

UC Santa Barbara

rEvista: A Multi-media, Multi-genre e-Journal for Social Justice

Title

Classic Mayan Mestizaje

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7943z6vh>

Journal

rEvista: A Multi-media, Multi-genre e-Journal for Social Justice, 5(2)

Author

Aldana, Gerardo

Publication Date

2017

Copyright Information

Copyright 2017 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Classic Mayan Mestizaje¹

Gerardo Aldana, University of California, Santa Barbara

Since their inception in the mid-twentieth century, Chican@ Movements have made various appeals to Mesoamerican cultural production. Gloria Anzaldúa and Alurista, for example, each make frequent references to Aztlan (the mythic homeland of the Mexica/Aztecs) as a source of Chicana/o indigenous identity (Anzaldúa 1989; Alurista 1989). In a Chicana critique of the Chicano Movement, Ana Castillo invoked the Mexica deity Coyolxauqui to unpack the complexity of Chicana/o identities from a feminist perspective (1994). Chican@ mural art is also filled with iconography derived from Mesoamerican art, notably the “remembered” Coyolxauhqui within “MaestraPeace” on the Women’s Building in San Francisco and the Quetzalcoatl and Coatlicue imagery in Chicano Park in San Diego.² For the most part, however, these and many other Chican@ appeals to Mesoamerica have concentrated on artistic and literary representation. Quite notably, these efforts have often made a concerted effort to avoid engaging anthropological and/or archaeological scholarship on ancient Mesoamerica.

Indeed, anthro- and archaeo-logies have in many cases maintained something of a taboo status within

Chican@ communities. Without going into extensive study here, the source of the taboo partially resides in the recognized ethical violations at times inherent to anthropo- and archaeological inquiries. Examples of these violations are manifold, but Linda Tuhiwai Smith gives an excellent review of the issue in *Decolonizing Methodologies* from a Maori perspective (1999).³ This essay does not intend to address explicitly the nature or extent of the taboo; rather, it aims to present an alternative access to indigenous investigation that has only recently become available. In particular, I suggest that Classic Mayan hieroglyphic inscriptions allow Chican@ scholarship to engage indigenous history in a new forum.

Moreover, in this essay, I demonstrate that a critical aspect of Chican@ epistemologies finds precedent in the case of a particular Classic Mayan dynasty’s political self-fashioning. Within the inscriptions of Copán (Honduras), we confront textual and iconographic evidence for a Precontact *mestizo* identity. In order to make this case, I first review the political context providing the source of this *mestizaje* and then focus on its explicit representation by the fifteenth member

¹ This article originally appeared in translation as “El Chicanismo del Imperio Antiguo Maya” in *NERTER: Revista dedicada a la literatura, el arte y el conocimiento*, no. 5-6, 2003, pp. 43-49. I wrote it in English, and the journal editors translated it, which in part led to the misleading title suggesting there was an empire within Classic Maya civilization. It has

been lightly revised and updated for this venue.

² See Guisela Latorre’s *Walls of Empowerment: Chicana/o Indigenist Murals of California*. University of Texas Press, 2008.

³ Malinowski 1967, Stevenson 1970, Tierney 2000 do not even begin to scrape the surface, but do demonstrate the basis of the protest.



Figure 1: View from the Pyramid of the Moon at Teotihuacan, looking south along the Miccaotli ('Street of the Dead'). The structures around the plaza in the foreground are all constructed with the distinctive talud-tablero façade. (Photo by the author)

of the Copán royal dynasty. After considering these representations, this essay moves on to discuss the ramifications of identifying parallels to Chican@ ideologies within indigenous histories, advocating a new discourse between anthropo- and archaeo-logies and ethnic and indigenous studies as an enterprise of critical importance to the responsible development of each.

