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**“Si usted no tiene pasaje otro día está muerto”:
The Privatization of Social Suffering in a Guatemalan Finca**

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by

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Thesis

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Dedication

Para Elena.
Para Marcos.
Para los niños de la Finca,
Que su luz siempre brille.

To Elena.
To Marcos.
To the children of the Finca,
May your light always shine.

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Abstract

“Si usted no tiene pasaje otro día está muerto”: The Privatization of Social Suffering in a Guatemalan Finca

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Local actors in the coastal side of Chimaltenango, Guatemala regularly characterize *fincas* (plantations) as “private property” to explain that they function as independent social spaces, with its inner-functions considered matters between owners and workers, not of concern to society. I argue that locally employed explanations of *fincas* as private areas support a common sense finca ideology that has placed the basic human and social needs of workers and their families at the discretion of landowners who stand to benefit directly from their marginalization. My major finding is that a finca ideology has privatized the social suffering of resident families who are forced to respond as individuals to constant pressures to their survival. Their agency to respond and possibilities for actions rooted in social solidarity have been restricted within the finca. I conclude that this ideology needs to be delegitimized so that the social and human needs of families are not dependent on the decision of landowners and so that they are empowered take action as individuals and as part of a community to redress the conditions that cause their suffering.

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Figure 1: Workers strip the bark and place receptacles to collect tree sap drippings.

The *chipa* (tree sap) is later processed into rubber or latex at processing plants. Photo Credit: Jessica Osorio.35

The Construction of a Finca Ideology

*Because this is a finca, the mayor cannot help, this is a finca. He can't, it is private, while in communities one can at least go with the mayor. People have to organize their committees, they form a directive, and they meet up. If this were a colonia, well two women could join to support each other. Here you cannot do that, because it is a finca.*¹

-Doña Mercedes

An Introduction to Plantations in Guatemala

Reading food labels at U.S. grocery stores reveals that much of the food we consume on a daily basis was grown in Latin America, with certain items coming from certain countries. A glance at labels on bananas and coffee packaging will reveal that much of it comes from Guatemala, yet most consumers do not consider the working and living conditions of the workers that harvested those common-place items. When a U.S. consumer hears that workers in *fincas* (plantations) in Guatemala are paid less than minimum wage, that many never had the opportunity to attend school, and that they live in cramped conditions, many will probably think: so what? *It happens everywhere* and *it is required for cheap produce* are the responses some listeners have offered when I discuss my work. Yet, I am certain that if they were to visit a plantation in Guatemala they would be appalled to witness the human costs of coffee, as I was. When I first arrived at Finca “La Asunción” for ethnographic fieldwork my first thoughts were of disbelief at a place that had the marks of colonialism, the place looks and feels to what I

¹ Original in Spanish: “Porque aquí como es finca, más bien que el alcalde no puede ayudar, como es finca. No puede, es privado, en cambio las colonias siquiera con el alcalde va uno. Tienen que hacer sus comités, hacen una directiva y se juntan. Si aquí fuera una colonia, mira aquí estamos dos señoras y hacemos un grupito para apoyar. Aquí no se puede, como es finca.”

² Original in Spanish. “Es una finca privada, si el patrón autoriza un permiso se hacen las cosas si no, no.”

imagine a Spanish hacienda from the colonial period to have been. Families live in the finca to serve the needs of the finca owner – at its core the finca is colonial.

On the other hand, low wages, extreme poverty, high rates of malnutrition in children, and entire families tied to agricultural work is what characterizes fincas to most Guatemalans. Everyone seems to know this; Guatemala itself is popularly referred to as a “finca state,” a term that recognizes that relations of servitude found on fincas are extended throughout society and that *finqueros* (finca owners) wield great power in society. Even with recognition of the extreme suffering of families and its implications for society in general, there is little discussion on the role of fincas and much less action at societal levels to transform the structure of fincas so that families living there are treated as equal members of society.

I was first introduced to fincas through my father’s recollections of living in a finca as a child. I was introduced to Finca La Asunción in the coastal side of the department of Chimaltenango by the director of an NGO who recommended I conduct work through the non-profit health center (*hospitalito*) located on the plantation because of the marginal living conditions of the families that work and live there. During the drive to La Asunción he explained that throughout his over two decades of experience working with communities throughout the country, the most oppressive conditions he has seen are in fincas.

Historical Finca Formation and the Social Consequences of Violence

The finca has its roots in the second half of the nineteenth century, when the government implemented policies to structure Guatemala’s economy on the export of labor intensive coffee (Wilkinson 68). With the purpose of implementing a liberal

economic model, starting in the 1860s land was concentrated more deliberately in the hands of few national white elites or recent European immigrants attracted to the country by the promise of entrepreneurial opportunities. Mechanisms for the concentration of land included: forcibly taking land from rural mestizo and indigenous Maya communities, buying land cheaply from individuals on what was considered communal property, and titling *terrenos baldíos* (uncultivated land) to would-be agricultural exporters (Cambranes; McCreery, “An Odious Feudalism”). In the towns of the Pacific Coast, coffee plantations engrossed land and converted locals into resident workers (*mozos colonos*) or day laborers (McCreery, “An Odious Feudalism” 107). With the increasing concentration of land and a drive for the export of coffee, finqueros demanded a cheap and stable labor force to work the fields.

David McCreery explains that to fulfill the labor demands of plantation owners “feudal relations of production” were established (“An Odious Feudalism” 100) that were “characterized by a reliance on extraeconomic coercion to extract a surplus from the peasants, physical separation of necessary from surplus labor, and retention by the actual producers of at least some of the means of production, in this case land” (101). Extraeconomic coercion was fulfilled by a series of state policies for the benefit of the owner, who in many occasions then used the law to further exploit workers and coerce labor. One such policy is the *mandamiento* or forced labor law of 1877 that required towns to send up to sixty people to work in coffee plantations, which led to debt peonage as workers forcibly or voluntarily borrowed money from the owner or middlemen and worked until they paid it off (McCreery, “An Odious Feudalism” 106-108). Debt peonage created the conditions that required workers to stay on plantations for long periods of time to pay off debts, many then becoming permanent workers and residents of the farm along with their families, this led directly to residential debt servitude (Grandin, *The*

Blood of Guatemala). Others may have “voluntarily” become colonos to avoid forced labor drafts for fincas, public works, or military service (Grandin, *The Blood of Guatemala*). After debt peonage was outlawed, the state instituted another mechanism to ensure a cheap supply of labor through the vagrancy laws of 1934 that required 100 to 150 days of work on fincas from any person without a recognized profession, a large business, adequate income, or a large amount of cultivated land (Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre*; McCreery, “Debt Servitude”).

While much is written on how the lack of land is the principal reason why *campesinos* (peasants) supported legal and armed struggles for agrarian reform, not much is documented on the living conditions of resident workers and families in the first half of the twentieth century. What is documented is how state policies mandated, regulated, and enforced a cheap labor force for coffee and other commodities (McCreery, “Debt Servitude” 742). McCreery explains that once workers were living permanently on plantations, few managed to escape, “[leaving] the Indians absolutely dependant on the whim of the owner, who could deprive them not only of paid employment but of subsistence as well” (“Debt Servitude” 745). Colonos of the 1920s summarized their conditions, “They have kept us as slaves in a manner most miserable” (quoted in McCreery, “Debt Servitude” 745) with the result that workers engaged in “a low level but persistent struggle over not so much the existence of forced wage labor and debt servitude, which the Indians largely accepted as unfair but inevitable, but the day-to-day operation of the system” (755) which given the lack of alternate sources for income “rendered them increasingly dependent on the fincas” (758).

The labor force of fincas was and continues to be from varied sources. Most fincas of the region continue to have a resident worker population that live on plantation property with their families; these have been known as *fincas de mozos*, *colonos*,

rancheros, or “with permanent population,” as described by locals of La Asunción. Fincas in the region also employ a seasonal migrant labor force known as *cuadrillas* (Pansini 13). Another mechanism to supply labor has been the use of *voluntarios*, workers who “volunteer” to work on the finca on a daily basis or for a predetermined time period, but do not live on the finca and have fewer benefits in housing and pensions (Pansini 12). Living conditions for migrant workers and families that live temporarily on fincas is known to be the most precarious as hundreds of workers and their families live cramped into *galeras* (warehouse or a storage space), with little to no privacy, without running water, little space for cooking, and without outhouses. Resident workers have tended to live in smaller galleys or in one-room houses with their families, also with few if any other resources beyond the structure itself. Arrangements to pay workers for their labor vary, but have tended to be less than minimum wage with “benefits” provided in housing, the availability of a plot to grow maize and other desired crops, and primary education for children (Bossen 139). What are considered benefits in lieu of wages continue to be one of the mechanisms that leave families dependent on fincas as housing and the plot of land are located within the finca, they do not have viable avenues for land ownership.

Much of the twentieth century in Guatemala was characterized by social movements for reform and later for a revolution of this land tenure system. In October 1944 the dictatorship of Jorge Ubico and associated military rule was defeated, this ended the so-called *república cafetalera*, which was followed by the election of Juan José Arévalo as President. This ushered in ten years of democratic rule and reforms commonly known as the “October Revolution”. The reform period continued into the presidency of Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán who in June 1952 approved the Agrarian Reform or Decree 900 which would expropriate unused land from fincas to facilitate land ownership for finca

workers (Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre* 33). In July 1952, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) began a covert operation to overthrow Arbenz with the help of sympathizers that organized an “internal conspiracy” within the country by destabilizing support for Arbenz’s presidency and instilling fear of communism (literature is extensive; Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre* 76; Torres-Rivas, *Centroamérica* 30). Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas led an invasion of the country, was openly supported by some students from the national university, while sectors of the military actively blocked campesinos from arriving to the National Palace to defend the President (Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre*). On June 27, 1954 Arbenz resigned from the presidency amidst mass confusion, over the following days a series of colonels successively assumed power, initiating the counter-revolution that would last for decades. Soon after Arbenz’s overthrow the Agrarian Reform was overturned.

Since before the Agrarian Reform and for decades to follow campesinos and students organized through the Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo (PGT) to work through government institutions for land reforms with little success. Divisions within organizations struggling for social reforms through state institutions and legal mechanisms led to the formation of armed guerrilla groups that were met by the force of the military. This plunged the country into nearly four decades of armed struggle between guerrillas and the counterinsurgent tactics of the military. The military escalated the intensity and brutality of violence towards civilian communities perceived to be supporters or potential supporters of the guerrilla during the late the 1970s and early half of the 1980s. In 1996 the Peace Accords official ended the armed struggle; subsequently, the United Nations led a Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH) with the purpose of accounting for the violence perpetrated by the military and the guerrilla and the Catholic Church led the Recovery of Historical Memory Project (REHMI). No

documentation can accurately portray the atrocities that were committed in the countryside against indigenous populations in a campaign of genocide, I can only briefly summarize those findings here. The information that both commissions documented are testament to the horrors of the war and its “scorched earth” campaign: 626 communities were disappeared from the country; over 200,000 people were tortured and murdered; women were raped to live with the shame or then murdered; and approximately 150,000 were displaced within the country (CEH). The period of high-intensity armed conflict and brutality against the civilian population is commonly referred to as the Civil War or the Internal Armed Conflict. Guatemalan socialist Edelberto Torres Rivas describes the brutality of those years, “What happened here was a permanent repression by the state, punishing everyone who was considered part of the political opposition in thought or in deeds. This imbued military action with the logic of war – a military campaign to destroy ‘subversive’ opposition – and what resulted was the systematic destruction of union leaders, peasants and students” (Torres Rivas, “Guatemala, Guatebuena, Guatemaya”).

