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**Writing about Aj Pop B'atz': Bruce Grindal and the Transformation of Ethnographic
Writing**

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SUMMARY: The works of Bruce Grindal teach us many things about anthropology's humanistic tradition. With examples such as *Redneck Girl* and "Postmodernism as Seen by the Boys at Downhome Auto Repair," Bruce Grindal demonstrated how we can creatively engage our ethnographic writing to reflect lived experiences. In this article, I examine Bruce's influence on my ethnographic writing and collaborative research in the Maya community of San Juan Chamelco, Guatemala. Since 2006, I have worked collectively with a group of Chamelqueños to investigate the story of their local hero, Aj Pop B'atz'. In the sixteenth century, Aj Pop B'atz' welcomed Spanish invaders to Chamelco in peace, avoiding the death and destruction suffered by indigenous communities elsewhere. Today, he is revered as a model of indigenous identity. Throughout our work together, my collaborators and I sought outlets to share the information learned through our research with the community. In 2012, we co-wrote a bilingual children's book about Aj Pop B'atz' for use in Chamelco's schools. This book offered school children a chance to reconnect with their history, lost through decades of state-sponsored violence. The Aj Pop B'atz' project, inspired by Bruce Grindal's legacy, reveals that ethnographic writing can inform creative collaborative projects, making them accessible to those outside of academia and with whom we work in the field.

The marimba played loudly, as I looked around the table at which I sat with my friends and colleagues, nestled in the side of the municipal hall of San Juan Chamelco, Guatemala. On this cool night in June 2012, we joined Chamelco's political leaders and most prominent residents at a gala celebrating the town fair. The event, sponsored by the municipal government each year, celebrates Chamelco's history and honors a select group of Chamelqueños who have contributed to the preservation of Q'eqchi'-Maya culture. The event was an important one not only for residents of Chamelco, but also for my colleagues and me who had begun our collaborative research more than six years before. My return to Chamelco twenty-four hours before the gala was fortuitous: we had not anticipated the invitation to present our work—a bilingual children's book about Chamelco's founder—at the event. When news of our project reached the mayor, we received an invitation to speak at the gala.

As I sat with my friends, nervously waiting for the moment we would speak to the crowd, I took in the scene around me. The marimba played cheerfully to the mark the occasion. The aroma of the pine branches decorating the room enveloped me. The beautiful colors of the attendees' finest clothing lit up the room. When my colleague and I took the stage a few hours later, I was filled with excitement as we shared our research with the community that felt like home to me.

When we took to the stage, I was overwhelmed by the crowd's reaction. They said we were the first scholars to have “taken them into consideration” and shared our research with them. Others, they said, simply took the information they needed for their research and left, never to return, leaving the community feeling exploited. These comments raised important

questions for me about the nature of anthropological research and the purpose of ethnographic writing.

This paper examines Bruce Grindal's work in making anthropology accessible to academic and popular audiences as a shaping force behind my collaborative ethnographic research in the Q'eqchi'-Maya town of San Juan Chamelco, Guatemala. While Bruce's published works teach us many things about anthropology's humanistic tradition, most important are his lessons about creatively engaging ethnographic writing to reflect our lived experiences. Since 2006, I have worked with a group of Chamelqueños to collect narratives and historical documents about Chamelco's sixteenth-century founder, Aj Pop B'atz'. Since the inception of our collaborative research, my colleagues and I have sought ways to share our research with the community to contribute to their cultural revitalization efforts. After working with Chamelco's municipal government to establish a holiday honoring Aj Pop B'atz', we co-wrote a bilingual children's book about Aj Pop B'atz' for use in Chamelco's schools. The community reaction to this book during the town gala reveals the importance of making our ethnographic writing accessible to those who can benefit from it—the communities with whom we work and the friends we make in the field.

Bruce Grindal and the Transformation of Ethnographic Writing

Bruce Grindal was a man of many talents. He was a skilled carpenter, accomplished author, renowned scholar, dedicated teacher, caring mentor, and good friend. Among his many lessons, he guided us to become ethical anthropologists, strong scholars, and good people. He argued that anthropology has the ability to transcend the boundaries of the ivory tower and that by engaging creative forms of writing, we can reach wider audiences. As anthropologists, we

not only can, but also have a responsibility to share our knowledge with the public. Bruce argued that by keeping “alive the novel and limitless possibilities inherent in our intuitive sensibilities” (1993:46), we can make anthropology a discipline accessible to all.

As a founding father of the Society for Humanistic Anthropology, Bruce worked to make anthropology a field in which scholars could share their ethnographic knowledge with specialist and non-specialist audiences alike. For Bruce, one way to do so was to employ creative writing techniques. “A humanistic anthropology,” he said, “must strike a proper balance between creative effort and critical scholarly writing” (Grindal 1993:46). Too often, Bruce argued, anthropologists feel forced to adopt formal scholarly ways of writing and deny their creativity and innovation.

Bruce saw anthropology’s failure to share its research with those outside of our field as a major shortcoming of our discipline. He argued that, “Much of anthropological publication has been pedantic, arcane, obtuse; the academic and often pretentiously scientific formula of Problem—Data—Argument—Conclusion does not make for exciting reading” (Grindal 1993:47). Instead, he suggested we should write in such a way as to give life to what we have experienced. “We must affect a voice that renders the human story both compelling and true” (Grindal 1993:47). Bruce believed that creative writing sometimes offered a better way to capture the spirits of ethnographic encounters and make anthropology more accessible to those outside of academia.

Bruce’s play—*Flatfish Blues*—is a clear example of his vision for humanistic anthropology. *Flatfish Blues* tells the story of a conversation between an anthropology professor and a young Southern woman on a bus ride from Lake City to Tallahassee, FL (Shephard and Grindal 2002). When the play was performed onstage at the Washington State University in

1986, it gave the audience the unique opportunity to connect with Bruce's ethnographic experiences. With *Flatfish Blues*, Bruce achieved what he said humanistic anthropology should aspire to do: bring anthropology to the public. By doing so, Bruce said, anthropologists "are capable of both perceiving a world culture in the process of creation and helping to fashion its shape and direction" (Grindal 1993:46).

