INDIGENOUSNESS AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE OTHER IN
GUATEMALAN INDIGENOUS LITERATURE

by

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“Indigenousness and the Reconstruction of the Other in Guatemalan Indigenous Literature”

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Abstract

“Indigenousness and the Reconstruction of the Other in Guatemalan Indigenous Literature” examines the production of a contemporary Indigenous literature in Guatemala. With the aid of a multidisciplinary approach informed by cultural, feminist, gender, socio-anthropological, and postcolonial studies, I analyze the emergence and ongoing struggle of Maya writers in Guatemala to show how the production of an alternate ideology contests official notions of nationhood and promotes a more inclusive space. I argue that Maya writers redefine Indigenous identity by reinstating Indigenous agency and self-determination, and deconstructing and rearticulating ethnicity, class and gender, among other markers of identity.

I begin by examining the *indio* as the basis of colonial and national narratives that logically organize the Guatemalan nation. I then observe the emergence of a contemporary Indigenous literature in Guatemala in the 1970s, a literature that, I argue, isolates and contests the position that was assigned to the *indio* and proposes a literature written by and for the Indigenous peoples of Guatemala. I posit that the inauguration of a Maya cultural space occurs with Luis de Lión’s novel *El tiempo principia en Xibalbá* (1985) and Gaspar Pedro González’ *La otra cara* (1992). I then observe the destabilization of traditional Maya female roles and symbols in the recent work of female Indigenous poets, Calixta Gabriel Xiquín and Maya Cu. Lastly, in
the work of Víctor Montejo and Humberto Ak’abal I identify a negotiation of heterogeneity and
essentialism for the development of a cultural project that looks to the formation of a
pluricultural, plurinational Guatemalan state.
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Introduction

In recent years, Guatemala, like other Latin American countries, has witnessed the resurgence of Indigenous cultural movements as never before. This has been accompanied by the production of a new literature, written by and for Indigenous people in an effort to rearticulate Mayanness, rewrite history, and promote active participation in the Guatemalan nation project. Indigenous literature in Guatemala is the product of a complex history and a rapidly changing present that cannot be overlooked; it is a response to the reality in which it was conceived as it speaks directly to the factors that have shaped the lives of Indigenous men, women and children in Guatemala. As a result, it is important to note that writing in Guatemala is an artistic endeavour as much as it is a political commitment. Today contemporary Indigenous writers constantly appropriate, rewrite, and reinsert notions of Indigenousness into official and unofficial cultural practices. This in turn remodels the nation to include racial and ethnic differences as enunciated rather than assigned identity markers.

It is estimated that more than half of Guatemala’s total population is Indigenous and, though the members of this majority speak twenty-one recognized Maya languages, the official language of the country is Spanish. In recent years, many Indigenous intellectuals have gained prominence in both the cultural and political arenas due to a revitalization of the Maya movement as well as an implementation of multicultural policies on the part of the government to protect the cultural rights of Indigenous people. Even so, many Mayas today face racism and discrimination, remain largely illiterate, and continually struggle to preserve their language and culture in addition to satisfying their larger material needs—access to necessities such as health care, land, and resources.
Growing up in Guatemala in the 1980s, I lived in the state-imposed silence that permeated all aspects of everyday life. This silence was felt differently by *ladinos* (non-Indigenous people) and Indigenous people, as well as by the rural populations who were caught in the crossfire. I understood little about the situation given that I was safely sheltered by my middle class family: I was enrolled in a private school and was privileged enough to have lice-free friends who where chosen and groomed by my grandmother.

The first time I experienced ethnic and class difference occurred many years later, in the 1990s and from exile, when I witnessed the signing of the peace accords in Guatemala and the rise to prominence of an Indigenous woman, Rigoberta Menchú. During that time, Menchú’s traditional clothing and speech were the object of scorn, mockery and denigration among many *ladino* Guatemalans. The clothing that she wore was reminiscent of an outfit that I once wore as a *ladina* during my grandmother’s town’s annual *convite*, a celebration honouring the Virgen de Patrocinio. At the time, my brother and I, two and five years old, respectively, were dressed in the traditional *traje*, given a light *refacción* and paraded through the main streets of town on a float. Interestingly, there were no Indigenous children among those of us who had been allowed to participate. We, the *ladino* children and grandchildren of the respected families of the town of Palín, were given the task of representing the *indio* that day. Unlike Menchú, my brother and I were not mocked for wearing *indio* clothing; rather we were rewarded for keeping our respective *corte* and *calzón* tightly bound around our waists.

These and many other experiences, together with my unique perspective gained from exile, have permitted me to reflect on what constitutes Guatemalanness and the idea of the *indio* as manipulated in official and unofficial discourse to help create a national consciousness. In this project I set out to trace the articulation of varying forms of
Indigenousness. I first examine Indigenous as articulated from a *ladino* perspective and I then explore how Indigenous people have reclaimed their own representation through their participation in a cultural project that distinguishes its many expressions from those of the dominant culture.

In my study I employ a number of terms that refer to ethnicity and denote class and social status. Over time, these terms have been shaped by the many social and political actors that contribute to the logical organization of the nation. The term *criollo* refers to an individual of Spanish descent who was born in the Americas. The influence of this social group was significant as Guatemala slowly developed into a nation with the efforts of emancipation and independence largely led by the new intellectual *criollo* elite. I utilize the widely accepted definition of the term *ladino* to refer to non-Indigenous people in Guatemala. The term has been used since the time of the colony to distinguish the Guatemalan *mestizo* from the *indio* on the basis of ethnic difference and European cultural heritage.¹

*Indio*, for its part, is a derogatory term used to refer to Indigenous people, and I use it to illustrate its ethnic, racial and class connotations in official and unofficial discourses. Generally, the term Indigenous in the Guatemalan context is used to refer to the various Indigenous groups in Guatemala—Maya, Xinca and Garífuna—and lacks the political overtones of the term Maya. The term Maya gained currency in the past two decades as a result of the pan-Maya movement’s efforts to reaffirm a collective identity among Indigenous people in Guatemala. Thus, it signals the political and social mobilization that took place in the second half of the twentieth century and at the beginning of the twenty-

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¹ Observing what occurs in the Los Altos region in Guatemala in the 1870s, Arturo Taracena posits that the currency of the term *ladino* originated from the need of Altenses to differentiate themselves from the *criollo* and *mestizo* elites that rivaled them in the capital (*Invención criolla, sueño ladino, pesadilla indígena: los Altos de Guatemala, de región a estado, 1740-1850*).
first century. In fact, as Diane Nelson indicates, the use of the term Maya signals a conscious effort on the part of an Indigenous person “to take on this identity” and struggle for the recognition of Maya cultural rights (380). For this reason, the term is particularly useful in my study when I address the socio-political charge present in the literature written by Maya people in Guatemala.

As I will show, it is also important to examine the extra-literary dimensions—historical, social, political and economic—that shape contemporary Indigenous literature in Guatemala as a postcolonial literature. In order to examine the roots of an indio discourse, the emergence of a pan-Maya movement, and the cultural presence of Mayas in Guatemala today, I will cross disciplinary boundaries to understand the evangelizing enterprise of the Catholic Church in the sixteenth century, the work of North American anthropologists, and a discourse of ethnic relations that developed in Guatemala over time.

In Chapter 1, I begin by examining how, late in the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century, the indio was a construct manipulated by intellectual elites as the basis for national narratives that sought to ground Guatemalan history in a mythical past, issue a dire warning against economic incompetence, and promote the foundation of a successful mestizo nation. The work of prominent thinkers of this era illustrates the production of an identitary paradox that relies on Indigenousness for the articulation of official and unofficial Guatemalaness. I focus on La recordación florida: Discurso historial, natural, material y político del reino de Guatemala (1699), written by Francisco Antonio de Fuentes y Guzmán, Guatemala’s first criollo chronicler, as one of the earliest examples of this identitary paradox. In his work, Fuentes y Guzmán sets the indio figure against the landscape and generally disregards his role as a contributing member of society, while at
the same time evoking a mythic indio figure, Tecum Uman, and constructing a coherent history of the origins of the rising Guatemalan nation.

Following a brief analysis of Fuentes y Guzmán’s early work, I survey the work of other criollo intellectuals who actively sought independence from the Spanish Crown. As an emerging socio-economic class in the Americas, criollos began imagining themselves as members of a unique community by setting themselves apart from the indio. Leading criollo thinkers like José Cecilio del Valle, Pedro Molina and Antonio Batres Jáuregui show the indio as stunted, obtuse, voiceless and in need of protection and oversight by those in power.

Soon after independence from Spain, when the nation began to be imagined as an autonomous unit, mestizo intellectuals, including Alberto Masferrer, Fernando Juárez Muñoz, Carlos Wyld Ospina and Miguel Ángel Asturias, envisioned national change in the indio: these thinkers proposed that a process of blanqueamiento through racial intermingling and ethnic blending would improve the constitution of the frail and ailing indio population and ensure Guatemala’s success as a leading Latin American country.

This was followed by Guatemala’s ten years of spring (1944-1954), a decade characterized for its socialist governments, in which the indio first gained official recognition as a citizen. Ideas of assimilation and integration for the success of the nation began circulating and as a result the Indigenous population began to benefit from literacy programs, land reforms and access to social services. However, the recognition and improved standing enjoyed by Indigenous people was short-lived and it came to a complete halt with the military coup of 1954 led by Carlos Castillo Armas. During this time, many Maya individuals continued the ideological formation that had begun with the literacy programs during Guatemala’s socialist decade. The Maya community, however, suffered by far the most during the violent civil war (1960-1996) that ensued.
Chapter 2 deals with the emergence of a contemporary Indigenous literature in Guatemala in the 1970s and the emergence of the pan-Maya movement. I show that, like the pan-Maya movement, the work of Maya writers is itself a form of activism: the act of writing is an act of self-representation and contestation. Moreover, this new literature is the product of socio-political, economic, cultural and literary forces that have affected the lives of Indigenous people in Guatemala since the time of the colony. The voices of Indigenous writers carry the need for inclusion and recognition while at the same time challenging the roles that Indigenous people have been assigned in national narratives and in the nation project due to their race, ethnicity, gender and class. More specifically, this new literature isolates the position that was assigned to the indio subject, counters traditional notions of Indigenous identity, and proposes a literature written by and for the Indigenous peoples of Guatemala. To analyze Indigenous literature in Guatemala, I propose the use of a postcolonial framework that takes into account the social, political and cultural pressures surrounding the production of a new Maya literature.

In the second half of Chapter 2, I posit that the inauguration of a Maya cultural space occurs with Luis de Lión’s novel El tiempo principia en Xibalbá (1985) and Gaspar Pedro González’ La otra cara (1992). De Lión writes an Indigenous novel that deliberately challenges Miguel Ángel Asturias’ indigenista work and revises the construction of an indio subject, replacing it with an Indigenous subject. González, like de Lión, is concerned with the revision of ladino forms of indianidad but, in addition, he undertakes the literacization of the Maya language for the self-representation of Mayas and the preservation of Maya culture and tradition.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the poetry of female Indigenous writers who question the traditional roles of women in Maya and ladino culture. The situation that Maya women have
faced in Guatemala since the time of the colony is tied to the Guatemalan nation project, whose national narrative and other literary productions favour a male-dominated society and marginalize the participation of both Mayas and women. Generally, women have not occupied influential positions in Guatemalan society and their access to intellectual circles early in the twentieth century has been very limited. It was not until the second half of the twentieth century, with Rigoberta Menchú’s entry into Guatemalan society and politics, that female Indigenous writers in Guatemala gained some recognition. Like their male counterparts, Indigenous women writers rearticulate an Indigenous identity, but they do so from a woman’s perspective. I examine how, in their poetry, Calixta Gabriel Xiquín and Maya Cu reevaluate traditional Maya female roles and symbols and reinsert them into a dominant culture and literary tradition that has by and large marginalized Maya women. Since the struggle of Maya women is twofold—they subvert a literary tradition and culture that have been dominated by ladino men and confronted a legacy of colonialism and patriarchy—, I utilize postcolonial feminism to analyze their work and to help explain the issues of class, gender and sex that arise.

Finally, in Chapter 4, I observe the deployment and contestation of a strategic essentialism in recent Indigenous literature. Strategic essentialism is a form of representation adopted by the pan-Maya movement in an effort to present a unified front. This results in the setting aside of internal conflict and difference among the various Maya groups. To examine this Maya strategy of contestation and self-representation in the work of Maya writers Humberto Ak’abal and Víctor Montejo, I propose an approach that does not simply dismiss strategic essentialism for its homogenizing effects but rather takes into account cultural difference. I argue that the negotiation of heterogeneity and essentialism occurs for the development of a cultural project and the formation of a pluricultural,
plurinational Guatemalan state. As a result, in recent years, Guatemala has seen the emergence of a distinctly Maya literature that is much more focused on its unique development. This change signals a new phase in the development of the Maya cultural project in which self-sufficiency and continuance are key factors.
Chapter 1
The indio and the Guatemalan Nation

In this chapter I analyze the emergence of a Guatemalan criollo consciousness and its development into a national discourse that shapes the relations of power and control around the notion of Indigenousness. Indigenousness, I posit, becomes a heavily mediated concept that is employed to create a foundational narrative, issue a stern warning and ensure the advancement of Guatemala as a nation on the world stage. I begin by discussing a case study of Indigenousness in present-day Guatemala that showcases the conflicting perceptions of Indigenous ethnicity in the dominant ladino culture. I then trace the parameters that determine this perception back to their colonial origins and to their criollo forefathers to show the manner in which, for over four centuries, Indigenousness has been articulated, mediated, and moulded by those in power to convey a Guatemalanness in which Indigenousness serves a paradoxical function that inhabits the national imaginary as an idea with both positive and negative connotations.

Indigenousness on the Streets of Guatemala City: A Case Study

On March 30, 2007 Prensa libre, one of the most widely-available newspapers in Guatemala, published a small news item with the headline “Protestas en el centro,” notifying people of traffic diversions around the downtown core. Street closures would begin with the Huelga parade and resume after the march and closing ceremony of the III Continental Summit of Indigenous Pueblos and Nations of Abya Yala. Another well-known newspaper, La hora, reported that huelgueros “would wait for the Summit march to offer their support” (Alvarado, my translation).
Each annual event had its own agenda and distinct objectives. The *Huelga*, on one hand, is a student-led movement that speaks for the poor, the oppressed and the forgotten in a counter-discourse that, in a carnivalesque fashion, ‘turns the world upside down’ and fills the streets of Guatemala City with caustic laughter every year.\(^1\) This tradition dates back more than one hundred years and was created by students of the Universidad de San Carlos (USAC) in an effort to denounce injustices and corruption. It was fashioned after the popular Holy Week processions and the parade takes place exactly a week before Holy Week, on the last Friday of Lent before Good Friday.\(^2\) The Summit of Indigenous Pueblos and Nations, on the other hand, is an annual event that promotes discussion and encourages political action amongst Indigenous leaders in the region. The 2007 Summit, which took place in Guatemala, was the third of its kind in Latin America. This event was of great importance as it was a testament to the continuing political mobilization of Indigenous peoples all over Latin America in the past two decades.\(^3\)

According to the news item “Protestas en el centro,” Summit organizers notified the authorities of their march on very short notice and a traffic plan had to be quickly

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\(^1\) Months before Holy Week in Guatemala students of the Universidad de San Carlos (USAC) prepare floats, dances, street theatre, and costumes for the annual *Huelga de Dolores*. Today, the *Huelga* is a controversial movement and it has fallen out of favour with the different sectors of the Guatemalan population. Nonetheless, *huelgueros* continue to parody political figures and denounce the state of affairs in Guatemala every year in a month-long event that culminates with the satirical procession.

\(^2\) Lent is a time of utmost sacredness in the Catholic calendar when the greatest transgressions can be enacted. In this context, the *Huelga* is a limited act of transgression that reinforces the taboo according to Bataille (35), or in Bakhtin’s theory of the carnival, a time of resistance and contestation as licensed by the official culture.

\(^3\) In *Contesting Citizenship in Latin America: The Rise of Indigenous Movements and the Postliberal Challenge* Deborah J. Yashar conducts a thorough analysis of the emergence of Indigenous movements in Latin America in the past two decades. She argues that Indigenous movements today in Latin America challenge existing models of citizenship and statehood that are homogenous and often exclude Indigenous people. The demands of these well-organized Indigenous groups include equality, greater involvement in the socio-political arena and a revamping of existing socio-economic systems.
implemented. Contrary to what *Prensa libre* suggests, I presume that local traffic was not largely affected by the addition of the Summit march. After all, there is a 100-year precedent of *Huelga* blockades every Friday before Good Friday that Guatemalan authorities have come to know and expect. From this, I would suggest that the Summit march relied, at least in part, on the *huelgueros’* street blockades on the Friday before Lent, a move that guaranteed the compliance of the authorities. But more than just relying on street blockades, the Guatemalan Summit hosts relied on the 100-year-old tradition of the *Huelga* procession, known best for its defiant nature and decisive steps on the streets of Guatemala City. That is why traffic on this particular Friday tells a unique story about the streets of Guatemala as it brings together Indigenous and First Nations people from Latin America and North America. The regional character of the 2007 Summit was supported by its Guatemalan hosts; when the Summit delegates marched in Guatemala City on the same day and on the same streets as the *Huelga de Dolores*, the III Continental Summit of Indigenous Pueblos and Nations of Abya Yala revealed its Guatemalanness. In other words, the regional aspect of the Summit showed a ‘localness’, complete with its contradictions and negotiations.

The convergence of these two marches on the streets of Guatemala City on March 30, 2007 helps illustrate the complexity of Guatemalan ethnic relations and Guatemalan identity in general. For one, inherent in the *Huelga* are a negotiation of Guatemalan national identity, a Hispanic past and Indigenous roots. Core elements of the *Huelga*, such as the patron saint La Chabella⁴ and the march, are appropriations of syncretic elements of Roman

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⁴ In *Guatemala: ceremonias y fiestas populares*, Celso Lara Figueroa indicates that there are two patron saints and a Maya god represented by a skeleton in Guatemala: “San Pascual Bailón, San La Muerte, entran en el santoral popular guatemalteco de la mano de la deidad maya Ach Puch, señor de Xibalbá cuyo emblema de cofradía también es un esqueleto” (76). In Mexico, the iconography of José Guadalupe Posadas features skeleton figures that are employed to provide a social commentary of Mexican society.
Catholic tradition and Maya religion. The Huelga procession is reminiscent of the rites of Maximón, a patron saint that combines the Maya god Mam and the Catholic Saint San Simón. In Tecpán Guatemala: A Modern Maya Town in Global and Local Context Edward F. Fischer and Carol Hendrickson describe the contestatory nature of Maximón, a patron saint in the highlands, who is paraded through town streets on Good Friday. The march concludes at the church steps “where his handlers would read lists of gossip and jesting accusations against prominent town figures” (72). In a similar fashion, huelgueros take to the streets every year, displaying their public irreverence of prominent figures and mocking the government, the Church and the private sector.

A similar appropriation of sorts took place at the Summit when, a week before, the official program was made available to delegates, to the press and to the public in general. The Guatemalan hosts of the Summit guaranteed their request for street blockades by scheduling their march on the same day as the Huelga procession, inadvertently invoking the Huelga’s Maya roots. The convergence of these two events showed that the Summit’s Guatemalan hosts needed to partake in national ladino culture in some measure in order to warrant greater visibility and inclusion, even when a certain Mayanness was at the heart of ladino cultural practices such as the Huelga procession shows. Huelgueros pledged solidarity to the Summit delegates by attending the march. Despite having a very distinct agenda and a unique approach to issues of foreign intervention, government corruption, U.S. immigration policies, and free trade agreements, the Huelga aligned ideologically with the demands made by members of the Summit in the Declaration of Iximché. For four consecutive weeks each area of political tension was addressed in the Boletines, official Huelga communiqués that precede the annual procession, and, on the Friday before Good Friday, huelgueros performed in the streets.
Meanwhile, delegates to the Summit, particularly their Guatemalan hosts, first 
reclaimed their pre-Hispanic roots found in Iximché,\(^5\) proceeded to the capital city and 
demanded the visibility traditionally denied to them, all to set forth the demands of the 
Indigenous Pueblos and Nations of the Americas. The Summit could not be limited to 
Iximché alone and it was necessary for the Summit participants to march in Guatemala City 
as an act of defiance and self-representation.

While *huelgueros* wore costumes and mocked images of prominent political figures, 
Summit delegates wore their everyday clothes, *cortes, guipiles*, and the traditional male 
dress as markers of their ethnic identity and political stance. In contrast to the still images 
of *Revista D* and other national newspapers documenting the Summit,\(^6\) the march showed a 
mobilization of political agents capable of signifying their ethnicity and ideology through 
their own bodies.

Weeks after the Summit, on Sunday April 22, 2007, *Prensa libre*’s cultural 
supplement *Revista D* featured a collection of photographs of the march taken by Kattia 
Vargas. The article was reminiscent of a photo-essay on folklore rather than a piece on an 
international event of more than one thousand participants. Women, men and children were 
exoticized in these photos, in a careful composition of present-day technology—cell phones, 

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\(^5\) Iximché is located on the Western highlands of Guatemala, in the department of Tecpán. 
Two weeks before the Summit was held, Iximché played yet another central role in Guatemalan 
politics: On March 12, 2007 the BBC reported that U.S. president George W. Bush visited the religious 
site and upon his departure, Maya leaders ordered cleansing rites to rid Iximché of “bad spirits” and 
“reject the portrayal of our people as a tourist attraction” according to Morales Toj, a Maya youth 
leader (“Mayas to cleanse site after Bush”).

\(^6\) Despite the political significance of hosting the largest meeting of Indigenous Peoples and 
Nations in Latin and North America in Guatemala, the press did not pay much attention to the week-
long event and no effort was made to make it headline news. A search of articles relating to the third 
annual Continental Summit of Indigenous Nations and Pueblos of Abya Yala on the country’s leading 
two newspapers reveals this lack of media interest. In the month of March *Prensa libre* printed five 
news items related to the Summit; *La hora*, a widely-read newspaper, printed six in addition to a 
front page article about the Summit and its refusal to formally endorse Rigoberta Menchú’s 
presidential candidacy.
digital cameras—, the pre-Hispanic backdrop of Iximché and the traditional dress of the *indio* subject. Two North American First Nations people were quoted in the opening lines of the photo-essay while the Latin American Indigenous remained passive, as subjects to be gazed upon. Guatemalans, *ladinos* more specifically, with a long and complicated history of ethnic tensions, would gaze upon these images through a *ladino* lens and identify the subjects in the photographs as *indios* but not as Summit delegates or political activists. The visual cues—brightly coloured garments, *trajes típicos*, set against Maya ruins—in the Sunday cultural supplement of *Prensa libre* further distanced the delegates and their Maya hosts from the newspaper’s non-Indigenous audience and from the political arena altogether.

Despite this exotic portrayal of Indigenous people, the actions of the delegates in Iximché spoke to their political agency. The political significance of this former Kakchiquel city\(^7\) de-centered the course of national and international politics that would traditionally take place in the heart of Western culture, the capital city. The stronghold of dominant *ladino* culture in Guatemala was challenged at the moment when political action was redeployed in Iximché, a place for the enunciation of Maya culture: upon their arrival in Guatemala City on March 26, 2007 Summit delegates were promptly transported to Iximché where they remained for the duration of the event. On the last day, however, travel arrangements were made for a “movilización” followed by a closing ceremony in Guatemala City (“Programa”). The “movilización” referred to the march that circulated through Guatemala’s main arteries hours after the *Huelga* parade. It was here, in the city streets, that the delegates of the Summit contested the visibility denied them by the national press.

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\(^7\) Iximché was the capital of the Kakchiquel nation before the Spanish invasion and today it has witnessed a political and religious revival amongst Mayas.
As the streets of Guatemala City were taken over by participants and spectators of both the Huelga de Dolores and the III Continental Summit of Indigenous Nations and Pueblos of Abya Yala, that day’s traffic, political agendas, programs and symbols reveal much about inter-ethnic conflict in Guatemala. The fortuitous encounter of two distinct groups in the streets of Guatemala has allowed me to draw points of comparison that expose the intricate web that constitutes Guatemalaness as it relates to race and ethnicity. Indigenous people in Guatemala are often represented as the other, even with the expansion of Pan-Maya ideology and with current policies of development and inclusion. This othering is the product of a complex history, a shifting present and an uncertain future. The work of Maya activists for the recognition and inclusion of Indigenous people at the socio-political and cultural levels in Guatemala is an endless and very difficult task, particularly because inter-ethnic strife is very much a part of all aspects of everyday Maya life.

As I have briefly shown, Maya people must find ways to effectively participate in the economic, socio-political and cultural arenas of the country. For this purpose, an incursion into the cultural practices of the dominant groups is necessary, even when these practices contain elements that are Maya in origin, as in the case of the Huelga. The difference lies in the point of enunciation, from which varying forms of identity are articulated. Here I employ Stuart Hall’s concept of articulation, which theorizes that identity is never absolute but negotiated in ordinary cultural practices for any one specific goal, combining elements that can be at once contradictory and complimentary: “the form of the connection . . . can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time. You have to ask, under what circumstances can a connection be forged or made?” (Hall 141).
Over the years the image of Indigenous people in Guatemala has come to signify many different things to different people. For this reason, the term Indigenous in Guatemala is no longer used to refer to a people but to a politically charged notion that is very much a part of the official and unofficial discourses that define Guatemala and its imagined homogeneous community. In *Guatemala: Linaje y racismo*, Marta Casaus Arzú carries out an in-depth socio-cultural analysis of the Guatemalan oligarchy and its foundations. Casaus Arzú identifies racial differentiation as a key element of the strategies employed by the ruling elites to justify their claim to power. In the same manner, since the time of the Spanish Invasion, many groups and individuals have exploited the Indigenous subject for their own political, economic and moral agendas. Today, even though Indigenous people in Guatemala have gained a voice and acquired some power, fixed notions of what constitutes Indigenousness pervade Guatemalan society. The limited press coverage of the Summit and the picturesque images in *Revista D* offer a stark picture of Guatemala as a nation largely composed of mestizo and Indigenous people with seemingly irreconcilable differences. What is more striking is that the power balance favours the mestizo members of the Guatemalan nation while the Indigenous must devise ways to reach the sphere of power and actively participate. This is an intricate process that entails the reappropriation, reinvention and reinsertion of Indigenousness into the dominant culture as conceived from the inside by Indigenous people themselves and not as an imposed, mediated notion that merely aids in the formulation of a Guatemalan identity.

**The Guatemalan Identitary Paradox**

In the past three decades, literary works written by Maya people have enjoyed increased readership and academic interest thanks to the rise of an Indigenous national
consciousness and Pan-Maya activism that have led to greater participation of Indigenous people in the country’s political sphere. Maya activists, Indigenous people, intellectuals and writers are constantly seeking varying modes of self-representation that come from within and defy traditional notions of Indigenousness imposed by the dominant culture. Two attitudes towards Indigenous people remain dominant in Guatemalan society today: one positive, in which the Indigenous is seen as an integral part of the Guatemalan nation, a mythical, foundational figure; and the other negative, in which the Indigenous is thought to be backward, ignorant and poor, and to represent a threat to the future of the nation and its people. In nineteenth-century Argentina, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento presented many ideas about progress by means of eradicating barbarism, a concept notably related to the indio (Kristine L. Jones, “Civilization and Barbarism and Sarmiento’s Indian Policy” 40-41). These attitudes have a precedent in subject-crown relations in the Captaincy General of Guatemala\(^8\) at the time of the Spanish Conquest and thereafter with the social restructuring initiated by emissaries of the Crown, through the Independence period. Though Indigenous people have formed the largest proportion of the Guatemalan population since the time of the conquest, their socio-political participation has been greatly limited by those in power who exploit linguistic, cultural, and class differences to segregate some groups and solidify others. In the past Indigenous people seldom possessed enough agency to change their living conditions, plead equality or secure a better future. Many others have spoken on behalf of the Indigenous and some have helped advance the political agendas of Maya

\(^8\) After the initial invasion, the New World was organized into Captaincies to more effectively oversee the administration and military operations of the Crown.
intellectuals and activists who seek better integration and recognition of their rights as Indigenous people of Guatemala.⁹

Official and unofficial expressions of Indigenousness as an element of Guatemalan identity in the national discourse, literature and popular culture often contradict one another as each one commonly serves a particular function in the creation of a seemingly cohesive, homogeneous Guatemalanness. As a result, varying notions of Indigenousness have emerged and these can hardly be reconciled due to their arbitrary and contradictory nature. At times the notion of Indigenousness is imbued with positive qualities, at others a negative character is accentuated; what remains constant is the use of Indigenousness both as a quintessential and antithetical element of Guatemalan identity. This conflictive integration of Indigenousness in both official and unofficial discourses points to what I wish to call an identitary paradox that attempts to articulate a cohesive sense of Guatemalanness through cultural and political texts that conceive of the nation as a harmonious entity. A good example of this it the lack of media attention that the Summit received concerning its political impact upon the lives of Indigenous people in Guatemala and the Central American region. The only news outlet that followed the event closely was Prensa libre’s Revista, which focused on the cultural aspect of the Summit above all else.

This identitary paradox is neither binary nor polar, consisting of gradations of Indigenousness set out to define what is and what is not Guatemalan. For example, at the core of all Guatemalanness is a foundational narrative of Indigenousness that gives the nation its mythic origins and sense of tradition. At the same time, Indigenousness is presented as an anti-model of nationhood that thwarts economic, moral, social, and

⁹ For example, in the late 1970s the work of anthropologists permitted the revitalization of Maya culture through linguistic inquiry while non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and religious institutions offered protection to Maya communities from violence during Guatemala’s 36-year-long Civil War (Morales 38-47).
technological advancement. These two examples are steep gradations of Indigenousness in the Guatemalan identitary paradox, best characterized by their utopic and dystopic functions that include or exclude certain members of the nation and ultimately articulate a Guatemalan identity. I concentrate on the utopic and dystopic functions of Indigenousness since they constitute the building blocks of an imagined ladino nation. The concepts of utopia and dystopia are most suitable for speaking of the nation and its imaginary edification; here I recall *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson’s theory of the imagined nation-state and its community of like-minded and self-identified members (7). I follow Anderson’s definition of the nation as an imagined political unit insofar as it helps explain the emergence of a socially and culturally mediated nationalism in Guatemala. However, other aspects of his theory are incongruent with my study, particularly the incursion of a marginal group, Indigenous people specifically, in the formulation of the imagined nation. I posit that in *imagining* the nation, the practices that sustain it are utopic in nature. Much in the same manner, dystopianism helps maintain the nation project in the desired direction as stark images of destruction and decadence make a stronger case for moral, social and economic reforms.

What follows is an exploration of how Indigenousness, as performed through an indio subject, is employed in the articulation of a national identity that upon closer inspection appears fragmented and contradictory due to its inclusion of irreconcilable notions of Indigenousness that serve utopic and dystopic functions. To begin, I will outline the parameters that permit a closer examination of the Indigenous body as a key component of the Guatemalan nation. Then I will trace the historical and socio-political trajectory of a discourse based on racial and ethnic difference. This discourse is motivated by the transposition of a European socio-economic system from Spain to the Captaincy
General and the advent of a *criollo* consciousness and the nation-forming efforts of the intellectual elite in nineteenth-century Guatemala.

Ever-present in the Guatemalan identity paradox, as a concrete manifestation of Indigenousness, is the *indio* as a subject. Here I employ the word *indio*, or Indian, in place of Indigenous because it best characterizes the ladino cultural practices that deploy Indigenousness as a socio-political device for imagining the nation. *Indio* is a derogatory term with deeply racist, classist and discriminatory connotations when used by *ladinos* and other non-Indigenous people. As I showed with the case of Pan-Maya activists in Iximché, the visual cues of their traditional dress helped contest and reassert their own ethnic and political identities. Ironically, those same cues were used weeks later in *Revista D*'s photo-essay to show the Indigenous as picturesque. The difference lies in the point of enunciation and intended function, but more importantly, it lies in the interpretation of those cues given their specific cultural and socio-political contexts. Before the increased political participation of Indigenous people over the past two decades or more, official and unofficial representations of the Indigenous typically led the spectator or reader to an understanding of Indigenousness as a certain visible or imaginable *indianidad* or Indianness. Integral to that understanding is the *indio* figure, which operates as an exclusive mark of race and ethnicity, a legacy of Guatemala’s past. From the time of the Colony and five hundred years thereafter the Indigenous has served as an indicator of racial and ethnic difference not without its own unique function and paradoxical charge. Its trajectory can be traced to key periods in the history of Guatemala in which different political discourses underwent changes and were adapted to best suit the needs and demands of those who sought to redefine their position in the socio-political spectrum of Guatemala. In other words, notions of Indigenousness as represented by an Indigenous body were born out of a colonial reality
and infused with the many discourses that developed over time. What is more, they have each served an important function in the literary, socio-economic and political discourses that help to imagine the nation logically by explaining a grandiose past, a shifting present and a promising future.

**From Invasion to Colony**

With Spanish invasion and settlement came the transposition of European core beliefs and values on to a system that allowed for the articulation of the newly acquired territory and its inhabitants. Colonial literature reveals that the Indigenous was perceived as exotic, ignoble savages devoid of religion, morality and civilization. Many in-depth studies have examined the different portrayals of the *indio* in the early stages of Spanish invasion and settlement. These studies often reveal a type of binarism in the literature of this period in which the Indigenous is all that the European is not. The European is Christian, a vassal of the Crown, civilized and perhaps most important and most encapsulating of all, Spanish in ethnicity. I will not discuss at great length these differences since I concentrate primarily on the decades when a social restructuring of the different castes was underway as I feel this is more telling of the Guatemalan identitary paradox that soon emerges. It must be noted, nonetheless, that this binarism will remain key in bringing to the foreground the complexity of that paradox: not only was this binarism deployed for the first time to help define the colonized *indio* but it was extended, even when subjected and adapted to socio-cultural pressures, along a temporal axis to present day Guatemala.

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*Some of the most notable examples of this literature written about the inhabitants of the New World that denotes this attitude include Cartas de relación written by Héran Cortés, Columbus and Bartolomé de las Casas; official documents such as the Requerimiento and encyclopedic histories; and the chronicles of Bernal Díaz del Castillo and Francisco Antonio Fuentes y Guzmán, to name a few.*
In the sixteenth century an expansionist, commercial venture, under the guise of a civilizing endeavour and moral salvation, was initiated in the projects of colonization and evangelism undertaken by representatives of the Crown. The binarism mentioned above was often used to justify the appropriation and settlement of lands, and the oversight of Indigenous vassals. But more importantly, this binary logic that helped distinguish the conquerors from the conquered organized the body politic according to racial and ethnic difference. Sonia Alda Mejías explains in *La participación indígena en la construcción de la república de Guatemala, S XIX* that with settlement, colonial administrators had to look to the Spanish cultural logics that ordered subjects of the Crown according to their function (39-40). Consequently, Spain’s feudal system permitted Indigenous communities to be conceived as an integral part of the colonial enterprise, an attitude not without great economic significance. Mejías observes that a number of chroniclers and political writers of the time described the Indigenous in colonial society as a vital body part responsible for the overall sustenance and harmonious function of the colonial body (39-43). In the New World’s societal model Indigenous people were associated with the Spanish peasantry, the *rústicos*. The *rústico* was conceived of as the feet of the feudal state; like feet that hold up the body mass of a human being, the work of this social stratum supported the weight of the rest of the kingdom (41). The primary work of the Spanish peasant consisted of agriculture and animal husbandry and peasants were regarded as the most uneducated and uncivilized sector of society because they lived in rural areas and seldom read or wrote. These criteria were easily met by the Indigenous overseas, who under the transplanted social structure of the empire also occupied the lowest rung of colonial society, while functioning as an integral part of the hierarchal body. Various groups attempted to diminish the importance of the peasantry and the Indigenous in this hierarchical structure, but like
the rústico in the peninsula, the Indigenous throught his labour sustained almost the entire system.

The inclusion of the Indigenous in the colonial hierarchy was made possible not only through the transposition of cultural logics, but also with the addition of ethnicity as an element of difference. The social structure in place in the New World with the principles that oversaw the inclusion and protection of the indio was by no means a replica of the Old World model since it still had to account for a primary difference: race and ethnicity. While the rústico might have been regarded as uneducated, uncivilized and ignorant, he was still European, more specifically Spanish. In the feudal system the lowest social strata was occupied by the rústico, but in the great chain of being humans occupied a higher place than did animals and plants. Mejías explains that chroniclers and administrators noted that the indio, almost like the lowest and most uncivilized rústico, was only slightly different from the animals (40). As a result, the Indigenous was relegated to the interstitial space found between the categories of humans and animals.

This was not only an attempt at differentiating the indio from the rústico, but also a means of justifying the absolute protection and oversight of the New World peasantry whose perceived inferiority and ignorance threatened his own existence and that of the colonial body (Mejías 42). More than a social practice, the hierarchal organization in the Spanish colonies soon became a legal code that perpetuated a system of Indigenous subordination and dependence. In the 1600s colonial statutes—under the pretence of protection and administration—legally recognized the Indigenous as “rústico, menor y miserable” (43), a triadic concept that Bartolomé Clavero in Derecho indígena y cultura constitucional en América identifies as the “status de etnia” (11). In other words, this “status de etnia” helped maintain the Indigenous in a state of protective subordination that
appeared as a natural logic in the structure of the colonial enterprise, a logic that would be incorporated into a discourse that defined Guatemalan identity in terms of its Indigenousness or lack thereof. This legal move on the part of the Crown marks a key moment in the production of an indio figure that not only provides the criollo with the necessary tools for his own plight, but becomes the basis of many models of integration in the process of emancipation and nation-building in later years.

There were other political manoeuvres that served to emphasize the status of the Indigenous as a racial and ethnic other, which in turn allowed the Crown and its sympathizers to legitimatize the colonial enterprise, all under the premise that at the forefront was the civilization and moral salvation of the Indigenous. The institution of indio republics and their corresponding cabildos is perhaps a complex, but interesting illustration of such a manoeuvre. In this system, Indigenous communities were granted a level of autonomy that contradicted their status in the colonial hierarchy at the same time that it reinforced and further naturalized the unequal balance of power that already existed between the Indigenous and the ruling classes. This was nothing more than the continuation of a dynamic that decreed that Indigenousness had to be modulated by the dominant culture in order for the colonial societal model to fully function. Whatever political power the Indigenous did possess existed only under the authorization and oversight of institutions that represented the Crown, such as the Church and the audiencias. In other words, the Indigenous institution of the cabildo operated as a minor structure

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11 The instauration of indio republics came about from the Crown’s need to effectively administer vast expanses of land and organize its inhabitants. This system allowed a nearly autonomous form of Indigenous government, the “república del indio”, to subsist alongside colonial rule. Mejías explains that at the heart of each indio republic was the cabildo, a form of local government administered by an Indigenous noble class that presided over members of the community and communicated with other indio republics as well as with representatives of the Crown. According to Mejías, there exists enough evidence to indicate that this political unit, the cabildo, could exert enough power to denounce injustices and even promote change.
under the tutelage of those Colonial institutions, much like the basest members of the Colonial body.  

12 But more than that, this process saw the enactment of the hierarchical organization of the Colony and of colonial statutes that helped further the notion of an Indigenous other—*el indio*—who was placed at the very bottom of the hierarchy.  

Mejías’ study of the role of the Indigenous at the time of the colony is valuable because it helps demystify the image of a completely victimized Indigenous with absolutely no voice or agency, an image too often utilized to advance political agendas or manipulate readers and entire audiences. What is important to remember, nonetheless, is that the voice that the Indigenous did possess at the time of the Colony was modulated every step of the way—directly or indirectly—by the hegemonic power that represented the Spanish Crown. As mentioned before, the sovereignty of the Indigenous republic was but a political manoeuvre to aid in the administration and, more importantly, in the ideological conquest of Indigenous communities. This of great importance, as I have shown, for Indigenousness was acted upon as a term of difference that was articulated from the perspective of the white European colonizer and his sympathizers. The colonial enterprise that established the  

12 There was a practical element as well as an ideological objective in such a seemingly benevolent move on the part of the Crown: by relegating authority to Indigenous representatives the Spanish colonial enterprise was expanded without the expense of warfare. In addition, the Indigenous elite of leading noblemen helped legitimize the colonial enterprise of dominating land and securing inexpensive labour.  

13 In its early stages *caciquismo* followed this hierarchal organization in which the Indigenous were relegated to the lowest rungs of society. More often than not, the *caciques* were foreigners who identified with the ruling power, however sometimes they would be members of the community. In the case of Totonicapán, explains Robert M. Hill II in “Social Organization by Decree in Colonial Highland Guatemala”, the *caciques* came from Tlaxcala, Mexico alongside Pedro Alvarado for the conquest of Guatemala in 1524. The *caciques* were granted special privileges by the ruling power as they were often exempt “from tribute and labor (*téquio*) obligations, which the Maya-controlled *cabildo* was evidently trying to impose on them” (Hill 187). The power they exercised was coupled with their Europeization: they spoke Spanish, traded their traditional garb for Spanish dress and, most important of all, they did not identify as Maya but as an extension of the Spanish ruling class. The *cacique* was a social stratum found in the interstices of Indigenousness and Spanishness that served to highlight the disjunction between the two: ethnicity, the element of difference that lay the foundation for a complex, and at times contradictory, set of relations that defined Guatemalanness.
Indigenous’ need for guidance and protection laid down the bases of an identitary paradox present in contemporary Guatemala. As Indigenousness was weighed for its central role in the colonial apparatus it was also rebuked for its perceived backwardness and barbarity. Moreover, this backwardness and the barbaric state in which Indigenous peoples were found conveniently legitimized the agendas of those in power. Things in the Captaincy General of Guatemala functioned harmoniously as long as the system could tower over and control its own ‘feet’. In other words, Indigenousness was a key component in the social, cultural and economic organization of the city, a notion that justified cultural practices at the same time that it legitimized a political agenda: Indigenousness was a necessary notion for the organizational logics of the body politic but it was best kept under a watchful eye.

The Articulation of Un-Indigenousness in Colonial Guatemala

Early in the 1600s, while a place for the *indio* in the colonial hierarchal structure was being fashioned, the Indigenous population was being decimated as a result of disease, poor working conditions, forced displacement, ill-treatment as well as armed conflicts brought about by those in power. Changes in the form of *requerimientos* were introduced by the Spanish Crown in later years to better protect the interests of the Indigenous, but what in fact occurred was a transfer of power that sustained a legalized form of abuse and dominance. Like before, the Indigenous peasant had very little agency, and whenever spoken of or for, his image was manipulated to serve the interests of whoever articulated the words at any particular time. The notion of *indio* was used as an ideological tool to

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14 In "Conquest and Population: Maya Demography in Historical Perspective” W. George Lovell and Christopher H. Lutz estimate that the Indigenous population in Guatemala decreased from 2,000,000 in 1520 to 128,000 in 1625 (136). Lovell and Lutz believe that this period is one of “downward spiral of a general, although regionally variable, pattern of New World decline” (133).
differentiate, degrade, dominate and thus justify the actions of the conquistador, the peninsular, the criollo, the Church or the Crown, as each individual case required.

The criollo was born in the Americas, heir of Spanish immigrants, conquistadores, landowners or bureaucrats. According to Benedict Anderson, “the accident of birth in the Americas consigned him [the criollo] to subordination—even though in terms of language, religion, ancestry or manners he was largely in distinguishable from the Spain-born Spaniard” (58). Though his entry into colonial society destabilized the hierarchical classifications imposed by the dominant culture, soon criollos began imagining themselves as members of communities different from those who ruled over them (Anderson 62-63). In fact, the articulation of a distinct criollo consciousness was made possible by the written word and access to a discourse dependent on a register of ethnic difference. To have the discursive tools of the Crown at his disposal, in Ángel Rama’s terms, meant that the criollo could utilize the sacred codes used by a “ciudad letrada”, a ‘lettered’ elite capable of policy-making, nation-building and bureaucratic control and organization.15 In Guatemala, this group became an intellectual force capable of centering and organizing the colonial legacy of power and dominance. As a result, later, as the criollo severed ties with the Crown and set forth a nation project, he recreated the relations of power and control that were accentuated by an interplay of ethnic and cultural differences. This gave rise a more intricate and conflicting notion of Indigenousness in which the criollo’s identitary negation of mestizo or Indigenous bloodlines was key.16 As long as the Indigenous needed protection

15 Formerly, the written word had been single-handedly managed by the Church and its emissaries, but now the inherited ecclesiastic quality implicit in the written word transferred over to a new lettered elite and the signs appeared as sacred and accessible only to them while virtually excluding the illiterate majority (Rama 32).

