

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Mayanists' Methods and Tradition Discourses: Research and the Politics of Maya Language and Cultural Practice

Walter E. Little

University at Albany, SUNY, US

wlittle@albany.edu

This essay reviews the following works:

The Ch'ol Maya of Chiapas. Edited by Karen Bassie-Sweet, with Robert M. Laughlin, Nicholas A. Hopkins, and Andrés Brizuela Casimir. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015. Pp. ix + 251. \$45.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780806147024.

Wellness beyond Words: Maya Compositions of Speech and Silence in Medical Care. By T. S. Harvey. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013. Pp. vii + 256. \$55.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780826352736.

Maya Market Women: Power and Tradition in San Juan Chamelco, Guatemala. By S. Ashley Kistler. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014. Pp. ix + 160. \$44.68 paperback. ISBN: 9780252079887.

Southern Eastern Huastec Narratives: A Trilingual Edition. Translated and edited by Ana Kondic. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016. Pp. vii + 197. \$24.95 hardcover. ISBN: 9780806151809.

Indigenous Bodies, Maya Minds: Religion and Modernity in a Transnational K'iche' Community. By C. James MacKenzie. Boulder: University Press of Colorado; Albany: Institute for Mesoamerican Studies, 2016. Pp. ix + 368. \$34.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781607325567.

Songs That Make the Road Dance: Courtship and Fertility Music of the Tz'utujil Maya. By Linda O'Brien-Rothe. Forewords by Allen J. Christenson and Sandra L. Orellana. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015. Pp. ix + 244. \$72.93 paperback. ISBN: 9781477305386.

Language and Ethnicity among the K'ichee' Maya. By Sergio Romero. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2015. Pp. ix + 123. \$50.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9781607813972.

The Maya vendors and their families who have been central figures in my anthropological research in Guatemala over the last thirty years would tell my earlier novice ethnographer and Kaqchikel-Maya-language-learner self, "Tawoyob'ej, tatzu', tawak'axaj, Walter, k'a ri, xtawetmaj achike nariyij nawetemaj" (Listen, watch, listen, then, you will learn what you desire to learn), when I eagerly posed question after enthusiastic question. Heeding their advice, I sat watching and listening, often for long periods of silence, learning patience and humility on the way to gaining deeper cultural knowledge of their lives in the marketplace, in homes, and elsewhere. As one K'ichee' Maya vendor from Chichicastenango once told some of my students, "It is easy to lie to foreigners. They ask a lot of questions, but they don't know how to listen." These seven books triggered these memories of self, listening, and language politics. Language and silence matter to contemporary Mayas and, for non-Maya scholars of Maya culture and history, they should matter, too.

Recent Mayanist ethnographic scholarship has put increasing emphasis on language, exploring not just formal linguistic structures and pedagogical practices,¹ but the ways that Maya language use plays out in a wide range of cultural, political, social, and other contexts in which Mayas speak their respective languages. Scholars have used Maya languages, if at all, as a vehicle to getting answers to their scientific questions. For example, John Watanabe's ethnography of Maya life in Santiago Chimaltenango, Guatemala,² and much of the ethnographic output of the Harvard Chiapas Project³ relied on deep knowledge of Maya languages, which distinguished them from many earlier Mayanists such as Ruth Bunzel, Robert Redfield, and Sol Tax, who had marginal competency, at best, in Maya languages.⁴

In the monographs reviewed here, the authors' attention to language in their nuanced analyses contrasts with a nearly forty-year trend in which Maya language use was pushed aside in ethnographic publications to focus on political and social violence. In Guatemala, beginning with the publication of the collections *Harvest of Violence* and *Guatemalan Indians and the State*,⁵ and in Chiapas, Mexico, with publications about the Zapatista uprising in 1994 and its aftermath,⁶ authors paid attention to political conflicts and human rights with less attention to language use.

