

## Rebuilding a Mayan World: Awakening, Presence, and Possibilities

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### Abstract

In the last two decades, the literary production in Chiapas by Mayan writers has flourished alongside the mobilization created by the uprising of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN). Two parallel movements that have at their center the importance of presence and recognition of Mayan peoples of Chiapas and Indigenous people of Mexico at large. Orality and written word become their guiding forces in the articulation of this position. In the literary production of Mayan writers of Chiapas, however, the act of speaking and writing unfold within the literature, raising the question of meanings of presence and recognition. The possibilities contained in the literature, I suggest, reveal new visions of a Mayan world in Chiapas. In this article, I examine the importance of presence and recognition as central themes in the literature Mayan poets of Chiapas have produced in the last couple of decades. Using selected pieces from this body of literature, I raise the following questions: Why is presence and recognition such central themes in their literary production? In addition, how is “orality” and “writing” central to the claiming process of this presence and recognition? As the writers move through this practice, I suggest, they stitch together their foundation of a Mayan World in Chiapas.

### Keywords

Mayan writers, Chiapas, indigenous knowledge systems, poetry, Mexico

### Introduction

From the moment the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) burst into the public eye, they stated their position and vision as an organized guerrilla movement through the release of the *First Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle* published on January 1, 1994 in the local paper, *El Despertador Mexicano*, and released through the worldwide web. The media surrounded the EZLN as they declared control of the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas and other main cities in the state of Chiapas bombarding them with questions about their uprising, yet their position had already been clearly stated. Throughout the course of this 23-year movement, the EZLN has released six declarations and hundreds of communiqués stating the philosophy of the movement, giving rise to what they have called the power of the word, which is how very early on the EZLN took control of the narrative of their movement. When they tell their story, they highlight the 10 years of underground organizing, preparation, and development prior to the 1994 uprising. As books, films, music, and art about the

EZLN continues to be produced to capture their struggle, the continuing release of their communiqués to state the position and direction of the movement grants them the control of their histories.

The current literary movement of Mayan writers of Chiapas goes back to the 1970s, when indigenous peoples engaged in a reframing of the ways they related to the state projects of indigenismo. During a guest class lecture, Enrique Pérez López (Tsotsil), director of the Centro Estatal de Lenguas Arte y Literatura Indígena (CELALI) [State Center of Indigenous Languages, Art and Literature] refers to this period as a time of a re-awakening of indigenous peoples of Chiapas. In the 1980s, Pérez López explains, indigenous intellectuals (young men and women mostly formally trained as teachers) engaged in a shared reflection on the current state of their communities under the guidance of Jacinto Arias (Tsotsil).<sup>1</sup> The focus of their work was on reading, writing, song and art rooted in their Mayan belief system. Arias's work on the rescuing of histories had begun earlier as reflected in his master's thesis *The 'Numinous' World of the Maya: Contemporary Structure and Change* (1973). In his thesis, published in Spanish under the title *El mundo numinoso de los Mayas. Estructura y cambios contemporáneos* (1975), Arias engages in a critical analysis of the lives, cultural and spiritual traditions of this Tsotsil community and reveals the struggles in their everyday lives. Most importantly, Arias' work reflects the continuity of their Mayan ways of life.

Thus, in the last three decades, these two movements have flourished parallel to each other, crossing paths in different stages along the way. Languages, both Mayan and Spanish, are central to this process. Orality and the written word are the guiding forces in the articulation of the position of the EZLN, a strategy they have used wisely to deliver the power of their flowery word<sup>2</sup> through the written, audio and visual release of their communiqués. In the literary production of writers of Chiapas, however, their work reveals a distinction between the power of what is said and what is written. In this article, I examine the works of Mayan writers and artists that have flourished in Chiapas in the last three decades. Central to their work is their role as organic intellectuals and carriers of knowledge that re-centers their presence in their region and sets forward new possibilities for rights claiming and identity formation in the future. These writers re-explore their millennial traditions to reconfigure them as instruments that evidence the continuing importance of cultural politics in contemporary Chiapanecan social movements. These poets are looking back and reflecting on the experiences of their peoples to inform their new sense of being, to reclaim their presence and envision the possibilities ahead. They are reading back, in order to create their new steps forward. Narratives grounded in their historical experience give way to the re-claiming of Mayan identities that speak to

the formation of new Mayan ways of being, a new vision rooted in place and time, to historical experiences, belief systems, but that move away from the denial, silences, and oppression.

There are risks involved in all the movement this questioning and action-taking creates; nonetheless through this movement, different spaces are claimed and occupied, liminal spaces created in the process of the writers reclaiming a more complete sense of self in the world. Through my readings of their work, I ask the following questions: What are the central themes articulated by the Mayan writers of Chiapas? How do “orality” and “writing”, as well as the use of specific languages, work to produce these central themes? As these poets move through the practices of orality and writing I suggest that the central theme the poems address is this notion of presence revealing new knowledges of a Mayan world, a presence that is not just about claiming a Mayan identity but about claiming a space to perform their Mayan identities.

### **Writing Themselves into Being**

In this first poem<sup>3</sup> by Adriana del Carmen López Sántiz (T'seltal) (38), the tone and style of the poem begin to shape the re-claiming that is central to the works of Mayan poets.

