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Joel Wainwright & Joshua Lund

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## ARTICLES

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# Race, Space, and the Problem of Guatemala in Miguel Ángel Asturias's Early Work

Joel Wainwright

*The Ohio State University*

Joshua Lund

*University of Notre Dame*

This article provides a reading of Miguel Ángel Asturias (1899–1974), widely regarded as one of the most important writers of the twentieth century. We focus on his first substantial literary work, *Leyendas de Guatemala* [Legends of Guatemala] (Asturias [1930] 1995)—a text considered by some critics as the first instance of “magic realism”—to consider the problem of the literary representation of race and space. Asturias’s early works, we contend, are especially fruitful sites for exploring the complex interrelations of space, race, nation, and territory. Reading his *Leyendas*, which aesthetically represent the origins of Guatemala, we analyze the failure of his project. This is a productive failure, illuminating Asturias’s commitment to addressing the race–space couplet and reaffirming its tragic relevance for Guatemala, and our world, today. For, we conclude, the problem is not Asturias, but the liberal nation form itself. **Key Words: Guatemala, magic realism, Miguel Ángel Asturias, race and space.**

It is the failure of imagination that is important, and not its achievement, since in any case all representations fail and it is always impossible to imagine. This is also to say that in terms of political positions and ideologies, all the radical positions of the past are flawed, precisely because they failed.

—Jameson (1984, 209)

### 1

Miguel Ángel Asturias (1899–1974) is widely regarded as one of the most ambitious and important writers of the twentieth century. Latin America’s first writer of prose fiction to be awarded the Nobel Prize in literature, Asturias is typically placed alongside Mário de Andrade, Jorge Luis Borges, Alejo Carpentier, and João Guimarães Rosa as early avatars of the style that has come to define an entire continent’s literature: magic realism.

Around the time that Asturias won the Nobel Prize, he took on a new nickname: *El Gran Lengua*. Loosely associated with a number of demigods of Mesoamerican myth, the nickname is meant to reverberate with indigenous energy, evoking the image of something like an old storyteller, the wise man of the tribe. It is difficult to be more literal about its meaning. The polyvalence of *lengua*—tongue, language—supports multiple translations;<sup>1</sup> and the metaphor’s

equivalent in Maya-K'iche' is hard to discern. For those who know Asturias's work, this ambiguity is not particularly surprising: Apart from a few Maya words—flourishes in his literary work—Asturias did not speak Maya-K'iche', Q'eqchi', or any other indigenous language. Although the biographical information on this point is obscure, it seems he gave the nickname to himself. *El Gran Lengua*, then, molds an authoritatively indigenous identity onto a writer who spent his life turning indigenous stories into national literature, beginning with a prominent Maya sacred text, the *Popol Vuh*, which he helped translate into Spanish, from the French. This is not to question the veracity of Asturias's Mayanist writings, a matter about which the author himself was explicit; essentially, his stories are made up.<sup>2</sup> Rather, it is to emphasize one of the clearest contradictions of Asturias's work: if he, *El Gran Lengua*, was a tribal storyteller, his texts remain unintelligible to many of "his" people. He spoke in tongues (Spanish, French) whose most immediate relationship to the people represented in his tales is an oppressive one. There are more than twenty Maya languages spoken today in Guatemala (mainly from the Qichean family),<sup>3</sup> but state language policy and national-cultural hegemony emphasize Spanish, in which Asturias dreamed of a new Guatemala.

All of this makes his texts worthy of patient reading in a world where the near-universal celebration of multicultural tolerance coexists with the violence of racism, whether structural or quotidian.<sup>4</sup> Racism is sustained in part by spatial imaginaries and geographical forms of separation that are particularly acute and visible in Guatemala. Our contention is that Asturias's texts respond to this, and are especially fruitful sites for exploring the complex interrelations of space, race, territory, and literary imagination. On these themes, geographers and literary critics have produced rich, albeit disparate, literatures. For three decades the analysis of space and its representations has been a preeminent theme of literary criticism.<sup>5</sup> For Said (1978) and his commentators, postcolonial literary criticism centers on geography and representation. Yet whereas the analysis of representations of spatiality came easily to literary critics, the study of literary texts as a legitimate means of doing human geography has emerged fitfully and belatedly.<sup>6</sup> If the emerging field of geohumanities has a mandate, then it surely involves bringing the insights of critical human geography and literary criticism to bear on the interrelations of race and space.<sup>7</sup> We locate our analysis at this juncture. Our object of critique is the race-space couplet in Asturias's early work.

The question of Asturias's relations to the Maya and Guatemala has received considerable scholarly attention. Since 2007, at least seven new studies have been added to this genre (Arias 2007; Guerra Félix 2007; Lund and Wainwright 2008; del Valle Escalante 2009; Palacios 2009; Dewees 2010; Engelbrecht 2011). One might ask if all this attention to one writer is justified. There are two plausible replies. The first, made by all his critics, is that Asturias is genuinely significant. These seven studies were written after a generation of critics produced monographs on Asturias with similar questions, yet each drew novel conclusions. This demonstrates that Asturias's texts are at once dense, challenging, subtle, and problematic, hence worthy of bearing multiple readings. All the critics joke about the *lengua* nickname he gave himself, but nobody disputes he was indeed *gran*.

A second answer, closer to our ambit, concerns the lingering violence of Guatemala. We treat Guatemala here as a living, social geography and a concept, an ideal space, a problem.<sup>8</sup> Through waves of imperialism (both external and internal to the territorial nation-state), Guatemala has been constituted as one of the most unequal and violent places in the world, a land where two decades after the formal end of the civil war the indigenous majority still suffer systematic

discrimination, the plunder of ancestral lands, and untold acts of brutality. On 25 October 2015 a new president was elected: a comedian, representative of a right-wing clique with roots in military groups that participated in the elimination of whole Maya villages in the 1980s (Malkin and Wirtz 2015). The contemporary political problem in Guatemala is not merely electoral (who votes for whom), but concerns fundamentals: the very idea of Guatemala, the constitution, and form of political representation. The prospects for the political in a society under de facto apartheid are strictly limited. Asturias understood all this and committed his life to the task of producing a new conception of Guatemala. He was a man of the left and supporter of Jacobo Árbenz<sup>9</sup> who paid a heavy price for his political advocacy: Asturias was expelled from Guatemala and stripped of his citizenship by Carlos Castillo Armas, the U.S.-backed strongman who reversed the gains of the 1944–1954 “Guatemalan revolution.”<sup>10</sup> To critique Asturias, then, is to extend a conversation whose groundwork he established, to affirm the tragic relevance of his work for our world today.

