

WRITING "MAYA COUNTRY" IN MEXICO AND GUATEMALA

Bret Gustafson

Washington University in St. Louis

Indigenous Citizens: Local Liberalism in Early National Oaxaca and Yucatán.

By Karen D. Caplan. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010. Pp. vii + 289. \$60.00 cloth.

Global Maya: Work and Ideology in Rural Guatemala. By Liliana R. Goldín.

Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009. Pp. x + 242. \$50.00 cloth.

Escaping the Fire: How an Ixil Mayan Pastor Led His People out of a Holocaust during the Guatemalan Civil War. By Tomás Guzaro and Terri Jacob McComb.

Afterword by David Stoll. Austin: University of Texas Press. Pp. xv + 224. \$24.95 paper.

Human Rights in the Maya Region: Global Politics, Cultural Contentions, and Moral Engagements. Edited by Pedro Pitarch, Shannon Speed, and Xochitl Leyva Solano.

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009. Pp. ix + 377. \$84.95 cloth. \$23.95 paper.

White Roads of the Yucatán: Changing Social Landscapes of the Yucatec Maya.

By Justine M. Shaw. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2008. Pp. x + 226. \$45.00 cloth.

Maya Nationalisms and Postcolonial Challenges in Guatemala. By Emilio del Valle Escalante.

Santa Fe, NM: School for Advanced Research Press, 2009. Pp. x + 210. \$29.95 paper.

Guatemala is spiraling into deepening inequality and institutionalized criminality, with an economy dominated by export-oriented assemblage, agriculture, mining, migration, and drug transport. The Yucatán has become an outpost of the absurdities and dislocations of tourism-based development. Chiapas is also part of a new global logic, combining corridors of extraction, increasing militarized security, local struggles for change, and low-intensity counterinsurgency. In some ways reminiscent of the Cold War era—replete with nearby coups d'état, heavy-handed U.S. policies, and resurgent criminal and military rule—new economic modalities, new languages of organizing, and new struggles over the representation of past and future are reshaping the Maya region of southern Mexico and Guatemala. The challenge to analyze and interpret these developments is intensified when the region is viewed through the particular optic of its unity as "Maya Country," as in the present review, by bringing to the surface histories of colonialism in collision with neoliberal development, ongoing academic politics, and grassroots struggles. The works reviewed here shed light on emergent and

older developments, linking—and recentering—Mayan places and peoples in the context of broader shifts in the cultural politics of indigeneity and of transformations in Latin America.

Escaping the Fire is the life story of Tomás Guzaro, a Mayan evangelical pastor, as told to and written by Terri Jacob McComb, a missionary with the New Life Advance International Mission. Guzaro recounts how he led a group of Ixils out of guerrilla-controlled territory in 1982 and delivered them to a new life in a refugee camp linked to the Foundation for Aid to the Indian People (FUNDAPI), an organization created by then de facto president of Guatemala, Efraín Ríos Montt, and controlled by the army and missionaries. Guzaro's story was written as first-person narrative, having been compiled from interviews with McComb, retranslated into Spanish, and checked by Guzaro. As a result, *Escaping the Fire* is a curious work, at first glance *testimonio* with reminiscences of the story of Rigoberta Menchú, not least because of the afterword by David Stoll, who perhaps most famously questioned the authenticity of Menchú's own first-person testimony. Yet it is distinct from *testimonio* as a historically situated genre, and in fact, better exemplifies the Anglo-Protestant genre of Christian biography. Its publication by an academic press will raise concern in some quarters, as its plot, cast, and politicized morality tale offer up a Maya hero for the Christian right. Guzaro is thus antithetical to Menchú, and with a new edition of *I, Rigoberta Menchú* and yet another reassessment of Menchú's narrative recently out, *Escaping the Fire* is sure to fuel debate.¹

In contrast to Menchú's image as a revolutionary, Guzaro is a recovering alcoholic, small landholder, entrepreneur, evangelical pastor, and tailor, with a traditionalist Maya father and an evil stepmother. He relates that he strived to maintain neutrality throughout Guatemala's civil war, following the word of God as his friends were killed by guerrillas and the army alike. As pastor, Guzaro would become a liberator in the style of Moses, blessed by the vision of a white-haired, white-bearded Ixil elder, who indicated a path through the mountains along which he led several hundred followers out of guerrilla-occupied territory. With the help of Otto Pérez Molina—a Guatemalan military officer, School of the Americas graduate, alleged death-squad supporter, and presidential candidate—Guzaro facilitated the rescue of other Ixils. Stoll's afterword argues that the text affirms his own thesis that the Maya were caught between two armies, or in Guzaro's words, "entre dos fuegos" (202). He also warns—correctly, though one might take issue with the categorization—that, as *testimonio*, Guzaro's story should not be read as the only Maya point of view.

