

CH'U MAYAA AND THE APPROPRIATION OF THE PAST

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21: INQUIRIES INTO ART, HISTORY, AND THE VISUAL
#2-2023, pp. 245–258

<https://doi.org/10.11588/xxi.2023.2.96033>



ABSTRACT

The short video *Ch'u Mayaa* (*Maya Blue*, 2017) by artist Clarissa Tossin uses the Barnsdall (or Hollyhock) House, one of five Southern California textile block homes by Frank Lloyd Wright built in the early 1920s, as the setting for a dance performance by the choreographer Crystal Sepúlveda. Without dialogue or narration, the video raises complex issues about the use and appropriation of imagery and designs from the ancient Americas, and the ways in which a structure from the past, now designated an architectural landmark, can be reframed by contemporary artists. The essay concludes with a brief discussion of the author's collaboration with Mexican artist Mariana Castillo Deball, a playful conceptual project which also highlights the relationship between the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright and that of the ancient Maya.

KEYWORDS

Maya Revival; Appropriations; Video art; Clarissa Tossin; Mariana Castillo Deball; Frank Lloyd Wright.

Any number of contemporary artists have made works based on twentieth-century Maya Revival architecture, from Eduardo Abaroa's epic fantasy of iconoclasm, *La destrucción total del Museo Nacional de Antropología* (2012–2016), to the late Lourdes Grobet's photographic essay *Neo-Olmayaztec* (1990), from Pablo López Luz's deadpan photographs of even more modest, vernacular examples of this style gathered in *Pyramids* (2019) to Andrés Padilla Domene's Yucatecan science fiction documentary *Ciudad Maya* (2016, set in the ruins of the Mérida nightclub of the same name).¹ All of these works sit at a crossroads, where modernism meets the Pre-Columbian past, where architecture, archaeology, contemporary art, and art history all intersect. Elsewhere I've explored the ways in which Maya Revival architecture – in Mexico (both within and beyond the Maya region of the southeast), in the USA, in Spain, and beyond – has been framed by forces of nationalism, manifest destiny, post-Revolutionary ideological debates, and regional pride.² In the wake of the European invasion of the Americas, the introduction to and assimilation of the radically different aesthetics of Mesoamerica produced little discernable impact on European art, and even less on European architecture. It was not until the late nineteenth century and the start of the twentieth that the first Western architects began to integrate references to these ancient structures into contemporary designs, in ways that were as diverse as the principal practitioners: Robert Stacy-Judd, Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin, Frank Lloyd Wright and his son, Lloyd Wright. In Mexico, and especially on Mexico's Yucatan peninsula, these references gathered another set of meanings and a different ideological charge, as evident in the work of architects there, especially Manuel Amabilis and Francisco J. Serrano. When taking these Maya Revival buildings as a point of departure, contemporary artists are confronted with a tangled knot of questions revolving around appropriations of the Indigenous past, tangible and intangible cultural heritage, and the legacies of the European Conquest. How can artists re-imagine these histories? A short, seventeen-minute video by Los Angeles-based artist Clarissa Tossin entitled *Ch'u Mayaa* (or in English, *Maya Blue*, 2017) enters into these debates with a choreography and montage that create a powerful, poetic intervention within one particularly beautiful, highly charged space, one richly suggestive of a productive dialogue between contemporary art practice, archaeology, and art (and architectural) history.

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Eduardo Abaroa, *La destrucción total del Museo Nacional de Antropología*, Mexico City 2017; Pablo López Luz, *Pyramid*, Paris 2015. Grobet's photo-essay has yet to be published in its entirety, but is available for viewing on her website [Lourdes Grobet](#).

2

Jesse Lerner, *The Maya of Modernism. Art, Architecture, and Film*, Albuquerque, NM 2013. More of the context for these exchanges and appropriations in architecture and design is provided by Wendy Kaplan (ed.), *Found in Translation. Design in California and Mexico, 1915–1985*, Los Angeles 2017.

