

INTRODUCTION

THE POWER OF ARCHIVAL THINKING

In the dark of a restless night during the late 1970s, a young Guatemalan named Raúl Perera shot into wakefulness from a dream so unusual that he remembers it vividly thirty-five years later. He cannot quite recall the date. He knows that it was after he joined the Guatemalan Workers' Party (PGT), the outlawed communist party, and became a vocal leader of his Guatemala City trade union, but before the two attempts on his life that left a bullet scar along his forearm, a close friend dead, and no option for him but to begin a long exile in Mexico. Amid years of activism and war, that one night has haunted Raúl ever since because it brought him a vision so fantastical that it verged on the absurd. That night, his subconscious granted him entrance to a forbidden space: the archives kept by his country's feared National Police.¹

Once inside, Raúl crept along the archives' labyrinthine corridors in the crepuscular light. He yanked open drawers and thumbed through file folders thick with surveillance photographs of loved ones and reports detailing informants' infiltration of leftist groups. He mined the files, learning how the police organized its death squads, what sorts of information they collected on citizens, and what could be gleaned about the fates of disappeared comrades. In Raúl's waking life—which he spent dodging, not courting, the attention of state security forces—such acts would have been inconceivable transgressions, sure to be met with lethal retribution. Generations of dictators and elites had long directed the National Police (PN) to suppress not only organized resistance but any and all forms of oppositional thinking, eventually using it to help execute the Cold War counterinsurgency campaign for which Guatemala will always be notorious. During that campaign, police administered spy networks; they crushed demonstrations; they did the dirty work of generals and political leaders; they followed, abducted, tortured, and killed. With a terrifying blend of clumsiness and zeal, they targeted schoolteachers, students, progressive priests, peasant farmers, social democratic politicians, street children, and Marxist revolutionaries alike. Raúl was hardly the only Guatemalan whose reveries the police tormented.

So it seemed unreal when, decades later, he found himself inside the police's archives once more. This time, however, it was no dream. "The very color of the pages, the fonts, and everything about the documents in my dream turned out to be exactly how they looked in real life," Raúl reflected incredulously after several years' work on a pathbreaking initiative to put the once-secret police records at the service of postwar justice.² In a serendipitous coup that none had ever imagined possible, a small contingent of human rights activists had gained access to the National Police's long-lost archives. Investigators from Guatemala's Human Rights Ombudsman's Office (PDH), while conducting an unrelated inspection on police property in July 2005, stumbled upon what seemed to be vast quantities of old papers. After surveying the sprawling warehouse—a former detention and torture center once known as *la isla* (the island), with spattered cinderblock walls and cell-like inner chambers—and navigating its maze of rooms piled high with bundles of moldy records dating back more than a century, the investigators realized that they had uncovered the largest collection of secret state documents in Latin American history.³

The news spread quickly in a country still deeply divided after nearly four decades of brutal counterinsurgent warfare, but the discovery raised more questions and controversies than it resolved. How would the find—an estimated eighty million decaying pages—be managed? Who would have control over this potentially explosive cache of records, believed to contain damning evidence of state abuses from an era of forced disappearances, political assassinations, and genocide? Could these archives offer a new chance at postwar reckoning, which remained stalled more than a decade after the end of a conflict that took the lives of as many as 200,000 citizens?⁴

Raúl was among the first members of a tiny team, soon to grow, that took stock of the find. Its members would take on the arduous task of sorting through the half-rotten, disordered heaps of paper, hoping to rescue a dark portion of their nation's past. Grasping for a manageable place to start, the earliest archival recovery volunteers began by rescuing a huge mound of personal identity cards that lay decomposing in a half-completed room at the building's rear. The majority of the 250,000 cards had survived, but only because sun and water exposure had transformed those at the top of the pile into a tough papier-mâché crust that protected the others beneath. As Raúl sifted through more and more records, on his hands and knees alongside fellow activists clad in face masks and rubber gloves, he routinely stumbled upon the names of friends and acquaintances now alive only in archives and memories. He did not know that a Central American archivist decades earlier had described

such documents as “paper cadavers” in need of “resurrection,” but he would have found the metaphor almost painfully apt; in some cases, the archives revealed companions’ fates for the first time.⁵ It was difficult labor, made no easier by the arson attempts and death threats that periodically reminded the volunteers of the real risks still faced in Guatemala by those seeking to unearth the war’s history.

How had these mountains of paper, with all the power and social control they represented, never been destroyed? Why were they all but abandoned, yet still deemed threatening enough for the Guatemalan government to keep them secret from postwar truth commission investigators? Raúl’s life story—his past and present encounters with the police and its archives in dreams and in life—encapsulated a tumultuous and unsettled half century of Guatemalan history. How had this political exile, after some thirty years of struggle and failed revolution, found himself in the company of others like him, using the files of their former victimizers as part of an unprecedented effort to rewrite history? And would their collective effort finally yield justice?

People study history in order to participate in contemporary politics; we recover the past in order to look to the future. As such, documents, archives, and historical knowledge are more than just the building blocks of politics—they are themselves sites of contemporary political struggle. We argue and disagree, ardently, about history. We interpret the same documents and events in myriad, divergent ways. We push for state records to be made public, decry their censorship, and support those whistle-blowers and document-leakers punished for violating the presumed sanctity of the state secret.⁶ And while we can build consensus around the notion that we must learn from the past in order to avoid repeating our forebears’ errors, we spar openly over that past and, especially, over who should bear the blame for those errors. The adjudication of history has serious consequences, including the payment of reparations, the offering of official apologies following atrocities, the settlement of land claims, and the integrity of national identities. This means that our engagement with history, whether or not in a professional capacity, is always suffused with our own ideological inclinations, personal interests, and present-day political ends.

