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Review Essay

Elusive Identities: Indigeneity and Nation-States in Central America

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Maya Intellectual Renaissance: Identity, Representation, and Leadership.

By Victor Montejo. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005. xxi + 236 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$19.95 paper.)

Ch'orti'-Maya Survival in Eastern Guatemala: Indigeneity in Transition.

By Brent E. Metz. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006. ix + 346 pp., map, illustrations, notes, appendixes, bibliography, index. \$29.95 paper.)

"I Won't Stay Indian, I'll Keep Studying": Race, Place, and Discrimination in a Costa Rican High School. By Karen Stocker. (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2005. x + 248 pp., notes, appendixes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 cloth.)

Mayas in the Marketplace: Tourism, Globalization, and Cultural Identity.

By Walter E. Little. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004. x + 320 pp., maps, illustrations, notes, appendix, bibliography, index. \$22.95 paper.)

Seeing Indians: A Study of Race, Nation, and Power in El Salvador.

By Virginia Q. Tilley. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005. xviii + 297 pp., maps, illustrations, notes, appendix, bibliography, index. \$22.95 paper.)

For scholars of indigenous people, one of the most elusive and debated issues is how to define ethnicity. With the state, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), academics, activists, and of course indigenous people themselves all constructing and perpetuating notions of indigeneity, ethnic

identities are enigmatic. Though postmodernists such as James Clifford have argued strongly against defining indigenous people by discrete cultural, traditional, historical, and/or linguistic essences, it remains easier to critique existing definitions of identity than to explain what makes indigenous people indigenous.¹ The books under review here explore how ethnic identities are created, contested, and reinvented and, more specifically, how ethnic and national identities buttress and undermine each other. Throughout Latin America, national identity and indigeneity are inextricable. Whether a nation's citizenry denies, denigrates, or celebrates them, indigenous peoples and their histories influence discourses of national identity even when such discourses attempt to imagine them out of existence.

In Central America, where such sixteenth-century indigenous warriors as Tekún Umán and Atlacatl have become iconic figures, yet modern indigenes are marginalized, erased, and even murdered, identity politics are particularly complex. Countries like Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Costa Rica have long held to their myths of *mestizaje* (racial mixing), while Guatemala has desperately and often violently attempted to create a more homogeneous Ladino (nonindigenous) nation. The tension between celebrating an indigenous past and suppressing an indigenous present is perhaps most palpable in Guatemala. Since the 1870s, liberal governments had sought to assimilate Maya. Yet beginning in the 1930s this goal clashed with the state's attempt to attract international tourists by marketing Maya. Even today images of colorful Mayas and statues of Tekún Umán form a perplexing backdrop in a nation that devolved into genocide during its thirty-six-year civil war (1960–96). That many Guatemalans refused to celebrate K'ichee-Maya Rigoberta Menchú's 1992 Nobel Peace Prize even as their country's civil war was winding down is emblematic of a nation struggling to reconcile its multiple and contradictory pasts.

Though the levels and duration of violence varied, similar histories inform the national identities and myths of other Central American nations. For example, as Jeffrey Gould shows in his study of Nicaragua, local Ladino authorities and landowners sought to dispossess indigenous people there of their land by claiming they had become *mestizos* (i.e., participants in mainstream culture). Yet in contravention to Nicaragua's national history and identity, many indigenous people continued to identify as such.² At the same time, states can revive indigenous identities. When Costa Rica and El Salvador, for instance, officially recognized their indigenous populations in the 1970s and 1990s respectively, the relationship between indigeneity and national identity shifted yet again. Because state policy could both compound and ameliorate their marginality, some populations resisted being labeled "Indian." The organic nature of national and

ethnic identities informed how indigenous groups positioned themselves vis-à-vis the state.

