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**Becoming I'x: Maya Ontological Decolonization
and the Turn to Theater in Postwar Guatemala**

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and the Turn to Theater in Postwar Guatemala**

by

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Dissertation

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Dedication

Reh qa uxpach, yino jaar qaxilu.

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Matyox chi re rajaw juyu', rajaw taq che' qochoch (pa Chi K'im, pa Pa'laq'ha') ruma iwuxla' richin nuk'aslem. Matyox ruma xeya'o chinwe nuchuq'a' richin yitz'ib'an; xek'ütu chinwe ri b'ey chi re na'oj. Ninwajo' chi re samaj re' ntikir nto' richin ruk'u'x siwan tinamit chuqa' richin ruk'aslem xajoj q'ojom ojer kan. Man ta xtikäm re na'oj re'. Matyox chiwe.

Becoming I'x: Maya Ontological Decolonization and the Turn to Theater in Postwar Guatemala

Czarina Faith Thelen, Ph.D.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2017

Supervisor: Charles R. Hale

This dissertation examines theater's capacity to communicate Maya ontologies and nurture cultural-political imaginaries among rural Mayas engaged in decolonization politics. In response to the highly exclusionary Guatemalan state and the 1980s genocide of Mayas, and coinciding with continent-wide Indigenous protests against quincennial celebrations of Columbus' arrival to the Americas in 1992, a vibrant Maya Kaqchikel movement emerged in Sololá, Guatemala. This rural grassroots movement of farmers and schoolteachers, which I call Tejido Social (Social Fabric), demonstrated an enormous capacity for mobilization around a range of issues including recovering ancestral land, expelling a military base, building a bilingual Kaqchikel community school, and revitalizing the practice of Maya customary law and governance. Beginning in 1999, a local political party sought to incorporate the Tejido Social movement, at times using tactics of intimidation and violence.

In 2000, children of Tejido Social leaders, curious about aspects of Maya culture and ontology that had been repressed by genocide and colonization, took another approach. Turning away from broad grassroots organizing through village networks, they express a politics of *reivindicación* (cultural dignification and vindication) through theater. Through an ethnography of rehearsals, theater productions, and audience responses to the theater group Sotz'il, I analyze what Sotz'il's theater performances do for performers and audiences. Extending Hirschkind's concept of "ethical soundscapes," I contend that Sotz'il shapes Maya worlds through theater. This research finds that Sotz'il's theater performances evoke sensory memories of Maya ontology and lifeways. I contend that by awakening an emotional connection to everyday rural Maya experience, Sotz'il strengthens audiences' ethicopolitical commitment to Maya *reivindicación*.

Sotz'il's project, however, stands in tension with the maintenance of the village networks that are central to Indigenous communities' mobilizing power, leaving open questions about its future amidst repression. By exploring this tension I seek to rethink subaltern politics more generally, beyond social movements as a political formation, to conceptualize processes through which subaltern peoples internalize and emotionally attach to – and then mobilize around – identity-based causes and values.

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Chapter 1: Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology

Early Sotz'il: Entering the Temple of Theater. (March 2006)

Tonight we were lucky to walk with the clarity of moonlight. We did not need flashlights or umbrellas.

Ana led and her brother Lucas walked behind me as we followed dirt footpaths from their house. Cornfields towered over our heads like a dense wall of very tall lanky brothers who stood close on either side of us. Ana had told me to bundle up because she got cold during rehearsals. Since her sandals left her ankles uncovered at the base of her corte, she would wrap her lower legs with su'ts (woven shawls) while playing instruments seated.

Sometimes Ana got tired of going to rehearsal. To arrive on time, she would have to rush to do all her household chores, then her teaching preparations. Of course, Cabrera would reprimand you if you were late. Then she would not return home until very late with her brother Lucas, after the rest of the family was in bed. They would find their dinner in covered ceramic plates on the wood-burning stove. (Tonight our dinner would be pescaditos (little fish) in a tomato chile sauce, with tortillas that we would reheat over the embers that the family had tried to preserve for us. The portion in the red clay bowl was small, but the coziness of huddling around the "estufa mejorada" (an efficient wood-burning stove) made stomach and heart feel warm and full.)

We walked past two adobe houses. After just one more patch of milpa, we turned the corner to approach Sotz'il Jay. We knocked on the resonant lamina (corrugated aluminum) door and another Sotz'il member let us in to the earthen patio. It was already dark inside with sparse light from a couple lightbulbs hanging in the covered passageways and from the altar room.

Ana and Lucas already knew their routines for setting up for rehearsal. They silently gathered their instruments and materials from the handmade storage shelves that faced the altar in the side room. Then in the darkness they placed them in their appropriate locations at the borders of the patio where they would rehearse. Presiding over the general

silence was Mauricio Cabrera, a constant presence of serious focus and concentration in his usual position leaning against a pillar of the corridor, with one booted leg crossed against the other and hands firmly buried in his pants pockets. His stern presence made the process efficient and solemn: no joking or messing around, after the customary initial greetings.

But there was some leeway for quick greetings upon arrival. We said “Buenas noches” to Cabrera who gave a curt nod of acknowledgement, and greeted the other Sotz’iles with “Xokaq’a.” Ana had quick Kaqchikel exchanges and hushed laughs with her male cousins. When Lisandro entered, he was more hearty and vocal with his “Buenas noches!” This was accompanied by a round of handshaking from polite young men like Rafael or neighbors from El Tablón who were visiting a rehearsal and did not know about Sotz’il’s ritual of concentration.

Then the Sotz’iles quietly moved into their warm-up in the middle of the patio.

The dimly-lit nighttime mystery and solemnity at the start of those evening rehearsals felt like entering into a sacred space – the temple of theater. Cabrera’s sternness set the tone for the opening ritual: everyone got quiet and got down to business. The warm-up felt like a hushed meditation. It piqued my curiosity: What was about to unfold in the rehearsal?

This dissertation examines theater’s capacity to communicate Maya ontologies and nurture cultural-political imaginaries among rural Mayas engaged in decolonization politics. In response to the highly exclusionary Guatemalan state and the 1980s genocide of Mayas, and coinciding with continent-wide Indigenous protests against quincentennial celebrations of Columbus’ arrival to the Americas in 1992, a vibrant Maya Kaqchikel movement emerged in the municipality of Sololá, Guatemala. This rural grassroots movement of farmers and schoolteachers, which I call Tejido Social (Social Fabric), demonstrated an enormous capacity for mobilization at the close of Guatemala’s armed

conflict and post-war transition.¹ In my Master's thesis, I refer to this movement as "Tejido Social" because it drew upon the Kaqchikel social fabric as inspiration for its resistance strategies (Thelen 2010). They organized successfully around a range of issues including recovering ancestral land, expelling a military base, building a bilingual Kaqchikel community school, and revitalizing the practice of Maya customary law and Kaqchikel governance bodies. Beginning in 1999, the demobilized guerrilla organization, the URNG, formed a local political party and sought to incorporate the Tejido Social movement, at times using tactics of intimidation and violence.

In 2000, children, nephews, and nieces of Tejido Social leaders did not follow in their footsteps with movement politics. With burgeoning questions about aspects of Maya culture and ontology that had been repressed by genocide and colonization, they took another approach and founded youth group Sotz'il ("People of the Bat"). Turning away from broad grassroots organizing through village networks, they express a politics of *reivindicación* (cultural dignification and vindication) through theater.

As family members of Tejido Social's leaders, Sotz'il still inherits the legacy of the Tejido Social movement, and that inheritance is mixed. On the promising side, this legacy includes the resurgence of Kaqchikel governance in the municipality of Sololá and the founding of many Kaqchikel institutions, including a bilingual Maya school which all the younger members of Sotz'il attended. On the disturbing side, the legacy includes a bloody community division with many casualties, including Sotz'il's young founder Lisandro Guarcax at age 32. This turn of events is shocking for those who had felt optimistic that post-war openings could generate opportunities for rural Maya cultural activism.

Furthermore, as a decolonization project critiquing Christianity amidst Maya Christians who view their work as *brujería* (witchcraft), Sotz'il's project has at times been in tension with their surrounding communities. Rather than participate directly in

¹ Before this period, Mayas had self-identified primarily with their linguistic community (for example, as Kaqchikeles or Q'eq'ch'is) and secondarily as "indígenas" (Indigenous people). The term Maya had primarily been used by archaeologists to describe the pre-colonial civilizations of the so-called Classic Maya in lowland city-states like Tikal. With the rise of the pan-Maya movement, participants began to use the term Maya as an umbrella term to unite all the Maya linguistic communities across Guatemala and to evoke their living connection with their pre-colonial Maya ancestors.

grassroots organizing, Sotz'il has chosen to focus on the space of theater where they can practice a degree of self-determination with relative autonomy. The problem is what becomes of their connection to traditional village networks if Sotz'il's everyday politics (aside from performances) is atomized. Because the maintenance of village networks is central to Indigenous communities' mobilizing power, this leaves open questions about the future of Sotz'il's politics in light of ongoing repression.

This dissertation is an ethnographic study of Sotz'il theater with an analysis of Maya politics. My ethnographic research sites are the spaces of incubation of Sotz'il's work where they engage in collective visioning and teaching. The artistic process often has an incubation phase before its public appearance – before the mass diffusion and implementation of a particular project. What is most interesting to me is this birthing ground of ideas, politics, and artistic projects because it holds ripe opportunities for radical changes of direction. It is in this space of play, drafting, improvisation, and experimentation that dramatic changes can most easily be made – before the phase of pragmatic implementation which requires budgets, personnel, and material considerations on a large-scale. This is a research interest I share with scholars of “politics as process” and of political imaginaries.

Specifically, the sites of my research interest are Sotz'il's artistic creation process in rehearsals, their theatrical productions, and audiences' responses to Sotz'il's theater plays. In these sites I specifically study Sotz'il's original approach to theater. I analyze both Sotz'il's theater work – that is, i.e. the craft and its “internal” content as it stands on its own -- and its relation to the vision of *Maya reivindicación* that Sotz'il members express.

To shed light on the research problem of why Sotz'il turned to theater as the means of expressing their stated political goals of *Maya reivindicación* (cultural dignification), my research questions are:

1. First, is Sotz'il's turn to theater ontological? That is, do they turn to theater to advance a politics more consistent with Maya cosmovisión? If so, how does Sotz'il's theater express Maya ontological politics?

2. Second, what do Sotz'il's theater performances do (ontologically and politically) for their audiences?
3. Third, Sotz'il's project presents a dilemma: In advancing a politics more consistent with Maya cosmovisión, does Sotz'il have a strategy for confronting the dominance of Western, capitalist, state-centered political economic relations that threaten Maya communities and lifeways? If not, considering the repression that surrounds its project, does the "autonomy" proposal of Sotz'il politics have a future beyond the realm of theater performance?

Extending Hirschkind's concept of "ethical soundscapes," I contend that Sotz'il engages in ontological worldings² through theater. This research finds that Sotz'il's theater performances evoke sensory-laden memories of practices associated with Maya cosmovisión. By awakening an emotional connection to everyday rural Maya experience, I argue that Sotz'il strengthens audiences' ethicopolitical commitment to Maya reivindicación.

Sotz'il's project, however, stands in tension with the maintenance of the village networks that are central to Indigenous communities' mobilizing power, leaving open questions about its future amidst repression. By exploring this tension I seek to rethink subaltern politics more generally, beyond social movements as a political formation, to conceptualize processes through which subaltern peoples internalize and emotionally attach to – and then mobilize around – identity-based causes and values.

² I borrow the concept of "worldings" from Marisol de la Cadena's work. She describes her use and genealogy of the term as follows: "*Worlding* is a notion that I borrow from both Haraway (2008) and Tsing (2010), and that I think they composed in conversation. I use the concept to refer to practices that create (forms of) being with (and without) entities, as well as the entities themselves. Worlding is the practice of creating relations of life in a place and the place itself." (de la Cadena 2015: 291fn4)

Historical Background

Among Indigenous peoples in Guatemala and across the Americas, 1492 (the year of Columbus' arrival to the Western hemisphere) has become known as the first genocide. Despite the imposition of Spanish rule, until the late 1600s "frontier regions" remained independent of Spanish control. For example, in the Maya region, "unconquered areas" on the fringe / frontiers of the Guatemalan highlands, the Lacandón, and the Itza kingdoms of the Petén were hotbeds of Indigenous revolt and resistance as late as 1697, when Spaniards achieved a military victory over the Itza at Tayasal.

Even with Spanish military victories, Indigenous peoples were not willing subjects and openly rebelled frequently. Indigenous revolutions and rebellions rocked the colonies' power and authority and invoked notions of liberation and justice rooted in Indigenous cosmologies (Varese 2008, 385) -- inspiring legacies which live on today in contemporary Indigenous movements across the Americas. In Mexico, Indigenous rebellions were numerous -- every few years in some regions -- and many were messianic, culminating in 1855 with the end of the Caste War of the Yucatan.

The period from 1775 through the Early Republics (1825-1850: Liberal rule) is known as "Second Conquest" throughout the Indigenous Americas. This transition from Indirect Rule of the Spanish Crown to Direct Rule included policies like extreme taxation which bolstered colonial society's attempts to assimilate Indigenous peoples (Farriss 1984). Rather than usher in liberal ideals of equality, liberal regimes instigated bloody processes of land dispossession for Indigenous peoples; mestizos' interference in village administration and economy that previously had enjoyed more autonomy under the Spanish Crown; and unpaid labor or peonage (Larson 2004). Gould (1998) calls this period the "Dawn of Citizenship and the Suppression of Community." In sum, across the Americas, Liberal state formation (1855-1930) was a homogenizing paradigm predicated on the suppression of the autonomy of Indigenous communities.

Beginning in 1930, two ideological paradigms of "national integration" became predominant in the nation-states of Latin America. The first paradigm is *Indigenismo*, a project that had salience across the region but had particular variations in each country.

Among the most famous theorists of Indigenismo is Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, who sought to overcome Indigenous “regions of refuge” through acculturation into the “revolutionary” Mexican state (Aguirre Beltrán 1991). Projects of Indigenismo tended to the following dimensions: First, indigenismo sought a collectivization of society and the nation³ by integrating Indigenous people into the “revolutionary” state (like Mexico) as peasants. That is, in the populist politics and agrarian reform processes of the day, they could be articulated in Marxist analyses of class and modes of production as peasants, while discarding any Indigenous dimensions of struggle. Second, Indigenismo involved a racial privileging and centering of the mestizo as the teleological progress and uplift of Latin America’s races, like Vasconcelos’ “cosmic race” and mestizaje projects in Nicaragua (Gould 1998). Third, Indigenous culture and ethnic consciousness – while useful for producing distinctive narratives of national origin and nationalist folklore -- were viewed as backward, and Indigenismo sought Indigenous peoples’ acculturation and cultural integration into the modern nation and citizenship. For example, anthropologist Eric Wolf (1957) argued that culture is a result of historic processes, and that the colonial period transformed Indigenous life into peasant life.

Of note is that these Indigenismo and agrarian reforms occurred in an era of increasing capital encroachments by U.S. Empire (Grandin 2004). Also of note, early socialist and anarchist movements influenced and involved at least the early formation of Indigenous intellectuals and activists, including Fausto Reinaga and Quintín Lame (Castillo Cárdenas 1987). Peruvian socialist José Carlos Mariátegui represented a “less integrationist” position than other Indigenistas (Wade 1997, 33), arguing that Andean Indigenous peoples as oppressed nationalities have the right to self-determination, and that Indigenous liberation and socialism would be achieved not through state-building, but from a unified struggle of Indigenous nationalities, peasants, and urban workers (Curley 2012). However, Reinaga and Lame later became known for breaking with their early Leftists

³ In this aspect, they differed from modernization theories and assimilation projects based on U.S. models of individualism.

affiliations and founded a flourishing movement now known as *Indianismo* (Reinaga 1969, Lucero 2008, Lame Chantre 1971).

The second ideological paradigm of national integration on the surface appeared radical: it was “the ideology of revolution” advanced by Marxists and Leftists of all stripes. Nonetheless, in this period it involved the suppression of any *Indigenous adaptation* of this revolutionary ideology. Marxists demonstrated their ideological foundations in modernization. Based in Marxist theory of a teleology of civilizational advancement, Marxists advocated for peasants and Indigenous peoples to shed “pre-modern” identities in order to join industrial-era class identification as workers and better be able to unify for revolution. In Guatemala, Severo Martínez Peláez’s *Patria del Criollo* (Martínez Peláez 1981) became required reading at the Leftist public university, la Universidad de San Carlos (USAC), even as it infamously made the case that Indigenous identity (and markers such as traje) ought to become vestiges of the past.

Hence, the effects of Indigenismo ran strong, and where before the project was to integrate Indigenous peoples as peasants into the nation-state, now they were to be integrated as revolutionary cadres into the ideologies and bases of Marxist revolution. Indigenous peoples were still treated as objects to be organized rather than subjects of their own revolutionary history.

Although Indigenous peoples participated in and were mutually energized by a global explosion of Marxist revolutions in the 1960s-1980s, in Latin America a second revolutionary political current emerged and proliferated: the *Indianista* movement. Protesting Leftist cadres’ suppression of Indigenous revolutionary expressions, Indianistas conceived themselves as part of a longer-term trajectory of Indian revolutionary traditions transcending the era of modernization (that is, existing before and after the periodization of modernization).

Anthropologists sympathetic to the Indianista movement on the grounds of its cultural critique of colonialism led anthropology as a discipline to shift its relationships with Indigenous politics from one of colonialism to one of participatory solidarity and activist scholarship. Scholars like González Casanova (who coined the term “internal

colonialism” in Mexico) critiqued acculturation theories like Beltran’s and marked a new generation of anthropologists aligned with Indianista positions and, hence, stressing ethnic over class consciousness (Bonfil Batalla 1981, González Casanova 1965, Varese 2008).

Furthermore, Indigenous people began to develop their own theories and organizations based on Indian identities, and the *Indianista* movement developed to become pan-ethnic in places. Yet their positions vis-a-vis the Left were diverse, ranging from those that had fully participated in Leftist guerrilla organizations (like TOJIL in Guatemala until they became outcasts); to those who saw ethnic and class consciousness as necessarily co-articulated and thus occasionally formed alliances with certain Leftist organizations (Kataristas in Bolivia); to those who rejected all ties to the Left and called for an autonomous Aymara nation (Felipe Quispe / “el Mallku” in Bolivia) (Albó 1994, Mamani Condori 1992, Tiwanaku Manifesto 1987, Tojil 1978 [1977]). Yet they may have drawn from similar influences: for example, both the Kataristas and Felipe Quispe drew heavily from the inspiration and discourse of Fausto Reinaga (Hylton and Thomson 2007), and CRIC in Colombia was influenced by Quintín Lame (Rappaport 1998). Indigenous–Left relations became increasingly complex in practice, particularly when tensions intensified under the assault of state militarization and genocide (Le Bot 1995, Hale 2006, McAllister 2003, Grandin 2004. Cojti Cuxil 1997 and Sam Colop 1991 are among those who coined the term “Third Genocide” of the Mayas). In La Paz, Indigenous intellectuals of THOA allied with Indigenous movements and revised dominant histories of “conquest” (Wachtel 1977), radical struggle, and promoted the *ayllu* (rather than trade unions) as the best-suited form of political organization (Rivera Cusicanqui 1987, Varese 2008, 386).

The central critique levied by Indianistas against orthodox Marxist guerrillas was that they did not visualize revolutionary change for Indigenous peoples *as Indigenous*. By the time of the continental anti-quincennial mobilizations leading up to 1992, Indigenous peoples organized around their general dissatisfaction with revolutionary strategies that sought overthrow of the state but which visualized little change in how the new socialist nation-state would be run (Declaration of Quito 1990, Encuentro de Pueblos de Abya Yala 2011, Hale 1994, Nelson 1999, Sam Colop 1991, Varese 2008). By then, it

was evident that existing models of Third World socialist states -- under attack by the United States -- had not done much better for Indigenous peoples and racialized subjects (Churchill and Morris 1987, Gordon 1998, Hale 2002, Moore 2008). Furthermore, the start of the Guatemalan Peace Accords process that excluded Indigenous peoples from central positions at the negotiating table made evident in Guatemala that a socialist state dominated by ladino URNG leadership may have continued to exclude Indigenous peoples from leadership positions.

In this milieu, the continental organizing around the anti-quincentennial drew heightened and painful awareness to the dimension of *colonization* in Indigenous peoples' oppression. Conferences of Indigenous peoples of the North around a shared protest of ongoing colonization led radical Latin American Indianistas to have a renewed co-articulation with Indian sovereignty and self-determination struggles from the North.

Maya *cosmovisión* and ontology

Maya *cosmovisión* represents the overall framing of Maya ways of life that is linked to practice and is ontologically distinct from Western ontology. Based on ethnographic and archaeological analysis, Freidel, Schele, and Parker (1993) argue that “a unified view of Maya ritual and cosmology has endured for at least two millennia,” and that this *cosmovisión* encompasses a set of “structures of belief [that] have descended from the Olmec” in some cases. In this, their argument coincides with a fundamental pillar of the decolonizing school of Mayas: that contemporary Mayas are descendants of their ancestors of over a thousand years ago (referred to by archaeologists as “the Classic Maya”), not a lesser separate category of people as the Guatemala school system has taught. Rather, the diversity of Maya cosmogonic practices both ancient and contemporary all come under one system of meaning, assert Freidel, Schele, and Parker:

Though called by a variety of names throughout the ages, the experience has not changed. ... Maya cultures evince continuity particularly in their core ideas about the essential order of the cosmos, its patterns and purposes, and the place of human beings in it. (Freidel et al. 1993, 51, 39)

They conclude that contemporary Maya “cosmogonic” practices – what I refer to in this dissertation as Maya ontological practices -- are part of the body of “diverse contemporary expressions of these ancient beliefs [carried out] in the lives of the five million Maya living today” (1993, 58).

The most important example of contemporary Maya ontological practices is the use of the Maya calendars and, in particular, the lunar calendar (*cholq’ij*, “the counting of the faces of the day” (B. Tedlock 1982)) that is the daily foundation of Maya life. Each day name of the *cholq’ij*’s calendrical cycle corresponds to one of twenty *nawales*, which can be very roughly translated as protector or “helper energies”⁴ that accompany a human being throughout their life and have energetic correspondences with animals, lakes, or other living beings. Its practitioners note that this nine-month Maya lunar calendar corresponds to the gestation period during a woman’s pregnancy. Since ancient times, daykeepers (*ajq’ijab’*) have kept the count of the days – before on their hands and at present through consulting books of calendar dates. Maya cosmovisión is a focus of Sotz’il’s work and the logic through which distinct aspects of Maya culture attain meaning and make sense to its members. It is also an aspect of Maya lifeways that has come under brutal assault.

The Lowland city states of the Classic Maya in Yucatan peninsula and in the Petén region of Guatemala are characterized by sophisticated architecture, hierarchical social strata, and political and religious inscriptions that include the day names (*nawales*) of the *cholq’ij* Maya lunar calendar as well as the Maya long-count and solar calendars. Barbara Tedlock has noted the irony that in these Lowland city states there is little contemporary living practice of Maya spirituality and particularly the *nawal* system (*cholq’ij*). Rather, it is in the Guatemalan highlands that Maya spirituality and the *nawal* system has been practiced generationally without break.

Tedlock stresses that Maya ontology in the Guatemalan highlands places an emphasis on *practice* rather than *abstraction / inscription*. She calls this an “epistemology of practice.” Tedlock argues that because of this “epistemology of practice,” the popular

⁴ Sotz’il program for *Oxlajuj B’aqtun*, March 2011.

highlands form of Maya religion has survived in “living form” for thousands of years through today.

That is, the Maya regions that *lack* inscriptions of the nawales – such as the highlands of Guatemala, where even sacred sites like Iximche’ do not bear these kinds of calendrical inscriptions or iconography on stelae – have maintained ages-old continuity of the practice of “the counting of the faces of the day” in Maya ontology. According to Tedlock, this is because the Highland practice of nawal-based spirituality centers on transmission through *practice* rather than through abstraction of the philosophy through either discursive explanations *about* it or through documentation of it.

According to older anthropological literature on “nagualismo,” because one’s protector energies (nawales) are determined by one’s date of birth, the nawal system is personalized and nawales are randomly distributed across the population (Paz 1995). Nawales are not distributed by clan, nor social class, nor heredity, hence the assignment of one’s nawal is not hierarchical.

This is the *personalized* aspect to the nawal system. The nawal system also has *collective* aspects. For example, all communities are under the influence of the same *ajaw del día* (guardian of the day) and the same *cargador del año* (year-bearer). Moreover, all Mayas have access to the nawal system through local daykeepers (ajq’ijab’). Traditionally, there had been at least one ajq’ij in each family.

The Maya Movement of the past half-century in Guatemala has made access to “the counting of the faces of the day” even more accessible and “democratic” (in contrast to hierarchical and esoteric). Today, schools teach lessons about the nawales; Maya cholq’ij calendars and educational books are being published and distributed; and diverse Maya organizations lead ice-breaking exercises (*dinámicas*) that teach their participants about nawales and the Maya cholq’ij calendar.

The practice of Maya spirituality is relatively autonomous since it is not regulated by the state nor by any institution. Access to sacred sites is limited by private property rules, but Maya organizations are organizing for fair access as an expression of the right to practice their spirituality.

Alcaldías Auxiliares and the Indigenous Municipality

The ‘freedom’ guaranteed to some individuals in society has always been premised upon the radical unfreedom of others. ... [T]he U.S. could not exist without the genocide of Indigenous peoples. Otherwise visitors to this continent would be living under Indigenous forms of governance rather than under U.S. empire. (Smith 2004, 84)

The pre-colonial Maya governance and judicial system continues in the present day through *alcaldías indígenas* (also known in municipal town centers as *municipalidades indígenas* and in villages and hamlets as *alcaldías auxiliares*). *Alcaldías indígenas* were established by the Spanish during the early colonial period as a mechanism for the distribution of “mano de obra” (the forced labor of Indigenous people) and the collection of tribute, among other functions of the colonial system. However, “features of the ancient Indigenous culture” (“rasgos de la cultura indígena antigua”) still were passed on through this institution, such as “elections⁵” to positions of voluntary service to the community – known in Kaqchikel as *patan samaj* (literally, *patan* is a tumpline or *mecapal*; Sotz’il members have referred to this as “a mission” that is carried through being charged with responsibilities) and in Spanish as the “*cargo*” system⁶ (Barrios 2001, xi-xii). Furthermore, despite the abrupt “rupture in the system of government” (Barrios 2001, 30) with the invasion of the conquistador Pedro de Alvarado in 1524, traces of pre-Alvarado forms of government still exist currently because Indigenous communities were allowed to retain local power despite the Spanish – and later ladinos – holding on to national power (Barrios 2001, xiv-xv). The reason for this is that by 1530 the Spanish crown operated under the “‘Bad Example’ theory of the Spaniards” (“teoría del Mal Ejemplo de los españoles”) based on reports of friars and Spanish officials because (a) the Spaniards’ goal of Hispanicizing and Christianizing the Indigenous people had not been fully accomplished, and (b) due to the abuses against the Indigenous people. However, the 1944 Revolution

⁵ This is Barrios’ term. I would call this a process of consensual selection or seeking people to fulfill these responsibilities (as people say, certain people “fueron buscados” based on their history of service in the community). Each community’s process of electing / selecting / seeking leaders would be an interesting subject for comparative research.

⁶ Translation by the author from the original Spanish text to English.

“abolished the existence of the [Indigenous] municipalities” (“suprimió la existencia de las alcaldías”) (Barrios 2001, xiii). Indigenous participation in political parties began in this period because Indigenous people were no longer allowed the traditional designation of *principales* – that is, titles of leadership recognizing their charges of communal responsibility and experience through service – because all selection of *cargos* happened through the electoral system (Barrios 2001, xiii). An additional major drawback was that the party system was “controlled by ladinos” (“controlado por los ladinos”) (Barrios 2001, xiii). This shift in the designation of *principales* – now known as “Indigenous mayors” or “auxiliary mayors” -- and the entry of political parties has contributed to a destabilization of the *alcaldías indígenas* (Indigenous mayoralties) that may explain some of the tensions and conflicts around the Indigenous Municipality in Sololá, Guatemala.

Yet still, during the revolutionary period (1944-1954), Lina Barrios notes signs of Indigenous subaltern resistance to the political party system: they “simulated participation” as a “method of survival” (Barrios 2001, 198-199). However, the manipulation and division caused by political parties continued (if not worsened) during the period of the counter-revolution (1954-1963). The parties “took advantage of the internal rivalries of Indigenous people” (Barrios 2001, 217).

Efrain López Rancho traces the pre-colonial roots of the system of governance and judicial authority of the Poqomam k’amolb’ee (literally, “guides of the road”) of Palín, Escuintla and systematizes their current operational functions to demonstrate their traditional authority in implementing the Poqomam Maya judicial system. He writes,

The existence of the Maya ancestral authorities in Palín, Escuintla are exercised by the Poqomam K’amolb’ee, who after completing their service within the Poqomam *cofradía* are delegated by the population to positions of authority for the application of the Maya judicial system based on principles of the Maya cosmogonic philosophy. The objective of the K’amolb’ee’s community service is the reestablishment of equilibrium and harmony within the Maya Poqomam population.⁷ (López Rancho 2015)

⁷ Translation by the author from the original Spanish text to English.

López Rancho notes two historic functions of the K'amolb'ee: "first to orient the Poqomam community in general, and second to mediate and resolve family conflicts." He notes, "Pre-hispanic Maya documents like the Madrid and Dresden codices as well as the Pop Juuj book (Popol Vuh) demonstrate the similarity between the organizational forms of the pre-hispanic Maya authorities and the Maya community authorities reflected in the Poqomam K'amolb'ee of Palín" (López Rancho 2015). However, Palín has not had a formal *alcaldía indígena* since the 18th century, and its K'amolb'ee system operates autonomously from the governance and judicial system of the Guatemalan state.

In sum, *alcaldías indígenas* have played a critical role in passing down an ancient Maya practice of elders' leadership and governance through a system of traditional responsibilities and service to the community (the *patan samaj* or *cargo* system). However, this autonomous Maya system of traditional authority has suffered drastic changes due to colonization, including in the selection and designation of leadership. Some communities maintain a system in which the most respected married couples are nominated for positions of increasing responsibility in guiding the community as elders. In other communities, the leadership of the Indigenous municipalities have become elected positions that have become subject to the influence of political parties. Traditional roles have changed: some no longer express the Maya value for service to the community, but instead have become an opportunity for accumulating social and political power.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Indigenous Autonomy and Maya *Reivindicación*

Since the 1970s, Indigenous mobilization has become a political force in Latin America. Specifically characteristic of this period is the development of contemporary Indigenous politics of *reivindicación* – a reclaiming of the dignity, traditions, and value of Indigenous culture and society with the goal of seeking self-determination for Indigenous peoples to continue their cultural and societal practices without impediment.

Reivindicación represents an overturning of the previous hegemonic political logics of the 20th century, in which national integration was declared the foremost objective

(whether through *indigenista* politics or Marxist revolution). Under the integrationist logic, Indigenous communities and cultures were viewed as outmoded and facing an inevitable end in the teleological roll towards industrial modernity. Reivindicación movements have organized themselves to contest this inferiorizing and colonial logic (of civilizational superiority over *lo indígena*).

Today, fortified by the affirmations of pride, survival, and resurgence from *indianista* movements and anti-quincentennial declarations, numerous Indigenous communities throughout the Americas uphold their communities, histories, and ways of life not as outdated or shameful, but as keys for regeneration and a life-giving alternative vision to capitalist modernity – of more socially just societies ontologically grounded in principles of balance with the universe. In broad terms, this general vision inspires and unites movements such as those in Mexico (Zapatistas), Guatemala (*tejido social* politics), and Bolivia (popular communitarian based on *ayllus*). Despite the variety and particulars of how this vision emerges and develops locally, these movements share in common at least two elements:

1. They re-conceptualize what political power is; and
2. They seek gaps in state power where Indigenous forms of sociopolitical organization, social life, and utopian political imaginations can be strengthened and take root.

In theorizing the (re)constitution of Indigenous worlds, scholars of cosmo-politics argue for the incommensurability of Indigenous ontological difference and Indigenous worlds with modernization paradigms of dominant Western capitalist political-economic relations (Blaser 2009, 2010, de la Cadena 2010, 2015, Escobar, 2012). Some note openings for relating across ontologies and for strategic alliances with social movements working to respect and protect Mother Earth and Indigenous lifeways. Scholars of pluriversal studies propose that relating across ontologies first requires recognizing a pluriverse and provincializing processes of Western universalization.

Like growing currents of Indigenous movements across Latin America, a new, understudied current of Maya politics in Guatemala has been delving into politics of

reivindicación and ontology and practices that lean towards autonomy. Turning away from directing their principal energies towards negotiating with the state as the “mediat[or of] social inequalities” (Speed 2007, 21), their efforts have instead focused on reviving and reclaiming Maya society – that is, re-founding Maya society on its own terms.

This term “Siwan Tinamit” has circulated in the texts and discourse of the Maya Movement since at least the 1970s to refer to a project of re-founding Maya society. “Siwan Tinamit” is a term in Kaqchikel and K’iche which literally refers to the ravines that shape Guatemala’s landscape, but which has overtones of the *depth* of the Maya people as “peoples (nations)” – not only in terms of territory, but also of Maya lifeways, worldview, philosophy, aesthetics-craft, and all the aspects that constitute a culture and peoplehood (David, pers. comm., July 2009). Ernesto Guarcax adopted the term to be the title of his radio show which Sotz’il co-hosted from 2006 and then maintained after the assassination of Guarcax and his brother Emilio in February 2009.

Due to the historical genealogy of this term, I use the term “Siwan Tinamit” interchangeably with “*reivindicación*” to describe a political current that seeks to vindicate “the profundity of the [Maya] people” and advocate for practicing Maya cultural traditions, with an emphasis on Maya ontology.

From Nation-State Entanglements to Processes of Social Transformation

Still, problems remain from Indigenous peoples’ entanglement with nation-state forms of governance, particularly the undermining of self-determination and sovereignty and the reinforcement of patriarchy and other oppressive systems. In particular, Native feminists critique state-focused solutions because Western nation-states operate through racial, sexual, and colonial violence destructive to Indigenous ways and worldviews. This analysis is very pertinent to Guatemala, where, over the 500 years since Spanish colonization, state violence and genocide of Maya peoples has produced extreme poverty, structural racism, judicial impunity, violence from clandestine groups, and gendered consequences of all these. Yet, in crisis periods, Maya organizations have fallen back on conventional methods of pressuring state institutions for resolution. Native feminist

analyses warn that such strategies are ineffective both short- and long-term: they divert energy towards an inherently abusive state (Monture-Angus 1995, Smith 2004). The ontological turn in Maya politics implicitly critiques the perceived need of Indigenous movements to appeal to the state for safety, justice, and well-being. For decolonization, Native feminists emphasize non-state, multifaceted community-based projects of cultural restoration which increase Indigenous political and ontological autonomy.

Even when Indigenous leaders or Indigenous-majority parties have “taken state power” (as with Evo Morales’ presidency in Bolivia), some Indigenous social movements have critiqued them as de-radicalizing or abandoning key issues and demands of the movement. Raquel Gutiérrez claims that what is most liberatory about grassroots movements is their *process* of “social emancipation” (Gutiérrez Aguilar 2008, 57-58) which is not bound by rigid doctrinaire goals but a “horizonte de deseo” (horizon of desire) – a term derived from Ernst Bloch among others. She contends that taking state power can block the transformative potential of such movements because they instead get caught up in “administering the institutional framework of a society ‘in favor of the people’” (“administrar el entramado institucional de una sociedad ‘a favor del pueblo’” (Gutiérrez Aguilar 2008, 53)).

As a corrective to the Leftist vanguard model, scholars of “politics as process” contend the process itself will empower participants to augment their capacity to shape a more just and representative society (Gutiérrez Aguilar 2008, Holloway 2002, Iton 2010, Kelley 2003, Osterweil 2013). In her study of the Italian alter-globalization movement “Movimiento dei Movimenti (MoM)”, Osterweil proposes that the central problem facing social movements today is the shutting down of a reflexive space for uncertainty, complexity, and questioning:

As Foucault (1994) argues, one of the key problems of politics today is that it operates polemically, denying the sincere questions, uncertainties, and problems facing the field of politics and those working for social change. (Osterweil 2013, 612)

I read this as a call to understand why different actors have taken particular political positions. Osterweil suggests that part of the solution is embracing moments of questioning

and uncertainty as opportunities for engaging the emergent and “not-yet” aspects of politics, recognizing political practice as necessarily about a process of creating social futures. She contends that “rather than suspend complexity, questioning, and uncertainty *in order to act*,” movements are “arguing instead for a more nuanced, contingent, even messy form of political practice. As one activist articulated to me ‘No to War with many ifs and buts!’” (Osterweil 2013, 610).

Recognizing that the lived practice of aspirational politics is messy, proponents of pre-figuration politics propose embodying a positive proposal of an alternative society even as it gains clarity and shape through practice. Through creating on a small scale a preview of the society one wishes to live in, a collective doesn’t need to wait for a successful revolution in order to be living out their social justice ideals. These projects do not frontally confront or challenge the capitalist system nor violent state apparatuses -- hence the critique has been made that they “let the state off the hook” (Speed). This charge has particularly been levelled at “insular” forms of pre-figurative politics: small collectives that become atomized rather than grow their membership. In contrast, a second approach is represented by rhizomatic proliferation, who start with small groups, and the act of living out their ideals and values on a human scale has the potential of being infectiously appealing and inspiring changes across the world. The hope is that a proliferation of people will join in making a multitude of small-scale changes that will eventually “crowd out” the dominant technologies of state power and capitalism. A prototypical example of this is the Zapatista movement whose political imaginary has traveled around the world.

Yet pre-figurative politics doesn’t need to be limited to small scale projects. As a third option, dual power social movements incorporate prefigurative and/or communitarian approaches, but are also “popular” (mass membership particularly through community networks) and recognize that the liberation of even these “utopic” spaces requires battling back the state and its abuses. Yet, they do not seek state power. They may instead focus on recovering community-based Indigenous forms of self-government and organization. An example is the model of popular communitarian politics organized around the *ayllu*, an Indigenous model of sociopolitical organization. As “dual power” social movements, they

combine (1) an interest in the massive organizing capacity of Bolivia's trade unions and Indigenous community dynamics with (2) prefiguration approaches: constructing and living as their own ideal societies rather than waiting for the state to be just (La Comuna / Tapia 2001, Gutiérrez Aguilar 2008, Zibechi 2010).

Scholars of “politics of process” contend the process itself will be empowering and will shape a more just and representative society. For example, through his “philosophy of process,” Ernst Bloch theorizes that the process is made by participants who themselves are being shaped by the process (“*processus cum figuris, figurae in processu*”⁸) (Bloch 1975).

Additionally, scholars of politics as process say that for lasting empowerment and true social emancipation, social movements must accommodate radical political heterogeneity – which theoretically could include Indigenous ontological difference. Since the needs and priorities of a diverse group will change over time, fixed ideologies are too stifling at best and elitist at worst when they are pre-determined by a small group (a la the Leftist vanguard model) which cannot be representative of heterogeneous peoples. Hence, the thinking goes, social movements must incorporate ongoing, inclusive political visioning that emphasizes the process as empowering, in order to best address the ongoing needs of increasingly diverse integrants over time. Hence, Osterweil argues for movements, analyses, and politics that “resist analytical closure” through experimentation and open-ended dialogue that is responsive to participants’ current situations (Osterweil 2013). I propose that this lays the theoretical groundwork for radical artistic-imaginative politics as a process of collective experimentation and dialogic engagement rather than pre-formulated ideological fixture.

Arturo Escobar makes the case for why it is important to study third current interventions or transitional movements in their “emerging” state—even before they have achieved the goals, interventions, and changes that they have set out to achieve. Escobar stresses that the significance of social movements cannot merely be evaluated by tallying

⁸ My rough translation: The process with figures, figures in [the act of] process. Bloch’s phrase has also been translated colloquially into English as: “The process is made by those who are made by the process.” (Thompson 2013)

their mobilizations and charting the direct response of the government or the policy changes they provoke. Social movements also produce social and political imaginaries which are central to their effects on the world. In fact, these imaginaries are a key component of what social movements do:

[Social] movements do not exist only as empirical objects “out there” carrying out “protests” but in their enunciations and knowledges, as a potentiality of how politics and the world could be, and as a sphere of action in which people can dream of a better world and contribute to enact it. It is in these spaces that new imaginaries and ideas about how to re/assemble the socio-natural world are not only hatched but experimented with, critiqued, elaborated upon, and so forth (Escobar 2010, 13).

Thus, Escobar presents a theory for why these third spaces are significant, even when those like Tejido Social by constitution do not aggregate.

Beyond “Socialist Realism”

Other critics of modernization, primarily scholars of Black revolutionary politics, argue against “socialist realism” (Kelley 2003) as the dominant mode for understanding the world and social justice. For Robin Kelley, “socialist realism” is the plane of material analysis and political economy which, according to what the state makes its subjects believe, are the only realms for possible action. Arturo Escobar adds that “poststructuralist authors pointed out that the realist notion of social change fails to unpack its own views of the material, livelihood, needs and the like” (2012, xiv). An additional problem is the sterile prescriptiveness of Marxism, Kelley contends.

However, within Western revolutionary aesthetics and regimes of representation, there has been an alternative to realism as reflection and representation. Surrealism focuses on fantasy, dream states, and states of consciousness beyond the observational or five senses (Fred Ho, pers. comm., September 2012). Kelley rebels against his own political roots in relatively orthodox socialist circles to argue that the Black radical tradition has never been rooted in social realism.⁹ Kelley proposes that “black dissatisfaction with

⁹ Cedric Robinson also states that Black revolt is rooted more in the metaphysical than the material.

socialist realism has to do precisely with the suppression of key elements of black culture that surrealism embraces: the unconscious, the spirit, desire, humor, magic, and love” (Kelley 2003, 191).

As a solution, Robin Kelley turns to the tradition of the Black surrealist imagination to envision liberation:

Surrealism recognizes that any revolution must begin with thought, with how we imagine a new World, with how we reconstruct our social and individual relationships, with unleashing our desire and building a new future on the basis of love and creativity rather than rationality (2003, 193).

Kelley argues that Black surrealism occurs necessarily through spatial or metaphysical exodus because it historically emerged as a response to processes of psychological liberation from internalized racism (Césaire 2001, 14-15, Fanon 1991 [1967], Kelley 2003). He states,

The idea of a revolution of the mind has always been central to surrealism as well as to black conceptions of liberation. By revolution of the mind, I mean not merely a refusal of victim status. I am talking about an unleashing of the mind’s most creative capacities, catalyzed by participation in struggles for change. (2002, 191)

As a corrective to the sterile prescriptiveness of scientific socialism, surrealism allows Kelley a framework to probe the role of desire in imagining – then acting – unstifled by apparent *realistic* limitations:

Above all, surrealism considers love and poetry and the imagination powerful social and revolutionary forces . . . [U]nless we have the space to imagine and a vision of what it means fully to realize our humanity, all the protests and demonstrations in the world won’t bring about our liberation. (2002, 193, 198)

For Kelley, imagination and surrealist desire are critical not only for pointing the way to what people yearn for, but also because of the energies they release that, combined with the right political moment, can produce unstoppable revolutions erupting out of seemingly impossible conditions:

Nothing could stop these movements, not even the jailing and deportation of suspected Communists, the outlawing of the NAACP, or the general suspension of civil liberties. . . . Decolonization and the Chinese Revolution meant that there

were new kids on the historical bloc, new sources for political imagination, and new prospects for freedom. (2002, 59)

Here, Kelley insinuates that Black radical political imagination is not only good for envisioning beyond dominant, oppressive logics; but also for inspiring the energy required to shift beyond despair, stasis, and inaction into revolt. In theorizing the almost tangible force of dreams and desire, Kelley locates a force that is based not on superior military power, but on love and desire for more human relations, dignity, and self-determination.

Jacqui Alexander also locates a force that allows oppressed peoples to transgress boundaries, reject the psychic effects of disciplining, and rebel against forced containment (modernity's Foucauldian subject formation) via altered states of consciousness. For her, though, it is not surrealism but Black spirituality. She theorizes that spirituality psychically opens up a subject's field of imagination to broader realms of possible organizing tactics and/or subversive actions, including realms that go under the radar of the Foucauldian state archives. Alexander's concept of "collectivized self-possession" is a surrender to Spirit for one's direction, within the context of a "community contract,"¹⁰ rather than taking prescribed directions from state institutions and norms (Alexander 2005).

Joy James argues that the significance of liberatory African cosmologies also cannot be fully understood outside the context of Black genocide. She cites historian Vincent Harding, in which he "describes as mentacide the dehumanizing practices that turned Africans into slaves, arguing that to enslave a people, one must first destroy their belief systems, their knowledge in themselves, and their understandings of physical and metaphysical power" (James 1996, 182). James invokes Toni Morrison's call for a "politicized spirit" in the face of "discredited knowledges." Using the framework of Toni Morrison's writings, James demonstrates how African American cultural traditions sustain this spirit and Black resistance through connection with ancestors, community, transcendence, and the non-dualistic paradigms of African cosmology (James 1996, 174). She also raises the concept of "the uncompromisable knower ... one who straddles, standing with a foot in both worlds, unsplit by dualities and unhampered by a toxic

¹⁰ Term is from (James 1996, 178).

imagination” (James 1996, 187). This is a Black feminist version of W.E.B. DuBois’ double consciousness.

These critiques of social realism as a regime of representation, as well as Kelley’s theorization of the almost tangible force of dreams and desire, suggest one possible reason that Sotz’il turned to theater. Like the transitional discourses that Escobar (2012) discusses, Sotz’il too perhaps sought to look beyond a political-economy approach to politics. Also, these theories suggest art’s potential to push social movements to be more transgressive.

Utopian performatives

Based on poststructural theory, Osterweil makes an argument that is similar to traditions of guerrilla street theater and radical invisible theater (Weisman 1973):

[A] great deal of day-to-day activism can be understood to be part of an extended theoretical or experimental moment in which the object is to test out or make visible the possibilities of new arrangements or imaginaries of the social, as well as to think within and against current formulations – including the market, the state, and the university. Success, then, is achieved by impacting people’s imaginations and desires; making imagining ‘other worlds’ and other institutions possible, rather than creating immediate or actual transformations in the present.

... [A]ctivists chip away at the hegemonic or totalizing vision of social and political reality, instigating experimental or spectacular actions that have semiotic or prefiguring effects on people’s imaginations and impinge on their way of engaging with and perceiving society as it currently stands. (Osterweil 2013, 607)

Political theater offers a way to experiment with and embody solutions to social problems and oppression. Augusto Boal’s work in the 1960s-1970s precedes poststructural theory in drawing links between political practice as experimentation and a material practice of theorizing-reflexivity (Boal 1985). However, Qwo-Li Driskill notes that despite being a radical Marxist, Boal takes a colonial position on Indigenous peoples in Brazil. Still, Driskill notes the usefulness of Boal’s theater techniques for Indigenous theater groups in engaged in anti-oppression work (Driskill 2008).

Thus far I have presented the political potential of emergence through social movements’ practices of experimentation and dialogue (as in assemblies). Performance

offers another medium for the political potential of emergence, as scholars of theater and performance studies theorize. Richard Bauman writes that “in the special emergent quality of performance the capacity for change may be highlighted and made manifest to the community” (Bauman 1984, 45).

Experimental theater points to the realms of unconventional possibility that open when undoing an assumption of fixedness – even through disruption. Of Antonin Artaud’s groundbreaking intervention, Una Chaudhuri remarked,

Artaud believed that the function of theatre was to teach us that ‘the sky can still fall on our heads.’ ... At a time when every cultural practice is reassessing itself and its role, perhaps we will re-entertain Artaud’s mad vision of the theatre as a place to encounter the unknown and the unimaginable, a place that teaches the necessary humility of not knowing (Taylor, Chaudhuri et al. 2002, 98).

Even within the avant garde community however there is a tension between how much theater’s liberating potential is reached through intellectual registers – through analyzing and contemplating social reality – versus sensory embodiment. Even a Marxist of his era in his promotion of modernization and industrialization via socialism, Brecht was famously on the side of the scientific and the intellectual – in fact, of shocking and disrupting intellectual analysis through his “alienation” technique (Brecht 1977). Dolan writes that “utopian performatives are relatives of the famed German director and theorist Bertolt Brecht’s notion of *gestus*, actions in performance that crystallize social relations and offer them to spectators for critical contemplation” (Dolan 2005, 7). Dolan then links the intellectual orientation of Brecht to a utopian theater that seeks to communicate through a more sensory embodiment:

In some ways utopian performatives are the received moment of *gestus*, when those well-delineated, moving pictures of social relations become not only intellectually clear but felt and lived by spectators as well as actors. Utopian performatives persuade us that beyond this ‘now’ of material oppression and unequal power relations lives a future that might be different, one whose potential we can feel ... (Dolan 2005, 7).

Dolan also points to how utopian performatives relate to the performance theories of Boal and Brecht:

The affective and ideological ‘doings’ we see and feel demonstrated in utopian performatives also critically rehearse civic engagement that could be effective in the wider public and political realm. ... they provoke affective rehearsals for revolution (Dolan 2005, 7).

Utopian performatives are not representation but an unfixed expression of alternative experience. Dolan is careful to note that utopia in performance “resists the effort to find representations of a better world,” but rather is a gesturing towards alternate possibilities that otherwise would appear impossible:

the word *utopia* means, literally, “no place,” and this book respects the letter of its sense by refusing to pin it down to prescription. I agree with Marxist philosophers Ernst Bloch and Herbert Marcuse ... who “see art as an arena in which an alternative world can be expressed—not in a didactic, prescriptive way as in traditional ‘utopian’ literature, but through the communication of an alternative experience.” Any fixed, static image or structure would be much too finite and exclusionary for the soaring sense of hope, possibility, and desire that imbues utopian performatives. (Dolan 2005, 7)

Hence, similar to theorists of politics as process, Dolan suggests that utopian performatives are a process of never-finished gestures and, in John Rockwell’s words, “mesmerizing moments” (quoted in Dolan 2005, 8).

Dolan notes that utopian performatives do not need to look hopeful on stage or produce only happy endings: “spectators might draw a utopian performative from even the most dystopian theatrical universe” (Dolan 2005, 7). In contrast to Diana Taylor (2003), Dolan emphasizes the ephemerality of utopian performatives, and suggests that this is part of their power: they leave spectators yearning for the worlds and better possibilities they gestured towards. Similar to Taylor, Dolan does note one residue of these inevitable disappearances: the embodied memory or recollection that “for however brief a moment, we felt something of what redemption might be like” (Dolan 2005, 7).

One example of a vibrant aesthetic is the Black Arts Movement, which gave audiences an experience of an anti-Modern, Black world not just in content, but also in form (Wynter 2006). In 1967, Amiri Baraka wrote, “I mean there is a world powered by that image” (Jones [Baraka] 1967, 123). He goes on to show that Black aesthetics have the

power and energy to create a world outside of the white man's grasp and control – a political project that is at once about Black self-determination, pre-figuration, and Black ontology:

By image, I mean that music (art for that matter ... or anything else if analyzed) summons and describes where its energies were gotten. The blinking lights and shiny heads, or the gray concrete and endless dreams. But the description is of a total environment.

... If you play James Brown... in a bank, the total environment is changed. Not only the sardonic comment of the lyrics, but the total emotional placement of the rhythm, instrumentation and sound. An energy is released in the bank, a summoning of images that take the bank, and everybody in it, on a trip. That is, they visit another place. A place where Black People live.

But dig, not only is it a place where Black People live, it is a place, in the spiritual precincts of its emotional telling, where Black People move in almost absolute openness and strength. ... The something you want to hear is the thing you already are or move toward (Jones [Baraka] 1967, 124-5).

Taking audiences on a sensory, energetic trip to “where Black People live” and “move in almost absolute openness and strength” are qualities of surrealism, using Kelley's framing. However, aspects of the Black Arts Movement that performed and enforced rigid boundaries of masculinist heteronormative sexuality and identity would take BAM outside the realm of Kelley's conceptualization of Surrealism and Richard Iton's Black Fantastic and, as a result, limited BAM's political potential (Iton 2010; Moten 2003). The question is whether these kinds of vibrant embodied worlds can be created without reinscribing rigid boundaries of ideologies, identity, and performance.

Performance Studies theorists such as Schechner argue for analyzing theater plays as *twice repeated behavior*—actions that the theater group is underlining. That is, theater expresses cultural and political aspirations and imaginaries – ideals, rather than how people “actually” lead their lives. Yet, as Bloch, Gutiérrez, and other scholars of “politics as process” demonstrate, this doesn't make the plays any less “real” in studying them as part

of “social life,” since imaginaries, desires, and horizons shape, limit, and expand the range of actions people take in their material lives.

At the same time, I am not limiting my analysis to an exegesis of theater performances. Given my long-term immersion in Sololá communities, I am interested in the history and socio-political context of the community and the Maya region and Maya politics at large. This dissertation is a move to analyze theater through an ethnographic approach, even when my primary research subjects are theater artists and their daily practice largely consists of artistic and organizational work in a theater rehearsal space and community-based cultural center. I cannot separate them from their context: Sotz’il is interwoven with their communities at present and their histories and cultural-political legacies.

On the other hand, my research also moves beyond dominant paradigms of how social movements achieve social change. Whereas much analysis of Maya politics in Guatemala focuses on social movements and their engagement with the state, I analyze theater as a site of Maya politics – in particular, as a politics of autonomy. Recognizing that political process is not just “productive” but creative, I propose to analyze theater as a political process. Following Bloch, I analyze how theater shapes political actors – Sotz’il members, allies, and audiences – through an ethnography of their interactions and involvement in the process of artistic creation and *reivindicación*.

Critics suggest that “socialist realism” – both as an aesthetic and, more broadly, as regime of representation – does not provide a sufficient response to processes of psychological liberation from internalized racism. Black surrealism is one example of an alternative. Other alternatives are heterogeneous emancipation processes attending to the radical potential of emergence (“radical becoming”) – that is, politics and performances that “resist analytical closure” (Osterweil 2013).

Through this dissertation, I propose to explore a theater aesthetic that eschews realism for something closer to surrealism as a response to Maya communities’ experiences of internalized racism in the context of Maya Guatemala. Sotz’il’s aesthetic does not fall within the aesthetic movement known as surrealism due to a different historicity, but I

propose to use Kelley's broader application of the concept of "surrealism" to analyze movements and artistic projects with the following characteristics: They energize artists and societies by taking them (1) beyond Western pragmatism, materialism, rationality, and modes of representation; (2) towards transgression of dominant paradigms; and (3) in some cases, even beyond teleological notions of modernization as inevitable and the desired, ultimate form of civilization.

