A Theology of Resistance

By HyeRan Kim-Cragg (St. Andrew's College, Saskatoon), the recipient of Emma Kaufman scholarship 2012

1. Locating a Reality as a Methodology of Practical Theology

Guatemala is close to North America (USA and Canada), yet the violent conditions under which they live are unknown to most of North Americans.¹ In order to learn more about this situation, I went to Guatemala on March 2014.² This trip was organized by "Breaking the Silence (BTS)" March was deliberately chosen for two primary educational purposes: to learn about Rio Negro Massacre that occurred in March 1982; to mark International Women's Day together with the local women and activists there. This paper examines a particular reality of Guatemala, as an "epistemological situation." It further seeks to develop a practical theology and "thematize the complex and dense subject matter of contemporary situation" in order to construct "the critical reflection that is done about the meaning of faith and action in the world."

On March 13, 1982, 177 Mayan indigenous women and their children were killed by the Guatemalan army and the civil patrollers of Xococ in Río Negro. These killings were related to the community's opposition to the construction of the Pueblo Viejo-Chixoy Hydroelectric dam.

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¹ By the end of 2010, Guatemala reportedly had a homicide rate of 41.1 per every 100,000 ² http://www.breakingthesilenceblog.com/general/2014-delegation/ accessed June 19, 2014. I

This known as "Breaking the Silence" (BTS), a voluntary organization, made an active presence with people in Guatemala since 1989, as it has celebrated its 25th anniversary 2014. BTS, based on the Maritime region of Canada, is housed at Tatamagouche Centre, a Christian educational center where various programs of retreat, social justice, youth and family, faith and spirituality, leadership development, and art and creativity happen throughout year. See more https://www.tatacentre.ca/index.php/partnerships/bts, accessed June 19, 2014.

⁴ Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, "Michel de Carteua: Introduction Certeau Texts: How is Christianity Thinkable today? And White Ecstasy," in Graham Ward, ed., *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader* (Malden: Blackwell, 1997), 142.

⁵ Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 7.

⁶ James N Poling and Donald Miller, *Foundations for a Practical Theology of Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 33.

⁷ There was an incident that led up to this massacre. On May 4, 1980 a killing happened between local police and local indigenous people. This prompted the entrance of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP) who organized leadership of resistance groups in that region. EGP was targeted as a terrorist group which means the army and the government could legally oppress them and those who were labelled as accomplices. This aggravated the situation at Río Negro in terms of the economic development becoming politicized and militarized.

⁸ Between 1977 and 1978, the National Electricity Institute (INDE) proposed the project of building the dam which would force 150 families to leave their lands.

This construction project endangered the people living nearby. When it was completed it did indeed flood villages and destroy a way of life. But the people knew the consequences would be more than the material consequences related to home and their livestock. Michael Hardt has described the consequences of such development as a kind of "immaterial" and "biopolitical" exploitation which may be even more violent and damaging in the long run. "The dam project not only affected the community; it also *affected the heritage of the Mayan culture.*" When the dam was completed it was largely funded by International Monetary Fund (IMF) with the collaboration of the local elites and their military government. This was a greedy handshake between European American colonialism and transnational capitalism. Aided by the local culture of militarism, the deal perpetuated a history of racism against Mayan people. In the end this evil concoction of factors led to a ghastly orgy of violence that cost many innocent lives. International financial institutions only served the interests of 1% of very wealthy stakeholders, while 99% of the majority did not benefit from them. Hence, a new sense of solidarity for the 99 percent became even more urgent than ever before. 12

2. Three Threads for weaving a Theology of Resistance

1) Remembrance

Every year since 1982 people of the Achi Mayan community mark March 13 by climbing a mountain called Pak'oxom. In order to get to the mountain, we, the BTS group, all had to take a boat across a river above a dam and walked for another few hours to get to the mountain. But this journey was more than a pleasure hike; it was a pilgrimage of remembrance. The whole mountain has become a monument to a terrible massacre that happened there. More than that, it is a site of resistance. On our way there, we paused 6 times at the behest of our guide Juan Uscap to mark the place where an act of violence took place. Uscap was just nine years old at the time of the massacre and was himself an eye witness. When all of us had made it to the top, his child came running to embrace Juan. In the hugs and smiles of son and father, we were reminded that "death is not the final word. Beyond every death..., there is resurrection, new life." 13

⁹ Michael Hardt, "Foreword: Creation beyond Measure," in Antonio Negri, *The Labor of Job: The Biblical Text as a Parable of Human Labor*, translated by Matteo Mandarini (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2009), xii.

