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*Ezra*

**Between Words and Worlds: Navigating Historical Memory,  
Meaning-Making, and Transformative Possibilities Through  
Critical Language Pedagogies**

A Research Paper

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines how historical memory is produced in a multilingual, transnational Spanish and K'iche' language school in Guatemala. Building on critiques of institutionalised, transitional justice-oriented memory practices, and on growing scholarship exploring pedagogies as potentially transformative means of engaging with violent pasts, this study contributes to a gap in the literature where the potential of transnational language education remains largely under examined. Through an in-depth qualitative case study, the research analyses how memory is engaged and made meaningful, how multilingual and transnational dynamics mediate pedagogical encounters, and what tensions and possibilities emerge shape the distinctive approach of the chosen school. Drawing on one month of participatory research as an enrolled student, the findings show that memory work takes shape through situated, relational and continually negotiated practices in sustained dialogue and interaction with a visually, politically grounded environment. By centring subjectivities shaped by organised resistance and drawing attention to the layered temporalities of violence and struggle, the school unsettles dominant victim-centred memory frames and transforms teaching into an active practice of remembering in the face of state-led efforts to forget. Multilingual and transnational dynamics introduced both constraints and openings for expression, listening and relation, making partiality and collaborative meaning making central to the pedagogical process. Overall, this study demonstrates how critical, multilingual language education can become a meaningful site of everyday memory production and historical-political engagement, opening possibilities for the cultivation of more critical awarenesses and dispositions from which more historically conscious and justice-oriented forms of action may begin to emerge.

## **Relevance to Development Studies**

This research speaks to core debates in Development Studies about justice, power, memory, education and the everyday processes through which social action and change become possible. By critically examining how historical memory is produced through the micro dynamics of a multilingual and transnational language school, the study shifts the attention away from dominant state-centred and liberal approaches to transitional justice that prioritise institutional reform and punitive accountability over structural change. It shows how meaning-making, critical historical and political consciousness and creative forms of agency can emerge in situated and relational ways, highlighting how pedagogical communities navigate the enduring effects of violence and resist efforts to silence histories that don't align with state-endorsed narratives. Whilst grounded in the specific dynamics, practices and tension of one multilingual, transnational school in Guatemala, this thesis speaks to wider debates at the centre of more critical approaches to development. These include how education becomes a site of memory production, how power influences transnational and multilingual pedagogical encounters, and how critically informed language learning can open or constrain possibilities for more transformation-oriented engagements with histories and contemporary expressions of harm – crucial to imagining enacting more just futures.

## **Key words**

Memory production, transformative justice, language education, critical pedagogies, Guatemala

# Introduction

Reckoning with mass collective violence is an ongoing political, ethical, and social challenge. It concerns addressing the immediate harms and confronting the effects that reverberate across generations as communities seek to sustain daily life and pursue justice long after violence is deemed formally 'over'. Central to these struggles is the question of how people remember and make sense of what happened - personally and collectively. Historical memory, understood here as individual narratives grounded in lived experience (Bellino, 2014:132), is widely regarded as key to breaking cycles of violence (Snyder, 2021:106). Yet, there is little consensus over how best it should be acknowledged, preserved or mobilised in pursuit of reparative or transformative aims. The politics of memory is one shaped by intersecting debates around narration, power, victimhood, identity, 'truth' and justice. Across contexts shaped by such violence and for those implicated in its eruption through colonial, political or economic entanglements, remembering and learning from difficult histories remain deeply contested and politically charged terrains.

Mainstream, institutionalised approaches to memory have typically sat within the liberal paradigm of transitional justice, employing mechanisms such as truth commissions, archives, museums, monuments and peace education programmes. Whilst these have contributed to acknowledging harms and asserting rights to memory, 'truth' and justice, they have also been widely critiqued for their limited transformative reach (Gready and Robins, 2014:341). Implemented in top-down and state-endorsed ways, these mechanisms often seek to close off the past rather than tackle its enduring effects in the present (Miller, 2021:851) and are frequently dominated by hegemonic, state-favoured narratives (Kochanski, 2021:370). Consequently, they often entrench the forgetting of marginalised or subversive experiences and structural conditions underpinning more overt expressions of violence.

Informal and grassroots memory practices like community archives, oral histories, murals, song, weaving and performance have long been central to how people make sense of and respond to violence (Rugo and Parish, 2025:2). Particularly where the state seeks to instrumentalise 'memory' to obscure its own role in perpetrating harm or silence marginalised narratives, such forms of community-grounded remembrance constitute important acts of resistance, identity reclamation and collective meaning-making (Schultze-Kraft, 2022:47). Increasing scholarly attention highlights how these initiatives can bring non-hegemonic narratives to the forefront, open up more pluralistic

engagements and link historical violence to its contemporary manifestations (Cohen, 2020:4; Rauschenbach et al., 2022:10). These developments signal an academic shift towards recognising the more creative, relational and affective dimensions of how memory and justice are (re)imagined and produced in everyday life (Lynch et al., 2022:1).

Building on this shift, a growing body of literature examines how pedagogies – enacted both within and beyond formal ‘classrooms’ – can offer more restorative, dialogic and transformative means to engage with violent pasts in order to imagine more just futures (Espinal Meza et al., 2021:6; Sriprakash et al., 2020:6). This research foregrounds the role of creative, non-institutionalised pedagogical spaces and practices as potential sites of memory, repair and transformative justice (EdJam, 2024). However, the potential contribution of language education to this landscape remains largely under-considered, despite such environments facilitating encounters wherein narration, dialogue, translation and interpretation continuously occur, making them potentially significant grounds for alternative engagements with historical memory. It is this conceptual and empirical gap that grounds this study.

This thesis examines how memory production unfolds in a multilingual, transnational educational space through a qualitative case study of a collectively run Spanish and K’iche’ language school for non-native speakers in Guatemala. I refer to the school as “QTA” to respect its anonymity. Founded in the late 1980s amidst the 36-year internal armed conflict, QTA intentionally combines language instruction alongside critical engagement with Guatemala’s historical, social, political and economic realities, making memory an implicit but central part of its pedagogical approach. Situated within a national context shaped by recent histories of civil war and genocide, as well as enduring inequalities and injustices, QTA provides a particularly salient site of inquiry. Struggles over how the past is narrated and engaged is entangled with ongoing experiences of repression in Guatemala. The military actively weaponised memory as a tool of destruction during the war, forcing survivors of state terror to “forget what they had seen, experienced, and knew to be true” (Hatcher, 2009:142). Contemporarily, grassroots memory activism is a vital counter to state denialism, impunity and pressures to forget to move forward (Gellman and Bellino, 2019:18). Although not a formal memory project, QTA sits within this broader landscape, representing a distinctive site where historical memory, language learning and critical pedagogies intersect. Its

transnational composition, with foreign students learning in a context shaped by US intervention (McAllister, 2010:276), adds further complexity to its approach.

These dimensions make it a compelling case through which to explore the central question of this research: **How does QTA function as a site of memory production and what does this suggest about the potential of critical language education as a platform for transformative change?** My interest in this case is driven not only by the specificity of its make-up, context and pedagogical approach, but also because I studied there myself for five weeks in 2024 and was struck by how it shifted my personal understandings of power, perspective, and language. Whilst conscious of how these impressions inherently shaped how I conducted this research, they are also what drove me to examine QTA more systematically and in-depth.

Rather than assuming its emancipatory or transformative nature, this study adopts a critical, micro-level lens to examine how memory work is variably interpreted, negotiated, and enacted in QTA. It draws on one month of participatory research as an enrolled student in July 2025 to analyse how memory and historical narratives are embedded into the school's everyday pedagogical practices; how multilingual, relational and embodied dynamics shape these encounters; and what tensions and possibilities emerge around QTA's distinct approach. These objectives are guided by three sub-questions:

- How and why does QTA engage with historical memory?
- How do the multilingual and transnational dynamics mediate the pedagogical encounters?
- How do members of the school community understand and experience the effects of QTA's pedagogies?

By examining these questions, this thesis offers a detailed account of how historical memory is engaged in one particular educational space in Guatemala. Whilst grounded in QTA's specific dynamics, practices and tensions, the insights generated by my analysis also speak to wider debates on education as a site of memory production, the politics of meaning-making in transnational and multilingual spaces, and the possibilities and limits of language learning as a transformation-oriented approach to engaging with historical and contemporary harm.

The thesis is organised as follows. The following chapter situates the study within existing literature on the engagement, preservation and (re)production of historical memory in post-war contexts and outlines the theoretical framework. The context chapter grounds the research within Guatemala's historic-socio-political landscape and outlines the case study. The methodology chapter sets out the qualitative case study design and feminist epistemology, the participatory methods used for data collection, the analytical methods, and reflections on positionalities and ethics. The three findings chapters present the empirical analysis. Whilst thematically interrelated, the first focuses on the production of memory, the second on the influence of transnational and multilingual dynamics, and the third on transformative possibilities and tensions. The conclusion draws together the key arguments and insights, considers the study's limitations and directions for future research, and reflects on wider implications within the current political context.

# Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This chapter traces the academic debates informing this study. It reviews three interconnected bodies of literature: i) critiques of the dominant, institutionalised memory practices in transitional justice; ii) pedagogical engagements with historical memory and iii) the role of education in producing memory and enabling transformation. It then outlines the theoretical pillars of memory, pedagogy and justice that guide the analysis before concluding with how ‘language’ is understood within the conceptual and geographical context of this research.

## 2.1 Literature review

### 2.1.1 Institutionalised memory practices and transitional justice

In the context of post-mass collective violence, most research on historical memory has long focussed on institutionalised, highly visible and symbolic practices of ‘memorialisation’ sitting within the liberal framework of transitional justice (Rauschenbach et al., 2022:1). Yet transitional justice has been widely critiqued in both theory and practice (Rooney and Ní Annoláin, 2018:2), notably for its ontological grounding in “liberal peace and top-down, state-based processes” (Gready and Robins, 2014:341) and its consequential shortcomings and underwhelming reforms. Criticisms typically centre around: i) the field’s legally defined practices and institutional limitations (McEvoy and McGregor, 2008:15) ii) its rigid schematic and narrative frameworks circumscribed by ideals of reconciliation (Hatcher, 2009:134) and victimhood (Leebaw, 2013:238) and iii) its narrow, linear temporalities (Miller, 2021:849; Lemay-Hébert, 2025:48). Memory initiatives that remain constrained by the overarching transitional justice framework falls short in capturing the contingent and socially constructed nature of memory (Viebach, 2020:5-6), obscuring how memory is continually reinterpreted in relation to the present in new and evolving ways (Halbwachs, 1992:51), and silencing how historical injustices are reproduced long after periods of overt violence have ended (Nutti, 2019:9; Gallen, 2023:57).

Truth commissions, for example, have been extensively studied and praised for producing a historical record, acknowledging victimisation and enabling forms of healing and redress. However, they have also been critiqued for failing to achieve their ambitions (Leyh, 2019:174) and for being a site of violence (Mendeloff, 2004:365). The eliciting of ‘truth’ in such settings can risk re-traumatisation and reproduction of existing hierarchies of power and voice (Larkin and Rudolf, 2023:283). Their restricted temporal mandates set limits on what counts as legitimate disclosure,

framing violence as discrete events rather than ongoing processes (Miller, 2021:849). In synthesising complex histories into digestible forms, such mechanisms typically produce narrow, singular historical reports that produce particular kinds of victim and perpetrator subjects (Tavares Furtado, 2024:379), thereby institutionalising the silencing and forgetting of experiences not aligned with their often state-endorsed agendas of reconciliation and forgiveness (Hatcher, 2009:134).

In light of these shortcomings, informal and grassroots memory practices have emerged as vital and often explicitly political means through which people confront and honour experiences of violence and demand justice in their everyday lives. Such initiatives create alternative spaces where narratives of injustice, including their multiplicity and morally complexity, can be claimed and remembered in more dynamic, participatory, and creative ways (Rugo and Parish, 2021:3). Whilst comparatively little attention has been paid to how such informal memory work unfolds, the potential of these practices to unsettle, subvert, or transcend more formalised memory and transitional justice initiatives is being increasingly recognised (Rauschenbach et al., 2022:2). In parallel, a large body of work focuses on the relational, embodied, and performative dimensions of memory (such as Palacios, 2014; Kent, 2019; Wilson et al., 2020; Taylor, 2003). This has greatly furthered understanding of the value of memory practices that go beyond transitional justice-defined frames and informs the focus on relational and embodied dynamics within this research.

### **2.1.2 Peace education, memory and justice**

Historical memory is also considered as something important to be engaged with through education. Peace education literature has largely addressed its inclusion in formal schooling but typically focuses on national-level curriculum and institutional reforms (Davies, 2017:334), or the dissemination of truth commission findings (Paulson and Bellino, 2017:354). In the Guatemalan context, this literature typically examines how education has either advanced or impeded the goals of transitional justice (Bellino, 2015:61; Poppema, 2009:383) remaining tightly tied to a liberally defined institutional framework and focused on education of Guatemalan nationals.

Many scholars critique conventional approaches to peace education for privileging individual attitudinal change according to universalised, Euro-Enlightenment values (Cremin, 2016:7) which ultimately maintain a harmful status quo by not addressing the underlying drivers of armed conflict

and ongoing manifestations of structural violence (Schultze-Kraft, 2022:20). In response, some scholars advocate for historical memory-oriented peace education (or “historical memory education for peace and justice”/“HME” (Corredor et al., 2018:169) as a pedagogical intervention to facilitate the rights to truth and non-repetition in recent contexts of mass violence (*ibid.*, 2018:171). HME seeks to bring about more complex historical understanding by grounding the pedagogical process in the lived experiences of teachers and students. It uses personal narratives as didactic tools to bridge the space between understanding of injustice at individual and social levels and seeks to open spaces for recognition, relational repair, and addressing traumatic experiences through recognition of the moral agency of the “Other” through having witnessed their suffering (Schultze-Kraft, 2022:67-68).

