Women, Water, and Development in Santiago Atitlan: An ethnographic study of municipal interventions into women's lake washing practice

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Abstract
In recent years the municipal government of Santiago Atitlan, Guatemala, has come to make “development” a priority. Of particular importance to the municipality has been environmental conservation and sustainability, specifically with regards to the deteriorating condition of Lake Atitlan. To achieve this goal, the mayor of Santiago Atitlan has jumpstarted several programs such as trash removal and lake area clean ups to address the imminent danger posed to the lake and to the health of Santiago’s residents. In this paper I examine a project that has targeted laundry washing in the lake as an area for improvement through the building of pilas, or laundry washing facilities, towards the eventual goal of deterring women from washing in the lake. The municipal government believes that the pila program will protect the women from the cyanobacteria toxins as well as prevent further contamination of the lake by the women washers. The pila project has been a source of conflict and contestation, but more importantly confusion. I will explore how this confusion has been produced and what this reveals about the development process in Santiago Atitlan and the relationship between the women washers and their governing bodies.

Disciplines
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**Table of Contents**

Introduction 3

Research Methods 11

A Review of the Literature 12

The Pila Project 16

The Lakeside Washing Spaces as Contested 23

Development and Gender in Santiago Atitlan 36

Availability of Space, Dueñas de las Piedras, and Lake Responsibility 39

The Production of Confusion and Uncertainty at the Lakeside 48

Conclusion 57
Introduction

At the 5th World Water Forum held in 2009 in Istanbul, the Global Nature Fund declared Lake Atitlan the “Threatened Lake of the Year 2009.” Located in the Western Highlands of Guatemala, Lake Atitlan is characterized by the many Mayan towns and villages that surround it; predominantly composed of the Tz’utujil and Kaqchikel people. The lake provides livelihood for the majority of local residents, supplying people with water for consumption, bathing, laundry washing, fishing, and agriculture. Lake Atitlan has been called the most beautiful lake in the world, and has been a popular tourist destination in Guatemala, supporting the local economy. Yet this wonder of wonders and the people who inhabit this magical place have recently come under threat of water pollution and disease due to lack of waste water treatment and sewage systems, insufficient filtration, and recent cyanobacteria outbreaks and algal blooms. As a result, the people of Lake Atitlan are in danger of losing their most precious resource: water.

The water supply and sanitation sector in Guatemala is characterized by low and inconsistent service coverage, especially in rural areas; unclear allocation of management responsibilities; and little or no regulation and monitoring of service provision. The rural urban divide is staggering. 89% of the urban population (47% of the population) of Guatemala has a house connection whereas only 65% of the rural population (53% of the population) has such water access. The state of sanitation is even worse. 68% having sewerage in urban areas and only 17% have access to proper sanitation in rural areas. The CIA World Factbook has cited the Guatemalan population as being at high risk for major infectious diseases, particularly food or waterborne diseases such as bacterial diarrhea and typhoid, water contact disease such as
leptospirosis, and vectorborne/water-related disease such as dengue fever and malaria. The Center for Sustainable Development has conducted research on waterborne disease in Guatemala and has found that 35% of children under the age of six in rural areas suffer from diarrhea.

The Guatemalan government and many international aid and development organizations are attempting to address the water crisis in Guatemala. The Inter-American Development Bank has approved a $50 million loan for rural water investment programs. NGOs will provide information on sanitation and clean water systems to local communities in order to help them develop their own solutions.

Yet Guatemala lacks a national mechanism that coordinates all interventions in the water and sanitation sector and systemized sector information. Sector planning and management of external funds are weak. Water for People have emphasized in their "Guatemala Country Strategy" that there is a need for a national process of communication and sensitization in order to create a culture of water in terms of the appropriate handling of water and sustainability of water systems and resources.

One of the rural areas most at-risk for water-related problems in the area of safe drinking water and sanitation is Lake Atitlan, Guatemala. The region around Lake Atitlan is one of the poorest in Guatemala; 74% live in extreme poverty. Water related diseases (mainly diarrheas) are a major cause of morbidity and mortality, particularly among children. In the last 5 years, the region around Lake Atitlan has suffered additionally from the devastation left behind from Hurricane Stan in 2005 as well as the contamination of the lake by cyanobacteria, caused by the introduction of a new species of carp. The presence of cyanobacteria has led to periodic algal blooms and the
release of toxins that threaten the health of the lake towns’ inhabitants. This problem is further exacerbated by the extensive coffee production and processing that occurs around the lake, which discharges organic pollutants into the lake. Finally, the lack of local government resources explains the inadequate quality of water provision and complete lack of any wastewater treatment or sewage systems, which means that wastewater containing contaminants, is dumped back into the lake.

Addressing the water crisis in this region has become a development priority for all of the towns around the lake. Many foreign governments (Spain, Japan, EU), international aid and development organizations (Catholic Relief Services, Care, Water for People, and multilateral agencies and governing bodies (UNICEF), have been working in the area to respond to the impending water sanitation problem. Various programs aimed at preventing further pollution of the lake and providing clean water distribution systems have been met with varying success due to the lack of understanding of local culture, economy, history, and context, on the part of implementers.

In recent years the municipal government of Santiago Atitlan, Guatemala, a lakeside town with a population of over 40,000, has come to make “development” a priority. The various policies and programs being undertaken by the mayor and the municipality are geared to address issues such as poverty, gender inequality, environmental degradation, and health. In 2008, the municipal government issued a “Plan de Desarrollo Municipal con Enfoque Territorial.” This 80-page development handbook outlines a 25 year plan for the “development” of Santiago Atitlan. The book features statistics on mortality, education, demographics, economy, and environment.
“The vision of the municipal government is to, by 2023, have consolidated Santiago Atitlan as a model municipality characterized by the vindication of its ancient culture and the promotion of a sustainable development.” This vision involves programs designed to decrease the maternal mortality rate by training more midwives, expand the education system by building more schools, and increase household income through microfinance.

The development handbook also presents a flow diagram of the various actors involved in the “development” of Santiago Atitlan. In the handbook, the municipality assumes “Responsibility for Execution” and enumerates the various national departments and agencies, private organization, the community, and NGOs as “actors of intervention.” In the diagram, the planning will be the responsibility of la Oficina Municipal de Planificacion and the execution of projects will be carried out by all actors. Monitoring and follow-up will be carried out by the Consejo Municipal de Desarollo (COMODE) or the Council of Municipal Development. Evaluation will be carried out by SEGEPLAN or Secretaría de Planificación y Programación de la Presidencia with support of the Unidad Tecnia Departamental and experts in planning and development.

Of particular importance to the municipality has been environmental conservation and sustainability, specifically with regards to the deteriorating condition of Lake Atitlan. In the 25 year plan, the municipality lays out a plan to construct sanitation systems, implement proper waste disposal protocols, and to educate the public on hygiene and water sanitation. The municipal building, or alcaldia, has papered its walls with posters outlining proper chlorination techniques. (Fig 1) Office doors of the alcaldia carry stickers with the message “Unidos por un pueblo limpio” or “united for a clean town” and
the logos for the various supporting NGOs. (Fig 1) There are even large banners in the central plaza bearing the municipal office’s insignia carry messages such as “por un Atitlan ecologico,” for an ecological Atitlan, indicating the municipal commitment to environmental sustainability and conservation. (Fig 1) Thus the municipality of Santiago has made it a priority to preserve the lake.

Figure 1. (top left) poster in municipal office demonstrating proper home water filtration and chlorination techniques. (top right) sticker on a door to a municipal office bearing “united for a clean pueblo” and the logos of the various NGOs working in Santiago Atitlan. (bottom) banner in central plaza bearing “for an environmental Atitlan.”
To achieve this goal, the mayor of Santiago Atitlan has jumpstarted several programs such as trash removal and community lake area clean ups to address the imminent danger posed to the lake and to the health of Santiago’s residents. Additionally the municipality is overseeing the construction of the first water filtration and wastewater treatment system in Santiago for the municipal district of Chuk Muk. 5,000 relocated residents who had previously lost homes due to the mudslides of Hurricane Stan in 2005 will have access to clean water and proper waste disposal and treatment in the new resettlement project. The project has received funding from both the Italian and Spanish governments as well as many other foreign NGOs.

Another particularly interesting program has targeted laundry washing in the lake as an area for improvement. Mayan women all around the lake have traditionally and necessarily come to the lake to launder clothes and bathe. It is part of the daily rhythm of household work carried out by the women of Santiago Atitlan. Even women who’s homes have running water and a pila (a large sink with a washboard, connected to the piped water system) come to wash laundry in the lake, enjoying the benefits of space, the opportunity to bathe, or even just to socialize.

