

# The Long and Winding Road: The Elite, Intellectuals, and From What to Who in Indigenous Identity Formation

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*Return of the Native: Indians and Myth-Making in Spanish America, 1810–1930.*  
By Rebecca Earle. Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2007.

*Indians and Leftists in the Making of Ecuador's Modern Indigenous Movements.*  
By Marc Becker. Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2008.

*Stories in the Time of Cholera: Racial Profiling During a Medical Nightmare.*  
By Charles Briggs and Clara Mantini-Briggs. University of California Press, Berkeley, 2003.

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

E. Bradford Burns wrote that violent conflict between the Latin American ‘folk with their community values’ and the elite defined the 19th century (Burns, 1981, p. 1). Elite triumphs in those conflicts coalesced around nation-building projects. Burns’ ‘folk’ were the ordinary people who shared a common way of life and did not rapidly embrace European or North American political ideologies. Burns suggested that the Indians were more resistant to change than others groups in the folk (1981, pp. 88–89). Burns’ *The Poverty of Progress* was one of the first books to focus on the significance of the 19th century in the formation of the nation-state and, more importantly, to assert that the folk and the elite *together* shaped what the state became. Still, much has changed since the 1980s. In recent years, scholars from multiple disciplines have begun to explore indigenous reality in the 19th and 20th century with new eyes and new sources, looking at indigenous–state relationships, land ownership, citizenship, political ideologies, identity, resistance, gender, religion, and indigenous intellectuals (Clark & Becker, 2007; Garrard-Burnett, 1998; Gould, 1998; Gould & Lauria-Santiago, 2004; Grandin, 2000; Guardino, 2005; Thurner, 1997). We no longer view indigenous peoples as the most recalcitrant sector of the folk, but instead see them as often ideologically innovative and politically-savvy citizens of Latin American nations. Violence was one weapon in the arsenal indigenous peoples used to protect and shape their realities, but it was not the weapon of choice (Voss, 2002). More frequently, indigenous peoples relied on petitions, peaceful protest and the courts to defend their interests.

Such venues required an indigenous intellectual elite to interact regularly with the state that was also in its own ongoing process of constructing a definition of modernity. It is to those broad, often related topics – indigenous peoples, intellectuals, the state and the meaning of modernity – to which the authors in the present issue of *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies* turn their attention. They remind us that in this process of understanding intellectuals, the state, and modernity we must also reconceptualize knowledge more broadly so as to include different media for knowledge production or reproduction (*cine* for David Wood) or new formations of historical memory (postmemory for Arturo Arias). As Victor Montejo (2005) asserts in *Maya Intellectual Renaissance*, text-based literacy is not a prerequisite for knowledge production. Spiritual leadership, medicinal expertise, and narrative construction also represent significant intellectual expertise that must not be discounted when reconstructing the indigenous past and tying it to the present and future: ‘Our pride in our own heritage and our link with our ancestral past has reconnected the fabric of Maya culture, worn by centuries of neglect’ (Montejo, 2005, p. xviii). All sorts of indigenous intellectuals are necessary to reweave that *tela*. While indigenous peoples respect the complex roles intellectuals play in indigenous cultures, however, non-indigenous elites have often denied them and have chosen instead to paint indigenous peoples into the ugly canvas of the barbarian ‘other’.

Rebecca Earle’s *The Return of the Native: Indians and Myth-Making in Spanish America, 1810–1930* (2007) and Marc Becker’s *Indians and Leftists in the Making of Ecuador’s Modern Indigenous Movements* (2008) are the primary works under review here, although they are appropriately understood in dialogue with Charles Briggs and Clara Mantini-Briggs’ *Stories in the Time of Cholera: Racial Profiling During a Medical Nightmare* (2003) and Victor Montejo’s *Maya Intellectual Renaissance: Identity, Representation, and Leadership* (2005). Indeed, the issues addressed in the four books complement each other so thoroughly that, taken together, they become a study of the evolution of the relationship between indigenous peoples, intellectual or not, and the state. Three broad questions unify the monographs. Those questions are ‘how do/did indigenous peoples understand indigenous identity?’ and ‘how does/did the state (elite) define indigenous identity?’ The third question, ‘what is an Indian?’, appears the most simple, but it is by far the most complex. The word ‘what’ implies that the Indian is an object or, at best, an idea. The phrase ‘who is an Indian?’ moves away from the Indian as a thing to the Indian as a person with an identity. Both ‘what’ and ‘who’ imply constructed processes, although ‘who’ can allow for indigenous peoples to exert agency, to take terms imposed from above and rework them to their own advantage. Earle, Becker, Briggs and Briggs, and Montejo assess an incomplete, uneven and sinuous progression from ‘what’ to ‘who’ in indigenous relationships with the state, and thereby add another color to the multi-hued indigenous historiographic *tela*.

