MAYAN WOMEN AND THE POLITICS OF SELFHOOD:
THE CASE OF THE GUATEMALAN NATIONAL WOMEN’S FORUM

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Masters
Department of Adult Education, Community Development and Counselling Psychology
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ABSTRACT

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In its broadest theoretical dimension, this thesis is an exploration of the potential for political unity among differently positioned women in Guatemala. It examines the processes of identification which transpire between a political collective and its differently positioned members, i.e., the Guatemalan National Women's Forum and Mayan women together with Ladina women. It thus takes up one of feminist scholarship's central concerns, the meaningfulness of the category “Woman.” It explores some of the theoretical concerns that arise in an examination of an “authentic” form of political selfhood (i.e., Mayan women) and its links to the potential for collective action undertaken by this group with other differently positioned women.

This thesis takes as its starting point the historical exclusion of Mayan women from full participation in Guatemala's socio-political processes (including from the practices of citizenship) and draws upon the Forum as one example of recent efforts to redress such exclusions.
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PLEASE NOTE: I have done all the translation of Spanish text to English for use in this thesis. All Spanish sources appear as such in the bibliography.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

"Sisterhood can not be assumed on the basis of gender; it must be forged in concrete historical and political practice and analysis" (Mohanty 1997, 260).

As a human rights observer with the United Nations Mission in Guatemala (MINUGUA), I had the privilege of working closely with participants in the Guatemalan National Women’s Forum (Forum), a 225-plus body of delegates representing women from throughout Guatemala. The Government backed the creation of the Forum in fulfilment of one of its many commitments outlined in the Peace Accords.¹ This commitment calls for the establishment of a women’s forum that would concern itself with "agreements related to women’s rights and participation found in the Peace Accords" (Peace Accords 1996, 473).

The Forum was designed to represent all Guatemalan women, a diverse population whose most salient division has been along ethnic lines. It is generally agreed that Guatemala’s Mayan indigenous communities comprise over 60% of the population.²

Along with other colleagues from MINUGUA’s offices, I was struck by the dedication of indigenous Mayan women (appearing initially greater than that of non-indigenous women) to participate in the Forum at the local level and in relation to their particular concerns: “It is in

¹ The Peace Accords represent the culmination of over 10 years of negotiations begun in 1985 between the Guatemalan Government and guerrilla or armed rebel forces of the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG). The Accords consist of six "substantive" and seven "operational" accords, the first of the former being the Global Human Rights Accord signed in November 1994. The Accord called for the immediate establishment of a UN Mission (MINUGUA) to verify compliance with this and future Accords. The final Firm and Lasting Peace Accord was signed in December 1996. I worked with MINUGUA as a human rights observer from May 1995 to May 1998.

² According to Lovell, “Highland Guatemala, particularly the midwestern highlands around Lake Atitlán and the Cuchumatán highlands of the north-west, may therefore be regarded as Indian Guatemala, for it is within this upland region that over a dozen different language groups in all, are to be found” (1992, 22). There are a total of 25 languages spoken: 22 Mayan, Xinca, Garifuna and Spanish. The Xinca are a non-Mayan people whose origin is uncertain, although they are believed to have come from what is now El Salvador. The Garifuna are descendants of the former slave population from the Caribbean, which settled in Belize, Honduras.
the linguistic communities where more commitment, consistency and continuity is perceived
in relation to the strengthening and amplification [of the Forum] by the delegates” (Wohlers
1998, 2). While bearing in mind the dangers of oversimplification and generalisation, it
could be argued that the apparent heightened engagement with the Forum of indigenous
women reflects the fact that they were seizing a historic opportunity to participate in socio-
political processes at the local, regional and national levels. Without belittling the effects of
exclusion and discrimination faced by other groups (e.g., misogyny on non-indigenous
women, or racism against indigenous men), the specificity of Mayan women’s identities and
marginalization needs to be acknowledged.

Mayan women have been historically excluded from full participation in a host of socio-
political processes within the nation-state. 3 As Nelson so aptly states, “It may be cliché to
speak of the triple oppression [of Mayan women], but most Guatemalan women’s lives are
deeply constrained by the multiple orthopedics4 of poverty, racism and misogyny” (emphasis
added, 1999, 67). Moreover, such constraints are perpetuated by national hegemonic,
discursive constructions of Mayan women and their “proper place” within the nation-state.
That is, the nation-state employs negative depictions of a particular group to control its
access to resources and participation in processes of decision-making. While reflecting on
contested conceptions of the contemporary nation-state, Yuval-Davis identifies a dialectical

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3 While recognising the fluidity that exists between these categories, I have adopted the helpful definition
provided by Yuval-Davis that clarifies a common “conflation between the dichotomy of state and civil society
and that of the public and private domains.” Because civil society encompasses “those institutions,
collectivities, groupings and social agencies which lie outside the formal rubric of state parameters,” it retains a
public character. The private domain is that of the family which “includes social, economic and political
networks and households which are organised around kinship or friendship relations” (see Yuval-Davis 1997,
14).

4 Nelson borrows from the Foucauldian concept of orthopedics “to suggest the ways that powerful practices
such as the law, schooling, and the use of language work with individual bodies to produce the body politic
rather than simply repress an already-existing self” (1999, 5).
relationship between access to the state and a group’s socio-economic and/or political “location” within that same state:

Theoretical perspectives which have altogether dispensed with the state as a meaningful analytical category can not explain the centrality of struggles in civil society to gain further access to the state and state power, or the extent to which the different positionings [in the nation-state] of men and women, kinship units and various ethnic collectivities (as well as of other groupings in civil society) is determined by their differential access to the state. Analytically, as well as politically, therefore, the state has to be differentiated from civil society (1997, 14).

Guatemala’s recent history is replete with examples of groups from so-called civil society\(^5\) organising against a corrupt, militarised state. In such a context, Mayan women’s enthusiastic participation in the Forum may well reflect a critical self-consciousness of their marginalized positioning within the Guatemalan nation-state as well as a concern with the plight of other women, and a desire to gain greater access to that state.

MINUGUA gave me more opportunities to learn more about the Forum’s impact on Mayan women’s historical location in the nation-state. In 1998, one year after the Forum’s inauguration, I designed and carried out a qualitative analysis of the Forum’s 54 local structures.\(^6\) (MINUGUA had been asked by the Forum’s centralised Co-ordinating Commission to provide information about each structure’s advances, setbacks and most importantly, articulated needs). Study results confirmed that the Forum had so far been unable to meet the expectations of many participants, particularly of those in predominately Mayan rural areas. At the same time, however, various sources, including MINUGUA, had

\(^5\) The term civil society in Guatemala has been used in the past decade to refer to groups in the public sphere separate from the Government and the URNG. For example, the Assembly of Civil Society (ASC) is a coalition of groups which drafted and presented proposals representing the public interest to the two sides in the UN-mediated peace talks. With the signing of the final Peace Accord in December 1996, the ASC has redefined its mandate to include verification of compliance with the Peace Accords and the implementation of development projects (Palencia Prado 1996, 30-31).

\(^6\) The Forum’s design divided Guatemala’s 22 departments into eight regions and 54 local structures. A stipulated number of delegates and committee members were elected per department (i.e., “multi-sectors” representing sectors of the non-indigenous population) and per linguistic communities (those spanning
recognised Forum contributions in a number of areas:

The Forum process has helped to consolidate the construction of the women’s movement, whose members are discovering what unites them above their diversity. [The Forum] demonstrates that this is the opportunity to construct a common agenda for all women. [The Forum] has promoted the participation of women, [previously] organised or not in the debate; it is also the first time that linguistic communities have been represented (Wohlers 1998, 1).

These seemingly contrasting views of the Forum perplexed and intrigued me for several reasons. During my time as an observer with the UN, I had witnessed the eagerness of Mayan women to participate in the Forum and had thus come to have my own expectations as to what the future might hold for them.7 I had, in fact, come to believe in the Forum as a potential mobilising force for Mayan women and Ladin as Mestizas9 alike throughout Guatemala. Given the historical prominence of ethnic difference in Guatemala and its importance in the Forum, I wanted a better understanding of what effect the Forum might have had on the historically inequitable power relations between Mayan women and Ladin. Did the Forum indeed help to consolidate the women's movement? How was diversity thought of and dealt with in the process? In my graduate studies, I have come to realise that many of these issues are also fundamental to feminist theories on citizenship, identity and difference. Perhaps more importantly, since one of the most compelling challenges faced by both the Forum and feminist theory has been how to grapple with the unity/diversity

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7 After leaving MINUGUA, I worked as a technical consultant with the Forum’s Co-ordinating Commission prior to and during the First National Assembly in November 1998. I provided assistance with the synthesis of the eight regional proposals (by theme) into a single, national proposal.

8 Although in colonial Guatemala the term Ladino referred to “those indigenous people who learned Spanish and left the community to live in the borderlands between Criollo colonizer and indigenous colonized” (Nelson 1999, 7n9), today it is used synonymously with mestizo or a person of mixed Spanish-Mayan descent. There is an ongoing debate amongst activists and scholars who would identify themselves as either mestizo or ladino concerning the appropriateness of either term. With all due respect to and acknowledgement of the discussions underway, I have chosen to use the term Ladina throughout this thesis given its common usage in Guatemala. For more on the historical intricacies of these definitions see Watanabe 1992; Warren 1998; Lovell 1992; Adams 1991; Stern-Pettersson 1997; and Cojti Cuxil 1997).
dialectic, I decided to make that the starting point for my research.

In its broadest theoretical dimension, then, this thesis is an exploration of the potential for political unity among differently positioned women in Guatemala. It thus examines the processes of social mediation which transpire between a political collective and its differently positioned members. In this sense, it takes up what Mohanty describes as one of feminist scholarship's "central questions," the meaningfulness of the category "Woman." According to Mohanty,

the relationship between 'Woman' (a cultural and ideological composite other constructed through diverse representational discourses ...) and 'women' (real, material subjects of their collective histories) is one of the central questions the practice of feminist scholarship seeks to address. This connection between women as historical subjects and the representation of Woman produced by hegemonic discourses is not a relation of direct identity or a relation of correspondence or simple implication. It is an arbitrary relation set up by particular cultures (1997, 256).

For Mohanty, "Woman" is not a category a priori; it can not be deemed to exist based on the assumption that all women live basically the same experiences because they are women.

Moreover, Mohanty explains that such hegemonic discourses (she uses the example of Western feminist writings on "Third World women") have the injurious effect of concealing women's heterogeneity and thus, of denying their agency (Mohanty 1997a; Mohanty 1997b).

My thesis takes as a starting point the historical exclusion of Mayan women from full participation in Guatemala's socio-political processes (including from the definition and practices of citizenship) and draws upon the Forum as one example of recent efforts to redress such exclusions. Given the historic ethnic divisions of Guatemala's population, this work focuses on the ways in which the Forum informs theoretical issues which concern the politics of identity and affiliation. It looks at some of the underlying ideological processes of identification which inform how differently positioned women identify with others dissimilar
from themselves for the sake of a political project. As a main point of inquiry, it asks to what extent any endeavour in a diverse nation-state with participatory claims such as the Forum should aim to represent and respect the myriad, self-determined identities of its constituency (in this case, Guatemalan women)? Did the Forum adequately represent and respect the specificity of Mayan women's identities and corresponding needs? How did Mayan women experience the tangible, operative mechanisms of representation and participation made available by the Forum? What were the implications of this participation for Mayan women themselves?

I attempt to delve more deeply into these questions by looking at the participation of Mayan women in different "moments" in the Forum's history such as it's creation and design, the consultative process and follow-up. As I have indicated, my main objective is to discuss some key issues concerning the politics of identity and difference as they are articulated in feminist theory through this analysis of the role and treatment of Mayan women in the Forum's distinct phases. More specifically, I want to explore some of the theoretical concerns that arise in an examination of an "authentic" form of political identity (i.e., Mayan women) and its links to the potential for collective action undertaken by this group with other differently positioned women. In this context, I take up a discussion about the nature of the self and of the processes of identification involved in its construction. My principal aim here is to identify a notion about the nature of the self and related processes of identification that would facilitate the efforts of a diverse group of women to identify as women and work

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10 The Indigenous Rights and Identity Accord (AIDPI) confers the same rights and status to the non-Mayan Garifuna and Xinca communities of Guatemala and these women have representation in the Forum as linguistic communities. However, I focus my study on the participation of Mayan women in the Forum.
together collectively as was attempted in the Forum. In so doing, I wish to suggest that making claims for the political category “women” is a critical point of departure for this kind of political project, but that it does not have to defy the reality of heterogeneity amongst women themselves.

I go about this by formulating two inextricably intertwined areas of concern. The first pertains to those feminist theoretical notions about the notion of self-identity and the self-other relationship that might be relevant to the Forum experience. What understandings of the processes of identification in the formation of the self might be pertinent to Mayan women’s involvement in the Forum? Or, what might the experience of Mayan women in the Forum indicate about identity formation and its relation to processes of social mediation (i.e., the mechanisms governing the interactions between self and other)?

A second set of considerations in this project centers on how the Forum ultimately attempted to deal with difference, in this case, the specificity of Mayan women’s self-ascribed identities. In other words, what insights could be extrapolated from the Forum experience about the difficult challenges of avoiding or eradicating the marginalisation of women who are subordinate in Guatemala (i.e., Mayan women) when attempting to unite women around a political purpose and respect their unique social locations? Did the Forum merely serve to reinforce existing discourses and/or stereotypes of Mayan women? Did it inadvertently reproduce those historic power imbalances associated with the Guatemalan nation-state thereby perpetuating the practice of discrimination against Mayan women? Or, does the Forum experience offer insights into mechanisms or processes that would allow us to avoid infusing difference with negative connotations – and thus, avoid creating an “Other” - that serve to setup and sustain power imbalances? In the course of my analysis, I wish to
suggest that making claims to the political category "women" is a critical point of departure for working across difference, but that it does not have to defy the reality of heterogeneity amongst women themselves.

Methodology/Epistemology

One of my main tasks in this thesis is to reconcile Mayan women's accounts of the Forum with some of the theoretical tensions concerning women's participation and representation in heterogeneous, female communities. I use a feminist, multi-layered case study approach as my primary method of research which has the following components: the analysis of appropriate documents (UN reports, author's field notes and Forum documents, including an in-depth survey) and interviews with six Mayan women who have participated in the Forum. Coupled with an analysis of existing documents about the Forum, the interview process adds depth and richness to my attempt to gain an understanding of both the complexities of Mayan women's identities and to what extent the Forum acknowledged them. Drawing upon diverse feminist models of selfhood, I examine the relationships between such theory and the Forum practices and attempt to assess the tensions which are raised when diverse or differently positioned women strive to work across difference.

In light of the topic at hand, the politics of selfhood and its relation to possibilities for collective action by women, I would be remiss not to mention my own social position or location as it relates to this research. Identifying myself as a gringa\textsuperscript{11} "outsider" who, like others, struggles with questions of representation and authenticity, I attempt to be mindful of writing on the subject of Mayan women in Guatemala from a position of relative privilege. In fact, the impetus to choose to write on self and collective identities comes from the lessons

\textsuperscript{11} Gringa is a term used by Central Americans to refer to North Americans, particularly people from the U.S.
learned and mistakes made during my seven-year hiatus in Central America in which I was obliged to deal with my position as a "white woman" from the so-called "First World". Thus, my most profound (in the sense of deeply personal) motivation for exploring this topic stems from a personal investment in learning to understand how I can engage more meaningfully and respectfully with women positioned differently from myself. When I asked Irene, one of the six Mayan women I interviewed in Guatemala, if she approved of my doing research on Mayan women, keeping in mind my past experiences in the country and with the Forum, she replies,

I think it's fine as long as you in North America remain conscious . . . about what you've learned or what impressed you . . . [This work] could also benefit us; if you were to give us a copy of your document we could use it as a testimony to history . . . I think that this research might also teach people elsewhere about the struggle of women [in Guatemala]. Perhaps it's not that appropriate for others to record our history; it is important that we do it ourselves. But, since you have this opportunity to come and do the work, I believe in this possibility, as long as you use what you learn to do good (Irene, 2001, 12).

I appreciate the sincerity and directness of Isabel's response, a response that has been echoed by many Guatemalan women, both indigenous and Ladina, throughout my time in their country. By choosing this subject, I am also choosing to take up the challenge discussed throughout this thesis: how to work respectfully with "others" different from myself.

**Chapter Overviews**

The remainder of the thesis is structured as follows:

In Chapter Two, I discuss some of the more blatantly homogenising depictions of Mayan women that have been produced by an exclusionary nation-state. I look at key elements of the historical treatment of Mayan women starting with the time of the Spanish Invasion. This section also discusses Guatemala's emergence from a 36-year internal armed conflict officially ending in 1996 with the signing of the Peace Accords. The Forum stands as one of
many agreements contained within the Accords that herald participation as the key mechanism for ensuring the sought-after ideals of peace, democracy, and a socially just nation-state held accountable by the populace. It is in this context that one might argue that the Forum becomes a potential site of resistance and reconstituted social movement for Mayan women. In Chapter Three, I review in greater detail my methodological approach as well as touch upon its underlying epistemological framework.

In Chapter Four, I develop a theoretical perspective through an examination of feminist understandings of the self and processes of identification, including a concern with identity construction and formation in the State, the meaningfulness and significance of the category "Woman," and the capacity of differently positioned subjects to work collectively across difference. I draw primarily on Weir's model of self and social identity in order to speculate as to the theoretical connection between these mechanisms of identity construction and those of social mediation, i.e., our capacity to work collectively with others different from ourselves. In addition to Weir's ideas on processes of identification, I also incorporate such theoretical concepts as Benhabib's notion of "creative political action" (1996, 37), Yuval-Davis' "transversal politics" and Mohanty's "politics of engagement" in my exploration of the formation of a social collective with heterogeneity at its core. In the process, I reflect on the particular manifestations of the relationship between unity and diversity that would result when differently positioned women work collectively towards some form of political resolution to a complex "gender" problem.

It is in Chapter Five where I explore the relationship between theory and practice through a presentation of the findings of my research on the Forum. I present the data in terms of different "moments" of the Forum (i.e., its creation and design, the consultation process and
follow-up) and in relation to the conceptual links to feminist theory which arise. For example, within the section on the Forum's creation and design, I discuss notions of self/collective identity as expressed by the Mayan women interviewed (i.e., self/collective identities involving the co-existence of gender, ethnicity, class and geographical location). In other words, I present an analysis of how these women’s notions of political selfhood as expressed within or affected by the Forum relate to different feminist models of selfhood, and vice-versa. First, I am concerned with the theoretical and practical nature of processes of identification at both the individual and collective levels. Second, I seek to understand the implications that a particular model of the selfhood might have for working across difference. I use Weir’s theory, amongst others, as a way to evaluate Forum attempts to include the extant socio-political identities of Mayan women. How does the Forum seek to represent the self-ascribed identities of Mayan women and thereby avoid further marginalisation of Mayan difference? At the same time, I look for ways that the Mayan women’s experiences in the Forum might inform feminist models of selfhood. I attempt to connect theory and practice in the hopes of discovering those lessons sure to be found in the Forum experience which relate to how differently positioned women in a collective might work more effectively across difference. In the final chapter, I present a summary of the main ideas and conclusions of the thesis.

I proceed by describing the context in which the Forum emerges, i.e., the signing of the Peace Accords which brought an end to Guatemala’s internal armed conflict between the Guatemalan State (Army) and the rebel forces, the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG). I then provide a more historical backdrop for the manifestation of this recent effort
(i.e., the Forum) by Guatemalan women, both Mayan and Ladina, to put gender on their country's socio-political agenda.
CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND

Gender, Identity and Nationhood in Guatemala

Beyond my personal attachment to Mayan women's struggles for justice in Guatemala, there are relevant, historical reasons for examining the politics of Mayan women's political participation in Guatemala. More precisely, the attempt at regulation of cultural identity and practices by the State (at the behest of Guatemala's political and socio-economic elite) through Government policy and associated discourses has fuelled the systematic oppression and exploitation of Mayan women (and men) since the time of the Spanish invasion. As Craske asserts while reflecting on inequity in Latin America, "the region's exclusionary social, economic and political structures have resulted in highly stratified societies headed by a small and powerful elite. This exclusion reflects issues of class, gender and ethnicity, which leaves Indian peasants, particularly women, at the bottom of the pile" (1999, 26-27). Feminist, post-colonial theorists such as Bannerji liken this attempt at regulation to a sort of identity politics engaged in by the State. According to Bannerji, this form of national identity regulation is not new:

There has been throughout colonization, slavery and after, an identity politics already in place - though not acknowledged as such. Political and cultural critiques such as Fanon and Said and other anti-colonial, anti-imperialist writers have drawn our attention to colonial culture or discourse, to cultural imperialism and reified or distorted representation (1994, 23).

Extrapolating from Bannerji, I would suggest that, just as they were integral components of the colonising process, these regulatory practices have been essential to the nation-building strategies of subsequent independent governments. Within the context of the nation-state, citizenship becomes an important site of regulation. In Guatemala, for example, certain
"reified or distorted representations" of national culture have been invoked to justify the exclusion of Mayan women (and men) from citizenship both in definition and practice.

What are the historical impetuses behind such regulations of national cultural and citizenship by the State (and elite societal sectors)? Following Smith's use of ideology, I would place these practices in the broader context of strategies employed by the ruling class to control the means of production. Smith, drawing in turn from Marx and Engels, refers to these strategies as ideology:

I am concerned . . . with ideology as those ideas and images through which the class that rules the society by virtue of its domination of the means of production orders, organizes, and sanctions the social relations that sustain its domination . . . Thus, the concept of ideology provides us with a thread through the maze different from our more familiar notions of 'culture,' for it directs us to look for and at the actual practical organization of the production of images, ideas, symbols, concepts, vocabularies, as means for us to think about our world (1987, 54).

If one applies Smith's logic on the function of ideology to the operation of cultural imperialism mentioned by Bannerji, the latter would become one more instrument for securing the economic interests of the ruling powers in question. The Mayan Women's Group KAQLA takes a similar position regarding the role of "ideas, laws and social practices" in the historical oppression of women and indigenous peoples in Guatemala:

The situation of oppression suffered by women and indigenous peoples is historically of an economic origin and has a class content: to justify the domination over these sectors in function of their exploitation and marginalization from the productive process . . . such that historically and socially, a framework of ideas, laws and social practices has been constructed to justify their supposed inferiority, their culpability regarding the oppressive situation in which they live, and their need to be directed and protected (2000, 2-3).

The framework of ideas mentioned by KAQLA, like Smith's ideology, is created by those in power in order to generate and maintain certain material consequences. KAQLA's explanation enhances our grasp of the impact of colonial ideology with its reified or distorted

12 I use the definition of oppression provided by KAQLA: that which "occurs in social relations, with the State
representations on the society in question by describing the tenacious grip that such
distortions can have on society. For example, in the case of Guatemala, negative cultural or
stereotypes (i.e., distortions) about indigenous women have become so entrenched in
everyday life that they have become part and parcel of society’s superstructure:

Oppressive practices, however, once spawned from a certain material base, acquire a life
of their own, reproduce themselves and have a bearing on the social structure that built
them through complex and prolonged historical processes. Once these practices become
systematized and generalized over time, they then become part of society’s superstructure
(KAQLA 2000, 3).

In other words, the effects of oppressive practices can be so powerful as to spill over into the
non-material realm. Nelson provides an example of just how real the connection between
ideology or discourse can be. Referring to Guatemala’s recent civil war, she writes, “Causa
Arzú13 is clearly appalled at the racist discourses of the oligarchic families she interviewed –
discourses that have had deadly effects in the counterinsurgency war of the early 1980s”
(1999, 229). That is, the exclusionary structures described by Craske, KAQLA and Smith
are often propped up by those (post)colonial discourses which Bannerji points to in her
analysis of the regulation of national culture and women’s precarious position in the nation-
state.

The core ideas circulated by dominant discourses include intermeshed colonial, gendered
and raced notions of nationhood that tacitly promote and/or sustain the creation of a society,
national culture and of a “people” that defends the dominant’s material interests. And, as
Yuval-Davis purports, “... the discourse on gender and that on nation tend to intersect and
to be constructed by each other” (1997, 4). Guatemala is no exception among ‘formerly

13 In her polemic Guatemala: Lineage and Racism, Marta Causa Arzú aimed to “study, on the one hand, the
familial genesis of what is called the dominant class and its structure, and on the other, its practices and
attitudes regarding the indigenous population, i.e., its racist culture” (Causa Arzú 1992, 12). That Causa Arzú
and Government; while exploitation occurs in the relations of economic production” (2000, 2).
colonised countries; as put forth by KAQLA and others, colonial discourses (and their postcolonial manifestations) have infused Guatemalan notions of nationhood with questions of ethnicity and gender for the past 500 years. After over a year of investigations, the United Nations Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH) issued a succinct yet comprehensive statement on those 500 years that makes clear the connection between racist State discourse and the results of exclusionary, often violent State practices. It thereby gave 'official' sanction to what many indigenous and concerned non-indigenous Guatemalans had been claiming all along regarding the Spanish Invasion and some of its legacies:

The . . . CEH concludes that the structure and nature of economic, cultural and social relations in Guatemala are marked by profound exclusion, antagonism and conflict – a reflection of its colonial history . . . The evidence for this, throughout Guatemala's history, but particularly so during the armed confrontation, lies in the fact that the violence was fundamentally directed by the State against the excluded, the poor and above all, the Mayan people, as well as against those who fought for justice and greater social equality (CEH 1999, 17).

In other words, there has been (albeit limited) public awareness of the institutional constraints placed upon cultural identity and practices. Radcliffe & Westwood remind us that "Gramsci's now familiar analysis of ideological hegemony helps us to understand the ways in which the nation is constructed through a consensus around 'the people'" (1993, 10). Within the Guatemalan historical context, such an ideological hegemony established through the invocation, denial and/or manipulation of Mayan cultures and identities by the Guatemalan ruling elite has served to justify and sustain the latter's political and socio-economic dominion over the Mayan majority (consisting today of 22 distinct ethnicities).

Moreover, the ascription of stereotypes and corresponding roles for Mayan women by non-

herself comes from the dominant class has added to the book's controversial reception.

14 The CEH was established as per one of the six substantive Peace Accords. Its mandate was to investigate human rights abuses that occurred during Guatemala's internal armed conflict of 36 years (1960-96). Because no editor is cited in the original source, the UN report appears in my bibliography under the name of the
indigenous and/or male Guatemalans is a crucial component of the complex and exclusionary system of social, economic and political practices that limit indigenous women's participation in the nation-state.

In general terms, in this chapter I examine the nature of what has become, in the words of Chatterjee, Guatemala's "hegemonic project of nationalist modernity" (1993, 13). More particularly, I trace those aspects of colonial (and neo-colonial) ideologies and related discourses in Guatemala related to Mayan women that have contributed to their exclusion from what has been an elite project of citizenship and the nation-state. My goal is to set the stage for a discussion of how the National Women's Forum might represent an alternative project that embraces the participation of Mayan women and which attempts to value their own ways of identifying as women in Guatemala.

