

UC Santa Barbara

rEvista: A Multi-media, Multi-genre e-Journal for Social Justice

Title

Editor's Introduction

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0j33s331>

Journal

rEvista: A Multi-media, Multi-genre e-Journal for Social Justice, 5(2)

Author

Aldana, Gerardo

Publication Date

2017

Copyright Information

Copyright 2017 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Editor's Introduction

This volume is about traveling. It's not that the terrain is new, but more about the work of developing tools for navigating and engaging that terrain that can be both foreign and familiar. As perhaps it should, in many ways this volume began with a geographical trip and resulted from the intersection of it with various others.

One summer, for my graduate training in the history of Mayan astronomy, I travelled to Yucatan to investigate a possible architectural alignment to the planet Venus at the Postclassic Mayan city of Mayapan. My literary research had my expectations floating in between the colorful interpretations of Linda Schele and David Freidel in *A Forest of Kings* (1990), or *Maya Cosmos* (1993), and the more clinical archaeoastronomical methods of Anthony Aveni in *Skywatchers of Ancient Mexico* (1980). The experience of actually measuring the orientations of buildings "on the ground" helped to mediate between the two extremes and began to reveal an interesting new connection to the role of K'uk'ulkan at Mayapan within the recorded history of the region (Aldana 2003). As it turns out, though, my departure from that archaeological site would not end my education in the Mayan celestial realm for the summer.

Before returning to the States to start a new semester, I saved a few weeks to visit an acquaintance I had made through some friends from Mexico who were living in Boston at the time. In the traditional town of Popolá near Valladolid in eastern Yucatan, I visited a Mayan elder, Pedro Pablo Chuc Pech—or Don Pedro—who had spent his

career in bilingual education (Mayan/Spanish), and now worked in his retirement on Yucatec Mayan literacy. Our shared interests in community outreach fostered the idea of offering a workshop locally that combined Yucatec literacy with an introduction to hieroglyphic writing—and some Mayan mathematics thrown in for good measure. We developed a plan for the following summer to spend the mornings in the Popolá municipal building with participation open to all ages; in the afternoons, he would let me hang around, drifting in and out of the lives of a contemporary Mayan community.

My journal from that next summer makes clear that I was having a fantastic time. I was working on learning the language, naturally, but I was also confronting so much of the ethnographic and ethnohistoric material I had been reading about for my classes. The *aluxes* ('spirits of the forest'), *Yum K'aax* ('Lord of the Forest'), *ch'achaak* ceremonies—all were part of the rural milpa-cycle-world that I was now experiencing firsthand. My vision of the ancient Maya was being transformed as I became enchanted by the world of contemporary rural Yucatan.

One morning near the end of my stay, Don Pedro roused me from the hammock I had strung up in his living room at what seemed like a ghastly hour. "¿Quieres hacer una meditación?" he asked me. Once I convinced myself that I heard him right, my mind started racing, flitting from question to question: am I dreaming? What is 'a meditation'? Was I being

invited into some secret ritual of the modern Maya?

“Por supuesto,” I grunted back, trying to sound confident, even though I was still feeling groggy. Nevertheless, I stalled for time. “Tengo que ir al baño primero.”

“Bueno,” he responded. “Vamos a estar arriba.”

Now I was really fascinated. “Arriba”? What did that mean? My thoughts kicked into overdrive. Did he mean behind the house? The small hill behind the chicken pens? Would I have to climb that hill by myself... in the dark? Maybe this was part of an initiation? I’d already fought off bugs of various sorts picked up in our walks through the trees, scrub brush, and milpa. Would this be a test to demonstrate that I learned something?

I washed up and stepped out of the bathroom into the patio. Whatever was going to happen, I was ready for it. Just then, Don Pedro peered out over the wall of the (cement block) living room, opposite the thatch-roofed room I came out of; he was on the roof.

“Pase p’arriba.”

This threw me for a loop. The roof?