The work sets Guatemala, the Maya, and Guzaro into an evolutionary evangelical-capitalist schema: Guzaro—like the Ixils, who were "preliterate until recently" (xii)—progresses from darkness to salvation, from moral faults to Christian purity, from Maya rites to Catholicism and finally to Protestantism, and from poverty to self-made prosperity. In contrast to Menchú's revolutionary persona, Guzaro is a paternal and pastoral prophet who confronts mostly treacherous women and converts wayward male disciples and friends. His story celebrates

1. Greg Grandin, *Who Is Rigoberta Menchú?* (London: Verso, 2011).

individual effort, hope, and faith, and it embraces the wealthy, most of whom "worked hard for what they had" and succeeded by being "smart or taking initiative" (71). Faith in God ultimately delivers Guzaro from evil.

Whether it is testimonio or Christian biography, *Escaping the Fire* replicates the alleged flaws of *I, Rigoberta Menchú* by presenting a heroic icon, an idealized Indian made to suit an ideological narrative. If Elisabeth Burgos-Debray's mediation at least left Menchú's testimony largely intact, McComb embellishes scenes, emotions, and dialogue, creating a narrative distant from Guzaro's voice yet imminently digestible to American readers. For instance, we watch with Guzaro as a bad Maya priest enters a Catholic church to put a curse on him "[w]ith a sinister gleam in his eyes" (44). For such reasons, *Escaping the Fire* is a problematic text for classroom use. Despite the laudable attempt to represent other nonrevolutionary Maya who lived through *la violencia*, the book understates the extent of army massacres while foregrounding the killings carried out by guerrillas. It is an apology for war criminals and for the evangelical Protestants, American and otherwise, who supported them. The genocidal Guatemalan army is redeemed through the heroizing of Major Tito (Pérez Molina's nom de guerre), who, besides helping Guzaro, is said to have ended wanton killing in Ixil country. The climax of Guzaro's narrative, a trip to SeaWorld in Florida thanks to his missionary patrons, is oddly and sadly absurd, if not appropriate. Through McComb, Guzaro expresses his hope that, "despite all the evil in this world," God can "change men's hearts and help us to love unselfishly and live together in peace, like the dolphins I saw in Miami" (192).

Escaping the Fire will find avid readers among evangelical missionaries, church groups, Guatemalan adoption networks, and religious colleges. Yet much is obscured. Poverty and war are reduced to foibles of human immorality. In case readers miss the point of the action, lessons about it are placed in Guzaro's mouth; for example: "The guerrillas said they were in favor of the poor, but it was the poor who were suffering the most because of them" (114). Nonetheless, there is some ethnographic material: vignettes of daily life in the midst of war, of how conversion to Protestantism contributed to family schisms, and of the shift from kin-based to dyadic and small-group networks of friendship and labor. One also finds entrepreneurship, the ills of alcoholism, migrations from the highlands to coastal plantations, and the tragedies of malnutrition and child mortality. To be sure, *Escaping the Fire* does shed light on the impact of American evangelicals, a useful reminder to scholars and activists alike. However, to teach it one would need to engage a broader range of texts such as *I, Rigoberta Menchú* and more comprehensive and balanced historical studies of *la violencia* in Guatemala.