Recently, concern has spread over the safety of the women with respect to the cyanobacteria as well as over the possible contribution of the activity to the worsening condition of the lake. In a study carried out by researchers at the University of Pennsylvania, a survey of 120 Santiago residents found 8 respondents that believed the source of contamination was the runoff from laundry washing.

The Oficina Municipal de Planificacion is currently overseeing the building of pilas, or laundry washing facilities, towards the eventual goal of deterring women from
washing in the lake. This program falls under the category environmental initiatives as one of the many projects being implemented to fulfill the goal of “implementing an integrated water resources and sanitations system for the reduction of contamination of Santiago Atitlan.”

Such a program has been executed in other municipalities around the lake with varying levels of success. Upon visiting other towns around the lake such as Santa Cruz, one can observe empty pilas filled with stagnant water. (Fig 2) Such projects have been widely promoted in international development circles. The Global Water Foundation is one of the many NGOs dedicated to addressing water problems in the developing world and has supported the building of many laundry facilities in developing countries in order to provide a safe washing environment for women as well as prevent further pollution of water sources. The municipal government believes that the pila program will protect the women from the cyanobacteria toxins as well as prevent further contamination of the lake by the women washers. The various development actors in Santiago Atitlan (primarily the mayor, municipality, and foreign NGOs) have come to define the women washers as part of the impending lake problem. Yet this belief is largely a construct of development discourse. The lack of sewage treatment for a lake population of over 100,000 has been the main contributing factor to the lake contamination. Most women and even the town residents at large acknowledge a lack of water infrastructure as the main contributing factor to the deteriorating condition of the lake. Faced with a development challenge, the municipality has delineated a social problem in need of municipal intervention. What has resulted is the building of town laundry washing stations in two municipal districts, that of Pachichaj and Xechivoy.
Figure 2. Pila in Santa Cruz, another lakeside municipality north of Santiago Atitlan.

In early 2010, the first pila was constructed in a park in the municipal district of Pachichaj. The construction of a pila at the lakeside washing site in the district of Xechivoy is currently underway. This site is one of the main locations for women to come wash laundry in the lake. The area is also used by fisherman to park their boats and by boys to swim and bathe. However, laundry washing is the principal activity taking place in this area. Lake laundry washing is a necessity as well as a long-lived custom among the women of Santiago. Women come daily to the lakeside and spend at least an hour bent over the carefully arranged rocks that serve as washboards cleaning laundry for their family. Many of these women lack running water in their homes, and so come to the lake out of necessity. Others purely enjoy the time they spend in the lake and are able to socialize with other women or cool off from a hot day. At a given time, up to 20 women can occupy the washing space.
The construction of the pila has physically altered the space that is the lakeside of Xechivoy and has been the source of much contestation and confusion. My conversations with women lake washers in Santiago reveal a perception and understanding of the pila that stands entirely at odds with the municipality’s intended purpose for the construction. These women fail to perceive of the pila as an intervention into their daily practice and instead see the pila as a further supplement and validation of their activity. Additionally, there is general confusion and disagreement among the women as to the pila’s origins, rationale, and intended use. Yet these confused narratives also indicate a unique knowledge and important understanding of the lake that function in the women washers’ perceptions of the pila. The disjuncture between the municipality and the women washers indicate that each harbors distinct meanings and understandings of the pila project and the lake. In this paper I will explore how confusion, uncertainty, and misalignment regarding the goals of the pila project have been constructed and perpetuated and what this reveals about the relationship and power dynamics between women washers and their governing bodies. Finally, I will look at what this reveals about the development process in Santiago de Atitlan.

**Research Methods**

My study began in June 2010 as part of the University of Pennsylvania Guatemala Health Initiative. I conducted my fieldwork over the course of 6 weeks with the guidance of Frances Barg PhD and Kent Bream MD. I conducted participant observation in the lakeside washing areas in the cantons of Xechivoy and Pachichaj. What had begun as an ethnographic study of lake users’ responses and reactions to
lake and lakeside changes became an in-depth look at municipal-led and lake-centered
development projects in Santiago Atitlan and the nature of meaning and participation
imparted on the project by those whom the project is meant to serve. I conducted semi-
structured interviews with 18 women washers in both Pachichaj and Xechivoy and one
municipal official. My paper also includes some field notes taken from conversations
with other women and men regarding their perceptions of the lake.

A Review of the Literature

This paper serves the subfield of anthropology that has been termed
“development anthropology.” Development anthropology puts together the discipline of
anthropology and the practice of development, and examines a wide range of activities
within governments, non-governmental organizations, international aid organizations,
and the subjects of the development project. Further, it considers the differential power
relationships among these various players, taking into account class, gender, and racial
hierarchies of power.

One of the leading scholars within development anthropology has been Arturo
Escobar, whose research has focused primarily on social movements and development
in Latin America. Escobar argues in *Encountering Development*, that the ‘discourse of
development’ has its roots in colonialism and modernization theories. He argues for an
analysis that examines how ‘certain representations become dominant and shape
indelibly the ways in which reality is imagined and acted upon’ (Escobar, 1995a: 5).
Modernization as a dominant theme in development discourse, visualizes development
in terms of a progressive movement towards technologically more complex and
integrated forms of “modern” society.’ (Long and Long, 1992) It makes the assumption that all change inevitably follows a linear and Western pattern of growth. Escobar further articulates that the concept of ‘development’ is historically constituted and arose specifically out of WWII and the existence of “underdevelopment.” He makes the claim that development has served as a strategy for economic dominance by the first world over the third world and that the constitution of countries as “underdeveloped” has acted as a form of silencing alternative representations, discourses, and knowledge (Escobar, 1995b: 212).

Escobar also argued against the prevailing idea that the “development encounter” be viewed as a clash between two cultural systems. He proposed instead that development projects be examined as an intersection in which people and social situations are seen and represented in different ways. Yet while Escobar shifts the focus of development anthropology from studying solely the seemingly monolithic power of developers, he creates a sharp division between developers and the people acted upon making the assumption that developers develop while local people resist.

In Whose Development: An Ethnography of Aid, authors Emma Crewe and Elizabeth Harrison argue against the “us” and “them” categorization espoused by Escobar. They argue that such a view results in an incomplete account of agency and that it is more useful to look at the relationships and dynamics surrounding intervention practices as they actually happen (Crewe and Harrison, 1998: 19).

Crewe and Harrison further contribute to the field of development anthropology by exploring the role of race, gender, and technology in development. Crewe and Harrison make the claim that technology has been a significant driver of “progress.”
The concept of “Intermediate Technology” has become a key term in the development discourse and claims to “enable poor people in the South to develop and use skills and technologies which give them more control over their lives” (Crewe and Harrison, 1998: 32). While it is clear that the pila project involves the implementation of an intermediate technology, that of the pila, we will not look into the modernization aspects of the pila project.

Rather our discussion of the pila project involves describing the relationship among the various players involved in the project. In particular we will examine the interaction between the municipal government and the women washers, which requires an understanding of gender hierarchies, government authority, power dynamics, and agency.

In *Women in the Latin American Development Process*, authors Christine Bose and Edna Acosta-Belen make the connection between the colonial experience of the third world and the subordination experienced by women currently to argue for a gendered understanding in development studies (Bose and Acosta-Belen, 1995). Yet such a claim does not take into consideration women’s own means of resisting and understanding and participating in development projects. In order to elucidate such an understanding, “female status” in the public domain must be understood. Peggy Sanday delineates four dimensions for coding female status in the public domain: female material control (ability to act on things beyond the domestic unit), demand for female produce, female political participation, and female solidarity groups devoted to female political or economic interests (Sanday, 1974).
Another dimension of gender analysis within the development literature looks at women’s special relationship with nature. Some feminist thinkers believe that the emphasis on science and technology in development has been the cause of women’s oppression through the exploitation of natural resources, disrupting women’s traditional roles. Yet the assumption that women have an inherent relationship with nature is problematic in that it is usually the result of established gender roles and other economic and social factors (Crewe and Harrison, 1998).

Gender hierarchies present an element of differential power that must be considered. Yet another element of power can be elucidated by examining spatial relationships. The implementation of the pila project at the lakeside washing areas takes place within a specific space and involves the physical alteration of many spatial characteristics. Further, examining spatial dimensions of the pila project and the operation of the various players within that space characterizes the nature of state domination, resistance, and authority. Paul Rabinow argues for the importance of space as a tool to locate and identify relations of knowledge and power, and the centrality of space, both analytically and politically (Rabinow, 1982). He articulated Foucault’s three regimes of space and power: the sovereign in which the basic unit is the territory, the disciplinary where the problem is the control of bodies by spatial ordering, and bio-power in which power is exercised on a population existing in a particular milieu (Rabinow, 1982).