Of Asturias’s vast literary production, *Hombres de maíz*, or *Men of Maize* in Martin’s definitive translation (Asturias [1949] 1993), is the standard point of departure (Henighan 1999; Lund and Wainwright 2008; Palacios 2009; Dewees 2010). The novel is Asturias’s greatest work, his Mayanist masterpiece, the indigenist literary effort against which all others are judged. The politics of *Hombres de maíz* are complex and multiple, but most prominently it is a novel that relocates the marginalized and heterogeneous groups called Maya to the cultural center of Guatemala.<sup>11</sup> It also represents the dividing line between Asturias’s early and late work.

Two decades before *Hombres de maíz*, the young Asturias (he was about twenty-three) wrote a racist thesis in defense of his law degree, a text that links national health with the elimination of the Maya. Seven years later, he published his first substantial literary work, *Leyendas de Guatemala* ([1930] 1995), a book that represents the initial step on a path that reaches its fulfillment with *Hombres de maíz*, where Asturias’s Indian becomes the central protagonist of Guatemala’s story and soul. What to make of this drastic reversal? Did epiphany strike, provoking a new attitude of solidarity with his national other? If so, where and why?

Two tendencies frame the literature around these questions. A minority position is unforgiving: Once a racist, always a racist; nothing to learn here. The other, predominant position in studies of Asturias, argues that his thesis was an error lacking conviction, or relatively progressive for its time, or fully overcome.<sup>12</sup> In our view, neither position is particularly compelling. Both place the writer, long dead, on trial, and it is a show trial, for it judges on the basis of present-day norms. More interesting for our purposes, and more rigorously postcolonial, is reexamining the “problem” that animates his law thesis to trace how it developed in his more sophisticated later works. The subtitle of his law essay, *El problema social del indio* (The Social Problem of the Indian; Asturias [1923] 1977), could be applied, with different inflections, to many of his literary writings. Throughout his life, Asturias struggled to realize Guatemala as a coherent nation-state, which is to say, to make its people (*el pueblo*) line up properly with its national boundaries. The contradictions that emerge here transcend the project and the man. At issue is neither Asturias’s literature nor his politics. The problem is the liberal nation form and its historical articulation to racial discourse. In addressing it, Asturias confronts a problem that has been the central one for no less than six generations of Latin American thinkers: Bolívar, Sarmiento, Martí, Mariátegui, Arguedas, and Menchú.<sup>13</sup> Its contours are already visible in his law thesis. We consider its position at the point of his breathtaking transition, the 1920s, at the heights of Asturias’s early work: *Leyendas de Guatemala*.

## 2

Asturias is often remembered as “the quintessential modern Latin American writer” (González Echevarría 1997, 242). In keeping with Latin American intellectual tradition, however, he did not grow into this identity at home. He would have to travel.

The conditions for the emergence of this distinctly American writer were created, geographically, in Paris and, epistemologically, at the intersection of Freud and Breton (1924).<sup>14</sup> Surrealist technique (automatic writing, dream analysis, etc.) encouraged the cultivation of feeling over thinking, which, for Asturias, was precisely the natural tendency of the American—as opposed to European—writer. Late in life, he explained that for his talented generation of expatriate Latin Americans living in Paris during the 1920s, “surrealism represented . . . an encounter with a non-European, indigenous American within ourselves . . . Under our Western consciousness, we carried something good—unconsciously. When everyone started registering this on the inside, they found their indigenous unconscious” [*su inconsciente indígena*]. These three words could also be translated “their unconscious Indian.”<sup>15</sup>

To be a Latin American in Paris in the 1920s meant recognizing oneself as an alienated self: the anxious advocate for a national culture that was elsewhere and, moreover, even the oracle of the very margins of that other culture. This confrontation with the unconscious generated his disciplinary breakthrough: a literary form applied to a national return. If Europe’s racialized map of the world fixes nations according to their proper color, then it was at the center of this map that Asturias became convinced that the authentic hue of his Guatemala was *Maya*. This realization extended first and foremost to himself. Through an anecdote that has been described as the “most familiar in Asturias’s biography” (Sáenz 1974, 41), we learn that his transformation happened at an institution no less central to the cultivation and dissemination of Eurocentrism than the Sorbonne. One day, in the classroom of the famous scholar of Maya civilization, Georges Raynaud, the professor singled him out—interpellating him as if by magical incantation—to the young Asturias’s bemusement, with the declaration: “*Vous êtes maya*” (“You are Maya”; Asturias interview with López Álvarez 1974, 75). His Maya discovery in arm, that evening Raynaud would surprise his wife, declaring, by Asturias’s account, “Here is a Maya. And you said the Maya do not exist!”<sup>16</sup>

This anecdote is significant but not for the reasons of phenotype sometimes ascribed to it. Its importance lies in its effect on Asturias’s relation to Guatemala as a national space: that is, his conceptualization of a Guatemalan national subject as a kind of race. Consider Asturias’s description of his own response to Raynaud: “When I *confirmed that I came from Guatemala*, the man became very enthusiastic” (López Álvarez 1974, 75, italics added).<sup>17</sup> Suddenly, being Guatemalan, even a self-acknowledged *ladino* Guatemalan like Asturias, could mean *being* Maya.<sup>18</sup>

