Tanya Domi:

Hello, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to The Thought Project recorded at the CUNY Graduate Center. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating groundbreaking research, assisting New Yorkers, and informing the world.

Lili Quiroa-Crowell is a PhD candidate in anthropology at the CUNY Graduate Center. Her research is looking at urban space and indigeneity on the Caribbean coast of Guatemala. She is a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Abroad Recipient and is supported by the Wenner-Gren Dissertation Fieldwork Grant. Ms. Quiroa has just begun a 12-month ethnographic fieldwork project in Porto Barrios, Guatemala, where she is conducting archival research on the historic development of the city, as well as organizing a collaborative cartography project and public exhibition as part of her larger doctoral dissertation project to examine the process of a erasure of the Q'eqchi' Maya Indigenous women in this Caribbean port city.

Welcome to The Thought Project, Lili Quiroa-Crowell.

Lilianna Quiroa-Crowell:

Thank you so much. I'm really honored to be here and really excited to have a conversation about these exciting themes.

Tanya Domi:

Indeed. You are a PhD candidate in anthropology, and you are now based in Guatemala carrying out your research. How did you become interested in the role of Guatemala and women in connection to the US company United Fruit Company that essentially established a colonized presence in Guatemala through commercial exploitation via capitalism from the beginning of the 20th century?

Lilianna Quiroa-Crowell:

Yeah, I'm definitely coming to you straight from Guatemala City, so it's really exciting to be here, kind of starting to look at these questions on the ground.

So I've been interested and looking at Guatemala most of my life. A lot of it comes from my own family background. I'm biracial, bicultural. My father immigrated from Guatemala when he was 18 to the United States, and then my mother's from the United States. So most of my life, I grew up going kind of back and forth between the two countries, was very aware of the very difficult history, very difficult social realities, both that being economic, racial-ethnic, discrimination, genocidal violence that ended in 1996. Those were kind of always topics that were at the forefront of my life growing up in the United States, but knowing that I had kind of this split history.

And then I furthered that interest when I started my doctoral program. I knew that I wanted to do a project in Guatemala. I knew that I wanted it to be on Guatemala women. And as I started learning more about the history of Guatemala, I really became stuck on the role of the United Fruit Company in Guatemala.

So to give a little bit of background, the United Fruit Company essentially kind of monopolized banana trade across Latin America, but in particular Central America. At one point, they were the largest landowner in Guatemala. They owned almost all transportation, all communication, and they actually co-financed a coup against the democratically elected government, which kind of sent the country into this really viral spiral and civil war and genocide that ended. And so I knew that I really wanted to commit my academic investigations into understanding this relationship between this company, the spaces that they controlled, and the people that are still living there today.

I think I really also was really interested, when I went to Porto Barrios, which is the port city where at one point and still Chiquita Banana today owns, because it's a space that's always linked to men when you think of fruit plantations, kind of like the physical labor or even commercial shipping, it's always male-associated. And there's been a lot of really good and inspirational academic work that has kind of disentangled this and really highlighted that yes, a lot of the people that do the physical labor on the plantations today and in history have been men, but there's always women that are supporting these efforts. It's not possible without a really robust group of women that kind of keep the plantations running. Laura Putnam has looked at this on United Fruit as well as others.

And so I really was interested in how Maya Indigenous women who are rarely associated with the banana industry are connected to it since when I went to Porto Barrios, I saw a lot of Indigenous women living in this commercial port city, and I really just wanted to understand why is it that we don't talk about these women and the labor and social realities that they contribute or are forced to contribute to these economic systems? And what are the consequences of not talking about these people that are so integral to the way that these companies are still functioning in these spaces?

So that's kind of the really drawn-out way that I got interested in these topics.

Tanya Domi:

That's very interesting. Familial connections always kind of pull us into some of the things we end up doing. I myself am like third-generation Albanian, and that's how I ended up becoming a Balkanist, you know? So I can relate to your personal story.