Rebecca Earle argues that for Latin American elites, from the independence era through the early 20th century, Indians as an idea served multiple purposes divorced from the real indigenous peoples with whom elites co-habited in a defined territory

without necessarily sharing a nation. Before this, Spaniards invented the concept or category of the Indian to serve their own objectives. Of course those so-called Indians did not share the same classifications as the Spaniards because they did not all see themselves as members of one homogeneous ethnic group (Earle, 2007, p. 1). Actually, had the Spaniards noticed, Americans thought of other Americans just as Europeans thought of other Europeans – some were more civilized than others, some were enemies, some better trading partners. Through an analysis of patriotic poetry, stamps, museum holdings, place names, independence day celebrations, theater, histories, constitutions, and decrees, Earle asserts that Latin American elites needed a constructed indigenous past in order to build a concept of nationalism that incorporated some, but not all, members of the nation.

The need for a heroic past was particularly acute in the early 19th century, when independent-minded Creoles sought to undermine European beliefs that all inhabitants of Spanish America were ‘doomed, climatically and racially to inferiority’ (Earle, 2007, p. 28). In this context, Mexican elites celebrated Aztec glories and bemoaned the oppression imposed by second-rate Spaniards, comparing the Aztecs with the Greeks and Romans. Peruvian and Chilean elites made similar claims about their heroic Incan and Araucanian ancestors, transforming select portions of pre-conquest America into a patriotic, civilized paradise.

Although Creole elites needed the patriotic past associated with select groups of pre-Columbian indigenous peoples, they disassociated those Indians from the indigenous peoples of the 19th century considered to be barbaric degenerates. The ideological drive to accept one idea of Indian while rejecting living ones led to complicated rhetorical gymnastics, Earle argues. During the 1810s, incipient Latin American nations demonstrated some official concern for the status of Indians in the new nations, left derelict by 300 years of abuse and neglect at the hands of the Spaniards (Earle, 2007, p. 26). For example, Venezuela’s 1811 Constitution referred to indigenous peoples as *ciudadanos naturales* and promised to fulfill the Spaniards’ broken promises to educate and provide for the indigenous population (Asamblea Nacional Venezuela, n.d., Chapter 9, part 200). But once Creoles achieved independence, the indigenous past was no longer so necessary. Living Indians became reminders of the negatively perceived colonial heritage and at best irrelevant to the poetics of nationalism. According to Earle, some nations went so far as to try to abolish the term ‘Indian’ in the ‘vain hope that the human signified would follow the demise of the signifier’ (Earle, 2007, p. 40).

Earle asserts that by the later decades of the 19th century, Indians presented the nation with a substantial problem. How could nation-builders construct the modern, progressive nation when it was populated by backwards and degenerate peoples? (Thurner, 2003). Because they were intellectually incapable of exercising citizenship, Indians became an anchor dragging down Latin American nations in their efforts to modernize. Early 20th-century *indigenista* authors José Vasconcelos and Ricardo Rojas brought back into intellectual discourse the role of an idealized indigenous past and the role of idealized Indians, who had to replace the real Indians (Earle, 2007, pp. 206 and 209). Nineteenth-century Creoles created a new genealogy in which the

union of Spaniards and the first Indians (Aztecs, Incans, or Araucanians) gave birth not to mestizos, but to Creoles, and also required the death of indigenous history (Earle, 2007, pp. 210–211). *Indigenismo* did not bring back mestizos into the cosmic race any more than it could bring back the history other elites erased.

Earle's work is a masterful assessment of the progression of intellectual discourse on what an Indian is, why elites did or did not need the Indian as an idea, how the ideas changed, and why that meant that Latin American elites could not accept Indians as peoples with culturally valuable and viable identities. The sins that exist in the work are those of slight generalization and occasional overreliance on secondary sources that exist in any work that attempts to synthesize ideas over such a broad expanse of time and space. I would, for example, want to see more substantive analysis of the viability of Earle's arguments in countries like Venezuela, Colombia, or Nicaragua with tenuous connections to a heroic pre-Colombian past. If there is a more substantial weakness in the work, it is the lack of attention to the consequences of the elite rhetorical gamesmanship. Did the elites' ability to divorce the plight of contemporary Indians from the heroic past reinforce the caste system that Earle acknowledges was a practical reality? That is an all important question and one now left for other scholars to address more thoroughly, using Earle's work on the language of nationalisms as a foundation.

