



Studies in Testimony

Volume One, Issue One, 2018

Testimony and Place in the Work of Victor Montejo

Tim Craker

Reference: Tim Craker, 'Testimony and Place in the Work of Victor Montejo', *Studies in Testimony*, 1 (2018), pp. 77 - 101.

Tim Craker is Associate Professor of Comparative Literature and Philosophy at Penfield College of Mercer University. In another life, he sometimes writes about Wittgenstein and 'critical theory.' For the past 15 years or so he has been engaged in a covert operation to teach literature and social thought of the Americas in general education courses.

Abstract

From his *testimonio* to his poetry, from his written renditions of oral tradition to his work in the fields of anthropology and leadership studies, Victor Montejo's work inhabits a world that takes place in the Western Highlands of Guatemala and the Chiapas region of Mexico. What might we learn about Testimony Studies and about Place Studies if we ask of Montejo: 'What are the ways in which your testimony *takes place*?' Clearly, this question covers a lot of ground. If we focus on the temporal character of 'taking place,' we are asking questions about the *event* of testimony. If we focus on the 'ways' testimony takes place, we are asking questions about the form(s) or genre(s) of testimony, but also on *who* gives voice to these 'ways.' We may also, in an ethical vein, be asking about what place to give testimony in our considerations. And, if we focus on 'place' in the ways that the emerging fields of Place Studies or Geo-Humanities may teach us, we are asking questions about the ways a sense of place shapes testimony, as well as the ways the act of testimony shapes our sense of place.

One way, perhaps, to tie these questions together is by focusing on the thread of testimony as a response to a loss of some kind. This is not to say that testimony is to be defined strictly in these terms, but it is certainly a familiar thread in the literature on testimony and is evident in Montejo's work. To the extent that Montejo's work is a response to loss, what can it tell us about testimony as a response to the loss of place and the place of loss?

Testimony and Place in the Work of Victor

Montejo

Tim Craker

The Loss of Place and the Place of Loss

Victor Montejo's first book, *Testimony: Death of a Guatemalan Village*, lays out in a clear-eyed way the death of a place - or, since the village remains, the death of a world that can no longer take place in that place. Montejo's *testimonio* shows us how the 36-year civil war, with the genocidal practices that reached their height in the 80s, tore apart the fabric of society in Guatemala. In the midst of this fight, where land reform and political engagement had become distant issues compared with survival and the further loss of land to the army after massacres, we see how Montejo, despite his courage and resourcefulness, cannot, in the end, escape the demand to turn in names of 'guerillas', whether he knows any or not. Finding himself in a place where his ties to his fellow villagers must be severed - whether by betraying them, by being killed as a result of his refusal to 'cooperate', or by leaving - Montejo chooses exile. What is lost here is the network of social relationships that make up what anthropologists sometimes call the 'closed corporate community' of Maya village life, and with the loss of that body of relationships, he loses his place in the world.

Not only does Montejo lose his place in the world, however, but the world that takes place in the dynamic of everyday life in his village is gone, re-placed (we might say) by a static, corpse-like version of the life-world:

The last days of October resembled a sick burro reluctant to move a step. More corpses kept appearing in the outskirts of town, and machine gun volleys shattered the silence every night. The army infested the town with secret agents who sowed distrust and fear among the neighbors [...] the army became the sole arbiter over the lives of Guatemalans.¹

¹ Victor Montejo, *Testimony: Death of a Guatemalan Village*, trans. by Victor Perera (Willimantic: Curbstone Press, 1987), pp.112-113.

Montejo then tells us that he leaves with the 'firm expectation of returning when peace and tranquility will have returned to the beloved land of the quetzal', but his work in the years before his return, as we shall see, bears the marks of his loss. Insofar as it is not just 'peace and tranquility' that have been lost, but his place in the world, his eventual return to the 'land of the quetzal', then, will also mark something more than a cessation of violence: it will also mark a rebirth of a world.²

Montejo's work *represents* for us a particular way of addressing the place of loss. Montejo's work is not just a representative example of a certain perspective and style, his work actively takes up the difficult task of representing a way of life to others. One sees this as a thread throughout his life and work. In his *testimonio*, when the men of a village where he is teaching grade school are mistakenly captured in a gunfight as 'guerillas,' a woman from that village calls upon him to talk with the army on their behalf, to explain to the commander that a mistake has been made. His willingness to speak for this woman and others in the village rather than go immediately home to his own village after the skirmish leads to his own torture and eventual exile. While in exile he publishes the *testimonio* and a book of poems that, in different ways, represent the Maya to a wider public; later still - as an anthropologist - he published written versions of oral traditions (folk tales, a brief epic poem, and the songs, traditions, and stories of people in a refugee camp in Chiapas, Mexico) in an attempt to ensure these voices could be heard. Arguing that discrimination occurs against *indios*, but that all Guatemaltecos use Maya traditions to serve personal and nationalist agendas, he has worked to have anthropologists use the term 'Maya' rather than 'Indian' in their work. He also served Guatemala for a time - after the war - in a cabinet post as Secretary of Peace, and as a *diputado* in the Guatemalan congress.