Whilst peace education literature does expand understandings of the links between education, historical memory and justice, it typically focuses on the institutional dimensions of formal education, centring curricula reform and implementation (Corredor et al., 2018:179; Zembylas, 2016:133). Fundamentally, the educational spaces explored within this field, even those advancing HME, are aimed at educating those most directly impacted by the histories at hand and are not characterised by transnational and/or multilingual dimensions. This signifies a distinctive opportunity for further research, as cross-linguistic educational encounters could offer distinctive possibilities for engaging with historical memory given that language is a meaning-making system through which people make sense of, interpret, and construct their own experiences and social realities (Shaw, 2004:133).

### **2.1.3 Education as a site of memory production and transformative potential**

There is growing recognition that education should be understood not just as a vehicle for transmitting predetermined historical narratives but as a site “wherein the work and the struggles of memory making might be glimpsed” (Paulson et al., 2020:9). Although the politics of memory in education is widely documented, schooling is often narrowly viewed as a “stable and authoritative site” of memory delivery (Paulson et al., 2020:1). This neglects the relational, interactive and dynamic dimensions of pedagogy through which memory might be shared, animated and contested. Consequently, less attention is paid to what happens in classrooms and the agency of teachers and students as active participants in memory’s production. Attending to the “identities, lived experiences, embodiment and affect” all participants bring to the classroom

along with the “meanings of the past” they take away is crucial for understanding education as a space where memory is actively produced in the present (Paulson, et al., 2020:10).

Interrelatedly, education has long been seen as a site of socio-political intervention with transformative (Gready and Robins, 2014:355) and even reparative potential (Paulson, 2024). Yet such potential is not inherent or universally enacted. It depends on pedagogical approaches that engages historical memory – including histories and knowledges erased in mainstream institutions and curricula - in creative and collaborative ways. Such approaches are more likely to enable learners to reflect on how past violence shapes the conditions sustaining it into the present (Stripakash et al., 2020:2) – a crucial step to building more just futures. Those underpinned by critical pedagogy aiming to “empower learners as transformative change agents” who can “critically analyze power dynamics and intersectionality” (Bajaj and Brantmeier, 2011:221) are often viewed as most promising.

In response to these debates, this research conceptualises educational sites as spaces of “contestation, negotiation and cultural production” (Sobe, 2014:313) where memory is socially and actively “produced and struggled over” (Paulson et al., 2020:61). Adopting a more relational and micro-level lens, it investigates the everyday memory work that unfolds across the pedagogical encounters at QTA and how agency is exercised within a transnational, multilingual learning environment. In doing so, it addresses both an academic and practical need to consider how everyday memory work can take shape beyond institutionalised transitional justice mechanisms – here, through language education – and how such work may contribute to broader efforts toward more transformative forms of justice in and beyond post-war contexts.

## **2.2. Theoretical framework**

This section elaborates on the three concepts central to this study – memory, pedagogy, and justice – that together form the theoretical framework through which I analyse the case of QTA.

### ***2.2.1 Memory work***

Within this research, memory is understood as an active process of (re)establishing a relationship between past and present (Viebach, 2020:5); a socially accomplished, situated and embodied

practice negotiated “between agents, memory tools and social contexts” (Paulson, 2020:5). Paulson’s notion of ‘memory work’, building on Jelin’s recognition of the labour involved in the production of memory (2003), highlights how memory is continually (re)interpreted within certain relational, temporal and spatial conditions (2020:6).

This socially constructed understanding of memory draws attention to its fundamentally reciprocal nature, demanding an active audience (Palacios, 2018:14-146). Listening therefore plays an important role (Acosta López, 2023:154), requiring reflexivity, active engagement and a willingness to be affected. The “conscious and attentive dimensions” (Sotelo-Castro and Shapiro-Phim, 2023:4) of listening – and how one chooses to do so – are central to the questioning, interpreting of and relating to the histories and knowledges being shared during the process of making memory meaningful. This perspective challenges education’s presumed neutrality as a transmitter of fixed historical narratives, instead framing it as a site in which memories are “constructed, communicated and struggled over” (Paulson, 2020:3), even when these processes are informal or not explicitly recognised as such.

### ***2.2.2 Critical and relational pedagogy***

Education is understood as a political, relational and critical endeavour with transformative potential at both individual and collective levels. This study draws on critical and relational theories of pedagogy to examine how learning unfolds at QTA through shared exchanges and practices – across cultures, nationalities, life experiences, languages and epistemologies – and through the relations made possible in the moments of encounter.

Drawing principally from Freire, pedagogy is understood as a creative, ‘problem-posing’ process seeking to create the conditions from which teachers and students can become cognisant of and critically question their presence in and relation to the world around them (1970:71). This incremental, always-in-becoming process of developing critical awareness, termed by Freire as *conscientização* (conscientisation), must be joined by praxis – the ongoing interplay between “action and reflection” on the world “to transform it” (1970:66) through dismantling oppressive structures and systems of domination. A dialectical exchange of ideas between all participants (including amongst students and teachers themselves); taking mutual responsibility engaging with

material meaningful to all participants' lives; and active, committed participation are all considered central to the learning process.

hooks' feminist understanding of critical pedagogy extends Freire's principles by foregrounding the affective, relational, and performative dimensions of education. Her concept of *engaged* pedagogy emphasises that both students and teachers must bring their voices, emotions, and experiences into a continuously evolving classroom (1994:11). Lived experience alone is not the ultimate marker of authority but can become pedagogically generative when it is linked with other forms of knowing because it helps students to connect abstract ideas to their own lives (*ibid.*, 84). hooks' reflections on community and language in relation to pedagogy, such as listening without 'mastery' and knowing in fragments as potentially productive moments (1994:172), are particularly relevant in a setting where multiple languages and worldviews are continuously negotiated.

Although the literature on critical pedagogy is vast, I draw principally on Freire and hooks as their conceptual grounding offers the most appropriate balance between structural critique and focus on micro-level classroom dynamics. Within QTA, this combined perspective helps analyse how the pedagogical practices enable students to connect meaningfully with historical, political and linguistic concepts that go beyond their own personal experience and whether such engagements encourage a more critical form of awareness, reflection and action in response. Because critical pedagogy is a philosophical commitment to creating the educational conditions *from which* politicising and transformative learning can take place, I also draw on relational pedagogy to consider how such commitments are enacted in practice. Although associated with the work of several scholars including Bingham and Sidorkin (2004) and Noddings (2002), this thesis takes Hickey and Riddle's more recent contributions as its core theoretical basis.

Relational pedagogy centres both the pedagogical relationship itself and its conditions (the physical learning environment and socio-cultural dynamics like positionalities, linguistic and epistemic orientations, and power relations) as what together shape and make education possible (Hickey and Riddle, 2024:3274). One of its key dimensions is *mutuality* – a form of reciprocity established through recognising “the pedagogical Other” as mutually engaged within the exchange and thus valuing and attending to the positionalities they bring to the classroom (Hickey and Riddle, 2024:3277). This involves an active, dialogic responsiveness to one another and to what emerges as most important within the immediacy of the encounter, enacted through following unexpected

lines of inquiry to produce jointly meaningful knowledge (Hickey and Riddle, 2025:8 and 31). Informality can be a productive modality for its enactment insofar as it supports the vulnerability, trust and openness required to establish rich, mutual educational relations (*ibid.*, 28-29). Together, these ideas help analyse how memory work is enacted in QTA through the in-the-moment dimensions of daily pedagogical encounters rather than solely through curricular content. They also enable examination of how listening, attentiveness, reciprocity and mutuality (or their absence) shape how memory is produced within this space, how pedagogical roles are perceived, and how transformative possibilities are opened or foreclosed.

### ***2.2.3 Transformative justice and implicated subjects***

Justice is approached as an ongoing, historically conscious, and ethically demanding process concerned with recognising the conditions underlying harm and inequality and taking steps to transform them in response. This perspective draws from the underlying values and ambitions of transformative justice (Gready and Robins, 2014) and the notion of implicated subjectivity (Rothberg, 2019), using these as conceptual anchors to consider how the school's critical pedagogical approach to engaging with historical memory may contribute to nurturing individual and collective transformative capacities within and beyond Guatemala.

Given the systemic and transnational nature of the harms at question in the broader context of this research, I draw predominantly from transformative justice, which shares with restorative justice a foundational understanding of harm as relational and socially embedded rather than solely legalistic (Zehr, 2002:18; Rossner and Taylor 2024:362) and seeks to transform the latent social conditions making overt expressions of violence possible (Gready and Robins, 2014:340). This approach shifts the focus away from the state and institutions (as prioritised by proponents of transitional justice) to communities and every-day actions, prioritising process over fixed, abstracted outcomes (Mingus, 2019; Gready and Robins, 2014:355). Within the broader debates framing this research, transformative justice offers a conceptual response to the systemic issues neglected by liberal peacebuilding and transitional justice in their favour of institution building, democratisation and securitisation over deep, structural change (Gready and Robins, 2014:340). It provides a base for thinking about justice not only as redress for singular events but also as a forward-looking, collective process of structural transformation and liberation.

Moving beyond the victim/perpetrator binary underpinning punitive approaches to justice (constrained by the ontological restrictions of liberal individualism (Mutua, 2015:4)) is essential when considering who participates in processes oriented towards such transformative goals. The role of transnational corporate interests and US financing and intervention in Guatemala’s “internal armed conflict”, for example, undermines the notion of any war being entirely ‘internal’, illustrating how violence is produced and sustained through interlocking global networks of states and private actors (Johnson, 2018:9).

This narrow framing is particularly inadequate in contexts like QTA, where many students arrive from countries whose governments and corporates play direct and indirect roles in perpetuating injustice in Guatemala. To conceptualise such messy webs of entanglement, this thesis draws from Rothberg’s concept of the *implicated subject* to consider how QTA’s students are positioned or see themselves in relation to Guatemala’s historical and present-day harms and resistance (2019). Implication refers to how some individuals are “folded into” (*ibid.*, 2) histories and ongoing violent structures through how they may contribute to, occupy or benefit from regimes of domination because of their alignment with structures of power and privilege, even when not direct agents of harm (Rothberg, 2023:267). Such positionalities may initially seem outside personal responsibility yet remain necessary to confront when pursuing more transformative approaches to justice.

### **2.3 A note on language**

This thesis understands language as what gives meaning to reality, shaping both thought and articulation of experience and beliefs (Taylor, 2016:17). Language is therefore treated as a contested system of meaning-making and a site of power through which individuals construct their understanding of both self and the world in a fluid and contextually situated ways (Shaw, 2004:133). It shapes “our understanding of why things are the way they are” and also what else is imaginable and actionable (McLaren and da Silva, 1991:37).

In Guatemala, language is deeply entwined with processes of dispossession, marginalisation and erasure, as well as resistance. It is also fundamental to identity, with different Maya groups, sub-groups and communities identifying along linguistically and dialectically distinct lines.<sup>1</sup> Spanish was

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<sup>1</sup> There are currently approximately 30 Mayan language spoken across Mesoamerica (present day southern Mexico, Guatemala and Belize) 21 of which are spoken in Guatemala.

violently imposed upon the original peoples of Mesoamerica during the process of colonisation and Mayan languages were also weaponised as means of dehumanisation and subsumption of their cultural identities during the internal armed conflict (Salamanca Villamizar, 2014:66). Within the context of this research, language education carries the risk of reproducing violent hierarchies even as it may open space for engaging with historical memory and re-negotiating meaning.

Language at QTA is both the subject of study and the medium through which memory work unfolds, but is also a site where power, knowledge and access asymmetries exist and must be considered critically due to how the school community bring different linguistic abilities, discursive frameworks and perspectives to the school. This understanding is fundamental to analysing both the friction and possibilities of language within QTA, and to examining how new meanings and potential solidarities might emerge through negotiating the differences and power hierarchies embedded within linguistic practice in this space.

# Guatemalan Context and the Case of QTA

## 3.1 Historical and socio-political conditions shaping the research context

Guatemala's 'internal armed conflict'<sup>2</sup> (1960-1996) represented a continuation and intensification of the colonial structures engendered by Spanish rule: entrenched inequality, agrarian capitalism, and the systematic dispossession, exploitation, and dehumanisation of Maya peoples foundational to the modern Guatemalan state (Castro and Lavinas Picq, 2017:791). Despite formal independence in 1821, power has remained concentrated in a small oligarchy of European descent; by the 1950s, less than 3% of Guatemalans owned 70% of arable land, whilst 90% of the majority-Maya population had access to only 10% (Costello, 1997:12).

The October Revolution of 1944 briefly opened a decade of social, economic and electoral reforms known as the "Democratic Spring". This ended in 1954 when a CIA-backed coup overthrew President Árbenz whose agrarian reforms had redistributed idle land to the benefit of some 500,000 people, including 400,000 uncultivated acres owned by the United Fruit Company (UFC) (Johnson, 2018:12). Intense UFC-led lobbying of US lawmakers under the pretext of 'fighting communism' was central to mobilising support for the 1954 intervention that reinstated a pro-US regime, collapsing democratic space, freedom of expression and revolutionary momentum in the process (Lopez Bracamonte, 2021:330).

The ensuing authoritarianism, militarisation and repression formed the conditions in which escalating violence transcended into civil war by 1960. Broadly, this was fought between guerilla revolutionary groups<sup>3</sup> and Guatemalan state forces backed by the US and Israel (Gill, 2004:155 and McAllister, 2010:297). Massacres, forced disappearances and mass displacement became systematic tools of state terror. Violence became genocidal between 1981-1983 following a coup that brought General Ríos Montt to power, triggering scorched-earth campaigns against Maya-

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<sup>2</sup> This period of mass collective violence is sometimes called "*la guerra*" (the war) but more commonly "*el conflicto armado interno*" (the internal armed conflict/civil war). From here I use the term 'war', both because it aligns with how the school referred to it and because it avoids overstating its supposedly 'internal' nature, given the fundamental influence of foreign funding, training and arming. Moreover, shifting intensities of political and social 'conflict' are entrenched in the functioning of the modern Guatemalan state. Therefore, 'war' better encapsulates the scale and organised character of the violence experienced during these 36 years.

