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Elizabeth Coonrod Martínez
Sonoma State University

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CHAPTER
ELEVEN

Elizabeth Coonrod Martínez

Maya Themes in U.S. Latino/Chicano Literature

U.S. Latino literature, or literature composed in English by people of Latin American ethnic heritage who were born in the U.S., attempts in part to identify cultural traits specific to that ethnicity. In U.S. Chicano (or Mexican-American heritage) literature, indigenous "voice" reveals a native-to-this-continent identity. The Chicano identifies more with his or her Native-American heritage than Spain or Europe, and also identifies closely with the U.S. This indigenous representation in early Chicano literature (the 1960s and early 70s) was mostly Aztec, connecting to the fabled origen of Aztlán—a lost paradise thought to have been in what is now the U.S., and the former homeland of tribes who wandered south and founded Tenochtitlán, now present-day Mexico City.

In the past two decades, however, other indigenous heritage has been identified in Chicano literature published in English—most notably the *Tarahumara* in Estela Portillo-Trambley's novel *Trini* and in novels by Graciela Limón, or the *Yaqui* in Lucha Corpi and other authors' works. These are indigenous cultures of northern Mexico.

Now recent Chicano as well as other U.S. Latino literature [1] is beginning to include what is understood to be "Maya" culture, originating from southern Mexico or Central America. In fact, literature produced in English in the U.S. with a Latina or Latino "voice" now frequently includes Maya themes.

This can be helpful in teaching college students, at a time when travel agencies advertise excursions to the Mayan Riviera, or tours of the Mayan World, and the nightly news reveals the struggles of the Zapatistas in Chiapas or the efforts toward a peace process in Guatemala, where thousands of people of mostly Maya heritage were killed by the military in recent years.

Principally, it is several Latinas—women authors—who are bringing this new awareness to late twentieth century U.S. literature, but there is also the example of Chicano poet and novelist, Juan Felipe Herrera. Their publications demonstrate a broader consciousness of indigenous heritage among English-language Latino/Chicano writers.

In the Spanish-language world, the Maya people and culture were brought to life in early and mid-twentieth century novels, especially by two prominent novelists: Mexican Rosario Castellanos and Guatemalan Miguel Angel Asturias. While Castellanos and Asturias are not of Maya ethnic heritage, their legacy is of excellent writing (Asturias won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1967) with strong Maya themes. Although most of their novels have been translated to English[2], their work is little known by contemporary English-language readers. It is the U.S. Latino authors who have published in recent years, and Latin American authors recently translated to English, who are introducing (or re-introducing) Maya themes to the English-reading public.

"Maya" is not a self-specific term, but instead, a broad category encompassing various indigenous people and dialects, all loosely associated linguistically and by legend and traditions. Today, some six million Maya reside in Southeastern Mexico including the Yucatán peninsula, in Guatemala, Belize, western Honduras and El Salvador. There are also some 100,000 living in the U.S. and Canada. Those

grouped under the term "Maya" share commonalities of religion, science and astronomy, and stories of origin. For some, their language is interrelated—the Yucatec Maya language is very similar to the Quiché Maya language spoken in Guatemala—but others have very different language structures. For example, Rigoberta Menchú is of the Maya-Quiché, or Quiché people, and the young brother and sister depicted in the film *El Norte* are of the Kanjobal, who speak a somewhat different language. There are also indigenous people in the Maya region who are not called "Maya," such as the Pipil of El Salvador.

Maya ethnic awareness first crept into late twentieth century U.S. Latino literature based on a desire in the U.S. to understand the rampant mass killings by Central American governments of peasants—principally *indios* or Maya—to rid their countries of possible guerrillas. While Guatemala also suffered extensive genocide against its indigenous people, El Salvador received more attention and activism in the U.S. during the 1980s, and is focused in some of the following U.S. novels.

Two prominent Chicana authors represented El Salvador and its culture early on: In Graciela Limón's 1990 novel, In *Search of Bernabé*, a young Salvadoran man planning to become a priest instead joins the revolutionaries after a brutal rampage by the military in his village. Here, descriptions of indigenous culture are limited to homemade *pupusas* (a flat, filled bread made from corn dough) stacked near the fire at mealtime, or the signficance of a corn or maize-based diet, as well as the indigenous lifestyle—or reliance on the land—which is often in conflict with a government that does not trust self-reliance. In Ana Castillo's *Sapogonia*, also of 1990, the main character feels closer to his Mayan grandmother than to his stern, patriarchal grandfather (of Spanish descent). "Sapogonia" seems to be a fictional name for El Salvador. Sapogonia is the principal character, Máximo's, country, but he prefers living in Spain and the U.S., and when he returns, finds his country devastated by civil war. The character notes specific aspects of Mayan culture—his grandmother's native dress, her long braids, and a philosophy that is markedly different from Western.

