**Chapter 1 – Introduction: Two lynchings – a microcosm**

**Abstract**

Following a brief overview of the book as a whole this first chapter quickly gets to the two detailed accounts of vigilante violence in Todos Santos, Guatemala at the heart of this book. Starting with the lynching of Jorge Mario – a local youth suspected of thefts following his return to the traditional Maya community from the United States with long hair, tattoos and piercings. We then move on to the fatal attack on the Japanese tourist Tetsuo Yamahiro and his bus driver Edgar Castellanos which followed regional rumours of satanic violence against children. The victims were innocent of the accusation in both cases. To contextualise these acts – and to begin the process of unpicking how these innocent victims came to be singled out - the chapter moves on to look at the wider wave of lynchings that swept across Guatemala, how they relate to other forms of collective violence, wider regional practices of vigilantism (Mendoza 2003; Pratten & Sen 2007) and how they came to be described by the UN as a ‘new form of human rights abuse’.

**Overview**

Drawing upon two lynchings that happened in Todos Santos Cuchumatán in the North-western highlands of Guatemala, this book seeks to explain why these two attacks occurred and to reconcile the geneses of these two events with the wider national and regional wave of vigilante lynchings that began in the 1990’s and have carried on into the present. The book explores the complex causation of violence and how local, national and regional factors interplay in the spread of collective violence. The book is *A Tale of Two Lynchings* because, by the time I arrived in Todos Santos, the lynchings had already happened and my research became a matter of unpicking the stories that circulated about the attacks in an attempt to retrospectively understand what happened through the narratives I encountered. This approach is a layered one as I aim to make sense of lynchings as acts of violence in themselves but also against the backdrop of the national and regional wave of lynchings and in relation to the violence of the conflict, while also exploring how collective violence and violence more generally spread as social phenomena. My approach is distinctly scalar in that I am starting with the local and specific in early chapters before expanding outwards into more nationally and then globally relevant factors in regards to the analysis of vigilante violence. This approach leads to the book being a little strange for the ethnographically inclined as chapters become less localised and less personal as the book progresses.

In this introductory chapter I will describe the two attacks and contextualise them against the backdrop of a wave of lynchings which began in 1996 in the immediate aftermath of the Guatemalan civil war. The chapter begins with a detailed account of both lynchings in order to unpick the various layers of context and analysis throughout the rest of the book. The chapter ends with discussion of the wave of lynchings that swept across Guatemala, how they relate to other forms of collective violence, wider regional practices of vigilantism (Mendoza 2003; Pratten & Sen 2007).

The process of unpacking these lynchings begins in the second chapter. This chapter provides local contextual detail regarding Todos Santos, exploring the history of the town, how the war deconstructed local social structures and the increasing levels of labour migration that underpin deep divisions within the community regarding threats to local Mam-speaking Maya identities. This chapter unpicks the social changes, locally referred to as *los cambios* – spanning rejection of Maya typical clothing, language, media consumption, and the emergence of gangs - and how these changes played into the two attacks: the first attack targeted a tourist, the second targeted one of the first wave of labour migrants. This chapter contextualises the history of the town to provide a sense of how and why this history resonates in contemporary disputes and violence.

The third chapter explores the relationship between lynchings and the violence of the conflict that preceded them. As lynchings began so distinctly in the same year the civil war ended, there is a clear relationship between old and new violence. This chapter explores how the lynchings in Todos Santos, and Guatemalan lynchings more generally, can be seen as a continuity of violence from the civil war. With lynching participants often consisting of former civil patrollers who were armed and forced to police and patrol their own communities – vigilante violence is often seen as a continuation of their war-time policing roles. But as urban areas without civil patrols are also experiencing lynchings and with similar vigilantism now emerging throughout Central America in response to gangs, the relationship between patrollers and lynchings is not so straightforward. With issues of individual and collective trauma affecting responses to threat and the shift from military to civilian policing also contributing to the make-up of lynchings how much can we (or should we) blame the war? The ubiquity of the term postwar is critiqued in this chapter as a reductionist explanation that flattens understandings of reactive violence. Here, the war and the human rights abuses of the past are approached as significant but often overstated factors in the fomentation of lynchings at both a local and national level.

