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Words and things in Yucatán: poststructuralism and the everyday life of Mayan multiculturalism

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This article draws on ethnographic examples to examine how rural Maya-speakers in the Mexican state of Yucatán ground the experience of identity politics in quotidian engagements with pre-Hispanic objects and utterances in the Maya language. My argument is intended as a revision of models of critical scholarship that have been influenced by poststructuralism and that place an overwhelming emphasis on discourse as a modality through which politically viable identities are created and performed. Specific examples show how vernacular multiculturalism is shaped by the agency of forms of language use and physical objects that have been a part of local life-worlds long before the popularization of Mayan identity politics. This offers some potentials for collaborative work that have not been fully explored in poststructural critiques of representation.

In this article, I propose an approach to the ethnography of multiculturalism and indigenous ethnic politics that focuses on the agency of the specific objects and practices that become anchors for narratives about identity. This represents a shift from recent poststructuralist literature that has emphasized the ways in which Maya-speaking peoples appropriate Western representations of their own cultures when they try to articulate politically viable identities. In contrast, I argue for a renewed analysis of the ways in which self-identified Maya people make sense of discourses on ethnicity by referring to experiences with words and things whose presence in their quotidian life-world long precedes the diffusion of anthropological discourse to vernacular publics in the global South. In this respect, I hope to engage a double-bind that emerged for scholars who sought to critique earlier anthropological representations that treated Maya culture as a fairly monolithic ethnological and archaeological assemblage (Hervik & Kahn 2006; Redfield & Tax 1952). Ethnographers writing in the 1990s developed highly insightful critiques of traditional Mayanist scholarship by examining the processes through which different models of being Mayan have been imposed on or adopted by rural indigenous people at different points in history (see below). But even as they characterized ethnic identity as something that was constituted through the appropriation of non-local ideas such as 'culture', these scholars said relatively little about how contemporary identity politics are also shaped by ways in which people experience words and things that existed in the lives of their communities before the

appropriation of anthropological narratives. Thus, my goal here is to retain the best insights of critiques of representation that revised older essentialist visions of Mayan culture, while re-examining how kinds of experience with far deeper local roots come into play in contemporary articulations of indigenous identity politics in rural Maya-speaking communities.

This analysis will require the casting of a critical, if largely sympathetic, eye towards poststructural theory and the political resonances that it has had in the lives of the communities that are studied by anthropologists. Though a number of scholars from the global South would characterize poststructuralism as fundamentally first-world cultural capital (Beverley & Oviedo 1995; see also Hale 1999), this same body of continental theory inspired approaches to identity politics that were rooted in a progressive and even radical drive to democratize Western knowledge. For students of Mesoamerica working in the 1990s, critical discussions of representation and self-representation offered a means of celebrating the politicized discursive strategies of indigenous people amidst a series of 'culture wars' in which texts such as David Stoll's critique of Nobel Prize Laureate Rigoberta Menchú had turned questions of authenticity and authority into the bases for heated debates (Arias 2001; Stoll 1999). But the same critiques of 'traditional' forms of anthropological authority that seemed liberating in North American universities had a very different valence in post-war Guatemala, where they clashed with the perspective of Mayan public intellectuals for whom cultural continuity was a powerful political claim (Bartra 2002; Hale 1999; Warren 1998; Yashar 2005). One particular flashpoint occurred after the publication of the volume *Maya cultural activism in Guatemala* (Fischer & Brown 1996), the authors of which characterized Pan-Mayan scholarship as the expression of new political subjectivities based in part on the appropriation of foreign representations of Maya culture. The various contributors documented how this politicized engagement with indigenous identity coalesced into an essentializing vision of 'Mayanness' based on cross-ethnic and cross-community solidarities that were less common in the experience of older forms of regional and community-based identity. Such well-intentioned academic observation by scholars who were very sympathetic to the politicized Maya movement was cited in print by elements of the Guatemalan Right that sought to discredit the primordialist claims of the indigenous activists, creating some tensions between Mayan intellectuals and foreign scholars (Fischer 1999; Hale 1999; Warren 1998: 69-85; Yashar 2005; see also Spivak 1987). What function as progressive critiques of representation in the university can have a very different political resonance amidst the *realpolitik* of multiculturalism and ethnic conflict (see also Ahmad 1991; Povinelli 2002).

Incidents like these figured in the reflections of scholars working among the large, rural, Maya-speaking population of the Mexican state of Yucatán, where I have conducted research since 1997. In some ways, Yucatán seemed like a polar opposite of Guatemala: it was a state where a significant majority of the population living outside of several major cities were speakers of a Mayance language that would be considered 'indigenous' by most urban Mexicans, but where grassroots mobilization on issues of ethnic identity has been less visible than in regions with similarly high populations of indigenous language speakers (Castillo Cocom 2005). At a time when the neo-Zapatista movement of Chiapas was deploying the language of indigenous rights (Collier & Quaratiello 2005), rural mobilizations in Yucatán seemed to be more strongly rooted in older models of agrarian and municipal politics (Castañeda 2003). But be this as it may, the Guatemalan experience provided a cautionary tale at a time when ethnographies of

Yucatecan communities were also placing more emphasis on the ways in which Mayan identity had changed as different discourses were imposed from above or appropriated from below (see Breglia 2006; Castañeda 1996; Gabbert 2004; Hervik 1999; Hervik & Kahn 2006).

As I spent more time speaking to self-identified Maya people in rural Yucatán, the particular ways in which my friends and informants articulated narratives of Mayan identity seemed to offer some solutions to the tensions between theoretical critique and identity politics that had emerged in Guatemala. Phrases such as 'Maya culture' and other ethnological abstractions that had made a relatively recent appearance in local repertoires reflected rural Yucatecans' appropriation of Western anthropological discourse and forms of 'strategic essentialism' discussed by a number of authors (Fischer 1999; Spivak 1987; Warren 1998). But, as I will demonstrate below, there were just as many cases in which everyday narratives about ethnic identity articulated by self-identified Maya people were not just a strategic iteration of discourses that had been legitimated by foreign anthropologists, but statements that were grounded in the experience of words and things that had much deeper local roots, and that might not necessarily be intelligible to outsiders. Many of my friends and informants performed the idea of 'authentic' Mayanness with examples of linguistic knowledge that would be obscure to people who were not fluent in Yucatec Maya. Others referred to the cultural significance of pre-Hispanic artefacts in ways that reflected the intimate tactile contact of people who encountered them in their quotidian life-world more than they did the 'gaze' (Urry 1990) of the non-local authors and consumers of 'official' archaeology. A more careful analysis of the historical contingencies that brought these quotidian experiences into the articulation of vernacular notions of Mayanness can be useful in developing an ethnography of identity politics that looks beyond the analysis of 'strategic essentialism' and other ethico-political aporias.

