

Scholarly Surrealism

The Persistence of Mayanness

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Abstract ■ We imagine Mayanness as an enduring ‘pure’ substrate below surfaces of diversity that is constructed and maintained through surrealist scholarship. Equipped with community studies, theories and methods, scholars surrealistically construct ideas of Mayanness, as do the millions of self-identified Mayan individuals from Guatemala, Mexico, Belize and beyond. We use Salvador Dalí’s masterpiece, *The Persistence of Memory*, as a playful device for explaining how Mayanness is perpetuated in practice, within ethnographic contexts, and always in realms of power. Mayanist discourse is analogous to Surrealism in many, but not all, ways. Mayanist discourse is clearly surrealist when we view it as emerging from discordance and paradox, but it differs from Surrealism when it masks and replaces the surreal with aesthetic, palatable and ‘pure’ images of coherence and rationality. By acknowledging our scholarly surrealism, we suggest that we may encounter a bit of academic iconoclasm and liberation. By embracing the inherent paradox, rather than concealing it, we contribute to polemical academic debates regarding constructed binary oppositions, geographic foundations of identity, alternative methodologies and means of representation, and issues of continuity and change in Mayan scholarship and lives.

Keywords ■ community ■ critical anthropology ■ Mayan Studies ■ resistance ■ scholarly surrealism ■ territorialized identities

The persistence of Mayanness

Practically every text on ethnographic field methods has a chapter dedicated to choosing a research site. Factors involved in this important decision include professional, personal and theoretical interests, as well as other more practical issues. However, in practice, the process is more appropriately likened to a surrealist experience, where an ethnographer is metaphysically ushered to a research site as if in an eclectic dream. Once located in the field site, the ethnographer is free to focus on the specifics of what is most often a geographically or conceptually distinct social entity: a community is born.

Scholars of the Maya – Mayan and non-Mayan ethnographers and theorists, experts in development studies, intellectuals and activists – are not excluded from this process, which inevitably leads researchers to an intimate knowledge of a particular town, *municipio*, *barrio*, sub-population or region. Paradoxically, scholars of the Maya not only become experts on these territorial units, but they also assume a position of authority for larger ethnic or linguistic groups and, more commonly, for ‘the Maya’ in general. From one supposedly localized ethnographically based and geographically linked entity, surrealist scholars bring forth a meta-image of a homogeneous cultural group, even though the cultural entity is actually comprised of some 30 languages, varied political structures, distinct environmental factors, unique histories and is spread across multiple nation-states.

Though there are Mayan and non-Mayan scholars who have begun to critically oppose this surrealist formation of homogeneity – and we will certainly acknowledge these later – the tradition remains for (mostly non-Mayan) scholars to haphazardly mix and match their territorialized studies in order to bolster academic legitimacy. These scholars thus ignore the underlying regional richness (politics, economics, sociocultural idiosyncrasies) in favour of shiny Mayan surfaces that suggest the existence of the Mayanness below.

By ‘Mayanness’ we mean a concept that signifies some imagined unity between all Mayan people across time and space. This imagined substrate pre-empts regional diversity, historical epochs, academic investigations and individual agency in such a way that it is extractable from these varied contexts. Mayanness exists in practice, though it is also reproduced as meta-discourse by, for example, artists, academics, politicians and tourists. We reveal how this imagined bond between very different peoples, places and institutions is mediated within discourses of power. We demonstrate how this surrealistic marker of identity – imposed by others while simultaneously practiced and constructed by people known as Maya – is reproduced through territorialized links, agricultural metaphors, unadulterated ethnicity and tropes of resistance.

Academic investigations of the Maya utilize archetypes in this surrealist discourse: ‘Maya’, ‘traditional’, ‘continuity’, ‘people’, ‘ethnic’, ‘culture’, for example. Accordingly, with a playful nod to Salvador Dalí’s famous painting, *The Persistence of Memory* (1931), we explore some of the conflicting images of Mayanness that produce surrealist academic discord. We highlight the application of the community study in this process of defining what and who is ‘Maya’, a term that likewise insinuates intimate and embodied bonds connecting people and ordering objects across at least seven different countries and over what is often thousands of years. We ask what features construct Mayanness and how scholars theoretically extract its elements from the geographic locations where this essence is supposedly rooted. Does it reflect an existing psychological bond within ‘a people’ or an ‘ethnic group’? Is it a link formed through linguistic

similarity or is it a historical network shared by people? Is it constructed by romantic academics and politically driven Mayan activists? Or is it a real embodied notion of Mayan identity that perpetuates itself through practice? Surrealist discourse, of course, suggests that it is all of the above – the pure and the provocative, the cohesive and conflictive, the rational and the irrational – all created by scholars, communities, theories and the millions of Mayan people residing in many nations and in extremely diverse situations.

Small communities: territorialized vehicles of Mayanness

There are innumerable studies of the Maya, though the referent of the term remains opaque. The word is hardly used in colonial documents, and when used it rarely refers to human beings. The origin of the word is disputed, but the predominant opinion is that Maya refers to *Maya thaan*, the language of the country or the people who had once been ruled by the city state of Mayapán (Schackt, 2001: 7). Otto Stoll in 1884 was likely the first ethnographer to appropriate the Yucatec term in his identification of a common Mayan linguistic stock (Schackt, 2001: 8). Precipitously, collective groups, such as Tzotzil-Maya, Q'eqchi'-Maya, K'iche-Maya, who were likely unaware of the term 'Maya', surfaced as ritual kin members of a neoteric cultural unit.

