Americana de 1897," *Diario de Centro-América*, June 22, 1896, p. 1.

Guatemalan merchants petitioned the Spanish Crown for the right to form an independent guild to regulate trade. Their agitation reaped rewards as they were allowed in the 1790s to form a *Consulado de Comercio* (Commercial Consulate) in Guatemala City. The *Consulado* regulated commerce and stimulated economic activity while using its special privilege as an arbiter of mercantile justice to consolidate its monopoly on trade.⁴⁹ Leadership of the *Consulado* included well-known families with strong commercial ties such as the Aycinenas, Tejadas, and Urruelas. Together with another colonial-era organization, the Enlightenment-inspired *Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País* of Guatemala (Economic Society of Friends of the Country), the *Consulado* guided economic policy for the remainder of the colonial period, through independence (being suspended for a decade between 1829 and 1839) until it was dissolved in the early 1870s during the liberal reforms.

While not a liberal institution—the *Consulado*'s monopolistic tendencies and influence over markets greatly agitated liberal proponents, which helps explain its decade-long suppression in the 1830s and dissolution after 1871—the *Consulado* was concerned with the lack of capital investment that plagued Guatemalan economic growth and the expansion of capitalism. In 1827, the *Consulado* attempted to form a state bank but withdrew the plan due to insufficient capital. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the utmost concern of the *Consulado*, *Sociedad Económica*, as well as independent liberals and entrepreneurs, was generating capital.

While the leadership of the *Consulado* was less inclined to have the organization directly invest in industry, it did actively promote certain forms of agricultural production

⁴⁹ Ralph Lee Woodward, Jr., *The Consulado de Comercio of Guatemala, 1793-1871*, (PhD diss., Tulane University, 1962), pp. 5-6.

in addition to building infrastructure required by the agro-export economy. For example, the Consulado oversaw the rapid expansion of cochineal production, especially during its golden age from the 1840s until the 1860s when it was replaced by industrially-produced red dyes from Europe.⁵⁰ Further, the Consulado may be credited with the early promotion of coffee, publishing a pamphlet in 1845 based on experiences with the bean in Costa Rica though coffee was but one of many crops that the Consulado believed held export potential. As well, Ralph Lee Woodward argues that the Consulado was significant for its infrastructure-building efforts that effectively connected agricultural zones to domestic and world markets. While never constructing railroads, the Consulado worked on important projects such as road, port, and bridge construction, effectively tying together diverse parts of the country.⁵¹ Such undertakings fostered economic growth and provided transportation networks utilized by coffee producers in the subsequent decades.

When liberal revolutionaries swept the old conservative guard from power, they also removed institutions such as the Consulado and minimized the influence of the Sociedad Económica. An immediate concern for the liberals was the lack of capital available for investment in both coffee production and railway construction. The timely mass entry of Guatemalan coffee producers into the global market brought a large influx of wealth which oligarchic families such as the Iburgüens, Castillos, and Novellas used to finance banking institutions such as the Banco de Occidente, Banco de Guatemala, Banco

⁵⁰ Jim Handy, *Gift of the Devil: A History of Guatemala*, (Boston: South End Press, 1984), pp. 58-59.

⁵¹ See Woodward, *Consulado*, Chapter Six.

Americano, and Banco Agrícola Hipotecario.⁵² The demand for capital finally found an outlet through commercial banks, which helped fund the expansion of coffee fincas, railway building, and nascent industrial growth. Where capital flow was limited, the liberal regime of President Justo Rufino Barrios improvised by instituting a tax scheme to fund the construction of rail lines across the country, as discussed in Chapter One.

Capital was given majestic properties and was believed to be a means through which Guatemala could modernize. Economic setbacks influenced by the volatility of coffee markets such as those in 1874 and from 1882 until 1884, however, often wreaked havoc on the flow of capital. Projects often went bankrupt or remained unfinished such as the illustrative case of the Northern Railway. Indeed, capital fluctuations helped produce the unique features of the *cultura de esperar*, which perennially showcased the frustrations of the Guatemalan bourgeoisie. The wait for capital gave rise to impatience whereby the government sought investment from abroad, often with conditions that were detrimental to domestic interests.

The desire for capital had interesting implications at the 1897 Central American Exposition. The flooding of the coffee market with Brazilian beans instigated the most dramatic economic crisis in well over a generation in Guatemala. Whereas six million bags of coffee were produced globally in the early 1890s, by the turn of the century some sixteen million bags saturated the market.⁵³ For Guatemalan producers, the crisis began in 1896 during the planning of the Expo. As a result, by the following year, the price of coffee in the New York exchange had dropped to roughly half what it had been at the

⁵² Paul J. Dosal, *Power in Transition: The Rise of Guatemala's Industrial Oligarchy, 1871-1994*, (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1995).

⁵³ V.D. Wickizer, *The Coffee Economy with Special References to Control Schemes*, (Stanford: Food Research Institute, 1943), p. 139.

start of the decade.⁵⁴ A current affairs writer put it mildly in early February 1897, writing, “The economic situation leaves something to be desired”.⁵⁵

In mid-January 1897, government capital had effectively disappeared and President Reyna Barrios was said to have circulated a letter begging local capitalists to provide \$800,000 to complete the fair grounds for the Expo.⁵⁶ The coveting of capital remained a prominent theme through the Expo itself, with countless efforts to attract potential investors. To this end, proponents of the event, seeking to deflect criticisms of the high costs amidst domestic economic turmoil, passionately argued that the costs would be repaid through the foreign investment that the Expo would generate.⁵⁷ Indeed, initial reports from the fair contended, “mercantile business has taken off as a result of the audience at the inauguration of our Central American Competition. If so, the situation may change favorably and the feared ‘crisis’ will be avoided altogether.”⁵⁸

Much of the literature produced for the Expo, then, amounted to advertisements and invitations to foreign capitalists to exploit natural resources in Guatemala. It is hardly surprising that European visitors would sense that Central America’s greatest potential existed in the agro-export economy for the displays from the republics of the isthmus were heavily focused on agricultural production.⁵⁹ One report published in the official bulletin of the Expo argued, “Our country is rich in natural products that, once

⁵⁴ Sanford A. Mosk, “Economía Cafetalera de Guatemala Durante el Periodo 1850-1918,” *Economía de Guatemala*, (Guatemala: Editorial del Ministerio de Educación Pública, 1958), p. 176.

⁵⁵ A. Macías del Real, “Resumen Quincenal,” *La Ilustración Guatemalteca*, Feb. 1, 1897, p. 204.

⁵⁶ A. Macías del Real, “Resumen Quincenal,” *La Ilustración Guatemalteca*, Jan. 15, 1897, p. 192.

⁵⁷ For a summary of both sides of the debate, please see “La Exposición,” *La República*, Oct. 9, 1896, p. 1.

⁵⁸ *El Progreso Nacional* quoted in “Ecos de la Prensa,” *La Ilustración Guatemalteca*, April 1, 1897, p. 252.

⁵⁹ See Sapper, “The Central American Exhibition at Guatemala,” pp. 2-5 and “La Exposición,” *La Ilustración Guatemalteca*, p. 288.

realized through the great Competition, can be the objects of valuable commerce hitherto unknown today.”⁶⁰ Among the resources that Guatemala possessed were rare construction lumber, rich flora of unknown medicinal potential, and the high-grade coffee “destined for the aristocratic classes”.⁶¹

Special volumes were produced that provided geographical, topographical, and economic data about Guatemala to woo would-be investors, seducing them with promises of bountiful minerals available for exploitation such as gold, silver, marble, and iron, as well as the finest coffee in the world, an enlightened population, electric lighting, and wonderful roads.⁶² Elsewhere, illustrated catalogues spoke of the allure of Guatemala’s natural environment, enticing investment through boasts of it being “an essentially rich country still in the infancy of its exploitation.”⁶³ It continued, suggesting, “A banker would be able to invest his capital with ease, guaranteed a rate more remunerative than that which he takes in Europe and the United States,” and arguing that similar business ventures would be comforted by “an erudite and liberal government that completely assures them the guarantee of their person and property.”⁶⁴

The 1897 Expo witnessed the continuation of efforts from the preceding century to generate capital, understood to possess modernizing powers. Coupled with the economic depression of the late nineteenth-century, however, the Expo was used as an event to promote Guatemala’s natural riches, a strategy that recurred during the previous

⁶⁰ “La Exposición,” *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, Jan. 30, 1897, p. 2.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁶² See Castellanos & Cía., *Guía de la Exposición Centro-Americana y de la Ciudad de Guatemala: Con instrucciones al Viajero, é importantes datos estadísticos, políticos, geográficos, comerciales é industriales*, (Guatemala: Tipografía Nacional, 1897).

⁶³ P.J. Pierson, Fils, *Catalogo Ilustrado: lista oficial de recompensas de la Exposición Centro-Americana é Internacional, 1897*, (Guatemala: Tipografía Nacional, 1899), p. iv.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. iv.

century when there existed a need to inspire foreign investors to bring much needed capital into the country. As coffee prices failed to rebound for upwards of a decade following the 1896 crash, so too did the government continue their appeal abroad, offering massive incentives to North American capitalists to complete the Northern Railway, for example. Such desperate petitions for capital explain the manner in which companies such as the United Fruit Company came to exert enormous economic influence in the country during the twentieth century.

While catering to obsessions with capital proliferation, the 1897 Central American Expo was significant for the consolidation of the commodity form as the dominant objectified marker of modernity. Although commodities were not new to Guatemala, the 1890s witnessed the expansion of consumption and the introduction of new goods in the capital city. The Expo functioned as the symbolic integration of the commodity form into the experience of modernity as well as conveying the near-religious enrapture that modernizers held with commodity forms.

The commodity existed as an example of the human conquest over nature as one article contended: “The products and utensils of industry that are the ordinary objects of the great national and international Expositions manifest the power of human genius and affirm the domination of humanity over the material world and the subjugation of natural forces to the satisfaction of our needs.”⁶⁵ In addition to advertising wares—Angostura bitters, Bechstein pianos, European bicycles, photo prints from Alberto G. Valdeavellano’s studio El Siglo XX, Koppel’s portable urban trains, Molino Excelsior for grinding coffee, Singer sewing machines, Smith premier typewriters—the Exposition broadcasted the arrival of commodities as hallmarks of progress. Like capital, the

⁶⁵ “Las Exposiciones” *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, Jan. 23, 1897, p. 3

commodities at the Expo were imbued with transformative properties that both foreshadowed and announced the arrival of progress in the eyes of the bourgeoisie.

Much of the fascination and public interest in the 1897 Expo was generated by the collection of commodities displayed within the exhibition halls. One of the first buildings constructed on the grounds was a giant warehouse, built to store commodities in anticipation of the fair, being inaugurated on Independence Day 1896, approximately six months prior to the opening.⁶⁶ In order to entice exhibitors to participate in the competition, guarantees were extended that assured that foreign patents would be respected for up to three months after the closure of the Expo.⁶⁷ The organizers promised that the Expo offered opportunities to open their products to new markets. “Making new products known” to the countries at the Expo, one editorial explained, “is an event that not only considerably broadens the consumption of such products, but also creates mercantile relations where none existed before.”⁶⁸

Products were placed into competition with one another, with consumers being afforded the chance to evaluate commodities from different producing regions. An oft-repeated refrain was that the fair facilitated the consuming public’s ability to compare the quality and prices of products that they would not otherwise have an opportunity to view.⁶⁹ Still, not everyone was content; one article explained, “Storeowners are in bad humour, as with the importation of certain tariff-free items—for the upcoming contest—

⁶⁶ “Almacenes de la Exposición,” *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, Sept. 15, 1896, p. 6.

⁶⁷ “Decreto Número 327,” *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, Sept. 1, 1896.

⁶⁸ “La Exposición,” *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, Jan. 16, 1897, p. 2.

⁶⁹ “La Exposición y nuestro comercio importador” from *El Diario del Salvador* reprinted in *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, March 27, 1897, pp. 4-5.

they have had to sell their current stock cheaply.”⁷⁰ Undeterred by the complaints of storeowners, items from Chile and Mexico could be assessed alongside similar wares from the United States within the Exhibition Halls. Moreover, in many regards, the relationship between capital and commodities was complementary. Capital was understood to provoke the conditions through which commodities would become aplenty. Investment in railroads, for example, “will bring us closer to Europe and the United States, which are at the same time the centers from where we are provided with the wares that we consume and the markets for our products.”⁷¹

A condition of consumer capitalism is that most forms of socio-economic activity are subjected to the market and are commoditized. In the case of the Central American Expo, even cultural participation could not escape objectification and was reduced to commodities. Kitsch, in the variety of memorabilia made available for purchase, indicates that the spectacle and experience of the fair assumed commodity form. In his study of Victorian England, Thomas Richards suggested that the crystallization of consumer society could be found in the emergence of commemorative kitsch for Queen Victoria’s Golden Jubilee in 1887. As Richards explains, kitsch is “elaborately aestheticized commodities produced in the name of large institutions (church, state, empire, monarchy) for middle-class home use. Kitsch is short-order charisma, charisma that has obviously been recently manufactured.”⁷² Elsewhere, it has been suggested that kitsch grew out of capitalist modernity in the field of the arts. It came to be one of the

⁷⁰ *La Ilustración Guatemalteca*, Feb. 15, 1897, p. 215.

⁷¹ “La Exposición,” *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, p. 2.

⁷² Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 88.

central factors of modern life as it functions as the triumph of immediacy: “immediacy of access, immediacy of effect, instant beauty.”⁷³

Cheaply produced through industrialized processes, kitsch was the commodity staple that fed the massification of consumer culture. Through it, participation in a broader shared cultural experience was assured. Efforts were taken, for example, to ensure that a vast segment of *capitalinos* partook in the festivities at the fair grounds. The cost of admission was lowered to half price on Sundays to appeal to the labouring classes on the day they were most likely to attend.⁷⁴ Working class organizations such as the Sociedad “El Porvenir de los Obreros” (The Future of the Workers Society)—representing urban labourers from cobblers, carpenters, and tailors, to jewelers and mechanics—endorsed the efforts of the 1897 Expo, believing that a shared future of progress was beneficial for the lower classes.⁷⁵

Souvenir kitsch at the Expo was an important factor in bridging concern for progress between the city’s bourgeoisie and labourers but, also, generating a shared inter-class experience through commodities. To this end, mementos of the event were generated in seemingly mundane places: lotteries were held, for example, whereby the tickets had commemorative prints on them to serve as souvenirs, even if the ticket did not win.⁷⁶ Likewise, the state postal office issued stamps bearing the image of President Reyna Barrios, along with a ship, train, and the national seal “in order to commemorate

⁷³ Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), pp. 8-9.

⁷⁴ “Reglamento de entradas al campo de la Exposición” and “La Exposición,” *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, April 3, 1897, pp. 1-2.

⁷⁵ “La Exposición,” *El Porvenir de los Obreros*, March 15, 1897, pp. 1-2.

⁷⁶ See “Reglamento de la Lotería de la Exposición Centro-Americana,” *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, March 6, 1897, p. 3

the 1897 Central American Exposition.⁷⁷ Even the entrance ticket had the words “Souvenir of the Exposition” printed in a number of European languages.⁷⁸ For wealthier consumers with higher disposable incomes, illustrated catalogues were published recalling speeches, participants, and lists of medal winners along with countless advertisements indicating where foreign-produced wares could be purchased in Guatemala City.⁷⁹ These catalogues detached commodities from the fracas of the Expo, hiding the massive shortcomings in planning. Similar works also went to press that provided statistical data on Guatemala and the fair, partly to encourage foreign investment and partly as a token through which the fair could later be recalled.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, large commemorative souvenirs were the exception to a field otherwise dominated by easily discarded mementos.

Perhaps most characteristic of the poor quality and immediacy of kitsch was the distribution of pan-American flag souvenirs that erroneously read “Esposición [sic] Centro-Americana.”⁸¹ The spelling error captured the essence of kitsch: low quality, mass-manufactured, and easily accessible. In these commodities, use-value was purely memorial and symbolic as the kitsch served as evidence of cultural participation and to generate nostalgia for the event.

⁷⁷ “Emisión de sellos postales,” *Boletín Postal*, Feb. 1, 1897, p. 1.

⁷⁸ “Souvenir of the Exposition, Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas No. 1989, Year 1897].

⁷⁹ See Carlos Arellano Torres, *Catálogo de los objetos que la Municipalidad de Guatemala exhibe en la Exposición Centro-Americana é Internacional*, (Guatemala: Tipografía Sánchez y De Guise, 1897); *Exposición Centro-Americana 1897, Souvenir del Correo de Guatemala*, (New York: The Albertype Co.); P.J. Pierson, Fils, *Catalogo Ilustrado*.

⁸⁰ Castellanos & Cía., *Guía de la Exposición Centro-Americana y de la Ciudad de Guatemala: Con instrucciones al Viajero, é importantes datos estadísticos, políticos, geográficos, comerciales é industriales*, (Guatemala: Tipografía Nacional, 1897).

⁸¹ “Esposición Centro-Americana,” Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas No. 1989, Year 1897].

The Commodity and the City: The Optics of Display

The 1897 Exposición Centro-Americana was an exercise in taxonomy and ordering.⁸² Categories were demarked according to discipline, nationality, and industry, which effectively ordered a hierarchy of progress and industrial modernization according to country. But more importantly for this analysis, there was an ordering of space and of displays that later were reflected in twentieth-century optics. That is to say, the consolidation of the commodity form as the principal marker of modernity through the Expo also influenced how the commodities related to the social world and their place within it. Display techniques, a craft analyzed and honed in Europe and the United States, served to order commodity culture in the Guatemalan capital in a manner that was later replicated and popularized.

A new optic emerged that united the exhibition showcases of the Expo with window displays in the city's shopping arcades and museum exhibits. Walter Benjamin acknowledged the relationship between arcades and museums, with the two institutions forming parts of what he called "dream houses of the collective".⁸³ He contended that these two venues were brought into communication with each other through the vast collection of commodities in the one and of artwork in the other. Their association was mediated through their shared methods of exhibition and ordering. As it was true of museums and shopping windows, so it was true of the 1897 Expo.

Historian Stephen Greenblatt has looked at different forms of display, suggesting that two models exist, one that relies on resonance and the other that uses wonder. He

⁸² Peter H. Hoffenberg, *An Empire on Display: English, Indian, and Australian Exhibitions from the Crystal Palace to the Great War*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 12-13.

⁸³ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2002, [L1,3], p. 405.

explains, “By *resonance* I mean the power of the displayed object to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which it may be taken by a viewer to stand.” He continues, “By *wonder* I mean the power of the displayed object to stop the viewer in his or her tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention.”⁸⁴ Greenblatt cautions against treating these tendencies as static instead viewing them as gradually evolving forms. The distinction between resonance and wonder is a useful tool to understand the cultural import of display. Wonder functions similarly to what Marx referred to as the fetishism of commodities. Marx suggested that the social relations of production are mystified within capitalism through the primacy of commodities;⁸⁵ that is to say, marvel for the commodity form obscures the conditions under which it was manufactured. Taken one way, resonance, on the other hand, threatens to partially unmask the fetishistic nature of commodities by revealing the context from which they were derived. Conversely, however, this resonating tendency may remain wholly superficial, attributing the item of interest not to capitalist modes of production but to vague notions of progress that further bury social relations and exploitation under additional layers of fetish. In speaking of the Salvadoran, Honduran, and Nicaraguan pavilions, for example, one newspaper report explained that much could be learned from the display of “products that give a clear idea of the progress attained in Central America”.⁸⁶ In this regard, the displayed items did not reveal the way in which

⁸⁴ Stephen Greenblatt, “Resonance and Wonder,” *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (eds.), (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), p. 42.

⁸⁵ Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume One: A Critique Political Economy*, (London, Penguin Classics, 1992), Chapter One.

⁸⁶ “La Exposición,” *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, June 20, 1897, p. 2.

they were manufactured; instead, the revelation that they were products of progress merely cloaked them in further mystery. Another writer argued, “Progress, in whichever of its phases, imposes laws that are not possible to evade without displaying its success.”⁸⁷ Understood in this way, Greenblatt’s notions of wonder and resonance complicate the cultural significance of display, often giving rise to more mystique than they reveal.

Museum displays, like Expos and stores, employ “a way of seeing” that isolates an object from the world in which it was produced.⁸⁸ Through selection, exclusion, and framing, authority was transferred to exhibitors who were able to negotiate the terms through which their wares were observed. Indeed, the only caveat that limited viewing at the 1897 Expo was that the Central Committee was allowed to temporarily close the exhibition halls to alter displays.⁸⁹ In this way, efforts were undertaken to manage and control the sights of the Expo. The success of these efforts is debatable, of course. Nevertheless, it was telling that commodities in the various pavilions were often aligned with artifacts belonging to a museum. Indeed, one section of the Guatemalan exhibit was devoted to a military museum whereby guests could examine Colt revolvers, Winchester rifles, Maussers, and an ancient harquebus, as well as compare modern cannons to colonial era ones.⁹⁰ Elsewhere, there was an original copy of Bernal Díaz de Castillo’s first-hand history of the conquest of Mexico and Guatemala, a volume of Guatemalan

⁸⁷ “La Exposición,” *El Porvenir de los Obreros*, p. 1.

⁸⁸ Svetlana Alpers, “The Museum as a Way of Seeing,” *Exhibiting Cultures*, Karp and Lavine (eds.), p. 27.

⁸⁹ “Reglamento de entradas al campo de la Exposición,” *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, p. 1.

⁹⁰ “Museo Militar,” *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, July 18, 1897, p. 4 and “La Exposición,” *La Ilustración Guatemalteca*, May 15, 1897, pp. 287-288.

laws and decrees, and a Bible translated into 348 different languages.⁹¹ The Costa Rican pavilion even included a massive zoological exhibit complete with flora and taxidermies of various national fauna.⁹² Thus, techniques were employed to alter perceptions of items, displaying them in an ordered manner that attempted to maximize their appeal and allure audiences with their properties.

The view generated by the museum was not unlike “the vista in elegant shop-windows” where one could view, for example, the luxurious fabrics produced by the Cantél factory.⁹³ The Expo provided space for the act of display that mimicked the view in *escaparates*—the shop-windows—that was emerging in the Guatemalan capital. The eyes of *capitalinos* were trained to associate the vista of *escaparates* with consumption, and the act of display became a small spectacle that recalled the practice of consumerism. But more than the manner in which the commodities were ordered and displayed, the Expo relied on spatial use that evoked consumption. To commemorate the event, poet Juan Fermín Aycinena composed an ode “To Central America in Honour of the Exposition Celebrated in Guatemala.” In the piece he praises the exhibition halls, “Look! In it there is no barren space/ its gallant palatial towers of glass and iron/ elevate to the heavens”.⁹⁴

The pavilions, full of commodities, were designed to recall Parisian-style shopping arcades. These impressive iron constructions represented the triumph of modern architecture and engineering, as their tall glass ceilings permitted natural light to

⁹¹ Arellano Torres, *Catálogo de los objetos que la Municipalidad de Guatemala exhibe*, pp. 44-46 and “La Exposición,” *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, June 20, 1897, p. 30.

⁹² “Nuestros Grabados,” *La Ilustración Guatemalteca*, June 15, 1897.

⁹³ “La Exposición,” *La Ilustración Guatemalteca*, May 15, 1897, p. 287.

⁹⁴ Juan Fermín Aycinena, “A Centro-América,” *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, April 24, 1897, pp. 3-4.

flood over the displays below. The official bulletin of the fair frequently published photographic updates informing the public of the buildings' stages of completion, their iron skeletal ribs adjoining opposing walls.⁹⁵ “The principal building showed off its

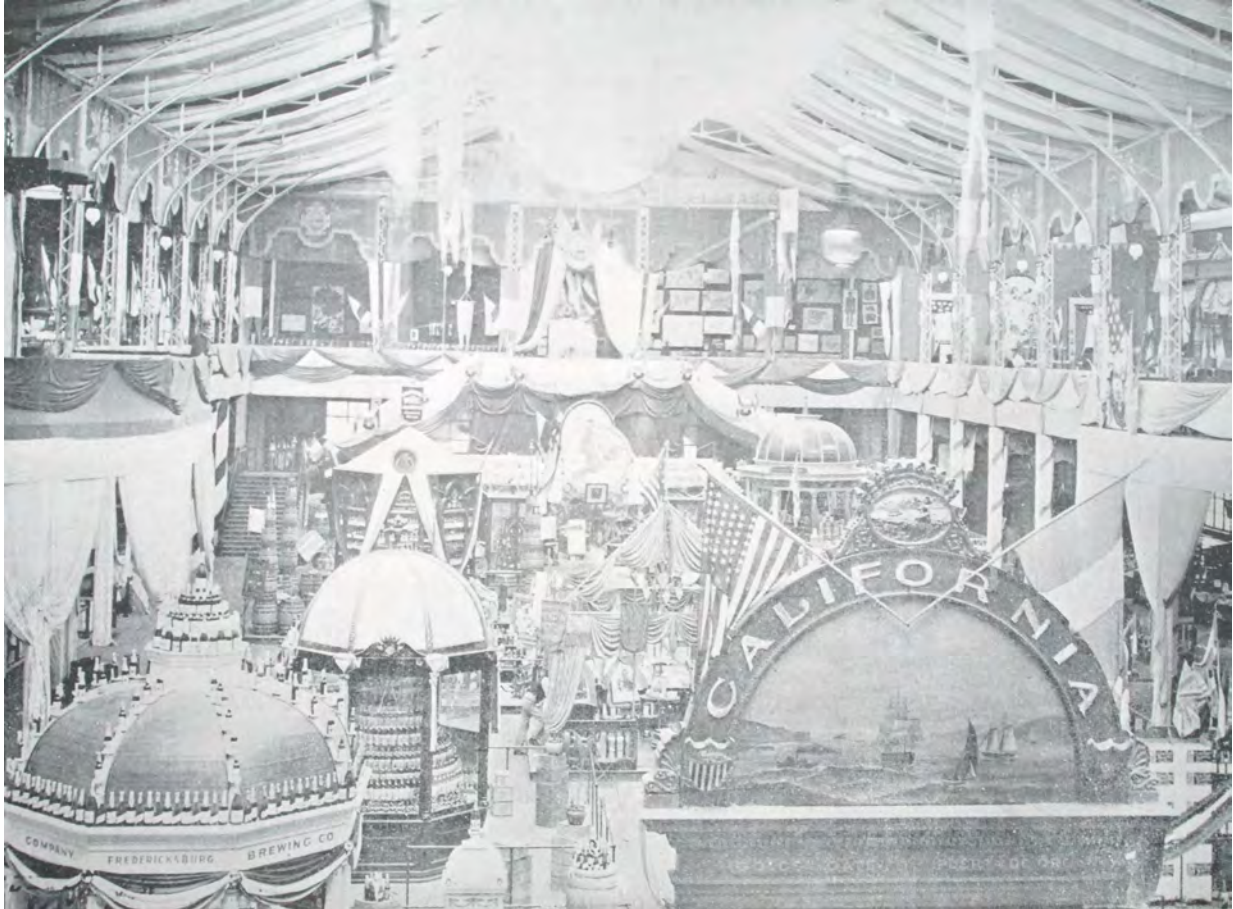


FIGURE 6 A collection of commodities in the Expo. Alberto G. Valdeavellano, “Vista General de la Sección de los Estados Unidos y en Especial la de California (Este.)” 1897. Source: Pierson Fils, *Catalogo Ilustrado*.

elegant façade and its spacious salons,” an article insisted, “where our industrial, artistic, and literary products in all of their multiple forms and variable subjects will soon be exhibited.”⁹⁶ Through the use of displays to the buildings that housed commodities, the Central American Exposition was a celebration of a consumer culture that it helped to foster. Like museums and the vista of *escaparates*, the Expo helped forge a new optic

⁹⁵ See, for example, *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, Jan. 23, 1897, p. 1.

⁹⁶ *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, March 20, 1897, p. 2.

with which future consumption was experienced in the twentieth-century. The displays found within the exhibition halls provided a template for consumer practices whereby shoppers would recreate the act of browsing at items through shop windows and store proprietors ordered their wares in a similar fashion.

Spatially, the 1897 Expo was held in the south end of the capital. While the so-called urban transformation initiated by the Liberal Reforms ultimately amounted to the appropriation of Church properties and their conversion into government offices for the first two decades after 1871, the Expo was part of a new urban transition. During the 1880s, the municipality annexed a numbers of cantons to the city's south, including Independencia, Ciudad Vieja and Villa de Guadalupe. In 1890, Cantón Exposición was formed to house the Guatemalan Pavilion from the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris. In honour of Paris, state engineer Claudio Urrutia broke from Guatemalan urban tradition by constructing streets diagonally as opposed to the well-established North-South trajectory, thus creating *rutas* and *vias* to complement the existing *calles* and *avenidas*.⁹⁷ By 1897, the space was being utilized by the Expo, along the grandiose Boulevard 30 de Junio. As will be examined more completely in Chapter Five, the southward expansion of the city and consequent growth of suburbs spatially segregated the Guatemalan capital as urban space came to visually represent social hierarchies. Moreover, inclinations towards zones committed to consumption and honouring the commodity form ossified in the decades after the Expo as urban space was increasing predisposed to aiding the circulation of commodities.

⁹⁷ Gellert, *Ciudad de Guatemala*, pp. 58-59.

The Modern Prometheus: Rafael Spínola and Commodity Worship

Perhaps the most exuberant praise for the order and brilliance of commodity display was extolled by Rafael Spínola, one of the fin-de-siècle's most partisan advocates of the liberal regime in Guatemala. Spínola inherited the language of Catholic piety and applied it his vision of a secular modern culture replete with commodities. Chapter Two discussed the manner in which theological thinking was transformed within liberal Guatemala. Through his allusion to Catholic cultural tropes and his invocation of wonder, Spínola's words hint at the discursive continuity that persisted as the "conservative citadel" gave way to the liberal order. Spínola's world was animated by myth and religious intonations that came to describe the rapidly changing world. He grounded his descriptions of commodity culture in existing signifiers that resonated with *capitalinos* familiar with the language of theological worship. As such, mysticism and an enchanted worldview persevered, applied not to theological considerations but to secularized objects such as the commodity form. In this manner, the religious temple yielded its power to inspire the faithful to the exposition hall, and later the department store and shopping mall.

From his rise to national prominence around 1894 until his death in 1901 following a difficult illness, Spínola was heralded as "a youth of exceptional talent and well-cultivated intelligence" who "handles the quill with great success".⁹⁸ He had been the subject of political persecution for his views but even his detractors were forced to reconcile themselves to his fierce talent as an author and orator.⁹⁹ Spínola, a master of prose, provided not only rhetorical legitimacy to the state but also bolstering civic-

⁹⁸ *El Ferrocarril*, April 13, 1894, p. 2.

⁹⁹ A. Macías del Real, "Artículos y Discursos" *La Ilustración Guatemalteca*, Jan. 15, 1897, p. 187.

mindedness amongst those in positions of power. Indeed, it was none other than Spínola who planted the idea of an annual celebration of the Greek goddess of wisdom Minerva in the mind of Estrada Cabrera in 1899, which became the Minervalias consecrated every October in honour of public education until the government collapsed in 1920 (for more on the Minervalias, see Chapter Seven).¹⁰⁰

On the 15th of March, 1897, Rafael Spínola stood before the assembled collection of dignitaries, diplomats, participants, and the general public and opened the Expo. His prose was insightful and packed with allusions that proudly betrayed any attempts to conceal his positivist biases. After welcoming the guests to “the great festival of peace and progress,” Spínola alerted those assembled, “At this moment the submarine cable, shaking under the waves of the ocean, is announcing to the entire world that the dial of our history has just finished pointing at a solemn hour.” He continued, relating the human spirit as “this Atlas of modern times” that “similar to that king of whom the fabled Greeks spoke to us, goes forth with an immense sky upon its shoulders.” In an act of human mimicry of the Divine, “Every exposition that opens is a species of new genesis that escapes from the hands of man,” explains Spínola. “God created the world, the great cosmos, and the human creature—the image of God—has attempted to imitate His work by constructing small cosmos or quasi-worlds in the form of expositions.” the wordsmith writes. He equates human ingenuity with Prometheus of Greek lore who stole fire from the gods and delivered it to man upon the punishment of being chained to the rocks of the Caucasus for eternity while vultures devoured his entrails; nevertheless, proclaims Spínola, “man has stolen his fire from heaven!” It is from nature that humanity draws the

¹⁰⁰ See Flavio Rojas Lima, “La ciudad de Guatemala como foco de poder: 1898-1944,” *La Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción: 230 años de historia*, Ana María Urruela Villacorta de Quezada (ed.) (Guatemala: Grupo Financiero de Occidente, 2006), pp. 116-117.

resources that power its world: “the forces of nature folding themselves to human calculation, submissive and docile to its will.” Illustrating such declarations, Spínola proclaimed,

from the utilization of the waterfall with which the wheel of the simple mill was moved, until the usage of the mysterious electric fluid with which suns are formed to illuminate its nights and provide all of the clarity of the daytime; suns yes, so authentic and bright as this splendid luminal suspended above the planet that we inhabit.

Through technological mimicry of God’s work of nature, humanity has created a world which can only be understood and described through references to the natural muses that inspired it. The commodity form extends from the battle against nature—from “the hand of man against nature”—which in itself, serves as inspiration that humanity obtains from God.

Shifting from Divine inspiration to the commodity form, if nature and man are God’s two greatest creations then, Spínola suggests, science and art are the two eternal forces that drive progress: “Combine the two sets of terms and you shall obtain the vast infinite array of marvels that go to be accommodated in every one of the naves of this vast temple of human progress.” The halls of the Exposition that hold the commodities—the “products of Industry”—are described as a place of worship. “We open the ivory doors of this temple and penetrate its interior, full of mystical devotion,” he assured the crowd.¹⁰¹ Spínola’s description of consumer and industrial goods echoes Marx’s description of commodity fetishism and the manner in which obsession with commodities

¹⁰¹ Rafael Spínola, “Discurso pronunciado por Rafael Spínola, en nombre del Gobierno al inaugurarse la Primera Exposición Centro-Americana en Guatemala, el día 15 de Marzo de 1897,” *Catálogo Ilustrado y Lista Oficial de Recompensas de la Exposición Centro-Americana é Internacional*, (Guatemala: Tipografía Nacional, 1899), pp. i-iii.

obscure the social relations of production that brought them into being.¹⁰² At the base of commodity fetishism is a deep-seeded sense of awe that the commodity form inspires; the commodity, then, begins to contest ground with organized religion as a new source of



FIGURE 7 Bicycles in the English exhibit. Alberto G. Valdeavellano, “Vista General de la Exhibición Inglesa,” 1897. Source: Pierson Fils, *Catalogo Ilustrado*.

secular worship. “Behold,” Spínola declares, acknowledging the wares housed within the Exposition hall, “the miracles of Science; that is to say, the vast museum of all of the secrets that man has stolen from the Creator.”¹⁰³ Borrowing Catholic allusions, the commodity form became evidence of the miracle of human ingenuity, shrouded in mystery within the “altars” and “immaculate vestals” of temples of commodity worship:

¹⁰² See Marx, *Capital*, Chapter One.

¹⁰³ Spínola, “Discurso,” p. ii.

at first the Exposition grounds, later the arcades of the commercial district, Guatemala City's Sexta Avenida, and shopping mall, as discussed in the next chapter.¹⁰⁴

Phantasmagoria and the Economic Crisis of 1897

Rafael Spínola's discussion of the near miraculous nature of modernity and the commodity form resonated within wider discussions of modernity elsewhere. Walter Benjamin's unfinished opus, *The Arcades Project* as well as essays inspired by the material buried within it, draw on a series of motifs to illustrate the functioning of phantasmagoria in nineteenth-century Paris. Most of these allegorical characters and constructions are now well-known to those familiar with Benjamin: the Parisian arcades, iron construction, the flâneur, and Haussmannization.¹⁰⁵ The concept of phantasmagoria itself is metaphor for optical illusion, one Benjamin effectively borrowed from Marx.¹⁰⁶ Phantasmagorias, better known as magic lanterns, were popular eighteenth and nineteenth-century devices that projected images such as ghosts and demons upon walls or smoke, much to the delight of frightened audiences. Benjamin used phantasmagoria—in a sense similar to Marx's fetishism of commodities—to account for the wonder and awe afforded to the markers of capitalist modernity, which served to mask the horrors of industrial capitalism.

Both David Harvey and Patrice Higonnet have expanded on Benjamin's use of phantasmagoria in detailing cultural, social, and spatial histories of Paris. Harvey is quick to remind us that phantasmagoria and fetish—those things that possess “magical, mysterious, and usually hidden powers to shape and transform the world around us”—

¹⁰⁴ Spínola, “Discurso,” p. iii.

¹⁰⁵ For elaboration, see Benjamin's 1939 version of “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” in Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*.

¹⁰⁶ Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, Robert C. Tucker (ed), (New York: Norton, 1972), p. 304.

have real attributes and are not merely imagined.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, as a geographer, Harvey demonstrates how space is transformed in manners that serve phantasmagoria, a concept that informs urban optics as understood in this dissertation. Similarly, Higonnet used phantasmagoria to detail the transformation of myth in the modern age, appending the caveat that myth served to bring understanding whereas phantasmagoria aids in deception.¹⁰⁸ We can take from this, then, that the modern optic and the images present in the modern age possess an element of pretense and masquerade.

The newspaper *La Nación* published an article in late 1896 in which the hopes that the Exposición Centro-Americana “has the success that we desire for it and that, without illusions nor phantasmagorias, it is truly able to obtain it” were expounded.¹⁰⁹ Well-wishing aside, many *capitalinos*, especially in the opposition press, denounced the discussion of the Expo’s wonders, suggesting they merely concealed social ills and economic crisis. Like the contradictory nature of the police at the fair, these ailments placed the order in which goods were arranged into tension with an accompanying asymmetry for which the 1897 Expo is usually remembered.

The delays in the construction of exhibition halls brought criticism to the Expo’s planners who were often voraciously defended by supporters. A. Macias del Real, a writer for *La Ilustración Guatemalteca*, taunted critics and challenged them to visit the fair grounds after the first couple of warehouses had been erected some six months before

¹⁰⁷ David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity*, (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 55.

¹⁰⁸ Patrice Higonnet, *Paris: Capital of the World*, Arthur Goldhammer (trans.), (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 6.

¹⁰⁹ “La Exposición de 1897” from *La Nación* reprinted in *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, Jan. 23, 1897, p. 5.

the Expo's first inauguration."¹¹⁰ Great efforts were undertaken to assure the public that the fair grounds would be completed and that the Expo would be a complete success. Yet assurances often betrayed their authors for they served to draw attention to shortcomings. The loyal press denounced what they saw as malignant propaganda, while promising that the grounds would soon be completed.¹¹¹ Great efforts were undertaken to ensure that the inauguration was flawless and, after the Central Committee was replaced in late 1896, electric lights were installed at the grounds to permit nocturnal labour.¹¹² Despite the full inauguration arriving two months later than originally scheduled, defenders continued to decry critics with one editorial arguing, "What we can assure with total certainty is that our Competition did not bring the fiasco to the country that so many timid and malicious spirits desired."¹¹³ Nevertheless, denigration continued to be heaped upon the government, the Central Committee, and the idea of the Expo itself.

Two of the most common censures arose from the joint concerns that the fair was too expensive and that the funds could have been better spent, especially during a severe economic crisis. Concerns about commodity circulation had been voiced early in the year with reports that "Business has been without movement with the exception of some sales generated by gifts for New Year's."¹¹⁴ The editors of *La República* were amongst the most ardent critics. Despite "what comes adorned with all the bright ornaments of luxury and ostentations of apparent progress," they suggested, the planning of the Expo was "a calamity in perspective." They continued, arguing that the high expenditures were

¹¹⁰ A. Macías del Real, "Revista Quincenal," *La Ilustración Guatemalteca*, Sept. 15, 1896, p. 54. For similar sentiments, see "Estudios sobre la Exposición" *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, May 22, 1897, p. 3.

¹¹¹ See "La Exposición," *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, Feb. 27, 1897, p. 2.

¹¹² "La Exposición," *La Ilustración Guatemalteca*, Jan. 1, 1897, p. 175.

¹¹³ "La Exposición," *Boletín de la Exposición Centro-Americana*, p. 3.

¹¹⁴ A. Macías de Real, "Resumen Quincenal," *La Ilustración Guatemalteca*, Jan. 15, 1897, p. 192.

doing little to prevent the fair from “being a complete fiasco,” contending that “it should have been selected to celebrate a time of abundance and general well-being instead of improvising it when we have so many outstanding public works that deplete our resources.” The independent press, it suggested, should have been more vocal in its opposition years earlier, when they were blinded by the dazzle of abundant money and capital. Indeed, they likened the Expo to a father who was so spellbound by the reproductive power of capital that he spent his money investing in a company while his children starved. They concluded with the suggestion that the “exorbitant expense” would result in foreign exhibitors being delighted to “lighten our purses” as locals purchased their wares.¹¹⁵

Elsewhere, articles in *La República* disparaged what they viewed as a waste of public money,¹¹⁶ while their most pointed critique was reserved for the illuminated fountain that greeted visitors arriving at the grounds. Gilberto Valenzuela, whose denunciation of the Expo’s organizers was analyzed in the Introduction of this dissertation, reasoned that the *f fuente luminoso* (illuminated fountain) had been advertized as a gimmick to attract visitors even though it seldom was in operation.¹¹⁷ The editors of *La República*, however, attacked the fountain on more pragmatic grounds, questioning whether “In place of water and marvelous fountains that only give pleasure to the audiences at the Exposition grounds, would it not be a thousand times better if this water arrived in the wells of those who have paid for it? This way, miasmas could be avoided

¹¹⁵ “La Exposición,” *La República*, Oct. 9, 1896, p. 1.

¹¹⁶ “La Exposición,” *La República*, May 10, 1897, p. 1.

¹¹⁷ “Exposición Centro-Americana é Internacional, reverse side, Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas No. 1989, Year 1897].

instead of exponentially augmenting the number of infirmities to the point where they develop into a grave epidemic during these most dangerous months of the year.”¹¹⁸

Compounding the criticism, an anonymous letter—attributed to Francisco Lainfiesta—was circulated in which the author complains of the two million pesos spent on the Expo when the nation should be concerned with the completion of the Northern Railway.¹¹⁹ Several years later, in 1904, a national exposition was held at the grounds that once hosted the 1897 Expo. Assessing the earlier fair, commentators acknowledged President Reyna Barrios’ patriotic idealism but concluded that organizational errors and the broad ambition of the event failed to fulfill the economic hopes of the country.¹²⁰ Despite pronouncements that celebrated the spirit of emulation, the circulation of commodities, the attraction of capital investment and immigrants, and the heralding of progress, large segments of the urban population held serious reservations about the viability of the 1897 Central American Exposition despite the phantasmagoria that shrouded the event. The disorder that operated in unison with the symmetry helped to reveal the gross miscalculations of the affair. Although planners attempted to minimize the inherent contradictions, detractors deprecated their attempts “to throw golden dust over the eyes of those who have seen, examined, and censured what is in the Competition grounds.”¹²¹

Perhaps the mask of peace, social tranquility, and harmony was most radically unveiled during the closing days of the Expo when a serious social revolution erupted to

¹¹⁸ *La República* reprinted in “Ecos de la Prensa,” *La Ilustración Guatemalteca*, April 1, 1897, p. 252.

¹¹⁹ “El Señor Casanova y la Exposición Centro-Americana,” October 1896, 3, Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas No. 1989, Year 1897].

¹²⁰ “¿Triunfo ó Fracaso?” *Boletín de la Exposición*, October 4, 1904, p. 1.

¹²¹ “Notas de la Exposición,” *La República*, April 9, 1897, p. 1.

the west of the capital in the Department of San Marcos led by Daniel Fuentes Barrios, Feliciano Aguilar, and Próspero Morales. In his September 1897 call to arms, Fuentes Barrios decried the shameless tyranny of President Reyna Barrios who had suspended the Asamblea Nacional and ruled by decree since the beginning of June. The new dictatorship “today slaps us across the face and attempts to forever drown our sacred liberties,” Fuentes Barrios affirmed in his explanation for the armed uprising.¹²²

An impending revolt against Reyna Barrios had been simmering for months stemming from the President’s increasingly authoritarian tendencies. In February 1897, an armed uprising of 150 men at La Concepción near the Salvadoran frontier was crushed.¹²³ Elements of the press lamented that reports of the insurrection would be transmitted by cable abroad, testing the confidence of foreign capitalists.¹²⁴ A feud between Reyna Barrios and his Ministro de Guerra (Minister of War) Próspero Morales, ostensibly about the latter’s candidacy for the presidency in 1898, led to Morales being demoted to the Ministro de Educación Pública (Minister of Public Education). The political unrest spread throughout the capital. Emphasis on the 1897 Exposición Centro-Americana could not have “distracted our countrymen from political concerns that recently developed and sprung up even among those indifferent to public affairs.”¹²⁵ Throughout the duration of the Expo, a series of crises erupted whereby funds were diverted from the civil service to hasten the fairgrounds’ completion, resulting in wages

¹²² Daniel Fuentes Barrios, “Guatemaltecos: A la armas!” Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas, No. 1989, Year 1897].

¹²³ “Finances of Guatemala” *New York Times*, Feb. 27, 1897, p. 6.

¹²⁴ *La Ilustración Guatemalteca*, Feb. 15, 1897, p. 215.

¹²⁵ *La República* reprinted in “Ecos de la Prensa,” *La Ilustración Guatemalteca*, March 15, 1897, p. 240.

for government employees being in arrears for upwards of five months.¹²⁶ In early September, the economic depression led to the failure of some of Guatemala's largest coffee-exporting and import houses as Morales threatened a civil uprising against the Reyna Barrios regime.¹²⁷

With the outbreak of violence, official publications disparaged Fuentes Barrios and Morales as "enemies of order," insisting that "the rigour of the law shall descend upon them" as the government quickly restored order.¹²⁸ As the city of San Marcos fell to the revolutionaries, Feliciano Aguilar, the President of the dissolved Asamblea Legislativa, issued a statement addressed to Quetzaltecos from the country's second largest city imploring them to defend the constitution by continuing "the struggle undertaken against the tyranny of the current ruler."¹²⁹ Ironically, the rebellion made use of the technologies championed by Reyna Barrios, emitting telegraphs to report on military successes.¹³⁰ The Administration responded with a decree protecting telegraph lines and threatening military punishment against any telegraph workers found disclosing, altering, or delaying telegraph reports.¹³¹

Within weeks of the capture of Quetzaltenango, the city had been liberated by forces loyal to Reyna Barrios and the leaders of the rebellion fled to Mexico and, later, California. In December 1897, the government consolidated its grip on power and commenced exacting retribution upon rebel prisoners. Reports emerged that told of flogging being revived as a punishment for the upwards of 200 captured rebels being

¹²⁶ "Guatemala in a Bad Way," *New York Times*, June 5, 1897, p. 4.

¹²⁷ "Guatemala in a Bad Way," *New York Times*, Sept 10, 1897, p. 7.

¹²⁸ *El Guatemalteco*, Suplemento al número 95, Sept. 11, 1897.

¹²⁹ Feliciano Aguilar, "Quezatecos" Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas No. 1989, Year 1897].

¹³⁰ Daniel Fuentes B., "Telegrama de la Revolución," Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas No. 1989, Year 1897].

¹³¹ José María Reina Barrios, "Decreto Número 536," *El Guatemalteco*, Sept. 18, 1897.

detained in the Guatemala City penitentiary.¹³² Unsurprisingly—and characteristic of the phantasmagoria that enveloped the 1897 Expo—the government categorically denied the charges.

