

Genocide: Children in Crisis

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## Introduction

Genocide is an idea that most individuals cannot fathom. However, we unfortunately live in a world where genocide exists. Attempts have occurred throughout history; and today, many ask how it is possible that humanity has allowed the continuation of such carnage. While it is important to consider how to prevent genocide from occurring in the future, it is also crucial to focus on the lives that have already been affected from this type of destruction. This paper is going to discuss the impact genocide has on children who had been victimized but survived the time in which their lives were in jeopardy. By taking a deeper look into the Guatemalan genocide which is still unknown to many today, it will be clear that the targeted children were completely terrorized and psychologically damaged. They were forced to adapt after the massacres were over and they discovered various methods as an outlet for their fear and sadness. While many are affected during genocide, the children are especially traumatized with the event since they are more physically and emotionally vulnerable as they are rapidly developing into adolescents and young adults.

In addition, it is important for those who have studied genocide but did not live through it to find coping mechanisms. The information that we learn about the perpetrator's motives and methods is often very intense. Coping skills will help students of genocide keep themselves emotionally healthy. As an artist, I have found my mechanism in painting. Painting was a way for me to reflect on what I have learned; also, it was a way to cope with the tragic nature of this specific holocaust and genocide in general. There are many compelling aspects of the Guatemalan massacres that have inspired me to create a series of paintings that capture various perspectives of the Mayan children. Later in this paper, I will discuss how the genocide and the children's stories have motivated me to express this disastrous event artistically.

## Guatemala Genocide

The Guatemalan genocide has been largely overlooked partially due to the United States participation with the destruction. However, several scholars and others have spent years trying to tell the stories of the many who died and of those who barely survived. James Sexton spent much time learning about one man's personal story. For years, he dedicated himself to translating and editing Ignacio Bizarro Ujpán's story and making it available for the public. With Ujpán's cooperation and commitment, Sexton was able to publish a trilogy of books. His first, *Son of Tecún Umán*, is an autobiography from Ignacio's birth in 1941 to 1972. His second, *Campesino*, covered February 5, 1977 to May 13, 1983 which discussed how violent the situation was getting in Guatemala.<sup>1</sup> Finally, the last volume, *Ignacio: The Diary of a Maya Indian of Guatemala*, covers Ignacio's story from 1983-1987 where the civil situation in the country was still declining.<sup>2</sup> Sexton is just one example of a committed individual willing to spend years on telling the enthralling story of how someone lives through civil wars and genocide. These first-hand stories are important to have accessible to the public because it helps people connect personally to the genocide. Ignacio's story is very striking, and this is just one out of hundreds of thousands.

The exact dates of the genocide are not clear since the country was going through a major civil war that lasted several decades. The general consensus of the start of the genocide is in 1981. The Guatemalan anti-communist army swiped the country, looking for villages of the Mayan people. When they got to one, they pillaged, raped, murdered, and conducted scorched-earth campaigns in order to eliminate or run off the entire Mayan group. During this time,

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<sup>1</sup> James D. Sexton, ed., *Campesino: The Diary of a Guatemalan Indian* (Tuscon: University of Arizona Press, 1985), 3.

<sup>2</sup> James D. Sexton, ed., *Ignacio: The Diary of a Mayan Indian of Guatemala* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1992), ix.

Guatemalan groups, called guerrillas came together to fight back for their rights. By the end of 1983, the Guatemalan army had killed over 100,000 Mayan peasants and the truth commission documented 626 massacres.<sup>3</sup> The army's motivation was to obtain the land for growing coffee, building a dam<sup>4</sup>, and using it in other ways to gain revenue. The genocide ended due to a shift in power. Even though the mission to systemically kill off the Mayan people was over, the conflict did not end completely. People were still dying and the peace process took over a decade. Guatemala is still in a fragile state, and even though many of the Mayas still live in fear, they are now starting to recover and heal.

