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M. Bianet Castellanos
University of Minnesota

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Idealizing Maya Culture: The Politics of Race, Indigeneity, and Immigration Among Maya Restaurant Owners in Southern California

M. BIANET CASTELLANOS
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Abstract: Based on an ethnography of Maya restaurant owners in Los Angeles, the article examines how Maya migrants use Yucatecan cuisine to negotiate the politics of indigeneity. In Mexico, Maya peoples are denigrated as “Indian.” In the U.S., Maya migrants are racialized as “Mexican.” These racialization processes are intended to discipline indigenous subjects both within and outside of national boundaries. By drawing on popular indigenous cultural symbols and tastes that reinforce an idealized Maya culture, Maya restaurateurs construct an alternative politics of recognition that opens the door for new conversations about what it means to be indigenous and Latino.

Key Terms: Maya culture; Immigration; Entrepreneurs; Racialization; Los Angeles; Politics of Recognition

In August 2014, the restaurant Chichén Itzá and the marketplace Mercado la Paloma celebrated “El mes de Yucatán/The Magic of Yucatán”¹ with support from the Mexico Tourism Board. The events in Los Angeles included a lecture on Maya archaeology, an art exhibit, cooking classes, and a performance by a *ballet folklórico* dance troupe. The opening ceremony drew Yucatecan families from distant suburbs and cities. Mingling amongst the crowd were young hipsters, students, and university employees from the University of Southern California. Chichén Itzá serves classic Yucatecan dishes like *poc chuc* (marinated pork shoulder roasted with onions and tomatoes), *bistec a la Yucateca* (thin strip steak served with onions, fried potatoes, black beans, and sweet plantains), and *tikin-xic* (marinated fish fillets served with rice and a jicama salad). The evening concluded with a public lecture on Maya archaeology and culture by Gregorio Luke, the former director of the Museum of Latin American Art in Long Beach. A local DJ played lively *cumbias* and Mexican rock throughout the lecture and slide show, which took place in the Mercado’s parking lot. Those present were primarily Yucatecan families eager to learn more about their cultural roots and to expose their children to their heritage. A dynamic speaker, Luke provided a fascinating and accessible overview of Maya archaeology and history.

Don Gilberto, the chef and owner of Chichén Itzá, presided over the events with pride.² Each year he organizes and coordinates three cultural events that promote Yucatecan cuisine and Maya culture. For him, these public

events transmit a positive image of Yucatecan culture and cuisine to a broad audience. A multicultural and cosmopolitan city, Los Angeles is marked by extreme economic inequality and a racial legacy of Anglo-political domination rooted in empire (Ochoa and Ochoa, 2005). The recent influx of indigenous migrants from Mexico’s southern states has transformed Los Angeles into the city with the largest indigenous Mexican population outside of Mexico (Malpica, 2005). Yucatecans remain at the margins of urban political power and within the Latino community. They struggle with popular depictions of Maya culture found in films like *Apocalypto* (2006) that rely on racialized tropes of bloodthirsty savages and backward *indios*. Events sponsored by don Gilberto challenge dominant discourses of indigeneity by highlighting the diverse roots of Maya cuisine and the historical and cultural legacies of ancient and contemporary Maya *pueblos*.³

Don Gilberto is not alone. He forms part of a small group of ethnic entrepreneurs from Yucatán invested in putting culture to work by serving as community brokers and (re)educating a broad audience about Yucatán and its people. Based on an ethnographic case study of Maya restaurant owners in Southern California, I examine how Maya migrants use Yucatecan cuisine and culture to negotiate the politics of indigeneity and recognition within the complex racial landscape of Los Angeles. To disrupt and contest narratives of racialized indigeneity, they appropriate cultural symbols used to market an “authentic” Yucatecan cuisine and Maya culture to global

consumers and a tourist market. Symbols like archeological relics and regional folklore make Yucatecans legible to an American and Mexican-American audience because almost everyone is familiar with the tourist center of Cancún and the archeological site of Chichén Itzá. Among Maya restaurant owners, promoting Yucatecan cuisine and culture also generates an alternative narrative that reclaims indigeneity as a positive community asset. Arlene Dávila points out that putting culture to work can be a highly contested process as culture becomes appropriated, objectified, or repackaged for public consumption and for the benefit of corporate enterprise and nationalist ideologies (2012: 4). By relying on popular indigenous cultural symbols and tastes, Maya restaurant owners (re)create an idealized Maya culture that is consumable, marketable, and unsettles the politics of recognition and racialization processes in the Americas. This cultural work may reinforce stereotypes of “authentic Indians,” but it is necessary to reimagine Yucatecans, who are primarily of Maya descent, as “cultured” and worthy of recognition.

