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Conquests of the Imagination: Maya-Mexican Polarity and the Story of Chichén Itzá

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Conquests of the Imagination

Maya-Mexican Polarity and the Story of Chichén Itzá

Never has the Spenglerian theme of “raw man” conquering effete “over civilized man” been so well illustrated as in the Toltec Conquest of the Maya. [Von Hagen 1948:220]

Mesoamerica is a bow-tie-shaped area, squeezed in the middle by the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, the Maya zone to the southeast, and central Mexico to the northwest. Many scholars both long before and after Paul Kirchhoff’s seminal designation of “Mesoamerica” as a distinctive culture area (1943) have accentuated the fundamental unity of the entire region. One enduring strain of Americanist studies has, however, consistently treated pre-Columbian Maya and Mexicans (or Nahua, including Teotihuacáanos, Toltecs, and Aztecs) as two discrete cultural entities. As early as the mid-17th century, “the line between ‘Mexicans’ (of the central valley) and the people of Yucatán is,” as Ignacio Bernal notes, “already clearly drawn” (1980:33). By the 19th century, that division had reached nearly canonical status. Daniel Brinton, for instance, was adamant that these were two radically different sets of Indians, “distinct in origin, different in character, only similar by reason of that general similarity which of necessity arose from the two nations being subject to like surroundings, and nearly in the same stage of progress” (1881:645).

Brinton, moreover, instantiated another widespread sentiment when he opined that the “Maya race” is “in several respects the most civilized of any found on the American continent” (1882:18). For generations, particularly among students of the Maya, both amateur and professional, there was a pervasive tendency to characterize the pre-Hispanic culture of the lowland Maya not only as profoundly different from its highland Mexican counterpart but as vastly more sophisticated and more appealing in virtually all important respects. Thomas Gann, for example, was simply reiterating common wisdom when he waxed that the Yucatán Maya

were cerebral astronomer/philosophers who originally subscribed to a “bright and joyous religion,” the only improprieties of which could be explained by the eventual infusion of “the black, cruel, gloomy religion of Mexico, with its bloodthirsty priests and its savage, obscene deities demanding hecatombs of human sacrifice” (1971 [1924]:6). Although few scholars even in that era were quite so unsubtle, Gann has surprisingly long and wide support for this fictive presumption that pre-Columbian Maya and Mexicans not only were different but were, in many respects, opposites.

Nowhere has this tendency toward the polarization of Maya and Mexican peoples found more fertile ground than in the spectacular ruins of Chichén Itzá, Yucatán, the most storied, and maybe most vexing, of all Mesoamerican sites. Even more than the remarkably circular sinkhole from which the Mouth of the Well of the Itzá takes its name, the uniquely evocative character of Chichén Itzá derives from an unmistakable contrast between the buildings and decoration of the southern sector of the site, which bear an obvious likeness to other Puuc-style Maya ruins in southwestern Yucatán, and the structures of the great plaza in the northern sector, which are uncannily similar to the remains of Tula, Hidalgo, some 800 miles west in the Valley of Mexico (Jones 1995). This stark contrast between Chichén’s two architectural styles has for generations been the impetus, and a sustaining force, for imagining that this place was the site of a momentous meeting between two profoundly different pre-Columbian peoples—indigenous lowland Maya and invading highland Mexicans—a bicultural confrontation of such proportions that it was long regarded as “comparable to no other case of pre-Hispanic acculturation in Mesoamerica” (Lincoln 1986:143).

In the most blunt versions of the story, the introspective Maya are simply bullied, bashed, and replaced by marauding warriors from the central plateau in the Mexican (or Toltec) “conquest” of Chichén Itzá. But the fascinating prospect that this site could have been host to an extraordinary confrontation between two drasti-

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cally different orientations to human life has evoked countless more nuanced variations on the theme of the “Mexicanization of the Maya.”¹ This set of (re)constructions, which feature variously the catastrophic mismatch or sometimes happy synthesis of two previously disconnected cultures, provides neither the oldest narrative explanations of Chichén Itzá nor the most recent; moreover these are not the most empirically verifiable or the most completely fanciful explanations. They are, however, the most well-circulated and most enduring of Chichén stories. For most of this century, variations on this theme were rehearsed in nearly all the pertinent secondary literature, both popular and academic. And though scholars are increasingly disenchanted with any permutation of the old plot line, hundreds of visitors to the archaeological/tourist site each day continue to be captivated by guides’ renditions of the biethnic roots of the city and by the rare opportunity of supposedly experiencing both the best and the worst of pre-Hispanic aesthetics, all within a few meters.

Debate over “what really happened” at Chichén Itzá is certain to continue. More empirically well-informed renditions of Chichén history are already available and others are definitely forthcoming.² The limited scope of this article focuses on that older (though still current) set of solutions to Chichén’s past: the conventional stories of Chichén Itzá, which attribute the success of the Yucatán capital and the “Tula-like” look of its art and architecture to some sort of fateful confrontation, either disastrous or fortuitous, between profoundly different Maya and Mexican peoples.

The discussion will proceed this way: A brief review of some of the countless variations on that basic historiological motif will be followed by similarly brief reflections on the imprudence either of simply accepting these (re)constructions as accurate recountings of “the events as they happened” or of simply dismissing them as complete fantasy. The rest of the essay, which inventories in greater detail a whole succession of stories about the Mexicanization of the Maya, is dedicated to two related sets of concerns. First, *the contexts of the creation of the story*: If these two-Indian tales were not crafted solely (or even primarily) on the basis of available documentary and archaeological evidence concerning Chichén’s past, then where did these stories come from? What forces were at work in their construction? And what, besides the history of Chichén Itzá, are they about? The second, related set of issues concerns *the contexts of their reception*: If the appeal of these stories is not primarily contingent on their faithfulness to the sequence of pre-Columbian events at Chichén Itzá, then to what do they owe their impressive endurance? Why have so many, for so long, and in so many venues told these stories with such enthusiasm and interest?

A Leitmotif: Stories of Maya-Mexican Confrontation

Into this rather easygoing [Yucatán Maya] milieu came the Toltecs, with such catalytic effect over Mesoamerica that stories concerning them were almost universally encountered by the Spanish five hundred years later. In Yucatán the Toltec conquest changed the Maya way of life considerably more than did the Spanish. [Morley 1956:79–80]³

The stunning ruins of Chichén Itzá, which have never been out of the spotlight of Maya studies, have then provided the stimulus to an endless succession of stories. During the colonial era, Yucatán natives, Spanish conquistadors and priests, and a mélange of international visitors, though wildly different in other respects, all seem to have taken for granted that crafting a coherent story of Chichén Itzá, a narrative synthesis of some sort, was the most suitable way to come to terms with and help others come to terms with the strangeness of these wrecked old buildings.

With the emergence and development of a more professional field of Middle American archaeology in the early 20th century, and especially with the designation of Chichén Itzá as the headquarters of the Carnegie Institution of Washington’s massive Maya research initiative in 1924, the site’s already high profile was enhanced (Jones 1995). Ironically, however, despite constant pleas for “hard evidence” and the avoidance of premature speculation that would separate them from their antiquarian predecessors (see Tozzer 1934), the complaint that archaeologists of this era “consistently violated their own explicit epistemological and methodological principles, doing so without penalty because they were delivering culturally meaningful science to their colleagues and to the general public” (Murray 1993:105) is nowhere more applicable than in the case of the archaeological/tourist site of Chichén Itzá. In fact, with this generation’s self-espoused goal of composing “historical reconstructions” and “re-creations of the aboriginal past,” the collection of imaginative Chichén plots multiplied and thickened at a truly remarkable rate. Positivists tell stories too.