Linda Green’s ethnographic study of how Mayan widows coped with the murder of their husbands highlights the fear that permeated all aspects of their lives during the Armed Conflict. The recruitment of local men for military duty or as civil patrollers in their home communities lead to “severe ruptures in family and community relations” (31) that forced them to remain silent. Therefore, she finds that fear in Guatemala is a “chronic condition” as distrust, suspicion, and apprehension have divided families, friends, and neighbors (55). Green reminds the reader that the violence that women experienced was physical and tangible, but also structural as it is historically rooted in inequality and impunity that has been expressed through class, ethnicity, and gender (10).

The work of Daniel Wilkinson to uncover the history of violence in the plantations of the Pacific Coast finds, like Green, that people remained in silence for fear

of repercussions for speaking against the brutal acts of violence they had witnessed. Plantation workers, their families, and even plantation owners have repressed their memories of the violence and most refuse to speak about the military and guerrilla violence in the region, their participation or family participation on either side, or about the violence committed against them. The consequence of the counterinsurgent campaign was the forced silence of its victims (Wilkinson 351-352).

Historian Greg Grandin adds to the literature that analyzes the consequences of the military repression by focusing on the fragmentation of social solidarity. In *The Last Colonial Massacre*, he asserts that the social movements that began before the October Revolution and lasted until the late 1970s were founded on a vision of social democracy through which people could take action to transform societies for the benefit of all, a praxis he calls “social solidarity” (183). He writes that “the threat of mid-century social movements was that they provided a venue in which self and solidarity could be imagined as existing in sustaining relation to one another through collective politics that looked toward the state to dispense justice” (14). The effects of such violence was that “terror trained citizens to turn their political passions inward, to receive sustenance from their families, to focus on personal pursuits, and to draw strength from faiths less concerned with history and politics,” therefore severing the alliances between social classes and splintering collective movements, radically changing understandings of democracy (196-197).

Living with the Fear of Generalized “Insecurity” in Times of Peace

Military repression and the political opposition of the guerrillas under the URNG (Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca) officially ended in December 1996 with

the signing of the Paz Firme y Duradera Accord (Firm and Lasting Peace Accord), yet violence continues to envelope Guatemalan society in similar and distinct ways. Contemporary violence preoccupies daily interpersonal conversations and media coverage due to the anxiety and fear it causes. This was evident during my fieldwork when presidential campaigns focused on citizen concern over the high levels of violence, followed by the November 2011 election of former military General Otto Perez Molina as President. He ran a campaign of “mano dura” (iron fist) against “delinquency”.

Today, violence of all kinds permeates society to the point that like the decades of military repression, fear impacts the daily life of Guatemalans, especially in urban centers. The difference is that crimes documented by the CEH were committed in what is recognized as a Civil War, while present-day violence is occurring in times of peace. Present-day violence is widespread, but with patterns that are difficult to characterize. Statistics tell us very little of the human suffering that is experienced, but do shed light on the pervasiveness of the acts. Every day an average of 17 bodies are found murdered throughout the country or a homicide rate of 45 per 100,000 inhabitants (Samayoa 374; Colussi 10). This is a significant increase from the average of 7 murders per day at the signing of the Peace Accords (Samayoa 374). These murders occur in the context of criminal gangs (*maras*), increased presence of drug cartel and transnational criminal organizations, all forms of violence against women, femicides, violence against farm workers and human rights workers, “social cleansing campaigns,” extrajudicial killings, and lynchings (Samayao; Colussi).

While it is difficult to explain the causes and name the perpetrators of these acts, media outlets and society at large place most of the blame on the *maras* and *mareros* (gang members) even prior to investigations, which for the most part do not occur, while the vast majority of crimes remain in impunity (García 10; Camus 347). Colussi finds

that this violence is based on many factors, among them: generalized poverty, corruption, generalized impunity, and the proliferation of arms. Analysts of the high levels of violence in Central America propose that contemporary violence is a structural continuation of past political conflicts that have transferred to urban centers (Rodgers). The social repercussions of this violence “are the direct threats to social space and the immediate social threads of people, debilitating their sense of security, fostering beliefs and acts of mistrust, fear and anguish” (Rodgers 396).

Within fincas violence and repression retain a similar pattern to the Armed Conflict, the National Civil Police and the Armed Forces are used on behalf of finca owners to maintain control of land with explicit reference to the protection of private property rights, even in cases of disputed land claims. One recent example is the March 2011 violent eviction of Q’echi workers from corporate sugar plantation Chab’il Utz’aj in the Panzós municipality of the Polochic Valley by police, military officers, and private security guards. Officers burned homes and family subsistence crops that displaced 700 to 800 families, leaving them without access to food and water, and assassinating at least one worker (OAS Medidas Cautelares; *Prensa Libre*). A week later private security guards associated with the sugar plantation shot farmers, killing one person, and wounding three others with bullet shots (“Violent Evictions”). In August 2011, twenty-two families were attacked by paramilitary forces setting their homes and crops on fire, two men received gun shots and an eight-year-old girl was injured (“Violent Evictions”; Plaza Pública). As we can see with the violent evictions in the Polochic Valley, violence in fincas resurfaces not infrequently.

My encounters with everyday violence have not been physical as I have not been a victim nor a witness to an incident, but I did live for two and a half months in the country with a sense of fear that permeated all aspects of life, especially in Guatemala

City. Due to personal fears and constant warnings from family members, I remained either at the house of a family member, the finca, or the offices of ASECSA (Asociación de Servicios Comunitarios de Salud). My life was this insulated because I was warned by my family and the hospitalito's staff I could not go anywhere by myself. The doctor warned me: "imprudence is what gets visitors killed."

After about three weeks of being in the country I felt suffocated by the requisite that I remain indoors. To relieve this suffocation one morning I decided to go for a run on the main road, confident that I would be safe given a comment by a hospitalito worker that this region of the country is "tranquila" (calm). When I returned, the staff members were concerned and warned me to not do that again. It turned out that during the afternoon of the previous day a bus was stopped at gun point; subsequently everyone was forced to exit the bus to surrender all valuable objects and cash. That morning I was running towards the same spot where that bus was gunned-down in broad daylight. The doctor then explained that the region had been calm since October 2010, when residents of a nearby city decided to take justice into their own hands by burning presumed delinquents, filming the event, and then posting the video on YouTube to make an example out of those men. That act had made the region "tranquila."

It is in this context of historical levels of violence in the countryside during the Armed Conflict, the quotidian violence of living in urban centers, the brutal acts that occur in nearby towns, and on the road that crosses Finca La Asunción that the families find themselves today. As we will see, the unrelenting physical-brutal violence associated with urban centers of all sizes impacts the decisions families take as they strategize to survive the suffering of hunger.

Literature on Fincas and a National “Finca Culture”

A finca is a large farm or plantation where production is focused on harvesting one or a few commodities for domestic consumption or for export, in Guatemala these have traditionally been coffee and bananas, but also sugar cane and other agricultural products. To my knowledge there have been three studies about the living conditions of resident and migrant worker communities in fincas in Guatemala. Joseph Pansini’s 1977 dissertation focused on ethnic identity formation as it pertained to economic class and religion in corporately owned Finca “El Pilar”. Sheila Cosminsky and Mary Scrimshaw (1980) document the plurality of medical practices of the 690 people that live in Finca San Felipe. Cosminsky (1987) also documents the decisions and strategies women employ to access health care services.

A 1984 study by Laurel Herbenar Bossen examines women’s economic strategies in El Cañaveral, a family-owned sugar plantation organized as a public corporation, that has over 500 unionized permanent workers, a resident population of 3000, as well as a seasonal migrant work force. Resident families were provided with a small two-room house, daily food rations, a plot to grow maize and beans, space for cows to pasture, free health care, modern schools, while most also had access to radios, newspapers, and television. Bossen explains that the plantation is a business enterprise, but also a community where many members were not employed by the plantation and was characterized by hierarchical socio-economic divisions (136). For the resident community, their social and economic identity was derived from the finca (136).

In relation to the role of fincas within society, Jorge González Ponciano writes about racial ideology and racism in Guatemala, analyzing how discourse on “lazy” mestizos and “lazy” or at times “obedient” natives led to social-racial hierarchies at national and global scales. In Guatemala racism and racial hierarchies have reproduced

the “cultura finquera” (finca culture), the servile relations that persist throughout society today (43). The inferiorization of certain mestizos and indigenous peoples has left the majority stuck in a “pre-national country” in which “the marginalized majority live to this day in a situation of perpetual non-citizenship or pre-citizenship the favors the hegemonic force of authoritarian conservatism, whiteness, and ‘finca culture’ ” (44). He expands his analysis of today’s racist pejoratives for non-whites and social-racial hierarchies by examining its historic roots founded on an “economy of agroexports that was not capable of generating sufficient jobs and that never fully assumed a regimen of salaries or wages that had channels for social mobility for the middle and working classes of the city and the countryside” (46). González asserts that “finca culture” is maintained through racist ideology on the proper societal and class position of non-whites and those with non-white culture and values, relegating many to non-citizenship throughout society.

Outside of Guatemala, Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992) describes everyday violence in the sugar plantation zone of Pernambuco, Brazil, by documenting constant and chronic hunger and an associated *delírio de fome* (the madness or delirium of hunger). Of this common and persistent hunger she writes: “what I have been seeing in Alto do Cruzeiro for two and a half decades is more than ‘malnutrition,’ and it is politically as well as economically caused, although in the absence of overt political strife or war... But it is the overt hunger and starvation that one sees in babies and small children, the victims of a ‘famine’ that is endemic, relentless, and political-economic in origin” (146).

In the United States the conditions I will describe for Finca La Asunción are similar to the work and living conditions of migrant farmworkers housed in labor camps. Peter Benson (2008) analyzes government neglect and liberal productions models that create the conditions of structural violence for farmworkers living in labor camps located

within tobacco fields in North Carolina. He examines perceptions of farmworkers, growers, and residents of nearby non-labor camp communities to examine the barriers created among each; residents in nearby communities perceive farmworkers as perpetually the “other” who are to blame for the deplorable conditions with which they live, while farmworkers perceive growers with skepticism and resist in ways that are not noticeable to the growers. Benson finds that farmworkers inhabit “dispossessed space” that they do not own and do not call home (601), while for people outside of labor camps these “seem to somehow exist in an earlier time, while migrants are facialized as people whose proper time and space is always elsewhere, neither proximate nor immediate” (604).

Finca Ideology Conditions Social Suffering: The Case of Finca La Asunción

Unlike El Pilar and El Cañaveral that are organized as corporations, La Asunción is individually owned by a man who lives on the finca, his presence continuously asserts his role as the boss. Families that live on the finca must have at least one family member working formally for the finca; most adult men work in the fields, although some women work in the fields and others work in the *casa patronal* (the boss’ house). Most women, older adults, and children are not formally employed by the finca, although during harvest season spouses and children assist with coffee picking. Together the families form a community that calls the finca home, it is much more than a work place for them.

For the families that live in La Asunción, their living conditions are in sharp contrast to the described conditions of El Cañaveral – free access to health care is not facilitated by the owner, families ranging from 4 to 10 people live in small one-room buildings without electricity, televisions are a rarity, children attend a school that cannot be described as “modern,” and the families experience daily hunger while they live

surrounded by agricultural commodities and some of the most productive and fertile land in the country. Hunger is so prevalent that children under age ten are dependent on the twice-daily meals provided by the hospitalito for their sustenance. Even with these meals young children are undernourished and at least one newborn was suffering the consequences of severe malnutrition since birth. A mother I interviewed put it bluntly, with her adult son's meager wages "we have to see how we will survive."