Friendship also became a focus of Bruce's ethnographic writings (Grindal 2011). Bruce (1994, 2011) wrote about his unlikely friendships with the mechanics at a car repair shop. Though Lee, Bobby, and Clayton lived lives that were very different from Bruce's, they found commonality through drinking beer and talking about their families, discussing academic theories (in particular, postmodernism), and politics. Bruce reflects that while the culture of White Southern working class males was far removed from his own, the friendships that he formed with the Downhome Boys were a valued part of his life. Bruce also wrote that along with the friendships we make in the field comes a responsibility to give voice to our friends, though he notes that we can't always speak for them. "We all have our own motives," he writes. "We are teachers and academics. The people about whom I write are not. Each must speak for oneself. Yet, all of this notwithstanding, we do *try* to speak for those whom we claim to know" (Grindal 1994:26). In addition to reflecting our lived experiences, we have a responsibility to share our research with the friends about whom we write. This exchange of knowledge, Bruce shows, is the basis of friendship.

The emergent field of collaborative ethnography is a natural extension of Bruce's ideas about the humanistic nature of anthropology and about making ethnographic writing accessible to all. Collaborative ethnography seeks to represent the indigenous cultural perspective more holistically by engaging local collaborators in the research process (Lassiter 2005). It also seeks

to rectify the power struggle between Western researchers and local informants inherent in traditional forms of ethnography (Clifford 1986). While classic ethnography empowers the researcher, it subjugates the viewpoints of local communities to the authority of Western academia. Collaborative ethnography strives to overcome these issues by giving agency to the indigenous communities that participate in ethnographic work, including their voices in the cultural representations that result from ethnographic process. Participating in collaborative ethnographic research sometimes empowers communities (Rivera Cusicanqui 1997; Vasco 2002; Rappaport 2008; Kistler 2010; Butler 2013; Hale and Stephens 2013; Perry and Rappaport 2013).

Recent collaborative projects recognize that traditional ethnography is written for the academic community and is largely not accessible to the subjects of ethnographic research (Hale and Stephen 2013). In their edited volume, Hale and Stephen (2013:25) state that “we believe that discussions of the political impact of the Otros Saberes research projects are best held in venues other than academic publications like this one.” Academic books hold little value for those who are engaged in on-going political organizing. Rather, non-academic writing offers the communities involved in collaborative research access to the results of such projects. Reflecting on collaborative fieldwork with Brazilian youths, Butler argues that anthropologists often struggle not to privilege the academic writing style over the voices of their collaborators. “A way to overcome these challenges may well be to opt for other forms of collaboration that are not text-based” (Butler 2013:112). Collaborative ethnography advocates non-academic writing or other creative projects as a way to make anthropological research accessible to all.

Nevertheless, though collaborative projects aspire to create “horizontal exchanges” (Géliga Vargas et al. 2013) between academic and community researchers, the asymmetry in

participants' backgrounds (i.e. educational levels, nationality, ethnicity, access to funding, academic reputations) sometimes shapes their roles in the research process (Goode 2013; Hale and Stephen 2013; Perry and Rappaport 2013; Philips et al. 2013; Atalay 2012; Holmes and Marcus 2012; Lowe 2012). While Bodenhorn (2012:230) argues that collaborative research strives to conduct "collaboration among equals," though this ideal is not always achievable. Atalay (2012:137) reflects on this issue in discussing her community-based archaeological project in Turkey, stating, "Despite my efforts to interact as equal partners, the feeling that I was an expert remained. I spent some time in this uncomfortable space before I resolved this for myself. I came to understand that being equal partners does not mean that we have similar knowledge. The strength and beauty of a CBPR partnership comes in the acknowledgement that both sides bring valuable knowledge to the table" (Atalay 2012:137). She elaborates that talking about this imbalance with her local collaborators allowed them to move past this issue and achieve a more successful collaboration. She emphasizes that the key to collaborative research is addressing these power dynamics so that "both partners feel that their power and voice, though different, can come together in balance" (Atalay 2012:138). To explore these issues further, I now turn to my fieldwork in San Juan Chamelco, Guatemala. I first visited Chamelco in 2004, when I was a doctoral student of Bruce Grindal's at Florida State University. His lessons about making anthropology accessible to all audiences and about creatively engaging ethnographic writing to reflect our lived experiences and those of the people we meet in the field have underpinned my ethnographic research in Chamelco over the last ten years.

Collaborative Research in Chamelco

San Juan Chamelco, Guatemala is the homeland of the Q'eqchi'-Maya and has been since the Pre-Columbian era (Las Casas 1927; Ximenez 1930; Tovilla 1960; Viana et al. 1962; Remesal 1966). Designated a *pueblo de indios*, 'Indian town', by the Spanish colonial government in the 1500s, Chamelco remained a semi-autonomous community throughout the colonial era. Chamelco's contemporary population consists of more than 50,000 residents (INE 2002), 98% of whom identify ethnically as Q'eqchi'-Maya. Chamelco is unique among other Maya towns in that community members unite in efforts to use their history to define their present. Nevertheless, Chamelco no longer has the independence it once had. While Q'eqchi' is still the primary language spoken locally, many Chamelqueños living in the municipal center are fluent in Spanish and some have pursued higher education and work in office jobs rather than in traditional agriculture. While Chamelco remains off Guatemala's main tourist route, it faces numerous challenges because of its incorporation into the global economy, the introduction of new religions (especially Evangelical Christianity), high crime rates, and political instability.