<sup>3</sup> Although guerilla groups drew support from many sectors opposing the militarised regime, they were initially dominated by a Ladino, urban, leftist intellectual cohort. Only in the late 1970s did these groups gain significant rural support, particularly that of the Maya communities in the central and north-western highlands.

Q'anjob'al, Chuj, Ixil, K'iche' and Achi peoples and the forced resettlement of survivors to army-controlled "model villages" for "re-education" (Vela Castañeda, 2016:229).<sup>4</sup> The scale and enduring effects of the war cannot be reduced to numbers, but they help demonstrate its enormity. An estimated 200,000 people were killed (70,000 during the genocide), 45,000 disappeared and over 1.5 million displaced. State forces were responsible for 93% of the violations and over 83% of those victimised were Maya (Rothenberg, 2012:xxi-xxii).

Six years of peace negotiations involved the government, La Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional de Guatemala (URNG),<sup>5</sup> international actors, the UN, and Guatemalan civil society (Armond et al., 1997:81-86). Influential business elites, previously aligned with militarised regimes, joined only once war was seen as an obstacle to foreign capital (Bull and Aguilar-Støen, 2019:125). The signing of the Accords in 1996 formally ended the war, but, being grounded in the dominant liberal peace paradigm, ushered in a neoliberal 'peace' structured around marketisation, economic growth and extractivism 'development'. Large-scale, predominantly US- and Canadian-backed mining, hydroelectric and monocropping projects expanded under the guise of 'peace', reproducing longstanding patterns of dispossession, exploitation and resistance (Dearden, 2012:5).

Today, struggles against corruption, racialised land dispossession and evictions, labour exploitation and territorial defence remain central socio-political challenges (PBI, 2025). Judicial backsliding accelerated after the 2019 expulsion of the UN-mandated CICIG (tasked to assist anti-corruption investigations), led largely by Attorney General Porras. President Arévalo's electoral victory in September 2023 represented an unexpected disruption to entrenched elite control. Despite aggressive election invalidation campaigns led by Attorney General Porras, Arévalo assumed office in January 2024 following 106 days of sustained collective mobilisation<sup>6</sup> led by several Indigenous authorities, including the Maya K'iche' *Los 48 Cantones de Totonicapán*<sup>7</sup> (NISGUA, 2023).

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<sup>4</sup> Whilst alliances between popular peasant and Indigenous mobilisation and the guerilla units did shape where the war's activity was concentrated, the state perpetrated genocide far exceeded its purported rationale of 'destroying the guerilla's social base', explicitly targeting the destruction of Maya populations.

<sup>5</sup> The URNG was the unified national front created in the early 1980s of four previously distinct revolutionary groups. They have since demobilised to become the political party URNG-MAIZ.

<sup>6</sup> Including marches, highway blockades, sit ins and a national strike that caused economic shutdown for 2 weeks.

<sup>7</sup> The legitimate authority of the Maya K'iche' people of Totonicapán organised to defend their customary governance, collective territorial rights, cultural identity and autonomy.

However, his administration has struggled to dismantle impunity or advance substantive change, constrained by a system in which the legislature, judiciary, police and military have long been captured by elite interests, corruption and criminality. Most notably, it has faced repeated attacks by a co-opted judiciary aligned with Attorney General Porras, who continues to imprison or force into exile anti-corruption prosecutors, journalists, human rights and environmental defenders and Maya leaders (Human Rights Watch, 2024). The April 2025 arrest of two *Los 48 Cantones* leaders on terrorism charges for their peaceful participation in the 2023 protests (Impunity Watch, 2025) exemplifies this pattern; both remain arbitrarily detained alongside many others targeted through politically motivated prosecutions.

### **3.2 Memory, truth and justice in the aftermath of war**

Efforts to reckon with the past after the formal end to the war in 1996 have taken multiple forms. Two truth-seeking efforts, the UN-backed “Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico” (CEH), and the Catholic church-led “Guatemala: Nunca Más” (REMHI) project, were central to exposing the scale of violence and the state’s overwhelming responsibility (Hatcher, 2009:131; Lovell, 2013:203). The extent of their denunciations were particularly noteworthy given their establishment and operation amidst ongoing peace negotiations (Oettler, 2006:1). Notably, the CEH explicitly affirmed that acts of genocide against Maya peoples were committed (Rothenberg, 2012:70), an assertion of “hubo genocidio”<sup>8</sup> that has since become central to survivor movements and Maya-led justice work. The CEH’s combined juridical and historical methodology was particularly notable for its time (Oglesby, 2007:10) and its final report recognised the role of the US and located the deeper roots of the war in racism, repression as a substitution for law, and closing of political space (CEH, 1999:82). Nevertheless, many scholars have criticised their overarching “peace and national harmony” framing for demanding that testimonies be analysed through a reconciliatory lens (Hatcher, 2009:134) and encouraging survivors to adopt certain temporal and narrative forms (Angulo Brenes, 2019:9), consequently silencing experiences that fall outside of this framework.

Since their publication, political, military, and conservative powers have persistently delegitimised the reports’ findings, including through congressional declarations denying genocide (Clouser, 2020:96), limiting meaningful reckoning with and preservation of historical memory. These actions

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<sup>8</sup> “there was genocide” [author translation] has become a collective assertion demanding recognition of the genocide, countering the state’s ongoing denial and the entrenched impunity for wartime atrocities.

exemplify a broader elite project of institutionalised forgetting (ibid., 96), whereby hegemonic discourses call to “forget the past in order to move forward” (Impunity Watch, 2012:14). The few state-endorsed commemorations have been criticised as largely symbolic, offering a static, depoliticised interpretation of the war (Impunity Watch, 2012:43). Silencing is further sustained by long-standing impunity instantiated during colonial rule (Salamanca Villamizar, 2014:69; Molina-Mejía, 1999:56), bolstered by blanket amnesty provisions in the Accords, reduced sentences for former military commanders (if prosecuted) and the overturning of the Rios Montt genocide conviction in 2013. Ultimately, Guatemalan elites attempt to erase historical memory by shelving it away (Palacios, 2018:164), making alternative spaces of ongoing dialogue, remembering, and reflection essential.

Educational reform has also been limited, narrowing opportunities for meaningful, sustained engagement with historical memory in educational settings. Efforts to integrate the truth commissions into the national curriculum became an “arena of struggle” (Oglesby, 2007:15). Although historical discussion does occur in schools and in informal peace education projects led by international actors or “memory entrepreneurs”, research consistently finds that these accounts remain depoliticised, frequently attributing the war to a generic “culture of violence” (Oglesby, 2007:4). Textbooks particularly favour state narratives, and where Maya peoples are acknowledged as victims, the disproportionate extent of their victimisation and the genocide itself is rarely addressed (Bellino, 2014:137). This framing obscures the war’s “linkages to colonial and contemporary power structures” (Gellman and Bellino, 2019:4), setting narrow limits in pedagogical engagement with Guatemala’s social and political history (Bellino, 2014:148).

### **3.3 Grassroots memory initiatives and practices**

Seeking to move beyond these constraints, grassroots, Maya and survivor-led initiatives continue to challenge dominant narratives and reconstruct situated, community-based histories. Such efforts include exhumations, the recovery of ‘lost’ national police archives (Lovell, 2013:201), monuments, museums and murals (Salamanca Villamizar, 2014:70; Castañeda, 2020:72), artistic practices and performance (Palacios, 2018:138), and pedagogical materials (Impunity Watch, 2012:25).

By publicly denouncing atrocities and bringing marginalised experiences into view (Gellman and Bellino, 2019:18), these initiatives work to break the culture of silence and impunity upheld by fear,

denialism and political pressure, encouraging inter-generational dialogue to cultivate critical reflection and prevent future violence (Impunity Watch, 2012:29). In doing so, they speak to a temporal perspective that predates and extends beyond the relatively narrow official ‘conflict’ period that shapes institutionalised memory initiatives, emphasises continuity over closure and invites plural understandings of memory and justice.

### **3.2 The case study**

Within this broader context, QTA offers a compelling site for this investigation. Founded in 1988 by a collective of educators in honour of two student activists kidnapped, tortured and subsequently killed, QTA has the dual purpose of teaching Spanish and K’iche<sup>9</sup> to non-native speakers whilst also critically analysing Guatemala’s social, economic, political, historical, and environmental conditions. It was initially also intended as a mode of international solidarity work, involving students in small initiatives providing art, music, computer and creative writing classes to the local community. Whilst it has stopped this practice since the Covid-19 pandemic, many of these projects continue to be sustained by student fees and it still directs part of its income to scholarships and a small library for young people in a neighbouring rural area. The school has also maintained connections with popular organisations, human rights groups, and social justice movements.

Whilst not a formal memorialisation project, the school purposefully integrates social justice-oriented and political themes into its language instruction, particularly focusing on human rights, cultural identity, and historical memory. Teaching is primarily through one-on-one, five-hour daily lessons structured dialogically, although small group classes are offered in busier months at a lower cost. Students may choose emphases like healthcare, legal, social work, Latin American history, and Latin American literature. Bi-monthly debates on various socio-political issues are held amongst educators for their own discussion, covering topics such as abortion, religion, LGBTQ+ identities and experiences, or regional political issues. In the afternoons, the school offers activities open to teachers and students alike<sup>10</sup>:

- Mondays: documentaries on Guatemala’s historical and contemporary realities

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<sup>9</sup> K’iche’ is the most widely spoken Mayan language in Guatemala. There are over over one million Maya K’iche’ people, making up about 7% of the overall population. It is spoken in one third of Guatemala’s 22 departments.

<sup>10</sup> All afternoon activities take place in Spanish and are open to students and teachers alike. The seminars and testimonies feature live translation to English conducted by the student coordinator or volunteer student. The trips are guided and led in Spanish and students typically volunteer to translate.

- Tuesdays: seminars by invited speakers or teachers on various historical events, themes, and justice struggles (e.g. liberation theology, labour organising, narco-trafficking, journalist persecution, extractivism, comadronas<sup>11</sup>, exhumations, transnational adoption); or testimonies from teachers or guests recounting roles in revolutionary groups
- Wednesdays: a local trip, salsa or cooking class, and teacher-student football
- Thursdays/Saturdays: guided visits to historically important sites, extending the pedagogical space into the town and surrounding rural areas<sup>12</sup>
- Fridays: a circular, group “Qué Pasa” discussion of current news in Guatemala<sup>13</sup>

Through these oral, visual, and experiential modalities, the school blurs the lines between linguistic and historically grounded political education. Students come from around the world but mostly from the United States. For these students particularly, the motivation for enrolling is primarily communication and respect related, as many interact with or work alongside Spanish, or less frequently, K’iche’-speaking people in their jobs, political organising, and daily lives. Whilst this transnational student composition opens up alternative avenues for discussion and reflection compared to homogeneously Guatemalan educational spaces and memory initiatives, it introduces other tensions and constraints. Students arrive with varying degrees of historical awareness, linguistic ability, and epistemological openness and willingness to engage with the school’s broader political dimensions, raising questions about positionality, translation, power, listening across difference, knowledge, and responsibility within the pedagogical encounters. These dynamics influence how memory work unfolds within this space, and mediates the kinds of possibilities, responsibilities, and actions that can be conceived of and enacted in response.

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<sup>11</sup> Maya midwives whose practice has medical, spiritual and community care dimensions to it.

<sup>12</sup> This is central to showing the students the disproportionate concentration of the wartime violence in rural areas where mainly Maya people lived, as the location of the school itself is not in such areas.

<sup>13</sup> This is held in the morning, during one-on-one class time, so teachers and students usually attend together.

# Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative case study design, understood as an “empirical inquiry which investigates a phenomenon in its real-life context” (Priya, 2021:95). It takes a participatory approach grounded in a feminist epistemology, understanding knowledge as partial, shaped by power and socially embedded (Reich, 2021:575). An ongoing ethics of care (Noddings, 1986) and understanding of myself and participants as situated knowers (Haraway, 1988:581) informed all stages of the research, recognising how our positionalities shaped how we made up the space, interactions and knowledge produced within it (Kent, 2019:186).

In line with this epistemology, I draw on Cockburn’s continuum of violence blurring the distinctions between ‘war’ and ‘peace’ time (2004) to understand overt violence as interconnected manifestations of structurally embedded forms. The study’s temporal scope is therefore defined by the themes, voices and needs foregrounded during the month of my participation rather than a specific historical period.

## 4.1 Data collection

This research is consciously situated within my experiences as a full-time enrolled QTA student for four weeks in July 2025. Data collection combined semi-structured interviews, participant observation and ongoing reflexive journaling to enable an in-depth, multilayered and balanced interpretation of the case (Flick, 2018:778).

### 4.1.1 Interviews

I conducted semi-structured interviews with teachers and students to understand how they viewed the memory work, pedagogical practices and broader effects of the school.<sup>14</sup> I interviewed nine students in English and seven teachers in Spanish. Four teacher interviews were integrated into our daily one-on-one lessons where 2-3 hours were set aside each week for more structured, audio-recorded conversations. Three others were scheduled in the afternoons. Student interviews took place either in cafés after school hours or online. Interviews lasted 30 minutes to three hours. All but one (at the participant’s request) were audio-recorded and automatically transcribed in the

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<sup>14</sup> See Appendix 1 for the interview guides, although questions shifted somewhat according to interviewee and what had already been covered in our lessons.

original language using Notik, an AI-powered app. I manually re-listened to all recordings before correcting transcripts and inserting notes on gestures, pauses, laughter or confusion. Participants were offered a copy; one made minor edits to their transcript.

Spending approximately 25 hours a week with each teacher enabled an iterative and collaborative approach that was adaptable to individual preferences and the week's unfolding. My dual researcher-student role meant interviews could not be treated in isolation as they were shaped by relevant themes that surfaced during our ongoing dialogue flowing between lessons and breaktimes. Conducting several structured sessions across the week allowed flexibility, helped establish trust and created useful opportunities to reflect together on my observations of afternoon activities. The clarifications, additions and suggestions from teachers were central to how I refined the investigation's focus.

