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### **Review/Reseña**

Laura E. Matthew. *Memories of Conquest: Becoming Mexicano in Colonial Guatemala*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012.

## **Ethnic Outsiders and Their Place in Paradigmatic Histories of Conquest, or How Insisting on Speaking about “Indians” Impoverishes the Study of Native Colonial Guatemalan and Mexican Indigenous People**

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Matthew's book begins and concludes with a discussion on the state of contemporary ethnic relations in Guatemala. It is required reading for anyone seeking an overview of the political and cultural complexities that continue to beset this nation. Matthew's assertion that in Guatemala ethnicity is a concept clothed with as much ambiguity as it with learning,

rings as true as ever after the end of the country's civil war and rise of its Maya movement. Matthew's careful attention to detail and superbly researched work is also essential reading for its challenge to longstanding Eurocentric views of the conquest, particularly regarding the idea that only Europeans could have accomplished such a conquest.

But first: the basics. *Memories of Conquest's* initial three chapters chronicle the arrival in today's Guatemala of Native American armed contingents from regions in central Mexico and the Mexican region of Oaxaca in "waves and even in trickles between 1524 and 1542" (89). They arrived as allies of Europeans who, like their Native American counterparts, saw economic opportunity or financial gain in this region of Mesoamerica. Most of these indigenous groups spoke Nahuatl, with the obvious exception of those from Oaxaca. Spanish colonial usage and bureaucratic shorthand turned all of this Native American diversity into "Mexican" Native Americans, or the adjective *mexicano* in the book's title. These communities of Native American peoples were awarded special status by the colonial state in the form of partial tributary exemptions. Also, as a group of peoples, they congregated around the Spanish settlement of what is now known as Ciudad Vieja. Here, Matthew shows, these "Mexican" Native Americans had to survive as Native Americans while at the same time appearing not to be too "Indian" in the eyes of the state and society. They had to maintain and institutionalize their special status at the same time, lest they become absorbed into surrounding Maya communities or allow local bureaucrats to question their status as a special group of Native Americans. This was indeed a constant struggle, one which reminds us that the colonial state was a precocious entity in defining and utilizing bureaucratic categories of social control when attempting to fashion a sense of cultural homogeneity.

The patrimonial Spanish state was the purveyor of who was considered "Indian" and—for this particular community of Native peoples—of distinguishing among Native peoples. Meantime, inside Ciudad Vieja's *mexicano* homes community leaders had to show their subservient status constantly not only by declaring themselves faithful Indian subjects, but also by doing their utmost to distance themselves from stereotypical

“Indian” behavior. The use of Spanish among this community of peoples, for example, was not only encouraged but over time—for reasons which deserve further study—became the language of choice. They were Hispanicized Indians, one could say, but only to a point. Matthew’s study of Ciudad Vieja’s religious activities and militia organizations (chapter five) provide nuanced community analyses displaying the limitations of the “conquest” paradigm or Native peoples as victims. Here we see Ciudad Vieja’s leadership engaging local Spanish officials in a “political back-and-forth” “designed to uphold each side’s respective position in colonial society” (190). Thus, to be a “Mexican Indian” in colonial Guatemala did not just mean to recall one’s geographical or cultural roots. For the *mexicano* community of Ciudad Vieja the act of creating memories to bolster that claim was far more important. This has meant—and continues to mean—that the persistence of memory must aggressively engage political ideologies, the state and its representatives, and each other as members of specific ethno- and municipal corporate entities.

At the heart of Matthew’s counter-paradigmatic history are primary and secondary sources, or authors who have only been getting the attention that they deserve in the larger field of Latin American studies since the 1990s. In the case of the first type of evidence she employed the painted sheet of cloth known as the *Lienzo de Quauhquechollan* (only recently discovered) which depicts Nahua peoples in the conquest of Guatemala, and a *probanza* (or legal proof of merit documenting services or favors rendered) filed in the Archivo de Indias in Seville, Spain, as Justicia 291. In these painted and written documents we hear the voices of Nahuas, Oaxacans, and their descendants in a region of Mesoamerica assumed to be inhabited solely by Maya. The larger historical and anthropological context that informs the book comes from the works of Mesoamericanists or Guatemalan experts such as Matthew Restall, Christopher Lutz, and Robinson Herrera. These are examples of authors whose works have been pushing the boundaries of academic disciplines in helping us understand the knotted messiness of ethnic relations in southern Mesoamerica.

The initial three chapters are as much historiographical as they are a disinterested assessment of the archaeological and ethno-historical

evidence which has been used to obscure or manipulate the presence or participation of non-Maya peoples in occupying lands or subjugating peoples later incorporated into the Spanish monarchy. The historical approach Matthew is responding to in these chapters held true until roughly the second half of the twentieth century. Two important conclusions from this school of thought were, firstly, that Spanish conquistadors brought with them Native American “aids” in their service, for example, as cooks, scouts, and porters. Secondly, cultural influences and migratory movements from pre-contact central Mexico into Mayan lands essentially meant Maya peoples who met Spanish interlopers in the sixteenth century were but recent arrivals and hence genetically mixed. The colonial Maya shared few if any continuities with the societies which built the great Maya cities that dotted the country before AD 1000. Even a critic of Spanish colonialism such as Severo Martínez Peláez subscribed to a similar point of view when he wrote that the study of modern Native Guatemalans was a fruitless enterprise. The Indian was nothing but the creation of the colonial state “designated for exploitation” (284).