Stoll may have been the first to textualize the term, but he was not the first to conceive the native peoples of Central America and Southern Mexico as sharing a variety of cultural traits. John L. Stephens, in his *Incidents of Travel in Yucatán* in 1843, was the first since Spanish contact to describe the ruins of the area somewhat systematically. He describes how Indians, as the Yucatec Maya speakers were called, gathered around him everywhere he went. He notes on one occasion that, despite living close to their ruin-complexes, 'It was strange and almost incredible that, with these extraordinary monuments before their eyes, the Indians never bestowed upon them one passing thought. The question, who built them? never by any accident crossed their minds' (Stephens, 1990 [1843], vol. II: 30). He did, however, establish that the 19th-century Indians belonged to the same race as those who had built the magnificent buildings, although he acknowledged that great changes had occurred, which once and for all destroyed 'the national character of the aboriginal inhabitants' (1990 [1943], vol. II: 190; see also Hervik, 2003: 94–5). In this context, which is also when Stoll would have devised his conception of 'Maya', the term applied to the civilization that flourished in Mesoamerica long before the 16th century. It would have thus applied to the impressive material remains still located in the area where the Yucatec language was spoken (Schackt, 2001: 8). By default, 'the Maya of Yucatan' were reinvented as an archeological vestige (Castañeda, 1996: 109).

The term 'Maya' was paradoxically established as a linguistic connotation referring to people who spoke a language of the so-called Maya linguistic stock, regardless of whether the term was actually used or even known by the people in question. This era also marks the emergence of contemporary Mayan Studies, which still exists in spite of the opaque referent and the inclusive term. Today, Mayan Studies comprises anthropology, ethnohistory, history, archeology, linguistics, epigraphy, genetic anthropology, mythology, etc., still 'weaving' (the use of this term is not coincidental) various peoples, geographic regions, political economic systems and histories with architectural ruins, multiple languages and belief systems into what must be presented in quotes – 'the Maya'.

This book describes the mode of life in a peasant village. A large part of the population of the peninsula of Yucatan dwells in such villages. These villages are small communities of illiterate agriculturalists, carrying on a homogeneous culture transmitted by oral tradition. (Redfield and Villa Rojas, 1934: 1)

We assume that almost every Mayanist scholar would recognize this introduction to *Chan Kom: A Maya Village* by 'the giants of Mesoamerican ethnography' (Re Cruz, 1996: 7), Robert Redfield and Alfonso Villa Rojas. Many other scholars may recognize it as well. Although Redfield (1960) later broadened his idyllic vision of this homogeneous culture, his initial orientation to community-based studies as bastions of Mayanness became the pre-eminent approach in Mayan Studies and elsewhere in academia. Even when the 'little community' was geographically incohesive, Redfield still envisioned a state of homogeneous isolation due to barriers of illiteracy, culture and habit (Sullivan, 1989: 158). Thus, it is no coincidence that in 1930 Redfield visited the archeological site of Chichen Itza, which was being excavated by the Carnegie Institution, an academic organization that, along with the Harvard Chiapas Project, years later and under the direction of Evon Vogt, strengthened the seminal position of the 'community' in scholarly research of 'the Maya'.¹

'Small communities' became the embodiment of certain qualities: distinctiveness, homogeneity and self-sufficiency (Redfield, 1955: 4), making them flawless and unadulterated reproducers of the status quo. The goals of community studies, although they varied from making general referential statements about a *kind* of community or understanding an area in its 'contemporary condition' to answering problems of scientific interest (Redfield, 1955: 154–5), were based upon an academic paradigm where cultures, communities, peasants and Mayans were functional carriers of wholeness and cohesion (Nash, 2001: 37–41).

These 'small communities' of 'homogeneous cultures' still reverberate in contemporary Mayan Studies, where scholars utilize bounded entities as their vehicles of Mayanness. The municipio holds a distinguished position in this approach, as numerous scholars of Maya (Burns, 1993; Carlsen, 1997; Early, 1983; Hawkins, 1983; Watanabe, 1992, to name only a few

examples) defer to Sol Tax's classic 1937 article to understand the persistence and existence of Mayanness, that imagined unity across time and space.

The people of Guatemala live in municipios which are territorial administrative divisions commonly recognized in all governmental matters, but which are also – as it happens – the basic ethnic division and cultural groups into which the country is divided. (Tax, 1937: 425)

According to Tax, the Mayan people in each municipio were 'conscious of their unity and their uniqueness' (Tax, 1937: 433). Tax and Redfield, among others, regarded 'culture' as the distinct, local and separate, arguing that each municipio had its unique characteristics that made up an ethnic group. This earlier academic understanding of identity has since been criticized due to the subsequent theorization of ethnicity (Barth, 1969), which emphasizes how bounded groups contrast and oppose their ethnicity to neighboring groups (see Hawkins, 1983: 307). Nonetheless, it seems that since the municipio 'happened' to be a basic divisor consisting of distinct ethnic groups, each anthropologist studied 'his' or 'her' own municipio or community (again the possessive pronouns are not coincidental). The effect was obvious. The study of society fragmented into a multiplicity of disconnected communities. Furthermore, these studies tended to exclude Ladinos and *mestizos* from their sphere of interest (Hawkins, 1983: 307). At this point, Mayanness must be pluralized.²

And this pluralization did indeed create a surrealist monsoon. Adherence to community homogeneity and specificity was what eventually constructed the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) as an enemy and equally a friend to the greater pan-Mayan community. Though the production of texts in indigenous languages created priceless opportunities, the placement of translators in villages during these times led to multiple alphabets and confusion, which the ALMG (Guatemalan Mayan Language Academy) subsequently sought to repair by creating its own unifying Mayan alphabet (Nelson, 1999: 141–2).

