

Cultural Transgressions in Omar S. Castañeda's
Remembering to Say 'Mouth' or 'Face'

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Omar S. Castañeda wrote mostly fiction, yet several short stories in *Remembering to Say 'Mouth' or 'Face'* (1993) seem to reflect autobiographical experiences.¹ He was born in Guatemala City on September 6, 1954, three months after CIA-led *coup d'état* in that country.² At three years old, he migrated to the United States with his family. He died in 1997 of a heroine overdose at the age of forty-three. At the time of his death, he was a creative writing professor at Western Washington University. He received the Charles H. and N. Mildred Nilon Excellence in Minority Fiction in 1993 for *Remembering to Say 'Mouth' or 'Face,'* (hereafter *Remembering*) among other literary awards.³

In *Remembering* the characters cross multiple cultural, social and geographical borders. These stories, unlike several US Central American literary texts, root violence not only in the Guatemalan civil war and in subsequent migration experiences to the United States, but also in varied social as well as personal spaces that the characters traverse as they attempt to recreate ancestral links to their place of origin. These links are made through literal and metaphorical connections to the ancient Maya-K'iche' text *Popol Wuj*. In particular, characters' struggles of social marginalization, racism as well as the material conditions of Maya and Ladino Guatemalan migrants are told using, and blending, the *Popol Wuj's* narrative style. Castañeda's collection is divided in three sections: "On the Way Out," "Crossing the Border," and "Remembering." While the three sections illustrate the desire and difficulty of speaking and naming a self that lives within multiple cultural spaces, it is the

second section, “Crossing the Border,” that exemplifies the often violent processes of crossing and living within multiple cultural, social and geographical contexts.

The title of Castañeda’s *Remembering to Say ‘Mouth’ or ‘Face’* alludes to the creation story in the *Popol Wuj*. In the Maya-K’iche’ text the mud people are destroyed, because of their inability to evoke and name their creators. In this way, Castañeda’s title emphasizes a need to remember and retell ancestral history as a way of re-affirming the self. The connection to the *Popol Wuj* is further highlighted at the beginning of the book, which opens with an extensive excerpt from the Maya text. The passage is from the story of the hero-twins who take the struggles of their fathers and ultimately are able to successfully defeat the Lords of *Xibalba*—a space that represents death, illness and sacrifice. This excerpt sets the stage for the short stories that follow, since the duality in the *Popol Wuj*, via the hero-twins, mirrors the dual and multiple cultural spaces that many characters in the collection embody. Similarly, the hero-twins’ struggles parallel the various internal and social conflicts the protagonists in the stories confront. In particular, the characters’ arduous movements from and to different social and cultural spaces as well as their experiences with and challenges to neo-colonial legacies.

Moreover, in the *Popol Wuj* passage cited by Castañeda there is an emphasis on needing to speak in what the Maya text calls “true language” to name one’s existence. In doing so, these stories also situate speaking and, particularly, language as a central trope that unites the sections. They illustrate the internal as well as external struggles the characters face as they use and shape language to ultimately make it their own. This effort, as Mikhail Bakhtin indicates, takes place through the appropriation of the word and its adaption to one’s “own semantic and expressive intention” (294). In these short stories the characters attempt to name their experiences in their own voice, one constituted along multiple cultural, linguistic, and historical axes and contexts.

This article examines the ways Castañeda’s *Remembering* contests notions of assimilation as well as deconstructs national and hyphenated identities. It argues that rooting these short stories within the *Popol Wuj*’s narrative structure allows for

the construction of different historical references and cultural archaeologies, which are not solely based on national identities or histories, but are also grounded on indigenous epistemologies. This is evident in the second section titled “Crossing the Border.” The section’s three stories, “Shell and Bone,” “Under an Ice Moon,” and “Crossing the Border,” blend myths from the *Popol Wuj* with the characters’ contemporary historical contexts in the United States and Guatemala. The stories illustrate the protagonists’ multiple displacements, and their links to the histories and cultures of indigenous, specifically Maya, peoples in *Abya Yala*.⁴ Consequently, these displacements and connections result in the search as well as the creation of alternative narratives of belonging attuned to the characters’ multiple embodied subjectivities and positionalities. By grounding the protagonists’ cultural genealogies within Maya mythical and historical frameworks that emphasize difference and duality, Castañeda’s text highlights the multiple identities of Guatemalans in that country and the diaspora.