This new conception of himself conflicted with Asturias’s intellectual trajectory. Immediately preceding his departure for Europe, Asturias had made a systematic case for a eugenic approach to Guatemala’s “Indian problem” in his first significant intellectual effort, the aforementioned law thesis, formally titled *Sociología guatemalteca: El problema social del indio* ([1923] 1977). The text is a social-scientific treatise with premises that anticipate the mystically inflected solutions to the race-nation articulation proposed by Vasconcelos in *La Raza Cósmica* ([1925] 1948). Asturias (1923 [1977]) wrote, “The Indian represents a past civilization and the mestizo, or *ladino* as we call him, a future

civilization” (65). To bring the Indian into this future civilization, Asturias proposed that the indigenous communities should be genetically overwhelmed by “transfus[ing] new blood into [their] veins” (105). The nation would be cured by giving a kind of life that lets the Indian die.<sup>19</sup> The progress of Asturias’s imagined Guatemala would be fomented through European immigration (he suggested recruiting from Tyrol) and the *mestizaje* that would naturally ensue.

Tyrol aside, these were unoriginal ideas. The notion that Asturias’s law thesis was progressive for its time ignores that its central argument—that the Indian’s salvation rests in his biological elimination—was common to the Mesoamerican liberalism of its time. Henighan (1999, 15–18) rightly cited the importance of Vasconcelos’s idea of an *alma nacional* (national soul) for the young Asturias, but there are even earlier references. The failed politics of *colonización* in Mexico, broached by the liberal philosopher and statesman José María Luis Mora, dates to the mid-nineteenth century. Mexican newspaper editor and columnist Luis Alva (1882) argued for the Indian’s redemption in terms that foresee those of the “progressive” Asturias: condemnation of the social treatment of the Indian, alongside a set of eugenic solutions. (Alva’s appeal for legal, labor, and land reform appears enlightened next to Asturias’s bald eugenic proposals.) Until the end of his life, Asturias continued to cite Domingo Sarmiento—a political thinker ideologically affiliated with Juan Alberdi, famous for coining the maxim “*gobernar es poblar*” and advocate of clearing the Argentine pampa of Indians—as a potential “*guía*” for “*nuestras posibilidades políticas*” (cited in Morales 2000, 596). If there is nothing original in the eugenic solutions proposed by Asturias’s text, it is the crudity of Asturias’s articulation of these ideas that is so jarring. Its unchecked racism—the Maya are compared to mules and dogs, there is a weird screed against the Chinese, and so on—shows it to be anything but progressive for its time. As Lienhard (2000) argued, it was in fact reactionary for its time.

So what do we do with the clear-eyed racism of a youthful writer who went on to greatness? How do we make sense of his early work in the genealogy of Latin American magic realism? Aspects of this debate are well worn, but one element of his law thesis has received practically no commentary: its geographical character. Although entitled and framed as a work of sociology, what preoccupies Asturias is the relation between man and land, what geographers today call nature and society. Neither Marx nor Durkheim define his project parameters; it is written in Ritter’s terms. The object of his thesis is the relation between “our piece of the globe (its territory) and the people that inhabit it (its population)” (Asturias [1923] 1977, 64). And here is the central claim of his thesis: The only way to grasp “Guatemalan social reality,” and convert this understanding into a “strengthening of souls” and a “straightening of bodies,” is to take what he called the “feeling of the land” for our guiding “intuition.” (To support this claim, Asturias cited Nietzsche.) The problem, as he framed it, is that the population does not fit Guatemala right; communities are out of place; the nation is disarticulate. There is no national race, no *real* Guatemalans, merely *indios* and *ladinos*, existing in mutual rancor. Asturias sought harmony via geography. He committed his life, his voice—*el gran lengua*—to this problem, all while keeping his ears close to the ground. As he explained to Harss and Dohmann (1967), “That’s why I have to keep going back to Guatemala. Because when I’m away I stop hearing its voice. Not so much the voice of the people as that of the landscape” (82).

## 3

Within two decades of his law thesis, Asturias's literary works relocate the Maya as the center of the nation and make a militant turn toward a politics of social justice. Consider the truly dizzying geography of "discoveries" that animate Asturias. Asturias was discovered "as Maya" by the gaze of a French ethnologist, at the Sorbonne, whose business was to explore the mysteries of the Maya. Thus interpellated, Asturias came to know himself anew, now perceiving "his" people through imperial eyes. From the crow's nest of transatlantic anthropology, Asturias spied the contours of something on the horizon—a *Maya* nation—and narrated it poetically. His status as "Latin American writer" now rivaled only by Borges, Asturias is discovered yet again, now by critics. A series of momentous interviews by Luis Harss would place Asturias at the center of the North American boom in Latin American fiction and he would soon be crowned by the Nobel Committee in 1967 (as well as the Lenin Prize in 1966 and other honors). Discovered by a U.S. audience, Asturias became the joint-point of an emerging continental literature, *Latin Americanism*.

Thus Asturias's rediscovery of Guatemala emerged not through encounters with Maya people in Guatemala, but with Mayanism in Paris. By *Mayanism* we refer to a European discourse that aims at a scientific and aesthetic appreciation of the Maya, one that emerged principally through the nineteenth-century European exploration and plunder of Maya lands.<sup>20</sup> Mayanism made Asturias; from within its discourse he discards positivism in favor of surrealism, reworked and reconverted into Latin America's signature magic realism.<sup>21</sup> His investment in Mayanism allows him to integrate his political concerns—articulating the national population and its territory—with a way of knowing, a science, producing a poetics of Mayanism.<sup>22</sup>