Clearly, the early anthropologists of the Maya and others were interested in community studies as the basis for distinguishing cultural traits with which they could fill their inventories. Redfield, Tax and others were wildly engaged in an academic game, distinguishing pre-Columbian from European traits. From this early interest in Mayan culture, the community study became the preferred method for finding the cultural qualities that make up this checklist of Mayanness, and Robert Redfield's investigations of civilized gradients, ideal types and folk culture in the Yucatan brought the community study to its eminent position. For many, Chan Kom became the embodiment of academic investigations and of Mayan culture itself, even though, with hindsight, we now recognize how biased his folk-urban results were (Castañeda, 1996: 35–67; Elmendorf, 1970; Re Cruz, 1996). For Redfield, his villages and towns were archetypes of Mayan and other folk

cultures; they were localized cohesive totalities that represented generalized gradients along his continuum from primitive to civilized. His 'homogeneous culture transmitted by oral tradition' assumed a unique bond that united individual members of the village into a moralized and rooted whole (Redfield, 1934; see also Hervik, 1999).

For over half a century, scholars have both been adhering to and, equally, dismantling Redfield's view of bounded culture and community. Chambers and Young (1979), in a survey of more than 100 studies of Mexican and Guatemalan communities, demonstrate that these studies pay little attention to community heterogeneity, but rather that they view 'the community as a unified, integrated whole' (1979: 65). Castañeda also demonstrates that, for most scholars of the Maya, a village or town is assumed to be the geographic foundation of a community and an imagined moral bond that supposedly exists among the people of these particular areas. This assumption, where a village automatically implies a community, is parallel to the use of the *municipio*, which is a region assumed to be economically and ethnically cohesive (Castañeda, 1996: 40).

Even Barth criticizes the Redfieldian view when he defines ethnic groups 'as aggregates of people who essentially share a common culture [by maintaining] . . . its culture through a bellicose ignorance of its neighbors' (1969: 9). Barth, who himself has been criticized for ignoring the political-economic realm of identification processes, argues that ethnicity is an aspect of a relationship, not a property of a group, thereby marking a needed shift of focus from culture as bounded (i.e. Redfield) to culture as interactive entities (1969: 9), which also create the nation-state (Williams, 1989) and globalism (Comaroff, 1996). By stressing the relational aspect of identity-formation, Hastings Donnan and Thomas Wilson (1999) further break down the geographic foundation of the community study. While a community is conceptualized as sharing a structure or morphology as its defining feature, it exists only 'by virtue of its opposition to another community. The notion is thus relational, implying both similarity and difference . . .' (1999: 24). With culture seen as mediated rather than primordial, attempts to characterize people by ethnic traits, to the exclusion of the meanings attached to these traits, are no longer valid (Hawkins, 1983: 306).

Even though scholars, such as Wolf (1957), now conceive of this cohesion as an active strategy of peasant groups that withdraw and reproduce community in response to colonial impositions, there remains the bounded, territorially based, homogeneous nature of Mayanness. Further, the community-centered, geographically linked approach does not stop at the *municipio* or ethnic group.³ Various scholars have transcended the *municipio* in favor of more distinctive, subjective groupings of Mayan people, who are still envisioned as closed carriers of tradition. In these cases, K'iche Daykeepers (Tedlock, 1992), Mopan victims of domestic violence (McCluskey, 2001), victims of terror (Green, 1999; Zur, 1998), speakers of 'Mayan' languages, midwives, and even transnationalized

migrants (Re Cruz, 1996) are still imagined as sharing unique cultural traits that mark their identities as 'Maya'.

Of course, the term 'Maya' was not extensively used as a self-referent until the 1980s, when indigenous activists redeployed the term to indicate a solidified pan-Mayan identity (Nelson, 1999: 5). The Pan-Mayan movement (Fischer and Brown, 1996; Warren, 1998), with its rhetoric of essentialism and its strategic denial of difference, is firmly located within a surrealistic discourse of construction and continuity, along with other groupings maintained and created by selves and others for political, cultural and academic reasons.

Accordingly, many activists and scholars are now more fully embracing the instability of surrealistic discord and are representing Mayan culture and community as made stable through conflict, contradiction, creativity. Victor Montejo suggests we listen to the multiplicity of Mayan voices (2002: 124). June Nash (2001) reveals how contemporary indigenous communities adhere to a global habitus. Robert Wasserstrom (1983) and Aída Hernández Castillo (2001) show how modification and change is embedded in the social continuity and Mayan identities of Chiapas. Xochitl Leyva Solano and Gabriel Ascencio Franco (1996) discuss the people and politics of the Lacandon as a diversified mosaic. There are others among this growing number of scholars,⁴ Mayan and non-Mayan alike, who are consciously and critically working to disentangle their own epistemological concerns from the ominous burden of Mayanness.

However, this surrealistic discourse would prevent even the aforementioned critical scholars of pluriculturalism, globalization and multiple identities from denying that bounded groups share cultural perceptions, practices and 'structures of feeling' (Appadurai, 1996: 199). Academics are not the only ones perpetuating sites and metaphors of Mayanness; Mayan subjects do it themselves. Cohesion exists. Even so, it seems that Otto Stoll, John L. Stephens, Robert Redfield and Sol Tax forged an iron-clad academic mold that, along with the anthropological conception of culture, produced an approach in Mayan Studies that continues to revere a concept of Mayanness – a metaphysical link that is shared by collective members and embodied in their practices and perceptions, regardless of individual, political, economic, regional, temporal and cognitive differences. At times we all fall into this surrealistic trap; it is almost impossible to avoid.

We thus do not deny the existence of cohesion (though we may question it), nor do we replace it with fragmentation. We want to illustrate how ethnicity, like 'community' and 'art', is always caught up in equations of power that are material, political and symbolic.⁵ And we want to consider the irony in much Mayan research, such as that embedded in the municipio research of Tax and his long list of followers. Their (our) paradoxes are numerous, but a particularly intriguing one is how a number of scholars of the Maya examine ethnicity by means of community by concurrently conceptualizing Ladinos as not ethnic but as the ethnicizers. In these

surreal cases, it appears that groups who are in control do not qualify analytically as ethnic, which is why Ladinos are not typically viewed as ethnic but rather as the agents of ethnification (Wilmsen and MacAllister, 1996). And Ladinos, if addressed, are not conceptualized as the embodiment of an enduring timelessness, as are Mayan people, but rather viewed as having contemporary significance.