Ch'u Mayaa is shot at the Barnsdall House (1918–1920, also known as the Hollyhock House), the first of five textile block homes Frank Lloyd Wright built in Southern California in the early 1920s. The building was commissioned as a private home by the millionaire oil heiress, arts patron, experimental theater impresario, and radical leftist Aline Barnsdall, who imagined it as the center of a sprawling arts complex called Olive Hill. During this interval in Southern California in the early 1920s, Frank Lloyd Wright and his office (especially Rudolph Schindler, Richard Neutra, and Lloyd Wright) designed – in addition to the Hollyhock House – Pasadena's Millard House (1923, also known as *La Miniatura*), the Ennis House (1923–1924), the Storer House (1923–1924), the Freeman House (1923–1924), as well as a never realized plan for the Doheny Ranch Development (1921), an ambitious proposal for what is today's moneyed Trousdale Estates neighborhood of Beverly Hills.³ The most notable commonalities shared by all these projects are the abstract geometric references to the ancient monumental architecture of the Maya region and the use of textured, cast concrete blocks, incorporating sand from the site, to add an element of the local earth tones. Numerous scholars have detailed the connections with ancient Maya ceremonial buildings,⁴ but Wright himself was loath to acknowledge “influences”, for fear that it might diminish perceptions of his originality or genius. “Resemblances are mistaken for influences”,⁵ Wright stated dismissively. Yet Wright did acknowledge that from an early age, “primitive American architecture, Toltec, Aztec, Mayan, Inca, stirred my wonder, excited my wishful admiration”.⁶ Later in his life, after his 1952 visit to Mexico City (and especially the newly constructed Ciudad Universitaria campus of the National University, or UNAM), he stated he was “more than ever sure that American Architecture needs only American influences originating in the Toltec area as the great basis of all future architecture [...] Swiss or French influence is now

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The Doheny Ranch Development would have comprised between two and three hundred textile block houses of different shapes and sizes sprawling over a 411-acre site, owned at the time by another petroleum multi-millionaire, Edward L. Doheny. See Greg Gilden and Sam Lubell, *Never Built Los Angeles*, New York 2013, 52–53. Frank Lloyd Wright was in Japan during much of this time, preoccupied with the construction of the New Imperial Hotel in Tokyo, and left much of the work on the Hollyhock House to Schindler, Neutra, and his eldest son, much to the consternation of Barnsdall. See Kathryn Smith, *Frank Lloyd Wright. Hollyhock House and Olive Hill, Buildings and Projects for Aline Barnsdall*, Santa Monica, CA 2006.

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See, for example, Barbara Braun, *Pre-Columbian Art and the Post-Columbian World. Ancient American Sources of Modern Art*, New York 1993, 138–179; and Anthony Alfonsin, *Frank Lloyd Wright, The Lost Years, 1910–1922. A Study of Influence*, Chicago 1993, 221–260. Ruth Anne Phillips and R. Sarah Richardson argue that the architecture of the Inca, Tiwanaku, and other Andean sources were equally influential, if less often acknowledged: Phillips and Richardson, Stone, Water, and Mortarless Constructions. Frank Lloyd Wright and the Pre-Columbian Inca, in: *The Latin Americanist* 57/4, 2013, 97–129.

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Frank Lloyd Wright, *A Testament*, New York 1957, 204.

6

Ibid., 111.

behind the American lighthouse and I hope it stays there”⁷ These Mesoamerican resonances appear earlier in his work (the no-longer existent Midway Gardens, 1915, the A. D. German Warehouse, 1915, the Imperial Hotel, 1916–1922, and the Bogk House, 1917) and continue intermittently until some of his very last buildings (especially New York’s Guggenheim Museum, 1943–1959, a riff on Chichén Itzá’s “observatory”, popularly known as El Caracol). But unlike Amábilis and Stacy-Judd, who both wrote analyses and celebrations of ancient Maya architecture, albeit through highly idiosyncratic interpretations that flew in the face of the more orthodox archaeological understanding of their day,⁸ or those of other contemporaries mining these same sources, Frank Lloyd Wright’s appropriation of Native American sources is elided by his obfuscations and denials. “To cut ambiguity short: there has never been an external influence on my work, other than [...] the great poets”, he wrote in one autobiography. “As for the Incas, the Mayans, even the Japanese – all were to me but splendid confirmation.”⁹