The overwhelming majority of the renditions constructed in this era play upon the notion that somehow, sometime, for some reason, native peoples from central Mexico moved into and took control of the Maya homeland of Yucatán—that is, the notion of the Mexicanization of the Maya—but there was never strong consensus on the particulars of the story. The means and motivations of the imagined Mexican intrusion into the Maya zone, for instance, have been ceaselessly debated. Long-distance trade, religious proselytizing, and pilgrimage to the Sacred Cenote are all offered as possible Mexican motives, but far more versions present warfare and violent conquest as the principal mechanisms.⁴ In

that respect, a few older accounts identify the Mexican conquerors as Teotihuacáanos and even Aztecs (e.g., Morley 1925; Willard 1926:217–218). More versions, however, describe the intruders as Toltecs from Tula but then disagree as to the whether they were savvy colonizers (e.g., Charnay 1887), refugees on the lam (e.g., J. E. S. Thompson 1970), or perhaps mercenaries invited to Yucatán to assist a less militarily adept Yucatán Maya faction in their bid to overthrow the Maya lords of Chichén Itzá (e.g., Morley 1925, 1936).

The direction, number, and timing of the migrations that supposedly led to the uncanny similarity between the architectures of north Chichén and Tula have also been constantly disputed. A significant (and growing) minority undermines the whole “Mexican conquest” motif by describing some sort of “reverse,” east-to-west migration of Maya into central Mexico (e.g., Kubler 1961); but the overwhelming majority (at least until recently) have concurred with Alfred Tozzer that “the movement was all in one direction, from west to east” (1957:148). In the plainest versions, the westward-moving invaders arrive directly from central Mexico in one huge wave (e.g., Brainerd 1954; Willard 1926). Most versions, however, complicate the story by depicting several qualitatively different waves of Mexicanization (Tozzer 1957) or by holding that the “Toltec immigrants were in the country for some time before they established themselves as a dominant group at Chichén Itzá” (Proskouriakoff 1950:170).

Furthermore—and this will prove particularly instructive with respect to what is at stake in the infamous story of the Toltec “conquest” of the Maya—there is a broad spectrum of opinions concerning the viability and consequences of Maya-Mexican blending at Chichén Itzá. Again, in the least elaborate versions, there is almost no cross-cultural mixing as the powerful Mexican expansionists simply steamroll and enslave their passive Maya victims (e.g., Willard 1926:47 ff.). More complicated versions similarly reject the viability of any significant biethnic mixing by having the wholly incompatible Maya and Mexican factions alternate as the sovereigns of Chichén without ever developing anything like a joint rulership (e.g., Tozzer 1934, 1957). Other authors, however, are much more enthusiastic (though still ambivalent) about the prospect of a genuine, perhaps even fortuitous, melding of contradistinct Maya and Mexican peoples. Some of these versions depict the virile Mexican invaders as the catalyst that inspires the lethargic Maya to realize their latent potential (e.g., Morley 1936), while others rely more heavily on the notion of “hybrid vigor” by attributing Chichén’s political success and crassly spectacular architecture to an oddly compensatory synthesis of reckless Mexican strength and subtle Maya finesse, either of which was

somewhat inadequate in itself (e.g., J. E. S. Thompson 1954, 1970).

In sum, the range of variations on the basic theme of the Mexican conquest of Chichén Itzá is dizzying, and very often these stories seem to reveal much more about modern ambivalences toward transcultural interaction than about events in pre-Hispanic Yucatán. But one sustaining chord echoes through nearly every pre-1980s version: namely, the fundamental difference between pre-Columbian Maya and Mexican peoples. In fact, the recurrent motif (or perhaps mythologem) that animates virtually all these (re)constructions is that the two principal protagonists were not only dissimilar but, in many important respects, complete opposites. For most of the 20th century, the prospect that the “non-Maya” look of Chichén Itzá could have resulted from a meeting between like-minded equals seems to have engendered almost no interest at all.

A Hypothesis: Tales of Two Indians

Archaeology is best understood as narrative, a particular and powerful form of origin myth that began in nineteenth-century Euro-American societies to take on increasing importance as a vehicle of validation for social groups engaged (or enmeshed) in industrial growth, capital accumulation, and colonial expansion. [Hinsley 1989: 79–80]

Even from these bland fragments it should be apparent that this body of stories about two contradistinct indigenous peoples meeting head-to-head at the Sacred Cenote is filled with fascinating images. These are wonderful and endlessly evocative stories to be sure. Moreover, that they were (and are) presented and perceived as (relatively) accurate rehearsals of “what really happened” in pre-Columbian Yucatán intensifies immeasurably the urgency and appeal of these tales of the Mexicanization of the Maya. It was not without considerable resistance, then, that radical reassessments in several areas of Maya studies eventually were forced to recognize the once-inconceivable possibility that the ballyhooed Mexican conquest of the Maya never happened!

The convergence of archaeological, epigraphic, art historical, and ethnohistorical researches that worked to undermine the familiar old script is not easily summarized (see Jones 1995). At this point, however, no (re)construction that depends upon the radical polarization of the “gentle Maya” and the “war-obsessed Mexicans” is given much serious academic consideration (see Chase and Rice 1985; Sabloff and Andrews 1986). Instead of the Postclassic, bastard offspring of a coerced union of Mexican and Maya stocks, Chichén is now usually assessed as a genuinely indigenous Classic Maya city (see, for example, Lincoln 1986), that is, a legitimate heir to the great Maya centers of the Peten re-

gion—a rehabilitative reassessment that, in a sense, makes the Yucatán capital more reputable but less special. In today's prevailing though still highly uncertain view, Chichén Itzá has finally won a Maya pedigree but lost much of its claim to uniqueness.

Now that the historical veracity of the exciting tale of the Mexican conquest of Chichén Itzá has been put in doubt, a number of quite different responses are evident. Popular travel literature, documentary filmmakers, and guides at the site (who, one suspects, are *not* for the most part naive regarding the implausibility of the conventional stories) continue to accommodate huge lay audiences by reciting variously modified versions of the old scripts. In these guide-tourist exchanges, the tendency to fashion Chichén's past into "a commodity, well-packaged and responsive to demand" (Hodder 1991:172) is especially evident. Many professional Mayanists, however, owing to more rigorous standards of empirical verifiability, feel compelled not only to reject the timeworn versions but, moreover, to replace them with alternative, equally thoroughgoing (re)constructions of Chichén that better reflect both the revised visions of pre-Columbian Maya character and the most recent academic (especially epigraphic) advances.⁵

Alternatively, however, a growing set of advocates for a more postprocessual approach (Hodder 1991) or critical archaeology (Leone et al. 1987) is less committed to replacing outmoded (re)constructions of Chichén with presumably more well-informed ones than with deconstructing or demystifying earlier interpretations "by showing them to be functions of political and economic considerations present not in the archaeological past, but current when the earlier interpretation itself was enunciated" (Leone and Kryder-Reid 1992:151–152). For critics of this persuasion—who are troubled by possible links between archaeological knowledge claims and the perpetuation of neocolonialism, the creation of national mythologies, and attacks on liberty—the story of Chichén Itzá that most needs to be told at this point is not that of its pre-Columbian past but that of its modern investigatory history.⁶ In their view, it is high time that we scrutinize and contextualize, for instance, the "mixture of romantic imagination, ethnocentrism, and proprietary stewardship" that Mayanist workers for the Carnegie Institution both inherited and perpetuated.⁷

If this sort of initiative in critical contextualization helps to shed light on the Carnegie's shadowy involvements with 20th-century Yucatán politics, it also prods us to trace the considerably deeper and wider roots of the traditional archaeohistorical stories of Chichén Itzá. In fact, I would wager that the fascination with the infamous Toltec conquest of the Maya, which now seems *not* to have been a historical circumstance at all, is actually the manifestation of imaginative (and coloni-

alist) processes that began with the initial encounters between Europeans and indigenous Americans. The versions of Chichén Itzá "history" that feature that motif—most prominently, those by Sylvanus Morley, Alfred Tozzer, and Eric Thompson—though original and quite different from one another in many respects, all rely upon the creative manipulation of stereotypes and images of Indians that have been available for several hundred years.