Clocks frozen still

Many scholars who utilize the community study recognize the hypocrisy in their theoretical notions. They understand the hazards of making generalized statements based on the localized community they study because of its idiosyncratic nature, but they have no other foundation on which to structure their findings of Mayanness. Thus most scholars of the Maya (Carlsen, 1997; Restall, 1995), including ourselves, claim, as does Allan Burns, that 'the Maya are not a unified group in Guatemala or for that matter in any of the areas where they presently reside' (Burns, 1993: 17). Yet many of us Mayanist scholars continue to make generalized statements about the Maya. We legitimate our intensive knowledge of a village/region/community by applying it to, and cross-referencing it with, a collective comprised of some 12 million people scattered throughout the Americas. We admit that differences exist but fail to acknowledge them in our search for true Mayanness.

For example, in his detailed account of Q'anjob'al-speaking immigrants in Indiantown, Florida, Allan Burns recognizes that there are over 33 Maya languages, many of them as different from one another as the European languages of French, German and Spanish (Burns, 1993: 9, 17–18), whose speakers obviously see themselves as separate. Something then shifts in Burns' argument when it comes to these differences between Maya languages. First, he finds that his ability to speak Yucatec assists his research with Q'anjob'al-speaking Maya in Florida (1993: 15) and, surrealistically, it certainly does. Second, he seems to emphasize diversity and individual voices in Indiantown, but leaps to the commonalities among the Maya in general, as exemplified in the title of his study of Q'anjob'al immigrants, *Maya in Exile*.

Robert Carlsen (1997) also falls prey to such an academic paradox. He writes that he is 'quite aware of the limitation of any single community to exemplify the vast population of Mayas', yet he uses the town of Santiago Atitlan to discuss the 'general cultural mechanisms utilized by otherwise disparate groups of Maya' (1997: 2). Though he is clearly aware of the difficulty involved in case studies and the polemical nature of general conclusions about the Maya, he proceeds to make a large claim from a small locality. Can we not get away from this surreal paradox? Although we recognize the difficulties, can we not cease searching for the Mayan substrate?

Manning Nash echoes this hypocrisy in his statement that ‘The Maya are still (despite the variety of community organizational forms and the continuing process of Ladinoization) basically local communities, with local cultural variants of a tradition distinct from Ladino culture’ (1989: 110). He continues that the Maya are ‘still, in day-to-day life, localized, rooted, territorially attached members of relatively distinct and bounded communities’ (1989: 110). Therefore, he does not see the Maya as an ‘ethnic’ group ‘in the sense of a larger Indian solidarity vis-à-vis Ladinos’. However, he writes that ‘becoming an “ethnic” group in the sense of wider ties of identity, organization, and common action and purpose is possible’ (Nash, 1989: 110–11). Nash’s argument, therefore, represents the inevitable surrealistic slippage in applications of ‘ethnicity’ to ‘the Maya’. One form this slippage takes is the Taxian application of ethnicity to a distinct, local/municipal indigenous culture and another is the reference to a wider, translocal solidarity and consciousness of indigenous pan-Maya speakers. And, even so, both sides of this coin of collectivity emphasize coalescence over conflict.

Like much scholarship on the Maya, Nash’s statement above includes a term that implies an imagined thread leading back to a pre-Columbian past – ‘still’. The Maya are ‘still’ living in localized communities. Burns also writes that ‘they continue to inhabit the lowlands and highlands of southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, and Honduras just as they have for the past two thousand years’ (1983: 2–3). Carlsen writes how in Lake Atitlan communities, the ‘women and girls stand knee-deep in the water washing clothes on rocks polished from centuries of use’ (1997: 35). The translation of this simple idea – that cultures can be in a state of ‘still’ – brings us to the surrealistic reproduction or production of Mayanness. Few scholars and producers of Maya avoid this. Barbara Tedlock (1992) and Dennis Tedlock (1993) skillfully articulate the past with current beliefs, myths and practices. Even one of the authors of this article dips back into the Postclassic period when discussing the Q’eqchi’ Mayan understanding of crime in contemporary Livingston, Guatemala (Kahn, 2003). And, of course, Mayan people embody and perpetuate these links in everyday practice and perception. Scholars do not pull this from mid-air, even though we may tend to emphasize these links more than do our ethnographic contacts.

Rather than a decisive historical moment, ‘still’ scholarship highlights the randomized, authentic and timeless ‘they’, representing enduring human values rather than unique historical or contemporary significance (see Lutz and Collins, 1993: 59–60). In these surrealist fragments, scholars look to the past and the future at the same time, the specific near and remote simultaneously. A Mayan substrate symbolizes a connection to the past that remains unchanged and unwavering in the face of diversity. In these frozen images of the Maya, we encounter Dalí’s anachronistic melting clocks.

Identities of Mayan people are said to embody this essential linkage to the past. However, as Allan Burns and others remind us, 'ethnicity is more than an internal feature of an individual's or group's personality. Ethnicity is also something that is imposed from without, a label that outsiders apply to a group of people' (1993: 18; see also De Vos and Romanucci-Ross, 1982). Thus, most scholars of the Maya seek their larger order of identity in the contrasting other, the non-Maya (see Greene, 1996). They emphasize an indigenous Mayan base that is not ethnic until outside impositions take place, allowing scholars to skillfully carve out a place to speak of the Maya in a more generic manner. In this way, tribes which are not yet fully encroached upon by outside forces, i.e. still fortified in nature, become ethnic groups that emerge through oppositional discourse (Jackson, 1991). Their external surfaces change while an internal substance, i.e. a generic natural Mayanness, is a melting clock, frozen 'still'.

