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Traversing the Zones, Transcending the Nonhuman: Urban Ecologies in Postwar Guatemala

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When the Guatemalan civil engineer Raúl Aguilar Batres was commissioned to create a coordinate system to define the contours of his country's capital city, he named north-south thoroughfares *avenidas*, while east-west ones became *calles*. He subsequently used avenues and streets as reference points to create the numeric zone system, which is now a defining feature of Central America's largest metropolis. Guatemala City's zones, originating with Zone 1 in the Historic Center and spiraling outward in a snail shell pattern, not only serve as divisions for urban space, but also help us contemplate human relations with each other as well as with their urban surroundings in neatly compartmentalized units. However, despite the modern characteristics of the rapid urbanization of Guatemala from the second half of the 20th century to the present, naturally-occurring environmental changes continue to interfere with and define metropolitan development.

This article brings into focus the relation between human and nonhuman activities in ostensibly human-dominated cityscapes in postwar Guatemala. Notions of multiple ecosystems and ecologies, although often associated with areas away from human activity, are found within Guatemala City's zones, as evidenced by the moldy decay and animal droppings that encased the decaying site of the Historical Archives of the National Police (AHPN) in Zone 6, perhaps prolonging its July 2005 discovery as a key player in reckoning with war crimes. Likewise, in the wake of tropical storms and seismic activity, numerous sinkholes have threatened the demise of

the AHPN and forced the relocation of Guatemalan urbanites (and, in some extreme cases, have swallowed them into the earth along with buildings). Departing from these naturally-occurring events, this article argues that we can expound upon Guatemalan urban spaces from a perspective that transcends the imaginary human/nonhuman divide, while at the same time positing new directions for postwar cultural criticism.

In late 2008, an elusive quetzal suddenly appeared in a corner store in Guatemala City. The astonishing occurrence, although well out of the ordinary given the bird's general range in remote cloud forests, calls attention to potential links between urbanization and biodiversity and how ecosystems encroach on urban space despite the negative effects that city planning has had on the environment. The fact that the national bird, an emblematic feature of Guatemalan identity worldwide, "visited" the country's capital, also implies that there is a strong relationship between humans and their nonhuman environments in Guatemala City, which, in turn, has been characterized by significant environmental impacts on its urban spaces throughout much of its history. To read specific locations dotted throughout Guatemala City's zones through the lens of urban ecologies implies that we can offer a fresh assessment of postwar cityscapes that bear the scars of nearly forty years of internal armed conflicts. Because of the gruesome nature of human rights violations that became an ominous hallmark of the Guatemalan Civil War, cultural production in the 21st century generally tends to portray and denounce lingering postwar urban violence, which, as elsewhere in Central America, also ensures its survival as a defining characteristic of contemporary culture.¹ Therefore, to scrutinize the nonhuman in postwar Guatemala City is to pave the way for uncharted territory of cultural analysis, which, until now,

¹ Aside from Guatemala, this reality is also palpable in El Salvador and Honduras. Cultural critiques in the wake of the Salvadoran Civil War, as seen in novels such as Horacio Castellanos Moya's *El asco* (1997) and Mario Bencastro's collection of short stories *Árbol de la vida* (1997), denounce postwar urban violence as detrimental to societal development. In addition, in response to the 2009 coup d'état in Honduras, the bilingual Spanish-English edition of women's poetry, *Women's Poems of Protest and Resistance: Honduras (2009-2014)* (2015), includes dark accounts and rational fears of contemporary urban violence as a major threat to security, especially for women. Even in Panama, which is generally considered much safer than other parts of Central America due to a considerably lower homicide rate, we see a critique of Noriega's impact on Panama City in Mauro Zúñiga Araúz's *El chacal del general* (2007).

has largely consisted of anthropocentric representations of human acts of violence against other humans.