Ancient Copán

The Classic Mayan dynasty of Copán was founded circa AD 400 by a foreigner

who took the name Yax K'uk' Mo'.⁴ Most of what we know about this *k'uhulajaw*⁵ comes from texts commissioned long after his reign, but archaeologists also have recovered the location of his burial chamber (Fash 1991:93-96). Of particular note here is that Yax K'uk' Mo' brought his foreign material culture with him for representation at Copán. Most conspicuously, the structure in which his body would be laid to rest was built in a style unlike any other at Copán. For this building, he commissioned a talud-tablero façade

⁴ The transcription of Mesoamerican languages into the Latin alphabet has led to a few notable idiosyncrasies. The letter 'x' represents the sound 'sh.' The apostrophe represents a 'glottal stop,' making the consonant or vowel 'pop.'

⁵ The Mayan word *ajaw* is often translated as 'ruler' or 'king' and the prefix *k'uhul-* as 'divine' or 'holy' (e.g. Sharer 2006; Coe 1999). For a more nuanced treatment, see Aldana (2014),

which counters traditional scholarship's implicit reliance on Christianity for its interpretation of religiosity and instead moves toward an indigenous interpretation. Therein, I read *k'uhulajaw* as 'one who speaks with authority among the *k'uh*,' where *k'uh* refers to those entities often translated colloquially as 'gods' but might be better represented as 'forms of power.'

tying him directly to the great Central Mexican city, Teotihuacan (Fash 1998:227). (See Figure 1)

Teotihuacan was that great first metropolis in Mesoamerica, growing in earnest by the first century AD, and peaking between AD 300 and 600. Teotihuacan was in ruins by the time of

Classic Teotihuacano forms (Fash 1998:227). In monument and ceramic possession, therefore, Yax K'uk' Mo' was demonstrating his affiliation with this Mesoamerican metropolis in his own cultural and political representation to the people of Copan.