In this sense, my dual focus on words and things in this essay is an ironic play on the original French title of Foucault's *The order of things* (1994 [1970]) (*Les mots et les choses* or 'Words and things'), a text that embodies many of the assumptions about the discursive constitution of reality that have come to dominate poststructural scholarship on identity politics. In Foucault, discourse is privileged as the modality of human experience through which objects in the world are constituted (Megill 1985). As in Wittgensteinian ordinary-language philosophy,¹ he and other poststructuralists assumed that the relationship between words and things is marked by a fundamental tendency towards semantic slippage: there is no absolute metaphysical substance in someone's experience of the entity that I refer to as 'pig' that indicates that there is a fundamentally truthful language of 'pigness' with which to speak about it. In the Foucauldian view, the potential range of legitimate ways of speaking about my experience of this four-legged animal is an overarching disciplinary regime that enforces certain regularities in the discourses that make pigs and other things intelligible within a given social and cultural context (Foucault 1980 [1976]; 1994 [1970]). When this same logic is applied to the politics of Maya identity, any narrative that refers to elements of the quotidian experience of rural Maya-speaking people as an aspect of their 'culture' or 'ethnicity' can be read as a local appropriation of a first-world ethnological abstraction that has no home-grown precedent.

Stated in these stark terms, poststructural analyses of vernacular narratives that invoke the idea of Maya culture mirror many of the arguments that have been used in attempts to discredit the Pan-Mayan movement in Guatemala. But the caricature that

I have sketched above also reflects an aporia that has been implicit in the writing of well-intentioned Mayanist scholars who have made extensive use of poststructural theory. Anthropological studies of identity politics written in the last decade have not gone so far as to deny that the Maya language, pre-Hispanic artefacts, agricultural practices, and other things that are cited as key elements of Maya culture originated before the Maya were 'invented' as an ideologically compromised ethnological abstraction (Castañeda 1996). However, given their commitment to a poststructural model of the relationship between discourse and experience, these scholars show a certain reticence to discuss how the words and things that are often invoked in narratives about Mayan identity had a presence in local life-worlds that preceded the articulation of contemporary identity politics. For example, in her study of identity politics in post-war Guatemala, Diane Nelson emphasized how local people can perform 'Mayanness' to make themselves intelligible to 'the demands of the scholarly body politic that leans on them across a transnational power differential' (1999: 366). In his own study of archaeology and archaeological tourism, Quetzil Castañeda treats the ruins of Chichén Itzá as an apparatus where discourse on the Maya is 'invented' through the work of archaeologists, tourists, and local Maya-speakers. For all of its webs of power and resistance and built-in zones of subversion – a phenomenon that the author describes as the Mayas' 'reading over the shoulders' of first-world archaeologists and tourists – Castañeda's museum tends to produce a fundamentally occidental cosmology through the re-cycling of pre-existing narrative representations. Likewise, in an analysis of the processes that create and territorialize heritage in Yucatán, Lisa Breglia suggests that

in a place with more archaeological development, residents become more comfortable with the markers of 'Maya Culture', as they carry a certain currency when oriented to outsiders; in a place with no 'outside' audience such as that provided by tourism, residents have less connections to those same 'tell tale' signs of the Maya Culture (2006: 198).

Writing against a tradition of Mesoamericanist scholarship that found the essence of indigenous culture in continuities between pre-Hispanic civilizations and contemporary Mayan-speaking groups, these scholars are committed to a style of critique that aims to recover historical transformations and contemporary variability in the experience of cultural identity. In this respect, the heritage of poststructuralism has made powerful contributions to our understanding of the cultural and social dynamics of Mayan identity. However, these critiques have placed an overwhelming emphasis on self-conscious and 'strategic' acts of narrative or performance, saying little about the range of other ways in which the 'tell tale signs' of Maya culture emerge in the quotidian experience of people who self-identify as 'indigenous'.

For anthropologists working since the 1970s, the adoption of poststructural theory has not been a merely philosophical commitment to view the world as something constituted by discourse, but a reflection of a more general scepticism about the knowability of non-discursive phenomena that are encountered during the course of fieldwork (Marcus & Fischer 1986). I would argue, however, that this healthy scepticism of positivist models of representation does not necessarily imply that the discussion of cultural continuity and non-discursive experience should be bracketed off to the degree that it has been. Models of materiality that have been discussed at length by scholars working in archaeology, material culture studies, and science and technology studies help us to trace historical continuities in the way that material objects have played a role

in defining the fields of experience in which more recent discursive processes become intelligible. Drawing on the work of Alfred Gell (1998) and Bruno Latour (1999), we can see how artefacts have a presence in social interaction that goes beyond the ways in which they are constituted by discourse to function as agents in their own right (see also Domanska 2006; Miller 2005). Contrasting this view to the metaphors of 'inscription' used by Castañeda (1996: 97-107) and Breglia (2006: 196) is especially useful. The discourses of cultural heritage and anthropology might 'inscribe' a range of different meanings to archaeological remains, but these objects also have a physical form and visual and tactile properties that are less mutable. Many self-identified Maya from rural Yucatán are now engaged in the appropriation of narratives in which stressing their ethnic link to the ruin-builders helps them become intelligible to privileged foreigners. Still, as Breglia herself notes (2006: 181-90), their engagement with these narratives comes after a much deeper collective history of interactions with the local environment in which they and their ancestors gained a fairly intimate experience with the less mutable tactile properties of these objects. Whether as a source of building materials and ritual paraphernalia, or as a place of work as manual labourers in archaeological projects, these objects exercise forms of physical agency that are not fully explained by the poststructural model of 'inscription'. These activities, and the kinds of agency that artefacts exercise as tactile objects, are a part of the experience of rural Maya-speakers that is distinct from that of the tourists and scholars with whom they engage on a daily basis, and that clearly precedes the contexts in which it becomes viable to perform Mayanness for 'outside audiences'.