Following BAM and the surrealists, I analyze the potential of Sotz'il theater to shape worlds where Maya people live and move through the embodiment of Maya ontologies, both as a project of conveying a sensory environment of Maya liberation as well as a project of *reivindicación*. Also like BAM and the surrealists, I propose that Sotz'il theater emerged as an act of psychological liberation to contest the internalization of racism in order to pave the way for deeper processes of social transformation. In contrast to theorizations of BAM and Black surrealism through history, literary critique, and cultural critique, my analysis of Sotz'il provides ethnographic grounding as well as using methods of performance analysis. I pay a great deal of attention to the process of embodiment of energies that are significant in the practice of Maya ontology.

I extend theories of utopian performatives to analyze Sotz'il in a Maya Kaqchikel community context as a performative enactment of liberation from the ideologies that drove genocide. However, much theorization of the possibilities of performative interventions lack a grounding in ethnography, especially in a context where the performance confronts repression. The context of Sotz'il calls into question if resistance and liberation are simply matters of altering signification, "making visible" the limits of the current model, and "testing" alternative possibilities, as in the history of guerrilla street theater and radical invisible theater and the examples that Max Rameau and Osterweil provide of squats – occupations of abandoned buildings. Are these performative and "virtual interventions" (Osterweil 2013) sufficient? My ethnography can get at this complexity through lived experience. Also, to frame the question less pessimistically, an

ethnographic analysis can uncover current practices that “augment alternative worlds” and reveal broader varieties of “efficacious action.”¹¹

While taking inspiration from Black-centered concepts and theory, I do not intend to equate Black and Indigenous histories nor ontological positions vis-à-vis modernity and Whiteness / the Human. In fact, it is specifically because of the distinctions in Indigenous and Black experience that I find it interesting to see similarly-named concepts in Indigenous and Black theory. First are the critiques of modernity from Black theorists who critique the unavoidable relationship of Blackness with modernity’s institutions due to the “afterlife of slavery” (Hartman 2008, 6). As a result, the notion of an exodus to Africa arises with articulations of the (impossible?) desire for non-modern “worlds” and ontologies. Those in the lineages I have cited here (BAM, Black surrealism) seek exodus to the Black surrealist imagination, back to Africa, to ancient Egypt and/or traditionalism, or to Afro-futurism.

However, Frank Wilderson argues that the existence of Black ontologies is impossible – that anti-Black gratuitous violence “position[s] Blacks as ontologically outside of Humanity / civil society” (2010, 55) and Blackness as “outside the terrain of the subaltern” (2010, 65-66) and, furthermore, as “ontological death” (2010, 6). Thus, he does not consider exodus to alternative worlds and ontologies to be possible for Black people as it is for Indigenous people. De la Cadena’s notion that incommensurable Western (White) and Indigenous ontologies can still co-exist – even Viveiros de Castro’s notion that it is possible to “control” equivocations between different worlds -- is not possible for Blacks, in Wilderson’s view. Can I still draw upon Black theories, then, even for inspiration? The theorists I cite pre-date Wilderson’s theorizations and conceive of greater ontological room for Black subjects. While recognizing the incommensurability of Black and Indigenous experience, I find instructive these theorists’ critiques of modernity as fundamentally fraught as well as their conceptualization of the desire to seek other ontologies and worlds – even if this is an impossible quest. Finally, the fact that Black artists and theorists are

¹¹ To heed Osterweil’s calls for “an epistemic and ontological practice that enables or augments alternative worlds and alternative forms of efficacious action” (Osterweil 2013, 599).

responding to Black genocide, while Sotz'il as Indigenous artists are responding to Maya genocide, may be a bridge between these two theories.¹²

From “Ethical Soundscapes” to Ontological Worldings

Critics of social realism point to its hyperfocus on pragmatic representations, contending that this has come at the cost of understanding and engaging what animates people’s yearnings and desires. Performance studies scholars theorize that these yearnings are crystallized and mobilized by utopian performatives. A related question is how affect and ethical “heart” (Hirschkind 2009) influence political commitments and move people to mobilize for social justice. I bring into this conversation the connection between politics and “embodied sensibilities” through Hirschkind’s ethnographic analysis of how Islamic cassette sermons create “ethical soundscapes” that shape “ethicopolitical” commitments:

It is increasingly difficult to sustain an image of political life that does not include recognition of the role of embodied sensibilities and prereflexive habits in shaping our commitments and reasons. Political judgments are not the product of rational argumentation alone but also of the way we come to care deeply about certain issues, feel passionately attached to certain positions, as well as the traditions of practices through which such attachments and commitments have been sedimented into our emotional-volitional equipment. As Talal Asad has succinctly put it: “The public sphere is not an empty place for carrying out debates. It is constituted by the sensibilities—memories and aspirations, fears and hopes—of speakers and listeners. And also by the manner in which they exist (and are made to exist) for each other, and by the propensity to act and react in distinctive ways” (Hirschkind 2009, 30-31).

Central to this inquiry is the role of emotional attachments in building concern and political willpower – that is, sufficient motivation to act, be loyal to, and form community around particular issues. I bring Indigenous theater into this conversation. Specifically, in this dissertation I will examine how Sotz'il’s theater speaks to that place of emotion and brings people to “come to care deeply about certain issues.”

¹² I thank João Vargas for this insight.

To extend Hirschkind's concept of "ethical soundscapes" from cassettes to theater and from the Islamic world to Maya Guatemala, I use the term *ontological worldings*. I contend that Sotz'il engages in ontological worldings through theater. My hypothesis is that Sotz'il's theater opens up feelings about Maya *reivindicación* on a register that social movements frequently do not access, and that this has the potential to redress processes of subordination. This dissertation will contribute to performance studies theorizations of the transformation that happens in theater and performance and the significance of performances bringing audiences to other worlds. I analyze the transformative potential of theater through the lens of Indigenous ontologies and worldings.

As with autonomy movements, Sotz'il's strategy is to not confront the state directly but rather engage in Maya worldings. I contend this is a contribution to a process of empowerment by valorizing Maya subjects and anti-colonial resistance. By redressing the historical shaming and subjugation of Maya peoples, it opens a path for social transformation beyond the realm of the theater performances.

In sum, in this dissertation I analyze Indigenous theater as a space of experimental visioning with the potential to shape ethicopolitical commitments. I examine how Sotz'il's theater appeals to sensoria, affect, and Maya ontologies and whether this contributes to the long-term viability of Indigenous movements.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

My qualitative research design is influenced by a phenomenological approach due to its interest in bodily perception through the senses and in participants' subjective experiences and their consciousness – how they perceive meaning. Their perceptions, as ascertained through interviews, is considered seriously, as subjects, rather than being dismissed as being less truthful than what would be discerned from ethnography's third-party observation of a cultural group's behavior. However, I decided against explicitly including phenomenological research methods because of phenomenology's Western stress on "universal structures" or essences of meaning, based on the philosophy of Edmund Husserl (Creswell 1998).

The resolution I reached in my research design is two-fold. First, to resolve my ethical concerns about participant observation that would be overly intrusive and invasive of research subjects' privacy, I rely a great deal on long in-depth interviews with Sotz'il members and close allies, as well as short interviews with audience members, in order to get at the meaning of the theater productions for each of these constituents. Second, I loosely draw on ideas raised by phenomenological theory. Rather than orthodox phenomenologists' focus on singular essences of meaning, however, my analysis is sensitive to – and indeed is interested in and highlights -- the multiplicity of meanings possible for individuals due to situatedness, cultural specificity, etc.

In October 2012 I began ethnographic research in Guatemala including participant observation, in-depth interviews, and review of relevant documents and media such as video and photography. I took handwritten notes and jottings during interviews and participant observation when possible. To record interviews for transcription, I used a handheld digital audio recorder with each interviewee's permission. I typed field notes and began transcribing interviews during fieldwork. This preliminary processing of my data informed my ongoing selection of interviewees and allowed me to refine my interview question protocols which I customized for each research participant.

As my in-field analysis developed, I continued to work through the themes and patterns that were emerging from ethnographic fieldwork. Finally, I created tables to organize my preliminary data analysis and especially for my in-field presentation to Sotz'il in September 2013 about my research progress.

In July 2014 I concluded "fieldwork," that is, the human subjects interaction phase of my research (in IRB terminology). I began preliminary data analysis by writing analytical memos during my first complete review of field notes.

Research Participants

I conducted interviews from January 2013 through August 2014. These include interviews with audience members, both immediately after a performance and some time after. I was most interested in Maya respondents, and I sought diversity in age, sex,

identity, occupation, and positionality. Many interviewees had graduated as teachers, particularly bilingual teachers who teach in a Maya language. Others were artists and creators of “arte Maya”; founders of musical groups; farmers; “amas de casa” (“stay-at-home mothers”); secretaries; a tourist guide who has worked in the U.S.; a public transport driver; a nurse; a judiciary staff person; a business administrator; an accountant; founders of Maya cultural-political organizations; staff of women’s leadership organizations; owner and cook of a *comedor*; university students – undergraduate, graduate, and a Ph.D. graduate; a student of the technical training school INTECAP; a mother who returned to school as an adult student for her high school degree; authors of books on Maya culture; community elders; and spiritual guides. The total number of participants in this group was 49. Interview length depended on participants’ availability. Some after performances were only ten minutes. Most were in-depth interviews that lasted from one to two hours.

Audience interviews were conducted mostly in the rural hamlets in and around El Tablón and in town centers in the department of Sololá, Guatemala, specifically: Santa Catarina Palopó, Nawalá, San José Chacayá, Santa Lucía Utatlán, and “La Nueva” Santa Catarina Ixtahuacán. Four interviews were conducted in the capital, either after a theater festival presentation or with interviewees who live and/or work in the capital. One interview was conducted in Antigua, one in Chimaltenango. In Comalapa I conducted one individual interview and one group interview with members of the women’s theater group I’x Saqil Ik’.

Specifying participants’ demographic information like age, gender, or ethnicity may compromise their anonymity, particularly within these small communities (speaking both geographically and of the “artist community”). For this reason, in this dissertation I have used pseudonyms except in the case of particular public figures and when referring directly to some interviewees’ public organizational positions and history (such as the names of mayors). Per a meeting with Sotz’il members (July 2013), in this dissertation I use the full name of Sotz’il members who have passed on to the other dimension – Ernesto, Emilio, and Lisandro Guarcax -- for the historical record. All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.

I have aggregated demographic data to provide more privacy and confidentiality. About half the interviewees were female and half were male. Of these, most of the young adults were female and almost all the elders were male. Nearly all interviewees were Kaqchikel with a handful of K'iche's and Mayas of other Maya ethnicities. The two theater directors were ladino.

In addition, I conducted interviews with almost all current Sotz'il members and all current members of the all-women's group Ajchowen. These comprised nine interviews total (four female and five male). Almost all of these interviews were conducted in the rural hamlets (caseríos) in and around El Tablón and one in the town of Sololá.

Two interviews were conducted in Kaqchikel. The language spoken in the rest of the interviews was Spanish, although Maya Kaqchikel terms were used to refer to concepts of Maya worldview which cannot fully be expressed in Spanish. Also I spoke with participants in Maya Kaqchikel occasionally during informal interactions and participant observation.¹³ I speak, verbally comprehend, read, and write Maya Kaqchikel at an intermediate level.

I selected participants for this study based on whether they were “information-rich cases” (purposeful sampling; see Palinkas et al. 2015) and/or whether they met several criteria for inclusion. For example, purposefully selected participants included family members, audience members, Maya artists, or leaders of Maya organizations. Aside from information-rich cases, the following were my criteria for inclusion:

- Past and/or present engagement with Maya civil society organizations and/or Maya community-based cultural politics in Sololá municipality, Guatemala;
- Past and/or present membership in the theater group Sotz'il; and/or
- Past and/or present engagement as a Maya artist in Guatemala with familiarity with theater group Sotz'il's work.

¹³ Note on Translation: Interviews were primarily conducted in Spanish. All translations from Spanish into English are mine, both of interviews and fieldnotes of participant observation. Translations from Kaqchikel or Spanish texts to English are mine, as noted through footnotes. Short definitions of Kaqchikel and Spanish terms are in the Glossary.

- Potential participant does community-based work engaging Maya ontologies and cosmovisión.

Because I conducted in-depth interviews, carefully chose research sites and participants who represented information-rich cases, and have had a long-term community relationship of cultural immersion, I did not need a sample size larger than what I obtained.

Research Design and Data Collection Methods

The research problem I address is why Sotz'il turned to theater as the means of expressing their stated political goals of Maya *reivindicación*. By the time I began doctoral research, I already had extensive ethnographic background data from a previous Fulbright research project I had conducted in 2006 (prior to entering graduate school) This included twenty-nine in-depth interviews that I had conducted in 2006¹⁴ with women and men community leaders in Sololá municipality and San Jorge La Laguna village, as well as from participant observation of community meetings (of Tejido Social politics, traditional authorities, and community assemblies) and socio-cultural events, such as *cofradía* processions.

RESEARCH QUESTION #1: To study if and how Sotz'il's theater expresses a Maya ontological politics, I conducted an ethnographic analysis of Sotz'il's artistic creation process (of developing, staging, and rehearsing their plays). My data collection method was observation¹⁵ of Sotz'il rehearsals of their third play *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* (2011) and the creation of their original new fourth play *Uk'u'x Ulew* (2013). The plays are performed in Kaqchikel with no translation to Spanish or other Maya languages, although rehearsals were mostly conducted in Spanish, as discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.

My rehearsal observation helped me understand Sotz'il's intra-group negotiations of how to represent Maya ontology in a society that historically has prohibited Mayas from

¹⁴ Prior to entering graduate school, during my Fulbright research project.

¹⁵ Note: this wasn't *participant* observation (since there was not a way for me to participate in the rehearsals, not being a company member, except for chatting with members before and after), although I did participate in Sotz'il's pedagogical workshops in the warm-ups, as discussed in Chapter 5 on body training.

practicing and representing their cosmovisión. I propose that Sotz'il's rehearsal process reveals their unique approach to Maya revitalization and politics. Because their debates and decisions about their approach are expressed in rehearsals, it was important for me to ethnographically analyze the flow of members' interactions in rehearsals. Through jottings and field notes, I documented Sotz'il's employment of Kaqchikel symbolism, as well as the artistic decisions Sotz'il made in staging and adapting colonial-era Kaqchikel texts for contemporary audiences. This included:

- technical choices such as lighting and how space is used.
- the expressiveness vs. literalness of costumes.
- the ways that theatrical illusions are achieved.
- the level of detail with which realism is sought or eschewed in both acting and set design.
- the philosophy behind actor training, particularly body training.
- the origin, craftsmanship, and significance of their various musical instruments, dress, and "props."
- Who speaks which lines? How is the narrative broken down? How do they use their bodies? How do men and women share space? What aspects of Maya culture are valorized in their plays?¹⁶

I was most interested in documenting internal debates about their artistic choices in order to understand which decisions were most contested and why. This data revealed the politics and ontology "embedded in each of these choices."¹⁷

I also gathered descriptive data (in the form of ethnographic field notes and jottings; see Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 1995) about the broader organization of the production:

- Who are the various craftspeople selected to weave the costumes or handcraft the instruments?

¹⁶ This methodology for a close reading of performance is inspired by ideas suggested by Omi Jones (pers. comm., September 25, 2012).

¹⁷ Omi Jones, pers. comm., September 25, 2012.

- How does the staging of their play frame Sotz'il musician-dancers' relationship with the audience?
- How is "the story" told and do the gestures of the actors uphold or undercut this?¹⁸

Through in-depth interviews with current and founding members, I collected perceptual data of theater artists' experience of their performances and of the process of embodying characters to see what this would reveal about their stated politics of cosmovisión. This included a 2006 interview with founder Lisandro Guarcax about the group's intentions for their theater productions, prior to his assassination in 2010.

I found that Sotz'il's theater productions involved diverse aspects of community life: stage materials and musical instruments are custom-made through local artisan economies; their woven wardrobe is made by family weavers; the new cultural center is being built by local community members; and food for workshops is cooked by local families. Because Sotz'il's cultural center was a hub of hamlet life, it became the central site of my ethnography. I attended Sotz'il's and Ri Ak'u'x's meetings, workshops, collective work days, daily crafting of instruments, and key events.

Having been trained in dance, principally ballet and West African dance, I participated in movement warm-ups during pedagogical workshops and observed discussions and staging of their final presentations. At public performances, I helped set the stage, run errands, and "break down" the set afterwards. During the performance itself, I observed interactions between and among the performers and audience members. I recorded data from participant observation in the form of handwritten jottings (in the moment in small notebooks) and then re-constructed these as typed field notes (either later that day, or as soon as I got back to my computer after participating in overnight trips, such as for artistic festivals or events in the capital to which I didn't bring my computer).

Through this participant observation, I also sought evidence of how cultural and political self-determination is practiced. I examined Sotz'il's community-based practices

¹⁸ This methodology for a close reading of performance is inspired by ideas suggested by Omi Jones (pers. comm., September 25, 2012).

(artistic, organizational maintenance, and daily life) to explore what aspects may have been influenced by community politics (Tejido Social practices and orientation) and/or by Maya worldview. As I accompanied Sotz'il to performances and other aspects of daily work and community life, I observed the conditions of life and daily challenges they face, and even instances of indignities as they arise. In past informal fieldwork dating from 2006, I have observed disrespectful atmospheres for their productions and inadequate accommodations and remuneration for the artists: sleeping on office floors or makeshift spaces after performances; travel late at night and in the back of trucks, while sleeping on top of their equipment. While such close quarters seem to be the norm for rural Maya living and travel, it shows a different positionality and experience of moving through the world from the elite and even from ladino artists' conditions of artistic production that I witnessed during fieldwork.

Semi-structured interviews with Sotz'il members provided insight into how their cultural and political critique is expressed in *artistic visioning* and *everyday consciousness*. I also collected life history data and accounts. These interviews helped me understand complex processes and interactions such as the inner workings of how Sotz'il achieves their on-stage presence, as well as cultural nuances such as Sotz'il's relations with elders and with other-than-human persons such as guardian stones.

RESEARCH QUESTION #2: With the question "What do Sotz'il's theater performances do (ontologically and politically) for their audiences?" I seek to get at effects – both those seen in the world and those that are felt internally and that affect participants' subjectivities. Schechner defines "performance" as the actions and cultural behaviors that a given person or group underlines. To answer my research question, I collected descriptive data of the actions and cultural behaviors that Sotz'il underlines in both the *content* and the *performance* of their theater plays. Following Schechner (2013) and Phelan (1993, 1998), I understand that *performance* can only be studied in the fleeting moment of its execution because it is a disappearing moment of interaction in a distinct space and context with a distinct audience composition. Thus, I conducted participant

observation of rehearsals and community-based performances of three Sotz'il plays to collect descriptive data about the plays' content, performance, and the local context of each performance. This is where the discipline of anthropology and my long-term immersion in and studies of Sololá's socio-political context and history was of benefit.

The plays that I examined are the following, with particular attention to the performances listed below by location and date:

1. *Oxlajuj B'aqtun*: in Totonicapán, shortly after the massacre at the Cumbre de Alaska in October 2012 and at several other sites in 2011-2013.
2. *Ixkik*: as performed in Sotz'il Jay for a local audience and for a non-profit women's organization in Panajachel in 2013.
3. *Uk'u'x Ulew (Heart of Earth)*: as performed outside the Central Park of Sololá in 2013.

Next, I collected perceptual data on audience responses through three methods:

1. *Participant observation* of visible and audible audience responses and audience-performer interactions during and after theater performances. I also noted how the play was presented and contextualized prior to starting the performance.
2. Semi-structured *audience interviews*: At or soon after performances in over fifteen Maya town plazas and municipal gymnasiums, I interviewed general audience members, mostly in rural hamlets and town centers in the department of Sololá, Guatemala, to understand their experience of each performance: what it felt like to them, how it made them think.
3. Semi-structured, in-depth *interviews with Maya artists, activists, and allies of Sotz'il* who comprise the "cuates generation" in order to understand their perceptions of Sotz'il's theater productions and their impact, both personal and societal.

RESEARCH QUESTION #3: Evidence for answering "Does Sotz'il have a strategy for confronting the dominance of Western, capitalist, state-centered political

economic relations?” came from interviews with Sotz’il members and participant-observation of activities at Sotz’il Jay cultural center. I answered the question “If not, does the ‘autonomy’ proposal of Sotz’il politics have a future?” with long-term ethnographic data on Kaqchikel life and civic participation in Sololá municipality as well as interviews with community members for the broader social context of fears, the narrowing of political options, and repression.

Reflecting theorizations of imaginaries in social justice movements (Alexander 2005, Bloch 1975, Escobar, 2010, Gutiérrez Aguilar 2008, Iton 2010, Kelley 2003, Osterweil 2013), I am not only seeking evidence of Sotz’il’s social effects as proof of its success as an artistic-political project. Rather, I am interested in understanding the ways in which Sotz’il’s theater process and plays “impact... people’s imaginations and desires” (Osterweil 2013, 607). Hence, to answer this final research question I also collected perceptual data from interviews with audience members and Sotz’il’s community as well as ethnographic observations of shifts and trends in community sociocultural life.

In this research, I strove to examine theater as a lens into Maya interiorities. I sought to understand how changes in the perception of collective and personal agency were expressed by audiences and theater artists in the process of rehearsing, shaping their plays, and enacting theater performances.

Overview of Sotz’il’s major artistic productions

Xajoj Q’ojom Kaji’ Imox (2005)

Sotz’il’s first play was based on the precolonial *Memorial de Sololá* (the version translated by Adrian Recinos).¹⁹ It explores themes of the pre-colonial political organization of the Kaqchikel people, with dual heads of state; the genocide provoked by the arrival of the forces of Pedro de Alvarado; and Kaqchikel resistance led by Kaji’ Imox and Belejeb’ K’at, “the last Kaqchikel governors” (Pablo, pre-festival presentation, March 9, 2013).

¹⁹ See also Maxwell and Hill II, *Kaqchikel Chronicles: The Definitive Edition* 2006a.

I observed Sotz'il's dress rehearsal in Sololá's municipal gymnasium on Sunday, February 26, 2006, less than one week before the national premiere on the roof of the historic Oficina de Correos in Guatemala City on Saturday, March 4, 2006. I also observed subsequent rehearsals at Sotz'il Jay in El Tablón from March through October 2006 when they continued to develop the staging in preparation for several presentations in the Maya highlands which I accompanied (Chimaltenango; Comalapa; San Juan Sacatepéquez; Santa Maria Visitación in Sololá municipality; Nebaj; at the National Palace for Indigenous People's Day; and at private ceremonies in caseríos of Sololá municipality). These presentations culminated with their performance at the first National Theater Festival in November 2006. According to Mauricio Cabrera, this was the performance that "put them on the national scene" -- at least in terms of artist circles in the capital. I did not get to see the festival: my Fulbright fellowship had finished and I returned to the U.S. in mid-October 2006.

Ajchowen (2009)

Based on scenes from the *Pop Wuj*, Sotz'il's second play *Ajchowen* is a comedy that is "an homage to the first Maya artists," according to Pablo (pre-festival presentation, March 9, 2013). I observed a couple local performances of this play in 2009 and 2010.

Oxlajuj B'aqtun (2011)

During the time of my doctoral dissertation fieldwork from October 2012 through July 2014, the *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* play was fully staged and had begun presentations with the Q'ij Saq festival in most of the municipalities of Sololá department. As a result, I didn't observe the creation or staging process of *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* except for a couple rehearsals and performances in 2011 during pre-dissertation preliminary fieldwork.

In 2012-3, the Q'ij Saq Festival (funded by PROSOL, via Canada's international aid agency) funded the transportation and production costs and conducted the coordination with municipalities participating in the festival. Commemorating the year of the Oxlajuj B'aqtun change of cycle, the Q'ij Saq (New Dawn) Festival brought Maya performing arts

performances to nearly all the municipalities in Sololá department. The festival had a similar lineup at all its performances: Chajchaay teams played the Maya ballgame around 2pm; Maya hip hop artist Tz'utu performed from his album about the Maya nawales around 4pm; and Sotz'il's play *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* was the closing act around sunset at 6pm. The Q'ij Saq Festival provided a sound and lighting engineer and equipment. Even then, however, their sound and lighting equipment was much simpler than that used by *marimba orquestas* (marimba orchestras) for town fairs in honor of each town's patronal saint. Hip hop artist Tz'utu joked with Sotz'il that when arriving at San José Chacayá for a performance, he saw enormous speakers stacked up nearly two stories on the town plaza and thought, "Wow, we have great sound equipment!' Then I realized it wasn't for us."

Uk'u'x Ulew (Heart of Earth) (2013)

During the onset of the rainy season in April 2013, as both the Q'ij Saq Festival came to a close as well as Sotz'il's weekly workshops with young people (also funded by the Q'ij Saq Festival), Sotz'il transitioned into mounting its fourth and latest play, about "Mother Earth" (*Nan Ulew*). It would later be titled *Uk'u'x Ulew*.

From June through October 2013, I witnessed two to three rehearsals from each phase of the staging process of *Uk'u'x Ulew*. I also attended two early performances of *Uk'u'x Ulew*: as a work-in-progress in Sololá's town square and then as a premiere for the Paiz Festival in the capital (as a proscenium theater adaptation) in November 2014.

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

In this chapter I have presented the theoretical framework of this study. As historical background, I traced the emergence of the ontological turn in the Indigenous Americas as an outgrowth of *Indianista* politics. I framed Maya *reivindicación* as a project of cultural dignification and vindication with a particular interest in ontological decolonization. Chapter 2 presents the historical and social context of Sotz'il both in their local municipality of Sololá and in relationship with the local Kaqchikel "Tejido Social" movement. I examine the formative influences on what I call the "cuates generation" and

theorize Sotz'il's turn to theater as an ontological break with Tejido Social. Chapter 3 explores why *reivindicación* became a powerful motivator for youth founders of Sotz'il. To address this question, I looked in detail at the context of discrimination faced by young Mayas growing up in Sololá municipality.

In Chapters 4 through 7, via different ethnographic foci, I address the questions: Why is Sotz'il's theater powerful to Maya performers and audiences? What does it do for them ontologically and politically? In chapter 4 and 5 I focus on effects on performers. In Chapter 6 and 7 I focus on effects on audiences.

In Chapter 4, my ethnographic lens is Sotz'il's collective creation process from conception of the play *Uk'u'x Ulew* through staging. In Chapter 5, my ethnographic lens is Sotz'il's process of training the body to take on energies from a Maya ontological perspective. This includes their approach to engaging living materials during their plays, with a focus on the development of their fourth play, *Uk'u'x Ulew*.

Chapter 6 is an ethnographic analysis of the content of Sotz'il's third play *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* in the context of their community performances in order to understand how Sotz'il expresses Maya ontological perspectives through theater. In Chapter 7, I analyze audience responses to performances of the play *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* in Maya towns. Chapter 8 presents my conclusions.

Chapter 2. From *Tejido Social* to Ontological Decolonization:

A Revisionist History of Maya Politics (1970s – present)

All our environment, including the community itself, made us change so that we could create this theater group. The youth could have had all the enthusiasm in the world, but if the society itself, our context, had not told us, ‘*Do it!*’ we would not have succeeded.²⁰

Lisandro Guarcax, coordinator and co-founder of Maya Kaqchikel theater group Sotz’il, made this declaration in our 2006 interview in the cornfields surrounding Sotz’il’s rehearsal center located in a *caserío* (hamlet) of the rural plain known as El Tablón, Sololá. He was referring to the sacred places and nawales, Qate’ Ulew (Mother Nature), ancestors, elders, neighbors, and family members whose interactions with and support of the group – in ways big and small – made the group’s formation possible. In that same interview, Lisandro recounted some of these formative, even unforeseen interactions.

Seeing Lisandro’s statement today, nearly seven years after his assassination on August 25, 2010 at age 32, the words take on another valence: In addition to the environment that produced Sotz’il in its creative and political dimensions, there also was the environment that produced the conditions for his and other youth activists’ assassinations. To some degree, these environments overlapped and shaped each other.

In this chapter, I ethnographically trace the history and genealogy of the Kaqchikel political movement in Sololá municipality starting in the 1970s. This is the sociopolitical backdrop for the emergence of Sotz’il as a youth theater group. It informs why Sotz’il turned to theater rather than continue the social movement strategies of *Tejido Social*.

Sotz’il is both an outgrowth of and a contrast with the previous generation who were primary actors during wartime organizing for self-defense and the rise of the Maya Movement in civil society. I call this movement “*Tejido Social*” (Social Fabric) because its primary intervention was to create and/or strengthen Kaqchikel institutions, no longer as marginal but in Sololá municipality’s public sphere. It reached its peak of vibrancy in

²⁰ Lisandro Guarcax González, interview by author, September 18, 2006.

1996, coinciding with the active Maya organizing around the terms and implementation of the Peace Accords. This vibrancy was obscured by violence in Sololá causing a polarization in 2000 and the closing of the political opening for Tejido Social.

I argue that at the national level there were a series of antecedents for Tejido Social in the 1970s which had also been obscured by counterinsurgency violence and genocide (1978-1983). While the fabric of Tejido Social was starting to be woven during the self-defense period of the late 1970s in Sololá, it only fully blossomed in the public sphere when political conditions permitted after the first (wartime) democratic elections in 1986 and the lead-up to the 1992 anti-quincentennial organizing.

Against this sociopolitical backdrop, Sotz'il emerges as a youth theater group with a distinctive intervention: a more radical turn to decolonization and Maya ontologies. Despite being children of leaders of Tejido Social, they did not seek to build Maya political power even through Kaqchikel governance institutions like the traditional authorities. Rather, they sought to make their political intervention through Maya dance, music, and theater.

THE CULTURAL AND POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY OF SOLOLÁ

The town of Tz'oluj Ya' (water of the Sambucus elder tree²¹), or Sololá as it is "officially" designated, sits in the highlands, twelve kilometers from the Pan American Highway's crossroads at Los Encuentros with the route to the famed market (and previous Kaqchikel capital²²) of Chichicastenango, Quiché, to the North; the route east to Guatemala City, and the route west to Totonicapán, Quetzaltenango, and Huehuetenango. Today, the principal route to Panajachel and the tourist destinations along the picturesque Lake Atitlán runs from Los Encuentros through the mostly flat rural caseríos known collectively as El Tablón, then through Sololá town, the seat of the municipality of Sololá and the department of Sololá. Most tourists do not stop in Sololá, but for those who do, the main reason to

²¹ COMS 1998: 11.

²² Ibid.

stop before 2012 was the colorful “photo op” of the bustling market that used to spill onto the streets.²³

Sololá’s market is in fact a convergence point of regional Indigenous economies which has a historical and geographical basis. While a principal geographical referent today is Panajachel, the principal referent in pre-Hispanic times was K’ayb’al (“Market”) – about 5 kilometers downhill, following the steep slope of mountainside down to the lakefront below. K’ayb’al, or Jaibal as it is known in the Spanish record, was the original seat of the families now residing in San Jorge La Laguna, an *aldea* of Sololá. K’ayb’al was so called because it was the major market at the north end of Lake Atitlán at the crossroads of trade coming from the South Coast and Boca Costa through the Tz’utujil town of what is now Santiago Atitlán on the south side of the lake. Merchants and goods having crossed the lake then had access to the ancient trade routes connecting the west, north (towards Chichicastenango, the ancient K’iche’ capital Q’umark’aj, and beyond) and east of Guatemala (towards the Kaqchikel colonial-era capital of Iximché and ancestral Poqomam seat Mixco Viejo). So Sololá, in both contemporary and ancient times, was always a key crossroads of various Maya worlds: of economies, goods, politically (between the Tz’utujiles to the south, the K’iches to the north and west, and Kaqchikeles and Poqomames in the east). Being such a strategic center, Sololá was also close to sacred sites of vital importance to the Maya world – not only the volcanos guarding Lake Atitlán, but also several mountains named in ceremonies far away and in the Kaqchikel Chronicles²⁴. In fact, the town of Sololá sits at the tip of a plain (El Tablón, a cluster of caseríos) between various mountain ranges that since the colonial era have been divided into distinct “departments” at the crossroads of Totonicapán, Sololá, Quiché, and Chimaltenango. Los Encuentros appears to be a contemporary Spanish name that reflects an ancient reality of this meeting point among Maya language communities and polities.

²³ While Sololateco municipal administrations are interested in promoting tourism, some Sololatecos took the sprawling market to be the cause of traffic back-ups and a traffic engineering problem to be solved. Under the administration of Ing. Andres Iboy, these Sololatecos are realizing a years-old development proposal to bring the entire market inside into a modernized multi-story building with a garage on the bottom levels (under construction at the time of writing).

²⁴ Maxwell, Judy. Presentation at 2013 Congreso de Estudios Mayas, Kaminal Juyu’.

Maya Sololatecos are very aware of their strategic location, as they have been throughout time. During the height of the Guatemalan army's counter-insurgency campaign in 1978-1983 (colloquially known as La Violencia), they used it to their advantage to do risky organizing that in other more remote locations would have made them primary targets of scorched earth massacres. Jennifer Schirmer's maps of Guatemalan army campaigns show that Sololá municipality was actually quite close to the thrust of military dictator Fernando Romeo Lucas García's October 1981-February 1982 offensive – specifically through the Iximche Task Force (Schirmer 1998, xii). Many hamlets of Sololá are more remote and invisible to travelers' eyes; some of these were in fact where massacres happened (as documented by the truth commission reports²⁵) and where more of Sololá's poverty remains (such as the area of Pujujil, Xajaxac, and Pixabaj). The history of Maya Sololatecos' self-defensive organizing was a major factor that enabled them to avoid more massacres in their midst. However, they were not spared the selective “disappearances” of young community leaders, women and men.

At a catty corner from the Central Park stands the Municipalidad Indígena and, across the street, the Municipalidad Oficial. Today, the most distinctive aspect of the two-story “official” municipal building is the wrought iron guardrails on the second floor. The metalwork is forged into an intricate beautiful design – black decorative bars curving and crossing at acute angles to form the ornate symbol of the Bat Nawal (*Sotz'*), the guardian of the Kaqchikel people of Tz'oluj Ya'. That same bat design is embroidered with dramatic black lines on the backs of *ri chaqueta*, the traditional wool coats worn by adult male Sololatecos. *Sotz'il* is referred to in the *Anales de los Kaqchikeles* as one of the great houses of Tulán that became the Kaqchikel people. While the Xajil lineage settled near Iximché, the bat lineage (the *Sotz'ila'*) settled in Sololá (Maxwell and Hill II 2006a). This is also the referent from which the cultural center of *Sotz'il* takes its name: “*Sotz'il Jay*” (House of the Bat Lineage).

This design for the municipal building was introduced during the administration of

²⁵ CEH 1999; REMHI 1998.

schoolteacher Pedro Iboy (1996-2000) as a way to mark the historic, sweeping change in the cultural referents of the municipal administration. The “official” municipality had been created in 1901 as a separate entity from the “Indigenous” municipality and, as such, was implicitly designated as the ladino-directed space governed by ladino norms, rules, laws, and cultural hegemony. However, since 1996, all municipal mayors in Sololá have been Maya Kaqchikel and all municipal councils have been majority Maya.

The forging of the Sotz’ nawal onto the structure of the official municipality represents not simply the shift to Maya Kaqchikel leadership in the municipality, but more so the *political process* that mobilized Kaqchikel Sololatecos around a united organizing cause that culminated in 1996-1998 with several major political changes:

- the first Kaqchikel “official mayor” since that office was created in 1901;
- a Kaqchikel majority municipal council;
- and an “empowered” and re-structured “Maya Municipality” which Maya organizations used as an organizing hub to coordinate the various social, cultural, spiritual, and political expressions of their mobilization.

In this dissertation and in my previous writing²⁶, I refer to this Kaqchikel political process and movement as “*Tejido Social*” in order to indicate that the thrust of the movement was to knit together the various expressions of Kaqchikel social life into a political mobilization of diverse Maya-centered organizations. Since over time the name and organizational center of the organizing hub (for example, the name of the coordinating council) has changed, and since eventually there was a schism, in this dissertation I refer to this pre-schism, united political current as the “Tejido Social” movement in order to clarify the narrative for the reader.

Riding home on the *camioneta* – colorful converted U.S. school buses that are the primary mode of transportation for most Kaqchikeles – takes us up the road leading to Los Encuentros. The bus passes franchise ice cream shops, locally-owned and franchise

²⁶ Thelen 2010

pharmacies, and a Kaqchikel-run restaurant and bar. Riders will see a couple banks, sprawling furniture and appliance chain stores, and El Calvario church before the bus rumbles up the steep roadway of interlocking concrete pavers. Passengers ride past a couple tailors and a candle shop that sells *panela* as an less-processed alternative to sugar for Maya ceremonies; on up past the Exxon gasoline station at the top of the road and a couple large hardware franchise stores.

Right where the steep road starts to flatten out, at the edge of the neighboring rural district of El Tablón lies a large campus that is noticeable for its dense patch of forest, unlike anything on the now-developed edge of the highway between Sololá and Los Encuentros. Behind the grand, gated entrance staffed by a guard are soccer fields. From the 1960s through 1997, this had been the entrance to Military Zone No. 14 and was marked with a large statue of a towering oversized military boot, as if stomping down and crushing regular-sized people. Young Kaqchikel men were captured and forced to train here after forced conscription sweeps *en masse* in the town center on market days²⁷. Brave young Kaqchikel pregnant women came here too to rescue the conscripted men as part of the community's organized campaign. Their strategy was to state that the captured young men were the fathers of the babies growing in their wombs (Tat Alonso, pers. comm., 2006). Other young Kaqchikel men couldn't get out of the forced conscription and found it safer to stay within – but acted as informants to the community of the army's movements and the days when the army would march down on communities.

Other young Kaqchikel men were specifically targeted for capture: in their case, not for mass military conscription, but torture and assassination. Tat Adrián, an uncle of Sotz'il, was picked up while playing soccer with the team for which he was captain. He had been singled out for being a "leader." He was a bilingual school teacher, a local health promoter, and, at a young age, acted as scribe for his father and members of the local development committee to write applications for electricity and potable water for his community.²⁸ His teammates managed to help him talk his way out of being held at the

²⁷ See (Green 1995) for a more detailed description of these "army sweeps."

²⁸ Tat Adrián, interview with author, 2006.

army base. Some years ago, out of curiosity, Tat Adrián examined declassified army documents from the military base and found his name on a list of Kaqchikel Mayas targeted for “disappearance.”

Today the campus is a composite of two universities: a private exclusive university (the Highlands campus of the University del Valle de Guatemala, UVG-Altiplano) and the public San Carlos University (USAC). The switch from shady military base to forested university campus is the result of a 1997 Tejido Social-initiated struggle to expel the military base and replace it with the national public university (USAC). The grassroots movement was successful in booting out both the military base and its successor, the Adolfo V. Hall Institute for military training.

Continuing on the camioneta, we are now fully in the mostly wide-open plain of El Tablón (flanked in the distance by Atitlan’s volcanos in the south and mountain ranges in the north, among other sacred sites). After a couple more stops, we are at Tijob’al Tz’oluj Ya’, the community-run Maya Kaqchikel middle and secondary school. This too was a product of Maya struggles both local and national. It was part of the second generation of Maya bilingual schools that were founded in 1995 after the anti-quincentennial organizing and fundraising efforts of national Maya movement leaders involved in the Left who sought to deepen young people’s engagement with Maya languages through education. This national effort intersected with the local Tejido Social movement to found a school based on Kaqchikel pedagogy and language.

Back on the camioneta, the next stop heading into the Caserío Central of El Tablón is “Iglesia,” a light green Evangelical church with a lofty interior salon, bright lighting, and a loud sound system for its Christian rock bands. Though built at least eight years ago, it still looks fairly new, with ample room inside for the throngs of people that attend its *cultos* (worship services). It is simple compared to the half-dozen newer churches springing up along the highway which are a few stories high and gaudily ornate with spiraling columns, tinted windows, and flashy gold-painted wrought iron designs.

At our bus stop, the most frequented building is the motorized corn mill, which is the point of encounter for women and children walking through the milpa (cornfields) from

a variety of directions. Another point of encounter is the basketball court next door, right outside a small office staffed by Kaqchikel women running cooperative projects. A display case shows their products: natural shampoo and cookies. Sometimes, right after work, these women divide into pairs to play a fierce, no-holds-barred game of basketball, wearing their *cortes* and regular walking shoes. Those who live nearby and use the corn mill next door have a disadvantage: The woman owner of mill scolds any women she catches playing basketball, saying basketball is scandalous and unbecoming of women and mothers. The other women ballplayers have an advantage: they can jump on the bus to go home and avoid castigation.

This is Sotz'il's rural hamlet and their cultural and political geography. In the next section, I will lay out the sociopolitical history that gives meaning to their intervention through theater.

NATIONAL HISTORY (1944 – 1996)

From 1944 through 1954, Guatemala experienced a progressive period known as the “Guatemalan Spring” whose hallmark was widespread agrarian reform. In 1954, the administration of President Jacobo Arbenz²⁹ was toppled by a CIA-sponsored military coup. However, popular unrest with the coup simmered until finally, in 1960, a group of military officers in the eastern region of Guatemala (which was largely ladino) initiated a guerrilla revolutionary war against the military government. Thus began thirty-six years of revolutionary war. Four revolutionary guerrilla groups were eventually created, and in 1982 formed an alliance as the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG).

²⁹ While the presidencies of José Arévalo and Jacobo Arbenz were very important for reducing class inequalities and re-distributing land to ladino peasants through agrarian reform, some Mayas have expressed critiques of this period on two grounds: First, with the attempts at more widespread democratization, political parties were introduced to Indigenous communities. Critics say that political parties initiated a history of division in Maya communities. Second, the government interventions fall within the continent-wide project of *indigenismo* which promoted assimilation of Mayas as peasants into its project of a more egalitarian Guatemalan society. Critics says that this national project of incorporation into the rule of the state chipped away at remaining vestiges of Indigenous communities' de facto autonomy (from previously having been ignored or marginalized by the state), whitewashed their cultural identity, and negated their particular status as Indigenous people. Yet, this period left important legacies like minimum wage and labor rights laws and the Guatemalan social security institute (IGSS).

In the 1970s, the guerrillas – and the Ejército Guerrillero de los Pobres (EGP) in particular – began organizing and, through popular education, “conscientizing” Maya communities about the revolutionary struggle, particularly in the Northwestern highlands. This politicization spread through Maya village networks and led to massive incorporation of Mayas into the revolutionary movement, either directly as guerrilla cadres or indirectly as webs of logistical support.

This moment is the usual climactic peak of the standard Left-leaning national narrative which reflects the burgeoning organizing energy and grassroots multiplication of revolutionary aspirations. I will pause the standard national narrative here to introduce some revisionist history. Another aspect of 1970s Maya politicization and mobilization was Maya-centered, pan-Maya, and diverse in class and profession (that is, not limited to *campesinos* (peasants) like the organized bases of the EGP). It developed revolutionary proposals of decolonization, Maya autonomy, and self-determination. I focus on three organized expressions of this period that embraced radical political heterogeneity and decolonization politics: the Seminarios Indígenas, Revista Ixim, and Tojil.

In the 1970s, a political current named itself Indianistas to highlight a course towards *auto-determinación* (self-determination) that had become salient in the international Indigenous community at that time. They used the term Indianista to indicate their counter-proposal to “indigenistas” and “indigenismo” that had “been imposed” on Mayas in Guatemala since the early twentieth century with its financing of projects of assimilation and social integration (*¿Existe Movimiento Maya?* 2007, 21). As a member of the movement reflected,

There was a network of Indigenous organizations that were meeting in South America and Central America. They were generating a position of Indianismo that was a political position against the politics of assimilation. (*¿Existe Movimiento Maya?* 2007)

Furthermore, the Indianistas were against the folkloric image of docile Indian subjects of a romanticized past – an image which fueled and funded the indigenista project – and instead projected a revolutionary and proud profile. Because of the many Marxist

revolutions around the globe, it seems that there was almost an electricity with being on the edge of a possibility of major national and international change. It was not outside the realm of possibility that the dominant Guatemala social order could be overturned, and in fact the guerrillas had positioned themselves as being at the front of a transformational social change – an image that lasts to this day, of the guerrillas and orthodox Leftists projects as being the engine of history-making social progress. However, another set of actors was arriving on the national scene and beginning to make complex proposals of their history-shifting agency at the front of a “pluri-national” state: the Indianista Mayas and other Mayas were coming together for debates and to make proposals, to overturn their relegation to the sidelines as those who receive the orders rather than make proposals. The Indianista Mayas were aligned with the internationalist revolutionary project from their particular subjectivity as being Maya.

The texts of anti-colonial struggle, such as Fanon and Memmi, first made their appearance in texts and debates in the 1970s (Macleod 2008, 10-11). In 1971, the Declaration of Barbados was published, and there had been a Maya social movement delegate from Guatemala to the conference. In 1977, Maya social movement delegates participated in continental gatherings of CORPI, the Regional Coordinator of Indigenous Peoples of Central America. They returned to Guatemala inspired by the models of autonomy that they witnessed and heard about from the Kuna of Panamá and the Yaqui of México, “who had their own authorities.”³⁰ “Autonomy” became a demand of the Guatemala Maya Movement.

In addition to their anti-colonial political orientation, certain expressions of 1970s Indianista politics reflect a process of multi-sectoral dialogue that bears some similarities with the later *chinamital* model. Three expressions of this dialogic process are the Seminarios Indígenas, Revista Ixim, and Tojil.

Seminarios Indígenas created a space for debate among Mayas representing diverse sectors and political orientations: the goal was to come together as Mayas. They succeeded in creating a unity of diverse Maya expressions among whom they had rich discussions

³⁰ Leopoldo Mendez, interview by author, June 21, 2013.

and actions. They started as the other generations of “debate” would do in future decades: by analyzing their history as Maya peoples. Amilcar Pop declared that the question that launched the discussion in the First K’iche’ Seminar was about getting clear on identity: “Who am I?” And [revolutionary Indianist group] Kab’raqaan appears, re-defining who I am” (*¿Existe Movimiento Maya?* 2007).

Whereas the revolutionary Indianist groups of the day like Kab’raqaan and Tojil were frontally concerned with revolutionary projects, the Seminarios Indígenas emphasized instead the process of developing their ideologies together through debate and unified organization. A central purpose of the space was *auto-valorización* – a common concern that brought Mayas together across differences in class, political affinity, and social sectors and which kept them invested in continuing to convene for the Seminarios. This focus on self-valorization points to the Maya movement’s long history (since at least the 1960s) of interaction with theories of internalized colonization³¹ and collective analysis of how dynamics of racial and cultural inferiorization result in some Mayas’ sociocultural alienation (similar to Fanon’s proposals for “dis-alienation”). Valorization of Maya identity was their response to internalized colonization.

It appears that ideology became a central concern of these groups because Marxism was taught as an ideology. “La ideología de la guerrilla” (the guerrillas’ ideology) had marked a turning point in Maya communities because it sparked their interest in politicization and mobilizing, as many interviewees in Sololá and other Maya regions of Guatemala attest. It appears that the popular education workshops led by guerrillas validated Mayas’ experience of injustice at historical subordination, gave it a national sociopolitical context through social analysis that many Mayas experienced as an awakening, and left a road map: a vision of united struggle (which resonated with Maya collective culture) that, for the first time in decades if not centuries, made social emancipation for Maya peoples seem possible -- under an umbrella of guerrilla revolution.

However, interviewees note that they saw the social analysis and revolutionary

³¹ By internalized colonization, I mean the desire to reject and excise from oneself the stigmatized aspects of one’s culture and peoplehood.

vision presented by the guerrillas an inspiration and a launching point rather than an end point in and of itself. Marxist ideology was resonant with some aspects of their historical experience of oppression, but Mayas also were cognizant of having been oppressed as Mayas and of living in an autochthonous society whose norms differed from those of the Guatemalan state and even Marxist ideologies.

Hence, at the onset of massive Maya participation in the revolution in the 1970s, a large cohort of Mayas sympathetic to the guerrillas' revolutionary project proposed to develop a "Maya ideology" to parallel the Marxist ideology. They sought to articulate a position aligned with Marxist revolutionary project but grounded in Maya cosmovisión and civilization. This cohort of Mayas believed that developing a "Maya ideology" would demonstrate that the Maya system of life was on par with Marxism's revolutionary Western civilization.³²

Concurrent with the Seminarios Indígenas, members of this amorphous, roughly unified and nascent Maya Movement published the *Ixim Revista* (Corn Magazine). The magazine demonstrated their commitment to diverse political expressions: the written pieces ranged in political opinion and also in medium. Poems were included alongside political and cultural commentary (Salazar Tetzaguic 1995). *Revista Ixim* demonstrated a politics of Maya autonomy because it was "self-financed and self-sustaining" through members' "collaborations" (donations) and "ads paid by merchants and ... lawyers" (Macleod 2008, 214-215). The first issue highlighted a range of issues:

- "cultural colonialism, especially critiques of folkloric festivals, days and monuments"
- "valorizing Indigenous languages, Maya last names, and the use of *traje* in schools."
- Social issues, especially those arising from the war: "cooperativism, the march of San Ildefonso Ixtahuacán, the massacre of Panzós, the escalation of repression and denouncements of ... obligatory military service," economic exploitation, and the unequal distribution of land in Guatemala. (Macleod 2008, 213-214)

³² Mendez, interview.

These issues would be taken up again later in Sololá's Maya movements. *Ixim Magazine* transcended issues that later would be affiliated with either the *culturalista* or the *populares* current of the Maya movement.

Within a year, the magazine's mission had clarified and radicalized. "On the first anniversary of the first Indigenous newspaper," *Revista Ixim* declares its aspiration "to play a role in the liberation of the Indigenous pueblo. . . to create an Indian consciousness, with respect to . . . the extermination of the race (ETHNOCIDE)³³, economic and political exploitation, and racial and cultural discrimination" (Coj Ajbalam 1981 [1978], 369). In keeping with the Indianist current of the day (and in conversation with Lenin's theses on "the right of oppressed nations to self-determination"³⁴), the magazine used terms like "Indian liberation"³⁵ and the "self-determination" of Guatemala's Indigenous "nations" to describe its aims. It contested early accusations of "reverse racism" ("racismo al revés"). *Revista Ixim* expressed an aim that foreshadows the artistic work of Sotz'il in the 2000s: "*Ixim* promotes above all the emergence of an authentic Indigenous literature that expresses

³³ Because this was published before the massacres of Maya communities, the writers used the term "ethnocide" to refer to assimilation.

³⁴ Lenin, V.I. "The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination. THESES (1916)." *Lenin Collected Works*, UNKNOWN, [19xx], Moscow, *Volume 22*, pages 143-156. Source: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/jan/x01.htm> Accessed: Jan 24, 2017.

³⁵ "auto-determinación . . . de las naciones indias" (Coj Ajbalam 1981 [1978], 368) and "liberación del indio" (Coj Ajbalam 1981 [1978], 369). This is important to historicize, because in a 2013 meeting at Sotz'il Jay, members joked about the term "liberation" as if it was not used for Maya reivindicación but only in Leftist contexts. An analysis of 1970s Maya movements for reivindicación disprove this assumption. For example, *Ixim* firmly declared its support for Maya linguistic self-determination using a radical, politicized discourse:

Ixim, por consiguiente, respetando el principio de la autodeterminación de las naciones anexas (tal el caso de las naciones indias con respeto al Estado guatemalteco) no puede decidir por su propia cuenta cuál debe ser la lengua oficial del indio, sino que son las comunidades mayahablantes quienes decidirán en el futuro cuál será o cómo será el destino de las lenguas de la familia maya (Coj Ajbalam 1981 [1978], 368).

Positions like this paved the way for the founding of the Academy of Maya Languages of Guatemala (ALMG), whose work today continues in a de-radicalized (some would say coopted) context as a government agency.

the spirit and sensibility of the Maya race” (Coj Ajbalam 1981 [1978], 369).

This literature also was in conversation with international Indigenous movements and political literature. Macleod writes that *Ixim* published “letters, articles, and declarations from Indigenous leaders and organizations of Bolivia, México, Perú, Panamá, Nicaragua y Colombia, thus demonstrating a considerable level of pan-Indian coordination throughout the continent” (Macleod 2008, 213-4).

In the politicized context of the 1970s, *Revista Ixim* framed the revitalization of Maya languages as a core component interconnected with other aspects of a Maya political project of reivindicación and self-determination. It was not until years later that certain academic linguistic programs de-radicalized the work of Maya language revitalization by isolating it from larger projects of self-determination.

Similarly, the heterogeneous space of the Seminarios had “interlocution” with Maya revolutionary groups like Kab’raqan and Indian Movement Tojil as well as with community-oriented linguists like Adrián Ines Chávez³⁶, whose seminal translation of the *Popol Vuh* was published in 1978. The participants in the Seminarios Indígenas viewed Chávez as a progenitor of the work they were doing.³⁷ Even though Tojil represented very different politics, and even though Tojil was short-lived due to repression from both the Guatemalan State army and the URNG, Tojil was a major political referent of that time “for representing an autonomous position and its own Indigenous thought, that is, Indigenous people who do not want to be represented or controlled by others” (Macleod 2008, 235).

Tojil had also undergone its own process of debate and research for the purposes of Maya *reivindicación* which enriched the two manifestos that they issued. According to

³⁶ In 1978, Adrián Ines Chávez published his translation of the *Popol Vuh*, the first published translation of this seminal Maya text by a native speaker. To generations of Mayas, Adrian Ines Chávez (K’iche’) was a model of a community-oriented linguist. Younger Mayas of the cuates generation have told me that in their eyes Chávez was more interested in contributing to Maya communities’ ownership of their languages and literature than using academic conventions in his linguistic translations. In fact, he is known among Mayas for writing K’iche’ in a way that valorizes the ways that Maya communities speak their languages. Chávez had been trained as a schoolteacher, and even though he was academically trained as a linguist, he never held an academic position.

³⁷ Mendez, interview.

Maya sources, starting in 1977 Tojil “investigated what was the sustenance of Maya thought, their principles and values, as the heart of the life of the Pueblo.” This process enabled them to “concretize” the major thrust of their demands: the recovery of territory and territorial autonomy as their approach to reivindicación (¿Existe Movimiento Maya? 2007, 22). Tojil’s 1977 Manifiesto critically interrogates the hegemonic projects of modernization and homogenization as impositions of Western principles (Tojil 1978 [1977]).