### Mayan Children in Guatemala

Genocide is always a violent situation. The massacres that occurred in Guatemala were particularly vicious, especially for the Mayan children. In September, 1984, a beginning count of the Guatemalan census of three major areas, Chimaltenango, El Quiché, and San Marcos, indicated that there were 51,144 orphans.<sup>5</sup> This number not only shows that many parents died in the early 1980's, but it also indicates that children were forced to adapt from either having one or two parents to having none or a new caretaker. Plus, they had to find a way to grieve over their lost loved ones and take care of themselves after being through such a traumatic event.

The killers were merciless in their forms of slaughtering. While many children were thrown and beaten up against walls, others were thrown into pits to later be crushed or suffocated by dead bodies.<sup>6</sup> Often, the perpetrators would continue to kick the children until they stopped screaming. They would grab the kids by the feet and smash them into the floor or rocks.

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<sup>3</sup> Greg Grandin, *Quiet Genocide: Guatemala 1981-1983*, ed. Etelle Higonnet (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2009), 1-9.

<sup>4</sup> *A Massacre Remembered; A Right to Justice*, DVD (Brooklyn, NY: Witness, 2007)

<sup>5</sup> Shelton H. Davis, *Harvest of Violence: The Maya Indians and the Guatemalan Crisis*, ed. Robert M. Carmack (Norman & London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 11.

<sup>6</sup> Peace Pledge Union Information: Genocide, [http://www.ppu.org.uk/genocide/g\\_guatemala1.html](http://www.ppu.org.uk/genocide/g_guatemala1.html).

Sometimes, they would tie them by the necks and hung them. There were some cases in which the mass executions were primarily of just the children. At the second massacre in Río Negro, 107 children were slaughtered and at the massacre of Agua Fría, 35 children were killed who earlier were able to escape from the massacre of Los Encuentros.<sup>7</sup>

Rape was one of the main psychological forms of torture of the Guatemalan army. While one of the army's main goals was to completely get rid of the Mayas, another was to emotionally and psychologically break down the Mayan people. They wanted to demonstrate their control and domination by utterly humiliating the people and their way of life while emotionally tearing them down so that they would be too afraid to join any of the guerilla's efforts. Public rapes were especially traumatizing for the Mayan people, and the army used it for this reason. The army wanted to rape the women and children in front of the community to scare them. It was the killer's way to inform the community that they should be afraid and this could happen to them if they chose to support the rebels.

While the public rapes were a statement, the private ones were long, horrifying, and most often, ending in death. For the children and young girls, rape would often result in the destruction of their reproductive organs. While this causes physical damage, it also results in a great psychological breakdown. The women's role in the community is child bearing, and many feel this is their purpose for their people.<sup>8</sup> Thus, not only did the Mayan women and adolescents feel spoiled and tainted after being brutally raped, but they also felt useless. They were often socially rejected and sometimes discarded from their own husbands and families. After the genocide, the young girls who were physically damaged had to adjust to life knowing that they were unable to bear children. This made it difficult for them to later find husbands. Rape is a

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<sup>7</sup> Etelle Higonnet, *Quiet Genocide: Guatemala 1981-1983* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2009), 74.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

traumatic experience for everyone who has unfortunately been through it. However, sexual violence against children is especially traumatizing due to their inexperienced and naïve nature. They are still developing and learning how to be kids. It is hard enough to have them try to understand why so many are dying around them, but then to have them understand why they were sexually victimized is complicated and overwhelming.

The children survivors of the Guatemalan genocide have undoubtedly been traumatized by all that happened. Many had to witness the deaths of their families. In fact, many were forced to transfer to other communities and live with people that had committed the killings during the massacres. The children were given new identities and many had to live with people that killed their parents and siblings.<sup>9</sup> Other children were injured and now have to live with lost limbs or damaged organs.

Some of the Guatemalan Mayas took a risk by leaving their homeland and moving to a safer place. Many parents and their children left Guatemala to settle in refugee camps close to the border while others walked through Mexico and found salvation in the United States. Author, Brent Ashabranner, is deeply interested in the interaction of human cultures. This interest has led him to study and understand a group of Mayas that fled to Indiantown, Florida during the genocide. After learning as much as he can about this group, he wrote a book about the genocide that was written in a way that children can understand.

