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Who “Counts”?: How Numbering Defines Who Matters (and Who Decides)

Review by Rebecca Nelson

Who Counts?: The Mathematics of Death and Life after Genocide

by Diane M. Nelson

Duke University Press, 2015

Careful accounting has been used to implicate the vice president and president of Guatemala in the activities of an embezzlement ring known as “La Linea.” Every day the number of protesters in the streets grows, and their sheer quantity has driven the vice president into resigning and provoked the business community into renouncing the president. The force of counting and accounting in (re)creating social worlds resonates powerfully in Diane Nelson’s new book, *Who Counts?: The Mathematics of Death and Life After Genocide*. Nelson plays with the idea that if indigenous people could only “count more” (become numerate) they would “count more” (matter to the authorities). In addition to these differential valuations, the book also examines “who counts,” in the sense of the institutions that collect and utilize data, and the “counter counters,” those who use numbers to combat the dehumanization of victims. Rather than viewing quantitative thinking simplistically as either factual or dehumanizing, Nelson seeks to take a genealogical, epistemological, and institutional approach to the act of counting, which naturally raises questions of categorization and membership. A key concept for Nelson is “adequation,” the act of trying to make abstract numbers commensurate with material reality. She links it to Gayatri Spivak’s (1987) term “super-adequation,” the process of defining people by their ability to produce more than they need for themselves. That extractable surplus can convert a group of people into a resource to be exploited, a process that Nelson decries.

This book is the third entry in what Nelson calls her “genocide trilogy” (279), following *A Finger in the Wound: Body Politics in Quincentennial Guatemala* (1999) and *Reckoning: The Ends of War in Guatemala* (2009), with each taking a more expansive ethnographic and theoretical approach

than the last. It struck me as an interesting choice for a famously logocentric scholar like Diane Nelson to focus on numbers. While words are generally considered creative and personal, she notes that it is jarring to think of numbers that way.

The book is divided into four sections. The first, “When You Count You Begin with 1, 2, 3,” comprises Chapters Minus One and Zero (a playful affectation in the table of contents that epitomizes Nelson’s iconoclastic style). Here, “ethnomathematics” are defined as systems of calculation identified with a distinct ethnic group, the way we associate the Classic Maya with the independent discovery of the concept of zero. In an admittedly “quick and dirty run” (17) through history, Nelson reviews literature suggesting that the mechanical model of the world as a set of interlocking parts that can be separated and reorganized coincided with the increasing individuation of society. The ability to note gains supported the growth of a culture of accumulation. In this section, Nelson emphasizes that numbers are a human institution invested with meaning that are manipulated, invoked, and contested.

The second section, “Bonesetting,” refers to the etymology of the word “algebra,” which comes from the Arabic word *al-jabr* for bone setting or, more generally, restoring broken parts. In the Guatemalan genocide, the government targeted and killed non-indigenous people as individual units, whereas it killed indigenous people as aggregates. At the same time, the mass effect of indigenous groups’ numbers can also give them strength in protests. This section focuses on scenes from the efforts to prove that genocide occurred in Guatemala, including La Verbena, an ossuary in a public cemetery where forensic anthropologists are slowly reuniting the scattered bones of missing people and the National Police Archive, where calculations of the volume of messages are being used to make the case that senior officials had prior and constant knowledge of the acts being carried out in their name. Math is used in defining whether genocide took place in projecting the percentage of the population that would have died naturally and determining whether the difference between actual and projected deaths is significant.

This section veers into a discussion of traditional Mayan counting systems, which are rich sources of information about social valuation. The count differs depending on what is being counted: adult humans are marked grammatically in a way that objects and preverbal children (foreign anthropologists) are not. Mayan counting is also progressive, in the sense that rather than counting something already completed, they mark the next number to which the count is progressing. Nelson argues that, just as algebra is meant to repair a broken equation, reparations for state violence are meant to rectify a situation of imbalance. However, the money from reparations is seen as blood money that absolves the government for its atrocities, stains recipients with the appearance of financial interest in victimhood, and imbues any use of the money with the stink of death. One woman took the

government's check as evidence, finally, that she was not guilty for allowing the army to forcibly take and murder her son, and kept it uncashed on an altar. Rape reparations were particularly controversial because of the stigma of rape; Nelson writes that accepting a payment in compensation for rape can "turn a victim into a whore. What else is a woman who accepts money for sex?" (114). Her macabre sense of humor (for example, one section is entitled "it takes a pillage") risks coming off as flippant – she recognizes that reckoning with something as unfathomable as mass murder can be "simultaneously horrible and funny" (102) – but her long-term commitment to Guatemalan struggles for equality shines clearly through every anecdote.