INDIGENOUS IMMIGRATION

When I first began this project, I was told by an anthropologist who lived for many years in central Los Angeles that “there [were] no Maya here.” This response, which is often repeated, speaks to the multiple ways that indigenous peoples have been erased from urban landscapes. Los Angeles is a profoundly indigenous space, originally occupied by the prosperous Tongva tribe (Kroeber, 1967; Suintree, 2010). By the 1970s, after the onset of the federal relocation program (established in 1952), the city had attracted the largest concentration of American Indians outside of the reservation system (Rosenthal, 2012; Weibel-Orlando, 1991). Yet, this history has been suppressed in the popular imaginary.

Simultaneously, indigenous peoples, primarily from the southern states of Mexico, arrived in Los Angeles to work as *braceros* (guest workers) through the Bracero Program (1942-1964). These indigenous braceros, who primarily came from P’urhépecha, Mixteco, Zapotec, Nahuas, and Maya communities, worked in agriculture (Loza, 2011). But as they settled permanently in California, many transitioned to assembly and service work and construction. Indigenous braceros were discriminated against for being Indian by other Mexicans and their American employers (Loza, 2011). For those who spoke very little Spanish, the language barrier was

difficult to overcome. In spite of these challenges, many settled in the United States and established thriving transnational communities (Adler, 2004; Cornelius, Fitzgerald, and Lewin Fischer, 2007; Fox and Rivera-Salgado, 2004; Malpica, 2005; Stephen, 2007; Smith, 2006). After the Bracero Program ended, Mexico’s economic and political crises, in conjunction with the restructuring of Mexico’s agricultural sector, spurred further migrations of indigenous Mexicans to the U.S.⁴ Today over 200,000 indigenous migrants originating from over 60 indigenous groups in Mexico reside in California.⁵ According to the Mexican Consulate, during the past two decades, 30,000 indigenous Mexicans arrive annually to the U.S. (Burke, 2002).

The second largest indigenous group in Mexico, Maya migrants from Yucatán joined the Bracero Program beginning in the 1940s. Although they constituted a small percentage of braceros, participants hailed from over half of the municipalities in the peninsula of Yucatán (Lewin Fischer, 2007).⁶ After the Bracero Program ended (in 1964), Yucatecan men and women traveled with tourist visas or as undocumented workers to join friends and relatives in California. Some saw this trip as an opportunity to travel and make money. For others, it was a lifeline from a desperate situation, including poverty, domestic violence, or stifling patriarchy. Unlike Mixtec, Tzeltal, and Tzoltzil migrants who are concentrated in agriculture, Maya migrants are concentrated in the service industry of major U.S. cities.⁷ Recent immigrants work in construction, in restaurants, as chauffeurs and as gardeners. Prior work experience in tourism in Yucatán and their Spanish language skills facilitates their entry into an urban market. Beginning in the late 1990s, Yucatecan migration increased dramatically, propelled by the dip in American tourism after September 11, the devastation caused by Hurricane Wilma, the swine flu pandemic, and the recent global economic recession. According to Los Angeles City Councilman Felipe Fuentes, approximately 150,000 Yucatecans live in the Los Angeles metro region today.⁸ The majority are of Maya descent. To claim “there are no Maya here” denies this rich history of indigenous migration and once again erases indigenous peoples from Los Angeles’ landscape.

To uncover this hidden history, I began conducting ethnographic research with Maya immigrants in the greater Los Angeles metro area in 2003.⁹ I recruited informants by hanging out in restaurants owned by Yucatecan immigrants, which served as central sites for community

formation and participation. I identified eight restaurants in the greater Los Angeles area. My research methodology is based on participant observation, informal conversations with Maya immigrants and restaurant owners, and formal in-depth interviews I conducted with two Yucatecan restaurant owners in the Los Angeles metro area who are of Maya descent.

BEING INDIAN AND LATINO IN LOS ANGELES

For indigenous immigrants, claiming indigeneity is complicated by racial and social formations in the U.S. shaped by a history of colonization and predicated on a black/white binary. This process of racialization locates Latinos as “alien” and “outside” the nation, regardless of ethnicity (De Genova and Ramos-Zayas, 2003). As Mexicans, indigenous immigrants are categorized as Latino when they cross the U.S.-Mexico border and thus are racialized as “illegal” (De Genova, 2005/1999) and “rendered invisible” as Indians (Gutiérrez Nájera, 2010: 69). Similar processes are at work in Mexico where Mesoamerican ruins are proud national symbols, but living indigenous peoples are denigrated or consigned to a historical past (Bonfil Batalla, 1996). This triple erasure—of being rendered extinct and not recognized as citizens and Indians—speaks to the mutability of race and its historical specificities (De Genova and Ramos-Zayas, 2003). Studying indigenous migration helps us to think through racialization as a process and as a transnational social formation. Since racial imaginaries circulate across borders (Kim, 2008; Pérez, 2004), recent work on Mexican migration examines how transnational migrant subjectivities challenge assimilation narratives that erase cultural, racial, and ethnic differences (Stephen, 2007; Zavella, 2012). Studies of indigenous transnational communities show how indigenous migrants resist marginalization and oppression by building thriving communities that maintain strong ties to communities of origin and establish new linkages with other Mexican communities (Cruz-Manjarrez, 2013; Fortuny Loret de Mola, 2004; Gutiérrez Nájera, 2010, 2012; Malpica, 2005).