Liliana Goldín brings a more scholarly approach to bear on the highlands by studying the shift from peasant agriculture to proletarianization and entrepreneurship. The subjects of *Global Maya* are small-scale tailors (industrialists), farmers (commodity agriculturalists and exporters of nontraditional crops), and factory (textile) laborers. Through rich if depersonalized ethnographic description, Goldín argues that these "global Maya" are in transition from traditional to modern values shaped by new relations to wages and are engaged in creating a new identity alongside that of ladinos. This pits Guatemalans (Mayas and ladinos)

against Korean textile-factory owners and North American buyers, weaving “class, ethnicity, and nationality into a conceptual blend that constitutes the sociological scenario of the waged worker in globalized production” (152).

In this scenario, Goldín argues, oral traditions that stigmatized personal enrichment and ambition give way to the “individualizing” effects of factory labor. The desire for progress and improvement combine with the new significance of wages as a means to consumption and accumulation. Maya history is not emphasized but is instead simply the backdrop against which subjects attempt to insert themselves into global capitalism while generating and reinterpreting “economic morality” (170). Goldín concludes that “the adoption of capitalist ideology through active participation in the capitalist system is not synonymous with changes in ethnic identity” (172) and that “economic ideology tends to be consistent with people’s position in the economy such that the more that people are exposed to profits, accumulation, and competition, the more they are sympathetic to those constructs” (95).

This contribution to our understanding of Maya proletarianization and ideological change is important, given the tendency to view the Maya through an anachronistic ethnological lens or through the romanticized politics of indigenous movements. Like other recent studies, Goldín’s addresses the rearticulation of symbolic, discursive, and cultural expressions that accompanies new economic practices, a process that nevertheless results in a distinctively Mayan sociality.² Yet Goldín’s Maya are generic, in keeping with the acritical sensibility of a theorist of modernization: new conditions exist, conflict is likely if mobility is not ensured, gender relations are shifting in a positive direction because of new roles for women in labor, and “Mayaness” may persist in a new form or intensify if economic achievement is restricted. Very little is said about the past and present violence that characterizes this global turn, or about labor struggles. We are given a sense of the ties between workers and communities, and of Maya identity, but not of how laborers might be linked to other political manifestations, such as the union organizing that Goldín has described elsewhere.³ As a result, *Global Maya* gives a flattened sense of change and its potentialities; its actors have little choice but to modernize in the face of global trends.

Human Rights in the Maya Region, edited by Pedro Pitarch, Shannon Speed, and Xochitl Leyva Solano, gives a richly researched account of the politics of conflict and cultural difference. In particular, it asks how universal discourses of human rights interact with local understandings and struggles over power. Some scholars assume that local (indigenous) cultures and states (e.g., Mexico, Guatemala) are obstacles to robust, liberal human rights. Conversely, other scholars sympathetic

2. Carol Hendrickson, *Weaving Identities: Construction of Dress and Self in a Highland Guatemala Town* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995); Edward F. Fischer, *Cultural Logics and Global Economies: Maya Identity in Thought and Practice* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001); Walter E. Little, *Mayas in The Marketplace: Tourism, Globalization, and Cultural Identity* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004); Edward F. Fischer and Peter Benson, *Broccoli and Desire: Global Connections and Maya Struggles in Postwar Guatemala* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).

3. Liliana Goldín, “Labor Ideologies in the International Factories of Rural Guatemala,” *Latin American Perspectives* 32 (2005): 59–79.

to self-determination argue that local visions of fairness and justice matter, and that local movements for economic, political, and cultural equality are means to attain broader human rights.

Both stances are found here. Stener Ekern suggests that Maya culture can manifest illiberal logics in events such as recent lynchings. Alternatively, Irma Otzoy (on indigenous law and gender dialogues), Speed and Alvaro Reyes (on Zapatista struggles), and Christine Kovic (on the rights of the poor) argue that Mayas pursue a hybrid, articulated model of rights that incorporates cultural self-determination, liberal concerns such as gender equality, and progressive notions of social justice. Other contributors articulate a conceptual framework of cultural rights (Rodolfo Stavenhagen), trace postconflict political and legal transformations (Robert M. Carmack, Rachel Sieder), explore the workings of human rights training and nongovernmental organization (NGO) advocacy (Speed and Leyva Solano, Speed and Reyes), and examine the ethical dilemmas of uncovering mass graves. With echoes of Menchú and Guzaro, there are also contested memories of army and guerrilla violence (Victoria Sanford, David Stoll). The volume, which stems from engaged work by activists and NGOs, is indispensable for specialists and students, and it sheds light on three themes relevant to the study of indigenous and popular movements throughout Latin America.