What's interesting to me also, from a feminist standpoint, is the fact that, as you said, the local women, the Guatemala women, just essentially as you describe in your research narrative, they've been erased and they're invisible. And yet, as you just pointed out, there's no way these companies could run and function because women really, in these situations, probably lead the family, they care for the family, and they probably, as you you've documented it, also help support the family financially as well. And yet we don't see them. They're not visible. And of course, from a feminist perspective, that's very disturbing, and to unpack it seems to be part of your ethnographic research.

You are there as a Fulbright Scholar and you're going to be carrying out this research for the next year. What is the precise focus of your archival research while you're there?

Lilianna Quiroa-Crowell:

Yeah. And I think what you said is exactly right. It's very unsettling when you start to think about all of the people that are involved in these processes that we don't think about, we don't see, aren't recognized officially, because it allows a lot of violence to go unnoticed. We don't talk about the people that are, in the case of a lot of times, United Fruit, cleaning the houses, creating the food, running the marketplaces, doing the transport. You don't hear about some of the forms of exploitation that are also going on the ground because technically, these people don't exist in those spaces.

So that's really what I'm looking at when I'm doing the archival research. So, this first bit, I'm visiting a lot of time in the archives that are located in the capital city, the Archivos [Spanish 00:07:45], the Centroamérica, some private collections, and I'm really trying to figure out and reconstruct the history of Porto Barrios.

So Porto Barrios is located on the Caribbean coast of Guatemala. It's one of two really important Atlantic coast port cities, but it really isn't a city that's considered very important anymore in Guatemala. If you mention it to average people walking around the capital city, they'd say, "Oh yeah, that's a commercial

city. That's where shipping containers go through. That's where you go to get on a cruise. That's where you go to get to this beautiful beach."

There's really no ability to see this city as part of Guatemala, as an important city, as somewhere to visit, as somewhere even where people live. It's really just for shipping, which is so interesting because in the past, Porto Barrios was actually constructed as a modern city. It was kind of seen as this space that was going to be constructed completely fresh. It was going to be the height of modernization of Central America, of Guatemala. It was going to be seen as their kind of entry port for tourism. They had a direct train line that brought people to the capital to show how modern the country was. So I'm super interested in how this transformation happened, why it happened, and why there's really very little written about it.

So in the archives, I'm looking at a lot of Guatemala state geography projects. How is the city mapped? How was the city planned out? What were the legislative records of the use of this space, the transformation of this space? And I'm also looking at United Fruit Company records. So I did a lot of this archival research over COVID in the United States at Harvard Archives, at Tulane Archives, looking at United Fruit Company employee magazines, their corporate annual records, and also a lot of their architectural and geographical plans of planning the city since the city ended up being financed, planned and controlled by the United Fruit Company.

Tanya Domi:

Well, that is an incredible overview of the history and how significant the presence was of the United Fruit Company.

I just want to ask you, I mean, I did read in your materials you gave me that they actually published a monthly magazine that was written by and women participated in this. Could you talk a little bit about that?

Lilianna Quiroa-Crowell:

Yeah. So they had a magazine that circulated across the different divisions. So each country had different plantation divisions that they would organize, and it was supposed to be a magazine that connected their US-based and white employees so that they could feel this sense of community and connection to the corporation and connection to other plantations. And they're so fascinating because they are basically kind of like a social magazine. There's like essays written by women, poems. There's essays by some of their husbands. And this is actually something that has been extremely helpful in kind of setting up the archival research that I'm doing here because a lot of these men and women and young people that wrote in this magazine described their everyday activities living on the plantations as Americans in Guatemala, Honduras, wherever it may be.

And so, as I said, a lot of Indigenous people, they don't show up in the actual records of United Fruit Company, especially women because they didn't work on the plantations, they didn't harvest the bananas. But in these corporate magazines that were written by everyday US wives of the employees, you actually do see a lot of Indigenous women. They show up in photographs, they show up in the personal narratives of employees, they show up in these, I don't know, sometimes they would write fantasy stories about the adventures they were having, and you would kind of see these little glimpses of people that existed in this space but aren't officially recorded.