Unlike many other Maya communities, Chamelco was not a direct target of the violence of Guatemala's 36-year civil war (Perera 1995, Carmack 1998, Schirmer 1998, Lovell 2010, Adams and Smith 2011). Nevertheless, Chamelqueños, like other indigenous Guatemalans, suffered many other forms of oppression stemming from the civil war, including lack of educational opportunities, the suppression of indigenous ritual and practice, alienation from their history, and the loss of indigenous culture (Konefal 2010, Lovell 2010; Way 2012). I often heard some local schoolteachers lament the few resources they have to teach the history of Chamelco, or even of Guatemala, in their classes. Mario Cu, a Chamelqueño and activist working within the Maya linguistic revitalization movement, shared, "Many times our own education system

emphasizes other elements, far removed from those of each community. It hasn't been until recently that we have started looking at these contextualized topics. And one of these is what [Aj Pop B'atz'] did. We have always said that the children should learn about their own context first, their community first." Chamelco's Catholic priest, Father A López, likewise concurred, "Above all, in the schools, sometimes it's sad, but they learn about the history of other places, of Russia, of Asia, and they don't learn anything about San Juan Chamelco. And it's sad, because people need to know their own history." The lack of educational materials talking about the Maya past stems from governmental attempts to disempower the Maya by alienating them from understanding their history, as Father Denis elaborated. "I think that it is really because of discrimination. Because, let's say, the schools want to "Spanishize" everything." Precluding the Maya from learning about their past strategically undermines their social position (Konefal 2010, Lovell 2010).

In Guatemala and beyond, Maya communities are empowered by tying their contemporary practices and identities to their ancestors' historical accomplishments. For the Maya, historical understanding has long been the key to overcoming oppression and to facing the challenges of the present head-on. Historical knowledge serves as a primary source of power for the contemporary Maya (Clendinnen 1987; Wilson 1995; Warren 1996, 1998; Konefal 2010; Kistler 2014). My colleague in collaborative research, Q'eqchi' activist and former president of the Academia de Lenguas Mayas (ALMG) Sebastian Si Pop explained that despite growing cultural and linguistic revitalization movements, the Q'eqchi' community has not always supported efforts to preserve historical knowledge, because "of the effects of the politics of our state, it's like they condition us, they obligate us to forget it all." This disconnect in the contemporary Maya's understanding of the accomplishments of their ancient ancestors

disempowers them, preventing them from contextualizing their culture in its longstanding historical legacy. Q'eqchi' activist Mario Cu told me, "Someone from Chamelco who doesn't know the history of [Aj Pop B'atz'], it's like they are not from Chamelco." Instead of learning local history, Chamelco's schoolchildren learn mythologized accounts of their past, promoted through governmental discourse, the national media, and indigenous pageants (McAllister 1994, 1996; Schackt 2002; Montejo 2005; Konefal 2010).

The story of Tecún Umán provides a clear example of the mythologized accounts of the Maya past that have been promulgated in Guatemalan popular culture (Otzoy 1999; Montejo 2005, Konefal 2010). Tecún Umán was a K'iche'-Maya leader and warrior who lived during the time of the Spanish invasion. Popular accounts recall that in battle, Tecún Umán mistakenly stabbed Pedro de Alvarado's horse with his spear, unable to distinguish the horse from the Spanish commander himself (Montejo 2005). Given an advantage by the Maya leader's mistake, Pedro de Alvarado fatally stabbed Tecún Umán in the chest. As the blood gushed from his fatal wound, Tecún Umán's chest turned a deep crimson. In death, Tecún Umán transformed into the resplendent quetzal, Guatemala's national bird famous for its red breast. Montejo (2005), however, reports that one Guatemalan textbook states that when Tecún Umán fell to his death, the quetzal fell with him. "The destiny of all Indians," Montejo (2005:56) writes, "is hereby sealed in the death of Tecún Umán, and all children learn that freedom for the Maya people was forever denied them at that fatal moment."

During Guatemala's civil war, Tecún Umán was appropriated by the Guatemalan state as a symbol of the country's indigenous past (Konefal 2010). In 1960, the Guatemalan government named Tecún Umán a national hero (Konefal 2010). Scholars, however, critique the use of Tecún Umán in this way. Otzoy (1999) argues that Tecún Umán "represents an icon of the

Indian space within the nation, ... [it] is a space in which the Mayas are present in a petrified form, leaving no possibility for their development, inclusion, self-determination or autonomy” (Otzoy 1999:164 as cited in Konefal 2010:27). Moreover, the image that Tecún Umán promotes is not one of strength and bravery, but rather of ignorance and misguidedness. Q’eqchi’ activist Mario Cu told me that:

We have good illustrated dictionaries, they say that Tecún Umán was an indigenous person, that he fought against the Spaniards, and instead of killing Don Pedro de Alvarado, he killed his horse. This means that, now, for me at least, Tecún Umán is stupid, he is a brute, because he should have killed [Alvarado] and not the horse. So, this how history is manipulated. It really depends on one’s interests.

Chosen by the state, Tecún Umán represents hegemonic ideals of indigenosity promoted by the Guatemalan state, rather than a symbol selected or celebrated by the Maya themselves. In addition, the story of Tecún Umán is greatly romanticized, with little historical evidence to support his existence. Romanticizing the Maya past in the story of Tecún Umán, the only popular account of ancient Maya culture widely known by indigenous Guatemalans, further alienates the contemporary Maya from understanding their historical accomplishments. Today, Maya communities are empowered by helping to re-write national historical discourse based on their own knowledge of their indigenous past.

In Chamelco, many community residents strive to connect with their past precisely because it serves as one of few sources of power available to indigenous communities in Guatemala. Despite the absence of formal venues for residents to learn about their history, community members seek opportunities to share stories of their Maya ancestors. While many

Chamelqueños doubt the validity of the story of national figure Tecún Umán, they tell stories of local hero and Chamelco's sixteenth century founder Aj Pop B'atz'. Sebastian Si explained, "[Aj Pop B'atz']ⁱ was one of those elected to govern these lands that today we call Alta and Baja Verapaz. ... I think that [Aj Pop B'atz'] for us is a little different than talking about Tecún Umán. Tecún Umán, many people don't believe in him, but here, in our case, it is obvious, explainable." When one drives into Chamelco today via the main road from the nearby city of Cobán, one of the first sights one sees is a statue and mural dedicated to Aj Pop B'atz', located in front of the town's Catholic church.ⁱⁱ Municipal officials frequently invoke Aj Pop B'atz's name during official government activities, such as official meetings, the town fair, and other community celebrations. As Rubén Osorio, once Head of Public Works for Chamelco's municipal government explained, "The municipal seal displays [Aj Pop B'atz'] and our famous bell too, it is something that is our own, no one else has it, it is our culture." In addition to remembering their history through municipal imagery, many community members celebrate their history through folkloric events, most notably the celebration of Rabin Aj Pop Batz, the town's annual pageant that elects a young woman to represent Chamelco in the national Rabin Ajau pageant, held annually in Cobán. Though such pageants are, as all folkloric activities, the subject of great controversy, in Chamelco as elsewhere in Guatemala (McAllister 1994; Schackt 2002; and Konefal 2010), they serve as a way through which some Q'eqchi' learn about their ancestral traditions and gain power in the national political landscape.

