

INDIGENOUS DECOLONIZATION OF WESTERN NOTIONS OF TIME AND HISTORY THROUGH LITERARY AND VISUAL ARTS

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Abstract

Since the early colonial period, indigenous peoples around the globe have been framed as being anchored in the past. The manner in which this was accomplished varied in different locations, yet it was all done with the same intent: to leave them outside of history. Placing indigenous peoples in the past meant assigning lesser value to their forms of life and thought than to those of the West, which allowed for all manner of injustices to be inflicted upon them. In response to this strategic misrepresentation, indigenous peoples reached for their own notions of history and time in an effort to validate an alternate perspective that could discredit the supremacy of dominant Western ideas. Thus, history and time become a highly contested terrain.

In this essay, we explore some of the strategies used by two indigenous communities to decolonize Western representations of these groups. One of the case studies looks at how, in his 1958 novel *Things Fall Apart*, Igbo Anglophone writer Chinua Achebe deploys narrative time to challenge the Hegelian notion of sub-Saharan Africa as being ‘outside of history.’ On the other side of the globe, contemporary Maya artists use their ancestral philosophies of time that included the coexistence of multiple temporalities, as a way to challenge the universality of Western ideas of progressive time, and thus of Western constructions of history. Through the literary and the visual, the Igbo and the Maya decolonize normative representations of time in their efforts to reinscribe their place in global history.

1 Introduction

Various forms of injustice and oppression against indigenous peoples throughout modern history have been intrinsically connected to Western modernity and its conceptualization of time as linear, progressive, and universal. Yet the (post)Enlightenment era has made strikingly apparent that time is not only an aspect of nature, but a social construct, too. The Enlightenment philosophy of the eighteenth century shaped a particular notion of modernity that caused a radical split between the past (‘tradition’) and the present/future (‘modern’).¹ Not only was ‘the present/future’ radically distinguished from ‘the past,’ but the relationship between the two was conceptualized in terms of clear succession. This engendered the dichotomy between the past as static and traditional, and the present/future as modern, with change and progress implied in its rupture with tradition.² In this arrangement, breaking with the past and heading toward the future became not only a dominant way of perceiving time in Western culture, but was also perceived as a sign of cultural and social progress.³ Colonizing campaigns, such as those that took place in the Americas in the sixteenth century and sub-Saharan Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, were motivated by the idea that “certain pasts

and certain presents are [...] better than others.”⁴ This presumed to justify the application of force in order to alter indigenous societies (defined as primitive and static), such that these societies were subjected to different forms of violence that threatened their ways of life in addition to their lives, all in the name of ‘enlightenment’ and ‘progress.’

Indigenous peoples responded to this strategic misrepresentation by reaching toward their own notions of history and time in an effort to debunk Western ideas and assert a separately valid perspective of their own reality. Thus, history and time become a highly contested terrain. In this essay, we ask what political valences of time emerge in indigenous visual and literary discourses, and how these facilitate decolonial representations of indigenous history and culture. To this aim, we will explore some of the strategies used by two indigenous communities to decolonize Western representations of these groups. The first case study is Igbo writer Chinua Achebe’s 1958 *Things Fall Apart*, which renowned Kenyan literary critic Simon Gikandi claimed “came to define who we (Africans) were, where we were, and as Achebe himself would say, where the rain began to beat us.”⁵ Gikandi’s remark unambiguously suggests that Achebe’s novel resonated not only with the wider Igbo community, but also with other African communities that shared a history of colonization. The focus of that analysis will be on how Achebe manipulates narrative time to challenge the Hegelian notion of sub-Saharan Africa as being ‘outside of history.’ The second case study takes us to the other side of the globe where contemporary Maya artists use ancestral philosophies of time where the past, present, and future intertwine as a way to challenge the universality of Western ideas of progressive time, and thus of Western constructions of history. Although these are two very different groups of people, we will show here that, by inserting their own ways of understanding and practicing time into literary and visual works, the Igbo and the Maya decolonize normative representations of time.

The pairing of these two case studies emerged from a multi-year dialogue between the authors about issues of indigeneity.⁶ One recurrent theme in both of our research was the idea that, for these indigenous groups, time consists of multiple temporalities where the present includes the past (in the form of ancestral knowledge) such that past and present are both also part of the future — a practice in direct contrast to Western ideas of progressive time. This essay is an attempt to generate a conversation across multiple indigenous societies that explores commonalities in these groups’ resistance against the injustices of modernity. In this, we do not aim to assert that these particular

groups nor all indigenous people use the same strategies to decolonize their misrepresentations. Instead, we demonstrate that the primary similarity is the groups' efforts to insert their own voices into history, and that these literary or visual artists achieve their goals through diverse strategies of breaking away from the hold of Western historicism.⁷

One line of distinction between the Maya and the Igbo, for example, is the aspect of time that artists chose to address, which directly reflects the different preoccupation in the two communities. Writing his novel at the time of strong cultural nationalism in Nigeria — nationalism that entailed a deconstruction and revision of the colonial historiographic archive on Nigeria's indigenous peoples — Achebe deemed it crucial to address the function of time in narrative representation. Taking a closer look at the use of time in ethnographic writing held the potential to underscore the constructedness of ethnographic representations of the Igbo and thus challenge the claim of those representations to truthfulness. In comparison, the contemporary increase in indigenous political movements has encouraged the participation of visual artists, such as Abraham Gómez and Marco Girón from the Maya region of Mexico. In their work, they explore ideas of indigenous identity at a time of globalization, wherein their rich ancestral history forms a critical part of their present. By juxtaposing images from historical archives alongside their own, they demonstrate that there are many ways of living time: in particular, ways that do not leave them outside of history.