The novel suggests Máximo's need to reach or connect spiritually with his grandmother—or the Maya world—which is only vaguely attained by him near the end of the novel. A true understanding is left unanswered. And the novel confuses the reader by citing the grandmother's language as *Quechua* when *Quiché* was probably intended, since the novel states that she is Maya. Still, Limón and Castillo's novels *presence*[3] early on, a Central American people who struggle daily to survive and to preserve their indigenous culture.

The metaphor of corn or maize as the basis of human life and sustenance (prevalent in Mexican and Central American novels) is becoming more apparent in some recent U.S. novels, and defining the basis of indigenous and especially Mayan image and philosophy. This metaphor was first portrayed in Asturias' and Castellanos' novels, and is evident in some contemporary Central American novels, but also courses through Chicano poet Juan Felipe Herrera's book released in 1997, *Mayan Drifter: Chicano Poet in the Lowlands of America*. Although the latter text is written in English, Herrera uses several words in Spanish and Maya, and includes a glossary of definitions. Herrera's book is based in the Maya area of Chiapas in southern Mexico, and is a collage of travel diary, memoir, poetry and a play. His focus is on the Lacandón Maya, as visitor to their area as well as (he states) partial inheritor of their bloodline. His assessments are both reportorial travelogue and spiritual quest. In the remote Chiapas jungle, Herrera makes note of the "No trespassing" sign with the colors of the Mexican flag, and an eagle superimposed over a pyramid—Aztec symbology or an iconography that has nothing to do with the Maya, and the Lacandón of this jungle. He is visiting the "people of Nahá, whose lives and dream worlds were cast in the shape of the caoba forests and the earth that sustained them" (151).

Earlier, in the city of San Cristóbal, Herrera purchases some thick, Mayan-style tortillas (not thin enough to make *tacos* like those in central Mexico) from a "small Indian woman" in the *zócalo*. After giving her three instead of the required two pesos, he:

> walked and chewed the tortillas, tried to push the food down my throat. Even though I was ravenous, even though I chewed hard, I wrestled with the corn paste in my mouth. It went down in clumps. Some of it stuck to the inside of my cheeks, some of it dissolved on my tongue and stayed there; the rest knotted itself in the middle of my throat. Even though I had not eaten since leaving Tuxtla, something was bruising me and did not allow me to chew and swallow. It was forcing me, against my will, to spit everything out. Most of all it wanted me to spit myself out. The tortillas wanted to turn me over, upside down, with the guts out (39).

Here maize serves to begin a soul-searching connection to Herrera's Mayan roots. At the end of his book, he calls Chicano "a half-step between Ladino and Indian, a jump start from apathy into commitment on the edge of a contemplation between Mexican, American [of this continent], campesino, and Maya" (258).

Herrera examines how we translate culture, how it is preserved, especially when its basic philosophy is disregarded. The various migrations and invasions that the Maya have endured have not obliterated their traditions, but change and re-adaptation differs from region to region. John Christie, writing on the modern imagination in Latino fiction, states the following:

> What they gather in their travels, their shuttling between cultures, encourages them to balance logical reality with the unexplainable. Treating folk beliefs and faith with reverence and understanding, Latino writers return to their cultural beginnings (literally or imaginatively), and bring back with them to life in the U.S. the foods and sounds of post-colonial or indigenous worlds, and along with [these] come the ideas, customs and values of their grand-parents to be either discarded as antiquated supersititions or more often molded into some aspect of life in the U.S. (164).

It is the "shuttling between cultures" that the following two authors seek to identify. In 1994, Demetria Martínez published *Mother Tongue*, which deftly contrasts the lower socio-economic status and plight of a young Chicana woman with a Salvadoran refugee's experience as he tries to adapt to the U.S. A Chicana poet and newspaper writer, Martínez wanted to make readers aware of the late twentieth century genocide against people in El Salvador in her first and only novel. In the foreword, she notes that more than 75,000 people died or disappeared during the twelve-year struggle principally of the 1980s. In this short novel, a refugee—José Luis—arrives in Albuquerque where he works as a dishwasher and is considered Mexican. He gives talks about his experience in community and church meetings, and lives in the basement of a home the other main character—Mary—is housesitting. He assumes it is safer in the Chicana character's world, but does not realize, as she points out, that brown people are ignored by the mainstream population. It is another form of disappearing people, she tells him. Martínez's short novel compares what is done by those-in-power in both countries.