I took detailed hand-written notes during lessons to prompt further reflection and revise guiding interview questions based on prior conversations, making clear that all notes formed part of the data. These were not only essential to how I adjusted my interview strategy but also formed a valuable base from which my teachers and I could collaboratively review the direction of the week's lessons. This process proved useful for checking my understanding and the notes' accuracy (broken between Spanish and English) and also offered teachers a chance to clarify or expand on how I had recorded our conversations.

#### ***4.1.2 Sampling***

Sampling followed a purposive strategy (Moser and Korstjens, 2018:10). For students, I sought variation in enrolment length, gender, nationality, language level and track (K'iche' and/or Spanish). Teacher selection was partly shaped by the school's scheduling system, but I requested teachers for two weeks based on factors like their length of time at QTA, distinctive perspectives shared in group sessions, or recommendations. The influence of my positionality was particularly apparent here; I was acutely aware of my subjectivity in requesting certain teachers and at times questioned the representativeness of my choices. I came to view this as consistent with the school's emphasis on individualised learning and the participatory, non-generalising nature of this research. Considering time constraints, I prioritised variation and thematic saturation.

### ***4.1.3 Participant observation and reflexive practice***

I took detailed observation notes in Spanish and English during afternoon activities, documenting both content (e.g. themes, issues, actors, needs, perspectives raised) and forms of engagement and communication (e.g. tone, silences, gestures, facial expressions, questions, interactive dynamics, laughter). Reflexive practice was a central methodological and ethical element of this investigation and aligns with my feminist epistemology understanding knowledge as inherently situated, partial and embodied (Haraway, 1988). I wrote and voice-recorded reflexive journals to critically reflect on my emotional responses, thoughts, questions, ethical tensions, shifting positionality, and power dynamics. These reflections helped trace how my own schematic, semiotic and semantic frameworks shaped the position from which I spoke and made meaning within the research site, and how this shifted as my linguistic abilities developed through the lessons themselves. This journal was a valuable data source, offering insights into how my presence as both student and foreign researcher contributed to the spaces' ongoing remaking.

### **4.3 Data analysis**

Interview transcripts, observational notes and reflexive journals were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun and Clarke, 2019). RTA suits interpretive and participatory research and recognises the researcher's active role in knowledge production, treating subjectivity as a resource not limitation (Braun and Clarke, 2020:330). It also accommodates multiple data types and allows for the identification of themes and meaning patterns without the linguistic technicality demanded by narrative or discourse analysis.

The analysis unfolded iteratively and systematically through repeatedly reading, listening to, and coding the data to develop themes. Using ATLAS.ti, I first marked and categorised the data, applying inductive codes generated organically and deductive codes informed by the conceptual framework and existing literature. I then clustered these codes around "central organising concepts" (Braun and Clarke, 2019:590) to develop preliminary themes. I applied codes in the original language and translated them to English only when grouped into themes (Esfehiani and Walters, 2018:3166), ensuring familiarity with the data in both linguistic contexts. I gradually refined themes through ongoing movement between the theory and empirical material, continuously questioning how my own assumptions and emotional attachments to particular moments influenced categorisation, pattern interpretation and concept connection. Once themes were clearly defined, I expanded them through analytic memos and mapped their connections to

organise the analytical thread that structures the findings chapters. I continued adjusting and reviewing their relevance and interrelationships throughout the writing process.

#### **4.4 Ethical considerations**

Decision-making throughout the process was primarily guided by an ongoing, flexible and relational ethics of care (Noddings, 1988:219) seeking to “prevent any unjust action, harm or suffering” and “create opportunities for fair practices” (Shanks and Paulson, 2022:5).

Written permission was obtained from QTA’s administration several months before fieldwork. All interviews were preceded by clear, informed consent, given either in writing or verbally depending on participant preference. Consent forms (in Spanish and English) explained the study’s scope and purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw, and data storage and usage. Consent was an ongoing process with regularly check-ins throughout. I replaced all names with pseudonyms and anonymised personal data during transcription; ultimately not even the pseudonyms are included in the final thesis as extra precaution. All data was stored securely on an encrypted, password-protected drive.

I communicated regularly with QTA’s administration, providing updates on progress before during and after fieldwork. I shared a summary of preliminary findings after my enrolled month. The final thesis will sent to all participants in English and I will translate the findings to be also shared in Spanish. I took particular care when discussing potentially sensitive topics given Guatemala’s historical-political context, avoiding asking directly about the teachers’ roles or experiences in the war and focusing instead on their practices and understanding of how QTA functioned. Where more personal or sensitive topics arose, I re-confirmed consent and omitted any material that they didn’t want to be used.

#### **4.5 Positionalities**

I carried out and authored this research from a position shaped by multiple intersecting dimensions of identity and power, including being a white, foreign, female researcher from the Global North, a former student at QTA, and someone with communicative but not fluent Spanish. My Dutch-Canadian nationality and British education, grounded in hegemonic Western ideals, norms, and narratives, has socialised me into a perspective shaped fundamentally by colonial amnesia and

“White Ignorance” (Mills, 2007). They have privileged an epistemology centring ‘science’ and its logics of rationality, binarism and Enlightenment reasoning in academia. Even as I questioned these foundations, they influenced what I noticed, how I interpreted and represented the knowledges shared with me, and how others perceived me.

Positionalities shift across contexts, relations, and interactions (Türkmen, 2023:149) and mine fluctuated throughout the fieldwork. Returning as a researcher carried responsibilities and new forms of power linked to my academic affiliation. Although enrolling as a student created specific dynamics because I too paid fees and was a transient presence, it also enabled me to study pedagogy from the distinctive standpoint of a learner. Familiarity with the school at times positioned me closer to an insider, and sometimes I leant into this, highlighting my ‘alumni’ status to build trust and legitimise the research. However, I was no longer just a student. I had to approach this shift with sensitivity and respect to be mindful of the relationships that enabled my access and grounded my interest in the topic, and the trust my presence depended on (Noddings, 1988:217). Some interpreted my researcher-student role as implying I had prior knowledge about Guatemala or the school. Others, especially when meeting for the first time, saw me as an outsider and were vague and selective in what they shared. I navigated by being transparent about my dual role in every new interaction, but dynamics of uncertainty, hospitality and protectiveness still shaped some conversations.

My positionalities also shaped how I related to different participants. Silences in my British schooling and gaps in my understanding of how my family histories are entwined with settler colonialism and empire made it easy, for example, to relate to students who felt they were learning parts of their own history at QTA. It made me consider how British people could engage in similarly unsettling and honest learning, given how colonial the national education system remains. Yet my privileged upbringing also meant I entered conversations about coloniality, state violence, organised resistance from a fundamentally different standpoint, one informed by academic study and socio-legal research work, rather than the lived and intergenerational knowledges through which many educators understood and related to these realities.

Language as a technical skill and meaning-making system further shaped the research. Whilst my Spanish-speaking interviewees, as teachers, were accustomed to linguistically imperfect conversations (often treating mistakes as learning opportunities), my conversational but partial

fluency inevitably limited the depth, pace and nuances of conversations. Rather than treating these as limitations, I included my own mistakes and partial understandings as analytical material. Interviews in later weeks flowed easier as my confidence and communication improved. Ultimately, I do not claim access to participants' internal meaning-making processes, nor does my analysis aim to interpret their experiences for them. Instead, I focus on the school as a space of encounter, analysing how meaning was continually negotiated, sometimes left verbally out of reach or ambiguous in the school's pedagogical relations and practices

A brief note on terminology: I use 'educator' to refer to the school's teachers and regularly invited external speakers; 'student' describes those formally enrolled; and 'learner' includes both students and teachers, reflecting how all participants were actively learning in the space. 'Maya' and 'Ladino' are used only as participants themselves highlighted them. I consider these terms as historically and politically constructed categories tied to coloniality and power rather than as fixed or binary identities.

# The Production of Memory Through Language Instruction

This chapter examines how and why historical memory was engaged through the school's pedagogical structure, practices and activities. It analyses the social-material entanglements through which memory was produced in the everyday pedagogical encounters before turning to the narrative and multi-layered temporal dimensions of such memory work.

Three findings guide the analysis: that memory work emerged as a situated, relational practice shaped by the interplay between material cues, pedagogical structure and sustained, interpersonal dialogue; that it narratively centred resistance, struggle and endurance; and that it enabled students to confront the multiplicity of memory through interwoven temporalities and layers of meaning. The chapter argues that memory – both a social process and form of knowledge – was produced as contested, intersubjective and continuously renegotiated, rather than an entity studied in an abstract, static form.

## 5.1 The social-material entanglements of memory work

Memory work unfolded through the interaction of the school's visual and material environment, the pedagogical structure, and the interpersonal, dialogic encounters across the week. The school's visual and spatial layout and class materials warrant particular attention because they served as both didactic historic-linguistic prompts and as material expressions of the school's underlying worldview, values and political orientation. Together, they formed part of the "assemblage of forces" shaping how knowledge was encountered and valued within the school and what kinds of learning relationships formed (Hickey and Riddle, 2024:3273).

### *Material environment as memory tools*

The visual environment and spatial layout of the school provided an immediate sense of place and epistemological orientation. Bright yellow walls, green plants, and the central courtyard lined with small tables seating student-teacher pairings anchor the space, with classrooms for small groups, a library, rooftop, kitchen and seminar room leading off from it. The proximity of these learning spaces and freedom to move between created a collaborative and flexible atmosphere characterised

more by informality (Hickey and Riddle, 2025:27) than rigid hierarchy, supporting spontaneity and responsiveness to the school community's energy and needs.

Every wall is adorned with paintings, song lyrics, quotes, and photos documenting key Guatemalan liberation, memory and justice struggles: writers and poets; liberation theology leaders; the CEH and REMHI reports; revolutionary figures; maps of extractive projects; land and human rights defenders. These are interspersed with posters expressing solidarity with global struggles such as those in Haiti, Colombia and Palestine. Students frequently described these visuals as their strongest first impressions. One student highlighted "*the real map of the world*" as a deliberate attempt to highlight the skewed nature of students' perspectives, particularly those "*thinking in a very US-centred context*" as even "*the dimensions of what different parts of the world look like on a map*" shapes "*people's worldview and way of orienting themselves.*" This immersive environment is designed to unsettle preconceptions and prompt critical thinking from the outset. The space speaks before teachers do, signalling a politicised and multi-temporal orientation towards solidarity, anti-imperialism and memory of struggle. By positioning Guatemala-specific visuals next to global struggles, the school aesthetically situates it as one node within broader systems of power, domination and resistance, making it easier for students to draw connections across contexts. This systemic framing is first verbally introduced during the weekly two-hour orientation that geo-historically grounds new students using a 'four invasions' quadrant of colonisation, the plantation economy, the war and neoliberal extractivism to encourage the tracing of structural, temporal and geographical continuities rather than framing history as a series of isolated, discrete events. It is reinforced consistently across the school's spaces and activities.

The visual environment also provided visual didactics functioning as "memory tools" which, alongside the participants and social context, mediated the production of memory in QTA (Paulson et al., 2020:5). These didactics were routinely drawn upon to contextualise learning alongside more traditionally used written and auditory materials. For example, whilst discussing a book I was reading on feminism in Guatemala, my teacher led me to a room where photos of female authors, revolutionaries, artists and land defenders lined the walls, explaining the relevance of each to her historical understanding. Teachers consistently emphasised that their choice of materials was guided by students' linguistic abilities and interests, exemplary of a problem-posing ethos (Freire, 1970:79), but a recurring theme was their political nature. As one teacher explained, linking grammatical and vocabulary exercises with historical content was an obvious choice

because “*cuando un estudiante está estudiando el pretérito y el imperfecto [...] se presta muy bien para leer algunas historias sobre la lucha revolucionaria, la lucha popular, sobre la resistencia comunitaria en los años 80, en los años 90.*”<sup>15</sup> Students described using old URNG pamphlets written by a teacher’s father for translation exercises, or reading from a book produced by QTA that narrates the experiences of four women in various revolutionary movements, including that of a current teacher. As such, learning materials were not only immersive but also grounded in personal and collective social, political and historical narratives, resonating with critical pedagogy’s calls for contextualised education (Freire, 1970:85).

### *The social, relational dimensions of QTA’s pedagogy*

It was the interaction of these material elements with the school’s pedagogical structure and social dimensions, namely the combined one-on-one format with collaborative group activities, that enabled memory work to emerge as a continually negotiated, situated and relational practice. As the primary locus of instruction, teachers and students spend 25 hours a week together, an arrangement students found particularly demanding but also one that could enable deeper pedagogical relationships through the heightened presence and gradual trust building that sustained engagement allows (Hickey and Riddle, 2025:3). Personally, the intensity of “*locking in*” to this format was amplified by the need to sustain ongoing conversation in a second language, particularly as most of my lessons were conducted orally rather than being balanced with written exercises because of both my preference for conversational practice and my research focus,

Classes typically oscillated between structured grammar and vocabulary work and fluid conversations shaped by the student’s interests and goals. Over time, these dialogic exchanges created conditions for memory work to surface organically and intersubjectively; personal stories or anecdotes might be prompted by a grammatical point, visual didactic, or reflection on activities. Regardless of the topic, language learning functioned as both entry point and legitimising frame for memory work. It brought shared purpose that structured interactions, but also enabled vulnerable, political or sensitive conversations – the kinds more likely to elicit personal recollection. As one student observed, language learning was the “*blanket*” that made it permissible to move between grammar and an “*off-topic thing*” dealing with “*something a bit more real.*” Under the

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<sup>15</sup> “When a student is studying the preterite or imperfect [tenses][...] it lends itself very well to reading some stories about the revolutionary struggle, the popular struggle, about community resistance in the 80s and 90s” [author translation]

guise of language instruction, these encounters took on a more informal, flexible and affective character where personal insights and recollections were considered legitimate learning material.