However, before entering the realm of the nonhuman, it is important to note, in comparison with other metropolitan areas across Latin America as sources of cultural analysis, particularly those in Brazil, Mexico, and the Southern Cone, a parallel effort in the Central American isthmus has yet to reach the same level of maturity in the field of cultural studies. Therefore, we must draw upon panoramic treatments of Latin American cities, or those that focus on specific urban centers of other countries in the region, to approach cultural implications of urban milieu in Guatemala. As Rebecca Biron asserts, “historical, economic, and political threads” combine to produce what she calls “the cultural tapestry,” bound together by the intertwined elements that generate the Latin American city’s identity (xii). Certainly, environmental events also constitute a significant strand of urban identity, given that a great majority of Latin American cities with populations of over 500,000 inhabitants, particularly the Central American capitals, lie in close proximity to active fault lines along the Pacific Ring of Fire. Biron continues by suggesting that “the cities one can live in, visit, or analyze emerge as the material results of violence and social conflict, ideological agendas, economic practices, architectural vision, and survival strategies” (xii). Although her view neglects the nonhuman, it is clear that environmental, geological, and related events beyond the human can also find their place among material, manmade influences on urban identity, especially when we consider the “survival strategies” that Biron mentions, which define how modern cities are shaped.

The concept of Latin American cities as “sites of creativity” and “sources of cultural information,” to use Biron’s words, allows us to contemplate the potential place of the environment as one of the interlocking threads that captures the essence of the metropolis (xiii, xiv). In the Guatemalan case in particular, Kedron Thomas, Kevin Lewis O’Neill, and Thomas Offit remind us how, subsequent to the 1773 Antigua earthquake, “Guatemala City was born from disaster” (4). The devastating seismic event, registering 7.5 on the Richter Scale and leveling Antigua, prompted the move of the capital to a new site in a neighboring valley under

the Spanish Crown, christened La Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción en el Valle de la Ermita upon its 1776 foundation. Thus, Guatemala City was established as a nexus of environmental disaster from its beginning, a pessimistic outlook made even more poignant with the addition of further environmental events in the 20th and 21st centuries, climate change, pollution, overcrowding, and increased violence that came with the war's impact, as seen through the push toward modernization and neoliberal restructuring of urban space. The environment seems to have always been part of Guatemala City's identity along with the violence that so intensely defines it as the result of decades of turmoil and there appears to be a direct correlation between cultural and environmental peril, mirroring Mark Anderson's reading of Mexico City, the megalopolis through which much of Latin American urban cultural studies originates, as "teetering on the brink of catastrophe" (100).

Despite the environmental risks, Guatemala City grew exponentially in the 20th century, especially as the war drove many thousands of people to flee from state-sponsored atrocities in the highlands. Nearly 200 years after its foundation, to establish order in a haphazard, rapidly growing city, the civil engineer Raúl Aguilar Batres was called upon to reimagine Guatemala City's layout. His first major engineering work had been the redesign of Guatemala's borderlines with Mexico in the northern Petén department, followed by highway designs from the Honduran border to the Izabal department, but the 1952 "zonification" of Guatemala City is regarded as the highlight of his career. As director of urban planning under the supervision of the mayor, fellow engineer, and friend Martín Prado Vélez, Aguilar Batres envisioned a new design for the city, characterized by the numeric zone system still used today and adopted by other Guatemalan cities such as Cobán and Quetzaltenango (ver González). The zones currently number one through twenty-two, although Zone 20 is notably absent because, as *Los Angeles Times* writer Marisa Gerber tells us, "when the urban engineer Raúl Aguilar Batres designed the spiral that gave shape to Guatemala City, the spot he picked for Zone 20 landed beyond the city limits, so it got skipped over" (n.p.). Despite this engineering oddity, the zone system is generally regarded as a way for people to create reference points, estimate arrival times, and pinpoint specific locations within the

city. There are also cultural, socioeconomic, and inherently warlike implications of organizing the metropolitan sprawl into nameless, numbered units, as demonstrated by fact that the wealthy elite originally inhabited the historic center but have since spilled into the periphery when Zone 1 became poorer and more dangerous during the war, and because warzones are hostile environments occupied by combatants and illicit activities in climates of impunity.² The restructuring of Guatemala City was made obligatory yet again following the 1976 earthquake, which, like its geologic predecessor that destroyed Antigua and forced the establishment of the new capital in the first place, measured 7.5 on the Richter Scale. Throughout the country, 23,000 people perished, over 3,000 of whom lived in Guatemala City. Despite the mass destruction, the earthquake caused an influx of people to move to the city and establish squatter settlements, adding to the poverty, which sits uncomfortably alongside flagrant displays of wealth, inadvertently acting as a source of urban violence (see Thomas, O'Neill, and Offit 6).