2 Narrative Time and Indigenous History in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958)

British colonial ethnography played a major role in defining Africa's indigenous peoples' identities, cultures, and histories, and as such was "of use, directly or indirectly, to the colonial administration."⁸ Anthropologist Maxwell Owusu claims that "[e]thnographic research conventionally has had as its main objective the descriptive account of native cultures," seeking to provide a "Western European audience [with] new and basic or additional and reliable information about non-Western — the so-called 'primitive,' 'barbarous,' 'savage,' or 'backward' peoples [...]."⁹ Depicting Africa as, in Friedrich Hegel's words, "no historical part of the world" and a place with "no movement or development to exhibit" was not, however, a neutral matter.¹⁰ It had profound political implications in that it was through defining African societies as 'nonhistorical,' in the sense of 'nonmodern,' that British colonial forces justified their presence on the

African continent. The British presented themselves as bearers of civilization who, by preaching good governance, Western literature and philosophy, Christianity, and market economy, would lead ‘the natives’ along the path to progress.

Just as the British colonizing process cannot be disentangled from the ethnographic practice of defining ‘the native,’ so the African peoples’ struggle for decolonization cannot be disengaged from reclaiming indigenous histories as vehicles of ‘ideological resistance’ to colonialism.¹¹ In Nigeria, such a trend could be observable in the historiographic and philosophical writing in the 1950s and 1960s as much as in early post-colonial Anglophone writing.¹² Early Nigerian Anglophone literature engaged from various angles with Nigeria’s indigenous cultural legacy, which significantly contributed to redefining indigenous identities, and to disclosing the constructed nature and questionable premises of colonial discourses.¹³ What is more, Nigerian Anglophone writers would often turn to the very same discourse that defined African indigenous societies as ‘nonhistorical,’ namely ethnographic discourse, and reframe that discourse in a way that, simultaneously, disclosed its oppressive mechanisms and facilitated alternative figurations of indigenous histories. An illustrative example of such writing is Chinua Achebe’s 1958 novel *Things Fall Apart*, which has commonly been read as a narrative employing ethnographic discourse to reframe colonial notions of indigenous Igbo history.¹⁴

The present analysis of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* will arrive at the widely-established conclusion that the novel “bring[s] the existence of [the Igbo] culture into view as a historical reality, one that bears witness to the human world realized within it,” but will be carried out in a new way, from a specifically narratological perspective: by establishing a correlation between the literary concept of narrative time and the notion of indigenous history.¹⁵ The novel will serve as an illustration of how narrative time can be manipulated in a way that helps the author represent different discourses that construct contesting notions of indigenous Igbo history: colonial and decolonial ethnographic discourses. Setting the two discourses alongside one another, Achebe invites a dialogic comparative reading of their respective notions of Igbo history that foregrounds the ‘epistemic violence’ involved in colonial ethnographic practice.¹⁶

The distinction, in the study of narrative, between story and discourse, or what literary critic Seymour Chatman described, respectively, as ‘a what’ and ‘a how’ of the

narrative, enables a nuanced reading of time in narrative.¹⁷ Inspired by philologist Günther Müller's observation about time in narrative, made as early as 1948, structuralist narratology nowadays commonly distinguishes between narrated time (*Erzählzeit*) and narrative time (*erzählte Zeit*).¹⁸ Narrated time refers to "the time or the times that unfold in the story" whereas narrative time denotes "the time in which the narrative is told."¹⁹ This distinction helps illuminate the temporal structure of narrative that becomes particularly prominent in the cases of deviation from the regularities of time in the actual world. Discussed in length in literary theorist Gérard Genette's seminal study *Narrative Discourse* under the rubric of duration/speed of narrative, some such deviations include: the slowing down of narrative progression in the form of *stretch*, when the telling of events takes longer than the events themselves; the speeding up of narrative progression in the form of *summaries*, when events that occurs over a longer period of time are presented in a small portion of text; the *pause* in narrative progression, when the narrator halts narrative progression so as to offer descriptions or comments; and jumps in time in the form of *ellipses*, when significant periods in the story time are simply omitted from the narrative.²⁰

However, narrative time contributes to more than simply temporally structuring the narrative. When Müller announced that, in the context of narrative, "time [...] articulates,"²¹ he meant that "[time] gives human meaning, human significance to the natural event which is alien to meaning."²² Narratologist Monika Fludernik shed some light on the meaning-making potential of narrative time to which Müller referred, when she observed that Genette's discussion of duration/speed in narrative essentially "tackles the problem of *selection and emphasis*."²³ A heightened level of selectiveness of the events to present on the narrative time line — entailed in summaries and ellipses — and an extensive reflection on detail and emphasis — allowed by pauses and stretches — are acts imbued with the potential to give (or deny) meaning to the events²⁴ and, by extension, the world(s) in narrative. It is with the notion in mind that time is both a major organizing principle behind the narrative and a significant element in the shaping of world(s) in narrative that we approach *Things Fall Apart*: we will show how Achebe relies on the semantic potential of narrative time so as to invoke different ethnographic discourses that produce contesting notions of Igbo history.²⁵

In the famous ending to *Things Fall Apart*, the unnamed narrator, focalizing the thoughts of the colonial District Commissioner, reports how the Commissioner intends to write a book about what he learned about the Igbo during his appointment:

As [the Commissioner] walked back to the court he thought about that book. Every day brought him some new material. The story of this man [Okonkwo] who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details.²⁶

Marked by a sudden shift in character perspective — that is, from the indigenous Igbo perspective to the colonizer's perspective — the final scene leads to a convergence of indigenous and Western versions of history: the history of the imaginary Igbo clans of Umuofia and Mbanta, related throughout the novel by the narrator who resembles an ethnographer-insider, suddenly becomes an object of ethnographic observation conducted by another figure, the colonial District Commissioner. Assuming the role of ethnographer, the Commissioner claims not only the right to define the Igbo but also the authority of his representation of Igbo historical reality.