The valorization of Maya spiritual practice was key across these three spaces of Indianista politics – even when due to the diversity of these spaces some integrants practiced Catholicism or Evangelical Christianity. For some participants in the Seminarios, seeing and participating in Maya ceremonies was “new” in that these practices had been previously prohibited for them. For others, the practice of Maya ceremony was a validation of what they had already been practicing privately.³⁸

Tojil made a declaration of the fundamental importance of Maya spirituality and particularly the central role and authority of *ajq’ijab’* (daykeepers) in no uncertain terms in their second Manifiesto:

... the Indian people are unified by their own conception of life, by their own way of considering the dimension of space and time of the universe. This cosmogonic unity has been maintained and defended by the only pre-Columbian pan-ethnic institution still in use today: the priestly organization of the AJQ’IJ. ... They have been, are, and will be the last bastions in the defense of the system of the calendarization of time, of Maya languages, of homage to the ancestors, of the prayers to Mother Earth, of service in the *cofradías*, because they cannot become acculturated nor ‘capitulate’ (Tojil 1978 [1977], 15).³⁹

Tojil asserts that even in the midst of a society with many cultural influences, *ajq’ijab’* must maintain certain commitments of spiritual practice that continue to keep her

³⁸ Mendez, interview.

³⁹ “los pueblos indios están unificados entre sí por una misma concepción de la vida, por una misma manera de considerar la dimensión espacio y tiempo del universo. Esta unidad cosmogónica ha sido mantenida y defendida por la única institución pan-étnica precolombina todavía vigente hoy en día: la organización sacerdotal de los AJQ’IJ. ... ellos han sido, son, y serán los últimos bastiones en la defensa del sistema de la calendarización del tiempo, de las lenguas mayances, del culto a los ancestros, de las oraciones a la Madre Tierra, del servicio en las *cofradías*, porque ellos no pueden aculturarse ni ‘claudicar.’”

or him loyal to Maya ontology. Thus, Tojil declares that *ajq'ijab'* are the pillars of Maya society and culture at large, especially when communities are involved in politics that lean towards autonomy and self-determination. A key part of this Indianista orientation was re-founding *Maya* society on *Maya* principles and values that are fundamentally expressed through the practice of Maya spirituality.

These three spaces of decolonization politics and political heterogeneity and debate were short-lived due to the military's intensified counter-insurgency campaign. In 1979, *Revista Ixim* "disappears . . . like other social communication organs" (Macleod 2008, 215). Physical repression and assassinations led to the end of Tojil's issuance of manifestos:

The reaction . . . of the URNG to Tojil was hostile. The URNG showed a singular incapacity for accepting Tojil's Indianista questioning and proposals. Bastos and Camus even have gathered information about executions of Tojil members by the EGP and FAR (Macleod 2008, 236).⁴⁰

Still, these spaces left their influence on subsequent Maya organizing. Leopoldo Mendez asserts that Tojil's Manifesto "*continues* to be the basis for arguing for the specific rights of the Maya People – rights of territorial and political autonomy"⁴¹ (*¿Existe Movimiento Maya?* 2007). Macleod notes that Tojil's enduring influence was its articulation of demands for the "autonomy" of Maya territory and traditional authority and "the analysis of internal colonialism" (2008, 255fn).

In this section, I have proposed that *Seminarios Indígenas*, *Revista Ixim*, and Tojil are antecedents of Maya decolonization politics. They analyzed strategies to confront racial inferiorization and shaming which, Fanon noted, are an arm to colonization projects. Their process of self-determination in the 1970s involved a gathering of diverse Maya sectors for dialogue through which they articulated cultural and social demands as well as

⁴⁰ "La reacción . . . de la URNG a Tojil fue hostil. La URNG mostró una singular incapacidad para aceptar los cuestionamientos y planteamientos indianistas de Tojil. Incluso, Bastos y Camus recogen información sobre ajusticiamientos de miembros de Tojil por parte del EGP y las FAR."

⁴¹ "*sigue* siendo base para argumentar los derechos específicos del Pueblo Maya, derechos de la autonomía territorial y política."

critiques of colonization. Leopoldo Mendez notes that this activity of mutual fertilization and cross-sector dialogue produced a “massive generation ... of imagination” (“la generación masiva ... de la imaginación”).⁴² Violence from both the army and, in some pivotal cases, the guerrillas caused a premature folding of these spaces.

From 1978 through 1983, military dictators Fernando Romeo Lucas García and Efraín Ríos Montt began to target Maya civilians in their counter-insurgency war (with the support of the governments of the U.S. and Israel). They masterminded scorched earth campaigns to root out what they called the grassroots bases of revolution: *campesino* (peasant) Maya communities, which became the target of concentrated massacres. Their armies marched through rural Maya-majority departments obliterating anything that appeared to show community organization or Maya community-interwovenness. The Guatemala military and state’s targeting of Maya *campesinos* extended beyond destroying food supplies such as Maya cornfields (which are considered sacred by Mayas who consider themselves to be made of corn). There is clear evidence of a racist and genocidal intent to destroy Mayas as peoples through desecrating their cultural fabric and humanity: they burned people and farm animals alive in their places of worship (such as churches), targeted Maya *ajq’ijab’* (daykeepers), raped pregnant women, and committed atrocities against Maya elders, adults, and babies.

Mayas colloquially refer to this period of unspeakable violence as *La Violencia*, and the United Nations has said that it constitutes genocide against Maya peoples. Guatemalan military officers had been trained at the U.S.’ School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia in “counterinsurgency techniques, sniper training, commando and psychological warfare, military intelligence and interrogation tactics,” including torture techniques (SOA Watch n.d., SOA Watch 2016). To carry out the scorched earth campaign masterminded by the criollo generals, the military conscripted Maya foot soldiers. Through torture and intimidation, they forced Maya community members to spy and inform on others in their communities. These tactics produced intracommunity division

⁴² Mendez, interview.

and distrust that has undone the social and cultural fabric of Maya communities. “The 36 years of armed confrontation between the army and guerrillas weakened even more the structure of the organization of the communities of Sololá. It is therefore an urgent task to strengthen the local authorities such as the *auxiliares* to maintain the exercise of Maya Law,” wrote the Coordinating Body of Maya Organizations of Sololá (COMS 1998, 10).

SOLOLÁ: THE *TEJIDO SOCIAL* POLITICAL OPENING (1980S-1990S)

With the onset of the military’s scorched earth campaign in the late 1970s, self-defense became urgent for Maya communities. In Sololá, strategies for self-defense were influenced by their Kaqchikel rural social fabric and cultural norms. With these strategies, Kaqchikel Sololatecos freed youth who had been conscripted by the military and hid community leaders being targeted for disappearance by the military. Success with these strategies made these Sololatecos interested in researching and resuscitating systems that had fallen out of daily practice. This self-defense organizing was the forerunner to a distinct political project in Sololá that I call “Tejido Social.”

After *La Violencia*, as soon as political conditions permitted, Maya organizations gradually came out of hiding. These included national organizations like CONAVIGUA and Majawil Q’ij (New Dawn), as well as local organizations like Defensoría Maya that had led Kaqchikel Sololatecos’ self-defense organizing during the height of the genocide. The Tejido Social movement arose in Sololá from an alliance of these Maya civic organizations and was largely composed of subsistence farmers and a first generation of Maya schoolteachers. Their success at organizing for self-defense during La Violencia gave them increasing confidence in governing themselves through the Kaqchikel cultural system rather than the ladino system that marginalized them. To do this, they sought to strengthen Kaqchikel sociocultural bodies like their auxiliary mayors (*alcaldes auxiliares*), committees, and *cofradías* (religious associations that cared for sacred figures). They viewed them as descendants of Kaqchikel sociopolitical institutions that preceded those imposed by the Guatemalan nation-state.

The Tejido Social movement was beginning to be knit as the residents of San Jorge La Laguna, a village of Sololá municipality, were beginning to organize to recover their ancestral land that had been lost to hotel developers through a series of deceptions.⁴³ On March 23, 1992, Jorgeños broke the landowners' fence⁴⁴ and launched "The Struggle for the Recovery of Jaibal."⁴⁵ As noted by their official proclamation:

On the morning of March 23, 1992, hundreds of Jorgeños walked from the mountainside towards their legitimate land Jaibal, occupying it again. They constructed their shanties in the place where their grandparents – the Mayas Kaqchikeles Jorgeños -- had been born and lived. Accompanied by the image of the Patron [saint] of the community of San Jorge, they returned to live in their ancient lands: young women, children, young men, and elders.⁴⁶

The year 1992 also marked the height of continent-wide Indigenous peoples' counter-mobilizations to the Quincentennial celebrations of Columbus' arrival to the Americas planned for October 12, 1992. In anticipation of Indigenous mobilization protesting the Columbus Quincentennial, the Maya organizations in Sololá planned a public launching of their work. Organizations such as CONAVIGUA, Majawil Q'ij, the Movement for 500 Years, and Usaq'il Tinamit had been in the very initial planning stages of forming a union of organizations. On a practical level, says Acetún:

The Coordinadora Comunal [of San Jorge] sought the solidarity of these groups as they were organizing for the land occupation, and their support helped them organize better in the years 1992-1994. The groups were strong. Each struggle that we launched, we did it as a coordinated group and everyone supported.⁴⁷

Antonia Buch adds that the Coordinadora specifically began coordinating "a permanent unification . . . for collective work" at the municipal level through a youth committee of

⁴³ Their land title in K'ayb'al had been lost in the 1800s through shady transfers of land titles by regional ladino elites. The Kaqchikel inhabitants of San Jorge La Laguna initiated the first of their land occupations in 1992, coinciding with continental anti-quincentennial mobilizations protesting celebrations of Columbus' arrival to the Americas. For more detail on this movement, see (C. Thelen 2010).

⁴⁴ *Prensa Libre*. 1992. "San Jorge La Laguna, en la historia"; p. 8. Guatemala: 6 de Abril 1992.

⁴⁵ Comunidad de la aldea San Jorge La Laguna. 1994. *Jaibal Es Nuestra Tierra: San Jorge La Laguna, Sololá*. Guatemala: Coordinadora Nacional Indígena y Campesina (CONIC), p13.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 13-15.

⁴⁷ Genaro Acetún, interview by author, April 26, 2006.

the Indigenous Municipality.⁴⁸

San Jorge La Laguna's land struggle became a turning point in the mobilization of Kaqchikel Sololatecos throughout the municipality because it revealed the racism that they faced in politics and nearly all aspects of Guatemalan society. For example, in the course of the land occupations and mobilizations of April 1992, Acetún states that:

all the communities began to realize that the municipal mayor did not heed their needs. That is, [before the land occupation], only the committees [leaders of organized Maya groups of the rural area] went to the Official Municipality – only they were aware of the kind of treatment that the mayor gave them. ... But with the [San Jorge] land conflict, *all the people* woke up to the fact that the Official Municipality, the governor's office, and other institutions did not support this struggle – they did not advocate for the community to the [national] government. ... We had to drag the mayor to visit us in the community! This also provoked [us] to organize – better.⁴⁹

San Jorge's land struggle made masses of Sololatecos more aware of the levels of racial discrimination in local governance and decision-making. Even though it technically was not their land struggle, Kaqchikel Sololatecos from all caseríos found common cause with the villagers of San Jorge in confronting the Guatemalan military and state in order to defend their traditional agricultural lands. As a result, traditional village networks throughout the municipality of Sololá mobilized to support Jorgeños' land occupations. As the movement progressed, participants began to devise new ways that they could take action. This led to "a new process of political participation when we began to strengthen the Indigenous Municipality."⁵⁰

The Re-structuring of the Indigenous Municipality (1994)

In the course of organizing around San Jorge La Laguna's land struggle, the Tejido

⁴⁸ Antonia Buch, interview by author, April 29, 2006.

⁴⁹ Acetún, interview.

⁵⁰ Rodolfo Pocop quoted in Czarina Thelen, "Our Grandparents Have Told Us that These Lands are Ours": Rodolfo Pocop on Land Struggles and Indigenous Organizing," *Report on Guatemala* (NISGUA), Summer 2006, 27(2): 6.

Social movement began to recognize that the Indigenous Municipality⁵¹ was an important terrain of struggle. Despite their united massive mobilization, the “official” mayor denied Kaqchikel Sololatecos’ demand for official municipal endorsement of the 1992 land occupation. The Tejido Social movement then realized they needed to re-claim the municipal authority that had been wrested away from the Indigenous Municipality. Historically, the Indigenous Municipality had held a significant “*poder de convocatoria*” (mobilizing power) (Guarcax González 2012, 3).

In 1901, the Official Municipality was created in Sololá as part of the national ladino-dominated government system. The traditional Maya leaders of the Sololá municipality – the Auxiliary Mayors – were displaced and moved across the street to form what has since been called the Indigenous Municipality. But the ladino system intended to strip them of all governance powers and relegate them to symbolic religious functions.⁵² That is, the auxiliary mayors (*alcaldes auxiliares*) no longer were heads of both religious (cofradía) and government functions. Rodolfo Pocop notes that the officials of the Indigenous Municipality essentially became figureheads expected to rubber-stamp and serve the Official Municipal Council:

We said that this is not the role of the Indigenous Municipality. Rather, its goal is to live and revive the values held by the Maya culture: above all, the values and rights that we have as Maya people. That we be respected because we have the ability to analyze, to decide, and to propose. At that time, we struggled for the Official Municipality to respect our process, and the fact that the real power [should be] in the Indigenous Municipality and not in the other municipality. This was the impetus that we gave from the Indigenous Municipality, and this gave rise to discussions galore until finally a change was made.

Now the Indigenous Municipality is seen as a parallel power, and a positive one. If the Official Municipal Council makes a decision or plans a project for the communities and it is not approved by the Indigenous Municipality, then it is not viable.⁵³

⁵¹ Sololá is one of few municipal centers that has maintained its “Alcadía Indígena” as a modified continuation of pre-colonial traditional authority. Other active Indigenous Municipalities are in Chichicastenango (in Quiché department), and Totonicapán (capital of Totonicapán department).

⁵² In fact, when the Municipalidad Oficial was created in 1901, Kaqchikel leaders in the Municipalidad Indígena were even reduced to doing “subservient” menial tasks for the Municipalidad Oficial, according to young Tejido Social leaders (pers. comm., 2006).

⁵³ Rodolfo Pocop, interview by author, 2006.

This pivotal re-structuring of the Maya Municipality was led by Tat Bartolo Panjoj, who was elected to lead the Indigenous Municipality in 1993 and who served from 1994-1995. Under Panjoj's leadership, the Indigenous Municipality created a forum for the Maya organizations in Sololá to coordinate, build common ground and struggle, and collectively analyze. In other words, the idea was to create a similar body to San Jorge's *Coordinadora Comunal* which served as the central organizing body for the land struggle and a multi-sectoral node for all groups in San Jorge. As a result, the Coordinating Body of Maya Organizations of Sololá (COMS) was created.

Ancestral Forms of Maya Social Organization: Chinamitales

Panjoj played a crucial visionary role in encouraging and opening spaces for formally educated adults in their 20s and 30s to research past Maya models of governance. Antonia Buch notes that COMS' "principal work was the documentation of the traditional governance system of the Kaqchikeles of Sololá."⁵⁴ Through this research, they learned about the *chinamital* model: nested coordinating councils that seek to maintain dialogic relationships with all sectors of a community. Chinamitales may not have been perfect models since the most documented examples come from the colonial period (a common postcolonial predicament). Still, COMS' initiative to research and revitalize traditional governance systems demonstrates their desire for Maya self-determination – that is, the cultivation of autonomous self-governance spaces with a degree of protection from the ladino-dominated system. Recognizing their historicity⁵⁵ as Maya peoples, participants modified colonial-era Maya models to meet their new historical conditions – their contemporary needs – through a very deliberate, sometimes long-term process of collective analysis of what they called their "reality."

Eventually, the chinamital model influenced the organization of COMS itself, as well as organization on the level of *cantones* and *caseríos*. COMS has visually represented the

⁵⁴ Buch, interview.

⁵⁵ Ananya Chatterjea (2004) has influenced my thinking on postcolonial historicity.

organizational structure of the *chinamital* as spokes on a wheel that meet and spin off from a central hub (COMS 1998, 36). These spokes represent the organizational relationships and coordination among diverse political and social entities in the Tejido Social movement. According to COMS (1998), these range from:

- the *ajb'ojo'y* (the authority and representative of the *chinamital* in the Assembly);
- the successive positions of authority and responsibility in the *alcaldía indígena*;
- the 13 *cofradías*;
- the “de-centralized” auxiliary mayoral structures in the *aldeas*;
- the committees, Maya organizations, and sectors coordinated through the *Municipalidad Indígena*; (*These included youth groups; national organizations like Majawil Q'ij, CUC, CONIC, and CONAVIGUA; and local groups like the Defensoría Maya and the Coordinadora Comunal de San Jorge La Laguna.*)
- and the three stages of community and municipal assembly (COMS 1998, 37-55).

The *chinamital*-influenced coordinating councils reflect a holistic Maya organizing style to connect apparently unrelated groups.⁵⁶ Antonia Buch and others stated that the *Coordinadora Comunal* of San Jorge La Laguna village encouraged the independent development and trajectory of many different organizations in the village. Furthermore, Tejido Social politics allows for community-level fluidity between groups, in contrast to stark divisions and competition at the national level. Villagers participated not only with the coordinating council, but also with a range of cultural revitalization projects and organizations.

This nested structure was foundational to Tejido Social's enormous capacity for local mobilization. From the central hub of Maya organizing in the *Municipalidad Maya* in the 1990s, Maya groups embarked on diverse organizing campaigns (to be able to wear

⁵⁶ It also shares the three characteristics of “non-state and non-capitalist” grassroots practice of social emancipation that Raquel Gutiérrez highlights, based on the *ayllus*: assemblies, horizontal organization, and rotation of responsibilities (2008, 58).

traje in school, for example) and constructive institution-building projects. In the early 1990s, Kaqchikel Sololateco organizing congealed around two projects: San Jorge La Laguna's land struggle and the "*fortalecimiento de la Muni Indígena*" (strengthening of the Indigenous municipality⁵⁷) so that it would once again represent the true "authority" of the Kaqchikel Sololateco people. These two projects gave larger purpose and vision to the diverse expressions of Maya organized participation. The smaller, more focused projects (such as women's weaving cooperatives or youth groups) were fortified by being plugged into an overarching goal that represented their common interest.

The genius that I see in the chinamital organizational format is its function as a space of convergence which isn't so much *united* around a flattened ideology as it is a place where robust differences in ideology are respected and can be held by the community within an organizational "container," that is, an ongoing space of relational dialogue. I witnessed this during seven months of ethnographic research living in San Jorge La Laguna in 2006. That is, the genius of the chinamital is that ideological differences become less strained because all representatives of various ideological positions come together in relationship and dialogue with each other. This allows for mutual respect and differences that are not of enmity but of position and opinion. They are still engaged with one another as a community and as *qawinaq* (our people) – perhaps not so much "united" as "converged." In engineering terms, this is why the hub of a wheel (that can metaphorically represent the chinamital) is so strong: With the various spokes converging on the central hub, the centripetal force inward sustains the centrifugal force outwards, and vice versa. The center hub provides the grounding center so that the spokes can move outwards in many directions while not dispersing their power or becoming disaggregated and weak. Rather, they have a strong center.

In 1990s Sololá, chinamitales became spaces of dialogue for working through political visions with diverse sectors. Foreshadowing Sotz'il's creative process, collective analysis was used for major decisions about political directions. Participants viewed this

⁵⁷ COMS 1998, 99-110.

process of consultation as existing in stark contrast with the ladino tradition of political parties “which are vertically-oriented: they’re dependent on only one person.”⁵⁸ This communal analysis is an integral part of a processual approach “to improve our work on a daily basis” based on years of experience.⁵⁹

I have found that *chinamital*-like processes are significant because they convoke gatherings of diverse sectors, like spokes branching outwards from a common hub, for cross-sector dialogue and debate that can potentially become electric. These fora nurture a radical heterogeneity within the movement while also recognizing a common commitment to Maya *reivindicación*. Second, this activity of mutual fertilization and collective deliberation historically has produced a “massive generation of the imagination,” to use Mendez’s phrase, that recall 1970s antecedents like the Seminarios Indígenas, Revista Ixim, and Tojil. In Sololá, the *chinamital* structure invigorated organizing through the Indigenous Municipality that became the basis for sedimenting Kaqchikel leadership in the Official Municipality. Third, *chinamitales* established space of convergence from which to work through issues as they come up, since the ground of Maya politics is always shifting depending on the historical moment and the particular form of repression that is being unleashed upon the Maya Movement at the time. By enabling contextualized responses to the shifting ground of Maya politics, *chinamitales* help communities avoid establishing fixed ideological boundaries.

Despite the diversity represented, *chinamital* dialogues shared one priority: coming together as Maya peoples to *think through* Maya cultural practice and cosmovisión to collectively decide about their interventions in a *kaxlan* (non-Maya) world.

Through the *chinamitales*, the Tejido Social movement also pursued its aspiration to re-found Kaqchikel society. This aspiration coincided with Maya projects at the national level. Because this was the era of the negotiation of the Peace Accords, Maya organizations nationally were organizing around the contents and implementation of the Accords. Maya

⁵⁸ Pedro Iboy, interview by author, May 12, 2006.

⁵⁹ Buch, interview.

organizations had the greatest stake in two aspects of the Peace process: (a) the *de-militarization* of the State, to dismantle the power structures that had led to 1980s genocide; and (b) *constructive complements* that focused on re-building society, making Maya demands visible, and empowering Maya political participation.

Tejido Social successfully organized around these two pillars of the Peace process: re-building society and state de-militarization. In 1997, the Kaqchikel movement expelled the local military training base and negotiated to replace it with a university (Guarcax González 2012). Tejido Social's second focus was the creation of Maya institutions that reflect Maya traditional authority and governing principles, not only as disempowered "piecemeal" (Fanon 1988, 41) elements, but at the center of the seat of power in the town of Sololá that had been occupied symbolically and physically since *la colonia*. Through the base-building capacity of *chinamitales*, these initiatives were pursued without seeking approval from the state. That is, *chinamitales* unified Kaqchikel Sololatecos to realize these autonomous cultural-political projects as a form of "everyday"⁶⁰ politics.

When the struggle for San Jorge's land became drawn-out because of the stalling tactics of regional politicians, the Tejido Social movement collaborated with new Maya campesino organization CONIC to apply social movement tactics (such as marches locally and in the capital) to pressure the state to fulfill their demands – a form of "eventful" politics.

Eventually, though, pressuring congress people proved fruitless. Meanwhile, Sololatecos had been discovering that concrete changes could be made at the community level which granted them some degree of grassroots autonomy. They strengthened the Indigenous Municipality and founded new institutions: the Defensoría Maya to promote Maya systems of justice through consuetudinary law; and T'ijob'al Tz'ol'oj Ya', a Kaqchikel-grounded, community-based middle and secondary school that trained bilingual teachers to teach in Kaqchikel and Spanish.

⁶⁰ Here I adapt to a political organizing framework Veena Das' terminology distinguishing "eventful" and "everyday" violence.

As nested coordinating bodies, chinamitales provided an organizational umbrella for broad alliances across the Kaqchikel population. Chinamitales channeled the historic connective power of Maya village networks to make possible two powerful forms of organizing. First, the chinamital model facilitated mass mobilization. This was particularly well-suited to “eventful” politics such as specific marches to protest specific policies – and there were many such marches at the height of Tejido Social politics. Second, they cultivated rhizomatic roots for Kaqchikel base-building politics. This was particularly helpful for the “everyday” politics of building Kaqchikel institutions like schools and Maya justice organizations. These institutions have survived to this day, thriving but not as radical as they might have been had Tejido Social had the space to continue to develop organically.

Forming a Civic Committee

In 1995, in order to run the first Maya candidate for “Official” Mayor, the Tejido Social movement established a Civic Committee (a legal local alternative to political parties) called “Sololatecos United for Development” (SUD) in order to run the first Maya candidates for “Official” Mayor. The SUD Civic Committee was formed explicitly as a rejection of political party formations, as it is a common experience in Maya communities that political parties divide Indigenous communities. Even from within the “official” municipality, participants sought to valorize Kaqchikel forms of leadership, organizing, and alternative political structures such as: chinamitales; three stages of assemblies; and using a candidate profile for the community to nominate candidates based on leadership qualifications rather than clientelism or name recognition. As such, SUD is colloquially known as “Ri Chaqueta” for their logo, the men’s traditional wool jacket with the *sotz’ (bat) nawal*.

The irony is that, as the Municipalidad Maya strengthened its capacity to convoke and mobilize the Kaqchikel Sololateco communities, it attracted the attention of the URNG, the united front of Guatemala’s four guerrilla forces that had recently been demilitarized and converted into its own political party on December 19, 1998. Founded

in Sololá in 1998-9 as the Sololá arm of the URNG political party, the local URNG professes to align with the radical Leftist positions of the national URNG movement but, in so doing, appears to profess more allegiance to a national ladino-led political structure than to the local, autonomous, Maya-led political project that the Comité Cívico represented.

It is possible that, when the SUD Civic Committee was founded in 1995, certain URNG members supported it assuming that the Civic Committee would automatically convert into the URNG political party when the latter was legalized in December 1998. In that historical moment, social movements and Leftists held out hope that the revolutionary project could transfer to the electoral realm. Still, in Sololá, any plan to subsume the successfully organized Maya movement under the URNG banner would have involved an egregious misunderstanding of the Tejido Social project. The Tejido Social trajectory had demonstrated a long-standing distrust in political parties as Mayas and an investment instead in developing alternative means of local political participation that distributed power horizontally and empowered Maya communities. In the Peace Accords era in which there was increasing investment in “poder local” and “decentralization”, Tejido Social actors did not want to subsume their processes and structures to the URNG’s top-down political party model. Furthermore, various Tejido Social leaders expressed a mistrust that was sewn during wartime experiences with ladino-directed guerrilla leadership structures that did not respect local Maya ways of organizing.

To be clear, the division between URNG and the Tejido Social movement is not between ex-guerrillas and non-guerrillas, nor is it between *populares* and *culturalistas*. Tejido Social and community members have expressed that the local URNG leadership exploits local and national silences around Maya participation in the guerrillas to insinuate that the SUD Civic Committee is the antithesis of a Leftist political position. In fact, the Tejido Social movement arose from a 1980s – 1990s alliance of Maya civic organizations, some of which were above-ground political expressions sympathetic to clandestine revolutionary projects.

For example, one Tejido Social leader who was at the forefront of the

empowerment of the *Municipalidad Maya* said that although “we had the good luck of being provided with the guerrillas’ politics and ideology,” he emphasized that in Sololá municipality:

It was less [armed] confrontation and more the organized struggle – what we applied was the political struggle. Because we oriented our population from community to community. From that, we had a powerful force in the face of military might. But we weren’t afraid and didn’t back down although some brothers and sisters fell. We continued.

The “organization” that was at our side helped us a lot because we strategized, ‘If we can’t do it through armed avenues, we’ll do it through political avenues.’ I dedicated myself almost daily to meeting with people, to “capacitate” / train and discover all the social problems they were dealing with. It was to win over people, not for personal power, but rather for a *local* power to liberate ourselves of everything. Because we were numerous! [...]

The ladino people [...] imposed things on our people, [...] saying that Indigenous people were incapable, that we couldn’t govern because we were illiterate.

But what I believe until now is that it isn’t so much one’s academic level but rather *la voluntad*, the act of discovering of the social problem and *doing* something to change a pueblo. Because I only completed second grade of elementary school, not even sixth grade! What helped me was training myself [*capacitarme*], discovering the social problem and with this we could organize.⁶¹

In sum, the Tejido Social current reached its maximum expression in the 1990s, buoyed by the *chinamitales* as a Kaqchikel organizational form. This Kaqchikel movement of schoolteachers and farmers mobilized to revitalize and empower Kaqchikel sociopolitical institutions in the *cabecera* (municipal center) and surrounding rural communities. By the decade’s end, however, the vibrancy of Tejido Social was obscured by violence. In order to explain this shift, I will first describe the national context of the Guatemalan internal armed conflict and postwar period.

⁶¹ Tat Bernardo, interview by author, 2006.

NATIONAL SCHISMS

After a couple years of negotiation, Peace Accords between the URNG and the Guatemalan state were signed in 1996. At first, civil society organizations had high hopes for the negotiation process. Signed accords such as the Agreement on Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples set important precedents that became useful organizing tools for Maya communities in pressing for their rights. However, with no Mayas at the negotiating table, Maya organizations denounced their exclusion. As the national sector that had paid most dearly for the revolution, they critiqued the URNG for exploiting their participation in the war. They argued that the Peace Accords could have made more significant steps for Maya rights had Mayas not been marginalized during the negotiation process.

Despite the high command excluding Mayas from the negotiating table, the URNG made a “Maya turn” once it entered the field of electoral politics. When it converted into a political party, the URNG realized the electoral power of having Maya support. Consequently, the URNG developed a strong Maya arm to develop Maya bases that could rally village networks. Some Maya campesino organizations do not join the URNG because they had broken with the URNG long ago. Other Maya campesino organizations form alliances with the URNG in national and local electoral politics. In embracing Mayas only after the Peace Accords negotiation for their electoral benefit, the URNG leadership exhibited tendencies to be “highly opportunistic, instrumental, and clearly focused on seizing power,” according to observers (pers. comm., 2017). This created a nationwide schism.

A second schism divided the previously unified Maya Movement. The crisis of genocide was followed by the systemic exclusion of Mayas during the Peace Accords negotiations. One effect of crisis is that it forces a comprehensive re-evaluation of the stakes of social struggle: What political imperatives are key? This diagnosis informs the primary strategies to be employed. In my analysis, many nationally-oriented Maya groups split according to what they felt to be their most urgent political imperatives at that juncture. That is, before the crisis there was relative fluidity among political projects that were seen

as mutually reinforcing.⁶² However, the crisis – a period of intense and high-stakes international scrutiny because of efforts to attract enough international attention to stop the genocide -- provoked many nationally-visible groups to “close ranks”⁶³ around more unified and coherent agendas. Ironically and tragically, this closing of ranks caused a major split in the national Maya movement along doctrinal lines. The *culturalistas* solidified around the axis of “culture,” framed as a professional and academic project (with a focus on language, traditional dress, and bilingual education as primary sites of Maya culture to salvage). On the other hand, the *populares* were committed to mass-based organizing and to transforming Mayas’ social conditions, since La Violencia left the majority of Mayas with severe land shortages and in extreme poverty. To accomplish this agenda, the *populares* retained alliances with the Guatemalan Left, although newer organizations had all-Maya leadership and were increasingly drawing upon Maya worldview and symbolism in creating their platforms.

Charles Hale has argued that a bifurcation in the Maya movement is a product of the aftermath of genocide (2006). Hale describes how this dynamic occurred in Chimaltenango in 1981-1984 after FIN’S demise in 1978 and the onset of La Violencia. He demonstrates that this polarization only occurred after La Violencia and argues that it should not be forgotten that there had been an earlier confluence of Indigenous political projects in the years before the height of *La Violencia* in 1978-1983.

I agree with Hale’s argument. Although much canonical literature on the Maya Movement has historically focused on this dichotomy, I have argued in my Master’s Report (2010) that it is an overgeneralization, and increasingly I believe it to misrepresent the political aspirations of most Maya interventions. In fact, there is a field of different formations of Maya politics that were suppressed and silenced as a result of *La Violencia*.

⁶² See Hale 2006, Chapter 3 for a discussion of how *La Violencia* functioned as a kind of “closing of the archives” (Richardson 2003, 63) in the Maya Movement, sealing off some ways of doing Maya politics (publicly) and therefore contributing to the split I describe above.

⁶³ A military image, used by Iton (2008) in discussing the transition in U.S.-based Black movements from internationalism / the Robinsonian era to the McCarthy era. I am indebted to his line of analysis about such transitional political periods (from openness to repression) for racialized groups in national politics and U.S. efforts to “domesticate blackness” and prohibit boundary transgression. A similar dynamic seems to have occurred for Maya politics as well in the post-Violencia period.

Furthermore, a schism between *culturalistas* and *populares* does not apply to Sololá, mostly because historically there has not been (until perhaps the last couple years) a sector of academics in Sololá. The term *culturalista* was created to refer to a sector of Mayas who reject the Leftist class struggle by claiming that the concept of “class” does not exist in Maya cosmovisión. However, in an interview I found that one prominent leader who claims this also advocates for Mayas to hold stocks in a bank; others are in favor of free trade agreements and against Maya *campesino* roadblocks to protest them. In other words, the claim negating the applicability of the Marxist concept of “class” to Maya struggle has sometimes been levied by *culturalistas* who are promoting neoliberal capitalist policies.

In regions besides Sololá, groups that could be called *culturalistas* have been cliquish and enforced elitist practices by excluding from their linguistic and educational projects anyone without academic degrees. Ironically, many of these linguists do not teach their children the Maya languages that is the focus of their language revitalization work.⁶⁴ Some community members critique *culturalista* linguistic work for reflecting a limited sense of Maya culture since, according to their reports, many of these *culturalistas* are Evangelical or Catholic and have taken steps to actively repress the practice of Maya ontology in their communities. In this sense their language project is akin to what William Hanks calls “Maya *reducido*” – a colonial-era, “reduced” form of the Yucatec Maya language that was purged of Maya ontological concepts and altered to reflect Christian concepts and dogma. In sum, the *culturalista* current does not advocate a radical project of Maya decolonization nor of strengthening Maya traditional institutions, and in fact may distance themselves from working-class and agriculturalist Mayas. The term *culturalista* is very limited and specific and does not cover the many groups of people who work for the revitalization of Maya languages and culture. I have not found a group that can be called specifically *culturalista* in Sololá, nor have I found a group that could strictly be called *populares*, even among those who support the local branch of the URNG party.

In fact, there are many expressions of the Maya Movement that reflect projects that

⁶⁴ I base this analysis on reports from people who have worked in professional office settings with these groups and people who have lived in communities where these groups have influenced language and educational projects (from 2006 through 2014).

are more radical than those represented by the terms *culturalistas* and *populares*. As the 1970s antecedents show, influential expressions of the Maya movement understood their struggle to be one of decolonization, including a struggle for *reivindicación* of Maya culture, language, and spirituality as well as social movement organizing to support the revolutionary class struggle.

However, the genocide took its toll on Maya families, community life, and organizing. Prominent institutional responses to the 1980s genocide, including two truth and reconciliation commissions organized by the United Nations and Guatemala's Catholic Church, were not empowered to implement policies to address root causes identified in their reports, nor to address foundational racism and violence that structures Guatemalan society. The Peace Accords were not as strong as civil society organizations had hoped, partly due to the exclusion of Mayas. A referendum ("la consulta popular") for the ratification of Constitutional amendments that would have incorporated key elements of the Peace Accords was rejected on May 16, 1999. As a result of these blows to civil society and Maya organizing, foundational structures of racism and violence have gone unreformed in Guatemala, producing devastating results. In the two decades since the Peace Accords, the social fabric continues to decay, opening spaces for clandestine armed groups and creating increased vulnerability to state militarization and the criminalization of dissidents.

Sololá department had the highest percentage voting in favor of the Constitutional reforms. This statistic is another indication of the strength of the Tejido Social organizing and Left-aligned politicization in Sololá's municipal and departmental seat in comparison with the rest of the country. It suggests that massive potential for radical change existed in Sololá municipality and department, along original and partly autonomous / autochthonous lines, had it not been demobilized by the schism when the URNG became a political party. We now turn again to the local scene in Sololá municipality to see the consequences of this division and to ascertain to what extent the division reflected national dynamics versus unique local factors.

SOLOLÁ: THE CLOSING OF *TEJIDO SOCIAL* (1998 - PRESENT)

Members of Tejido Social were buoyed by Peace Accords, particularly the Agreement on Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples which was signed in 1995. They viewed this agreement as validating their independent development of Kaqchikel “political and ideological guidelines,” and they cited it to justify their rationale for their local Tejido Social project:

Now that this research on the Indigenous Municipality has concluded, the political and ideological guidelines of the community’s own Organization [sic] (*Organización propia de las comunidades*) have been found. These are applicable in the framework of the Accords Signed between the Government [sic] and the URNG, principally in those referring to Indigenous Rights established in the Agreement on Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

On the other hand, we consider that this project of compiling and systematizing data through participatory research will contribute to uniting the historic thread of the process of evolution of the Kaqchikeles of Sololá, after having been broken during the invasion and colonial period. (COMS 1998, 10)

With this statement, COMS articulated the goals of the Tejido Social movement: “uniting the historic thread of the process of evolution of the Kaqchikeles of Sololá” and strengthening “the political and ideological guidelines of the community’s own Organization” through the Indigenous Municipality. Furthermore, it justified the appropriateness of their move to ground their organization in Kaqchikel history and principles by citing the Agreement on Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which had been signed in 1995.

Because they viewed the Peace Accords as backing their rights as Indigenous peoples to independent local organization (also through the *poder local* movement that strengthened the role of civic committees in local elections), many in Tejido Social were surprised that the URNG decided to compete with Tejido Social in local elections and to attempt to steer Tejido Social supporters towards its own new party branch. In 1999, SUD Civic Committee members asked the URNG political party to not run local candidates, while leaving open the possibility for the Civic Committee to form an “alliance” to support

the URNG's Congressional and Presidential candidates. The URNG local party refused. A contentious election for "official" mayor was held in December 1999 in which the URNG unexpectedly won by a slim margin (21 or 22 votes⁶⁵), with hundreds of ballots discounted from double votes for both URNG and SUD. The SUD charged that the URNG had played foul by not making clear to voters that SUD and URNG had separated and one could not vote for both.

From 1999 through the present, a lethal and incendiary division has wracked Sololá, resulting in charges of stolen elections (1999), the setting on fire of the community-owned bus of San Jorge La Laguna (1999), the burning of effigies of several Tejido Social leaders in front of the Indigenous Municipality (1999), and death threats, kidnappings, and assassinations that appear to be at least partly motivated by this conflict (2006 – present). In December 2000, Tejido Social leaders abdicated the Indigenous Municipality after URNG supporters threatened to burn the building. From that moment through 2012, the Indigenous Municipality remained in the hands of the URNG faction (partly because the SUD Civic Committee decided to no longer fight over it). Since 2000, the Official Municipality has alternated between URNG and SUD administrations and municipal councils. The space for the kind of organizing that the Tejido Social movement did in the 1990s -- which reached its apex during the organizing through the Maya Municipality -- had definitively closed by December 2000 given the conditions of duress and violence to which its participants and leaders have been subjected. Tejido Social leaders commented:

In 1999 when the URNG was already on the legal route [to becoming a political party] ... they didn't allow the Civic Committees to continue. Instead, they wanted all those who had been in the Civic Committees to become the URNG. That is, it is an orientation that was brought from the capital [...] It must have been a general strategy of the URNG, because there were a lot of divisions all over Guatemala.

[...] But as we later realized, it affected us. If we go with the URNG directly, our organization disappears. So the people and population of Sololá didn't accept that. [...] We had already been practicing that idea [of organization]. So there wasn't any need to accept a name or political flag that is the repudiation of the population.

⁶⁵ P. Iboy, interview.

[...] Our idea was born there [with the guerrillas], but the struggle was the community's own, from our experience.⁶⁶

They're strategies to divide the people, definitely.⁶⁷

Like these leaders, Kaqchikel Sololatecos explain the destructive violence at the local level in terms of both national URNG politics and local factors particular to the URNG's Sololá branch. To explain the start of the schism and violence in 1999 to 2000, they point to the URNG political party's refusal to respect the autochthonous Kaqchikel movement that had emerged organically from their particular context, which they felt was an expression of the rights as Maya peoples under the Agreement on Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples. They describe the "*ambición*" of local URNG leaders -- that is, having "ambition," but with a negative connotation as with opportunism. This description mirrors the national characterization of the URNG as opportunistic and more interested in taking power than in social justice movement-building, much less Maya "social emancipation" (using Raquel Gutierrez's expansive sense of this). Tejido Social participants have stressed that the division with the URNG party is not between Left and Right. They in fact suggest that the leaders of the URNG political party have been opportunistic in claiming the URNG mantle since they did not participate in the guerrillas and in conscientizing the Kaqchikel community bases as Tejido Social leaders had.

Despite the URNG having dominated the Indigenous Municipality for over a decade and having led two mayoral administrations in the Official Municipality, the division has persisted and devolved into kidnappings and targeted assassinations. That is to say, the URNG's opportunism and focus on seizing power as a nation-wide characteristic is not a sufficient explanation for local violence. The violence has escalated despite the URNG holding local power. To explain the current violence, local people use terms like "envidia" to point to strongmen's envy of other "organic" Kaqchikel leaders who are held in high esteem by their neighbors.

⁶⁶ Tat Bernardo, interview.

⁶⁷ Tat Adrián, interview.

The Tejido Social movement that arose in Sololá organized around diverse issues which do not fall neatly within either a *culturalista* or *populares* camp, such as Maya rights to ancestral land bases, bilingual schools and Kaqchikel language rights, the right to wear traje in schools, defending Maya law, expelling out a military base, strengthening Kaqchikel institutions and *poder local* (local power), and electing working class Kaqchikel civic committee representatives (mostly farmers and schoolteachers) to the mayorship and town council. Hence the intervention of Tejido Social in the realm of culture was distinct and crucial. It would have been interesting to see where they would have taken the Kaqchikel movement had it not been violently repressed. However, while the civil society organizations that represented the Tejido Social vision, such as the SUD Civic Committee, Defensoría Maya, and Tijob'al Tz'olaj Ya', have survived, the heterogeneous expansive political vision (that aimed to organize diverse Kaqchikel sectors through revived Kaqchikel organizations structures) has not.

The strong wave of Maya organizing in Sololá in the 1970s - 1990s can be read as an indication of what would have been possible throughout Guatemala in the absence of violent repression and division. Over a roughly twenty-year window, Sololatecos carved out a political opening to pursue increasingly homegrown initiatives of organized struggle with a cultural character through incorporating Maya organizing principles and structures into their social demands and strategies for participatory democracy. Yet, that promise was tragically not to be fully realized. The 1999 entry of the URNG into local elections to compete with SUD Civic Committee was destructive to the Tejido Social Maya Movement that had been building organically. The URNG misled voters and usurped the local independent Maya organization, causing a schism that soon turned violent. When Tejido Social leaders abdicated the Municipalidad Indígena in December 2000 after URNG supporters threatened to burn the building, the opening for Tejido Social politics came to a close. The political conditions of violence and polarization with the URNG appear to have created a crossroads: Either make a clean break with institutionalized politics or move into a more protected space of conventional politics. I argue that Sotz'il chose the former strategy and the SUD Civic Committee followed the latter. To this day, the SUD Civic

Committee still exists, but without its complement of COMS (Coordinating Council of Maya Organizations of Sololá). Tejido Social's engagement of radical political heterogeneity could no longer be sustained under duress.

SUD now focuses on more conventional politics: municipal administration through the Official Municipality. Today, SUD appears to continue its mission of serving the most marginalized sectors of Sololá, but through “desarrollo con identidad” – development projects “with identity” that use certain Kaqchikel projects of consultation, led by Mayor Andres Iboy, an agronomist engineer. The Iboy family trajectory reflects the changes of the times. The eldest brother Julio had been a seminarian student who became a guerrilla leader of Sololá and who, along with his wife Juliana Pocop, organized the caseríos of Sololá in resistance and self-defense until they were disappeared with their baby by the military. The second eldest brother, Pedro Iboy, was a schoolteacher who was the first Kaqchikel to be elected mayor of Sololá at the height of the Tejido Social movement. Now Andres Iboy is a two-term mayor (2012-2019) who is applying his engineering training to benefit Kaqchikel residents who had been excluded under ladino administrations, but through the lens of “desarrollo con identidad.”

On the other hand, young people who would soon form Sotz'il make a clean yet friendly break with institutionalized politics. They do not pursue participation in Tejido Social due to their diagnosis of Tejido Social' weakness: that Tejido Social was not sufficiently based on Maya ontology. I will describe the nature of this break through the life histories of Ernesto and Lisandro Guarcax in an ethnographic narrative and then theorize the break as ontological.

Life Histories of the *Cuates* Generation: Ernesto and Lisandro Guarcax

In this section, I present the life histories of Ernesto and Lisandro Guarcax as paradigmatic forerunners of the *cuates generation*⁶⁸ to describe ethnographically the break

⁶⁸ “Cuate” is a Nahuatl-derived term picked up from Mexico that literally means “twin” and colloquially refers to a close friend. Particularly in school environments where Maya students are speaking diverse native languages, “cuate” is part of their lingua franca that they sprinkle into conversations in either their native languages or Spanish.

with Tejido Social and the emergence of Sotz'il. What I call the *cuates generation* is the generation of Mayas born roughly between 1975-1985 who were babies, young children, or in the womb during *La Violencia* and were children or young adults at the time of the Peace Accords. That is, what is key for me in defining this generation is that even as infants and young children – or even in the womb -- they would have at least sensed the environment of the height of violence – if nothing else, through the tensions within their families about the violence; their parents' need to hide or take precautions; and even the children's experiences of warning their parents of potential danger. Even if not fully articulated, many children had a consciousness of the threat of violence against their families and communities (diverse anonymous interviews, 2006 and 2013).

Both Ernesto and Lisandro were old enough to have childhood memories of wartime repression of Maya communities and culture. One father noted that the height of “La Violencia” (about 1978-1983) coincided with their earliest formative years, from newborns to age seven. Even at that young age, they were involved in maintaining their parents' and neighbors' cover in hiding from the army by offering alibi or simply not telling where their parents were.

The *cuates* generation was also aware that Mayas were being persecuted by the army for their practice of Maya cosmovisión. Maya traditional and spiritual authorities were assassinated or threatened. Maya ceremonies were forced underground.⁶⁹ Maya principles of nurturing life were rent asunder when army directives forced Mayas in civil patrols and other death squads to commit atrocities against other Mayas, such as the horrific atrocities against pregnant women and their fetuses.⁷⁰ Furthermore, Christian conservatives interpellated Maya spiritual practices as *brujería* (witchcraft). A member of a music group that Sotz'il has mentored says this:

During the armed conflict, our parents were immersed in the Catholic religion because that's what prevailed at that time – there was only space for the Catholic religion. But they had many problems – economic, familial, vices, poverty – countless problems! So they consulted with some elders who gave them an idea of

⁶⁹ Until at least 1985, Maya spiritual ceremonies were forced to be clandestine. Collective ceremonies were not seen publicly until after the 1996 signing of the Peace Accords (Mendez, interview).

⁷⁰ (CEH 1999, REMHI 1998) and from testimonies from returned refugees (pers. comm., 2000-2001).

how to change and how to take up again Maya spiritual practices.

But the very discrimination of religion forced them to have to do their ceremonies clandestinely. Because they were not only criticized, but persecuted – they were accused of being guerrillas. So they did their ceremonies at night, or far away. Little by little they left behind Catholicism and began adopting our culture.⁷¹

The cuates generation witnessed not only the underground practice of Maya spirituality but also the significance of Maya spiritual practice coming out into the public sphere. After the height of the violence and with the surge of continental Indigenous organizing around the Anti-Quincentennial, Maya groups started to pronounce collective positions around Maya spirituality. Yet, “there still was a fear that coming out publicly was risky,” stated Leopoldo Méndez. Hence, when the first Maya calendar was published in 1981, it was published anonymously. However, it was not until “the struggle of ’85 . . . that ceremonies were beginning to be made public. In 1985, imagine, you still didn’t see this!”⁷² Sotz’il original member Jimena reflects,

I think that Sotz’il in that moment challenged many social situations because the Peace Accords had scarcely been signed and within six years, Sotz’il was born. And to see for the first time the sacred fire [in Sotz’il’s plays] is something that . . . [her voice trails off]. Because [Sotz’il] did these consultations in the communities and [community members] made the comment that ‘We saw this [Maya ceremony] or we practiced this in a very discreet form with the family, in our homes.’ But [to see it] already in public was novel and strange for them. Also, it gave a lot of strength to the spiritual guides [ajq’ijab’] to be able say, ‘Ah, this is coming to light.’ So they felt more liberty to be able to speak about the topic [of Maya spirituality].⁷³

Typical of their generation of Maya students, the older generation who founded Sotz’il were students at two kinds of boarding schools that provided scholarships for Maya students: the public Escuelas Normales (Escuela Normal Rural del Occidente in Santa Lucía Utatlán and Escuela Normal Rural Dr. Pedro Molina in Chimaltenango) and the Christian boarding schools for Indigenous students (Instituto Indígena Santiago). In the

⁷¹ Ukotz’ijal Ajpu member, interview by author, June 11, 2013.

⁷² Méndez, interview.

⁷³ Jimena, interview by author, July 22, 2014.

early 1990s, Ernesto Guarcax, an older cousin and brother to Sotz'il members, graduated from the public Escuela Normal Regional del Occidente (ENRO). The Escuelas Normales were politicized at that time because many teachers had graduated from the Leftist public university, the Universidad de San Carlos (USAC), and a significant group were or would later become guerrillas.

Ernesto Guarcax later became an early teacher at Tijob'al Tz'olaj Ya' and there passed on his radical education. At the time of Sotz'il's founding, most younger members were students of Ernesto at Tijob'al. They cite as formative Ernesto's courses on "Maya culture" in which he dedicated entire semesters to studying Mayas' social realities through analyzing neoliberal free trade agreement *Plan Puebla Panamá* and as well as Severo Martínez Peláez's *La Patria del criollo* (1971), a classic text widely assigned in the USAC and Escuelas Normales in that period. However, Ernesto began to have differences with the leadership of Tijob'al Tz'olaj Ya' over the Catholic influence in the school, because he wore his hair long as part of embodying Maya *reivindicación* (setting an example for the Sotz'iles that they call formative), and because he had a more radical vision for Maya education. He left Tijob'al to become director of a local elementary school.

Ernesto continued to play a leadership role in the lives of local youth, setting a path of decolonization for them to follow. He participated in the original group revitalizing the Maya ballgame (Chajchaay) with José Mucía B'atz' (a bilingual education activist who researches Maya mathematics). In 2006, Ernesto founded the Kaqchikel radio program *Siwan Tinamit* and enlisted the support of the Sotz'iles in its production. The radio program was delivered completely in the Maya Kaqchikel language, purposely excising any Spanish loan words as part of Ernesto's politics of *reivindicación* and revitalization. Ernesto's brother Emilio, who worked at the Kaqchikel branch of the Academy of Maya Languages of Guatemala (ALMG), helped with the linguistic direction of the program such as identifying Kaqchikel neologisms to use in place of Spanish for newer words like "computer" and "phone." Young and old Kaqchikeles of the rural caserío enjoyed how Ernesto expressed himself in Kaqchikel to such a degree that they said Ernesto made them proud of their Kaqchikel language. They frequently sought his help to resolve problems.

If we had continued the walking tour of the town center of Sololá that had opened this chapter, we would have found the municipal stadium several blocks downhill from the central park. This is where all the school parades congregate during the town's annual fair celebrating its patron saint. This is also where big moments in the Tejido Social movement happened. First, on July 27, 1992, a *Cabildo Abierto* (constituent assembly) was held to pressure the Official Municipality (at that point in the hands of ladinos) to officially support San Jorge's land struggle.

Nearly sixteen years later, about eight years after the height of the political conflict between URNG and the SUD Civic Committee, the massive gathering of Kaqchikeles in the municipal stadium was of a much less celebratory tenor. On February 20, 2008 – “Tecún Umán Day” -- all the *tiendas* (family-run stores) in the Sololá town had closed for the day. People from the town and surrounding communities marched to the stadium to denounce the armed kidnappings that had been plaguing the community. The community had written a collective statement of denunciation, but the individuals involved were afraid to be singled out to read it. A younger leader, Ernesto Guarcax, volunteered to read this letter since, with his upbeat charismatic demeanor, he was frequently called upon to be the master of ceremonies for community events. On this occasion, reading the letter denouncing the armed kidnappings, Ernesto's words rung out first in Kaqchikel, then in Spanish to the crowd, which broke out in loud applause to hear this statement.⁷⁴

This event marked the height of the community organizing against the kidnappings – a nonviolent movement confronting intra-community violence. Families turned to Ernesto to help them free their relatives from the kidnappers. Hopes ran high, and people thought Ernesto would be elected the next Mayor. If this had come to pass, SUD Civic Committee could have pursued a more visionary direction like its Tejido Social roots, compared to the more protected space of conventional politics into which it continued to retreat.

A year to the day after this speech, on Feb 20, 2009, Ernesto was kidnapped and later assassinated en route to emceeding his *Siwan Tinamit* radio program. Within two

⁷⁴ I heard a recording of this speech on his father's “frijolito” cell phone in 2013.

weeks, his brother Emilio, who had collaborated with Ernesto on Kaqchikel language projects, was found dying from poisoning. The anti-kidnapping movement was silenced, shocked, and grief-stricken.

Lisandro's Life History and the Emergence of Sotz'il

From 1991 through 1993, Lisandro Guarcax attended middle school at the Instituto Indígena Santiago, a boarding school for Maya boys in Guatemala City founded by De La Salle Christian Brothers (a Roman Catholic teaching order). There he had a formative experience of Christian hegemony and Maya push-back. Teachers at the Instituto Indígena Santiago suspended eleven students for questioning Catholic doctrine when they gave their opinion about the masses they were required to attend (L. Guarcax, pers. comm., 2006). Those students included Lisandro Guarcax and another cuate, Eduardo Ramirez Ortíz, who would soon go on to co-found another seminal Maya performing arts group, the Mam rock group Sobrevivencia. Of that episode, Lisandro reflected, “This experience marked me. It proved to me that this system is not made for us [Mayas].”⁷⁵

Even at a young age, Lisandro's experience in the capital woke him up to valorizing his Maya identity and rural way of life:

[The dominant urban culture] was another system, another way of life. Some friends and I began to dance according to the trends that we saw in the media. At that time, it was techno, rap, and hip-hop. So we began to dance in the clubs. More than anything, it was a show. But there came a time when I asked myself, “What am I doing? Nothing! Sure, the youth like this, but – I'm from a rural area.” And to jump into city life – I could do it, but it wasn't my world. Even more, the people there were very discriminatory. They didn't like to see someone “from the mountains” coming here to dance in front of them. So, I went back home.

Young Lisandro's response to discrimination – to valorize his identity and pursue a life in his rural hamlet – is a marked contrast with Mayas who seek to migrate permanently to the capital, even at a young age, in an effort to escape their Maya roots and identity.

⁷⁵ Lisandro Guarcax González, interview, September 18, 2006. Lisandro's life history and quotations in this section are from this interview.

Coming of age when the Peace Accords were signed in 1996, youth of the *cuates* generation were old enough to understand the significance of the Peace Accords: the closing of the internal armed conflict that it marked and the promise that it initially appeared to offer. They were also young enough to have the anti-establishment propensities of youth. Too young to have adult responsibilities of economically supporting their own families, they had more free time and especially more freedom in their thinking and projections of the future. They could envision a future that was not invested in the same paradigms as their parents. The school system and media like television played a greater role in their lives. Through them, they were picking up on a national and global youth culture, so youth vernacular like “*cuates*” and “*muchá*” were sprinkled into their Maya language conversations.