In all these ways, Montejo is - in Kirsten Silva Gruesz's felicitous phrase - an 'ambassador of culture.' More media and scholarly attention has been given to Rigoberta Menchú, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992, who has been the public face of contemporary Maya culture for over 30 years now. As Gruesz reminds us: 'The Romantic-era search for the national author whose writing would best represent 'our' essential values and character (a process one also sees at work in the contemporary context of ethnic writers)

² Victor Montejo, pp.112-113.

sought to compress a complex web of meanings into a single icon of cultural mastery.’³ If Menchú has been an icon, our focus on Montejo is not an effort to produce another iconic image. Rather, our focus is meant as a corrective to the general focus on Menchú, and to open up the discussion on Montejo to Gruesz’s insight that ‘The rhetoric of ambassadorship insists on literature’s place in a public sphere, where definitions of citizenship, identity, and policy are debated.’⁴

If the testimony of Victor Montejo is that of a cultural ambassador, it takes place in many different genres. In his work as an anthropologist, for example, Montejo writes down the oral tradition (which he sees as itself in the process of being lost) of the man of lightning as it has been told in his village. In this brief epic account of *El Q’anil: Man of Lightning* (2001), the village of *Jacaltenango* is called upon to respond to the need of another village across the sea, which is under attack. Sorcerous shape-shifters see this as an opportunity to win personal glory and ensure that they are the ones sent. *Xhuwan* (Juan), a porter, sees this as a disaster in the making, and goes to visit the four *k’uh* (ancestors / angels of lightning-bolt powers who occupy the heights of the mountains surrounding the village, towards the north, east, west, and south, and who protect the village) to ask them to save his people from the shame that will be brought upon them by the certain death of the foolish sorcerers. Finally, *Q’anil*, on the southwestern range, grants him the power he will need to defeat the enemy and save the sorcerers, but says that *Xhuwan* needs to promise that he will forswear returning to his family, since his transformation will require him to become, like the other *k’uh*, an immortal protector of the village from the heights of the mountain. He promises this, is joined by two others who have a similar devotion to the community rather than to self-glorification, and wins the battle and the respect of the sorcerers. On his return, he has lost his place in the village, but the world that takes place in that place has been renewed because of his sacrifice. Put another way, though defeat would have made it impossible to return, the victory also makes it impossible to return - though his return then brings about a renewal. In the trope or turn of the return, then, we see the (im)possibility of return that shapes Montejo’s work.⁵

³ Kirsten Silva Gruesz, *Ambassadors of Culture: The Transamerican Origins of Latino Writing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 15-18.

⁴ Kirsten Silva Gruesz, *Ambassadors of Culture*, pp. 15-18.

⁵ Victor Montejo, *El Q’anil: Man of Lightning*, trans. by Wallace Kaufman and Susan G. Rascon (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001).

Montejo's volume of poetry, for example, written in the decade after he left Guatemala, consistently brings to the foreground what has been lost, so that it is not completely lost and may be reborn. Insofar as Montejo's historical and anthropological writings make the same gesture, the poetry would not be a privileged example. Insofar as Montejo's poetry, however, is an embodiment of what we might call a 'poetics' of creation that emphasizes rebirth and renewal (as we shall see), the poems are more than a mere example of a theme. We will have occasion to see whether this poetics of creation may also be at work in other forms of discourse (e.g. history), and what that means for the ways Montejo's work as a whole address the loss of place and the place of loss. But the poetry created in response to loss is particularly telling, especially when contrasted with a poem like 'A Los Cuchamatanes' by Juan Diéguez Olaverri. Written in exile, after a failed revolution, Olaverri's poem is a nostalgic balm for the loss of a country that never was:

¡Oh cielo de mi Patria!
¡Oh caros horizontes!
¡Oh azules, altos montes;
oídme desde allí!
La alma mía os saluda,
cumbres de la alta Sierra,
murallas de esa tierra
donde la luz yo vi!⁶

Unlike Olaverri, though Montejo marks loss, he generally avoids nostalgia.

In 'Interrogations by Ancestors', he imagines what Maya ancestors will say to their descendants when they stop being silent and learn how much of the Maya culture has been lost. The admonition to rekindle 'la pequena llama sola' (the single tiny flame) in order that 'los pueblos' (the people) might light the way to a future is the logical outcome of their dismay, but the admonition has force only insofar as one has internalized voices that have long since been silenced: 'who little by little | were stilled, | their traces disappearing | like

⁶ Juan Diéguez Olaverri, 'A Los Cuchamatanes', <<http://www.poemasde.net/a-los-cuchumatanes-juan-dieguez-olaverri/>> [accessed September 8 2017].

the distant wind | of the unknowable | stars.' Juxtaposed with this loss of the ancestors and their knowledge - even to the point of forgetting what the poem later remembers, that for the Maya the stars were not unknowable - is the dream of a rebirth, one made all the more difficult because, although there are still traces of the lost past carved in the stele in ceremonial plazas of the ancient temples, 'it will take a long time to read | and not just imagine | the stories written on those stones.'⁷ Even so, Montejo seems to add (later, in a poem called 'Sculpted Stones'), the *stela* still 'speak.' Montejo writes of the stones 'lost in the jungle' and 'forgotten' in which, however, the 'Maya and their glyphs | stand as one | like fathers and sons.' Is it possible to retrace in these stones a vestige of Maya culture? The stones seem to 'say' so, as when a glyph:

[...] bares its teeth
to the onlookers
as if saying:
"After two thousand years,
Traveler,
we're still on our feet
vigilant
among the silken
cobwebs
of time."⁸

This lost past which nevertheless remains, which has been silenced but nevertheless speaks, is not only a matter for poetic contemplation for Montejo. This theme of a disastrous loss that nevertheless calls for, or upon, Maya voices or traditions in response can also be seen in his history of the advent of violence in the Kuchumatan highlands. As Kay Warren notes of the work in Spanish upon which *Voices from Exile* is based, 'Montejo structures his collection of testimonies of genocidal war to mirror Bartolomé de las Casas's famous description of the atrocities committed by the Spanish invaders against indigenous

⁷ Victor Montejo, *Sculpted Stones*, trans. by Victor Parera (Willimantic: Curbstone Press, 1995), pp. 8-19.

