

Victor Montejo's Testimonio: Appropriations and Critiques of Human Rights Discourses

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Human rights discourse has infused realms as diverse as trauma studies, international development, the law of war, gender discrimination, and cultural rights.¹ While providing an “emancipatory vocabulary and institutional machinery” and establishing standards by which governments are judged by other governments, by their own people, and by the international community, the human rights movement has also exposed “the dark sides of virtue” (Kennedy 3-35). David Kennedy’s sustained critique of the human rights movement is one of several necessary inquiries into the fault lines between the aspirations of the human rights movement and its variegated realities. One of the chief critiques of human rights discourse is that it carries with it implicit claims of universalism. Balakrishnan Rajagopal and José Alvarez, for example, have each engaged this critique within the broader framework of hegemony and international law, and Yasuaki Onuma has proposed to move beyond the view of human rights as either “universal” or “relative” in a quest for what he calls “intercivilizational” human rights (69).

Nevertheless, the implicit claim to universalism has persisted in human rights discourse, and the debate surrounding this issue has focused on explorations of ideologies, colonial discourse, and the reproductions of hierarchies in contemporary geopolitical power struggles. Special attention has been paid to whether human rights norms, drafted in and by the West, can avoid reproducing the very colonial gestures that they claim to disavow. Some critics have questioned whether it is possible at all for the discourse of human rights to avoid such reproduction of colonialism. The most forceful of these critiques is Makau Wa Mutua’s “Savages, Victims, and Saviors.” In Mutua’s view, each actor—“savage,” “victim,” or “savior”—is defined and reified through the institutionalized dissemination of human rights discourse: human rights advocacy and reporting (204). Mutua adds, controversially, that “the [human rights] movement does not deeply resonate in the cultural fabrics of non-Western states, except among hypocritical elites steeped in Western ideas” (208).

Scholars who have engaged human rights movements and discourses critically have tended to focus on one of two objects of analysis: either the state-centered text of human rights treaties, as exemplified in Gayatri Spivak’s “Use and Abuse of Human Rights” and “Close Reading,” or the perceived agents of the human rights movement—advocates from international human rights

organizations—as Mutua’s critique illustrates. In addition, human rights advocates and organizations have responded by engaging in self-critique and self-defense, producing work that is necessarily focused on the practices of these organizations. All these modes of meditation on the limits, failures, and successes of human rights discourse share a concern about the pertinence of human rights advocacy, the definition of human rights, or the ways in which universalism and cultural relativism emerge as the two poles upon which the debate of human rights becomes more and more taut. These critiques also tend to share particular assumptions about so-called subalterns. Questions regarding the unwitting/unwilling reproduction of unequal power relations assume that the one who speaks, the one who writes, is not a subaltern. There is, by contrast, relatively little work on the tactical use of human rights discourse by “subalterns.”

In this article, I argue that Victor Montejo’s *Brevísima relación testimonial de la continua destrucción del Mayab*’ is an example of a text that is authored by so-called subalterns and which deploys tactically, and quite consciously, the human rights discourse of the West.² Perhaps even a text such as this one—carefully crafted to bring together, sometimes harmoniously and sometimes problematically, Maya and Western narrative conventions, tropes, and symbols—retains the assumption that subalterns are not in control of their own narratives. Indeed, John Beverley views the speaker in a testimonio as a Gramscian organic intellectual more than a subaltern *strictu sensu* (*Against Literature* 89-90). But, as I will show, Montejo’s *relación testimonial*—transcultured, acculturated, and/or indigenous—problematizes the view of the testimonio author as organic intellectual and complicates the easy equivalence between being “Western” and having access to speech, writing, and power.

My analysis of Montejo’s work aligns itself with works that focus on the ways in which the subaltern engages, deploys, and even co-opts Western discourses for his or her own purposes. For example, in the field of anthropology Lila Abu-Lughod focuses on the voice and perspective of the subaltern and levels important critiques of scholarly attempts to translate local struggles to define and assert rights into the language of human rights (1621-30). Abu-Lughod’s anthropological work explores local, indigenous engagements with rights-definition, formations of the self, and agency to highlight the differences between Western and non-Western conceptions of rights, autonomy, self-actualization, agency, and subjectification. She suggests that attention to these phenomena can reveal the fissures in the foundational assumptions of human rights discourse, in particular the idea that the Western notion of what comprises human rights is universally applicable, regardless of historical, religious, or social context (1629).