For Yucatecan immigrants, claiming their indigeneity is fraught by a long history of colonial exploitation and nationalist projects intended to assimilate and erase indigenous practices (e.g. Eiss, 2010; Farriss, 1984; Re Cruz, 1996). There are over one million indigenous peoples, mainly of Maya descent, residing on the peninsula of Yucatán¹⁰ (Lewin Fischer, 2007). Given that 65.5% of

Yucatán’s population is indigenous, most Yucatecans have ties to Maya communities. While Maya culture and heritage is publicly celebrated, to be indigenous or *mestizo*—in Yucatán this term refers to rural Maya speakers from indigenous communities and thus is conceptually distinct from the usage of *mestizo* in central Mexico, where it connotes racial mixing—is not always acclaimed. *Mestizos* in Yucatán are considered to embody Maya culture through their dress, cultural practices, and Maya language fluency. They are also portrayed pejoratively as backward, illiterate, and gullible. Not surprisingly, these racialized hierarchies do not dissolve at the U.S.-Mexico border. Maya migrants who are racialized and denigrated as *indio* (Indian) in Mexico find that they continue to be marked as *indios* by other Mexicans in the U.S. Yet, in the U.S. public imaginary, they are racialized as “Mexican” or “Latino.” Their indigeneity becomes subsumed within a racialized imaginary of a fixed Latino identity and bounded nation-states. It is this imaginary that makes possible proclamations that there are no Maya in central Los Angeles. To counter hegemonic discourses of indigenous abjection and to construct an alternative narrative of cultural value, Yucatecan restaurant owners rely on popular depictions of Maya culture rooted in a pre-Columbian and colonial past and Caribbean cuisine.

IDEALIZING MAYA CULTURE

The walls of Restaurant Mariscos Yucatan¹¹ are turquoise blue like the Caribbean Ocean, in contrast with the muted colors of the neighboring businesses (a video store, liquor store, laundromat, and donut shop) in the commercial strip mall catering to South Gate’s dense Latino population (94% based on census data). The wonders of the Yucatán Peninsula—palm trees, white sandy beaches, and impressive Maya ruins—leap out from the blue. The Caribbean theme and color continues inside. The owner, don Enrique Canto Cherrez, painted a large map of Mexico on one interior wall as a daily reminder of the long journey he traversed to get to the U.S. Brightly colored and stylized pictures of the dishes on the menu hang on the walls. Don Enrique explained, “Normally the food comes in through the nose, but these foods aren’t well-known. Most people won’t risk [trying something new]. The taste buds have the ultimate say.”¹² This curated display was meant to tempt consumers to try dishes they could not pronounce and had never heard of. The photographs of the *cochinita pibil* (a dish

made of pork baked in banana leaves), *papadzules* (corn tortillas dipped in pumpkin sauce and garnished with boiled eggs and tomato sauce), and *kibis* (fried meatballs made up of ground beef mixed with diced onions and a wheat dough) were artfully plated. The dishes looked vibrant, delicious, and exciting. The menu was similarly styled with photographs of the most popular dishes and archaeological ruins. To transport Yucatecans and other customers momentarily to Yucatán, don Enrique plays a segment of a Yucatecan radio show dubbed on tape. To enhance an aural sensation of simultaneity, he times the cassette to play at the same hour the program was aired in

Emphasizing authenticity can also reinforce an exotic otherness. Renown for its secessionist tendencies, Yucatán has a complicated relationship to central Mexico. Each independence movement, in conjunction with migrant streams from Syria, Lebanon, and Cuba, greatly influenced Yucatecan cuisine and made it distinctive from a central homogeneous Mexican cuisine (Ayor-Díaz, 2010). “Most people [Mexicans] believe that Yucatecans aren’t Mexican,” don Enrique explains. “They think we are Central Americans, according to Mexicans from the north. I educate them. I explain that they didn’t learn their geography well in school. We are identified with Cancún.

Most people [Mexicans] believe that Yucatecans aren’t Mexican. They think we are Central Americans ...

Yucatán. At first, his customers think they are listening to the radio show firsthand. “People [especially Yucatecans] are impressed to hear news and music from Yucatán,” he proudly exclaims.