Accordingly, the next sections of this essay, which reflect upon the origins of these Chichén stories, explore the possibility that the countless versions of the Mexican invasion of the Mayaland, though not without some empirical basis, have proven appealing primarily because they provide such pregnant opportunities to reflect upon what *might* transpire (rather than what *did* transpire) in confrontations between two kinds of Indians—between noble savages and savage savages, between native scribes and native warriors, between superstitious priests and heathen brutes, and between primitive victims and primitive attackers. Moreover, in hindsight, it now appears that the fashioning and dissemination of these Mexican invasion stories also afforded scholars and nonscholars occasions to ruminate on the more generalized difficulties of confrontations between families and men, between rural and urban mentalities, between sedentary and mobile cultures, and even between democratic and totalitarian governments. The historical peoples and geography of pre-Columbian Mesoamerica provided a skeleton, but fertile Western imaginations fleshed out the body and set it in motion. And Chichén Itzá, though almost certainly undeserved of this singular designation on historical grounds—since the Yucatán capital now seems to have been a typically Maya city rather than a Mexicanized Maya anomaly—nonetheless won a unique prestige in Mesoamerican "history" as the site where all this came to a head.

Ambivalent Images of the Indian: Emergent Polarity

There developed during the first half century of Spanish action in America a kind of polarity between two extremes—what might be called the "dirty dog" and the "noble savage" schools of thought—although there were many different and more subtle shades of opinion in between. [Hanke 1974:9]

As a veritable explosion of nuanced studies in the past two decades regarding matters of representation and the "discovery" of the New World has well demonstrated, mixed European motives of exploitation, philanthropy, conversion, and subjugation issued almost immediately in a snarl of conflicting images of the In-

dian (see Jones 1995). The diaries of Columbus, the letters of Cortes, and the transcriptions of the infamous Valladolid debates of 1550, to cite only the most notorious of countless telling exemplars, are loaded with radically contradictory depictions and “constructions” of indigenous Americans—some effusive in their flattery, others vitriolic, nearly all condescending. Yet if this well-stocked array of condemnatory and laudatory stereotypes did prove (for better or worse) an invaluable resource in legitimating colonialist activities and helping Europeans to recover their imperiled sense of order and authority in the face of a “threatening Other” (Greenblatt 1980), those ambivalent images of the Indian were of almost no use in sorting out in any reliable fashion the immense diversity of specific indigenous peoples and cultures, say, the empirical differences between lowland Maya and highland Mexicans.

Nonetheless, if early efforts at (re)constructing the historical relations between the peninsula and the altiplano were halting and undisciplined, and empirical accuracy was hardly their sole priority, a number of palpable topographic and cultural realities do seem to have contributed significantly to the colonial-era (mis)perception that the indigenous peoples of Yucatán were considerably gentler and more sublime than those of central Mexico. Geographically speaking, for instance, Yucatán’s much poorer agricultural resources and almost complete dearth of mineral wealth seem to have fostered the idealization of the ancient Maya as (unlike their supposedly avaricious Mexican counterparts) nonmaterialistic, nonentrepreneurial, cerebral, and otherworldly. Demographically, again in contrast to urbanized central Mexico, the highly dispersed settlements of colonial-era Yucatán—almost none exceeding 4,000 inhabitants—may have flamed the stereotypes of the Maya as gentle rural folk (in contrast to the citified highlanders), as apolitical (in contrast to the totalitarian and imperialist Mexicans), and as supposedly indifferent and inexperienced in the machinations of hegemonic authority, hierarchy, and forcible control (all spheres in which the imperial Toltecs and Aztecs had presumably excelled). And with respect to matters of literacy and abstract thinking, as early as the 16th century, Father Alonso Ponce, for instance, was praising the glyphic system of the Maya (in contrast to highland “picture-writing”) as “the only graphic system on the continent . . . which merits the name of writing” (Brinton 1882:62 n.2), an assessment that Brinton would echo three centuries later when he commended the Maya as indigenous America’s only “naturally literary people” (1882:62–63).

Even more influential in early efforts at (re)constructing the pre-Hispanic character and connections of the highland and lowland Indians than any of these factors, however, were the ample (and intertextual) *ethno-*

historic traditions regarding Mexican, specifically Toltec, migrations into Yucatán. In this regard, no stories are nearly so important as the mythicohistoric Aztec traditions of Quetzalcoatl, the mighty feathered-serpent priest-king of the Toltecs who, upon his exile from the magnificent city of Tollan, disappeared “into the east” with a contingent of his faithful followers, where, according to at least some versions, he established a new Toltec capital (Carrasco 1982). All colonial historians from Fray Bernardino Sahagun forward were familiar with these famous Aztec tales, and for most of them, including the Yucatán-based Bishop Landa, the Quetzalcoatl exile story provided the key to the historical relatedness of the two halves of Middle America (Bernal 1980:32–33, 57–58). In short, though there were always dissenting voices who favored Maya primacy or independence, the prevailing view in this era, based overwhelmingly on Aztec documentary sources, held that the pre-Columbian interregional interaction had been essentially one way, from west to east: that is, the Mexicanization (or “Toltecization”) of the Maya zone.

When then, in the 19th century, the really concerted effort to understand the specific site of Chichén Itzá finally began, even before one monument had been measured or photographed, the antiquarian explorers were well equipped not only with the generic stereotypes of naked and noble savages but also with the more particularistic motifs of exiled feathered-serpent kings, Toltec conquerors, and Maya victims. The puzzle pieces were groomed for assembly, the actors primed for casting. Somewhat surprisingly, however, though all of the important explorers of Chichén Itzá in this era were apprised of these abiding traditions of two types of Indians and of the general theme of the Toltec conquest of Yucatán, none of them made a radical distinction between the “Maya” and “Toltec” portions of the Chichén ruins. Nor did any of these pioneers single out Chichén Itzá as the site of a climactic confrontation between these two different Indian “races.”

John L. Stephens, for instance, at Chichén in 1842, noticed two different architectural styles within the site (1843:221) but saw no reason to believe that the builders had been other than ethnically homogeneous. French expeditionary Désiré Charnay, at Chichén in 1860 and again in 1882, attributed the startlingly Tula-like architecture to a Toltec superrace that had fanned out all over the Americas from their central Mexican homeland (1887:323–370); but even he declined to make any conjecture about two distinct eras of habitation or two distinct ethnicities among the inhabitants of the city. Englishman Alfred Maudslay meticulously surveyed all of the structures at Chichén in 1889 but noted no radical bifurcation between them and hazarded no thoroughgoing explanation of their origin via a Mexican conquest or anything else (1889–1902, 3:1–43). W. H.

Holmes, adamant against diffusionist theorizing, recognized an atypicality about Chichén Itzá during his reconnaissance of the site in 1895 but wholly denied the influence of Mexicans along with that of Egyptians, Assyrians, and Chaldeans (1895–97:105). And even Edward Herbert Thompson, who actually bought the site in 1894 and who claimed (perhaps unwarranted) credit for the infamous designations of “Old Chichén” and “New Chichén” (1932:219–229, 251), though enlisting the Quetzalcoatl tale as the basis for his eccentric explanation, did not specifically correlate those two sectors with Maya and Mexican ethnicities. In sum, the paradigm of Maya-Mexican polarity, while certainly in the air, was not yet enlisted as the leitmotif of the Chichén Itzá story.

Chilam Balam Correlations: Poetic Polarity

Genuine specimens of native [American] literature are rare, and almost or quite inaccessible. They remain in manuscript in the hands of a few collectors, or, if printed, they are in forms not convenient to obtain, as in the ponderous transactions of learned societies, or in privately printed works. [Brinton 1882:v–vi]

Roughly contemporaneous with E. H. Thompson’s on-site investigations and bipartitioning of the site was another development that would prove even more momentous for fashioning the familiar story of the Mexican conquest of the Maya at Chichén Itzá, namely, the (re)emergence and wide circulation of the so-called Books of Chilam Balam. Apparently produced throughout the early colonial era in Maya languages but with characters of the Latin alphabet, the controversial Chilam Balam books seem to address matters of pre- and postconquest history, astrology, prophecy, and even medicine (Chase 1986:124). Optimism about retrieving any reliable historical information from these cryptic treatises has, however, fluctuated widely (compare, for instance, Tozzer 1917 and Edmonson 1982, 1986).