⁸ Victor Montejo, *Sculpted Stones*, p. 35.

populations.’ Though the ‘intercutting of fragments from the sixteenth century las Casas account’ that underscore the similarity is not in *Voices from Exile*, the parallel remains - as does the reference to the *Codex Florentino* in which *Nahuatl* descriptions of omens of the Spanish conquest are found.⁹ In a section devoted to ‘Dreams and Portents’, Montejo draws on a tradition, one not even necessarily explicitly Maya, to give voice to a diverse Maya response to the onset of violence in the early 80s in the Kuchumatanes. In addition to dreams of golden letters in the sky and of machetes falling from the sky in great numbers were dreams of patron saints leaving their niches to move toward the West, toward Chiapas. Over 100,000 people would eventually move into Mexico, at least for a time, in response to the violence, not to mention the many people who were ‘internally’ displaced. Stories of such displaced people, the ‘voices from exile’, have been collected and transcribed by Montejo, but they have also been situated or placed in the context of a Maya history of Guatemala and *la violencia*. In this way the stories do not simply reach us like the dismembered bodies Montejo tells us about that washed downstream to refugee camps in Chiapas, but as part of a multi-layered account, one that emulates the Maya tradition of a ‘keeper of days’ to remember and situate events.

What this history that must be, in Walter Benjamin’s famous phrase, ‘brushed against the grain’ might mean for Montejo’s way of addressing loss, we will take up a bit later in the context of a discussion on mourning and melancholia. First, though, let us look at another of his poems, ‘Ombligo’, for what it can tell us about taking the measure of loss and living with it, about enduring loss:

Ombligo

Yo sé que mi ombligo	I know my umbilical cord
está sembrado	is planted
allá en las tierras altas	there in the highlands
de Guatemala.	of Guatemala.
Y aunque esté lejos	And though I'm a long way
de mi patria	from home

⁹ Kay B. Warren, *Indigenous Movements and their Critics: Pan-Maya Activism in Guatemala* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 122-128.

yo sé que mi corazón	I know my undivided
indivisible	heart
late igual que antes	beats as before
y sufre la distante	and endures the distant
melancolía. ¹⁰	melancholy.

This capacity to endure melancholy without giving in to it (to experience loss without either 'getting over it' and 'moving on', on the one hand, or becoming captivated by an idealized version of the past as a way of diminishing the sense of loss in one's self, on the other) is what one sees in his characteristic gesture of marking both a devastating, incontrovertible loss and the possibility of rebirth - an experience of the (im)possibility of return to the place - world of the Maya in the American Tropics. The term 'place-world' is taken from Edward Casey who, after Heidegger, has taught us to see the opening of a world in and through a gathering together of what is near and far in a particular place.¹¹ Let's now look at how the creation of the world and the poetry that remembers it brings such a place-world into relief for us.

The Sense of Place

It is no accident that the burial of his umbilical cord in the Kuchumatan Mountains (as we just saw in his poem 'Ombligo') functions to centre Montejo's thought of the American Tropics in his poetry and anthropology. In the account of creation given in *Popul Vuh* (2003) - a central text not only for understanding the Maya but also for understanding literature of indigenous people throughout the Americas, as has been argued by Gordon Brotherston¹² - we are told that in the beginning, after the creation of the world: 'All then was measured and staked out into four divisions, doubling over and stretching the measuring cords of the womb of sky and the womb of earth.'¹³ Initially, there was water 'all alone,' and sky 'all

¹⁰ Victor Montejo, *Sculpted Stones*, pp, 88 - 89.

¹¹ Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World*, 2nd edition (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

¹² Gordon Brotherston, *Book of the Fourth World: Reading the Native Americas through their Literature* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 1992).

¹³ Allen J. Christenson, *Popul Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya* (New York: O Books, 2003) p. 65.

alone,' but when the earth juts into the sky out of the water, the sky and earth are brought into relation to one another, forming the constitutive relation of all relations necessary for a world. This relation of earth and sky, or the world, takes place in and through its measurement, and without it there is no sense of place, and no world.

If, however, the birth of the world performed in the tying-together of sky and earth is measured by the umbilical cords of the womb of sky and womb of earth, setting out the four divisions from the centre of the world, this is just the beginning. For good measure, the gods thought, the wonder of a world of things held together in the relation of sky and earth needs to be remembered and praised, so this creation of the world could not be complete until the successful creation of human beings who, with the help of the Council Book (the *Popul Vuh*), could keep the days and re-enact - or renew - the act of creating the world. Without both the measurement of the world and its remembrance, then, there is no sense of place in a world of things in relation to one another, only of discrete elements - water all alone, or sky all alone without relation, and so without the interconnections that define a place.

This vision of creation and its necessary daily remembrance is echoed in many ways, according to Friedel, Schele, and Parker, who point out that one may see a repetition of the creation of the world in a variety of basic acts. For example:

The very act of preparing a plot of land for growing food - the clearing and measuring out of rectilinear spaces - echoes Creation mythology thousands of years old. Before cutting down the trees and brush, a devout Yukatek farmer will make offerings at the center of his field. His field has four corners and four side sides like the original order established in Creation...He marks the corners and sides of his field, just as First Father lifted up the sky and created a house with four sides and four corners.¹⁴

This is one of the multiple examples of the significance of the centring of life in connection to the four cardinal directions, which thereby creates a pattern of five cardinal directions - or (in Latin) a quincunx. According to William Hanks, this pattern is seen throughout Maya language and culture: 'Altars, yards, cornfields, the earth, the sky, and the highest