The fourth chapter explains the relationship between lynchings, a form of non-state justice, and the Guatemalan state. As Abrahams established in *Vigilant Citizens*, vigilantism is a frontier phenomenon. For vigilantism to thrive there must be widespread dissatisfaction with justice. As with other forms of vigilantism, lynchings embody a complex relationship between citizens and the Guatemalan state. Lynchings critique state inaction regarding crime, while paradoxically enunciating a desire for better provision of state justice. State apathy towards lynchings is seen to legitimise them, while state-led anti-lynching campaigns seek to stigmatise them. The Guatemalan state has used lynchings as a mask for death squads, as a tool to critique suggestions for expanding the provision of customary law for indigenous Maya communities and has simultaneously outlawed patrol-based vigilantism while also encouraging civilian patrols in areas where gangs have gained territorial control. Drawing upon literature on Weberian (1919) and Giddensian (1985) ideas of monopolies of legitimate state violence, Andersonian anthropology on imagining the state (Anderson 1983; Hannsen & Stepputat 2001; Das & Poole 2004) this chapter explores the interplay between contrasting conceptions of law and justice (Rawls 1971) including rule of law, customary law, ‘indigenous justice’, popular justice, *mano dura* (Godoy 2006) and how they play out in dissonant understandings of the ‘justice’ in lynchings in Todos Santos and beyond.

The fifth chapter explores the lynchings in relation to gossip and rumour. The two lynchings discussed in this book were driven by hearsay in ways that will become clear by the end of this introduction. This chapter will explore the role of hearsay as the mechanism at the heart of the scapegoating and targeting seen in vigilantism on a global scale.

Chapter 6 discusses the role of the media in the spread of lynchings. While the arrival of the rumour regarding Satanism into Todos Santos via Mam language radio broadcast is a stark part of the make-up of that particular lynching the relationship between vigilantism and broadcast media is an old one. D.W. Griffith’s 1915 film *Birth of a Nation* (alongside the media coverage of the death of Mary Phagan) is widely credited with the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan. In writings on vigilantism (Starn 1999; Pratten 2007) it is often noted that specific groups of vigilantes got the idea through seeing or hearing reports of others in the news. Yet the role played by the media in spreading the notion of, and specific blueprints for, vigilantism has gone almost entirely unexplored. This chapter addresses this by exploring the role played by the media in the ‘noise’-laden (Rothwell 2004) mimesis of specific forms of violence. In the 21st century the relationship between vigilantism and the media is becoming increasingly intertwined through the promulgation of new social medias. Exploring diverse groups spanning Anonymous, the ‘Real Life Superhero’ movement and cyber vigilantes such as Letzgohunting this chapter unwraps the wider relationship between vigilantism and the media and explores the role of media in the spread of Guatemalan vigilantism.

Chapter 7 explores how lynchings are not a finite phenomenon and how they inter-penetrate other forms of violence. The term *linchamientos* only came into being in 1996, taking the name from the racially motivated lynchings of the Deep South of the United States (Rothenburg 1998). Vigilante attacks that occurred before this date are not considered part of this wave of lynchings despite striking similarities. But such temporal omissions are not the only place where the boundaries between lynchings and other forms of violence are blurred. There are fine lines between lynchings and riots; between organised vigilantism and spontaneous attacks; between gangs who patrol their territories and vigilantes who police their communities. Collective violence is inherently chaotic and the language we use to describe it is inevitably imperfect. This chapter explores how these forms of collective violence pass across these porous divides and how this affects our understanding and analysis of violence.

The concluding chapter of this book will interrogate what might be done in light of these observations. Based on the premise that less fatal violence is preferable, the book finishes by exploring viable ways in which the worst excesses of this violence might be diminished.

As the main purpose of this book is to unpick and then recontextualise these two lynchings I am forestalling on the contextual background to get to the lynchings first. As such this chapter now turns to those attacks.