Yucatecan restaurants in Los Angeles traffic in similar motifs of Maya and Mexican culture. Facades and interiors of buildings are decorated with Mesoamerican ruins and with *talavera* tiles and bright colors from a colonial past and regional culture. Yet, the use of Maya and Caribbean iconography is more than a visual display of a Maya culture. These images reflect well-known tourist tropes of desire and authenticity associated with Mexico in the American imaginary (Berger and Wood, 2010; Babb, 2011). Tourism has been central to the making of modern Mexico by promoting rural development, especially among indigenous communities, and helping the nation brand itself after political movements like the Mexican Revolution and the Zapatista Movement (Babb, 2011; Berger, 2006; Castellanos, 2010). As tourism in Mexico became acclaimed for its regional differences and ethnic communities, especially after the 1960s, indigenous foods like maize, *chiles*, and chocolate that were previously overlooked now came to be identified with a national Mexican cuisine (Pilcher, 2012). “Authentic” Mexican food became associated with idealized Mesoamerican cultures and iconography (Ibid.). This “way of seeing” Mexico was actively promoted by Mexican nationalist projects (Berger, 1972). At Mariscos Yucatan, the pyramid icons on the walls project this “authenticity.” Yucatán’s Caribbean and Arab influences reinforce an exotic ideal.¹³

That’s the only thing they know, even though we have amazing pyramids. Our ancestors were agriculturalists who learned to cultivate maize ... Yucatán is Mexico.”

Yucatecan restaurants form part of an expanding global market for Mexican food. Arising in response to the mass industrialization of food, Mexican cuisine has been popular in the U.S. for over a century (Arrellano, 2012; Pilcher, 2012). In recent years, salsa has brought in more revenue than ketchup, and tortillas have outsold hamburger and hot dog buns (Arrellano, 2012; Dávila, 2001). As Mexican food has become mainstream, Mexican restaurants are opening at a faster rate than other ethnic restaurants (Wong, 2013). In addition to Yucatecan cuisine, Yucatecan restaurants sell traditional and popular Mexican dishes like *tacos* and *tamales*. Mariscos Yucatan and Chichén Itzá both aim to attract a diverse consumer market, in addition to Yucatecan customers who appreciate the intricacy and unique flavors of Yucatecan cuisine. The logo of Mariscos Yucatan reminds its customers that it’s “the finest Mexican food around.” Don Enrique explains, “most people have heard of Yucatán, of Cancún, of the pyramids of Chichén Itzá, of Uxmal,” he explains. “And they say, ‘Well let’s try Yucatecan cuisine.’ Once they try it, they get hooked for some time. There are people who come frequently over the years ... once or twice a month.” To make “everyone [feel] welcome,” he plays music that caters to his clients’ cultural roots. “When Chinese come, I play Chinese music. For Koreans, I play Korean music. They ask if the owner is Korean. But we tell them ‘no,’ but the music is for them. I do the same for Cubans, and so

on.” By associating Yucatán with Mexico and its colorful folkloric culture, the restaurant décor makes Yucatecan cuisine familiar to Mexican Americans who may or may not have ever been to Mexico, but have heard about it from their relatives, and to an American public whose main experience with Mexico is traveling to Tijuana or Cancún. Representations of “authenticity” and alterity are examples of how culture is put to work on behalf of capital and national projects (Dávila, 2012).

For Yucatecan restaurant owners, the challenge is to put culture to work on behalf of Latino and Yucatecan communities. Predominantly located in Latino neighborhoods, Yucatecan restaurants face stiff competition for Latino consumers from fast-food chains and other Mexican eateries.¹⁴ To combat these homogenizing influences and make their restaurants distinctive, Yucatecan restaurateurs champion Yucatecan cuisine. This campaign forms part of recent and longstanding efforts to highlight the diversity of Mexico’s cuisine by Mexican cooks and elites. In an effort to diminish the popularity of industrial food consumption in Mexico and of Mexican cuisine in the U.S., Mexican cooks and elites, influenced by cultural tourism with its emphasis on local culture and ethnic communities, turned toward regional and indigenous cuisines to distinguish an “authentic” national cuisine from Mexican food sold across the border (Pilcher, 2012). Similarly, the influx of indigenous migrants to Los Angeles inspired a focus on ethnic cuisines and regional dishes. The success of Oaxacan restaurant Guelaguetza, which opened in 1994 and whose initial clientele was made up of Oaxaqueños and Anglos, proved that regional cuisines could prosper in Latino Los Angeles (Arellano, 2012). Before don Enrique established Mariscos Yucatan, the locale was a Mexican restaurant called “Adelita,” dedicated to a revolutionary theme. This restaurant went bust, a common phenomenon among small businesses (Valdez, 2011). The owner of the strip mall, who happened to be Korean, knew little about Yucatecan food. He was doubtful that don Enrique’s venture would thrive. However, Mariscos Yucatan has now been in business for 17 years, a significant achievement for a family business in L.A.’s highly competitive restaurant industry. All but one of eight Yucatecan restaurants have now been in business for over fifteen years.¹⁶ The oldest restaurant, Yuca’s Hut, was founded in 1976. Yucatecan restaurant owners mobilize their cultural resources to tap into an expanding Latino market eager to consume goods that remind them of home.