The ethnographic details in *Mother Tongue* include references to *pupusas* as well as Mexican *posole*—both corn-based foods native to the Americas. Indigenous beliefs are noted—those of the Pipil and Náhuats of El Salvador as well as of *curanderas* (healers) in the Southwest—and reference is made to the great *ceiba* trees of Maya land, as well as to the indigenous cultural symbols of New Mexico.

Martínez's goal in the novel seems to be to bring societies to a deeper understanding of each other. As the novel's absent homeowner, Soledad, demonstrates in her many letters to Mary and by the articles around her house, U.S. mainstream society has no idea of the reality of life for the Salvadoran people. José Luis, on the other hand, has no idea what life has been like for the young Chicana. He assumes it was or is much better than his own experience. Martínez uses the José Luis character to demonstrate that U.S. society also needs to pay better attention to its own common people.

Martínez' first purpose in her succinct novel is to note that the U.S. populace is uninformed about those tortured and killed during El Salvador's civil war, and the reason for the presence of refugees in the U.S. and Canada, who are often assumed to be Mexican or "Hispanic." The second half of Martínez's story enlightens the U.S. Latina socio-economic experience. Mary is the child of a working single mother who occasionally leaves her with a neighbor who sexually abuses the child unbeknown to Mary's mother. Later, when Mary is barely an adult, her mother dies of cancer, and she has no other family. Mary's and José Luis' submerged memories seem to explode in revelation late in the novel.

The novel's physical construction enhances the intention of greater understanding and serves to contrast and compare life in the U.S. and in El Salvador. Martínez uses letters from Soledad, newspaper articles, and quotes from great Salvadoran poets Roque Dalton and Claribel Alegría, to provide background and history. There is day-to-day narrative of the characters' actions and dialogue, as well as changes to first-person introspection by Mary and José Luis. Finally, there are also poems and letters from José Luis to Mary, and a poem written by his murdered Salvadoran fiancé. The story weaves from present to past and back to present, and then thrusts several years into the future. The early information gives basis to José Luis' and Mary's present shattered lives; now they must find their place in society and go on living. The Central American voice—that of the Salvadoran refugee and *indio* fleeing certain death—is strong in this novel. The Salvadoran existence is projected into our day-to-day lives, and then contrasted with the experience of underclass U.S. existence. Martínez's novel does a much better job than that attempted in Ana Castillo's early novel *Sapogonia*, of depicting and contrasting the Salvadoran and U.S. Latino experience.

Sandra Benítez, a Minnesota writer of Puerto Rican descent, published a novel in 1997, *Bitter Grounds*, that spans three generations of women's lives in El Salvador, beginning with the infamous massacre of

hundreds of mostly indigenous peasants in the early twentieth century. Benítez's novel may have been inspired by Salvadoran Manlio Argueta's lyrical novels of the 1980s which focus the indigenous or peasant consciousness in El Salvador. Benítez (who grew up in Mexico and El Salvador) attempts to document the stamping out of indigenous way of life in the twentieth century. Her novel opens with the 1932 massacre called *La Matanza*, which started as a revolt against harsh working conditions in the coffee plantations, but resulted in the authorities singling out indigenous-looking people and killing some 30,000.

The novel follows three generations of women—both the privileged women of families who own everything in El Salvador, and their indigenous domestic servants. As in Martínez's novel, Benítez shows that darker skin color makes you suspect. The servants' family name is *Prieto*, meaning "dark." At the beginning of the novel, Ignacio *Prieto* is killed and his wife and daughter flee, leave their life in the country, and eventually go to work for an elite family in the city. There they prepare Western food for their *patrones*, and watch a soap opera in the kitchen. Their cultural values and way of life seem lost forever. Earlier, Mercedes *Prieto* had looked to her dreams for guidance and burned *ocote* (torch pine burnt by the Maya in Central America for safeguarding a household or before any ceremony). "Pipil ways have to be preserved" (5), she says to her family only days before the massacre. Her family speaks Náhuatl, the language of the Pipil, and follows traditional customs. Their philosophy is referenced in terms of their gods and the ordering of nature. Their forced departure from their land to the city removes these beliefs. Though they may still eat beans and tortillas in the kitchen, their indigenous customs are lost. Mercedes' daughter, Jacinta, goes to work for a newly married daughter of her mother's mistress who grows to depend upon her entirely—both to help with her children and to run the household. Jacinta's own daughter studies, travels to the countryside to work and to educate the poor indigenous people on health care, and then returns to the city and becomes a revolutionary. These are the roles of the darker-skinned indigenous people of El Salvador.

We understand from these novels that native or indigenous ways need "to be preserved," for reasons of dignity and a sense of life. Their traditional philosophy is evoked in the voices of these novels. It survives even when their language, their gods, and their customs are taken from them.