The entry of Teotihuacanos and their

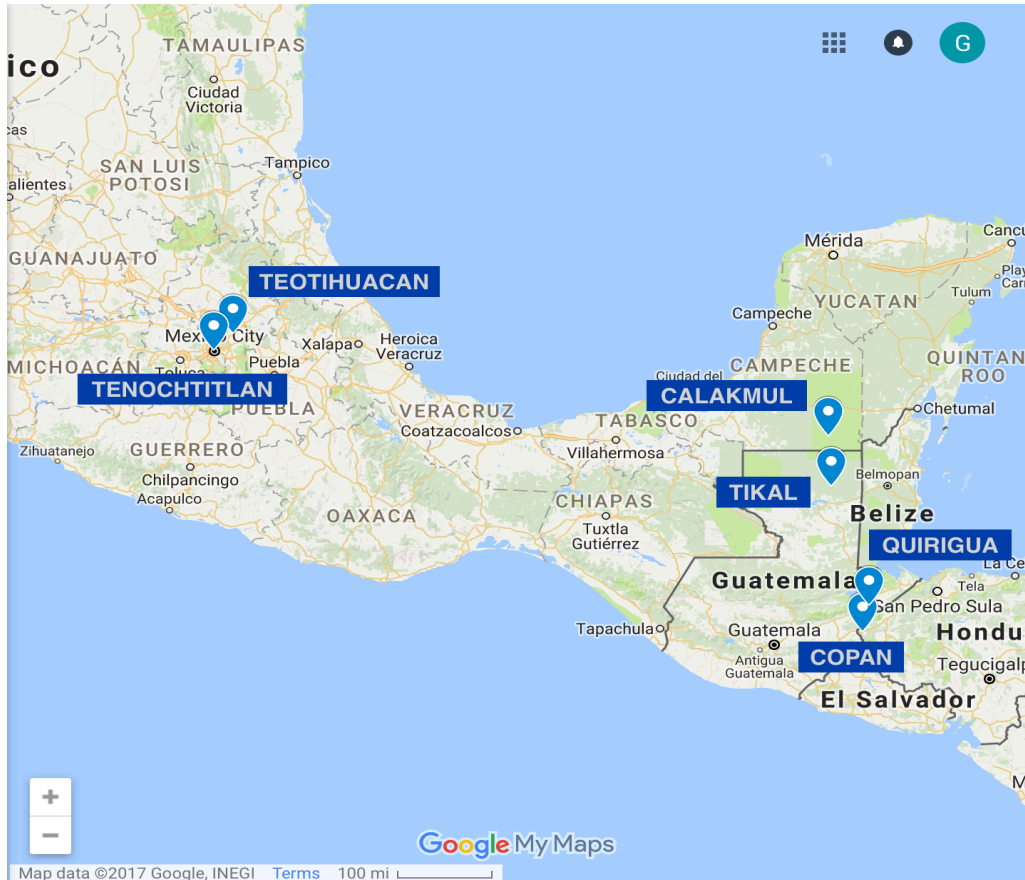


Figure 2: Google map of Mesoamerican region with cities referred to in the text highlighted.

the Aztecs; but only 20 miles from Tenochtitlan, it was well known to Aztec emperors and Motecuhzoma Xocoyotzin was said to visit the site regularly.

Further corroborating the link of Yax K'uk' Mo', the Copan k'uhulajaw, to Teotihuacan, the University of Pennsylvania archaeologist Robert Sharer recovered offertory vessels from Yax K'uk' Mo's burial chamber that took

material culture into Mayan lands and politics beyond Copan has been recognized for some time. The Preclassic archaeological record at Kaminaljuyu (Guatemala) and the Early Classic record at Tikal (Guatemala) that first revealed these interregional connections to archaeologists have been treated since the first half of the twentieth century (Kidder et al 1946; Proskouriakoff 1993; Coggins 1993). (See

Figure 2) What has come to light recently are some of the later Classic Mayan treatments of these much earlier events. Principally, two developments have transformed our understanding of Late Classic Mayan politics at Copán. First, in 2000 David Stuart offered a complete translation of the text of Copán “Altar Q”. This cubical altar sits in front of Structure 10L-16 and was commissioned by the sixteenth member of the dynasty to commemorate his own accession to the throne. (See Figures 3 & 4) Second, excavations of Structure 10L-26 at Copán revealed a text unique in the Mesoamerican archaeological record, which also made appeal to Teotihuacan. My argument in this essay

is that an examination of these recent developments demonstrates a resonance between Classic Maya and Chicana/o consciousnesses.⁶

Critical within Stuart’s translation of the Altar Q text was the recognition of a referenced place. The hieroglyphic text notes that Yax K’uk’ Mo’ first became a prince at a foreign location (Stuart 2000). He then left that place, journeying for 152 days, before arriving at Copán. The place from which he came thereafter provided his legitimacy for rulership, telling us two things. For one, we have an historical statement that Yax K’uk’ Mo’ was a foreigner, thus corroborating the inference that



Figure 3: front face of Altar Q, in front of Copan Structure 10L-16. K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo' (center left) hands the scepter of rulership to the 16th member of the dynasty, Yax Pahsaj Chan Yopaat (center right). Photo by the author.

⁶ Here I follow Chela Sandoval’s development of consciousnesses as useful frames of studying communities (2000).

William Fash and Sharer had made based on architecture and ritual artifacts (Fash 1991). Second, we recognize that the author of the text—centuries after Yax K'uk' Mo's reign—was still cashing in on the currency of the dynastic founder's foreignness. That is, the Early Classic connection of the Mayan dynasty to Teotihuacan was politically relevant even in the Late Classic period (a span of almost 500 years). Interestingly, this relevance was not of consistent value throughout the interim period. After the initial entry of Teotihuacanos into the Maya region, Teotihuacano architecture, iconography, and artifacts fall out of the scene throughout Mayan lands. Only later—after the fall of Teotihuacan (ca. AD 600)—is there a renewed interest in the foreign culture within Mayan royal legitimization schemes (Stuart 2000; Aldana and Fash 2001).