Although an English translation of a section of the *Chilam Balam of Mani* appeared in Stephens’s widely read work (1843:465–469; also see Chase 1986:125), none of the substantial renditions of Chichén Itzá’s past proposed by Charnay, Holmes, Maudslay, or even Stephens himself relied upon these mythicopoetic documents for historical information (and recall that none of these renditions featured the motif of Maya-Mexican polarity). Following Brinton’s *Maya Chronicles* (1882), however, which he undertook with the express hope of putting this previously inaccessible material “within the reach of American and European scholars” (1882:vi), virtually every thoroughgoing (re)construction of Chichén Itzá for the next 50

years—most prominently those by Tozzer, Morley, Ralph Roys, and Eric Thompson, all of whom do depict versions of a Maya-Mexican confrontation—rely very heavily, especially for dates and details, on creative exegeses of the Books of Chilam Balam, particularly the *Chilam Balam of Chumayel* (Roys 1933). In fact, the startling realization that none of the major 19th-century Chichén stories depended to any significant extent on the Chilam Balam books, but that none of the most prominent early-20th-century versions of that story could have been crafted without them, suggests that the availability of those documents to non-Maya readers constituted perhaps *the* decisive turning point in the imaginative (re)construction of a head-on collision between two sorts of Indians at Chichén Itzá. The deep rooted paradigm of Maya-Mexican polarity at last blossomed.

Despite serious disagreements about the particulars, virtually all Mayanists of that era concurred that the basic dynamic that the *Chumayel* recounts was pre-Columbian antagonism between a highly sympathetic indigenous Yucatecan Maya host population, presumably the authors of the text, and a succession of marauding invaders from outside. Albeit convoluted, the *Chumayel* invasion story seemed, in other words, to provide unassailable confirmation (from the perspective of the vanquished no less) that the mythicolegendarly stories of Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl’s exile from Tollan and of the Toltec conquest of Yucatán actually did have a solid historical foundation after all. Quite obviously, or so it appeared at this point, the very respectable victims in the *Chumayel* story could be matched up historically with the indigenous Yucatecan Maya, while the lewd, slobbering intruders must have been some conglomerate (or maybe several waves) of Mexican Toltecs and Mexicanized Itzá (Roys 1933). Moreover, providing a geographical focus for the climax of the alleged confrontation, these Mayanists—and Tozzer is the preeminent force in this regard—argued that the two stylistically very different sections of the Chichén Itzá ruins, already termed “Old” and “New Chichén,” could be correlated respectively with the indigenous Maya and the foreign Mexicans.

Once these correlations of times, spaces, art styles, and indigenous peoples were put in place, the imaginative (re)construction of the Mexicanization of Chichén Itzá accelerated like never before. Archaeological researches of unprecedented magnitude and sophistication could increasingly be marshaled as “confirming evidence,” but for decades nearly all the narrative details, including the polarizing characterizations of the principals in the Chichén story, continued to be drawn from creative textual exegesis of these colonial-era documents. In this respect, the still oft-cited renditions of Chichén’s past fashioned by Morley, Tozzer, and Eric

Thompson, each of whom exercises his own eccentricities but all of whom play on the radical contrast between the Maya and Mexicans, constitute the outstanding exemplars.

Sylvanus G. Morley: Popular Polarity

The popular apprehension of archaeology in the previous century occurred most dramatically at public moments—those points when the archaeologist sought or encountered a public audience. [Hinsley 1989:80]

Sylvanus Morley, who first visited Yucatán in 1907, would do more in the succeeding decades than any other individual to bring Chichén Itzá and the cultural accomplishments of the Maya to the attention of the American public (see Brunhouse 1971 and Black 1990). His numerous versions of the Chichén story, all of which are couched in his stubborn (though never tenable) postulate that there were two successive Maya “Empires” and depend overwhelmingly on ethnohistorical sources for the details, invariably focus on the Maya component. The Mexicans in his oeuvre are seldom more than faceless strongmen (never accompanied by female counterparts) who serve principally as rhetorical foils to the artistic excellence and good character of the Maya. The two groups (almost) never meld in any significant way. In fact, Morley’s priorities and his skill as a raconteur are perhaps best reflected by the way in which he is able to experiment with so many permutations on the story of Yucatán’s past without, in any case, jeopardizing the cultural supereminence, benignly religious disposition, or ethnic purity of his Maya protagonists.

In Morley’s early, simplified versions of the story (1925, 1936), for instance, Maya emigrants from the “old empire” of the south manage somehow to move north, colonize, abandon, recover, and then lose the City of the Sacred Cenote to roving Mexican intruders without ever compromising their strictly Maya ethnicity. Later, however, in his slightly more technical presentation of the Chichén story in *The Ancient Maya* (1946), Morley, apparently compelled by quickly emerging archaeological data, complicated that scenario somewhat by affording Mexicans an earlier and more substantial role in Yucatán history. In this version, Mexicans are depicted more as collaborators in Chichén Itzá’s florescence than brute conquerors. But if this plot admits some measure of bicultural mixing, Morley ingeniously retrieved the notion of Maya independence and superiority by insisting that, instead of any significant Mexicanization of the Maya, the essential process had been one of Mayanization (or even “civilization”) of the wayward Mexicans, which prepared them to participate in “an era of general prosperity” under the so-termed League of Mayapan

(1946:88). Moreover, even in this more nuanced version, Morley was able to preserve his notion of the Mexicans’ ignoble role in the collapse of Maya civilization by ending the story (as in early drafts) with the arrival of cruel Mexican mercenaries who “reduced the country to political chaos, and paved the wave for the final conquest of the Spaniards in 1527–1546” (1946:93).

Along with supposedly contradistinct attitudes toward war, matters of religion provided Morley with perhaps even more grist for advancing the comparative superiority of Maya over Mexican lifeways. Thus while he emphasized Maya resistance and resilience in the face of contamination from the central plateau in most respects, Morley depicted the tenth-century arrival of Mexican religion in Yucatán as both momentous and disastrous: “Sweeping changes of a debased nature were introduced” (1946:211). If at first seeming to betray a weakness in the Maya character, Morley’s depiction of this (supposed) religious transformation actually enabled him to purify (or maybe sanitize) the “august, stately faith” of the indigenous Maya by assessing all of its darker aspects—most importantly, idolatry and “bloody orgies” of human sacrifice—as “importations from Mexico in New Empire times” (1946:211–212).

Based on these premises, Morley was freed to showcase over and over again perhaps the most infamous of all the oppositional images connected with this site: that of darkly clad Mexican priests flinging nubile Itzá Maya maidens to their watery deaths in the Sacred Cenote. Furthermore, this forbidding image of splashing, sacrificial death—a colorful painting of which illustrated his text in *National Geographic* (1936:622)—provided Morley a kind of focusing lens for a whole set of contrasts between the two antithetical versions of aboriginal spirituality that had supposedly succeeded one another at Chichén Itzá. Some of these oppositions he makes explicit; others are only implied. For instance, in addition to the bluntly sexist image of Mexican men ritually slaughtering Maya women, there are also intimations of a gendered polarity in Morley’s suggestions that Maya worship at Chichén was usually private, introspective, and quiet, focusing either inward or perhaps on the heavens, while the Mexican rituals were always loud, extroverted, public affairs: in nearly every Mexican Chichén rite Morley describes, “thousands were attracted thither” (1925:82). Even their respective gods were radically dissimilar: Where Maya devotion aimed to propitiate “simple gods of nature . . . who, though they may be mischievous, are on the whole well-disposed toward mankind” (1946:212), Mexican cenote rituals were driven by the fearful necessity of “appeasing the wrath of offended deities” (1925:80). Thus in Morley’s imagination, Maya religion was a largely apolitical, “highly esoteric” strategy for maintaining har-

mony with nature, while the Mexican conquerors of Chichén Itzá subscribed to a noisy and garish religion, which was principally a ritualistic tool of the state (1925:81–82).