In light of Mohanty's assertion that "colonization almost invariably implies a suppression - often violent - of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question" (Mohanty 1997, 256), I suggest that the elite project of nation-state construction in Guatemala, deeply permeated by colonial ideologies, has acted in much the same way. In a cursory examination of some significant historical moments in Guatemala's history, my aim is to convey a sense of the hegemonic, essentializing discourses that have operated in relation to Mayan women (and men) and their role in the complex processes that have created and sustained an exclusionary nation-state. I will look at how discourses have been articulated within, and shaped by, certain critical periods of Guatemalan history ranging from the Spanish Invasion up to the present period of post-conflict nation-state re/construction.

In their anthology about women and protest in Latin America, Radcliffe and Westwood undertake a similar task. They set out to deconstruct "the ideological construction of the Commission which produced it, the Commission for Historical Clarification."
nation [which] is organized around specific ethnicities and constructs 'fictive ethnicities' and national identities as a crucial part of the national story" (1993, 10). Guatemalan indigenous scholar Cojti Cuxil reminds us that in this ideological construction, certain groups are deemed representative of the nation at the expense of others and that this construction may well shift over time:

When the Ladinos or Mestizos take power around 1871, they appropriate the [earlier] Creole national project and thus perpetuate the same negative vision of ethnic and racial diversity, thereby undertaking a project against the indigenous peoples . . . Just as the Creole in their day, the Ladino assumed representation of the Guatemalan nation therefore becoming representative of national identity (1995, 132).

It is imperative, therefore, for any analysis of the construction of nationhood to take into account the particularities of specific temporal, historical and geographical contexts. Thus, while drawing from feminist theories on gender, nationhood and citizenship, I take my cue from Mohanty in attempting whenever possible to base my analysis on the specifics of Guatemala’s socio-political context. I hope therefore to avoid sweeping generalisations, and hence the essentialisation of Mayan women's identities, that could ultimately dismiss the particular agency of the historical actors in question (Mohanty 1997a; Mohanty 1997b), i.e., Mayan women. Thus, Yuval-Davis’ warning that “. . . the search for a universal, ‘original’ reason for the subordination of women can detract attention from historically specific ways in which gender relations are constructed in different societies,” (Yuval-Davis 1997, 6) should be applied to our understandings of gendered constructions of citizenship and nationhood.

In addition to the significance of contextual specificity, another concept that warrants attention is the inherently tenuous nature of hegemonic discourses. Writing on the particularity of so-called “Englishness” and its apparent crisis in the face of current
globalisation trends, Hall argues that today the construction and sustenance of a national identity would require tremendous effort (1997). He states that "Englishness" is not embraced "with the same large confidence with which the English have always occupied their own identities... It is produced with enormous effort. Huge ideological work has to go on every day to produce this mouse that people can recognize as English" (178). I would argue that such arduous ideological work has often been required to create and uphold the powerful political and economic positionings of the dominant. The fact that such efforts are required to maintain a particular national vision suggests conceptual (if not actual) room for the emergence of counterhegemonic movements and ideologies. On this, Chatterjee counsels that:

We must think of discourse as situated within fields of power, not only constituting that field but also constituted by it. Dominance here cannot exhaust the claims to subjectivity, for even the dominated must always retain an aspect of autonomy. Otherwise, power would cease to be a relation; it would no longer be constituted by struggle (1993, 137).

Thus, in any discussion of hegemonic discourses there should be at least a mention of struggles by those at the so-called margins to resist, rebel and/or forge authentic representations of themselves that could positively impact their social, economic and political realities. Pan-Mayanist leaders and others have recently recounted the history of the Mayan peoples' resistance to colonialism. Although an in-depth analysis of opposition to hegemonic power and its constituent discourse is beyond the scope of this thesis, the acknowledgement of Mayan, and specifically Mayan women's, resistance is needed in order to properly contextualize the Forum. I suggest that the Forum emerges as a recent effort to promote an alternative project of nation-state re/construction within which women in general and Mayan women in particular are seen and function as the true protagonists of their own lives. One final word of caution: the recognition of agency allowed by careful regard to
context and to the existence of resistance should not serve to underestimate those very real barriers to power faced by the marginalized, i.e., in this case, Mayan women. At the same time, I do not wish to undermine Mayan women’s creative capacity to resist political domination in times of relentless subordination. I think Nelson nicely reminds us of the power structures in place while recognising their ultimate vulnerability, thereby retaining the possibility of struggles for and achievement of a more representative and just society:

Although most agree that the Guatemaian state is politically exclusive, ethnically discriminatory, and economically monopolistic, it may be precisely because of this insecurity, this tenousness, that the state is also open in some ways... It is the subject of demand, the ‘pikuta,’ the space within which diverse groups are struggling for representation (1999, 84-85).

Before looking at past constructions of Mayan women by and within the Guatemalan State, I place the emergence of the Forum in the context of Guatemala’s more recent historical developments beginning with a discussion of the internal armed conflict between the Guatemalan State (Army) and the rebel forces, the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG).

The Forum in Context: War, Peace Accords & “Mayan Women”

Guatemala’s 36 years of internal armed conflict from 1960-1996 caused unimaginable suffering to hundreds of thousands of Guatemalans, most of them indigenous. Although the ostensible foe of the Guatemalan Government was the guerrilla groups united under the banner of the URNG, the CEH concludes that the Mayan population was considered the collective enemy of the State during much of the war:

The massacres, scorched earth operations, forced disappearances and executions of Mayan authorities, leaders and spiritual guides, were not only an attempt to destroy the social base of the guerrillas, but above all, to destroy the cultural values that ensured cohesion and collective action in Mayan communities (1999, 23).  

15 The CEH established that acts of genocide were committed by the State against the Mayan people in “four
The CEH as well as other sources verify that Mayan women were the targets of specific kinds of human right violations by the Guatemalan Army (CEH 1999). Light quotes the results of a study on post-traumatic stress syndrome disorder which concludes that “acts of violence by army soldiers against women in Guatemala during this period [1980-83] are seen to be clearly centered on gender, as well as ethnicity. Sexual abuse of Indian women by soldiers is an institutionalized form of control, sanctioned by the government” (1991, 300).

Stern-Pettersson relates the State’s specific targeting of Mayan women during the armed conflict to its quest to construct and maintain a hegemonic national identity. She writes, “Guatemala’s national security policy has defined Mayan women as dangerous threats to national identity, constructing a hegemonic national subjectivity based, in part, on the exclusion and fear of contesting political identities” (1994, 128). In efforts to, as Pettersson might put it, extinguish any threat to its power and related project of national identity construction, the Guatemalan State resorted to the systematic rape of Mayan women. The CEH concludes that,

the majority of rape victims were Mayan women. Those who survived the crime still suffer profound trauma as a result of this aggression, and the communities themselves were deeply offended by this practice. The presence of sexual violence in the social memory of the communities has become a source of collective shame (1999, 35).

The “symbolic character of systematic rapes” as discussed by Yuval-Davis (1997), becomes distressingly visible in this context.

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KAQLA\textsuperscript{17} and others (Nelson 1999; Stern-Pettersson 1997; Cojí Cuxil 1997; CEH 1999) suggest that the tortures, rapes, murders and other wrongs inflicted on the Mayan people in general and on Mayan women in particular figure into the Guatemalan State's historically exclusive, racist project of nation-state construction. This extensive excerpt from KAQLA's document on Mayan women's realities details the horrific effects of "Guatemala State terror" on the population during the internal armed conflict while placing this policy in the broader context of socio-economic exploitation and oppression of particularly indigenous peoples and women:

In the case of Guatemala, the derivatives of the counterinsurgency strategy and State terror which prevailed for various decades must be included into the already grave socioeconomic problems produced by the predominance of the oppressive capitalist regime (itself dependent on the global capitalist system). These [State] policies only worsened the extreme levels of oppression of women and indigenous peoples, striking indigenous peoples and women of all ages, especially of the middle and lower classes, with particular brutality. On top of the existing exploitation and oppression, these [State practices] produced widows, orphans, familial and ethnic disintegration; assassinations, disappearances, tortures and massacres; persecution, refugees, uprooted [communities], exile and forced displacement.

This analysis of the genesis of "gender and ethno-cultural oppressions" draws heavily from a political economic model\textsuperscript{18} in order to put the more recent sufferings of Mayan women into historical perspective.

On December 29, 1996 the Guatemalan Government and the URNG signed the \textit{Firm and Lasting Peace Accord} thereby putting an official end to Guatemala's internal armed conflict of 30 years. This Accord put into effect a comprehensive package of Accords by theme that

\textsuperscript{17} KAQLA is an organization in Guatemala of Mayan women dedicated to research in their communities. All information and/or interpretations about KAQLA are based on my interview with the Director in June 2001.

\textsuperscript{18} KAQLA's nuanced application of a political economic analysis of gender and ethnic relations in Guatemala is particularly apparent in the following excerpt: "We acknowledge the specificity of the oppression of women and of indigenous people, which both transcend class yet remain within a class framework" (2000, 1).
had been negotiated between the two forces for over a decade. The Accords, in their entirety, should be viewed as promoting an overhaul of a blighted nation-state, striving towards full representation and participation of a diverse population. Although all of the Accords allude indirectly to the historical roots of the internal armed conflict, the Indigenous Rights and Identity Accord includes the strongest language in this regard, including the following reference to the ethnic and classed aspects of the oppression of poor, indigenous people:

The Indigenous Peoples have been particularly subject to levels of de facto discrimination, exploitation and injustice due to their origin, culture and language, and like many other sectors of society of the national collective, suffer unequal and unjust conditions and treatments because of their socioeconomic circumstances (MINUGUA-PNUD 1997, 193).

Furthermore, this Accord asserts that, in light of the historical discrimination against and marginalization of Guatemala's indigenous majority, real societal change can only be achieved when indigenous peoples are taken into account:

Oppression and discrimination in Guatemala will only be eliminated if and when the identity and rights of the peoples that have inhabited and continue to inhabit the country are recognized . . . Indigenous peoples should take up all affairs of direct concern to them. [The Indigenous Rights and Identity Accord] attempts to create, amplify, and strengthen the structures, conditions, opportunities and guarantees of participation of indigenous peoples, fully respecting their identity and the exercise of their rights (MINUGUA-PNUD 1997, 193).

Thus, a central component of Guatemala's project of national reconstruction as laid out in the Peace Accords is a legal redefinition of the nation-state as multilingual, multicultural and multietnic. Such a redefinition has been heralded as revolutionary and essential to address

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the underlying causes of Guatemala’s 36-year internal armed conflict (in short, political and economic domination by the country’s Creole elite). In line with the Accords, I believe that central to striving towards the ideal of a participatory, inclusive and representative democratic nation-state is the acknowledgement and respect of the extant socio-political identities of that state.

The participation of all sectors of Guatemalan society is touted in the Accords as a necessary condition for the inextricably linked concepts of democracy, development, social justice and peace (MINUGUA-PNUD 1997). Indigenous people, women and the poor (by no means mutually exclusive groups) are mentioned among the historically marginalized constituencies that need to be taken into account. The Peace Accords not only recognize the discrimination of women and indigenous people in socio-economic and political spheres, but also establish mechanisms to redress their historic lack of participation in decision-making processes.

The Forum is a case in point; it’s creation was mandated by the Chronology Accord signed in December 1996. Point 29 of the Accord calls for the establishment of a women’s forum that would concern itself with “agreements related to women’s rights and participation found in the Peace Accords (MINUGUA-PNUD 1997, 473). The incorporation of this agreement, or for that matter, any specific references to women, in the Peace Accords was no small feat. After an extended effort by the Women’s Sector of the ASC (Foro 1999a), the Guatemalan Government and URNG agreed to include point 29 in the Chronology Accord as

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20 These connections are made particularly well in the Socioeconomic and Agrarian Situation Accord (MINUGUA-PNUD 1997, 243-271).
21 Some sceptics interpreted the forum as a kind of Government lip service paid to women’s issues, and were even more determined to turn it into an opportunity for women to dictate the terms of the Accords’ implementation. Some seasoned women activists at an assembly in Huehuetenango told me this concern in September 1997.
a step towards compliance with all agreements relating to women. Thus, January 1997 marked the beginning of an extensive debate among primarily urban women's groups, both indigenous and Ladina, and with representatives of the Guatemalan Government to reach a consensus on how to proceed with the Forum (Foro, 1999b). In May 1997, the Forum's Coordinating Commission (CC) was formed, with five governmental institutions and five organizations and/or coalitions from the public sphere. (In Chapter 5, I cover certain telling aspects of the creation and design of the Forum which relate to the participation and representation of Mayan women's identities in the Forum).

After months of intense debate, the CC approved the Forum's design which would attempt to "take into account the diversity of the country" (Foro 1999a, 2) by creating 56 committees in Guatemala's 22 departments, organised into eight regions and representing all sectors and 24 linguistic communities in the country. A stipulated number of delegates and a support committee were elected for each linguistic community and department in the country (referred to as linguistic and multisectoral committees respectively). The Forum, complete with its 225+ delegates, was officially inaugurated in December 1997. In the spring of 1998, the Forum began the one and a half year-long process of conducting two nation-wide

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22 The CC is made up of the 10 groups: Co-ordinator of Mayan Organizations (COPMAGUA); Consultative Assembly for the Displaced Population (ACPD); Cooperation for Western Rural Development (CDRO); Women's Sector of the ASC; Guatemalan Confederation of Federated Cooperatives (CONFECOOP); National Office on Women (ONAM); Commission of Congressional Women; Women's Forum of Political Parties (FONAMUP); Peace Secretary (SEPAZ); and Guatemalan Fund for Indigenous Development (FODIGUA). According to the CC's technical assistant, as of June 2001, the following groups were actively participating in the Forum: COPMAGUA, CONFECOOP, FODIGUA, ONAM and SEPAZ. The ACPD and Women's Sector of the ASC, formerly two of the CC's most active groups, had temporarily withdrawn to assess the future of the Forum process and their respective roles.

23 The multisectoral committees were divided into sectors such as teachers, youth, public health workers, women at home with children, midwives, etc.). All municipalities are to have representation in both the linguistic and multisectoral committees. The country is divided into regions containing one or more departments. For example, Region VI includes the departments of Alta Verapaz, Baja Verapaz and a portion of Quiché; it thus has two multisectoral committees, three linguistic committees (Achi, Q'eqchi' and Poqomchi) and one multilingual committee for the Ixcán, Quiché.
consultations, the first on socio-economic development and the second, civic and political participation.

The Forum emerges as part of a larger, comprehensive project of nation-state reconstruction whose “nationwide agenda is oriented towards overcoming the roots of social, political, economic, ethnic and cultural conflict as well as the consequences of the armed conflict” (MINUGUA-PNUD 1997, 467). What’s more, a basic parallel can be said to exist between the creation of a viable women’s forum and the overhauling of a nation-state: the challenge of inclusion.24 With this (and other) challenges in mind, the CC, formulated the following statement of objectives after many months of deliberation:

To promote an ample, pluralistic and representative forum of women for permanent consultation and dialogue, taking into account the diversity of the country, that would promote: national conciliation and reconciliation, equity between men and women, and the identification, incorporation and participation of women’s organizations. [This body would] propose, formulate, negotiate, follow up on and influence national policies concerning integral development from the perspective of equity between men and women, in accordance with the Peace Accords and International Conventions and Treaties favorable to women ratified by Guatemala that contribute to the construction of a socially just and equitable, multiethnic, multicultural and multilingual State (Foro 1999b, 6).

Given its fundamental aim of inclusion of representatives of Guatemala’s differently positioned female population, the Forum represents a microcosm of this larger process of nation-state reconstruction.

I now turn to a description of the various constructions of Mayan women over time that have contributed to their oppression and exclusion within the nation-state, including: racist treatment, disenfranchisement, poverty, subjugation in the home, and the particular violence associated with internal armed conflict.

24 Ang points out that feminism, much like the nation-state (and I would add, the Forum and social movements in general) faces the challenge of working across difference in an inclusive way. She alludes to its evolution as a movement, but also to its ongoing struggle: “In this sense, feminism acts like a nation; just like Australia, it no
The Conquest

The racist foundations of the Guatemalan notion of nationhood can be seen to originate with the arrival of the Spanish conquistador Pedro de Alvarado in 1524 and subsequent ravaging of the indigenous population and its land. As Lovell explains, it was in the latter 17th Century, during the period of a "marked tendency on the part of resident Spaniards to take up land" (1992, 118) that "the basis was laid for the modern political and economic divisions [of Guatemala], and for the cultural cleavage between Indian and Ladino which hampers Guatemalan nationhood to this day" (MacLeod quoted in Lovell 1992, 118). The land issue has thus taken centre stage and it central to the intertwined social, economic and cultural politics of Guatemalan life. The significance of land in the Mayan worldview as well as the harmful effects of its continual confiscation should be emphasised. Ghidinelli, albeit with a bit of romanticism, describes the indigenous connection with the earth:

The territory of the Mayans was invaded by the Spanish in the 16th Century and continues to be [seized] by their mestizo descendants. The Mayans... have a mystical relationship with the land that is based on thousands of years of an agricultural civilization; the relationship with a territory becomes visceral (1991, 122-123).

This barbaric act of conquest is painfully transparent, revealing a desire for economic expansion as one of its principal, underlying raison d'être. And this - a fact of particular relevance to this analysis - constitutes one important material motivation for the creation of discourses that would in turn rationalise the expropriation of indigenous lands.

In her polemic study that traces the ancestry of Guatemala's elite from 1524 to 1992, Casaus Arzú traces the evolution of the racist mentality of the colonisers towards indigenous women (and men) from the initial years of the Spanish occupation of what is today Guatemala. In terms of their aim, many of the practices of Guatemala's elite would fit longer subscribes to a policy of assimilation but wants to be multicultural" (1995, 57).
Yuval-Davis' description of the "eugenist discourse," one of three broad discourses around the biological reproduction of the nation (Yuval-Davis 1997) that inform certain nationalist projects. In what follows, I cite several telling excerpts from Casaus Arzú’s work that explore the foundations of a gendered (and racist) nation that remain much intact in today’s Guatemala.

Since Spanish women were not to arrive for some 15 years after their men, "... the taking of [Mayan] women by the Spaniards was one more element in the process of conquest and slavery that took place during the first decades of the Conquest" (Casaus Arzú 1992, 33). Casaus Arzú goes on to explain that, in addition to fulfilling the role of sexual object, indigenous women were used to accelerate the process of consolidation of power and property (mainly land) by the Spanish Crown. Marriages between Spaniards and the daughters (especially, heiresses) of Mayan chiefs were promoted from 1501 until 1549 "so that all [future] chiefs would become Spanish" (1992, 34). However, once the Spanish Crown had confiscated sufficient land and property from the indigenous population, and could count on the presence of "proper Spanish" women to assume a reproductive role, the Crown need not promote or tolerate "mixed" marriages (but, as will be discussed, would continue to accept the extramarital "taking of Mayan women"). Casaus Arzú continues:

Since the beginning of the Conquest obtaining *encomiendas* and the distribution of *indios* and royal titles would be closely tied to a family’s capacity to unite in marriage with others of more prestige [based on achievement in battle] and a higher social status. In this case, the *peninsulares* and functionaries of the [Spanish] Crown seemed the most appropriate to achieve this objective and in the process, wipe away any sign of

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25 *Encomiendas* are described by Lovell as "formal [land] titles that carried the right to exact tribute from subjugated communities" (1992, 181-182).

26 *Indio* or Indian is commonly explained as a misnomer originating with Columbus. Thinking he had landed in India, he called the inhabitants of Central America, Indians. The epithet often has negative connotations as non-indigenous people have historically used it as a demeaning phrase.

27 The term *peninsulares* refers to people born in Spain who lived in the colonies, as opposed to *Criollos* or Creoles, people of Spanish descent born in the colonies and their modern day descendants.
mestizaje$^{28}$ or impure blood stemming from the first years of the Conquest (Casaus Arzú 1992, 36).

In fact, by 1549, mestizos were considered illegitimate by those of “pure” Spanish-descent and were denied the status of encomendero or landowner (Casaus Arzú 1992). Casaus Arzú provides detailed genealogical records that reveal the extent to which marriages were arranged between members of the oligarchy in order that they survive centuries of political instability and upheaval. In fact, “these great [family] networks . . . continue to maintain a large portion of political and economic power, and remain part of the power block [in Guatemala]” (1992, 13). Thus, “purity” of race was to be a central concern of Guatemala’s ruling oligarchy and continues to underpin the systematic, racist oppression - with material consequences - of Guatemala’s indigenous population.

“Modern” Nation-Building in Guatemala - resolving the “indigenous problem”$^{29}$

As I have examined, Arzú illustrates the ways in which racist ideologies by today’s socio-economic and political elite in Guatemala, a surprising number of whom are Creole descendants of the Spanish conquerors and subsequent European settlers, undergird their exclusionary exercise of power over the indigenous majority. But, “although she cannot ignore the role of the exchange of women in maintaining the oligarchic networks, or the importance of their fecundity in assuring a lineage’s success, Casaus Arzú is not attentive to the gender specificity of those ‘Aryan seeds’ . . .” (Nelson 1999, 215). Perhaps Arzú’s focus

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$^{28}$ Mestizaje is the Spanish word for the “mixing” of so-called distinct races, in this case, of Spanish peninsulares or Criollos and Mayan women. In the late 17th Century, when such people of mixed lineage were openly acknowledged, they were known not as Mestizos, but as Ladinos (Kramer, Lovell and Lutz cited in Esquit Choy & Gálvez Borrell 1997). Although today the two terms are often conflated, Mestizo can be thought of as referring to the biological melding of different races, and Ladino as pertaining more to the cultural identity of the Mestizo.

$^{29}$ Pan Mayanist scholar Cojti Cuxil juxtaposes the ‘indigenous or ethnic problem’ (the question of coping with a heterogeneous population in a nation-state posed from the perspective of some prominent Ladinos – see Carillo 1991, 109) with the ‘colonial problem,’ the challenges of working towards decolonization and self-
on ethnicity is indicative of a general failure to address the role of gendered ethnicity (or of ethnicized gender!), i.e., of Mayan women, in Guatemalan history. Carillo reminds us that “... looking for women in the distinct phases of [Guatemala’s] history is virtually an archaeological task. Women are buried in history” (1991, 111). And as Monzón reminds us, the results of a search with respect to Mayan women are even slimmer (Monzón 2001).

Based on the limited information available, I contend that the rape of Mayan women that Arzú mentions in passing is actually a central point concerning Mayan women’s place in the nation-state: the availability, albeit unacknowledged, of Mayan women “as [the] symbolic border guards and as embodiments of the collectivity [i.e., the Guatemalan nation-state], while at the same time being its cultural reproducers” (Yuval-Davis 1997, 23). In the following, drawing from Nelson, Cojti Cuxil and others, I will argue that this denigrating aspect of the gendered nature of the nation-state has endured, yet gone unnoticed; while, at the same time, certain stereotypes of la mujer maya30 have prevailed to the detriment of Mayan women. Moreover, the resulting objectification of Mayan women (i.e., objects of sex or labour) has been a constant in strategies sanctioned by the Guatemalan elite to “unify” the nation-state, strategies like blanqueamiento (or “whitening”) and mestizaje. Interestingly enough, these approaches to the construction of national identity have been put forth by both the Left and Right in Guatemala as proposed “solutions” to the so-called “ethnic” or indigenous problem (Nelson 1999; Cojti Cuxil 1997), in either case, effectively relegating questions of gender to the margins.

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30 I use la mujer maya, or the Mayan woman, in reference to the essentializing effects of the stereotypes used.
Blanqueamiento

The CEH has succinctly summarised the essence of Guatemalan independence from Spain: “The proclamation of independence in 1821, an event prompted by the country’s elite, saw the creation of an authoritarian State which excluded the majority of the population, was racist in its precepts and practices, and served to protect the economic interests of the privileged minority” (CEH 1999, 17). Like Arzú, the CEH sees racism as having been inextricably bound up in the protection of the “economic interests of the privileged minority,” in this time frame, the Creoles. How was the accompanying racist ideology of such an elite project of nation building to take form? According to Cojti Cuxil, “Around 1821, the Creoles, or sons of Spaniards born in America, achieved administrative and fiscal independence for Guatemalan from Spain, but wagered the progress and viability of the country on the existence of uniformity, or at least, of a homogenous culture” (1995, 17). By definition, a homogenizing project would be exclusionary, “erasing” from its ideological parameters most of the diversity present in the nation-state except, of course, that of the founding group(s). Cojti Cuxil continues: “[Guatemalan] diversity should thus disappear, that is to say that Mayas and Ladinos should become ethnically Creole and racially white” (1995, 121-122). Guatemalan independence thus marked the beginning of a project of Creole nation building oriented towards the creation of a homogenous national culture in which the indigenous majority would be excluded.

The initial manifestation of this aspiration to homogeneity in Guatemala has been called blanqueamiento or “whitening” by Nelson (1999) and others (Cojti Cuxil 1995; Radcliffe & Westwood 1993). The concept of blanqueamiento, its eugenicist overtones rather obvious, called for the eventual whitening of a people through the siring, in this case, of “whiter”
offspring from unions between “white” Creole men and Mayan women. In the following quote, Nelson cleverly reveals the way that (purity of) race and gender infuse the concept of *blanqueamiento*:

> Embedded, so to speak, in the Guatemalan discourse of blood is the possibility of ‘whitening’ or ‘improving’ the race, . . . In Guatemala and much of Latin America, despite the sense that a lineage can be stained by mixing blood, it is widely held that an influx of whiter blood can ‘improve’ a ‘lower’ race . . . This belief . . . asserts that the backwardness of the Indians, and thus of Guatemala, can be combated through importing superior races” (1999, 214).

It is worth pausing to consider the implications such a mentality would have for Mayan women. Put rather crudely, women in general, and Mayan women in particular would be considered of negligible intrinsic value, except as reproductive vehicles for the nation-state. In such a scenario the literal rape of Mayan women would be sanctioned. Nelson proposes what might be an underlying psychological mechanism at work in this scenario:

> This projection of desire and aggression onto indigenous women allows ladino men to rape them and allows that rape to be described as desired by the women: either because of her lust, or for material gain as a sex worker (and rape is also naturalized through the metaphor of the Maya [both men and women] as wife, therefore legally sexually available, in the national family (1999, 236).

In a perverse twist of logic, Mayan women become the aggressors and thus bear the responsibility and blame for the abuse directed their way. In their respective studies, both Arzu (1992) and Nelson (1999) comment that only *extramarital* liaisons between “white” men and indigenous women were condoned: “Under the terms of [the] racialized fantasy [of blanqueamiento], indigenous women are to be impregnated by but never legally married to whiter men” (Nelson 1999, 221). It would seem that the associated practices, if not the logic, of so-called “whitening” remain alive and well. Nelson words struck me as I recalled my time as a human rights observer with MINUGUA; we investigated numerous cases of Mayan
female domestic servants or finca\textsuperscript{31} labourers who had reported sexual abuse - at times resulting in pregnancy - by their employers.

The availability of Mayan women within the "purifying" project of blanqueamiento reflects their relative powerlessness within the nation-state and has rendered their reproductive contributions (and historic sufferings of abuse) practically invisible. But what of the racism that underlies the notion of blanqueamiento and thus, the "taking of Mayan women?" Influenced by Said (1978), I suggest that the practice of racism in Guatemala involves the creation of an "other" because of, amongst other things, a perceived threat (by that "other") to what would be an elite Creole (subsequently, Ladino) project of nation-state construction. The list of negative stereotypes of the Mayan "other" is extensive and includes savage, barbaric, subhuman, irrational, child-like (Cojti Cuxil 1995), "lazy, stupid, brutal, backward, superstitious, uncivilized, illiterate, rebellious" (Nelson 1999, 128), and "best suited for physical labor" (Nelson 1999, 231). Casaus Arzú writes, "To the dominant class, indigenous people are vagrant, submissive, dark-skinned and ugly. But these differences come to be seen as definitive and timeless by that social group..." (1992, 30). To these racialized slurs I add the gendered stereotype of the Mayan woman as sexually exploitable.