16 Despite the criollos effort to call attention to his Spanish roots, his colonial inheritance and the assertion that he was neither mestizo nor Indigenous by birth, he was often reminded that he was definitely not Spanish (Martínez Peláez 115). Thomas Gage’s travel chronicles, The English-
due to his status as “rústico, menor y miserable” there needed to be an elite that could prescribe the terms of that protector and protégé relation.

Spanish lineage combined with wealth, upbringing and Western education contributed to the criollo’s ideological alignment with the great empire and a rejection or general omission of Indigenousness. The Crown and the peninsular, however, continued rejecting the criollo, asserting that his un-Spanishness by reason of birthplace was grounds enough for his exclusion from politics and power. To add to this, by the eighteenth century, the Americas were the subject of scientific and hypothetical studies that considered the barbaric New World and its inhabitants inferior (Liano 60). This view rendered the criollo’s plight for recognition ineffectual as these attitudes only reinforced his undefined and underprivileged status in the New World. The birth of the criollo in the New World enlarged the socio-cultural scale by which colonial society had been organized as another interstitial space sprouted and further demoted Indigenousness to a position that highlighted barbarism, backwardness and a naturalized form of under-privilege, among other things. The transitional period between colony and independent state reveals an intricate equation in which the Indigenous was a constant and a point of contrast in the plight of the criollo and his assumed birthright.

**Francisco Fuentes y Guzmán and the New Criollo Nation**

Francisco Fuentes y Guzmán’s *La recordación florida: Discurso historial, natural, material y político del reino de Guatemala*, published in the late seventeenth century is a revision of Bernal Díaz del Castillo’s chronicle *La verdadera y notable relación de los hechos American: a new survey of the West Indies, 1648*, show that ethnicity is played upon in a game of power and control: on one hand, the criollo asserted his Spanishness, while on the other hand the peninsular attributed *indio* qualities to him. Gage reports that *peninsulares* referred to *criollos* as “halfe Indians” (10). Here, any relation to what is Indigenous serves to degrade in order to validate the peninsular’s own position as a civilized, white Spanish man and to advance his own interests.
According to Fuentes y Guzmán, his great grandfather’s original manuscript barely resembled the printed versions that were readily available (59). In *La recordación*, Fuentes y Guzmán sets out to correct his great grandfather’s altered account and to relay Guatemala’s history and its physical attributes. In so doing, Fuentes y Guzmán composed a document that is of foundational importance to Guatemala’s official historiography. The impact of Fuentes y Guzmán’s revised chronicle was far-reaching as he was the first to envision the Guatmalan *patria* and to recount the story of Guatemala’s greatest icon and national hero, Tecum Uman. More importantly, Fuentes y Guzmán first established the terms upon which Indigenousness was spoken about in relation to the nation in Guatemala.

Francisco Fuentes y Guzmán is perhaps the first well-known *criollo* to relate a patriotic sentiment towards the Captaincy General of Guatemala that resembled a plight for independence. But what is interesting is that he did this as early as the seventeenth century. In *La recordación florida*, written in 1699, he refers to the Spanish colony as *patria*, suggesting that one of the principal motives for writing the chronicle is “el amor a la patria, que me arrebata” (I: 50). In *La patria del criollo*, an in-depth analysis of Guatemala’s colonial history, Severo Martínez Peláez suggests that Fuentes y Guzmán conceived of the Captaincy General of Guatemala as an independent body:

*Sí. La recordación florida* es el primer documento en que se manifiesta, de manera clara y vehemente, la idea y la emoción de una patria guatemalteca. El vocablo suena muy de cuando en cuando a lo largo del relato, pero la crónica es, toda ella, una exaltación, un canto y una defensa del reino de Guatemala. No del reino como un trozo del imperio español, sino como algo que vale por sí mismo y que precisamente, debe ser valorado con abstracción de cualesquiera imperios para hacerle justicia. (42-43)

Together with this sentiment of belonging, *La recordación* expresses great concern for the indeterminate place of the *criollo* in the New World, specifically in the Captaincy General of
Guatemala. What is more, *La recordación* is written from the stance of an intellectual of the times who sought to have an active and more profitable political role. In his chronicle, he often contrasts the *criollo* with the Indigenous by highlighting the *criollo's* relation to Spain, and in his particular case, to his conquistador past. The early *criollo* consciousness of *La recordación* focused more markedly on the Spanishness of the *criollo*: Fuentes y Guzmán’s aim was to legitimize his past in order to guarantee a sound future in a land that he felt belonged rightfully to the conquistador and his heirs. However, it was his subtle idea of an autonomous, self-governing territory, free from the oversight of the Crown, that would eventually drive the efforts of independence in Central America.

In addition to this patriotic sentiment Fuentes y Guzmán’s chronicle is a catalogue of Guatemala’s flora, fauna, minerals and overall potential for greatness. Though the *indio* in *La recordación* blends into the landscape, his value is seen as much less than that of Guatemala’s natural riches. He gives a detailed description of Guatemala’s flora and fauna by way of demonstrating its raw potential and a comprehensive account of the mining industry in Guatemala as a promising enterprise:

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compuesto todo de lo más de su cuerpo de pedregal y de peñasquería, abriéndose y separándose en partes, de tierra ya amarilla, ya leonada, rosicler y otros semblantes; y sin más instrumento que una estaca de madera se desmora y suelta, dando así mucho oro en pepita; sin embargo, es muy vestido y cubierto de arboleda, de pinería, robles y encinos... Toda la cantidad de su mole se advierte llena de criaderos de oro... (II: 361)
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Martínez Peláez affirms that this is very representative of Flores y Guzmán’s time in which the *criollo* went to great lengths to diminish the role of the Indigenous in Colonial Guatemala (201). The lives of Indigenous people are mentioned almost incidentally through the relation of the labours of the *criollo*. The negative attributes of the *indio* in the chronicle are the product of a deterioration of the Indigenous race: defeated, their body and spirit are weak: [c]uando los españoles conquistaron estos países y reinos tan dilatados, eran los
indios de ellos muy belicosos, dotados de gran don de gobierno, ingeniosos . . . Y ahora son 

cobardes, rústicos y sin talento, sin gobierno, desaliñados, sin arte y llenos de malicia”

(Fuentes y Guzmán, *Recordación* I: 431). Fuentes y Guzmán does more than reject the

Indigenous; he minimizes their situation. He describes in great detail the lushness and

fertility of the Guatemalan soil, a description in which he diminishes the value of the work of

the Indigenous by emphasizing the almost miraculous wealth of the land and the ease with

which it can yield crops and provide food (Martínez Peláez 141). Another example of this

can be found in Rafael Landívar’s *Rusticatio mexicana* (1782). In this first Latin American

epic poem written in Latin, Landívar describes the Guatemalan landscape with its people, its

flora, and its fauna. But this Guatemalan landscape resembles more a European one, as

Dante Liano points out: ”los lagos mexicanos salen más parecidos al Mediterráneo que a sí

mismos” (62). Liano also explains that Landívar is aware of this; as in the foreword

“Advertencia” he justifies his use of contrived poetic language and images: “Lector

benévolo, quisiera advertir que hablaré al modo poético cuantas veces se haga mención de

la Antigüedad.” What is more telling of Landívar’s *criollo* identity is that, omitting the

Indigenous altogether, he wrote his epic poem entirely in Latin, the language of the clergy

and the learned in both the New and Old Worlds.

In *La recordación* the terms upon which the nation was to be founded are outlined in

conjunction with the assertion that the Guatemalan territory was a land apt for development

and industry. Like Andrés Bello’s poem ”Silva a la agricultura de la zona tórrida” (1826) and

Alexander von Humboldt’s *Views of Nature* (1808) and *Personal Narrative of travels to the*

*equinoctial regions of America, during the years 1799-1804* (1814), *La recordación* presents

Guatemala’s natural resources and its people as valuable raw materials for the foundation of

a new society. According to Mary Louise Pratt, Von Humboldt wrote for two distinct publics:
a European one that needed to see the renewed potential of the New World; and a *criollo* one that needed to imagine itself (*Imperial Eyes* 112). Bello, on the other hand, moved beyond the connotative function of the New-World-as-nature metaphor by using a discursive tactic of discovery; “Humboldt’s appropriative gesture of rediscovering America as primal nature . . . mov[es] from celebration to exhortation” so that *criollos* can imagine themselves as a “citizen-subjects of republican América” (Pratt 177, 176). Employing similar discursive tools, Fuentes y Guzmán wrote his chronicle nearly a century earlier. Before his time, he openly praised Guatemala as if it were already an autonomous unit—*la patria*—capable of being governed by *criollos*.

Perhaps Fuentes y Guzmán’s most significant contribution was a story that shaped the Guatemalan imaginary and gave the nation a necessary foundational narrative—with an Indigenous element, no less—upon which to build a sense of Guatemalanness. In the country’s historiography, *La recordación* is the first work of its kind to speak of a great Indigenous leader, the last ruler of the K’iche’ people, Tecum Umam. To lend veracity to the tale of Guatemala’s great fallen hero, Fuentes y Guzmán based his account on Maya manuscripts and documents and claimed that he could explain what Bernal Díaz de Castillo could not: los “encantos y *Naguales*” that the K’iche’ leader and his people employed in an effort to defeat the Spanish (his emphasis, I: 29). Poetically and with an air of mystery, he describes how Tecum Umam met his death after his *nagual* was stricken by Pedro de Alvarado’s lance:

> porque viendo los indios de todo aquel país la constancia, valor y inflexibilidad de nuestros españoles, procuraron valerse . . . del arte de los encantos y *Naguales*, tomando en esta ocasión el demonio, por el rey de el *Quiché*, la forma de águila, sumamente crecida . . . que se vestía de hermosas y dilatadas plumas verdes, volaba con extraño y singular estruendo sobre el ejército, pero procurando siempre enderezar todo el empeño de su sana contra el heroico caudillo D. Pedro de Alvarado; mas este ilustre adalid, sin perderse de ánimo ni pausar jamás su marcha, tomando una lanza en la mano, sin desmontarse, la hirió con ella tan diestro, que
vino muerta á la campaña... Hallaron en esta ocasión muerto al rey *Tecúm*, con el mismo golpe y herida de lanza que recibió el pájaro (I: 29).

Fuentes y Guzmán describes the K’iche’ king Tecum Uum as a mythic, magical presence, who is one with the lush Guatemalan landscape and its flora and fauna. Adding to this magical vision, the uncanny timing of the deaths of both king and bird, the quetzal, another of Guatemala’s national icons, points to an un-Christian demonic otherness that readily expiates the conquistador’s actions. At the same time as the lance is thrust into the body of the quetzal it ends the life of the K’iche’ king, evidencing the prowess of the Crown to bend nature to its will. More importantly, it shows the Crown’s ability to end an era in the history of Guatemala in order to begin a new one. Guatemala’s national history, as taught in classrooms and as presented as an imaginary of the state, invariably includes this chapter of, or rather introduction to, the history of modern day Guatemala. According to Ruud W. van Akkeren in “Tecum Uman: personaje mítico o histórico” it is thanks to Domingo Juarros and José Milla, Guatemalan historians of the early nineteenth century, that the legend of Tecum Uum was etched in the collective memory of Guatemalans as it became integrated into history texts of primary and secondary education in Guatemala (2). On March 22, 1960, Tecum Uum, “el de las torres verdes, verdes, verdes” as described by Miguel Ángel Asturias, was declared Guatemala’s national hero by Congress. Fuentes y Guzmán’s account recreated an Indigenous national hero and penned Guatemala’s official narrative.

In *La recordación* Fuentes y Guzmán looks to the past to legitimize his position as a rich *criollo* landowner in search of greater status. As I showed, descriptions of the land by far surpass descriptions of the Indigenous, as his focus was to show the Guatemalan landscape as a canvas on which to initiate a great social and economic enterprise. Living Indigenous people are shown as lazy, weak and idolatrous, obedient only “a palos y a pescozadas” (cited in *La patria* 207). Moreover, in his chronicle, he fleshes out the
Indigenous as represented by the K’iche’ king only to be able to pierce his body, more specifically the body of his *nagual*, with a lance in a war of Christian values versus idolatry, civilization versus barbarism, and Spanishness versus *indiniadad*.

**Emancipation and Independence**

Early in the nineteenth century, decades after the publication of Fuentes y Guzmán’s chronicle, many more prominent *criollo* intellectuals began to participate actively in the debates about independence and nation formation. With full access to the sacred codes and discursive practices of the dominant classes, this group of intellectual *criollos* slowly developed a consciousness of nationhood and soon began to strive for independence. Indigenousness, or its undoing, once again played an essential role in these early efforts of imagining a community. The function of this concept changed, however, as the *indio* is no longer simply a “rústico, menor y miserable” who must be supervised and oriented at all times. Indigenousness becomes a more sharpened, multifaceted discursive tool that is not just employed to mark ethnic difference, but to evoke a past, like Fuentes y Guzmán’s chronicle, and even suggest a future.

The debates of the *criollo* intellectual were filled with the ideals of European Enlightenment that sought to indoctrinate the masses in order to ensure progress and success of the nation and its citizens. Some of these Enlightenment ideals infused the initiatives of leading thinkers of the time as the Captaincy General underwent three major changes. First, the Captaincy became a new and independent nation with the declaration of independence from the Crown in 1821; then it separated from Mexico in 1823, only to join and later separate from the Central American Federation of States in 1839. It is important to note that *criollo* intellectuals not only had to grapple with the colonial legacy of ethnic
exclusion to which they, as criollos, had also been subjected, but also with the opposition of those who had benefited from such a legacy.

With independence, there also emerged a strong opposition of Indigenous groups that had been politically active thanks to the system of self-regulation of indio republics that the Spanish Crown had allowed. Independence from the Crown threatened this mutually beneficial relationship between representatives of the Crown and Indigenous elites. Under these circumstances leading Indigenous groups did not support independence efforts; instead they aligned with groups and individuals that sought to preserve the colonial institution (Grandin 54-55).

Criollo intellectuals were well aware of the socio-political turmoil that would arise from Independence. As a result, many schools of thought emerged in an effort to provide a plan of action for the socio-political restructuring needed for the successful formation and realization of a political body independent of the Spanish Crown. There existed two main intellectual currents that thrust the ideals of independence and of a national consciousness. While some criollo intellectuals offered to reverse the effects of exclusion and begin a new era, others reinterpreted exclusion and reinserted it in the logics of power that validated their position as leaders. But whatever the stance of each enlightened criollo intellectual was, the Indigenous continued to be a primary concern in the development of a nation project well into the twentieth century.

The beginnings of an independence movement were clearly delineated at a crucial time in which a Guatemalan consciousness extending beyond an emotive connection to the territory began to emerge. Criollo writers in the nineteenth century vouched for the liberation and protection of Indigenous people in Guatemala, a tactic that permitted them to gain ground in the political arena. Indeed, by implementing the ideals of Enlightenment and
Positivism that came from Europe, *criollo* intellectuals sought to advance their plight for change that would in turn allow for a more complete inclusion of the *criollo* elite in all economic, social and political aspects of Guatemala while at the same time securing their role as political leaders of the country. All the while, the Western ideologies that shaped the *criollo* carried on as the notion of Indigenousness continued occupying a place of great disadvantage in which illiteracy, lack of technology and Indigenous ethnicity in general became symbolic of backwardness and barbarism. Notwithstanding, the primary focus in the writing of enlightened *criollo* intellectuals was the creation of an independent state in which all inhabitants were free and autonomous and protected under a new decentralized, secular government.

The biggest challenge for these writers, however, was the successful inclusion of the *mestizo* peasantry and the Indigenous while maintaining the upper hand in the organization of the independent body they wished to achieve. Colonial rule had almost exclusively marginalized these two groups, leaving them out of the decision-making processes and also of any project aimed at integration or successful collaboration. Although the Crown did allow the Indigenous elite of the *repúblicas del indio* to act with some autonomy, the process was not equal as Indigenous elites could not effect any major change in the governance of the colony. Indigenous elites exercised a great deal of power and authority in their communities but with Independence and with the ideals of liberation they faced the loss of land, wealth and free labour. For these reasons Indigenous communities, with the aid and often the endorsement of conservative politicians, mobilized to oppose efforts of independence. This was not without a solution in the ideation of an independent nation by *criollo* intellectuals.

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17 According to Greg Grandin in *The Blood of Guatemala*: “Incessant insurrections by conservative elites...gave way in 1837 to a popular rebellion of peasants and Indians reacting against unaccustomed state intervention, taxation, and land expropriation. The uprising started in eastern Guatemala and was headed by an illiterate Mestizo swineherd named José Rafael Carrera. Guatemala City quickly fell under siege” (18-19).
This new era in the history of Guatemala anticipated by the *criollo* elite included the implementation of programs that limited the power previously conceded to Indigenous leaders and diminished the inter-dependence of Indigenous communities and leaders.

With independence and with the efforts behind nation formation, two attitudes arose around the question of the Indigenous in Guatemala: most debates centered on either exclusion or inclusion of the Indigenous, be it through assimilation or ethnic fusion, according to the negative or positive impact it was to have on the nation project. To ground their arguments and outlooks on the inclusion or exclusion of Indigenous people, intellectuals often drew attention to the perceived ignorance of the Indigenous and their need for protection. In addition, they also highlighted the potential for productivity that could be derived from a well-orchestrated Indigenous machinery that would ensure Guatemala’s entry into the world stage as a leader in market economy.

Marta Elena Casaus Arzú and Teresa García Giráldez’s *Las redes intelectuales centroamericanas: un siglo de imaginarios nacionales* (1820-1920) is one of the most comprehensive and up-to-date studies on the intellectual forces behind Guatemala’s projects of independence and nationhood. In their study, they point to three key figures in the intellectual development of independence and emancipation in the nineteenth century: José Cecilio del Valle y Díaz (1780-1834), Pedro Molina (1777-1854) and Antonio Batres Jáuregui (1847-1928). Some of the main issues identified by Casaus Arzú and García Giráldez in the work of these intellectuals include the social and economic restructuring of society as a whole, the redistribution of wealth, increased participation in the decision-making process, and a break away from the empire, ideals that ultimately led Guatemala to gain its independence and form a modern nation-state (13-8). The ideas presented in the work of José Cecilio del Valle and Antonio Batres Jáuregui resonate strongly with those of
other leading intellectuals in Latin America and help understand the development of the Guatemalan nation-state as a part of larger project in the Americas. Molina’s work coincides with del Valle’s ideas concerning the Indigenous, particularly issues of nationhood as they relate to the Indigenous in the integration of *criollo* and *mestizo* communities.

Del Valle and Molina led three of the most well-known publications in Central America that dealt exclusively with issues of independence. Their work was vital as it set the stage for *criollo* and *mestizo* communities who would soon act upon the ideals of emancipation and social and economic growth when they began envisioning themselves as members of a future self-governing group. The very titles of some of their publications carry a strong sense of purpose as well as socio-political compromise: *El amigo de la patria* (del Valle), *El editor constitucional* (Molina) and *El genio de la libertad* (Molina). Batres Jáuregui, for his part, wrote many years later and was concerned almost exclusively with the fate of the Indigenous after independence: in 1883 he wrote *Bosquejo de Guatemala en la América Central* and in 1893 he wrote his best-known work, *Los indios, su historia y su civilización*. A year later he participated in the project *Dictamen y conclusiones que la comisión respectiva presentó al Congreso Pedagógico sobre el tema siguiente: ¿Cuál será el medio más eficaz de civilizar a la raza indígena en el sentido de inculcarle ideas de progreso y hábitos de pueblos cultos?* (García Giráldez 1997).

Both *El amigo* and *El editor* discussed the formation of an independent state free from the Spanish Crown and under the lead of an intellectual elite. It is interesting to note that each publication reflected a distinct attitude regarding a structural change of government, but more importantly both reflected the interests of those who sought public office. *El amigo* and *El editor* presented opposing views on how this process should occur and whether it should result in a centralized nation or a federal state. Del Valle, for
example, did not believe in completely breaking all ties with Spain, while other political figures were much more radical, opposing even Guatemala’s union to Mexico after independence from Spain. Despite their opposing perspectives on the future of the nation, del Valle and Molina held similar views on the issue of the Indigenous and his incorporation into a Guatemalan nation project and, as I will show, their particular views added to the evolving character of Guatemalan identity and its contradictions.

While the Indigenous was highly regarded as a monument of the past, the insistence on the reformation of Indigenous people suggested that their social, cultural and economic role in del Valle and Molina’s time was less than ideal. As a result, an effort was made to imagine this marginal group as a contributing member of society. Soon after severing ties with the Crown, even as the focus shifted from independence to issues of nationhood, one matter pervaded all debates: the issue of membership in the soon-to-be-independent state. Questions of power, authority, inclusion and exclusion were raised, as well as questions relating to the successful transition from colony to independent state, and from colonial subjects to free individuals. Across the board it was a given that an intellectual, lettered elite should be in charge. This automatically discarded the participation of the Indigenous, who remained illiterate, and continued, to varying degrees, to be trapped in the dynamic of colonial tutelage, though now under the guise of emancipation.

Del Valle and Molina believed that the Indigenous could become a functioning member of society but to achieve this he had to be steered in the right direction. In “El sabio” del Valle saw the need for a leader who shows others the way, “un dirigente sabio”, using Humboldt as an example (121-122). Molina for his part, integrated this idea in “Diálogo: El coronel Quijano y el cacique Capac”, a fictitious dialogue between a landowner

18 Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are taken from del Valle’s Obra escogida.
and his right-hand man in which Capac suggests that the Indigenous would follow the *criollo* as a child would turn to his father: “[los hijos] nunca dejarían ellos el lado paterno, si en vez de impedirles acciones, se les dirigiese y aconsejase lo que debían hacer por su bien” (*Escritos del doctor Pedro Molina* 660). Del Valle and Molina viewed the *indio* as a minor, a child who had not yet reached adolescence, who lacked maturity and needed guidance. However, they insisted that all individuals needed to participate in a civic project as this was the only option for the socio-economic success of the region of Guatemala. For del Valle, Guatemala and its inhabitants had much potential for greatness.

Del Valle reinforced the role of the *criollo* elite as an agent of change and liberation. While del Valle’s nation project relied on civic duty and moral renovation rather than eugenics, Western culture was the core of all civilization and was the only route toward technological and economic advancement. For del Valle, the arrival of the Spanish to the Americas and the years of colonial rule that followed had a providential quality. In his view, these historical events led to the moment in history in which the Indigenous could be civilized and become part of Western society. He believed that the living Maya people of Guatemala were poor, miserable and lived in deplorable conditions due to the ravages of the conquest and the inequality of the colony, two circumstances that further perpetuated the decline of a once great empire: “Quedó lo más infeliz, lo más ignorante de los pueblos; y a esos hombres que quedaron no se permitía tener un baile, ni montar una caballería” (350-51). Even though del Valle criticized the conquest and the colony for its unfair and vile treatment of the Indigenous, he felt that these historical events were necessary because they allowed for a key moment in the history of Guatemala. Thanks to the Spanish invasion and ensuing years of colony, Indigenous people could develop as citizens and thus

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19 In this dialogue Molina puts forth ideas about independence contrasting the stance of the *español*, Quijano, to the (*latino*)*americano*, Capac.
participate in the formation of a nation that would excel civically and economically on the world stage.

José Cecilio del Valle embarked in a nation-making project reminiscent of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento’s *Facundo o, civilización y barbarie*, written in 1845. With *Facundo*, Sarmiento undertook a description of the Argentinean land and its people that led to the creation of Argentina’s national imaginary. Del Valle, on the other hand, identified quite explicitly the foundations of the nation, in particular those elements that evoked sense of history and tradition. He attributed a certain amount of virtue to the Indigenous, an action that was not without its purpose: in this manner, he justified his project in which he deposited a great deal of faith in Indigenous people, whom he believed had much potential and possessed a good work ethic and perseverance. Del Valle reconstructed a mythic past for the Indigenous in order to justify his present course of action and guarantee a future. In “Prospecto de la Historia de Guatemala” del Valle sets out to draft a history of the country in which he includes historical events integral to the formation of Guatemala. The essay is divided in four parts, organized logically to correspond with important historical periods that led to the birth and maturity of the nation: “Guatemala india”; “Guatemala provincia de España”; “Guatemala provincia de México” and “Guatemala república independiente y libre” (345-354). “Guatemala india” is a short subsection that includes a very brief account of pre-Columbian Guatemala, focusing mainly on a catalogue of Maya rulers. To legitimize the enterprise of building a nation upon Guatemalan soil, del Valle highlights the importance of recording this pre-Columbian stage in order to create a sense of authenticity and legacy: “[los hijos de Guatemala] [v]en en su primera edad el germen de los primeros principios; ven a sus padres dando lecciones a su posteridad” (349).
In other commentaries published in *El amigo de la patria* del Valle features the landscape as a vast expanse with a great capacity to produce minerals, food, raw and base materials as well as committed individuals. Guatemalan nature stood as an immeasurable supply of raw materials and to best exploit that seemingly endless expanse of land and infinite resources, all members of society, including the Indigenous, needed to be enlightened. Del Valle believed that Indigenous people in Guatemala were poor and backward due to a complete disinterest in the possession of land. The Maya system of communal lands had prevented market growth and del Valle and his contemporaries felt that it was only possible to amass wealth through land tenure. However, issues of land tenure were not major concerns for del Valle since redistribution of land would come from the natural progression of the civic renovation of the Indigenous population. This would be solved once Indigenous people were assimilated into *ladino* culture and began professing the same desires and needs as *ladinos*. But what drove del Valle’s faith in the complete assimilation of Indigenous people was the assumed ability of an ‘enlightened’ Indigenous people to turn away from its former ‘barbaric’ culture and opt for a more civilized mode of living in which all participate in civic duty and a market economy. It was necessary to step away from barbaric life into a civilized life of “ilustración” and understanding.

In *El amigo*, del Valle imagines Guatemala as an up-and-coming nation with much to offer to the rest of the world: “Guatemala será lo que debe ser: un Gigante en lo político como es grande en lo físico” (Casaus Arzú and García Giráldez 31). The key for unleashing such potential lay in the socio-political and moral renovation of all Guatemalans, in particular the poor, illiterate and marginalized masses. Del Valle saw Guatemala as a part of a growing group of nations that would stand in the world stage as a force with which to be reckoned.

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20 Del Valle strongly believed that conquest and colonization were necessary not only for the moral salvation of Indigenous people, but for their entry into Western civilization.
The country would be key to Latin America’s success as a rapidly emerging economic and political power that one day would surpass Europe. All throughout El amigo de la patria del Valle envisions Latin America as a socio-cultural and economic World power: “América caminará a la par de Europa y luego la superará” (220). This vision of Latin America’s promise is further explained:

La América será, por último, la que debe ser. Colocada en la posición geográfica más feliz; dueña de tierras más vastas y fecundas que las de España; señora de minerales más ricos; poblada con la multiplicación de medios más abundantes de existencia, ilustrada con todos los descubrimientos del europeo, y lo que estos mismos descubrimientos facilitarían al americano; llena de hombres, de luces, de riquezas y de poder, será en la Tierra la primera parte de ella; dará opiniones, usos y costumbres a las demás naciones; llegará a dominar por su ilustración y riqueza; será en lo futuro en toda la extensión del globo lo que es al presente en Europa la rica y pensadora Albión. (220)

In this description there are no racial differences and the ethnic ones—“the European” and “the American”—indicate an aspiration for future harmony. However, the indio is nowhere present in this picture of success and wonder: his absence can be read as the fruition of a full fledged integration project as proposed by del Valle in other texts. In other words, the Indigenous is presented as a vital part of the nation project insofar as he can undergo a process of un-Indigenousness.

Del Valle’s outlook on the future of the Indigenous in this respect was relatively positive. He firmly believed that in essence the indio could be enlightened and integrated as a functioning member of society. He attributed those special powers of enlightenment to education: “la educación dá valor a los que la reciben y el valor de los hombres designa el de la provincial donde vive” (José Cecilio Valle para Jóvenes 30). Del Valle deposited his trust in the human essence that equalized individuals across the board: he believed that through science and knowledge, humans, specifically Guatemalans, could achieve a state of advancement in which all individuals would be equal: “los derechos del hombre son
Del Valle’s project relied quite heavily on the moral obligation of the Indigenous to improve on an individual level and become a contributing member of a developing society. In fact, del Valle firmly believed that through education and access to other institutions, a voluntary transition from Indigenous to ladino culture would readily take place: the Indigenous would shed his language, customs and beliefs almost as quickly as he would shed his traditional garb and opt for a ladino lifestyle. Del Valle’s faith in the voluntary moral renovation of the Indigenous relied only in education for its initiation; from there on it was up to each individual to utilize the tools available to him to incur social change.

Pedro Molina shared a view similar to del Valle’s. He believed that the Indigenous population could become a part of the nation through access to education, culture and language (Casaus Arzú and García Giráldez 32). He encouraged the use of the Spanish language and proposed ladino culture as a baseline for the successful integration of marginalized groups. The realization of this project heavily depended on the advancement of a socio-political agenda that sought to inspire the desire for progress in each and every individual, a desire that would in turn incur economic growth. Above all, del Valle valued work and its property to renew the moral and physical forces necessary for the success of the nation project: “el trabajo es origen de toda riqueza: el trabajo es el principio de la escala inmensa de valores” (273).

Much earlier than José Martí, del Valle expressed the idea of a (Latin) American project where class or skin colour had little to do with equality. His dream was focused on a
Spanish America, “[la] América española” (232), which he saw as a depository of riches. In 1822 he gave an address on the importance of the amalgamation of Spanish America titled “América, Discurso presentado a la junta gubernativa el 10 de febrero de 1822” in which he discussed the promising future of Latin America. Moreover, like Martí, del Valle believed in the importance of deriving a form of government from experience itself and not merely from theoretical innovation. According to Martí: “El espíritu del gobierno ha de ser el del país. La forma de gobierno ha de avenirse a la constitución propia del país. El gobierno no es más que el equilibrio de los elementos naturales del país” (Nuestra América 28). Similarly, del Valle believed in a form of government that was compatible with its people and its land and was derived from experience:

Un legislador no debe confundirse con un profesor de academia. . . . Un legislador observa el territorio a que se dilata la Nación, los paralelos que la circunscriben, los elementos heterogéneos de su población. . . y cuando ha llegado a reunir todos los conocimientos de la Nación entra a resolver. . . no busca leyes más sublimes en un sistema abstracto o ideal. . . (liii n.83)

Much in the same manner as del Valle, Molina believed in a new era in which the Indigenous would contribute actively to society. But in addition to the civic project laid out by del Valle and Molina, and as European positivist ideas reached Central America, a biological factor was added to the overall integration initiative. Del Valle and Molina, as well as some of their contemporaries, suggested that the immigration of individuals originating from more developed countries would greatly benefit Guatemala as there would be positive impact on the economy and greater ethnic fusion that would reduce the ‘Indigenousness’ of Guatemala (Casaus Arzú and García Giráldez 37-38). Del Valle believed ‘foreign men’, namely white in race, would come in search of America’s ‘depository of riches’ and a racial intermingling would take place: “Cruzándose los indios y ladinos con los españoles y suizos, los alemanes e ingleses que vengan a poblar América, se acabarán las castas, división
sensible de los pueblos; será homogénea la población; habrá unidad en las sociedades’’ (217). The dissolution of the caste system was vital to the economic and political reorganization of Guatemala: it would ensure the successful redistribution of land amongst those in power, access to cheap labour and economic integration. With del Valle and Molina we see the invocation of a different type of *indio* figure: one that, without any protest, could be easily chiseled into the ideal agent of progress, but ultimately his Indigenousness would be diminished and he would become entirely *ladino*.

José Cecilio del Valle and Pedro Molina believed that a series structural changes in society and the government and a complete integration of marginal peoples were key to the nation’s success. Though the complete obliteration of ethnic difference for an entry into *ladino* culture was present at the heart of this project, a racial aspect was also key: the homogeneity so desired by del Valle and Molina would ideally be brought about by the introduction of white European men who would ultimately whiten the Guatemalan bloodline. Del Valle and Molina were concerned primarily with the moral renovation of Guatemala, as indicated by the ideals of Enlightenment that are present in their writings. These ideals point toward the essence of man before all else. I suggest that del Valle and Molina use a nearly absent *indio* referent for imagining of the future of the nation. As I have shown, the living Indigenous and his conditions are seldom present in their work and they place a greater emphasis on the past—in which the Indigenous was barbaric—and on the future—at time when the Indigenous is whiter, *ladino* and full of promise. Consequently, the eugenic argument for the integration of the Indigenous was not fully fledged and was only a small part of a much larger project. However, as Guatemala became more industrialized and Indigenous people moved from rural areas to urban areas, a different outlook on the Indigenous situation, or ‘problem’, emerged. The *indio*, with whom the intellectual elite had
very little contact in the eighteenth century, was no longer an imagined entity, but rather fleshed out men, women and children who were not simply conceived as different but carried the physical mark of difference in the body.

The *Indio* and the Guatemalan Body Politic

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, as Positivism reached the Americas, Indigenousness was read through its corporality, as is demonstrated in the work of Antonio Batres Jáuregui, and his contemporaries. Antonio Batres Jáuregui’s stance on the inclusion of the Indigenous differs substantially from that of his predecessors. This is due, in part, to his entry into the discussions of nationhood much later in the nineteenth century. His work took that of del Valle and Molina’s and developed it further. He placed great emphasis on the biological dimension of Guatemala’s integration project. However, Batres Jáuregui did not at all believe in the capacity of the Indigenous to become enlightened and take on the role of a productive citizen; instead it was a task for those in power: “hay que sacar á los indios de la manera de ser que tienen, estancada y oriental” (*Los indios* 177).

While Molina and del Valle had complete faith in the assimilation and civilization of Indigenous people, Batres Jáuregui recreated the colonial stereotype of the lazy, drunk and barbaric Indigenous. His focus was not on the enlightenment ideals of del Valle and Molina, but on racial ones. Like other intellectuals, he was greatly influenced by nineteenth-century Positivist ideas that reached Latin America: he suggested that progress was attainable only through scientific inquiry and that the barbaric traits of the Indigenous were biological and not social ones (Casaus and Giráldez 36-37). For Batres Jáuregui ethnic fusion was the only viable option for the successful integration of the Indigenous population. He felt that it was necessary to redistribute the Guatemalan territory in order for Indigenous communities to
be completely disintegrated and forced to either disappear or mix with other ethnic groups and become ladino: “que el aborigen venga á confundirse con nosotros en un solo pueblo, en una sola nación, á gozar de los elementos de vida y de progreso. . . á conseguir conjuntamente con nosotros los fines sociales e individuales que son propios del ser racional” (*Dictamen* 4).

But for the success of a nation project inclusive of civilized, un-Indigenous people it was imperative that every aspect of their life be monitored. For this Batres Jáuregui proposed the creation of a mentoring system for each community of Indigenous people that encouraged and ultimately regulated the adoption of a new lifestyle, complete with ladino language and culture: “Fácil es organizar en cada departamento *Sociedades Sucursales Protectoras de los Indios*. . . con el objeto de fomentar todo lo que tienda á la civilización y mejoramiento de esa raza” (his emphasis, *Los indios* 195). And much like del Valle and Molina, Batres Jáuregui emphasized the relative civilization of the Indigenous upon the arrival of the Spanish, but only to attribute a redemptive quality to the work of the criollo intellectual in Guatemala: “[l]a cultura aborigen se perdió por completo. Los quichés y los cakchiqueles revelan su pasada grandeza; pero no dan muestra hoy de ella. . . . Que hay gérmenes de perfectibilidad en esos pueblos, lo prueba la misma historia. Lo que se necesita es que se desarrollen y se fecunden” (*Los indios* 177). In this manner, Batres Jáuregui authenticated his role and that of his contemporaries as leaders of the soon-to-be independent state.

As I have shown, del Valle condemned but also found a purpose in the Spanish invasion and the years of colony that ensued. More so than Batres Jáuregui and Molina, del Valle attempted to create a niche in Western history for the Indigenous people of Guatemala while in reality he relegated them to the margins. Del Valle and his
contemporaries balanced on one hand the latest ideas of enlightenment and on the other hand an economic and political program. To reconcile both sides of the equation it was necessary to design an agenda that carefully equalized the situation of all in the Kingdom of Guatemala. Part of this could be accomplished through the abolition of the caste system and the assimilation of Indigenous people into *ladino* culture. Ultimately, assimilation would provide a baseline for a project of social or biological renovation geared towards integration. This resulted in the perpetuation of a system of inclusion/exclusion based on ethnicity and its undoing; it ultimately required the passive compliance of Indigenous people. In this manner, Indigenous people in Guatemala could one day be a part of a nation project as long as they were a more civilized, un-Indigenous people. Before such a transformation could take place, however, they needed the protection of an elite that knew best. Despite del Valle’s less invasive and more civic approach to the conversion of the Indigenous to *ladino* citizens, the structures of power that relied on ethno-racial differences at the time of the colony were adopted, translated and reinserted into the socio-political discourse of nation-building employed by del Valle and his contemporaries.

The agendas of del Valle, Molina and Batres Jáuregui however different and however aimed at the Indigenous population, be it as the invocation of a civic sentiment, ethnic fusion, relocation or cultural assimilation, were all based on the premise that Indigenousness was a form of barbarism. Moreover, implicit in the premise of the barbaric *indio* was the notion of the racial and ethnic superiority of the *criollo* and the superiority of the Guatemalan *criollo* intellectual is suggested not only by the act of writing about the *indio* itself, but also by posing as the moral, social and political authority. In other words, Indigenous people were measured against the attributes of a perceived racially and ethnically superior group represented by a *criollo* authority. What is most striking in this
system of equivalencies and differences is the prescribed set of relations between criollo and Indigenous people that is determined by the ethnic and racial factors established by the criollo elite. The moral and social inferiority of the Indigenous community is explained by its ethnicity and can only be remedied by the intervention of a culturally, morally and socially sound group, namely an intellectual criollo elite.

**The Guatemalan Nation in the Twentieth Century**

The projects of inclusion/exclusion of the Indigenous formulated by criollo thinkers in the nineteenth century did not see their realization under the twenty-year dictatorship of Manuel Estrada Cabrera (1898-1920), as these integration theories were counterproductive to the ongoing trade: agriculture had become one of Guatemala’s most profitable enterprises and Estrada Cabrera had struck life-long deals with American companies for the exploitation of Guatemala’s raw materials. One major component of these deals was the endless provision of cheap labour and an non-unionized work force. The implementation of assimilation programs would interfere with this insofar as education was regarded as a dangerous tool that could lead to an uprising of the underpaid, abused and exploited illiterate Indigenous population. Nevertheless, an intellectual elite continued thriving and envisioning the nation in the coming years. New pressures were added, as new models of race and nation arrived in Guatemala and the debate on ethnic integration continued. Perhaps what was most notable in the decades that ensued was the context in which new intellectual thought emerged. For one, Guatemala was entering an economic market as an agricultural exporter and opening its doors to foreign trade (e.g. United Fruit Company). This initiated a series of migrations and displacements that brought the situation of the
Indigenous into the limelight. The Indigenous who was no longer confined to the highlands and intellectuals saw the need for more dynamic integration strategies.

Unfortunately, as we will see, the interests of those in power and these intellectuals did not see eye to eye: actual integration meant a decrease in a cheap workforce and an increasing consciousness that threatened the regime. Casaus Arzú and García Giráldez explain that thinkers at the beginning of the twentieth century negotiate new representations of Guatemalan collectivity and seek to cultivate a national imaginary that is both culturally and politically hegemonic (77). They point to three men in particular as the leading thinkers of the generation of 1910: Alberto Masferrer (1868-1932), Fernando Juárez Muñoz (1878-1952) and Carlos Wyld Ospina (1891-1956). The positivist ideas that Batres Jáuregui had employed for the ideation of his project could be found in some these efforts of arriving at a Guatemalanness. However, despite the theosophical and spiritualist approaches that were in vogue at the time, a school of thought remarkably different emerged in Guatemala during this period. There exist some similarities between these writers and the writers of the earlier generation, but what stands out is a greater emphasis on the real integration and legal recognition of the Indigenous as a fellow citizen who needed assistance in becoming ladino.

Alberto Masferrer is a well-known Salvadorean intellectual who offered an approach to the integration of the indio. Like the Mexican intellectual José Vasconcelos who wrote about “la raza cósmica,” Masferrer was interested in the formation of “El alma de la nación” in a cultural community devoid of borders and distinctions and as an expression of a race “que forjará la América” (Casaús Arzú and García Giráldez 94). Masferrer’s idea of a national consciousness is also reminiscent of the Uruguayan José Enrique Rodó’s Ariel that calls for the preservation of a Latin America race. Though Masferrer’s vision shares some similarities
with the discourses of Vasconcelos and Rodó, implicit in his own discourse is the complete erasure of Indigenousness through the mixing of races. In *El indio guatemalteco: Ensayo de sociología nacionalista* Fernando Juárez Muñoz, another intellectual of the same period, affirms that Guatemala will not succeed as a nation unless the ‘problem’ of the Indigenous was solved: “No nos cansaremos nunca de repetir que es de urgencia tratar este asunto: Guatemala no será nunca una nación, si no se resuelve el problema del indio, como debe” (2). Unlike Masferrer, Juárez Muñoz believed in an integration of the Indigenous that left intact their culture and at the same time guaranteed them the same rights and education as any Guatemalan citizen. In marked similarity to del Valle, Juárez Muñoz believed that all that ailed the Indigenous would be easily solved by the desire of land ownership. Carlos Wyld Ospina is perhaps the only member of this group, according to Casaús Arzú and García Giráldez, who rejects the supposed supremacy of the white race and denounces racism as a social construct that attempted to justify in an empirical manner a system of discrimination, domination; exclusion and inclusion.21 As another dictatorship soon followed, none of these projects were ever effectively put into place.

In the work of these three writers there is a significant shift in the treatment of Indigenousness: in the previous decades, Indigenousness was intrinsically linked to backwardness and barbarism that required the intervention of a well-versed elite. As we have seen, the aim was often to wipe out the Indigenous factor and begin afresh. Masferrer, Juárez Muñoz and Wyld Ospina approached the question of ethnicity from a new angle but the interplay of ethnic difference did not disappear and it remained as an undercurrent: an intellectual elite still assumed a leading role in the fate of the Indigenous and Western culture continued as the baseline in all three cases.

21 It is also interesting to note that Wyld Ospina is considered the father of the *indigenista* novel in Guatemala.
As I mentioned previously, when Indigenous people moved from rural areas to urban areas in search of work or in hopes of *ladinización*, greater contact between Indigenous and *ladinos* was made possible. Consequently, notions of Indigenousness materialized for lettered *ladinos* at the same time that the dismal social and economic conditions of Indigenous people became a visible national ‘problem’ in need of a solution. Still, the historicism of the project remained, as Miguel Ángel Asturias located the barbaric *indio* in the past and envisioned the undoing of the *indio* in a promising, civilized future: “[e]l indio representa una civilización pasada y el mestizo, o ladino que le llamamos, una civilización que viene” (*El problema social del indio* 36). The self-proclaimed generation of 1920, a group of young intellectuals, among them Miguel Ángel Asturias, utilized models of French racialism to try to ‘solve’ the Indigenous problem that afflicted the nation (Casaus Arzú and García Giráldez 272). These intellectuals saw the lack of intermixing of bloods, “cruzamiento”, as the main hindrance to the integration of the Indigenous. One of the most notable examples is Asturias’ thesis, which focused on the social problem that was the Indigenous, *El problema social del indio* where he proposed complete assimilation. In his thesis he expressed a complete dissatisfaction with the Indigenous situation of the time, but in particular he alluded to the backwardness and passive misery of this ethnic group. Asturias takes up the discourse of his predecessors that tries to understand Indigenousness as an integral part of Guatemalan identity. For one, he saw the Indigenous as a barbaric people whose eating habits are deplorable (73), who lacked any ambition (74) and who had no familial organization (67), all indicative of the ‘degeneration’ of the Maya race. To explain this degeneration, and central to his argument, is the metaphor of the nation as an ill body in need of a cure:

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22 The generation of 1920 was made up of a group of USAC students who had joined forces in the opposition of Estrada Cabrera’s government. This group launched the student movement known as *La Huelga de Dolores*. 

