



Mayan Ponzi: A Contagion of Hope, A Made-off With Your Money

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Abstract:

In the fall of 2007 a Ponzi scheme promising “*medio millon*” or half a million quetzals collapsed in the Zacualpa, Quiché area of the central highlands of Guatemala. Zacualpa is one of the four case studies supporting the United Nations argument that Guatemala’s civil war was genocidal. The people who promoted the scheme were all Maya and only indigenous people were allowed to participate. When it collapsed thousands of people, already living intensive precarity, were left homeless, landless, and penniless, but the hope of making money without suffering had been contagious. This essay explores post-collapse meaning-making as locals (and anthropologist) try to parse how people could have been so “duped” that someone “made-off” with their money (like Bernard Madoff’s dupes in the US). It seeks to identify the channels through which contagious elements run and ponders the more systemic illnesses for which Ponzis may be only a symptom.

"We're still working our way through the aftershocks of the orgy of irresponsibility and greed

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that brought America to this nadir. In his recent letter to shareholders, a chastened Warren Buffet likened our financial institution's recklessness to venereal disease. Even the innocent were infected because 'it's not just whom *you* slept with' but also 'whom *they*'—unnamed huge financial institutions—'are sleeping with.'" – Frank Rich

The Delirio

"My people! My people! How could they have done this??!" Natalia was suddenly close to tears. We were at her kitchen table discussing the strange case of "*El Millonario*" (The Millionaire), and laughing at the total preposterousness of it all. "It's like a *telenovela*," I said. She agreed, giggling, "the story is impossible!" But moments later she was shaking and grief stricken. "If you were me what would you do? What can we do? People want to believe. They think you can get rich without struggle, without sacrifice." Natalia lives in Joyabaj, a small town in southern Quiché, Guatemala, which is a majority indigenous area. She identifies proudly as a Mayan activist and trained as an *aj q'ij* or traditional healer. She is very involved in a range of cultural and political projects including mayoral campaigns, indigenous women's rights, and preparations for the yearly festival. The civil war did enormous damage in the area, especially between 1979 and 1984, leading the UN to use the neighboring town of Zacualpa as one of the four case studies of genocide in its truth commission report (CEH 1999). Natalia was in exile for the later part of the war, collaborating with one of the armed resistance groups, and returned to open a small business with her husband in the late 1990s.

El Millonario (no one ever used his name, few seemed to know it) had pulled off a mind-boggling *estafa*, a swindle that had spread across a wide swath of the region, and devastated the economies of a number of towns. He promised *medio millón* or half a million *quetzals* (Guatemalan currency) to anyone who put in a (at first) small down payment. A local indigenous man from a hamlet of Zacualpa, he had spent time in Mexico—perhaps in a war-related exile—and many people remarked that he really couldn't speak Spanish very well. At first, people say, he claimed it was a development project. He had papers, pamphlets and embossed cards with his name and the NGO, it all looked legit. He claimed the international funders wanted to help the neediest people, the victims of the war. Only indigenous people were invited to join as the others, non-indigenous *ladinos*, already had plenty. Don Neto, an indigenous man and now mayor of Zacualpa, said he was asked in maybe 1997 or 98, when he was working in a different development project, if he would help get people together. "It was a project to *regalar* money, to give it away. The NGO was called ANECOF, *Asociación Para las Necesidades Con un Solo Corazon y Fé* (One Heart and Faith Association for Needs), and they wanted to give the money directly to the people. If it passed through the president, governor, or mayor it would just be stolen." He claims he was too busy to get involved (although many think he was). As time went on the initial down payment of Q200 or Q300 began to grow a bit as the funders—apparently convinced by moral hazard arguments—seemed to need more proof that the beneficiaries were serious, that they were not just waiting for a hand-out but willing to do their

part.

Then, some say, the story changed. The funders were from the Middle East, awash in oil money and wanting to help victims of American imperialism. Some even said it was bin Laden himself who was trying to give them the money, but George Bush wouldn't let the money get to Guatemala—even imposing a sea blockade to keep cash-filled ships from landing. A bit more money for taxes, lawyers' fees, travel, and lobbying expenses would be necessary to circumvent these obstacles. They also needed a place to store the money, with bodyguards and arms to keep it safe. Inscription rose to some Q1500 (about \$200) but you could only join once, so people were signing up their spouses, children, even unborn babies and the deceased, hoping for half a million each. Some ended up “investing” up to Q300,000 (\$40,000).² By 2002, or 2003, said Don Neto, it was a “*delirio*” (delirium, delusion). “People were drowning in their hopes for salvation, people put all their money in, every little bit to contribute. *Se contagiaron*” (they were contagioned).