¹⁴ David Friedel, Linda Schele and Joy Parker, *Maya Cosmos: Three thousand Years on the Shaman's Path* (New York: Perennial Publishing, 2001), p. 130.

atmospheres are described in terms of the five point cardinal frame.’¹⁵ And, in the succinct phrasing of Vogt, we see that ‘[h]ouses and fields are small scale models of the quincuncial cosmogony.’¹⁶ Within the context of this cosmogony, the intercardinal positions are crucial for situating the altars, yards, cornfields and so on, but what we want to underscore here is the act of centering that occurs when a term like ‘the navel of the world’ is used to designate a small but central hill in Zinacantan.¹⁷

This moveable, centring, quincuncial perspective is also embodied in a poem of Montejo's entitled ‘The Five Directions.’ Montejo begins with the rising of the sun in the east of his country, but the threads of light (along the warp and woof of east / west and north / south) are woven or tied together at the centre or navel of the world:

The sun will travel slowly
from east to west
and likewise shine
from north to south,
though it will be clearest
in the center,
The navel of the world.¹⁸

Of particular interest here is the temporal character of the light - the way it can be traced ‘slowly’ from East to West, along with the active *shining* of light from north to south. What this suggests is that the ‘center’ is as temporal as it is physical:

Cocks will crow loudly
when dawn appears
in the East of our country.
The smiling sun will climb

¹⁵ William Hanks, *Referential Practice, Language and Lived Space Among the Maya* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 349

¹⁶ Evon Z. Vogt, *Tortillas for the Gods: A Symbolic Analysis of Zinacantan Rituals* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 58.

¹⁷ *Maya Cosmos*, pp. 123-126.

¹⁸ Victor Montejo, *Sculpted Stones*, p 21.

with the bustle of melodious birds
and light will flash
in the cones of distant volcanoes.¹⁹

Our focus is on an *event* of the sky becoming light, filled with the sound of birds, and - in a flash - meeting the earth, the volcanoes jutting into the sky.

This echoes *Popul Vuh* where, as we have seen, the world comes into being when things come together and are remembered. In *Popul Vuh*, this idea is underscored by the account of how- without memory - things fall apart, and the world dissolves. We see this in the first attempt to make a human being using mud. This being could not even remember its own form, much less the world, and dissolved. When the people made of wood, the manikins, failed to care for the things of the world, to hold them in their memory and be thankful for them, the things rose up against their 'masters' in the 'humiliation' that included the great flood that dissolved all of creation. The flip side of the idea that memory plays a creative role in holding the world together is the idea that without language there would be no world at all. We have seen that, initially, there was the sky 'alone,' not in relation to anything else. And there was the murmuring of the water 'alone,' not in relation to anything else. But with the word of the gods, including Sudden Thunderbolt and New Thunderbolt, mountains thrust out of the waters into the sky, and sky and earth are joined in relation to each other. In a flash of lighting, then, the power to bring together what is near and far constitutes the world. This constitutive act is repeated in the performance of reading *Popul Vuh*:

It takes a long performance and account to complete the lighting of all the
sky-earth:
the fourfold siding, fourfold cornering,
measuring, fourfold staking,
halving the cord, stretching the cord
in the sky, on the earth,
the four sides, the four corners, as it is said,

¹⁹ IBID.

by the Maker, Modeler,
mother-father of life, of humankind,
giver of breath, giver of heart,
bearer, upbringer in the light that lasts
of those born in the light, begotten in the light;
worrier, knower of everything, whatever there is;
sky-earth, lake-sea.²⁰

As we saw earlier, the sky-earth, or world, is created and opens out in the four-fold directions as the umbilical cords of Heart of Sky and Heart of Earth are tied together and stretched out. If the light is clearest at the centre, the navel of the world, it may be because where sky and earth meet and the four corners emerge, at the navel of a new world, there is a kind of clearing that occurs that makes possible the thought of the possibility of humanity.

Such was the formation of the earth when it was brought forth by the Heart of Sky, Heart of Earth, as they are called, since they were the first to think of it. The sky was set apart, and the earth was set apart in the midst of the waters.

Such was their plan when they thought, when they worried about the completion of their work.²¹

What they 'worried about' in thinking of the 'completion of their work' was a being who would be able to be a 'keeper of days,' who could understand, remember, and be thankful for the world that was created. It took the gods several tries to get it right, which underscores the way creation is a repetitive, temporal process - creation takes place, but it also takes time. In the same way, the re-creation of the world through the performance or reading of *Popul Vuh* by a keeper of days is a repetitive, temporal process, which creates the world anew each time.²²

²⁰ Dennis Tedlock, *Popul Vuh: The Definitive Edition of the Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life and the Glories of Gods and Kings*, Revised Edition (New York: Touchstone Books, 1996), pp. 63-64.

²¹ IBID, p. 66.

²² IBID p. 63.

The gods needed to repeat their acts of creation because their creations could not keep the days and be thankful. Then, when they did create beings capable of remembering and understanding the bringing-together of things, they discovered that these men of maize could do this too well. As the new beings said, 'we've understood | what is far and near, | and we've seen what is great and small | under the sky, on the earth.' To underscore this, the narrative then recounts: 'They understand everything perfectly, they sighted the four sides, the four corners in the sky, on the earth, and this doesn't sound good to the builder and sculptor,' who think that while it would be good for them to see what is nearby, a portion of the face of the earth, seeing the near and the far brought together makes them like gods. So, 'They were blinded as the face of a mirror is breathed upon'.²³ *Popul Vuh*, however, speaks of knowledge gained by those shamans who read it and know the Maya calendar:

They know whether war would occur; everything they saw was clear to them. Whether there would be death, or whether there would be famine, or whether quarrels would occur, they knew it for certain, since there was a place to see it, there was a book. Council Book [Popul Vuh] was their name for it'.²⁴

The profound acceptance of the temporal process of keeping days, of the limits placed on our understanding of the lighting of the world, so that we must return again and again to the lighting of the world as it is given in *Popul Vuh*, as well as attend to each new day as significant in its own right, is echoed in the following passage of Montejo's poem:

I believe in the avian light
in the center of America
that greets the lovely dawning of day
in the East
and knows how to say goodbye
to the dark evening
of the West.²⁵

²³ IBID, p. 148.