Recently, a century after the construction of the Hollyhock House, there have been any number of unauthorized, popular interventions both in California and elsewhere in the USA attacking public and private monuments that mark the European invasion and Conquest. These attacks are part of a larger, national reckoning, in large part provoked by the brutal murders by police of Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Jordan Edwards, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and too many others, and a contentious reevaluation of how multiple histories of violence ought to be marked in public spaces and in official narratives. Authorities in Carmel, San Luis Obispo, and Ventura, California have removed and put in storage public statues of Junípero Serra (the Franciscan friar – and as of 2015, a saint as well – who led the evangelization of the Californias), similar monuments to Serra in San Francisco, Monterey, Santa Barbara, Sacramento, Mission Hills, Malibu, Los Angeles, and San Gabriel have been toppled, vandalized, or decapitated.¹⁰ Dozens of public

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Frank Lloyd Wright to Carlos Lazo, November 15, 1952, in: Frank Lloyd Wright, *Letters to Architects*, ed. by Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, London 1984, 202. Wright’s use of the word “Toltec” likely reflects a now-outdated understanding of that culture’s influence in Mexico’s southeast. The first edition of Sylvanus Griswold Morley’s survey text *The Ancient Maya* (Stanford, CA 1946, 88) for example, states that around the tenth century, it is “probable that originally some of their ancestors at least had come from central Mexico, perhaps even from Tula, the ancient Toltec capital”.

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Stacy-Judd’s treatment of the ancient Maya revisits many of the ideas of Augustus and Alice Le Plongeon and Charles Étienne Brasseur de Bourbourg; see his *Atlantis. Mother of Empires*, Los Angeles 1939. Amábilis’s esotericism reaches similar conclusions with an altogether different methodology; as in his *Los Atlantes en Yucatán*, Mexico City 1975.

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Wright, A Testament, 205.

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See the essays published in the section “Dialogues. The California Missions and the Arts of the Conquest”, in: *Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture 2/3*, 2020, 53–111; as well as Charlene Villaseñor Black’s introduction, Rethinking Mission Studies, in: *Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture 2/3*, 2020, 3–7. For a more general discussion of the contemporary

statues of Columbus across the USA have met similar fates, as have monuments commemorating the conquistadors Juan de Oñate and Ponce de León. While neither violent nor iconoclastic, Tossin's *Ch'u Mayaa* is also a reckoning with the history of the Conquest and of cultural appropriation. As this rash of demolitions suggests, her intervention (inevitably, and in too many ways to enumerate) takes place in a political and social context, and at a moment that is quite different from the time a century ago when the Barnsdall House was constructed. One important difference is that the Hollyhock House is no longer a private home, and Olive Hill is not (nor was it ever) the sort of ambitious artists' colony that Aline Barnsdall hoped it would become.¹¹ The southern and eastern parcels at the base of Olive Hill were sold off to private developers, and today are the site of a private hospital and a large shopping plaza housing a barber shop, a Thai restaurant, an Armenian grocery store, a drive-through fast food outlet, a faux half-timbered storefront selling fish and chips, a taco shop, and an Asian fusion restaurant. This is the part of the site where Barnsdall imagined constructing a series of studios, home for an artists' residency program that was never realized. Nor were Wright's plans for an open-air theater, an apartment building, artists' residences, and shops – except for two smaller structures, known as “Residence A” (often called the “Director's House”) and (the subsequently demolished) “Residence B”.¹² The Hollyhock House itself, however, has been preserved and restored, and is recognized on the US National Register of Historic Places. It is also, like the Maya ruins of Chichén Itzá, Uxmal, Calakmul, Palenque, Quiriguá, and Tikal, designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site; along with seven other Wright buildings, it is part of a multi-sited monument called “The 20th-Century Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright”.¹³ In short, the Hollyhock House is neither what it was when Barnsdall (briefly) lived there, nor what she imagined it would become today; it is rather now an architectural landmark, a monument.

re-evaluation of public art and monuments in the USA, see Laura Raicovich, *Culture Strike. Art and Museums in an Age of Protest*, London 2021, 126–131.

