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A Brief History of Guatemalan Maya Literature's Emergence

THE SILENT BEGINNINGS

Contemporary Maya Indigenous literature came into existence before we even knew it as Maya—or literature, for that matter—long before it was written in a Maya language. But it was Maya, and it was literature, just the same. It consisted of a solitary, obscure effort by two friends in the early to mid-1960s, Luis de Lión and Francisco Morales Santos. They were teenagers from the town of San Juan del Obispo, a few miles from Antigua, Guatemala, the colonial capital of Central America. Francisco Marroquín (1499–1563), Guatemala's first Catholic bishop and Antigua's founder, selected San Juan del Obispo, which literally translates as “St. John of the Bishop,” for his personal residence. De Lión and Morales Santos knew this. The old bishop's palace remains the main tourist attraction, hence the preposition's significance in the town's official name, “of the Bishop.” The site was abandoned subsequently, as earthquakes chased the Spanish colonial administration away from the Valley of Panchoy, where Antigua is located. Those who built the bishop's palace or worked as his servants set up residence around the palatial edifice, establishing a new Indigenous town without a pre-Hispanic presence. Not unlike de Lión and Morales Santos, most Indigenous peoples in this part of the country are Kaqchikel Maya. Spaniards forced them to transplant to this site against their will during the

sixteenth century to build for them and to serve them. The Kaqchikels are the second-largest Maya group after the K'iche's, vying for hegemony with them since the 1400s. Given San Juan del Obispo's artificiality, coupled with its lack of a pre-Hispanic existence and absence of an established lineage of Indigenous leadership as well as traditional sites of worship and a priestly caste, this community was inevitably a candidate for "Ladinization." Ladinization brings about a gradual and subtle transformation from an Indigenous to a Mestizo village. Residents lose their language and culture, thereby becoming monolingual Castilian speakers over time and practically abandoning all remnants of their original Kaqchikel culture.¹ Or so it seemed.

De Li3n was born Jos3 Luis de Le3n on August 19, 1939, and Morales Santos was born on October 4, 1940. What binds the two bibliophages from the beginning follows: they were both carrying literary books as they spotted each other in the town's main square and soon developed a rapport. Their animated exchange centered on literature. Other pressing topics related to ideas of permanent and universal expression included the need to migrate to the capital, Guatemala City, to pursue further studies and, mostly, to improve their writing skills and to learn to write literature. They were precocious poets who had participated in local contests and readings as young students. Neither spoke Kaqchikel at the time, but they were heavily marked by their Indigenous ancestry, for they were the embodiment of indigeneity. De Li3n and Morales Santos felt the stigma of racism and discrimination because of their phenotype, a factor that was rarely explored by 1950s social scientists. This was the beginning of a camaraderie that would last a lifetime. While de Li3n wrote militant poetry later in his life, most of it awaits publication. He was primarily a short-story writer and a novelist, whereas Morales Santos remained mainly a poet, though he has written children's literature too.

A few biographical notes mark the tensions in educational processes with an impulse toward Ladinization: first, de Li3n's father was a policeman. This occupation enabled him to provide Luis with elementary and high-school education. This was extremely unusual among Mayas in the 1940s and 1950s, given the marked socioeconomic, cultural, and racial discrimination that placed them in a precarious condition of misery and exploitation. De Li3n was able to go to Guatemala City, managing to formally complete his *escuela normal* in the city's poor public school system (exclusively Castilian-based in language and Eurocentric in culture), which granted him a high-school diploma and a teacher's certificate. He became an elementary-school educator, first working in the Indigenous countryside and later in Guatemala City. He was a prolific writer, producing

several poems and short stories on a daily basis—most of which have been lost—in his literary language: Castilian. In 1960s Guatemala there was no Kaqchikel in existence, and de Lión knew of no Indigenous scholars working in Kaqchikel.²

Morales Santos's biographical sketch runs along these lines: he studied in a Jesuit Catholic seminary from 1957 to 1959. He realized he had no vocation for the priesthood, but this experience helped him get an initial education in the European literary classics. Still, after dropping out of the seminary, he had to redo his entire secondary-school curriculum to have his education validated. The Ministry of Education did not recognize the seminary's schooling, even though it was far more rigorous and thorough than what was available in the country's deficient public-school system.

Morales Santos demonstrates the various stages of becoming an officially recognized educated subject and illuminates a nascent trajectory of articulating an Indigenous identity in Castilian. Sample his take on Indigenous subject formation and literary creation:

Yo estaba consciente de mi ascendencia indígena, pero no compenetrado de ella. En primer lugar porque aunque unas tías por el lado paterno hablaban cakchiquel, por alguna razón que nunca entendí dejaban de hablarlo cuando yo estaba cerca. De mi padre no podía esperarlo porque muy joven comenzó a trabajar de mozo de finca, donde el administrador y el caporal sólo se comunicaban en español. Con Luis nunca hablamos de esto, quizá porque teníamos claro nuestro origen. Nuestras preocupaciones iban más por lo social y por la literatura. A veces pienso que por estar inmerso en el mundo indígena, que era común verme rodeado de tías que vestían corte y huipil no me preocupaba si era indígena o no.³

(I was conscious of my Indigenous ancestry, but did not fully understand its implications. First, because although some aunts from my paternal side spoke Kaqchikel, for some reason I never understood they would stop speaking it when they were near me. I could not expect to hear it from my father, because ever since he was very young he began to work as a farmhand in a hacienda, where both the administrator and the foreman only spoke Castilian. With Luis we never spoke about this, perhaps because we both had clarity about our origins. Our concerns were more about social issues and about literature. Sometimes I think that because I was immersed in the Indigenous world, and it was common to be surrounded by

aunts dressed in a corte and a huipil, I was never concerned about whether I was Indigenous or not.)