²⁴ IBID, p. 192.

²⁵ Montejo, *Sculpted Stones*, p. 23.

The light is avian because with the dawning of a new day the sky becomes not only light but also filled with the sound of birds. In a double-gesture concerning loss and rebirth that is now familiar to us, this avian light 'knows how to say goodbye' to the day as the sun sets but also knows how to greet 'the lovely dawning of day.' This capacity, it will come as no surprise to us to find, emerges from an almost erased Maya sacred geography:

These are the five directions
according to Mayan astronomers:
The red dawn of day (East).
The dying black of evening (West).
The white of the chilly North.
The yellow power of the South;
and in the center of the world
the intense blue-green
of the tropics.²⁶

In addition, then, to holding together the East and the West through the keeping of days, the avian light at the centre of the world also weaves together the North and the South with the East and the West:

I believe in the avian light of the tropics
that pursues its fugitive arc
from North to South
and South to North
when the cold comes
making bite-marks
with its cold white fangs.²⁷

²⁶ IBID, p. 21.

²⁷ IBID, p. 23.

The centre or navel of the world, then, figured in the *temporal* avian light of the tropics, is not a point in space so much as it is the holding together, keeping, or weaving of the four directions.

The five directions Montejo articulates for us here, when taken together, give us an implicit poetics of creation, an opening of the world that gathers together what is near and far in a particular place, but the key here is that the intercardinal directions have to be taken together. To take only the East and West, and to divide them, is to forget the temporal event of the sky becoming light and filled with the sound of birds.

How beautiful to see the world
through the Maya prism
with its five cardinal directions.
Can this be learned by Westerners
who see just two directions:
East and West?

What do the birds,
wrapped in their melodious song,
know about the arms race
between East and West?²⁸

The East / West divide also leaves out the role of the imagination in relation to nature, since the 'leaping deer,' who are 'symbols of good luck,' know nothing about '*odios diplomaticos*' between East and West. And children who have just been born are likewise positioned outside the bounds of an East / West divide, so that they do not yet know the reductive world produced by this dichotomy, still prevalent today (though no longer in the form of the Cold War that had such violent consequences in Guatemala).²⁹ Rather than beginning with a binary division, then, Montejo seeks to begin with a quincuncial sharing (out) of the world:

More than ever I believe

²⁸ IBID, p. 21.

²⁹ IBID, pp. 22 -23.

as the ancient Maya believed
in the five sacred colors
that rule the world's directions.³⁰

From within the avian blue-green light of the tropics, evoking not only the quetzal feathers but also the blue of Heart of Sky and the green of Heart of Earth, we can see the world in such a way that it is held or woven together, and we can, as humans (in the account of the *Popul Vuh*) were meant to do, keep the days and be thankful.

When we learn to see the world
like human beings,
we'll see that life is very beautiful,
an unfolded flower
that won't bloom twice.³¹

Given the temporal character of this avian green-blue lighting of the world in and through which the world unfolds itself, it is difficult to understand in what sense it is a centre. Perhaps it might be clearer to think, as we have seen Friedel, Schele and Parker do, of a 'centering' that takes place in this quincuncial cosmogony.³²

Place as Palimpsest

*A layered location replete with human histories and memories, place has width as well as depth. It is about connections, what surrounds it, what formed it, what happened there, what will happen there.*³³

— Lucy Lippard, *The Lure of the Local*

³⁰ IBID, p. 23.

³¹ IBID, p. 23.

³² *Maya Cosmos*, pp. 123-176.

³³ Lucy R. Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: The New Press, 1997).

Is the poetic cosmogony we have just sketched out sufficient to explain how Montejo finds his way about this landscape of exile and return, of loss and renewal?

Drawing on Lucy Lippard's suggestive formulation in the epigraph above, we might refine this question further to ask: How do we readers, like Montejo, immerse ourselves in the layers 'replete with histories and memories', the connections that 'surround' and 'form' a place, deal with the loss of 'what happened there', all the while recognizing the promise or possibility (which is not a given, nor a prediction) of 'what will happen there?'

Perhaps one place to start such an inquiry is the concept of 'palimpsest' with which Lippard is working. What does it mean to understand place as a palimpsest?

In a remarkable installation about Retreat Plantation on St. Simon's Island, an artist and a historian see in the term 'palimpsest' a way to come to grips with the difficulty of envisioning Retreat Plantation as a place over time.³⁴ So: that the sole remaining still-standing quarters of the enslaved people who lived on the plantation has become a gift shop at the Plantation Golf Course (of Sea Island Golf Courses) is more than an irony of history, it is an almost erased, not quite legible, but still significant feature of a place considered as a palimpsest. To this image we can add the graveyard of enslaved inhabitants of Retreat Plantation that is just out of bounds (but still in play) at the golf course, along with the tabby ruins of a plantation 'slave hospital' that adds local color and a sense of 'authentic' history to the grounds of The Cloister Resort. Juxtapositions of images like these enable us to see history take place, or become implaced, in its layers. We can lament the time-space compression of a tourist industry that silences the former inhabitants of the plantation, but then we realize that the plantation itself (and its use of tabby materials first used by native inhabitants) is connected to the displacement of indigenous people on the island - who were themselves located in a complicated network of places and affiliations. Rather than an exercise in nostalgia for some 'authentic' understanding of a place, then, the installation becomes an inquiry into how we might situate ourselves in relation to a palimpsest-place that, while 'socially constructed' in relation to global economies of colonialism and tourism, nevertheless has a depth that cannot (quite) be erased. This reminds us that places are composed of multiple connections and layers that give our experiences of them dimensions of width and depth without locking us into - but also not denying as part of the equation -