<p><i>Sts'ibujon</i>  Ka'iy ts'ibujel  ta sba xnichimal ch'uch' jaben,  ta yelaw lum k'inal  exchenajem yu'un ja'wiletik.</p>	<p><i>Yo escribo</i>  Yo escribo  sobre pétalos de lirios,  sobre el rostro de la tierra  herida por los años.</p>	<p><i>I write</i>  I write  on petals of lilies,  on the face of the earth  wounded by the years.</p>
<p>Ka'iy bonwanej uuk  ta k'unil bonil k'atbujem ta ti'bal  te sna'el yot'an tseltaletik  sk'unbil ta sk'u sakubel k'inal</p>	<p>También pinto  con suave tinta encarnada  sueños tseltales  abrigados con el ropaje de la  aurora.</p>	<p>I also paint  with soft embodied ink  tseltal dreams  wrapped up in the garb of  dawn.</p>
<p>Ya'ka'iy joswanej  sok yaw xch'ababet k'inal  snamey kuxlejal jbats'il k'op.</p>	<p>Y esculpo  con el grito del silencio  la historia de mi lengua milenaria.</p>	<p>I sculpt  with the cry of silence  the history of my millennial  language.</p>
<p>Ya jwol ok'el k'opetik  ta stojol bats'il winiketik,  mach'atik xch'abajik ta stojol  xchanebal schikin ch'ulchan  sok ya xbeenik ta xchololal  namey kuxlejal</p>	<p>Moldeo palabras que lloran  por los hombres verdaderos,  los que oran hacia las cuatro  esquinas del cielo  y caminan por el surco de la  historia.</p>	<p>I mold words that cry  for the true men,  those who pray to the four  corners of the sky  and walk along the furrow of  history.</p>
<p>Sok ya jbon ajk'abal,  sakubel sok mal k'aaletik  k'alalto ta sk'ubulil lum k'inal  banti ayinem sboniletik te xaab.</p>	<p>Y pinto noches,  mañanas y tardes  desde las entrañas de la tierra  donde yacen los colores del  abismo.</p>	<p>And I paint nights,  mornings and afternoons  from the bowels of the earth  where the colors of the abyss  lie.</p>
<p>Ya ka'iy ts'ibujel,  ta jtsajal k'uxul te nak'bil  ta sk'in k'opetik  ya jt'anantes snopibal ku'un  ta stojol sikil yaxinal lajel.</p>	<p>Yo escribo  con mi dolor purpúreo escondido  con el concierto de las palabras,  desnudo mi pensamiento  ante la sombra fría de la muerte.</p>	<p>I write  with my purple hidden pain  with the concert of the words,  expose my thought  before the cold shadow of  death.</p>

“I write,” the poet states in the opening line, bursting open the space that in her role as a writer she is to occupy. “I write,” she says, and with this she pushes her presence into history. The following lines in this first stanza assert the cosmocentric connections she creates in her writing, the ways she carefully selects the words that speak of this reciprocal relation of language and environment, and the ways the world around her become the palette from where she gives life to her world. The fourth line lands the work in history, to a crude reality of destruction (which can be environmental destruction or the destruction of the people who have always honored the earth) that interrupts the idyllic message

of the first three lines. The poet is not conveying a contradiction just a reality of the world from where she writes; and that in a way by highlighting the wounded state, she is also highlighting the wounded state of herself, her peoples, and communities.

The second stanza begins with “I also paint,” stating with these words an additional dimension to the production of her work, which also places her within the ancient Mayan tradition of visual text production as captured in codices, architectural structures, and various artifacts. With this “I also...,” the articulation of her worldview travels in various spaces, written and visual texts, yet continuing to be rooted in cosmocentric relations. The poet solidifies these relations with “[a]nd sculpt” which also recalls the millennial old tradition of Maya sculpting as seen in the pieces (stelae, sculptures, artifacts) that have survived the course of time and continue to reveal the knowledges of Mayan peoples.

The language in this second and third stanza makes sure that now that she writes and paints and sculpts, her word will leave a mark that will not be easily erased. Her Tselal dreams will be forever captured in paint, and her language bursts into the silence of history to scream their ongoing existence. In this selection of words and language, the poet is painting and voicing her declaration of writing. The writing alone then, is not enough to capture the past to give way to her present; the articulation of words alone is not enough, she must also embody these experiences, and undergo these transformations as part of her emergence at the center of her history and as part of the process to bring herself into being.

As the poet moves to the fourth stanza, the tone and control over language reads stronger, as if in the first three stanzas she is pulling the tools together that are necessary to frame the space that she is to occupy or is now occupying. “I mold words that cry” she states, screaming also that through the claiming of “writing” she also gains control of the words and language, and finally in control of the message these are to convey that gives way to Mayan history. In the fifth stanza, the poet recalls the painting process of history again. Her worldview is revealed as she roots the source of this history to the entrails of the earth. This is where the source of it all is, where the tools, inspiration, knowledge necessary for the production of work lies.

In the last stanza, the poet goes back to the statement of “I write,” coming full circle, back to the importance of writing. There is a level of rawness in these lines, the nakedness of her thoughts; as if in the writing there is no more hiding. She is screaming through the silences, the hidden pain is now revealed through the multitude of words, and she too is revealed as the journey of the poem reveals the multi-layered approach that leads to the “I write” statement.

The introduction of López Sántiz's poetry book *Jalbil K'opetik: Palabras Tejidas [Woven Words]* where this poem is included reads: "The young poet writes to bare her thinking and leave as a testimony the art of the word in the Tseltal letters..." (12). This is what the poet does with her work, and what writing means to her, the vindication of her Tseltal worldview, the acknowledgement of the value that everyday life has for her and her community, a reciprocal relation in this art of writing as the poet's use of language demonstrates. Just as she shapes her world by writing "on the face of earth," the history of her "millennial language" guides her work as well breaking through the silences of time. The layers of denouncement present in the writing, where the author states repeatedly that her decision to write carries the weight of history trace a map to the awakening process. She writes about painting "tseltal dreams" and molding "words that cry / for the true men,"<sup>4</sup> noting with these lines the voice that she gifts through her writing to the Tseltal peoples. The poet also highlights all the beautiful attributes of her relation to the world, the ways she claims access to histories and knowledges through her writing, and the ways this interaction contributes to the materialization of her being into the world. There are difficulties, pains, silences that she is breaking away from, but with the "I write" the poet claims her newfound voice through her writing, and re-claims control of her histories.