The Commissioner's authority lies, in part, in his power to organize his ethnographic account in a certain way. Particularly significant in that respect are two sections of the paragraph quoted above: one is the Commissioner's quick description of Okonkwo's unfortunate fate, and the other is the Commissioner's decision to reduce the story of Okonkwo's suicide from a 'whole chapter' to a 'reasonable paragraph.' Presenting the story of Okonkwo as 'the story of a man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself,' the Commissioner offers a strikingly rough summary of that which the entire narrative prior to the closing scene portrays. Related to that and captured in the latter section, the Commissioner's decision to reduce Okonkwo's story to a paragraph implies an omission of a larger portion of the (hi)story that leads to Okonkwo's suicide. The summary and the ellipsis (a narratological term for omission) on which the Commissioner's account relies allow him to organize his ethnographic narrative temporally, in a way that contracts clock time.

In the light of Müller's observation that "[i]f a narration contracts clock time such that spatio-temporal condition is contracted away, then it makes an obvious choice with an interpreting effect," the question that remains is that of the semantic meaning of the contraction of actual time in the Commissioner's account in the making.²⁷ The Commissioner's omission of the tragic set of events that leads to Okonkwo's unfortunate

suicide means that he leaves unaddressed the devastating effects of the colonial rule on both the individual and the community, while the summary of Okonkwo as solely ‘a man who commits suicide’ means that the Commissioner overlooks the complex indigenous philosophical and cultural system that Okonkwo’s suicide activates. As Okonkwo’s friend Obierika explains: “It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offense against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen.”²⁸ Dismissing the above-mentioned events as irrelevant, the Commissioner removes significance from Okonkwo’s history and, by extension, the history of the Igbo community. The closing scene of *Things Fall Apart* thus demonstrates how gaining a fuller understanding of colonial ethnographic accounts of indigenous history requires considering not only the organizational but also the political dimension of narrative time employed in those accounts. Thinking in these terms ultimately allows for understanding how narrative time can become an ideological tool that portrays indigenous Igbo history as devoid of depth and meaning.

Starkly contrasted to the rough and negative presentation of Igbo history in the Commissioner’s ethnographic account is the presentation of Igbo history throughout the rest of the narrative, in general, and Part I of the novel, in particular. The sense of opposition is largely constructed through a different handling of narrative time in the first part of the novel. Unlike the Commissioner’s account, which skips events in its representation of the Igbo, the first part is characterized by a markedly slow narration that entails reflecting on minute details from the lives of the Igbo of Umuofia. In that sense, the parts of the novel that lead to the closing scene with the Commissioner can be read as critical responses to colonial ethnographic discourse in that they fill in the gaps that emerge in colonial ethnographic accounts as results of a generalizing and crudely-biased portrayal of indigenous people.

In Part I, the narrator-ethnographer offers an extensive account of the clan’s meetings in the marketplace, wrestling competitions, wedding negotiations and the wedding ceremony, and the settling of disputes. All of these events are presented in a similar manner in terms of temporality: narrative progression is slowed down by frequent pauses. A paradigmatic example of such handling of narrative time is a scene in which Okonkwo receives a message from the town crier about the clan’s meeting taking place the following morning. After the preliminary description of the town crier delivering the message, a pause occurs and the narrator relates Okonkwo’s inner thoughts about

the message: “Okonkwo wondered what was amiss. He had discerned a clear overtone of tragedy in the crier’s voice, and even now he could still hear it as it grew dimmer and dimmer in the distance.”²⁹ After this, the scene resumes with the narrator reporting that “[t]he night was very quiet [and dark],”³⁰ only to be interrupted time and again to accommodate the narrator’s comments about how “[d]arkness held a vague terror for these people, even the bravest among them”³¹ and how “[o]n a moonlight night it would be different.”³²

In line with understanding narrative time as an element that participates in defining world(s) in narratives, the question that begs for attention is what kind of a notion of Igbo history emerges in the slow-paced narration of decolonial ethnographic discourse. Let us turn to the following example:

Everybody thanked Okonkwo and the neighbours brought out their drinking horns from the goatskin bags they carried. Nwakibie brought down his own horn, *which was fastened to the rafters*. The younger of his sons, *who was also the youngest man in the group*, moved to the centre, raised the pot on his left knee and began to pour out the wine. The first cup went to Okonkwo, *who must taste the wine before anyone else*. Then the group drank, *beginning with the eldest man*.³³