This article studies first “Shell and Bone” and the struggles faced by the young protagonist who attempts to rediscover as well as recover his cultural genealogies. Then, it analyzes the role of language and, particularly, of attempting to speak in one’s own “true language,” as suggested in the *Popol Wuj*, in the short story “Under an Ice Moon.” Lastly, it examines the ways community is rooted within the varied geographical and cultural border crossings made by the Maya protagonists in “Crossing the Border.” The conclusions highlight that by rooting the three short stories within Maya cultural and historical frameworks Castañeda’s *Remembering* constructs an alternative narrative of belonging that highlights difference, duality, connections, gaps and disconnections. In doing so, these stories deconstruct national and hyphenated identities in Guatemala and the diaspora while they simultaneously expand notions of Latinidad through their attunement to a notion of difference that is grounded within indigenous epistemologies and experiences.

Reconstructing Cultural Genealogies

The section “Crossing the Border” opens with “Shell and Bone.” In the story, Marco, the protagonist and narrator, is a boy born in Guatemala. He has lived in the United States’ Midwest since the age

of three. The story centers on the boy's connection to shells and bones that appear all around his house and follow him and his family wherever they lived. For Marco "the mere coloring of these [shell and bone] pieces shouted Guatemala" (Castañeda 45). His curiosity and excitement about the shell and bone are continuously ignored and erased by his parents, who "acted as if the bone didn't exist, and became expert[s] at changing the direction of [the boy's] ... questions" (45). Marco admits that after months of asking about the shell and bone, and his voice becoming "too weak," his "interest shifted more and more to the baseball games outside" (46). The American pastime, and his parents' efforts to hide the existence of the shell and bone in their US lives, diminishes the quantity of the artifacts, but not their presence.

Furthermore, "by the end of each summer, the shell and bone returned with a vengeance" and Marco tells us that they were always "more shells than I had ever seen. *Guatemala*" (46). In the text, Guatemala stands isolated and appears italicized. It forces the reader to stop and note the centrality of the word as well as Marco's inability to replace it. His reference to the shell, bone and Guatemala suggests his deep desire to recover his cultural, and not solely national, roots. This is represented by the presence of the shell and bone in Marco's home, which symbolize the family's cultural roots in the diaspora. His parents' failure to conceal the shell and bone indicates their difficulty in ignoring those cultural artifacts. The shell and bone in the story also subtly suggest the family's ancestral links to indigenous cultures, since they represent materials used to make knives, shaping and carving tools. As Marco begins to closely examine the shell and bone, he notices that "there are small and delicate symbols etched onto them," like the glyphs carved on shell and bone during the Maya classic period (47). Hence, the shell and bone also symbolize non-western modes of remembering, writing and retelling. His study of these cultural artifacts in the diaspora, however, is interrupted when his father announces the two would leave for Guatemala the next day (46).

When they arrive at his birthplace, Marco's depictions of Guatemala foreshow the complex struggles he will face as he attempts to reconstruct his cultural genealogies. The eastern countryside is illustrated as dry with red clay and covered with dung

(48). Marco's grotesque descriptions of the village and its people roaming the main street with pigs, chickens, donkeys and lizards are coupled with his impassioned affirmation that "these ... [are] ... my people—my heritage!" (48). In spite of his enthusiasm, Marco is unable to instantly reconnect with them, to speak, and understand their life and community. He depicts the town as someone who gazes from the margins fascinated by the cultural exchanges and the daily life of the villagers. In this way, the story explicitly affirms that there is no easy recovery of these cultural genealogies.