Also captured within the idea of blanqueamiento - and subsequently of mestizaje - are the seeds of a particular concept of "progress" that would become linked to the creation of a "modern" nation. For "the race that is to be 'whitened' are the Indians, who become strangely isomorphic with the nation, as this demand to whiten is braided into discourses of national progress" (Nelson 1999, 224). It is worth noting the subtle way that blanqueamiento - the ideology of the Creole ruling elite in the newly formed Guatemalan republic – differs

\textsuperscript{31} A finca is a large farm or plantation found throughout Guatemala on which to this day generations of indigenous people labour as virtual indentured servants under semi-feudal conditions.
conceptually from the notion of *mestizaje* that was to come later. Whereas both promote the creation of a homogenous national culture and identity, the transparent goal of *blanqueamiento* was to eradicate the indigenous population in the eugenicist sense, instead of assimilating them into the Creole culture. As Nelson points out, "Though the efforts of such entrepreneurs in the whitening business would seem to fold into a *mestizo* project, the discourse of *blanqueamiento* . . . posits a teleology toward white, rather than valuing a mixed, hybrid product" (1999, 215 n.10). I now turn to the regulatory and oppressive implications of the discourse of *mestizaje* for Mayan women.

*Mestizaje*

A military coup in 1871 ushered in the Liberal Republican period in Guatemala that lasted until 1944. According to Cojti Cuxil (1995), the new ruling elite was no longer comprised exclusively of Creoles, but included a select group of *Ladinos*, a population that had been growing in number and influence especially since Guatemalan independence from Spain in 1821.32 "The Liberals’ Nation-State project, which . . . rested on the unitary and centralist notion, also was characterized by its interest in homogenizing the population around the model of what was supposedly the ‘Western Culture’" (Esquit Choy & Gálvez Borrell 1997, 22). Adopting a liberal platform, this group of powerful *Ladinos* aspired to a national identity (and corresponding citizenship) encapsulated by the discourse of *mestizaje* rather than *blanqueamiento*. Whatever the discourse, however, material inequalities between Mayans and non-Mayans were to be exacerbated under Liberal Reform. The Liberal administration of Rufino Barrios passed laws ordering the expropriation of indigenous

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32 Kramer, Lovell and Lutz put the *Ladinos* or *Mestizos* at 37.5% of the Central American population by the beginning of the 19th Century (cited in Esquit Choy & Gálvez Borrell 1997, 19). Furthermore, "[The Mestizos] became an important social and political force following independence from Spain, pressuring for a protagonist
communal lands and permitting the indentured servitude of the Mayan people (Cojti Cuxil 1995; Lovell 1992). Above all, these nation-building efforts remained the exclusive domain of a dominant, ruling elite of Guatemala which left out the majority of indigenous people and Ladinos. Smith explains:

But illiterate Indians and mestizos in all of these places in the prenationalist era were ‘subalterns who did not speak (cf. Spivak 1988) . . . While they were agents, they had very limited options for affecting state policies concerning culture and identity . . . they did not directly shape the imaginings of the nation even in the early Independence period, only aspects of who they were within the nation . . . Criollos were the first Latin Americans to reconceptualize national identity in the Independence movements, and . . . they conceptualized national identities in their own very exclusive terms. Mestizos did not join into the national discourse . . . until later . . . Indians are entering the debate on national identity only today (1996, 154).

I find Smith’s clarification about agency quite crucial. She reminds us that political agency is never lost, but that our capacity to exercise it, i.e., our political participatory power, can be effectively hampered by repressive state apparatuses.

In her explanation of how mestizaje as a concept did not enter the popular imagination until sometime in the 19th Century, Smith makes visible the role of women, Creole, Ladina and indigenous, as the designated reproducers of the nation:

Spanish women came to the New World in large numbers after 1540, along with Spanish bureaucrats to maintain the ‘purity’ of the imperial ruling class . . . The notion that virtually all Latin Americans were mestizos and that miscegenation had gone on for centuries only became a popular myth late in the 19th Century (1996, 164).

The myth has remained to this day, according to Cojti Cuxil, its fallacious claim of equality for all being yet one more racist manoeuvre on the part of the nation-state: “From [1944] on,

(sic.) role earlier denied by the Spaniards and criollos” (Esquit Choy & Gálvez Borrell 1997, 20).

According to Smith, “mestizaje consists of at least three distinct, but related processes: 1) the social processes (including rape, concubinage, marriage . . . ) used to procreate, socialize, and position people of mixed biological heritage . . . ; 2) the personal identification of an individual or community — whether Criollo, Indian, African, or actual biological ‘mestizo’ — with mestizo communities or the mestizo national subject (which are two different things); and 3) a political discourse in which people . . . argue about the racial, cultural, and political character of the mestizo in relation to other identity types . . . and what should be their relative positions in society and in the polity” (1996, 150).
theories of assimilation of indigenous people were systematised in order to provide a solution to the heterogeneous ethnic reality of the country. In order to save the indigenous people and Guatemala, [unique] indigenous ethnicity must be annihilated" (1995, 123). Mestizaje would be used to promote the assimilation of the indigenous population into a “national” homogeneous (Ladino) culture imagined in the likeness of the “modern” nation-state (Ghidinelli 1991; Cojti Cuxil 1995):

*Ladino* political leaders and intellectuals also sought to legitimate their authority over the [indigenous] population, arguing the need to absorb these groups, which, having been kept back due to their racial condition and their scant capability to discern and to use reason, were sidetracking efforts to enter into modernity (Esquit Choy & Gálvez Borrell 1997, 22).

In strikingly similar language, Cojti Cuxil describes how indigenous people were conceived of by the *Ladino* elite as a “blight that impedes the transformation of Guatemala into a modern nation . . . traditional indigenous culture goes against progress and modernisation of the country” (1995, 124). Thus, the modern project presented an opportunity for the *Ladino* elite to reconstitute its exploitative relationship with the indigenous majority in more “modern” terms.

Ghidinelli contends that the discourse of mestizaje and the associated policy of assimilation used to further the project of the modern nation-state was just as racist as its predecessors, the discourse of blood “purity” and then, of blanqueamiento:

The integration of the indigenous person into ‘national life’ is also a form of colonisation, no matter how refined, benevolent or modernising. It is based on the premise that dominant [Ladino] society represents the model to follow. Thus, those sectors considered to be backward or to be stalling ‘development’ must be integrated” (1991, 126).

Cojti Cuxil (1995) would agree; he argues that despite subtle alterations and claims to the contrary, mestizaje as a concept never breaks free of its racist underpinnings. For example,
instead of being used to espouse the cultural assimilation of indigenous peoples, *mestizaje*’s advocates began to argue for a multicultural-like approach of accepting and respecting cultural differences, since such differences “between Indian and ladino are cultural, not genetic; ethnic, not racial; a question of equitable resources distribution rather than innate backwardness. Strip off the traje and everybody is pretty much the same” (Nelson 1999, 209). This strand of *mestizaje* is said to be attractive to *Ladinos* from the Left (Nelson 1999), because it explains away the problem of national unity, or lack thereof, by couching it in terms of class. Nelson writes:

> The conviction that it’s about class, not race, where race is seen as a brutal and antiquated ideological formation, offers a powerful unifying promise. This ‘anti-racist’ denial of racial difference in support of class (and incipient national) unity is widespread in Guatemala [among the Left] and draws on deeprooted lexicons of progress and modernization condensed in the hopes of *mestizaje*” (1999, 233).

With more than a hint of irony in his tone, Cojít Cuxil exposes this emphasis on class and liberal notions of equality as a sham: “In Guatemala, we are now beyond such public and overt justifications [of racism]. The subjugation of Indigenous people is no longer rationalised openly, but rather in an evasive and underhanded manner: now we are all equal before the law . . . ” (1995, 148). In this way, indigenous specificity would conveniently disappear, thus easing what Nelson calls *Ladino* anxiety about “fearsome warnings of a ‘race war’” (1999, 62). In fact, Radcliffe and Westwood describe a State strategy in Brazil which is strikingly similar to that of *mestizaje* employed by the Guatemalan Government:

> Constructing ‘the Other’ has, in part, been about the ways in which the diversity of colonial peoples has been re-presented in relation to racial categorizations. In the Latin American states, especially Brazil, this has been organized around an ideological configuration known as “racial democracy” which is, in effect, the process of “whitening” through miscegenation (1993, 6).
Thus, these authors reveal that *mestizaje* as a region-wide trend in Latin America has most often been “whitening” in disguise, at the service of States in the creation and devaluing of the “other” (1993).

But what are the repercussions of *mestizaje* on women in general and Mayan women in particular? What do the modernist conceptual beginnings of *mestizaje* reveal about women’s roles in the nation-state? In such modernist imaginings of the State, women (and the family) are located in the private domain, which is not seen as politically relevant. As nationalism and nations have usually been discussed as part of the public political sphere, the exclusion of women from that arena has affected their exclusion from that discourse as well (Yuval-Davis 1997, 12).

Craske adds that “the responsibility of women is to bear children for the State [and men, arms] . . . These differing citizenship duties reflect the public-private distinction central to liberal citizenship” (1999, 22). In the case of Guatemala, while we have examined the reality of Mayan women in their role as the “universal donors” in all phases of Guatemala’s colonial (and neo-colonial) past, only White women were envisioned as perfect “housewives” for the nation-state. Carillo describes the model type of modern Guatemalan woman: “Honourable, hardworking, working class [*Ladina*] women best matched the construction of ‘the perfect woman’ in Guatemala’s social imaginary: preferably White, or at least *mestiza*, delicate, maternal, a homebody and, in the best tradition of modernity, relatively educated and independent” (1991, 114). While all women are trapped in the subordinated private realm, Mayan women are completely absent from even the discourse. This silence reveals nothing of the “violence inflicted upon the bodies of Mayan women [and] from which *mestizaje* stems” (Monzón 2000, 5). Nelson concurs in her argument about *mestizaje* as “the unified ‘national’ ethnicity . . . [which] leans as heavily on the body as the elites’ racializing discourse. It covers over the rapes that initiated *mestizaje* and ignores the splattering of
gendered and ethnicized bodies that are supposed to support rational national identifications – but that so often slip through reason” (1999, 241).

Current Constructions of Mayan Women

The Guatemalan State continues to caste Mayan women in roles that reflect, constitute and facilitate their discrimination. A relatively new role for Mayan women linked to the rise of global economic forces and international tourism, has been that of tourist attraction. Nelson explains:

When the vice-minister of culture talks about ‘our cultural heritage as a major money-earner,’ he really means the Mayan woman. It is her incarceration in the highland villages that keeps them (and her) ‘traditional.’ Her ritual practices, the visual excitement of her colorful clothing, the commodification of her labor as weaver in the world-famous market towns, and her willingness to sit for photos are what attract tourists from all over the world (1999, 170).

Mayan women are for once placed in centre stage; they are the most valuable products - depicted as the exotic “other” by their own nation-state - in an increasingly commodified atmosphere. Minh-ha’s argument concerning the commodification of authenticity would certainly apply:

Authenticity ... turns out to be a product that one can buy, arrange to one’s liking, and/or preserve ... the Third World representative the modern sophisticated public ideally seeks is the unspoiled African, Asian, or Native American, who remains more preoccupied with her/his image of the real native - the truly different - than with the issues of hegemony, racism, feminism, and social change (which s/he lightly touches on in conformance to the reigning fashion of liberal discourse) (Minh-ha 1995, 267).

At the same time that Mayan women are prized as “major money-earners”, however, they are paradoxically depicted as lazy, ignorant, out-of-control breeders who pose a danger to the stability of the nation-state. This alternate imagining hints towards what may be a more accurate reading of the notion of “multicultural” mestizaje discussed above, i.e., that “cultural” differences are okay, but that political claims are not.
As MINUGUA points out in a recent report on women’s participation in Guatemala, many more Mayan women have begun to challenge the sexist and racist roles which have been imposed upon them for literally hundreds of years:

The internal dynamic of the internal armed conflict, and the following period of the Peace Process, has propelled a qualitative change in the participatory process of indigenous women, particularly with respect to the construction of [Peace Accords]. This process has promoted the emergence of indigenous women as new political subjects ...” (2001, 12).

I now turn to a brief look at the history of Mayan women’s efforts at resistance, efforts that were to ultimately find possibilities for expression in the Forum itself.

**Political Selfhood and Mayan Women’s Resistance**

“With the passing of time, [we must demonstrate] that all [of the stereotypes] are a lie. We are the ones who must refute them; although we are not to blame for their existence, we Mayan women are the ones responsible for abolishing these stereotypes” (Irene, 2001).

As apparent from the above excerpt, awareness exists today amongst many indigenous women of the need to disprove racist stereotypes. Moreover, they contend that Mayan women must lead in the effort. Such acts of resistance are not necessarily isolated or spontaneous occurrences, but are outcomes of power struggles inherent to colonial or nationalist projects (Chatterjee 1993). In Guatemala, then, this Mayan woman’s posture could be said to have arisen within a historical context of Mayan women’s resistance to hegemonic discourses about their own community in relation to problems posed in a nation-state when national identity is asserted as homogeneous. In turn, the Forum could be seen as providing yet another site of resistance or action. Are there other examples that might be cited of Mayan women’s resistance to what Monzón calls the “social imaginary”34 in order to

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34 Monzón’s social imaginary is “the system of representations tied to the exercise of power which constitutes, in this sense, the cultural fabric that maintains, transmits and modifies the majority’s image of themselves, of
better contextualize the involvement of Mayan women in the Forum? As various researchers note, women in general (Carillo 1991) and indigenous women in particular (Monzón 2001) have been virtually omitted from the annals of Guatemalan history. What’s more, the scant information that is available primarily deals with the place of Ladinas in the nation-state. Monzón outlines the main problems encountered during recent efforts to construct a history of Guatemalan women. She remarks: “Since the currently obtainable facts reflect the reality of women living in urban centres in the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, and given that ‘the vast majority of [rural, indigenous] women in that period had different rhythms, languages, surroundings and cultures,’ it has been difficult to reconstruct a more complete history of women.” (2001, 2). Nonetheless, the lives and acts of resistance of some Mayan women have been documented (see Monzón 2001, 7n32). Others, like Mama Maquin, have been immortalised by popular organizations that have adopted their names.

Although KAQLA has found that most indigenous women would not yet identity themselves as Mayan - instead, they might use the terms “naturals or Indians” – there seems to be a growing social movement of indigenous women who do ascribe to such an identity. For example, Stern-Pettersson concludes:

For the first time in Guatemala’s history, Mayan women are making claims for security and identity as Mayan-women. They are thus re-constructing both what this identity and

health, sickness and also, of [what it is to be a] man or woman, according to the wishes of those who manipulate it. These representations are of a psycho-social, historic-cultural character and constitute the basic elements of identities – principally of gender.” To me, the representations in Monzón’s social imaginary functions similarly to dominant discourse.

35 Perhaps the best known Mayan female activist is Rigoberta Menchú Tum, winner of the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize. For more information, see Burgos-Debray 1994. Another distinguished indigenous woman is Rosalina Tuyuc, director of the National Co-ordinator of Guatemalan Widows (CONAVIGUA), and former parliamentarian.

36 A group of indigenous women formed Mama Maquin in 1990 while in refugee camps in Mexico, taking its name from a Q’eqchi’ woman who was massacred along with several hundred others by the Guatemalan army in Panzós, Alta Verapaz in 1978. They were killed while demonstrating to demand land titles from the government. For more information, contact the group via email at mmqu@intelnet.net.gt.
what security means in the context of seemingly intractable conflicts between those who wield power in Guatemala, and those who are striving to empower themselves in the face of violence and marginalization (1997, 123).

However incipient, this movement of Mayan women is making their voice(s) heard and entering, as Smith has put it, the debate on national identity. One of KAQLA’s main undertakings has been to engage in “discussion about gender and ethnic categories . . . the intention [being] to construct a discourse which would be compatible with both the Mayan worldview and the category of gender” (MINUGUA 2001, 17). KAQLA’s endeavours have been motivated in part by the lack of an adequate participatory space in which Mayan women could engage as Mayan women; KAQLA maintains that Mayan women “have not yet found room for themselves in other spaces”38 like the women’s or Pan-Mayan movements. (I turn to the theoretical implications behind the creation of the political subject “Mayan woman” (and of the category of political selfhood “Mayan women”) in Chapter 4. In this chapter, I explore what I see as the relevant feminist theoretical notions about the tensions raised by the political category “woman”, the unity/diversity identity debates and Mayan women’s position within them).

KAQLA’s research notwithstanding, the most widely available information about Mayan women’s resistance is often found within sources about broader social justice struggles undertaken by the popular, indigenous and women’s movements of the past 30 years.39 In fact, such movements have definite overlaps in membership since, as Aguilar Theissen

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37 The group has been conducting a series of workshops with Mayan women in several parts of Guatemala in which the women reflect upon and analyse the effects of oppression on their lives. According to KAQLA’s director, this training, which draws on Mayan psychological/spiritual beliefs, are intended to help women recognize and deal with the problems that have marked their lives (violence, poverty, discrimination, etc.).

38 All ideas about KAQLA are based on an interview with the Director of KAQLA by the author in June 2001.

39 For information about the relationship between the popular, indigenous and women’s movements see Carillo (1991) who posits that the indigenous movement sprung out of the wider popular movement of the 1970s (1991). Cují Cuxil mentions efforts by “teachers, health promoters, lawyers, mayors, etc.” (1995, 13) to separate from a movement that maintained a class versus ethnic analysis. Aguilar Theissen remarks that the
affirms, women have organised for all different reasons: “[Women] have organised themselves because of gender as well as class, ethnicity, and other specific vulnerabilities (e.g., as returnees40). Organization because of age, sexual preference, cultural difference or disabilities is not so clearly visible” (1991 129). While sources dealing with the development and current state of both the popular and indigenous movements are relatively abundant, there are few publications specifically on the women’s movement, and fewer still on the Mayan women’s movement per se. There have been several recent books on the reality and resistance of both Ladinas and Mayan women that rely exclusively on testimonies.41 Thus, it is possible to find out about predominately Mayan, female organizations by carefully reviewing these and other more general publications.42

On the other hand, Logan may have a point when she asserts that such testimonies, which I would situate within a feminist methodological approach, “... are life histories of women whose political engagement represents the core of their self-identity” (Logan 1997). It may well be this activism that links the differently positioned women in Guatemala’s web of interconnected social movements. On the one hand, there are undoubtedly divergent opinions as to the extent to which female activists would affiliate themselves with the women’s movement or other political movements. There also remains the question of a rural-urban divide, still a prominent feature of Guatemala’s socio-political landscape. Writing on what she calls an “embryonic" women’s movement, Aguilar Theissen concludes, “despite that the majority of women’s organizations (refugees, returnees, displaced people.

women’s movement grew out of the burgeoning popular and indigenous movements of the early 1980s (n.d.).
40 The term “returnees” applies to former refugees who have come back to Guatemala.
widows, peasants, farm workers) are concentrated in rural areas, the groups that prevail in existing spaces of co-ordination and political action are based in the capital" (n.d., 112). Therefore, as one element of this project, I wish to ask, "What is the relationship between the urban-based, primarily Ladina women's movement and the rural, largely Mayan women's groups?" and "What might this mean for a nation-state caught up in an attempt to unite difference?" (In Chapter 5 I suggest that we should not underestimate the importance of the rural-urban divide as a factor complicating attempts to work across difference, in this case, by the Forum).

Logan suggests that political engagement is part of one's identity. I would argue, as I think would Craske, that political engagement is not so much a component of identity, but rather a process through which the latter is shaped. She links women's social movements and their political subjectivity in the context of struggles against authoritarian regimes in Latin America:

Social movements also encouraged the development of citizenship and political subjectivity – and more particularly with a gender perspective. Schild . . . suggests that, by challenging the pre-existing boundaries of appropriate behaviors, there is the development of a 'gender-specific culture of citizenship.' Fisher . . . indicates the importance of breaking the isolation as collective identities develop resulting in a challenge to authoritarianism (131-132).

In viewing the Forum as part of a larger social movement to define citizenship's boundaries, we can begin to ask questions concerning the impact of the Forum on the development of Mayan women's political agency and identity within that movement. In its efforts to create a body representative of Guatemala's population of differently positioned women, how were Mayan women treated? As KAQLA might ask, did the Forum recognise Mayan women's uniquely gendered and ethnicized position within the nation-state? Did it seek to create a space in which the injustices or inequities of that position might be examined and that
therefore steps were taken to redress them? In the process, were Mayan women’s forms of identification and political participation recognised and respected? Did the Forum act as a vehicle for the exercise of women’s political agency and thus the enhancement of a collective identity for Mayan women as women and as Mayans? Or, did the Forum reproduce stereotypes about Mayan women, reify their identities and thus confine them to their historically marginalised position within the nation-state?

Before turning to an analysis of the Forum, I provide a description of my methodological and epistemological orientations (Chapter 3) and theoretical approach (Chapter 4) that will frame this analysis.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGICAL & EPISTEMOLOGICAL NOTES

Given the principal aim of my thesis - to use the Forum as a case study in order to look at the potential of a diverse group of women to act collectively - I logically hope to draw on a methodology that places women and their knowledges at the center. Given the historic lacuna of mainstream (positivist) methodology in this regard, certain key issues in both feminist and indigenous approaches to research and its underlying epistemologies are appealing to me, among them, the primacy given to participants' voices and the ethical challenges encountered by researchers. Moreover, as I discuss, my own role as a researcher in this project both illustrates the problems facing researchers and constitutes a form of the politics of engagement: an attempt to be involved in an ethical way with a diverse group of woman acting collectively. That is, through the act of research itself (including my attempt to respect the concerns and perspectives of the women I interview), I embody an issue at the core of this thesis: how to avoid what I consider to be two unethical extremes - a complete retreat from any connection with people who are different from oneself and participation from a dominant posture in which one ignores, dismisses and/or exacerbates differences of power and identity.

While influenced by certain tenets of indigenous methods and epistemological frameworks, I primarily adopt a critical, feminist qualitative approach in the conduction of my thesis. I would add that the decision to use a feminist method is derived largely from the subject matter of my research: a study of Mayan women and the nature of their participation in the Forum as a mechanism for shedding light on key debates about identity and difference raised by feminist theorists concerning attempts by diverse women to act as a feminist community in the name of some larger issue. The fundamental goal therefore is to explore
concerns put forward by feminists of different theoretical persuasions about the complicated political implications of the politics of female identity and the manner in which they play out in the case of the Guatemalan National Women’s Forum.

I draw upon two basic methods in this work: document analysis and personal interviews. In relation to the documents, using a critical feminist approach, I analyze all available Forum documents as well as UN reports on the Forum, including minutes from some popular education workshops with Forum women that I led as a human rights observer with the UN Mission in Guatemala (MINUGUA). The goal of such an analysis is to extract some understanding of the representation and participation of Mayan women in the Forum. Before leaving MINUGUA, I designed and conducted a survey of the then 54 Forum structures through telephone interviews and written forms. I draw upon the results of this survey and another on quite similar issues completed by Guatemalan consultants in December 2000. For the thesis, I also interview several Mayan women who were involved with the Forum. Finally, I consider the relevance of larger theoretical positions on identity and difference for women’s political practices in Guatemala as pertaining to the Forum.

In what follows, I comment briefly on those components of feminist, and to a lesser extent, indigenous epistemologies that have influenced my methodological approach to research, particularly as they relate to the epistemological conditions I have attempted to adopt. In so doing, I touch upon the some key themes taken up in feminist methodologies such as: the role of participants or “subjects” in research; research topics and objectives; and the role and/or implication of the researcher in the research process. I also describe the ways in which my approach to certain research methods – i.e., interviewing and analysis - is compatible with a feminist methodological framework particularly in terms of the possibility
offered to create counter-narratives that challenge more traditional schemes of knowledge production.

Balancing the Historical Account

Feminist and indigenous and scholars, amongst others, have discussed at length the exclusionary tendencies of Western epistemology spawned by the Enlightenment project of modernity. For example, feminists, anti-racists, and anti-colonialist and/or post-colonial scholars have voiced ardent critiques of and responses to the historically homogenizing, colonizing and dismissive effects of Western epistemology on knowledges that were non-Western, non-male and/or non-white. Smith elucidates the mutually reinforcing relationship between Western research, systems of knowledge and colonialism:

This sense of what the idea of the West represents is important here because to a large extent theories about research are underpinned by a cultural system of classification and representation, by views about human nature, human morality and virtue, by conceptions of space and time, by conceptions of gender and race. Ideas about these things help determine what counts as real. Systems of classification and representation enable different traditions or fragments of traditions to be retrieved and reformulated in different contexts as discourses, and them to be played out in systems of power and domination, with real material consequences for colonized peoples (1999, 44).

Feminist theorists and others have attempted to reveal the exclusionary aspects of such systems of classification and representation. Code writes, "And despite positivist disclaimers, feminists have demonstrated that specific values, subjectivities, and social-

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43 As of December 2000, there were 57 Forum structures (Mayén & Reiche 2000).
44 For different perspectives on the dichotomy between Western epistemology and non-Western modes of thought, see Smith 1999; Dei, Hall & Goldin Rosenberg 2000; Mazama 1998; Amin 1989; Kabeer 1994; Code 1995; Harding 1996; and Harding 1997.
45 Given its contested nature, I would like to clarify my use of the term post-colonial. I employ it to refer to theorists like Gayatri Spivak who write from the perspective of a person coming from a previously colonized nation-state. I would not suggest however, that colonial practices no longer occur under the guise of other processes like, for example, globalization. "[However] there is also," as Smith puts it, "amongst indigenous academics, the sneaking suspicion that the fashion of post-colonialism has become a strategy for reinscribing or reauthorizing the privileges of non-indigenous academics because the field of ‘post-colonial discourse has been defined in ways which can still leave out indigenous peoples, our ways of knowing and our current concerns”
cultural locations have produced these positivist epistemologies, whose influence is indelibly imprinted on authoritative public knowledge” (Code 1995, 19). Feminist and indigenous epistemologies and corresponding methodologies have arisen in this context as alternatives to the traditionally dominant positivist research paradigm. On feminism’s influence in this regard, DuBois writes,

I do believe that feminism empowers and requires us to think very differently about the purposes and methods of social science than we have been able to do within the confines of hegemony and androcentric science and worldview … (F)eminist social science and scholarship offer the possibility of necessary, vital and vitalizing departures from the norms and functions, both scientific and political, of traditional social science (1983, 109).