Memory work was often enacted during moments of one-on-one student-teacher reflection on group activities or trips. Clarifying details opened space for teachers to share their opinions, experiences or connections to the broader theme addressed. One student described how their teacher sharing about a disappeared family member arose out of a discussion on the previous trip: “it wasn't like, [...] welcome - 8AM - I'm trying to tell you this story. [...] we actually did ask her questions about her involvement in activism and stuff [...] the conversation came out of the intercultural centre visit.” Class reflection also enabled students to respond and draw parallels with injustices, struggles or forms of resistance in their own contexts. Teachers, in turn, remarked how much they learn from the students' worlds, seeing the exchange as “*un dialogo entre dos fuentes de información*”<sup>16</sup> where “*aprendizaje mutuo*”<sup>17</sup> takes place that stretches far beyond linguistics. The meaning that students and teachers alike formed of activities and trips was interactively and continuously negotiated as each related the topic to their own positions and prior experiences. Memory was not transmitted abstractly or unidirectionally as fixed ‘bankable’ knowledge (Freire, 1970:73), but emerged intersubjectively within and because of the relational dynamics between student and teacher and their interaction with the wider social-material context.

Seminars and *Qué Pasa* discussions similarly enacted memory work through interpersonal dynamics. Framed by the “*blanket*” of language instruction, the testimonies and lived experiences of teachers and speakers were expressed, shared and valued as individual “*micro-historias*”<sup>18</sup> – lived accounts articulated in their present, sometimes fragmented form, resisting chronological or totalising coherence. Because these testimonies are repeatedly narrated to new groups, their form shifts subtly over time, reshaped by questions, clarifications and discussions unfolding during or after each session, including those prompted by linguistic misunderstanding. Whilst the topical threads connecting accounts persist, each retelling is slightly different, its (re)production dependent on the presence and interaction of speaker and audience within the specific context of its embodied performance (Taylor, 2003:20). The memory work enacted in such contexts thus resists the stabilising and unifying tendencies of more archival memory initiatives circumscribed, for example,

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<sup>16</sup> “a dialogue between two sources of information” [author translation]

<sup>17</sup> “mutual learning” [author translation]

<sup>18</sup> “micro histories” [author translation]

by the goal of constructing a single collective narrative or establishing a definitive truth record (Hatcher, 2009:138). Instead, the space functions more as a dynamic, relational and shifting repertoire where memory is effectively re-constituted through each instance of its telling.

The significance of this form of interpersonal engagement lies in how it stimulates learning both cognitively and affectively, bringing about forms of intersubjective understanding. As Schultz-Krafte (2022:66-67) notes, personal narratives invite emotions into the pedagogical process, helping bridge the gap between intellectual comprehension of abstract concepts and lived understanding. Similarly, hooks argues that bringing lived experience into conversation with other knowledges enables learners to connect with ideas that may at first seem distant to their reality (1994:86). In a transnational setting like QTA, these connective and affective functions were particularly important. Concepts or ideas that felt initially 'hard to grasp' were not just linguistic or grammatical but also epistemological and experiential, grounded in each person's socio-historical reality. Although such differences cannot be fully bridged, the affective and relational quality of these sustained encounters oriented participants not towards full comprehension or completely aligned understanding, but towards an engagement grounded in an ethics of openness, attentiveness, curiosity and mutual recognition of one another's knowledges. Moments of affective connection, even if temporary and uneven in how they emerged, were significant because it is this quality that ultimately increases the power of learning to produce the capacity for transformative action (Mulcahy and Healy, 2023:829)

## **5.2 Narratives of resistance, struggle and endurance**

Whilst several thematic threads cut across afternoon activities, the most consistent was how they foregrounded experiences of resistance, struggle, and endurance in the face of shifting state violence and repression. This thread linked diverse topics, including collective mobilisation in fincas for fair wages and labour rights; ongoing teachers' union protests and blockades; the work of land defenders; the URNG's clandestine radio station; and the experience of a guerilla unit in their transition to non-armed political participation. Crucially, these conversations were not one-dimensional or uncritically celebratory. There was space to discuss both progress and constraints in trying to affect change, acknowledging, for example, the contradictions within a teachers' union affected by corruption, or recognising that the cancellation of ten metallic mining licenses in the Q'eqchi' lands of the Sierra Santa Cruz was a significant achievement whilst still situating this within a broader landscape of constant intimidation and criminalisation.

Foregrounding resistance is significant for several reasons. Primarily, it enabled educators to highlight political subjectivities typically marginalised within i) institutionalised memory initiatives designed to elicit testimony through hegemonic ‘victimhood’ frameworks where recognition of moral worth is defined by the violence inflicted onto individuals rather than through assertions of agency or collective action (Godoy, 2018:373; Gready and Robin, 2014:355-356) and ii) traditional educational settings where lived experience of racism, dispossession and colonialism are largely excluded epistemic bases for historical knowledge production (Sriprakash et al., 2020:355-356). In doing so, QTA brought forward forms of “dangerous memory”, experiences of both “hope and [...] suffering” that have the potential to subvert dominant understandings (Giroux, 1997:105), particularly amidst the persistent refusal to acknowledge the extent of popular participation in the revolutionary struggle within Guatemala’s broader memory politics (Oglesby, 2007:80).

By contrast, such experiences were deliberately centred at QTA. Contemporary resistance against ongoing extraction-related dispossession and exploitation, for example, was used to highlight continuities between colonial and neoliberal power and the broader reverberations of violence beyond formal wartime periods (Lemay-Hébert et al., 2025:49). One teacher, critiquing the imprisonment and danger his “*activist compañeros*” face, linked present-day struggles to the same structures that drove him and his comrades to take up arms decades earlier:

*“cuando vinieron la colonización, [...] tomaron las tierras buenas, la oligarquía histórica [...] y las familias Mayas [fueron desplazadas] a las montañas, pero ahora viene la reconversión. Hoy están sacando los minerales, agua y palma africana, caña de azúcar. Entonces otra vez - quitar la tierra”.*<sup>19</sup>

Here, export-oriented extractivism was the contemporary expression of ongoing structural forces, situating both historical and contemporary resistance within cyclical histories of dispossession, violence and collective struggle stretching back to invasion and colonisation.

Secondly, such narratives hold transformative potential in inviting students to engage with more complex representations of, and possibilities for, agency and community (Gready and Robin, 2014:355-356) often overlooked within hegemonic social orders or binary victim/perpetrator

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<sup>19</sup> “When colonisation came, the historical oligarchy took the good lands [...] and displaced the Maya families to the mountains. But now comes the restructuring. Today they’re extracting the minerals, water, African palm, sugarcane. So again, taking the land.” [author translation]

portrayals of injustice. They offer opportunities to highlight a more nuanced emotive relationship with memories of ostensibly painful historical periods. Leebaw highlights that looking to organised political resistance highlights forms of community so deeply bound by shared commitment, meaning and urgency that reflecting even on the “dark” moments in which these social relations arose may evoke nostalgia (2013:2610). I sensed this complexity in conversations with teachers who described their experiences in the guerillas as marked by loss and pain but also conviction, pride and gratitude: *“la lucha me dio muchos beneficios [...] viajé mucho, conocí países, aprendí la historia, tuve la oportunidad de [...] dar ayuda a gente en la calle [...] estar en familia sin jerarquía”*.<sup>20</sup> By centring such perspectives, there was space for students to think beyond simplistic binaries of victimhood and violence, to question assumptions about the political and moral complexities of what constitutes agency and ‘legitimate’ action, and to learn from the innovative forms of solidarity, social relations and political life that can emerge amidst systematic violence.

## 5.2 Multiplicity, contradiction and temporal layering

Finally, historical memory was engaged through an interweaving of multiple levels of meaning and temporalities – sometimes within the same visual frame. Political violence and its remembrance rarely unfold along a neat timeline, instead marked by ongoing struggles over multiple meanings (Jelin, 2010:61 and Miller, 2021:850). This idea became most visibly and materially apparent during guided trips when learners were situated in places marked by overlapping colonial, capitalist and militarised histories. One student recalled when this layering was particularly clear upon stopping at some Maya temples after visiting a nearby Catholic church:

*“...they had talked about how some of the churches don't allow people to practice the Mayan spiritual practices. So that was an aspect, obviously, that is being overwritten by other religions. But going to the Mayan ruins, you saw them and then [...] we looked out to the land, and you could see the mines [that] have been very, like, destructive to the land and the community [...] so you really were seeing so many levels of Guatemalan history at once.”*

Here, learning about such histories unfolded not through a linear, chronological narrative but through confronting multiple temporalities – pre-colonial, colonial, and contemporary – within the same visual field. Extractivism as represented by the mines and Maya spiritual practices as represented by the temples formed the connective threads that materially illustrated continuities

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<sup>20</sup> “I benefitted greatly from the struggle [...] I travelled a lot, I got to know a lot of places, I learned the history, I had the opportunity [...] to help people in the street [...] to be in a family without hierarchy” [author translation]

and overlapping structures of violence and resistance as interpreted by the student all within the present moment.

Other trips emphasised not only the simultaneity of temporal layers but of different *levels* of memory. Being guided by someone with a personal connection to these sites, often rooted in their experiences with the URNG, meant that historic, collective and autobiographical memories (Halbwachs, 1992:23-24) could each be drawn into coexistence at once. The guide's narration was the labour through which these layers intersected and were brought to the present (Paulson et al., 2020:7); by engaging in his own act of remembering in each space, he actively positioned his personal meanings alongside and sometimes in contradiction with more institutionalised or collective narratives.

A trip to a former military base turned public cultural centre made these dynamics evident. The complex houses a public concert hall and sports field, sitting above a grassroots, volunteer-run museum that narrates the site's significance as a former military base central to the planning of the scorched earth campaigns. The museum preserves detention cells, a basement with indications of torture, and a collective wall of remembrance for the town's disappeared people. Described by the museum volunteers as "*tierra inolvidable*"<sup>21</sup>, the cultural centre itself remains a contested space: municipal and corporate bodies have repeatedly campaigned for the museum's closure to bury these histories and reinforce its present cultural function only; it is also one of few formerly militarised sites not yet exhumed despite ongoing demands. The steps to the basement, located behind heavy, large doors that separate the reception/bar area from the museum are painted with "*Usted tambien se resiste a olvidar? Usted tambien se pregunta por que?*"<sup>22</sup>, phrases that demand introspection and highlight remembrance as a morally and politically significant act.

As we approached the building, the guide paused outside to recount the former presence of a monument commemorating a soldier killed in 1995, later removed during demilitarisation. This statue held deep personal significance because it was the guide's URNG unit that killed the soldier. Sharing this detail before entering the site immediately drew students into a more complex and affective sense-making process, one shaped also by his vivid, personal and morally complicated

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<sup>21</sup> "Unforgettable earth" [author translation]

<sup>22</sup> "Do you also resist forgetting? Do you also wonder why?" [author translation]

experiences of militancy. This memory work is what enabled students to engage with confronting and fluctuating meanings of the past (Jelin, 2003:26), rather than understanding the location's meaning as singular or stable.

This trip thus permitted multiple, intersecting levels and narratives of historical memory to be made sense of simultaneously by the students and guide (Sutton, 2024:594). In my own reflections, I noted the jarring effects. Revisiting the space with the guide caused me to reframe my own previous memory of attending a concert there the year before, unaware of the 'darker histories' it contained. The pedagogical value lay precisely in making visible the multiplicity, instability and simultaneity of competing mnemonic and temporal registers. The coexistence of the site's hegemonic framing as a cultural centre, the more subversive one narrated by the museum volunteers, and the guide's personal connection laid bare how histories can coexist and contradict each other within a single location (Jelin, 2010:64 and Paulson et al., 2020:6). It was this work of unsettling the meaning that we, as students and tourists, attached to certain locations by bringing to light their darker sides that the guide identified as fundamental to his role.

# The Politics of Language, Meaning-Making and (un)Translatability

This chapter examines how the school's multilingual and transnational dynamics mediated pedagogical encounters and the memory work unfolding within them. These dynamics shaped not only what could be expressed, heard, and understood, but also the forms of knowledge, communication and relating that became possible. As anticipated, multilingualism produced hierarchies of access, voice and comprehension. These asymmetries necessitated formal translation during group activities, a particularly power-laden site that made visible the continuous interpretative processes underpinning meaning-making whilst also creating openings for collective knowledge production and critical discussion. Rather than foreclosing understanding, moments of linguistic imperfection or (un)translatability sometimes generated creative and affective forms of communication and relation that drew attention to emotions and body language as meaningful signifiers of knowledge.

This chapter develops this analysis through three findings: the possibilities and constraints of verbal expression; the role of affective and embodied registers; and how translation was both a site of power and intersubjectivity. I argue that QTA functions as a liminal expressive and communicative space in which multilingualism both legitimises the articulation of personal and political “*micro-historias*” whilst also producing the very hierarchies that constrain their intelligibility. Translation exposes this politics of meaning-making whilst also demonstrating the generative potential of turning to affective and embodied registers – central to learning with the partiality that a multilingual environment brings.

## 6.1 The possibilities and constraints of verbal comprehension

Language functioned as a bridge, connecting the knowledges and worlds of the school community (Bassnett, 2002:10), and as a boundary, producing asymmetries in access and understanding. Its learning enabled the articulation of personal and political histories as forms of “lived and embodied ways of knowing, being and remembering” (Baines and Riaño-Alcalá, 2025:3) whilst simultaneously structuring how the narratives became audible. For teachers who more regularly participated, seminars and testimonies held personal, political and pedagogical significance. They

were opportunities to “*convertirse en narradora [...] de un evento fuerte vivido*”<sup>23</sup>, to raise historical and political awareness, and to honour the struggle and spirit of comrades, friends and family all whilst exposing students to diverse expressive forms. These narratives were not presented as definitive or absolute, but as meaningful, personal references through which students could learn “*cómo fue una guerra, directamente de una persona.*”<sup>24</sup> Being able to engage and respond in the same language represented a form of recognition (Hickey and Riddle, 2024:3278) that students saw as essential to demonstrating respect and openness to connection.