Humans are constantly reminded of the powerful forces of nature in cities due to the large concentrations of peoples affected, sometimes at a moment's notice. Perhaps these negative connotations, coupled with postwar urban violence, are some of the reasons why little academic attention emphasizes Guatemala City. Returning to the work of Thomas, O'Neill, and Offit, the scholars collectively argue:

research in the historically *ladino/a* (nonindigenous) capital city has often been viewed as uninteresting and even irrelevant, prompting many foreign researchers, like tourists, to leave Guatemala City only moments after their flights touch down (4).

Despite their pioneering work, and that of other scholars such as John T. Way and Deborah Levenson (*Adiós Niño*), among others, they rightfully affirm that “the theorization of the city remains woefully incomplete” (Thomas, O'Neill, and Offit 7). This ethical vacuum

² To challenge Zone 1's maligned image of deterioration, the area has been gentrified. Although not totally escaping neoliberal interpretations of the privatization and reconstruction of urban space, a notable achievement lies in a five-block section of the Sexta Avenida, a main road with much historical significance. The area has been closed to traffic and now has a large police presence and security cameras, new businesses, cultural centers, theatres, and art installations (see Al Jazeera English).

notwithstanding, the scant amounts of literary representations present further challenges for the cultural critic trying to understand Guatemala City, literally central but literarily marginalized in the Guatemalan national imaginary, despite its historical relevance. Historian Deborah Levenson proclaims:

Unlike Buenos Aires or Rio de Janeiro, there are few myths or colorful narratives of this capital city; it is a literary subject only in Guatemalan writer Miguel Ángel Asturias's chilling 1930s novel *El señor presidente*, where it makes an appearance as the setting for a police state replete with beggars, night prowlers, dark alleys, traps, lies, cells, spies, and corrupt politicians. ("Living" 25).

While it is undeniable that novelistic representations of Guatemala City pale in comparison with the cities that Levenson mentions, they are not altogether nonexistent in other works, though their existence is a recent development and is not always readily obvious.

Indeed, even though Asturias's *El Señor Presidente* (1946) elucidates archetypal Guatemalan urban violence and is one of the most highly-acclaimed pieces of Guatemalan literature, the author never outwardly says that the novel takes place in Guatemala City, although the narrative voice does mention specific locales such as Cerrito del Carmen and the Hospital San Juan de Dios in Zone 1 and describes how the main characters, including the dictator Manuel Estrada Cabrera for whom the novel is based, operate under conditions of fear and uncertainty (see 233, 251). For its part, Rigoberta Menchú's highly-contested testimony, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (1983), presents Guatemala City as a novelty for a child who enjoys her first ice cream cone and is mesmerized by the number of vehicles in the streets, but later evolves into a volatile place where Menchú must seek refuge in a nun convent (see 52, 261). Even travel writers from the United States, who tend to exotify Latin America, have not always painted the most pleasant image of Guatemala City. When American travel writer Paul Theroux embarked on a transcontinental journey across the Americas by train in the late 1970s, he passed through Guatemala City, commenting on the weird juxtapositions of the natural surroundings in *The Old Patagonian Express* (1989):

Guatemala City, an extremely horizontal place, is like a city on its back. Its ugliness, which is a threatened look (the low morose houses have earthquake cracks in their facades; the buildings wince at you with fright lines) is ugliest on those streets, where, just past the last toppling house, a blue volcano's cone bulges. I could see the volcanoes from the window of my hotel room. I was on the third floor, which was also the top floor. They were tall volcanoes and looked capable of spewing lava. Their beauty was undeniable; but it was the beauty of witches. The rumbles from their fires had heaved this city down. (104-105).