This renewed interest in Teotihuacan provides the focus of our study at Copán. In particular, the fifteenth k'uhulajaw of Copán commissioned a monument testifying to the inter-regional connection (Fash 1991:80). This work came on the heels of his predecessor's short reign, during which the fourteenth k'uhulajaw found himself in a unique position. His predecessor, the thirteenth k'uhulajaw, the famed Waxaklajun Ubaj K'awiil, had been captured by the army of nearby Quirigua (Guatemala) and was killed (Fash 1991:139-151; Stuart 2000; Schele and Freidel 1990). If ever there were a need for dynastic legitimation, this was it.

The fourteenth k'uhulajaw's response to his predecessor's death was two-fold. First, he commissioned a *Popol Naj* ('Council House') in an effort to consolidate noble power (Fash et al



	5 KABAN	15 YAXK'IN
	u-cham-ma k'awiil	wi-te-NAH
	AJAW K'UK' MO'-o	8 AJAW
	18 YAXK'IN	ta-li
	wi-te-NAH	K'INICH YAX K'UK' MO'
	12 K'IN, 7 WINIK-hi	i-u-ti

1992). Art historian Barbara Fash has

	5 BEN	11 MUWAAN
	hi-li	o-ke
	K'AWIIL	OCH-K'IN-ni
	KALOMTE'	yi-ta
	HUL-li-ja	OX-wi-ti-ki

Figure 4: a) top of Altar Q; b) first two columns of text on Altar Q; c) second pair of columns on Altar Q. (Photo, drawings and transcription by the author.)

detailed the ways in which this construction served to maintain the

position of the dynasty among the local nobility in a time of crisis (Fash et al 1992). Ruler 14's second response was to erect a tremendous monument to the glory of the dynasty. This took the form of the widely-recognized Temple of the Hieroglyphic Stairway—less illustriously known in the archaeological literature as Structure 10L-26. The faces of each of the steps on the front of this building (over 60 of them) were carved with a single narrative hieroglyphic text (hence the name). The overall theme, not surprisingly, is that of the history of the Copán dynasty. Although it has not yet been completely translated, events in the lives of nearly all 15 Copán kings are noted in the inscription (Stuart 2000; Fash 1991:79-81). But what concerns us here is not the text of the stairway.

Vertically spaced along the steps were Copán royal figures dressed in royal attire. Their regalia belied a consistent theme: prowess in war. All figural representations on the Stairway were outfitted in warrior attire, and in every case, this warrior regalia incorporated Teotihuacano-derived imagery (Schele and Freidel 1990:319; Fash 1998:254). Here, the Copánecs were tapping into the prolific Late Classic association of Teotihuacano imagery to military prowess. With these sculptures, Ruler 15 was reminding his populace that, although his predecessor had been defeated, the kingdom of Copán historically held great martial power; perhaps Ruler 15 hoped to allay the fears of the commoners as well as

ensure the fealty of the nobility. Each demographic group received its own version of the message (cf. Aldana 2007:131).

For the properly initiated, yet another appeal had been made to Teotihuacano culture. Although the text along the Hieroglyphic Stairway was long enough to impress anyone, there was an even more intriguing inscription housed within the temple at the top of the structure. Herein do we confront the intellectual appeal to Teotihuacano culture. Around an inner doorway of the temple, one confronts an inscribed text. Per convention, the text was written in paired columns; defying convention, however, a literate Mayan would not have been able to read the text. Although one column very ornately recorded the dedication of the structure using full-figure hieroglyphs,⁷ the other column was actually *not* hieroglyphic writing. (See Figure 5) Instead, the sculptor had taken the hieroglyphs of the legible text, and “translated” the imagery into Teotihuacano iconography. Stuart has