The ebb and flow of rhetoric imposed from above or co-opted by the subaltern is one of the themes Marc Becker addresses in *Indians and Leftists in the Making of Ecuador's Modern Indigenous Movements*. He argues that indigenous revolt is nothing new in Ecuador. Indeed, 20th-century and 21st-century Indian activists consciously drew on the experiences of previous generations of indigenous organizers. In that process, indigenous peoples made conscious choices about the language of self-definition. Language becomes part of Becker's larger argument, in which he insists that it is fallacious to assert that indigenous peoples acted as junior, subordinate, or token partners to leftists in left-indigenous alliances formed as early as the 1920s. The left and indigenous actors used each other for strategic purposes, and both movements became stronger as a result.

Becker realizes that most readers are unfamiliar with the topography of Ecuadorian indigenous history and he does much to try to fill in readers' multiple blanks, providing a useful chronology, glossary, acronym index, and short biographies. He also makes an important contribution with his assessment of early indigenous political organizing in the 1930s, culminating with the establishment of the Federación Ecuatoriana de Indios (FEI) in 1944. Becker suggests that indigenous movements began to organize around land access and labor rights issues before the establishment of the Partido Socialista Ecuatoriana. Once new indigenous organizations began to collaborate with nascent leftist organizations, they started to use leftist language and perceive indigenous struggles as part of global class and economic struggles. Particularly fascinating is Becker's analysis of a potentially major indigenous congress in 1930 thwarted by the state. He provides a good assessment of how much of the press used presumptions of indigenous intellectual capabilities to interpret the congress, in that the press insisted that the urban left must have constructed the indigenous congress as a puppet congress for leftist purposes

because rural, indigenous peoples were incapable of mounting such a major event on their own. Such assumptions, Becker insists, colored even scholars' interpretations of indigenous–left relationships for decades (Becker, 2008, p. 58). The state's efforts to end indigenous activism had the opposite effect, however. Marches to Quito to present petitions began after the failed 1930 congress. The expulsion of indigenous leaders from the state-owned haciendas strengthened those leaders' relationship with the left. Constant pressure from indigenous peoples through non-violent means, the left, and the leftist press (some bilingual in Kichwa and Spanish), eventually forced the state to pass a Labor Code in 1938 that honored indigenous access to *huasipungo* plots on haciendas and established pay regulations for the male holders of *huasipungo* rights and their families.

Becker's book suggests that the FEI represented the zenith of indigenous and leftist collaboration efforts in the mid-20th century. Clearly Becker implies that indigenous identity became stronger in the process, while not sacrificing strategic relationships with non-indigenous peoples. For example, in the 1930s and the 1940s, indigenous organizers chose to use the word '*indio*' rather than the more neutral '*campesino*' as a self-identifier, even though the '*indio*' was perceived to be derogatory (Becker, 2008, pp. 86–87). The FEI fell from favor in the 1960s and 1970s, as other indigenous organizations began to advocate a variety of issues, including those more deeply rooted in ethnicity and culture – bilingual education, for example – than the land-driven and class-driven agenda that marked much FEI advocacy. That the FEI chose to use the term '*campesino*' instead of '*indio*' is a sign, Becker suggests, of how out of step a once-powerful organization had become (Becker, 2008, pp. 152–153). That said, he claims that the return of the concept of Indian nationalities, plurinational ethnic identity, and the Pachakutik political movement in Ecuador in the 1980s, 1990s, and early-21st century would not have been possible without the achievements of the indigenous FEI organizers and the white leftists with whom they collaborated in earlier decades.

While Becker adds much to our understanding of indigenous movement activities and accomplishments through the 20th century, his analysis leaves future researchers with important questions to answer. He suggests that Andean concepts of gender complementarity allowed for powerful female leadership in indigenous movements. Did all women who participated in the movements feel as empowered as leaders? Did women leaders feel more able to act when they functioned in a purely indigenous context? Did they experience complications when working with white collaborators, who did not share indigenous concepts of complementarity (Grandin, 2004)? Becker's analysis of indigenous identity formation in the earlier decades of the 20th century, although intriguing, is not as strong as it is for later decades. More work needs to be done to uncover the sources that would enable us to understand the broader and more complicated trajectory of indigenous identity formation in the decades prior to the formation of the FEI. Exactly how the early alliances between the left and indigenous groups were formed, why each group chose to participate, and conceptions and misconceptions they brought to the relationship that shaped alliance dynamics are additional topics that merit further exploration (Gould & Lauria-Santiago, 2004).