Operation within a space can also reveal resistance to spatial domination by the state. Michel de Certeau describes how people’s “ways of operating” constitute the means by which users reappropriate space (De Certeau, 1984). He describes power as
about territory and boundaries where the strong use classification, delineation, and division. The weak use mobility as a way of contesting spatial domination (De Certeau, 1984).

Finally, we will look at the production of confusion and uncertainty among the different players regarding the pila project. In Flammable, authors Javier Auyero and Debora Alejandra Swistun uncover the ways in which uncertainty and confusion result in social domination (Auyero and Swistun, 2009). They draw from Pierre Bourdieu who argued that domination works via the misrecognition of power structures on the part of the dominated. Thus domination is exercised with the subaltern’s complicity (Bourdieu, 1991). Yet, the pila project does not fall within traditional ideas of power and subordination. Rather, the women washers exercise their own knowledge and agency to either resist or alter the meaning of the pila project.

**The Pila Project**

Off of the main road to the town hospital and exactly across from the town soccer field is a wide path that cuts through the cornfields and leads down to the lakeside. The

![Figure 3. Entrance to Mayor’s Park in the canton of Pachichaj, Santiago Atitlan.](image)
Figure 4. Sign outside entrance of the Mayor’s Park in Pachichaj that lists the funders of the park. Included are the Municipality, the Community Council on Development, and the National Department of Development.

The path is so uneven and filled with rocks and potholes that I wonder how any of the tuk tuks, brightly colored red motor rickshaws, manage to come down here. But soon enough, I reach a paved path that cuts through a beautiful park plaza (Fig. 3), complete with concrete tables and thatched umbrellas for shade, low walls to sit and pass the time, a public bathroom, and a laundry washing facility to top it all off. Upon entering, visitors can read the sign indicating the various national departments and NGOs that provided funds to the construction of this plaza and the amount of funds provided.

It is noon and the sun is beating down hot. I walk through the plaza and watch as kids run around the park, some older men sit in the shade of the thatched umbrellas, and some women are washing their large cortes and wipils in the washing facility, or pila. The park is small, and soon the paved path stops short and is replaced by a dirt
path leading straight to the water. Here, the shoreline is limited to about 50 feet, closed in by reeds on either side. In the water are several women washing laundry against the carefully mounted rocks placed in the shallows of the lake. Off on one side are two canoes, and one man leans and rests against his canoe, watching his surroundings.

I decide to sit in the shade of the red roof provided by the pila. The pila looks like a big concrete bath. It stands about 2 feet tall and occupies a 10 ft by 8 ft area. (Fig 5) It is filled with water, and along each long edge are 4 cement washboards with ridge surfaces. (Fig 6) Two women wash their laundry quietly, taking clothes from baskets precariously balanced on the edge of the pila. They rub their t-shirts, wipils, and jeans against the serrated surface in swift and powerful motions, throwing water and powdered soap every few minutes, finally ending the task by submerging the clothes in the water and lastly wringing the clothes and hanging them on the fence running along the side of the park to dry. (Fig 6)
I sit for a while, watching, until a man comes and interrupts my gazing to inquire about my presence. I tell him I am here to learn more about the pilas and he smiles and responds enthusiastically that he is there for the same reason. His name is Diego, a plump and kind-faced middle-aged man, and he is a journalist from the El Diario, a national newspaper. He was investigating the use of the park and he shared with me that the pila was put in to encourage women to refrain from washing in the lake. Diego told me that the pila was seldom used, however, since most women simply preferred using the lake. We chat for a bit more, and I learn that the park was completed 2 months prior and was intended to be an attraction for tourists. After a few more minutes, he kindly excuses himself, and goes off to chat with some young teenagers who have seated themselves under the shade of the thatched umbrellas. Nearly an hour has passed since I came to the park, and I am hot and my water bottle is empty. I leave the park and toss my water bottle into one of the blue cans marked “Muni Atitlan.”

The construction of the park, and particularly the completion of the laundry facility, is part of the municipality’s initiative to protect the lake. I had learned from the Oficina Municipal de Planificacion (Office of Municipal Planning or OMP) as well as from
the municipal development handbook that the pila project was intended to encourage women to wash in laundry facilities instead of the lake as to minimize further contamination of the lake. The project that had begun there in Pachichaj was expanded with the building of a laundry facility in another lake washing area, in the canton of Xechivoy, which at the close of my field study was awaiting funds in order to complete construction.

The introduction of pilas into the lakeside washing spaces demonstrates how lake users, specifically women washers, have become a target for the municipality’s development and environmental agenda. Women come to the lakeside areas daily to wash laundry, bathe, and collect drinking water. While men use the lakeside space to park their Cayucos, or canoes, for fishing, the most visible activity is laundry washing. Women spend over an hour in the lake washing clothes for their family or even for other families in order to bring generate extra income. Yet the Oficina Municipal de Planificacion, as well as many of the NGOs involved in the management of the lake, defines women’s laundry washing as a problem in need of a solution. The municipality believes the chemicals used by the women to wash their clothing as well as the fecal matter introduced into the water contribute significantly to the lake condition. One can observe the colored residue that builds up around the women washers. The visibility of their activity and it’s apparent effect on the lake has allowed the municipality to designate lake washing as part of the lake problem, a behavior that must be changed for the benefit of the environment. The pila project thus serves as a way for the municipality to address the environmental problem and take an active role in influencing daily practice at the lakeside.
I wanted to find out more about the pila project and how it came about. My preliminary conversations with women washers seemed to indicate that the mayor was the primary actor in implementing the project. Further, the signs illustrating the various organizations supporting the project indicated municipal ownership of the project as the signs carried the Muni’s insignia and years in office, specifically “Muni Atitlan 2008-2012.” So I decided to venture into the alcaldia, or municipal building, to see if I could clearly attribute ownership and find the roots of the project. In one of my first forays into the alcaldia, I met an elderly fellow by the name of Juan Carlos. His suit was baggy and he had trouble hearing, but he was very happy to talk about his work and was very helpful to me. He was involved with the Chuk Muk relocation and development project and in many of the general municipal conversations regarding the lake situation. I asked him if he knew anything about the pilas being built to which he replied that I should talk to a person named Agustin in the OMP.

Juan Carlos shuttled me down to the office and pointed me to a young man at a desk who was currently meeting with a townsperson. Juan smiled at me and told me to wait patiently and that if I needed anything else I could contact him. I waited while Agustin helped the woman fill out some paperwork. Soon after, the woman left and Agustin beckoned toward me and I proceeded to introduce myself and explain my interest in the pilas. He seemed happy to talk about the pilas and invited me to have a seat across his desk. I first asked about funding sources and Agustin explained to me that both pilas were funded by the central government but by different agencies. The pila in Pachichaj was financed by the Centro de Desarrollo and the one in Chechivoy was being funded by Fonapaz. I asked how the pila project was conceived and he told
me that the people of the pueblo wanted the pila and thus the municipality solicited the help of the central government. Every canton (district) has a cocode, or committee of district representatives, of 7-11 people who are elected every 2 years and these cocodes requested that pilas be built. At this point I asked him if women took part in the cocodes to which he replied with an astonished “of course!” as if any other possibility would have been unacceptable. I asked him what reasons they had to build the pila and he listed several reasons.

“First there is the problem of the cyanobacteria, we want to protect the women from possible health risks. Second, the washing contributes to contamination of the lake. It’s not that much, but the lake is in such a precarious state that we need to do whatever we can to keep the lake clean. Thirdly and fourthly the pilas are to serve as an educational tool and a way to have the women slowly get accustomed to washing laundry outside of the lake. We are currently in the process of developing a plan for “conscientizacion.” Finally, the pila will simply provide the women with more options for washing.”

He went on further to tell me that the women don’t mind the pila being built. I finally asked him about challenges the municipality will face in the future regarding the pila. He told me that the pueblo would need more pilas and thus more money to fund them. He also told me that the municipality needs to better understand why women use the lake. I asked him how they could achieve this and he suggested that a census/survey should be taken and that the municipality should talk to the women who are indeed using the pilas.
The picture painted by Agustin offered a seemingly benign solution to the lake pollution problem. His story presents the pila project as a grassroots effort with support from the municipality and other national government agencies. Yet the stories presented by the women washers I spoke with indicate a variety of experiences, perceptions, and understandings of the pila and the municipality that differ markedly from what I understood in my conversation with municipal officials. In the following pages I will explore the myriad of meanings attributed to the pila, such as the pila as spatial and social domination as well as the pila as part of municipal consciousness of women washers’ dilemmas regarding their activity. Finally I will navigate the disparate narratives to develop an understanding of the environmental action process in the Santiago Atitlan development context.

