

Cultivating Nichimal K'op (poetry) from the Heart: Indigenous Women of Chiapas

Este ensayo examina la obra de Enriqueta Lunez Pérez y Angelina Díaz Ruiz, poetas pertenecientes a las comunidades mayas tsotsiles de Chamula, Chiapas. Se analiza cómo las poetas abordan el capitalismo y el catolicismo en su trabajo para demostrar la supervivencia de la comunidad tsotsil. En particular, este trabajo explora la manera en la cual el género influye en la crítica que se manifiesta en los versos. Sobre la base de la discusión de Kevin Gosner y su uso de la economía moral, sostengo que el sentido superior de una economía moral permite que las poetas desarticulen y desarmen ambas fuerzas históricas desde una enunciación de mujer indígena y pobre.

Mu'yuk ono'ox xich' ak'bel xch'unobil pe
la jta ti xi joybijuk ta antes mu jna' k'uxi
mu ja'uk bak'ni /There were no
promises, but I managed to be born a
woman...

Angelina Díaz Ruiz¹

k'ambil kantilaun li' ta yut ch'ul na/uni
jutebun mu'yuk ojtikinbilun ta ora
k'ak'al /I am the privileged candle in
this temple, I am the miniscule part
unknown to time.

Enriqueta Lunez Pérez

The Mexican state of Chiapas occupies a unique place in the international political as well as cultural imagination. Centuries of land and labour exploitation by capitalist sectors and institutionalized racism against indigenous people culminated in the 1994 Zapatista uprising. Instantiated through the charismatic figure of Subcomandante Marcos, the movement provoked an outpouring of solidarity throughout the world and continues to fuel the international community's interest (see Harvey 1998, Hayden 2002, Collier 2008 to name a few authors who focused on the Zapatista uprising in the United States). Indigenous women have been critical in this movement (see the excellent essays in the anthology edited by Speed,

Castillo, and Stephen's *Dissident Women: Gender and Cultural Politics in Chiapas*). Women's literary output, however, remains largely understudied. And yet, despite the restricted circulation, poetry in the various local indigenous languages represents a powerful expression that invigorates and adds another dimension to this rebellion.² In the early 1980s Maya and Zoque members founded informal literary groups predicated on identity and cultural expression. But it was in the aftermath of the Zapatista uprising that arts and cultural organizations succeeded in officially promoting indigenous cultural productions from the short story to the novel.³ The historical weight of this unprecedented endeavour cannot be underestimated given the powerful function narrativization about indigenous peoples (or what most critics simply describe as *indigenista*) achieved in the popular imaginings of native people. CELALI (Centro Estatal de Lengua, Arte, y Literatura Indígena) becomes an official cultural entity after the Zapatista uprising. CELALI's initial funding had direct ties to the 1996 Peace accords between the EZLN (Zapatista Army for National Liberation) and the Mexican government. In 1997 - with the full financial support of the state government - Tsotsil, Tzeltal, Chol, and Zoque cultural producers, who in most cases were self-taught, began to create plays, poetry, and narratives with great enthusiasm.⁴ CELALI along with other cultural centers continue to encourage this artistic output through fellowships and literary workshops.⁵ Headed by indigenous men and women, the organization strives to play an instrumental role in sponsoring creative writing workshops and literary contests among the Maya and Zoque communities of Chiapas even though its operating budget has reached a precarious state in the last years.⁶

Financial support animates indigenous language literary publications, but for indigenous women limited access to higher education explains to a degree the reduced number of first books of poetry; other women have made the stage their primary form of expression⁷ Enriqueta Lunez Pérez, Mikeas Sánchez, Angelina Díaz Ruiz, Juana Karen Peñate and Ruperta Vásquez exemplify women's poetic voices in Chiapas. Due to space limitations, I shall focus on the work of Enriqueta Lunez Pérez and Angelina Díaz Ruiz who are in solidarity with *zapatismo* but who are not active on the ground. Poetry serves as a platform from which they can launch their critiques as well as affirm their identities. Their verses rely on a Tsotsil *cosmovisión* - a capacious concept that includes cultural motifs, beliefs, values, and practices but also, as I will explain, the idea of a superior moral economy. Kevin Gosner in *Soldiers of the Virgin* discusses moral economy as a useful framework to interpret the 1776 Tzeltal rebellion in Chiapas. *Soldiers of the Virgin* builds on the works by E.P.