With these lines Morales Santos gives primacy to social affairs and literary matters, tracing his preoccupations to a different kind of urban literary planning in Guatemala City, so to speak. And so he headed for the capital, paradoxically at a time when de Li3n got a job as a rural teacher and left Guatemala City. Morales Santos, as an urban dweller, soon won a position at the Direcci3n General de Bellas Artes.⁴ While working there, he met Delia Qui3n3nez, a poet about his age. Qui3n3nez was then running the Department of Literature in the Direcci3n General and introduced Morales Santos to Julio Fausto Aguilera, another young poet. In 1968 this cohort formed the literary group Nuevo Signo (New Sign), which Morales Santos describes as follows:

Pr3cticamente el surgimiento de Nuevo Signo se da en Bellas Artes. Un d3a veo el mime3grafo de la instituci3n y se me ocurre comprar est3nciles y pedirle a la secretaria que transcriba unos poemas m3os, agrupados bajo el t3tulo *Nimay3*: un intento de afianzarme en mis ra3ces. Solo un intento. Al final con el permiso de la direcci3n se hace una impresi3n de cien copias, se les pone una funda y los pongo a circular. El entusiasmo prende en Delia y luego en los otros poetas. Con el tiempo empezamos a reunirnos, “sin estatutos ni formalismos”, como escribi3 Jos3 Mej3a. Despu3s vinieron las lecturas en algunas sedes sindicales, escuelas secundarias p3blicas, al interior fuimos a Quetzaltenango, San Marcos y Chiquimula.⁵

(Basically, the Nuevo Signo group happened at the Fine Arts institution. One day I saw the institution’s mimeograph, and I got the idea to buy stencils and ask the secretary to transcribe some of my poems, grouped under the title *Nimay3*, an attempt to affirm my roots. It was only a first try. In the end, with the director’s support, we printed an edition of one hundred copies, we added a dust jacket, and I began distributing them. Delia was rapt with enthusiasm and then the other poets were too. We began to meet soon thereafter, “without writing any statutes or any other formal aspect to our meetings,” as Jos3 Mej3a wrote. Poetry readings at some labor union headquarters and public secondary schools followed, as did trips to the interior, when we went to Quetzaltenango, San Marcos and Chiquimula.)

The collective met at Homero & Compañía, a bookstore owned by literary critic José Mejía and poet Antonio Brañas, also a Nuevo Signo member, located in front of the old law school in downtown Guatemala City. In addition to the previously mentioned figures, Nuevo Signo also included among its cognoscenti Roberto Obregón, Julio Fausto Aguilera, Luis Alfredo Arango, and José Luis Villatoro. They all came from elsewhere in the country—meaning, in less elegant terms, that they were collectively regarded as “provincial” inhabitants of the capital—and they were of very modest means. It bears mentioning that Morales Santos was Nuevo Signo’s only Indigenous poet.⁶ But just as important is this detail: Morales Santos was not a marginal member. He was sufficiently bold to take the first steps to publish small poetry booklets by the group’s members, one of which was entitled *La gran flauta* (The great flute, a picaresque pun on a common Guatemalan epithet). He vigorously promoted literary readings, until, that is, Roberto Obregón was “disappeared” by the Guatemalan army on March 28, 1970, as he crossed the Salvadoran border. This traumatic event brought the group’s activities to a halt. Obregón’s disappearance was a foundational marker that radicalized many writers such as de Lión, who enlisted in antigovernment militant organizations.

While de Lión and Morales Santos continued to see each other periodically, de Lión was never a part of Nuevo Signo. Instead, he began to spend time with Ladino poet and novelist Marco Antonio Flores, a controversial figure in Guatemalan letters. Flores and the abovementioned José Mejía were the coeditors of the national university’s journal *Alero*. Flores was breaking new literary ground, and de Lión joined his group, which included another young writer with traits similar to those of Flores, Mario Roberto Morales, who would become a close friend of de Lión. Perhaps more than by grounding de Lión to literature, Flores contributed to his life by helping him publish in a literary magazine, *La semana*, and encouraging him to take courses at Guatemala’s San Carlos University. De Lión studied literature and philosophy there and published in *La semana* the first-ever article on ethnic identity, “El indio por un indio” (“The Indian as seen by an Indian”). At the university, he teamed up with his old friend Morales Santos and formed a Saturday study group, where they read and discussed works by major literary figures such as Jorge Luis Borges and Octavio Paz.⁷ The early personal history of de Lión and Morales Santos must be framed and grasped within the context of Spanish imperialism in the Americas and its legacy of conquest, racialism and racism, violent displacement, colonialism, and coloniality. In Guatemala’s case, this is an abject history of terror, brutality, and dehumanization.

As we progress with this first chapter, I wish to underscore that this plotting of Maya literature's inception requires attention to dates and details that are particular to national political alliances and ideologies and their impact on subaltern subjects and literary praxis. The events narrated here allow for intricate openings concerning the cultural role by motley Maya generations who have struggled to voice and preserve Indigenous languages and literary production. A critical question that grows out of these historical annotations and that the reader should take cognizance of is what conditions have given rise to creative imaginations from Indigenous perspectives? The consideration that follows strives to map how the divergent and unequal experiences in the place where "we" live have placed and displaced certain groups.