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Pilar Tompkins Rivas, Civic Virtue. Intersections of Art, Agency, and Activism, in: *Civic Virtue. The Impact of the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery and the Watts Towers Arts Center*, Los Angeles 2011, 40–43. Barnsdall's relationship with the architect, who left for Japan during construction, and whom she blamed for cost overruns and the building's structural problems, was contentious. Her relationship with the city government, to whom she donated the building, was even more so. Wright returned to the site in 1954 for the Los Angeles presentation of his retrospective, *Sixty Years of Organic Architecture. The Works of Frank Lloyd Wright*, in a temporary structure of his design and the prototype for today's Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery. The Cultural Affairs department also operates a small theater on the site, though modest compared to the open-air theater Barnsdall dreamed of building.

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After donating the Hollyhock House to the City of Los Angeles in 1926, Aline Barnsdall continued living in the much smaller Residence B. It was demolished in 1954, eight years after her death.

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See The 20th-Century Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright on the website of the [UNESCO World Heritage Convention](#) (May 22, 2023).

While the Hollyhock House is not a tribute to a colonizer or an evangelist, it is nonetheless one fraught with colonial subtexts. However exceptional and however beautiful, it is like the countless monuments to Columbus, Fray Diego de Landa, Father Junípero Serra, and others, in that it is a product, a marker, and a celebration of the Conquest and of the subjugation of Indigenous Americans erected by Americans of European descent. While most such public monuments use a familiar sculptural style inherited from Europe, that of a bronze or marble bust or larger-than-life, idealized likeness placed on a pedestal and labeled with a commemorative plaque, Wright's monument is a house, designed for a modern, radical client, and replete with Mesoamerican quotations. When people of European descent in the United States hope to assert their "American-ness" and sever the umbilical cord with Europe, they often don red face and buckskin and put feathers in their hair. From the Boston Tea Party to fraternal organizations such as The Improved Order of Red Men and the New Confederacy of Iroquois, the Anglo tradition of "playing Indian" is part of what Philip J. Deloria calls "a still-unfinished, always-contested effort to find an ideal sense of national self".¹⁴ Wright's building performs a more sophisticated sort of architectural red face, an act of cross-cultural transvestitism that its author simultaneously acknowledges ("American Architecture needs only American influences originating in the Toltec area") and denies ("there has never been an external influence on my work").

Tossin's *Ch'u Mayaa* is a collaboration with the choreographer Crystal Sepúlveda, who performs dressed in jaguar print leotards, blue running shoes, and (occasionally) sheer blue dresses with high slits. Both the fabrics worn and postures assumed by the dancer suggest depictions of royalty or high priesthood in the paintings and bas reliefs of the ancient Maya. The "Maya blue" of the title, of the dancer's shoes and dress all reference the exceptionally stable pigment used in ritual costumes and body paintings as recorded in multiple pre-Conquest sources.¹⁵ The jaguar print pattern of the dancers' costumes might derive from that of one of the triumphant royals shown in the murals of Bonampak's room 2, or slightly further afield, the warriors clad in jaguar skins painted at Cacaxtla.¹⁶ But the movements are decidedly not a speculative reconstruction

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Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian*, New Haven, CT 1998. See also Chad A. Barbour, *From Daniel Boone to Captain America. Playing Indian in American Popular Culture*, Jackson, MS 2016. The project has been exported to Europe as well; see, for example, the documentary *If Only I Were an Indian...* (John Paskievich, 1996).

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See, for example, Constantino Reyes Valerio, *De Bonampak al Templo Mayor. El azul maya en Mesoamérica*, Mexico City 1993; and Nicholas Carter, Stephen D. Houston, and Franco D. Rossi (eds.), *The Adorned Body. Mapping Ancient Maya Dress*, Austin, TX 2020.