The sorts of departures to which DuBois refers involve a shift away from social science research dedicated to the pursuit of supposedly objective, impartial, and neutral “facts” about people and their worlds, towards what Haraway calls “situated knowledges” (1991) - knowledges arising directly out of life circumstances (and recognized as such). A key component of feminist methodologies designed to move us towards a respect for “situated knowledges” is the privileging of the subject’s voice in the research process. The objective of privileging these “other” voices goes deep; it is ultimately concerned with listening to and fostering respect for “other” ways of knowing - a critical tenet of both feminist and indigenous methodologies. I incorporate this objective into my thesis both as a theme and a method. Thematically, I am primarily concerned with the extent to which the Forum itself has attempted to center Mayan women’s voices (and hence, their knowledges). At the level of method, therefore, I attempt to bring forward Mayan women’s perspectives on their experience of and in the Forum. I am particularly concerned with Mayan women’s perceptions of their inclusion in the practices and politics of the Forum itself. I then draw

upon these voices to address some of the tensions currently raised by feminists about the potential homogenization of the political category “woman,” in this case, in Guatemala. I therefore view women’s accounts as counter-narratives to dominant, authoritative knowledge claims.

The importance of an emphasis on women’s accounts of a particular experience would ultimately be to counter those traditional research paradigms that have operated in the social sciences and the academia in general. The specific goal in this case, however, is to re/construct counter-narratives to the hegemonic, historically pervasive beliefs and/or stereotypes about Mayan women and their role in the nation-state. Mayan women’s accounts of their lives can serve to shatter what Code calls the “folk wisdom, that women have never been able to know very much at all, and that they have only rarely been significant actors in the making of society and history” (1995, 21). In other words, alternative research methods may constitute important sites of resistance (Smith 1999) for women and others. In and of itself, pointing out the fallaciousness of historical beliefs or stereotypes that function to thwart the exercise of Mayan women’s agency and/or erase any record thereof in the nation-state is a worthwhile goal. Indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith comments on an additional aspect of the importance of, in her words, “coming to know the past.” She writes: “To hold alternative histories is to hold alternative knowledges. The pedagogical implication of this access to alternative knowledges is that they can form the basis of alternative ways of doing things” (Smith 1999, 34). Sharing the view along with Smith (1987) and Nelson, not to mention Marx, that ideologies and material realities are inextricably intertwined, Smith argues that counter narratives can lead to real, material changes in the existences of those that have been marginalized. With this understanding of (and hope for) the possibilities offered
by alternative knowledges, I have attempted to put forward an interpretation of the participation of Mayan women in the Forum that underscores their own accounts of that experience.

Thus, I arrive at another key characteristic of feminist methodologies, that of the nature and purpose of the research undertaken. Jones cites Stanley’s description of feminist methodology as “a broad sense term, concerning itself with the way in which the researcher positions her/himself, the topic she/he sets out to investigate, the method/s or technique/s used, the purposes of the research, and the form and style it is written in” (1996, 134). An obvious subject for feminists would be women’s emancipation from oppressive, discriminatory environments. Code elaborates,

Indeed, feminist commitments to fostering women’s emancipation make it imperative for them to know the situations and circumstances of women’s lives: to know them not just in their surface manifestations, but in their deeper implications and effects. Feminists have to know how to explain the absence of women ‘both as agents and as subjects on inquiry’ throughout received public knowledge (1995, 20).

In this thesis, for example, I am concerned first with understanding in historic terms the ways in which Mayan women have been excluded from exercising their civil and political rights as citizens in the nation-state. My analysis focuses on those hegemonic state discourses that have served to uphold inequitable social, economic and political structures. This project involves the exposure of the systematic erasure of Mayan women from Guatemalan public consciousness. In this way, according to Fine, I would be making “a move to activism [that] occurs when research fractures the very ideologies that justify power inequities. In such work, the researchers pry open social mythologies that others are committed to sealing” (1994, 24). I view the interviews of Mayan women as vital to any potential fracturing of ideologies or altering of consciousness.
The social mythologies mentioned by Eine are often imbued with a host of "isms" that are also reflected in the exclusionary elements of mainstream research. Thus, in shattering such mythologies, feminist qualitative methodologies also identify and challenge the racist, sexist and other exclusionary elements of society and of traditional positivist approaches to research:

"Hence, feminist epistemologies have exposed the androcentricity and, latterly, the racial, cultural, historical, class, and numerous other 'centricities' of the epistemologies of the mainstream Anglo-American traditions" (Code 1995, 15).

In my efforts to make a theoretical case about the possibilities for organizing collectively by a group of diverse women, the prominence that feminist methodologies give to complexities of identity and difference are invaluable. However, while some feminist methodologies have addressed concerns about the exclusion of non-White communities from hegemonic accounts of knowledge, "White" Western feminist approaches have been criticized as sometimes "conforming to some very fundamental Western European world views, value systems and attitudes towards the Other" (Smith 1999, 43). And while feminist methodologies have influenced indigenous methodologies (Smith 1999), the latter gives primacy to race/ethnicity and possibilities for decolonization through anti-colonial research.

For the purposes of my research, in which I theorize about the complexities of identity and thus oppression (more specifically, the relationship between race/ethnicity, gender, class etc.) and the concomitant implications for acting/organizing collectively, feminist and indigenous epistemologies and the attendant methodologies are mutually enhancing. I then look to indigenous epistemologies to complement what, for Stanfield, is a less developed aspect of feminist epistemologies.

"Perhaps the major Achilles' heel of feminist interpretations of how to conduct qualitative research is the absence of a central racialized ethnic component. Once again,
we all have ethnicity, just as we all have gender. Indeed, ethnicity, in its subtle and explicit ways, compounded by other synchronic status variables, gives biological sex categories their historical, cultural, social and political economic meanings” (Stanfield 1994, 180).

I posit that a constant recentering of ethnicity as a facet of identity is particularly important to my research given Guatemala's history of ethnic strife; my analysis of the participation and representation of Mayan women in the Forum can only be enhanced by consideration of the full import of ethnicity to Mayan women's identities. Smith reminds us of a related focal point of indigenous methodologies - taking the legacies and contemporary manifestations of colonial practices into account: “Gendering contemporary indigenous debates occurs inside indigenous communities and while it is debated in other contexts, such as in Western feminist debates, indigenous women hold an analysis of colonialism as a central tenet of an indigenous feminism” (1999, 152). I have attempted, particularly in the background chapter, to heed this and similar calls by indigenous and critical post-colonial feminists through charting the effects of colonialism on Mayan women at the connected levels of discursive and material realities.

Any discussion of colonialism and, more particularly, the colonizing effects of Western research paradigms, is not complete without a mention of the researcher's role (including as a potential accomplice) in the process. Both feminist and indigenous methodologies distinguish themselves from the traditional positivist approach to research by problematizing the role of researcher in qualitative studies, be they "insider" or "outsider." I now turn to a consideration of what I refer to as the politics of social location of the researcher and also of the relationship between researcher and "researched." I also attempt to spell out my position on what constitutes an ethical encounter (i.e., a politics of engagement, to use Mohanty's phrase) between researcher and "subject," principally when the former occupies a privileged
social location in relation to the latter. Finally, I point out that my challenge as a researcher parallels a key research topic of this thesis: how to work across difference, i.e., engage ethically with a group of "others" different from oneself in terms of identity and social location for the purpose of acting collectively.

**Politics of Social Location & One’s Place in the Research Paradigm**

Within the Western research and knowledge paradigm that has inappropriately passed as universal (instead of contextually derived and historically situated), the researcher/scholar has typically been presented as the neutral purveyor of the "Truth." However, in exposing the exclusive, and thus partial, nature of such "Truths" (i.e., largely reflections of the worldview of the Western, white male), feminists have correspondingly revealed the subjective role of the researcher/scholar in the processes of knowledge production. Fine describes how the subject position of any scholar inescapably impinges upon the outcome of a research project: "That we are human inventors of some questions and repressors of others, shapers of the very contexts we study, coparticipants in our interviews, interpreter’s of others’ stories and narrators of our own, is sometimes rendered irrelevant to the texts we publish" (1994, 14). Our social location determines in part what our influence on the processes and content of knowledge production will be; we inevitably bring the biases we have acquired as members of particular social, political and economic milieus into the research process and final product. A major contribution of feminist scholarly thought has been the acknowledgement of this presence of the researcher in research and moreover, of the inherently political nature of social research (Fine 1994).

46 On this worldview, Code writes, "Rather, feminists have shown that there is a marked coincidence between the ideals and values constitutive of ideal (=white, educated, propertied, and heterosexual) masculinity throughout the Western philosophical, cultural, and social history, and the values constitutive of the highest
As a certain power (or lack thereof) is conferred to us according to our social location, feminists are concerned with making transparent one’s social location and grappling with the relations of power between researcher and “subject” as they play out in the research process. Such power relations have a direct bearing on efforts to center women’s accounts of knowledge, on agency, and ultimately, on the broader question of the nature of knowledge production. In other words, questions about the authenticity of research (and hence knowledge) and of representation (i.e., “who writes for whom?”) are always problematic in the research process, even when researchers are feminists disposed to centering women’s voices. As Fine states, “. . . feminist researchers are chronically and uncomfortably engaged in ethical decisions about how deeply to work with/for/despite those cast as others and how seamlessly to represent the [Self-Other] hyphen [of social research]” (1994, 23). For example, in my case an important question has been how to mitigate the inherent danger of representing or speaking for Guatemalan indigenous women, i.e., how to engage ethically with these women in the research process.

What are some of the key feminist guidelines to addressing such issues of power, privilege, authenticity and representation in research? For a start, I would say that the very act of questioning the hierarchical relations in positivist epistemologies proposed by feminist practices begins the process of leveling power relations in research. According to Jones, “The [feminist] approach is not ‘orthodox’ in terms of traditionally accepted research parlance, in that it challenges conventional approaches to addressing the research question, such as preserving the distance between the researcher and the passive subject” (1996, 134). In other words, feminist approaches to research strive to place researcher and “subjects” on a more equal footing in the research process. This is partly achieved by the researcher clear forms of rationality and the most authoritative forms of knowledge” (1995, 15-16).
delineation of her/his social location, both to the "subjects" and in the final document. As discussed, the privileging of "subjects'" voices including through participation in the development of research agendas, designs and questions can also help. However, while mindful of this need to center women's voices, Fine cautions researchers to avoid a different trap: the "popular romancing of the voices of women in poverty" (1994, 22). That is, the researcher's voice can not and should not disappear entirely. According to Fine, the researcher should attempt to recognize and explain the ways in which her/his voice (and biases) interacts with "other" voices to tell the story.

There is another danger, according to some feminists, stemming from undoubtedly noble attempts to engage ethically with "subjects." Researchers can engage in an obsessive focus on their own positions, in a kind of "navel-gazing," as it were. Patai refers to this compulsion as the "egocentricity involved in our constant self-appraisals" (1994, 68). She continues, "The fact is that those of us whose medium is words do occupy privileged positions, and we hardly give up those positions when we engage in endless self-scrutiny and anxious identification" (1994, 67). A mere recognition of our relative positions of privilege will not wipe away power differentials or their real, material effects in the world. Thus, another important guideline for addressing such issues of power, privilege, etc. is to include the macro level in any analysis of power relations, as Lamphere suggests:

These essays clearly show the importance of examining power in relation to method, but only through examining the institutionalization of power as it utilizes race, class, gender, and sexual orientation and the way our subjects are both shaped by these attributes and struggle against their defining and limiting qualities can we show how power really operates and how individuals can become more empowered (1994, 223).

In her reflections, she reminds us of the ultimately political focus of feminist research and thus the need to take structural constraints into account:
Moreover, academics should take care not to conflate two distinct factors that inform their research: their social location with their analytical/theoretical expertise. In other words, I suggest, as I believe Patai and others do, that researchers can and should acknowledge their social location while retaining what some would call their inherently analytical role in research. Ironically, as Fine points out, an abandonment of theory and/or analysis would be tantamount to perpetuating a process that feminist researchers have tried so hard to avoid—the creation and patronization of “others” through the research process:

While researchers, particularly White feminists, need to worry about the imperialistic history of qualitative research that we have inherited and to contain the liberal impulse to 'translate for' rather than 'with' women across chasms of class, race, sexualities, politics, living arrangements, etc. . . . the refusal to theorize reflects either a form of theoretical condescension or hyper-protocol reserved only for Others with whom serious intellectual work or struggle are considered inappropriate (Fine 1994, 21).

Fine's comment implies to me that a balance must be struck between related (but not equivalent) extremes: basing one’s research entirely on theory versus on experience; and, negating the “subject’s” voice versus blindly privileging that voice. Practicing the extremes of either dualism would deny the role of the researcher in knowledge production. I interpret Fine as saying that researchers’ (“insiders” and outsiders” alike) fear of perpetuating the imperialistic tendencies of traditional qualitative research should not lead to a complete disregard of theory. Writing on the development of a feminist method, Dorothy Smith calls for new modes of thinking that, I believe, point towards a better negotiation of the tension between the voice of the researcher (be they “insider” or “outsider”) and that of the researched. She retains a critical role for analysis, albeit one with different operative principles, in research. She writes,

Important as it has been and is to hear the authentic speaking of women, it is not sufficient to ground and guide sociological inquiry. The development of a feminist method in sociology has to go beyond our interviewing practices and our research
relationships to explore methods of thinking that will organize our inquiry and write our sociological texts so as to preserve the presence of actual subjects while exploring and explicating the relations in which our everyday worlds are embedded (Smith 1987, 111).

In fact, an embrace of the knowledge contained in or arising from analysis could be considered part of undertaking an ethical encounter with others - what Mohanty might call a politics of engagement in research. In fact, if we take seriously Code’s view that knowledge production constitutes a “negotiation with an epistemic community” (1995, 29), then neither researcher nor “subject” would have a monopoly on the complex processes or outcomes of knowledge production. Such a conception of the construction of knowledge would subvert the standard researcher/”subject” hierarchy supported by traditional research paradigms without leading to extremes such as the repudiation of theory altogether.

Likewise, Smith seems to echo Fine’s idea of the danger of “theoretical condescension or hyper-protocol” in her emphasis on the responsibility of researchers to engage in the task of sharing knowledge with indigenous people as part of attempting a mutual goal of decolonization:

I use the term ‘sharing knowledge’ deliberately, rather than the term ‘sharing information’ because to me the responsibility of researchers and academics is not simply to share surface information (pamphlet knowledge) but to share the theories and analyses which inform the way knowledge and information are constructed and represented. By taking this approach seriously, it is possible to introduce communities and people who may have had little schooling to a wider world, a world which includes people who think just like them, who share in their struggles and dreams and who voice their concerns in similar sorts of ways. To assume in advance that people will not be interested in, or will not understand, the deeper issues is arrogant. The challenge is to demystify, to decolonize” (1999, 16).

Smith’s call or researchers is fundamentally ethical in nature. According to her, researchers need to recognize and value the role of research “subjects” in their epistemic community and to engage ethically with that community by sharing their privilege, which, in this case, is
access to academic theory and analyses. Smith's suggestion goes beyond a mere recognition of power and privilege to its potential dissolution!

My Social Location & Methods Revisited

It is not coincidence that my challenge as a researcher parallels a key research topic of this thesis: how to work across difference, i.e., engage ethically with a group of "others" different from oneself in terms of identity and social location for the purpose of acting collectively. As a woman, I have developed a personal investment in exploring how diverse women can work together and respect differences without infusing those differences with traces of inferiority. I am invested in the issue, as it were. Upon reflection, I realize that my interest in this topic was sparked by my own attempts to engage with both Ladina and Mayan women in Guatemalan, particularly through the Forum. This challenge has taken on new dimensions with the undertaking of a research project. Although I now find myself more ensconced in the realm of academia than in activism, I remain committed to the political project of participating in feminist social movements including groups of diverse women. For me, an important part of this commitment has meant conducting ethical research that may impact positively on such movements for social justice. It has been from this vantage point or social location that I have asked myself, as a woman seeking to engage politically and ethically with other women, what can I learn from the experience of Guatemalan indigenous women's participation in the Forum? Taking my cue from Nelson, a North American anthropologist who, like me, has been involved in solidarity work with Central Americans for many years, and others who have struggled with questions of representation and authenticity (1999). Above all, while attempting to apply the guidelines referred to
above, I have been mindful of writing about Mayan women in Guatemala from a position of relative privilege.

I have attempted to infuse the methods employed in this thesis (document analysis, interviews and the application of feminist theories) with the general principles of critical feminist methodologies and, to a lesser extent, indigenous perspectives on research. Jones has this to say about the fundamental goal of feminist methodology:

Feminist methodology then, is the underpinning structural theory delineating a research approach intended to give equality to the participants, and allowing them to use the research process to address the questions as they see it, rather than simply providing the answers the researcher may require. The methods chosen . . . [are] to be used in a way which embodies this principle (1996, 134).

While aspiring to establish a more equal relationship between “researcher” and “researched”, I am reminded by my own experience and by other feminist authors I have cited that such a task is fraught with difficulty, especially in light of the perception that academic knowledge is somehow superior to other forms. Good intentions do not necessarily permit the researcher to “hear” the authenticity of women’s voices or to do away with the hierarchy of power between researcher and researched. Perhaps, however, attempts by individual researchers at ethical interactions with their research “subjects” would gradually break down the barriers and deeply entrenched power relations between the academy and political communities, thus leading to a bridging of theory and practice.

And so, what have I done in concrete terms to mitigate the danger of “speaking for” others? First, based on my previous experiences with Mayan women in Guatemala I have tried to open myself (both emotionally and rationally) to recognizing and registering non-Western conceptions of self, “Other”, community, and the relationship between these (i.e., structure and agency), etc. Second, although I had designed themes and corresponding
questions as preparation for the interviews, I have used these as general guides in an effort to reveal how Mayan women themselves experienced the Forum. Moreover, while what I have gathered is not precisely testimony, I have attempted to carry out interviews in such a way that, like testimony, they would become conduits “through which the voice of a ‘witness’ is accorded space and protection” (Smith 1999, 144). I have attempted to be a vigilant listener to these “witnesses,” intervening to direct the course of the interview as little as possible.

Furthermore, I have made clear to the best of my ability in all interviews my social location, biases and investment in this research project, including a mention of my work with the Forum both as UN human rights observer and subsequent freelance consultant. I have shared my opinions of the Forum with interviewees. In fact, rather than having hindered communication, my previous experience in Guatemala may well have facilitate the interview process since interviewees may be more comfortable opening up to someone that they feel has a commitment to their reality.

In terms of methods specifics, I have interviewed six bilingual Mayan women (speakers of one of the 22 Mayan languages and Spanish), from five linguistic communities, who participated in the Forum as delegates and/or Coordinating Committee members. They are of different ages and diverse backgrounds, including academia, the popular sector, the urban sector, and the rural peasantry. I used the following sampling methods to choose the participants: criterion based (all bilingual, Mayan women and Forum participants), maximum variation (different linguistic communities, roles in Forum), politically important cases (regional committees that have had relevant experiences with the Coordinating Committee) and opportunistic sampling - including snowball sampling (recommendations from consultations with MINUGUA liaisons).
At the risk of seeming trite, I would like to speak of another element I have tried to incorporate into my research approach, that of respect. According to Smith, “The term 'respect' is consistently used by indigenous peoples to underscore the significance of our relationships and humanity. Through respect the place of everyone and everything in the universe is kept in balance and harmony. Respect is a reciprocal, shared, constantly interchanging principle which is expressed through all aspects of social conduct” (1999, 120). While in Guatemala, I began to appreciate the magnitude of the importance of concepts such as respect and balance in the lives of Mayan peoples. I was actually quite blind to any differences between my (Western) view of these concepts (and, most importantly, their role in the everyday world) and indigenous perspectives. The beginnings of comprehending what, at least for me, is at times a completely different worldview came slowly in fits and starts. In retrospect, I would say that a fundamental flaw in my functioning early on as a human rights observer with the UN stemmed from my lack of understanding of the concept of respect. Debates about the applicability of human rights to non-Western cultures notwithstanding, I eventually learned to link what some argue to be Western conceptions of human rights to the intricate and pervasive concept of respect in Guatemalan indigenous culture. The writing of this thesis finds me at yet another juncture in terms of my capacity to perceive differences in a respectful way; I continue to struggle with this and associated issues. However, I have attempted, I hope not in vain, to infuse this research with a basic, albeit, at times intangible, principle of respect.

Respect for difference, however, does not translate into indiscriminate and uncritical acceptance of information gleaned from interviews with “authentic” sources. Mindful of the difficulties inherent in researching an “other,” I see my responsibility as an attempt to
provide insight into the reflections and concerns of Mayan women about their participation in the Forum. However, I have also taken advantage of what I believe to be the significant role of a politically minded researcher through the provision of a socially mediated dialogue about those concerns raised by Mayan women. In so doing, I have attempted to make more explicit the challenges faced by Mayan women in particular and women in general when we try to work collectively while respecting the differences amongst us.
CHAPTER 4: THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In Chapter Two, I discuss the historical constructions of Mayan women within the Guatemalan nation-state and the relation of these discourses to broader processes of discrimination against and exclusion of indigenous peoples in that country since the time of the Spanish Invasion. I also mention recent efforts - most notably reflected by those commitments contained within the 1996 Peace Accords which officially ended 36 years of internal armed struggle - to re/construct the nation-state via the creation of a participatory, political space representative of Guatemala’s “multiethnic, multilingual and pluricultural” reality. I argue that in order for inclusive principles of citizenship to operate, such a space would have to be built upon a firm acknowledgement of the country’s colonial history and a commitment to rectify its modern day legacy: the continued subordination and oppression of the indigenous population, particularly of Mayan women.

Given the normative application of citizenship which excluded indigenous women from the modern nation-state, the question in many academic and political settings centres on the theoretical and practical possibilities of an inclusive notion of citizenship. Werbner and Yuval-Davis suggest that current citizenship debates should be understood as “arising from [their] central locus within modernity itself” (1999, 2):

As recent debates about the modern versus the late - or postmodern have highlighted, modernity was marked from its inception by contradictory tendencies: towards ordering, control and normalisation, on the one hand, and the toleration of uncertainly, scepticism, disagreement and difference, on the other. Democratic citizenship as a social and political construct encapsulates this modern aporia (1999, 2).

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47 The AIDPI calls for the recognition of Guatemala as a “multiethnic, multilingual and pluricultural” country. A public referendum proposing this and other constitutional reforms was defeated in 1999. The current Government (headed by a right-wing party elected in 2000) has not yet fulfilled its campaign promise to honor these and other political commitments found in the Peace Accords.
Is modernity plagued by an inherent contradiction between unity and diversity? On the one hand, the apparently irresolvable nature of this internal contradiction in modernity, as the term aporia suggests, would cast doubts on the possibility of instituting an inclusionary system of citizenship or, for that matter, of working effectively across difference, the focus of this thesis. On the other hand, could these supposedly contradictory elements coexist in what might be called a mutually respectful and enhancing relationship?

As might be inferred from Werbner and Yuval-Davis, the potential clash between the universal and the particular could occur within any attempt to form a collective consisting of heterogeneous members or components, i.e., a nation-state, a movement such as feminism or the Forum, and even an entity such as the self. Likewise, an individual and/or a group’s identity, depending on the nature of the collective in question, can be reified or essentialized. Thus, the political relevance of attempting a theoretical (and more importantly, a political) resolution of the apparent conflict between the universal and the particular may be obvious: to facilitate the active, meaningful and equitable engagement of differently positioned members or groups within a collective. In other words, the goal of such an undertaking is to contribute to the dialogue around how a collective might “recognise and respect ‘difference’ without reifying ‘it’ as perpetual, closed and unchanging” (Werbner & Yuval-Davis 1999, 9).

It is with this larger goal that I take up research on the Forum, a study warranted precisely because of the potentially invaluable lessons the Forum might hold for questions around identity and difference. As a microcosm of a larger project of transformation of the nation-state, the Forum has had to negotiate the difficult terrain presented by the existence of differently positioned members. Moreover, Forum efforts to grapple with, as Young puts it, “what it means to acknowledge and affirm group differences among women while retaining a
progressive feminist politics [may] serve . . . as a model of a general politics of inclusion” (1990, 8).

In this chapter, I explore certain theoretical tensions involving projects that make participatory claims. I begin by articulating a position on the nature of the self (and thus, of identities and identification) in relation to how it is commonly depicted, i.e., in terms of the universal/particular or unity/diversity binaries. I consider Weir’s model of the self and its compatibility with theories which address the political necessity for working across difference. I also take up the question of the nature of an “authentic” claim to identity by a particular group of women and its links to the potential for political unity with other differently positioned women. My discussion includes a mention of the meaningfulness of the category “women.” My aim here is to examine the theoretical possibilities for differently positioned women to work together collectively.

My ultimate intention is to draw upon human experience (i.e., Mayan women’s participation in the Forum) to illuminate our understanding of what have been seen as crucial theoretical debates on the nature of the self and our ability to work effectively with others of different social locations. I hope to contribute towards a bridging of the proverbial gap between theory and practice by looking at a real life occurrence in which “unity in diversity,” that is, a politics of political engagement between differently positioned women, was sought and struggled over. How would the Forum project and, more particularly, Mayan women’s participation in it, inform these understandings of the self and their connection to our capacities to join in a collective, political effort? Before proceeding, however, I review

48 “Unity in diversity” has become somewhat of a catchphrase in political circles in Guatemala over the course of the Peace Negotiations. While employed differently for distinct political agendas, the phrase is used strategically by the Pan-Mayan movement to express a demand for autonomous regions for Guatemala’s linguistic communities (deemed nationalities) within a unified Guatemalan state (Warren 1998, Cojti Cuxil
selected feminist theories that constitute the sounding board for my analysis of and reflection on the Forum.

**A Trip down Binary Lane: the Universal-Particular Debate Revisited**

As I review briefly in my chapter on methodology, thinkers from a number of theoretical leanings critique the homogenising tendencies of modernist epistemological approaches linked to the Enlightenment. As alluded to by Werbner and Yuval-Davis, the debates that have ensued are frequently, though not exclusively, framed in binary terms: modernist viewpoints pitted against post-modernist ones, the former associated with defending claims of universality and the latter with plurality. (Ironically, the very terms of the debate have had the effect of perpetuating binary constructions, the uses of which has been a main critique of the modernist approach by the postmodernist position [Weedon 1999]). Variations on the universal-particular relationship and on notions of difference are to be found and discussed with respect to innumerable subjects, such as the self and identity, human rights, the question of culture and social theory, to name a few. In their attempts to explain cases of exclusion within the practices of citizenship or feminism, for example, academics have been induced to theorise the nature of difference as related to, and expressed in, the relationship between the universal and the particular.

According to Young, postmodernists would argue that the suppression (and oppression) of difference to which binaries inevitably lead, not their creation per se, is one of the most egregious offences committed by the modernist approach:

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49 As Weedon reminds us, "The term 'postmodern' remains highly contentious... not all commentators would call Derrida or Foucault 'postmodern' and this is a term that Derrida himself refused when it has been applied to his work on deconstruction" (1999, 100). While a thorough discussion of the complexities or nuances surrounding the definition of postmodernist theory is warranted, it is beyond the scope of this thesis. For the
Postmodernist theorists\(^{50}\) suggest that the construction of any unity or totality (e.g., humanity, the subject, the social system, history) involves the suppression of difference—that is, the reduction of different elements to sameness and the expulsion of some elements to the margins, the outside, otherness. This logic of identity turns difference, understood as relational specificity, into rigid hierarchical, exclusive opposition (Young 1990, 9).