THE BURDEN OF HISTORY

In general terms, Spain's Eurocentric colonialism created in Guatemala what Xinka-Pipil scholar Eglá Martínez Salazar, presently living in Canada, labels "heteropatriarchies" (3). This is one of the many possible outcomes of Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano's concept of the coloniality of power, as expounded in this book's introduction. The coloniality of power incorporates domination and racialization to the known factor of colonialism as a critical dimension of modernity. Patterns of social discrimination outlive formal colonialism and become integrated in postindependence and postcolonial social orders. Quijano's idea speaks to how colonized peoples were effectively subalternized during the centuries of colonization and forever after as well. Not only was it the result of racializing their subjectivities, knowledges, and cultures, but also of the imposition of social hierarchical orders that disenfranchised them. A caste system was implemented: Spaniards were originally ranked at the top, and those they had conquered at the bottom due to different phenotypic traits and a culture presumed to be inferior.⁸ Inevitably, the aforementioned categorization resulted in a permanently racist discourse that was reflected in the colony's social and economic structure. It then continued to make its way in modern and contemporary social fabrics, wherein all descendants of white European immigrants with a clearly defined Western outlook now occupy the privileged site originally designed for Spaniards during colonialism. It is a system that effectively denies Indigenous peoples their own "worlding." Argentine philosopher María Lugones has touched upon the imposition of values and expectations on gender aspects from within this

contour, a scrutiny later amplified specifically for Guatemalan contexts by Martínez Salazar.

These conceptual aspects in Guatemala have translated into an ordinary exploitation and enslavement of Indigenous labor within a hacienda arrangement that evolved into what came to be known in the nineteenth century as a “latifundia-minifundia system” of land tenure. Under this configuration, large plantations owned by a minuscule economic elite, all descendants of Spanish criollos or European migrants, coexisted with subsistence-oriented tiny plots of land parceled out to Indigenous populations. Indigenous peoples could not feed themselves and their families from their exiguous yields and were forced to submit themselves as seasonal sharecroppers at the mammoth coffee (and later sugarcane) plantations for miserly wages, while obtaining no social or health benefits whatsoever. Indigenous peoples obviously resisted the system from the start. Their resistance ranged from secretly preserving their religious and cultural practices, which had been officially outlawed by Spaniards since the advent of colonialism, and continuing them through underground practices by recording their culture and beliefs for posterity as in the *Popol Wuj*—a textual construct explained further down—to launching periodic insurrections. In the twentieth century they organized peasant leagues and other communal organizations, ultimately leading to their participation in 1970s guerrilla rebellions. Despite the trauma of the civil war, attempts at reconciliation after the signing of the peace treaty in 1996, and superficial bids to recognize indigeneity by some government administrations, Guatemalan Ladinos continue to see Mayas as fragmented nonorganic bodies coexisting and intermingling with modernity. Mayas remain non-subjects excluded from conventional discourse. They are considered deliria of the secret threads of coloniality, what Boaventura de Sousa Santos has called a “sociology of absences.”⁹ This term alludes to an attitude that, under the guise of rationality, ruling elites condemn subjects they label as “the ignorant, the residual, the inferior, the local, and the nonproductive” (“The World Social Forum,” 17) to social forms of nonexistence. De Sousa Santos fleshes this out:

They are [considered] social forms of nonexistence because the realities to which they give shape are present only as obstacles vis-à-vis the realities deemed relevant, be they scientific, advanced, superior, global, or productive realities.

It is no accident that contemporary Guatemalan Maya leaders such as Pablo Ceto still connect current events to their defeat by the Spanish in

1524.¹⁰ Through this lens, coloniality is the hidden face of modernity, as Walter Mignolo has noted, although Javier Sanjinés warns that we should not locate it “‘before’ modernity and the nation-building process” (*Mestizaje Upside Down*, 4). Coloniality is constitutive of modernity and hovers as a tangible presence in our day.

Even if Guatemalan Mayas were subalternized as they seemingly acquiesced to an externally imposed Eurocentric worldview, their contemporary identity has been reconfigured. This should not, and cannot, be confused with an unproblematized, ideal Indigenous identity with essentializing traits that would continue an unmodified trajectory since the sixteenth century, despite the community’s strong ideological ties to the classical Maya order. Guatemalan Maya identity, as I have examined elsewhere, is a fluid notion. It cannot be more than a symbolic expression to determine agency, as Kay Warren has cued us. Its construction is an activity whose effects are never firmly fixed: it is never present, but always re-presented and reiterated in the slippage of its own production. There are lines of flight within it. It is an assemblage of a multiplicity of perceptions without a center or verifiable data other than the actual process of its own reiteration as a “truth effect” and, evidently, their unbending will to, as emphasized above, wield agency. Its repetition—a sort of never-ending dress rehearsal—produces and sustains the power of the truth effect and the discursive regime that has constructed it and that operates in the production of racialized and ethnicized bodies. The need for anchoring one’s beingness within a valued identity horizon that spelled “roots” of some sort—the idealized Maya world in this case—and the necessity to articulate the community’s self-worth and gain recognition in a society where success matters above all else, and the Ladino subject is situated in asymmetrical relations of power, is real.