“People were pressuring me, pressuring me to join,” said a man who earns his living transporting people and livestock in a beat-up old truck. “They said, ‘What’s wrong with you? We’re going to have new cars, new trucks, so many animals we’ll have to buy land to pasture them all, and you’ll be left with your stupid old truck. You’ll be sorry then!’” He held out and now has a new vehicle, bought with the proceeds from ferrying believers up the *Cerro Kumatz*, or Snake Mountain, where *El Millonario* began to hold nighttime ceremonies. That’s because at some point the story changed again. It was no longer an earthly donor but the *Ajau* itself, the world spirit, who would provide the half a million. The *Ajau* required an undivided heart and unquestioning faith evinced in ritual actions like crawling over gravel (people spoke of 17 hours of kneeling in “sacrificial ceremonies”). This is when non-indigenous outsiders, authorities like the Catholic priest and local doctors, became aware something was going on. Hospital workers recall being overrun with patients whose knees were wrecked, torn apart and infected, and the priest found even his best catechists (lay pastors) unable to kneel at mass. At one point you couldn’t find a *costal* (the large baskets used to ferry merchandise) anywhere—for love or money. *El Millonario* had proclaimed the money was coming and everyone needed to get ready to carry it home.

An indigenous woman from Zacualpa, who claimed she had resisted the *medio millón*'s allure, told me her midwife had told her about some of the odd goings-on. “It was all so strange. There were tons of people up there on the *cerro*, as the day got close. They were told they had to show penitence, had to kiss the feet of a huge man, he was fat, gigantic! AND had his face covered. There were huge candles everywhere, they were calling on the *siete poderes*. They said if you have gold in your mouth you have to take it out, if they see it, they won’t help, it’s wealth. So people pulled out their own teeth. Menstruating women weren’t allowed either, they said it would want to take the blood. It was like a horror movie!”³

Meanwhile *El Millonario* was cutting a larger than life figure in the small town of

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Zacualpa. He had a yellow Hummer, maybe two. (“We didn’t even know what that was,” said Natalia, “until reporters from Guatemala City came up to cover the election and all they could do was take pictures of his cars. They couldn’t believe such a vehicle existed way up here!”) Some claim he had a helicopter too. He was also well known for his *Norteño* band, featuring himself as the lead singer. He imported some of Guatemala’s best musicians as back up and flaunted an overwhelming sound system, needing several trucks just to transport the amplifiers. He had big plans to record an album, make videos, and even produced postcards showing him in full-on narco-gangster drag. (There were rumors that this wasn’t just a show, that he was involved in drug-trafficking. Guatemala has become a transshipment point between Colombia and the US and Mexico’s narco-wars have spilled over, with spectacular murders and gross impunity. In 2008 a stash supposedly worth Q1 million of cocaine and marijuana was seized in Joyabaj.) He paid Carmen, a young *ladina* woman, Q2000 for a few hours of work each month to help him with the Spanish lyrics to the Mexican *corridos* he loved to sing (quite badly some now recall). She claimed he was practically illiterate. But people remember with great satisfaction the blowout party he helped sponsor (with his band performing) to inaugurate the new, four-story municipal palace in Zacualpa—an object of enormous local pride.

He was also renowned for his fanny-pack full of cash. “We were soliciting money to help pay for the town *fiesta*” said a young Mayan woman in Zacualpa, “going to all the businesses for contributions. *El Millonario* was there, in the park, and we went right up and asked him, and he just reached into his pack and pulled out Q20,000! Cash! In a big handful!!” He sponsored the women’s soccer team, providing fancy new uniforms, and a young Mayan man remembers the silly contests he would hold—like seeing who could drink the most soda at one sitting, then handing out handsome cash prizes. “He was very popular for that!” Some say he hired four young women to live at his house and work as his accountants. Others say there were seven women and they were all his “wives.” Several were sisters, the rumors went, and he had bought them from their father for a large sum. How else could the man now have a truck and many animals? These were the stories that made Natalia and me laugh at the soap-opera-y-over-the-top-ness of the whole caboodle, but also shiver at the suggestion of human traffic and at the uncanny, horror film-like aura of the tale.



These young women are from a hamlet of Joyabaj that was heavily involved in the *medio millón* project.

Photo: Diane Nelson.