**Two Lynchings in Todos Santos**

The accounts of these two lynchings given here draw upon wide ranging interviews conducted in the first few months of my time in Todos Santos. In these first months I tried to gain a detailed picture of how the violence arose and what occurred during the attacks. These included fifteen more 'formal' interviews (where informants were happy to have me take notes) alongside around twenty other 'less formal' interviews which were 'reconstructed' after the conversations had taken place, and additional conversations from throughout my research. Interviews included seven witness' testimonies for the first attack (as well as a detailed account from the victim), and six witnesses of the second attack. This ‘less formal’ approach to interviews was something that emerged slowly through experience. It became clear that experiences in the aftermath of the second lynching had left Todosanteros (the collective noun for people from Todos Santos) mistrusting of journalists, and this caution was often extended to others due to suspicions regarding undercover journalists or if an interviewee had diffuse misgivings about sharing their account with outsiders. This was sometimes expressed by declining to be interviewed, and at other times through a desire not to be seen being interviewed, so tape recorder or note taking sometimes made interviewees uncomfortable. This often led to me listening to accounts then having to (often literally) run to the nearest available toilet, bench or other amenable space to download as much as could be recalled from the conversation in its immediate aftermath. This was not the case for all interviews, but enough for it to be a notable feature of my methodology.

These experiences were my first tentative steps as an ethnographer and represented me feeling my way into my research site. It had taken six months to find a research site where I felt both an openness amongst locals to discuss lynchings coupled with sense of safety that made it viable. Having explored many other possible research sites I was met off the bus in Todos Santos by a representative from one of their three language schools, within hours I had a family to stay with and was talking openly with someone who had witnessed one of the lynchings in Todos Santos and another in a neighbouring town. It was clear that the aftermath of the second lynching had led to an openness to discuss the violence (although as noted above – this had its limits) which I had not encountered elsewhere. Research participants pointed me in the direction of others who were willing to talk, and sitting in *Parque Central* turned out to be a viable way of instigating conversation and interviews.

What became clear throughout these interviews and conversations was that while there was a ‘core story’ around which narratives were told and retold, there was profound variation in many of the details: these were contentious and unstable narratives. To maintain this inherent instability for further unpacking throughout this book, especially in Chapter 5, the ambiguities are left largely intact for the time being, while some of the more tangential assertions are saved for later chapters. I shall also be drawing on written accounts of the lynchings by Jennifer Burrell (Burrell 2005; Burrell & Weston 2007) (who was present for the first lynching), Robert Sitler (2000), Jim Handy (2004), Daniel Valencia Caravantes (2011) Marta Gutiérrez and Paul Kobrak (2001) as my aim is to capture this multiplicity. Narratives of both lynchings differ depending on a variety of factors including who the narrator is, who their audience is, where the interchange took place, how well the narrator knows their audience and many other inter-related issues spanning the general and the incredibly specific. This applies as much to myself as it does to those who have recounted the story to me, as I myself have a variety of versions of the lynchings to select from and the aspects I choose to stress and the way in which I convey the narrative varies substantially from one occasion to the next. Recognising that everybody who I interviewed did exactly the same, it must be noted that this is just one assemblage (Deleuze 1988) of events riddled with ambiguities.

**The First Lynching: Jorge Mario**

In 1997 Jorge Mario Ramirez Matias returned to Todos Santos having spent over a year working in the United States. He was there to visit family and friends in and around Todos Santos and to enjoy and show off his newfound wealth. WhileJorge Mario had always been of a greater build than the average diminutive Mayan (although of a relatively average height), through construction work in the US he had bulked out even more.Already standing out due to his size and aura of self-confidence, he compounded this by becoming the first Todosantero to return from the United States appearing visually changed. His ears were pierced, three times in one ear and twice in the other, and his hair had grown long past his shoulders. Alongside these other changes he had also got tattooed on his arms. While tattoos in a wider context represent youthful rebellion, machismo or ‘alternative’ lifestyle choices they were becoming at the time, and even more so today, widely considered a symbol of gang membership among Guatemalans both in the US and in Guatemala. While it would perhaps be misleading to state that Jorge Mario was not a gang member, he was not a gang member in the context of the very real problem of *maras* in Guatemala and throughout Latin America. I have been assured by someone who was close to him in the US that he was never involved in gang culture whilst there, and his gang membership in Todos Santos amounted to little more than the petty misbehaviour. However, as Burrell notes, Jorge Mario himself helped to produce an ambiguous position as he would frequently refer to himself as a gang member in order to gain a degree of prestige both with local youths and visiting tourists, even boasting of (possibly non-existent) gang contacts in the United States (Burrell & Weston 2007). Other ‘Gringos’ (a term used by locals and a term of self-reference used by Americans and Europeans throughout Guatemala) who were in Todos Santos during my stay heard him contradictorily claim to be a gang member, and to have never been a gang member, making different assertions depending on who he was talking to and in what context.[[1]](#footnote-1) When I tried to talk to Jorge Mario about this he sheepishly shrugged and gave a guilty smile. He was very much aware of the problems this particular strategic instability had brought upon him.