Aestheticized fragments, mediated identities

Even though transnational theorists (Hannerz, 1996; Kearney, 1996; Rouse, 1991) warn us about reductionist parallels between people, identities, geographic locations of birth and communities, this understanding remains entrenched in Mayan Studies, so much so that even scholars who attempt transnational overviews ultimately fall prey to the same weaknesses found in earlier studies of geographically bounded communities.

Carlsen, for example, opens his impressive ethnography, *The War for the Heart and Soul of a Highland Maya Town*, with a very real, in-your-face image of the 1994 Zapatista uprising (1997: 1). Then, over the next few pages, he jumps through the 16th, 18th and 19th centuries to show Mayan 'tenacity'. This stubborn resistance is pieced together as an aesthetic collage. It emerges in the same way as the scene imagined by the artist Ferdinand Léger, when a soldier looks down during a momentary silence in battle and finds beauty in a fragment of metal (Clifford, 1988: 120). Scraps are aestheticized, politicized and abstracted from the historical moment.

Carlsen's introduction brings up four points for our analysis. First, it shows how scholars of the Maya haphazardly compare and contrast across diverse ethnographic contexts and case studies in order to support findings and bolster an idea of generalized Mayanness (Carlsen's ethnographic text involves a fieldsite some 200–300 km south of Zapatista activity). Second, it shows how scholars of Maya cannot discuss contemporary Mayan people without immediately turning to pre-Columbian and colonial periods for support and evidence. Third, by providing an image of Mayans entangled in NAFTA, this introductory paragraph demonstrates that this is not some pristine pre-capitalist society but one that is fully engaged in global capitalism. Last, Carlsen wants to show how all Mayan people, not only the people

of Santiago Atitlan, are involved in these shifting global and local networks that create arenas of resistance and adaptation. However, after the first paragraph, we lose sight of the transnational as he focuses in on the community of Santiago Atitlan. In addition, he concludes that his research is about two incompatible worlds. So, although he attempts to provide a transnational network as a theoretical foundation to his work, he ultimately falls back on an economic duality.

Re Cruz, too, attempts a revitalized case study of Chan Kom, a Mayan community in crisis that is now engaged in transnational networks of economics and power (1996). However, her community is still regionally defined, even as it flows from rural to urban. In fact, she ends up repeating some of the evolutionary ideas put forward by Redfield himself. And, even though she provides an enlightening discussion on how *milpas* are metaphorically re-invented when community members move to Cancun, like Carlsen she falls back on a Marxist economic dichotomy where milpas have use rather than exchange value. She also fails to go beyond the geographic location of Cancun. Transnational theory ends up being a shiny surreal surface that lacks any internal substance.

Liisa Malkki has convincingly shown 'that people are often thought of, and think of themselves, as being rooted in place and as deriving their identity from that rootedness' (1992: 24–45). Nations and cultures are described in ways that emphasize the naturalization of people and places through botanical discourses and practices of kinship. Ethnic groups are thus incarcerated in specific physical and conceptual spaces. Among Mayan speakers, this prison is guarded and ecologically maintained by corn. Milpas (corn fields), for example, are envisioned as the bastion of Mayan culture, and if one fails to cultivate milpa then this becomes a threat to being 'Mayan'.⁶ Nature is defied when geographic and cultural lines are crossed, though nature prevails. When milpas are no longer maintained, agricultural attachments are still embodied. Redfield's geographic borders are replaced with conceptual ones. You can take the Maya from the milpa, but you cannot take the milpa from the Maya.

Burns writes that 'a well-documented aspect of Maya cultural identity in Guatemala is the connection that people have to the communities where they were born' (1993: 129) and Wilson confirms that 'geography is the cornerstone of community identity' (1995: 20–21). Few scholars of the Maya would deny this, nor would Mayan practitioners. Yet, at the same time, why is it that Mayan people maintain such a strong connection to their homeland that it is referred to as sacred landscape (Wilson, 1995: 21)? This territoriality of sacredness provides the backdrop to the association of movement with Ladinoization, of emigration with the forsaking of ethnicity, and of abandoning milpa agriculture with a break from an authentic expression of Maya culture. Granted that this sacred geography is related to physiocratic notions embedded in cosmological worlds, to sociality integrally linked to earthly fecundity and cycles, to the land as a vehicle of

oppression and liberation, and to an agricultural economy. Nonetheless, through our surrealist prism, sacredness of land also seems to reflect a problem located more generally within the social sciences: in the emphasis on territories as didactic aids in the consumption and comprehension of metaphysical concepts. Thus, during the recent decade in anthropology 'much of this theorizing (modernity and post-modernity) has sought to liberate notions of space, place and time from assumptions about their connection to the supposedly natural units of nation, state, identity and culture' (Donnan and Wilson, 1999: 9). Perhaps it is more appropriate, as Salman Rushdie suggests, that we think of people with feet rather than roots. Even more so, we must acknowledge that dirt sticks to feet, and that 'soils of identity' are created from 'layered sediments representing countless leavings and returns' (Thompson, 2001: 89). Feet, and their residue, emphasize that time rather than place may be more significant in issues of identity, that identities and surrealist discourse, for that matter, are about activities more than things (Clifford, 1988: 117). Perhaps it is not so much that Mayan people have some cosmological connection to the land, but more that they have spent the most time in these particular locales, that they are the people who have walked in these areas for the longest time, that they have conducted the most activities in these sacred regions, that their feet have become the 'dirtiest'. Their roots are not physically deeper, but the concept of place has been reified through time, through the practice of walking, laboring and action. It is not coincidental that one of the authors found migrant Q'eqchi' speakers in Livingston, Guatemala to miss the temporal products of their Alta Verapaz homeland – the beans and tomatoes – rather than the geography itself.