Brent's book, *Children of the Maya: A Guatemalan Indian Odyssey*, describes the Mayas when they built their empire in 2000 B.C. that stretched from southern Mexico to parts of Central America and how they were later conquered. Brent describes how the Mayans lived in Guatemala thousands of years later and then, he focuses on how and why the war started in

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<sup>9</sup> Etelle Higonnet, *Quiet Genocide: Guatemala 1981-1983* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2009), 77.

Guatemala. He gives a general description of the genocide. Brent does not give gruesome details, but he does not lie either. He gives the facts so that the children know how many Mayas died and why the Guatemalan army thought it was necessary to conduct these systemic killings. After these descriptions, Brent focuses on how a group of Mayan people lived in Indiantown. While this town is small, there are benefits to living here that made it a great place for the Mayas to seek refuge. New intermediate schools were built in the area and it is well-equipped and well-staffed so that the quality of education is high. Also, Indiantown contains several churches; this is important to have to meet their spiritual needs. When people arrived to Indiantown after their long journey from Guatemala, most were badly malnourished and still dealing with the shock of the killings. However, after adjusting to this new life, children quickly started riding bikes again, playing video games, watching television, and most importantly, eating healthy food.<sup>10</sup> Although the people will probably never fully heal from the affects of genocide, the Mayas that moved to Indiantown have proven that it is possible to continue living and work hard to make their life the way it was before the destruction began.

#### Children in Trauma

After an atrocity happens at this magnitude, what are some of the children's reactions and forms of coping? Is it possible to continue having a childhood and living a normal life? While considering these questions, it is important to look into research that psychologists have found throughout their experience in working with children dealing with posttraumatic stress.

According to Suzanne Kaplan, a psychologist and psychoanalyst, age distortion occurs to the children recovering from genocides. Kaplan has spent years conducting interviews and focusing on the children who survived living in the concentration camps or in hiding during the

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<sup>10</sup> Brent Ashabranner, *Children of the Maya: A Guatemalan Indian Odyssey* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1986), 1-13.

Holocaust. She describes how the children go through emotional stunting by the shift in the way the children view themselves. They see themselves differently than they did before the genocide. First, during this crisis, there is not much time to celebrate certain events, especially birthdays. There was a sense of birthday disappearances. Kaplan points out that children tend to associate their own existence with having birthday celebrations. Therefore, since the priority was survival during the genocide, it was difficult for the Mayas to stay festive and help the children celebrate a time that is so dear to them. Ignacio Bizarro Ujpán relates to this issue in one of his diaries. In March, 1984, his daughter turned 15 years old. In many Hispanic cultures, a girl's fifteenth birthday is an important event and marks a turning point in her life. Ignacio explains how his señora made tamales for the occasion, but the day did not have a grand celebration<sup>11</sup>. There were more important things to worry about at that time. Therefore, as children lived through the genocide, a sense of time was unclear for many. Birthdays would happen sometimes without people realizing it. For children, this would cause confusion in their growing up process.

Kaplan also discusses that age distortion becomes a factor in the children's lives because many had to obtain a great amount of responsibility due to the genocide. Some had to take the role as caretaker for their siblings or even parents. If a family lost both parents, then one of the children had to replace the role of caretaker so that the rest of the family had a chance to survive.<sup>12</sup> This type of responsibility is not suitable for a child to take on. These kids have not experienced or learned enough yet to raise others. At the same time, the kids that are becoming instant caretakers have to find a way to emotionally take care of themselves so that they are strong enough to take care of others. In some cases, the children had to take care of their parents.

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<sup>11</sup> James D. Sexton.ed., *Ignacio: The Diary of a Maya Indian of Guatemala* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1992), 74.

<sup>12</sup> Suzanne Kaplan, *Children in Genocide: Extreme Traumatization and Affect Regulation* (London: International Psychoanalytical Association, 2008), 104-105.