The prospects and limits of this project are displayed throughout Asturias's first literary effort, *Leyendas de Guatemala* ([1930] 1995). A collection of eight short stories, *Leyendas* is considered by Martin (2011, 11) as "surely the first great expression of 'magical realism' in Latin America (which is to say, in the world)"; yet, for all that, it has been oddly neglected from criticism (Washbourne 2011, 15)<sup>23</sup> and was only translated into English in 2011 (Asturias [1930] 2011). Although some of the tales describe events that seem to occur entirely, or nearly entirely, within a Spanish or Ladino city (e.g., "Legend of the great hat [*sombrerón*]"), most occur in an ambiguous hybrid zone, without clear boundaries of race and space. Although generally poetic, surrealist, and indigenist—a style exemplified with the second legend, "Now that I recall . . ."—the eight legends' tone and topoi vary, reflecting Asturias's experiments with representing multiple conceptions of Guatemala as socionatural space. There are no typical subjects, no ordinary human protagonists, and no plain narrative. What acts—words, animals, people, Earth—is uncertain. For instance, in the "Legend of the treasure of the flowering place," which narrates the response of a Maya community at Lake Atitlán to Pedro de Alvarado's conquest, the tale's central figure—the protagonist, really—is the Earth itself, a volcano, "the Volcano," who warns of war and then, having received gifts from the Maya community, attacks the conquistadores:

Scorched inside their suits of armor, their ships adrift, Pedro de Alvarado's men, petrified with fear, livid at the insult the elements were hurling at them, looked on as mountain collapsed upon mountain, jungle upon jungle, river upon river cascading, a rain of rocks, flames, ashes, lava, and sand in torrents, everything the Volcano was spewing to form another volcano on top of the treasure of the Flowering place that the tribe had laid at its feet like a twilight. (Asturias 1930 [2011], 83)

In what constitutes the basic motif of Asturias's anticolonialism, Maya resistance is propelled by and coterminous with the land itself. Although the region around Lake Atitlán experienced numerous earthquakes during the Spanish colonial era—the cause of moving the capital, twice, to the present-day Guatemala City—this legend, imagining the Earth's own reaction to conquest, reflects Asturias's fantasy.

Asturias's preoccupation with the race-space relation is announced at the outset, in the opening legend, entitled, "Guatemala," his literary return to the nation.<sup>24</sup> "Guatemala" fits within a class of lyrical, American narratives that simultaneously pay homage to and lament the buried origins, or repressed unconscious, of the nation. The exemplary Latin American model would be the striking portrait of pre-Cortesian Mexico offered by Reyes (1915), *Visión de Anáhuac*, a text that Asturias knew well.<sup>25</sup>

Unlike Reyes's national context of Mexico, however, the Guatemalan national imaginary has never fully incorporated a dialectical theory of *mestizaje* as its ideology of race and nation. Indeed, the *indio-ladino* dualism that governs the practice of racism in Guatemala has been compared to a system of apartheid.<sup>26</sup> Evoking a series of historical stages, Asturias wrote of a national book bound in stone "*con páginas de oro de Indias, de pergaminos españoles y de papel republicano*" ([1930] 1995, 86). Although the binding evokes an indigenous ruin, the content—gold of the West Indies, Spanish parchments, Republican documents—asserts no fantasy of integrating the indigenous population into the national project. These topics represent instead the Indian's conquest and marginalization. This national condition dovetails with Asturias's faith in his Freudian-inflected surrealism, in which the Indian can only be thinkable as repressed (forgotten, past); that is, everybody, as it were, got in touch with "their *unconscious Indian*." In Asturias's "Guatemala," the Spanish colonial project sits visibly as ego—on top.<sup>27</sup>

Asturias's task is to make the incompatible pieces of race and space fit. Striving to articulate population and territory, Guatemala, both narrative and nation, depends on, is exceeded by, and ultimately effaces the Indian. It buries the Maya civilization that it attempts to take as its own. First, "Guatemala" depends on the Indian to support its narrative structure. The vignette begins by setting the scene at a small, modest, provincial, somewhat outmoded ("*viejo*" appears three times), and clearly *ladino*, town. Then, abruptly, the narrative tone and scene shift, with this exquisitely crafted line: "*Como se cuenta en las historias que ahora nadie cree—ni las abuelas ni los niños—, esta ciudad fue construida sobre ciudades enterradas en el centro de América*" ([1930] 1977, 85) ("As told in the stories that no one now believes—neither grandmothers nor children—[this] city was built on buried cities in the heart of the Americas").<sup>28</sup> "Guatemala" rests upon "*ciudades enterradas*." It is through these cities, in which "*nadie cree*," that the Indian is territorialized within the space of the fallen ancient Maya civilization, a fantastic land of strange rites and ruins in progress. An old Ladino couple suffering from goiters will become the narrators of the *leyendas* that follow. One prominent critic, Morales (2000), reads this fact as proof of Asturias's "intercultural" vision of the nation, insofar as the mestizo "storytellers" of Guatemala represent two cultures, both at once, as a national totality. This is a powerful and influential interpretation, but one that ultimately overplays its hand: The pull of history is too strong for this reading and the structure of *Leyendas* resists it. No land will be *cleared* and then later *destroyed* to evoke the Spanish heritage of Guatemala. Only the Maya need to be first evoked from and then later banished to the unconscious, forgotten Guatemala, as "stories that no one believes." (Indeed, "forgotten"—*olvidado*—is the term that Asturias uses to describe indigenous Guatemala in the law thesis.) Perhaps even against the author's will, his Mayanist

writings consistently churn up what he called Latin America's "geography of madness" in his Nobel address, currents that run directly counter to his dream of an articulate totality of intercultural American nations.<sup>29</sup>

Guatemala is exemplary in this regard. For it is precisely here, in (unceded) Maya territory, that we are confronted with the limits of the idea of Guatemala, one where the nation is exceeded by the Indian. Beyond the opening village, Asturias evokes two modern urban centers and four "buried" cities, two of which, Palenque and Copán, lie outside of Guatemala's territorial boundaries. Lienhard (2000) caught this in his reading of *Leyendas*, but we believe that he inverts its meaning, reading it as Asturias's desire to dream a Maya world that *transcends* Guatemala. Consider the narrative sequence through which Guatemala travels. The first place named, Palenque, is in Chiapas, Mexico, named, in the first instance, because it is the most beautiful ancient city in Mesoamerica. For the second stop, the narrative circles around Guatemala, arriving in Copán, Honduras, whence we enter the borders of Guatemala to visit Quiriguá and Tikal. Tracing these points on a map gives a spiral, perhaps the sacred *caracol*, as the snail trail continues through the three capitals of Guatemala: two destroyed by earthquakes, and the third, present-day Guatemala City. Pace Lienhard (2000), we suggest a different symbolic function to this geography; the narrative spiral of Maya cities—from outside to the center of the present state's territory—inscribe Guatemala, both as legend and territory, within a circle of ruins. This is an attempt to naturalize and spatialize national prehistory. The effect is to produce Guatemala as a Maya nation—without Maya territory.