Likely, the Guatemalan identity of the other authors justifies the fact that they are more attuned to the city's geography, which stands out in a foreigner's viewpoint. Whatever the reason, Theroux's intervention is crucial in understanding how physical features can help define Guatemalan urban imaginaries, especially because more recent postwar novels tend to shy away from the environment to focus more exclusively on urban violence, are often apocalyptic with dark imagery, and sometimes constitute literary reconstructions of the author's lived experiences.³

Although much of the literature produced to date does not depict it, apart from the excerpt from Theroux's work, Guatemala City's zones are ecosystems unto themselves, in addition to their roles as inhabited spaces and human environments. As Mark Anderson points out:

When megacities were first approached from an ecocentric standpoint they were viewed primarily as blights on the landscape, as vast, apocalyptic machines that produced the end of natural history, vacuuming in resources from surrounding areas and spewing them back out as ephemeral consumer products, trash, and pollution. (106).

In the case of Guatemala City, we can observe its historical development as both a series of modern impacts on the environment and environmental impacts on modernity, lending itself to

³ Such is the case for Javier Payeras's novel *Ruido de fondo* (2006), which can be read as a literary reconstruction of some of the author's life events as well as a critique of urban violence in Guatemala City and the indifference of its young people, as evidenced by unenthusiastic university students, familial problems, strange sex practices, and the possibility of transvestites, cocaine, street children, thieves, rapists, children born from rape, and police officers coming together in the same person (see 13).

possible spaces for urban ecologies as integral parts of its zones. Anderson defines urban ecology as that which

examines the specific material environments that are generated by modern urbanization, recognizing them as unique places that are inhabited by a diversity of species, rather than purely artificial environments that segregate or abstract humans from the experience of the material world (106).

Rather than view the city as “the end product of a mechanized production line known as modernity,” Anderson sees it as “a node in a system in which people, animals, and minerals circulated in multiple directions, transforming every place along the circuit” (106-107). In the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Urban Ecology*, Mark J. McDonnell appears to use the terms urban ecology and urban ecosystem synonymously, intertwining physical and social science fields of inquiry that embrace a range from geography, climatology, architecture, history, environmental science, and political science, among others. For McDonnell, “urban ecology is evolving as an amalgamation of several disciplines focused on understanding the ecological and human dimensions of the structure and function of human ecosystems” (s.p.). In both cases, the considerations of Anderson and McDonnell extend well beyond Rebecca Biron’s anthropocentric perspective of cities to combine ecological and physical aspects with the sociocultural fabric of the quotidian.

The cultural construction of urban ecologies is a key factor in conceptualizing nonhuman impacts on human life in postwar Guatemala City. Urban ecologies blur the lines between the human and nonhuman, conjoining urban and seemingly rural phenomena.⁴ If we are to take part of Anderson’s definition, to fixate on humans and the experience of the material world within city limits to give weight to ecocriticism, and to understand cities not as artificial environments but rather as their own kind of habitat, then we can begin to approach postwar Guatemalan urban

⁴ In this sense, urban ecologies can perhaps be understood as metaphorical implications of the war’s crossover from rural areas to Guatemala City, in addition to the heavy human migration during and after the conflicts.

space from a new angle. The intrinsic relationship between the city and the environment is striking when we consider the July 17, 2005 discovery of the Historical Archives of the National Police (AHPN). The discovery, an unprecedented event in Latin America, has allowed suppressed memories to come alive again and provides invaluable information about thousands of war victims, but not without immense challenges. As Diane Nelson notes, the unexpected encounter occurred after the spontaneous combustion of stockpiled explosives at the police junkyard in Zone 6, a marginal zone just across the bridge from some of the most dangerous areas of the city.⁵ Soon thereafter, as described by Nelson:

Worried neighbors called the Human Rights Ombuds Office, and a small team found –nestled amid acres of detritus, wrecked cars, crashed planes, trash heaps, and parking lots– several nondescript buildings with odd-looking stuff crammed against the dirty windows. A sharp-eyed historian recognized the ‘stuff’ as files. (86).