Many people had limbs amputated during the killings; therefore, it was necessary for them to have extra help in functioning and doing daily routines. A role reversal would occur when the parents were too injured to care for themselves and their children had to help them. Due to this instant gain of responsibility, children are forced to almost completely cease their childhood and become adults. This creates confusion for the kids that are already traumatized by the violence that occurred during the genocide.

Children survivors of any genocide tend to feel guilty when loved ones were not able to stay alive throughout the massacres. These children often do not understand why they were able to live through the killings but other family members could not. They begin to wonder what everyone could have done to deserve their fates. Some children questioned if they were somehow responsible for their loved ones' death. Most of them understand that the intention of the perpetrators were to kill everyone, especially if they had been seeing death around them. In the case of Guatemala, the killers would come to the village and work to kill everyone at that time. Therefore, it was clear to many of the children that they were wanted dead. With this understanding, these children grow confused when they were able to escape death while others were not as fortunate. Kaplan has interviewed children who have exclaimed that they may be the one who should be dead.<sup>13</sup> These feelings are overwhelming, and may hinder their recovery process.

Kaplan also examines how sexual violence affects the victimized survivors. While she has mostly studied the children from the Holocaust, there are several similar affects of rape with the Guatemalan Mayan children. After the Holocaust, the survivor's bodies were emaciated and frail. Most of the girl adolescents no longer felt feminine because their features were

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 36.

diminished.<sup>14</sup> This feeling of loss of womanliness is apparent with the Mayan children as well. Many of the young girls who were raped also suffered damage to their reproductive organs. Therefore, even though many of the girl's exterior features were untouched, they still suffered from internal damage. Unlike the Holocaust survivors, these girl's injuries were more permanent. The children from the Holocaust had to slowly regain weight and fat to recover their healthy bodies. Unfortunately, most of the Guatemalan girls had to live with being barren for the rest of their lives. These injuries have caused the girls to feel less feminine and useless which cause them to question their identity. Before the genocide, the girls had a good idea on what they are going to do with their lives, including get married and have children. Now, they have to change their self-image and reevaluate how they see themselves.

All rape survivors respond to the trauma in different ways. However, there are a few common symptoms that both adults and children experience. Hopelessness and helplessness are just a couple feelings that these survivors tend to suffer. Health professionals report that many women and young adults who have been raped are emotionally distraught, anxious, and in need of support. Many times, these survivors developed depression which led them to have suicidal thoughts<sup>15</sup>. These symptoms are more intense with children due to their fragile nature. Emotionally, children are not as strong as adults since they have been through less life experiences. Therefore, the recovery process may take longer for these young rape victims.

Associate Clinical Professor of Psychiatry, Judith Herman, aspires to collect as much useful information she can about trauma and psychological effects of violence so she can help those going through a recovery process. She claims that recovery can be dissected into three

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>15</sup> Lars Weisaeth, *Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Acute and Long-term Responses to Trauma and Disaster*. ed. Carol S. Fullerton and Robert J. Ursano (Washington D.C. & London: American Psychiatric Press, Inc., 1997), 105.

main stages. The first is the establishment of safety.<sup>16</sup> This stage is crucial and it may take longer to achieve for the children. They are coming out of a highly traumatic experience which may have caused the death of their main protectors, their parents/caretakers. These children need security and reassurance right away that they are safe. However, in order for them to gain this feeling of safety, they must be willing to be out of control and allow others to help them.

After achieving this stage, Herman claims that the next stage is remembrance and mourning. Then, the central idea of the third stage is reconnection with ordinary life.<sup>17</sup> As Herman has inferred, the process to recovery is not easy and it takes much effort by the survivor and other individuals for this process to be completed. While it is unfortunate that rape and other crimes that occurred during the Guatemalan genocide happened to innocent children, it is encouraging knowing that recovery is attainable.