There were doubts. Felipe Natareno identifies as part Maya. He was “the first indigenous mayor” in Joyabaj in the late 1970s, elected on a wave of organizing that was transforming the ethnic-class politics of the highlands, before receiving death threats and going into exile. He returned after the 1996 peace treaty and ran again for mayor with the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) party, the former guerrillas. (He was reading a biography of Che Guevara when I saw him in summer 2008). He had come close to winning several times due to strong indigenous backing, but when he began to raise questions about the *medio millón* he suddenly found himself to be a rich ladino. “People got mad and said anyone who says it’s *mentira* (lies) is someone who already has money, who just has *envidia* and is jealous because poor people and indigenous people want to have some too!” He decided to hold his tongue rather than risk losing votes, since so many people were involved. The Catholic priest, who has taken a strong stance against lynchings and even risked his life to stop a crowd from taking an alleged malefactor out of police custody and burning him alive, also began to speak out against the scheme. Natalia and others say one particularly impassioned sermon, where he spoke at length against the *medio millón* and denounced that he was receiving death threats for doing so, impacted them strongly and represented a turning point in the saga. (Death threats carry a special resonance in Joyabaj where the parish priest was murdered in 1980 and no one has ever been charged with the crime.) But when he called *El Millonario* a liar and a thief, one catechist told him, “Padre, you don’t have a wife or kids. You don’t need money and so you don’t want us to have money.” Many parishioners saw him betraying their hopes for a better life and stopped coming to church altogether.

To assuage the naysayers, people say *El Millonario* invited people to his well-guarded mansion up in the hills and showed them rooms full of money, from floor to ceiling. “He brought these leaders, the *sacerdotes mayas*, the Mayan priests, he showed them big bags of money. It was all Maya, only Maya were working at every level. They *palparon grandes maletas llenas de pisto*, they saw and felt the money so they believed. *Palparon!*” said one Mayan man, who claimed not to have been involved. Others say he did distribute some *costales* of money, but warned that, if the recipients had ever had doubts, the money would disappear on the walk home. While some supposedly made it with their cash intact, others found the bills converted into cut-up old newspaper.

Then tragedy struck. Someone torched *El Millonario*’s mansion, burning all the money into a cinder. Word went out it was envious people, who couldn’t bear to see the poor get ahead. Others say inspections had found charred newspaper rather than quetzals. The

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mountains of money were mostly worthless paper, with a few real bills on top. But people kept praying to the *Ajau* for their money to come. Many had taken mortgages on their lands and/or their houses (at 10% monthly interest). Others had gone into debt had skipped the odious annual trip to work on the South Coast, secure that their investment would pay off by Christmas, or maybe next Christmas, leaving them with no money whatsoever.



These are two photos of one of the buildings and cars that was burned. The obscured writing in red behind the arches reads '*propiedad de la gente.*' The photographer couldn't get the best image, because the people with her seemed nervous about standing there taking pictures.

Photo: Diane Nelson.

It did, finally, fall apart in mid-2007, not long after the fire. While in most people's minds the dates are unclear, the events are not. Whatever was sustaining people's faith, hope, and charity collapsed and in its place an equally secure and widespread intention emerged: get that *hijo de la gran puta*. Word spread quickly through the villages and a lynch mob formed in Joyabaj, joining several thousand people from the town and highland hamlets. They went to Zacualpa to hunt down El Millonario with the crowd growing along the way. They burned his Hummer and other cars, his houses and other buildings, and the gasoline station and three-story hotel he was building on the road out of town. On the remains of the buildings they painted "*Prohibido Negociar. Propiedad de la Gente.*" People's Property, Sale Prohibited. Some say they even had a marimba to accompany the festival of destruction. To everyone's great disappointment, their quarry had fled. They had to make do with several of his associates, including Tiño, a young indigenous

schoolteacher from Joyabaj. At least four of El Millonario's men, maybe more, were hauled up the mountain to a hamlet that, during the war, was infamous for its brutal Civil Patrol. Again, stories differ, but all agree the men were held in the school and were tortured—beaten, strung up for days (some say over a month), and starved (a muscular expression of outrage even Elie Wiesel, among Bernard Madoff's other victims, might relish.⁴) "Who knows why they let them go and didn't kill them?" said a Maya fellow schoolteacher. "People were definitely out for blood! But that Tiño is very well spoken, a very smooth talker. Somehow he convinced them he was a victim too, that he had really believed, and that he was only trying to help people. He said that only if they let him go was there a chance to get some money back. What's amazing is that he came down the mountain and ran for mayor of Joyabaj!! And he almost won!!!" El Millonario remains missing, reportedly hiding somewhere in Mexico. In May 2008 there was a mysterious shoot-out when some men supposedly tried to kidnap El Millonario's accountant. He and his family fought back, killing or wounding the attackers. About the gran estafa, no police report was ever filed nor has any formal process been opened against El Millonario. The only official coverage, which affected an entire province, bankrupted tens of thousands of people, and "disappeared" close to one million dollars, was one piece in a progressive, small circulation national newspaper (Naveda 2008). Returning to the city from Joyabaj in July 2008 I mentioned the stories about El Millonario to an economist friend and he helped me find the article. "When I first read it," he said, "It seemed like a rumor, or a myth. Like a dream. It was impossible. What makes people believe this?"