The phrases that provide additional details (above emphasis mine) — about the horn, Nwakibie’s son, Okonkwo and the act of drinking — are in principle not essential to the forward movement of the narrative, and at the same time slow down narrative progression. The slowing of narrative progression is thus directly linked to achieving a sense of the depth of the Igbo world that the narrative describes. In other cases, the intricate and multidimensional picture of the Igbo emerges through staging the pauses in narrative progression that accommodate narratorial comment: “When Unoka [Okonkwo’s father] dies he had taken no title at all and he was heavily in debt. *Any wonder then that his son Okonkwo was ashamed of him?*”³⁴ and “Okonkwo was provoked to *justifiable* anger by his younger wife, who went to plait her hair at her friend’s house and did not return early enough to cook the afternoon meal.”³⁵ Narratorial comment, as the given examples demonstrate, allows for an additional dimension in the ethnographic account of the Igbo to materialize: a meta-layer characterized by a prominent ethnographic voice. Through that additional layer, the impression is created that what unfolds before the reader is not only a lively and vivid Igbo world, but a particular ethnographic discourse, too. The representation characterized by detailed descriptions in realist fashion, the narratorial comments that provide substantial additional information and the heightened level of the ethnographer’s engagement with his/her object

of observation give shape to an ethnographic discourse that ‘writes back’ to the colonial ethnographic discourse embedded in the Commissioner’s account.³⁶

The final step in this analysis is a dialogic comparative reading of the two ethnographic discourses and their contesting notions of Igbo history. The Commissioner’s narrative in the making, with its reliance on summaries and ellipses, implies a faster narrative progression, which, as demonstrated earlier, results in excluding much of what constitutes Igbo history. The notion of Igbo history that emerges is thus characterized by mono-dimensionality, lack, and simplicity. In comparison, the slow narrative progression of decolonial ethnographic discourse allows an incorporation of more detail, which in turn adds nuance to the representation of Igbo history. Igbo history in this case emerges as rich and complex, and as requiring a deeper level of ethnographic engagement for it to be done justice in a narrative. In the convergence of Western and indigenous representations of Igbo history that occurs at the end of the novel, colonial ethnographic discourse is strongly ironized: the representation of Igbo history as long-lasting and rich undermines the oversimplifying colonial representations of indigenous history by exposing the strategic and ideologically laden use of narrative time in colonial ethnographic discourse. In this way, decolonial representation of Igbo history calls into question the mechanisms and outcomes of colonial historical knowledge production.

Effectively establishing a link between the organizing principles of colonial ethnographic narration (i.e. narrative time) and the notions of indigenous Igbo history, Achebe confirmed Müller’s observation that “not just the explicitly evaluating opinion turns the narration into an interpretation,” but that “already one of [the] elementary forming processes [of narrative], the representation of time periods in a tension between time of narrating and narrated time, has an interpreting effect.”³⁷ Toying with the creative, meaning-making potential of narrative time, Achebe not only laid bare the ideological dimension of colonial ethnographic writing but also constructed an alternative, decolonial narrative of indigenous Igbo history that shows how the key to a sustainable future lies in the collective past.

This section has shown that, for the Igbo in the age of cultural nationalism, validating a present and envisioning a sustainable national future crucially depended on rehabilitating their precolonial past. Related to that, Achebe’s emphasis on the certain details of daily life of the Igbo community asserts Igbo humanity and stands in contrast

to the reductive comments in the Commissioner's account. Both of these concepts are strikingly similar to the way the Maya conceive of time and their interest in highlighting communal activities. The following section will demonstrate how these strategies and ideas emerge in the work of Maya visual artists, and in conjunction with the Igbo, how these seemingly ordinary things hold the essence to indigenous thought.

3_Multiple Temporalities as a Decolonial Strategy in Maya Visual Arts

Visiting the highlands of Chiapas, Mexico is often described as 'going back in time.' At the center of Chiapas lies the quaint colonial city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, with its cobblestone streets, Spanish Colonial architecture, and moderate climate producing a seemingly tranquil space where one can escape the concerns of daily life. The many indigenous communities that surround this city are characterized as further evidence that time in this area is not quite the same as in the rest of the modern world. Chiapas, the southernmost state in Mexico, has the country's second-largest indigenous population, most of whom are Maya. Though it is the poorest state in Mexico, Chiapas is also one of the wealthiest in natural resources, including oil, natural gas, and water, which through hydroelectric dams produces about fifty percent of the nation's energy.³⁸ This combination of elements has attracted a number of interests to this region, including explorers, tourists, scholars, and government forces. A particular ideology of oppression developed to gain control of these rich natural and human resources and has inflicted injustice upon Chiapas' indigenous groups from the time of the Spanish Conquest until today.³⁹

Dominant Western visions of the Maya that justify the political abandonment of a people are related to a certain (Western) configuration of time that is tied to a notion of progress. According to historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, the construction of difference is a construction of time: in this, some groups of people are always in a state of 'not yet' when compared to the 'so-called west.'⁴⁰ In this equation of injustice, 'not yet' is underdevelopment; all aspects of indigenous cultural continuity — from ancient calendars and agrarian societal structures to diet and clothing — become what envisions and thus leaves them in this 'not yet' state. For example, Maya people who participate in traditional ceremonies and join efforts to preserve their local histories are seen as against 'progress,' or as incapable of adapting to or adopting modern ways of living, when the reality is far different from that. In this section, I look at the tactics used by some contemporary Maya artists, particularly their epistemologies about time and history, to

confront the scopic regimes that have depicted their people as always already in the past, with no history and thus, consigned to suffering.