The most incredible aspect of the files is that they constituted 80 million decaying pages housed in a forgotten, rotting warehouse at *La Isla*, a former torture and detention center and police compound, with the AHPN as its nucleus. Guatemalans and foreigners alike took a keen interest in preserving the integrity of the site, as shown by the quickly-established Project for the Recovery of the National Police Historical Archives (PRAHPN, or, simply, the Project), an activist group supported by foreign financial aid. The Project was set on “rescuing the decaying records and analyzing their contents, with the aim of generating evidence to use in prosecuting war-era officials for crimes against humanity” (Weld 5). Aside from the voluminous amounts of mismatched documents, which were stacked to the ceiling upon their miraculous recovery, the main challenges for the Project members hinged on the unfavorable conditions of the AHPN.

Kirsten Weld, combining historical and ethnographic perspectives to conduct fieldwork at the AHPN, recreates the murky imagery vis-à-vis some of the interviews with the Project’s

⁵ The Puente Belice divides Zone 6 with Zone 18, which is considered the most dangerous zone of Guatemala City due to high gang and drug activity. Some of the city’s most brutal crimes take place there and the short distance between the AHPN and Zone 18 could account, in part, for the initial neglect associated with the police papers.

workers, consisting of archivists, amateur historians, university professors and their students, and other volunteers. Weld writes:

When investigators from the Human Rights Ombudsman's Office (PDH) stumbled upon the archives in July 2005, what they found was, according to one of the first to see it, "impossible to describe." There was an aura of decay about the massive unfinished structure, occupied only by small armies of rats and bats and reeking of mold and mildew, where detainees had once been regularly tortured to death. It lay in a scrubby field carpeted with overgrown weeds and ringed by heaps of scrapped cars. The papers it housed seemed endless, crude bundles by the millions spotted with vermin feces and cockroach carcasses, their hand-scrawled labels barely visible beneath years of dust, with puddles of cloudy water seeping up into the piles of paper and rotting them from within [...] At the back of the edifice, humidity and neglect had conspired such that verdant plant life coiled up the walls, sprouted from within the masses of paper blanketing the earth, and hung down from the ceiling in long fronds. (29).

After years of neglect, the AHPN had sprouted its own mini ecosystem, a naturally-occurring act that allows us to once again revisit Anderson's assertion that the identifying aspect of urban ecologies is the fact that cities can encompass their own habitats, are not strictly manmade, and that there is a tight bond between humans and the experience of the material world. The presence of rats and bats on the site, both of which carry deep symbolism of evil, filth, disease, death, and, paradoxically in the case of the bat, rebirth by remerging from womb-like caverns each evening, seem to correspond with the torture that took place at *La Isla*, the documentation of such crimes in the AHPN paperwork (which for many victims serve as de facto death certificates), and the restoration of the site as a space of remembrance in its second life; it is a "memoriescape," to borrow Louis Bickford's term (96). The mold and mildew, both of which need dark, damp places and cannot survive in the sunlight, present further health hazards for the Project workers and add to the notion of complete neglect and utter carelessness associated with the papers, supporting Weld's view that "important documents in Guatemala have a history of being treated as trash," in itself a form of state violence and repression (51). The animal life,

organic growth, and natural forces, along with the act of not allowing in fresh air and light over the papers and leaving the unkempt grounds to succumb to overgrowth alongside old, rusty police cars (which still sit on the site at the time of writing), converge to magnify the incredible darkness associated with the AHPN.



*A museum at the AHPN shows the original conditions of the police documents as they appeared in 2005.
Author's photo.*



*Old police vehicles sit at La Isla around the corner from the AHPN in July 2017.
Author's photo.*