Apart from the fact that the spiral begins with Maya cities and ends in Spanish ones, the narrative makes no mention of the violence associated with the shift from the former to the latter, or past to present. Rather than direct our gaze toward the historical-geographical processes through which Guatemala came into existence as a territorial nation-state (Spanish conquest, the primitive accumulation of Maya lands, genocidal wars), the Maya cities are called forth poetically as glyphs of a ghostly prehistory:

In the city of Tikal, palaces, temples and mansions are uninhabited. Three hundred warriors, followed by their families, abandoned it. Yesterday morning, at the door of the labyrinth, grandmothers and visionaries were still telling legends of the people. The city went off singing down the streets. Women's full hips swaying water jugs side to side. Merchants counting out cacao beans on puma skins. Favorites who on pita thread strung chalchihuitls, whiter than the moon, which their lovers carved for them when the sun went down. The doors to an enchanted treasure were closed. The temple flame was extinguished. Everything is as it was. Down the deserted streets, lost shades and ghosts with empty eyes wander. (Asturias [1930] 2011, 47–48)

Uninhabited, abandoned, legends, extinguished, deserted, ghosts, empty: Every possible synonym is used in one paragraph to make the point that Guatemala comes from a place that is dead and buried and gone. Yet, although uninhabited, abandoned, and so on, these cities lie on the way to Guatemala; they are the necessary passage points: waypoints to the nation. In their mansions and labyrinths you can see women's full hips gyrating and enchanted treasure hidden behind closed doors, etc. This is aestheticism at its purest, a mode of writing that Karatani (2000) called colonialism's "most typical . . . way of appreciating and respecting the other" (145).

The legend's aestheticism and its spatial imaginary, we contend, are two elements of one problem, that of fitting the Maya to Guatemala. Hence, predictably, the story of Guatemala ends where its spiral finds its center, in the capital city. The narrator's return

marks the story's culmination. Although the homeland remains unnamed, the title and myriad indicators communicate the point of arrival: Guatemala City.<sup>30</sup> At the conclusion, the narrator rejoices—"¡Mi pueblo! ¡Mi pueblo, repito, para creer que estoy llegando!" [Asturias [1930] 1977, 91]—to return to a *ladino* town, complete with "la plaza y la iglesia" [read: state and Church]. Santiago, the patron saint of Guatemala City and famous killer of "Moors" and "Indians," is celebrated;<sup>31</sup> yet no Maya heroes are mentioned, nor their living social relations: They remain symbols of ruin and myth. The space of the Indian is untimely, its temporality defined through rites and rituals and lost cities that provide both a literal—the cities submerged under living Guatemala—and symbolic subtext. This pertains to both the individual story and the larger collection that it introduces, both Guatemala and its *leyendas*. Like the slashed-and-burned clearing that Mayanism knows as the *milpa*, "Guatemala" opens a workspace, in this case for the writing of the nation's *leyendas*, its cultural base, epic past, and proper space. Asturias ([1930] 1977) gave a quick, final glimpse of the great Maya cities: "ciudades mitológicas, lejanas, arropadas en la niebla" (91), lost cities, misty and mystical, buried (again, the metaphor is also literal), only to be appreciated by the contemporary European.<sup>32</sup> With this dynamic—living Spanish cities versus mythic, dead Indian ones—the narrative winds down, subjects emerge (90–91), dialogue happens, and the narrator arrives home. The Indian continues to disappear.<sup>33</sup>

In sum, the legend called Guatemala reaches its limit where it tries, unsuccessfully, to capture the Maya as proto-Guatemalan; the same Maya who, historically and politically, exceeds and resists Guatemala. This unsuccessful capture appears homologous with Asturias's own Indianization, which relies on the mobilization of surrealism to explore the mysteries of the inner, unconscious self. Asturias's Indian, though, like the unconscious, is not containable within stable borders; just as the unconscious could erupt to destabilize the rational self without warning, so might the Indian resist easy incorporation into the national self and the narrative geographies of its contours. These disarticulations between Maya Guatemalans and the conversion of Maya lands from bare earth into territory engaged and frustrated Asturias throughout his writing life. At the time of writing *Leyendas de Guatemala* ([1930] 1977), the central question of his law thesis was still driving Asturias: How to place the Maya within Guatemala? Its objectives remained as well: Asturias continued to take landscape as a guide and to treat territory as a goal. So far, this project has led to the portrait of a mythic Indian, relegated to an inaccessible Indian territory, made legible in the museum. Years later, with *Hombres de maíz*, Asturias would at once resist and confirm this framework. Yet the link between the Maya and Guatemala is already beset by three interlaced conflicts.

The first is historical. The Maya in need of justice are Asturias's contemporaries—living communities in active resistance. Asturias was not especially interested in these subjects, though. It is the ancient grandeur of "collapsed" Maya civilization that attracts attention; the living Maya are valued principally as warehouses of stories and data. The living Maya as national subject—the very "problem" to be solved for the young Asturias—is always already a problematic object of construction.<sup>34</sup>

The second conflict is political. The nation-state was constituted through colonial hostility toward the Maya. Guatemala is not the reformation of Maya peoples into an expanded and integrated political community: It is the result of various forms of political violence exacted against them. The tenacious thematization of this history of rancor—this race war—within

Asturias's Mayanist literature (the classic example is the opening chapters of *Hombres de maíz*) presents itself as an obstacle to the dream of a politically articulate, multicultural nation.

