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Decolonizing Methodologies and Beyond-Constructing Indigenous  
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*The Maya Writing of Briceida Cuevas and Flor Marlene Herrera  
In search of a Methodology of Identity*

by

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An innovative way of getting closer to modern Maya identity is by recognising and admiring the intellectual production of women writers in the Maya language of the Yucatan Peninsula. In this article, we will take a look at two young writers: Briceida Cuevas and Flor Marlene Herrera<sup>i</sup>.

To have at our disposal writings and publications by women creators possessing a specific consciousness of being Maya<sup>ii</sup>, provides additional clues as to how one may approach diversities. Such material also means having in our possession reading materials and activities of the imagination that allow us to understand cultures detached from symbolisms of oppression or dominance. However, we have not always had women writers of indigenous languages. The incursion of indigenous women into the realm of intellectual production aimed at creating, inventing or fabricating is a recent phenomenon (Gutiérrez 1999). The thoughts, ideas and sentiments currently emerging from the minds and hearts of these writers are of recent provenance.

In previous research (Gutierrez 2001) on Maya ethnocentrism as a legitimate source of identity based on ideas of origin and destiny, I have discussed two trends of analysis. On the one hand, the ethnic group's current system of information which gives credit to feelings of belonging, originality and continuity, on the other, the capacity to socialize and reproduce such system of information by the same group, that is to say, by their own intellectuals and spokespeople. Maya identity is dynamic and historical, it is not essentialist and it is deeply disrupted. Many of its meanings have become eroded or distorted. Just like any other kind of identity Maya identity resists invention, fabrication and idealization. Nevertheless, it results highly unsatisfactory to

study a group's identity without knowing the way in which ideas and thoughts are expressed by the group itself.

I specifically refer to those ways of studying indigenous identity. I identify three approaches by non-indigenous scholars. 1) The appropriation of indigenous discourse; 2). the scholarly interpretation of symbolisms outside the cultural realm and 3) the academic neglect of the system of identity information produced by indigenous thinkers and intellectuals.

To illustrate the above, my point of departure is not to confuse the method of recollecting oral traditions and editing testimonies by non-indigenous peoples with the activity which gives the author total control of her information and the way she exactly wishes to convey by means of the written word. Even so, there are few examples of the first method recording interest in knowing the inner private world of indigenous women. In *Historia General de las Cosas de la Nueva España* (1575) written by Friar Bernardino de Sahagún and *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán*, by Diego de Landa, women are taken into consideration but from an entirely male point of view. They are described in relation to their moral performance and their domestic duties and obligations. Travel notes such as those written by the Dominican, Thomas Gage, in the mid 17<sup>th</sup> Century, capture the colour and exoticism of female clothing, expressing inequity in a cast-divided society. But in none of these anthologies and colonial writings, based mostly on personal descriptions, have women been employed as authoritative informants.

From the 1990's new anthropological studies have emerged. An example is the ethnographic description undertaken by a ñahñu Indian about the flora, fauna

and geography of the Mezquital valley. I am referring to the co-authored work by Bernard Russell and Jesús Salinas Pedraza, *A Mexican Indian Describes His Culture* (Sage Books, 1990). Part of the value of this book is its conceptualisation and planification undertaken with a certain amount of autonomy by a ñahñu intellectual and written originally in the ñahñu language with the aid of computer software. Although the book includes descriptions of women in their domestic surroundings, once again indigenous women do not have the means themselves to externalise their own views. A final example of this, and well known to many, is the oral testimony produced by Rigoberta Menchú and edited by E Burgos (1985). This practice of using women's voices and testimonies, thus dispossessing them of their own voices and feelings so as to convert them into a mass of information useful for a third text, has been common among social scientists. Only very recently are we beginning to recognize the voices of indigenous women and quote their writing.

From an early age indigenous women learn to carry out crafts demanding a high degree of concentration and skill. Embroidery, pottery, weaving, are activities carried out by women but others are not aware of the mental processes involved in such tasks. The subjective/spiritual externalisation of indigenous women is not only evident in the training and skills required to produce breathtaking and fantastic objects, it has also confronted the difficult transition between the modernity encouraged by the state and the traditional realm of daily life. Within the indigenous realm modernity and tradition are linked by teachers and instructors and women teachers have played a significant role. We do not know much about indigenous female teachers and

research is awaiting. But it is interesting to observe that most women indigenous writers have a background in the teaching profession<sup>iii</sup>.