This is all the more true for those communities in which matters of historical interpretation have immediate real-world stakes, such as the Guatemalan activists whose lives and labor form the subject of this book. As E. P. Thompson once wrote, “Experience walks in without knocking at the door,

and announces deaths, crises of subsistence, trench warfare, unemployment, inflation, genocide. . . . In the face of such general experiences old conceptual systems may crumble and new problematics insist upon their presence.”⁷ In an unstable postwar Guatemala, the surprising appearance of the National Police archives presented all manner of new problematics, requiring new conceptual systems with which to confront them. Aging police and military officials implicated in war crimes walked free, enjoying impunity and ongoing political power, while the fates of thousands of citizens remained unknown. In such a context, the amateur historians exhuming this past had no choice but to get down to work, and the new conceptual system they developed for reckoning with the documents combined historical research, courtroom litigation, technical archival science, and impassioned advocacy. In the process, they set a model of political engagement with the past, one that channeled the spirit of an observation by anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot: “No amount of historical research about the Holocaust and no amount of guilt about Germany’s past can serve as a substitute for marching in the streets against German skinheads today.”⁸

This book analyzes how the sudden reappearance of seventy-five million pages of once-secret police documents impacted the volatile Guatemalan political scene, bringing a historian’s eye to bear upon how postwar activists use historical research and archives precisely as a way of marching in the streets today. During the peace process in the mid-1990s, then president Alvaro Arzú and his administration denied that any police archives existed. Arzú, defense minister Héctor Barrios Celada, and interior minister Rodolfo Mendoza stonewalled the United Nations–sponsored Historical Clarification Commission (CEH) charged with investigating the country’s 1960–1996 civil war.⁹ In theory, and according to the terms of the 1996 Peace Accords, the CEH had the right to access military and police records for its investigation. In practice, however, its petitions for access were summarily denied, and the CEH was forced to proceed without any documentation from the Guatemalan state.¹⁰ The police archives, therefore, were a political bombshell, because while victims’ families had long been armed with what Gloria Alberti terms “archives of pain”—the watchdog reports and testimonies of state violence amassed by human rights nongovernmental organizations and other nonstate actors—they had never before had large-scale access to “archives of terror,” namely, the records used by state perpetrators.¹¹

The archives’ discovery renewed a national conversation about historical memory and transitional justice. It also provoked violent opposition from conservative sectors seeking to prevent the documents from coming to light.

Today, a foreign-funded activist initiative called the Project for the Recovery of the National Police Historical Archives (PRAHPN), hereafter “the Project,” is rescuing the decaying records and analyzing their contents, with the aim of generating evidence to use in prosecuting war-era officials for crimes against humanity. Over time, the Project grew from its improvisational beginnings into a precedent-setting effort armed with hundreds of staff, state-of-the-art technology, and support from around the world.

It also operated from a position of political commitment; the Project’s coordinator was a former guerrilla commander, and its work was animated by the goal of reframing the official narrative about the war—what Elizabeth Jelin has called the “master narrative of the nation”—that had been promoted for years by its victors.¹² This military-backed version of history held, not to put too fine a point on it, that state security forces heroically defended the fatherland from the evils of Soviet-sponsored communism. Lives lost along the way, the story went, were those of naive youngsters brainwashed by vulgar Marxism, who would have done better to stay at home (*se habían metido en algo*), or else of terrorists who deserved what they got and worse still. In this telling, if a high school student distributing leaflets for a leftist student group ended up as yet another defiled corpse with its tongue cut out and hands severed, dumped in a ravine or mass grave, the student had brought it upon herself. It tarred trade unionists, students, and peasant activists as traitors, deviants, and *vendepatrias* subservient to foreign ideologies.¹³ But this interpretation could neither bury survivors’ contradictory memories nor quell their expectations that a purportedly democratic state should offer at least an opportunity at justice. If the postwar project of building a democratic society where one had never existed was to succeed, this paean to the armed forces could no longer be its foundation myth.

In such a setting, the (re)writing of history is politics—politics with a definite sense of urgency, as statistical indicators unanimously warn that postwar Guatemala finds itself in an “emergency situation.”¹⁴ The country’s major twenty-first-century preoccupations (inequality, violence, impunity, Maya disenfranchisement, out-migration) are driven by unresolved historical grievances: crimes not solved, socioeconomic disparities not redressed, power not redistributed, and perpetrators unprosecuted.¹⁵ Only 2 or 3 percent of all crimes, political or common, are prosecuted at all.¹⁶ And so history is lived as an open wound. Those who have plumbed its depths know all too well how *el delito de pensar* (the crime of thinking) invites punishment from those who would turn the page on the past and foreclose certain visions of the future.¹⁷

With the weak state scarcely able to protect its citizens’ health and safety,

entrenched affinity groups—oligarchs, business elites, foreign agro-export and mineral extraction interests, and the military—have made the resulting power vacuum their own jealously guarded domain. The question today for reformers, and regional systems like the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, is: How to dislodge them?¹⁸ The Guatemalan military explicitly conceived the country's mid-1980s transition to procedural democracy as a counter-insurgency strategy; wartime power structures were never dismantled. Newer human rights organizations struggled to carve out spaces for debate in a crippled postwar society that was democratic in little more than name.¹⁹ After the accords, these organizations focused on chipping away at a deeply corrupt political system, with results ranging from unforeseen successes—for example, the hard-won conviction of Bishop Juan Gerardi's murderers—to, more commonly, disheartening failures, particularly in security reform.²⁰ Framed against such a bleak landscape, a forgotten warehouse filled with rotting administrative documents seems an unlikely motor for substantive change.

But as with all tools, the archives' utility derives entirely from the manner of their application. This book seeks to make sense of the archives' importance in both the past and the present, investigating how these documents acquired their power and how they are being reimagined in a very delicate postwar setting. Though the documentary collection is composed of one physical set of papers, those papers have at different historical moments represented two distinct *archival logics*—two organizing principles, or two reasons for being. The first logic was one of surveillance, social control, and ideological management, a Cold War–inflected logic that used archives as a weapon against enemies of the state. The second logic, emerging from the records' rescue, is one of democratic opening, historical memory, and the pursuit of justice for war crimes—again using archives as a weapon, but to very different ends. I analyze how the varied uses to which Guatemalans have put these records over time—the evolution from the first archival logic to the second—offer a narrative arc that maps onto the country's broader transition from war to an unstable peace.²¹ (In so doing, I suggest that we must expand the conventional chronology by which we define the Cold War, because in various parts of Latin America, such as Chile and Argentina, electoral politics and judicial cultures remain strongly colored by that period's legacies.)

Trouillot writes that the word “history” has two vernacular, mutually dependent meanings: the first refers to the materiality of the sociohistorical process (“that which happened,” or what historians write *about*); the second refers to the past, present, and future narratives that are produced about it (“that which is said to have happened,” or what historians *write*).²² In this

book, I explore these meanings and their interrelation. For example, did genocide happen in Guatemala—as the CEH and, in 2013, a Guatemalan court ruled—or is it only *said* to have happened? How would one go about proving it? Those accused of crimes against humanity have long argued that *no hubo genocidio*; as the website of Guatemala’s Association of Military Veterans (AVEMILGUA) proclaims, “There are those who feel the need to manipulate history in order to justify their crimes and treasonously implicate those who prevented their terrorist plans from being realized. . . . They only disinform, and the truth will never change.”²³ The police archives’ reappearance, however, destabilized such confident claims. For the first time since formal peace was struck, human rights activists had access to abundant documentary evidence in the state’s own hand, though they faced the risks of conflating “history” with a description of crimes and victims. In tracking how these activists made use of these documents—how they exhumed this mass grave filled with paper cadavers—this book not only details how the messy process of history-writing and rewriting functions but also makes an argument about why it matters.

