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Review/Reseña

Kathleen Rock Martín. *Discarded Pages: Araceli Cab Cumí, Maya Poet and Politician*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007).

Textual Ensembles and Mexican Lives

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Born in 1932 into humble circumstances in Maxcanú, Mexico, Araceli Cab Cumí rose to become the only indigenous woman ever elected to the Yucatán (Mexico) state congress. In this vivid, compelling, and complex study, Kathleen Rock Martín presents a biography of Araceli (as she is referred to throughout the book) that simultaneously illuminates the history of the region over the last half of the twentieth century and provides an analysis of the intertwined ways identity and class inform quotidian life.

Over her life, Araceli wrote not only political speeches and tracts but also poetry, autobiographical narratives, and essays. She had thrown away her early writings (one sort of the “discarded pages” referred to in the title) and kept the rest stuffed into binders and notebooks on a kitchen shelf, likewise discarded until Martín discovered this treasure trove and used it as the basis for this book. Martín worked with Araceli for more than 11 years, developing a rich and nuanced understanding of her life and a palpable empathy with her collaborator. Reading Araceli’s poetry, Martín was powerfully moved, struck by the artistry and insight of her words, and saw in Araceli’s evocative descriptions and cultural critiques a kindred anthropological spirit.

There have been other attempts to weave diaries and biographical essays into ethnographies of the Maya region. But none that I know of have so fully given voice to their “subject” while so thoroughly making connections between inner states, personal remembrances, and historical and sociological contexts. In Araceli’s ruminations on the Mexican revolution, for example, we find not only a reading of history that critiques current inequities, but also one that humanizes and feminizes—from a postcolonial, subaltern perspective—depictions of this foundational event in the country’s history. Araceli’s Mexico is one of adversity and entrenched structures, but it is also one of the triumph of the will, of hope and salvation, of the promise of the Revolution.

Araceli uses salient images and metaphors to rhetorically link the Maya past and present, and to justify visions of Yucatecan and Mexican possibilities. Recurrent themes such as communication and equilibrium highlight traditional Maya lessons for a modern, wired, globalized society.

In her writings, Araceli “portrays Maya women as individuals with an intellectual capacity and a fully fleshed emotional reality” (9). While many would argue that this should be the goal of all ethnography, it is all too rare for academic writers to capture such a full range of humanity of our subjects—we far too often use them toward our own ends rather than letting them be true subjects (and not just objects) and interlocutors of equal standing. Martín has organized the text and written the extensive

analysis in a way that fully engages anthropological theory and yet in a way that is also led, clearly and explicitly, by Araceli's words and intentions.

Clifford Geertz once described a peoples' culture as "an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong." I have always thought this a very apt metaphor, capturing, almost palpably, the inscription of culture and the anthropologist's role. What makes this work by Martín so remarkable is that we get a real and vivid sense of these texts. Through the reproductions of Araceli's hand written pages that follow each chapter, providing the originals for the translations used in the narrative text, we can literally see Geertz's metaphorical texts. They give not only a check on translations, but offer a real feel for the context of Araceli's life and art. And Martín's running analysis allows us a glimpse of the anthropologist's thoughts as she reads these cultural texts.

Martín frames Araceli's life in terms of Gramsci's category of "organic intellectual," but rethinking Gramsci's class-based perspective with a focus on ethnic community and consciousness. As an indigenous intellectual, Araceli is not concerned with class issues per se, although economic inequalities are deeply implicated in her critique of indigenous peoples' role in society. She is not bothered by the nuanced debates over what "Maya" means—rather, she focuses on the practice of being Maya in a globalizing, rural Mexico.

Araceli fills the category of organic intellectual in its full range: working within the government system to agitate for socio-economic and political equality for Maya peoples and agitating within the Maya community for equality of women; at times resisting the categories imposed upon her, at other times embracing them and using them to make space for subaltern voices.

Araceli presents us with a remarkably sophisticated, postcolonial, and feminist reading of Mexican history, a strategic agenda for the Yucatec Maya, and a rich understanding of a remarkable Maya life. Martín places Araceli's words front and center while also fully interrogating the texts in terms of anthropological theory, regional history, and ethnographic understandings. The result is an important contribution to Maya studies.