The *cuates* generation realized that they had a political opening that was not available to their parents, and they sought to take advantage of it. Lisandro noted,

The community organizing that the previous generation did was like the “first front,” because they were under severe, constant repression. The only way to confront that was to organize, to join together. That is, if you have five families by your side, it’s immediately noticeable if someone disappears, and why – [also] who did it.

This “front” – these organizations -- opened many spaces, and the new generations are occupying them. Now we *can* project a vision of the future.

At first, our youth group faced a lot of frustration. We would make music – but *for what?* There came a moment when I felt it was necessary to be able to say to the state, and to municipal and national authorities, “This is bad!” But I thought I couldn’t.

Then we realized that one of the functions of art is to declare our vision and protest. “Protesting” through art is different. It’s visual, and aural. It’s much more complete. In art, you can’t walk around with a combat-hardened face, saying, “I am strong! We must do this!” No. One must have even deeper feelings about the injustice to protest through art.

Having grown up in a wartime environment of organized Maya defense with family members having leadership roles in the resistance, the *cuates* generation was concerned about Mayas’ social struggles. Due to the political atmosphere at the time, Maya

organizations largely focused on socioeconomic issues.⁷⁶ Now coming of age during Guatemala's postwar transition, the young adults formed another interest in addition to their politicized social consciousness: a "reivindicación" of Maya culture and ontology.

Around the year 2000, Lisandro Guarcax had the idea to found the youth group that later was to become Sotz'il. He recounted that he had been depressed from his experiences in the capital and became an alcoholic by the age of 18. "The days didn't matter to me, nothing mattered," he recalled. Then, tragedy struck. Lisandro's younger brother died while working at a construction site in the nearby tourist mecca of Panajachel. He was only 17 years old and was already a very gifted artist who loved theater. His brother's death led Lisandro to re-evaluate his own life.

Around this time, Lisandro read *Memorial of Sololá*, a colonial-era text about the last governors of the Kaqchikel people which is not taught in the national school curriculum. This text inspired Lisandro to create a theater group that counters demeaning representations of Mayas by presenting dignified stories of their ancestors and recuperating "the true spirit and musical aesthetic of the Maya Kaqchikel world."

The youth group was initially composed of young men and women attending middle and high school at Tijob'al Tz'olaj Ya'. They were students of Ernesto Guarcax's "Maya culture" courses. For the youth group, they met for workshops to discuss various aspects of Maya culture, social issues, and politics. Similar to 1970s antecedents *Revista Ixim* and the *Seminarios Indígenas*, Sotz'il's workshops initially covered a wide range of topics presented by Maya leaders representing different sectors. As two examples, Tat Apolinario (now deceased) of the Gran Confederación of Ajq'ij'ab' spoke about Maya spirituality and José Mucía B'atz' taught Maya mathematics and about revitalizing the ancient Maya ballgame (Tejaxún 2005).

Over a couple years of meeting, debating, and creating dance and music pieces, the youth group decided to focus on Kaqchikel music-dance and theater. Alejandro noted that the group could have focused on other topics like on agricultural production or micro-

⁷⁶ Rafael, interview.

credit, but they found they were most inspired by Maya dance and music.⁷⁷ Lisandro states that at first they were discouraged from not having any money or formal training in the arts, but that this led them to an insight:

Later, we realized that to want to do something doesn't mean that we have to follow what's on the television or radio. Rather, we can begin from our *own* context! So we thought, "OK, what do we have here? What about marimba, and the old melodies?"

From the beginning, Sotz'il placed Maya ontology and consultation with elders at the center of their practice as a youth group. As a result of this process, they decided to shift away from recreating *cofradía* dances and instead towards creating theater to honor the request of a respected elder who advised them, "Do not portray the degrading stereotypes of our culture. Portray its dignity. Portray the ancestral line." From that point, the group began to shape what I call the art of Maya *reivindicación*, based on Sotz'il's frequent use of the term "reivindicación" to describe their work.

As they began to research the stories of their ancestors, they took an interest in the histories of "our last grandparents who governed us."⁷⁸ They decided to focus on reclaiming histories about Kaqchikel *ajpopi'* (traditional authorities or governors) who do not appear in Guatemalan schoolbooks and official nation-state histories. As Lisandro commented,

We sought to counter the way in which we as Indigenous people are represented in Guatemalan society. It's ridiculous... That's why people think that we're backward! It makes me think that the character of Tecún Umán was created simply to call us stupid, ridiculous, idiots, clowns, like we do not know anything.

Yet it's totally the opposite. We have our own stories. We have a history that we've been prohibited from seeing and hearing.⁷⁹

After seeing Sotz'il's dance performances of the Jaguar and Deer and of Pop Wuj twins Jun Ajpu and Yaxb'alamkej, Mauricio Cabrera, an experimental theater director who

⁷⁷ Alejandro, interview by author, December 19, 2013.

⁷⁸ Rafael, interview by author, February 5, 2013.

⁷⁹ Lisandro Guarcax, interview.

grew up in marginal zones of the capital, proposed to collaborate with them to create theater works. Sotz'il decided that they would present their theater plays in Kaqchikel. "Using Spanish might have facilitated the experience of many audience members. But if we did that, our play would not be Maya," remarked Lisandro.

A mere five years later, in July 2010, as representative of Sotz'il, Lisandro Guarcax attended Riddu Riddu, an international Indigenous arts festival in Saami territory in Norway. According to reports, upon returning to Guatemala, he learned of a misuse of funds by the Indigenous Municipality and denounced this corruption to the Norwegian Ambassador to Guatemala. Weeks later, on August 25, 2010, Lisandro Guarcax was captured by hooded armed men en route to the rural school where he was director. After his family received a ransom call from his assailants, Lisandro's body was found on the side of the highway with signs that he had been tortured and assassinated.

Lisandro's remarks about Sotz'il's play *Xajoj Q'ojom Kaji' Imox* seem prescient. The conclusion depicts the execution of Kaqchikel governor Kaji' Imox at the hands of the Spaniards for his refusal to abandon his Maya spiritual practices. The execution was conducted in secret, said Lisandro, because his captors realize that to do so in public would simply fan the flames of rebellion. In the final scene, two Spaniards lead Kaji' Imox onto an empty stage to be hung. Minutes after the deed is done, though, the play alludes to Kaji' Imox's unique form of resistance as his character reaches up, breaks the noose from his neck, and tosses it away. With serene integrity, Kaji' Imox walks off-stage, where once again he dons the headdress of the Jaguar *nawal* and, with a melodic whistle, calls to all the other *nawales* who do a joyous dance as the play concludes.

In a 2006 interview, I asked Lisandro, "How did Kaji' Imox's surrender help his people? Did the Spanish persecute the Mayas less after Kaji' Imox turned himself in?" Lisandro responded:

The Mayas continued to suffer. What was possibly alleviated was the degree of persecution. But the tribute continued, as well as the slavery. If we look at it this way, Kaji' Imox's surrender could appear to have been in vain. But also, we have to keep in mind that at that time, the Mayas were in the process of being exterminated. ... The epidemics weakened all the Maya nations. So did the wars, and the slavery. On top of that, the frustration, desperation, and repression

diminished the population. And if Kaji' Imox hadn't turned himself in? Perhaps we wouldn't be here today talking about it! [*Laughs ironically.*]

In our culture, to die is to be born again. It's to pass into another dimension. By turning himself in, Kaji' Imox showed that he had completed another cycle. His death meant that he entered into yet another cycle of life. That's what the cutting of the noose symbolizes. *The resistance of the Maya people emerges again.*

In response to the assassination of Lisandro Guarcax, ladino and Maya artists from the capital and the Maya highlands created the alliance Ri Ak'u'x. With the support of the Norwegian Ambassador, they launched two international arts festivals to commemorate Lisandro. These projects provided crucial accompaniment and solidarity to the families of Sotz'il who had suffered three assassinations in 18 months. The projects also ushered in a new phase for Sotz'il with more institutional funding through the Ri Ak'u'x (later, Ruk'u'x) alliance for Maya arts. The alliance also pressured the CICIG (the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala) to take on the case of Lisandro's assassination. In 2011-12, the Attorney General's office (*el Ministerio Público*) brought to trial the case of the kidnappings and assassinations of 46 Kaqchikel Sololatecos, including Lisandro Guarcax. Members of a local gang were prosecuted and found guilty of the kidnappings and assassinations, but it appears that the intellectual authors have yet to be brought to justice.

The assassinations against those affiliated with the SUD Civic Committee did not stop for good. Campesinos who are outside the public eye have been killed. On January 16, 2014, Juan de León Tuyuc Velásquez, brother of Rosalina Tuyuc and known as Comandante Leo of the EGP, was assassinated in Sololá. He had helped guide the Tejido Social movement and the SUD Civic Committee. Mayor Andrés Iboy honored Tuyuc Velásquez as "a humble and authentic revolutionary who did not abuse his position as [guerrilla] commander but rather continued working for the development of the communities, especially those of the department of Sololá. Sololá is in mourning."⁸⁰

⁸⁰ "JUAN TUYUC ¡PRESENTE! ¡COMANDANTE LEO PRESENTE EN LA LUCHA!" Noticias Comunicarte, January 16, 2014. <http://noticiascomunicarte.blogspot.com/2014/01/juan-tuyuc-presente-comandante-leo.html> Accessed: January 24, 2015.

SOTZ'IL'S BREAK WITH TEJIDO SOCIAL

As the life histories of Ernesto and Lisandro show, several characteristics define the cuates generation and probably led to their particular positionality and politicization. First, this generation had very early infancy or childhood memories of wartime repression of Maya communities and culture. Even if they were too young to be explicitly conscious, they were old enough to have a sense of the “before” and “after” of wartime versus peace. Additionally, members of this generation witnessed or heard of the repression of Maya spirituality, particularly by the army.

Second, both Ernesto and Lisandro received a politicized education during the war. Third, they were young adults during the negotiations and implementation of the Peace Accords, around which there was massive Maya organizing. In other words, to use a concept from Alejandra Aquino, they were aware of being a Generation 1.5, having grown up in wartime yet still “occupying a space as youth⁸¹” in the period after the Peace Accords was signed.

Yet ironically, or perhaps dialectically, this nascent sense of optimism of the cuates generation – Generation 1.5 -- seemed always to be tempered by, or perhaps even forged out of, disparagement and expulsion from dominant ladino society in Guatemala. This sensibility was encapsulated by Maya youth in phrases such as Lisandro's: “This system was not made for us [Mayas].” I propose that it was their social analysis and experience of the wartime period – before the period of openings from neoliberal multiculturalism – that clarified for Generation 1.5 their impetus to create an original solution to Maya subordination, “desde nuestro contexto” (from our context, as various Sotz'il members have said).

Sotz'il members had a unique perspective on the Tejido Social movement as children of its leaders. Because of their close familial relationship to Tejido Social, it is all the more striking that they chose not to participate directly in it, much less carry on leadership of it. This suggests an implicit rejection of the Tejido Social movement's forms

⁸¹ Defined in Guatemala as being under age 35. Frequently in this dissertation, I am using “youth” at the time of their action – i.e. the Peace Accords generation, although many have families and are adults now.

of struggle, since they were well positioned to carry on the mantle of its struggle. In Sotz'il's own family of the Guarcax lineage, their grandfather had been a leader in bringing local development projects to their village, which helped set up their fathers and uncles to carry on that leadership through Tejido Social. For Sotz'il's generation to not carry on that leadership of Tejido Social as family "successors" so to speak was against the grain and has left a notable vacuum of leadership. In fact, even though Lisandro did not actively participate in Tejido Social, after Ernesto's assassination community members reportedly turned to him for help with resolving their problems. Even if not explicitly a Tejido Social leader, neighbors still looked to him as a *community* leader. This section will address this question: *Why didn't Sotz'il participate in Tejido Social, when they were clear successors to its leadership?*

In their narratives of the founding of Sotz'il, members do not speak explicitly about rejecting Tejido Social politics and the SUD Civic Committee. However, I theorize their turn to theater as an ontological break with Tejido Social because of their anti-colonial critiques of certain contemporary community practices, such as ferias and certain aspects of *cofradías*; their distancing from direct participation in social movement politics (while signaling their support for SUD by showing up to neighborhood rallies); and the various ways they express that they want to deepen their engagement with Maya ontology. Furthermore, through my ethnographic research on San Jorge La Laguna's struggle to recover their ancestral land, I have seen that over the past three generations, many present-day leaders in Sololá are children and even grandchildren of local leaders at the community level. This is not necessarily about nepotism since many of these leadership posts are unpaid and, historically, were more about voluntary service to the community as a *patan samaj* (literally, referring to work as a tumpline / *mecapal*; Sotz'il members have referred to this as "a mission" that is carried through being charged with responsibilities, or what is referred to as "cargo" in Spanish). There is a cultural dimension to the dynamic of community members looking to particular families for leadership. Some trust in the family's experience, because they have witnessed the family members' past success in addressing community problems. I have witnessed community members visiting the

houses of these men and women family leaders for counsel. I have also observed that these families' experience of leadership tends to be reproduced through its members gaining access to formal education through high school and, in some cases, university. From what I have noticed, these families are characterized by valuing formal education – and thereby either attend formal schools or read more than most peers. They are not characterized by a pronounced accrual of economic wealth. In fact, their houses are modest compared to others along El Tablón's highway.

The Guarcax family's interest in education is made particularly clear through different members' leadership in the founding of a local elementary school, a scholarship program for local students, and, in 1995, the founding of Tijob'al Tz'oluj Ya'. All Sotz'il members attended Tijob'al, with the exception of Mariana who is from another region and Sotz'il's eldest founders who had already graduated from middle school by that point. Tijob'al Tz'oluj Ya' is the most concrete legacy of the Tejido Social movement in the caseríos of El Tablón, standing at the side of the highway and educating hundreds of Kaqchikel young women and men to be bilingual (Kaqchikel-Spanish) schoolteachers in the surrounding communities. Yet, it is in their assessment of their formative experience at Tijob'al – this product of the Tejido Social struggle – that Sotz'il members' nuanced critique of Tejido Social is made most explicit.

In many ways, Sotz'il members' assessment of Tijob'al has the feel of a younger generation's assertion of independence from their parents' generation. In interviews, Sotz'il members first always express their appreciation for the opportunity provided by Tijob'al Tz'oluj Ya' to study the Maya Kaqchikel language and “Maya culture” as school courses, since they stress that this was a groundbreaking intervention provided by Tijob'al that attracted students from throughout the municipality and beyond. Second, original members of Sotz'il stress that their most formative experiences were in Ernesto's classes of “Maya culture” and emphatically note that his emphasis on social analysis and decolonization would only span a few short years at Tijob'al.

However, with the exception of Ernesto's classes, the Sotz'iles felt that Tijob'al was just like regular school – the normal national curriculum – “but in Kaqchikel.” Sotz'il

wanted Tijob'al to completely re-conceptualize Maya pedagogy. Instead, Sotz'il members found that, besides Ernesto's classes, Tijob'al focused on training "técnicos" (technicians) rather than teaching "critical thinking." Sotz'il members highlight Tijob'al's unwillingness to question the role of Christianity in Maya colonization, noting that one of its founders is a Kaqchikel Catholic priest. Tijob'al was unwilling to recognize embodied expressions of their Maya decolonizing identity and consciousness. Their prime example of this is male students' decision to wear their hair long, following the lead of their teacher Ernesto. Many Sotz'iles in interviews cite this as a key initiation moment in their empowered sense of being Maya. However, the school and their parents berated them for this, saying it made them look like criminals and delinquents. Some were forced to cut their hair short, which for them epitomized the Christian domestication of Mayas in the conversion and subordination process.

Sotz'il wanted to take their decolonization critique deeper and found that their personal investigations into Maya ontology and a Maya sense of being would stay limited if critiquing historical processes of Christian conversion was placed off-limits for debate. Hence, when Tijob'al leadership began to balk at their rehearsals at the school, Sotz'il began to rehearse outside the school, marking a key turning point in their independent expression. They began to rehearse in the old adobe house and patio where their parents had grown up where, according to local lore, guerrillas hid during the war, amidst the milpa and patches of woods.

In questioning the institutional dominance of Christianity in Tijob'al and their community, Sotz'il in effect has called into question the ontological foundations of Tejido Social, revealing (a) that it had not radically decolonized institutions such as the municipalities, *cofradías*, Christianity, and the national school curriculum; and (b) that the project could further elicit the Kaqchikel orientation of its institutions. Sotz'il raises questions about the basis of leadership and authority (Chapter 7) and how to balance the role of various sectors of Kaqchikel society (for example, to not prioritize spirituality and governance over Maya medicine and arts; see Chapter 3).

Sotz'il's ontological break with the post-2000 SUD current is "friendly." Their families identify with SUD. In a 2011 SUD campaign rally at a basketball court in Sotz'il's hamlet, a young woman emcee in a wavering voice called for a moment of silence for SUD "martyrs" Ernesto, Emilio, and Lisandro. Their parents, wearing traje, wide-brim hats, and "Ri Chaqueta," were recognized with front-row seats. Sotz'il members hung out in the back in hooded sweatshirts, greeting passersby amiably. Like the young woman emcee, many other youth members of Tejido Social remember Ernesto fondly and with mourning. As youth, they looked up to him as a Tejido Social leader. They describe the Guarcax family as "una gran familia" (a respected family) and express their respect for the parents.

The founders of Sotz'il could have engaged with the same line of Tejido Social politics in Sololá – that which was contributing towards re-building Kaqchikel institutions and governance in Sololá, but whose potential had been cut short by factionalization and rifts with the URNG, leading to violent conflict. However, Sotz'il founders made a different choice to make a clean break and engage with an experiment: an attempt to shift the foundation of dialogue to a more serious engagement with Maya ontology, and to pursue that exploration through theater.

One challenge in analyzing Sotz'il's ontological turn is that most interviewees use the term "ideology" to describe difference as Mayas with anything Western – the "ideology" of capitalism, the "ideology" of the Spanish invasion, and the Marxist "ideology" of the Left. They express their differences as ideological, from the positionality of what they call "a Maya ideology," and it is not common practice to use the term "ontology" but rather "cosmovisión." However, this discourse of ideology and cosmovisión leaves room for people with Maya politics to still embrace a Christian (i.e. at least partially Western) ontology, albeit with Maya expressions, because cosmovisión as an ideology may not be incommensurable with Christianity as an ideology. However, in ontological terms, Sotz'il describes their project as incommensurable with Christianity. This will be explored in the following chapters.

CONCLUSION: BASE-BUILDING VS. AN ATOMIZED POLITICS OF MAYA ONTOLOGY

Sotz'il reflects aspects of chinamital process in two ways. First, Sotz'il's creation process is collective, dialogic, and always in formation until the last presentation of a play (as opposed to being run according to fixed ideologies). This dialogic process produces a "the proliferation of the imagination." Second, they inherited from the chinamital politics their interest in researching Maya ancestral past for models for present-day reivindicación. However, Sotz'il does not focus its research on recovering and strengthening Kaqchikel sociopolitical organization as Tejido Social does.

At the height of Tejido Social, the heterogeneous politics of the chinamitales was well-suited to massive base-building across broad alliances of Kaqchikel sectors. In fact, it was probably the electoral potential of this model that caught the attention of the URNG party to begin with. And it is precisely a participation in this politics of mass mobilization that Sotz'il declined in order to focus on the integrity of Maya ontology. That is, Sotz'il was not interested in forming alliances across different religious expressions, particularly when they felt that Maya spirituality was being demonized by dominant religions in their community. In effect, they retreated to a more autonomous space to go deep in their explorations of breadth and depth of Maya ontology and found that immersion in Maya theater, dance, and music facilitated this pursuit.

This raises a question about what constitutes a politics that is effective in confronting the dominance of oppression stemming from the Western cultural-economic-political system. The appealing strength of the Left has historically been its capacity to universalize or internationalize its movement – to catch on fire in many pueblos, states, countries, and continents, with regional adaptations of the basic elements of a Marxist-Leninist revolution. However, the Marxist model is founded in a Western (read: Judeo-Christian) universalizing meta-narrative.

On the other hand, the chinamitales appear to have tapped into a rhizomatic base-building capacity that is grounded in a Kaqchikel organizational form. As Indigenous "collectives," they introduce an alternative to the uniform Leftist "united front" in that they provide openings for multi-vocal debate and prioritize processes of consensual decision-

making over the fixed ideologies of a vanguardist model. Yet, chinamitales also are founded on a principle of broad alliances. In contemporary Maya society, this would require openness to Christian sectors which are the most populous sectors. In fact, Christian sectors would constitute the majority of an alliance and would win a democratic vote.

Sotz'il does not wish to compromise in this way. I argue that Sotz'il abandoned the project of radical political heterogeneity (the chinamital model which both the 1970s anti-colonial antecedents and 1990s Tejido Social embodied) in favor of a more "atomized" form of ontology politics through theater. First, they were not interested in building Indigenous political power in public sphere institutions. Second, while they shared an interest with Tejido Social in revitalization, they chose to focus on other "repressed" aspects of Indigenous identity -- arts and ontology. Maya arts and ontology also gave them the option of working in more autonomous and self-determining ways as their means of empowerment while being more consonant with Maya ontology. Through theater, they could make a more radical turn to decolonization and Maya cosmovisión and reject the influence of Christian and Western paradigms that, in their view, had burdened some of Tejido Social's Kaqchikel institutions.

In short, like "Maya reducido," the colonial form of the Maya language that is a translation of Christian concepts (Hanks 2010), they felt Tijob'al is "reduced" version of Kaqchikel education. This encapsulates their view of the rest of the Tejido Social project as well. Hanks also discusses colonial-era "pueblos reducidos," wherein Mayas were displaced from their original communities to inhabit the town centers that were structured around the institutions of Spanish colonial authority and Christian conversion: the church, town plaza, municipal government buildings, and the "calle reales" (royal streets) that the elite criollos occupied. Tejido Social, like some Maya currents in other regions, was Mayanizing this town center, which has great anti-colonial symbolism. Sotz'il in essence is demonstrating that the very structure of the town center is "reduced" – it is a colonial construct. The entire structure and its underlying philosophy needs to be decolonized and re-thought according to Kaqchikel ontology. Of course, that would be quite a project. So

Sotz'il began with a smaller step that was within reach: Maya theater.

Yet, as Hanks notes, the Maya scribes who were trained by the Catholic Church led anti-colonial rebellion and resistance. This kind of language and negotiation can be seen in the colonial-era *Memorial de Sololá* which adopts Christian language at times. It could be said that this is the kind of resistance that Tejido Social embodied – using some of the master's tools (colonial-era Kaqchikel institutions) to dismantle the master's house. Sotz'il on the other hand, essentially concurring with Audre Lorde that this strategy will not work, adds one more twist. Though they base their first play on the *Memorial de Sololá*, they replace language that is deferential to Catholic authority with scenes that boldly resist Christian conversion and give primary roles to Maya ancestors and nawales.

Sotz'il's project is meaningful to many Mayas from youth to elders. However, it presents a dilemma: In advancing a politics more consistent with Maya cosmovisión, does Sotz'il have a strategy for confronting the dominance of Western, capitalist, state-centered political economic relations that threaten Maya communities and lifeways? If not, considering the repression that surrounds it, does the “autonomy” proposal of Sotz'il politics have a future, beyond the realm of theater performance? These are the central questions the rest of the dissertation attempts to answer.

Chapter 3. “*Dicen que somos del monte*”⁸²: Unearthing Youth Identity after Genocide

Why were these relics in the house? ... There was a great question within me: to go searching deeper for what had happened with my ancestors.

-- Jimena⁸³

This is precisely the time when artists go to work. There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal.

-- Toni Morrison⁸⁴

In the last chapter, I traced the genealogy of the Tejido Social Kaqchikel movement in Sololá as a predecessor to Sotz’il. I used the concepts of “Maya reducido” and “pueblos reducidos” (reduced Maya language and towns) to theorize Sotz’il’s ontological break with Tejido Social’s strategy of rebuilding Kaqchikel institutions in the centers of power in Sololá town. In this chapter, I continue the exploration of what decolonization meant to Sotz’il when they came of age in the decade after the 1996 Peace Accords. Through ethnography, I study Sotz’il members’ intersectional experiences of racism, sexism, and “religious discrimination” in order to understand how these shaped their desire to “decolonize” – that is, unearth repressed practices of rural Maya culture that have been disparaged. I do not wish to indicate that racism and sexism *only* occurred after genocide, but that the search of the cuates generation had particular qualities to it defined by their positionality, age, and context / time period. Also, while their search includes a critique of colonization, it also takes on a particular dimension after 1980s genocide and the 1996 Peace Accords. This seems to indicate that Sotz’il’s politics of decolonization is concerned not only with the Spanish colonial era, but also, and perhaps more immediately, with

⁸² “They say that we are from the bush...” -- Nan Josefina

⁸³ Jimena, interview. Jimena’s life history and quotations in this chapter come from this interview.

⁸⁴ Toni Morrison. “No Place for Self-Pity, No Room for Fear.” In *The Nation*. March 23, 2015.

intensified Christian evangelization in Maya communities since the 1970s (Garrard-Burnett 1998, 2010)

I begin this chapter with a brief introduction to key individuals in Sotz'il.

OVERVIEW OF KEY INDIVIDUALS

With the exception of one member attending a music conservatory for a brief period in 2007, the Sotz'iles have not been formally educated in music, theater, dance, and the other arts and artisanship involved in making their sets. They are proud of being self-taught because it means they have not learned from Western institutions and forms of pedagogy. Instead, reflecting the Maya “epistemology of practice,” the Sotz'iles have learned their artistic craft from embodied practice through teacher-to-student apprenticeship: first with community elder Tat Francisco Yaxón for marimba lessons, and then with Mauricio Cabrera in theater.

Apart from Lisandro Guarcax and Ernesto Guarcax, whose life histories as leading figures in the founding of Sotz'il were discussed in Chapter 2, other key individuals and groups of people who make up Sotz'il are the following:

Most of the first generation who founded Sotz'il were educated in their rural community of El Tablón at the Tijob'al Tz'olaj Ya' (Sololá School) that had been founded as part of the Tejido Social movement in 1995. Tijob'al's training of bilingual Kaqchikel-Spanish teachers was the first of its kind in the region. This meant that Tijob'al's graduates had an advantage in getting government teacher positions in the caseríos of Sololá municipality, in the context of a Maya Movement in power in the municipalities that was seeking to hire bilingual teachers of Kaqchikel ethnicity to counter the historic domination of ladinos with Spanish-only titles teaching rural Kaqchikel students.

This bilingual program allowed Sotz'il to get off the ground in its early years with many employed as bilingual teachers until funding in 2012 allowed integrants to work as full-time artists with Sotz'il. By the time I met Sotz'il in 2006, at least five of its core members had paid government positions as teachers, with Lisandro having been selected as a union representative at his school. Through their involvement in the teachers' union,

these Sotz'iles had experience with striking and marching for better wages from the government. Their early workday ended at noontime, meaning that even for those who had to travel long distances from their schools in remote rural hamlets of Sololá, they still had time after work to dedicate to the youth group. The other integrants of Sotz'il were either still students, worked at family-run stores, sold artisanal wares in places as far as Izabal, and/or were contracted by local families for agricultural work.

However, young women were not considered by their families as having extra time to dedicate to Sotz'il, even if they earned a greater salary as schoolteachers than others in the household. After returning from teaching, the young women had their household responsibilities or “oficio”: cleaning the kitchen, cooking food, getting the nixtamal milled and making tortillas, handwashing clothes, and sweeping the patio and rooms, on top of preparing their school lessons for the next day. Young women's participation in Sotz'il was a source of tension with their families. This made it difficult for Sotz'il to recruit and retain female members particularly after they had graduated from high school. Yet, Kaqchikel families did not consider young men to have major responsibilities when they returned home from school or work.

As discussed in Chapter 2, this first generation of Sotz'il was part of the “cuates generation.” The majority of them grew up in politically oriented and socially engaged families⁸⁵ who were active in Kaqchikel village networks.

In contrast, the second generation of Sotz'il — who joined Sotz'il after 2010 – did not experience Ernesto's politicized classes at Tijob'al nor the workshops of Sotz'il's founding years. They were all born after Guatemala's transition from military dictatorships to democracy in 1986. They were still young children during the height of Tejido Social organizing in Sololá municipality in 1992-1998 and the signing of the Peace Accords in 1996. They had not even turned age ten when the violent division between URNG and

⁸⁵ Most Sotz'il members are family relatives: siblings, cousins, or more distant cousins. This is not unlike others Maya music groups, both those considered “traditional” and “contemporary.” Traditional marimbistas passed on musical lessons usually just within their family. Most *marimba orquestas* – which frequently have a dozen or more members -- are composed of family members.

Comite Cívico SUD erupted around 1998. It is possible that, as young children, they did not experience the sense of promise, unification, and optimistic mobilization of the 1992-1996 height of the Tejido Social movement (when they were young children) and were more conscious of the negative outcomes of political involvement in the violent period after 1998. The young men all were students at T'ijob'al Tz'oluj Ya' in recent years during a period that Sotz'il members felt was more conservative and Christian-influenced. This group also includes a young Mam woman from the department of Huehuetenango.

Sotz'il members have traveled far and wide – some due to the life of Maya *comerciantes* (merchants), and all due to the theater groups' participation in Indigenous arts festivals from Saami country in Norway to London to Brazil. But these trips are temporary and Sotz'il members do not wish to live outside El Tablón. They have expressed that they feel more settled in El Tablón. After their international trips they joke among each other about how much they missed tortillas and other Maya foods.

The Sotz'iles are committed to living in their community. This supports opportunities for decentralized arts employment in a highly centralized country where most higher paying jobs, government agencies, arts conservatories, and higher quality university and healthcare institutions are located in the capital city. Only two original members of Sotz'il (Jimena and Alejandro) have moved to the capital for a more extended period. They left the group in its early years (before the second play) in order to pursue university education and, in Jimena's case, to work at Maya women's leadership organizations. (They are the only members of Sotz'il to have pursued university and, later, graduate education. No current Sotz'il members are pursuing post-secondary study.) Other members have lived in the capital for periods of about a year to work with a Maya ball game team that the Ministerio de Deportes y Cultura (Ministry of Sports and Culture) had organized, but they grew disillusioned with what they called the "folkloricism" of the Ministerio and grew tired of their hard life in the capital as marginalized Maya subjects. Another former Sotz'il member had the opportunity to live abroad for a longer duration but decided to return to Guatemala for a more consistent Maya spiritual practice. In sum, the Sotz'iles choose to

stay in El Tablón and work as artists, earning a meager living, rather than pursue more lucrative work or higher education.

This is in contrast to the Maya Mam rock group *Sobrevivencia*, several of whose members have travelled periodically to Florida in the U.S. to work as migrant laborers in agricultural work while remaining members of the band. At least one member of *Sobrevivencia* settled permanently in the U.S., and a distant relative of Sotz'il who is a hip hop artist has settled permanently in Europe. *Sobrevivencia* regularly performs their music in Florida and Los Angeles. In the early years of the band, all members lived in the capital city for a period to record and perform. *Sobrevivencia* and some Maya hip hop artists have more actively sought to become part of a Maya diaspora than Sotz'il has.

Sotz'il members' decisions to work mostly as artists in rural Sololá has come at a cost. The Sotz'iles have little money for their families, even when being paid to be full-time artists through NGO funding. One member once told me that his wife was pressuring him to finally build a house for their young family. Until then they had been living with his wife's family – which runs against the norm of Maya wives going to live with their husband's family. As more current Sotz'il members start having families, this economic pressure to care for their families is bound to increase.

The third primary figure involved in Sotz'il's rehearsals is Mauricio Cabrera, the stage director (“director escénico⁸⁶”) of Sotz'il since 2005. Cabrera (as the Sotz'iles call him) is a ladino man who grew up in the 1970s in the most marginalized neighborhoods of the capital in Zona 3 and Zona 18. His family was “demasiado pobre”⁸⁷ (very poor) but read a lot and spoke to him about their interest in music, theater, “cosas espiritistas” (spiritist things), and radical / Leftist politics. In the sixth grade he had a teacher who

⁸⁶ Rather than “teatro” (theater), because there is no word in Kaqchikel for theater, Sotz'il prefers to use the Kaqchikel term *xajoj q'ojom*, which as a linguistic pairing signifies “dance music” and all that falls between those two categories. This term is then glossed in Spanish as “artes escénicos” (scenic arts). Hence their Spanish term for their stage director literally means “scenic director.” In this dissertation, I may use the term “theater” where it makes my phrasing less cumbersome, but keeping in mind the original Kaqchikel concept of *xajoj q'ojom*.

⁸⁷ Mauricio Cabrera, interview by author, February 21, 2013. Cabrera's life history and quotations in this section are from this interview.

introduced critical analysis instead of the normal scholastic emphasis on memorization. In addition, Cabrera said his classes were very “ludic.” When the teacher disappeared, Cabrera learned he had been a guerrilla fighter and “had to go.” However, he left his impression on Cabrera, who afterwards was no longer interested in getting good grades in classes that privileged memorization over analysis. Due to “bochinchería” (rowdiness) he was expelled from high school. “Now what do I do? Theater,” he decided.

Some time later he returned to school, managing to get accepted into the prestigious Escuela Nacional de Arte Dramático (National School of Dramatic Arts) by talking his way into the school. At that time the school was “especially exceptional” – Cabrera credits it with providing him a high quality training in critical theater methods and deepening his interest in experimental theater. Cabrera still remained an “outsider artist” (my term) from marginalized neighborhoods. His “outsider” status is reinforced by his own choices to align himself with the marginalized sectors of Guatemala. For example, since 2005 he has lived at Sotz’il Jay when working on theater projects, and at the time of my fieldwork in 2013 he was also working on a site-specific theater project at a bar in the capital with transgender actors and sex workers.

Cabrera is the only member of the group who is not Maya and who (besides Mariana who is from Huehuetenango) is not from the rural caseríos of El Tablón, Sololá. The manner in which the Sotz’iles relate to Cabrera demonstrates Sotz’il’s understanding of the nawales. Cabrera has noted that the Sotz’il’s accept his habit of “disappearing” for months after finishing a theater project, and that they do not appear too surprised or upset when he later calls them out of the blue to work on a new project.⁸⁸ They even keep his room for him for when he is ready to come back. In a 2006 Interview, Tat Adrián had told me about Maya pedagogy and that Maya bilingual schools are encouraging teachers to understand the characteristics of their students through their nawales in order to adapt their teaching methods to better engage each child’s learning style.⁸⁹ Given this, Cabrera’s testimonial suggests to me that the Sotz’iles understand and harmonize with Cabrera’s

⁸⁸ Cabrera, interview.

⁸⁹ Tat Adrián, interview by author, March 2006.

nawal and accept him for who he is given the energy of his nawal. As a result, they have had a working relationship for over eleven years. One group member had noted that “the director demands a lot, but all directors are like that. One must accept the instruction and see what one should do, because if one fights, it makes it worse.”⁹⁰

Cabrera is an atheist, yet ironically that seems to be compatible with Sotz’il’s manner of working for the *reivindicación* of Maya ontology. While he respects Sotz’il’s ontological practice, he does not appropriate or romanticize it on the one hand, nor does he castigate or demean it as many conservative Christian Mayas or ladinos would do.

In the role of coordinator, one of the Sotz’iles is responsible for the administration and operations of the group, including serving as main contact person for inquiries about booking presentations, arranging transportation and meals, and negotiating financial agreements. As the original and longest-serving coordinator thus far, Lisandro Guarcax was Sotz’il’s charismatic and inspiring public face. In contrast, Cabrera is in charge of the theater production and rehearsals. Unlike other models of ladino leadership in organizations in which Sotz’il has recently participated, I have not witnessed Cabrera dominating decision-making or debate to the same extreme degree, nor does he insist upon members’ translating their Kaqchikel for his comprehension. This working relationship with Cabrera allows Sotz’il autonomy in organizational matters as well as in collectively representing themselves in discussions with him through first discussing among themselves in Kaqchikel.

Sotz’iles are not exclusively musicians or dancers. For example, Miguel is primarily a dancer, but he also plays marimba and flute among many other instruments for Sotz’il’s musical repertoire. Because he crafts a lot of the instruments, he has to have an appreciation for how to play them. All Sotz’il members must participate in Sotz’il’s physical warm-up for dancing which is part of their body training.

When Lisandro was coordinator, he helped with the stage direction and often initiated Kaqchikel-language discussions of Cabrera’s instructions to process them with

⁹⁰ Lorenzo, interview by author, June 13, 2013.

the actors. Although all Sotz'il plays are presented in Kaqchikel (with the Mam speaker saying her lines in the Mam language), Cabrera speaks Spanish only and not Kaqchikel. In the rehearsals I observed in 2006 Lisandro would frequently step in as a charismatic motivator to interpret Cabrera's instructions into Kaqchikel, work through any potential conflicts (given that he knew more about members' daily life and obligations, as well as cultural questions), and "liven up" and motivate (*animar*) members to come to agreements about rehearsal plans and staging decisions.

This means of language translation through a representative reflect what I have witnessed other Kaqchikel⁹¹ community groups (ranging from coordinating committees, *alcaldes auxiliares*, youth musical groups, *cofradías*, and development committees) do when meeting with me and other non-Kaqchikeles. A leader will act as primary spokesperson⁹² for the group in Spanish but will also consult in Kaqchikel with the

⁹¹ A similar process was followed in meetings with sectors of a returned refugee community in 2000 even when the discussion was conducted in Spanish since the community members were from four different Maya language groups.

⁹² During 2006 ethnographic research, I was dismayed at how hard it was to elicit different members' responses during "collective interviews" in San Jorge La Laguna first with the *Alcaldes Auxiliares* and later with women's groups, *cofradías*, the Community Coordinating Committee, and others. I had organized these interviews collectively specifically to get the perspective of the various people present, like a focus group. Yet no matter how I tried to direct my questions openly and even look around the tables to encourage responses from others, it was almost always the *primer alcalde* (first mayor) who responded in the case of the *alcaldes* and *cofradías*, and the president who responded in the case of the committees. Seeing that I was looking for others to respond, the *segundo alcalde* (second mayor) and later the father of the family I lived with started to pipe up near the end of one particular interview.

A similar process happened with my first conversation with Sotz'il during their lunch break from rehearsing in Sololá's municipal gymnasium. No matter how much I looked around at other members for responses to my attempts at conversation, it was Lisandro who responded as coordinator, speaking for the group. When conversations became more informal, in my subsequent meetings, then others would speak, but they still tended to be the older members. Later, Ana would tell me her response when we were on our own or went to the women's bathroom. But even when I lived with her, in the formal meetings Ana never would speak — it was the protocol not to. Although there are gendered implications of this unspoken protocol, I also had the experience of conducting interviews with mixed groups of men and women in which women have been the senior representative and, hence, the primary spokesperson for the group.

What I realized afterwards is that this doesn't necessarily give the speaker (the elder or the person fulfilling the role of spokesperson) full liberty to speak of her or his own accord. The other members are still always present. The practice is that the senior spokesperson speaks for the group, and *in the presence* of all members of the group, who — even when I've seen them with their heads down — are actively listening. I now see this practice as a form of accountability to know how the leader is describing the situation and speaking *for* them.

On what occasions do people pipe up to offer an opinion? Hearing something missing is not normally sufficient cause for others to speak up as it would challenge the spokesperson's framing of the

committee to help answer questions or make decisions – given that this would be a discussion internal to the group when the outsider does not speak Kaqchikel. The leader will then present the Kaqchikel consensus of the group, translated into Spanish for the outsider (*kaxlan*). Meanwhile, the rest of the committee remains mostly silent. However, their presence is a form of accountability because they hear what the leader says and how she or he is presenting their decision. This stands in contrast with representative democracy where the electorate does not hear what their congressional representative actually says in high-power, closed-door negotiations. In this open-door *consulta*, privacy for intra-group negotiation is provided by the screen of Kaqchikel language before presenting a proposal to – or responding to an interview question by -- the outside party. To be able to speak among themselves is a key part of the Kaqchikel relationality vis-à-vis their relationship with the outside / *kaxlan* world and is part of how they maintain the relative power of a collective negotiating base.

In theater, Cabrera believes it is important to be realistic and not romanticize. I asked him for an example. He said, for example,

If I am working on a play with a group of daykeepers, I will not treat them as perfect people who are above [critique or above others], as if “Oh, they are daykeepers.” [He makes gestures of bowing down]. No, I also see their weaknesses and who they are now. Because if not, the play would be too mystical (*demasiada mística*), like “Oh, Maya spirituality, how lovely!”

Cabrera strives to create theater that does not idealize or sugarcoat its subject – not even “sacred” topics like Maya spirituality or delicate subjects like community conflict. In fact, Cabrera views it as a good sign that some people reject Sotz’il’s plays. He says that is an indication that Sotz’il’s plays have opened a space in which “audiences get involved in the topic” which may be controversial.

Likewise, being realistic (in terms of not romanticizing and as opposed to “folklorization”) is an important value for the other Sotz’iles. In my first 2012 meeting

narrative. I have found that other members have spoken when the leader doesn’t know the answer and will himself or herself turn to the other members present and, in Kaqchikel, ask for their opinions.

with Sotz'il about my dissertation project, Pablo urged me to be "realistic" in what people from Ri Ak'u'x and other artists say about Sotz'il — he said Sotz'il would be interested to learn from their honesty. Another Sotz'il member said that being political means "saying what needs to be said, no matter who is in the room." Hence, one of the ways that Sotz'il considers itself to be political is in its attempts to be realistic.

DISCOURSES OF RACISM

The roots of contemporary violence against Indigenous peoples in Guatemala can be traced to a long painful history including the Spanish invasion and colonization (what Maya activists refer to as "the first genocide"), the consolidation of liberal nation-states in the late 1800s and dissolution of Indigenous collective lands and autonomy ("the second genocide"), *indigenista* politics of forced integration and assimilation, and the 1978-1983 scorched earth massacres (Maya activists call this the "third genocide").

The history of "eventful violence" has also shaped everyday peoples' experience of "everyday violence" -- the day-to-day consequences of the violences foundational to modernity (Das 2007). For Mayas in Guatemala today, this history includes not only extreme poverty and dispossession, but also the psychological effects of dehumanization and debasement, resulting in rising rates of addiction, gendered violence, and alienation among Maya youth.

State and structural violence against Mayas in Guatemala has been perpetuated by rabid anti-Maya discourses of racism. One aspect of this racism is how it shapes regimes of representation in Guatemala. Historically, criollo and ladino Guatemalans have sought to suppress and stereotype Indigenous peoples and lifeways in national cultural life. As ladino filmmaker Jayro Bustamante stated,

The racism in Guatemala is very crude and very strong. When [my movie] "Ixcanul" first came to theaters, people would say, "Why would I see that? I can watch plenty of Indians in the street." It's really crude like that. People would be laughing at the film in the theater just because they see a Mayan woman on the screen, like "Ahh, there is an Indian!" Really, like that. They feel the [Maya]

language[s] is part of the past and not part of the progress we have made in the country.⁹³

An older participant in Sotz'il's Q'ij Saq⁹⁴ workshop series on Maya arts painted a picture of the kind of virulent racism that Mayas historically have experienced in Guatemala. A K'iche' music teacher, Julián graduated from the Escuela Normal de Guatemala in the 1970s. As a guerrilla in the 1970s – 1980s, for five years he studied texts of sociopolitical analysis and revolution by Marx and Mao Tse Tung among others. During one discussion in Sotz'il's workshops, he stated his observation as a schoolteacher that the greatest challenge for Mayas now are the many churches and “youth ... who do not have identity.” Reflecting themes expressed by Mayas of the reivindicación current, Julián suggested that this “lack of identity” is both a cause and a consequence of Mayas' conversion to Christianity whose leaders often demonize Maya spirituality and ontological practice.

Later, in an interview, I asked Julián to elaborate on his experience of racism and his view of the threats to Maya identity. To convey the virulence of the racism that Mayas face to this day, Julián quoted commonplace discourse from the 1980s: “that the Indian is the reason for the backwardness” in Guatemala. He also quoted a speech by “a rich person,” a brother of Mario Sandoval Alarcón – “who is *ultra-* right” and who participated in the army's CIA-backed “anticommunist” coup in 1954 as well as becoming Guatemalan Vice-President to a military dictator. Julián paraphrases Sandoval Alarcón's speech from the 1980s that was included in a documentary on Telesur:⁹⁵

JULIÁN, *paraphrasing Sandoval Alarcón*: “Let's thank Spain because it's our Motherland. She gave us land, she gave us culture, she gave us slaves and cheap labor. The Maya here is intelligent, but they disappeared. Only the temples

⁹³ Source: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/ixcanul-jayro-bustamante_us_57c858dae4b0a22de0948cfb
Accessed: January 31, 2017.

⁹⁴ This was a workshop series on Maya arts funded by the Canadian development agency PROSOL. The name Q'ij Saq literally means “white day.” Pablo has translated it as “a new dawn” (“un nuevo amanecer”).

⁹⁵ Julián, interview by author, March 25, 2013. Julián's life history and quotations in this section are from this interview.

remain. And *the indio* [*he stresses the pejorative term*] who exists now – we have to domesticate them. That’s why the democracy in Guatemala is a *controlled* democracy,” said this brother of Mario Sandoval Alarcón.

INTERVIEWER: Domesticate them? What did he [Sandoval Alarcón] mean by that?

JULIÁN: To dominate us – so that we would not have any rights. That is why they said, “When the Indian is seated with hands down, he is adorable. But when the Indian stands up and demands his rights, he is a terrorist.”

INTERVIEWER: In what year was this?! The 1980s!

JULIÁN: In the 1980s. And it continues like this because they succeeded in putting in the heads of the people [Mayas] who study that, for there to be development, it’s necessary for us to forget our language, our roots, and to *take hold* of ladino culture. And that notion is false. Here in Guatemala there is a lot of racial discrimination. I’ve felt it in Guatemala. “Hey you *indio*, hey you beast! (*Vos burro!*)” That how Indigenous people are treated. Like it or not, a lot of people – *a lot* of people – are forgetting about our roots because they think that to speak in K’iche’ is *an insult*. So, it’s necessary to speak to one’s child in Spanish. Which is not true. [...] They have us very controlled.⁹⁶

Partly as a response to this kind of racism, in the 1970s Julián founded a series of K’iche’ music groups, the most well-known of which is Xojlin Siwan. Julián said that around 1978 they had decided to name Xojlin Siwan after the “bird of the ravines” (*ave de barranco*) for several reasons. First, it was a local bird that had been prevalent in their community. Second, “we wanted to sing music like the *ave de barranco*, which no longer exists.” They identified with this bird of their community and also with preserving the sound of its song.

⁹⁶ Julián, interview by author, March 25, 2013. Julián’s life history and quotations in this section are based on this interview.

Through this statement, Julián appears to share with Sotz'il similar perspectives on Maya arts though their ultimate expression differed due to generational differences in historical context. As he and Pablo discussed in the workshop, Xojlin Siwan played “protest music” and “war music” (*música de guerra*) like that which was popular during the 1970s revolutionary era, but with their particular intervention of highlighting Maya experiences of oppression in the K'iche' language. As their attempt to make their music more “Indigenous,” they played the Andean pan pipe and adapted the sound of “*música andina*.” That is, they borrowed an instrument and musical genre from Quechua and Aymara Indigenous cultures of the South which was gaining popularity in Latin American *nueva canción* music in the 1970s (due to groups like Inti-Illimani). This conviction and sentiment about the development of Maya arts brought Julián to participate in the Maya arts workshops with Sotz'il to learn about the new developments this younger generation has introduced to Maya political music: the revival of ancestral Maya instruments.

Like the paradigmatic currents of the Maya Movement and truth commissions, Tejido Social left unaddressed the societal and intrapersonal effects of racialized violence that were a product of Spanish colonization and culminated in genocide. Second, although Tejido Social was a grassroots movement, it lacked grassroots approaches to healing traumas and relationships, thus leaving people to individually deal with their traumas and unprocessed, heightened state of fears. This means a good portion of society has lived in a constant state of alert from their body's self-defense mechanisms. Third, the internalization of entrenched societal racism that produced genocide was left unaddressed. Finally, they did not address less quantifiable aspects of Maya culture such as (ethicopolitical) sensibilities, embodied experiences, and relationship with land and sacred sites which give purpose and basic orientation to Maya lives and contain capacities for societal regeneration. The result of the above dynamics constitute part of the ongoing legacy of wartime violence which has resulted in the fracturing of Maya communities. It also has created fertile soil for the ongoing disparagement of Mayas in Guatemalan society and, disturbingly, Maya peoples' internalization of these dynamics as weapons against each

other. While *Tejido Social* provided important contributions to expanding the imaginaries of what could be possible through the self-organization of Maya communities around ancestrally-rooted institutions, its solutions were not complete.

Stigmatization of Maya ontological practice

The term “religious discrimination” was used by interviewees to describe their experiences of racism and the stigmatization of Maya ontological practice. When I commented to Jimena that Lisandro had said people told him not to make dances public, she said, “Yes, we heard this comment many times. Stigmas still exist that ‘this [Maya spiritual practice] is something bad. Why are they returning to it? It’s not good for society.’”

My ethnographic research found that the objects of discrimination and stigmatization go beyond purely religious or spiritual practices. Such practices include Maya cooking, especially the use of traditional greens and beans; the use of the *tuj* (traditional steam bath) for bathing instead of a shower; birthing and maternal practices (midwives and breastfeeding); and healing practices (through curanderas with herbs). Stigmatized forms of embodiment of Maya identity include men’s long hair; women’s use of traje; the speaking of Maya languages; and using Maya last names. For example, a young woman studying to be a music teacher in the capital told me that classmates would frequently jeer at her, saying, “Why do you always sing in ‘kakchi kakchi’?” (as a pejorative reference to her Kaqchikel language). Luckily she could advocate for her Maya identity because she has high self-esteem that was supported by several factors: her family of Maya scholar-activists, living in a politicized Maya majority community when not at that school, and being active in the Ruk’u’x alliance of Maya artists.

As another example, at a Ruk’u’x workshop in 2013, two young women artist-activists from Totonicapán lamented that they hadn’t before seen, much less been inside, a *tuj* (traditional steam bath). As in other Maya majority towns, *tuj*s have been forced out of

existence in certain urbanized centers like Totonicapán because of the disparagement by ladinos who hold hegemonic power in town centers.

Thus, it appears that the objects of inferiorization are Maya ontological practices and embodiments of Maya identity that do not fit within the dominant paradigm of modernization to which mainstream ladino Guatemalan society aspires (as they themselves seek to reach their perceptions of the standards of Mexico, the U.S., and Europe). Hence, I propose that this “religious discrimination” is only partly about religion and that it also shows signs of having more to do with a discrimination against repressed practices of rural Maya ontology that have been disparaged. Rather than describe this as religious discrimination, I re-frame this particular dimension of “subordinación” as a form of internalized racism for not fitting within the norms of white modernization.

What people describe as “religious discrimination” also produces a division in the community. Sotz’il members, the cuates generation, and even families with children feel themselves to experience the brunt of this and to be outcasts in the community. Hence, in addition to community divisions that result from affiliations with political parties, this produces a cleavage within the community that interviewees describe as falling along religious lines with the most stark being between Christians and those that practice Maya ontology.

Another reason that Sotz’il’s intervention is critically important is that they are based in a rural community. Many leaders of the Maya Movement nationally are based in the capital region or Chimaltenango, having migrated during the war. They themselves express their distance from rural community lifeways – now shopping in supermarkets and perhaps only visiting their hometowns but once a year.⁹⁷ These frequently are the Mayas who wield the power of representation of Maya experience through positions as academics or as dirigentes (high-level leaders) of social movements. One of the most unique

⁹⁷ Maya fellow passengers on *camionetas* (converted U.S. schoolbuses) from the capital to the highlands would initiate conversations with me, asking me where I was going. When I would state that I was living in a rural *caserío*, they expressed surprise, implying that they themselves would not do that now that they have acculturated to life in the capital.

interventions of Sotz'il is that they are based in a rural community yet, through theater, they have gained the power of representation.

With this access, Sotz'il seeks to portray the fundamental relationship between rural Maya ontological practice and "life." In their creative works, they make frequent references to life (*k'aslemal*), including in the title of their short documentary *Jun Tz'uj Xajoj Pa Qak'aslem* (*A drop of dance for our life*) (Sotz'il 2010). Jimena expresses that "the presence of the sacred fire" is "so fundamental" to Sotz'il's plays precisely because "it is life itself" and it "generates life."

Sotz'il's theater empowers audiences to process internalized racism and oppression and to speak back to people who try to shame them. One example is a vignette from my field notes of women countering modernization norms that frame Maya birthing and maternal practices as backwards.

Nan Josefina joked with Marta in Kaqchikel that Marta's two-year-old was huge from drinking so much maternal milk from her swollen breasts. She then turned to me and told me a story about breast cancer. She said that a female relative had just had one of her breasts removed due to breast cancer! They said it was because she refused to breastfeed her children because she wanted to keep her breasts firm and not droopy.

This led to an entire discussion on the politics of beauty (influenced by television, such as the Mexican telenovelas) and local women's responses to it. Marta stated emphatically to me that if a mother doesn't breastfeed, then her breasts still have support under them, not even needing a bra – that she still has the "pecho de una *señorita*!" (breasts of a young woman). Because when a woman breastfeeds, the children tug at her breasts and they begin to droop. And some women in recent years do not want this – they want to keep their breasts firm, even if their husband wants them to breastfeed. But then look what happened to these women who do not breastfeed? Their milk in their breasts had nowhere to go, so the breastmilk solidified and became tumors! They find lumps in their breasts and have to get the lumps removed.

Through this narrative, one that they repeated to me on other occasions when they heard of other women this had happened to, Nan Josefina and Marta were framing and critiquing what they consider vanity on the part of other Maya women for the serious health consequences it caused. One could argue that the vanity was exacerbated by increasing pressures of Western models of beauty, sexuality, and body image through television commercials and programs. Also, there were

pressures from ladino society to use infant formula as a supposedly more modern way of feeding babies. This pressure was compounded for women who sought to distance themselves from the close association of breastfeeding with Maya motherhood in Guatemala.

On the topic of drooping, Nan Josefina told a story, laughing raucously, *proud* of her drooping breasts. She said that the other day she had been running, and she heard a “whoop, whoop, whoop” sharp sound. She thought, “Who’s behind me?” then turned around to look who was behind her – and no one was there. So she continued to run again – and again the same sound: Whoop, whoop, whoop! Then she realized it was the sound of her breasts slapping against her body! She laughed again raucously, throwing her head back. This was definitely a Nan Josefina joke!