Foremost is the use of human rights discourses as an instrument both of neoliberal state control and of indigenous movements seeking to contest inequality and violence. These uses update a cold war struggle between those who seek to make the Indian a prototypical liberal and those who seek to equate human rights with economic, cultural, and political equality. As Richard Ashby Wilson asks in a slightly different way in his final comments, "What kind of outcome will human rights have as an overarching political discourse—that of Marxism, of nationalism, or of Christianity?" (306). The defense of human rights comes to the fore as a key form of political participation and as the central frame of resistance and rule. As Speed and Reyes observe, neoliberal elites are as astute as grassroots organizations and NGOs in the use of "rights talk," easily morphing the defense of individuals into justifications for extralegal violence (16).

The second central theme of *Human Rights in the Maya Region* is the equally labile and paradoxical use of the ideal of autonomy, embraced by oligarchs and popular movements alike. For the former, autonomy entails individual freedoms and decentralized federalist governance, so that capital might resist the threat of democracy. For popular groups, autonomy instead involves resistance to neoliberalism (Speed and Reyes); indigenous self-determination, especially in rights conventions (Stavenhagen); third-world struggles for democracy, multiculturalism, human rights, and local rule (Carmack); community-based justice (Ekern); or community decision making vis-à-vis the "alien legal order" of human rights legislation (Speed and Leyva Solano, 297). The contributors also suggest that autonomy can be pursued through local development projects for schools, potable water, and health services. Yet in uncomfortable proximity to some of the meanings that it has for grassroots movements, neoliberal autonomy can also free the state of its obligation to enforce laws locally. Sieder suggests that it can bring decentralization and lead to depoliticized technical solutions, such as alternative

dispute resolution, thereby paralleling what she calls the “colonization” of the Guatemalan state by organized crime (79).

A third theme is indigenous epistemology as part of a “decolonial” rethinking of entities such as democracy, the state, and human rights. In this vein, Pitarch examines the translation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights into the Tzeltal language of Chiapas, beyond such dichotomies as liberal-communitarian and Western-indigenous. Tzeltal translators rendered *law* as *mantalil* (advice, order, dictate, rule) and *rights* as *ich’el ta muk* (respect). Rather than merely cataloging these choices as the collective alternative to individualist liberal notions, Pitarch argues that they reflect an ontogenetic understanding, in that the Maya might acquire more and more *mantalil* as they grow and mature as a physical and social body. Similarly, *ich’el ta muk* is socially constitutive rather than simply something that all people might possess and the state enforce. This approach is a promising way to go beyond the stale dichotomies and abstracted legitimations of violence that purportedly liberal ways of thinking about rights can generate.

Also at the axis of the decolonial turn, Emilio del Valle Escalante examines knowledge production from the position of the postcolonial—in this case, Maya—subject. *Maya Nationalisms and Postcolonial Challenges in Guatemala* uses texts by both Mayas and non-Mayas to question Western epistemes. Although Valle is himself K’iche’, he claims to present a stance from which nonindigenous peoples might also speak, that is, “an alternative locus of enunciation for Guatemala” (16). His Mayaness is an “epistemological, political axis that destabilizes the presently constituted hegemonic systems of knowledge and classification.” It is also a “space that allows the construction of a more inclusive and democratic nation-state” (16). This decolonial option offers not an essentializing utopia but a space for reflection in pursuit of new social orders, political imaginaries, and academic categories.

Valle explores central figures of the decolonial debate in Guatemala. He considers how Kaqchikel writer Luis de Lión (ca. 1940–1984) rethought Mayan participation in the revolutionary struggles of the 1970s and 1980s in pursuit of national liberation, that is, Mayan liberation. He juxtaposes Lión to Miguel Ángel Asturias (1899–1974), whose pessimistic treatment of the Maya in *Hombres de maíz* (1949) reflects a ladino consciousness and paternalistic *indigenismo*. For Lión, national liberation entailed epistemic decolonization and the transformation of deep structural inequalities, a creative labor in dialogue with so-called Western epistemes. For Valle, this radicalism justifiably rejected ladino hegemony and reaffirmed a specifically Mayan stance that was both anticolonial and anticapitalist, a struggle that Valle considers the precursor to a truly intercultural Guatemala.