Although Becker does not use the term 'intellectuals' to describe indigenous leaders, their ability to function in multiple cultural and class contexts, often in a variety of languages, employing multiple ideological and political concepts made indigenous leaders intellectuals. Charles Briggs and Clara Mantini-Briggs' analysis of the 1992 cholera outbreak among the Warao in Venezuela highlighted the tragic consequences when indigenous intellectuals needed to function in multiple cultural and class contexts, like their Ecuadoran counterparts, but for various reasons were unable to do so. In *Stories in the Time of Cholera*, Briggs and Briggs discuss how multiple groups responded (or failed to respond) to cholera in Delta Amacuro. Their analysis of layers (local to international) of official narratives about and responses to the cholera epidemic among the Warao makes tragically and painfully clear that most officials could not recognize the voices of Warao leaders and cultural intellectuals because *criollos* nearly universally perceived them as a backwards people whose culture and ignorance made them logical victims of the dreaded cholera. The Warao, in Briggs' analysis, bore the blame for the epidemic instead of the systematic social/racial inequality that deprived the Warao of any education, public health facilities, reasonable employment, or running water. The narrative that blamed the Warao for their plight further marginalized the Warao, making it more difficult for officials to hear the voices of the indigenous leadership who survived the initial deadly onslaught of the disease.

Sadly, the tale told by Briggs and Briggs is not new. The 19th-century Guatemalan elite similarly dismissed Mayans as backwards for resisting the construction of new, modern, and supposedly sanitary cemeteries, not unlike the way Venezuelan officials argued that the Warao were intellectually incapable of understanding contemporary public health practices (Sullivan-González, 1998). I have already noted that Earle's argument that 19th-century and early-20th-century Latin American elites consistently dismissed contemporary indigenous peoples as barbaric, while celebrating a mythologized heroic indigenous past. This clearly echoes some of the points made by Briggs and Briggs, who note with irony how in 1992, in homage to the celebrations of the 500th anniversary of Columbus, many communities in Latin America attempted to celebrate native contributions to the Americas. While elites in the Delta community of Barrancas erected a statue of a pre-Colombian *cacique*, refugees from the epidemic lived in forced quarantine in the city (Briggs & Mantini-Briggs, 2003, p. 162). Just four years before the cholera outbreak in the Delta in 1992, state officials constructed a narrative that implied all residents in border areas in the far western regions of Venezuelan were criminals in order to try to explain away a military massacre of fishermen near Amparo (Coronil & Skurksi, 2006). During the *Caracazo* in 1989, Congressman Gonzalez Barrios called demonstrating *barrio* residents a 'primitive tribe' (Coronil & Skurksi, 2006, p. 85). Indeed, late-20th-century national elites continued the imagining of the barbaric Indian begun by their 19th-century predecessors.

Briggs and Mantini-Briggs highlight indigenous leadership's tacit complicity in the construction of negative narratives. Simultaneous to the cholera outbreak in 1992, a nascent indigenous movement in Venezuela sponsored marches in the Delta and



the adjoining states, but the organizers did not bring cholera into the discussion because they felt ashamed (Briggs & Mantini-Briggs, 2003, p. 134). As indigenous peoples and states move to discussions about what plurinationality means, there will be many issues uncomfortable not only for the state, but for indigenous leadership. Becker's analysis of the fall of the FEI and his description of its turn to non-indigenous leaders who seemed to betray indigenous populations with statements like 'There are no sharply defined racial groups in Ecuador' marks one of those uncomfortable moments (Becker, 2008, p. 151). Victor Montejo argues that it is the special role of the indigenous intellectual to lay out what is most uncomfortable for all to examine; in so doing, plurinationality can move from an idea to a practical reality. Indigenous peoples can move from being a 'what' to an active 'who'. Victor Montejo's *Maya Intellectual Renaissance* is the most *apropos* to discuss in the present special edition because it represents the critiques of an indigenous activist, intellectual, North American-trained anthropologist, survivor of the Guatemalan civil wars and exile, member of the Guatemalan Congress and peace minister. Because of his depth of experience as a Maya in Guatemala and in exile, and as an academic in the United States, Montejo occupies a singular vantage point from which he can criticize how academics have represented indigenous peoples, the construction and consequences of Guatemalan narratives of Mayans as barbaric Indians, as well as the limitations of some Pan-Mayan efforts to move towards social justice and other identity politics. The work, however, is predominately optimistic as Montejo charts a clear path in which academics and activists inside and outside Guatemala and of all ethnicities can collaborate in the fight against racism.