Postmodernists, then, might conclude that unity can be said to exist only at the expense of the particular; difference would disappear, be subsumed under hegemonic notions of the “Truth,” or, in the case of an underclass in the nation-state, be relegated to a marginalized position as the subordinate “Other.” Feminist theorists outside the postmodern camp like Werbner and Yuval-Davis would agree that history since the Enlightenment has been witness to innumerable acts of exclusion in the name of difference. For example, Yuval-Davis explains how “hegemonic ethnicities . . . often have the power to ‘naturalize’ their weltanschauung, usually using their privileged access to the state apparatus. Thus they construct any different ethnicity as deviant in some way or another” (1994, 411). In their more recent volume Women, Citizenship and Difference, Werbner and Yuval-Davis position themselves as part of a broader trend in the study of citizenship that recognises that the specific location of people in society – their group membership and categorical definition by gender, nationality, religion, ethnicity, ‘race’, ability, age or life cycle stage – mediates the construction of their citizenship as ‘different’ and thus determines their access to entitlements and their capacity to exercise independent agency (1999, 5).

A related critique by postmodern and poststructuralist feminism, according to Weir, is an interrogation of the modernist, liberal “concept of the disembedded subject as the free and unfettered author of his destiny” (1995, 263). These strands of feminism, says Weir, argue “that the ideal of self-identity can be understood only in terms of the system of meanings which produces it: a system predicated on a logic of exclusion of nonidentity or difference”

\(^{50}\) Young includes Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard in this category (1990, 9).
The supposedly universally applicable notion of the abstract, autonomous and rational actor is exposed as a particularly Western, liberal, and male view of the self. It dismisses the role of context, e.g., language, in the fashioning of the self and disregards alternative knowledges as inferior or deviant not unlike the way difference is negated in the construction of a “whole”.

While careful not to advocate the unqualified application of postmodernist theory to enhance feminist discourses about difference, Young acknowledges that she has “found postmodernist critiques of Western reason’s urge to totalization helpful for theorizing all the group exclusions and devaluations typical of modern societies . . .” (1990, 9). Certainly the Guatemalan State’s historical marginalization to attempted assimilation of Mayan women is an example of how attempts at creating a unified entity, in this case, the nation-state, can tend toward a disregard or erasure of difference. However, as Young contends, if one were to take the postmodernist critique of essentialisms51 to a theoretical extreme, the subject as a coherent totality would not exist: “But in its zeal to expose the myth of the subject as authentic origin, some postmodern thought completely eclipses the subject” (1990, 13). Weir adopts a similar position with respect to relational and postmodern or poststructuralist feminist critiques of an autonomous subject:

While there is much to be learned from feminist critiques of the abstraction of the individual from the intersubjective relationships and the contexts of power, language, and meaning that constitute us, there is also a danger here of sliding into absurdity. Once we get to the point where we reject any abstraction of the individual from contexts and any postulation of the individual’s capacity for reflection on contexts, we effectively deny any capacity of agents to participate in, criticize, and change those contexts (1995, 268).

51 I agree with Minh-ha that “clear-cut divisions and dualistic oppositions . . . may serve as departure points for analytical purposes but [that they] are no longer satisfactory if not entirely untenable to the critical mind” (1997, 416). Thus, I set up the postmodernist vs. modernist dichotomy to take an analytical position.
Weir also points out that, despite their "otherwise disparate arguments, [both relational and postmodern or poststructuralist feminisms associate] ... abstraction and separation with domination or repression" (1995, 267). In a curious twist of logic, then, postmodern efforts to resuscitate difference within the self could backfire and lead to several possibilities: the subject's theoretical unravelling or inevitable domination by discourse or the other. Mohanty makes a similar point regarding the descent into individualised identity politics to which the postmodern emphasis on relativism and pluralism could lead. Mohanty writes:

One problematic effect of the postmodern critique of essentialist notions of identity has been the dissolution of the category of race — however, this is often accomplished at the expense of a recognition of racism. Another effect has been the generation of discourses of diversity and pluralism which are grounded in an apolitical, often individualized identity politics. Here, questions of historical interconnection are transformed into questions of discrete and separate histories (or even herstories) and into questions of identity politics" (1997b, 69).

Hence, the danger becomes apparent of adopting an overly myopic vision of the particular which rejects the "universal" as repressive; one’s capacity to acknowledge the existence of or affect general, structural constraints on the self or group is adversely affected.

What would a theoretical view of the self situated somewhere in the balance of the admittedly oversimplified dualism "modernist-postmodernist" look like? What aspects would it retain of those represented by the extremes of the modernist/universal and postmodernist/particular binary respectively: an abstract, fixed, autonomous, disembedded, disembodied, rational self vs. a constructed (through discourse including language), embedded, fragmented and fluid "non-self"? Is it possible to conceive of a self which would address the legitimate critiques of relational and postmodern or poststructuralist feminists alike? Finally, what would be the implications for the category "women" and aspirations towards an inclusive nation-state or participatory project?
I attempt throughout this work to make clear the ultimately political goal of this research: to contribute to the ongoing dialogue about possibilities for women’s collective action. Given that the logical extremes of either vision of the self contained within the larger universal-particular debate arguably fails to provide a theoretical framework for working across difference – the liberal self fails to accept the existence of difference and the postmodern “non-self”, the capacity to enter into a non-repressive collective unity - I am drawn to theories that attempt to move beyond the apparent tension between the universal and the particular. My conjecture is that such a move could provide some direction in terms of how to acknowledge and respect difference in tangible, equitable ways without reifying it. In this sense, I agree with Weir’s motivation for developing a model of self-identity:

My attempt to clarify a normative ideal of self-identity comes out of a conviction that we need to uphold a commitment to women’s struggles for identity and autonomy in the context of feminist critiques of defensive atomistic individualism and critiques of the concept of the disembedded subject as the free and unfettered author of his destiny (1995, 263).

I also agree that the critiques Weir mentions merit the kind of consideration they have received by her and others. In a similar vein, Young does not suggest a “total rejection of postmodernism, . . . [but rather shares] the intuition that emancipatory politics needs the notion of the subject in order to name an awareness of oppression and a starting point for resistance” (1990, 13). Might these be examples of “balanced” perspectives that in turn would point towards a reconsideration of the universal-particular debate?

Retaining the Self - Weir’s Model of Self-identity

In my view, Weir, through drawing on the work of Habermas and Kristeva, furnishes an explanation of how the notion of a coherent, yet fluid or changeable self is possible. Moreover, as I attempt to demonstrate, this conception of the self may well establish
guidelines for working across difference. I describe the basic premises of her model of self-identity before moving on to its application vis-à-vis the Forum in the next chapter.

As it relates to my political project, I share Weir's need to retain an understanding of the self "that can be defined as the capacity to experience oneself as an active and relatively coherent participant in the social world" (1995, 264). By combining aspects of the theories of Habermas and Kristeva, Weir conceives of a self-identity that, by virtue of its capacity to act reflexively and intersubjectively,52 straddles the universal-particular divide:

Reflexivity, for the meanings of my relationships to myself and to others come down to me: I am the one faced with the question of who I am and who I want to be. I am the one who must invest my existence with meaning for me; this meaning is generated only through my participation in social meanings, which are intersubjectively constituted. The very concept of a self, of an I, of a me, is something which is constructed only through intersubjective interactions, which take place in contexts of shared meanings (1995, 264).

As the quote suggests, our self-identities, the "T" we present to the world, and the social context in which we interact, are mutually constitutive, although not to be conflated. In other words, we come to be who we are through our participation in intersubjective interactions.

Thus, Weir proposes that "the old opposition between the individual and society, the paradox of social identity and self identity, identity with and difference from others, is a false paradox" (1995, 268). That is not to say that the never-ending project of construction of a coherent self is not inherently conflict-ridden or that it does not involve a certain negotiation between the self and others. As "modern subjects" we are obliged to engage in the task of "identity work"53 – the ongoing process utilising our "capacity to sustain and reconcile multiple and often conflicting identities and . . . conflicting interpretations of those identities"

52 I find Weir's concept of intersubjectivity compatible with its dictionary definition as "a term used primarily in phenomenological sociology to refer to the mutual constitution of social relationships. It suggests that people can reach consensus about knowledge or about what they have experienced in their life-world – at least as working agreement if not a claim to objectivity" (Marshall 1998, 328).

53 Weir defines such "identity work" as "the capacity, and responsibility, to problematize and define one's own
(1995, 265) - as subjects embedded in particular contexts. This engagement is the inescapable "burden" and "privilege" in light of our exposure to others and development in a social world mediated through language (Weir 1995). Importantly, Weir’s conception of the process of "reconciliations" attends to the considerations of both relational and postmodernist feminisms:

Ideally, these reconciliations are achieved not through the imposition of an identity which excludes or represses difference and nonidentity (the concern of postmodernists), but through a capacity to reflexively and practically accept, live with, and make sense of differences and complexity. This capacity is based not on a denial of connections with others (the concern of relational theorists), but on a cognitive and affective acceptance of intersubjectivity and autonomy and of the dependence on and independence from others, which underlies a capacity to recognize when my meaning differs from the meaning of others, and when my identity is bound up with the identity of a partial or general “we” (1995, 265).

By retaining the concept of a coherent subject and avoiding the pitfalls associated with a universal notion of the self (critiqued by relational and postmodernist feminisms, amongst others), Weir’s model of self-identity gives form to the interstice between the universal and the particular. The question becomes to what extent the logic of our individual identity work transfers to our efforts to work across difference? Perhaps a closer look at this mechanism will provide insights into how we enter and sustain collaborative projects with others.

A pivotal aspect of Weir’s model deserves to be reiterated: “Similarly, my identity as this specific individual is constructed through my participation in communities, institutions, and systems of meaning, which organize my interactions with, and through which I interpret my interactions with, the world, my self, and others” (1995, 264). In other words, it is through a socially-mediated process, i.e., our participation in intersubjective interactions through language, that we individuate ourselves or make our own meaning. The very same process, i.e., learning to express ourselves to others via language, both ties and separates us from the meaning (one’s own identity) . . .” (1995, 264).
general or partial "we". How does this happen? According to Weir, certain skills are required to undertake this identity work:

Essential to an individual's capacity to problematize and define her own identity are cognitive and practical capacities for self-knowledge, self-realization, and self-direction, which involve cognitive capacities for learning, for critique, and for organization, and practical capacities for expression, engagement, commitment, and flexibility (1995, 265).

At this point, Weir distinguishes between the contributions of Habermas and Kristeva in terms of their explanations of the mechanisms of reconciliation that we use to create our identities or meanings, crediting the former for his discussion of cognitive capacities and the latter for arguments concerning practical capacities. Weir explains more about the mechanisms involved in the reflexive component of self-identity:

The development of a self-identity requires the cognitive capacity to reflect on who I am and what matters to me, and to organize diverse identities and identity-attributes, into some sort of meaningful narrative or constellation. It also requires the practical, existential capacity to discover and define and commit to what matters to me, to my meaning, while remaining flexible and open to change (1995, 265-6).

Both theorists would argue that our cognitive and practical capacities are enabled by our internalisation of language, a process which involves "taking a position" (Weir 1995). However, for Habermas, "taking a position" - responding meaningfully when it is demanded of us by another's speech - requires exercising our capacity to critique. What's more, "It is this freedom - and this responsibility - demanded of participants in linguistically mediated social interaction, which is the source of individuation" (Weir 1995, 272). If the act of

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54 It is at this juncture that Habermas and Kristeva diverge, according to Weir. Whereas for Habermas, the process of internalisation of social norms and linguistic norms is initially motivated "in response to a threat," for Kristeva the "development of linguistic competence and the development of self-identity through the internalization of sociosymbolic norms is a pleasurable process" (Weir 1995, 277).

55 As I understand Habermas, our capacity for critique (and hence to take a position) stems from the internalisation of the will of the generalized other through language. Through deciding to take the position of the other, we are activating a latent potential for critique (saying yes or no). In turn, this mechanism of critique is characterized by the act of abstraction. When we take a position in response to conflict (or another's speech act), we are "abstracting from [our] particular loyalties to each of [our] different reference persons, to appeal to principles" (Weir 1995, 271). We are thus in effect undergoing a process of individuation. This entire process
"taking position" contributed to the development of our self-identity, and since language by its nature demands this response from participants, then it could be claimed, as Habermas does, that "the development of self-identity is a response to the demands inherent in the structure of linguistic communication" (Weir 1995, 273). For Habermas, we are obliged as intersubjective beings to engage in a process of individuation, or identity work, through our linguistic interactions. Moreover, this identity work goes on throughout our lives and demands the constant exercise of our capacity for critique (and abstraction):

The self-identity of the adult depends on the ability to 'take over and be responsible' for integrating all of the different, often conflicting, positions one takes, into a narrative that is meaningful to others and to oneself. This requires a cognitive ability to resolve conflicts among particular positions by abstracting to more complex meanings, and by reflecting on practices in a process of self-critique (Weir 1995, 274).

While Habermas' interpretation of our "cognitive ability to resolve conflicts" is critical, it is not sufficient to explain the nature of identity work. To complement the Habermasian notion, Weir turns to Kristeva.

According to Weir, Kristeva and Habermas hold a remarkably similar view on the intersubjective nature of identity work. Like Habermas, Kristeva sees self-realisation as possible only in a socially-mediated context: "For the development of individual identity, or individual meaning, is only possible through the expression or realization of one's specificity in language – in a system of shared meanings, through interaction with others" (1995, 276). For Kristeva, however, one is motivated to take a position for affective reasons. Two apparently conflicting tendencies, abjection and incorporation, spur on our development as human beings; abjection corresponds to the drive "which underlies the rejection of dependence on the power of others, the separation of self and other" and incorporation, to the "drive toward both having and being, possession of and identification with others, and continually mediates our linguistic interactions with others when we are called upon to respond.
investment in language” (Weir, 276). Thus, Kristeva seems to argue that we have dual motivations to acquire proficiency in language; we want our heterogeneity or difference (and a certain "independence") to be respected by others while at the same time remaining connected or attached to those others. Thus, unlike the Habermasian self, Kristeva's subject is affectively motivated to internalise the sociosymbolic order. The self is lured by the promise of the gift of meaning – of a means for mediating relationships with primary others and for participating in a larger social world where desires can be satisfied. It is this affective investment in social meaning which underlies the capacity to affectively accept one's own differentiation from others and the differentiation within oneself. It also underlies the capacity to develop an integrated sense of self, which will not dissolve into differences. One is able to realize one's self through the expression of one's "nonidentity" in terms of shared meanings and this expression is mediated through affective investment in discourse with others (Weir 1995, 278).

Expression of our nonidentity or difference through language thus becomes the ingenious mechanism for the simultaneous and mutual satisfaction of our drives towards abjection and incorporation. The process of individuation (satisfaction of the abjection drive) is made all the more pleasurable as it happens through our participation in a shared system of meaning (satisfaction of the incorporation drive). Weir explains further that, “for Kristeva taking a position tends to mean taking a position of identity within the symbolic order, which will allow 'nonidentity' or difference to emerge – to be realized or expressed – thereby producing a new position” (1995, 275). The pleasure of participating in a social world motivates us to express our heterogeneity in ways that others can understand; in the process, we may create new meanings for others or take up new positions ourselves. Our participation provides a safe and necessary space in which to further pursue and accept our nonidentity or difference from others, that is, to reconstruct our unique identities. In coming to terms with our

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56 For Kristeva, this process begins when the child perceives “in some rudimentary way, that the mother is complex and internally differentiated” (Weir 1995, 278) and gets some of her needs met through communication with others.
difference, we experience the value of flexibility (or openness toward difference) and its connection to the creation of new political meaning.

In sum, Weir’s “defensible ideal of the self”, may create and sustain a place for its heterogeneity in a social world through recourse to language and employing a capacity for abstraction and critique:

The struggle to make meaning through attempting to resolve apparent contradictions is essential to the ongoing constitution of self-identity. Since it is impossible to make meaning in abstraction from the practical activity of making meaning for and with other people, the development of self-identity is possible only through the development of a capacity for mutual understanding, within intersubjective relationships. But this means that we have to be able to conceptually abstract from the relationships themselves to the intersubjective meanings which mediate relationships (Weir 1995, 266-7).

Thus, contrary to the supposition of relational and postmodernist feminisms, the act of abstraction does not necessarily lead to domination or repression of the self. As Weir explains through her discussion of Habermasian theory, our ability for abstraction and critique is actually enabled and cultivated by the internalisation of social and linguistic norms. Thus we individuate through the process of forming social bonds. For Weir, “The challenge, then, is not to reject abstraction for embeddedness, but to theorize a capacity for abstraction for detachment, for critique, which is not opposed to but continuous with, and in fact constitutive of, participation” (1995, 268). Drawing heavily on Habermas and Kristeva, Weir fashions a self whose agency actually depends upon and flourishes in a socially-mediated context. Would such a self harbour a potential for negotiating the relationship between unity (connection) and diversity (separation) in the social world? In other words, what are the ramifications for working across difference provided by this model of the self?
Implications for Working across Difference

Before moving on to an analysis of the participation of Mayan women in the Forum, I want to briefly explore some of the implications that Weir’s model of self-identity might have for working across difference. As I discuss, Weir defends a vision of the self as an “active and relatively coherent participant in a social world” (1995, 264). In retaining the concept of a self, Weir provides the initial basis for sustaining a belief in the possibility of working across difference: the existence of a self to attempt such a task. Moreover, Weir’s ideal self is stable, yet fluid; critical of, yet subject to the social world. It is a self that remains flexible and open to difference. Weir looks to Kristeva for an explanation of the affective component of our capacity to remain open to difference:

The strength of Kristeva’s account, for feminism, is her insistence that the affective relationship cannot serve as an end in itself, as a means of producing individual or particular meanings. Rather, it serves as a means of investment in a world of shared meanings, of constituting and experiencing oneself as a participant in that world and of making those meanings constantly open to diversity and change (1995, 278).

We become our unique selves, accept our difference (within ourselves and from others) through the act of participation in a “world of shared meanings”. Once again, we return to the central point that the self’s existence is inextricably intertwined with the social world.

The intersubjective nature of identity work in Weir’s model may have several implications for working across difference, perhaps the most obvious being that the self has the capacity to connect with others. Furthermore, the self can understand and/or integrate difference (of both an intra- and interpersonal nature). This “I-we” dialectic would allow for the formation of collective identities which are flexible, yet constant, like a well-integrated self. The capacity to resolve the tensions or contradictions encountered in terms of our
affiliations, i.e., our individual identity work, may be transferable to conflicts between groups in the sense that a new collective identity must be forged in each individual.

As Weir explains, this capacity to resolve contradiction (or difference) that constitutes our identity work involves being open to sources of contradiction. In fact, Weir suggests that we possess a latent openness to difference that is activated by engagement in identity work, i.e., through application of our cognitive and practical skills such as the capacity for critique and affective attachment respectively. Weir emphasises that “the struggle to resolve conflicts through an openness to difference is essential to the practice of change and the generation of new meaning” (1995, 266). Perhaps not surprisingly, the greater our openness to difference, the better equipped we may become to create an environment which is tolerant of difference. That is, the more open we are to difference, the more invested in and the better we understand our social worlds. In turn, the better equipped and more likely we will be to impact the social order. For Weir, this circular relationship between change effected in the self and in the social world exemplifies the intersubjective nature of individuation. Weir writes:

Kristeva understands individuation in terms of a not-impossible dialectic between system and practice, as a constant process of investment in and internalization of a language system that is constantly transformed through individual and social practices. Kristeva’s ‘subject-in-process’ is a subject who develops and changes through taking up positions, or identities, through an investment in a sociosymbolic order and thereby realizing and expressing her own heterogeneity (and in turn transforming language and society) (1995, 275).

She gives the example of how understandings of feminism, of desire and even of ourselves have changed upon examination. She explains how, in the case of an individual, such "change... could not have happened if she had simply accepted paradox and had made no attempt to resolve it; if, that is, she had not taken either her desires or her commitment to
feminist values seriously enough to attempt to resolve the apparent conflict between them" (1995, 266). Moreover, Weir reminds us that societal change is also brought about by social as well as individual practices, implying that collectivities can be said to take positions and invest in the social order.

What guidelines for working across difference might be derived from our supposed capacity to resolve tensions around difference within or amongst ourselves? For one, this model of self and social identity posits resolution of contradiction as possible, albeit demanding of much diligence by the individual or collective in question. As individuals and as members of collectives, we possess the capacity to take positions and thereby foment changes in society. Another potential implication of this model is perhaps more obvious: difference per se would need to be addressed. This suggests that differently positioned members of a group must aspire to reconcile conflicts in the sense of having sufficient affective and political investment in the dialogical process. If, as Weir posits, our openness to difference is imperative for the resolution of conflict, and thus the generation of new meanings or identities, a pertinent question becomes, What sort of environment or practices would cultivate or facilitate our potential to remain open to difference and hence the generation of new meanings, or newly reconstituted identities? That is, what kind of spaces (and processes therein) should a group of differently positioned women, such as the Forum, strive to create when attempting to work across their differences?

It is my understanding of Weir that reconciliation of contradiction or difference should not be conflated with its erasure (i.e., the agreement may be that differences must be understood and accommodated). Such a reading of identity work risks the return to a theory of essential experiences thereby reducing Weir’s subject to that of the liberal self. Instead,
her model of the self points to the need to focus on providing conditions that are conducive to
dialogue about difference, much like Mohanty’s “politics of engagement”. The need for a
“politics of engagement” arises when differently positioned women or collectivities make
particular claims (often political, economic, ideological and cultural all in one) based on their
difference. Moreover, the theoretical basis for the existence of a socially-mediated self
supplied by Weir’s model logically leads to the theoretical possibility of a collective identity
or category (e.g., “women”) representing real, historically determined social communities.
Furthermore, if we agree that identity work is everyone's burden and privilege, then we must
acknowledge the right of others (at an individual or collective level) to engage in identity
work and claim the resulting self-ascribed identities. Thus, a main condition for the creation
of a dialogical space for (groups of) differently positioned women is the recognition and
representation of self-ascribed identities, collective or otherwise.

The acknowledgement of collective identities in practice would become especially
important for groups (such as Mayan women) which have been marginalised and whose
collective identities have been tampered with by the nation-state. In such cases, it would
become imperative to also distinguish between self-ascribed vs. externally imposed identities
as part of the dialogue across difference. What are the implications of making such a
distinction? How could a forum attempting to work across difference extend due respect to
the former and not the latter? I would suggest that a proper understanding of self-ascribed
identities would require at least two fundamental steps: an examination of the historic power
imbalance (and their current manifestations) that have given rise to constructions of
difference and careful attention given to the voices of marginalised peoples. (Perhaps even
the act of recognition is a step forward in a politics of engagement). Discussions that fail to
explicitly name the injurious labels and their historical origins, such as those about Mayan women discussed in Chapter 2, may inadvertently reproduce the discriminatory practices and inequitable distribution of power behind such labels. On the other hand, confronting past (and present) injustices would lead to a better grasp of the current interrelated needs, interests and identities of the marginalised groups in question and the ways in which such needs might be met.

Clearly, Weir conceives of self-identity as intersubjectively-constituted. As we have seen, she takes pains to clarify her position from the outset. She explains that the ideal of self-identity she defends is not some sort of essentialist ontology, not an idealist conception of an original pregiven authentic self. It is not an alienated individualism severed from connections and solidarities, severed from collective struggles, immune to systems of power and oppression. It is not an attempt to repress or deny the embodiment, fragmentation, dividedness, and multiplicity of human selves, or the constitution of subjects in and through language and power (1995, 263-4).

However, because her concern is to pursue a notion of the self as an active participant in a social world, she does not focus on the limits placed on agency by "systems of power and oppression". At times, in fact, her emphasis on the self as active subject could give the (mistaken) impression that she minimises the harmful effects of such systems. The following quotation is a case in point; she writes: “As a subject who is no longer defined by a fixed position in a social system, I am (relatively) free (or, at the least, I aspire to a normative ideal of freedom) to determine, through my practices, who I am and who I am going to be” (Weir 1995, 264). What about those subjects who still occupy a "relatively fixed position" in their social system? Does Weir's model include a place for these (collective) selves?

Weir's model of self-identity suggests the importance of addressing difference in order to open the path for change. The creation of an environment in which historical power
Imbalances are acknowledged is compatible with her model in that, in so doing, social and linguistic norms could be critiqued and altered, i.e., attitudes can potentially change. However, postcolonialist perspectives like those of Minh-ha and Mohanty could enhance Weir's model of self-identity by emphasising the history of colonialism and its modern day legacies (Minh-ha 1997; Mohanty 1997a, 1997b). Furthermore, the notions of selfhood associated with these perspectives would not view difference as deviance, but instead as something central to the construction of the self. Minh-ha elaborates at length:

Difference as understood in many feminist and non-Western contexts ... is not opposed to sameness nor synonymous with separateness. Difference does not necessarily give rise to separatism. This concept of difference is not what makes conflicts. It is beyond and alongside conflict. This is where the confusion often arises and where the challenge can be issued. Many of us still hold on to the concept of difference not as a tool of creativity to question multiple forms of repression and dominance but as a tool of segregation used to exert power on the basis of racial and sexual essences. The apartheid type of difference (Minh-ha 1997, 416).

When difference is no longer viewed as deviance in a particular society, an interesting development might ensue. The eradication of such constructions of the "other" might also expose (and hopefully eliminate) the justifications for their subordination. While difference should not be equated with inequality, the two concepts are related in a case like Guatemala where inequalities have been perpetuated in the name of difference as inferior (i.e., as Mayan people have been perceived by the ruling elite in Guatemala for centuries). However, through the creation of new understandings of difference, a more equitable playing field may be established. In the words of Minh-ha, "Interdependency cannot be reduced to a mere question of mutual enslavement. It also consists of creating a ground that belongs to no one, not even to the creator. Otherness becomes empowerment, critical difference, when it is not given but re-created (1997, 418).
The crucial question becomes exactly how to expose these processes of subordination in a situation like Guatemala’s for what they may well be, i.e., pretexts for the systematic exploitation of a marginalised people. Similarly to Mohanty, Yuval-Davis describes her commitment to examining the specific contextual circumstances involved in the emergence of any social (or political) category such as women: “I highlight the crucial importance of social and economic power relations and the cross-cutting of social divisions in which any concrete historical social categorization is enmeshed” (1997, 3). Perhaps such a careful review would explain the particular motivations for the creation of a political category like “Mayan women” in Guatemala. Rather than represent the erasure of difference, such categories may well serve political ends for those groups who have had their differences oppressed from without.

However, it must be remembered that even legitimate collectivities may create internally oppressive categories. Mayan women’s restricted roles within the Pan-Mayan or broader women’s movement are cases in point (Warren 1998; Nelson 1995). Nelson reminds us of the “double bind” in which discriminated groups struggling for socio-political inclusion often find themselves: “The need for unity when confronting powerful antagonists with the demand for inclusion may limit a movement’s flexibility in acknowledging internal difference, as the revolution based on class unity resisted Mayan specificity” (1999, 163). At the same time, this kind of essentialising can be a politically expedient strategy when employed consciously by a marginalised group. Lattas explains how this strategy is often part of a formerly colonised group’s project of decolonization: “What is often ignored is the sense of autonomy from the control of the ‘Other’ conferred by images of primordiality and indeed the necessity to have an image of the past if one is to have a sense of ownership of
oneself” (1993, 247). In the context of historical power imbalances as is the case in Guatemala, strategic essentialising can become an act of resistance by a marginalised group such as Mayan women. That is, while indigenous women (or women in general) are not homogenous, they may re/claim a collective identity in order to pursue a political project of equity.