¹⁰ Jesús Tecú Osorio, *Memoir of the Río Negro Massacres* (Ixmules, Guatemala City, 2012), 51-52. The emphasis mine. He is one of the survivors of the Río Negro Massacres.

¹¹ Luis Solano, a Guatemalan political and economic analyst, came to us on the first of our visit, to share such poignant analysis on these interlocking oppression and international involvement in violence in Guatemala. Ironically such oppression has been escalating since the peace accord of 1996. He told us that peace accord brought the international money grabbers into the country since Guatemala is stable enough to worth investing. Since the accord, Canadian mining companies of Gold Corp and others have been so comfortably (but violently) making astronomical profit by taking the gold, silver, and other natural resources.

¹² Joerg Rieger and Kwok Pui-lan, *Occupy Religion: Theology of the Multitude* (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, 2012), 33.

¹³ Parker Palmer, *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity, and Caring* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990), 140.

A few hundred people of all ages spent the night together, observing Mayan and Christian rituals, telling stories to their children and grandchildren, breaking bread, and sharing tears together. All these culturally and religiously embedded acts of playing and praying were embodied as a concrete form of remembrance and resistance. Even though their land was stolen and some of their cultural treasure was drowned under the water, those gathered were determined not to let the perpetuators of the violence take their memory away. For this reason they are determined to remember the massacre and to "remember truthfully." ¹⁴ In fact, the act of remembrance is an act of faith which is both resilient and resistant. ¹⁵ Faith is an act performed by the body such that it comes to know. This bodily knowing, through the communal gesture of remembrance, is learned in this physical gathering. ¹⁶ "There is a critical connection between space and memory, a connection that refashions itself from one generation to the next."¹⁷ The connection between space and memory creates "a counter-map to sanitized landscape of national forgetting." The people on Pak'oxom Mountain were engaged in a bodily knowing acquired through their senses, while physically present in the very site of the massacre they seek to preserve in memory. This bodily knowing is also a communal knowing. Remembrance cannot be done alone. Here the site (physical, mental, social) interrelates and overlaps as it becomes a shaping force in life. 19 Re-mapping this site from stolen lives to lives shared is one way to unmask and unmake violence. Remembrance is, thus, not simply a commemorative act that marks and mourns for the past but also a transgressive act that corrects and crosses the past to shape the present. The pilgrimage to the mountain, and the practice of staying together through the night, by which the community remembered what happened is a primary source of a theology of resistance.

• 2) Relationship-Building

On March 8 2014, the BTS delegation joined with the National Union of Guatemalan Women (UNAMG) in the march to mark the International Women's Day. We gathered in downtown Guatemala City and shouted together, "Si a la vida digna, si a la justicia!" (Yes to a dignified life, yes to justice!). Along with UNAMG, there were many different organizations and individuals who came out to "publicly condemn the actions of the government" that lead to

¹⁴ Miroslav Volf, "Love's Memory: Redemptive Remembering," in *Compass Points: Navigating Vocation*, The 2002 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture (Princeton, NJ: Institute for Youth Ministry, 2002), 73.

¹⁵ A Catholic indigenous woman from another tribe said, "Even though they took away and polluted our land, they cannot take our faith away." http://www.breakingthesilenceblog.com/general/2014-delegation/ accessed July 9, 2014.

¹⁶ Brett Webb-Mitchell, *Christly Gestures: Learning to be Members of the Body of Christ* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2003), 173.

¹⁷ Mona Oikawa, "Cartographies of Violence: Women, Memory, and the Subject(s) of the 'Internment," in Sherene H. Razack, ed., *Race, Space, and the Law: Unmapping a White Settler Society* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2002), 74.

¹⁸ Ibid., 75.

¹⁹ Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), 7, 120.

"economic, political, and social crisis generated throughout the world by the patriarchal, neoliberal, racist, and colonizing system." ²⁰

What was most striking about this event was the heterogeneity of the gathering: those who were present were different. While there were many indigenous people, they were not at all homogenous but representative of different languages and cultures judging from their clothing that features unique patterns. There were also many different non-indigenous Guatemalans and non-Guatemalans. It was the "polydoxy" of heterogenous people, making the public performance of differences through movements, sounds, speeches, seeing, and even the silence in between movements that distinctively marked the march. ²¹ Some young people (artists) were making graffiti on the wall, while others were singing and dancing. Some were observing a Mayan ritual in silence, while others walked shoulder to shoulder in a gesture of solidarity. Threads of relationship were strong and visible as people from different organizations and groups, were hugging, laughing, and talking with each other. Though chaotic, disorderly, and loose, the march demonstrated a model of relationship-building in heterogenous ways, whose aim was to defend the right to life, land, water and also the dignity, history, and memory of this country. ²²