Crucial to this order is, of course, the *Popol Wuj*, the heart of the Mesoamerican cultural matrix. The *Popol Wuj* constitutes a positive counterpoint to the “Mongolian spot,” another colonialized antecedent operating as an epistemic metaphor of the trace of indigeneity in Mestizos. For them, it is an apparently visible sign of their equally colonialized inferiority complex in relation to “genuine European whiteness.” These twin emblems are key for problematizing Ladino literature’s representation of Maya subjects and for explaining the present-day flourishing of Guatemalan Maya literature. They make up a way of thinking beyond that which fits easily within what Mignolo has labeled “macro-narratives from the perspective of coloniality.”¹¹

Under this premise, culture moves faster in one direction, and it is true that the force with which Maya cultures entered and modified Europe’s

was notably much less significant than the reverse. At the local level, however, the impact of Indigenous cultures has been more marked, considering the Guatemalan Mayas' numerical advantage in relation to European settlers and their visceral resistance to the colonizers' cultural onslaught and domination.¹² If Mayas' identity became hybridized and/or transcultural (meaning that after the Spanish invasion it was vulnerable to Western deployment of power), Ladino identity, also a result of miscegenation between Spaniards and Mayas, cannot be described as European either. Ladino identity, after all, is impacted by Maya culture on a quotidian basis. Since a good deal of this epistemic struggle took place in the discursive arena, we must turn to discourse to better detect and explain this cultural hybridity. For Mesoamerica that discourse is embedded, to some degree, within an Indigenous cosmological source, the *Popol Wuj*. This is a worldview that outlines acts of protest, the creative energy of subaltern events, and processes leading to a more just and equal society. The same holds for texts that might employ traits of Christian cosmology or a secular view of Western civilization. For this reason, contemporary symbolic figurations in Mesoamerican and Central American imaginaries differ in significant ways from traditional Western parameters, and their repeated, often subtle, allusion to that foundational discourse renders many of their signs "illegible" outside the region in question. This "invisible matrix" is problematic for critics who are unfamiliar with it, or who want to "translate" all literary production originating in the "marginality of marginality" into urban or metropolitan signs of Westernness that are, in turn, presented as the macro-narrative of Latin America's literary modernity.

The *Popol Wuj* tells the story of creation in a fashion that conflates the origins of all Mesoamerican peoples in one foundational discourse. During the Spanish invasion, Indigenous peoples endured the destruction of their cities and their cultures, the rape of their women and the enslavement of their men. In the fifty years following the event, they lost approximately 86 percent of their total population. Those who survived were forced to accommodate their perception of the world to new cultural and social realities. But the *Popol Wuj* became a foundational manifesto of resistance in the Guatemalan highlands. It was originally written around 1550–55 in K'iche' Maya but using a Latin alphabet. After the Holocaust of the Spanish invasion, surviving Maya K'iche' leaders/priests of the Kaweq lineage or *chinamital* sensed their imminent extermination and/or the loss of practicing their spirituality, except in deep secrecy. The need to both leave a trace of their peoples' experience and a record of their beliefs became urgent. Much as their classic ancestors had done by carving glyphs on stelae to record their

deeds and history with astronomical associations, they chose to secretly write a narrative that explained their origins, their spiritual practices, and their culture. The *Popol Wuj* offers an account of the world's creation, the fashioning from maize of the first humans, signaling the emanation of the K'iche' people, followed by the history of their rulers up until the Spaniards' arrival. The *Popol Wuj* empowered those rulers to make claims while under Spanish rule. Most importantly, K'iche' leaders declared that they received the insignia and gifts of Quetzalcoatl/Kukulkán, the feathered serpent, the highest deity in the cosmos, god of arts and culture. In other words, the *Popol Wuj* claims that the K'iche' were the chosen ones, and the Spaniards were simply the barbarians who won the war. As a caveat to this statement, we should recall that, as we know it, this text is already born in a colonial semiosis, where the written letter, the Latin alphabet, is employed for the first time both to name a non-Western referent, K'iche' Maya significations, and to occlude the vaporous condition of the original, an oral text performed before audiences for thousands of years. We have to nuance the quasi-celebratory mantle placed over this seemingly ur-text, emerging from a zone where the aura of the other, and of otherness, has been smothered.¹³ Still now, however, contemporary Maya organic intellectuals reimagine it as an interstitial text, interpreting it to create meaning in the present. More is said about the *Popol Wuj* in chapter 2, prior to discussing Luis de Lión's seminal novel, *Time Commences in Xibalbá*.

Emblematic Ladino figures such as Guatemala's Nobel laureate Miguel Ángel Asturias—bestowed the 1967 Nobel Prize—used the *Popol Wuj* as a model for a contemporary masterpiece; in his case, *Hombres de maíz* (1949; *Men of Maize*, 1993).¹⁴ However, this Ladino author has also been named by Maya intellectuals for silencing Indigenous voices even as he created the illusion of speaking from an Indigenous perspective, as is developed further on in this same chapter. In this logic, Asturias mythified the allegedly hybrid quality of *mestizaje* as a harmonious synthesis of Western and Guatemalan Maya values in the aforementioned novel. In so doing, Asturias was equally guilty of relegating Mayaness to a subaltern role within Ladino identity. Maya culture provided symbolic icons for his romanticized, liberal conception of nationality, an adequate stand for late 1940s Ladino culture. The outcome was that the subaltern voice was expressed exclusively by the Ladino letrados and exclusively in Castilian. Since the acquisition of agency implies control of one's enunciations, Asturias's attitude wrested agency from Guatemala's Mayas. The Nobel laureate may have indeed named the Maya community, spoken for it, and defended it. But he did not speak *with* it. In this chain of representational

circumstances, Mayas did not speak. Asturias's discursivity stripped identity from the Maya and symbolically attacked them. *Men of Maize* underscored the limits of the representation of subalternity when the subaltern's own enunciation is suppressed. If *Men of Maize* is the maximum possible consciousness to which a Ladino letrado could aspire in his immersion with modernizing parameters, wherein the subliminal and discontinuous emergence of the subaltern subject is traced, we can clearly witness the difficulty of representing alternative expressions of a complex heterogeneity in literary discursivity. But, again, it was Asturias who defended Maya culture and who bequeathed the Nobel Prize money to his son Rodrigo, so that he could create a guerrilla organization that fought for Indigenous rights. Rodrigo Asturias took Gaspar Ilom as a nom de guerre, honoring his father's heroic Indigenous leader of resistance in *Men of Maize*. This is doubtlessly the complex inheritance of conquest, coloniality, and its vast corollaries, including rebellion and mestizaje.

THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR: A LONG INTERLUDE BETWEEN CULTURALIST SOLUTIONS

Between the publications of Asturias's major works and the actualization of a new Maya literature came thirty-seven years of civil war in Guatemala. The latter part of that conflict exposed a spontaneous insurrection in the Maya highlands from 1979 to 1982. The army counteroffensive, begun in the summer of 1982, was brutal. The UN Truth Commission has stated that the army wiped out well over six hundred Maya villages. More than one hundred thousand people were killed—primarily older people, women, and children—and over a quarter of a million were driven into exile. In the spring of 2013, General Efraín Ríos Montt was tried and convicted of genocide because of these activities, but a higher court ordered a retrial. The horror notwithstanding, this genocide led to a Maya cultural revival as well.

The war originally had little to do with Mayas. It was a consequence of the June 1954 coup d'état that overthrew democratically elected president Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán, elected in 1950 and due to finish his term in 1956. Resistance to the coup turned into armed struggle after a failed counter coup on November 13, 1960. That date became emblematic of the civil war's beginning. Two trends were implemented in the country along the lines of *desarrollismo* (developmentalism) in the volatile 1960s: to improve economic conditions and to attempt to reduce discontent

and prevent the dispossessed from joining guerrillas. These approaches impacted Guatemalan Maya communities and were ultimately responsible for their radicalization. These directives fostered a commercialization that gave rise to new crops for export and new levels of technology and modernization. Observe:

These processes contributed to major social and economic diversification in the Guatemalan countryside, processes with particular impact on Indigenous communities. In the highlands, textile industries began to appear, finding markets outside the local and regional environment, making incursions to the capital city and even in the international market. The growth in demand for artisan products stimulated production on a large scale and commercialization on a national and international scale. (Ja C'Amabal I'b [6])

Maya communities grew in unprecedented fashion. Mass communications entered many of these communities for the first time. Reading and writing in Castilian were introduced as well, and, given the market growth, even monolingual speakers were forced to learn Castilian. Ideas and knowledge seeped in from multiple sources, primarily via radio: "People could buy radios, and radio stations sprang up which spoke to them of their problems and linked them to a larger world" (Ja C'Amabal I'b [7]). Perspectives and worldviews thus began to change. The latter had economic and social consequences. As the agricultural land base in Maya communities decreased and as the externally driven commercial activity increased, those Mayas involved in the commercial sector consolidated power, and in many instances they ran counter to religious and political stances from their town's *principales*.¹⁵ Mayas linked to this newly powerful commercial sector often joined Acción Católica (Catholic Action; AC) and began to implement new organizational modes learned from AC catechists, such as cooperatives.¹⁶ Despite their moderate developmentalist orientation, the growth of cooperatives brought about serious conflicts with entrenched local Ladino power. This accelerated the radicalization of AC members and their mentors. The Guatemalan military dictatorship, as a result, came into conflict with the church. Peasant leagues were formed by AC organizers to defend Maya rights from Ladinos and their authorities. The government reacted by claiming this was a guerrilla front and responded accordingly. The extension of capital into the rural economy led to the minifundio's incorporation into the money economy through the production of agricultural commodities and the acquisition of consumer goods and fertilizers,

a key aspect of the "Green Revolution."¹⁷ Mayas' traditional isolation was broken, and a new generation of activists with access to education was engendered.

Prior to the mid-1960s, Mayas had not been on the Guatemalan Left's radar. The pre-1968 belief among Guatemala's communists was that Mayas were feudal leftovers and, by extension, a human reserve for reactionary landlords. This logic was evident in communist cadres' embrace of the classical tenets of Mexican *mestizaje* and *indigenismo* (as is explained later in this chapter), thereby justifying *mestizaje* and forced acculturation.¹⁸ Such thinking ultimately reweave the threads of coloniality and racism into the seemingly radical communist narrative regarding the nation.

As previously outlined, the state tried to fulfill the role of agent for development while still repressing the population to keep those modernizing features from bringing about changes in the Ladino power structure. Those attempts at modernization instituted expectations among Mayas, who were excited by the initial promise of the Green Revolution. This, in turn, unsettled the traditional order by generating rapid changes, paired with a combustible mix through the work of Catholic missionaries practicing liberation theology in line with Guatemala's Indigenous poor.¹⁹

Ricardo Ramírez, future commander-in-chief of the Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP) made an evaluation, under the pseudonym Rolando Morán, of the state of guerrilla warfare after the Rebel Armed Forces (FAR) were defeated in the mid-1960s. He argued in a document titled *Documento de marzo 1967* (March 1967 Document) that one of the main reasons for their defeat was FAR's incapacity to mobilize the Maya population. Morán launched a foundational critique of the revolutionary/Indigenous paradigm by pointing to a deeper, qualitatively superior second stage in Guatemala's civil war. He proposed a political-military structure in which Mayas would be incorporated as the base of support for a guerrilla column that centralized political and military decision-making.