³⁴ Melanie Pavich-Lindsay and Lisa Tuttle, *Retreat: Palimpsest of a Georgia Sea Island Plantation* (Clark Atlanta University Galleries, 2001).

either lamentation of the shallowness of a sense of place in a plantation-turned-resort or reactionary affirmations of nostalgic identity that endure as essences in an otherwise changeable world.

As in the palimpsest of Retreat Plantation, Montejo's testimony in his work as a whole calls upon us to respond in ways that neither simply affirm nor jettison our attachments and identifications. The complicated character of this gesture owes something to the complicated character of mourning and melancholia as reactions to loss, especially if we broaden the concepts to include societal reactions to loss that occur in social change. Here we see the possibility, pursued in a recent anthology on loss, edited by David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, of using the concepts of melancholia and mourning in a context that does not focus on the individual so much as on socio-historical fields of inquiry.³⁵ This possibility has interesting consequences for our study of Montejo who, as an 'ambassador of culture' in Kirsten Silva Gruesz's useful phrase, comes to represent not only a Maya identity, but also the processes of change and loss places and cultures may undergo.

Whatever else we might say about these concepts 'mourning' and 'melancholia', as responses to loss, they have to be understood in relation to complex layers of attachments and identifications, which cannot be jettisoned all at once when we have lost something to which we are attached or with which we identify. Because the object is lost to us, the attempt to affirm and maintain our connections to the object can open a kind of wound that saps energy from us. On the other hand, the expenditure of energy involved in jettisoning one's attachments to and identifications with an object all at once is thought by Freud to be prohibitive; because our relation to the object is made up of 'innumerable single impressions (unconscious traces of them),' the libido can detach itself from the object only 'bit by bit.' If the work of mourning gets short-circuited when the focus is not so much on a lost object as on a loss of the ego, as Freud at least sometimes seems to suggest, it remains the case that we cannot simply affirm or jettison the layers of attachments and identifications that have accreted over time. We keep our connections, to a certain extent, but we also uncouple our connections, bit by bit, over time, until with the passage of time the links become less difficult to break off. So if places may be understood as palimpsests, sedimentary records of social and cultural change, our attachments and identifications with places have about them

³⁵ David L. Eng and David Kazanjian eds., *Loss* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

something of the character of a palimpsest as well. This means that when a place is lost to us we have the capacity to 'get over' our loss, partially, over time, but also to stay attached to what we have lost, or at least to the wound in our ego that marks our sense of loss.³⁶

Freud's work tends to be dismissive of the strategy of coping with loss through a melancholy fixation on a lost ideal, and has a parallel in Benjamin's critique of a 'historicist' identification with a 'lost' past which has been idealized by the 'victors,' which he then contrasts to the work of historical materialists who uncouple our identifications and attachments layer by layer through reading history 'against the grain.' The attempt of the historicist to focus on the past alone stems, he supposes, from a kind of acedia, or sorrow of the world (as Thomas Aquinas defines it). Rather than acknowledge loss as central to history and seek to work out the implications of that loss for our lives, the historicist focuses on his or her identification with the past. By substituting the identification with the past for the lost past, the historicist seeks to shore up the sense of loss by internalizing the loss of the past into him- or herself. Thus, what has been lost becomes experienced as a loss in his / her ego, but in a way that cannot acknowledge it. This results in the seemingly 'blind' affirmation of the nostalgic account of what has been lost; to question seriously the transmission of and loss of cultural treasures in terms other than those of our primary identification would be to be unable to sustain the fiction of an identification with the past that will make up for its loss.³⁷

This way of understanding mourning and melancholia in a social register may seem all too familiar to us. People are displaced. Places die. We confront, again and again, the loss of the possibility of inhabiting a world (through historical forces we narrate as 'colonization', 'modernization', 'globalization', 'governmentality', etc.). Like Benjamin's angel of history, we see disaster pile upon disaster with a wearying ever-changing sameness. How, we wonder, are we to respond to this otherwise than with sadness in and anger at our helpless complicity with the loss of whole worlds? We might ask of Benjamin and Freud, what enables us to read history against the grain rather than short-circuit the work of mourning through focusing on the wound one feels and substituting for an attachment to the object a

³⁶ Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia,' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological works of Sigmund Freud, Vol XIV*, trans. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 2001), pp. 243-258.

³⁷ Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), pp. 253-264.

narcissistic identification with those who have defined the lost object? What enables us, in Benjamin's terms, to 'seize history' in a 'moment of danger' rather than be captivated by it?