As the vast literature on Mayan studies attests, the Maya of central and western Guatemala often have overshadowed other indigenous groups and movements in Central America. Three of the books considered here—*Maya Intellectual Renaissance*, *Mayas in the Marketplace*, and *Ch'orti'-Maya Survival in Eastern Guatemala*—enrich and complicate conceptions of Mayan ethnicity. That each of the authors speaks at least one Mayan language makes these works all the more authoritative. As a Maya from Jacaltenango who survived the civil war, earned a PhD in anthropology (while in exile), became a professor at the University of California, Davis, and most recently returned to Guatemala as an elected member of congress, Victor Montejo offers unique analysis of the Maya.³ His cross-cultural position informs his scholarship. By drawing on both insider and outsider perspectives, Montejo creates rich “intercultural texts,” to borrow a phrase from Mary Louise Pratt.⁴ In *Maya Intellectual Renaissance*, Montejo assails simplistic understandings of Maya, such as accepting Menchú as the voice of the Maya, even while he at times seems an apologist for essentializing Mayan culture: “When the Maya speak of the cultural and historic essence that gives their identity a foundation, they are accused of being essentialists, as if it were a sin to affirm that Maya culture has millennia-old roots and that current Maya speak languages that descend from this ancient Maya culture” (8). But, as such scholars as Greg Urban and Jane Hill have shown for Paraguay, Peru, and Mexico, using language as an ethnic marker is problematic.⁵ As Brent Metz’s *Ch'orti'-Maya Survival in Eastern Guatemala* illustrates, some who identify as Maya are monolingual Spanish speakers. This critique notwithstanding, Montejo’s essentialist leanings must be understood in the context of Guatemalan ethnic relations. As anthropologist Kay Warren points out, “For Mayas . . . essentialism is a powerful rejection of the Ladino definition of Mayas as the negative and weaker other.”⁶ Montejo’s goal is not to reify Mayan culture or identity but rather to encourage Mayan leaders to build on shared notions to “create a Maya knowledge that will go into the construction of a multiethnic and multicultural Guatemalan nation, built with the commitment of both Maya and non-Maya” (31).

While Montejo recognizes diversity among Maya, particularly along ethnic and class lines, Metz’s *Ch'orti'-Maya Survival in Eastern Guatemala* deepens this perspective by revealing how different and isolated the Ch’orti’-Maya are from western Mayas. Until the early 1990s, when representatives from the Academy of Mayan Languages and Majawil Q’ij began to organize in eastern Guatemala, Ch’orti’s considered western Mayas

exotic, and thus never identified with them. Unlike Montejo, Metz argues that Mayan identity is not the result of a shared “primordial essence that determines their behaviors” (300) but rather is based in a shared history of colonization and the reproduction of “mutually recognizable traditions” (300). Since independence did not free Maya from colonial relations, in some ways Metz’s argument reflects one made nearly forty years earlier by Guatemalan historian Severo Martínez Paleaz, who insisted that the Spanish conquest destroyed Mayan culture and that “Indians” were thus simply colonial constructions of the other—a notion popular among many Ladinos today and decried by Maya.⁷ For Metz, over seventy years of liberal reforms (1871–1944) aimed at usurping Mayan land and labor reconstituted the Ch’orti’. He asserts that “Ch’orti’ culture would change so dramatically that their ancestors in the 1930s, much less in the 1530s, would scarcely recognize or identify with them today” (56). And yet even those who attempt to distance themselves from Ch’orti’ identity (because they associate it with victimhood and poverty) continue to practice cultures and ways of life that distinguish them from Ladinos. In this much-needed study of eastern Guatemala (ethnographies of Guatemala have focused overwhelmingly on the western and central highlands), Ch’orti’ identities are processual rather than fixed.⁸ Though negotiations between hegemonic forces and subalterns are at the heart of this process, gaining a deeper understanding of how ethnicity affects people’s lived experience is contingent on acknowledging that indigenous people are not simply reacting to external stimuli but also initiating actions from their own perspectives.

To offset the tendency of outsiders to control the discourse about indigenous people, Montejo advocates moving from a colonialist Indian identity to an autonomous Maya identity. To this end, he encourages Mayan scholars to write an “autohistory” based on their own texts (62). Fortunately, since the late 1980s Maya have produced sources ranging from editorials and essays to novels and poetry that have been published and distributed by Mayan presses. Some of these texts are studied at Guatemalan universities. Nevertheless, entrenched misinformation and misconceptions are difficult to extirpate. Montejo shows how Ladino pedagogues developed primary school textbooks and curricula based on early ethnographers’ notions of what was authentically Maya. Consequently, what Guatemalan children learn in school misconstrues Mayan reality and history. And as Mayan novelist Gaspar Pedro González poignantly captures in *La otra cara*, pedagogical materials and teachers often repudiate the knowledge Mayan children glean from their elders.⁹ Similarly, in her study of a Costa Rican high school “*I Won’t Stay Indian, I’ll Keep Studying*,” Karen Stocker found that distortions about indigenous culture and history in the

curriculum contradicted what “Indian” students knew from their experience. Of course, teachers, ethnographers, authors, and state officials are not the only outsiders who shape notions of indigeneity. As Walter Little demonstrates in *Mayas in the Marketplace*, tourists both influence and are influenced by images of indigenous people.