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Los organismos sociales, como los individuales, están expuestos a sufrir muchas dolencias, en muchos casos difíciles de curar. Cuando las sociedades humanas enferman por falta de funcionamiento de sus órganos... o por una anemia social... urge la aplicación de medicamentos que la restablezcan. (88)

He further explains that there are anatomical, physiological and psychological signs of a degenerative disease in the Indigenous individual that ultimately will lead to his destruction (80-81) because it is passed on as “viciación ancestral” (102).

The root of the ‘problem of the Indigenous’, according to Asturias, was the lack of integration of the Indigenous into ladino culture and the stagnation of Indigenous bloodlines. The solution lay in the intermingling of bloods, because nature had proven that through such a process plant and animal species were able to endure extinction: “El ganado vacuno importado la primera vez a la Isla de Santo Domingo... experimentó grandes decaimientos. ... Para mejorar el ganado hubo necesidad de traer nuevos ejemplares, así para con el perro y así para con las plantas” (107). Asturias’ approach to the question of Indigenousness is quite grim when compared to del Valle’s. Curiously, Asturias’ literary work reveals a completely different attitude towards the Indigenous, as he presents him under a more positive light in his novels, poetry and short stories. The indio that comes through in Hombres de maíz, for example, is not the indio that he confronts in his thesis. For that reason, the identitary paradox that is prevalent in the discourse of the nation is most evident in the work of Asturias. While he adopts a most aggressive approach to the un-Indigenousness of Guatemalans, he builds on the national imaginary that is inextricably linked to notions of an Indigenous ancestry. The indio in Hombres de maíz is perhaps the first fully fledged mythic, almost shamanic, indio that surfaces in many indigenist Guatemalan novels.
**Guatemala’s Ten Years of Spring**

Despite the many proposals made by leading intellectuals during the first half of the twentieth century, not much changed, as governments driven by the market economy overlooked all integrative strategies and opted for the continued exploitation of Guatemala’s soil and people. During the long presidencies of Manuel José Estrada Cabrera (1898-1920) and Jorge Ubico (1931-1944) and with the support of the United Fruit Company, much of the land and resources were controlled by corporate interests in Guatemala. Little attention was paid to the Indigenous, who continued to be spoken of and for in an interplay that denied his ethnicity and embraced his participation as a producer of goods in the new Guatemalan nation. Change only began taking place after what is known as the ten years of spring in Guatemala. In October of 1944 a group of revolutionaries overthrew Jorge Ubico’s military government and democratically elected Juan José Arévalo (1945-1950) and later Jacobo Arbenz (1951-1954). With the greater freedom that the new socialist government brought, intellectuals, amongst them Asturias and David Vela, more freely presented the terms of the assimilation of the Indigenous population. Soon, the liberalist governments sought to provide the Indigenous with the tools of progress: literacy programs, land reforms and legal recognition. This in turn gave intellectuals, activists and supporters a springboard for the negotiation of Indigenous civil rights and the political involvement of Indigenous-led movements. Arévalo’s literacy program was effective in that it reached many people in rural areas and resulted in the beginning of an Indigenous intellectual elite.

Many regard this era as the beginning of the legal emancipation of the Indigenous peoples in Guatemala. In *Guatemala: Leyes y regulaciones en materia indígena, (1944-2001)* Jorge Edwin Flores Juárez indicates that “con la Revolución de octubre se inició la emancipación legal de la población indígena y el ejercicio de sus derechos ciudadanos; y
con el surgimiento de los partidos políticos, la oportunidad de participar en la vida cívica y política del país” (36). Coupled with legal recognition was a mandate to promote literacy and free education to the Indigenous population in Guatemala. For example, in 1952 missionaries from abroad arrived in Guatemala with an agenda: to evangelize the rural Indigenous populations. To set their agenda in motion, missionary groups presented the government with a plan for the promotion of literacy, the inauguration of rural schools and the creation of training programs for Indigenous teachers (Fischer, Tecpán Guatemala 89-91). These groups also showed an interest in Indigenous languages, which encouraged the creation of linguistic institutes in Guatemala for their preservation, as well as the translation of bibles into Indigenous languages.

However, in 1954 Carlos Castillo Armas led a military coup and set up a military junta government which reversed the socialist reforms and returned to the ways in which the dictatorships of Estrada Cabrera and Ubico handled the ‘national Indigenous problem.’ With the newly gained socio-political visibility of the Indigenous and other groups, this did not suffice and the government adopted more drastic measures than ever before. After this period, the counter-revolutionary government led by Castillo Armas identified literacy programs in rural areas as an indoctrination tool of the previous ruling government. As a result, government-led literacy programs were brought to a halt and, as Flores Juárez points out, a new law was introduced but only as a political manoeuvre: “se emitió la Ley de Comisiones Permanentes de Cultura, con la que ‘se trataba de impulsar un programa de educación y desarrollo comunitario orientado a resolver íntegramente el problema indígena nacional’” (42). This marks the first official use of the phrase el problema indígena nacional, an idea introduced in the 1920s and 1930s by Guatemalan scholars. In this period the term loses its socio-political and cultural connotation and gains an economic one: the “national
Indigenous problem” was perceived as a debilitating force in the country’s participation in the global economy. The political involvement of individuals in groups that supported the former liberalist government was identified as subversive and repressive measures were included in the criminal code to contain undesired political action.  

Despite the cutbacks and government sanctions that affected many Indigenous organizations, supporters continued to struggle for the rights of the Indigenous as Guatemalan citizens. In part thanks to Arévalo and Arbenz’s liberalist governments’ legal recognition of Indigenous peoples and in part thanks to the introduction of literacy programs, teacher training and language institutes by Catholic and evangelical initiatives, many Indigenous people in Guatemala began participating more actively in the political sphere and continued to do so after the Revolution of October. Edward F. Fischer identifies this period as key in the development of the Pan-Maya movement in Guatemala. In an attempt to raise awareness, in the 1940s and 1950s Pan-Mayanists and mestizo intellectuals wrote about the discrimination and poverty that the Indigenous people faced. The thirty six years of armed struggle that ensued saw many Indigenous leaders and intellectuals as well as their supporters fall prey to the government’s systematic violence. In 1993, Rigoberta Menchú received the Nobel Peace Prize for her testimony *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (1983) and all eyes turned to Guatemala and greater pressure was exerted on the country to begin peace talks. From this point on, Indigenous people in Guatemala were able to participate more actively than ever in the cultural production and in 

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23 Flores Juárez indicates that:

La ‘Liberación’ [Ejército de Liberación Nacional] creó de inmediato un Comité Nacional contra el Comunismo, para perseguir y encarcelar a los ex funcionarios y colaboradores del depuesto gobierno y a los militantes de los partidos revolucionarios, incorporó a la legislación penal ciertas medidas de seguridad, no sólo para prevenir la delincuencia, sino los estados de peligrosidad social y política, sobre todo la actividad comunista, y dispuso someter al fuero militar los delitos políticos y comunes conexos. (41)
the socio-political sphere of the country. But it was not until much later in the twentieth century that the Indigenous peoples began reclaiming their place in Guatemalan society and participating in the decision-making process that affects them directly.

**From Colonial *Indio* to Maya in Contemporary Guatemala**

Indigenous people in Guatemala have had a long history of near invisibility that has been the foundation of a Guatemalan identity. The terms under which this has occurred are very problematic in that they constantly contradict each other and seldom serve to truly represent the Indigenous and other marginal groups. I have employed the term 'identitaiy paradox' to refer to the production of a Guatemalan identity that is full of negotiation and contradiction as it articulates Indigenousness in an attempt to reconstruct a national narrative. As I have shown, Indigenousness operates at different levels, deployed to fulfill utopic or dystopic functions that legitimize a certain Guatemalanness that is not *indio* or European, but *ladino*. I have identified some of the major mechanisms of this process as manipulations and erasures of the Indigenous body from the body politic as performed by *ladinos* upon *indios*. From the time of the Spanish invasion the notion of Indigenousness or *indianidad* has been used as a discursive instrument used to differentiate and to organize the body politic in a logical manner. The *indio* as feet of the Colonial body; Fuentes y Guzmán’s spectral *indio* as myth, del Valle and Molina’s *indio* as a malleable citizen; Batres Jáuregui’s *indio* as raw genetic material for a homogenous race; Asturias’s ill *indio* body in need of regeneration; all of these *indio* figures reveal the sharp turns and obstacles that the *indio* as a discursive figure has had to endure in the formulation of a coherent story of the nation. What is most problematic, however, is the dramatic effect that this deployment of
Indianidad as a political tool has had on inter-ethnic relations in Guatemala, particularly as they negatively affect living Indigenous people and other marginal groups.

Indigenous people in Guatemala today have to face the arduous task of reinventing themselves in order to gain the place that has long been denied them by virtue of their ethnicity. Part of this task is the inscription of a Guatemalan Indigenousness that is articulated by Indigenous people for a more inclusive history that purports a more tolerant future. An ongoing form of cultural activism in Guatemala has been taking place in the literary establishment since the 1980s, starting with Luis de Lión's first Indigenous novel *El tiempo principia en Xibalbá*. This occurs at a cultural level for one chief reason: the Indigenous in Guatemala have been granted access to the cultural arena more readily than the political one because of the seemingly harmless effects this can have on the continuing development of a ladino Guatemalan nation. Furthermore, Indigenous writers and activists have strategically inserted themselves into the dominant culture, appropriating its tools and discourses for the deployment of an Indigenous cultural project.

Today, some of the biggest challenges Indigenous writers must face are discrimination and access to the literary establishment. Many writers compose their work in Spanish rather than in their mother tongue as their academic and artistic formation has taken place in a ladino classroom. Writing in Spanish also offers greater dissemination and better possibilities for publication as well as literary prizes: more than half of the Indigenous population in Guatemala today is illiterate, not to mention the fact that there are twenty-two different living Indigenous languages. It is important to mention that their work is recognized as literary because it is, in fact, written. Other forms of expression, particularly those founded in oral tradition, are deemed folkloric and are often overlooked as is any written work that is not translated into Spanish. In the past decade small publishing houses
have emerged to exclusively publish the work of up-and-coming Indigenous writers. These editorial works are the initiative of Indigenous grassroots organizations and often publish editions of translated texts both in Spanish and major Maya languages, but seldom print exclusively in any one Maya language. Many leading Indigenous writers are politically active, have moved to an urban centre and hold prestigious posts (teachers, academics, journalists, activists).

Indigenous literature in Guatemala almost invariably denotes a negotiation of identity and challenges the all-encompassing, stereotyped and homogenous definitions of what the indio is, what the indio does and what the Indio should be. Recent works reveal an inconformity with earlier portrayals of the voiceless Indigenous; they isolate the position that was assigned to the Indigenous subject, only to test its limits and reflect on its rigidity. This contestatory nature counters traditional notions of Indigenous identity and proposes an Indigenous body of texts written by and for the Indigenous peoples of Guatemala. But more than that, these texts are imbued with contradiction, distinction and difference that show Indigenous identity as something ambiguous, fragmented and ever-changing. Indigenous writers like Humberto Ak’abal and Luis de Lión often play with traditional notions of Indigenous and mestizo identity only to subvert them and show the seams of their construction: issues of language, ethnicity, oppression and discrimination are brought to the forefront and dismantled in order to reflect on their rigidity and insufficiency. What these writers do, in fact, is set the stage for the demystification of identity. Here, identity is confronted, rejected and questioned with excesses, exaggeration, taboo and the absurd, among other things. Identity is then reinserted into dominant culture as an artifact that shows its inefficacy and inadequacy. As I mentioned in the beginning, the act of writing as an Indigenous author alone is a form of activism in Guatemala today because in literature,
as in other cultural forms, marks of *indianidad* are revised and redeployed to reinvent the literary Indigenous figure, an effort that should find resonance in other forms of political activism in the redefinition of Indigenousness in the Guatemalan context.

In the following chapter I propose a postcolonial framework for the analysis of what I identify as Guatemala’s founding corpus of Indigenous literature. As I have shown, colonial relations in Guatemala were characterized by an imbalance of power in which Indigenous people were systematically subjugated and kept at the margins. The Pan-Maya movement, Mayas and their supporters recognize the present situation of Indigenous people as a continued form of colonialism that is sanctioned by neoliberal governments, and their response to it is manifested as anti-colonial. These circumstances, I will show, make the study of Indigenous literature in Guatemala an ideal case for the application of postcolonial theory, which has generated much debate about its suitability to the region.
Chapter 2
Writing Contemporary Indigenous Literature: Luis De Lión, Gaspar Pedro González and the Foundation of a Maya Cultural Project

Many studies have been carried out on the development of Indigenous movements in Guatemala, but very little attention has been paid to the literary work of contemporary Indigenous writers. The work of Indigenous writers in Guatemala in the last decade captures an Indigenousness that is at odds with earlier portrayals of a one-dimensional indio. For these writers, Indigenousness is articulated by the socio-political and economic forces that have shaped the country and is not simply a fixed, essentialist notion of racial identity. What is more, these writers are committed to providing their own version of Indigenous Guatemalan identity while playing with existing notions of Indigenousness, as articulated from a space within Guatemala’s neoliberal cultural project.

In this chapter, I examine the questioning and revision of the ladino Indigenous myth as articulated from an Indigenous perspective in Luis de Lión’s novel El tiempo principia en Xibalbá (first written in 1972, published posthumously in 1985) and in Gaspar Pedro González’s La otra cara (1993). I use postcolonial theory to observe how the structures of power and knowledge are destabilized by the Maya intellectual as he re-articulates an Indigenous identity, revises Guatemalan history and sets forth a Maya socio-cultural, economic and political project that is more inclusive of Indigenous people in contemporary Guatemala. My focus is on the development of contemporary Indigenous writing in Guatemala for a number of reasons: first, it is a new phenomenon that is deeply grounded in the socio-political history of the country; second, it signals a key moment in the history of Guatemalan literature; third, it has a profound impact on Guatemala’s nation
project, its discourse and national narratives; and finally, it provides a testing ground for some assumptions of postcolonial theory as it relates to Latin America.

**Setting the Stage: Ethnic Performance and the Everyday in a Guatemalan Town**

Guatemala is a place full of contradictions. The country has one of the largest Indigenous populations in Latin America, but it is better known for its history of inequality and human rights abuses. Some estimate that the Indigenous population of present-day Guatemala constitutes 40 to 70 percent of the total population and it continues to grow. It is difficult to determine with precision the ethnic makeup of Guatemala given that most Indigenous people live in rural areas and, until very recently, Indigenous people have been largely underrepresented. Many towns in Guatemala are hubs for Indigenous people who come down from their villages or small rural communities to buy and sell, and to visit the municipal offices, pharmacies and health clinics. Some of these urban centres are also of great appeal to tourists as they offer picturesque settings with colonial buildings and a cross-section of the Indigenous people from the outlying areas.

The town of Chichicastenango is such a town. This commercial hub known affectionately as ‘Chichi’ bustles with activity on market days and during religious observances. According to the *Anales de los Cakchiqueles*, Kakchiquel rule was established in the area and held for a number of years with the collaboration of the K’iche’s (Brinton

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1 Narciso Cojtí Macario, a Kakchiquel linguist and spiritual guide, estimates that the Indigenous population oscillates between "65% and 70% over 30% of the mestizo population" (my translation, "Comentarios" 11), while the Instituto Nacional de Estadística reports that the official number is 43%. These figures vary since they often represent the interests of Maya groups, government officials, foreign investors, non-profit agencies, and human rights organizations, among others. In *Configuración del pensamiento político del pueblo maya* Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil notes that the manipulation of census information forms part of a larger project of the Guatemalan *ladino* state, which he qualifies as colonial: “En la sociedad colonial Guatemalteca, los Censos Oficiales de Población no son actividades políticamente neutrales sino operaciones sesgados para concretar la politica del colonialismo ladino: eliminar al indígena” (92).
Later, in the sixteenth century, Chichicastenango became an important religious centre for missionaries; it was here, in the convent of the Church of Santo Tomás, that Father Francisco Ximénez first discovered the manuscript of the *Pop Wuj* some time between 1701 and 1703. The Church of Santo Tomás was built on the platform of a pre-Hispanic Maya temple, and it is believed that the twenty steps leading up to the church entrance are actually remnants of the Maya temple. This is significant in that the separate Maya and Catholic physical structures support a third structure that cannot stand alone: a Maya-K’iche’ Catholic Church.

Inside the church, columns, walls, paintings and wooden saints are blackened with soot from the burning of *copal*. Members of the congregation light small candles, sprinkle flower petals and *aguardiente*, ask for favours and give thanks to the saints. These wooden saints are cared for by *cofradías*, groups of men in charge of their dress and preservation. *Cofradías* are also charged with collecting offerings for their patron saint and organizing annual processions. In the town square, tour guides, craftspeople and vendors sell souvenirs and offer detailed explanations of the Church of Santo Tomás and its mysteries.

Like in many regions of Guatemala, tourism plays a key role in the survival of Maya-K’iche’ Catholicism in Chichicastenango. According to Infopress’ *Servicio de Información Municipal*, more than 45% of the population is Evangelical in the municipality of Santo Tomás de Chichicastenango. This is due, in part, to the influx of fundamentalist Christian groups into the country in the past three decades. These religious groups have attracted a significant number of former Catholic followers all over Guatemala, in urban and rural areas

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2 The *Pop Wuj* is the story of the K’iche’ people. It narrates the mythical creation of the world and the genealogy of the rulers of the K’iche’ kingdom. See Carlos Guzmán Böeckler’s prologue to Adrián Chávez’ translation *Pop Wuj. El libro del tiempo*. 
alike, and have contributed to the complex makeup of Indigenous and ladino identities. It is not surprising then that, in Chichicastenango, the sounds of an Evangelical choir belonging to one of the twelve different denominations in the region reach Pascual Abaj, a Maya shrine, where Maya rituals take place and the architectonic hybridity of the Church of Santo Tomás confirms the syncretic cosmology of the present-day K’iche’. But more than walls and columns, it is the constant movement of patrons, craftspeople, tourists and cofrades in, out and around the church that constitutes an active site of negotiated identity. Embedded in the foundation of this third hybrid structure, and key to its survival, are the invisible socio-economic interactions of the congregation, the tourists, other Indigenous groups, religious institutions, and Guatemalan society at large, to name a few.

Chichicastenango caters indiscriminately to local and international tourists. In the town square Indigenous guides in traditional K’iche’ garb who speak Spanish, English, French or Italian offer to take the tourist to an ‘authentic’ Maya ceremony complete with chants, animal sacrifices, food offerings, and copal. After agreeing on the guide’s fee, the unsuspecting tourist will hike up to Pascual Abaj to find a shrine to the Maya god Huyup Tak’ah, where a shaman mutters in a guttural language, sprinkles Indita rum and adjusts his faja, a colourful handwoven belt traditionally worn by Maya men and women, as the guide lowers her voice and offers a running commentary on the symbolic significance of each aspect of the ceremony. But rather than provide a glance into an ‘authentic’ Maya experience atop Pascual Abaj, the guide and the shaman orchestrate a performance of a carefully selected Mayanness, one that little resembles the experiences of present-day Maya people.

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3 Mario Roberto Morales, in *La articulación de las diferencias o el síndrome de Maximón*, draws attention to this phenomenon: the popularity of Evangelism amongst former members of the Catholic congregation in Santiago de Atitlán left the cofradía of Maximón nearly bankrupt. To subsist, the cofradía quickly adapted and it now relies on tourist traffic as a primary source of revenue (32-33).
people. The selective voyeurism of the tourist fails to notice that the performance and the elements that make its staging possible—cell phone ring tones, replica wristwatches, t-shirts with American sports-team logos, a partnership in currency exchange—tell a narrative that is closer to the reality of Indigenous people that live in and around the town of Chichicastenango. The tourist need not have climbed up Pascual Abaj to observe the complexity of Indigenous identity in contemporary Guatemala. Back in the town square, the multilingual Indigenous guides, the craftspeople and the food vendors that gather on market days, must continually devise strategies for their day-to-day survival. This results in an informal economy that relies on the constant re-invention and performance of an ethnic identity: Maya women in colorful handmade *cortes* and *guipiles*, for example, sell factory-made textiles in the market by adapting an ethnic performance for each buyer. For the tourist, the seller legitimates the Mayanness of the textile by her presence alone; for local women, on the other hand, the seller intimates on the textiles’ declining quality and rising prices, thus establishing a rapport based on the shared experience of women’s traditional roles.

The performance of the Maya guide and shaman on a Maya-shrine backdrop with an Evangelical soundtrack, and the goings-on around the Church of Santo Tomás with its unique character consisting of superimposed sacred buildings, are a good illustration of the articulation of Indigenous identity in present-day Guatemala. There are few narratives that tell of a heterogeneous Maya identity as articulated under specific economic, social, political and cultural conditions as it occurs in Chichicastenango. What predominate are national narratives that assign concrete roles to the Maya in order to logically organize the nation and its narratives, which rely on an essentialist Maya identity politics for the political mobilization of Indigenous groups. In official narratives, Indigenousness is a homogenous
concept that may be modified to best represent a certain Guatemalanness. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Indigenous identity in Guatemala has been traditionally defined from a mestizo perspective and not an Indigenous one, given the hegemonic mestizo Christian tradition of imagining the Guatemalan nation since the country’s independence from Spain late in the nineteenth century. These accounts seldom took into consideration the everyday acts of Maya people in Chichicastenango, for example, and focused more on stereotypes of the Indigenous.

Early in the twentieth century there were many attempts to write about the role of the indio in the nation project. This was done from a socio-political and literary perspective that explained the origins of the nation, its people and its cultural production in terms of a mythical ancestry. At other times, an Indigenista initiative took over and spoke of a melancholic, over-exploited and ignorant, but noble, indio, much reminiscent of the chronicles of Franciscan fathers who sought to redeem indio souls and bring them closer to God.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the voice of the Indigenous is channeled in the writing of modernist thinkers such as Miguel Angel Asturias and Mario Monteforte Toledo. 4 These writers sought to represent the Indigenous in Guatemala by creating an Indigenous literary subject through language, themes and myths. The inclusion of the Indigenous in literary texts of the time was restricted to a literary presence, however. The literary Indigenous subject was not an agent of change for living Indigenous people. Instead, he was an ideal that transmitted a story of mythical proportions to help further define and unify the Guatemalan nation. After all, modern thinkers participated very actively in the nation-building project and their work often carried a political message that sought to

4 Well-known examples of this are Asturias’ *Hombres de maíz* (1949) and *Mulata de tal* (1963); and Monteforte Toledo’s *Entre la piedra y la cruz* (1948).
construct a unified country coupled with societal excellence. From the 1930s through to the early 1970s, the most significant examination of manifestations of Maya identitary negotiation was done by North American anthropologists. Their work remained a matter of scientific inquiry for many years but eventually led to the discussion of ethnic relations in Guatemala and opened up the debate on representation.

The Maya movement, for its part, has relied heavily on a discourse that essentializes Maya identity, tracing its origins back to a pre-Hispanic past, while “the vast majority of Maya peoples root their identity in geographical place and in known genealogical continuities” (Fischer 84). Mayanists promote a return to a Maya ideological, political, linguistic and cultural essence whose course was disturbed by a series of historical events such as colonialism, wars and neoliberalism. Mario Roberto Morales indicates that the work of North American anthropologists has helped forge a Maya essence through the re-invention of Maya traditions, culture, and religiosity (La articulación 41). This essentialism, however, results in the re-production of a ladino-indio binarism and a conceptualization of Indigenous identity as homogenous and static, built on a model of monolithic Mayanness that ignores the fluidity of ethnic boundaries.

Today, Indigenous scholars, activists and supporters are engaged in a debate on ethnicity, representation and identity, for which they offer alternative theories and approaches to the question of ethnicity in Guatemala. Even so, Indigenousness in present-day ladino Guatemala continues as a homogenous idea, too often paired with ladinidad to produce a binarism that helps cement official and unofficial notions of Guatemalanness.

5 For Mario Roberto Morales, North American anthropologists writing as early as the 1930s laid the bases for a politics of identity in Guatemala: “ellos dejaron asentados algunos criterios que no solo determinaron la política gubernamental hacia los grupos indígenas, sino que configuraron criterios de identificación étnica y cultural entre los ladinos” (La articulación 47). For a compiled list of North American Anthropologists writing about Guatemala in the fifties and sixties, see Pierre L. van den Berghe’s “Ethnic Membership and Cultural Change in Guatemala” (515 n2).
Activists, government officials and academics, among others, draw upon this perception time and time again to advance their cultural and political agendas. They fail to account, however, for the differences and contradictions that emerge in trying to consolidate Indigenous and ladino identities, which are in reality ethnically and culturally unique, autonomous units.

The architectonic uniqueness of the Church of Santo Tomás, the coexistence of various religious factions in Chichicastenango, the goings-on in the town plaza, and the tourism industry are some of the elements that contradict the constraints placed by official and unofficial narratives of what constitutes Indigenousness in Guatemala. Instead, a heterogeneous and somewhat fragmented identitary narrative can be noted in the everyday acts of the K’iche’ people that mill around Chichicastenango. Mayas today must constantly negotiate their identity as peasants, symbolic bearers of national culture, political actors, consumers and marginalized others in order to survive the economic and socio-political reforms that shape Guatemala as it enters the global marketplace. In Chichicastenango, Maya men and women rely on the region’s tourism and in order to be successful they must perform their Indigenousness much like the tour guide, the shaman or the textile vendor.

In *La articulación de las diferencias ó el síndrome de Maximón*, Mario Roberto Morales takes a closer look at the tourism industry and the free market in Guatemala to help explain the articulation of contemporary Indigenous identity. For Morales, Indigenous culture, history, and tradition are packaged for material and ideological consumption; material and symbolic goods are constantly produced and sold by Indigenous communities in a market economy at global and national levels (67). What is more, Maya identity, as negotiated in the political and social spheres, cannot be disengaged from those processes that contribute to the creation and staging of Maya history, tradition and identity as
financed by international aid (67-68). While Morales' argument raises a number of questions and stirs much controversy, its focus on the market as an important variable in the production of Maya identity in present-day Guatemala is relevant: now, more than ever before, the country is looking to a neoliberal model that integrates Indigenous groups as productive citizens.

**A Case of Postcoloniality: The Decolonization of Maya Subjectivity in Guatemala**

Critics question the relevance of postcolonial studies for Latin America, pointing out that the concept refers specifically to the colonial experiences of Asia and Africa that resulted from the French and British imperialism of the nineteenth century. In his polemic essay, “Colonialism and Postcolonialism as (Latin) American Mirages”, Jorge Klor de Alva argues that the *mestizo* sectors in Latin America were never really colonized, which meant that wars of independence were not anti-colonial struggles because they were not led by marginal populations and thus the region never reached a condition of postcoloniality (3-4). In “The Postcolonization of the (Latin) American Experience: a Reconsideration of ‘Colonialism,’ ‘Postcolonialism,’ and ‘Mestizaje’”, a revised version of his first essay, Klor de Alva claims that the heterogeneity of Latin America’s nations and people, in conjunction with very different colonial experiences that predate those of India or South Africa, further show the inadequacy of postcolonialism in relation to Latin America (248). Nelly Richard, for her part, views postcolonialism as Eurocentric and imperialistic when utilized by North American scholars to study the region (467-468). Also central to the argument of the inapplicability of postcolonial studies in Latin America are its temporal and geographical aspects. Opponents circumscribe postcolonial studies to the socio-political and historical conditions of British and French colonialism in Africa and Asia. The debate is further complicated by the ‘post’ in
postcolonial as it carries both temporal and ideological connotations that complicate its use (Loomba 12).

Following Klor de Alva’s and Richard’s reasoning concerning the inapplicability of postcolonial theory to Latin America results in the homogenization of the Indian and South African colonial experiences since the possibility of more than one type of colonialism is not considered. What is more, under this rubric the heterogeneity of Asia or Africa and the specific conditions under which they emerged as postcolonial are altogether omitted. Fernando Coronil points out that Alva’s critique ignores the similarities between Latin America’s pre- and post-independence realities and those of the South Asian or African postcolonial experiences “which also involved the preservation of élite privilege and the reproduction of internal inequalities” (230). For this reason, Peter Hulme argues, it is necessary to include other regions, for “to deny that one [type of colonialism] was colonialism at all takes away the ground that would facilitate understanding of the particular differences” (119). Hulme also suggests that “‘postcolonial’ is (or should be) a descriptive, not an evaluative, term” insofar as it refers to a “process of disengagement from the whole colonial syndrome, which takes many forms and is probably inescapable for those whose worlds have been marked by that set of phenomena” (his emphasis, 120). In fact, the exclusion of Latin America on the basis of temporal, ideological and geographical difference contributes to a model of colonialism that is monolithic and subordinates Latin America’s own cultural tradition; in other words, as Fernando de Toro argues, accepting such a model recreates a dominant discourse that relegates Latin America to “a permanently marginalized position, since, whether we like it or not, Latin America makes up part of the West.”

Loomba, for her part, suggests using a more flexible definition of postcolonialism in order to ease the geographical and historical constraints of traditional notions of the concept and
include other peoples who have undergone a similar experience: “it is more helpful to think of postcolonialism not just as coming literally after colonialism and signifying its demise, but more flexibly as the contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism” (16).

I would like to suggest that to examine contemporary Indigenous literature in present-day Guatemala a postcolonial framework is necessary due to Guatemala’s long history of colonialism, its legacy of internal colonialism, its changing political and cultural climates, and a rapidly emerging Maya movement. For these reasons I view Guatemala’s present condition as an ideal case study of postcoloniality in Latin America at a time when Indigenous people are re-articulating their ethnic identity through a process of recovery, contestation and re-definition.

Traditionally, Maya people in Guatemala have had limited access to the state’s programs and to the decision-making process in general. According to Deborah Yashar in “Contesting Citizenship: Indigenous Movements and Democracy in Latin America,” neoliberal reforms of recent years have done little to restore whatever benefits the Maya population gained in the period known as Guatemala’s Ten Years of Spring (1944-1954). During this period, a socialist government promoted the integration of the Guatemalan peasantry by instating land reforms, agricultural subsidies and enabling, in general, “indigenous communities to strengthen and (re)construct local public spaces for community authority structures and customary law” (Yashar, “Contesting Citizenship” 33). With the counterrevolution of 1954 came repressive measures and the reversal of government reforms that deeply affected the Indigenous population as their recent gains were completely reversed (Yashar, “Contesting Citizenship” 34).
According to Duncan Green, in the 1980s and 1990s, as Latin America embraced economic liberalization and introduced stabilization and structural adjustment programs, marginalized groups’ access to state programs and resources was further limited and soon they were faced with increasing poverty, inequality and discrimination (“Latin America: Neoliberal Failure and the Search for Alternatives” 117). Even after the Peace Accords of 1996 and a shift towards neoliberalism with a focus on multiculturalism, marginalized groups continued to be negatively affected by previous and ongoing economic and social reforms.

Yashar points out that while Indigenous participation and visibility in the government has risen over the past two decades, the material concerns of Indigenous people—for example, land reform, social and health programs and infrastructure—have not been adequately addressed by recent governments with a neoliberal agenda (“Contesting Citizenship” 33-34). David Hale puts forth the concept of the “indio permitido” to explain this phenomenon in Guatemala and Bolivia, countries in which state ideology sets out to integrate marginalized groups (17). The “indio permitido,” argues Hale, is the result of a neoliberal cultural project that integrates Indigenous people into the nation project on the condition that they “govern themselves in accordance with the logic of globalized capitalism” (17). As Hale points out, this presents a number of problems because the participation and the autonomy of Indigenous people is delimited by the state and by the market: only some Indigenous actors have access to benefits while others are left out, and while certain rights are respected, there exists an unspoken agreement to not address other rights and concerns (17-18). For example, in recent years the government post of Minister of Sports and Culture has been held by a Maya, and it “has become known as the ‘Indian’ cabinet post” (Hale 18). While this is a significant step forward for the Maya movement, it has had
little or no effect on the lives of Indigenous people whose more pressing concerns have to do with land and resources. These concerns remain largely unaddressed since judgment in favour of Indigenous land rights or territorial autonomy would be in conflict with the interests of the neoliberal institutions, while judgment against those rights would be at odds with the nation’s multicultural agenda that has garnered much international interest and support.

Maya activists in Guatemala view the present situation of their people and the events leading up to it, namely Guatemala’s violent civil war that claimed the lives of more than 100,000 Mayas, as the continuation of a colonial past. Demetrio Cojtí explains the conditions of Maya people in terms of an ‘internal colonialism,’ recalling the concept developed in the late 1960s that tried to explain state policies and the subjugation of Indigenous communities in Mexico (Stavenhagen 1965, González Casanova 1965). He arrives at a definition of ‘internal colonialism’ that takes into consideration economic, political, cultural and ideological factors that characterize a power imbalance between a privileged elite and a subaltern group (25). Arturo Arias agrees that it is possible to speak of the Maya as postcolonial subjects “[i]f anthropological concepts of the 1960s were to be applied, when Mayas were said to be suffering from a state of ‘internal colonialism’ from the hegemonic Ladino community” (“The Maya Movement” 259). The notion of internal colonialism is thus useful in understanding how Indigenous people understand their present condition and how the government, the media, and the Guatemalan population in general view this traditionally marginalized group. Accordingly, the notion of ‘decolonization’ is at

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6 According to the report of the Commission for Historical Clarification, *Guatemala: Memory of Silence*: “The Army’s perception of Mayan communities as natural allies of the guerrillas contributed to increasing and aggravating the human rights violations perpetrated against them, demonstrating an aggressive racist component of extreme cruelty that led to the extermination en masse, of defenceless Mayan communities purportedly linked to the guerrillas—including children, women and the elderly—through methods whose cruelty has outraged the moral conscience of the civilised world” (“Conclusions,” par.85).
the heart of the Maya movement where it fuels the socio-political struggle of Maya people and provides a theoretical framework for Maya intellectuals.

A good example of the Maya movement’s discursive use of ‘internal colonialism’ is the gold mining debate that has been going on since 2004 in Guatemala. In the department of San Marcos, Maya groups have organized protests and voiced their demands over mining practices that have serious environmental, economic, health and land tenure ramifications. In response, government authorities have pointed to external pressures and the opportunity for market growth, giving Montana Exportadora de Guatemala approval to undertake several mining projects. While Guatemala's Constitutional Court (CC) recognizes the right of Indigenous communities to hold public consultations, in 2007 the CC ruled in favour of Montana, arguing that the results of the community consultations held in 2005 were legal but not binding (Wetherborn). As a result of the state’s conflicting position and of the positive light in which mining is presented by major media outlets, as well as a long-existing discourse on the backwardness of the *indio*, many have come to view the opposition of Mayas to Montana’s mining projects as a hindrance to Guatemala’s economic development. Maya activists, NGOs, and supporters, for their part, draw a parallel between their ongoing struggle and Spanish colonization of the region: “Hemos comprobado que, al igual que la invasión española y con la introducción del cultivo del café, ahora está en marcha un tercer gran despojo contra nuestras comunidades indígenas y campesinas” (“Declaración del primer encuentro nacional de comunidades en defensa del territorio y la madre naturaleza,” par. 2).

The motivation of the Maya movement in Guatemala, as well as the identification of neoliberalism as a present-day type of colonialism, centers on an Indigenous Maya identity that seeks to destabilize traditional structures of power and knowledge. At the same time,
the discursive strategies employed to construct a subordinate Other in Latin America and more specifically in Guatemala are the legacy of a colonial past and the product of a European expansionist project. While Guatemala currently follows a neoliberal model of multicultural economic and social integration, its neutralizing effects reproduce a new subordinate Other that is condemned for its antagonism and un-productivity. As Hale explains, “[g]overnance now takes place instead through the distinction—to echo a World Bank dictum—between good ethnicity, which builds social capital, and ‘dysfunctional’ ethnicity, which incites conflict” (Hale 17). This new formulation strongly echoes former colonial and post-independence attitudes toward Indigenous people and Maya intellectuals are quick to identify the semblance. As a result, the combined factors that constantly shape Indigenous identity in Guatemala—neoliberal reforms, the market, globalization, ethnicity, gender, tourism, etc.—and a colonial past with deep roots in the nation’s collective memory, make necessary the use of a postcolonial theoretical framework in the study of Indigenous culture, tradition and history.

Though it is difficult to speak of postcoloniality and postcolonial theory in relation to Latin America as there has been much debate surrounding its applicability to any one specific socio-political, economic and/or cultural reality of the region, we cannot deny the value of these concepts in trying to understand the relations of power at work in the construction of subjects and nations during the period of transition from colonial dominance to independence in present-day Guatemala. As I showed in the previous chapter, in Guatemala, independence from Spain marked a transfer of power from imperial dominance to a criollo governance that continued to perpetuate colonial relations. This involved the subordination of Indigenous people to guarantee cheap labour, access to land and a seemingly endless supply of natural resources. In addition, present-day Guatemala has
adopted a neoliberal economic model that has done little to relieve the conditions of poverty and inequality that have affected the lives of Indigenous people for many years.

**Contemporary Indigenous Literature in Guatemala**

I begin this section by briefly discussing the salient features of Indigenous literature in Guatemala and Luis de Lión’s and Gaspar Pedro González’s entry into the literary establishment as Indigenous writers who are well aware of the cultural, political and social impact of their work as a tool for the articulation of an ethnic identity. I then examine the manner in which these two writers utilize their cultural and socio-political standing to advance the agenda of a Maya cultural project that can thrive alongside a more inclusive *ladino* neoliberal cultural project. As I will show, de Lión offers an alternate version of Indigenousness and debunks former conceptions of the *indio*, while González introduces a new Maya subject who adopts the tools of the dominant *ladino* culture to reproduce and record a Mayanness that can withstand the test of Guatemala’s changing cultural, economic, social and political realities.

At present Indigenous literature in Guatemala is in its formative years and its recognition and induction into the literary and critical establishment is recent. As a result, it is very difficult to classify or categorize a contemporary Indigenous literature. Classification might prove ineffective because there are more than sixteen Indigenous groups in Guatemala, each with its own language(s), customs, history and economic and socio-political conditions, factors that are a testament to the heterogeneity of Indigenous groups in the region. Nevertheless there are some distinguishing features and common themes that help us to understand the development of this literature as part of a larger socio-cultural
project that looks to rewrite Indigenousness and guarantee the continuance of Maya oral tradition and culture.

One of the salient characteristics of recent Indigenous literature in Guatemala is the predominance of poetry. The work of Indigenous authors consists primarily of poetry, as well as some short story and prose. In her doctoral dissertation *The Postcolonial Mayan Scribe: Contemporary Indigenous Writers of Guatemala*, Gail R. Ament suggests that poetry is a preferred literary form among Indigenous writers for a number of reasons: it is considered a more elevated form; it has long been used as a form of social commentary; it is more easily disseminated; and finally, it challenges both the canon and Maya tradition (22-25). I would add that the preference of poetry for its prestige is a tactical manoeuvre for Indigenous writers in particular, as the genre denotes knowledge of and deference to the literary canon, which in turn may secure the writer’s induction. Other critics suggest that the oral tradition of Maya cultures accounts for this predilection amongst Indigenous writers. This is a result of identifying the oral histories of the Maya with a lyricism, content and form that more closely resemble those of Western traditions of poetry. For Virsa Valenzuela, Indigenous poetry is a natural step in the development of an Indigenous literature since poetry is a ‘primary form’ of language development (“Literatura indígena”). As Ament suggests, ease of dissemination and the socio-political commitment of the writer

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7 Here Ament cites John Beverley and Marc Zimmerman: “[p]rose was the main language of Liberal/Conservative polemics, of policy and policy debate, of official ideology and ideological struggle; poetry tended to be reserved to social commentary and personal experience—a situation that still persists” (145).

8 Ament introduces another layer to the question of contestation. Not only do Indigenous poets subvert traditional literary forms and themes, but according to the Maya academic Manuel de Jesús Salazar Tetzagüic, these writers challenge Maya traditions and values: “[e]xistía una contradicción temática entre la narrativa tradicional y la poesía actual. Por un lado, la narrativa preservaba la tradición, la mantenía viva, basada en la organización familiar sólida. Por otro lado, las creaciones nuevas (poesía y teatro) cuestionaban la situación, la interpretaban y la sugerían... Ante todo era un situación [síc] de generaciones” (29).
play an important part in the preference for poetic forms over prose. I would like to add that as poetry effectively disseminates a message or social commentary thanks to its ease of publication and readability, it also helps rewrite and preserve Maya history and tradition through the deployment of the written word—in true Western fashion—as the ultimate cultural weapon for the creation of what may be called, in Ángel Rama’s terms, a “Maya lettered city.” This, of course, also holds true for prose, as I will show with work of de Lión and González.

Another important aspect of Indigenous literature in Guatemala is language and the key considerations that the Indigenous writer must weigh in publishing his or her work. Indigenous writers typically publish their works as bilingual editions with the text in the author’s mother tongue appearing alongside a Spanish translation. Seldom will the text appear in the writer’s mother tongue alone. This is due largely to an almost non-existent Indigenous literate public in Guatemala. The _Informe sobre desarrollo humano 2005_ indicates that nearly half of the Indigenous population in Guatemala is illiterate (Programa de Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo 158). What is more, access to literary works is unlikely among those Indigenous people who are literate due to the country’s ever-widening poverty gap and racial disparity. Since Indigenous writers and Indigenous readers in Guatemala constitute a minority, most of their work is read by _ladino_ and international audiences. Here there is a disconnect in the literary production of Indigenous writers: while the major themes and motifs present in their work possess a strong commitment to (re)presenting the Indigenous experience from the vantage point of the Indigenous person himself, their work is almost exclusively written for a Spanish-reading public and it hardly reaches the majority of Indigenous people in Guatemala. This disconnect is the result of three main factors: the rise of a Maya intellectual elite with a western academic formation,
the demands of the Guatemalan literary establishment and reading public respectively, and the present socio-political situation faced by the general Indigenous population.

The academic formation of Indigenous writers began with the literacy campaigns of the 1950s of Evangelical missionaries, a time when many Mayas learned Spanish and organized themselves to drive what Shelton Davis calls a "sociological awakening' of the Guatemalan Indian population" (16). According to Edward F. Fischer, the Church "acted to empower a progressive segment of the Maya population to pursue policies of their own design" and with the help of parish priests young Mayas travelled to the capital or North America to continue their studies (Cultural Logics 92). The most prominent Indigenous thinkers in Guatemala received their ideological formation in this way; their work was greatly influenced by the West and they voiced their plight and presented their agendas to a largely Spanish-speaking audience.

In the 1990s, as all eyes turned to Guatemala with the publication of Rigoberta Menchú’s testimonio and her receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize, local and international interest in the situation of Indigenous people was renewed. This was a time like no other for Indigenous intellectuals to come into the limelight to make their presence known and gain support for their plight. Today, however, the Indigenous population remains largely illiterate and at the margins, although the efforts of the Indigenous intellectual elite to advance policies of their own design are effecting some change. For this, Maya intellectuals must possess a certain cultural fluency to successfully infiltrate the system. This is equivalent to a bi- or, in some cases, a multi-culturalism that denotes their ability to function effectively and

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9 As I previously mentioned, the counterrevolutionary government of 1954 almost completely obliterated the former administration’s integration policies and with this eliminated all literacy programs. Although some literacy programs were reinstated in later years, abject poverty, corruption and a general indifference toward the rural areas of the country have left many Indigenous people without proper access to education. The work of Evangelical missionaries was very significant, as Indigenous catechists became community leaders and activists and continued to work closely with Indigenous people.
move with ease between two seemingly distinct cultural spaces. This is also key in understanding the disconnect I identified between the Indigenous writer, his literary production and his target audience.

In “La literatura maya. Tres perspectivas: El editor” Fernando Peñalosa, a Chicano academic, founder and former editor of Yax Te’ Books—a small publishing house that specializes in the work of Maya writers based in Cleveland, Ohio—offers a unique perspective as an editor and publisher of Indigenous literature based outside Guatemala. Peñalosa’s outlook points to the market concerns of publishers, but more importantly it highlights the need of Indigenous authors to operate within the literary and academic establishment as bi-cultural, bilingual men and women who write with an explicit Indigenous focus in mind. For Peñalosa, the publication of Indigenous texts as bilingual editions is of utmost importance because they guarantee the success of the publication: “Algunos editores todavía no hacen esto, y es menos la utilidad de estos libros o folletos” (my emphasis, “La literatura maya”). The ‘utility’ of these books is directly related to the question of an actual market for Indigenous literature because, according to Peñalosa, there are very few Indigenous people who actually read books, let alone purchase them in their own language: “El problema es que, aparte de algunos intelectuales, pocos mayas tienen la costumbre de leer, ni mucho menos de comprar libros. . . . . Es triste que gran parte de las ediciones de literatura maya la compren ladinos y extranjeros.” Peñalosa’s statement points to the obstacles too often faced by publishers of Indigenous literature and Indigenous writers: there is very little demand for this kind of literature and Indigenous writers need to be able to write in Spanish and for a Spanish-speaking public in order to sell.