Chamelqueños also share historical stories informally in daily conversation and family life. For example, not only did I hear people share stories of Aj Pop B'atz' at family gatherings, municipal events, and in the market, but a few of the market women with whom I did my initial fieldwork in Chamelco related their strength to his ancestry. This practice, and the widespread

community interest in Aj Pop B'atz', struck me as unusual given his death more than 450 years ago.

Although most Chamelqueños recognize Aj Pop B'atz' as a key part of their history, he remains absent from the Spanish chronicles and most official accounts of Guatemalan history. During my 2005 fieldwork, Chamelco's vice-mayor, Huicho Sierra, told me:

Well, there is a lot of information out there, not formally, about what [Aj Pop B'atz'] represents in the life of this town, San Juan Chamelco. To date, though, I don't know of any clear document, that gets rid of any doubt ... what I am sure about is that he was a figure that was here in the colonial era, when the Spaniards, the Dominicans, or the priests, came here to San Juan Chamelco.

President of Guatemala's National Folkloric Committee in 2005-2006, Professor Carlos Leal, shared similar sentiments, stating that no one knows the "real story" of Aj Pop B'atz', as oral accounts of the important leader have transformed to include fantastic elements over time. While a few histories mention that "Cacique Juan Aj Pop'o B'atz'" was named "Lifelong Governor" of the Verapaz province in 1555 (Saint-Lu 1968; Estrada 1979; Guerrero 2007), they do not detail his life. While most older Chamelqueños can and do relate Aj Pop B'atz' story with ease, few children learn his story today due to the limited historical resources of Chamelco's schools, as Doña Gloria, a long-term marketer in the town's municipal market, shared, "... He is a hero for people, but now, little by little, we are losing our custom without realizing it. Talking about [Aj Pop B'atz'], anyone can do it, but we are losing the custom. Many people don't do it anymore. Not anymore." While some parents share this important tale with their children,

others do not, due in part to the loss of tradition they experienced during the oppression of the civil war.

The introduction of new Evangelical Christian faiths has further changed the way that some Chamelqueños perceive their relationship with their history, leading them to stop sharing stories of the past with their children. Some Evangelical churches in Chamelco encourage congregation members to distance themselves from indigenous practices, especially rituals, ceremonies, and in some cases, even the Q'eqchi' language and dress. Congregation members abandon such practice to show devotion to their new faiths.

While integration into Evangelical Christianity can create a new Q'eqchi' identity for some congregation members, it does not necessarily do so. Some Chamelqueños embrace Q'eqchi' practice in altered form even after converting to Evangelical Christianity, as Adams (1999, 2001) suggests. The extent to which Evangelical converts engage with Maya practice differs with each individual, each family, and in each church.

While some Evangelical Christians oppose efforts to connect with Chamelco's Maya past, most local Catholics and *mayanistas* (those who follow a non-Christian religion based on Maya religious belief and practice) unite in their efforts to connect with their history. A growing number of Chamelqueños participate in regional and national Maya resurgence movements, which seek to revitalize Maya practice and power in the wake of Guatemala's civil war. Members of the Maya resurgence movement learn about Maya history from ancient and colonial Maya texts and study the works of foreign anthropologists to authenticate contemporary cultural practices based on their ancestors' historical accomplishments (Asociación Maya Uk'u'x B'e 2005a, 2005b; Montejo 2005; Fischer and Brown 1996; Cojti' Cuxil 1994, 1997, 2006; Wilson

1991, 1995). While such practices reintegrate into Maya communities through cultural change, they become authentic representations of the Maya past for many (Kistler 2013).

During my 2005 dissertation fieldwork in Chamelco, I met with one of Chamelco's most well-known residents, Don Oscar Fernández, to discuss the role that Chamelco's past plays in defining its present and future. Famous locally for his ownership of the Rey Marcos caves, Oscar was a regular contributor to regional newspapers and magazines, publishing articles about Chamelco's history and traditions. Oscar and I discussed the importance that understanding the town's past held for Chamelqueños. "We should invite community members," Oscar proposed, "to join us for a meeting to discuss the story of Aj Pop B'atz'." While some community members knew a little bit about his life, their knowledge was based on mythological accounts of the town founder, rather than historical evidence, he said. Oscar suggested that we could combine our perspectives to develop a holistic picture of Aj Pop B'atz's life. Our continued collaboration, he thought, could allow us the time to investigate this important figure thoroughly. I thought a lot about Oscar's suggestion, especially since his idea corresponded to what I'd learned as a student of Bruce Grindal's about making our research accessible to all. Unfortunately, my field season in Chamelco ended a few weeks later and could not begin our collaboration at that time.

Nevertheless, I returned to Chamelco in Summer 2006 to continue my fieldwork, and the Grupo Aj Pop B'atz' met for the first time shortly after in the living room of Oscar Fernandez's house. Those in attendance for our first meeting included retired Chamelqueño schoolteacher, Otto Chaman; then-president of Guatemala's National Folkloric Committee, Carlos Leal; Oscar; and me. We talked that night about why we should investigate Aj Pop B'atz' and laid out an agenda for collecting information. My Guatemalan collaborators stated their interest in finding

historical documentation to prove Aj Pop B'atz's existence: I sought ways to collect oral histories of his life from community members and explore his contemporary significance. We each brought different knowledge, skills, and qualifications to the table: while I had the time and funding necessary to dedicate myself fulltime to our research, my colleagues had the connections and knowledge we needed to succeed. We did not prioritize any of our interests over the others, instead working together to satisfy all of our missions. Although our approaches and interests did not always align, the other members of the Grupo Aj Pop B'atz' and I worked together diligently to develop a complete historical and cultural picture of Chamelco's great leader and to contribute to local efforts to give all Chamelqueños the opportunity to learn about their history.