The knowledge that abounds within contemporary Maya culture that has been passed down from generation to generation since Prehispanic times, is used by hegemonic culture as a reason to keep them in this state of ‘not-yet.’ Modernity argues that any instances of cultural continuity, including present day uses of Maya calendars and the agrarian knowledge that these calendars hold, are proof of the contemporary irrelevance of Maya culture. Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano coined the term ‘coloniality’ to describe the lingering systems of power that remain in place after colonial governments are dismantled.⁴¹ Quijano posits that coloniality/modernity — linked as they are two sides of the same coin — uses certain racial, political and hierarchical orders to legitimize the supremacy of certain populations over others.⁴² Philosopher and literary scholar Nelson Maldonado-Torres, further explains: “[c]oloniality, [...] refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labour, intersubjectivity relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations.”⁴³ Such coloniality/modernity is distinguishable in the way the Maya culture is denigrated, in the lack of resources for Maya people, and of course, in the long lasting control of land by the wealthy Ladinos, people of Spanish descent or mixed race (mestizos).⁴⁴

This process of domination extends beyond control of resources to control of time, history, and the senses of those being colonized.⁴⁵ The style, themes, and everyday scenes that characterize the concerns of Maya people have been used as proof of their state of ‘backwardness,’ despite being what literary theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak would call ‘incommensurate’ with the concerns of ‘Western art.’⁴⁶ As visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff has pointed out, visibility is a tool that controls how ‘others’ are seen and treated in favor of those with power.⁴⁷ The question, then, is what other political valences can time and the senses hold? How can the way that Maya time and visual culture have been interpreted and used by the West be decolonized and reclaimed for meanings and associations other than regression as the opposite of progression? The key here is to decolonize interpretations that favor a Western art historical reading (visuality).

Many contemporary Maya artists and groups are creating works using indigenous methodologies precisely as acts of countervisuality to contest normative visions of their

people and the effects of coloniality/modernity.⁴⁸ San Cristóbal de Las Casas has experienced a boom in indigenous art production over the last fifteen years. It began in 1992 with projects such as The Chiapas Photography Project, which, in direct response to the fact that the grand majority of Maya representations had been produced by outsiders, recruited Maya individuals to document their own daily lives and concerns.⁴⁹ Since then, painting and photography have become a significant medium through which Maya artists express their own ideas. At the end of 2014, Galería Muy opened in the city of San Cristóbal as a space dedicated to showcasing and promoting the work of local indigenous artists.⁵⁰ I will focus here on one particular show that juxtaposes the view of the indigenous versus those of the Ladinos, while also dealing with issues of change and endurance in Maya practices over the last fifty years. *La Cámara Gira/The Camera Rotates*, puts Genaro Sántiz, Abraham Gómez, and Marco Girón — three Maya artists from the Chamula (*Tsotsil*) and Tenejapa (*Tzeltal*) communities near San Cristóbal — in conversation with historical photographs taken by Vicente Kramsky, a well-known, local photographer, taken between 1950 and 1970.⁵¹ Kramsky's images of the region are iconic: largely distributed as souvenir postcards, they document Maya communities, festivals, and people.⁵² Each of the contemporary artists in this project chose to engage with Kramsky's historical archive in his own way, whether responding to it with his own images or even incorporating them with his own to produce a collage. The result is a critical look at the passage of time and sense of identity in these Maya communities.

Artist Abraham Gómez from Chamula recalls a curiosity to find out what life must have looked like for his grandparents whenever he heard their stories. Looking through Kramsky's images, he felt transported to that time and space of what he calls the “present-past of the grandparents of his community.”⁵³ He was also interested in observing the changes that have taken place over the last forty to fifty years, and with that in mind he put the images from the past next to those of his current moment. The result reflects a tension between the passage of time with its natural changes, and the things that remain because they are such an integral component of Chamula identity (that actually goes back to ancestral times). In *La Abuela/The Grandmother*, Gómez takes a small image of an elderly woman surrounded by men in what seems to be a public space captured by Kramsky in the 60s, and superimposes it with a photograph he took of a group of Chamula women including an elderly grandmother (see figure 1). At first, one

notices the similarities in these images, mainly of the grandmother figure, who serves as the focal point of this particular photograph. In both cases, the grandmother has gray hair and wears a black shawl. She is surrounded by other people but it is not entirely clear that she is interacting with anyone. The almost identical compositions of each photograph reinforce the idea that despite the fifty years between these images, the reality of the Chamula has not changed greatly.



Fig. 1: *La Abuela/The Grandmother*. Abraham Gómez, 2016.

A normative reading of this photo collage would focus on the continuity of practices apparent through these images. In order to decolonize that colonial visibility, one must look deeper. Feminist philosopher Maria Lugones has proposed that it is in the places of colonial difference where the disruptions of the colonial imaginary of indigenous people are found.⁵⁴ The place of colonial difference is the space created when coloniality attempts to impose its ideology, and the ‘resister’ (Lugones’ term) engages and responds to this burden. In some ways it is the unexpected, the often subtle signs that point to these places of difference, the moments of decoloniality. In *La Abuela* the location of difference is exactly the same as that of similarity, what coloniality would use to claim a static moment: the grandmother. The positioning of these two women, facing each other almost as if they were in conversation, is a point of productive tension. What

would these two women say to one another? The disruption within the images, caused by differences such as color versus black and white, and men versus women surrounding each grandmother, are reminders that these women live in two different times and thus cannot speak directly. And yet, there is the feeling that they do, perhaps because of the things that remain constant. Gómez's demonstration of the similarities and continuities of his community reveals that aspect of Maya thought where the past is always remembered and is part of the present. It should not be taken to symbolize that the Chamula are weary of transformation and adaptation and have thus remained static; one can simply take a look at the clothing worn by all the individuals in these photographs to notice that there have been many changes in the last fifty years. What is more relevant is to notice that Gómez shows that multiple temporal components can coexist, which disrupts the imposition of the Western notion of time that is linear and progressive.

