Framing the Popul Wuj: Articulating Modern Ladino Identity in Guatemala

by

GEOFFREY ALLEN HORNER

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Department of History

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ABSTRACT

As the Pan-Maya movement becomes increasingly important in present day Guatemala, the *Popul Wuj*, a Maya creation narrative, has become a site of struggle over national identity for indigenous and non-indigenous Guatemalans alike. This paper engages with the introductions of various editions of the *Popul Wuj* written from the late 1940s to the mid 1970s by non-indigenous *ladinos* in Guatemala. These middle and upper class *ladino* academics, or *letrados*, express their own view of the nation and its place in the roll of important Western nations using the language and epistemology of modern science. It traces their underlying assumptions about prehispanic Maya culture and attempts to reveal their deployment of it for the purpose of producing a glorious past for the "modern," and in their eyes, *ladino*, nation.

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Introduction

Visitors to the Museo Popol Vuh in Guatemala City are treated to an inciteful glimpse into the historical imaginary of Guatemala. After passing through the entranceway listing the museum's major sponsors, Pepsi and Pollo Campero included, the visitor tours through displays of indigenous artefacts: urns, implements, musical instruments and carvings which represent a prehispanic chronology of the different indigenous cultures which live in Guatemala. After browsing through this Maya chronoscape of the past and listening to the soundscape piped in through the unobtrusive speakers, the visitor encounters the two last rooms of the exhibit which are filled with Christian relics, missionary and clergy garb, as well as soldier armour from the time of the conquistadors.

Organized chronologically, the museum reflects the curators' choice to end the exhibit with colonial artefacts, putting a temporal cap on Maya space and time in the narrative of Guatemalan history. The structure of the Museo's narrative, an ancient indigenous past terminated with the beginning of the colonial era, locates the end of the relevance of indigenous culture at the time of the conquest. The silencing of contemporary Maya people has historically been a common feature of the national imaginings of *ladino*, non-indigenous Guatemalans. Spanish speaking descendents of the criollos and mestizos, *ladinos* represent both a cultural minority group in Guatemala and yet at the same time count among their members the elite powerbrokers who control the government and economic structures of the state.[1]

[1] The term *ladino* is a complicated category which binds together ideas about ethnicity, culture , and "race." In some cases it may also refer to an indigenous person who has adopted western style clothing and thus becomes "ladino-ized." For this paper, I use *ladino* to refer to the identity constructed in the elite discourse produced and consumed by upper and middle class Guatemalans who may be state officials, academics or members of the economic oligarchy.

In the course of this study, I will examine another such site of the Guatemalan historical imaginary, the highly educated *ladino*, or *letrado*,[2] writing about the *Popul Wuj* itself. This K'ichee' Maya creation narrative, recorded on paper in alphabetized form in the sixteenth century by indigenous writers, has been translated and published many times since then by non-indigenous people. I view the *ladino* translations, in particular their introductions, as opportunities for these non-indigenous Guatemalans to represent Maya culture through the frame of conquest, consciously or not, asserting their power as active members of a nation where Indians are seen as passive dependents. Through writing onto Maya culture (in the form of the *Popul Wuj*), the *ladino letrados* are able to imagine a modern *ladino* nation in Guatemala. As a close investigation of a set of introductions to the *Popul Wuj* and the group of *letrados* who wrote them will show, the space available to these *ladinos* is bounded by the legacy and significance of the conquest. Moreover, I suggest that the conquest as a conceptual frame condenses ideas about race and identity that prefigure the writers' assumptions about the Guatemalan nation.

In their intellectual engagement with the text of the *Popul Wuj* and Maya culture, the *letrados* employ the tools of science and the ordered, rational thought common to positivist state modernizers of the twentieth century.[3] Just as the logic and methodology of science allow the writers to observe and record certain facts, such as the ancient Maya's thorough knowledge of astronomy, they also permit the *letrados* to ignore others

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[2] In his book *The Lettered City*, Angel Rama describes the link between the development of written communication, urban communities of educated, "lettered" men, and the city itself in the colonial era. The *letrados* dealt with administrative communication, wrote poetry, and were involved in shaping the "order of signs" within which code the city itself operated and expanded as a tool of rule in the period. See Angel Rama, *The Lettered City* John Charles Chasteen, trans. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

[3] The insights of James Scott about twentieth century positivistic state builders, architects and urban planners provide a context of ideas and philosophical principles which guided those interested in the use of science to change and "modernize" human society. For more discussion of the links between the Enlightenment and twentieth century modernizers, see James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

including most of the practices of contemporary Maya. Although this is a powerful and significant silence, the categories, divisions and measures of modern science allow the *letrados*' project to appear benign and innocent.[4] In fact, their use of the sciences of anthropology, archaeology, paleography and linguistics to produce criteria with which to evaluate the *Popul Wuj* and Maya cultural expression allow them to order their image of the nation with *ladino* forms of knowledge firmly fixed at the top of their scale.

The powerful ambivalence that the voices of the *letrados* express in their introductions towards their Maya co-citizens is a critical aspect of their views of the nation. While their entire enterprise is motivated by a wish to explore prehispanic Maya culture as one of the great civilizations of the world, their relationship to the text and to the Maya culture that it represents is mediated by the countless dichotomies and categories, such as prehistory versus history, that are the result of the narration of the conquest. As I explore below, the historical disjuncture of the conquest is productive of racial and ethnic sterotypes which prove difficult for the *letrados* to escape. Ideas about the backwardness of indigenous people in Guatemala, which had currency during the period the introductions were written, show up in various different ways in the writings of the *letrados*, in their assumptions about the culture which forms the object of their inquiry. Yet their fascination with indigenous culture, at least in its "ancient" form, leads them to praise the *Popul Wuj* as a unique and valuable document in the history of the Americas.

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[4] Here I am referring to Mary Louise Pratt's characterization of colonial travel writers and their ability to mask their project of discursively claiming new regions, knowledges and peoples for the ever expanding European Empires in seemingly neutral, scientific rhetoric. For her discussion of European travel writing, see Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation.* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

Introducing the *Popul Wuj*

The *Popul Wuj* (also Popol Vuh, Popol Vuj, or Pop Wuj) is a K'ichee' Maya narrative about the origins of human life on earth. Its title translates as "Book of Council", or "Book of the community." Adding a new valence to the meaning of the title's translation, Guatemalan Maya anthropologist Victor Montejo, in his 1999 edition of the manuscript, assigns the metaphoric meaning of "power" to the word Popol coming from the K'ichee' "Pop."[5] Academics who have translated or written on the *Popul Wuj* generally believe the narrative to have existed in oral, performed form before the Spanish invasion.[6] If the narrative was in book form, it was either burned in the fires set by the conquistadors or the K'ichee' hid remaining copies from the Europeans.

Between 1554 and 1558, K'ichee' writers compiled an alphabetized version of the narrative in manuscript form. In 1701, Friar Ximénez was shown this manuscript by the K'ichee' and took the opportunity to copy down this new K'ichee' version and translate it into Spanish. In order to get past the censors of the Spanish Inquisition, Ximénez, like many colonial era intellectuals interested in "heathen" indigenous culture yet fearful of that institution's reach, attributed the volume's authorship to Satan.[7] The Friar's translation then disappeared in the collections of the Dominicans for a century after its completion, turning up once again in the mid nineteenth century.

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[5] Víctor Montejo trans., *Popol Vuj* (México, D.F.: Artes de México, 1999), 7. "The name popol vuj comes from the words in k'iche', pop, which means mat – in a metaphorical sense – power." Or in Spanish, "El nombre popol vuj viene de las palabras en k'iche', pop, que significa estera – en un sentido metafórico – poder." In the K'ichee', as seating is the position of authority and the mat is what you sit on, the mat is thus the symbol of authority.

[6] Both Adrián Recinos, one of the *ladino letrados*, and Dennis Tedlock, in his 1996 edition, suggest that the *Popul Wuj* was a book in painted hieroglyphic format, but there is some debate among Mayanists about the existence of hieroglyphic painting in the K'ichee' area. It is most likely that the oral performance of the *Popul Wuj* was the primary way the narrative was communicated by the K'ichee' in pre-conquest times.

[7] José Antonio Villacorta Calderón trans., *El Popol-Vuh en Crestomatia Quiche* (Guatemala: Centro Editorial "José de Pineda Ibarra" Ministerio de Educación Pública, 1962), 8. Quoting doctor José Imbelloni, "...Ximénez, who by his *formæ mentis* was disposed to misunderstand the content of the codex, by considering its narrations as dictated by the evil of Satan..." or in Spanish, "...Ximénez, quien por su *formæ mentis* estaba dispuesto a desentender el contenido del códice, por considerar a sus narraciones como dictadas por la malicia de Satanás..."

According to Montejo, in 1854 the French abbot Charles Etienne Brasseur de Bourbourg came upon the Ximénez edition in Guatemala. He took the manuscript to France where he wrote and published his famous French translation entitled *Popol Vuh: Le Livre Sacre et les Mythes de L'Antiquité Américaine, Avec les Livres Héroïques et Historiques des Quichés*. There are many different versions of the history of the manuscript's *re*-discovery in the nineteenth century. For example, the editors of the 1998 edition of the *Popul Wuj* published by Losada in Mexico credit the first publication to Dr. Carl Scherzer in Vienna in 1857, it being followed in 1861 by the Brasseur edition. As we will see, the preoccupation with the veracity of the dates and times of the European *re*-discovery narrative – who made the "firsts" (as in first to publish it in Europe) – is a key part of the debates occurring between the introductions I present in this paper. Interestingly, Montejo's 1999 edition allows only one minor paragraph in his introduction for this discussion, possibly indicating his attempt to subordinate it to the larger significance of the Maya narrative itself.

The Ximénez manuscript, the oldest "known" copy of the *Popul Wuj*, was purchased in France by Edward Ayer who deposited it in the Newberry Library in Chicago. From the late nineteenth century on there have been countless subsequent editions and translations published all over the world in different languages. Among these editions are the works of Georges Raynaud of France who published an edition in 1925; that of Manuel González de Mendoza and Miguel Angel Asturias, Raynaud's students at the time in Paris, who published the narrative in Spanish in 1927; a significant English translation of Adrián Recinos' Spanish edition by Goetz and Morley in 1950; and Dennis Tedlock who later published a popular English edition in 1985. In Guatemala during the time of the introductions that I look at, Hugo Cerezo Dardón and Rafael Girard

published lesser known editions.[8] As the legion of editions in European languages would suggest, the *Popul Wuj* has taken on great significance as an artefact of prehispanic Maya culture.