In Todos Santos in 1997 when Jorge Mario was 'lynched' the activities of gangs amounted to little more than groups of youths naming themselves in ways that aped gang culture i.e. *M2 (Emé Dos*), the Mendoza Gang or the Pajone Clan. They were not involved in drugs or thefts, they did not own guns and were not responsible for violence outside of drunken brawling (which are not limited to gangs of youths) and territorial bullying of other local youths.[[2]](#footnote-2) As Burrell notes, gang activity in Todos Santos, in contrast to the rest of Latin America is a pursuit for the relatively affluent, restricted to those that need not work and who have ample leisure time available (Burrell 2005; Burrell & Weston 2007), making Todos Santos gangs very much a middle-class pursuit. Through loitering and the intimidation of other youths they were viewed as threatening. Despite the fact that Jorge Mario was not connected to any real criminality, outside of alcohol fuelled altercations, his appearance and association with general trouble marked him out as a social misfit, something out of place in a Mayan village which prides itself on its *tradición* and *custumbre*.

His return to Todos Santos set off ripples of gossip concerning his appearance and his behaviour. From working in the States he was relatively wealthy and spent his money freely amongst his friends, getting drunk and having fun. He and his friends would stay up late holding barbecues, listening to loud music and drinking beer by the crate-load at the ancient Mayan ruins (a local ritual center) near his house. Rumours eventually started which at some stage encompassed recent local and regional crimes, ranging from local petty thefts and later even encompassing hold-ups on pick-up trucks.

On December 20th 1997, the day he was lynched, around a month and a half after his return, he was having his hair cut in direct response to the attention it was receiving. Before his haircut was finished his father arrived visibly upset and asked him whether it was true that he was involved in robberies, because the *alcalde* (mayor) was in the town square with a loud-hailer saying he and his friends were criminals. Jorge Mario was furious and went down to the town square to see what was happening. It was a market day and a large crowd was gathered listening. The mayor was making allegations against Jorge Mario and his friends regarding thefts, precisely which thefts he was being accused of at this point is unclear, some say petty thefts others armed robberies. He walked up to the mayor and started to defend himself verbally. The *alcalde* said “*Vienen los ladrones!*” (“Here come the thieves!”). Jorge Mario pointed out that he had been in the US when the robberies took place, which was true. But the *alcalde* bated the crowd, making out that Jorge Mario was coming to attack him as he tried to convince the mayor to give him the megaphone.

The crowd started to heckle him, largely with insults about his appearance. They called him a woman (due to his long hair), telling him to go and sell women’s clothing at the market. Others accused him of being a *marero* or gangster. Then one man declared that Jorge Mario had robbed him 3 months previously (a time when he was not even in the country) which directly implicated him in a spate of robberies that had targeted pick-up trucks on the road to Huehuetenango. This was the spark that started people attacking him, initially just a few, but he fought back hard. Due to his size and strength he held them off for quite some time, but the attacks escalated. People started grabbing any available items to hit him with. Everything from fruit crates to spiked vegetables. His friends tried to help him but to little avail. He received bad blows to the head which disorientated him. Soon he was covered in blood from head to toe. At some stage in this attack somebody had taken it upon themselves to go and fetch petrol with which members of the crowd started to douse him. His friends ran to get water from the fountain in the town square to counter this. Although his attackers never managed to set him on fire it was not for lack of trying. He eventually managed to fight his way through the crowd and barricade himself inside the local clothing *cooperativa*. He was not sure how he did this and did not actually remember doing so due to the blows he had received to his head. The *cooperativa* however was quickly surrounded and as the building was made of wood at the time, the building itself in turn became the target for burning. Soon his friends and family arrived. His father tried to calm the crowd down. Eventually his relatives organised a human chain consisting of adults and children to stop them lighting the fire. His brother made the two hour journey to fetch the military as this was prior to the instigation of the Civil National Police (PNC). While all this had happened at around mid-day, it was not until 7pm that the military finally arrived to help. He had to escape under escort, dressed in women’s clothing to hide his identity from the still gathered crowd.