Then it struck me: he was going to let me in on his understanding of the celestial realm. We’d finally look at the stars together! He knew that I was interested in astronomy—he must have decided that he could trust me now. I was in Yucatan to recover the astronomy of ancient Mayapan, but now I would be finding the kernel that was preserved into modern times! I flew up the stairs, taking the steps two at a time. Forget the data in my journals and notebooks; this was what was going to make my dissertation!

Don Pedro and his son were sitting in the middle of the roof, looking out

toward the East. I waited for his signal and then approached slowly, taking a spot behind them. Just as I sat down, a faint shooting star ripped through the constellation Aries overhead. Don Pedro’s head jerked and he whispered over his shoulder, “¿lo miraste?”

“¡Sí!” I whispered back emphatically. This was perfect. My mind churned out the possibilities. Was I about to find out that contemporary Mayans did track meteor showers? Immediately my mind flipped through the pages I had recently read by Barbara Tedlock on K’iche’ Mayan “flaming arrows” of the night sky. Even the sixteenth-century Spaniard Sahagún depicted meteors as celestial arrows for the Aztecs. So meteors were definitely important in ancient Mesoamerica, but in my research for one of my dissertation chapters, I was planning on concluding that ancient Mayan skywatchers actually did not closely follow the periodicities of meteor showers. Should I now plan on re-working that chapter if Don Pedro told me otherwise?

My thoughts and the silence were interrupted next by a massive streak of light. This meteor tore through the blackness from north to south, right through Orion.

“Ohh!” All three of us were taken aback by the sight.

We sat for a while longer in silence, enjoying the occasional meteor, but mostly appreciating the clarity of the night sky. I glanced at my watch; it was 4:30.

Don Pedro motioned for me to come forward and sit next to him. “¿Tú sabes algo de la astronomía?”

“Poco,” I responded. I was trying to play it cool. I was incredibly anxious to hear what he had to say, but I didn’t want to come off as though I knew

nothing. On the other hand, if I suggested that I knew “too much,” he might think that my interest in his knowledge was disingenuous. “Todavía voy aprendiendo.”

He paused, and I wondered if I had blown it. But then he turned to me. “Linda sí conocía todo,” he stated flatly.

My mind raced. “Linda”? I groped for answers. He had mentioned a sister, but her name was Lydia. An aunt? A grandmother?

Then it dawned on me. Yes; he mentioned to me at one point that he had met Linda Schele and Nikolai Grube at one of their workshops in Mexico. Was he now going to tell me that his knowledge of Mayan astronomy came from the University of Texas art historian, Linda Schele?

“No mas señalaba y lo nombraba.” Pedro finished his thought, clearly impressed with her knowledge.

And then it hit me like a ton of bricks. I had been completely seduced by the romanticism of the ethnographic experience and bought into the possibility that I was accessing an ancient world, somehow surviving into modern times. But it was far more complicated than that. Foreigners were playing roles in the interpretations of ‘the Maya’ by Mayans themselves.

So was I on the roof with Don Pedro because he was telling me what he thought I wanted to hear now? All along? Was he instead simply demonstrating to me that he was connected to an international network of Mayanists? Was he just interested in finding out what or who I knew or where I fit into the politics of the contemporary academic scene?

That night I saw the sky and ‘the Maya’ with new eyes. I began to see how complicated it must be to be an

indigenous intellectual in a rural Mexican town—working for family and community, but forced to navigate international politics and foreign academics. It also became clear to me that there would be no shortcuts in my dissertation research. The complexity, the messiness of it all—not the elegant magic bullet solution—I took up as critical to my future work.

On the drive back to the U.S., my Toyota pickup winding along the highways of Veracruz, my mind drifted back to the sixteenth century and the discussions of the mythical figure of K’uk’ulkan between the Spaniard, Diego de Landa, and the Yucatecan, Gaspar Antonio Xiu. How complicated and challenging must their conversations have been?

The kind of complication I experienced in Yucatan in the late 1990s was initiated by my travel. In 2014, a group of us at UCSB put together a panel session on similar cultural complications for the National Association of Chicana and Chicano Studies annual meeting in Salt Lake City. We were three graduate students, one undergraduate and one faculty member, all leaving from UCSB, so we decided to rent a minivan and drive together.