Conclusion

The 1897 Exposición Centro-Americana was beset by contradictions. Intended as a celebration of progress, order, and well-being, it was plagued by economic depression, poor planning, and eventually a narrowly-averted revolution. The tension between symmetry and disorder characterized much of the proceedings. Through their desires to mimic the grandeur of Parisian commodity culture in the name of emulation, the Central Committee unwittingly revealed many of the social and economic shortcomings of the much-touted export economy as desired by modernizing liberals. So while commodities and imitation arcades, illuminated fountains and kitsch all alluded to material prosperity, the phantasmagorias of the Exposition were constantly revealed to be partial illusions that masked social disparity.

Nevertheless, the 1897 Exposition significantly marked the ascension of the commodity form as the dominant marker of modernity, a position that it held throughout the twentieth century despite social strife and, later, disintegration. With the advent of commodities, alongside the bourgeoisie's obsession with capital, a new optic was created that gave rise to "fables of abundance" and the phantasmagoric delusion of general well-being in Guatemala City. Through the commodity form, a new way of seeing, organizing, ordering, displaying, and showcasing came into being that weighed heavily on popular conceptions of the capital city during the next century. Yet, as the 1897 Exposición Centro-Americana revealed, the optic generated through consumer culture

¹³² "Flogging in Guatemala," *New York Times*, Dec. 5, 1897, p. 2.

was always to be tempered by the social relations of production—and the consequences that they produced—lurking behind the fetishized marvel of commodities.

Chapter Four

Enchantment, Fetish, and the Accumulation of Useless Things: The Ascendency of the Commodity Form and Its Domination

The old Teatro Colón, once found on 11th Avenue in what is now Zone One, was the central focus for Guatemala City's evening pomp and cultural spectacle from the second-half of the nineteenth century until its destruction in the earthquakes of 1917. The site of plays, operas, and concert recitals, it drew large crowds of the city's well-to-do, offering them opportunities to enjoy both the theatric displays and engage in their own forms of social pageantry. In early March 1894, the Great Enireb, a magician and illusionist, performed at the theatre with his assistant Miss Eva D'Konin, winning plaudits from the press in attendance and leaving the public extremely satisfied.¹ While his "La Sibila de Esparta" illusion was applauded for its beauty, he received the loudest cheers and hollers for an act titled "the wandering sleepwalker floating in air." In it, D'Konin was first hypnotized and then made to lay horizontal to the stage floor, supported by beams under her head and feet. She continued in her hypnotic trance as the Great Enireb removed the post under her feet, followed by that under her head. While men from the audience swung iron batons under and over D'Konin's body to demonstrate that neither strings nor other devices supported her, the assistant lay motionless, suspended in mid-air and seemingly defying gravity.

Almost a decade later, an *hoja suelta* was circulated advertising a mid-May 1903 event at the same theatre venue for "the real devil" Mr. Wood and his "diabolical mysteries."² Like the Great Enireb, Mr. Wood was an illusionist who entertained Guatemalan audiences through a series of performances during that year's rainy season.

¹ "El Gran Enireb," *El Ferrocarril*, March 10, 1894, p 3,

² "Teatro Colón," Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas no. 1993, Year 1903].

And Mr. Wood, too, performed an illusion where his assistant Edna—“the woman who flies”—was held suspended in the air while lying horizontal. Only slightly demystifying the spectacle, the advertisement suggests the act is accomplished through the powers of magnetism and hypnotism: “not fiction” but a science “that really exists.”

Reflecting the incredulous performances from the stage of the Teatro Colón, Guatemala City’s daily newspapers, *hojas sueltas*, and journals advertised new “scientific” breakthroughs in health and well-being. Modern pharmaceutical companies marketed products through Guatemalan distributors that claimed to cure any host of ailment—physiological or invented—that may affect a health-conscious and stricken urban population. J.A. Dougherty & Cía’s Emporio de Luz on Ninth Street, for example, sold Richardson’s Magnetic-Galvanic Battery, claiming to be “the most complete medical and scientific triumph of the nineteenth century.” Placing the battery—shaped like a medallion—to one’s skin, nerves and muscles were said to respond to Richardson’s invention. “Almost all infirmities are radically cured by the Richardson Battery,” the advertisement assured, explaining, “Just as lightning purifies the air, so electricity purifies the blood.”³

Elsewhere, Uranium Wine Pesqui, available at all pharmacies and drugstores in the capital, was said to cure diabetes.⁴ Piladoras de Davis could be taken to relieve constipation, headaches, and indigestion.⁵ Neurosine Prunier promised “wonderful results” in alleviating neurological tensions such as neurasthenia.⁶ I. Sierra y Cía, another pharmacy, sold Específico de Henry, a formula said to cure impotency, seminal spillages,

³ “Las Baterías Magnético-Galvánicas de Richardson,” *Las Noticias*, Dec. 1, 1891, p. 1.

⁴ *Diario de Centro-América*, May 27, 1904, pp. 2-3.

⁵ *El Democrata*, July 27, 1922, pp. 3-4.

⁶ *Diario de Centro-América*, Feb. 13, 1896, p. 3.

and problems caused by sexual excesses during youth, adulthood, or old age.⁷ Perhaps the most consistent health product available in Guatemala for decades was Scott Emulsion, a remedy composed of cod liver oil with lime and soda hypophosphates, and glycerin, used to cure tuberculosis, anemia, rickets, and scrofula. So reputedly effective was Scott Emulsion that the company published a letter from Archbishop Ricardo Casanova y Estrada's personal secretary, Presbítero José M. Ramírez Colón, from August 1908, in which the priest communicated that the Archbishop used Scott Emulsion on various occasions and wished prosperity for its producers and blessed them in the name of the Lord.⁸ Indeed, as Miguel Ángel Asturias wrote in *Hombres de Maíz*, "When a man goes into a pharmacy with a toothache and comes out feeling better, it seems a place of enchantment, like it did to him the time before last."⁹

Between illusionists and pharmacists, charlatans proliferated throughout fin-de-siècle Guatemala City. Like the chimeras of the Great Enireb and Mr. Wood, the commodities that lined the shelves of pharmacies, department stores, and specialty shops in particular districts of the capital during the fin-de-siècle appeared to be suspended in the air, often confusing science and rationale with fetishism, mythical thinking, wonder, and marvel. With promises of well-being, these commodities hung unbound to meaningful social relations in any tangible way to Guatemalan consumers who strolled past shop windows. Nevertheless, they served as concrete evidence that the national policies of liberalism wrought structural changes that promised consumer modernity and

⁷ *El Jeneral Barrios*, Feb. 24, 1883, p. 4.

⁸ *Electra*, Sept. 15 1909, back cover; *Electra*, Aug. 1908, back cover; *Diario de Centro-América*, May 27, 1904.

⁹ Miguel Ángel Asturias, *Men of Maize*, Gerald Martin (trans), (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993), p. 216.

altered cultural production in the city. Akin to pharmaceutical products, commodity culture numbed the senses of *capitalinos* through enchantment with modernity.

This chapter examines the culture of consumption in Guatemala City, the spaces, social practices, and myths that it created, and how the commodity form gave rise to expectations of the future. Rather than floating in the air as it often appeared, commodity culture was grounded by the relations of production in the Guatemalan countryside. In particular, profits extracted from rural coffee and banana labour commanded a flood of expendable incomes for privileged *capitalinos*, fuelling a hitherto unforeseen consumer culture. Not coincidentally did modern consumer culture emerge in the Guatemalan capital within a decade of Guatemala's conjoining with global coffee markets. Moreover, commodity culture was integral in redefining citizenship in Guatemala, placing consumers into local and regional dialogues about participation in the modern nation. This is especially true for women, who through consumerism were integrated into a burgeoning conversation about what it meant to be modern.

Chapter Four continues the arguments put forth in the previous two chapters that the emergence of modern culture did not foster the dissipation of magical thinking, it merely reanimated mysticism in modern guises. Tales abound detailing the superstitions of indigenous culture in Guatemala, often shared by urban dwellers to bewildered foreigners. Daniel Wilkinson's *Silence on the Mountain* relates narratives of the wonder expressed by indigenous Guatemalans upon their first contact with new technologies or ideas. One colleague of Wilkinson reported, "When they brought the first radio to La Igualdad, all the people gathered around. They had never seen anything like it. And someone asked if there were little dolls inside the box singing!" Another friend told him

of unworldly rural workers who struggled to comprehend technologies often taken for granted in the capital:

If you told them the simplest story, maybe just about buying a dress in the city, they would be in awe. Tell them about cars, or about how many cars there were in the city, they'd get awed and be afraid to go to the city. When we installed a toilet in the *casa patronal* and one of the house servants was shown how to use it, he thought it was a miracle. 'Look, it's eternal water!'¹⁰

Such anecdotes are often understood in racialized spatial terms, whereby the indigenous countryside is paternalistically imbued with fascination and punch-lines mock the discourse of magic and misunderstanding. In contrast, a whitened urban population, bloated with Enlightenment rationale and scientific knowledge, carefully deduces calculated explanations for modern phenomenon.

Miguel Ángel Asturias, however, inverted this binary when he shared memories from his youth to an assembled audience at the University of San Carlos in 1966. He recalled the German traders from his youth who circulated commodities throughout the country and depended on the mail for their livelihood. These Germans bestowed on the postal system near miraculous qualities as they obsessed over timely deliveries and Asturias humoured the audience with the suggestion that to him, as a child, it was not indigenous people who were superstitious and engaged in magical thinking but, rather, the European traders.¹¹ Examining the preoccupation the newspaper editors had for publishing the latest shipping news or the advertisements for pharmaceutical cure-alls discussed above, one may be forgiven for sharing Asturias' position.

¹⁰ Daniel Wilkinson, *Silence on the Mountain: Stories of Terror, Betrayal, and Forgetting in Guatemala*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002), pp. 96 and 93.

¹¹ Miguel Ángel Asturias et al, *Coloquio con Miguel Ángel Asturias*, (Guatemala: Editorial Universitaria, 1968), pp. 19-20.

In addition to fulfilling an important function in modern experience—helping to create “fables of abundance”—commodities also altered of urban spaces and everyday social practices. The spatial design of Guatemala City underwent significant renovation to accommodate changes in consumer practice. In the old core, the blocks immediately south of the Plaza Mayor expanded their social significance and La Sexta Avenida—long a corridor of importance—became the focus of the dawning commodity culture. It was not just the presence of department stores and arcades that transformed La Sexta and codified a new urban optic; rather, it was a new form of social practice that gradually surpassed the one-time popularity of strolls through the plaza. The construction of widened sidewalks, the consolidation of display optics and advertisements, and the location along La Sexta of new venues expressly tied to modernity such as movie theatres all contributed to new forms of urban behavior, perhaps best captured in the act of *sextear*; that is, the act of strolling, loitering, and window shopping along Sixth Avenue.

Whereas an avalanche of commodities and rapidly transforming fashions threatened to bury *capitalinos* under panoply of wares and styles, concerns were melted away by new ways of ordering the modern world. Chapter Three discussed the role played by display windows in this regard. But even more common, newspaper advertisements soon forged then standardized the language of consumption, repeating the same motifs and phrases *ad nauseum*. Advertisement pages became the refuge for otherwise unrelated objects—Parisian-style empanadas and Canadian Club Whiskey littered together with Columbia Bicycles and cinematic exhibitions at Salon Valenti—willing into existence a cohesive logic for consumer modernity from thin air. Heaps of unrelated commodities were codified through advertisements to form a seemingly consistent modern culture.

Relatively little has been written on the material history of Latin America particularly in the realm of commodity circulation, a shortcoming even more readily apparent in discussions of the Central American isthmus. The silences within the historiography betray the vast regional, national, and international movement of goods and commodities within Guatemala City, a practice that carried over from the colonial era and expanded into a defining feature of twentieth-century urban life. Nevertheless, commodities and consumption served as cultural points of reference, a touchstone for understanding the experience of urban modernity and the reciprocal outcome of the much-documented exploitation of workers in the countryside that has dominated historiographic conversation in Guatemala.

Commenting on the absence of historical analyses of imported goods in Latin America, historians Benjamin Orlove and Arnold Bauer observed the stark contrast in attention devoted to the export economy and that granted to the arrival of commodities from abroad. This omission, they suggest, is all the more apparent when one considers that Latin American elite consume more and invest less than the wealthy in regions with comparable income disparities.¹² These omissions force a historical reconsideration of urban culture and how foreign goods held allure over the imaginations of the regional bourgeoisie. More significantly, however, Néstor García Canclini has argued that the role of consumer has evolved significantly during the past century in its relationship to citizenship. Critically, he posits that, “For many men and women, especially youth, the questions specific to citizenship, such as how we inform ourselves and who represents our interests, are answered more often than not through private consumption of

¹² Benjamin Orlove and Arnold J. Bauer, “Giving Importance to Imports,” Benjamin Orlove (ed.) (ed.), *The Allure of the Foreign: Imported Goods in Postcolonial Latin America*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 3-4.

commodities and media offerings than through the abstract rules of democracy or through participation in discredited political organizations.”¹³ García Canclini suggests then that social participation is often mediated through consumption and that consumer culture provides a basic framework for social life, a perspective shared by Steven Bunker’s recent work on consumer culture in Mexico City.¹⁴ There is, no doubt, some basis for his contentions.

A recent oral history written by Deborah Levenson tells of a working class matriarch named María Cruz who came of age in the mid-1940s in Guatemala City. While Cruz had no recollection of the October Revolution of 1944—arguably the most important political event of the twentieth century—she remembered with detail the purchase of her first possessions: shoes and a Victrola record player. She explained to Levenson,

We [she and other young female employees] had our room and we’d practice dance steps! I was always happy listening to the radio in the kitchen. I liked Guatemalan music, no Mexican music, only marimba—12 Calle, Los Altos! I loved marimba! That’s where I met my first boyfriend, Miguel. We’d go dancing at the Porvenir de los Obreros. I sent to get a dress made. I bought a matching handbag, shoes and a pair of imported stockings.¹⁵

For young María Cruz, social participation in the urban environment was negotiated through consumer culture, whether consumption on Sexta Avenida, attending dances in the middle-class “New Look” women’s fashions, or attending Pedro Infante films at the Teatro Lux, an Art Deco cinema also located on La Sexta. García Canclini views

¹³ Néstor García Canclini, *Consumers and Citizens: Globalization and Multicultural Conflicts*, George Yúdice (trans.), (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 5.

¹⁴ Steven B. Bunker, *Creating Mexican Consumer Culture in the Age of Porfirio Díaz*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012), p. 2.

¹⁵ Quoted in Deborah T. Levenson, “Living Guatemala City, 1930s-2000s” *Securing the City: Neoliberalism, Space, and Insecurity in Postwar Guatemala*, Kevin Lewis O’Neill and Kedron Thomas (eds.), (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 29.

consumerism and citizenship as constantly interacting with one another. Where states and other national institutions fail to provide services for people and communities, the private sector (and, later, transnational corporate entities) has proven willing.¹⁶ While García Canclini is particularly interested in the late twentieth century, it is apparent that in Guatemala the intersection between these two constellations of social participation dates back to the nineteenth century and the defining of modern citizenship.

The Conservative Inheritance and the Dawning of Consumer Culture

Foreign travelers to Guatemala offer some of the most astute insights into urban dynamics. Visiting the Guatemalan capital in the 1850s, Arthur Morelet viciously criticized the city for its lack of modern amenities and consumerism, reporting,

The city is without a public promenade; it has no cafés, no reading room; nor, in fact, any places for reunion or for pleasure. It is equally destitute of a theatre, the lack of which is supplied by a kind of arena for bull fights... What is worse, the city is without a hotel of any kind, and the stranger, unless provided with good letters of introduction, is obliged to seek an asylum in one of the miserable *posada sin mesones*, veritable caravanseries, cut up into little, dark, dirty, dilapidated rooms, or rather pens, fetid, and infested with fleas, *niguas*, and all kinds of vermin, which are the resorts of the Indian marketmen or peddlers.¹⁷

He also explained that the city lacked commerce with no visual signs of the day's commencement before ten o'clock in the morning. "As soon as the shadows begin to shorten," he mentions further, "the wares exposed for sale are withdrawn within the shops, the doors are hermetically closed, and by eight o'clock in the evening only the watchmen are found in the streets."¹⁸ For his part, Morelet blamed persistent civil war within the region and poor roads for the city's material shortcomings, concluding that the

¹⁶ García Canclini, *Consumers and Citizens*, p. 24.

¹⁷ Arthur Morelet, *Travels in Central America*, (New York: Leypoldt, Holy & Williams, 1871), 406.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 391-392.

transportation of goods was so slow and expensive that their value was increased exponentially to would-be consumers.

Still, despite Morelet's criticisms, newspapers from the 1850s and 1860s reveal that commodity culture and the advertisements that announced it were not the inventions of the Liberal reforms but predated them by decades. Newspapers from the 1860s find their back-pages rife with publicities announcing shipping news, hotels, tailors, and bathhouses.¹⁹ In an April 1862 edition of *El Noticioso*, the Fitz-Gibbon's Photographic Gallery—"The oldest in Central America"—was advertising that "due to the important and recent improvements that have been made in photography, I can now take portraits of whichever type you desire and as nicely and perfect as any other taken in the United States or Europe". Yet commodity culture was still in its infancy. But change was afoot. In the same issue as Fitz-Gibbon's ad, Enrique Palacios, Secretaria de la Sociedad Económica of Guatemala, announced that the organization had agreed to purchase a quantity of coffee seedbeds for their distribution amongst the population—the crop that radically altered regional political economy in the coming decades and through which the commodity era was truly inaugurated—while drawing particular attention to poor sectors of society who may want to plant the coffee on their land.²⁰

Even as coffee production slowly transformed the political economy of commodity culture, the concerns expressed by Morelet were echoed throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as Guatemalans struggled to find solutions to what they perceived as local backwardness compared to the material wealth of foreign countries. Writing in 1879, Julio Rossignon expressed his delight in how much Guatemala had

¹⁹ *El Noticioso*, Jan. 18, 1862, p. 6.

²⁰ *El Noticioso*, April 19, 1862, p. 4.

progressed in the past twenty years and through coffee and sugar production, “our country has only begun to enter into the great industrial and commercial movement of the century and that it should persevere, that is to say, forever go forward”²¹ Like Morelet, Rossignon believed that commerce would be positively affected by the expansion of transportation lines, particularly the eventual opening of the Panama Canal which he argued will challenge the monopoly of the Panama Railroad which consumed Guatemala’s earnings.

Rossignon’s observations reveal that the nature of Guatemala City’s relationship to commodities was going to be mediated through the export of agricultural goods and the importation of foreign goods. Thus, until the mid-twentieth century, Guatemala lacked a domestic manufacturing and industrial sector with the exception of beer distilleries, cement processing, and textile weaving. Merchants and storeowners were required, then, to look abroad for commodities and the national government paid close attention to ensuring the circulation of foreign commodities into Guatemala.

State reports from the 1870s and 1880s repeatedly bemoan the barriers to commodity circulation such as lamentable roads that were too frequently inundated and rendered impassable during the annual rains, stranding merchandise in warehouses along Guatemala’s Pacific coast ports and reinforcing the need for more reliable railway transportation.²² The reliance on foreign manufacture and import placed great importance on local merchants in the city who often engaged in both the import of goods and agro-export of products such as coffee. Dependence on external suppliers and markets placed great importance on the arrival and departure of steamships, leading storeowners to

²¹ Julio Rossignon, “El porvenir material de Guatemala,” *El Porvenir*, Sept. 6, 1879, pp. 113-114.

²² *Memoria de la Secretaria de Hacienda y Crédito Público, 1880*, pp. 3 and 6.

include shipping news in their advertisements.²³ The Novelties Department Store of Rosenthal é Hijos announced in an 1891 notice, “Every steamship that touches this Republic carries merchandise destined for this store,” thus affirming its place in the hierarchy of Guatemalan importers, whereas La Perla still promised almost twenty years later “Novelties with every steamship!”²⁴ The recent arrival of different goods warranted announcements that trumpeted the novelty and rarity of particular items or styles.²⁵

Consumerism in the Early Liberal Era

Although the liberal governments since the early 1870s established infrastructure to promote agro-export and increase disposable income, problems affecting the importation of commodities proliferated then ebbed, only to recur again. Instability in coffee production, export markets, and earnings throughout the 1870s and 1880s created a host of dilemmas. Even if coffee exports were high in a given year, foreign manufacturers were unwilling to extend credit to Guatemalan importers or high bills of exchange paralyzed would-be retailers. Or worse, as was the case when coffee prices deflated in 1883 and earnings dropped, foreign merchandise imported the previous two years languished in “the lavish stores established over the past few years in this capital” where they sat as constant reminders of economic woes.²⁶ Solutions to these quandaries were not necessarily forthcoming.

For the half century after the liberal reforms, the government’s principal source of state revenue was generated by tariffs and associated taxes placed on importations, which

²³ See for example *Diario de Centro-América*, Jan. 12, 1885, p. 3.

²⁴ *Las Noticias*, Dec. 15, 1891, p. 4; *Electra*, Nov. 1908, p. ii.

²⁵ *Diario de Centro-América*, May 20, 1896, p. 3.

²⁶ *Memoria con que el Sub-Secretario de Estado Encargado del Despacho de Hacienda y Crédito Público da cuenta a la Asamblea Nacional Lejislativa en los trabajos practicados durante el año de 1882*, (Guatemala: Tipografía “El Progreso,” 1883), p. 6.

generally exceeded export taxes. Infrastructure that might have abetted trade was often delayed due to low state finances from import and export taxes, completing a vicious cycle in which financial crises were often self-replicating. Left without other avenues, the government attempted to stimulate commerce by revising outdated import regulations and attempting to promote Guatemala's trade reputation abroad. Throughout the turbulent years of the late nineteenth century, the state Customs House extended tariff-free concessions on certain goods with the recognition that import earnings would be harmed but the trade of essential goods would continue.²⁷

Elsewhere, merchants and other organizations undertook measures to facilitate commerce. In 1880, Don Luis S. Andreu petitioned and organized to establish the Bolsa de Guatemala (Guatemalan Stock Exchange) to improve trade with the eventual goal of forming a Cámara de Comercio (Chamber of Commerce). The Bolsa was intended to be a locale where local businessmen and authorized agents could meet to facilitate mercantile transactions, "making this meeting place a central focus, if one can say so, of the Republic's commercial business".²⁸ The Bolsa was inaugurated on October 4th, 1880 with its own telegraph, which it boasted would ease large business transactions and be instrumental in national commercial, industrial, and agricultural decisions.²⁹

Efforts were also made to educate a younger generation of entrepreneurs, merchants, and capitalists who would understand national commerce and create a suitable culture and climate for trade. In May 1892, the Escuela Nacional de Comercio (National

²⁷ During the depression that commenced in 1897, the Aduana General declared agricultural equipment and other goods free of duty. *Memoria de la Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público correspondiente al año de 1899 presentada á la Asamblea Nacional Legislativa en sus sesiones ordinarias de 1900*, (Guatemala: Tipografía Nacional, 1900), pp. 4-5.

²⁸ Los dos Foscarì, "La Bolsa de Guatemala," *El Porvenir*, July 31, 1880, p. 9.

²⁹ "Instalación de 'La Bolsa'," *El Porvenir*, Oct. 5, 1880, p. 79.

School of Business) was inaugurated which included a curriculum of fiscal accounting, mercantile law, political economy, commercial geography, and banking. Business degrees could be completed in three years, and the school offered night classes to students who laboured during the day.³⁰ Before long, students were graduating and publishing their theses on commerce and consumption. Channeling French classical economist Jean-Baptiste Say, graduate Monterroso Ralda concluded, “For trade to flourish it is necessary to consume, destroy or damage as much as possible, replacing all those objects that are destroyed or damaged with new ones.”³¹

By the early 1890s, obstacles to economic stability had seemingly dissipated as the Central American conflicts drew to an end, railways were completed from the Pacific Coast to the capital, and coffee prices remained stable. While other aspects of governance may have been troubled, especially in light of President José María Reyna Barrios’ rise to power, the value of imported goods increased consistently from 1886 until 1896 with only a minor blip in 1892 during which time 67,078 fewer packages were imported compared to the year before.³² The increase in commodity imports soon peaked then crashed. As mentioned in earlier chapters, the international price of coffee crashed in 1897 after world markets were saturated by Brazilian coffee, bringing, according to

³⁰ *Memoria que la Secretaría de Estado en el Despacho de Instrucción Pública presenta á la Asamblea Legislativa*, (Guatemala: Encuadernación y Tipografía Nacional, 1893), pp. 53-54 and *Escuela Nacional de Comercio*, 1915, CIRMA Fondo Agustín Estrada Monroy Serie: sobres con documentos: 17 (Breve historial sobre la fundación de la Escuela de Comercio [3]).

³¹ Valentín Monterroso Ralda. “El Consumo,” (Thesis, Escuela Nacional de Comercio, 1917, Guatemala, Tipografía Sánchez & De Guise), p. 13.

³² *Memoria con que el Secretario de Estado en el Despacho de Hacienda y Crédito Público da cuenta á la Asamblea Nacional Legislativa de los trabajos efectuados durante el año de 1892*, (Guatemala: Encuadernación y Tipografía Nacional, 1893), p. 26. Government reports account for this decline by pointing to the political situation during which time business all but stopped as well as a cholera outbreak that closed the Puerto de Colón, p. 33

government reports of 1898, “a notable reduction in the importation of merchandise.”³³ Criticizing the obsession with foreign commodities, the endless expansion of capital, and accounting for the general economic ruin, government reports claimed, “the fever of grandeur and extravagance knew no bounds”.³⁴ In an ironic twist, commodities, and the culture that was forged to accommodate them, came to be blamed for the economic crisis.

For the next decade, the levels of imported goods fluctuated from year to year. Brief periods of recovery and growth only seemed to inaugurate the next collapse in importations, most notably in 1903 and 1908. The long-awaited completion of the Northern Railway that had dogged Guatemalan liberals for roughly a quarter century altered the dynamics of domestic consumption with shipping prices tumbling as importation shifted to the Caribbean coast, placing steamships on a more direct channel with Europe and the eastern seaboard of the United States. Nevertheless, the outbreak of a European war in August 1914 once again spelled temporary doom for Guatemalan merchants as imports dropped by approximately one-half between 1913 and 1915, owing to the closure of European markets, the drop in demand for coffee, and the elevated costs of shipping due to heightened security risks to maritime traffic.³⁵ Thus, the half-century from 1870 until 1920 witnessed great instability for Guatemalan importers who grappled with repeated collapses in export prices, wars in Central America and abroad, poor transport infrastructure, and poor credit.

³³ *Memoria de la Secretaria de Hacienda y Crédito Público correspondiente al año de 1898 presentada á la Asamblea Nacional Legislativa en sus sesiones ordinarias de 1899* (Guatemala: Tipografía Nacional, 1899), p. 3.

³⁴ *Memoria de la Secretaria de Hacienda y Crédito Público correspondiente al año de 1898 presentada á la Asamblea Nacional Legislativa de 1898*, (Guatemala: Tipografía Nacional, 1898), pp. 3-4.

³⁵ *Memoria de la Secretaria de Hacienda y Crédito Público presentada á la Asamblea Nacional Legislativa en sus sesiones ordinarias de 1917 correspondiente a los trabajos verificados durante el año de 1916*, (Guatemala: Tipografía Nacional, 1917), p. 3.

The ceaseless volatility of agricultural exportation during this fifty-year period prevented the formation of stable consumption patterns amongst Guatemalan consumers like those that emerged in the 1920s and 1930s along Sexta Avenida. Indeed, fluctuation and unreliability were the only guarantees when examining the change in importation levels over a period of time. While there were bountiful years—and even a decade-long period of nearly constant growth commencing in the mid-1880s—these were constantly offset by gluts, reverses, and the outright economic depressions. During these periods, commodity circulation slowed as retailers were saddled with wares that *capitalinos* could not afford to buy. Rather than flourishing, many businesses solely tried to survive the repeated economic crises. Certainly a sense existed that Guatemala need only wait out each crisis, then the economy would simply correct itself.

Blind faith placed in agricultural export aggravated the existing *cultura de esperar*, which constantly attempted to balance doubts with hopes among the local bourgeoisie. As constant reports of the Northern Railway's impending completion heightened the expectations of *capitalinos*, so, too, did the importation of goods such as bicycles and automobiles because of what they symbolized. Due to the *cultura de esperar* and the constant disappointments of railway construction, the arrival of consumer goods piqued fascination with this foreign merchandise and accentuated their social clout. Thus, while commodities were important for modernizing societies in general, they held special significance for places like Guatemala that were regularly beset by a cycle of hopes and disappointments.

Commodities as Civilizing Goods

Through the course of the nineteenth century, trade and importation became associated with foreign commodities, and these goods came to be viewed as a hallmark of civilization. Certainly, students from the Escuela Nacional de Comercio were able to establish a connection between commodities, trade, and what they understood as civilization. Economic activity was viewed as akin to civilization, a belief that echoed after the late nineteenth century and which found expression through the circulation of commodities. Elsewhere, graduating from the Academia de Señoritas, Delfina Cobar Lazo published a thesis detailing the relationship between commerce and civilization. In particular, Cobar Lazo contended that commerce alongside war have served as evolutionary factors, driving forth “the vehicle of Progress.”³⁶ She elaborated, specifying that the founding of financial houses, minting of national currencies, and the existence of commodities clearly demonstrated the degree of civilization present within a country. The young graduate thus concludes, “commerce is the pedestal of civilization and the cultural coefficient of the people.”³⁷

Such pronouncements were not unique to Guatemala. Europeans manufacturers, politicians, and merchants especially in nineteenth century England viewed commodities as a civilizing force and, as historian Thomas Richards has noted, were central in imperial projects to civilize what were regarded as barbarian countries.³⁸ Within the regional historiography, particular attention has been paid to the allure of foreign wares.

Historians Benjamin Orlove and Arnold Bauer have discussed the complexity of

³⁶ Delfina Cobar Lazo, “Influencia del Comercio en la Civilización de los Pueblos,” (Thesis, Academia de Señoritas “21 de Noviembre,” Tipografía Sánchez & De Guise, 1917), p. 7.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

³⁸ Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

imported goods as a site where “images of modernity were stated, contested, and affirmed in postcolonial Latin America.”³⁹ They point out that there was not necessarily a direct correlation between agro-exports and foreign-imported goods, suggesting a more nuanced understanding is required to comprehend the influence of foreign goods. These authors remind us that we cannot assume that foreign items served as badges of civilization but, rather, operated within a dense network of social relations. Indeed, the signification of foreignness represented different interests to various groups of people and individuals. As Nevin O. Winter noted above, albeit in a generalization, some indigenous groups viewed the encroachment of foreign technologies and that which they carried with great suspicion. Foreignness was not equated necessarily with the chic or the modern but with subjugation and the transformation of local customs and practices. Finally, the vast number of importers in Guatemala City, predating the Liberal Reforms and expanding greatly during the Belle Époque, suggests that consumption of foreign commodities was not an activity restricted to the local elite but penetrated various social spheres to greater or lesser extents.

Perhaps one of the earliest treatises on the relationship between consumption and civilization in Guatemala was written by nineteenth-century intellect Juan Fermin Aycinena in 1881. Writing under the pseudonym Delius, Fermin Aycinena published a lengthy two-part analysis about advertisements in which he details what he perceived as the great social importance of *los anuncios*. The thesis of Fermin Aycinena’s work is that the character and civilization of a people is not determined by the journalism that appears in its newspapers but through its advertisements. It is advertisers, the author submits, who best know their society and who are forced to condense their thoughts into short lengths

³⁹ “Orlove and Bauer,” “Giving Importance to Imports,” p. 9.

in order to appeal to their fellow citizens.⁴⁰ The brief notifications of advertisements, then, can reveal a great deal about customs and assumptions in a given society, as well as the level of its civilization. Fermin Aycinena proceeds to analyze the ads from different countries, insisting that observers can gain insight through the discourse utilized. The French, for example, are prone to impressive adjectives, evidencing the fact that its countrymen “aspire to the luxury and grandeur” and are “truly civilized men.”⁴¹ The English, in contrast, are not given to similar rhetoric and hyperbole, instead demonstrating the seriousness of their character and their positivism. They are less inclined to market something as “the best” or with “prices without comparison,” relying rather on repetition and commitment. Finally, he argues that advertisers in the United States are carefree like their national character, which itself is an embodiment of the great machinery and inventions that are advertised.⁴²

The relationship between commodities and civilization—and the related notions of progress and modernity—was often explicitly stated through advertising and store monikers. This tendency was especially apparent between the 1880s and the 1910s but certainly continued for decades afterwards. In the world of commodities, concepts of the modern, civilization, and progress were conflated and represented a joint social project. The propensity of retailers in Guatemala City to recite a rather limited lexicon was, thus, hardly coincidental. From the *Droguería y Farmacia “La Moderna”* and *Agua de Colonia Modern Style* to the *Tipografía El Progreso* and its “most modern types” available for printing, these were but a selection of businesses that seized the language of

⁴⁰ Delius [Juan Fermin Aycinena], “Los Anuncios,” *El Porvenir*, Sept. 8, 1881, p. 351.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 370.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 371

modernity.⁴³ Elsewhere, Pedro Más' knitwear factory "La Estrella" explained in a promotional pamphlet, "There is no doubt, true progress of countries stems from the development of industry, coming from the transformation of agricultural products, a source of endless riches" while Salvador Krolik's Joyeria y Relojeria La Marquesa promised to deliver "The most elegant, modern, and finest taste in fancy goods."⁴⁴

In what appeared as a newspaper article under the heading, "El Progreso," makers of the Omega watch explained, "Everything in this life has a tendency to follow the irresistible march of progress" from the burning of candles, to the use of gas, to the advent of electricity, a truism evident in the manufacture of watches. The advertisement continued, explaining, "The clockwork of Omega watches are of such perfection that they hardly have a minute's difference over the span of a month."⁴⁵ The plethora of goods gave rise to visions of plenty or what historian T.J. Jackson Lears called "fables of abundance."⁴⁶ In essence, the circulation of goods, most readily evidenced through the change of store-window displays, newspaper advertisements, and pamphlets gave credence to the perception that the modern world and progress promised to deliver unforeseen fortune and luxury.

There was, of course, a reciprocal assumption buried within Juan Fermin Aycinena's observations and within the advertisements that drew correlations between civilization, modernity, and progress on the one hand, and consumption on the other.

⁴³ "Droguería y Farmacia 'La Moderna,'" *Electra*, June 15, 1908, back page; *Diario de Centro-América*, Oct. 30, 1902, p. 2; *Almanaque de "El Progreso,"* (Guatemala: Tipografía "El Progreso," 1886). Tipografía "El Progreso" suggested it had the "most modern types."

⁴⁴ "'La Estrella' Fabrica de Generos de Punto de Pedro Más," Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas no. 1994, Year 1904]; "Joyeria y Relojeria La Marquesa," *Electra*, May 15, 1908, inside front cover.

⁴⁵ *La Nación*, Nov. 1, 1903, p. 5.

⁴⁶ T.J. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America*, (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

Principally this supposition assumed that societies which did not advertise and otherwise evaded consumer culture were inherently uncivilized and backwards. Beneath the centuries of racism and resentment heaped upon Guatemala's indigenous population was a singular concern, namely that they refused to labour for the colonial and post-colonial economic regimes that presided over them. By the late nineteenth century, a corollary was appended to this maxim: not only did the indigenous masses resist liberal labour regimes, they also did not consume commodities, much to the aggravation of import and export merchants. The indigenous peasant, it was observed by import traders in 1865, consumes "very few, if any foreign products."⁴⁷ For his part, the liberal Ignacio Solís explained the problem thusly,

If the native does not presently consume more than the immediate products of his work, it is because they turn out cheaper, and for this reason, as the native is strongly attached to his habits, he goes on living with little change, just as he has lived before the Conquest, that is to say, he does not count on anybody else than himself for what he needs. Supposing that he spends less in wearing european [sic] cloths, that he acquired needs for other articles of foreign origin then, when the predominating element of progress and the division of labour have penetrated that society, we will see the native race devoted to agricultural production which we will contemplate, while nourishing an abundant external commerce.⁴⁸

In documenting during the mid-1890s what he believed were the causes of indigenous backwardness, liberal intellectual Antonio Batres Jáuregui asserted that the problem arose partly from the fact that "they do not have needs that compel them to progress... With a poor shack, without having neither bed nor furniture but a hammock or a *tapexco* and a grindstone, the aborigine lives an unproductive and monotonous life in which he cannot enter upon the pathway of progressive movement." He supported an idea put forth by the

⁴⁷ José María Barrundia quoted in J.C. Cambranes, *Coffee and Peasants: The Origins of the Modern Plantation Economy in Guatemala, 1853-1897*, (Stockholm, Sweden: Institute of Latin American Studies, 1985), p. 162.

⁴⁸ Ignacio Solís quoted in *ibid.*, p. 163.

Sociedad Económica of assuring that the indigenous wear the clothing of *Ladinos*, which “would contribute to creating needs in them that would be the incentive for them to get jobs and that would augment the national wealth.”⁴⁹

Peddlers Versus Spaces of Modernity: Consumption and the Politics of Race

Related to the discussion of civilization, ethnicity, and consumption, was an evolving conception of how civilizing goods were to be sold or marketed. Distinctions between different types of commodity distribution are drawn in Miguel Ángel Asturias’ *Hombres de Maíz*. Within the capital city, the social world of commodity consumption appears rationalized as it might in any other modern urban setting. Asturias describes the world of commodities thusly, “The clothes stores were a fine sight, really poetical, just like altars, with breeches, jackets, petticoats, shawls, and children’s clothes all hanging on displays in the doorways. Lengths of cloth lay sleeping on the shelves in rolls, until the assistants spread them out expertly along the counter when someone was buying by the yard.”⁵⁰ While chaotic, the city also gave order to consumer goods and a modern logic existed within the predominantly *Ladino* shopping districts, much like the display cases described in Chapter Three. The optic generated by the department store or arcade was decidedly modern.

In contrast to the capital’s fine stores, the place of peddlers within Guatemalan modernity is complicated. Nevin O. Winter, a foreign traveler who passed through Guatemala in 1905, praised the resourcefulness of peddlers, who crossed Guatemala on a mercantile civilizing mission,

⁴⁹ Antonio Batres Jáuregui, *Indios: su historia y su civilización*, (Guatemala: Tipografía La Unión, 1894), p. 188.

⁵⁰ Miguel Ángel Asturias, *Men of Maize (Critical Edition)*, Gerald Martin (trans) (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993), p. 216.

At the Gran Hotel [in Guatemala City] I encountered a number of members of that strange legion who are always in active service and on the firing line—those men who go through the jungle ahead of the railroad and over the mountains before the engineers. To sell a bit of cotton cloth or a phonograph they are ready to speak as many languages as a German diplomat. They cross deserts and run the risk of pestilence, and have more adventures than an amateur explorer would write volumes about. These men are the salesmen who introduce the manufactured goods of commercial countries into the uncivilized and uncommercial lands of the globe. Some of them deserve medals and even pensions, but they are lucky if they get their names in the papers when they pass away in some far-off land.⁵¹

For Winter, the traveling salesmen operate akin to the shock-troops of consumer modernity. Indeed, after Yic, Asturias introduces his readers to Nelo, a small character modeled after American playwright Eugene O’Neill, who is the quintessential modern businessman (as opposed to peddler) responsible for bringing sewing machines to the communities around Lake Atitlán.⁵² Because of the goods that the salesmen carry, they stand in opposition to what Arthur Morelet described taking place in the Plaza Mayor some decades earlier “where the Indians collect from every direction around the capital, to dispose of their wares and provisions.”⁵³ While the labour involved remains the same—that is, transporting large quantities of goods to a potential market—the perception of such deeds differs. This distinction derives from several different facets. In part, attitudes towards peddlers stemmed from their relationship to the means of production and from that which they sold. Small-scale farmers, who harvested their own produce and transported it to market, were more likely to be denigrated as backwards and

⁵¹ Nevin O. Winter, *Guatemala and Her People of To-Day*, (Boston: L.C. Page and Company, 1909), pp. 78-79.

⁵² Asturias, *Hombres de Maíz*, Ch 13 and 14.

⁵³ Arthur Morelet, *Travels in Central America*, (New York: Leypoldt, Holy & Williams, 1871), p. 392.

harassed as such. Peddlers, however, who sold foreign-manufactured items—what historian Arnold J. Bauer called “civilizing goods,”⁵⁴—were held in greater esteem.

In speaking of the countryside, Winter insists that isolation is a primary factor in indigenous backwardness that keeps them apart from modern commodities. He writes,

the very isolation of the people and difficulty of communication keeps them aloof from modern progress, and leaves them content with things as they are, and with no ambition for anything more advanced or better than was enjoyed by their forefathers. The Indians rather look with distrust upon the encroaching iron highways as they fear they will interfere with their employment.⁵⁵

The mules and burros of the *cargadores* (merchandise carriers) who transported goods across the country were juxtaposed with the industrial might of the railroad. In the summation that locomotives eased the transport of goods, brought prosperity, and facilitated the trade of commodities, it stood to reason that other forms of transport was detrimental to national progress and conclusions were drawn on racialized grounds.

The modern department store, exercising the optics of display and civilizing goods existed as the binary opposite of traditional indigenous markets, but also more civilized than the efforts of peddlers. Registered businesses operating within fixed locations took priority within the urban sphere of fin-de-siècle Guatemala City, especially when confronted by peddlers who, by nature of their itinerant labour, were difficult for state authorities to monitor. The editors of *El Ferrocarril* complained in 1894 of the large numbers of merchandise tables belonging to transient sellers that rendered walking through the Portal de Comercio (Business Portal)—found on the periphery of the Plaza Mayor in the most coveted commercial space in the capital—difficult. “The Portal de

⁵⁴ Arnold Bauer, *Goods, Power, History: Latin America’s Material Culture*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. xvi.

⁵⁵ Winter, *Guatemala and Her People of To-Day*, pp. 132-133.

Comercio is the best commercial location in the city,” the editors explained, “and we believe that there is no reason to be detrimental to the *senores* shopkeepers by placing obstacles in the entrances of their respective stores.”⁵⁶ Within modern urban spaces, stores were to take precedent over the sales of peddlers.

Department stores often began as humble outlets for import distributors, rising in importance from the 1890s. But, in many regards, the shopping arcade more adequately captured the mood of what it meant to be modern by the mid-1890s as the pre-eminent architectural form of consumer modernity. In the early 1890s, the Aycinena family converted a portion of their large colonial residence into a shopping arcade styled after its Parisian forbearers, often regarded by commentators as the hallmarks of nineteenth-century modernity. The Aycinenas, a merchant family of Basque descent, occupied the reverse side of the Portal de Comercio. The Marqués de Aycinena, family patriarch and the country’s most influential merchant, was awarded the real estate when the capital city was relocated to its current location in 1776. The conversion of the residence into a shopping arcade was an appropriate gesture that confirmed the family’s one-time prestige within Guatemalan trade.

With countless architectural and economic precedents—from Middle Eastern bazaars to the daily markets of located behind the Catedral Metropolitana and beyond—arcades were sites of commodity exchange and motion. Author of a work about the building type, Johann Friedrich Geist, highlights several characteristics of arcades that distinguish them from other building forms, including the utilization of interior space of a

⁵⁶ *El Ferrocarril*, Aug. 25, 1894, p. 2.

city block to organize retail trade, spatial separation from vehicular street traffic, and public space on private property.⁵⁷ Unlike most conventional arcades however, the



FIGURE 8 “Pasaje Aycinena, 1934” by J. Francisco Muñoz. Source: Fototeca Guatemala, CIRMA. Colección: Álbum Guatemala, Familia Taracena Arriola.

Pasaje Aycinena lacked a sky-lit ceiling, instead exposing would-be shoppers to environmental elements; nevertheless, the arcade fulfilled a symbolic function by placing Guatemalan modernity into conversation with European consumer habits while providing a template for future arcades such as the Pasaje Rubio, located a block from the Aycinena and completed some thirty-five years later. The construction of the arcade in the mid-

⁵⁷ Johann Friedrich Geist, *Arcades: The History of a Building Type*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1983), p. 12.

1890s was hardly surprising. Its inauguration coincided with the apogee of coffee exports and its associated commodity imports prior to the crippling depressions that commenced in 1897.

To the extent that arcades still stand in diverse locales today, they exist as relics of a past commercial life; construction of the arcades in Europe lasted a mere century from the Napoleonic adventures of the nineteenth century until the bloodletting of the Great War. Still, the Pasaje's inauguration during the fin-de-siècle highlighted the *capitalino* bourgeoisie's intoxication with foreign architectural fashions and commodity culture. Moreover, pragmatically-speaking, the Pasaje Aycinena provided appropriately modern space for commodity circulation at the heart of Guatemala City's commercial district during the 1890s. Appropriately, it was the site of the city's first mechanical cash registers.⁵⁸ The first cinematographic viewing was held in Carlos Valenti Sorié's barbershop in the Pasaje in 1896. Indeed, for well over a decade after its inauguration in March 1894, the "elegant arcade" served as a focal point along with the Portal de Comercio of modern commodity celebration.⁵⁹ Among other institutions, the Pasaje housed El Volcán, a retailer in Columbia bicycles, Comerciantes y Particulares, an alcohol importer, and El Buen Gusto, a baked goods shop.⁶⁰

There was not necessarily harmony in the capital, however, despite the presence of commodities, the modern spaces in which they were sold, and other markers of modernity. As sure as peddlers could penetrate "savage" spaces with civilizing wares, so too could "traditional" or "non-modern" forces transgress the spaces of modernity.

⁵⁸ Augusto Acuña G., "Las calles y avenidas de mi capital, XIII," *El Imparcial*, Nov. 4, 1983, p. 10.

⁵⁹ *La República*, March 16, 1894, p. 2

⁶⁰ *Diario de Centro-América*, May 28, 1896, p. 2; *El Progreso Nacional*, Aug. 14 1894, p. 8; Flyer, Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas no. 1999, Year 1909], p. 4.

Travelogue writers cautioned that the customs of Guatemala's indigenous possessed the potential to overwhelm the modern tendencies within Guatemala City. Even in the 1920s, Wallace Thompson warned of the predominance of tradition within the Mayan world that resists assimilation,

Over the streets of the capital [the Indians] trot and trudge unconcernedly by the hundreds on their way under their packs, and they fill the big central market with the vivid colors of their raiment and of their goods and with the sound of heir strange, almost Oriental, language. The Guatemalan Indian has no diffidence about coming to the strongholds of the white man. He penetrates to every town, bringing his stores of vegetables, fruits and flowers, his pigs and his chickens, his pottery, his basketry and his bales of hand-woven woolens. Rather he overwhelms and dominates the modern, galvanized iron market shelters with the most gorgeous and tempting display. He never loses his identity, he seldom changes his native garb, and only when he serves in the army as a barefoot soldier in khaki does he conform in any way to the customs of the civilization which rules over him.⁶¹

Nevertheless, Thompson recognized that the indigenous population existed as a powerful social force in the country, juxtaposing the fact that "The Indian is the national labor of Guatemala. The Indian is the greatest potential market of Guatemala."⁶² The modernity of consumerism was tenuous and often perceived to be under threat. Perhaps this explained the Municipality's impulse to surveil and investigate spaces deemed to be non-modern. Markets and butcher shops in Guatemala City were constantly invigilated by the state during the 1880s and 1890s and repeatedly harangued by municipal inspectors for reasons of cleanliness and hygiene.⁶³ Underlying the scrutiny were a series of prejudices that assumed a clear-cut distinction between what was regarded as modern and, therefore, sanitized and what was considered non-modern and, thus, hygienically polluted. More

⁶¹ Wallace Thompson, *Rainbow Countries of Central America*, (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1926), pp. 117-118.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 118.