One of the most striking observations from my time in La Asunción was a commentary by the doctor from the hospitalito stating that because the finca is private property government institutions, NGOs, and non-profit organizations *cannot* get involved to oversee and regulate operations in fincas nor facilitate access to social services. These institutions do not get involved in fincas even though families live there because, "for legal reasons it would be too complicated." A brief examination of laws does not support this assertion because no law precludes government involvement in fincas, however this statement reveals profoundly how fincas function. Fincas operate as independent social spaces that are unregulated, giving finqueros discretion in all matters inside of the property. Finqueros determine land uses and they are also the authorities to decide on housing conditions, labor conditions, wages, education for children, and the extent of social gatherings for the workers and their families that live on the finca. This allows finca owners to regard all interactions with families as part of a private transaction, with little fear of repercussion for what he does or does not do in regards to the workers and families. The families suffer directly because of this arrangement.

The argument I put forward is three-fold: First, it requires recognition that the social suffering I will describe has been structured and perpetuated by the finca as an institution of Guatemalan society that since the 1860s has concentrated land in few hands and has coerced cheap labor through varying mechanisms for the benefit of land holders.

It is a system that from its inception has had the support of the State and has utilized violence to maintain the privileges of land owners. Contemporary fincas are heirs to this legacy as they continue to exploit maximum profits and personal gains with high human costs to workers and their families. Second, that a finca ideology constructed over time has established fincas as social spaces that are independent from society. This ideology places the basic human and social needs of families at the discretion of land owners who stand to benefit from their marginalization, their needs have become private matters and have ceased to be of concern to society. Despite the social implications of this construction, the ideology has been internalized by local actors (health care workers, the town mayor, non-profit organization staff, teachers, workers, and finca residents) who accept its tenets based on expansive notions of property rights. The ideology is legitimized by lax and vague laws that are not enforced; these allow owners to operate their plantation outside of social scrutiny. Third, this common sense ideology has profound implications on the livelihoods of workers and families who work there, they have been left to respond as individuals within the confines of the finca. Their agency to respond as individuals and through actions of social solidarity to relieve their suffering have been constricted by the ideology itself, nonetheless families continue to resist those pressures given the limitations. These three arguments inform my conclusion, that social suffering has been privatized on the finca.

Describing a finca as private property can be seen as a literal recognition that an individual, a family, or a corporation holds title to the land, therefore it is private property. However, when local actors offered the explanation that fincas are private property, “private” carries an understanding that goes beyond remarking that the land belongs to an individual as privacy has been transferred to all functions in the space. Most of the time this characterization of the finca is expressed without questioning its

logic and the profound impact it has on the residents. The prevalence of this explanation demonstrates that finca ideology has been internalized, it has become what Antonio Gramsci terms “common sense,” when a group of people “[adopt] a conception which is not its own but is borrowed from another group; and it affirms this conception verbally and believes itself to be following it, because this is the conception which it follows in ‘normal times’” (327).

Given that “private” and “public” have multiple meanings and connotations depending on the context, location, local political histories, and personal interpretation, I will delineate what I mean by “private” and “privatization.” One way to establish whether something is private or public is to examine whether or not it is open, visible, or accessible to others in society (Weintraub). Something that is hidden, not visible or accessible could be considered private. Another common criteria is whether something pertains to an individual or to a collective – the individual is largely considered private and the collective, public (Weintraub). These two criteria intersect and can be applied in varying ways, I will treat private as something that is not readily accessible to others in society and pertains to a limited number of individuals. In this region of Chimaltenango the finca has been constructed as private space, where the functions of the space and its impact over resident families are not pertinent to people and institutions from the “outside”. In contrast to the finca as private space, the principal town of the municipio would be considered public as it is more accessible and visible to greater numbers of persons and a space where governmental institutions are perceived to have obligations to residents.

The type of privatization I describe for fincas is not to be confused with the privatization that is associated with neoliberal economic policies where state-run agencies, businesses, or companies are transferred to the private sector to be owned and

administered by corporations for profit (e.g. transferring state-run oil companies to private firms). Or when it is used to characterize the outsourcing of once public services to private entities (e.g. prison management, water management). What I mean with privatization is more associated with feudal or colonial land and social arrangements, with relationships formed around large landholdings, with landless peasants working for the landholder in exchange for a place to live and use of a plot of land to grow crops. Unlike other spaces in the region where the government and society are perceived to have responsibilities to meet basic social and human needs, in fincas these needs and human suffering has been confined to the space of the finca, these have been privatized.

The term social suffering has been used by many including, Arthur Kleinman, Venna Das, and Paul Farmer, with a conceptualization of suffering as social; social forces, state institutions, and the actions and inactions of groups of people cause bodily, emotional, psychological, and collective suffering, creating categories of marginalized peoples. Kleinman explains that suffering is social because the actions of state institutions directly inflict harm, but also because institutions categorize sufferers; social – state institutions determine who is a sufferer worthy of assistance (321). Farmer uses an analogous definition for structural violence: “The term is apt because such suffering is ‘structured’ by historically given (and often economically driven) processes and forces that conspire – whether through routine, ritual, or, as is more commonly the case, the hard surfaces of life – to constrain agency” (40). Structural violence is directly tied to social suffering, as its analysis “invariably reveals its social origins” (142). I will describe the difficult and precarious living conditions of the families that live in Finca La Asunción as social suffering, the suffering of the families in the everyday quest for sufficient food and education are a consequence of the social construction of the finca, the actions and inactions of the finca owner, as well as the state and society. The daily

struggles for survival I also describe as the invisible violence of their lives, these are an affront to their survival.

In the remainder of this chapter I will discuss the methodology employed in field research and I will position myself within the context of researching and writing this thesis. In chapter two, I will highlight the social suffering of families and I will analyze discourse on fincas as private property that supports an ideology that has enshrined the private property rights of plantation owners, without placing equal weight on social rights and human needs. Given my conclusion that fincas have privatized social suffering, in chapter three I will address the following questions: How do workers and family members living in La Asunción respond to situations that further threaten their ability to meet their basic necessities? To what extent are actions of social solidarity possible within the finca? Answering these questions can provide insights into the ways families resist within the limitations of the finca. In chapter four I offer some conclusions on delegitimizing the ideology and building alternatives to the finca so that families have choices and agency to determine their futures.

Research Methodology

Conducting research on a finca, was not what I planned when I left Austin, Texas to research what culturally appropriate health programs for Mayas could look like. I was motivated by my conviction that all people deserve access to medical care and that the culture, traditions, and practices of all people should be respected in health care programs. Developing such programs, I thought, could most adequately fulfill the health rights of Mayas, probably increase the use of local medical facilities, and improve health outcomes.

I arrived at ASECSA the first week of June 2011, to learn about their work to support health promoter and midwife education, increase access to essential medicines, promote food sovereignty, and women's equality, among other efforts. When I discussed my research idea with the national director of ASECSA, he recommended I work through the hospitalito located within, but independent from, Finca La Asunción.

I decided to stay there because I had come to Guatemala precisely to learn about the social injustices that people live with every day. This is where the people that work to improve health and increase health care access in rural areas had suggested I conduct my research; I knew that they had placed me there for a reason. In all I spent eight weeks conducting ethnographic fieldwork; one-and-a-half with ASECSA in the city of Chimaltenango and six-and-a-half in La Asunción.

Participant observations of the workings of the finca were shaped by my role as a “volunteer” at the health center located at the center of the community where the workers and their families live. I was based out of the health center, I walked throughout the community to interact with residents, while many came to the hospitalito on a daily basis to bring their children for meals, fulfill requirements to wash dishes and clean in exchange for the meals, and wash clothes on the large basins. Children living on the finca were to be found at the hospitalito throughout the day. I conducted semi-structured interviews with seven women that live on the finca, three men, the two teachers who run the school on the finca, the medical director of the Centro de Atención Permanente (the public health center) located in the *cabecera municipal* (the principal town), the coordinator of environmental concerns for the public health center, staff members from a non-profit health promoter and local development organization, two *comadronas* (midwives) who live in an agrarian cooperative, and a health promoter that lives on a nearby finca. The perspectives of women and their responses to increased pressures

within the finca will be prominent in my analysis, obtaining interviews from men proved to be more difficult given their long work hours. I also held regular conversations about my research with hospitalito staff, some of whom live on the finca and most others in nearby communities.

I helped the hospitalito's staff organize a workshop for midwives and health promoters from a nearby municipio on the topics of gender-based violence and HIV and their role as HIV educators in their communities. During this two-day workshop I led an afternoon of activities to field-test an activity from a draft of the "Safe Motherhood" chapter of a book in development by the Hesperian Foundation. I also attended the annual ASECSA conference held in mid-July that focused on health care in Central America, developments in the 2011 presidential election campaigns, and ASECSA's reasons for supporting Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú for President. At the end of the conference she delivered a campaign speech.

Given the process that led me to change my research focus I would like to note some of the limitations of this thesis. Due to the "private" status of fincas I was informed by the center's staff that I needed to request permission from the owner before I could cross the street to speak to the families. The doctor and I visited the finquero in his home where we were seated in a patio landscaped by palm trees and bromelias. The doctor introduced me, helped me explain my research interests in health care access in the region, and I asked for permission to interview the families. He said that I could conduct the study, but not before telling me that a few years ago a Belgian student who had come to conduct research asked questions that were not appropriate (ie – on working conditions and wages). I understood this to be a limitation on the questions I could ask. Therefore, all of my questions focused on health and education concerns, not on working conditions, their relationship with the boss, or even their personal history at the finca. While I did not

ask these questions, some mothers and fathers decided to provide this type of information and share personal experiences which I then recorded. Given these limitations, I understand the documentation of their living and working conditions and their relationship to this finca to be partial, yet true to the information provided by the families, the center's staff, and my observations.

The finca, the health center's name, and all the names of participants have been changed to protect their identity. I do not provide the name of the municipio where this work was conducted for the same reason.

Towards a Pragmatic Solidarity

As the daughter of a Salvadoran mother and a Guatemalan father who immigrated to the United States in 1980, my experiences and identity play a role in how I analyze plantation life for the families that live in Finca La Asunción, how I understand the role of fincas within Guatemalan society, and even the purpose of writing this thesis. I am the daughter of immigrants that fled Central America at the height of the Civil Wars and have lived in little Central America – Los Angeles, California – ever since. My dad left after his high school graduation, never to live again in his beloved Guatemala. Dinner time for us at home involved my dad discussing his participation in student protests in Guatemala City, lectures on the Agrarian Reform, and President Jacobo Arbenz's CIA-sponsored coup.

In addition to the political conversations that routinely surface with my dad, I grew up listening to his stories about playing in his grandparents orchard near the town of Mataquescuintla and living on Finca San Lorenzo, department of Santa Rosa, where Mamita (my grandmother) worked to support her eight children for about two years. His

memories of living on a finca are very different from my experience as a participant observer at La Asunción. He has told me countless times how he wishes he could once again play on the finca with his childhood friends, Chomita and Ponchita, and cut down all of the racimos (banana clusters) he wants. He remembers eating varieties of bananas and plantains that are not sold in U.S. grocery stores – *bananos*, *mahunches*, *bananitos*, and *criollos*. He remembers living at the end of a galley with Mamita and his siblings, eating beans and tortillas every day, and not owning a pair of shoes. Yet, the memories of living on this finca and at the orchard with his grandparents are the happiest of his life.

When I told him I would be conducting field research on a coffee and rubber finca his response was, “que alegre” (how exciting) as he began to tell me once again about his childhood in the finca. When I told my uncle who lives in a suburb outside of Guatemala City about my work in the finca, he began to tell me about how joyous and “sano” (wholesome) life on fincas has been. He then recounted how men would wake up early to work in the fields and that at mid-day women would bring exactly one-cup of beans and all of the desired tortillas for the men’s lunch. He remembers that work for the men appeared difficult, yet they at least ate every day, even if humbly.