Weld continues her scrutiny of the original conditions of the AHPN when she reflects upon the impact that these nonhuman features of the site have had on human life, drawing on the negative effects that *La Isla* began to have on the Project workers over time. Weld explains, “the physical conditions of the site posed health risks; respiratory problems due to the mold and dust plagued workers, who often showed up with hacking coughs or congestion caused by inflamed sinuses” (45). These physical challenges add another layer to the psychological damage inflicted on Project workers after reading endless amounts of information about forced disappearance, mutilation, torture, and other war crimes that contribute to the country’s image as “a death world,” as Achille Mbembe would term it, in other words, a geographic space where death is a driving force of life (40). On a surface level, it seems, it is easier to push back against the

tangible, physical obstacles at hand in the parameters of the AHPN. To combat health risks, workers wear masks and special clothing to protect against animal fecal matter, the animals themselves, and mold spores as well as for warmth (Nelson 217). This is observable in the opening scene of the documentary *La Isla: Archivos de una tragedia* (2009), where viewers are confronted with a table of six Project members all in the protective clothing and wearing masks as they sift through documents with gloved hands. The narrator, by telling us that the war took place *here* (within the AHPN) and is not merely recorded here, while at the same time showing us police papers discarded in puddles like garbage on the floor left to disintegrate, echoes Weld's observation that the papers were uncared for, adding to the overall bleak tone that the AHPN conveys.



*A museum at the AHPN recreates the makeshift Project workstation as it appeared in 2005.
Author's photo.*

Aside from the inscriptions of state-sponsored violence that have survived despite the elements and unceremonious disrespect for the value of these records, the environment also plays a role in Guatemala's position as a "death world." Inexorably, this reality is conveyed through the earthquakes that have plagued Guatemala City since its beginnings, as well as by the volcanoes described in Theroux's account. These features, coupled with torrential rainfall triggered by annual tropical storms, come together across Guatemala City's zones and are most notably felt precariously close to the AHPN. An insider account of the Project, which also touches upon this other facet of urban ecologies, comes in the form of Rodrigo Rey Rosa's novel, *El material humano* (2009).⁶ The publication of the novel four years after the discovery of the AHPN is in tune with Rebecca Atencio's suggestion, in her breakdown of what she calls "cycles of cultural memory," that there exists an "*imaginary linkage* between the cultural work (or works) and an institutional mechanism. The general public comes to associate the two events, and to think of them as a pairing" (6, emphasis in the original). Although Atencio writes from the Brazilian context, her outlook can easily be transposed to the AHPN's installation as a space of remembrance and Rey Rosa's novel. *El material humano* is not only a literary reconstruction of the AHPN with a main character that embodies the author's lived experiences in the Project, but also serves as a point of departure for examining the psychological consequences of spending a prolonged period at the site and the forces of nature that endanger human life.

When Rodrigo, a literary alter ego of the author, arrives at the AHPN, he openly admits that *La Isla* offers him a form of entertainment. He declares:

Después de aquella visita inicial las circunstancias y el ambiente del Archivo de La Isla habían comenzado a parecerme novelescos, y acaso aun novelables. Una especie de *microcaos* cuya relación podría servir de coda para la singular danza macabra de nuestro último siglo. (Rey Rosa 14, emphasis in the original).

⁶ For a recent analysis of *El material humano* and its relationship to truth and justice, see Buiza. For the connection between the novel and law, particularly as it relates to the 2009 murder of lawyer Rodrigo Rosenberg, see Pérez.

By contextualizing the AHPN as a “microcaos,” Rodrigo, through the prefix *micro*, implies that the site is a fragment of a much broader space and that other parts of the city replicate the AHPN’s characteristics. The second half of the word, *caos*, refers to the state of confusion felt by the Project workers when encountering the labyrinth of documents as well as the dangerous environments both within the AHPN and beyond. As Rodrigo spends more time with other team members of the Project, he takes note of his findings from the police documents in his own notebook, where he lists “political crimes” such as a tendency to keep guns and underage visits to brothels (22, 29). Rodrigo discusses these crimes with other archivists-in-training and obsesses over the meticulously-documented events, many of which predate the war era. We begin to see how the constant readings in the AHPN negatively impact Rodrigo after two months when, while on the phone with his girlfriend, he has the sensation that someone is listening to the conversation and suggests that the pair speaks in a more private setting (see 68). He feels distressed after compiling and analyzing the documents for hours on end, in a space that challenges him because it was a former site of torture for hundreds of victims (see Weld 161). Rodrigo, cognizant of the fact that *La Isla* was another front in the Guatemalan Civil War, begins to slip into a state a paranoia that seems to coincide with Weld’s position that postwar Guatemala is “a state of purgatory: neither in open conflict, nor truly at peace” (122).