From 2006-2012, our group membership fluctuated, ranging between three and five members. While the group's original members were all Chamelqueño community elders, the group later expanded to include a younger Q'eqchi' artist and a former president of the Q'eqchi' branch of Guatemala's Academy of Mayan Languages. I asked Sebastian Si to explain why he wanted to work together to investigate Aj Pop B'atz':

Well, because he also has an historical significance for us. And maybe the only way that we can first recognize and learn about history is to study it, and this allows us to reconstruct and construct the present. Because if we don't, we don't know about our history, we are very far away from many of the things that we want to be. For me, it is very important to know about this figure, know about his decisions, know about what he did, and later, well there is no doubt that he left us a lot

In 2006, our project gained momentum as we visited historical sites, viewed artifacts, met with former officials, and searched for archival records together. In 2009 and 2010, we dedicated ourselves to finding ways to give Aj Pop B'atz' his deserving place in Chamelco's historical

discourse. The Aj Pop B'atz' project was a true collaborative effort: it was not my project that was community-supported, but rather a community-initiated and community-driven effort to which I helped to contribute during my time in the field.

Working together wasn't always easy, though it was always rewarding. To help to overcome the power dynamics embedded in ethnographic research, I made sure our work did not privilege my agenda over theirs. Along the way, each of us stated our interests, our desired outcomes, and the steps that we viewed as necessary for conducting our research. We all contributed to outlining the methods we would use and the goals we would strive to achieve. We tried to ensure that each of us had equal voice and representation in all facets of our work together. While we respected each other's points of view, we sometimes faced conflicts when our ideas or approaches differed. In 2006, for example, as we worked together to translate and transcribe a sixteenth-century Q'eqchi' manuscript recording the story of Aj Pop B'atz', we often heatedly debated the content of the eroded and hard-to-read document as well as its meaning. Ultimately, however, we did not privilege any of our individual perspectives but worked hard to come to a consensus, recognizing the distinct contributions each of us brought to the process. By approaching our work in this way, we sought to create "horizontal exchanges" in our research process (Géliga Vargas et al. 2013) and not privilege my authority as an American scholar over theirs as indigenous activists. Nevertheless, there was always some asymmetry in our working relationship as we were forced to work around my limited fieldwork schedule of a few months each year, and the group only met while I was in Chamelco. To contextualize our work together and the significance of the Aj Pop B'atz' project, I briefly present Aj Pop B'atz's story, as compiled through our interviews with community elders, local officials, activists, teachers, and our archival research.

While few details of Aj Pop B'atz's birth are clear, most Chamelqueños relate that he was born in a rural village far from the center of present-day Chamelco (Estrada 1979). Community members related that from his birth, it was his destiny to be the last great leader of the Q'eqchi' people. While little is known about his childhood, community members and scholars of the region alike state that Aj Pop B'atz' was chosen as leader of the Q'eqchi' when the Spaniards abducted the region's previous ruler in 1529 (Estrada 1979; Guerrero 2007; Kistler 2010).

Sebastian told me:

They say that he was 29 when he was elected cacique of the Verapaz region. They had to look for someone with [a strong] character, because the Spaniards were trying to enter through Baja Verapaz. So, that's how [Aj Pop B'atz'] was elected. And they didn't make a mistake, because he prepared the army, I think he was also in the army, and they had to face the Spaniards and so he gained a great deal of importance, not as history, but as someone who made history in our region. [Someone] who defended our ancestors by cape and by sword,

A council of elders selected Aj Pop B'atz' from among other Q'eqchi' men because of his wisdom, intelligence, strength. While Aj Pop B'atz' spent several years trying to resist Spanish forces, he watched his neighboring communities succumb to the brutality of the Spanish military. He realized that to protect his people from devastation and death, he needed to accept the Spaniards in peace.

Community elders and historical documents state that Aj Pop B'atz' welcomed three Spanish friars to his home, where they baptized him as Catholic (Resurrección document; Estrada 1979; Kistler 2010). While he welcomed the Spaniards, he refused "to sell out" to them, as a former mayor of Chamelco told me. "[He said] 'I will never sell my people.' And that is where

he didn't accept, he refused to negotiate with them." Impressed by his actions, the friars invited Aj Pop B'atz' to travel with them to Spain to meet King Carlos V in 1544 (Estrada 1979; Guerrero 2007; Kistler 2010; Resurrección document). Aj Pop B'atz' made the long journey, travelling by boat with the men to Spain.ⁱⁱⁱ With him, he took gifts of songbirds, quetzal feathers, and local textiles to present to the Spanish monarch. After a long and difficult journey, the men arrived at the King's palace at night. They lined the throne room with the gifts, awaiting their audience with the King the next day. In the morning, elders told me, the King awoke to the beautiful songs of the birds. He demanded to meet Aj Pop B'atz' at once. Many Chamelqueños emphasize what happened next as the most important part of Aj Pop B'atz's story. "When the king of Spain told him to bow, [Aj Pop B'atz'] did not bow in front of the other King, it was that he couldn't bow in front of the other King, because he was also a King. Then, it was there that the King of Spain realized, yes, it was true, [Aj Pop B'atz'] was a King," one man said. Aj Pop B'atz's refusal to observe court custom when introduced to the Spanish king earned him a legendary place in Chamelco's history.

Community elders state that in recognition of this act, King Carlos V gave him many magnificent gifts for Chamelco. Among these gifts were a gold flag, a jewel-encrusted monstrance, a metal cross, a goblet, and most famously, bells for Chamelco's church. The men set off on their return journey. The men struggled to carry the weight of the church bells across the rugged terrain of the Guatemalan landscape. One night, community members state, the men stopped to rest in a village just outside of Chamelco, now known as Sa' Campana. They left the bells on the ground as they rested. When they awoke the next morning, the largest bell had disappeared, having sunk into the ground overnight.^{iv}

When the men completed their journey back to Chamelco, Aj Pop B'atz' assisted the Spaniards in reorganizing Chamelco's neighborhoods. The Spaniards overseeing the development of Chamelco ordered Aj Pop B'atz' to assist them in building the town's first Catholic Church. Chamelqueños recall that he used his supernatural powers to build the church in one night, whistling the construction materials into place. Some elder community members revealed that Aj Pop B'atz' summoned the forest animals to help him with the construction. He hung the Spanish bells in the newly constructed church where they remain to this day.