This position that the poets takes in the poem, on the relations of language and her worldview, is central to the field of Native American Studies where scholars such as N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa), Simón J. Ortiz (Acoma) and Reid Gómez (mixed-blood, Navajo, Chicana), among others, have worked with language to weave their stories, reveal their worldviews, and reclaim their place in history. These relations are always rooted to place (land) and time, and are in continuous dialogue with each other. In *Woven Stones* Simon Ortiz states in relation to the meaning of writing: "Because Indians always tell a story...The only way to continue is to tell a story and there is no other way" (153). Ortiz further emphasizes the importance of writing for those who are present, those who will come, and those who are gone, as they all are part of the life cycle one is to take as part of the journey (153). Writing thus is part of the sustainment of life, the story telling that is part and giver of life.

Central to the significance of telling a good story is the value of the selection of words that give life to the story, words that "accept the risk and responsibility to account for birth, movement and continuance..." (Gómez 89) of the story itself. This emphasis on carefully selected words that give life to language is what N. Scott Momaday says give way to the articulation of the idea a person has of herself/himself. Language is then, the essence of oneself and as such, people must know their language in order to always remember their origins. In this argument however, the reference is not just on the mother tongue alone, but a language that carefully positions words together to speak of

philosophies and cosmovision that places peoples in relation to the world. Thus, the importance of the responsible word as “[e]ach word carries with it other words and worldview(s)” (Gómez 65) and exemplifies the relation that word exchanges are wor(l)d exchanges.

Writing is thus the space where the relations of words, language and storytelling come into place, as Ortiz notes: “Without this sharing in the intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual activity, nothing much happens” (151). He highlights these relations as closely connected and necessary in the assurance of peoples’ continuance. In the case of Mexico, in the Nahuatl school system, the text and oral tradition complemented each other as the text was used as a reminder of what the students had orally studied (León-Portilla 12-14). This pedagogical approach was interrupted during contact, but was not eradicated because literature does not happen in isolation, it continues to be performed within the community (Florescano 119-24).

These relations of storytelling, language, the power of the word Native American writers establish in their work as a reflection of their worldview is rooted to place and time. This interconnection reflects the constant conversation of the language with the environment and it is through these interactions that meanings of indigenous peoples’ worldviews emerge (Varese 226-28). Jeannette Armstrong (Okanagan) connects the idea of word/worlds exchanges as she highlights the interaction with her Okanagan land and landscape that make her feel at times as the translator of the language the land speaks (174). In effect, she asserts the influence of language on the environment and the environment to language. Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna pueblo) states that this dialoguing begins with the practice of oral tradition, but is carried as people travel the land honoring and respecting the land and the life that she sustains (Silko 11-13). The landscape, she notes, is in continuous dialogue with people and language allows for this conversation that sustains life and gives life to the landscape that includes all that inhabits the cosmos. This strong relation of language and words that weave worlds into existence is central to the process of reclaiming a presence in history and the world and it is a relation indigenous writers and intellectuals of Mexico also share, as their work demonstrates.

Mayan scholar José Daniel Ochoa Nájera (T’sotsil) narrates his experience as part of the project of translating the San Andres Accords,<sup>5</sup> into ten Mayan languages of Chiapas noting that “[t]he translation, implied the promotion of the writing of these languages, demonstrating thereby the existence of their own grammars, and especially give active participation to their speakers as a premise for social, cultural and linguistic development in community life” (20).

Here too, the author is identifying language as central to the writing process. Ochoa highlights the importance of the translation of this historic document to the various Mayan languages of Chiapas because of the acknowledgement Mayan languages and speakers received. Ochoa further notes of this connection “when I think of them [the languages]...I am also thinking myself” (13). He is emphasizing with these words the connection of the art of writing to the art of thinking himself, of creating himself, of elevating the value of the Mayan language and in turn elevating the sense of value of the Mayan peoples of Chiapas. The completion of this project is thus “...one of the first steps to recognize the languages and the connection of these with the peoples, it is evident that when they name their languages, they are defining their linguistic identity,” (15) and in this way, they are claiming their sense of being.

The relations of language to a person’s sense of being and connection to the land and place is also addressed in the introduction of the compilation *Incantations by Mayan Women* (Past, Okotz, and Ernánides 2005) where the authors note that in the Tsotsil language “*to write* and *to paint* are the same verb (*tx’ib*)” (18). When López Sántiz, in her poem “I write,” asserts the different methods she is utilizing to bring herself into being and insert herself into history, she is recognizing these relations sustained over time, these traditions and naming the different methods that make her possible. However, according to the women’s voices in this compilation, you do not have to practice both painting and writing to record your history.

The works of indigenous scholars and writers of Mexico also reveal a non-linear relation to language. When writing about the role language plays in the articulation of agency and the ways indigenous peoples “deploy language” and use language “as a vehicle for expressing identity” (183), Laura Graham categorizes these “linguistic interactions.” The ones that are relevant to the situation of Mayan peoples of Chiapas is what she calls “Performing Language” and “Bilingual Culture Brokers: Authentic or Counterfeit Representations.” The former refers to the ways indigenous peoples strategically choose to use their mother tongue and dominant language depending on the spaces they navigate. The latter refers to the ability of indigenous peoples to choose words from the dominant language to convey meaning. In practice, indigenous peoples strategically navigate through these linguistic interactions. The choice Mayan writers make in the presentation of their written text, which is always published in their mother tongue and Spanish, and in the articulation of the work, written or voiced, speaks to this strategic maneuvering of linguistic interactions.