Indigenous women perform a diversity of roles within the family and in a variety of trades. A woman can be a weaver, a healer and a teacher, she can perform multiple roles and still have the ability and willingness to master the skill of writing. Nevertheless, few indigenous women are writers in control of their thoughts. One does not question the existence of a whole branch of French literature authored by French women, or that Chinese women living in exile have contributed to the narration of an entire epoch. But Maya women have a double difficulty to overcome: in the first place, access the realm of writing, secondly, achieve recognition. In exploring the written ideas of indigenous women three aspects emerge.

Firstly, the possibility that women are capable of controlling their own thoughts when they want and in the moment in which they give shape to these, thus avoiding the distortion of events or of chronology frequently imposed by the interviewer-researcher. Secondly, the revelation of unknown ways of understanding and approaching cultural resources, thus subverting the dominance of male reasoning, sensibility and hierarchy. Thirdly, the diffusion of innovation in an array of expressions: ideas, symbols, dreams, themes, concerns, thus reducing the influence of non-indigenous thought.

I wish to emphasise here the importance acquired by women writers as creators of their own ideas and daily experiences, as authors of a specific style and as disseminators of their literary production. Neither Briceida nor Flor Marlene develop their writing activities in an exclusively introspective and

pleasure-producing manner. What is immediately apparent in these two female writers is their need to communicate other themes, interests and thoughts. This is a feature that begins to characterise the writings of indigenous women.

### *Briceida Cuevas Cob*

I met Briceida in Merida some five years ago. I was invited to comment on the release of a new book on Maya writers (Ligorred 1997) and Briceida was in the public attending the event. Once we had been introduced, I expressed my interest in knowing more about her writings. She gave me a copy of one of her most well known poems "El quejido del perro en su existencia" (The groaning of the dog in his existence) (Cuevas 1985). The poem is about a badly treated dog but it also reflects the suffering and humiliation of human beings in general. I am not toying here with literary criticism, I am simply saying why her poem made me wish to read her other writings.

Flor Marlene responded to my invitation in 1998 to participate in a seminar entitled "Identidad Maya y Creación Intelectual" which I organised in the city of Merida (Gutierrez 1998). The purpose of the seminar was to discuss directly with Maya writers and creators certain ideas concerning the way in which they perceived or reinterpreted the past or the importance which they gave to the past in defining contemporary Maya identity. A second seminar was organised in Mexico City (1999) with the same purpose in mind. A few months later, Flor Marlene and I met in Guatemala and we had the opportunity of getting to know more about each other.

The purpose of this paper is not to tell you how *I* (from an academic perspective) am able to re-interpret these writers' lives, their writings, their identities. Instead, I assume that they are in the process of producing new themes and ideas in an attempt to understand the present stage of identity's revival. In general, writers get known through the publication of their works, which may not be read immediately in that the ideal audience is still to be assembled. Writers likewise avail of considerable infrastructure in getting themselves known. As far as indigenous writers and creators are concerned, their writings are not accessible in the sophisticated world of the commercial printing press.

If the goal is to explore, to open up a field in which one is able to find out different ways of reordering and reinterpreting the creative realm of the writer and the way in which this same writer conveys her reality, then this means getting involved in the writing itself. This is why I wish to explore a methodological path in which I am able to bring together three different strands: firstly, I need to know to what extent the past is important in tailoring modern indigenous identity; secondly, I am determined to avoid recording voices in audios; and finally, I recognise indigenous writers in their own right.

In order to comply with this methodology I discuss with Briceida and Flor Marlene the possibility of writing together, the three of us, a single text. They were not quite sure how this would work, nor was I. I explained the idea of the text and I suggested three themes: bio-data; Maya culture and past, and dreams. Time past and then Flor Marlene and Briceida sent me, via e-mail, their contributions. Of the three themes developed, I will focus exclusively on how they perceived Maya culture and womanhood.