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While outside the Maya region, the murals of Cacaxtla, Tlaxcala are done in a Maya style and probably represent a battle between armies from the Central Valley and the southeast. See Claudia Lozoff Brittenham, *The Murals of Cacaxtla. The Power of Painting in Ancient Central Mexico*, Austin, TX 2015.

of what Mesoamerican ceremonial dance might have looked like, far from the exotica styles adopted by Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn in *Xochitl* (1915), or Stacy-Judd's gesticulations in his *penacho* and full art deco-Maya regalia, as recorded in his home movies of 1932, filmed in front of the Ennis House.¹⁷ The garments are not anything like the sort of reconstruction of ancient Maya ritual wear we see in those dances, nor those in movies like *Chilam Balam* (Iñigo de Martino, 1955), *Kings of the Sun* (J. Lee Thompson, 1963), or other cinematic reconstructions. The costumes and choreography make even fewer gestures to evoke the era of the construction of the Hollyhock House: no flapper dresses, no shimmies, no Charlestons. The strategy deployed here is something entirely different, one that filters archaeology, art history, and modernist architecture through a lens of re-appropriation and re-conquest.

Ancient Maya dance, "widely represented in ancient imagery"¹⁸ if little studied, is largely the realm of speculation. While we can be sure that "the classic Maya paid great attention to the positioning of human bodies in space",¹⁹ and we can see many, many static depictions of bodies in movement on painted ceramics, murals, and in carvings, most of these ancient choreographies will always remain unknown. Presented as the inhabitant of the house, Sepúlveda greets the dawn, opens the windows, and walks onto a balcony. She gently caresses the cast concrete blocks and breaks into dance. Some of the dancer's movements are so suggestive of specific actions or sources that they invite comparisons to ancient sources. Sepúlveda's body rolls down the broad staircase leading to the terrace outside the music room like one of the bloody prisoners of war, splayed on the stairs depicted in room 3 in Bonampak. The building fragments and crops her body, isolating hands, arms, legs, like shards of broken artifacts. The camera is frequently positioned to leave most of her body out of view, blocked by the architecture. Her hand flits back and forth from an opening by Schindler's flower boxes on the house's eastern side [Fig. 1]. In another sequence, the columns around the garden courtyard obstruct our view of all of Sepúlveda's body except for an extended leg or arm. Like the fragments of human bodies depicted on countless potsherds (in Maya *teping*, or *tepalcates* in Nahuatl), these are isolated excerpts of gestures, extracted and divorced from any original context or meaning. Tossin's editing amplifies this sense of fragmentation. The repeated

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Held in the Architecture and Design Collections of the University of California, Santa Barbara.

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Mallory E. Matsumoto, *The Moving Body*, in: Carter, Houston, and Rossi, *The Adorned Body*, 175.

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Stephen D. Houston, *Telling It Slant. Imaginative Reconstructions of Classic Maya Life*, in: Joanne Pillsbury (ed.), *Past Presented. Archaeological Illustration and the Ancient Americas*, Washington DC 2012, 392.

jump cuts interrupt the continuity of the dancers' movements, further fracturing the actions recorded.

But it is misleading to read too much here through the lens of ancient Maya. The house is named for the Hollyhock flower, Aline Barnsdall's favorite and a graphic source of much of the ornamentations. The *Alcea rosea* was imported from Asia to Europe, and from there to the Americas. A fixture of *Ukiyo-e*, and a symbol of the Edo (or Tokugawa) shogunate, the symmetrical arrangements of the leaves and brightly colored flowers would have been familiar to Wright, a collector and student of Japanese prints who was in Japan during most of the construction process.²⁰ At times, the abstracted concrete adornments on the house can lead us to wonder: is that a feathered serpent's tail or a stalk of hollyhock buds? The influences that shaped the house are not simply Mesoamerican, but like the small businesses housed in the strip mall below, they are Asian, European, and Mexican, in short, a result of the processes of globalization which the European invasion of the Americas accelerated immeasurably.