A different, more textually based approach is one exemplified by Rajagopal’s analysis of the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic potential of human rights discourse. In his article, “Counter-Hegemonic International Law,” Rajagopal notes that human rights discourse may be influenced by anti-colonial struggles but that its self-image neglects this part of its history (63-79). Rajagopal argues that,

despite a momentary counter-hegemonic impulse during the 1980s, there is a significant pattern of complicity of human rights discourse with Western political agendas (66). This sweeping approach explores historical and global patterns of complicity of human rights discourse and practice with Western hegemonic forces. Rajagopal focuses on transnational producers and disseminators of rights discourses and their interactions with structures of Western power. Abu-Lughod, by contrast, urges greater attention toward local productions of knowledge and concepts of rights and self-actualization. But the heart of the debate remains the same. It is a question of voice and agency, of who speaks for whom, who establishes international human rights norms, who produces knowledge and who consumes it, and what consequences ensue from these relationships.

When Abu-Lughod champions a study of local, subaltern, definitions of rights, it is to emphasize the difference between Western liberal conceptions of rights and to propose to look seriously at other modes of self-actualization as discourses that can validly compete with human rights discourses (1628-29). This is illustrated in Abu-Lughod's analysis of Saba Mahmood's study of the "ethical formation and cultivation of self among women in the pietistic mosque movement in Egypt" (1628). If one approach is to reject, as Abu-Lughod argues, external definitions of rights and produce ways of achieving self-actualization that defy Western liberal comprehension, another tactic for subaltern self-actualization is to mobilize, adapt, and transform human rights discourses in order to both define and demand rights. If, for example, the discourse of human rights is often deployed to appease donors whose values and beliefs are Western and liberal, it is also a discourse that is appropriated, circulated, and transformed by local populations who may see in the adherence to a set of international norms a way to interpellate history and to challenge a hostile state and unequal local and global economic relations. Victor Montejo's *Brevísima relación testimonial de la continua destrucción del Mayab'* is a textual embodiment of the same intellectual and political moves that Abu-Lughod and Mahmood find in contemporary local non-Western practices of self-actualization.

The *Brevísima relación testimonial* appropriates human rights discourse and interpellates a Western audience even as it seems to conform to the narrative conventions that demand that the subaltern be presented as a silent victim. In a carefully crafted choral testimonial that conforms to both the *Testimonio* genre and to traditional Maya narrative practices, *Brevísima relación testimonial* chronicles the violence endured by the Maya in the Kuchumatanes region in Guatemala between 1981 and 1982. The text is complex and fragmented. It contains six different personal accounts from survivors of the violence and is structured not in chapters but in laments. Each lament is prefaced by a quote from the books of Chilam Balam, Bartolomé de las Casas' 1552 *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de Indias* (Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies), or Bernardino de Sahagún's sixteenth-century accounts of Maya priests' augurs, as recorded in his *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*

(General History of the Things of New Spain).³ Each reference ties acts of violence committed against the Mayas in the 1980s to atrocities committed at the beginning of the Spanish colony in the New World.

Interspersed throughout the text are also children's drawings of their experience of military attacks and photographs of their hand-written meditations on life in the refugee camps. The organization of the text and the evident intent to resonate with Bartolomé de las Casas' *Brevísima relación* suggest that this "choral testimonial" conforms to Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry, which is "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (122). Adding that "the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence" Bhabha notes that, "in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" (122). Montejo's testimonial, structured as a choir of voices, is not quite a version of Las Casas' *Brevísima Relación*, and not quite a conventional modern *Testimonio*. Montejo uses a title, topic and organization that are obvious references to Las Casas' work, thus locating the *Brevísima relación testimonial* as part of the continuum of indigenous rights advocacy that Las Casas inaugurated. Yet Montejo's *Brevísima relación testimonial* subverts the traditional representation of the victims of violence as mere victims. In this way, Montejo's *relación testimonial* is a "moment of civil disobedience within the discipline of civility" (Bhabha 121). There is an additional layer of resistance in Montejo's adoption of two Western literary models—the *testimonio* and Las Casas' *Brevísima Relación*—in that these models are Western, but they locate themselves at the margins of Western power. They are texts that critique the West for its failure to live up to its proclaimed values. Montejo's text embraces this spirit but emphasizes that the Maya insist on speaking for themselves even if it seems, at first, that they must do so by using a platform created by Western advocates.