Thompson (1971) and James Scott (1976) who analyze the motivations driving peasant rebellions in England and India, respectively. Thompson and Scott argue that when certain communities perceive a threat to their moral economy, ethical outrage leads to political action. Moral economy represents a community's "shared moral universe, a common notion of what is just..." (James Scott as qtd in Gosner 7). According to Gosner, a violation of the main moral principles identified as "...the norm of reciprocity and the right to subsistence" inspire social discontent (7). I extend this idea of a moral economy in my analysis of the force driving the poets' verses, as the norm of reciprocity in Maya religion saturates Enriqueta Lunez Pérez's stanzas, and the idea of a right to subsistence influences Angelina Díaz Ruiz's poem.

This section contextualizes and analyzes the work of Lunez Pérez and Díaz Ruiz, who are part of an emergent but strong contingency of writers in Chiapas. They express an aesthetic concern with the nuances of creating in their Native language. Lunez Pérez and Díaz Ruiz buttress their poetic renditions with the idea of a Maya Tsotsil *cosmovisión*, which I argue serves them as a springboard to express a superior moral economy. Organic intellectuals explain *cosmovisión* as a unique lens shaped by indigenous languages through which they interpret the world. Q'anjob'al novelist and critic, Gaspar Pedro González in *Kotz'ib', nuestra literatura maya* (1997) writes that *cosmovisión* can be found in numerous community-making sites such as in the oral tradition, the discourse in textile signs, and in the written tradition (both in glyphs and alphabetic systems). In its most recent iteration, the critic Arturo Arias synthesizes *cosmovisión* in English to refer to the Mayas in the Guatemalan context as the "will to become constituted as subjects through an agency process permeated by the community's cultural values, regardless of whether these are liminal to Western values or a hybrid of both Western and ladino values" (75). In Chiapas, *cosmovisión* connotes all of these various meanings. In relation to the poems, I contend that *cosmovisión* facilitates the poets' display of a superior moral economy in addressing two distinct interpretations of history relevant to indigenous peoples. The first relates to religion and the second to capitalism. My analysis of Lunez Pérez and Díaz Ruiz's poems demonstrates that their locus of enunciation as indigenous women rooted in their community affects and effects their critique of these historical forces. A bilingual and comparative exegesis of their poetry would be optimal, but due to space constraints, I focus on the self-translated versions - noting when necessary any meaningful differences.⁸

POLITICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

A discussion of indigenous literature in Latin America cannot discount the *indigenista* tradition that inevitably indigenous writers interrupt. Many foundational *indigenista* texts distinctly aligned with Mexico's official *indigenismo* to the detriment of indigenous communities - especially those writers producing after the 1920s. *Indigenista* novels set in the Chiapas region aimed to dramatize the social issues afflicting indigenous peoples. In doing so, however, the novelist portrayed indigenous women characters as uneducated, objects in sexual and political transactions, unhygienic and most tellingly - silent. Immortalized in classics like Ramón Rubín's *El callado dolor de los tzotziles* (1949), the indigenous female protagonist María Manuela is represented as an animal, a woman who "...endured silently the irremediable ... unjust misfortune" (23). In *indigenista* narratives, the indigenous woman sustains oppression without speaking. Indeed, who can forget the nannie in Rosario Castellanos' classic *indigenista* novel, *Balún Canán* (1957)? Her silence infuriates the Arguello matriarch. The nanny's striking and memorable acquiescence culminates in her kneeling without protest (like a child about to be punished) as she is beaten on the head "with the cutting edge of the comb. She did not defend herself, did not complain" (232). Much has already been written about the polemics of the *indigenista* literary tradition in Latin America, and I shall not rehash those arguments here except to underline that in the *indigenista* literary tradition the indigenous subject does not speak, as the writers' cultural referent is different to the one he or she describes.⁹ In the incisive words of the Peruvian literary critic Antonio Cornejo Polar, *indigenista* literature does not "...even in the most radical cases ... manage to incorporate indigenous sectors within the communication circuit ... Like the chronicles, *indigenista* literature presupposes a distant reader, far from the universe that is presented in the text" (112). While indigenous writers have generated important spaces, the production of *indigenista* literature continues. Indeed, as Cynthia Steele notes, although a new wave of literature has emerged about indigenous societies that differs from works such as those by Rosario Castellanos due to their approximation to an indigenous subjectivity, these texts revive the *indigenista* tradition of earlier decades (249).¹⁰ In a similar argument, Brian Gollnick in "El ciclón de Chiapas," identifies *indigenista* texts published in the late 1980s as "simply another development of *indigenista* literature" (214).