⁶³ See *Municipal Reports* such as "La Higiene en el Mercado Central," *La Revista Municipal*, Dec. 15, 1899, p. 1.

often than not, these assumptions were informed and reinforced ethnic and class-based biases.

Repeated were the efforts to modernize spaces commonly regarded as traditional. In addition to hygiene inspectors, the Municipality devoted considerable energy to creating centralized markets that could be more easily monitored and disciplined. This first centered on the desire to construct the new Mercado Central (Central Market)—relocated to the space behind the Catedral Metropolitana once reserved as the Church’s cemetery—then, later, the supplementary Mercado del Sur (Southern Market), which was eventually housed within one of the vacated arcades once used during the 1897 Exposición Centro-Americana. Similar sentiments were reflected in the renovation and modernization of the municipal slaughterhouse, effectively displacing individually-owned and operated butcher shops, especially in working-class neighbourhoods such as Candelaria in the city’s northeast corner and in Calvario, south of the historic core.⁶⁴

In contrast, inspectors did not so closely invigilate most modern establishments. To the extent that municipal attention was turned towards modern spaces, it was done to facilitate consumption and to protect consumers and private property. Municipal efforts in the early decades of the twentieth century were directed towards paving streets to ensure the smooth circulation of commodities and the construction of sidewalks to protect shoppers and permit window-shopping, browsing, strolling, and other acts commonplace within consumer society. The police presence and public lighting were focused on the commercial district to enforce the protection of property and the well-being of the bourgeoisie. With the aid of the state, the spaces and terms of modern consumerism

⁶⁴ Reports about pigs in the city and butchers can be found in regular reports in *La Revista Municipal* throughout the 1890s; see *La Revista Municipal*, March 12, 1893, p. 2, for example. On the slaughterhouse, see *Memoria de la Municipalidad 1910*, p. 171.

gradually came into being, codified within the urban environment both spatially and in the practice of consumption.

Advertisements and the Logic of Consumer Capitalism

Beyond their spatial organization, commodities were increasingly ordered within a cultural logic that soon became common-sense. If capitalist society was, indeed, “an immense collection of commodities” as Marx suggested, an epistemological re-ordering was required whereby otherwise unrelated objects and services were lined up alongside one another and appear rationalized. Store displays completed this task in a physical sense, whereas newspaper advertisements amassed and organized items and services within a coherent ideological space. This ideological familiarity with advertisements was seen as early as 1902 when commodities and marketing were used in self-referential manners.

Consider how mock newspapers distributed throughout Guatemala City entitled *El Nuevo Proteo* would have humoured *capitalinos*. Recalling the early sea-god of Greek mythology, the eponymous “El Nuevo Proteo” was the nickname of the shape-shifting, quick-changing, one-man Vaudeville impersonator Roberto Fernández. With the ability to sing the entire musical scale from a soprano to a bass, Fernández won acclaim from audiences for his singing, dancing, acting, and illusions while performing pantomimes, zarzuelas, and comedies. According to the faux newspaper, “Roberto Fernández is young and old, man and woman, according to the personage that he is representing, changing instantly his clothing, his wig, voice, expressions, until his body properly conforms itself to all these evolutions, in a way that makes all of his personality types a complete illusion, brilliantly characterizing from the most ideal feminine type to a stooped and

nasally, dirty old man.”⁶⁵ The New Proteus presented “his modern and notable works” throughout the United States, Mexico, and Central America, along with a flock of well-trained birds that responded to his commands.

Most relevant to this discussion, the final page of the newspaper consisted of clever newspaper advertisements that recalled the common optical strategies of *anuncios* that then appeared in Guatemala dailies; but rather than advertising goods and service that they appeared to market, the announcements publicized Fernández’s show. Thus, one promotion for precision watches reported to help the attending public know the exact time at which the Nuevo Proteo completed his transformations. Another, in the style of a “wanted” ad, requested 1000 people to fill the seats of the Teatro Colón for Fernández’s function. Elsewhere: “For rent: boxes and seats at the Teatro Colón for performances of short duration—very cheap,” whereas another mocked medical advertisements by claiming “Hypochondria and many other illnesses can be radically cured by attending the magnificent spectacles that shall be presented in this capital by the notable quick-changer Roberto Fernández.”⁶⁶ Viewing the advertisements found within Fernández’s fake newspaper, *capitalinos* would have recognized the cultural motifs and ordering of commodities found within the coded lexicon of “For Rent” and “Wanted” as it appeared in *El Nuevo Proteo*. The vocabulary of consumption mimicked by the New Proteus was an everyday reality within Guatemalan newspapers as importers and producers looked for strategies to circulate their wares. The hilarity of the spoof depended on the familiarity afforded by advertisements and the way they ordered and aligned the modern world of commodities.

⁶⁵ “El Nuevo Proteo,” Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas no. 1992, Year 1902].

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Of course, the organization of advertisement pages was not a deliberate ploy to induce people to think holistically about modern consumer society. Advertisements were simply a way to persuade potential consumers. To this end, Guatemalan retailers employed a host of different marketing strategies to solicit the attention of consumers. Beyond typical announcements of items for sale or rent, more imaginative techniques to sell goods and services emerged in the 1890s. An early common ploy was to publish images of eyes or pointing hands to catch the visual attention of readers; however, such tactics were gradually displaced by the use of more appealing imagery, if retailers could afford the additional publishing costs. If not, more sinister tactics could be employed. For example, an 1896 ad offering two new billiard tables and equipment from a luxury saloon for sale was featured under a large heading that read *Asesinato*, or “murder.”⁶⁷

Perhaps the most innovative marketer in 1890s Guatemala City was Carlos Valenti Sorié, the father of the modernist painter, responsible for introducing the Lumière cinematograph to Guatemala, and the proprietor of Peluquería Valenti, a barbershop located in the city’s core. Among his various methods of drawing the consumer gaze to his establishment’s advertisements were headings that read, “Pronto! Violento! Luego! Rapido!” in calling the public to his shop and marketing razors with a money-back guarantee in ads printed upside down on the newspaper page.⁶⁸ Perhaps his most notorious ad, which required an explanation to the public, appeared in January 1892 under a heading that demanded “I Want Some Heads,” written in Spanish, French, English, German, and Italian. Further explanation of the ad was published in *Las Noticias*. The editors suggested Valenti’s advertisement caused a ruckus, with some

⁶⁷ *El Ferrocarril*, Sept. 28, 1894, p. 3.

⁶⁸ *Las Noticias*, March 2, 1892, p. 1 and *Las Noticias*, Oct. 2, 1892, p. 1.

Christians claiming it was a vigilante effort to behead those involved in the recent elections. Elsewhere, others claimed Valenti wanted heads of people from the five national languages represented for their minds; Italian minds would provide fine arts, French minds for the spirit, German minds for their philosophical musings, and so forth. The newspaper explained, though, that the words came from none other than Valenti, the local polyglot who desired heads so that he could trim the hair from them. In exchange for the additional publicity afforded by the newspaper, Valenti promised to provide haircuts and shave for all the workers at the Tipografía El Modelo, which printed *Las Noticias*, as well as all of the daily's subscribers at no cost for six months.⁶⁹

More typical than shrewd advertising techniques, Guatemalan businesses more frequently attempted to reflect pre-existing social practices, characteristic of the age, while simultaneously forging new forms of public performance and codifying new social behaviors. Before new behaviors could take form, however, advertisers had to embed the logic of consumption within familiar social behaviors. Advertisers were, then, especially adept at adopting national holidays, celebrations, and events to bolster their place and appeal within the social environment. Rather than operating independently of cultural and social context within both the local and national sphere, newspaper ads showed the desire of store owners, importers, and others to weave themselves and their wares into the social fabric of their times. In so doing, they came to both mirror and alter the social practices of everyday life in the Guatemalan capital, bolstering their appeals to a prominent place within the national community, often in the guise of having provided an essential public service. The willingness to associate business with the modern nation

⁶⁹ "Se Piden Cabezas," *Las Noticias*, Jan. 24, 1892, pp. 1-2.

was, at first, rather tentative; however, by the 1930s, it had become common practice by which time consumerism was a part of national culture.

In mid-December 1889, a new Rosenthal é Hijos department store—selling goods imported from the United States and Europe—opened in the Portal de Comercio that bordered the Plaza Mayor. Selling “an extensive selection of jewelry articles, completely new to the country,” the store advertised a host of items, extending from artificial flowers that look real and possess a flowery aroma, small toys for children, clothing for “the ugly sex,” and some 50,000 *cromos*, or picture cards that show scenes from foreign lakes, gardens, and depict military battles.⁷⁰ Organized as a hastily-written poem, the advertisement subtly draws attention to the approaching holiday season and how children’s toys make a perfect gift for Christmas. Utilizing a simple marketing strategy that would be repeatedly drawn on in the future, Rosenthal é Hijos—as others had before them—placed the question of consumption into a broader conversation with existing social practices in the Guatemalan capital.

Religious celebrations and holidays were perhaps the most obvious observances to be seized by business-owners to relate their products to broader social trends. By the turn of the century, Christmas was commonly referenced within advertisements, impelling consumers to purchase wares and kitsch as part of contemporary social practice. In 1910 for example, Alfredo Herburger’s Centro Artístico de Reproducciones Gráficas announced that just in time for Christmas, *capitalinos* could mail photos of themselves or loved ones along with money to Herburger’s studio and have the images transformed into mock postage stamps. Meant as souvenirs or as gifts for friends, the stamps—currently the trend in Europe, according to the ad—were being offered at a reduced price for the

⁷⁰ *El Cronista*, Dec. 14, 1889, p. 4.

month of December.⁷¹ Other religious days were also commercialized. In the days leading up to All Saints' Day 1900 (popularly known as the Day of the Dead), Guatemala City's florists advertised wreaths, crosses, and flower arrangements available at Carlos Troller's floral shop on Sexta Avenida, while Jardín La Quinta, on 5th Street, promised an abundance of fresh, beautiful flowers "for the saints".⁷²

Gradually, however, broader social events were celebrated in advertisements, more explicitly fusing consumption with the nation and its secular ceremonies. Exploiting the occasion of large-scale festivals to relate consumer products to cultural spectacles first occurred *en masse* at the 1897 Central American Exposition. In addition to hotels, apartments, and bed and breakfasts filling the announcement pages of newspapers, individuals and businesses used the opportunity to provide other services, from providing food to offering animal care for the duration of the Expo.⁷³ Importers who sold some of the international prize-winning machinery brought to the Expo from Krupp Grusonwerk factories in Germany, for example, used the national event to market their wares.⁷⁴ Even the editors of *La Ilustración Guatemalteca* saw the Expo as a chance to sell advertising space to a wider, international clientele. The journal published an English-language notice listing their bi-weekly review with a circulation of 2000 copies, contending it was "the best medium for advertising and reaching importers of the five Central American Republics. For information as to space and rates address the publishers."⁷⁵ Even for years after the close of the Exposition, advertisers made reference to award-winning items and services such as Castellanos é Hijo's chemical factory selling products for

⁷¹ "Primera vez en Guatemala," Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas no. 2000, Year 1910].

⁷² *Diario de Centro-América*, Oct. 29, 1900, p. 3.

⁷³ *La Nación*, Jan. 29, 1897, pp. 3-4.

⁷⁴ *La Nación*, Sept. 6, 1897, Suplemento al numero 267, p. 4.

⁷⁵ *La Ilustración Guatemalteca*, May 1, 1897, pp. 276-277.

industries, photography, and medicine, which won prizes at both the Central American Expo and the Universal Exposition in Paris.⁷⁶

Subsequently, advertisers often invoked events like the 1905 National Exposition, the 1908 completion of the Transoceanic Railway, President Estrada Cabrera's Festivals to Minerva, and the 1921 Centennial celebrations of independence from Spain when the clothing store Bazar Italiano asked *capitalinos* rhetorically, "Do you want to be elegantly dressed for the Centennial celebrations?"⁷⁷ In the 1930s, under the rule of General Jorge Ubico, advertisements were tailored to make reference to the President and his deeds. The Feria Nacional de Guatemala, an annual event held every November from the mid-1930s until the early 1940 to celebrate Ubico's birthday, saw explicit mention of the President and his national project.⁷⁸ For example, the hardware stores El Candado Dorado and Casa Blanca used a 1936 advertisement to praise Ubico for his efforts in fostering progress in Guatemala and affirming that the two stores "satisfactorily cooperate in the work for the material aggrandizement of Guatemala" by providing steel for the construction of reinforced concrete.⁷⁹

Nearly a decade later, however, the rhetoric and tone of advertisements changed following the October Revolution of 1944. No longer mentioning the conservative rule of Ubico or his militaristic tendencies, many ads spoke to the revolutionary spirit of the

⁷⁶ *El Boletín Científico*, June 1900, inside front cover.

⁷⁷ See for example, "La Parisiense," Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas no. 1994, Year 1904]; "La Estrella," [Hojas Sueltas no. 1994, Year 1904]; "Fotografía Arte Nuevo," *La Locomotora*, Aug. 4, 1906, back cover; "El Zapato Orellana," *La Locomotora*, June 15, 1908, back cover; "El Hotelito de la Estación," Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas no. 1998, Year 1908] said to be located two blocks from the Estación del Ferrocarril al Norte; "Ferrocarril Central for the Gran Fiesta de Minerva," *Diario de Centro-América*, Oct. 27, 1901, p. 4; Imprenta "Minerva," *Ilustración Obrera*, May 22, 1919, p. 2; "Bazar Italiano," Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas no. 2004, Year 1921].

⁷⁸ See, for example, the programmes from the fair between 1936-1938.

⁷⁹ *El Imparcial*, Nov. 2, 1936, p. 8.

Arévalo administration. Indeed, on the first anniversary of the October Revolution, the clothing store, Los Pantalones que Marchan Solos called shoppers on “to the vanguard.”⁸⁰

Moreover, advertisements and consumer culture relied on heavily racialized, gendered, and class-stratified conceptions, embedding legitimate and illegitimate forms of modern consumer practice within the urban sphere. In the previous chapters, the experience of modernity in Guatemala City was dominantly encountered and described by privileged *Ladino* men. While women, the working class, and urban indigenous people had a role in configuring urban modernity, they often did so as subjects. The expansion of consumerism, however, modified the terms in which these groups operated within and negotiated the modern experience, as well as how they were represented.

Women and Consumers of All Types/Classes

Through the association of commodity consumption with existing practices, merchants portrayed their wares as a part of the broader national culture. But commodities also complemented more frequent, everyday ways. In this regard, women and fashion were instructive. The expansion of consumer culture also had gendered ramifications, inserting women into a more relevant discussion of modernity in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. And the place of femininity within consumer modernity helped to redefine women’s societal role amongst the bourgeois classes. This shift was a considerable amendment to beliefs about women within society.

Prior to the liberal reforms, upper-class Guatemalan women had a limited social role besides reproduction and protecting a family’s honour. The disciplining of optics characteristic of the colonial and early Republican era had a gendered dynamic whereby the gaze of men was to be averted away from wholesome, upper class women. Travel

⁸⁰ *La República*, Oct. 20, 1945.

narratives denote the extent to which urban women were shuttered out from contemporary culture. Winter reports that young, unmarried women, “forbidden by custom to walk the streets unaccompanied,” pass time in windows and balconies, staring upon those who pass below.⁸¹ The life of economically privileged women is all but controlled, with Winter explaining, “From childhood to old age the Spanish-American woman rarely does as she likes, but is a slave to antiquated customs. Think of a woman not doing as she wants!”⁸² Thompson shares many of Winter’s impressions, suggesting, “the women make their homes the centers of social life, and long visits with the relatives and close women friends features of their days”. In trying to comprehend the social exclusion of women, Thompson resorts to a well-rehearsed trope that echoed frequently throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. Thompson asserts,

Concomitant with this, religion occupies an overwhelming place in the lives of women in these countries—even in the countries where the men (except when they marry and some of them when they are dying) have broken away from the Church. It is not without significance that we hear, everywhere, the same reply to our question of the progress of women’s rights in Central America. Always those in power say that “the women can never be given the ballot because that means putting their solid votes in the hands of the Catholic priests.” This feeling is general, although in Salvador and to a less extent in the other countries, there has been some effort to organize women and to move to secure them broader legal rights and in connection with this, even the vote.⁸³

Liberals widely subscribed to the notion that women were inherently conservative or reactionary due to their faith.

Although writing in a Totonicapán-based newspaper, Joaquina A. de Castañeda shared a common sentiment that women held the potential to be essential factors in modern civilization, however, “religious fanaticism had degraded and continues to

⁸¹ Winter, *Guatemala and Her People of To-Day*, pp. 111-112.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁸³ Thompson, *Rainbow Countries of Central America*, pp. 229, 233-234.

degrade women, obscuring their conscience and killing their innate noble and elevated aspirations”.⁸⁴ Between protecting their chastity and harnessing their old-fashioned beliefs, women were, in many regards, hidden from modern culture within the recesses of their own private lives, only to emerge under the strict supervision of a chaperon. Thompson did add the caveat, however, that women often participate in evening events with their spouses or the men from their family, and that dancing was an important facet of nightlife. Gradually through the upper-class culture of evening pomp, women found a function within the modern culture in Guatemala City as consumers.

While many historical accounts of women in Guatemala during the nineteenth century focused on questions of suffrage and education,⁸⁵ they have tended to neglect the role of consumption in incorporating upper-class women into a discussion of citizenship and participation within the emerging bourgeois epoch. The education debates of the 1880s and 1890s are of indisputable importance and throughout the period champions of women’s education as a means to social emancipation celebrated the likes of Doña Natalia Górriz de Morales, who lobbied for the broader education of young girls within the capital.⁸⁶ Notwithstanding education, general discussions of the culture of modernity in the Guatemalan capital neglected to include upper-class women, as “the fairer sex” was generally excluded for public political life. Retailers, however, recognized that women and women’s fashions presented an untapped and bountiful potential market.

In the early 1880s, Juan Fermin Aycinena identified the most habitual readers of newspaper advertisements as women, those “delicate creatures that dazzle us with their

⁸⁴ *Minerva*, Oct. 27, 1901, p. 2, Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas no. 1991, Year 1901].

⁸⁵ See Patricia Faith Harms, “Imagining a Place For Themselves: The Social and Political Roles of Guatemalan Women, 1871-1954,” (PhD diss., Arizona State University, 2007).

⁸⁶ “Doña Natalia Górriz de Morales,” *La Ilustración Guatemalteca*, Aug. 15 1896, p. 24.

singular beauty and elegance in the dances, in the theatres, and on strolls”. As evidence of his claim to any doubtful readers, he claimed, “you need not do more than observe the anxiety with which these heavenly little angels await *El Diario de Centro-América* every afternoon—which they call the *Avisos* because without doubt they have not even read the heading of the newspaper.” Concern with fashion was the primary concern of women consumers in Guatemala City, according to Fermin Aycinena, especially outfits for dances and the accompanying accessories. Pretty or not, young or old, according to the author, all women need to make themselves aware “of all the inventions of fashion and of concerns regarding the art of embellishment, and the easiest means to do so is to read the advertisements of the luxury shops.”⁸⁷

Beauty was a pressing concern and the popularity of a given woman was measured by the sales made by local photographers, who having captured images of clients then proceeded to sell the photographs of their patrons to the purchasing public. For the models, the more photographers the visual artist sells, “the more his patron is pleased, for it flatters her vanity.”⁸⁸ A drop in the costs of printing photographic images in newspapers and *revistas* during the first decade of the twentieth century, led to the publication of portraits of local “beauties” like those taken by Ramiro Fernández for *Electra* or the collages of “Flores Centro-Americanas” compiled by Alberto Valdeavellano for *La Locomotora*.⁸⁹

Nighttime social engagements were a prominent aspect of urban life in the last decades of the nineteenth century and continued through the following century.

Newspaper editors composed society pages that documented the guests in attendance,

⁸⁷ Delius [Juan Fermin Aycinena], “Los Anuncios,” pp. 352-353.

⁸⁸ Winter, *Guatemala and Her People of To-Day*, p. 115.

⁸⁹ *Electra*, June 15, 1908, p. 66 and *La Locomotora*, Feb. 1, 1907, p. 8.

paying particular attention to women's fashions. In late November 1889, the Rosenthal's hosted a party and dance, inviting a large part of the capital's high society. The following week, the party was described to the public, including mention of General Barillas' wife's diamond earrings and the elegance of Señora de Montúfar. Rhetorically, it asks, "How can one paint the beauty of Carlota Sinibaldi on that unforgettable night?" and suggests that Victoria and Carlota Solares are "two jewels of Guatemalan society." Ridiculing its own gendered interest in fashion, the piece ends, "We were going to say something about the ugly sex, but it is better to leave it in the inkwell. It was all tailcoat, part white waistcoat, part black waistcoat, some black neckties, and other white ones, those with *claque* and this one without it, everyone happy and.... nothing else."⁹⁰ As if pressured by persons of social clout, the editors of *El Cronista* published another short piece a couple days later in which they expressed regret that they had neglected to mention the wife of José María Reyna Barrios.⁹¹ Some years later, when Reyna Barrios was President, he and his wife attended parties where the dances dare not commence prior to the arrival of the guests-of-honour such as that held at José María González's in celebration of his wife giving birth, reputedly "among the most splendid parties that have taken place this year in the cultured Guatemalan capital."⁹²

Such was the pageantry and spectacle of fin-de-siècle parties that they became the object of ridicule in publication that gently mocked socialites while simultaneously confirming their social importance. Tomas Mur's illustrated satirical weekly, *El Diablo Cojuelo*, teased the celebrations of high society through cartoons and caricatures. One, entitled "At the dance," depicted a well-dressed couple dancing with the man castigating

⁹⁰ "El baile del sabado," *El Cronista*, Nov. 27, 1889, pp. 1-2.

⁹¹ "Más sobre el baile," *El Cronista*, Nov. 30, 1889, p. 1.

⁹² "Sociedad Elegante," *La Ilustración Guatemalteca*, Aug. 15, 1896, p. 28.

the woman by asking, “Why do you anger me?” to which the woman responded, “Because you are very tyrannical...” Wrapping his hand on his wife’s hip, the man orders her, “Lola, don’t lower your eyes!” with the woman cleverly retorting, “Well, don’t lower your hand.”⁹³

Accompanying reports from social engagements and dances, the press published articles stressing the importance of women’s fashion.⁹⁴ The city’s well-to-do women followed advice on what to wear and discouraged the habit “of clinging to ancient taste, which is what deprives fashion.”⁹⁵ Furthermore, *revistas* such as *La Ilustración Moderna* were imported from Barcelona with frequent updates on the “Styles of Paris.”⁹⁶ To purchase the latest fashions for the countless weekend dances and thus enter into the culture of modernity in fin-de-siècle Guatemala City, *capitalinas* were only required to head to the city’s many clothing and department stores, for which there were no shortage of advertisements.

Hector Gaitán, chronicler of the city, tells of the social furor and outraged dignities caused by Ángel Muttini’s store El Bazar Italiano at the turn of the century. Muttini was the first clothing store proprietor to display fashions in his store window and he caused a minor scandal by showcasing women’s underwear before the public. Gaitán reports that parents prohibited their daughters from passing by the Bazar and recounts stories of local youths and old men who used to “mill around” the department store to “look out of the corner of their eyes” at the lingerie, which had only been publicly seen in the capital by way of illegal pamphlets and contraband from Europe. Despite great pressure by decency

⁹³ “En el baile,” *El Diablo Cojuelo*, Sept. 5, 1891, p. 1.

⁹⁴ “Correo de la Moda,” *Guatemala Ilustrada*, April 16, 1893, p. 369.

⁹⁵ “Fashion Chronicle,” *Las Noticias*, Feb. 20, 1892, p. 2.

⁹⁶ See, for example, *La Ilustración Moderna*, 1892, p. 58.

leagues and offended *capitalinos*, Muttini remained steadfast in his defense of clothing displays.⁹⁷ However, it was not solely through undergarments that women experienced modernity in the Belle Époque. The perfumery Breeze of the Pampas sold various scents and soaps whereas The Princess marketed ladies clothing.⁹⁸ Issues speaking to women's concerns—whether they be fashion or health-related, like remedies for ailments related to obstetrics⁹⁹—more frequently found an outlet through advertisements than formal public discourse in the print media. The private sector, thus, held great influence over women's modern experience.

Involving upper-class women in consumption was not sufficient, however, to maintain an adequate consumer base. Store proprietors were faced with a difficult dilemma in Guatemala City, as the consumer base was relatively narrow due to limited affluence. Nevertheless, the wide array of importers, advertisements, and commodities indicated that consumer society was—if not flourishing and subject to the whims of global markets—certainly able to sustain itself. In 1898, Manuel Morales G.'s Almacén de Cajas Mortuorias, newly opened store selling funerary caskets, announced to the public the sale of coffins “of all classes”.¹⁰⁰ Perhaps unwittingly, Morales' ad captured the essence of Guatemala consumer culture through the dual signification of the notion of *clase*. Meaning “type” or “kind,” *clase* also connotes social distinction akin to the idea of “class.” The nature of Guatemalan consumption required that storeowners offer items, as Almacén de Cajas Mortuorias ad described them, “from the finest of painstaking labour

⁹⁷ Héctor Gaitán Alfaro, *Memorias del Siglo XX Tomo I*, (Guatemala: Artemis Edinter, 1999), pp. 17-18.

⁹⁸ *Diario de Centro-América*, May 20, 1896, p. 4 and *La Ilustración Guatemalteca*, Nov. 15, 1896, pp 128-129.

⁹⁹ See, for example, “La Salud de la Mujer,” *El Ferrocarril*, July 18, 1894, p. 3.

¹⁰⁰ “Un Almacén de Cajas Mortuorias,” Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas no. 1990, Year 1898].

to the most humble and simple.” In so doing, commercial establishments did not run the risk of alienating prospective lower-income consumers.

In marketing goods with all classes of quality, merchants signaled to the public that workers, students, and low-level professionals could also partake in commodity culture. Countless storeowners marketed the affordability of their wares. The Bazar La Exposición noted, for example, that it was renowned for its moderate prices, while A. Castanet’s department store offered items at incomparable prices.¹⁰¹ T. Gutierrez’s Relojeria “El Meridiano,” selling imported watches from the United States and Europe, suggested that it was the cheapest watch retailer in the city, specializing in watches for both students and workers. The desire to circulate commodities through the lower classes added significance to the idea of *gangas*, or bargains or sales.¹⁰²

The seemingly endless availability of goods and services, as well as the willingness and desire of retailers to incorporate women and people from different financial backgrounds, gave commodity culture heightened importance in Guatemala City. By the early twentieth century, the Aduana Nacional (National Customs House) was distinguishing between the different classes of items being imported. In 1904, some 46% of imports were deemed to be of primary necessity and ultimately destined for the labouring classes, including items such as cotton and fleece fabrics, tallow candles, matches, ordinary soaps, pottery, glass, domestic-use iron, and foodstuffs. Whereas, 18% of imported wares were considered as luxury or comfort goods, including tanned leather, alcohol, tinned goods, specialty tobacco, fine and porcelain pottery, toys, jewelry,

¹⁰¹ *El Cronista*, June 14, 1891, p. 4 and *Diario de Centro-América*, April 27, 1885, p. 4.

¹⁰² “Fotografía La Exposición of José García Sánchez” and “Ganga,” *La Opinión Pública*, Aug. 26, 1902, p. 6; “Por 15 días mas” Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas no. 1999, Year 1909], sale in front of the Pasaje Aycinena at José Pinetta’s store.

perfumes, musical instruments, enameled goods, watches, sewing machines, typewriters, bicycles, and automobiles. The remaining 36% consisted of industrial goods such as machinery, agricultural and artisanal tools, and ironworks.¹⁰³ These were the types of items around which Guatemalan consumer society developed in the early twentieth century. Having come to be associated with existing practices and incorporating groups often marginalized from bourgeois culture, consumerism came to acquire its own local idiosyncrasies. While spaces of consumer modernity such as arcades, department stores, and luxury shops along the main plaza continued to exist, the focus of Guatemala City's commercial and consumer culture shifted to Sixth Avenue South, known colloquially as La Sexta.

¡Vamos a sextear! Consumption Along La Sexta Avenida

La Sexta Avenida was long an important corridor in the city. However, it was increasingly linked to consumerism in the 1910s, experiencing its golden age during the 1940s and 1950s, before declining by the 1970s. It was along La Sexta that consumer practices were codified into acts of public performance as the southbound strip leading away from the Plaza Mayor dominated Guatemalan commodity culture for the subsequent half century. Sexta Avenida was arguably the most important corridor in Guatemala City from the capital's founding until the 1970s or 1980s. During the late colonial and early republican era, La Sexta—then known as Calle Real (Royal Street)—was made of cobblestone and featured some of the capital's most decadent residences. It was one of the first thoroughfares to feature lamp posts and—throughout the nineteenth

¹⁰³ See *Memoria presentada por el Secretario de Estado y del Despacho de Hacienda y Crédito Público á la Asamblea Nacional Legislativa en sus sesiones de 1905 correspondiente á los trabajos verificados durante el año de 1904*, (Guatemala: Tipografía Nacional, 1905), pp. 188-190. Discussion of imported luxury goods also drawn from Charles M. Pepper, *Guatemala: The Country of the Future*, (Washington, 1900), pp. 46-50.

century—was annually sprinkled in pine needles every December 8th to honour the procession celebrating the Immaculate Conception as it wound its way to the San Francisco Church to the south.¹⁰⁴

Some the Guatemala's most important families lived along La Sexta. During the colonial period, the residence of the colonial governor was located along it while after the Liberal Reforms it housed, amongst others, the Herrera, Samayoa, Cruz, Saravia, and Arzú families. During his presidency, Justo Rufino Barrios rented a house on the Sexta near the Plaza Mayor where today the Empresa Eléctrica is found. La Sexta has been the site of lore and fable, serving as the locale of many important social and political spectacles in the city's past. When Edgar Zollinger—an Englishmen of Swiss background reputed to be a madman—assassinated President José María Reyna Barrios as the President and his wife returned to the Presidential Palace from a night at the Teatro Colón on February 8th, 1898, he did so on Sexta Avenida. Similarly, when Manuel Cobos Batres—a leader of the Partido Unionista, the political movement that eventually unseated President Manuel Estrada Cabrera from power in 1920—chose a location for his symbolic moments of silence in defiance of President Estrada Cabrera, he selected Sexta Avenida.¹⁰⁵ The avenue, then, has historically held an important place in the imaginations of *capitalinos* and been the setting of near-legendary events from the country's past.

From the city's foundation, La Sexta has served as a principal commercial artery; however, commencing in the 1880s and 1890s, its position as a place of modern practice

¹⁰⁴ Miguel Álvarez Arévalo, "The Very Noble and Very Loyal City of St. James of Guatemala," *Galería Guatemala. Ciudad de Guatemala: Nuestros rasgos y símbolos culturales*, (Año 7, No. 20, 2004, p. 105.

¹⁰⁵ Augusto Acuña G., "Las calles y avenidas de mi capital, XIII," *El Imparcial*, Nov. 4, 1983, p. 10.

began to be confirmed. The city's most vital businesses were located along the avenue and served as urban points of reference for *capitalinos* including La Perla—"the pride of Sixth Avenue"¹⁰⁶—Rosenthal é Hijos, El Cairo, La Paquetería, La Marquesa, the Empresa Eléctrica, and La Princesa. After the 1920s, cinemas began to appear such as Cine Rex, Cine Capitol, Cine Palace, and the Art Deco themed Cine Lux while some of the most renowned hotels of the first half of the twentieth century were found along it like the Hotel Panamerican.

By 1913, the traffic along Sixth and Seventh Avenues had become so congested that the city attempted to facilitate the flow of vehicles and pedestrians. "The incessant passing of vehicles has always been an alluring spectacle on La Sexta Avenida," the *Diario de Centro-América* explained, continuing, "the majority of the houses found on this road are the rendezvous points of countless families who situate themselves by windows to watch the multitude of people pass by. The parade of carriages occupied by beautiful ladies and señoritas at six in the afternoon has been a superb spectacle."¹⁰⁷ For approximately ten blocks between 8th Street and 18th Street (though especially from 8th through 12th), La Sexta became a place to view and experience consumer modernity. The avenue was, according to one historian, "the scene of peaceful and pleasant Sunday walks. Its physiognomy was of a Renaissance style that in its time made the city glitter with columns, windows, gargoyles, and cornices that conserved this style."¹⁰⁸

By the 1930 and 1940s, the urban behavior associated with La Sexta was codified in the local jargon. The experience of urban consumer modernity in the capital city had

¹⁰⁶ "Lo que significa para Guatemala la Joyería y Relojería la Perla S.A.," *El Imparcial*, Nov. 2, 1936, Sección II, p. 6.

¹⁰⁷ "Por la 7a. y la 6a. Avenidas," *Diario de Centro-América*, Aug. 12, 1913, p. 7.

¹⁰⁸ Ricky López Bruni (ed), *Ciudad de Guatemala, Ayer y hoy*, (Guatemala: Telgua, 2005), p. 140.

produced its own verb: *sextear*. As city historian Miguel Álvarez Arévalo has explained, La Sexta “became the city’s main avenue to stroll, strut, shop, seek entertainment, or make new friends. All of these activities described, between 1930 and 1960, the art of *sextear*: to move about Guatemala City’s 6th Avenue.”¹⁰⁹ Further elaboration came from journalist Evelyn Lanck, who wrote retrospectively, “by dint of not having anything else to do, the custom of *capitalinos* was to window shop, snack, listen to music or go to the cinema, converting it into a paseo. Thus, it was common to hear, as a type of invitation, the phrase: ‘Let’s *sextear*’.”¹¹⁰ Indeed, La Sexta surpassed the Plaza Mayor as the principal location to stroll, symbolically confirming the cultural shift away from colonial and early republican-era practices to modern commodity spectacles.

One foreigner posited that “the proud Sixth Avenue of the metropolis of Central America quite bears out all its claims to the interest of the traveler and resident.”¹¹¹ This “strolling passage for people who admired the colourful merchandise displayed in shop windows” was a daily activity and an opportunity to view new styles and be seen.¹¹² Young Irma Flaquer—later a journalist for *La Hora*—walked down La Sexta with her teenaged sweetheart, strolling between the Parque Central and the Teatro Lux and back again, ceaselessly talking.¹¹³ For young *capitalinos* in the 1930s and 1940s, La Sexta was an essential part of the urban core and the center of modern culture. Deborah Levenson writes,

¹⁰⁹ Álvarez Arévalo, “The Very Noble and Very Loyal City of St. James of Guatemala,” p. 105.

¹¹⁰ Evelyn Blanck, “Sexta Avenida: Paseo sabatino por una via decadente,” *El Periódico*, June 20, 1999, p. 9.

¹¹¹ Thompson, *Rainbow Countries of Central America*, p. 117.

¹¹² Rojas Lima, “La ciudad de Guatemala como foco de poder,” p. 140.

¹¹³ June Carolyn Erlick, *Disappeared, A Journalist Silenced: The Irma Flaquer Story*, (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2004), p. 21.

The city's glamour, the 'sparkling modernity' noted by period writers and by María, was located on several blocks of El Centro, where María walked with her employers on Sundays. There were pharmacies, well-to-do dress, shoe, and paper goods stores; banks; restaurants; the Hotel Palace; and the electric company. Guatemala's new department stores, such as La Perla on Sexta Avenida, known as the 'Tiffany's of Guatemala City,' offered stunning imports such as cashmere sweaters and Max Factor cosmetics. Nearby on La Sexta stood the Art Deco *palacio del cine* Teatro Lux, which advertised parquet floors and the era's famed Hollywood and Mexican movies."¹¹⁴

Through the act of consumption, the experience of modernity witnessed a spatial and experiential shift from fin-de-siècle cultural spectacle surrounding the Plaza Mayor—where dandies smoked and military students strutted around like peacocks¹¹⁵—the Portal de Comercio and Pasaje Aycinena, to the glitter of La Sexta. It was along this corridor that urban modernity from the 1930s until the 1970s was practiced and flaunted, where consumption and the art of window-shopping became spectacles in themselves, and where cultural participation was negotiated.

The golden years of Guatemalan modernity—the era of the so-called *Tacita del Plata* (Little Silver Cup, analyzed in Chapter Six)—coincided with La Sexta's cultural apogee. However, the cultural conditions that had graced La Sexta with fancy eventually inaugurated its downfall. Beginning in the 1940s—until they were banned in 2002—the avenue started to be beset by overhanging electric lights and large billboard advertisements that masked the facades of the buildings.¹¹⁶ The signs found along La Sexta, worthy of comment from an array of observers,¹¹⁷ bombarded passersby with

¹¹⁴ Deborah T. Levenson, "Living Guatemala City, 1930s-2000s" *Securing the City: Neoliberalism, Space, and Insecurity in Postwar Guatemala*, Kevin Lewis O'Neill and Kedron Thomas (eds.), (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 28-29.

¹¹⁵ Winter, *Guatemala and Her People of To-Day*, pp. 66.

¹¹⁶ See López Bruni (ed.), *Ciudad de Guatemala*.

¹¹⁷ Héctor Gaitán Alfaro, *La calle donde tu vives, Tomo II*, (Guatemala: Artemis Edinter, 1989), p. 130.

consumer messages. While in the early years, the advertisements were part of the avenue's charm, eventually they came to obscure the store fronts for which La Sexta was renowned, hiding the display windows that had brought it prominence. Around this time, the avenue became a primary location for vendors, as the Portal de Comercio had been a century earlier, thus further blocking the optics of consumer display that the Exposición Centro-Americana had perfected and the businesses along the corridor had popularized. "By the early 1970s, La Sexta," Levenson writes, "was crowded with stores that sold cheap cosmetics and out-dated imported appliances, and with police who fought with vendors for control of its sidewalks. Fumes poisoned the air, and the once visible volcano started to disappear behind smog."¹¹⁸

Partly to escape the pollution and danger that came to be associated with Sexta Avenida and as a consequence of the general urban trend towards suburbanization, consumer establishments began to move to more affluent neighbourhoods, first in Zone Nine, then Zones Seven, Ten, Thirteen, and Fifteen. The idea of La Sexta was reserved as a place of nostalgia for more tranquil, quieter times while the street itself became the purported scene of violence and disorder. As Blanck writes, "Here, the paseo has disappeared and the face of marginality has arrived to settle in, in order to remind Guatemalans that dreams of glitter are always ephemeral in cities overwhelmed by poverty."¹¹⁹

For over half a century, Sexta Avenida was Guatemala City's most important place to experience modernity and its association with spectacle and the optics of display altered how the culture of modernity was understood as a hedonistic encounter with

¹¹⁸ Levenson, "Living Guatemala City," pp. 34-35.

¹¹⁹ Blanck, "Sexta Avenida," p. 9.

illusions of abundance. However, despite efforts by Guatemala City's merchants and businesspeople to create mass consumption by sharing the fruits of modernity with women and the working poor, their endeavors collided with broader structural inequalities in the capital. As such, while the working class was able to engage in commodity culture, their association was largely marginal. Anthropologist Bryan Roberts explained how poverty-stricken communities organized cooperatives in the late 1960s so that their residents could participate in consumer society.¹²⁰ Nevertheless, despite the working poor's best efforts, Guatemala City merchants continually struggled to maintain a substantial consumer base upon which to rest lofty ambitions of commodity grandeur.

Conclusion

From the 1880s and 1890s, consumer culture descended upon Guatemala City, drawing a fetishistic veil over the eyes of *capitalinos* with the commodity form. Like the advertisements of medicines during this period that promised to cure virtually any physiological ailment, the commodity was viewed as a social remedy that evidenced the healthy circulation of capital through the streets of the Republic. So enthralled were the bourgeoisie with foreign-manufactured goods that the commodity form became both a means and an end to their modernizing project. Spaces within the capital city were renovated and refurbished to accommodate the optics of display that began to ossify with the *Exposición Centro-Americana*. Buildings such as the *Pasaje Aycinena*, then later, entire city streets became venues and avenues of commodity worship, helping to shape the practice of everyday life for generations of Guatemalan urbanites. For all the magical

¹²⁰ See Bryan R. Roberts, *Organizing Strangers: Poor Families in Guatemala City*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973).

powers ascribed to commodities and the mystique that enshrouded them, the sale of merchandise was also bound by meaningful economic limits. Depressions arising from the collapse of coffee prices and a host of other impediments restricted the flow of commodities, serving as a reminder to *capitalinos* that their dream-world of consumption was often precarious and always subject to the *cultura de esperar*, especially prior to the 1920s. Perhaps herein lies the appeal of commodities and why they were so treasured. Every shipment of foreign goods that arrived in the capital demonstrated that the liberal hope for consumer modernity was gradually becoming a reality despite setbacks. But the social value granted to commodities also served as a mask for the pressing problems associated with Guatemalan modernity.

At the surface, no one appeared to object to commodity culture and even those most marginalized by processes of capital accumulation established means to foment their own participation. There were, however, traces of lingering misgiving related to consumption. Returning to Asturias' *Hombres de Maíz*, in the epic struggle between the men of maize and the maize growers—who are merely concerned with exchange value and profit—the latter is symbolically represented by the commodity form. When Nicho, a postman who experiences a spiritual awakening, decides to transcend the world of materialism, which he helped deliver through his labour, he does so by physically destroying the mail. Empowered by his willingness to release himself from material desires, he allows the goods he was entrusted to deliver—from sheet music, banknotes, photographs, and other traces of civilization—to fall into a fire. Only by doing so was Nicho liberated. Indeed,

as Asturias suggests elsewhere in the work, sobriety and abstemiousness teach that civilization is “merely an accumulation of useless things.”¹²¹

Perhaps more damning and illustrative of the shortcomings of efforts to transform Guatemala into a dream-world of commodity celebration come from Guatemalan poet Luis Alfredo Arango, who came of age amidst the turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s. In a short piece entitled “General Electric” he fuses the three trajectories of progress, commodity culture, and the limits to culture of modernity in Guatemala City. He writes,

I saw them bury a dead child
in a cardboard box.
(This is true, and I can't forget it.)
On the box there was a stamp:
“*General Electric Company -
Progress is our Best Product*”...¹²²

¹²¹ Asturias, *Hombres de Maíz*, pp. 262 and 274.

¹²² Vi sepultar a un niño muerto

en una caja de cartón.

(Esto es verdad, y no lo olvido.)

Sobre la caja había un sello:

“*General Electric Company -*

Progress is our Best Product”...

Luis Alfredo Arango, *Papel y Tusa*, (Guatemala: Editorial Landívar, 1967), p. 8.

Chapter Five
Right Angles and Dream Sequences:
The Manufacturing of Urban Dream-Worlds Since 1871 and the
Collective Awakening of 1917-1918

The twenty-fourth of December 1917—Nochebuena or Christmas Eve, the most important date of the season—commenced with trepidation in Guatemala City. The ground upon which the capital was built had shaken the night before and an ominous foreboding permeated preparations for the night's celebrations. Nevertheless, *capitalinos* busied themselves in the early evening, readying for *Misa de Gallo*, firing rockets off in the streets, and singing Christmas carols in their *barrios* while small tremors shook the city. The next day, Christmas, *capitalinos* recovered from the previous night's festivities where children were awake later than usual for mass and the reading of *La Nochebuena del Poeta* by Pedro Antonio de Alarcón and adults danced to the marimba at parties across the capital. That evening, the city went to bed early exhausted from the celebrations of the preceding days.

At roughly 10:00 p.m. on Christmas night, sleepy *capitalinos* were awakened by a large tremor that caused little damage but placed the city on alert. Around an hour and a half later, two strong seismic movements shook the capital, causing many buildings to collapse and chasing the frightened populace out into the streets. Crowds began to assemble in open spaces, such as the Plaza Central and the park near the Teatro Colón. A second forceful shift occurred shortly before midnight, collapsing the dome of the Catedral Metropolitana and reducing many of the buildings that surrounded the Plaza to rubble as astonished *capitalinos* watched their city crumble.¹ The disintegration of

¹ Oscar Guillermo Peláez Almengor, "La Ciudad de Guatemala: una panorámica histórica," (PhD diss. Tulane University, 1996), pp. 130-131.

buildings coughed plumes of dust into the air and, with the electricity disabled, “the floating dust gave ghostly profiles to the multitude of victims” as they stumbled through the streets.² The haunting surrealism of the night’s atmosphere was complemented by the groans of those trapped in the ruins and appeals for God’s mercy filled the night air.

Less than two and a half years later—amidst a mass mobilization of protesting urbanites and the artillery shelling of Guatemala City by government forces during what is known as *Semana Trágica* (Week of Tragedy)—President Manuel Estrada Cabrera was forced out of office and arrested. The twenty-two year rule of “El Señor Presidente” ended thusly. Later accounts of the earthquakes were placed within the context of Estrada Cabrera’s fall from power. These works posited the thesis that the corruption, inefficiency, and cruelty of Estrada Cabrera and his government were exposed by its response to the earthquakes of December 1917 and January 1918. Guillermo Rodríguez’s deeply influential *Guatemala en 1919*, an anti-Cabrerista tract published in 1920, was among the first to describe the Movimiento Unionista (Unionist Movement) that overthrew Cabrera using the metaphor of a collective awakening whereby political action spurred by the earthquakes of 1917 and 1918 had “awakened a hitherto unknown spirit never felt so broadly in social circles, a thirst for freedom, guarantees, life...”³ Elsewhere, Miguel Ángel Asturias retrospectively explained, “it’s curious but undoubtedly the earthquake not only shook the earth but also jolted consciences.”

Continuing further, he added,

People from all walks of life suddenly found themselves thrown together in the streets in nightshirts and pajamas. We had to live in tents. So what

² Oscar González Goyri, *Recuerdos de los Terremotos 1917 y 1918*, (Guatemala: Instituto de Antropología é Historia, 1971), p. 7.

³ Guillermo Rodríguez, *Guatemala en 1919*, (Guatemala: Tipografía Sánchez & De Guise, 1920), p. 4.

was the result? Those who had lived withdrawn, out of touch with the rest of the population, joined the crowd. No doubt this was one of the factors that contributed to Estrada Cabrera's downfall. From 1917 until 1920, the year he was overthrown, the situation quickly deteriorated. In 1917 my generation, no longer intimidated by memories of previous reprisals, entered the political arena.⁴

As the citizens of Guatemala City were jarred awake on the night of Christmas 1917 so, too, were they collectively awakened from the dream-world that hitherto characterized urban modernity in the Guatemalan capital. Or so the common refrain goes.

Between the Liberal Reforms of the 1870s and Estrada Cabrera's ouster in 1920, life in Guatemala City had changed fundamentally. Mid-nineteenth-century foreign travelogues bemoaned the provincial nature of Guatemala City and its lack of modern amenities; however, by the early decades of the new century, the city was heralded as the Paris of Central America or as a Little Paris.⁵ During this half-century transformation, the population of the capital more than doubled to approximately 120,000 people by 1920. A tension existed throughout this process—made evident by the emergence of city directories and the changing nature of gossip—that although the capital was released from its one-time provincialism, modernity had rendered the city less familiar to its inhabitants.

By the 1910s, questions were being raised as to whether something vernacular or distinctly Guatemalan had been lost in the process of modernization. "Juan Chapin"—a

⁴ Cited in Luis Harss and Barbara Dohmann, "Miguel Ángel Asturias, or the Land Where the Flowers Bloom," Miguel Ángel Asturias, *Men of Maize (Critical Edition)*, Gerald Martin (trans), (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993), p. 417.

