



The Profound Impact of Neoliberal Reform in Mexico's Preeminent Tourist Destination

Browner CH*

University of California, USA

***Corresponding author:** Carole H. Browner, University of California, Los Angeles, USA, Email: browner@ucla.edu

Book Review

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Book Review

Review of M. Bianet Castellanos, *Indigenous Dispossession: Housing and Maya Indebtedness in Mexico*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021. Paperback, 190 pages, ISBN-10 :1503614344, ISBN-13: 978-1503614345.

I had been impatiently awaiting publication of M. Bianet Castellanos's new book, *Indigenous Dispossession: Housing and Maya Indebtedness in Mexico*. Her 2010 monograph, *A Return to Servitude: Maya Migration and the Tourist Trade in Cancún* had a huge impact on me. *A Return to Servitude...* is a beautifully rendered ethnography of the causes and consequences of Mexico's vast Maya internal migrant stream. It documents the critical importance of the Maya, along with Mexico's other indigenous groups, for the development of modern Mexico.

Indigenous Dispossession is indeed the book I had been waiting for. It illuminates a little studied feature of the neoliberal paradigm: how global modernization processes are imposed. The book follows the trajectories of Maya migrant families as they seek to secure affordable housing in Cancún, Mexico's top tourist destination. This is also the site of Castellanos's earlier book. Both draw upon her decades-long history of ethnographic research in Cancún and the surrounding region. Castellanos's new monograph focuses on two major challenges Maya migrants to Cancún face in their quest to create an urban life: securing affordable, safe, convenient housing and assuming a previously inconceivable level consumer debt. These problems are not independent.

Cancún's modern origin ostensibly began in the mid-

1960s when a group of Mexican bankers decided to build a city to attract mass tourism. They selected the remote Yucatán Peninsula despite the fact that it was a dense sparsely populated jungle thousands of kilometres from Mexico's large cities. Castellanos explains that this fictitious origin story falsely depicted Cancún as a virgin paradise, occluding the historical and contemporary presence of the Indigenous inhabitants of the region. Prior to the 16th century Spanish conquest, indigenous Maya built vibrant urban centers and following colonization they inhabited dispersed settlements throughout the Yucatán Peninsula. Castellanos argues that the historical fiction of Cancún as devoid of people and history served to legitimize the "settler colonialism" at the root of its creation, that is, the dispossession of the Indigenous population and replacement with non-Indigenous migrants.

Indigenous Dispossession casts a bright light on contemporary Maya's experiences in Cancún mainly with land and housing. The author's main argument is that "as Indigenous migrants move to cities, they are no longer treated as Indigenous and instead become deracialized subjects who are disciplined through neoliberal instruments of debt, like mortgage finance and credit cards, leading to greater economic precarity and a loss of autonomy from the state".

Historically land held great material and symbolic value for the Maya. "Land and freedom" (*tierra y libertad*) and "Land is for those who work it" (*La tierra es para el que la trabaja*) were rallying cries of Mexico's early 20th century revolution. This was because after the Spanish Conquest, farmland had become overwhelmingly concentrated in the hands of a small wealthy group. But while the post-revolution Constitution of 1917 recognized the rights of small farmers to own land, it was not until decades later during President Lázaro Cárdenas's administration (1934-1940) that significant

land reform was seen. But while Cárdenas redistributed over 18 million hectares overall, more than all previous presidential administrations combined, little of it was high quality farmland and much was to be held collectively by villages (ejidos). Ejido lands could not be sold and were to be collectively held in perpetuity. There were perennial tensions between the interests of small and large landowners in the decades that followed, with the government generally siding with the large landowners. Moreover, land reform policies began to die out as early as the 1940s and by the 1970s even some earlier reforms had been rolled back. NAFTA, the late 20th century Canada-U.S.-Mexico trade accord, ended land redistribution entirely while opening the door to the previously forbidden privatization of the ejidos. A primary outcome of land reform during and after NAFTA, then, was further displacement of Indigenous and other poor people from their lands. The Yucatán Peninsula was no exception and without land, the Yucatán Maya was obliged to take on wage work in Cancún.

Yet despite the need for a massive labor force to build this major tourist destination, Cancún's 1974 "master plan" failed to include any working class housing. In addition, it was all but impossible for migrants to obtain either housing or land. Eventually acknowledging this reality, the state authorized construction of thousands of hectares of privately built tract housing ("social housing"). And so as Cancún's lands were becoming increasingly privatized, tract housing became the main viable option for migrant workers.