THAT WHICH HAPPENED, OR, “*SÍ HUBO GENOCIDIO*”

Each year, the small town of Sumpango Sacatepéquez celebrates Day of the Dead with a festival of giant kites handmade from tissue paper and bamboo rods.²⁴ The round kites, the largest of which span an impressive six meters in diameter, are intricate works of art, labored over for months by all-male teams of community members late each night after their days in the field. From afar, the festival appears whimsical: the translucent kites’ vivid colors shot through with sunlight, their tasseled edges ruffled by mountain breezes. Thousands of visitors crowd Sumpango’s dusty soccer pitch, waiting for the climactic moment when all but the very grandest kites are taken down from their display mountings and flown. Each kite-building team sends its own opus aloft, with as many as five or six young men straining to control their creations with long ropes; the competition is fierce, but all in good fun. The beautiful kites are effectively destroyed in the process, half a year’s work torn apart in a few delirious seconds. Once the prizes are handed out, the community celebrates with live music and cold Gallo beer.

The gaiety of the festival masks a dark obverse. Many of the kites appear brightly hued and merry at a distance, but upon closer inspection they depict detailed images of loss and suffering inspired by Mayan experiences of the war. “Guatemala weeps and struggles, searching for its peace,” read one kite; it showed three generations of indigenous women standing in horror before three men’s machete-slashed corpses whose raw tendons and bones lay ex-

posed. Another's imagery stretched back to the Conquest. Beneath a tableau of Spanish conquistadors torturing captured Mayan warriors and burning pages of hieroglyphic script, it read: "They burned our codices and killed our people, but the flame of our culture was not extinguished; it continues burning." Yet another bore images of four weeping women, each captioned: "Pain, Sorrow, Loneliness" framed the topmost woman's weathered face, and below the profiles to the left and the right appeared "Poverty, Insult, Mistreatment" and "Violence, Insecurity, Crime." But it was the 2007 festival's most visually stunning kite, a many-pointed star adorned with swirling licks of color and patterns evocative of the *alfombra* carpets lain during Guatemala's Easter Week, which featured the most arresting message. "To be born in this immense world filled with evil is simply to begin to die," it proclaimed above dramatic, Dalí-inspired renderings of winged demons hovering, spectral humans locked in a desperate embrace, and a bleeding world cleaved in twain. "Guatemala," the kite affirmed, "lives under the shadows of death."²⁵ (See fig. Intro1.)

Death and violence in Guatemala are more than artistic metaphors; they are daily realities that hover uncomfortably close to life. Historically, the country's salient features have been a dramatically unequal distribution of wealth, a semifeudal labor system in which elites forcibly conscripted indigenous peasants into debt peonage on farms producing goods for export, a profound anti-Indian racism (though the census still classifies more than half the population as "indigenous"), and a long tradition of dictatorship.²⁶ Popular protest and a general strike deposed the tyrant Jorge Ubico and brought, in 1944, a decade of political opening, free elections, and economic redistribution referred to as the Revolutionary Spring.²⁷ It was short-lived. In 1954, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), fearing the spread of Soviet-sponsored communism and wanting to protect U.S. economic interests, worked with revanchist local elites to oust the progressive reformist president, Jacobo Arbenz.²⁸ A new military dictator, Carlos Castillo Armas, was flown into Guatemala on a U.S. embassy airplane to take Arbenz's place, ushering in decades of antidemocratic rule. As U.S. assistance flowed into military and police coffers, unrest over successive regimes' crusades against not just the tiny Marxist left but also unions, universities, churches, peasant cooperatives, and journalists exploded into rebellion during the 1960s and 1970s.²⁹ Four insurgent groups—the Rebel Armed Forces (FAR), the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP), the Revolutionary Organization of People in Arms (ORPA), and the Guatemalan Workers' Party (PGT)—attempted to mobilize first urban and then mass rural support for revolution against an increasingly murderous state.³⁰ They united in 1982 under the banner of the Guatemalan National Revolutionary



FIG. INTRO1 Kite from the Sumpango Sacatepéquez Day of the Dead festival in 2007. It reads, “Guatemala lives under the shadows of death. To be born in this immense world filled with evil is simply to begin to die.” Photograph by author.

Unity (URNG).³¹ These groups, and anyone deemed to be their allies—trade unionists, students, Mayas—were defined as “internal enemies” and became the targets of a coordinated counterinsurgency effort on the part of the military, police, and paramilitary death squads, with the country’s elites using Cold War rhetoric to justify a full-spectrum campaign against any form of democratic opening.³² When all was said and done, the army and police, fortified with foreign guns, technical expertise, and political cover, crushed the weak insurgency and killed or disappeared tens of thousands of civilians.³³ The terms of the Peace Accords, only halfheartedly and partially implemented, were a better reflection of the insurgency’s near-total destruction than of the victors’ will to enact change.³⁴

The bloodbath in the highlands provoked outrage among observers, many of whom sought to contribute by documenting the crimes to which they bore witness.³⁵ Rigoberta Menchú’s testimonial memoir, as well as many hundreds of reports by human rights organizations both inside and outside of Guatemala, sought not only to publicize rural violence but to stop it from continuing. Mindful of ongoing repression within the country and the heat of Cold War anticommunism in the international sphere, these early reports neces-

sarily minimized guerrilla and militant politics in order to make the more immediately pressing case about crimes against humanity; the narrative was simplified, stripped to the heart of the matter (army violence against unaffiliated Maya civilians), and framed to make the maximum possible impact upon the U.S. Congress, interested world citizens, and foreign governments. This version of the story, one so appalling that it stuck in the minds of people around the world, was an important political tool. Moreover, it was true, and it was substantiated over time by a wealth of forensic and testimonial evidence.³⁶

It was not, however, the entire story. Not only did it tend to collapse the complexity of the war into a single type of victim (Maya), a single perpetrator (the military), and a single theater (the countryside), it stripped the dead of agency.³⁷ In the postwar period, it produced the ahistorical suggestion that, as Carlota McAllister writes, “to be counted as victims of the war, Maya had to be innocent not only of any crime but also of any political agenda.”³⁸ Scholars and researchers both foreign and local have since amply deepened and expanded our understandings of this complex conflict, but the sound-bite version of the war tends, still, to reflect just a few takeaway points: genocidal military, apolitical Mayas, rural massacres.³⁹