Despite his sense of alienation, Marco begins to eagerly notice that the villagers "manufacture shell [and the ways] bone clicked along with the wooden marimba" (49). For the boy, the presence of these cultural artifacts in his US home links him with the villagers that manufacture them. Thus, Marco's perceived bond is not a result of national, or bi-national identities, but rather of shared cultural connections and contexts. In this realization, Marco reveals that he "leaped to [his] feet with questions [to the villagers], but they ... [said] nothing ... Only Ezíquel can tell ... of the shell and bone" (49). The villagers' silence and constant mention of the "infamous Ezíquel" represent the boy's grandfather as the elder of his family and community (49). The story also draws attention to the ways these local community dynamics and historical contexts inform the process in which Marco attempts to reconstruct his cultural genealogies. This is evident during the boy's subsequent encounter with Ezíquel, whose harsh material reality clashes once again with Marco's idealization of the elder. While the boy desperately attempts to hold to the mythical image of his grandfather, and describes the old man as a "long white shell," the caregivers as well as Marco's own father deconstruct his myth by speaking of the old man's illegitimate children, ill state, long suffering and their hopes for his quick death (51). Marco's last attempt to reaffirm his idealized reconstructions of the family's genealogies is articulated by his loud objection to the old man's pending death. The boy's outburst is followed by pleas for his grandfather to speak.

Ezíquel breaks the silence through his efforts to physically move. Believing his grandfather is truly seeing him, Marco passionately states: "I knew he understood me, then. He felt me. He recognized me from across the years, across the miles and miles of fervent

and disconsolate blood. Emotion was the bridge of years” (53). Though Marco believes he has been able to rediscover and return to his origins, the ancestral bridge, which Marco desperately yearns for, quickly fractures like the broken body of the old man. Marco points out that after Ezíquel rises from his chair and begins to sway dangerously, his caregivers “brought his arms down like broken sticks, and guided him back to the chair, back to his mannequin pose and wooden stare” (53). Instantly, the Ezíquel myth is broken forcing the boy to finally acknowledge the frailty of these cultural genealogies. Indeed as cultural critic Stuart Hall notes, and Marco begins to realize, there is no “fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute Return” (226).

Emotionally broken, like the old man, Marco cries. In an effort to console him, Juan, Ezíquel’s caregiver, suggests that Marco ignore the old man, explaining to the boy that “When he’s tired, [Ezíquel] babbles” (53). Marco’s solemn response to Juan’s declaration also ends the story. Speaking more to himself, the boy states: “That was that: Ignore the shell and bone” (53). And while the story begins by suggesting, through Marco’s enthusiastic ideas about his ancestry, that “cultural identities reflect ... common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as ‘one people’, with stable, unchanging continuous frames of reference and meaning,” the ending reminds us that identity is a “‘production,’ which is never complete, always in process” and constructed within our own positionalities (Hall 222, 223).

Linguistic Crossings

The desire for, as well as the complexity of, reclaiming ancestral links is continued as a central trope in the story “Under an Ice Moon.” Here, John, the protagonist, like the hero-twins in the *Popol Wuj*, must learn to speak in “true language.” At the same time, the story stresses, as does Gloria Anzaldúa, that linguistic practices need to be understood within regional historical contexts, since the ability to speak, or not, one’s native language is based on social and political conditions (55). Similarly, Jacques Derrida notes that under neo-colonialism, subaltern subjects are denied possession of their ancestral language and history (55). In Castañeda’s story, these historical contexts and complex linguistic processes are illustrated

through the incorporation of Spanish and Maya words in the English text and the protagonist's reflection on the inabilities and abilities of speaking in these languages. The story also suggests that linguistic crossings are possible, but are continuously challenged by national and social norms.

In "Under an Ice Moon," John, a Guatemalan fiction writer raised in the United States, returns to his birthplace as a Fulbright scholar. His goal is to write a novel on the Maya. John's desires are contrasted with his Anglo-American girlfriend, Jenny, an anthropologist, who speaks fluent Spanish and quickly learns Maya-Tz'utujil. John, on the other hand, speaks limited Spanish, lacks familiarity with Maya culture and the Mesoamerican region. His return to Guatemala is facilitated by Jenny's cultural and linguistic translations both in Maya and Spanish. In the beginning of the story, John notes his continuous feelings of alienation and highlights that "Jenny did most of the talking. My Spanish was weak" (57). His subaltern position is also emphasized by Jenny, who reminds John that she has "plenty of publications" and years studying indigenous peoples. Additionally, she frequently tells John that his disciplinary approach to Maya culture, writing poems and stories, will add to "the great storehouse of misinformation" on the Maya (57). In this context, John's fictional narratives are positioned as different and, like him, Othered within Western knowledge. Moreover, in Jenny's relation with John, she, like the West, is positioned as the holder of knowledge, while John is defined by what she sees as his academic as well as personal limits and lacks. The story simultaneously suggests that John's internalized oppression begins to impact and shape his own identity.