And so that's actually kind of the second half of the archival research that now I'm doing here is I'm trying to really reconstruct the history of the city and reconstruct the history of Q'eqchi' people in the

city, which is a little difficult since they don't show up in a lot of official records, but they show up in these shadow ways at the edges, which that corporate magazine has really helped unpack for me.

Tanya Domi:

Oh, that's very interesting. So there's no census data or anything like that on Indigenous people?

Lilianna Quiroa-Crowell:

There is a little bit. It's a little complicated since they're seen as migratory. So a lot of times, migratory populations are not officially recorded.

Tanya Domi:

Like the Roma in Europe, for example.

Lilianna Quiroa-Crowell:

Yeah, definitely. And also because this area was so controlled by United Fruit Company, it was less integrated in some of the kind of official mechanisms of collecting data that other spaces in Guatemala were.

Also, this area is not associated with indigeneity in Guatemala. In Guatemala, it's kind of assumed that Indigenous people live in the highlands to the north, the west, and this is the east. So this was kind of seen as an abandoned tropical area, nobody lives here. Maybe there are some Afro-Caribbean who live here, but there's really no Indigenous people. So I would guess, and this is something I'm going to hopefully find out, that even if there were, it would be difficult for census records to even be able to record Indigenous people in a space where indigeneity is not assumed to exist. So that's kind of what I'm going to figure out.

Tanya Domi:

That's very paradoxical.

So you have explained that you are building on important academic work that has explored the spatialization of indigeneity across Latin America, rendering Indigenous people unrecognizable as we just alluded to, inauthentic and urban spaces. Now, it seems like this city is probably pretty urbanized given the history of its development, and it seems indeed, that among all the people that congregate there, they seem to be the most invisible. How do you view them within that society? It's just an interesting paradox when you're talking about their invisibility.

Lilianna Quiroa-Crowell:

And actually, this is kind of this question of Maya at large, but Q'eqchi' in my project in particular, the question of where and when Maya identity is seen as authentic or appropriate or recognizable, is actually really at the forefront of a lot of conversations, both in the US and here in Guatemala.

So yesterday, I actually went to a fantastic panel here in the capital city. It was a panel of five different Indigenous either academics, there were anthropologists, sociologists, there was a doctor and a lawyer. And they were all discussing this issue of how Mayans in Guatemala is really kind of geographically limited to particular areas and particular activities and practices, and anyone that falls out of that kind of spectrum is deemed inauthentic, not real, not really Indigenous. And so this is a really kind of hot topic right now in Guatemala that I see happening a lot in Porto Barrios actually.

The way that I kind of see this community at large, it is a smaller percentage of the overall population of Porto Barrios. That is kind of the reality. They are not the majority. The majority live kind of to the north in Alta Verapaz, about in Cobán area. But I think that this speaks to the larger reality of the Maya community, the Q'eqchi' community in Guatemala. It's an extremely diverse community, as all communities are. Geographically, they're spread across a lot of spaces. Ideologically, they have a very different diverse perspectives. Also, intergenerationally, you see a lot of different ways of being Maya Q'eqchi'. They're actually the largest geographical spread of almost all the Indigenous groups in Guatemala, and so you see a lot of diversity coming from those different life experiences.

But that goes back to the reality that still, even if Maya identity looks different in different spaces in different communities, that really has nothing to do with authenticity. So the question is, who is implementing these standards of authenticity? Why? What are the consequences of deeming a group inauthentic and thus non-existent? So I think-

Tanya Domi:

And marginalizing them. By de facto, they're marginalized.

Lilianna Quiroa-Crowell:

Yeah, absolutely. I think that we see this a lot. Porto Barrios is known, unfortunately, a lot for its rates of violence, especially violence against women. And so when you look at statistics or stories coming out of Porto Barrios, you see violence against women, violence against people, but because we don't really recognize Indigenous Q'eqchi' people as a distinct community in this space, those statistics are not kind of divided or broken down further, which I think kind of helps us ignore what's going on a little bit or not really see what's going on the ground because we don't recognize these people as authentically living in a particular city.

