

# FROM ATITLÁN TO VANCOUVER: Mayan Voices in New Works on Guatemala

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*SILENT LOOMS: WOMEN AND PRODUCTION IN A GUATEMALAN TOWN.*

By Tracy Bachrach Ehlers. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000, 2nd ed. Pp. 200. \$27.50 paper.)

*OUR ELDERS TEACH US: MAYA-KAQCHIKEL HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES.*

By David Carey Jr. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001. Pp. 385. \$29.95 paper.)

*THE MAYA DIASPORA: GUATEMALAN ROOTS, NEW AMERICAN LIVES.*

Edited by James Loucky and Marilyn M. Moors. (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2000. Pp. 263. \$64.50 cloth, \$22.95 paper.)

*JOSEÑO: ANOTHER MAYAN VOICE SPEAKS FROM GUATEMALA.* Narrated

by Ignacio Bizarro Ujpán, translated and edited by James Sexton. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001. Pp. 312. \$45.00 cloth, \$21.95 paper.)

Though much has been written about the Maya, their voices are often absent from academic representations of their culture and history. Many Mayan and non-Mayan scholars have sought to address that problem through a variety of academic endeavors and activism (see Fischer and Brown 1996). The urgency of addressing this dilemma has been accentuated since the signing of the Peace Accords in Guatemala in 1996.

While these four books differ in many respects, their authors convey a common interest. Each provides the reader with authentic Mayan voices and perspectives to help underscore that the Maya are a part *of*, not apart *from*, identifying their joys and struggles, their historical and present contexts, and their visions for the future. These voices are represented by either interview data from ethnographic fieldwork or, as in the case of James Loucky and Marilyn Moors's book, chapters from both the Maya and non-Maya academics.

Among the books reviewed here, James Sexton's *Joseño: Another Mayan Voice Speaks from Guatemala* is the only one that is testimonial in

nature. Since 1970 Sexton has worked on the western shores of Lake Atitlán in the community of San José La Laguna (a pseudonym) seeking to “understand the human condition on the highland Maya” by chronicling Ignacio Bizarro Ujpán’s (also a pseudonym) life (1). This relationship began with Sexton (then a graduate student conducting fieldwork on the shores of Atitlán) requesting the help of Bizarro as a research assistant. Their work evolved into the three-decades-long endeavor of Bizarro keeping a diary and writing his autobiography. Hence, *Joseño* is the fourth (and final) in a series of books produced by Bizarro and Sexton.

One can also see in Sexton’s and Bizarro Ujpán’s, *Joseño*, that during their thirty years of working together, some of the anthropological distance has diminished and been replaced by a genuine friendship and a caring relationship. In fact, Sexton is mentioned on a variety of occasions in Bizarro’s diary. For example, when his daughter obtained her teaching credentials, Bizarro states:

The truth is we feel very proud of her, but also it is a great sacrifice for the children of a poor person to study. If my friend Jaime D. Sexton had not been helping, it is certain that I alone would not have been able to do something for my daughter. (175)

The insights gained by such a long working relationship are certainly among the strengths of this book. Furthermore, given that Bizarro’s story is original data, Sexton suggests that this provides the reader with the freedom to “analyze the results any way he or she wishes, regardless of his or her academic perspective or view of life” (18). This reviewer would like to suggest that regardless of one’s academic perspective, Bizarro’s diary requires some background knowledge of Maya life in the highlands and Guatemalan history. Sexton provides a great deal of that background knowledge in his introduction.

Bizarro explores a variety of themes in his diary. His personal accounts of human rights violations, religious celebrations and tensions in and between religious communities, and milestones in his children’s lives offer the reader a highly textured and personal account of one Tzutuhil man who describes himself as “just a campesino who wants to observe and distinguish the good from the bad, or better said, an observer of what is happening” (67). Despite this seemingly apolitical approach, Bizarro does discuss in detail his thoughts and feelings about the atrocities committed by the armed forces and guerrillas in and around his community.

In his introduction to *Joseño*, Sexton provides an in-depth discussion of how Bizarro’s testimony differs from that of Rigoberta Menchú. I believe the comparison will be most helpful to those readers unfamiliar with some of the criticism of Menchú and Elisabeth Burgos’s (1984) book, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*. Bizarro’s

diary, essentially about an Indian man in Guatemala, is written from a less political perspective. This is not to say that Bizarro is not critical of the political and social context in which he lives. His reflections seem to be more based upon the Bible and his Mayan heritage. What is clear from his testimony is that Bizarro hopes for a peace in Guatemala that is *firme* and *duradera* and a better life for the present-day Maya people.