CULTURAL AMBASSADOR

For these two restaurateurs, cooking is a profession they came to late in life. Don Gilberto worked as an engineer in Mexico and the U.S. Don Enrique studied to be a teacher in Mexico, but left for the U.S. before entering the profession. He worked in a restaurant, a clothing warehouse, and as a chauffer before becoming a pipe welder for the U.S. Navy. Both come from families with culinary backgrounds. Don Gilberto grew up in a town founded by an American timber company near Tizimín that employed Americans, German engineers, and Maya factory workers. His mother ran a restaurant out of her home. He helped prep classic home-cooked dishes at an early age. Don Enrique’s parents were from Campeche and Yucatán. His love for cooking was inspired by his grandmother who spoke fluent Maya. His indigenous heritage “adds a flair [to his cooking].” Their cooking reflects these diverse histories and their pride in their indigenous heritage.

For Yucatecan entrepreneurs, culture is more than just a vehicle by which to launch a small business and live the American dream. Don Enrique and don Gilberto opened their restaurants late in life after successful careers as a welder and an engineer, respectively. For don Gilberto, “it was a dream that I had and would have been realized in whatever location ... I wanted to make something ... and do it well.”¹⁵ Don Enrique was also inspired by “an idea” of opening a restaurant and “putting it together ... I did everything myself,” he proudly exclaimed. They didn’t have any models. They learned of successful ethnic restaurants like Guelaguetza after opening their own restaurants. Their entrepreneurship was not motivated by the American Dream, in contrast to studies framing ethnic entrepreneurship as the culmination of this dream. Rather, don Gilberto explains, “It didn’t begin this way [as the American dream]... It’s a way to make a living, but at the same time it’s a way to promote our culture.” As a former educator, don Enrique is intent on educating other Mexicans about Yucatecan culture and history, especially those who are only familiar with Cancún. “[Yucatán] is one of the states where the Mexican Revolution began. Henequen [which was used to make rope] was the green gold ... and helped fund the federal government ... [Yucatán] wanted to become independent of Mexico. Yucatán has its own national anthem and flag.”

Don Gilberto considers his principal role as a business owner to be “an ambassador of Yucatecan culture.” He

takes pride knowing that people come to “know Yucatán” and its cuisine through him. He sells cookies, candies, and salsas imported from Yucatán. He opened a small gift shop next to his restaurant where he sells Yucatecan crafts and goods, including *guayabera* shirts, hand stitched purses, and hammocks. “The gift store is symbolic. To show people what is Yucatán. It’s more decorative. It doesn’t make much money. What I sell most is *hamacas*. Right now my wife is in Mérida buying *hamacas*. We buy everything from the people who produce it. We go to Chumayel and we buy it from them.” Buying directly from the people, from indigenous pueblos, is why the gift shop matters, not the profits (there aren’t any). Cultivating a relationship between indigenous peoples and Americans helps counter narratives of extinction.

He is peddling an idea of “authenticity” that has long been associated with Mexico’s arts and crafts. Given the fluidity of the U.S.-Mexico border (Anzaldúa, 1987), this rendering of Mexico as an exotic “other” has been historically cultivated on both sides of the border. Popular depictions of Mexican Americans and Latinos are deeply influenced by the tourist tropes of authenticity and the exotic. Sofia Vergara’s character Gloria in the television series “Modern Family” plays the sexy Latina immigrant, while forays into Mexico on television shows tend to show burros carrying woven baskets and dusty unpaved streets. By trafficking in the “exotic” and the “authentic,” Yucatecan restaurants attempt to diffuse or negate racist images of indigenous peoples. But relying on stereotypes of Maya and Mexican culture does little to unsettle romantic notions of indigeneity rooted in a distant past. Dead Indians are easily consumable but where do living Indians in all their complexity fit within this idealized landscape? It is at this juncture that Yucatecan restaurant owners take on the important role of cultural mediators.

Don Gilberto takes his role as cultural ambassador seriously by literally serving as an unofficial tour guide to American travelers. He explains:

People have gone to Yucatán after getting to know us. They come. I’ve taken people to Yucatán, about 10 people, to get to know Yucatán. I’ve been their guide. People I’ve met in the restaurant have become my friends. We have various friends. We’ve had the fortune of meeting people. We

wouldn’t have met these people if we didn’t have the restaurant ... They go to our house in Yucatán. [I take them to] the classical places. I look for where there are fiestas in the *pueblos* and I take them to the *vaquerías*. I’ve taken people to Tizimín, etc. So they can see what life is like in Yucatán ... I take people to the markets (*mercados*). We go to Chichén, Uxmal, to the beach. To the museums. I love to show off the museums. We have a lot to take pride in of our land, our cuisine, everything.¹⁷