El Millonario, the Devil, and Financial Fetishism

Maybe I should start with the world that has made conspiracy theory not only possible (and popular) but ever present, unavoidable, pervasive, compulsive, fun, frightening, and fascinating [...] The networked world of system and power [...] The burgeoning new world order of starkly divided camps where haves and have-nots have become, more simply and efficiently and finally, winners and losers [...] The sure knowledge (and experience) that everything is interconnected and merging—a seduction, a dreaming [...] coupled with the [...] moment of terror when something whispers in our ear that the inter-connectedness is all controlled by a dark and monolithic Other and we are in it, no exit.

—Kathleen Stewart

In July 2008, when Natalia expressed despair and grief that "her" Mayan people had been so shatteringly deceived, some was for the economic devastation the fraud had wrought on families that were barely getting back on their feet after the human and material losses of the war. (And perhaps a bit for her own pocket, as a businesswoman where no one has any money any more.) As a simultaneously local and also quite cosmopolitan activist (people know her in isolated hamlets of Joyabaj and Zacualpa and in NGO and political party offices in Guatemala City), she is also keenly aware of the racist stereotypes of indigenous people as easily *engañado* or duped, and as especially gullible and ingenuous (Nelson 2009). (Some anguished responses to Madoff's

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scam in Jewish communities suggest the same fear that he reinforces racist stereotypes.⁵) And shame at having been tricked seems as endemic as the anger at *El Millonario*—as you can tell by my account, no one admitted to having fallen for his wiles. (All I “know” about it, and can share here, comes from the unstable circulations of rumor, *post facto* reconstructions with their accrued fantabulations.) Shame at falling victim to fraud, *estafa*, *engaño*, duping, may arise from the sense that people have collaborated in their own undoing. You were not forced to give someone your wallet via the threat of violence. You were conned. You went along with it of your own accord. “What makes people believe this?”

Contemplating a confidence trick once it's over and from a distance, can afford the epistemological pleasures of a detective novel and of feeling like the non-duped. Couldn't they see what is so obvious now: of course it was too good to be true! Once sincere beliefs now look ludicrous, impossible, laughable. We turn to myth, horror films, and dream logic to try to understand.

But for those involved these are deeply painful and highly political questions. Natalia, as a Mayan activist with the URNG party, is especially allergic to the army and right-wing claims that during the war indigenous people were caught up “in a struggle that was not their own” (as Otilia Lux, a UN truth commissioner said). They were deceived into supporting the guerrillas rather than deciding for themselves, as rational actors, that taking up arms might end their sea of troubles. What is “hearts and minds” counterinsurgency but the attempt to convince people that their hopes that “another world is possible” is “too good to be true,” a fraud? She quite rightly sees this ubiquitous discourse as draining the Maya of agency and revolutionary consciousness. The same stereotypes animate metropolitan fascination and horror at the numerous lynchings—or mass, rapid, and summary violence carried out against supposed thieves, murderers, Satanists and baby-snatchers by people in highland communities (Gutierrez and Kobrak 2001). These images traffic in the same problematic sense of the Maya as unthinking reactors, mobilized easily and so quickly there's no time for considered reflection. A crowd, a horde, a mob, a disturbance, a panic, a contagion. Natalia is committed to undermining such ways of “knowing” her people. Yet here they were, caught up in a ludicrous scheme, hoping, against any possibly rational hope, that they could get money for nothing. How could people who had already suffered so much make such a huge, pathetic mistake?

Bear Stearns having recently collapsed, I tried to reassure her: “It's not only highland Maya. People in the US, with years of education, also put all their money into worthless schemes. The stock market, maybe capitalism as a whole, is based on the same thing.” I was feeling a bit of lefty smugness that I had it all figured out. It seemed to make Natalia feel a bit better too, even as she seemed rather unconvinced that people were so gullible in the high-tech, well informed US.

Of course, since then, the whole shebang has crashed. Not just “the American *El Millonarios*” coming to light—Bernard Madoff, Robert Stanford, and all the “mini-Madoffs” (Wayne

2009:B1)—and not just the world’s largest banks, but the organizations that rated and insured them, and even some governments supposed to regulate them, have collapsed, devastating the global economy. Warren Buffet, the embodiment of US capitalism is chastened, seeing the entire system riddled with a contagious disease (he lost \$35 billion in 2008). The whole planet *se contagió*.