*Maya culture as thought by women*

One can ask an indigenous man or woman to tell his/her recollections of childhood, stories, traditions, ways of celebration or how certain things are done, and so on and so forth. Using this well known method, we presume that they will tell only what they have heard or seen. Furthermore, if the researcher is physically present when the interviewee/informant is speaking, then there is pressure on the latter by the informer in that answers are prompted, answers that may not contain any qualitative significance but which are made in complying with the guidelines and timing established by the interviewer. On the other hand, when one asks or suggests to the writers that they write on a particular subject, then we are asking them, first and foremost, for their thoughts and ideas and not the repetition of something they may have heard or seen.

Although oral tradition is very significant in socializing indigenous ideas within a limited realm, this information is not enough. This is why today many Mexican indigenous peoples are taking advantage of modernity and using the printing press and the mass media to disseminate their ideas and thoughts (Gutiérrez 1999). However, such an intellectual activity does imply, for the individual writer, control of their timing, ideas, thoughts, associative ideas and above all, freedom of expression.

To illustrate the above, it is useful to bear in mind that Maya/Tojolabal people apprehend reality through a fluid interrelation between animated beings and inanimate objects. For them "everyone and everything possesses a soul" (not

only animals and plants). Thus, they interrelate socially as "I am a thinking being existing in society" and not according to the Descartes principle of "I think, therefore I am" (Lenkersdorf p.117).

Briceida, in her text, describes a specially close relationship with dogs, cats and insects. Animals seem to articulate or indicate the flow of life, of people visiting the family, deaths, fortune, or things that going to happen. Everything counts in Briceida's universe. Earlier I mentioned that one of her most well known poems is about a dog's existentialism. How does she perceive a dog's anguishing dilemma of existence? In our shared text, she refers once again to her beloved dog's misfortune. What follows is a recollection in her bio-data of the animal that prompted her to compose her intriguing poem:

"We lived with Boxin (the name of the dog) for nearly five years, until the night it started to howl. Each night it howled my father would hit it very hard to make it stop, for when a dog howls, it means it can see the devil who is on its way to carry off a soul belonging to a family member. One day Boxin came into the kitchen and started howling loudly. With its cry the dog was writing its own death warrant. My father punched the dog repeatedly until it was no more than a corpse lying there in silence in the company of my father. At the same time, there was the sadness of my brothers and sisters, and the murmur of the wind caressing the dry leaves outside. My father feigned annoyance in order to hide his fear and remorse. He put on his sandals and went out to the meadow (*milpa*) seeking some kind of refuge. It was then time for us to cry over Boxin's body. So the devil did come, but it didn't touch us, instead, it took away the body of Boxin but never its soul".

Maya writers never miss the opportunity to highlight one of the most relevant aspects of their ethnocentrism: their approach to nature. Numerous phenomena have a place within nature: the origin of rural life, *la madre tierra* (mother earth) and how everything is linked to guarantee its continuity. We shall see the importance of observing surroundings, the position of the planets, the movement of the wind.

### *Flor Marlene Herrera*

Flor Marlene recalls her grand parents' love for nature. "They used to regard themselves as nature and in communion with nature; consequently, they could see perfectly well all the changes around them. They were able to understand and see all the different cycles of the moon, which were useful in defining the goals of agriculture. They were able to read the time by simply looking at the sky, they knew how and when was the appropriate time to sow, they could see the days when it would rain". Time and weather for rural life was crucial, so too the imagination. Storms are associated with a popular legend of a "little horse" known as Yum Chak or the Yumbalanes. The *aluxes* -spirits- are to be found everywhere, but particularly in the *milpas*, since everything has a heart.

"When someone goes to sow in the *milpa*, Flor Marlene explains, he/she greets and entertains the *aluxes*, otherwise your harvest may not be what you expected, they look after the *milpa*, the hills and everything these contain, they dislike when someone comes in the *milpa* and the hills, and do not ask permission. One has to greet them with *zaka'a*, that is, everything you prepare while you are sowing in order to keep them happy. They look after your seeds and fruits, and if someone comes and wants to steal your produce, they will

protect your *milpa* by producing winds, throwing stones and creating an atmosphere of genuine fear, it is no game.”