Indigenous languages have a similar kind of historical presence and agency in the form of contemporary identity politics. The use of an indigenous language has been at the centre of official notions of indigeneity since at least the mid-nineteenth century (Armstrong-Fumero 2009a; England 2003; Montejo 2005). But what is relevant in quotidian experiences of contemporary identity politics is not just the fact that people may begin to explicitly refer to their language as a form of cultural patrimony, but also kinds of agency that the language itself exerts as a diachronic formation that has had a long presence in the lives of local communities. Though less durable and obviously 'thing-like' than pre-Hispanic remains, utterances in the Maya language – or any language – also have a significant material component. For Marxist scholars of language who have critiqued the structuralist or formalist reduction of language to a fixed synchronic cognitive code, utterances are artefacts in social space that derive their meaning from their place in diachronic processes of human interaction and cultural production (see Jameson 1972; Voloshinov, Matejka & Titunik 1973; Williams 1977). As a diachronic social and material phenomenon, language has an existence outside of politically motivated auto-ethnography and other specific instances of 'narrative' (White 1987) or 'narrative discourse' (Genette 1983) that constitute self-conscious statements about the world. Like sculptures found by chance in the bush, specific sounds of the Maya language have been learned and employed by many generations of native speakers through social phenomena that precede the appropriation of the narratives and discursive regularities that figure in the self-conscious iteration of 'Mayanness' as a contemporary political identity.

A greater sensibility to the agency of material culture and language can be very useful in rereading the quotidian incidents that instantiate the politics of indigenous culture in the lives of the rural people who are increasingly self-identifying as Maya. One particularly memorable event took place on an afternoon in March of 2004, as I set out

for the scrub forest outside of the town of Pisté with Antonio May,² an informant who had become a close personal friend. Antonio had offered to show me some of the medicinal plants that grew there. At the time, I was more interested in researching the contemporary production of archaeologically themed handicrafts that were sold to tourists. But since traditional medicine was a form of local knowledge that had been validated by recent anthropological studies in some neighbouring communities, Antonio insisted that I should include it in my own study of 'the Maya culture'.

Before we left Antonio's house, he showed me a conch shell that a tourist had traded him for a t-shirt, when it happened that 90-year-old Don Carlín strolled by. Antonio assumed that this exotic object would be unfamiliar to the old man, and called him over with an amused smile, asking him if he had ever seen a shell like that. Both of us were surprised when Don Carlín replied casually in Maya, 'Yes, it's a little *jub*'. The Maya term that I have rendered in italics was something that neither I, nor Antonio, had ever heard uttered before. After raising the shell to his lips and blowing a long and sonorous note that set all of the neighbourhood dogs to barking, Don Carlín went on to explain how in his day they were used to call cattle that were in the bush, and he praised the sound quality of Antonio's *jub*.

Antonio and I were both at something of a loss. He, a self-identified native who had been about to share some of his knowledge about the 'real' Maya culture, found himself faced with a traditional practice of which he had been completely unaware. There is more to this than just the generational differences between Don Carlín and Antonio; it is important to recognize *why* their different life experiences influenced their knowledge of what to do with the shell. Antonio bought his conch shell from a foreign tourist and had often seen them as part of a larger assemblage of objects that figure in contemporary contexts for Maya culture, from museum displays to the logos of heritage organization and the rituals of New Age religion. As a monolingual Maya-speaker who has not been involved in the tourist trade that has burgeoned since the 1970s, Don Carlín has had a very different kind of experience of the same object and recalls the conch shell as a practical tool that he and his family used in forms of agriculture that dominated local production long before the advent of the tourist industry.

After our initial surprise faded, Antonio smiled and conducted an impromptu interview of Don Carlín about the provenience and types of the *jubo'ob* used in the old days, and concluded, 'Today, we learned something of old Maya'. This quick transformation of a previously unknown word and practice into an example of 'old' Maya is a kind of quotidian event that is especially important to my arguments here. Antonio's characterization of Don Carlín's utterance of the word *jub* as a token of 'old Maya' framed this chance encounter through the logic of 'tradition' that was promoted by the same kind of official institution that certified practices like herbal medicine as state-recognized elements of ethnic heritage. But even so, the conch shell's Maya name and its use in cattle-calling entered into our knowledge through a different set of contingencies: a local history in which it had been a utilitarian object in the activities of agriculture. However much Antonio's notions of 'old Maya' are influenced by non-local narratives about authenticity, any future reference that he makes to *jubo'ob* is necessarily shaped by this chance encounter with a word and thing with deep roots in the past of his own community. The transition from engagements with non-discursive phenomena to the production of coherent narratives has figured in some discussions of 'evocation' in experimental ethnographic practice and writing (see Castañeda 2004; Tyler 1986). But as the case of Antonio's conch shell shows, this phenomenon also

figures in quotidian encounters and non-discursive engagements that provide the stuff of vernacular multicultural discourse.