Of those editions of the *Popul Wuj* published in Guatemala between the late 1940s and the mid 1970s, I consider five. Of these, three were published by the Guatemalan Ministry of Education and all five make up the collection of the Ministry's own library. Several of these editions feature official state correspondence regarding their publication in their opening pages, including, in one case, a letter from the standing president of the Republic. The Ministry's investment in these productions as symbols of national significance, possibly used in Guatemalan schools,[9] ties them together as a group of works representing not only the dominant, public, academic discourse about indigenous culture, but also the attitudes of those in positions of authority in Guatemala at the time.

The voices of the five *letrados* I have selected for this study articulate a relatively homogenous discourse about the *Popul Wuj*. These *letrados*' common formation in academia, membership in the *Sociedad de Geografía e Historia de Guatemala*, and their shared view of the nation as modern and *ladino* means that their introductions bear many thematic similarities and common tropes of representation. The *letrado* most closely associated with the Guatemalan oligarchy was Adrián Recinos, scion of one of

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[8] See Rafael Girard, *Popol-vuh, fuente historica.* (Guatemala: Editorial del Ministerio de Educacion Publica, 1952). And Hugo Cerezo Dardón, *La creacion del mundo, segun el Popol-Vuh.* (Guatemala: Editorial del Ministerio de Educacion Publica, 1950).

[9] Although I have not been able to confirm the use of these specific editions in schools, the *letrados* had other works that were used as textbooks. For example, Estrada Monroy published four editions of *El Popol Vuh* (escolar) between 1973 and 1995 and Villacorta published courses on Geography and History of Central America for the *escuelas normales*. See "Falleció Agustín Estrada Monroy: El historiador guatemalteco dejó de existir ayer por la mañana," *Prensa Libre: Ediccion Electronica* 27 June, 2002, and "José Antonio Villacorta Calderon" <http://www.legal.com.gt/historia/perso20.htm>.

Guatemala's most prominent established families.[10] He became dictator Jorge Ubico's ambassador in Washington in the midst of Ubico's acquiescence to U.S. commercial interests in Guatemala (such as the infamous United Fruit Company). Failing to beat out Juan José Arévalo in the first truly free elections in Guatemala when he ran on a platform representing old, conservative families in 1944, he was exiled from Guatemala during the Arévalo/Arbenz years, a period from 1944 to 1954 known as the Ten Years of Spring.[11] Recinos then became the UN representative for the post-coup Castillo Armas government which was responsible for the beginning of the civil war in 1954.[12]

Juan Antonio Villacorta Calderón, historian and famous *letrado*, was born in 1879 in Quetzaltenango and became Minister of Education during the regime of Jorge Ubico. He held several political posts as well as chairs in various Guatemalan academic institutes, including the *Sociedad*, where he was a founding member. His published works include *Arqueología Guatemalteca*, *Códices Mayas*, *Curso de Geografía de la América Central para uso de los Institutos y Escuelas Normales*, and *Elementos de Historia Patria*, indicating his interest in Maya culture and nationalistic history. Among the titles Villacorta was awarded during his life are the order of the Quetzal of Guatemala; he also became a member of the *Ordre des Palmes Académiques* of France.[13]

Earning the title of *Caballero de la Orden de Santiago* at the age of 27 in 1954, Agustín Estrada Monroy was another distinguished academic and member of this group. He was described in his obituary as "a great scholar of anthropology, paleography and a

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[10] Jim Handy, *Gift of the Devil: A History of Guatemala.* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), 106. According to Handy, Recinos was the son of "one of Guatemala's most prominent families."
[11] "El ideario polémico de Clemente Marroquín Rojas," editorial, *La Hora: El 19 de junio en los 80 años de La Hora* 19 June, <http://www.lahora.com.gt/paginas/documentos2.htm>.
[12] Luis Cardoza y Aragón, *La revolución guatemalteca* (La Antigua Guatemala: Editorial del Pensativo, 1994).
[13] "José Antonio Villacorta Calderon" <http://www.legal.com.gt/historia/perso20.htm>.

reconstructor of ancient documents and prehispanic codices."[14] Each of the writers has been recognized by the western academy, often in Europe, for their contributions to the knowledge about indigenous people.

The period during which the *letrados* wrote, from the late 1940s to the mid-1970s, marks the transition from Guatemala's Ten Years of Spring to the civil war. The introduction by Recinos, first published in 1947, is available from the Ministry of Education's library in its 1953 printing, which predates the CIA coup by one year. The overthrow of the democratically elected Arbenz government was the beginning of the thirty year civil war in Guatemala which saw the killing of some two hundred thousand people in a war of counterinsurgency by the 1990s. During this period, the rhetoric of anti-communism which targetted labour and peasant movements resisting the oligarchy and major US interests, such as the United Fruit Company and the Coca-Cola Bottling Company, created divisions and sowed distrust throughout the different communities in Guatemala. After the massive earthquake of 1976, three years after Estrada Monroy's edition was published, the war became increasingly focused on the annihilation of Maya people as indigenous organizing reached new levels and was perceived by the the government and military as a growing threat.[15] In the early 1980s the military used extreme violence to sever Maya peoples' links to place and community through the massacring and burning of villages and the forced migration to Vietnam-style strategic hamlets and model villages.[16] It was a period of extreme violence during which the

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[14] "Falleció Agustín Estrada Monroy: El historiador guatemalteco dejó de existir ayer por la mañana," *Prensa Libre: Ediccion Electronica* 27 June, 2002, <http://www.prensalibre.com/pls/prensa/detnoticia.jsp?p_cnoticia=30902&p_fedicion=27-06-02>.

[15] There is a history of massacres of indigenous people in Guatemala reaching back to the time of the conquest, but a more recent example that suggests the continuity of this phenomenon in the twentieth century is the massacre in Patzicía in 1944 which occurred at the same time as the 1944 revolution. For a discussion of the complex events leading up to it, see Piero Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the United States.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 37.

[16] Handy, 261.

military's mission, in the words of one military intelligence officer, was to "'change the cassettes' in indigenous peoples' heads."[17]

It is impossible to come to grips with the breakdown of civil society over the course of the 30 years of counterinsurgency in Guatemala without taking into account the tensions apparent in *ladino* imaginings of the modern Guatemalan nation. Through their introductions and writing in the *Anales*, the *letrados* imagine a modern *ladino* national identity in the midst of a prelude to violence which would culminate in disaster for Guatemala's indigenous peoples. This *ladino* identity requires the Maya, at times as ally or even progenitor (in the *letrados*' evocations of the pre-Columbian roots of Guatemalan nationalistic spirit and pride), but more often as a counterpoint against which to constitute *ladino*-"ness." This deep ambivalence towards the place of Maya in the Guatemalan nation, apparent in the writings of the *letrados*, is also manifest in other contexts within Guatemala. For example, Diane Nelson describes the use of Maya culture by the very national military which was responsible for the razing of Maya villages and the massacre of thousands of Maya people during the civil war:

> Statues and murals on the army bases represent indigenous warriors and gods, and the names of divisions and elite fighting groups like the Kaibiles commemorate figures from the *Popul Wuj*.[18]

The tensions and contradictions inherent in these various deployments of Maya culture suggest the complex impulses behind the modernizing project being envisioned and carried out by numerous constituencies in Guatemala. It is critical, then, to recognize

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[17] Diane Nelson, *Finger in the Wound: Body Politics in Quincentennial Guatemala*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 6. Nelson takes the quote "change the cassettes" from her interviews with a military intelligence officer operating in the army-run resettlement "model villages."
[18] Nelson, 92.

these cross-currents of desire in the writings of the *letrados* in order to understand the cultural context within which such violence became possible.

The Frame of Conquest

The conceptual frame imposed by the conquest is a prominent aspect of the introductions, and the destruction of Utatlan/G'umarcaaj by Pedro de Alvarado often provides the entry point to the *letrados*' narratives of the manuscript of the *Popul Wuj* (as in the Recinos edition). In order to suggest a source of these tensions arising in the discourse of the *letrados*, I will draw out some of the ideas surrounding the conquest and their connotations to the *ladino* national imaginary. By conquest I refer both to the historical event of the Spanish invasion of the Americas, a lynch pin in historical narratives of the region, and the continuity of the practice of conquest of Maya peoples throughout the colonial and independence period of Guatemala, that is to say the scientific, economic and cultural conquest which has not ceased since the arrival of the Spanish. Both senses of the conquest are critical for understanding the context within which the *letrados* write.

The historical event of the conquest, encapsulated in western historiography by the arrival of Columbus, Cortez's defeat of the Aztecs, and Pedro de Alvarado's invasion of Guatemala, is a turning point in the historical imaginary of Guatemala, Europe and the Americas.[19] This moment has given rise to a series of binaries in Western thought which inform the *letrados*' analytical and descriptive categories. These binaries, made possible

[19] According to Michel Rolph Trouillot in his book *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, the arrival of Columbus in the Bahamas has been retrospectively condensed into a single date, October 12, 1492, despite the fact that the significance of his landing did not even begin to enter into the European consciousness until 1493 when the news returned to the Old World. In his words, "The isolation of a single moment thus creates a historical 'fact'..." Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 114.

by the narration of the arrival of the Europeans as a single moment, include prehistory versus history, traditional versus modern, and oral versus print expression and culture.

The terms prehistory and history suggest a temporal dislocation between Maya time (prehistory) and Spanish/*ladino* time which is fundamental to the *letrados*' assumptions about their project. The idea of prehistory distances indigenous civilization (at its "height") as having existed only in a mythical time before the advent of a European, western consciousness in the Americas. In *ladino* discourse, the end of prehistory is marked by the fall of the "ancient" Maya kingdoms and is associated with the end of a productive, hard working "Indianness;" Maya authority over the region of Guatemala; and the loss of indigenous masculinity.[20] In Villacorta's edition, for example, he presents contemporary Maya as "lost in a labyrinth of close to four centuries, full of suffering and ignorance."[21]

With the rupture of the conquest and the beginning of "history" in Guatemala, the Spanish and criollos took over the roles of power and authority, becoming, in the eyes of many twentieth century *ladinos*, the inheritors, even "creators" of the Maya Past. One *ladino*'s comments, published in *La Hora*, illustrate this fundamental assumption among *ladinos* which was prevalent even at the time the comment's publication in 1944, at the beginningof the ten years of spring:

> Four centuries of oppression, cruelty and systematic brutalization of the native has made him so indolent and apathetic that he is resigned to his lot... When it is said that the Indian is lazy, a cheat, a liar, ill adapted to work, one who needs to be constantly oppressed because he is an irresponsible subject who does not respect the obligations he has contracted, one forgets that this is due to his lack of education and

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[20] In her discussion of *ladino* perceptions of the Maya, Diane Nelson explains that "the Indian is often coded as female. Discussing the emergence(y) of Mayan organizing and possible autonomy, many ladinos echoed the state official who complained, 'But this is like a wife leaving her husband." Nelson, 26.