Undoubtedly, one can find numerous examples of how indigenous peoples approach the outside world and how the Maya people, in particular, provide this world with a life of their own. The point I wish to make is the way in which these women writers use written narratives to reveal the parts of the culture they wish to expose.

Let us now turn to exploring some interrelations between myths, beliefs, traditions and the individual perception of womanhood

#### *How women learn to be Maya*

In the family realm of the Maya woman there are powerful symbolical associations with domestic artefacts of daily consumption, such as the stove (*fogón*), the four corners of the house, or the blouse (*huipil*), the effects on one's body after eating certain fruits and eggs, or the ceiba tree.

For Briceida, once again animals play a central role.

"If a dog is lost, but not dead, one can call him back in the neck of a pot and it will return".

"If a mother wishes her girl to grow big breasts she will place, nine times in each nipple the nest of the *Xyuya* -a bird- , but if she prefers not to grow the breasts too big, then she performs the same ritual but this time using a hummingbird".

Sexual honour and modesty are one of the highest values of Maya women. Flor Marlene writes how teachings of this kind formed part of her early education.

"My grandmother never missed an opportunity to remind me: daughter, you are a girl and you have to look after yourself by not going out with men. Look, see how those big girls are walking down the street, hand in hand with men? Well, it won't be long before they're bearing a child."

"The impact of such words made me believe that if a man dared touch my hand I could have a child; and to become pregnant, out of the wedlock, was something wrong and bad, so I was very afraid and wasn't prepared to let men get close to me, much less touch my hand".

A symbol of domesticity is the stove, and the stove gives meaning to numerous aspects of Maya womanhood. The Maya stove requires the support of a fork and if a woman places it in the fire it will make the act of birth difficult, in that the feet of the baby will spread as wide as the prongs of the fork.

"In the case of the three stones which serve as a base for the stove, these cannot be placed too far apart, otherwise the hips may remain excessively spread after delivery, or if the stones are placed close together, then the hips themselves will remain closed".

The written accounts of Briceida and Flor Marlene express the creativity in the dimension they wish to convey it, they contribute to exerting cohesion, cultural reproduction and then, identity. The system of information that women writers are accumulating would indeed endorse their many roles as women reproducing and disseminating the Maya culture of the future.

### *Conclusion*

In this paper I sought to highlight how narratives, not told, but, written by women are able to illustrate unknown aspects of their intimate world. If they write, they can control what they wish to convey at their own timing. This methodology not only seeks better ways of including unheard “voices”, it rejects the employment of testimonies or oral traditions taken out of their original context. Instead, it seeks to recognise within the written indigenous texts, a value of its own, and to start respecting and recognising the indigenous independent thought. Modernity has certainly help to unleash unknown and unpredicted manners of knowing identities. These are becoming visible through recombination, invention or fabrication, nevertheless, what is at stake is the innovative enthusiasm of young writers and creators.

In previous works (Gutiérrez 1997) I have stated the difficulties found by indigenous writers, creators or intellectuals to locate the sources of their ethnocentrism. Resorting in romantic appeals they continue idealising the family and community as the areas where tradition, wisdom or culture are kept. However, the influence of acculturation and the lack of respect to indigenous cultures have eroded deeply the subjective/cultural capital of native cultures. Not everything is lost, and no identity is essentialist.

Indigenous cultures through their own creators and intellectuals would construct a type of identity based on constructs of invention or recombination. Invention is not artificiality it is a continuous search of the collective self.

Indigenous cultures face a stage of reappraisal provided by bilingual skills and contemporary Indian consciousness as a result of modernity and the spread of globalisation. Indigenous writers are taking advantage of technology to convey and disseminate new themes and ideas such type of work can be appreciated in the literary production by Briceida and Flor Marlene.

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<sup>ii</sup> I refer to people who are aware and act accordingly to subjective or objective aspects of identity.

<sup>iii</sup> Examples of writers whose initial activity is the teaching profession: Roselia Jiménez Pérez (Tojolabal), Flor Marlene (Maya), Josefa Ventura (Mixtec).