Quotidian incidents like this are more than just examples for rethinking the discursive 'invention' of culture and cultural politics; they also reflect local practices and experiences that can help us to develop models of collaboration and political engagement that are not limited by the same aporias that create tensions between the critique of representations and the exigencies of identity politics. Part of the heritage of poststructural and post-colonial theory is a focus on how the non-discursive experience of non-Western people is inaccessible to our dominant epistemes, a situation that constitutes the appropriation and 'strategic' manipulation of these dominant epistemes as the primary means through which people like self-identified Maya make themselves intelligible to global publics (see especially Spivak 1987). But this model of radical alterity is difficult to reconcile with incidents like the one I describe above, in which words and objects emerge by chance into a given interaction, and exercise a degree of agency in how different subjects self-consciously articulate narratives about cultural or ethnic identity. As the philosopher Todd May observed in his critique of poststructuralist notions of radical alterity, the *a priori* assumption that difference is an absolute barrier to the communication of non-discursive reality tends to obscure the ways in which words and things have a presence in intersubjective interactions that exceeds their specific semantic function within the respective 'codes' that exist in the minds of different agents. This presence is a shared experience even for agents who comprehend the content of a given message through very different cultural or linguistic schemata, constituting the basis for other forms of negotiation or translation (May 1997). May's critique of radical alterity reflects a pragmatist philosophical heritage (see also Rorty 1998: 93-107) that has also informed models of narrativity that pay closer attention to the phenomenological relationship between individual subjectivity, non-discursive experience, and communication. For example, Paul Ricoeur situates cross-cultural and cross-linguistic communication within a more generalized phenomenological context in which the articulation of subjective experience through the medium of narrative is as crucial to constituting ethical subjects in communication between speakers of a same language as it is in the cross-cultural and cross-linguistic encounters (Ricoeur 1994; 2006; see also White 1987). By extension, it can be argued that the translation of subjective experience into the intelligible medium of narrative is not just something that happens when a local people chooses to perform 'its own' culture for a non-local audience, but a dimension of any interaction in which human agents must communicate the experience of objects that have a non-discursive presence in their lives.

In the following sections, I will build on these theoretical observations with two sets of ethnographic sketches of quotidian engagements between rural Yucatecans and utterances in the Maya language and pre-Hispanic artefacts. I have intentionally chosen statements that emerged spontaneously in conversation on other topics or in group discussions that involved several community members. These are all examples that lend themselves to detailed contextual analysis. Though these might seem like relatively insignificant instances of people invoking the idea of Maya culture, they are good representations of the kinds of quotidian performances and conversations that instantiate the discourse of Mayan identity politics in the everyday life of rural Yucatecans. As I will demonstrate, elements of a long collective experience of interacting with the Yucatec language and pre-Hispanic artefacts form an integral part of the local

repertoires that make 'official' representations of Maya culture intelligible to rural Yucatecans, challenging the idea that the substance of identity politics is primarily a matter of strategic appropriation.

Words: official language policy and the experience of 'bad' Maya

Anthropologists have treated speaking an aboriginal language as a marker of indigeneity since at least the mid-nineteenth century (Armstrong-Fumero 2009a; Cifuentes 2002; England 2003). The conflation of language and ethnic identity continues to play an important role in contemporary multicultural politics, as is evident in an official report published by the state government of Yucatán that calculates the population of the 'Yucatec Maya ethnic group' based on the number of persons who speak Maya and young children of parents who speak the language (Gobierno del Estado de Yucatán 2004). By extension, spaces that have been created for the Maya language in education and mass media have emerged as some of the most visible sites in which government officials, educators, and rural activists instantiate contemporary multicultural politics (Pfeiler & Zámisiá 2006).

Ironically, language tends to be a far more ambiguous marker of ethnic identity for rural Maya-speakers in Yucatán. Many residents of what are considered to be ethnic Maya communities do not consider themselves to be 'Indians' or 'indigenous', even if they speak the Maya language and conform to many stereotypes that urban Mexicans and foreigners associate with indigeneity (see Armstrong-Fumero 2009a; Castañeda 2004; Gabbert 2004; Hervik 1999). This situation reflects a history in which Maya served as a lingua franca for communication between city and village, and was used extensively by elements of the regional population who identified as European descendants (Amaro Gamboa 1999; Armstrong-Fumero 2009b; Gabbert 2004). Vernacular consciousness of Yucatec Maya sociolinguistics also differs from many other well-known examples of indigenous language ideology in that the native language of Yucatán has a long history of literacy. While scholars conducting ethnographic studies of emergent literacies in Maya-speaking Central America (England 2003; Maxwell 1996) and other minority language contexts (Bauman and Briggs 2003; Schieffelin 2000; Schieffelin & Doucet 1994) have focused on the transition from language ideologies based on oral to written language, Maya has been a literate language for at least some members of the Yucatec speech community fairly continuously since the sixteenth century (Restall 1997a).

On the surface, the fact that more rural Yucatecans today are citing language as a marker of a distinctively 'Mayan' cultural identity seems to support the idea that post-Cold War cultural politics are rooted in the appropriation of official anthropological discourses by self-identified indigenous people. However, local invocations of elements of contemporary multicultural discourses are not always consistent with the stated goals of government policy. Many Maya-speakers in Yucatán assume that the incorporation of more indigenous language texts in print and electronic media and public school curricula is meant to promote a 'more correct' standard of Maya that should transform the way the language is actually spoken (see Armstrong-Fumero 2009b; Berkley 1998). This perception of new proscriptive standards extends to attitudes towards an official orthography based on a standard approved by Mayan scholars in Guatemala in 1985 (England 2003). Most writers and educational institutions in Yucatán use this official orthography instead of an older colonial-period orthography in which surnames and toponyms are written. For one man who attended a workshop

on this official orthography that I observed in 2004, the validity of the 'official' orthography had an almost metaphysical origin. He noted:

I think that colonization [by the Spanish] changed all of the surnames. Because they changed the letters in many of the surnames. They write [the surname] 'Cimé' with 'C', [before 'i'] which would be pronounced 'Simé' [following the pronunciation standards of Spanish]. It should be 'Kimé' with a 'K'.

Statements like this make it clear that Maya-language texts and written standards that are written by non-local experts and diffused from the top down are influencing vernacular forms of language ideology. But my own experience suggests that the historical substrate of local linguistic forms plays an equally important role in this process. Where scholars such as Nelson, Castañeda, and Breglia have analysed how performances of Maya culture by self-identified Maya are meant to be intelligible to non-local audiences, many of the examples that my informants have used to articulate their own sense of linguistic authenticity are not necessarily the kind of thing that would be comprehensible to people who are not familiar with spoken Maya. Note, for example, how a 50-year-old grocery store owner from Pisté made the following statement about 'legitimate' Maya by contrasting it to the 'dialects' spoken in his home community and the nearby village of San Francisco: 'It should be in the legitimate Maya language. It cannot be in the Maya of Pisté or in the Maya of [the village of] San Francisco, because these are dialects'.