The Lakeside Washing Spaces as Contested: Spatial Tactics and Social Domination

As in Pachichaj, the lakeside washing area in Xechivoy (Fig 7) is currently undergoing similar changes in landscape with the construction of a pila at the site. This site is located along the road leading out of the center of town on the opposite end of the Pachichaj lakeside washing area. A steep paved path branches from the main road and leads you down to a flat dirt path. 30 feet on this dirt path leads you to a set of stone/paved steps that take to yet another dirt path leading you directly down to the lakeshore. Close to and below the main road, perched above and overlooking the lake is the near completed pila. The pila is rectangular and has a red metal roof and 14 wash stations (5 on each long side, 2 on each short side). Like the one in Pachichaj, the
laundry facility in Xechivoy is indicated by cement washboards containing ridged surfaces. (Fig 8) 2 latrines sit next to the pila and in front of the latrines are 4 T-shaped poles with laundry lines hanging between them. From the pila, one can see canoes lined up on the shore. Two blue trash cans with “Muni Atitlan 2008-2012” spray painted in white sit about 15 feet away from the women washers. Sitting at the pila station, one can comfortably watch the women below washing, the water around them cloudy grayish green from the soap, trash glistening from under the lake surface.

While many of the women I spoke with in Xechivoy and Pachichaj regard the municipal pila project as a positive intervention, there is some indication that women are somewhat wary of the municipality’s, particularly the mayor’s, motives and intentions, and that the pila is a source of some contention. A story that has appeared in several
conversations is that of a town meeting held to discuss the proposed pila. Some of the women merely referenced it, whereas others provided more detail of the event. Concepcion’s account of the meeting encapsulates many of the common threads that indicate a sense of what happened.

In one of my first interviews, I spoke with a woman by the name of Concepcion, who lived in Xechivoy and washed laundry almost daily in the lake. She was quite poor and supported herself and her daughter by washing laundry for other households as well as her own. Concepcion had welcomed my translator Emilia and I in to sit in her bedroom. The radio was blaring and she blushed as she went to turn it off. Two girls stood in the doorway and watched as I sat myself precariously on the bed, which could better be described as a board with a wool blanket cover. Emily and the woman chatted in Tz’utujil. Emily described the project to her and the woman smiled and laughed and expressed excitement over being able to participate. She proceeded to tell me that she uses the lake to wash laundry, to earn her living, and to bathe. When prompted about the pila, Concepcion explained that the pila would be available for all women to use, but that she herself would not use the pila since she needs more space than is offered by the pila.
She informed me that the municipality and a comite (or cocode, which is the term used to reference the councils elected by each canton) of townsmen were overseeing the project. The comite is also in charge of other issues regarding the lake such as trash clean up. Balancing precariously on her bed of board, Concepcion described to me the town meeting that the mayor and Xechivoy cocode had held at the site of the proposed pila in Xechivoy. She recounted how the town did not support the project since it would make no difference for women who had home pilas but preferred lake washing. The mayor insisted that the pila be built. In Concepcion’s version of the story, the mayor had initially planned to remove the washing rocks and clean the area of trash as part of the project. He had also announced his intention to build several pilas. Concepcion went on to tell me that when the public expressed their lack of support, the mayor ignored the town’s opinion and continued with the project. She added that since the women insisted on keeping the rocks, the mayor refused to clean the trash as he had initially planned. Concepcion told me how she thought the mayor went ahead with the project in order to see if he could change the minds of the public. When asked about her opinion regarding the pila and whether she would use it, Concepcion told me she was indifferent and would not use it. The only benefit she sees is that it could provide shelter from hot sunny days or rainy days.

Another woman by the name of Candelaria from Xechivoy gave me a secondhand account of a meeting where the mayor had expressed his interest in having the women use the pila instead of washing in the lake. Candelaria along with a few other women I spoke with had elaborated that at the meeting, only a minority of 25-35 women supported the pila. When asked for her opinion, Candelaria told me that she
was not interested in the pila nor would it benefit her. The lake was much cooler and refreshing. Even if the rains came, she would continue to wash in the lake because the pila could not offer her enough space.

In a conversation with two women who had opted to use the pila in Pachichaj, one mentioned that a meeting was held to discuss the park construction and that many opposed the project. She also told me that at this meeting, the public was not informed of any pila that would be part of the project.

One woman, Maria had told me, too, about a meeting held to gather opinions on the proposed pila for Xechivoy. She recounted how the men had opposed the pila because they did not want the mayor and municipality to use the pila as a way to take ownership of the entire lakeside area. When I asked why this would harm the men she explained that the men feared that they would lose power over the activities they carry out on the lake such as fishing. Another woman in Xechivoy, Chonita, shared another story regarding the male lake users’ involvement in the project saying that the fishermen were coerced into supporting the pila by the municipality, threatened by the loss of space on the shore for their Cayucos (canoes). She added that the pueblo opposed the pila as they considered it a waste of money and believed no woman would use it. Only a minority of women supported the project. She herself would not use the pila as it was no different than using the lake.

Taken together, these stories suggest that the pila projects and municipal development agenda have been a source of conflict and contestation between the residents of Santiago and the municipality. Some have even regarded the pila project as an imposition of state control over the lakeside spaces and as a threat to daily
practice and custom. While the municipality’s goal to keep the lake clean by deterring the women from washing in the lake through the pilas seems benign, there is apparent resistance on the part of the women washers and the town to the construction of these pilas. Thus, the municipality’s continuation of the pila construction in spite of the public’s disapproval is a direct assertion of its agenda and authority over the lakeside washing space.

Thus the lakeside areas have become spaces of contestation between the municipality and the lake users, particularly the women washers. In *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture*, authors Setha M. Low and Denise Lawrence-Zuniga define “contested spaces” as geographic locations where conflicts in the form of opposition, confrontation, subversion, and/or resistance engage actors whose social positions are defined by differential control of resources and access to power (Low and Lawrence-Zuniga, 2003: 18). Studies of contested spaces in urban sites have focused on struggles to control the outcomes of urban planning and redevelopment. Within this context, space is often constitutive of power, and resistance takes the form of social movements and local activism. Setha Low looks at the conflict surrounding the renovation of the Parque Central in San Jose, Costa Rica. The conflict involves the redesign of space by cultural elites in an attempt to exclude the lower class residents who have come to use the park. Thus the planning, design, and construction of the city are processes of social production and are often contentious because interventions that physically shape the urban landscape reveal underlying and unresolved conflicts (Low, 2000). Low and Lawrence-Zuniga also articulate the idea that actors employ “spatial tactics” as a strategy and/or technique of power and social control (Low and Lawrence-
Zuniga, 2003: 30). In the Costa Rican context, the redesign of space is the spatial tactic utilized to assert the cultural elites power and dominance over the space. Their control of the planning allows them to reaffirm ownership and authority over the park (Low, 2000).

The apparent conflict that many of the aforementioned women have described has many characteristics of a contested space. The municipality has physically altered the lakeside areas through the construction of parks and pilas in order to influence and change the lake washing behavior of the women lake users. The conflict emerges in the articulation by the women of their (or others’) initial resistance to the project and of fears that the municipality has used this as a way to interfere in daily practice at the lakeside. Further, there is apparent rejection or disinterest in the project by Xechivoy women where the project has yet to be completed.

Yet it was also apparent that women were indeed using the pila, as indicated by my conversation with and observation of the two women pila users in Pachichaj. Both Agustin and Concepcion have articulated that the mere presence of the pila may encourage women to wash in the laundry stations instead of in the lake, which seems to indeed have been the case in Pachichaj indicating a spatial acquiescence to the project on the part of the women washers. Thus, the continuation of the pila building in spite of initial resistance is a spatial tactic on the part of the municipality to assert its authority and control over the lakeside spaces as well as to influence the behavior of the bodies that inhabit that space.

The organization of space at Pachichaj and Xechivoy are indicative of how the municipality has employed spatial tactics and imposed a spatial regime in order to
achieve spatial and social domination. The park plaza has physically altered the appearance of the space and physically dominated the area. The park is known as the “Mayor’s Park” by many of the townspeople. It was commissioned by the mayor and funded by the Centro de Desarrollo in the national government and was meant to serve as a tourist attraction. A young girl named Francisca, who has opted to use the pila and whose story I relate below, informed me that the committee in charge of the construction of the park had initially informed the women at the lakeside only of the park and not the pila.