Derek Walcott, in a colonial register, leads us to a similar question. Walcott makes a distinction between the history of the New World as a causal chain and the myth of the New World as a place where 'everything is renewed'. Literature that 'serves the muse of History' then becomes 'chained' to the past, and is a literature of revenge or remorse. Poets of the New World (from 'Whitman to Neruda', Walcott says) who, like Adam, see themselves at the creation of the world, seek to break the chains of history and renew the world. This distinction has more to do with the purposes of the writer than the genres of discourse. Novels and other forms of literature share narrative structures with history, and remind us that 'in time every event becomes an exertion of memory and is thus subject to invention', making them more subject to the power of creation at the heart of myth and poetry than to the chains of cause and effect. At the same time, there are 'poets of the Third World' whose poetry, in service to the muse of History, respects 'only incoherence or nostalgia'. As with Montejó, more important than the genre of discourse is the purpose to which it is put. Whether in poetic or narrative form, there is a poetic and mythic attention to the possibility of creation understood as always including rebirth and renewal. This leads to the question: If history (and the history of colonization and slavery in particular) prompts us to think that all history can do is 'what the past always does: suffer, and stare' (as he puts it in *Omeros*³⁸)—an image of our inability to free ourselves from the chains of cause and effect in our apprehension of history—how is poetry as an affirmation (however conflicted) of creation (and of the creation of the New World in particular) possible?³⁹

Montejó, of course, is able to draw on what amounts to a poetics of Maya cosmogony in a kind of answer to these questions. After all, loss is built into the act of creation, with the world undergoing several 'humiliations' before humankind was successfully created. Even then, humans lost their ability to see the world completely, making them dependent on the supplement of the *Popul Vuh*. Most importantly, however, is the way the gods require a memory of creation to 'complete the lighting of all the sky-earth'. Each time the story of creation is retold, the world is renewed. The keeping of days is itself

³⁸ Derek Walcott, *Omeros* (New York: Noonday Press, 1990), p. 15.

³⁹ Derek Walcott, 'The Muse of History', in *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1998), pp. 36-64.

an act of creation, of renewal or rebirth. This is especially true when the original manuscript of the *Popul Vuh* is either hidden or gone, because the *Popul Vuh* must now be told amidst the 'preaching about God' in 'the time of Christendom'. Written in a transliteration of the K'iche language, it is created anew, even while remembering its loss of place in the world. Montejo, however, in drawing on a poetics of Maya cosmogony, does not (as Derek Walcott sometimes seems to do) simply privilege poetry over history; nor does he (as Benjamin sometimes seems to do), in focusing on loss and the absence of linear progress, assume the inescapability of the perspective of the angel of history. Rather, Montejo's work testifies to the power of the perspective of a man who understands that *sharp* distinctions between melancholy and mourning, history and poetry, serve other purposes than that of moving toward a rebirth of Maya worlds and villages.

We see this attitude at work in a later book, *Voices from Exile* (1999), which examines the displacement of a people through a study of Maya who have moved from the Kuchumatan Highlands in Guatemala to refugee camps in Chiapas, Mexico. Exile is often defined by the place from which one has been displaced, but the voices from exile are not nostalgic as much as articulations of different kinds of implacement after this general displacement. For example, in certain cases people from different villages and languages lived in the 'same' camp. Clearly, their initial experiences would have been quite different, but over time the importance of Spanish as a medium for communication led to greater knowledge of Spanish (for those women, for example, who had not previously had an opportunity to learn market Spanish). And children from different villages who grew up and were educated together sometimes learned more than one Maya language along with their Spanish.⁴⁰ On their return to Guatemala, whether in a newly established village for repatriation or to their home village, these experiences would lay the groundwork for what Kay Warren calls a pluricultural society. Montejo's recognition of this leads him to his latest book, *Maya Intellectual Renaissance: Identity, Representation, and Leadership* (2005), which seeks to think through the implications of a rebirth of a Maya world.⁴¹ What might it mean - in spite of the violence, in spite of the loss of a traditional sense of place, in spite of

⁴⁰ Victor Montejo, *Voices from Exile: Violence and Survival in Modern Maya History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999).

⁴¹ Victor Montejo, *Maya Intellectual Renaissance: Identity, Representation and Leadership* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005).

everything - to underscore the possibility of inhabiting a renewed human world in the American Tropics?

For Whom Is Montejo's Testimony Given?

Our guiding question has been one of how (in what forms), when (in which event, across what periods of time, according to what tempo), where (in what place or across what places), by whom (which subject, citizen, community, society, world) and for whom - with what purpose - do responses to loss *take place*? We have sought to weave together loosely responses to these questions through focusing on the thread of Montejo's response to loss. We are perhaps now in a position to focus on the purpose of Montejo's testimony.

The strategy of Montejo's collected essays on the Pan-Maya movement after the war and its consequences for thinking about issues of identity, representation, and leadership, is roughly the following. There is a Maya tradition - it is not the province of any particular Maya language or group, but in the interconnecting family resemblances (as Wittgenstein might put it) it can be seen - and that plurivocal tradition is in the process of being renewed yet again. Take these practices and ways of speaking and seeing as a kind of bedrock - not one that cannot be worn away or lost, but a sedimentary ground for getting on with things - and see in the more and more finely grained understandings we have of the plurivocal tradition the possibility of a common sharing (out) - or *partage*, in Jean-Luc Nancy's terms - of 'being all together, all and each one among all.'⁴² This possibility of a democratic culture is marked by Montejo at the level of the efforts of Maya self-determination (which for Montejo consists primarily of weaving together the different voices of a Maya tradition and its changes rather than creating a separate nation-state), at the level of national culture and feeling (which for Montejo consists in demythifying racism and weaving together a plurivocal Maya tradition with a *mestizaje* conception of being ladino in order to enable indigenous people to live with other citizens of Guatemala as indigenous and as citizens), or at the level of the Americas (where Montejo focuses on the importance of addressing the same issues he is addressing in Guatemala within the hemisphere as a whole). In response to the loss of sense felt generally because of colonization, the Cold War, and globalization, he focuses on

