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Maya America: Introduction to the Journal of Essays, Commentary, and Analysis

James Loucky

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The history of the Americas is one of great human movement and social transformations. From the first settling of the hemisphere over 20,000 years ago, through centuries of mass trans-Atlantic crossings, migration has been a continuing phenomenon. Recent decades have seen significant numbers of people of Mesoamerica traversing north and across the continent, motivated by political unrest, violence, and the press of survival. The Maya, consisting of about twenty-five ethnic-linguistic groups spanning Guatemala, southern Mexico, and parts of Belize and Honduras, are among the diaspora peoples now present across the United States and Canada. Their heritages now blend with those native to North America, enriching yet also testing institutions, opinions, and harmonies.

In a 21st century world on the move, Maya embody the dynamism of migration and subsequent intermingling. In only four decades, people of Maya ancestry have become a vibrant and vital part of communities and neighborhoods throughout North America. How is it that Maya have come to be continental in scope? How do they not only confront but also shape social, economic, and political dynamics in new places, as well as those to which they may continue to be connected? In what ways might they be unique, and how might they also be representative of the diversity of adaptations made by people who are, or have recently been, on the move? What do their experiences and roles clarify about some of the most compelling issues of our time, particularly those concerning how societies may herald immigrant roots while rebuffing the migratory present?

Such questions are among those that have inspired a new journal, *Maya America: Journal of Essays, Commentary, and Analysis*. Twenty years ago, the first account of the emerging transnational scope of the Maya, *The Maya Diaspora: Guatemalan Roots, New American Lives* (2000), focused on the roots and emerging realities of Maya migration. Much has changed in a short time. As their contributions have become part of the American mosaic, *Maya America* is also shifting attention to the developing destinies of people beyond their traditional homelands in the highlands and lowlands of Guatemala and southern Mexico. While lives and identities continue to involve intergenerational connections to the south, they are also increasingly ones that reflect an intersection of indigenous, intercultural, and transnational experiences. They offer good insights for a

more holistic understanding of the history of all of the Americas as well as of a constantly developing U.S. society.

Maya America was chosen as the title for this journal, in recognition of those who acknowledge Maya ancestry as being essential to their ethnicity, regardless of overt cultural expressions or spoken language. It aims to demonstrate how people can contribute deeply to mutual wellbeing and transactions beyond places of origin, while also striving for acceptance and legitimacy. Among the issues the journal will cover are those relating to ethnicity and intercultural relations, including complications associated with being indigenous. For example, if acknowledged as Native Americans, Maya would substantially add to existing numbers in the United States. Their aspirations and accomplishments, as much as the terms and ways by which they are conceptualized, are significant in the evolution of increasingly diverse societies. By encouraging inquiry and inclusion, this journal encourages re-imaginings of current immigration debates as well as affirmation of humane and inclusive possibilities.

Roots and Routes

Human movement has been a common and persistent experience worldwide, and migration narratives integral to the histories of most peoples. As complex and varied as it is contentious, migration involves dreams as well as disappointments, displacement and resettlement, and separations along with suffering. It also engenders determination, creativity, and cooperation. Context is essential for comprehending its dimensions as well as outcomes. Migration from Central American and Mexico is grounded in powerful political and economic determinants. Overlaid on centuries of cultural interchange, colonialism and a plunder mentality introduced repressive plantation economies and debt servitude, including in what is today Guatemala. As the United States increasingly asserted dominance over a presumptive sphere of influence, East-West geopolitics mixed with poverty and authoritarian rule to generate mass violence and uprooting, peaking in the late twentieth century. Popular efforts to confront impoverishment and injustice were met with harsh military repression throughout the region, including in Guatemala.

Maya communities in the Guatemalan central and western highlands were especially hard hit. Brutal counter-insurgency campaigns, justified by deep-seated racism and anti-subversive ideologies, produced understandable responses of fright, fight, and flight – submission, resistance, and exodus. Many Maya fled to regions of refuge in mountains or cities, and when possible beyond Guatemala. The early 1980s witnessed an exodus of about 200,000 into southern Mexico. From scores of refugee camps along the border,

Maya in ensuing years also sought refuge in the United States, joining relatives and acquaintances who had ventured north for work in the 1970s. They, in turn, provided supportive anchors for subsequent newcomers, as migrants have done throughout human history. Primary destinations were across the “sunbelt” of the United States, to states like California, Florida and Texas offering jobs in agriculture, manufacturing, construction, and a variety of services. Both large cities and rural regions became gateways for developing social networks and new opportunities, and in turn directed people into seemingly every direction. Over the same decades, migration of Maya and other indigenous peoples from Mexico also grew. Their experiences replicated many of those of Maya from Central America, regarding search for refuge and a future, amid uncertainties, particularly those associated with the unauthorized status that many held.

Continuing dispersion and the need of many people to remain relatively inconspicuous makes it difficult to determine numbers or even locations, much less to speak of Maya as a single ethnic group. Likely half a million or more Maya from Guatemala now reside and work in cities, towns, and countryside throughout the United States, while Maya from Yucatan and Chiapas add tens of thousands more to that number. Today Maya undoubtedly live in every state of the United States, as well as in Canadian provinces from British Columbia to the Maritimes. Social networks, ethnic and kin ties, and relationships developed through employment and residence, along with serendipitous events, account for this expansion coast to coast. Commitment to families and hard work, along with creative and cooperative relationships, are key to a remarkable capacity of most Maya not only to adapt, but also to thrive amid the challenges associated with displacement and new circumstances.