The subsequent ethnographic literature on Mayas in the 1990s and into the 2000s was conducted in Spanish.⁷ Ironically, what Mayas say about violence, economics, and health programs from distinctly Maya worldviews gets left behind or subsumed by the perspectives of non-Maya nationals and foreigners. When Maya perspectives are present it is often through the lens of Spanish rather than a Maya language,⁸ or through English translations with the original Maya left out.⁹ This is not to imply that these and other ethnographies about Mayas do not make significant scholarly contributions. Although publishing in English and peppering it with ethnographically important Maya words makes the book more accessible to a broader audience, the inclusion of more sustained examples of Maya language use and practice can provide a more direct and far more challenging perspective into the language and cultural practices of Mayas. The authors reviewed here highlight Maya languages to shed light on how language use intersects with social and political issues, showing the multiple ways contemporary Mayas conceive of themselves as parts of complex regional and global politics and social economies.

The case studies discussed represent a fraction of the populations who ethnically self-identify as or are categorized as Mayas. Maya speakers live in Belize, the southern Mexican states of Yucatan, Quintana Roo, Chiapas, Veracruz, Campeche, and Tabasco; Guatemala; and the western part of Honduras; they number over seven million people and speak roughly thirty different languages.¹⁰ How the authors treat language in their respective monographs varies greatly, depending on the focus of their research and how overtly language matters to their arguments and to the Mayas who populate the pages of these books. It would be a mistake to infer that there is a coherent field of Mayan studies from this selection of books, since they are so diverse in their subject matter, methods of inquiry, and theoretical approaches.

¹ See Judith Aissen, Nora C. England, and Roberto Zavala Maldonado, *The Mayan Languages* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

² John M. Watanabe, *Maya Saints and Souls in a Changing World* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992).

³ Evon Zartman Vogt, *Fieldwork among the Maya: Reflections on the Harvard Chiapas Project* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994).

⁴ Ruth Bunzel, *Chichicastenango: A Guatemalan Village* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1952); Robert Redfield, *Chan Kom: A Maya Village* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962 [1934]); Sol Tax, *Penny Capitalism: a Guatemalan Indian Economy*, Smithsonian Institute of Social Anthropology, no. 16 (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1953).

⁵ Robert M. Carmack, ed., *Harvest of Violence: The Maya Indians and the Guatemalan Crisis* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988); Carol Smith, ed., *Guatemalans and the State 1540 to 1988* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990).

⁶ See, among many others, Christine Eber and Christine Kovic, *Women of Chiapas: Making History in Times of Struggle and Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003); June C. Nash, *Mayan Visions: The Quest for Autonomy in an Age of Globalization* (New York: Routledge, 2001); and Shannon Speed, R. Aída Hernández Castillo, and Lynn M. Stephen, *Dissident Women: Gender and Cultural Politics in Chiapas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006).

⁷ See for example, on vendors, Thomas A. Offit, *Conquistadores de la calle: Child Street Labor in Guatemala City* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009); on health, Nicole S. Barry, *Unsafe Motherhood: Mayan Maternal Mortality and Subjectivity in Post-War Guatemala* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013); and on political violence, Diane M. Nelson, *A Finger in the Wound: Body Politics in Quincentennial Guatemala* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), and David Stoll, *Between Two Armies in the Ixil Towns of Guatemala* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

⁸ Carlota McAllister and Diane M. Nelson, *War by Other Means: Aftermath in Post-Genocide Guatemala* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

⁹ Walter E. Little, *Mayas in the Marketplace: Tourism, Globalization, and Cultural Identity* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004); Walter E. Little and Timothy J. Smith, *Mayas in Postwar Guatemala: Harvest of Violence Revisited* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009); John M. Watanabe and Edward F. Fischer, *Pluralizing Ethnography: Comparison and Representation in Maya Cultures, Histories, and Identities* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2004).

¹⁰ Aissen, England, and Zavala Maldonado, *The Mayan Languages*.

Experiences of Language and Methods

In each book, the authors demonstrate how they engage the particular Maya language in which they conducted research, and explain the politics of choosing to do research in that language rather than in Spanish. It is refreshing to see their transparency with respect to how competent they are in their Maya field language and how they mediated deficiencies. For instance, Linda O'Brien-Rothe, in *Songs That Make the Road Dance: Courtship and Fertility Music of the Tz'utujil Maya*, describes the close work that she did with Diego Pop Ajuchan, a trained translator from Santiago Atitlán, where the research was conducted: "Although Diego was a member of Catholic Action, his pride and enthusiasm for explaining the Old Ways to me was a great asset. During our conversations, I gained many basic insights into the meaning of the songs and of the traditions from his explanations, and was able to add to my understanding of Tz'utujil ritual language and develop a simple lexicon" (16). Such practices allowed for a collaborative research approach that was not merely a mechanism to compensate for her language skills but a way to understand the broader uses and meanings of ritual language in songs.