I share a little on my dad’s and uncle’s memories as a contrast to my observations of life in La Asunción. The most vivid memory I have is of meeting one-and-a-half year old Elena the day of my arrival; she was living with the physical consequences and manifestation of malnutrition on her body and arrived at the center for nutritional rehabilitation. My reflections from the day I arrived are full of frustration as I arrived to a place that looked to be remnants of Spanish colonial rule, where workers and their families live on the owner’s property with implications for living conditions, life opportunities, and human relationships. I remember learning that most of the families do not have electricity inside their homes even though electrical wires run behind their

homes to funnel energy to urban centers. Those electrical wirings seemed to serve as a mockery to all that the families do not have, as a reminder that they have been abandoned by society.

During those days I wondered how my dad and uncle could possibly be remembering their days on a finca. How could those days have been joyful, adventurous, and full of an unlimited supply of divine fruit? Or characterized by hard, yet satisfying work? How could they be speaking about a place that keeps people living in such cramped conditions, with substandard education, and children living with hunger? This finca too has plantains, yet these are not available for the taking by coltish children. My family has strange memories and conceptions of finca life, I thought, as I figured that theirs highlight hide and seek adventures with friends. As adults my dad and uncle and their children have had all of their necessities fulfilled in Los Angeles or in Guatemala City, perhaps impacting how they remember life on the finca. I cannot know why my dad and uncle's memories of living in a finca, of picking coffee as a child and a teenager, are remembered so fondly. Mamita and her eldest children did decide, however, to move the family to Guatemala City to seek other opportunities, especially education for the youngest.

Processing my experience at Finca La Asunción has been one of introspection, as I had never witnessed the injustices that people in fincas experience on a regular basis. At first I gained perspective on my family roots in the countryside and for sometime at a finca, as all I have known of Guatemala prior to this experience was the city and its suburbs. As I realized that my dad spent part of his childhood at a finca, it also allowed me to visualize his journey from Santa Rosa to Guatemala City, later to the township of Villanueva, and then the life-changing move to Los Angeles. While the experience allowed me to focus inward, the experience also allowed me to evaluate the conditions

that cause child hunger and as I will share later, the death of a young man due to AIDS-related complications only a few hours after I met him.

One of the reasons I struggle to write this document is that I know that writing this thesis does nothing to change families' constant struggle to access basic necessities on the finca. Not once in my conversations with the families and staff did they ask me to write a thesis. The hospitalito's staff supports the research because it is what I went to do and because they encouraged me to research life on the finca. They work to alleviate some of the hunger and illness of families in fincas; they welcome a study to document those social injustices. The families on the other hand insist that what they need are financial resources to support their families as they struggle everyday to place beans, tortillas, and coffee on their tables and to find ways to continue the education of their children past sixth grade. Anything else is of little value to the families, when as Grandin succinctly illustrates: "Hunger is routine and starvation common" (*The Last Colonial Massacre* 191). Some of the women I spoke with did, however, appear to welcome the opportunity to speak of their daily challenges for survival and demonstrated pride in the work they do in their community.

This thesis is therefore an academic endeavor to shed light on the finca within Guatemalan society, which after decades of political and armed struggle to radically transform land tenure, remains largely the same as in the years prior to the attempted Agrarian Reform. Given that during my time in Guatemala it was evident that finca ideology is not sufficiently questioned, but rather largely accepted and justified in its structure, I hope to use this thesis as a tool to generate discussion on how finca social construction invisibilizes the social needs, suffering, and afflictions of families the find themselves largely bound to that space. Families living in fincas can no longer be viewed as less worthy of concern by society and the State because they live on private property.

The need for dialogue of finca structure, ideology, and its implications for resident workers was evident when I discussed my research project with people in the city and even with my own family. One common response was to blame people in rural areas for their struggles and suffering. An uncle told a group of people gathered at the house one Saturday: “Those people out in the country live like that because they want to, they have too many children, and they refuse to use birth control.” Another uncle asked about the background of the owner of the finca and I told him that the owner has proud Italian roots, he responded by saying, “at least some of the women could have children with an Italian man.” It is commonly known that finca owners sexually abuse women that live on their property.

These statements offer insight into how people in the city view families in the countryside, they are to be blamed for their hunger, illnesses, and socio-economic marginalization, rather than viewed as integrally linked to society. Blaming people for their own marginalization then averts discussions over the conditions that their cause social suffering. While discussion on racism is beyond the scope of this thesis, my uncle’s statement highlights prevailing racism against *campesinos* (understood to be non-white farmworkers) and the perceived superiority of people of European descent. For my uncle, the best thing that could happen to the women living in La Asunción would be to have a child with the *patrón* (boss).

In addition to using the thesis as a tool for discussion, I am actively trying to move towards what I consider more central in my future work, what Paul Farmer calls pragmatic solidarity – action that “responds to the needs expressed by the people and communities who are living, and often dying, on the edge” (230). This calling requires that we ask of ourselves in our daily life and work: “How is this relevant to the suffering of the poor and to the relief of that suffering?” (Farmer 138). How I will develop a

pragmatic solidarity with the people of Finca La Asunción I still do not know, but it is something that I will continue to work on.

Invisible Violence(s): Social Suffering in “Private” Fincas

*It is a private finca, if the boss gives permission things are done, otherwise they are not.*²

-Tomas

Life for the families of Finca La Asunción begins early; women get up at 4 a.m. to stand in line at the *molino* (corn mill) so that they can make tortillas by hand for their families' first meal and then go about cleaning, washing clothes, and caring for their children. The men wake up not long after so that they can begin their work in the coffee or rubber fields, not to be seen in the community until lunchtime. At 8am, school-aged children head to the *escuelita* for a few hours of instruction and by noon their giggles are heard about the hospitalito as they play hide-and-seek. All of this is ordinary in rural communities, yet on a closer look the fears and social suffering associated with life on this plantation are not difficult to notice. It is apparent when the mother of an 18 month-old lives with the constant worry that one day a driver will run over her son when he plays beside or as he crosses the road. Mothers have asked the finca owner and the municipal government for speed bumps and precaution signs for the children's safety to no avail. She lives *pendiente* (alert) to make sure that her son does not run across the road as a driver would likely not see him. She also remains pendiente so that her family can survive on the few resources provided by this finca and the benevolences of the municipal government - providing basic social resources here is the responsibility of no one. They live on private property.

The owner attempts to provide fewer resources for the families than he has in the past, while the state is largely absent from their lives resulting in constant worries about how they will feed their families this week, afford to buy notebooks and pencils for their

² Original in Spanish. “Es una finca privada, si el patrón autoriza un permiso se hacen las cosas si no, no.”

children's primary education, or how they will pay for bus or taxi fare to town in a medical emergency. These constant pressures are not isolated to one or two families, these are the pressures most of the thirty-two families face. These living conditions and daily struggles have been structured by an ideology or "finca culture" established to ensure a cheap and stable labor force that left entire families dependent on fincas for their survival. Debt bondage was outlawed in the 1930s, vagrancy laws have long ceased being in effect, and land tenure as it exists was deeply challenged by social movements in the twentieth century. Notwithstanding these changes and challenges, finca ideology continues to leave entire families dependent on fincas for survival. In this chapter I highlight the suffering of the families that live in La Asunción by examining various aspects in working and social conditions that go without regulation; in particular, wages, occupational hazards, access to health care, nutrition, education, and I will offer some consideration of legal aspects in regards to fincas. Throughout this discussion I will analyze the discourse employed by local actors that explains that fincas operate as independent social worlds, but also inadvertently justifies finca ideology.

On the Ground in Finca La Asunción and the Hospitalito

The region where La Asunción is located is known for its coffee and rubber plantations, while some also harvest sugar cane. According to data collected by the local public health center, the resident population at La Asunción in 2010 was approximately 200; fifty-nine people under age nine and forty-seven more under age twenty. The *municipio* (township) includes over twenty "private fincas," as explicitly labeled on a map I was given at the public health center, two agrarian communities (former fincas where land has been divided among families), and over ten communities of various sizes,

including the principal town. The population of the township is approximately 10,000 people.

Finca La Asunción is divided by a road; to one side of the road you will find the gated entrance to the owner's private quarters that include two large homes and a swimming pool. The owner of the finca is a man of Italian descent who lives in one of the two homes alone for most of the year, while his wife and children live in the capital city. This finca and the neighboring one were owned by his father, who once had a private airstrip. When I visited the owner in his home to ask for permission to conduct research there, he complained about the costs of paying electricity for his homes that sometimes added up to 2000 Q (quetzales, approximately \$285) a month. This is in sharp contrast to the reality that the families that work for him spend their nights by candle light or in the dark.

Next to the owner, the bookkeeper (*planillero*) lives in a house that is visibly larger than the homes of all other workers, with divisions for different rooms, most notably with electricity, and to my knowledge the one family that has a refrigerator. Next to his home there is open space used as a soccer field, followed by the two school houses, and the hospitalito's facilities. The hospitalito is located within but it is operated independently from the finca – much of their financial support has come from international organizations and the staff is responsible for all operational decisions and activities. Staff members at the hospitalito recall that in the early 1990s the finquero was persuaded by religious sisters to donate land so that they could build a health and nutritional rehabilitation center. They were given the right to use the land, although the owner never ceded title. The hospitalito is now run by a board of health promoters and midwives. The resident families live in the area surrounding the hospitalito.

There are thirty-two houses on the finca that are the homes of the families; some of the houses are made of brick and mortar and others of adobe. Most families have one faucet that supplies non-potable water for their use (families note that they extended piping from the hospitalito's pump to install outdoor faucets by each of their homes; the owner had provided one faucet for every three homes), and an open-fire wood burning stove without a chimney. Some have open-pit latrines, while others do not, and with the exception of seven families they do not have electricity. Workers are allowed to use a plot of land to grow maize and beans.

Staff at the hospitalito includes a doctor, an auxiliary nurse, a midwife, an accountant, a pre-school teacher, a health educator, and until March 2012 a cook to prepare the meals for the children and staff. Their central focus for the last few years has been to prevent chronic malnutrition among the children that live in the finca by providing nutritious and varied twice-daily meals, Monday through Friday to fifty-four children and two senior-adults. For children with acute malnutrition, the hospitalito provides medical attention and daily meals for as long as necessary so that they can begin to gain weight and continue their physical and cognitive development. They offer medical consultations for 10 Q.

In the last few years this region has experienced a rapid increase in the number of HIV infected persons. The hospitalito offers HIV education, provides testing, guidance on how to acquire the necessary care at a hospice in the city, and pays for part of the transportation costs to the city for thirty-five patients to access antiretroviral treatment. Additionally, the center runs a pre-school for the children that live on the finca and pays partial bus fares for children to attend secondary schools in nearby towns.

In La Asunción we see a socio-racial hierarchy that González Ponciano terms “finca culture”; the racial contrast between landowners who reap the financial benefits of

land and cheap labor and those who work the land. “Don Adolfo” is a man of European background who owns the land, the houses where the families live, the land where the families grow their *milpa* (maize and beans), the title to the land of the hospitalito, and all water rights. Workers and their families are Maya Kakchikel or Ladino (non-white), after decades of work the families cannot expect to own the house where they live or the plot of land where they harvest corn. One young woman summed up their experience in the finca: “For us there is nothing, only shelter to sleep and live with hunger.”³ In the Spanish the woman used the word *posada* to describe their living situation, a word associated with temporary shelter offered to people who do not have a place to stay or are traveling. In Christian tradition, which a majority of Guatemalans practice in a plurality of ways, Mary and Joseph were given posada in a stable. In La Asunción the families can be seen as guests that live there permanently in the most rudimentary of structures, yet they do not belong there even though most have lived there for decades and many their entire lives.