Developing Destinies

As contemporary pressure on resources, concentrations of wealth, and widening inequities grow in Mesoamerica, migration *al norte* (to the north) remains a reasonable option, in spite of its considerable risks. Erosion of opportunities, as well as of arable land, combine with increasingly powerful south-north connections to compel long-lasting exodus. Many towns, and families within them, are now enveloped in a web of relations, indebtedness, and parameters characteristic of a “culture of migration.” The collective momentum is generally far more substantial than assertions of nationality for determining prospects that are increasingly mobilized and transnational in nature.

Maya children and families have today become the most prominent face of migration to the United States. Even as family separations and children’s deaths have

shocked public consciousness, thousands of lives remain hostage to politics of inertia and the shortcomings of existing protections. Worsening circumstances in Mesoamerica from which people seek refuge compound the calamity. Disposessions of land and toils of labor have been continuing themes for centuries, but today growing climate devastation and generalized violence further undermine wellbeing and survival, particularly in the northern part of Central America that includes hundreds of Maya communities.

Given such circumstances, and in an increasingly globalized 21st century, it is hardly surprising that dispersion continues. When livelihood decisions take priority over policy developments, south or north, exclusionary U.S. migration policies and mass expulsions serve only modestly to deter migration. This is the context in which Maya families and communities are likely to continue to operate for years to come. Their experiences of vulnerability as well as vibrancy, and the range of responses and transformations evident in family and civic lives, call for the kind of attention and direction that Maya America will take.

Connections

The title, *Maya America*, denotes a broad and varied space where discussion, commentary, and creativity can be freely explored. As a venue for interdisciplinary perspectives regarding interpersonal, identity, and cultural transformations, particularly as they are considered across time and space, *Maya America* draws on the experiences and voices of Maya, anthropological and social research, and endeavors of community organizations and partnerships. It will include research articles, literary contributions, book or film reviews, and “roundtable” or workshop options, along with community updates, personal narratives, and perspectives of both youth and elders. As research and resources by, and about, people of Maya descent continue to grow, this journal can serve to encourage continuing dialog about ways to build connectivity and community across cultures, generations, and borders.

In promoting breadth of knowledge, wide participation, and promoting cultural memory, *Maya America* strives for grounded evidence and informed interpretations of the complex situations of people of Maya heritage in the United States and across North America. It also aspires to be evocative. Varied lived experiences, of coming as well as becoming, and through processes of social and economic relatedness over time, illuminate the contours of everyday life while providing a window on wider political, demographic, and cultural developments. Questions that are central to ongoing cultural and political discourse, such as those regarding ethnic cooperation and conflict in the United States,

require thoughtful consideration. The power of systemic structures will be examined, to see how they can both encourage or limit civic engagement. Individual and interpersonal resourcefulness will be a primary subject of inquiry as well, along with the largely positive nature of migration, integration, and change. Including a range of places and possibilities also allows the journal to probe the complications and nuances regarding what it means to be Maya, Maya American, and even American.

Borders themselves are of many kinds, with capacity to either divide or bridge, geographic, cultural, political, and even psychological domains. Maya America can help us move beyond identity politics, and a nationalistic or statist bind. Integration, indigeneity, resilience, and dignity, and what they imply for the future of ethnic relations or the United States itself, are significant angles that the journal will feature. Contemporary practices and impacts of incarceration, deportation, and actions leading to political and social disadvantages are also areas to examine, alongside exemplary humanitarian and legal efforts to promote more humane policies.

Format

As contemporary events become history, Maya America takes up the challenge of both gathering and transmitting useful lessons. Case studies, personal and literary narratives, and commentary and analyses regarding contemporary policy concerns represent diverse entry points for inquiry and understanding. Collaborative methodologies, comparative approaches, and community research are especially welcome. All are essential for providing insights into ways that cultural understandings and intergenerational commitments shape priorities, the processes of ethnogenesis, negotiated self-identity, and language shifts.

Maya America is intended to be both accessible and compelling. As a digital, open access publication, suggestions and participation are welcome. Prominent in its development is an acknowledgment of the generations of Maya whose endeavors and sacrifices have shaped today's communities as well as countries. Their remarkable endeavors, coupled with the leadership emerging today, are invaluable for encouraging continuing engagement and for building funds of knowledge. So-called "traditional" knowledge, conveyed largely through the lessons and continuity provided by elders, will be complemented by perspectives of younger community members and scholars. Youth exemplify new energies for family and community formation, activism, and pan-ethnicity, and because they are often the most enveloped by changes, their views and social spaces are particularly useful for what they reveal about values, transfers of responsibilities, and potentials for encouraging mutual health and wellbeing.

Maya America should find a ready and varied audience, insofar as it involves people who identify as Maya and people of other ethnicities in its development and as authors, while also introducing the Maya to a wider public. Its scope and contents will resonate with community members, researchers, and practitioners. It will prove to be of value for students of U.S. history, Latin American studies, migration and ethnic issues, education, and anthropology. Inclusion of scholarly and community-based efforts, such as participatory action research, increases its usefulness for popular and community education, as well as in academic settings. Like the narratives of Irish, Chinese, Mexican, and many other peoples of the world, the experiences of the Maya are intrinsic to an American history that includes the United States as part of the Americas. Ultimately, it is hoped that *Maya America* will serve to reveal how greatly interconnected are the Americas, through processes of social and cultural evolution, history, and demography, and through assertions of rights of peoples south and north in shaping, and not just facing, what is ultimately a shared human destiny.