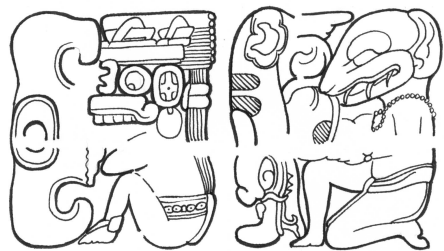


Figure 5: goggle-eyes, stylized nose and Teotihuacan headdress on the left-hand figure; on

⁷ Mayan hieroglyphic writing is made up of images, most of which do not correspond iconographically to the sounds they represent—i.e. it is not a type of Rebus writing in which the picture of an eye can stand for the vowel sound ‘I.’ The images, however, can be

simplified, including only diagnostic elements, or they can be full human or zoomorphic figures representing a sound or word depending on the artist/scribe’s purpose. “Full-figure” hieroglyphs refer to the latter, more ornate forms of writing (cf. Coe 1999).

the right are the Mayan full-figure glyphs for u-B'AAH. (Illustration by the author.)

shown that this is actually not Teotihuacano writing, but might be better understood as a Teotihuacano “font” for Mayan writing (2000). The take home point for us is that the appeal to Teotihuacan was not only military—as on the statues positioned along the stairway—but intellectual as well.

The latter point should not surprise one familiar with Classic Mayan hieroglyphics. Explicit depictions of the early-arriving Teotihuacanos to Tikal and Copán, for example, represent them as warriors (Schele and Freidel 1990:162, Fig. 4:26). But the hieroglyphic texts at each site reveal an intellectual component to their arrival. At both Copán and Tikal, the establishment of Teotihuacano warrior hegemony brings with it the introduction of a new title: *kalomte*. I have argued elsewhere that this title betrays a different conceptualization of government from that “traditionally” Mayan (Aldana 2001; Aldana and Fash 2002; Aldana 2006). Rather than focus attention on a single polity, the *kalomte* title appears to unite several (relatively) equal polities in one hegemonic structure. Such a structure directly contradicted the imperial structure maintained by their enemy: the Peten city known as Calakmul (cf. Martin and Grube 2000:104; Aldana 2006).

Through the *kalomte* title and Teotihuacano imagery, the Maya of Copán were demonstrating a dual cultural subscription. The commoners were undoubtedly culturally and biologically Maya, as were the vast majority of the nobility. Ideologically, however, the legitimacy of the state rested on a split foundation: one foot

rested upon the military and intellectual potency of Teotihuacan, the other upon the dynastic structure that defined Mayan royal politics. If they were to give up the Teotihuacano aspects, the Copanecos would enter into the model of hegemony maintained by Calakmul, and so enter the regional hierarchy set by them.

Herein do we encounter the above-promised reference to Classic Mayan mestizaje. Namely, the simultaneous appeal to both Teotihuacano and Mayan cultures as a means of political and ideological identification resonates with modern Chican@ maintenance of a culturally-multiple personality. In Chican@ nationalist literature and art (as in Mexican post-revolutionary war cultural production), references to the indigenous are often heavily romanticized appeals to a “lost” culture. Affiliation with European-derivative cultures, however, are perceived as necessary for survival (Sandoval 2000) and so form a vital component of Chican@ identities. Similarly, by the Late Classic, the great city of Teotihuacan had fallen, and so could only be accessed through local histories and teachings. Like the Toltecs for the Aztecs, Teotihuacanos were envisioned by the Maya as militarily mighty yet intellectually gifted. Also resonating with Chican@ appeals to indigenous culture in a stance against “majority American” culture, the Copánecos incorporated Teotihuacano culture as a means to distinguish and position themselves against the Maya of Calakmul.