Perhaps less obvious are the branding of the space as well as the activities of the lake committees charged with taking care of the lake that have served as municipal spatial dominance of the lakeside washing areas. At Pachichaj, one can observe a sign posted by the municipality indicating the various organizations involved in the planning and funding of the park plaza. The sign indicates the municipality (Santiago Atitlan), current office term (2008-2012) as well as the mayor’s name. At Pachichaj as well as Xechivoy, one can observe the bright blue trashcans marked with “Muni Atitlan 2008-2012.” During a site visit to Pachichaj, two women using the pila informed me that the mayor had sent men to place trashcans by the lakeside in order to deter lake users from throwing trash in the lake. Following this, a younger woman by the name of Maria offered another story of how the mayor had also wanted to divert water from the street to go directly through to the lake, but that women had resisted as this would make the lake washing areas unclean.

Finally, the committee in charge of the lake and park and pila construction has been another actor carrying out functions demonstrating municipal authority over and
responsibility for the lakeside washing areas. Upon asking many women as to the role of the committee with regard to the lake areas, many women responded by telling me that the committees were responsible for keeping the lakeside areas clean. Candelaria from Xechivoy had described to me the committee’s role when the bashte (or cyanobacteria) problem began affecting the women’s washing. The committee came with fine nets to capture the algae and clear the water. They also instructed the lake users not to throw trash into the lake.

It would seem that the municipality is using spatial domination as a form of social domination. A dominant theme in the literature on state power suggests that state bodies exercise absolute control over the governed. State policies reproduce social hierarchies. Michel Foucault articulated the idea that states control bodies through spatial ordering. Foucault approaches the spatial tactics of social control and the relationships between power and space through the analysis of spatial arrangements. As an example he looks at the “structural organization” of Jeremy Bentham’s 1787 plan for the Panopticon and observes how the goals of discipline are met through the combination of space and power (Foucault, 1975). The municipality of Santiago has
thus taken to physically altering the lakeside spaces through the construction of parks and pilas as well to physically operating in the lakeside spaces through the lake committees and cocodes in order to assert their authority over that space and to subtly enforce a change in women’s washing behavior. Yet I will argue that the pila project and the relations between the municipality and women washers reflect both an attempt at social and spatial domination on the part of the municipality, but also a negotiation on the part of the women washers.

On what looked to be a deceitfully sunny day, Emily and I walked over to Pachichaj to interview a young girl named Francisca. Francisca was 18 and attended the same church as Emily, and upon our arrival she greeted us timidly. As I made myself comfortable, Francisca giggled and chatted nervously with Emily. She was quite shy and wary of my presence, but Emily prodded her playfully to get her to speak with me about her washing. Francisca became more comfortable as time went on and she told me about how she goes three times a week at dawn to the mayor’s park to wash her laundry in the pila. She used to wash in the lake with the other women, but prefers the pila as it is much simpler than using the rocks in the lake. She explained that the municipality had built the pila since many issues had arisen regarding ownership of the rocks. The municipality had put together a committee to oversee construction of the park and pila. She explained further that the committee had only initially informed the women of the park but not of the laundry station. Since the building of the pila, some women have opted to use the pila, however many women continue to wash in the lake, including her mother, since they consider the pila to be the same as washing in the lake.
After our conversation with Francisca, Emily and I decided to walk over to the park to see if any women would be willing to talk to us about the pila. As we walked down the path to the park, the rain started, and soon the heavens broke loose. Emily and I ran for the cover of the thatched umbrellas and sat at a table, in full view of the pila.

The pila was full. Eight women occupied the station. It was early afternoon and I had not yet in all my time in Santiago seen the pila in use. The pila seemed an ideal washing space in light of the rainy situation. The path that cut through the park had become a river at this point and the rain was coming down hard, but I could still make out the women’s chatter and the sound of wet clothes hitting concrete. I soon noticed one woman had developed a system for washing that involved two boys, whom I could only presume were her sons, carrying clean laundry loads up the now muddy path and dirty laundry back down.

I was utterly captivated. Yet I was confused considering many of the women I had spoken with had explained that the pilas initially lacked any public support. But here I was, watching a fully occupied pila in use.

I reflected back on my conversation with Concepcion. I remembered her story about the contentious town meeting held regarding the pila project. But I also remembered that Concepcion herself believed the project to have its benefits. Though she herself would not use it, she believed the pila would be good for providing shelter from the rain and sun.

And here I was, watching women use the pila and benefitting from the shelter the roof provided from the downpour. I spoke with and observed many other women in
Pachichaj using the pila, while many of the women I spoke with in Xechivoy still anticipating completion of the project expressed their disinterest in using the pila once finished. Thus, one could argue that the pila in Pachichaj has resulted in spatial acquiescence on the part of some women washers to the municipal project.

Yet, while many of my conversations with women indicated initial contestation regarding the pila project, deeper analysis of the women’s stories reveal that what the women understand about the pila project stands in utter contrast to what the municipality understands regarding the project. On the part of the municipality, the building of the pila is part of a larger environmental agenda to keep the lake clean by deterring women from washing in the lake. The aforementioned narratives indicate that from its conception, the pila was seen as an affront to the daily practice of lake users, particularly of women washers. This makes sense in that the pila’s objective was to change the behavior of women washers. Yet in defining the purpose of the pila project at the present, women see the pila in a completely different way. The women provide a myriad of explanations for the pila project that differ from the explanation proposed by the municipality. Francisca mentioned the insecurity and conflict many of the women washers face regarding use of the rocks in the lake for washing. To other women such as Concepcion, the pila offers refuge from the rain and sun. Thus women have negotiated meanings among themselves that allow them to accept the project and that are reflective of their own concerns regarding lake washing. Thus, it would appear that instead of spatial and social domination of the municipality over lake space and lake use, a bizarre negotiation of meaning has occurred that reflects the women washers’ knowledge of and experiences at the lake space.
Henry Lefebvre views space as a social product that creates an “illusion of transparency” (Lefebvre, 1991). As an example, in the Latin American plaza, colonial space disguises underlying indigenous place-making and religious meanings. It could very well be that the introduction of the pila is viewed as an attempt by the municipality to replace traditional washing schemes and indigenous meanings regarding lake use (Lefebvre, 1991).

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau makes a distinction between the concepts of strategy and tactics. He connects strategies with institutions of power who are “producers” of the design of and rules for spaces. Tactics are used to describe the way in which individuals as “consumers” of those strategized spaces actually operate within those spaces. He delineates how groups or individuals reappropriate space in the ways they operate within that space. A pedestrian’s walking is the spatial acting-out of place, creating and representing public space rather than being subject to it. The municipality’s building of the pila is a strategy by the municipality to redefine the space by redefining the ways of washing laundry, from lake to pila. The women washers’ continued acting out of washing in the lake, repossesses the lakeside area as a washing space for women of Santiago, resisting the spatial domination of the state. de Certeau’s argument assumes that the groups are “already caught in the nets of ‘discipline,’” but that the rules and products of the state that exist within a space never wholly determine the everyday operating of individuals within that space (De Certeau, 1984).

But what is happening among the washers and the municipality does not seem to fall exactly into traditional ideas of power, class, or gender conflicts. In the next chapter
we will look at the knowledge and experiences that women have of the lake and how they have been employed in crafting explanations for the pila. Specifically we will look at the physical availability of space, the situation of rock use and ownership at the lakeside space, as well as the changes in the condition of the lake that have informed women’s perception of the pila. However, first we will explore the relationship between the women washers and the municipality in terms of gender relations. I will draw from the literature that produces gendered perspectives on development practice in the developing world.

**Development and Gender in Santiago Atitlan**

I asked several of the women washers I interviewed whether women sat or participated in the committees or cocodes in charge of the pila project. Every woman responded that there were no women in the committees, that the committees were exclusively male. One woman, Beatrice, explained that women had no time to participate since they were preoccupied with household duties and chores. One of the women I spoke with at the Pachichaj pila told me that she believed no women participated because the job of serving on the committee most likely requires reading skills, which many women in theueblo lack. Yet, during my conversation with Agustin in the municipal offices I learned that the committees, or cocodes, that had served to manage the construction of the pilas, did in fact involve women in the decision-making process. Further, I was informed that the committee consisted of both male and female members, elected every 2 years by their respective cocodes, one per canton. Yet all of the women I had spoken to were under the impression that the committees, or cocodes,
were exclusively male. Regarding support for the pila, Agustin had told me that the reason the pila was being built was due to the public’s request and support for the project. Yet most women had informed me that the pila was built either independently of support from the women or with the support of only a minority of the women.

While there are no occupational statistics in the development handbook divided by gender, the women washer narratives indicate little public participation among women in Santiago Atitlan. While I observed many women working in municipal offices, there is a perceived exclusion of women from public decision-making on the part of the women washers. The agency of Atiteca woman is situated within unequal economic, political, social, and cultural power relations and ideologies of domination. Divisions, whether real or perceived, are critically important to the production and reproduction of power relations.