In sum, Morley's paired enthusiasm for Maya piety and disdain for Mexican ceremonialism seem, at times, to be apprising his audience less about the pre-Columbian history of Yucatán than, albeit indirectly, such matters as a modern ambivalence toward ritual, the relative merits of Protestant over Catholic spirituality, or perhaps the virtues of separating church and state.⁸ Nonetheless, or maybe for just those reasons, Morley's stories have proven remarkably resilient. His creative exegeses of the documentary sources—his “stirring tales of other days, other men, other deeds” (1925:95)—are still popular fare around the site of “Chichén Itzá the Magnificent” (as he was prone to call it). And yet, if Morley's scripts successfully showcased the wonders of his ancient Maya to nonspecialists, he was considerably less successful in convincing the academic community. All serious Americanists, even in Morley's own era (Morley himself included, so it would seem), could see that his imaginative rendition of two Maya empires and of the Mexicanization of Yucatán was an impossible distortion of the actual historical events.

Alfred M. Tozzer: Irreconcilable Polarity

Alfred M. Tozzer's encyclopedic *Chichén Itzá and Its Cenote of Sacrifice: A Comparative Study of Contemporaneous Maya and Toltec* (1957) remains the basic descriptive text on the archaeological and ethnohistoric data pertaining to this great pre-Columbian city. [Lincoln 1986:143]

Although Alfred Tozzer did acknowledge the Carnegie Institution's “most carefully correlated investigations along many lines” (1934:4), he nonetheless had deep reservations about both Morley's extravagant appraisal of the Maya and especially his exciting accounts of Chichén Itzá's past (Coe 1990:253). It is ironic then, given Tozzer's disdain for speculation and his emphatic pleas for the rigorous documentation that would finally secure Maya studies' place on a “solidly scientific foundation” (1934), that he delivers an incredibly intricate (and imaginative) five-stage version of the Chichén Itzá story (published posthumously in 1957) which actually throws the imagined polarization of Maya and Mexican people into even higher relief than Morley had. In Tozzer's view, virtually every element of Chichén Itzá's material remains could be ascribed to one of two distinct groups: the original “pure Maya” and the later hybrid “Toltec-Maya,” a term he coined (Spinden 1957).

The serpentine plot of Tozzer's version of the Chichén story, like Morley's, depends heavily on a creative interpretation of the *Chilam Balam of Chumayel*,

particularly a passage that reads, “three times it was, they say, that foreigners arrived” (Roys 1933:84). With that triple threat in mind, Tozzer produced archaeological and art historical support for a twisting tale in which the peaceful Maya are overwhelmed by Mexican invaders, not just once but three times. If moderated slightly, the familiar characterizations of the peaceful Maya and bellicose Mexicans were, in other words, perpetuated rather than dislodged.

To make his long story short, in the first invasion Toltec interlopers led by Kukulcan I come directly from their central Mexican capital at Tula, carrying with them the gory, heart-sacrificing cults associated with the ball game and the feathered serpent—creations that appalled the gentle Maya of Tozzer's imagination (1957:25–35). The Maya briefly recover the city, only to be (re)conquered by a second wave of Mexicanized Itzá, this time from the Gulf Coast region of Chakanputun and led by Kukulcan II, a new leader who had taken the former's name (1957:35–45). Then after another brief Maya resurgence, a third and final wave of Mexican mercenaries from Tabasco again storms the city, which thereafter peters into obscurity. At that point most of the remaining inhabitants move off to the south so that by the time the Spaniards arrive in Yucatán, the once-great capital is largely ruined and deserted (1957:58–64).

Tozzer's ingenuity and rigorous attention to detail, along with his singular impact on subsequent imaginings of Chichén Itzá, are impressive, to be sure; but his venturesome solution to the “Toltec-Maya problem” is riddled with idiosyncrasies that were never widely accepted either in public or academic circles (Lincoln 1986:144, 152). In retrospect, even more troubling (and more telling) than Tozzer's dubious correlations of episodes and actors in the Chilam Balam books with various depictions in Chichén's art is the central place to which he assigns ethnicity in his interpretive scheme. He contends, for instance, that the different facial features and regalia of the figures on Chichén's frescoes and bas-reliefs and on disks recovered from the Sacred Cenote correspond to distinct “ethnological types,” types whose differences apparently lie even deeper than culture and socialization (1957:25). In other words, in Tozzer's treatment, “ethnicity” (or race) is the single most important criterion that differentiates the two groups. In sorting out the hybrid Toltec Maya from the pure Maya, none of the supposed disparities in religion, social organization, artistic and architectural style, or even militarism are nearly as significant or as reliable as the discernment of “ethnic variations” (perhaps because all those other qualities are, in Tozzer's mind, derivative of ethnicity).

Consequently, instead of the image that so fascinated Morley (and others) of Mexican men throwing

Maya women to their deaths in Chichén's Sacred Well, the most vividly recurrent image to emerge from Tozzer's work is that of vanquished "typical Maya warriors" being sacrificed (in the Great Ball Court and at the Sacred Cenote) by their same-sexed but physiologically and ethnically different Mexican executioners (Tozzer 1957:128–129). Furthermore, the incredible mass of careful documentation that Tozzer assembles to support this thesis, together with his confidence that "the modern techniques of archaeological investigation have raised the subject to an almost exact science" (1934:19), allows him to present his conclusions with a kind of positivistic, academic authority to which Morley's popular versions could not really pretend. Thus in the end, Tozzer's distortions may be subtler but more insidious than those of his much less careful counterpart.

In any case, as a monumental contribution to the history of storytelling about Chichén Itzá, Tozzer's incredible project is outstanding most of all as the quintessence of antagonistic Maya-Mexican polarity. His pendulous story of Chichén Itzá is a confrontational saga of two oil-and-water entities, fundamentally and irreconcilably contrary, who pass the baton of authority back and forth but who never merge or cooperate in any important fashion. For Tozzer, the differences between Maya and Mexican peoples, which he seems to locate in their respective ethnic (or maybe even genetic) make-ups, are essential and intractable; in fact, this is perhaps the most tragic of all Chichén stories insofar as the city collapses entirely before these two disparate ethnicities are able to find any common ground.

J. Eric S. Thompson: Symbiotic Polarity

The Putun (Chontal Maya) [or Itzá] are here presented as a virile, expanding group which probably developed its aggressive qualities as a result of an earlier injection of Mexican blood and toughness from Nahuatl-speaking neighbors in the Chontalpa. The culture and people were hybrid Maya-Nahuatl. [J. E. S. Thompson 1970:43]

If countless renditions of the Chichén Itzá story portray this as the site of a momentous meeting between profoundly different Maya and Mexican peoples, all versions have to accommodate as well another, infamous third party: the mysteriously elusive and maligned Itzá. Still a matter of great uncertainty, one popular old view held that the Itzá were thoroughly Maya emigrants from the southern lowlands, while a significant minority identified them as full-blooded Mexican intruders.⁹ The more reputable opinion since the 1930s, however, has located the Itzá homeland in the Gulf Coast hinterland between the Mexican zone and the Mayaland, on the knot of the bow tie of Mesoamerica as it were, with significant affiliations to both halves. Accord-

ingly—and in keeping with the paradigm of Maya-Mexican bifurcation—the Itzá have nearly always been imagined as joining the fray at Chichén Itzá, not as an equal and autonomous third party but rather as some sort of hybrid (or bastard) ethnic constituency. The Itzá are, in other words, invariably classed—and this is where the notion of symbiotic polarity blossoms—as either Mayanized Mexicans or Mexicanized Maya.

Tozzer (1957:1, 36) and Roys (1962:25–86) each, in somewhat different ways, argued for the first option: that is, the Itzá were a relatively small contingent of Mayanized Mexican scavengers "who arrived in the city a few years after it had been 'destroyed'" (Tozzer 1957:1), a kind of asterisk to the great two-culture confrontation at Chichén Itzá. The intimation in these versions is that significant ethnic mixing between Maya and Mexican peoples happened only at the very tail end of the saga of pre-Columbian Mesoamerica and, notably, even then without any particularly fortuitous consequences.