Tanya Domi:

Oh, for sure. And one of the things that Hillary Clinton used to say is that what is counted matters. What is counted matters. And so if they're not counted, like in population studies or census studies, or they're not recorded with their presence, then yes, all that is lost and it's marginalized, by de facto, erased. So it seems that your ethnographic research here is quite important, Lili.

Lilianna Quiroa-Crowell:

Thank you.

Tanya Domi:

Given the history of the United Fruit Company and your ability to access archives to it, how do you think that you'll be able to explain maybe the development of the city and how they played a role in developing it, as you said, it was imagined to be when it was or originally built?

Lilianna Quiroa-Crowell:

I mean, that's part of what I'm going to be finding out on the ground as well. I'm going to be conducting a lot of oral histories and interviews with different elders in the community or families in the Q'eqchi' community in Port Barrios to really understand their history of moving into this space, how long they've been around, things they've participated in, perspectives they've had on the change. But my hypothesis is I really do think that this community is going to play an important role in how the city developed, and I

think it's also really important to think about that this city used to be seen as the peak of modernity. And when we talk about Mayans in Guatemala, a lot of times, Maya as an Indigenous community is very stereotyped and very static. It's kind of seen as this past, very archaic kind of cultural group, which is super problematic.

So I think that this idea or this original inception of the city as a space of modernity really will help explain why Indigenous people cannot be recognized in that space since the stereotype is always so limited to talking about Mayas as if they live in the past, which is so problematic because it erases their ongoing presence, contribution, political struggle, resilience.

So I think that a lot of the research that I'm going to be doing on the ground, these interviews, is going to help unpack these really tricky relationships between urban space, modernity, indigeneity, and then also today, the fact that the space is now not talked about as modern, it's talked about as really dangerous, really abandoned, really for shipping, which also plays a role in ignoring the reality that this community is undergoing a lot of challenges right now in that area. I think the current climate crisis, there were two really large hurricanes that went through this city. There's currently a lot of nickel mining that's happening in the surrounding more rural areas, and these Q'eqchi' communities are kind of on the forefront of challenging those really harsh realities.

But again, if we don't talk about them as living in a space, we can't really talk about these political struggles they're engaged in.

Tanya Domi:

So from a US perspective, if you open up a newspaper and you read any article about Guatemala, what you're going to read, I think, and see is it this is a really dangerous space, there's a lot of violence, there's gangs and drugs, and people coming to the US border that are coming from Guatemala are probably leaving because of fear of violence. And then the climate change issues, the issues that I've read about is that Guatemala is having a harder time growing food because of climate changes. So you're also, in this context of violence, kind of like a narrative that may have some truth to it because I'm sure people also are able to live as well, and not everybody is fleeing violence, but at the same time, this community is being confronted with climate change and it's near the ocean and it's close to water. And all these islands and countries that are on coastlines are all facing these challenges right now.

Lilianna Quiroa-Crowell:

Yeah, absolutely. And I think that something that has really inspired me about this project is that this idea of invisible people, invisible spaces isn't just limited to Guatemala or Puerto Barrios. I mean, we see it even in our own conversations based in the US, even if we're thinking about the migrant situation on the border. If you remember a bit ago, there was, in the news, several children that died in detention centers. And if you look at the last names of several of those children, they are Maya Indigenous, and they actually came from the northern regions where a lot of Q'eqchi' communities live. So in the kind of north Alta Verapaz area, several of those children had come from.

And so, I think when we talk about these larger abstract issues, it helps to think that it also involves these kinds of smaller, very locally-based communities because they're participating, they're being impacted, they are resisting all of the violence. And I think that part of my project also wants to emphasize that not only is a community resilient, but they're also creative and they also offer solutions, if we take a second to listen. And I think that that's something I really want to emphasize in a lot of this collaborative project that I'm going to be doing in the second half in these interviews to really think about what does maybe solutions, urban solutions or solutions that these communities are offering on

the ground, what do they look like? How might they be different than what dominant conversations propose to be solutions?