Like Earle and Briggs and Mantini-Briggs, Montejo argues that 'Indian' is a category designed to justify racism and its oppressive consequences (Montejo, 2005, p. 1). Indigenous Guatemalans are dehumanized objects in the eyes of the elite, a 'what'. When Mayan identity is constructed (or reconstructed) by Mayans, they reclaim their identity and become agents or 'who'. Montejo analyzes quite clearly how Guatemalan elite created the Indian as object. Reminiscent of Earle, he suggests that contemporary Guatemalan culture glorifies the ancient Maya while simultaneously laying at the feet of the contemporary Maya the persistent problems of national underdevelopment (Montejo, 2005, p. 59). Textbooks, Montejo suggests, are deadly tools in this process of distortion of Mayan identity because they 'hide the ideology of the dominant group and convey information that children must absorb and internalize' (Montejo, 2005, pp. 51–52). Pan-Mayan cultural revitalization, Montejo insists, is crucial to the construction of identity. The ways of knowing of the elders are particularly pertinent in the global economy, and coincidentally in an age of environmental angst. He notes, for example, how Maya from multiple traditions ask the Earth's permission before planting or cutting down a tree and admonish 'those who cut trees for pleasure shorten their own lives' (Montejo, 2005, p. 153).

Mayan leaders, Montejo suggests, must be intellectuals who build bridges using the Internet and print technology that reach beyond Guatemalan borders into popular culture, political debate, and academia – bridges that connect older ways of knowing and revitalized Mayan identity with the Guatemalan *ladino* community and the

broader world. Intellectuals have to be literate in Mayan, *ladino* and global narratives, and be able to translate between constituencies as necessary. As Montejo puts it, those leaders who forget to be intellectuals and those intellectuals who forget to lead do equal disservice to the Mayan population and the broader community. Likewise, he urges *ladinos* to acknowledge not only their role in the history of repression of Mayans, but also to remember the Mayan blood that runs through their veins. In short, Montejo proposes nothing short of a new cultural and racial paradigm that incorporates all Guatemalans based on plurinationality, but one that also implies criticism of all Guatemalans and requires effort from all Guatemalans. Only through realization of the paradigm can Guatemalans construct true democracy, something Montejo asserts is absolutely necessary to redress past wrongs and to reimagine national security and geopolitics. As the work is a collection of several essays written over a period of years, repetition is sometimes a distracting issue in *Maya Intellectual Renaissance*, but repetition should not distract from the truly significant nature of the paradigm Montejo proposes in his well-researched, carefully argued, and cogently written book.

The good news is that nations are moving towards new paradigms, as evinced by the Pachakutik political movement in Ecuador, and constitutional reforms in Venezuela and Colombia, which guaranteed indigenous representation in national assemblies for the first time, Victor Montejo's post on the Guatemalan cabinet, and the election of Evo Morales as president of Bolivia. Even 30 years ago all of these events would have been unthinkable. That is the good news. The more complicated news is the same complicated news as always, and painfully apparent in all four works considered here. Efforts of indigenous peoples to assert their own identity (or of the elite to define indigenous peoples) do not occur in national isolation, but instead within the context of broader geopolitical and economic realities. That is evident in Bolivia in any discussion of the cultural significance of coca versus the demands imposed by the United States in its own war on drugs. In recent years, the Wayuú in western Venezuela have had to fight particularly hard against commercial coal strip-mining projects supported by both the Venezuelan national oil company and international coal interests. Coal project proponents argued that the mines represented economic development, whereas the Wayuú insisted that mining would further damage the already polluted rivers that they used for subsistence and as a result, damage their cultural integrity – connecting land to identity in manners reminiscent of identity formation processes suggested by Becker, by Montejo, and by Briggs and Mantini-Briggs (Wagner, 2005). What is also tragically clear in all four works is the durability of the narrative of the Indian as object created by Latin American elites in centuries past. The ability to objectify indigenous peoples has not only facilitated racism, marginalization, exploitation, and death, but also led indigenous peoples to adopt counterproductive victim complexes in some cases (Montejo, 2005) and to deny the most politically inconvenient parts of indigenous reality in others (Becker, 2008; Briggs & Mantini-Briggs, 2003). Given those circumstances, the progress towards positive indigenous identity formation is nearly miraculous.



The year 2009 marked the 40th anniversary of the release of the Beatles' last album. It truly has been a 'long and winding road' for Latin American indigenous peoples' construction and auto-construction of indigenous identity and dignity. Evident in the indigenous construction of the road is a tremendous amount of creativity, ingenuity, deep knowledge of multiple histories, political and cultural savvy, and broad-based intellectual achievement. One can safely assume that the road is not going to become straighter any time soon – but with the skills and new paradigms, there is reason to hope.

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