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Emil' Keme. *Le Maya Q'atzij /Our Maya Word: Poetics of Resistance in Guatemala*. U of Minnesota P, 2021.

Rigoberto Guevara
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, rguevara@unl.edu

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Abstract

Review of Emil' Keme. *Le Maya Q'atzij /Our Maya Word: Poetics of Resistance in Guatemala*. U of Minnesota P, 2021. 248 pp.

Keywords

Maya, Guatemala, resistance, poetry, colonialism, sexuality

Emil' Keme. *Le Maya Q'atzij /Our Maya Word: Poetics of Resistance in Guatemala*. U of Minnesota P, 2021. 248 pp.

Le Maya Q'atzij / Our Maya Word is an energetic attempt to recover and promote Mayan identity, culture, and language from over five hundred years of encroachment. The author critically analyzes poetry that delves into the challenges of the Mayan people in the land claimed as Mayan: *Iximulew*. The entire work is an effort to rid Mayans of external and internal colonialism. With this de-colonial approach to the analysis of poetry, Emil' Keme seeks to contextualize the suffering and devaluing of the Mayan people under what he terms the evils of capitalism, the exploitation of neocolonial globalization, and the imposition of heteronormativities by the dominant culture of Spanish descent. At the same time, he denounces the *ladinoization* (the conversion to "Western/Spanish" culture of the Mayan people, by free will or coercion) as cultural genocide.

To this end, the author examines the works of ten Mayan poets (representing five Mayan linguistic communities, most of whom wrote in Spanish) between the years of 1960 to 2007, a period that covers the Guatemalan Civil War (1960-1996), a time of repression of indigenous people by military governments. The poetry of the postwar years presents the fallout from the turmoil of conflict and genocide within the context of the political ascension of indigenous peoples in other parts of the Americas, such as in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Mexico.

Chapter one implements what can be understood as a decolonization project and promotion of the Kaqchikel Mayan identity by analyzing Víctor Morales Santos and Luis de Lión's poetry. Morales Santos' poem "Volveremos a ser Caqchikeles" ('We will be Caqchikel Again') appears as a Mayan literary manifesto. "Madre, nosotros también somos historia" ('Mother, We Too are History'), posits a return to Mayan ancestral origins: identity, culture, control and command of "Mayan lands" through parts of Mexico, Guatemala, Belize and El Salvador in a desire to rid Mayan people of outside interference. As a literature of resistance, it also embraces Marxism as a solution to the exploitation of capitalism and calls for Mayan nationalism that in many instances resonates with extreme exclusivity of non-true Mayas.

Luis de Lión's book, *Poemas del volcán de Agua* ('Water Volcano'), is read as a *Bildungsroman*, a metaphor of childhood in its different stages that illustrates the changes of an arriving social revolution. After many propositions for the recovery of Mayan identity, it ends up condemning land privatization and agrarian reform because it only gave Mayan land to national and international foreigners. According to Keme, the poems also decry that Christianity, together with the voracious appetite of capitalism from companies such as the United Fruit Company, which have worked to depoliticize the Maya community, robbing them of their political power.

In Chapter two, Humberto Ak'abal, Victor Montejo, and Gaspar Pedro González are studied under the rubric of strategic essentialism against state terrorism, the promotion of revolution, and the defense of indigenous identity. By using this postcolonial literary approach to counter orchestrated attacks by the non-Mayan government, Keme identifies Maya nationalist literature as a way to break the chains of colonialism. Ak'abal's book, *El animalero* ('The Animal Gathering') of 1990 echoes the *Popol Wuj* ('Book of the People'), a Mayan book. Keme interprets the representation of the many unpoetic and small creatures in *El animalero* (vultures, termites, ants, etc.) as the poet's intention to demonstrate that in the past, Mother Earth was in charge of humans whereas now it is the opposite. He concludes that progress and modernity aim to invalidate the role of Nature in human existence, contrary to Mayan traditions, starting with the arrival of the Spanish.

The poetry of Pedro González in *The Dry Season: Qandjob'al Maya Poems* and *Sculpted Stones / Piedras labradas* by Víctor Montejo present Pan-Maya identity as connected through variations of one language. At the same time, it highlights the continuity of Mayan history and ultimately counters the notion that Mayan culture and Maya people disappeared. This poetry promotes the essentialism of a diverse people with a common root, coming together to address their shared grievances to repopulate and rule *Iximulew* where the *ladinos* may join in. Montejo's *Sculpted Stones / Piedras labradas*, referring to Mayan cities and stone structures, asserts Mayan culture by featuring sacred places of the past. Keme reads this poetry as an urgent call to regain sovereignty for and empower present-day descendants of the Maya.

In Chapter three, Rosa Chávez, Pablo García, and Sabino Esteban Francisco provide examples for the study of *Xib'alb'a* and globalism. From 1990, indigenous people of the Americas enter the political stage, and literature is a weapon in this scenario. *Xib'alb'a* (a term that evokes the underworld, place of fright) in Chávez's and in García's poetry is analyzed as a literary trope to denounce modern conditions and the neoliberalism that introduced them as infernal. The descent to the underworld eventually leads to mental and political decolonization in Chávez, while, in García's work, the journey through postwar Guatemala, decrying the application of economic policies and cultural globalization that foster western logic, locates *Xib'alb'a* on the surface of the Earth.

Chapter four delves into the protest against colonialism in Mayan feminism and queer poetics, particularly the poetry of Maya Cu Choc and Manuel Tzoc. Keme proposes that, as these two poets have shown, urban centers can serve to promote Mayan values and persuade more people to overtake the western dominant society. While Maya Cu's poetry brings prominence to Mayan women and values matrilineal lineages, countering the male dominated society imposed by colonial power, Manuel Tzoc's poetry decries the imposition of heteronormativities that rob

Mayan people of their fluid sexuality. Both join the fight to de-colonialize Mayan people and feminism, non-normative gender identities and orientations serve this struggle in Keme's analysis.

Keme makes it a personal battle, deeply felt and sincerely expressed. His critical analysis of the poems, the biographies, and the historical context contribute a great deal to the understanding of the Maya situation. Each analysis serves the larger goal of presenting the ideal of Mayanness among the putrid remains of colonialism, social order and non-Maya people. I could not agree more with him when he writes: "the reader will notice that my position is not merely academic when I employ 'I', 'us' and 'we' in the book" (6). The author's own battle takes over the poets too often and the book becomes the author's singular struggle to advance a nationalist agenda based on a nostalgic myth of *Iximulew*. All poetry is presented in English translation, with no opportunity for the multilingual reader to parse the original versions, which prevents full appreciation of the artistic talent of the poets. Despite these objections, this book can be of interest for those who seek to understand the current Mayan struggles and the Mayan poets involved with art and direct participation as social or political warriors.

Rigoberto Guevara
University of Nebraska-Lincoln