Tanya Domi:

So I want you to talk about these collaborative projects. And you are based in Porto Barrios, correct?

Lilianna Quiroa-Crowell:

Mm-hmm.

Tanya Domi:

That's where you're based. So I'd like you to talk about some of the activities that you're planning to do as part of your dissertation research.

Lilianna Quiroa-Crowell:

Yeah, absolutely. So obviously, I'm going to be doing a lot of archival stuff, but the second half that I'm going to be doing while I'm here in Guatemala is actually a collaborative cartography project. And so in the beginning, I think you mentioned something about statistics and how that kind of serves as a mechanism to recognize or not recognize people. My project really looks at not only statistics, but also maps. How we draw space and who we imagine to fill that space really matters when it comes to conversations about race, ethnicity, people that belong, people that don't belong, authenticity.

So I'm going to be doing a collaborative cartography project with a group of Q'eqchi' women that live in or work primarily in Porto Barrios. We're going to meet biweekly and we're going to discuss their perspectives of the city and have them actually go out every week and draw different types of maps. So a lot of this is coming from the Toolkit for the Study of Ethnographic Space that was published by the Grad Center, where I'm going to have them go and draw where do they feel at home? How do they go about the city? How do they see circulations in the city? What is the history of their families and communities in these spaces? Where are important landmarks in the city that maybe aren't on our official Google Maps or state-produced maps?

And I want to create, at the end of this kind of collaborative project, an exhibition where they're actually going to display their different hand-drawn maps and also photographs of the city. So part of this project also will be each woman will receive a 35 millimeter camera, kind of like a reusable camera, and they're going to go out and take pictures based on different themes we come up with as a group. So what does home look like? What does Mayans look like? Where do you feel safe? Where do you feel connected to the city? And then they're going to discuss these photographs as a group and what these different perspectives on the city mean to them as Q'eqchi' women.

So the end goal of this collaborative project is the group will decide what they will and will not include in the exhibition and why, and then we'll put it up in a public space in the center of Porto Barrios to see what does it look like putting up a Q'eqchi' perspective of a city where they're said to not belong? And so that's going to be the last eight months of my project is going to be this collaborative project with a group of women in the city.

Tanya Domi:

That is very cool, and you're going to be doing oral histories as well.

Lilianna Quiroa-Crowell:

Mm-hmm.

Tanya Domi:

That is a really commendable project. So you're going out of your way in a very overt manner by using this collaborative project to basically document the contributions and the presence of the Q'eqchi' people, as an outsider, which will be very interesting to do.

Lilianna Quiroa-Crowell:

Right. Which is I think why I also, I'm really emphasizing this collaborative methodology because as an academic, I've done a lot of readings, I've done a lot of interviews, but I think it's really important, especially in drawing these maps and creating this exhibition, that the women themselves get to really decide what they want to include and how they view the city, and that it's not my voice saying that, that it's really the group that is deciding what they want to include. Because I think that this type of opening, this creative opening, this creation of maps that challenge the maps that either academics or officials impose on spaces can be a really fruitful way for hearing voices of people that are said not to matter, or said don't have the official skills to create these things. I think it can be really fruitful, which is why I really am pushing for this collaborative part of the project, to not speak as an academic for the people on the ground, but really open up a space so that they can display what they see about the city.

Tanya Domi:

I'm thinking about Susan Sontag and her essay on photography. I actually, in my master's thesis, I actually did use photography of genocide survivors, and you might want to take a look at that essay. It's an interesting one because she's talking about photography and how we use it and don't use it. Anyway, it's an interesting piece.

I love your description of this collaborative project and who knows what will come of it. Right?

Lilianna Quiroa-Crowell:

Right. Which I think is also exciting. How it will look at the end of eight months is still a little unclear since that is not entirely my decision. And I think too, I really am excited about the use of photography and putting it in conversation with maps. A map is essentially a visual way to represent or capture a space, so it'll be really interesting to see how these women view and inhabit their spaces and how they choose to display that visually, which is kind of the goal of this project as well.