Marco Girón, from the town of Tenejapa, takes a different approach to the Kramsky archive with his selection titled: *Los Espejos del Carnaval/The Mirrors of Carnival*.⁵⁵ Anthropologists and tourists alike have long been interested in the festivals of carnival that takes place in many Maya communities, producing a large archive of images of these ceremonies over the last hundred years or so; Kramsky was no exception. Girón has been interested in the carnival of his hometown both from an insider perspective and through the representations of it by foreigners. For this show, he placed one of Kramsky's photographs of the carnival in Tenejapa at the center of the gallery wall (see figure 2). Strings connect fourteen of Girón's photographs to Kramsky's image, and to each other (see figure 3). At one level, he is dissecting the various components of Kramsky's photograph — the bull, the musicians, the local authorities — into their individual parts shown as solo pictures. And yet, the string weaves all of these participants into this communal festival, which symbolically is the tie that binds the community together. During ceremonies that celebrate significant moments in their calendar, such as the carnival that takes place at the end of their sacred year, the Maya recreate their sacred time-space cosmological arrangement through rituals. These are moments of crisis when the community remembers their long history of suffering and performs a ritual battle in which they conquer all evil and order returns. Thus, the carnival is a moment of reflection, of vigilance, when all rituals must be performed properly, yet it is also a time of laughter, of letting go of social norms, the chaos before the calm.⁵⁶



Fig. 2: *Carnaval de Tenejapa/Carnival at Tenejapa*. Vicente Kramsky, 1960s.



Fig. 3: *Conexiones Sinápticas/Synaptic Connecions*.
Installation photograph. Marco Girón, 2016.

The tensions between chaos and order present during carnival are not lost in someone like Girón — although they might not have been fully appreciated by Kramsky — and

this is precisely where the location of colonial difference lies. Girón purposely chose images that show the humorous aspects of the festival to contrast the more serious one of Kramsky. In Girón's words:

On the one hand we have solemnity and respect to the local authorities that Vicente Kramsky's gaze presents, and on the other, happiness, the essence of the carnival between giggles, laughter, a lighthearted attitude towards a hard life, towards the political leaders who have betrayed the people. It is in these moments where time becomes an accomplice of the encounters between two gazes that meet in order to converse.⁵⁷

Here, Girón juxtaposes the typical ethnographic record of the ceremony with something that is more intimate — portraits of people smiling, for example — as a way to reflect how Tenejapans actually live these festivals. He also puts these images taken many years apart in conversation, as if they were happening in the present moment — and in a way, they are. Every time this ceremony is performed, it comprises an elaborate sequence of rituals that in many ways follow patterns established centuries ago. Girón uses his composition to make the argument that for the Maya, the past and the present are always intertwined and as such they will always be part of the future.⁵⁸

It is necessary to point out that for contemporary Maya, the continuity of practices and beliefs that have endured for millennia does not obviate the consideration of change. 'New' things, of course, can be incorporated, and many of these ceremonies are amalgamations of changes and performed in order to process significant historical moments for the community. It is the coloniality/modernity model that pushes the idea of an 'unchanged' indigenous, stuck in the past, with accusations that their 'traditions' are what 'hold them back' and prevent them from fully participating in this modern, neoliberal world.⁵⁹ These two artists show that while there are continuities, there are also changes that get incorporated into what already exists, as in the operation of any other culture.

At first glance, Kramsky's images and those of the Maya artists do appear similar. They all capture almost identical moments, from festivals to everyday events. Yet if we look for the places of colonial difference, we begin to see how these representations of the Maya are being decolonized. Decolonizing is accomplished by more than the act of a Maya artist taking the photograph; it is through the meaning behind the images, in what the artist adds to the story, and how all that challenges ethnographic accounts. For example, the inclusion of laughter on the image adds another layer of interpretation that signals to the way the people of Tenejapa deal with the injustices they have suffered.

Also, the grandmother figures, and women in general, are interpreted as crucial links in the creation of communal identity through their storytelling, which transmits ancestral knowledge from generation to generation. Decolonization is also accomplished through the manner these photographs were shown: through Girón's clever weaving of images that deconstructs the tourist photograph into something larger than an exotic festival, and Gómez's arrangement of images that highlight both continuity and difference. Change need not oppose continuity; the artists' reality indicates that the present is a combination of the past and the 'new' elements that happen throughout the years are incorporated as part of the future.

As these artists demonstrate, the visual can be a powerful tool to decolonize aesthetics and normative cultural, visual and political representations of indigenous people. These Maya artists are taking on the task of self-representation in a global world and challenging the current practice that misrecognizes them by marking the stark separation of past from present, and future. More importantly, these works disrupt the argument made by hegemonic progressive models of time that suggest that the Maya are stuck in the past because they continue to practice their ancestral philosophies. Instead, they show that in the reach for the past lies a force, a way of seeing, that propels them to a future; that the coexistence of multiple temporalities, is not only valid but a vital way of living time.