Invoking contagion is an effort to know, to perform an understanding of something that spreads mysteriously, whose forms, pathways, and agents of transmission are inscrutable (Wald 2008). It struggles to grasp a process that resists rational modes, clear cause and effect, orderly and transparent functioning. Contagion bypasses the mediation of discerning senses, acting directly and immediately on the body (and its passions). Buffett is far from the first to metaphorize finance’s mysteries via biology, although this is usually only necessary post-crash. Before that, the rational workings of the invisible hand (Look Ma, no fetish!) are discernible—and profitably manipulable—by captains of industry and “masters of the universe.” To list only a few examples: the “Asian Contagion” of 1998; the fear that Argentina’s 2001 crash would “infect” all of Latin America; and “Dutch disease,” in which a flood of foreign currency for a single natural resource, like oil, destroys national agricultural, manufacturing, and financial sovereignty (also called the “resource curse”), and which, Fernando Coronil says, “constitutes an epidemic in the monocrop economies of the third world...[it] should be renamed the third-world or neo-colonial disease” (1997:7). Like the tales of *El Millonario*, shot through with the uncanny, contagion symptomatizes trouble in the liberal self: no longer active and self-possessed, it becomes vulnerable, acted on.

Doctors, even social science ones, are acutely aware of the suffering caused by the spread of contagious diseases. Natalia asks, “What can we do?” To continue the metaphor, perhaps our first step is to demystify, to study the pathogen’s structure. Then map its course and trace the agents back to the infected well, the mosquito-breeding standing water, the Patient Zero.

Study the Pathogen’s Structure

Abuse of Power Comes As No Surprise
Protect Me From What I Want
—Jenny Holzer

As most people in the US are suddenly aware, New York financier Bernie Madoff, like *El Millonario*, perpetrated what’s called a Ponzi or pyramid scheme, paying off early investors with money from those who got in later. Charles Ponzi was an Italian immigrant to the US who, in 1920, offered enticingly high returns based on taking advantage of (a.k.a. arbitraging) a price differential between postal reply coupons issued in war-wrecked European currencies and redeemed at face value in US dollars. Pioneer investors got a 50% return in just 90 days. As they re-invested in the hopes of continuing this return, and others put new money in, the pot miraculously grew. In a few short months Ponzi made \$4.59 million in 2008 terms. People

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began mortgaging their houses and investing their life savings. By August 1920, however, it collapsed and Ponzi was tried and jailed.

Similarly, Madoff began with a perfectly legal financial innovation to make money in the interstices of the system, specifically in the OTC or over-the-counter market by paying clients for every share they traded. Money was made by "pocketing the difference in the 'spread,' or the gap between the offering and selling price for the stocks" (Creswell and Thomas 2009:B8). His firm was also one of the first to computerize trading. It remains unclear exactly when and how legitimate earnings (within capitalist ethics, at least) morphed into the taking-from-Peter-to-pay-Paul-form of the Ponzi, but a *delirio* took hold. Clients (at least on paper) were consistently making far better returns than the market rate and people begged to hook up with Madoff, even coughing up huge member fees for country clubs where they *might* meet him and *perhaps* get a chance to invest. Most clients now say they invested reasonably at first, but with handsome payoffs they invested more and more, until rational people, the "out of sight" rich (Fussell 1983), Nobel laureates, sovereign wealth funds, and shapers of our most intimate fantasy lives (like Steven Spielberg and Jeffrey Katzenberg) gave him tens of billions of dollars. Some gave him everything they had.

In the late 1990s, when *El Millonario* apparently began to collect "the neediest" to his cause, it was increasingly likely, even in the most out of the way hamlets, for someone (sometimes a local, sometimes a foreigner) to show up offering to give things away—chickens, building supplies, tractors, medicine, a workshop on Mayan rights, even free money, a.k.a. post-war development aid. From 1996 to 2003 foreign donors gave \$1.7 billion to Guatemala's peace process and this aid bonanza created many "Pedro Proyectos" (less often Pedrinas)—people adept at *gestionando* or maneuvering through the paperwork necessary to bring projects and money to their locales. "One group had a million dollars they had to spend by a certain time and it had to be on customary law. We were scouring the place looking for any one we could give the money to," said a Guatemalan woman. Throughout the highlands, such policies had unsurprising effects. A Mayan accountant hired to audit a rural Mayan organization said he found every paid position held by members of one family (a lot like Madoff's inner circle). When he asked about it, they offered to put him on the payroll of a project on Mayan spirituality. "I'm an accountant," he said, laughing. "Not really the most spiritual person!"

The flood of aid energized hopes, employed thousands of people, and, yes, encouraged some corruption. It supported reforms in health care, education, ethnic relations, legal structures, human rights, traditional culture, refugee resettlement, and the environment. For a while, it felt like magic, with money abundant and free flowing. You just had to put your hand out with the correctly filled-in forms, and you could start your own Mayan women's organization or turn a struggling coffee plantation into an organic fair trade co-operative. Picturesque but hard-hit areas like Nebaj in central Quiché saw NGO offices sprout up almost overnight along with the infrastructure to support foreign relief workers' needs (and local people's aspirations), from

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paved roads to lattes and hotels with hot water and cable TV. Such largesse was certainly rather odd—given these areas were far more accustomed to violent dispossession—but it didn't seem crazy or irrational to try to get on the gravy train. The 90s didn't only roar in the US (Stiglitz 2003). Given the immense losses from the war: over 400 villages completely destroyed, 250,000 people killed, and several million displaced (between 10 and 20% of the entire population), who wouldn't put their hand out? Who hadn't struggled and sacrificed?