Other than a brief glimpse of Hollyhock flowers, the frequently contradictory narratives about the house offered by Frank Lloyd Wright and Barnsdall are entirely absent from *Ch'u Mayaa*. The architectural historian Alice T. Friedman has argued that the house's open spaces were conceived as a sort of open-air theater, and arguably Tossin's video returns to that neglected part of the building's original program.²¹ But the dramas surrounding the conflict between the demanding, doubtlessly difficult client and the largely absent yet authoritarian architect as well as the strange and convoluted history of the house following construction are all eclipsed by Tossin's re-taking of the space for an Indigenous subject, and that person's very physical and kinetic occupation of the restored neo-Maya house and the broad expanses of Southern California it surveys. It is, symbolically at least, a gesture of *Reconquista*, to use a loaded term, one which symbolically reclaims a building that borrows liberally from pre-Conquest Mesoamerica.

Tossin's current project – which the global pandemic put on hold – also reinvests a Southern California house with ancient Maya. For this project, she plans to use a Maya Revival house of the same period, the John Sowden House (popularly known as the “Jaws House”, 1926), designed by Wright's son, Lloyd Wright (who directed much of the construction on the Hollyhock House). Using replicas of ancient Maya wind instruments (based on 3D prints from scans of ancient prototypes), and in collaboration with a composer, Tossin will re-appropriate the space with a speculative reconstruc-

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Frank Lloyd Wright, *The Japanese Print. An Interpretation, and The Frank Lloyd Wright Collection of Japanese Antique Prints*, in: Bruce Brice Pfeiffer (ed.), *Frank Lloyd Wright. Collected Writings, vol. 1, 1894–1930*, New York 1992, 116–125 and 221–224.

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Alice T. Friedmann, *A House Is Not a Home. The Hollyhock House as “Art-Theater Garden”*, in: *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 51/3, 1992, 239–260.



[Fig. 1]
Clarissa Tossin, *Ch'u Mayaa*, 2017, video still, framegrab at 5:54, total running time 17:57.
Courtesy of the artist.

tion of ancient Maya music, like *Ch'u Mayaa*, but now through the sounds these instruments produce rather than through dance.

To conclude in first person: in 2011, the Mexican artist Mariana Castillo Deball invited me to participate (along with Mario Bellatín, Pablo León de la Barra, Valeria Luiselli, and others) in a publication of a collection of dust jackets for a collection of books never written. The project, entitled *Never Odd or Even*, was published on the occasion of her exhibition of the same name at the Grimmuseum in Berlin. The palindrome title suggests its own reversal, an unresolved, perpetual back and forth, as well as an algebraic puzzle. The dust jacket for the unwritten book that I contributed to this speculative collection is for a volume called *My Debt to the Ancient Americas*, by Frank Lloyd Wright [Fig. 2]. Its graphic design is copied from, and the text itself (on the book flaps and back cover) channels the rhetoric of the books Wright published with Duell, Sloan, and Pearce in the 1940s.²² While I believe it looks convincing, the architect would certainly never have written such a book, any more than he would have recognized that the Hollyhock House (and the Ennis House, etc.) had been built on the ancestral lands of the Chumash. Unlike the collection's title, the non-existent book I proposed here is not a reversal of anything (least of all the Conquest), not even on a symbolic level, but it does make explicit a heretofore missing recognition.²³

This hypothetical book jacket and Tossin's video share, I believe, a similar spirit, what author and journalist Cristina Rivera Garza calls "disappropriation", an effort to return cultural production "to its plural origins".²⁴ Rivera Garza's neologism is developed in her wide-ranging collection of essays on writing during times of violence, especially the violence that engulfed Mexico following President Felipe Calderon's catastrophic declaration of a "war on drugs". While her collection addresses a range of diverse themes, from bilingualism and writing in a language that is not one's mother tongue to pedagogy and authorship, it repeatedly circles back to the possibilities and challenges of creating a text attributed to a single author based on the experiences of others, experiences of a community, and Rivera Garza's search for alternatives to the paternalistic fantasy of "giving a voice to the voiceless". She reflects on a range of artists and writers who employ very different strategies of appropriation, including Duchamp's ready-mades, Kathy Acker's post-modern cut-ups, and James Agee's "bold, mad, thrilling" collaboration with Walker Evans, the modernist account of Alabama