One particular area of interest to Peñalosa is the development of written Indigenous languages through the publication of bilingual editions. He introduces his vision when he
highlights three reasons for producing bilingual editions: (1) to show the written form—
graham, diction, alphabet, etc.—of Indigenous languages and dispel the myth that
Indigenous languages are dialects; (2) to promote the use of written Indigenous languages
and incite other Mayas to become authors; and (3) to promote the learning of Indigenous
languages ("La literatura maya"). Peñalosa’s justification for bilingual editions inadvertently
points to the need for a written language for the success of an Indigenous project. Many
contemporary Indigenous writers are concerned first of all with denouncing and rewriting an
Indigenous past, present and future history of Indigenous people; with this concern comes
an interest in promoting Indigenous culture and guaranteeing its survival in a world
primarily operated by Spanish-speaking ladinos. However, for Maya intellectuals to be
recognized as a culturally and politically relevant group in the socio-cultural and political
arena of a former Spanish colony and a now westernized ladino Guatemala, they must
certify their agency through the successful redeployment of those discursive tools used by
the hegemonic power.

Like the Maya tour guide or the textile vendor in Chichicastenango, Indigenous
writers must perform their ethnicity in order to successfully participate in Guatemala’s
cultural establishment. The language of the publication, the reading public, the literary
establishment and the subject matter all figure into this performance. As a result, we will
find that, more often than not, editions of Indigenous literary works include a translation
into Spanish on the text’s facing pages. While this convention is very telling of the situation
of the Indigenous writer who must write in Spanish in order for his work to be recognized
by the literary establishment, issues of representation, agency, market competence and
active participation in the nation project cannot be ignored. The decisions that Indigenous
writers make with regard to the publication of their work have wider implications as they
denote a departure from Maya oral tradition, a contestation of the canon, and a reformulation of Mayanness. Moreover, it marks the entry of Indigenous people into Guatemala’s cultural establishment as determined by Indigenous writers themselves, as participants and not subjects of narratives on Indigenousness.

Another distinguishing feature of contemporary Indigenous literature in Guatemala, and perhaps the most important, is the re-articulation of Indigenousness from an Indigenous positioning within Guatemala’s dominant culture. I define this Indigenous positioning as the Maya writer’s self-situating within the literary institution, the academy, the government, and/or the cultural scene. In addition to this positioning, there is an underlying testimonial narrative that I believe is a device used to validate the voice of the author as an agent of Indigenous representation. With the truth-effect this testimonial device offers, former versions of Indigenousness are debunked and new ones are set forth. Here I refer to John Beverley’s concept of truth-effect in his study of *testimonio*. For Beverley, *testimonio* is not a veritable historical account nor a reproduction of reality; rather *testimonio* gives a feeling of having experienced that reality (*Against Literature* 82). With the re-articulation of Indigenous identity comes the negation of a *ladino* version of Indigenousness, a negation that may manifest itself implicitly or explicitly in the text, and the rewriting of a narrative of Guatemalan Indigenousness.

The recent emergence of Indigenous literature in Guatemala cannot be overlooked, since at least half of the population is Indigenous and, though their participation in the dominant culture has been limited, their presence is being felt now more than ever. Moreover, the incursion of Indigenous intellectuals into the cultural, social and political arena is changing the way in which Guatemalans view themselves. Indigenousness is no longer just of mythical importance for the birth of the nation or an addition to promotional
brochures;\textsuperscript{10} new Indigenous literature is reshaping the Guatemalan nation and the identity of those who inhabit it. In other words, as Indigenous authors dismantle fixed notions of identity and culture and renegotiate Indigenousness on their own terms, they ultimately rearticulate the notion of Guatemalanness. As Homi Bhabha explains in \textit{The Location of Culture}, what takes place is a reconstitution of cultural, social and political identity in an active site of negotiation: "It is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of \textit{nationness}, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated" (his emphasis, 2). Moreover, in writing as Indigenous men and women, these writers perform in the medium that marks their difference and thus further articulate their project. For Bhabha, cultural differences are performed in the in-between spaces: "Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively. . . . The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation" (2).

Maya writers negate \textit{ladino} versions of Indigenousness, which may be implicit or explicit in the text, by rewriting narratives that deal with notions of Indigenousness in Guatemala. In other words, their re-appropriation of Indigenousness and its consequent redeployment as a de-centered concept that comes from within, contests previous identitary constructs that were imposed on the Indigenous as an ethnically different, marginal \textit{other}. These writer-activists have claimed their part in the Guatemalan imaginary, the literary establishment,

\textsuperscript{10} An example of this is the 2007 Programa Nacional de Competitividad’s (PRONACOM) campaign to promote trade in Guatemala. Its leading campaign image, entitled “Naciste con una marca mundial,” features a map of the country—which includes Belize as part of the national territory—airbrushed on a right hand, palm-up, with Indigenous-textile motifs all around the map’s borders. Below the image’s title appears the campaign’s title \textit{Sos guatemalteco, sé competitivo}. This use of Indigenousness as an accent is not uncommon in Guatemala; it speaks to the conflicting inclusion/exclusion of Indigenousness as an identitary mark by and for dominant \textit{ladino} culture.
and the economic and political spheres, and have gained greater visibility for those Indigenous peoples at the margins.

**Luis de Lión, Gaspar Pedro González, Guatemala’s Spanish-Reading Public and the *Ladino* Literary Establishment**

Guatemala’s first Indigenous novel, de Lión’s *El tiempo*, was written entirely in Spanish. To date, there are no bilingual editions of the novel. When de Lión wrote his novel, he had a clearly-defined audience in mind. Mario Roberto Morales, de Lión’s good friend and colleague, explains that *El tiempo* was the product of a literary exercise: “En 1970, Luis de Lión y yo dispusimos hacer un experimento literario escribiendo una novela circular, sin principio ni fin. . . Luis dijo que quería escribir una historia que se desarrollara al revés, de adelante hacia atrás, para simbolizar lo que él percibía como una realidad involutiva” (“Un libro que se niega a morir”). Morales and de Lión submitted their finished works to the annual Juegos Florales de Quetzaltenango and Morales won the first prize in 1970. In 1971, de Lión was awarded second place for best Central American novel (“Un libro”).

It is clear that de Lión was interested in writing for a particular audience, namely his peers, who constituted a Spanish-reading public and the literary establishment. To this end, Francisco Morales Santos writes: “[de Lión,] un escritor venido del campo, como él, escribe una literatura que no será para los individuos sobre los cuales escribe... sino para quienes realmente la leen, que son los pequeños burgueses con los que se relaciona” (“Luis de Lión, poeta de la cotidianidad y de la tierra” 32). For de Lión, targeting such an audience was not without reason: writing a novel in Spanish was a testament to his *ladino* academic formation and it guaranteed exposure; writing about an Indigenous experience as an *indio* writer was a testament to his ability to represent the *indio* from a new perspective. But more
importantly, evident in the act of writing in Spanish is de Lión’s awareness of the socio-political impact of his work as an *indio* writer for a *ladino* reader. As an Indigenous writer, de Lión knew what it meant to write as an *indio*, about an *indio* experience, and in representation of an *indio* community. His work as an educator and scholar is further proof of his role as a Maya spokesperson. It is well known that de Lión was an activist; he was a rural schoolteacher who taught his students poetry and participated in the academic formation of “over fifty Indigenous students” (Gerardo Guinea Diez, “El hombre que regresó de Xibalbá”).

Some aspects of de Lión’s career strongly resonate with the work of other contemporary Indigenous authors and are very telling of his work as a committed Indigenous writer. De Lión lived in an era of extreme violence and oppression; his pedagogic activities were considered subversive and in May 1984 he disappeared and was never found. *El tiempo* was published posthumously in 1985 and has been republished three times since. De Lión’s commitment to an Indigenous project of nation-building and a revision of Indigenous identity is implicit in both his work and his exchanges with friends and colleagues. In a short editorial piece, Ana María Rodas writes that de Lión was known among his friends as “el indio” and was a very active member of his literary circle: “Hablab—pero todos lo hacían—para los hombres, o para algún interlocutor invisible a quien le explicaba rotundamente lo que pensaba sobre escritores, obras tendencias” (“El indio”). In the past two decades readers and academics have recognized the importance of de Lion in Guatemalan literature as a pioneer in the development of a body of Indigenous writing. *El tiempo principia en Xibalbá* signals a new direction in Guatemalan literary tradition in which Indigenous people became authors of their own story, whereas before they had been merely the subject matter.
Gaspar Pedro González’s approach to writing and publishing his work about Indigenousness is similar to de Lión’s. As I previously mentioned, to write for a *ladino* or a North American audience requires Indigenous authors to possess enough cultural fluency to perform well in both *ladino* and Maya worlds. On writing his first novel, *La otra cara*, in both Spanish and Q’anjob’al, the Indigenous writer Gaspar Pedro González affirms:

“Afortunadamente, manejo más o menos los dos idiomas. Yo he vivido en los dos mundos. Entonces no me fue muy difícil.” (“Entrevista”). In the interview González explains that he wrote the novel two decades before its first publication but due to the political unrest at the time, his lack of resources, and limited interest in Maya literature, it was not published until 1992 in a bilingual edition by the Ministerio de Cultura y Deportes. González explains that he wrote it in Q’anjob’al first but, once he became aware of the drawbacks of a Q’anjob’al-only publication, he translated it: “La escribí en q’anjob’al. Pensé la novela en q’anjob’al. Pero la iba traduciendo, capítulo por capítulo, al español. El q’anjob’al fue lo último que se metió en la computadora porque la mayor posibilidad de publicar la novela era en español” (“Entrevista”). Peñalosa’s outlook resonates with González’s last statement; having a Spanish publication is what ultimately matters. When he discusses the publication by Yax Te’ Books of a Q’anjob’al-only version of Gaspar Pedro González’s novel *La otra cara*, he points to the drawbacks of non-Spanish publications:

>tanto para el autor como para el editor y el pueblo maya q’anjob’al ha sido un logro cultural significativo, y un motivo de orgullo para todos. Pero ha sido un fracaso económico. Hemos obsequiado bastantes, pero hemos vendido pocos. ¿Por qué? Porque pocos q’anjob’ales leen su idioma. Es motivo de alegría para ellos saber que se ha editado una novela en su idioma, aunque muchos no pueden leerla. No nos arrepentimos de haber invertido nuestros recursos en este libro, que nos ha dado mucho prestigio pero pocos quetzales. (“La literatura maya. Tres perspectivas: el editor”)

Even though Peñalosa is very much in favour of the publication of Indigenous literature, as an editor and publisher he understands that for the success of González’s project it must
reach an audience, specifically a Spanish- or English-speaking one. Given the repute of González’s novel as one of a few known Indigenous novels in Guatemala,\(^\text{11}\) Yax Te’ gained much prestige when it published a monolingual, non-Spanish version of an Indigenous novel, but as Peñalosa indicates, there exists no market for this kind of literature. The second edition of *La otra cara* was sponsored by González himself and, like de Lion’s novel, it was a Spanish-only edition. This demonstrates González’s changing perception of the market response to his work and also his understanding of his commitment as an Indigenous writer who writes primarily for a *ladino* reader rather than an Indigenous one.

The most recent and most widely available edition of *La otra cara* was published by Yax Te’ Books and is a much more successful bilingual venture thanks to the interest of North American readers and scholars. González’s awareness of his reader and his own medium brings up the question of his authority as an Indigenous writer who writes about Indigenousness from an exclusive vantage point.

**De Lión and González as Socio-Cultural, Political Agents**

Luis de Lión was interested in an Indigenous project that ensured the participation of the Maya intellectual in the socio-political spheres of the country. His ideas of what constitutes an Indigenous literature, combined with his literary activities and his literacy efforts in rural Guatemala, point to a larger undertaking on his part. It is an Indigenous project that goes well beyond the interpellation of a *ladino* reader by an *indio* writer. De Lión’s commitment extended beyond the representation of Maya people to include their empowerment, as his work as a rural teacher shows. Writing a work of fiction for a literary

\(^{11}\) A number of critics, among them Robert Sitler, consider *La otra cara* to be the first Indigenous novel. González himself shares this view: “Ha habido escritos sobre los mayas por personas no mayas. Pero una novela de esta naturaleza, escrita en idioma maya, es, hasta yo sé, la primera” (“Entrevista ”).
prize, though at first glance it may appear to be nothing more than an artistic endeavour, once contextualized shows de Lión’s interest in correcting the historical record and confronting the ladino reader with an Indigenous version of Indigenousness. Writing in Spanish as a Maya author shows de Lión’s commitment to reaching that very audience.

As I remarked earlier, the intercession of Indigenous intellectuals into the hegemonic ladino culture occurs simultaneously with a political stance and the self-appointment of the Maya intellectual as an Indigenous spokesperson. This amounts to an identification with the spheres of power that results in their revalidation. What is more, it authenticates the position of a new intellectual elite that possesses the privilege to speak for the other Indigenous—the poor, illiterate and oppressed indio. While most Indigenous writers challenge traditional representations of Indigenousness in their literature and are actively involved in the politics of the country, they do so from the privileged stance of a Maya intellectual, a position that has generated much debate among scholars, political activists and the Maya population in general.

In Indigenous Movements and their Critics: Pan-Maya Activism in Guatemala, Kay B. Warren points out that Indigenous intellectuals are often criticized for their ideological agendas that fail to effect any change in the situation of living Indigenous peoples (40-1). Hale and, to some extent, Mario Roberto Morales warn of the dangers of entering into Guatemala’s neoliberal cultural project, primarily for its limiting effects and its potential to perpetuate hegemonic rule that relies on the marginalization of Indigenous people (Hale 21). However, I argue that this approach is necessary for the inception of a much larger project, that of an Indigenous nation, because, given Guatemala’s long history of civil war, discrimination and systematic violence, “[t]o occupy the space of the indio permitido may well be the most reasonable means at hand” (Hale 21).
For Arturo Arias, the increasing participation of Maya intellectuals in *ladino* Guatemala is a phenomenon best explained as an infiltration into the *ladino* political arena by Maya intellectuals; this phenomenon is understood by those Maya intellectuals themselves as “la conspiración dentro de la conspiración,” a tactic that permits Indigenous people to effect change and build a Maya nation within the existing *ladino* one (“The Maya Movement” 253). This phenomenon marks a shift from guerrilla mobilization to the politicization and organization of Indigenous people and movements in Latin America who, according to Yashar, “do not seek to overthrow the state but rather are looking to reform democracy” in order to counteract the effects of the failure of present-day states to implement successful models of democracy (“Democracy, Indigenous Movements and the Post-liberal Challenge in Latin America” 77). This outlook on the part of activists, scholars, and Maya people in general is expressed as a response to a legacy of colonialism that has left Indigenous people at the margins. What is most significant about this recent shift is the Indigenous intellectual’s keen awareness of the implications of self-positioning as a representative and agent of Maya people within the cultural institutions of the dominant *ladino* culture. As with the material concerns of their work and its publication, Indigenous writers perform their ethnicity in the presentation of their subject matter to effectively appeal to their *ladino* readership. In “Authoring Ethnicized Subjects: Rigoberta Menchú and the Performative Production of the Subaltern Self,” Arturo Arias explains that in Menchú’s discourse there is a performance of her Indigenousness and subalternity that produces a truth-effect that is vital to the effectiveness of her story so that her “struggle [is] available to others as an objective of and for action” (78). Similarly, de Lión and González reproduce

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12 Arias briefly looks at the case of Indigenous intellectuals who worked closely with the revolutionary movement and other organizations and who now hold government posts. This sentiment of “la conspiración dentro de la conspiración” was carried over from the revolutionary left to today’s Indigenous participation in the Guatemalan government.
a truth-effect in their stories of Maya people in order to authenticate their position as Maya spokespeople, rearticulate Indigenousness, and issue a call to action.

Luis de Lión’s greatest concern was a renewed representation of the indio as written by the indio himself, and with this, he raised the question of agency and representation. Upon reading some of Mario Roberto Morales’ early work in which he tried to “capture the Indigenous world,” de Lión suggested that writing about Indigenousness was a task better left to the Indigenous writer himself: “Mejor ocupate de tus ladinos y dejame los indios a mí” (“Un libro”). De Lión’s interest in writing for a ladino audience, about Indigenousness, and under a legitimizing Indigenous authorship all point to the question of the Indigenous writer’s positioning as a better authorized political actor and representative of Indigenous peoples in Guatemala. He was well aware of the significance of his role as a Maya writer writing about Indigenousness. For him, ethnicity played an important role in the articulation of a Guatemalan Indigenous identity: de Lión believed that the Indigenous writer could exercise socio-political agency to speak about Indigenousness, while the ladino writer only possessed aesthetic license to do so.

According to Morales, de Lión was primarily concerned with Miguel Ángel Asturias’ portrayal of Indigenousness: “por ser indígena, le preocupaba mucho Asturias y su versión de la indianidad guatemalteca. Fue Luis quien dijo que a Asturias había que ‘matarlo’ leyéndolo más, entendiéndolo profundamente, y aceptando que su aporte era, sobre todo, poético y literario y no social ni político” (“Matemos a Miguel Ángel Asturias” 854, n.2). Here we see how de Lión equates his position as an Indigenous writer to that of a socio-political activist. For him, Asturias’s ladinidad and his treatment of Indigenousness amounts to a poetic endeavour, while de Lión’s own indianidad amounts to a political one. De Lión’s efforts to rewrite Indigenousness as an indio points to a re-appropriation of a socio-political
discourse that has long been used by the ladino hegemonic power. What is more, the insistence that it must come from the indio himself reveals a keen interest in the issue of representation. It must be noted, nonetheless, that there exists a third element that suggests an ethno-political project that reaches beyond the limits of a strictly literary endeavour; de Lión writes for a ladino reading public in an attempt to rewrite Indigenousness and reinsert it into dominant culture.

Like de Lión, González understands his market, but more importantly, he understands his reader. He is also interested in providing an alternative version of Maya history and like de Lión, he feels he needs to revise previous (ladino) versions of Indigenousness, specifically that of Asturias. For him, Asturias provided a very limiting representation of the Maya as “his vision is a ladino vision of the Maya” (my translation, “Entrevista” 6). Asturias’ treatment of Mayanness, adds González, is akin to the exoticization of local elements by the tourism industry. González believes that Asturias’ contribution “from an artistic point of view, has literary value” but not socio-political value, like his own (6). By denying Asturias the authority to represent the Indigenous as a breathing, living political subject, González assumes responsibility for an Indigenous representation of Mayas in Guatemala. Like de Lión, the Q’anjob’al writer believes he is a more suitable agent for this task, which is far more than just an artistic commitment: “Creo que es importante recordar los objetivos que pretendí yo alcanzar con la obra. Aparte de la necesidad de expresión artística y estética, es en cierto sentido la denuncia de la situación social y especialmente dar a conocer la cultura maya q'anjob'al.” In de Lión’s and González’s self-appointedness as Indigenous agents there is an unspoken contract between the indio writer and the intended ladino reader that is characteristic of other contemporary Maya literature. The intended
*ladino* reader accepts the Indigenous writer’s position and agency, and with this the intended reader validates the narration and its intent.

An integral component of the Indigenous writer’s ethnic performance in self-determination and appointedness occurs at a literary level with the truth-effect. In *El tiempo*, the Indigenous experience is voiced by an Indigenous agent and written in Spanish in order to reach his reader and call him to action. According to Emilio del Valle Escalante, de Lión skillfully turns to the reader to achieve this goal:

> The Maya author assumed that he had a ladino readership, and that he wanted to expose them [the ladino readers] to a radically different vision of the world... In the novel, there are moments in which de Lión makes a pause, turning to the second person and intimating the reader to condemn colonialism and the exploitation of indigenous peoples. (210)

For del Valle, this signals the moment when de Lión “interpellates those who are responsible for creating those conditions” and encourages the reader “to imagine another vision of the world besides the dominant one” (210). While I agree with del Valle’s notion of de Lión’s interpellation of his reader through a vivid and verisimilar account of the Indigenous experience, I believe de Lión’s course of action to be less that of pointedly accusing the *ladino* reader for the deplorable living conditions of Indigenous people and more that of exposing and even reeducating the *ladino* reader on the question of Indigenousness, not without exculpating *ladinos* for their complicit role in the course of events that has shaped the lives of Indigenous people. In other words, I believe de Lión’s project to be an ideological one that involves the careful composition of elements that authorize his role as an Indigenous storyteller but also that of a well-trained, reputable Guatemalan writer.

De Lión, as I have shown, was well aware that as an Indigenous man, representative, and author of Indigenous literature, he bore a great deal of responsibility. For this reason I would like to delve further into del Valle’s argument of second-person
‘intimation’ and combine it with the question of agency, to produce a truth-effect, a testimonio-like voice that authenticates the Indigenous experience as told by de Lión. The underlying testimonial narrative in novels written by Maya writers is not necessarily explicit and the novelistic quality of the work is first and foremost, as in the case of de Lión’s novel, where testimonial elements appear time and time again. It is important to point out that although de Lión was primarily interested in experimenting with narrative devices and new and innovative literary trends, there are moments in the story when an interpellative voice is revealed as del Valle points out in his essay. This interpellative voice is reminiscent of the voice of testimonio narratives that seek to appeal to the reader and coax him into action. It is important to note that this testimonial voice also denotes a collectivity: the narrator represents an ethnic, political, cultural or religious group to which he belongs and speaks as one and on behalf of its members.

Arturo Arias and Aida Toledo reflect on the collectivity of de Lión’s novel as a recurrent narrative device. Arias, for one, considers that the narrator takes on a collective voice that is seldom individualized: “la voz narrativa está enunciando, asumiendo la palabra, en nombre de una colectividad que no es individualizada . . . [n]o es una voz que pretenda

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13 Mario Roberto Morales affirms that they read “Cortázar’s 62 modelo para armar and other experimental narratives” and his own novel, Obraye and de Lión’s El tiempo were a result of their literary activity (my translation, “Un libro”). Dante Liano identifies Julio Cortázar, Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa and Carlos Fuentes as some of de Lión’s literary influences, authors who were interested in narrative fragmentation for the increased participation of the reader (305).

14 John Beverley’s definition of testimonio is one the most well known and widely used: “a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also a real protagonist or witness of the event he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a ‘life’ or a significant life experience. Testimonio may include, but is not subsumed under, any of the following categories, some of which are conventionally considered literature, others not: autobiography, autobiographical novel, oral history, memoir, confession, diary, interview, eyewitness report, life history, novela testimonio, nonfiction novel, or ‘factographic’ literature. . .This situation of narration in testimonio has to involve an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, and so on, implicated in the act of narration itself.” (“The Margin at the Centre: On Testimonio (Testimonial Narrative)” 24-25, 26)
hablar ‘en nombre de’ la población maya, sino una voz que habla junto con los mayas” (La identidad 167, 168). Toledo, for her part, interprets El tiempo as a collective vengeance of the Indigenous against the white colonizer (Vocación de herejes 47). While I am not suggesting that de Lión’s novel be classified as testimonio, I identify certain elements in the novel often associated with the testimonio genre. These elements have a comparable function in El tiempo as in testimonial narratives. For one, de Lión is aware of his role in the production of an Indigenous account of Indigenousness, while denouncing the past and present conditions of Indigenous people and speaking as a socio-political agent for the voiceless. De Lión’s interest in experimenting with literary forms and conventions inadvertently conceals those testimonial elements. There is some tension, nevertheless, between what is fiction and what is real, as many critics interpret de Lión’s novel as an Indigenous response to the real violence to which Indigenous people have been subjected. A good example of this is Toledo’s reading of violence in El tiempo as a collective retaliation of Indigenous people against hegemonic power.

Much more explicitly than de Lión, Gaspar Pedro González introduces a testimonial narrative in his novel. In fact, González calls La otra cara a “testinovela”: “Cae La otra cara dentro del género de testinovela porque es un testimonio de explotación y marginación que se da para la sociedad maya en general” (“Entrevista”). González is candid about the purpose of his literary work and from this it is clear who his intended audience is. As I mentioned earlier, chapter by chapter he translated his novel into Spanish because he was cognizant of his market, but more importantly, as an Indigenous writer, he understood the impact of his work. And like de Lión, González self-identifies with the role of a Maya intellectual whose participation is key in a broader socio-cultural political project.
González’s novel follows the life of a young Q’anjob’al man who gradually learns of the economic, cultural and political divide between indios and ladinos and who decides to stand up for his people through a renewal of tradition. The characteristics that contribute to the truth-effect in González’s ‘testinovela’ include an account of Maya tradition, a comprehensive description of real events and conditions denote a subalternity, an explicit call to arms, and a denunciation of an oppressive regime. Though the definition of testimonio is widely debated, the elements I have outlined form part of what Beverly describes as “a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet. . .form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a ‘life’ or a significant life experience” (31). González’s novel, while narrated in the third person, closely follows the life of Luín Mekel and provides an intimate look into his life and that of his family and community. Moreover, in the words of Luín and of other characters it is easy to identify a denunciation and a call to action: often speeches and dialogues laden with a clear political message abandon the narrative and directly address the reader. For example, Luín, at eight years of age, talks to his school friends with the wisdom and resolution of an older, more mature man:

Más bien creo que nuestro bajo rendimiento en los estudios se debe a muchas otras cosas. Nosotros debemos ayudar a nuestros padres con los trabajos; no contamos con todos los recursos necesarios para estudiar como otros niños de nuestra edad. . . . Nuestra salud es deficiente porque carecemos de una alimentación adecuada. Estamos expuestos a las inclemencias del tiempo; nuestros padres no nos pueden orientar y ayudar porque tampoco tienen instrucción; en nuestras casas carecemos de lo más indispensable, y en estas condiciones no es posible tener un buen rendimiento. (112-113).

The recurrence of this type of speech speaks volumes of González’s political agenda and the testimonio-like quality of his novel. It is clear that he identifies himself as a representative of
the Maya people of the highlands and that he believes it is his responsibility to denounce
the injustices they face.

Despite the questions of representation and agency that inevitably arise with the
study of works of contemporary Indigenous literature, much is revealed of that other
response to the established ruling *ladino* power in past and present-day Guatemala. De Lión
and González are key figures in the development of an Indigenous literature in Guatemala
that was non-existent until the first publication of *El tiempo*. The work of de Lión and
González signals key moments in the development of the nation project of the Maya in
Guatemala. De Lión, for one, writes in the 1970s at a time when Indigenous people are
‘infiltrating’ the files of the leftist revolutionary movement. Arturo Arias suggests that
Indigenous people quietly infiltrate the movement and work behind the scenes, while others
take up arms, and yet others, like de Lión, work to re-signify Indigenousness. González, for
his part, comes onto the literary scene a later time, at a point in the history of Indigenous
literature when there has been a fair production of Maya poetry and Rigoberta Menchú’s
testimonio, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*, was published and
garnered much attention. González’s *La otra cara* continues the project that de Lión set in
motion. De Lión’s novel marks the opening of a socio-cultural stage for Maya people, while
González sets out to develop that space.
Violence, Contestation and the Re-articulation of Maya Identity in *El tiempo principia en Xibalbá*

Luis de Lión is recognized by many critics\(^{15}\) as the first Indigenous writer in Guatemala and his novel *El tiempo* is the first and, until recently, the only Indigenous novel of contemporary Guatemala. Written in Spanish, de Lión’s *El tiempo* is the story of a Maya town that begins and ends in an unknown space, at an unknown time.\(^{16}\) Time and place in this novel have no real significance as the two variables emerge, converge and collide only to display the cosmological complexity of Xibalbá, a place of death and torture in Maya-K’iche’ mythology. The story begins in the midst of unforgiving wind and death, and it ends in the prologue, which tells of the town’s calm and its abundance of food and foliage. The most notable characteristic of *El tiempo* is the violence with which the Indigenous town and its people revolt and the chaos and destruction that follow one of the novel’s main characters, a wooden effigy of La Virgen de la Concepción. The story’s main conflict stems from the men’s sexual obsession with the wooden Virgin because of her white skin and *ladino* ethnicity. One day the wooden Virgin is abducted and raped, and upon finding her in the arms of another man, the men destroy her, revolt and elect a new Virgin, a promiscuous Indigenous woman who resembles the wooden figure of the Catholic saint.

*El tiempo* is de Lión’s only novel, and, together with his poetry and short fiction, was written at a time of increased political repression in Guatemala in the 1970s and 1980s.

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\(^{15}\) See Aida Toledo’s *Vocación de herejes. Reflexiones sobre literatura guatemalteca contemporánea;* Arturo Arias’ *La identidad de la palabra;* and Dante Liano’s *Visión crítica de la literatura guatemalteca.*

\(^{16}\) Even though the town’s name is not mentioned in the text, there exists textual and biographical evidence that indicates the town is San Juan del Obispo, De Lión’s hometown. In “Entre lo indígena y lo ladino: *El tiempo principia en Xibalbá y Velador de noche, soñador de día,* tonalidades melodramáticas en la narrativa guatemalteca contemporánea” Aida Toledo points out that The Virgin of Conception is the patron saint of San Juan del Obispo: “históricamente viene a ser la Virgen de la Concepción, patrona del pueblo desde la época de la encomienda de [Obispo] Marroquín” (8).
During this time, de Lión was a strong advocate for Indigenous rights and he encouraged a revision of Guatemalan history to one that was more inclusive of his Maya ancestors and contemporaries. This Indigenous revision is present in his novel as it contests *ladino* hegemonic rule in Guatemala and asserts an Indigenous presence from the perspective of the Indigenous. What is more, de Lión sets the stage for a Maya cultural project: *El tiempo* marks the beginning of a voiced Indigenous literature that claims the space it has long been denied. With his first novel de Lión readies a space, a point of enunciation for Maya writers in which they themselves can tell their own unmediated story and act as agents of their own socio-political and cultural lives.

As I have pointed out, political activism, commitment and a rewriting of the past and present are key elements found in contemporary Maya literature, as can be observed in *El tiempo* and *La otra cara*. However, the most interesting feature of de Lión’s and Gonzalez’s work is the treatment of Indigenousness as an ethnic, racial and social composite set against and in function of *ladinidad*. That is not to say that the treatment is the same, as each writer possesses his own artistic agenda for a socio-political and cultural project for Maya people. Luis de Lión, for one, is interested in invalidating former representations of Indigenousness in Guatemala that did not include the voices of Indigenous people who remained at the margins. For this, he revises Indigenous identity from the position of an Indigenous writer who has access to the cultural establishment of the dominant *ladino* elite. The result is a glimpse into the seams of the construction of Maya identity and its re-articulation from a new positioning. Before Indigenousness is re-articulated, de Lión bares the mechanisms of its negotiation and shows it—with the aid of identitary markers such as sexuality and ethnicity—to be unstable, arbitrary and complex. Finally, de Lión shows the *indio* subject, now a speaking, self-determining socio-political and cultural actor, at the helm
of his own destiny, spearheading a cultural uprising that much resembles the writer’s own
endeavour.

In the opening paragraph of his novel, Luis de Lión briefly recalls traditional *ladino*
representations of Indigenousness, only to dismantle them with the gust of wind that rouses
the inhabitants of the town of *El tiempo*. As the novel opens, for a few brief moments the
narrator shows the town and its people in a tableau-like manner that is reminiscent of early
portrayals of the *indio*. He begins by telling of the strong wind that enters the town and as
he follows its trajectory he reveals small details about the inhabitants of the town of *El
tiempo* in a *cuadro de costumbre* fashion: tired, sleepy men, children with distended bellies,
and women whose dirtied legs are concealed by their *corte* stand around almost motionless.
These men, women and children are abruptly awakened from their slumber as the wind
surges through town destroying everything in its path. An eerie silence follows but is soon
broken by Death, who pushes a cart noisily through town and dances to the sound of sad
marimba music. The scene closes with Death’s entrance into an unsuspecting victim’s house
and the narrator’s musings about the house in question. The story’s main character and
central conflict are then introduced with one sentence that sets the tone for the rest of the
action: “La Virgen de Concejición era una puta” (18).

La Virgen de Concejición is one of two Virgins in the novel: one is wooden, white
and *ladina*; the other is of flesh and blood, dark and Indigenous. In his first mention of La
Virgen de Concejición, the narrator refers to the Indigenous woman who is nicknamed after
the religious saint of La Virgen de Concejición for her striking resemblance. Throughout the
text de Lión differentiates between them by using the terms “de madera” and “puta” after
their respective names. The use of the adjective “puta” is significant in that de Lión strays from the traditional ethnographic portrayal of the *indio* of *indigenista* narrative by characterizing the Indigenous subject as a sexual and sensual being. In *La identidad de la palabra*, Arturo Arias points to this aspect of de Lión’s work and deems it an innovative contribution to Guatemalan literature in general, as “Guatemalan narrative”, writes Arias, “is characterized by its lack of eroticism” (my translation, 171). Oddly enough, all eroticism in the novel has to do with both versions of La Virgen de la Concepción, the popular Catholic saint and the Maya woman of the small village in *El tiempo*. In speaking of the charged eroticism of the Virgins, Arias draws attention to the highly parodic dimension that is laced with humour and the grotesque, which, Arias suggests, is a mechanism not all that well known to the *ladino* (171). The eroticism of de Lión’s novel that Arias qualifies as innovative thrusts the story forward: the infatuation of the townspeople of *El tiempo* with the wooden effigy of La Virgen de Concepción soon develops into irrepressible sexual frustration that materializes as rampant violence.

With the two Virgins, de Lión further counteracts the traditional *indio* figure and re-focuses the lens under which Indigenousness is typically observed as he reinvests traditional Catholic iconography, the Virgin Mary specifically, with elements of Maya religion to further show the effects of the colonizing Catholic enterprise to be far-reaching but neither absolute nor successful. I interpret de Lión’s two Virgins as one and the same: instead of distinguishing between two characters, I consider La Virgen de Concepción in *El tiempo* as an expression of identitary duality in Maya cosmogony. Adrián Chávez’s reinterpretation of the *Pop Wuj* offers the bases for my interpretation of the Virgin’s duality. Chávez, a Maya scholar and the father of the pan-Maya movement in Guatemala, introduces an Indigenous

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17 To distinguish between the virgins, both Vírgenes de la Concepción, I will follow de Lión’s practice and refer to the religious statue as the wooden Virgin and to the Indigenous woman as the Virgin-whore.
worldview into the analysis of the *Pop Wuj* in which the two heroic figures of Aj Pu and Shblanké are not twin brothers but the same person.\(^1\) Observed under this scheme, it is possible to analyze de Lion’s *ladino* virgin as more than an expression of religious syncretism of Catholic religion and Maya cosmology. Like the Catholic church in Chichicastenango, the Virgin is both a product of the interaction of Catholic and Maya forces and an expression of Maya cosmological duality. On one hand, she is carved by a Maya artist, “el escultor ¿indio?, sí indio”; she is given *ladino* characteristics; and her function is to represent a Catholic ideal and to aid in the indoctrination of the Indigenous population of the nameless town in *El tiempo*. On the other hand, de Lión’s insistence on the interchangeability of the wooden Virgin and the Virgin-whore points to a Maya conceptualization of Catholic iconography that informs the saint’s double nature as both a sacred religious object and an object of sexual desire.

I would like to observe what occurs in *El tiempo* using Frantz Fanon’s argument of “absolute violence” in *The Wretched of the Earth* in order to examine the interplay between

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\(^{1}\) Chávez proposed a number of linguistic approaches to the study of Maya languages, but his greatest contribution was perhaps the introduction of a more comprehensive K’iche’ alphabet that takes into account a number of sounds and signs that the Latin-based alphabet ignored. He employed this new system in the translation and reinterpretation of the *Pop Wuj*, which differs from earlier translations in that the cosmological perspective is Maya rather than Western. For Chávez, the *Pop Wuj* presents a system of appositions that is common in Maya ideology, in which the personal name is followed by an attribute and vice versa: ‘Cuando se sacó la copia en ki-che se creyó que Cada Cerbatanero, Siete Un Cerbatanero; Jun Aj Pu, Shbalanké; Jun Batz, Jun Chowén era pares de seres: fue una lamentable equivocación. Cada Cerbatanero, Siete Un Cerbatanero son dos nombres del ajau que fue vencido en Shibalbá, fue colgada en un árbol y que hizo fecundar a Ishkik. (...) Jun Aj Pu, Shblanké, también son dos nombres de un mismo ser: el primero alude a su oficio de cazador y el segundo es nombre propio... La aposición, o sea la repetición de una misma idea con otras palabras se ha empleado en el *Pop Wuj* con carácter enfático... Jun Batz, Jun Chowén son dos nombres de un mismo mito, el primero está en ki-cheñ el segundo en maya” (“Explicación necesaria” from the author’s own edition written in Quetzaltenango in 1981). Though Chávez’s linguistic and interpretative work is often disqualified by critics due to his academic limitations as well as his unorthodox approach, he offers an Indigenous interpretation of an Indigenous text. His linguistic knowledge as well as his first-hand understanding of K’iche’ cosmogony and cultural tradition provides a distinct base from which to interpret the *Pop Wuj*, the most complete text of Maya cosmogony.
sex, sexuality, ethnicity and violence in the unfolding and re-articulation of Indigenousness from a new positioning within Guatemala’s socio-cultural and political arena(s). In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon argues that “absolute violence” is necessary to call into question and ultimately subvert the colonial forces that subjugate the colonized subject (37). De Lión’s novel contains a violence that is resonant with Fanon’s proposal: revolt and absolute chaos in *El tiempo* tear down the colonial constraints placed upon Indigenous people that marginalize, objectify and oppress them. It is important to note that all violence in *El tiempo* is inextricably linked to sex, sexuality and ethnicity.

Joan Nagel’s concept of ethnosexuality in *Race, Ethnicity, and Sexuality: Intimate Intersections, Forbidden Frontiers* sheds some light on what occurs in *El tiempo*. According to Nagel there are similarities in the production of sexual, ethnic and gender differences respectively. These differences unify and at the same time segregate members of any one community. Sex, gender and ethnicity can all be used to vilify the other in order to exclude him. A good illustration of this traces back to colonial times in which the white Christian enterprise identified the Indigenous as a promiscuous sodomite. This sexual differentiation put limitations on what was sexual, and the sexual informed the ethnic and vice versa. Nagel highlights the importance of performance and the performative in the production of differences: ethnic, sexual or gender frontiers are reinforced by a corresponding performance while the performative are unintentional acts that validate those frontiers (54). In *El tiempo*, sexual performances help define ethnic or racial identity. The successful enactment of gender roles coupled with appropriate sexual conduct authenticates any one individual’s membership to a specific ethnic group. In the negotiation of a specific identity, the individual produces other differences and defines the identity of others. In the case of *El
tiempo, the men and women’s sexual behaviour not only contributes to their own ethnification but also to the ethnification of others.

The novel’s Virgin is the character that best represents the colonizer’s oppressive hold since she is the cause and recipient of the wrath of all the inhabitants of the town of El tiempo. Her abduction, rape and replacement represent the profanation of the most sacred of icons in the Catholic tradition and reveal a moment of revolution in which the imposed dominant culture is rejected and the cultural values of the inhabitants of the Maya town are reinvested. In addition, the relation and the conflict between sexuality, ethnicity and identity in the novel further show that the identitary constructions of Indigenousness put forth by mestizo writers are insufficient. The uncontrollable sexual urges of the Indigenous men are directed at none other than the ‘white’ figure of the Virgin Mary, the holiest, purest woman of all and the mother of humankind in the Catholic imaginary. The link between sex, sexuality and ethnicity is not without motive; in fact, it permits the greatest degree of transgression in El tiempo as the individual’s own sexual behaviour ethnifies him. This is even more sharply defined when sexual conduct is regulated by the Catholic Church: Indigenousness is characterized by an overt sexuality, best illustrated by the promiscuous Indigenous woman who uncannily resembles the wooden Virgin and whose name she shares, while the suppression of all sexual desire results in un-Indigenous Catholic behaviour.

A short passage in El tiempo illustrates a site of identitary negotiation of the role of the Indigenous man before a religious icon representing the Catholic religion:

[E]lla quedó limpia, pura, brillante en toda su desnudez, en toda la madera, con nada más que la ropa simulada de la misma madera que tenía encima, una tela delgada, apenas gruesa que el escultor ¿indio?, sí indio, le había dejado tan sólo para disimular su amor y su odio. (61)
This passage highlights the religious syncretism of present-day Catholic Maya tradition. It also demonstrates the colonial relation between colonizer and colonized. More than that, it illustrates the grip of the Catholic Church on its subject: the Church’s founding ideology of the sacred and the profane is implicit in its interpellation of the Maya sculptor. The Indigenous sculptor adds a simulated sheath to cover the body of the Virgin that allows him to conceal “su amor y su odio,” two conflicting emotions derived from the interrelation between the taboo and the sacred. The love he professes for the Virgin is carnal desire and for that he conceals it with the robe that covers the Virgin’s body. In sculpting the effigy, the Indigenous artist is already performing within Catholic ideology and white colonial rule: he shows that he recognizes the taboo the moment he covers her body in a fine sheath. The sculptor’s professed desire, however, foreshadows the action in the novel that causes the erosion of the boundaries between the sacred and the profane that support Christian ideology.

Like the Indigenous sculptor, the *cofrades* keep their desire in check by dutifully carrying out their role as respected townspeople and caring for the saint for a year, presenting offerings (candles, flowers and clothing) and feasts (62). The *cofrades* operate within Catholic ideology as they focus on the religious aspect of their role, but veiled under their sense of duty lies their wish to be closer to the object of their sexual desire: “recordás que vos también te enamoraste de ella, que varias veces estuviste tentado a salir de tu aislamiento, de ingresar a la Cofradía para que te eligieran de principal y llevártela a tu casa” (65). One day, one of the *principales*, at the end of his patronage, takes the Virgin in his arms and kisses her passionately on the lips. It is at this moment that all the men manifest their desire for her as they feel that they delivered the same kiss through the actions of their peer. Once their desire for the wooden statue has been performed explicitly,
they reject the priest’s assertion that she is their Mother, “ella no era una mujer cualquiera sino su Madre” (63). The priest delivers an important message: a Christian cannot desire the Virgin, his Mother. This is contrasted by the rejection of the Virgin as their Mother, when the cofrades choose to deny their religious kinship to the Virgin in order to continue desiring her: “[n]o, aunque el padre lo dijera ella no era su madre. Por eso, todos la habían besado en la boca por medio de la boca de un principal” (my emphasis). The men are well aware of what is at stake here: they must deny their Christianity in order to be granted access to the wooden Virgin as a sexual object. This denial is a performative of Catholic ideology; in denying the Virgin as their Mother, these men revoke the taboo of desiring the mother figure thus making their desire more acceptable.

The Western Catholic aspect of the cofradía is cancelled when the men reveal their true intentions. Their year-long patronage is shown to be nothing but the desire to possess her as a sexual object and the marked differences between a fervent Christian and a libidinous Indigenous man are revealed. The actions of the cofrade that kissed the Virgin upset everyone in town, not because they were immoral but because they provoked jealousy amongst the men. Soon, the priest, “con cara de español”, intervenes before there is bloodshed, while the women try to break up the fight, reminding the men that they are, in fact, Christian: “los separaron con lágrimas y con ruegos de que no parecían cristianos” (63). This is a distinction between what constitutes a Christian and a non-Christian, namely an Indigenous individual. It must be noted that the evangelization enterprise of the Catholic Church in the time of the colonies saw it fit to eradicate all forms of Maya religion throughout Guatemala. As a result the distinction between Christian and Indigenous as it relates to conduct is very much relevant here. The priest pronounces a three-part mandate that regulates the status of the Virgin Mary. In it, he reminds the Indigenous men and
women that the wooden Virgin does not belong to any one, “ni para uno ni para otro”, and as a consequence she shall not be removed from the church. When the priest denies the cofrades access to the Virgin, he prohibits the performance of the Maya tradition of the cofradía and further delineates the differences between unacceptable indio Indigenous tradition and acceptable Christian Indigenous values.