These issues sparked a full-fledged academic debate at the University of San Carlos in the early 1970s, in which major Guatemalan academic figures such as Carlos Guzmán Böckler, Mario Solórzano Foppa, and Severo Martínez, among others, participated. They produced an initial theorization about ethnicity on the part of Ladino intellectuals, the first to ever emerge in the country. This theorization, however limited and partial, was also the first to configure Maya subjectivity from a Ladino point of view. It thus became a foundational source for two political-military organizations launched in the early 1970s, the EGP and the Organization of People in Arms (ORPA).²⁰

In 1972, AC launched a literacy campaign in Guatemala's western highlands—Maya country—that lasted approximately four years. The linguistic fluency campaign included teaching reading and writing in Castilian to monolingual Maya speakers. Following Paulo Freire's method, literacy became a way of discussing local problems and of raising the students' awareness and problematizing issues such as racism, identity, and analogous topics. Many organizations soon burgeoned, enabling members to develop self-reliance, explore self-government, and master leadership skills. Seminars began to be held in Quetzaltenango, whose K'iche' name is Xelajú Noj', Guatemala's second-largest city, to capacitate many of these organizations' leaders, who were popping up like mushrooms all over the western highlands.²¹ Around the same time, in 1973, development fever led to bust as the Arab oil embargo drove up the price of fertilizers, undercutting developmentalist paradigms and closing off the expectations generated since the 1960s. Thousands of Maya peasants went bankrupt. Lands were mortgaged and frustration rose, leading to rebellious outbreaks in some areas. Combined with the February 4, 1976, earthquake that killed roughly twenty thousand people and left more than one million homeless, this shook free of ancient conservatism significant sectors of Guatemala's rural Mayas, especially the younger generations, who were already seeking political leadership within the various organizations providing guidance. Most of the victims of the collapse of the Green Revolution and the earthquake were Mayas. These events radicalized significant numbers of young Mayas, inducing their subsequent incorporation into late-1970s revolutionary battles. The armed conflict truly took off when the army occupied the Ixil town of Nebaj for the first time, on March 1, 1976, less than a month after the earthquake. Repression began barely two weeks later.²² Events then cascaded, from contacts with labor unions in early 1977 to seek protection and participation in the May 1 demonstration as a display of numbers and force, to support of the Ixtahuacan miners' march in November 1977, which crossed the entire western highlands to achieve political change. Mayas spontaneously joined this groundbreaking march, and approximately 150,000 of them accompanied the miners into Guatemala City. By 1978 Mayas were ready to take the next step and align themselves with the guerrillas.

And yet the traditional Ladino-led revolutionary leftists considered themselves the revolution's intellectual architects. Within the scope of what Uruguayan cultural critic Ángel Rama defined as "the lettered city,"²³ these Ladinos monopolized leadership posts and power/knowledge relations. Mayas were conceptualized as providing most of the cannon fodder and

logistical support. Mayas, of course, saw it differently. They kept their ethnic goals a secret. As stated in the acknowledgments of this same volume, they called this *la conspiración dentro de la conspiración* (the conspiracy within the conspiracy). As told to me by Maya Ixil leader Pablo Ceto in 1981,²⁴ it consisted of trying to move up the revolutionary ladder as far as possible but not to further the revolutionaries' objectives as a whole. Rather, they sought to further Mayas' secret goals of agency. Because of their grassroots organizing, they called themselves "*maya populares*." Other Maya cadres agreed on agency and empowerment but disagreed on the need to violently confront the Ladino state. Many of these other cadres were primarily urban Mayas. Their rivals later labeled them as "*maya culturales*." The Ladino-led revolutionary process became, from a Maya point of view, a mere vehicle for the defense of Maya identity, for gaining agency, and for the future configuration of their enfranchisement, regardless of whether they were members of one tendency or the other. Ladino members of the revolutionary Left, however, were blind to this outcome. The EGP garnered the highest numbers of Mayas. But their political conception remained rooted in the pre-1968 *foco*-theory, as developed by Che Guevara in the Cuban Revolution's aftermath.²⁵ Morán remained faithful to this viewpoint until late 1978, when the rapid mass incorporation of followers of Catholic Action forced him to reconsider his strategy and further develop the "ethnic-national" question. He asked second-in-command Mario Payeras to write both.²⁶ At the time their ideas about ethnicity were not any more developed than those espoused by Joseph Stalin, as commissar of nationalities in 1917, when granting the right of self-determination to the various nationalities within Russia.²⁷

According to the Ladino history of the Guatemalan civil war, a spontaneous insurrection in the Maya highlands surfaced from 1979 to 1982, and broader revolutionary plans began in 1974 when the EGP was founded. The Ladino revolutionary organizations were unable to bring the "undisciplined" masses under their centralized control. The revolutionary movement, as a whole, was neutralized politically by 1982 and defeated militarily the following year. After lingering in the jungle for more than a dozen years as a power factor, the movement signed a peace treaty in December 1996 that enabled them to become a legal political party. In this narrative of events, it is clear that the revolutionaries lost the war.

It was a recounting that I embraced in the past, but I recognize now that it contains significant errors. For one, it soft-pedals the guerrillas' paternalistic behavior and neglects to problematize and critique authoritarian manipulations and the inevitable militaristic normativity weighing

down political-revolutionary organizations from their very beginnings. This retelling does not address either the guerrillas' exercise of violence when forcing people to join them in liberated areas or war zones or their attempt to hegemonize the heterogeneous and fractured leftist movement. It especially failed regarding Mayas. The categorical separation between *maya populares* as peasants and *maya culturales*, labeled as bourgeois or elite, cannot pass the litmus test of history, given the two groups' similar goals. In the official history of the Guatemalan Left, the liberation theology—espousing priests and the organized Left considered themselves to be the engine of history. The Maya population remained primarily a reactive object of history, and their struggle for agency was ignored.