He spent the next two days in hospital. The mayor in this time had made a *denuncia* (official accusation) against him, accusing him of being responsible for the hold-ups on pick-up trucks. His family say this was a change in accusations by the mayor to cover his own back for inciting the violence. Due to these accusations he had a permanent military escort while in hospital and had to pay a hefty 10,000Q (roughly £1000 Sterling at the time) bail to remain out of detention while there was an investigation. Charges were later dropped against him when his passport and other papers showed he was not in the country at the time of the robberies. Allegedly the *alcalde* had to pay a bribe to escape charges of inciting the attack, although this is quite obviously only based on hearsay. Jorge Mario did return briefly to Todos Santos, but he soon went back to the US under advice from his friends and family, as many in the village still believed he was guilty of the crimes of which he was accused. In this time those that saw him were amazed to see him scar free, having previously seen him covered head to toe in blood. There was even, according to Jorge Mario, talk from some of magic accounting for his lack of any lasting injuries. While back in Todos Santos he managed to exacerbate negative ideas surrounding him still further by attacking his former teacher at a local celebration in the hills near Todos Santos. The teacher, who Jorge Mario had previously thought of as a friend, had been playing a large part in the continued rumours that circulated about him. Drunk at the fiesta he confronted the teacher, and when he refused to apologise Jorge Mario attacked him. The children who were in the teacher's care ran and hid in the forest – some were not found until the next day, spending a night exposed to the elements. After the attack even those that accepted he was innocent of the robberies now had him marked as a trouble maker – a reputation which for many lingered on until his death in November 2003 during my fieldwork.

It should also be noted that a possible secondary motivation for the *alcade’s* accusations against Jorge Mario was political point-scoring. Jorge Mario’s father was an ex-*alcalde* and was planning to stand again in the next elections, and many of his accused friends were from similarly politically connected branches of the town. Those close to his family argue that accusations may simply have been an attempt to sully the family’s political reputation. After the attack, his father still ran for *alcalde* on principal, but received just a handful of votes. Whether it was entirely political or whether he intended to incite violence will never be known. But normal criminal procedure would be to take the accusation to the authorities (although megaphones and town squares do play a large part in Guatemalan politics) rather than to go into the town centre and use a loud-speaker – a decision which appears to be based on local politics.

**The second lynching: Tetsuo Yamahiro and Edgar Castellanos**

The second lynching which occurred in Todos Santos is perhaps the most infamous lynching in Guatemala, at least in respect to press attention at both the national and international level. The attack occurred due to rumours which began in the State capital of Huehuetenango around (although some say exactly) a year prior to the attack. While details as to how exactly the rumour started are contested, at some stage there was a murder (or murders) which the police attributed to a Satanic group. One version of the rumour holds that police attributed the murder of a schoolgirl to a Satanic rite carried out by “young gang members” (Sitler 1999: 4). Another version I heard has the murder of the girl carried out by ex-military members patrolling the towns, attempting to rid the city of the *delinquencia* plaguing the town. In this version local youths avenge the killing of 6-8 female students by torturing one of the patrollers to death – cutting his tongue out and carving ‘*grupo satanico*’ on his chest. In another version it is a teenage girl who has the same message carved on her chest. In the year that followed these rumours circulated and transformed. By the time the rumour had crystalised a year later it concerned a quite specific fear; that Satanic child thieves were coming to Huehuetenango to sacrifice children on the local sports grounds. On the 19th of April 2000, the day the Satanists were rumoured to be coming, levels of paranoia in the departmental capital were so intense that the military were drafted in to reassuringly patrol the empty streets. But the panic was no longer localised to Huehuetenango, it had spread throughout the department through radio broadcasts. Sitler (1999:4) notes that the radio broadcasts which led to the panic were actually public service announcements telling *Huehuetecos* (collective noun for those from Huehuetenango) not to panic as the rumours were not true. He states that these messages were poorly understood and had the adverse effect of spreading the rumour further and lending it credibility. Todosanteros thought that a mere rumour would not be worthy of air-time, believing instead that there must be some truth to the rumours if they were the subject of department wide broadcasts.