The third conflict has to do with the very being of the Maya and the lands associated with them, what we might call its spatial ontology. The multiplicity of communities (speaking different languages) that comprise what we today call "the Maya," were not historically in Guatemala, or any other nation-state. They have other names for the places where they dwell, names that precede and exceed Guatemala.

## 4

Although much changed in Paris, Asturias never switched objects. Throughout his career, Asturias was still trying to articulate the ties between land and people, nation and territory. Asturias left the eugenic tone of his law thesis behind, but he could not yet produce a radically alternative narrative of Guatemala in his *Leyendas*. Fortunately, his works continued to mature. In a single writing life, he went from embracing a terrifying biopolitical racism to becoming the epigraphical figurehead in the most well-known Latin American case for indigenous rights, the famous testimony of Rigoberta Menchú's political *concientización*.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, his self-designation as *el Gran Lengua*, his rise to a subject position that authorizes him to produce his object of literary reflection, is entirely fitting if applied to Asturias's life experience and stature vis-à-vis the nation and its constitutive, *ladino* elite. In crafting a critical and political literary project that seeks to resubjectify the Maya within the population-territory dyad (the articulation of nation-space), Asturias—*el Gran Lengua*, the authoritative storyteller, the one whom the tribe obliges to speak—confronts a quagmire of contradictions. In attempting to extricate himself by drawing on a racialized map of the world, he only sinks deeper. Stuck in the swampy territory between race and nation, Asturias renders Guatemala "Maya," and thus repeats the Eurocentric conventions that presume a necessary articulation between space and race.

If these problems have lives that seem in excess of the proper frame of an orderly historical sequence, the same could be said of Asturias himself. Consider his grave in the *Cimetière du Père-Lachaise* in Paris. His gravesite is at once awesome and bizarre, *gran* and unnerving. It literally stands out: It is marked by a full-sized Maya stela, as one might find at Palenque (see [Figure 1](#)).<sup>36</sup> The stela—featuring a figure who resembles a hybrid between a Maya lord and Asturias—rises from a plain concrete tomb, bearing a metal plaque ([Figure 2](#)). The plaque lists his awards and the date of his death in Maya numerals, under the words:

Miguel Ángel Asturias  
Gran lengua de Guatemala  
Unigénito de Tecun-uman

So in death the *Gran lengua* is assigned to a nation-state (*de Guatemala*) and consecrated as the sole descendent of Tecun-uman. According to Martin ([1992] 1996, 466), the latter honorific was imparted to Asturias in 1968 by a group of Guatemalan writers. Tecun-uman, or Tekun Umam, leader of the K'iche' Maya at the time of Pedro de Alvarado's conquest—the inaugural event in the making of the modern Guatemalan nation-state—was memorialized by Asturias in his poem, "Tecún-Umán."<sup>37</sup> In his grave, Asturias is in turn

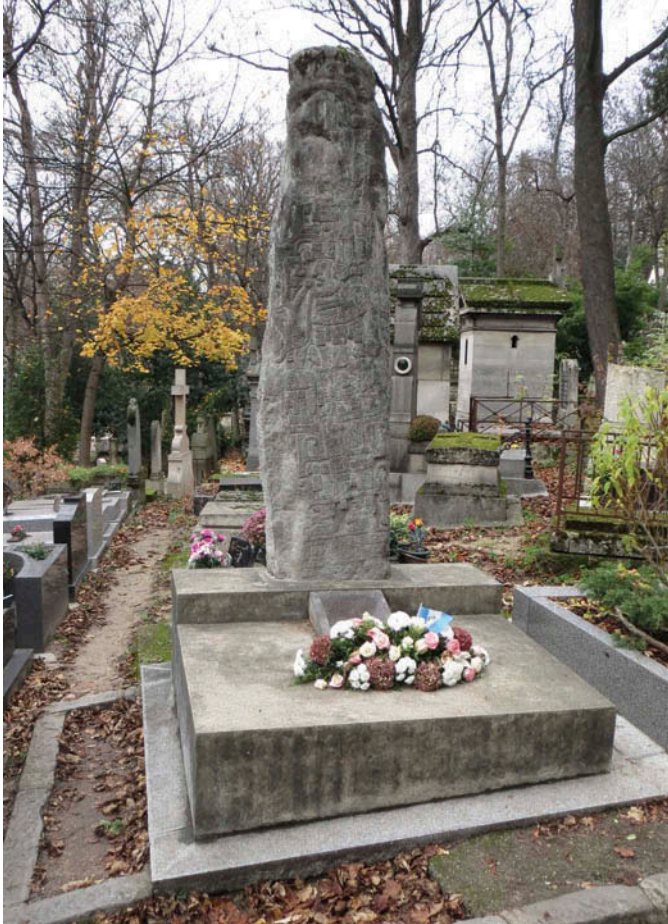


FIGURE 1 Asturias's grave in the Cimetière du Père-Lachaise, Paris. Note the flag of Guatemala. The stela was made by American sculptor Joan W. Patten (1924–2005) in 1976. (Photo by J. Wainwright, 11 December 2015). (Color figure available online.)

memorialized by his own poem, the glyphs of Guatemala's ghostly prehistory etched into his stela.

Among the puzzles posed by his gravesite, there is one that is as obvious and awkward as any raised by the law thesis. How shall we interpret the claim that Asturias is Tekun Umam's sole descendent when there are over a million K'iche' Maya-speaking people in Guatemala today? (In 1968 there were many Guatemalan citizens who could plausibly claim descent from Tekun Umam, but Asturias was not one.) One answer would be to say that Asturias's gravesite reiterates the worst element of racial prejudice from his early works: a refusal to recognize the living Maya, coupled with an insistence on representing them.



FIGURE 2 Plaque on Asturias's grave. (Photo by J. Wainwright, 11 December 2015). (Color figure available online.)