This study has a different focus. The institutional perpetrator explored here is the National Police—a wartime actor so understudied that mention of it barely even appears in most accounts—and the theater of conflict examined, both in wartime and in peacetime, is Guatemala City.⁴⁰ Founded in 1881 by liberal dictator Justo Rufino Barrios, the PN tied existing bands of urban gendarmes and rural night watchmen into a more cohesive corps that, alongside the military, defended the interests of private capital. Two of its early directors were U.S. citizens—José H. Pratt of the New York Police Department and Gustavo Joseph of the Washington, DC, Metropolitan Police Force—who, foreshadowing the 1950s, were brought in to help with professionalization and training. The historical record’s silence on the PN can be partly explained by several factors: first, of course, that there were no police records available for would-be researchers to use until 2005; second, the common understanding that the counterinsurgency’s primary architects and executors were the military, not the police. The first factor contributed directly to the perception of the second; while the military was indeed decisively in charge, the police were still involved in many of the conflict’s defining crimes, which Guatemalans knew well at the time. Third, the emergence of the Maya movement over the course of the 1980s and 1990s stimulated interest in writing about the Maya experience of the war, and indeed, Mayas—including politically mobilized

Mayas, as Carlota McAllister, Betsy Konefal, and others have shown—made up a majority of the war’s dead, raped, and displaced.⁴¹ This led researchers to the rural areas where the military’s massacres were concentrated, away from the urban centers that were the police’s main theater of operations.

There is also a fourth factor, one that brings us back to the political nature of historical interpretation. The war in Guatemala City involved a different kind of violence—a surgical, targeted repression against specific sectors of civil society and popular movements—and often, consequently, a different kind of victim. Many of the forty-five thousand Guatemalans who disappeared during the war had lived and agitated in the capital city. They were trade unionists, schoolteachers, antipoverty campaigners, labor lawyers, radical students, Communist Party members, reformist politicians, liberation theology–influenced clergy, organizers and fund-raisers for the insurgency, and yes, in not a few cases, armed insurgents themselves.⁴² The urban counterinsurgency, which featured heavy National Police participation, inflicted disproportionate repression upon thousands of city dwellers whose only crime was to be a student, a union member, or a victim’s family member searching for her lost sister or son. It also, however, pursued sectors of society radicalized into fighting and fighting back, self-consciously and passionately, for revolution. Urban insurgents blew up police stations and supply convoys, assassinated police and military officials, and carried out high-profile kidnappings to draw attention to their cause and—they hoped—destabilize the state. Popular movement activists, organized in labor and student federations, decried the escalation of state repression and called openly for regime change. They died for it, and they should not have. They were well aware, however, that they might, and they knew that their police files would grow thicker with each passing day of their foreshortened lives. Around the University of San Carlos in the early 1980s, student leaders would half-jestingly ask each other, “¿A quién le toca mañana?” (Whose turn will it be [to die] tomorrow?). It was an admission that they knew what they were getting into, believed in what they stood for, and, for better or worse, were willing to become martyrs to their cause.⁴³

The war’s victims were not only, we now know, apolitical cannon fodder, nor was the U.S.-backed military the only agent of repression, nor did the entire conflict unfold in the *altiplano*. Yet these other components of the story have been comparatively little told in the war’s aftermath, leaving us with a peculiar paradox: though the police’s counterinsurgent role and the importance of the war’s urban stages were well understood at the time—as documented in press and popular movement reports—both of these dynamics have largely disappeared from subsequent accounts. The discovery of the PN

archives therefore promises a wealth of opportunities for new analyses and understandings—about the police’s responsibility for war crimes, about urban social movements, about the geography of insurgency, about the institutional and social history of the police and its agents, about changing conceptions of crime and criminality over time, and more. Also, because of the toll taken by forced disappearance in Guatemala City, hopes run high, perhaps dangerously so, that the archives will help bereaved family members to learn what became of their loved ones, and to prosecute those responsible.

As the records are cleaned, reordered, and digitized—as of January 2013, some fifteen million pages of the total seventy-five million had been thus preserved—these and other stories will be written and rewritten. The Project’s publication of a hard-hitting investigative report, *Del silencio a la memoria*, in 2011 represented an important first thrust. Other voices from the archives are emerging in various forms, including undergraduate theses written by young Guatemalans interested in excavating their country’s past. By working toward the passage of a new national archives system law, building new diploma programs in archival science and human rights at the national university, sharing its technical means and expertise with other arms of government and NGOs seeking to preserve their own records, and collaborating on standing war crimes cases, the Project has argued for archives to occupy a new and different role in national culture—and, hence, for a different and slightly more equitable relationship between citizens and the state. By changing the way Guatemala archived, the Project sought to change the way Guatemalans lived.⁴⁴

It is this trajectory of continuity and change that I have sought to document. Consequently, although this work treats the PN’s structural history and the war in Guatemala City at significant length, it does not purport to be a complete social history of the police. Rather, I use the archives as a conceptual bridge with which to connect two very different periods of political ferment: the armed conflict, and the attempts to grapple with its legacies. As mentioned earlier, the PN archives have at different times represented two distinct archival logics, one of wartime social control and the other of postwar truth claims and democratic opening. The historical evolution of the first logic into the next parallels the transition from formal conflict to contractual peace (*paz pactada*). I therefore tell the history of the archives as a way of telling the history of the war, and I conduct an ethnography of the archives and the Project as a way of narrating the importance of this history in peacetime. In tracking how the very same raw documents, the police archives, engendered the production of very different historical narratives, I expose the interdependence of history’s two meanings: *that which happened* and *that which is said to have hap-*

pened. In this case, what connects them is the archives. In every case, archives form stunning articulations of power and knowledge, which must be teased apart if we are to understand the stories we tell ourselves about the past.

ARCHIVAL THINKING

To put the archives at the center of my work and to consider them as a unit of analysis unto themselves rather than as a simple repository of historical source material, I had to learn how to think archivally. Archival thinking, as I define it, has a dual meaning: first, it is a method of historical analysis, and second, it is a frame for political analysis.⁴⁵ These correspond to the dual meanings of the word “archives” itself: the first denotes collections of objects, often but not exclusively documents, analyzed for their content; the second refers to the politicized and contingent state institutions that house said documents.