[21] Villacorta, 11. See footnote below for translation.

> inadaptability and that in reality he is the pillar of the national economy which is based mainly on agriculture.[22]

In this narrative, given that the powerful, prehispanic Maya have been conquered and impoverished by violence and oppression, *ladinos* represent the strength and ability needed to rule Guatemala properly. Inevitably, however, these powerful inheritors of the Guatemalan nation are left to deal in some way with the Indians who persist as necessary members of this nation. Although they detail the achievements of the "ancient" Maya through their writings on the *Popul Wuj* as an example of "literatura india" that has even "influenced the character of some literature created by the whites,"[23] and although they claim the Maya past as part of the national patrimony, for the *ladino* intellectuals of the twentieth century, the future of the nation is *ladino* and modern, taking many of its defining characteristics from European models. As such, in the minds of many *ladinos* and *letrados* the indigenous population of post-colonial Guatemala, a leftover from prehistory, is a backward pull on an otherwise future oriented, advanced nation.

Rooted in the past, the Maya, in *ladino* discourse, represent tradition to the *ladino*'s technologically advanced modernity. The second binary of tradition versus modernity casts Guatemalan indigenous people as holders of "authentic" precolumbian culture. Through the discourses of folklore and tourism, the contemporary indigenous people become associated with the "ruins" of the "ancient" Maya and with craft and textile production in a precolumbian style. On the other side of this binary, *ladinos* become the modern citizens who will push Guatemala forward in the modern age. According to this narrative, just as the Spanish conquistadors had superior weapons'

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[22] Jorge Shlesinger, La Hora November 26, 1944, quoted in: Richard N. Adams, "Ethnic Images and Strategies in 1944." *Guatemalan Indians and the State: 1540 to 1988.* Carol A. Smith Ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 148.

[23] Ermilo Abreu Gómez trans. *Popol Vuh: Las Antiguas Historias del Quiché.* (Guatemala: Editorial "José de Pineda Ibarra", 1967), 5. "Esta literatura tiene tanta validez estética y humana que hast ha influido en el carácter de cierta literatura creada por los blancos."

technology when they defeated the different groups living in the Americas, *ladinos* of the twentieth century have modern communication devices, bureaucratic state apparatii and modern science.[24] In their own eyes, *ladinos* possess the social, military and economic tools to build a modern nation-state rivaling those of Europe and North America.

The third binary coming out of the paradigm of conquest, oral versus print expression, is also a symbol of *ladinos*' technological superiority. One of the prominent markers of a supposedly primitive society, the exclusively oral transmission of collective memory and cultural traits was associated by *ladinos* with indigenous people in Guatemala in part because Maya cultural development was said to have stopped at the time of the conquest. Villacorta, for example, sees this lack of change in the following terms: "the indigenous race of our country... remains *even now* resistant to all change in his spiritual culture *since the time of the Spanish conquest* which demolished his race and destroyed his ancestral civilization."[my emphasis][25] As Villacorta says later, through his translation of the manuscript of the *Popul Wuj*, he is helping the Maya "recover the soul of their race" which they have lost through years of ignorance of their own pre-conquest past and traditions.[26]

Villacorta's attitude demonstrates his complete disregard for the contemporary oral practices of Maya people, collective memory and beliefs which they have proudly maintained in an unbroken, yet in many respects dramatically changed, continuity with prehispanic Maya beliefs. Instead, he believes that the printed text of the *Popul Wuj*, as

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[24] In a later example of the *ladino* vision of the traditional/modern divide between ethnicities in Guatemala, the government released a poster in 1992 celebrating the Quincentennial of Columbus' arrival in the Americas which shows white *ladinos* operating telephones and fixing an electrical box alongside an indigenous Cofradia or traditionalist indigenous celebration and an indigenous-looking campesino hoeing a field. Nelson, 14.

[25] Villacorta, 7. "convencidos que hacíamos un trabajo necesario en favor principalmente de la raza indígena de nuestro país, que permanece aún renuente a todo cambio en su cultura espiritual desde la época de la conquista española que abatió a su raza y destruyó su ancestral civilización."

[26] See my discussion of this quote and Villacorta's role as a patriotic scientist below.

brought to light by the *letrados*, represents the "authentic" soul of the prehispanic Maya. Thus, in the minds of many *letrados* and *ladinos,* the Maya, not having the skills and awareness to work with the written translation of the *Popul Wuj*, remain in the dark, still associated with mere storytelling, "superstition," and oral forms of expression often considered to be "organic" and "chaotic." As a result of this stereotype, their "primitive" oral systems of knowledge made the contemporary Maya objects of the science of anthropology, a discipline reserved for the study of non-Western, Other societies.

Descendants of the European tradition, on the other hand, *ladinos* cast themselves as the inheritors of thousands of years of written culture in the old world putting them in a superior position. Not only did *ladinos* have blood connections to Europe, but many prominent Guatemalan scholars had studied there and saw their scholarly debates as occurring in constant dialogue with European scholars. Contrary to the supposedly organic impenetrable oral memory of the Maya, the technology of writing provided the *ladino* with a means of verification to establish "facts" recognized by an audience around the globe. The printed word permitted the events in *ladino* history to be recorded on paper at the time they occurred leaving a precise physical account for later historians and administrators to investigate. Instead of becoming "corrupted" while passing "de boca en boca" (from mouth to mouth)[27], the events of Guatemalan *ladino* history become discrete objects with an inherent veracity and accuracy because of the written evidence that remains and to some extent speaks for itself.

The three interrelated binaries of prehistory versus history, tradition versus modernity, and oral versus print, made possible by the ideas surrounding the moment of conquest, permeate the writing of the *letrados* in the form of underlying assumptions and

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[27] Adrián Recinos trans. *Popol-Vuh: Las Antiguas Historias del Quiché.* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1953), 25.

tropes of representation. They are productive of stereotypes about contemporary Guatemalan indigenous people and culture which provide the *letrados* with the means to trivialize their co-citizens.[28] Through these devices, *ladinos* are able to construct a biased, simplified representation of indigenous identity as an exotic Other against which they define their own identity.[29] In opposition to the prehistoric, traditional, oral culture of the Maya, *ladinos* write themselves into their own narratives using the categories of modern, scientific, rational and enlightened. For the *letrados*, indigenous culture becomes the backdrop against which they imagine a modern nation.

The conquest of indigenous culture, waged at an intellectual level, represents one of the foremost themes in *ladino* thought. Starting with the missionaries' attempts to Christianize the Mam, Kaqchikel, K'ichee' and other groups through undermining their prehispanic beliefs, the *ladino* conviction that indigenous peoples would have to give up their languages and cultural practices persisted over the years, eventually being taken up through ideas about assimilation as citizens of an independent *ladino* Guatemala. Amongst the various strains of *ladino* discourse on the progress of the nation since Guatemala's independence, the question of the place of the indigenous people within these visions has generally been articulated as "the problem of the Indian." In one of the articles of the *Anales*, "A propósito del problema del indio," a *ladino* colleague of the *letrados* suggested that instead of "eliminating" the Indian as some would suggest, "according to our humble sentiment and thinking he should be educated, he should be

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[28] I am refering again to Trouillot when he outlines the different strategies for silencing the past. Trivialization and "formulas of banalization" cast people or events in the historical narrative as "not that bad, or important." Moreover, my use of the word "identifications" comes from Nelson's deployment of the term to suggest the many different ways in which different people access the traits of a common identity and represent themselves as belonging to a certain group.

[29] Speaking of the relationship between Maya and *ladino*, Nelson refers to the Maya as the "self constituting other." Nelson, 25.

made to evolve..."[30] That *ladinos* in the state and intelligensia are the paternal leaders responsible for molding a new Indian identity which is no longer a "backward looking" strain on the Guatemalan nation is apparently self evident to many *ladino letrados*.

Assimilation of indigenous people has had a widespread currency among *indigenista* intellectuals as a solution to the country's woes. Members of a widespread movement to revive indigenous culture throughout the Americas, *indigenistas* employed the terms of folklore and anthropology to re-imagine the indigenous past, challenging colonial perspectives, yet re-affirming the ascendence of the creole nation state. In his article on *indigenismo* in Guatemala, David Carey Jr. summarizes the attitudes of some of the men involved in the project of discovering Maya prehistory:

> Bartres Jáuregui, Villacorta, Recinos, and Rodríguez Beteta did not consider the Indians Guatemalans. These historians envisioned a future when the Indians would be fused into society and only then respected as full citizens. They would not consider the Indians equals until they gave up their "indianness." While these ladino intellectuals respected the ancient civilizations, they treated the contemporaneous Indians as a separate entity who would not be accepted into Guatemalan society until they parted with their language, dress, customs, and traditions, and assimilated into the national society."[31]

Along with Villacorta and Recinos, the other *letrados* who introduced the *Popul Wuj* were at one time members of the *Sociedad de Geografia e Historia de Guatemala*.[32] The *Sociedad* provided a focus for the *indigenista* movement in Guatemala. Like many similar groups thoughout Latin America, these intellectuals were attempting to increase awareness of the "glorious" indigenous past not only with their Guatemalan audience, but

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[30] Carlos L. Luna, "A Proposito del problema del indio." *Anales de la Sociedad de Geografia e Historia de Guatemala*. 5 - 6 (1928): 91. "...según nuestro humilde sentir y pensar hay que educarlo, hay que hacerle evolucionar..."

[31] David Carey Jr., "Indigenismo and Guatemalan History in the Twentieth Century." *Inter-American Review of Bibliography*. 48. 2 (1998): 379-408.