By highlighting the quotidian and the sensational side-by-side, don Gilberto aims to convey an intimate portrait of Yucatecan life that disrupts negative stereotypes of “backward” Indians and “dirty” Mexicans. He may rely on tourist tropes to portray the richness of Yucatecan life, but he sees the role of culture as a bridge to greater inter- and intra-ethnic understanding and as central to the refashioning of Yucatán’s significance in the American imaginary. He explains, “This is what moves me, what’s important. For the pride I feel for being where I’m from. There have been moments when people will ask me how long I have been here. They ask me when I will lose my Yucatecan accent? I say I will never lose it because I’m proud of it ... I’m very proud of being born there, of being *mestizo* [indigenous].” Don Enrique considers language as indicative of national exclusion and belonging. “We talk differently. We have a very strong accent. But there are people who don’t know anything. They don’t know their geography.” His views speak to a greater challenge of integrating Yucatecans into the nation on both sides of the border. Yucatecans are perceived to be different than other Mexicans, especially amongst Mexicans originating from Mexico’s northern frontier who place the peninsula of Yucatán outside the Mexican nation-state. As Arlene Dávila suggests, the work of culture is “hierarchically ordered” and thus highly contested and fraught with tensions (2012: 4).

A POLITICS OF DIGNITY

In Los Angeles, racialization is a process that disciplines indigenous subjects in and outside of national boundaries. National affiliations render indigenous

migrants invisible within the social geography of Los Angeles and within the field of Latino Studies (Gutiérrez Nájera, 2010). For Maya migrants, becoming Latino has its advantages and disadvantages; it helps them avoid discrimination for being Indian, even as they continue to face discrimination for being Latino. It is common to hear fluent Maya speakers claim that they don't speak pure Maya like their ancestors or speak Maya at all, even when they use it daily. Such claims reference nostalgia for a distant past and index the marginal positions Maya speakers find themselves in within national politics and identity as a result of Yucatán's history of colonization and racism (Berkley, 1998). Maya immigrants rely on similar discursive strategies of loss and nostalgia as a way to mediate marginality on the U.S. side of the border.

Being indigenous in Los Angeles involves more than a politics of difference. For Maya immigrants who are doubly disenfranchised as Indians and immigrants, it has become a quest for a "politics of equal dignity" (Taylor, 1994: 44) and an "alternative politics of recognition" (Fraser, 2000).¹⁸ They follow in the footsteps of a long history of Latino immigrants' organizing efforts to combat displacement and marginalization in downtown Los Angeles by staking claims to cultural citizenship and urban space (Leclerc, Villa, and Dear, 1999; Valle and Torres, 2000; Villa, 1999). These efforts are visible in the rise of hometown associations (HTAs) or "clubs" organized by Yucatecan communities. In 2001, very few official HTAs existed within the Yucatecan community. In contrast, the communities and states of Zacatecas, Jalisco, Sinaloa, Nayarit, and Oaxaca had established numerous and thriving HTAs and binational organizations by 1998 (Alarcón, 2000). One of the most well-known binational organizations is the Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales (FIOB), which was established over twenty years ago to help indigenous Oaxacan migrants and communities to organize for indigenous rights, immigrant rights, and social justice.¹⁹ The creation of the FIOB challenged assimilationist narratives of immigration that negated migrant ethnic identity and collective agency (Velasco Ortiz, 2005). Most important, it paved the way for indigenous organizing in other Mexican states. In the wake of Hurricane Isidore that came in from the north and hovered over the peninsula in 2002, HTAs mushroomed to provide support to communities devastated in Yucatán. In 2004, the Federación Alianza de Clubes Yucatecos and the Federación Yucateca de California were established

to bring together and support Yucatecan HTAs. Over thirty HTAs exist today.²⁰

Like other Mexican HTAs, Yucatecan HTAs raise funds for community development projects in Yucatán and support immigrant rights and well being. HTAs promote their indigenous heritage (Maya) alongside the regional culture of Yucatán. For Sara Zapata Mijares, founder and president of the Federación Alianza de Clubes Yucatecos, her identity as "Maya/Yucateca" propels her efforts to promote and maintain ties with Yucatán.²¹ The growth in Yucatecan HTAs highlights a shift in the political evolution of Yucatecans and Maya peoples. Yucatecans are no longer content to remain in the shadows. They publicly embrace their indigenous heritage and use it to connect communities on both sides of the border. For Yucatecan immigrants, this politics of recognition acknowledges and honors their immigrant labor and indigenous ancestry and does not divorce one from the other.

Given the brutal hours, small business owners, especially restaurant owners, must invest to make their business a success, Yucatecan restaurant owners have little time to participate in HTAs. Don Enrique lamented, "I dedicate my time to my restaurant ... I have to keep an eye out. I am always on call." Don Gilberto participated in past community efforts to organize a workshop on community leadership, but the project didn't come to fruition. Frustrated with the outcome, he decided to spearhead projects and events on his own. While don Gilberto and don Enrique may not participate in organizing events with HTAs, they do provide financial support for community events organized by HTAs and other community groups. Mariscos Yucatan funds the Federación Alianza de Clubes Yucatecos. The Federación, in conjunction with the Centro Cultural Eek Mayab (a non-profit organization that promotes community development) and the state government of Yucatán hosted the 1st *Festival Internacional de Cultura Maya* (International Festival of Maya Culture) in Los Angeles.²² Spanning three days in August in 2014, the festival focused on music and the arts and featured the well-known *trova* musical group, *Los Juglares*. For don Gilberto, this event's success was a testament to the power of the HTAs.