On the historical side, archival thinking requires us to look past the words on a document’s page to examine the conditions of that document’s production: how it came to exist, what it was used for, what its form reveals, and what sorts of state knowledge and action it both reflected and engendered. On the political side, archival thinking demands that we see archives not only as sources of data to be mined by researchers but also as more than the sum of their parts—as instruments of political action, implements of state formation (“technologies of rule”), institutions of liberal democratization, enablers of gaze and desire, and sites of social struggle.⁴⁶ Why a particular document was created *and* why it was grouped with other documents and kept in order to constitute an “archives” are mutually dependent questions. Any archive contains far less than it excludes, as archivists know, and every archive has its own history—one that conditions the ability to interact with it, write from it, and understand the larger systems of power, control, and legibility that record keeping necessarily enables.⁴⁷ The Enlightenment notions undergirding the concept of state archives, as both *a part of* and *apart from* modern societies, represent these institutions as neutral storehouses of foundational documents.⁴⁸ In practice, however, the politics of how archives are compiled, created, and opened are intimately tied to the politics and practices of governance, and are themselves historical in a way that transcends the content written on their documents’ pages. This is especially so in settings where the “terror archives” of deposed regimes are reconceived as technologies of justice and/or components of state (re-)formation. In order to think archivally, then, we must place archives—with their histories, their contingencies, their silences and gaps, and their politics—at the heart of our research questions rather than simply relegating them to footnotes and parentheses.

This work does so by taking the PN archives as its central site of analysis, examining three different types of work done by the archives at the state, civil society, and individual levels. At the level of government, these records—like the military’s records, a prize long fought for by activists—were tools of counterinsurgent state formation, rendering legible those sectors of society deemed to be enemies of the state in order to enable their elimination. Policing is, in its most basic sense, a process by which a state builds an archive of society. The work of policing—think, for example, of the criminal background check—would be impossible without the archival tools of fingerprint databases, arrest logs, and categories of circumscribed behavior. Hitched to Cold War objectives and local elites’ efforts to shut down socioeconomic change, however, the oppressive power of police records assumed an intensified character. By producing a massive documentary record about Guatemala and Guatemalans, the National Police corps was transformed—with U.S. assistance in matters archival, technical, political, and material—into the shock troops of the hemisphere’s most brutal counterinsurgency.

At the civil society level, the records’ current incarnation as the objects of a revisionist recovery initiative makes them a space in which battered progressive sectors attempt both to reconstitute and construct themselves anew through archival practice. Increasingly, human rights activists have come to phrase their demands upon the state in archival terms: to obtain documentary access means to obtain truth, and to obtain truth means to obtain justice. Therefore, documentary access becomes equated with justice, even if the reality remains more complicated. There is no simple equation wherein more documents equals more truth, or more truth commissions mean more justice, and though these propositions ring true for a reason, critiques of audit culture suggest that the declassification of former repressive regimes’ records serves ill as a mere barometer of state transparency or democratization.⁴⁹ I pursue a thornier question with this case study: What does the way a society grapples with an archive like this—the way it puts history to work—tell us about that society, its “peace process,” the nature of its institutions, and the fabric of its relationships between citizens and state?

Finally, at the individual level, the police archives exert power over the subjectivities of all who come into contact with them. They offer up the ever-elusive promise of “revealing the truth” about the war’s dynamics even as the archive’s sheer dimension creates a totalizing illusion of counterinsurgent omnipotence, changing and reorganizing survivors’ memories of their own political participation. As fetishes of the state, they generate desire for the forbidden state secret, whether a historian’s craving for virgin documenta-

tion or a survivor's urgent need to learn how his sister died. But although we often assume a correlation between archived documents and historical facts, the police records, like those of any institution, are imperfect, incomplete, and riddled with misapprehensions and errors. They cannot align with survivors' memories of the war, owing to questions of perspective and the passage of time.

It is important to remember that at all three levels, the memory work represented by the police archives' rescue is more about knowledge *production* than it is about knowledge's recovery. At all three levels, the archives act—generating archival subjects, historical narratives, and state practices. I hope that this book's position in the interstitial space between history and anthropology, and its development of the concept of archival thinking, will encourage historians to think more ethnographically—and anthropologists to think more historically—about archives.

In the Guatemalan case, the conditions and contingencies of how these archives came to be *both* an implement of wartime social control *and* a site of postconflict empowerment tell us much not only about the country's history but more broadly about the conduct of the Cold War in Latin America. As the United States initiated police assistance programs in countries seen as potential “dominoes,” its advisers in Guatemala focused specifically on security forces' need to improve their archival surveillance methods, enabling them to more effectively eradicate “subversion.”⁵⁰ As Stoler reminds us, “Filing systems and disciplined writing produce assemblages of control and specific methods of domination.”⁵¹ And yet, the role of archival practice in the militarization of modern regimes is rarely considered by scholars, despite a raft of excellent studies on the uses of archives for social control in various colonial administrations.⁵² This study argues for the integration of archives and archival surveillance into the pantheon of more obvious tools of international Cold War political influence. After all, the work of containment was not only carried out with guns, helicopters, and development programs: it was also carried out with three-by-five-inch index cards, filing cabinets, and training in records management. Archives, in Guatemala and elsewhere, were another front in the global Cold War.

This examination of archives' counterinsurgent uses also provides insight into postconflict transitions and societies' efforts to reckon with civil war's corrosive legacies. It demonstrates how a society's “archival culture”—the attitudes it fosters about archival access, and how citizens can conceive of putting information to use—is a revelatory indicator of the relationship between state and society, one that changes over time. Put simply, we can discern a lot about

a society, particularly a postwar society, by looking at how that society treats its archives. As cultural theorist Jacques Derrida writes, “There is no political power without control of the archive, if not memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation.”⁵³ Accordingly, I use archival thinking to explore both the technologies of political repression and the practices of social reconstruction being deployed by survivors working to marshal the same body of records for different ends.

Guatemalans’ practices of postwar social reconstruction have been multifarious; the rescue of the PN archives is simply a bright and recent star in a larger constellation of initiatives. As Mario Castañeda writes, “Memory is actualized in struggle, in rebellion, in the negation of our society’s status quo,” a notion that has produced enduring battles referred to by one activist group as a “memory offensive.”⁵⁴ “Memory,” here, is defined not as passive or recuperative but as active and engaged. The memory offensive has taken forms as diverse as *escrache*-style public denunciations of ex-generals; research projects on social movement history; efforts at criminal prosecution; raising public awareness through historical education; demonstrations and counterdemonstrations (for example, the annual protest march every 30 June, attempting to rebrand Army Day); exhumations of mass graves and inhumations of identified remains; the building of local museums and memorials; and ongoing work to combat corporate mineral extraction on Maya community land and oppose drug war–related rural remilitarization.⁵⁵ Within this array of practices, however, certain moments stand out as landmarks: the release of the Archbishop’s Office on Human Rights report *Guatemala: Never Again!* in 1998; the publication of the CEH report in 1999; the leak of a high-impact army dossier dubbed the “Death-Squad Diary,” or *Diario Militar*, in 1999; and, I submit here, the rescue of the National Police archives.⁵⁶ This book explores how the Project fit into this broader memoryscape, drew strength from previous initiatives, and laid the groundwork for subsequent advances.

