

# INTRODUCTION: RE-IMAGINING THE MAYA IN TRANSNATIONAL CONTEXTS

*“The Indian represents a past civilization and the Mestizo or Ladino, as we call him, a civilization to come. The Indian forms the majority of our population, but lost his force a long time ago because of the slavery to which he was subjected. He is not interested in anything, accustomed to things as they are...even his women and children represent the mental, moral, and material distress of the country: poor, dirty, dressed in different style, and he suffers without blinking.”*<sup>1</sup>

Miguel Angel Asturias, 1923

During the 1920s and 1930s, indigenous cultures in Latin America mesmerized the U.S. public because of a surge of romantic notions about the simplicity and beauty of their enchanting cultural traditions. The growing fascination with native peoples drew in part from the emerging ethno-tourism trends of earlier decades that brought U.S. travelers into direct contact with the native peoples of the desert Southwest and Pacific Northwest; excursions to these regions provided tourists with a glimpse of authentic Indian life and the opportunity to purchase unique handmade native arts and crafts as souvenirs. These kinds of tours grew in popularity as revolutions in transportation expanded the geographic scope and nature of leisure travel for the purpose of experiencing other cultures. Increased ease and speed of travel aboard either United Fruit Company (UFCO) steamships or the aircraft of the recently launched Pan-American Airways allowed commercial passengers to travel with relative comfort from both New York and New Orleans to new destinations throughout Central and South America.<sup>2</sup> These modern technologies created new hemispheric political and cultural ties, which in

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<sup>1</sup>Miguel Angel Asturias and Julio César Pinto Soria, *Sociología guatemalteca: el problema social del indio* (Guatemala: Editorial Universitaria, Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, 2007), 8. “El indio representa una civilización pasada y el mestizo, o ladino que le llamamos, una civilización que viene. El indio forma la mayoría de nuestra población, perdió su vigor en el largo tiempo de esclavitud a que se le sometió, no se interesa por nada, acostumbrado como está a que quien primero pasa le quite lo que tiene, incluso la mujer, los hijos, representa la penuria mental, moral, y material del país es humilde, es sucio, viste de distinta manera, y padece sin pestañar.” Translation mine.

<sup>2</sup>Dennis Merrill, *Negotiating Paradise: U.S. Tourism and Empire in Twentieth-Century Latin America* (Chapel Hill [N.C.]: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Dina Berger and Andrew Grant Wood, eds., *Holiday in Mexico: Critical Reflections on Tourism and Tourist Encounters* (Duke University Press Books, 2010); Rosalie Schwartz, *Flying Down to Rio: Hollywood, Tourists, and Yankee Clippers* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2004). The emergence of recent scholarship on the origins of Latin America tourism has highlighted various aspects of the expansion of this industry, including ideas about empire and the ways that popular entertainment and travel functioned to construct images of certain

turn, allowed greater numbers of tourists to travel throughout the Americas to fulfill their hopes of encountering even more exotic and remote native cultures.

The romantic sentiment that native cultures evoked in U.S. cultural imaginations stemmed from a gnawing sense of nostalgia for what seemed lost; people longed for not only a simpler, anti-modern past, but also recalled wistful memories of earlier decades when the U.S. nation and the power of its industrial culture had seemed unstoppable. The allure of indigenous civilizations also revived earlier waves of late nineteenth-century Mayanism, whose enigmatic mysticism stood in stark contrast to the gritty realities of the present.<sup>3</sup> Responding to this vague sense of nostalgia in growing numbers, U.S. tourists pushed further south in pursuit of newer frontiers in the form of ever more exotic destinations and cultures. In the midst of this sense of romantic yearning, the Maya of Guatemala cast a special spell over the public because of their staunch adherence to seemingly strange pre-Columbian traditions. Their handmade woven costumes, ancient native languages, and pagan religious ceremonies ignited popular imaginations and prompted many to fantasize about traveling abroad to experience these wonders. During the bleak years of the Great Depression, which seemed to many a tangible sign of cultural decay and economic decadence following the exuberance and excesses of the 1920s, a personal experience with native cultures offered a glimpse into an alternative reality of a pre-modern idyllic past, unencumbered by the intense anxieties of the present. New interest in Mayan culture also stirred deep cultural memories of earlier U.S. frontier experiences with North American Indian tribes. Perceptions of cultural differences placed imaginary boundaries between foreign travelers and the Maya they encountered, which created a new type of frontier experience. Against the backdrop of this new cultural frontier, travelers reenacted old narratives of conquest in order to experience the

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travel destinations.

<sup>3</sup> Lawrence Desmond, *A Dream of Maya: Augustus and Alice Le Plongeon in Nineteenth-Century Yucatan*, 1st ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988); R. Tripp Evans, *Romancing the Maya: Mexican Antiquity in the American Imagination, 1820-1915*, 1st ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004). Mayanism, a loose-knit collection of beliefs in certain New Age aspects of Maya culture, flourished during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Mayanists often asserted imaginary cultural connections between the Maya and other ancient civilizations. Both Desmond and Evans argue that the surge in Maya studies of the late nineteenth century was based in part on romanticized notions about Mayan history and culture.

mythological regenerative properties of an authentic experience with wild Indians. In short, the presumed characteristics of the Maya, their charm, simplicity, and traditional life ways, seemed to offer a sense of hope and a cultural panacea for the ills of modern industrial living.