On August 3, 1555, the Spanish King named Aj Pop B'atz' "Lifelong Governor" of the newly formed Verapaz region of Guatemala (Real Cédula of Chamelco). In doing so, he gave him absolute authority over the region, an act to which Chamelqueños attribute their cultural authenticity. Later in life, however, Aj Pop B'atz' began to regret his alliance with the Spaniards. Doña Valeria, the leader of the union of Chamelco's market vendors, explained, "Well, he got tired of so many problems, so he fled. He was pursued by the Spaniards. He didn't want to die, by being killed, but he wanted to die that way, hiding himself and everything. So, he went to Chamil. And no one could find him. There he disappeared." Like Valeria, many Chamelqueños relate that he fled to the village of Chamil, where he hid in a cave in the side of a sinkhole. Others, like Sebastian Si, however, state that he hid out of shame. "So, I believe in two things. First, he was of advanced age, and second, possibly, he realized the error that he had made in accepting Christianity. These could be two important things in the downfall of [Aj Pop B'atz']." In either case, Chamelqueños state that Aj Pop B'atz' died in this sinkhole, which remains an important pilgrimage site.^v

As I've argued elsewhere (Kistler 2010; Kistler 2013), Aj Pop B'atz' is a symbol of Q'eqchi' value, identity, and kinship for many Chamelqueños. Doña Valeria shared, "One

cannot erase the story of [Aj Pop B'atz'] very easily, for all the work that he did.” She elaborated, “Chamelco is very important, because of its leader. They say that he left his intelligence for our ancestors. This is why there are many students, many intelligent people [here]. Many people say it’s because of him. Aj Pop B'atz' confronted two colliding and conflicting worlds: that of the Q'eqchi' and that of the Spanish colonizers. He mediated the two conflicting value systems to protect and preserve Q'eqchi' culture. Rubén Osorio attributed Chamelco's cultural “purity” to Aj Pop B'atz's actions. “Our people remained pure, and for this reason, Chamelco is one of the municipalities of Alta Verapaz that has the most pure race.” Longtime marketer Doña Gloria likewise stated, “He fought so they didn't take Guatemala away from us, because if he hadn't fought, we would have been already in the hands of the Spaniards.” Chamelqueños attribute their adaptability and the perpetuation of Q'eqchi' culture in their community to his colonial actions. Today, Chamelqueños face a similar struggle: the confrontation of Q'eqchi' practice with the globalizing world. As Chamelqueños seek to integrate global practices into their indigenous lifestyles, Aj Pop B'atz' serves as a model of how to embrace cultural change without sacrificing Q'eqchi' value. Learning the story of Aj Pop B'atz', and connecting their contemporary position to his colonial-era actions, serves as a source of power for many Chamelqueños.

The Aj Pop B'atz' Project

The contemporary significance of Aj Pop B'atz' and his importance as a symbol of Q'eqchi' power led my collaborators to seek ways to ensure that future generations of Chamelqueños could learn the story of Aj Pop B'atz' as their ancestors did. From our inception, the Grupo Aj Pop B'atz' saw the value of our research as our ability to put the story of Aj Pop

B'atz' in its historical context, since many community members lamented the community's lack of knowledge about Aj Pop B'atz'. When I interviewed one of my collaborators, retired teacher Otto Chaman, about our collaborative work, he explained, "Look, Ashley, when we met, I felt very happy because I saw your desire to get to know Juan Aj Pop B'atz'." He elaborated:

This is my point of view, to have certainty about who he was, for example ... where did [Aj Pop B'atz'] come from, I never found it in any document ... so that is what intrigued me, when you came, when you talked to me, I thought now I have someone to help me, since one can't do this alone ... Of course, this has given me more strength to keep investigating [the story of Aj Pop B'atz'] because we have found out many things that we didn't know.

Since Aj Pop B'atz's story had become so mythologized, they argued, it was easy for community members to discount it as pure fantasy. Finding historical evidence of Aj Pop B'atz' would allow community members to recognize his great accomplishments and celebrate their legacy as his descendants. Understanding this important part of their history would not only help them to relearn information lost during decades of state-sponsored oppression, but also to be empowered by the strength of their past.

In the spirit of Bruce Grindal's work, members of the Grupo Aj Pop B'atz' and I focused on finding ways to create a public space for discussions of Aj Pop B'atz' during my 2009 fieldwork in Chamelco. Though some community members recalled a public celebration of Aj Pop B'atz' sponsored by the military dictatorships governing the country in the late 1970s, Aj Pop B'atz' had not been celebrated publicly since that time. My collaborators wanted to ensure that he would be honored in perpetuity, and his story not forgotten after our work was complete.

Otto Chaman explained, “Our work would mean a lot. First of all, when tourists come, when they come to ask what there is here. They [the municipal government] doesn’t have any information. For example, when you came here the first time, and asked for something, did they tell you anything?” I replied, “No. They told me he was the leader, something like that. They didn’t tell me anything else.” He responded, “Yes, that’s what they say. Because that is what it says in the entrance, ‘leader of leaders.’ So, anyone can see it, and it stays there. If you go to a school and ask a student, a kid, who was Don Juan Aj Pop B’atz’, they don’t know ... So, of course, [our work] would change a lot.”

In early August 2009, we petitioned the municipal government to establish an annual holiday honoring Aj Pop B’atz’. We proposed that August 3 of each year serve as his holiday, to commemorate the date on which he was given his honorary title of “Lifelong Governor of the Verapaz region” by the Spanish crown (Real Cédula of Chamelco). After a brief meeting with the mayor, he invited us to present our proposal to the town council.