Carolyn Alessio is one individual that strived to help the children recover while receiving an education years after the genocide. She arrived in La Esperanza, Guatemala in the summer of 1995. She started teaching in the town and was interested in starting a creative writing class. Due to the limited amount of governmental funds contributed for schools in Guatemala, in some areas, the kids only attend school half-days and creative classes are not common. During Alessio's second summer in Guatemala, she started a creative writing class that fifteen students from the ages of four to sixteen attended weekly. She began collecting and translating the children's writings and drawings. Most of the time, she would allow them to write about any subject and other times, she would read aloud poems to help inspire them. After collecting several pieces, Alessio noticed many similarities in the writing and how they reflected upon

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<sup>16</sup> Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence- from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: BasicBooks, 1997), 155.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

times of crisis.<sup>18</sup> La Esperanza was one of the towns that were visited by the Guatemalan army during the genocide. Many died during the destruction of this town. Therefore, it is very possible that some of these children remember what happened during the genocide, or at least the war which took place even after the genocide ended.

Creative writing and drawing is just one out of many mechanisms that children can use to cope with traumatic events. After analyzing the collection of creative pieces that Alessio gathered, it is clear that the children used art as an outlet for what they were feeling pertaining to the violence and the war. They wrote stories about people who would terrorize others and people who used violence as a part of their job. The children used clever names to describe these people, such as “the witch” or “the weeping woman.” The kids did not directly describe their characters as people who participated in war. They presented a thoughtful story with each description. Among these stories and drawings, it is also apparent that the children desire a consistent and happy future. Many described a future where they have a great job, a family, and a house to live in. Houses were a common theme that I noticed among these pieces. One child wrote a poem about a square house with windows and how it is similar to boxes. Another wrote a poem about a house that protects all the children from the cold and the rain. This subject repetition of houses can be interpreted as a desire for consistency and protection. A house is a place that most children associate as being their home. Having a home is something that is comforting and reassuring. When children know they have a home, they know there is always going to be a place to go and a place to protect them from any bad that might be outside. Many children also wrote poems and stories about the future they hope to obtain. A little girl wrote about becoming a secretary one day and being able to afford carfare for her mother. The kids expressed their

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<sup>18</sup> Carolyn Alessio, ed., *The Voices of Hope: Poems, Stories, and Drawings by the Children of La Esperanza, Guatemala* (Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), xiv-xvii.

feelings and although they may not comprehend such a violent situation as war and genocide, they stay simple and express how they are really feeling.

There are various consequences of trauma and violence that include post-traumatic stress disorders and impaired cognitive, behavioral, and psychosocial development. Children may go through anxiety, depression, aggression, suspicion, mistrust, isolation, and changes in peer and family relationships.<sup>19</sup> In order to handle these symptoms, children find ways to reduce their anxiety and try to live a normal life. Professionals who work with children in the aftermath of trauma find it important to discover ways the kids can feel empowered. Due to the violence and cruelty committed against their families and communities, the children feel as if they have been robbed of control and power. In order to recover and regain happiness, they need to find ways to feel in control of their own lives again. Professionals work to encourage kids to express their grief, strengthen their individual coping skills, and restore connections to give them a sense of community.<sup>20</sup> It is important to support the children and help them understand that it is appropriate for them to feel many types of emotion. Anger, sadness, hatred, and other intense feelings are normal to have; but, it is crucial that the children are given examples on how to properly express these feelings. Many times, children who are experiencing the consequences of trauma communicate their frustration in a hostile manner against other people. In order to provide safe outlets for expression, individuals should support the use of art, music, writing, therapy, sports, and other harmless activities for the children in time of crisis.

#### Reflections/Artist Statement

Everybody is affected by genocide. Although I have not been directly affected by the Guatemalan genocide, I am interested in learning more about it and spreading awareness of its

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<sup>19</sup> Andrew Malekoff, "Transforming Trauma and Empowering Children." *Social Work with Groups*, Vol. 31, no. 1 (2008): 32.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

existence. It has been called the “Silent Holocaust.”<sup>21</sup> Many Americans are still not aware that it happened; however, it is important to tell the story of those who were terrorized, abused, and died. We should remember and honor those innocent people who suffered due to their history and culture.