As I discuss, the difference of a particular collective is sometimes oppressed and/or constituted as inferior by a repressive nation-state, such as I discuss in Chapter 2. Efforts to include the marginalised group in projects such as the Forum, must take seriously this history of meddling with self-ascribed identities. These marginalised groups may demand a separate representative space to ensure a relatively unfettered participation in term of the regulation of difference. In fact, if Weir’s model bears out, such a consolidation or strengthening of a collective identity would prepare Mayan women, in this case, for engagement with the broader collective “women”.

On the other hand, there is always the danger of collapsing back into the fragmented world of identity politics. At this point, the intersubjective processes of identification so central to Weir’s model of self-identity must be emphasised. Just as the self can not claim to be completely autonomous or decontextualised, neither can a collective from the larger whole. Furthermore, just as the self is able to “navigate” the self-other or unity-particular divide, so too could a collectivity. In other words, it is theoretical plausible that a collectivity within a larger group could make particular claims based on its difference while at the same time identifying and recognising the common bonds which connect it to the larger whole. In fact, just as the self and its social world are mutually constitutive, a collectivity is partly constructed in relation to the rest of society. Thus, the collectivity must strive to understand
this connection to the "general 'we'" – what Mohanty might call engaging in a broader, more encompassing politics of social recognition.

Once again, our focus shifts to the theoretical need for understanding the processes involved in a "politics of engagement", whatever the outcome, be it troubling, difficult, disturbing, etc. Weir's model suggests that differently positioned members or collectivities attempting to work across difference would need to place their differences on the agenda and engage in a dialogue across difference. It is dialogue, or language, that emerges as the principle mechanism through which collectivities can maintain equilibrium between the self-other, or universal-particular relationship, i.e., solidify their identities and cultivate an openness to engaging with others different from themselves.

In the next chapter, I address the degree to which the Forum facilitated working across difference, for one, by measuring to what extent it reaffirmed Mayan women's political selfhood or their constitution, in UN terms, as a political subject.
CHAPTER 5: PRESENTATION & ANALYSIS OF DATA

As I discuss in Chapter 1, the Forum emerges as a high profile agreement amongst hundreds contained in the Guatemalan Peace Accords. It remains an unprecedented attempt in that country’s history to promote the representation of Guatemalan women in all their specificity in a national, participatory project, a project which would necessarily involve the goal of effectively working across difference between Mayan women and Ladin as. The Forum itself professes to have contributed to society’s larger project of inclusionary politics, as evidenced by the following message in the second of its two National Proposals:

This is an experience of participation that constitutes proof that yes, it is possible to mobilise civil society to organise itself and impact the formulation of public policy through the presentation of proposals, to create democratic mechanisms of local, regional and national consensus while taking into account the richness of our diversity in order to create a unity working for common objectives” (Foro 1999c, 36).

Given that the Forum’s goals and challenges are in many ways a microcosm of the broader project of Guatemala’s reconstruction, I am motivated to glean as many insights as possible from that experience that might be applicable to a more general politics of inclusion at the national level. More specifically, given the historical marginalisation of, and discrimination against, the indigenous populations of Guatemala, and particularly against Mayan women, I focus on the degree to which the Forum might have become a vehicle through which to alter Guatemala’s “social imaginary” in terms of depictions of Mayan women and their role in society. Were historically constructed stereotypes about Mayan women (and their relationship with Ladin as) challenged or further entrenched by the Forum? That is, during its creation and unfolding, were the self-ascribed identities of Mayan women adequately represented and valued? Did the Forum facilitate a dialogue between the indigenous and non-indigenous participants?
In this chapter, I address these and other related questions about the participation of Mayan women in the Forum in relation to discussions in feminist theory about the nature of political selfhood and community and one's ability to work effectively with differently positioned others in the name of a larger political goal. More specifically, I consider the relevance of the implications of feminist theories on the politics of identity and difference - including Weir, Benhabib, Yuval-Davis and Mohanty - to the experiences of the Forum. For example, is Weir's notion of self-identity a useful frame of reference through which to extract and analyse Forum contributions to working across difference? On the other hand, how might Mayan women’s experiences in the Forum inform these understandings of the self and any connection they might have to our capacities to join in a collective effort? What, if anything, do the women interviewed articulate about processes of identification amongst differently positioned women? Do their stories indicate something about the relationship between these processes of identification and possibilities for collective identities? What implication might such a relationship have for facilitating dialogue across difference?

In this chapter, I analyse the data concerning some of the Forum’s different “moments” (i.e., its design, process and follow-up). I present and comment upon the information that six women, all Mayan, shared with me on their participation in the Forum in personal interviews conducted in June 2001 in Guatemala.\(^{57}\) I then summarise what my attempt at merging theory with practice has produced in terms of potential implications for working effectively across difference.

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\(^{57}\) As participants agreed that they wished to remain anonymous, I give each of the six Mayan women a pseudonym. In the interest of ensuring their anonymity, I do not reveal their particular linguistic community. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations in this chapter are from the interviews I did in Spanish and translated into English. I also include “Guiding Themes and Questions for Interviews” as an appendix at the end of the thesis.
The Politics of Identification in the Forum's Creation & Design

As I mention in Chapter 1, the incorporation of the Forum in the Peace Accords was in itself a significant accomplishment for Guatemala's burgeoning women's movement. However, the Peace Accords provided little in the way of guidance about what was to be the Forum's design or process. As Alicia puts it, "Agreement #29 of the Chronology Accord merely required the Government to install a [women's] forum. The agreement was really short . . . and included absolutely nothing about what [the Forum] should do, with whom or what was going to be its objective." How, then, did the Forum's design come to pass? A look at the debate generated by the Forum's design reveals the first of many challenges to realising the Forum's statement of purpose, "to promote "an ample, pluralistic and representative forum . . . for permanent consultation and dialogue, taking into account the diversity of the country that would promote national reconciliation . . ." ((Foro 1999b, 6).

As was confirmed in four of the interviews, the Forum's parallel design structure constitutes a hard won victory spearheaded by the Women's Committee of COPMAGUÁ to guarantee the representation of the indigenous peoples in Guatemala. Her ethnic identification apparent, Monica explains the battle that ensued between COPMAGUÁ et. al. and other members of the CC, including the Ladinás in the Women's Sector of the ASC, over the Forum's design:

At the national level, they were thinking of organising assemblies with representatives of multisectorals by department, in which case there wouldn't have been much participation of the linguistic communities. That's why we had to struggle so hard with the Ladinás

MINUGUA describes this struggle for the Forum's design as a concerted effort by several indigenous women's groups, including the Women's Coordinator of the ACPD, FODIGUA, C'DRO and COPMAGUÁ. This would suggest that, rather than representing a clash of interests between the Government and civil society (i.e., FODIGUA is a Government organization), the debate over the Forum design was drawn along ethnic lines. The Xinca and Garifuna populations are also taken into account by the COPMAGUÁ-proposed design.
about accepting our proposal for the design, that it include representatives by linguistic community and multisectorals by department.

The other two women attribute the initial Ladina stance, though not in such explicit terms, to a longstanding resistance to Mayan women representing themselves in these types of spaces. Carolina is of the opinion that "it was clear in the beginning that [Government representatives and Ladinas] didn't want to include the indigenous population. They explained that [the linguistic communities] couldn't be taken into account because of too many limitations, as if to say, 'how would indigenous peoples be capable [of participating]?''"

Noting such historical resistance to Mayan participation, Ingrid states emphatically that "we no longer want women who don't know our history, women who aren't from the community to continue speaking about us. That's the way it has been ever since the [Spanish] Invasion." However, unlike the Ladina historical stance, all the women I interviewed shared the opinion that the representation of Mayan women according to linguistic communities was necessary in order to reflect the diversity of Guatemala. Ingrid captures this shared sentiment: "It was time that all indigenous women, that is, the wives, elderly, traditional healers and midwives put forth their proposals; that they state their needs in their own languages." The women expressed great appreciation of COPMAGUA et. al.'s efforts to make that happen and were, for the most part, satisfied with the result. (Although Monica and Carolina pointed out that, even so, Ladinas seemed to be overly represented as compared to the linguistic communities taking into account the population represented by each delegate).

The successful lobbying of COPMAGUA et. al. meant that specificity as a concept would be incorporated into, at the very least, the Forum design, through the creation of parallel
spaces for Mayan women and for Ladinas. It would seem that the design agreed upon in the end resonates with the Forum's mandate of creating an "ample, representative and plural" space in which all women could converge and elaborate proposals based on their needs. In this section, I begin an exploration of two main theoretical notions detected from these (and other) passages: the significance of (self-determined, or self-ascribed) collective identities for political purposes; and the importance of their representation in any project with aspirations of facilitating the collective engagement of differently positioned members. These few interview excerpts suggest little doubt as to the immense value placed by these women on their collective Mayan identity and its composite linguistic communities. Furthermore, these women appear to believe that respect for a collective identity (Mayan women) by differently positioned others (Ladinas) would need a tangible translation, i.e., a system of representation that reflected the linguistic composition of the country. In order to fully comprehend the relationship between Mayan women's processes of identification and the resulting collective identities, one must first understand the involvement of Government or institutional interests in the creation and unfolding of the Forum. Thus, before returning to the interviewees' stories about collective identifications (in the subsection, Similarity with a Difference: "Mayan Women" & the Politics of Identification), I turn to the broader theme of the part played by a nation-state in the politics of identification.

Nation-State Interventions in the Politics of Identification

Another issue of great concern to the women that I interviewed is the degree to which urban-based institutional/organisational interests and/or Government involvement in the Forum might have negatively impacted its evolution. Alicia discusses the role of the Peace Secretariat (SEPAZ), the Government body formed in early 1997 to oversee implementation
of the Peace Accords, in deciding the composition of the Forum’s Co-ordinating Commission (CC). She alludes to the appropriation by SEPAZ of initial efforts to construct the Forum:

It was more or less in March and April 1997 when SEPAZ began a series of visits [to women’s organisations]; SEPAZ was the group that finally decided which organisations would integrate the CC. But, the Women’s Sector of the ASC were the ones with the most information, integration and strength in general terms to set this initiative in motion. These women had been involved in the process [to include the Forum in the Peace Accords]; they were much more identified with, much more conscious of the reality of real women’s lives.

Other sources\(^{60}\) reveal the basics of what is undoubtedly a complex story about power struggles between Government institutions and groups from the public sphere, and amongst the latter themselves to shape the Forum’s destiny.\(^{61}\) According to a reliable source from outside the Forum, the institutional interests at stake in these struggles were to have lasting detrimental effects on the Forum’s operational capacity.\(^{62}\) However, I limit my disclosure of this story to that information concerning its general impact on the Forum as a body representative of Guatemalan women in which power was to be shared.

The debilitating effect of power struggles amongst institutions, be they governmental or non-governmental, was noted by Alicia at the Forum’s beginning. She remembers, “Lamentably, not all CC members had the same commitment [to the Forum]. I think there were a lot of institutional interests involved and that at one point, all that [these institutional representatives] wanted to do was neutralise the process.” Alicia goes on to explain that this created a situation in which institutional/political interests of the particular organisations were pursued perhaps at the expense of the Forum’s ultimate objective: to produce unified,

\(^{60}\) See Escobedo Escalante 2000 for details on the Women’s Sector of the ASC’s role in this process.

\(^{61}\) Looming overhead much of this discussion is the larger question of the degree to which the Forum was imposed from without, i.e., by a Peace Process from which much of the population has felt increasingly removed. Based on the general tenor of my interviews and of my experiences with the Forum, I would venture to say that regardless of its original source, the concept of the Forum resonated with many women throughout Guatemala. If anything, as I discuss in the section on follow-up, expectations were generated that exceeded Forum possibilities.
national proposals on women's issues. Moreover, several women interviewed noted the lack of regional representation on the CC stemming directly from the Government's decision concerning the CC's composition. When asked about the degree of representation of Mayan women in the Forum, for example, Irene responds that the design of the Forum is generally adequate, but critiques the CC in comparison to the rest of the Forum:

As far as decision-making goes and all that, I think things were a little different [than the question of representation]. We knew that a Co-ordinating Commission existed at the national level and that supposedly, its members were representatives of large ‘organizaciones de base’, but in practice . . . they were self-appointed or appointed [to the Forum] internally by their own groups. Isn't this somewhat of a deficiency?

Irene refers to the general sentiment amongst her rural-based colleagues that local/regional delegates did not have representatives on the national decision-making body, the CC.

Nine of the CC's ten member organisations were based in Guatemala City (although, Alicia clarified that some of the organisational representatives were campesinas by origin, residing in Guatemala City for employment purposes). The women interviewed reiterated that rural interests were not sufficiently taken into account by the CC. For instance, in addition to their focus on institutional interests, some CC members had little or no experience in the rural areas (Alicia). According to Carolina and Irene, regional Forum delegates proposed early on that the CC's structure be altered to include regional representatives.

(According to the interviewees, the proposal to include regional delegates on the CC was apparently passed sometime in 2000 - I was unable to ascertain the exact date of approval - but had yet to be implemented).

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62 I obtained this information in an encounter in June 2001 with its source, who wishes to remain anonymous.
63 This term literally translates as base organizations, a reference to popular organizations, mass-based groups with appreciable memberships whose leadership represents the entire group. This is in contrast to a small-staffed NGO that works with a target population.
64 Campesino is a term used to refer to a (usually poor) peasant or person living in a rural area.
One major challenge facing the Forum in its attempt to create a participatory project representative of all Guatemalan women becomes apparent: How to bridge the historical rural-urban divide\textsuperscript{65} separating Guatemala City from the rest of the country? The strife over the CC’s composition and, in fact, the very struggle to include the Forum in the Peace Accords were, for all intents and purposes, an urban-based phenomena, following a historical pattern of centralised decision-making in Guatemala. (This is not to say that indigenous women have not been involved at the national level; COPMAGUA et. al.’s effective lobbying is a case in point). Since the vast majority of rural inhabitants are indigenous, decisions made in the capital which fail to account for rural realities tend to exacerbate any inequities between the \textit{Ladino} and indigenous populations.

Perhaps one of the more obvious connections of this scenario to Weir’s model of self-identity (or rather, to its implications) is the question of representation. The concern of the women interviewed with the lack of regional representation on the CC seems indicative of a general discontent with Forum leadership on the part of many Forum participants. (Other factors fuelling this discontent will be mentioned throughout the chapter). Although the Forum (due to the efforts led by COPMAGUA) succeeded for the most part in representing Guatemala’s diverse population of women – no small feat in light of the historical marginalisation suffered by the indigenous majority – it could not remain impervious to historic structural constraints like the rural-urban divide and its associated centralised political jockeying. In agreement with Alicia, Irene points out that not all CC members involvement with the Forum corresponded to a vocation to work with women: “As in our case, there were open-minded [CC members] with real conviction to work with women. But

\textsuperscript{65}The rural-urban divide has come to symbolize the historic marginalization and poverty of Guatemala’s \textit{campesino} population, indigenous and \textit{Ladino} alike.
we heard that of those responsible for other regions, some had economic or political interests, nothing more.” Partly because members did not always put their institutional or political interests aside, the CC continued to be perceived as removed from and unresponsive to regional realities, despite the presence in its ranks of indigenous women from the countryside. Thus, it was never quite able to convert itself into a body representative of Guatemalan women.

A further link can be made to the theoretical need for some degree of affective investment or political will on the part of differently positioned members of a group who might be interested in working across difference. Alicia finds that “it was evident that not all [CC members] held the same interest in or identification with women, and that was our common denominator, the fact that we were all women.” Alicia’s comments imply her belief that the CC process would have functioned better (perhaps adopting earlier the proposal for regional representation) had institutional/political interests taken a back seat to an identification with women.

In a similar vein, Yanet calls for a unified objective for the Forum: “We need to prioritise from amongst the multitude of reasons behind our involvement in the Forum in order to forge a single objective.” But, is there a contradiction in advocating separate representation and spaces for deliberation for indigenous women according to linguistic communities and promoting the need for a project of identification along gender lines? Some initial answers may be provided by a further look at these women’s thoughts on and practices of the politics of identification.
"Similarity with a Difference: "Mayan Women" & the Politics of Identification"

Before turning to an analysis of how difference was dealt with within the Forum, I explore these women’s views on the development of their self (and collective) identities. In addition to showing how these conceptions would validate the logic of the Forum’s design, I hope to lay the theoretical foundation for understanding the link between processes of identification and the task of working across difference. I thus intersperse the descriptions of what were quite poignant remarks made by the interviewees concerning the processes involved in forging their self/collective identities with my comments on the applicability of certain theoretical concepts concerning the processes of identification.

In addition to all having been involved in the Forum in some form or another, every one of the women interviewed had had prior experiences working with women. In fact, Yanet, Alicia and Irene describe these experiences as having contributed to their sense of commitment towards future work with women. I quote each at length, as they touch upon the notion of how identities are constructed in socially mediated situations, an idea that figures prominently in Weir’s model of self-identity. For example, Irene refers to those processes of identification that constitute the basis of our ongoing identity work:

I think that little by little we go along in life creating a consciousness of who we are, what we do and where we’d like to go according to the spaces in which we relate to one another . . . From when I was 19, almost 20 years old, due to the very circumstances of life, my work at the time allowed me to develop first a consciousness of ethnicity, of being Mayan and belonging to [my particular] linguistic community, and then a consciousness of gender. From then on I have identified myself as a Mayan woman wherever I am or may be.
Similarly, Yanet tells of her involvement in seminars on Mayan women in the context of the 500 Years of Resistance Campaign.\(^66\) She vividly describes the atmosphere in those years as one of revolution on the one hand, with nonconformists protesting all the bad things that have happened since the Spanish Conquest, and on the other, of resistance, especially of Mayan women . . . I think this was the best experience I’ve ever had because I think it was a space where the efforts of those who have maintained Mayan culture, [namely, Mayan women], beginning with our traditional dress, language, cultural symbols and oral traditions, were truly valued. In the end, this is a kind of recognition for Mayan women.

While Yanet and Alicia’s work was with primarily indigenous women, Irene’s experience was somewhat unique. She explains, “[My contact with] an organisation with women from different countries helped me to take stock of women’s reality. I knew some things before about the situation of women, but not a lot. But, when we shared experiences, I became more conscious.” In theoretical terms, each woman’s identity seems to became bound up with that of a collective through an engagement in specific social processes of identification and critical reflection. The self’s capacity to affiliate simultaneously with two distinct collectives is most notable in the case of Irene (who later explains her incorporation in the struggle of a particular linguistic community). And, we get a glimpse of the self’s operation as a stable, yet fluid, entity, dependent on the social world and thus able to participate in and shape collective identities. At least theoretically, the possibility would seem to emerge for the Forum to constitute a site for the collective identity work of *Ladinas* and Mayan women.

When I asked the question, “How would you identity yourself,” I was struck by the clarity and similarity of these women’s descriptions of themselves and their communities.

All the women interviewed refer to themselves as Mayan women and then add other

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\(^66\) This campaign included a broad coalition of indigenous groups whose aim was to protest the celebrations in 1992 of the 500th anniversary of Columbus’ “discovery” of the “New World” (See Nelson 1999; Stern-Peterson 1997; Radcliffe & Westwood 1996).
identifications such as their common affiliation with indigenous campesinos from the rural countryside. In effect, they do not separate ethnicity from gender. Monica's answer is a case in point: "I identify myself with my people, that is, I am a Mayan woman... a campesina who works in the countryside, helping people, and I'm also Guatemalan." While identifying also as a Mayan woman, Yanet adds the dimension of the particular: "I believe that I am in reality a Mayan woman, I also recognise that I am part of a linguistic community. But to me, I am fundamentally a Mayan woman."

Given the existence of 22 Mayan languages, like Yanet, each woman identifies her particular linguistic community as a key element of her political selfhood. The internal heterogeneity of the category "Mayan," however, does not seem to cause it to shatter. Carolina provides insight into the ultimate relatedness of social actors in a particular setting with her description of particular processes of identifications, undoubtedly difficult to comprehend for "others" beyond the group. When asked if she identifies more with her particular linguistic group than with the broader category "Mayan," she responds, "As both... our particular linguistic community doesn't differentiate us [in terms of the broad category]; I identify with my linguistic community and also as a Mayan." She goes on to say that what distinguishes many Mayans, whichever their linguistic community, from Ladinos is an attachment to the land and commitment to community life. Carolina is not alone in referring to the importance of both community and land for the Mayan peoples. Yanet explains that the "rural population still maintains a sense of unity, of community spirit."

In fact, Carolina explains that the existence of a Mayan identity for her is predicated on this relationship with the land. Given the current debate about the Pan-Mayan Movement, I asked Carolina to comment on the degree to which a collective Mayan identity can be said to
exist. Her answer, however, is bound by something more besides land: “Well, I deduce
the existence of a Mayan identity] from the term we use in our language to refer to
ourselves. In fact, we don’t say we are Mayans; we say we are sons of the earth.” In her
response, Carolina makes reference to the role of language as the vehicle for the expression
and consolidation of a collective identity, in this case, of Mayans, or “sons of the earth”.
(The assumption is, of course, that a similar phrase and connection to the land exists in the
rest of the Mayan languages). This importance of language as a marker and tool for the
construction of Mayan identity resonates with a notion of language as the device that
intercedes in our intersubjective interactions. The stability for these women of the categories
“Mayan” and “Mayan woman” suggests that they have done the kind of identity work
described by Weir in which a coherent narrative of self is fashioned contextually through
language, but fashioned nonetheless. Moreover, the socially-mediated nature of this identity
is reflected in the simultaneous construction of the self and the collective, i.e., Mayan woman
or Poqomchi woman. Thus, the theoretical possibility of the existence and usefulness of a
category (such as “Mayan woman” or “woman”) has a counterpart in reality which is
meaningful to those who deploy it for politically meaningful purposes. Alicia refers to this
dialectical relationship between the theoretical and actual existence of categories of identity
when speaking about the Forum’s design. She explains:

I think the Forum has in fact strengthened [my identity] in two aspects, in terms of being
a woman, that is, along the idea of gender, and in terms of belonging to a Mayan group
because of the fact that in its very design, it created space for all women. There was
room for everybody who was a woman; and then, there were the different levels, local,

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67 The question of a Mayan identity has been discussed by scholars and activists within and without the Mayan
communities (see Warren 1998 for a thorough overview of the Pan-Mayan movement and those who critique
it). Rather than enter into or give an overview of the debate, I find it more appropriate for the purposes of this
thesis to comment on the processes of identification involved in these women’s experiences of “Mayaness”.
68 Poqomchi is one of the 22 Mayan languages of Guatemala; none of the interviewees are from this linguistic
community.
regional and national . . . on top of that, there's the Mayan element, the fact that there were other Mayan women participating from their level, from a position where they could make valuable contributions.

Beyond their strategic use as a basis for making political claims (e.g., the right to linguistic community structures in the Forum's design), such categories seem to provide a kind of encasement which not only reflects, but facilitates our ongoing identity work, a "space" in which we can invest meaning as we see fit.

After gender and ethnicity, class is recognised by several women as a component of the exclusion and oppression suffered by poor indigenous (and Ladina) women. For example, Yanet gives an account of overarching power structures that have characterised much of Guatemala's history as a nation-state: "In all the years I've been working in development, we've gained a certain clarity that problems of discrimination, poverty and many others faced by women aren't just caused by men, for example, but stem from existing structures in our country, from the domination of certain sectors by an elite group." Monica is more explicit about the link between some Ladina and indigenous women due to a mutual experience of poverty; she considers that

there are poor Ladinas as well. In Guatemala we live in social classes, not only in cultures; I think that when someone is poor, they feel humiliated and devalued, but when someone is rich, they feel privileged. They've been educated, [they feel as if] they have the capacity to do anything. [Like a poor Mayan woman] a poor Ladina doesn't have anything either.

However, class for these women is a point of both convergence and divergence between Mayan women and Ladinas. According to Carolina,

Mayan women are not just discriminated against by Mayan men, that is, from the point of view of gender, but also because of class. [Class oppression] greatly affects us as Mayan women since most of us have few economic resources. Furthermore, the mere fact of being indigenous limits our abilities to better ourselves compared to that of Ladinas; a Ladina can be just as poor as an indigenous woman but experience less discrimination because of the whole question of identity.
It may be that members of the “working classes” have poverty in common; but, as Carolina intimates, all other things being equal, Ladin as are treated better by society in general than Mayan women are. Carolina and others also mention that the majority of Mayan women are poor (and that the majority of rural dwellers are indigenous and the poorest sector in society).

Perhaps Alicia best sums up these women’s views on the similarities and differences between Mayan and Ladina women. She comments that the two groups of women receive “more or less the same kind of treatment” (interestingly, no woman uses the term sexism), but to different degrees: “Even after all these years of struggle for the recognition of Mayan rights and of demands made in the name of gender, the idea still exists that women are second-class [citizens] and, that Mayan women, because we are indigenous, are third class [citizens].” Five of the interviewees concur that “both Mayan and Ladina women are marginalized, but in distinct ways” (Irene). Alongside their common plight as women are significant enough differences between the two groups in terms of identity and overall living standards to make separate categories meaningful. And, while all women would have similar issues with which to contend (i.e., inadequate housing, education, healthcare, etc.), Mayan women would have greater needs in these areas and unique needs altogether due to their ethnic, class and geographical particulars (i.e., the fact that most Mayan women are campesinas and most Ladinas, urban dwellers).

As previously discussed, indigenous women leaders fought hard for and won the right to have Mayan women’s myriad identities (and thus, hopefully, needs) represented within the Forum’s design. These women’s accounts of the processes of identification linking them to a larger collective, be it women, Mayan women or their particular linguistic community, display an affinity with COPMAGUA et. al’s position and corresponding action. At the
same time, the interviewees describe their affiliations with women in general, citing class oppression as a point of convergence (and divergence) between the two groups. The relevance of class oppression as a bridge between ethnicities (and genders, for that matter) suggests that any attempt at a politics of engagement between differently positioned participants should include an analysis of systemic or structural power relations.

What implications might such stories of crosscutting similarities between Mayan women and Ladinas simultaneously juxtaposed by differences have for a model of self-identity? These stories present relatively coherent narratives of self that are capable of recognising (and thus reconciling) similarities and differences between Mayan women and Ladina women. In other words, the processes of identification that these women engage in (and which constitute their identity work) result in the emergence of a stable, yet flexible self. The refusal to deny the existence of their multiple affiliations indicates that these women have been largely able to negotiate any tensions that undoubtedly exist between their gender and ethnic identifications, for example. These stories thus lend credibility to Weir's idea of a self that can integrate difference, a self with multiple, yet inseparable, facets.

Reclaiming Difference – History & the Politics of Identification

Given the co-existence of multiple facets of the self, and hence its multiple collective affiliations, why would the self choose one particular combination of identifications over others? (I have discussed how this might happen in Chapter 4). In looking for an answer, I recall Mohanty's emphasis on a contextual, historical analysis when discussing questions of collective identities or categories. Interestingly, these women's attitudes on feminism may provide insight into the specific, contextual/historical reasons they their having opted to embrace the identity “Mayan woman”.