Nonetheless, the relationship between *indigenista* and indigenous literature need not simply reflect an opposition; rather, we must perform what Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) coins as a

contrapuntal reading - albeit in a different context. Said describes contrapuntal reading as one that takes into account the force of imperialism and resistance to it, to read back and realize what was subjugated (66). A contrapuntal reading of *indigenista* and indigenous texts illuminates the epistemic and ontological stakes of contemporary indigenous writings in the decolonization process: a process that obviously is marred with contradictions. In celebration of Indigenous Peoples Day in 2013, Rosario Castellanos' poetry, *El rescate del mundo*, appeared in a compact disc distributed under the same title. Indigenous writers Roselia Jiménez (Tojolabal), Mikeas Sánchez (Zoque), Adriana López (Tseltal) and Enriqueta Lunez (Tsotsil) translated the poems for this project. Collaboration in this case points to the complex ways indigenous writers relate to *indigenista* productions. A contrapuntal reading would have to grapple with Rosario Castellanos as someone who worked for the INI (National Indigenist Institute) but also someone whose work illustrated the racism embedded in the elite families of Chiapas, of which she was a part, and who tried to distance herself from the racism that plagued this social sector.¹¹

Traditional anthropology and leftist feminism research tends to focus on the victimization of indigenous women who need to be rescued by Westerners from their male counterparts. Christine Eber's scholarship departs from this approach and argues that indigenous women should not be perceived as completely oppressed within their communities or envisioned as functioning within "complementary" systems where sexism does not operate (8). Instead, she argues that individual experiences must inform the ways we understand social movements and women's lives. Contextualizing collaboration between women, Mexican anthropologist Aída Hernández Castillo asserts that in the beginning of the 1980s, indigenous women were between "ethnocentric feminism and ethnic essentialism." She points out that Mexican feminists who chose to work with indigenous women, especially in Chiapas, wrestled with the legacy of a Marxist theoretical premise that they (the feminist intellectuals) could bring indigenous women to consciousness about their oppression, as bearers, by definition, of a "false consciousness" (214). Traditional indigenous women critics add another layer of complexity to the issue as they dismiss any feminist critique of indigenous movements as evaluations operating from a Western base of thinking.¹²

THEORIZING FROM INDIGENOUS WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES

The work of indigenous women entering higher education institutions theorizing a triple oppression promises to grow in years to come. One of

the most salient issues indigenous women grapple with in their theorization of indigeneity relates to the burden of identity signifiers attributed to their bodies; more so than their male counterparts, women embody markers of identity personified by language and dress. In this way, the female body serves as a synecdoche for culture: the ribbons in her hair, the *huipil* (blouse), and *corte* (skirt) become part of the way the indigenous female body is consumed. The reification of the indigenous female body as representative of culture contributes to her oppression. Georgina Méndez Torres, a sociologist from the Maya Chol community, presents a critical view of reducing indigeneity to women's clothed body. She notes with care:

Although we Indian women begin to be protagonists of our stories, we are required, either by our community or by the non-indigenous society, to be the carriers of indigenous 'authenticity,' articulated through the use of traditional dress, the transmission of indigenous languages and the management of the body, elements that act as markers of identity that reproduce, in certain contexts, power relations between the sexes and we face the dilemma of how to live changes in our identities without thereby allowing others to question our word. (27)

Particularly for the poets I discuss in this essay, literary production affords them another way to deflect the gaze on the external markers conventionally read as indigeneity to other ways of seeing and hearing indigenous women. In this sense, they write themselves into a literary history that has traditionally represented them as abject characters and simultaneously hails them as embodiments of authenticity.