The 19th of April was a market day in Todos Santos. Buying food and other household goods is usually the role of women in the town, yet that day, due to the rising level of fear it was largely men who were out doing the shopping at the market, while the women stayed at home. Then for the first time people could recall a plush tourist coach, unlike other buses that regularly visited the town and full of Japanese tourists, arrived in town as part of an organised tour of Guatemala. The driver Edgar Castellanos was from Quetzaltenango and not known locally. The bus was jet black with blacked out windows, all lending an air of mystery. Asians are collectively referred to as *chinos*, in the same way that people from the US, Canada and Europe are called *gringos*. In accounts of the attack locals note that *chinos* were not frequently seen in Todos Santos as most Japanese and Korean tourists tended to frequent the more established tourist locations of Antigua, Lake Atitlan and Xela. As such their arrival was even more unexpected and seemed incongruous, particularly on a day of heightened tensions.

The rumour spread quickly that the Satanists were in town and dressed either entirely in black or ‘*traje tipico*’ (‘typical clothing’). Exactly how the attack was sparked is one of the most disputed parts of the account. Some say that Tetsuo Yamahiro was taking photos of the baby of Catarina Pablo, others say he was comforting the child as it cried. One version has it that was Yamahiro’s friend who was initially attacked, and it was when he tried to save him that he became the focus of the attack. I heard one version where Yamahiro offered the baby a piece of fruit from a knife. Whatever actually occurred, it was the accusation of Catarina Pablo that someone was trying to steal or harm her baby which sparked the attack.

A 2011 journalistic account by Daniel Valencia Caravantes synthesises some of these triggers:

“The imaginary abductor was a tourist who stroked the head of Desiderio, the son of Catarina, and the crowd immediately cornered the Japanese man. "We don’t understand what’s going on", said Midori Kaneko to Tetsuo, before fleeing with Takashi Esashika and the police who let them past the cordon. Tetsuo, curious, stayed behind and began photographing men and women who surrounded him slowly, shouting.” (Caravantes 2011 – my translation)[[3]](#footnote-3)

Tetsuo Yamahiro was in his 60’s and asthmatic. He was wearing a dust mask to protect him from the dusty market, which added to his ‘other’ appearance which is often commented upon in narratives of the attack. When the attack started he was quickly overpowered. He was beaten with whatever was nearby; sticks, crates and hacked at with the ever abundant machetes men routinely carry at their sides. Other Japanese tourists were taken, largely by teachers from the language schools, to hide in the cells of the police station. Most reports in papers and online news sources said that 500 were involved in the attack (Reuters 30/4/2000; Guardian 2/5/2000; BBC 1/5/2000), but if you see the narrow alley-way where the violence occurred that number of people could never have been direct participants, even if they were present. Many were nearby, but only trying to see what the commotion was and others were actively assisting escaping tourists. Others were too scared to stop those that were frenziedly attacking the tourist. If there were 500 or more present, the physics of the space meant no more than fifty could have been directly involved in the violence against Tetsuo Yamahiro. The events were chaotic – some fled the scene entirely unclear as to what was happening shouting about *guerillas* or the military, this led others to go in the opposite direction towards the attack to find out what was going on.

The bus driver Edgar Castellanos tried to escape the chaos. Running to his coach which was parked down near the cemetery, but he was followed by a mob wanting to investigate the vehicle, fearing there were children hidden on board or other evidence of Satanism. As he tried to turn the coach around on the narrow road they stormed the bus. He attempted to flee on foot but they caught him and pelted him with stones, some say to death, others say he was still alive when the crowd set him on fire. Some allegedly took the fact that he did not burn easily as a sign that he was not human, thus confirming his guilt as a Satanist. The bus was torn to pieces, right down to the fabric being torn from the seats to look for evidence of children. Handy (2004:2) adds the detail that two policemen and two other tourists were also injured in the attack.

Eventually the military came in from Huehuetenango to calm the situation. Pressure from the Japanese embassy lead to a witch-hunt, whereby according to most of the town, of the six arrested Catarina Pablo, the woman whose accusation started the attack, was the only person definitely arrested correctly and even her guilt was based in a panicked mistake. The rest were allegedly scapegoats accused as part of unconnected family feuds.

For example Sonia told me that her friend’s son was wrongly given two years in prison.[[4]](#footnote-4) His involvement in the lynching allegedly amounted to no more than going to look at Tetsuo Yamahiro’s body but he was arrested because “the Japanese authorities needed somebody for it”. Whether this is entirely true is unclear, but this is what many Todosanteros believe.