'Legitimate Maya' in this case is the purist register of Maya that is used in most state-published texts, which substitute Spanish borrowings that are common in everyday speech with neologisms or obsolete terms gleaned from colonial-period texts. By characterizing the speech of Pisté and San Francisco as mere 'dialects', the grocer legitimates ideals of purism promoted by institutional sources by suggesting that the local speech forms are aberrations of the original language. But is this particular performance based primarily on the appropriation of discourses that would be intelligible to non-local audiences? It is only because I had been doing research in the area for nearly a decade when I attended this workshop that I understood the sociolinguistic references of this statement. I know, for example, that the people of San Francisco are often mocked in Pisté for speaking Maya with a particular sing-songy accent, while many people from surrounding communities refer to how the Maya spoken by younger people in Pisté is corrupted by extensive Spanish borrowings. The degree to which this statement about the validity of a non-local linguistic standard hinged on knowledge of local linguistic practices demonstrates how strategic appropriations tend to be contingent on a pre-existing body of experiences that makes these non-local discourses on purism locally intelligible. Not only does this statement about 'legitimate' Maya hinge on a native speaker's knowledge of the subtle phonetic differences of the language spoken in different communities, it makes explicit reference to the localist identities that critical scholars have argued are generally ignored in academic representations of Yucatec Maya culture (see especially Gabbert 2004: 30-1; Hervik & Kahn 2006; Restall 1997b: 13-19).

I have observed a similar combination of non-local standards of 'good' language and subtle linguistic differences that would be less intelligible to speakers of other languages when Maya-speakers discuss their experience of writing and speaking. In the same workshop on the use of the new official orthography that I cited earlier, one man in his thirties observed: 'Before I learned this alphabet, I used to pronounce the word *paax* for

music with the short “a” like *pax*, *p-a-x*. But now I know that it is *paax* [with a long “a”]. The participants in the workshop were all natives of an eastern micro-region within the Yucatec Maya speech community that is known for speaking in a fast-paced, clipped accent, and for shortening the vowel length of many words. On the surface, the fact that this man conceded the greater validity of a pronunciation implied by written media seems consistent with the image of a Mayan identity based on the appropriation of non-local texts. But how many members of an ‘external’ audience would find the changing of one’s pronunciation of the word ‘*paax*’ to be an especially intelligible performance of ‘authentic’ Mayanness? Statements like this show that official discourses on language often become intelligible locally when they are associated with the experience of linguistic phenomena that have deeper local roots. Even as an example of ‘bad’ Maya that was used to make a contrast with standards imposed from above, the pronunciation of the word *pax* emerge from the substrate of local speech to form part of an everyday performance that instantiates Mayan identity politics in the lives of a given community.

These examples can give us some sense of the micro-level processes through which the discourses of anthropology and multicultural politics are instantiated in the everyday lives of rural people who are labelled, and are increasingly self-labelling, as ethnic Maya. The strategic appropriations and performances that have been at the core of poststructuralist critiques of traditional Mesoamericanist anthropology are clearly evident, but they are not the only – or even the primary – mechanism through which the politics of indigenous identity are becoming intelligible to people in local communities. Just as native fluency in Maya allows rural Yucatecans to associate discourses on language purism with the pronunciation of *paax* or different micro-regional accents, other bodies of local experience play a crucial role in making sense of discourses on pre-Hispanic civilization in ways that are quite distinct from the modes of engagement that are typical of foreign scholars and tourists. This will be the focus of the next section.

Things: telling stories amidst the tactility of ruins

There are important parallels between the everyday incidents that turn utterances in the Maya language into agents in the emergence of vernacular cultural politics and those in which individuals use physical objects to articulate and interpret their relationship to the more abstract entity of ‘culture’. Both language and pre-Hispanic artefacts often work as metonyms for official conceptions of indigeneity. Just as language is cited by official texts as something that defines discretely bounded indigenous groups, the idea of Mesoamerica or the Maya as culture regions often hinges on continuities that link contemporary societies to practices documented in the archaeological and ethnohistorical record (Roys 1943; Tax *et al.* 1952: 282–5; Thompson 1970). The idea that the pre-Hispanic past is the point of origin for indigenous cultures is also common in popular media, where images of pyramids and well-known sculptures abound on t-shirts, billboards, and television programming, often accompanied by text or voiceover narrative that makes an explicit reference to ‘the Maya Culture’.

Assumptions about the ‘cultural’ content of images that represent pre-Hispanic civilization have diffused into vernacular narratives about Maya culture that are told in rural communities. When I asked one artisan from Pisté why he had included the image of a famous pyramid from Chichén Itzá between a warrior and jaguar head on one of the carvings that he sold to tourists, he replied that the pyramid was ‘a general banner

for the Maya culture', while the jaguar represented the fierce spirit of the warrior. The warrior is constituted as having jaguar-like powers by the image of his animal alter ego, while both images become 'Mayan' through the presence of the pyramid. This metonymization of culture-as-pyramid is common in far more spontaneous contexts. One afternoon, a taxi driver made the following deadpan remark about the refurbished *zócalo* of Pisté, which had just been re-baptized as the 'Park of Culture': 'They say that it is the Park of Culture but it doesn't have anything of culture. I don't see a pyramid!'

Everyday statements about the significance of ancient ruins also parallel local attitudes towards the Maya language insofar as rural Yucatecans often have a fairly ambiguous sense of what exactly constitutes certain words and things as privileged signs of 'their' culture. Just as the exact relationship between speaking the Maya language and being an 'indigenous' person is not always clear in rural communities, rural Yucatecans have not tended to consider the builders of the pre-Hispanic ruins to be their cultural or genetic ancestors. For many older people who are still alive today, the ancient ruins were built before the biblical flood by a race of hunchbacks (Burns 1983) or by an extinct nocturnal folk whom people in the communities where I have conducted research refer to as the Itzá or the 'ancient people' (Maya: *Uchben mako'ob*). Oral narratives about the ruins that have been recorded since the nineteenth century stress their magical origin, dwelling on uncanny events and spectral winds that cause disease in the living (see also Carrillo y Ancona 1863; Redfield 1932). Like the everyday use of the Maya language, tactile contacts with pre-Hispanic ruins are playing an important role in making emergent notions of ethnic identity tangible presences in the lives of rural Yucatecans. Just as Maya-speakers today are more likely to refer to their use of language as a marker of ethnic identity, traditional supernatural narratives about the ruins are gradually being substituted by references to the ancient Maya as ancestors. This shift in beliefs about the past reflects the appropriation of official discourses that stress cultural and historical continuities. But as in the case of Maya language ideologies, the emergence of this vernacular narrative about an ancestral connection to the ancient Maya tends to be mitigated through highly tactile contacts with the physical remains of pre-Hispanic, colonial, and more recent settlements. This kind of embodied contact with material remains makes the experience of rural Yucatecans distinct from that of global travellers and publics.

