

# Maya Textures: Conceptualizing Contemporary Indigenous Poetics, Patterns, and Performances

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Paul M. Worley, and Rita M. Palacios. *Unwriting Maya Literature: Ts'ïib as Recorded Knowledge*. Arizona UP, 2019. 232 pp. ISBN 978-0-8165-3427-2.

Latin American literary studies have always been characterized by a certain unease when it comes to their main object of study: literature. From Ángel Rama's *La ciudad letrada* to John Beverley's *Against Literature*, Latin Americanists have been painfully aware that literature is a practice of power and close to power. Ever since writing in the Latin script was introduced and used by the European invaders to administrate, dominate, and represent the native population of the American continent, literature has been an instrument of power, a power generally held by white or mestizo elites. Recent decades, however, have led to an increased production by and visibility of non-white and non-mestizo voices. In this context appears *Unwriting Maya Literature: Ts'ïib as Recorded Knowledge* by Paul Worley and Rita Palacios. Their book continues the pattern of critical skepticism towards literature, but by centering indigenous intellectual production. In the introduction, the authors expressly state that this is not a book on literature, literary criticism, or literary theory (3). In this case, the distance to the literary has to do with a desire to move beyond narrow European Alphabet-centric conceptions of literature or writing in order to better conceptualize contemporary indigenous cultural forms of expression. In their attempt to unwrite the idea of Maya literature, they employ the Maya concept of Ts'ïib, a term for cultural creation and recording that encompasses textual writing, performances, and pattern-making and which is inherently dynamic, social, and interconnected in nature.

Understanding Ts'ïib as “a multimodal site of cultural production (textile, textual, architectural, divinatory, or agricultural)” (19), throughout the book's seven chapters, Worley and Palacios discuss different dimensions and examples of ts'ïib. The works analyzed include a wide range of examples of contemporary indigenous art and writing in Maya or Spanish from Mexico and Guatemala and include artists/pattern-creators belonging to different Maya groups such as K'iche, Kaqchikel, Tsotsil, Tseltal, Yucatec, Jakalteq, and Tz'utujil. Chapter 1 relates ts'ïib to other Maya concepts such as cha'anil, k'anel, and cholel and discusses it in relation to the colonial legacy of European-style writing. Chapter

2 focuses in particular on textiles as object-texts in practices of Maya weavers in Chiapas. Chapter 3, on the other hand, explores the intersection between writing and weaving in the poetry of Calixta Gabriel Chiquín and Ruperta Bautista. Chapter 4 focuses on the meaning of traditional Maya dress (*traje*), gender, and identity politics in the works of poets Humberto Ak'abal and Rosa Chávez in Guatemala. Chapter 5 analyzes contemporary decolonial practices in relation to the colonial-era books of Chilam Balam. Chapter 6 posits the bilingual poetry of Waldemar Noh Tzec as an act of rebellion aimed at creating a new plurilingual imagined community. Chapter 7 then pays attention to Maya visual art and the tensions that arise from Western conceptions of art and craft.

The University of Arizona Press is a premier publishing venue for indigenous studies, and increasingly so the subfield contemporary indigenous literatures, a position it further strengthens with the publication of *Unwriting Maya Literature*. There is much to be commended about the book. For one there is the spectacular cover featuring art created by Taller Leñateros (and designed by Leigh McDonald), which captures the book's argument beautifully. Taller Leñateros, founded in 1975 by the Mexican American poet Ámbar Past in San Cristóbal de las Casas, is a largely female Maya Tsotsil cooperative focused on the preservation and dissemination of Maya culture that produces books, prints, and papers using traditional Maya techniques and natural materials. Secondly, there is the fact that the authors dared to co-author a book, making the book a rare gem within humanistic scholarship in the US still too focused on the single-authored monograph. But thirdly and most importantly it needs to be commended for its invaluable contribution to indigenous, Maya, and Latin American studies. The authors highlight the relative illiteracy on indigenous matters in Latin America overall (16), and as such the importance of the book in its centering of Maya concepts cannot be overstated. It is a book that has the potential to increase Maya literacy among Latin Americanists with sentences like these: "Tying these concepts together, we argue that the heavy performatic character (*cha'anil*) of Maya writing (*ts'iib*) helps (re)create and sustain the social networks and interactions (*k'anel*) of its public in spaces real and imagined (*cholel*)" (27). Despite postcolonial and decolonial gestures and efforts, the Latin Americanist field still depends very much on European philosophy to think of the world but such sophisticated engagements with Maya language and thought as this book open not only the possibility for Latin Americanists to become more literate in indigenous thought, but also to conceive differently of the world. Furthermore, Worley and Palacios argue that *ts'iib* is not a practice of power but of community-building, an idea which offers many impulses for rethinking indigenous and non-indigenous practices of writing, worldmaking, and reading in Latin America and beyond.

My only reservations with regard to the book is that the introduction could make a greater effort to be accessible to scholars and readers less versed in indigenous and Maya studies or decolonial theory. While it is never quite fair to ask specialized books to be less specialized, precisely because the authors highlight the relative illiteracy on indigenous matters in Latin America, a book like *Unwriting Maya Literature* needs to strike a fine balance between advancing its sophisticated argument and remaining accessible to Latin Americanist audiences overall. Similarly, the writing could at times be clearer; there are

instance when the authors' ideas get muddled in complex syntax and rhetorical questions. It should be said, however, that other chapters, for example chapter 2 (a second introduction) and chapters 4 and 5 do a very good job in presenting and explaining concepts and texts. Overall, these are minor issues that do not take away from the great intellectual merit of the book. *Unwriting Maya Literature* is a stimulating work that surely will become a central point of reference in debates in Maya, indigenous studies, and Latin Americanism.