Notice that in each of these cases, we are not considering a process of “syncretism” or assimilation, but an active maintenance of conflicting entities within a single body. To a

significant degree, such a cultural identity makes sense within an indigenous Precontact world-view. For one, we might appeal to the Postclassic Mexica self-construction as “tolteca-chichimeca”; they did not subsume their identity into one lifestyle or the other only. Second, Mesoamerican deities were nothing like Christian or European gods. As Susan Gillespie and Joyce Marcus have recently argued, Mesoamerican deities were not unique in identity over time or space. The “same” deity, Tezcatlipoca, for example, was represented differently by different Nahuatl communities at the time of contact with cross-Atlantic cultures (Gillespie and Marcus 1998). Likewise, we see in the “Histoire du Mechique” that the “god” Tezcatlipoca was able to exist as his companion spirit (or *nagual*), without giving up his identity or will (de Jonghe 1966). Similarly, the Sun is given multiple identities in Aztec “religion” without causing ideological chaos.

I would like to suggest that in some sense, Mesoamerican deities were like Gestaltian images. That is, for a given ceremony, or in a given mythological account (mythistory), one visage of a deity was perceived/presented. In some other scenario, another visage might be given primacy. Different “gods” qua different visages then constituted a single Mesoamerican deity, with the representation dictated by the ritual perspective introduced—not unlike modern conceptualizations of ‘intersectionality.’ The deity itself, therefore, was both the individual visage perceived as well as the totality of

all visages comprising it. Analogously, the Gestaltian image is neither one nor the other recognizable construct, but the *composite* image. Chican@s may be viewed as two different people depending on the focus of the observer—either expatriot Mexicans (or Central Americans), or marginalized Americans. Chican@s themselves, however, like Classic Copán royalty, require that they exist as the *composite* image... and more.⁸

The point of this essay has not been to philosophically derive a Mesoamerican/Chican@ theology. Here, I have only sketched the outline of a new font of research within Chican@ culture. Namely, I here appeal to a unique record accessible to modern scholarship: through Classic Maya hieroglyphic inscriptions, we are able to access indigenous arguments as they were constructed for indigenous audiences. Such a perspective provides a rich resource for understanding the indigenous components of Chican@ identities/consciousnesses. Rather than resorting only to reconstructions of Mesoamerican ideologies by anthropological and archaeologies, Chican@s may now access Mesoamerican thought through recorded history.

I propose further that part of the problem that anthropological and archaeological have had in reconstructing indigenous cultures stems from the necessary translation between reductionistic, scientific ideologies and the complexly composite phenomena they attempt to address within Mesoamerican cultures. The fact that a

⁸ I would now, 15 years after writing this essay, include a section on Chicana Feminism and Intersectionality to more fully elaborate this

point. I will, however, now save that for a later project.

reductionistic, scientific ideology resides within one of a Chican@s consciousnesses presents an intriguing possibility for research at the confluence of Ethnic and Indigenous Studies and Anthro- and Archaeologies. Indeed, it may well be that significant advances in either discipline will only come from collaboration between them. In this way, Chican@s will gain access to a tremendous well of information about Mesoamerica while archaeologists will obtain access to translators for some of the more vexing “epiphenomenal” problems they confront.

Through the texts of Late Classic Copán, I have attempted here to present an example of what a bridge between these disciplines might look like and to suggest some of the potential that lay within. I propose that research in this vein not only augments literary and artistic Chican@ appeals to our indigenous past, but that it also will aid in the clarification of Chican@ epistemologies and political consciousnesses.

Bibliography

Aldana, Gerardo.

2001 *Oracular Science: Uncertainty in the History of Maya Astronomy*. Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University.

2002 “Solar Stelae and a Venus Window: Science and Royal Personality in Late Classic Copán.” *Archaeoastronomy*, no. 27 (JHA, xxxiii (2002)), pp. S30-S50

2006 “Lunar Alliances: Shedding Light on Conflicting Classic Maya Theories of Hegemony,” in *Proceedings of the Oxford VII*

Conference on Archaeo-astronomy and Astronomy in Culture. Arizona State Museum, Tucson, pp. 237- 258.
2014 “An Oracular Hypothesis: the Dresden Codex Venus Table and the cultural translation of science,” in *Archaeoastronomy and the Maya*. G. Aldana and E. Barnhart, eds. Oxbow Books, Oxford, pp. 77-96.