Meanwhile, Marta continued on seriously: that perhaps some women can’t breastfeed if they do not have much maternal milk. And she said that bras make women’s nipples be smooth because they push down the nipple, when to breastfeed, the nipple needs to pop out. So sometimes it’s hard to get the nipple to stick out, as was her case with her first child.

Then Nan jumped in again and emphatically said that *all* these issues can be solved in the *tuj* (traditional steam bath). She quickly demonstrated some of the motions she does to get the women’s breastmilk to come out, which included a motion of massaging the breasts. So, for the second time in the conversation, both she and Marta made a joke about the motion of milking a cow (yanking the breasts downward), and we all laughed! And she also indicated that there are natural midwifery techniques to get a woman’s nipple to come out so that babies can latch onto it (as Marta had done). Her conclusion was that there is no reason for any mother to not breastfeed her child, from a Maya traditional perspective. And it will help her health-wise – and prevent cancer.

Underscoring her point, Nan Josefina said, “They say that we are from the bush, but in fact we have everything! (*Dicen que somos del monte, pero tenemos todo!*) We have milk, beans, greens...” She then made a sweeping motion with her hand, indicating all the things in her kitchen that she uses to make food and natural remedies. “And much more!” she added, including natural ways of being with their bodies that maintained their health.

I asked Nan Josefina a follow-up question, to clarify this phrasing of the derogatory label spat at them, since it is related to what I have been thinking of as the “politics of *superación*” (a politics of betterment): “Who says that you are ‘from the bush’ (*del monte*)? The people in town?”

She didn’t reply as extensively as I was seeking, perhaps because of her limited

Spanish, but she did nod affirmatively, “Yes, the people in town,” indicating with her hand that she meant the town of Sololá.

On numerous occasions over the years in Guatemala, I have heard stories from Maya women of how *ladinas* at health clinics and other institutions have told them that Maya lifeways (infant care, traditional cooking, traditional healthcare and more) are wrong, backwards, and even dangerous; then they try to scare and shame the women into adopting more “modern” products and practices. The irony is that recent research shows that these “modern” practices are less healthy than traditional Indigenous ways, for example: feeding infants formula instead of breastmilk; cooking with low-cost processed vegetable oils that contain genetically-modified ingredients instead of lard from local family producers; and the over-use of antibiotics for childhood ailments instead of Maya herbal remedies. However, Maya women who cannot read or write are particularly susceptible to being pressured to devalue their inherited practices on the basis of the authority of the *ladina* officials.

The vignette about breastfeeding is one example of a family environment of *reivindicación* that has been strengthened by Sotz’il’s daily practice and theater performances. As children, Sotz’il was influenced by their parents’ political and cultural trajectories and involvement with community movements. Now the Sotz’iles are also influencing their parents and siblings, who then impact their circles. Nan Josefina jokes, “We used to say, ‘My God!’ (*Dios mio!*) But now we say, ‘My Ajaw!’” That joke actually refers in shorthand to the process that has happened in this household and other households close to Sotz’il. In part, this process is also influenced by the *Siwan Tinamit* community radio show which Tat Ernesto hosted with the help of the Sotz’iles (2006-2010).

As the anecdote about breastfeeding suggests, Nan Josefina and Marta have learned to speak back to people – even fellow Mayas – who try to shame them for following traditional Maya ways of life and refusing to adopt more “modern” ways even under pressure. Another example of people who have tried to shame rural Mayas involves people who might apparently be allies from the Left – a young Maya man who had been training to be a medical doctor for six years in Cuba and was close to graduating. Nan Josefina and

Marta told me that he had rushed back from Cuba for what he hoped would be the first baby he would deliver, of a relative. However, when he arrived at the airport in Guatemala City he was told that she didn't want him to attend the birth "because she trusted her midwife" – which was Nan Josefina, since she had attended her other births, some of which had been complicated.

Then Nan Josefina and Marta launched into stories of how this young man and his cousins, who also had studied to become doctors in Cuba, have attitudes of arrogance in relation to midwives, as though they are the "médicos *modernos*" (*modern* doctors), and as if the Maya midwives are backwards and know nothing. I expressed my surprise to Nan Josefina and Marta, saying that I thought that Cuban doctors were trained to do community-based work in the rural areas of Latin America and thus would appreciate the work of midwives.

"No!" Nan Josefina and Marta fervently declared. "How will a doctor from Cuba ["un médico de Cuba" – they use this term "from Cuba" throughout the discussion to refer to Maya neighbors who studied in Cuba] understand what to do in a *tuj* with a pregnant woman? These are modern doctors. They have their instruments and their gloves. They have their devices to check if your blood pressure is high or low, or to check your eyes. *With my finger* I can see if the pressure is high or low! I do not need gloves – I have herbs to disinfect my hands! I know how to prepare the space, with a *petate* (reed mat) and two pieces of nylon. I have my schedule of when I will see the woman and when we enter the *tuj* before and after the birth." They told me stories of two ways that Nan Josefina schooled these "modern doctors" with *her* expertise in traditional Maya medicine.

First, when they arrived for the baby's delivery, Nan Josefina saw that the woman's room was ready for the birth. But the Cuba-trained medical student came up to her and asked her, "Nan, where are your instruments?" -- denigrating her, as if she knew nothing and was outdated.

So Nan Josefina gave him a jab back, pretending innocence: "My instruments? Like the [musical] instruments that your dad plays in the Evangelical Church?"

"Nan, pardon me, no, the instruments for the delivery."

Nan Josefina again indicated to me that she already had everything there that she needed: the herbs to disinfect her hands, etc. In fact, she already knew all the medical information she needed about her patient: her blood pressure, etc. (As an aside, she mentioned that she can tell her patients' illnesses – she listed a wide variety – just by looking at their eyes.) Yet ironically, the "modern doctor" didn't even have his gloves there yet! They didn't arrive until *after* the baby was born!

And what also bothered Nan Josefina was that in this moment of labor, which was intense for the woman, the “modern doctor” was going about lifting up the woman’s eyelids! He probably even wanted to check her blood pressure with those things you wrap around the upper arm... But Nan Josefina said he should have done that *before* this stage of labor – and that she *already* knew all that information *without* any “instruments.” So she moved quickly to do her work before the “modern doctor” could interfere – especially since he was still on his cell phone, ordering someone in an arrogant tone, “Send me my gloves.”

Meanwhile, Nan Josefina had already checked the woman’s cervix and saw she was fully dilated and ready to push. So she swiftly gave her an injection in the buttocks – to give her *fuerza* (strength) to push. Before she did so, the woman’s husband and father-in-law entered the room. She had to whisk them out, saying that the wife was in the midst of labor and didn’t want them to see her buttocks when Nan Josefina lifts her corte for the “inyección”!

Then, just four pushes later, the baby comes out -- before the “modern doctor” even realized what had happened!

He was so surprised that he kept nagging Nan Josefina: “Y qué inyección diste? Y qué inyección es?” (“What injection did you give her? And what injection was it?”) But Nan Josefina evaded the question saying, “Allí en el Centro de Salud lo aprendí!” (“I learned it in the [public] Health Center!”) Marta added, “Because the *doctors* won’t reveal *their* secrets.”

The “modern doctor” was so surprised because he said that in Cuba, it takes many hours or even three days for women to give birth: there are cases that get very complicated, or there are a lot of problems there. So he had never seen such an easy birth! “Nan, voy a llegar a su casa” (“Nan, I’m going to come to your house”) he said, *now* wanting to learn from her – wanting to learn her secrets!

Like the anecdote about breastfeeding, this vignette of challenging Cuban doctor modernity demonstrates a politics of valorization that stands in opposition to the dominant paradigm that argues that for socioeconomic “progress,” Maya communities must be dependent on development policies. Interestingly, in this vignette, each person’s take on Maya reivindicación versus development parallels their position on local Maya politics (Tejido Social vs. URNG). The Cuba-trained medical students are of the Sololá branch of the URNG, while the midwife is with the Tejido Social political current of Maya reivindicación. A final vignette illustrates differences in sociocultural practice which end

up running parallel to differences in political affiliation. On Easter Sunday, one of Nan Josefina's patients was giving birth but lost Nan's phone number. So the patient's husband showed up at the gate to Nan Josefina's house early on Sunday morning, calling for Nan. But this was Nan's one day of rest during a week when everyone was resting (for *Semana Santa*, which she doesn't celebrate as a practitioner of Maya spirituality). She thought the knocking at the gate was one of her normal patients for herbal remedies, so she stayed in bed for once and ignored the calling -- until her grandson informed her that the man was there and she realized it was for a birth. When she got to the gate, the husband reported that his wife had already given birth but wanted Nan to come to cut the umbilical cord and clean up the baby and afterbirth.

When Nan went to their house, the husband commented that when they couldn't find her phone number, they tried to call everyone else they knew. They couldn't find *any* other midwives on that Easter morning to attend the birth. They even tried to call "the doctors from Cuba" ("los doctores de Cuba") – and were rejected by all!

The first answered his cell phone inside the church saying: "I'm at Mass! I can't attend to her."

The second "doctor de Cuba" said that he was "with my wife in Chimaltenango."

Nan Josefina interpreted these responses as "pretensions" on the part of the Cuba-trained doctors and medical students. In the end, only Nan Josefina could be reached and was willing to attend the birth on Easter Sunday.

These vignettes demonstrate the two-way street of cultural and political influence. On the one hand, mothers and grandmothers have raised the Sotz'iles with their cultural practices of midwifery, use of the *tuj* during pregnancy and postpartum recovery, breastfeeding, Maya herbal remedies, and home cooking. In this way, they have influenced the young peoples' interests and commitment to Maya *reivindicación*. Yet today, at a time when many youth are challenging their parents' Maya practices or seeking to distance themselves from affiliation with Maya culture and lifeways, the Sotz'iles' theater work and educational radio programs validate Maya practices that bear the brunt of

kaxlan (ladino) society's derision. The embodied experience of Sotz'il's theater creations now mutually supports Mayas of their families, communities, and beyond to dismantle the silencing and shaming power of racism and internalized oppression.

“They prefer to be ladino”

Mayas have dealt with the inferiorization and stigmatization of their cultural practices through a variety of survival and coping strategies – some habitual, some more intentional after conscious processes like politicization and collective dialogue about common experiences of racism and stigmatization. One response is when a person internalizes the societal rejection. Similar to what Fanon (1967) proposes – applying Carl Jung's work to contexts of racism and colonization – this learned rejection gets expressed both internally, by rejecting that stigmatized part (or practices) within oneself, as well as externally, by rejecting and disparaging other Mayas for exhibiting the stigmatized attitudes, behaviors, and practices that one has been taught is inferior and unworthy of acceptance. This results in society-wide dynamics of internalized colonization through which some Mayas themselves are averse or even afraid to see or be associated with the everyday practices and ontology of their ancestors. In fact, “fear” (*temor, temen, miedo*) is a term that came up a lot in the course of ethnographic research when interviewees and workshop participants talked about discrimination.

Pablo mentions that what helped Sotz'il a lot, including through their years studying at Tijob'al, was that even though among their parents and elder siblings there was some mixing with Christianity, still “They had a lot of identity and a lot of pride in being Maya.” He contrasts this with “other families who let themselves go more for the other culture. They prefer to be ladino than be Maya.”⁹⁸

Signs of this sentiment are Mayas who drop identifiers of Maya identity such as last names. In fact, in a law exam preparation course, law school students commented that one of the easiest money-makers for lawyers in Guatemala are name changes – specifically, Mayas changing their last names to Spanish ones so that they will not be obviously marked

⁹⁸ Pablo, interview by author, July 24, 2013.

as Maya, at least on paper or when wearing nametags at work. Clear evidence of this are the pages upon pages of legal notices of Hispanicization of Maya last names in newspapers.⁹⁹

While name changes are particularly frequent in the capital, Nan Josefina describes how this also happens in rural caseríos in Sololá. She spoke of Mayas, even URNG candidates for municipal office, who are ashamed of their Kaqchikel last names, so they Hispanicize their given name or change their name entirely to an unrelated Hispanic last name. Nan Josefina said they change their last names due to arrogance or pride. “But why would one not feel pride for one’s own last name?” she said. As an example she said, “A family with the last name ‘Kej’ might change it to ‘Kequez.’ But then they would lose the meaning of ‘Kej’ [a nawal and the word for deer] signifying strength!” she critiqued.

SOTZ’IL’S ORIGINAL MEMBERS: “THEY HAD QUESTIONS ABOUT THEIR OWN IDENTITY”

Jimena joined Sotz’il because of her commitment to do something “for the people” and her “firm belief in the *reivindicación* of ancestral memory.”¹⁰⁰ Also, by that time the youth group was doing “theater, dance, and music” which were “very new” at the time, so that motivated her. She describes the group as a coming together of youth with similar visions.

The development of her commitment to *reivindicación* seems to reflect a common process for youth of this tendency in the years 1996 through 2001 – the period just after the Peace Accords and less than a decade after Rigoberta Menchú’s 1992 Nobel Peace Prize when there were lots of questions of identity at a moment of emerging pride in being Maya. Jimena noted, “Being a youth at that time, I believe [many youth] had questions about their own identity. Many had the experience that no one talked to them at home or in school about their identity.”

Also at that time, Jimena stressed like many others that there was a lot of repression of Maya spirituality. She noted that even as late as 1998 – less than twenty years ago –

⁹⁹ I thank Efrain López Rancho for this insight.

¹⁰⁰ Jimena, interview. Jimena’s life history and quotations in this chapter come from this interview.

there was a silence about many questions of Maya spirituality. Growing up she had learned that in her father's family there had been many *ajq'ijab'* (daykeepers) and *texeles* (senior women *cofrades*). Her father and his siblings had divided their "relics" among themselves. Seeing these relics around the house, Jimena had "a nagging question: Why do we have this relics in the house?" She took an interest in the stories and oral histories told by her grandfather whose religious practice was "half Catholic and half Maya *cosmovisión*." Hearing these stories awoke her curiosity: "There was a great question within me: to go searching deeper for what had happened with my ancestors." She began by talking with her grandfather who had been "part of the groups that are *cofradías* today. But he said that 'cofradía' is something imposed by the Catholic religion." He told her about the more ancestral version: "the community service that is given to the community to eventually become [the traditional] mayor, that is, the *k'amöl b'ey*."¹⁰¹ In the course of history, the Catholic Church took control over this practice."

This internally motivated, nascent interest was amplified when attending the new middle school of *Tijob'al Tz'olaj Ya'* -- a product of the *Tejido Social* movement. At that time, the school's teachers had a "philosophy that was very much of the people, of our roots" -- an important tendency that changed just three years later, according to *Sotz'il* members. Two courses, "Maya Culture" and "Kaqchikel Language," were very important in Jimena's eyes "because we saw our history. In other schools, they teach another history that's not of our roots."

Hence, the environment in the middle school fostered the students' curiosity about their identity. Community leaders visited the school and encouraged the students to inquire into their family and community histories, emphasizing that, in Jimena's words, "There are histories there. You must inquire into them so that our history doesn't end or isn't forgotten."

As a student of *Tijob'al Tz'olaj Ya'*'s new middle school, she and others formed a youth group called *Belejeb' Kan* in 1997. They began to research artists who were "very

¹⁰¹ The spelling in *Kaqchikel* is *k'amöl b'ey*, according to the *OKMA* dictionary (2007). In *Poqomam* it is *k'amolb'ee* as discussed in Chapter 1.

much of the community.” In 2000, they came together with Lisandro’s youth group for meetings and workshops. Then in 2001 they founded a single group called Sotz’il. They viewed their intervention in terms of their current political moment of “post-Peace Accords” for whom peace and identity emerged as their two principal concerns rather than social demands (as other group members also noted about that period). “We had this alternative of not making more violence, but rather having a space of art as a process of peace,” Jimena remarks.¹⁰² Given the context of recovery from a war marked by massacres against Mayas, which was just beginning to be described as genocide, their mandate to “strengthen the identity of more youth” had a sense of survival / “survivance”¹⁰³ for these youth and the community leaders and elders who were guiding them. “Because once identity is lost, it’s like a thread that we were cutting. It’s a historic thread for us and we have to maintain it,” Jimena declared.

Yet, their approach to investigating identity was distinct from the Tejido Social generation of young adults who focused on recovery of governance and Kaqchikel civic institutions, such as community coordinating committees, schools, the Maya justice system, and the municipalities. Sotz’il was interested in exploring ontology in a “deeper” way rather than paying lip service to Maya cosmovisión on a superficial level as they viewed some others as doing, such as through books that describe it like a flattened blueprint. Jimena said that first they began with “dialogue” among youth “with the same vision.” It quickly evolved to something more profound for them:

Then we went on walks to the mountaintops – to have a field day, but also to connect ourselves with something that we did not know, but that attracted us, not only for recreation, but because there was an essence that pulled us to do this.

We also visited elder women and men of our community. We began by approaching our parents and grandparents [that is, their own family]. Then we did this in our community [at large]. We were investigating: Did Maya spirituality still exist? Or what happened in history?

¹⁰² Her statement recalls public addresses given by Lisandro’s father before 2006 where he called upon the community to have “no more violence” because they want “no more orphans.” In a tragic turn of history, due to the ongoing community division, this father’s grandchildren, grandnephews, and grandnieces are orphans.

¹⁰³ (Vizenor 2008)

We also began to make radio segments about Maya culture and the nawales of the Maya calendar for the community radio.¹⁰⁴ It was like a test (*ejercicio*) for the community: What was their perspective on hearing for the first time – in this space – something referring to our identity?

It is hard to believe now, but just twenty years ago – just in 1998, as Jimena emphasized – you wouldn't see Maya spiritual ceremonies openly the way you do today. Regarding Maya spirituality, the Maya Movement accomplished a huge feat of regeneration considering not only the immediate period of genocide but centuries of subordination of Maya ontology.

Furthermore, Tijob'al Tz'oluj Ya', as a product of the Tejido Social movement, helped to re-generate the interest in Maya reivindicación so that the next generation not only reproduced an interest in reivindicación, but they expanded on and evolved it into a more complex trajectory that could overcome the limitations of the previous generation.

Sotz'il's intervention: Reivindicación of Maya Ontologies and Practices

Sotz'il members critique the Folkloric Ballet of Guatemala for performing Maya dances as a "show." "At times they play with the [ceremonial] fire, copying elders like ajq'ijab' also. They shouldn't be copied," states an original group member.¹⁰⁵ Another original group member says that Sotz'il decided to only represent and create from what they themselves were living. He said that to represent others, like the cofrades, would not "correspond" to them or be appropriate for them because it would end up being at best a reduction and at worst an insult.¹⁰⁶ Instead, Sotz'il focuses on making original theater. As Pablo stated, "We are contemporary Mayas and we take a hold of themes that hurt us, that are detrimental to our current situation."¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ They did this radio show for one year, in 2001, and didn't continue. This is distinct from Ernesto Guarcax's radio program *Siwan Tinamit* that ran from about 2006 through about 2010.

¹⁰⁵ Rafael, interview.

¹⁰⁶ Alejandro, interview.

¹⁰⁷ Pablo, interview.

For example, Sotz'il directly addressed the topic of religious colonization in their first theater production, *Xajoj Q'ojom Kaji' Imox* (2005). "We wanted to integrate in the play how they were organized politically and the change of authorities, which today is only seen a little through the change of authority of the Indigenous mayors. Since the Pop Wuj, duality has always been practiced" by having two governors, says Rafael. He adds that to develop the play, Sotz'il members had a discussion about what resistance means for them and about "what have we lost, what do we still have today."¹⁰⁸

Set in the period of the Spanish invasion and genocide, Sotz'il's first play presents Kaji' Imox's strategies to resist the Spanish invaders and protect the Kaqchikel people, in consultation with Maya ancestors and nawales. Particularly controversial is the climactic scene in which Kaji' Imox throws the statue of a Catholic saint to the ground, shattering it. Rafael says that in Maya society this scene's critique of Catholic religion is "a bit strong" and that audiences "understand it quickly, and some do not accept it." On the other hand, he and others have said that some audience members cry over seeing their history of colonization represented. Rafael adds, "We too have cried. For that moment, it makes you feel the strength within the play. It's more than a teaching. We enter into the being of the person. ... It gave us more strength."¹⁰⁹

Testifying to the lasting impact of this theater performance, to this day interviewees have strong memories tied to the emotion of first seeing this play between 2005 until its final performances in 2007 or 2008. In interviews, they have mentioned crying after performances. I also witnessed a father in his thirties whose eyes were tear-stained after a community presentation of *Oxlajuj B'aqtun*.

Celestino and Lisandro Guarcax have commented that Kaji' Imox's resistance paved the way for Maya people to survive, resisting, in the centuries since the Spanish invasion:

Kaji' Imox decides to give up the resistance of war, and take on another kind of resistance. He turns himself in, and thus lives under captivity until the Spanish execute him – but the Maya people survive, practicing our

¹⁰⁸ Rafael, interview.

¹⁰⁹ Rafael, interview.

culture without assimilation. And we have survived in the 500 years since.¹¹⁰

Sotz'il views their work as a continuation of the resistance that Kaji' Imox initiated through their everyday practice and valorization – *reivindicación* – of Maya culture. They specifically seek to make an intervention through theater, dance, and music. Pablo alludes to one aspect of this intervention in a workshop on Maya music that they led for a public audience in Antigua (Sotz'il, Nim Q'ojom 2013).

Pablo sat on a bench behind a display of Sotz'il's instruments which were laid out on a weaving on the floor. He explained each of the different families of instruments one by one. “The ocarina kept evolving to become what is known today as the flauta,” he said, noting that the top chamber that you blow into is called the “cara” (face). In fact, some were shaped to look like human or animal faces.

Speaking about musical instrument during the “Classic Maya” period, Pablo said, “There is evidence of string instruments.” He showed a slide of “Classic Maya” iconography and explained, “The string communicates with the sounding box.”

Sotz'il's purpose in teaching this audience about ancestral Maya instruments was to advance Sotz'il's *reivindicación* project of, in Pablo's words, “reviving the word [that is, the speaking] of these instruments. Through these instruments we can return to years ago, to hear our ancestors. Then go forward to create our future.” Through this comment, Pablo communicated Sotz'il's perspective that instruments speak -- that is, the musical instruments also are viewed as other-than-human persons in their capacity to speak. He drew a connection between ancestral revitalization and Maya futures. Furthermore, Sotz'il invited the workshop attendees to “be part of this new sounding of these instruments.”

Pablo answered a question about the marimba, stating that its origin is in Africa and Asia. He stated that the difference between these versions and the version played in Guatemala is the “material and tonality.” He also said that the drum (*tambor*) came from the Spaniards and the shawm (*chirimía*) from the Arabs. Thus, Pablo admitted that the instruments that define the Maya music of *cofradías* are not necessarily of Maya origin.

¹¹⁰ José Celestino Guarcax González, quoted in (Thelen 2008, 54).

However, he still considered them to be well within the world of traditional Maya music, stating, “What is important is the inspiration for these instruments. A Maya inspiration has been maintained.” He said this is similar to “guitars: the form of the musical creation and the dynamic of using it is what makes it Maya.” He concluded that Mayas “have adapted” these instruments, and then as Sotz’il “we compile this inspiration” (Sotz’il, Nim Q’ojom 2013).

Jimena said that Sotz’il contributes to the struggle for Maya “identity” in this way: “Art has been a more visual form – to be able to more profoundly touch many things that as Maya people we have repressed. Through art, it’s not necessary to talk, because you see it, and you can appreciate it.” Jimena states that the art of Sotz’il doesn’t only apply to a specific Maya region due to historic similarities – a similar root -- among various Maya pueblos: “The needs of the Maya people are diverse but not different. And we end up at the same point of what wounds us, what distresses us.”

Jimena notes that Sotz’il’s project of reivindicación is particularly meaningful for Mayas who have migrated to the capital. When I mentioned how through theater Sotz’il portrays scenes like the tuj or a grandmother chasing after a turkey in her patio, Jimena said:

Sotz’il shows us something that is lived in the rural community but not in the city. So it’s a form of showing that these legacies still exist and perhaps in the capital we have lost them due to the assimilation of the system and of other cultures that have assimilated us. [...]

I think it is [Sotz’il’s] very strategic way of making it known to those who have migrated that we have to re-connect again. And it is an alternative of how to be a society that is more conscious and just, including being more just with Mother Nature.

On the other hand, Alejandro notes that it is unfortunate that Sotz’il’s plays have not had the funding to go to the most remote and marginalized rural Maya communities.¹¹¹ Having been a schoolteacher in a remote rural community, he believes that it is those communities that have been hit hardest by the historic stigmatization of Maya practices

¹¹¹ Alejandro, interview.

and identity (by powerful institutions like the state, churches, and military). Because of their marginalization, they have not had access to alternative perspectives afforded by Maya organizations or other sectors. Sotz'il's plays would show an alternative – the path of *reivindicación*.

CHALLENGES TO PARTICIPATION

Some original members of the youth group couldn't keep participating due to economic needs. Lorenzo for example notes that even though he really enjoyed participating in Sotz'il, he had to take a leave of absence for three years since his family had major economic problems with the bankruptcy of their tiendas (family-run stores) and having to pay back debts. "All we had left was our house," he said. "I couldn't think only of myself. I saw that my younger brothers did not have what I had at their age."¹¹²

Part of the issue is that until recently, Sotz'il members did not get paid for all the hours they devote to rehearsing. Even today with some funding from international donor agencies, the salary is not much compared to other jobs even in the rural areas of Guatemala where wages are lower than in urban areas. One member told me that his wife was pressuring him to finally build a house for their young family. Until then they had been living with his wife's family, which runs against the norm. As more Sotz'iles start having families, this economic pressure to care for their children is bound to increase.

Unlike Lorenzo, who eventually returned to Sotz'il, Jimena did not, like many of the original members. She stated, "Although the group gave you many opportunities, one also had to look for how to support oneself (*auto-sostenerse*)." Once she finished Diversificado (High School) it was "like a fact (*un hecho*) – it's the story of many youth: 'OK, you should begin to work and support yourself.'" (Jimena didn't clarify if this voice is her own voice speaking to herself, or that of her parents, or some mixture of the two.) She attests that many participants in the original youth group had to leave the group because upon graduating from high school they no longer had time nor "resources" and were expected to fulfill additional responsibilities in their households.

¹¹² Lorenzo, interview.

Compounding the problem of earning a living, Guatemala is a very centralized country with most institutions, infrastructure, and even Maya Movement organizations located in the capital, Guatemala City, and secondarily in the second largest city, Quetzaltenango. Jimena too had the experience that “the spaces of growth” for both work and studies were located in the capital, which boasts the best universities with the most diverse options for career specialization. Pursuing these opportunities of “growth” meant that she had to leave the group: “If you had to work in the capital, there was no way to rehearse” with Sotz’il since the rehearsals were on weekdays.

Obtaining parental permission was another major obstacle to participation for many youth especially when their families were strictly Christian. Pablo said, “Sometimes the families yes, will permit them to dance (danzar) and to attend group meetings, but when the youth touch the depth of the spirituality of the culture is when the parents say ‘No – no more. Yes, you can dance; yes, you can play music; but be in a ceremony? NO.’”¹¹³

Particularly in the beginning, some youth dropped out voluntarily because “they no longer seek the profundity that the group seeks,” says Pablo, referring to Sotz’il’s explorations of Maya ontology and the suppressed aspects of Maya culture. However, there has been “friction ... between the group and the family of some participants” when parents have forced their children to leave the group. Pablo explains:

We’ve been in the situation in which we have had problems with the families of youth or children that have been training here. Because normally we leave it up to the youth to decide voluntarily if they want to receive our training (*una formación*). At other moments we have had to ask permission and authorization from the parents. But some youth, because they want to be part of the group yet know that their father will not permit them, show up and tell us, “Yes, they let me and I’m here, it’s no problem.” But, there came a moment when a parent came to complain to us and said, “No, I do not want my son to learn this, and especially because we belong to a religion [Christianity]. So please do not call him.” As if we were pressuring the young man, when really it was [the young man] who wanted this. But unfortunately, due to the [Christian] ideologies he couldn’t [continue to participate].¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Pablo, interview, July 31, 2013.

¹¹⁴ Pablo, interview.

Jimena explains this conflict between interested youth and their families: “Many youth were motivated by listening to these radio programs” (which were one of Sotz’il’s first projects) since they had “questions about their own identity. Many had the experience that no one talked to them at home or in the schools about their identity. So it was something novel for the youth.” However, she adds:

But for the parents who were in the communities, it was somewhat uncomfortable to hear these radio programs [that Sotz’il created] due to their [Christian] religion. So, much of the population didn’t look well upon it. These critiques of [Maya] culture (la cultura) surfaced again, that it’s something bad.”

In fact, many youth whom we invited [to Sotz’il meetings] couldn’t attend because their parents didn’t give them permission. They always said to us: “Ah, it’s because you practice another culture that doesn’t go with our own,” or “because you drink a lot of alcohol.” That is, there were certain [accusations] that were false that they said to their children so that they wouldn’t take an interest in us.

Jimena identifies a couple causes of the “community’s reaction”:

One [reason] is because they lived a historic repression. So they fear a return to practicing [Maya cosmovisión] because of what society might say. Another [reason] is that the [Christian] religions had a lot of influence over communities through which they cut off this practice. Thus, there was fear, disinformation, and also the religions castrated the communities.

Obstacles to participate in Sotz’il were compounded for women. When Sotz’il started with middle and high school students, there were more female members in Sotz’il than males. Jimena notes that this was a novel circumstance at that time and that these young women’s contributions were “breaking with [the pattern] that in many spaces only men participate.”

Yet women’s participation eventually dropped, and since at least 2005 Sotz’il has had only one female member at a time. The first, Ana, was related to the majority of group members. That familial relationship insulated her to some degree from factors that forced most women to leave. The current female member is Mam from Huehuetenango. Since she now lives far from her community and in another Maya linguistic region, she is not confronted with her community’s critique on a daily basis.

The first reason that women had to drop their participation in Sotz'il is that young women have more work responsibilities than men, especially after they graduate from school. Their parents and/or spouses expect them to do housework – women's *oficio* -- after coming home from work or school, “or they had to take care of their younger siblings,” says Jimena. She adds, “Thus, breaking this circle [pattern] that families live [like a gendered division of labor] and that later the community recognizes that there are women dancers (danzantes) – this is something very new.”

The second reason that women had to drop their participation in Sotz'il was that among Maya rural communities, parents and husbands expect that a married woman with children “stay in the house and attend to her husband and her children, but not support other groups” outside the house, says Jimena, who adds:

If you formed a family, it was unlikely that the husband would give permission to his wife to continue participating. [...] It's discrimination and it's not looked upon well by the society 'that the woman who has already formed a family and has children participate in a dance group.' So many of the women accede that it's better to leave the group for good.

Jimena says that due to this discrimination, “the Indigenous woman is classified as the one who stays in the house. The man is the one who has the right to go out for recreation or work, but not the woman.” She stresses that this impacts not only Sotz'il: “the limited participation of the woman is not only in the artistic realm but also in the social, political, and economic realms. And practically the woman has a very internal struggle and resists all these situations.”

Furthermore, as a result of groups being mostly composed of men, it is not considered “decent for women” to participate in groups, a sentiment which is compounded for a theater and dance group. Pablo states that another obstacle to the participation of women in Sotz'il is

social inequalities... the abuse of the woman, psychologically. Perhaps even physically. This has created certain social stereotypes that are unfounded. For example, when a woman joins a group, people [in the community] make comments that she's a tramp (“Es una cualquiera”) or that “she likes to be with men.”¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Pablo, interview.

Jimena says that the sense that participating in groups is not “decent for a woman” was exacerbated in the case of Sotz’il because people looked down on the group when it started:

At that time, people frequently said, “Those who are spending time forming youth groups are doing it because they do not have work and they do not have anything to do! They do not have principles or values in their houses. They’re not in the habit of respecting their parents.” This was the image [of Sotz’il].

These judgments created an environment in which the young women felt ashamed to dance and perform in theater, especially during Sotz’il’s early years around 2001-2005. Jimena says:

It was novel at that time, so it was very difficult for us to express ourselves – through gesture, and having to express what we felt through some action. I believe that [as Maya women] we carry a lot of fear, a lot of repressed shame, so presenting and expressing oneself before an audience is difficult [...] especially when one felt that what one was doing is not a mere dance but rather that it was imbued with the ceremonial. [...] In contrast, for the young men, it was easier to express themselves – it flowed out of them.

Once a woman started to participate in Sotz’il, she faced another set of challenges in overcoming the stereotypical representations of Maya women in acting. Cabrera notes that representations of Maya women in Guatemala in theater and film have historically been limited to “the woman who has suffered” (“la mujer sufrida,” as if this is her natural condition) or “the one who does the cleaning” (“quién hace la limpieza”).

Jimena suggests that these stereotypical performances of Maya women to some degree had been internalized by the women actors and, in Sotz’il’s early years, were the easiest expressions for them to reproduce – in contrast to other emotions such as anger or delight. She says:

I think that what was easiest to express were actions of sadness. That wasn’t the case with expressing happiness or other emotions. I believe that what flowed out most easily was sadness – playing the role of lamentation.

As we will see in Chapter 6, women actors and the women's group of Sotz'il have since been challenging these stereotypical portrayals of Maya women as "victim" and "la mujer sufrida." Their plays represent empowered autonomous Maya worlds – even when fighting back against the Spanish invasion or mining. Hence, they do not represent Maya society as victimized or as occupying the lower rungs in a capitalist hierarchy, and they do not portray stereotypes that reproduce these hierarchies, such as Maya women in the role of domestic workers and cleaning women.

Rupturing convention even as they revive ancestral tradition

Hence, even as they sought to revive ancestral tradition, the youth of Sotz'il – and particularly the women -- ruptured many conventions of their local society. Yet they had the support of certain elders in their communities. Jimena reflects that for all the challenges facing women actors and dancers,

On the other hand, there are always groups of people who encourage the work of youth. At our presentations, many elders would express their thanks "that the women and men are taking this up again." It's something that they wanted to do but never dared to. For one thing, there was the repression that they lived through during the armed conflict. Afterwards, they had to keep quiet about these situations due to the [Christian] religion. So, they thought it better not to do it. It's like a desire that they had, and upon seeing that the youth of today were doing it – it's like their desire had been realized.

Sotz'il also noted that they should take a stand in correcting injustices and hierarchies of ancient and pre-colonial Maya society. Pablo offers his view of contemporary "machismo in Maya culture":

There's a lot of discussion about gender equity in Maya culture. Now there isn't any. Right before the [Spanish] Invasion, the Maya culture almost didn't have [gender equity] – there wasn't much presence of women. But if we go much farther back and analyze the Codices, there were women governors – as if there was equilibrium. But at another historical moment, right before the Invasion, really there was a discrepancy in equilibrium in which the masculine gender dominated.

But we do not rule out that at some moment in Maya culture, yes, there was equilibrium. The Pop Wuj matters a lot: the grandmother Ixmukane; the Heart of Earth and of Sky complemented each other; there was a lot of equity, equilibrium, and harmony.

Pablo suggests that “if in the past” something in Maya society wasn’t correct or just, as with questions of “gender equity,” then:

... today as Mayas we should propose how it ought to be -- to reconstruct this cultural continuation. Because sometimes Maya culture is talked about with a lot of romanticism, saying that Maya culture was like being in paradise for example, taking this Biblical idea [of a past of Eden] – that all was without problems, without difficulties, without conflicts. But really there were a lot of conflicts, as with any culture. In certain moments completeness (plenitude) was found, and at other moments you have your lows and social and political problems. We find in the Pop Wuj that Wuqu’ Qak’ix wanted to dominate, but that the twins did not let him. There is always a power struggle also. There are always difficulties and conflicts within a culture.

Part of this—and it was not only the [Spanish] invasion that imposed these kinds of issues and cultural conflicts – is that we also should recognize that what is Maya is not always beautiful.

Jimena too notes the investigative curiosity that Maya women have had about women in Maya history. In researching aspects of their history and culture that have been repressed and silenced, Sotz’il is navigating representations of Maya ontology and coming to terms with gender roles in contemporary times as well as at different moments in the long history of Maya civilization.

Fears that Music Stirs Rebellion

In the play *Oxlajuj B’aqtun*, flute music liberates Jun Ajpu and the Jaguar nawal. Sotz’il views music as being alive and having the capacity to liberate. Pablo notes that “during the time of the [Spanish] Invasion, many musicians were executed. Why? Because music vindicates you (*la música te reivindica*).” He continues:

Christianity sought to keep Mayas from having contact with spirituality, from the perspective of their *cosmovisión*. But music succeeded [in maintaining this contact] in this sense: when our grandparents began to play music, this was a threat to the invaders, because the people began to have feelings (*sentimientos*) and memories

of their *cosmovisión*. So music was a form of drawing close to their spirituality, because it brought memories.

At a certain moment, all this was prohibited. You could no longer play music, similar to what happened to Afro-descendant brothers and sisters – that they were no longer permitted to play their music because it brought memories and made them feel their being (*sentir su ser*).

There are very powerful stories about how one way of practicing spirituality is through music. Our ancestors would gather in hidden places to play music with a certain audience. Clearly, [they were] up against the swords of the oppression and [Spanish] Invasion. But there were many cases in which they went there playing music and were decapitated.¹¹⁶

Telling this history of Maya ancestors being decapitated just for playing music reminds Pablo of an experience when Sotz'il performed at a festival in France. When they were walking with one of the festival organizers, “a French man of African origin” came up to the organizer and Lisandro. The organizer was carrying Sotz'il's *timbal*, dual barrel-shaped drums that are strapped with a faja around the waist and are similar in shape to a pair of conga drums. Pablo recounts,

And Lisandro told him, “If you'd like, we'll play something. Let's try the drum,” etc. The guy had been asking us where we came from, what we were doing there. He and his friend were really interested. They didn't want to go away, because they felt among family with us. Imagine, in France, finding yourself with people of your-- like he felt a bond with us. And the organizer told us, “NO, no, no, [do not play] because they're there and it could cause them certain emotions” that the organizer didn't want. But we realized that – having met us, it impacted them and it made them have a connection with their culture. [...]

As I sought to clarify this episode, Pablo said that the young man:

... didn't want to detach himself (*despegar*) from us. He was asking and asking. The organizer didn't want [us to play the *timbal*] because it could cause even wailing (*un llanto*) or whatever emotion from within the person. The organizer didn't want to be responsible for this. He said, “It could even--” – the organizer was discriminatory – “there could be aggression from him.” I realized that it was causing a certain sentimental effect in him. He saw the drum, the *flauta*, and he wanted to hear.

¹¹⁶ Pablo, interview.

Sotz'il encountered anti-Black racism and xenophobia in France. The organizer of the French performing arts festival expressed his anxiety that Maya music could bring out aggression from a Black French man. Pablo recalled this story after having recounted the Spanish Invaders' prohibition of Maya music, dance, and theater out of fear of anti-colonial rebellion.

Sotz'il's experience with a performing arts festival in France shows clearly that racism and discrimination against former colonial subjects who practice non-Christian spiritualities is not exclusively a dynamic within Maya communities in Guatemala. It points to a larger process of colonization and the global construction of race and racism that has influenced Maya communities to internalize these dynamics into a particular expression of internalized racism. This experience also recalls the history of Indigenous peoples being brought to perform on national and international tours, including most notoriously *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* and the World's Fairs, as part of wars of conquest and imperialism (for example, see Deloria 2004). It is beyond the scope of this present dissertation to analyze Sotz'il's experiences of performing internationally in comparison and contrast with international speaking tours of Maya activists and with Mayas funded by the Guatemalan government and business sectors, but this is an important area for further research and analysis.

CONCLUSION

Theater allows Sotz'il to respond to an issue that pains them: the assimilation of Maya youth through the denial of Indigenous history and ontology in Guatemala's ladino society. Particularly before the Peace Accords, older generations kept ceremonies hidden due to both military and social repression. However, after the Peace Accords when the cuates generation experienced openings for Maya organizing and cultural expression, Sotz'il began to create theater in the public sphere. They see theater as a forum to literally put Maya experience "center stage" – and in particular, how they experience Maya ontology and its role in liberating Maya people. They felt this was a necessary response to the problem they identified as primary for them: that in their communities, less youth are

practicing Maya ontological practices due to repression and discriminatory Christian evangelization.

According to Lisandro, some tension had occurred in Sotz'il's early years when some elders felt that spiritual ceremonies and ontological practices should be kept secret.¹¹⁷ Sotz'il had felt the opposite: that Maya ontology in ancient times was not kept secret since rituals were performed in public plazas, and that colonization forced Mayas to hide their ontological practices. Furthermore, Sotz'il and their peers have experienced the negative consequences of having been denied a basic knowledge of Maya ontology due to condemnation by neighbors and their families. Furthermore, with the proliferating construction of Evangelical and Pentecostal churches on their communities' landscape, these youth may feel the hegemonic presence of Christianity and not know where they can learn about Maya ontology in a deeper way.

Hence, Sotz'il's body of work responds to the sociopolitical and psychological process of stigmatization and internalized colonization. Over the next few chapters, we will see how Sotz'il's plays bring stigmatized elements of Maya ontology to light. They embody elements of Maya ontological practices and histories that many young Mayas have been "prohibited from seeing and hearing."¹¹⁸

This artistic space of collective creation has been newly open to Mayas since the Peace Accords. Spanish colonization had forced Maya-authored narratives underground. As one powerful example, Lisandro cites the prohibitions of Maya colonial-era performances commemorating Kaji' Imox's execution by the Spanish.¹¹⁹

Now that we have examined why *reivindicación* (cultural dignification and vindication) became a powerful motivator for youth founders of Sotz'il, in chapters 4 through 7, I will explore why Sotz'il's theater is powerful to Maya performers and audiences: what does it do for them? Through ethnographic methods, I will first analyze Sotz'il's process of collective creation of the play *Uk'u'x Ulew*; next, their process of body

¹¹⁷ Lisandro Guarcax, interview.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

training; then, the content of Sotz'il's play *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* in community performances; and finally, audience responses to performances of the play *Oxlajuj B'aqtun*.

Chapter 4. Playing with Sensory Worldings: Sotz'il's Process of Collective Creation

I cut the electric cables
So that the machines would stop.
Because the mining [industry] is contaminating
My womb,
My blood,
My hair,
My body: Mother Nature.

The Lords of Xib'alb'a are entering my womb.
They want to kill my daughter.
And if she dies, I dry up.
The seed will no longer sprout.¹²⁰

* * * * *

After processing around the circular performance area, Earth takes items out of the bundle on her back. She arranges the items on the floor around her with sensitivity and care. Some of the materials are the same as those used in ceremonies, such as ocote. Others are weaving materials, such as yarn. After laying these materials in their place, Earth sweeps the border of her circle, similar to the way participants sweep ceremonial spaces before arranging materials for a ceremony on Mother Earth.

Earth adds charcoal to her clay bowl, then Fire lights it to create a smoking fire. Wind joins them to blows his breath through with a long reed blow pipe into the smoking

¹²⁰ *Ixkik* (2013) as performed in February 2013 rehearsals.

carbon until it finally lights into a bright and dramatic fire. Then Wind fans the fire with owl wings that cover his hands.

As she is arranging and cleaning her home space, Earth goes into labor. Her groans and pained pauses for labor contractions take her into a squat-dance that evokes women's birthing squats. Earth moves counterclockwise with the squatting dance around the fire placed in the circle's center. A wide faja is wrapped around her. She faces the center and bounces twice in a wide-leg squat; then pivots on her right leg, turning until she faces outside to again squat and bounce twice. She repeats this movement sequence for several minutes as she revolves around the central fire, until she starts groaning more forcefully. As Earth circles around and around the fire, she pulls up her corte in order to bend down further.

On the Eastern perimeter of the stage, Fire is tending the kotz'ij fire under his charge by putting more incense on the charcoal. Earth leans over with a hand on her lower back, as if she feels lower back pain. Earth's groans build to screams as Dog howls with her. He is crouched and tense in a corner of the stage. As Grandmother Moon drums with escalating intensity, the character Fire adds incense to the bowl of charcoal, producing growing billows of perfumed smoke.¹²¹

The previous chapter explored why *reivindicación* (cultural dignification and vindication) became a powerful motivator for youth founders of Sotz'il. I looked in detail at the context of discrimination faced by young Mayas growing up in Sololá. In the next three chapters, via different ethnographic contexts and foci, I examine why Sotz'il's theater is powerful to Maya performers and audiences: what does it do for them ontologically and politically? In this chapter, I analyze Sotz'il's process of collective creation from conception of the play through staging in order to understand how Sotz'il develops an ontologically-based political critique through theater. I contend that the process of Sotz'il's creative theater development is a significant part of what makes it political. Their method of embodied experimentation and brainstorming as a collective allows them to work

¹²¹ *Uk'u'x Ulew* as performed in September 2013 rehearsals.

through a political and cultural critique, deepen the meaning that Maya ontology holds for them, and bring theater worlds to life through visioning and dialogue that elicit cultural details from their community and family histories.

I consider Sotz'il creative process to be in the same category of political strategies as open-ended political visioning. Yet, although theorists of "politics as process" advocate for ongoing, inclusive political visioning processes in place of fixed ideologies, these theorists have largely neglected the experimental space of theater. In this chapter, I analyze Indigenous theater as a space of collective experimental visioning that has the potential to continually shape Maya ethicopolitical commitments through its ongoing, unscripted quest to produce embodied stories that move people through lived dilemmas of their community.

In this chapter, I examine Sotz'il's creative process and staging rehearsals of the play *Uk'u'x Ulew* through an ethnographic analysis in order to discover how Sotz'il negotiates the content and political intent of Maya world-making during theatrical staging and performance. This analysis will help readers understand theater's potential as a space for experimental and open-ended visioning through worldings.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Sotz'il's latest play *Uk'u'x Ulew (Heart of the Earth)* is perhaps an unexpected way to protest mining as it contrasts with the agit prop approach to artmaking as protest. Recognizing that persuasion in their communities occurs not only through the West's primary epistemology of rational argumentation, but also through tuning in to their familiar senses and sensibilities of being Maya, this play is their invitation to audiences to tune in to Mother Nature and appreciate her with as much fervor as the Maya communities that are organizing to defend the mountains from the violations caused by mining. It appeals to audience's experiences of hurt, longing, warm familiarity, and familial belonging. For this line of argumentation, I draw upon Hirschkind's argument that ethicopolitical commitments among working-class Muslims in Egypt are formed through aesthetic sensibilities which are valued culturally above cognitive rational argumentation. Hirschkind theorizes that in Islamic societies, affect and ethical "heart" often powerfully

influence political commitments— despite being disparaged by the Western modernist project in its privileging of rational argumentation, or the head over the heart (2009).

Yet, the political force of desire has been channeled by arts-political movements such as surrealism, as has been noted by various theorists. Raquel Gutiérrez theorizes a political process of social emancipation in Bolivia through the notion of a “horizon of desire” that was partly inspired by Bloch (1959). She cites this passage in particular:

Impulse manifests itself *at first* as an ‘aspiration,’ as a kind of hunger. If the aspiration *is felt*, it becomes a ‘desire,’ the only sincere state experienced by mankind. The desire is less vague and general than impulse, but at least it is clearly directed outwardly. . . . (For the desire to be satisfied) it has to direct itself clearly at something. Thus determined, it stops moving in every direction and it becomes a ‘seeking’ that has and does not have what it pursues, in a movement toward an objective (Bloch 1959, 74 as quoted in Gutiérrez 2014, 229n35).

Bloch’s and Gutiérrez’s notions of a horizon of desire is more directive than the sensibilities that Hirschkind theorizes and they do not as specifically appeal to embodied affect or the human “sensorium,” despite Bloch’s allusion to these desires being “felt” (embodied?) and “sincere” (affect?). However, both Bloch and Gutiérrez emphasize the ever-evolving process of social emancipation. Bloch’s “Not-Yet” is not a fixed utopia but a horizon – or a “horizon of desire” in Gutiérrez’s theorization. Participants in the process are shaped and empowered by the process itself more so than by the achievement of a particular political goal.

In *Intercultural Utopias*, Joanne Rappaport highlights “workshops as a key space of interpretation” (90), and as “appropriation and re-appropriation,” since “we¹²² all stand on the frontier” (Rappaport 2005, 89). Through ethnography, Rappaport describes how regional Nasas translate concepts of Nasa cosmovision (the “cosmovision project”) for local intellectuals, health workers, and priests by drawing upon standard NGO and anthropology “workshop” discursive conventions like sketching binary diagrams onto newsprint or flipcharts. Rappaport argues that shamanic knowledge gets mediated into a rather flattened blueprint for communication with the “outside world.”

¹²² Referring to the range of interethnic colaboradores to regional Nasa intellectuals.

Sotz'il too holds workshops (to teach others about their form of theater) and rehearsals for members that involve translations and mediation of cosmovisión and what Rappaport calls "shamanic knowledge." Even though Sotz'il sometimes passes through a blueprint stage during the creative process – outlining the dramatic structure of their plays on newsprint in their altar room – I propose that the creative process of embodied theater is more akin to world-making (worlding). Sotz'il does not seek to represent Maya cosmovisión through a reductive and fixed blueprint of key attributes, nor does Maya cosmovisión become the object of their theater. Rather, Maya cosmovisión and ontological practices inform the world and ontological environment they shape on stage which breathes and responds realistically (truthfully) to the fictional dramatic conflicts and dilemmas portrayed in their plays. This "worlding" is political in the ways theorized by Arendt and then expressed by Hirschkind:

the activities that constitute the public arena I describe are political in a way close to the sense Hannah Arendt (1958) gives to the term: the activities of ordinary citizens who, through the exercise of their agency in contexts of public interaction, shape the conditions of their collective existence. As conceived by its participants, this arena constitutes that space of communal reflexivity and action understood as necessary for perfecting and sustaining the totality of practices upon which an Islamic society depends. (Hirschkind 2009, 8)

I propose that Hirschkind's theorization can be applied to the context of Sotz'il's Maya theater. By shaping worlds and conducting "communal reflexivity and action," Sotz'il may be influencing "conditions of their collective existence" as Mayas of the cuates generation, with the broader effect of "sustaining the totality of practices upon which" a vindicated Maya society "depends." Ascertaining if this is, in fact, the case is the focus of this chapter.

OVERVIEW OF PHASES OF SOTZ'IL'S CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

Unlike many Western theater groups, Sotz'il does not use a pre-written script nor do they write their own script. In the course of their performances, their work is not fixed to a textual rendering like a script. Rather, they sketch out a dramatic structure and develop the play through embodied improvisation. When Luis Carlos Piñeda, a ladino Guatemalan

theater artist, asked to include Sotz'il's play *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* in his second anthology of political theater in Guatemala, Sotz'il transcribed their play – which had already been in performance – into textual form in both Kaqchikel and Spanish. However, this was not for purposes of their performance, but rather for their work to be included in this book about leading political theater in Guatemala.

The following are the steps that comprise Sotz'il's process for developing new plays. Sotz'il allowed me to observe a couple rehearsals of each phase of their process:

1. Start with a Maya text as inspiration.

Sotz'il has generally started with a base text or oral history as inspiration for developing its plays. The first play *Xajoj Q'ojom Kaji' Imox* was based on Memorial de Sololá / Anales de los Cakchiqueles (Recinos 1950); the second play *Ajchowen* was inspired by stories from the Pop Wuj; and the third play *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* was loosely based on the books of Chilam B'alam.¹²³ Sotz'il's fourth play *Uk'u'x Ulew* is the only one that was not based on a Maya text produced in the colonial era. Instead, certain of its scenes draw from cofradía rituals.

2. Background readings on topics of interest for the play, then meet to discuss what new ideas this provokes.

Rather than working with a dramaturg, Sotz'il does all its own research.

3. The group organizes a community investigation as they “look for the dramatic structure” of the play.

Sotz'il designs their protocol of interview questions as a group. Individually or in pairs, they then interview elders, activists, and leaders of Maya organizations about topics that will help them develop the narrative of their play. In the case of *Uk'u'x Ulew*, they asked questions related to mining and the care of Mother Nature. They also generally take

¹²³ David, pers. comm., 2011.

a research trip as a group. Finally, they meet as a group to synthesize and discuss the results of their research.

As their research trip in developing the play *Uk'u'x Ulew*, Sotz'il traveled to Polochic in the Río Cahobón Valley to visit with Q'eq'chi community representatives about their organized resistance to resource extraction projects such as mining and hydroelectric dams (in September 2013). In recent years, Q'eq'chi resistance in the region has resulted in brutal evictions by police and military.

4. Looking for the Dramatic Structure: As a group, they outline ideas for the narrative arc of their play.

5. STAGING: Staging rehearsals encourage embodied improvisation and play to “dar vida a la estructura” (give life to the dramatic structure).

6. Ensayos de Nawales: On a semi-weekly basis throughout the creative development of their play, Sotz'il engages in closed rehearsals called “ensayos de nawales” whose stated purpose is to explore the relation between their dance and music and the movements of the nawales.

7. In the final stages, the group does a preliminary presentation for community elders of their work-in-progress as a “validation” of their play.

Traditionally, this type of consultation is called *pixab'* in Maya community life. After this private presentation, the floor is open to the elders to comment on the play. “They might say ‘Here what you do is good, but this is not.’ They correct you. And that’s what we wanted from the start. ... It’s a lesson,” says original member Rafael.

Sotz'il takes into account the elders’ corrections, backing (*aval*), and all other feedback as they enter the final staging rehearsals of their play and before they publicly present their play.

As Sotz'il develops a new play, they continue their other activities such as:

- Their daily committee work. This includes the preparation of sets and traje; curriculum development for their workshops with children and youth; and administration.
- Facilitating workshops with youth and children in different communities.
- Presentations of their current play, including with arts festivals and at community celebrations.
- Participation in Ri Ak'u'x's projects, including making videos of other Maya arts groups, facilitating orientation meetings with grantees of Ri Ak'u'x (to share their projects with one another), and holding spiritual ceremonies before important events.
- Participation in national and international arts festivals, particularly those focused on Indigenous arts such as Riddu Riddu in Saami territory in Norway.

THE POLITICS OF ART: DRAMATIC STRUCTURING REHEARSALS

Sotz'il's ontological and political perspectives get woven into the fabric of their plays through the decision-making process that shapes the creative development of Sotz'il's plays. Through the questions that the stage director asks to provoke discussion and facilitate brainstorming, Sotz'il's ontological and political interests are drawn out from their life experiences and woven into the play. To demonstrate this, I draw upon vignettes from my field notes of two meetings in which Sotz'il discussed their community research to generate ideas for the dramatic structure of their play *Uk'u'x Ulew*. The first rehearsal that I describe below, on June 11, 2013, was focused on a political discussion that grew out of a summary of findings from their community research. The second rehearsal, on June 12, 2013, shifts into a discussion centered on Maya ontological thought and perception.