Yucatecan restaurant owners perceive their role as cultural workers through a wider lens than the projects advocated by the HTAs. They consider Yucatecan cuisine a vehicle through which to teach respect, tolerance, and

recognition. During the 2008 presidential campaign, don Enrique provided the venue and food for several information meetings hosted by the local Spanish TV channels for his neighborhood. He actively courts the media to promote his restaurant and Maya culture, but he considers his “best promotion [to be] mouth to mouth.” Don Gilberto considers his role as a business owner to be critical to the well-being of the Latino community. “I feel proud of what I’ve been able to do here. My wife and I started this business by ourselves. We have 32 employees. 26 families depend on us.” Chichén Itzá feeds 12,000 customers per month. Don Enrique has eight full-time Latino employees and treats them well: For him, fair treatment and fair prices are crucial to running a successful and profitable business, and a service to the community. To lower overhead costs, he shops for his own supplies. Every morning he goes to the market to buy fresh produce, fish, and meat.

For don Gilberto, “it’s huge traffic and a great opportunity to promote whatever cause.” With this captive audience in mind, he organized the “Magic of Yucatán” and co-authored a Yucatecan cookbook, *Sabores yucatecos: A Culinary Tour of the Yucatan* (2011, with Katharine Díaz and Gilberto Cetina Jr.), with a first printing in English and a second printing in Spanish. He is now working on a Mexican cookbook promoting healthy recipes.²³ “I consider myself a cultural conductor. It would be pretentious to say of [speak for all] Maya culture, but I would say of Yucatecan culture through food. This is why we did the cookbook. The book was an extension of this promotion.” Thirty-two media representatives—from the *LA Times* to *La opinión*—were present for the book launch of the Spanish translation of his cookbook. He feels incredibly fortunate.

We’ve had a great acceptance. We have received a positive response. The cultural event the people who come are very grateful. They come and give you the thanks for taking the time to do it, for organizing it ... I feel when I am in the middle of it that I regret taking it on. It’s so much work. It’s hard to deal with the artists’ [schedules]. But the results change my mind.

EL DÍA DEL YUCATECO

In 2013, the city of Los Angeles declared May 29th the “Día del Yucateco” to honor Yucatecans living in Los Angeles and as a way to reinforce ties with communities in Yucatán. On this day, the City Council, in conjunction with the Casa de la Cultura Maya, honors an outstanding Yucatecan for his/her contributions to Los Angeles. The Casa de la Cultura Maya, a non-profit organization whose mission is to “preserve the diversity and history of the Mayan people of Mesoamerica, through the promotion of their culture, cosmovision, and ancient traditions,”²⁴ was established by Yucatecans and community activists José Loria and Marco Pacheco in 2009. It’s noteworthy that this celebration does not distinguish between Maya and Yucatecan; these identities are collapsed together. The first Yucatecan to be honored was Socorro Herrera, owner of Yuca’s Restaurant and a 2005 James Beard awardee.²⁵ She was recognized for her outstanding cultural contribution to the city of Los Angeles. Yuca’s has helped support local schools, health organizations like the Children’s Hospital of Los Angeles, and community organizations like the Greater Griffith Park Neighborhood Council and the Los Feliz Business Improvement Board.

Celebrating this day is a huge achievement for Yucatecans who have been triply erased from Los Angeles’ landscape for so long. This public recognition is a culmination of concerted efforts by community members and leaders to acknowledge their contributions to Los Angeles as Yucatecans and as indigenous people. The Yucatecan community is well-established and made up of doctors, lawyers, police, and judges, as well as service and construction workers. The fact that this honor was first bestowed on a restaurateur speaks to the crucial role restaurateurs have played in forging community amongst Latinos and Angelinos and in promoting Maya culture as a rich tradition to be celebrated rather than negated. For don Gilberto, Socorro Herrera is an exemplary model of how love for food can be transformative by bringing people together. He sums it up proudly: “We’ve achieved a lot. We’ve gotten people to become interested in Yucatecan cuisine and in Yucatán.”