The name we used for the session was “Nepantitlan.” We formed the title out of two now relatively familiar terms. ‘Nepantla’ is that now iconic word in Chicana/o/x culture with origins in Precontact Nahuatl communities; Remi Simeon’s nineteenth-century Nahuatl dictionary defines it as: “**adv.** En medio, por el medio” (1997:331). During the late 20th century, nepantla was re-vivified conceptually by Chicana Feminisms catalyzing around Gloria Anzaldúa’s

poetic scholarship. It has come to represent a cultural in-between-ness; an embodied and mindful mestizaje that can be healing, nourishing and yes at times painful. As for the suffix in the title, *-tlan* denotes 'within' or 'amongst', more loosely as 'place' in Nahuatl. Examples include Tenochtitlan (*tetl* – stone, *nochtli* – nopal, *tlan* – place; yielding 'around the stone and cactus') or Zapotitlan (zapote – a type of tree, *tlan* – place; yielding amongst the zapote trees). Nepantitlan, then, was intended to invoke a sense of being among multiple in-between spaces.

projects. That workshop was a curricular descendent of the activities Don Pedro and I developed for outreach in Popolá.

Natalie Avalos's presentation "Interdependence as a Lifeway: Religious Persistence and Indigenous Futurities in a Native/Chicano Community," was based on her dissertation research in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Then a UCSB graduate student working with Ines Talamantez in the Religious Studies Department, Avalos set out to compare the transnational decolonial movements of urban Indian/Chicanx

3.10 • Alpine East – 2nd floor

Nepantitlan: indigeneity in Chican@ Studies

Avalos-Cisneros, Natalie. University of California, Santa Barbara. "Interdependence as a Lifeway: Religious Persistence and Indigenous Futurities in a Native/Chicano Community."

Lopez, Felicia. University of California, Santa Barbara. "Mayahuel in Her Changing Forms: Fertility, Ritual, and Direction in the Codex Borgia and other Divinatory Texts of Mesoamerica."

Medina Riancho, Andrea. Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. "Traditional Yucatec Medicine and its Practitioners."

Pineda, Cecilia. University of California, Santa Barbara. "Mayan Math Workshop."

Discussant: Aldana, Gerardo. University of California, Santa Barbara. "Nepantitlan."

We traveled twelve hours from Santa Barbara to Salt Lake City to discuss different forms of Nepantitlan. As a session, it was intended both to create and to examine in-between spaces on multiple levels. For one, we were bringing together discussions of different forms of indigeneity to a long-historied indigenous Newe/Shoshone geographical space. For another, we combined formal research presentations with small group workshop experiences for our session; for her presentation, Cecilia Pineda led a demonstration of how Mayan Mathematics could be used within K-12 educational or community outreach

peoples and Tibetans living in diaspora in New Mexico. For the paper at NACCS and in its article form here, Avalos brings to light the experiences and motivations of volunteers at La Plazita, a community center committed to serving urban Indians and Chicane people suffering from historical trauma. Her ethnographically recovered vignettes demonstrate a "survival," reflecting "an earth-based pedagogy of possibility that contributes to a larger movement of Indigenous resistance."

Reaching back to Precontact communities, Felicia Lopez's presentation "Mayahuel in Her Changing Forms: Fertility, Ritual, and Direction in

the Codex Borgia and other Divinatory Texts of Mesoamerica” took a new look at the Codex Borgia. Moving beyond the fetishization of Precontact Mesoamerican visual art common in modern scholarship, Lopez pushes the art historical approach to Mixteca/Puebla codices in “Case Study for Development of a Visual Grammar: Mayahuel and Maguey as Teotl in the Directional Tree Pages of the Codex Borgia” by infusing their analysis with the Nahuatl language. Capturing a key contribution from her doctoral work in Chicana/o Studies at UCSB, she thus generates a new method for engaging Precontact indigenous scholars as they represented their own world.