TWO MAYA TSOTSIL WOMEN POETS

Literary production by indigenous women in Chiapas epitomizes an unequivocal, critical departure from the ways writers and anthropologists have imagined, represented, and discussed them across various disciplines. Enriqueta Lunez Pérez and Angelina Díaz Ruiz live in Chamula, a hamlet about fifteen minutes from San Cristobal de las Casas. Both poets have participated in discussions focused on the problematic of producing literature in an indigenous language and Spanish, more so than any of their female predecessors. CELALI along with various institutions sponsor these conversations through conferences and workshops organized in Chiapas, Mexico City, the Yucatán Peninsula, and Oaxaca among other places. Other issues explored in these regional and national gatherings include theories of translation, self-translation, aesthetics, *cosmovisión*, modernity and tradition as well as oral and written conventions.

Both Lunez Pérez's and Díaz Ruíz's acts of writing challenge centuries of linguistic and cultural oppression as well as transform gender expectations in their communities. Inverted in their metaphors and political positions lies the popular image of the hermetic, religious, and submissive indigenous woman who lacks literacy (in the alphabetic sense). Instead they create active and intelligent speakers who intervene in capitalist and religious discourses. The poets accomplish this new image through cultural-specific symbols along with a superior sense of morality to counter the suppression of Maya Tsotsil spirituality as well as charging and sentencing those who control the modes of production.

One of the most vehemently contested colonial impositions in Chiapas remains embodied by religion. Historically, Maya women played critical roles in the religious rebellions of the highlands in the 1700s. In *Soldiers of the Virgin: The Moral Economy of a Colonial Maya Rebellion* (1992), Kevin Gosner identifies Dominica López, María de la Candelaria, and María López and their visions of the Virgin Mary as responsible for spurring on indigenous worship communities that strove to replace the orthodox Catholicism imposed on them, thereby ensuing multiple Maya/Spanish racial conflicts. Indeed, most racial tensions in colonial Chiapas directly involve a symbolic and material wrestling over religious authority.

Struggles over religious beliefs systems are manifested in Enriqueta Lunez Pérez's first book, *Yi'beltak ch'ulelaetik/Raíces del alma* (Roots of the Soul), published in 2007. Cultural references and symbols favor a Maya Tsotsil *cosmovisión* in the poems - even though these appear shrouded in Catholicism. In interviews, Lunez Pérez insists that her knowledge, stories, and experiences originate from imprints left in her heart by the ancestors rather than the books she has certainly read. In the Tsotsil culture, one thinks and speaks from the heart. When someone inquires, "how are you," that person literally means, how is your heart? The heart represents the fountain/repository of knowledge, the mind, the one that filters experiences and stories. While analyzing a sixteenth century Maya Tsotsil dictionary, the linguist and anthropologist Robert Laughlin found over eighty metaphors to refer to the heart, confirming this organ's centrality in the Maya Tsotsil culture.¹³ Thus, the heart becomes a poignant and powerful metaphor in much of the poetry.

Allusions to celestial bodies, *nahuales*, and nature abound in the collection. Through key objects, colors, and rituals, Lunez Pérez exalts the spiritual elements of her culture. The poem I examine here, "La jti jbe' svayel kajvaltik/ Desperté a Dios" (I Awoke God), intervenes in a religious discourse that dialogues with the last 500 years of history in Chiapas. Lunez Pérez states, "I awoke God/ near midnight/in turn for him staying

up/ I offered him/ seven verses/ seven absolutions/ I confessed to him my transgressions/ all of my sins/ and I kissed his forehead" (1-9).¹⁴ The image of a young woman daring to wake God delicately inverts the historical power relations between indigenous peoples and the imposition of a Christian God. Direct access to God unravels the notion that individuals need an intermediary, one usually represented by the figure of a priest. In juxtaposing her contrite confessions and gestures as in the line, "I kissed his forehead," the speaker invokes a superior moral economy, conjuring up the image of a mother kissing the forehead of a child. The speaker's maternal gesture makes her more powerful than the image of the God-child she portrays in the first stanza.