Our answer to this riddle is different. Asturias's work, we have argued, is the distillation, that is, the descendent, of the conquest of Guatemala. In this sense it offers a living legacy of Tekun Umam's fall, even if Asturias the man descends, genetically speaking, from Pedro de Alvarado's side. Recall that conquest of Guatemala is, strictly speaking, an impossible historical event, a concept that can only be grasped retrospectively: There was no Guatemala until after the conquest, and it is only a problem for a nationalism like Asturias's, which seeks to affirm Guatemala while doing justice to the memory of Tekun Umam and the Maya. Recall, too, that Asturias sought, in his "Legend of the treasure of the flowering place," to imagine resistance by the Earth itself against Alvarado's conquest: The volcano scorches the *conquistadores*. On this imagined land, Asturias sought to rebuild the nation: Guatemala. He might have failed but he is, so to speak, buried there.

On the day we visited Asturias's grave it was graced with a flower bouquet embedded with a Guatemalan flag.<sup>38</sup> All of the paradoxes of his writing concretize here, in this monument to his

identity, one that simultaneously celebrates his Maya-ness, his American-ness, and his Guatemalan-ness: in Paris. His grave is a fitting, final text of his oeuvre, its natural end, its full stop.

Examining the failure of Asturias's geographical imagination helps discern the political and ontological challenges that still violently resonate—through his literature, through Guatemala, and through our world. Asturias receives empathy for his early racism because he is the kind of writer who can change your perspective on the world, and did so for a generation of Latin American literati. Taken as a whole, his life's work belongs neither to the prejudiced *ladino* of age twenty-three, nor to *El Gran Lengua*. It belongs to us all, and it remains our challenge to deal with its implications. Hence we do not propose another debunking of a Guatemalan laureate.<sup>39</sup> Like Menchú, Asturias struggled to imagine a more just Guatemala. The strategy through which he attempted to realize this project—the poetical joining of national territory—failed him, reproducing the segregating impulse of race that bedevils national discourse. To draw this conclusion is not to propose another facile solution, but to learn from the limits of his work, via the labor of negation necessary to any critical project. It is to recall, as Jameson (1984) wrote, that it is not the achievement of imagination that is important, but its failure.

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## NOTES

1. In Mexico, *ser lengua* is to be a fable-maker, one who “tells tall tales.” A *lengua* has a fertile imagination that contaminates true accounts with the untrue. (We owe this insight to Ignacio Corona.)
2. Asturias's interview with Harss comprises Chapter 2 of Harss and Dohman (1967).
3. The “proto-Maya” language from which the variety of Maya languages derive has been traced to a region in what is now Guatemala's western highlands.
4. On race and racism in Guatemala, see, for example, Nelson (1999), Grandin (2000), and Hale (2006). On the genomic expression of this ethno-history, see Söchtig et al. (2015).
5. Discernable in the 1970s, literary criticism's spatial turn is crystallized in Jameson's (1984) claim that “our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time, as in the preceding period of high modernism proper” (64). The spatial turn can be historicized, however; see, for example, Wegner (2002) and Telly (2013).
6. There are exceptions to this generalization—for example, Harvey's (2011) chapter on Balzac in *Paris: Capital of Modernity*; Strauss's (2015) study of “cli-fi”; and Morton's (2015) essay on spatial history in McCarthy's border trilogy—but they prove the rule.
7. A rich literature on race and space has recently emerged in critical human geography (see, e.g., Thomas 2011; Tyner 2013). With exceptions, this research is not literary (and lies beyond our scope to review).
8. Ismail (2005) proposed, in polemical, literary-theoretical form, that we should treat places, or geographical objects, as problems. See also Mariátegui ([1928] 2007).
9. Árbenz (1913–1971), President of Guatemala from 1951 to 1954, was deposed by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) coup of 1954. Overthrowing Árbenz set Guatemala on the path of military tyranny, war, and the violent disorganization of civil society, a path from which Guatemala has yet to depart. The CIA's official history of their coup deserves careful reading (Cullather 1999).

10. Guatemalan revolution (*Revolución de Guatemala*) is becoming a preferred term for the political events of 1944 to 1954. In our view, however, neither Arévalo nor Árbenz (nor Asturias) were revolutionaries. They were left-liberal elites who sought changes in backward, conservative social settings that made even basic reforms (most important, of land) difficult, even radical objectives. Prieto (1993) wrote:

To suggest that Asturias merely sided with the newly elected president [Arévalo, later Árbenz] would be a gross understatement, for the policies of one are in many ways inextricable from the prose of the other. The distinction between them was methodological rather than ideological. . . . While Arévalo set out to transform Guatemala physically by giving land to the peasants, Asturias strove to transfigure the soul and conscience of his people. That is why in *Hombres de maíz* he denounces the exploitation of the soil and the plight of the Indian and, for the first time in his fiction, offers a remedy and shows his countrymen the path to recovery (128).