John's subaltern position, and internalized oppression, is further illustrated as the couple crosses multiple geographical, cultural, and linguistic borders during their trip through what they both call the "Maya world." John indicates that Jenny

had made the trip recently, at her own expense, before we'd met, and enjoyed pointing out things anthropologists thrive on: the change of living from Merida to Chetumal... Once across the border, she pointed out the changes of music, and her new interest: the Mayas who spoke not only their native tongue and Spanish, but Caribbean English as well. (56)

While Jenny considers John's fictional narratives as invalid discursive representations, her approach to scholarship on the Maya exemplifies the ways knowledge about indigenous peoples is produced, packaged, and circulated by some Western academics. This, according to Edward Said in *Orientalism*, is an essential aspect of neo-colonial power structures. In this way, John's honesty and recognition that his study is framed within his positionality in the United States opens a space of reflection and offers the potential of constructing alternative narratives that are attuned to difference and power relations.

Once John and Jenny cross the border into Guatemala and arrive to Cerro de Oro, near lake Atitlan, these personal and social power relations are further expanded and complicated by John's efforts to understand the political and historical conditions of the country's civil war. It is when the characters arrive in Guatemala that structurally Maya and Spanish words appear within the larger English text emphasizing the region's multilingualism and the ways these varied linguistic forms come into conflict with each other. For John navigating these multiple linguistic practices produces a sense of "nervousness" with the town's people, since it highlights his perceived linguistic limitations (62). He notes that when they first arrived to the town a Maya woman greeted them "by saying something like *Utz Awach* ... We greeted her in Spanish. The woman preferred Jen's Spanish over mine." (60). In this multilingual exchange, John's inability to speak not only reinforces his feelings of marginalization, but also affirms his subaltern position in his relationship with Jenny.

Yet, John's ability to acknowledge his limitations allows for the possibility to explore other ways of reconnecting with the Maya in Cerro de Oro. This is evident in his conversation with Chepe Poc, the town's storeowner. John describes a linguistic exchange where Poc teaches him numbers in Tz'utujil and John teaches them to his interlocutor in English and broken Spanish. The interaction between John and Poc illustrates their abilities to shift between different cultural spaces. They further show that John and Poc's linguistic mishaps are not deficiencies, but rather, as Doris Sommer explains, part of "the game of shuttling between insider and outsider" (3). In this context neither of the men are defined by their subalternity,

but rather by their abilities to navigate within and outside different cultural contexts and positions.

However, the complexities of these linguistic crossings coupled with Poc's "missing tooth" which "made certain words indecipherable" created "cavernous spaces between words" (62). It is in the in-between of these linguistic spaces that John is able to find another way of communicating with Poc and in doing so, goes beyond their mutual linguistic limitations and abilities. John indicates that while they both looked "awkwardly for something to say, I saw a series of half pint bottles labeled *Venado*. When he caught the direction of my gaze, I asked him what they were" (62). Their mutual understanding of their physical expressions recognizes that speaking also includes other forms of interactions like body language. After a couple of beers, and some *Venado* rum, John notes that soon "[o]ur Spanish was abandoned. He spoke Tzutujil and I spoke English" (62). The new fluidity of their conversation is shared by a common enjoyment of alcohol and the physical expressions both men make as they communicate in multiple linguistic and cultural practices. The experience with Poc provides John a new position from which to shape and create his "own language."