Listeners emphasised the significance of learning directly from someone’s “*own words*”. As one explained, “*language performs so much [...] about epistemologically how one thinks and how they choose to articulate themselves*”, recognising the entwined relationship between language and meaning (Taylor, 2016:15). A teacher’s description of sleeping “*on the ground with my compatriots*” conveyed cultural, epistemic and lived nuance that “*even the best translation*” could not. hooks’ argument that experiential knowledge derives its power from the “*passion of experience [...] of remembrance*” (1994:90) helps demonstrate why these encounters held such weight for learners. When such memories are articulated by the person who lived them, the “*spirit that orders those words*” (*ibid.*) carries a presence and intensity easily lost in third-person retelling. The value of these exchanges therefore lay less in *what* was recalled, but more in the opportunity they provided to witness *how* the teacher chose to express the most meaningful aspects of their experience in the moment, making learning “*more real, immediate and personal*” (Clark and Rossiter, 2008:1).

Nonetheless, narration is always subject to power-laden institutional and discursive conditions structuring its expression and reception (Trouillot, 1995:25, Clark, 1996:5; French, 2009:94). Even seemingly unmediated moments of learning directly from personal experience were embedded within the school’s broader pedagogical and social frame. This linguistic and critical orientation freed narratives from hegemonic judicial, archival or truth-telling logics (Acosta López, 2023:153) and from the politics of appeal or victimhood (Lawther, 2025:7; McKevooy and McConnachie, 2012:532). Instead, they were shaped by overlapping constraints produced by linguistic hierarchies and the transnational composition of the school community, revealing tensions to be navigated in engaging with historical memory through language education.

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<sup>23</sup> “become narrator [...] of an intense lived event” [author translation]

<sup>24</sup> “how a war was, directly from a person” [author translation]

Although openings existed for non-hegemonic narratives to surface, certain voices nonetheless dominated the memory production. QTA includes Maya K'iche' teachers<sup>25</sup> and intentionally foregrounds Maya histories in its programming, but these efforts remained somewhat constrained by the fact that Spanish was the language through which these knowledges are communicated – though widely spoken, also a weapon of assimilatory erasure (Arriaza and Arias, 1998:73). Teachers attributed this to the practical challenges of live translating K'iche'-Spanish-English, yet the effect was that knowledges only expressible in K'iche' or other Mayan languages rarely entered the space, limiting the linguistic, epistemic, and political nuances that could be voiced. Whilst learning directly from teachers' 'own words' offered impactful pedagogical opportunities, the space to which these perspectives were brought remained circumscribed by enduring colonial linguistic hierarchies making Spanish the dominant and most accessible language (Peña-Pinceira and Allweiss, 2025:214).

These linguistic hierarchies influenced not only who could speak but what could be understood. Memory work was co-produced through layered acts of speaking, questioning, interpreting, clarifying (Taylor, 2003:XX), and through attending to embodied and affective signals. In a setting where verbal comprehension was partial and uneven due to differing linguistic abilities, this co-production required particular forms of “intentional listening” to establish a “conscious and active sense of relationality between the self and other” (Sotelo-Castro and Shapiro-Phim 2023:4). Yet the same multilingual dynamics that made this attentiveness crucial also made it difficult to sustain. Beginners struggled to direct attention to the speaker during prolonged periods of Spanish; more advanced learners recalled losing idioms, jokes, or sarcasm when processing speech word-for-word. Most significantly, students often struggled to hold the emotional weight of a testimony or explanation. They could recognise visible emotion – *“they’re crying and I can understand it”* – but how this emotion was embedded within linguistic choices was often *“lost in translation”*, producing uncertainty about how to respond.

This challenge speaks not only to how linguistic hierarchies obscure emotional nuance but also to the ethical tension in engaging with personal testimony for educational purposes, particularly

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<sup>25</sup> Notably, one teacher shared with me that despite being Maya K'iche' herself she was never encouraged to learn or speak the language due to fears of discrimination. In wanting to learn more herself, she now practices with these teachers in the school. Other teachers shared similar experiences of not learning their own Mayan language.

where presence is mediated by the power-laden asymmetries of being a temporary visitor. The ethical task lies in hearing what is painful and responding in-the-moment as *witnesses* (Zembylas and Bekerman, 2008:131). This requires a receptivity that allows for one to be “radically transformed by the very process” (Felman and Laub, 1992:10) and, pedagogically, can disrupt conscience enough “to see, feel and act differently” (Zembylas and Bekerman, 2008:145). Although not entirely foreclosing this mode of presence, linguistic asymmetries and the positionality of students made it both more fragile *and* more necessary, for the transience tourism entails (irrespective of its language learning purpose) heightens the risk of consuming testimony as spectators rather than engaging consciously, affectively, and ethically.

One unusual trip heightened these tensions. It marked the anniversary of the return of a community of families forced into exile during the war. Unlike other trips led by QTA’s guide, whose personal connections to the locations usually shaped their nature and ethical tone, an external charity representative led and translated much of this trip. This person repeatedly interrupted, sensationalised, and steered community members’ narration of their experiences, seemingly to align these narratives with the charity’s fundraising goals. The expectation that we engage as ‘regular’<sup>26</sup> tourists exposed, with unusual force, the hierarchies structuring the encounter: our relative financial and mobility privilege; the risk of re-traumatisation in eliciting testimony; and the voyeuristic potential in learning from the suffering of others as temporary visitors. These dynamics together undermined any possibility of witnessing shaped by attentive, reciprocal presence. Whilst the tensions of a transnational, partly touristic educational setting made so visible by this trip cannot be fully resolved, it highlighted the importance of creating conditions that support more ethical engagement: respecting speaker autonomy, minimising external pressures, allowing adequate time and space, and ensuring safeguards for speakers and students. Such practices, more typical of how activities were structured within QTA itself, cannot neutralise asymmetry but can increase the possibility for engaging with greater care and attentiveness.

## 6.2 Turning to embodied and affective registers

Amidst the challenges produced by linguistic hierarchies and the uneven possibilities for ethical witnessing, many students and teachers emphasised that one could still “*sentir el dolor de una*

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<sup>26</sup> I interpret this as being associated with a degree of not only transience but passivity, detachedness and, often in multilingual contexts, inability to respond.

*persona*”<sup>27</sup> through non-verbal cues like tone, body language, gestures or facial expressions. These affective and embodied registers did not replace verbal comprehension but became essential forms of listening when linguistic understanding faltered. One student described how being immersed in the materiality of historically charged sites enabled a multi-sensory process of meaning-making. Recalling a visit to a church where a massacre had taken place, they noted:

*“I felt very emotional [...] so I wasn't even registering anything that was being said [...] but even if I didn't really understand [...] everything was in front of my face. It was all happening around me”.*

These reflections highlight how memory work at QTA often exceeded the boundaries of speech, reinforcing arguments that emotions and non-verbal communication are integral to memory work as constitutive and transmissive of embodied knowledge (Wilson et al., 2020:2). As Ahmed argues, the experience of emotionality can hold such force that it produces a distinct form of meaning (2004:120). Importantly, trauma can also shatter the very grammars and assumptions of perception, intelligibility and sense that ordinarily support meaning-making (Acosta López, 2023:154). Testimonies emerging from such ruptures may therefore resist coherent verbal articulation, making tone, expressions, and body language all the more central to how meaning is conveyed and made. This helps explain why the school community so often relied on unspoken signals not only to find resonance with difficult histories but also to maintain a form of reciprocity and mutuality within encounters shaped by linguistic and experiential difference (Hickey and Riddle, 2024:3278)

Teachers described consciously cultivating these alternative forms of listening in their pedagogical practice, viewing the liminal space between spoken and embodied communication as creative rather than inherently restrictive. Although they adapted narratives, pace and expressive forms to student’s proficiency, this did not necessarily undermine the one-on-one exchange. As one teacher explained, proficiency: *“no es el obstáculo para que la persona diga lo que quiere decir”*<sup>28</sup>, recalling students with very basic Spanish but such *“ganas de aprender, [...] deseos de expresarse, que con [...] los primeros verbos [...] ellos bien te cuentan una historia.”*<sup>29</sup> What often mattered more than linguistic proficiency was the willingness to remain mutually engaged across gaps in understanding, echoing Cohen’s argument that communicating across difference demands “patience, epistemic humility, time and the willingness to persist” (2020:4). Participants’ disposition and openness were therefore central

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<sup>27</sup> “feel the pain of a person” [author translation]

<sup>28</sup> “isn’t the obstacle to a person saying what they want to say” [author translation]

<sup>29</sup> “an enthusiasm to learn, desire to express themselves, that with the first verbs [...] they tell you a story really well” [author translation]

to the exchange, suggesting certain ways of being in relation were valued more than its outcome in terms of linguistic accuracy or comprehension. When student and teacher recognised each other as equally legitimate knowers (Hickey and Riddle, 2024:3279), relatively complex conversations could be sustained. As one teacher explained, “*estamos usando el presente, pero usamos frases, usamos las manos, usamos cosas para ubicarnos en el tiempo [...] usamos nosotros esa forma de hablar*”<sup>30</sup>, demonstrating how partiality did not always foreclose connection and dialogue but could instead create conditions for alternative, creative forms grounded more in embodied communication.

### **6.3 Translation as a site of power and inter-subjectivity**

Translation here functioned as the externalisation of the interpretative labour through which we all continuously make meaning. Whilst no social context is devoid of such work, translation made it overtly visible, drawing attention to how our worldview and lived experience shape how we hear, process and reproduce knowledge (Bassnett, 2002:86). During one trip I noted discrepancies between my own interpretation and that of the volunteer translator regarding a guide’s narration of post-demobilisation URNG-MAIZ organising. On reflection, I realised we approached the same narrative through distinct “realms of meaning” (Shaw, 2004:133) each shaped by our positionalities and interests which influenced what we considered as significant to relay. As a researcher I was attuned to justice, memory, and genocide, whereas the translator, a seminarian, emphasised references to the Church and liberation theology. These lenses, compounded by the Spanish vocabulary and communicative tools available to us, shaped how we translated each other’s words and worlds.

Such differing interpretative processes mattered because translators held the authority to externalise their version as the dominant English meaning. Live translations produced inevitable inaccuracies, confusion, and omissions. Throughout my participation, including as translator, I observed and occasionally contributed to such errors: misunderstanding words, jumbling timelines, summarising long passages, misrepresenting tone. As one student remarked, translation is “*never supposed to be perfect*”. However, these imperfections significantly mediated how many students, especially beginners, understood the memory work: they distributed comprehension unevenly, subtly shaping how experiences became legible, memorable or lost within individual and group understanding. Therefore, whilst intending to mediate linguistic hierarchies of access and

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<sup>30</sup> “We’re using the present tense, but we use phrases, we use hands, we use things to locate ourselves in time [...] we use that form of speaking” [author translation]

understanding, translation could inadvertently reproduce or deepen them (Monzó-Nebot, 2020:15). The weight of mistranslations varied. In one-on-one lessons, the pedagogical flexibility made such moments productive: students could pause, clarify meaning and learn from the mistake. Sometimes they generated humour and connection, such as when I asked whether a teacher had brought his “*hijos*” (children) rather than “*higos*” (figs) for the morning snack. In group settings, especially during more emotionally charged narratives, the stakes of mistranslation were higher. Here it risked inadvertently distorting how a person’s experience was represented, potentially producing subtle epistemic erasures through the smoothing over of what seemed unintelligible to the translator (Vázquez, 2011:28).

Yet translation and its imperfections also generated moments of unexpected collaboration. Because it made so visible the continuous filtering effect of individual subjectivity, students often intervened to supplement translations with details they found personally meaningful. One student recalled their frustration at not fully understanding a Spanish explanation because they could see how more proficient classmates were “*really moved at certain moments*”, implying the English translation lacked emotional depth. Rather than this fully obstructing understanding, the omissions prompted collective meaning making. Classmates would “*jump in and be like, you forgot this one*”, offering details that were “*emotionally relevant*”. More broadly, such gaps also prompted post-activity discussion amongst students. Clarifying missing details or questioning someone’s interpretation frequently led into wider reflective and critical conversations about what each student had taken away and how it related to other familiar contexts. Such instances highlight how the limits of translation at times created space for the kind of collaborative interpretation scholars like Sriprakash et al. (2020:3) identify as central to pedagogies oriented towards more just and reparative futures. Students collectively interweaving their own layers of meaning and emotional resonance alongside the translator’s authoritative account allowed shared understanding to be constructed.

# Transformative Possibilities and Frictions

This chapter shifts the focus to what the memory work shaped by the environment's multilingual and transnational dimensions made possible. It examines the effects of QTA's pedagogical practices to consider what they might suggest about the capacity of critical, politically engaged and historically grounded language education to engage with the past in ways that contribute towards transformative change. The analysis is structured around three findings: the emergence of shifts in perspectives understood as turning to "*ojos abiertos*"; the role of tension and discomfort; and how emerging forms of critical awareness related to questions of action and responsibility

Within QTA, it argues that transformative possibilities emerged unevenly across positionalities as part of situated and contingent processes of critical reflection, re-negotiation, and re-articulation of meaning, all of which shape, without determining, the possibilities for future action across different social and geographical scales.

## 7.1 Ojos abiertos

One of the most commonly expressed, though varyingly experienced, effects of QTA's pedagogical approach was a shift towards "*ojos abiertos*": the slow, sometimes uncomfortable process of becoming aware of, unsettling and rethinking prior assumptions through which one begins to articulate a more critical understanding of the world around them. From a critical pedagogical perspective this reflects processes of conscientisation (Freire, 1974:15). These new understandings and meanings primarily developed as teachers and students connected the themes and discussions centred on Guatemala to their own or other socio-political contexts. This was made possible by the school's systemic framing of the war and contemporary violence as manifestations of intersecting global structures of power, imperialism and inequality. Such framing encouraged a way of knowing that moved beyond individual circumstance, prompting consideration of how wider structures and ideologies shape and connect lives – albeit unevenly - across global scales (Freire, cited in Glass, 2001:17). It also supported the development of a more entangled understanding of oneself, one's implication and the responsibilities arising from these interconnections (Rothberg, 2019:2).

