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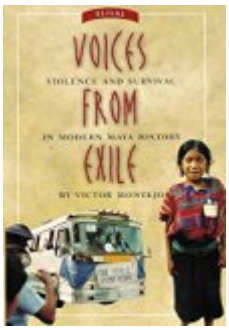
Victor Montejo. *Voices from Exile: Violence and Survival in Modern Maya History.* Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999. xiv + 287 pp. $25.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8061-3171-9.



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Auto-Anthropology

Few Latin American countries have captured the attention of outside observers to the extent that Guatemala has over recent years. Increased interest in the pre-Columbian past, appalling human rights abuses, political turmoil, and the emergence of Rigoberta Menchu Tum as a cultural and political leader have combined to focus a great deal of academic and journalistic attention on Guatemala. Victor Montejo's *Voices from Exile* builds on that interest, making an important contribution to the already extensive bibliography on the plight of the contemporary Maya by concentrating on the political, cultural, and artistic consequences of exile for the thousands of Mayas who fled their country in the 1980s.

Importantly, Montejo makes that contribution in terms of his ability to escape the dichotomy between the anthropologist and the "other." Montejo, who teaches in the Department of Native American Studies at the University of California, Davis, carefully presents a picture of a different kind of anthropologist and a different kind of Guatemalan Maya. For example, he says "I grew up speaking Popb'al Ti'" (p. 5), just a few pages before summarizing his education by noting "I graduated from SUNY in the spring of 1989 and moved to the University of Connecticut to work on my doctorate" (p. 11). This information appears in an autobiographical sketch in the first chapter to call attention to the fact that the author lived the experiences he narrates. Furthermore, the autobiographical content of this book suggests that the question of who speaks is just as important as what that speaker takes as his subject matter.

Montejo makes his purposes and his perspective clear in the following passage. "I am a Maya, I was a refugee, I lived in exile, and as an anthropologist I returned to the refugee camps to investigate the situation of those remaining there. I have the advantage of a Western education ***and*** a Maya upbringing. I speak two May languages, Popb'al Ti' and Q'anjob'al, in addition to Spanish and English" (p. 11). Speaking from his unique position, Montejo sets for himself a double task. First, he will "decolonize this Maya experience of exile" (p. 13). Second, he will fulfill his "moral re-

sponsibility to make evident to the world the plight of my people in exile" (p. 13).

Of those two tasks, it is certainly the second that Montejo achieves most convincingly. ***Voices from Exile*** very clearly and methodically presents the exile experience, giving special attention to the cultural transformations caused by exile and to the artistic response to it. Long personal narratives by refugees give this study a powerful human connection and the poetry and songs of other refugees likewise help the reader to see the Mayan refugees as agents of social change rather than as mere victims. I was, however, disappointed to find little analysis of the songs, poetry, or personal narratives. The presentation of these materials clearly makes evident the plight of Montejo's compatriots, but it does not in itself constitute a decolonization of the experience.

Montejo's hesitance to analyze or comment on the material that he cites suggests to me that there is a fundamental generic uneasiness at work in this book. ***Voices from Exile*** seems stuck somewhere between history and ***testimonio***, caught as much between the presentation of experience and the academic analysis of it as between Mayan roots and the Western theoretical models that purport to explain them. This uncertainty as to the genre of the book prevents ***Voices from Exile*** from becoming a truly compelling piece of work. It is, nonetheless, a valuable record of a people in transition. On this point, Montejo concludes with a statement that summarizes his vision of exile and Maya identity. "Our ability to be Mayas is not limited to any one place or time. It is not forever rooted in the past. It can be our identity and our strength wherever we are." (p. 243).

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