4_Conclusion

Modern Nigerian Anglophone writing and contemporary Maya visual art demonstrate how, for the Igbo and Maya communities, the movement forward into the future is inseparable from a glance back into the past. Yet for both the Igbo and the Maya this reaching back into their histories means having to face oppressive Western interpretations of their histories and cultures. Identifying time as a crucial element that underlies Western representations of indigenous histories and cultures, Igbo and Maya artists refer to and/or employ time as a means to discredit those representations and offer alternative ones. These two case studies illustrate the diversity of strategies indigenous people employ to present their notions of multiple and intertwined temporalities, which stand in contrast to Western linear and progressive time. By showing how Achebe used narrative time to deconstruct Western ethnographic discourse on the Igbo and offer a separately valid vision of Igbo reality, and how Gómez and Girón use ancestral notions of time to challenge dominant visual discourse on the Maya, we foreground the effort

common to indigenous societies to inscribe their own voices into history and claim a future where many worlds are possible.

Endnotes

- ¹ See Jürgen Habermas, “Modernity versus Postmodernity,” in *New German Critique* 22 (1981), 3–14, here: 5; Thomas Linehan, *Modernism and British Socialism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 13.
- ² See Pertti Anttonen, *Tradition through Modernity: Postmodernism and the Nation-State in Folklore Scholarship* (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2016), 34; our emphasis.
- ³ Linehan, *Modernism and British Socialism*, 14; emphasis in original.
- ⁴ Stefan Helgesson, “Radicalizing Temporal Difference: Anthropology, Postcolonial Theory, and Literary Time,” in *History and Theory* 53 (2014), 545–562, here: 552.
- ⁵ Simon Gikandi, “Chinua Achebe and the Invention of African Culture,” in *Research in African Literatures* 32.3 (2001), 4–5.
- ⁶ Both authors participated as fellows of a Mellon Foundation project, Integrative Graduate Humanities Education & Research Training (IGHERT).
- ⁷ “Crudely, one might say that it [Western historicism] was one important form that the ideology of progress or ‘development’ took from the nineteenth century on. Historicism is what made modernity or capitalism look not simply global but rather as something that became global over time, by originating in one place (Europe) and then spreading outside it.” Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000), 7.
- ⁸ Helen Lackner, “Colonial Administration and Social Anthropology: Eastern Nigeria 1920–1940,” in *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounters*, ed. Talal Asad (London: Ithaca Press, 1973), 123–151, here: 123.
- ⁹ Maxwell Owusu, “Ethnography of Africa: The Usefulness of the Useless,” in *American Anthropologist* 80 (1978), 310–334, here: 311–312.
- ¹⁰ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. H. Clarke (New York: Dover, 1956), 92.
- ¹¹ Edward William Said, “Resistance, Opposition and Representation,” in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, eds. Bill Ashcroft, Helen Tiffin, and Gareth Griffiths (London/New York: Routledge, 2006 [1995]), 95–98, here: 95.
- ¹² See Toyin Falola and Saheed Aderinto, *Nigeria, Nationalism, and Writing History* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2010); Gloria Chuku, ed., *The Igbo Intellectual Tradition: Creative Conflict in African and African Diasporic Thought* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
- ¹³ Timothy Mofolorunso Aluko’s novels *One Man, One Wife* (Lagos: Nigerian Print. & Publishing Company, 1959), *One Man, One Machete* (London: Heinemann, 1964) and *Kinsman and Foreman* (London: Heinemann, 1966) explore dialogues between modernity and tradition; Cyprian Ekwensi’s *People of the City* (London: Heinemann, 1954) and *Jagua Nana* (London: Hutchinson, 1961) examine the cultural dynamic in the rising hybrid urban spaces; Chinua Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease* (London: Heinemann, 1960), Gabriel Okara’s *The Voice* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1964) and Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru* (London: Heinemann, 1966) explore the dialectic between the modern subject and the indigenous community.

- ¹⁴ See David Borman, “Playful Ethnography: Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and Nigerian Education,” in *ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 46.3 (2015), 91–112; Carey Snyder, “The Possibilities and Pitfalls of Ethnographic Readings: Narrative Complexity in *Things Fall Apart*,” in *College Literature* 35.2 (2008), 154–174; Thomas J. Lynn, *Chinua Achebe and the Politics of Narration: Envisioning Language* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 156; Abiola F. Irele, *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 149.
- ¹⁵ Irele, *The African Imagination*, 149.
- ¹⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak uses the term ‘epistemic violence’ to denote the infliction of harm against subjects through discourse. See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988), 271–313.
- ¹⁷ Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1978), 9.
- ¹⁸ Günther Müller, “Erzählzeit und erzählte Zeit,” in *Morphologische Poetik: Gesammelte Aufsätze*, ed. Elena Müller (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968 [1948]), 269–286.
- ¹⁹ Jens Brockmeier, *Beyond the Archive: Memory, Narrative, and the Autobiographical Process* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 299.
- ²⁰ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1980 [1972]), 86–112.
- ²¹ Günther Müller, “The Significance of Time in Narrative Act,” in *Time: From Concept to Narrative Construct: A Reader*, eds. Jan Christoph Meister and Wilhelm Schernus (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2011), 67–83, here: 81.
- ²² Müller, “The Significance of Time in Narrative Act,” 82.
- ²³ Monika Fludernik, “Chronology, Time, Tense and Experientiality in Narrative,” in *Language and Literature* 12.2 (2003), 117–134, here: 118; our emphasis.
- ²⁴ The term ‘event’ is used here in the narratological sense as “a change of state, one of the constitutive features of narrativity.” See Peter H. Hühn, “Event and Eventfulness,” (2011), accessed February 2, 2018, <http://wikis.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Event_and_Eventfulness>.
- ²⁵ See Tanya Reinhart, “Principles of Gestalt Perception in the Temporal Organization of Narrative Texts,” in *Linguistics* 22 (1984), 779–809; Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*. Vol. 1. trans. by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1984 [1983]); Ruth Ronen, *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
- ²⁶ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1958), 187.
- ²⁷ Müller, “The Significance of Time in Narrative Act,” 78.
- ²⁸ Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 186.
- ²⁹ Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 9.
- ³⁰ Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 9.
- ³¹ Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 9.
- ³² Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 10.
- ³³ Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 18; our emphasis throughout.
- ³⁴ Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 7; our emphasis.
- ³⁵ Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 26; our emphasis.