At the opposite end of the Maya language comprehension spectrum is Sergio Romero, who adeptly conducts linguistic and sociolinguistic research in K'ichee' Maya communities in *Language and Ethnicity among the K'ichee' Maya*. His fluency in K'ichee' Maya permitted him "to participate and witness numerous speech events, affording a better understanding of pragmatic context and social meaning" (3).

In *The Ch'ol Maya of Chiapas*, edited by Karen Bassie-Sweet with Robert M. Laughlin, Nicholas A. Hopkins, and Andrés Brizuela Casimir, the authors elected to place Ch'ol Maya language at the forefront of their archaeological, historical, and linguistic analyses. This is essentially a coauthored book that relies on the combined expertise of the authors to describe Ch'ol Maya continuity and change over time. Bassie-Sweet, Hopkins, and Laughlin write most of the chapters, with additional contributions from Christina T. Halperin, Jon Spensard, Marc Zender, Jorge Pérez de Lara, Stanley Guenter; and Alejandro Sheseña. Admittedly, their approach was less interpersonal or ethnographic than in the study by O'Brien-Rothe and, especially, Romero's *Language and Ethnicity among the K'ichee' Maya*, S. Ashley Kistler's *Maya Market Women: Power and Tradition in San Juan Chamelco*, C. James MacKenzie's *Guatemala, Indigenous Bodies, Maya Minds: Religion and Modernity in a Transnational K'ichee' Community*, and T. S. Harvey's *Wellness beyond Words: Maya Compositions of Speech and Silence in Medical Care*.

Tied to the authors' explanations of how they engaged Maya languages as a form of communication and methodological tool are statements about the language politics of speaking Maya languages, something that is clearly evident in the works by Harvey, MacKenzie, and Romero. The examples of K'ichee' Maya language use in Harvey's, MacKenzie's, and Romero's monographs are entwined with the pragmatic politics of being Maya in Guatemala, a country long embroiled in social conflict in which Mayas are economically and politically marginalized.

In order to get at K'ichee' Maya understandings and practices of ethnicity (Romero), religion and spirituality (MacKenzie), and meanings of health (Harvey), these scholars rely on an explicit fusion of ethnographic participant observation and close attention to language use in the communities where they conducted research. MacKenzie's attention to K'ichee' Maya language practices within the contexts of his participation in San Andrés Xecul allows him to better understand the construction of K'ichee' Maya worldviews as they confront contemporary religious change and the challenges that transnational migration for economic and political reasons poses to their ethnic identity.

In a similar vein, Kistler uses a conventional ethnographic approach that relies on a deep knowledge of Q'eqchi' Maya language to understand the relationships between market work, kinship ties, and ethnicity. Harvey and Romero use a more explicitly linguistic methodology that attends to the complicated political and social contexts in which language is used to explore the ways in which Mayas and non-Mayas communicate with each other in health care settings (Harvey) and to demarcate community and ethnic boundaries through speech acts in everyday life, in poetry, and in honorific political speech (Romero).

Although all the monographs discussed in this review reference the history of anti-Maya language politics and the challenges that Mayas, in general, have in navigating Spanish-language political contexts, especially in national-level economic and political spheres, Harvey and Romero take a closer look at the specific ways in which Mayas use language. Romero fuses linguistic and ethnographic methodological approaches to analyze a broad corpus of data drawn from colonial texts, K'ichee' poetry, and extensive interviewing in K'ichee' in order to analyze K'ichee' Mayas' ways of using their language and making microdistinctions between their home community and other K'ichee'-speaking communities. He reveals that economic, social, and political conditions play into the reasons why they make these distinctions with nearby neighbors, as well as the local politics behind code-switching between their language and Spanish.