The presence of children's drawings and voices in the book suggests that Montejo explicitly complicates Las Casas' sixteenth-century representation of indigenous Guatemalans as child-like. Those drawings and notes, produced by children who survived some of the worst moments of violence in 1980s Guatemala, serve to corroborate the elaborate narratives of adult survivors. But they also serve as a contrast for the complex and symbolically-laden testimonial narratives of adult survivors. By revisiting colonial history in the context of counterinsurgency policies in 1980s Guatemala, the text stresses the unfulfilled promises of the West—tracing them from the *Leyes de Indias* to the Enlightenment—and underscores the responsibility of the West to intervene in the late twentieth-century genocide of the Maya. The violence in Guatemala is thus represented as part of the cycles of violence by a Western state against indigenous peoples. That Guatemala is an independent nation matters little, for, as the *relación testimonial* shows, the Western-identified ladino state of Guatemala views indigenous peoples in the same way as the colonial powers did before independence. This situation of repetitive and atrocious violence is a situation that, as Montejo's testimonial insists, the West

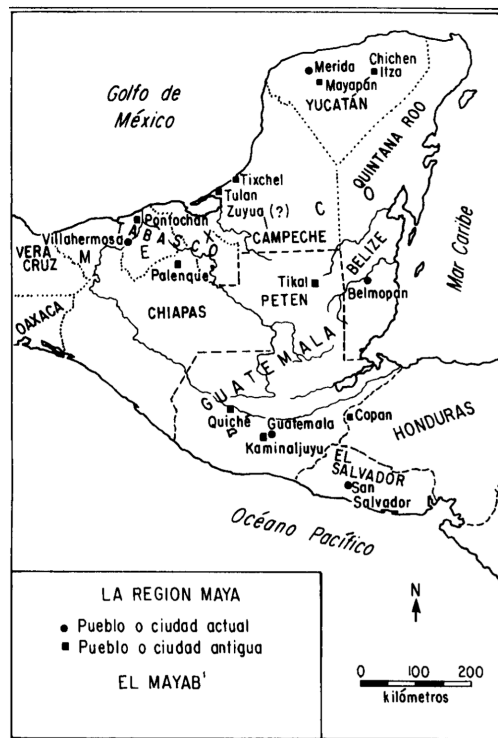
(metonymically represented by Spain) has both caused and long promised to attend to.

The Margins Frame the Center: Understanding the Casing of the Text

The title of this text already suggests how the narrative packs together Western and Maya histories, voices, and conventions: *Brevísima relación testimonial de la continua destrucción del Mayab*'. Its echo of Bartolomé de las Casas' 1552 *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* establishes an intertextual dialogue with the voice (Las Casas), the intended audience (the Royal Court of Spain), and the narrative (the destruction of the indigenous populations of the New World) of the former text. The addition of the word "testimonial" inserts the text within the debates about *testimonio* in quite self-conscious ways and replaces the voice of the priest/advocate with the voices of the Maya themselves. It also goes beyond the Spanish/Maya divide by also bridging a temporal divide, arguing for a longitudinal view of the *testimonio* genre, much like Hugo Achugar and Beverley have done. Achugar suggests that the *testimonio* can be traced at least as far back as the Chronicles of the Indies, but chooses to limit the discussion to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in order to keep the discussion within the imaginary of Latin America. Beverly argues that one important common element between the *testimonio* and the picaresque novel is "the powerful textual affirmation of the speaking subject itself" (28).

Brief Account of the Continuing Destruction of the Mayab' suggests that the discussion about human rights in Guatemala is one that began long before human rights discourse emerged as such, well before the Enlightenment, by referring to a sixteenth-century phenomenon as uninterrupted and repetitive forms of violence that are as present in the 1980s as they were in 1552. Finally, the book's use of the term "Mayab" demands that the reader undergo an exploration of its meaning: the word inserts itself into Spanish vocabulary as a rejection of the Spanish colonial term "Indias" (used by Las Casas). "Mayab" is an assertion of the Maya geographical distribution of space, a distribution that exists as a counterweight to modern national boundaries, as the "Maya area (Mayab)" comprises the South of Mexico (Chiapas, Tabasco, Campeche, Quintana Roo), Belice, Guatemala and Honduras. In this testimonial narrative we refer to the region that comprises the Guatemalan territory" (4).