From the point of view of relationship building, a theology of resistance takes differences seriously. Relationship-building encourages people to work across differences. It does so without failing to return to the claim of sameness or unity. One of many challenges of relationship-building is the fear of those who are different. This fear is more than a feeling from a social interaction; it is deeply engrained at a philosophical and ideological level. Laurel Schneider puts it succinctly: "If to be is to be the same, then to be other is a frightful loss of existence." This loss is frightening, indeed, so we create fear that breeds our capacity to exclude and erase others, leading to violence and the distortion of humanity. The remedy for the fear of the other as solidarity is a matter "of the heart and of faith." In fact, a theology of resistance as relationship-building comes to full flower in "manifold institutions and relationality" fed by "the embodiment of love" that "hangs together" in the web of living interactions. This "hanging together" is another name for relationship-building when the heart is moved and the faith takes root. It "occurs only through the actual presence of people who have the courage to be physically present, to be in a place of hunger, violence, or despair, who have the courage to really see, and

²⁰ http://www.breakingthesilenceblog.com/general/unamg-press-release/ accessed June 20, 2014.

²¹ Catherine Keller and Laurel Schneider, eds. *Polydoxy: Theology of Multiplicity and Relation* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 2.

http://www.breakingthesilenceblog.com/general/unamg-press-release/ accessed August 6, 2014.
Laurel Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (New York: Routledge,

²³ Laurel Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 88.

²⁴ Kathryn Anderson, *Weaving the Relationships: Canada-Guatemala Solidarity* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2003), 199. She cites Marta Gloria de la Vega, a lawyer, who worked closely with Guatemalan Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú, who said, "Solidarity is revolutionary and is of the heart, of faith." It should be noted that Anderson, trained as an adult Christian educator, was the one who did revolutionary solidarity work with the people in Guatemala when she first encountered them during the World Council of the Churches' General Assembly in 1983, which gave birth to the BTS in 1988.

²⁵ Keller and Schneider, *Polydoxy*, 3-4.

the courage actually to sin against its prevailing ethos of disrespect and disregard."²⁶ Our group were physically present in that march when indigenous and non-indigenous Guatemalans cried out for dignity. Despite our limit (and privilege), we were touched by their courage to fight for justice and life. Cognizant of our complicity (as visitors from Canada, the country that is home to the biggest and the most mining companies in the world), we were led to repent our systematic sins. We, in other words, turned to the God who was marching among us. This kind of relationship building is theological for it unmasks inhumane reality, while manifesting the face of God for "the indignity done to one person degrades the image of God in all of us."²⁷

Relationship-building is communal. Indeed, it is this communitarianism or "communalism" ²⁸ that fuels just relationships which in turn are critical in developing a theology of resistance. Earlier, it was argued that remembrance cannot be done alone. Stories (as a powerful medium of remembrance) cannot *be* stories if they are told by one person to no one else. To be a story it needs the tellers and hearers. In community, through relationships, stories and events are remembered. In this setting they shape people's identity, such as was the case with our Christian identity. ²⁹ Thus, remembrance and relationship-building is fundamental to a theology of resistance. They go hand in hand. Both remembrance and relationship-building are a communal act; they create *koinonia* that in turn teaches and practices solidarity and responsibility. ³⁰

3) Reclaiming Space

In order to weave the final thread of a theology of resistance as reclaiming space we need to go back to Río Negro, Rabinal, where the massacre occurred. There is a school, called "the Inter-Cultural Bilingual Institute in the New Hope Foundation" established by Jesús Tecú Osorio, the survivor of the massacre. The Foundation states its goals, "to share the bloody history that we have lived, and to make this story available in all of the education centres so that our children and grandchildren may know it and never forget it." These goals combine the first and second

²⁶ Schneider, Beyond Monotheism, 206.

²⁷ Anderson, Weaving the Relationships, 202.

²⁸ Boyung Lee, *Transforming Congregations through Community: Faith Formation from the Seminary to the Church* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2013), 12. She illuminates the linguistic uniqueness of Korean and Japanese, where "We" or "ourselves" are not the many separate individuals but refers to the coexistence of 'I' and 'You' in binding relational ways. ²⁹ No one alone can be Christian. Only through and in relationships can we be Christians. Michel De Certeau, Michael Smith, trans. *The Mystic Fable: The Sixteenth and the Seventeenth Centuries* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992), 231, 258, 293. I give thanks to Prof. Cho Min-Ah, who provided this reference.