Encounters with pre-Hispanic remains that range from carved monuments to more humble house platforms, burials, garbage deposits, and sporadic finds of pottery, lithics, and even jade jewellery are an extremely commonplace experience in the quotidian life of rural Yucatán. The Maya word *mul*, a term derived from a root meaning to stack or bunch together, is used to refer to ancient, human-made structures and distinguish them from natural landscape features such as *pu'uk* or hills. Long before they served as manual labourers in excavation and restoration projects, Mayan peasants mined *mulo'ob* for building materials, a practice of architectural recycling that was common in the pre-Hispanic and colonial periods (Pendergast 2005). More portable excavated objects ranging from ceramics to grindstones have been used in utilitarian and decorative contexts in peasant homes for generations. Other pre-Hispanic objects – such as clay figurines, obsidian blade fragments, and crystals – play an important role in shamanic ritual (Redfield & Villa Rojas 1934).

This 'local knowledge' of archaeological remains – based as much on the physical utility of artefacts as on the consistency of the stories that were told about them – played an early and important role in the emergence of academic archaeology. In most

of the communities where I have conducted fieldwork, residents can easily find *mulo'ob* scattered in the bush, often miles away from their community. A number of scholars have pointed out how the detailed landscape knowledge of people who are involved in agriculture and wild resource exploitation was crucial in the discovery and excavation of archaeological sites in the Maya area by the first generations of foreign archaeologists (Brunhouse 1971; Castañeda 1996; Graham 2002), and that it continues to figure in the ways in which local stakeholders engage with these sites through manual labour as restorers and groundskeepers (Breglia 2006: 181–92).

In this sense, contemporary vernacular narratives in which rural Yucatecans treat pre-Hispanic artefacts as tokens of Maya culture were preceded by a long local tradition of tactile engagements with the physical form of these objects. From the re-use of cut stone in household construction to wage labour in archaeological projects, these traditional forms of engagement with pre-Hispanic ruins are not necessarily experienced through narratives – the act of telling stories about ruins. Instead, these interactions tend to hinge on the pragmatic utility of found objects; a quality that is largely determined by physical properties imparted to these objects by builders and craftspersons who lived over a thousand years ago.

Though it seems obvious that the social hierarchies that govern the work of archaeology tend to differentiate the experience of those who do the heavy lifting from that of those who do the heavy thinking, it is important to think about some of the ways in which the non-narrative aspect of workers' engagements with pre-Hispanic artefacts has been downplayed amidst the pervasive emphasis on narrative as a privileged site in which objects from the past are constituted. Many of the models of inclusive heritage practice that have emerged from critiques of representation have been framed in terms of 'multivocality': the need for different stakeholder groups to be allowed to articulate their own distinctive narratives about objects from the past (see Abu el-Haj 1998; Castañeda & Matthews 2008; Hodder 2003). One problem with this notion of multivocality is that it situates the creation of 'inclusive' heritage practice primarily in the democratization of the right to tell stories about the past, saying little about other kinds of activities with which people may have interacted with ancient objects. A good example of the limits of this model of heritage production can be seen in Quetzil Castañeda's characterization of the ruins of Chichén Itzá as a 'magic writing pad' in which different individuals 'inscribe' narratives onto objects, essentially 'inventing' and 're-inventing' the ruins. Each act of 'inscription' is preceded by gestures that generate a 'fresh' space for inscription, even as it betrays an intertextual relationship to earlier 'inscriptions'. This 'magic writing pad' model is a radical rethinking of archaeology in that it constitutes a space in which the narratives of local Maya can be as valid or authoritative as those of archaeologists (Castañeda 1996: 122–6). But it says very little about kinds of experience that are embodied in physical labour, not to mention the fact that certain objects exercise a kind of agency in the process of archaeology through their physical form. Instead, Castañeda draws an analogy between the theoretical notion of clearing a space for 'inscription' and anthropological narratives about clearing the bush from 'lost' ruins. This rhetorical device pushes the poststructural conflation of text and practice to such a degree that it becomes unclear whether the cutting down of bush and reconstruction of ruins are merely metaphors for the discursive process through which anthropologists and tourists create spaces for inscribing their own narratives onto ruins, or if they are meant to be actual analogues (Castañeda 1996: see esp. 93–103).

Provocative as this analogy may be, there are experiential differences between working with narrative and working with the physical properties of things. However much ancient Maya artefacts are turned into symbols of different ideologies of culture or templates for the inscription of diverse narratives, the credibility of these narratives and ideologies tends to be limited in some way by features that were imparted into those artefacts by craftspeople over a thousand years ago. Thus, even if an archaeologist, a Maya peasant, a New Age ritualist, or modern sculptor might apply different meanings to the famous Chac Mool sculpture, the visual and tactile form imparted to this object by ancient sculptors make it less likely that these different interpreters could argue that it is a literal depiction of a pig rather than a person. Given the fact that objects like the Chac Mool have been found – quite literally sometimes – in the backyards of rural Yucatecans, members of this society have generations of direct contact with these visual and tactile forms. This is a clear contrast to the experience of members of non-local societies whose first engagement with these objects has taken place through the creation of special expeditions and the dissemination of printed texts.