Yet, there is more work to be done to unsettle the negative stereotypes of indigenous peoples that abound in the American imaginary. Popular cultural misconceptions of Maya culture found in the media, such as the apocalyptic prophecies heralded by the supposed ending of the Maya calendar in 2012, rely on images

of bloodthirsty savages. For don Gilberto, the work of contestation is “to do something. And do it well ... To have the opportunity to show through [cuisine] ... to move beyond the delimitations that are placed upon us [immigrants] that tell us that we aren’t capable of doing something like this.” In so doing, “people are surprised ... It’s very important. Not everyone can move beyond the box we are placed in [as immigrants and as Yucatecans].” The work of culture becomes a way for Maya migrants to construct an alternative politics of recognition, one that not only validates an idealized indigenous culture, but that opens the door for new conversations about what it means to be indigenous and Latino; how to put culture to work on behalf of indigenous communities; and how to promote a politics of dignity.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 The official name of the event was “El mes de Yucatán/ The Magic of Yucatán.”
- 2 I rely on the Mexican practice of using the honorific “don/doña” before the name of married or elderly adults.
- 3 The term *pueblo* in Mexico is complex with multiple meanings. See Eiss, 2010. I use it here to refer to indigenous *ejido* communities (collective landholdings) in Yucatán.
- 4 In the mid-1980s, the fall of coffee prices intensified the migration of Mixtec and Zapotecans from Oaxaca and prompted Maya migration from Chiapas. In the 1990s, military occupation and guerrilla warfare in Chiapas further intensified Maya migration.
- 5 According to Jonathan Fox, see <<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2013/06/130624-mexico-mixteco-indigenous-immigration-spanish-culture/>> [Accessed Oct 18, 2014]. This is a conservative estimate. In California, indigenous migrants from the Mexican

state of Oaxaca are estimated to number approximately 100,000 to 150,000 (Kresge, 2007; Malpica, 2005), while Maya migrants from the state of Yucatán are estimated to number approximately 100,000. These numbers are also reflected in the exponential rise (146%) in people identifying as “Hispanic American Indian” in the 1990 and 2000 U.S. census (Kresge, 2007: 5). See <<http://www.radiolaprimerisima.com/noticias/154818/migrantes-yucatecos-muestran-poder-de-organizacion-en-eu>> [Accessed Oct 5, 2014].

- 6 According to most sources, approximately 4.5 million Mexicans participated in the Bracero Program.
- 7 An estimated 120,000 indigenous Mexicans work as farm laborers as of 2013. See <<http://indiancountry-todaymedianetwork.com/2013/01/25/indigenous-farmworkers-are-breaking-new-ground-california-147229>> [Accessed Oct 5, 2014].
- 8 Of these 150,000 migrants, 40,000 reside in the San Fernando Valley. See <http://www.7thdistrict.net/celebrating_dia_del_yucateco_in_los_angeles> [Accessed Sept 18, 2014].
- 9 The greater Los Angeles metropolitan area includes the counties of Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Ventura.
- 10 The peninsula is comprised of three states: Quintana Roo, Yucatán, and Campeche.
- 11 The restaurant’s owner prefers not to apply an accent to Yucatán.
- 12 Personal interview with Enrique Canto Cherrez, August 4, 2014, Los Angeles, Los Angeles County.
- 13 For don Enrique, these influences give Yucatecan cuisine a distinct flavor. “Yucatecan food is a bit different [than Mexican food] because it has been influenced by Caribbean, indigenous, Lebanese, and [central] Mexican cuisines. We are a state on the outskirts. We are a combination of aromas, tastes, and spices. Everything is based on spices. Whereas Mexican food is based on chiles: morenos, guajillos, rojo ... We use chiles but not as much.”
- 14 Gentrification and urban development during the 1990s and early 2000s has led to the flight of Latinos from three of the neighborhoods where these restaurants are situated. Anglo-Americans who have settled in these new neighborhoods were quick to appreciate and patronize Yucatecan restaurants.
- 15 I do not include here Yucatecan restaurants located just beyond the greater Los Angeles area, such as La Paz

- in Calabasas, Los Angeles County, and Casa Maya in Mentone, San Bernardino County.
- 16 Personal interview with Gilberto Cetina, Aug. 5, 2014, Los Angeles, Los Angeles County.
- 17 Personal interview, Cetina, Aug. 5, 2014.
- 18 Nancy Fraser argues that the politics of recognition rooted in identity politics are limited because they do not always speak to or address questions of parity. This “misrecognition” is based on an “institutionalized relation of social subordination” (2000: 113). She proposes an “alternative politics of recognition” as a way to “de-institutionalize patterns of cultural value that impede parity of participation” (Ibid.:115).
- 19 The FIOB was previously known as the Frente Indígena Oaxaqueño Binacional.
- 20 Gilberto Cetina, August 5, 2014, Los Angeles, Los Angeles County.
- 21 See <http://www.yucatecos.org/pres_mensaje.html> [Accessed Oct 15, 2013].
- 22 The festival took place from August 15-16, 2014, in Los Angeles, Los Angeles County.
- 23 Don Gilberto is co-authoring the cookbook with my brother (Phillip Castellano), a physician. This outcome is coincidental. During one of our conversations, I mentioned to don Gilberto that my brother is a physician who specializes in weight-loss. A few months later, after struggling to lose weight, don Gilberto made an appointment with him. The idea for the cookbook sprang up during his treatment.
- 24 Casa de la Cultura Maya, see <www.casadelacultura-maya.org> [Accessed Oct 15, 2013].
- 25 The 2014 recipient was Los Angeles Police Department Captain Martín Baeza.
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