Harvey, by contrast, addresses the politics of code-switching between the K'ichee' language and Spanish and the translation that goes on within the health care settings in which Mayas participate. Harvey draws on a fairly narrow corpus of data in what he describes as "K'ichee' intracultural therapeutic and cross-cultural biomedical communicative interactions" (8). He considers this language material to be open, ongoing conversations rather than contained, closed interviews. Notably, he brings to this perspective an analytical tool, the polyphonic score, that is used to capture not just what is said, which is standard for ethnographic and linguistic documentation, but "a written description that better represents the multiplicity, movement, and sociotemporal positioning of speakers and speaking in communicative interactions" (33). The transcription, written literally like a musical score, not only illustrates the ways in which people talk over each other and the flexibilities and incongruences in code-switching and interpreting K'ichee'–Spanish exchanges, it shows the silences of and the ethnographic contexts in which the "communicative interactions" occur. Because so many things are happening at once, he had to record the interactions in order to document them in this polyphonic framework.

As productive as Harvey's approach is in health care settings in which multiple people participate beyond the health provider and patient, his methodology and analysis leave out what can be considered closer ethnographic engagement, and give less of a sense of what the interactions mean to the Mayas seeking help for health problems. Although Kistler, MacKenzie, and Romero do not capture the language messiness (and silences) that happens in the marketplaces, family gatherings, community meetings, religious services, and other aspects of life that they observe, their methodological approach allows them to interact with Mayas on a far more interpersonal level, through interviews and conversations, which helps them better understand Mayas' opinions.

Constructing Tradition and Traditional Mayas

Another theme that runs through this set of monographs is the question of and *questioning of* tradition and what is traditionally Maya. The authors invoke Maya tradition in conventional ways using clothing, religion, and ritual to describe Maya practices that are under cultural, economic, and political assault by non-Mayas yet are still maintained from the past to the present. This discourse of continuity is strongest in *Southern Eastern Huastec Narratives: A Trilingual Edition*, edited by Ana Kondic. Kondic clearly delineates what she means by tradition and traditional in the introduction: "These narratives tell of the traditional practices, daily life, and oral literature of the Huastec people from the village of San Francisco Chonda. Although younger generations have been gradually abandoning traditional practices, the older generations preserve the vast knowledge of their cultural heritage" (xi). She adds, "Despite their long-term interactions with non-indigenous people, the villagers' way of life and cultural practices are in many respects still traditional. This book of narratives tries to capture these vanishing voices" (xiv).

In the dozens of instances where Kondic uses the word "tradition" in *Southern Eastern Huastec Narratives*, there is no critical reflection on the concept or examination as to what Huastecs themselves think is traditional. In the meticulously translated Huastec narratives, which describe building houses, planting maize fields, caring for children, making food, and storytelling, among many other activities, Kondic frames them all in ways that emphasize that they are traditional practices. Yet only Leonardo Iglesias Domínguez, her research collaborator, among all the narratives collected, uses terminology that Kondic glosses as "tradition": "*kostuumbre*" (128) and "*chalaplaap*" (130). As is delineated by MacKenzie in his monograph, *costumbre* is not simply "tradition." It would have been useful for her to have addressed these terms directly and discussed why she glossed them as "tradition." Despite the small introductions through the book, in which she frames the narratives as traditional, this was a moment to get at Huastec framings and understandings of tradition and delineate her specific mode of eliciting what is traditional to Huastecs.

While only Iglesias Domínguez specifically mentions "tradition" a few times (119), his usage is contradictory: in one instance he says of a holiday "that we shouldn't lose it, that we always have to celebrate it as before and to continue with our tradition"; when referring to new religious practices, "the tradition that we have now ... is like a tradition and an obligation toward God." In the former instance, tradition is used in the sense of an ongoing practice that has deep historical continuities. In the other usage, it more a practice referencing the future rather than the past that has some kind of imperative to contemporary life.

O'Brien-Rothe and Bassie-Sweet use the concept of tradition in much the same ways as does Kondic—to refer to particular historical continuities and ongoing practices, as Romero and MacKenzie critique in their respective monographs. O'Brien-Rothe, however, additionally frames Tz'utujil Maya traditions as practices that have been under assault by outsiders since the sixteenth century Spanish invasion. In the Bassie-Sweet volume, the authors note similar kinds of pressures on traditions, with the caveat that "while Ch'ol Maya

language has reoccupied the ancient territories, Ch'ol traditions are not present throughout" (37), and that "few communities in the region ... still have a traditional Ch'ol world view" (160). Curiously, none of the authors in the Bassie-Sweet volume address why language use persists and increases, while other practices considered traditional declined. What does this say about Maya language resiliency? The question can be posed to O'Brien-Rothe, too, who leaves such seeming contradictions unexplained.