**What are lynchings?**

These two attacks were part of a much larger wave of vigilante violence in Guatemala. In 1996, the same year that the 36 year long civil war came to an end, the term *linchamientos* (lynchings) became the designated word to describe the wave of vigilante attacks which was spreading across Guatemala. At their peak between 1996 and 2001 MINUGUA, the United Nations Verification Mission in Guatemala, recorded 421 separate incidents of lynchings, involving 837 victims, which included 116 fatalities (MINUGUA 2003: 279), although the true figure is certainly higher as statistics are based on attacks covered in media sources and others cases will have gone unreported to avoid attention and potential prosecutions. While the numbers of lynchings had waned, they have more recently been resurgent. The *Procurador de los Derechos Humanos* noted that between 2004 and 2011 reported lynchings had increased more than fivefold from 2.08 to 14.7 lynchings per month – resulting in 216 deaths and 911 serious injuries (Emisoras Unidas 11/11/2011) in those 7 years. In 2013 alone 49 people died as the result of lynchings (Prensa Libre 29/1/2015), in 2015 the PNC were reporting 30 lynchings a month, while in 2016 there were 23 deaths and 43 serious injuries attributed to lynchings in Guatemala (OSAC 2017).[[5]](#footnote-5) So while numbers fluctuate slightly and figures are patchy, they remain a significant source of fatal violence in Guatemala.

As Guatemalan law does not define 'lynchings', a number of highly contrasting definitions circulate simultaneously; a definitional angst that is not confined to Guatemala. The Spanish verb *linchar* (to lynch) comes directly from its English language equivalent which has its roots in the 'regulatory' violence of the American Deep South. Somewhat inevitably by borrowing a word to fit a phenomenon certain disjunctures between meanings arose, not least of which is the absence of 'racial' motivations as *linchamientos* in Guatemala tend to target alleged criminals and those responsible for other forms of perceived social deviance, but without the underlying racist motivations which characterised lynchings in the United States (Tolnay and Beck 1995).[[6]](#footnote-6) The ambiguities of whether or not a lynching need involve the death of the victim is discussed in more detail in Chapter 7 – but to clarify my position before we get to that more detailed discussion I shall be using the term lynching to describe both fatal and non-fatal acts of violence in accordance with the manner in which the term is used by the UN Mission in Guatemala (MINUGUA).

There are also definitional ambiguities in regards to how many people need to be involved for an attack to be thought of as a lynching. According to Pfeifer in relation to lynchings in Alabama if there were three or more assailants it constituted a lynching, although this does not appear to be legally enshrined (Pfeifer 2006:6). Yet in Guatemala, if someone were attacked by three people, it would not be referred to as a lynching, as it is the crowd which defines it. Yet there is no distinct number at which people do start referring to an attack as a lynching.

There is profound variation in the violence seen in lynchings. Certain configurations of violence seen in Todos Santos such as the use of machetes or the use of petrol are common motifs of *linchamientos*, but other attacks have involved stoning, firearms, other weapons or no weapons at all. In part this stems from the fact that lynchings can be either planned or spontaneous. In more spontaneous lynchings crowds will use whatever resources are available as weapons. This malleable approach precludes lynchings being defined by the form the violence takes. Planned attacks tend to be orchestrated by more organised vigilante groups and in some cases they have gone so far as to organise collection of funds to pre-purchase petrol ‘should the need for a lynching arise’ (Godoy 2003:142). Spontaneous attacks often take place in crowded areas such as market places in an immediate response to an accusation. But these two categories are porous. The involvement of former civil patrollers (more in Chapter 4) in a spontaneous attack might draw upon long established vigilance practices from the conflict, while an organised attack might draw in non-organised participants. It is however important to be aware that the word ‘*linchamientos*’ is applied to violence of both types and that this in turn effects the degree of thought put into the attack and is reflected in the supposed proportionality of the violence.