A shift in the tenor of historical understanding and ethnic relations took a not too unpredictable turn in this country as the nation began to transition to democratic governments and to finally accept its ethnic plurality by the middle of the 1990s. At that point, what had been largely academic debates confined to specialized publications on the country’s Mayan past and ethnic relations began to spill over into information outlets now uncensored. For example, the pages of the country’s largest newspapers, cultural and political magazines, radio and TV programming, and academic congresses provided the spaces for Mayas and non-Mayas to discuss the creation of a pluralist nation-state project.

In this latter context of political and cultural fermentation the presence of non-Mayas in the historical and ethno-historical records from the sixteenth century and before came up with fierce intensity. Some intellectual quarters and government apologists took the position that contemporary Maya groups had no more right to political spaces in this transition to democracy than anyone else given their diluted ethno-cultural roots. The accusation of a foreign (Mexican) origin was leveled at Maya

groups but, above all, the intellectual leadership of the Mayan movement. Mayan intellectuals responded by saying this was indeed an attitude reminiscent of colonial-era diatribes against the alleged inferiority of Native Guatemalans and an imperialist discourse dismissive of a people's right to self-representation. The question of Mayan identity and its political meaning is a debate readers of this review might be more familiar with: the controversy surrounding 1992 Nobel Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú and her ghost-written testimonial narrative, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (*I, Rigoberta Menchú*).<sup>1</sup> In 1999 American anthropologist David Stoll parsed Menchú's testimonial in his *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of all Poor Guatemalans* and threw into question the political motivations behind a number of factual errors or fabrications in her account.<sup>2</sup> The end result was to suspect Menchú of intellectual camouflaging and of fabricating memories in order to garner international sympathy for Menchú's guerrilla publicity campaign.

Notice how, in the few preceding paragraphs, the "conquest paradigm" has remained central as both metaphor and analytical point of departure used to understand not just ethnic relations in Guatemala but, in general, all of the Americas. Different groups and institutions have used it for a number of purposes, from the post-Mexican Revolution model of the mestizo (cultural hybridity) at the center of Mexican nationalism to, in this instance, Native Guatemalan grassroots movements struggling to carve out political and cultural spaces they deem commensurate with their cultural traditions and sense of who they are. Stories and spaces that do not fit this entrenched historical model are left unexplored and thus victimization narratives continue to perpetuate the view of the conquest as rupture and not as continuity.

What is both challenging and stimulating about Matthew's book is that she does not ask the reader to step away or stray too far from that

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<sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Burgos-Debray and Rigoberta Menchú, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI Editores, 1985); *I Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, Ann Wright, tr. (London and New York: Verso, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> David Stoll, *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of all Poor Guatemalans* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1999).

paradigm, since the political disenfranchisement of Native Guatemalans is not something that can be denied. But to take a few steps away from that model of historical and anthropological understanding yields a whole new world of socio-cultural dynamics and historical possibilities. Usually multidisciplinary approaches to historical issues end up being labeled cultural histories, a category which in turn references *mentalité* approaches to history developed in Europe. Matthew does indeed analyze “attitudes” and even “habits” (or Pierre Bourdieu’s *habitus*) that have come to shape and form worldviews. But in this context notions of mentalities which develop over hundreds of years and somehow become dormant once modernity arrived may be misplaced. The historical, political, urban, colonizing, and migratory pre-contact patterns described in the latter three chapters belie the notion that Mesoamerican cultures are unchanging and static. It is the similarity of pre-contact experiences that became central for Ciudad Vieja’s non-Maya groups in creating and preserving institutions allowing them to become “Indians” in the eyes of Spanish society while remembering their non-Guatemalan geographical origins. In that regard, they were no different than their neighbors since to one degree or other Spanish cultural norms were the ultimate arbiters of who could be considered to “belong,” who was or was not Spanish. Everyone, even upper socio-economic sectors of colonial society had to persistently remind the colonial state of some trait or aspect of their corporate identity that warranted state protection.

But what is truly refreshing about Matthew’s book is that too often experts on ethnic relations and ethnicity assume that concept to be immutable and self-aware. In other words, ethnicity itself needs a narrative of some form of disenfranchisement in order to make sense. The history of the colonial-era *mexicano* residents of Ciudad Vieja does not quite fit that mold. For what was so central in Ciudad Vieja becoming a colonial Indian town was not its relationship with a far-off imperial city or a cultural, Spanish hegemony, but the “profound continuities with the pre-Columbian past” (285). Not the reified past of past glories, but of continued alertness in *mexicano* adaptation strategies to circumstances which were constantly changing around them.