How Does It Spread?

In each of these cases an existing and functioning assemblage, legitimate and authorized—an investment system, a stock exchange, development culture, all undergirded by accounting procedures, warranting reports and official-looking paper—inspires confidence. Most Ponzis also work through pre-existing social networks of kin, ethnicity, nations, or religions in producing their communities of faith. Ponzi started with fellow Italian immigrants, while recently George Theodule pulled in Haitian-Americans in Florida, Madoff worked through Jewish connections, and others pulled in Lutherans, Scientologists, and even countries like Romania and Albania (where, as the USSR broke apart, about half the population ended up “investing” the equivalent of the nation's entire GNP [Porter 2008]).

It Takes A Pillage



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Images of the Joyabaj festival; the first is a *cofrade* procession of saints, the second is a street scene where various dances are going on.

Photo: Diane Nelson.

Don Neto, Zacualpa's mayor said, "It was not a ladino who lied to us, it was us, one of the same poor people as we are." Many remembered *El Millonario's* organization as Maya, all Maya, at all levels. They say he started with the traditional authorities in outlying hamlets, the *sacerdotes mayas*, the *aj'q'ij*, and then the catechists and even some Evangelicals. Don Neto said local leaders went door-to-door, drawing on the esteem people had for them. "Maybe some did it for the money," he said, "others just wanted to help." Felipe Natareno says that they organized through the *cofrades*, the "brotherhoods" that care for saints and organize dances and other aspects of the important yearly festivals. "They are organized and credible, and people are used to *aportando*, contributing for the greater good, to sharing money and resources through them. This is our *estilo cooperativo*, you give something and then you get." Later he explained that *El Millonario* had "*promotores, enganchadores, contratistas, habilitadores, adelantados* [all ways that people have been organized to work on the South Coast plantations since the 19th Century], they helped get to people, it became like a company." Also, "It's a shame! The *Señor* had a great power of persuasion. He showed people the moon, the stars, everything. 'You won't have room for your cattle, your cars, there will be so much money, so much money!' It was a *locura de riqueza*, an insanity of riches."

The dream logic of the scam thus mashed up many old and new forms of social organization and understandings of human relations with that non-human actant: money. For example, everyone knows that on *Cerro Kumatz* you can make deals with the devil. One evening as we finished our supper by candlelight because a sluicing downpour had cut the lights, Adela (whose mother is Maya but she identifies as ladina) began to recount ghost stories to me and her four children. One went like this (sadly excised of much detail and her delightful performance): "There is a mountain north of town where people do ceremonies. They go up there to try to get money, to make a deal with the devil. It's a very strong place. I know a man. I know him. This *señor* went there with a *sajorín* [someone with esoteric knowledge, a witch]. They went to *pedir dinero*, to request money. They did all the rituals and the *sajorín* told him a truck would come and he would have to jump on the truck and then all the money would be inside and then the *sajorín* left. Sure enough the man heard exactly the sound of a truck coming although there were no roads." [I can't capture it here but by this point I had goose bumps and was glad her warm little son had crawled into my lap!] "He was very frightened, but waited and then there appeared a *culebrón*, a HUGE snake with three heads!! Three heads

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and with bright fiery eyes. It must have been the devil, don't you think so, Diana? That's what it looks like. And hanging on it was all the money, bags of cash, *costales*, and the man jumped on, but just as he was going to take the money he had second thoughts and he fell off and the snake disappeared. When the *sajorín* came back the man was almost dead. He had a fever for many days and the *sajorín* had to come many times to cure him but he survived. He told me this story himself. That's what happens when you try for too much." Adela here recapitulates Michael Taussig's classic analysis of devils and commodity fetishism (1980), limning the fascination and horror that accompanies money's workings, its strange accrual through interest or the exploitation of surplus value by people who don't struggle or sacrifice. They are morality tales, warnings, but they also incite a contagious hope. Maybe I can be the one with *costales* of money, maybe that promise is for me.