⁵ Some foreigners mocked the moniker. Nevin Winter writes, "Because of its superiority over other Central American municipalities Guatemala City has been called the 'Little Paris,' a designation very pleasing to the inhabitants of the metropolis of Central America. Its similarity to Paris is about as great as that of St. Augustine to New York." Nevin O. Winter, *Guatemala and Her People of To-Day*, (Boston: L.C. Page and Company, 1909), pp. 54-55.

fictional inhabitant of Guatemala City who embodied and personified the national spirit—“has died,” claimed journalist Federico Hernández de León in the 1910s. The journalist continued, explaining, “He died the victim of an unprecedented modernization, run over by imported customs, poisoned by an atmosphere foreign to his nature, and martyred by exotic causes that undermined the delicacy of his temperament.”⁶

Hernández de León’s concerns reflected a growing temperament concerned with the national disposition during the final years of Estrada Cabrera’s rule. While some continued to be enthralled by modernity, others voiced concerns that modernity was producing unanticipated and adverse effects. The capital no longer appeared familiar to many of its inhabitants as their sense of place was subsumed to larger structural forces.

Hernández de León’s concerns notwithstanding, for many liberal-minded *capitalinos*, the seduction of progress and the experience of modernity during the fin-de-siècle were exhilarating. The Municipality created new spaces for people to enjoy bourgeois culture, enticing members of the city’s new cycling club to the paved roads of the Parque La Reforma during the mid-1890s, for example. Consumer culture brought ever-changing fashions, much to the delight of dandies who paraded through the Central Plaza in the early evenings. Annual celebrations to the goddess Minerva, called *Minervalias*, commenced at the turn of the century and brought the spectacle of modernity—fashions, kitsch, bicycles, motion picture cameras, and student parades—to the city’s northern extension. A dark underbelly accompanied the pageantry of modern culture, however.

⁶ Reprinted in Clemente Marroquin Rojas, “Pourtalés comienza a sentir el frío de la amenaza...” *La Hora*, Oct. 23, 1959, p. 4.

Social ills still lurked in the recesses of liberal Guatemala City, exacerbated by social conditions and the relations of production. Vagrants forever foiled the project of urban reformers, serving as a constant reminder of the limits to their liberal utopia. Substance abuse and prostitution were rife, especially in the city's northeast. There was a political and economic reality to the darker side of bourgeois culture: during the 1890s, discussion of vagrancy in the city's newspapers heightened, reflecting the susceptibility of the export economy to world markets. The so-called idlers were objects of scorn and viewed as implicated in the periodic economic downturns rather than symptomatic of economic cycles.

The experience of modernity in Guatemala then was encountered spatially and depended on one's class position. That is to say, "modern" life on a coffee finca, banana plantation, or within working-class neighbourhoods like Calvario or Candelaria, differed greatly from the "modern" lifestyle of those whose dwellings were located on Sexta Avenida. This point may seem redundant. However, it illustrates that both the emergence of consumer society and modernism was as much a part of the modern experience as changing relations of production in the countryside or economic transformation in certain urban spaces. In fact, the modernism experienced in the capital depended on and was afforded by the realignment of the export economy. It was in rural areas that *campesinos* were made to shoulder the burden of urban modernity by labouring under conditions that maximized the extraction of surplus-value from export regions. As historian J.C. Cambranes suggests, "The peasants built roads, cleared jungles, planted coffee, constructed *beneficio* (coffee processing plant), established coffee plantations,

laid railroad tracks and installed a telegraph network, and all of this for a pittance.”⁷ The urban modernism for which the liberal regimes were credited was actually a product of the countryside. With the dominance of the commodity form, obsession with new technologies, the embellishment of the capital, and the phantasmagoria of modernity looming over urban culture, sectors of the capital was seduced by a dream-world divorced from the realities of export agricultural production.

State-endorsed celebrations of progress and efforts to beautify the capital should be considered in light of rural conditions, economic instability, and the urban personalities they bred. To urban populations who lived in economically marginalized neighbourhoods, vice was no secret. Regular spectacles hid severe economic and political disasters, keeping the liberal classes contented in their security and enjoyment of modern offerings. The urban bourgeoisie, then, less readily identified the pains of economic modernization, intoxicated as they were by consumer modernity and lulled to sleep by the dream-worlds of progress. It was working-class sectors and professionals—those who bought into the hegemonic project of liberalism—that were jarred awake by the earthquakes of 1917 and 1918 when forced to cope with the realities faced by the rest of the population. No amount of celebration could mask the discomfort and insecurity wrought by the earthquakes for many *capitalinos*. And no modern phantasmagorias could mask the shortcomings of the Estrada Cabrera regime, which toppled two years later, thus inaugurating an era of mass participation in Guatemalan politics.

⁷ J.C. Cambranes, *Coffee and Peasants: The Origins of the Modern Plantation Economy in Guatemala, 1853-1897*, (Stockholm, Sweden: Institute of Latin American Studies, 1985), p. 61.

The Wandering City and the Origins of the Modern Capital

Chronicler Álvarez Arévalo has suggested that Guatemala's capital city has been a "wanderer" because of the propensity of its founders and inhabitants to demand relocation when stricken by earthquakes or acts of God.⁸ Having settled upon its current location in the late eighteenth century though, the city was characterized as inactive, growing very slowly through the Independence era. The conservative interlude after the 1820s that lasted until the Liberal Reforms of the 1870s similarly saw the capital remain largely stagnant.

Accounts of the capital during this period were hardly flattering.⁹ Reflecting upon the city with "sad streets" prior to the Liberal Reforms, Ramón A. Salazar admonished the complacency with the status quo that the conservative regime had maintained through the rule of President Rafael Carrera. In addition to criticizing the lack of high culture and deficiency in education and reputable newspapers, he reported that sewage lay stagnant in the streets, "poisoning the air with its mephitic emissions." The fall in the price of cochineal—the dominant export crop until it was displaced by coffee—had caused distress in the capital, and Salazar reveals, "Houses with glass windows that had broken were substituted with paper and remained this way for many years." In contrast, he

⁸ Miguel Álvarez Arévalo, "The Very Noble and Very Loyal City of St. James of Guatemala," *Galería Guatemala. Ciudad de Guatemala: Nuestros rasgos y símbolos culturales*, Año 7, No. 20, 2004, p. 103.

⁹ Exceptions exist, of course. John L. Stephens drew a comparatively favourable image of the city in the late 1830s, comparing it to the best Italian cities. Despite, having "seldom been more favorably impressed with the first appearance of any city," however, he still describes it as dull and lacking in many amenities. See John L. Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan, Volume One*, Richard L. Predmore (ed), (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1949), p. 152.

maintained that the clergy survived off of public charity and lived in buildings that appeared as palaces in comparison.¹⁰

Foreigners were equally unenthused about the city. In Frederick Crowe's description of Guatemala City, he commended the urban lighting and existence of night watchmen who called out the hours and the state of the weather. The traveler, however, objected to the lack of hotels and the necessary reliance on "mezones" which he describes as "more like eastern caravansaries than inns, and much more attention is paid to the wants of the horses and mules than to the convenience of travelers." Further, like Salazar, Crowe decried the privileges of the clergy as seen through "the prodigious number, extent, and lordly character of the churches and convents." Continuing, he suggested that, in comparison, "The rest of the city might easily be mistaken for their dependencies, and indeed, wide spread as it is, it appears scarcely to afford scope enough for the priestcraft and monkish enterprise of these hungry 'exploiteurs' of the people, and farmers of souls."¹¹ Perhaps the most scathing account of the capital at mid-century was provided by French traveler Arthur Morelet who visited the city during the 1850s. His suggestion, "Guatemala is gloomy in appearance" barely scratched the surface of his invective which was saturated by an attitude of European superiority and racism. He writes:

An air of solitude and abandonment pervades its environs; there are no gardens, no plantations, no country houses, nor any of those industrial establishments, which throng the approaches to our capitals. The houses

¹⁰ Ramón A. Salazar, *Tiempo Viejo: Recuerdos de mi juventud, Segunda Edición* (Guatemala: Editorial del Ministerio de Educación Pública, 1957), pp. 9-11.

¹¹ Frederick Crowe, *The Gospel in Central America: Containing a Sketch of the Country, Physical and Geographical, Historical and Political, Moral and Religious* (London: C. Gilpin; Edinburgh: A. & C. Black, 1850), pp. 24 and 27.

of the suburbs are mere huts, covered with thatch, and separated from each other by hedges or open spaces of ground.¹²

Put briefly, the city was defined by its absences and deficiencies.

Inadequacies in appearance and extracurricular activity were not the only problems in the capital; rather, concerns were expressed that the mentality of the inhabitants was juvenile and provincial. Superstition, mysticism, and magic pervaded the city, a relic of a dying epistemology that was to be eroded by the floods of progress. The legends and tales that punctuated evening discussions in the old capital of Santiago de los Caballeros were translated to the new capital. The mythical figures of la Llorona, la Siguanaba, el Cadejo, and el Sombrerón, wandered to the *barrios* of the city, continuing to serve as allegories for the dangers of the city at night.¹³

Meanwhile, the Great Comet of 1859, Salazar explained, brought fears of war and an anxiety amongst *capitalinos* that the city would succumb to the ravages of plagues and associated misery.¹⁴ In criticizing the belief systems of *capitalinos* during the conservative era, proponents of liberalism like Salazar failed to see how these antiquated beliefs and superstitions were transformed by modernity. Rather than dispel myths, the Liberal Reforms of the 1870s and the dawning of the modern age in Guatemala City brought new beliefs in magic and wonder, as discussed in earlier chapters. Instead of emanating from age-old theological origins or allegorical tales, new mythologies came from the power of technology and science, the magical properties of capital, and the fantastic appeal of progress. In so doing, just like fables that frightened children at night

¹² Arthur Morelet, *Travels in Central America*, (New York: Leypoldt, Holy & Williams, 1871), p. 381.

¹³ Álvarez Arévalo, "The Very Noble," p. 105.

¹⁴ Salazar, *Tiempo Viejo*, p. 29.

during Carrera's long rule, the phantasmagorias of modernity lulled urban modernizers under its spell, transfixing them in a dream-like state.

The Dawning of the Liberal City

In June 1871, rebel soldiers infiltrated Guatemala City signaling the collapse of what historian Ralph Lee Woodward has called "the conservative citadel."¹⁵ The liberal era arose in its place, transforming Guatemala City from a provincial city to a modern, cosmopolitan capital within a couple of generations. Urban historian Gisela Gellert described the Liberal Reforms as initiating the first phase of urbanization, which followed the foundation and consolidation of the city in the preceding century.¹⁶ She contends that urban changes were the result of the politics of modernization and spatial expansion that accompanied the growth of the agro-export sector. Gellert further suggests that urban modernization was neither linear nor continuous, as the city's growth was interrupted by periods of stagnation. Reconceptualizing the process of urbanization, she later argued that four cycles dominated the history of "the liberal city" from 1871 until President Ubico's ouster during the October Revolution of 1944.

The first phase stretched from 1871 until 1898 when the basic infrastructure for the production and sale of coffee was assured. There were plans to expand the city and new public buildings were constructed. The second era was characterized by stagnation owing to the collapse in coffee prices in 1896 and 1897. The third period commenced with the earthquakes of 1917-1918 and continued through the 1920s, primarily

¹⁵ Ralph Lee Woodward, *Rafael Carrera and the Emergence of the Republic of Guatemala, 1821-1871*, (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1993).

¹⁶ Gisela Gellert, "Desarrollo de la estructura especial en la Ciudad de Guatemala: Desde su fundación hasta la revolución de 1944," Gisela Gellert and J.C. Pinto Soria, *Ciudad de Guatemala: dos estudios sobre su evolución urbana (1524-1950)*, (Guatemala: Centro de Estudios Urbanos y Regionales), p. 14.

characterized by the rapid succession of governments due to economic instability and the difficulties of reconstruction. The final cycle lasted the duration of President Ubico's rule and was characterized by the reconstruction of public buildings and an expansion in infrastructure though without the early postcolonial patronage in the urban structure that occurred during the nineteenth century.¹⁷

The account found within this chapter shares the basic contours of Gellert's proposals though places more emphasis on the physical growth of the city between 1880 and 1910 during which time the city expanded spatially by two hundred percent.¹⁸ It considers the related process of suburbanization and seeks to comprehend efforts to embellish the city from the Liberal Reforms until the earthquakes of 1917-1918. Gellert acknowledges and speaks at length about these processes; however, they appear secondary in her work whereas I see them as of great significance for how the city was perceived. Thus, while it is true that the economic depression that commenced in 1896 seriously hindered construction in the city, it is equally true that even after that President Estrada Cabrera continued to use city spaces to spin narratives of progress. Pageantry, as seen through the annual Minervalias, helped weave new mythologies about capitalist modernity. Through phantasmagorias of progress like the Minervalias, the liberal elite attempted to mask the economic plight experienced by many *capitalinos* by allowing them to imagine Guatemala as a better place.

The presidency of Miguel García Granados, whose liberal troops from the Guatemalan highlands defeated the conservative forces of President Vicente Cerna, inaugurated the liberal era in June 1871. García Granados was in power for less than two

¹⁷ Gellert, *Ciudad de Guatemala*, pp. 48-49.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

years, however, before Justo Rufino Barrios seized power. It was under Barrios that the Liberal Reforms could truly be said to have commenced. Complementing Barrios' accession was a massive expansion of the coffee exporting economy from lands that had been under coffee cultivation for well over a decade. While the Carrera regime had provided the city with its first theatre in 1859 and the city already had rudimentary public lighting since the 1830s for the most prominent streets, Guatemala City was about to be deluged with capital and public spending as the surplus value and customs leveled from coffee production arrived in urban environs.

As discussed in Chapter Two, a large number of Barrios' first acts were to attack Church properties. Thus, the primary urban transitions during the Liberal period were Barrios' nationalization of Church holdings, converting Church buildings into public infrastructure. In early 1874, all convents in Guatemala City were confiscated and those of Santo Domingo and San Francisco, for example, were converted into public schools.¹⁹ Meanwhile, funds expropriated from Church properties were used to fund the short-lived Banco Nacional de Guatemala in 1874. The combination of nationalized Church properties, finances made available through banks, and profits secured from the export of coffee allowed the liberal state to enact many urban changes, some of which have informed the cultural discussion of earlier chapters. Thus, telegraph lines were raised and reliable postal services were established. Urban trams began to run across the city in 1882, first powered by mules, to be replaced by the motorized Decauville urban train services, while oil and gas urban lighting soon became electric.

¹⁹ Ana María Urruela de Quezada, "Siglo XIX: Luces y sombras en el surgimiento de la ciudad," *La Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción: 230 años de historia*, Ana María Urruela Villacorta de Quezada (ed.) (Guatemala: Grupo Financiero de Occidente, 2006), p. 96.

City Directories, Gossip, and the Transforming City

Signaling new changes in spatial organization, metamorphoses in private enterprise, and the circulation of new commodities and technologies, Guatemala City's first public directory was published in 1881. The directory—a proto-phonebook—commenced with a list of government officials and diplomats and included pertinent information to users about the telegraph and its personnel, postal services and oceanic steamships in addition to a list of the city's "notable" citizens.²⁰ Further, like later incarnations, the directory contained an abundance of advertisements announcing a host of goods and services available in the city as well as lists of lawyers, notaries, banks, engineers, public bathhouses, and library information. In relative terms, the city grew rapidly and expanded its commercial and industrial base in the decades after the assumption of power by the liberals. The expansion of the city soon led to the development of tensions highlighted by Federico Hernández de León's discussion of the death of Juan Chapin due to modernization of the city whereby once-familiar neighbourhoods and customs were overwhelmed by that which was new. The first directory of Guatemala City demonstrated the social changes and tensions experienced by the population. There was a delicate balance between familiar local places and the impersonal spaces of a burgeoning metropolis to which the first directory was a response. Briefly, the directory captured a city on the cusp of a significant transition.

Indeed, the directory's appearance indicated that alterations in infrastructure and location were disrupting the once-familiar and seemingly perennial organization of urban space. They demonstrated the social transformations associated with the dawning

²⁰ *Directorio de la Ciudad de Guatemala, Año de 1881*, (Guatemala: Imprenta de P. Arenales, 1881).

modern world as spatial information was necessitated to relieve unfamiliarity, hitherto relatively unnecessary in urban space with a smaller population and comparatively fewer commercial establishments. Balancing these changes and associated unfamiliarity, however, was the fact that a second directory of the capital city did not appear until 1886 (with subsequent versions appearing in 1894 and 1898 before publication became more regular), suggesting that while the urban environment was evolving, change was still rather sluggish in the early years of the Liberal Reforms.

The second volume hints at these contradictions within the perceptions of modern urban space. The prologue to the 1886 version began with a justification for its existence:

In 1881, the first Directory of Guatemala City appeared. Five years have passed since it saw the light of day during which changes have been carried out, some radical while others partial, in the *raison d'être* of businesses, things, and even people.²¹

The uneven shifting of events—the combination of radical and partial alterations in the social fabric of the city—presented the directory with utilitarian purpose; nevertheless, the passage of five years was required to warrant such a republication. Indeed, in contrast to the suggested rapidity of change, the second guide contains peculiarities indicative of a once-existing but passing social world. Like other early editions of the directory, the second edition lacked cartographic indicators such as maps; rather a brief description of the spatial arrangement of the city was provided, not an unrealistic task given the city's relatively straight-forward urban grid of north-south running avenues and east-west running streets. As such, the directories denoted what could be found on each of the

²¹ Dirección General de Estadística, *Directorio de la Ciudad de Guatemala 1886*, (Guatemala: Tipografía de Pedro Arenales, 1886), p. 6. Subsequent editions would likewise justify their existence in similar terms.

city's twelve principal avenues and eighteen streets as well as spatial markers for visitors and locals to orientate themselves. These descriptions of space were indicative of urban perceptions and a non-modern culture of personalized permanence. So, for example, according to the second edition, First Avenue is described as,

The road which originates at Don Mauricio Braune's house, passing the Colomari Coffee Mill, in front of the Hospital, by the small plaza of Guadalupe, past the wash fountain of La Recolección and ending at the plains of the fairgrounds (First Street).²²

In addition to homes, other avenues and streets are described as located close to individual's fincas or pastures—space that within a limited amount of time would no longer exist, being absorbed into urban sprawl but which had existed long enough within popular consciousness to warrant familiarity as a recognizable place.

Given the uncertainty and changes of modern life, within a generation such descriptions were rendered completely obsolete. That is to say, in the 1880s, urban space remained personal and consistent and there existed a sense of place or, at least, enough to use an individual household as a spatial marker. Moreover, spatial descriptions not only relied on assumptions about popular conceptions of space for locals but also on the simplicity of space for would-be visitors to the city who would require the guide to orientate themselves. The possibility of visitors using the directory certainly was not lost upon the editors, as subsequent issues would include guides to the city's attractions.

In a similar regard, the existence of *hojas sueltas* tells a similar tale of an increasingly complicated local social fabric. A plethora of Guatemala City's printing houses, residents, businesses, clubs, and organizations published a host of advertisements, pledges of political allegiance, death notifications, propaganda, denunciations,

²² Ibid., p. 9.

accusations, and public quarrels that demonstrate both the complexity of urban life and the centrality of locality. When murmur was not enough to discredit a foe or to defend one's honour, *capitalinos* employed *hojas sueltas* to widely disseminate their opinions. The pamphlets proliferated through the course of the nineteenth century and signaled the transforming nature of gossip by guaranteeing a readership and that strangers would learn of disputes and individual's outlooks. Popular poet and social commentator Juan Arzú Batres commented on the nature of gossip and rumour in the decade after the Liberal seizure of power. "In Guatemala today, rumours and gossips form the soul of its society, being as well the cause of its backwardness."²³ Arzú Batres reasoned that when people speak about the secrets of others, they threaten the stability of families and damage reputations. Between the clarifying of gossip and further distortion, *hojas sueltas* were used to great effect in sullyng the good names of individuals or clearing one of culpability.

In November 1882, for example, Manuel F. Ariza published a pamphlet in which he referred to an event that saw his son Daniel prosecuted for assaulting José A. Beteta at the city's hippodrome. In response to Ariza's pleas for his son's innocence, Beteta published a public letter not to denounce Ariza's claims and air his grievances, but to inform Ariza that the facts about "the drama at the Hippodrome" will soon be publicly known as Beteta has already spoken to the authorities.²⁴ Elsewhere, José Azurdia published an *hoja suelta* in July 1886 in which he denounced the *Diario de Centro América* for the "grave calamity against my reputation and honour" after the newspaper implicated him in an attempted murder a month earlier. Azurdia defiantly defended his

²³ Juan Arzú Batres, "Los chismes y la murmuración," *El Porvenir*, July 24, 1877, p. 71.

²⁴ José A. Beteta, "Al público," Nov 26, 1882, Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Seltas no. 1984, Year 1882].

character, however, publishing the sentence condemning another man, Desiderio Fajardo Ortiz for the crime.²⁵ Nearly thirty years after first raising his concern about rumours, Juan Arzú Batres once again spoke to the social dangers of gossip insisting that the practice—even when not of a defamatory or slanderous nature—can lead to misinterpretation and a loss of reputation.²⁶

Hojas sueltas were also a common medium for criticizing police abuses and state policies as was seen at the 1897 Exposición Centroamericana. They reveal insights into the prominence of locality and place within Guatemala City characteristic of the nineteenth century. When Rosendo Muñoz Pérez denounced the police at the 1897 Expo—as discussed in Chapter Three—he was able to identify the accused police officers by name and reputation. Similarly, an authorless criticism of the event, also publicly published and distributed as an *hoja suelta*, had its anonymity betrayed by Gilberto Valenzuela who scribbled Dr. Francisco Lainfiesta’s name onto the bottom of the document before storing it in his collection of public papers.²⁷ The modern world had not eliminated gossip; rather the expansion of urban centers altered the medium through which rumour and speculation was passed, ensuring that gossip would reach a substantial enough percentage of the population. The expansion of the city and altered social relations aggravated urban phenomenon that challenged liberal perceptions of the capital.

Unsavoury Elements: Threats to the Liberal Project

Threats to urban well-being constantly lurked in the shadows of modern experience. In particular moments, these perils were immediate and dominated public

²⁵ José Azurdia, “Tentativa de Homicidio,” July 12, 1886, Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Seltas no. 1985, Year 1886-1888].

²⁶ J. Arzú Batres, “Vida Social,” *Diario de Centro-América*, March 4, 1904, p. 1.

²⁷ “El Señor Casanova y la Exposición Centro-Americana,” October 1896, Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Seltas No. 1989, Year 1897].

attention. Thus was the case with the red and black scare of 1894 when the press in Guatemala City obsessed about the specter of anarchism. Interest in anarchism existed through the early 1890s but the assassination of French President Marie François Sadi Carnot by Italian anarchist Sante Geronimo Caserio in June 1894 initiated a firestorm of hysteria in the Guatemalan press. Like perceptions elsewhere, anarchism was portrayed as a savage political philosophy in a struggle against civilization.²⁸ Accounts of the anarchist press and important dates in the history of anarchism appeared in news briefs, as well as reports on anarchist threats against Russian Czar Alexander III and general denunciations against those who oppose trade and are the “eternal enemies of progress.”²⁹ When police Colonel Don José Montufar assaulted the director of *La Nueva Era*, Juan B.P.F. Padilla, in front of the Hotel Unión, the victim described the event as an “anarchist episode,” seizing the discourse of anarchism to discredit the perpetrator.³⁰ Indeed, he goes so far as to suggest that the assault sparked a riot from the public that witnessed it, a well-rehearsed motif that Padilla’s newspaper continued to use for years, including the 1896 reminder “that anarchy incites the mob, that there is no enemy more implacable than those disillusioned by spite.”³¹

More generally, however, the greatest menaces were the urban poor. Vagrants, sex workers, and alcoholics, in particular, reaped the scorn of liberal modernizers. Modernity did not invent these urban characters. Social concerns about the urban poor

²⁸ Francisco Torres, “Carnot y los anarquistas,” *El Ferrocarril*, June 28, 1894, p. 1.

²⁹ “Fechas anarquistas,” *El Ferrocarril*, Sept. 26, 1894, p. 2; “La prensa anarquista,” *El Ferrocarril*, Aug. 4, 1894, p. 3; “Los anarquistas y el Czar,” *El Ferrocarril*, Sept. 25, 1894, p. 2; “Alcance,” *El Ferrocarril*, July 12, 1894, p. 1.

³⁰ That a police officer would be accused of perpetrating an event described as anarchist demonstrates a serious misunderstanding of the tenets of nineteenth-century anarchism. But the choice of words does show a desire to be part of a broader cosmopolitan conversation.

³¹ “Consecuencias de la Anarquía,” *La Nueva Era*, June 23, 1896, p. 1.

existed in the city virtually since its foundation and settlement. There was a crisis of unemployment, for example, after the peak of the capital's construction as a pool of skilled masons and semi-skilled labourers concentrated in the city's outskirts.³²

However, the Liberal Reforms aggravated social tensions by creating a reserve of employable labour left permanently in flux given the volatility of the export economy. Steady urbanization, as well, meant ever increasing competition for jobs. Indeed, as historian David McCreery has written with regards to prostitution in Guatemala City, "Unprecedented but unstable economic prosperity, urbanization, and the social disorganization resulting from the implementation of systems of forced labour and removal from the land created a climate propitious for an increase in and institutionalization of commercial sex."³³ By the early to mid-1890s, discussion of the urban poor peaked in Guatemala City, portrayed by the country's press corps as a veritable epidemic.

The fear of so-called degenerates and retrogrades arose from a particular impulse to order space and manage urban behavior in a way that liberal reformers felt was conducive to advancing the project of modernity. An 1894 editorial argued, "In our young people, labour is not an ineludible law in the struggle for existence." Idleness and vagrancy abounded through Guatemala City, according to the press, a condition found "principally in the proletarian class of people." Rather than a consequence of urbanization, the vice of vagrancy was viewed as owing to the character of social misfits, portrayed as those healthy young men who were inebriated on the corners while their wives and children suffered the pains of hunger. "Making a living is extremely easy for

³² Gellert, *Ciudad de Guatemala*, p. 19.

³³ David McCreery, "'This Life of Misery and Shame': Female Prostitution in Guatemala City, 1880-1920," *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Nov 1986), pp. 333-334.

the working class here where all kinds of workshops are always lacking operators,” it was explained, “just as back rooms and taverns maintain themselves full of the idle and vagabonds.” Youths as young as fifteen or sixteen years of age are often seduced to drink by their older workmates in binges that often lead to violence after the alcohol transforms men into ferocious beasts, according to one editorial. Those found in taverns in the afternoon are “senseless automatons whose organism is fueled by the impulses of the infamous fermentation, bathed in waves of fire, without restraint or hindrance of any kind.” It concludes by calling on the police “to combat this social plague, persecuting vagrancy and idleness, which are the dark halls through which one passes towards the labyrinths of vice, crime, and misfortune.”³⁴

El Ferrocarril reported a little more than a month later that “Vagrancy is already a true plague among us,” indicating that 41 individuals had been locked up in prison following a police sweep for drunkenness and vagrancy. The author concludes with resignation, “What a society!”³⁵ Detention was a common solution to the problem with *Las Noticias* reporting in a news brief in 1892 that “For fifteen bums, the dawn broke today in *jail*. Sweep the streets,” it suggested because “they are quite neglected and really need—are in dire need—of the accessory we call a broom.”³⁶

The issue of vagrancy had a gendered dynamic according to some commentators. A few years earlier, female journalist Sara María G.S. de Moreno deplored vagrancy as “the gangrene that corrodes the entrails of the family and necessarily that of the entire society.” Mothers, she explained, had the responsibility to ensure that their children did not succumb to vices that would make them commit an “action that morality condemns

³⁴ “Ociosidad y Vagancia,” *El Ferrocarril*, Aug. 17, 1894, p. 1.

³⁵ *El Ferrocarril*, Sept. 19, 1894, p. 2.

³⁶ “Contra la vagancia,” *Las Noticias*, Jan. 13, 1892, p. 2.

when it is not a felony.” Vagrants, she elaborates further, are “vampires that suck the blood of a poor mother, of their siblings, and their parents.” She cautioned that mothers of the middle and upper classes should be able to permit their children to enter into the trades as “the name of an honorable artisan is much more respectable than the shreds of a illustrious family name muddied by the ugly vices that idleness breeds.” In concluding she posits that idlers merely consume the labours of others like a parasite while reiterating her appeal to mothers to instill an ethic of work in their children for the benefit of the nation’s progress.³⁷

In 1896, *La Nueva Era* launched a two-part analysis of alcohol abuse and the prospects of prohibition. Inspired by a debate in the Chilean press, the editors sought a solution to combat the excessive consumption of alcohol and *aguardiente* (home brew). Taxation appeared reasonable as a means to diminish abuse, however, it was not sufficient to stem the flow of alcohol. As such, the authors argued for prohibition even at the risk of fiscal loss for governments. They explained that curtailing both superfluous and harmful consumption led to increased consumerism in other taxable sectors of the economy. Former alcohol abusers would be able to satisfy the necessities of life “that extend the circle of their licit pleasures and shall permit them to reach a *comfort* that they presently lack. They would not remain stalled, then. And would go on to provide for other industries that would offer products taxable by the state.” Taking the argument further, they suggested “And the same would happen, if instead of consuming it, it was saved and accumulated to form a modest amount of capital; which, following the course of all capital, it would aspire to reproduce itself by finding whichever placement.” Rather than having a society plagued by the vice of retrogrades, they concluded, it would consist

³⁷ Sara María G.S. de Moreno, “La Vagancia,” *Pabellón Centro-Americano*, Oct. 28, 1888, p. 2.

of honourable, robust men. Eugenicist reasoning suggested that alcoholism would cease to pass through the blood to new generations of degenerates.³⁸

The second part of the analysis featured an effort to view prohibition in alignment with the precepts of liberty. From a social point of view, they argued, “aguardiente does not satisfy any necessity that should be satisfied. Its immoderate use affects the physical constitution of individuals, corrupting their moral sentiments, predisposing them to crime and rendering them lazy and inept.” There was, they suggested, no despotism in prohibiting evil-doers from committing crimes and impeding their moral and physical suicides. They conclude, “We are liberal but freedom does not mean debauchery and libertinage.”³⁹

The liberal desire to control *capitalinos*' actions and bodies extended beyond alcoholism and vagrancy, incorporating prostitution and efforts to manage brothels and their employees. Like other perceived social ills, prostitution predated the Liberal Reforms in Guatemala City. During the colonial era and through the early republican period, prostitution was permitted, if clandestine, with little effort by the state to impose control over the practice. To the extent that there was any regulation over brothels, it was through the Catholic Church-administered Casa de Recogida (Retirement Residence), which sought to reform prostitutes.⁴⁰ Historian David McCreery argues that prostitution increased as a result of the Liberal Reforms and was often the target of reformers who sought to control female sex-workers while recognizing the well-rehearsed role in the culture of shame and honour in Guatemala City. By this, McCreery suggests that

³⁸ “Alcoholismo,” *La Nueva Era*, Feb. 15, 1896, p. 1.

³⁹ “Alcoholismo,” *La Nueva Era*, Feb. 21, 1896, p. 1.

⁴⁰ Blanca Iliana Ordoñez Montepeque, “La prostitución como fenómeno social de la Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción, durante los años 1880-1910”, (Thesis, Universidad de San Carlos, 2000), p. 29.

prostitution allowed male *capitalinos* to relieve their sexual urges and aggressiveness without spoiling one's lineage or family honour. To this end, many observers contended that prostitution was a necessary evil. Indeed, McCreery cites a Guatemala City doctor who explained,

Taking into account the breakdown in morality which would afflict society if the houses [of prostitution] were to be closed, as honorable women the daughters of good families and wives would necessarily become the objects of corruption..., [prostitution] is the alternative least damaging to society.⁴¹

A second concern amongst liberal reformers was venereal disease.

Syphilis, in particular, occupied urban minds as the disease ravaged segments of the population and spread into "respectable" homes by way of male visitors to local brothels. Of course, the discussion of syphilis hinted at broader trepidations about class and reveals social gender prejudices. Miguel Díaz, for example, commenting on venereal disease and its relation to prostitution, posited in 1877 that the issue was, at base, a problem of female seduction, as women were said to "seduce in silence before even opening their lips" through their beauty. While pure women, through their dedication to honour, were less a threat, their binary opposite, the temptress, threatened societal stability. Díaz writes,

Yes to beauty, light, youthful age, a life full of intoxicating objects, health; the contrast this offers with the darkness of the night, with the coarse winter of the age, with the torments of passion, with the censure of the an unsettled conscience, with the menacing prospect of a dark future with a misty sky, with the screeching of a terrifying owl. Behold the two polar opposites of social existence and in the lives of women: the virgin and the prostitute, the wife full of virtue and the adulteress.

⁴¹ McCreery, "This Life of Misery and Shame," p. 335.

Through their powers of seduction, women proceeded in “dragging society, as it does the individual, towards the abyss.”⁴² Through the association of prostitution and syphilis, and woman as seductress, reformers like Díaz forcefully argued for controlling prostitution. Others, however, targeted men as those with the power to seduce and called upon women to educate themselves to avoid being abused.⁴³

In either case, prostitution was regulated after 1881 rather than banned; the state began to institute a system like those in place in Europe and the United States. Licenses were required to operate a *bordello* and a series of criteria about solicitation, hours, the ages of prostitutes, and regular tests and treatment for venereal disease were ostensibly enforced. Clandestine prostitution was targeted due to its association with syphilis and reformers called upon police “to cut at the roots this gangrene that gradually corrupts our customs.”⁴⁴

Blanca Iliana Ordoñez Montepeque argues that Guatemala City prostitutes generally came from the city’s outskirts, emerging from disintegrated families employed in unsteady tertiary services. The *bordellos* were able to secure a consistent supply of young women as some economically depressed women voluntarily entered the trade, while women caught in public late at night, suspected of clandestine prostitution, or arrested for other crimes were often enlisted in brothels where police enforcement ensured that they did not escape. In *El Señor Presidente*, Miguel Ángel Asturias discussed the common fate of women who were in trouble with the law through the character of Fedina de Rodas, who was arrested on suspicion of participating in sedition.

⁴² Miguel Díaz, “La Prostitución bajo el punto de vista de la moral pública, y de la infección venereal”, presented to Doctor Don Manuel Herrera (hijo), and Dean of the Faculty Don Nazario Toledo; 7 August 1877; Guatemala: Tipografía del ‘Progreso’, pp. 7, 38-39.

⁴³ A. García Llansó, “La Prostitución,” *Diario de Centro-América*, May 4, 1892, p. 1.

⁴⁴ Dr. Véritas, “Prostitución Clandestina,” *Diario de Centro-América*, May 10, 1899, p. 1.

After she was interrogated and tortured, Fedina was sold to one of the city's brothels at a high price.⁴⁵ It was also not unheard of for parents to sell their daughters into the trade or to receive a subsidy for maintaining a child in a brothel.

One of the most prominent brothel matrons in Guatemala City during the late nineteenth century was Petrona Montis who won a monopoly over the prostitution trade despite the protests of her competitors. Montis appealed to the Ministerio de Gobernación (Ministry of Governance) by arguing, as many had before, that venereal disease would be more easily controlled through a closer regulation of the trade. Through the strict monitoring of brothels by way of a monopoly, Montis convinced the government to regulate the trade with close cooperation from her collection of brothels.⁴⁶ A ranking system whereby the women were categorized as either first or second-class according to their age, origins, ethnicity, and beauty determined their pay.

Strict enforcement of regulations (that included frequent doctors' visits to check for venereal disease), the inability to travel and limitation on movement in the city during the day, a system of forced indebtedness that trapped women in the profession, and the social ostracization associated with their work led many prostitutes to flee the control of the brothel and matron. As McCreery suggests, there was a strong desire to control the urban poor and the state's intrusion into the prostitution trade represented an attempt to monitor marginalized spheres of society while reinforcing gender norms.⁴⁷ Through the regulation of prostitution together with denouncing and arresting urban paupers and shaming unproductive alcoholics, the liberal state enforced its vision of urban modernity,

⁴⁵ Miguel Ángel Asturias, *El Señor Presidente*, Frances Partridge (trans), (New York: Atheneum, 1963), see Chapter Nineteen and Twenty-Two.

⁴⁶ Ordoñez Montepeque, "La prostitución," Chapter Two.

⁴⁷ McCreery, "'This Life of Misery and Shame,'" pp. 338-340.

attempting to harness forces that undermined its attempts to make the capital into the country's centre of progress. The urban poor threatened to spoil the liberal's image of the city while simultaneously failing to contribute to the local economy as workers and proper consumers. Yet—and this is a fundamental point—the urban poor, while not a creation of the liberals, expanded their presence in the city in large part because of liberal policies.

Suburbanization, Beautification, and the Dream-Worlds of Modernity

Modernization transformed the nature of life in Guatemala City. There were urban anxieties amongst the bourgeoisie that the city was losing its character, that its spaces were rendered less familiar, and that foreign elements such as anarchists as well as social types like paupers, prostitutes, and alcoholics threatened its morality and order. In order to hide away these realities of modern life and mask the shortcoming of the export economy, the liberal regime attempted to cosmetically alter the urban physiognomy of the capital city and engage *capitalinos* with the wonders of consumer modernity. That is to say, the liberal regime attempted to intoxicate the population with its dream-worlds of consumption, spectacle, and urban beautification. The ultimate goal was to distract *capitalinos* from the challenges and shortcomings of the liberal project.

From 1871 until 1920, the liberal state was largely successful at managing threats to its stability whether from popular uprisings or attempts to spark social change via assassination of government officials. As such, during this period, the experience of modernity and the optics that it helped forge was more likely to be influenced by the Decauville, merchandise in the Portal de Comercio, and French-style chalets that lined the avenue to the Hippodrome and Temple to Minerva than by social threats. While

suffering certainly existed amongst the urban poor, it tended to be spatially segregated, limited to working-class neighbourhoods such as Calvario and Candelaria. Indeed, the greatest concentration of brothels, for example, was located in the red light district of the city's poorer northeast. While paupers sometimes crept into view, the optics of modernity were more heavily influenced by the city's modernism than the negative effects of its modernization. Indeed, it is no surprise that the efforts at embellishment, the sights and spectacles of urban modernity, the enchantment and magical properties attributed to electricity, commodities, trains, the telegraph, and capital all were said to have contributed to lulling the population to sleep filled with modern bliss.

Efforts by the liberal regimes to alter perceptions of the modern capital were perhaps most clearly seen in Jocotenango. It was in this neighbourhood in the city's north that the liberals engaged in modern spectacle and urban beautification. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Jocotenango was a relocated indigenous village that was established north of La Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción in order to supply labour for the new capital's construction. In the 1870s, the Municipality of Guatemala annexed Jocotenango and the physiognomy of the town was drastically altered as the community was settled by the suburbanizing bourgeoisie and used as a place of recreation and enjoyment befitting of their class status. When the town was relocated in the eighteenth century, as a cultural enticement for the local population to leave the old town site, colonial officials also appropriated the original village's annual religious fair to honour the Virgen de la Asunción that had been held every August since 1620. Until the Liberal Reforms, the fair of Jocotenango was a collection of indigenous artisans, food producers, and textile weavers from various regions that would gather around the local church for

several days in mid-August to celebrate the assumption of the Virgin Mary. This changed, however, in the 1870s.

Historian Ofelia Columba Déleon Meléndez suggests that the liberals altered the nature of the fair in Jocotenango upon coming to power as they saw the fair and community as a possible avenue for suburbanization and site for cultural modernization. Indeed, she concludes her study of the fair by arguing that it “has suffered changes since its founding as a result of the participation of non-popular sectors of Guatemalan society, who wanted to transform it into a fiesta of their own at the expense of the common interest”.⁴⁸ By this, she refers to a series of reforms instituted by the liberals to render the fair a hallmark of progress through its secularization. One of the first decrees pertaining to Jocotenango by the administration of Justo Rufino Barrios ordered the destruction of the local parish church in 1874.

Beyond challenging the power of the Church, the act was executed in order to clear a path from the Jocotenango market to the focus of the liberal’s modernizing cultural project: the hippodrome. Under the state direction of the Ministerio de Fomento and that of the Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País, the Sociedad Zootécnica (Veterinary Society) was founded in Jocotenango to further the selective breeding of livestock for entertainment purposes such as horse racing and bullfighting.⁴⁹ From here, not only was the canton annexed and incorporated by the capital city in September 1879 but also liberals intent on promoting modern ends usurped much of the religious symbolism of the annual fair. City chronicler Ramón A. Salazar and others recall the fair from a time when it was an opportunity for indigenous communities to sell their locally

⁴⁸ Déleon Meléndez, *La feria de Jocotenango en la ciudad de Guatemala*, p. 83.

⁴⁹ Víctor Miguel Díaz, “La Feria Nacional de 1934,” *El Imparcial*, Nov. 18, 1934, Sección Cine, p. 3.

produced goods in the capital;⁵⁰ by the 1880s, however, the fair had become much more class-based, serving as an important function for socialites with its horse races, galas, carriage parades, and livestock auctions.

The community also attracted bourgeois spectacle due to the presence of the hippodrome. Indeed, in a benefit for the Casas de Beneficencia (Almshouse) in August 1903, a young jockey named Jorge Ubico rode upon an American bred horse named Hulda.⁵¹ Ubico had already made a name for himself in the mid-1890s: after cycling became popular in the same epoch, following its introduction by English and North Americans, Ubico excelled at it. In so doing he afforded himself the rare opportunity to be photographed and featured in one of the first illustrated magazines in Guatemala upon his bicycle “The White Flyer” at the tender age of sixteen.⁵² Ubico was elected President of the Republic in the 1930s and oversaw the alteration of urban recreational space, completing an urban coup that had been planned for nearly half a century: southern expansion of the City of Guatemala (analyzed in Chapters Six and Seven).

A series of other recreational activities and spectacles of cultural modernization complemented all the attention brought to Jocotenango by way of the fair throughout the year. In 1899 President Manuel Estrada Cabrera decreed the establishment of an annual festival of knowledge known alternatively as the Fiesta de Minerva or Minervalias to be held every October. To that end, he had a replica of the Greek Parthenon, known as the Temple of Minerva, constructed at the end of the Avenida del Hipodromo within the inner field of the horse track. The temple was then mimicked in cities and towns

⁵⁰ Déleon Meléndez, *La feria de Jocotenango en la ciudad de Guatemala*, pp. 32-33.

⁵¹ “Hipódromo Nacional de Guatemala,” Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas no. 1993, Year 1903].

⁵² *La Ilustración Guatemalteca*, Sept.1, 1896, pp. 31, 38 and 39.

throughout the Republic. Until the President's overthrow in 1920, the Minervalias witnessed school-aged children marching through the streets of Jocotenango, along with speeches of homage, pavilions, contests, and martial bands along the avenue leading to the Temple. The famed Mapa en Relieve (Relief Map)—discussed in Chapter Seven—was inaugurated during the festival of 1905, attracting visitors to Jocotenango throughout the year. More generally, the avenue to the hippodrome was a site of bourgeois spectacle. Indeed, the road was lined with European-style homes and embassies and became a place for public promenading. In a word, the community—despite its largely indigenous legacy and the remnants of Catholic order—became one of the most celebrated sites of Guatemalan liberal modernity. It also functioned as a zone where Guatemalans could imagine themselves someplace other than Guatemala.

The embellishment and re-imagining of Guatemala City did not end in Jocotenango, however. Echoing international trends, new impulses towards sanitation and health, as well as a desire to address the harsh realities of urban life, inspired reformers to undertake urban embellishment projects. At the heart of these aspirations was the perceived need to beautify the city through the use of public parks and promenades, places that would indicate that Guatemala had left behind “its old habits of moody recluse and now finds charms along the promenade, which is so hygienic and necessary.”⁵³ To this end, the government of Reyna Barrios decreed in July 1892 to create a public garden called La Reforma in honour of the high level of culture and progress that the country had achieved since 1871. The decree rationalized the creation of the garden by arguing that ornamentation in civilized countries makes residence easier for immigrants and contending that parks and gardens are indispensable for public

⁵³ “Parque La Exposición,” *El Ferrocarril*, July 24, 1894, p. 3.

hygiene.⁵⁴ In April 1894, the Secretario de Fomento announced that land would be expropriated from José María Samayoa in order to construct the Parque de La Reforma.⁵⁵

Several months later, the newspaper *El Progreso Nacional* gave its readers a description of the new promenade to the city's south, which it assured would provide dividends for the delicate tastes and culture of the capital's inhabitants. Consisting of seven *caballerías*⁵⁶ of land from what was once the *finca* La Aurora, it had three entrances to allow pedestrians and carriages to pass along an approximately one and a half kilometer avenue lined with statues. The park was an extension of the Boulevard 30 de Junio and together the two projects brought comparisons to Baron Haussmann's urbanism in Paris. Indeed, the park was described as "an enterprise that would honor any of the most civilized capitals".⁵⁷ The Boulevard 30 de Junio connected the Parque de la Reforma to the train station and was predicted to be one of the most beautiful streets in the world.⁵⁸ The press talked about efforts to embellish and beautify the city, crediting Reyna Barrios with the effort.⁵⁹ The Boulevard should be understood as part of the same movement as the Exposición Centro-Americana discussed in Chapter Three and was inaugurated in time for the event.

When the cycling rage arrived in Guatemala City in 1896, the paseos in the Parque La Reforma, as well as along the Boulevard 30 de Junio and the Avenida del Hipodromo were among the favorite locations of bicycle enthusiasts. Forming the Club Union Ciclista Guatemalteca, promoters published pamphlets and articles about the sport

⁵⁴ "Se crea el jardín público de La Reforma," *El Guatemalteco*, July 7 1892, p. 112.

⁵⁵ "Parque de la Reforma," *El Ferrocarril*, April 10, 1894, p. 3.

⁵⁶ One *caballería* equals 45 hectares.

⁵⁷ "El Parque de La Reforma," *El Progreso Nacional*, Sept. 4, 1894, pp. 27-28.

⁵⁸ *El Progreso Nacional*, Aug. 28, 1894, p. 19.

⁵⁹ "Ensanche y embellecimiento de la Capital," *El Progreso Nacional*, Sept. 25, 1894, p. 51 and "Cambiando Traje," *El Progreso Nacional*, June 21, 1895, p. 178.

of cycling, intended as a means for modern men and women to remain healthy. Within a couple months of its foundation, the Club boasted of 182 members.⁶⁰ “Capitalists, bankers, magistrates, proprietors, supervisory staff, businessmen, lawyers, all classes of respectable men,” one article argued, “leaving aside ridiculous human respect and their many worries, have found in the pedal an effective remedy against the outcomes of a sedentary lifestyle, mental work, and so many threats of health that make life in capital cities so difficult.”⁶¹ Within zones such as Jocotenango and the Parque La Reforma and with activities such as cycling, the bourgeoisie were able to create a culture of modernity that was conducive to their understanding of how the modern metropolis was to be experienced. And, in time, the social evolution of bourgeois culture would produce distinctive social types—mentioned in Chapter One—that embodied the spirit of the Belle Époque.