Like Sexton's book, the second edition of Tracy Bachrach Ehlers's *Silent Looms: Women and Production in a Guatemalan Town* is also based on research she began in the 1970s in Guatemala. Ehlers's original work in San Pedro, Sacatepéquez, examined women and production from a variety of perspectives, including looking at women in trade, cottage industries, and the division of labor in the family. In the first edition (1990), Ehlers "demonstrated that an expanding, modernizing base of production destroyed women's traditional work, transforming them into a dependent and exploitable rural proletariat competing for scarce economic opportunities" (xx). However, not all women fall into this category. Ehlers notes that there are some women who benefit from socioeconomic change and some that do not. She goes on to describe how a woman may be losing some economic control while gaining a better standard of living (no small feat in Guatemala). Ehlers carefully explains how this rise in standard of living plays itself out in the lives of *San Pedranas*. For many, the higher standard of living does not come without its costs. For example, the financial gain that some women might experience (especially those working with their husbands) is often accompanied by an increased level of female seclusion.

Ehlers accurately predicted in the first edition that dress makers would become marginalized and traditional clothing (*trajes*) would become harder to acquire and sell. Part of the weavers' and seamstresses' demise was due to the rise in what she refers to as "Kmart special" clothing (xiv). One of the topics underscored in what Ehlers calls her "restudy" of women in San Pedro, is the surge in this cheap, second-hand clothing.

*Pacas*, the second-hand clothing industry, is a booming business in San Pedro and in Guatemala. Have you ever wondered what happened to that bag of clothing you donated? What about those slightly damaged garments that do not make it to the outlet malls? Chances are someone could be wearing them in Guatemala. Guatemala ranks tenth in the world in amount spent in the used-clothing trade (\$1.53 million), and fifth in the world of metric tons of clothes imported. Ehlers's description of the Paca industry and its impact on women's participation in commerce (and dress) is both insightful and interesting. More than half of the town's Paca owners are women, many of whom are high-school educated. Ehlers notes "Clearly, investment in a Paca is an accepted avenue for a young, educated woman, and it had the cachet of being American, modern, and quickly profitable" (xvii). These businesses also allow young women to

stay in their own communities instead of relocating to rural towns or even more remote *aldeas* in order to obtain positions in their given professions (teacher, accountant, or nurse).

Ehlers also discusses another new profession for women in San Pedro, that of *bayunquera*. These women smuggle mostly ordinary household products from nearby Mexico to Guatemala. Because the department of San Marcos (where San Pedro is located) is so close to Mexico, Guatemalans from that department only need their identity cards to cross the border. Once across, the women buy products such as Pepsi (in a can), rice, toilet paper, soap, and beer to bring back to Guatemala to sell at a profit. Ehlers describes in detail the many different types of *bayunqueras* that can earn anywhere from \$12 to nearly \$2,000 profit from every trip (clearly, those at the higher end of the earning scale are few and far between). This lucrative business has had a major impact on the already existing businesses in San Pedro. It is virtually impossible to compete with the lower prices of the items brought from Mexico.

One of the strengths of *Silent Looms* is Ehlers's ability to engage the reader on academic and personal levels. She provides a careful analysis and integration of the data from the first edition and that of her restudy of *San Pedranas*. In doing so, she interweaves poignant stories to further illustrate her findings. Her apparent and unabashedly close relationship with the family with which she lived is refreshing. She notes "Where the Fuentes family is concerned, I confess to no longer maintaining the orthodox anthropological distance, or hiding my routines and habits so as to fit in better. I introduced my *comadre*, Liliana, to power walking, for example" (xxii).

David Carey Jr.'s *Our Elders Teach Us: Maya-Kaqchikel Historical Perspectives* also offers a present-day Maya perspective. Carey explains that his book "provides a forum for contemporary Maya to share what is important to them about their past and talk about how they apply it to their lives" (23). Carey's research is focused on a five-year period of field work in five Kaqchikel towns. He combines both anthropological and historical methods to present a fascinating story of Kaqchikel historical and contemporary realities. More so than the books reviewed thus far, the emphasis on language as a transmitter of cultural and historical beliefs and knowledge is noted several times by the author and his Kaqchikel collaborators. The Kaqchikel, according to Carey, believe that "if they lose their language, they will also lose their spirit or character (na'oj)" (3). Nonetheless, one Kaqchikel informant, a bilingual teacher and advisor to DIGEBI (General Administration of Bilingual Education), stated in an interview "We are in a very accelerated process of losing our identity" (158). Evidence of this can be found especially in towns such as the one discussed in Ehlers's *Silent Looms*, where traditional dress and language are quickly disappearing.