The second section in the poem brings the reader back to the everyday religious practices in Chiapas in which reciprocity is central. She writes: "I awoke God near midnight and the never-ending time consumed the seven colors/the earth drank the sacred pox, and the incense holder slowly turned off/ the dove became my flesh" (10-16)¹⁵. An image of a ceremony or offering acquires centrality in these lines. Reciprocity characterizes religious practices in Maya communities. In other words, the speaker makes an offering to obtain something in return. Lunez Pérez mentions that people use candles in ceremonies to exorcise evil or cure sickness; the candles must represent seven colors (personal communication). The explicit mention of the material objects used in a ceremony/offering also allows Lunez Pérez to shift the reader's attention to a moment of spiritual communion. She concludes the poem with the verse, "I awoke God near midnight and slowly time transformed my prayer into sublime desire" (17-20). The image of a dove becoming her very flesh forcefully contrasts the image of the dove in the Catholic version of the Holy Spirit without flesh. In this way, she cleverly undermines the impact of religious indoctrination, exchanging prayer for "sublime desire." Maya concept of time trumps the Christian one. Although both indigenous and Catholic traditions influence the poem, the speaker's maternal relationship to God reinforces a Maya superior moral economy. More important, a ceremony or offering represents the right to reciprocity, and one where in the context of the poem, the female speaker holds ultimate power.

That indigenous languages survive despite historical attempts to annihilate even their traces imbues the creation of poetic texts in these languages with a political commitment, one that consumes critics and poets. Fluency in an indigenous language signals identity, authenticity, and resistance. Many poets, especially the generation that spearheaded the indigenous literary renaissance that reached its apogee in the 1990s, insist all writing should be originally written in the native language. Nonetheless,

Lunez Pérez concedes resorting to Spanish on numerous occasions to write and translate back into Tsotsil. Lunez Pérez indicates that no one should penalize indigenous peoples for not knowing how to write in their language as the racist political policies enacted through the educational system precluded many from acquiring literacy in native languages. The absence of bilingual books reflects not only her experience as a young student but that of the majority of indigenous groups before the 1980s. Poets like her begin to fill this void. Now students have access to bilingual books and can simultaneously learn from the standardization of the language's orthography. In fact, secondary schools in Chiapas require their students to read her second book, *Juego de nahuales*. Literary production, then, acts as an important decolonizing strategy for young Tsotsiles.

In a recent interview, Lunez Pérez offers advice to her Tsotsil compatriots, urging them (whether they migrate within Mexico or abroad) not to feel embarrassed nor forget about the culture. She reminds them that culture represents an inheritance the Maya ancestors bequeathed them. I find this interview particularly striking because it was filmed by another Maya woman artist and it concludes within the domestic sphere, shepherding lands along with an untranslated version of the poem, "Tajimol chu'lelaetik/Juego de nahuales" or "Game of Energies."¹⁶ In Tsotsil land, some people believe lambs represent God on earth. Notably, the subject of the poem is the concept of "nahual," a central philosophical tenet in Mesoamerica thriving in the oral tradition. Depending on the region, but generally similar in spirit, upon birth the nahual embodies an energy or animal protector that accompanies an individual throughout life. In some communities these energies correlate to one of the twenty energies sculpted in the sacred calendar, while in others, a *nahual* typifies an individual who can transform into its animal double. In the context of this interview and the strategic use of the poem, the writer establishes a relationship between lambs and God, again, strategically reinforcing a Mayan super moral economy at work.