[32] One possible exception to this rule is Ermilo Abreu Gómez, though he was a member of similar Mexican societies such as the *Academia Mexicana de la Lengua*. His edition of the *Popul Wuj* was published by the Guatemalan Ministry of Education.

also in North America and throughout Latin America. Arriola, for example, lauds Charles Etienne Brasseur de Bourbourg, famous translator of the *Popul Wuj*, for his efforts to raise this awareness in Europe:

> Spirited investigator, he was dedicated to showing to his contemporaries, especially the French, interested in organizing scientific expeditions to Close and Far Orients, that America too has a cultural patrimony worthy of being studied by specialists.[33]

National Science

As a patriotic act, the *re*-discovery of the prehispanic Maya past through scientific inquiry allows the *indigenista* to display a remote, "classical" period of their own nation's past which rivals the legacy of the Greeks and Romans for Europeans. In response to the civilization versus barbarism rhetoric which was such a critical part of the European discourse on the colonies, the "heights" of Maya civilization the investigators discover allow them to argue that there is a precedent of civilized, educated thought in Guatemala. The investigators of the *Sociedad* often referred to the "admirable archeological sites, the ability to calculate the revolutions of Mars and Venus as well as predict eclipses, the accurate calendar, and their ability to grasp the concept of zero."[34] Through their discourses on Maya culture and practice in their introductions to the *Popul Wuj* and in the articles of the *Anales*, these *letrados* discursively claimed the Maya past for themselves and for the Guatemalan nation erasing the tremendous disjuncture of the conquest.

Founded in 1923, the society had the support of the Guatemalan state from its inception. Following the death of José María Orellana, president of Guatemala, the 1927

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[33] Jorge Luis Arriola trans. *Popol Vuh: Le Livre Sacre et les Mythes de L'Antiquité Américaine, Avec les Livres Héroïques et Historiques des Quichés*. (Guatemala: Editorial Universitaria, 1972), 18. "Esforzado investigador, se empeña en mostrar a sus coetáneos, especialmente a los franceses, interesados entonces en organizar expediciones cientificas al Cercano y Lejano Orientes, que América tiene también un patrimonio cultural digno de ser estudiado por los especialistas."

[34] Carey Jr., 4. In this particular case, Carey Jr. is referring to Villacorta C.

publication of the *Anales* of the *Sociedad* features a protracted and glowing tribute to the man who was apparently greatly invested in the success of the society. In the words of the *Sociedad*'s *Junta Directiva* at the time:

> With a spirit of equanimity, General Orellana understood the highly nationalist ends of the Sociedad de Geografía e Historia, and for this reason he lent the society his most decisive moral and material help.[35]

This society, then, a *ladino* forum on the ancient Maya past, had at its core the explicit project of re-imagining Guatemala's past through the application of science to achieve the great destiny of the nation. Supported by the financial assistance of the *ladino* state, the *Sociedad* pursued scientific investigation as a patriotic act, fulfilling a covenant with the nation's leaders. According to one presenter praising the society for its educational mission:

> You form a select group of true patriots, because it is impossible to consider otherwise those who dedicate themselves to scientific speculation in these times of disconcerting materialism and utilitarianism, with no other interest than to reconstruct the past with the greatest exactitude, making reparations that truth and justice impose, restoring what must live and making endure what best serves as an example and model for future generations.[36]

The nationalist mission of the society included mapping and creating accounts from various periods of Guatemala's history, but its primary focus was the "ancient" Maya. A key voice of modern Guatemalan indigenismo, the *Anales* had for its cover a frame of Maya iconography with glyphs at the bottom. The majority of the discourses

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[35] Ibid., 5. "Espíritu ecuánime, el General Orellana supo comprender las finalidades altamente nacionalistas de la Sociedad de Geografía e Historia, y por ello le prestó su ayuda moral y material más decidida."

[36] Miguel Morazan. "Importancia Educativa de los Estudios de Geografía e Historia" *Anales de la Sociedad de Geografía e Historia de Guatemala.* 3 – 1 (1926): 137. "Formáis, un grupo selecto de verdaderos patriotas, porque no de otro modo puede considerarse a quienes se dedican a especulaciones científicas en estos tiempos de materialismo y utilitarismo desconcertantes, sin más interés que el de reconstruír con la mayor exactitud el pasado, haciendo las reparaciones que la verdad y la justicia imponen, restaurando cuanto debe vivir y procurando que perdure cuanto es digno de servir de ejemplo y de modelo a las generaciones venideras."

addressed to the society and recorded in their *Anales* were on the topic of Maya "ruins" and archaeology, language and art. Typical examples of article titles included: "Arqueología Guatemalteca: Piedras Negras. – Región Maya del Usumacinta Medio," "Religión Y Arte de los Mayas," "Sistema Hidrográfico del Departamento de Guatemala," and "A propósito del Problema del Indio." The *Anales* were, for the society and readership, a site of *ladino* national imagining and, through their more or less random collection of articles on subjects ranging from early Maya civilization to the independence period and beyond, they recreated with each new publication a continuum of ideas and images of how the *ladino* community envisioned the past of Guatemala, a past to which they claimed full ownership.

For the *letrados*, members of the Guatemalan intelligensia, and members of the *Sociedad de Geografía e Historia de Guatemala*, *letrados* all, the solution to the problem of the Indian lay in bringing science to bear on the thousands of years of Maya cultural legacy. Scientific inquiry into Maya culture became a patriotic act clearing away the "jungle growth" which prevents the modern *ladino* and *his* "indigenous compatriots" from understanding the "authentic" traditions and practices of the Maya.

In their introductions, the *letrados* use the westernized, scientific knowledge they create about the *Popul Wuj* to construct their authority on Maya culture and its place in the nation. Their in depth descriptions of the history of the manuscript, their observations and deductions regarding its author, and the specialized linguistic techniques they bring to the translations of the text demonstrate for their educated (and by implication non-indigenous) reader their expertise and legitimacy as translators and interpreters of the *Popul Wuj*. Through their abstract scientific rhetoric the *letrados* disguise the fact that their way of knowing is culturally specific and as such is in competition with other

systems of knowing which exist contemporaneously in Guatemala. One such system happens to be present in and embodied by the *Popul Wuj*.[37]

Ways of Knowing

As many different editions of the *Popul Wuj* claim in their introductions, the text is considered to be the "Mayan Bible." Although this label likely began as a sweeping, Eurocentric comparison which condensed the more than 25 different cultures that make up the "Maya" culture into one monolith, its implications are being taken up by Maya activists today. For many members of the increasingly important pan-Maya movement, it is becoming a foundational text that is bringing together indigenous people from all over Guatemala and Southern Mexico by facilitating the creation of a common identity.[38] In a new discourse of Maya unity and activism, present day Maya are re-appropriating ideas and phrases from the many different editions of the *Popul Wuj* to legitimate their political positions and actions. For example, in one of the communications from the Majawil Q'ij, an activist Maya cultural rights organization, the writers accuse the government and *ladinos* of carrying out atrocities against indigenous peoples; the writers associate those in power with the lords of the underworld in the *Popul Wuj*:

> They propose laws to "protect" us, while the civil patrols and the military control in our communities destroy trust, unity, and community life. We have suffered massacres just as our ancestors suffered the destruction of the cities of Gumarkaaj and Iximche in 1524. This is a policy to finish off the Indians with the same cruelty

[37] There are many continuities between the *letrados*' project and that of Said's orientalists. In their approach to Asia and the Middle East, the European scholars and antiquarians Said refers to use "specific orientalist techniques – lexicography, grammar, translation, cultural decoding" and just as the *letrados*' discourse creates powerful silences, Said draws our attention to the traces of power, "power to have resurrected, indeed created, the Orient, power that dwelt in the new, scientifically advanced techniques of philology and of anthropological generalization." Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 121.

[38] This identity in formation is fraught with difficulty for the different groups who are joining up to it because of the many ethnic differences among them. It is no small burden that the common language for the movement is Spanish, the language of those who have historically oppressed the Maya.

> and savagery of the Spaniards during the invasion, only now this is carried out by the *new lords of Xibalbá.*[my emphasis]

As well, some Maya contrast the Christian version of Eve being created from Adam's rib with the *Popul Wuj* which, they suggest, represents the genders as equal since in the narrative the creation of men and women happens simultaneously and both sexes are created of the same material.[39] These Maya uses of the *Popul Wuj* represent a new turn in the history of the narrative as a written text, which, after the original K'ichee' writers produced it, has been dominated by non-indigenous academics. But there is another history of the *Popul Wuj* which has a greater continuity with the pre-conquest practice of verbal expression in which the narrative was initially shared.

A creation narrative, the *Popul Wuj* is a form of oral expression. In the introduction to Dennis Tedlock's English edition, for example, he points out that the original K'ichee' transcribers of the *Popul Wuj* write as though they were part of an audience listening to a teller or tellers:

> 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." At one point they themselves become perfomers, *speaking directly to us* as if we were members of a live audience rather than mere readers. When they introduce the first episode of a long cycle of stories about the gods who prepared the sky-earth for human life, they propose that we all drink a toast to the heroes.[emphasis in original][40]

According to Walter Ong, a central difference between oral and written expression is the way each constitutes its "audience." A written or printed text implies a reader who is isolated "in his or her private reading world", whereas a speaker communicating to a

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[39] Nelson, 23, 164. The reference to the lords of Xibalbá comes from the representation of the underworld in the *Popul Wuj*. For a larger discussion of the currents and context of Maya activism in Guatemala, see *Finger in the Wound.*

[40] Dennis Tedlock, trans. *Popol Vuh: The Definitive Edition of the Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life and the Glories of Gods and Kings.* (Toronto: Simon & Schuster: 1996), 30.

group generally creates a "unity" of listeners, or a true audience.[41] In this sense, the writers of the 1550s *Popul Wuj*, descendents of a "primary oral culture," remind their reader, through various strategies in their text, of the original orality of the narrative.

Oral creation narratives like the *Popul Wuj* are still alive in non-print form and maintain their significance for indigenous collective memory in Guatemala. The Tzutujil Maya in Santiago Atitlán tell a narrative about the creation of men and women which has themes in common with the *Popul Wuj*, but is centred around the figure of the Maximon. Copied down in the 1970s by American anthropologist Nathaniel Tarn with the help of Martin Prechtel, this telling of the narrative involved lawyers and army generals. In contrast to romantic ideas that define "authenticity" as forms that are fixed from the time of their creation, oral forms of memory cannot be fixed, but change to incorporate the experience of the tellers.