We nervously waited for our meeting with the town council the following night. When the council welcomed us into the mayor’s chambers, the council asked us important questions: What was Aj Pop B’atz’s true name? What historical evidence had we found to support his existence? Why honor him on August 3? The council asked for copies of the historical documents that we collected throughout our research to display in the municipal building. As the discussion ensued, the council voted in support of our petition. One council member spoke carefully. “Just as the Spanish King named Aj Pop B’atz’ ‘Lifelong Governor,’ let us name August 3 ‘Lifelong Aj Pop B’atz’ Day.’” They asked us to plan an event for August 3 of the following year, to inaugurate the new holiday. Though I returned home from Chamelco a few days later, I spent the year corresponding with my collaborators to plan for the inaugural event.

July 2010 was one of the most interesting and challenging months of my life. I arrived in Chamelco with only one month before the inaugural Aj Pop B'atz' celebration, and my collaborators and I had a lot of work to do. We planned a variety of different events honoring Aj Pop B'atz'. On August 3, we would begin the day with a *ceremonia maya* at dawn to honor Aj Pop B'atz' in accordance with Maya religious tradition. Following the ceremony, we would hold an ethnohistoric symposium about Aj Pop B'atz', featuring talks by local historians and village elders. In the afternoon, we would host a workshop in which symposium participants could share their stories about Aj Pop B'atz' and we could collect information about their understanding of his life. The day would conclude with a public marimba concert.

As we prepared for the festivities, little went as planned, as we navigated some of the challenges of the collaborative research process. While our visions for the event were aligned, our ideas of planning and of time were not. As an American, I wanted all events planned and commitments to participate made ahead of time. Coming from a time-obsessed society, I wanted all facets of the event, from the meal servers and the kitchen staff to the music and decorations to the distribution of invitations, planned with a wide margin of error. In accordance with Guatemalan tradition, my collaborators warned that we should wait until just before the event to make arrangements, expressing concern that overly-obligated community members would lose track of their commitments to work with us amidst their daily business. They were right.

My colleagues became increasingly concerned about our budget limitations as we planned our guest list. While we could only invite 200 guests to participate in the symposium, many more, they said, would benefit from learning the information that we would present. We brainstormed ways to make the event accessible to all. To generate public interest, we would decorate the statue of Aj Pop B'atz' in the town square and start our festivities there with a

public speech by Chamelco's mayor before processing to the town hall for the conference. We needed, my colleagues proposed, to connect with Chamelco's school children, the new generation of Chamelqueños who weren't learning their history at all. To fill this need, we planned a public celebration of Aj Pop B'atz' for school children to be held the day before the inaugural holiday.

On August 3, 2010, two hundred community members, including ritual leaders, representatives of government organizations, teachers, and activists, gathered in Chamelco's municipal hall for the Simposio Aj Pop B'atz'. The panel of experts we invited delivered four academic presentations about Aj Pop B'atz' to attendees: our emcees ensured that the presentations were presented in bilingual form so that all in attendance could understand. The event concluded with a speech from Chamelco's mayor, who, like many of the experts who spoke, reminded attendees that it was their responsibility to carry on the tradition that the inaugural celebration had started. The celebration was now wholly in the community's hands.^{vi}

Despite the mayor's poignant words, the event was less than a qualified success: due to bad weather and technical glitches, few things went off as planned. Nevertheless, it marked an important day for the community, who not only celebrated Aj Pop B'atz', but also the enduring legacy of Q'eqchi' history, for the first time in many years. Sebastian explained that importance of the celebration was not what transpired that day, he said, but rather what it meant for Chamelco's future: that the community honored its commitment to the August 3 holiday and to Aj Pop B'atz'. It was the start of a tradition and that is what mattered.

Having seen the children's interest in learning the story about Aj Pop B'atz', Sebastian and I turned our attention to another project: writing about Aj Pop B'atz' for Chamelco's schoolchildren. The idea for this project had come from a conversation I had with a Q'eqchi'

linguist working in the regional offices Guatemala's bilingual education institute, DIGEBI, many years before, who suggested that teaching the story to children in a formal academic context would transform Aj Pop B'atz' from a mythological figure to an historical one. Reflecting on what I learned from Bruce Grindal about creatively engaging ethnographic writing to make anthropological research accessible, I suggested we write a bilingual children's book about Aj Pop B'atz'. While the idea was mine, the impetus for the project came from my collaborators and their community. Sebastian quickly agreed, explaining the importance of this project. "Really, the moment that we stop knowing a historic person or process is in when education doesn't mention them, and that they are no longer taken into consideration in the curriculum. And that's where, obviously, children slowly stop knowing [them]."

Many of the conversations I had with friends, colleagues, and local officials throughout my many years of fieldwork in Chamelco echoed these ideas. Though my collaborators and I had shared our research with the community through oral presentations, presenting it in written form held greater significance and power, as the Maya have long emphasized writing as the key to preserving historical knowledge. During the pre-Columbian and colonial eras, Maya elite recorded historical information on stele, lintels, ceramics, and books. While storytelling plays a crucial role in Maya cultural education (Montejo 2005), contemporary Maya communities view written documentation as important to legitimizing their historical identity in the larger framework of the Guatemalan state (Kistler 2010). While the Maya communities regard oral narratives as authentic histories, they recognize that national standards require written documentation to authenticate history. For this reason, Chamelqueños my collaborators pushed for our initiatives to provide written documentation to authenticate oral history and enhance the power of local revitalization movements.

For this reason, Chamelqueños my collaborators pushed for our initiatives to provide written documentation to authenticate oral history and enhance the power of local revitalization movements.

In 2012, Sebastian and I worked together on our book project. We fine-tuned our manuscript, collaboratively deciding on the information we would include, the format we would use, and the message we would highlight throughout. We wrote the book, which is fully bilingual in Q'eqchi' and Spanish, for third to sixth grade students. We added a list of historical references at the end of the book, to assist those who were interested in continuing their own research on Aj Pop B'atz'. Sebastian translated the manuscript from Spanish into Q'eqchi', seeking feedback from his linguist colleagues to make sure the language was flawless.

When I arrived in Chamelco on June 22, 2012 after a long journey with almost 500 copies of the book, I was excited to share our research in a concrete form with the community. Following our presentation of the book at the gala, Sebastian and I spent the next few weeks delivering the books to local schools and cultural institutions. After meeting with municipal officials to come up with a plan for distributing the books, we visited more than twenty community organizations, the municipal offices of nearby towns, seminaries, and government offices to donate copies. We presented our book before all of Chamelco's teachers during the municipal celebration of *Día del Maestro*, "Teacher's Day," and talked to the teachers about how to use the book with their students. Following the event, we distributed two copies of the book to the heads of each of Chamelco's more than fifty schools. Chamelco's municipal government hosted a press conference to announce their intention to include it in school curriculum.