As the last article in this special issue, I included a reprint of an essay from 2003, representing my own attempts to grapple with the intersections of indigeneity and Chicana/o Studies at a similar time in my career. Inspired by the relatively new possibility of reading Mayan hieroglyphic texts in their entirety, I relished the opportunity to read Precontact indigenous Mayan records as intended for indigenous Mayan audiences. In “Classic Mayan Mestizaje,” I explore what I consider to be a resonance between the political self-fashioning of Mayan kings and Chicana/o activists.

A third journey critical to the final form of this special journal issue was taken by Jenell Navarro, assistant professor at Cal Poly SLO who traveled along Highway 101 to consult on an exhibition developed by the Special Collections unit of the UCSB Davidson Library. Initiated by Savador Güereña, Director of the California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives (CEMA) the exhibition was intended to highlight

elements held in Special Collections as they brought together representations of indigeneity and Chicanidad. Titled “Indigenous Peoples of the Americas: Roots, Resistance and Resurgence,” Güereña brought together members of the local Chumash community, Navarro from Cal Poly SLO, Lynn Gamble from the Anthropology Department at UCSB and myself to develop the project.

Drawing from the visual art of the CEMA collection, Navarro was inspired to write the fourth article in this special issue, “The Promise of the Jaguar: Indigeneity in Contemporary Chicana/o Graphic Art.” For it, she brings a decolonial aesthetic to read power relations as represented by Chicana/o artists from local communities to international politics.

These four articles, then, are complemented in this special journal issue by the catalogue of the exhibition with commentary on the artifacts provided by contributors. The section brings forth a multitude of voices exploring representations of contemporary indigeneity and Chicanidad within a broader context of cultural production and political resistance.

The symbol of the exhibition itself represents yet another journey: the toml-crossing of the Santa Barbara Channel by members of the Chumash Maritime Association. The construction of the indigenous sea-faring canoe and its journey over kelp-forests and sea life fits easily in conversation with the rest of the journal issue’s attempts at locating spaces of consciousness or social-psychological intersectional identities that provide at least partial or transitory access to the experiences of indigeneity. Nepantitlan becomes a space that one can enter when s/he shifts into such a consciousness.

In many ways, then, this special issue takes on concerns that are central to Chicana/o/x and Indigenous Studies. The first aspect of such concerns is simply to generate representations of those experiences that have been ignored, suppressed or even erased, 'disappeared.' The intent on this level is to represent the unrepresented, which brings along its own challenges and opportunities. The second aspect is the innovation of analyses that can incorporate the new material rendered visible by new representations. Each of the projects in this special journal issue contributes to these two aspects in provocative ways.

For this issue of *rEvista*, special thanks are due to Felicia Lopez for preliminary editorial work. The final form is also indebted to two peer reviewers for their comments and suggested revisions on each article. We further appreciate the contributions of the staff of the Department of Chicana/o Studies and the Chicano Studies Institute at UCSB in facilitating participation at NACCS 2014. Of course the exhibition and catalogue resulted from tremendous effort and commitment by the curator Sal Güereña and UCSB Library staff. Finally, thanks to Aida Hurtado, Luis Leal Endowed Chair of Chicana/o Studies at UCSB for creating the *rEvista* journal and accepting the proposal for this special issue.

Gerardo Aldana
Goleta, CA

References Cited

- Aldana, G.
2003 "K'uk'ulkan at Mayapan: Venus and Postclassic Maya statecraft," in *Journal for the History of Astronomy*, xxxiv, pp.33-51.
- Aveni, A.
1980 *Skywatchers of Ancient Mexico*. University of Texas Press, Austin.
- Friedel, D., L. Schele & J. Parker
1993 *Maya Cosmos: three thousand years on the shaman's path*. William Morrow Paperback, New York.
- Schele, L. & D. Friedel
1990 *A Forest of Kings: the untold story of the Ancient Maya*. William Morrow & Co, Inc., New York.
- Simeon, R.
1977 *Diccionario de la Lengua Nahuatl o Mexicana*. Translated by J. O. De Coll. Siglo Veintiuno, Mexico City.