In the Bassie-Sweet volume, what can be construed as tradition takes form in the ways history is delineated through cultural contact before and after the Spanish invasion, particularly through resistance to Catholicism and persistence of distinctive Ch'ol origin stories and worldviews, as expressed via deities. Drawing on archaeological, ethnohistorical, ethnographic, and folktale research, the authors demonstrate, via a sustained exploration of Thunderbolt and Meteor deities, Ch'ol ideological continuities across time and the specific links to place.

In many ways, what O'Brien-Rothe identifies as tradition is, likewise, an example of Maya resistance to the state and globalization that demonstrates persistence and resilience of distinctively Maya worldviews and practices; one such important practice is songs, which are the vehicle in which she documents Tz'utujil tradition. Like Kondic, O'Brien-Rothe positions herself to get to the places where she can hear the "most traditional music" (13). Throughout the book, she describes what make the songs she recorded and analyzed traditional, as well as providing vignettes as to what threatens their continued use. She writes of the musicians she recorded, "They know this tradition was slipping away and that I was making a copy that could last" (16). She concludes the book by stating the "collection of traditional" songs, "is not unlike the water in a basin one might dip into the waters of Lake Atitlán. It contains only a taste, a shallow cupful of a great spring of ancient tradition" (191). Her quest to document cultural practices that "have their roots in pre-Columbian and Spanish colonial times" (191) is romantic and, I would add, tragic, much in the way that Boasian salvage anthropology such as hers and Kondic's can be, as they each carefully document practices that may disappear. The unanswered and interesting question, at least for me who has spent some long nights in the Santa Cruz *cofradía* (a hierarchical religious fraternity in charge of caring for saints, among other things, in Santiago Atitlán) and heard some of these songs, however, is why these long-standing forms continue to decline in relevance to Tz'utujil Mayas in Santiago Atitlán, who express their distinctive Maya culture and politics in their language in other song forms like rap and hip-hop.

Although the uses of the concept of tradition tend to be ambiguously conservative, something that each of the authors reviewed here indulge in, Romero documents multiple places where K'ichee' Mayas reference things and behaviors as traditional. Whether it is clothing or particular ways of speaking, Romero lets the subjects speak for themselves and, then, illustrates the ways in which tradition is constructed via material, social, and language practices. Early in his narrative he links "emblematic cultural artifacts such as local dialects, traditional dress, ritual calendars, and artisanal specializations into iconic indices of ethnic affiliation" (33). Later, he goes into greater detail of how K'ichee' Mayas' references to clothing (64–65, 66) and food (68) and authoritative speech (in Chapters 5 and 6) are used but are categories culturally and socially constructed by Mayas themselves. In concluding his monograph, he explains that the K'ichee' Maya poet "Akabal continues the innovative role played by the K'ichee' in fashioning new ways of articulating tradition and social change" (105), suggesting that K'ichee' Mayas' uses and conceptualizations of what tradition is and can be are contemporary social and cultural processes, much in the way that Iglesias Domínguez uses the concept in Kondic's book.

MacKenzie notes that "tradition is born alongside modernity" (18) and is a way to frame the subjects; essentially, what is tradition is a problem of those who do the studying rather than for those being studied. To a great extent, MacKenzie is dealing with the force of tradition as a framing mechanism in Maya and Mesoamerican studies. In order to focus on Maya-specific constructions of tradition and modernity, he "consider[s] each of the key religious options Xeculenses have cultivated in terms of their position on temporality; the relative value of, and distinction between, the traditional and the modern" (21). In a chapter dedicated to the concept of *costumbre*, he is clear that, when he or the K'ichee' Mayas of Xecul use the term it is more than a way to index tradition or processes with deep historical links. Rather, it can be "understood as a kind of substrate—a dialectic and ultimately ineffable and contingent source of praxis—that informs identity and behavior without demanding conscious rationalization" (62). In various instances in his monograph, MacKenzie addresses the attitude that Mayas are regarded as in stasis with unchanging worldviews and clinging to practices that are out of sync with the contemporary world in which they live. When the Catholic Church uses such rhetoric, for example (139–142), it frames Mayas in a way that justifies particular social, political, and economic actions on the part of the church and the state. Mayas, themselves, as MacKenzie notes, use tradition as a frame to counterpose their cultural religious practices to those of non-Mayas and