Alternatively, Eric Thompson (1954, 1970), along with George Brainerd, credited the Itzá—and ethnic mixing—with a far more important role in Chichén Itzá's ascent to domination of Yucatán. For them, the hybrid Itzá were Mexicanized Maya from the Gulf Coast who, by virtue of prolonged trading relationships, had absorbed considerable central Mexican traits. Paying particular attention to the relevant ceramic data, they interpret the ethnohistorical accounts in such a way that the Itzá arrival at Chichén actually *preceded* the presumed Toltec conquest and laid the essential groundwork without which the subsequent success of the capital would not have been possible. This set of Itzá stories, then, similarly acknowledges the generally unsavory character of these "hybrid Maya-Nahuatl" people but, nonetheless, affords them a pivotal role in the most spectacular (if decidedly crass) cultural florescence in the peninsula's history. Particularly for Thompson, the radical discrepancies between Maya and Mexican constituted opportunities as well as difficulties. Thus while he experimented with several alternative solutions to the problem of Toltec Chichén, all of Thompson's (re)constructions—most prominently 1954 and 1970—feature biethnic hybridity as the decisive catalyst for cultural vitality and innovation.

In the earlier synthesis, Thompson (1954:116–139) describes a kind of one-two punch with two successive and very different modes of Mexicanization at Chichén Itzá; both, however, entail actual bicultural syntheses rather than Tozzer's model of Maya-Mexican rotational authority. The first begins with a prolonged and apparently mutually beneficial commercial and even intermarital melding of Itzá Maya and central Mexicans along the Gulf Coast, and culminates when the partially Mexicanized Itzá seize Chichén away from their Yucatec-

an Maya brethren. The second wave of Mexicanization is the Toltec conquest proper, a more drastic coup de grace that begins with the abrupt, coercive invasion by a small Toltec militia direct from Mexico to Chichén but culminates in a Toltec-Itzá collusion and a spectacular though garish and short-lived florescence. The vulgar success of Toltec Chichén, which reminds Thompson of “those Hitler youth rallies with unending *heils* and swastikas” (1954:121), derives, in this version, from a somewhat motley conglomeration of pure Mexican Toltecs, partially Mexicanized Itzá, and indigenous Yucatecan Maya.

Thompson’s later, even more famous (re)construction (1970), which features his Putun hypothesis, was actually an elaboration rather than a denigration of his earlier depiction of two successive modes of Mexicanization. As in the earlier scheme, the first wave is a long, evolving process wherein the Putun Itzá Maya based in the Gulf Coast region absorb from central Mexicans the decidedly “non-Maya” flair for unscrupulous commercial and military exploitation that enable them to win mastery over the whole of Yucatán. Continuing to equate the Mexicanization of Yucatán with a kind of moral decay, Thompson maintained that the Putun Itzá overlords of this vast empire, though militarily superior, were dedicated to a phallic cult and to “lewd, erotic practices” that repulsed the more sublime Yucatecan Maya; the Putun were, in other words, powerful but despised and disrespected (1970:20–21). The second, speedier wave of Mexicanization in Thompson’s updated scheme involves a small retinue of Toltec refugees, led by Quetzalcoatl-Kukulcan and fleeing directly from Tula, who are welcomed into Tabasco and then escorted directly to Chichén Itzá by the invincible and already strongly Mexicanized Putun Itzá. This complimentary union between the formidable but unloved Putun Itzá and the prestigious but disenfranchised Tula Toltecs—the quintessence of symbiotic polarity—catapults the City of the Sacred Well to its zenith of temporal preeminence. It is, in other words, the fortuitous marriage between the corporeal resources of the Itzá and the transcorporeal vision of the Toltecs that explains the religioarchitectural bravura and totalitarian might of “New Chichén” (1970:4–5).

Thompson’s incredible tales of compensatory cooperation, which combine Tozzer’s attention to detail and Morley’s unbridled hyperbole, have had both an enormous and contradictory legacy with respect to the ways that Maya-Mexican polarity manifests itself in subsequent (re)constructions of Chichén Itzá. By his exposition of the aggressive, internationalizing Putun Itzá, Thompson (perhaps unwittingly) contributed significantly to the dismantlement of the stock characterizations of the strictly cerebral, stay-at-home Maya and thus opened the way for the eventual appreciation of

Chichén as a basically Maya accomplishment. Yet on the other hand, Thompson’s persistent invocation of Maya-Mexican “blood mixing” as the essential means that had empowered the Putun with the non-Maya savvy to succeed in the competitive Mesoamerican world actually intensified old stereotypes. As (perhaps) the last major scholarly production to feature in such bald fashion the antithesizing caricatures of the Maya priest and Toltec warrior, Thompson’s grand saga of the migration and reseating of Tula’s Quetzalcoatl in Chichén Itzá belongs to a former, rather than the present, era of Maya studies. Despite his daringly original ventures with respect to the notion of symbiotic polarity, Thompson stuck to the end with the timeworn, typecast actors.

More Recent Tales of Two Indians: Resilient Polarity

Chichén Itzá, political capital and mythic homeland, will always inspire debate. Students of the Maya have viewed it as more Maya while Mexicanists describe Chichén as Central Mexican—certainly this northern center was both. [Coggins 1987:427]

As appreciation of Chichén Itzá’s basic continuity with the rest of the Maya area has grown, the most guileless versions of the Toltec conquest of the Maya have fallen out of vogue. Since Thompson’s era, there is increasing support both for the possibility that Chichén Itzá was “*probably* ethnically uniform and Maya” (Lincoln 1986:153, emphasis in original) or, alternatively, for the possibility that Chichén was a multiethnic, widely eclectic but generally unified Maya center with elements drawn from a host of different Mesoamerican culture areas (see Kubler 1961 and Jones 1995)—and either of those possibilities works to undermine the old paradigm of Maya-Mexican polarity. Nevertheless, the prospect of a two-party, Maya-Mexican meeting at the Sacred Cenote remains irresistible to scholars and laity alike.

Art historian Clemency Coggins, for instance, revives the old idea with her excitingly iconoclastic proposal that, in the wake of the collapses of Classic-period civilizations in both the Maya and Mexican areas, these two great strains joined forces and “deliberately conceived and founded [Toltec Chichén] as a cultural amalgam” (1987:427; also see Coggins 1989). In her bold hypothesis, the two groups shared a mutual foreboding at the shocking realization that their respective calendars, the 52-year Mexican cycle and the 400-year cycle of the Maya, were about to close out major blocks of time simultaneously in 830 C.E. (Coggins 1987, 1989). Together they settled on Chichén Itzá as the most efficacious site for a collaborative New Fire Ceremony that would avert the impending cosmic catastrophe and then jointly built

the great Castillo pyramid specifically for that occasion. In this Chichén story, which departs from earlier versions of symbiotic polarity by stressing the similarities between Maya and Mexican mindsets rather than their profound differences, shared fear of the end was transformed into a synthetic new beginning: calendars and cultures were unified, and an era of Toltec-Maya prosperity and hegemony initiated.

The endurance of the genre of two-Indian tales of Chichén Itzá, especially among popular audiences, is even more apparent in a 1992 film entitled *Chichén Itzá: La Palabra del Chilam*, sponsored by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología Historia and directed by Gonzalo Infante. The script here, which depends heavily on a creative reading of the Books of Chilam Balam, is more familiar insofar as the two parties are almost thoroughly antagonistic, though as usual, editorializing on the viability of bicultural mixing leads to some novel plot twists. In this case, elaborately costumed actors—performing in the actual ruins no less—(re)enact a short period of tense coexistence between indigenous Maya and invading, heavily “Mexicanized” Itzá constituencies until, eventually, the noble leader (or Chilam) of the Maya feels compelled to offer himself as a human sacrificial victim rather than participate further in the unconscionable alliance with the foreign interlopers. The film climaxes in an eerie ritual atop the Temple of the Warriors as the dour Itzá priests gladly comply with the Chilam’s request by driving an obsidian knife into his chest. But then, entertaining a final time the possibility of mutual coexistence (or symbiotic rather than irreconcilable polarity), the narrator invokes the Popol Vuh to propose the dark irony that human sacrifice sometimes binds rather than separates victims and executioners: “Yes, the governing brethren [at Chichén Itzá] are the Itzá and the Maya, the victors and sacrificial victims; they are divine brothers.”