Towards the end of the story, on a bus to Sololá in route to a birthday party with Jenny, John breaks his silence and begins to ask questions that relate to the Guatemalan civil war in public. Jenny objects to his inquiries, but for the first time in the story John persists. Outraged by the violence he witnesses in the highlands, he attempts to speak to the people on the bus even as his "Spanish was ... more miserable and confusing than usual" (65). Expressing a deep desire to understand the conditions of the civil war, John continues to passionately engage with anyone who listens and begins to proclaim his support for the revolutionaries.

At the birthday party, against Jenny's pleas, John tells the people that the guerrilla are "fighting for human rights. For *your* lives" (67). For the first time in the story, John not only actively defines his position in relation to the community, but also the socio-political contexts of the civil war. What emerges from his interactions and ability to speak in his own linguistic skills is the possibility of producing a different narrative of belonging that is not only filtered through Jenny's lens or national linguistic norms, but one that also

acknowledges his internalized oppressions, resistances as well as his abilities and limits.

Angered by his insistence to speak of the civil war, Jenny decides to end her relationship with John and leaves him behind in Cerro de Oro. He notes that alone “under [the] moon, waiting [for Jenny to return]. Four bats jagged across the light” and “an owl called” (69). While the passage suggests an instant feeling of alienation, John’s awareness of the natural elements around him emphasizes his new re-connection to the region.⁵ Hence, “Under an Ice Moon” situates language as central in the construction of subjectivity, but also illustrates different places and positions from which to speak. It is in the dismantling and appropriation of dominant linguistic practices that John begins to speak and create an alternative narrative of belonging from within, in-between, and outside his cultural contexts and positionalities.

Rooting Community

While the previous two narratives illustrate migration experiences from the United States to Guatemala, the last story in the section inverts this migratory movement. The story is divided in three parts. Structurally, it replicates the format of the *Popol Wuj* through the blending of myth and history to emphasize, like the K’iche’ text, that these seemingly different genres belong to “a single, balanced whole” (Tedlock 63). In the mythic realm the story also illustrates and reaffirms the protagonists’ strong sense of community. In “Crossing the Border” the incorporation of myths from the *Popol Wuj* seek to re-tell and remember a past grounded on Maya worldview that emphasizes dualities, differences and transformations.

“Crossing the Border” is told in the third person and begins with mythical depictions of Maya life in Guatemala. The first section opens with the death of Raúl Cáscara, a trickster and “caretaker for a chestnut grove outside the village of Motagua” (Castañeda 71). Cáscara, however, is in a liminal state and undoing Cáscara’s “neither-death-nor-life” condition becomes the community’s central preoccupation (78). After several consultations with the magician Juan Aguacero, four of Cáscara’s friends, like the four humans created in the *Popol Wuj*, are selected to migrate and take

him to the mythical Klouwer town in northern United States. In Klouwer town Raúl Cáscara will find his resting place and not “fall and live with the Lords of Hell [Xibalba]” (77). The mythical connections made between Klouwer town and the people of the Motagua subtly links indigenous peoples in *Abya Yala* and contests contemporary geopolitical borders. Additionally, the conditions in which Cáscara’s friends journey to the United States suggest that the migration process is based on indigenous cultural values, where the collective needs of the larger community are privileged. This is a significant distinction since it overtly challenges US capitalist discourses framing migratory movements from south to north within consumer culture and individualistic interests like the search for an “American dream” and the accumulation of material goods.

Moreover, the four friends make the journey as an act of self-sacrifice, since the narrator explains that even the name “‘United States’ ... subdued the knowers and gave power to the name itself” (79). Thus, while the mythical Klouwer town maintains an ancestral cultural connection for the Maya of Motagua, its existence within the confines of the US produces terror for everyone including “people from neighboring villages” (79). In this context, the US signifies neo-colonial power structures that simultaneously co-exist with indigenous cultures and societies in the region. The narrator states that the four friends, Séptimo Tzuí, María Teresa, Chirón, and Tecún Umán, felt the “weight of the ‘United States’ ... real and heavy within their bodies” (79).⁶ The recorded trauma of the United States’ historical domination in *Abya Yala* is inscribed and evoked in the bodies of indigenous peoples. The story suggests that this history of domination is retold and remembered within multiple spaces and dimensions. The presence of the US, and memory of European violence, create a literal break in the story from the mythical space of the community and begins to formulate new positionalities from which the protagonists speak.