the nation-state. Tradition, then, is a positioning by Mayas themselves and by others through which everyday religious practice and existing in the world play out. It frames the ways in which Mayas interact with each other and with outsiders from within Xecul and beyond, as they participate in transnational migration for economic and political reasons. Indeed, as they migrate to the United States, they describe their religious practices as “a tradition that we bring with us” (312), which delineates their ethnic identity and help them live and work.

Although Kistler uses the concept of tradition gratuitously in much the same ways as the other scholars use it in their monographs, she references various other Mayanist anthropologists who also do the same. What is important to recognize about Kistler's use of “tradition” when she discusses ethnographic data is that it is tradition as understood by the Q'eqchi' Mayas of San Juan Chamelco, and markets are one very important kind of tradition to them (3, 42); so are “cosmological beliefs, including the petition-for-marriage ceremony (*tz'amaank*) and notions of disease and healing” (22). She notes, as have several other ethnographers, that “by participating in global capitalism through agriculture and craft production, practices that have traditionally defined Maya life, Guatemalans reinforce a historical sense of highland Maya identity” (12). In other words, what is defined as tradition is tied to being in the contemporary world, a point also made by MacKenzie and Romero. As Kistler observes, even among various religious, political, and economic factions in San Juan Chamelco, there is a consensus that tradition is ongoing practices that include kinds of dress and uses of Q'eqchi' Maya language that, according to one of her informants, Doña Blanca, serve “to remind people what the ancestors were like, to remember everything” (34). In a book about markets and vendors, it is not surprising that her subjects place great emphasis on this significance of the sociality, economics, and histories of the marketplace. According to Kistler, “Chamelquenos classify the market as a center of Q'eqchi' personhood and the embodiment of ancestral tradition” (42). Elsewhere she observes, “Vendors and municipal officials alike recognize marketing as a tradition passed down to them by their Maya ancestors” (48).

What Q'eqchi' Maya share with those described in MacKenzie's and Romero's monographs, and hinted at in the comment by Iglesias Domínguez in Kondic's monograph, is the perspective that tradition is a way of indexing practices and obligations that members of a community share with each other. As Kistler beautifully illustrates throughout her monograph, the tradition that imbues the marketplace and marketing, from both consumer and vendor perspectives, matters most in serving as a vehicle to integrate kin and members of the community around core sets of values and practices. It is not just about making money but about recognizing relationships—past, present, and even future. To understand tradition as a way of merely indexing the past through memory or persistent, unchanging practices would be to miss the ways in which Q'eqchi' Mayas in San Juan Chamelco and those described in the other monographs conceive of and practice tradition.

Of the authors in this review, Harvey evokes the term tradition with far less frequency and most often as a critique of Mayanist ethnographers' and linguists' tendencies to “focus [on] ‘traditional’ Maya (indigenous) beliefs” (4), especially with respect to “‘traditional’ healing practices and more recently health seeking in biomedical contexts” (77). When he does reference tradition and the traditional, it is to question it, as he does when discussing “Maya mobile medical vendors ... that are neither strictly definable as ‘traditional’ nor ‘biomedical’” (77). It is this sense of in-betweenness that he gets at which is missing from MacKenzie's and Romero's discussions. For the Maya women who he describes seeking health care and services, that which is regarded as tradition does not just put them in opposition to Ladino national power and culture, it also locates them in some kind of ambiguous space that is neither Maya or Ladino. In these spaces, Maya language and clothing become sites of contestation. And similar to MacKenzie's far more ethnographically detailed account, what is tradition is about positioning—social, political, and economic. Harvey ends his book with a particularly ludicrous example, but one with which we Mayanist scholars are familiar. “Expectant mothers were also told that their traditional Maya dress was a hindrance to the healthy growth of a child in the womb.... In, fact, on one occasion a nurse went so far as to tell an expectant mother that it was the clothing that was primarily responsible for low birth weight in Maya children” (143). Irrespective of this, Maya women persist in wearing their clothing and speaking their language. Why this is the case, and why health care settings are loci for such comments and debates about cultural practices is not addressed by Harvey, possibly because he too quickly dismisses Mesoamericanists' proclivities to look for tradition without wondering what Mayas themselves may have to say about it.