López Sántiz’s book is published in Tseltal and Spanish, along with the introduction and presentation of the book. In fact, all the literary works of Mayan writers of Chiapas are printed in the

writers' mother tongue and Spanish. When asked about this ongoing translation and navigation between mother tongue and Spanish, Tsostil poet Enriqueta Lunez notes that she does not apologize for having to write her work in Spanish first, then translate it to Tsotsil ("La Poesía Indígena" n. pag.). When she started going to school to receive a formal education, the curriculum was in Spanish only. If she was to succeed academically, she had to learn how to read and write in Spanish. No one taught her how to read and write in Tsotsil. She admits that she has heard the stories from her grandparents and other stories from the community in Tsotsil since she was little, and that her inspiration can come in Tsotsil as well, but when it comes to writing, she goes to Spanish first ("La Poesía Indígena" n. pag.). She also notes that in order for her work to circulate, this has to happen in Spanish, as there is little audience in Tsotsil. The state-issued curriculum in schools is still in Spanish and children continue to be told to put their mother tongue aside over Spanish. She notes that the ongoing challenge in their efforts towards the continuance of their language is to promote a readership in both Spanish and peoples' mother tongue ("La Poesía Indígena" n. pag.).

Zapotec writer of Oaxaca Víctor de la Cruz shares a similar position to Lunez's, and expands on this relation to language and writing in his mother tongue. Víctor de la Cruz (Zapotec) presents this position when narrating the story of the first wave of Zapotec students who left their communities in the late nineteenth century to pursue an education in the city of Oaxaca and Mexico City. In this environment, the newly arrived Zapotecs chose to write in Spanish, he writes "the vocation or political necessity was imposed over the poetic and their poems were written in Spanish" (25). According to de la Cruz, given the relations to language in place at that time, and to the present really, Spanish was the official language, indigenous languages were considered only dialects, and so these writers did not want to come across as "some stupid Indians' riri' ngola... They sought to demonstrate their intelligence; Indians, but intelligent. And to prove it, they learned the language of the colonizer" (28) de la Cruz highlights however, that they did this "without forgetting their language" (28). These writers strategically chose to write in Spanish in order to open a space for their work and for themselves but never envisioned a Spanish only state.

This negotiation with language, the decisions that writers have made to break away from their mother tongue to later return to it, as well as the awakening process to re-claim them and the vulnerability of the languages if there is no continuance in the reading and writing practice emerges in another poem by Andrés López Díaz (Tsotsil) *A'yej: Discurso [Speech]* (2). In the first four stanzas of the poem, the poet focuses on a historic sense of the loss of language, the ways the language fades into the landscape of place, masking a reality that can no longer be sustained, withering away in the

lies the language holds. “Orator”<sup>6</sup> he writes, “your words / become dry soil / your root rots in oblivion”<sup>7</sup> (lines 6-9). However, when the poet moves to the fifth stanza and writes “Not now, orator / You can no longer do it: / I bring in the volume of my silence / A consciousness full of us”<sup>8</sup> (lines 19-22), the readers realize that the language he is referencing in the first four stanzas is the dominant language (Spanish).

The poet creates a shift as he moves to the fifth and sixth stanza, noting that the power of a discourse (their language, their worldview) has not been lost but rather continues to grow in their consciousness, leads them to a life of rebellion, and a new world of possibilities. The poet is bringing up with these lines, through the shifts and movement he creates in the writing, a new sense of awareness. “I am of the word of the current bats”<sup>9</sup> (line 27) the poet states in the opening line of the seventh stanza; “it is the flower of history”<sup>10</sup> (line 30), the word that is, the poet continues as he closes this stanza. It is here that he articulates this transformation, the ways his language (Tsotsil) falls on fertile land, grows and flourishes. The transformation of the poet’s relation to language throughout the poem is not subtle. This level of difficulty to describe this awakening into his language is seen in the poet’s choice of carefully selected words in the last six lines of the poem:

¡Ah!	Ah!
y también	and also
es flor de fuego,	is fire flower,
es calor y luz por su futuro,	is heat and light for their future,
porque mis letras se extenderán al cosmos	because my letters will extend to the cosmos
como sangre ardiente en los nervios del tiempo.	as hot blood in the nerves of the time.

Thus, in the course of this poem, the poet transforms the historic relation of his Tsotsil language to the Spanish language, elevating the sense of value of his mother tongue, and re-affirming his central sense of being in relation to the language.

What López Díaz accomplishes in this poem is what Ochoa underlines as the main accomplishment of the translation of the San Andres Accords to ten Mayan languages. The Mayan languages were re-awakened through this project causing an explosion of thought and an act of liberation (18). The connection of the word, language, and the spaces the poet navigates in the process of telling the historic experience is a shared position with Native and Indigenous writers, particularly Ortiz’s connection of writing and storytelling as vital to the continuance of Native peoples. *Discurso* is the title of the poem, which translates into “speech” or “discourse,” and it is in this process of playing with words and language that the poet captures this history of the relation of his language and Spanish.

The discourse of the denial of the language and thus the denial of the people has been forced on his community for centuries, but this discourse is finding less fertile soil in the communities. The power of his true word centered in the Tzeltal worldview is the key for his community's history to flourish to all corners of the cosmos.

The article thus far has laid claim to the relations of language to claim a presence that materialize Native and Indigenous peoples into being. The poems speak of this claim through the deliverance of the written word, of what is written. The section that follows places the emphasis on what is said through poetry and the ways the poet re-claims the old practice of orality in their work to articulate themselves into being.

### **Orality and the articulation of Mayan identities**

In this poem by poet Andrés López Díaz (Tsotsil) the practice of orality that frames the rest of this section is central to his work. The deliverance of his words carry an immediate effect that adds to the poets' dimension and sense of being. This understanding adds to the urgency of the deliverance of the words.