The juxtaposition of this popular film and Coggin’s scholarly interpretation, only two of many recently crafted variations on the old theme, reminds us again of the remarkable endurance of this notion that Chichén Itzá was the host, or perhaps the consequence, of a momentous meeting between two radically different pre-Columbian peoples. The story’s appeal is startlingly resilient. Turning, then, from the *circumstances of the construction* of these two-Indian tales to the *circumstances of their reception*, I want in these final sections to make explicit why so many, for so long, and in so many venues have told these stories with such enthusiasm and interest.

Contexts of Creation and Reception: Colonialist Polarity

The history of archaeology emerges as metanarrative. It is the story of storytellers, seen in a variety of time, place, method, motive, and both institutional and personal power. [Hinsley 1989:80]

The metanarrative this article aims to tell contends that the realities of the Toltec conquest of the Maya, intriguing as they are, can no longer be accepted as pre-Hispanic historical realities. Their empirical unlikelihood notwithstanding, the conventional two-Indian tales of Chichén Itzá remain very much alive, although as a critical reception history of these stories would remind us (Iser 1974), that continuing appeal has been based on an exceedingly wide variety of interests. An ostensible correspondence to actual pre-Columbian events is only one, and hardly the most important, of many different factors that have accounted for the widespread and enduring allure of depicting the Maya and Mexicans as drastically different, and then imagining their fateful confrontation at the City of the Sacred Well. The utility of the variations on this multivocal narrative—like the many audiences to which these stories have been directed, the many agenda that they have served, and the many lessons that they have been invoked to instantiate—has been diversified in the extreme. Moreover, new uses for the old stories of Chichén and new contexts of reception continue to emerge.

For that early generation of professional Americanists who did so much to systematize and disseminate the Maya-Mexican distinction, for instance, the bipartitioning of Mesoamerican geographies and mentalities, however oversimplified and distorting, proved exceedingly useful as an academic, heuristic principle of organization. The paired oppositional images of the benign Maya and fierce Mexicans provided stable poles around which scholars could classify and arrange the otherwise baffling diversity of indigenous peoples and cultures. For Tozzer, Spinden, and others, the essential first step in making sense of Yucatán’s ruined art and architecture involved locating various elements on a continuum that stretched between endpoints defined as pure Maya and pure Mexican (Spinden 1957:385). And the associated motif of the Mexicanization of the Maya provided an arching framework of coherence within which scholars in the emergent field could arrange their more specific hypotheses about the pre-Columbian past. The Maya-Mexican distinction, in short, played a crucial role in organizing the growing fund of empirical data in seemingly significant ways, that is, in Foucaultian terms, “establishing an order among things” that would define and unify Maya studies as a respectable academic field.

Irrefutable heuristic appeal notwithstanding, it has become increasingly clear that the radical polarization of Maya and Mexicans promulgated by the early Mayanists also served a number of quite specific, and not “strictly academic,” interests with respect to early-20th-century Latin American politics. Paul Sullivan’s highly revealing account of the “long conversation” between foreigners and the Yucatecan Maya, for instance, alerts us to the sometimes neglected ramifications of the fact that the Carnegie project at Chichén Itzá was initiated in the most restless portion of Yucatán immediately following both the Mexican Revolution and the War of the Castes, “a peninsula-wide race war lasting over a half century [beginning in 1847] and consuming tens of thousands of lives” (1989:xv), which had pitted independence-seeking Maya rebels against the Hispanic Mexicans who controlled the federal government. If Morley and the Yucatecan Maya rebels with whom he had so much interaction were at odds on many issues, they were, then, in complete accord regarding the drastic difference between Maya and Mexican peoples. In fact, Maya hopes for some sort of alliance with the Chichén-based North Americans against the hated Mexican republic informed nearly every encounter between researchers and informants so that, as Sullivan notes, irrespective of the rhetoric of scientific neutrality, “less grand, more tangible topics were often the matter at hand—money, merchandise, labor, weapons, information” (1989:xiii).

The Carnegie’s characterization of the Maya as both largely distinct from and decidedly superior to central Mexican culture may, almost unwittingly, have advanced the Yucatán independence movement by denigrating the cultural attainments of the altiplano and thus, implicitly anyway, questioning the centralized authority of the present Mexican state, which Americans (like their Maya hosts in this respect) perceived as a threat to economic and social stability.¹⁰ Yet on the other hand, Morley’s accentuation of the huge gap between the former greatness and present impoverishment of Maya culture, as well as the Mayas’ supposed lack of facility in practical matters during all eras, probably worked even more strongly *against* the Maya aspirations for self-determination by “creating at least the psychological conditions for future domination and exploitation” (Hinsley 1989:82). Severing contemporary Yucatecans’ ties both with the rest of Mexico and with their own spectacular cultural heritage served to underwrite, and even seemingly necessitate, a kind of paternalistic proprietorship of Maya archaeological sites and objects (Hinsley 1989:82–83). And more disturbingly still, isolating and romanticizing the Maya, albeit indirectly, worked to legitimate the foreign management of Yucatán’s commercial interests and control of products

that were of strategic importance to the United States (see Sullivan 1989:131–137).

Furthermore, besides its utility in advancing specific 20th-century political and economic agendas, the polarization of the Maya and Mexicans has also played an important if somewhat more general role in the ongoing processes of what Stephen Greenblatt (1980:7–9) terms the Western “self-refashioning” in relation to a “threatening Other.” Chichén storytelling, in other words, contributed additional chapters to the continuing history of colonialism insofar as the Toltec conquest narrative provided a kind of imaginal laboratory space in which the variously laudatory and condemnatory old images of the Indian could be tested, sorted, distilled, and then deployed in strategic new ways. While informed to an important extent by actual pre-Columbian events, the supposed historical *reconstructions* of Maya protagonists and Mexican antagonists are, in large part, imaginative *constructions*, hopeful and fearful reflections of Euro-American notions about “primitive” psychology, sociology, spirituality, and morality, which are only tangentially related to the realities of ancient Mesoamerica. In this respect then—that is, as colonialist discourse—the poignancy and resilience of Tozzer’s and the Carnegie Mayanists’ stories about Chichén Itzá have stemmed less from their (partial) success in recounting events that transpired over a millennium earlier than from their dexterous provision of an arena for organizing, assaying, and juxtaposing all that is positive and appealing in Western perceptions of the Indian with all that is negative and repugnant.

Morley (1946), for instance, by his unabashed correlation of Maya and Mexican peoples with a full series of *sociopsychological dichotomies*—such as gentle/combatative, humble/arrogant, honest/conniving, and docile/aggressive—systematized and perpetuated the habitual colonialist practice of reducing the perceived diversity of indigenous Americans to a catalogue of their best and worst attributes. The conventional stories of Chichén Itzá similarly evinced (and perpetuated) the conflicted admiration and disgust for native aesthetic sensibilities by segregating the site’s supposedly Maya versus Mexican art and architecture into oppositional categories such as serene/showy, exuberant/austere, angular/curved, calm/stiff, beautiful/crass, and subtle/garish. And likewise in the realm of Indian intellectual achievement, the standard practice of praising the cerebral Maya at the expense of crude Mexicans provided occasions to reflect upon the awkward issue of “how natives think” in terms of such oppositional formulations as otherworldly/this-worldly, literate/illiterate, poetic/stuttering, and abstract/pragmatic.