Discretionary Salaries and Occupational Hazards in La Asunción

Under the construction of fincas as private places the working conditions, salaries, and legally guaranteed work provisions have been left to the judgment of finca owners and administrators. I begin this section by sharing the experience of a man who takes on health risks to earn a little more than his neighbors. Edgar was born in Finca La Asunción; he grew up there and has worked and lived there his entire life. He looks back on how early he began working in the finca’s *hulera* (rubber production) as a teenager after completing fourth grade. He now has worked over a decade in rubber extraction;

³ Original in Spanish: “Para nosotros no hay nada, sólo no mas posada para dormir y vivir con hambre.”

something he says is dangerous to his health. Rubber trees (*Hevea brasiliensis*) have long been planted in this region to extract its sap for rubber but to a lesser degree than coffee, yet in recent years the owner has decided to replace much of his coffee production for rubber.

Unlike in neighboring plantations, rubber workers here are not provided gear to protect their eyes from the hazardous liquid chemicals and masks to limit inhalation of the strong fumes generated by the chemicals. Edgar tells me he uses formic acid, formaldehyde, and sulfuric acid on a regular basis so that the milky sap that is extracted from the tree thickens before sending it to a processing plant. Depending on the desired end product, the liquid extracted will be processed into different types of rubber or latex, much of it for export to the United States. He says he does not have hand gloves, masks, or goggles to protect him from the chemicals, yet “I do this work because I earn 150 quetzales more a week.” He earns 620 Q (\$88) every two weeks which is not enough to support his family the way he wishes. He is most concerned about providing for his children’s education, “I don’t want my children to suffer how I am suffering” he says. So far he has been able to send his eldest son to the secondary school in town, as the school on the finca is only for first through sixth grade. He pays for his son’s daily bus fare and for regular visits to an internet café to complete homework assignments. The concern is that now that his other children are finishing primary school, he will not be able to pay for bus fares for all of them, school supplies, and related expenses. He laments that “because of the wages I have, I am not capable of offering my children much education.”

He takes on the health risks associated with his work because in comparison to other options on the finca he has a few benefits, he earns a little more, and probably because of the health risks the finquero contributes to Edgar’s social security and public health insurance through the Instituto Guatemalteco de Seguro Social (IGSS). This

provides him with a pension for retirement, access to more health care coverage in comparison to the care provided through public health centers and hospitals, and dental care. His wife and children under five years also have access to health care provided through the IGSS. By law any employer who employs three or more persons is required to register and contribute to employee's IGSS coverage,⁴ although in this finca only a few workers have this legally guaranteed social benefit. Only a select few workers and their families are registered with IGSS and these tend to be workers in riskier and higher paying jobs. It is not clear to me how the owner has determined who is enrolled and will be able to access IGSS services, but workers and spouses did express concern over perceived favoritism towards certain workers.

The medical director at the public health center shares Edgar's concerns due to the frequency of cases of renal complications, tonsillitis, other infections, and effects on the nervous system of rubber workers due to regular exposure to toxic chemicals. She corroborates that even with these health concerns, workers at some fincas are not provided with protective equipment. Although the medical director is concerned about worker health and safety and they have visited a few fincas to monitor occupational safety measures, it is clear that the public health center cannot require plantation owners to follow occupational precautionary measures and provide workers with safety equipment.

Shifts for rubber extraction begin at 11pm and run through 1 pm the next day. In this time they are expected to complete two *tareas* (40 trees per task) of stripping tree bark to guide sap drippings into receptacles that are attached to the tree. Most other workers who cultivate and pick coffee are paid 28 Q (\$4 USD) for a day of work, while a

⁴ Instituto Guatemalteco de Seguro Social, Inscripciones Patronales. <http://www.igssgt.org/patronos/index.html> (accessed May 1, 2012).

few work with livestock and earn more. Women who work in the fields earn 14 Q (\$2 USD) per day – about one fifth of Guatemala’s daily minimum wage of 68 Q (\$9.7 USD).⁵ People throughout Guatemala regularly state that it is impossible to support a family with one minimum wage. Families in this finca, who for the most part have one wage earner, must survive on less than half a minimum wage for families with up to eight children. The finca owner is not concerned with following minimum wage requirements, he has established that he will only pay workers less than half of what is required with differences marked by gender. All other fincas in the region are known to pay their workers more than Don Adolfo, yet still far below minimum wage.



Figure 1: Workers strip the bark and place receptacles to collect tree sap drippings. The *chipa* (tree sap) is later processed into rubber or latex at processing plants. Photo Credit: Jessica Osorio.

⁵ Ministerio de Trabajo y Provisión Social, Acuerdo 520 -2011.

**“Si usted no tiene pasaje otro día está muerto”:
The Question of Access to Health Care**

Arguably, the families that live in La Asunción have a few more choices in access to allopathic medical services than families in other plantations because of the services offered by the non-profit hospitalito in addition to the services of the public health center in town. The hospitalito has a doctor on site Mondays through Fridays who is available for medical consultations for the cost of 10 Q and an auxiliary nurse and a midwife who have been working with this community since the center opened. For years after the opening of the center the religious sisters provided the families with food provisions to ensure that the families had enough to eat, these were replaced with twice-daily meals which earlier this year were stopped due to financial limitations.

The most frequently used health care facility by the families is the public health center (Centro de Atención Médica Permanente) located in the township where consultations are free. Staff there includes six doctors on rotations of 24 to 48 hours, four auxiliary nurses, two licensed nurses, an environmental inspector, and a social worker. None of the staff members are fluent in Kaqchikel, the Mayan language spoken by some families in the municipality, or K'iche, the principal language spoken in the community of Unión La Victoria.

According to the medical director services include: infant and child physical examinations and vaccinations; monthly visits to communities and fincas with a traveling nurse to monitor the development of children under five; coordination of care for tuberculosis, HIV-positive cases, and malnutrition in children under five; they run a program to contain the spread of vectors for malaria, dengue fever, and onchocerciasis (also known as river blindness); and follow adults for common illnesses including diabetes and hypertension.

The center is known to be poorly supplied for daily functions or for emergencies. One staff member at the hospitalito remarks that sometimes when the public health center is without supplies, the public center has borrowed syringes from the hospitalito while they wait to be restocked. The center has an ambulance to drive patients to public hospitals in Tiquisate or Mazatenango (each over an hour away by car), yet midwives complained that the ambulance at the public health center was not always available due to lack of gasoline, a driver, or car malfunctions.

Even though the hospitalito and the public health center are available for primary medical services and public hospitals are available for emergencies or obstetric attention for first-time mothers or due to labor complications, for the mothers and fathers that I interviewed access to these services is of major concern. Doña Mercedes who has lived in La Asunción for over twenty years remembers a traumatic experience three years ago when she miscarried at home. She and her husband are one of the few families in the finca that are covered through IGSS; consequently, she has more options to access health care than other families in the finca. She recalls a recent pregnancy: “That day I suffered because they did not take me to IGSS right away and I had to stay home three more days.” She remembers asking her husband to take her to the hospital, while he replied: “how am I going to take you if there is no *pisto* (money).” She said that one of her sons arranged to take her to the hospital where they learned she had miscarried. For the return ride home she had to pay 250 Q which was collected from contributions from family and friends. She sums up the difficulty of accessing emergency medical care by saying: “If you do not have bus fare the next day you will be dead. Then people just say that the person died, that is all.”⁶ Therefore, one of the greatest obstacles to accessing urgent and emergency care can be 10 Q for round-trip bus fare to the health center in town or paying

⁶ Original in Spanish. “Si usted no tiene pasaje otro día está muerto. Solo dicen que se murió, ya estuvo.”

for a car ride to a public hospital. In La Asunción and nearby communities it is not uncommon that people lose their lives for not having money to pay for bus fare.

Even for people who earn more than finca workers, for example staff members at the hospitalito, accessing necessary and adequate medical treatment and medications is simply unaffordable. One of the staff members explained that her diabetes now required daily glucose monitoring and that she has a portable blood glucose monitor, yet the costs of the test strips made it impossible for her to monitor her diabetes that has already led to many related health complications. During the weeks that I spent there, she had to undergo retina surgery with considerable costs to her family.

While accessing medical care is difficult for the families due to transportation costs, the families and hospitalito staff note that access to dental care is even more difficult as there is no publicly available dental care. Edgar notes that he wishes he could pay for dental coverage for his children, but that is not a possibility. Rather, he says that they only go to the dentist once a tooth hurts.

While families do use the available allopathic health centers and hospitals when necessary, in most fincas and communities families regularly seek the services of health promoters, *comadronas* (midwives), and/or *curanderos* (healers). In most communities in the region these practitioners are respected members of the community who are believed to care about the well-being of others and who are available in the community when their assistance is needed. They are the providers in the communities and are usually the ones first sought for guidance or care – they are the frontline providers. A proud health promoter of a nearby finca explained, “our job is to keep watch over the health of the community.”

In contrast to the costs and distance of the hospitalito and the public health center for families in the fincas of the region, these practitioners are the most flexible in their

ability to consult neighbors inside their homes or through home visits at all hours of the day. These community health workers are the most affordable and flexible in how they accept payment for the care they provide. Comadronas for example charge 300 Q for attending a birth while public and private hospitals charge 1000 to 5000 Q. Even with these seemingly low costs for attending births, the comadronas I interviewed stated that many times mothers and their families did not pay them for their assistance or pay over long periods of time because people simply could not afford to pay them.

At La Asunción the comadrona states that she has assisted in the births of at least twenty people living in the plantation during her twenty-five years of practice and that she regularly assists mothers in nearby communities and fincas. She is also a practicing curandera; she says that families seek care for their children when they have stomach aches, colds, fevers, and diarrheas. She treats these illnesses with plants whose medicinal properties she has learned over the years. The families at this finca seek care at the public health center, the hospitalito, and with the comadrona - curandera that lives in the finca.

The barriers to accessing medical care in fincas and the region were succinctly manifested with Marcos' death. One morning we picked him up and his mother from a gas station in a nearby town, he was visibly underweight and frail as he struggled to climb into the car with the assistance of his mother. It was obvious in the moment that Marcos was afflicted by the complications of advanced stages of AIDS. We rode in silence that morning until a comadrona and I were dropped off in Esquintla, while they continued to the San José Hospice in Guatemala City. Later that day we received a phone call to inform us that Marcos had passed away at 3pm – the day he was to begin his antiretroviral treatment. Marcos worked until the very end because he needed to provide for his family, even though he had unbearable fevers for the previous two weeks and he

only accessed the medical care he needed at the moment of his death. For Marcos, Doña Mercedes' words bear an ominous truth: money cost him his life.

The Private School in Finca La Asunción

Sustaining education at Finca La Asunción is a constant battle given that ten years ago the finca did not have a school and until about three or four years ago the classes were not taught by a teacher, but rather by the finca's administrator. One of the current teachers explained that in those days he only taught from 8 to 10:30am, as he had many other duties. Part of the school is located in a building next to the soccer field for the twenty-seven students ages six to fifteen that attend first through third grade. The finca's owner has not provided the necessary additional space to teach students in other grades, to meet this need the hospitalito has allotted a one-room building to be used by the fifteen students ages nine to sixteen that attend fourth, fifth, and sixth grade. These students are taught by two teachers, one who is paid by the plantation owner and the other by the municipal government, who teach the following subjects: communication, language, mathematics, social sciences, science, English, and Kaqchikel.

Classes are now held Monday through Friday from 8am to noon in two buildings that are limited in their classroom activities by the lack of electricity, but mostly due to the lack textbooks or reading materials for the forty-two students. Students have pencils and notebooks to copy notes from the dry erase boards and for their assignments only when their parents can afford to buy these items. A young mother explained that her younger siblings were at risk of not completing the school year because her parents did not have enough money to pay for notebooks and pencils. She says of many students, "at

mid-year they drop out because they do not have money for a notebook, they do not have enough to buy a pencil.”