Rethinking the Maya narrative from the Maya perspective, we observe decentralized sites of struggle where subjugated peoples contest hegemony and recover local voices. We discover, as well, alternative struggles for agency and self-empowerment. This is as it should be: Mayas remain, in statistical terms, the war's greatest victims. Among the quarter of a million war dead and the hundreds of thousands of refugees, most were Mayas, and the army was officially accused (in *Guatemala: Memory of Silence* [Commission for Historical Clarification, 1999]) of wiping out more than six hundred Maya villages. But the apparently absolute division between the group favored by Ladino leftist ideology, the *maya populares*, and their supposed rivals or class oppressors, the *maya culturales*, is greatly attenuated if we read the story from the Maya viewpoint. In general, *maya populares* were poorer, illiterate, rural Mayas, such as Nobel laureate Rigoberta Menchú and her family. *Maya culturales* were, by contrast, mostly urban dwellers. Some, but not all, were members of Maya elites, with high school diplomas or higher levels of education, hailing from the towns of Quetzaltenango or Santa Cruz del Quiché. Many of the *maya culturales* enrolled at the University of San Carlos. Some members of the Maya elite, such as the Álvarez family of Santa Cruz del Quiché, joined the EGP, while many of the sons and daughters of the so-called Maya bourgeoisie in Quetzaltenango joined ORPA. Class is not the central issue in this division, which is more conceptual and cultural—one of means, not ends.

In this struggle's earlier part, from the 1979 semi-insurrection to the summer of 1983, *maya populares* that were linked to revolutionary organizations had more visibility. But this was so only because they accepted a subservient role within the ranks of Ladino-led revolutionary organizations. This self-disciplining process generally implied a renunciation of their demands. When the revolutionary war stalled, and new political organizations were created vis-à-vis the 1985 constitution and the democratic

elections that followed, maya culturales poured their energy into reviving their cultural heritage through peaceful and institutional means.

During the years leading to the peace signing in 1996, the hegemony of the Maya movement as a whole flip-flopped between maya culturales and maya populares as both groups struggled to gain the upper hand. This was most evident in October 1991, when the latter tried to keep the former from participating, or having any say, in the celebration of the Second Continental Meeting of Indigenous Peoples commemorating five hundred years of Indigenous resistance to Spanish/Western colonialism.²⁸ At this juncture the maya populares, having lost their base of support, which now lay scattered either in refugee camps in Mexico or in the jungle, had become virtual intellectual prisoners of the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional de Guatemala, the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG), formed of the four revolutionary organizations: EGP, ORPA, FAR, and the Partido Guatemalteco del Trabajo, PGT (Guatemalan Workers Party, of Communist orientation), which kept a tight party discipline in typical Leninist vertical fashion. Maya culturales complained that they were either not allowed to participate in the event or were placed in marginal positions within it, so that maya populares and Menchú could play a preferential role, since she was already a candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize at that time. Despite the tension, this was the first time that the two groups participated jointly in an event. Within a year Menchú won the Nobel Peace Prize. Her initial gesture was to break with the URNG and build a bridge to the maya culturales, in the hope of forming a single and unified Maya movement free from any Ladino/revolutionary/Marxist-Leninist tutorial role. The Maya movement as such emerged as the one distinctive, rising social movement during the peace accords. Consider:

Mayan organizations in the ASC fought vigorously for the Accord on Indigenous Rights and Identity (AIDPI), and grew in strength and stature during the negotiations. Forming COPMAGUA, the largest umbrella group of Mayan organizations, was considered a crucial step for Maya unity. The peace accords recognized COPMAGUA as an official counterpart of the government in peace implementation. These developments made many feel that the time of the Maya had finally arrived.²⁹

The problem with the Coordinadora de los Pueblos Mayas de Guatemala (COPMAGUA; Coordinating Body of the Maya Peoples of Guatemala) was that it was still controlled by the URNG, which, rather than allowing

free-flowing horizontal relations among Indigenous groups, imposed a verticalist discipline. Maya culturales negotiated bilaterally with Menchú, who had become a third force and a bridge between maya culturales and maya populares. Politically, though, COPMAGUA's verticalism prevented the realization of a genuinely autonomous cultural citizenship. This lack meant that public processes to generate support for Maya issues in the public arena never took place. It sufficed that military officers and guerrilla commanders negotiating the peace process behind closed doors agreed. The result was that, whereas the peace accords of 1996 established bilingual education for Mayas, and other rights—such as a land fund, a right to judge and be judged in their own language, and even the implementation of Maya law at the local level—alongside recognition of their subjectivity, Maya organizations still were absent from the national scene. Very few believed in COPMAGUA because it was perceived as a front for the URNG, even if this was only partially true. Even though it appeared in 1966 that Mayas were ultimately this war's victors—despite the huge cost they had paid in terms of the dead, the disappeared, and the immeasurable psychological trauma for hundreds of thousands—once the euphoria of the peace signing faded, most social trends returned to business as usual.