- We agree with Prieto's general argument, yet not this formulation (e.g., we would not characterize *Hombres de maíz* as a guide to "recovery"; Lund and Wainwright 2008).
11. We discuss *Hombres de maíz* elsewhere (Lund and Wainwright 2008).
12. One finds a statement along these lines by most of Asturias's most prominent critics (e.g., Martin [1992] 1996; Barnabé 2000; Morales 2000; Prieto 2000).
13. The racialization of the nation form continues to be at the center of political ontologies as Latin America has shifted left over the past decade. Hugo Chávez consistently invoked the racial heterogeneity of the Venezuelan *pueblo* as part of his nationalist-populist platform (and saw his executive legitimacy questioned on similar grounds) and the land reform project advanced by the administration of Evo Morales takes racial justice as a stabilizing centerpiece of its nationalist rhetoric.
14. For Asturias's Paris writings between 1924 and 1933, see Asturias ([1924–1933] 1988). On Asturias's assumption of Mayanism in Paris, see Cheymol (1987), Henighan (1999), and Dewees (2010).
15. Asturias: "*el surrealism representó . . . el encontrar en nosotros mismos no lo europeo, sino lo indígena y lo americano . . . Nosotros el inconsciente lo teníamos bien guardadito bajo toda la conciencia occidental. Pero cuando cada uno empezó a registrarse por dentro se encontró con su inconsciente indígena*" (interview in López Álvarez 1974, 80). Tarica's (2008) *The Inner Life of Mestizo Nationalism* offers an enlightening account of this phenomenon, wherein nonindigenous writers discover what Asturias called their "unconscious Indian." These discoveries were unearthed by a range of prominent midcentury authors, including Bolivia's Jesús Lara, Peru's José María Arguedas, and Mexico's Rosario Castellanos. Like Asturias, Castellanos's area of interest is the Maya world, and her story of nationalist epiphany is strikingly similar to that of Asturias: Both experienced the transformation in Europe and cited the discovery of Maya artifacts in world-historical museums—Asturias in the Maya Room of the British Museum in London, Castellanos at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris—as watershed moments in their self-discovery.
16. "He aquí un maya. ¡Y tú que dices que los mayas no existen!" (Asturias interview with López Álvarez 1974, 75).
17. "[A] confirmarle que *procedía de Guatemala* el hombre se puso entusiasmadísimo" (Asturias interview with López Álvarez 1974, 75).
18. The social and racial category *ladino* in Guatemala and southern Mexico is complex, but means, essentially, not indigenous. See Fischer and Brown (1996) and Hale (2006); on its genomic expression, see Söchtig et al. (2015).
19. Asturias's thesis crystallizes the biopolitics of liberal progressivism specific to Mesoamerica (dating, roughly, to the 1870s).
20. On the general idea of discourse that is guiding our thinking here, see Said (1978); on the specific discourse called Mayanism, see Wainwright (2008, Chapter 3); on Asturias's literary Mayanism, see Lund and Wainwright (2008) and Dewees (2010).
21. In his Nobel banquet address, when Asturias said that the traumas of conquest "*no son antecedentes para una literatura de componenda y por eso nuestras novelas aparecen a los ojos de los europeos como ilógicas o desorbitadas; y que n[on] es el tremendismo por el tremendismo . . . [sino] que fue tremendo lo que nos pasó*" (1967), he placed his work squarely within the literary tendency that his colleague Alejo Carpentier called "the marvelous real" in the same year that *Hombres de maíz* was published. See his "Prólogo" to *El reino de este mundo* ([1949] 2004). For the classic statement on the relations between magic realism and postcolonial discourse, see Slemmon (1988). For a more current problematization of magic realism thought in broadly postcolonial terms, see Reber (2015).
22. Anti-imperialism is later added to this mix. On Asturias's anti-imperialist turn, see Martin ([1992] 1996).

23. Washbourne's (2011) excellent introduction summarizes the literature. For context, see Arias (2007) and the texts cited in note 21.
24. The return became literal when Asturias returned to Guatemala, a move taken on the advice of Paul Valéry (whose letter endorsing Asturias's writing is typically positioned as a prologue to *Leyendas*) to, in the words of Sáenz (1974), "tomar contacto otra vez con esa tierra nutritiva de la que él será el vocero" (56).
25. In his introduction to the Cátedra edition of *Leyendas*, Lanoë noted that Asturias sent a copy of *Leyendas* to "his friend Alfonso Reyes" (Asturias [1930] 1995, 12).
26. See Fischer and Brown (1996), Nelson (1999), Grandin (2000), and Hale (2006).
27. Morales (2000) read Asturias otherwise, as a literature of integration.
28. Translation by Washbourne (Asturias [1930] 2011, 45).
29. A spatial reading of "Guatemala" is further suggested by the fact that—along with the following story, "*Ahora que me acuerdo*" ("Now that I recall"), a surrealist iteration of a Maya creation myth—this "legend" is set apart from the five that follow by a header calling them *Noticias* (news or notice), suggesting that the purpose of Guatemala is to define the landscape, set the scene, and frame the nation.
30. See Morales (2000, 119).
31. Martín: "*Santiago, santo patrono del país imperial, es también el patrono de la antigua ciudad de Guatemala*" (312, note 42). Known in Spain as the vanquisher of Moors, in Guatemala, Santiago is associated with victory over the Indians.
32. Asturias and his generation were involved in the psychologization of a long-standing historicist thesis on the function of pre-Columbian civilizations within America's dominant narrative of progress. Sarmiento's influence, although unoriginal, looms large; in an 1865 speech before the Rhode Island Historical Society, he would call these same ruins evidence of a South American "civilization which has had its dark age but not its *renaissance*. America has her petrified cities, the abode of a great people who flourished in them, pyramids which rival those of Egypt, temples and palaces which now fertilize the trunks of trees centuries old" ([1865] 1866, 24–25).
33. On the trope of the ghostly, present-disappearing Indian, see Cameron (2008).
34. The ideology of contemporary pan-Mayanism, although potentially nationalist, is not coterminous with the nation-state; it is a movement premised against historical-geographical injustices, many associated with the nation-states of Guatemala, Mexico, and Belize.
35. In the English version of his critical edition of *Hombres de maíz* (Asturias [1949] 1993), Martín argued for the resonance of *Hombres de maíz* within Menchú's political struggle and her Nobel address. Suggestively, her Nobel address is included as an epilogue within the volume, whereas Asturias's is not.
36. His grave is in division 10 along *Chemin du Coq*. For another reading, see Dewees (2010).
37. A recording of Asturias reading his poem "Tekun Umam" can be heard on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Llh8RVQdQhk>.
38. 11 December 2015.
39. On the Menchú controversy, see Arias (2001) and Grandin (2011).

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JOEL WAINWRIGHT is an Associate Professor in the Department of Geography at The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH 43210. E-mail: [wainwright.11@osu.edu](mailto:wainwright.11@osu.edu). He studies political economy, social theory, and environmental change.

JOSHUA LUND works in the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures at the University of Notre Dame, South Bend, IN 46556. E-mail: [jlund2@nd.edu](mailto:jlund2@nd.edu). His research interests include literature, film, and cultural politics, in the Latin American context and beyond.