Ong suggests that oral cultures use stories of human action to "store, organize, and communicate much of what they know." Although Ong would consider most of the different Maya cultures as "residually oral" as they live in the context of Spanish occupation, these types of narrative, which encode information and memory, still circulate and form part of religious practice in Guatemala.[42] Thus, living oral narratives are critical to learning the history of Maya peoples in Guatemala. The irony of the *ladino letrados*' project is that although the *Popul Wuj* represents just such a layered, dynamic, oral bank of information, the importance they assign to it through lauding its canonical literary status is entirely based on its characteristics as a manuscript of fixed, written format. As Abreu Gómez's expression "literatura India" suggests, the *letrados*' discourse

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[41] Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word.* (London: Routledge, 1982), 74.
[42] Ong, 140. In his book, Ong uses the term "residually oral" to characterize cultures that have maintained their oral traditions and practices after the arrival of written culture in their orbit.

on the *Popul Wuj* is entirely shaped by the rules and priorities applied to "chirographic" or written expression.

The Frame-up

In many ways, through the *letrados*' narratives of discovery, through the language they use, and also in the relative positions of power occupied by the Maya versus these *ladino* academics, the enterprise of bringing the *Popul Wuj* to the "public light"[43] of European science has been a re-enactment of the conquest itself. Speaking over top of the violent oppression of indigenous peoples, both physical and economic, that has marked much of Guatemala's history, the *letrados* use the discourses, the conceptual apparatii, and the institutions at their service as modern middle and upper class *ladinos* to assert their superiority over the object of their study (ie., indigenous Maya culture). In order to trace the outlines of power in the introductions, I offer an interpretive reading of their writers' representations of themselves, their readership, and Maya culture.

The appearance of the books themselves gives us a window into the project of the *letrados*. The volume *El Popol-Vuh en Crestomatía Quiché* by J. Antonio Villacorta C., published in 1962, provides a good example of the constituencies who see their interests served by these publications. *Crestomatía* was published by the *Ministerio de Educación Pública de Guatemala*, an arm of the state, and features a dedicatory page after the title pages with a photo of President Miguel Ydígoras Fuentes who, as the dedication says, ordered the printing of the book. Also on the dedications' page is the seal of the *Sociedad Folklórica Guatemalteca* with a thank you for its enthusiastic cooperation.

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[43] Recinos, 41. In the context of Ximénez's translation, he says "...and also the first that saw the public light when it was printed in Viena, in 1857, under the auspices of the Imperial Academy of the Sciences." Or, in Spanish, "...y la primera también que vió la luz pública cuando se imprimió en Viena, en 1857, bajo los auspicios de las Academia Imperial de Ciencias."

Finally, the page has a quote written in K'ichee' from the Popol-Vuh. A reprint of a letter from Lic. Luis González Batres of the *Ministerio de Educación Pública* follows, which has the official seal of the ministry and directs the head of the Ministry printer, by authority of the president of the republic, to print Villacorta's volume. The text of the prologue begins with a photo of Villacorta and an elaborate capital "E" in the style of medieval monastery manuscripts.

The publisher made several choices in the spacial layout and content of the opening pages of the book which almost overwhelm the text of the creation narrative in their pompousness and officialese. The tributes to governmental bodies and the president as well as the letter of command map out a power relationship for the reader between the middle and upper class *eruditos* and the state, on the one hand, and the indigenous narrative that the book represents following the introduction, on the other. On the dedications' page, for example, the three lines of K'ichee' text are dwarfed by the visual representations of the president and folklore society indicating the bulky frame within which the Maya narrative is presented. The stamp of the government which legitimates this expression of native culture in the eyes of the literate middle and upper class mostly urban readership casts a shadow over the rest of the work demonstrating the pitched ground of this project of representation.

A more recent version of the *Popul Wuj*, that introduced by Agustín Estrada Monroy in 1973, reveals the interests involved in the *Sociedad*'s project of *re*-discovering the Guatemalan past. Entitled "*Empiezan las Historias del Origen de los Indios de esta Provincia de Guatemala: Popol Vuh*"[44] this coffee table book is in large 8.5 x 14 inch format and has full colour plates featuring contemporary Guatemalan painters' emotive

[44] The title comes from the Fray Ximénez copy of the Popol Wuj and could be loosely translated as "And now the stories of the origins of the indians of this province of Guatemala begin."

works in oil paint specially commissioned for the publication. After the reader turns over the title page, s/he is presented with the articles of the Guatemalan constitution which declare the *Popul Wuj* to be the "Libro Nacional de Guatemala" ("National Book of Guatemala"). In contrast to the poetic style of the *Popul Wuj* itself, the articles from the constitution are part of a letter written in a stilted legal statement by the President of the Republic, Carlos Arana Osorio. This particular association is telling as Osorio is known in history books to be a violent dictator who, during the elections he won in 1970, had military commissioners in the countryside threaten to "burn down whole villages that did not vote for the MLN [Osorio's party]."[45] Thus, not only are the *letrados* aligning themselves with a state project of mass culture production through the study and popularizing of Guatemalan folklore, but they are in some cases allying their works with state officials known for their savage repression of primarily indigenous rural people.

The coffee table format of the book, oil paintings and all, indicate the broader audience and purpose the publishers have in mind for it. The large size of the book makes it more costly to produce, so the intended consumer would have to have the means to purchase it, as well as a coffee table to put it on. As a physical object, the book is to be a symbol, a national treasure. The "Advertencia Inicial" suggests its different meanings:

> The edition of this work which is offered as a Guatemalan cultural tribute to to all nations of the world...
> Considering this printed version as a tribute to one of the most famous manuscripts, we wished to manifest in it a representative principle of our nationhood. [...]
> With the publication of the facsimile and paleographic edition of the Popol Vuh, the government of the Republic of Guatemala has given a historical testimony of high culture and love to our nation [Patria].[46]

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[45] For more discussion of Osorio's regime, see Handy, 167-169.

[46] Agustín Estrada Monroy trans. *Popol Vuh: Traducido de la lengua quiché a la castellana por el R. P. fray Francisco Ximénez.* (Guatemala: Editorial "José de Pineda Ibarra", 1973), 8. "La edición de esta obra que se ofrece como un tributo cultural guatemalteco a los pueblos del mundo... Tratándose de la publicación de homenaje al más famoso manuscrito indígena, quisimos hacer participar en ella a un exponente de nuestra nacionalidad. [...] Al publicar la edición facsimilar y paleográfica del Popol Vuh, el

Addressing a national reader,[47] this edition, in an official, ritualistic manner, reiterates the significance of the *Popul Wuj* for the *patria* of Guatemala. Moreover, it announces to this reader how it is to be known, that is, through the lens of modern science. Thus, the patriotic historians/anthropologists writing the introductions to the *Popul Wuj* have as their mission the role of scientific interpreters of the nation.

Part of the project of each of the *letrados* in preparing their readers for the *Popul Wuj* was to build up themselves and their colleagues as the experts with credentials. The *letrados* also argued for the authority and credentials of the European scholars who translated the *Popul Wuj* during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; with this same gesture they made these previous generations of non-indigenous translators the protagonists of their stories. The credentials in this case are those of enlightened science: the categorization and ordering of languages and the comparative observations and classifications of human social organization typical of archeology and anthropology. The *letrados* stress the "scientific" aspect of translating, linking it to the discipline of linguistics and to scientific disciplines and practices.

Another common recourse in the introductions is to anthropology and archaeology. Despite the prevalence of the relativist paradigm in anthropology and archaeology at the time of his introduction's publication (particularly in North American discourses) which sees all cultures as falling into a dichotomy of Western, civilized and modern versus other, Recinos seems to be more inclined towards the staged approach which was a prominent paradigm in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The

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Gobierno de la República de Guatemala, ha dado un testimonio histórico de alta cultura y amor a nuestra Patria."

[47] By "national reader," I mean the domestic Guatemalan readers that the writers of the introduction imagine and represent as part of their audience. The implication is the modern, middle or upper class *ladino* who could afford the coffee table edition of the *Popul Wuj*.

view that civilizations progress, from hunter-gatherer through military religious societies to the modern, technologically advanced civilizations of the present, informs the assumptions of the *letrados*, as in the edition introduced by Adrián Recinos. His discussion of the text frames it within the ongoing anthropological discourse about oral societies versus societies that had progressed to the use of written script:

> ...from what we know of the writing system of the American Indians before the conquest, it is doubtful that the ancient K'ichee' book would have been a document of fixed form and permanent literary phraseology. More likely, the book consisted of paintings that the priests interpreted before the people in order to maintain alive in it the memory of the origins of the race and the mysteries of the religion.[48]

In this passage, Recinos, moving off into conjecture, evokes the ignorant, unlettered populace in the thrall of the mysterious priest, a stereotype born of the linear, positivist view of the development of human societies. Moreover, using the binary of oral versus print technology, he infers that the prehispanic version of the *Popul Wuj* would lack "fixed form and permanent literary phraseology" referring to the chaotic and unreliable nature of oral expression. In positing that the Maya simply hadn't arrived at or evolved to the point of communicating through writing that Europeans had, his statement also fits into the prevalent underlying assumption among the *letrados* that, at the time of the conquest, Maya civilization was in a prior stage of the evolution of social structures when the pueblos fell to Pedro de Alvarado in the sixteenth century.

Continuing his discussion, Recinos refers to Lewis Spence to affirm the stage the Maya were at the time of the conquest:

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[48] Recinos, 25. "...por el conocimiento que se posee del sistema de escritura de los indios americanos con anterioridad a la Conquista, cabe dudar que el libro antiguo quiché haya sido de forma fija y redacción literaria permanente. Más bien debe suponerse que haya sido un libro de pinturas que los sacerdotes interpretaban ante el pueblo para mantener vivo en él el recuerdo de los orígenes de la raza y los misterios de su religión."