Crewe and Harrison make the claim that within the development industry, gendered structures exist within a myriad of other cross-cutting political, social, and cultural influences (Crewe and Harrison 1998). Before we engage the various women washer narratives explaining the pila project, it is important to discuss gender relations within Santiago Atitlan as a way of elucidating another element of power and exploring the nature of public participation in the execution of the pila project.

Deep gender inequalities pervade Guatemala, among both ladino (defined as the heterogenous population which expresses itself in the Spanish language as a maternal language and possesses specific cultural traits of Hispanic origin mixed with indigenous cultural elements) and indigenous populations. Women in Guatemala, and specifically Santiago Atitlan, occupy a subordinate position in society. Men have historically
controlled decision-making, and political, social, and economic resources. In Santiago Atitlan, this is reflected in lower levels of educational achievement and literacy for women, poor health and higher mortality rates, few women working in formal sector employment, and high levels of gender-based violence. USAID cites improvements in gender inequality over the past decade, but that continued marginalization has resulted in a dependency that has led to a lack of understanding among women of rights and resources and a reluctance or inability to act independently.

Thus, gender inequality in Santiago Atitlan serves to perpetuate a gendered division in the decision-making process regarding development projects such as the pila project. Yet this extends beyond the pila as well. The two women at the Pachichaj pila described many of the policies being implemented to clean up the lake. According to them, only men implement trash clean ups and other related initiatives. Women, however, do participate in taking care of the lake, and many women described their experiences volunteering to clean the lake shore of trash and to clear the water of the bashte or cyanobacteria. Thus, although women are affected by and participate in development projects like lake clean-ups, they are not in positions of power with respect to how these projects are managed and implemented.

It is also important to understand the role of gender in terms of the local meanings and significance of water and the role of gender in schemes of power. Gender distinctions regarding the use of and relationship with the lake are clear. Women use water and the lake to wash laundry, collect drinking water, as well as in maintaining the household. Men use the lake to generate income in the form of fishing and collecting water for agriculture. But gender becomes even more important in
defining roles in managing development programs, particularly in the realm of water. The pila project is characteristic of the male-dominated agendas that prevail in development that act to change the behavior of women’s work in service of larger environmental, economic, or social goals.

Yet we will see that the women washers of Lake Atitlan already possess a consciousness about the health of their lake due to their extensive use of water in their daily practice. So although there is clearly gendered divisions in participation with regards to the implementation of the pila project, women exercise agency in being able to impose their understanding of the lake and alter the meaning of the pila project in a way that diminishes the ability of the municipality to impose their agenda.

Availability of Space, Dueñas de las Piedras, and Lake Responsibility

When women were asked why the pila was being built, a variety of explanations were presented that reflected the women’s own experiences at the lakeside. In an interview with a neighbor of Emily’s, a woman named Clara, I was told that the pila was being built in order to provide more space for women washers. At the time of this interview, in the summer of 2010, the record amount of rain in the region had resulted in rising lake levels, which had caused many of the washing rocks to become inundated resulting in less available space for women to wash.

I myself had observed the problem of space at both Xechivoy and Pachichaj. At Pachichaj, about 10 washing rocks were available. The rising lake level meant women had to wade in quite far to reach the rocks. At its busiest, the rocks would be fully occupied with as many as 7 women waiting their turn. A woman I interviewed in
Xechivoy, Mariela, spoke to me while she washed and told me that she believed the pila to be a positive project as the lake space gets very crowded. Chonita had told me, too, that the pila was being built in order to create more space for the women to wash.

Yet the availability of space was not merely a problem that was a result of physical availability. The issue was complicated by ownership issues over washing rocks that prevented some women from finding space at the lakeside to carry out their washing activity.

On one of my first days in Santiago, I had decided to venture to the lakeside washing area in Xechivoy to take a look at the pila and observe the washing activity of the women washers. It was early morning, but the sun was beating down mercilessly. I sat at the top of the paved steps that led down to the lakeshore and watched the women beat their wet and soapy wipils and cortes against the flat slabs of rock. The rocks were stacked against one another to form the washboards that several women use daily. A woman passed me on a footpath that ran alongside my steps. With one arm she held the hand of a young boy, and with the other she held a bucket filled with green soap bottles, all while balancing a basket load of laundry on her head. As she passed I noticed two women chatting with one another, away from the other women washers. One of the women appeared to be moving a large rock down to the lake. She was small and it proved a feat to roll the rock down to the lake. As soon as she reached the water, her companion left, a basket at her waist, and a bucket of water balanced precariously on her head. I could not comprehend why she had been moving the rock around. Half an hour later, however, I watched as the woman settled into the rhythm of
washing, beating her clothes against the rock she had brought down to use as her very own washboard.

I did not understand the importance of this activity until much later in my fieldwork. It was illustrated to me one rainy day in Xechivoy. Emily had arranged an interview with a woman by the name of Luisa. It was only noon and the rain had already started. We navigated the labyrinth of houses, jumping from rock to rock to avoid the flooded paths. After asking four different women, we finally found Luisa’s home. She held a baby in her arms and ushered us to come under the overhanging roof above the entrance. Two other children came running in to watch as she told me about her washing activity. But what was most distinctive about our conversation was what Luisa told me about “las dueñas de las piedras.” She explained that the rocks in the lake were owned by certain women-“las dueñas”- and that many women washers would have to wait to use the rocks owned by las dueñas since they did not have their own. She went on to tell me how the dueñas work hard to move rocks (Fig 10) and stabilize them. A woman may hurt her finger or suffer in other ways in the process, thus

Figure 10. Washing rocks at the lakeside of Xechivoy.
she is very protective and possessive over the space they have arranged for themselves and for what they believe is theirs. Luisa uses the rocks when the owners leave, but occasionally the dueña will come back and tell her to leave. When asked why the pila was being built, Luisa reasoned that it must be built to provide more space for women and that she intends to use the pila upon completion.

To Luisa, the pila addresses the problem she faces daily of finding space to wash her laundry due not only to the lack of space, but the ownership issues she faces regarding rock use. Nowhere in my conversation with Agustín did he mention the dueñas de las piedras as an issue regarding the beneficial aspects of the pila. Thus women who have not officially participated in the decision-making processes regarding the pila have negotiated their own terms in defining the purpose and meaning of these laundry facilities.

Another day I had been to Xechivoy and decided to speak with some women who washed in another part of the lakeshore, quite separated from the lakeshore I normally considered the lakeside washing area. One woman washed among the canoes while their children sat playing in the canoes. This woman’s name was Ana and she informed me that she washes here because her family and relatives own the property. She also told me that she did not wash in the public area because of territorial and ownership issues regarding the rocks and the dueñas de las piedras. When asked about what she knew about the pila, Ana told me that the mayor had found out about the conflicts between the women and the dueñas and proposed a pila to be built to prevent the women from fighting and to provide an area to wash when women had trouble finding space in the lake. Ana perceived the municipal pila as an intervention
into the politics of washing in the lake. Ana viewed the municipality’s role in building the pila as that of a conflict mediator.

Another woman had interjected during a conversation I had with the two women pila users in Pachichaj to tell me that she uses the pila to avoid arguing with the dueñas when she comes down to the lakeside. This woman’s use of the pila demonstrates a reason for using the pila that does not involve an understanding of lake washing as an environmental hazard.

The ways in which women have developed their own understanding of the pila’s origins and purpose indicates how the municipality and the public are working at cross purposes regarding the pila project. The public has rejected the original terms of the pila: to deter women from washing in the lake to decrease further contamination of the lake. Yet the women have rejected this notion that their activity harms the lake and opted for meanings that are relevant to the problems that threaten their necessary daily activity.

No woman seems to accept the idea that her washing activity contaminates the lake. In fact, it makes sense to reject the notion that the pila could address this considering the wastewater coming from the pila goes directly back to the lake. In Pachichaj, a concrete pipe runs underground and deposits the soap and dirty water right into the lake, a mere 30 feet from the lake washers. Chonita had recognized this and had told me that the pila was exactly the same as using the lake since the water is dumped back into the lake anyway.

When I had spoken to a woman at Xechivoy while she washed, she told me that the pila was being built in order to prevent women from washing in the lake and
contaminating the lake. She expressed to me her fear that she may not be allowed to
continue washing in the lake after the completion of the pila. She did not wish to use
the pila as it would not offer enough space for her large cortes. When I asked her what
she thought made the lake dirty, she told me that the lake becomes unclean after the
rains. She clarified that she did not think that women washing laundry affected the lake.

This reflects what my research revealed about sewage treatment/waste water
removal in Santiago Atitlan. Santiago Atitlan, like many other lake towns, lacks any
proper waste disposal or sanitation facilities. The mountains form a caldera, and during
heavy rains, water carries trash into the lake. Further, the town lacks any infrastructure
to sanitize wastewater coming from homes. Thus, the women’s washing activity
contributes very little to the state of the lake.