Our visit to Chamelco's public library perhaps best reveals the significance of the book for Chamelqueños. Located in the town's municipal center beyond the Catholic church, Chamelco's public library is frequented by schoolchildren who are sent to research various projects for their classes. Since schools in Guatemala have very little economic support and most children come from families of lower socioeconomic standing, they go to the library to use the textbooks they need. Children gather in the library during afternoon hours to use its computers to type assignments or access the Internet, or to complete homework assignments. I visited the library many times during my field research in Chamelco in search of historical resources about the town or the region. The librarians always reported that they had no information about the town's history to share with the schoolchildren or foreign researchers.

In June 2012, Sebastian and I walked eagerly up the staircase into the library with our arms full of books. The librarian, a soft-spoken woman who had often assisted me during my visits to Chamelco's library, greeted us. The sun streamed in through the large windows on the wall of the library as we sat at one of the small children's tables in the center of the room. The librarian listened with great interest as we explained the reason for our visit. We presented her with the copies of the book, and she sat for a moment without speaking, with her head bowed. When she lifted her head a few moments later, I saw the reason for her hesitation: her eyes were brimming with tears. When she began to speak, she thanked us for our donation. When children came to the library to research Chamelco's history, she said, she had nothing to offer. Now, she said, she would be able to assist them in learning about their history. She could make a difference, she said.

Our experiences presenting our collaborative work in written form during June 2012 were transformative for me and were inspired by Bruce Grindal's ethnographic legacy. In early July,

we signed contracts with two local NGOs working on issues of bilingual education, GTZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft Fur Technische Zusammenarbeit) and Xch'ool Ixim, granting them the rights to print more copies of the book for more widespread distribution in local schools. The community reaction to our children's book revealed not only the profound potential of collaborative research for cultural revitalization in the Maya area, but also the importance of making anthropological research accessible to the communities whose story it is. By writing about our research as a children's book for use in Chamelco's schools, we used creative writing to make our research accessible to a public audience, as Bruce argued that we had a responsibility to do. In this project, we sought to engage anthropology's humanistic tradition, made possible by Bruce Grindal's teachings and many published works.

Returning to the scene with which I began this paper, the presentation of our children's book during Chamelco's town gala in June 2012 marked the culmination of six years of collaborative ethnographic research in Chamelco. The collaborative nature of the Aj Pop B'atz' Project stems from an extension of Bruce Grindal's commitment to humanistic anthropology. Bruce's dedication to making anthropology accessible inspired our work and encouraged me to explore new ways to share my research. Above all, Bruce taught us that ethnography is about taking chances, and that we need to push the boundaries of traditional ethnography to communicate our ideas creatively and with a wider audience. By employing children's literature as a form of ethnographic writing, my collaborators and I found the opportunity to help the community relearn a part of their history lost through decades of state-sponsored oppression. This history serves as a key source of power for Chamelqueños, as it does for Maya communities throughout Guatemala. This project, and the work of Bruce Grindal, reveals that humanistic

ethnography can and should make a difference in the lives of the people we work with in the field.

Over the course of time, Aj Pop B'atz's name was transformed in historical records to Don Juan Matalbatz. Some Chamelqueños suggested that his name was changed by the Spaniards during his baptism to Catholicism while others suggested that the Spaniards misinterpretation of the Q'eqchi' language led to his renaming. As a result, many Chamelqueños Whatever the case, the reason for the change in Aj Pop B'atz' remains unclear. For consistency's sake, I have replaced the name Don Juan Matalbatz with the name Aj Pop B'atz' in brackets in the quotes used throughout this article.

ⁱⁱ From 2004-2010, this mural read "Don Juan Matalbatz, cacique de caciques." In 2010, however, the municipal government repainted the mural to reflect Aj Pop B'atz's true and historical name. Visitors to Chamelco now see not only the beautifully painted statue, but also the new mural, which reads "Juan Aj Poop B'atz', cacique de caciques."

ⁱⁱⁱ Just how Aj Pop B'atz' and his companions travelled to Spain is the subject of great speculation in Chamelco. Some community elders in the rural village of Chamil recalled that he used his supernatural powers to fly through the air to Spain. Others stated that he walked through caves under the earth's surface. Historical records held by Chamelco's cofradías, however, state that he travelled with the Spaniards by boat to Spain (Estrada 1979; Kistler 2010; Resurrección document).

^{iv} Today, Chamelqueños state that the bell remains below ground in the village of Sa'Campana. It rings from within the earth, they say, during planting and harvest season. During my 2012 trip to Chamelco, I heard from one local resident that some local residents found the missing bell while exploring a cave in this village. The bell was there intact, they stated, perfectly preserved inside the cave. Stories like this one reveal the great attention that Chamelqueños give to the story of Aj Pop B'atz' and underscore his contemporary role.

^v Many Chamelqueños relate that there are human remains in the cave. Despite my attempts to verify this claim, I was not able to enter the cave due to high water levels inside. One elder from the village of Chamil, however, told me that while Aj Pop B'atz' died in this cave, his body was moved after his death to a cave high up in the mountains around the village of Chamil so that it

would not be found and desecrated by the Spaniards. Catholic and *mayanista* Chamelqueños, he said, visit both locations to perform *mayejak* petition ceremonies to ask for Aj Pop B'atz's blessing at certain times in the agricultural cycle.

^{vi} The community appropriated the holiday and planned a small scale celebration for the 2011 Aj Pop B'atz' Day. In 2012, the community planned a large-scale celebration, featuring both a Maya ritual ceremony and a Catholic Mass, a symposium, marimba music, traditional dances, a temporary museum of the gifts Aj Pop B'atz' brought back from Spain, and a sale of traditional foods. In 2013, they celebrated the holiday on a small-scale once again, with a Maya ritual ceremony in Chamelco's church plaza.

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