As an artist, I have found inspiration from the children’s stories. I have spent two months sketching and painting based on what I have learned about the children’s cases in Guatemala and how these traumatized children found ways to cope with their distress. The painting, *Shield* (figure 1), is a response to the children’s desire for protection. As I looked through the kid’s drawings from La Esperanza, it seemed clear that the kids desperately yearned for protection. Before the genocide, the children felt relatively safe; however, during the massacres, they quickly felt unsure about their safety. Afterwards, the fear still existed and they wanted to feel reassured that they are protected.

After reflecting on what I have researched, I developed a composition that balances death and life. The death areas are apparently not representing natural death but rather an evil doing of annihilation and destruction. The composition is broken up into three sections. The two outer sections display scenes that we would see during the genocide. On the right, there is a pile of a non-objective material on fire. This mound symbolizes how children were thrown alive in a ditch to later be crushed by a pile of adult corpses. This method was used often by the Guatemalan army in order to get rid of the Mayan children. Although it is not clear in the painting that these objects are dead bodies, an abstract form allows for many interpretations. However, it is evident that this pile represents something dark and gruesome. It is on fire, and smoke is polluting the air and it is filling up the rest of the space creating a sense of suffocation of that area. In the left section, I have painted a natural scene of trees and a creek. However, this scene is not a peaceful

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<sup>21</sup> Peace Pledge Union Information: Genocide, [http://www.ppu.org.uk/genocide/g\\_guatemala1.html](http://www.ppu.org.uk/genocide/g_guatemala1.html).

landscape. Due to the hollow nature of the trees, the watery quality of the creek, and the color choices, this image creates an eerie sense that opens up a story rather than just a landscape picture. The scene represents how the trees were a major component of the genocide. Since there are many jungles in Guatemala, the Mayans used these areas as a way to hide and protect themselves. In fact, after massacres, men would go by the town looking for survivors and then help them hide into the jungles.<sup>22</sup> However, the army used the trees as weapons. Children were beaten to death against the trees and some were cut up with machetes and left for dead in the jungles. Therefore, the painting presents a scene where the trees were a method for killing, but it does not directly confront this idea. Its obscurity suggests a deeper story than what is being presented. Hopefully, it will spark a curiosity and a desire to learn more from the viewers of the painting.

Plus, the colors used reinforce the idea of death and loss. Black was used often to emphasize the dark nature of the killers. As an artist, I do not frequently use black. This color creates a depressed mood in art pieces and a murky feeling throughout the entire piece despite the use of other bright colors. However, in this piece, it is necessary to produce a dramatic statement. Therefore, the bold use of black demonstrates the powerful nature of the genocide. To balance the black, bursts of reds and oranges have been placed within these two sections. They are also used to highlight the idea of anger and death. Red is a strong color that can be used to interpret love; however, in this case, it symbolizes death due to its association with blood.

The middle section represents life. A baby in the fetal position is placed in a protective covering that functions as a shield from all the death and annihilation that is happening around it. This shield resembles a mother's belly; however, it is possible to interpret this as just a protective

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<sup>22</sup> Ricardo Falla, *Massacres in the Jungle: Ixcán, Guatemala 1975-1982* (Boulder, San Francisco, and Oxford: Westview Press, 1994), 98.

niche for the child. The important part of this image is seeing that the walls of the shield are strong and thick. They are not easily permeable, which is something that the children needed during the genocide. They needed to be protected from the horrors going on around them. The colors used in this section are bright and vibrant. They are energetic and alive which reinforces the idea of life. Since this image is placed in the middle of the composition, there is a suggestion that life conquers death. Life is the emphasis. No matter how horrific things get, it is crucial to stay hopeful because life will eventually overpower destruction.