Once we de-territorialize identity, we can then address whether Maya people have such primordial, unique bonds to the community where they were born, or whether their practice has reproduced their perception of this being the case. We can also ask whether the bond is really to the processes of making community or to the parents or family? Maybe it is the embodiment (and reproduction) of networks of kin and quasi-kin through practice that turns activity into reified locations, communities, ethnicity and scholarly studies. Or perhaps it is related more generally to an ethnographic discourse that frames fieldwork 'in-between beginnings and endings, even shoring up borders of containment around the places represented' (Thompson, 2001: 178). This is the same academic structure that also tends to categorize and label deliberate and localized performances and actions as *cosmological*, *ritual* or *traditional*, which distracts 'us from their active, intentional, and productive character' (Appadurai, 1996: 180).

This argument, of course, is not entirely new. Burns emphasizes that 'the core of Maya adaptation to the city is found in family structures' (1991/2: 37) and Saloveish (1983) suggests that kinship bonds are more appropriate criteria for defining who and where Mesoamericans are. Accordingly, and with foresight, Saloveish (1983) also suggests that

'Mexican cultures' (which he prefers to *Mesoamerica*) extend as far north as Chicago. Such an argument is in accordance with recent practices of regional associations, such as the Society of Latin American Anthropologists, which has recently changed its bylaws to state that Latin America is not only a geographic region, but extends to wherever Latin Americans are found.

Laurie Kroshus Medina (1998) has also demonstrated that Mayan groups are not (if they ever were) as geographically tied and culturally bounded as we once thought. Instead of a self-contained Mayan substrate, she found a Mayan discourse that uses the generic Maya territoriality as one of its artifacts in the competition to define native Belizeness. After achieving independence in 1981, Kekchi and Mopan Maya competed with the Baymen, Garifuna and Creole groups for rights to cultural differences based on indigenous status in order to gain cultural autonomy, political self-rule and land (Medina, 1998; Wilk, 1991). While the Mopan and Kekchi crossed the present border to settle in Belize during the 19th century, both the Garifuna and the British log-cutters provided evidence that they were in what is today the territory of Belize much earlier. Yet the Mopan and Kekchi representatives emphasized their generic Mayan ancestry by pointing to the archeological marks left in the landscape. By raising the level of abstraction from a particular indigenous identity to an all-encompassing Mayan substrate – one substantiated by geographic, pre-Columbian and architectural markings – their argument made use of strategic essentialism (Warren, 1998): that they were the first people to inhabit the territory and should thus be considered the country's most native and *naturalized* citizens.

Mayan people do identify themselves with particular geographic bearings, as *Sanpedranos* or *Cobañeros*, for example. We do not deny this. What we suggest is that this geographic landscape is more appropriately understood as surreal, constructed of surfaces, divergent ideas of power, and numerous points of contact and dream-like paradoxes, rather than an autochthonous umbilicus that links the past with the present, Mayan speakers with 'the Maya', or ethnic identity with territories. We must remember that self-identification with a town or municipio may well originate from the colonial period rather than from some tenuous connection to the pre-Columbian past (Wilk, 1991). Coalescence comes from conflict; essentialism emerges from hybridity (Werbner, 1997).

Mirrors of resistance

As we continue through our checklist of Mayanness, we must consider how these identifiable 'pure' forms of Mayanness are mediums of resistance. Why are Mayan traits academically interpreted and presented as vehicles of resistance? Why is 'stillness' constructed as cultural rebellion?

Ethnohistorian José Arturo Güémez Pineda argues that cattle rustling was a form of resistance in the Mérida district, a jurisdiction that encompassed most of the northwestern part of Yucatán from 1821 to 1847 (1991: 91). The expanding cattle business resulted in livestock entering and trampling over milpas, thus threatening the subsistence economy. Stealing cattle, therefore, was a form of subcultural resistance, a survival strategy. But, is it really resistance? Or is it, as Brown (1996) and Ortner (1995) suggest, that anthropologists of the Maya are simply rationalizing the ethnographic process so that anthropological knowledge becomes a means of public service rather than a self-serving enterprise? No one denies the existence of the Spanish invasion of the Americas, but only the unsound would suggest that a mental or spiritual conquest ensued. On the contrary, most scholars imagine forms of resistance. Carlsen, for example, uses epigraphic data, myths, prayers and kinship to represent an 'ingenious expression of Mayan philosophy and resistance' (1997: 4). Why? Resistance – besides being a way to deal ethically with the political issues of colonization and anthropology itself – emphasizes an understanding of culture as a hegemonic (territorialized) force that must be 'conquered' or 'resisted'. Continuity, Mayan 'stillness' and Mayanness become the archetypes of this resistance, and in this way they too can act as self-serving political ploys. In the case of stealing cattle (which we do not deny contains aspects of 'resistance', but also aspects of social and economic protest and crime), Mayan speakers are defined as resisting oppression by protecting their enduring territorial ethnic core – the corn milpa.

Resistance exudes from the past, and, though the polemical debate in Mayan studies as to whether we should emphasize continuity or change need not be repeated here, we may want to consider why this is an issue at all. And why does continuity, which is considered an underlying link of the Mayan substrate, automatically become resistance? Could it not as easily be labeled subjugation? Continuity-as-resistance provides legitimacy for ideas of Mayanness. Many ethnographers work diligently to distinguish contemporary manifestations of the past, particularly the pre-Columbian past, so much so that some have trouble getting to the present. Correlations between pre-Columbian iconography and ethnographic data (and across regional boundaries) are emphasized as evidence in support of contemporary findings. If a scholar of the Maya is lucky enough to find that her or his current data reveal vestiges of the *Popol Vuh* or of the carved stele of Palenque, then s/he has hit the jackpot. Scholars particularly love to find echoes of the past in narratives and myths, or vestiges of ancient deities in contemporary mountain spirits or entities such as the infamous *Maximon*. For the inventory of Mayanness, these sorts of pre-Columbian documentation are bonus points. They are the artists' signatures that boost the value of the painting because of the way they strengthen an imagined unity and imply a unity beyond discord.

