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Indigenous Movements, Self-Representation and the State in  
Latin America (review)

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## Book Reviews

Cynthia S. Simmons, Book Review Editor

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Kay B. Warren and Jean E. Jackson (eds.) **Indigenous Movements, Self-Representation and the State in Latin America**. University of Texas Press Austin, 2002. 294 pp., maps, photos, notes, appendices and index. \$22.95 cloth (ISBN: 0-292-79141-0).

Warren and Jackson's volume successfully demonstrates that contemporary indigenous movements are seeking self-representation against and with the Latin American state. The authors assert these groups do not exist "outside historical time and agency" (p. 7) and thus, they endeavor to overturn a common mistake whereby many observers believe that "indigeness and modernity are mutually exclusive." (p. 28) By emphasizing the complexity of indigenous self-representation in light of modernization, in seven chapters the authors' use a case study format to study the micro political relationships among and between indigenous and non-indigenous actors. In each case, indigenous groups confront the problems of forging a multiplicity of identities and strategies to create coherent messages for transmittal amongst themselves and toward non-indigenous actors. What unifies the chapters is not where changing discourses are analyzed (Colombia, Guatemala, Brazil), but how they are undertaken. This volume establishes that similar to the globalization of indigenous concerns, the methods of indigenous discourse among and between actors have also become globalized.

Defining one's identity or voice given contradictory identity definitions is important, but not simple. The first essay, "The Indigenous Public Voice: The Multiple Idioms of Modernity in Native Cauca" by David Gow explores the conflicts among Caucaans in defining *tierra*, *autonomía* and *cultura*. He writes that determining true definitions are as challenging for observers as they are for the indigenous groups. By writing, "Latin American modernity is multiple, indeed, indigenous modernity is too," (p. 72) Gow's expression of Caucaan definitional conflicts begins the echo of the key idea represented throughout this collection of essays.

Finding a method for representing identity takes many forms. In Terence Turner's "Representation, Polyphony, and the Construction of Power in a Kayapó Video," he finds that Western videography has been captured by the Kayapó as a tool for preserving culture, sharing ideas, recording history and ultimately, redefining their identity. It is the Kayapó's use of video, which identifies not just its cinematographer and his videotape as part of memory creation — it also represents power. The power of this tool, Turner notes, has provoked skeptical observers of the Kayapó to question whether, given their use of video, what they capture by video is truly authentic.

The right to political representation is crucial in determining the discourse agenda. In Jackson's "Contested Discourse of Authority in Colombian National Indigenous Politics: The 1996 Summer Takeovers," she successfully proves that it is not only *mestizos*, converted Protestants, and aspiring *políticos* who can be the enemy of the indigenous discourse, but also Indians. While the state institutions that serve as the conversation partner to indigenous groups also faces institutional and historical barriers, she writes that

Indians are also not an automatic political unit and that difference in autonomy, authority and authenticity of their relationships to each other and with the state are constantly being negotiated.

In line with this idea, Alcida Rita Ramos' "Cutting Through State and Class: Sources of Strategies of Self-Representation in Latin America," quickly establishes that "in what is truly record time, indigenous peoples of the Americas replaced their white spokespersons with their own voices..." (p. 255). Ramos' description of the vibrant "cacophony" of divergent voices attempting to influence an indigenous message is a sound encapsulation of this volume. She accentuates the "insolvable contradictions" (p. 264) that face indigenous groups as they try to transform their activism into a participatory relationship with new constitutions, government and legal systems.

Victor Montejo's contribution, "The Multiplicity of Mayan Voices: Mayan Leadership and the Politics of Self-Representation," demonstrates that his representation of Guatemalan Mayan reality is as problematic as his opinion on what that reality must achieve. Perhaps that is his greatest contribution to this volume. In one part of his essay, he criticizes fellow Mayans for falling into "traps of party politics" (p. 133) yet only a few pages later writes, "Mayan intellectuals should get more involved in politics and seek positions in government." (pp. 141-142). He criticizes the *nivelados*, the Mayan leaders who compete with *ladinos* for economic advantage, who "sell out" their Mayan family in return for a different type of "inclusion." Montejo concludes "the construction of a Guatemalan nationalism must come from a compromise between both Maya and non-Maya." (p. 143). However, how he plans to move beyond such platitudes is unclear.