The effects were particularly evident in how learners began reinterpreting prior understandings through lenses of interconnected struggle. Whilst the assumptions that came under critique varied, a recurring theme concerned evolving understandings of resistance – both armed and civil – and its relationship to discourses of ‘terrorism’. By foregrounding liberationist perspectives and lived experience of organised political resistance, QTA created conditions for students and teachers to critically examine how states and media can weaponise language of ‘terrorism’ to criminalise dissent across contexts and historical moments (Brown, Weizman and Matchain, 2025:3). For one student, recognising patterns in the “*playbook*” of US imperial interventions prompted a re-evaluation of previously accepted narratives of the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka being “*villainized*” as “*terrorists*”. They contrasted this with their understanding of Guatemalan revolutionary movements, which, having learned about through the school’s framing, were not viewed through the same lens of ‘terrorism’, despite ‘counter-insurgency’ discourses dominating in Guatemala and the US. Comparing this perspective to their impression that “*the Tamil guerillas were considered really evil*” prompted reflection on the ideological and cultural frameworks that had shaped their knowledge of the Sri Lankan context (Said, 1978:58), enabling them to recognise how it had been “*warped*” by the “*dominant culture*” of Western discourses. Teachers described similar perspective shifts. After discussing the mass arrests of Palestine Action supporters in the UK,<sup>31</sup> my teacher explained that when the Guatemalan government labelled peaceful protests defending Arévalo’s election in 2023 as ‘terrorism’, she began to re-examine her earlier assumptions about Palestinian resistance because she now saw how such labels could be used to delegitimise opposition to repression.

These examples demonstrate how QTA’s pedagogies unsettled dominant assumptions and hegemonic understandings, facilitating moments where new meanings could come into being (Taylor, 2016:77). As discussed in the previous chapter, the school’s multilingual dynamics both complicated and expanded its educative, relational, and communicative possibilities. They also influenced the political and transformative reconstitution of meaning because they shaped the conditions through which meaning was made and, consequently, how processes of conscientisation could begin to emerge. Continuous linguistic movement made language learning itself a site of ongoing self-reflection as students and teachers continually experimented with new vernaculars, expressions and communicative forms to find common ground (Clark, 1996:12). Communicating across cultural difference and linguistic gaps demands vulnerability and humility

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<sup>31</sup> Palestine Action was proscribed a terrorist organisation by the UK government in July 2025, the latest step in an ongoing process of delegitimising and chilling all kinds of political protest in the UK. This was at the front of my mind when I discussed UK politics in my lessons as it happened just before I arrived.

(Cohen, 2020:4) as well as heightened attentiveness as participants had to listen closely, sit within partiality, and became more aware of how their own subjectivities shaped meaning. These qualities not only mirror the affective work of critical pedagogy but also expanded imaginative and expressive possibilities essential to transformation.

For example, some students described expressing themselves in Spanish as unexpectedly liberating: *“I was more comfortable speaking in clichés. I wouldn't usually be saying these sweeping political opinions in English, but in Spanish, [...] I can't fucking speak with more nuance! I can't, like, couch my opinions.”* Communicating political ideas in an unfamiliar language appeared to lessen fear of judgement or sounding overly idealistic, suggesting that working through awkwardness, mistakes and imperfection opened up small spaces for honesty and imaginative freedom. In the process, students also acquired new political vocabulary and conceptual tools helping them to critically “re-symbolise ordinary social life” and give name to ideas and experiences previously unarticulated in that way (McLaren and da Silva, 1991:41). The frictions of multilingualism were thus fundamental to the pedagogy's transformative potential because the creativity, reflexivity and necessity to push beyond familiar linguistic and conceptual frameworks deepened students' openness to reconstituting their understandings of broader political ideas.

Teachers similarly noted new expressive possibilities, less because of multilingualism itself than because their students were foreign visitors. This distance made some teachers feel more able to discuss topics often silenced or stereotyped as ‘taboo’, such as LGBTQ+ experiences, misogyny, and religion, with students than with their own communities. One teacher attributed this contrast to their culture of *“callarnos y no decir lo que opinamos [...] porque así nos educaron, por la represión y todo eso.”*<sup>32</sup> For these teachers, the same transnational dynamics that constrained some forms of speakability also created different openings to step outside the norms of what was ‘acceptable’ in their everyday social worlds. That both students and teachers took attempted expressing themselves in ways less constrained by self-censorship reflects a willingness to be unsettled that is central to envisioning the world otherwise (Sriprakash et al., 2020:2).

Taken together, these micro-level openings and perspective shifts demonstrate the transformative potential of the school's pedagogies. How we perceive issues and their causes fundamentally

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<sup>32</sup> “silencing ourselves and not saying our opinions [...] because we were educated that way and because of the repression and all of that” [author translation]

shapes our capacity to imagine and act towards a more expansive range of just futures (Glass, 2001:17). By unsettling dominant assumptions and understandings of – amongst other things – violence and resistance and enabling learners to reconstitute their meaning of those ideas, the pedagogical encounters at QTA helped foster the “initial stage of transformation” (hooks, 1994:43): a move towards greater critical awareness, self-reflexivity and interrogation of the power structures that uphold hegemonic narratives. Recognising violence as structurally embedded enables clearer understandings of and capacities to respond to how patterns of harm and social conflict are continuously reconfigured rather than resolved. This is central to the collective efforts of transformative justice that seek to confront not only the consequences of violence but its causes and everyday conditions (Gready and Robins, 2014:354). By creating the conditions from which people learn to recognise, name, and respond to structural violence and injustice, the school’s pedagogical approach contributes to the building of dispositions and perspectives, relations and critical awareness from which more transformative forms of social action may emerge.

## 7.2 Navigating tension and friction

Whilst QTA’s pedagogies hold significant transformative possibilities, it was also a space where discomfort could arise because of how it explicitly centres politics both as a site of language learning and of memory production. As hooks reminds us, friction often intensifies in classrooms grounded in critical pedagogy (1994:43), presenting both challenges and opportunities for engaging with historical memory. Most students arrive with some awareness of the school’s political and critical orientation, often through word-of-mouth, but not all. The explicitly political visual environment, whilst appreciated by some, could also provoke unease amongst students cautious of overtly leftist spaces, with several describing feeling initially “*on the back foot*”, concerned about judgement, cancel culture, or not fitting into what they perceived as a politically homogenous environment. One described being surrounded by people “*championing revolution*” as “*surprising, maybe slightly uncomfortable*” having been taught in the US to view Central American revolutions as “*foreign [...] maybe a dangerous thing*”. Another reflected that, “*where I come from, communism is a very bad word. Like, you do not wanna be identified with that*” and so being in an environment where they felt “*bombarded by that*” was challenging.

Discomfort, however, lies central to the purpose of critical pedagogy. Friction exposes learners to the positionality of their own knowledge, disrupts established viewpoints, and can open space for reimagining agency and potential beyond the classroom (hooks, 1994:43). Whilst tensions couldn’t

be controlled for, educators often addressed them directly or mediated them through subtle adjustments to the weekly programming, particularly when more conservative groups arrived. When seminarians visited, for example, educators maintained the usual focus on themes of violence, repression, resistance, land, and popular struggle but with greater emphasis on the Catholic Church, scheduling more sessions on liberation theology to offer a more relatable entry point. Such adjustments reflect the balancing act required to maintain an unapologetically political and critical stance whilst fostering a learning community that is not dogmatic or exclusionary, ensuring reflective discomfort is productive and unsettling rather than alienating.

When tensions surfaced more explicitly, if managed carefully they could encourage wider reflection on the assumptions shaping more divergent or unexpected viewpoints. One teacher recalled a moment of tension during a graduation celebration when the group sang “La Vida Chao”, including “*soy comunista*”<sup>33</sup>. One student reacted with suspicion, interpreting this as ideological indoctrination. The teacher addressed the concern directly, explaining that in Guatemala, systems of oppression, exclusion, and marginalisation have long denied dignity to the majority, but speaking out against this is routinely labelled as ‘communist’ to delegitimise critique of the state. From the teacher’s perspective, “*si protestar porque, este, no hay justicia, si eso es ser comunista, bueno, somos comunistas*”<sup>34</sup>. By unpacking the power-laden uses of such labels, the teacher encouraged students to interrogate where their own understandings originated and see that language isn’t just a question of ideology but takes on a distinct meaning in context. This example highlights how critical pedagogy entails sitting within, rather than shying away from, the friction generated by difference. Among students I interviewed, even those initially taken aback highlighted small shifts in their views, reflecting that “*it seems like down here, leftist means you support and defend the poor, and [...] right means you're defending corrupt systems. And, like, that's definitely just not [...] how I've been raised of thinking*” but “*if those are the terms we're using, then, yes, I would want to be considered leftist,*” suggesting that they were beginning to reconsider the political language through which they understood the world.

### **7.3 Translating consciousness into action and transnational responsibilities**

Many understood the school’s transformative potential as ultimately what extended beyond the classroom. For them, its significance lay not only in creating space for questioning and thinking differently, but in the possibility that this could be later mobilised by students and teachers in their

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<sup>33</sup> “I am a communist” [author translation]

<sup>34</sup> “If protesting because there’s no justice is being a communist, well fine, we’re communists” [author translation]

own contexts to demand and pursue more just futures. Particularly for those whose political formation was shaped largely by experiences in revolutionary movements, memory work functioned as a critique of the broader continuities that persist in the present (Sriprakash et al., 2020:3) to demonstrate the need for action in the respective contexts of students and teachers. As the school's guide explained, "*para cambiar la historia tienes que empezar a participar. Si no participas, no cambias. Tienes que trabajar con tu familia, hablar con tu mamá, con tu papa. [...] es un proceso*"<sup>35</sup>, echoing Freire's insistence that critical awareness must be joined with praxis (Fakazlı, 2020:2074). From this perspective, transformation was inseparable from active political participation in its broadest sense – demanding and enacting change not only in formal political structures but through everyday conversations and reflections with parents, friends, and colleagues, through organising locally, or participating in collective action.

This invitation extended to both students and teachers. The school's activities exposed teachers to topics and perspectives often marginalised within their own formal education. Particularly for younger teachers, what they learned about the war at QTA could be completely new; for others, expanding their political and historical awareness demanded unlearning and confronting prejudices formed through dominant socialisation. As one teacher reflected, their work at QTA helped to counter being raised "*un poquito más discriminatorios*"<sup>36</sup> towards Maya culture and experiences through learning from seminar speakers and colleagues whose lives had been shaped differently by the very histories and power structures the school interrogates. That QTA brings together a relatively diverse group of Guatemalans is significant considering how historical memory is often positioned as a wedge in formal national schooling to fracture understanding, reinforce racialised divisions, and limit opportunities for shared reflection (Bellino, 2015:73). Against this backdrop, the teacher's reflection that "*cuando uno empieza a conocer, a comprender, entonces, uno empieza también a cambiar*"<sup>37</sup> highlights the significance of these encounters, pointing to the possibility that they moved individuals towards recognising that "*todos somos seres humanos. Tal vez pensamos diferente en algunos casos, pero eso no hace que las personas sean malas*"<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup> "to change the history, you have to start participating. If you don't participate, you don't change. You have to work with your family, talk with your mum, with your dad. That is a process" [author translation]

<sup>36</sup> "a bit more discriminatory" [author translation]

<sup>37</sup> "when one starts to know, to understand, then one starts to change as well" [author translation]

<sup>38</sup> "we're all human beings. Maybe we think differently in some cases, but that doesn't mean that people are bad" [author translation]

Many teachers described their responsibility as one of carrying these conversations into their own communities, whilst also acknowledging the difficulty of doing so given their still ‘taboo’ nature outside of the school. Simultaneously, teachers recognised that their work also produced ripple effects far beyond their own circles, particularly because so many of their students worked with Latinx communities in the US or were involved in political organising and activism. Although many had some kind of base awareness, sometimes students arrived “*completamente cegados*”<sup>39</sup> to “*el papel que ha tenido su gobierno en diferentes pueblos alrededor del mundo*”<sup>40</sup>, reflecting the silencing of such histories in US formal education (Alweiss and Al-Aedimi, 2025:308). After time at the school, however, “*empiezan a investigar por su propia cuenta*”<sup>41</sup>, questioning not only Guatemalan histories but “*la realidad de su propio país*”<sup>42</sup>, sometimes “*regresan y regresan y cada vez quieren saber más*”<sup>43</sup>. Remaining informed was thus not only important for teachers’ own political participation but was integral to their pedagogical responsibility, knowing that it contributed to cultivating a political consciousness that might circulate far beyond Guatemala through students’ own political practices and circles.

Students, too, described moments when their learning – linguistically, politically, historically – began shaping their sense of responsibility and intended actions after leaving the school. For many, what QTA added was specificity, personal grounding and affective weight to the students’ historical and political understanding. As one student reflected, “*it’s not enough to be, like, vaguely the US fucked up some stuff [...] the details are actually really important*”, especially for those working with communities directly shaped by these histories and structures. Another positioned discomfort as central to their understanding of responsibility: “*I can’t have this experience [...] and go back to my comfortable life and never think about that again. [...] it’s a good thing that it’s bothering me. It’s like, okay [...] the first person in front of me, how can I just help them, even just a little bit?*” The shifts observed – albeit subtle – were not just cognitive but carried an ethical dimension for they prompted an inner, sometimes painful, reflection on one’s own relation to broader systems of power (Rothberg, 2019:11) and realisation of prior learned ignorance.