The “private” status of fincas is highlighted by the lack of regulation of primary education since providing primary education is considered the responsibility of the finquero, not of the Ministry of Education or the municipal government. Samantha, one of the teachers, explained school supervision in the following manner:

Because this is private area, the government does not really instruct us. They do not consider us for anything. We are instructed by Proyecto Funcafe. They instruct all fincas, it is a project. They only instruct the administrators of each finca. For example, here he is the one who comes to supervise how we are doing with the children, how we keep the corners [of the classroom], how we maintain the classroom, if it is clean, if it is dirty. If the children are well-mannered. How the children behave.⁷

Samantha responds by stating matter-of-factly that this is “private area” and the government is not involved in supervising instruction and that it does not offer any other support to the school. Her statement provides an explanation of how fincas operate, education has been taken out of a public realm where state institutions have responsibilities to ensure children’s education and placed in a private realm where land owners make the decisions. Samantha’s response allows us to see how the ideology has been internalized, she tells us how education is supervised but she does not question the logic where conflict of interests for finca owners compromise children’s education. She has explained that the school is supervised by the finca administrator and Proyecto

⁷ Original in Spanish. "Como este es área privada, a nosotros el gobierno casi no nos manda nada. No nos toman en cuenta en nada. A nosotros quien nos manda en un Proyecto de Funcafe. Manda todas las fincas, es un proyecto. Solo manda a los directores de cada finca. Por ejemplo aquí, el nos manda, el nos viene a supervisar como vamos con los niños, como tenemos los rincones, como tenemos el aula, si está limpia, si esta sucia. Si los niños son educados. Como se comportan los niños.”

Funcafe, a program run by the national association of coffee growers (Anacafe).⁸ The education of the children has been privatized – it is not under the responsibility of institutions seeking collective well-being – but rather dependent on the decisions of individuals who seek personal profits from the parents of the children and potentially from the children’s future labor.

The municipal government and the Ministry of Education do not supervise instruction, establish curriculums, pay for teachers in all fincas nor provide resources for the schools, in practice the education of these children is treated differently than children in other spaces. The municipal government is currently paying one of the teachers’ salaries, however according to the mayor they do it to support people at the fincas, not out of responsibility. As a result of this arrangement the school has two buildings and two teachers, but no other resources which impact the education offered to the children. This has repercussions on the instruction offered to the children and future choices in education and employment.

A statement from a non-profit organization worker from the principal town further explains the ideology. On her opinion of educational quality in fincas, Patricia explained:

You see, fincas are practically private. The conception is that the owner is the one who has to cover the costs of education when it comes to teachers, but ever since there was a crisis in coffee [prices], this was a way for fincas to evade responsibilities. They no longer paid for education. What people in fincas started to do was to pay for the teacher themselves, each parent gave 40, 30, or 20 [quetzales] per child. That way the children could study. They sought help from

⁸The state mission of Proyecto Funcafe is: “Work to improve the level of human development in rural populations, by increasing the quality and access to social services, principally in the areas of health, education, food sovereignty, and nutrition to have more competitive economic activity.” See Anacafe.org

the municipal government, but the municipality's point is that those are private places, for that reason they do not get involved there.⁹

Patricia's explanation is telling of how she understands the organization of fincas and their relation to workers and families. She began by explaining that fincas are "practically private," to explain that these function differently than other spaces that could by contrast be understood to be public, necessarily spaces outside of fincas. In this region, it is understood that land owners also have discretion over the social aspects of the lives of the families, privatizing basic human needs in a similar manner as the land. This means that when an owner wants to close a school, families have few options to ensure that educational instruction is offered to their children. In the case she has offered as an example, families organized themselves to pay for the teacher and when they sought the help of the municipal government their response further justified the logic that finca owners have discretion to provide education and meet other social needs, while the local government does not assume responsibility. This means that families have had to organize themselves to pay for a teacher with no societal support from the government or people living outside of the finca.

Patricia repeated the point that the town mayor made in my presence, the municipio is not supposed to get involved in fincas because those are private spaces. Patricia and the mayor have explained the ideology and also reinforced the construction of fincas as places of exception within Guatemala, where social expectations for the provision of social services do not apply. Patricia's response reveals how the ideology

⁹ Original in Spanish: "Fíjese que las fincas prácticamente son privadas, y el concepto es que el dueño es el que tiene que cubrir los gastos de educación en relación a maestros, pero que desde que hubo una crisis en el café, para los fincas fue un zafe. Ellos ya no le pagaron el estudio. Lo que empezaron hacer fue ellos mismos pagar al maestro, cada padre daba 40, 30, 20 por niño. A manera de que los niños estudiaran. Empezaron a ver que la municipalidad apoyara, pero el punto de la municipalidad es que esos son lugares privados por lo tanto ellos no se meten allí."

has been normalized by local actors who often offer the private property explanation without questioning or challenging its logic and implications.

One of the few persons that challenged finca ideology in respect to education was the other teacher in La Asunción. Marta complained of the resources available and the quality of education:

They [the administrator and the owner] do not provide absolutely anything. They do too much by paying for one of our salaries is what they say, yet they do not even provide a minimum salary for us. For them what is most important is who produces and because children do not produce money for them, they just meet their obligation by providing education how it comes. It is how they say, how it comes. If it comes in good quality, well good. If it comes in bad quality, well too bad.¹⁰

Marta challenges the ideology by stating bluntly that quality education is jeopardized because of the conflict of interest for finca owners who decide on the instruction of the children of their employees. She highlights that owners prioritize and seek to ensure their profits over the education of children who are not producing coffee or extracting rubber. It is also clear that providing quality education could limit his future profits if these children grew up to demand higher wages or left to seek employment elsewhere. Marta highlights the cycle that keeps families dependent on the finca as a consequence of finca ideology.

While teachers have highlighted the contradictions and limitations of providing education in a social space limited by finca ideology, they note that the students take pride in trying to make their school look better. The children have started and maintain a

¹⁰ Original in Spanish. “Esos no dan absolutamente nada. Mucho están haciendo por cubrir un sueldo, que dicen ellos, pero ni el sueldo mínimo llegan cubrirnos de la finca. Lo que ellos más le vale es el que produce y como los niños no producen dinero, ellos sólo están cumpliendo con dar educación como viene. Como dicen, a como viene. Si viene bien, pues bien. Si viene mal, pues mal.”

vegetable garden where they grow corn and bell peppers. In 2010 the students with the help of the teacher managed to save enough from selling vegetables to go on an excursion to San Lucas Tolimán where they played in Lake Atitlán. One of the teachers says, “they were so happy at the edge of the lake,” as this had been the first time many of them had left the plantation. She says they are hoping to replicate this success for a second trip to San Lucas or visit the beaches of the Pacific Coast. The teachers notes that the children are the ones who decorated the outside of school building located within the space of the hospitalito with hand painted images of Winnie the Pooh, the Guatemalan flag, and a quetzal (the national bird) and planted flowers at its entrance. In contrast, the school building located on finca property has not been decorated by the children. This shows that the children value their school and what it represents in their lives, at least in one of the buildings they have been allowed to express themselves creatively which is otherwise limited by the conditions of the finca.

While finishing six grade is a challenge for most of the children due to the families’ financial limitations to buy basic supplies, the likelihood that children will continue past six grade decreases further. After six grade parents must pay for daily bus transportation to nearby towns so that they can attend public secondary schools and for required texts, access to computers and the Internet, expenses that are beyond the financial means of most of the families. Given that most families’ daily income is 28 Q, paying 10 Q daily to send each child to the regional public schools is unaffordable.

A young mother remembers how a few years ago she was forced to drop out of the first year of secondary school because she did not have financial support. She is glad that at least a few children from the finca now receive financial aid from the hospitalito to cover part of the costs of transportation, making it possible for some to continue attending school. She also notes that several teenagers who have wanted to continue their

education did not receive this financial support, causing her to question why some have received the help and not others.

What we have seen in this section are explanations of finca ideology and its consequences in the educational opportunities of children. The school in La Asunción would not be accepted as a public school in other spaces in the country because of the lack of resources beyond the teacher and the building itself, yet because it is located on the private property of a finca it is allowed to continue functioning in subpar conditions. The ideology has allowed for the owner to operate the school as he chooses, while few people challenge the logic that has permitted this in the first place or seek ways to ensure the school meets expected standards for an elementary school.

Searching for Food and the Promise of the “Super Tortilla”

Look, for example, the man that works two complete weeks earns three hundred plus [quetzales]. If they are a lot they have to buy more than one hundred kilograms of corn and there goes all of the money. With what money do you buy beans? With what do you buy sugar? With what do you buy tomatoes?¹¹

-Doña Martina

While access to medical care is a challenge for the families, their struggle to maintain their health through adequate nutrition is even more fundamental – their constant preoccupation is on feeding their children. Their daily struggle is on trying to place tortillas and beans on their tables with their earnings – earnings that make it difficult to buy sufficient corn for the entire family once their corn reserves are

¹¹Original in Spanish. "Mire pues, por ejemplo el hombre que trabaja su quincena cabal saca sus trescientos y pico. Y si son bastantes tienen que comprar más de un quintal de maíz, allí se fue todo el dinero. ¿Y con que se compra el frijol, con que se compra la azúcar? ¿Con que se compra el tomate?"

exhausted. For the families of La Asunción eating tortillas with beans is not a given, and eating three meals a day is a luxury. A mother explained that what her husband earns on the finca is so little that towards the end of pay periods “we have to see how we survive, sometimes just eating tortillas and *yerbitas* (leafy vegetables)”. The fact that families on the finca do not earn enough money to provide sufficient food for their families was most evident in a statement made by a thirteen-year-old boy. While I played hide-and-seek with the children one night, staff members called me to join them for dinner. As I stood at the entrance of the kitchen I asked the teenager if he was going to go home for dinner, he replied matter-a-factly, “we do not eat dinner.” That moment was a striking contrast to the regular meals that I shared with the hospitalito’s staff that while not extravagant, generally consisted of beans, tortillas, *queso fresco* from a popular regional cheese maker, and on occasion fried plantains. In that moment it was frustrating to think that this boy and his family were not going to eat that night while the center’s staff and I were. That moment did, however, reinforce the value and importance of the meals that they did provide on a daily basis to the children as they are not necessarily going to have other meals.

Doña Martina describes her suffering at watching her six-year-old grandson cry for food, “he cried, cried for his food, I told him to instead go [to el hospitalito to eat].” She says that although she is older and that it is difficult to contribute chopped wood to the hospitalito as required in exchange for meals for the children, she washes dishes and cleans at the center instead. She says that although they cannot afford beans many times, “we at least drink coffee with our tortillas, that is all. What can we do?”

While families are forced to eat little more than tortillas on a regular basis and eating three meals a day is not an option, politicians asked to address concerns over the high levels of child malnutrition propose bandages to cover up child hunger, not solutions

to its causes. During the months that I conducted fieldwork, presidential candidates were actively campaigning prior to the September elections. During interviews and debates presidential candidate Harold Caballeros assured Guatemalans that he would address the country's food insecurity by focusing on infant malnutrition by facilitating access to a "super tortilla" fortified with soy additives, amino acids, vitamins and minerals that "have been proven to bring a child out of malnutrition in two years."¹²

This recently developed "super tortilla" is similar to fortified foods already available in Guatemala (e.g. *Incaparina* and *Vitacereal*). In La Asunción, a young mother explained that for children with malnutrition the health center provided "chocolates with pure vitamins." While consuming these items may provide essential nutrients to the child, what is clear from my observations and interviews is that what families need is regular access to sufficient food for the entire family, not just fortified foods that may be more costly and difficult to access.