⁴² Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Truth of Democracy*, trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

the sense of a *Mayab'* world that nevertheless has been, is, and will be - though not necessarily in a continuous way. It is perhaps worth remembering that the ancient Maya, in 'keeping the days', worked within a calendrical system that was able to situate or 'place' the days in relation to multiple cycles of years. A *k'atun* cycle refers to 20 Maya years, and each *k'atun* has its own prophecies and meanings associated with it, which can shape the meanings of the days within that *k'atun* cycle. There is, then, always the possibility of disruption between *k'atun*-cycles. There is also disruption involved in the *b'aktun*, the completion of 144,000 days or 20 *k'atun*. Montejo refers to this when he notes (prior to 2012) that Maya leaders are aware of the coming-to-completion of the 13th *b'aktun* (in the long count), and that past prophecies concerning the coming 14th *b'aktun* tends to create a 'millennial' attitude to the future of the Maya and all people in the Americas. Their attitude, however, is neither catastrophic nor messianic. Rather, they focus on things taking place in such a way as to see events come into being that are resonant with both past and future, but which are neither completely grounded in the past nor come to completion in the future (whether catastrophically or redemptively). Thus, rather than the traditionalist focus on what has been, on the one hand, or the revolutionary focus on what must be, on the other, Montejo advocates a 'regenerationist' stance that looks backwards and forwards simultaneously, all the while keeping a sharp eye on the injustices as well as the possibilities of the present moment, which will give way to another *k'atun* or cycle of 20 Maya years.

The key point here is that there is a difference between *having* a place-world and *making* a place-world. Traditionalists and revolutionaries each focus on possession rather than creation. Can we reclaim our place in the world? Can we re-place those in positions of power? These questions are expressions of desire to *have* a place - with its attendant powers - in order to create the world anew, but Montejo sees in each of these ways of engaging the world a dead-end, one that does not lead to the regenerationist style of leadership that he sees as necessary to weave together the Maya and the ladino in Guatemala in a pluricultural nation. Can we lay claim to Maya traditions, he would ask, without claiming them as belonging only to the Maya? Ladino appropriation of Maya tradition is nothing new (just read Miguel Angel Asturias!), but what might be new is a trust in the possibility of the tradition being regenerated in its mixture with ladino life and culture. 'It may be selling out if one transforms oneself into a "Madino" (Maya-ladino) from a hunger for power for oneself, but not if the goal is to place the Maya agenda in the foreground, equal with the ladino

agenda.⁴³ This potential restructuring of cultural discourse can occur only in a world where there is a shared aim to bring about a unified sense of place to a pluricultural society, but this shared aim can only come about through a Maya renaissance, a rebirth of a world that has always already been a weaving-together of different voices, but which, like a promise, is also always still to come.

As a result, in Montejo's more specific terms, we might rather ask of the angel of history whether it is possible to endure melancholy but refuse to give in to it; to attend to changes in tradition that occur in voices from exile, without forgetting their ties to the traditional colonial wound marked, for example, in the *Codex Florentino*; to transcribe / translate / transform oral traditions that are becoming lost by writing them down, but not without insisting on the irreducible oral setting from which these works emerge; to engage in a critique of continuing appropriations and losses of the Maya, but also to situate for us the rebirth of Maya ways of life as a promise of democracy to come, of being all together, all and each one among all?

⁴³ Victor Montejo, *Maya Intellectual Renaissance: Identity*.

Bibliography

Benjamin, Walter, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968).

Brotherston, Gordon, *Book of the Fourth World: Reading the Native Americas through their Literature* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 1992).

Casey, Edward S., *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World*, 2nd edition (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

Christenson, Allen J., *Popul Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya* (New York: O Books, 2003).

Eng, David L. and David Kazanjian eds., *Loss* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

Freud, Sigmund, 'Mourning and Melancholia,' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological works of Sigmund Freud, Vol XIV*, trans. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 2001).

Friedel, David, Linda Schele and Joy Parker, *Maya Cosmos: Three thousand Years on the Shaman's Path* (New York: Perennial Publishing, 2001).

Gruesz, Kirsten Silva, *Ambassadors of Culture: The Transamerican Origins of Latino Writing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

Hanks, William, *Referential Practice, Language and Lived Space Among the Maya* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

Lippard, Lucy R., *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (New York: The New Press, 1997).

Montejo, Victor, *El Q'anil: Man of Lightning*, trans. by Wallace Kaufman and Susan G. Rascon (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001).

— *Maya Intellectual Renaissance: Identity, Representation and Leadership* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005).

— *Sculpted Stones*, trans. by Victor Parera (Willimantic: Curbstone Press, 1995).

— *Testimony: Death of a Guatemalan Village*, trans. by Victor Perera (Willimantic: Curbstone Press, 1987).

— *Voices from Exile: Violence and Survival in Modern Maya History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999).

Nancy, Jean-Luc, *The Truth of Democracy*, trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010).

Olaverri, Juan Diéguez, 'A Los Cuchamatanes',
<<http://www.poemasde.net/a-los-cuchumatanes-juan-diequez-olaverri/>> [accessed September 8 2017].

Pavich-Lindsay, Melanie, and Lisa Tuttle, *Retreat: Palimpsest of a Georgia Sea Island Plantation* (Clark Atlanta University Galleries, 2001).

Tedlock, Dennis, *Popul Vuh: The Definitive Edition of the Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life and the Glories of Gods and Kings*, Revised Edition (New York: Touchstone Books, 1996).

Vogt, Evon Z., *Tortillas for the Gods: A Symbolic Analysis of Zinacantan Rituals* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976).

Walcott, Derek, *Omeros* (New York: Noonday Press, 1990).

— 'The Muse of History', in *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1998).

Warren, Kay B., *Indigenous Movements and their Critics: Pan-Maya Activism in Guatemala* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).