Soon after the cofrade’s kiss, things in El tiempo worsen as the wooden Virgin is abducted and raped. After her rape, she suggests that she herself sought out Pascual, her abductor, out of “casuanecesidad” and she places great emphasis on the impossibility of consuming any act with the rest of the men because they are Indigenous, thus limiting her sexual activity according to ethnicity. Pascual is an odd exception, however, possibly because he is perceived as a ladino-ized indio by the rest of the community. The wooden Virgin directly addresses the townspeople, outlining the ethnic differences between them:

Les pidió perdón a todos, les dijo que disculparan pero tenía años y años de haber conocido sólo a la paloma y que de allí en adelante nada, que mentiras, que seguía siendo virgen, que gracias porque la perdonaban, que gracias por no hacerle nada a su momentáneo marido, que sí, que déjenlo, que no tuvo la culpa, que había sido ella quien se le había insinuado y que ni modo, él era hombre. ¿Qué de puritita verdad la perdonaran? ¿De veras de veras? Ah vaya. Pues les haría a todos los milagritos que quisieran. Pero que eso sí, si con él se había metido había sido por pura casuanecesidad. Que no fueran a pensar que con todos sería igual. Que recordaran que eran inditos. Que otra vez gracias por ponerla nuevamente en su camarín. ¡Gracias, inditos por su buen corazón! (71-72)

This passage marks the precise moment when the men of El tiempo revolt by destroying the wooden Virgin and replace her with the Virgin-whore. The destruction and supplantation of one of the Catholic Church’s most venerated symbols foreshadows the fall of an imposed form of Catholicism, a religious system that informs each of de Lión’s characters’ ethnicity and regulates their sexual and social behaviour. Consequently, the election of the Virgin-whore as the Catholic Virgin’s replacement has wider implications as it signals the moment
when the Indigenous subject takes the stage and performs his own ethnicity on his own terms by violently rejecting imposed forms of social, sexual and cultural conduct and reinstating Indigenous tradition. The Virgin-whore’s ascent to the role of saint in the town of *El tiempo* is not unforeseen; her characterization is similar to that of popular saints of Maya-Catholic tradition in Guatemala who, though unrecognized by the Catholic Church, are an integral part of Maya life and are often permitted to remain alongside their Catholic counterparts.

Maya folk saints are popularly elected and often have human attributes, perform human actions, and are not free of vice and temptation. Maya folk saints, according to Jim Pieper “mirror the human form and needs in the constant pursuit of the spiritual, or God. They have been formed under the pressures of a turbulent culture overburdened with a layered dictatorially pressing Christian religiosity” (10). The Virgin-whore is human, and the colour of her skin, her carnality and her actions all point to an Indigenous expression of the Catholic saint of the Virgin Mary. And like many folk saints in Guatemala, the Virgin-whore is shunned by the Catholic Church in de Lión’s town: important figures in Maya religion such as Maximón were often forbidden by the Catholic Church in many municipalities in Guatemala. Maximón falls outside the Catholic Church jurisdiction of saints, but he is often tolerated and allowed to process next to Jesus during Holy Week celebrations. To worship this figure was considered sacrilegious by the Church as he was often associated with Judas, and the congregation was discouraged from partaking in any activities that involved a folk saint. Similarly, early on in the novel, the priest references the figure of the Virgin-whore in delivering a sermon advising against all that is sinful: “era como el resumen de todo, según el padre: protestantismo, comunismo, masonería y liberalismo, y que todos

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19 Jim Pieper explains that Maximón “satisfies the religious needs of many” and can be identified with both Maya figures and Catholic Saints (19).
entendían perfectamente porque les era familiar y cercana” (25). To appear ‘familiar and near’ not only indicates an accessible contextual reference for the congregation but also shows the close relationship that can exist between a cofrade or devotee and the folk saint.

When the townspeople discard the wooden effigy of the Virgen de la Concepción and elect a new Virgin, the imposed, ladina version of Catholicism that plays a significant part in the constitution of Indigenous identity is revoked and Indigenousness is forever changed. The violent procession through town with the newly elected Virgin at its helm signals self-determination and an articulation of identity from a new perspective. The Virgin is an interesting character because her status as a religious icon in an Indigenous town lends itself to both a heterogeneous and syncretic unfolding of Maya identity in the novel. The Virgin presents multiple problems in the novel as she is not represented by one character but two, who at the end prove to be interchangeable. The complex manifestations of the Virgin Mary in the novel are reflective of the religious syncretism between Christian and Maya belief systems in Guatemala, but more importantly they reveal a tension between both worlds: the Virgin is a dual expression of a Catholic saint and an Indigenous folk saint that together constitute a process of identitary resistance and negotiation. What is more, this negotiation occurs in the site of production of sexual difference(s) from a Western, Catholic worldview. Eventually, this negotiation comes to a complete halt as the world of El tiempo is turned upside down. Violence (murders, brawls, rape) is rampant and all lines are blurred: what is sacred is profaned, what is profane is sacralized. As a result the constraints placed upon Indigenousness as a mark of difference are disrupted. The rape of the wooden Virgin and the unorthodox sanctification of the Virgin-whore brings to an abrupt end the centuries-old domination of the Catholic Church, but more importantly it challenges the constraints of ethnicity as imposed by an external, white hegemonic power. Indigenous people in El
tiempo rise up and reinstate their own worldview, thus rearticulating their traditions, culture and, most importantly, their Indigenousness. Or as Fanon explains: “The violence which has ruled over the ordering of the colonial world . . . will be claimed and taken over by the native at the moment when, deciding to embody history in his own person, he surges into the forbidden quarters” (40).

In de Lión’s *El tiempo*, Maya people take over their ethnicization through their own cultural agency as expressed by the violence with which they destroy the effigy of the Virgin Mary. Although Fanon’s “absolute violence” in de Lión’s novel may suggest a clean slate, the corpses that inundate the streets of the Maya town of *El tiempo* cannot be ignored and serve as a reminder of the town’s colonial past. Although de Lión’s Indigenous characters do not completely obliterate the Catholic Church, *ladino* dominance or their colonial past, they re-inaugurate the streets of their town on their own terms by marching through the town with their own living Virgin. Similarly, de Lión, as an Indigenous author writing an Indigenous story, enters the Guatemalan literary scene and stages his own ‘revolt’ by challenging canonical representations of the *indio* and providing his own version of Indigenousness.

**Gaspar Pedro González’s *La otra cara*: Literacization as the Foundation of a Maya Lettered City**

*La otra cara* by Gaspar Pedro González is a pioneering novel of contemporary Indigenous literature in Guatemala. It is particularly worthy of note because *La otra cara* is the first Indigenous novel written and published in an Indigenous language. Though critics differ on whether González’s novel was written in Spanish first and then translated into
Q’anjob’al or vice versa, González puts the question to rest in an interview in which he declares that he wrote *La otra cara* in Q’anjob’al and translated it into Spanish for ease of publication (“Entrevista con Gaspar Pedro González”).

González’s novel follows the life of a young Q’anjob’al man who gradually learns of the economic, cultural and political divide between *indios* and *ladinos*, and who decides to fight for his people through a renewal of tradition. Like de Lión’s novel, González debunks typical notions of the lazy and passive *indio* and reinstates him as an active and contributing member of his community. While de Lión’s novel opens up a space for Indigenous writers and re-directs the voice of the Indigenous to arise from within, González’s novel sets forth a project that guarantees the continued existence of Indigenous literary tradition by reinvesting and transforming its core values.

In *La otra cara* González proposes an Indigenous project that starts out where de Lión’s *El tiempo* leaves off as he continues the appropriation of the space that de Lión claimed for Indigenous people in the Guatemalan literary scene. In *El tiempo* Maya people obtain their own cultural agency as expressed by the violence with which they tear down the Catholic Church. As I previously showed, Indigenous writers are aware of the need to access the dominant culture in order to guarantee the success of a renewed nation project that includes the Indigenous. González’s novel proposes a project in which Indigenous people can represent themselves and actively shape their own future by ensuring the continuance of their culture, traditions and history.

With colonization, Indigenous people were deprived of political self-representation in part due to limited access to *ladino* discourse. Because of their status as oral cultures, Maya

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20 Hana Muzika Kahn says that González “writes in both Q’anjob’al and in Spanish but maintains a strong Q’anjob’al voice in the Spanish text ... [although] no Q’anjob’al version has been published” (116). Nadine Grimm, on the other hand, states that *La otra cara* “was written originally in Spanish, later translated into English, and then published in Q’anjobal [sic]” (104).
communities were invalidated as ‘civilized’ communities capable of using the ‘the sacred
codes’ of the lettered, ruling classes.\(^\text{21}\) Many contemporary Indigenous writers are
concerned with denouncing and rewriting an Indigenous past, present and future and with
this concern comes an interest in promoting Indigenous culture and guaranteeing its
survival in a world primarily driven by Spanish-speaking \textit{ladinos}. Maya intellectuals must
successfully utilize the discursive tools employed by those in power to ensure their entry
into the dominant culture in order to secure a space in which Maya identity, culture and
politics can be articulated by Indigenous people themselves.

Authors like González reaffirm their position as Indigenous writers when they write in
Spanish about Indigenousness. González reaffirms his positioning as an Indigenous author
when he writes in Q’anjob’al. More importantly, his decision to write in his native language
is also a testament to the relevance of a Maya language by updating its status to that of a
modern ‘written’ language. For this purpose, the Q’anjob’al author finds it necessary that
Maya orality undergo a process of literacization: “Entre los Mayas, semejante a lo que
ocurrió en el Viejo Continente, la oralidad está sirviendo de base para reconstruir una
identidad, que está siendo trasladada a la escritura por parte de los escritores actuales” (“La
literatura maya contemporánea: como base la oralidad” 97). The literacization of Indigenous
culture shows it to be as effective and relevant as \textit{ladino} culture by incorporating it into the
dominant culture. To do this, González imbues his novel with an orality that is reminiscent
of the oral tradition of Maya culture. The critic Hana Muzika Kahn points out that “González
inscribes orality by extensive use of direct speech and by the use of Q’anjob’al vocabulary
for culturally specific terms in the Spanish text” (124-25). Traditional Maya oral narratives

\(^{21}\) Here I refer to Rama’s notion that a ‘lettered’ elite had exclusive access to the written
word, a tool that was bestowed a certain sacredness due to its exclusivity. With this ‘tool’ the lettered
elite was granted, and even self-appointed, the tasks of policy-making, nation-building and
bureaucratic control and organization.
are retold in the novel, and with this Maya orality is also literacized. According to González, this guarantees the revival of Indigenous culture, which eventually gives way to the creation of a more integrative societal model developed for and by Mayas themselves. González explains why this course of action is necessary:

[C]reemos que debe de haber una reconstrucción de la cultura . . . para que el maya no solamente sirva de distracción turística sino que también aporte en el futuro sus conocimientos y su sabiduría . . . Entonces habrá una nueva generación de mayas que van a trabajar para la reconstrucción [sic] de la sociedad. ("Entrevista")

What is more, for this project, González, as an Indigenous writer trained in the Western literary tradition, integrates elements from both traditions: "Muchos de estos ‘materiales’ de la oralidad, son incorporados como elementos tanto en la prosa como en el verso, con un nuevo enfoque y una nueva interpretación y dimensión artística" ("Entrevista"). As a result, critics like Kahn note the “hybrid style” displayed in González’s work (117). More than an illustration of hybridity, I observe the redeployment of appropriated and reappropriated discursive tools in *La otra cara*. With this in mind, the plight of Indigenous writers like de Lión and González, whether as the reinvention of the discursive *indio* or as the renewal of Indigenous tradition, is a direct response to the long-standing practice of speaking for and about the Indigenous.

Other Indigenous writers in Guatemala express a similar sentiment as they are not only preoccupied with revitalizing Maya culture and participating more effectively as agents of their own advancement, but also recognize the need for a cultural model that ensures a future for the Maya people. In an interview, the Jakaltec scholar, poet and novelist Víctor Montejo explains that he wrote a collection of fables entitled *El pájaro que limpia el mundo*.

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22 Montejo is best known as a political activist and scholar and his literary work has not been analyzed at great length. His *Testimonio: muerte de un pueblo guatemalteco* is his most well-known work. In 2002 he published a novel entitled *Las aventuras de mister Puttison entre los mayas*. 
to show that Mayans continue to create and recreate their culture, despite the restrictions imposed on them by the Guatemalan elite, as well as the destruction of native values and tradition” (“An Interview with Víctor Montejo”). Montejo’s main concern, similar to González’s own, is to literacize an oral history for fear of its loss:

I wanted to have a permanent record of our culture and to preserve the history of the Mayan oral tradition. It is important to me that our tradition is not completely lost. This book [The Bird Who Cleans the World and Other Mayan Fables] is my effort to save the literary tradition of our culture and give it permanence, as well as to furnish other cultures with an understanding of the Mayan people. (“An interview”)

Like de Lión and González, Montejo is well aware that his political agency as an Indigenous writer and activist is dependent on his ability to mediate between ladino and Maya cultural modes to articulate a more ‘valid’ version of Indigenousness. Furthermore, implicit in the transformation of Maya oral culture into a written one is the guarantee of socio-political and cultural recognition of Maya people by the dominant ladino culture. This literacization of Maya culture has wider implications, as it suggests not only the transformation of oral tradition but also the participation of a literate Indigenous public.

To better understand how the act of writing in an Indigenous language can help consolidate the new identity of a written culture I would like to briefly examine the case of Juan Gregorio Regino of San Miguel Soyaltepec, Oaxaca, Mexico. Juan Gregorio Regino is a Mazatec ethnolinguist and poet who, like González and Montejo, writes in his native language with a clear goal in mind: to preserve his people’s language, culture, history and traditions. In an interview, he declared that before his poetry came the development of a written alphabet of the Mazatec language. Regino, like the Indigenous linguist Adrián Chávez in Guatemala, helped develop an accurate alphabet of his native language with the belief that it would cement his culture: “I also wanted to write poetry, because it wasn’t
enough to say, ‘Well, now we have the alphabet.’ What was important was to create things, to produce written work” (122-23). Here Regino shows a keen insight into the need to preserve Indigenous culture through language and vice versa. Moreover, he understands the need for a cultural market for the continuation of the Mazatec language, customs and traditions. Poetry, he tells us, helps validate and keep current the new cultural tool at the disposition of Mazatec people. Regino detects change, as the production and publication of literature in Indigenous languages of the past two decades is much greater:

> [I]n those times, here in Mexico, there wasn’t much space for the diffusion of the literature that we were producing. I am speaking of ’87, ’88, of ’90. Even in 1990 there wasn’t the possibility of publishing. My book wasn’t published until ’90 even though I finished it by ’87. From ’90 on I think things have changed. There is more space for Indigenous languages. I believe there are more possibilities today to make known the works being produced, in newspapers, in magazines, in books. (123)

Regino’s project is much broader, however, as from this he foresees the rise of a new Indigenous culture. For one, he highlights the importance of literacy among Indigenous people in order to participate more effectively in a “modern society”, bringing renewed forces coming from the margins, from a “new Indigenous culture that will regain its pride, that will regain its knowledge,” (125). Regino further insists on the importance of showing that the Maya are in fact a ‘lettered city’:

> Now we, as the new generation of intellectuals, have the challenge of slowly erasing the myth that was created. Including the one about our languages, that they’re dialects, that they’re not written, it’s not true. We’re now demonstrating that they can be written and that they are as rich as any other language. So it’s an entire struggle, a movement of revindication. (127)

In the process of creating a lettered Indigenous city an appropriation of hegemonic *ladino* culture—or *mestizo*, in the case of Regino—takes place.

> In his novel, González offers an overview of the place of Indigenous people in the nation project in which the question of literacization is of great importance. The story
follows Luín, a young man whose life is a journey of struggle, self-awareness and socio-political action for Indigenous people. Through this journey, Luín becomes a protagonist for a new Indigenous project that seeks to fully integrate Indigenous people. Early on, Luín learns what it means to be a member of the Maya community of Jolomk’u, as Lotaxh, his mother, explains to him that “El maya nace para sufrir . . . Ese es su destino” (95). Although this statement may suggest otherwise, in his novel González portrays the Maya as Indigenous people who are keenly aware of their situation and actively seek change. This statement is perhaps Luín’s first call to arms; from here on he reflects more carefully on the conditions of his people and on the dynamics that render them vulnerable.

As a young man, Luín’s glimpses into the life of an indio as offset by the dominant ladino culture. His is also a glimpse into the country’s many attempts at assimilation. During the town’s Patron Saint Day celebration, Luín looks on at the parade of “inditos” that march behind the “Honorable Corporación Municipal” and who are forced to wear ladino clothes instead of their capishay—a traditional woolen shirt worn by Maya men of the highlands—“para pasar marchando ante su gente” (174). Here Indigenous identity and its negation are enacted not only by virtue of membership to one group, but also through visual cues in the body, in this case by not wearing the capishay. Upon seeing this, Luín perceives the threat of assimilation and he asks himself: “¿Será, se preguntaba Luín, que para poder participar en la vida nacional tengamos que convertirnos en ladinos?” (174). At this moment Luín realizes what the role of the Indigenous has been thus far and he asks himself what Indigenousness may mean and how others define it. This is a pivotal moment in the story; it is a coming of age for the novel’s protagonist and it marks a new beginning for his community and for all Maya people. Most remarkable of all is Luín’s introspection into the nation project as he immediately understands that Indigenous people are not participants.
The ladino, Luín realizes, always spearheads the project—not without violence, as the use of the word “caudillo” may denote—and what is worse, Indigenous people look on, allowing this to happen:

No encontraba en ningún lado a su gente en los distintos niveles. No estaba presente en la Corporación Municipal de aquel pueblo, excepto más de cuarenta mil que admiraban y aplaudían el paso de sus propios hijos disfrazados en pos del ladino que iba siempre adelante como guía y caudillo. (my emphasis, 174)

Luín’s gaze captures much more in the brief moments when he looks on the parade and takes a detailed snapshot of the situation of the Indigenous in relation to the ladino; more specifically, he discovers the lack of Indigenous representation in the nation and the problematic role of the nation’s engineers. Luín arrives at the conclusion that even though Indigenous people make up more than fifty percent of the Guatemalan population, “se pretende . . . que algún día la nación sea sólo de ladinos” (175).

González points to key aspects of the century-old Guatemalan nation project that fail to benefit Indigenous people and ultimately marginalize them. For one, he criticizes the role of the ladino as guide to the Indigenous people, a legacy of colonial times as I discussed in the previous chapter. In addition, the Q’anjob’al author is quick to highlight the danger of a project directed exclusively by ladinos who seldom understand the actual situation of Indigenous people and, more often than not, equate their development to a ladino version of progress, as in the official order for Indigenous people to wear “ladino suits and costumes” for the parade shows. Despite the ladinos apparent efforts to integrate Indigenous people, they remain largely unrepresented: “los cientos de miles que obscurecían las márgenes de la tierra y del pueblo, seguían sin representación” (175).

As Luín matures, he develops a political consciousness. On the eve of the closing ceremonies of the town’s Patron Saint celebrations the military is sent to conscript young
forcibly Indigenous men but Luín manages to escape. He spends a few days in hiding and during this time he reflects on the meaning of “patria” as it relates to his civic duty. He is quick to point out that although the military calls upon his sense of duty, his rights as an individual are denied. With this, González uncovers yet another flaw of the nation project, which relies on the Indigenous for support of the macro-structure that is the state, but denies them recognition as contributing members: “Como en la mayoría de los aspectos de la vida nacional, a nosotros los indios y los campesinos nos toca la peor parte. Cuando se trata de obligaciones, se acuerdan de nosotros. Pero cuando se trata de nuestros derechos, somos los últimos en recibir los beneficios” (189). Luín’s criticism of the *ladino* project is not completely disparaging as he inadvertently offers an alternative approach. Luín’s approach involves the active participation of Indigenous people so that a sense of nationness is more instinctive and there is no need to violently force them to participate, which inevitably causes a great deal of fear, distrust and resentment (189). Moreover, the new, more integrative project would take into account the social, political and cultural differences of Indigenous people in order to ensure that they are included and more fairly treated. To guarantee the success of a more just nation project, Luín indicates that education is the ultimate conduit. This is reminiscent of González’s declared project of literacization of oral Maya tradition: Luín’s project requires that a lettered Maya intellectual be the leader and representative of Maya people (190).

Writing as an Indigenous author in Guatemala today is a form of activism. In an endless number of cultural texts marks of *indianidad* need to be revised and redeployed to rearticulate Indigenousness in a country where at least half of the population is not *ladino*, but belongs to one of Guatemala’s many Indigenous nations. Indigenous literature in Guatemala almost invariably denotes a negotiation of identity and challenges all-
encompassing, stereotyped and homogenous definitions of what the *indio* is, what the *indio* does, and what the *indio* should be. The works of authors like Luis de Lión and Gaspar Pedro González reveal an inconformity with earlier portrayals of the voiceless Indigenous as they isolate the position that was assigned to the Indigenous subject, only to test its limits and reflect on their rigidity. This contestatory nature counters traditional notions of Indigenous identity and proposes an Indigenous body of texts written by and for the Indigenous peoples of Guatemala. But more than that, these texts are imbued with contradiction, distinction and difference that show Indigenous identity as something ambiguous, fragmented and ever-changing, as the tourist guide and shaman in Chichicastenago show. Luis de Lión plays with traditional notions of Indigenousness only to subvert them and show the seams of their construction: issues of language, ethnicity, oppression and discrimination are brought to the forefront and dismantled in order to reflect on their rigidity and insufficiency. Gaspar Pedro González also reflects on those traditional notions of Indigenousness and offers an alternative: a cultural endeavour for the revitalization of Indigenous culture that carries great socio-political significance for the overall nation project.

It is important to examine the invalidation and revision of the *ladino* Indigenous myth from the perspective of the Indigenous subject himself, as this marks a new tradition in the history of Guatemalan literature and also in the history of Indigenous literature in Latin America. Most importantly, the study of counter-narratives by Indigenous writers and an examination of the socio-political forces that have informed their production helps provide an alternative history for Guatemala and Guatemalan literature. Luis de Lión’s novel *El tiempo principia en Xibalbá* and Gaspar Pedro González’s *La otra cara* pioneer a body of literature that evidences the cultural relevance of groups that have been traditionally
marginalized in Guatemalan society. Taking on such projects has been no easy task for these writers because writing about Indigenous subjects was an undertaking exclusive to the ladino intellectual elites of Guatemala. Nonetheless, the greater visibility and political participation of a new elite of Maya intellectuals have opened up the literary market as well as the cultural establishment for Indigenous writers in Guatemala, and Indigenous people are claiming more vigorously than ever the space and the voice they were denied for many years.
Chapter 3

From Rigoberta Menchú’s *Testimonio* to Maya Cu’s Erotic Poetry: the Emergence of a Contemporary Indigenous Women’s Literature

Like the work of their male counterparts, the writing of Indigenous women in Guatemala is shaped by the circumstances surrounding its production as a marginal literature, as well as by the situation that its authors face in the political, social and literary realms. These Indigenous women writers not only articulate an Indigenous identity; they do so from a woman’s perspective. Their struggle is far greater as they seek to insert their works into a literary tradition that has long been dominated by male writers.

In a web project dedicated to the literary production of Maya women writers in Guatemala, Ann Sittig includes Rigoberta Menchú, Maya Cu, and Calixta Gabriela Xiquín, as well as other prominent Indigenous women who write about politics, culture, family, and class (*Mayan Literature*). Of all the women that Sittig includes, only Cu and Gabriel Xiquín write poetry, and Menchú *testimonio*. This decision on the part of Sittig to include women whose work focuses on issues of politics, health or social justice denotes the deep-rooted connection between literary production and political activism that cannot be overlooked when considering the work of Indigenous women writers. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Guatemala has only recently seen the production of an Indigenous literature. However, a significant feature of this new literature is the underrepresentation of Indigenous women writers. This can be explained by a number of factors: a male-dominated *ladino* culture, high levels of illiteracy among Indigenous women, racism, discrimination, economic disadvantage and a long history of oral tradition. Like the literature written by Indigenous men, that of Indigenous women shows a keen awareness of the
situation of Maya people in the political, cultural and socio-economic spheres of the country and they address those issues explicitly, in particular as they relate to the lives of Indigenous women. At present, there are very few Indigenous women writing in Guatemala; I consider Rigoberta Menchú’s controversial *testimonio, Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia*, to be the first female incursion into an Indigenous literature. Though *testimonio* as a literary genre was, in its inception, the object of much debate, today it is widely recognized as a literary form.¹

In order to ground my study in the context of contemporary Guatemala as it relates to the experience of Maya women writers in particular, I take into account the specificities of place, culture and tradition as well as of the emerging feminist Indigenous movement. I begin this chapter by discussing the suitability of a postcolonial-feminist framework in the analysis of the literary production of Indigenous women. I employ postcolonial feminism in order to elucidate the social, economic, cultural and political impact of the colonial and internal-colonial enterprises on the lives of women in Guatemala, while critically observing the intersections of race, ethnicity, class and gender. I then discuss the current situation of Maya women in Guatemala and the impact of Menchú’s work on the emergence of an Indigenous literature, in particular as it pertains to the writing of women. I do not, however, include an analysis of Menchú’s work as its complexity, controversy and impact have been discussed at great length elsewhere and, while it signals a key moment in the development of an Indigenous literature in Guatemala, in its production, publication and reception it differs markedly from the works I analyze here. Lastly, I observe how the work of Calixta Gabriel Xiquín and Maya Cu seeks a fuller, more inclusive integration of female voices for the articulation of Maya identity, as well as for the continuance of a Maya project that is

¹ See John Beverly’s essay “Second Thoughts on Testimonio” in *Against Literature*. 
representative of both men and women. For this, I examine how each poet reevaluates and contests traditional female roles and symbols, rendering them insufficient as imposed social constructs produced by a predominantly male *ladino* culture to organize the Guatemalan nation. I also look at Gabriel Xiquín and Cu’s particular approach to raising issues of representation so that Indigenous women may participate more actively in a process of self-determination in which they can write their own history.

**A Postcolonial Feminist Perspective**

Given that, as Indigenous women writers, Gabriel Xiquín and Maya Cu and female Maya activists, like Irma Alicia Velázquez Nimatuj and Alma López, raise issues of gender, sex, ethnicity and class in their work, I employ a theoretical framework of postcolonial feminism. I deem it imperative to employ such an approach to analyze the work of these women as their concerns cannot be explained solely with the aid of postcolonial theory. Postcolonialism seldom takes into account gender as a contributing factor in the power relations that emerge in a colonial society. When observing the category of the colonized, postcolonialism ignores gender difference and its effects on the colonial experiences of men and women, because, as Sara Mills points out, postcolonial theory has been primarily concerned with the study of narratives that “represent the colonial/imperial context, primarily those written by British males” (99).

Women, as well as the feminized *indio*, have had an important symbolic function in colonial texts in which gender plays a central role in the preservation of colonial control and imperial rule. For Lyn Innes, who focuses on the independence movements in Ireland and Africa, the symbolic role of women extends to the production of nationalist and anti-colonial texts, which rely on patriarchal notions of manhood and womanhood ("Virgin Territories and
Motherlands: Colonial and Nationalist Representations of Africa and Ireland”). In fact, in anticolonial struggles there is an “aggressive masculinity” in response to the colonial discourse’s feminization of colonized men (Boehmer 216). Given that power relations in the colonial and postcolonial context are gendered, we must turn to feminism. Anne McClintock argues:

imperialism cannot be understood without a theory of gender power. Gender power was not the superficial patina of empire, an ephemeral gloss over the more decisive mechanics of class or race. Rather gender dynamics were from the outset, fundamental to the securing and maintenance of the imperial enterprise. (6-7)

However, we also must be mindful of the feminist approach that we use in the analysis of the postcoloniality of Indigenous texts written by women in Guatemala.

Traditional feminism is problematic when used in the postcolonial context and when speaking of Guatemala more specifically, as it essentializes the plight for liberation of all women, overlooking racial, ethnic, class and political differences. In fact, Western feminism has relied on what Gayatri Spivak calls a ‘strategic essentialism’ that blurs ethnic and gender difference amongst women (The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues 109). Above all, mainstream feminism and its universalizing modes inadvertently propose that Western culture be a model for the Third World as it relates to the rights of women. In “Under Western Eyes,” Chandra Mohanty criticizes traditional feminism for regarding women as an all-homogenous group, altogether ignoring issues of ethnicity and class. For Mohanty, Western feminism “discursively colonize[s] the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/re-presenting a composite, singular ‘Third World woman’—an image which appears arbitrarily constructed, but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse” (53).
More importantly, traditional feminists’ essentialist outlook can be seen as a Westernizing concept that holds Third World women in a permanent position of marginality and oppression. Spivak asks “Can the subaltern speak?” as she reflects on the role of the Western feminist in speaking of (or for) the subaltern Third World woman. For Spivak, the subaltern is permanently subordinated as the Western feminist speaks for her through “an imperialist-subject-constitution,” which results in the subaltern’s inability to speak (294). Moreover, as Nelly Richard points out, we must be aware of the possible effects of the West’s feminist discourse and its exclusiveness:

Euro-North American theory tends to vindicate the figure of the Other in order to administer its own rhetoric as international privilege: the decentered center speaks in representation of the Other, but generally does so while denying its own others (from the periphery) the opportunity to fight those mechanisms of discursive/institutional intervention and confrontation that would constitute and institute them as subjects, not objects of the discourse of otherness. (Masculine/Feminine: Practices of Difference(s) 58)

It is thus important to utilize a feminism that is critical of the “decentered center” and is reflexive of its own colonizing discourse. More importantly, it is crucial that the specific concerns of Maya women as well as feminism(s) articulated by Mayan activists in Guatemala be taken into account.

In Guatemala, there has been little or no debate about the application of feminism to the reality of Maya women today. For the most part, feminism is perceived as foreign and, in an effort to form a collective consciousness, some Maya activists have offered an essentialist view on gender that positions Maya men and women outside the patriarchal reach of the West and of ladino Guatemala, insisting that sexism, machismo and other forms of gender oppression are not prevalent in Maya society (Camus, “Mujeres y Mayas”). Today, Maya women recognize the importance of feminism in raising awareness and advancing the rights of Indigenous women in Guatemala and they acknowledge the need to
develop a consciousness that is specific to their needs and that comes directly from their own reality. Carmen Álvarez Medrano, a Maya-K’iche’ activist, explains:

No obstante, con todo y los aportes del feminismo, muy pocas mujeres indígenas han tomado el feminismo como bandera de lucha, ya que hoy por hoy las mujeres mayas estamos desarrollando una manera propia de pensarnos, de expresarnos, de actuar, de ser sujetas de nuestras propias vidas, para estar más en el camino del respeto, de la equidad, de la paz para la construcción de sociedades más [sic] sanas y [sic] integradoras, sin olvidar que somos parte de un pueblo, de una comunidad y eso implica otras maneras de ver y abordar la realidad. (6)

Meanwhile, some Maya female activists, in an effort to present a united front and advance a Mayanist agenda, turn a blind eye to sexism and choose to continue the struggle for recognition of Maya people.² In other cases, women are reprimanded for denouncing the machismo of their fathers, spouses or colleagues (Macleod 14).³ In other words, the mobilization of women is perceived as a threat by some male Maya leaders as it signals a departure from the Maya movement’s ‘essentialist strategy’ that tries to ensure a certain continuity, coherence and cohesiveness through the homogenization of Maya identity.

Though they encounter opposition and resistance, many Maya women continually organize themselves and reaffirm their rights as women, mothers, political actors, landowners, entrepreneurs, scholars, etc. Moreover, these women adopt strategies that directly address their specific reality as informed by a set of particular socio-political, cultural, ethnic and economic circumstances, as I showed with the women involved in the Summit. In a study relating to Indigenous women in Mexico, Aída Hernández Castillo suggests that this and other unique realities call forth the emergence of a new feminism,

² The idea of gender complementarity is often cited by Maya activists, both men and women, to deny the power relations between Indigenous men and women; it forms part of a Maya revitalization that recovers an ancient Maya cosmovision that is centered around the idea of duality (Hérnandez Castillo, “Between Complementarity and Inequality” 6)

³ Macleod points out that members of the organization Grupo de Mujeres Kaqla have been accused of disloyalty and even ethnocide when attempting to address issues of sexism and machismo (14n).
specifically an Indigenous one that resembles in some ways other feminisms but addresses the gender, class, ethnic and cultural identities of Maya women (“Entre el etnocentrismo feminista y el esencialismo étnico” 3). Unlike traditional feminisms or “hegemonic feminism,” an Indigenous feminism or a conception of gender would take into consideration Maya spirituality as well as other markers of identity.

In their work and in their homes, Indigenous women activists in Guatemala revise the Maya project set forth early on by Maya intellectuals to include women as political actors and resignify their symbolic status as mothers of the nation and guardians of Maya culture itself. Issues of disparity, racism and sexism are addressed as they redefine the Indigenous woman for the success of a more inclusive project that ensures equal access to health care, education, economic development programs, and to the political and socio-cultural lives of their own communities as well as of the dominant ladino culture. More importantly, in doing so Maya women confront a legacy of colonialism that cannot be ignored. As a result, it is important to observe the postcolonial condition of female Indigenous writers when examining the power relations that are based on class, ethnicity and gender that shape their work.

As I argued in the previous chapter, it is useful to speak of postcoloniality when observing former Spanish colonies, like Guatemala. In Guatemala’s postcolonial society, Maya women continue to face a double bind in which they are simultaneously subordinated for their position as colonized people and as women. The lives of Indigenous women in the region have been inevitably shaped by Spanish colonization, Western imperialism and global

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4 The term hegemonic feminism was introduced by Chela Sandoval in her book *Methodology of the Oppressed* to refer to white, Western feminism. Hernández Castillo uses it to describe the feminism that is written from the center and theorized in the academia (2n).

5 Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford use the term “double colonisation” to refer to postcolonial women’s double bind (*A Double Colonisation: Colonial and Post-Colonial Women’s Writing* 9).
capitalism, systems that rely on the exploitation, marginalization and oppression of women for their cultural, social and economic organization. For these reasons, it is important to employ a theoretical framework that takes into consideration both the postcolonial condition as well as the gendered power relations that shape the lives of Indigenous women in Guatemala.

In the work of female Maya writers, issues of ethnicity are addressed together with sexuality, gender, and class in an attempt to destabilize the structures that rely on the execution of those markers of individual and group identity. For Uma Narayan, Third World feminists and, I would like to add, Indigenous women in postcolonial Guatemalan society, need to challenge “the larger pictures of Nation, National History, and Cultural Traditions . . . that conceal their own historicity and their own status as representations—suggesting that the nation and its culture are ‘natural givens’ rather than the historical inventions and constructions that they are” (her emphasis, 20-1). I argue that, in their poetry, Gabriel Xiquín and Cu are successful in revealing the constructedness of the nation project by contesting traditional Maya gender roles that exist not only in Maya society but also in dominant ladino culture. In other words, not only do these Indigenous women writers defy certain cultural practices and institutions in Guatemalan and Maya societies, but also deal with the “larger pictures of Nation, National History, and Cultural Traditions,” as Narayan suggests.

With the exception of Rigoberta Menchú’s testimony, postcolonial feminism has not been employed in examining how the experiences of Indigenous women in Guatemala have been shaped by colonialism. I believe that the critical work of postcolonial feminists such as

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6 Two recent studies that examine Menchú’s postcolonial literary project are Susan C. Jarratt’s essay “Beside Ourselves: Rhetoric and Representation in Postcolonial Feminist Writing” in Crossing Borderlands: Composition and Postcolonial Studies and Laura Kempen’s Mariama Bâ, Rigoberta Menchu, and Postcolonial Feminism
Anne McClintock, Nirmal Puwar Nira, and Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias provide a vital feminist critique of nationalism(s) in Guatemala. Their approach is helpful in unpacking the symbolic and actual roles of Indigenous women in contemporary Guatemalan and Maya societies, as I will show in the case of Velázquez Nimatuj and in Gabriel Xiquín’s and Cu’s poetry.

**The Lives of Maya Women in Guatemala: From Silence to Political Mobilization**

In general, the socio-political agency of women in Guatemala has been ignored and their participation limited due to the gender, class and ethnic constraints of the country’s modern nation state model. Guatemalan women have had limited access to education and in areas where the population is mainly Indigenous illiteracy rates among women reach 90% (Montenegro 86). Under labour law, women are placed in the same category as working minors, a classification that is illustrative of prevalent attitudes toward women and reminiscent of colonial rule. When comparing the political participation of Guatemalan women with that of other Central American countries, Guatemala lags behind: the country has the lowest percentage of women in key positions in the legislative, judicial and executive divisions of the government (Montenegro 89). For Montenegro, patriarchy, exclusion, illiteracy, and the prevalence of gender roles are major obstacles to women’s political participation in Guatemala (90). The situation of poor women is further

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7 The articles relating to women in Guatemala’s *Código de Trabajo*, or Labour Code appear in a chapter entitled “Trabajo de mujeres y menores de edad.”

8 According to a study carried out by Alejandra Massolo for the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (UN-INSTRAW) and the Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional (AECI), in Latin America few government posts are held by women and those that are, are perceived as favours granted to women, who are believed not to be able to perform as well as men (38).
compounded by the ethnic, class and cultural differences that restrict their engagement in the country’s socio-political and economic activities.

Indigenous women face far more challenges than Indigenous men because they are further marginalized: while their male counterparts are subject to greater discrimination than most Guatemalans because of their ethnicity, class and education, women must doubly overcome the restrictions placed upon them by a male-dominated Maya society as well as those that come from the dominant ladino culture. Moreover, Indigenous women do not enjoy the same access to education, the formal economy and government posts that Indigenous enjoy. According to Ana Silvia Monzón, gender plays a central role in the marginalization of Indigenous women in Guatemala:

La situación de las mujeres indígenas en el contexto histórico guatemalteco, ha sido y es de marginación, explotación y discriminación, al igual que los hombres indígenas. Sin embargo, estas condiciones se ven agravadas por el hecho de que por ser mujeres, se les han negado más oportunidades que al hombre en materia de educación, ellas más que ellos son analfabetas y monolingües, lo que limita su desarrollo.

A more telling illustration of the present situation of Indigenous women in Guatemala can be found in the “Acuerdo sobre la identidad y derechos de los pueblos indígenas,” an agreement signed during the peace negotiations by the Guatemalan government and the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG). This accord marks a major shift in the history of interethnic relations in Guatemala as it recognizes the identity of Indigenous people and vows to protect their rights and customs. In a section entitled “Derechos de la

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9 In January 2008 it was reported that in the Zapotec village of Santa María Quiegolani Eufrosina Cruz, an Indigenous woman who declared her candidacy for Mayor, was denied her right to run for the post due to the belief that women are not citizens: “The all-male town board tore up ballots cast in her favor in the Nov. 4 election, arguing that as a woman, she wasn’t a ‘citizen’ of the town. ‘That is the custom here, that only the citizens vote, not the women,’ said Valeriano Lopez, the town’s deputy mayor. Rather than give up, Cruz has launched the first serious, national-level challenge to traditional Indian forms of government, known as ‘use and customs,’ which were given full legal status in Mexico six years ago in response to Indian rights movements sweeping across Latin America (Stevenson, “In Mexico, a gain for native civil rights is a loss for some women”).
mujer indígena,” the accord explicitly addresses the rights of Indigenous women and the double discrimination they face. Indigenous women are said to be particularly vulnerable and defenceless: “Se reconoce la particular vulnerabilidad e indefensión de la mujer indígena frente a la doble discriminación como mujer y como indígena, con el agravante de una situación social de particular pobreza y explotación” (3). For Susan Berger this statement “continues to reflect long-standing patriarchal and racist sentiments toward indigenous women” at the same time that it “disavows indigenous women as empowered subjects” (Guatemaltecas: The Women’s Movement 1986-2003 45).

Despite the long-standing attitudes and the deep-seated discrimination that shape the lives of Maya women in Guatemala, in the past decade the country has seen the increased participation of Indigenous women as Maya people actively organize themselves and demand their rights as Guatemalan citizens and political actors. Indigenous women today are beginning to claim a voice and a space in the Guatemalan dominant culture as Indigenous individuals capable of cultural empowerment, self-determination and political action. However, politically active Maya women who step outside tradition and question the dominant culture still face discrimination within their own ethno-political affiliations. At the III Continental Summit of Indigenous Pueblos and Nations of Abya Yala held in Guatemala in March of 2007, Alma López, a K’iche’ activist addressed this specific issue. In her experience, Indigenous women are seen as weak, vulnerable, and unreliable within their own communities:

[A]l tratar de organizar una directiva dijeron que es muy peligroso que las mujeres estemos al frente, porque es como tener un barco a la deriva, porque ellas se quejan de que no tienen tiempo, que si salen tarde las pueden violar en el camino o el esposo las va a regañar. No se reconoce que estamos aportando, sino se nos acusa de que estamos dividiendo el comité. (qtd. in Cu, ”Demandas y denuncias en tono de mujer”)
In fact, well-known Indigenous women activists noted that even at the Summit, a forum for Indigenous people, they were denied the same rights and privileges as the Indigenous men who gathered in Iximché. After a brief inspection, Maya Cu reported that very few panels were presided over by women, and female panelists at the Summit constituted a minority ("Demandas"). López criticized the Summit organizers for not including women: "denunció que el espacio de las mujeres (en esta cumbre) fue integrado por emergencia" (Cu, "Demandas"). In a debate that followed López’s talk, Cu indicated that the participants demanded the use of a more inclusive language. To illustrate the lack of a language that was more inclusive of women, the participants spoke of the nametags that identified them as "delegados," failing to acknowledge gender differences of participants. The label that appeared on each participant’s nametag ultimately denoted the place, or lack thereof, of women in the masculine-oriented political mobilization of Indigenous people. Women at the Summit not only recognized their double marginalization but also demanded that their situation change.

At the Summit, Indigenous women activists also identified other obstacles they faced in their struggle for political recognition as women, political actors and Indigenous individuals. For Blanca Chancoso, leader of the Confederación de los Pueblos de Nacionalidad Kichua del Ecuador (ECUARUNARI), the traditional roles assigned to Indigenous women has prevented their integration as actors in the political organization of Indigenous societies: “[Las mujeres] hemos venido acompañando silenciosamente todo el tiempo (a los hombres), como hija, como esposa, como madres; pero acompañando y muy pocas veces hemos sido visibles. . . . Quisiéramos hacer un acompañamiento no silencioso, no como ‘arrimadas’” (qtd. in Cu, “Demandas”). In the same roundtable discussion, Alma López described the role of the Indigenous woman as follows: “a las mujeres se nos ha
educado a andar agachadas, dar pasos cortos y mejor si no hacemos ruido” (“Demandas”). Chancoso’s statement resonates with the organization of the masculine nation that the feminist critics Anne McClintock, Nirmal Puwar and Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias have described. While López’s statement speaks more pointedly to the case of Indigenous women in Guatemala, she identifies some key elements that define femininity in terms of a masculine nation project: woman is represented as a silent companion to man—the leader and defender of the nation project—and producer and caretaker of national subjects and their culture.

Indigenous Women as Mothers, Producers of Culture and Symbols of Nationhood

Maya women in Guatemala are seen as mothers par excellence and their most valued contributions are a product of their domestic labour. In essence, their role consists of maintaining the production of national subjects and of national symbols. Martha Florinda González Diéguez points out that Indigenous women carry on tradition and transmit customs through everyday mundane acts:

La mujer como transmisora de la cultura lo hace desde que está esperando al nuevo ser, cuando se encuentra en su vientre, por esa razón la mujer como transmisora de la cultura, como madre, como tejedora de la historia a través de los güipiles, tocoyales [a type of headdress], de los trajes [traditional female dresses] que elabora con sus propias manos, más que escribir en papeles deja impresos sus pensamientos, sentimientos, creatividad en los tejidos multicolores, con sus diversos estilos, formas y diseños en el vestuario que con toda dignidad los lleva luciendo en su diario vivir. (150)

The overall role of women, however, is passive as Anne McClintock notes, since in the nation women’s role is “metaphoric or symbolic” while men’s role is “metonymic” (355). Indigenous women in Guatemala are the cornerstone of the Guatemalan nation: they tend the hearth, cook, weave and raise children. These domestic activities characterize the
Indigenous feminine ideal in the logical organization of a Guatemalan national narrative in which the woman cares for the home while the man edifies the nation.