On Tuesday, June 11, 2013, the Sotz'iles re-grouped for their second meeting dedicated to "looking for the dramatic structure." At that point, their working title was *Nan Ulew: Mother Earth*. After listening to the typed summary of the results of their research, Cabrera repeats that the purpose of doing the research was to see if they would pursue the theme of mining – "from the Maya [perspective]" ("desde lo maya") for their

next play, “so that the audience will become aware (*tomar consciencia*), or to make them think.”

In my interviews with Cabrera and the group, they each clearly stated that Sotz’il does not set out to dictate a one-dimensional message to audiences that is easily encapsulated in words – not even a political message nor a culturally normative moral lesson as with fables. Yet in this meeting, there appears to be a tension with this idea of presenting an open-ended reflection. They set out to define a dramatic objective for their play so that the plot will have clarity and an intention that propels the dramatic action forward in order to engage audiences.

Cabrera pushes the group further to brainstorm: “What is latent in mining? Gold, metals, industrial contamination...”

Lorenzo adds, “The metals in our Blackberrys? Our computers would not exist either.”

Pablo chimes in, “What Alan [a Ri Ak’u’x staffer] said is key: The earth ought to exist for all to produce in equilibrium. But a [practice of] exploitation has arrived [in which companies use] whatever is easiest to take [metal ores] out in one go. However, the earth should be used without being detrimental to it (*sin perjudicarla*).

This discussion reveals that even though the resulting theater piece isn’t overtly political (as in agit-prop), the discussions that lead up to it are frontally discussing political themes. Using the topic of mining as a springboard, the group discussed the relationship of metal ores to technology like smartphones and computers. They critiqued mining companies’ exploitation of Mother Earth – extracting metals as quickly as possible without considering Mother Earth. Then they contrast the current state of exploitation with their ideal of “human development”:

PABLO: We should be able to have a human development. They are already speaking of other vehicles that do not use petroleum but another oil...

CABRERA: With petroleum, they control ideas.

JOSUÉ: You can’t get solar calculators anymore.

[...]

CABRERA: In theater, there's a super-objective. It can be industrial contamination, or what the daykeepers said [in the interviews] about ancestral ways. It can be what's going on today from the perspective of Maya spirituality. What will be our objective that we ought to transmit? [...] It's not that our play should say "what the people have to do" but rather that: "We've got to think about and react to this..."

Cabrera clarifies that in pushing the Sotz'iles to define an "objective," he is encouraging them to refine a theme that the group will put forward for the audience to chew on, rather than a neatly packaged take-home message.

PABLO: We can do a group exercise in how to use the elements. For example, to cut down a tree to make a drum, you must ask permission. With something that simple, you can do a lot – and without very "advanced" technologies. It's about respect towards our things and valuing them: paying them their *toj* (offering). You can make wonders with this. [This idea] isn't from the group – it's from the culture. It's a spiritual value.

CABRERA: We have to go walking, walking to think. To show the essence of the relationship of Maya culture – human beings with the Mother Earth [...] so that the people, when they see the play, compare what is happening in the world with what ought to be. So that the audience doesn't leave with this dream and beautiful flavor...

PABLO: Our outfits should ring (*sonar*), yell, express themselves! So that the people recognize that they have life and *esencia*! They're not just "useful."

CABRERA: It's like our interviews with the elders. The way they speak is like poetry. This [aesthetic] is useful for our staging: it ought to be poetic. It ought to use all this beauty on stage. A constant beauty.

Sotz'il decides to express their critique of mining through creating an on-stage world evoking the beauty of Mother Nature – that is, the Heart of Earth.¹²⁴ They organically arrived at this artistic concept by offering relevant “spiritual values” to the discussion, such as practices of asking permission before felling trees, and from how elders expressed themselves in interviews with Sotz'il. As the discussion gets more animated, Sotz'il members bring in their understanding of Maya cosmovisión:

SOTZ'IL MEMBER: There's a conflict and it's not always between Evil and Good. Rather, there are contrary energies. The wind passes over the trees and the branches double. There is a clash of forces that strengthen. We can show the energies of night, winter, summer...

This member's proposal for the story suggests that elements from nature signal the movement of energies within Maya cosmovisión. Cabrera then pushes the group to think of how get the audience to “interact” with sensory elements:

CABRERA: We have to investigate: How is Maya art, and how can we make it interactive – constantly – with the audience. For example, with flowers, like “siete montes,” the scent is unique – or like flower water. We can do something so that the scent pours out, like in [the play] *Ajchowen*, when the bananas were thrown ...

The group then discusses how their play will make an impact if their audiences are composed of “their people” rather than the rich and powerful who they view as causing the large-scale injustices:

PABLO: [The message of the play] should reach the owners [the rich powerful people]. But it's our own people who see our plays. [For them the question is] if we accept what's happening. Or, the only option is to continue with the resistance.

¹²⁴ Three months after they had begun their dramatic structuring process, their play's working title had changed to its final version: *Uk'u'x Ulew -- Heart of Earth*, instead of “Mother Earth” (*Nan Ulew*). I surmise that the group made this change since the phrase *Uk'u'x Ulew* is a core phrase used in Maya spiritual practice and invocations, and since the sense of “heart / essence” is central to what Sotz'il's seeks to convey through their plays (as discussed in Chapter 5) and in their festivals with *Ruk'u'x* (“His Heart / Essence”, referring to Lisandro, or simply “Heart / Essence”). As of this rehearsal in June 2013, however, the working title was still *Nan Ulew / Mother Earth*.

This comment initiates a discussion on the power and politics of art. Cabrera mentions the impact of a provocative 1983 movie, *The Day After (Un día después)* that generated public discussion and impacted policy during the Reagan years about the catastrophic dangers of a nuclear arms race. He uses this example as a springboard to comment:

CABRERA: Cuba reached Revolution by way of art. There are many things that art has done through enabling a massive proliferation (*masivamente*). For example, Sotz'il raised awareness about [Maya ancient] dances. Now a lot of groups are doing these dances. They're "Little Sotz'iles" ("*Sotz'ilitos*") – they no longer do ballet.

[...] This is accomplished en masse – spreading it to everyone. ("Masivamente se logra esto — masificando.") So that they're transforming themselves. Art reaches from the individual to the collective.

Cabrera is suggesting that even if the rich and powerful do not see Sotz'il's plays, Sotz'il's art can still shift politics by changing the tide of consciousness among Maya people. He indicates that art's power is moving people to "transform themselves," perhaps by reaching into the emotional and ontological depths of each person. If that process happens "en masse," then a societal transformation occurs. This discussion so far conveys that theater is powerful because from an explicitly political critique (which launched Sotz'il's discussion), it can reach into people's "hearts" and make them feel strongly about an issue. Theater's capacity to draw out – even hook into -- "felt aspirations," when wedded to particular political "direction" (using Bloch's framing) has the power to move people from complacency to action.

Cabrera then states that the play that they're proposing to make will be:

CABRERA: ... intense work, because it's more spiritual. So that the audience will see the earth at its maximum dimension: through sound, smell, touch, all the senses... Produced by musicians, but with different instruments or with metals. So that the audience enjoys it and feels very, very delicious. And feels the atmosphere: without screams or wailing. Give [the audience] this dream...

PABLO: Re-live the past...

CABRERA: ... as Maya culture perceives it. And at the end, break up this poetry.

Through this process Sotz'il arrives at the suggestion of making the play like the poetry of elders' language, and then ending with a harsh break at the end – one minute in which modernity breaks the poetry of Maya culture and harmony with Mother Nature. Note that Pablo uses the term “re-live the past” to describe the ideal that Sotz'il is presenting on stage. That is, with that comment Pablo, perhaps unintentionally, signals that the magnificent world Sotz'il presents on stage is not Maya contemporary reality but the past. Then the final moment of the play will be the contemporary world interfering in and breaking the ideal Maya life of the past. It appears that Cabrera's intention was that this not be a story about the past, but about the present – the way of life that Maya communities are currently defending against the incursions of mining. The proposal was to present one aspect of why Mayas are so dedicated to fighting these mega-projects: because of “the deliciousness” of Mother Nature. (They do not discuss calamities caused by Mother Nature such as mudslides or major earthquakes.) Importantly, the proposal is to present this motivation not through logical reasoning or argumentation, but through sensory states of leading audiences to feel the beauty of this world – in fact, to begin to enter this world through Sotz'il's audience engagement plans in order to engage corporally with this beauty. Thus, the play proposes to be not *about* Mayas' “reasons” for political resistance, but rather to transmit their ontological motivations – that is, from their very being; their sensory-related, experientially grounded, internal drive to resist the destructive onslaught against Mother Nature and their ancestral ways of life.

In the dialogue above and continuing below, we see that both Cabrera and the Sotz'iles are using dualistic and oppositional categories to describe Mother Nature (which they associate with “Maya culture”) versus modernity (which they associate with “foreign ideologies”).

PABLO: We'll close with sounds of a motor?

JOSUÉ: Something that feels repugnant (*asco*) to them so that they simply feel sensations.

PABLO: The contamination of the foreign ideology.

This concept of a monolithic foreign ideology contaminating Maya culture also was expressed by Maya elders in their interviews during Sotz'il's research phase. Sotz'il also has used this concept before, since it is common among Maya communities, particularly those that are organizing (and not just within the *reivindicación* current). It was reinforced for them by the elders whom they consulted. However, it should also be noted that on many occasions the Sotz'iles, taking a cue from others in the Maya Movement more broadly who derive this term from Marxism, use the term "ideology" to describe what I would call "ontology," as in "Maya ideology" or when stating that the Spanish invasion introduced a new "ideology" that had not existed before in Maya societies.

At this point in the project they have a rough sense of the overall arc of the narrative as well as the purpose of the middle and the feel of the end. Specifically, they have arrived at the kinds of emotions they want to lead audiences through. However, the group does not yet have the specificities of the dramatic structure (the conflicts among characters) that will draw the audience in. They will continue to work on that the next day.

The very next afternoon (June 12, 2013), Sotz'il re-convened for their third meeting focused on creating the dramatic structure for their new play. The group met outside in front of Sotz'il Jay under the large avocado tree and surrounded on the other sides by cornfields with family members' wooded plots in the background. Leading off the meeting, Cabrera challenged the group to take a different tack from their previous plays and repertoire until then: to "think of energies and not so much of animals" for their characters. They ultimately decided that the characters would be elements like Wind, Water, and Earth rather than *nawales* in the form of animals.

After more discussion from the group, Cabrera made another proposal: That the staging would "not be only to show trees, but also spirituality, as in: How are dreams perceived?" Since Pablo had just been discussing the significance of metamorphosis and

“a new sprout” (*un nuevo retoño*) in Maya cosmovisión, Cabrera commented, “The course (*transcurso*) of something – even a metamorphosis – is itself a story.” The Sotz’iles seem to be settling on some life process as the central narrative thread or plot of the play.

From these ideas — about metamorphosis, sprouting, and how dreams are perceived in Maya ontology — the group began to discuss including a theme of the “muxu’x” (the word for navel in several Maya languages¹²⁵), because this represents “the umbilical cord: our connection with the earth” (“*la tierra*”). One group member mentioned that in Maya Kaqchikel tradition, when a baby is born the umbilical cord is buried – a tradition that now is threatened by births in hospitals where families often cannot retain the afterbirth.

This led to the worrisome topic of local violence, framed in ontological terms: “Many energies have been cut before their time,” such as cutting trees or fruit prematurely. They considered this kind of dynamic to have an impact on the current violence in Sololá. The group arrived at the insight that the theme of the play would be about “the growth of things that are not permitted to develop completely. They do not finish their cycle.” Hence, while their play may appear to be mostly “about” the beauty of Mother Earth, it is conceptually related to metaphysical reasons for the sociopolitical violence that Sotz’il has suffered.

In sum, the discussion initiated by Cabrera’s proposal to make this play about elements (that are not in animal form) organically winds up with the Sotz’iles discussing an ontological interpretation of local violence. In the next part of the rehearsal, the group comes to preliminary decisions about how to present these ontological ideas in the play. Through their creative process, Sotz’il materializes Maya cosmovisión politics through the artistic genre of theater.

EMBODIED EXPERIMENTATION

With the question “How can we make this concrete?” Cabrera guides the group

¹²⁵ When a word is the same in several Maya languages, it tends to mean that it is a more ancient word that was spread among different language groups.

from abstract brainstorming of themes for the play's dramatic structure to now focus on its material staging. Miguel dives into esoteric ontological references, as he tends to do with his philosophical bent, saying, "The Pop Wuj speaks of the Tree of Life as the essence of Mother Earth. [...] All the conflicts of the human acts [in the Pop Wuj] occur below this tree."

Miguel's analysis of the *Pop Wuj* is perceptive, particularly to note that all the human conflicts in the *Pop Wuj* happen below the Tree of Life. Maya iconography analysts¹²⁶ refer to this as the "World Tree" that sometimes is depicted as a flowering corn stalk. Some months after this rehearsal, Miguel attends one of these Maya iconography courses as a student. However, his gift for visually analyzing ancient iconography and discussing Maya ontology pre-dates the course.

The tree of life integrates the three levels of existence. First, the infinite sky, the celestial. Then the earthly, through its trunk. And finally, the roots, which have the connection with the earth and the underworld.

It would be good to speak to the people who work in community agriculture about the relationship of the elements [about questions like]: "What would we [as Mayas of this community] like to do with the Mother Earth? What will my contribution be?"

Again, Miguel delivers a profound analysis of the role of the Tree of Life in Maya philosophy. His reflections organically emerge from the discussion and Cabrera's prompting to think about "concrete" ideas and representations for the play. In his comments, he easily links everyday Maya practice (the planting of trees when children are born) with mystical spiritual analyses about the "three levels of existence" that trees unite. These reflections in turn lead him to the community-minded proposal to speak to fellow peasant farmers (*campesinos*) of their community about what they think of these topics. Eventually, the Tree of Life will make its way ingeniously into the staging of the play, acting as a frame on which Grandmother Moon's drums are hung.

Cabrera presses on with advancing the definition of the dramatic structure: "Based on the lives we have had, what would we like to talk about with this play? What interests

¹²⁶ Such as David Stuart and those associated with the "Maya Meetings" of UT's Mesoamerica Center.

us most?” He seems to be digging for more practical proposals and re-directing the philosophical turn that Miguel has been opening up. Miguel, however, continues with his philosophical musings:

I’d say it’s defending my territory, and the territorial resistances. For example, in the case of my household: I do not have green beans growing at my house. If I want to eat something, I no longer have greens or chickens at the house [because we do not raise them at home]. We [as “modern” Mayas] want to clean everything, and this cleaning is depriving us of many things. You find yourself naked without even green beans.

At this point in his speech, Miguel imitates the posture of urbanized Mayas who are into *superación* – the “bettering” of their social position:

“I do not have time [to take care of crops at home], and I no longer know my land.” Plants are growing here and there, and yet the people are throwing plastic bags [garbage] there. Yet, to eat a fruit you have grown in your own home is the most delicious thing of all.

He mentions a couple things that might turn people off from farming such as mice, but says that ultimately these are “part of oneself... You’d like to plant crops – and to feel part of this all.”

With this flowing discourse and almost hypnotic reflection about the beauty of a more “natural existence,” harkening to traditional lifeways of Maya farmers, Miguel is taking a position against the notion of the “*superación de los Mayas*” – the elevation of social status. Although Miguel does not couch his speech in overtly political terms, he is presenting the philosophical basis for a very political position. This, in fact, is the position of what I refer to as the Siwan Tinamit / *reivindicación* current who seek to elevate and revive this kind of agriculturally-centered Maya lifestyle that is disparaged by many in the urbanized and ladino-ized middle class. Now Cabrera challenges the Sotz’iles with reflexive questions that guide Sotz’il to convert this Maya political current into a theater work with the capacity for dissemination in Guatemalan society, saying, “Ok, how can you present what you just said, Miguel, without presenting plants and animals? So that the audience feels this necessity of enjoying the earth? Which is the opposite of ending up with mining?”

After some more discussion and Cabrera's pressing, Mariana says:

MARIANA: For example, the grandmother is asleep. The crickets sing as well as the night animals. There is an image of a person connected to the earth – enjoying and playing melodies. And in the end, the umbilical cord is cut.

CABRERA: What other characters could there be?

PABLO: A grandmother to weave things. She could be weaving the characters [into existence]. Like the figures in weavings: like deer... And they have to remain under her care.

MARIANA: Or the weaving will be cut...

MIGUEL: Life: How does it arise? How do you become a complete person? Since pregnancy: how do we grow? We must ask our parents.

CABRERA: The next meeting will focus on what we visualize. To remember when we were little.

This is the power of Sotz'il's collective mind. These ideas make it into the play through the antics of the human-monkey baby that make his mother upset and yell.

These rehearsals to sketch out a dramatic structure demonstrate that the evolution of Sotz'il's plays is a cultural and political process woven together. These aspects are not separated from each other, even in the questions that Cabrera provokes. This ethnographic description of these rehearsals demonstrates that the origin of the play *Uk'u'x Ulew* is highly political both in the vein of radical traditionalism (a cultural politics) as well as from a political economy analysis of the potential of arts to raise awareness ("*conscientizar*") among audiences about the destructiveness of mining mega-projects.

When they moved into the staging phase, Sotz'il decided to pursue some of the inquiries that emerged in the discussion: How does life begin and develop, from the perspective of Maya cosmovisión? How can they use theater to show Maya lifeways and Mother Nature as so precious that it hurts to see their impending destruction at the end of the play? How can the sensory experiences they impart to the audience through their play

be so powerful that the play will leave audiences with hurt in their hearts – a hurt that will impel them to action and a (renewed) ethicopolitical commitment to Maya *reivindicación*?

Like the principles of derived theater, Sotz'il's staging is based on their cultural context with a focus on engaging the senses. This reflects one aspect of Lisandro Guarcax's statement that "All of our environment made us change so that we could create this theater group." A community-based education from their environment gave the Sotz'iles a vast storehouse and repertoire of Maya embodied knowledges from which to draw in crafting their theater works and worlds. For this reason, it would be hard for a Maya who did not grow up in a similar environment to create a Sotz'il play.

Sotz'il, like many other rural Mayas of their generation, grew up in an environment that inspired them to learn the specific sounds of bird calls – to communicate with each other and with the birds. Those birdcalls are the types of sounds they bring into their plays through playing ocarinas (one-chamber wind instruments like vessel flutes).

Yet, upon hearing the variety of birdsongs around Sotz'il Jay,¹²⁷ workshop participants from towns around Lake Atitlán noted that they do not hear such variety of birdsongs in their homes and community. However, being at Sotz'il Jay inspired them to consider creating community centers like Sotz'il Jay in the middle of cornfields and patches of forest where they can enjoy those kinds of birdsongs to inspire their artmaking.

The following anecdotes show how Sotz'il draws upon their vast repertoire of Maya embodied knowledges to craft compelling theater that serves as *reivindicación*.

“Propuesta en escena”: Directing as a collective

After roughly fleshing out the initial scenes through their dramatic structuring and initial staging rehearsals, Sotz'il begins to polish the scenes and add more imaginative detail through embodied improvisation and creative play.

CABRERA

(Introducing the “creative problem” that the collective needs to solve)

¹²⁷ In fact, birdsongs can be heard on many of my interview recordings, even clearer than the human voices.

There was a proposal that Imox begin to bathe the conch. Maybe in a clay tinaja. How do we get [the Baby character] there?

This short interjection shows that the character of Water is initially conceived of as the nawal Imox, and that Sotz'il's staging relates natural elements to sensory aspects of Maya lifeways: bathing a shell in clay tinajas (which were more commonly used before contemporary plastic versions). The Sotz'iles then begin an embodied experimentation to figure out how to transport Miguel to his place on stage. This embodied play involves physical exertion:

(Two Sotz'iles try lifting Miguel by the knees, then on the side. I hear Miguel exclaim "Cerote!" (Shit!). They must have gotten him wrong and it hurt or was awkward. Then they experiment with carrying Miguel upside down by his legs.)

PABLO

(proposing an idea)

Bring him to the midwife by [using] the faja.

(Lorenzo and Rodrigo tell Miguel to squat, and they lift him.)

CABRERA

In *Kaji' Imox* [referring to Sotz'il's first play], how were the lifts? Try a couple.

(The actors experiment with a couple more lifts. This round, they are more creative and daring. They are intentionally setting them up, whereas in the first round it was literally play and joking and whatever was fastest and easiest. Miguel does a shoulder stand and

they lift him onto Vicente's back shoulder, to which Rodrigo suggests, "Cuello a cuello!" for them to align the backs of their necks together.)

CABRERA

And if four people carry him?

(The group dialogues in Kaqchikel about how to arrange themselves to try out different positions for lifting Miguel. More joking ensues, interspersed with exclamations of "Cerote! Puta!" ("Shit! Whore!") from Miguel after nearly being dropped repeatedly and handled roughly.)

For nitty-gritty problem-solving, the Sotz'iles default to speaking to each other in Kaqchikel rather than be inclusive of Cabrera by speaking in Spanish. Cabrera here is like a coach observing the experimentation and asking provocative questions, but not directly participating in the action. Cabrera asks questions about what Mayas in their rural community would do in their daily life. The idea is that the Sotz'il dancers would reference those practices through the stunts and challenging lifting that they are now experimenting with.

CABRERA

How do men carry a heavy object [in Maya daily life]?

RODRIGO

With a mecapal! *(a porter's harness worn across the forehead to carry objects on the back)*

CABRERA

Can you carry a chair with a mecapal?

(By suggesting that Miguel be lifted via a chair that is carried by a forehead strap, it appears that Cabrera is looking for a safer way to lift Miguel given Miguel's cursing, since Miguel is not one to shy away from physical challenges but apparently is reaching his limit.)

PABLO

(Doubtful and not liking the idea)

Ah, but it would look very.... *(Ah pero se ve muy...)*

LORENZO

(joking)

San Simón!

(referring to Rilaj Mam (“Ancient Grandfather” in Tz’utujil), known to the kaxlan world as Ma Ximón (“Grandfather Simon”), a Maya ancestor whose wooden statue is carried on the back of cofrades in the Holy Week processions in Santiago Atitlán. Figures depict him seated in a chair, smoking a cigar and wearing a Western suit, tie, and hat.)

PABLO

(With the joke just dawning on him)

Ah, Sí-Món...

(Like the USAC students say to indicate “You’re right!” But Pablo didn’t realize the play on words with the tone of his voice. He was a bit slower on the jokes than Lorenzo and Vicente were.)

VICENTE

(Jokingly pointing out how Pablo accidentally fell into the play on words)

Sí-Món, San Simón...

In the above interaction, Pablo's voice trails off searching for the right word. Apparently he was going to say something like "That would look awkward" – because Cabrera's aesthetic and cultural sensibility were very off with the suggestion of carrying a chair with a mecapal. With his attuned cultural sensibility, Pablo could tell right off that no one in a Maya community carries a chair with a mecapal. Then Lorenzo jumped in with a joke. Without losing a beat, Lorenzo added, "San Simón!" which leads to a chain of "Si-Móns" with different vocal inflections and significations. This joking demonstrates that cultural symbolism has meaning for youth and comes up in popularized settings.

CABRERA

But to make it more interesting... And if Miguel enters by himself?

LORENZO

But we're still trying things out...

Lorenzo thus indicates to Cabrera to hold off: they're still experimenting and brainstorming in an embodied form. Cabrera's question to move things along probably arose because this bodily experimentation has already been going on, with joking, for at least 15 minutes. Yet Cabrera doesn't have all the power as director, nor is he in a hierarchical position above them.

(Different voices from the Kaqchikel Sotz'iles. Happening so fast that I couldn't note who said what)

- On a reed mat, or a weaving! ("En un petate, o un tejido!")

- Or using a woven shawl from the storage room... (“Jun su’t de la bodega...”)

VICENTE

(speaking to Miguel)

How much do you weigh? 110 pounds?

MIGUEL

Putá (Whore), that’s you! I’m 120 pounds. For Miss Universe. (“Para Miss Universe.”)

The gendered banter among the male actors implicate their masculinity in comments about physical weight.

The anecdote thus far shows Sotz’il’s dialogic process of “propuesta en escena” (staging proposals while in the scene) that is a core building block of their process of collective creation (*creación colectiva*). To generate creative “proposals while in the scene,” the artists talk about an idea from Maya culture, and then they try it out physically to see if it will work. The embodied play and experimentation that this process depends on here also involves bantering that feels “very Maya” and probably could only happen in a group like Sotz’il, among cousins and close cuates.

The group then decides to take a different tack with the lift. They consider the body posture of a woman giving birth while standing – as Mariana was embodying in her squat dance – in order to figure out how to evoke the position of the baby as it emerges from the mother. Would the Human-Monkey Baby have his feet in the air? Miguel first tries out the pose on the floor.

SOTZ’IL MEMBER

Try a fetal position.

Miguel follows the suggestion, curling into a fetal position.

CABRERA

That's it!

Cabrera sounds very sure that this is the right position to keep. As director, he has the eye for knowing when the brainstorming has hit its high point when they have hit upon an excellent position to work with.

By now, Miguel is balancing on Pablo's upper back and neck, curled in a sit-up position while Pablo reaches over his shoulder to hold Miguel by one ankle. Pablo rises to a standing position from his squat. Miguel shoots his other leg vertically upwards. This is challenging because he's contracting his abdomen while he's upside down (at 245° degrees). At one point Miguel arcs backwards so that he is hanging upside down from Pablo's upper back.

They try this posture with three guys spotting Miguel until he's secure as Pablo walks around the stage.

PABLO

(When Miguel finally gets down)

Getting up is what's difficult.

(Both PABLO and MIGUEL exhale from the acrobatic effort.)

This section demonstrates the kind of physical exertion and acrobatic dexterity that the Sotz'iles strive for. Their movement vocabulary is very different from ballet. They are not concerned about "healthy movement" or trying to maintain good form or posture according to a certain movement code. They instead seek movements that seem to defy gravity, that look impossible and test the limits of their physicality, and that enthrall the audience's imagination.

The next embodied brainstorm reveals Sotz'il's perspective on how it communicates through contemporary Maya trajes. First, Cabrera asks what other Elements (characters) can help with the preparation of the baby after he's been bathed for the first time (implied by the scene in which the Water character pours water luxuriously over the shell.)

CABRERA

Braid his hair, dress him, what else? Wash him...

PABLO

Put on the "mother's faja" [*la faja de mamá,* referring to the wide *postpartum faja*]. Saturate him too?

CABRERA

I do not know how babies are bathed for the first time.

This statement evokes Cabrera's positionality and how he works with Sotz'il. As an outsider to Kaqchikel culture, he doesn't know many of the cultural traditions, but as stage director he knows how to elicit these cultural references from Sotz'il.

As Pablo helps Mariana wrap her seven-inch wide green postpartum faja, group members comment that Mariana and Miguel will need fajas of the same color "so that the audience doesn't get confused" about the relationship between the two. This leads to a conversation about commissioning wardrobe items from local weavers.

PABLO

For those who will make the wardrobe, there's a budget – for purchases with invoices.

The problem is that many women who weave at home do not give invoices (*facturas*). They are part of the community-based network of relationships that sustains a Maya economy, which in development discourse would now be called “informal economies.” Pablo has raised a challenge for the group to consider under the new regime of audits that has come with NGO-ization.

CABRERA

With the contemporary weavings, there’s an advantage: the audience will associate them rapidly with contemporary women.

In their three previous plays, Sotz’il re-created trajes from the pre-colonial period. Cabrera is noting the contrast, that in this new play the characters will wear the contemporary style of trajes. He is musing that the advantage of using current trajes is that the audience will quickly associate the action on stage with present-day women, as opposed to the audience reading this as a play about the ancient or mythic past. What this reflection implies is that theater art communicates through various registers. The embodied register of the style of dress the characters are wearing may be read more intuitively.

MIGUEL

Also they stand out because they are red.

PABLO

We’ll see later who can make them.

(Speaking to Miguel)

Your sister-in-law and your mother: because through you, you can get everything made. Ask them what price they will give you. We’ll figure out later what to do about invoicing.

Pablo's comments reveal the link between Sotz'il's theater productions and their interrelationship with local and family-based economies of artisans. However, it also suggests that choosing to work within local Maya economies produces tensions that emerge with the introduction of NGO funding which requires documentation of expenses through "facturas" (invoices) – an instrument of regulation by the SAT, the taxation department of the Guatemalan state (which at the time of fieldwork was not highly functioning and may in fact have been corrupt).

PABLO

(Speaking to Miguel, describing the weaving that they should commission)

[...] with figures of flowers, animals, cats, because it's [representing] Life [the character!]. Although the audience doesn't see it, we know [what it means].

Pablo's request reveals that to the Sotz'iles, aesthetic appearance to the audience is less important than the meaning that the woven figures have for themselves as symbols. In interviews, the Sotz'iles reveal that connecting with the energies of the nawales invigorates their dance. Presumably, knowing the significance of the weaving details can also inspire their performance. Thus, with this clothing detail, the preoccupation is less about how art communicates with the audience than about what the woven trajes do for the performers and how it shapes the quality of skill, expression, and physical exertion of their performance. Furthermore, the woven symbols which hold this power of signification for Sotz'il are related to Mother Nature: as flowers and animals, they represent the life of the Maya cosmovisión.

PABLO

(Speaking to Miguel about the instructions he should give to the weaver)

Maybe they should separate the figures more [than usual], so that the audience can see them.

Pablo modifies his statement above that the audience doesn't need to understand the significance of traje. Even if the public only sees it as just another traje or faja, for Sotz'il it is important that they use not just any woven dress. Sotz'il has an intention behind each weaving that they commission, just like each weaver has an intention in weaving each blouse. Still, Pablo's comments reveal that Sotz'il's artistic choices are not all directed towards what the audience understands.

When an “epistemology of practice” becomes abstracted

In one of their sit-down meetings, Sotz'il was planning out scenes of *Uk'u'x Ulew* based on the cycle of nawales (day names) in the Maya lunar calendar, the *cholq'ij* (“the counting of the faces of the day”). This led to a discussion about which nawal leads off the calendrical cycle. There are two positions: Some daykeepers and academics say the cycle begins with B'atz', and some say it begins with Imox. Some books on the *cholq'ij* (those cited by Lisandro Guarcax) discuss the relationship between the *cholq'ij* and human development. Sotz'il's play is about a birth and the development of “Life” -- literally, through the character K'aslemal / Life which is the name they eventually give the Human-Monkey Baby character. Hence, it appears that Sotz'il correlates the symbolism of their play -- and particularly their orientation according to cardinal direction -- with the road marked out by the *cholq'ij*. The problem that arises for Sotz'il is how to confirm the ordering of the nawal count. They note that different versions of the *cholq'ij* calendar are practiced in different Maya communities.

Sotz'il is debating this question in the context of staging their theater play because it does not apply in the rest of their everyday life. That is, the “start day” of the Maya calendar is not a very important question outside of contemporary arenas of representation such as publication of Maya calendars and theater representations. In the practice of Maya spirituality, one always counts starting with the nawal of the current day. That is, the

practice of the Maya counting of days is contextual and relational. As a living cycle, there is no “start” or “end.”¹²⁸

The problem of the starting day only appears when this knowledge is abstracted and taken out of context (similar to Barbara Tedlock's argument that Maya spirituality is one of practice). So, for example, if we write a book about nawales, with which nawal should we begin? This may reflect a difference between Maya and Gregorian philosophies of calendarization and time. In the West, a calendar cycle always begins with Sunday or Monday for the week (a religious decision, ultimately, of the Judeo-Christian tradition of Sabbath), or with January for the months. To begin a calendar on Wednesday would throw people off. This is why some planners based on the Maya calendar are hard to adapt to a Western context of the concept of a "weekly" unit beginning on Sunday and a "monthly" system of organization that is derived from the uneven Roman system (with its history of power struggles among emperors). It is only when trying to adapt the Maya calendar to a Western format (for example, publishing planners (“agendas”) based on the Maya calendar) that these tensions surface.

This meeting’s facilitator summarizes the two-part decision that Sotz’il arrived at:

1. “We will use what is in the Codex as the basis.” In this case, he is referring to the Dresden Codex which indicates that Imox (water source) is the start of the cycle.
2. “Then we will confirm with the daykeepers.”

With this decision, Sotz’il demonstrates that verifying ancestral knowledge and spiritual practice is important to them. This also demonstrates how Sotz’il chooses to proceed to verify that knowledge. First, the pre-colonial Códices are seen as the “purest” authority since they pre-date the arrival of the Spanish, hence they have not been “tainted” by the effects of colonization. Second, they consult the daykeepers who have knowledge of the local practice as it has been passed down from teacher to apprentice through processes of validation, albeit affected by the societal effects of colonization. Yet, the

¹²⁸ Except for the more esoteric question of the Creation Day in the long-count calendar (4 Ahau 8 Kumku) thousands of years ago. However, that is a different calendar system.

choice of *which* daykeepers Sotz'il chooses to consult is also a social-political decision given that the interpretations and practice of Maya spirituality vary among daykeepers since there is no centralized top-down institution of Maya spirituality that authorizes its rites. This is a tripping point in determining cultural authenticity from oral tradition and even from ongoing practice -- because the practice has evolved differently in different regions, partly due to local adaptations to colonization, partly due to geography and access to particular sacred materials, and partly due to internal cultural dynamics. The practice of Maya ontology has become ever more contextual based on one's local surroundings.

This debate reveals that Sotz'il's play itself is an abstraction in some ways (i.e. set outside a practical context), and that is why the issue of the count of the nawales becomes a problem to begin with. It should be noted, though, that Sotz'il does not always practice "out of context." Relative to Western theater, Sotz'il is very aware of its local context and relationality and that affects the performance of their plays -- even though, of necessity, they travel to perform their plays. For example, when they mark the portal entrance in *Oxlajuj B'aqtun*, it is always in the East, and they mark the four cardinal directions (East, North, West, and South) with corresponding colors of flower petals. This is a relationship with natural phenomena that reflects how Maya ceremonies are set up: The daykeeper will check where "the sun rises" to orient how the offering is placed. If they are traveling to someplace unfamiliar and do not know in what direction the sun rises, they ask someone local. This bears the assumption that a local person will always know in what direction the sun rises -- that is, an assumption that all Mayas are familiar with their geography in relation to the sun, moon, and other natural phenomena that bear much importance on their agricultural, social, and ontological lives. (In contrast, in an urbanized Western environment at a desk job, a worker's daily life does not depend upon in what direction the sun rises.)

However, Sotz'il appears to have made the decision or to be assuming that for the structure of the play they will have to set a nawal to begin with. That is, their theater play will abstract what in daily practice would be contextual. This assumption or decision is interesting because it assumes that theater plays need to have a fixed structure because of

the narrative they present – the development of a human life. They do not seek to be as radically anti-structure as some avant garde modern dance theater in the West. After all, Maya culture is fairly structured: the cholq'ij literally means “the ordering of days,” and some describe the daykeeper’s role as helping with that (hence her name: ajq’ij – she or he who keeps the days).

Humor

Despite the “rituals of concentration” in opening their rehearsals, once their brainstorming gets going, Sotz’il’s creative development brings out their humor. Their humor brings out aspects of Maya ontology as well as sometimes teasing each other about (and implicitly critiquing) how they are going about their practice of *Maya reivindicación*.

In the following vignette, the Sotz’iles decide that the nawal “E” will be the theme for this particular scene that they are staging. In seeking ideas for the scene, one member consults a book to look up the animal energy that corresponds with the nawal E:

READER

(Reading from the book)

Here it says wildcat. (“gato de monte”)

VICENTE

(Looking over the reader’s shoulder, in a joking tone)

And teeth! (“Y dientes!”)

(Vicente recognizes the rhyme from a Maya hip hop song. The glyph represents teeth, and literally in Kaqchikel, "EY" = tooth. The two symbols are correlated, since the wildcat certainly has large sharp teeth.)

LORENZO

(chanting the hip hop refrain that is always performed by Maya Tz'utujil hip hop artist Tz'utu in their Q'ij Saq festival lineup, while adding a drumbeat from Grandmother Moon's drumset tree)

SaqB'E! Gato de monTE! *(rhythmically rhyming)*

READER

(Continuing to read)

...with a long tail. A panther! We saw those in the Petén *(referring to a prior trip, probably for researching a previous Sotz'il play)*. It's also the sacred road.

CABRERA

(Reading the characteristics of people whose nawal is E)

"They are manipulators. They are not trustworthy. E is the base of the foot."

MIGUEL

(joking)

What does Tz'utu's song say?

OTHER MEMBER

(Rhyming with a hip hop beat)

"Saqb'e! Gato de monte!" ("Sacred Road! Wildcat!)]

MIGUEL

Yup, there it is. ("Si pues, allí está.")

After the other members consult the book, Miguel jokes that their authoritative source for this cultural knowledge can be Maya hip hop artist Tz'utu's song, since in fact the lyrics contain the information they were looking for about the animal representation – while also rhythmically rhyming words in Spanish and Maya Tz'utujil languages.

The group was joking that they would source their information from Tz'utu – usually the dynamic is the other way around, as Tz'utu has bought handmade instruments from the Sotz'iles. However, this episode reveals a couple important questions: Where can Sotz'il obtain their data, when available sources of Maya histories have many limitations? How can they explore practices that have been “cut off” due to repression?

Alejandro in particular has lamented the lack of historical data, for example, about the life and leadership of Kaji' Imox, the last governor of a sovereign Kaqchikel city-state prior to Spanish colonization. During the course of their research, Sotz'il pieced together the life history of Kaji' Imox and reached certain conclusions based on the available evidence. Alejandro asserted that the genre of theater gives them a kind of literary license to fill in spotty historical data with Sotz'il's interpretations, which shapes the narrative they perform in their play *Kaji' Imox*.¹²⁹

Other Sotz'il members comment that on the level of ontology, the past is present with them in their lives through their ongoing lifeways. This is part of the legacy that Kaji' Imox left them, Celestino and Lisandro imply.¹³⁰ Additionally, Miguel states, “Even if we no longer practice something, they [ancestors] have left it for you. You might find that when you're in front of an altar, you remember.” Sotz'il routinely engages in other practices, such as the “nawal rehearsals” and *pixab'*, or consultation with elders, to facilitate this dynamic of embodied remembering.

Layers of Meaning

A distinguishing feature of Sotz'il's theater repertoire is that it crystallizes multiple layers of ontological meaning in the scenes they perform. One example of this is the scene

¹²⁹ Alejandro, interview.

¹³⁰ Thelen 2008, 54.

in *Uk'u'x Ulew* in which the umbilical cord has been cut and is “returning to its cycle.” The majority of one rehearsal is dedicated to probing the depths of their conjoined cultural knowledges to enrich the energetic communicative power of this scene.

As the culmination of the scenes portraying birth, the group decides to stage this scene during the Full Moon phase of the play as the culmination of the lunar cycle. The umbilical cord as the physiological connection between mother and baby is related to the nawal B'atz', and the faja is related to the verb *b'atz'ik* which means “to wrap” or “to bind,” as a faja (a thick wraparound woven band) wraps a woman's corte.

In the course of discussion, the idea emerges to stage and embody the linguistic, conceptual, and energetic correlations between the baby's umbilical cord, the postpartum fajas on both the mother and baby that are put on or below the navel, and the mother's weaving of a faja in the opening scenes. Sotz'il members noted that the faja can suggest an umbilical cord through its length and because it also has to be cut – detached – from the sticks of the backstrap loom when the weaving is finished. They ask each other provocative questions about the motivations of each character and the ontological logic behind each action to fill in details that will make this particular scene come alive for audiences, “to give it deeper meaning”: Why is Mother Earth spinning thread? What happens when the umbilical cord is cut? What happens with the detachment of the faja that binds mother and baby together?

At the end of the birth scenes, the baby detaches from the mother's weaving and begins to weave his own life beginning with the B'atz' nawal (which, again, is etymologically, conceptually, and energetically related to wrapping as with a faja). It is in this moment that he removes his “B'atz',” said Sotz'il, referring to thread recently spun by the mother that doubles as the child's umbilical cord. The moment the baby attains his full independent life is the moment of separation from the mother, in the sense of “desprender” – removing what had once been attached.

This scene is representative of the creative product that results from Sotz'il's repertoire of Maya embodied knowledges, born of their community-based education and

environment, and accessed through their collective process of brainstorming and embodied experimentation.

Taking root in the audience's imagination

Sotz'il's process of selecting key evocative cultural details for its plays reflects a principle of the craft of developing a fictional narrative: That an audience enters the world of the fictional story through sensory textures that can be sensed by the reader's body. This includes presenting dramatic action that the audience can witness. When audience members get embroiled in the stakes of a conflict being played out on stage, they will viscerally transport themselves to the scene of that dilemma through investing their imaginations. For their fictional worlds to take root in the imagination of audiences, Sotz'il portrays the kinds of dilemmas that cause Mayas pain in their everyday lives, such as children asserting their independence or the contamination of mining companies. The dilemma is further enriched through tensions with the physical settings in which the characters' bodies are immersed, which Sotz'il evokes through sensory textures from Maya lifeways. If the proper degree of emotional and psychological tension is achieved, audiences will invest their imaginations in the story. Recent cognitive science studies suggest that audience members have a physiological response to theater and movies akin to responding to conflicts in real life, for example, with an escalation of heart rate, palms sweating, and fear responses.

This principle holds for ethnographic writing too. In this chapter, I have included several "scenes" of dialogue and interaction between Sotz'il members so that the reader can "witness" this. A challenge in writing this dissertation is that because Sotz'il's theater relies heavily on embodiment, with the action advancing in some scenes through choreography and dance rather than dialogue (such as stealing a flute, or stealing the drum of time), it is challenging to convey the power of these sensorially rich, embodied scenes through text. (An example of this is in the distinction between the two epigraphs to this chapter. The first is a monologue spoken directly to the audience. The second involves no dialogue, only movement and action.) In fact, this rendering into text – the archive – is the

opposite of Sotz'il's move to communicate through its embodied repertoire of theater, dance, and music (see Taylor 2003).

One example of bringing in sensory detail to evoke a powerful living world was the process of the women's group for finding the words in Spanish for their unwritten Kaqchikel "script." At one rehearsal, the women's group decided to translate one monologue in their play to Spanish for a performance at an arts festival in Costa Rica where no one would understand their lines in Kaqchikel. This was the first time a Sotz'il group would perform lines in Spanish.

"Let's look for something more poetic," Cabrera kept urging:

I cut the electric cables
[*Now in a smooth voice*] Because the mining [industry] is contaminating
my womb,
my blood,
my hair,
my body.¹³¹

You are Mother Earth! So, let's look for the metaphors. Your skin would be the earth. Your blood would be the rivers. Your hair would be the hills. What else? Let's make a list. Say the list.

By focusing on poetic metaphors, the group begins to evoke sensory images related to Mother Earth, whom one of the actors is personifying. The course of their dialogue to define these words in Spanish reveals their process regarding language and their (mostly) unwritten "script." At that moment, I got the sense that the group rarely writes down scenes or lines – nor "fixes" lines with the same exactness, because a long time passed before Mariana had the idea to walk into another room to get a notebook. Also, Cabrera's reaction indicated this was a surprise: "Oh, you have a notebook! Good, Mariana, can you write the lines?"

¹³¹ 'Corté las cables de luz porque la minería está contaminando a mi vientre, a mi sangre, a mi cabello, a mi cuerpo.'"

“I’m already doing that,” she snapped. Carmen and Cabrera drew closer to the notebook to fine-tune the words – something I hadn’t seen before in rehearsals. This was new to Sotz’il methodology – especially since this is the first Sotz’il play with lines in Spanish. More evidence:

After they set the words, Cabrera said to Carmen, “Now you have to memorize this well for tomorrow. When you get home, memorize it well.” Carmen’s response was, “Oh, it’s already a long speech!” Relatively, the monologue is not that long for dialogue-based Western plays, but this is the first set text of a Sotz’il play and it is in Spanish rather than her native Kaqchikel.

As they continued to craft the monologue, Cabrera said (in his impassioned, urgent way): “Let’s look for something more poetic! What’s next?” Translating from Kaqchikel, Carmen replies, “The Lords of Xib’alb’a are attacking my daughter.” Cabrera re-composes: “Ok. [Again in a smooth low voice, filling each word with meaning]: ‘The Lords of Xib’alb’a ... [*thinking...*] ... are *entering* my womb. They want to kill my daughter. But she is not responsible for my actions.’”

Cabrera continued, “You are Mother Earth! So, what happens to you if your daughter dies in your womb?”

Mariana responded, “She is the seed.”

“Ok, and poetically?” urged Cabrera. “What happens to Mother Earth if the seed, if humanity dies?”

Mariana offered these lines: “‘If she dies, I dry up. The seed will not sprout again.’”

By the end of this rehearsal, they had settled upon these lines in Spanish for Ixkik:

*Corté las cables de luz
para que las maquinas se parara.
Porque la minería está contaminando
a mi vientre,
a mi sangre,
a mi cabello,
a mi cuerpo: Qate’ ruwach ulew. [Mother Nature]*

*Los señores de Xib’alb’a
están entrando a mi vientre.
Quieren matar a mi hija.
Y si ella muere, me machita.
La semilla ya no retoñará.”*

I cut the electric cables
So that the machines would stop.
Because the mining [industry] is contaminating
my womb,
my blood,
my hair,
my body: Mother Nature.

The Lords of Xib'alb'a are entering my womb.
They want to kill my daughter.
And if she dies, I dry up.
The seed will no longer sprout.

The women's group portrays the impact of a Mam woman's daring act of protest against the mining company not through a "realistic" or literal representation of her cutting the electric cables, but rather through a monologue that evokes clear images of what was at stake through both the act of defiance and the mining itself: stopping the machines, contaminating her womb, entering her womb, Mother Earth drying up, seeds no longer sprouting. This portrayal gets audiences to invest their imaginations in the story (paraphrasing Anne Bogart) through the emotional and psychological tension of the conflict rather than through a factual representation of the act itself.

An example of the kinds of worlds that Sotz'il creates on stage through multi-sensory engagement is demonstrated by Sotz'il's rehearsals during September 2013 of the cofrades' celebration of the Baby character's birth. They came up with the idea for this scene from a brainstorm of Maya rituals having to do with birth. Through the process of embodied experimentation, during the period in which I watched this scene, they arrived at this work-in-progress version of their performance:

GRANDMOTHER MOON – played by a male actor -- announces the birth with celebratory drumming. She takes a drum off the drum-tree and ties it around her waist, then leaps high and joyously.¹³² As GRANDMOTHER MOON cheers

¹³² Sotz'il comments in rehearsal that this festive leaping and hurrahs with gusto are to give the impression of the cofradía ritual in announcing the birth of the Christchild. This is a rare reference by Sotz'il to a ritual that is partly associated with Christianity, albeit in a very Mayanized form.

(having taken the drum off the drum-tree), one-by-one each character (the THREE ELEMENTS and DOG) links arms, forming a line like the cofradía men who leap around the circular stage.

Meanwhile, EARTH is at the center of the circle spinning puffs of wool into thread using a spindle and whorl.¹³³ On stage, the raw wool and spun thread are depicted not as the raw puffy fiber as in “realism,” but rather as an *already* woven faja representing an umbilical cord, with the braided part on her end in the center, and the extension of it being pulled by DOG and the male cofrades as they circle around the edge of the circular stage announcing the birth of the baby (represented by the conch that they are cradling in their arms).

The cofrades leap and rejoice, echoing each other’s deep masculine cheers of “Eeyyy!” to celebrate the birth as a community. Ebullient with pride, they thank and salute each other as they take their turn to drink from the tecomate.

The procession wraps up and the characters retreat off-stage, leaving the things they had brought to the procession. Pablo instructs FIRE, “Continue the melody so that the Moon may rise.” FIRE plays a melody on the flute as GRANDMOTHER MOON ties her tambor onto the tree-branch drumset and returns to a high perch in the tree. GRANDMOTHER MOON then sings a refrain, “qak’aslem ruk’u’x ,” (essence of our life), as WIND returns to the stage carrying the Human-Monkey Baby, barefoot, on his back, holding one ankle while the other leg lifts to the sky.¹³⁴

Sotz’il’s aesthetic is brought to life by the rich cultural details that emerge from their creative process of collective dialogue and embodied brainstorming. Grandmother Moon plays drums from her drum set in the Tree of Life, then climbs the tree to represent the moon rising. Earth spins her thread, which also represents the umbilical cord that connects her to her baby as the male cofrades present him to the world. This dance initiates the ingenious staging of the relationship between the umbilical cord and the Mother’s spinning, and later her weaving, until the Baby finally detaches to become a separate being with his own path in life. Even the name of the Baby character is a creative crystallization of Maya cultural concepts. The program notes identify this character as “Life” (K’aslemal)

¹³³ These are actions and items related to the Kaqchikel root word b’atz’. To spin is nb’atz’in. The spindle and whorl is a b’atz’ib’äl.

¹³⁴ This was the same choreography that was being set and rehearsed extensively in the anecdote above: trying out different creative ways that they could carry HUMAN-MONKEY BABY and different positions and curls he could hold on top of WIND’s back.

and “Matter and Energy” (“Materia y energía”), using the concept of dualism¹³⁵ and complementarity that Sotz’il members often raised in brainstorming meetings and in interviews.

In this scene, the Sotz’iles evoke the celebration of male cofrades for the Epiphany or Three Kings’ Day on January 6. However, they de-Christianize it: Rather than carry a Christ child, they cradle the conch shell which stands in for the part-monkey, part human baby. Furthermore, they stress the Kaqchikel aspects of this celebration which are distinct from non-Maya celebrations of Three Kings’ Day. They perform the cofrades’ ebullient cheers of “Ey!” as they run through the streets asking for alms.¹³⁶

During the Epiphany celebration of January 6, various Christian denominations celebrate the “manifestation” or “revelation” of the Christ Child to Three Kings who as “gentiles” or non-Jews represent the world outside Christ’s family.¹³⁷ In their play, the Sotz’iles reference the Maya tradition of presenting a baby to the outside world after bathing and dressing the baby in fresh clothes.

WIND brings the mostly bare-skinned Human-Monkey Baby to the mother, who cleans the baby with a fiber broom, sweeping downwards. Accompanied by GRANDMOTHER MOON’s sparse drum beat, WIND presents the baby with his new *wexaj* (calf-length pants that are the traditional dress for Maya men) and shoes. EARTH-Mother dresses BABY in each item and knots his faja at his lower back. Both WIND and EARTH place his animal shoes. When they are finished, Human-Monkey Baby blows a long conch.

When brainstorming the dramatic structure of the play, the Sotz’iles expressed an interest in exploring the theme of how life begins and develops – “How do you become a complete person?” in Miguel’s words. From there, they honed in on presenting an experience of birth and then pain. This theme makes its way into a near-final version of the play through the birth of the part-human, part-monkey character that in these early rehearsals is referred to as Jun B’atz’¹³⁸, making reference to one twin in the Pop Wuj who

¹³⁵ A common form in Maya poetics.

¹³⁶ Lorenzo, interview.

¹³⁷ http://etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=epiphany. Accessed March 3, 2017.

¹³⁸ When Sotz’il presented their play publicly, this character’s name had changed to K’aslemal / Life, according to their program.

eventually is transformed into a monkey. In the next scene, the actors start to portray the pain Jun B'atz' eventually caused to his mother as a rambunctious child with the monkey aspect of his character emerging, as in the Pop Wuj:

Wind then sings out a call to weave: “Qakemonan! Tach'ab'al ab'atz'!” (“Let's weave! Speak to your thread!”)

Having finished her task of spinning the thread, Earth warps (winds or loops in a cross-wise pattern) the finished thread in and around the pegs of the warping board – a paddle-shaped board with two rows of pegs in the body and three single pegs at the head.

Meanwhile, as Earth warps the thread, Baby starts shoulder popping (similar to breakdancing). He does upside-down poses (such as a headstand), then flips. Then, he makes “Wo-hoo” sounds and does the monkey squats from Sotz'il's warm-up.

Here, the other elements echo Wind in chanting, “qak'aslema!” – “our Life.”

Silence follows – except for Human-Monkey Baby's panting from exhaustion and the sound of Water blowing through a reed blowpipe into water in a large clay bowl.

Then, all the characters make “monkey-croaks” as Human-Monkey Baby throws water playfully around the stage.

Now excited and worked up – like a kid -- Human-Monkey Baby chases Grandmother Moon, forcing her away from her drum-tree! It feels like a mischievous but fun pursuit of “hide and seek.”

Earth scolds Human-Monkey Baby: “*¡Sach!*” (“Scram! Get Lost!”) as she chases him around with a broom. After catching him, Earth sits him down and scolds him for disturbing Grandmother Moon with his playing. But, instead of Human-Monkey Baby crying, it is Grandmother Moon who cries while Dog howls. The rest of the characters clap on ocoote or whatever is near in a straight rhythmic pattern, escalating the tension.

Participating in Maya traditional village culture gives Sotz'il the practices, ontological concepts, worldview, and materials to produce magnificent theater works that breathe with life. This is yet another way that “all of [Sotz'il's] environment” supports

their theater-making.¹³⁹ In turn, Sotz'il's theater crystallizes Maya worlds, evoking Maya ontological sensibilities in the space and time of their theater performances.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined Sotz'il's process of collective creation, focusing on their practices of collective dialogue and embodied play; researching ancestral practices; and the implications of their works being in an ongoing process of formation. Sotz'il's process allows them to collectively create original theater even when they have a minimal budget, as in their early years. The narrative content is derived from ancient texts and their community's embodied memory. The materials for their production are mostly handmade and/or sourced from Maya community-based economies. This stands in contrast to the dominant "banking" model of education (Freire's concept of the antithesis of popular education) that "forms technicians" (Pablo, pers. comm., 2013). Sotz'il's theater process reflects a politics of autonomy and self-determination.

In Sotz'il's creative process, embodied experimentation is valued more than having a script written by an outsider. Sotz'il does not use a defined script for their performances. Rather than working with a dramaturg, Sotz'il does all its own research and uses the embodied experiences of their families and communities to inform their dramatic structure. Conversely as well, having no script allows Sotz'il to keep its focus on embodiment and collective dialogue. It also allows Sotz'il's theater works to always be in formation and avoid fixture. They keep "polishing" their play until the very last performance.¹⁴⁰

In creating their theater works, Sotz'il draws from the deep well of Maya *cosmovisión*, an embodied philosophy or "epistemology of practice" that guides daily practices. In their creative process of deciding how to represent and embody particular scenarios, they collectively brainstorm ideas from their childhood or current life experiences. On stage, they present aspects of Maya culture that are rich to the senses and have multiple layers of meaning. They emphasize the "strengths" (*fortalezas*) of Maya

¹³⁹ Lisandro Guarcax, interview.