Tanya Domi:

And you seem to be very driven to document their lives and the presence of their families and their participation. It seems to be a very critical aspect of your research and your storytelling.

Lilianna Quiroa-Crowell:

Yeah. I think a lot of that does come out of what I mentioned before, that I think it's really important to challenge the idea of particular urban spaces being just for a particular activity. In this case, commercial shipping, or just for particular people, in this case, again, male port workers or male activities. And I think it's really important to highlight a lot of the unrecognized labor, the unrecognized creativity, and also, a lot of the unrecognized challenges that women face on the ground in these spaces. I want this project to be a way to unsettle this because cities are spaces where you see a lot of creativity coming out, and when it's stereotyped into this very particular box, it's hard to see what's going on.

Also, I think that, as I mentioned, a lot of the Q'eqchi' community right now is involved in a lot of political struggle. I mentioned the nickel mine, and actually on the International Women's Day, there was one of the Q'eqchi' women that is protesting this nickel mine named Maria Cuc Choc, actually was on trial in Porto Barrios. She's been kind of illegally detained or detained and criminalized for her environmental and women's rights participation in resisting this mine in a city that's a couple of hours from Porto Barrios. And I think that when we don't talk about the activities that are going on the ground in urban spaces, it actually depoliticizes the people and devalues the people that are involved in these types of struggles.

And so I hope to join larger conversations that are coming out of the Q'eqchi' community, that are coming out of the Guatemalan academic community, and US academic community who are all talking about these things and play a little part in adding to that conversation.

Tanya Domi:

What I think you're doing is you're highlighting and illuminating their agency, that they actually are really engaged, in this example of this activist you just mentioned, and they're quite visible there, even though there may be efforts to marginalize them. Is there anything else you'd like to mention before we end here?

Lilianna Quiroa-Crowell:

Yeah. I guess my push with this project too is to encourage both listeners and the people that are going to be engaged in the conversations with me here in my research to really think about what is made to be invisible, who is made to be invisible, and the consequences of that. And while my project looks at a very specific community, a very specific space, something very focused, I think that that is a framework that can be expanded out to something that we can kind of implement more in our everyday lives. I mentioned it in the conversations about migration. And we can add that kind of lens to a lot of our conversations about issues happening in the United States.

Before coming down here, I was living in Chicago for a bit, and there's a really big mayoral campaign happening right now, but something that hasn't been mentioned is actually, there was recently, in Little Village, there was a murder of three women that actually are Indigenous, and one of them is Q'eqchi' as well. And I think that these types of invisibility, it's not really being talked about. I heard about it actually when I came to Guatemala through friends and then Twitter posts. And so I think that this idea of who is made to be invisible because they're seen as not belonging or not being authentic or not being real in a space can really help us add a little bit more depth to our conversations, whether that be conversations about violence in the city of Chicago, violence at the border, global economic shipping systems. When we take a second to really look at what's erased, why, why do we forget these things, I think that it can actually make our conversations more robust and make our solutions more robust as well.

So I am pushing myself to think that way more, and I encourage others to also start to try and notice the margins or notice the people that are inauthentically in a space because that often can illuminate a lot of the systems at work.

Tanya Domi:

That's a wonderful mission, and you are here with us straight from Porto Barrios, Guatemala, the first student to ever do this with The Thought Project. It's been a wonderful conversation and we wish you a great deal of success and luck in your research, and I look forward to seeing you back here in New York afterwards.

Lilianna Quiroa-Crowell:

Thank you so much, and thank you so much for your conversation with me. I really have enjoyed our time.

Tanya Domi:

Thanks for tuning into The Thought Project, and thanks to our guest, Lili Quiroa-Crowell, a PhD candidate in Anthropology at the CUNY Graduate Center.

The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering, and technical assistance by audio engineer Kevin Wolf and CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.