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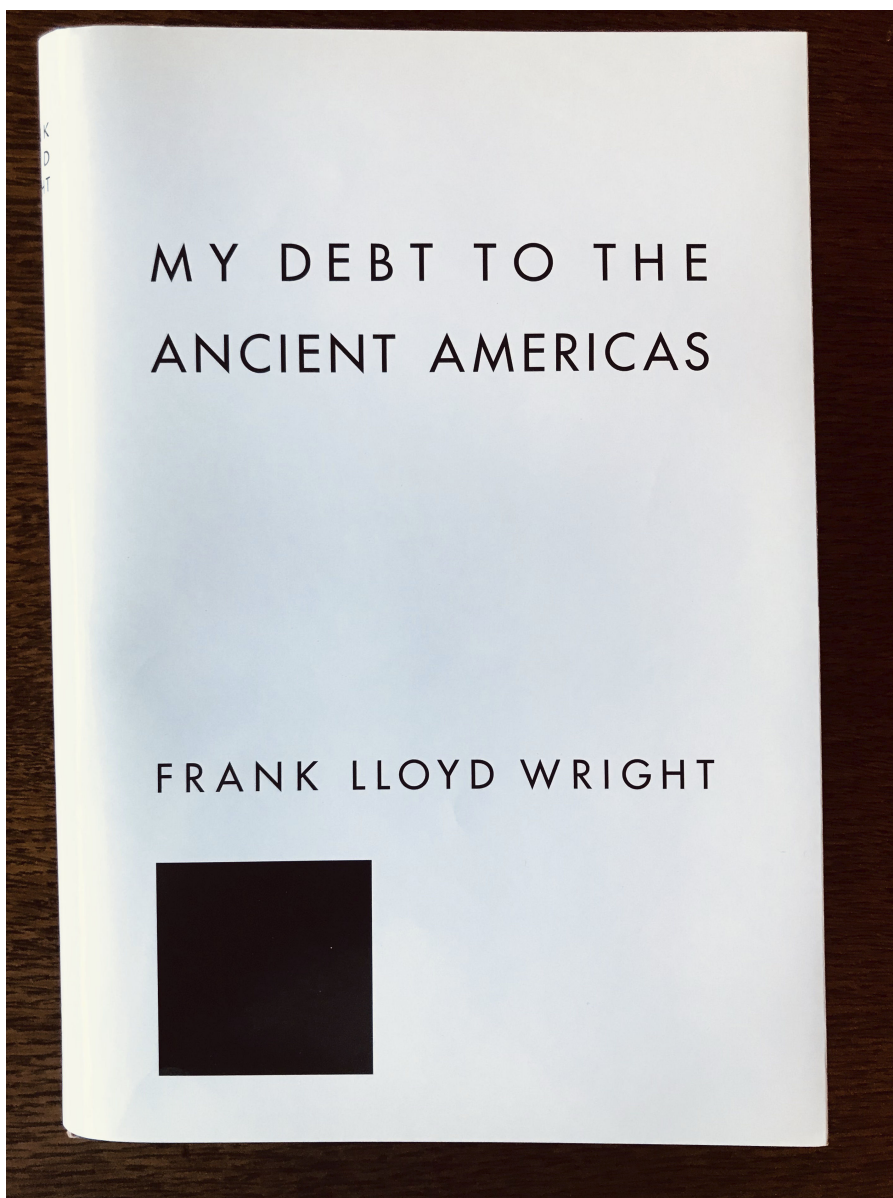
Frank Lloyd Wright, *On Architecture. Selected Writings on Architecture between 1894 and 1940*, New York 1941; id., *An Autobiography*, New York 1941; id., *Genius and the Mobocracy*, New York 1949.