This book is thus far the only one documenting the process by which terror archives are recovered, but this line of inquiry has regional and global resonance. As Louis Bickford wrote a decade ago, “An emphasis on archival preservation is often not explicitly highlighted as a key ingredient to deepening democracy and the long-term vibrancy of democratic practices in countries that have experienced traumatic pasts.”⁵⁷ In recent years, however, an emphasis on preserving and declassifying archives documenting human rights abuses—and archives in general—has increasingly been folded into postauthoritarian strategies that previously focused more on lustration, the building of monu-

ments, or securing apologies, though much distance remains to be covered. In virtually every country of Central and Eastern Europe, including the former East Germany, Serbia, Romania, and the former Czechoslovakia, political change impelled popular demands for access to secret police records, and Germany's decision to open the Ministry for State Security, or Stasi, archives after reunification was influential.⁵⁸ In 1997, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights adopted the Principles for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights through Action to Combat Impunity. They included five principles on the "preservation of and access to archives bearing witness to violations," developed by jurists Louis Joinet and Diane Orentlicher, which established norms for victims', prosecutors', defendants', and researchers' access to archives containing information about human rights abuses.⁵⁹

Latin American countries have now taken the Joinet-Orentlicher principles and run with them. In 1992, Paraguay's "Terror Archives"—the records of its secret police during the Stroessner dictatorship—were discovered, processed, and used in the country's truth commission.⁶⁰ (In 2009 they were integrated into the Memory of the World archival register of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], which as of that same year also included Cambodia's Khmer Rouge records, collected by the Documentation Center of Cambodia and made accessible to researchers at the Tuol Sleng genocide museum in Phnom Penh.)⁶¹ In 2008 in Uruguay, President Tabaré Vázquez created the National Archives of Remembrance to make accessible records from more than a decade of military rule.⁶² In Brazil in 2009, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva ordered the creation of the website "Memories Revealed," where his administration published declassified army records from the country's twenty-year dictatorship.⁶³ In January 2010, Argentina ordered the declassification of military records from its Dirty War and reversed its amnesty law for army officials.⁶⁴ Also in 2010, Chile's Michelle Bachelet inaugurated the Memory Museum; it features a large library documenting the years of the dictatorship, during which Bachelet herself was tortured.⁶⁵

Beyond the Americas, Spanish president José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero passed a decree in 2008, part of his Historical Memory Laws, allowing Franco victims to retrieve documents about their families from the Spanish Civil War archives.⁶⁶ Farther east, the Iraq Memory Foundation today works to compile and preserve documentation from the long years of Ba'athist repression. (Its efforts are complicated by the fact that the U.S. military seized great quantities of Hussein-era intelligence files upon occupying Baghdad, and more were destroyed in the fighting.)⁶⁷ These many recent examples are interrelated,

as nations at different stages of postconflict reckoning use each other's best and worst practices as models for their own approaches, with assistance from transnational networks of human rights NGOs.⁶⁸ In the wake of the Arab Spring, activists in Tunisia and Egypt, too, moved to secure the archives of fallen regimes with an eye toward their future use. One journalist reported from Tunis that an "unassuming whitewashed building . . . [is] crammed full of explosive material potentially more damaging, or vital, to Tunisia's democratic experiment than any incendiary device. The structure is not an armory packed with weapons. It houses the long-secret archives of the country's once-dreaded Interior Ministry."⁶⁹

In the Guatemalan case, the National Police archives are a microcosm of the country's larger postwar dynamics: their existence denied, their rediscovery accidental, their future uncertain due to the threats faced by "human rights" initiatives in the country, their rescue initially completely ad hoc in the absence of government capacity or political will to exercise its constitutional responsibility over them, their processing funded entirely from abroad. The conditions of the police records in 2005 offered a sobering snapshot of the "peacetime" landscape; their recovery has provided another, capturing the incremental, hard-fought nature of political change on the ground. The archives' double nature thus reflects the tremendous tension of post-Peace Accords Guatemala. On the one hand, as Guatemalans know well, there has been so little substantive change; on the other hand, the very existence of the archival recovery initiative, however beset by challenges it has been, testifies to how much political opening *has* been achieved. As one activist commented to me, "Even ten years ago, they would have killed all the people working in a project like that."⁷⁰

It is partly for this reason that archivist Eric Ketelaar likens archives to both temples and prisons. "In all totalitarian systems—public and private—records are used as instruments of power, of extreme surveillance, oppression, torture, murder," he writes. "The records themselves are dumb, but without them the oppressor is powerless." Following Foucault, he suggests that the panoptical archive of a terror state serves a carceral purpose, imprisoning society by making it known that the state is always watching and always filing; but, he notes, "paradoxically, the same records can also become instruments of empowerment and liberation, salvation and freedom"—they can serve as temples, as "safe havens," once the terror state falls.⁷¹ This has certainly been the case in the post facto repurposing of the terror archives kept by, for example, the Nazis, the Stasi, the Khmer Rouge, or the KGB. However, close ethnographic attention to the process by which that repurposing takes place reveals the temples/

prisons dyad to be less black-and-white than we might wish. To be able to resurrect a paper cadaver in postwar Guatemala—to learn what became of a *desaparecido*, or identify a *desaparecido*'s remains, or write and reveal new histories—is a gift of inestimable value, a temple's treasure indeed. But for all that, what is rescued remains a paper cadaver, not a citizen: a testament to the repression suffered by that citizen, a thin and tragic representation of a once-full life, and a less-than-liberatory reminder that the military state succeeded in forcing social struggle off the shop floors and university campuses, down from the mountains, and into the filing cabinets. To walk the halls of a state's prison-turned-temple is a worthy goal for any citizenry; however, the salvation and freedom thus offered can necessarily only be partial, for the deeds chronicled in the archives have already taken place. The right to truth is critically important, but not more so than the violated right to life.