Angelina Díaz Ruiz's, *Mujeres de mi presente/Ta jk'ak'al tana antsetik* (Women of My Present) included in the book *Sbel sjol yo'nton ik'/Memorial del viento*, offers readers a more politicized understanding of her role as a woman poet. A cursory view of the themes in her poetry incites the reader to recognize immediately a tangible preoccupation with gender. She invokes a feminist geography through Suyul - an area in Tenejapa recognized as the home of the Virgen Suyul - as her origin, a referent that affects and influences her engagement with women.¹⁷ Most of her poems speak of the women in her life; others pay homage to the Virgen Suyul. Díaz Ruiz's explicit admiration and praise of her mother's strength allude

to her strong bond with women and a sense of solidarity between them. In contrast, in a recent interview, the poet bluntly reveals that despite her father profession as a teacher, he opposed the cultivation of her writing and her desire to pursue higher education. Díaz Ruíz's father's adverse reaction to her writing prompted him to confiscate her notebook, work she never recuperated.

In the interview, Díaz Ruíz accentuates the vital function writing played in her empowerment as an indigenous woman. She states that expressing herself through the written word allowed her to defy her community's gender role expectations as well as the dominant society's stereotypes about the Maya Tsotsil who are only supposed to excel in physical labour. The first prize she earned in an essay contest entitled "Soy indígena, ¿y tú?" was a fellowship to attend the university.¹⁸ She proudly asserts that composing essays allowed her "... at 17 [to] demonstrate[d] that I am not what they wanted me to be." While Díaz Ruiz expresses beauty and love in her poetry, her verses also manifest an acerbic critique of racism, classism, and sexism.

Díaz Ruiz's anti-capitalist and anti-patriarchal pose reflects a superior moral economy at work in the idea of a right to subsistence. "Riqueza/K'ulejal" ("Wealth") epitomizes her most forceful poem, relaying a powerful indictment against the ill effects of capitalist excess that affect indigenous peoples' right to subsistence. While the poem does not necessarily make a case for Marxism as the solution to the exploitation of indigenous people, the poet concretely illustrates how the system perpetuates their marginalization. It represents a departure from an explicit "historical materialism" or an idealized version of a pre-Columbian communism in the way José Carlos Mariátegui imagined the connection between Marxism and indigenous people. Capitalism, cast as masculine, animates a connection between patriarchy and capital, facilitating the speaker's unyielding desire to annihilate the phallus. The phallus represents the origin of all the social ills that make mothers sick, fathers drunk, and forces others to migrate. Through its violent tone and male personification of a capitalist structure, the speaker proclaims her own indigenous critique grounded in a shared moral universe. She writes:

I want to know what your sweet suicide is like
 Think like yesterday to kill you
 I want to pour your black blood on your shoulders
 Look at crosses in the courtyard of the palace without tears
 To see you hanging there with your hands covered in dirt.
 I want to defeat your stinking wealth

Imagine a blue gray rainbow for you
 Abhor you for my sick mother,
 Curse you for my drunken father,
 Imprison you for my brother who has emigrated,
 You stink like the misfortune that you left me. (1-11)

...
 I shall be back tomorrow,
 See your eyes full of coins,
 Your teeth dirty with fine lunches,
 Your mind full of barbarisms. (20-23)¹⁹

“K’ulejal” (“Wealth”) conveys the speaker’s anger, hatred, and a desire for vengeance against the capitalist practices that exploit her community. Informed by her position as poor, indigenous, and female, Díaz Ruiz interrogates issues related to healthcare, the rampant alcoholism in the communities, and as well speaks to the transformation of the modes of production for indigenous men. While the speaker foresees the system’s decay and demise, she makes clear that indigenous people will survive and witness its complete destruction. A distinct moral economy echoes in the line, “I shall be back tomorrow.” The speaker - and by extension the community - will outlive an unjust system that threatens their right to subsistence.

In other poems, Díaz Ruiz broaches themes related to ritual, the importance of the Virgin Suyul, and empowering women. Her poetry furthers the dialogues beginning to take shape in other disciplines about the ways social structures affect indigenous women differently. Legal expert Rosalba Gómez Gutierrez of the Tseltal community writes “As Indigenous women we are in a situation of double or even triple discrimination for gender status, ethnicity and sometimes also age in the case of girls” (49). When gender and age intersect, being a girl means living under the tutelage of the men in the family who will make decisions about her education, reproductive health, and marriage prospects. Parents tend to deny daughters the right to attend school, and instead encourage their sons. Others express concern for the safety of the daughters, fearing teachers may sexually assault them (see Olivera Bustamante 87).