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Mariana Castillo Deball, *Never Odd or Even Volume II*, Berlin 2011.

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Cristina Rivera Garza, *Los muertos indóviles. Necroescritura y desapropiación*, Mexico City 2020, 4. Translations by the author.



[Fig. 2]

Mariana Castillo Deball, Manuel Raeder, and Jesse Lerner, *My Debt to the Ancient Americas* by Frank Lloyd Wright, from the series *Never Odd or Even*, 2012, print. One of a collection of dustjackets for books never written. Photograph by author.

sharecroppers' lives *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, and proposes working toward a model which "exposes the plurality that precedes the individuality on the creative process".²⁵ So while Wright's building is both a collaboration (with Schindler, Neutra, and his own son), albeit an asymmetrical one, and a series of unacknowledged appropriations (principally from anonymous architects of ancient Mesoamerica), Tossin's video, like the dust jacket for Wright's unwritten book [Fig. 2], urges us to recognize what has for too long remained unacknowledged, albeit in oblique, poetic, and – certainly in the latter case – cheeky ways.

Disappropriation is a theoretical model to begin to think about alternative ways of writing others' stories and working collaboratively across cultural differences. One way in which *Ch'u Mayaa* resonates with this model is through fragmentation; rather than presenting a unified, coordinated whole (Wright famously insisted on designing the furniture, carpets, lighting fixtures for his buildings), the video relies on collaboration and fracturing, as argued above. In the same spirit, Castillo Deball's collection of dust jackets involves more than thirty collaborators, as well as evoking additional, unwitting ones like Wright. While the two are clearly very different sorts of cultural products in many ways, as are the writings of Rivera Garza, Agee, and Acker, all signal in their own ways a return of artmaking to a pluralistic and communal process, drawing on the experiences and contributions of multiple participants. Disappropriation is surely not a universal or facile solution to the complex ethical and political issues involved in representing the cultural heritage, class positions, and lived experiences of others. These issues will remain, and the examples discussed above – taken from experimental video, architecture, dance, literature, and other disciplines – all raise different and specific questions that deserve consideration. Though while neither addresses this explicitly, one significant commonality shared by the work of Tossin and Wright are the traumas of the historical backdrop: the European Conquest of the Americas and the ensuing dispossession of land, decimation of lives, and mass destruction of cultures. The auto-da-fé of Izamal, the burning of the Maya libraries, the Caste Wars of Yucatan, and the genocidal wars of Guatemala all destroyed parts of Maya cultures, thus making these cultures and their monumental ruins more susceptible for use as a blank screen onto which others project their own narratives and fantasies. Returning to the original prompt on the divide between art and archaeology, the questions that provoked these reflections, Tossin's video is a powerful catalyst for thinking through some of these issues.

²⁵

Ibid., 65.

[Jesse Lerner](#) is a filmmaker, curator, and writer based in Los Angeles. He is a professor in Intercollegiate Media Studies at the Claremont Colleges. His experimental documentary films have won numerous prizes at film festivals in the United States, Latin America, and Japan, and have screened at NYC's Museum of Modern Art, Mexico's National Anthropology Museum, the Guggenheim Museums in New York and Bilbao, and the Sundance, Rotterdam, and Los Angeles Film Festivals. His books include *The Maya of Modernism. Art, Architecture, and Film* (2011), *F Is for Phony. Fake Documentary and Truth's Undoing* (2006, edited with Alex Juhasz), *Ism Ism Ism/Ismo Ismo Ismo. Experimental Cinema in Latin America* (2017, edited with Luciano Piazza), *The Catherwood Project. Incidents of Visual Reconstructions and Other Matters* (2018, with Leandro Katz), *L.A. Collects L.A.: Latin America in Southern California Collections* (2017, edited with Rubén Ortiz Torres), and *The Shock of Modernity. Crime Photography in Mexico City* (2007).