For families in La Asunción who at times eat nothing more than tortillas and do not have dinner on a regular basis, securing a stable food supply is of greatest concern. They live in a territory with fertile soil used by the landowner for financial benefit without any guarantee that they can feed their families. UNICEF information on Guatemala's child malnutrition reiterates that "a diet based almost exclusively on corn tortillas cause permanent health consequences in boys and girls" (translation mine, UNICEF 2009).

¹² This statement was made during a televised interview with Luis Velásquez on "Inversion y Desarrollo," uploaded onto YouTube 29 August 2011.

Legal Codes Reinforce Finca Ideology

When we examine the legal responsibilities of owners to the workers and families that live on fincas, the logic that social needs have been privatized is reinforced by vague and lax laws that give much discretion to land owners and that are ultimately not enforced. In this section I will briefly examine codes as they pertain to finquero responsibilities to workers to offer a perspective on how laws benefit land owners and neglect the legal rights of workers and their families. Legal codes are not in conflict with finca ideology but rather reinforce its tenets.

In the Labor Code there are a few legal obligations that an owner has to a *campesino*, these include: 1) concede paid leave or rest for certain occasions; 2) access to sufficient wood for their domestic use; 3) access to water for personal and animal consumption; 4) access to pasture for animals he may have; and 4) access to fruits harvested within the finca that were not grown for commercial purposes.¹³ With regards to pay and labor benefits, finca workers are entitled to a minimum wage with up to thirty percent subtracted for analogous articles provided (e.g. housing and access to a plot of land), registration for IGSS benefits, and minimum severance pay depending on worker wages and years worked.¹⁴ Even though these requirements are minimal and open to interpretation, the Ministry of Labor makes little effort to enforce them and the finca owner makes no attempt to apply it because he has been tacitly allowed to act within his discretion.

Since the finca is also a temporary and/or permanent place of living for families, the Labor Code makes mention of expected social guarantees for the families without establishing who is responsible for ensuring and protecting social rights. The code states

¹³Labor Code, Decree 14-41, Article 61, “obligaciones de los patronos.”

¹⁴Código de Trabajo, Decreto 14-41, Artículo 82, 90.

that depending on the uses and customs of the region bosses can choose to offer more than what is required by law and what they are “accustomed to offer” in the areas of medical services, medicine, stipends, teachers, burial costs, and maternity costs.¹⁵ As would be expected, the Constitution declares minimum standards for certain basic human and social needs for every citizen, including the right to state provided education through the equivalent of 9th grade and that the state has the obligation to watch over and provide access to medical care and facilitate access to sufficient food for minimum requirements in health. Laws do not establish who is responsible for ensuring and fulfilling these rights for families in fincas, which according to the above is the state, nor practical ways to ensure access for families in fincas. In sum, land owners have some obligations to workers, but can choose to provide additional services or benefits if he is “accustomed to it.”

I have included this brief overview of codes as they pertain to resident finca families to highlight that few codes exist, that these are vague and that they have left the decisions over the human and social needs of workers to the discretion of finqueros. In practice the codes are not enforced and allow us to see how the laws are necessarily vague to benefit finca owners. The operation of fincas in the region, finca ideology, and codes that are vague and are not enforced have normalized the situation in which the survival and subsistence of families is left to the decisions of land holders. The multiple facets that support the operation of fincas as unregulated social spaces have made it so that families are the targets of exploitative practices so that finqueros can guarantee profits and maintain their power and influence. The finca has conditioned the social suffering of families, while to people on the “outside” their suffering does not cause

¹⁵ Article 144 (b) of Código de Trabajo, Decreto 14-41.

alarm because their situation is expected and justified within the private property of fincas.

Daring to Speak the Truth: Confronting the Pressures of Finca La Asunción

A few from the Red Cross came by asking, how do you live here? They were asking those kinds of questions. Well the following day people starting saying that the owner was trying to find out what they were doing. But I say, why is he afraid? He shouldn't be afraid. One speaks the truth.

-Doña Mercedes¹⁶

As we have seen in the previous chapter the discourse on the privacy of fincas explains how these are administered and organized, but it also unintentionally reinforces the ideology that plantations are places of exception – spaces that are run independently from society and where the authority is the owner. The discourse on fincas employed by local actors explains and reinforces an ideology that leaves the people that live there effectively dependent on the decisions of the owner, while their individual agency is conditioned by the logic associated with the space. Finca logic has structured social suffering for the families who must respond to perpetual pressures to their well-being along with intermittent challenges to the few social resources they do have. With this framing, I ask the following questions: How do people respond to situations that further threaten their ability to provide the basic necessities for their families? To what extent are actions of social solidarity possible within the finca?

What some individual responses will highlight are the different ways they resist the pressures and constraints imposed by the owner. Some responses also reveal contradictions between the discourse that supposes that plantations are independent social spaces and the influence of social spaces outside of fincas, particularly the physical

¹⁶ Original in Spanish: “Aquí vinieron unos de la cruz roja preguntando, ¿cómo viven aquí? Todo eso vinieron preguntaron. El otro día andaban contando que el patrón está averiguando que es lo que estaban haciendo ellos. Pero lo que digo yo, ¿porque tiene miedo? El no tenía que tener miedo. Uno habla la verdad.”

violence of urban centers. Despite the rhetoric of private space and its function as such, for the families that live there the space is not unaffected by what occurs elsewhere.

Contesting the Boundaries of Social Suffering

The educational instruction that is available on the finca is under regular contention by the owner, the families, and the municipality. While the families and the town mayor believe the finca owner is responsible for providing primary education to the children because they work for him and live on his private property, the owner contests this conception by trying to eliminate the two teaching positions or indirectly threatening to do so.

The latest struggle occurred in late 2010 and early 2011 when the finca's administrator sent notice to the non-profit organization that at the time paid for half the salary of one of the teachers stating that their financial support was no longer needed. This did not mean, however, that the owner would be paying both teachers, but rather that finca administration felt that having trained teachers on the finca was no longer necessary. It was then rumored that this position would be filled by the daughter of the bookkeeper who is not a teacher by training. The mothers worried that the bookkeeper was trying to create a paid position for his daughter's benefit at the expense of the quality of education for the children, similar to when the administrator acted as the teacher in the past.

Amidst the confusion of what would happen, mothers rallied to demand that the teacher be reinstated, thereby directly meeting the challenge of the administrator and the finca owner to further limit education. One mother of several children at the school recalls, "we women had to go, none of the men went, only we women went with the boss

(finquero's wife) and we told her we wanted the same teacher." Ultimately the mothers worked out an agreement in which the owner would pay for the teacher's salary and mothers would collect funds from amongst themselves to help cover her daily transportation costs from town. The teacher had made clear that the low salary offered was cost-prohibiting due to daily transportation costs.

Currently one of the teachers is paid by the municipality and the other by the owner, although the one paid by the owner earns less than is expected for teachers. This mother also states that the owner has undermined his obligation to pay the teacher by paying her after payday on several occasions, hoping that she will simply stop coming to teach. She says that they have remained alert to ensure that their children have a teacher the coming school year. To prevent a similar situation they have requested that the teacher sign a document stating that she will continue teaching so that way the owner knows he has the responsibility to pay her.

Considering that the ideology has left the social needs of the families to his discretion, the owner regularly challenges the necessity to have teachers and his responsibility to pay their salaries. The fact that mothers organized themselves to demand that the teacher be reinstated highlights the power of the owner to act according to his discretion in regards to the education of children; at no point did the Ministry of Education nor the municipality require the owner to maintain the teacher. With the exception of the financial support provided by the municipality, the government stands out by its lack of oversight to ensure that the children in La Asunción have access to education.

This recent challenge and counter-challenge over maintaining the teacher is similar to the situation that has happened with basic first aid on most fincas. According to a health promoter, maintaining *botiquines* (first aid posts) was a common feature of

fincas in decades past to facilitate affordable or free access to essential medicines for resident and migrant workers. After the fall of coffee prices in the 1980s finca owners have sought ways to eliminate the resources available to workers and their families, presumably to decrease their expenses. Today only two fincas in the municipio retain a botiquín, which has added to the financial burdens of families.

Back and forth contestation of what the owner can get away is also seen in his attempts to undercut severance payments as required by law and less than what seems fair to workers and their spouses. A worker who has picked coffee on La Asunción for over twenty years wished to leave after his work time had been reduced, yet he and Doña Mercedes refused to leave with a severance payment of 9,000 Q. She stated that the owner had given 12,000 Q to a worker who had worked for similar number of years; consequently, they refused to leave for less. Doña Mercedes was vehement in her statement because it is the way they resist what they view as unfair and unequal treatment by the owner, they will not allow him get away with offering low severance pay that then allows him to eliminate all of his responsibilities to a longtime worker. The fact that the severance pay offered to Doña Mercedes' husband is below what is minimally required by law was not, however, a reason she voiced for refusing to accept the severance pay in an act of resistance.¹⁷ The offer made by the owner and their reasons for refusing the offer reinforces the logic that fincas function independently from laws and labor codes, the owner decides to ignore the codes and the workers to don't expect them to be followed. The interaction between this family and Don Adolfo highlights how negotiations in the finca are treated as private transactions, the owner offers as little as he can and the

¹⁷ Labor Code, Decree 14-41, Article 82: "a boss or corporation shall compensate a worker with the average one month salary for the six months prior to termination of employment, for each year of employment."

families try to get more in compensation without any expectation that societal norms apply in this space or that the Ministry of Labor will enforce labor codes.

The Impossible Choice

The couple's refusal to leave the finca for less severance pay than they feel is fair has been their way to resist what they perceive to be the owner's tendency to treat workers differently. While this family has considered the possibility of leaving the finca because of limited work hours, there are several reasons why leaving the finca was not a suitable option for them. After demonstrating her frustration at the severance pay offer, Doña Mercedes expressed her concerns for the well-being of her children. She said that she has refused to leave the finca because "I thought about the children, over in the town a lot of people only get together to form a gang. Going there is to go lose your children in the town. I told him, if we find another finca we can go, but the truth is that I am not going [there]."¹⁸ As she considered the possibility of leaving La Asunción, her fears of gangs and their possible influence over her children surfaced. Her fears are similar to generalized societal fears of violence throughout the country that tend to blame gangs for all violent acts. After considering what living in an urban center could mean in terms of gangs and the violence associated with gangs, Doña Mercedes decided that it was best to keep her family at the plantation. While living in La Asunción has structured their social suffering, ironically, for the families who live there it offers one comfort: it is a refuge from the brutal, physical violence so feared in urban centers. Those fears are so great and violence of all kinds frequent enough that this mother, given this impossible option, has

¹⁸ Original in Spanish. "Yo lo que pensé por los patojos, allí se juntan muchos que hacen mara. Allí es solo para ir a perder los niños en el pueblo. Si dices que nos vamos buscá otra finca, pero de verdad [allí] no me voy."

chosen to keep her family in the finca. This decision provides an incisive perspective on contemporary Guatemala, physical violence of all kinds is so rampant in urban centers that families feel safer within the confines of the finca that is causing them daily suffering. The finca has so far shielded them from the gang violence that is commonly known to affect nearby towns, it may be that the ideology has kept gangs out of fincas. Residents did tell me that Don Adolfo has warned that he did not want gang members living on the finca and that he would expel any person who joined a gang. This is not to say that physical violence of other forms is not present in the finca, but that the finca did provide them protection from the violence that is so feared in urban centers.