Just as recognizing the deep roots of quotidian experiences of the Maya language has offered some means of re-reading incidents in which rural Yucatecans seem to appropriate non-local notions of ethnic identity, a closer look at the kind of visual and tactile experience that has marked rural Yucatecans' engagement with pre-Hispanic objects can help us to rethink the dynamics of multivocality in anthropology. This is the case with a story told to me by Don Carlín, the elderly conch trumpet player whom I introduced earlier in this article. Don Carlín is typical of many people over 50 in that he tends to assume that Chichén Itzá and other ruins were built by the Ancient People before the biblical flood and the first sunrise. His adherence to these supernatural narratives is especially ironic, given that he is one of the last surviving members of the crews who worked in the Carnegie Institute of Washington's excavations in Chichén Itzá in the 1920s. Between stints as a subsistence agriculturalist and gatherer of chicle sap for foreign chewing gum companies, he has participated in a number of other archaeological excavations and mapping projects. He makes specific reference to having met the Anglo-American archaeologists 'Mister Morley' and 'Mister Rup' (Sylvanus G. Morley and Karl Rupert).

Don Carlín once told me about the building 'Where the Pricks of the Ancient Men Dangle' (*Ti ku pa'ach'al u pooio'ob uchbeen mak*). This is a building in what is currently known as the Temple of the Phallus group, an architectural complex where several key structures have phallic imagery carved into the façade. Don Carlín recalls going there late at night once to guide a *gringo* (North American) who came to draw the ruins by lamplight. Based on his description and discussions with some local archaeologists, I have surmised that he was working as an assistant to a draughtsman who was attempting to draw badly eroded hieroglyphs under artificial light conditions. Half a century later, Don Carlín recalled the conditions of several structures that he saw there with the trained eye of someone who had participated in the technical reconstruction of these buildings with other Maya-speaking labourers. Gesturing at the empty air for emphasis, he recalled seeing much carved stone (*poolbi tunich*), a telltale sign that an overgrown *mul* is a pre-Hispanic ruin and not a natural formation. Many of these stones had collapsed downward (*niikij*), while some of the upper courses of stone were loose but still lined up in place (*eetkunsbi*). These technical observations blended seamlessly into a more fantastic description of things that Don Carlín saw in the lamplight, when many of the figures on

the wall turned to flesh once again. He remembers that the stone penises on the walls did too, revealing the origins of the strange motif. Chuckling, the old man observed that before they were petrified by the rising of the first sun, the Ancient Men were in the habit of removing their private parts and hanging them on the wall before bed. He observed that when the sun rose: 'That is where their pricks remain. There they dangle [now], all in order' (*Ti ku pa'atal u poio'ob. Ti ku pa'ach'al, tsoolbi*).

Here, the contrast with Castañeda's analogy between the physical act of clearing and the work of representation is very obvious. Don Carlín participated quite literally in the process of 'clearing a space' on which modern anthropology inscribed a number of texts about Chichén Itzá, but he was excluded from the narrative processes that created official representations of the Maya to such a degree that he had to invent his own explanation of the 'pricks of the ancient men'. Just as teachers rarely communicate the assumptions that turn speaking the Maya language into a marker of indigeneity (Armstrong-Fumero 2009a), Morley, Rupert, and the other archaeologists seem to have made few efforts to communicate their ideas about the relationship between ancient sculptures and contemporary 'Maya culture' to Don Carlín or any of the hundreds of other labourers who worked at the site over the decades. But the degree to which Don Carlín's story about 'The Pricks of the Ancient Men' relied on the rhetorical device of eye-witness testimony reflects a fundamental parallel between the authority that he claims on the subject and that which is established by archaeologists. It is unlikely that Don Carlín or Sylvanus Morley could have credibly described the stones on the wall of that particular building as, say, hands or ears, even if some other body part had made more sense for the particular story that they wanted to spin. In this context, the visual and tactile form that was imparted to these objects in the distant past bridges the semantic gulf between Harvard-trained archaeologists and the people who did most of the physical work on their projects, and who have a long and intimate experience with the material 'stuff' of Mayanist archaeology.

Having had more direct contact with anthropological representations of Maya culture, Don Carlín's grandchildren and great-grandchildren are more likely to refer to ancient bas reliefs as carvings made by their ancestors and not as petrified beings from before the first sunrise. But even so, their experience of 'culture' as something that can be embodied in carved stones that can be found in the bush is conditioned by a collective memory in which working with Maya culture is more a matter of physical labour and tactile contact than of scholarly inquiry. This is the case with artisans who produce carvings for sale to tourists. Castañeda's analysis of archaeologically themed tourist art (1996; 2004) tends to focus on how this tradition emerged through the strategic reproduction of images that circulated in Western print and digital media. But the artisans themselves often tell a different story, like a friend who observed the fact that a carved stone skull that had just been uncovered at Chichén looked like the skulls that he had been carving in wood for years by saying 'I think it's some sort of inheritance'. Skirting the possibility that the similarities stem from the commonality between the recently uncovered images and the thousands of examples that have served as models for generations of local artisans, my friend posited a continuity in the creative powers of ancient and contemporary Maya. But what I found more significant is the fact that he situated this continuity in the act of shaping material rather than in the realm of ideas or language. Like many artisans who make similar assertions about their 'inheritance', the most convincing argument that he can make for an ancestral connection to the ancient Maya refers to the world of manual labour and tactile engagement

with the form of ancient objects that has been the primary means through which he, his parents and grandparents encountered the ancient Maya in their quotidian experience.

Continuities in this pragmatic, materialistic claim on the past are even more evident in the more isolated agrarian communities where I have conducted research. In these small villages and hamlets, people have had less exposure to Spanish-language media associated with tourism, and notions of agrarian-based territoriality are far more conservative than in Pisté. Maya-monolingual adults lay claims on pre-Hispanic remains not as the artefacts of the ancient ancestors, but as parts of the bush to which members of their communities have pre-established usufruct rights through their role in 'fomenting' (Sp. *Fomentar*, Ma. *Pomentar*) of collective land claims (see also Breglia 2006). Though the last two decades have seen building materials recovered from pre-Hispanic *mulo'ob* replaced by cinderblock and other commercially available media, members of local agrarian committees are still likely to associate their claim to ancient stones with the legal right to exploit fertile soils, firewood, collected herbs, and wild game that can be legally harvested within their state-sanctioned agrarian territories (Sp. *ejidos*). In this context, the claims that local stakeholders make on pre-Hispanic artefacts are less about the simple ability to participate in a multivocal space where diverse narratives are articulated about the past than the kinds of practical use and tactile contact that have characterized working the bush for generations.

