

Victor Montejo's Choral Testimonio: Appropriations and Critiques of Human Rights Discourses.

Claret Vargas

Abstract

In this essay, I analyze certain contemporary debates about human rights discourses through a close reading of Victor Montejo's *Brevisima Relacion de la Continua Destruccion del Mayab*. Written by a Maya intellectual, this text uses traditional Maya narrative and modern Testimonio conventions, and intersperses the voices of sixteenth-century Maya accounts of the arrival of Spaniards to describe the experience of the 1981-82 massacres in the Kuchumatanes region of Guatemala. The text uses contemporary human rights claims as a renewed version of anti-colonial discourse, seeking to impute obligations on the modern Guatemalan state's obligations, the text suggests, that have existed and remained unfulfilled since the beginning of the Spanish colony. In other words, the text shows how certain Maya intellectuals and rights advocates appropriate and deploy human rights discourse to interpellate the Guatemalan state. At the heart of the debate about the circulation of human rights discourse is a question of voice and agency: who speaks for whom, who establishes international human rights norms, who receives knowledge and who produces it. Yet even in the formulation of these questions, there is an implicit assumption about the lack of voice and agency of those whose human rights are violated. If the discourse of human rights is justifiably criticized as hegemonic, it is also a discourse appropriated, circulated and transformed by local populations who may see in this adherence to a set of international norms a way to interpellate history, a hostile state and the unequal local and global economic relations. This is what Victor Montejo's text illustrates, and it provides an avenue for an alternative reading of the limitations and potentialities of the globalization of human rights discourse.

Keywords

Testimonio; Human Rights; Guatemala; Maya Intellectuals; Indigenous Rights; Human Rights Discourse; Popol Vuh

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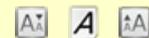
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For critics, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a Western-biased document which fails to account for the cultural norms and values which exist in the rest of the world. More than that, it is an attempt to impose Western values on everybody else.

By protecting individuals, human rights do not diminish the group, but merely ensure the protection of each and every individual within it. And in addition, culture is not static, but constantly evolving as people come

into contact with new ideas and concepts. Because some cultures do not emphasize certain rights at the moment, does not mean that will always be the case.