While for one family the fear of gangs and violence was a central factor in their decision to stay, a young mother explained that the cost of living in towns is another factor. On this consideration she explained:

We have lived here and we haven't left because there is nowhere to go. Because to pay rent you have to earn well. Earning 300 Q and paying for rent, all you make will be for rent. There are some that charge 400 to 600 quetzales for rent, then you are not going to eat all month long. It is hard. That is why we are all here. If people go to another place it will be worse because you have to pay for rent and will not have enough to eat.¹⁹

This twenty-year old weighs the fact that paying rent is a major cost of life outside of fincas that would further limit their ability to meet their most basic needs. For her, living within the finca offers the solace that they will eat something because they do not have to spend money on rent. While buying food is a major concern for the families because of their minimal wages, growing maize in the plot each family is allotted assures them that

¹⁹ Original in Spanish. "Aquí hemos vivido y no los hemos salido porque no hay donde ir también. Porque ya pagando alquiler se tiene que ganar bien. Porque si ganan 300Q y pagando alquiler, solo para el alquiler. Hay algunos que cobran 400 – 600 el alquiler, no va comer todo el mes. Es duro. Por eso están aquí porque no se gana. Si van a otra lado más peor porque más que un alquiler van a pagar y no van a tener para comer también."

they will at least eat tortillas until their reserves are depleted. By leaving they cannot even be sure they will eat tortillas. The suffering of families in La Asunción has been conditioned by the finca, but social suffering is experienced by people throughout the country as structural conditions prevent large sectors of society the ability to meet their needs.

Based on the responses of head of households who have chosen to remain in the finca despite the continual affronts to their well-being, it is evident that Guatemala does not have suitable options for families who have lived most or all of their lives on fincas. The young women said it bluntly, they have *nowhere to go*. The social suffering of Doña Mercedes' family and the young couple has been conditioned by the choices of the owner, historical policies that established finca structure and ideology, and contemporary government force only in support of private property, yet outside of the finca these families can see no better future for themselves.

On Social Solidarity

Historian Greg Grandin analyzes political participation in Panzós prior to the massacre of 1978 to show that the political movements that had defined preceding decades empowered “insurgent individuality” in collective struggles to challenge a social system characterized by social inequities, in particular land tenure disparities. People from rural communities and fincas, along with supporters from urban centers of all socio-economic backgrounds rooted their actions on social solidarity to work towards a vision of democracy and equality that was repressed by brutal military force. The terror of the Panzós massacre and the genocide severed alliances and the relationship between the self

and society and altered visions of democracy, consequently limiting the potential for future collective actions for social transformation.

The responses of resident families in La Asunción to additional pressures to their survival require an examination of the implications of this divorce between self and solidarity, given in particular that people in fincas actively participated in social movements for agrarian reform. Is social solidarity possible today within the confines of the finca that alienates resident families from society? Could collective actions from residents transform the structure of fincas for the benefits of workers and their families?

The ideology of the finca has structured social suffering and conditions the responses of families to daily pressures and sporadic challenges to the few resources they have. As we have seen with mothers' demands to reinstate the trained teacher, some collective action is possible. Mothers have refused to allow further compromise of the educational instruction offered to their children. But based on my observations and conversations with residents and health workers, collective actions of any kind are not common. Finca ideology has been internalized, which means that resident families and locals of the region largely accept the finca as a space of exception and where the authority is the finquero. As seen with a response quoted earlier, families living on the finca cannot form support groups because it is a private area. The possibility of collective actions has largely been eliminated. Additionally, when each finca is treated as an independent social space, the possibility of collective actions with people living outside, even in neighboring communities, has also been averted.

While the possibility of collective action for social transformation in this space has been hindered by the common sense logic of the finca, it has not extinguished individual will to resist in whatever way possible. For Doña Mercedes this means speaking the truth about life in La Asunción and challenging an unfair severance offer by

staying. For Edgar it means voicing his concerns on the hazards of extracting rubber without protective equipment. For Marta, the teacher fired and then re-hired, it means speaking against the owner that “provide[s] absolutely nothing” for the school. While the Agrarian Reform, social movements, and the Armed Conflict are testament to an understanding of collective actions rooted in social solidarity, the legacy of the Civil War for families in La Asunción can be seen with a recementing of a finca ideology that was institutionalized by state policies and implemented by force and coercion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Reimagining the Finca: Empowering Collective Action to Redress Social Suffering

In the long-run I do not see why fincas are excluded, it is a municipio, right? Although it has a boss who is a millionaire, it is his responsibility to give his workers an education, but in fact it is not to his benefit to have educated people here. If they [finca owners] provide education, they are going to lose their workers.²⁰

-Midwife Doña Maria

During my first day at the hospitalito I met Elena who held onto her mother dearly. The one-and-a-half-year old had an expression-less face as she stared towards the floor. The staff explained that she had been brought by the staff of Mi Familia Progres²¹ to begin nutritional rehabilitation for acute malnutrition. She weighed only nine pounds, the staff said, as I asked myself how that could be possible. That day she was wearing a pink dress that was too big for her frail body and her tiny arms. She was visibly losing most of her hair and the patch of hair that remained was a shade of orange; her body had stopped producing hair pigments. She was not as alert as is expected for a child her age; she did not smile, she did not laugh, she did not walk, she did not ask for food, and she did not cry.

Elena's suffering is similar to that of too many children in Guatemala living on and off fincas in a country that exports food, yet fails to feed its own. Elena, who is from

²⁰ Original in Spanish. "A la larga yo no veo porque la exclusión de las fincas porque es un municipio, verdad? Que aunque tenga un patrón, que es millonario, es su responsabilidad darle a sus trabajadores educación, pero como de hecho a ellos no les conviene que la gente se eduque. Si ellos le dan educación a la gente, van a perder sus trabajadores."

²¹ A conditional cash transfer program in existence during the presidency of Alvaro Colom (2008 – 2012) that offered money transfers to qualifying families with the condition that children attended school and were followed regularly by personnel at public health centers. The program was stopped when Otto Perez Molina entered the presidency in January 2012 and the future of conditional cash transfer programs remained uncertain as of July 2012.

a rural town a few hours by bus from the hospitalito, exemplifies the reality that social suffering is manifested through physical and health consequences for families throughout the country who live in varying circumstances of marginalization. The day I met Elena I asked myself many questions on how there could be such an injustice in the world. What had gone so wrong in her short life to cause her suffering? And why is her bodily-physical struggle to survive so common in the country? Elena is the reason I stayed for field research in the hospitalito and the finca. Her experience and the experience of families surviving within a finca reveals profoundly all that is wrong with land tenure in Guatemala - the livelihood of families has been left up to landowners to determine at will. As a result hunger is part of every day.

By examining the commonplace explanation of fincas as private property we can see how finca ideology has been internalized by local actors, accepting its tenets as the way that they have to be based on land ownership. The social construction of fincas as places where land owners have direct authority over multiple aspects that impact the lives of workers and their families is accepted as a result of expansive notions of property rights that in fact have little to do with the land itself. This has meant that perceived outside parties have limited ability to intervene, regulate, or monitor living, working and social conditions on fincas, this allows workers and families to be treated as distinct and different from other Guatemalans. A speaker at the 2011 ASECSA conference stated that “indigenous peoples and poor ladinos are not citizens of this country.” This statement is especially apt for the families that live on fincas whose rights of citizenship were not even a topic of discussion because private property rights prevail over any other right. By

consistently justifying the model in which finqueros act at their discretion, the rights and expected social guarantees of resident families are negated.

What I have found through research in the region is that finca ideology has not only structured the suffering of families, but also privatized their social suffering. This means that for the most part families must act as individuals to survive the pressures of the finca, limiting the potential to meet their family's needs and address the conditions that perpetuate the precarious conditions of their lives. Privatization of their struggles on the finca has made their responses mostly individual, with limited cooperation between neighbors to address their shared plight and precluding collective action with people living outside of fincas. The ideology has made it so that the operation of fincas as independent social spaces that benefit the owner remains intact. I conclude this thesis by arguing that it is precisely finca ideology that needs to be delegitimized so families living in fincas and other sectors of society are empowered to take actions as individuals and as part of groups to redress the conditions that structure the misery that has come to be expected in fincas.

As I emphasize the need to invalidate finca ideology I look for the things that are challenging its social construction and provide the families hope for the future. On my last day at La Asunción children came to play with me and then as a caravan they followed me from house to house as I said my good-byes to the families I had shared with (more adequately expressed in Spanish as *convivir*) in different ways. As I visited Doña Marta she expressed enthusiasm of what the future could hold for her family. A non-profit organization had given her a few chicks and a piglet so that she could start a

small-business that would allow her to earn money. She was no longer buying eggs, but instead she was paying herself for the eggs that her chickens laid to take deliberate steps to save money for her children's education. She was fattening-up China, her pig, to sell her for a profit and then expand her business with more pigs. Life for them is hard, her son conceded they do not eat dinner regularly, but she expressed much hope that life could get better for them because of this opportunity. Given that other women also keep chickens, pigs, and ducks as small-businesses or as a source of emergency cash, yet they do not express the same hope for what the animals can bring has made Doña Marta's enthusiasm especially poignant. Something about owning those animals allows her to hope that life can be different for her family and that her children can continue their education past sixth grade. She seemed to be determined to make it a reality for her children.

As I search for alternatives to an ideology that treats the decisions that affect human needs as a property right, I take a cue from her experience. Those farm animals have allowed a Doña Marta a small level of independency that she did not have before because now she has a way to earn money that is not tied to the finca. This means that in a small way her family's survival is no longer completely dependent on the finca and that with the cash earned she may ensure that her children access education beyond what is offered in the finca. Those animals allow her to believe that life for them is not limited to what is available at the finca, she has been empowered to take action to increase the opportunities for her children. Providing for the education of her children is no longer

constrained by the finca ideology that would leave them dependent on whatever the owner decides he will provide for education.

Despite Doña Marta's determination to construct a different future for her children, it is clear by the acts of resistance documented in the previous chapter and the stated fears and worries of living outside of the finca that alternatives to the finca are limited. The contrast between the choices families have in fincas and those outside was starkest when I visited a nearby former finca that was reorganized as an agrarian community. The land of that finca was divided among over one hundred families, they formed a community organization to help now independent farmers access markets for coffee and other crops, and they have agreements with non-profit organizations to build homes that families could buy. So far they had built approximately fifteen homes and a six classroom school. When I visited the community a midwife pointed out the new school as a contrast between life in fincas and other communities, "see how life is better outside of fincas" she said. As I walked the community and met with families it was apparent that life for them is also difficult and feeding the family remains the principal concern, but the families had more possibilities to search for ways to meet their needs because they are not constrained by finca ideology. Most notably they were able to organize to find ways to sell the crops of community farmers, build new homes, and build a school that was in sharp contrast to the school buildings of the fincas of the region. They have been acting in solidarity with each other and that has made a difference in their lives.

In La Asunción we see how finca ideology has limited collective action to defending the few resources that are available to the families, as in the case of the mothers' demands to reinstate the teacher, and individual action to meet the needs of family members or individual acts of resistance. The survival strategies of the families in La Asunción have not translated into gains for the entire community, as each acts to meet the needs of his or her family. The individualization of struggles is a result of finca ideology and it is this individualization that needs to be transformed so that through collective actions they can transform the conditions that oppress families living in fincas. The agrarian community has shown that community organization leads to gains for greater number of families.

What is required for the families living in fincas is an opening up of opportunities and the possibility to make the decisions that impact their lives without the limitations imposed by finca owners and finca ideology. This will require support from many sectors of society to meet basic social guarantees and the opening of opportunities to make a living that is not based solely in fincas. The promise of the Agrarian Reform was that landless campesinos would own a piece of land as a way to fulfill their basic necessities on the fruits of the land they would work. Today, increasing access to land for campesinos may be one way to create these possibilities as land tenure in Guatemala is one of the most unequal in the hemisphere, but those possibilities can also come in different forms. Small-business ventures for women, education for children, and community organization offer some families hope in this region. Expanding the possibilities for the families can only come by challenging finca ideology and its

consequences in privatizing social suffering. To start, their social suffering requires collective action in all levels of society that in the process dislodges the notion that their human needs are part of private transactions.

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