Scholarly surrealism

Surrealist discourse silently slips into sundry domains involved in the production of Mayanness. We find it among researchers, such as ourselves, who admit the difficulties in community studies yet proceed to make generalizations from localizations. It is located deep within the conflict between lived Mayan selves and academic constructions. It is embodied in an imagined unity of pure Mayanness. We see it emerge when we claim that there is no one 'Maya', though we continue to find and acknowledge similarities across time and space. We find it in the strategic essentialism skillfully employed by Mayan activists for legitimate political purposes (Warren, 1998). Surrealism is also embedded in the practice of fieldwork, for example in the false juxtaposition of subjects and objects, home and field, and theory and method. Surrealism is the assumption that any sort of continuity would influence contemporary lives. It is the presumption that it would not.

In 1919, the Surrealist group, an avant-garde group of writers and poets, began attacking socially sanctioned types of literature, aesthetics and art by producing less reifying and more iconoclastic literary forms, such as automatic texts, dream narratives and collage-poems (Montagu, 2002: 8–9). The first official definition of Surrealism was provided by André Breton, who in 1924 defined it as 'psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express – verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner – the actual functioning of thought . . . exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern' (Breton, 1969 [1924]: 26). This language-oriented definition clearly relates to the stream-of-consciousness writing that dominated the literary beginnings of the Surrealist movement. This surrealist ideal, that a pure, unadulterated and raw entity exists within reach, below social and practical surfaces, clearly applies to our understanding of Mayan surrealism. Mayanness is an attempt to reach that 'pure state', and we cannot forget how Redfield and Villa Rojas (1934: 1) suggest that it is oral traditions that transmit the homogeneous culture linked to the Mayan community. Oral traditions, like streams of consciousness, provide entry into the internalized dream-state of Mayanness that rationality fails to explain.

The Surrealist movement dramatically changed in 1929 with the arrival of Salvador Dalí, who obliterated the distinction between socially sanctioned surfaces and raw internal essences, between utility and art, and between time and space. His methods discredited reality and shocked the viewer into disorientation. Take, for example, his 1931 masterpiece, *The Persistence of Memory*, which we use as a didactic vehicle in this article. Viewers are unable to recognize physical landmarks, nor can they infer the time of day or the year, or even the temperature (Radford, 1997: 146). Dalí's soft watches are symbols of the relativity of space and time, 'a Surrealist meditation on the collapse of our notions of a fixed cosmic order'



Dalí, *The Persistence of Memory*

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Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by Scala/Art Resource, NY

(Ades, 1989: 145). A hard, mechanical object melts into sluggish softness and decay, visually representing the theory of relativity (Schiebler, 1996: 76) within postwar dearth. Discomfort and paradox blur rationality with the irrational. Reality drips away from the viewer's grasp.

Mayanness is created within political realms, as is Surrealism, and even though it is utilized in rational, strategic ways, such as by the pan-Mayan movement in Guatemala (Warren, 1998), it is also full of disturbing juxtapositions of apparently irrelevant and unrelated objects, ideas, epochs and locales. This is Surrealism. However, Mayan scholars tend to mask these juxtapositions through the reproduction of communities, resistance and Mayan ethnicity as forms of coherence rather than difference. This, on the contrary, is not surreal at all. In fact, it is in these constructed forms of unity, which tend to be polished and aestheticized for consumption (or publication), that Mayan scholarship adheres least to surrealist discourse. Surrealists excuse themselves from aesthetic demands, while Mayan scholars prefer the tidy and discriminating surfaces of resistance, tradition and community. The process is surreal, though the product is represented as objective rationality. Similarly, Mayan scholarship also fails to be surrealist in that it is usually far from iconoclastic, preferring to legitimate rather than attack dominant ideological paradigms.

With this in mind, we suggest that it might be time to openly admit that we adhere to a surrealist scholarship. We could then celebrate the discordance, rather than blanketing the shards with ideas of an underlying substrate that denies and reifies time and space. Rather than aestheticizing and masking fragmentary culture through territorialization and agricultural undertones, we could encounter the dialogical understanding of intra- and intergroup conflict, asymmetry and inequality (Ortner, 1995). We could accept that community, continuity and resistance do not necessarily imply unity, but conflict and debate (Werbner, 1997: 239). We could then envision, as June Nash suggests the Zapatistas do, pluriculturality as a strength rather than as an element of degeneration.

This new perspective, called for by the speakers, requires a shift from Cartesian dichotomies of culture versus rationality and collectivity versus individuality. Locked into the absolutes of particular versus universalistic dichotomies, Western-dominated discourse has rejected the possibilities of embracing pluralistic values. (Nash, 2001: 155)

Let us scholars of the Maya too break down, deny and get beyond the categorical differences between continuity and change. Dismiss any semblance of one coherent 'Maya'. Criticize the glorification of pre-Columbian ghosts while acknowledging the vitality of Mayan ethnic groups and the connections that may lead to colonial, pre-hispanic and pre-Aztec influences. Admit that linkages do exist on paper and in practice without fear of essentializing, and examine the forces that provide import to these linkages. Reveal the theoretical concepts that allow Mayanness to be extracted from the political, economic and sociocultural differences between contemporary locales and communities. Comprehend how there is no automatic, primordial self-perpetuation, although there are discourses – academic, as well as political, embodied and surrealist – that contribute to the appearance – at least on the surface – of an essential Mayanness.⁷