¹⁴⁰ Cabrera, interview; Pablo, comment in rehearsal, 2013.

culture, Cabrera notes, given its historical inferiorization. Mesmerizing, sensory-rich scenes that Sotz'il presents include: the captivating endurance of birthing labor through Earth's squat dance; the beauty of the long peach conch shell being bathed in sparkling water by Water who acts as midwife; and Wind fanning a fire in an earthenware bowl with the owl wings that cover his hands.

The very act of shaping their own collective narrative and creating their own original body of work is empowering. First, Sotz'il's embodied creative process helps members deepen their understanding of Maya cosmovisión. Sotz'il's artistic creation process involves the group's collective learning about cosmovisión, deepening each member's knowledge through discussion with other members – an exchange of experiential expertise.

Second, through this process of world-making, the actors develop confidence in their voice and opinions particularly on cultural debates. Their theater process reinforces the value of their life experience in rural Maya communities as a primary source of knowledge. Books that are consulted are still “validated” through the lens of the members' life experience. That is, resources outside their community of cuates and elders are not necessarily considered more authoritative, with the exception of the Codices which they consider to be part of their living inheritance. These discussions build each member's confidence in their positions on the ontological-political issues that capture their interest.¹⁴¹

As a result, Sotz'il members voice their interventions more in these theater rehearsals than in other settings, even when exhibiting leadership in their pedagogical workshops. While this is partly due to their familiarity with each other, this is also partly due to discussing, on their own terms, topics that are most meaningful to them. They speak confidently in these internal collective settings about community practices and Maya ontology. Also, they are not limited to verbal discussion in Spanish in their rehearsals:

¹⁴¹ This is a similarity with the effects of Freirean popular education and the internal decision-making process of community organizing groups.

their rehearsals also involve discussion in the Kaqchikel language as well as embodied improvisation.

This is a marked contrast to their perception of how “well” they do in interviews. One member told me before his interview that “I’m not good at interviews,” concerned that he would not speak much or know what to say. I have noticed that in television and filmed interviews, some members are more comfortable than others with talking in front of the camera. Some tend to be quiet while another member answers most of the questions, and some simply avoid interviews altogether. (However, all were eloquent in their unique ways during individual interviews for this dissertation, so perhaps the context and content of previous interviews were a factor in not drawing out their expertise.) Also, when a mostly ladino theater group visited in 2013 to present their play as a work-in-progress and asked for feedback afterwards, only Pablo and Tat Adrián responded. Like other Maya community-based groups that I have observed, not only is the protocol to have one representative represent and gather the opinions of the group in meetings with outsiders, but also their confidence and comfort is much greater among their circles of trust than with outsiders.

Their rehearsal process also helps them define their political proposal of Maya *reivindicación*. Their dialogues in these rehearsals are most animated when discussing issues around which they feel most engaged, such as ancestral culture, Maya ontology and practices, and current political issues that directly affect Maya communities, such as mining. Hence they tend to dwell more on these topics, and, over time, develop their thinking and positions on these topics, both individually and as a group. In interviews, Sotz’il members have cited similar formative incidents (such as the cofrade who urged them to portray the dignity of Kaqchikel culture), indicating that their collective processing of these incidents (led in the beginning by Lisandro’s facilitation) helped congeal their collective identity around a particular shared meaning of *reivindicación*.

Sotz’il’s theater-making appeals to Maya sensibilities to heighten particular felt aspirations. Ethnography of rehearsals reveals that the play *Uk’u’x Ulew* in particular attempts to elicit audiences’ longing for the beautiful aspects of Maya worlds experienced

through Maya ontologies. As they discussed in their rehearsals, the objective of the *Uk'u'x Ulew* play was to leave audiences with hurt or other emotions in their heart – especially a longing for the wonders (“maravillas” in Cabrera’s words) of Maya worlds, in order to “feel their value” (as Miguel says about why they make their own Maya instruments). The point of highlighting these sensory aspects of Maya worlds is to evoke and then channel audiences’ longing towards efforts to protect and defend Mother Nature – or as in their title, “the Heart of Earth” (*Uk'u'x Ulew*). Applying Bloch’s theorization, this “felt aspiration” would be a “desire” rather than an “impulse” because it is directed towards an objective. Sotz’il voiced in their rehearsals that they hope their play *Uk'u'x Ulew* will transmit the beauty of Maya worlds with an aching power that will impel audiences to a (renewed) ethicopolitical commitment to nurturing the lifeways, ontology, and social practices that sustain “the Heart of Earth.”

By appealing to the audiences’ affect and sensory experience, Sotz’il’s play *Uk'u'x Ulew* conveys an unforgettable sense of impending loss that very well could result from disastrous human decisions. Sotz’il intends to contribute not only to Mayas’ anti-mining demands but moreover to the renewal of Maya world-making in its social and ontological dimensions. Sotz’il seeks to advance a political project through an artistic intervention at the level of the sensorium rather than through argumentation and discursive debate (applying Hirschkind’s argument).

The most memorable impression left by Sotz’il’s theater plays are the wonders that can be created from Maya worlds – ontological, ecological, social, and aesthetic. Yet, maintaining the abundance of plants, animals, stones, and other living beings that are brought to luminescence in Sotz’il’s plays requires sustaining Maya territories. The next chapter will explore how Sotz’il’s very own artisanship is dependent on the integrity of Maya territories and community economies. I will demonstrate how Sotz’il’s master artisanship comes from intimacy with the materials and the living environment from which they are sourced, including the ongoing practices that give them life, continuing relevance, and utility.

Chapter 5. Becoming I'x: Body Training and Creating Worlds with Living Materials

The sound of water draws the audience's eyes to the character Water as he pours water luxuriously over a long conch held vertically. Similar to an elongated young rosebud, the conch's smooth interior is a sensual peach color. Like a midwife, Water bathes the newborn baby.¹⁴²

Earth unwraps her wide woven *pas* (sash tied around the navel and abdomen), revealing a brilliantly colored underside as she tosses it across the stage to Water and it unfurls in a multitude of colors. The *pas*' gorgeous long unfurling recalls an umbilical cord.¹⁴³ Water wraps the Conch / Baby in the wide *pas* and carefully hands him to his mother, Earth.

In the last chapter I analyzed Sotz'il's collective creation process from conception of the play through staging in order to understand why Sotz'il's theater is powerful to Maya performers. This chapter is an ethnographic examination of Sotz'il's training of the body to take on or become energies from a Maya ontological perspective. This includes their approach to engaging living materials in their plays.

In Maya cosmovisión, there is a long and ancient conceptualization and practice of embodied energetic transformations, particularly between human and other-than-human or "animal" personae. This is evident through ancient iconography from lowland city-states (approximately 700 B.C. through A.D. 900) – of rulers' elaborately ornamented headdresses, human dancers in jaguar dress, and male rulers wearing women's *cortes*

¹⁴² Water is performing acts associated with Maya female midwives, yet this character is being performed by a male actor – although his character as Water is not necessarily denoting a male gender in most scenes.

¹⁴³ Earth's wide *pas* (woven sash that binds the *corte* or wrap-around "skirt") is the width of the ancestral *pas* used in some Maya communities before they became narrower according to the fashion of recent years. It also is like the wide *pas* used after childbirth to wrap the navel and abdomen of the mother.

(traditional woven cloths wrapped somewhat like skirts) in transformations of gender. The *Xajil Chronicles*, a colonial era document, registers in its history of the pre-colonial era the transformations of Kaqchikeles between nawales and humans. One example among many is:

Some [of us] went up into the sky, some [of us] descended into the earth.
Some of us descended, some of us ascended.

Then, all the warriors manifested their nawal power, their transforming power.¹⁴⁴

The “fleeing warriors” (Maxwell and Hill II 2006b, 29) used their “nawal power, their transforming power” to “save” themselves by hiding in surprising locations: in the sky, in the “beak of the Macaw,” in the earth, and “inside a wasps’ nest” (ibid. 2006a, 52, 53).

Transformations into animal personae by dancers and *ajq’ijab’* (daykeepers) did not only happen in past eras; it is also significant in contemporary Maya ontology. Mayas attribute certain phenomena to these transformations. For example, a U.S. graduate student who was a fluent Kaqchikel speaker told me that rumors had circulated among her Kaqchikel friends that their co-worker, an *ajq’ij*, had transformed into a bird by night to visit a woman he was courting.

In Sotz’il’s theater process, these Maya practices and conceptualizations of bodily and energetic transformation are at times used interchangeably—as slippages—with theater notions of transformation – of body, in performing characters, and in staging worlds. This is captured in the instruction by stage director Cabrera to “Bring the audience to another world.” In this chapter, I seek to explore these slippages as equivocations between incommensurable conceptualizations of world-making and theatrical transformation. Viveiros de Castro calls these slippages equivocations -- as “a failure to understand that understandings are necessarily not the same” due to ontologically different “real worlds that are being seen” (2004, 11). To help with this analysis, I employ Marisol de la Cadena’s framing of “Not only ... but also,” as in her example “not only a mountain, but also an earth being” (2016). I contend that Sotz’il’s theater work has multiple meanings to them

¹⁴⁴ (Maxwell and Hill II 2006a, 50). This would make for another fruitful study comparing Sotz’il’s play with the text of the *Kaqchikel Chronicles*. See also (Thelen 2014).

as performers: *not only* a theater performance about representations of Maya dilemmas, *but also* a relationship with energies from the perspective of Maya ontologies. Aiding in these dynamics is the careful attention Sotz'il pays to living materials that accompany their performances.

In critiques of modernization paradigms, scholars of cosmopolitics note that most forms of Western politics fail to account for Indigenous ontological difference. These scholars propose to instead conceive of an opening for Indigenous worlds. For example, de la Cadena notes that certain Indigenous peoples talk about entities such as mountains and territories in two ways. First, they at times adopt the language of the state, using terms that would facilitate the management and regulation of entities such as mountains and territories under the legal apparatus of the Western nation-state (for example, as property or biosphere reserves protected by environmental regulations from mining). At the same time, to distinct Indigenous peoples, entities like mountains and territories are also living beings and are not separated from human beings through a Nature / Culture divide (de la Cadena 2015). Scholars of cosmopolitics note that Indigenous peoples' mobilizations since the 1990s have been explicitly articulating a notion of politics that makes room for both Western and Native ontological understandings of Indigenous worlds. One of the gains of these movements is that the rights of Mother Nature have been enshrined in the constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia (Walsh 2010).

To date, literature on cosmopolitics and the ontological turn has not examined the capacity of theater to embody relationships of living beings in Indigenous worlds (beyond the Nature / Culture divide) and convey Indigenous ontological difference. In this chapter, I am studying how Sotz'il attends to the energetic life of nawales and living materials in their embodiment of characters and in crafting their theater productions. I seek to understand how Sotz'il navigates ontological differences (between the Western and the Maya) in making their theater. My research questions for this chapter are: How do Sotz'il's understandings of Maya ontology – particularly their praxis of relationality with human and other-than-human beings -- shape their theater practice? What are some effects of engaging materials with ruk'u'x in their plays? In considering these ontological

perspectives, what are the implications for understanding theater transformations: how to achieve them and their significance for actors and audiences?

SOTZ'IL'S THEATER IN RELATION TO A LIVING ENVIRONMENT

Back in El Tablón, walking away from the highway along the footpaths that run deep into the milpa and patches of woods, one encounters adobe houses that face central patios where family members sit outside in the late afternoons to talk, weave, crochet, and play with babies. One such adobe house appears unassuming at first, until one turns the corner. There the entryway is guarded by a big-bellied black Sotz'¹⁴⁵ painted over a glowing magenta background, like the colors of molten lava or burning embers. As we walk towards it, we see the left-hand wall is painted with a replica of the mural at Bonampak (dating from 790 A.D.) of Maya musicians, each carrying a different musical instrument.¹⁴⁶

Surrounding Sotz'il Jay (also colloquially referred to as “la sede”) is a family milpa. A tall tree displays an abundance of avocados; Sotz'il members climb it to toss down avocados for the family. Near the small outdoors garden are tree trunk sections on which members sit when crafting instruments outside. Behind the outdoors *pila* (a washing basin), the group has started a compost pile for organic refuse.

Standing tall behind Sotz'il Jay are elegant pine trees – a small cluster of woods that had been the play, experimentation, and dance space of Sotz'il founders when they were children and the adobe home was still their grandparents' house. An older sister fondly remembers childhood outings when her parents, aunts, and uncles would take her siblings and cousins to play in the woods. She admired her father and uncles for having invented creative games to play. They were among the first generation of Maya schoolteachers in the caseríos, and they were applying their pedagogies imaginatively to

¹⁴⁵ This Sotz' references the abstracted design on the back of the mens' chaqueta, but with a fleshed-out bat lifting his wings.

¹⁴⁶ The musicians in Sotz'il's first theater play *Xajoj Q'ojom Kaji' Imox* brought this mural to life in the very opening scene through the order in which they processed from their backstage to their circular performance area.

resonate with Maya *cosmovisión*.

Sotz'il continues to rehearse and do artistic experiments in these woods. In 2005, Sotz'il chose to have its first photographic shoot in the woods. Victorino Tejaxún's photos show them leaping high in the woods and dancing as their *nawal* characters around a fire. They were just starting to make the transition to theater, but they had already performed their dances in energetic sites such as these woods and the ancient Maya ballcourt at Iximche'. In their 2013 Maya arts workshops for local children, they went outside to the forest to notice and communicate the sounds of the forest. Sotz'il's living environment has been an animating inspiration in their theater creations.

The Responsibility of Art

Early in the group's formation, a cofrade charged them with a value that is so important to each member that each interviewee recounted this story to me, separately and without prompting. He told them that they could borrow his clothes as a cofrade, but added, "Do not portray the degrading stereotypes of our culture. Portray its dignity. Portray the ancestral line."¹⁴⁷ Lisandro led discussions of this encounter afterwards with the group, and they interpreted this statement to be a critique of "folclor," a term which they use for any kind of "entertainment" that seeks to imitate dances and cultural expressions "that already exist."¹⁴⁸ (They use the term to critique in particular the Folkloric Ballet of Guatemala.) For example, in their case, in their early days as a youth group they performed dances of cofrades but, based on this analysis, later realized that this was not appropriate because they would be imitating cofrades who are living and do these dances as an ontological-social practice. They then viewed their own previous performance practice as a form of falsehood that the cofrades could view as disrespecting them, even though it was not their intention. From that point on, Sotz'il sought to create original *xajoj q'ojom* and theater based on ancestral traditions that were no longer being performed. They viewed

¹⁴⁷ Lisandro, interview.

¹⁴⁸ Alejandro, interview.

this definitive shift in their practice as one of taking on the responsibility of art – to portray their culture’s dignity.

It was after this point that they met Cabrera. They coincided with him in their mutual desire to create original theater instead of imitations, and they both viewed this as a form of “responsibility.” However, in an interview, he expressed this as a “responsibility to the audience” that is “not moral” but about “representing originality through sincerity.” Whereas Sotz’il’s concern, from their Maya highlands society, was with the imitations proffered by the Folkloric Ballet of Guatemala, Cabrera too wanted to buck the norms of his society, that of ladino theater in the capital. That is, the norm was either to be “ideological” (perhaps Leftist theater) or, even more commonly, to superficially imitate European theater and aesthetics. Cabrera attributes his initial sense of artistic responsibility to the legacy of the guerrillas, and specifically to his sixth grade teacher who had taught his class to analyze critically (rather than memorize), to be “lúdico” and creative, and to touch the root of problems.

In the convergence of Sotz’il’s creation process with Cabrera, then, their combined sense of responsibility (from their distinct positionalities) – to their history, their audiences, and (later) to their characters and musical instruments – fused to become a rigorous discipline that defines the group. One expression of this discipline is the level of physical rigor and exertion that the Sotz’il members bring to the group, an extension of their everyday practice of hard labor as part of an agricultural community (where much, if not all, of each family’s sustenance come from working with Mother Earth even when one is a schoolteacher or other professional). Sotz’il continues this embodied ethic of tough physical labor in building their instruments and sets.

For example, one Wednesday, I went to help out the Artistic Creation Committee with their daily afternoon work projects at Sotz’il Jay. Miguel and Mariana are the two committee members and they are charged with making the musical instruments, sets, and wardrobes for Sotz’il’s plays and the plays created by their students. The name of the committee reflects Sotz’il’s esteem for this work: it is not the committee of “set design” or “costume design”, but rather “Committee of Artistic Creation.” This signals that the

wardrobe and instruments themselves are part of the total corpus of artistic creation of Sotz'il plays.

Miguel and Mariana were scraping out wood from halved logs to make tuns – a very time-consuming process. Miguel gave me small tasks to do that took me a long while. We got to converse during the process. At one point, they joked, “Now we’re going to interview *you!*” since I had begun interviewing them that month.

Miguel told me to slice off wood from the sides of particular wood blocks (to make a tool) and trunks (to make a *tun*) with a machete. I cut the wood very slowly, but I learned how much arm strength it takes. I got over my fear, somewhat, of hacking with a machete. It was good to do the learning through my hands. I learned that the physical labor of this committee takes a long time!

In cutting wood to build their musical instruments (like the drum-like *tun*), Sotz'il members use field tools like machetes. The process requires both physical exertion and a lengthy amount of time since they make the instruments by hand rather than through mechanized production.

This embodied ethic of tough physical labor is also required in maintaining their cultural center, which is located in the midst of cornfields. To house their sets, they apply the same embodied practices of creating shelters and storage rooms:

This was the second collective work day at Sotz'il Jay. Lorenzo assigned me to weed the garden and break up the ground that had dried with a hoe, while the rest of the group went off to collect caña (cornstalks). They wore hats to protect them from the sun, since it's hot today! It's verano (dry season). They're going to build another “galería” – their outside storage area for their sets – using the caña as walls.

Sotz'il's practice of holding collective work days reflects a common Maya practice of doing agricultural and community work collectively. Their daily work, between that which is strictly about making “theater” and that which is organizational and for their daily sustenance, is labor intensive and requires weathering the elements, whether hot or cold. It is a lot more physically active – both invigorating and tiring -- than the average Western lifestyle which has been noted by medical studies to be mostly sedentary.

At lunchtime I finished my work project of cleaning up the garden in front of Sotz'il Jay. The Ri Ak'u'x staff had already left Sotz'il Jay after their meeting, and Tat Adrián had told me that I had done a lot of work that day. I think he felt bad that

the rest were away from Sotz'il Jay, and I was alone laboring there. I myself had been wondering where they had gone to, but didn't want to leave until I got to tell them goodbye. When I returned home, I saw from my second-story window that they were at the bus stop. Three or four of the Sotz'iles were with a couple guys from a pickup truck and a huge pile of long cañas. It looked like they had just unloaded all the caña from the pickup truck and were now organizing themselves for how to transport it along the footpaths that leads to Sotz'il Jay — by wheelbarrow? By mecapal (forehead straps) to carry the bundles on their back?

From 2013 through May 2016, Sotz'il had been gradually building a new cultural center. (Previously they had been rehearsing in an old adobe house that their parents had grown up in.) This construction confirmed my sense that rugged manual labor is a fundamental part of Sotz'il's culture and environment. In the midst of the cornfields, their fathers, uncles, and neighbors were hauling in cement, iron, and other materials by wheelbarrow to build the new structure.

On the way to Sotz'il Jay, descending the hill through the cornfields, I heard someone on the path ahead call out to me "Sarina!" I saw it was Lorenzo's father, pushing a wheelbarrow and about to turn it towards Sotz'il's amphitheater. We exchanged greetings, and he said he was working on the construction of Sotz'il's new center. Later, I saw the tall hills of piedrín and other materials lying on the side of the amphitheater.

Sometimes Sotz'il performs difficult choreography that astonishes me, such as their leaps and lifts. However, Sotz'il members in their daily life also perform physical feats that awe me because they are no longer common in suburban and urban settings in the West. One example is scaling tall trees to drop down avocados for women family members of Sotz'il.

PREPARING THE BODY FOR EXPRESSION

Like everyday agricultural labor in their community, Sotz'il's choreography and body training also require a high level of physical exertion. When Sotz'il engages in both agricultural labor and the physical exertion of rehearsals, they both happen in the same body. It appears that their choreography tries to take advantage of their areas of muscular strength rather than develop a different physique, such as a leaner physique associated with

ballet or yoga. For their warm-ups, Sot'zil has designed a style of body conditioning that builds muscles as bulk, as opposed to the lean muscles of some body conditioning systems such as Pilates or yoga.

After my exchange with Lorenzo's father, when I entered Sotzil Jay, the Sotz'iles were engaged in exercises to "warm up" their muscles. This was ironic given that throughout the warm-up they had to endure the highlands cold with no indoor heating:

Miguel led the group in lying down and relaxing – on the *cold* concrete floor! Most were wearing hoodies. Miguel had his purple hoodie tied closely around his head, and he kept it like this for the rest of the day, even when working in the "artisan room" (my term) in the back and putting on his artisan's apron.

For about two long minutes they lay with their left cheek on the floor (looking left) and right knee bent up towards their side abs; then they switched sides. Finally, they did some yoga moves. I couldn't believe how they endured the cold! Also, I was in amazement that some could dance in jeans with the variety of movements that they do. For the warm-up Mariana changed out of her traje to wear sweats.

Sotzil had expressed their interest in yoga to me in 2006, when I taught the group and my family homestay some yoga moves. They saw yoga as a non-Western movement system from India with spiritual significance (also due to its relationship with animal postures), hence it was part of their interest in aspiring to have exchanges with Indigenous groups internationally. Since Sotzil re-creates much of their movement from corporal postures in ancient iconography that they find in books on Maya archaeology, it was not a stretch for them to re-create yoga poses from photocopied pictures.

Sotzil's capacity for physical endurance has developed from growing up in the daily conditions of living in a Maya agricultural community without comforts like indoor heating or padded dance floors. Growing up in their Maya community has led them to have a greater expectation of pain and exertion in daily life than I have found in Western societies. In contrast to ballet or even yoga where the emphasis is on long lean muscles and relaxation and stretching to achieve grace and smoothness in movement, Sotzil's dance training is about building up bulkier muscular strength through muscle contractions (to build the muscle thick, rather than long), producing a stockier build than dancers trained in ballet or modern dance. Influenced by the type of muscular exertion expected in Maya

lifestyles that demand more physical exertion and physical labor than “modern” Western lifestyles, the Sotz’iles achieve agility and smoothness in their movement through bulk strength training.

Thus, Sotz’il’s theater expresses in many ways the group’s grounding in their rural community and lifeways. When another visitor (a Colombian woman who had been trained as a dancer) and I participated in a couple warm-ups during Sotz’il’s Q’ij Saq workshops, we experienced that Sotz’il could do movements that we could not do with our Western dance training.

Sotz’il’s ethic of pushing themselves to their limits of muscular exertion in dance allows them to perform very challenging movements, in particular the movements of animals. A couple of their Q’ij Saq workshops were dedicated to teaching Sotz’il’s original technique of dance that they had developed from researching pre-colonial dance postures and the energetic movement qualities of animal helper energies (nawales). In the workshop, Sotz’il dancers taught exercises that attempted to embody the intricate movements of five animals: the Bat, Owl, Lizard, Deer, and Dog. Four of these animals are directly associated with nawal day energies in the cholq’ij calendar cycle. The Bat is the guardian energy of the Kaqchikel people of Sololá, as noted in the *Xajil Chronicles*. Sotz’il performs their movements down to their very minute details. For example, from my field notes of a workshop warm-up that I had participated in:

For the “Bat squat”:

Squatting forward, on the balls of feet, with knees splayed apart for torso to arch through. Balance is helped by arms extended back (diagonally up), with palms flexed to the sky, as if flying / swooping low. (This is held for 10 long seconds! Talk about upper thighs burning!)

For part of the “flight sequence”:

Arms extend diagonally back, with palms flexed to sky as if swooping low in flight.

For the “perching sequence”:

Flex wrists back to look like claws.

Push chest forward like a proud, puffed-up animal;

Lift right knee while left heel is also lifted.

(Miguel says this is our “break” from the Bat squat, but with the standing-leg heel lifted, my calves are burning while also trying to keep my balance!)

This is an extremely rigorous workout for beginners and involves complex coordination and balancing in asymmetrical positions. The participants in the Q’ij Saq workshops had never done Sotz’il’s style of dance before because Sotz’il’s movement vocabulary is original. While all the beginners voiced their struggles throughout the workshop – of burning muscles and flubbed coordination -- Miguel appeared to perform the movements with ease. His strength gave him an agility, flexibility, and extreme diversity of movement, even when he was bouncing off the floor, or using arms and legs on the floor, or almost rolling.

We repeat the sequence: Bat squat for 10 seconds, and briefly coming to our “perch.” Now lift the left knee (foot somewhat relaxed). Then on the other side: a total of perhaps six repetitions. Upper thigh and calves burning!

By leading the movements and physically modeling for the group how lifelike to the animal energy his movements can get (even with a human body), Miguel is demonstrating one aspect—body conditioning--of the intense training and preparation process by which the Sotz’iles “become” or “take on” the animal energies. (The other aspects are research and metaphysical processes for connecting with the nawal energies.) This body conditioning involves a commitment to the energies that is not in word or discourse only. As with some ontological practices that involve a mental and physical sacrifice, Sotz’il’s body conditioning involves a physical “entrega” (giving over of oneself) that is physically demanding. The gap between Miguel’s expertise and the beginners’ attempts showed that this level of mastership to achieve the likeness of an animal’s

movements — to walk and move as if one is the animal itself — is not a question of a handful of weekly workshops. Rather, it requires a near-daily regimen of body conditioning. This is a level of commitment of a higher order that demands engagement with the animal movements and energies on multiple planes: the physical as well as the mental, spiritual, and psychological.

Another Bat movement: Again we raise our right knee (left heel is lifted: we're on our toes), but this time our torso is curled over our knee as low as possible, and we extend our arms to the sides. Then we drop down, bringing our feet and body crunched low to the floor as we wrap our arms around our knees. Alternating sides, now with the left knee lifted, we once again developpé arms and hands out to the side, like wings unfurling, as we "stand" on our right toe (heel lifted). We repeat the sequence, alternating sides, for 10 repetitions: Exhale down into a ball, inhale into a fully extended Bat with wings unfurled.

We repeat the sequence with jumps. We take a brief break between repetitions, but not long enough to fully catch our breath. In total we do about six repetitions of ten jumps each (!). We are truly breathless afterwards. This was a more intense cardio exercise for me than running or than other dance classes with a lot of jumping.

Next, we move to "across the floor" movement sequences in groups of three, doing the animal movements that Miguel has taught us in the previous couple weeks. I notice that we are getting better at these each week. I can see that as a group we have more physical endurance now. We cycle through each movement about three times. With only three groups cycling through, we do not have much time to catch our breath before running back to the starting line and beginning again. These movement sequences include:

- (a) OWL: From a forward roll (tucking the head and arms), jump onto your feet in a squat (!) with elbows bent and hands flexed up close in to your side/ribs. Repeat all the way across the floor (!).*
- (b) Starting with LIZARD: on all fours flat on the floor — Right knee and left elbow splayed out to the side as opposite arm and leg stretch and propel the dancer forward. Returning to the starting line with BAT.*
- (c) JAGUAR / DOG: Knee forward and under while body stays low and parallel to the floor, with elbows bent close to your side/ribs, like a moving push-up: no butts lifting up!*

That's the end of our warm-up. The young people didn't bring drinking water, so I do not know how they recover. Afterwards I got so sleepy that I was drifting in and out of sleep for the next half-hour of the rehearsal.

Sotz'il's movement regimen is extremely dynamic. First, it involves a diverse range of movement: Engaging the head to pull in and out like an owl, balancing in asymmetrical positions, etc. Second, the tempo of the movements vary. Sometimes the positions are held for a long time, as when Miguel is being carried across the stage upside down. Sometimes the repetitions are quick and build cardio endurance. Third, in the warm-up alone, we're engaging the "three levels": the standing level; the "sky" (balancing on toes, lifting knees, and leaping / jumping); and the "earth," with lots of interaction with the floor, with some across-the-floors involving moving forward with hands and feet, and some involving rolling forward and then jumping to one's feet in a squat.

For the warm-up, no music is involved. All the company members do the warm-up in Sotz'il's rehearsal. Since the musicians double as dancers, that means that no one is left over to play music. (This is very different from West African dance traditions with the live drum.)

One workshop student commented that the workshop warm-up of embodying animals' movements had this effect on him: "It guides you to movements besides 'normal' ones. It requires more effort from all your body. It relaxes you, awakens you, and fills you with strength."¹⁴⁹

Enduring Pain as a Toj

The regimen emphasized the value of endurance — being able to hold the challenging muscle contractions and endure the cardiovascular challenge of many repetitions. It did not emphasize stretching or relaxing into movements. That is, besides the start of the warm-up that began on the cold floor, very little time and attention was given to lengthening muscles or relaxing the body to attain a greater range of motion.

¹⁴⁹ Andrés, interview by author, May 5, 2013.

In contrast with low-impact body training philosophies that seek to avoid or minimize pain and muscle strain, the Sotz'iles *expected* pain and exertion during warm-ups. For example, Pablo and Miguel told new youth workshop participants to expect that they would be sore for a couple days afterwards as they get used to Sotz'il's dance routines. Miguel motivated participants to push and challenge themselves to finish the repetitions despite physical exhaustion.

This also applies to their conditions for rehearsal. It does not matter that the floor is cold — all participants will simply arrive bundled up, with hoodies closed around their heads. It does not matter that the floors are unforgivingly made of concrete: The Sotz'iles will still roll, tumble, jump, and do difficult moves (even where one could fall!) without using fancy springy floors (as in elite ballet studios) or yoga mats as cushions. This training prepares them to dance on the concrete pavers of the town plazas. Sotz'il will not find fancy, softer floors to help break falls in the places where they mostly perform: town plazas (i.e. on the street / pavement) and municipal gymnasiums made of concrete block. Likewise, their rehearsal floor is made of the same material as that of a regular house in El Tablón.

I have found that this is a common ethic among working-class (or even rural professional) Mayas in various regions of Guatemala. I have not heard much complaint from Sotz'il members about their rehearsal and performance conditions. The one time I heard a comment was memorable because of its rarity: original member Ana in 2006 mentioned that she did not like the cold. For one thing, she was wearing a *corte* and her matching sandals left her feet uncovered, unlike the young men. At that point, rehearsals were at night, making conditions even colder. For another, she had a greater burden of work that was expected of her and that she had to come home to when everyone else was sleeping and the house was cold: washing dishes, helping in the kitchen, and finishing lesson plans for teaching early the next day. As the only woman member of Sotz'il at the time, her comment seemed to highlight factors that made women's participation difficult in Sotz'il.

In fact, Sotz'il frames muscle soreness as a rite-of-passage. Sotz'il dancers and director have given instructions in rehearsal that indicate that their body training philosophy is about *using muscle soreness and pain* to propel actors to the next level of surrender.

One example is the laboring scene in *Uk'u'x Ulew*, in which the character Earth circles the center several times doing birthing squats. Cabrera remarks on Mariana's performance as the character Earth, "If your legs hurt, take advantage of that to express the pain." Only at the very end of the long scene of labor, when she unrolls her wide *pas*, is when she can (finally) relax to the ground.

As director, Cabrera is not one to shy away from pain and physical exertion especially in Sotz'il's choreography and dance training. Sotz'il does not either due to cultural expectations of physical rigor in everyday Maya rural life. In that respect, Cabrera and Sotz'il complement each other. Part of what makes Sotz'il's theater art so mesmerizing, deducing from experimental theater director Anne Bogart's seven characteristics of magnetic theater¹⁵⁰, is that Sotz'il is willing to put out their highest level of physical exertion. They view this as connected to their ontological practices.

Miguel commented that he enjoys experiencing exhaustion from his strenuous dance because it leads him to go deeper and look for the next level of giving himself over to the dance:

That's the most delicious! When your body is tired, it's because you've nourished yourself a lot. But when you're dragging yourself, listless, you are left with this worry. That's why within the music, this is born: energies are managed. And within this, you have to show up. That's why you have to surrender yourself totally until the end.¹⁵¹

Training the Human Body to Evoke Animal Energies

Sotz'il's rigorous corporal training prepares them to take on the complex movements of the animals that certain *nawales* correspond with. In Maya community life,

¹⁵⁰As Lenelle Moise had taught it to us, one characteristic is physical endurance: witnessing someone do a repetitive action, defying exhaustion.

¹⁵¹ Miguel, interview by author, February 11, 2013.

the detailed observation of animals is valued and people are able to replicate the sounds of farm and forest animals. This cultural practice of close observation also prepares Sotz'il embody animals' movements. In turn, by taking on a nawal's movements, they draw close to the energy of that nawal. Sotz'il members express their intention to "merge with" or become that nawal during the theater performance.

Their dance warm-ups and choreography demonstrate how the Sotz'iles develop an embodied relationship with the qualities of their animal nawales. Through improvisation and play, they begin to think *through* their animal characters – how they would respond through movement and interact with each other:

After their warm-up, the group begins to generate movement possibilities with body-centered play. In playfully interacting with the DOG character, the MONKEY-BABY character flips over many ways. DOG displays buoyancy in jumping up from squat to squat.

Sotz'il strives for realism in its choreography of animal movements, and they are masterful at it:

After howling, DOG flips to his back as if to "scratch" it by wriggling on the ground – i.e. moving his upper back and hips to one side while letting his midriff stay put, forming convex and concave crescents on the ground. DOG curls his paws upwards by pulling his elbows tight to his sides and raising his forearms vertically, then flexing his wrists forward with fingers curling down like a waterfall.

Because Sotz'il's dance training is done without mirrors, the Sotz'iles do not see their own execution of dance movements as they perform them. They only see pictures or videos of their performances which may be long afterwards. However, there is a beneficial experiential effect to dancing without mirrors: the dancer is less self-absorbed in personal image without mirrors. Dancers can immerse themselves more deeply in the *feeling or energy* of the movement – concentrating on how the body feels rather than how it appears -- which is the goal of non-Western movement traditions like yoga and taiji and of Sotz'il's philosophy of their Maya reivindicación dance and theater.

Sotz'il's dances are inspired by the ontological significance of nawales being linked to animal energies. Commenting on Sotz'il's seamless kinesthetics in moving as animal spirit pairs, a member of the woodcarver artisans' group Ajchowen from Pa'laq'ha' says,

To convert oneself into an animal is to transcend, to visualize another world. Animals have a vision that Nature is life itself. [...] This is the body movement of a Maya, the sensibility of a Maya. Converted into a jaguar, [the Sotz'il dancer's] greatest inspiration is already from the world of the jaguar. This is one of the most powerful things that Sotz'il has discovered.¹⁵²

This woodcarver suggests that from the point of view of animals, the Western nature / culture divide does not exist. Becoming an animal allows Mayas to expand not only their visualization of the world but also their bodily and sensory experience of the world. From this ontology, the Maya who transforms into an animal nawal is not limited by the experience of the human world.

Through their embodiment of animal nawales in their theater works, Sotz'il challenges the anthropocentrism of Western institutions and worldview. In fact, most of the characters in Sotz'il's plays are nawales or ancestors, and of these, many are represented in animal form. In their first play *Xajoj Q'ojom Kaji' Imox*, about half the characters were historical figures (for example, the last Kaqchikel governors Kaji' Imox and B'eleje' K'at) and about half were nawales or guardian ancestor energies. In *Uk'u'x Ulew*, all the characters are elements but one, which is a baby who is part human and part monkey. In the play *Oxlajuj B'aqtun*, all but one of the characters are energies and nawales. Even the "human being" character is one of the twin protagonists of the Pop Wuj and hence not simply a human being.

In the rehearsal described above, the actor "playing" the Dog nawal (Tz'i') was attaining such a high level of precision in his dog movements that, witnessing it, I felt a degree of transformation, even with the actor's street clothes of jeans and a T-shirt, without a mask or his stage outfit. Transformations into animal guardians by dancers and *ajq'ijab'* are an important component of the oral tradition and ontology of Maya peoples. It is reflected in precolonial iconography and is documented in passages in *Kaqchikel*

¹⁵² Nicolás, interview by author, June 22, 2013.

Chronicles, as noted above. These transformations invoke the capacity for multiple embodiments as well as the capacity to transcend the bodily form.

As part of the responsibility of theater that they practice, the Sotz'iles have a high level of diligence and rigor in taking on the energy of their characters. To absorb themselves in their theater work and better merge with their characters, they begin their rehearsals with a ritual of concentration. The epigraph to this dissertation described one such ritual during an early theater rehearsal, in the first year of developing their theater work with Cabrera.

Merging with characters: Rituals of Concentration

Cabrera notes another ritual of concentration that allows the Sotz'iles to “merge with” their characters: perfuming their stage outfits with ceremonial incense. Processions are another ritual of concentration that the Sotz'iles perform in all their major plays. They reflect the importance of processions in Maya ontological practice and social life, as the shouldering of the guardian energies of the community. Cofradías have annual processions for each of their guardian energies whose “imagenes” – the statues of saints from the Catholic Churches -- are carried on cofrades’ shoulders. These cofradía processions often precede Guatemala’s most famous processions: those performed during the Catholic Holy Week, when large statues of Jesus Christ are carried on the shoulders of dozens of women and men.

In Sotz'il's first play, *Xajoj Q'ojom Kaji' Imox*, the dancer-musicians begin the performance by processing from their dressing room with their musical instruments, preparing to be perfumed with incense (*saturado*) by ajq'ijab' (daykeepers) as they enter the circular stage area. This procession replicates one depicted in a pre-colonial mural at the ancient Maya city-state of Bonampak (in present-day Chiapas). In *Uk'u'w Ulew*, the procession is of four elements: After Grandmother Moon drums with her rising while Dog howls, four dancer-musicians enter the performance area as a procession of the elements: Earth (enters dressed in a Cobán-style corte, colored electric green); Fire (dressed in bright red traje and carries a bowl of ocote and fire); Wind (wears white owl wings like fans over

his hands); and Water (dressed in brilliant blue colors like the *trajes* of Santa Catarina Palopó and wears a Fish *tocado* (headdress / mask made of paper maché). The procession is magnificent with multiple senses and elements. Through these processions, the Sotz'iles prepare to merge with their characters and they invoke guardian energies to protect them from negative consequences during the play's performance.

To absorb themselves in their theater work and better merge with their characters, the Sotz'iles begin their rehearsals with a ritual of concentration combined with rigorous physical conditioning. Sometimes the concentration is tense when expectations collide.

As I walked down to Sotz'il Jay, I saw that Cabrera was leading the young women in warm-ups on the steps of the amphitheater: They were rolling their ankles balancing first on one leg, and then the other. Later, as I helped bring a *timbal* [a dual drum that is tied with a *faja* around the waist] up to Sotz'il's van, I saw that Cabrera was leading the young women in running laps around the amphitheater. And finally, in Sotz'il Jay they had pulled out the longer *petates* [woven reed mats] and he was leading them in sit-ups and other abs work.

When I finally came in to observe the rehearsal, I found a tense silence that I did not dare break – thus, I did not do my usual round of greetings. Had something gone wrong in the warm-up? Was Cabrera angry that Eugenia wasn't there? The women were setting up the stage, and I wrestled in my mind with whether I should ask the women if they wanted help, but decided not to interrupt. As Cabrera was sweeping the floor, I timidly asked if I could observe the rehearsal (even though he previously had said I could). Because he didn't hear me, he said to me in an irritated voice, “¿Cómo?” I asked again, and he said in a low voice and still bending down as he swept the performance area, “Yes, no problem.”

When he was done sweeping, as he waited for the women to change into their stage dress, he took his normal upright, firm posture at the edge of the stage and stood. Silently. With his hands on his hips, elbows flexed back, and head lifted high. Waiting. This was definitely a silence not to interrupt: a ritual, before starting the rehearsal, of concentration? “On stage,” no one spoke. The only voices that dared to laugh came from the back room where Mariana and Carmen were wrapping their *cortes* around their sweat pants¹⁵³ and their hair in several coils with long *su't* [woven shawls].

Once everyone had come silently to their places, they nodded about when to start, and did a full run-through (minus Eugenia).

¹⁵³ because the sweats are standing in for the jaguar suits that they will wear underneath their *cortes*

However, within the first five minutes, Cabrera was *on* Gabriela, who (as became especially evident because she was wearing her mask) we could see was turning her head to look upstage right at Carmen and the action, when she should have been facing the absent Eugenia's spot downstage left. "Don't look at her!" he quipped. Then he continued to yell, twice more: "Don't look at her! Don't look at her!"

I was taken aback by Cabrera's dominance of the rehearsal, while the Sotz'il members took it in stride. When I specifically asked the women's group of Sotz'il about Cabrera's discipline, they said that they appreciate it because it has helped them become better actors. Despite Cabrera's temper with the young women, they highly praised him in my interviews with them. They said they appreciated and were enthusiastic about his strict discipline because it raised them to a higher standard of acting, physical training, and physical exertion.

Gabriela's comment about this was, "My brother told me that it was a good opportunity [to participate in Sotz'il]. And if he [Cabrera] scolds one a lot, one must put up with it and keep in mind [his critique]. Simply look for how to improve my part. I can put up with critique – it does not affect me. Because that way I get better. In fact, Mauricio [Cabrera] has had a lot of patience with me."¹⁵⁴ It seems that the Sotz'iles try to adapt to each other's strengths while being cognizant of weaknesses, which again is a manner of adapting to each person's *nawal* in the effects their day energy has on their personality.

Becoming I'x¹⁵⁵: Beyond "la mujer sufrida"

In the play *Ixkik*, Carmen becomes the *Pop Wuj* character Yaxb'alamkej, here represented as a Jaguar, when she metaphysically goes to another dimension where a struggle with negative energies is happening inside her womb. Mariana commented that although in their play a woman plays the Jaguar character, that does not mean that this Jaguar necessarily has a "feminine" energy; and that regardless, its prevailing characteristic is being a warrior.¹⁵⁶ This characterization challenges the dominant stage representations of Maya women in Guatemala who are stereotyped

¹⁵⁴ Gabriela, interview by author, July 26, 2013.

¹⁵⁵ As a rough interpretation, I'x is "the face of a day" (a day name in the Maya lunar calendar) and a *nawal* that corresponds with the energy of a jaguar.

¹⁵⁶ Mariana, interview by author, February 19, 2013.

as “the woman who has suffered” (la mujer sufrida) or a cleaning woman. In directing Carmen, Cabrera provokes her to go beyond the stereotypical representations:

“Fuerza (Strength)!” Cabrera keeps shouting this at Carmen to get her to go deeper in her acting: “Look for it inside: Fuerza! Fuerza! FUERZA!!!!” His pitch gets high, almost whining. “Open your eyes, show your teeth! Tense your hands!” He demonstrates to her how she should rear her head back with a roar.

Cabrera demonstrates for Carmen how, from the very moment she takes up the jaguar mask, she should do it with fuerza! The mask is her fuerza, so she has to treat it like such. As she looks ferociously at the Lord of Xib’alb’a, she has to tensely pull back the elastic on the mask as she lowers it onto her face. Her hands can even shake as she does this. Cabrera demonstrates this for her.

In the next section, Cabrera instructs Gabriela: “Throw the sword when you get to the center. Not afterwards! Otherwise the audience will think, ‘Why are you attacking the wall?’ So once you throw it, you’ve got to turn around – at once! If you want to pause, you have to do it as if you are calculating [your next step].”

Cabrera demonstrates three options: Lunging into action, pausing to calculate, or tiptoeing stealthily forward. “Got it? If not, the audience will know that you do not know your next step. You have mark your actions well! [To indicate:] What do you want to do?”

In telling Carmen to “look inside,” Cabrera is urging her to feel her character from within her own body. At the same time, in the vignette above, Cabrera takes on the energy that he tries to call up in the actors. Sotz’il members say that he is demanding because he tries to get the actors to rise to another level of rigor. Cabrera jumps into the character himself to show Carmen and Gabriela.

Sotz’il members respect Cabrera for being committed to his craft and for the precision he evokes from them in demanding quality and excellence. Cabrera applies this discipline equally to the women’s theater group because of his philosophy to not coddle any of the groups he works with.

Cabrera’s directing shares similarities with – but as with other questions of Maya ontology, is not commensurable with -- the way in which Miguel describes his performance method of looking inside to take on the energy of his character’s nawal. An excerpt of his

comment about “surrender[ing] yourself totally” was discussed above. Here is his full statement from an interview:

I saw this when doing my teaching practicum. I saw that the students were very timid. [I thought,] Why? Why don't they express themselves? They should get out everything, and say the truth! Coming from an artistic expression, things can be said! This oriented me [set me off on my road / me encaminó mucho] on how to be within a [theater] setting, or within a character. One must enjoy it, to the last bit.

That's the most delicious! When your body is tired, it's because you've nourished yourself a lot. But when you're dragging yourself, listless, you are left with this worry. That's why within the music, this is born: energies are managed. And within this, you have to show up. That's why you have to surrender yourself totally until the end.¹⁵⁷

Even if you strain a finger, or whatever else happens to you on the stage, this doesn't bother you because this is your *toj*. And if something happened to you, it's because you were not prepared. You have to prepare yourself. At times we haven't prepared ourselves. There have been moments we've said “we have a ceremony,” but you simply do it out of obligation, or you're not feeling it. It's not done with affection (*cariño*).

Everything moves – in relation to its own circle or its own space managed by [muffled and unclear: *ajq'ijab' / daykeepers?*], because all the characters are within all of this. You feel the heat, the energy of your *compañero* who is at your side. No one should remain seated if he [your partner] is pouring himself out. And once my turn comes, I go also. They're complements that each person has to develop.¹⁵⁸

The Kaqchikel word *toj*--an ancient word that is similar in many Maya languages—is usually translated as “an offering” or “payment.” It is also a *nawal* and day name in the ceremonial Maya lunar calendar (*cholq'ij*). Miguel says that any pain that an actor experiences on stage is a payment. He views this giving over of one's energy in Maya ontological terms. Like Cabrera, he views acting as a commitment of one's physical or bodily energy in which nothing is held back in order to get “within” or “inside” a character – not taking into consideration an appearance of being pretty nor even preventing injury.

¹⁵⁷ This part of the quotation (this paragraph) was excerpted above.

¹⁵⁸ Miguel, interview.

For Miguel, the actor's performance involves *not only*¹⁵⁹ this commitment of physical energies, *but also* a metaphysical offering and “managing” of energies. If the proper metaphysical preparations are done, with sincerity and affection, the actor can concentrate fully on the *toj* / payment rather than on protecting herself and still won't be injured on stage (for example, in daring choreography). If the proper metaphysical preparations are not done, that opens a window for physical injury to happen, in Miguel's view. This metaphysical energy is not only felt individually, but is also shared among fellow actor-dancers who affect each other with the level of “heat” and “pouring out” that each does – not emotionally, as in inspiration, but metaphysically, through an interaction of their energies. To describe the mutual firing up of fellow actor-dancers, Miguel uses the term “complements” which is a foundational concept in Maya ontology that describes things ranging from pairs of ancestors, to present-day daykeepers, to the pre-colonial form of governance through dual authorities. Miguel would say that the woman actor's process of becoming *I'x* also involves a *toj*.

Miguel suggests that this management of energies is both at the individual and the collective level. At the collective level, an *ajq'ijab* couple (daykeepers) tends to the *kotz'ij* fire to help manage the energies of the group and the play. One original *Sotz'il* member says, “They always indicate to us where we are weak.”

Rafael also says that *Sotz'il*'s dances and theater have significance beyond the theater space. He says that their movements are based on

the movements of the planets, celestial bodies, the setting of the sun, where the wind originates, and where the wind falls. You always hear about these movements in the words of the grandfathers, and also in the texts. [...] It has meaning. I see it as cosmic. It's a unified whole -- it's the world, it's the universe. It's not just the stage. It's more ceremonial, where each character feels these energies that are in something, in the universe.

When I asked to clarify if this is a vision for the future or an ideal, Rafael stressed,

It already exists – we're living it. It's our home. But with our consciousness [now], we think in another way. When we think of technology, we shouldn't lose Mother Nature. Leaving technology totally is impossible [today]... We're dependent on

¹⁵⁹ Again, using Marisol de la Cadena's framework.

it. So the work of the group is to know how to connect ourselves with nature. But you can't get out of everything [in the present-day world].

Rafael's response flips back and forth between current demands of Western society – implying that Maya people have to participate in contemporary socioeconomic activities involving technology due to social and economic needs -- and Maya “cosmovisión” conveying a dual consciousness: “Have the other one [a Western worldview], but know who one is. ... We have to get closer with older people to have this [Maya] life, and teach it to the little ones.” He says that speaking one's Maya language helps maintain this.

Hence, at least two ontological understandings of theater performance are being expressed in Sotz'il's theater works and in interviews with Sotz'il members: the first, a Guatemalan Western ontology articulated by Cabrera, and the second, a Maya ontology as applied to performing characters, as articulated especially by Miguel. Using terminology that de la Cadena (2016) has introduced in her theorizations of the “ontological opening,” these ontologies are incommensurable yet entangled within each other, and they can be part of the same conversation. They can even both be taken into consideration within – and both provide orientation to -- the same act of embodiment. The following vignette illustrates this through the equivocation between what Cabrera has in mind about alternate “theater worlds” and how Sotz'il conceives of Maya worlds and dimensions of space and time.

“Bring the audience to another world”

In the action before Carmen puts on her jaguar mask, Cabrera says, “You're still making yourself ‘pretty’ with your face,” imitating her with his facial expression to show her. “*Be angry!*” he instructs. In response, she opens her eyes and mouth wider to roar.

Cabrera continues to provoke her: “Don't be *la mujer sufrida*. It's too easy to be the suffering woman. Be angry! Be a warrior! You are a warrior! Feel the anger! We don't want the audience to cry. We want the audience to be moved!” He continues:

Believe that you are a warrior! Believe that you are your character. If you believe it, you will bring the audience to another world. If you don't believe it, they will laugh. If you believe it, you will bring the audience with you. You will capture the

emotions of the audience and they will go with you!

Cabrera points to the power of embodying one's character with full emotional commitment: that this act has the power to "bring the audience to another world." Sotz'il's actors follow this instruction and their theater works indeed successfully bring audiences to another world. And yet, equivocations exist. Cabrera directs Sotz'il actors to *bring* the audience to another world, while Sotz'il's plays show that different but co-existing metaphysical "dimensions" with ancestors and nawales impinge upon material reality in the here and now. Cabrera urges the actors to *believe* they are their characters, while Sotz'il members say they attempt to *meld* with the energy of their nawal-characters during their performances. Examples of these practices are: the nawal rehearsals (*ensayos de nawales*), Miguel's comments about giving their all to their performances as a *toj*; being saturated with incense when entering the performance area; and making their own instruments. These ontological distinctions are subtle and easy to gloss over until teased out.

From Cabrera's perspective, "A ceremony...is not freed of present-day cruelty." He contests the assumption of ladino observers who have told him that for Sotz'il's theater to be real and to represent contemporary Mayas, the Sotz'iles would need to go on stage wearing "jeans and with at least a guitar." Like former Sotz'il member Jimena, Cabrera stresses that Sotz'il's theater "is not representing the past but things of today," indicating that their plays represent contemporary practices that influence the present moment. The implicit assumption by these ladino (non-Maya) commentators is that a non-modern representation of Maya worlds cannot co-exist with Mayas' current social reality because the latter can only be represented through social realism. Here again, Marisol de la Cadena's "Not only ... but also" framing is useful: Not only a mountain, but also an earth being (2016). Not only a contemporary social participant wearing jeans, but also a Maya subject experiencing Maya perceptions and sensibilities that exceed Western frames of understanding. Cabrera notes,

The fact that there's a lot of nature around us does not mean that there's no cruelty, or that we don't know that there are assassins around. That there are no thieves. That there's no repression or that cruelty isn't surrounding you. It's simply that we take a hold of these symbols that surround us and we represent this cruelty that

surrounds us also. And this oppression. And we don't only represent cruelty, but also the wonders, the beauty of this world.¹⁶⁰

In speaking of this, yet another difference emerges between Sotz'il and Cabrera: Cabrera speaks of "representing" through theater "symbols" – a theatrical language akin to what Anne Bogart describes as theatrical alchemy or magic -- and Sotz'il speaks of energies, nawales, and cosmovisión. There are equivocations that are present in each interaction of the staging process that I have not heard Cabrera and Sotz'il address directly, perhaps because there is enough correspondence that the collaboration works well despite ontological differences. This reminds me of the title of de la Cadena's talk, referring to the alliance between environmental activists and Indigenous peoples: "Uncommoning Nature (and Politics): Alliances across interests in common that are not the same interest" (2016). For example, Cabrera states,

Sotz'il ... represents things of today, and represents through what's happening. If they use masks and trajes, it's because that is what is provided in this moment: Note that [here and now] there are birds, the wind, the animals that pass by, the houses, the leaves. If this is what we are living in this moment, we can represent it in another way.¹⁶¹

However, from my interviews and conversations with Sotz'il, I sense that their "stage representations" are not just about adopting theatrical symbols through a representational aesthetic, even when that aesthetic is not social realism but something closer to surrealism or magic realism. They express another Maya ontological understanding too of both the content of their theater plays as well as the *ruk'u'x* of the materials that they bring to accompany them in their stage productions: the incense that they "saturate" (*saturar*) themselves with; the masks they feed; the fruit offerings¹⁶² to the stone figures they place around their performance areas in town plazas and whom they refer to as "guardian-protectors" ("taq iq' ab'äj ajchajinel" or "las y los guardianes-

¹⁶⁰ Cabrera, interview.

¹⁶¹ Cabrera, interview.

¹⁶² The giving of offerings to the guardians of the four directions also happens before the pre-colonial dance-theater masterwork *Rabinal Achi* (D. Tedlock 2003). Another similarity is that Sotz'il describes their play *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* as a "ceremonial dance."

protectores” of which, as they specify in Kaqchikel, two are women and two are men).¹⁶³ The Sotz’iles have closed rehearsals called “ensayos de nawales” whose stated purpose is to explore the relation between their dance and music and the movements of the nawales. Although I was not permitted to see these rehearsals, from what I have observed of how they regularly dedicate time in their work calendar to them and how they speak of them, they approach these *ensayos de nawales* with sincerity and a sense of investigating their cultural inheritance.

In sum, the Sotz’iles describe their plays as involving “energies” on many levels and at many moments: not just in what happens on stage with the characters, but also in the preparation of the plays and in what happens to the actors internally in taking on their characters. Sotz’il members speak of managing the energies as being key to their theater performances – not necessarily in terms of “success” or “effectiveness” (for example, as in communicating with audiences), but, I propose, in terms of their performances’ completeness as an offering.

MATERIALS WITH RUK’U’X

Managing the energies in a performance involves not only the actors’ embodied performances (and their body training to prepare) but also their relationship with the living materials in their play.