The explanatory note on the term "Mayab" accompanies an uncannily familiar map, one that blends together modern and pre-Columbian toponyms and geographic boundaries (5). The map, shown below, is neither a condemnation of modern national boundaries, nor a harmonious embrace between two traditions and worldviews. Instead, it highlights the tension of two superimposed views of the lines that delimit identity and solidarity.



In a kind of cartographic double speak, the map represents the “Maya Area” as transnational, but the book focuses on the “territory” of Guatemala, and acknowledges the modern national divide between Guatemala and Mexico: the former a land marked by violence and the latter a land populated by refugees. In other words, national boundaries are valid but do not replace pre-existing modes of delimiting the region’s populations. As with the description of the term “Mayab,” the map of the region superimposes Maya and Spanish colonial cities, as well as regional limits. But even this pre- and post-conquest division is imperfect, for several ancient cities and towns have retained their ancient names.

Like the map, Montejo’s collection of testimonials is not an attempt at reclaiming a cultural history that is exclusive to the Maya, but is rather a project to give rise once again to the Maya voices already subsumed in the palimpsest of the region’s history and geography. The legend of the map reads simply “The Maya Region: The Mayab,”⁴ but if the map honors the Maya view of borders and limits in the region, it also honors the art of translation, and it is as much an act of reclaiming the space for Mayas as it is an act of educating those not yet bilingual into an understanding of the multiple, and not mutually exclusive, ways of ordering the world. This book frames its collection of personal narratives in a tense, but possible, renegotiation of Maya and Western (Spanish) world-views and historical memories.

By placing Maya worldview, narrative conventions, and toponyms at the forefront, Montejo problematizes the naturalized ways in which information is coded and transmitted. He does not, however, reject the ways in which the land has been renamed and divided from

colonial times through independence. This approach to multiple ways of coding is markedly different from that of the colony. As Walter Mignolo notes, regarding maps:

Amerindian ‘maps’ are not as well documented as Spanish and European ones partly due to the fact that most of them were destroyed in the process of colonization. Here we are confronted with another example in the cultural process when anything that is not recognized or mentioned by those who control the transmission and circulation of information does not exist. Power asserts itself by suppressing and negating both what is not considered relevant or is considered dangerous. (297)

Montejo’s treatment of the map, the title of his collection of testimonial narratives, and his opening explanatory note of the meaning of “Mayab” all reveal a different approach. Rather than silencing the transmission of knowledge of the Other (in this case, the colonizer), Montejó’s text allows tensions and disagreements to bear their weight on the page. Competing discourses take place in the interior of the map, a map framed by Maya territorial delimitations that have been expressed in Spanish and explained to a Spanish-speaking reader. In presenting this bicultural and bilingual map, Montejó revives the excluded and silenced side of Guatemalan identity and history and proposes to open up more spaces for dual identities (Maya and Guatemalan, Western and Maya intellectual, etc.).

Intertextualities

The ways in which Montejó frames and uses intertextuality deserve further analysis. The introductory note begins with a reference to colonial violence at the hands of Pedro de Alvarado, who conquered Guatemala in 1524 and was its governor until his death in 1541. His Spanish name, however, is in parenthesis. He is presented with the name given to him by the Maya *ah-tz’ib* (poets), who “wrote about the cruelty of Tunatiuh (Alvarado) in 1524” (1). Two moves should be noted here: first, Alvarado’s invasion and violence are chronicled by Maya writers; the text thus presents—indeed, reclaims—writing as an instrument that belongs to the Maya, not the Spaniards.⁵ Second, Alvarado’s Maya name is privileged and his Spanish name is presented as an explanatory parenthesis, much like “Mayab” and “*ah-tz’ib*”. This is yet another significant decentering move in the text, one that privileges Maya historical memory even as the text is purportedly written for Western consumption, as the dedication and prologue claim.

As the references to the sixteenth century give way to an explanation of the violence in the Kuchumatanes region in 1981 and 1982, the narrator relates the process that led him to compile testimonials. Forced to leave his country, he took refuge in one of the camps set up at the Mexican border with Guatemala. After arriving to the United States and continuing to visit the camps, he claims that six refugees decided that he should record their testimonials “in Maya language in order to leave a register of the history that the Maya