According to Warren's "Voting Against Indigenous Rights in Guatemala: Lessons from the 1999 Referendum," the lackluster voting turnout of Mayans during a 1999 referendum addressing indigenous rights forced some outside analysts to conclude that "[its] defeat [w]as the end of effective indigenous organizing." (p. 151). Like Warren, I agree that such cursory analysis is shortsighted and reinforces misperceptions of Mayan activism. If Mayan activism failed within the referendum process it was by not advocating strongly enough for a simplified referendum with easily distinguishable choices. But then again, given the advocacy effort required to obtain the referendum and determine its wording, Warren echoes Montejo's previous insecurities in face of the state's equally defensive precautions. While word changes alone would not have solved the nearly 81% abstention rate, it could have clarified the true complexity facing Mayan activists instead of clouding the waters in which activists now tread, uncertain of the method by which to build consensus.

True representation is that ultimate form of consensus whereby confusion over who is speaking for whom is non-existent. Laura Graham's, "How Should an Indian Speak? Amazonian Indians and the Symbolic Politics of Language in the Global Public Sphere," focuses instead on who is speaking for whom; a far more interesting and perhaps more important analysis should consider "who speaks with whom." (p. 184) By describing the internal politicking over whether Davi Yanomami is a "Yanomami leader" or a "created" spokesman she carefully dissects the anthropological debate on whether Davi is "authentic" given his clever and perhaps needed articulation of Western and indigenous words and phrases, thus leaving some analysts unconvinced of his authenticity. Graham asks participants in this battle to consider ignoring their Western temptation to compartmentalize authentic as different from inauthentic. She urges readers that instead of asking Indians to isolate themselves from the incorporation of new ideas and words, it is more relevant to indigenous discourse if, through discussion of transnational ideas, indigenous groups become more engaged with the increasingly interconnected world in which they find themselves.

Finally, while the book discusses indigenous movements in Brazil, Colombia and Guatemala, it unfortunately neglects case studies in Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador, countries where the indigenous population is a greater proportion of the national population and thus may add greater relevance to the trends underlined in this book.

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Victoria Sanford. **Buried Secrets: Truth and Human Rights in Guatemala.** New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. xviii and 313 pp., maps, photographs, notes, and index. \$35.00 cloth, \$ 19.95 paper (ISBN 1-4039-6023-2).

Victoria Sanford's *Buried Secrets* makes a valuable contribution to our understanding about how rural Guatemalans come to grips with the death and destruction that dominated their lives over the past forty years. Through the voices of over 400 massacre survivors, former soldiers, civil patrollers, and insurgent combatants, which Sanford documented during her years of participation on teams exhuming mass graves, she writes a book about *La Violencia* in highland Guatemala from the perspective of rural Maya survivors. Guatemalans use the term *La Violencia* when referring to the massacres in 626 villages and 200,000 civilian victims of a thirty six year-long civil war. *Buried Secrets* is a difficult read simply because, in parts, tears flood the eyes of readers who wade through the traumatic memories of massacre survivors. If you want to learn more about how rural Guatemalans slowly come to terms with a horrific past and how academics theorize about how those impacted by the violence conduct their lives in post-war societies, Sanford's book must rest open in your hands.

In ten detailed chapters, supplemented by extensive notes and citations at the end of the book (which makes for annoying flipping back and forth if one wants to read in context), Sanford outlines how testimonies play an integral role in the exhumation process because they help us understand "local attempts to make meaning of the experience of survival" (p. 26). Sanford also attempts to understand the context and structure of Guatemala's bloody past, again through the voice of survivors. This talking about the past, Sanford stresses, is vital to transitional justice in Guatemala where survivors seek to rebuild full lives and communities. Finally, in *Buried Secrets* Sanford document how communities move to rebuild their lives by requesting exhumations and formal burial of victims, demanding public recognition of the truth, and in some cases, calling for justice and prosecution of perpetrators of past crimes. Now I leave the summary of the book behind to focus on the weaknesses and strengths of Sanford's contribution to our understanding of Guatemala's grisly past and uncertain future.

First and foremost, this book should stand as a monument to all Guatemalans who fell victim to the gun and machete, not just the Maya. Sanford follows the worn and tired track of many social scientists before her by focusing exclusively on Maya victims. Lest we forget in our academic discussions, even the word "Maya" is a misnomer and rarely used by Guatemala's indigenous people. Instead, they refer to themselves as "naturales," "gente de corte o traje" (people of traditional dress), "campesino," or "indígena." When I ask rural indigenous folk about the use of the word "Maya," they often retort "ah, nuestros antepasados" (ah, our ancestors). Sanford discusses at length genocide against the Maya. Yet, often in the same paragraph, Sanford mentions that 17 percent of the