Indigenous Dispossession introduces the concept of the "new credit economy," which consisted of bank credit, mortgages, credit cards, microfinance lenders, and retail store credit plans tailored to Cancún's Indigenous migrants. Previously most had no access to nor need for formal banks, nor much understanding of credit and its inherent risks. Castellanos describes the aggressive marketing and predatory lending tactics employed, in addition to the naturalization of a new way of being: Said one migrant, "If you wish to advance [you need to] expose yourself to risk" (p.62, brackets in original). Castellanos further advances the concept of the new credit economy in her assertion that more is at stake for these migrants than the simple offer of access to a consumption-based economy: "Housing reform becomes a form of discipline to produce new types of citizens through narratives that bind personal responsibility, private property, and debt, and eschew collective ownership, solidarity, and Indigenous rights".

The monograph consists of an Introduction, an Epilogue, and five data-rich chapters. The first chapter offers a history of Cancún land policies and details how ideologies associated with family, gender, and citizenship have shaped Indigenous Maya's struggles for survival and autonomy. Chapter 2

recounts the processes by which housing reform in Cancún and in Mexico more broadly were instituted. This chapter analyzes the discourses that helped legitimize a national shift away from collective land tenure toward private ownership.

Further developing this theme, Chapter 3 explains the reasons why these Indigenous migrants became willing to take on immense housing and other material debt. In part, the author explains, Cancún's social housing units became symbolically linked to whiteness as seen in ubiquitous billboards featuring light skinned nuclear families in front of new charming single-family homes; a common sales slogan was, "You deserve to live your dream; homes starting at only...." These homes also came to signify progress, although Castellanos points out fascinating gender differences in this regard: She found female migrants more willing to assume major debt because, to them, homeownership represented not only progress but also security. But for their male counterparts, assuming a large mortgage was fraught because it evoked memories of their ancestors' long painful history of debt peonage.

In the context of this discussion, Castellanos raises the important question of how individual home ownership became a hallmark of modern society. She shows this was a recent development that began in the U.S. following the end of the Second World War. The United States government offered extensive benefits to (white) service veterans to help ease their transition into civilian life. Government-backed loans that could be used to finance homes, farms, and businesses were perhaps the most important among them. However this costly investment was more than simple altruism; it was also intended to advance democracy building. The idea was that these investments would help veterans become good citizens who manifested the core democratic values of self-sufficiency, wealth, and social citizenship, that is, access to the formal political, civil, and social rights imbued by state.

Chapters 4 and 5 are the book's most poignant in that they focus on the migrants' experiences with foreclosure and eviction. Chapter 4 follows one couple over the course of nearly a decade as they seek to avert foreclosure and bankruptcy. Most bewildering to them were the banks and other lenders' seemingly arbitrary business practices. There were times when the couple did not know to whom to make their loan payments nor the amount that they owed. The physical and mental health costs were tangible and severe. Castellanos argues that foreclosure proceedings like these are integral to the neoliberal system that individualizes debt, promotes land privatization, and hastens Indigenous dispossession.

In Chapter 5 we meet a group of migrant families who eschewed social housing and instead chose to live in a

squatter settlement. They endured a miserable quality of life, at least at the outset. One man explained that when he, his wife, and toddler first arrived in Cancún they lived in a one-room structure that lacked electricity and water and was accessible only by narrow footpath. Raising their toddler under those conditions was a major challenge: "...you arrive in this place [Cancún] and you encounter many things you never imagined or dreamed of ...You arrive and you find the polar opposite...You arrive thinking that you will have a nicer home, a better future. He was also shocked by the endemic violence and sense of isolation and segregation that had become features of his family's life. This chapter also details migrants' pressure tactics and resistance strategies designed to impel the state to accept its own responsibility toward these migrants and their dreams of a "dignified life."

In concluding, Castellanos references Bettina Ng'weno's (2012) work. Ng'weno demonstrates that in indigenous and Afro Latin American communities, claims to autonomy and territory are transforming concepts of social citizenship and creating new, broader conceptions of territoriality. For the Yucatec Maya this more comprehensive concept of belonging

derives from their historical relationship to the peninsula's sacred geography. Castellanos posits that to combat historical and contemporary settler tactics of elimination through assimilation and dispossession, this fuller conception of belonging offers a more meaningful framework within which to interpret Indigenous rights.

I highly recommend *Indigenous Dispossession* to scholars and students of neoliberalism, historical and contemporary Mexico and Latin America, the Maya and Indigeneity. Those working in urban planning and related fields will also find the book of great interest.

References

1. Ng'weno B (2007) *Beyond Citizenship As We Know It: Race and Ethnicity in Afro-Colombian Struggles for Citizenship Equality*. In: Kwame Dixon, John Burdick (Eds.), *Comparative Perspectives on Afro-Latin America*. University Press of Florida, Gainesville, USA, pp: 156-175.