people have lived in exile” (2). With this foundational pact, the narrator/compiler constructs his identity and implicitly dialogues with previous testimonial introductions: the recording is represented as neither a favor to the six people nor as a request from the compiler, it is a joint decision: “I decided with them, *Q’anil akab’*, *Kaxh Pasil*, *Hulum B’aq*, *Chilin Hultaxh*, *Kaxh Maal-Ya’ y Tumaxh K’em* (pseudonyms), to tape record their testimonials in the Maya language” (2). It is a process that does not necessitate a translator—either linguistic or cultural—since the compiler is a native Maya who speaks two Maya languages. It is an act that is presented as a collective project with collective implications: to keep the memory of what has happened to the Mayas in exile. The memory, then, is not only for external consumption, but also for the reproduction and continuation of a Maya narrative, one that will be used by Mayas. Montejo is careful to leave traces of the orality of the narrations in the written text. The testimonials are a personal, oral exchange; the testimonial is incomplete if represented as something less than a dialogue. Rather than a testimonial mediated by a foreign anthropologist, as was Rigoberta Menchú’s famous *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, this *relación testimonial* seeks to conform to two separate narrative conventions, one Maya and another Western. In its form and its content, Montejo’s testimonial sustains the uneasy fit between two narrative modes, as if only in this process of uneasy reading can there be a level field for bicultural dialogue.

The importance of narrating the process of collecting stories is captured particularly powerfully in one narrative, that of Chilin Hultaxh, a former soldier:

I traveled to the region of Guerrero, Mexico, where he lived with his wife and children. From the mountain where he lived and worked as a keeper in a Catholic church, one could see the Acapulco beaches and the hotels always full of tourists. I stayed with the family for two nights, and during one of these nights of August of 1988, Chilin Hutlaxh related his experience to me. (2)

The story is told at the outskirts of the tourist town, in a place that sees the hotels and their guests but remains invisible to the bustling tourist town, focused, as it is, on the beaches of Acapulco. In a space invisible to the West, represented by Acapulco, the story is told, recorded, and transcribed. The significance of this scene is in the network of spaces and displacements that it brings together. Tourists and foreigners are not the center, but rather the contrasting margin that frames the little house in the mountain, they are “the view” of this exiled soldier. His quiet life as the keeper of a Catholic church is what the compiler has come to find, and only after a few lines does the word “Acapulco” emerge—doubtless a much more familiar geographical referent for foreign readers than “Guerrero.” As with Alvarado’s name, the order of the information matters, but both types of information—that which one is learning and that which one recognizes—are ultimately provided without stridency in the narrative flow. We are given an unfamiliar name and are then offered a translation, thus receiving an education. In many ways, this is the key difference between the

traditional testimonial and Montejo's choral testimonial: each narrative educates the reader into seeing the world through the eyes of the survivor. The survivor speaks in his language, in his own terminology, and the reader receives the information first in this local and specific language, and then in the more universalizing Western lexicon.

After collecting testimonials, the compiler claims that he decided to request the permission of the testimonialists to "share our suffering with the world, for although the signs of tortures have already been erased from our bodies, the effect of that violence persists and continues to destroy the lives of our kin" (3). This is a similar move to that of many *testimonios*: the experience of one (and in this case, of six) is taken as representative of a collective experience. The claim of "representativity," however, is problematic because the subaltern-author of a *testimonio* is already, in some way, extraordinary, as Nathaniel Gardner has argued (47). Beverley, in turn, argues:

Because in spite of that textual metonymy in the *testimonio* that equates individual life history with the history of a group or people, testimonial narrators like Rigoberta Menchú are not exactly the subaltern as such—Spivak is correct that the subaltern cannot speak in this sense; they are rather something more like "organic intellectuals" of the subaltern who can speak to the hegemony by means of this metonymy of self in the name and in the place of it. (*Against Literature*, 89-90).

Montejo's text also problematizes the *Testimonio* and the voice of the testimonialist, but it is not because the author is "extraordinary" or an "organic intellectual" (though he may very well be those things). Rather, it is because all the subalterns who speak in his work reject the passive victim identity. Montejo effects a significant shift in vocabulary that changes the subject-position of the six refugees and the compiler: although they present their stories with the implicit hope for intervention, help or attention from "the world," this is not presented as a passive hope for charity or paternalistic protection. The end of the introductory notes claims that these seven voices are those of "querellantes"—plaintiffs. The legalistic language lays claim to the idea that the victims feel entitled to redress, and that they are agents of their quest for justice:

Finally, we, the plaintiffs in this testimonial account affirm that the incursions of the army into our communities have been to commit robberies, rapes, kidnappings and murders, which results in the destruction of the community foundations of the corporative life of our people. (3).