And though the four Maya friends in the story understand that their migration will not only be treacherous, they are also aware of the cultural connections between indigenous peoples in the *Abya Yala*. This is evident as they begin their journey north and their sense of belonging to an extended indigenous hemispheric community is reaffirmed. According to the narrator, the connections made by the

four friends with the land they cross supersede national, and neo-colonial, borders and experiences:

[The] Maya world did not recognize the same border as Guatemala and Mexico, so in Chiapas they found echoes of their own world, echoes of an ancient walk from Zuyua of the seven caves...[they] went undisturbed into the states of Veracruz, Oaxaca, Puebla,... and finally Coahuila before reaching the Mexican-Texan border. (82)

Hence, while there is a movement away from the protagonists' community, they continue to be rooted in *Abya Yala*, and the land that is ancestrally theirs. In these spaces, primacy is given to indigenous cultural and spiritual values. Yet, as the four friends begin to reach the Mexico-Texas border, the present-day material conditions of these geopolitical crossings are not only understood, but also questioned. As the four travelers search for a *coyote* (smuggler) in the border town of *Puerta Triste* 'Door of Sorrow,' the youngest in the group, Tecún Umán, openly questions the construction of these geopolitical boundaries: "It seems, does it not, that this business of papers and documents and permission to walk really finishes everything for people?" (82). His inquiry reinscribes the land within indigenous cosmology and asserts their relationship to the territory pre-nation states and pre-conquest, because documentation is a result of neo-colonial and national demarcations. Additionally, his question emphasizes the centrality of the land for indigenous peoples as a source of healing and survival and the ways requesting permission to cross these ancestral territories not only limits mobility, but also access to cultural and spiritual sites. Consequently, Tecún Umán emphasizes that these policed national borders further oppress and displace indigenous people. In a way, Tecún Umán's reflections begin to suggest Hall's claim that oppression, migration, displacement, exploitation, separation also shape cultural identities and histories (224). Hall's assertion is further illustrated by Diego, a *Puerta Triste* resident, who tells the Maya pilgrims: "Don't think it will be easy. You'll learn to hate yourself" (85). Diego's well-intentioned warning highlights the neo-colonial dominance of the United States and the ways it forces migrants to internalize racist discourses, which produce violent ruptures from the migrants' indigenous cultural

practices.

Despite the warnings by the residents of *Puerta Triste*, the four Maya travelers decide to cross the border and keep their promise to the community. It is in this final part of the story, and after the protagonists cross the Rio Grande, that structurally the mythical elements are replaced by brutal realism. In the outskirts of the Rio Grande, the four Maya pilgrims find themselves physically and verbally beaten by the young white men. As the young men abuse the Maya migrants, they address them as “Damn wetbacks,” order them to show “their papers,” and demand that they speak English. In this intensely raw scene the young attackers not only reproduce US racialized legal discourse against poor immigrants, but also use it to justify their violent attacks toward the four Mayas.

The violence includes the young white men’s attempt to rape María Teresa, even as they claim that the “girl’s ugly” (90). The act also invokes historical sexual violence against indigenous women as a result of neo-colonial projects and systems. In spite of their efforts, the young men fail to rape María Teresa, because she resists. Thus, the story also complicates historical accounts of the conquest whereby indigenous women are often depicted as passive victims. While the young men’s continuous references to the Maya travelers within historically US racial categories, like greasers and wetbacks, situate the experiences of Maya migrants in those local and national histories, the very ethnic identity of the migrants locate the violence within a larger hemispheric historical framework of neo-colonialism. Therefore, these local US/Mexico border histories are tied to larger global struggles and migratory movements. At the same time, the Maya migrants’ collective resistance, even as they are seemingly defeated, demonstrates a continued challenge to neo-colonial legacies.