The National Police archives, we shall see, have many stories to tell, and most are not expressly written on its documents' pages. They are stories of politics, of collective action, of painful separations and reunions, of sacrifices made, of states and of people, of resistance and silencing and loss, of survival. Those engaged in trying to tell such stories carry out their historical work with the goal of a more democratic contemporary politics, and even the most impassioned advocates of a process referred to in Guatemala as “the recovery of historical memory” know that their efforts at rewriting history look more to the future than to the past. As Walter Benjamin has written, “To articulate what is past does not mean to recognize ‘how it really was.’ It means to take control of a memory, as it flashes in a moment of danger.”⁷² Historical memory cannot be “recovered” like data in a computer file; by its very nature, memory is a shape-shifter, morphing once an analytical gaze is brought to bear upon it.⁷³ Instead, memory's recovery is, fundamentally, about power. In this case, engaging the politics of memory is a way for a battered activist sector to articulate archival truth claims, seek reparations both material and symbolic, and reconstruct itself as the country's political conscience.⁷⁴ History and memory allow for the *reivindicación* (redemption) of the war's victims and the remaking of its survivors, both essential if Guatemala is to have any hope of building a more just society.

METHODOLOGY

In writing this book, my goals were twofold: first, to participate in the collaborative initiative of revealing new histories of repression and resistance, and second, to trace and analyze the process by which Guatemalans themselves made sense of the police records, their memories, their postconflict lives, and

their visions for an uncertain future. When I began this work, it was not at all clear that I would emerge with anything. The first week I arrived to do preliminary research as a Project volunteer, in April 2006, unknown individuals threw a Molotov cocktail into the archives site under cover of darkness, making both front-page headlines and the point that the documents' survival was hardly guaranteed (see fig. Intro2). A few months later, a group of uniformed army generals marched into the PDH, demanding that the Project's director be fired and that they be given access to the Project's personnel information. These were the sorts of hazards one expected, and they underscored activists' fears that their archival rescue effort would be shut down for political reasons. But other threats to the archives' safety came as surprises. In February 2007, a hundred-foot-deep sinkhole, resembling the crater an asteroid might pound into the earth, tore open Guatemala City's Zone 6. The result of poor plumbing infrastructure, the yawning sinkhole just around the corner from the archives devoured an entire city block and several area residents overnight. It could easily have taken the precious police papers along with it. Despite the uncertain outcome, I soldiered on, as we all do when we believe in the importance of the task.

To reconstruct the U.S. role in producing a counterinsurgent National Police, with attention to the role of archival production, I used records from the State Department, the Department of Defense, the CIA, the National Security Agency, the National Security Council, and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), particularly its Office of Public Safety. It bears highlighting that many of the records pertaining to this period and area of inquiry remain significantly redacted or classified altogether, underscoring the fact that state secrecy and hermetism where information is concerned are hardly the sole purview of the global South—as Chelsea Manning and the protagonists of Wikileaks, among others, might well attest if they were not in hiding or in prison. On the war more generally, I consulted long runs of Guatemalan newspapers; military and police publications; insurgents' communiqués and internal correspondence; student pamphlets and publications; guerrilla memoirs and testimonies; presidential speeches and radio addresses; Inter-American Court on Human Rights cases; reports from watchdog organizations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International; foreign police training manuals; and more. I complemented this documentary research with perspectives and memories shared by the older workers at the archival recovery project.

Much of my research was ethnographic as well, involving extended participant observation and interviews both formal and informal. I accompanied the Project as a volunteer worker, observer, translator, and colleague from



FIG. INTRO2 Early Molotov cocktail attacks at the police archives made front-page headlines. *La Hora*, 11 May 2006.

the spring of 2006 onward. Before doing my own formal research, I worked full-time for six months (May–July 2006 and June–August 2007) as a Project volunteer, the only foreigner to work as an everyday, rank-and-file member of the team. For the first stint, I worked on a historical analysis team generating preliminary reports on the PN’s clandestine and semiclandestine units and death squads, including Comando Six (Comando Seis) and the Special Operations Reaction Brigade (BROE). For the second, I was a member of the team processing the records of the Joint Operations Center (Centro de Operaciones Conjuntas), the entity serving as the primary conduit for police-military communications. During these months on staff, I was able to experience for myself the range of emotions engendered by this painstaking work: the pride and excitement of finding a document of real importance, the anger and sadness provoked by nonstop reading about violence and vice, the boredom and frustration of long days spent sifting through bureaucratic minutiae. It was only after this initial phase, which also included a shorter visit in January 2007 and volunteer work on a compilation of declassified U.S. documents sent to the Project by the National Security Archive that same year, that I began conducting my own research, mostly during the 2007–2008 academic year when I lived in Guatemala City. I thus became, in a sense, a tiny

part of the story. My early contributions to the historical analysis team were mixed into the basic building blocks of the Project's eventual, and much more substantial, public report on its findings. As a translator, I mediated a number of the interactions between international technical advisers and Project staff from 2006 to 2008. Most memorably, in one interview I conducted outside the Project I received an off-the-record tip about a warehouse full of forgotten police records in the town of Puerto Barrios. Passing the tip along led to the recovery and incorporation of thousands more documents into the archives (though not before a suspicious arson incident nearly derailed the process). Finally, of course, I am also part of the surge of international interest in the Project, placing me among a cohort whose commitment to assisting the Project carried its own imperial baggage and transnational power dynamics, key elements of the story too.

In addition to the archival research mentioned previously, I conducted dozens of interviews with the Project's workers and the figures involved in its orbit—in government, the diplomatic corps, and the human rights sector—and I took part in the Project's everyday life for a year and a half, watching it evolve and struggle and grow. This allowed me to observe the process of reconstituting the archives, work that expanded Project staffers' political consciousnesses and senses of themselves as political actors, contributors to a larger democratizing initiative, and opponents of an official history that had marginalized and criminalized popular agency. Many Project *compañeros* and *compañeras* had high hopes for the archives. They also struggled, however, with what Jelin calls “the labors of memory”—the active, demanding work of managing resurgent traumas, psychological burdens, and memories stirred by sorting through the archives, reading about violence for eight hours daily, and finding loved ones' names or photographs.⁷⁵ My interviews with Project workers took place all over the city, in bars and cafés and shopping malls and private homes, but I conducted the majority of them at the archives—a challenging environment for many reasons, not least of which being that it remains an active police base. The sounds of gunshots from the adjacent police firing range or barking dogs from the nearby canine unit are heard throughout my recordings, yet another testament to the tensions of the Project's workplace. There are pauses in the tapes, or moments of hushed whispering, when interviewees would see an officer walk by or thought one was within earshot. The interviews were thus conditioned by the same sense of unease and instability pervading both everyday life in Guatemala City and these amateur historians' particular line of work. As such, I have protected their identities; individuals are identified in the text by pseudonyms and in the notes by interview code number.