Conclusions

The goal of this article has been to develop a theoretical approach to the ethnography of identity politics that shifts the focus of critical scholarship from the discourse-centred critique of representation to the analysis of how experiences that precede the diffusion of occidental narratives about culture figure in the processes by which the politics of Maya culture are instantiated in the lives of local communities. Central to this has been the question of how to develop forms of critical scholarship and solidarity that avoid some of the tensions that emerged between identity politics and critiques of representation in the late 1990s. The politics of Maya culture in post-war Guatemala were marked by a clear tension between foreign scholars' commitment to transforming traditional forms of academic authority and indigenous activists' commitment to notions of continuity that had emerged as a valuable political capital. When the foreign scholars sought theoretical compromise that recognized the 'essentialist' discourses used by indigenous activists as a strategic choice amidst the exigencies of contemporary politics, this proved to be only a partial solution. In the end, those of us with a sensibility conditioned by poststructuralist theory are usually able to celebrate historical ironies that are more difficult to reconcile with the emphasis on primordialism that still permeates the *realpolitik* of multiculturalism.

Writing about the crises of the post-Cold War Left in the United States, the philosopher Richard Rorty prescribed a 'moratorium on theory' (1998: 91), insofar as the popularization of a particular reading of poststructuralism had reduced 'theory' to a series of a priori assumptions about how authoritarian forms of power permeated nearly all of our available means of speaking about truth. This statement seems like a caricature of the truly critical ways in which poststructuralism was put to use by anthropologists, but it also provokes some thoughts about the limits of critiques of representation as such. The ethnographic examples that I have presented here suggest that a more pragmatic approach to 'critique' that lets us engage with forms of

experience falling outside of the comfortable terrain of Western discourse can offer new ways for current anthropological work to be relevant in the political struggles of the communities that we study.

One model of engagement can come from the reaction of foreign linguists to the processes of lexical and grammatical standardization that are being undertaken by Maya-speaking scholars and educators. For the most part, linguists have been far more pragmatic than cultural anthropologists regarding issues of 'essentialist' ideologies that might be imposed from above, observing some of the ways in which these might challenge the looming threat of language shift to Spanish (England 2003; Maxwell 1996). It is significant that the linguistic training of these scholars makes them especially able to engage with the work that Nora England herself refers to as the 'technical' side of linguistics (2003: 736), the composition of grammars, dictionaries, and didactic material. The examples that I cited from the 2004 writing workshop in Pisté suggest that it is precisely through these 'technical' issues that a project of critical scholarship can engage the kinds of experience that make discourses on multiculturalism intelligible in local communities. As England herself has observed, the value of proscriptive standards versus local variability is very debatable. But what I consider to be just as important is that she has chosen to engage this debate with a detailed knowledge of the kinds of phonetic and syntactic subtleties that make this 'technical' work into an experience that is intelligible within the quotidian lives of people like rural Yucatecans.

Building parallel forms of collaboration around the ways in which rural Yucatecans have manipulated pre-Hispanic remains is more complicated, given the degree to which many of these practices are criminalized within a contemporary heritage practice that posits excavation as the exclusive terrain of university-trained experts. But for an inclusive heritage practice truly to incorporate the historical traditions of Maya communities, it must look beyond the simple right of individuals to make narrative claims on objects, which poststructuralist sensibilities tend to treat as an especially viable way to constitute political identities. In most of the communities where I have conducted research, the heritage of interactions with the pre-Hispanic past is not one of telling stories or performing claims, but something involved in the custodianship and use of the physical properties of objects. This kind of claim to the physical presence of objects has been legislated in the United States through the Native America Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) and other reforms based on Native American rights. However, the forms of tribal sovereignty that mark the history of indigenous people in the United States are difficult to reconcile with the political culture of rural Mexico, just as there is a difference between the role of the sacred in the legislation leading to NAGPRA and the more secular claims that many Maya communities make on pre-Hispanic remains. Still, the nature of these claims underscores the importance of exploring forms of ethical and political engagement that move beyond the recognition of diverse narratives about the past to a serious engagement and dialogue with claims based on the physical presence of objects and the history of tactile engagements with them.

NOTES

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¹ *Words and things* (2005 [1959]) is also the title of the polemical text in which Ernest Gellner critiques Wittgensteinian ordinary-language philosophy. Gellner's opinion on the relationship between language and non-discursive reality has some bearing on the issues that I discuss here. My own arguments, however, are not a comment on the broader questions of rationality versus relativism embodied in Gellner's work; I focus on a more specific series of ambiguities about the relationship between discourse and the ontology of words and things that emerged from the popularization of poststructuralism in anthropology. That is, my critique is directed more at the assumption that the contours of discourse on culture are dictated by a 'dominant' epistemic formation than on the more general question of the relationship between conventionalism and logical universals.

² Pseudonyms are used for all informants.

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Le mot et la chose au Yucatán : poststructuralisme et vie quotidienne dans l'environnement multiculturel maya

Résumé

L'auteur s'appuie sur des exemples ethnographiques pour étudier la manière dont les locuteurs du maya vivant dans les zones rurales de l'état mexicain du Yucatán fondent leur expérience de la politique identitaire sur une interaction quotidienne avec les objets et énoncés préhispaniques de la langue maya. Son argumentation se veut une remise en cause des modèles universitaires critiques influencés par le poststructuralisme, qui mettent lourdement l'accent sur le discours en tant que modalité permettant de créer et de réaliser des identités politiquement viables. Des exemples concrets montrent comment un multiculturalisme vernaculaire se constitue par l'action des formes d'usage du langage et des objets matériels qui faisaient partie de la vie locale longtemps avant que la politique identitaire maya se popularise. Cette approche offre un potentiel de travail en collaboration qui n'a pas été complètement exploré par les critiques poststructuralistes de la représentation.

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