Lunez Pérez’s and Díaz Ruiz’s experience of the literary illuminates the ways that writing *authorizes* them to confront the prejudices against them due to their sex, class, and ethnicity, making them pioneers in a cultural practice historically reserved for a privileged few in Chiapas. They also grapple with an elitist literary historiography that has traditionally spoken for indigenous peoples. Lunez Pérez and Díaz Ruiz

deploy a Maya Tsotsil *cosmovisión* to dialogue with Catholicism and capitalism, two social forces that continue to affect indigenous communities. If for most of the twentieth century indigenous women have been subjected to object positions in regional and national literatures, today they chart new territories through their own writings - and on their own terms - imbuing with metaphors the silent spaces of Mexico's history. To conclude, I reiterate that their vocation as poets in the town of San Juan Chamula, Chiapas, transforms the ways others see and hear indigenous women. In their community, young women usually do not have access to high school or college and many wed before the age of eighteen. Most important here, Lunez Pérez's and Díaz Ruiz's trajectories through a university education and their return to participate as cultural producers in their town set a revolutionary example for other young women who aspire to pursue writing against all the odds.

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NOTES

- 1 All translations are mine unless noted differently.
- 2 The act of writing in indigenous languages dispels the old hegemonic notion that they are dialects. They also counter the social stigma attached to indigenous languages as lacking the ability to express literary language.
- 3 Certain groups like Sna Jtz'ibajom were established in the early 80s, but my point is that after the Zapatista uprising these organizations gained more international prominence.
- 4 I use the preferred spelling by Tsotsil and Tseltal speakers to describe their language.
- 5 CONECULTA (at the state level) and CONACULTA (at the national level) also finance many writing fellowships. The novelist, Carlos Montemayor, spearheaded a series of contemporary Maya literature. He included in the series many members from the Sna Jtz'ibajom the FOMMA theater groups. Montemayor galvanized support for indigenous literature across Mexico and other Latin American countries. José Antonio Reyes Matamoros, the late director of the Jaime Sabines Cultural Centre, along with CELALI organized writing workshops and edited many anthologies as well.
- 6 See for example CELALI's narrative contest, *Y el Bolom dice*. Funding, of course, depends on state politics. This is one of the most difficult issues the centre has been dealing with in the last few years.

- 7 The available statistics on indigenous women's lack of access to education are staggering. According to Mercedes Olivera Bustamante, 60% of indigenous women lack literacy. Only 9% have had access to post-elementary education (87). For more information consult Olivera Bustamante's *Sumisiones, cambios y rebeldía: mujeres indígenas de Chiapas*. It is important to note that despite the statistics, indigenous women poets are highly regarded and occupy a prominent space in national and international literary gatherings. However, two of the only female founding members of theater group Sna Jtz'ibajom left because of the sexism in the group. Isabel Juárez Espinoza and Petrona de la Cruz Cruz went on to form an all women's Maya group, FOMMA (Fortaleza de la mujer maya).
- 8 Translation remains a highly contested issue among the poets who feel the translated versions of their "originals" are sometimes so different they stand as new poems. I think it is important to note that despite the degree of Spanish fluency almost all poets began publishing in Spanish, while creating in an indigenous language became a political project after the 1980s. While I agree with the spirit of these concerns, and the fact that a bilingual analysis may be better, I think an approximation to the original can offer important insights as well. In the case of most poems, a Spanish original and an indigenous language translation is *de rigueur*. In *Memoria del viento*, for example, poems were first created in Spanish and then translated into the Tsotsil language. The objective in translating from the Spanish to Maya Tsotsil was to explore the indigenous language's poetic structure. My contact with some of the writers cannot be underestimated as they graciously responded to questions about cultural and linguistic references I may not have been familiar with or have understood in the context of the poem. My general knowledge of three Mayan languages is helpful in this analysis. I do see how the translations lose beauty, or miss a deliberate play on words but ultimately, my position is that the writers have control over the translation and thus have in their hands an important mechanism for cultural, linguistic, and political resistance (see my forthcoming work on indigenous women of Mexico in Spanish).
- 9 See Angel Rama and Antonio Cornejo Polar's ground breaking works.
- 10 See for example Cynthia Steele's discussion in "Indigenismo y posmodernidad: narrativa indigenista, testimonio, teatro campesino y video en el Chiapas finisecular."
- 11 The INI founded in the early 1940s had as its agenda the full integration of indigenous peoples as citizens of Mexico, which meant acculturation and the imposition of Spanish, mainly through education. Castellanos was employed by the INI.