The story ends with the young white men severely beating the travelers and disfiguring Raúl Cáscara’s body. The narrator tells us that the violence they experienced at the border signaled “the end of their pilgrimage. They had brought their Lord and friend, and had left him fully immersed in this vast Klouwer place” (93). Their only satisfaction in crossing the Rio Grande comes from surviving the journey and fulfilling their communal responsibilities. Yet, in the process the protagonists are transformed as they experience the

traumatic ruptures that occur as a result of neo-colonial histories and structures. Their sense of community, the story implies, is now also based on survival and resistance towards neo-colonialism. In this way, while in “Crossing the Border” the characters do not struggle to rediscover and reconnect with their ancestral culture, like in the previous two stories analyzed, the story does emphasize that the history of *Abya Yala* must be rooted within different experiences and positionalities that result from migration, oppression and neo-colonialism.

Conclusion

By employing the structural and cultural frameworks of the *Popol Wuj*, Castañeda’s *Remembering* constructs an alternative discursive space from which to conceptualize the communities and histories of Maya and Ladino diasporic subjects living in the United States. Castañeda further explains this stylistic and thematic approach in the preface to his story “A Matter of Twins,” where he reads the *Popol Wuj* as

Defining the communal self, finding a place in the world, establishing language and purpose ... and claiming rights to land. [it is] an attempt to regain dignity from an oppressor by revealing the richness of tradition and culture, at the same time that it conceals the whole truth so as not to be robbed of it. (10)

The three short stories examined in this article aim to reconstruct, to use Castañeda’s term, “a communal self” that contests the varied forms of social and political oppressions experienced by indigenous peoples, migrants as well as racialized subjects in the US and Guatemala. In this way, the stories do not assert a unitary national, or bi-national, identity, but rather emphasize the characters’ multiple embodied subjectivities and positionalities. It is perhaps because the characters are not marked within static national identities that Castañeda’s literary work has received limited critical reception. These stories cannot be easily situated within established US or Guatemalan literary categories, because they begin to articulate an emerging US Central American literary production. Castañeda’s short stories challenge the production of fixed ethnic and/or national identities by emphasizing the need to recognize difference and

heterogeneity as well as highlighting the need to expand notions of Latinidad. His stories ground Guatemalan diasporic communities through the Maya and Ladino characters' cultural connections, and disconnections, to as well as their historical place in *Abya Yala* while simultaneously suggesting that these characters, like the communities, are continuously changing.

Notes

1 In interviews, Omar S. Castañeda mentions confronting racism growing up in the United States. He also acknowledges his continuous efforts to maintain cultural and intellectual connections to Guatemala.

2 The 1954 coup deposed President Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán and established a military regime that waged one of the most historically violent wars in the Americas against that country's Maya population. The systematic violence instituted by a series of US-sponsored military regimes escalated well into the 1980s. The civil war lasted from 1960-96.

3 He was the recipient of other awards including a Ernest Hemingway Fellowship, Fulbright Research Grant and a nomination for the Pulitzer Prize. Although Castañeda begins to publish in the mid-1980s, his literary work has obtained less critical reception than other US Central American writers like Francisco Goldman, Héctor Tobar and Marcos McPeck Villatoro. The works of Goldman, Tobar and McPeck Villatoro, published in the 1990s and 2000s, have received critical reception from both US Central American (Arias 2012 and 2007; Padilla 2012; Rodríguez 2009) and US scholars (Gruesz 2003; Templeton 2007).

4 The term, *Abya Yala*, comes from the Tule language of the Kuna and is used in reference to the American continent. This article employs the concept as is drawn by indigenous writers and organizations today that use it to challenge the colonial legacies reflected in concepts like America and New World, since the stories examined also highlight indigenous resistances.

5 The bats and owls imply a presence of Maya cosmology. For the Maya, the bat, or *Sotz* in Kaqchikel, is the symbolic depiction of the Sololá region and represents spiritual reflection and protection.

6 Tecún Umán is a contested figure in Guatemala. The *Popol Wuj* and *Título de Totonicapán* allude to the historical existence of a K'iche' warrior by the name of Tecún Umán. In national legends Tecún Umán's body is metaphorically inscribed by colonial discourses. The legends often portray him as a well-intended warrior, but unable to defeat the conquistador Pedro de Alvarado.

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