This heavily gendered and deeply ethnicized narrative of Guatemalan nationhood is but a legacy of colonial invasion, in which the female body was used in a metaphor of conquest and domination. Jan van der Straet’s well-known illustration (ca. 1575) of the encounter between an Indigenous woman and Vespucci reveals much of the gendered power relations that developed between conqueror and conquered and were inherited by the forefathers of the Guatemalan nation. The woman appears naked, on a hammock, in a submissive pose while Amerigo Vespucci, in full armour, holds a flag and an astrolabe, with a sword by his side. The background is accentuated by a variety of wildlife, lush vegetation, arrows and a human leg on a spit that is tended to by other Indigenous women. The implications of this illustration are highly significant as the body of the naked woman denotes the ‘new-found’ territory that must be conquered, possessed and tamed. McClintock further explains the significance of the contrast between the woman’s nakedness and Vespucci’s flag, sword and astrolabe:

America allegorically represents nature’s invitation to conquest, while Vespucci, gripping the fetish instruments of imperial mastery—astrolabe, flag and sword—confronts the virgin land with the patrimony of scientific mastery and imperial might. Invested with the male prerogative of naming, Vespucci renders America’s identity a dependent extension of his and stakes male Europe’s territorial rights to her body, and, by extension, the fruits of her land. (26)

Van der Straet’s illustration also depicts the gendered dynamics of protector and protégé that arose when the two worlds clashed: the Americas, represented by the Indigenous woman, were to remain under the care of a European master, namely a man who, like Vespucci, skilfully operated the “fetish instruments of imperial mastery.”
As the Americas began to consolidate efforts of emancipation and independence from the colonial powers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a discourse that relied heavily on gender differences was used by the intellectual elites. Leading figures in Latin America placed great emphasis on masculinity as a defining mark of nationhood in which women were seldom present. In “Masculinity and Nationalism: Gender and Sexuality in the Making of Nations,” Joan Nagel notes that the nation is a masculine institution because of its “hierarchical authority structure, the male domination of decision-making positions, the male superordinate/female subordinate internal division of labour, and the male legal regulation of female rights, labour and sexuality” (251). A body of self-professed strong, autonomous men defied the colonial powers and vowed to lead and protect *la madre patria* and its people.

The modern nation was thus shaped into an exclusively masculine institution in which the possibility of the political agency of women was completely absent. Women became metaphors for the nation and the nation remained a masculine endeavour. Despite men’s predominant roles, women occupied an important position in the nation as gender differences were generated by means of the female body for the regulation of public and private spaces, and civil and familial relations: “[e]xcluded from direct action as national citizens, women are subsumed symbolically into the national body politic as its boundary and metaphoric limit” (McClintock 354).

In the scheme of the (masculine) nation, domesticity and motherhood became the prescribed functions of women. According to Nirmal Purwar, typically “[w]omen are

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10 In Argentina, for example, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento had a positive outlook in regards to the integration of women into the nation project. However, this outlook saw women assuming traditional and symbolic roles in the home in support of men’s role as leaders of the nation (*Between Civilization and Barbarism: Women, Nation, and Literary Culture in Modern Argentina* 53-4).

11 In “Nuestra América” Martí criticizes the “sietemesinos,” the fickle young men who turn their back on their ‘mother,’ “la patria.”
assigned a different relationship to the nation, one that buys into the separation of the civil and the familial, the public and the private or nature and reason, by allocating them a place in the civil domain as figurines of the familial and nature” (26). Implicit in the domestic or “familial” roles assigned to women is the perpetuation of national culture. Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias identify some of the ways in which “women have tended to participate in ethnic and national processes and in relation to state practices,” as “transmitters of culture,” “biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities,” and “reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups” (7). The characteristics of the gendered nation, as outlined by McClintock, Purwae and Yuval-Davis and Anthias, hold true for Guatemala, a nation that operates well within the confines of patriarchy.

The Traje

The quintessential symbol of Guatemalan national identity, ethnicity, femininity, and domesticity is the traje woven by Indigenous women. The production of trajes is celebrated as a domestic activity carried out exclusively by Maya women who make up the majority of traje wearers. Accordingly, the traje in Guatemala signals the division of labour and citizenship based on gender difference and ethnic identity. While the traje has stood as a symbol of Guatemala’s Mayanness, today Indigenous men and women wear the traditional dress as a reaffirmation of their ethnic identity and a contestation of the norms and conventions of dominant ladino culture, which once sought the elimination of the Maya dress in its efforts to assimilate Indigenous people.

In June 2002, Irma Alicia Velázquez Nimatuj, a well-known scholar and Maya K’iche’ activist, was barred from entering a local establishment in one of the Guatemala City’s most affluent areas because of her attire, the traditional Maya dress consisting of a corte and a
güipil (a handwoven wrap skirt and blouse): “When I reached the door with four other women, a security guard in civilian clothes said politely to the other women: ‘This way, please.’ To me he said loudly: ‘But not you: women in traje típico (folkloric dress) aren’t allowed in’” (Velázquez Nimatuj, “Transnationalism and Maya Dress”). While the “Acuerdo sobre la identidad y derechos de los pueblos indígenas,” signed in 1995 by the Guatemalan government, recognizes and protects the constitutional right of Indigenous people to wear Indigenous dress, Mayas, in particular Maya women, face prejudice and discrimination on a daily basis because of their dress.

The traje, often referred to as a traje típico, a term that Maya activists view as a ‘folklorization’ of Maya culture, is a trope in the Guatemalan imaginary (Velázquez Nimatuj). The weavings made by Indigenous women repeatedly appear at the forefront of expressions of nationhood, where they are an emblem of Guatemalaness that “has become a symbol of national identity for the state, and is purveyed in international beauty contests, tourist brochures and business literature as the expression of a true national essence” (Radcliffe and Westwood 18). The weavings made by women are often regarded as metaphors of a master narrative that tells of the ethnic and historical complexity of Guatemala and found it in a pre-Hispanic past of mythical proportions. Moreover, the Maya traditional dress carries with it ethnic and gender differences as it constitutes a visual symbol of Indigenousness and is worn mostly by women. For Manuela Camus, the ethnic and gendered significance of the traje makes the Indigenous woman into a ‘living ethnic symbol’ used as currency in social and power relations in Guatemala today (Ser indígena 314).

According to Manuela Camus traje típico is a standardized term, used amongst Indigenous women as an euphemism to avoid the use of terms such as indígena, corte, and güipil which often carry a negative connotation (Ser indígena 316).
In many regions men have ceased to wear the traditional dress because they have travelled outside the community in search of work in ladino-dominated zones. For these men, shedding their traditional clothing is akin to shedding one’s ethnic affiliation, which for them guarantees better integration and less discrimination.\(^\text{13}\) Even as the *traje* and its colourful designs form an integral part of the symbols used by those in power as part of a national discourse, its significance is twofold. On one hand, its use legitimizes the Guatemalan nation by giving it a pre-Hispanic origin and a sense of permanence, while, on the other hand, it segregates by accentuating ethnic difference. Diane Nelson comments on the heavily gendered and ethnicized nature of the discourse found in the jokes about Nobel Peace Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú. According to Nelson, “Mayan woman’s traditional clothing figures prominently in the jokes and seems to mark a place of particular ambivalence or challenge to the notions of ethnic-national identity” (175). In these jokes, Nelson finds a discourse that renders Menchú “as a sort of transvestite who is not what she seems” because she does not conform to the prescribed roles of the Indigenous woman. The *traje*, which is “a ‘typical’ and thus unproblematic marker of identity,” is unravelled in the jokes, a move that reveals the anxiety felt by the ladino people that tell the jokes (175).

Wearing the *traje* is an act of defiance that ultimately reappropriates that which serves as a visual marker of ethnicity for both Maya and ladino people. Indigenous women in particular, boldly wear the *corte* and the *güipil* at home, at school, on the street and to a number of functions because they are constantly resignifying it as their own. For Velázquez Nimatuj, wearing the *traje* is indeed a political act:

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\(^{13}\) Manuela Camus’ *Ser indígena en Ciudad de Guatemala* is a well thought-out study that documents Indigenous identity in Guatemala City. Through a series of interviews, she discovered that when Indigenous men ceased wearing the traditional dress it was more widely accepted than when women did so (314n8). In the 1980s Indigenous men who attended university, would refrain from speaking to women dressed in *corte* and *güipil* in order to keep their ethnic identity hidden: “[los] hombres mayas, quienes al ser menos detectables, optaban por no hacerse evidentes no acercándose a estas jóvenes [mayas]” (327).
I must stress that wearing our trajes—whether they be K’iche’, Mam, Kaqchikel, Tzutuhil, Pocomchi, Jakalteca or others—is not simply a matter of standing up for our cultural rights. For post-war Guatemala it has become a political challenge: that of breaking the various ideological, legal, colonial and contemporary racist structures that exist in all spheres of the Guatemalan State.

The political significance of the Indigenous dress was fully revealed at the III Continental Summit of Indigenous Pueblos and Nations of Abya Yala as Maya people donned their traditional dress and marched through the streets of Guatemala City. For Maya activists, the revival of Maya languages, traditions and customs is necessary for the success of a new nation project. However, it is also necessary to reinvest the symbols employed by the dominant ladino discourse with a new meaning, one that more closely resembles the lives of the Indigenous people from whom it borrows. As a result, at the heart of the rearticulation of Indigenous identity we find the resignification of the traje, the traditional dress of Maya people that is undeniably female.

Maya women and men today assert their ethnic identity, challenge dominant ladino culture and claim the spaces from which they have been banned with the traje. These men and women constantly reclaim and transform their place in the Guatemalan nation by wearing the traje “within their own homes in addition to local languages, customs and rituals, as the basis for expressing their own identities, which are critical of the state and its use of their clothing” (Radcliffe and Westwood 18-19). In “Homeplace: A Site of Resistance” bell hooks rejects the “white bourgeois norms (where home is conceptualized as politically neutral space)” (47) and examines the “homeplace” of African American women as a “site of resistance and liberation struggle” (43). Hook’s theory proposes that the homeplace provides women with a private space in which to resist and contest dominant (white) society. Not only that, but home is a place where individuals can cease being objects and become subjects and “affirm one another” (42). Much the same occurs in the homes of
Guatemalan women who continue to weave and wear the *corte* and *güipil* despite societal pressures to cease wearing it. Ultimately, the self-determination and empowerment that occurs in the homeplace is taken outside the home, to the public spheres in order to effect change. On wearing the traditional *traje* in Guatemala City, Velázquez Nimatuj affirms that "[w]henever we are seen in regional *traje*, the ruling classes are reminded of the failure of their efforts to make us disappear, which have ranged from genocide to ideological coercion.” Bell hooks declares that the role of women in the homeplace is often undervalued as it is considered woman’s ‘natural’ responsibility. This “obscures the political commitment” that is behind the actions of mothers, wives and daughters (45). For hooks, it is thus necessary to revise and reinvest the conscious efforts of women that give rise to a community of resistance.

Similarly, in Guatemala, activists express the need to revise the roles typically assigned to them so that women may play a central role in determining their future, reviewing their past and reshaping the now, as Alma López explains:

> hemos tenido que resignificarnos...nosotras somos parte de un sistema patriarcal que nos hace cuestionarnos ¿qué es primero, ser mujer o ser maya? Pero hemos empezado a avanzar para escribir agendas políticas para ir conciliando esta dicotomía que el sistema nos impone. ("Demandas")

López also suggests that Indigenous women must reappropriate the images and symbols of Indigenousness, as represented by the female body, used by the state, the tourism industry, and international agencies. Interestingly, López uses the metaphor of the body to refer to the rearticulation of an Indigenous femininity. For the K’iche’ activist it is necessary

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14 Antonio Batres Jáuregui, one of Guatemala’s most influential thinkers, believed that for the successful realization of a nation project it was necessary that Indigenous people assimilate into *ladino* culture. Part of this assimilation consisted of shedding the Indigenous traditional garments: “De verdad tan palmaria, se deduce que, en la tarea de nivelar á la raza indígena con la más culta, deben dirigirse los esfuerzos; á que abandone sus miserables vestidos por los que usan los ladinos; á que se habitúe á una alimentación más sustanciosa y nutritiva que la que acostumbra; á que use de los muebles más indispensables para la salud y para una mediana comodidad” (12-13).
to cease the use of the female body as a malleable signifier of Indigenousness: “No debemos permitir más uso de nuestros cuerpos; no permitir ser más las de la foto, las del símbolo” (“Demandas”). For López, women must speak up and rearticulate their own identities as women and Maya people.

**Rigoberta Menchú Tum’s Testimonio: A Call to Arms**

Before Rigoberta Menchú’s testimonial narrative, there existed very little interest, if any existed at all, on the writing of Indigenous people in Guatemala. Indigenousness as a theme was popular among *ladino* writers, but there were very few literary accounts written by the Maya. When Menchú’s *testimonio* was published, it generated much debate around its inception, its development and its reception, and other *testimonio* accounts by Mayas and even *ladinos* involved in the armed conflict (re)emerged.15 None of these experienced the renown that *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú* enjoyed, but it was possible for these writers to benefit from the interest that Menchú’s work sparked. Moreover, Menchú, an Indigenous woman, had shocked Guatemalan society into a reconsideration of the Indigenous individual as a powerful political actor and contributor. Although some Indigenous people, like Luis de Lión and Gaspar Pedro González, were writing much before Menchú arrived on the Guatemalan literary scene, many speak of a contemporary Indigenous literature in

15 Some of the most well-known testimonial accounts include Ignacio Bizarro Ujpan’s *Son of Tecun Uman: A Maya Indian Tells His Life Story* (1981); *Campesino: The Diary of a Guatemalan Indian* (1985); and *Ignacio: The Diary of a Maya Indian of Guatemala* (1992). Another well-known testimonio is Víctor Montejo’s *Testimonio: muerte de una comunidad indígena en Guatemala* (1993). *Voices from the Silence. Guatemalan Literature of Resistance*, edited Marc Zimmerman and Raul Rojas, is a collection of poetry, fiction and testimonial accounts, representative of the work that existed before and after Menchú, but that took on greater significance and impact upon the Nobel laureate’s induction into the Guatemalan literary canon.
Guatemala beginning with the publication of *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú*. In anthologies, critical collections and literary histories Menchú often appears first, before any other Indigenous writers, as the inaugurator of an Indigenous literature.

Also of note is Menchú’s entry into the nation’s political scene. Menchú, a doubly marginalized woman, marked a moment in the history of Guatemala in which the voices of Indigenous people claimed their inclusion in the socio-political, literary and cultural life of the country. This phenomenon has been the subject of much discord among Guatemalans, a sentiment that reflects the long-standing patriarchal attitudes that form the bases of the Guatemalan nation. Nelson’s study, *A Finger in the Wound* that I briefly discussed, points to the intricate connection that exists between the nation and the Indigenous female body for the production of national symbols that logically organize of the nation. The Menchú jokes repeatedly display an anxiety about Menchú’s gender and often comment on her abnormal masculinity, an attribute ascribed to her for her political activity and activism, which was often seen as an exclusively male undertaking.

Menchú’s incursion into national and international politics as an Indigenous woman was the first of its kind for Guatemala. Menchú became one of the most well-known Indigenous activists in the late 1980s as she spoke out against the country’s systematic violence that targeted Indigenous people, among other groups (Arias, “Rigoberta Menchú’s History within the Guatemalan Context” 6). Never had a Maya woman spoken up so resolutely and garnered so much international attention. Her plight and the support it

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16 In *Visión crítica de la literatura guatemalteca*, Dante Liano includes Menchú and notes that she was the first Indigenous person in Guatemala to speak up: “por primera vez en cuatrocientos años de opresión, el maya guatemalteco rompe el silencio y habla en primera persona” (293).

17 Most of the jokes that Nelson analyzes quip about Menchú’s ethnicity, but as Nelson explains, gender plays a central role as well. One of the jokes in particular reflects the unsettling effect of Menchú’s presence in a male-dominated arena: “Why won’t Rigoberta wear mini-skirts? Because her balls would show” (175).
received from human rights organizations all over the world exerted enough pressure to save the lives of many and to advance the signing of the peace accords. As her reputation rose, the lives of Indigenous people in Guatemala began to change. For Arias, Menchú was more than a symbol of resistance for Maya activists—she also came to represent “Guatemalan nationalism and Maya identity in the eyes of certain members of the Ladino elite” (22). More importantly, Menchú renounced the symbolic status thus far assigned to her as a Maya woman and became a political actor:

In her transition from international symbol of oppression and racism to political actor, she has succeeded in reinventing herself. She has undergone a transition from the peripheral silence to which all Maya have been condemned by virtue of racism, to a prominent role as national leader and internationally recognized personality. ("Rigoberta Menchú’s History" 24)

Menchú’s publication of Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia, the Nobel Peace Prize, her nomination as Ambassador of Good Will for the International Year of Indigenous People—which was later extended to a decade—and her political activism in general, are all key events in the history of Indigenous people in Guatemala as they signalled, on both the national and international stage, the resignification of Mayanness and change for Maya people. This is not to say that Menchú was the first and only Maya activist, but rather that her work, and later on her prominence, focused so much attention on the situation of Maya people that her image, at the time, incarnated the pan-Maya movement and Indigenous people in general.

Menchú’s achievements had wider implications. As “[p]olitical configurations were also shaken by the recent awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Rigoberta Menchú Tum,” explains Susan Berger, “[f]or the first time, indigenous Guatemalans—more than 55% of the population—had an internationally respected leader who could use her prominence to fight for political recognition for the indigenous majority” (“Guatemala: Coup and Countercoup”
4). When Menchú, a Maya woman who had only recently learned to speak Spanish, gained international support and recognition, Guatemala’s leaders, Spanish-speaking *ladinos* who continued the patriarchal legacy, gave in to external and internal pressures and conceded Menchú the voice she had long been denied.

Despite Menchú’s gains and those of her sympathizers, attitudes remained largely unchanged as those in power acted favourably towards Menchú in an act of diplomacy aimed at remaking Guatemala before the eyes of the world. For instance, in the 1980s her book was banned as it was considered subversive, but in 1993, shortly after Menchú was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, her book was readily available in the Universidad de San Carlos’ bookstore. That same year, after President Serrano Elías’ *autogolpe* in May 1993, private sector groups, and members of Congress and the Constitutional Court met to find a solution to the crisis. Menchú was asked to participate but “ultimately walked out, claiming that representatives were not interested in her real participation but hoped to use her presence to legitimize the process” (Berger, “Guatemala: Coup and Countercoup” 4). The situation of Indigenous people in Guatemala has changed significantly over the past two decades, and, despite the continuing sexist and racist attitudes of those in power, Indigenous people can participate more actively in Guatemalan society and politics. For instance, in 2007 Rigoberta Menchú announced her presidential bid, something that had never been attempted before by an Indigenous person in Central America.

**The Evolving Face of Indigenous Literature in Guatemala**

Before Menchú, the work of Indigenous writers was in a state of near-invisibility. The literary and cultural establishments, as well as the social and political spheres, were closely guarded by dominant *ladino* classes whose social, economic and political hierarchies were
heavily regulated by deeply ethnicized and gendered discourses that excluded many people.
Although this has changed greatly over the past two decades, Indigenous women writers
still face a number of obstacles due to their ethnicity and their gender, and their work is
little known. Maya Cu and Calixta Gabriel Xiquín have only recently gained recognition as
poets and they are Guatemala's most well-known female Maya writers. Their work, written
in Spanish, has appeared in anthologies and has been translated into English, German and
Italian, but not into Maya languages.

In an essay about literature written by women in Guatemala, Lucrecia Méndez de
Penedo briefly mentions the work of Indigenous women. For her, Indigenous women’s
literature remains largely unexplored territory: “En mi caso, permanezco en un campo
hipotético, con una base escasa de conocimiento efectivo de este material poético”
(“Estrategias de la subversión: poesía guatemalteca contemporánea” 33n7). Méndez de
Penedo, in fact, acknowledges the studies in this field and attributes it to the situation of
Indigenous women in Guatemala: “Carecemos de investigaciones que incursionen en este
campo, ya que, insisto, son escrituras hipermarginadas dentro del contexto guatemalteco
y que no han gozado de publicación sistemática o divulgación significativa” (4).

Despite Méndez de Penedo’s insight into the state of Indigenous literature in
Guatemala today, her own misconceptions and assumptions concerning Cu’s work are a
good illustration of the lack of knowledge that exists around this literature. For instance,
Méndez de Penedo mistakenly claims that Cu’s poetry deals with war because she
experienced firsthand the violence of Guatemala’s 36-year civil war when in fact Cu was not
directly affected by it (Cu, “Poetas y escritoras Mayas de Guatemala: ¿Voces desde la
marginalidad, voces marginadas o voces inexistentes?”). What is more, when the literary
critic lists the most prominent female Indigenous voices of contemporary Guatemala today,
she presents Calixta Gabriel Xiquín alongside Domitila Kanek, a decision that further confirms the near-invisibility and lack of knowledge of this type of literature, as Cu indicates, because Domitila Kanek is Gabriel Xiquín’s pseudonym.

While Indigenous women writers remain largely unknown, the work of Calixta Gabriel Xiquín and Maya Cu is noted for its contribution to Indigenous literature as it provides a fresh perspective on the lives of Indigenous people, specifically women. What is more, in some ways their poetry resembles that of ladino women writers of the past three decades. For one, the work of women writers in Guatemala is largely characterized by its denunciation of patriarchal structures that hinder the economic, intellectual and political development of women beyond their prescribed roles as producers of culture. Indigenous women’s literature, however, distinguishes itself from the literature of ladina writers in that it seeks to articulate an ethnic and gender identity from the perspective of Maya women themselves. This involves overturning an entire system based on patriarchy in function of ethnic difference that has been perpetuated in the efforts of forming a cohesive, logical nation. Moreover, the work of Gabriel Xiquín and Cu is a response to the segregating efforts of dominant Guatemalan culture. In contrast to the work of their male counterparts, Indigenous women speak directly to the forces of oppression: there is little negotiation of a female identity and more of a rewriting from an Indigenous woman’s perspective. This rewriting challenges and contradicts, while at the same time revises the roles of Indigenous women in the family, their communities and in Guatemalan society.

Some of the salient themes in Gabriel Xiquín’s and Cu’s poetry include gender, ethnicity and class, issues that are especially relevant to the situation of Indigenous women in Guatemala today. With the aid of a strong feminine narrative voice, both Maya poets

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18 In Guatemala, there is a well-known tradition of feminist literature that enters the literary scene in the 1970s with Ana María Rodas’ Poemas de la izquierda erótica (1973) and that deals directly with themes of patriarchy, oppression and female sexuality.
disarm the institutions that limit the social, political, economic and cultural participation of Indigenous women in Maya and ladino societies in the country. What is more, these narrative voices in their poetry explicitly deal with representation, self-determination and agency. It is important to note, however, that Calixta Gabriel Xiquín’s approach to questions of representation, femininity and ethnicity is markedly different from that of Maya Cu, as she incorporates a collectivity in the voice of the narrator, while Cu’s narrator is characterized by her individuality. In effect, Gabriel Xiquín’s poetry has a strong resonance with testimonial narrative for its urgency, denunciation and collectivity, while Cu’s poetry, like the poetry of feminist Guatemalan writers, begins from the female body to call to attention and contest the traditional roles of women in Guatemalan society—both in the dominant ladino culture and in Maya custom.

Reflections of Collectivity, Individuality

Calixta Gabriel Xiquín’s work is imbued with the unique perspective of a Maya woman who has experienced firsthand the violence of Guatemala’s 36-year armed conflict, as well as the continuing struggle of Maya people. As a result, her work is very personal in its treatment of the subjects of war, injustice, racism, and corruption, and in her poetry she remembers and reconstructs Guatemala’s violent past from the perspective of an Indigenous woman who is also a daughter, a sister and a political activist. According to Anne Sittig, Gabriel Xiquín is very “explicit in her demands that Guatemala’s history be remembered. . .She attacks tourism, research, genocidal governments, torture, false elections and wars that turn brothers into soldiers” (“Contemporary Mayan Women Speak of Peace, Resistance and Citizenship” 36). As Sittig points out, Gabriel Xiquín’s poetry is highly
political, and, as I would suggest, primarily concerned with an alternate history of Guatemala rather than just a retelling of it.

In her latest collection of testimonial poetry, *Tejiendo los sucesos en el tiempo* (2002), Gabriel Xiquín rewrites Guatemalan history in a highly personal account that includes women alongside their male counterparts, trading traditional female domestic roles for those of socio-political actors. Her poems directly address questions of violence, war and ethnic difference as she heavily criticizes those Guatemalan institutions that are complicit in the human rights violations of entire Indigenous communities. She also reflects on the obstacles that restrict the participation of Indigenous women in the decision-making processes that affect them directly and issues a call to arms. Most important of all, *Tejiendo los sucesos* is characterized by a strong sense of collectivity and denunciation that gives it a *testimonio*-like quality, and a resilient female voice that suggests an ability for self-reflection.

In “Mujer,” read at the *Segundo congreso de literatura indígena de América* under the pen name Caly Domitila Kanek, Gabriel Xiquín raises the issues of the oppression and exploitation of women in their assigned societal roles. This poem signals a new point of enunciation for female Indigenous identity, one in which women are engaged in their own representation. Gabriel Xiquín’s poem does not speak for women; rather, it speaks to them:

Mujer,
Tu profesión mujer
Tu misión de madre
Fuerte como la tierra
Oprimida y explotada por los sistemas.

In this poem, Gabriel Xiquín gives the illusion of dialogue, as signaled by the use of the second person pronoun, and establishes a sense of intimacy as the poem’s speaker sympathetically acknowledges the presence of a woman to whom and about whom she
speaks from the very start. The speaker’s direct address suggests a cognizant look into the situation of women in a patriarchal society and, with the illusion of a dialogue, it counteracts the traditional practice of speaking on behalf of women. Moreover, the speaker contests the tropes used in traditional representations of women that glorify and exult female roles in the nation for a cohesive narrative in which everyone carries out pre-determined functions that sustain it. Judith Butler suggests that gender and gender roles are naturalized through the performance of everyday gender acts which further perpetuates the hegemony of the heteronormative institutions at the heart of the nation project. However, given the constructedness of these gender acts, they can be challenged and transformed. This is what Gabriel Xiquín does in “Mujer” as she contests the rigidity of the gender roles assigned to the Indigenous woman and presents a strong feminine voice capable of speaking for herself and for others.

She begins by denaturalizing womanhood and motherhood and shows them to be societal constructs when she refers to them as a profession and a mission, “Tu profesión mujer / Tu misión de madre.” She then de-mystifies the symbolically charged notions of womanhood and motherhood used in the dominant social logics that shape the nation, as she reveals a cruder picture:

Mujer,  
Buena que trabaja  
Mental,  
Física y espiritual  
Violada su dignidad  
Pero vive prostituida por las estructuras impuestas,  
Porque le pagan menos que al hombre y  
La maltratan en su casa.

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19 Here I refer to Judith Butler’s concept of gender as a social construct that is performed through socially-sanctioned acts that are repeated and naturalized (“Performative” 272).
In this stanza, the change of voice, from the second person to the third person, signals a change in tone as it moves from the familiar, deriving from a sense of empathy, to the denunciatory, as the speaker addresses a third party to whom she explains in greater detail the situation of women. What is more, Gabriel Xiquín counters the metaphoric function of women as mothers and reproducers of culture in the nation with an open denunciation, as signaled by a third person narration, of the exploitation of women in both public and private domains. The poet’s choice of words in this stanza recreates the image of a woman who is violated, debased and abused and offers a powerful critique of the effects of an oppressive system on the lives of women. The poem’s speaker, however, does not deny the addressee the ability to analyze her own situation, as she doubly emphasizes her agency when she repeats the third stanza:

Mujer,
Callada, analítica
Que sufre pero es fuerte
Fuerte como las raíces de los árboles milenarios.

Mujer,
Callada, analítica
Que sufre pero es fuerte
Fuerte como las raíces de los árboles milenarios.

Once again, Gabriel Xiquín tests the limits of women’s metaphorical role in the nation as she juxtaposes women’s desired qualities (passivity and silence) with physical and intellectual strength. As McClintock suggests, women’s agency is limited insofar as they are “[e]xcluded from direct action as national citizens” and must uphold the nation symbolically (354). In “Mujer,” the symbolic role of women is cast aside and the question of agency is raised as the poem’s speaker switches back to the second person and re-addresses the woman of the first stanza: “Mujer, / No vas a la escuela porque tienes muchos hijos.” In these two verses the narrative voice illustrates the intransigence of the system that
regulates the domestic and public lives of Indigenous women, continuously subordinates them and, with the aid of prescribed female roles and behaviours, prevents them from acquiring the necessary tools to participate effectively beyond their assigned symbolic function as ‘national citizens.’ The poem resumes on a positive note, however, as the speaker anticipates change in the situation of women:

Mujer,
En 1987, será diferente que los otros años
Serás respetada
Te tratarán con dignidad.

In this poem, 1987 signals a positive outlook as it refers to the year when Marco Vinicio Cerezo, Guatemala’s first civilian president in over thirty years, initiated peace talks and helped establish the National Commission for Reconciliation. These events are of particular importance to Maya communities, and women in particular, as they were the most affected by Guatemala’s long civil war. As I mentioned previously, with an official end to the war, the Peace accords were signed and the rights of Indigenous peoples in Guatemala became central to a widely supported effort to mend the nation.

Maya Cu’s poems, unlike Gabriel Xiquín’s, speak at an individual level and not on behalf of a collective. Cu writes a poetry that speaks of a personal struggle as an Indigenous woman in a ladino, male-dominated society and she denounces gender and ethnic inequalities that limit women’s rights and privileges in Guatemala. Her poetry offers a redefinition of gender after a careful examination and cancellation of performatives of feminity and motherhood. More markedly than Gabriel Xiquín, Cu invalidates the symbolic Indigenous woman that stands at the forefront of Guatemala’s narrative of nationness as well as the strategic essentialism of the Maya project. Cu’s project redefines the Indigenous woman, not as a function of complementarity in Maya cosmovision, but as an individual with the capacity for self-determination.
Cu’s approach to the situation of Indigenous women in Guatemala is different from Gabriel Xiquín as she invalidates notions of Indigenous womanhood with a poetry that is very intimate. Her work is characterized by an unrestrained eroticism that is uncommon in Indigenous literature but that has a precedent in Guatemala in the feminist poetry of Ana María Rodas, Aída Toledo, Alejandra Flores and Regina José Galindo, to name a few. The eroticism in Cu’s poetry reveals the needs and desires of a breathing, living, sexual Indigenous woman who is not just a producer of subjects and whose sexuality is traditionally concealed by the folds of her *corte*. This eroticism does away with the constraints placed upon the Indigenous woman as a guardian of culture and transmitter of customs and values, a view that is prevalent in male-dominated societies and for which the woman must show exemplary behaviour and adhere to strict moral codes that regulate female sexuality.

With an expression of overt eroticism and sexuality, the control placed upon Indigenous women’s bodies is challenged. Sarah Raddcliffe and Sallie Westwood take a brief look at the “[n]otions of *machismo/marianismo*” in Latin America that stem from a long-standing Catholic tradition of regulating gender relations “based on openly heterosexual and aggressive male behaviour, and on meek and selfabnegating female behaviour and chaste female bodies” (141). Whereas the bodies of Indigenous women have been traditionally organized and controlled by forces external to the Indigenous community and to Maya women altogether, in Cu’s poetry there is a female voice that controls her body at will and on her own terms. Furthermore, Cu contests fixed notions of identity by inverting performative acts and showing the seams of their construction.

In “¡Pobrecita yo...!” the poem’s narrator, an Indigenous woman, speaks tongue-in-cheek about her struggle. She begins by expressing self-pity for her inability to feel hatred
and a thirst for vengeance. Instead of these feelings, she opts for things that fill her with joy:

¡Me compadezco de mí!

De mi incapacidad
Por elegir el odio
La venganza o las armas
Mi pobre y desalmado corazón
Prefirió la risa, la música y el gozo. (1-6)

In these first two stanzas, the narrator’s self-pity and her use of the word “pobre” convey a sense of victimhood. However, this victimhood is countered by the narrator’s frivolous claims of hardship. In fact, the narrator’s voice carries a high degree of sarcasm since her privilege and class status, as denoted by joy, laughter and music, are what contribute to her feelings of victimhood. The absurdity of the narrator’s claims is further shown when she regrets missing out on the pain and suffering inflicted upon her by a man:

Me compadezco
De mi falta de agallas
Para continuar siendo víctima
Del llanto, del desprecio macho
De la injuria y el abandono. (7-11)

Here, Cu draws attention to the resolve actually needed to escape from the grip of domestic violence and its perpetrators, but interestingly she does so by reversing the logic of the situation, in which remaining a victim would appear to be a far more courageous act.

In the stanzas that follow, domestic work, extreme poverty and hard physical labour point to the ethnicity of the poem’s protagonist; all of these activities are generally associated with Indigenous women in Guatemala:

De mis pobrecitas manos
Que no conocieron
El calor de la sartén, del fuego, del leño ardiente
Que no fueron calcinadas
Por el cloro, el detergente y los ácidos domésticos
De mis pobres piececitos
Que caminaron calzados
Que no tuvieron callos
Ni ampollas

De mi estómago
Que no padeció hambres
Sólo calambres de risa

De mis atormentadas piernas
Que no han conocido
Escaladas sin aire
O embarrancamientos inclinados. (12-28)

When the female voice in Cu’s poem renounces the work typically assigned to Indigenous women, she contests the intricate relation between ethnicity and gender and subverts the terms used to define those gender roles. The activities that once would have defined her gender and ethnicity—domestic work, hard physical labour—are isolated and set aside as ineffectual signifiers. That is not to say that they are completely annulled, for in order to show their ineffectiveness, their meaning must first be deployed. It must be noted that these signifiers possess a dual function that is at once contradictory and complementary: detergents, harsh chemicals, bare feet, blisters, and strained legs denote gender and ethnicity, and at the same time they reveal their insufficiency as sole markers of an ethnic and gender identity when rejected by the poem’s protagonist.

In the latter part of the poem, notions of Indigenous womanhood, motherhood and female sexuality are transformed as Cu re-signifies the body of the Indigenous woman. The ethnicity-gender interplay used to define female Maya identity is questioned when the female body is imbued with an eroticism and a new corporality that is no longer concealed by the folds of the corte. Instead, a highly sexual Indigenous woman, who consciously transgresses the boundaries of the ethnicized and gendered discourse that define her, speaks of motherhood:
Pobre vagina mía
Que conociste tan solo un parto
en tu vida

Condenada vagina
También conociste el gozo
La ternura y la ricura
De unas manos ardientes
Y por ello
Serás condenada

Ay, mis pechos
Pobrecitos
Porque únicamente
Amamantaron una cría

Éstos también serán condenados
Por no resistirse al placer
De manos y lenguas
Llenas de locura. (29-46)

Interestingly, these last four stanzas reveal more explicitly the gender of the protagonist of the poem when she speaks of her body, “Pobre vagina mía / . . . / Ay, mis pechos” (29, 38). Up to this point, the only indicators of gender are allusions to heteronormativity (“el desprecio macho”) and the domestic (“el calor de la sartén”). The title, “¡Pobrecita yo...!” is the only clear indication that the protagonist is female. In the latter half of the poem, Cu’s persona juxtaposes motherhood, woman’s most venerated state in the nation, with her own sexual pleasure.

Motherhood in Cu’s poem is limited to bearing one child, a situation that does not fully measure up to the standards of an ideal womanhood that presupposes full fertility for the continuing reproduction of national subjects (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 7). In Cu’s protagonist’s sardonic tone is an acknowledgement of her own transgression as a woman whose motherhood does not rule out the possibility of sexual pleasure. As her reproductive organs show that they also serve as the loci of sexual gratification, she predicts that they will be condemned for it: “Éstos también serán condenados / Por no resistirse al placer”
(42-43). In conceiving the nation and its citizens, the emphasis on the production of national subjects rests on the idea that sexual behaviour of women be limited to that of sexual reproduction, and as mothers of the nation “their purity must be impeccable” (Nagel 254). Moreover, deeply rooted in Catholic ideology, the social norms that regulate the sexual behaviours of women in Guatemala advocate chastity and admonish any conduct that strays from the norm. In “¡Pobrecita yo…!” Cu reveals the performative acts of gender and ethnicity as social constructs as she takes a mordant look at the different pressures placed on women by the institutions that regulate normative behaviours and rely on women for the reproduction of national narratives.

While Gabriel Xiquín’s poetry redefine notions of womanhood by arming a strong female presence with a collective voice, Cu’s poetry shows an individual female Indigenous body that is re-inscribed in narratives that are no longer romanticized or symbolic, but erotic and sexual. Both women poets reject a static female presence that fulfills prescribed roles and instead they show a keen awareness of women’s own situation and the social, political and economic realities that shape their everyday lives. With a renewed female presence, Gabriel Xiquín’s and Cu’s poetry question dominant ladino and Maya cultures in Guatemala in the actual representation of Indigenous women.

**Representation and in Agency**

As Gabriel Xiquín and Cu examine the roles and responsibilities traditionally assigned to Indigenous women, they raise questions about representation and agency. Before Menchú very few Indigenous people could access the socio-political and cultural spheres of Guatemalan society but as human rights groups, individuals, NGOs and Indigenous activists mobilized, Indigenous people gained greater visibility and voiced their own concerns.
Indigenous women, however, have remained largely invisible and silent, with limited access to health, education and social services. Maya women like Gabriel Xiquín and Cu, take on the representation of those women who remain at the margins, but rather than re-telling their story, they challenge traditional forms of representation. What comes through is a renewed notion of Indigenousness from the perspective of the Indigenous woman herself, as noted by an ability for self-representation and self-determination. Gabriel Xiquín engages Indigenous women through the use of the narrative voice while Maya Cu’s narrator redefines female Indigenousness.

In “Mujer Campesina” Gabriel Xiquín’s narrator addresses an Indigenous woman with familiarity and rapport. Indirectly, the dialogue between the narrator and the addressee that is implied through the consistent use of the second person gives voice to the peasant woman who would otherwise remain silent. In fact, the suggested interaction between narrator and addressee functions as a testimonial device in which the narrator authoritatively denounces those institutions that further contribute to the marginalization of Indigenous women in Guatemala—the government, Guatemalan society, the non-profit sector—on behalf of the peasant woman. Empathy, awareness and a shared understanding are all key elements that authorize the narrator’s denunciation as she shows the real subsuming the symbolic as it pertains to notions of Indigenous womanhood:

Tus manos toscas por el trabajo duro en las fincas y
En el campo a la par del compañero sobreviviente.
Mujer eres la esperanza del mañana,
Porque buscas el alimento cada día para tus hijos desaturdidos por la injusticia.
El Estado no se preocupa por tu salud y educación;
Menos para tus hijos.
Solo APROFAM que se preocupa por el crecimiento de la población del área rural y marginal;
Te da pastillas anticonceptivas para que no tengas más hijos y te conformes.
Mujer campesina, hija del día
Hija del sol,
Con tu trabajo alimentas a los que te explotan,
Pagándote miserablemente por lo que vales. . . .

In “Mujer campesina,” Gabriel Xiquín grounds the ideas of womanhood and motherhood in the reality of a peasant life. With this portrayal she counters traditional, romantic representations of rural life and reveals the complicity of the state in the marginalization of women. Moreover, the speaker’s close examination of the life of a peasant woman and the perceived intimate understanding of her situation further legitimize her role as her representative. Even though Gabriel Xiquín’s recurrent use of the second person in this poem can be said to restrict the participation of the peasant woman insofar as she remains silent, thus continuing a tradition of misrepresentation, at the end of the poem the speaker incites the female addressee to speak up:

Mujer campesina hija del día y del sol,
Ayer fueron tus abuelas/os los que lucharon,
Hoy tú, con la frente en alto y
Tienes que hablar...

The call to arms that Gabriel Xiquín issues at the end of her poem is an invitation to peasant women to self-represent and to reject further representations of Indigenousness that ultimately distort the reality of Indigenous women in Guatemala. Not only that, but the suggested dialogue between the poem’s narrator and the peasant woman establishes a new form of speaking on behalf of and as Indigenous women in Guatemala, a shift that includes women as participants in their own struggle for gender equality, and, unlike Western forms of feminism that focus on the universal rights of women for their emancipation, takes into account the realities specific to Indigenous women in Guatemala and the Maya movement’s struggle for cultural and political autonomy.
In her poetry Maya Cu openly reclaims the symbols of Indigenousness and womanhood and contests their representation. As in the work of Gabriel Xiquín, masculine figures seldom appear at the forefront of her poetry, and when they do appear, they are assigned more passive roles that demonstrate their projects to be indeed of, by and for Indigenous women. In Cu’s “Proyecto sangre,” a work in progress, a strong feminine voice rejects the different forms of representation of the Indigenous woman:

No soy
la versión femenina
de ícono alguno
ni soy
el personaje mítico
creado en la imaginación
de algún poeta

tampoco soy
rostro de postal
para vender al turismo

que quede claro:
no soy
muñequita ancestral de barro
revivida por el soplo divino
de intelectuales posmodernos.

The images that the speaker of the poem first evokes—an icon, a myth—are reflections of Indigenousness, manipulated for their highly symbolic value by external actors—likely a ladino intellectual and a ladino writer. She also mentions a postcard and a metaphoric clay doll, inanimate objects that fail to capture a complete picture and are de-contextualized by a tourist and an academic, respectively. The woman in Cu’s poem firmly rejects the various attempts at defining her as a Maya woman from an outsider’s perspective. When she evokes each image, she points to the main discourses in which Indigenous women are represented but seldom allowed to speak. In response, Cu’s protagonist defines herself on her own terms:
Soy
eso sí
este cuerpo femenino andante
escondido tras el muro
de la prudencia (16-20).

In contrast to the icon, the mythical figure, the postcard and clay doll described in the first three stanzas of the poem, the Indigenous woman who speaks describes herself in the second half of the poem as a living, breathing female body, “este cuerpo femenino andante” (18). In Cu’s poem, the homogenizing narratives of Indigenous womanhood, as generated by the different discourses—official, literary, touristic and academic—are interrupted by the intercession of a female Maya voice who shows her ethnic and gender identity to be fluid:

[Soy]
esta mujer frágil
que se desarma
con un grito
con la amenaza violenta
o con la auténtica caricia

esta que intenta
ser buena gente
la permisiva
la complaciente

la bruja adivina
que sabe la cura
de los males de otras

la anciana sufriente
que quedó a medio camino
de alcanzar su sueño

la niña asustada
paralizada por el miedo
da la vida

la gata que se come
el fruto de su vientre
al saberlo defectuoso

la mala madre
que deja colgada sus ramas
Cu’s poem is a highly personalized account of one Indigenous woman who does not conform to official and unofficial versions of female Indigenousness. After rejecting the traditional roles assigned to Indigenous women—mother, tourist attraction, national symbol,— Cu’s protagonist describes herself in her own words. For example, the altruistic quality of motherhood is altered when a new, more visceral dimension is introduced, as she conjures up an image of a mother ingesting her young: “[Soy] la gata que se come / el fruto de su vientre / al saberlo defectuoso” (39-41). Also, with the image of the spider plant, “la mala madre,” she displays a behaviour atypical of ideal mothers: her children, like the spider plant’s shoots, are sent off, encouraged to abandon the nest. But rather than annulling versions of motherhood, the speaker in the poem redefines it with these images, as she also speaks of a mother who is loving, nurturing, and caring: “la que verá a su niña / niña / toda la vida” (45-47). At the end of the poem, the female voice reaffirms her autonomy by denying others the ability to represent her when she declares herself to be strange, antisocial, and impenetrable:

[søy]
odorosamente
rara, huraña
impenetrable
Most notably, this woman shows the ability to speak for herself: “[Soy] la princesa que lanza / maldiciones” (51-52).

**Self-determination and the Reappropriation of *el Traje***

As Gabriel Xiquín and Cu reflect on the limitations of the representation of the Indigenous from a lens that is at once removed and dominant, they offer a closer, more detailed look from within. What is interesting about this renewed locus from which Indigenous ethnic and gender identity are enunciated is the possibility for self-determination of Indigenous women. Gabriel Xiquín’s second poetry collection, *Tejiendo los sucesos en el tiempo / Weaving Events in Time*, is a good example of this. *Tejiendo los sucesos en el tiempo*, published by the Yax Té Foundation in Spanish with an English translation, is the highly autobiographical story of an Indigenous woman whose life is forever changed by Guatemala’s 36 years of civil war. The poems are divided into seven sections, each numbered using Maya numerals, following a timeline that signals key events in the protagonist’s life and in the history of Guatemala. In part one, “Roots,” she begins by detailing her ancestry and her Indigenous identity. Then, in part two, “Uprooting,” she recounts the deaths of her three brothers and her subsequent exile. This is followed by “Quest,” an attempt at understanding the causes of the extreme violence in Guatemala in the 1980s. As the protagonist gains a greater socio-political awareness, she calls others into action in “Speaking out,” but she soon finds herself longing for the company and understanding of her loved ones in “Refuge.” Finally, her story comes full circle as she tells her “Testimony” and returns to Guatemala, her “Home.”