The judicial metaphor is of course also problematic, since it is presumptively the West that is imagined as the court for this suit. However even if this is the case, the "plaintiffs" remain the active agents, the ones who initiate the process. Across this text, if there is a demand for help and intervention, it is framed as a debt owed, as an obligation "because our situation of poverty and dispossession is a product and a consequence of the Spanish empire" (10). This demand for justice is found in the introduction, in the prologue, and in the epilogue. The epilogue consists of a list of victims: "List of the persons who perished in the massacre of the community of the estate of San

Francisco Nentón, which took place on 17 July, 1982, in the region of the Kuchumatanes, in the northeast of Guatemala” (123). The list contains the full names of the victims and the age of each of them in parenthesis. The detailed identification of the victims is not an uncommon way of paying tribute to those who died in the wake of atrocity, but this epilogue is after something more: each name, tied to the age at which the victim died, is also a brief account of violence. This testimonio does not seek intervention. Rather, it seeks to have the history of the Mayas as told by the Mayas, reinstated into the history of Guatemala and the rest of the Mayab’. In this sense, Montejo’s testimonial rejects the image of the Mayas as victims who must be helped by external saviors. Instead, the victims are agents of their fate through the act of telling about violence. The West is not, in Montejo’s testimonial, the agent of justice. It is instead called upon to witness.

In Montejo’s “Prologue to the King,” the legal language is linked to a historical failure of the West, a broken promise, and an ethical obligation to make up for lost time and lost lives. In Bartolomé de las Casas’ sixteenth-century text, the Prologue is addressed “from the Bishop don Fray Bartolomé de las Casas o Casaus for the elevated and powerful Lord the Prince of the Spains, Don Felipe, our Lord” (71). Aside from the title in Montejo’s testimonial, the “Prologue to the King” is the most explicit gesture of rewriting Las Casas’ text in a contemporary context. As with the title, however, this is more than a modern version of the events related by Las Casas. It is also a claim to agency and self-sufficiency: “Prologue to the King. From the *ah-tz’ib’*, Qánil Akab’ and Victor Montejo for the elevated and powerful Lord, the King of Spain, Don Juan Carlos I” (Montejo, 7). The Maya author reclaims the space initially occupied by the Catholic Bishop and underscores that he belongs to a long tradition of Maya writers, one that precedes the Spanish colony. He assumes the title of the *ah-tz’ib’*, who authored laments about the arrival of the Spanish conquistador Pedro de Alvarado in 1524, and in turn suggests that the realm of the written word can also be claimed by the Maya without having to identify with the West. Indeed, in this case, competing for control of the written text is also a way for the Maya to claim a subjectivity that can dialogue with the West without having to adopt its paradigms.

This letter/prologue repeats the information initially given by Las Casas, but it also endeavors to suggest the presence of an additional cultural and temporal perspective, as well as a new epistemology that must be negotiated into human rights claims. It privileges Maya titles, names, and calendrics (“In the year • Baktun, ___ Katunes and •• Tunes of the Maya calendar, and 1992 in the Gregorian calendar”). The prologue rewrites Las Casas’ text in part, but this echo chamber of colonial and pre-Columbian voices is also constructed to speak of silence: “after nearly 500 years, the complaints of the Bishop of Chiapas have almost been forgotten, but the suffering of indigenous peoples in this continent persist, although the mechanisms of social control have become modernized” (8). The repeated return to the five centuries of continuous violence defines indigenous-Western relations, not Maya identity. The violence is carefully framed as an interruption

in Maya existence, a long interruption in an otherwise rich history: “since the times of the Spanish invasion to Guatemala (1524), we the Maya have not been able to narrate freely our exploits, achievements and failures. We have been always busy denouncing the pain and the suffering of our people” (1). At the closing of the Prologue, the text returns to the idea of violence as a distraction from the truly important legacy that modern Mayas need to leave for future generations: “It is necessary to speak in terms of justice and equality so that we modern Mayas can become part of this historic juncture, and can establish and record again our footprints on the world for the benefit of future katunes” (9). The road to this equality involves providing information, “to all those who want to hear, and to all those who do not want to hear us” (10).