But it wasn't all promises and moonlight with the *medio millón*. There was the philanthropy. And there were also threats. Some were benign: What are you waiting for? You'll be sorry! How can you deny your children this opportunity? Others a bit less so: If you stopped contributing, no matter how much you'd invested, you would receive nothing. And then there were the rumbles of something darker, something scarier, that hovered around the edges of any talk of *El Millonario*. Discussing his plans as the new mayor of Joyabaj, Don Lencho (a ladino who had barely squeaked in, with Natareno and Tiño, *El Millonario*'s minion, close behind) lamented: "This *estafa* has had terrible effects. Many families have nothing anymore. The entire economy is paralyzed. People lost houses, land." When I asked him to explain a bit more he suddenly got nervous, although we were alone in his office. "It's better to not talk about this. And I won't say anything more. The leaders are still around and they are armed. I don't want any problems." The Mayan schoolteacher who told me about Tiño became very distressed when I asked if I might talk to him. "Oh no! Oh no! He would send to kill me if he thought I told you to talk to him!" One day Natalia pointed out a black SUV on a ride to Zacualpa. "That's a *sicario*, a hit man. *El Millonario* had those people around him, like guards. They ran his errands for him. They were always heavily armed." But this is still not the same as forced robbery. It remains rather mysterious why thousands of savvy Maya actively and willingly collaborated and are now living in tents along the river or sharecropping land that once was theirs. Maybe some were corrupt, but others were motivated by a sincere and contagious hope.

Natalia asked, "If you were me what would you do?" As an anthropologist my first tendency when I see a con is to add a text. Context—my explanations of the post-war development boom, "traditional" beliefs in mountaintop ceremonies, the morphing of human connections into "social capital"—are meant to transform the ugly stereotype of the gullible Maya (or the greedy Jew) into rational moral actors—even as they "chose" rather than being forced to give away their hard-earned money. (You'll note I've also deployed the tried and true argument that "their" crazy fetish is actually ours. Highland Maya are no more easily duped than any investor who religiously follows the *WSJ* or *CNBC*.) But do these

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efforts follow my earlier prescription to contain the contagion? Do they get us back to the infected well, the source of the pathogen?

On the Mayan Question

Those in the know are lost.

—Slavoj Žižek

So, was the *gran estafa*, the *medio millón*, really a non-violent crime? David Harvey, drawing on Rosa Luxemburg, suggests modern capitalism is twofaced. One face is the everyday economic processes in factories or agricultural estates mediated by transactions between capitalist and laborer. The second is the rapacious and brutal “accumulation by dispossession” between capitalist and non-capitalist modes of production mediated via colonial policy, the international loan system, and war (2003:137). What Felipe Natareno calls the Maya’s *estilo cooperativo* (a less-capitalist mode of production) was seen by Spanish invaders and 19th century liberals as a refusal to produce and consume for the world market, and by Cold War strategists as naturally Communist. Enclosure, displacement, mass murder, and the shredding of community bonds are weapons in a centuries long war on sustainable communities the world over. For the global north, what Randy Martin calls “the financialization of everyday life,” or the privatization of risk, may appear as the first, law-abiding face of capitalism. Like *El Millonario* it may even radiate “irrational exuberance:” we now have the opportunity to be caretakers of our own individual futures! But UB*, you be the ass-to-risk (Cadigan 1991), precisely because brutal accumulation has shredded the social networks that once ensured our collective futures (and because the voracious stock market is in need of fresh infusions). This process is now so embedded in the structures of labor, retirement, and investment that its coercive power can feel like willed choice.⁶ In contrast, the revolution in Guatemala asserted that we should and can take care of each other. Perhaps so many savvy Maya joined up because this was (without romanticizing too much) a rather familiar understanding of social reciprocity. After all, the term “Indian Giver” means someone who gives *and* receives. The response was genocide.

US coverage of Madoff, Stanford, and others in the context of the larger capitalist disaster hovers tensely between describing them as bad apples in a good barrel—corrupt individuals perverting a lawful system—and as symptoms exposing the true workings of the entire caboodle. It’s suddenly not so crazy to look to Marx, who says capital must break Chinese walls and go global to, vampirically, keep feeding itself, or Lenin, who described finance capital as the hungry motor of imperialism—a planetary and intergenerational Ponzi scheme of looting, mayhem, and dispossessed “losers.” The “orgy of irresponsibility and greed” is less a perversion than the rules of the game. And (Marx again) the hateful stereotype of the Jew is not about a people *per se* but is a condensation and displacement of the savage effects of capitalism itself.