Gestures towards response varied. Several wanted to share their more detailed and grounded understanding with families, colleagues or activist networks, seeing themselves as “*1% to share them*

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<sup>39</sup> “completely blinded” [author translation]

<sup>40</sup> “the role their government has had in different (more oppressed) peoples and communities across the world” [author translation]

<sup>41</sup> “they start to investigate for themselves” [author translation]

<sup>42</sup> “the reality of their own country” [author translation]

<sup>43</sup> “returning again and again and every time want to know more” [author translation]

*even in a small way.*” Others emphasised the urgency of acting upon what they had learned in their own political organising given the renewed visibility of how “*the US government is [...] repeating the same cycles and [...] being insanely oppressive*”. For yet more still, what resonated the most went beyond historical, political or linguistic learning. It was the relational qualities and values that shaped the school environment and their interactions within it that underpinned the message they wanted to carry forward of “*I am someone who will listen [...] who cares to hear about this and who won't judge you, who won't write you off*” into their daily lives. If justice is understood as an evolving, collective process constituted through the cumulation of individual micro-, inter- and re-actions, the reflections of students and teachers suggest that the locus of transformative possibilities of the school operates across scales: grounded in micro-level, interpersonal encounters yet capable of reverberating through the teachers’ social worlds and across wider transnational networks of solidarity, organising and action in students’ own contexts and daily lives.

## Conclusions

This thesis set out to understand how the everyday pedagogical encounters at QTA function as sites of memory production and consider what this suggests about the possibilities and tensions of critical language pedagogies as more transformative and justice-oriented forms of engaging with difficult histories. The findings demonstrate that memory production took shape within a deliberately structured, politically grounded pedagogical environment valuing embodied, experiential, and affective ways of knowing. These conditions enabled memory work to unfold as situated, layered and relational practices formed through sustained interpersonal dialogue. Historical memory was not taught abstractedly but encountered through the lived knowledges of teachers and speakers, highlighting subjectivities shaped by resistance and endurance. Pedagogically, this added a grounded, affective weight to learning and relating. Politically, it transformed teaching from recounting past events into an active practice of remembering that refuses silencing, unsettles dominant victim-centred framings, and recentres more complex forms of agency, community and ambition for more just futures.

Whilst memory work moved beyond the institutional and narrative frames of transitional justice, what was sayable, audible, or remained unheard was still shaped by QTA's multilingual and transnational dimensions. Linguistic hierarchies and student transience constrained depth of sharing and understanding whilst heightening the ethical imperative to listen and respond as conscious witnesses rather than detached spectators. Crucially, these tensions also generated openings for they foregrounded the politics of meaning-making – its instability, its partiality, and its mediation through translation. In moments of partial comprehension, unspoken signals and emotional responses became constitutive of communication and meaning, demonstrating how memory work and relating can exceed linguistic mastery and verbal expression. Continuously negotiating communication across difference demanded forms of vulnerability, patience and introspection that, in turn, opened up creative forms of thinking, self-expression and political re-imagining.

The transformative potential of QTA's pedagogical approach lay not only in the linguistic frictions but also in how it engaged the past to critique the present, grounding memory work in a systemic understanding of power, oppression and global entanglement. By using Guatemalan histories and

realities to show the persistence and reconfiguration of violence across time and place, QTA cultivated forms of critical awareness through which learners began to (re)consider their own preconceptions and implications in these systems and imagine possibilities for action within their micro-contexts. Though small and uneven in their emergence, the shifts observed reflect incremental steps of conscientisation (Freire, 1974:15).

One key insight arising from these findings is the generative potential of epistemic partiality in multilingual memory work. Combining language instruction with historical and contemporary political discussions produced tensions yet also created unexpected openings. Because incomplete comprehension and confusion were commonplace, the school community was accustomed to engaging without full mastery (hooks, 1994:174), valuing embodied and multisensory signals whilst navigating partial verbal understanding. This normalisation of epistemic partiality created space for non-totalising forms of listening and presence oriented more towards affective resonance (Acosta López, 2023:165), allowing meaning and relation to be constructed and maintained even without full linguistic comprehension. Partiality also heightened curiosity, prompting students to research further, ask questions and collaboratively piece together interpretations sparked by mistranslation or omissions. This study therefore highlights epistemic partiality as not simply a tension, but as an integral part of the transformative potential of multilingual critical language pedagogy.

These findings and insights expand understandings of where memory work happens beyond the institutional confines of transitional justice. They also demonstrate how critical, multilingual language education, in part through and with its tensions, can become a meaningful site of everyday memory production and historical-political engagement. They offer micro-level insights into how such pedagogies can open possibilities for transformative justice rather than reproducing unquestioning subjects sustaining hegemonic orders.

Several limitations shape how these findings should be interpreted. My linguistic abilities restricted the depth and nuance of the research, affecting which threads and expressive subtleties I could pick up and respond to during interviews in Spanish. Additionally, one month of fieldwork meant this analysis is only a snapshot and could not account for seasonal variations in the thematic focuses or student compositions of QTA. I was unable to trace longer-term impacts on students and teachers. Many reflections were shared whilst participants were still immersed in or had just left the environment, and it was beyond the study's scope to follow the iterative movements

between reflection and action that praxis encapsulates. Finally, although there is K'iche' instruction in QTA, this analysis focused on Spanish and English because these were the primary languages mediating the experience of, interactions constituting, and pedagogical content of the school. This limits insights into how K'iche' teaching intersects with or perhaps complicates QTA's Spanish language approach to memory work.

These limitations suggest several directions for future research. Comparative studies of similar transnational or multilingual educational settings situated in other geographical contexts or that centre different languages and histories could help clarify how various configurations of linguistic hierarchies, political orientations and pedagogical arrangements shape memory work. It would be valuable to understand how these structural conditions intersect with the positionalities, perspectives, and political-historical entanglements teachers and students bring to other spaces and how this subtly influences the possibilities and constraints of similar work. Longitudinal research could also deepen understandings of how the dispositions, sensibilities and awarenesses cultivated by QTA's pedagogical approach extend into the communities, political organising, or everyday lives of students and teachers. This could also offer insights into how understandings of implication, relation and responsibility evolve with more physical and temporal distance from the learning environment.

Across the conversations, reflections and observations that shaped this research, the school's underlying drive remained clear: "*generar las condiciones para que la gente se empiece a cuestionar*,"<sup>44</sup> Creating and sustaining an environment in which questioning becomes possible across varying political ideas, worldviews, positionalities, and languages is undoubtedly challenging. It requires not only thoughtful programming, intentional structuring and willingness to work through tension, but also the cultivation of a community grounded in patience, dignity, respect, attentiveness and openness (hooks, 1994:40). As one student reflected, "*there are a lot of topics on the table just because we're at QTA*," signalling a shared understanding that "*we care and we wanna listen and we wanna hear*".

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<sup>44</sup> "To generate the conditions for people to begin questioning themselves" [author translation]

As violent systems consolidate and reorganise in historically resonant and increasingly overt ways,<sup>45</sup> the creation of spaces that cultivate (even temporarily) more relational engagement, careful listening, intentional presence and critical dispositions is not only pedagogically meaningful but politically urgent. These practices and ways of being offer crucial counters to the dehumanisation, manufactured ignorance and inertia upon which such systems depend. It is within these everyday moments of learning, questioning, and reflecting that small but significant shifts take shape: in recognising the threads linking past(s) and present(s); in understanding how power is reproduced across temporalities and geographies; in beginning to view oneself as in relation with others; and in considering how to act differently from that place of recognition. These are subtle adjustments and responses, but their modesty does not undermine their potential. They gesture towards the beginning of a longer and more uncertain process of critical reflection and transformation – one that cannot be guaranteed, but at least meaningfully prompted through the school's pedagogies.

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<sup>45</sup> For example, the US' escalating military aggression towards Venezuela and disregard for self-determination was mentioned towards the end of my fieldwork in July but has since taken on a far more urgent and threatening significance.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Question guide for semi-structured interviews

### With Students

- Introduction
  - Can you tell me a bit about yourself – like your name, age if you want, where you come from, how long you are in Guatemala for, what do you do for work
  - How long are you learning at QTA for? Is it your first time?
  - What is your background in terms of Spanish learning/fluency?
  - What other languages do you speak?
- Learning experience
  - Why did you decide to sign up with QTA? How did you hear about the school?
  - What has your learning experience at QTA been like so far? What were your first impressions?
  - Have there been any moments or days that stood out to you in particular?
  - How has that the political and historical part of the education been for you? Did you expect this?
  - How do you find the one-on-one format of learning and how does it compare to other language learning experiences?
  - Can you compare your experiences and impressions from when you first arrived to now?
- Memory
  - Do you or the teacher ever bring in personal narratives or memories into your conversations during classes?
  - Are there any particular stories or moments that you could share?
  - How did it feel to hear these stories?
  - How did your level of Spanish shape how you could experience or understand that story or engage in the conversation?
- Language and meaning making
  - How does learning Spanish (or K'iche' if relevant) influence how you engage with or make sense of the stories being shared here?
  - What does it mean to you to be learning about these issues in a different/newer language than your most familiar one?

- Is it ever difficult to interpret or respond or express something because of language differences? How do you deal with this? What happened in moments of mistranslation
- Justice imaginaries and discussions
  - What kind of themes or topics come up in discussions it can be inside the classroom or during break time?
  - Has anything that you've learnt here made you question or think differently about your own background or perspective?
  - Is there anything that you think doesn't get spoken about/is left unsaid here?
- Role, position, purpose, responsibility
  - How do you see your role and position in conversations about Guatemala's history and resistance/social justice struggles whilst studying here?
  - What responsibilities, if any, do you think students have when learning in this space?
  - If a returning student: is there anything that you learnt here that has informed your work or life back at home?

## **With Educators**

### **Sobre QTA en su funcionamiento (estructura, objetivos, estudiantes, proyectos)**

- Personal background/career
  - Can you tell me a bit about yourself, where you're from and how you came to work at QTA?
  - What did you do before working here?
  - Do you teach just Spanish or other languages too?
- Contexto personal y carrera
  - ¿Podría decirme un poco sobre usted, de dónde es y cómo llegó a trabajar en QTA?
  - ¿En qué consiste su trabajo aquí?
  - ¿Enseña solo español o también otro idioma?
- School objectives
  - In your opinión what are the main learning objectives at QTA?

- How would you describe the pedagogical approach of the school?
- How does the school make decisions about activities, trips or the program?
- **Objetivos de la escuela**
  - En su opinión, ¿cuáles son los objetivos del aprendizaje en QTA?
  - ¿Cómo describiría el enfoque pedagógico de la escuela?
  - ¿Cómo se toman decisiones sobre actividades, viajes o el programa?
- **Students and motivations**
  - What types of students usually come to QTA?
  - What motivations do they have?
  - Have you noticed changes in their profile or interests over the years?
- **Estudiantes y motivaciones**
  - ¿Qué tipos de estudiantes suelen venir a QTA?
  - ¿Qué motivaciones observa con más frecuencia?
  - ¿Ha notado cambios en el perfil o intereses de los estudiantes a lo largo de los años?
- **Projects and activities**
  - Could you tell me about the discussions or debates among teachers here?
  - What are the main themes or topics that come up?
  - Do you take part in the afternoon group activities or weekend trips?
  - What kinds of conversations usually emerge in group discussions?
  - Could you tell me more about the human rights or social justice projects the school does? Are you involved in those projects?
- **Proyectos y actividades**
  - ¿Podría decirme algo sobre los debates entre los maestros aquí?
  - ¿Cuáles son los temas principales?
  - ¿Participa en las actividades grupales por las tardes o en los viajes del fin de semana?
  - ¿Qué tipo de conversaciones suelen surgir en las discusiones grupales?
  - ¿Me podría decir más sobre los proyectos vinculados a los derechos humanos y la justicia social que realiza la escuela? ¿Está involucrada en esos proyectos?
- **Historical memory**
  - Why do you think historical memory and resistance and struggles are part of the teaching approach at QTA?
  - What themes or elements of the program do you consider as most important?

- La memoria histórica en QTA
  - ¿Por qué cree que la memoria histórica y las resistencias y luchas forman parte del enfoque de enseñanza en QTA?
  - ¿Qué temas o elementos del programa considera más importantes?

### **Sobre el enfoque pedagógico y las practicas personales como maestro/a**

- Teaching mode
  - How do you understand your role?
  - How would you describe your teaching style?
  - What kinds of materials do you normally use?
  - Do you prefer to teach one-on-one or in a group?
- Modelo de enseñanza
  - ¿Cómo entiende su papel?
  - ¿Cómo describiría su forma de enseñar?
  - ¿Qué tipos de materiales utiliza normalmente?
  - ¿Prefiere enseñar de forma dialógica o grupal?
- Using personal experiences and narratives
  - What do you consider when deciding which topics or experiences to include in your classes?
  - Do you share personal stories or historical narratives with your students? How do you do this?
  - What does it mean to you to share personal memories or experiences in a teaching context?
  - Have you ever felt limited in what you can or want to share?
- Uso de experiencias y narrativas personales
  - ¿Qué considera al decidir qué temas o experiencias incluir en clase?
  - ¿Comparte historias personales o narrativas históricas con sus estudiantes? ¿Cómo lo hace?
  - ¿Qué significa para usted compartir recuerdos o experiencias personales en un contexto de enseñanza?
  - ¿Ha sentido límites en lo que puede o desea compartir?
- Interacting with the students
  - How do students usually respond to conversations about history and memory?
  - Do they also share their own experiences or perspectives in class?

- Does their Spanish level influence how you talk about these topics?
- **Interacción con los estudiantes**
  - ¿Cómo suelen reaccionar los estudiantes después de conversaciones sobre historia y memoria?
  - ¿Ellos también comparten sus propias experiencias u opiniones en clase?
  - ¿El nivel de español del estudiante influye en cómo habla sobre estos temas?
- **Context and memory more broadly in Guatemala**
  - In your everyday life, is it possible or socially accepted to talk about the past in Guatemala?
  - When and how did you learn about the internal armed conflict?
- **Contexto y memoria en Guatemala**
  - En su vida cotidiana, ¿siente que es posible o aceptado hablar sobre el pasado en Guatemala?
  - ¿Cuándo y cómo aprendió usted sobre el conflicto armado interno?