<i>Jun k'ak'al</i>	<i>Un día</i>	<i>One day</i>
Li k'opoj jun k'ak'al stsinanan sba sbe jch'el ta jnuk', avan batel yech'omal ti kee, svo'vinikal ta bej satiletik laj yilikun.	Un día hablé con las venas apretadas en la garganta, mi voz retumbó, y cientos de pares de ojos me vieron.	One day I spoke with tight veins in the throat, my voice boomed, and hundreds of pairs of eyes looked at me.
K'olkinaj batel jk'os jnichim k'op, xanavanuk, vilanuk bal, ta jujun muk'tikil lum, ta xalala tsitsel nukul ta vo'neal kuxlejal.	Galoparon mis versos, volaron y viajaron de ciudad en ciudad anunciando el látigo de los siglos.	My verses galloped, flew and traveled from town to town announcing the whip of centuries.
Sts'ujulal xi'el lok'anuk tal ta jtiba ch'ail ya'lel vo'neal kuxlejal ka'i; slok'esan yeklalil k'ak'al o'ntonal ti jk'opejele ko'ol xchi'uk k'ok xchik'ik'an yech'omal kuxlejal.	En mi frente brotaron gotas de miedo, agua amarga de la historia; arrojaron en mi lengua signos de coraje, fuego que quema sombras del pasado.	Drops of fear sprouted on my forehead, bitter water of history; threw on my tongue signs of courage, fire burning shadows of the past.
Livil Livil batel livil ta xvik'lajan ik' li vil xchi'uk xhu'ulele k'ak'al: saktik'an bat ti jk'opojele.	Volé, Volé por el viento vibrante, con el espíritu del día; transparente fue mi palabra.	I flew, I flew by the vibrant wind, with the spirit of the day; transparent was my word.
Ti kuts' kalaltake tsotsiletik xchi'uk tseltaletik mu'yuk yilbikun jsat, staj o yav makal yelobik, ts'ijilik, mu xojtikinik xch'ich'elik xchi'uk yibelik, spasoj sbaik ta bijil kaxlan lumetik, "indio" xi yutikun o.	Pero mis hermanos tsotsiles y tseltales nunca me vieron a mis ojos, siguieron ciegos y callados, ignorando su esencia y su raíz, se visten de sabios y civilizados y me dicen el "indio".	But my tsotsil and tselta brothers never looked me in my eyes, continued blind and silent, ignoring their essence and root they dress up as wise and civilized and call me "Indian.

In *Jun k'ak'al: Un día [One Day]* (1), the poet brings himself into being through the deliverance of his words that speak of his place in the world, words that take a life of their own delivering his message to places he does not reach, and words that give way to change and reflection to his reality as a Mayan poet. With the "One day I spoke" the poet bursts into the scene and marks with this statement his sense of being in place. Despite the difficulty to speak, a feeling that he captures with the image of words traveling out of his throat to a resounding "boom" in the second and third lines, his tone is defiant and firm. He speaks and the impact of his words attract the attention of "hundreds

of pairs of eyes,” that “looked at...” him, noting a level of acclamation to his words. The poet does not state that they are listening to him, but that they are seeing him. Language, the articulation of the power of his words, is then what materializes him, what makes other see him, implying that before he chose to speak on that “one day” he was not visible, heard, or acknowledged.

The past tense that the poet chooses gives the poem a reflective tone, which he also captures in the shifts in gaze that he creates throughout the poem. The second stanza shows this shift and reflection when the poet recognizes the power of his words and the waves of movement the words create as these take a life of their own. “My verses galloped,” he writes capturing with this sixth line the firmness and strength of his words, which he follows with “flew and traveled from town to town” making the words themselves the deliverers of the denouncement that speak of the yolk of oppression indigenous peoples of Mexico have been living under or as the poet states “the whip of / centuries.” Here, the poet shifts his gaze again as he moves on to the third stanza and focuses this time on the weight of history. The “bitter water of history,” the poet states on the thirteenth line, touches his “tongue,” which prompts the naming of this oppression that gives the poet the “courage” to fight for change and to move beyond the oppressive relations of the past.

The fourth stanza continues with this idea of change for the poet. The true word that he has spoken has liberated him, and so he flies “by the vibrant wind.” But the struggle does not end here, this struggle does not take a lineal form and in the last stanza the poet recognizes that difficulty. Here the poet pauses to look inside his home and community where his words have no resonance and eyes do not look at him, and where his Tsotsil and Tseltal brothers, still call him “the ‘Indian.’” His words have created so much movement beyond limits, but the transformative power of words is still at work at home. The same words that he uses to criticize historic forms of oppression, he uses to criticize the “blind and silent” behavior of his brothers and sisters. The poet takes a stand to confront the state of denial and the conditions of internalized oppression present at home. The poet recognizes with these words the ongoing challenges the communities face in the continuance of their journey.

There is an emphasis on the orality aspect of delivering the word in this poem, on the impact voicing a language has and how it is perceived. In the deliverance of his words, an audience is immediately referenced and called in to watch and hear. Their response is immediately registered and the impact of their response strongly articulated. The poet is voicing his awakening, aloud, in the presence of others, hoping that together they can claim their presence and gain recognition. The reflective tone of the poem, the courage in the poet’s words, the defiant tone of his verses, the triumph that he expresses through the liberation of his words carry a lot of hope in the work of López Díaz.

“One day I spoke” the poet writes in his opening line, and with this statement, the author travels towards the liberation his words deliver, a challenging path, with various turns, but with a determination towards change.