> Lewis Spence observes that in the epoch of the conquest the writing amongst the Indians was in a state of transition and that a version of the *Popol Vuh* transcribed word for word in fixed literary form could not have existed long; and that most likely it had passed from mouth to mouth, following a mode of literary conservation that was very common amongst the peoples of ancient America [49]

Here again he follows the claims of anthropology that there is in fact a predictable, universal path of evolution of human societies, and that Maya cultures were "in a state of transition" between stages of development. In this view, given more time, the Maya would have invented print technologies:

> All the peoples of the world became accustomed to conserving their legends and traditions through oral transmission, before the invention of writing and the printing press.[50]

In another *ladino letrado*'s musings on the Maya past, Ermilo Abreu Gómez alludes to the archaeological investigators' sleuthing when he refers to a Toltec influence he observes in the ideas of the *Popul Wuj*. In the Mesoamerican archaeological discourse of Abreu Gómez's time, the Toltec group from the Valley of Mexico were hypothesized to have had an expansive empire influencing many other groups through trade and conquest. As he says: "In its pages, even the least versed reader will notice the presence of many ideas of the Toltec culture which, at one time, influenced the spiritual life of the Maya-Quiché."[51] Abreu Gómez's postulation about the text of the *Popul Wuj* and Maya culture shows his reliance on a body of scientific "facts" which he assumes are accepted before the text by his reader. Considering that his text is published by the Guatemalan

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[49] Recinos, 25. "Lewis Spence observa que en la época de la Conquista la escritura entre los indios se hallaba en estado de transición y que no podía haber existido mucho tiempo una versión del *Popol Vuh* vaciada en forma literaria fija; y que lo más probable es que haya ido pasando de boca en boca, siguiendo una manera de conservación literaria que era muy común entre los pueblos de la antigua América."
[50] Ibid. "Todos los pueblos del mundo han acostumbrado conservar sus leyendas y tradiciones por transmisión oral, antes de la invención de la escritura y de la imprenta."
[51] Abreu Gómez, 6. "En sus páginas, el menos versado, advertirá, de igual modo la presencia de no pocas ideas de la cultura tolteca que, en cierto tiempo, influyó en la vida espiritual maya-quiché."

Ministry of Education and thus destined for a domestic audience, possibly including the school system, Abreu Gómez imagines a national reader who has by definition read archaeological and anthropological accounts of the "ancient" Maya and is aware of a connection to the Toltec people. By extension, possession of this specialized knowledge is a prerequisite for citizenship in a modern *ladino* Guatemala. As his writing style would suggest, however, like a wine critic speaking to collectors, he refers to a particular mode of rationalized, categoric knowledge: familiarity at a distance. This acquaintance with the prehispanic past through the frame of science encourages a relationship to it based on ownership rather that identification. This is to say, that rather than integrating the beliefs and ideas expressed in the *Popul Wuj* into her/his ideas, the "national" reader postulated by Abreu Gómez feels a proprietorship or experiences a proprietary relationship with the Maya past. This ownership is symbolized in Estrada Monroy's coffee table book, which middle and upper-class consumers could purchase as a national treasure and display it for guests as a centre-piece of their collection.

For Estrada Monroy, science also has the power to move the antiquated text into Guatemala's modern present and future, so that these same modern consumers will "understand" it in their present. The title page of his coffee table edition advertises a "Partially Modernized Paleography"[52], a phrase which evokes the *letrado*'s position within a discipline of studying ancient texts. By assuming this position, Estrada Monroy asserts his identity as modern with respect to this "ancient", traditional text he evaluates. Scrutinized using the tools of the science of paleography, the *Popul Wuj* becomes an object of science, classified under the modern category of antiquity. Science once again inserts a distance between the reader and the culture and world view the *Popul Wuj*

[52] Estrada Monroy, 7. "Paleografía parcialmente modernizada."

represents. Estrada Monroy's use of the term "modernize," then, implies a temporal distance the text must travel over in order to be brought "up to date."

At the same time, however, through the claims of science and modernity to status as universals, describing human existence and destiny in ways that supercede culturally specific understandings, the terms "modernize" and "paleography" appear to collapse the *cultural* distance between the expert scientist, Estrada Monroy, and the *Popul Wuj*, masking the highly interpretive nature of his project. Instead of an objective, "scientific" process implied by "modernizing", Estrada Monroy is acting as interpreter, attempting to bridge two different cultures, an exercise which is problematic and subjective.

His faith in the legitimacy of his project leads him to believe that he can fix in place this dynamic, oral, ambiguous narrative while maintaining its original meanings:

> The central objective of this work has been to fix the castillian text of the Popol Vuh, partially modernizing the orthography in order to render the document, once incomprehensible to many of those who study the manuscript, into a source of crystal clear waters where anthropologists, linguists, historians, humanists and other investigators, encounter a secure [or stable] text, free of uncertainties and varied interpretations.[53]

This attempt to "fix" the *Popul Wuj* is consistent with other attempts made by *ladinos* and the state to fix Maya culture in place, in a frame like a botanical specimen, where it can be closely inspected. Diane Nelson refers to "fixing" in the context of the National Indigenist Institute's (IIN) project of issuing patents to the indigenous groups of different regions of Guatemala by order of a law promulgated in 1947 by the Arévalo government. The patents were for styles of *traje* or traditional costume in order to control a process by

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[53] Ibid. 8. "El objetivo central de esta obra ha sido el de fijar el texto castellano del Popol Vuh, modernizando parcialmente su ortografía para tornar el documento incomprensible para muchos de los estudiosos de este manuscrito, en fuente de aguas cristalinas donde antropólogos, lingüistas, historiadores, humanistas y demás investigadores, encuentren un texto seguro, libre de incertidumbres y de variadas interpretaciones."

which traditional textile designs were being "adulterated."[54] Nelson connects attempts to "fix" culture (both in the sense of repair and to pin down and control) with the anxiety in Guatemala caused by the instability and fluidity of identities. It is perhaps these same anxieties about a manuscript as complex and layered as the *Popul Wuj* which drives Estrada Monroy's desire to capture it in a freeze frame. It in fact foreshadows a new phase of the interpretation of the manuscript when Maya intellectuals' own claims on its meaning begin to be published.[55]

In Jorge Luis Arriola's introduction to the 1972 edition presenting a translation of what he believes is the the first published version of the *Popul Wuj*[56] by Charles Etienne Brasseur de Bourbourg, his editors comment that it is a source "whose importance is trancendental for *excavating* the past of the prehispanic peoples of Guatemala"[57] (my emphasis). Here Arriola's audience is invited to dig and sift through the remains of the indigenous past as archaeologists do at the pyramid sites around Guatemala. Clearly the audience Arriola has in mind does not include contemporary Maya. Instead, viable, relevant Maya culture is identified with the "ruins" of a past before History, thus leaving contemporary Maya and Maya culture out of the picture(frame). The *letrados* silence the indigenous majority of Guatemala, yet again imagining a modern, *ladino* nation with a glorious indigenous past but no indigenous present.

Plugging into the scientific apparatus in which the writer is outside and above *his* subject, the *letrados* make claims for themselves and their European protagonists to be the official interpreters of the *Popul Wuj*. Recinos speaks of the labour that he has invested in the thoroughness and exactitude of his translation: "The present work is the

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[54] Nelson, 89.
[55] See for example Victor Montejo's 1999 edition.
[56] There is some debate about this claim. As I mentioned above, many *letrados* credit Dr. Scherzer with this accomplishment.
[57] Arriola, 5. "...cuya importacia es trascendental para ahondar en el pasado de los pueblos guatemaltecos prehispánicos."

fruit of several years of labour of investigation and interpretation."[58] He plots himself into the long history of linguistic projects in Guatemala which began with the proselytizing of missionaries at the time of the conquest and continues to the present in the projects of state educators and transnational NGOs like the Summer Institute of Linguistics:

> Moreover, the possibility of saving, even in part, the imperfections of the existing translations, and of clarifying and correcting some passages stimulated my desire to make a new version direct from the K'ichee' to the Spanish that, taking advantage of the work of my predecessors, will push forward a bit more the intelligence of the book that Bancroft has described as the most precious legacy that is left to us of aboriginal American thought.[59]

Here, having re-discovered the Ximénez version in the Newberry Library, Recinos asserts the need to cast out the prior versions, such as Villacorta's and Rodas' 1926 edition, which only had access to the Brasseur translation. In his words, Recinos casts himself in the role of "clarifying", and "correcting" the Popul Wuj's language for his reader by starting an entirely new translation from Ximénez's K'ichee' version.[60]

Not only are the *letrados* preoccupied with representing themselves to their readers as experts, but they also laud those who have translated the *Popul Wuj* before them. Their in depth descriptions of Ximénez and Brasseur, among others, establish a

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[58] Recinos, 10. "El presente trabajo es el fruto de varios años de labor de investigación e interpretación." Note that a literary work is commonly called an "obra", whereas "trabajo" connotes the author's personal labour or life work.

[59] Recinos, 10. "Además, la posibilidad de salvar, siquiera en parte, las imperfecciones de las traducciones existentes, y de aclarar y corregir algunos pasajes de las mismas estimuló en mí el deseo de emprender una nueva versión directa del quiché al español que, aprovechando los trabajos de mis predecesores, adelantara algo más la inteligencia del libro que Bancroft ha calificado del legado más precioso que nos ha quedado del pensamiento aborigen americano."

[60] Recinos' concern with clarifying the language of the manuscript has been taken up by many translators throughout the post-conquest history of the text of the *Popul Wuj* and there are ongoing attempts to understand the language presented in the Ximénez manuscript by K'ichee' and non K'ichee' alike. In his latest edition, Tedlock has the help of K'ichee' informants and intelletuals such as Enrique Sam Colop to create his "Definitive Edition." Tedlock's move to open his interpretation of the *Popul Wuj* to Maya thinking, a feature of each of his editions, reflects a much needed change in the scholarly discourse on the *Popul Wuj*.

pedigree for the project they engage in. In Recino's account, Ximénez, the first person of European descent said to have dealt with the *Popul Wuj*, is recognized for his expertise with language: "Father Ximénez was a wise and good man, knowledgeable [conocedor] of the languages of the Indians with a lively interest in converting them to the Christian religion."[61] Later, Recinos says that Brasseur, the first actually to publish the *Popul Wuj*, was able to take advantage of Ximénez's "estudio minucioso" or "detailed study"[62] entitled *Las Tres Lenguas* (The Three Languages) to give explanations of grammar and vocabulary to his French readers for their better comprehension of the text. In Jorge Luis Arriola's sixty page history of Brasseur's adult life he presented in his prologue, he catalogues the attributes of Brasseur's publication that give it authority:

> the abundant citations – more than one thousand, two hundred – which in my opinion are the most valuable aspect of the work, and the analytic vocabulary, that provides its closing as a glossary.[63]

It is these systematic, scientific additions to the document that, in the eyes of Arriola, give it credence in the science of linguistics, a discipline that is dominated by objectivity and precision. Though the notes and translations are highly subjective, the fact that they are in a recognized format, that is to say a highly scientific, structured, text printed in French, means that they have a prestige and authority in the eyes of Arriola and the modern academy. The *letrados*' concern for precision and expertise in linguistics comes from a tradition of Western, European thought which has no inherent value for the text of the *Popul Wuj* which is not governed by similar principles of objective veracity. Each footnote contributes to ongoing debates among primarily non-indigenous Latin

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[61] Recinos, 14. "El Padre Ximénez era un varón sabio y bondadoso, conocedor de las lenguas de los indios y vivamente interesado en convertirlos a la religión cristiana."
[62] Recinos, 41.
[63] Arriola, 48. "las abundantes citas –más de mil doscientas–, que en mi opinión son lo más valioso de la obra, y el vocabulario analítico, que la cierra como un glosario."