Yet while women do not attribute their activity as contributing to the deteriorating
lake condition, many women do recognize many of the environmental changes that
have occurred in the lake that have significantly affected their activity. In many
conversations, women cited rising lake level, the cyanobacteria, and the trash problem
as major barriers to washing. The rising lake level due to the record amount of rain the
region has experienced has resulted in the moving of washing rocks to avoid complete
immersion.

Many women consider the trash and cyanobacteria as even more noteworthy
problems. During the rainy season the rains come daily, predictably around mid-
afternoon. The streets flood and those caught in the rain hop onto the narrow sidewalks
engaging in a precarious balancing act. The litter and debris are carried down to the
lake, becoming part of the ever-changing landscape of bags and cans that glitter below
the lakeshore surfaces. (Fig 11) The small drainage system the town possesses drains directly from a 5ft wide concrete pipe (Fig 11) into the washing areas in Xechivoy and Pachichaj contributing a cloudy greenish brown color to the water. The areas where women wash are nearly vacant after the rains. The water becomes too dirty to make laundry washing a feasible task.

These changes in the lakeshore occur daily, but are contributing to more long-term changes in the whole lake that have proven much more threatening. The lack of

Figure 11. (top left) a concrete runs into the lakeside at Xechivoy. (top right) after the rains, the pipe dumps sewage and rainwater into the lake. (bottom) litter in the lake water.
sewage treatment has resulted in the propagation of cyanobacteria algal blooms, threatening the health of the lake as well as the health of the lake users.

Agustin had cited the algal blooms as a reason for the building of the pilas, as a protective measure on the part of the women as well as the lake. The placement of municipal trashcans at the lakeside is indicative of other ways in which the municipality has taken responsibility over care for the lake. But how have the women washers perceived and attributed responsibility in light of the recent threat of algal blooms and increasing pollution in the lake? In my very first interview I was made aware of the ways in which women have responded to the changes. Ana Maria guided Emily and I into her little tienda and brought out two small stools for us. She talked to us about how she uses the lake to wash her laundry. She has a pila at home but she likes the flow one gets from washing in the lake. More recently, however, Ana Maria has begun washing in her small home pila since the lake has become very dirty and a lot of trash and plastic has accumulated. She told me about how she had helped clean up the trash and the “bashte” (what women call the algal material) under the direction of the committee in charge of the area.

Not all women have participated in such activities. One day I spoke to an elderly woman who washes on property owned by Iglesia Miel. She told me how the church cleans the lake area, but the women do not get involved. Many women, however, have been particularly aware of the bashte and have donated time to clean the lakeside areas. Candelaria told us of how the women washers had noticed the bashte and reported the problem to the committee. The municipality had sent some people to come
and help clean the bashte and many of the women including herself donated a few hours for a few days to help take care of the lake. Men and women of all ages came and used fine nets to collect and rid the water of the green algae. Many of the women had feared for their health when they first saw the bashte, but their worries subsided as they became involved in the cleaning. Maria had confirmed this and added that the women and men go every 3 weeks and clean the lake. The committee in charge of organizing the clean up also had advised the women to not throw trash into the lake. Additionally, the municipality had decided to build a pila for the women in case the bashte became too much of a problem. Mariela informed me that the committee alerts the pueblo of the problem and together with the people they decided on a day to come and clean.

Many women have cited the cocodes as being responsible for organizing lake clean-ups. Yet others acknowledge solely the women washers as those who have addressed the situation. One woman even claimed that the municipality did not respond to the bashte and only the dueñas of the rock took responsibility of their own areas and cleaned their own spaces in the lake. She did acknowledge however that the municipality had committees in charge of taking care of the lake. Thus many of the women acknowledge a shared responsibility on the part of the municipality and themselves regarding the status of the lake. How does this make sense in terms of the pila-building and the variety of narratives that women washers and municipal officials tell about the construction of the pilas?
The Production of Confusion and Uncertainty at the Lakeside

In spite of the obvious presence of the pila project and the clear objectives outlined by Agustin, there is all around confusion regarding origin, responsibility, purpose, and right to use. It was becoming apparent that what the women knew and understood about the municipality differed markedly from the municipality’s explanation for the project. No woman seemed to know that the pila was a response to the deteriorating condition of the lake and that the pila was meant to prevent women from washing in the lake in the future to preserve the health of the lake as well as the health of the women. The narratives were disparate and illusory and presented a variety of other reasons explaining the origins and purpose of the pila project. At times women’s stories were even contradictory.

During my conversation with Agustin in the municipal offices I learned that the committees, or cocodes, that had garnered support for the pilas, did in fact involve women in the decision-making process. Further, I was informed that the committee consisted of both male and female members, elected every 2 years by their respective cocodes, one per canton. Yet all of the women I had spoken to were under the impression that the committees, or cocodes, were exclusively male. Regarding support for the pila, Agustin had told me that the reason the pila was being built was due to the public’s request and support for the project. Yet most women had informed me that the pila was built either independently of support from the women or with the support of only a minority of the women.

There is a lot of discrepancy between the municipality and the women regarding the pila. Yet among the women also, the stories vary greatly. One example concerns
the right to use the pila. Concepcion from Xechivoy had told me that any woman would be able to use the pila. She even went on to suggest that the women would decide how they should go about taking turns to use the pila, developing some sort of schedule. In another conversation, a woman at the lake told me that the mayor had asked if the people wanted a pila, and only a minority of 25-35 women wanted it. This minority had to sign a paper to authorize the building of the pila. This minority of women will be using the pila. She went on to explain that these women wanted the pila because they don’t have pilas at home or they want to wash outside with the wind. The mayor promised a pila with a roof in case there was sun or rain. These women do not want others to use the pila since they signed and feel that because of this it is theirs. This story seems to pose a contrast to what I observed in Pachichaj at the pila in the Mayor’s park, where the two women I spoke with had informed me that the pila was for anyone to use. Even women from other cantons could come and use the pila if they so desired.

Even the pila’s origins and ownership do not yield unanimous consensus. One young girl by the name of Emilia, who had been waiting for her father to come back from his morning of fishing in Xechivoy, told me that she thought the pila was funded and had been commissioned by the American government. Concepcion seemed to also be under a similar impression and had told me the pila was being funded by foreign organizations. Most women, however, believe that the pila is the municipality’s creation.

The contradictory narratives I encountered make it apparent that there is a lot of misinformation among the women washers in Santiago with regards to what purpose the pila serves. The disparate explanations for the pila project point out concerns relevant to the women washers, but completely elide and overlook the environmental
and health concerns that have motivated the municipality to carry out the pila project in the first place. Yet what does this confusion tell us about the nature of this pila development project? What does it mean in terms of municipal interventions and the participation of those subjects intervened upon?

In Javier Auyero and Debora Swistun’s account of the making of an environmental disaster in an Argentine shantytown, *Flammable*, Auyero and Swistun explore how uncertainty and confusion are produced among the residents regarding the effects of the toxicity introduced into their environment by the powerful petroleum company Shell. One of Auyero and Swistun’s primary claims is that that the stock of knowledge that people have about their surroundings at a particular time and place is a joint product of the history of that place, the routines and interactions of its residents, and the power relations in which they are enmeshed. He articulates the idea that “doubt was crafted” (Auyero and Swistun, 2009:141) by the various actors involved such as the doctors, municipal players, and Shell itself. The embodied histories of the residents and their uninterrupted routines have served to shape and blind how they perceive their now toxic environment. Thus the labor of confusion and the embodied histories of the residents have served to produce what Auyero and Swistun term “toxic uncertainty” among the residents of Flammable.

The picture Auyero draws is somewhat analogous to what is occurring in Santiago. We see that confusion and uncertainty is apparent among the women washers in Santiago. Women are unsure of the purpose of the pila and of how it may affect their own activity. They are confused as to who is allowed to use the pila and of
who is ultimately responsible for the project. Yet I will argue that this confusion is not intentional as in the case of Flammable. It is simply a product of routine.