- 12 See for example, *Representaciones sociales mayas y teoría feminista: crítica de la aplicación literal de modelos teóricos en la interpretación de la realidad de las mujeres mayas* by Rosa Pu Tzunux.
- 13 See Victoria Dawson's discussion of Robert Laughlin's work in the Smithsonian Magazine.
- 14 All English translations of the poetry are mine and done from both the Spanish and Tsotsil versions as well as in consultation with the author. The Tsotsil version reads: La jtijbe svayel kajvaltik/jutuk sk'an o'lol ak'obal/sjelobil svayel/la kak'be/vukub nichimal k'op/vukub avokol/lajchapbe jmul,/ skotol jmul,/ la jbut's'be' stiba./La jtijbe svayel kajvaltik/jutuk sk'an o'lol ak'obal/li orae mu x-ech' no'ox ya'luk/tilanuk vuktos kantilaetik/, li banomil la yuch' ch'ul pox,/k'unk'un li yav ak'al la staub sba/tsebal alak' la sjoybin sba ta jbek'tal./la jtijbe svayel kajvaltik/jutuk sk'an o'lol ak'obal/kunk'un li ora/la sjoybin jk'op ta k'ambail...
- 15 Pox is a homemade alcoholic drink consumed during carnival or fiestas. It is interesting to note that in the Tsotsil version, she uses the word Ak'obal. The term is far more poetic in Tsotsil going from darkness to light and probably closer to the English word dawn as opposed to simply an hour or midnight. Also Ak'abal represents one of the twenty-day signs in the sacred calendar, which has important connotations in the poem. The linguistic nuance here, however, gets lost in translation. Notable, too, is the spelling of the term, which differs in Tsotsil then in K'iche' for example. However, I translated Ak'obal as midnight to adhere to Lunez Pérez's own translation.
- 16 Spelling of the term varies; in Guatemala it has been standardized as Nawal.
- 17 According to the oral tradition, the Virgin Suyul lives in the lake of the same name. Many believers come to this area to offer flowers, candles, and prayers.
- 18 Convened by Azalera Organization, the University of the Americas in Puebla, and the Rigoberta Menchú Tum Foundation, the contest helps indigenous youth acquire university training.
- 19 This is the Tsotsil translation of "Riqueza." This poem was first written in Spanish. Ta jk'an chka'i k'u schi'il la milombae,/ta jnop ta jmilot/k'ucha'al volje,/li ta nekebe ta jmalka'i avik'al ch'ich'el,/ta yamak'il sna ajvalile ta jk'el/kurusetik jech ch'abal j-o/tey, ta jk'el pixil ta ik'obal ak'ob jok'olot./Ta jk'an jtsal ka'i ta tuil k'ulejale,/Ta jnop yaxal chakxik' li vaknabale,/ Skoj ip ti jme'e xti'et ko'nton avu'un,/Skoj chyakub li/jtote ta jchopol k'optaot,/Skoj namajem ti jbankile ko'nton ka'i jtik'ot ta chukel,/Akuchojbe yik' ti vokolil la viktabune./Ta jtunes tubem kanaletik,/Ta jk'oopon li vitsetik joybijem ta jch'ultotiketik,/Ta spelet jme'ta jnau kuxlejal,/Li ch'a svale'al tsajal askale ta xka'i k'u yelan;/Tajimol xa no'ox ta joyibajel kuxlejal./... Ok'ome chisutal,/Noj ta tak'in chkil ti sate,/K'ik stanal ave ta lekil ve'lil,/Xchi'uk nojem spukujil bolom ta jol.

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