The Guatemalan and, more recently, Salvadoran governments’ exploitation of indigenous people to promote tourism speaks to the ways national identities heralded indigenous identities when national leaders deemed such discourse fiscally prudent. Economics shapes indigeneity in ways that can both undermine and sustain indigenous culture.¹⁰ Through his deft combination of theory and empirical data, Little illustrates how gender relations and household economies have changed as a result of Mayan women’s indispensable roles in tourist marketplaces. Instead of being censured by men and the state for disrupting male authority as their economically independent female counterparts often are, Mayan women who work in these markets enjoy increasing prestige and privilege vis-à-vis their male kin. In a radical shift from their communities’ division of labor norms, Mayan men are cleaning, cooking, and taking care of children! In part, as Little argues, Mayan women’s positions are products of tourists’ imaginings of what indigenous people are: women dressed in *traje* (traditional clothing) who speak native languages. In marketing strategies that parallel those of Mayan vendors, Nambueseñas of Costa Rica use their ethnicity to sell their goods in regional markets, even if they “abhor . . . being classified as an Indian,” as Stocker observes (74).

Though Mayan women benefit from tourists’ social constructions, they reject the notion that they are the sole bearers of ethnicity; they point to men as crucial participants in the reproduction of culture, maintenance of language, and perpetuation of Mayan identities. In this way, Little shows how globalization both brings about change in local communities and households and sustains the means by which people preserve their traditional ways of life, which themselves are never static. The Maya are neither omnipotent nor powerless in this process. Despite attracting tourists by making Guatemala seem exotic, wearing *traje* also labels Maya as inferior in Guatemalan society. As Metz points out, for many indigenous people straddling local subsistence lifestyles and neoliberal economic currents, economic modernization and international development projects often “reinforce problems rather than provide solutions” (228). Such varied responses among Central American indigenous peoples demonstrate that even within these groups, people experience economic modernization differently.

Like the contradictory effects of economic forces on ethnicity, state

responses to indigenous identities in Central America ranged from erasure to revival. In response to a peasant uprising in 1932, the Salvadoran military regime of General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez and Ladino vigilantes massacred some ten thousand people, most of whom were indigenous. Thereafter, Salvadoran intellectuals and leaders simply wrote indigenous people out of existence. To set a course for progress and emulate developed nations, Salvadorans created a myth of modern mestizaje. Ironically, given the celebration of multiculturalism in the 1990s, denying indigenous heritages and populations became a symbol of backwardness. So to associate itself with modern nations once again, the state scrambled to identify indigenous people within its borders. In *Seeing Indians*, Virginia Tilley follows this history to show how ethnic perceptions are products of state building. By looking at discourses adapted from Europe and the United States concerning civilization, modernization, race, and ethnicity, Tilley convincingly argues that constructions of indigeneity are not limited to local or even national influences. For instance, international donors often see the Maya as the paradigm of indigenous groups in Central America; for NGOs, state officials, and many Salvadorans, the Nahua and Lenca (Ulua speakers) were not quite indigenous enough. After listening to their concerns, UNESCO officials pronounced Nahuas to be “mere farmers” because their interests were more economic than cultural; on this basis, UNESCO denied them funding (230). Unfortunately, the lack of indigenous voices in Tilley’s book conveys the impression that indigeneity is dominated by hegemonic actors. By providing subaltern perspectives, Montejo’s, Little’s, Metz’s, and Stocker’s books correct this misconception.

Though Stocker does not analyze how Costa Rica’s myth of mestizaje developed, she too examines how the state invents indigeneity. When the government began establishing reservations in 1977, a number of people who had not previously identified as such suddenly became “Indians.” Like Tilley, Stocker argues that “discourse has the capacity to create, rather than simply reflect, local identities” (46). Previously coequal with and indistinguishable from their neighbors in Santa Rita, once the Nambueseños’ lived space was defined as a reservation, they were considered indigenes and thus discriminated against. Though groups such as the Maya have identities grounded in place, Nambueseños’ ascribed indigenous identity was created by place. In this sense, the Nambueseño experience is a modern-day reflection of a much larger historical process whereby indigenous people of the Americas became “ethnic groups” only when their land was incorporated into colonial territories and later nation-states.¹¹ Because many Nambueseños, though certainly not all, believed they arbitrarily became indigenous people by virtue of their residence, they

resented outsiders coming to their community to see Indians. Evidence of nation-states imposing indigeneity on uninterested citizens reminds us that ethnicity is a process not a product; at times states become unlikely champions of indigenous identity even while the targets of their policies seek assimilation or erasure.

By examining the multiple forces and perceptions at play in the formation of indigenous identities, these books provide a window into the workings of ethnicity and identity politics. What Montejo's collection of essays makes clear is that first and foremost the methodology, analysis, and finished products of such studies must be recognized as authoritative by indigenous peoples themselves. Yet even with the indigenous input that Montejo and other native scholars such as Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil advocate, indigenous peoples will never be able to control how others perceive them or how states and the international community appropriate their identities. At the same time, neither states, NGOs, marketplaces, nor nonindigenous citizens are omnipotent. The process of indigeneity is embedded in the complex interplay of economic, political, social, and cultural relations that occur from the local to the global level.

Notes

- 1 James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA, 1988). To cite one example of postmodern influence, a recent review essay in this journal explored how the move away from essentialist approaches to indigenous cultures has led scholars of vernacular and folk religions to examine how such faiths "engage with colonialism, modernism, and global economies"; Amy Hale, "Reevaluating Tradition and Modernity in Latin American Vernacular Religions," *Ethnohistory* 53 (2006): 420.
- 2 Jeffrey Gould, *To Die in This Way: Nicaraguan Indians and the Myth of Mestizaje, 1880-1965* (Durham, NC, 1998). See also Germán Romero Vargas et al., *Persistencia indígena en Nicaragua* (Managua, 1992). In contrast to these studies of indigeneity in Nicaragua, historian Elizabeth Dore found that many Dirio-mentos had assimilated to the point that they no longer identified as indigenous (*Myths of Modernity: Peonage and Patriarchy in Nicaragua* [Durham, NC, 2006]).
- 3 See *Testimony: Death of a Guatemalan Village* (Willimantic, CT, 1987) for Montejo's account of surviving a military attack on a Mayan community.
- 4 Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York, 1992).
- 5 Greg Urban, "The Semiotics of State-Indian Linguistic Relationships: Peru, Paraguay, and Brazil," and Jane H. Hill, "In Nēca Gobierno de Puebla: Mexicano Penetrations of the Mexican State," in *Nation-States and Indians in Latin America*, ed. Greg Urban and Joel Sherzer (Austin, TX, 1991), 307-30, 72-94.

- 6 Kay Warren, *Indigenous Movements and Their Critics: Pan-Maya Activism in Guatemala* (Princeton, NJ, 1998), 78.
- 7 Severo Martínez Pelaez, *La patria del criollo: Ensayo de interpretación de la realidad colonial guatemalteca* (Guatemala City, 1973), 567–70, 599–600, 612, 617. Other scholars have argued that many Latin American indigenous practices presumed to be pre-Hispanic actually have roots in the colonial era and later. See, e.g., Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983); and Judith Friedlander, *Being Indian in Hueyapán: A Study of Forced Identity in Contemporary Mexico* (New York, 1975).
- 8 For an analysis and critique of the ways anthropologists have framed indigenous identity in Guatemala, see Warren, *Indigenous Movements*, 178–80, 191–92.
- 9 Gaspar Pedro González, *Sbeybal jun naq Maya Q'anob'al/La otra cara* (Rancho Palos Verdes, CA, 1996). See also Luis Enrique Sam Colop, *Jub'aqtum Omay Kuchum K'aslemal: Cinco siglos de encubrimiento* (Guatemala City, 1991).
- 10 See, e.g., Edward F. Fischer and Peter Benson, *Broccoli and Desire: Global Connections and Maya Struggles in Postwar Guatemala* (Stanford, CA, 2006).
- 11 See Les Field, "Who Are the Indians? Reconceptualizing Indigenous Identity, Resistance, and the Role of Social Science in Latin America," *Latin American Research Review* 29.3 (1994): 240.

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