Dandies, decadents, Bohemians, and egoists were all said to wander the streets of the capital, cheerfully enjoying the fruits of fin-de-siècle culture. Often coming from the families of middle-class professionals, these social characters were said to frequent the paseos, parks, and plazas of Guatemala City, both looking at and being seen by others. From his visit to the city in the first decade of the twentieth century, Nevin O. Winters writes,

At night when the band concerts are given the plaza is a good place to study the people, for all classes turn out in great numbers and parade around the central portion. The cock-of-the-walk on such occasions is the student of the military academy who struts around much-bedecked in a red uniform covered with gold braid, and with his sword invariably trailing on the ground—much resembling the peacock on dress parade with his tail feathers fluttering in the breeze. The young dandies are there with their bamboo sticks, tailor-made clothes and smoking their abominable

⁶⁰ “Nuestras aspiraciones,” *Union Ciclista Guatemalteca*, October 15, 1896, p. 1.

⁶¹ Ciclomano, “Notas Ciclistas,” *La Ilustración Guatemalteca*, Aug. 1, 1896, p. 13.

cigarettes. A few foreign drummers or *concessionaires* stalk around the plaza side by side with the substratum of *ladinos* in their shabby attire. A few families may stroll around with their little girls in stiff little white gloves and their shy, velvety eyes turning this way and that without a sign of recognition.⁶²

The social performance on display during this period highlights the arrival of modern urban culture, though it was a long time in the coming. From the 1870s, the Teatro Colón was a site of cultural indulgence for those esteeming to be modern. Ramón Salazar decried the pedigree of early theatre productions, which amounted to little more than vulgar comics and depressing orchestras.⁶³ The introduction of Italian opera, however, was expected to draw large crowds and satiate the tastes of the cultural elite, though there were often complaints that the theatre was poorly attended.⁶⁴

As the city expanded and drew in immigrants from Western Europe and the United States, it necessarily became more cosmopolitan as diverse interests coalesced within its urban culture. The formation and usage of neologisms by people struggling to describe their social worlds or to use international flair to enliven their surroundings brought much discussion. In 1891, the *Diario de Centro-América* carried a story from a Lima newspaper about “el chic.” The article explained that *chic* was a popular expression amongst high society and was derived from France to describe everything that is perfect, elegant, and beautiful. “Together with the fashions and the imported artifacts from the great capital,” the editorial explained, “comes this word like so many others to enlist itself amidst the words of our rich language.”⁶⁵ Some years later, a similar discussion took place about the social significance of *flirting* and its Spanish-language

⁶² Winter, *Guatemala and Her People of To-Day*, p. 66.

⁶³ Salazar, *Tiempo Viejo*, p. 25.

⁶⁴ See for example, “Teatro,” *El Porvenir*, Nov. 5, 1877, p. 189 and “Teatro Colón,” *El Ferrocarril*, March 14, 1894, p 2.

⁶⁵ “El ‘Chic,’” *Diario de Centro-América*, March 3, 1891, p. 2.

derivative *flirtear*.⁶⁶ Tolerance existed for neologisms when dictionaries lacked an adequate vocabulary to describe something or when a word already embraced by many people.⁶⁷ The acceptance of neologisms threatened abuse, however, in literature. Emilio Bobadilla wrote, for example,

There is an enormous difference between being modern and being a modernist, the same that exists between an elegant and clean man and another that dresses in the style of a clown. To be modern is the equivalent of possessing wide, ductile talent, a scientific and literary culture free from old scholastic habits, a fine sensibility, a witty and astute gaze, a spirit capable of understanding and explaining the evolution of ideas, and the complexity of the contemporary social mechanism. The modern artist does not need—in order to express what he feels or thinks—to dislocate language, inventing useless words, violating syntax, relying on nebulous turns of images without any correspondence to reality, or colourful gaudiness.⁶⁸

In spite of criticisms of dandies, bohemians, their style of dress, and the language that they utilized, they served to place Guatemala City within a broader, more cosmopolitan, conversation about the nature of modern life. The seductive powers of the culture of modernity and role of spectacle and beautification in the city should not be underestimated. Indeed, Miguel Ángel Asturias insisted that the wonders of modernity and the dictatorial control of President Manuel Estrada Cabrera had calmed the city into a dream-state from which they were scarcely able to awaken.

Awakening the Sleepwalkers

The city described in Asturias' *El Señor Presidente* is awash with the meanderings of sleepwalkers cascading down the rationalized canals that are the streets of their capital. The motif of dream sequences in Guatemalan literature often brings

⁶⁶ "Croquis Cosmopolitas: El 'Flirt' en Norte América," *Diario de Centro-América*, Oct. 5, 1905, p. 2.

⁶⁷ Aníbal Galindo, "Neologismos y Americanismos," *La República*, Dec. 11, 1896, p. 1.

⁶⁸ Emilio Bobadilla, "Los Decadentistas," *La Locomotora*, April 2, 1908, p. 11.

clairvoyance and direction to rural-dwellers; sleep and dream are a means of preservation and perseverance in the countryside and source of vision. But dream hardens amnesia and fosters delirium among those who inhabit urban zones, burying reality deep within a veil. The sleepwalkers are phantoms, haunting both those who encounter them while in a conscious state, as well as, the dreams of their fellow wanderers. Even the city itself is restless. After a murder is committed in the plaza,

the streets ran one after the other, all scantily clad in moonlight, and not knowing what had happened, while the trees in the square twisted their fingers together in despair because they could not announce the event either by means of a wind or the telephone wires. The streets arrived at crossroads and asked one another where the crime had taken place, and then some hurried to the centre of the town and others to the outskirts, as if disorientated.

Such disorientation characterizes Asturias' city. While the President is distinguished by his clairvoyance—owing to a network of spies and informers who fear the President too greatly to betray him—the residents of the capital wander with their minds clouded, as confused as the streets and unable to ascertain the goings-on of the city.

Descriptions of urban space are full of allusions to sleepwalking, obfuscation, uncertainty, and fear. “The streets were swathed in mist,” Asturias claims, and along them walked a drunken postman, “throwing his letters into the street as he went along like a sleepwalker.”⁶⁹ Whether from delirium, drunkenness, or enchantment, Asturias suggests that in the mid-1910s, *capitalinos* were captured in a sleep-state. Those who had awakened, realized the absurdity of their situations, and attempted to challenge the status quo were quickly arrested, imprisoned, tortured, murdered, or exiled.

There were attempts undertaken by various interests and parties to awaken the urban population from its dream-state. Whether assassination attempts on presidents by

⁶⁹ Asturias, *El Señor Presidente*, pp. 51 and 126.

gunshot or bomb, student protests in the streets, or revolutionary endeavours, the liberal regimes from 1871 until 1920 experienced periodic turmoil that always threatened to awaken the populace. The attempted Revolution of 1897 during the *Exposición Centro-Americana* has already been considered. While the revolutionaries from Quetzaltenango succeeded in unveiling the phantasmagoria that aspired to conceal the extent of the coffee depression, they were ultimately unsuccessful in ousting Reyna Barrios. The President had little time to enjoy his victory against the revolutionaries, however.

The following February, during a walk home to his manor following a night at the Teatro Colón, an assassin's well-placed bullet struck Reyna Barrios in the mouth, killing him instantly. Edgar Zollinger, an Englishman of Swiss extract invariably described as a madman, was immediately murdered by Reyna Barrios' guards for the deed. A brief aperture opened in which criticism was heaped upon the regime of Reyna Barrios. Almost immediately, *hojas sueltas* were distributed that discussed the assassination and its implications. One such leaflet described Edgar Zollinger as the "Liberator of Guatemala" who "died heroically" and "whose memory shall eternally live on, engraved in the hearts of all true lovers of liberty."⁷⁰ Another, derived from the first, announced that Reyna Barrios was best known for his vicious soul and leprous heart. It continued further, reading, "He distinguished himself from other presidents—his predecessors—by his effeminate style of dress, his double character, his excessive cowardice..."⁷¹ Reports quickly surfaced that the exiled forces from the Revolution of 1897 were prepared to step into the political vacuum created by the President's death, however Manuel Estrada

⁷⁰ "Edgar Zollinger, Libertador de Guatemala," Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas, no. 1990, Year 1898].

⁷¹ "José Maria Reyna Barrios," Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas no. 1990, Year 1898].

Cabrera, a functionary within the deceased President's government quickly seized power.⁷²

Despite offering a general amnesty, Estrada Cabrera quickly consolidated his power and cracked down on dissent, thus re-establishing the dream-state achieved by Reyna Barrios; however, he lived in fear of assassination. In 1906, rumours circulated throughout the city that he refused to travel through the streets of the capital, had his mother send him food for fear of poisoning, and incarcerated the wives of his political opponents.⁷³ The following year, an attempt was made on Estrada Cabrera's life when an explosive device was detonated under his carriage, killing his horse and injuring several of the passengers. The President escaped unharmed.⁷⁴ Almost a year later, in April 1908, a military cadet attempted to shoot Estrada Cabrera but without success. The military responded by massacring a large number of cadets without evidence of whether the victims were implicated in the assassination attempt. The regime also used this incident as a pretext to execute a number of individuals who had been imprisoned since the previous year's bombing of the presidential carriage.⁷⁵ A vengeful Estrada Cabrera even ordered the demolition of the Escuela Politécnica (Polytechnic School) where the cadets studied.

Other attempts to awaken the population from its sleep took nonviolent and more comical, but no less serious, approaches. Some months after students from the Universidad de San Carlos paraded in the streets of the capital to mock President Reyna

⁷² For rumours about a possible uprising, see "Morales Declared President,": *New York Times*, Feb. 10, 1898, p. 1; "General Marroquin Killed and the Morales Forces Put to Flight," *New York Times*, Feb. 12, 1898, p. 2.

⁷³ "Women Put Into Jail," *The Washington Post*, July 5, 1906, p. 1.

⁷⁴ "Try to Kill Cabrera," *The Washington Post*, May 1, 1907, p. 4.

⁷⁵ Rodríguez, *Guatemala en 1919*, pp. 63-66.

Barrios for the “*second* inauguration of the *first* International Exposition of Central America” (as discussed in Chapter Three), students from the Schools of Law and Medicine published newspapers and marched through the city during the first Huelga de Dolores (Strike of Sorrows).⁷⁶ The Huelga transformed into an annual procession held the Friday before Lent and provided students with an opportunity to air their grievances and ridicule the political and economic establishment, especially through their publication *No nos tientes* (Don’t Tempt Us), but also through other activities spread over a number of days. The city’s press corps, the clergy, foreign interests, consumer society, and the government were lambasted in speeches and publications.

The initial Huelga coincided with Estrada Cabrera’s general amnesty of 1898 when the press operated with relative autonomy. Virgilio Álvarez Aragón has argued that the Huelga’s placement in the calendar year signals the slow secularization of university life in Guatemala City in accordance with liberal aims.⁷⁷ The Estrada Cabrera regime tolerated the student parades for their first few years but in 1903, following an incident where police interrupted a meeting at the Escuela de Derecho (School of Law) and, in the ensuing melee, student Bernardo Lemus was shot and killed, the Huelga was prohibited for the remainder of Estrada Cabrera’s time in office.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, *No nos tientes* was published and distributed clandestinely in 1907, having dropped its carnivalesque demeanour for more direct political agitation.⁷⁹ Despite student parades, assassination

⁷⁶ See José Barnoya, *Historia de la Huelga de Dolores*, (Guatemala: Editorial Universitaria, 1987), p. 3.

⁷⁷ Virgilio Álvarez Aragón, *Conventos, aulas y trincheras: Universidad y movimiento estudiantil en Guatemala, Volumen I: La ilusión por conservar*, (Guatemala: FLACSO, 2002), p. 141.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3; Augusto Cazali Ávila, *Historia de la Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala: Época Republicana (1821-1995)*, (Guatemala: Editorial Universitaria, 2001), p. 198.

⁷⁹ See Barnoya, *Historia de la Huelga de Dolores*, (Guatemala: Editorial Universitaria, 1987), p. 3.

attempts, and elite revolutionary movements, however, silence reigned as Estrada Cabrera effectively managed dissent in the Guatemalan capital.⁸⁰

The President was less inclined towards embellishment than his liberal predecessors, in part because the crippling economic depression of the late 1890s left state coffers barren. Nevertheless, Estrada Cabrera did create a cult of Minerva—discussed earlier—used as an opportunity for the city’s nascent bourgeoisie and middle classes to enact urban modernity, dressing up for the parade in the latest fashions. Indeed, in what must be among the first film footage shot in the republic, Carlos Valenti’s cinematograph first recorded then displayed scenes from the 1905 Minervalia at his theatre.⁸¹ Estrada Cabrera’s celebration of wisdom and public education won him praise within the international sphere, with letters of congratulations for the Minervalias coming from the likes of US President Theodore Roosevelt and Mexican President Porfirio Díaz.⁸²

Embellishment, efforts to suppress dissent and hide the urban poor, and the emergence of commodity culture were understood to have entranced *capitalinos*. As mentioned at the commencement of this chapter, the city’s inhabitants were forcefully awakened when the earth shook in late December 1917 and January 1918. The government’s unsatisfactory response to the crisis sparked dissent among a wide section of society, especially as the middle classes were made to live in encampments for months while the elite were afforded the opportunity to retreat from the devastated capital to their resort homes at Lake Amatitlán. Disenchantment coalesced around the Partido Unionista,

⁸⁰ For more on the Huelga, please see Heather A. Vrana, “Do Not Tempt Us!: The Guatemalan University in Protest, Memory, and Political Change, 1944-Present,” (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2013).

⁸¹ *Diario de Centroamerica*, Nov. 11, 1905, p. 4.

⁸² *Álbum de Minerva, Año IV*, (Guatemala: Tipografía Nacional, 1902).

especially as the export economy stagnated during the Great War and in its aftermath. The opposition to Estrada Cabrera that eventually transformed into the Unionist movement grew from the protests of Manuel Cobos Batres and Bishop José Piñol y Batres in the months prior to the earthquakes. Together, they directed open letters to the President commencing in 1919 and Bishop Piñol's sermons from San Francisco Church in May of that year served as catalysts for *capitalinos* to defy the government. The bishop was imprisoned for a month-and-a-half in July 1919 and upon his release following public outcry, he fled the country. Cobos, meanwhile, joined with others to form the Partido Unionista (Unionist Party), which they hoped would appeal to traditional liberals, conservatives, and workers.

Although the working class had been ingratiated to Estrada Cabrera in his early years in power due to his encouragement of worker clubs, a portion of workers formed the Comité de Obreras Patrióticas (Patriotic Workers Committee) in 1919, which later became known as the Liga Obrera and served as a base of support for the Partido Unionista. Finally, university students joined the ranks of the anti-Cabrera movement, eventually forming the *Club Unionista de Estudiantes Universitarias* (Unionist Club of University Students) in mid-January 1920 at the insistence of Cobos then later founding the student newspaper *El Estudiante*.⁸³ Journalist and future Vice-President of the Republic, Clemente Marroquín Rojas and Miguel Ángel Asturias were among the activists that composed the newspaper's first issues.⁸⁴

Once united, the unionists received donations from prominent families such as the Aycinenas and even the Banco Colombiano. The Party was officially founded on

⁸³ Álvarez Aragón, *Conventos*, p. 154.

⁸⁴ See *El Estudiante*, Feb. 8, 1920.

December 25, 1919, two years to the date after the first major earthquake, with the signing of the Act of the Three Folds (a reference to the paper upon which signatures were placed which had been folded three times). Finally, on January 1, 1920 the act was published as an *hoja suelta* and distributed throughout the city, a profound moment in the country's political history about which Guillermo Rodríguez later stated, "It's undeniable, however, that Guatemala has awakened."⁸⁵ Under pressure from the United States, Estrada Cabrera was made to follow the constitution and permit the rule of law. With the protection afforded by constitutional guarantees, the Unionist Party began holding mass meetings and publishing an official newspaper, *El Unionista*. By mid-March 1920, Estrada Cabrera's support was faltering as once-loyal supporters and parts of the military defected to the Unionist cause.

On April 8, 1920, the Asamblea Nacional met. In an attempt at interrupting the session, the President had loyal members of his government boycott the assembly and meet at his private residence. His gamble failed, however, as enough deputies arrived at the assembly to reach a quorum at which point the President was declared insane and unable to complete his responsibilities. A decree was passed that relieved Estrada Cabrera of the Presidency and replaced him with a provisional government. The old regime responded with what is known as "*la semana trágica*," a weeklong bombardment of the city and attack on the Unionist movement from April 9-15, 1920. After days of artillery shelling of the capital from the forts of San José and Matamoros, which left the city damaged considerably, Estrada Cabrera was forced to concede power and was arrested, thus ending his twenty-two year rule.

⁸⁵ Rodríguez, *Guatemala en 1919*, p. 4.

Conclusion

After having been relocated several times, the “wandering city” of Guatemala finally settled in its permanent home in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. A century later, the physiognomy of the city underwent its most significant transformation since the late colonial period following the inauguration of the Liberal Reforms of the 1870s. The change was slow but consistent as convents and Church properties were first converted into public buildings then new businesses began to emerge. By the 1890s, Guatemala City’s *capitalinos* were beginning to form new urban optics as a way to understand and experience their city. A new era of window displays and movie theatres, of horse-racing and bicycle clubs, and of Minervalias and public parks dawned upon the city as the spoils of the coffee export economy found its way into national and private coffers.

Within the Guatemalan experience of modernity, the period from 1871 until 1920 was the epoch of urban modernism. Embellishment and urban beautification changed the style of the city as planners attempted to draw inspiration from the cosmopolitan capitals of the world such as Paris, London, and New York. Those *capitalinos* astute to the way things used to be, mourned the passing of an age, arguing that Juan Chapin—the embodiment of the Guatemalan nation—had died on account of the modernization of the annual August celebration, the Fería de Jocotenango. Further, the city was not without its structural problems related to modernization. Periodic economic depressions slowed or halted projects and contributed to the expansion of the urban poor, most visible through the paupers, alcoholics, and prostitutes that caused anxiety amongst the city’s press corps. A repressive state security apparatus, however, that conducted occasional sweeps,

imprisoning those who were left marginalized by the modest modernization of the urban and rural economies managed these problems.

By the first decades of the twentieth century, repression and wonder for the modern world were said to have made the urban population fall into a deep state of sleep. Perennial problems associated with dictatorships and economic fallout often stirred segments of the population, however, these moments passed without a major reconfiguration of state power. The earthquakes of 1917 and 1918 changed the state of affairs, especially after the lackadaisical response of the Estrada Cabrera regime, which suggested to many residents that the government was not serious about reconstruction. Many commentators conveyed the imagery that the earthquake had shaken the consciousness of Guatemalans, having forced a collective awakening from the city's dream-state. The overthrow of Estrada Cabrera following the shelling of Guatemala City in April 1920 represented a fundamental turning point in the city's history. As the next chapter will make clear, it marked the emergence of mass politics and rapid urbanization as the consequences of a half-century of coffee cultivation in the countryside began to be felt in the capital. The one-time Paris of Central America was to become an urban nightmare, once again shifting the optics of modernity.

Chapter Six
Jorge Ubico on a Motorcycle: Circulation,
Phantasmagoria, and the Weakening of the *Cultura de Esperar*,
1920-1944

During the course of May 1931, President Jorge Ubico travelled across Guatemala with an entourage of government officials, paying visits to department capitals, towns, and villages. In the small town of San Lorenzo in the western department of San Marcos, Ubico visited a stone marker that commemorated the birth of former President, Justo Rufino Barrios. It was from the Barrios ancestral grounds that “the Great Reformer” had helped launch the Liberal Reforms of the 1870s. Ubico laid a floral arrangement at the base of the cenotaph as the last of the liberal dictators celebrated the life of the first.¹ In many ways, Ubico’s gesture spoke to the vast modernizing changes that had come to Guatemala in the preceding sixty years. Through his travels to far-flung regions of the country, Ubico appeared to have ended the great anxiety that troubled generations of liberal supporters and the bourgeoisie. Put briefly, Ubico seemed to have stifled the *cultura de esperar* in Guatemala.

Throughout his presidency, Jorge Ubico frequently toured the country, riding either by motorcycle or automobile upon newly constructed roads and highways to regions once regarded as remote. Significantly, many of these new transportation routes were built during the economic chaos of the Great Depression. Similar conditions had previously stopped or delayed work on national projects such as the 1897 Exposición Centro-Americana and the Northern Railway; in so doing, depressions had generated much more frustration and hand-wringing by the bourgeoisie than pragmatism. Despite the tribulations of economic collapse—“the most acute crisis ever recorded in history” as

¹ “El Pueblo de San Lorenzo,” *Diario de Centro-América*, May 20, 1931, p. 5.

one newspaper described the Great Depression²—Ubico was credited for successfully uniting Guatemala via an extensive network of roads. And he did so through taxation and forced labour directed towards public ends.

Ubico's tours also brought the President political capital. The United States Embassy in Guatemala City observed,

This new policy on the part of the Chief Executive has made an excellent impression on the people of the provinces who in the past have felt that they have been neglected and have consequently been easily influenced to support revolutionary movements against the Government in the more favored capital city.³

Subsequent commentators agreed. Ubico biographer Kenneth J. Grieb suggests that the tours implied that Ubico was ostensibly concerned for the well-being of Guatemala's indigenous populations.⁴ Indeed, during his travels, the President frequently asked locals what concerned them and how the state could ameliorate their troubles. The President consulted convicts on the conditions of their imprisonment and Ubico was reported to have lived alongside the people, "with the Indians, repudiated by almost all government officials; with all of Guatemala's misery, in order to attempt to remedy its misfortunes."⁵ Large municipal celebrations were planned in the capital to greet the President upon his return, as if he were a conquering hero, including twenty-one gun salute, the firing of artillery from the military forts in the city, and the playing of the Martial Band in the Parque Central.⁶ He effectively coupled modern transportation and telecommunication technologies with extensive use of traditional military pomp and ceremony. In this

² "Caminos y Carreteras Nacionales," *Diario de Centro-América*, June 1, 1931, p. 1.

³ McCafferty to State Department, Aug. 4, 1931, 814.00/1075.

⁴ Kenneth J. Grieb, *Guatemalan Caudillo: The Regime of Jorge Ubico, Guatemala 1931-1944*, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1979), pp. 35-36.

⁵ "La Jira Presidencial por los Departamentos de Occidente," *Diario de Centro-América*, May 15, 1931, p. 2

⁶ "El Arribo a la Capital del Señor Presidente," *Diario de Centro-América*, May 14, 1931, p. 12.

manner, Ubico fostered a populist image for himself and generated a celebrity aura around his personality.

This chapter advances several arguments. A byword of the Ubico years was the managed circulation of labour, commodities, and ideas. Ubico's presidency facilitated circulation in a number of ways. First, and most obviously, was his aforementioned campaign to construct roads throughout the country. This network of highways was explicitly intended for public use and represented an effort to overcome the lingering effects of the Great Depression, which had depleted agricultural exports. The manner in which these roads were constructed represented a departure from earlier attempts to remedy the *cultura de esperar* though. Rather than relying solely on government funds generated from import and export taxes and other sources, Ubico often directly taxed the oligarchy and bourgeoisie for the infrastructure from which they stood to profit. He also utilized a regime of mandatory labour which was eventually codified in the 1934 Ley Contra la Vagancia (Counter-Vagrancy Law), replacing earlier forms of coerced labour such a debt servitude and *mandamientos*. While the agricultural elite was allowed to petition the state for labour through the anti-vagrancy legislation, the law effectively took the control of labour from landowners and their agents, and placed it directly under the administration of the state. With control established over regimes of forced labour, the state applied sectors of the workforce on behalf of national interests instead of almost solely for private landowners. Explained briefly, the circulation afforded by road construction and its ability to overcome the *cultura de esperar* was derived from the desire to place labour and taxes towards national well-being.

What follows also continues the thesis from Chapter Five that the earthquakes of 1917 and 1918 signaled a mass awakening for *capitalinos*. The expansion of popular participation in politics may have culminated with the overthrow of President Manuel Estrada Cabrera but it did not terminate there, persisting throughout the 1920s. Great instability characterized the presidencies of Carlos Herrera (1920-1921), José María Orellana (1921-1926), and Lázaro Chacón (1926-1931), as each successive President became increasingly intolerant of mass democratic mobilization. When General Ubico came to power, he co-opted elements of mass mobilization through a paternalistic political culture. Part of this process was manifested through the President's own celebrity. During the 1930s, the optics of modernity morphed into something new. In one sense, optics were partly inverted as a result of Ubico's personality cult, abetted by his populist tactics. Whereas photographs of the President were commonplace throughout Guatemala by the 1930s because of the ease of reproducibility, pragmatic means of transportation and its accompanying infrastructure permitted the circulation of the President himself. Indeed, frequent were the observations that people living in rural Guatemalan and smaller departmental capitals had never before seen the President of the Republic in person. Ubico, thus, benefitted from what Walter Benjamin referred to as the "aura" to describe the reverence bestowed upon a celebrity. Like the movie stars in Benjamin's description, Ubico's person became a commodity in and of itself, something that seduced spectators with its presence.⁷

On a different level, however, the optics of modernity were being turned into an instrument of surveillance. The liberal governments were always interested in

⁷ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968), p. 231.

monitoring their population, rendering it more “legible” as James Scott described this “High Modernist” tendency.⁸ They did so in explicit ways through census-taking; but the liberals were also more inclined to invigilate the everyday activities of Guatemalans than their predecessor. Frequent government reports on the cleanliness of markets, for example, became the norm in liberal Guatemala City. But more sinister methods were used such as Estrada Cabrera’s networks of spies described in *El Señor Presidente*. Moreover, and symbolically, the original plan for the national penitentiary was to include a panopticon.⁹ Ubico placed a new Foucaultian dimension on governmental desires to “know” its population through his frequent unannounced trips to neighbouring cities to inspect schools, government building, and public works projects.¹⁰ The President reportedly favoured such unscheduled tours so as to capture government employees unprepared.¹¹ These unscheduled trips contributed to a sense, deliberately cultivated by Ubico himself, that people were under constant surveillance. The threat of perennial supervision brought self-disciplining, as Guatemalans were reluctant to disappoint the President. Fear and awe comingled within such Presidential tours. The optics of modernity were altered then by the combination of reproducibility of culture and the massification of politics, but also by the state’s increased capacity to surveil its population.

⁸ See James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, (London: Yale University Press, 1998).

⁹ Roberto Aycinena, “Los últimos cincuenta años de arquitectura en Guatemala,” *Arte Contemporáneo: Occidente—Guatemala*, Josefina Alonso de Rodríguez (ed.), (Guatemala: Imprenta Universitaria, 1966), p. 34.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Alan Sheridan (trans), (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

¹¹ “La Jira del Señor Presidente, General Ubico a Sacatepéquez,” *Diario de Centro-América*, May 19, 1931, p. 1.

But beyond the celebrity cult that Ubico enjoyed for the first several years of his presidency, his thirteen years in power witnessed a revitalization of phantasmagoria and commodity fetish. Unsurprisingly, discussions of consumer culture during the 1930s were placed within the context of roads and circulation. Commencing in the worst years of the Great Depression, a coalition of the federal and municipal governments began paving the streets and avenues of the capital's business district. Street festivals were held for the completion of particular thoroughfares that focused primarily on consumption. Sponsored in part by newspapers such as *El Imparcial*, these celebrations paid homage to Guatemala's consumer culture and inaugurated the golden age of sextear discussed in Chapter Four.

Complementing the illusions of plenty in the commercial core of the city was a new annual exposition, the FERIA NACIONAL DE NOVIEMBRE (National Fair of November), held in the southern national *finca* of La Aurora. Much of the discussion around the fair focused on its accessibility to the public, and represented genuine efforts to appeal to the mass of the population. The combination of commodities, sports, the amusement park, nocturnal lighting, and other features helped to distract urban Guatemalans from pressing issues facing their country. But it was also significant in helping to preserve the capitalist mode of production in Guatemala. Celebrating consumption during the Depression aided the more prosaic business interests of the city and helped reduce political unrest.

By the 1930s the mass mobilization of the decade before had turned into massive festivities during select times of the year. Silently, however, Ubico cynically continued the mass imprisonment and executions of labour leaders, political opponents, and suspected radicals. With palpable results in the construction of public infrastructure that

seemed to relieve the anxieties of the *cultura de esperar*, in addition to large numbers of *capitalinos* preoccupied with modern phantasmagoria and opponents silenced by sinister tactics, it is hardly shocking that Guatemala City during the 1930s and early 1940s earned its reputation as La Tacita de Plata (Little Silver Cup). Given the social instability that came before and after the 1930s, the illusions of security and plenty in Guatemala City during the decade were ingrained within popular consciousness. But the phantasmagoria spun into existence by Ubico did not last and by the mid-1940s, Guatemala City was once again shaken awake by the reverberations of the October Revolution of 1944.

Mass Politics During the 1920s

For the first time a broad coalition, representing diverse sectors of Guatemala City's populace came together to pressure for political change during the late 1910s and early 1920s. The cross-class alliance that comprised Unionismo was ultimately short-lived, though the movement succeeded in ousting President Estrada Cabrera from his decades-long rule and initiated the era of modern politics in Guatemala. Civil organizations had long existed in Guatemala City. After the Liberal Reforms, new political institutions such as clubs had an increased presence in national politics. The room for dissent, however, remained quite limited as both political and recreational clubs—from the Liberal Club, Club Guatemala, and American Club to the Jockey Club, Bicycle Club, and Youth Club—explicitly paid homage and swore allegiance to the President. Much has been made of those who failed to maintain their loyalty to the regime, from the fictionalized anecdotes found in Asturias' *El Señor Presidente* to the accounts of the fates of dissidents found in Guillermo Rodríguez's *Guatemala en 1919*. Nevertheless, as the uprising of 1920 makes abundantly clear, there existed mass

disapproval of the President's reign along with an impulse to alter the existing social order.

Both before and after Estrada Cabrera's ouster, much frustration was directed at the fact that the city remained in disrepair throughout most of the 1920s. As it had haunted the bourgeoisie during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the *cultura de esperar* plagued the urban conscience during the 1920s as *capitalinos* awaited their city's reconstruction. Already in early 1920, some commentators, targeting the inefficiency and corruption of President Estrada Cabrera, declared with exasperation, "three years have been lost and the city is in ruin."¹² Immediately after the first major earthquakes, fourteen encampments were erected around the city, often corresponding with the residents of particular neighbourhoods. They mostly consisted of impoverished or lower-income families as the wealthy were more inclined to move abroad or house themselves in vacation residences near Lake Amatitlán.

In some regards, the damage inflicted by the 1917-1918 earthquakes was never remedied and, where it was rebuilt, the physiognomy of the capital had been altered. "The whole capital collapsed. That's why Guatemala City is an ugly place now," Miguel Ángel Asturias later recalled after the earthquakes of 1917 and 1918, continuing, "It had a very different character before, baroque in architecture, ceremonious in its ways. I remember a Guatemala where people dressed in tails and top hats; they wore gloves and carried canes.... But now suddenly the earth shook and everyone was left out in the street."¹³ The inability of successive governments to rebuild the city weighed heavily on

¹² Guillermo Rodríguez, *Guatemala en 1919*, (Guatemala: Tipografía Sánchez & De Guise, 1920), p. 142.

¹³ Cited in Miguel Ángel Asturias, *Men of Maize (Critical Edition)*, Gerald Martin (trans.), (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993), p. 417.

the urban imagination. Where reconstruction occurred—and hoping to avoid such colossal infrastructural collapse again—houses were restricted to one-storey, zinc roofs replaced slates, terraces were removed from the edifices, and the colonial look of the city was for all intents and purposes abandoned. And this was the case for the fortunately privileged few.

The 1921 national census indicated that 43% of the capital's buildings were little more than hastily constructed shacks and the majority of public buildings remained in ruins.¹⁴ Moreover, the census revealed that thousands still lived in temporary encampments.¹⁵ Historian Gisela Gellert reports that an observer in the mid-1920s noted that nearly six thousand *capitalinos* were still residing in four encampments whereas a 1929 visit to the capital led to the observation that some communities still bore very visible scars of the earthquakes and had yet to be reconstructed.¹⁶ Part of the problem stemmed not from a lack of desire from the state; but continued economic instability in foreign coffee sales meant government coffers were emptied by simply clearing the city of rubble and providing minimal relief aid. Wealthier citizens were able to rebuild almost immediately and, when they did so, they began moving to the suburban limits of the city. Sometimes this was to northern sectors of the city such as Jocotenango but more frequently they relocated to the city's south, effectively abandoning the historical core of the capital.

¹⁴ Gisela Gellert and J.C. Pinto Soria, *Ciudad de Guatemala: dos estudios sobre su evolución urbana (1524-1950)*, (Guatemala: Centro de Estudios Urbanos y Regionales), p. 25.

¹⁵ *Censo de la República de Guatemala 1921*, (Guatemala, Tipografía Nacional, 1924), pp. 28-31

¹⁶ Gisela Gellert, "Desarrollo Urbano de la Ciudad de Guatemala," *Historia General de Guatemala, Tomo V*, J. Daniel Contreras R. (ed.), (Guatemala: Asociación de Amigos del País, Fundación para la Cultura y el Desarrollo, 1994-1999), p. 157.

Working-class families were not so fortunate. Some scholars, like Gellert, have contended that the first precarious settlements date from the late 1910s with the earthquakes of that decade. Grossly misnamed “temporary settlements” were built throughout the city but the largest clusters for the working-class appeared to the east and west of the historic core of the city. El Gallito in what is now Zone Three to the north of the national cemetery, for example, was a temporary settlement established after the earthquakes that evolved into a permanent, marginalized neighbourhood that many regard as a shantytown, with the land officially purchased by the state in 1927.¹⁷ By 1941, only some 25% of El Gallito was formal housing whereas the rest were temporary and marginal.¹⁸ Similarly, the temporary encampments of La Recolección and Gerona were legitimized by governmental decree as permanent settlements. Indeed, by mid-century, sociologist Theodore Caplow suggested that El Gallito alongside Colonia Abril were “in quality of street-layout and construction, probably the worst sections that had developed in the city since its founding.”¹⁹

The aggravating triumvirate of expecting, hoping, and waiting led to great political instability throughout the 1920s. The mass mobilization and its corresponding repression led to dire consequences as the bourgeoisie, oligarchy, and military increasingly restricted the paths of democratic or popular political reform in a bid to preserve their class and social interests.

¹⁷ Gisela Gellert, *Ciudad de Guatemala: Factores determinantes en su desarrollo urbano (desde la fundación hasta la actualidad)*, (Guatemala: FLACSO, 1995), p. 67.

¹⁸ Morán Mérida, *Condiciones de vida y tenencia de la tierra en asentamientos precarios de la ciudad de Guatemala 2nd Edición*, (Guatemala: CEUR, 2000), p. 18.

¹⁹ Theodore Caplow, “The Social Ecology of Guatemala City” *Social Forces*, Vol 28, No 2 (Dec 1949), p. 123.

Discussing the explosion of political activity early in the decade, in December 1920, a short time after Estrada Cabrera's overthrow and Carlos Herrera's inauguration as President, the United States Chargé d'Affaires in Guatemala City, Herbert S. Gould, reported,

It is only a few months ago that the gag was removed from the collective Guatemalan mouth which had been shut tight for twenty-two years. When the gag was first removed, the Guatemalan mouth and tongue functioned but slowly; they were weak from mere long continued non-use. But the velocity of their movement has been steady until now they, together with the Guatemalan pen, have acquired a tremendous momentum, and they criticize every act of every member of the government from the president to the village policeman with extreme acidity and without the slightest regard for truth, accuracy or fairness.²⁰

With the metaphoric gag removed, civil society in Guatemala City became increasingly involved in the country's changing political climate. With the relative democratic opening during the early 1920s, a deluge of political publications circulated throughout the Guatemalan capital. Many early pamphlets targeted Estrada Cabrera and his cronies, publicly revealing the extent of their crimes by documenting the fates of their victims.²¹

During Carlos Herrera's ascent to the presidency, much of the labour movement began to distance itself from the *Partido Unionista* (Unionist Party) due to Herrera's alliance with the discredited liberals. One of the earliest independent labour organizations, the *Liga Obrera Unionista* (Unionist Workers' League) opposed the liberals in part because of Liberal anti-clericalism, effectively bringing the workers into partnership with conservative elements. But more fundamentally, they targeted the old Liberal establishment, decrying them as "enemies of liberty." They continued, explaining, "We don't ask for nor do we accept your cooperation because not only do you

²⁰ U.S.N.A.-D.S., Herbert S. Gould, Charge d'Affaires, to Sec. of St., 28 December 1920, 814.00\517.

²¹ "Victimas del Cabrerismo," Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas no. 2003, Year 1920].

fail to work for the good of our nation but you aim to arrange everything according to your cravings.”²² Following their disillusionment with the Unionists, however, many members of the *Liga* left the coalition, alienated by the movement’s conservative impulses and helped form the Central American Communist Party in the late 1920s.²³ Even before this, however, there were pro-Moscow elements operating in Guatemala City who published, in 1923, an *hoja suelta* celebrating the anniversary of the Bolshevik overthrow of the Russian royal family, ending with the cry, “Long live social revolution!”²⁴ Unsurprisingly the Bolshevik October Revolution also garnered a strong reaction from anti-revolutionary elements of the Guatemalan public. Publications decrying the “Hunger Catastrophe in Russia” were circulated, complete with photographs of gravely emaciated people. “Behold the disastrous consequences of Bolshevism,” warned one pamphlet, explaining that in their hunger-induced madness, mothers had cannibalized their children.²⁵

Reports through the 1920s and early 1930s frequently told of labour unrest, both in the city and the countryside as union organizers and communist militants sought to activate the unemployed and exploited into mass mobilization. Describing the political situation, official correspondences spoke of working-class discontent and the threats posed by a politically-engaged and frustrated working class. This instability was

²² “Liga Obrera Unionista,” Sept. 1920, Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas no. 2003, Year 1920].

²³ See Deborah Levenson-Estrada, *Trade Unionists Against Terror: Guatemala City, 1954-1985*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), pp. 14-16.

²⁴ “Manifiesto del Partido Comunista de Guatemala a los trabajadores,” Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas no. 2005, Year 1922-1925].

²⁵ “¡La Catástrofe del Hambre en Rusia,” Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas no. 2005, Year 1922-1925].

mimicked amongst the political elites as they haggled over which politician would best preserve their privilege.

With hindsight, it is easy to view President Carlos Herrera as a tragic political figure, a democrat in turbulent times, who faced economic woes coupled with a democratic opening and a restless population. In particular, Herrera was most incessantly opposed by coffee-finqueros, a class with which his sugar-producing family had been allied, who felt the government was not doing enough to foster economic recovery.²⁶ In a bid to win the allegiance of the elite, he sanctioned the formation of the Asociación General de Agricultores (General Agricultural Association or AGA), a collection of the wealthiest agricultural producers who proceeded to influence national economic policy for the next sixty years. Still, despite such concessions, a preoccupation of Herrera's administration was *unionismo*, the long-held liberal desire to reunite the Central American Federation even as the US Embassy warned of growing economic crisis in the country.²⁷

Ironically, old guard liberals seized upon popular dissatisfaction with Herrera's regime as the exchange rate on the peso diminished and, with it, the purchasing power of Guatemalan workers. With the economic crisis, the *Unionista* coalition began to dissolve. In September 1921, it was reported,

the radical labor element of the Unionistas is one of the most troublesome elements here. It has now appeared pretty clearly that they are not satisfied with conservative methods of the President, who they helped to elevate and whom they so highly lauded in the beginning, and are now willing to lend themselves to any movement, pacific or otherwise, which

²⁶ Jim Handy, "Enfrentándose al Pulpo: Nacionalismo Económico y Cambio Político en Guatemala y Costa Rica en la Década de 1920," *Mesoamérica*, Vol. 17, Issue 31 (June 1996), p. 16.

²⁷ McMillin to State, July 7, 1921, 814.00/550.

would force him from the Presidency and enable them to participate in putting a more radical official in his place.²⁸

Meanwhile, other members of his coalition paraded through Guatemala City in late September calling on the democrat to dissolve Congress and assume a dictatorship in order to put an end to political uncertainty.²⁹ In early December 1921, political opponents who had acted to undermine Herrera's support and cultivate popular resistance to his rule, finally acted. Herrera was forced to tender his resignation to a military triumvirate consisting of Generals José María Lima, José María Orellana, and Miguel Larrave. The military was concerned with the President not only for his inability to cope with popular unrest but also because Herrera had reduced the size of the military in response to popular anti-military sentiment for the institution's loyalty to Estrada Cabrera.

Shortly after the coup, General Orellana rose to the presidency but neither he nor his successor Lázaro Chacón appeared up to the task of re-establishing order in Guatemala though they became increasingly authoritarian. Together, Orellana and Chacón represented the re-emergence of the Estrada Cabrera's old liberal party. This fact was obviously not lost upon urban workers and the fledgling middle class. To varying degrees, these two presidents attempted to harness popular movements when it served their interests and rely on mass mobilization. But labour movements and other organizations fought hard to maintain their independence from the regimes.

In 1923, stevedores at Puerto Barrios went on strike to demand that the government end the United Fruit Company's (UFCo) monopoly over national railroads, the port, and banana trade in general. The workers enjoyed support from the Guatemala City press and sectors of the elite due to increased opposition among certain influential sectors in the

²⁸ McMillin to State, Sept 8., 1921, 814.00/559.

²⁹ McMillin to State, Oct. 12, 1921, 814.00/562.

capital to the dominance of the Boston-owned fruit company. Independent banana growers with interests along the southern Pacific coastline and near Lake Izabal argued that the Orellana administration too heavily favoured foreign interests and pledged their support to the strikers. Orellana refused to yield to the protests and after UFCo bought off a number of newspaper editors, the government deployed 800 troops to Puerto Barrios to smash the strike and expel over a dozen union leaders.³⁰

As President, Chacón proved much more adept at mobilizing protesters when he felt it served his political interests. Guatemala City was a street fighting battleground in November 1926 when Chacón supporters were brought to the capital on trains from the provinces to demonstrate their allegiance to him during his interim presidency following Orellana's stroke. Fighting broke out during the presidential campaign when followers of candidate General Jorge Ubico insulted Chacón enthusiasts.³¹ But some urban volatility was out of the hands of scheming politicians. Striking bakers, for example, burned down bakeries out of their frustration with their employers. The suggestion in the press was that pyromaniac anarchists had infiltrated their unions.³²

The precariousness of labour and popular unrest was augmented throughout the decade by student radicalism. University students, heretofore cautious in their criticism of the government since the Cabrerista police had quashed their annual Huelga de Dolores, re-emerged as influential political actors during the era. Student activism in the early 1920s—featuring the likes of future political players Clemente Marroquín Rojas, David Vela, and Miguel Ángel Asturias³³—via their newly founded student newspaper, *El*

³⁰ Handy, “Enfrentándose al Pulpo,” pp. 23-26.

³¹ *Excelsior*, Nov. 24, 1926, p. 1

³² *Excelsior*, May 26 and May 28, 1928, p. 1 and 4

³³ See *El Estudiante*, Feb. 8, 1920 and March 11, 1920.

Estudiante, the foundation of the *Asociación Estudiantes Universitarios* (University Students' Association or AEU), and the revival of the Huelga featured prominently in national political discussion. Collectively, they were known as the "Generation of 1920." By the late 1920s, the students published intentionally provocative imagery, mocking the political establishment and US foreign interests both in Guatemala and throughout Central America. A souvenir from the student parades of 1928 featured an image of Nicaraguan revolutionary Augusto César Sandino defecating into Uncle Sam's top hat, while clutching toilet paper that reads "imperialismo." Beneath the image appears the rhyme,

Who is the one who goads the mighty?
In all of América Latino,
There's none other than Sandino,
Who shits in such a potty.³⁴

Though it may appear ironic with the advantage of historical hindsight given later developments, university students gravitated towards General Jorge Ubico during the 1920s as the political figure who most closely shared their aspirations. The Generation of 1920 was greatly influenced by the pedagogical and administrative approach of Mexico, following that country's revolution and consolidation of power, particularly the thought of educator José Vasconcelos and his advocacy of democratized education. Guatemalan students were responsible for founding the Normal School for Indians and the Popular University of Guatemala, a free-access institution that sought to spread literacy among Guatemala's indigenous and urban masses.³⁵ Perhaps sensing their growing political clout, Jorge Ubico began courting the students' favour. In April 1924, he opposed

³⁴ "Recuerdo de la Huelga Esudiantil de 1928," Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas no. 2006, Year 1927-1929].

³⁵ Jim Handy, *Gift of the Devil: A History of Guatemala*, (Boston: South End Press, 1984), p. 91.

President José María Orellana's decree to reestablish government supervision over university affairs and thus violate the newly won autonomy of the University of San Carlos.³⁶ Although this alliance grew increasingly strained after Ubico was elected in 1930, his somewhat amiable relationship with the Generation of 1920 continued throughout his rule, helping to explain Miguel Ángel Asturias' national radio program during the 1930s, *Diario del Aire*.³⁷

Ubico, La Tacita de Plata, and Labour

Ubico's rise to power was gradual. He had earned a reputation for maintaining order and discipline but also for brutality during his tenure as Jefe Político of Alta Verapaz and later as Governor of Retalhuleu. One pamphlet from the mid-1920s featured a heavily caricatured Ubico and a list of people he had ordered to be executed in Retalhuleu through the application of "ley fuga," a reference to the strategy of extrajudicial execution of prisoners ostensibly attempting to escape.³⁸ But in a time of apparent political and economic chaos, Ubico's regimented style of rule and his reputation for order and honesty held certain appeal to many. By the early 1930s and the crisis of the Great Depression, Ubico appeared the most reliable option for the presidency. Indeed, one US Embassy report warned of social upheaval in March 1930, "There are a great number of unemployed in the city and while there is not yet any question of lack of food for the laboring classes this is a condition which may come about

³⁶ Wade A. Kit, "Precursor of Change: Failed Reform and the Guatemalan Coffee Elite, 1918-1926," (Master's Thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 1989), p. 164.

³⁷ For more on radio history in Guatemala, please see Margot Alzamora, *La Comunicación Hoy*, (Guatemala: Editorial Piedra Santa, 1980) and *Ramo de Comunicaciones: Labor realizada en la Administración del señor General de División don Jorge Ubico*, (Guatemala: Tipografía Nacional, 1941).

³⁸ "Asesinados por Jorge Ubico, en Retalhuleu, con la aplicación de 'ley fuga,'" Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas no. 2004, Year 1921]. Although dated 1926, this item appeared misplaced in the folder cited above.

in the comparatively near future and, of course, is always dangerous.” More disconcerting for the political and economic elite, the report continued,

It is practically impossible to predict just what will happen and what political alignment will take place in the near future as the opposition to the President, which is well-nigh universal, is not unified but broken up into several groups which are working against each other, although from time to time two or more of them pretend to join forces only to separate again on the slightest pretext.³⁹

Near the end of 1930, the US Embassy argued that Ubico was one of the few men powerful enough to lead Guatemala.⁴⁰ It was into this social turmoil that Jorge Ubico entered.

Ubico was defeated by Chacón in the 1926 elections before retiring from politics and returning to his family *finca*. The Ubico family had long been active in national politics. Jorge Ubico’s father, Arturo Ubico, was a functionary within the Liberal Party during the nineteenth century and the Great Reformer Justo Rufino Barrios was Jorge’s godfather. Drawing upon his lineage, reputation for law and order, and his cultivated image as both an army man and *finquero*, Ubico re-entered national life in 1930 when President Chacón was incapacitated by a stroke. Ubico was well-prepared when presidential elections were called later in 1930 and, although he ran an unopposed candidacy, he treated the campaign seriously. His platform consisted of administrative reform and honesty to boost efficiency and root out corruption, as well as seeking economic development particularly in agriculture. Road construction was one of his greatest legacies and grew out of his concern for a well-integrated national economy in which labour and agricultural goods could circulate albeit under strict monitoring.