- 36 See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature* (London: Routledge, 1989).
- 37 Müller, “The Significance of Time in Narrative Act,” 79.
- 38 INEGI (National Institute of Statistics and Geography), “Estadísticas a propósito del día internacional de los pueblos indígenas” / “Statistics on the Occasion of the International Day of Indigenous Peoples,” (August 5, 2016), accessed May 2, 2017, <http://www.inegi.org.mx/saladeprensa/aproposito/2016/indigenas2016_0.pdf>; National statistics of poverty for Mexico 2012, accessed May 2, 2017, <<https://www.coneval.org.mx/Medicion/MP/Paginas/Anexo-estadístico-pobreza-2012.aspx>>.
- 39 Portions of this essay will appear in a forthcoming article: Diana Rose, “Maya Visions of Time: Imagining the Past in the Future,” in *Indigeneity: Claims, Relationships, and Concepts Between the Disciplines*, eds. Annemarie McLaren and Lara Ghisleni (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2018).
- 40 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 8.
- 41 Anibal Quijano, *Colonialidad del Poder, Eurocentrismo y América Latina* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: CLACSO, 2000), 342–386; Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being,” in *Cultural Studies* 21.2 (2007): 243. The coloniality/modernity/decoloniality collective is a group of mainly Latin American scholars, whose main proponents include Anibal Quijano, Walter D. Mignolo, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, and Maria Lugones, among others.
- 42 Quijano, *Colonialidad del Poder*, 342–386.
- 43 The term ‘decoloniality’ is a response to colonialism and coloniality by those who suffer the ravaging effects of it; it will be further explained later in the essay. See Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being,” 243.
- 44 Ladinos is a term used in Latin America to refer to people of Spanish descent or mixed race (mestizos). Throughout México’s history, Ladinos and foreign companies and individuals have owned most of the land.
- 45 “Decolonial Aesthetics (I),” (May 22, 2011), accessed June 20, 2017, <<https://transnationaldecolonialinstitute.wordpress.com/decolonial-aesthetics/>>; Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
- 46 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).
- 47 Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*.
- 48 TDI+Transnational Decolonial Institute, *Decolonial Aesthetics*, accessed June 20, 2017, <<https://transnationaldecolonialinstitute.wordpress.com/decolonial-aesthetics/>>.
- 49 The Chiapas Photography Project, accessed February 2, 2018, <<https://chiapasphoto.org/note/note.html>>.
- 50 The word “muy” in the Tsotsil Maya language means pleasure, joy, fun. Accessed November 17, 2017, <www.galeriamuy.org>.
- 51 La Cámara Gira exhibition, Galería Muy, accessed November 17, 2017, <<http://www.galeriamuy.org/esp/album/la-camara-gira/>>.
- 52 “Vicente Kramsky: A Local Photographer,” accessed February 2, 2018, <<http://piso9.net/vicente-kramsky-a-local-photographer/?lang=en>>.
- 53 Abraham Gomez, La Camera Gira exhibition document, accessed January 10, 2018, <<http://www.galeriamuy.org/esp/album/la-camara-gira/>>.

- ⁵⁴ Maria Lugones, “Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System,” in *Hypatia* 22.1 (2007), 186–209.
- ⁵⁵ While we use the word carnival through the text, it is important to note that these public events are not exactly the same as Western carnivals.
- ⁵⁶ The ancient Maya sacred calendar, tzolk’in, included five days when the deities of the underworld reigned, chaos thrived, and all societal norms were turned upside down. It was a time of darkness, but it was celebrated with humor. Thus, many of the modern-day names for the carnival in Maya languages mean ‘the festival of games’ to indicate this humorous aspect.
- ⁵⁷ Marco Girón, La Cámara Gira exhibition, accessed January 10, 2018, <<http://www.galeriamuy.org/esp/album/la-camara-gira>>: “Por un lado la solemnidad, el respeto de los cargos que la mirada de Vicente Kramsky nos presenta, por el otro la alegría, la esencia del carnaval entre risas, carcajadas, una actitud de burla hacia la vida dura, hacia los gobernantes que han decepcionado al pueblo. Es en estos momentos en el que el tiempo se vuelve cómplice de los encuentros entre dos miradas que se presentan para dialogar;” our translation.
- ⁵⁸ The description of this exhibition states that they thought of this as a möbius strip, linking the past, present and future. Accessed January 10, 2018, <<http://www.galeriamuy.org/esp/album/la-camara-gira>>.
- ⁵⁹ Quijano, *Colonialidad del Poder*, 352.