The basis of Mayan philosophy is preserved in the *Popol Vuh*, at times called the Book of Wisdom, or the Mayan Bible. It describes the creation of the earth, man's origin from corn, the journeys, and the knowledge of ancient peoples, and most Maya groups have an oral version of the narratives contained in this text. The epigraph of Martínez's novel includes a quote from the Popol Vuh:

> Remember us after we are gone. Don't forget us. Conjure up our faces and our words. Our image will be as a tear in the hearts of those who want to remember us (iii).

Martínez opens the door to "remember" the indigenous civilization, lest it be forgotten forever. These Latina writers (like Latin American writers before them) heed the call to portray ancient indigenous heritage, seeking to substantiate its contemporary voice. The *Popol Vuh* is also remembered and rewritten in a recent play by Cherríe Moraga, titled *Heart of the Earth: A Popol Vuh Story*. It is an allegory for the contemporary Chicano or native to this continent, in which the enemy is white, patriarchal, and greedy for hearts—here, of the female. Moraga uses humor and creative story-telling to bring the hero twins home from the deadly underworld and reveal that the real power of creation is found in corn being ground on a *metate* by their Grandmother, and which is then converted to *masa*—the essence of life. Again, corn as metaphor for the regeneration of life is a central philosophy of the native peoples of this continent. Moraga's feminist revisioning of the Popol Vuh story, and Martínez' prominent epigraph from the *Popol Vuh*, exalt the Maya indigenous voice in the contemporary era. These are not an extinct people, they are still here, and are still guided by the legends and stories from their ancient book of wisdom.

As U.S. Latina/o and Chicana/o writing incorporates the cultural traits, philosophy and traditions of specific indigenous groups, the Latino canon is being expanded. It is no longer enough to know that the U.S. Latino's origins include Spanish language, but also that it encompasses a vast and different culture and philosophy, and often a language other than Spanish. America is a continent of many people, whose histories are older than the name of this continent. As U.S. literature opens our understanding of forgotten traditions and indigenous voice, we can begin to better understand Maya and other indigenous philosophy, and value the same in this hemisphere.

Footnotes

[1] U.S. Latino literature is that published by writers living in the U.S., who principally write in English and who are of diverse Latin American origin—such as Dominican-American, Puerto Rican-American, Cuban-American, and Mexican-American. "Chicano" is another term for Mexican-American ethnicity, therefore Chicano writers are a part of the U.S. Latino grouping.

[2] Rosario Castellanos has two principal books based in the Chiapas region: a novel, *Balún Canán* (in English translation, *The Nine Guardians*, and a book of stories, *Ciudad Real* (in English translation *City of Kings*). Miguel Angel Asturias' books that recreate Maya legends are *El espejo de lida sal* (in English *The Mirror of Lida Sal: Tales based on Mayan Myths and Guatemalan Legends*), and a novel, Hombres de maíz (in English Men of Maize).

[3] I am using the critical term created by Amy Kaminsky in her book *Reading the Body Politic* (1993) to indicate that subjectivity is achieved by an author for a character or personage given only objectivity in western or hegemonic literature. Thus, *the other* (in western gaze) is redeemed from isolation and lack of representation by the notion of *presence*.

[4] The Pipil are often confused or merged with Maya because, in fact, they are a part of the Maya region of Central America. They are descendants of Náhuatl speakers from Central Mexico who immigrated to what is now western El Salvador as early as 500 A.D., although greater movement occurred between 900 and 1300, after the downfall of the great Maya city states in southern Mexico and Guatemala. These indigenous people mixed with the Maya (the Maya had lived in this area for more than one thousand years), but continued speaking a variant of Náhuatl—the language of the Aztecs and their predecessors which was once spoken in much of Central America, from Guatemala to Panamá. They settled in Honduras and along the Pacific coast in what is now El Salvador and Guatemala, but lost territory

during wars with the Quiché and Kakchikel Mayas prior to the Spanish arrival (see Fowler). While there are presently about 200,000 ethnic Pipils, their language (at times called Pipil and at times Náhuat) is now nearly extinct. Although they are called *Pipil*, the Salvadoran indigenous have always had more in common with the other indigenous Maya of their region than with the Aztec. They share the same legends and stories of origin.

[5] Argueta is an excellent writer. He lives in El Salvador but travels frequently to the U.S. His novels in English translation are *One Day in the Life; Magic Dogs of the Volcanoes* (children's book) *Cuzcatlán, Where the Southern Sea Beats; Little Red Riding Hood in the Red Light District;* and *A Place Called Milagro de la Paz*.

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