The waves the poet creates, moving from the realization of his condition to the denouncement, from the space where he finds his voice to the growing movement the raising of his voice creates, pushes him to occupy various spaces to cross various borders and to create new spaces with new borders that lead to a more complete sense of self (Waters 153). In the poem, the poet traces the journey of the change, which places him in different spaces of possibilities where his words can blossom or be ignored. In the telling, the poet is facing the challenges, falling in those in-between spaces of uncertainty that the poet is determined to occupy, to continue to push forward his voice and give way to change. Through the denouncement the poet is making, he is also reclaiming his history and relation to the world. He names his pain, the source of his courage, and the ways the articulation leads him to his true word. Language itself then, is the source of his liberation. The criticism of the blindness and deafness of his Tsotsil and Tzeltal brothers and sisters speaks of his awareness and knowledge of the ways oppression is disguised, and the ways those seeking change can be isolated.

This oppressive system López Díaz describes, the sense of isolation, the importance of the denouncement to claim his space in the world reflect the development of the work indigenous intellectuals of Mexico have been conducting in the last few decades. Juan Gregorio Regino (Mazatec), one of the founders of ELIAC (Escritores en Lenguas Indígenas Asociación Civil) [Civil Association of Writers in Indigenous Languages], speaks of his experience navigating the school system where indigenous peoples continue to be perceived as relics of the past that need to be absorbed into the dominant culture (Hernández-Ávila 54-55). While pursuing his degree in Ethnolinguistics, Regino realizes the entrapments of the system that insists on denying his Mazatec identity or belittling his Mazatec knowledges. This causes Regino to wake up and to “... radically exchange [] his role as an agent of acculturation to a promoter of his own language and culture, and ... [to] write...and think...in his language” (Hernández-Ávila 55). There is not one specific moment for this change for Regino, but rather a process of reflection, that as López Díaz states in his poem, leads Regino to the one day when he chooses to speak and create movement towards change for him and his community.

Connected to this notion of speaking up, of using the power of words to create movement toward change, is the historic relation of the dominant culture towards indigenous peoples or what Stefano Varese refers to as a “[d]ialectic denied” (126). “The states have silenced indigenous peoples’ attempt to claim their own rights, given that they see all forms of ethnic affirmation as a threat to the

authoritarian and centralist visions they have been promoting since the wars of independence” (126). The work of the writers and artists in this section is, thus, a direct confrontation to this system where the dominant culture has historically excluded indigenous peoples from the conversation in relations with the state.

This dialectic denied however, did not erase indigenous peoples’ knowledge systems, but rather lead to a stronger protection of these knowledges. In an interview with Inés Hernández-Ávila, Feliciano Sánchez Chan (Mayan/Yucateco) states that indigenous peoples have never stopped learning and sharing their knowledges, these were just occurring in secrecy and guarded in the sacred caves of the communities. In this way, Hernández-Ávila adds to their dialogue, what appears to be a resurgence of indigenous peoples’ literature has to do with the new spaces writers are occupying with their work (38-39). Thus, the time before López Díaz implies with the opening line of his poem may very well connect to this period of learning and sharing in secrecy, where people listened attentively and awaited a time where these knowledges could be shared in the open.

Language nonetheless, what is said and what is written, continues to be central to the claiming of Native and Indigenous identity. Language continues to be the vehicle through which Native and Indigenous writers claim presence. Language itself becomes the facilitator of this denouncement. Language, Víctor Montejo (Jakaltek) explains, is central to his Mayaness and sense of being. He writes: “When I reaffirm my Mayaness... I just have to visit the sanctuary of the Jakaltek hero Xhuwuan Q’anil and recharge my identity to participating in the Maya ceremonies and prayers carried out in my native Mayan language. Popb’alti. This is to belong to a tradition with roots still strong and deeply embedded in the land, its sacred places, and geography” (Montejo 67-68). His Mayan language connects Montejo to the land, and this relation re-affirms his sense of being in the world as a Jakaltek Mayan. In “The Man Made of Words” Momaday exemplifies the idea of language as a responsibility and a risk when he tells the story of “Man Made of Words” who “ventures to speak because he must,” his life is at risk and so he raises his word (Momaday 645). “Language is the repository of his whole knowledge and experience, and it represents the only chance he has for survival,” Momaday adds to further demonstrate the intricate relation of language and identity (Momaday 646). In this poem, López Díaz also puts his word forward to speak for survival, to bring himself into being, and reclaim in this way his place in history.

Thus, as these writers navigate the interstitial spaces to re-claim their presence, they are looking back to the knowledges housed in their communities. In López Sántiz’s poem “I write,” she re-claims a sense of presence that materializes through writing, the ways she roots herself to place, to a

millenarian past that also informs her present and future, as well as the ways she affirms the different approaches to articulate her history. This practice of writing is informed and created by language shaped by carefully selected words that speak of the reciprocal relation with the world around, language that carries worldviews, and extends to art production, song, and recitations. These are all forms of recording histories beyond written text that indigenous peoples have always practiced. When the poet states “I write...and also paint...and sculpt” she is calling all these knowledges and wisdoms that are part of her Mayan culture to give her the strength to once again assume control of her own destiny. The poets thus cannot reveal the result of this change they mention so much in their work, because this is still in the making.

The following poem also shows that through the claiming, the poet is envisioning new ways of being Mayan. The poem shows the way the poet is re-claiming traditions and aspects of his culture that have nurtured and sustained people and made possible their continuance, and at the same time denouncing imposed oppressive traditions that can hurt their endurance. The poet is highlighting through this process of reclaiming, nurturing and denouncing the fluidity and adaptability to change for survival.

*Ta'lo xa*

Ta staun ti jch'ulme'tike,  
ta xu'niun ti sts'ijleje,  
sjob k'anaetik  
oy ta sbijilal jol.

Li jchu'ulel ta pask'opale,  
ja'ta ilolal, ta moy, ta pom xchi'uk  
kantilaetik:  
chba xa jmilan ti jvayel xchi'uk yatel  
ko'ntone,  
mu xa jk'an ti ak'obal xi'el tanae, ti  
ak'obal o'notne.