Contributions to Maya Scholarship (Is There Such a Thing as Maya Studies?)

Although the seven monographs discussed here contribute to our understandings of Chiapas and the Huasteca in Mexico, and various Maya communities in Guatemala, they illustrate the fragmented nature of what could be considered Maya studies. When it comes to the substance of these books, there is little that links them together other than that their subjects all speak Maya languages and share some other cultural practices. The scholars here take primarily an ethnographic approach that focuses on specific problems or topics.

MacKenzie, building on similar themes addressed earlier by Robert Carmack and Gary Gossen, focuses on the politics of religious practice and identity.¹¹ Where he departs from their research and joins with Garrett Cook and Thomas Offit is by exploring how these practices play out within the flow of ideas and identities in transnational contexts.¹² Similarly, he demonstrates the mutual resilience and flexibility of Maya religion and identity.

Harvey addresses everyday language use, politics, and miscommunications in health care settings, effectively building on Nicole Barry's *Unsafe Motherhood: Mayan Maternal Mortality and Subjectivity in Post-War Guatemala*, with greater attention to Maya language practices that complements Anita Chary and Peter Rohloff's volume *Privatization and the New Medical Pluralism*, another fine example of how important it is for students of Maya culture to be able to speak Maya languages.¹³

Romero's work on the language and identity politics of Maya language use builds on earlier work by Susan Garzon, R. McKenna Brown, Julie Becker Richards, and Wuqu' Ajpub' in *The Life of Our Language: Kaqchikel Maya Maintenance, Shift, and Revitalization*, and Nora England's seminal 2003 essay, "Mayan Language Revival and Revitalization Politics: Linguists and Linguistic Ideologies."¹⁴ Moreover, Romero's and Harvey's monographs also get at the playfulness of Mayas' use of language, which is evident Victoria Bricker's *Ritual Humor in Highland Chiapas* (1973) and John Haviland's *Gossip, Reputation, and Knowledge in Zinacantan* (1977).¹⁵

Kistler highlights the important place of markets and marketing in providing a base for family and community. In fact, she explores in depth the place of family and social relations that Bunzel only touched on, and uses that to build on Tax's study of Mayas' economic behavior, while reminding us about the significance of local social relations that complements the more globally situated ethnographies by Liliana Goldín and this author.¹⁶

The largely oral narrative documentation projects of Maya religious and ritual songs by O'Brien-Rothe, and Maya narratives about everyday life by Kondic, are similar to those of Gossen (*Four Creations: An Epic Story of the Chiapas Mayas*, 2002) and Laughlin (*Mayan Tales from Chiapas, Mexico*, 2014).¹⁷ Such works, especially O'Brien-Rothe's and Kondic's, are a particular challenge for non-Mayanists to read, because they do not provide enough cultural, historical, and political context to situate the narratives being presented.

Bassie-Sweet's volume stands apart from the others discussed in this essay. It is the only edited volume of the books reviewed here. The authors' collaborative approach, while not common, is not without precedence in Maya studies.¹⁸ I have refrained from discussing this volume's individual chapters, in order not to distract

¹¹ Robert M. Carmack, *Rebels of Highland Guatemala: The Quiché-Mayas of Momostenango* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995); Gary H. Gossen, *Telling Maya Tales: Tzotzil Identities in Modern Mexico* (London: Routledge, 1999).

¹² Garrett W. Cook, and Thomas A. Offit, *Indigenous Religion and Cultural Performance in the New Maya World* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013).

¹³ Barry, *Unsafe Motherhood*; Anita Chary and Peter Rohloff, *Privatization and the New Medical Pluralism: Shifting Healthcare Landscapes in Maya Guatemala* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015).