What is unique about *Tejiendo los sucesos en el tiempo* is Gabriel Xiquín’s re-telling of the history of Guatemala’s 36-year civil war from the perspective of an Indigenous
woman who felt the direct effects of the violence, brutality and corruption that erupted. The poet undertakes a project of historical reconstruction in which she inserts a female Indigenous protagonist who is an active participant and not simply a victim of the casualties of war. Gabriel Xiquín continues Rigoberta Menchú’s legacy of speaking as a militant Indigenous woman on behalf of other men and women, an approach that contests official and unofficial narratives of nation formation, war, and revolution, narratives that have traditionally denied Indigenous women the role of protagonists. When Gabriel Xiquín writes her story, she introduces an active, militant woman who denounces the violence and its perpetrators, promotes change and raises awareness. What is more, the female protagonist of Tejiendo los sucesos en el tiempo is often removed from the domestic realm and defiantly presented as a political actor.

Gabriel Xiquin’s poetry in Tejiendo is an introspective poetry that is both deeply personal and very political. The poems are written in the first and second person, and are very critical of the army, the Guatemalan government and other institutions that discriminate, silence and marginalize Indigenous people in Guatemala. In “Escribiendo,” the collection’s opening poem, the first-person narrator reveals the reason why she writes:

Con sangre voy a escribir la historia,  
el sufrimiento del pueblo en la miseria.  
Con poesía redacto la frialdad de la injusticia,  
el hambre,  
la miseria y  
el dolor.

In this poem Gabriel Xiquín’s narrator offers an alternative history, one that originates from the direct experience of war, as the act of writing in blood suggests. Moreover, the symbolic act of writing in blood about the history of the suffering of a people subverts traditional notions of writing history. Gabriel Xiquín’s historical account offers a subjectivity and introspection that counters official histories that typically favour objectivity and factuality.
The immeasurability and subjectivity of pain, for example, warrant its exclusion from historical accounts, but in Gabriel Xiquín’s poetry, pain and suffering are testimonies of Guatemala’s violent past and a driving force behind the poet’s retelling of history. As in her earlier poetry, Gabriel Xiquín’s protagonist positions herself as a more legitimate representative of her people when she rejects external representations of the Indigenous:

Hoy alzo mi canto al cielo,
canto que es la voz del pueblo.
Los turistas conocen
sólo la pantalla de los países.

Los investigadores
usan al indígena para sus investigaciones;
estudian al ser humano como espécimen
reliquia de la historia.

What is most notable about Gabriel Xiquín’s *Tejiendo los sucesos en el tiempo* is the resolute inclusion of an Indigenous woman as a female protagonist who is strong, militant, political and female: “Mujer callada, segura, / haciendo revolución” (“Mi viaje”).

For Cu, the self-determination of Indigenous women comes from an awareness, a good understanding and a rejection of the patriarchal structures that regulate the activities and behaviours of women. Interestingly, for the Maya poet this takes place from and within the female body itself:

Sí soy yo
date la vuelta

hallarás una ingenua
que
tímidamente
estuvo desnuda
ante vos

no podés mirarme
aceptalo

estoy viéndote
Adán
The first verse denotes a powerful statement uttered by a female voice, one that not only reasserts her own identity but demands to be recognized by Adán, a male addressee reminiscent of Adam, the biblical forefather of mankind and a symbolic presence that stands for men in general, by challenging him to look at her. In the last stanza, Cu’s protagonist further defies Adán and what he represents when she suggests that she has undressed each one of his bodies. The image that Cu evokes here indicates an awareness of the social constructs that shape both masculinity and femininity, manhood and womanhood; the shame that stirs the male character of the poem points perhaps to the absurdity of such constructs. Maya Cu rejects constricting notions of Indigenousness that rely on the body as a visual marker of difference as she uncovers the female body to demonstrate that women are subject to socially constructed notions that determine and regulate gender and ethnic relations:

la palabra entonces sale  
en una sola corriente  
sin vestidos que la escondan  
desadornada  
empujada por la fuerza de cierto arraigo (“Nacimientos”).

The highly erotic dimension of Cu’s poetry is in itself a site of contestation of women’s role in Guatemalan society. The eroticism and sexuality that Cu injects into her poetry reappropriate the symbolic body of the Maya woman that has been used to reproduce national subjects and culture.

In Tejiendo los sucesos en el tiempo, Gabriel Xiquín, on the other hand, re-appropriates the weavings of Indigenous women and reinvests them with new meaning to renew the roles of Indigenous women as mothers, daughters and sisters as well as political
actors and activists. Gabriel Xiquín is a poet who weaves the ‘events in time’ that have shaped Maya reality. In doing so, she takes the traje, the traditional Indigenous dress, and rids it of its functions as an artifact, a tourist souvenir, and a national treasure to deploy it as an Indigenous symbol of Maya tradition and culture and feminine power.

In "Poema", the last poem in Tejiendo los sucesos en el tiempo, Gabriel Xiquín re-evaluates the work of Indigenous women, the weaving of güipiles, and removes it from the domestic realm by transferring it to an artistic one. This action dislocates national narratives that separates the güipil from its socio-economic and political contexts and use it as a national symbol:

Medito poemas,
diviso cuadros en mi pensamiento,
los multicolores de güipil de la mujer tejedora maya,
sus colores resistentes y firmes,
su dedicación al trabajo
y la creación constante con los diseños.

En las manos de la mujer,
brilla, brilla poesía
y su alma crea esperanza
con sus manos los colores,
rojo, amarillo, azul, verde y negro.
Con estos colores teje las poesías de angustia,
de dolor, de agonía y
de esperanza.

When Gabriel Xiquín compares the making of one of the quintessential symbols of Guatemalanness with the writing of poetry, she reappropriates it and relocates it within Maya culture. For one, she makes explicit the connection that exists between the güipil and its creator, namely a Maya woman. In this process, the güipil abandons the domestic realm and enters an artistic one, in which the act of weaving is akin to the act of writing poetry, thus revalorizing Indigenous culture. In the context of Gabriel Xiquín’s Tejiendo los sucesos en el tiempo, writing poetry is analogous to retelling Guatemala’s history; weaving, then,
when equated with the writing of poetry validates the narrator’s voice and agency as an Indigenous woman. In other words, when the güipil is de-folklorized, Maya women, like Gabriel Xiquín’s narrator, are shown to possess enough agency to participate in the socio-political life of their communities and of the country and to tell their own histories.

Maya Women and the Maya Cultural Project

Today Maya women continue to wear the traje as a symbol reinvested with Indigenous self-determination and political agency, as I previously discussed. More than that, Indigenous women in Guatemala re-articulate their identities as mothers, caretakers and reproducers of national culture in order to participate more actively as political agents. Maya women constantly redefine the prescription of gender roles in their own homes, their communities and finally in the nation of Guatemala, all the while re-asserting their ethnicity and their rights as Indigenous women. Part of this process includes ‘breaking the silence’ or ‘speaking out.’ As I showed, Indigenous women are typically recognized for their iconic status as symbols of the Guatemalan nation, but are prescribed roles that restrict their socio-political participation and limit their possibilities of self-representation. Women are expected to remain silent and follow their male counterparts subserviently, “agachadas” as López suggests (Cu, “Demandas”). For López, Indigenous women need to organize themselves and to actively participate as citizens and political agents: “En cuanto a participación política, [López] dijo que debe ampliarse el trabajo de las mujeres, estar en nuestros espacios, pero meternos en otros temas como salud, tierra, recursos económicos. Las mujeres somos ciudadanas que queremos participar” (“Demandas,” my emphasis).

Maya women, like Maya men, are interested in reshaping the nation so that it includes the voice of the Indigenous. Indigenous women, however, seek to participate in
this project and demand a place from which to be heard. According to Myra Muralles, at the end the III Continental Summit of Indigenous Pueblos and Nations of Abya Yala, Indigenous women formulated their own “Declaración de Iximché” in which they demanded greater inclusion, equity, recognition and increased access to health care, education, land tenure and government posts (24). In addition, and for the first time since the Summit’s inception, the women issued a call for the Cumbre continental de mujeres indígenas del Abya Yala. Though the work of Indigenous women in Guatemala has only begun, now more than ever they have entered the stage and are inciting change. It was the activism of Rigoberta Menchú that first shed light on the situation of Indigenous people in Guatemala, and it was her work that first called attention to the work of Maya activists, thinkers and writers alike.

In the next chapter I discuss the production of a unique Maya discursivity for the participation of Mayas in a plural nation that is more inclusive. This nation is imagined by ladinos and Mayas alike as a model of plurinationality, multiethnicity, multiculturalism and multilinguism. For the success of this newly imagined nation, one that claims to be more mindful of difference, Indigenous women must be recognized as political actors in order to exercise their rights and participate more fully. I believe that in their work the poets Calixta Gabriel Xiquín and Maya Cu and Maya women activists lay the bases for the inclusion of Maya women in all aspects of a new Indigenous project. These Maya women re-appropriate a female voice that has remained largely muted in ladino and Indigenous literature and culture and re-evaluate of the traditional roles assigned to Indigenous women. Maya Cu, I have shown, explicitly challenges patriarchal constructs and notions of Indigenousness, while Gabriel Xiquín contests ethnic and gender-based restrictions by resolutely showing Indigenous women as social and political agents. Both women reflect on the need for Indigenous women’s equal access to the socio-political life of their communities and of the
country as self-determining individuals. Luis de Lión and Gaspar Pedro González inaugurated a space for Indigenous writers and re-invested cultural values and expressions for the preservation and continuance of Maya culture; female Indigenous writers have opened up a space for Maya women to speak up and claim an active role in an inclusive project designed by and for all Indigenous people, regardless of their ethnicity, class, or gender.
Chapter 4

Maya discursivity and New Indigenous Literature in Guatemala

In this chapter I observe the deployment and contestation of strategic essentialism in recent Indigenous literature as it relates to the production of a Maya discursivity. In the work of Víctor Montejo and Humberto Ak’abal, heterogeneity and essentialism are renegotiated for the development of a cultural project that looks to the formation of a multicultural, plurinational, pluriethnic Guatemalan state. Moreover, their work marks a new and important phase in the development of an Indigenous literature in Guatemala. Unlike de Lión and González, who were interested in the appropriation of written language and literary forms for the rewriting of the indio figure from a Maya perspective, Ak’abal and Montejo formulate a new Maya discursivity for the articulation of a cultural project and a distinct Indigenous literature.

This discursivity is no longer dependent on recognition by actors and/or institutions of the dominant culture for its dissemination and success. Rather, it establishes its presence as a literature on its own, with its own reading public, setting itself well apart from ladino and other Western literary forms, traditions and styles. That is not to say that this literature is founded on a cultural essentialism of Mayanness. Though strategic essentialism may come into play, its difference lies in its focus and in a renovation of Maya culture and tradition as articulated by Mayas in ladino Guatemala for the reconstruction of a multicultural, plurinational, pluriethnic space. This shift in modality raises two principal issues: first of all, the theoretical frameworks utilized thus far may prove to be insufficient to account for the emergence of distinct Maya literature and an emerging discursivity; and second, cultural difference is even more paramount now, as Maya themes, traditions,
language(s), and worldview are embraced and instilled more readily—and unapologetically—for new reading publics. Given the added complexity inherent in the interpretation of texts written in the last decade by writers like Ak’abal and Montejo, I propose an alternate approach that carefully observes the strategies employed by these writers for the articulation of a distinct Maya discursivity in the reconstruction of the Guatemalan nation as imagined by Mayas.

I would like to point out that the Maya nation-building endeavour to which I refer does not seek out territorial or political autonomy, but rather proposes a new form of Guatemalanness that is inclusive of all Indigenous people. Víctor Montejo, for one, speaks of a “national unity project” that includes the Maya as Guatemalan citizens with the help of a “multiethnic affirmation” and recognizes ethnic and/or cultural differences (Maya Intellectual Renaissance: Identity, Representation and Leadership 9). Generally speaking, the Maya movement in Guatemala does not promote a separatist agenda for a Maya state; rather, it seeks the foundation of a Maya nation that can function alongside the ladino, Xinca and Garífuna nations.¹ Moreover, the bases of this new Maya nation rest largely on a cultural project, one that has been underway for a number of years, as I have previously discussed.

I will begin this chapter by briefly discussing Humberto Ak’abal’s rejection of the Miguel Ángel Asturias literary prize in order to illustrate the changing face of Guatemalan literature, but more importantly, to examine the impact of a new and emerging Indigenous literature on the Guatemalan canon, culture and tradition. I will then argue for a new approach in the analysis of this literature and establish the necessity for such an approach and its applicability in the examination of contemporary works by Humberto Ak’abal and Víctor Montejo.

¹ Demetrio Cojtí is one of the few Mayas who advocates political and territorial autonomy of Maya nations, each with its own government, territory, laws and language (Configuración del pensamiento político del Pueblo Maya, 12-13).
The Ak’abal Threat and the Contestation of Dominant Culture in Guatemala

In 2003, the prestigious Premio Nacional de Literatura Miguel Ángel Asturias, named after Guatemala’s first Nobel laureate, was awarded to an Indigenous poet for the first time since its establishment in 1988. Soon after the winner was announced, Humberto Ak’abal, a K’iche’ writer of great renown, made headlines when he rejected the award. In an interview conducted shortly thereafter, he explained that he did not want to receive the literary prize because it was inextricably linked to Asturias’ academic and literary work, which he felt was deeply racist: “Él [Asturias] con esa tesis ofendió a los pueblos indígenas de Guatemala y yo soy parte de esos pueblos, por lo tanto, no me siento honrado en recibir un premio con el nombre del Premio Nobel, aunque tenga muchos méritos” (“Ak’abal: ‘No, gracias’”). The reactions of scholars, journalists and the Guatemalan ladino public at large ranged from support to criticism. Not surprisingly, at the heart of the harsh criticism was Ak’abal’s Indigenous ethnicity and class status: his decision to refuse the award caused a backlash because it was a firm rejection of Guatemala’s established ladino literary tradition and was very telling of the country’s conflicting multicultural identity that ladinos purportedly embrace. Moreover, Ak’abal’s actions showed the changing face of Guatemala’s dominant culture and confirmed that an Indigenous cultural project was well underway.

In an opinion piece entitled “El ‘affair’ Monsieur Ak’abal,” Juan Carlos Lemus captures the general sentiment shared by many Guatemalans upon the K’iche’ poet’s decision to turn down the award. Lemus addresses the general perception of Ak’abal’s actions as a desire for greater repute and he supports Ak’abal’s ‘very personal’ decision not to accept the award. Under the veil of sarcasm, however, Lemus inadvertently recreates the attitudes of the Guatemalan public that he criticizes. For one, his characterization of Ak’abal as a respected poet goes hand in hand with an un-ethnification of sorts:
Visto en su justa medida, Ak’abal es el escritor guatemalteco—vivo—más reconocido en varios países. En los últimos cinco años ha sido invitado a leer su poesía y a dar conferencias en toda la Europa Central, en la mayoría de los países de América, y en Asia. Toda esa viajadera no ha sido en vano: sus poemas han sido traducidos al inglés, francés, alemán, holandés, sueco, vietnamita, etcétera. No se trata, por lo tanto, de un chancletudo que apenas si conoce Francia. (my emphasis)

In other words, due to his renown, his travels and his international recognition, Ak’abal is a Guatemalan writer more than an Indigenous one; as Lemus points out, he is certainly not “un chancletudo que apenas si conoce Francia.” Chancletudo is a pejorative term often used in Guatemala in reference to young ladino men and women who are politically active, harshly criticize the established order, and readily identify with oppressed groups. Their use of chancletas (sandals) symbolizes an alignment with Indigenous peoples who are known as caitudos for the rough caites—sandals made out of untreated leather scraps and tire-tread soles—that they wear.

In his defense of Ak’abal, Lemus annuls the poet’s ethnic and class identity by obliterating the notion of a caite-wearing indio when he suggests that Ak’abal is more than a chancletudo. However, in transposing the terms on which Ak’abal is judged for his work, Lemus reinforces their significance. An example of this is his critique of the heavy focus on Ak’abal’s ethnic performance: “Surgieron chismes de los más bajos entre columnistas. . . .se dijo que este poeta momosteco se dejaba crecer el pelo y usaba chajaleles [trinkets] alrededor del ‘pescuezo’ sólo para hacerse famoso en Europa.” In an effort to appear unbiased, Lemus ignores Ak’abal’s Maya ethnicity, even though it is central to the author’s decision not to accept the award. As Menchú’s corte causes anxiety amongst ladinos,²

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Ak’abal’s *chajaleles* and *caites* seem to stir the passions of the Guatemalan public because his actions are incongruous with the figure of a silent, noble, poor and uneducated *indio*.

Like Menchú’s *corte*, Ak’abal’s clothing is understood by *ladinos* as a marker of ethnic and class identity and, like Menchú, Ak’abal purposefully wears traditional Indigenous clothing as an expression of a socio-political commitment as well as an assertion of his ethnic identity. For many Guatemalans, however, Ak’abal’s actions deny his ethnicity. Lemus’ title for the Maya poet, “Monsieur Ak’abal,” best illustrates this denial. The juxtaposition of the French title and the K’iche’ poet’s last name is a tongue-in-cheek remark on Ak’abal’s actions as an Indigenous man who has been awarded the highest honour in the literary tradition of the dominant *ladino* culture. More importantly, his rejection of the literary award signaled a movement away from the expected ethnic performance of deference and gratitude of a good, noble *indio*: Ak’abal’s actions were deemed unacceptable by many because when he turned down the award he rejected a formal induction into the Guatemalan literary canon and openly accused one of the country’s most respected literary figures of racism. In fact, Ak’abal destabilized Guatemala’s official discourse of multiculturalism by speaking of racism.

Critics of Ak’abal’s decision were quick to point out his anachronism in the charge of Asturias’ racism. In an interview, Lemus asked Ak’abal if his decision to decline the honour was in fact an emotional reaction: “¿No resulta hepático pelear contra una tesis escrita hace tantos años? Porque, además pareciera que actualmente hay una etapa superada en asuntos de racismo” (“Ak’abal: ‘No, gracias’”). Ak’abal, however, asserts that racism still exists in Guatemala and is an issue that needs to be addressed. Arturo Arias indicates that the charge of Asturias’ racism was first brought forth by Sam Colop in the first conference on Maya studies in Guatemala City in 1996 (“Constructing Ethnic Bodies and Identities in
Miguel Ángel Asturias and Rigoberta Menchú” 1). For Arias, Colop and Ak’abal’s position further perpetuates the binarism put forth by Maya essentialism, which pits the ladino against the Maya and suggests that all non-Mayas are racist (“Constructing Ethnic Bodies”).

While the Maya movement has made great gains in the political arena and the state has adopted neoliberal reforms that protect the rights of Indigenous people, racism is still an issue in the lives of the Maya people of Guatemala. In fact, for Casaus Arzú, the discriminatory attitudes against the Maya are so pervasive that they have become naturalized or normalized (Guatemala: Linaje y racismo). What is more, the reforms that the state has implemented have had little impact on the everyday lives of Indigenous people.

The neoliberal ideology to which Guatemala subscribed in the past two years proposes a type of multiculturalism that is all-inclusive and mindful of cultural and linguistic rights but conveniently overlooks issues of land tenure, resources and access to health and social services. 3 While the controversy stirred first by Colop and then by Ak’abal when they charged Guatemala’s first Nobel laureate with racism may in fact contribute to a further validation of “an essentialist position on indigenous ethnicity,” as Arias suggests, it also reveals a larger problem, a mirage of multiculturalism that impedes the formation of a more inclusive space.

Ak’abal cannot be said to represent all Mayas in his decision to turn down the award, just as he suggests that Asturias cannot be blamed for all racism in Guatemala (“Ak’abal: ‘No gracias’”). In effect, the poet was nominated for the Miguel Ángel Asturias literary prize by the Academy of Maya Languages and the award was to be presented to him by Otilia Lux de Cotí, Guatemala’s first Indigenous Minister of Sports and Culture. Though it generated a great deal of controversy, Ak’abal’s decision to decline the Asturias prize was vital in

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3 For a detailed discussion of Indigenous rights and neoliberal policy in Latin America, see Deborah Yashar’s “Contesting Citizenship. Indigenous Movements and Democracy in Latin America” and June Nash’s “Toward Pluricultural States. Indigenous Movements Challenge Neoliberalism.”
initiating a dialogue between a quickly emerging Indigenous literary institution and a well-established *ladino* literary establishment. The following year, Rodrigo Rey Rosa was awarded (and accepted) the Miguel Ángel Asturias literary prize. With the proceeds of the award, Rey Rosa created the Premio B’atz’, a literary award that recognizes the work of Maya, Xinca and Garífuna writers in Guatemala. As Rey Rosa points out, there existed a need for such an award since the Guatemalan state continues to be deeply racist and, like the literary establishment, it generally fails to recognize the existence of a Maya literature (“Rey Rosa: Mientras las lenguas estén vivas, puede haber algo que gozar de ellas”).

**Postcolonialism, Cultural Logic and Incommensurability: An Alternate Approach to the Analysis of New Indigenous Literature in Guatemala**

In the past few decades Mayas have had a significant cultural and socio-political presence in Guatemala. Arturo Arias explains that in the late 1980s many exiled Mayas who studied abroad returned to Guatemala to participate in the peace process and “organize cultural movements” so that activism became “almost synonymous with cultural agency” (his emphasis, “Conspiracy on the Sidelines: How the Maya Won the War” 170). Interestingly, the principal gains of the Maya movement have been in the cultural arena. Though the rights of Indigenous people were formally recognized in the “Acuerdo sobre Identidad y Derechos de los Pueblos Indígenas” (AIDPI) signed in 1995, the reforms implemented by the Guatemalan state thereafter have had more to do with cultural rights than with political and economic empowerment. Charles Hale indicates that this is a measure adopted by those in power to prevent the disruption of the status quo (“Rethinking Indigenous Politics in the Era of the ‘Indio Permitido’” 17-18). Arias, on the other hand,
observing a statement made by Doris Sommer, suggests that the dichotomy between the ‘cultural’ and the ‘political-economic’ is part of a Maya nation-building agenda:

Menchú herself was building the Maya nation brick by brick, not to displace the Guatemalan state but to revive the premodern and (for postmoderns) very useful difference between (cultural) nation and state as an administrative structure. The old Guatemalan state was dysfunctional and despotic, to a great extent because it denied the difference and imposed one Ladino culture on a heterogeneous population. ("Conspiracy on the Sidelines” 175)

As Hale suggests, there is more than a sharp divide between the ‘cultural’ and the ‘political-economic’ and we must understand that the Maya cultural project “forges political unity and builds the trenches from which effective political challenge can later occur” (18). For this reason, it is important to examine the terms on which this project unfolds and the manner in which it changes the face of the Guatemalan nation-state. I would like to suggest that instead of an approach directed towards Maya cultural agency alone, the work of Maya activists like Menchú is the result of a strategy for self-determination and political agency that is tactically compatible with the neoliberal agenda of the state. In fact, the essentialist approach attributed to the Maya movement figures in this strategy, as Edward F. Fischer points out:

Maya activists base many of their claims against the ladino-controlled Guatemalan state on an ethnic legitimacy rooted in essentialist notions of culture. At the same time they deftly wield the power of constructivist deessentialization to deconstruct negative stereotypes of Maya culture and languages and to justify the right of their voice to be heard in these times of multivocality. ("Cultural Logic and Maya Identity: Rethinking Constructivism and Essentialism” 475)

Critics of the Maya movement refer to Gayatri Spivak’s concept of strategic essentialism to explain the movement’s tactic of identifying Maya people as a cohesive, homogenous people, a manoeuvre that ignores the differences between Guatemala’s distinct Indigenous ethnic groups. These critics widely refute the essentialization of ethnic identity among
Mayas in Guatemala and disregard the heavily essentialized narratives for their all-encompassing, homogenizing reach and their resulting binarisms. Moreover, as Arturo Arias suggests, this is but a *ladino* strategy that “has consisted in cornering Maya leaders by negating the importance of Maya subjectivity on the basis that their discursivity is essentialist, fundamentalism, anti-Ladino, and even guilty of reverse racism” (“The Maya Movement: Postcolonialism and Cultural Agency” n22). Consequently, the value of cultural essentialism as a tool for the representation, self-determination and political agency of Indigenous people is altogether overlooked: it is largely thanks to this essentialist strategy that Mayas have successfully forged a cultural and political presence that is changing the face of the Guatemalan nation and its citizens.

The theoretical frameworks often employed to examine Indigenous culture in Guatemala—postcolonialism, postmodernism, Third World feminism, and their derivatives—focus on the decentralization of knowledge, the specificity of regional context, and a move away from grand narratives. These approaches favour the analysis of the cross-boundaries, intersections and exchanges that inform any one text, experience or worldview in any given context. While this is useful and applicable in the case of Indigenous writers in Guatemala as I showed in chapters 2 and 3, these theoretical approaches do little to explain the successes of the essentialist strategies employed by communities of resistance in Latin America. The task of examining these strategies is further complicated by the fact that they draw from knowledge systems and worldviews that lie outside dominant culture. As it relates to the Mayas in Guatemala specifically, Fischer suggests that Mayas follow a distinct cultural logic that is not informed by Western ideology and is realized through practice, which has a “marked constructive quality” (“Cultural Logic and Maya Identity” 477). If this is  

A good example is Mario Roberto Morales’ critique of the Maya movement for its apparent threat to *ladino* culture.
the case, how do we approach the cultural texts produced by Mayas in present-day Guatemala? Likewise, how do we offer a useful critique of the strategies employed by Mayas?

The analysis of recent work by Indigenous writers in Colombia, Ecuador or Guatemala has proven problematic since these new forms do not draw from Western literary models, traditions or languages. Juan Guillermo Sánchez Martínez briefly examines the challenges presented to critics in this regard. He identifies a need for new criteria to analyze the fast-emerging field of “la nueva palabra indígena” that is characterized by its orality and a ubiquitous union between language and nature, among other things (“Poesía indígena contemporánea: la palabra (tzij) de Humberto Ak’abal,” his emphasis 81). For Jorge Miguel Cocom Pech, a Maya-Yucatec writer, contemporary Indigenous literature challenges the critical framework employed in literary studies because of an oral quality that is transposed to a ‘borrowed’ written language: “una transposición de la oralidad no documentada con la ‘prestada’ escritura, expresión de los propios indígenas, fenómeno que ha conseguido desestabilizar el andamiaje crítico de los estudios literarios” (Sánchez Martínez 82).

In addition, Indigenous literature faces much resistance and prejudice from the literary establishment due to a long history of racism and discrimination. In the case of a Maya literary historiography, Gail Ament indicates that “[t]here are intellectual prejudices of modern-day ‘tongues of flame’ that work against members of the Mayan intelligentsia,” n the assumed grounds that Mayas themselves are not qualified to undertake the preservation

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5 Cocom Pech proposes a schema for tracing the development of an Indigenous literature in the Americas in which he identifies four key stages that map out a historiography of Indigenous literature: “Una primera etapa prehispánica, monolingüe. . . una segunda etapa indígenista, entre los siglos XVI y XIX, relacionada con los frailes, los procesos de extirpación de idolatrías, los documentos legales y algunos brotes de Resistencia indígena. . . una tercera etapa indigenista, durante la primera mitad del siglo XX, registrada por escritores no indígenas, que no dominaban la lengua pero simpatizaron con las tradiciones orales; y finalmente una cuarta etapa que si puede denominarse literatura indígena” (his emphasis, Sánchez Martínez 82).
of ancient Maya texts (220). Similarly, Indigenous writers today face discrimination and must work doubly hard—often requiring success abroad, as is the case with many Maya writers—to garner attention and gain recognition nationally. Ak’abal’s poetry, for example, has been labeled by some as ‘children’s poetry’ for its simplicity (Marcela Saldivia-Berglund 58, Jorge R. Rogachevsky 24).

As suggested by Cocom Pech, new Indigenous literature presents a challenge to critics, readers and literary establishments alike because the concepts and the registers employed by writers of this new literature are drawn from markedly different cultural realities and worldviews. Take, for example, the case of Indigenous writers in Colombia whose literary contributions generated a great deal of debate about the terms of their analysis and the methodological possibilities of naming a new Indigenous literature. In this ongoing debate in the 1990s, many categories emerged—etnopoesía, etnoficción, etnoliteratura, oralitura, literaturas del cuarto mundo—in an effort to define a new type of literature that does not conform to the traditional system of classification (Restrepo, Ferreira and Sánchez 10). A good illustration of some of the challenges presented to critics and readers is Carlos Montemayor’s assessment of Ak’abal’s poetry:

[S]e trata de otro orden estético, más complejo, con una gama más amplia de valores sonoros, con modelos milenarios que aún siguen vivos en discursos ceremoniales, en conjuros en rezos sacerdotales, en canciones, en ciertos relatos, en consejas, en la captación de los sonidos del mundo. (16)

Montemayor’s description draws attention to the inextricable aspects that we must take into consideration in the analysis of Indigenous literature: its ‘formal’ literary elements—

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6 Ament illustrates this point by bringing to mind the case of researchers Anita Padia Guerchous and Manuel Vásquez-Bigi who based their translation of the Xajoj tun on a 19th century French translation rather than on the work of Indigenous researchers. Ament explains, that for Padia Guerchous and Vásquez-Bigi, “this scholarly labor falls to the erudite non-Maya” because as they explain, “[l]a tarea de preserver una creación y producción artística de tan formidable importancia, es demasiado grande para dejarla en manos de aquellos indígenas que pudieran emerger de la situación actual y mantener su cultura” (220).
structure, form and style—, as well as its themes and the cultural logic that shapes them. Given that the parameters employed by literary studies, even in the broadest expression of cultural studies, cannot escape the distinct non-Western, seemingly essentialist, cultural logic that informs these texts, we must rethink our approach. For this I turn to postcolonial feminism, a discourse that doubly questions the colonizing reach of Western culture, and is both applicable and adequate to Third World contexts.

Postcolonial feminists point out the need for a reflexive discourse that is not delimiting and that allows for dialogue in the expression of unique forms of female identity as informed by race, ethnicity and/or class. Ofelia Schutte addresses this need as she introduces the concept of incommensurability to speak about the challenges to cross-cultural discourse presented by cultural difference (61). For Schutte, it is important to acknowledge that those differences are present and incommensurable in order to begin a dialogue and arrive at a better understanding. That is not to say that cultural difference should be altogether dismissed or communication be truncated. Moreover, she suggests that “[i]t is incumbent on those speakers of the dominant cultural language not to foreclose the meaning of statements to only those that are readily available to them” (62). To examine the works of Humberto Ak’abal and Víctor Montejo, I suggest an approach that takes into account the incommensurability of their work and its cultural logic as read by a North American ladino critic using a postcolonial framework. This is a crucial step in understanding the importance of Ak’abal’s and Montejo’s work in the ongoing development of a Maya cultural project. Unlike preceding Indigenous writers, Ak’abal and Montejo reveal an interest in the formulation of a distinctly Maya literature written for a Maya audience. Specifically, there is a shift in focus from the appropriation of non-Indigenous language and literary forms to the articulation of a Maya discursivity. Here, I recall Foucault’s notion of “founders
of discursivity,” which refers to a new kind of author, one that not only produces his own
texts but also:

the possibilities or the rules for the formation of other texts. In this sense,
they are very different, for example, from a novelist, who is in fact, nothing
more than the author of his own text. Freud is not just the author of The Interpretation of Dreams or Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious,
Marx is not just the author of the Communist Manifesto or Das Kapital: they
both have established an endless possibility of discourse. (Foucault 114)

While Foucault points to a specific author for the foundation of a particular discursivity, i.e.
Marx as a founder of Marxism, I would like to apply the term to the case of the Maya
movement in which the “founders” of a Maya discursivity are the collective of Maya
intellectuals who continuously negotiate the terms on which Maya tradition, culture and
ethnicity are articulated. This is particularly useful if we call to mind Fischer’s study of a
Maya cultural logic in which he observes that the cosmology of the Kaqchikels links the self
to cosmic forces and phenomena, thus “blurring the very boundaries that the modern
(Western) conception of ‘self’ seeks to delineate,” a view that, as Fischer points out, was
“often problematic for Spanish missionizing” (“Cultural Logic” 480).

I would like to return briefly to the issue of strategic essentialism for which the Maya
movement is continuously criticized. As I have already mentioned, though essentialism is
indeed employed as a strategy, it can often lead to the dismissal and misunderstanding of
the Maya movement’s other tactics, goals and achievements. Kay Warren and Jean Jackson
overturn the critique of the Maya movement’s essentializing reach to show that Mayas use
other strategies to legitimate their struggle and engage in a politics of interethnic
inclusion/exclusion that varies according to political and economic pressures, as well as
audience(s) (Indigenous Movements, Self Representation and the State in Latin America).

More importantly, as Arias points out, “[t]he debate cannot be reduced to the fact that one
Maya faction may favor certain ‘essentialist’ elements to configure their own identity (which
does happen) while Ladinos paternalistically point out to them that they are in error because essentialisms do not exist” (“The Maya Movement” 524). What we need is to embrace Schutte’s incommensurability in order to understand the Maya cultural logic that Fischer identifies; this, in turn, will aid us in comprehending more fully the deployment of strategies that to the postmodern, postcolonial and feminist eye are inadequate and ineffective. To put it another way, we must move beyond a theoretical framework that essentializes that which it cannot comprehend “as it foreclose[s] the meaning of statements to only those that are readily available” (Schutte 62). We must proceed with caution, nonetheless, because, although it is important to comprehend essentialism as a strategy within its particular cultural context, we need avoid critiquing it for fear of incommensurable cultural difference.

**Ak’abal and Montejo as Cultural Warriors**

The most recent contributions of Humberto Ak’abal and Víctor Montejo are key in the articulation of a Maya discursivity in the formation of a body of Maya literature for a number of reasons. To begin, their work departs from the earlier of work of Indigenous writers and it also sets itself apart from Western literary modes. Second, this new Maya literature draws largely from non-Western cultural traditions and practices, and is written for and speaks to an Indigenous readership. Lastly, it seeks to articulate Maya Indigenousness, a *mayanidad*, from within an evolving multicultural, plurinational and pluriethnic space in which a cohesive narrative of past, present and future Mayanness can be enunciated.

Humberto Ak’abal and Víctor Montejo write at a time in the history of Indigenous peoples in Guatemala when a contemporary Maya cultural project has been launched and is well underway. Part of this project is the development of a (written) Maya literary tradition
that is now recognized by Mayas and ladinos alike. Unlike Luis de Lión and Gaspar Pedro González, these two contemporary Maya authors are no longer concerned with issues of language, agency and representation for success in the ladin cultural establishment, which at the time possessed the only readily accessible reading public. I posit that what we are now witnessing is the emergence of a distinctly Maya literature that is much more focused on its own unique development. Moreover, this change signals a new phase in the development of the Maya cultural project in which self-sufficiency and continuance of Maya culture and tradition are key. As I discussed in chapter 2, Luis de Lión and Gaspar Pedro González adopted the tools and strategies of dominant ladin culture to reach a reading audience and secure exposure. Most importantly, their work provided the bases for a Maya print capitalism\(^7\) on which the Maya movement could be founded. De Lión, for one, was interested in providing a Maya version of Indigenousness as written by an Indigenous writer. Gaspar Pedro González, for his part, wrote for the continuation of Maya culture and the preservation of Q’anjobal language as well as the denunciation of inequality and injustice.

In the work of Ak’abal and Montejo there is no longer a pressing need to rewrite Indigenousness or write from it; instead, the focus has shifted to the realization of a new Maya literature for the quickly forming Maya nation. In fact, this new approach reflects the change that is taking place in the official discourse of the state as well as in the perception by the public of what constitutes el indio. In “Multiculturalismo y pueblos indígenas: reflexiones a partir del caso de Guatemala,” Santiago Bastos and Manuela Camus observe the manner in which the official discourse is now addressing ethnic difference:

\(^7\) Here I refer Benedict Anderson’s concept of print capitalism to explain how imagining the nation was facilitated; imagined institutions were able to take concrete shape as ethnic and cultural affinities resonated with the aid of mass literacy (Imagined Communities 27).
El indio ha pasado de ser el problema nacional por resolver y la carga colonial que impide el desarrollo, a ser consustancial con la globalización: la legitimidad y extensión de los reclamos de base étnica se ha ido convirtiendo en una de las características de la postmodernidad y el posnacionalismo, transformándose el paradigma desde el cual se concibe la diversidad y su tratamiento por el Estado. (62)

In an interview, Demetrio Cojtí, a well known and respected Maya intellectual writing from a Maya perspective, addresses this shift in discourse: “Somos pueblo y nación, no raza. No hay problema indio, hay sólo un problema colonial” (1992). Indigenous authors and intellectuals are no longer concerned solely with the reformulation of official and unofficial notions of the Maya, but are actively engaged in the consolidation of a Maya cultural project. As a result, what we have is an unmediated Maya worldview that is more readily incorporated into the cultural production of Mayas. That is to say, cultural difference is not translated or catered to the benefit of a *ladino* reader just as ethnic performance is no longer finely modulated—Ak’abal’s decision to turn down the Asturias literary prize is a good illustration of this. Recent Maya literature is characterized by its innovativeness as these authors experiment with new techniques, forms, and styles drawn from Maya everyday life, as well as from ancient and current Indigenous tradition and myth. Ak’abal, for example, integrates nature at the structural and thematic levels of his poetry in a manner that is not characteristic of Western culture, but rather resonates with the Maya cosmovision that establishes an inextricable connection between society, nature and spirituality.

As the relevance of an Indigenous literature in Guatemala is made evident with the establishment of a literary prize, the foundation of private and public academies dedicated to the study of Maya languages, the boom of Maya publishing houses, and the official recognition of Maya culture and tradition, difference is now articulated as a positive aspect of nationhood:
Al hablar en términos de Pueblo, los Mayas y otros grupos buscan la legitimidad que sí se les reconoce a las naciones como colectivos con derechos políticos. Por ello se basan en los mismos elementos que los Estados nacionales para legitimar su existencia: reivindican una historia reescrita desde su perspectiva; reclaman el derecho al uso de sus propios idiomas al mismo nivel que el castellano oficial; demandan respeto a sus propias formas de organización y de espiritualidad. De esta forma, todos los elementos que antes eran marcas de la inferioridad, ahora son retomados como símbolos positivos de la diferencia. (Bastos and Camus 96)

This reevaluation of ethnic difference as a positive trait of the Guatemalan nation is similarly echoed in Demetrio Cojtí’s assertion that Mayas are “pueblo y nación, no raza.” Moreover, with this assertion, Cojtí invalidates colonialism quite explicitly by revealing its constructedness as he alludes to the discourse on “el problema del indio” that has been employed in the nation’s official and unofficial narratives. More importantly, Cojtí’s position concerning a new discourse that speaks of Indigenous people as “pueblo y nación,” is echoed in a new Indigenous literature that no longer seeks a place within the existing ladino dominant culture, but alongside it.

One particular aspect of Cojtí’s assertion that resonates with other Maya intellectuals is that of an active memory of the Mayas’ colonial past. Since the current neoliberal policies adopted by the Guatemalan state promote a model of integration and inclusion, past and present questions of racism, discrimination and social and economic inequality are commonly downplayed. New Indigenous writers like Ak’abal and Montejo actively concern themselves with the production of a collective memory for the articulation of a contemporary Maya identity. While the Maya movement may look well into the past for the production of a Maya imagined community, Indigenous authors re-appropriate and rewrite a recent Maya past and integrate Maya tradition and customs. In doing so, these writers formulate a new way of speaking as a Maya in Guatemala today. What characterizes their approach, as I will show, is an innovative use of language, an unapologetic un-translation of
Mayanness and a continuation of a Maya cultural project, in which new Maya literature is key.

**Humberto Ak’abal’s Poetry**

Humberto Ak’abal’s contribution to the new Indigenous literature emerging in Guatemala is very significant because his work signals a movement away from earlier works that emulated *ladino* and Western literary forms to seek success and guaranteed exposure. De Lión and González placed great emphasis on agency and self-representation, issues that still arise in Ak’abal’s poetry but that are not a primary concern. His poems reveal an interest in the production of an Indigenous literature that is more autonomous and uniquely Maya in form, language and style. In “El pregonero,” Ak’abal reflects on the right to self-representation and the preservation of cultural rights, specifically language and Maya custom:

Pido la palabra.

―Dije “la palabra”
no un micrófono

En mi pueblo
el pregonero
―cada lunes—
daba el mandado de la auxiliatura
en lengua Kiche’

¡Y a gritos!

En la mera mañana
despertaban los vecinos
al repique del tambor.

Cuando uno nace
le dan un par de nalgadas
para que grite.

¡Pido la palabra:
La quiero en mi propia lengua! (261)  

“El pregonero” is a testament to the Maya awakening that is presently taking place in Guatemala and highlights two important aspects that resonate in the work of Indigenous writers: Maya tradition and the rebirth of Maya culture. The poem’s first person narrator requests permission to speak, evoking the duties of the town crier but differentiating between “la palabra” as discourse and the ability to make oneself heard, signified by the microphone. Moreover, this distinction points to an act of self-determination and dialogue in which possessing “la palabra” denotes equal access to power, particularly when this access is requested in the speaker’s own language, “la quiero en mi propia lengua.” Ak’abal’s allusion to birth in the life-affirming cry of the newborn signals the resurgence of Maya culture. This, together with the poem’s concluding verse, is both a demand for and a reaffirmation of the protection of cultural rights and the continuation of Maya tradition. As the speaker evokes a memory of the town crier’s early morning call, he further revives Maya culture and, more importantly, invigorates his initial claim as he then asks for the floor “a gritos,” much more forcefully than before. When observed in the context of Ak’abal’s commitment to the production of a Maya literature, this poem speaks about the K’iche’ poet’s particular use of language and his unique vision.

Ak’abal locates his poetry outside the Western canon and Guatemalan literary tradition by drawing largely from the oral traditions, registers and customs of Maya culture. Unlike Luis de Lión, who sought a place for the enunciation of a Maya identity from an Indigenous perspective within the bounds of the Guatemalan (ladino) literary establishment, Ak’abal deliberately employs metaphors, devices and a language that defy his readers, the Guatemalan literary institution and Western literary canon(s). While de Lión and González,

8 All of Ak’abal’s poems cited in this chapter are taken from the collection *Ajkem Tzij: Tejedor de palabras* unless otherwise noted.
as I discussed previously, went to great lengths to show that they could perform well within the dominant culture without renouncing their ethnicity, Ak’abal does not overtly acquiesce to the pressures of the *ladino* literary establishment, but contests them as shown in his rejection of the Asturias literary prize. Ak’abal validates Maya customs and traditions by putting them on par with Western *ladino* culture. His artistic formation, for one, is not a product of formal training, but of his parents’ and grandparents’ own organic knowledge of the musicality and the oral traditions of Maya myth and legend:

> del lado materno mis abuelas eran contadoras de cuentos (lo que se conoce como tradición oral), y mi madre heredó de ellas el arte de contar, así que los primeros cuentos que escuché fueron en la voz de mi madre. Y del lado paterno, mis abuelos eran músicos-marimbistas compositores, músicos que tocaban al oído, porque tanto los unos como los otros eran analfabetas en el sentido de como [sic] se comprende en el mundo occidental. Así que mis oídos por un lado se educaron con el manejo de lo artístico de la palabra, y por el otro con el de la música, esto dio como resultado mis búsquedas y esfuerzos en la poesía. ("Humberto Ak’abal: ‘Nombrar a un pájaro es cantar con él.’")

Here Ak’abal shows a cultural chasm between Maya and *ladino* ideology when he makes a distinction between Western modes of knowledge and Indigenous ones. For him, his grandparents’ self-taught approach to music may be qualified as illiteracy in the West but it does not preclude it from recognition as an art form or a cultural expression. Moreover, the Western illiteracy that he alludes to does not in any way jeopardize his own poetic formation, rather it enriches it, for in his poetry Ak’abal gives paramount importance to the relationship between nature and humankind. For Saldivia Berglund these aspects of Ak’abal’s poetry make it challenging to analyze because his work could be easily categorized and dismissed as low culture: “corre el riesgo [la poesía de Ak’abal] de ser clasificada como un tipo de folclór o subcultura popular” (57). Interestingly, the K’iche’ poet is decidedly un-canonical as he places great emphasis on his move away from traditional forms. In *Ovillo de seda*, a collection of poems written in praise of Japan, Ak’abal experiments with various
poetic forms and themes, including East Asian culture and nature. Ak’abal’s use of haiku and other forms, and his reverence for Japanese culture, speak volumes of his stance on literary tradition and his strategic rejection of the established ladino cultural order. I say strategically, because his work is not entirely Maya in content, style and structure, but instead is a product of a long historical process of cross-cultural intersections. He has adopted a Western writing system, writes for a Maya print capitalism, has accepted international recognition and publishes in Guatemala. Ak’abal, however, highlights those aspects of his poetry that give it a characteristic Maya quality.