The verticalist imposition of Maya rights by maya populares acting on behalf of the URNG was thus a Pyrrhic victory. At a time when Mayas could have induced a movement similar to the one that led to Evo Morales's 2006 presidency in Bolivia, the URNG's traditional understanding of politics as an agreement exercised exclusively among top leaders behind closed doors caused this moment to dissipate. Instead, Guatemala slid into an era that Charles R. Hale has labeled as that of the *indio permitido*, an age controlled by Ladino forces across the political spectrum (298).³⁰ "It is more accurate to view the COPMAGUA debacle," Hale informs us, "as a punctuating episode in the long-term cycle of alliance-estrangement between Mayas and the ladino-controlled left" (296).

The split between maya populares and maya culturales was part of the heritage of shifting conceptions of global politics, sharing the emblematic date stamped on it by world-systems theorists or the World Social Forum: "1968."³¹ This date is characteristic of the differing political views for which 1968 stands as a divide. In Guatemala's case, maya populares, though providing the backbone of revolutionary resistance and insurrection in the late 1970s and early 1980s, were tied to a pre-1968 vision of politics. Theirs was a modern, verticalist, and ultimately Eurocentric vision. Mayas were the masses behind an avant-garde political party of Marxist-Leninist inclination that thought and decided in their name but that also instrumentalized

them as subjects, deploying ethnic animosity as a driving force behind class-based revolutionary violence. This is to say, then, that the political-military structure of guerrilla organizations politicized ethnicity without ever reflecting on the implications of the colonial nature of power within their organizations. We could go so far as to claim that the manipulation of Maya populations by political-military organizations could very well have had a basis in the heritage of colonial attitudes and practices.

Maya culturales, on the other hand, who originally were nonbelligerent in their approach, slid more comfortably into the spaces of the local and into the articulation of Indigenous identity as a site of contestation, even as they participated in the process that would conform the *indio permitido* era, in Hale's terms. Through the affirmation of Maya rights and identity in the context of a Maya cultural struggle, maya culturales had a better basis for redefining their terms of engagement with the state and with Ladino political forces. Without ever conceptualizing themselves as a post-1968 model of multicentric networks, maya culturales de facto ended up behaving like such a network, a loose affiliation of the type that has emerged in the context of the World Social Forum (2007). By returning to the local to reanchor the legitimacy and the self-worth of the community, they became better equipped to reposition their locality within those newer global designs that have emerged since 1968. In Latin America today, indigeneity, from Zapatistas to Mapuches, "is a historical formation characterized by its eloquent embrace of modern and non-modern institutions," as Marisol de la Cadena argues.³² According to this logic, an Indigenous neo-developmentalism could point the way toward a new Left, one very different from the outdated and verticalist authoritarian model inherited from the Jacobins. Some Guatemalan Maya thinkers, such as the Uk' ux B'e Maya Association—working primarily with K'iche', Tz'utujil, and Kaqchikel populations on educational and linguistic issues—embrace positions such as this, but as a part of long-term goals. These objectives are stated as "sustentados en la cosmovisión y cultura maya contribuimos en la formación intergeneracional del liderazgo maya para la reivindicación y el ejercicio de los derechos históricos del Mayab' Tinamit" (sustained by Maya cosmovision and culture, we contribute to the intergenerational formation of Maya leadership for the recognition and the exertion of the historical rights of the Mayab' Tinamit).³³ Uk' ux B'e forms linkages with the grassroots principles they embody and are beginning to theorize this, albeit in a tentative way.³⁴ What these communities might be producing is *un modo de futuro* (a type of future) as Raquel Gutiérrez and Luis Gómez labeled this critical disposition, using Morales's first presidential election

as an emblematic example of what took place in Bolivia.³⁵ We can, of course, wonder if the communal system can achieve a stable expansion of their noncapitalist practices and nonstate forms of power, and many more analogous issues. Can these practices of economic, ecological, and cultural difference be institutionalized in some fashion without falling back into dominant modernist forms? One may further ask: Can communitarian models ever be the basis for an alternative and effective institutionalization of the social? Can the new worlds envisioned by organizations as disparate as the Zapatistas, the World Social Forum, and many other analogous social movements be reached through the construction of nonstatist, post-capitalist, and postliberal local and regional autonomies? And can these alternatives find a way to coexist in mutual respect and tolerance with what until now have been dominant, and allegedly universal, modern forms of life? The main issue, more than the remnants of utopian thinking that may permeate them, is that this myriad of endeavors is emerging in noncentralized fashion through an equally numerous array of grassroots organizations, behind which stand Guatemalan Mayas who are exercising their agency without kowtowing to anybody else's priorities, needs, or interests. This alone reassures the nature of these enterprises, whatever the obstacles ahead may be.

HOW THE *CULTURALES* WON THE WAR AND PROPELLED THE EMERGENCE OF GUATEMALAN MAYA LITERATURE

After 1970 the paths of de Lión and Morales Santos diverged. Perhaps more audacious and impulsive in his political behavior—more visceral, in Sanjinés's sense—de Lión secretly joined the communist PGT. He invested the bulk of his energies in organizing political cells that would lead to Guatemalan peoples' insurrection. De Lión published his first book of short stories, *Los zopilotes* (*The Buzzards*), in 1966. His second one, *Su segunda muerte* (*His Second Death*), appeared in 1970. Both were written in Castilian, but their stories articulate a laboratory for representing racialized subalternity in various forms and fashions, while also evidencing a very distinct hybrid form of Castilian that undermined monolingualism by reconfiguring within it fragments of what could only be labeled "Kaqchilelian Spanish" in a delightful mongrelization that echoes the social, cultural, and political world of Maya subjects living on the abyssal line that decenters urban spaces from the perspective of racialized subjects. These