Aldana, Gerardo and William L. Fash.

2001 “Art, Astronomy and Statecraft of Late Classic Copán.” Paper presented at *Science, Art, and Religion in the Maya World*, a conference at Copán, Honduras on 14 July.

Alurista.

1989 “Myth, Identity and Struggle in Three Chicano Novels: Aztlán... Anaya, Mendez, and Acosta” in *Aztlán: Essays on the Chicano Homeland*. Rudolfo A. Anaya and Francisco A. Lomelí, editors. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque.

Anzaldúa, Gloria.

1989 “The Homeland, Aztlán/El Otro Mexico” in *Aztlán: Essays on the Chicano Homeland*. Rudolfo A. Anaya and Francisco A. Lomelí, editors. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque.

Castillo, Ana.

1995 *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanisma*. Penguin Books, New York.

Coe, Michael.

1999 *Breaking the Maya Code*. Thames & Hudson, New York.

Coggins, Clemency C.

- 1993 "The Age of Teotihuacan and Its Mission Abroad" in *Teotihuacan: Art from the City of the Gods*. Thames & Hudson, New York, pp. 140-155.
- De Jonghe, Edouard.
1966 "Histoire du Méchique: Manuscrit Français Inédit du XVI^e Siècle" in *Journal de la Société des Americanistes*, tome II, 1905, Johnson Reprint Corp., New York, pp. 1-41.
- Fash, Barbara, William Fash, Sheree Lane, Rudy Larios, Linda Schele, Jeffrey Stomper, and David Stuart.
1992 "Investigations of a Classic Maya Council House at Copan, Honduras" in *Journal of Field Archaeology*, vol. 19, pp. 419-442.
- Fash, William L.
1991 *Scribes, Warriors, and Kings: The City of Copán and the Ancient Maya*. Thames & Hudson, New York.
1998 "Dynastic Architectural Programs: Intention and Design in Classic Maya Buildings at Copan and Other Sites" in *Function and Meaning in Classic Maya Architecture*. Dumbarton Oaks, pp. 223-270.
- Gillespie, Susan D. and Rosemary A. Joyce.
1998 "Deity relationships in Mesoamerican cosmologies: the case of the Maya God L" in *Ancient Mesoamerica*, v. 9, no. 2, pp. 279-296.
- Kidder, Alfred V., Jesse D. Jennings, and Edwin M. Shook.
1946 *Examinations at Kaminaljuyu, Guatemala*. Carnegie Institution of Washington, no. 561, Washington, D.C.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw.
1967 *A diary in the strict sense of the term*. Harcourt, Brace and World, New York.
- Martin, Simon & Nikolai Grube.
2000 *Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens: Deciphering the dynasties of the Ancient Maya*. Thames & Hudson, New York.
- Proskouriakoff, Tatiana.
1993 *Maya History*. University of Texas Press, Austin.
- Sandoval, Chela.
2000 *Methodology of the Oppressed*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Sharer, Robert.
2006. *The Ancient Maya*. Stanford University Press, Stanford.
- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai.
1999 *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Zed Books, New York.
- Stevenson, Matilda Coxé.
1970 *The Zuñi Indians*; extract from the twenty-third annual report of the Bureau of American Ethnology. Washington, Govt. Print. Off., 1905. Johnson Reprint Corp., New York.
- Stuart, David.
2000 "The Arrival of Strangers: Teotihuacan and Tollan in Classic Maya History" in *Mesoamerica's classic heritage: from Teotihuacan to the Aztecs*. Edited by David Carrasco, Lindsay Jones, and Scott Sessions. University Press of Colorado, Boulder.

Tierney, Patrick.

2001 *Darkness in El Dorado: How Scientists and Journalists Devastated the Amazon*. W. W. Norton & Company, New York.