Federico Hernández de León—the journalist who had mourned the passing of Juan

³⁹ Hawks to State, March 21, 1930, 814.00/1010.

⁴⁰ W.J. McCaffery (charge) to State, Nov. 13, 1930, 814.00/1020.

Chapin discussed in Chapter Five—enthusiastically endorsed Ubico and used his influence as the editor of *Nuestro Diario* to boost the soon-to-be President's public persona.⁴¹ He was inaugurated in mid-February 1931 and immediately set upon fulfilling his campaign promises.

In the early years of his rule there were continued protests and students at the University of San Carlos continued to hold their annual Huelga de Dolores until Ubico had the parade banned. Nevertheless, the President's reliance on brutality and the suspension of civil liberties increased as time passed by, especially during election years. Ultimately though, the reason for his success and long duration as President stemmed from the fact that he was not merely a lackey of the elite and foreign interests when it came to economic issues. Indeed, it could be suggested that the President was more concerned with national interests than simply private ones. While also aiming to stimulate coffee production, domestic-use agriculture, for example, increased during his Presidency. Commencing in 1922, Guatemala began to import maize because of drops in national cultivation with the imports peaking in 1928. In the 1930s, the imports dropped to negligible levels because of Ubico's promotion of agricultural production for domestic consumption. In August 1931, he passed Decree 1160, which granted public lands to needy families in order to lessen the social impact of the Depression. The land, mostly around the Lake Izabal region northeast of Guatemala City, was to remain in the possession of families as long as they continued to farm it.⁴² One report from 1933 suggested,

In Guatemala no-one starves and no-one is without shelter; the lack of money has little effect on the standard of living of the lowest class, who

⁴¹ Grieb, *Guatemalan Caudillo*, p. 10.

⁴² McCafferty to State, Aug 10, 1931, 814.52/8.

raise their own food, weave their own clothes, and erect their own palm leaf huts. In the towns unemployment is high in proportion to the populations; but there are always relatives, however distant, to provide the bare necessities, and there is no demand for governmental assistance.⁴³

While perhaps depicting too pleasant of a scenario, constant demands for labour by *finqueros* throughout the 1920s and 1930s suggest that many in rural Guatemala had access to subsistence agriculture.

Ubico was able to cultivate an image of order in Guatemala City. This was the era of the so-called Tacita de Plata (Little Silver Cup), a moniker bestowed upon the capital that communicated the era's reputation of charm and security. An anecdote from the 1930s tells of a tourist who parked his car on the edge of sidewalk along Sexta Avenida with the windows down and with merchandise from the department store La Paquetería in plain sight. Returning to the vehicle several hours later, the tourist discovered that no delinquents had dared attempt to steal the wares with the fear of Ubico's reprisals weighing heavily on their minds.⁴⁴ Decades later, in light of Guatemala's descent into civil war, criminality, and economic chaos by the early 1980s, commentators expressed nostalgic longing for Ubico's Tacita de Plata.⁴⁵ Others, however, have sought to unveil the fetishism of the era. Historian Julio Pinto Soria has decried the historical deformations and idealism with which the Tacita de Plata has been remembered. Its memory as calm, ordered, and clean, Pinto Soria maintains, is the "propagandistic vision of apologists" made possible by the absence of historical research

⁴³ Gen. Cond. Report, Jan. 31, 1933, 814.00 Gen Cond. /62.

⁴⁴ Flavio Rojas Lima, "La ciudad de Guatemala como foco de poder: 1898-1944," *La Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción: 230 años de historia*, Ana María Urruela Villacorta de Quezada (ed.) (Guatemala: Grupo Financiero de Occidente, 2006), p. 134.

⁴⁵ Augusto Acuña G., "Las calles y avenidas de mi capital, XVIII," *El Imparcial*, Nov. 14, 1983, p. 9.

into the Ubico period and the tendency to overlook the President's iron-fisted rule.⁴⁶

Historian Oscar Palaez has echoed Pinto Soria's impressions, contrasting the modernizing urban infrastructural renovations with its contrasts, namely the repression that characterized the period. Moreover, he adds that Ubico worked diligently to protect the privilege of the wealthy whose interests most of the urban changes served.⁴⁷

It was not simply what the Tacita de Plata preceded that garnered its reputation as a more tranquil time but also what it followed. After laying in ruin for over a decade, Ubico's administration oversaw the arduous task of rebuilding Guatemala City. Public buildings were constructed using a combination of imposing and eclectic neo-classical architecture and more contemporary Arte Deco. And he did so despite the economic tremors of the Great Depression that constantly shook national coffers. Engineer Arturo A. Bickford was appointed as the Municipal Intendant for the capital. While the Municipality of Guatemala City lost its independence from the national government during Ubico's rule, national funds were directed at projects that the Municipality would have been scarcely able to afford. The National Post Office, the National Palace of Culture, the National Police Headquarters, the Public Health Department, the Supreme Court of Justice, the National Congressional Building, and the National Printing Office, which housed the country's first radio station, Radio Nacional de Guatemala, and the official newspaper *Diario de Centro América*, were all constructed, mostly under the supervision of Bickford and Ubico's favoured architect, Rafael Pérez de León. Further, La Aurora Airport to the city's south was considerably expanded and modernized to

⁴⁶ Gellert and Pinto Soria, *Ciudad de Guatemala*, pp. 65-67.

⁴⁷ See Chapter Five in Oscar Guillermo Peláez Almengor, "La Ciudad de Guatemala 1776-1954: Una Panorámica Histórica," (PhD diss., Tulane University, 1996).

handle modern air traffic. Sewers and drainage were constructed in the capital and the city's network of sidewalks was expanded in core business districts.⁴⁸

But more than anything else, Ubico appeared to have gotten Guatemala moving again amidst the doldrums of the Great Depression in a manner amiable to the capital's bourgeoisie and political classes. His national network of highways and roads complemented the motion of commerce both of which were intimately linked both pragmatically and in their conception. Roads were understood to facilitate business, metaphorically and practically uniting the disparate region of the country into a national economy. The motif of unity and prosperity via transportation was frequently invoked during Ubico's rule. This was made abundantly apparent during the jubilant festivities of the National Fair of November and the neighbourhood celebrations that welcomed the inauguration of recently paved roads, especially in the core district. Through such projects and hoopla, Ubico reinvigorated the phantasmagoria of modernity in spite of the Great Depression while also resolving the contradictions and frustrations of the *cultura de esperar*.

The secret to Ubico's success was two-fold: engaging in public works projects in the most cost-effective ways using cheap building materials wherever possible and, secondly, by utilizing forced labour. Securing this labour was sometimes conducted in unofficial manners such as having the police conduct dragnets of the capital on Saturday evening to arrest drunks who, upon sobering up, found themselves in labour gangs to supply a couple days of labour.⁴⁹ But more commonly, labour was attained through national policies such as Ubico's 1934 Ley Contra La Vagancia (Counter-Vagrancy

⁴⁸ See Gellert, *La Ciudad de Guatemala*; Gellert and Pinto Soria, *Ciudad de Guatemala*; Rojas Lima, "La ciudad de Guatemala como foco de poder."

⁴⁹ Grieb, *Guatemalan Caudillo*, p. 165.

Law). The Vagrancy Law replaced earlier labour regimes such as debt-peonage but, more importantly, assured sufficient labour for projects of national interest such as road construction rather than simply private well-being like conducting the annual coffee harvest.

Problems with debt-peonage in some sectors were apparent in the 1920s as *finqueros* were frustrated by the efforts required to secure workers at harvest. Complaints were raised by planters, who called upon the national government to institute a national forced labour draft. One newspaper suggested, “To expect that private interests will resolve the problem [of labour shortages], is to expect the impossible.”⁵⁰ Amidst reports in 1928 that the coffee harvest was going to be a third less than usual owing in part to a lack of workers,⁵¹ the Confederación de las Asociaciones Agrícolas (Confederation of Agricultural Associations) proposed a vagrancy law to President Chacón. These labour shortages were also the product of expanded coffee harvests in the 1920s. But, more cynically, many coffee *finqueros* disliked the significant capital outlay required to secure labour through debt bondage. In effect, vagrancy laws placed the financial responsibilities of labour recruitment on the public sector rather than individual *finqueros*. Proponents of the law argued, though, that idleness was the principal problem in rural Guatemala, suggesting that anyone who owned less than two *manzanas* of land (approximately 3.5 acres) should be subjected to one hundred days of labour annually, “a small amount for a worker.”⁵² Despite the pleas of planters, Chacón refused to institute the practice. By 1934, however, Ubico saw many advantages to a similar vagrancy law.

⁵⁰ *Excelsior*, Jan. 7, 1926, p. 3.

⁵¹ *Excelsior*, Jan. 4, 1928, pp. 1-4.

⁵² *Excelsior*, Feb. 8, 1928, p. 3.

The law that put so-called vagrants to work in Guatemala was typical of Ubico's presidency. It helped garner circulation of labour and also, through the construction of roads, of commodities, capital, and people. But it did so in a tightly invigilated manner. In effect, the 1934 law placed the organization of labour under the direction of the national government rather than private capital. It henceforth allowed for the strict monitoring of the movement generated by roads on the part of the military and police forces. And thus, on May 8, 1934, Decreto 1116, the Ley Contra la Vagancia, was passed and put into law, simultaneously abolishing debt servitude and forgiving labourers' debts. Vagrants were identified as those men over the age of fourteen but younger than sixty who did not own $1 \frac{5}{16}$ *manzanas* of land, those who did not earn a wage through honest work, those who were employed as seasonal workers, or who daily frequent billiards, taverns, and brothels between the hours of 8:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. Those identified as vagrants were either to be thrown in prison or, much more commonly, made to work for 150 days per year. In the case of those who owned a minimal amount of land and provided subsistence for themselves, they owed 100 days of labour.⁵³

The law was ostensibly enacted to target inactivity and laziness but also to inculcate a sense of duty amongst all citizens for the progress of the nation. "He who does not produce is not a good citizen," explained one editorial, "and production comes from those who work, and he who does not work is a vagrant."⁵⁴ Immediately apologists for the regime attempted to reconcile the law with the idea of the freedom of labour by claiming to counteract unemployment and increase production, suggesting that certain freedoms beget national responsibility. To this end, it was argued "If the *mozo*, through

⁵³ Grieb, *Guatemalan Caudillo*, pp. 38-40.

⁵⁴ "Ley Contra la Vagancia," *Diario de Centro-América*, May 12, 1934, p. 1.

the use of his citizenship rights, is able to freely rent out the service of his arms, he is not allowed to remain inactive, because in addition to committing a fraud against society, he would deprive it of the benefits of his production.”⁵⁵

Ironically, as individuals identified as vagrants were put to work building roads to apparently facilitate circulation, the new law restricted them from freely moving around the country themselves. The law explicitly forbade the free movement of particular groups like peddlers and purportedly allowed labourers to choose their employers in contrast to the conditions of debt servitude. But more implicitly, the movement of workers was closely observed as labourers were made to carry a *libreta* on them at all times that certified the number of days they had worked that year. Law enforcement was permitted to view *libretas* and act accordingly to ensure that people continued to work. Venturing into new regions or migrating to the capital was more likely to get workers rounded up and returned to their places of origins. In this way, Ubico’s administration was able to limit urbanization, especially when coupled with his relief efforts of providing national land to families to offset the dire consequences of the depression. In so doing, the image of urban stability during the Tacita de Plata was preserved.

Roads and the Decline of the *Cultura de Esperar*

Road expansion was already underway during the 1920s well before Ubico’s rise to power. But his regime’s efforts to rapidly extend them as well as the President’s publicity coups that demonstrated his fondness of speed and danger as he drove his motorcycle across the open country forever associated Ubico’s reign with highways. In fact, between 1931 and 1936, the distance of roads in Guatemala increased from 2200

⁵⁵ “Previsión Social,” *Diario de Centro-América*, May 10, 1934, p. 1.

kilometers to 5366 kilometers.⁵⁶ By the early 1930s, roads were viewed as instruments of progress, promising to link Guatemala to the civilized world as railroads had done. Moreover, they were perceived to bring modernity to the most isolated reaches of Guatemala. Remote regions were to be placed within national postal circuits with commentators suggesting they could help bring further political unity.⁵⁷ It was pointed out that, prior to highway construction, a direct route to Guatemala's second largest urban center, Quetzaltenango, from the capital did not exist. The Railway of Los Altos was yet to be completed, meaning it was necessary to navigate the oppressing heat and humidity of the western coastal lowlands to arrive in Quetzaltenango. A newly constructed highway, however, passed through some of the most scenic vistas in the country including the lake region of Atitlán.

Praising the newly improved highway, it was announced that good roads facilitated agriculture and commercial activity; moreover, automobiles were described as both "factors and indicators of civilization."⁵⁸ Roads were constructed without concern for quality but mere utility, leading to the need for repairs during the rainy season. But with forced labour regimes like the vagrancy law, finding peons to reconstruct sections of highway was completed with relative ease. Newspaper reports told of what roads had been built over the preceding month and how many workers participated in construction and repair, like the 275 labourers who mended the breaks in the road between Malacatán and Ayutla while the downpours of the 1931 rainy season threatened to sidetrack the

⁵⁶ Grieb, *Guatemalan Caudillo*, p. 137.

⁵⁷ Ventura Nuila C., "Vialidad," *Diario de Centro-América*, May 9, 1934, p. 3.

⁵⁸ A. Guevara Paniagua, "El Resultado de los Buenos Caminos," *Diario de Centro-América*, June 16, 1931, p. 5.

project.⁵⁹ Soon, the administration of the infrastructural expansion was codified within the bureaucracy. Roads were determined to be of public ownership for the benefit of all citizens and all issues related to maintenance, construction, and improvement of roads was under the charge of the Dirección General de Caminos, tellingly a part of the Ministerio de Agricultura. Roads were divided up between national, departmental, municipal, and neighbourhood.⁶⁰ Various governmental officials secured labour for the projects, organized by the municipal government, the departmental Jefe Político, or the Dirección General de Caminos, depending on the location of the project and significance of the road whether road work was being carried out in San Juan Sacatepéquez, Amatitlán, and Chimaltenango or in the capital city itself.⁶¹

As mentioned in this chapter's introduction, President Ubico used the roads to boost his public persona and to point to the palpable results accomplished by his regime despite the economic woes facing the country. He traveled to countless locations, visiting Panajachel, Tzanjuyú, and Sololá in the Lake Atitlán region and Cuilapa and Jutiapa in the eastern sector before touring Salamá, San Pedro Carchá, and Cobán to the north of Guatemala City.⁶² At one time, to travel from Cobán to the capital required people to boat by river to Lake Izabal, sail across it, then navigate Rio Dulce to Puerto Barrios, followed by a train from the coast to Guatemala City.⁶³

⁵⁹ "La Labor Caminera," *Diario de Centro-América*, July 9, 1931, p. 3.

⁶⁰ "Proyecto de Ley de Vialidad de la República," *Diario de Centro-América*, May 21, 1931, p. 2.

⁶¹ "Informe de los Trabajos Llevados a Cabo en el Ramo de Caminos," *Diario de Centro-América*, May 2, 1931, p. 2.

⁶² See "El Señor Presidente Llega a Salamá," *Diario de Centro-América*, May 25, 1931, p. 12; "Noticias de la Jira del Señor Presidente por los Departamentos Orientales de la República," *Diario de Centro-América*, May 22, 1931, p. 6; "La Jira Presidencial por los Departamentos de Occidente," *Diario de Centro-América*, May 15, 1931, p. 2.

⁶³ Grieb, *Guatemalan Caudillo*, p. 127.

Detailed itineraries were published in the official newspaper, indicating the precise schedule that the President was able to maintain and demonstrating the velocity at which he was able to travel with his entourage. Fifteen minutes from Cotío to Míxco, followed by a seventeen minute journey to San Rafael before arriving in San Lucas twenty-three minutes later.⁶⁴ Elsewhere it was reported that Ubico had journeyed some 260 kilometers in a mere twelve hours and 45 minutes along the highway between the capital and Chiquimula.⁶⁵ While touring, he heard tales of woe, saw neglected buildings and roads in need of repair, and heard reports, much to his frustration, that indigenous children in towns like Salamá did not actually attend school, being much more predisposed to labour on behalf of their families.⁶⁶ Ubico's paternalism shone through stories of him traversing the countryside as landless *campesinos* personally requested, for example, small parcels of land to sow with crops. "As the practical man that he is, he knows well enough that a country without roads to facilitate the free commerce of each zone, is the country without a definitive future," it was suggested before continuing, "The highways are, we can say, the arteries through which circulates the blood that strengthens the lives of the people."⁶⁷

Within Guatemala City, the paving of streets, construction of sidewalks, and the expansion of sewer and drainage networks helped alter perceptions of the capital as the Tacita de Plata. The spaces of modernity within the capital were highly selective, however. Municipal reports from the 1930s detail the gradual paving of the streets and

⁶⁴ "Itinerario del Viaje del Señor Presidente por la Zona Occidental," *Diario de Centro-América*, May 16, 1931, p. 12.

⁶⁵ "El General Ubico Llega a la Ciudad de Chiquimula," *Diario de Centro-América*, May 28, 1931, p. 5.

⁶⁶ "El Señor Presidente Llega a Salamá," *Diario de Centro-América*, May 25, 1931, p. 12.

⁶⁷ "Caminos," *Diario*, p. 1.

avenues of the capital, and principal commercial districts were clearly prioritized both in terms of timeliness and quality. Sexta Avenida, the famous corridor that housed the primary retail outlets, was among the first avenues to receive cement as was the parallel Septima Avenida. Important cross-streets such as eighth and ninth streets were soon paved where they intersected with La Sexta and La Septima.

The paving was overseen by engineers Arturo A. Bickford and Alberto Novella, the latter not coincidentally an heir to the Novella & Co. Cement factory.⁶⁸ From there, neighbouring streets and avenues were paved, receiving as well new drainage systems. The roads that circle the central plaza were paved in 1934 by a joint municipal and federal undertaking, allowing for two to three times the vehicular traffic.⁶⁹ Similarly, avenues with less economic import but high symbolic significance were prioritized, like the Avenida La Reforma to the city's south, an action justified by the fact that the avenue "is the most beautiful promenade of the capital." The municipality took care to plant new trees along its boulevards reinforcing the perceived value of La Reforma.⁷⁰ Roads considered to be of lesser importance, especially in working-class districts, received minimal attention. Where they were improved, like Nineteenth Street near Calvario, cheaper materials were used such as macadam, a mixture of small stones adhered with a cementing agent.

⁶⁸ *Memoria de los trabajos realizados por la Municipalidad de la Capital en el año de 1932*, (Guatemala: Centro Editorial, S.A., 1933).

⁶⁹ "Pavimentación y Drenaje de la Hermosa Plaza que Rodea al Parque Central y Pavimentación y Drenaje de la 10a. Calle Oriente hasta la Aduana Central," *El Imparcial*, Special Edition, Nov. 18, 1934, p. 11.

⁷⁰ *Memoria en que el Secretario de la Municipalidad de la Capital de cuenta a la Corporación de 1935 de los Trabajos Verificados por la de 1934*, (Guatemala: Centro Editorial S.A., 1935), p. 23.

Already by the early 1930s, the capital had Dodge, Buick, Fiat, Ford, and Chevrolet dealerships.⁷¹ The dominance given to vehicles within the urban sphere was not uncontested, however. Colonel Roderico Anzueto of the Dirección General de la Policía, for example, went to great lengths to regulate traffic. He was particularly concerned with the speed of automobiles along particular corridors such as La Reforma, Calle de Simón Bolívar, and that of Simeón Cañas near Jocotenango. The problem with these boulevards was that they were not intended solely for vehicular traffic but were meant to aid pedestrian traffic and tourism.⁷² The police colonel's concerns were repeatedly confirmed by stories of pedestrians being struck by vehicles. A car traveling at excessive speeds hit Licenciado Rodrigo Ochoa Barrientos while he attempted to dismount a bus, for example.⁷³

The recklessness of drivers posed a serious problem not only to the wellbeing of pedestrians but to the consumer culture of the 1930s as well. The act of *sixteando* through the capital's consumer district—discussed in Chapter Four—required not merely the circulation of consumers and commodities but also spaces for pausing, reflecting, and conversing, essential to the flourishing of window-shopping. In order for consumerism to flourish, vehicular traffic needed to be tempered. One solution was the arcade. It is no surprise that the commencement of La Sexta's golden age coincided with the inauguration of the yellow-and-black floored *Pasaje Rubio* on the corner of Sexta Avenida and Ninth Street. With its wide corridors reserved solely for pedestrians—allowing them to browse through the Santa Claus toy store or the Casa de Máquinas de

⁷¹ Tomás Montoya, *Guía General de la Ciudad de Guatemala, Año 1932*, (Guatemala: Talleres Tipográficos San Antonio, 1932), p. 23.

⁷² Bachiller Grijalva, "Problemas de Tráfico," *Diario de Centro-América*, April 10, 1931, p. 2.

⁷³ "Fue Atropellado por un Automóvil el Licenciado Ochoa Barrientos," *Diario de Centro-América*, May 5, 1931, p. 7.

Escribir, for example—the arcade provided consumers protection from the vehicles outside. But street paving was also complemented by the construction of sidewalks that permitted meditations before the display cases of the capital’s large department stores. Kilometers of sidewalks were built through the early-to-mid-1930s as an urban compromise, helping to protect the safety of pedestrians and shoppers without interrupting rapid circulation throughout the capital.⁷⁴

Elaborate celebrations were staged whenever a new section of freshly paved street was opened in the capital’s business district. When Ninth Street between La Sexta and La Septima was inaugurated in November 1936, a street carnival was held and newspapers provided lengthy coverage of the events in addition to providing social histories of the street and what institutions and residences were located along it. Marimba bands performed throughout the celebration in front of La Perla and assembled crowds cheered for Lotty I, the royal name bestowed upon Lotty Berg Laparra, who was selected as the queen of the festival.⁷⁵ Ninth Street was described in the press as “the highly important commercial artery where a mark of grace and distinction is located.”⁷⁶

Much ink was expended discussing the commercial establishments that graced the corridor. In this manner, it became abundantly clear that the greatest legacy of paving was that it facilitated commodity circulation. The carnivalesque atmosphere that accompanied such infrastructural projects indicated that the fetishism of modernity from earlier times was re-emerging in Guatemala City. Observations from the press suggested that the fine jewelry store La Perla, for example, was “like a vision from *A Thousand and*

⁷⁴ For reports on sidewalks, please see, for example, *Memoria de 1932*, p. 15.

⁷⁵ “Culmino la fiesta de la novena calle oriente; Inaugurado el pavimento,” *El Imparcial*, Nov. 10, 1936, p. 1.

⁷⁶ “Como una ascua de pedrerías fulge en la novena calle la Joyería El Sol,” *El Imparcial*, Nov. 2, 1936, p. 5.

One Nights” and that “Entering into its abundantly ample sales salon is to enter into one of the palaces that spring forth from the spells of Aladdin’s lamp.”⁷⁷ After the trying times within the political and social culture of the 1920s and early 1930s, an intoxicated dream-state once again threatened to lull *capitalinos* to sleep.

The phantasmagoria of modernity by the 1930s was all the more compelling because Ubico had seized forced labour for national interests to help overcome the *cultura de esperar*. Equally important, however, was that Ubico instituted a system of taxation to help offset the costs of paving. When La Sexta was paved, for example, residents were required to pay one quetzal for every meter of pavement that passed in front of their homes. The Municipality also solicited donations from businesses and residents on adjacent roads who might benefit from the paving.⁷⁸ Put briefly, for one of the first times since the Liberal Reforms, the bourgeoisie were required to directly pay for public infrastructure that principally benefitted them. In this manner, they overcame the stagnation that had paralyzed the city for long periods of time after the earthquakes of 1917 and 1918.

The re-emergence of commodity culture and the coming dominance of La Sexta were at the forefront of the public imaginary, owing to the paving festivities. One could visit the Schacher Hermanos, “the department store where society men purchase what they need to be elegant.” The era of storefront display windows had come to Guatemala City after making its debut decades earlier at the 1897 Exposición Centro-Americana. Of the Schacher Hermanos store, the *Diario de Centro América* announced, “Behold a beautiful department store whose entire front façade consists of gigantic display

⁷⁷ “Lo que significa para Guatemala La Joyería y Relojería La Perla S.S.,” *El Imparcial*, Nov. 2, 1936, p. 6.

⁷⁸ Peláez, “Ciudad de Guatemala,” pp. 206-207.

windows.”⁷⁹ Special commendation was reserved for the displays of Jorge Rosenberg and Jorge Ellgutter’s Almacén Rosenberg, then a 44 year-old institution within the capital’s shopping district. “Our readers have often seen the elegant window displays of the Casa Rosenberg,” it was suggested, “always arranged with an abundance of novelties and arranged with exquisite taste.” Continuing,

Don Jorge Rosenberg explained to us that such a result was realized by contracting the services of a display expert, who achieved the most effective and pleasant presentation of the items. These windows, prepared as a true art form, are the store’s greatest attraction, and many members of the public entered into the store seduced by their appearance.⁸⁰

Having lured shoppers in, they were then enraptured by the abundance of selection and the quality of merchandise found within. The link between consumption and circulation was made overtly clear with the street festivals that welcomed paved roads through Guatemala City’s business district. Both the municipal and national government were able to seize upon the correlation and the modern fantasies associated with it. But President Ubico’s largest public relations coup came to fruition not in the historic core of the capital but in the southern suburbs where in the mid-1930s he began to hold his birthday celebrations. At the annual Feria Nacional de Noviembre at the fairgrounds of La Aurora, the themes of commodity circulation, transportation, mass participation, and the end of the *cultura de esperar* came together for a jubilee of modernity.

Phantasmagoria and the Feria Nacional de Noviembre

The Feria de Noviembre had its origins in the centuries-old celebration of the Feria de Jocotenango, discussed in Chapter Five. As noted, the liberals used the annual

⁷⁹ “Schacher Hermanos, el almacén donde compra el hombre de sociedad lo que necesita para ser elegante,” *El Imparcial*, Nov. 2, 1936, p. 3.

⁸⁰ “Es gloriosa la existencia e historia del Almacén Rosenberg en los anales del comercio y economía guatemalteca a los que ha contribuido bastante,” *El Imparcial*, Nov. 2, 1936, p. 7.

August fair in Jocotenango to help legitimize their rule in the years immediately following the Liberal Reforms of the 1870s. Within a couple of decades, the fair was hardly recognizable from its earlier incarnation as a religious festival meant for trading indigenous goods. Indeed, these changes to the fair precipitated the argument that Juan Chapin—the personification of the nation—was dead in the 1910s. In 1932, Ubico held the fair at the northern extension of Jocotenango—north of the Templo a Minerva—during the month of August to honour, as had been the tradition, the Virgen de la Asunción. He inaugurated new features like the Indigenous Villages, pseudo-anthropological exhibits that allowed curious onlookers to view different Mayan groups create textiles and build homes. Akin to something from a Wild West Show, indigenous culture was caricatured as something tied to the past that has been overcome. As a later edition of Ubico’s Indigenous Villages was described,

The visitor will see the weavers at work as their ancestors centuries ago, making, or rather creating, their marvelous costumes; he will also see the woodworkers, still very primitive painters, and hundreds of others craftsmen. In the midst of this tropical setting he will hear the strains of ancient Indian music and watch the rhythmic [sic] beat of their dances.⁸¹

Concerned as he was with championing modernity, Ubico used these quaint relics as something to juxtapose with his vision of progress. In 1933, Ubico put his dream into motion by withdrawing many of the features and exhibits of the Feria de Jocotenango and transferring them away from Jocotenango (which was limited by natural boundaries to the north) to the city’s southern limits. The Feria Nacional de Agosto of 1933 was held adjacent to the southern hippodrome on the national *finca* La Aurora. Compared to subsequent fairs at that location, the 1933 festival was a modest affair that included an

⁸¹ “Visit Guatemala’s National Fair, Nov. 19th – 25th, 1939” Lito B. Zadik & Co. Guatemala, 1939, Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas no. 2010, Year 1938-1943].

industrial and agricultural exposition, Indigenous Villages, horseracing, golf, sports, and games section.⁸² The following year, the FERIA de Agosto was canceled and replaced by the FERIA Nacional de Noviembre, a new spectacle intended to commemorate the birthday of President Ubico. The decision to relocate the national fairs from Jocotenango to La Aurora placed Ubico's urban vision into alignment with late nineteenth century desires for southward expansion that had not been realized much beyond the completion of President Reyna Barrios' cursory imitation of Parisian urban logistics such as the Avenida 30 de Junio and the grounds that held the 1897 Exposición Centro-Americana. The FERIA Nacional de Noviembre matched the impetus of the elite during the 1920s and 1930s to escape from the urbanized neighbourhoods of the capital and move towards the city's southern suburban limits.

The relocation of the November Fair to the fields of La Aurora was an important step in the suburbanization of Guatemala City and it represented a continuation of efforts to expand the city's south that had commenced with President Reyna Barrios in the 1890s. But what distinguished Ubico's fair from the Exposición Centro-Americana, for example, was the popular nature of the carnivals of the 1930s. While lip-service was paid to the masses in 1897, it remained, for all intents and purposes, an elite activity with the attendance of the majority of *capitalinos* desired only to help cover the expo's expenditures. In contrast, Ubico hoped to court and seduce the working class with the allures of modernity and nationalism.

Transportation was an essential component of the fair's success, especially as the event was located in the capital's southern limits and not in a central location. At the first

⁸² *Feria Nacional de agosto, 1933 en el parque "La Aurora,"* (Guatemala: Tipografía Nacional, 1933).

November fair held in La Aurora, commentators celebrated the fact that people arrived at the capital from all directions and that the country's 23 Departments had sent representatives. The association of roads and the fair was explicitly noted with one editorial explaining, "The extensive and well-maintained highway network that connects the Republic's major cities is a guarantee and security for easing the old obstacles that were owed to the distances and the difficulty of transport."⁸³ Prior to the commencement of the fair, there was concern in some quarters that the transit of *capitalinos* from northern neighbourhoods like Jocotenango and La Parroquia to La Aurora would be too great a struggle. While there were plans to charter buses for these areas of the city, it remained unclear as to whether the transit prices would be lowered to accommodate lower income families.⁸⁴ The organizing committee assured, however, that all *capitalinos* would be provided an affordable means of arriving at the fairgrounds, whether by bus or by taxi. Taxi companies had been operating in the capital for a couple of years by this point and radio listeners were well-acquainted with commercials from companies such as Taxis Azules. One of the most popular commercials featured during Miguel Ángel Asturias' radio program in which a patient complains to a physician, "Doctor, I'm so exhausted from too much walking, what can I take?" The doctor coyly responds, "Take a Taxi Azul."⁸⁵ Through such means, public participation was guaranteed at the fair.

The fair itself was a menagerie of activities, mostly focused on movement. Horse and bicycle races were held at the southern hippodrome while cars raced from the coastal city of San José to the capital. The Club Guatemala hosted a dance, while both men and

⁸³ "¡Vamos a la Feria!" *Diario de Centro-América*, Nov. 17, 1934, p. 1.

⁸⁴ "Transportes al Campo de la Feria," *El Imparcial*, Nov. 5, 1934, p. 3.

⁸⁵ Rojas Lima, "La ciudad de Guatemala como foco de poder, p. 144.

women played baseball, soccer, and basketball matches. Marimba bands played in a specially designed acoustic conch, magical illusions were performed, films were screened, and fireworks were ignited. The amusement park was one of the most popular features, described in a guidebook in 1936 as a “labyrinth of new excitements.”⁸⁶ The “Chapin Coney Island” featured a host of popular rides like the Zig-Zag and children’s airplane rides, while most women were said to prefer the bumper cars. The greatest attraction, however, was the Montaña Rusa or rollercoaster—discussed in greater detail in Chapter Seven—for which the crowd waited in line for up to two hours to climb aboard.⁸⁷ The rides fostered imagination and the riders were encouraged to suspend reality. “In order to cross the ocean, one only needs a little bit of imagination and the airplane ride of our Coney Island,” telling advice from one guidebook when considering the phantasmagoria generated by the fair.⁸⁸

Importantly, however, promoters advertised the affordability of the activities. “Ours is an inexpensive fair,” declared *El Imparcial*, “Gone is the era when prices skyrocketed to the heavens in the sales stalls, enjoyments, and restaurants; today, you can take yourself there with the assurance that you’ll spend a minimal cost.” Championing the democratic spirit of the fair, the newspaper assured that one could ride the carousel, gyrating waves, and merry-go-round for very cheap, insisting, “Today, our fair is the festival of the achievements of all.”⁸⁹ The mass participation of the fair was confirmed in 1936 when ticket receipts showed that 400,090 pedestrians and 149,943 passengers

⁸⁶ *Guía de la Feria Nacional de Noviembre de 1936*, (Guatemala, 1936), p. 10

⁸⁷ “El Parque de Diversiones, Clamorosa Novedad y Nervio de la Gran Feria,” *El Imparcial*, Nov. 16, 1936, p. 1.

⁸⁸ *Guía de 1936*, p. 13

⁸⁹ “Solemne Inauguración de la Feria Nacional Ayer,” *El Imparcial*, Nov. 18, 1935, p. 1.

had attended the fair that year over several days.⁹⁰ Indeed, the success of the annual FERIA Nacional de Noviembre was assured by its appeal to the working classes, in stark contrast to the shortcoming of the 1897 Expo. Newspapers hailed the 1936 fair as a complete success and could genuinely suggest that the Guatemalan public and thousands of foreign tourists “have had several days of true amusement.”⁹¹

The fair also featured the aforementioned Indigenous Villages, where crowds could gaze upon the lifestyles of rural Mayans and contrast their stasis with the modern amusements, commodities, and motion of the fair’s other spectacles. Men from villages like Todos Santos Cuchumatán were shown conducting artisanal activities, while others performed the marimba in traditional clothing. Similarly, one of the most popular features allowed spectators to watch indigenous women weave fabrics.⁹² One foreigner from Chicago confessed that the exoticism of the Indigenous Villages was appealing, explaining, “I’ve never had the opportunity of admiring something like the indigenous villages.”⁹³

Booths were established for industrial and manufacturing companies, juxtaposing the seemingly primitive modes of production carried out in rural zones of the country. It was not lost upon commentators that the fair was supposed to demonstrate the progress of countries, what they produced, and the wealthy lifestyles and culture attained in the country while simultaneously seducing foreign tourists with the rustic and quaint

⁹⁰ “Clausura Clamorosa de la Feria,” *El Imparcial*, Nov. 23, 1936, p. 1.

⁹¹ “La Feria de Noviembre se Clausura con Exito Completo,” *El Imparcial*, Nov. 23, 1936, p. 3.

⁹² *Feria Nacional de 1938*, pp. 31-33.

⁹³ “‘La Feria de Guatemala, Algo Asombroso que no Esperaba’—Guatemala, una Sorpresa,” *El Imparcial*, Nov. 17, 1936, p. 1.

aesthetics of indigenous lifestyles.⁹⁴ In 1935, businessmen, industrialists, and cultivators were expected to demonstrate “the progressive labour of the country, demonstrating advances, and the improvements achieved over the past year” with the goal of expanding their foreign and domestic markets. There was some concern, however, that industrialists would place the labels of foreign companies on their wares to attract consumers to purchase what appeared to be items of superior quality; rather they were implored to celebrate the excellence of Guatemalan labour.⁹⁵ But perhaps more than anything else, the National Fair of November was understood to promote consumption.

Commodity culture had been under serious threat during the early years of the Depression and planners of the national fairs were acutely aware that a successful fair could be measured by the amount of merchandise sold. It was keenly observed in 1934 that expositions function as a thermometer to measure the commercial life of a country and that a key aspect of fairs was that they provided retailers an opportunity to share their goods.⁹⁶ Ubico oversaw the inaugurations, often arriving to the fairgrounds in a fancy car. In many regards, Ubico personified the consumption that inspired the fair. One biographer of the President described him thusly,

A meticulous dresser who was fond of display and elaborate public ceremonies, he had a penchant for medals, decorations, and fancy jewelry, and took considerable pride in his military dress uniform, though his taste in civilian clothes was conservative. He invested a considerable sum in a necklace-collar symbolizing an order he had originated, and enjoyed displaying it at public ceremonies. He was addicted to collecting objects, both his office and home being crowded with photographs, medals, and gifts received in homage from admirers, which blanketed the walls,

⁹⁴ Mariano Pacheco Herrerte, “La Feria de Guatemala de 1934,” *Diario de Centro-América*, Nov. 17, 1934, p. 4.

⁹⁵ Alberto Hernández, “Preparativos para la feria: industriales y nacionalismo,” *El Imparcial*, Nov. 15, 1935, 3.

⁹⁶ “Importancia Comercial de la Feria,” *Diario de Centro-América*, Nov. 17, 1934, p. 3.

crammed the bookless shelves of his 'library,' and cluttered much of the space on his desk.⁹⁷

Arguments erupted in 1934 when it was learned that the government intended to close businesses in Guatemala City's commercial district for the duration of the fair. The editors of *El Imparcial* found the proposition outlandish, contending that the point of the fair was to promote commerce and the establishments dedicated to business in the capital. The proposal was further denounced because it was reasoned that with the economic depression, businesses could benefit from the sales of items to foreigners and Guatemalans hailing from other Departments. Moreover, they were concerned about the image that a desolate business district would communicate to outsiders.⁹⁸ The same mistake was avoided in subsequent fairs and, by 1938, tour guides to the fair advertised Guatemala City as commonly as the festivities at La Aurora. Adjacent to a photograph of La Perla, the guide boasts, "Along Sixth Avenue, the palpitating heart of the *Chapin* metropolis, the visitor finds buildings such as the one pictured, works owed to the special impulse of the Guatemalan, tangible signs of the vigorous breath that animates the capital in its resolute march towards a future of constant improvement and comprehensive culture."⁹⁹ And its pages were littered with advertisements for the modern amenities for sale throughout the commercial area, from General Electric refrigerators and Philips radios, to automobiles and motorcycles that could carry visitors to Lake Amatitlán, a mere 20 kilometers from the capital "connected by a splendid highway that an automobile can travel along in just a few minutes."¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Grieb, *Guatemalan Caudillo*, p. 15.

⁹⁸ "El cierre del comercio capitalino durante 3 días de la feria a la cámara de comercio," *El Imparcial*, Nov. 14, 1934, p. 1.

⁹⁹ *Feria nacional de 1938*, p. 41.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

During the annual FERIA NACIONAL DE NOVIEMBRE, *capitalinos* were invited to suspend their beliefs and embrace the pleasures and amusements present at the fairgrounds of La Aurora. Upon passing through the gates of the fair, Guatemalans entered into a world of diversions and illusions where they were encouraged to allow their imaginations to run free. No longer constricted to the doldrums of Depression-era Guatemala, their minds were transported to far-away lands. “In their imaginations,” insisted one guidebook, “the miniature train carries children away to Paris and Shanghai, to New Zealand and Siberia.”¹⁰¹ The phantasmagoria of modernity loomed large in the southern suburbs of the capital. Dream-worlds of what life could be like in a city of abundant commodities, free from insecurity, in which expecting, hoping, and waiting were conditions of the past invaded the thoughts of *capitalinos*. The realities of everyday life were to be left behind. As one editorial instructed, “Everyone is invited then to an event where *capitalinos* can forget about their worries for a moment and go forth in search of enjoyment.”¹⁰² Forgetting, illusions, and imagination were the essence of FERIA NACIONAL DE NOVIEMBRE. And commodities, transportation, and amusements were the means to do so.

The masquerade of order, security, and social well-being characteristic of the Tacita de Plata was dramatically halted in mid-1944 when *capitalinos* rose up against the Ubico regime. Following similar uprisings in El Salvador, the middle and working classes denounced the dictatorial tendencies of the government. The war against fascism in Europe and East Asia brought much democratic rhetoric and discussion about the domestic deficit of basic liberties and meaningful suffrage. But complaints about the

¹⁰¹ *Guía de 1936*, p. 12.

¹⁰² “A las puertas de la feria,” *El Imparcial*, Nov. 18, 1934, p. 1.

Ubico government ran much deeper. There existed by the early 1940s a sense that Ubico's time had passed. While Ubico enjoyed genuine support in the early years of his rule for his response to the Depression, infrastructural improvements, presidential tours, and annual fairs, there was growing unease during election campaigns when levels of government repression drastically increased. Ubico's unwillingness to tolerate dissent or criticism frustrated many in the political classes who witnessed him too frequently strong-arm and intimidate Congress. Political careers and the hopes that accompanied them were too often shattered by the whims of the President. Always under the surface bubbled great levels of terror, emblematic of what historian J.T. Way called Ubico's "reactionary modernism."¹⁰³ And although explored very little within historical literature, Guatemala during the 1930s and 1940s was undergoing a radical economic transformation as cotton, sugar, and beef production grew in importance.

Industrialization was similarly increasing and there was a sense amongst sectors of the elite that the government was not doing enough to satisfy their interests, instead catering too heavily to the needs of foreign interests such as United Fruit Company, Electric Bond and Share Company, and International Railways of Central America. By the time protests closed down the capital in June 1944, the middle-class and sectors of the elite were loath to defend the regime. Meanwhile, university students, silenced for much of the 1930s and early 1940s helped to provide a bridge between urban professionals, the intelligentsia, and working-class sectors. The brutality of the Ubico regime—often hid away from the public—was brought into plain sight as striking teachers and students were the recipients of repression. Mass protest of a scale not seen in two decades since the

¹⁰³ J.T. Way, *The Mayan in the Mall: Globalization, Development, and the Making of Modern Guatemala*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 29.

collapse of the Estrada Cabrera regime ground the city to a halt. The self-cultivated aura of the President quickly faded and near the end of June, Jorge Ubico resigned and fled into exile.

The military placed Federico Ponce Vaides in the presidency where he aimed to continue a program of “ubiquismo sin Ubico,” (literally, Ubico-ism without Ubico) mistakenly believing that public outrage was directed at Ubico and not his political dynasty. Following blatantly fraudulent congressional elections in mid-October in which Ponce’s allies won more votes than ballots cast, massive street protests once again erupted. On October 20, 1944, Ponce was forced out of power after junior military officers allied with workers and launched a coup d’état and inaugurated the October Revolution of 1944. The next ten years of Guatemalan history witnessed a transformation of the country’s political, economic, social, and cultural life in ways never seen before.

Less than two weeks after the eradication of Ubiquismo, the US Consul in Tapachula, Mexico announced, “Guatemala City seemed to have emerged from a period of despondency into one that closely approached carnival hilarity.”¹⁰⁴ While the Feria Nacional de Noviembre and the street festivals that accompanied urban paving produced a carnivalesque atmosphere in the city, so too did political participation which had been denied to *capitalinos* for many years. As the glow from the Tacita de Plata faded and Ubico became more outwardly oppressive, the atmosphere in the Guatemalan capital became more dismal and, for all intents and purposes, the city closed down in the evenings. In contrast, the October Revolution breathed life into the city, altering the mood of despondency into one of enthusiasm and hope.

¹⁰⁴ American consul in Tapachula, Mexico to State, Nov. 1, 1944, 814.00/11-144.

Conclusion

Jorge Ubico re-energized the phantasmagoria of modernity in Guatemala during the 1930s. Much of his success owed itself to his ability to garner popularity for himself and convert the mass mobilization of politics that occurred during the 1920s into mass participation with the regime. Of course, Ubico relied on authoritarian measures to remain in power for thirteen years, but he also enjoyed support from large segments of the population. He was successful in disrupting the patterns of the *cultura de esperar* that had plagued the experience of modernity in Guatemala City since the Liberal Reforms and he did so at the least opportune time, the Great Depression. Ubico's success in this regard owed itself to his willingness to do what the other great liberal dictators had failed to do: namely, devote Guatemala's resources—principally labour among them—not only to private interests but to the service of the nation. Alongside taxing the bourgeoisie for the infrastructure that they used, Ubico was willing to use forced labour to construct roads, which helped integrate the national economy and put an end to the stagnation that had plagued earlier regimes.

With the aid of these roads, he nurtured a cult of personality for himself as the patriarch of the nation, incorporating hitherto marginalized populations into a sense of national belonging. But he also altered the optics of modernity in a two-fold sense. The aura of his celebrity superceded earlier optical perspectives like photography and film, which had earlier captured the imagination of Guatemalans. More significantly, he generated a disciplinary regime in which the state came to gaze down upon its population, encouraging the population to engage in self-surveillance and discipline. Within Guatemala City, he helped promote the circulation of commodities by paving roads in the business

district. Garish celebrations greeted the successes of the regime. However, it was the Feria Nacional de Noviembre that truly captured imaginations as *capitalinos* were encouraged to suspend reality and surrender to the phantasmagoria of modernity.

When discussing his presidential tours throughout Guatemala in the early 1930s, the national press repeatedly trumpeted the fact that these expeditions represented the first time that an acting head of state had visited isolated communities. The capital was, in a sense, being brought to the countryside. Contradictions arose between roads facilitating circulation and movement, and the surveillance and restrictions that accompanied them. Ultimately, a lasting legacy of Ubico's infrastructural programs was that the roads he ordered built also made the capital accessible from the countryside. During his rule, the police and military were able to monitor and control migration throughout Guatemala owing to the Vagrancy Law and the *libretas* that workers were required to carry. With the abolition of the law during the October Revolution and removal of restrictions on movement, people could freely migrate to the capital. It is no coincidence that the first land invasions in Guatemala City and establishment of precarious settlements by recently urbanized people occurred in the first years of the October Revolution. Perhaps this remains one of the greatest legacies of Ubico's much-vaunted national highways.

Chapter Seven
The Stars are Holding Hands:
Optics and the Politics of Verticality in Guatemalan Urban Space

Prior to partaking in spiritist activities with President Justo Rufino Barrios (see Chapter Two), Dr. Francisco Lainfiesta was a poet and writer of fantasy tales, seen by some as a Guatemalan version of Jules Verne. As a friend and colleague of the editors of the journal *El Porvenir* (The Future) like Salvador Falla, Lainfiesta was afforded special opportunities to further his literary career. Of course, it also helped that a substantial part of Lainfiesta's personal fortune arose from his ownership of publishing houses in Guatemala City. In 1879, he composed the fantasy, *A vista de pájaro* (Bird's Eye View), under the pseudonym "Paulino" for which the editors of *El Porvenir* praised him. Akin to the social ideals of progress to which the editors strived and worthy of their vision for the future, *A vista de pájaro* can be read as a text on optics, the transgression of space and time, and how these elucidate millenarian aspirations for the future.

Lainfiesta's tale tells of an old man who aspires to immortality in order to see the progress of Guatemala over the centuries and of a genie who transplants the old man's spirit into the body of a turkey buzzard or vulture.¹ The bird is transported to the future and from the heights at which it soars, the vulture looks from a distance upon "an opulent city, a grandiose republic, crossed by trains that run not on steam but on electricity and assisted by hot-air balloons that deliver the mail."² In Lainfiesta's vision, the Guatemala of the future is placed in more rapid communication with the United States and Europe through railways, trolleys and omnibuses service the cities, and—due to rapid circulation

¹ Paulino [Francisco Lainfiesta], *Á vista de pájaro: Cuento fantástico*, (Guatemala: Tipografía "El Progreso," 1879).

² *El Porvenir*, March 25, 1880, p. 294.

provided by the collapse of time and space by transportation—“life’s commodities augment the wealth.”³ In Lainfiesta’s idealized future, the buildings are notably taller than those of his own time.⁴ With the subject position offered from flight, verticality is inextricably related to teleology and progress.