Launching his own salvo in the debate on the authenticity of Menchú’s first-person voice, Valle asserts that Menchú is no ventriloquist’s dummy but a spokeswoman for human rights and interculturalism. Invoking Ranajit Guha’s idea of a prose of counterinsurgency, Valle argues that when indigenous militants such as Menchú threaten the colonial order, critics such as David Stoll—who, again, questioned the authenticity of the first-person account published in her name—use such prose to pacify, dominate, and domesticate them. Using Stoll in this way as a foil for his own argument, Valle makes Menchú the standard-bearer of an antiracist, anti-imperialist “revolution of values” grounded in a Maya epistemol-

ogy originating in the *Popol Wuj* (84). Valle cites the importance of Menchú's later writings, particularly *Crossing Borders*, which demands demilitarization; human rights; effective interculturality; and most important, the recognition of indigenous agency and self-representation. Harking back to the American Indian Movement, Valle calls decolonization a struggle against racism, inequality, and patriarchy.

Valle applies similar arguments to the works of Mario Roberto Morales, a critic of Maya intellectuals, and Estuardo Zapeta, a liberal Maya, to argue that their embrace of *mestizaje* and multiculturalism, respectively, affirms the status quo (Morales) or offers only limited mobility for Mayas (Zapeta). Valle takes Morales to task for casting Maya identity in racist biological metaphors, and he critiques Zapeta for ignoring the distinction between capitalist and precapitalist orders. In the same vein, I might argue that some of the books under review here do not presume to affirm indigenous values, but instead ones that are evangelical (*Escaping the Fire*), modernizing (*Global Maya*), or liberal-federalist (*Indigenous Citizens*, discussed subsequently). The decolonial turn demands a more radical and real interculturalism, one in which we, as foreign academics, are also implicated.

The decolonial turn challenges both the anticulturalist stance of the traditional left and the multiculturalist banality of the neoliberal right. Yet Valle's recurring invocation of inequality puts him more firmly in line with progressive thinkers. In reading what non-Mayas write about Mayas, Valle asks, as many indigenous intellectuals across the Americas do today: "What kind of answer could an Indian give to these . . . representations? For some, the answer would be a passionate and angry demand to disarticulate indigenismo and to proclaim the end of mestizo culture" (21). Skeptics might ask what this new decoloniality looks like in practice; and in answering, like many proponents, Valle falls short. However, his critique of one-sided interculturalism (which assumes that the Maya are the problem) is a useful start. As a retort, Valle intersperses untranslated passages of K'iche' into his writing. He thus interpellates critics and the reader as monolingual, monocultural thinkers who are ignorant of Maya languages even as they demand that Mayas be intercultural and work in Spanish on a daily basis. Following Valle, we might ask: "Jampa' chiri le kaxlantaj winaq kakik'am xukuje kakichakub'ej ri na'oj b'anikil, ri k'iya'lil kiwach ri mayab' tinamit?" (151).⁴

The rich historical research of Karen D. Caplan and Justine M. Shaw both affirms and unsettles such crosscutting analyses and politicizations. Caplan's *Indigenous Citizens* offers a comparative account of state policy and indigenous responses in Oaxaca and the Yucatán from roughly 1812 to the 1850s. Considering laws bearing on municipal organization and governance, taxation, military service, land conflicts, and political officeholding, Caplan examines a series of moments when liberalism influenced state practices or the responses of indigenous peoples. Caplan views liberalism as universal citizenship, access to the political process, and private ownership of property. Her core argument is that the history

4. "When will you learn about and take up the cultural thinking and lived knowledge practices of the diverse Maya peoples?" My thanks to Doc Billingsley and his colleagues at the Academy of Maya Languages for translation help.

of liberalism in Mexico is one not of failure but of adaptation to local conditions, which in turn reshaped liberalism itself. These local liberalisms combine liberal aims and discourses, colonial relations and ideologies (on race, labor, tribute, and indigeneity, or what it means to be an Indian), and local exigencies (e.g., the need to address land seizures by non-Maya entrepreneurs in early nineteenth-century Yucatán). Local liberalisms are, therefore, an alternative to Mexican liberalism as a “consolidated ideology with clear and predictable aims” (216). This leads to some confusing statements; for example, that “liberalism produced common processes, even if those processes did not have common outcomes” (216), and “the consolidation of national liberalism thus produced the collapse of local liberalisms” (220).