This testimonial is a collage of voices, memories, and implicit and explicit references to colonial documents. The Prologue operates as a location for the contestation of Western authority in human rights claims, suggesting two conclusions: First, current human rights violations, as repetitions of colonial violence, remain the responsibility of the West. Second, the West cannot choose or define the situations of human rights violations for which it is responsible. This is because, in this case, the colonized Other is claiming the right to preserve historical memory, and to confront the West with its uglier not-yet-past. These gestures imbricate Maya historical memory and indigenous rights advocacy into contemporary debates about human rights discourse. It suggests that this discourse is neither owned nor controlled by the West, even if its foundational vocabulary comes from Western traditions. Mayas, through Montejo’s collection, lay claim to a longer history of human rights advocacy, even if by other names.

Echoes of Echoes of the *Popol-Vuh*

More than a *testimonio* in the strict definition of the genre, Montejo’s *Brevísima relación testimonial* seems to aspire to play a role in Maya identity formation, historical documentation, and cultural revival. This implies a reinsertion of Maya historiographic practices into current notions of history, a rebellion against their exclusion and relegation to obscurity since the beginning of the Spanish colony. As Mignolo points out:

We can also find that both kinds of narrative [oral and written] have, among others, the important function of identity building. For the Renaissance men of letters, that was not enough. They decided that history should fulfill the conditions established on the experience of alphabetically written historical narratives. Since Amerindians did not fulfill that condition, the *letrados* appointed themselves to write the history of this people ‘without history.’ (133)

Montejo’s *relación testimonial* presents a collection of brief accounts of violence and exile buttressed by meditations on dialogue, voice and authority, and by a series of images that do not tell the same stories as the written text, but which complement and elicit a more complex

narrative of the events: children's drawings of the violence do not provide more information, but they do provide a different quality of information. This inclusion echoes the salvaging of the *Popol-Vuh*. In the process of re-writing the *Popol-Vuh*, the authors of the text refer to the pictographic "original" numerous times, but this "original" is either lost or hidden to protect it from Spanish fires. Dennis Tedlock's authoritative translation of the "alphabetic *Popol-Vuh*"—a version of the text written in the Latin alphabet, which Maya authors had acquired from the Spaniards—notes the dialectical relationship between images and writing in the original texts:

If the authors of the alphabetic *Popol-Vuh* had transposed the ancient *Popol-Vuh* directly, on a glyph-by-glyph basis, they might have produced a text that would have made little sense to anyone but a fully trained diviner and performer. What they did instead was to quote what a reader of the ancient book would say when he gave a "long performance," telling the full story that lay behind the charts, pictures, and plot outlines of the ancient book. Lest we miss the fact that they are quoting, they periodically insert such phrases as "this is the account, here it is" or "as it is said." (32-33)

Oral narrative, then, takes precedence over written text, which, were it not for the expert readers, would contain incomplete and confusing information. In Montejo's book, each lament is preceded by an epigraph about violence or premonitions of disaster from the sixteenth century and a child's drawing of such violence. The epigraphs serve to draw connections between the human rights violations perpetrated by the Guatemalan army in the 1980s and Alvarado's violence in the sixteenth century. By locating contemporary violence in the context of the colony and its vestiges, Western norms and status are relocated to a moment of dubious authority.

The epigraphs and the references to Maya premonitions recorded in the *Chilam Balam* and in Sahagún's *Historia general* are rendered valid by the accounts of Bartolomé de las Casas—accounts of violence that confirm the dramatic predictions of Maya priests. This validation, in turn, gives credibility to the "omens and dreams" that precede the violence in the Kuchumatanes region in the early 1980s:

Many persons had the same dreams, such that they began to spread through word of mouth in the communities, alerting the rest of the people. Some said they had seen in their dreams, crosses without heads and fireballs that rolled through the sky. Others said they saw sharp machetes falling from the sky... But the most common dreams were those of fires that razed all the crops, all the animals, and all the settlements. Then there were tears, many tears among the women and sighs among the elderly. (16).

These dreams, in turn, are given validity by the sheer atrocities that are committed in the Kuchumatanes in the early 1980s.

The testimonials are, in a way, the sorrowful validation of Maya premonitions. This is hardly a narrative delimited by the expectations of a Western readership. The book presents six testimonial narratives in a flurry of dialogues and negotiations between Maya and Western worldviews, histories, and narrative conventions. By the time the reader enters "lament" (Chapter 1), a practice of critical and multiple

reading has been established, a multivocal text has made itself practicable, and the narrative is told without much hope, but also without desperation. This is the urgent narrative of five centuries of violence, and survival is synonymous with voice. Only those who survive speak, and in order to demonstrate the survival of the Maya, Montejo's collection insists on presenting the Maya account of history. Here, to assert one's voice is to assert one's existence in the face of an attempted genocide. In bringing forth these accounts, and in dedicating them to the King of Spain, the former colonial master, the text interpellates the West and brings it to task for its silence. The West, after all, has laid claim to an ethical system that repudiates the children of its own creation, the creole heirs who reproduce the structures of colonial power.