¹⁴ Susan Garzon, R. McKenna Brown, Julia Becker Richards, Wuqu' Ajpub', *The Life of Our Language: Kaqchikel Maya Maintenance, Shift, and Revitalization* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998); Nora M. England, "Maya Language Revival and Revitalization Politics: Linguists and Linguistic Ideologies," *American Anthropologist* 105, no. 4 (2003): 733–743.

¹⁵ Victoria Reifler Bricker, *Ritual Humor in Highland Chiapas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973); John Beard Haviland, *Gossip, Reputation, and Knowledge in Zinacantan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

¹⁶ Bunzel, *Chichicastenango*; Tax, *Penny Capitalism*; Liliana R. Goldín, *Global Maya: Work and Ideology in Rural Guatemala* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009); Little, *Mayas in the Marketplace*.

¹⁷ Gary H. Gossen, ed. and trans., *Four Creations: An Epic Story of the Chiapas Mayas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002); Robert M. Laughlin, *Mayan Tales from Chiapas, Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2014).

¹⁸ Brent E. Metz, Cameron L. McNeil, and Kerry M. Hull, *The Ch'orti' Maya Area: Past and Present* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009).

from the well-integrated and coherent narrative of Ch'ol Maya history, language, and culture from this diverse team comprised of archaeologists, historians, and linguists.

For the most part, the books reviewed here represent a broad spectrum of research rationales, some of which do not engage long-standing conversations with Mesoamerican and Maya topics from anthropological and Latin Americanist perspectives. For instance, Harvey's inquiry into K'ichee' Maya health practices does not tell us much more than is already known; he engages very little of the research conducted on health topics or, for that matter, Maya linguistics, but he does introduce a very productive way to understand cross-cultural, cross-language communicative exchanges. Kondic's and O'Brien-Rothe's respective monographs are straightforward case studies aimed at narrow themes. However, Kondic, especially, but also O'Brien-Rothe rarely leave the specific ethnographic contexts of the Maya communities in which they conducted research. For specialists, linguists, ethnohistorians, and those intending to do research in those communities, these monographs provide a trove of data—for others, mere curiosities.

The works by Kistler, MacKenzie, and Romero are more firmly situated within past Mayanist research and also Mesoamericanist and Latin Americanist discussions and debates. Their monographs engage the scholarship of their ethnographer and linguist predecessors, not just in the towns and linguistic communities in which they conducted research but through comparisons with ethnographic studies on similar topics. Each of these authors takes on the long-standing topics in Mesoamerican research, such as what community means for Mayas, the ways in which ethnicity and Maya cultural identity play out in Guatemala's political and economic contexts, and the ongoing significance of religion in family and town. They bring new insights into what community, ethnicity, and religious practice mean that go beyond narrow discussions and debates about Maya culture, and speak to broader Latin Americanist concerns of religious change, security in the nation-state and community, and the articulation of state-level politics and everyday local political practice. Moreover, the authors of these three ethnographies portray diverse, complex Maya ontologies and everyday practices; in doing so they illustrate a rich tradition of Mayanist scholarship and ethnographic practice that takes Mayas' practices and perspectives as seriously as the theories that inform the scholarly arguments.

Author Information

Walter E. Little is a cultural anthropologist who conducts ethnographic research in Guatemala and Mexico on heritage and tourism practices, with attention to identity politics and handicrafts sales to tourists, through the exploration of Kaqchikel and K'ichee' Mayas' livelihoods as artisans and vendors in urban heritage sites. His monograph *Mayas in the Marketplace: Tourism, Globalization, and Cultural Identity* (2004) won Best Book of 2005 from the New England Council for Latin American Studies; his coedited volume *Street Economies in the Urban Global South* (2013) won the Society for the Anthropology of Work Book Prize in 2014.

How to cite this article: Little, Walter E. 2018. Mayanists' Methods and Tradition Discourses: Research and the Politics of Maya Language and Cultural Practice. *Latin American Research Review* 53(2), pp. 403–410. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.314>

Submitted: 21 July 2017

Accepted: 18 September 2017

Published: 13 June 2018

Copyright: © 2018 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

LARR

Latin American Research Review is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Latin American Studies Association.

OPEN ACCESS 