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All of these women explain that the term feminism conjures up quite specific associations in most Guatemalan contexts; it is generally seen as a Western, confrontational posture vis-à-vis men by groups of women who advocate separatism. Even so, two women expressed a certain embrace of the term. For example, Irene thinks that feminism is the struggle for women's rights and equality between men and women, although many people reject the term and don't really understand it. They think feminism is about not wanting anything to do with men. But I don't agree. We want to feel free to participate, free to express ourselves and to be taken into account when the time comes to make decisions. That's what being a feminist is for me.

Alicia is also sympathetic to a so-called feminist framework. She suggests that the definition of the term feminist is a woman who wants to cause structural changes from the root that would allow equitable relations between men and women . . . Feminism is not synonymous with women wanting to be better than men, [wanting to] replace them or take away their power, as it has been interpreted as being. Nothing of the sort. It's simply an attempt to create positive changes for a better human coexistence.

However, even Alicia prefers to call herself a “non-traditional" woman in order to avoid being misunderstood.

On the other hand, the remaining women expressed their general subscription to the truth contained within the popular connotations of feminism. When asked whether or not she considers herself a feminist (and what the term means to her), Yanet responds:

Not to oppose feminism, but it seems to me that feminism radically separates women [from men] and implies that the struggle [for women’s rights] should be by and for women alone. I don't quite see it like that. I think of society as a body, a body with different parts, each with a specific function . . . that's why we women can't break ourselves off from all relations with men and conceive of them as the 'other' against whom we must fight and win. Perhaps I misinterpret feminism . . . As women, we are part of this body, but we haven’t got enough attention. We don’t have enough [participatory] space and aren’t sufficiently valued as an important part of the body . . . and so the body as a whole doesn’t work properly . . . logically it is the rest of the body’s responsibility to ensure that this part can function adequately.

Yanet is among those who connect her distrust of feminism with the Mayan worldview.

Because according to Mayan cultural beliefs, “no one is indispensable, yet everyone is
important," she explains that men and women would have to work together to repair the body politic. In a similar vein, Ingrid responds:

That's a complicated question, I'm going to tell you my point of view since there are various interpretations [of feminism]. A feminist is a woman who doesn't accept men's opinions; she is an extremist in the sense that she thinks only women can have valid opinions . . . In my way of thinking as a Mayan woman I don't consider myself a feminist . . . because one of our [Mayan] values we can't afford to lose is . . . [the idea of] complementarity or duality."

Both Carolina and Monica add theirs to the voices saying that Mayan complementarity or duality is an ideal not sufficiently reflected in reality, but one to which Mayan communities should continue to aspire. Carolina suggests that

If we wish to strive for equality as women, we would need to think in communal terms . . . in fact, we'd be at a disadvantage because [equality] would mean doing everything a man does, and men lead distinct lives . . . the way to be focused on gender issues would be to value what women do in the community in real life.

Without calling it as such, she has put forth equity, as opposed to equality, as a central and challenging component of complementarity.

How do these women explain the discrepancy between the ideal of duality and the lived experiences of many Mayan women? According to Yanet, "this polemical theme always comes up; Are the conditions we live in as Mayan women a result of the Conquest or part of Mayan culture?" Monica is among those who identify the Conquest and its legacies as deeply implicated in current gender relations amongst the Mayan people:

With all the destruction and the Spanish Invasion . . . much of [the notion of duality] has been lost now that we're following the Western way . . . due to occurrences like the war, all the discrimination [against Mayans] . . . and colonisation and all that. Like it or not, the practice has been partially lost . . . although not altogether.

In addition, Carolina provides a more precise explanation of the effect of this "Western way" on Mayan women:
The discrimination between men and women – since men are also discriminated against because they are poor and indigenous - is like a chain, no? I see it as a chain because in the end, there are reasons why [a Mayan man] comes home and beats [his wife]. He arrives with a weight on his shoulders because he's undoubtedly been mistreated himself; society, for its part, provides the model for what kind of man he must be.

Both Yanet and Alicia acknowledge that Mayan gender relations were probably not perfect prior to the Spanish Invasion. But, thereafter, “a lot of situations occurred that added to the internal problems of the Mayan population . . . and accentuated the discrimination against Mayan women” (Alicia). They argue that certain cultural patterns, including Western individualism, at odds with the Mayan values of harmony between men and women and community were imposed on the Mayan people from the time of the Spanish Conquest to the present day.

In their stories, these indigenous women articulate a strong identification with their ethnicity (and indigenous male counterparts). This ethnic identification is firmly anchored in a shared history; these Mayan women display a profound allegiance to Mayan men based in part on the sufferings, exploitations and discriminations of a common past. However, their stories also reveal a strong affiliation along gender lines, hence their subscription to the identity category "Mayan woman". The very notion of duality or complementarity acknowledges a mutually dependent relationship between these women’s gendered and ethnicized self (and collective) identities: within the Mayan worldview, Mayan women’s difference is not to be degraded, but valued for its contribution to the whole.

Does the role played by the Mayan concept of duality or complementarity indicate something about the way that collectives in general engage in (or aspire to engage in) identity work as discussed by Weir? I suggest that this notion is an example of a social norm that is internalised by individuals as part of their ongoing process of identity work. What’s more,
these women's stories show that internalisation can involve a capacity to critique. Those women who do ascribe to the social norm of duality recognise that in reality, Mayan men do not always respect Mayan women's differences. They are not blind to the discrimination against Mayan women within their own communities, but nonetheless remain committed to their ethnic identifications.

Their different "takes" on feminism notwithstanding, these women share a commitment as Mayan women to struggle for, as they would see it, two interrelated causes: respect for indigenous peoples and indigenous (and Ladina) women both within and without their particular communities. Their ethnic identification based on a shared history (pre and post Conquest) with Mayan men shapes their socio-political identities and the kind of political work around gender that they are willing to practice. While acknowledging the imperfections of existing spaces for ethnic resistance, these women may perceive their commitment to the Pan-Mayan movement, for example, as important given the reality of continued discrimination against indigenous people in Guatemala. Furthermore, the (outward) strategic essentialising of their Mayan identity by indigenous women may sometimes serve political purposes.

At the same time, they do not eschew the opportunity to cultivate their gender affiliations with non-Mayan women, as is obvious by their involvement with the Forum. That is, their self-identity and the associated processes of identification at work seem to leave room for an affiliation with Ladinas, a recognition of and concern for gender relations extending beyond

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See my discussion in Chapter 2 of KAQLA and its critique of both the Pan-Mayan and (heretofore Ladina, urban-based) women's movements as adequate spaces in which Mayan women can represent themselves and their needs.
those of their own communities. However, for Mayan women, this concern must be couched in terms of their identity as *Mayan women*.

*The Forum & the Politics of Identification Revisited*

By way of review, I summarise the major points covered so far regarding Mayan women’s engagement in processes of identification exemplified by their experiences of the Forum’s creation and design. The stories told by these women reveal the immense importance of their ethnic affiliations to their self/collective identities. (The fact that they supported COPMAGUA et. al.’s proposal for parallel structures is further proof of this connection). Moreover, their depictions of the processes of identification behind those affiliations confirm the relationship between self and collective identity provided by Weir’s model of self-identity. In other words, because identities are constructed (via language and discourse) in a socially mediated context, self-identity often becomes bound up with that of a collective. In the case of Mayan women, this collective identity is based on both a shared history of oppression with Mayan men and its modern day legacies (e.g., discrimination against Mayan women). With this historical context in mind, the usefulness of the category “Mayan woman” for making political claims seems evident.

While openly acknowledging the value of their gender affiliations (with other Mayan women and *Ladinas*), these women are also painfully aware of the difference ethnicity can make. Thus, highlighting specificity in the form of representation along linguistic community lines would become important to them for at least two reasons: first, the need to acknowledge and disrupt the general, historical power imbalance between Mayans and *Ladinos*, including the multifaceted historically-implemented strategies to regulate Mayan identity; and second, the need for a safe space in which Mayan women could proactively
dictate the parameters of their own identities and needs, and re/construct and/or reaffirm their self-ascribed identities. At the same time, however, the need (indeed, right, as Weir and others might argue) to be recognised in their difference does not preclude for these Mayan women the possibility of working together as women.

Based on the information shared by the interviewees, I would conclude that the Forum's design (with the exception of the CC) adequately reflected the wishes of what would be most Mayan women: to participate in the Forum starting from their unique socio-political positions in Guatemala. By establishing representation along linguistic community lines, i.e., a separate space for Mayan women at the local level, the Forum's design facilitated the participation of Mayan women in their specificity. The "mixed" spaces (with Ladinas and Mayan women) at the regional and national levels presented a space in which existing gender identifications might be given expression and new ones might emerge. Thus, the Forum's design displayed respect for the importance of both ethnic and gender identifications for Mayan women. As I mention in passing, several women had the perception that participation in this way (i.e., via parallel structures which later unite) served to fortify Mayan women's identities both as women and as Mayan women. What transpired in these spaces in terms of processes of identification? In what ways did they facilitate the participation of Mayan women from their unique positions of self-ascribed difference? How, if at all, was the existing level of collective identity amongst Mayan women affected by the Forum process at this level? I now turn to an examination of the Forum process at the local and national levels from the perspective of the women interviewed.
Practising a Politics of Identification at the Local Level

As discussed in the previous section, if only by virtue of its design, the Forum made unprecedented headway in facilitating a meaningful encounter between Ladin as and indigenous women in Guatemala. By providing separate representational spaces in the form of linguistic community structures, the Forum displayed a commitment to the principle of respecting Mayan women’s self-ascribed identities, which I suggest as one of the first steps towards working effectively across difference.

In this section, I focus on the processes of identification at work in the local and national levels\(^7\) in order to assess the degree to which Mayan women (and others) were actually able to (first) participate from their unique positions in order to (later) work across difference. More specifically, I ask, Given the historical power imbalances discussed in Chapter 2 and in the previous section, did the Forum processes help to consolidate Mayan women’s collective identities in preparation for a convergence into a single national assembly of differently positioned women? I suggest in the forthcoming section that another of the important first steps towards facilitating dialogue across difference is attention to the provision of an unregulated space in which such collective identity work might transpire.

*The Forum at its “Best”*

There is consensus amongst the interviewees that the Forum “worked best” in terms of the representation and participation of Mayan women’s identities at the local (followed by the regional) level during its consultative stage. As I mention briefly in Chapter 1, this stage of the Forum began in the Spring of 1998 with the first round of consultations on women’s

\(^{7}\) I do not focus on the Forum’s regional level due to minimal information gleaned thereof in the interviews. The thoughts that were shared suggest to me that the regional level was less problematic than the national and less influential than the local in terms of its impact on Mayan women’s participation and on questions of
socio-economic issues. In terms of sheer numbers, the initial consultative process was remarkably successful: over 25,000 women participated (Foro 1999b). For Yanet, the consultative process created a “space in which the opinions on [women’s] development of women from the most remote corner [of Guatemala] are heard.” As for the quality of the participation, Ingrid has this to say about the consultative process:

the first level [workshops] with the local committees were more relaxed, above all because they were in the everyone’s first language . . . at this level, decisions were made freely, nobody was excluded, humiliated, or discriminated against . . . there was some discussion and a little trouble with the proposals, but all in all they were well formulated at this level . . . and were passed on, containing everybody’s input, to the regional level.

One aspect of this process stands out in terms of the degree of respect accorded to Mayan specificity, that the Forum provided a historic opportunity for indigenous women to participate in their own languages. But, unfortunately, as Carolina says, “the CC provided inappropriate [methodological material] to work with the linguistic communities, mostly because it was written in Spanish and there was no time to translate it” (see also D’Arcangelis 1998). Having reviewed this educational material myself, I can attest to its rather unsuitable nature.

It would seem that indigenous women worked well in spite of this limitation, and that, as a result, the Forum’s consultative process and associated preparations has had a profound effects at the local level. Not least, as Monica describes, is the enhancement of some Mayan women's knowledge about women’s and indigenous rights and an associated assertiveness:

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71 The first stage of the consultation process involved local delegates from each linguistic community and multisectoral structure (plus the local committee members) who convoked as many women as possible from their communities to participate in workshop on women’s socio-economic issues and (during the second consultation), on women’s civic and political participation. The results were written-up and then synthesized into regional proposals by the Forum delegates in each region. Two national assemblies were held (in November 1998 and in late 1999) to formulate and approve national proposals on these broad themes. See Marroquin 2000 for more information.
I think [the Forum] has benefited them because they now know their rights, they know about [their right of] participation . . . you see this strengthening effect on women in some communities where [Mayan women] have managed to get projects approved . . . they also claim their rights, speak about these rights . . . [and] no longer allow themselves to be discriminated against, not even by their husbands."

Similarly, Irene describes an “interest in organising that was awakened in women” by the Forum. This is not to say that indigenous women haven’t been organising themselves for some time, as I mention in Chapter 2. However, as Monica explains, the difference this time is that indigenous women (and women in general) have been recognised by the State as protagonists in their own right:

For the first time in I don’t know when, the Government of Alvaro Arzú\textsuperscript{72} has promoted the participation of [indigenous] women at the national level . . . There were protests by women and children before the signing of the Peace Accords, but they weren’t publicly recognised. But since [the Forum] is part of the Accords, making sure it happens reflects well on [Arzú], although he didn’t do anything, the women did! Maybe that’s why the UNDP arrives at such a grandiose conclusion; because this really is the first time women have been able to add their voices [to the public debate] and have a say about their problems.

Perhaps the Forum’s most important legacy at the local level is the kind of re/awakened interest in participation alluded to by Irene. Certainly Alicia would agree. In fact, she cites this spirit of participation spurred on by the Forum as it’s most significant contribution to the lives of indigenous women:

The great majority of women appropriated the Forum process as their own; thus, the most important [effect of the Forum] has been to plant a seed in each one of these women, in each local and regional structure . . . these women now say to the CC, ‘whether or not the Forum exists at the national level, we’re going to continue; [the CC] came and lit the spark and now we’re going to continue’.

\textsuperscript{72} Alvaro Arzú was elected President of Guatemala in 1996 for the Party for National Advancement (PAN), a party with neo-liberal leanings. He lost in the 2000 elections to the Guatemalan Republican Front (FRG) candidate, Alfonso Portillo; the FRG is best described as a right-wing populist party, although it is currently wracked by internal power struggles between the more liberal-leaning Portillo and the extreme rightist, Ríos Montt.
Many of these indigenous women have not let the opportunity pass. For example, a number of local linguistic community structures took it upon themselves to register indigenous women to vote prior to the 1999 elections (Ingrid). Moreover, 17 new organisations have been created within the context of Forum activities, several of which are active at the departmental level (Mayén & Reiche 2000; MINUGUA 2001).

At the same time that these women appreciate the potentially lasting effects of the Forum on women’s participation (of both the self and collective categories) at the local level, they also present valid criticisms, many aimed either directly or indirectly at the CC. The single most frequently expressed complaint by the interviewees which implicated the CC was the sporadic and inconsistent communication between CC members and regional delegates (all interviews; D’Arcangelis 1998; Mayén & Reiche 2000). Perhaps the greatest logistical challenges facing the Forum’s operation were relatively stringent financial and time constraints. On this, Yanet says:

Perhaps in the Forum’s preparatory stage there wasn’t enough time [to do justice to each level] of the consultative process, from the community to the municipal, from the municipal to the departmental, and from the departmental to the regional. I think this was purely a question of the limits of time; had their been assemblies of women in each community, the problems [described in the proposals] would have been much more representative. I don’t mean to say that they weren’t representative, because I think that they were. However, the problem then and the problem now is that there isn’t enough

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73 Criticisms of the CC can be summarized as follows: sporadic and inconsistent communication with the regional delegates; limited time, funds and personnel; lack of appropriate material for linguistic communities; partisan interests; centralised decision-making and urban focus; until recently, lack of regional representation; lack of clarity concerning the Forum’s long-term goal; current crisis in terms of mandate and membership; and internal discrimination. See D’Arcangelis 1998; Mayén & Reiche 2000; MINUGUA 2001 for more information.

74 Time constraints were imposed by the country’s political context at the time, namely the congressional and presidential elections of November/December 1999. The CC aimed to complete the consultation process and produce the national proposals while the Government was still under PAN-control; because the Peace Accords had been ushered by the PAN administration, it was perceived (and probably rightly so) as more invested than other parties in the Accords’ compliance. Without information on the Forum’s total budget, I can not comment adequately on the financial constraints mentioned, but will say that UNDP direct funding to the Forum was heavily supplemented in many local and regional cases by other institutions, particularly the UN Verification Mission in Guatemala (MINUGUA).
time to discuss issues in each community. But maybe I have unrealistic dreams. A lot was accomplished.

Thus, although this experience in indigenous participation far outshines those of a non-existent past, many more women could (and would) have been involved, had the Forum process not been under relatively serious financial and time constraints (Alicia, Yanet, Ingrid and Carolina).

Limitations notwithstanding, the Forum can be seen on the whole as having provided an opportunity for Mayan women to reflect on their identities as Mayan women, and thus as having reinforced their political selfhood. For Irene, “Although... the [Forum’s] principal objective was to prepare proposals for the Government; in a sense, working on these proposals did allow us to reflect on our identity as Mayan women.” Based on her personal experience, the Forum’s linguistic community structures, by facilitating participation in discussions about Mayan women’s problems, needs and solutions, reaffirmed and “strengthened our identities because [they] took into account the different ethnic groups that exist... I think the Forum reaffirmed my identity in both ways, as a woman in general and as a Mayan woman.” (Note that Irene refers to how the Forum’s design accorded a certain respect to Mayan women’s unique socio-political positions in Guatemala). Monica makes a similar connection between the Forum process and identity work; participation in the Forum, and in her particular case, the extensive consultations with la base, provided an indirect opportunity to reflect on identity:

Because we were looking at... central themes, social and economic development, judicial reform and women’s civil and political participation - we went from municipality to municipality to see firsthand the situation of indigenous women - I think the Forum did reaffirm our identity as Mayan women... but, not just the Forum; as indigenous women we feel even more strengthened by the Indigenous Identity and Rights Accord.

\[75\] La base refers to all women at the community level who could be part of the Forum’s consultative process.
Carolina is the most tentative and critical in her response. She thinks that there were local and regional encounters which permitted Mayan women from different towns and/or linguistic communities to take note of their common realities, but that these produced limited, insufficient gains in terms of Mayan women’s political selfhood:

“Since there hasn’t been any follow-up . . . we don’t have a clear idea of what the Forum is doing. On the other hand, there are women’s groups in the region, but each group works as best it can, but not in a united [coalition anymore] . . . [The Forum] gave us an opportunity to analyse our problems, but not the theme of identity” (Carolina 2001, 20).

What’s more, for Carolina, the Forum’s current impasse at the national level stands to undermine any advances made by the Forum in general.

Carolina is not alone in her doubts about the Forum’s future. (I discuss the question of follow-up and the possible repercussions on Mayan women’s political selfhood in a subsequent section). The issue of follow-up aside, however, her comment reveals the need for a careful reading of the notion of identity work, including a consideration of the ethnical implications of supporting “others’” identity work. Would Carolina or Irene deny that conversations about the needs, problems and solutions of a particular community might constitute identity work at the collective level? Probably not. Moreover, I don’t think they would be particularly concerned with disputing this connection. As it happens, in the case of Mayan women, their needs are tied in general to a history of oppression; it seems likely that a collective discussion about their situations strengthen their collective identity. More to the point, at least for Carolina, is that Forum activities did not provide enough time for a significant strengthening of Mayan women’s political selfhood.

Yanet sheds additional light on the dilemma presented by apparently contradictory perceptions about the Forum’s effect on Mayan women’s political selfhood. While she feels
that the Forum has reaffirmed her identity as a woman in general and as a Mayan woman in particular, when asked if hers is a generalizable experience, she hesitates to give an unequivocal affirmative response:

The majority of compañeras76 that comprise la base of the Forum are from rural communities and have little formal education; their needs are distinct as is their organisational experience . . . In the national CC, however, there are a lot of women . . . from the capital who have a different level of education and organisational training which affects their way of thinking. They identify with certain ideologies and political parties. Thus, I couldn’t say that mine is a general experience. Nonetheless, I don’t think I’m the only one [whose identity as a woman and as a Mayan] has been reaffirmed. There are many other women who would attest that [the Forum] is a valid, important space.

Her statement indicates that the specific impact of the Forum would be contingent upon the particular circumstances (including the social norms) and existing identifications of the members of the community in question. For example, we have seen that the degree to which each structured “worked” was dependent on a multiplicity of factors, including the degree of CC support received. It makes sense that the impact would vary from place to place. (At the same time, Yanet indicates that certain common circumstances between communities do exist, i.e., amongst poor, Mayan campesinas and urban Ladinas respectively).

To understand the ethical implications of supporting another’s identity work, we must first return to theory. Weir describes the intersubjective processes of identification which use language or discourse as their medium. The essence of our identity work is found in the ongoing process of reconciliation of contradictions and tensions (which, again, is not to be equated with their disappearance) in the social world; this is how we would produce and maintain a coherent narrative of self. Moreover, while the exercise of language supposes identity work, it does not guarantee the result will be the construction or maintenance of a coherent narrative of the self. (In fact, Weir contends that “many - probably most - of us fail

76 The word companera/a has a wide variety of meanings such as classmate, roommate, partner, workmate, etc.
to successfully develop coherent and meaningful self-identities and typically err either on the side of rigidity and defensiveness – a failure to question and criticize – or on the side of mushy indistinctiveness – a failure to abstract from particulars and resolve contradictions" [1995, 274]). From a theoretical perspective, then, the significance of the Forum’s consultative spaces does not lie in their actual effect on Mayan women’s identities (or my capacity to predict, identify or understand those effects), for there are no guarantees. But, promoting a particular outcome for the identity work of “others” directly contradicts the goal of respecting the self-ascribed identities of such “others”. Such a focus could constitute an act of domination on the part of any outsider, precisely the kind of risk relational and postmodernist feminisms warn about. One ethical way to facilitate the participation of women from their unique positions (e.g., Mayan women at the Forum’s local level), might be to facilitate a relatively unregulated space in which processes of identification, whatever their outcome, could proceed as these “others” saw fit.

What might an ethical posture on the part of the nation-state look like in this situation? In contrast to the problem of State interference in the Forum’s design, this is an example of the State’s omission of its responsibilities. In this case, the data suggests that the State would need to help create and sustain spaces for the strengthening of Mayan women’s political selfhood and for dialogue between Mayan and Ladina women, without dictating the parameters of their internal processes.

As it happens, the women interviewed agree that these local workshops were generally not interfered with by the CC, much less by the State itself. (Indeed, delegates wanted more “positive” interference on the part of the CC in the form of better communication and training, and more State funding). Moreover, the consultative processes met one of the key

In this case, it signifies a relationship with a sense of camaraderie similar to colleague or comrade.
criteria for constituting relatively free, unfettered spaces for Mayan women's identity work: all interactions were in the Mayan women's first languages. In Weir's model of the self and in the worldviews of Mayan women, language is a vital expression of and mechanism for the survival of both self and collective identities. At the same time, however, as Carolina emphasises, indigenous identity (and thus, indigenous difference) was not a theme per se of the consultative agenda. Perhaps had it been a focal point of the discussion, Mayan women would have made even greater gains in terms of their collective identity work.

Thus, despite limited time and resources, it would seem that the Forum did positively affect Mayan women's political selfhood. As Yanet exclaims, "For the first time ever, as indigenous women we have risen up and made public pronouncements about our problems; we worked collectively to make people aware of [these problems]." Perhaps even more importantly, the local consultative process constituted a relatively autonomous space in which indigenous women could consider their problems and forge solutions in a "relaxed" atmosphere mediated by their own languages. But what about the national level? Might Mayan women's processes of identification been relatively unhindered at the local level only to be forcefully regulated in the national assemblies?

**Difference Matters: Identifications & Working across Difference at the National Level**

The Forum's national level processes would seem to be the most likely spaces to have, "through the incorporation of indigenous women, promoted an unprecedented intercultural encounter in the country, between women from different cultural origins, yet with shared problems" (Mayén & Reiche 2000, 48). In light of conclusions such as this one from a report commissioned by the United Nations Development Program, a closer look at what transpired at the national level becomes that much more intriguing. Was it a space conducive to
working across differences as the UNDP report contends? What are the theoretical implications of what occurred at the national level? By way of comparison and contrast, I now turn to the interview's perceptions of the Forum process at the national level, i.e., the National Assemblies.

**Attempts at Dialoguing across Difference**

What kind of participatory atmosphere was created at the national level? Both Monica and Carolina attest to the fact that there was no overt discriminatory treatment against indigenous women (by Ladinas) in the assemblies. But, for Carolina, despite its substantial efforts to include Mayan women, the Forum (the CC in particular), was not to remain impervious to Guatemala’s history of systemic discrimination:

[The Forum] helped us as indigenous women to take note of just how far we could go in this type of situation. It was a good attempt at finding ways to incorporate the participation of the Mayan people, ... but, discrimination was still evident, even within the CC ... [the Ladina CC members] didn’t allow the indigenous co-ordinator sufficient room to act according to her abilities and limitations. It was more like, ‘Ok, I’ll give you the job, but I’ll be checking up on you’ ... That is, they give you a chance to do the job, but a certain way, which is their way ... no, I never approved of this attitude. If you’re going to give someone a [participatory space], it should be with no strings attached.

According to Monica, many Mayan women felt intimidated in the presence of their *Ladina compañeras* at the first National Assembly. She explains that this was partly due to insecurities regarding their command of the Spanish language (although all spoke some degree of Spanish since delegates at the regional and national levels were required to be bilingual), which in turn were related to questions of inequity in Guatemala’s educational system:

The majority of the indigenous delegates aren’t professionals and ... had difficulties with the ‘technical’ language used at the national level. Take me, for example, I had barely completed Grade 6 ... we Mayan women hardly spoke during the First National Assembly, but little by little we learned ... and that’s the way it has to be, even if you
have to look up words in the dictionary in order to give an appropriate response, because one is representing a whole linguistic community!

Picking up on the theme of representation, Ingrid adds that “representing Mayan women at the national level is an historic event for me, but one that has been very, very difficult, especially at the beginning when we were negotiating the Forum’s design . . . It was hard to get [the Ladinass] to agree to the participation of Mayan women as such.”

However “subtle”, manifestations of racism are powerful reminders of the extent to which historical power imbalances around ethnicity often impinge upon present day gender relations in Guatemala. They also denote the overarching systemic barriers that have faced the Forum in its commitment to facilitating a collective project amongst differently positioned women in Guatemala. The following discussion of dialogues about difference which occurred in the Forum should be seen in light of these formidable challenges. I provide just a few examples to illustrate how far the Forum has come (and, as Carolina would add, “just how far indigenous women could go” within it) in terms of providing effective dialogue across difference.