Reciprocating the view offered by Lainfiesta’s vulture is the perspective offered by Mariela García Castillo, whose painting *Sueño de niña* (Little Girl’s Dream) won first place in the children’s category in the Bank of Guatemala’s 1994 national painting competition.⁵ In many regards, the contemporary city as perceived by García Castillo’s reflects the city of the future as envisioned by Lainfiesta, albeit as seen from a different subject position. The young artist’s work features an urban area by night, its rationalized, rectangular streets forming sharp ninety-degree corners with one another, rescued by the dim lights of street lamps. In the evening sky above the sleeping city, the stars form the outlines of dancers holding hands as they swirl before their lunar audience, offering insight into the wonders of a child’s vivid imagination. In García Castillo’s mind’s eye, the city itself is vertical, characterized by mid-height office towers that stare down upon the streets below. Through the young girl’s work, we bear witness to the city from a miniature-sized perspective where the world—and the city—appears very tall. In this sense, the child’s work is the dialectical antithesis to Lainfiesta’s high-soaring verticality: the world as it is experienced from the ground versus how it visually materializes from above.

³ Ibid., p. 295

⁴ Ibid., p. 295.

⁵ Ernesto Boesche Rizo et al. (eds.), *Joyas Artísticas del Banco de Guatemala*, (Guatemala: Banco de Guatemala, 2001), p. 197.

This chapter considers the history of verticality in Guatemala City. Verticality refers to the predominance of the vertical axis over the horizontal, most commonly associated in contemporary urban zones with skyscrapers, though—as this chapter will suggest—not exclusively limited to tall buildings. I suggest that verticality is now the utmost expression of urban modernity in Guatemala City, but that its history has gradually shifted from a focus on the city’s surrounding volcanoes to the domination of the urban skyline by *rascacielos* or skyscrapers. In the final decades of the nineteenth century, verticality was limited to the natural environment, principally the volcanoes that fascinated classically-trained landscape artists who dominated aesthetic production prior to the fin-de-siècle. Early photographers, too, were taken by Guatemala’s imposing volcanoes and often featured them to highlight the country’s natural beauty in a bid to attract Western European and United States immigrants and capital investment. Similarly, panoramas of the capital—whether painted or photographed—were taken from the vantage point of tall hills such as Cerro del Carmen in the city’s northeast. Briefly, the optics of verticality during the late nineteenth century featured and were mediated by nature.

The vertical domination of nature and topography, however, was gradually tempered by *capitalinos* through engineering and iron construction, first with the iron rail bridges that crossed the ravines of the Valley of La Ermita. Here we see the first descriptions of the vertiginous sensation experienced by commentators as they stood on rail bridges, glancing into the abysses of ravines far below them. The Mapa en Relieve, a large concrete Relief Map of the Republic found in the capital’s Jocotenango neighbourhood and inaugurated in 1905, also offered *capitalinos* a bird’s eye view of

their country—albeit one with an exaggerated vertical axis whereby the scale of the volcanoes was deliberately distorted to make them appear taller. Finally, the rollercoaster of President Jorge Ubico’s FERIA NACIONAL DE NOVIEMBRE during the 1930s—the so-called *montaña rusa* or Russian Mountain (later renamed the “Barranca Chapin” or Guatemalan Ravine during the Cold War for ideological reasons)—offered a new perspective of verticality. The reliance on nature as a mediator of vertical experience underwent a transformation around the mid-twentieth century in the urban sphere, suggesting a triumph over nature as evidence of progress by way of tall buildings. As verticality in nature succumbed to urban architectural forms, the city came to be not only eminently modern but was also perceived as tall. Favio Hernández Soto has written most extensively on the “vertical densification” of Guatemala City suggesting that the emergence of multi-storied buildings had symbolic significance for the city. He traces the change in perception of the city to the 1940s, arguing that “with the first tall building, the transformation of the city’s image was initiated” as the capital was no longer “an exclusively horizontal city”.⁶ Significantly for those who commanded control of nascent skyscrapers, urban verticality embodied progress, modernity, and the triumph over nature.

The discussion of verticality in Guatemala City is the denouement of many of the prominent themes of this dissertation. Indeed, a century-long cultural discussion of verticality in the Guatemalan capital during which the city was increasingly perceived as vertical serves as a metaphor for the changes that unfolded in the decades after the Liberal Reforms of the 1870s. This long approach to the cultural ramifications of

⁶ Favio Hernández Soto, *Los edificios altos en la ciudad de Guatemala: tendencias de uso, escala, y localización (1949-1995)*, (DIGI-CIFA Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, Guatemala, 1996), p. 14.

Guatemala's economic evolution speaks to changes in the experience of modernity during the same period. In both verticality and the experience of modernity in the city, the roughly first fifty years of liberalism led to an emphasis on perceptions of modernity/verticality; both modernity and verticality were heavily characterized by modernism and phantasmagoria whereby aesthetics masked the social relations of production that produced the wealth of the liberal city. Gradually, however, the veil of modernity/verticality became transparent as the contradictions of the agro-export economy became more apparent in the urban sphere rather than being restricted to the countryside. The surplus value generated by the agro-export economy helped to finance the growth of what has been called "the vertical city" in Guatemala but it has also spawned a related phenomenon, namely the creation of precarious settlements—a phrase used by Guatemalan scholars so as to maintain the dignity of those who inhabit them rather than the more commonplace "shantytowns"—that have emerged in the ravines that wind through Guatemala City. As families have resorted to building their homes and neighbourhoods deeper into the abysses of the ravines, Guatemala City has experienced a rise in negative verticality that challenges the discourse of modernity and progress highlighted by the verticality of skyscrapers in the city's southern suburbs.

This discussion of verticality also forces the consideration of the state's role in capitalist development and democratic access. Since the 1960s, verticality has been funded by the private sector (though subsidized by the state). With this shift to capitalist growth, the perceptions of verticality have become limited for most *capitalinos* to the view from the ground, highlighted by Mariela García Castillo's painting of the city. In contrast, when verticality was a product of nature, the bird's eye view characteristic of

Lainfiesta's soaring vulture was more accessible to the majority of the population as one merely had to climb a hill, peer over a rail bridge, or visit the Mapa en Relieve to experience vertical sensations. Until the 1950s and 1960s, man-made verticality in Guatemala City was largely the product of the state, whether through rail bridge construction, the Mapa en Relieve, the national fair, and early multi-story buildings. Perceptions of verticality—like the experiences of modernity—gradually shifted over the course of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, reflecting the changing roles of the state in Guatemalan society and the contradictions of capital accumulation. Verticality evolved from being something that wealthy *capitalinos* dreamed about and desired, to something that was experienced entirely as modernism, to something that materialized in the urban sphere in the form of skyscraper and precarious settlements. The social forces that created negative verticality in Guatemala City were also the same tendencies that altered the experience of modernity in the city and highlight the contradiction of progress in Guatemala.

Verticality, Social Power, and Progress

In considering verticality, French thinker Michel de Certeau ponders “the practitioners of the city” from beyond “the thresholds at which visibility begins” as he peered down upon Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center in the 1980s.⁷ In light of his analysis on the practice of everyday life from the level of the street, he finds the heights intoxicating: “Having taken a voluptuous pleasure in it, I wonder what is the source of this pleasure of ‘seeing the whole,’ of looking down on,

⁷ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Steven Rendall (trans), (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 93.

totalizing the most immoderate of human texts.”⁸ In the World Trade Center, one is outside of the city’s grasp—elevation turns one into a voyeur placed at a distance. For de Certeau, verticality alters one’s subject position as the altitudes produce a new totalizing optic that brings moderated coherence to the city, clarity, which is usually obscured from the streets. Such is the appeal of maps and grids as they make sense of sprawl, traffic congestion, and the matrices of urban rationale. Verticality, then, provides a means to what James C. Scott has labelled “High-Modernism” or the totalizing impulse of twentieth-century state-planning.⁹ Scott strongly condemns the authoritarian and teleological prescriptions found within high-modernist thinking; such desires aim to render worldviews linear and orderly, though experience suggests that trying to harness the modern social world is “like trying to manage a whirlwind.”¹⁰ In addition to the likes of Lenin and Julius Nyerere, Scott places French-Swiss architect and city planner Le Corbusier among the twentieth-century’s notorious high-modernists. Le Corbusier is most closely associated with what came to be known as the International Style or modern architecture often characterized by skyscrapers that altered the skylines of the world’s cities. Ever candid, the egotistical Le Corbusier writes of verticality, “From its offices come the commands that put the world in order. In fact, the skyscrapers are the brain of the city, the brain of the whole country.”¹¹

Elsewhere, scholars of urban history have echoed suggestions that tie verticality to power. In his work on New York City, Thomas Bender has written about the change in the city’s skyline—most notably in Manhattan—and not only its influences on cultural

⁸ Ibid., p. 92.

⁹ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, (London: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 89.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 93.

¹¹ Quoted in Ibid., p. 111.

motifs but its association with different ideological convictions. He contends for example that horizontal architecture was related to notions of civic responsibility whereas verticality was allied with the corporate structure.¹² The optics of verticality from above, these authors agree, is conducive to the impression of power and authority. In peering down from the heights, the structures themselves become metaphors for the hierarchy that they differentiate. Conversely, when viewed from below, the impression generated by verticality is no less awe-struck.

Architectural monumentality has long altered urban space as the focus of attention and observation. And even in its most modest forms, human-engineered verticality communicated power dynamics in Guatemala City. From the colonial period, the tallest buildings were reserved for the principal institutions of power, whether the Church, state, or commercial institutions. Church towers, in particular, penetrated the urban monotony of low-rising houses in the Guatemalan capital. The association of power and verticality certainly continued into the Republican era and beyond. The emergence of the bourgeois city in the decades on either side of the century's turn continued this cultural motif. While subtle, a photograph by Guatemala City's most famous photographer during the 1890s and 1900s, Alberto G. Valdeavellano, transmitted the social and power dynamics of verticality. The image portrays the Viaduct of the Barranquilla along what is now Seventh Avenue during what appears to be a railway inauguration in Guatemala City. Besides the train's function as an emblem of modernity, the capital's parasol-carrying bourgeoisie pose for Valdeavellano camera from atop of the viaduct. Incidental to the celebration of progress, members of Guatemala's subaltern classes—labourers, the urban

¹² See Thomas Bender, *The Unfinished City: New York and the Metropolitan Idea*, (New York: The New Press, 2002).

poor, and indigenous market vendors walk below. Providing evidence of the fact that these subaltern elements were unaware of Valdeavellano’s lens, they glance not at the



FIGURE 9 Viaduct of the Baranquilla. Source: Archivo Histórico-Fotográfico de la Academia de Geografía é Historia de Guatemala. Colección de Alberto G. Valdeavellano, CG.

camera but at the spectacle above them and return the gaze of the bourgeoisie looking down upon them. Briefly, wealth, social prestige, power, and progress are associated with verticality.

Bender comments on such structures as “icons of transformation” explaining that “certain spaces and structures seem to represent a moment when the city becomes

something else (or failed to become an expected something else).”¹³ French thinker Jean Baudrillard has spoken about similar urban foci—albeit using a more exclusive, universal definition—as “singular objects” or objects possessing singularity. Singular objects are those urban forms that are exceptional and unique, and through which we can gain insight about culture. It is important for Baudrillard that singular objects embody a sense of anticipation of what is to come. For this reason, they need not be avant-garde or aesthetically cutting edge and can be dreadfully dull or ugly. Nevertheless the singular objects possess an element that is “absolutely essential”¹⁴ to a particular time, place, and mood. Like other French thinkers before him, Baudrillard is particularly captivated by the World Trade Center which he views as a quintessential singular object. “If I examine the truth of the twin towers of the World Trade Center, for example,” he claims, “I see that, in that location, architecture expresses, signifies, translates a kind of full, constructed form, the context of a society already experiencing hyperrealism.” Continuing, “Those two towers resemble two perforated bands. Today we’d probably say they’re clones of each other, that they’ve already been cloned.”¹⁵ And their verticality is the source of much of their singularity.

From the beginning, the culture of verticality was directly tied to discussions of nationality and nation-building, even when it related only to nature. In the imaginations of nineteenth-century liberal reformers, though, the harnessing of nature and producing verticality through humankind’s own initiative was ultimately the goal of progress. For the time being, however, the urban bourgeoisie turned to nature and topography to

¹³ Ibid., pp. 4-5.

¹⁴ Jean Baudrillard and Jean Nouvel, *The Singular Objects of Architecture*, Robert Bononno (trans.), (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p. 67.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 4.

experience verticality while fantasizing about tall buildings constructed in the United States and Europe. Indeed, urban Guatemalans expressed fascination with the fact that the modern world was getting taller around them. One issue of *Electra*, for example, carried images and a brief discussion of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company Building's construction in New York, then the world's largest building.¹⁶ The manner in which verticality was achieved was particularly telling; indeed, among the bourgeoisie there was very little mention that the tallest human-made structures in Guatemala dated back over a millennia. The ancient city of Tik'al, founded by the classical Maya in what is now El Petén boasted pyramid structures that stretched seventy meters high, taller than virtually all permanent structures in Guatemala City until the second-half of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, while admiration existed for the classical Maya in the nineteenth century, commentary on their cultural achievements was generally muted or used as evidence of Mayan population's cultural decline.

More commonly, the pre-Columbian Maya were more generally regarded as a part of nature, not outside of it. Compounding the association as mere extensions of nature was the relative inaccessibility of sites like Tik'al, which required several days' travel upon beasts of burden until roads and an airport were constructed near the site in the twentieth century. As will be argued, paintings from the last decades of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century support the notion of Indian-as-nature, while also associating verticality with the natural environment and topography. Nevertheless, cultural motifs that drew upon verticality and its relationship to the nation and nation-building recurred through the modern age. Nowhere was this association made more clear than with Guatemala City's Mapa en Relieve.

¹⁶ *Electra*, Sept 8, 1908, pp. 126-127.

Mapa en Relieve: Nature and Verticality

The Minervalias of 1905—the annual celebration of the scholarly youth held nationwide since 1899—commenced early in the morning of October 29th. The Guatemalan capital was awakened at 4:30 a.m. to the sound of the martial and military bands marching through its streets, announcing the youth festival. After a series of military parades in the Plaza de Armas, the assembled crowd of military corps, public officials, and spectators alike migrated two kilometers northward from the main plaza towards Jocotenango, the northernmost extension of the city. At the end of the French chalet-lined Avenida de Minerva (alternatively called the Avenida del Hipodromo; today's Avenida Simeón Cañas) stood a temple dedicated to the same Greek deity, encircled by the Hipódromo. And beside the mock-Parthenon lay the focal point of that year's celebration: the national Relief Map, a concrete and brick-constructed map of Guatemala's topography.

Commissioned by President Manuel Estrada Cabrera and constructed after meticulous surveying of the country's mountain ranges and frontiers, the final stone was lowered into place by Estrada Cabrera before the assembly. The President was reportedly deeply moved upon learning that the stone he had placed—which represented the region around Chemal, Huehuetanango on the Relief Map—had been excavated from the highest mountain summit of the Cuchumatanes range near Chemal and transported to the capital by a special committee.¹⁷ The singing of the national anthem and a speech delivered by Don Manuel Valle followed a twenty-one cannon salute.¹⁸

¹⁷ Alcira García Vassaux, *Libro de Oro del Mapa en Relieve*, (Guatemala: Instituto Guatemalteco de Turismo, 1999), p. 7.

¹⁸ "Programa de las Fiestas Escolares de 1905," Tipografía Nacional, 1905, Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas No. 1995, Year 1905].

The Relief Map was constructed over eighteen months under the direction of engineers Francisco Vela and Claudio Urrutia Mendaza. A success of pre-aviation cartography—heralded as “magnificent and only one of its type in the world” at a size of some 1,800 square meters¹⁹—it mapped out the political boundaries of the Guatemalan state. It was built between April 1904 and October 1905 after Vela and Urrutia had carried out extensive surveys in uncharted territories, which sometimes forced them to travel by foot, horse, or mule through unforgiving terrain. The Relief Map was characteristic of growing interest in the natural sciences—geography, topography, and cartography—that seized the imagination of the Guatemalan intelligentsia in the final decades of the nineteenth century.

As elsewhere on the Central American isthmus at the time, geographical research and the study of the natural environment gathered impetus. This stemmed partly from the Liberal regime’s emphasis on education and knowledge of natural orders. These interests were born partly out of nationalist urges to demarcate the political boundaries of the modern nation state and to chart and establish the state’s presence over national frontiers. Issues of national security—or the ability of countries “to defend their property in the field of law should a territorial violation occur”²⁰—weighed heavily on the liberals, especially given border conflicts with Mexico. In the 1880s and 1890s, the two countries agreed to launch survey expeditions to establish their national limits. Expeditions—which for a series of reasons continued for well over a decade—spawned general interest in geography within the national press. But the *Mapa en Relieve* and interest in Guatemala’s natural environment had more pragmatic origins. Drawing up inventories of

¹⁹ Carlos E. Prahl R., *El Mapa en Relieve de la República de Guatemala, 1905-2005*, (Guatemala: Impreso CD, 2005), p. 2.

²⁰ “Nuestras fronteras,” *La Ilustración Guatemalteca*, May 15, 1897, p. 281.

natural resources was essential to marketing the country to foreign investors and attracting capital from abroad for investment. Coupled with discussions of mountain ranges, river systems, and volcanoes were detailed surveys of natural resources and discussions of avenues for exploitation for “a well-organized company” with a desire to earn “huge profits.”²¹ With stakes in capitalist political economy, its reliance on scientific rationale, and the use of concrete, the Relief Map should be seen as eminently modern in its conception.

Surveying the frontier began after an accord was reached with Mexico in the 1870s. Originally under the charge of Miles Rock, a surveyor from the United States who spent much of his adult life in Guatemala, the effort lagged given the immense scope of the project. In 1883, Claudio Urrutia who later was involved with the construction of the Relief Map, was appointed the chief engineer for the Guatemalan Border Commission, though the number of personnel involved in the project was greatly reduced mid-decade, thus extending the completion time. Indeed, surveying the vastness of the Petén alone took from 1886 until 1895.²² During this time, particular texts—such as Vicente Rivas, *Elementos de Cosmografía y Geografía Física*—were adopted by government decree as part of the academic curriculum.²³ By the mid-1890s, intrigue with geography was also tangled up in discussion of railroad completion. The composition of geographic texts relied on unpublished railroad surveys such as those of the Intercontinental Railroad Commission.²⁴ The newspaper, *El Ferrocarril*, published a

²¹ *El Ferrocarril*, Aug. 25, 1894, p. 2.

²² “Nuestras fronteras,” *La Ilustración Guatemalteca*, May 15, 1897, p. 282.

²³ Vicente Rivas, *Elementos de Cosmografía y Geografía Física*, *Quinta Edición*, (Guatemala: Imprenta ‘Electra,’ 1914).

²⁴ See for example Dr. Carlos Sapper, *Sobre la Geografía Física: La Población y la Producción de la República de Guatemala*, (Guatemala: Tipografía Nacional, 1897), p. 4.

series of over twenty pieces about the geographical make-up of the country whereas others, such as *El Progreso Nacional*, carried several pages devoted to geographic instruction, as it related to commerce and transportation.²⁵ Such geographic statistics, details of services, and opportunities for investment would constantly be republished in subsequent decades in tourist guides, newspapers, and residential directories. Nevertheless, there was a sense of ground-breaking accomplishment for those carrying out such studies that was essential for national progress because the sciences they employed—the sum of a series of methodological approaches, some old, others new—were regarded as cutting edge.

It should not be a surprise, then, that the Relief Map was greeted with enthusiasm from the Guatemalan public given that it was a physical manifestation of modern scientific application, of geographical and topographical endeavours objectified. When President Estrada Cabrera pronounced his inaugural address in 1905, he labelled the map “an open-air geography class” thus emphasizing its pedagogical value.²⁶ As such, it should be viewed as a mixture of modern conditions related to science, education, engineering, and capital investment—all coming together within the urban sphere. For our purposes, its existence as a modern creation should be considered alongside some of the more peculiar aspects of its construction as they relate to revolutions in building methods, representations of modernity, and verticality.

The Relief Map was principally constructed of brick, stone, and imported Portland cement. The major roads that crossed the country were carved into the map, railway lines were made of lead, and miniature steel replicas represented major bridges.

²⁵ The *El Ferrocarril* series was featured in August and September 1894; *El Progreso Nacional*, Aug, 14, 1894, p. 6.

²⁶ Quoted in García Vassaux, *Libro de Oro del Mapa en Relieve*, p. 5.

At the time of its inauguration, plans were also made to include the telegraph and telephone networks on the map. A wooden bridge over the map was also scheduled to be constructed which would allow viewers to peer directly down over specific regions, though towers were eventually built instead. Interestingly, the horizontal aspects of the map were made at a 1:10,000 scale whereas the verticality of the country's topographical features were enhanced by their 1:2000 scale, "in order to make [the vertical axis] stand out" as Urrutia's son later explained.²⁷ Practically-speaking, emphasizing Guatemala's topography five-fold made sense; failure to do so would have rendered mountains, plateaus, and valleys nearly undetectable to observers. Pragmatics aside, however, when placed within a discussion of twentieth century verticality, the Relief Map becomes illuminating and a point of departure for the modern optic of verticality.

As one historian has written,

The Guatemalan Relief Map opens up a whole new world of images through objective visualization. Not only is the viewer aware of the scientific application, calculation, and measurement that went into the project, but also of the expression of its forms which exalt Guatemala's prodigious natural beauty.²⁸

There are two ways in which verticality and optics may be discussed with reference to the Relief Map, namely, the two manners discussed in the introduction of the chapter. The *Diario de Centro América* noted, "the public will be able to see close-up the seas, rivers, mountains, towns, and roads that cross the Republic."²⁹ In this way, Guatemalans began to approximate the optical perspective highlighted in Lainfiesta's work, viewing the country's mountains and valleys—as well as its modern achievements—from an aerial

²⁷ Héctor Gaitán, *Centro histórico de la ciudad de Guatemala*, (Guatemala: Artemis Edinter, 1995), p. 6-7.

²⁸ García Vassaux, *Libro de Oro del Mapa en Relieve*, p. 21.

²⁹ "Mapa," *Diario de Centro-América*, Oct. 26, 1905, p. 1.

perspective. As such, the map anticipated the optics of the twentieth century afforded by airplanes and tall buildings that permitted spectators to gaze downwards upon the world below. Equally important is the exaggerated perspective of the vertical scale inherent in the map by its five-fold scale over the horizontal axis. I wish to suggest that such manipulation fit directly into a cultural motif held within the plastic arts at the time and characterized pre-industrial notions of verticality, something that was to drastically alter during the twentieth century.

The Natural World and Vertical Perspectives

Interest in the natural world was not unique to the Guatemalan scientific community in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Landscape painting was the de facto national art form amongst those classically-trained in the national art school. Within the academy, Romanticism and Classicism dominated painting aesthetics before the introduction of European modernism by way of advertisements, magazines, and individual instructors such as Jamie Sabartés, a Catalan painter and instructor to Guatemala's first modernist painters Carlos Valenti and Carlos Mérida (discussed in Chapter One). For aspiring painters, Guatemala's mountainous landscapes and valleys were obvious subjects. Verticality in nature became a dominant aesthetic subject in Guatemalan painting, alongside still-life and portrait. It was this tendency that the young generation of modernists in the 1900s and 1910s expressly rejected, though the appeal of natural verticality in nature would continue to impress throughout the twentieth century.³⁰

The country's volcanoes equally captivated foreign painters. Belgian painter Charles A. Guido de Succa, painting Guatemala City during the early 1870s, exaggerated the vertical

³⁰ Marcia Vázquez de Schwank, "El paisaje, una constante en el arte guatemalteco del siglo XX," *Joyas Artísticas del Banco de Guatemala*, Ricardo Martínez (ed.), (Guatemala: Banco de Guatemala, 2001), p. 29.

scale of the volcanoes that surround the capital.³¹ In such a way, the verticality of nature was pronounced.

Creating a greater impression, however, for urban observers was the view presented by topography. Painters and photographers climbed to the summit of the surrounding hills and volcanoes to gain a different perspective of Guatemala City. The optical vantage provided by topographical relief informed *capitalinos*' interactions with verticality during the fin-de-siècle—it was a relationship mediated through the natural environment and was principally aesthetic. Writing at the turn of the century, government functionary and writer Felipe Estrada Paniagua reports of the capital,

Guatemala City, as seen from the summit of Cerro del Carmen, from the guard towers of Buena Vista, from the slope of Pinula, or from any other point that dominates over it, presents a singularly beautiful and charming aspect, and offers superb contrast of the high white church steeples with the dark and uneven roofs of houses, above which rise, graceful and proud pines and palms...³²

Different perspectives of the city were derived from the natural lookouts provided by Cerro del Carmen, Pinula, and were doubly amplified at Buena Vista fort with its towers built upon a rocky mound in what was then the city's southwest corner. Such had been the case for decades. Earlier in the nineteenth century, French traveler Arthur Morelet had opined,

The spectator, placed on the *cerro de Carmen* [sic], a hill rising to the north-east of Guatemala, and which supports a little church, the most ancient monument of Christian architecture in the country, is able to take in a vast horizon, in which the city occupies the first place. The plateau in

³¹ Miguel Ángel Chacón Véliz, "Atributos y contrastes del valle de La Ermita," *La Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción: 230 años de historia*, Ana María Urruela Villacorta de Quezada (ed.) (Guatemala: Grupo Financiero de Occidente, 2006), pp. 26-27.

³² Felipe Estrada Paniagua, *Pasatiempo: Prosa—Renglones Cortos*, (Guatemala: Tipografía Nacional, 1902), p. 172.

the centre of which it stands, is vast, bare, and monotonous; but beyond the city, in needful relief, rise three gigantic volcanoes...³³

Panoramas of the capital—whether photographed or painted—were invariably captured from the perspective of the cities hills or the neighbouring volcanoes. For his part,



FIGURE 10 Guatemala City. Source: Archivo Histórico-Fotográfico de la Academia de Geografía é Historia de Guatemala. Colección de Alberto G. Valdeavellano, PAI0011.

Alberto G. Valdeavellano—one of Guatemala City’s premiere photographers from the fin-de-siècle—was able to communicate the horizontal scale of the capital from a higher perspective, thus altering the subject position of viewers to through verticality.

³³ Arthur Morelet, *Travels in Central America*, (New York: Leypoldt, Holy & Williams, 1871), p. 380.

Valdeavellano's work demonstrates both the enormity of surrounding volcanoes but also the vantage point offered by topographical relief for panoramic perspectives of the capital. Verticality in nature and topography permitted *capitalinos* to view their city in a different angle, altering the subject position of viewers and enabling them to highlight the horizontal scale of urban space. Similarly, photographs were also taken of the city from Cerro del Carmen from which the city's spatial coverage was made apparent.³⁴

Besides altering perspectives of the capital, the verticality of nearby mountains offered practical applications to emerging technologies. *El Porvenir de Guatemala* reported in mid-1899 that wireless telegraphy was revolutionizing the transmission of messages across space, rendering conventional and submarine cables. The article notes that the volcanoes that surround the Guatemalan capital would be ideal for transmitting telegraphic signals great distance, rhetorically asking, "who doubts that a device installed at the summit of the mountains that surround Guatemala City—and that count an elevation of five thousand feet—would be able to transmit to another installed in Mexico City—eight thousand feet—or to the observatory of Monte Blanco, that reaches fourteen thousand feet?"³⁵ Reversing a centuries-old condition in Guatemala, verticality then also stood to facilitate communication rather than impede it.

In contrast to the verticality of nature and topography, the city itself was described as horizontal and bereft of verticality, mostly composed of single-story buildings. Once again, Arthur Morelet observed,

As the houses are low, one sees from a distance only a monotonous succession of roofs, relieved here and there by the domes and clock-towers

³⁴ Oscar González Goyri, *Recuerdos de los Terremotos 1917 y 1918*, (Guatemala: Instituto de Antropología é Historia, 1971).

³⁵ Antonio Valenzuela Moreno, "Telegrafia sin alambres," *El Porvenir de Guatemala*, June 9, 1899, p. 1.

of the churches. An air of solitude and abandonment pervades its environs; there are no gardens, no plantations, no country houses, nor any of those industrial establishments, which throng the approaches to our capitals. The houses of the suburbs are mere huts, covered with thatch, and separated from each other by hedges or open spaces of ground. Proceeding further, the traveler finds broad streets, all alike, laid out with the severest regularity, which prevails equally in the architecture of the houses. As a precaution against earthquakes, their height is limited to twenty feet, and they are therefore reduced to a single floor.³⁶

The threat of earthquakes served as a natural impediment to upward building construction. By the 1890s, vertical growth started to increase. An article on Ninth Avenue South in the old city core spoke of the construction of new buildings, stripped of their ugly, ornamental balconies and soon to warrant the avenue as one important for commerce and elegance. Noteworthy about these houses, then denominated as “casas de altos” was that they were all two stories tall, as promised by the owners along the avenue.³⁷ At the turn of the century, Estrada Paniagua counted 130 two-storied residences in the capital from a total of 6000 houses.³⁸ Thus it should not come as a surprise that when Jamie Sabartés arrived in the Guatemalan capital from Barcelona in 1904, he felt it worthwhile to note that “The homes are low and the sun seems to illuminate more, perhaps because the height of the houses make almost no shadows.”³⁹ Indeed, the photographs and landscape panoramas of the capital from the era show a short city, with its low-lying buildings only occasionally interrupted by Church steeples and towers.

³⁶ Morelet, *Travels in Central America*, p. 381.

³⁷ *El Ferrocarril*, April 14, 1894, p. 2.

³⁸ Estrada Paniagua, *Pasatiempo*, p. 177.

³⁹ Sabartés quoted in Luis Luján Muñoz, *Carlos Mérida, Rafael Yela Günther, Carlos Valenti, Sabartés y la Plástica Contemporánea de Guatemala*, (Guatemala: Serviprensa Centroamericana, 1983), p. 18.

Fusing Nature With Architecture

The modern age—with its new architectural and metallurgical technologies—brought with it a new vertical world of which colonial and republican-era architects and engineers could have only dreamed. Internationally, a revolution in building design commenced in the final years of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Physical limitations to vertical construction were remedied by such innovations as electric safety elevators and superior water pressure mechanisms. But perhaps most significant was the introduction of steel and concrete which heralded the arrival of a new urban aesthetic. While concrete has long been used in architecture, reinforced concrete—essentially the process of buttressing concrete’s tensile strength by casting it around a steel frame—was only popularized in the late nineteenth century. As early as 1893, Carlos Barraquer presented his dissertation on “Construction Materials: Iron and Its Metallurgy” to the 10th Public Session of the Guatemalan Society of Sciences. He recognized the obvious importance of iron and steel for the expansion of the railway but also took note of the 1889 Parisian Exposition that—by way of the Eiffel Tower—hinted at the potential for architectural verticality or, as Barraquer put it, buildings that were “height defying.”⁴⁰ He concludes that iron metallurgy “is the king of materials in modern constructions.”⁴¹ Nevertheless, it would take nearly half a century until Barraquer’s desires were fulfilled in regard to towers; however, the conjoining of modern metallurgy with Guatemala’s topography produced new forms of verticality.

⁴⁰ Carlos Barraquer, “Materiales de Construcción: Hierro y su metalurgia, primera parte,” *Sociedad Guatemalteca de Ciencias*, Tomo 2, Number 2, Nov. 30, 1893, p. 64.

⁴¹ Carlos Barraquer, “Materiales de Construcción: Hierro y su metalurgia, segunda parte,” *Sociedad Guatemalteca de Ciencias*, Tomo 2, Number 3, Dec. 30, 1893, p. 128.

Besides the great pyramids of Ti'kal and other pre-Columbian sites, early human-engineered forms of verticality in Guatemala synchronized modern metallurgy with topography in a manner hinted at but not explicitly delineated by Barraquer: the railway bridge. One element of the modern optic that truly fascinated spectators was the views afforded by the rail bridges that crossed rivers and ravines alike, often hundreds of feet above the ground or rushing waters below. These bridges were heralded as monuments of human ingenuity, of science and engineering's triumphs over nature. During the laying down of the Northern Railway, editorials and articles heightened public anxiousness over its fulfillment as it snaked its way from Puerto Barrios to the capital city. As sure as editorials referred to bridges "overcoming the abyss" of ravines in 1894,⁴² they spoke in equally stunned prose over a decade later of the engineering feats as the train "crosses the majestic bridge at Las Vacas,"⁴³ a ravine near Guatemala City. Similar praise was reserved for the Rio Fiscal where one journalist described, "We disembark from the train in order to take in the views of this work that rivals with that of Las Vacas, not by magnitude but by its elegance and its audacity that it triumphs."⁴⁴ Paired with such editorials were the first photographs of modern human-engineered verticality in Guatemala. Most frequently, trains would stop near the edges of ravines to permit photographers to disembark and capture the scene of the train crossing the bridge from below. Or, equally common, were images of bridges under construction with cranes lowering beams off what appears the edge of oblivion. Photographer Alberto G. Valdeavellano used the opportunity of rail bridge construction to partially descend into a ravine to photograph the marvel of modern engineering. Although the bridge was then

⁴² Alejandro Bermúdez, "El Ferrocarril," *El Ferrocarril*, March 5, 1894, p. 1.

⁴³ José María Mancada, "El Tren y el Rio," *Electra*, Aug. 1908, 113, p. 113

⁴⁴ "La excursión en el Ferrocarril al Norte," *La Locomotora*, Sept. 20, 1907, p. 2.

incomplete, Valdeavellano took artistic license to refinish the photo, furbishing it with a locomotive and erasing construction equipment. He also superimposed a hut with thatched roof in the ravine, juxtaposing non-modern lifestyles with modern technology and, perhaps inadvertently, relating technology and progress to verticality.



FIGURE 11 Rail Bridge. Source: Archivo Histórico-Fotográfico de la Academia de Geografía é Historia de Guatemala. Colección de Alberto G. Valdeavellano.

Like the Mapa en Relieve, rail bridges forged topographical verticality with technological improvements in engineering and the use of modern building materials. While bridges augmented a new optic of verticality, they were, in essence, the extension

of the horizontal plane over vertical topography. Thus, bridges and the Relief Map were well-entrenched within a cultural motif that related verticality to nature and topography, as was the case with landscape painting and photographic panoramas. Such was the case, too, with Lainfiesta's science-fantasy novel, which relied not on utopian dreams of scientific breakthrough in aviation, but on a condor for man to share a view of the world from above. Lainfiesta's lack of scientific faith was not unique to his generation with Rodolfo Figueroa concluding in a scientific inquiry into the physics of avian flight at the Sociedad Guatemalteca de Ciencias (Guatemalan Society of the Sciences) that he felt human flight was "impossible."⁴⁵

The Dawning of the Vertical City

Incipient verticality represented an element of utopianism and fantasy among the Guatemalan bourgeoisie, something they expected and for which they hoped and waited. Briefly, it was wound up in the *cultura de esperar* along with the Northern Railway, commodity culture, and the much-touted benefits of progress and modernity. While the rail bridges brought material benefits, much of the discussion surrounding them—like that of landscape paintings, photographic panoramas, and the Mapa en Relieve—focused on their aesthetic qualities. In short, verticality during the fin-de-siècle was—like the bourgeoisie's general experience of modernity—related to optics and modernism as opposed to modernization and was inescapable from nature and topography. During the next several decades, human-engineered verticality began to appear in the Guatemalan capital; however, this verticality came not in the form of tall buildings but of superficial facades, serving not practical but phantasmagorical purposes. This verticality began to

⁴⁵ Rodolfo Figueroa, "¿Por qué vuelan las aves?," *Sociedad Guatemalteca de Ciencias*, Tomo 1, Volume 10, July 31, 1893, p. 341.

mask the social ills that were becoming more apparent in the capital, the by-products of economic modernization in the countryside. Urban verticality until the October Revolution of 1944, then, was carnivalesque and merely a veneer of modernization.

The first four decades of the twentieth century saw the emergence of multiple story creations in the urban sphere. Many valuable lessons were drawn from the disaster reaped by the earthquakes of 1917 and 1918 about the limits of architecture in earthquake prone areas. The earthquakes flattened much of the city, with taller buildings such as palaces and the Catedral Metropolitana fairsing poorly. After the earthquakes, the city was a blank template for new architectural constructions, and monumentality was the order of the day. Both prior to and through the twentieth century, monumentality in urban architecture prominently existed; this monumentality, often in the form of neo-classical architecture was intended to inspire awe and wonder by encompassing large tracts of urban space. Monumental architecture was usually horizontal but with moderate verticality of buildings with a few stories. As might be expected, such buildings were clear demonstration or pronouncements of state and church power and can be plainly seen by the various national palaces that have existed in the main plaza of the capital as well as the Catedral Metropolitana. But, as mentioned, this was accompanied by a strong horizontal presence which tempered the verticality of buildings. For example, the military capacity of the state was architecturally complemented by the Escuela Politecnica, the national military college a few kilometres south of the main plaza. Beyond these sparse monuments to power, however, few buildings stretched their facades beyond the height limitations that grounded general housing. Nevertheless, fascination with tall buildings and verticality persisted. Newspapers in the 1930s demonstrated

continued fascination with foreign verticality, with articles appearing that discussed the architects of skyscrapers and how these buildings were constructed, first in Chicago then in New York City.⁴⁶

Besides the monumentality of the state and church, by the mid-1930s new forms of verticality were beginning to alter urban optics or ways of viewing the city. Aviation presented new perspectives on the capital as bird's eye views of the capital were published in newspapers and periodicals. But other manners for the public to directly experience urban verticality were coming into being. As part of the gradual suburbanization of Guatemala City to the south end of the Valley de la Ermita—commenced with the *Exposición Centro-Americana é Internacional* and the expansion of the *Avenida La Reforma*—in the 1930s, President Jorge Ubico transferred the fairgrounds associated with the *Feria de Jocotenango* to the city's southern region, known as *La Aurora*. The relocation served not merely a pragmatic purpose in that the south end held ample space for expansion; rather, it formed a wider strategy of associating southern Guatemala City with bourgeois decadence and modernity. By the 1930s, the *Feria de Jocotenango* had partly morphed into a spectacle of modernity in which the ostensibly non-modern was juxtaposed with the modern (as discussed in Chapters Five and Six).

The hosting of the National Fair of November in Guatemala City's southern limits re-animated the south in ways that it had not enjoyed in nearly two generations. Through Ubico's efforts, however, the south end was to be associated with modernity, recreation, and verticality. That Ubico had changed the character of the fair is confirmed by the manner in which it was described by guides and reports. One pamphlet reported that

⁴⁶ "Incomparable Belleza de los Edificios de las Ciudades de los Estados Unidos de Norteamérica," *Diario de Centro-América*, July 4, 1931, pp. 12-13.

while the fair preserved its national character, it “has evolved and has become modernized.”⁴⁷ Elsewhere, a brochure explains the expansion of the fair by way of allusions to progress, arguing, “Wanting to have the satisfaction of seeing in the fair grounds all of the shades of modernity, to all those who want to appreciate all the good it has to offer and to know at a glance, all of its agricultural and industrial vigor.” It continues, setting the Feria Nacional apart from that of Jocotenango by alluding to a dichotomy between them, suggesting that the latter will continue to be held in mid-August while “the modern fair, which is presented to all as an exponent of the country’s vitality, one will find in the extremely lovely and incomparable fields of La Aurora”.⁴⁸ The two most popular features of the Feria Nacional de Noviembre served as complementary representations of modern change and suburbanization. The first was the Indian Village, which persisted in popularity as it highlighted the extent of indigenous backwardness. The second alluded to a new form of verticality that relied on the successes of modern building trends while not entirely breaking with verticality’s association with nature: the so-called *montaña rusa*—the Russian Mountain or roller coaster.

The *montaña rusa* of the 1930s was not the first rollercoaster in Guatemala. President Reyna Barrios had imported one for the 1897 Central America Expo but it was not preserved in popular memory.⁴⁹ This “miniature railroad” was a “mechanic apparatus

⁴⁷ “Visit Guatemala’s National Fair, Nov. 19th – 25th, 1939” Lito B. Zadik & Co. Guatemala, 1939, Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas no. 2010, Year 1938-1943].

⁴⁸ “La Feria Nacional de Noviembre” in *Boletín de la Feria Nacional de Noviembre*, (Guatemala 1934, Centro Editorial, S.A.), p. 1.

⁴⁹ Alfredo Balsells Rivera, “Montaña Rusa o la emoción vertiginosa,” *El Imparcial*, Nov. 14, 1936, Sección de la feria, p. 3.

in constant motion”⁵⁰ that used the virtues of technology and engineering to send crowds of Guatemalan visitors careening through the air in the tempest of modern experience and optics. The rollercoaster was a state of the art amusement that carried riders to the tops of railed summits then plunged them towards the earth at rapid speeds, producing sensations of vertigo in many. Demand for the montaña was high: a line snaked through the amusement parks with people waiting up to two hours to climb into its carts.⁵¹ After the rollercoaster’s introduction at the 1935 fair, the iconography of the celebration was altered to include images of the montaña rusa—often looming in the background—as a veritable sign of modernization. Much of its appeal, of course, lie in the towering heights of its “elevated structure”⁵² which allowed visitors an opportunity to view the city and fair grounds of La Aurora from a new perspective. Indeed, popular historian Héctor Gaitán recalls the most outstanding features of the rollercoaster “which at night was a marvellous sight with its multicolour illumination that, due to its height, one could appreciate from whichever corner of the fair grounds”.⁵³ Unsurprisingly, the official guide to the 1938 fair contains an image of the fair grounds as taken from the view offered at the summit of the rollercoaster.⁵⁴

While some have described “the vertigo in oscillations” experienced when one rides the rollercoaster,⁵⁵ or the “new unknown excitement” generated by the ride in which

⁵⁰ “Feria Nacional de Guatemala del 19 al 26 de Noviembre de 1939,” Colección Valenzuela, [Hojas Sueltas no. 2010, Year 1938-1943], p. 2.

⁵¹ “El Parque de Diversiones, clamorosa novedad y nervio de la gran Feria,” *El Imparcial*, Nov. 16, 1936, p. 12.

⁵² *Guía de la Feria Nacional de Noviembre 1938*, (Guatemala: Tipografía América, 1938), p. 15.

⁵³ Héctor Gaitán Alfaro, *La calle donde tú vives, segundo tomo*, (Guatemala: Librería Artemis & Edinter, 1989), p. 114.

⁵⁴ *Guía de la Feria Nacional de Noviembre 1938*, p. 21.

⁵⁵ León Aguiler, “De la Feria de Agosto en Jocotenango a la Feria Nacional de Noviembre en La Aurora,” *El Imparcial*, Nov. 14, 1936, Seccion de la feria, p. 3.

“one feels that their heart is about to escape by way of their mouth,”⁵⁶ few have come close to the lyrical lucidity of Alfredo Balsells Rivera’s description. In his account, modern experience and magic converge, as the velocity generated by verticality allows the mind to seemingly transcend the body. “The carts of the montaña rusa carry us everywhere,” he begins, “to the sky, to the earth, to vulgarity and to hope.” The possibilities offered by the rollercoaster are seemingly endless: “We see the moon. We go to the moon. The cart climbs and climbs... The point is to climb, to climb, to climb. To the moon, to space, wherever. Climb!” Balsells Rivera continues,

Sometimes, in those moments when the cart neither climbs nor descends, in which almost by the magic arts it remains half stopped at the summit, a gust of serenity arrives at our soul. From a high, we view everything: the crowds, the lights, and the panoramas. We almost feel ourselves closer to the clouds than to the streets. But it only lasts a fraction of a second. The serenity evaporates instantaneously, hearts return to beating at a little known speed. The lights, the crowds, the clouds, the streets, and the hopes of prolonging the seconds and minutes all go by.

In the journalist’s descriptions, the speed of the ride transcends time. Riders lose their temporal logistics as the cart drops from the apogee. The light bulbs of “the fair’s spinal cord”—the rollercoaster—“appear as flashes. The crowd is shattered into unrecognizable fragments” by the abrupt drop. Balsells’ stream-of-consciousness composition continues, describing the montaña rusa as “something blood-thirsty, that chills the body,” that makes the stomach “transform itself into a maelstrom.”⁵⁷

I wish to suggest that the language used to describe the experiences of the montaña rusa is imminently modern, for it fit within a well-founded tradition that struggled to find the appropriate vocabulary to capture the essence of the modern experience. Some cultural workers, such as the painter Carlos Valenti, used aesthetics as

⁵⁶ *Guía de la Feria Nacional de Noviembre de 1936*, (Guatemala, 1936), p. 10.

⁵⁷ Balsells Rivera, “Montaña Rusa,” p. 3.

the most appropriate way to represent the fleeting nature of Guatemalan modernity, using a simple, blurred brushstroke to produce the perspective of a passing moment. Others, like the author Miguel Ángel Asturias, struggled to describe the experience of modernity, opting for metaphors that invoked fluidity to describe film or the view from the train. Elsewhere, in the medical sphere, doctors described new conditions such as neurasthenia as a blanket diagnosis to cover maladies provoked by modern living. Here, too, Balsells Rivera makes an effort to capture the essence of something new, however, with the appendix that his encounter with modernity relies on verticality. The fascination of the rollercoaster balanced between the view offered and the sensation of descent from a great height.

Jorge Ubico's regime was also responsible for overseeing the construction of the Torre del Reformador (Tower of the Reformer), a replica of the Eiffel Tower inaugurated July 19, 1935. The Torre was built in the United States and featured in the Golden State International Exposition in San Francisco. The seventy-meter structure impressed the Guatemalan delegation at the expo and Ubico's government agreed to purchase the tower. Having been disassembled, shipped to Guatemala, and reconstructed in the capital's southern suburbs, it featured prominently in the centennial celebrations of the birth of President Justo Rufino Barrios, for whom it was named.⁵⁸ The Torre del Reformador towered over all other man-made structures in Guatemala City for the next decade and served as a subject in guided tours and postcards that advertised the city's penchant for modern European styles. The tower tempted pranksters and daredevils who frequently attempted to scale its galvanized-steel frame.⁵⁹ The tower's construction flirted with the

⁵⁸ Ricky López Bruni (ed), *Ciudad de Guatemala, Ayer y hoy*, (Guatemala: Telgua, 2005), p. 108.

⁵⁹ Gaitán Alfaro, *Memorias del siglo xx, Tomo 1*, p. 97.

potential for skyward elongation. But for all the excitement it generated, the Torre del Reformador remained part of the fantasy and illusion of vertical modernism in Guatemala City.

Approached holistically, the relocation of the national fairgrounds from Jocotenango to La Aurora and the placement of the Torre del Reformador represented a refocusing of attention to a new suburban trajectory located in the city's south. The presence of the fair's amusement park with the montaña rusa served as a modern juxtaposition to the traditions and backwardness found within the Indian Village. It aptly captured the modernizing spirit that Ubico hoped the fair would evoke. Moreover, and this is important, the suburbanizing tendencies of the period that followed relied, like the fair, on the promise of verticality to produce new forms of modern experience. Commencing from the 1930s and 1950s, the capital's southern extensions, in what would become Zones Nine and Ten, emerged as the preeminent location of urban verticality, what has been called "the vertical city."⁶⁰ In this sense, the fair and the montaña rusa anticipated later urban trends that not only tied verticality to modernity but also to transformation in the cityscape that associated the y-axis with suburbanization.