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But isn't this a little much just to explain a highland Guatemala pyramid scheme? Perhaps *El Millonario*, barely literate and a bad singer, seems too small to explain the contagious effects of the promise of *medio millón*. But have I answered Natalia's anguished question of "what is to be done" when I explain its vertiginous effects as "really" capitalism? Maybe we need to both "follow the money"—which only accrues value when it circulates (not unlike a contagion, that strengthens as it spreads)—and mimic the Ponzi's promise of two for one—in this case, law and disorder, standard and corrupt, everyday conduct and accumulation by dispossession—not collapsed into a singularity, but dialectically inter-acting. And this brings us to another two-faced entity: Lacan's "agency of the big Other," via Žižek. One "face" is a hidden agency, pulling the strings, and like conspiracy theory, this presupposes the Subject presumed to know. This analysis can quiet and strengthen our struggles to make sense of the world, to identify and bring to justice both the individual schemers and the people and institutions that perpetrate the obscene violence of the market. But Žižek also suggests it is present in an exactly opposite way, as pure semblance, as nothing, but whose appearance is essential and must be preserved. This is how he explains the parades of Eastern European socialism. The long lines of happy people are a spectacle for the gaze of this Other, although neither the people nor the Party believe they are happy, and everyone knows that no one else believes. It is an essential appearance that rules our lives. Here the Subject is supposed not to know (1992: 38-41). Žižek says: "symbolic identity [of any given community] is bestowed upon it by a series of legal, religious, and other values which regulate its life; these values are literally 'fictions' [...] although such a 'fiction' effectively exists only in its real effects (the state is actual only in the real activity of its citizens), we cannot *reduce* it to these effects [...] [It] is nowhere in reality but in spite of this, we cannot explain the very 'material' reality of fights and suffering without reference to it. [...] What we forget, when we pursue our daily life, is that our human universe is nothing but an embodiment of the radically inhuman 'abstract negativity' of the abyss we experience when we face the 'night of the world'" (Žižek 1992: 52-53).

The terrifying three-headed snake on the *Cerro*, the vortex disappearing trillions of dollars of value, the uncanniness of tales of contagion, all push us to keep these two faces simultaneously in view rather than only dispersing the creepiness of the whole hornswoggle into rationality or context. But as we ponder what we should do, "the Maya question"—Natalia's people, an *estilo cooperativo*, a community mobilized quickly—reminds us that contagion's very poison—its quick spread, its connection among people—may also be the cure. Collective action.

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in *Quincentennial Guatemala* (1999) and *Guatemala: los polos de desarrollo: el caso de la desestructuración de las comunidades indígenas, Vol. 2 (Development Poles: The Case of the Destructuring/Destruction of Indigenous Communities)* (1988) and a few articles. She is an Associate Professor in the Cultural Anthropology Department at Duke University.

Notes

¹ Thanks to everyone in Quiché who spoke about these touchy issues (for non-public figures I have used pseudonyms). This essay is based on yearly visits to Joyabaj since 1999, and Guatemala since 1985. Fieldwork was funded by Duke University and the Mellon Title VI grant. I thank Marcial Godoy-Anativia for inspiration (you can dance), Elyse Crystal, Luis Solano, and Mark, so easily convertible to yen.

² To put this in perspective, many of those involved are subsistence farmers who also migrate to harvest export crops. Several months of cutting cane may earn you only a few hundred dollars (Oglesby 2002). A job in a store, working 120 hours a week (!) pays about \$140.00 a month and teaching pays about \$200 a month. Women's labor may garner only one or two quetzals of profit per meal sold in a *comedor* (simple restaurant), and weeks spent weaving a *huipil* (traditional blouse) may net her as little as \$7.00. The Guatemalan state's reparations program pays Q24,000 (\$3,200) for a family member lost in the war, but will only pay twice, regardless of how many family members were killed. The Joyabaj/Zacualpa area has been transformed by immigration and dollar remittances. It costs over \$3000 (dollars, not quetzals) to go, borrowed from *dueños de dinero* (moneylenders) who charge 10% interest a month. Ricardo Falla (2008) estimates 20% of Zacualpa's inhabitants are in the US, some 5,500 people, remitting (2007 figures) over \$17 million dollars a year, or about \$250 per person per month.

³ "Zombie banks" now stalk the US economic landscape, as here too horror films seem to offer the best grip on our current reality.

⁴ Wiesel said, "Psychopath"—it's too nice a word for him...there is a sickness, a pathology." "Asked what punishment he would like to see for Mr. Madoff, Mr. Wiesel said: 'I would like him to be in a solitary cell with only a screen, and on that screen for at least five years of his life, every day and every night, there should be pictures of his victims, one after the other after the other, all the time a voice saying, "Look what you have done to this old lady, look what you have done to that child, look what you have done," nothing else,'" (Strom 2009: A1, A4). At the mid-January event "Madoff: A Jewish Reckoning," audience member suggestions of an appropriate punishment included "an eye for an eye?" "Stoning?" (Widdicombe 2009: 23).

⁵ Elyse Crystal reminded me that no one called for Protestant soul-searching when Ken Lay defrauded millions at Enron.

⁶ Carol Jones, a nurse and a friend, told me she noticed this fundamental transformation in the

mid-1990s. Attending a demonstration of a new diagnostic device with other health-care workers, one day, rather than the usual questions about function and benefits, the first question was if the company were publicly traded. This was around the time that my recently divorced mother joined a “Beardstown Ladies” investment club.

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