Testimonio and the Human Rights Debate

Montejo's *Brevísima relación testimonial* is not merely written for the consumption of the West, it also responds to and is a reflection of a growing community of Maya revival intellectuals, schoolteachers, students, and storytellers. It is a text that exists for a political reason, but also for a longer-term cultural and intellectual reason: the re-emergence of Maya culture. Its authors, like those of the alphabetic *Popol Vuh* (the copy written in Latin alphabet), are merely repeating a long established and respected practice of culturally-based resistance: re-writing the story of its people in the language of the oppressor, and inserting within it several gestures of narration that are significant to the Maya but may be invisible to the Western reader. Victoria Bricker traces one example of such a practice among the Maya:

This text [the Maya *uinal*] suggests that the Yucatecan Mayas were not passive recipients of the Catholic religion and Biblical lore. It provides evidence that the scribe responsible for translating it into Maya was interested in relating it to concepts that would be meaningful to his people... Rather than adopting this calendrical cycle as given, he restructured the text in terms of what he regarded as its closest counterpart in the Mayan calendar, namely the *uinal*, and then gave it a more comprehensible rationale by broadening its scope to include the origin of time. In this way, he created a new hybrid discourse, still written in the Mayan language, albeit in a new script, and still containing Mayan concepts and metaphors, but incorporating religious themes and terms borrowed from the European tradition. (13)

Like the *Uinal*, Montejo's is a bicultural text, and the significance of this carries over into the debate on human rights, Western hegemony, and the voice of the subaltern.

It seems like the passage from silence to full-throated claims for human rights also carries with it an inevitable transition into a hybrid identity—Montejo is, after all, a subaltern and an intellectual. Speaking and being heard, having an influence in the ways in which the West views a specific nation, population or group that is not Western, all are too often taken as signs that one who was a subaltern has become Western and is therefore somehow divorced from the

place from which he or she came. This text, however, resists the very audience it claims to target,⁶ and it is in this incompleteness and multiplicity that I would locate something akin to Derek Attridge's reworking of J. Hillis Miller's notion of the ethical moment, a moment when the reader's narrative expectations are ruptured and cannot be sutured back together, a moment that makes evident the conceit of transparent and coherent narratives as merely conceit. It is not, perhaps, that the subaltern does not speak, but rather, as Antonio Cornejo Polar has argued in response to Gayatri Spivak, that the lettered city does not know where the subaltern speaks, to whom, or in what medium:

[I]t is obvious that [the subaltern] does speak, and eloquently, with her own and in her world, and ... what happens in reality is that non-subalterns do not have ears to hear them, except when we translate their words to the space of our consuetudinary decoding strategy ... We are something like an uncomfortable parody of King Midas: all that we touch 'turns into' literature. (220-21)

What is more, we dangerously assume that our incapacity to hear implies that the place where the subaltern speaks is somehow irrelevant, disenfranchising, or otherwise inconsequential to the subaltern's position as subaltern. If Montejo's repeated mention of five centuries' worth of violent interruptions tells us anything, it is that fundamental iterations of history are being written beyond the scope of vision of Western eyes.

Notes

1. For a discussion of human rights and development, see Alston 3-40; Olowu 7-15; and Marks 137-68. For vastly divergent views on the interaction of human rights and international humanitarian law (the law of armed conflict) see Watkin 1-34; Meron 239-78; Hansen 1-65; and Roberts 580-622.

2. Akab' and Montejo are, in fact, the same person. Q'anil Akab' is the Maya pseudonym that Montejo adopts (just like the other testimonialists) in order to protect all the narrators' safety during the violent decades of the 1980s and 1990s. I therefore refer to the author as Victor Montejo throughout the essay.

3. The Chilam Balam is "a series of seventeenth- through nineteenth-century almanac-style manuscripts written in the Latin alphabet in Yucatecan Maya" (Hirons 3).

4. My translation. Henceforth, unless otherwise noted, all translations into English are my own.

5. For a discussion of Maya writing and the place of importance that the Maya scribe occupied, see Coe.

6. For a thorough discussion of the fraught dialogue between Maya activists and foreign intellectuals, see Warren.

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