Yu'un lubemun xa,  
lubemun xchi'uk ti vu'une,  
lubemun xchi'uk jsak pak'an sat,  
xchi'uk xk'uxul ko'nton, yelanil  
kelob.

Ta'lo xa ti ilbajinel vaechile  
ti tsst'unan sba ta jbek'tale,  
ti ich'el ta muk'joybijem ta mu'yuk  
ich'el ta muk'e,  
ti lekil kuxlejal joybijem ta letoe.

Ja'xa sk'ak'alil yochebal yojtikinel ti  
ak'obale,  
ti xkil xch'ich'elinuk sin'jk obtake  
ti x-uk'umajuk bal ti snophenal jol  
ta sjunlej spat xokon banomile.

Mu xa xkak'oyijuk ti me'onal  
ch'ajetele,  
ti chi s-alpostaun ti jvaeche,  
ti chi sjoyobtaun ti utilanele  
jTa'lo xa chka'i ti snopbenal jolal  
yijuneb ta vo'neal kuxlejale.

Ta jk'an  
ti kkee yu'un xmuyubajuk ta k'ejimol,  
ti jsate oyuk ta xojobal,  
ti jchikine oyuk ta vob;  
jxanbilukun, jbak'elukun  
ta junlej osil vinajel.

*Basta*

Me alcanza la luna,  
me adueña su silencio,  
rocío de estrellas  
es mi conciencia

Mi espíritu guerrero contiene  
rezos, pilico, inciensos y velas:  
iré a matar mis sueños y mis  
penas,  
no quiero esta noche de  
miedo.

Estoy cansado,  
cansado de mí mismo,  
cansado de mi rostro pálido,  
de mis gestos y mi corazón  
herido.

Basta de pesadillas hechiceras  
que se siembran en mi carne,  
de la justicia a la injusticia,  
de la paz a la guerra

Es tiempo de entrar a conocer  
la noche,  
de ver sangrar mis dedos  
y mi pensamiento que corra  
en todas direcciones.

No permito más vaguedad  
alucinante,  
mis sueños me anestesian,  
las pesadillas giran en mi,  
¡basta de los pensamientos  
congelados de la historia!

Quiero  
mi idioma elevar en canto,  
mis ojos en la luz,  
mis oídos en la música;  
ser en el movimiento  
del universo.

*Enough*

The moon reaches me  
her silence seizes me  
dew of stars  
my conscience is

My warrior spirit contains  
prayers, *pilico*, incense and  
candles:  
I'm going to kill my dreams  
and sorrows,  
I do not want this night of fear.

I'm tired,  
tired of myself,  
tired of my pale face,  
of my wounded gestures and  
heart.

Enough of bewitching  
nightmares  
that are sown onto my flesh,  
of justice to injustice,  
of peace to war

It is time to enter to know the  
night  
to watch my fingers bleed  
and my thoughts to run  
in all directions.

I do not allow more mind-  
bending vagueness  
my dreams anesthetize me,  
my nightmares revolve around  
me,  
Enough of the thoughts  
frozen in history!

I want my language to be  
elevated in song,  
my eyes in the light,  
my ears in the music;  
be in the motion of  
the universe.

In *Ta'loxa: Basta [Enough]* (4) the poet Andrés López Díaz (Tsotsil) is reclaiming his place in the world and in the process, he calls on the various relations he has with the elements of the universe, he transcends barriers of space and time and occupies multiple spaces at once to make space for the emergence of his new strong sense of being. The movement in this piece is captured through the physical shifts the poet creates in the poem.

The first stanza paints an awakening of his consciousness. The silence that the poet connects to the moon carries a reflective tone, which he transforms in the following stanza by referring to his spirit as a warrior, though not yet brave enough. In the third stanza, the awakening is culminating as the “I’m tired” marks this shift, which culminates with the “Enough...” that opens the fourth stanza. “Enough of bewitching nightmares” the poet writes, cutting through time with this statement and stopping momentarily the passing of time with the denouncement of the injustices that have always hunt him.

The poet opens the fifth stanza with “[i]t is time to enter to know the night.” The fear is gone, and he is ready to confront his nightmare. No more lies he writes in the sixth stanza, no more freezing him in time, no more suspending his presence to a past. The culminating shift comes at the end; “I want” he writes and with language, he says, his song will be heard and he will move once again with the rhythm of the universe.

The poem of López Díaz denouncing silences and oppression leading to an awakening of his consciousness speaks directly to the path the EZLN has been stating in their communiqués since 1994. As the EZLN declares war on the Mexican Army and uses armed force to take over seven main cities in the state of Chiapas, they release the *First Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle* on January 1, 1994. In this written document, their first introduction to the world, they denounce the system of abuse and oppression that insists on marginalizing, denying, and silencing indigenous peoples. In the First Declaration, the EZLN also lists the endless experiences of injustices indigenous peoples of Mexico have suffered for over 500 years. The EZLN refers to this period of oppression as “the long night of 500 years” (Subcomandante Marcos 661); the long night that gave way to the light of day when they decided to rise up on (January 1) to defend their ways of life. “But today we say ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!” (Subcomandante Marcos 643) were the words the EZLN stated in this first document, and with these words, the paradigm shifted, and the relations of indigenous peoples of Mexico and government has not been the same. The *Enough* in the title of the poem connects to this trajectory the EZLN also took, when they made the jungles of Chiapas tremble with their presence, let their word

fly, and re-claimed indigenous peoples' places in the world. The poet too is a warrior, a spiritual warrior that blazes forward to elevate his indigenoussness and dance in tune with the universe.