After researching how the children felt after the genocide, I concluded that there were a couple main things that they yearned for the most. A future is one thing that they children desperately longed for. In *Longing* (figure 2), I have placed a Mayan child in a scene where she is surrounded by things she desires. She is painted in a space that suggests that she is not physically there. Her body has not been painted completely; instead, plants start to invade her space. She may be dreaming or wondering about what she could have. In the distance, there is a house that is connected to the girl by a streak of purple paint. There are tall, leafy trees in the background that are clearly not representing death like in the last painting, but rather a sense of liveliness. In fact, all the foliage in the composition symbolizes life. Since plants are animate objects, they are repeatedly depicted throughout the entire composition to suggest that life is an important element in genocide. Many are hoping to preserve their life and the lives of others. Children represent new life, thus representing a new way of thinking and possibly a change in the horrific events happening at that time.

When deciding what to paint, I chose two flowers due to their specific meanings and how these meanings are significant to the children in genocide. First, I painted snowdrops because they represent hope and consolation. Next, irises have been portrayed in order to reinforce that

idea of hope. These flowers are also associated with faith. Throughout the genocide and the aftermath of the destruction, being comforted and having faith might have been the most important elements for the children. They are more likely to have hope for happier times when they are supported, comforted, and have faith.

I made several deliberate choices in the way to paint this piece and which colors to use. First, brushstrokes are very energetic and loose. The trees in the background contain many loose brushstrokes, which demonstrate a sense of freedom. Since the brushstrokes are not limited and tight, it suggests that independence is a theme that embodies the entire painting. To be free from someone's control is a desire that many of the children felt during the genocide. While painting this piece, I experimented with letting the paint have its own type of freedom. I would place a brushstroke on the canvas and then place another watery one on top of it. This would create a runny line of color that streaked the canvas without me deliberately placing it there. This allowed the paint to freely make its marks around the composition which correlates with the children's desire for freedom. Most of the brushstrokes were intentional in this composition. However, I continued to keep the strokes loose to give the painting a lively feeling. The colors in the piece also suggest that it is supposed to be energetic and happy. Many types of greens, purples, and yellows are used instead of other muted colors, such as blacks and browns.

The last painting in this series is titled *Purification* (figure 3). All three of the pieces have one word titles. As an artist, I tend to give my pieces short titles because I prefer the painting to tell the story. I expect the title to just give a hint to what I am portraying. This piece is a very dramatic interpretation of a child rape survivor. I used a lot of black in this piece to catch the attention of the viewers. Sexual violence was a major component in the Guatemalan army's

method of destroying the lives of the Mayas. Therefore, I feel it is necessary to make a statement with this piece.

A child is placed on the right of the composition. However, this figure is not taking up much space even though the composition allows for a larger depiction. I have painted her in this way to suggest that this is how she feels. As a rape survivor, I can relate to the children that have victimized in this way. Although reactions vary among survivors, there is a tendency for them to feel tainted, unworthy of love, and isolated. This painting depicts all three of these feelings. The girl is alone, feeling small and insignificant. The space around her is empty, and she is isolating herself from places that have people and life. The streaks of light blue that is coming from the top of the painting represent water or rain. The girl is sitting below the water in hopes that it can purify her. Since the perpetrators forced themselves sexually on her, she now feels contaminated. It would be nice if the rain could just take away what happened and make everything back to the way it was before the violation. Unfortunately, the recovery process is not that simple. This painting is not about recovery, but rather a feeling of being in the lowest place you could possibly be in your life. The Mayan children who were raped can never gain their innocence back and there is a time when they realize this. *Purification* demonstrates this low feeling.

### Conclusion

In general, genocide is a horrific event that many find difficult to study and understand. The Guatemalan genocide is one of many that ended in the destruction of countless lives. In order to honor and remember those that were slaughtered in Guatemala, it is important to study more about it, tell their stories, and express how you are feeling about it. Even though the kids may have felt alone and sad for some time, it is possible that they can recover from this traumatic event. With time and support from others, happiness can once again fill the lives of the Mayan children of Guatemala.

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Figure 1

Ashley LePage, "Shield," 2009, Acrylic on canvas.



Figure 2

Ashley LePage, "Longing," 2009, Acrylic on canvas.



Figure 3

Ashley LePage, "Purification," 2009, Acrylic on canvas.

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