Discussion of proportionality is of relevance here because an important factor that differentiates lynchings from other forms of collective violence is that lynchings purport to serve some form of justice. While the term ‘vigilante’ normalises a state-centric approach to justice or justice-like practices (this will be further explored in Chapter 4) a state-centric understanding of violence legitimises state-led criminal justice even where its values and legislation do not correspond with those carrying out vigilantism. For example witch hunting could be seen as an example of justice beyond the scope of the state criminal justice system - although the state may shift their idea of justice towards public opinion (Abrahams 1998: 31-42). This is quite clearly a rupture from Rawls' conception of justice being a 'virtue of social institutions' (Rawls 1999:2), making it a free floating concept which can be wielded by the masses. Foucault's idea of 'popular justice' (1980: 1-36) is a slightly problematic term in these respects. Personally I avoid using the term 'popular justice', not because lynchings are not generally popular, one Guatemalan survey noted that at least 75% of the public 'partially supported' lynchings' (Godoy 2006: 2), but because this popularity should be assessed on a case-by-case basis. Cases where villages were coerced into attacks by former members of civil patrols for example show fear to sometimes be a more pertinent factor than popular support. Despite this slight contention over ‘popularity’, what is clear is that lynchings are not arbitrary, but aim to serve a purpose, in some way redressing a perceived offence. While in Guatemala (Godoy 2006: 184n) and beyond (Tolnay and Beck 1995) this is generally a ‘criminal’ offence, other 'non-criminalised' offences such as allegations of witchcraft are occasionally cited as the reasons behind lynchings. As with other forms of vigilantism, there are sometimes ideas of proportionality associated with the violence, but this is not always the case as petty thefts of corn, tools or chickens are sometimes met with death. Handy (2004) notes, in relation to Foucault's assertion, that in these cases of 'popular justice' the more extreme retribution may be accounted for due to the feelings of betrayal generated by crimes being directed 'inwards' towards one's fellow 'poor compatriots'.

Guatemala is not alone in experiencing a rise in lynchings. Lynchings have become common in recent decades in many Latin American countries including Ecuador (Guerrero 2000), Bolivia (Goldstein 2008), the Andes more generally (Vilas 2008), and Mexico (Vilas 2001). As with Guatemala these attacks target criminals or serve as reactions to “violations of communal affairs or norms” (Vilas 2001) and likewise the term *linchamientos* is applied in a way that reflects the communal use of violence, but does not reflect the racialised aspects of the historical lynchings they took their name from. This deracialised use of the word is echoed beyond Latin America where the term ‘lynching’ is applied with increasing ubiquity to diverse contexts. The chaotic summary execution of Colonel Gadaffi in Libya was widely described as a lynching, as was the murder of Farkhunda Malikzada in Kabul. The term lynching is increasingly coming to mean a crowd-based extrajudicial act of fatal or near fatal violence. Over the following chapters I will be exploring the lynchings in Todos Santos in relation to not only Guatemalan lynchings, but also this wider context of global lynchings.

1. While the term ‘gringo’ can be used pejoratively I use it here as it is used in Todos Santos and in Guatemala more widely as a term of self-identification, often used with a hint of irony and an awareness of the colonial and racial power imbalances. Backpackers and expats arguably use the term more frequently than Todosanteros and where used pejoratively it is generally preceded by an expletive. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Moser and McIlwaine (2001) note that by far the most common cause of all social violence in Guatemala comes as the result of alcohol consumption. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “El secuestrador imaginario era un turista que acariciaba la cabeza de Desiderio, el hijo de Catarina, y la muchedumbre de inmediato acorraló a los japoneses. “No entendemos qué pasa”, le dijo Midori Kaneko a Tetsuo, antes de huir junto a Esashika Takashi y los policías que los liberaron del cerco. Tetsuo, curioso, se quedó atrás y comenzó a fotografiar a los hombres y mujeres que, entre gritos, le rodeaban poco a poco.” (Caravantes 2011) – original Spanish [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. All names, other than those of the victims, whose deaths are already a matter of public record, have been changed throughout this book. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This continuation of lynchings does pose a problem in the writing of this book insomuch as I want to simultaneously avoid attributing a retrospective causality, while I do also wish to benefit from hindsight. My best efforts have been taken in the treading of this tightrope, but a degree of slippage is somewhat inevitable. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Tolnay & Beck note that of the 2805 lynchings in the South between 1882 and 1930, 2500 of these targeted African Americans, and of these 94% were at the hands of white assailants. Tolnay & Beck 1995 p ix. Although Pfeifer (2006) notes that recently there has been an acceptance that motivations for lynchings were remarkably diverse. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)