Travel advertisements for Guatemalan tours often depicted picturesque quaint villages, highlighting the beauty of their handmade arts and crafts, as well as the timelessness of ancient patterns of subsistence agriculture.<sup>4</sup> The Guatemalan nation, with its vibrant native cultures and incomparable natural beauty, captured public imaginations because it represented an essentially undiscovered, pristine vision of a primordial Eden. The lure of the mystery of the archaeological remains of the ancient Maya also bewitched travelers, offering them a place in which to imagine the vitality and dynamism of ancient cultures, in the hopes of bringing new life blood back to their own dreary realities at home. After 1930, when Guatemala began to court tourists in earnest, the nation's jungles, volcanoes, and above all, colorful native cultures, became major selling points of the tourist experience; together, they represented the perfect combination of romance and adventure. To assuage potential fears of discomfort during travels to a remote and unfamiliar nation, travel advertisements often emphasized the modern amenities available to travelers, such as well-appointed hotel rooms and delicious meals, suggesting that a trip to experience the Maya need not involve hardship. Those with the financial means to travel to Guatemala during this time purchased souvenirs and handmade crafts from Mayan women in the colorful, bustling market of Chichicastenango and observed the tranquility and simple routines of the villagers of tiny hamlets, who fished from wooden boats scattered across the surface of Lake Atitlán.<sup>5</sup> When they returned home, travelers brought back memories of the experiences with the Maya back to the U.S., where they shared them with friends and family through personal anecdotes. Sometimes, they even regaled public audiences with thrilling details of their adventures through educational lectures at local libraries or community expositions of photographs of the cherished memories of their experiences.

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<sup>4</sup>“Grace Line: Between New York and California or Mexico City,” *Life Magazine*, February 15, 1937.

<sup>5</sup>United Fruit Company Passenger Service, “A Trip To Guatemala by the Great White Fleet” (U.S.A., n.d.).

For those unable to splurge on a trip to Guatemala to experience the magic of the Maya in person, indigenous material culture on display in public venues throughout the U.S. offered vicarious experiences and a taste of the rejuvenation that international travelers hoped to gain during their cultural encounters with native peoples. U.S. audiences at home participated in imaginary adventures abroad through the commercial consumption of both ideas and items of Mayan culture during their experiences at world's fairs, textile expositions, and attendance at popular films. These venues provided a place for audiences to consume visual images and knowledge about native cultures without the expense or hassle of travel. For example, audiences learned about the Maya up-close through performances of indigenous musical traditions at large world's fairs designed to educate the U.S. public about the cultural diversity of the world around them. Purchasing textiles and home furnishings based on the material culture and artistic productions of native cultures conveyed not only the owner's design sense, but also a direct acquaintance with native cultures that signaled a worldliness that extended far past recognizable national and cultural boundaries. Finally, popular audiences consumed constructed visual images of native peoples through escapist adventure films that whisked viewers away to distant lands filled with mysterious peoples, without ever leaving the familiar comfort of their theater seats.

In addition to their starring roles in U.S. cultural imaginations, the Maya became the focal point of a growing number of social scientific studies during the 1930s. A motley wave of anthropologists, ethnographers, archaeologists, and geographers chose to conduct their fieldwork studies on Mayan culture in order to understand better the importance of indigenous cultural traditions and their role in the formation of indigenous identities and communities.<sup>6</sup> Both foreign amateur and professional social scientists began to conduct an increasing number of new field research studies in Guatemala because of widespread perceptions of the unadulterated nature of Mayan cultural traditions. Believed to be untouched by the culture clash of the Spanish conquest or corrupted by outside influences, the Maya

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<sup>6</sup>Sol Tax, *Penny Capitalism: A Guatemalan Indian Economy* (Washington: U.S. G.P.O., 1953); Ruth Leah Bunzel, *Chichicastenango: A Guatemalan Village*, Publications of the American Ethnological Society (Locust Valley, N.Y.: J.J. Augustin, 1952). Tax and Bunzel were just two of the many anthropologists who conducted fieldwork in Guatemala during the 1930s. Their studies were not published until after the end of the Second World War.

seemed ideal subjects for the application of new research methodologies and theories of cultural development. Social scientists sought to test new theories of cultural diffusion, as well as produce knowledge through a more collaborative, personal approach to social science research using participant-observation methodologies. In effect, Guatemala served as a testing ground for the application of new social science theories that aimed to disentangle old social constructions of biological race from new ideas about the development of culture. The new understandings of indigenous cultures that these studies generated not only filtered down to public audiences in the U.S., but also influenced debates between intellectuals in Guatemala over the fundamental nature of the Maya and their ability to participate in the construction of a new type of modern nation.