After Rodrigo reveals to the reader that he is determined to find his own mother’s archival footprint in the AHPN as plausible evidence of her 1981 kidnapping over a period of nearly five months, it becomes evident that the motivation for his integration into the Project rests in part on the desire to bring criminals to justice for the sake of his family, and not solely to combat boredom as his original account suggests (see 89-90). Beyond the taxing nature of the documents, traumatic side effects, Rodrigo’s fears of constant surveillance, recurring dreams that occur throughout the novel, a growing mistrust in Guatemala City’s security, and the possibility that Guatemala’s dark past has been reduced to minutiae, interactions between humans and the forces of nature make it clear that 21st century cities are still environmentally constructed. In the first-person voice, Rodrigo recounts a chilling newspaper article:

Hace dos días –leo en los periódicos de hoy– se produjo un vasto hundimiento de tierra en la Zona 6, donde se encuentra el Archivo. “Tres personas por lo menos fueron tragadas por la tierra y unas 300 tuvieron que desalojar sus viviendas. En las últimas horas, más vecinos tuvieron que abandonar sus casas al oír que el suelo retumbaba.”

Aparentemente “el hoyo de San Antonio”, una especie de cenote que tiene un diámetro de cincuenta metros por sesenta de profundidad, pone el peligro no sólo las casas circundantes, sino también las instalaciones donde se encuentra el Archivo, del que dista sólo ciento ochenta y cinco metros. Ayer –dice la prensa– los directores del Proyecto de Recuperación del Archivo discutían la inminente movilización de los documentos para ponerlos a salvo. (Rey Rosa 71).

Indeed, the Zone 6 sinkhole really did occur, adding a new dark element and environmental paradigm to the cityscape and deepening Guatemala City’s infamous identity as a dangerous place. Weld highlights the fact Guatemala City’s sinkhole, adjacent to the AHPN, meant that the Project workers began to expect environmental dangers at the site and how the city itself began to present “unforeseen hazards, now including the possibility that the ground might simply disappear beneath [the archival workers]” (45-46). Weld ponders the fact that the AHPN could have completely vanished not even two years after the Project was established:

In February 2007, a hundred-foot-deep sinkhole, resembling the crater an asteroid might pound into the earth, tore open Guatemala City’s Zone 6. The result of poor plumbing infrastructure, the yawning sinkhole just around the corner from the archives devoured an entire city block and several area residents overnight. It could easily have taken the precious police papers along with it. (20).

The sinkhole forced people to consider the experience of natural earthly movements within Zone 6 of Guatemala City and prompted responses in diverse venues such as *CBS News*, where David Miller writes that the pit emitted small tremors and loud noises, *Reuters*, which confirms that the trembling had been going on for weeks before the sinkhole opened due to a pipe burst, and *National Geographic*, which refutes both Rey Rosa’s and Weld’s figures by claiming the

sinkhole was actually 330 feet (100 meters) deep, using the Statue of Liberty's 151 foot (46 meter) height as a comparison (see Chamberlain; Miller; "Hole opens").

The sustainability of urbanization was compromised with this event, brought about in part due to an inundation of rainfall on manmade structures and the earth's surfaces, thus showing how human infrastructure cannot alone constitute the core of urban ecologies and city life. The February 2007 sinkhole, apart from endangering the welfare of the Project workers and putting the entire existence of the AHPN in jeopardy, also forces us to think of the aftereffects of intermingling human and nonhuman entities in Guatemala City. The poor plumbing infrastructure mimics the neglect associated with the poor placement of the police papers, while the rain emphasizes Zone 6's identity as a subtropical habitat. Writing on the aging effects of the Mexico City drainage system, Mark Anderson contends:

Fissures and sinkholes disrupt the city's smooth geometric surfaces, providing dramatic glimpses into "the bowels of the earth." The city's relation to its own geomorphology becomes impossible to ignore, as do the effects of extraction, when broken tubes jut out from the edges of these chasms like fractured bones, spewing water and sewage into the depths or onto the streets. (115).