Carey's keen understanding of the importance of Kaqchikel was no doubt underscored during his four years of Kaqchikel language study. It should be noted that all of his interviews with Kaqchikel speakers were conducted in that language. In discussing his methodology, Carey notes that "The barriers imposed by my not being a Kaqchikel native dissipated as my command of the language and commitment to the people became clear" (2). Carey's knowledge and commitment regarding Kaqchikel language and culture were key to his earning the confidence of the community members where he was conducting his research. Trust and confidence (*confianza*) are major components of being successful in fieldwork and his discussion of it as such in his chapter on methodology was beneficial.

For the person interested in Guatemalan history that is inclusive of the Maya voice, Carey's book is an easy and interesting read. He provides excellent notes and details about his sources. The topics of discussion include: town origins; land, labor, and integration; epidemics; natural disasters; education, exclusions, and assertiveness; Kaqchikel and the military; Jorge Ubico's legacy; leaders; and ethnic relations. Within each of these chapters he brilliantly weaves in the historical perspectives and oral histories of the Kaqchikel informants and other relevant primary and secondary sources. For example, Carey provides the point of view of one fifty-year-old Kaqchikel informant regarding school: "Certainly it is good that children attend school to learn something, but the *Ladino* teachers do not want to teach well, because they do not want us to learn and improve ourselves as indigenous people. They only want us to work" (162). This quote is then supported by something a *finquero* said some fifty years earlier "we have learned from experience that the Indians who have learned to read and write are no longer useful as agricultural workers" (162). Though this *finquero's* words are somewhat dated, the importance of them is not lost on the reader. One only has to look at who the agricultural workers are in Guatemala to know that not much has changed.

Editors Loucky and Moors's *The Maya Diaspora: Guatemalan Roots, New American Lives* offers a collection of articles on Mayan refugees and migrants that explores their realities from a variety of perspectives. The book is written primarily by non-Mayan social scientists, but does include four chapters by Mayas living in exile. Like the other books in this review, the focus of this book is not entirely political, though, one could be considered remiss if the historical and present-day reality of the Maya was discussed without considering the sociopolitical contexts. The authors of the chapters, the editors in their introduction and conclusion, and the poetic epilogue emphasize the importance of these contexts in their discussions.

*Maya Diaspora* clearly illustrates the wide range of experiences of the Maya people in an extensive geographic area. It explores their

experiences in Guatemala, Belize, Mexico, Arizona, Vancouver, Indiantown, Florida, Morganton, North Carolina, Houston, and Los Angeles. The formation and re-creation of a sense of community in places such as refugee camps in Belize and Mexico, and in agricultural communities in Florida and North Carolina are carefully analyzed and skillfully presented. Of particular interest is the way the cases presented in this book exemplify the differences between basic political categories, such as that of being a refugee or migrant, or between the notion of returning and or being repatriated to one's community. Nolin Hanlon and Lovell explain in their essay:

Repatriation is seen as something done *to* refugees by government agencies and international organizations, with minimal input from refugees themselves. 'Return,' by contrast, connotes an active, politicized involvement on the part of the refugees, who organized, negotiated, and influenced the conditions under which their usually collective journeys back to Guatemala took place. (2000, 38)

Like the other books in this review, the Maya voice is woven throughout, providing the reader with the stunning and sometimes painful images of creating "new lives in strange lands." It comes as no surprise that these new lives also have a great impact on the lives of the family and community members who still reside in Guatemala. The case of San Cristóbal Totonicapán illustrates how one community's social structure has been impacted by the cultural and economic changes brought on by the migrant experience. However, one must ask if it is just "a façade of prosperity" (227) as Moors indicates in her conclusions. Guatemala without a doubt benefits from the money sent home by relatives, but the underlying poverty has far from disappeared.

Though the reader might find the quality of the essays in *Maya Diaspora* far from uniform, the book at the same time provides some excellent discussions on the topic. It illustrates the many different experiences of Maya in their new lives in a variety of geographical contexts. It is informative, thought-provoking, and raises important questions for future research.

In examining these four quite varied books, it is easy to see that the Maya perspective is as diverse as the people it represents. The many voices that make up this viewpoint illustrate the complexities that accompany this scholarship. The books reviewed here highlight distinct aspects of the Maya and raise critical questions regarding the changing economic, political, and social world of the Maya in Guatemala and in other countries. From a collective vantage point, the books reviewed here present the reader with an interesting and wide array of methodological and theoretical perspectives. They provide us with multiple lenses and voices to consider in constructing our understanding of the present-day Maya.

## REFERENCES

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