Discourses strengthen themselves through active practice rather than through frozen images of 'stillness', though the latter are more cohesive and palatable than the messy underbelly of cultural discourse and its discontents. Beings (as coherent entities of our academic gazes) are first and foremost be-ings (perceived through motion and activity) (Spanos, 2000). The unfortunate (and seemingly unavoidable) reification of *process* into *thing* is in accord with our academic fascination with categories, compounded and concretized by the hyphen, which distinguishes entities while acknowledging their dialectic. Yet, when we look into the melting clock, when we take a magnifying glass to the divisor, when we implode the hyphen (Lavie and Swedenburg, 1996: 168), we do not find purity, sacred connections or institutionalized categories. What we encounter are active conjunctions, processes, movement and fluidity. We see how home, field, object, subject, theory, method, continuity, change, observer, participant,

community and Maya are utilitarian categories within a Westernized academic discourse that pursues bounded sites of knowledge. Differences, however, turn into dialogue when fragments, motion, dirt and temporality are introduced into these territorialized notions.⁸ The surrealist third eye, which 'yearns to burst out from its confinement and blind itself by staring at the sun' (Jay, 1994: 180; Rony, 1996), resists institutionalization by de-centering ocular metaphors and the geographic foundations of an enlightened academia. Rather than a monolithic doctrine, one of the few recurrent patterns of the surrealist movement is tension, contradiction, political dissonance, paradox and an aestheticism of the absurd (Jay, 1994: 182). It finds beauty in a cloud and equally in the debris of war.

Are we simply asking that we admit our surrealist complicity? No, because methodological modifications ought to accompany theoretical shifts. We challenge you to consider alternative forms of representation. Surrealism started as a language-based movement, before expanding into painting, objects, collages of images and words, sculpture, voyeuristic installations, interactive media, photography and architecture. Scholars of culture must problematize academically sanctioned forms of presentation, including the dominance of verbal language, linearity and locale in cultural representations. We must explore alternative ones. Do not fear; we are not suggesting that we begin presenting culture as furry teacups, cubist collages or as melting clocks (though we would not discourage these forms of iconoclasm). We do propose, however, that we take a long hard look at our ethnographic methods and formats of representation. Montage is something we may want to consider, most importantly because it is both a philosophy and methodology. Not surprisingly, Russian master film-maker Sergei Eisenstein, who outlined the theoretical and methodological uses of montage, was adored by the Surrealists. George Marcus has already persuasively applied montage to ethnographic practices, arguing that it problematizes authorship, deconstructs the spatial and the temporal, and emphasizes dialogue over binarism (1994 [1990]: 44). It incorporates the spectator as a maker of meaning, pulling the viewer into the process of creation, and it maintains distinctiveness of conflicting entities while winking at unity.

We, as the creators of this article and other shiny academic surfaces, are coming out as surrealist artists. With all our personal idiosyncrasies, political biases, humanistic tendencies, cravings, residues and fears that drive our professional careers and writing styles, we experientially embody the paradox of denying and reifying, of observing and participating, of investigating and imploding. While we are clearly guilty of painting melting clocks, we endeavor to dig beneath their shiny surfaces in order to reveal how they internally tick in their externally (unnatural) frozen state. Clocks, like all categories, particularly those labeled as Mayan, can transform and change their meaning through time, across space, in the minds of the beholder, and in the creating hands of the artist. They can melt away.

Enveloping enduring human qualities rather than deliberate, localized practice, scholars paint their anachronistic pictures of Mayan lives. By continuing to reify categories and communities, by denying time and spatial dissonance, by continuing to see roots rather than dirty feet, and by mixing and matching communities, Mayan scholars repress their practice of Surrealism. They construct 'still' creations of coherent, authentic, aesthetic images that are assembled of juxtaposing surfaces rather than substance. Disclosing our surreal constructionism liberates us from the spatial foundations of the Enlightenment; it addresses polemical debates; it provokes us to experiment with alternative methodologies and forms of representation; and it urges us to imagine community, ethnicity and the Maya as processes of be-ing made cohesive within realms of power, not through some essential link to the past or an internal cosmic state.

Of course, scholars, Surrealists and all producers of Mayanness will likely continue to embody and embolden an academic and aesthetic paradox. We somehow find comfort in our surrealist practices and denials. We relish the bringing together of disparate objects and practices – in stark academic landscapes – where time ceases and is sustained, and where lives are consumed by hungry ants and muffled by soft watches.

Notes

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- 1 In recent years, Evon Vogt has recognized the weakness in this community-oriented paradigm, explicitly admitting that the Harvard Chiapas Project tended to ignore the way communities are 'embedded in the larger world' (1994: 352).
- 2 See Smith (1990: 1–30, 205–29) for detailed analysis of Indian/non-Indian relations, community construction and maintenance, and class politics in Guatemala.
- 3 Contemporary scholars of Maya continue to understand Mayan people in such a geographically bounded manner. Recently, some scholars of Maya (Carlsen, 1997: 73; Hill and Monaghan, 1987; Watanabe, 1992: 5) have reinterpreted Tax by saying that the municipio and ethnic group within had a corresponding pre-Columbian unit, that there was a pre-hispanic idea of community. In these revisionist cases, the municipio remains unique and distinct, yet glossed over by continuity, merged with a pre-Columbian idea of community that necessarily relates to the municipio where researchers locate their subject matter.
- 4 The critical research of Diane Nelson, Demetrio Cotjí Cuxil, Jan Rus and Charles Hale comes to mind. Rick Wilk (1985) also provides critical studies on the ahistorical representations of Mayans, Mesoamericans and Belizians.
- 5 In Mexico and Central America, and elsewhere, it has its origins in the asymmetric incorporation of structurally dissimilar groupings into a single political economy (Warren, 1998). See also John Comaroff (1996).

- 6 See Bricker (1981), Gossen (1999: 1–30), Hawkins (1984), Stavenhagen (1977) and Warren (1989) for examples of how non-Maya define the Maya.
- 7 We recognize – along with Holland and Lave (2001), Bourdieu (1977, 1990) and Ortner (1989) – that history, and in our case Mayanness, is not simply reproduced from within, but is always mediated, constituted rather than reproduced (Holland et al., 1998: 419).
- 8 See Kahn (2001) for more on breaking down institutionalized dichotomies.

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