From the awakening, the poet experiences as stated in the line "I do not want this night of fear," the poet pushes to be free from this nightmare. This line reads like an internal monologue, a mental preparation for the battle the poet is about to face, and a pivotal moment in the transformation of the poet's spirit that unfolds in this poem: "It is time to enter to know the night" the poet continues, and with this line, he begins to come into being and to take the risks required to break away from the oppressing past that haunts him. The poet is awakening from a long night of fear and becoming in this process the person where "[his] language ... [is] elevated in song" and fear no longer rules his life.

Part of the breaking away and naming of the silences and denials is connected to memory rooted in time and place, memory to piece together fragments of history to denounce the state of oppression and the system that has spread fear and violence. Part of this denouncement process is recognizing the need to move beyond this space of oppression, to enter a new realm where he is at the heart of the circulation of this world, of the "universe" in motion, and where he would be free of the voices in history that insist on locking him still in time. All the poet wants to do is elevate the source of his Mayan knowledges and his voice to be heard as alive and in motion.

## **Conclusion**

The relation to language all these writers have demonstrated reveals another element at play that has to do with the sense of the individual and the collective. As the poets navigate various spaces through their writing, they are traversing through in-between spaces, creating new borders where people can perform the various layers of themselves and thus become human beings that are more complete. The spaces these writers navigate in their work sets them apart from the rest of the community and it is a space that they must navigate on their own first, before reaching out to their brothers and sisters. This reaching out is bridged through language, and as these poets have demonstrated, this languaging into being can occur through what is said and what is written to share the vision that they have of the world. This is what these poets are doing with their work, forging open new spaces, raising awareness, awakening their communities so together they can claim a new way of being Mayan, a more complete way of being Mayan.

When the poets, specifically López Sántiz and López Díaz, make claim to presence using these two approaches (voicing and writing) in their literature, they reveal not just the outcome of the impact of the word or voice once it is delivered but the process of getting there. They are not just conveying

the message of the poem of reclaiming and denouncing oppressive systems, or languaging themselves into being, they are naming (showing) the steps taken that lead to this denouncement. There is a collective effort in this process, but what the “I write” reveals is a layer of aloneness (individually) that takes place in the process of writing. Not isolation, but that moment that the poet is pinning the ideas together, writing, painting, sculpting, and shaping she is alone in her reflection and practice. The poet presumes an audience, can anticipate the response, but this is not immediate, not immediately facing her. There is a prolonged response to her work, to the moment when it will be read and become part of the collective. In the “One day / I spoke” though the poet also experiences a sense of aloneness, there is the presence of the collective throughout the deliverance, as what is said is immediately echoed to an audience. The poet can see the direct response in the faces of those who see him, as well as in the absence of those who refuse to see and hear what he says.

The waves this poetry creates, moving from the realization of their condition to the denouncement, from the space where the poets find their voice to the growing movement the raising of their voices creates, pushes them to occupy various spaces and creates a larger sense of self. The poets are calling for a continuity of their Mayaness and changes to the ways this has been performed, reading the past in order to stitch their paths ahead. In the poems, the poets trace the journey of the change, which places them in different spaces of possibilities where their words can blossom or be ignored. In the telling, the poets are facing the challenges to push forward their voice, give way to change and reclaim their presence. The reclaiming of presence the poets articulate in their poetry is not just about claiming a Maya identity but about claiming a space to perform their Mayan identities. This relation, as, the poetry shows, does not happen in isolation, this is always in dialogue with the community and the world around.

Furthermore, the writers demonstrate that when they print and articulate the word that gives way to language that affirms their Mayaness, they are reconnecting with all that encompasses their worldview. The act of writing, telling and re-claiming that shapes the literature are part of reciprocal relations that re-centers the poets within their Mayan cosmovisions. This method reveals that the awakening and continuance of Mayan indigenous knowledges is interactive and requires constant tending. In this way, language itself is at the center of the process through which Mayan indigenous knowledges are awakened to affirm Mayan people’s presence. Moreover, language is the source of their liberation towards the reconstruction of new possibilities to manifest their Mayan identities.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> On March 25, 2006, La Universidad Intercultural de Chiapas [the Intercultural University of Chiapas] awarded an honorary doctoral degree to Jacinto Arias in recognition of his lifelong contribution to the study of Tseltal culture, language, history and his commitment to the rescuing of millennia old knowledge of Maya peoples of Chiapas (Henriquez n. pag.).

<sup>2</sup> The statement connects to the Nahuatl concept of “in xochitl in cuicatl” or floricanto [flower-and-song] (León-Portilla 75). The concept captures the mystery of poetry and poetry’s metaphors that unlock the mysteries of life and dreams that are central to Nahuatl worldview (León-Portilla 75). In the *Fourth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle* the EZLN writes: “The flower of the word will not die” (Subcomandante Marcos 660). The statement captures the war the EZLN is waging and continues to wage in defense of the rights of indigenous peoples of Mexico. The ongoing release of written, audio, and written comunicués that capture the worldview of the EZLN speak directly to this concept.

<sup>3</sup> All translations from Spanish to English are mine.

<sup>4</sup> “True men/women” is the Tseltal definition of people.

<sup>5</sup> The San Andres Accords are the only official document between the EZLN and representative members of the government that outlines the EZLN’s demands for autonomy. The meetings that lead to the signing of this document took place in the town of San Andres Sacam Ch’em de los Pobres, thus the name of this legal document.

<sup>6</sup> “Orador...” (line 6)

<sup>7</sup> “tus palabras / se vuelven tierra seca, / tu raíz se pudre en el olvido.” (lines 7-9)

<sup>8</sup> “Ahora no, orador, / ya no podrás hacerlo: / traigo en el volumen de mi silencio / una consciencia llena de nosotros.” (19-22)

<sup>9</sup> “Soy la letra de los batsi’I viniketik del presente...” (line 27) Batsi’I viniketik means true men/true women, the Tseltal definition of people.

<sup>10</sup> “es flor de la historia.” (line 30)