Caplan recounts the dismantling and building of institutions by elite and subaltern citizens concerned for legitimacy. She notes that in Oaxaca indigeneity had less importance and that there were closer relations between indigenous citizens and the state, in part because of certain forms of indigenous autonomy and an independent land base. In Yucatán, by contrast, there were more aggressive attempts to exclude Mayas politically, to dispossess them of their lands, and to make them not citizens but semisubsistence wage laborers. Despite these striking differences, Caplan suggests that liberalism became a common language, a middle ground between states and the indigenous peoples who shared its assumptions, even as local circumstances reshaped these assumptions in various ways.

Caplan assumes that “indigenous autonomy” (a phrase used often in the text) existed from the colonial era through the nineteenth century. Yet like her application of the term *liberalism*, this claim is problematic, given that this autonomy took the form of parallel political institutions and that the limited protection of native lands was subject to colonial modes of labor extraction, tribute, and military service. Autonomy was thus a form of racialized subjugation and containment. And if the state did more to respect indigenous autonomy in Oaxaca, Caplan asks us to accept the questionable notion that this circumscribed neocolonial rule was the product of a dialogue between equals. In the case of Yucatán, such local liberalism collapsed when the private ownership of land brought political exclusion and dispossession of native subjects. Nevertheless, Caplan suggests that liberal governance, before its collapse in the Mexican Revolution, aimed to “maintain a basic level of governability, sustenance, and social peace” (221). Such revisionism neglects that—even to date—the Mexican state has not radically shed colonial foundations construed from a racialized class inequality and the centralizing accumulation of wealth and power through extraction and dispossession. *Indigenous Citizens* offers a richly researched account of changing political forms, yet its interpretations are framed by a liberal revisionism in which, through highly idealized dialogue and debate, citizens are assumed to determine how politics should function.

By focusing on liberalism, one also loses the distinctions between Mayas, Zapotecs, and other native peoples, that is, their particularities as something other than *indígenas*, the term used throughout by Caplan. Little is said, for instance, about the nonliberal frameworks that sustained the Maya during the Caste War. This erasure is surely as much an artifact of the historical record as it is of Caplan’s

analytical paradigm, but one might ask for a more ethnohistorical accounting, perhaps in tension with the issues raised in *Human Rights in the Maya Region*.

In this context, one may also consider Shaw's *White Roads of the Yucatán*, which focuses on the Terminal Classic Period (250–850 CE) of the Maya. White roads are *sac beob*, the slightly elevated causeways that linked population centers across the Yucatán. *White Roads* is a technical overview of the archaeology of these roads, and for the nonspecialist, it is a dense read. Yet it is useful to travel such roads from time to time, as Maya intellectuals and their interlocutors are wont to do today. Shaw argues that roads tell us about social integration, a premise more suited to the geopolitically and economically Maya-centric past than to the attempt by some to position the Maya in the extraction corridors of the present. Yet in light of Goldin's invocation of Abigail Adams's thoughts on the symbolism of roads to modern Maya,⁵ it is useful to consider how white roads might offer a way of thinking about the Maya and their region as multiple, interconnected centers in local and broader regional dynamics. This is the practice of some (e.g., Valle, and Pitarch, Speed, and Leyva Solano) but not all of the works reviewed here. A focus on how Maya networks rearticulate in tension between autonomy and containment, alterity and exchange, violence and transformation, is a more fruitful mode of analysis than reaffirming boundaries, categories, and narratives that impose external aspirational models on Maya peoples, pasts, and futures.

5. Abigail Adams, "The Transformation of the Tzuultaq'a: Jorge Ubico, Protestants and Other Vera-paz Maya at the Crossroads of Community, State and Transnational Interests," *Journal of Latin American Anthropology* 6, no. 2 (2001): 198–233.