In the first two stanzas of “Aprendiz” Ak’abal expounds his craft as it relates to nature:

En esos ‘de repentes’ se me viene la gana
de escribir, no porque sepa sino
porque haciéndolo y deshaciéndolo
es como aprendo este oficio y al final
algo me va quedando.

Las lomas,
los cerros,
los barrancos,
los pueblos viejos
tienen secretos encantadores
y de ahí mi deseo de sacarlos a pasear
en hojas de papel. (Ajkem Tzij: Tejedor de palabras 173)

For Jorge R. Rogachevsky, these verses describe the poet’s own creative process as it relates to the incorporation of nature, which occurs not only thematically but also stylistically and linguistically. In other words, Ak’abal conceives of his own creative process as a function of nature, in which he is but an extension of the natural world around him:

“Mis versos tienen la humedad de la lluvia, / o las lágrimas del sereno, y no pueden ser /
sino así, porque han sido traídos de la montaña” (“Aprendiz”).
Nature as central to Ak’abal’s poetry, and as manifest in his style, use of language and themes, is best observed in “Cantos de pájaro,” a poem in which he claims to step back and speak alongside the birds:

Klisklis, klisklis, klisklis...
Ch’ok, ch’ok, ch’ok...

Tz’unun, tz’unun, tz’unun
b’uqpurix, b’uqpurix, b’uqpurix...

Wiswil, wiswil, wiswil...
Tulul, tulul, tulul...

K’urupup, k’urupup, k’urupup...
Ch’owix, ch’owix, ch’owix...

Tuktuk, tuktuk, tuktuk...
Xar, xar, xar...

K’up, k’up, k’up...
Saq’k’or, saq’k’or, saq’k’or... (319)

“Cantos de pájaro” is a poem that renounces the use of Spanish as a lingua franca and contests ladino dominant culture. It was published in K’iche’, its original language, in the facing pages of a bilingual edition of Ajkem Tzij. Ak’abal explains that he does not provide a Spanish version of the poem because there is no need for a translation as the onomatopoeic nature of the K’iche’ language lends itself for the naming of birds and other animals: “estos [los nombres] los tomamos de su canto de modo que nombrar a un pájaro es cantar con él” (“Humberto Ak’abal”).

Rogachevsky warns of the dangers of employing a Western framework in the analysis of Ak’abal’s poetry; the critic may reproduce the image of the noble savage given that the parameters employed define Indigenousness as natural, inarticulate and simple. Moreover, according to Rogachevsky, Ak’abal’s poetry has been judged as expressive but not reflexive due to his particular use of language and its perceived simplicity. He suggests
that the K’iche’ poet’s work is in fact reflexive due to the distinct Maya cosmogony that it
draws from, a worldview that, unlike Western reflexivity, is informed by the natural world.
Rogachevsky suggests an awareness of the distinct cultural logic that Ak’abal employs for a
better understanding of his poetry. While I agree with Rogachevsky’s approach to Ak’abal’s
work, I would like to suggest that the K’iche’ poet strategically evokes a Maya cultural logic
and plays it against Western concepts of knowledge, artistic creation and understanding for
the production of a Maya discursivity.

“Cantos de pájaro” illustrates a shift in modality, one in which the poetic object is no
longer translated and transcribed into a written language, but it is said to speak for itself.
Here Ak’abal revises the traditional role of the poet by strategically shedding the artifice of
artistic production and showing an interconnectedness between humankind and nature.
When examined under a Western lens, Ak’abal’s statement and use of language give the
illusion of the death of the poet and the poetic object and of the erasure of linguistic and
stylistic barriers that divide the natural world from the civilized, cultural realm that humans
produce. His particular use of K’iche’ language counterpoints Western thought and its quest
for the examination of the constructedness of language that structuralists and post-
structuralists have undertaken during the second half of the twentieth century. In this
manner, with an emphasis on language and artistic creation as functions of nature, Ak’abal
challenges the West’s humanist discourse and presents an alternate one. I posit that this is
Ak’abal’s strategy, one designed to contest Western modes of knowledge through the
production of a distinct Mayanness that is articulated through a non-Western cultural logic.

Despite his rejection of Western literary traditions, conventions and canons, Ak’abal
continues to enjoy a great deal of recognition for his work as a Maya writer, but perhaps
more importantly, as an Indigenous Guatemalan writer. When he underscores the
Mayanness of his writing, Ak’abal clearly distinguishes his work from ladino Guatemalan literature and confirms the existence of a Maya literature. He does this with the aid of an ethnic performance, which, though markedly different from Menchú’s or de Lión’s in many respects and for reasons I have already established, emerges from a cultural logic that further confirms his Mayanness and that of his work. I would like to suggest that Ak’abal’s strategy is comparable to Menchú’s mediation of “Mayan ‘secrets’ and Western parameters of understanding” (Arias, “Authoring Ethnicized Subjects: Rigoberta Menchú and the Performative Production of the Subaltern Self” 80). At the end of her testimonio Menchú declares: “I’m still keeping my Indian identity a secret. I’m still keeping secret what I think no one should know. Not even anthropologists or intellectuals, no matter how many books they have, can find out all our secrets” (247). In Menchú’s strategy, the concept of incommensurability comes into play as we are reminded that as non-Mayas we cannot fully grasp, much less appropriate, Mayanness. As Doris Sommer explains of Menchú’s strategy: “It is the degree of our foreignness, our cultural difference that would make her secrets incomprehensible to the outsider. We could never know them as she does, because we would inevitably force her secrets into our framework” (246). Ak’abal expresses a similar sentiment in “Robo”: “Nos han robado / tierras, árboles, agua... / De lo que no han podido / adueñarse es del Nawal, / Ni podrán” (61). Though the Maya secret represented by the Nawal and its incommensurability are explicitly presented in “Robo,” this is something that Ak’abal also addresses thematically, structurally or stylistically, as I have already shown. The incommensurable cultural aspects of his work are a key strategy in the production of a Maya discursivity. The Maya worldview with which Ak’abal counters Western logic has long been used by Indigenous activists for the consolidation of the Maya movement. However, I would
like to suggest that due to Ak’abal’s poetic commitment above a political one, his work has not been labeled as essentialist.

Ak’abal emphasizes the significance of a Maya knowledge system, its cosmogony and its memory in the production of his own work:

Mi abuelo, que aún vive y tiene 97 años, es un sacerdote indígena con muchos conocimientos. En mi pueblo aún se usa el calendario lunar de 260 días. Me fui nutriendo de la cosmogonía de mi abuelo. Aprendí con él a leer los relámpagos, las tempestades, a calibrar el viento, a comprender el lenguaje de los pájaros, el comportamiento de los animales, el rumor de los ríos. (“Al publicar textos rompemos con el silencio”)

Though Ak’abal’s poetry is marked by its deeply personal character, his statements about his inspiration, his influences and his poetic formation transcend the personal and communicate a great deal about Maya culture. For example, when he talks about his mother and grandmother’s storytelling, Ak’abal is talking about Maya oral tradition. His poetry is deliberately personal, but not decidedly political. In most of his writing he refrains from overt socio-political critique or denunciation of injustice, racism or discrimination:

En algún momento dado escribí algunos textos, un poquito como liberándome, sobre este problema [el conflicto armado] que nos afectó socialmente muchísimo, pero cuando decidí ya formalmente dedicarme a la escritura me di cuenta que era más importante hablar de mi propia intimidad, del minimalismo, que a la larga es más permanente, más valedero que haberme dedicado a rabiar. (Sandoval)

Despite the highly personal dimension of his poetry, Ak’abal is especially interested in preserving Maya memory, recording everyday experience as well as an Indigenous worldview for a certain cultural transcendence that guarantees the continuation of Maya culture:

Si hubiera escrito unos cuantos poemas sobre la guerra interna, ahorita prácticamente no tendrían ninguna trascendencia, en tanto que las propias vivencias mías, de mi gente, de mi pueblo, la cosmovisión que todavía es viva en nuestras comunidades, tiene mucho más valor, me sirve a mí, le [sic] sirve a mis hijos y ojalá que a los que me lean puedan acercarlos un poco más. (Sandoval)
Ak’abal’s outlook on Maya literature and culture, though it may convey a sense of collectivity and even a certain homogeneity among Mayas (“mi gente”, “mi pueblo”) as well as a continuance of customs and traditions, is not readily accused of essentialism because of his commitment to an aesthetic of Maya poetry, the highly personal/intimate dimension of his poetry and the absence of an expressly political agenda. Nonetheless, Ak’abal, like González, is concerned with the preservation of culture through the literalization of Maya orality. Ak’abal affirms that though Maya poetry has existed in its oral form for a very long time, the innovation of new Maya poets consists of the development of a Maya written literature: “Lo novedoso consiste en que los de esta generación de fines del siglo XX usamos los caracteres latinos para darle forma escrita a nuestros textos” (“Al publicar textos”). The K’iche’ poet coincides with the Q’anjobal writer in his desire to give voice to a long-silenced Indigenous majority: “al presentar nuestros textos en forma escrita, para compartirlos, rompemos el silencio y las barreras impuestos durante siglos” (“Al publicar textos”). This sentiment is also expressed in his poetry. In “La voz,” Ak’abal explains the importance of a voice for a people:

La vida de las montañas
está en la voz de sus pájaros.
La voz de los pueblos
son sus cantores
un pueblo mudo
es un pueblo muerto (192)

Specifically, as the term “cantores” suggests, Ak’abal speaks of an oral poetry that founds Maya culture. Ak’abal is well aware of the cohesiveness lent to the Maya pueblo through an oral tradition. This image evokes not only a musicality characteristic of Ak’abal’s poetry, but also a tradition of storytelling and of transmitting a people’s history through orality. These two elements, as I have already pointed out, distinguish Ak’abal’s work from traditional
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ladino and Western literary forms. In this sense, and from a Western standpoint, his poetry is effectively anti-canonical, as he imbues it with informal elements shaped by Maya popular culture that do not figure in 'high' ladino dominant culture. The harmonious relationship with nature that Mayas uphold is mirrored in the mountains and the birds. This relationship in "La voz," further distinguishes Maya culture—associated with the rural—from ladino culture—associated with the urban. More than that, the Maya cultural logic with which Ak’abal works is revealed, as nature functions effectively and concurrently with Maya life.

Finally, in erecting a Maya discursivity, Ak’abal looks to the past not only for renewal, but also for validation. As in “El pregonero”, in “Consejo,” Ak’abal addresses the importance of making Maya culture and literature known through the act of speaking up:

—Hablá con cualquiera
   no vayan a pensar que somos mudos,
   me dijo el abuelo

—Eso sí, tené cuidado
   que no te vuelvan otro. (81)

In this poem, the speaker, namely Ak’abal’s grandfather, advises his grandson on speaking up so that others may acknowledge his ability to do so. Most significant of all, this poem is an endorsement from Ak’abal’s grandfather, as a representative of his community, to speak. The grandfather’s words are of great significance because as a Maya elder he acts as a vessel of his community’s collective history and memory and of ancient and existing systems of knowledge. Moreover, the grandfather’s advice calls for the recognition of Maya agency and self-representation through the act of speaking so that the actors of the dominant culture may not think Mayas incapable of doing so. Interestingly, the speaker/grandfather also issues a warning about assimilation that points to the paradox commonly faced by Maya intellectuals who are accused of being absorbed by the dominant culture for speaking
and writing in Spanish. For that reason, when Ak’abal’s protagonists speak, they demand to
do so in their own language.

More than Ak’abal’s own creative process, his poetry reveals the emerging
discursivity of Maya literature. The interconnectedness between humankind and nature that
Ak’abal presents is an integral part of Maya cosmogony that differs greatly from a Western
worldview, a difference that begs reexamination of his poetry. More importantly, the
parameters that the Maya poet employs to reassert Mayanness emerge from the very
incommensurability of his work and traditional literary forms and Western cultural logic(s).
In fact, his particular use of language, musicality and orality produces a foundational
narrative for the emerging Maya cultural project, one that needs not look beyond Maya
culture for its own cohesiveness.

Víctor Montejo: A Modern-day Shaman in Exile

The study of Víctor Montejo’s work presents a unique challenge as he writes from
exile as an Indigenous man and a North American academic. In comparison to Ak’abal, his
work is less known in Guatemala, but he has participated in the Menchú debate and
worked as Congressman and Vice-president of the Commission for Indigenous Affairs in the
Guatemalan National Congress, a post he held for a number of years but resigned after
much controversy. Montejo’s work consists of Maya legends (Q’anil: el hombre rayo [1982]
and El pájaro que limpia el mundo y otras fábulas [2000]); testimonio (Testimonio: Muerte
de una comunidad indígena de Guatemala [1987]); poetry (Piedras labradas [1995]); and
novel (Las aventuras de Míster Puttison entre los mayas [1998]). Evident in these works is
Montejo’s intention: he writes for a North American reader, to denounce and rearticulate

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Indigenousness and contribute to the formation of a Maya cultural project, much like Luis de Lión and Gaspar Pedro González. However, in his latest work *Oxlanh B’aqtun: Recordando al sacerdote jaguar (Chilam Balam) en el portón del nuevo milenio* (2003), I would like to suggest that there is a significant shift in Montejo’s intended audience: his work, like Ak’abal’s, ceases to be heavily mediated and is instead infused with language, themes, and a style that seeks to reach a Maya reader rather than a *ladino* or North American one. Moreover, the Jakaltek writer deliberately employs a strategic essentialism rooted in Maya tradition in order to found and lend cohesion to a narrative that shapes the nation project he envisions.

Montejo offers a unique perspective that is not as radical as that of other Mayanists, seeking instead a joint nation project that includes Indigenous peoples and *ladinos*. One of the principal concerns revealed in his writing is the production of a Maya history as written by Mayas: “[t]o represent themselves, the Maya must now focus on the construction of texts (autohistory) that could destroy the negative images that are embedded in the minds of the Ladino (non-Maya) population of Guatemala” (*Maya Intellectual Renaissance* 124). Moreover, he sees Mayas as active participants in the nation project: “We remember who we are and where we come from as we fashion our hopes for the future too. We are active subjects of our histories and Guatemalan history too” (124). In *Oxlanh B’aqtun*, Montejo focuses on the “construction of texts (autohistory)” for the development of a joint nation project. The phrase *Oxlanh B’aqtun* in the title of Montejo’s book refers to the prophetic cycle of time in Maya cosmogony and it reflects Montejo’s approach to the reconstruction of Maya memory and tradition as the building blocks for a new nation. It should be noted that Montejo’s latest work cannot be examined with the aid of a Western theoretical framework alone as his work is imbued with Maya cosmogony, tradition and language.
To begin, Montejo calls for Maya leadership and an organization that is informed by Maya tradition in order to secure the continuance of Maya culture. Interestingly, in his anthropological work Montejo explains Maya leadership and the current impetus of the Maya movement as a consequence of Maya cyclical time: “This revitalization force is a response to the prophetic time in which we are living, at the end of this fifth Maya millennium” (*Maya Intellectual Renaissance* 121). The end of the Maya millennium to which Montejo refers is a topic that has sparked great interest and generated much debate as it marks the end of the Great Cycle in the Maya Long Count calendar. According to Robert Sitler, many interpret it as a time of ominous global shift, but for many Mayas, the end of the Maya millennium, or the 2012 phenomenon, remains largely unknown (“2012 and the Maya world”). Sitler identifies very few links between Maya popular culture, oral tradition, ancient texts and the year 2012, attributing the current hype to an appropriation of the ancient Maya Calendar by the New Age movement (“The 2012 Phenomenon: New Age Appropriation of an Ancient Mayan Calendar”).

Gaspar Pedro González is one of few Mayas who consider the importance of the Maya millennium for contemporary Mayas. According to Sitler:

González contextualized the recent Guatemalan civil war as part of an extended period of severe tribulation that would prepare his people for the next cycle in human experience. He said that the current age of the human beings made of corn was ending, and that beginning after 2012, there will be a societal rebirth into what he called “una nueva era de la luz” (a new age of light). (Sitler, ”2012 and the Maya World“ 102)

González’ interest in the year 2012 is markedly different from that of followers of the New Age movement as he, like Montejo, views the completion of the Maya Long Count calendar as a metaphorical rebirth rather than a cataclysmic end of civilization. Montejo, while not pointing to the year 2012 specifically, draws his approach to Maya prophetic time from ancient texts that survey Maya cyclical time:
Prophetic expressions of the indigenous peoples insist on the protagonist role that new generations must play at the close of this Oxlanh B'aktun (thirteen B'aktun) and the beginning of the new Maya millennium. The ancestors have always said that “one day our children will speak to the world.” (Maya Intellectual Renaissance 120)

Montejo uses these “prophetic expressions” to explain the strategic essentialism of the Maya movement in which a renewal of tradition occurs and is rooted in ancient texts, such as the Pop Wuj and the Chilam Balam, because these texts contain “passages that give the people hope for a return to their roots at the close of the millennium” (Maya Intellectual Renaissance 122). Moreover, whereas followers of the New Age movement interpret literally the end of Maya calendar time, Montejo subscribes to a symbolic interpretation:

The b'aktun includes the global concept of time and the regeneration of life with new ideas and actions. In other words, the theoretical b'aktunian approach leads us to understand the effect of human ideas and actions on all that exists on the earth and their effects on the environment and cosmos. (Maya Intellectual Renaissance 122)

These aspects of his scholarly work are integrated into Oxlanh B’aqtun, as well as other texts, in order to create a foundational contemporary Maya literature. The aim of this literature is to provide a well-knit narrative of times past, to explain the present Maya condition, and to provide a positive outlook for the ongoing development of an Indigenous socio-cultural project.

In El Q’anil, Man of Lightning: A Legend of Jacaltenango, Guatemala, Montejo retells the mythical story of a Maya warrior who defeats foreign attackers from the sea with the aid of Maya sorcery. The King, who initially asks the Jakaltek people to fight the invaders, orders them not to annihilate them all because “They are owners of a great culture / And fine manufacturers of beautiful silks.” The warriors respond that in Oxlanh B’en, at the completion of the Maya millennium, a war will break out “And nobody else will act in our place. / Then, we will finish off all of the enemy” (El Q’anil 54). This prophesy of Maya
agency, rebirth and renewal is the foundation of Montejo’s *Oxlah B’aqtun*. More importantly, Montejo frames the story of *El Q’anil* in the context of other ancient Maya texts, such as the *Pop Wuj, The Annals of the Kakchiquels* and the *Chilam Balam* for the purpose of historical continuance and a place in Maya literary tradition, and he extols the value of the *El Q’anil* legend as a collective memory: “It is not simply a story but rather a model of virtues that portrays the thoughts and feelings of the Jakaltec over time” (*El Q’anil*, xv).

Montejo also observes the continuance of a Maya oral tradition as a form of cultural resistance, despite the colonizing and/or assimilation efforts of the dominant *ladino* culture:

> Despite the denial by non-Mayas of these values and of the indigenous system of knowledge, the Maya continued to express their creative and philosophical thought through stories, fables, legends, and histories, which live on in the oral tradition of the modern Maya people. (*El Q’anil*, xvii)

> Notwithstanding a strong tradition of orality, prior to writing down the folktales he had learned, Montejo believed that Maya tradition would lose its relevance to the Jakaltec people as tourism, technology, religion and globalization affected the way in which people told and observed folktales and customs. In *El pájaro que limpia el mundo y otras fábulas mayas* Montejo explains that he retells Maya folktales for fear that they may be forgotten. His poetic formation, like Ak’abal’s, was integrated partly through his mother’s storytelling but it was his fear for the loss of this tradition that prompted him to record those Maya folktales (111). He explains that, in his own experience, the changing world around him indeed affected the way in which he learned these stories:

> Los relatos maternos continuaron durante mi adolescencia, pero yo los olvidaba rápidamente. Al ser un muchacho inmerso en un mundo con constante cambio, me era difícil mantener esas historias vigentes en la memoria de la misma forma como ella lo había hecho por décadas, pues sus padres y abuelos le contaron esas historias hace mucho tiempo. (*El pájaro* 107)
For these reasons, and in hopes of saving what he perceived as the dying art of oral storytelling, Montejo collected a number of stories and presented them in written form (*El pájaro* 111). To Montejo’s surprise, the drastic measures adopted in 1976 by the Guatemalan government to forcibly conscript young Maya men provoked a flurry of activity among the town’s elders as they prayed to *El Q’anil* and began retelling the Jakaltec legend. Moreover, Montejo observed that the stories told by the elders were modulated to match the needs of the community. For example, the stories were personalized “as a way of including the listeners to be part of a direct experience of contact with their roots and their heritage” (*Maya Intellectual Renaissance* 141). In addition, different aspects of the stories were emphasized in order to reach the listener, as the elder Antun Luk did when he retold the story of *El Q’anil* to the young Jakaltec men who were about to be conscripted. Luk “put special emphasis on the fact that the invaders fought from the sea with strange weapons, and our heroes defeated themselves by turning into lightning” (*Maya Intellectual Renaissance* 141). Similarly, in *Oxlanh B’aqtun* Montejo modulates his message in the creation of a foundational Maya narrative. His intended reader, for one, is a contemporary Maya man who looks to his Maya cultural heritage for understanding his present condition and for forging a future in which he plays a leading role. He asks this reader to look to the past and to listen to the elders in order to ensure the continuation of Maya culture.

Montejo’s *Oxlanh B’aqtun* is a continuation of the prophecies of the great Jaguar priest, *Chilam Balam*. While Montejo establishes a well thought-out, non-linear timeline that responds to the Maya Long Count calendar and invokes the structure of the *Chilam Balam*, I focus on some of the themes and strategies emphasized in this new Maya history. The *Oxlanh B’aqtun* begins with the closing of “El k’altun 13 Ahaw,” a period in the Maya Long

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10 The forcible conscription of young men was ordered by Kjell E. Laugeurd García in case Guatemala declared war against the British in defense of Belize.
Count calendar that may point to end of Maya civilization signaled by the foundation of Mérida, according to the *Chilam Balam of Chumayel* (Roys 206). This period is marked by a great deal of pain and sadness, and though it signals the end of an important historical period in Maya history, it also signals the start of a new era. The poetic narrative that Montejo reproduces begins much in the same manner as other Mesoamerican foundational stories, with chaos, confusion and migration: “Los hijos del Mayab’ volverán a ver los días aciagos, / pues el hormiguero será removido de nuevo / y habrá guerreros dispersos por todas partes” (21). This confusion is further compounded by a loss of tradition and an inability to interpret the signs of nature:

Si tuviéramos los símbolos pintados
abiertos a los ojos de los sacerdotes intérpretes (*txumlum*)
nos daríamos cuenta de antemano de las desgracias venideras
y nos prepararíamos mejor a confrontar la carga del k’altún;
pero los escritos se han olvidado
y ya nadie ha podido leer las piedras
como lo hacían los *ah tz’ib’* en el pasado.
Esta es la aflicción de nuestros días. (21)

The prophetic voice in *Oxlanh B’aqtun* moves back in time to recount briefly the Spanish invasion, which, according to the *Chilam Balam*, occurred in 11 Ahaw, a few years before the invaders’ colonization of Yucatán. He refers to the invaders as “los hermanos abusadores” who arrived from the east five hundred *tunes* ago (24). This reference to the East comes from the *Chilam Balam*’s most well known prophecy of the arrival of the Spanish: “11 Ahau is the beginning of the count, because this was the katun when the foreigners arrived. They came from the east when they arrived. Then Christianity also began. The fulfilment of its prophecy is <ascribed> to the east” (Roys 77-78). The prophet of *Oxlanh B’aqtun* interprets these events as a consequence of the neglect of Maya custom, tradition and nature and warns of their recurrence, should corrective measures not be taken:
Aquel entonces hasta el cielo se nos volteó
y nuestros protectores nos dieron la espalda.
¿Acaso se nos ha olvidado la queja de los ancestros
cuando la milpa quedó sin limpiarse,
perdiéndose incluso, el conocimiento que nos unía
como un puente al pasado sobre el abismo del universo?
Esto es lo que nos espera de nuevo,
y no sólo a nosotros sino también a nuestros abusadores. (22)

Montejo’s poetic retelling of Maya history also surveys more recent events, specifically Guatemala’s civil war and its effect on Indigenous people. This is of particular importance as this chapter in Guatemalan history had remained closed until very recently as many efforts had been made by the perpetrators, namely the government and the army, to conceal the disproportionately large number of Maya people affected.

With the help of the truth commissions, La Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico (CEH) formed in 1994 and the Catholic Church’s Recovery of Historical Memory (REHMI) Project, Mayas began a process of remembering and reconstructing their recent history, which until then had been largely ignored and heavily censored. Thus, the integration of Mayas’ collective memory into the prophetic book of Oxlanh B’aqtun is of great importance as the book re-appropriates and reinterprets the history that Mayas had been denied and furthers the Maya people’s healing process: “Nos acordamos de la persecución de hombres y mujeres / durante aquellos días de angustia y aflicción / cuando los intestinos se esparcieron por los caminos” (23). Montejo’s re-appropriation and reinterpretation of Guatemala’s history into a epic and prophetic narrative of the Maya people occurs at a stylistic level as well, as the Jakaltek writer strips off the historical data, figures, records, testimonies, and dates that authenticate it as history. Instead, he adopts a poetic language that is reminiscent of ancient Maya texts and other foundational pre-Hispanic narratives. For example, he speaks of the perpetrators in terms of the colours that characterize them rather than their specific affiliations; the army is represented by the
colour green while the guerrilla is characterized by the pattern of spotted camouflage:

“Estuvimos descuidados cuando los malditos, / los verdes y los pintos entraron a morderse / la colas / entre nosotros, creando el miedo y desconfianza” (24). Montejo, however, is explicit about the effects of memory and healing:

Los jaguars violentos serán expulsados
y el día de la justicia llegará al amanecer
a barrer los escombros de la guerra
y a cicatrizar con su bálsamo los corazones heridos
de los que no volvieron a ver a sus seres queridos
que fueron desaparecidos durante aquel tiempo maligno. (37)

At the same time that Montejo envelops in poetic language certain aspects of these events in the history of the Maya people, he preserves distinct indicators of time, place and historical importance, as he continues the *Chilam Balam’s* tradition of including the Maya Long Count dates, makes numerous references to the *Mayab*, and contextualizes the *Oxlanh B’aqtun* within ancient and recent Maya history. These are important as they keep his narrative grounded in real historical time.

While Montejo employs a number of strategies to ensure that a Maya logic is maintained throughout *Oxlanh B’aqtun*, perhaps the foremost strategy is the concept of harmony and balance as conceived in Maya cosmogony. Balance, according to Sitler, “is a core Maya value” and “just as Maya culture seeks balance between hot and cold, between male and female, its orientation towards equilibrium implies that there will inevitably be a reversal of the centuries of repression suffered by highland Maya under rule by the Spanish-speaking minority” (“2012 and the Maya World” 101). This sentiment is echoed throughout Montejo’s *Oxlanh B’aqtun*, as the prophet envisions a time of justice and friendship to come. Moreover, this aspect of Maya culture gives the narrative a cohesiveness, informs its cyclical character, and accentuates significant events in Maya history. That is to say, the holistic approach that the Maya worldview promotes bridges past and present traditions and
customs as well as histories, at the same time that it gives continuity to a greater framework of Indigenous history. In fact, in Montejo’s foundational narrative the core values of Maya cosmogony, harmony and balance, affirm other Maya values and give meaning to a history punctuated by foreign invasion. Interestingly, it is this aspect of Oxlanh B’aqtun that makes it relevant for Mayas and ladinos alike. Montejo discusses issues such as economic disparity, environmental collapse, political instability, corruption, foreign intervention, and moral decay in terms of the great Maya cycle. For example, the issue of environmental collapse and its impact on our health that has taken center stage in recent years also makes its mark in Oxlanh B’aqtun:

Habrá agua pero sucia,
y habrá que tomarla así, teñida de colorantes
que hincharán la cara y abultarán el estómago
hasta reventar a los sedientos
como mueren las vacas de tabardillo.
Se preguntarán algunos por qué no hay agua,
pero la pregunta de todos será: ¿quién la ensució? (43)

According to Montejo, humans have lost the ability to interact with nature and this failure to connect can mar our future; without a renewed bond with nature humans will face famine, warfare and disease: “Si no nos preparamos con rezos y cantos / y no nos hacemos amigos del venado, / hermanos de los árboles y de las estrellas, / será aún más fuerte nuestro lamento” (46).

Although Montejo’s epic poem surveys many of the events of past and recent Maya history and admonishes those acts that are harmful to the harmonious realization of Maya life as it relates to the greater scheme of Maya cyclical time, the prophetic voice in Oxlanh B’aqtun is deeply concerned with providing a positive outlook for all Guatemalans, Maya and non-Maya alike, from a renewed Indigenous standpoint that guarantees unity and understanding. First, the prophet calls for a leader who has not only been trained in the
sciences of the *kaxhlanes* (the dominant ladino culture), but who is also well-versed in the millennial knowledge of the Maya (55). The prophetic voice in *Oxlanh B’aqtun* also calls forth people who can interpret the new Maya calendar and forewarn their people: “En muchas partes del Mayab’, en muchos rincones, / hará falta que se impulse a los *ah b’eh* [expert readers of the Maya calendar] / a que lean de nuevo el calendario interpretando para el pueblo / los augurios del amanecer del siglo” (37).

With these tools, these new Maya leaders can move toward reconciliation and understanding among Mayas and *ladinos*: “El *ah b’eh* y el líder nuestro nos hablarán de justicia, / nos anunciarán paz y solidaridad entre nuestros pueblos / y el fin de la violencia de los *kaxhlanes* cesará” (58). More importantly, the *kaxhlanes* will embrace Maya tradition as their own: “y los que han sembrado la discordia y el descontento / apártandonos de nuestra historia continua, / se darán cuenta de que nuestras verdades / no son de temer y las abrazarán como suyas” (60). On the whole, Montejo envisions a new millennium, one in which Mayas may move away from the harmful effects of colonization, represented by horse manure, and ascend to their former splendour, symbolized by jade:

> Se espera que los sacerdotes Mayas salten de gozo y pongan los incensarios a la puerta del nuevo milenio pues es el tiempo de la penitencia y el arrepentimiento para pedir que el equipaje del siglo que se asoma esté repleto de jade y no de estiércol de caballo. (29-30)

*Oxlanh B’aqtun* is the culmination of Víctor Montejo’s scholarly and literary work: he sets out to write a new foundational Maya text, framing it within Maya literary and oral traditions so that it may contribute in the production of a new way of being Maya in Guatemala today. Montejo’s enterprise consists of reworking the strategic essentialism adopted by the Maya movement in recent years for the consolidation of a collective past in the formulation of a new political and cultural identity that is clearly distinguished from
ladino cultural expressions. The Maya movement articulates a homogenous Maya identity by summoning a collective Maya past and ascribing universal qualities to Mayanness in an effort to gain sufficient political agency. Montejo does something similar with El Q'anil and Oxlanh B’aqtun, but his is largely a cultural project that little threatens the Guatemalan status quo. Although the Jakaltek author is interested in promoting change at various levels of the nation project, his concern is primarily cultural since he recognizes the effect of foundational narratives on the state and its subjects:

De esta forma los conocimientos de los ancestros servirán para reforzar el gobierno, y el aporte cultural de nuestros héroes Mayas se revalidará para la posteridad. (60)

Montejo’s production of a foundational narrative is a cultural approach distinct from the nation project, because as Charles Hale explains, “[c]ultural resistance forges political unity and builds the trenches from which effective political challenge can later occur” (18).

All in all, the separation from Western literary conventions and traditions occurs at structural, stylistic and thematic levels in recent Maya literature. Humberto Ak’abal, for one, experiments with the sounds of nature, K’iche’ language and elements of everyday Maya life, while Víctor Montejo writes a Maya history and a prophesy of a Maya nation that follows the modality of ancient texts such as the Chilam Balam. What is more, from their work a new discursivity emerges that articulates Mayanness from the perspective of the Indigenous author himself and posits a cultural project that is easily discernable from other cultural expressions.

For more than four hundred years Indigenous voices were expunged from dominant culture, though historical Maya texts, like the Pop Wuj and the Chilam Balam, were appropriated by ladinos for the formulation of foundational narratives and national literature(s). As Gail Ament indicates, these texts, though prized for their mythical and
foundational value, were regarded as ‘folkloric’ (218). The new Maya discursivity that is
negotiated in the recent literature written by Indigenous people in Guatemala destabilizes
the categories used to define culture, specifically those categories that repeatedly relegated
Indigenousness to the margins. With the relative success of a Maya print capitalism, the
official recognition of the cultural rights of Indigenous people, a visible public presence and
a resonant cultural project well underway, the formation of a new literature written by
Mayas is changing the face of Guatemala’s literary establishment, as well as that of the
dominant culture. Though still subject to a cultural gauge of high and low culture,
Indigenous literature is articulated today as an authentic cultural expression, as it stands
unapologetically alongside Western traditional and canonical forms. Lastly, this new
literature seeks to represent the existing reality of Maya people without forgetting to look
back.

While the current neoliberal government adopts policies to recognize and protect
Indigenous peoples as citizens of the Guatemalan nation, endemic racism and discrimination
are largely ignored in an effort to produce a cohesive narrative of Guatemalan
multiculturalism. Maya writers, like Ak’abal and Montejo, not only speak of the present
situation of Indigenous people but also to help preserve Maya people’s collective memory by
situating their narratives in the framework of distant and immediate pasts for the
configuration of a coherent present and the forecast of a more promising future. All things
considered, the work of these writers provides a unique challenge to literary studies, given
that the texts they draw from—both literary and cultural—and the cultural difference that
they represent fall well outside the scope of a Western canon or cultural tradition.
Conclusion

With the signing of the Peace Accords in Guatemala, Indigenous people have gained a great deal of ground in the political and cultural arenas. These Accords have done much to protect the cultural rights of Indigenous people; however, they have excluded the renovation of Guatemala’s state model, which is not well adapted to address the ethnic and cultural differences and the needs of the numerous Indigenous groups in Guatemala. Though a Maya intellectual elite today enjoys greater political presence and participation than it did two decades ago, the same cannot be said for the rest of the Maya population.

The literary production of Maya authors that I have examined in my study helps reveal much about the pan-Maya movement, Maya culture and tradition, as well as dominant ladino culture. This is of great significance as Indigenous people and ladinos alike are living at a time in which Guatemala is moving toward a multicultural, plurinational, plurilingual model of citizenship. More importantly, I have argued that the emergence of a Maya literature in Guatemala signals the changing face of Indigenousness as articulated by those who experience it in their everyday lives, as K’iche’s, Q’anjobals, Kaqchiquels or Mames. I have also shown that for the dominant ladino culture, the parameters for the inclusion of Indigenousness as a symbolic building block of national identity are shifting. Like Rigoberta Menchú or Humberto Ak’abal, Mayas today constantly un-perform an imposed form of Indigenousness, an Otherness that subordinates them as an indio, denies them agency, and renders them silent and helpless.

Observing the new Indigenous contemporary literature written by and for Mayas in Guatemala is of great significance because the Maya movement’s most notable gains have occurred in the cultural arena, for a number of reasons. First, the need to establish an
imagined community led the movement to strategically root its collective identity in an historic past and a shared sense of cultural norms, traditions and customs. Second, given Guatemala’s long history of violent oppression, Indigenous presence in the political and socio-economic arenas has been greatly limited, while a Maya cultural presence, albeit a heavily mediated one, has always existed in the symbols, narratives and histories of Guatemalan nationhood. And third, with the Peace Accords and the adoption of a neoliberal model of citizenship, Guatemala has ‘permitted,’ as Charles Hale suggests, a certain type of Indigenousness that does not disrupt the productive drive of a market economy (“Rethinking Indigenous Politics”).

As I showed with de Lión and González, in the early stages of the Maya cultural project an Indigenous voice, as articulated by the dominant ladino culture, was decentered, re-appropriated, and enunciated from a Maya perspective. More importantly, this signaled the start of a Guatemalan Indigenous literature that carved out a place within the dominant culture. Humberto Ak’abal’s and Víctor Montejo’s forms of cultural resistance have undertaken the renewal of Maya tradition and culture for the development of a new way of speaking as a Maya in Guatemala today. More importantly, through this new way of speaking about Indigenousness—this new Maya discursivity—the emphasis is no longer just a point of enunciation within the dominant culture but an integral part of the larger project of a Maya nation that exists alongside a ladino one.

The women writers Calixta Gabriel Xiquín and Maya Cu seek to redefine the role of Maya women in Indigenous and ladino Guatemalan societies, as well as in the larger picture of the nation. The case of Indigenous women writers is particularly interesting, as it adds an individuality that is not altogether common in the writing of their male counterparts. Their work, as I demonstrated, is highly personal at the same time that it contests larger notions
of womanhood and feminine identity. As Elleke Boehmer explains, “women’s many-centred, constellated power, the emphasis being at once on the importance of diversity and on occupying an enabling position from which to articulate selfhood” is key when observing multiplicity and difference in the postcolonial condition (her emphasis, 220).

The changes in the literary realm of Indigenous culture echo the changes in different sectors of Guatemalan and Maya society. For one, in the past decade there have been many debates about multiculturalism and plurilingualism. Maya people are actively organizing themselves and a number of programs promoting literacy in the Maya languages have been launched. In April 2008, for example, with the help of UNESCO and under the supervision of the Academy of Mayan Languages of Guatemala (AMLG), TV Maya was launched on Guatemala’s Channel 5, a military channel that aired between the years 1979 and 1998 (Alvarado, “TV Maya, al aire, para promover interculturalidad”). For Modesto Baquía, president of the AMLG, TV Maya is part of a larger project, one that ensures a new state model: “el objetivo principal de este medio de comunicación será contribuir a ‘la construcción de un Estado democrático y participativo, que refleje la nación multicultural’” (Castellanos, “TV Maya se organiza”).

Interestingly, some of the changes that Guatemalans are witnessing in a move toward an inclusive multiculturalism—changes that are having the largest impact on the everyday lives of Indigenous people—are coming from the private sector. As part of a series of events in celebration of La Francophonie, the Swiss ambassador to Guatemala, Jean Pierre Villard, and the noted Maya intellectual, Demetrio Cojtí, participated in a debate entitled “Federalismo, plurilingüismo y multiculturalidad.” The event’s moderator, Demetrio Rodríguez Guaján, a respected Maya leader, addressed the changes that the private sector

1 Shortly after it was launched, TV Maya faced the Congress’ decision to ban the sale of advertisement on public television, which put the channel’s continuation at risk (Reynoso “Marcha contra restricción a canales mayas”).
is effecting in relation to Guatemala’s multiculturalism. For Rodríguez Guaján, Guatemala’s market forces are currently driving a change and, I would like to add, they are doing so rapidly and effectively. According to Rodríguez Guaján, Pollo Campero, a large Guatemalan restaurant chain, is now considering providing a multilingual menu, just as telemarketing companies and one of the country’s largest banks, Banrural, now offer their services in a number of Maya languages in addition to Spanish. Similarly, given the increasing number of literate Mayas, there are a number of publishing houses that are translating Guatemalan literary classics as well as important sociological, anthropological and political texts into Maya languages.²

In my project I have proposed the use of postcolonial and postcolonial feminist frameworks for the analysis of Indigenous literature in Guatemala. I am certain that in addition to these frameworks, the careful consideration of Maya theoretical approaches that are starting to emerge in the region can be very useful given that Indigenous literature in Guatemala is written in contestation of official and unofficial local discourses, histories, and traditions. In addition, the study of Indigenous literature in Guatemala would benefit from a comparative study with other Indigenous literatures of the region because it would elucidate the intrinsic relations of power that developed with European colonialism and imperialism and help reach a cross-cultural understanding that does not diminish difference.

At present, Latin America is experiencing rapidly evolving economies, integrated communication networks, mass media, and new forms of migration. As a result, the approach(es) that scholars employ must be mindful of these elements as they shape the cultural production across real and imaginary borders. Thus, such a comparative,

² Perhaps the most well known and prestigious is the Fondo de Cultura’s Colección Intercultural, which has published the works of leading ladino writers in over twenty titles translated into K’iche’, Kaqchikel and Q’eqchi’. There are also a number of Maya initiatives, among them an initiative by the Escuela de educación superior de integral rural Mayab’ and Editorial Saqil Tzij.
interdisciplinary study would be particularly useful in the case of Guatemala since the
Indigenous community has experienced displacement as well as internal and external exile.
Currently there is also a strong Maya presence in Central America, Mexico, the United States
and Canada. This Maya diaspora was the result of an unprecedented flight by the survivors
of the Maya communities that were annihilated during Guatemala’s civil war.³

Given the circumstances I have outlined above, I encourage future studies to
examine the manner in which Maya writers in Guatemala write not from the margins, but
from a juncture in which they articulate an Indigenous identity by utilizing the tools of the
dominant culture—language, media, technology, global networks of communication, trade
relations—to renew their own oral traditions, histories and customs. For this reason, it is
important to reflect on the place of enunciation, as Maya writers do. In speaking of
borderland literary production, the Chicana writer-critic Gloria Anzaldúa states that in
allowing for difference it is important to also question boundaries:

In our literature, social issues such as race, class and sexual difference are
intertwined with the narrative and poetic elements of a text, elements in
which theory is embedded. In our mestizaje theories we create new
categories for those of us left out or pushed out of the existing ones. We
recover and examine non-Western aesthetics; recover and examine non-
rational modes and ‘blanked-out’ realities while critiquing Western aesthetics;
recover and examine non-rational modes and ‘blanked-out’ realities while
critiquing rational, consensual reality; recover and examine indigenous
languages while critiquing the ‘languages’ of the dominant culture. And we
simultaneously combat the tokenization and appropriation of our literatures
and our writers/artists. (xxvi)

With the emergence and success of a new contemporary Indigenous literature, the
literary establishment in Guatemala has opened up and is presently seeing and celebrating
the surfacing of other literatures by Indigenous writers from non-Maya groups. In the past
few months, attention has been focused on the work of young Garífuna poet, Wingston

³ According to the Commission for Historical Clarification, Guatemala’s civil war saw the
destruction of more than 600 Maya villages and caused the deaths and disappearances of 150,000
Mayas (*Guatemala: Memory of Silence. Conclusions and Recommendations*).
González, for example. There is no doubt that the creation of the Premio de Literatura Indígena B’atz’, which received entries in eight different Indigenous languages in 2007, will promote increased participation by Maya, Xinca, and Garífuna writers.

For Demetrio Cojtí, at present in Guatemala we are observing symbolic and declarative pluralisms that are neither real nor institutionalized ("Federalismo, plurilinguismo y multiculturalidad"). More specifically, Cojtí refers to the signing of the peace agreements and the ensuing ”Acuerdo sobre la identidad y derechos de los pueblos indígenas” as documents that are observed in contemporary Guatemala but not fully implemented. The problem, he argues, is the unaltered state model that continues to legitimize a system that marginalizes the Indigenous population and limits its participation. Maya intellectuals like Cojtí actively promote the development of a new state model in which Indigenous people can actively participate as members of a plurinational, multiethnic, and multicultural society.

While in the political arena these changes will undoubtedly have lasting effects, a long dialogue needs to continue in order to arrive at a state model that can be successfully implemented. If we observe the changes that are occurring in the cultural arena at present, a positive outlook can be predicted for the development of a Maya nation. Mayas have carved out a place for their own cultural production and established a Maya discursivity that lends cohesion to the cultural project that will help forge a nation. The road ahead is long and difficult, and Mayas must constantly and strategically articulate their imagined Maya community without dissolving the differences that define each Maya group. Though the Maya movement’s cultural gains leave much to be desired when it comes to meeting the immediate material needs of the Maya population at large, they have a positive and lasting impact that holds promise for effecting eventual change. As Hale points out: “[c]ultural resistance forges political unity and builds the trenches from which effective political
challenge can later occur” (18). Perhaps the most important changes have already occurred at a cultural level, and with the increased participation of Indigenous men and women from different ethnic groups these changes will continue to take place. Still, many questions remain to be asked and our work as critics and observers of the postcolonial Maya experience has only begun.
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