While Monica credits the strides made by indigenous women in enhancing the quality of their participation, Ingrid describes how (Ladina) women respected these efforts over time. She cites the example of the CC where ethnic relations actually improved over time. Ingrid feels that at first, the Ladina members took advantage of their higher levels of education and monopolised the “mixed” spaces: “Initially it was [discriminatory], but then people learned how to be more respectful of difference - especially in terms of education levels - and the [technical] facilitators explained things as many times as necessary in simple language.” In the end, a certain mutual comprehension was established amongst Forum delegates in general, as Ladinass became sensitised to indigenous women’s realities (Ingrid 2001).
Another example of successful dialogue concerns ideas on natural medicine put forth by indigenous women in several regions. They wanted this theme to be included under health concerns in the Forum's final proposal on socio-economic issues which would be presented to the Government. Ingrid explains that the indigenous delegates' lobbying efforts around natural medicine represent broader efforts "to rescue a cultural process." According to Monica, the health theme in general brought to light instances of indigenous women's specificity. Despite the existence, for her, of significant differences between Ladina and indigenous women in terms of health care, Monica finds that Ladina women were open enough to including indigenous perspectives on health in the final proposal: "Well, it's not as if [the Ladinas] were in agreement [with our position], because they weren't, but in the end, there was not a single theme that they wouldn't accept." She continues,

We [indigenous women] have really united so as to understand ourselves, and [also] to understand the [different] necessities of the rural and urban areas without anything being excluded. Rather, together [with Ladinas] we made one proposal so that in the end everybody's needs could be met. So we talked [until] we understood each other and agreed, 'ok, let's include that point,' and that's how the discussions went.

Ingrid concurs, describing how indigenous women and Ladinas "reached consensus on the majority of points. The few on which consensus couldn't be reached, went to a vote."

Two contentious issues requiring a vote were abortion and the classification of prostitutes as "sex workers." In short, two polarised positions emerged along ethnic (and geographic) lines: urban Ladinas were pro-choice and in favour of outlining "sex worker" rights in the proposal; rural indigenous women were not pro-choice\(^7\) and opposed any terminology that might sanction prostitution. Alicia recalls:

\(^7\) Because none of the interviewees described the Mayan position as pro-life, I hesitate to use that term. Also, based on my perception of events at that National Assembly (it was the only one I attended), I would say that the indigenous position was not couched in pro-life terms, but rather as a reaction against the Ladina proposal.
“Sex work”, or prostitution, as the case may be, also provoked an intense discussion like abortion. As indigenous women we were adamantly opposed to [calling prostitutes “sex workers”], arguing if we are trying to make claims as Mayan women, we can’t struggle for something that we consider an indignity against women . . .

My perception of events at this First National Assembly corroborates these women’s views on the heated nature of the debate on both of these themes. I would add that the initial facilitation by an urban-based Ladina actually exacerbated the situation, causing each side to entrench their positions. When asked if and how the assembly resolved the debate, Carolina responds:

The debates were very confrontational for us. Everyone defended the position that corresponded to their reality. In the end, I think we met each other half-way. Although, [after that] a [working group] systematised the proposals and I imagine made decisions about what to include or omit based on political considerations.

I received contradictory opinions about the success (and actual content) of the debate’s outcome, but one thing was clear: dialogue was the process used to attempt its resolution.

Can a conclusion be drawn about the degree to which the Forum facilitated working across difference? On the one hand, Ingrid claims that the Forum delegates were able to mobilise and act around a common politicised identification as women; they were ultimately able to draft and present unified proposals to the Guatemalan Government. She states:

I think having to present a united front before the Government made it clear that we shouldn’t fight internally amongst ourselves . . . that’s when we thought about it and decided to practice what we call multiculturalism . . . it behoved us to make united demands; and so in the process of reaching consensus, we respected diversity for the first time in history.

On the other hand, regarding the aforementioned contentious themes, Carolina recalls that “we reached an agreement at some point that perhaps wasn’t altogether satisfactory, but, what can you do, it was really hard [to reach].” She also expresses doubts about the

78 Upon reviewing the National Proposal on Social and Economic Development, I discovered that abortion does not figure into the text, although the term trabajadoras del sexo (“sex workers”) does (Foro 1999b). Carolina’s
appropriateness of the Forum as a space in which to attend to diversity of the kind talked about by Ingrid: "[The assembly process] was too hurried to permit the necessary level of analysis . . . we worked overtime and had no space to exchange ideas, experiences or do anything other than sit down to systematise (the proposals), rush around and produce a document." Carolina’s view appears to stand in stark contrast to that of Ingrid’s.

The examples and comments I cite, particularly those of Carolina and Ingrid, lead to contradictory conclusions about the Forum’s capacity to deal with difference at the national level, assessments which in turn reflect the large theoretical dilemma discussed by feminists (and this thesis). To what extent is it possible for a group of differently positioned women to work collectively without their differences (i.e., those contained within their self-ascribed identities) being subsumed by the collective? Carolina might say that it is possible, but that, in the case of the Forum, neither sufficient time nor space was provided for Mayan and Ladina women to work out their differences (or discover their similarities). Carolina finds that the Forum didn’t contribute much towards the strengthening of bonds of solidarity between Ladinas and Mayan women:

No, [solidarity wasn’t strengthened] because the consciousness-raising work [we need to do] with Ladina women can’t be done overnight . . . [these issues] can’t be resolved in two or three assemblies held in the capital . . . that’s not to say that all Ladina women discriminate . . . but we also can’t be overly optimistic and say that the Forum has resolved our problems and we have achieved ‘interculturality’ . . . the Forum wasn’t the appropriate space [to do this work] because it was so rushed and conflictive. I think there should be other spaces of discussion and analysis of women’s realities” (Carolina 2001, 19).

Even Ingrid, who initially appears to conclude that the Forum was an example of a successful “intercultural encounter” (Mayén & Reiche 2000, 48), clarifies her position. She says it was a successful beginning, but in the end, Mayan women’s identities weren’t respected enough
(she calculates that they were respected a mere 20%!). Her take on the Forum's version of multiculturalism corresponds to a thinly veiled respect of difference arising more out of time constraints and circumstance, than an affective, political commitment on the part of Forum delegates. Both relational and postmodernist feminist fears would appear vindicated. The possibility of a common objective seems to evaporates or to subsume difference in its wake. Does this imply that we need to accept the irreconcilable nature of some conflicts, including those that emerge within our selves? Moreover, does this shatter any possibility for the realisation of Weir's ideal: a coherent narrative of the self? What about the supposed capacities of Mayan women to reconcile the inevitable tensions presented by their gendered and ethnicized identities?

In spite of her disappointment concerning the Forum, particularly concerning the lack of devotion on the part of some CC members to women's issues, Alicia remains convinced that the Forum provided an opportunity for Mayan and Ladina women to work towards a common goal without compromising their self/collective identities: “I was strengthened by the fact that we were all, from our different positions, taking actions directed toward a single objective.” Even more optimistic than Alicia is Yanet, who classifies the Forum as “a space that allowed us to get closer to the realisation of a dream that many [indigenous and Ladina] women have had . . . [it has been] an opportunity for those of us who always wanted to do something for the female population . . . still with our differences, but interested in resolving the problems we face as women.” Her statement implies a belief that pursuance of a common cause or goal (or coherent self, for that matter) by a group of differently positioned women is possible and does not inevitably lead to the eradication or domination of the differences between them.
History, Political Engagement, and Social Positions in the Balance

Some interesting notions about difference put forth by the interviewees may lead us (and theory) towards a better understanding of our capacities (or lack thereof) to work across difference, whether internally or externally. For example, let us review Carolina’s thoughts on difference from a previous section of this thesis. I conclude that at the local level, despite the difficulties, the Forum provided Mayan women with an opportunity to reflect on their identities as Mayan women, and thus reinforced their political selfhood. However, as Carolina point out, indigenous identity (and thus, indigenous difference) was not a theme of the consultative agenda. Carolina makes another point regarding difference, but this time in reference to the consultative process at the national level:

Difference per se was not a topic of discussion, that is, there was no theme on the reasons why discrimination exists between Ladinases and indigenous women. These themes emerged but weren’t discussed enough to get to the bottom of the problem; discussions of every topic were too superficial throughout the Forum process (Carolina 2001, 19).

Carolina seems to shift her emphasis to another kind of difference, distinct from social or ethnic difference linked to identity. She refers more to the historically different (i.e., discriminatory, unequal) treatment received by indigenous women (and men) at the hands of the State compared to that received by Creoles and later, Ladinos. Thus, she seems to be suggesting that it is important for historical power imbalances between Mayan women and Ladinases to be addressed overtly so that they might be understood. Similarly, Irene thinks that the ultimate success of an intercultural encounter would be the eradication of racism and inequity or inequality, but that this takes time and necessitates addressing differences (Irene 2001, 10). These women’s emphasis on the historically-determined difference (i.e., marginalization) of indigenous people in Guatemala points to the need, theoretically
speaking, to avoid conflating difference (i.e., of the kind associated with questions of identity), with inequality (of the kind instituted by power discrepancies).

At the same time, these two concepts are intimately linked in the realities of Mayan women. As I discuss in Chapter 2, Mayan “difference” has been historically constructed as inferior by those in power in order to justify the continued domination and exploitation of the Mayan people. Yanet explains that:

It’s one thing to be considered different, a distinct human being; the Mayan population and Mayan women are distinct. But, this difference is not always seen as good, as simply different from something else, but rather is considered inferior. There’s an element of inferiority and superiority. The other situation I see behind this is a problem of power . . . it’s as if [Ladinas] feel threatened; they are afraid they will lose space when that moment finally arrives in which differences don’t matter, when we see each other as equals regardless of skin colour or clothes” (Yanet 2001, 8-9).

How could inequity and difference (and any relation between them) be discussed in order to ensure equitable participation of the differently position members of a collective? In this case, it seems important for Mayan women to be able to articulate their difference as an entry point into a conversation about historical power imbalances, not as an exercise in identity politics of the separatist sort. Moreover, by focusing on the history of their oppression (and thus their historical specificity) in a dialogue with Ladinas, Mayan women would be advancing the practice of a “politics of engagement” as discussed by Mohanty. According to Mohanty,

Historicizing and locating political agency is a necessary alternative to formulations of the ‘universality’ of gendered oppression and struggles . . . This universality of gender oppression is problematic, based as it is on the assumption that the categories of race and class have to be invisible for gender to be visible (1997b, 69).

For Mohanty, such a politics becomes, in fact, an attempt to work across difference while aiming to steer away from universalising explanations of gender oppression that would dismiss the agency of the so-called “Third World woman”.

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It seems, then, that another vital step towards respecting the self-ascribed identities of differently positioned women (or groups) in a collective (in this case, Mayan women), would be to address any historical power imbalances that might have resulted in the construction of difference as deviance. However, as several of the women interviewed point out, attention to difference and its relation to systemic hierarchies of power does not indicate a recognition or denial of similarity or the need to work collectively. On the contrary, Irene gives an example of how a look at difference can ultimately reveal points of common interest:

I think [the Forum] was a successful [intercultural encounter] ... but there hasn’t been any follow-up, no chance to continue to look at Ladina-Mayan relations ... I think what we need are more space in which to work on these differences, to work on changing our mentalities, or to talk about what affects us ... it’s not just indigenous people, Ladinas also feel discriminated against and marginalised. It’s a matter of providing more spaces and continuing to analyse these issues (Irene 2001, 10).

When asked how the Forum affected Mayan-Ladina relations, i.e., if it helped to establish or strengthen a solidarity between Ladinas and Mayan women, Irene then answers that “somehow the Forum made both Ladina and indigenous women conscious of the fact that we are equals, but, that lamentably, there is a system of preferences in place that creates inequality” (Irene 2001, 9). Yanet would agree:

I think one way to increase solidarity amongst women even with all our differences, is to learn about them, to come to know and understand that we are distinct, but that as such we suffer problems that are, if not the same, well, are similar. I think this consciousness can be acquired through learning about each other’s realities (Yanet 2001, 19).

These comments point to the possibility that in a context like Guatemala, dialogue about difference may be necessary for the identification of those similar positions occupied by both Mayan women and Ladinas in the nation-state. Indeed, since places abound in which historical injustices are implicated in everyday notions of difference and power imbalances,
this strategy may be applicable to many projects which would attempt to work across difference.

*Forum Follow-up: Mayan Women's Political Selfhood in the Future*

At the time of the interviewees, all six women agreed that the Forum was not functioning as a cohesive institution. Irene explains that

There is hardly any communication with the CC . . . perhaps they didn't think ahead about follow-up. So, what we see happening is that proposals were made, presented to the Government and there they've stayed with the CC. Maybe it's a question of politics, you know, every organization has its political interests. I think it's a little hard for the CC members to take political action as women; they may have to follow the party line of their organization. It's as if this has limited their work on the Forum's follow-up. The way we see it is that the Forum really was an opportunity to strengthen the women's movement at the national level. But, seeing it stalled is very worrying (Irene 2001, 6.)

Once more, this time in while commenting on the Forum's insecure future, Irene makes clear at least some Mayan women's interest in cohering a national movement of women, *Ladina* and Mayan alike. In a similar lament regarding the Forum's next steps, Carolina invokes the more encompassing political identity "women" while at the same time mindful of Mayan specificity:

[Even though the Forum] provided an opportunity to bring indigenous women together to discuss our problems and propose solutions, the biggest problem we have is [ensuring that] concrete actions are taken to resolve these issues. Sometimes much time and energy is invested in these types of activities . . . a host of proposals now exist . . . Will the Government take these proposals into account or make new ones? If the Forum's effort isn't valued, that will be one more sign that women's work is not taken into account (Carolina, 2001, 16).

Carolina also expresses the desires of Mayan and *Ladina* women alike that tangible improvements in women's lives will result from this unprecedented experiment in participation. In fact, the Forum's mandate has recently been revamped by virtue of the latest amendment to the Chronology Accord; it can now take certain actions to follow-up on
Government compliance with the Peace Accord agreements related to women (MINUGUA 2001). In light of this new mandate, MINUGUA seconds the calls of the interviewees to provide the Forum with enough resources to do the job:

To respond adequately to these responsibilities, it is imperative that [the Forum] receive political support, and be endowed with institutional mechanisms and associated resources. Its actions need to be accorded legitimacy so that it can give effective attention to proposals and recommendations ... the CC’s composition should be reformulated ... although last year was inactive and debilitating for the Forum structures due to a lack of strategic planning and follow-up, the Forum nonetheless constitutes a national network with significant potential in terms of [facilitating] the practice of citizenship (MINUGUA 2001, 37).

The jury remains out as to whether or not the Forum will be able to continue as such. What is certain is that much remains of the multifaceted work it has undertaken, particularly in terms of facilitating dialogue across difference in a country where such lines have historically never been crossed. Its future aside, the Forum stands as a testament to the commitment of many Mayan (and Ladina) women to an ongoing struggle for their political selfhood as Mayan women yet together with their Ladina sisters. Ingrid confirms this sentiment:

[Different identifications] were formulated at the Forum’s different levels ... [one of them was] an identity as Guatemalan women, women drawing up a unified proposal. But, there were also [the separate identities] of being indigenous women and non-indigenous women ... and again, that of being Guatemalan women (Ingrid 2001, 19).

Given the analysis of the Forum’s historical context and the associated complexities around gender, ethnic and class identifications, how might it (or a similar space) enhance the facilitation of such a collective project in the future? What final lessons might be gleaned from this experience for feminist theories on the politics of identity and difference? First, I suggest, as might Benhabib, that political claims based on a certain kind of difference (i.e., the historically based discrimination against Mayan women) do not (and indeed, should not) separate that group from the larger whole (i.e., Guatemalan women). Because of historical
power imbalances, certain groups may request and require time and resources for the consolidation of a collective identity which has been oppressed due to that history. However, the creation of such a relatively unregulated space would not need to preclude work across difference with the larger collective.

It would be in such a "mixed" space, like the national assemblies of the Forum, in which the difficult task of engaging in heretofore-uncharted processes of identification would get underway. As Weir points out, it is only through our exposure and openness to difference that we can exercise our agency, our capacity for critique and thereby challenge and change the social norms under which our society operates. I agree with Weir that the generation of new meanings depends upon one's openness to difference. However, as I discuss in Chapter 4, Weir seems to assume a kind of level playing field between differently positioned women that simply doesn't exist in Guatemala, (or anywhere, for that matter). Nonetheless, if modified to embrace the importance of a contextual analysis that accounts for histories of oppression, Weir's model of self and social identity could be quite useful to a space such as the Forum. For example, if Mayan women were able to articulate their stories and be heard by their Ladina compañeras, the new meanings generated may well serve to shatter historical stereotypes of difference, thus moving forward towards true respect of self-ascribed identities. (On a more practical note, such dialogues around historical difference may have improved the quality of the final Forum proposals in terms of the level of specificity of Mayan women's needs being included). Moreover, such collective identity work between Mayan women and Ladinas would constitute the engagement in processes of identification that could lead to new visions of political selfhood for all involved.
In the final analysis, however, true respect for an "other's" difference as defined by that very "other," in addition to involving the application of skills like dedication, patience, and hard work over a substantial period of time, will require addressing and ultimately altering those systemic power imbalances which have so often turned difference into bad thing. I end this chapter with a message from Monica which I think captures the realistic appraisals of and hopes held by many Mayan (and Ladina) women for the Forum, the women's movement and for "intercultural encounters" in general in Guatemala:

I think these processes have to run their course, because these [discriminatory] practices didn't develop overnight, but over the course of 500 years. As a result, it's not easy to [understand and respect these different] experiences, our ways of being on the earth; it's going to be difficult for us to truly unify ourselves . . . although it's no one's fault, not of the [Ladinos] living now and not ours, but rather a question of [historical] circumstances . . . it's as if we must yank out the roots and plant something new . . . [in the Forum] even though we've been able to understand one another, these root causes must be resolved before we can truly unite (Monica 2001, 24-25).
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS

Mayan people in general and Mayan women in particular have been historically excluded from full participation in the socio-political processes which constitute the Guatemalan nation-state. Moreover, as I discuss in some detail in Chapter 2, the exploitation of and discrimination against Mayan women is perpetuated by the use of racist and gendered constructions of their roles within society. In light of this historical oppression of Mayan women, the representation and participation of Mayan women in the Guatemalan National Women's Forum (Forum) represents an unprecedented event in this country's political landscape. The Forum emerges within the context of the Peace Accords and thus represents an exercise in the creation of an inclusionary nation-state, a principle goal of those Accords. That is, given its fundamental aim of representing Guatemala's differently positioned female population, the Forum becomes a microcosm of the larger challenge of nation-state re/construction. I have argued that certain insights into meeting this broader challenge may be gleaned through a closer examination of the Forum experience.

Independent from conjectures about the Forum's long-term effects on Guatemala's "social (and political) imaginary" (Monzón 2001), this much can be said: "It was the first time that Mayan women have participated as representatives of their people and that is taken as a success" (Monica). I suggest that Mayan delegates took their representative role seriously and in effect, were able to convert the Forum into a space in which they could make their unique ethnicized and gendered claims as Mayan women. Mayan women leaders put much effort into crafting and ensuring the adoption of a design for the Forum along linguistic community lines. In turn, the design became an invaluable foundation for the Forum's capacity to respect the specificity of Mayan women’s socio-political identities.
However, the kind of respect for difference sought for by Mayan women in the Forum (and in other sites of resistance), must be understood in historical terms. The data suggests that the position of Mayan women is not to reject broader attempts to work across difference, but rather to seek redress for the historical limitations to participation they have faced and to shatter the hegemonic discourses regulating their marginalised position in the nation-state. Theirs is a struggle based on historical power imbalances, that is, on their lived experiences (and collective memories) of systemic injustices in the social, economic, political and cultural realms. The political relevance (indeed, the necessity) of a collective identity, i.e., of “Mayan women” is validated within such a historical context. The movement for the recognition of difference on the part of these women (within and beyond the Forum) channelled through the socio-political identity “Mayan women” develops precisely because their particular difference has been subject to high levels of repression by and within the Guatemala nation-state.

Thus, the Forum also presents an example of an attempt to work across (historically entrenched) difference in Guatemala. For the first time in history, Mayan and Ladina women gathered together to fashion unified, national proposals regarding the realities of Guatemalan women. These documents were completed and presented to the Government; and, much of their content has been included in the Government document commonly referred to as the Equity Plan (Gobierno 2001). The consultative processes, particularly at the local levels, actively engaged thousands of Mayan (and Ladina) women in a reflection about their needs as women and as Mayans. Despite the many limitations to participation at this level (most prominent among them being financial and time constraints coupled with the Forum’s increasingly centralised, unresponsive Co-ordinating Commission), the Forum has positively
impacted the lives of many Mayan and Ladina women across the country. I would agree with the following impression of the Forum obtained from the 2000 report commissioned by the UNDP:

As a space of consultation, discussion and collection for the proposals and demands of the diverse sectors of [Guatemalan] women, the Forum constitutes an unprecedented exercise in Guatemala’s history. This space permitted the organization of new groups and opportunities for participation at the regional and local levels. It generated an ample mobilisation at the national level and promoted activism in rural areas (Mayén & Reiche 2000, 47).

Such local level activism includes the launch of new organisations, voter registration projects and successful fundraising endeavours for local development projects (D’Arcangelis 1998, Mayén & Reiche 2000).

But what of the manifestation of those historic power imbalances of the Guatemalan nation-state within the Forum? Were Forum delegates able to challenge the stereotypes of Mayan women associated and perpetuated by those imbalances? What are the theoretical implications provided by the Forum’s creation and unfolding in terms of the facilitation of working across difference? What vision of the relationship between “unity and diversity” (e.g., a coherent narrative of the self and its composite - potentially conflicting - identifications) is revealed by Mayan women’s perspectives on their interactions with Ladinas in the Forum? (Though based largely on an analysis of the interviews I conducted in June 2001, my perceptions are also influenced by my personal interactions with Forum participants as a UN human rights observer and later, as a technical consultant with the Forum).

The Forum was, by any assessment, a unique political experiment to foster greater participation of Mayan and Ladina women alike. As I discuss, however, it was a project facing enormous limitations, some endemic to Guatemalan reality, like a colonial history and
the urban-rural divide, and others particular to the Forum, such as the partisan interests of certain CC members. Despite these difficulties, the Forum did open up a space for dialogue between Mayan and *Ladina* women, a space that could not have been imagined only two decades ago.\(^79\) Theoretically speaking, it was a space in which differently positioned women were essentially asked to manoeuvre within the illusive terrain of unity/diversity, in this case, where unity refers to a coherent political collectivity, and diversity, to the heterogeneous social locations of its members.

These Mayan women tell stories of complex, inextricably interrelated social and political identifications replete with elements of gender, ethnicity, class and geographic location, amongst others. These tales bear out many aspects of Weir’s model of self and social identity, particularly in terms of the mutually constitutive relationship between the self and the community it posits. These women’s stories depict the existence of a stable, yet flexible self, formed in socially mediated contexts through language. (Thus, these Mayan women were insistent that the Forum design reflect linguistic realities at the local level). Moreover, Mayan women seem to have done Weir’s kind of identity work; they have fashioned coherent narratives of the self and are conscious of the historically based need to do so. (In fact, the emergence of a coherent narrative of the self/collective is imperative for making political claims). On the other hand, in their recognition of discrimination based on class and gender, they display an understanding that identity categories are not mutually exclusive and thus defy rigid definition (i.e., *Ladinas* can be poor). One theoretical implication for working across difference suggested by these stories is that such work is possible, if difficult. The

\(^{79}\)The years 1981-84 are considered to be the most violent and repressive of Guatemala’s 36-year internal armed conflict. During those years, it is estimated that over 400 Mayan villages were razed and their indigenous inhabitants either killed or displaced by the Guatemalan Army (CEH 1999).
inherent dialectical relationship between self and collective identities coupled with our capacity for critique means that we can forge new political identities under the right circumstances.

Another particularly important theoretical implication for working across difference is the importance of acknowledging historical power imbalances between differently positioned members of a collectivity. Although Weir stresses that openness to difference is fundamental for the generation of “new meanings” (i.e., in the realms of social and linguistic norms), she refers to the process we would employ to make sense of, as Benhabib might say, difference as a normative reality. However, for these Mayan women, difference while not conflated with inequality, becomes closely related to it. These Mayan women argue that, in the course of their historic marginalisation by dominant powers for over 500 years (since the Spanish Invasion), their “difference” as a people has been oppressed and constructed as inferior. Thus, in terms of the Forum, one important step in respecting their socio-political difference would have involved a greater focus on the history of racist domination and oppression. One concrete result of such a focus might have been the inclusion in the final Forum proposals of a more accurate description of Mayan women’s needs and demands before the State.

As a whole, the experiences of these Mayan women in the Forum indicate that rather than maintain a gaze on questions of identity per se, we might do better to focus on what certain identifications tell us about the realities in which they are embedded. These Mayan women’s accounts of participation in the Forum point to the existence of deeply politicised identifications which in turn reveal a history of hierarchical power relations in the nation-state. (One demand that arises is the need for a relatively unencumbered space in which Mayan women can participate in their own language). Perhaps then, a focus on processes of
identification would steer us away from the equally dangerous traps of identity politics and of universal understandings of the self that deny difference altogether. We might stop attempting to answer questions about the identity of the “other” (or to interfere with its construction), and start looking at why and how certain identity claims are made. In so doing, we might remain open to difference, as Mayan women and Ladina women have attempted to do in Guatemala.
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APPENDIX 1: GUIDING THEMES AND QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEWS

Theme 1 – Mayan Women and Identity

- What is your background (where do you come from, are you married, what is your job, etc.)?
- Do you have a history of participation with organizations (women’s or other) in your community or elsewhere?
- How do you identity yourself? Does this change depending on the circumstance? Do you identify more with urban or rural women?
- Do you consider yourself a feminist? What does this term mean to you?
- How did the Forum affect your identity or that of your linguistic community? Did the Forum strengthen your identity as a Mayan woman, or as a woman?

Theme 2 – Issues of Mayan women’s representation and exclusion in Guatemala

- What are some of the similarities and differences in the treatment received by Mayan women and by Ladinas in Guatemalan society?
- How do Mayan women’s needs compare to those of Ladinas?
- In what ways have indigenous women been discriminated against in Guatemalan society (politically, socially, economically, etc.)? Can you give me examples of how have you or other women in your community have experienced discrimination?
- What are some of the racist attitudes or beliefs about Mayan women that exist?
- How is the treatment of Mayan women today linked to historical processes of colonialism?

Theme 3 – Issues of Mayan women’s representation and exclusion in the Forum

Representation and Participation

- Why was the Forum created? What was your role in the Forum?
- In general terms, how would you classify the representation and participation of Mayan women in the different levels of the Forum? Which level functioned best?
- How were the realities of rural Mayan women’s lives taken into account in the planning of the Forum?
- Were your interests and the interests of Mayan women important in the discussions?
- Was everyone who participated in the Forum treated fairly and equally (with respect)? Or, were certain women privileged over others?
- How was the relationship and communication between the different levels of the Forum?
- How could Mayan women’s participation been improved in the Forum’s different levels?

The Results

- Were your needs and demands - or those of your community’s - included in the final proposals?
Have you or has your community benefited by your participation?

Theme 4 – Theorizing a politics of engagement

- How did you work out any major differences between women or between groups? (E.g., issues at first national assembly of abortion and sex-workers).
- Did the Forum give you an opportunity to talk about differences or similarities between Ladinan and indigenous women or between rich and poor, etc.?
- Overall, do you feel that the Forum was a positive experience for Mayan women?
- How did the Forum affect the relationship between Ladina and indigenous women? Did it contribute to the establishment or strengthening of solidarity between the groups?
- Do you agree with the UNDP conclusion that the Forum was an “unprecedented intercultural encounter”, etc?
- How could it have been an even better intercultural encounter?
- In the end, to what extent were Mayan women’s identities respected?