David Ng, "A Path of Concentric Circles: Toward an Autobiographical Theology of Community," in Peter C. Phan and Jung Young Lee, eds., *Journeys at the Margin: Toward an Autobiographical Theology in American-Asian Perspective* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1999), 102. In Cantonese, *koinonia* is translated as *tuen kai*: "solidarity" and "responsibility."

³¹ He was awarded the Reebok Prize for Human Rights on December 11, 1996 for the work he did to bring justice to the massacre at Río Negro. This award came with USD \$25,000 which allowed to create the foundation, focusing on education for those affected by political violence.

³² Jesús Tecú Osorio, *Memoir*, the back cover.

threads of a theology of resistance where remembrance is taught by passing down wisdom and actualized through relationship-building in community by focusing on education for the children, the survivors of the massacre.

Despite the brutal history of violence, it was impossible not to notice the sign of life that was manifested by the children in this school. Their curriculum involved remembering their colonial history, claiming who they are (as Maya Achi people), and celebrating their languages, religions and cultures through intercultural and bilingual education.³³ Many students and teachers practiced Christianity mixed with their indigenous cultures and Mayan spirituality. While one may label it as syncretic (and even heretical), it was fully inculturated.³⁴ That is to say that their religion, culture and education are integrated. Their curriculum also involved critical thinking and leadership development by employing a pedagogy similar to bell hooks' "engaged pedagogy"³⁵ but extended to incorporate their Mayan cosmology and spirituality. This pedagogy is performed at the round table where a group of 4 students as peers mutually engage in discussion from colonial history to environmental injustice, agricultural science, Mayan mathematics, and indigenous medicine.³⁶ The curriculum is designed in a way that empowers them to think critically and listen attentively. Henry Giroux's advice is relevant here: we should not be too "concerned with simply motivating students to learn, but rather with establishing the conditions of learning that enable students to locate themselves in history and to interrogate the adequacy of that location as both a pedagogical and political question."³⁷ Not only the classroom but also surrounding of the school, located as it was on a hill surrounded by a wide-open space, gave a sense that this was a place where all kinds of teaching and learning could occur.³⁸

One of the most powerful teaching moments for us was when two senior students were showing their project on toilet construction. We were led up on a hill to see the eco-friendly

³³ This is critical in protecting Mayan people's educational and cultural rights as a way of making room for an intercultural bilingual education (IBE). Ruth Moya Torres, "Indigenous Education and 'Living Well': An Alternative in the Midst of Crisis," in Lois Meyer and Menjamín Maldonado Alvarado, eds. *New World of Indigenous Resistance: Noam Chomsky and Voices from North, South, and Central America* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2010), 219. ³⁴ Compartmentalizing religion from culture, viewing other non-European religious traditions from the standard of European Christianity, only endorses Eurocentric Christian colonial desire of control and conquest. Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: WJF, 2005), 161-162.

bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as a Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 13-22. Later she further develops a pedagogy of hope in *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (London/New York: Routledge), 2003.

³⁶ Guillermo Chen Morales, "Repress Ideas to Consolidate Nation-States... or Re-Create Ways of Thinking to Strengthen Balance," in Lois Meyer and Menjamín Maldonado Alvarado, eds. *New World of Indigenous Resistance: Noam Chomsky and Voices from North, South, and Central America* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2010), 229.

³⁷ Henry A. Giroux, *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 182.

³⁸ It has a few vegetable gardens where students with teachers grow things for learning primarily but then used for feeding and fund-raising. It has a chicken and a pig farm where students are responsible to monitor and keep tending the animals. It has a clinic where sick children not only come to rest and heal but also all students learn their indigenous herb medicine.

toilet that they had built out of mud and straw only. "Eco-friendly" is an understatement. It was a divine (meaning the spirit-guided) invention that took the needs of planet earth as seriously as their own need for survival. Water is precious to all of us. But for them, located in a dry and volcanic land, water simply cannot be wasted. Without using a single drop of water, they had designed the toilet in a way that would separate urine and feces, using lime to create a well-balanced compost. This compost, free of smell (magically!), was then used to fertilize the vegetables. It was an example of an embodied, holistic education rooted in religiously, spiritually and culturally hybrid traditions and derived from a "disciplined community life and (from) a concern for all creatures."³⁹