Urban Verticality and the State

Favio Hernández Soto has written most extensively on the "vertical densification" of Guatemala City, commencing modestly in the late 1940s.⁶¹ Just what comprises a tall building among Guatemalan urban historians varies between five and eight stories.⁶²

⁶⁰ Favio Hernández Soto, *Los edificios altos en la ciudad de Guatemala: tendencias de uso, escala, y localización (1949-1995)*, (DIGI-CIFA Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, Guatemala, 1996), p. 4.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁶² See Hernandez Soto, *Los edificios altos en la ciudad de Guatemala* and Maynor Giovanni Nicho Similox, "Apuntes y Análisis de la Tipología Formal de Edificios altos, de Apartamentos,

These low figures suggest that verticality in Guatemala City has never been a defining urban characteristic relative to other global cities, a reality reinforced by the concentration of such edifices in only a couple of zones. Perhaps owing to the city's limited verticality, where tall buildings do exist in the Guatemalan capital, they have captured imaginations and have been the focus of intense interest as evidence of modernization.

In the first couple of decades after the Second World War, the construction of tall buildings was principally a state initiative. To a large degree, this new urban verticality grew out of the social democratic impulses of the October Revolution of 1944, beginning with Ubico's ouster and the commencement of a ten-year democratic interlude. The elected governments of Juan José Arévalo and Jacobo Arbenz oversaw the rapid expansion of the Guatemalan state as a nascent welfare state was established. The growth of national and municipal institutions during this period required new infrastructure to house the new Instituto Guatemalteco de Seguridad Social (Guatemalan Institute of Social Security or IGSS), while buildings for the Municipality had never been reconstructed after the 1917-1918 earthquakes.⁶³ In 1952, the Centro Cívico (Civic Center) was proposed to hold these new public buildings located in Zone Four. Over the next couple decades, new institutions were added to the Centro so that today it holds the IGSS, Banco de Guatemala (Bank of Guatemala), town hall, the national mortgage centre, the Supreme Courts, and a cultural centre.

Oficinas y Hoteles de más de 8 niveles sobre Avenida la Reforma en el período del año 1960 al 2000," (Thesis, Universidad de San Carlos, 2004).

⁶³ The Congress passed Decreto 226 in April 1946 that created the position of mayor as guaranteed by the Constitution of 1945, which effectively granted autonomy to the Municipality from the clutches of the national government.

Importantly, the International Style of Architecture, most commonly associated with Swiss architect Le Corbusier and Catalan city planner Josep Lluís Sert, was used for most of these building. Through the International Style, the buildings of the Centro Cívico communicated ideas of cosmopolitan modernity and embodied the state's aspirations towards national progress. The crown jewel of the Centro was the Banco de Guatemala, which received great attention after its inauguration in 1966 owing to its verticality. This building was emblematic of state-sponsored vertical growth, serving as the tallest skyscraper in the Republic for a number of years.

When completed, the President of the Banco de Guatemala Arturo Pérez Galliano boasted that the building “signifies progress for the country.”⁶⁴ Admirers paid special attention to the height of the Bank—seventeen stories including basement and mezzanine—as the vertical scale finally imposed itself on the cityscape. “With its profile viewed from Septima Avenida,” one editorial suggested, “it appears as a gigantic monolith with stylizations worn into the cement of sculptures and Mayan glyphs that give it a harsh and imposing appearance.” Elsewhere, the editorial remarks, “Even though it finds itself located in front of two large buildings—the IGSS and the Municipality—it strikingly extends an additional ten stories,” and “is a clear expression of progress”.⁶⁵ Others commented that the Bank of Guatemala is visible from any location in the city during the day and when it is illuminated at night. Discussing the view provided by the tower—accessed by one of four elevators—the building “offers an unrivalled view of the

⁶⁴ Jorge García Morales, “Banco de Guatemala Impulsa el Desarrollo General del País,” *Diario de Centro-América*, May 13, 1966, p. 3.

⁶⁵ José A. Miranda, “El Nuevo Edificio del Banco de Guatemala,” *Diario de Centro-América*, June 3, 1966, pp. 3 and 5.

capital to the visitor”.⁶⁶ When Archbishop Monseñor Casariego blessed of the building before an audience of 2000 spectators in late May 1966, he commented on the building’s vertical and monumental importance, suggesting, “Placed in the heart of the capital city, its foundational silhouette protrudes from it with a striking appearance though not without solidly establishing itself in the ground.”⁶⁷

Many of the images of the Bank at its inauguration highlighted the vertical axis in its representation by either photographing or illustrating it with an emphasis on its narrower western and eastern facades or by offering perspectives from positions close to its base in order to elongate the perception of verticality, and rendering it a more “imposing building.”⁶⁸ The building’s association with modernity was solidified by its vertical axis and its use of the International Style. While debuting the Bank, Guatemalan President Enrique Peralta Azurdia observed, “The spirit of innovation held by the Bank of Guatemala’s authorities opens the possibilities that the capital’s Centro Cívico will give rise to more modern buildings in the near future. In addition to beautifying the city, they will also demonstrate the advances that are gradually reaching the Republic.”⁶⁹ The Banco de Guatemala marked only the initiation of urban verticality in the Guatemalan capital; however, the bulk of subsequent skyscrapers were more likely to originate from the desires of the private sector rather than the state.

⁶⁶ “Imponente Edificio,” *Prensa Libre*, May 28, 1966, p. 14.

⁶⁷ “Conceptuoso Discurso de Monseñor Casariego al Bendecir el Edificio,” *Diario de Centro-América*, May 30, 1966, pp. 1-2.

⁶⁸ See the photograph of the Bank from *Prensa Libre*, May 28, 1966, p. 15. The store La Helvetía advertised Christmas cards in December 1966 featuring images of Guatemalan landmarks, among them the Bank of Guatemala with an exaggerated vertical axis. See *Prensa Libre*, Dec. 1, 1966, p. 33. The quotation is from “Imponente Edificio,” *Prensa Libre*, p. 14.

⁶⁹ “Espíritu Renovador,” *Prensa Libre*, May 30, 1966, p. 7.

Verticality, Negative Verticality, and Regimes of Capital Accumulation

The restructuring of the Guatemalan economy through the diversification of export agriculture and the increased manufacturing sector since the 1950s has brought unprecedented levels of wealth in Guatemala.⁷⁰ By the 1970s, the private sector began constructing skyscrapers that housed hotels, apartments, retail outlets, offices, and financial institutions. Urban verticality since this period has almost expressly been an expression of regimes of capital accumulation, especially in the capital's southern suburbs found first in Zones Nine and Ten, then later in Zones Fourteen and Fifteen. But the economic restructuring that generated great levels of wealth amongst the bourgeoisie also contributed to urbanization of one-time rural workers who were marginalized by changes in rural land tenure and labour organization. The countryside, so important in creating urban modernism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, now threatened to undermine the bourgeoisie's urban project. As economic modernization came to be the prominent expression of modernity in the capital, the contrast in wealth disparity became abundantly clear. It is no surprise then that one of the dominant urban features in the second half of the twentieth century was the rapid spread of precarious settlements, or shantytowns, that descended into the ravines that carved through Guatemala City. With the upward expansion of the "vertical city" in the suburbs came its dialectical antithesis: the negative verticality of the capital's precarious settlements.

⁷⁰ The sources of this wealth in the countryside came from ranching, cotton production, and sugar harvesting which received a boost due to the imposition of the Cuban sugar embargo by the United States. For more on this economic transformation and urban industrialization, please see Theodore Caplow, "The Social Ecology of Guatemala City," *Social Forces*, Vol 28, No 2 (Dec 1949) and Paul J. Dosal, *Power in Transition: The Rise of Guatemala's Industrial Oligarchy, 1871-1994*, (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1995).

The reorganization of agribusiness in the countryside mostly along the southern coast had many consequences in terms of urbanization and fuelling the civil war after the 1960s. But it also had the outcome of re-establishing the dominance of the landed oligarchy in national economic affairs following the collapse of the October Revolution in 1954. This formative moment in modern Guatemalan history taught a series of lessons to the oligarchy about the importance of class-consciousness and the need for class unity. It is no surprise then that, in the face of popular mobilization, the oligarchy effectively waged class warfare in order to defend its interests in the face of unrest both in the capital and countryside. The formation of the Comité Coordinador de Asociaciones Agrícolas, Comerciales, y Financieras (Coordinating Committee of Agricultural, Commercial, and Financial Associations or CACIF) in January 1957 was important to the enrichment of the oligarchy. CACIF functioned as an umbrella organization to protect the economic privilege of the oligarchy, as well as a forum to resolve internal grievances amongst the wealthy in the interest of promoting unity. Under the military governments that mostly ruled Guatemala from 1954 until 1986, economic policy planning was often deferred to CACIF as the military concerned itself with counter-insurgency. The result was a high concentration of wealth and one of the highest rates of inequity in the world.

By the 1970s, verticality in the suburbs served as a metaphor for wealth and successes of the Guatemalan oligarchy and industrial elite. Private sector verticality began slowly in the late 1940s as part of the Juan José Arévalo government's desire to remedy the emerging housing shortage. In April 1949, it passed Decreto 600 that exonerated the owners of buildings with three floors from paying fiscal and municipal

taxes for two years and buildings of more than three levels for five years.⁷¹ The saturation of horizontal land-use served as an immediate impetus for upwards growth. Nevertheless, urban verticality quickly became a suburban feature with the official government newspaper proclaiming, “Guatemala is growing” in which it heralded the new suburban neighbourhoods that open “the promises of the future” as the city emerges from its one-time provincialism.⁷² Verticality was announced as the new modern urban aesthetic and evidence of the revolutionary government’s commitment to progress. New vertical growth was focused along the Avenida la Reforma, mostly in Zones Nine and Ten during the 1960s and 1970s. Further suburbanization occurred in Zones Fourteen and Fifteen, also to the south, as higher real estate values facilitated upward expansion.

Such growth was explicitly tied to wealth concentration in Guatemala City, as periods of vertical stagnation clearly mirrored the country’s economic fortunes; thus explains the lull in skyscraper construction in the early 1980s when a severe recession hit Guatemala. Favio Hernández Soto has written that this wealth concentration has irrevocably altered the image of the city in particular areas. He points to the suburb of Santa Clara in Zone Ten, for example, which once housed the city’s gardens but had been “transforming itself, little by little, into the Guatemalan Manhattan with its mountain of buildings.”⁷³ Tall buildings have altered perceptions of the city as these areas have come to form the “new urban centrality.”⁷⁴ While tall buildings continued to be built in the traditional urban core, these were generally of modest height, whereas the tallest

⁷¹ See annex one in Hernández Soto, *Los edificios altos en la ciudad de Guatemala*.

⁷² “Guatemala Crece,” *Diario de Centro-América*, Sept. 24, 1953, p. 2.

⁷³ Hernández Soto, *Los edificios altos en la ciudad de Guatemala*, p. 14.

⁷⁴ Similox, “Apuntes y Análisis de la Tipología Formal de Edificios altos, de Apartamentos, Oficinas y Hoteles de más de 8 niveles sobre Avenida la Reforma en el período del año 1960 al 2000,” p. 7.

skyscrapers, most frequently apartments and offices, were located in the southern suburbs in zones most often characterized as modern. It is no surprise that one of the dominant perceptions of Guatemala City is that of a modern, vertical capital whereby the skyline dominates discussions of urban modernity. This is, of course, the view offered by Marcia Castillo's artwork where urban verticality captured the young girl's imagination, a discussion of which opened this chapter.

Yet these representations of the city leave a number of silences about urban experience that is overlooked when the focus is placed solely on tall buildings. It was not merely a coincidence that the expansion of vertical densification coincided with the assault on meaningful labour opposition to the oligarchy, the consolidation of land holdings in the countryside, the creation of the Central American Common Market, and later, structural adjustment programs. To the contrary, verticality, as it developed in suburban Guatemala City, came to depend on it. Carlos Vilas perfectly captures this sentiment when suggesting that the social conditions that gave rise to insurgency since 1960 have not been due to the failures of capitalist development but because of its success.⁷⁵ It is for this reason that urban verticality associated with wealth brings "a modern and cosmopolitan image that contrasts with peripheral and marginal areas."⁷⁶ In this way, the urban sphere mimics the dialectic of capitalist development and concretely displays the contradictions of progress within urban space.

J.T. Way recently observed that contemporary Guatemala is the product of capitalist development projects and the grassroots organizing of everyday Guatemalans

⁷⁵ Carlos M. Vilas, *Between Earthquakes and Volcanoes: Market, State, and the Revolutions in Central America*, Ted Kuster (trans), (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1995), p. 66.

⁷⁶ Hernández Soto, *Los edificios altos en la ciudad de Guatemala*, p. 4.

as they attempt to survive the tempest of modernity.⁷⁷ The combination of social fallout from capitalist development and *capitalinos*' capacities to conduct their lives despite structures that limit their agency led to the first large-scale urban land invasion in Guatemala City's ravines during the 1940s, not long after the abolition of Ubico's Ley de Vagrancia freed inter- and intra-departmental migration. That same decade, the Sánchez building was inaugurated in Zone One, the capital's first building of more than five stories. If tall buildings and skyscrapers represent the promise of modernity and capitalist development through verticality, the precarious settlements represent their antithesis. Urban verticality in the suburbs fostered negative verticality in the ravines.

The first precarious settlements were founded in the decade of the 1940s near Zone Five, to the southeast of the urban core, largely as a result of the inability of urban workers to afford housing rentals. Quickly the strategy of mass land invasions was used where hundreds or thousands of families descended upon a parcel of unused land—either public or private—and quickly establish rudimentary housing with the hope that the numbers would dissuade the state from evicting them. The probability of success depended on a series of factors but residents of the new communities aimed to enter negotiations with the state for recognition of their claim to the land. Early reports of precarious settlements such as La Palmita spoke of a “panorama of misery, sorrow, and filth” and as an “underworld of colonizers” living within “caricatures of houses.”⁷⁸ While the state gradually accommodated many precarious settlements and permitted the expansion of certain state services to the new communities, the deepening of negative

⁷⁷ See J.T. Way, *The Mayan in the Mall: Globalization, Development, and the Making of Modern Guatemala*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

⁷⁸ “Panorama de miseria en el barranco de la Palmita,” *El Imparcial*, June 8, 1948, p. 1.

verticality offers a serious counterpoint to the verticality of the southern suburbs and a reminder of the social repercussions of capitalist development.

Life in La Palmita was described as tentative and dangerous owing to the steep inclines of the ravine and the poor construction of homes. The “bottom-dwellers” only received sewage water from runoff, had no electricity, and children living in the community did not receive state education owing to their propensity to work for their parents.⁷⁹ A little over one year later, some 600 people were killed in Guatemala following a week of rains in mid-October, a number of whom were living in La Palmita. The disaster prompted the state to construct a new neighbourhood on the national finca called Bethania, in the hope of easing population pressures and the tendency of seeking residency in areas prone to natural misfortunes.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, economic transformations arising from the export economy continued to apply pressures in rural Guatemala ensuring that precarious settlements continued to be formed.

In 1959, the first broadly coordinated land invasion took place when a large group of families attempted to settle near Ciudad Nueva only for the new tenants to be forcibly removed by state authorities. Approximately a week later, an estimated six hundred people launched an invasion of land near La Palmita, occupying the ravines of Zone Five near the Olympic Stadium. Here they formed La Limonada, now regarded as the classic model for precarious settlements in Guatemala City. Subsequent land invasions sought to replicate the La Limonada occupation. The new community’s name itself became a

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 1.

⁸⁰ Luis Rafael Valladares Vielman, “Infraestructura Vial, Barreras Naturales y Población: Municipio de Guatemala 1944-2005,” Luis Rafael Valladares Vielman and Amanda Morán Mérida, *El crecimiento de la ciudad de Guatemala, 1944-2005*, (Guatemala: Centro de Estudios Urbanos y Regiones, 2006), p. 61.

byword for precarious settlements as new “limonadas” appeared in the capital’s ravines.⁸¹ While there have been attempts to evict people from precarious settlements—the military governments of the early 1970s were successful in this regard—the state often encountered well-organized communities intent on defending themselves. Having done so, the communities were usually denoted as colonies, affording them status within the Municipality. In a short amount of time, the community of La Limonada swelled to an estimated 11,700 people, the size of which compelled President Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes to officially recognize the community, which was later divided into five distinct colonies.⁸²

An estimated 60,000 people lived in precarious settlements by 1968, a number that was exacerbated by the 1976 earthquake—which once again flattened large sectors of Guatemala City—when the number of similar settlements grew to 126 across the capital.⁸³ Commencing in June 1982 some ten large-scale land invasions were coordinated in Guatemala City during a brief window when civil liberties were respected. These actions were conducted partly in response to the economic problems of the early 1980s when rental prices skyrocketed and due to mass displacement from the civil war, taking advantage of political instability brought on by a military coup in March. Within a span of four days, some four thousand families occupied unused land in Zones Eighteen, Nineteen, Twelve, Twenty-One, and Six, mostly in the city’s extreme limits. Two years later, another mass land invasion was carried out in which about 50,000 people formed

⁸¹ Flavio J. Quesada S., *Invasiones de terrenos en la ciudad de Guatemala*, (Guatemala: Centro de Estudios Urbanos y Regionales, 1985), p. 11.

⁸² Amanda Morán Mérida, *Condiciones de vida y tenencia de la tierra en asentamientos precarios de la ciudad de Guatemala*, (Guatemala: Centro de Estudios Urbanos y Regionales, 2000), pp. 20-21.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-23.

three new colonies in the Municipality of Villa Nueva.⁸⁴ By 1986, there were 450,000 people living in 130 settlements, numbers that increased to 750,000 and 230, respectively.⁸⁵

The imagery of Guatemala City sold to tourists and the public is that of a modern metropolis with beautiful suburbs consisting of skyscrapers surrounded by shopping centres and parks. This portrait of Guatemala City certainly exists. But it does not exist in isolation or independent from other social processes. Indeed, verticality depended on wealth concentration and the marginalization of sectors of the Guatemalan population. Negative verticality was the product of the same social, political, and economic factors that encouraged the growth of skyscrapers in Guatemala City. As buildings stretched towards the clouds, precarious settlements plummeted into the shadows of ravines that carved their way through the capital. In the second half of the twentieth century, the social repercussions of capitalist economic development reared its head in Guatemala City. In so doing—as the example of skyscrapers and negative verticality in the form of shantytowns makes abundantly clear—the optics of modernity were increasingly informed by economic modernization rather than aesthetic modernism as they had been earlier in the century.

Conclusion

Dagoberto Vásquez is among the most widely celebrated Guatemalan artists of the twentieth century. He came of age amidst the social turmoil of the 1940s and 1950s, a period which bore witness to the collapse of the old military guard, the implementation of representative social democracy and its violent overturning by the military in 1954.

⁸⁴ Quesada S., *Invasiones*, pp. 2-8.

⁸⁵ Gellert, *La Ciudad de Guatemala*, pp. 82-85.

Like the skyline of Guatemala City, Vásquez's paintings from the 1940s until the 1980s gradually highlighted the vertical axis over the horizontal. During the October Revolution, the existence of a popular front in Guatemala City inspired visual representations of human struggle that highlighted the horizontal, non-hierarchical nature of popular protests that ended Ubico's rule. Vásquez painted murals during this time that demonstrated cross-class solidarity, equality, and social harmony, depicting industrial workers, teachers, engineers, and others labouring alongside one another to construct a new Guatemala together.⁸⁶

After the violent end of the October Revolution in 1954, a gradual shift occurred in Vásquez's aesthetic production whereby the sturdy, robust body types and horizontality common in social realism were displaced by tall, slender body shapes. The verticality found in Vásquez's work has been noted with the suggestion, "He has kept axial orientation predominantly vertical, while his form, which manifests a formal synthesis, has remained simple and unadorned. The human figure is slender and stylized. Accessorial elements are kept at a minimum."⁸⁷ Mirroring the buildings found in Guatemala City's suburbs, the figures found in Vásquez's paintings have stretched skywards. I do not want to suggest that the interaction between architecture and artistic worldviews relies on simple causation.⁸⁸ Rather, I contend that the emphasis on verticality is related to an emerging optic or way of seeing things that transformed over the course of the twentieth century in Guatemalan artistic circles.

⁸⁶ The most obvious examples are his two 1950 murals — "La Industria y Su Proyección Social y Cultural" (Industry and Its Social and Cultural Impact) and "La Industria en Sus Manifestaciones Prácticas y Económicas" (Industry Through Its Practical and Economic Manifestations). See Guillermo Monsanto, *Vásquez*, (Guatemala: Editorial Galería, 2005), pp. 18 and 33.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁸⁸ That is to say, I do not want to argue that because tall buildings appeared in the Guatemalan capital, suddenly artists began painting tall, slim figures.

In 1975, Vásquez completed the aptly titled piece “Paisaje Citadino” (Urban Landscape).⁸⁹ Here the painter depicted a cityscape dominated exclusively by multi-storied, white buildings. In many regards, the work is reminiscent of the International Style of Architecture and urban planning as conceived of by the likes of Le Corbusier and Sert. In stark contrast to his social realist work, the city of 1975 was devoid of people, cooperation, and unity; instead, the perception was caught up in the maelstrom of vertical modernity, the product not of democratic participation but of capital accumulation.

The culture of verticality in Guatemala City provides an appropriate metaphor for the experience of modernity in the capital since the Liberal Reforms of the 1870s. While verticality existed in the last decades of the nineteenth century, it did so through the nature and the topography that encircled the city. Human-engineered verticality, like the wonders of modernity, such as the relatively tall buildings that existed in Chicago, New York, and the European capitals was but a dream for the Guatemalan bourgeoisie. Gradually, however, *capitalinos* began to experience the sensations of verticality through the early decades of the twentieth century, albeit in forms mediated by nature and topography such as the Mapa en Relieve, photographs from neighbouring hills, the sights permitted by rail bridges and the eventually the montaña rusa at the Feria de Noviembre. These forms of verticality consisted as aesthetic dream-worlds, constructed to give the impression of modernity rather than tangible expressions of vertical growth. The phantasmagoria of verticality that existed until the 1940s was tantamount to modernism, a mere aesthetic fix for the limits of the agro-export economy. The seductions of pre-1940s verticality veiled the lack of economic development in Guatemala, much as the Exposición Centro-Americana masked the shortcomings of the coffee trade in the 1890s.

⁸⁹ Monsanto, *Vásquez*, p. 97.

Like the experience of modernity, early human-engineered verticality, relied on the spatial separation between the city and the countryside whereby the social costs of agro-export were most explicitly seen in rural regions while the city enjoyed (relatively speaking) the fruits of modernism.

During the course of the decades between the 1920s and the 1950s, the social dislocation rendered by the agro-export economy came to bear on the capital city and slowly revealed the phantasmagoria of modernity to be a mere illusion of economic growth. That is to say, the social relations of agricultural production with its gradual displacement of ruralites to the city became more visible. With the rise of “the vertical city” and its skyscrapers came a deepening of negative verticality. The dwellings found in Guatemala City’s ravines are the antithesis of urban verticality and have historically been created by the same modernizing forces. To the extent that tall buildings are a creation of the modern world and essential to the formation of modern urban optics, so too are precarious settlements. By the last decades of the twentieth century, the urban experience in Guatemala City could not be understood without consideration of the dialectical trends of neoliberal capitalism, poignantly illustrated by the contrast of precarious settlements and skyscrapers. Disparities in wealth and democratic access limited the perception of verticality to the degree that the view from above was monopolized by those in privileged social positions while those in marginalized conditions of negative verticality were fortunate to observe their city from ground-level.

Conclusion
The Burning Fields of Ilóm and the Departure to Bewilderment in
Guatemala City

Towards the evening on Sundays, I go through the new shantytowns where life begins to weep, and where songs and hope originate. Through streets whose secret names remain unknown to the Municipality, I scrutinize the houses and smiles.

César Brañas¹

Born in Guatemala City in 1948, Francisco Tún came of age in the maddening social world of the early 1970s. He formed part of a generation of *capitalinos* whose lives were pressed between the hopes of the Central American Common Market, the desolation of the 1976 earthquake that flattened working class neighbourhoods and precarious settlements across the capital, a world infiltrated by the fears of civil conflict and suffocated by massive urbanization. The city to which Tún had been born was scarcely recognizable by the last quarter of the twentieth century. The bourgeois city of the fin-de-siècle and Ubico's Tacita de Plata were gone and the capital had exploded into a booming metropolis of nearly 900,000 by 1981.² Tún was raised in the streets of the capital by his mother and older sisters, an underprivileged artistic genius with a keen eye for capturing both sentiments and social structures with simple geometric and colourful paintings. Through his work, he brilliantly speaks to the class, racial, and power dynamics that bound Guatemala City together but also threatened to tear it apart. He illuminates a deeply alienating and stark urbanscape whereby *capitalinos* are dwarfed by tall buildings that dominate the skyline. The urban inhabitants daily reconfirm their

¹ Quoted in Celso A. Lara Figueroa, "Las tradiciones en la ciudad de Guatemala," *La Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción: 230 años de historia*, Ana María Urruela Villacorta de Quezada (ed.) (Guatemala: Grupo Financiero de Occidente, 2006), p. 253.

² In contrast, the population of the Metropolitan Area of Guatemala City in 1950 was approximately 285,000. José Florentín Martínez López, *El proceso de urbanización en Guatemala: Un enfoque demográfico 1950-2002*, (Guatemala: Centro de Estudios Urbanos y Regionales, 2006), pp. 137-140.

existence and social worlds within the dense matrices of the capital's grid even as the city appears to consume them through its monumentality. Everyday life, its struggles and small victories, are captured within the tiny figures that populate the sidewalks of Tún's city; in contrast, the broad structures that channel *capitalinos* through its corridors embody the sources of their frustrations, limitations, and resignation: civil war, poverty, urban violence, and structural adjustment programs.

As a youth, Tún used to scale Cerro del Carmen, the modest hill in the city's old northeast corner upon which sat the famous church of the same name.³ The panoramic view of the capital—captured on film by Alberto G. Valdeavellano as discussed in Chapter Seven—but especially the old working-class neighbourhood of La Parroquia, influenced his later aesthetic production, frequently consisting of roofs, church domes, and perpendicular streets. Tún's impoverished childhood, often characterized by hunger and minimal formal education, held great importance in formulating his artistic perspective. Like Carlos Valenti sixty years earlier, Tún's paintings featured scenes from the daily life of Guatemala City, filled with images of street dogs, vendors, drunks passed out on street corners, festivals, and children playing.⁴

Despite modest local attention, Tún was never a widely celebrated painter in his lifetime. He often struggled with substance abuse during the 1970s, frequenting prisons due to bouts of alcoholism. When the Guatemala currency was devalued in the early 1980s as a result of governmental structural adjustment policies, Tún was no longer able to live from the avails of his labour, finally retiring from painting in 1984. He was less frequently spotted in artistic circles and whenever he re-emerged from the city's

³ Edith Recourat, "José Francisco Tún," *El Imparcial*, Oct. 12, 1970, pp. 3

⁴ Guillermo Monsanto, *El mundo de Tún*, (Guatemala City, Galería El Attico, 1996).

shadows, friends and former colleagues hardly recognized him. He soon would return to the vortex of the capital where he became addicted to sniffing glue and had his leg crippled in an accident. Meanwhile, an apartment fire destroyed much of his painting collection and archive. In 1989, Francisco Tún was struck by a car on a busy Guatemala City street and killed. His body was taken to the morgue where it remained for a time before disappearing, not having been claimed by his surviving relatives who were unaware of his death. Guatemalan art historian Guillermo Monsanto writes,

They do not know what became of his remains or where Tún is buried. By then he had already been a blur in the minds of the Guatemalan art world. He fades more with time. Nobody, except his family, is aware of his absence. There are those who believe he will appear one day, paintings under-arm. Others believe they have seen him hanging about. Who knows?⁵

Like many *capitalinos*, Francisco Tún fell casualty to the dangers of the capital. His fate resonates within the political and social culture of Guatemala City during the second half of the twentieth century.

As part of its counter-insurgency campaign against communist-inspired guerrillas during the 1960s, the Guatemalan state created a new type of casualty of civil conflict: the *desaparecidos* or the disappeared. Suspected subversives were frequently snatched from the streets of Guatemala City and taken to clandestine prisons where they were subjected to interrogation, torture, and eventually murdered. Their corpses seldom resurfaced—often buried in clandestine graves—while the state, police, and other security services denied any involvement with the missing individuals. Of the *desaparecidos*, Uruguayan journalist Eduardo Galeano has written,

there are no prisoners to claim nor martyrs to mourn. The earth devours the people and the government washes its hands. There are no crimes to

⁵ Monsanto, *El mundo del Tún*, p. 47.

denounce nor explanations to give. Each death dies over and over again until, finally, the only thing your soul retains is a mist of horror and uncertainty.⁶

Since the signing of the 1996 Peace Accords that ended Guatemala's 36-year internal armed conflict, much attention has been devoted to recovering and identifying the remains of those disappeared by the state.⁷ As the case of Francisco Tún suggests, however, the city itself was similarly adept at disappearing its inhabitants. Unclaimed cadavers, like that of Tún, were periodically disposed in the city's garbage dump between Zones Three and Seven—directly behind the main cemetery—effectively disappearing large numbers of deceased and unknown persons with no record of who they were in life. Though, rather than being the victims of state violence, these *desaparecidos* fell prey to structural adjustment programs and the squalor that these economic policies generate. Meanwhile, as the precarious settlements described in Chapter Seven continue to drop deeper into the recesses of ravines, the poor and marginalized of Guatemala City continue to disappear from the view of those living in suburban skyscrapers.

As this dissertation has argued, the Guatemalan bourgeoisie often fretted about stagnation, whether economic or cultural. Stasis was a defining characteristic of the *cultura de esperar*, symbolically represented by insatiated desires and delayed completions like the inauguration of the 1897 Exposición Centro-Americana, the Northern Railway, the dawning of consumer modernity, and the reconstruction of Guatemala City after the 1917-1918 earthquakes. In the second half of the twentieth

⁶ Eduardo Galeano, *Days and Nights of Love and War*, Judith Brister (trans), (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), p. 15.

⁷ This process has been aided enormously by the discovery in 2005 of state security documents in an abandoned police compound that later formed the Archivo Histórico de la Policía Nacional.

century, the bourgeoisie's affliction of immobility was converted into a sense that unmanageable social change was spiraling out of control.

Miguel Ángel Asturias' critically-acclaimed *Hombres de Maíz* tells the story of modernity in Guatemala.⁸ The author begins his masterpiece with the betrayal of the semi-fictional Mayan leader Gaspar Ilóm. Ilóm embodied the men of maize, those who grew corn for its use-value, whose entire social and cultural existence was predicated on the production and consumption of subsistence crops. The men of maize were engaged, however, in both an epistemological clash and class warfare with the European-influenced maizegrowers, who harvested corn for its exchange-value as a market-bound commodity. In a word, the novel depicts the confrontation between subsistence-based agriculture and export-oriented modernizing forces that seek the creation of private property symbolized by the dialectic between the use-value and exchange-value of maize. While the state seeks to defeat Ilóm, it is the Faustian Señor Tomás, and his wife Señora Vaca Manuela, who betrays Ilóm and has him poisoned. While the indigenous leader survives the assassination attempt, the treachery sets into action a sequence of events that culminate in his self-destruction. Amidst his throes, Ilóm casts a curse on Señor Tomás and the maizegrowers, while Ilóm's wife—symbolic of the land—escapes from the grasp of her husband.

Ilóm's curse is manifested in Señor Tomás' sterility and the termination of his family line when his only son, Machojón, disappears. Legend arises, however, that Machojón appears while atop his horse in the flames that consume forest when the

⁸ *Hombres de Maíz* can, of course, be read in countless different ways from a morality play to a celebration of women's and indigenous rights to an eco-narrative. Miguel Ángel Asturias, *Men of Maize (Critical Edition)*, Gerald Martin (trans) (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993).

maizegrowers clear land. Exploiting his gullibility, the maizegrowers persuade Señor Tomás to surrender more and more of his land to them for clearing as he hopes to capture a glimpse of his son in the flames. But in the process, he inadvertently furthers the accumulation of land for exploitation and modernization by the maizegrowers. Driven to madness and full of guilt for betraying Ilóm and surrendering his heir to the curse, Señor Tomás seeks revenge on the maizegrowers by dressing himself as Machojón, mounting his horse, and setting the maize fields alight. Before they are consumed by the fire, the maizegrowers catch glimpse of who they believe is Machojón, riding wildly to his death in the flames. Señor Tomás' sacrifice kills a number of maizegrowers but ultimately he assists the process of enclosures.

Asturias reminds his readers later in the novel that progress can be seen “advancing with the tread of a conqueror” in “the forests of Ilóm burning at the turn of the century.”⁹ Señor Tomás lost faith and gave into the demons that haunt the void left in its place: like Faust, Señor Tomás made a bargain that ultimately destroys him and advances that which, *post facto* he sought to harness. Like the burning fields and forests of Ilóm—ignited by Asturias' Señor Tomás in *Hombres de Maíz*—or the blur that enveloped Carlos Valenti's dandy, modernization had grown out of hand, a veritable Pandora's box that could no longer be contained. The departure to bewilderment in Guatemala City had begun.

The sources of this bewilderment are plenty. But they stem in large part from the social processes that commenced with the Liberal Reforms. The same political economic changes that contributed to the enrichment of Guatemala City, its beautification, and the flourishing of bourgeois culture also triggered new social relations in the countryside that

⁹ Ibid., p. 237.

took longer to manifest in urban Guatemala. Urbanization is one such example. The census of 1893 indicated that some 72,000 people lived in Guatemala City, a number that jumped to 121,000 in the early 1920s. While significant, this increase was manageable and orderly. After the 1950s, however, the demographic size of Guatemala City erupted so that by the start of the twenty-first century, the Metropolitan Area consisted of over 2 million people, a number that is estimated to be between 3.5 and 4 million today.¹⁰ This demographic upsurge owes itself to changes in land tenure in rural Guatemala that have constantly evolved since the Liberal Reforms. The alternating demands of agricultural export have led to both a shortage of land and—in the case of certain exportable goods—a lack of employment opportunity.¹¹ Tensions over land came to a head during the October Revolution from 1944 until 1954 when the state instituted agrarian reform. The overthrow of President Jacobo Arbenz's revolutionary government in 1954 reversed the land reforms, returning land to its original owners. The pretext for future conflict had been sowed over the land issue and Guatemala had descended into a Civil War within less than a decade as communist-inspired guerrilla bands sought the violent overthrow of the state.

Within decades of the Tacita de Plata, Guatemala City had descended into a nightmare amidst the rapid urbanization, growth of precarious settlements, traffic congestion, state and paramilitary violence, and forced disappearances. Gone were the

¹⁰ Dirección General de Estadística, *Censo General de la República de Guatemala*, (Guatemala: Tipografía Nacional, 1894), p. 12; *Censo de la República de Guatemala 1921*, (Guatemala, 1924, pp. 26-31); Martínez López, *El proceso de urbanización en Guatemala*, pp. 137-145.

¹¹ See Huber Ernesto Palma Urrutia, *Latifundio y urbanización en Guatemala*, (Guatemala: Centro de Estudios Urbanos y Regionales, 2006); Luis Alvarado C., *Desarrollo capitalista de Guatemala y la cuestión urbana*, (Guatemala: Centro de Estudios Urbanos y Regionales, 1983); Luis Alvarado C., *El proceso de urbanización en Guatemala*, (Guatemala: Centro de Estudios Urbanos y Regionales, 1984).

dream-worlds and phantasmagorias spun by the bourgeoisie. In their place was a world of uncertainty and insecurity. Describing her first visit to the capital city in the late 1960s or early 1970s, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Rigoberta Menchú writes, “There were so many interesting things, but also things that I didn’t want to see, that frightened me. I thought, ‘If I were alone, I’d die here.’ The city for me was a monster, something alien, different.”¹² The experience of modernity in Guatemala City had shifted away from the aesthetic modernism and its associated phantasmagoria that characterized the Belle Époque. Replacing this perspective of the city is one in which the capital is experienced primarily as a site of economic modernization and its related social fallout. Perceptions of the city evolved during this period from a place that could be admired for its grace and charm to a place that should be feared. But the source of this contrast must be understood to be the same: namely, the economic modernization of the Guatemalan countryside and its repercussions for the Guatemalan capital.

This dissertation has put forth a series of arguments. It has proposed that the experience of modernity in Guatemala City was the product of changes in the political economy of the Guatemalan countryside. The introduction of coffee production in the volcanic highlands of the western Guatemala inaugurated a process of accumulation by dispossession. Surplus and profits earned from the countryside were used for the benefit of the capital. The experience of modernity, then, in urban Guatemala was more thoroughly characterized by aesthetic modernism as *capitalinos* engaged with new technologies, perspectives, and commodities. A veritable culture of modernity was forged that, while being afforded by economic modernization in the countryside, was

¹² Rigoberta Menchú, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, Elisabeth Burgos-Debray (ed.), Ann Wright (trans.), (New York: Verso Books, 1984), pp. 31-32.

heavily informed by modernism, to borrow Marshall Berman's useful dialectical approach. The perspective generated by this culture of modernity in the capital was that the modern world was one of charm and enchantment as the bourgeoisie mused about technologies that effectively dissected time and space. But, importantly, this modernism also helped to create the spaces required by consumer culture in anticipation for its arrival. Consumer modernity appeared ready-made for the city's well-to-do. But, gradually, the culture of modernity began to shift away from modernism and towards modernization. The social fallout of export-oriented economic growth began to change the dynamic of the city, contributing by the 1920s to mass mobilization and the transformation of Guatemalan politics. As this conclusion has suggested, these changes associated to modernization—as it shifted from the countryside to urban Guatemala—only became more pronounced as the century progressed.

A second argument of this dissertation is that the Liberal Reforms set into motion a project that ultimately altered how *capitalinos* viewed the world. In a word, in the decades after the 1870s, urban Guatemalans learned how to see as modern subjects. Here the concept of the optics of modernity is useful. Modern optics have a double significance. They refer to the markers of modernity that came into being that confirmed to the bourgeoisie that their city was modern. These included locomotives, which were widely celebrated as emblems of progress, new architectural forms whether shopping arcades during the *fin-de-siècle*, department stores along La Sexta Avenida during the 1930s, or Art Deco movie houses in the 1940s. They also included commodities which helped create fables of abundance, wide boulevards and the bicycles that rode along them, as well as new social behaviors from the sauntering of the dandy to the collective

celebrations of the Minervalias. The second aspect of modern optics encapsulates the new subject positions offered by modern culture and technology. The view from the train, photographs, cinema, modernist painting, and the view from tall buildings or atop the rollercoaster at fairs all generated new ways of seeing the modern world.

Technologies such as the telegraph, telephone, and other instruments that transgressed hitherto impenetrable boundaries also forced *capitalinos* to contemplate the significance of innovation for people's spiritual lives. That séance culture during the 1880s and 1890s came to be understood in the rhetoric of science and progress is illustrative in this regard.

A final major argument of this dissertation is that the culture of modernity in Guatemala City was always exceedingly precarious owing to the instability of the export-oriented economy. The volatility of export markets meant that the experience of modernity was frequently interrupted by economic gluts that derailed both the projects and hopes of the bourgeoisie. The *cultura de esperar* describes the three-fold anxiety of expecting, hoping, and waiting that the bourgeoisie experienced whenever economic downturns or depressions delayed the completion of particular projects. A number of examples have been provided to illustrate this cultural phenomenon. Gilberto Valenzuela captured the spirit of the *cultura de esperar* when the depression of 1897 severely postponed the opening of the Exposición Centro-Americana in that year. Elsewhere the first aesthetic modernists in Guatemala, young men such as Carlos Valenti and Carlos Mérida, were invariably described as restless as they awaited new trends to arrive in Guatemala from European artistic circles. The city, too, suffered inquietude as it lay in ruin for over a decade following the 1917-1918 earthquakes. But it was the Northern Railway that betrayed the desires of the Guatemala City bourgeoisie more than any other

project. The rail line that was to connect the capital to the Atlantic Coast—and, hence, the markets of the eastern seaboard of the United States and Western Europe—was repeatedly hampered by misfortune and took nearly a quarter-century to construct. The significance of the failures surrounding the Northern Railway, and the *cultura de esperar* in general, was that the process of expecting, hoping, and waiting problematized liberal conceptions of time and progress, generating an epistemological crisis amongst the bourgeoisie as their faith in liberal worldviews was acutely tested.

The culture of modernity appears inescapable. Modernization—the social relations and modes of capitalist economic production—continues unabated and the culture that accompanies it—aesthetic modernism and its historical tendencies of fragmentation and convergence, of order and asymmetry, bewilderment and the *cultura de esperar*—prevails. Like a parable, the modern desires of the bourgeoisie in Guatemala City came to haunt them. Indeed, the shantytowns that disappear into the depths of Guatemala City’s ravines are as modern as the skyscrapers that tower over them. As Don Casualdon instructs in Miguel Ángel Asturias’ *Hombres de Maíz*, “The Indians avenged themselves on their oppressors by putting the means of perdition in their hands. Gold and more gold to create useless things, factories full of stinking slaves in the cities, torments, anxieties, violence, without ever remembering to live.”¹³ In mid-twentieth-century Guatemala, Asturias understood clearly that the experience of modernity was predicated on the relations of production in the countryside. He prefaced his masterpiece novel with the last verse from the “Canto de Atamalcaloyan,” a pre-Columbian text, which reads: “Here the woman,/And I, asleep.” Plainly, for Asturias,

¹³ Miguel Ángel Asturias, *Men of Maize (Critical Edition)*, Gerald Martin (trans) (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993), p. 263.

woman represents land. Indeed, throughout *Hombres de Maíz*, women continually flee from their estranged husbands just as the industrial proletariat and agricultural workers are alienated from the means of production. Asturias, however, provides his readers with a clue on how to break the cycle of modernity. He concludes the novel with Goyo Yic, a blind peddler who regains his eyesight when he reunites with his wife, and together they return to the land where his family harvest maize as *nahuales*: “Old folk, young folk, men and women, they all become ants after the harvest, to carry home the maize: ants, ants, ants, ants..”¹⁴ In returning to the land, capitalist modes of production are shattered and new era commences in which the terms of a post-modern experience are unwritten.¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 306.

¹⁵ Post-modern is used here to indicate *after the modern* rather than the erroneously named school of thought associated with French Post-Structuralism.

GLOSSARY OF FREQUENTLY USED TERMS

<i>Asamblea Nacional Legislativa</i>	National Legislative Assembly
<i>Asociación Estudiantes Universitarios</i>	University Students' Association
Brujería	Witchcraft, sorcery
<i>Caballerías</i>	Unit of measurement equal to 45 hectares
<i>Capitalino</i>	Inhabitant of Guatemala City
<i>Campesino</i>	Farmer
<i>Cargador</i>	Merchandise carriers
<i>Catedral Metropolitana</i>	Metropolitan Cathedral
<i>Caudillo</i>	Military strongman
<i>Cofradía</i>	Catholic brotherhood
<i>Cultura de esperar</i>	Culture of expecting, hoping, and waiting
<i>Escaparate</i>	Shop-window or display case
<i>Exposición Centro-Americana</i>	Central American Exposition
<i>Finca</i>	Rural estate
<i>Ladino</i>	People who adopt non-indigenous culture
<i>Manzana</i>	Unit of measurement equal to 0.7 hectares
<i>Minervalia</i>	Celebration dedicated to the goddess Minerva
<i>Ministerio de Fomento</i>	Ministry of Development
<i>Pasaje</i>	Parisian-style arcade
<i>La Sexta Avenida</i>	Sixth Avenue known colloquially as <i>La Sexta</i>
<i>La Séptima Avenida</i>	Seventh Avenue

ARCHIVAL SOURCES

Research Institutions and Archives

Several research institutions and archives were consulted in the writing of this dissertation. The two most valuable collections were housed in the Biblioteca Nacional de Guatemala, namely the Hemeroteca Nacional and the Colección Valenzuela. The Hemeroteca Nacional holds a collection of print media unlike any other in Guatemala. A list of the holdings can be found in *Volumen del listado de periódicos que posee la Hemeroteca Nacional*, which includes material from the two *vitrinas* in the Hemeroteca, as well as, part of the Colección Valenzuela, located in the mezzanine section between the first and second floor of the Biblioteca Nacional. A second list also exists, called the *Listado de periódicos y documentos ubicados en la Dirección Hemeroteca Nacional Clemente Marroquín Rojas* in a sky blue Duo-Tang, though much of the list of the holdings is duplicated from the *Volumen*. The newspapers and journals contained within the collection date back to the mid-nineteenth century and earlier. The numbers of newspapers increase exponentially, however, after the Liberal Reforms and during the fin-de-siècle.

The bulk of the Colección Valenzuela was more difficult to access though Todd Little-Siebold's description of the collection, "The Valenzuela Collection in the Biblioteca Nacional de Guatemala," was immensely helpful in understanding how the fruit of the Valenzuela family's labour is organized. A summary of the collection is found in a green binder with the Valenzuela name scrawled on the side. Inside is an eclectic list of material that the Valenzuelas organized over a couple of generations that include newspapers, university and college theses, books, medical papers, governmental

reports, and manuals, as well as the enormously useful collection of *hojas sueltas*—ephemera distributed on the streets of Guatemala City, organized by year. The material is housed in the upper floors of the Biblioteca Nacional and the library staff was immensely courteous in transporting hundreds upon hundreds of my requests up and down the stairs while maintaining smiles on their faces.

Located on the reverse side of the Biblioteca Nacional, the Archivo General de Centro América (AGCA) also served as an invaluable resource. The Biblioteca found in the archives possesses a wide variety of government documents and *Memorias* from most ministries dating back to the mid-nineteenth century. The Hemeroteca within the AGCA also has an impressive assortment of newspapers and periodicals, which are decently catalogued. Relatively little was drawn from the actual archive itself for this dissertation with the exception of police reports and court records from the 1890s. The Academia de Historia e Geografía is located a couple of blocks west of the AGCA and its library collection and catalog was of great use. Of even greater value to me was the Academia's Archivo Histórico-Fotográfico, particularly the Colección de Alberto G. Valdeavellano, Guatemala City's premiere photographer during the Belle Époque. The libraries of the Asociación para el Avance de las Ciencias Sociales en Guatemala (AVANCSO) and the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO) were also extremely helpful.

At the Universidad de San Carlos (specifically the Ciudad Universitaria in Zona 12), the Biblioteca Central contained an immense collection of monographs, superseding that of the Biblioteca Nacional. The hemeroteca found in the library also contained a unique assemblage of newspapers and periodicals, often filling in the gaps that exist within the Hemeroteca Nacional collection. Also found in the Ciudad Universitaria are

the offices and library of the Centro de Estudios Urbanos y Regionales (CEUR). The staff and faculty there were happy to share their thoughts and insights into the urban process in Guatemala City, especially Doctors Oscar Peláez Almengor and Eduardo Antonio Velásquez Carrera.

In Antigua Guatemala, the Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamérica (CIRMA) was always welcoming and I repeatedly used their Biblioteca, Archivo Histórico, and Fototeca on my various research trips to Guatemala. The catalog for their Fondo *El Imparcial* was extremely helpful, as was the Fondo Taracena Arriola, Fondo Manuel Rubio Sánchez, Fondo Jorge Guillemin, and Fondo Agustín Estrada Monroy.

Finally, I was able to access the research notes of my supervisor, Dr. Jim Handy. In particular, I used the comments and synopses he drafted from the General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59 at the United States National Archives in Washington, D.C. This mostly included his notes on decimal series 814, consisting of reports from the US Embassy in Guatemala City to the State Department in Washington. These records helped clarify perspectives and events during the tumultuous years of the 1920s.

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