The same can be said for Guatemala City after the sinkhole, which was cordoned off with yellow caution tape, a symbolic act usually reserved for crime scenes such as homicides. The "bowels of the earth" below Zone 6's surfaces showcase how natural forces, as opposed to humankind, are in complete control of the area. Action had to be taken to ensure that the sinkhole would not expand and so that more would not open, so the government invested \$2.7 million to redirect sewer pipes and fill the gargantuan chamber with cement (see Palmer). History repeated itself when the ground opened again in May 2010 when Tropical Storm Agatha, the first named storm of the 2010 Pacific season, dumped more than three feet of rain across parts of Guatemala and neighboring El Salvador, causing a 200-foot (60 meter) sinkhole to swallow a three-story building in Zone 2, after which close to 100,000 people were evacuated from Guatemala City. Beyond the sinkhole, high winds and mudslides also ravaged the capital and ash from the nearby

Pacaya volcano caused major drain blockages (see “Storm blows”). Sam Bonis, an American geologist and volcanologist living in Guatemala City when Agatha wreaked havoc, stresses how in the 18th Century, the city’s infrastructure was created over land that is filled with pumice fill deposits from the surrounding volcanoes, at least several hundred meters into the earth. Such deposits are fragile and easily movable when the sediment is disrupted (see Than).

Further into the second decade of the 21st Century, sinkholes have disastrously become more commonplace. In July 2011, a hole some 40 feet (12 meters) deep made an explosive sound as it opened directly beneath a woman’s bed (see “Guatemalan woman”). More alarming still was the September 2014 sinkhole near a major shopping center on the Calzada Roosevelt in Zone 11, a pulsing artery of the Pan-American Highway and one of Guatemala City’s major roads on the route to Antigua. Fortunately, because of its shallow depth of 32 feet (10 meters), there were no casualties even though a terrified truck driver found himself trapped in the hole before firefighters came to his rescue (see De León). The same held true in the case of the July 2015 sinkhole in Zone 6, which, at only 13 feet deep (4 meters), caused no injuries but opened old wounds from the first event of its kind in the area in 2007. By traversing the zones and transcending the nonhuman, urban ecologies come alive in Guatemala City. The near fatal loss of the AHPN and the apertures on the earth’s surface remind us of the volatile topography that cause certain zones to feel more vulnerable in a city that is already dangerous.



*Yellow tape cordons off July 2015 sinkhole in Zone 6, a few blocks from the AHPN.
Author's photo.*

Human-oriented activity has provided the impetus behind postwar cultural criticism in Guatemala. However, as the Guatemalan Civil War recedes further into the past, postwar cultural criticism veers in new directions. Guatemala City has largely been imagined through anthropocentric paradigms, which designate humankind as the single most important element of existence. Nonetheless, Central America's largest metropolitan area both culturally and environmentally exposes the relationship between humans and their nonhuman urban habitats and the powerful forces of nature within the city limits. Guatemala City in the 21st century presents itself as a manmade center of modernity and a series of urban ecologies that zero in on the relationship between humans and their municipal habitats, the effects humans have had on climatic conditions, and vice versa. Throughout its zones, Guatemala City exhibits these traits, most notably in consideration of a key transitional phase in contemporary history. In the AHPN,

the condition of the documents and *La Isla* upon their reemergence into society shows how human neglect, naturally-occurring environmental change, and urban ecosystems invaded some of the most precious traces of the recent past. The sinkholes, which present a new challenge for Guatemalans in the 21st century, have not only endangered the police papers but also the livelihood of Project workers and other Guatemala City inhabitants in adjacent zones who have been forced to move or have lost their lives when the city surfaces opened of their own accord. Both the AHPN and the sinkholes tie together ecological and cultural features of life to show how the ecological is inserted into the anthropocentric urban ethos, thus broadening postwar Guatemalan cultural horizons past their humanistic boundaries.

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