While I have had the privilege of reading, both as a volunteer and in subsequent visits, many thousands of documents from the PN archives, my work here does not involve engaging the archives as a historian customarily might. I wanted to document the *process*, not to process the *documents*. This was why the Project gave me such unparalleled access to its work and workers so early on, in the spring of 2006. I was allowed to join the team precisely—and only—because its leaders believed that it could help to have an on-site foreign observer present to document its efforts, and because I offered to work at the service of the Guatemalans’ priorities before following my own. Had I asked for research access in 2006, or 2007, or 2008, I would have been denied (as others were), with good reason. Aside from the fact that the archives’ state of disorder at that time made traditional historical research impossible, the Project was operating with a very low profile, hoping to avoid the release of any information that could provoke retaliatory attacks. At that point, even family members of the dead and disappeared were being refused access to the records; it was not a queue I was interested in jumping. As a result, all staffers, myself included, signed confidentiality agreements promising not to divulge anything about the documents’ contents.⁷⁶ (Access has subsequently been opened to the approximately fifteen million documents that have been digitized; many historical studies will emerge from that body of documentation in the not-too-distant future.)

I constantly struggled with the challenge of making my research useful to the Guatemalans who had extended me such trust. “We need to have a high international profile, so that nobody can come and shut us down for knowing too much,” one Project worker told me.⁷⁷ I hope I have repaid their faith in some small sense not only by honoring the confidentiality agreement I was asked to sign (which is to say, I have not quoted from documents I saw while the agreement was in effect, though I do use documents subsequently made public), but by writing a book that argues strenuously for both the historical and the contemporary relevance of their work. My central preoccupation was to make the case for this history’s importance, and by extension for the importance of historical and archival knowledge to the conduct of contemporary politics. I wanted to trace the remaking of these archives from the ground up because I knew instinctively that once that process concluded, its messiness and complexity would forever be lost as the archives were transformed into an institution, a success story—considered a *fait accompli*, like so many of the other archives that historians visit. We would have a new historical narrative about the war—the one being generated by the archive’s rescuers—but no account of the process by which that narrative was produced or of those actors’

stake in it, and hence no sense of the powerful relationship between the two types of history.

STRUCTURE AND ORGANIZATION

In keeping with the dialectical structure outlined here, whereby I explore the tension between the two archival logics applied to the National Police documents over time, this study introduces the circumstances of the archives' discovery, closely examines both logics, and then turns to the synthesis produced over time by their opposition. The book is structured in four parts: "Explosions at the Archives" (chapters 1 through 3), "Archives and Counterinsurgency in Cold War Guatemala" (chapters 4 and 5), "Archives and Social Reconstruction in Postwar Guatemala" (chapters 6 and 7), and "Pasts Present and the Future Imperfect" (chapters 8 and 9).

Chapter 1 narrates the early days of the archives' reappearance, charting the beginnings of the rescue initiative and the Project's evolving ideas about how to build new knowledge about the armed conflict and the police's role in it. It shows how this process was microcosmic of larger questions about war and postwar political struggle. Chapter 2 demonstrates that rather than being a stroke of random luck, the discovery and marshaling of the PN archives were instead the culmination of decades of activism over access to state security records. These "archive wars," as I term them, established important precedents that informed how the PN archives would be put to use, and I outline the trajectory of the archive wars while also assessing the role of archival access in authoritarian societies. Chapter 3 returns to the Project, narrating its conversion from an ad hoc, scrappy effort into the professionalized and more stable initiative it would become. It attempts to answer the "million-dollar question" of why the archives were never destroyed by authorities while they had the chance.

Chapters 4 and 5 form a pair: by stepping back in time to analyze the role of the police and their archives in the conduct of the counterinsurgency, they show how the PN records acquired their power. (As the archivists at the Project quickly learned, one must understand the police's structural history in order to interpret the documents.) Chapter 4 reaches back to a decisive moment in the history of the PN: the 1954 overthrow of Arbenz and the subsequent initiation of a large-scale U.S. assistance program that converted the PN from a ramshackle assortment of thugs into a professionalized counterinsurgency apparatus. It examines the construction and use of the police archives historically, arguing that archival technologies were essential components of the state's campaign against civil unrest. Chapter 5 continues the story of the PN

past the termination of direct U.S. police aid in 1974, arguing that the dramatic failure of security reform in the postwar era is a function of the PN's own institutional history. It traces the structural genealogy of the PN's militarized, semi-official wings, demonstrating how these structures were never dismantled and today continue to participate in extralegal activities like social cleansings and politically motivated executions. It introduces the term "post-peace" to describe Guatemala's unstable, violent postwar status quo.

Chapters 6 and 7 also form a pair, ethnographically following the experiences of the workers at the archival recovery project. Chapter 6, which focuses on the experiences of older-generation leftists working at the Project, argues that these veterans have played an instrumental role in the production of new narratives about the conflict's history. It also explores how working in the archives has impacted these survivors' subjectivities, generating new opportunities for social reconstruction and reckoning while reopening old wounds. Chapter 7 examines the experiences of the younger workers at the Project, a large group of under-thirty individuals who lived the war as children and who today bridge the conflict and postconflict eras. It shows how their time at the archives shaped their emerging senses of self, transforming some of them into lifelong activists. It argues that among the archives' greatest impacts on Guatemala may prove to be the *formación* of more than one hundred politically conscious youth leaders committed not only to postwar justice but also to privileging archival preservation and historical reconstruction in their visions for the future.

The final two chapters discuss other archival recovery initiatives, international collaborations, legal advances, and educational endeavors sparked by the Project. Chapter 8 looks at the ontological shift undergone by the police archives since 2005: from a ragtag project in the process of *becoming* a usable archive, through a dangerous historical moment in which the Project was nearly destroyed altogether, into the established Historical Archive for the National Police—an institutionalized state of *being*. It examines what that shift both promised and portended for national politics. Chapter 9 discusses the landmark legal advances from 2010 on to which the police archives contributed; exceptions that prove the rule, these successful few cases and the herculean efforts to secure them suggest that a fuller reckoning with Guatemala's history will be hard-won. The charged debates surrounding these legal cases speak to the connections between a society's archival culture, its engagement with historical knowledge, and its political conditions. They demonstrate both the possibilities and the limitations of archival thinking.

As one Project worker once told me, "Human beings need to write their

own histories.”⁷⁸ This book defends that proposition, while demonstrating that in delicate postconflict settings where the politics of history remain deadly serious, the act of doing so represents personal risk, collective courage, and, above all, a tremendous amount of labor. Project workers have worked, admirably and against the odds, to resurrect their country’s paper cadavers in the hope of charting a new path forward. I wrote this book in the service of that larger aspiration: to resurrect lost archives, lost narratives, and, however abstractly, lost lives.