It was a cloudy day and I was afraid the rain would come soon. Emily and I trudged up the hill from the lakeside in Xechivoy. As we walked up, a woman standing in the doorway of her home called out to us. She was curious as to what we had been doing down by the lake. Emily explained my project to her and she volunteered to participate. I was thrilled, and though I was wary of the dark clouds gathering above, I allowed her to welcome us into her home. Her name was Beatrice. She told us about how she also uses the lake to wash laundry and how important the lake is for life here in Santiago. When the bashte came she was scared, but had helped to clear the area of the algae with fine nets. She was very happy that the lake was clean now. When prompted about the pila Beatrice told us that there was a cocode in charge of the pila and that the men still planned to put up walls and connect electricity so that women could wash at night and feel safe. She told me this was a very positive thing as it is very dangerous for women to come at night. Additionally, the pila would be great in times of rain since it has a roof. I was astonished. This was the first woman I had met whose details aligned with those provided by Agustin. I asked her how she knew what she knew and she told me that the men in charge of construction have been using her home to store materials, so she has been able to talk to the men about it. When asked about why the pila was being built, however, she told me that the pila was built for women to wash in when trash accumulates in the lake from the rain, which poses a barrier to washing. She then went on to tell me that only women who do not have a house pila may use the communal pila. Finally when I asked Beatrice about why
women do not participate in the cocode, she replied that women are too busy to get involved because they have to take care of the house.

My conversation with Beatrice reveals a multitude of understandings and meanings attributed to the pila. While she recognizes environmental problems occurring with the lake such as the bashte and the trash, the way in which she conceives of the pila is hardly an environmental one. Whereas the municipality’s purpose is to protect women from the contaminated lake with the pila as well as use the pila as one solution to the lake problem, to Beatrice, the pila addresses issues that preserve the practice of washing. Ana delineates safety, trash accumulation, rain, and the lack of a house pila as barriers to the necessary practice of washing. The pila is an option for women facing any of these obstacles. This can be explained by the fact that the pila building has not affected women’s daily practice thus far. No interruption of routine has occurred. Women still wash daily and have not encountered any municipal imposed alteration of their daily custom. The maintenance of routine has served as a blinder to understanding the municipality’s purpose in building the pila. Further, the fact that women have not ventured to involve themselves in the project is further affirmation of women’s active adherence to routine and active lack of public participation. This is also confirmed by the lack of knowledge regarding their own governing cocodes, which they believe consist of only male participants. Such lack of participation and lack of knowledge regarding governing bodies have resulted in women’s confusion regarding the municipal objectives in instituting the pila project.

The women’s rejection of the purpose imparted to the pila by the municipality makes sense particularly in light of something I observed in Pachichaj. In the mayor’s
park, a long concrete pipe takes the soapy dirty water from the pila and dumps the waste water directly back into the lake. (Fig 12) Thus, it would seem the women cannot perceive the pila as addressing any environmental concern. The pila observably maintains the consistent “polluting” of the lake with soapy residues and fecal matter from the activity. The pila has merely created a new separate space for the activity, and does not address an environmental concern. Thus, it would be impossible given the women’s lack of real communication with the municipality to understand the municipality’s environmental purpose in building the pila since washing at the pila has
the same affect on the lake as washing in the lake.

Auyero’s claim of routines as blinders in the production of uncertainty and confusion is relevant in this way. In Flammable, “continuity was never dissolved—if anything, residents were, as many noted, ‘making progress’ or as others put it ‘living our lives’—the routines and relations rooted residents in Flammable” (2009:143). The ways in which women operate at the lakeside have not been disrupted. The pila building, while inhabiting the same space as the women washers, has not had much influence over the behavior of the women washers. It is almost as if the pila occupied an entirely separate sphere from the lakeside washing space. Further, women have not been forcibly deterred from washing in the lake and have instead been allowed to continue their activity. Nor have they been told outright that their activity contaminates the lake. Thus the women washer’s perceptions of how their behavior might affect the lake and their daily routine of washing have been uninterrupted.

Yet Auyero takes his argument on the production of confusion further to claim that confusion is actively and intentionally produced on the part of power players. In the town of Flammable, the power player in question is Shell. The meaning and the doubt that the residents have attributed to and experienced regarding Shell’s contamination of their environment has been crafted and produced by actors in positions of power. The uncertainty regarding relocation by municipal officials, the variable diagnoses of illness by town doctors, and the mixed messages over responsibility by company representatives and journalists, aid in framing and shaping toxic uncertainty among the residents. Following Bourdieu, Auyero and Swistun argue that social domination and subordination of Flammable residents is achieved in the production of toxic uncertainty.
The “stock of knowledge that people have about their surroundings at a particular time and place is therefore a joint product of the history of that place, the routines and interactions of its residents, and the power relations in which they are enmeshed” (2009:144).

The municipality’s pila project, however, seems for the most part well-intentioned. Whereas in Flammable, one could claim that Shell is clearly the malevolent party, the case is not so clear here. Confusion here is not purposeful on any party’s part. While there is a stark division between the municipal actors and those acted upon, and while a number of gender and class barriers may explain the lack of cooperation between the women and the municipality, the women do not see their government’s intervention into their work as a negative one. Most women perceive the pila project, and by extension the municipality, in a way that serves to address and mollify their own insecurities regarding their lake washing activity. Thus in the many narratives I’ve encountered, the municipality has been perceived as a conflict mediator with regards to the dueñas of the rocks, a public health actor in the way women see the pila as protecting their skin from the bashte, and as an administrator of security by providing a safe space for washing.

Thus women have taken their “stock of knowledge” of the space and its history in their narratives of what they know about the pila. Ana is an interesting case in that she demonstrates several different understandings regarding the pila, reflective of her own or maybe of women washers’ general experience at the lakeside, but also knowledge of facts such as the wall building and electricity not mentioned by any other woman, but confirmed in my conversation with Agustin. This was a result of interactions with the
builders who had used her home to store materials and allowed for Ana to engage in the project at some base level.

Thus I claim that the municipality is not actively manipulating the public’s perception of the pila. The confusion that is continually produced is in part the result of the women’s routines – and the lack on municipal interference therein – but it is not intentionally produced as we see in *Flammable*. Yet the misunderstandings that have arisen may in fact aid the municipality’s objectives.

The women washers for the most part do not perceive the pila as a statement on their activity. Women do not believe that their washing contaminate the lake, either in their omission of such an idea in their narratives, or by verbal refutation as with Candelaria who told me she does not believe her activity affects the lake negatively. Women are allowed to do this because they know the pila would have the same effect on the lake as they have had, so to them they cannot perceive the pila as a negative statement on their activity. Thus by not perceiving the pila as a reaction to their washing, women have simultaneously been able to prevent stigmatization as well as create their own meaning.

By perceiving the pila in terms that address their concerns, the municipal objective can more easily be served. Women can see the pila as a solution to their concerns over space, weather, dueñas de las piedras, and bashte. We see this with the women in Pachichaj who have opted to use the pila, not because they believe by doing so they are preserving their environment, but rather because the pila helps them with their own everyday concerns regarding their washing activity. If the municipality had labeled the women washers of Santiago as contaminators of the lake, the women would...
have been stigmatized and conflict or subordination would have resulted. Yet the municipality has not communicated such a notion outright and the women themselves do not perceive the pila as a negative redress against them.

The testimonies of the women washers indicate a lived understanding of the lake condition, of the way in which the municipality cares for lake, and the politics of the lakeside space that inform their schemes of perception, appreciation, and action regarding the pila. The women washers’ experiences and embodied histories of the lakeside—inter-women washer conflict with dueñas, availability of space, the “bashte”—shape what women washers see and don’t see, what they know and don’t know, what they want to know, and what they don’t want to know about the changes occurring around them.

Conclusion

Through the pila project, the municipality has framed the women washers as an “environmental problem.” They have used spatial domination as a tool to resolve this problem, yet their attempts to assert their authority over the lakeside washing areas are limited. The lack of acknowledgement and knowledge among the women regarding the objectives of the pila project has allowed them to reject the “environmental problem” label and reframe the purpose of the pila. While there is some indication of outright resistance and contestation to the pila, as demonstrated by the town meeting, the women’s formation of knowledge regarding the pila seems to be in part a negotiation of their lived knowledge regarding the lake and their perceived understanding of their relationship with the municipality.
Thus this ethnography reveals the limits of analyzing municipal and women washers’ actions within the categories of subjugation and resistance. While the local government of Santiago Atitlan has employed spatial tactics to assert its authority over lakeside spaces, it is limited in its ability to achieve social and spatial domination. And while the women washers’ refusal of the notion that laundry washing is an environmental problem appears to be a small act of resistance, what is more striking is that women washers’ lack of participation in the project has resulted in recasting the objectives of the pila that reflect their own lived experience and employ their own alternative etiologies for the lake contamination (i.e. the waste water from the pila going straight into the lake; untreated sewage pipe leading directly into the lake).

Thus the municipality and women washers appear to be working at cross-purposes in service of the pila project. Because of a lack of enforcement on the part of the municipality and barriers to women’s participation, women are able to redefine and renegotiate the meanings of the pila to fulfill their own objectives of maintain their washing activity with security, health, and peace at the lakeside.

References:


