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Review / Reseña

Florencia Mallon, ed. *Decolonizing Native Histories: Collaboration, Knowledge and Language in the Americas*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2012.

Thinking about the Indigenous and Ethnohistory

Erick Langer

Georgetown University

Over the past decades, Ethnohistory has burgeoned among the historians as a means to understand indigenous peoples. Scholars have become increasingly skillful in discerning natives' perspectives from documents written in many cases by their enemies. When every once in a while scholars encounter a document or other evidence generated by native peoples, they try to wring the very most out of it, given the scarcity of such material. In the Americas, only Mexicanists have appeared to have it easier, given the relative wealth of native-language, municipal-level documents written in native languages.

However, the problem of native voice is endemic in the field. The vast majority of scholars who work on native histories are not native to the

peoples they study. The field of Ethnohistory is dominated not only by non-natives, but also in most cases the histories of natives is squeezed to fit into the histories of their enemies or at the very least their counterparts, the Europeans and other peoples who attempted to ally with them, colonize them, displace them, or at worst, rub them out. It is difficult to figure out in most cases how indigenous peoples themselves thought of history; there are very few examples where scholars use indigenous categories—when they can be worked out—to understand the impact of outsiders on native peoples.

Anthropologists have generally been much more sensitive to this issue; after all, most anthropologists try to understand and then communicate indigenous understandings in their own scholarly work. In many cases, anthropologists have taken us much farther into understanding native histories on their own terms than historians. One need only think of, for example, work by Andeanists such as Tristan Platt, Frank Solomon, or John Murra—to just mention three scholars in my field—to see the impact they have had by untangling some native understandings of history in the Andes. In addition, anthropologists have struggled over the past twenty-odd years with the colonial origins of their discipline that has brought much reflection on the methods used to understand other cultures, the ability and right of non-natives to understand indigenous knowledge, and the right to expose other peoples' lives and attitudes to a foreign audience. That has created an even greater sensitivity to native cultures and a discussion about who has the right to disseminate this knowledge and to what extent.

In my mind, it is not a bad thing that people who are foreign to the people they study do so. How else could we figure out the history of the ancient Greeks, or the Hittites, or even medieval Western Europeans, who are probably culturally as distant from twenty-first century peoples as many of the colonial indigenous groups in the Americas? Even U.S. History, which has a tendency to colonize and bring to the United States the best foreign scholars who study this country, has benefited tremendously from foreign-born historians.

The predominance of non-natives doing most Ethnohistory is of a different order of magnitude. The issue here is that many people from native cultures are living today who could contribute through their scholarship perspectives in a way that non-natives simply cannot. Few indigenous peoples have been trained to write history in a fashion that non-natives can or want to consume. Clearly, training in a discipline such as Anthropology or History brings its own cultural assumptions and imbues even native scholars with its traditions. However, the fact is that there have not been enough native scholars and that, with few exceptions, they have not had as much of an impact on the field of Ethnohistory as they deserve.

Florencia Mallon, a historian of Peru, Mexico, and Chile, has tried to remedy this situation through the publication of the book under discussion. The book is an attempt to highlight the contributions of native peoples in writing their histories and the methods that might be used to write and understand native histories. Not all contributions are by native scholars (Mallon is not a native American). As always with edited volumes, the results are a bit uneven. Some contributions deal more with Ethnohistory than others. Mallon provides an Introduction and brief essays to each of the three parts of the book to tie the essays together. A two-page essay at the end reiterates main points. The book gives us a good understanding of where the field is in different countries and what still needs to be done.

Mallon's definition of "The Americas" is stretched a bit in the first two contributions, which form a separate section on "Land, Sovereignty and Self-Determination." The first essay is by Kehaulani Kauanui, who writes on Hawaiian history. The selection is defensible because Hawaiian history is often marginalized in Pacific histories, given its statehood in the United States. Moreover, Hawaii and its natives have been profoundly influenced by policies emanating from the Americas, the government of the United States. Kauanui examines recent history from a native perspective by showing how the "Akaka Bill" of 2011, which provided for rights for native Hawaiians, in fact disenfranchised native peoples by exchanging rights on the islands for native Hawaiians to have the option to choose independence from the United States. Kauanui rightfully shows how

international law privileges the right of states over peoples. His work shows how native histories bump up against legal frameworks that claim to be universal but in fact were concocted by European peoples who imposed their own cultural and historical specific criteria on international law.

The following contribution makes the same geographical jump to the Pacific; this time to Rapa Nui, or Easter Island. The author, Riet Delsing, is a Dutch anthropologist who has worked extensively on the island. She describes the relationship the Rapa Nui had with the government of Chile, which annexed the island in 1888. The essay focuses mainly on land tenure arrangements and how they changed over time. For much of the early days, a Scottish company administered Easter Island, on which it raised sheep. This changed in 1933, when the state registered all land as “fiscal,” i.e. state-owned land. This presumably made it impossible for non-Rapanui to own land. The 1966 law made the Rapanui into Chilean citizens, but under the Pinochet dictatorship in 1979 the land was distributed to individual natives, which went against the collective concept of property among the clans on the island. Delsing shows the contradictions in Chilean policies well and the attempt by some Rapanui to live within the Chilean nation-state with some autonomy and others, like those in the Rapa Nui Parliament, who want their island to be autonomous because they do not accept the original 1888 annexation. In this case, the essay highlights the unequal and culturally insensitive policies that governments in the Americas imposed on Pacific native populations.

The following section, on “Indigenous Writing and Experiences with Collaboration,” is the heart of the book and takes us to the continental heartlands. Fernando Garcés, a *k'ara* (non-native person), recounts his experiences publishing a Quechua-language newspaper in Bolivia. Begun in 1983 in Mizque, a subtropical region in the Cochabamba department, the newspaper tried to promote reading and writing in Quechua, often through testimonials by inhabitants of the region. Quechua is a flexible and mostly oral language, in which Spanish words occur quite frequently. In fact, Garcés shows that parts of the newspaper, especially national and international articles, appeared in Spanish while he published local news in the native language. But the most important aspect of Garcés’s essay is his

discussion of *Quechua yachay*, which can be translated as local or Andean knowledge. Garcés posits that in the language, a kind of knowledge is embedded that is vital to the continuity of peasant and indigenous culture and social structures.

Returning to native collaboration, anthropologist Joanne Rappaport and Abelardo Ramos Pacho, the latter a native of the Nasa ethnic group of southern Colombia, provide a frank discussion of the joys and difficulties of collaborating together to write academic and non-academic publications. The essay itself is written in the form of a dialogue, where Rappaport and Ramos exchange opinions and provide separate perspectives to common issues. It is an interesting attempt to show how two social scientists can collaborate but maintain their distinctive voices and perspectives. Particularly interesting is the discussion of how to incorporate—or not—distinctive native ways of thinking. Also important is the understanding that the needs of social movements, such as the CRIC—*Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca* (Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca)—are different than that of academic research. Since many of the collaborative works that have emerged between academics and indigenous people involve some kind of social or political activism, how Rappaport and Ramos managed is instructive. What is clear is that both maintained a deep respect for one another and willingly discussed their differences in constructive ways.

Jan and Diane Rus, two anthropologists who have lived in Chiapas since 1985, use a diary format to describe the *Taller Tzotzil*, which published in Tzotzil and in Spanish information about indigenous practices and other issues such as plantation labor. The authors take on the problems of authorship, the role of women, the complex issue of readership. It appeared that the books were most popular among the Protestants who learned how to read Tzotzil by reading *The Bible* and had been expelled by their original communities. The authors also discuss the fact that the Zapatista rebellion had a profound effect on native consciousness. The Ruses conclude on a positive note, showing how Tzotzil language has taken off in Chiapas and become a vital mode of communication even in written form.

The third section, on “Generations of Indigenous Activism and Internal Debates,” deals with the United States and Guatemala. Brian Klopotek, who defines himself as Choctaw, addresses the racial issues within his ethnic group (being a Latin Americanist, I prefer not to use the term “tribe”). The Choctaw had slaves of African origin and many escaped slaves and free blacks joined the Choctaws. The Clifton-Choctaw in particular have African ancestry. Klopotek examines how the anti-black racism by other Choctaws undermined ethnic solidarity. In other words, the Choctaw took on the characteristics of the dominant group—whites—to place themselves in a better social position than those of African descent. His work shows how complex the issue of race remains especially in the South, where mixtures of descendants of Africans and indigenous peoples are quite common.

Edgar Esquit examines the encounter between Maya history in Guatemala and Maya intellectuals who are beginning to define a new historical discourse based on the reading of hieroglyphs and old Maya texts. This relationship began when archaeologists started teaching Maya hieroglyphic writing and triangulating the ancient inscriptions with modern-day Maya practices. The Mayanists, as Esquit calls them, used this information to create a new, Maya-centered history for political use. In contrast, Guatemala’s indigenous movements distinguish themselves from Mexican and Andean movements by focusing on attempts to recoup language and culture rather than explicit political movements. This comparison is based on the context of the Maya movement, which tried to survive within a national environment of death squads and repression of indigenous peoples. The creation of a new, contestatory history came up against the new official multiculturalism that tried to integrate Maya history into national discourse. In addition, the author shows that Mayanists created a history that fit their own conceptions, but was not necessarily the point of view of Maya who had not had the advantage of university training. The author shows that within the Maya community, the issue as to how to interpret Maya history remains fraught with contradictions and struggles.

Overall, the book provides much reflection on the issue of native representation among social scientists and historians. The volume shows how far we still need to go. Although the editor tries to highlight indigenous theorizing, it is scantily present. Indeed, Rappaport and Ramos's contribution illustrates that some types of indigenous theorizing might be judged in unexpected ways by indigenous peoples, such as when Rappaport tried to introduce the Nasa concept of a spiral movement of time rather than a linear history. The political exigencies of making these histories clear to outsiders are limited. Such endeavors remind us that writing about indigenous peoples within the context in which they remain subaltern and generally much poorer and powerless than other groups is in fact political. Writing such histories is even more politically motivated for indigenous peoples who want to change the balance of power within their countries. At the same time, such efforts to center indigenous narratives does not exempt non-native scholars.

In such a short book it is difficult to obtain all indigenous experiences—it is not an encyclopedia. Nevertheless, the absence of Canadian First Nations, who have developed their own way of thinking about history and operate in a political context that bears strikingly similarities and differences with the United States or Latin America, might have been a valuable addition. This is especially the case, given that contact between U.S. and Latin American native groups was instrumental in bringing about the creation of new movements and ways to think about and organize in Latin America.

It is also striking that non-natives wrote a majority of the contributions, which shows how far academia still needs to go to incorporate native viewpoints and recruit budding native scholars so that they might help transform current interpretations. The trick is to socialize natives into these rather closed disciplinary discourses and facilitate change that will expand the dialogue to embrace incredibly varied native cultures. Such efforts will hopefully improve the conceptual possibilities and deepen the discussion that books such as *Decolonizing Native Histories* hint at. In fact, some of the debates among scholars and native activists as well as

those among indigenous groups discussed in this volume provide evidence that this highly constructive rethinking is already happening.

Decolonizing Native Histories is very diverse in its objectives and contributions and deserves to be read by ethnohistorians and anthropologists. This volume provides thoughtful perspectives on many crucial issues, such as the writing of Ethnohistory, the use of native languages, the publication of testimonials, and the contemporary struggles of native peoples in the Americas.