Opposites in so many ways, perhaps the most important commonality between Maya and Mexican lifeways as they are depicted in these stories is their similar

nonviability in the modern world (though for different reasons): In most versions, the demise of the sublime Maya culture is depicted as tragic though inevitable; theirs was an impractical, lamentably nonviable way of life. The vile barbarism of the Toltec lifestyle, similarly and by contrast, is usually depicted as a gross aberration, a warning of how *not* to live that unlamentably self-destructs even before it can be displaced by the superior civilization of the Spaniards.

Flexibility, Endurance, and Appeal: Multivalent Polarity

The fact that completely different readers can be differently affected by the “reality” of a particular text is ample evidence of the degree to which literary texts transform reading into a creative process that is far above mere perception of what is written. [Iser 1974:279]

The conventional stories of Chichén have, then, proven quite useful in rationalizing the excesses of European expansion and assuaging guilt about exploitation of Native Americans and third-world nations. Yet, however deeply implicated in the processes of colonialism and Latin American politics these standard (re)constructions may be, their perpetuating appeal is not exhausted in those affiliations. The oeuvre of Chichén stories also provides, particularly for nonspecialist audiences, an invaluable resource for countless more personal and more idiosyncratic “self-refashionings” that are not principally concerned with white-Indian relations or with the political and economic relations between Mexico and the United States (or, for that matter, with the nuances of pre-Columbian history).

In other words, though only a handful of specialists are equipped (or interested) to assess critically the details of various renditions of Chichén’s history, an enormous lay audience has found in these two-Indian tales grist for all manner of imaginative ruminations and reflections, many of which were unanticipated by the scholars who fashioned those (re)constructions and some of which, no doubt, would have appalled them. The multivalent and evocative nature of these famous stories of Chichén—and this is *not* really the case for most ruins—can hardly be overestimated. The creative hermeneutics of Mayanist storytellers has evoked an unending stream of similarly creative hermeneutics from their listeners and readers.

The simplistic supposal, then, that the “bad Indians” whipped the “good Indians” actually opens the way for limitless and potentially much more subtle argumentation about what might be at stake in the convergence of different attitudes, ethnicities, and lifeways in other historical contexts. Once widely accepted as axiomatic, the supposed antithesis between Maya and Mexican be-

came available as a superabundant and largely autonomous resource for illustrating all sorts of lessons, a point of departure for all sorts of polemical debates. In a sociopolitical vein, for instance, the story of the Toltec conquest provides an apt narrative vehicle for reflecting upon generic tensions such as peaceful/warlike, settled/roving, families/unmarried males, and agricultural economy/tribute economy. With the addition of Eric Thompson’s intimations of Maya socialism and popular peasant revolts (1954, 1970), the fabled Maya-Mexican confrontation could serve as a forum for discussing the relative merits of different governmental arrangements in terms of dichotomies such as socialist/totalitarian, democratic/dictatorial, and egalitarian/hierarchical. And when Thompson (1954) further embellished the story by depicting “Toltec Chichén” as a mediation between Maya “vacant cities” (or “ceremonial centers”) and the “true cities” of the Mexicans, whether describing any indigenous Mesoamerican reality or not, he nevertheless invited debate on the comparative virtues of rural versus urban life.

Moreover, the notorious polarization of Maya mystics and blood-obsessed Mexican heathens—elaborated in oppositions like astronomer/sacrificer, life-worshipper/death-worshipper, contemplative/idolater, and celibate/sodomite—adduces to a whole series of polemical exchanges regarding not only the status of “primitive religion” but of spirituality, ritual, and morality in general. For instance, the unappealing, fanatical Mexican invaders—who are depicted as superstitious rather than pious, ritualistic rather than introspective, and pretentious in their worship rather than private—could furnish apparent instantiation to those who are interested in exposing the dangers either of overelaborate ceremony or of inordinately close associations between church and state.

Furthermore, these stories—which are overflowing with dichotomies such as pure-blood/mixed-blood, singular/hybrid, pedigreed/mongrel, legitimate/bastard, original/derivative, and indigenous/immigrant—offer even more potential for debating matters of race and ethnicity. Tozzer’s (1957) figuration of the rotations of Maya and Mexican authority at Chichén, for instance, which features hypothetical cycles of ethnic purity, contamination, and purgation (or cleansing), could be deployed as “evidence” of the near-impossibility of fortuitous multiethnic accommodation. Thompson’s experiments with more symbiotic Maya-Mexican polarity, laced with intimations that no amount of interaction short of intermarriage (and thus “blood mixing”) is sufficient to solidify intercultural alliances, are perhaps more optimistic but still highly ambivalent about the consequences of cultural and ethnic blending. Depending on one’s sympathies, Thompson’s hybrid Putun conquerors of Chichén could be marshaled in support of

such variant convictions as the vitality that comes with bicultural admixing, the nontransferability of artistic genius, or perhaps even the inevitably unsavory consequences of racially mixed marriages. The possible readings are endless. And those more recent (re)constructions that attribute the ascendancy of Toltec Chichén less to conquest than to a wide-reaching and deliberate eclecticism, to a conciliatory synthesis of one from many provide, albeit inadvertently, particularly fertile resources for those who are interested in advancing the promise of multiculturalism or maybe even forced integration or affirmative action.¹¹

In sum, this ingenious game of arranging, rearranging, and rearranging again the pastiche of Chichén protagonists and antagonists, though ostensibly recounting pre-Columbian events and initially based primarily on stereotypes of the American Indian, actually has much wider relevancy—and consequently, much more enduring appeal. In particular, this incessant practice of organizing perceptions of difference in terms of polar opposites has eventuated in a corpus of Chichén Itzá stories that are, on the one hand, spellbinding, swash-buckling, and interminably provocative yet, on the other hand, rhetorically manipulative and insidious by their perpetuation of a host of colonialist and racist abuses. Although now superseded by presumably more accurate alternatives, these timeworn narrative accounts of the Mexican conquest of the Maya, if assessed critically, open to view so many avenues and obstacles for future study that to dismiss them as inadequate, untrue, or simply wrong would be a profound loss. In the end, ironically, Morley's audacious claim in the 1920s, designed to win the backing of the Carnegie Institution, that the single site of Chichén Itzá presented an unrivaled opportunity to advance on "all outstanding problems of ancient Maya history" (Sullivan 1989:28) may actually prove to have been an understatement. If insight into the pre-Columbian Maya was the sole goal, subsequent investigations of the City of the Sacred Cenote have vastly exceeded expectations.

Notes

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1. The term *Mexicanization*, when applied to the glamorous confrontational drama between the Toltecs and the Maya at Chichén Itzá, is an obvious and telling misnomer, since the Mexica, the preeminent third of the Aztec triple alliance, did

not rise to prominence until some three centuries after the presumed Toltec conquest of Yucatán.

2. See, for instance, Lincoln 1986, Ringle 1990, and Kepecs et al. 1994; .

3. Actually, this quote should be attributed to Brainerd because it appears in his 1956 revision of Morley's *Ancient Maya* but not in the 1946 original.

4. See, for instance, Brainerd 1954, J. E. S. Thompson 1954:116–138, and Morley 1956:79–80.

5. See, for instance, Lincoln 1986, Coggins 1987, 1989, Ringle 1990, Schele and Freidel 1990:346–376, and Kepecs et al. 1994.

6. See Hodder 1991, Gardin and Peebles 1992, Shanks and Tilley 1992, and Murray 1993:105–106.

7. Hinsley 1989:82. See also Patterson 1986, Schávelzon 1989, Sullivan 1989, Black 1990, and Coe 1990 .

8. Morley himself was an Episcopalian.

9. See Holmes 1895–97, Willard 1926, and Morley 1946, on the view that the Itzá were Maya emigrants from the southern lowlands. See Spinden 1957:385 on the view that they were Mexican intruders.

10. Sullivan 1989:131 ff. See also Patterson 1986 and Schávelzon 1989.

11. See, for instance, Kubler 1961, Coggins 1987, and Jones 1995.

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