Americans, Europeans and North Americans in the scientific disciplines. The meanings the *letrados* make about the *Popul Wuj* signify only from within the larger body of Western, scientific knowledge; they are understandings that are specific to Western culture and cosmovision and do not have a final, universal explanatory force as the attitudes of the *letrados* would suggest.[64]

Along with the scientific rigour that not only characterizes the *letrados*' own approaches to the manuscript, but that they also recognize and celebrate in the previous works on the *Popul Wuj*, the *letrados* display a typically modern concern for "authenticity." Though the desire for authenticity itself is not necessarily modern, this *ladino* quest for the "authentic" was guided by the concept's reconfiguration in the discipline of anthropology as "original forms" of culture and practice among human collectivities which are quickly "being lost" with the encroachment of capitalist modes of production. Laura Senecal Carney cites a typical example of this impulse in her article "Modernists and Folk on the Lower St Lawrence: The Problem of Folk Art" when she talks about 1930s Montreal art critic John Lymman's definition of "authentic" folk art as "innocent of debasing modern life and the capitalist marketplace."[65] The attempts by the translators to fix in place the text and language of the *Popul Wuj*, as mentioned above, comes from their concern to preserve the "authentic."

In a similar move, Recinos reasures his reader that the syncretic elements evident in the beginning lines of the *Popul Wuj* are not enough to threaten its authenticity:

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[64] I take this sense of signification from Michel Foucault's explanation of the shift in understandings of epistemology expressed in the *Logique* of Port Royal in 1662, discussed in the context of Latin America by Angel Rama. Rama, 3.

[65] Laura Senecal Carney. "Modernists and Folk on the Lower St. Lawrence: The Problem of Folk Art" ed. Lynda Jessup, *Antimodernism and Artistic Experience.* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 105.

> The influence of the Bible is evident in the description of the creation, though this circumstance is not enough to wipe out the indigenous flavour of the K'ichee' book.[66]

This desire to establish the purity of the flavours, that is to say the "authenticity" of the document, is also exemplified by the *letrados*' quest for the identity of the original indigenous author of the manuscript of the *Popul Wuj*, generally considered to be unknown. Recinos, for example, has an entire section entitled "El Autor del Popol Vuh" (The author of the Popol Vuh) dedicated to an evaluation of the evidence presented in previous works on the *Popul Wuj*. In this section Recinos discusses Diego Reynoso, or Popol Vinak, the main competitor for the honours, giving all the academic theories on his relation to the K'ichee' princes of Utatlán. In the end he maintains that Villacorta's identification of Reynoso as author is invalid based on handwriting:

> But this same fact reveals that the *Manuscrito de Chichicastenango* [the *Popul Wuj*] and Reynoso's notes in the margin [of the Christian book of devotion] were not from the same hand, had this been true there is no doubt that Ximénez, who had studied, copied and translated the K'ichee' manuscript, would have identified it as the work of Reynoso...[67]

The debate over the author's identity is a case in point of the *letrados*' lack of engagement with Maya culture, or, more broadly, oral modes of cultural production. The manuscript of the *Popul Wuj* represents a snap shot of the narrative at one point in its millenia of existence among the Maya. Having been retold in new forms over its existence by countless different tellers, the *Popul Wuj*'s "author," that is to say, the person or persons who actually copied the narratives down on paper, is relevant only to a

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[66] Recinos, 26. "La influencia de la Biblia es evidente en la descripción de la creación, aunque esta circunstancia no es bastante para borrar el sabor indígena del libro quiché."

[67] Recinos, 33. "Pero este mismo hecho revela que el Manuscrito de Chichicastenango y las notas marginales de Reynoso no eran de la misma mano, pues de haberlo sido es indudable que Ximénez, que había estudiado, copiado y traducido el manuscrito quiché, lo habría identificado como obra de Reynoso..."

discussion taking place in cultures dominated by the apparent immutability of the written word. In the course of this debate over the identity of the "author" of the manuscript, the *letrados* write themselves into their works as judges of culture with their own evidentiary systems that have little to do with the lives of the people they write about, and everything to do with an abstract benchmark of their own creation. Moving in a "closed circuit" discussion similar to that of the colonial *letrados* in Rama's "Lettered City," writers like Recinos and Villacorta have as their principle terms of reference the other introductions to the *Popul Wuj*.[68] Thus the meanings they create about the text exist only in relation to the other voices in this ideologically consistent discourse.

"Authenticity" also forms a key part of another trope used in the introductions, that of Discovery. Discovery and naming are potent aspects of the modernist project of the Enlightenment. Both Pratt and Jervis refer to the power of the seemingly benign project of naming that Linnaeus originated: "...natural history asserted an urban, lettered male authority over the whole of the planet... it figures a certain kind of global hegemony."[69] Discovery of the world, from the mundane to the exotic, by this lettered, bourgeois subject became a practice not just reserved for explorers. Indigenous Maya culture became such an exotic object of discovery for the *letrados* of the *Popul Wuj*. Narratives of discovery run through each of the introductions and structure the reader's encounter with the text. Abreu Gómez exemplifies this mindset in his 1967 introduction as he declares that "literatura india" (Indian literature) has only just started to be explored by *los eruditos* :

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[68] Rama, 18. Discussing the *letrados*' work, Rama maintains that "The producers and consumers of this literature were largely the same individuals, and their verses moved in a closed circuit that originated in viceregal power and constantly returned to flatter it in flourishes of fulsome praise." Instead of a viceregal power, it is the president of the Republic who these twentieth century *letrados* lavish their praise upon, both in their introductory dedications and the tributes in the *Anales*.

[69] Pratt quoted in Jervis, 144.

> Some work has been done, but still missing from our knowledge is an immense wealth lost in the jungle, in the hermetic consciousness of the indigine.[70]

Abreu Gómez represents indigenous Guatemalans as mere objects of western, scientific discovery; like the other wildlife in the jungle, they too will soon be discovered and investigated in order to increase "our knowledge." His racist, colonial attitude indicates without a doubt that indigenous Maya are not among the people in Abreu Gómez's intended audience.

Colonial attitudes are also evident in the way the different introductions enshrine the deeds of both Brasseur and Ximénez. As members of the church in direct contact with the 'natives' in earlier eras, the two are cast as the discoverers of the manuscript of the *Popul Wuj*. Recinos describes Ximénez's encounter with the K'ichee' in Chichicastenango at the beginning of the 18th century:

> It is probable that in his interactions with them and through his help and paternal counsel, he was able to conquer [the Indians'] confidence and convince them to tell him the legends and traditions of their race... All these favourable circumstances helped to overcome (vencer) the natural lack of confidence [desconfianza] of the Indians, and for these reasons, it is probable, that, in the end, the book that was so jealously guarded by them and that contained the ancient stories of their nation, arrived in Ximénez's hands.[71]

This passage, narrating the way the book most likely passed into the hands of Europeans, is full of the language of conquest and the labour that Ximénez engaged in to penetrate the deepest realms of the K'ichee's "hermetic consciousness." Arriola quotes Brasseur, more than one hundred years later, detailing his own discovery: "'In terms of

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[70] Abreu Gómez, 5. "Algo se ha hecho ya, pero falta todavía conocer un inmenso caudal perdido en la selva, en la hermética conciencia del aborigen."

[71] Recinos, 14. "Es probable que en su trato con ellos y mediante su ayuda y consejos paternales, se haya conquistado su confianza y haya conseguido que le refirieran las leyendas y tradiciones de su raza...Todas estas circunstancias favorables ayudaron a vencer la natural desconfianza de los indios, y a ellas se debe, probablemente, que, por último, llegara a manos del religioso dominicano el libro que tan celosamente guardaban y que contenía las antiguas historias de su nación.

the manuscript of father Ximénez I was the first' –he says—'who made it known to the scientific world in one of my Four Letters of Introduction to the History of the Civilized Nations of Mexico and Central America...'"[72]

The *letrados* are at once mapping power laden language, terminology and European heroes onto the document, reiterating their superior position in the European hierarchy of knowledge, while at the same time denying any connection between this position and the exploitation and subjugation of Maya peoples that the same power structure makes possible. Mary Louise Pratt's concept of "anti-conquest" brings into focus this gesture of writing onto 'exotic' cultures. Pratt defines it as "a utopian, innocent vision of European global authority"[73] that the travel writers and explorers she examines spread over the world. The *letrados* present themselves to their readers as merely observers collecting facts and compiling information about Maya culture, when in actuality their translations and framing of the *Popul Wuj* radically reinterpret and rewrite the narratives of the Maya past.

It is difficult to step around the fact of the conquest in writing about indigenous people in America, but the writers of the introductions seem to have consciously arrived at their desired result. One way is to tell the stories of the European "discoverers" of the document, leaving indigenous people out of the narrative, simply not a part of history.[74] Addressing the tragedy of the conquest directly, Recinos uses a passive voice construction to veil the Spanish European actors:

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[72] Arriola, 37. "En cuanto al manuscrito del padre Ximénez fui el primero" –dice—"que lo hizo conocer al mundo científico en una de mis Cuatro Cartas de Introduccíon a la Historia de las Naciones Civilizadas de México y de la América Central..."

[73] Pratt, 39.

[74] In his recent speech at UBC (14 November, 2002), the Vice-Minister of Education of Guatemala, Dr. Demitrio Cojti, alluded to the continuation of the trope of casting Mayas as people without history in present day political discourse.

> The Indians of México and Guatemala also conserved their stories and other [expressions] written in the media of paintings on cloth, some of which were saved from *the general destruction of which the indigenous books and documents* ***were*** *victims.*[75]

This phrase, as Pratt might suggest, innocently conveys an episode of history, but the event it refers to speaks of bloodletting and oppression. Through the writer's sleight of hand, Pedro de Alvarado, the principle actor and a founding father of Spanish *Ladino* Guatemala, is erased and his responsibility evaded.