The most ethnographically rich section, for me, was "Mayan Pyramids," which brings together the stories of two pyramid schemes: the multi-level marketing structure of nutrition brand Omnilife and a classic Ponzi con job. Nelson struggled with her own discomfort at a long-term friend's transition from working for a bilingual education advocacy organization, work that anthropologists find understandable and laudable, to hawking expensive vitamin supplements. Skeptical of the claims she heard from her friend and other community members about Omnilife's spectacular curative properties, Nelson nonetheless came to recognize it as fitting into the medical pluralism common to people who are marginalized within formal healthcare systems. Her participants also viewed Omnilife sales as very "Maya" because the company's complicated sales networks and motivational workshops reinforce the sense that health is social and provide a space for people to remake themselves in the aftermath of war. However, she argues that the exquisitely complex structure of percentage earnings based on hierarchical position within the organizational pyramid make it difficult for the vendors to calculate their earnings accurately, and that there may be other incalculable losses as vendors deploy their social capital to sell vitamins. The second pyramid in this section refers to the near-lynching in 2008 of a mysterious figure known as *El Millonario*. His "Mayan development project" (which he initially described as international aid and subsequently as a form of divine benevolence) provoked a cult-like bubble of unfettered investment that left entire villages in debt

The final section, "Yes to Life = No to Mining," focuses on the accounting used in the public consultations for international mining projects, both by the proponents, who left many people lacking formal government identification out of the count, and the opponents, who repeat the calculation that "98% said no" in their anti-mining activism. Quantification is also used to document the deleterious effects of mining, such as arsenic levels in the water. The chapter on Mayan activism plays with the concept of "resistance," which can be both electrical and social. Nelson was nonplussed that, in the face of violent suppression of anti-mining activism, Mayan activists testifying in the People's Tribunal of 2008 focused on the failings of the national electrical infrastructure. However, she rationalizes this

claim for equal access to the new global “currency,” the electrical current that powers Internet access, by relating it to the use of ancient Mayan knowledge as a source of power.

Reading this book provoked the same question I often have with Diane Nelson’s work: Is clever wordplay equivalent to advancing anthropological theory? I began maintaining a running pun count but I quickly lost track; a few notable words whose multiple meanings are teased out include:

- *count*: “to number”/*count*: “to matter or have value”
- *mangle*: “an antique iron used to smooth clothes”/*mangle*: “to deform or maim”
- *qualify*: “antonym of quantify”/*qualify*: “to be eligible”

The book flits restlessly from example to example, drawing tenuous connections between concepts and cases through (often coincidental) conjunctions in the meaning of terms. At times, these can become strained; for example, the page-long technical description of electrical resistance pertains to nothing but a slight metaphor for social resistance to oppression. This leads to my biggest critique of the book: ultimately, while *Who Counts?* is entertaining, nuanced, ethnographically grounded, and thought-provoking, any substantial contributions to the anthropological literature on Guatemala or quantification it might make are frustratingly slippery. Despite these concerns, I highly recommend the book to anyone interested in Guatemala, post-genocidal reconstruction, environmental justice movements, or the social embeddedness of economic rationality.

References Cited

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Rebecca Nelson recently graduated with a Ph.D. in cultural anthropology from the University of Connecticut. Her research focuses on volunteer tourism in Guatemala and how it is opening up new avenues for tourists and hosts to develop more cosmopolitan understandings of the world (as well as creating new forms of friction over the circulation of knowledge). She is also examining how non-governmental organizations encourage Guatemalan women's participation in the public sphere.