The school was spearheaded to develop a pedagogical model of holistic education where all forms of life are respected. The whole cycle of life, from seed, to consumption, to compost, is well lived in this school. This is not only true for the biological life of the plants and animals but also applies to humans. Among the teaching staff, for example, is an intern who had just graduated from the school and was now focussing on becoming a teacher. There was also a veteran teacher who had retired as a principal from another school and then joined this school as a volunteer. The cycle of beginnings, endings and new beginnings was evident. Here a journey of education is circular where the past is never over, and the future is already here. The past, present, and future are actualized simultaneously; while the present is haunted by the (violent) past, the future is unfolding as a reality of hope today. We should not forget that they are the children who witnessed an entire generation of their community almost completely wiped out. They are the survivors of the genocide. Life is closely connected (or close) to death in this school. However, life beyond death is also tangibly felt and experienced. As the name of the foundation represents well, it is the New Hope, to be born again like a phoenix rising out of the ash. The school ignites the burning desire to create a space and reclaim it as "their" space. This is perhaps one of the most powerful ways to resist evil and overcome death. By "re-creating" (rather than creating from nothing) a space of life, by building a life-sustaining, life-recycling, and life-thriving community, the violence is unmade, not tomorrow but at this very moment. It is where God dwells, continuing to journey with the new generation of learners and teachers, leaders and activists who faithfully carry on a life-giving journey on earth with God and with one another.

3. Further Thoughts on a Theology of Resistance for Religious Education

³⁹ Maria Harris and Gabriel Moran, *Reshaping Religious Education: Conversations on Contemporary Practice* (Louisville: WJK, 1998), 115.

⁴⁰ "re-creating" needs a further articulation. Guillermo Chen Morales, who was the director general of the New Hope Foundation, wrote the following: "We try not to reinvent the wheel, but rather to take the elements of innovative methodologies and adapt them to our contexts. That is why we are calling it 're-creation,' as this means 'take all the best' and insert it and adapt it to indigenous ways of thinking. We are not trying to be purists, rather, we look for the most pedagogical and communitarian forms which are still true to our indigenousness." See her "Repress Ideas to Consolidate Nation-States… or Re-Create Ways of Thinking to Strengthen Balance," in *New World of Indigenous Resistance*, 227.

From this physically and spiritually charged trip, do two further educational lessons emerge: faith matters in developing a theology of resistance. Hear a Mayan Christian woman's faithful testimony: "it is better to die in struggles than live cowardly. Mother earth gives us life. We live by her. That is why we resist. God gives us strength to continue in this struggle." The word for "faith" in the Hebrew language is *emunah*, derived from *aman*, meaning 'to nourish.' From her testimony and this etymology, faith is not a doctrinal formula or an intellectual set of beliefs but a source of nourishment that feeds to resist for life. The second lesson is that practice matters. The practice enables us to form "the habits of heart and mind essential for creating and maintaining community."

With these faith and practice intact, through the practice of faith, a theology of resistance becomes an agenda for religious education. The practice of remembrance is a form of critical pedagogy as it is concerned with inquiry of the past by posing the question, what might it mean to take the memories of others into our lives and so live as though the lives of others mattered. Caring for others is not only political and personal, but fundamentally pedagogical because "the touch of the past is an encounter with difficult knowledge and the welcome given to the memories of others as a teaching." The critical pedagogy for religious education is a "dance of the spirit," together with the other, the community, and God. The theology of resistance witnessed and articulated here is not a neat and static subject matter done outside raw and messy daily realties. Rather it affirms a sense of "teaching as a sacramental act" where generations of ordinary people, especially the oppressed, dare to learn and teach what happened and how holy and precious they are. In this act, a theology of resistance is something that is tangled with and in touch with the sweat, laughter, and tears of those who struggle for life, as it unfolds in building a relationship and reclaiming a space of and for life.

While there are other things that also help create a theology of resistance, this paper has proposed three, remembrance, relationship-building, and reclaiming space, as essential elements to such a theology based upon and emerged from a particular reality in Guatemala. These elements are not simply concepts to speculate or think about. They are relevant to Canadian Christians whose lives are tangled with people of Guatemala. We need to learn to practice nourishing acts as an act of doing theology of resistance These acts are theological imperatives as God revealed in the lives of the people in Guatemala.

⁴¹http://www.breakingthesilenceblog.com/general/2014-delegation-blog-march-15/ accessed June 25, 2014.

⁴²http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Meditations/By Faith/by faith.html accessed July 10,

http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Meditations/By_Faith/by_faith.html accessed July 10, 2014.

⁴³ Scott Russell Sanders, *Hunting for Hope*, in bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 196-197.

⁴⁴ Roger Simon, *The Touch of the Past: Remembrance, Learning and Ethics* (New York: Palgrave/MacMillan, 2005), 9-10.

⁴⁵ Maria Harris, *Dance of the Spirit: The Seven Steps of Women's Spirituality* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989).

⁴⁶ Mary Elizabeth Moore, *Teaching as a Sacramental Act* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2004).

⁴⁷ Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1986), 36.

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