Instead of seeing their identities as related in the least to the legacy of the conquest, the *letrados*, in their self assigned roles as interpreters of 'true' Maya culture (i.e., prehispanic), fashion themselves as saviours of present day indigenous people in Guatemala. Having achieved such a precise, nuanced reading of the *Popul Wuj* through the application of scientific methods such as the latest linguistic theories, they can now offer this (processed) knowledge back to their indigenous countrymen who have lost their way. As Villacorta says of his *Crestomatía Quiché*:

> ... all of which makes our manucript the more important for understanding why the indigenous American has not advanced as would be expected in [his] culture, creating for himself an inferiority complex through ignoring completely his ancestral civilization, for which reason our labour in this sense is so that our modern indigenous compatriots recover the soul of their race, lost in a labyrinth of close to four centuries, full of suffering and ignorance.[76]

Having silenced his own connection to the conquistadors as a *ladino* inheritor of the power structure they violently set in place, Villacorta then uses the event as a divider in

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[75] Recinos, 16. "Los indios de México y Guatemala conservaban también sus historias y otros escritos por medio de pinturas en lienzos, algunos de los cuales se salvaron de la destruccíon general de que fueron víctimas los libros y documentos indígenas."

[76] Villacorta, 11. "...todo lo cual hace a nuestro manuscrito lo más importante para comprender por qué el indígena americano no ha avanzado lo debido en su cultura, creándose él mismo un complejo de inferioridad al ignorar por completo toda su civilizacíon ancestral, por lo que nuestra labor en tal sentido tiende a que nuestros compatriotas indígenas modernos recobren el alma de la raza, perdida en un dédalo de cerca de cuatro siglos y medio de sufrimientos y de ignorancia.

Maya time representing the ensuing 400 years of colonial and *ladino* rule as a fall in Maya culture, indigenous peoples descending into a domesticated, enslaved, "ignorant" state. Writing from a position in academia supported through state funding, he is able to sustain a myriad of contradictions in order simultaneously to present himself as a saviour of indigenous people. Like the Christian missionaries accompanying the conquistadors, Villacorta's is a voice of the modernizing *ladino* state which makes claims to carrying out a program of cultural uplift when many branches of the state and military are involved in exploiting indigenous labour and appropriating indigenous land.

Moreover, as I mentioned earlier in reference to Recinos' evocation of the ignorant, unlettered (and probably deluded) population of Maya in the thrall of the priest, Villacorta's "labyrinth of close to four centuries" demonstrates his assumption that Maya culture and people have been stuck in a fixed, static condition since Alvarado's defeat of the K'ichee', Kaqchikel and Tz'utujil kings. The antithesis of the modern, progressive, scientific development being pursued by the Guatemalan state, the "backward" situation of Guatemalan Maya make them, in the eyes of many *ladinos*, permanent victims of the conquest, un-knowable through any other frame.

According to Adrian Recinos, however, there are exceptions to the rule of this labyrinth, such as in Chichicastenango where the indigenous people have "prospered over the three hundred years of Spanish government," remain one of the most "industrious" indigenous communities in Guatemala (refering to the crafts that they sell to tourists) and that as such they are a "mecca for the foreigner, who is powerfully attracted by the natural beauty of the region and the picturesque customs of its residents."[77]

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[77] Recinos, 14. "Chichicastenango... constituye un núcleo importante de indios quichés, que properó a través de los trescientos años del gobierno español y que es hoy una de las comunidades indígenas más industriosas y extensas de Guatemala y la meca del extranjero, a quien atraen poderosamente la belleza natural del lugar y las costumbres pintorescas de sus habitantes."

In talking about the productive, "industrious" Maya, Recinos expresses his ambivalence towards their status in the nation. Leading into his discussion of Chichicastenango, he makes a link between the last K'ichee' princes of Utatlán who moved to the present site of Chichicastenango after Alvarado's men burned the original K'ichee' centre. He thereby alludes to a proud heritage and continuity of Maya culture and leadership in the region. Yet he then proceeds to tie their identity and practices to tourist desire citing Chichicastenango as a mecca for foreigners. In this strain of *ladino* thought, the Maya are the dependent children in the grand household of Guatemala who merely contribute the window-dressing for tourists through their "picturesque" customs. According to this perspective, the Maya have a place at the bottom of the economic scale which is justified by the fact that their knowledge of the world simply does not measure up to the *letrados*' ideal of modern European knowledge disseminated through the university. Despite the tremendous ambivalence involved in the *letrados*' project of reviving their version of the Maya past, their attitude towards contemporary Maya is more akin to that of Minor C. Keith expressed in his invitation to ride the rails with the International Railways of Central America (IRCA) in an ad featured in the front pages of the first editions of the *Anales de la Sociedad de Geografía e Historia* in the 1920s and 1930s:

> The romance of the conquest is typified in the ruins of Antigua Guatemala, Quiriguá, Petén, etc. The Maya civilization is studied on the same ground on which that admirable race once flourished.[78]

Although in certain cases Maya people may be seen as industrious and attractive objects for tourists, in other contexts the *ladino letrados* view the Maya with distrust and

[78] "El romance de la conquista española está estereotipado en las ruinas de Antigua Guatemala, Quiriguá, Petén, etc. La civilización Maya se estudia sobre el propio terreno donde floreció aquella raza de hombres admirables."

suspicion. In the eyes of many *ladinos*, contemporary Maya have retained links to the pre-Columbian Maya beliefs and practices they associate with Maya pyramids and ritual sacrifice (as revealed to the Western world by archeologists) despite years of oppression and attempts at assimilation and conversion by Spaniards and criollos. Cloaked in Catholicism throughout the colonial era, the "original" beliefs of the contemporary Maya still persist, hidden from the view of outsiders.

Their true identities and practices having gone underground, the traditions and culture of contemporary Guatemalan indigenous peoples become associated in the introductions with an inherent mystery and darkness through recurring tropes of dark versus light. Where Europeans are constantly linked to the light, enlightenment, and having a key role in the first time the document "vió la luz pública," or "saw the public light" when it was published in Vienna, the Maya are associated with darkness, inaccessibility and obscurity. For example, when he refers to the book written by Diego Reynoso (the suspected author of the *Popul Wuj*), Recinos suggests that after Fray Ximénez had used it to make his famous translation, the book "had returned to the hands of the Indians and to the darkness (*obscuridad*) in which it had existed until then."[79] Later, Recinos also makes clear the relative positions of European immigrants in Guatemala versus the original inhabitants of the region. When referring to Reynoso, he presents him in familiar, patronizing terms in contrast to the European Bishop Marroquín: "... according to *la Isagoge*, our Quiché Indian was learning to write in 1541 by the order of the illustrious prelate."[80] In this sentence he opposes "*nuestro indio quiché*" with "*el*

[79] Recinos, 15. "y es posible que, después que el Padre Ximénez hizo uso de él, haya vuelto a manos de los indios y a la obscuridad en que hasta entonces había existido."
[80] Recinos, 35. "según la Isagoge, nuestro indio quiché estaba aprendiendo a leer y escribir en 1541 por orden del ilustre prelado."

ilustre prelado," treating the writer of the *Popul Wuj* (assuming that there is only *one* writer) with a paternal condescension and the European bishop with emphatic respect.

Conclusion

It is through casting themselves as scientific interpreters and aficionados of indigenous culture that the *letrado* writers of these introductions become powerful gatekeepers. Since class and ethnic divisions in Guatemala throughout the region's history of occupation by Europeans have been so pronounced, like fundamentally different worlds in the same geography, information flow and mutual understanding has been at a minimum. As the introductions show, to the extent that cross cultural communication does occur, it has historically been framed by the discourse of those in positions of power and respect in Guatemala, that is to say, urban upper and middle class *ladinos*. In the Eurocentric academic tradition the *letrados* observe, the knowledge produced by different peoples around the world are structured hierarchically with the knowledge of indigenous peoples, such as the Maya, at the very bottom. On the other hand, Professor Raynaud, the *fin de siecle* French author and translator of the *Popul Wuj* represents the very highest echelon of knowledge, having the Bibliothèque de Paris at his disposal.

That the category of "Indian" exists in Western thought is as a result of the event of the conquest in the decades after 1492. But the fact that indigenous identity and systems of knowing remain subordinate to their Western equivalent is the result of the continuity and reproduction of the conquest throughout the history of Guatemala. The discourse represented by the *letrados*' introductions to the *Popul Wuj* is a site for the reproduction of a cultural conquest that has significant ramifications for representations of the Guatemalan nation. While these *letrados* glorify the Maya past, they do so using

the language and perspective of modern science. By erecting a frame through which to describe and catalogue the manuscript's attributes, the *letrados* remain aloof and unengaged from the content of the narratives of the *Popul Wuj*. The copious details about the lives of Ximénez and Brasseur and their abstract disciplinary discussions of Maya culture reify and objectify the *Popul Wuj*, leaving little or no space for an understanding of the narratives within the cultural context from which they arose. In this way, the *letrados* construct their authority to pass judgement on Maya culture and simultaneously silence any direct threat the *Popul Wuj* poses to their own world view.

Through the *ladinos*' own foundational narratives of the discovery and conquest of Guatemala, the "Indians'" concommitant loss of authority and autonomy leaves contemporary Maya feminized and infantilized in the eyes of the *letrados*. So lazy and backward are they that they must be given back their cultural roots through the agency of benevolent *ladino* academics. This is not a two way dialogue. In the introductions to the *Popul Wuj* the voices of indigenous people are entirely, categorically silenced. Although between 1953 and the early 1970s Nathaniel Tarn was working with a Tzutujil community on the shore of Lago Atitlán recording a creation narrative with similar cultural roots as the *Popul Wuj*,[81] during the same period, Villacorta, Recinos, Estrada Monroy and Abreu Gómez leave these narratives of their co-citizens out of the picture. Their interest in the *Popul Wuj* was limited by the frame they themselves had constructed.

The *letrados*' fascination with the manuscript was prefigured by the work they needed it to do for their own patriotic aspirations. Their ambivalence toward Maya culture, past and present, pervaded their works, leading to a complex and potentially

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[81] Nathaniel Tarn (with Martín Prechtel) Scandals in the House of Birds: Shamans and Priests on Lake Atitlán. (New York: Marsilio, 1997) 96.

destructive relationship to contemporary Maya people. Through their introductions and writings in the *Anales*, the *letrados* were creating the Guatemalan nation discursively, writing it into existence. In order to compete with European nationalisms, they represented Guatemala as a unique nation with a long tradition preceding it. In their imaginings, the *Popul Wuj* becomes a masterpiece of literature like those of Rome and Greece. As scientists with the latest technologies of thought in linguistics, archeology and anthropology at their disposal, they secure for the *Popul Wuj* an elevated status, attempting to fix its significance to the nation for all posterity.

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