Inhabiting a living world

In one Ri Ak’u’x workshop, a daykeeper proposed to the youth artists that all Mayas should use the term “encantos” (in Spanish) when referring to sacred sites because people of Maya communities experience those sites as energetic. This daykeeper was suggesting that Maya cosmovisión recognizes that the world is shared by human and non-human living beings. This provide a more complex notion of agency and causality that extends beyond the human. Like the reflection by the woodcarver above about looking at the world through

¹⁶³ Libretto, *Oxlajuj B’aqtun*.

the perspective of a jaguar, it allows for possibilities beyond the limited vision and finite resources of the human material world.

Living materials are integrated into Maya daily life and eventful celebrations (of life events). For example, the sap of pine trees is used both in ceremonies and on a daily basis (in the form of ocote) to start hearth fires for cooking. Pine needles are considered indispensable for community celebrations for providing a natural perfume that both enlivens and sweetens, heightening attendees' emotional and sensory connection to that life event. In fact, when Sotz'il arrived to play music at a hamlet's annual fair (*feria*) but saw that the organizers had not laid down pine needles across the stage and celebration area, Sotz'il coordinator Lisandro Guarcax indicated that this was a significant oversight because he said every Maya celebration should be accompanied by pine needles (pers. comm., 2006).

For many Mayas, valuing these living beings and enchanted sites leads to an ethicopolitical commitment to sustain them and their living environment. Many Maya communities' affective connection with energetic centers such as mountains is demonstrated by their strong mobilization against industries such as mining that seek to disembowel their sacred landscapes. Although environmental contamination has increased in Maya communities in the past century with the introduction of non-biodegradable packaging and products as well as limited infrastructure for disposing of the toxic wastes of factories, the carbon footprint among Maya communities continues to be minimal when compared to Western societies.

Sotz'il members have noted that what brings vibrancy to living materials is their "*esencia*" or, in Kaqchikel, *ruk'u'x*, which literally means "its heart." It is important to them to highlight the *k'u'x* of the elements they work with, both in the course of crafting their stage materials and in the performance of their plays. In turn, these living materials and the energetic territories that are their home reciprocate by nourishing human beings' *esencia*. An original Sotz'il member reflected:

Being with Sotz'il has taught me that one must travel across all of your territory and get to know it. There are many mountains, many caves. Located there are the energies waiting for you the day that you arrive. But instead we travel in other

parts, without having rooted yourself in where you were born, from where you can understand your *esencia*.

[...] And that's where the knowledge is. What more do we want in this life if we have it all in our hands? It's knowing how to find it. To talk to it, feel it, live it – yes, that's to enjoy it! At least I'm enjoying it! And –

[*Upon seeing three dogs circling nearby, he tells me:*] They're guiding you!
[*Laughs.*]

So, it's that. Maybe they are messages that sometimes we do not understand because we are totally isolated from the *esencia* of our Mother. And that's why I wanted to be a different person, to be able to seek, to be able to tell this to the people...¹⁶⁴

Miguel refers to what in the West is viewed as “nature,” but he doesn't use that term; instead Miguel uses the kinship terms “Mother.” This is similar to other Kaqchikel kinship expressions that refer to what the West calls “nature” such as Grandmother Moon (Ati't Ik'); Father Sun (Tat Q'ij); or terms that refer to “nature” by referencing a living body, as in Uk'u'x Kaj, Uk'u'x Ulew (Heart of Sky, Heart of Earth). In other words, these relationships are not abstract, but familial or related to a living body. They involve embodied demonstrations of respect, affection, and nourishment as with a family member or nurturing one's bodily life.

For example, when I asked “How do you integrate Maya values in your plays?” an original Sotz'il member responded not through abstract concepts but rather with examples of embodied practices that involve maintaining the k'u'x of materials. First, Rafael demonstrated to me a gesture of blowing breath made before playing a musical instrument to show “respect for the communication and all sound.” Rafael then gave more examples including these: “With the trajes, it's not simply to put on a pas, a corte, because each has its form [of putting it on] related to the movement of celestial bodies. Like when a bean is born, it always [grows in a spiral] from right to left. That's where one shows the values and that everything has meaning.” His responses indicate that, first, Maya values are demonstrated through embodied practices, supporting Tedlock's theory that Maya

¹⁶⁴ Miguel, interview.

cosmovisión is an “epistemology of practice.” Second, the embodied practices center around nurturing ruk’u’x.

As children and like others of their generation, present-day Sotz’il members learned how to make distinct bird calls – to make a bird’s head turn, to communicate beyond the human realm in times of distress. Hence, the call of birds and the “speaking” of musical instruments are both important in their plays. They are masters at playing sweet bird melodies with various *ocarinas* (one-chamber wind instruments like vessel flutes). In 2006, when the Casa de Cultura in Nebaj showed them ancient ocarinas in a box that they were sorting through, Sotz’il members picked out ocarinas of various animal and anthropomorphic figures and on the spot began playing sweet birdlike melodies with them. The power of instruments speaking is a theme in their play *Oxlajuj B’aqtun*, in which it is the sounding of *tzak tzak* (an instrument made of cut reeds) and the melodies of a flute that liberate the human figure from the forces of greed and envious destruction.

Hence, Sotz’il members grew up valuing the *ruk’u’x* of other-than-human persons in their home territories and learned to include this in their plays. In contrast to the Folkloric Ballet of Guatemala, the vast majority of materials in Sotz’il’s plays (besides things like the Spaniards’ swords) are significant in their social life outside the theater space. That is, they are not merely props.¹⁶⁵ In fact, if something they use in their play has significance or *ruk’u’x*, such as bones, fire, and stones, they use these living materials with *ruk’u’x* rather than imitations.

One Sotz’il member gives this example from Sotz’il’s early years:

If we do not know something, the people around us advise us. And in many ways. Once I forgot some agreements. For example, to the masks, one has to always give them their drink. It reminds me a lot of the “Dance of the Spaniards” [that we did in the beginning]. Sometimes one gets exhausted, because in that time we rented those costumes [for that dance]. But when you rent them, there are many elders who have used those costumes, so it’s like they have used the energy . . . Well, the character of the Spaniard is another topic. But yes, the person who uses it has left energy. That’s why you have to give it [the outfit] a little bit of drink [...] That is just one example of the advice that the elders have given us. We learn from them.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ See more discussion of this in (Thelen 2014).

¹⁶⁶ Rafael, interview.

These kinds of agreements connect Sotz'il's original theater to pre-colonial Maya dance-theater like *Rabinal Achi* that has been passed down through generations through its practice and embodied training. Similar to Miguel's comment that a dancer can get injured if she or he has not prepared, Rafael notes that dancers can get exhausted if they have not fed the masks that have been passed down from generation to generation. Sotz'il consults with elders about how to fulfill agreements such as these. Rather than "professional training" in Western dance and music academies, the Sotz'iles have been prepared for their performances by elders who teach them agreements about practices and how to relate to the energies and living materials that accompany their performances. Practices of relationality with living energies help animate Sotz'il's performances and lend them vibrancy.

The significance to Sotz'il of using living materials with *ruk'u'x / esencia* holds even if they can't get a particular material locally. Because of Sotz'il's relationships of trust with Indigenous peoples of other nations, the principle of using living materials will also apply to materials with *ruk'u'x / esencia* from these other cultures and regions. The following vignettes provide two examples of this unstated principle of international Indigenous understanding.

First, for the steam bath (tuj) scene in the play *Ixkik*, the women actors were deciding between a couple herbs that can produce smoke that will look like steam. Sotz'il had access to a particular local herb that is actually used in the tuj. However, the women chose to use a sage stick that they had received as a gift in the past from Indigenous peoples in the North because Mariana said it keeps smoking so they do not have to continually re-light it.

In this case, Sotz'il's women's group chose practicality – how the herb would fit the detail they need for the play – rather than the authenticity of local herbs that are actually used in steam baths. At the same time, the herb they chose, sage, is used in Indigenous ceremonies in the North Americas, so the non-local substitute they have chosen is meaningful in the realm of continental Indigenous practice. For example, if the women

had chosen to use an electric fog machine to produce the effect of smoke in the *tuj*, they would have diverged from Sotz'il's practice of using sacred and/or living materials that are generally from Indigenous economies.

As a second example, at the end of one rehearsal, the Sotz'iles discussed logistics for the Riddu Riddu Festival in Saami territory in northern Norway. After hashing out their options, they decided to take a longer flight route via Panamá to Amsterdam with their sets. They felt it would be too risky to have layovers in the United States with the numerous post-9/11 customs restrictions, especially considering that the United States would not be their final destination. In their *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* play they use materials with *ruk'u'x* such as ancient carved stones of Maya figures as well as feathers, bones, shells, gourds, and incensary herbs that came from living animals and plants, as well as candles. They were concerned that their baggage would attract intensive scrutiny by U.S. airport security that would risk confiscation.

However, even though they chose to fly through Panamá, the Sotz'iles decided they would not risk bringing the bones on an international flight. Instead, they considered making imitation bones out of wood and painting them white. This would be a major change for Sotz'il because a central principle to which they adhere is to use energetically alive materials with *ruk'u'x*. The net of the character Owl contains real bones woven in to create a rattling sound when shaken. For this flight, though, the Sotz'iles proposed to replace the bones with tiny shells. This would change the effect of the scene, both in terms of the energy that the Sotz'iles would receive upon using these materials during the play as well as the symbolism for audiences since the little shells have a lighter and prettier connotation than the heavy weight of the bones. The Sotz'iles discussed the issue further and arrived at a better solution, if it would work out: they would ask the Saami festival organizers to lend them some bones for their use during the festival.

This extended discussion about the importance of using bones during their play indicates the significance to Sotz'il of using materials with *ruk'u'x*. It also points to their relationship of trust with the Saami because of a general degree of international Indigenous understanding that has emerged over the years in settings like the Indigenous arts festivals,

political convergences (like those of Abya Yala), and small group exchanges. This understanding leads the Sotz'iles to sense that, unlike *kaxlanes*, the Saami are used to working with bones. This is not a request that the Sotz'iles would make of urbanized ladinos or non-Indigenous foreigners, for example.

Then, Pablo announced that each member needs to check which of their stage materials needs replacement, because the Riddu Riddu Festival will pay for it, he said. On one hand, this speaks to an apparent abundance of artistry that is possible with NGO funding. On the other hand, through the lens of international Indigenous understanding, this gesture by the Saami festival organizers shows that they valorize Sotz'il's handmade artisanship of the materials used in their plays to the degree that they will pay for the replacement of those that are worn out. From Sotz'iles' recollections of a later exchange with Saami artists in Sotz'il Jay, I additionally deduce that the Saami festival organizers view the artisanship of Sotz'il's materials, whether made by them directly or by other local artisans and weavers, as part of the Indigenous arts that the festival is celebrating. Even if those particular weavers and artisans cannot themselves present their aesthetic works at the festival, the festival at least will value their work through an honorable payment.

Master artisanship: Making one's own instrument

Master artisanship comes from intimacy with materials and the living environment from which they are sourced. Sotz'il members are master artisans who are able to curate, select, and imaginatively use materials from their immediate natural environment in a very beautiful aesthetic. They are an example of what I have noticed in other Maya regions throughout Guatemala – household members who know the elements of the natural world so well that they are able to creatively use them to meet household and aesthetic needs. Sotz'il is able to craft gorgeous awe-inspiring instruments, sets, and wardrobes because of their intimacy with the form and *ruk'u'x* of these materials and with the living environment from which they are sourced. From my field notes is one example of how they use this ability in creating their wardrobe for *Uk'u'x Ulew*: “The character Air rehearses his role

with owl wings covering the backs of his hands. The character Fire moves with incense holders (incensarios) hanging from his elbows.”

In this scene, the characters Air and Fire are identified by materials from their living and social environment. Owl wings have special significance due to their association with the owl nawal. Incensarios are used in *cofradías* and homes to cleanse them of negative energies. These incensarios are made by traditional artisans from a natural clay that originally comes from particular communities (as those familiar with Maya community economies would know).

The owl wings are used to masterful effect. My fieldnotes from that same rehearsal of continue: “With his owl wings, Air helps fan the flames of the *kotz’ij* fire that Earth has lit. Then his wings cover the flute he holds in his hands as he plays it.” This brief moment crystallizes Sotz’il’s ingenious theater imagery that elicits a response and connection with audiences—whether resonance, memory, or sparking their imagination (as explored in Chapter 7). Not only are the fluffy white wings (about one foot long) gorgeous to look at, they also fulfill practical functions: they fan the flames of the *kotz’ij* fire and, by hiding Air’s hands and his reed flute, they create the illusion that sweet melodies arise from the atmosphere rather than from a musician.

Another example of the creative genius that arises from Sotz’il’s intimacy with living materials of their home environments was a creation for the Grandmother Moon character in the *Uk’u’x Ulew* play. The Tree of Life is the frame for a “*tun and tambor*” drumset that ignites the imagination. This drumset is like the performance art equivalent of Maya wordplay and double entendre that are fundamental to Maya poetics. The drumset is an embodied play on the concept of the Western drumset that allows for polyrhythms with its multiple drums and cymbals – but in Sotz’il’s signature aesthetic of Maya *reivindicación*. Rather than metal mounts and frames, Sotz’il uses a gorgeous knotted tree branch that splits into three lower branches on which their handmade wood-trunk *tambores* are mounted – not with metal fasteners, but with red woven “belts” (*pas* en Kaqchkel / *fajas* in Spanish) that usually are used to wrap *cortes / uq*. The leather “face” of the drums are used by Sotz’il to evoke the monthly phases of Grandmother Moon whose drumset this

is. Additionally, the fact that the drums are mounted on a tree evokes the meaning of the Tree of Life that Miguel mentioned during the dramatic structuring process (discussed in Chapter 4).

Sotz'il's talent for curating well depends on their intimate knowledge of their materials and how to craft them into instruments. As Sotz'il member Miguel stated after a brief joking interlude:

MIGUEL: There's so much to do in this life! [...]

INTERVIEWER: And what else would you like to do?

MIGUEL: What else would I like to be? A narco-trafficker! *Utz k'a!* [We laugh.] Nah! [Quickly changes gear.]

For example, a great elder came to our center and said, "One isn't an artist if one doesn't construct one's own instrument." You have to make your own instrument in order to feel the value with which you ought to treat it. Because if you buy it, it's like, "How did you do this?" You do not have this dedication.

Sometimes we neglect this part. [...] Yet we should be doing this in our music, our dance, in relation with the land, and the crops, in getting close to plants and animals. This opens you to many things, many visions. They're roles you have to play! At times we do not do them, and we lose this part. For that reason we feel unbalanced. Because there's no connection. [...]

In school, you only get a half hour for each course – and that doesn't help you! There are a lot of subjects: there's math, there's science, there's a little bit of everything. But they are tiny little things that bring you to a big level – without understanding the *esencia* of something very simple. For example, let's say they tell me about another country – but what if I do not know where I'm located in my own community? Nor what it is that I have in my community?¹⁶⁷

Miguel contrasts an integrated understanding of ruk'u'x with the Western school system's separation of studies into discrete spheres of analysis: for example, math vs. science. This idea reflects a statement by Lisandro in 2006 that in ancient Maya culture, math and art were integrated (Thelen 2008). Similarly, Kim TallBear writes that

¹⁶⁷ Miguel, interview.

“Indigenous ontologies ... do not break narrative from spirit from materiality to make ‘literature,’ ‘religious studies’ and ‘biology’” (TallBear 2013).

Sourcing sets from Maya economies and environments

Sotz’il sources the majority of their materials and instruments from Maya artisans and/or through community-based economies. Additionally, Sotz’il maintains everyday practices that show respect to trees and other sentient matter that is used to craft Maya musical instruments, as Rafael described above and as Pablo discussed in his presentation at a public workshop on Maya music. One drum, said Pablo, was made by Sotz’il from “a tree that was given to us as a gift.” He said that care must be taken when cutting down a tree and that the proper respect must be shown to the tree before felling it. In contrast, Sotz’il’s tunkul and their other drum are secondhand and did not require felling more trees. They were “inherited from a *cofradía*. We’ve given them new life,” he added.

Pablo told the audience that in Maya cosmovisión, “the function of music and instruments is medicinal and spiritual.” He pointed out families of Maya instruments: turtle shells, ocarinas (like whistles), “triple flutes” made of three reeds strung together, and flutes made of bone. He commented, “All the instruments have their ‘why’ [their purpose]. The purpose of music is to transmit something. Music helps us reflect and concentrate.” He shared a Kaqchikel term which he translated as “the sound or word of all that exists.” Rather than translate the phrase literally, Pablo translated the phrase metaphorically to express the idea that instruments speak.

Pablo referred to the life of matter (trees) and instruments (the drum and tunkul) repeatedly. He also said that musical instruments “speak,” a common Kaqchikel concept. Finally, he spoke of music and instruments as though they have agency: he said they have a “role” that extends beyond entertainment, and which is “medicinal and spiritual,” enhancing peoples’ reflection and communication. In fact, the Maya concept that instruments speak is demonstrated in their play *Oxlajuj B’aqtun*, in which the “speaking” of the *flauta* liberates the protagonist.

Additionally, Maya instruments exhibit a complex Maya technology. Pablo contended, “You can see the technology in the instruments” and that this technology developed “without harming Mother Nature.”¹⁶⁸ To demonstrate this, he used the example of a tiny gourd that has two small reeds that extend diagonally from the bottom (*jícara con dos pitos*). In the second part of the workshop, he and other Sotz’il members taught participants how to make this wind instrument.

Using a Powerpoint slideshow, Pablo showed scenes from ancient iconography that depict characters playing instruments. He discussed one such instrument that is particularly complex. He said that Sotz’il has re-created many instruments depicted in Classic iconography, but that this particular one posed a challenge. He explained, “We need X-rays to understand what is happening inside it,” in terms of the physics of producing sound, because this instrument has four holes and a sound box and the sound is “deep.”

In hands-on workshops, Sotz’il teaches their theater aesthetic to participants who are mostly young adults. These workshops make evident Sotz’il’s mastery in creating their instruments. In one Q’ij Saq workshop, as the second task of their collective creation process to develop an original play, Pablo guided the mostly youth participants to list the musical instruments that they will need for their play because they will make them, together with the Sotz’iles.

1. Medium drum made of white pine wood. Pablo adds, “It’s important to note ‘white pine’ because the other kind of pine wood doesn’t ring (*no suena*).”
2. Three *flautas* – with different tones (i.e. small, medium, and large)
3. Rain sticks: four big ones (“grandes de 2 metros”) and two small ones which they will hold with the hand that is not holding the chin-chines.
4. Tun: “We have to commission these, but they take three months to make.” However, the group does not have three months before their presentation. Pablo notes that the group can’t buy tuns either: “We have to make them because they are not found in the markets. Only we and some other people make these instruments.

¹⁶⁸ Apparently, he is contrasting this with some current technology that is powered by oil or electricity or made from metals obtained from mega-extractive industries.

Or we will see if it's possible to get them in Chichi[castenango]." In the end, Miguel and Mariana worked on making small *tuns* for the youths' workshop presentation.

Pablo's comment about making the tun implies Sotz'il's important role in carrying on a tradition of artisanship. First, although they make most of their own instruments, Sotz'il supports the Maya local economy by commissioning local artisans to make handmade instruments, trajes, and sets. Second, when the instruments are not available through artisans or markets, Sotz'il will construct their own instruments out of necessity. These instruments were once part of the Maya economy through interregional Maya markets. This discussion shows Sotz'il's in-depth knowledge of this broader Maya economy, including the knowledge of which materials can be bought and in which markets. Part of maintaining their artisanship and expertise -- and fulfilling their function as a cultural center -- is maintaining their own storehouse of the instruments that they have made, particularly since many are now rare and hard to find. This is part of their project of revitalization. The scope of the instruments in their collection was displayed in the Nim Q'ojom (Great Music) taller in Antigua. Thus, Sotz'il's role as a cultural center includes an educational role in maintaining and growing their collection so that their students, who range in age from children to youth to adults, can practice playing these pre-colonial and contemporary Maya instruments. The rest of the instruments on this diverse list are:

5. Turtle shells: one big, one small.
6. Chin-chines: six pairs of different sizes.
7. Ocarinas: small, medium, and large.
8. Twelve little clay sticks. These make different bird sounds.
9. One conch to make wind sounds.
10. Three pairs of drumsticks [made locally with artisanal rubber and wood]: to play the drum (tambor), turtle shell, and the tun.
11. Two dozen *tz'a'r* [large brown pods that are shaken to produce a rattling sound].

12. The final item on the list is a spinning instrument that is the ancient antecedent (made of natural materials) of the spinning *ronrones* that are sold at town *ferias* and which looks like a miniature drum with colorful metallic paper. One whirls a string vertically and the instrument on the end buzzes as it whirls through the air. The popular *ronrones* have colorful dyed feathers springing from the metallic-decorated cylinder, reminiscent of the headdresses of the "Españoles" in colonial Maya dances.

This list demonstrates the rich material and musical textures that Sotz'il produces by making their own instruments and sourcing them from Maya community economies. I am impressed that the Sotz'il facilitators know the measurements they need offhand. They are not just expert musicians, but also master artisans at making their instruments. The mastery that Sotz'il has developed from making their own instruments allows them to be very knowledgeable about where to access specific materials from their home environments. It demonstrates the depth to which interregional Maya economies are still rooted in Maya Guatemala. This is very significant in a global economy that is increasingly being dominated by chain megastores like Office Depot and Walmart, even in urbanized and ladino-ized parts of Guatemala. It has often struck me that, just as it is nearly impossible to hold a full Maya ceremony in most parts of the United States because the materials are inaccessible there, it would be impossible for theater like Sotz'il's to be created in the United States because the natural materials would either be inaccessible or extremely costly to purchase – and certainly out of the budget of most arts groups.¹⁶⁹

Part of the costliness of making one's instruments by hand is that it takes a long time. Sotz'il highly values their artisanship, so they prioritize dedicating time to making their sets and instruments. Sometimes this comes at the expense of more overtly political tasks such as visiting Maya communities in resistance for their research:

¹⁶⁹ Artists like Pina Bausch have attempted to include natural elements like boulders and wáter into their theater-dance works, but their budget skyrockets to thousands of dollars for this alone – for elements that Sotz'il would find in their environment.

Sotz'il has transitioned to their post-rehearsal meeting to briefly discuss administrative matters. It sounds like this is when the floor is open for the Sotz'il members to voice problems, issues, and concerns with the workshop groups that they are facilitating. The topic is raised of Sotz'il's upcoming four-day research trip to the Polochic Valley to speak with a Q'eq'chi community about their resistance to mining. Miguel comments that he doesn't think he can go on the trip with the group because he has too much work: He is behind schedule in making the instruments, masks, and other stage materials for the workshop youths' play. He explains, "It's taking a lot of time to make the flutes." Sotz'il's Committee of Artistic Creation is charged with making these instruments and sets, and they invest a lot of time into making them.

Sotz'il's choice of valuing the hand-making of instruments has in this case created a conflict: some members need to choose between the politically-oriented research trip and artisanship. I have observed that Miguel's commitment to artisanship of the highest quality is what pushes him to create the highest quality materials, trajes, and stage materials for Sotz'il. His perfectionism to their hard-to-attain aesthetic serves him well for Sotz'il's plays but in this case kept him from their political engagement work in standing in solidarity with other Maya communities in struggle.

Audiences sense the vibrancy of Sotz'il's materials

Audience members too sense the vibrancy of Sotz'il's instruments and materials. Andrés, a teacher and a participant in the Q'ij Saq workshops, says that using materials that are "the community's own – not copied" nor "chemical" helps them to "feel the heart" of that thing. Felipe, a driver of a pickup truck used for collective transport who primarily speaks Kaqchikel, expresses that the natural materials convey a sense of respect:

The music is very, very "natural" because it comes from all that is the Maya culture. The instruments are very special, because they are not metal or they are not instruments that man has made. . . . For me all of this is very special because these days the majority of instruments are industrial – they are no longer natural. For me, each instrument that comes from nature is very important and meaningful – each shows a lot of respect.¹⁷⁰

¹⁷⁰ Felipe, interview by author, February 25, 2013.

Felipe contrasts the feeling of Sotz'il's natural musical instruments from the predominant musical instruments in Guatemala which he calls "industrial." In the same interview, he says that his spirit and body relaxed after having watched the play:

What I felt is an environment (ambiente). I was left very calm. My spirit opened a lot and . . . stayed very relaxed from seeing this performance and from remembering Maya time(s) (el tiempo Maya).

Felipe's two responses suggest that for him as an audience member, there may be a relationship between Sotz'il's natural materials, as well as the content of the play about an embodied Maya experience, and his bodily response of relaxation as an audience member. His responses suggest that the "feeling" of the natural materials in Sotz'il's play may affect the embodied experience of audience members as well as of the actors themselves.

Actions on stage have consequences

Because Sotz'il uses living materials and sometimes sacred things like the kotz'ij fire, members of Sotz'il – and their audiences-- have suggested that certain actions or elements of their plays can have lived consequences. For example, as an audience member, Felipe stated that because the play dealt with "different types of problems" in a real way and in a Maya language, "it's very important to have the presence of a Maya priest to be safer and [to assure it's done] with good intentions – so that the group doesn't stay affected from carrying out these kinds of events." He responded to my clarifying question in this way:

INTERVIEWER: Are you saying that the same words that the actors speak have a power...

FELIPE, *interjecting*: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: ... that can affect them if they do not have a Maya priest watching over and *manejando* (managing) the play?

FELIPE: Yes. To me it's very important that they are prepared by Maya priests, because this activity is almost real due to the language that they use and because

they confront Good and Evil. [...] Because it's not easy what they did: confronting Evil is a bit tricky (un poco delicado).

That's why the actors need protection and *saturación* so that they will not be affected. [...] Because I've seen Maya priests who work with the fire and this is what the group lacks: they should present the ceremonial fire [with particular materials, as he mentioned earlier in the interview] and this would also protect the people harmed by Evil.

Even though Sotz'il's theater is fictional, the actions carried out during the play can cause consequences outside the theater space, according to this audience member. He was even more forthright on his views about this after the "official" interview was over and I had shut off the voice recorder. He expressed that the words some characters said in the play were strong and that those words can lead to effects in "real life," even after the fictional play had ended. His last comment is an interesting idea: He is suggesting involving an actual ceremony in the play to help "people" (presumably audience members) with the very real ways that "Evil" is hurting their lives.

When I spoke about this audience member's suggestions later with Sotz'il members, they said that the actual words they say in the play are not that strong. However, they agreed that the actions they do in the play can have real effects after the play, and this is precisely the reason for the accompaniment of the *ajq'ijab'* who saturate them upon entering and exiting the stage area. It is possible that the interviewee thought that the Sotz'iles need additional protection because he may have (even partially) viewed the work as involving what some Christians would call "black magic" – for example, in the actions and words of the Lords of Xib'alb'a and the torture scene. This interviewee's positionality seems to be entangled in both Christianity and Maya ontology. While Felipe says the play brought up fond memories for him of his grandparents' Maya spiritual practices of protection when he was a child, he also uses Christian terms like Good and Evil throughout the interview and uses the term Maya "priest." Yet, his solution for this is not a Christian one: he suggests bringing more elements of a formal

Maya ceremony into the play for energetic protection. This is something that Sotz'il explicitly does not want to do, because they want to maintain clear boundaries between their work as art and Maya ceremonial practices which "correspond" to daykeepers. This interviewee's responses suggest to me that Christian and Maya beliefs are complex and entangled in the subjectivity of probably many Mayas today. It also reinforces an idea that current and former Sotz'il members have stated: whether or not people like their plays, and regardless of their religious beliefs, many audience members at least partially "get" or "understand" what is going on in the play – elements of Maya practice and worldview that the play refers to, even if they do not interpret it as Sotz'il does or even if they would need to investigate further to more fully understand it.

CONCLUSION

Sotz'il members in different individual interviews have suggested that the living world in which Maya communities participate contains the energies and elements needed to support Maya lives. Indeed, many of Sotz'il's sets and instruments are made of living materials from their environment. Sotz'il either hand-crafts them or commissions Maya artisans to make them, thus supporting community-based Indigenous economies.

This chapter has explored some effects of Sotz'il's attending to the energetic dimensions of embodiment and living materials in their plays. First, Sotz'il members and audiences affirm that their experience of Sotz'il theater makes them feel affectively closer to Maya cosmovisión and embodied Maya lifeways. Second, Sotz'il contributes to maintaining local Maya economies, creating an economic effect that supports ongoing revitalization efforts.

In recognizing the powerful scope of communicating with living entities beyond the human, Mayas heed the importance of tending to other aspects of existence beyond mere human survival and basic needs. This perspective reveals how a strictly socioeconomic materialist and social realism analysis can fall flat when it ignores the sensory, emotive, and affective dimensions of a life experience that encompasses humans within a richer world that pulsates with life. Sotz'il's plays highlight the power of moving

their audiences when not limiting themselves to representations in the vein of social realism. That is the subject of the next two chapters.

Chapter 6. Maya Theater during Sanctioned Violence and New Age Hysteria: The Play *Oxlajuj B'aqtun*

The last couple chapters have examined the effects of Sotz'il's theater on performers through an ethnographic analysis of rehearsals and body training. In this chapter I turn to the question of why Sotz'il's theater is powerful to Maya audiences by analyzing community performances of their play *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* in 2013. I examine how Sotz'il communicates a Maya ontological perspective on everyday Kaqchikel dilemmas through theater.

In 2013, during the genocide trial of former army general and dictator Efraín Ríos Montt, the Guatemalan oligarchy questioned the veracity of charges of genocide against Maya people in resistance in the 1980s. It framed Maya people in resistance as terrorist threats to the nation, using racialized discourse and imagery to sanction violence (both past and present) against Mayas and dissenters. Adding to the national silence and misinformation campaigns, numerous figures with relative power and influence on a local level, from school principals to journalists, have suppressed local people's remembrances of 1980s massacres and colonial violence.

In contrast, rather than suppress the theme of violence, Sotz'il puts it center stage in their plays. From the rural highlands, Sotz'il embodies Maya experiences of violence through theater, presenting community dilemmas of social justice through Maya ontologies. According to Cabrera, Sotz'il presents scenarios as they see them, rather than delivering a message. Audiences can agree or disagree, but at least they "get into the topic[s]" of Sotz'il's plays and grapple with them.

Veena Das writes that the significance of "showing ... how it is that something can build into a crisis" – whether through anthropology or, I propose, through theater -- is that it helps us see "the way in which everyday life absorbs the traumatic collective violence that creates boundaries between nations and between ethnic and religious groups" (Das 2007, 218, 16). Das implies that ignoring violence in everyday life reinforces the boundaries that eventually explode into "eventful" episodes of violence. It appears that

suppression of discussion about violence in Sololá, both contemporary and during the war, may contribute to deepening divisions. From 2012 through 2014, community performances of Sotz'il's play *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* helped bring the topic of violence to the local public sphere.

Similar to the kind of ethnography that Das argues for, Sotz'il's *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* “show[s] ... how it is that something can build into a crisis” through an allegory of the energetic and social process that leads to a crescendo of conflict, anger, hate, and eventually violence. A Maya ontological perspective of how conflict escalates to violence, the play gives audiences an opportunity to “see how diffused feelings of anger and hate could be translated into the actual acts of killing.” (Das 2007, 207)

In this play Sotz'il is not portraying a specific event of violence against a particular historical figure. Rather, their play is an exploration of the causes of community division and violence, according to Sotz'il's understanding of Maya worldview and their ontological practice which has been developed in consultation with various *ajq'ijab'* (daykeepers) and community elders. They seek to recover an ancestral principle that they view as having been waylaid: that the authority of community leaders is not ultimately based on human political power but is rooted in Maya ontology -- that is, it is not ultimately able to be controlled by any one human being.

THE CHANGE OF ERA AND VIOLENT COMMUNITY DIVISIONS

Sotz'il's third play *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* was created in 2011 through 2012 at the juncture of two important events for Sotz'il. The first is that it was the period leading up to *Oxlajuj B'aqtun*¹⁷¹ (December 21, 2012), the internationally-anticipated “change of era” in the Maya long-count calendar that was interpreted by many New Age spiritualists as the

¹⁷¹ A *b'aqtun* is a period of time in the Maya-long count calendar, and each measures a cycle of approximately 400 years. The start of the cycle numbered thirteen (*Oxlajuj*) occurred on the winter solstice (December 21) of 2012, marking the completion – and opening -- of another 5,200 year period – that is, 400 years multiplied by thirteen. The last such cycle initiated by the “13 *B'aqtun*” prefix opened on August 11, 3114 B.C. The thirteenth cycle that opened on December 21, 2012 is significant because the number 13 (*Oxlajuj*) is the culmination of one of the counts of energies.

apocalyptic end of the world. The Guatemalan government and many businesses took advantage of New Age hysteria to boost tourism for their own profit -- without much benefit for or lasting interest in the Maya communities “in the interior” whose culture provided the content and interest for the spiritual tourism.

Furthermore, most Mayas heard about the international hysteria over Oxlajuj B’aqtun from reports of an avalanche of New Age tourist interest and competing interpretations by academic experts of Maya epigraphy (who said this date was merely a change in era). The reason that most Mayas originally only learned about the significance of Oxlajuj B’aqtun from non-Maya sources is partly because most Mayas in the rural highlands are now Christian, and partly because knowledge of the long-count calendar has not been widely passed down through oral tradition. (This is in contrast to widespread knowledge of the *cholq’ij*, the lunar calendar of nawales that is used in the everyday practice of Maya ceremonies). When the approach of December 21, 2012 generated lots of news, interpretations of Oxlajuj B’aqtun developed across the spectrum of Maya society from Evangelical pastors to *ajq’ijab’* to Maya activist organizations. The period leading up to December 21, 2012 was met with much serious reflection by Maya daykeepers and organizations about the significance of this changing of cycles for their people as well as critiques of cultural appropriation as an abuse of Maya cultural heritage.¹⁷² Sotz’il created their play partly as their intervention in this debate with what they viewed as the significance of the Oxlajuj B’aqtun change-in-era according to their *cosmovisión*.

Additionally, the play was created in the period after the assassination of founder Lisandro Guarcax on August 25, 2010. Through an allegory about the change of era that Oxlajuj B’aqtun represents, Sotz’il’s play addresses violent community divisions in Maya highland communities that are local intracommunal effects of larger centuries-old dynamics of violence against Mayas in Guatemala. The play explores two questions: First, what does Oxlajuj B’aqtun (the change of era) mean for Maya people? Second, how can Maya communities move forward amidst violence and strongmen who will stop at nothing

¹⁷² See press releases of *Komon Ajq’ijab’* on the initial critiques of the “commercialization and folklorization” of Oxlajuj B’aqtun (October 23 and November 12, 2012).

to wield power?

Sotz'il presents their proposed answer to these two questions through the lens of Maya ontology – different from a social realist understanding of these events. For example, Sotz'il interprets the community division described in Chapter 2 not only in political terms as a conflict between two agrupations, the URNG and the SUD Civic Committee. They also interpret what has happened energetically to community leaders and the roots of contemporary “divisionismo” in Maya communities from the perspective of Maya ontology and the influence of nawales. Their play *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* depicts the detrimental consequences of the rejection of Maya ontology by community members and leaders.

THE CIRCULAR POWER OF THE COLLECTIVE

In the many interviews I conducted with community members of San Jorge La Laguna and Sololá in 2006, corrupt leaders were described as having too much “ambición,” where ambition has a negative association as an immoral, egoistic, and opportunistic accumulation of power at the expense of the community. Lisandro stated that this kind of ambition was introduced by the Spanish Invasion and was not previously seen among Maya communities.¹⁷³ Sotz'il members similarly describe “divisionismo” among Maya communities but using terms more explicitly from Maya cosmovisión. Miguel states that “divisionismo” has occurred “Because respect no longer exists and they have abandoned [Maya] spirituality.”¹⁷⁴

Interviewees state that one effect of abandoning Maya ontology is that power becomes hierarchical rather than shared among a circle of people – as in the coordinating councils of the chinamitales – or shared between dual governing figures as they depict in their play *Xajoj Q'ojom Kaji' Imox*. Miguel states,

The collectivity is managed through circles. ... In contrast, Christianity is a straight line: it is one vision that you must follow. It's about serving one person. [But in

¹⁷³ Lisandro, interview.

¹⁷⁴ Miguel, interview. Audience members I interviewed also cited a lack of respect as a cause of contemporary “delinquency” and violence.

Maya ontology] we do not serve ourselves. We serve what surrounds us. We serve the energies and they share with us.¹⁷⁵

In serving what surrounds them, Sotz'il attends to the living materials and instruments in their plays, all of whom must be fed and which mutually support human life. This mutual sharing coincides with the idea that Lisandro presented, that "All our environment" contributed to forming the theater group.

Notions of mutual sharing contrast with the hierarchical power of those contributing to "divisionismo" through which power is accumulated, concentrated, and monopolized. This hierarchical organization and worldview leaves leaders prone to egotism, opportunism, and a jealous control of power – in short, what is known in Kaqchikel culture as the "seven disgraces": being "proud, ambitious, envious, lying, destructive, egocentric, and ignorant."¹⁷⁶ Similarly, the play *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* suggests that the Lords of Xib'alb'a tempt Jun Ajpu with this kind of controlling power and ambition – an appeal to the ego that leaves Jun Ajpu prone to be blinded by the character Our Seven Disgraces (Verguenzas) and then to be blind to -- and complicit in -- a downward spiral of increasing violence.

The theme of the circular power of the collective recurs in the play. As with all Sotz'il plays, the stage area is circular, about nine meters in diameter. This circle is set off from the encircling chairs by an outer ring of pine needles that is approximately one meter wide. This is the Saqb'e – Clear Road – that Q'uq'umätz and the Time Bearer walk in the course of the play, lighting urns of kotz'ij fire in each of the four cardinal directions to light the way of the k'amöl b'ey (guide of the people). This Clear Road designates both a metaphysical space from which the energies of the ancestors can guide community leaders and it designates the cyclical passage of time,¹⁷⁷ one of whose cycles closes with the titular *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* date. The play begins with the characters moving in a spiral to maintain

¹⁷⁵ Miguel, interview.

¹⁷⁶ Sotz'il program notes for *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* (March 2011). This is their description of the character Our Seven Disgraces from the Pop Wuj ("personaje orgulloso, ambicioso, envidioso, mentiroso, destructivo, egocéntrico e ignorante").

¹⁷⁷ Time is represented in Maya calendars as circular and cyclical.

an equilibrium among themselves until they are interrupted by the Lords of Xib'alb'a. In the next scene, while Q'uq'umätz invests Jun Ajpu with the staff of the k'amöl b'ey, the rest of the characters circle around the kotz'ij fire. In the final scene, all the characters circle around the kotz'ij fire. Miguel states that this was a result of the characters finally "serving" all the energies around them: "in the end, they come together."¹⁷⁸

The circular theme also applies to Maya concepts of the multiple and overlapping cycles of time that are represented pictorially as circular. Maya culture is renowned for its many complex calendars since antiquity. Ancient Maya timekeeping resulted in the discovery of the concept of "zero" -- the first ancient civilization to discover this fundamental mathematical concept. Contemporary ajq'ijab' (daykeepers) are the inheritors of this great legacy. Hence, even though Sotz'il dancer-musicians view their plays as distinct from Maya spiritual ceremonies, they integrate Maya ontological practices into their plays under the guidance of ajq'ijab' who accompany them to each performance. The musicians-dancers enter the circular "ceremonial space"¹⁷⁹ (where the dramatic action will take place) by processing with their musical instruments in a single-file line, waiting to each be saturated with a bowl of smoking incense by an elder couple who are ajq'ijab', as they pass through the portal formed by cañas arranged as a "cosmic pyramid."

Sotz'il notes in their program that "for us, time is cyclical, given that we walk via a spiral in which the past and the future are situated in parallel."¹⁸⁰ Lining the outside and inside circumference of the Clear Road's carpet of pine needles are short, wide vigil candles (*veladoras*), slices of oranges and bananas, and flower petals in the colors of the four directions: red, black (purple petals), white, and yellow.

The libretto¹⁸¹ of *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* notes:

In the four cardinal points are located "las y los" guardian-protectors, the four legs of Kej (Deer) that command the space, the pillars, the four corners of the world. These guardians are of stone carved with anthropomorphic figures, two of women and two of men. Placed alongside each of the guardians are earthenware vessels

¹⁷⁸ Miguel, interview.

¹⁷⁹ (Sotz'il, Libretto 2012, 1)

¹⁸⁰ Sotzil program notes for *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* (March 2011).

¹⁸¹ 2012 Manuscript of Spanish language libretto produced by Sotz'il for a Luis Carlos Piñeda publication. I also translate from Spanish doing a comparative reading with the Kaqchikel language libretto.

with ceremonial material to burn. A fifth vessel with this material is set in the center of the circle. To the east is the entryway to the ceremonial-stage circle. This gateway is composed of four canes forming a pyramid that is adorned with flowers of the four sacred colors. (Sotz'il, Libretto 2012)

Similar to the principles of a Maya kotz'ij ceremony, Sotz'il notes that other-than-human persons (the guardian-protector stones) guard over the space and that the energy of the kotz'ij fire is cared for during the course of the play by an elder daykeeper couple.

These elements also mark the circular central space as ceremonial, since these are elements that are laid out around a Maya kotz'ij fire. The pine needles also mark and give aroma to festive occasions in Maya communities, as noted in Chapter 3. Sotz'il does not use a backstage area during the course of their performance. All their musical instruments are shown throughout the play for accessibility (placed on palm leaf mats at the interior border of the circle), to continue to receive the sacred incense of saturation throughout the play, and also to show audiences the materiality of the ancient arts of Maya craftsmanship.

The play deals with contemporary themes of “divisionismo” in Maya communities, violence, and the corruption of community leaders – for the Maya pueblo at large and not just Sololá. Miguel says that the play represents:

the resistance, pain, suffering ... of an entire great people, and of great leaders and even of Mother Nature. They've taken many things from us... they commit crimes without knowing who is around them.¹⁸²

With the last statement, Miguel seems to be referring to the assassinations of Ernesto, Emilio, Lisandro, and other Kaqchikel Sololatecos – that the assassins murdered them without realizing who they were -- what they stood for and what they strove for, their insights, their principles, their contributions to the Maya pueblo at large.

Typical of Sotz'il's style, these contemporary preoccupations are told through the story of an archetypal rivalry in Maya culture between the Lords of Xib'alb'a and the twins Jun Ajpu and Yaxb'alamkej – against the backdrop of the change of era Oxlajuj B'aqtun¹⁸³.

¹⁸² Miguel, interview.

¹⁸³ For a full description of the characters, please see Appendices 5 and 6.

Sotz'il members say there is nothing "more profound" than to reflect on these questions of divisionism and violence through the ontological lens of "the essences" / ruk'u'x (*las esencias*).¹⁸⁴

In interviews, Sotz'il members state that the root of community division across Maya communities is the change in the meaning and practice of community leadership due to colonization and Christianization. In their consultations with certain respected cofrades as elders who teach them ancestral traditions, they have learned about certain activities which are only practiced "ceremonially" now, almost as figureheads. Before, the k'amöl b'ey were very involved in "community work" and were "always accompanying the community," particularly in the resolution of familial and community conflicts. In contrast, they say that because many cofrades are Catholic or Evangelical, they fulfill these activities only "ceremonially" now – or in the words of a Tejido Social leader, as "figureheads." The critique is that the office of serving as cofrade has lost the ontological source of their authority and, with that, the political authority that they held in pre-Hispanic times. For example, ancestrally it is not the k'amöl b'ey themselves who have power or make the decisions. Rather, it is the staff of authority that the k'amöl b'ey carry which "speaks," say Sotz'il members. Hence, the k'amöl b'ey have a "commitment with the staff" as an other-than-human person and a commitment with the people – that is, their position is one of service rather than of possessing power themselves as individual human beings. Traditionally, their service to the staff included feeding the staff (a practice that extends North beyond the Maya region) and dancing with the staff – treating the staff like a "girlfriend" says a Sotz'il member -- that is, courting the staff and developing an intimate relationship of respect and courteous service. However, Sotz'il members state that the *alcaldes auxiliares* only rarely dance with the staff now. They cite the example of one elder who did dance with the staff to the chagrin of a fellow *alcalde auxiliar* who is Evangelical and disapproved of this practice.¹⁸⁵

Teaching their community, particularly the young people, about these practices and

¹⁸⁴ Miguel, interview.

¹⁸⁵ Interviews with Sotz'il members.

worldview is part of the larger “change of mentality” to which Sotz’il hopes to contribute. If they were to accomplish this on a large scale – if many people would take up ancestral ontological-communal practices -- the effects would be systemic with political implications, they say. “If this is taken up again, then the system of the people (pueblo) would change,” says Miguel. For example, if the ancient organization of the k’amöl b’ey were in place in all Kaqchikel communities, there would be multiple levels of appealing questions of community conflict. If a problem is not resolved at the neighborhood level, “other communities would be convoked.” If the problem is still not resolved at the second level, a broader spectrum of Kaqchikel communities would be convoked, and on and on until a resolution is reached. The ramifications of a high-level, regional practice of these traditions are societal since it would shift the philosophical and ontological ground of the practice of law and justice.

Yet, Miguel notes that these ontological views are not widely accepted today. Hence, Sotz’il’s project is aspirational. It is significant to note though that although Sotz’il seeks to “change people’s thinking” as their immediate, tangible objective of their plays, their larger vision is a broader re-founding of Maya society. In this, their society-wide goals are of a comparable scale to other Maya organizations of the decolonization / Siwan Tinamit current¹⁸⁶ despite being a small group of artists focused on the creation of theater. Also similar to these organizations, the Sotz’iles view an initial step in this transformation to be a change in how Maya people view themselves, to develop pride in identifying as Maya.

Dual Authority: Jun Ajpu and the Jaguar nawal

Sotz’il offers audiences a reflection on the current practice of community leaders and *alcaldes auxiliares* through the figure of Jun Ajpu who is invested with the staff of authority of a k’amöl b’ey at the start of the play. In his actions in the human realm (in the central circle) he is always accompanied by his *nawal*, a jaguar (Yaxb’alamkej), although Jun Ajpu does not always pay decent attention to him. This pair is an allusion to the “Hero

¹⁸⁶ Such as Uk’u’x B’e.

Twins” of the *Pop Wuj*

Jun Ajpu and Yaxb’alamkej also receive accompaniment from Q’uq’umätz in an immaterial energetic dimension – that is, the circular ring of pine needles that surrounds the central stage area. Q’uq’umätz is described in the program as “authority (*autoridad*) and wisdom” and appears to be a personification of the staff of authority – signaling that authority and wisdom truly derives from this ancestor character rather than from the human character. She demonstrates this by intervening at key moments of crisis on the human plane: she heals wounds, offers counsel, and protects the twins by getting predator energies to back off through energetic invocations. At the start of the play, Q’uq’umätz invests Jun Ajpu with his role of service as k’amöl b’ey¹⁸⁷ through these words of orientation: “you guide the path of your people. You are the clarity which sets your people off on their road.” She hands him the staff of authority, charging him to “use the staff with respect” and to “never cause us shame” by guiding his people “correctly.” Her counsel to him reflects Sotz’il members’ statements about how contemporary *alcades auxiliares* should fulfill their “commitment with the staff”.^{188 189}

Live in harmony [heart-to-heart] with her [the staff] ...

Dance with her, sing with her,

Become mist and fly with her. (Libretto 2012, 3)

Another other-than-human character who has bearing on actions in the human

¹⁸⁷ Refers to the highest ontological-political authority in a Maya community. The term literally means “conductor of the road.” The function of the k’amöl b’ey is to *encaminar*: walk alongside people initially to set them off on the right road; guide them and direct them. That is, the Maya term for leader is built on the concept of a guide – someone who accompanies people and sets them off on their road. The action is done together and tends to be communal, in contrast to some Western notions of the lone leader out in front of the crowd.

¹⁸⁸ In Maya culture, the staff of authority has ancient antecedents in the *Pop Wuj* as well as pre-colonial Maya iconography. When doing ethnographic research in the village of San Jorge La Laguna and spending a lot of time with the *Alcades Auxiliares* (traditional mayors) and the *cofradías*, I observed that they carried their staffs whenever attending to their traditional responsibilities (including processions and, recently, on protest marches) and that when they met as traditional mayors, they put their staffs in a special part of the *alcaldía* (mayoral meeting room).

¹⁸⁹ Although it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to conduct a detailed narrative analysis of the role of the staff of authority in the *Oxlajuj B’aqtun* performance (and I leave that to future research), I note that this living staff performs an important role in the play, similar to its important role in the governance and ontology of Maya community life (Maya b’anob’al).

realm is the Time Bearer. In Maya ontology, the Time Bearer determines the guiding energy of each solar year. In contemporary Maya calendars (published by Maya organizations and independent publishers), he is depicted as a male human figure who carries on his back, with a tumpline, a glyph representing the nawal energy of the solar year. In the *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* play, the Time Bearer carries a drum (painted with a glyph) on his back with a tumpline. He represents the changing energies of the passage of time by accompanying Q'uq'umätz as she walks in the circular road and lights a bowl of kotz'ij fire in each of the cardinal directions at distinct moments in the play.

The final set of metaphysical energies who influence human action and instigate the downfall of the community leader are the Lords of Xib'alb'a, who want Jun Ajpu's staff of authority and provoke a conflict with the twins to get it. The rivalry between the Lords of Xib'alb'a and the twins has been a central theme in Maya ontology since ancient times as represented in iconography (on murals, vases, etc.) and in the *Pop Wuj* (a colonial era text that some argue is a rough transcription of performances dating to the Classic period (D. Tedlock 1996)). In the *Pop Wuj*, the conflict begins when the Lords challenge the twins to a ballgame. Similarly, in Sotz'il's play, the Lords of Xib'alb'a first confront the twins in a ballgame scene. Q'uq'umätz tosses a rubber ball to initiate the Maya ball game, but Owl, the Messenger of Xib'alb'a, intercepts and sits on the ball, disrupting the harmonious play of the game and taking an oppositional stance to the twins. As in the *Pop Wuj*, the Lords of Xib'alb'a are defeated in the first round of the ballgame. They win the second round by cheating. In the third round they stab Jun Ajpu with an obsidian blade. As a result of this violence, they win the game and the twins have to turn over Jun Ajpu's staff of authority.

Q'uq'umätz gives Jaguar her vase of fire to heal Jun Ajpu's wounds. After Jun Ajpu recovers, he begins to dance in a circle with Jaguar's support – again the theme of the circle of collectivity and shared power. Wuqu' Qak'ix identifies this as an act of creating harmonious relations and scolds Jun Ajpu for this: “You are disobeying us. Stop ‘harmonizing’ and ‘leading Life’!” Wuqu' Qak'ix provokes the second conflict by sending the nawal Kame (personified as a skeleton) and then Owl to “close Jun Ajpu's road.” Owl

does a rhythmic step in second position plié: touching one knee in, then out; then the other knee in, then out, alternating quickly. He places large bones in front of Jaguar and tosses a net of bones in front of Jun Ajpu to tempt them and halt them in their tracks¹⁹⁰. They stand paralyzed while Wuqu' Qak'ix chants these verses that seem to induce a hypnosis in his victims:

Jun Ajpu', obey us! [Lit., "Honor our words" / "Treat our words as Great."]
Because we are the ones who change the course of time.
We are the ones who cause the difficulties of life.
We are the ones who bury the light of the Sun.
We are the ones who knot the wicks of the candles.
We are the ones who provoke sickness
We are the ones who cut off Life and provoke death... (Sotz'il 2012, 6)

With that, Wuqu' Qak'ix blows into an elongated, halved tecomate receptacle that is filled with bone powder, thus spraying the bone powder all over Jaguar and Jun Ajpu to paralyze them. Owl puts on Jun Ajpu a mask without holes for the eyes to blind him. Tempting Jun Ajpu with a shiny silver necklace, Owl coaxes Jun Ajpu into taking their Kame staff, which brings him further under their control.

In the above scenes, the Lords of Xib'alb'a blind Jun Ajpu and play violent tricks to get his staff of authority and then control him through their Kame staff. Mayas may associate the Lords of Xib'alb'a with external oppressors, such as strongmen, mining companies, and death squads. However, Sotz'il's play does not hold responsible only external factors as causes of community division and intracommunal violence. They make a point to note that the name of the antagonist in their play is not Seven Disgraces, but rather *Our Seven Disgraces*.¹⁹¹ In interviews, they have noted that the Kame nawal, like every nawal, only appears negative when unbalanced, and that it exists in every person.¹⁹²

Yet as the play develops, Jun Ajpu displays his own weakness to being seduced by the shiny traps of Xib'alb'a. Once he is blinded by the Xib'alb'a mask, he accepts their shiny bauble necklace and Kame Staff and begins to dance like a puppet to the rhythm of

¹⁹⁰ This is explained further in the section about Totonicapán, below.

¹⁹¹ *Wuqu' Qak'ix* and *Nuestras Siete Verguenzas* as they translate the name into Spanish.

¹⁹² Lorenzo, interview.

their *son* music. So too with his nawal Jaguar, despite being more consistent and nearly inexhaustible in his efforts to resist the forces of Xib'alb'a. Jaguar's weaknesses contribute to his initial capture by the Lords of Xib'alb'a: Tempted by the rattling of bones in front of his face, Jaguar accepts alcohol from minions of Xib'alb'a. Hence, the twins are not purely innocent victims of the treacherous tricks of the Lords of Xib'alb'a.

Yet the twins are not helpless nor alone in facing domination and violence. First, the twins represent the Maya value of duality: ideally, they help each other (like the dual governorship of the precolonial Kaqchikel city-state). Hence, it was an anomaly for Jun Ajpu to ignore the efforts of Jaguar to free him, thus underscoring the power of the Lords of Xib'alb'a to manipulate him. Second, Q'uq'umätz intervenes to protect and strengthen each of the twins, particularly after scenes of injustice in the play. Although she wasn't able to prevent all acts of violence and injustice, she helped in the twins' recovery so that the domination and effects of violence would not be permanent. She acted in favor of restoring holistic community leadership for the people. Third, the ever-changing season of the Maya calendrical cycle, represented by the movements of the Time Bearer to each of the four cardinal directions, allowed for distinct energies to influence the action on the human plane. A shift in the lead nawal of the calendrical cycle at times helped the twins liberate themselves from the treachery of the Lords of Xib'alb'a.

Consequences of ignoring one's nawal

The play conveys the harmful consequences of ignoring one's nawal (helper energy). Specifically, when Jun Ajpu ignores his Jaguar nawal, he becomes more vulnerable to the forces of avarice, sickness, and suffering.

After Owl has put the blinding mask on Jun Ajpu, Jun Ajpu dances submissively to Our Seven Disgraces' marimba playing. Jaguar tries in vain to grab the feet of Jun Ajpu to free him from this submission. When Jun Ajpu doesn't respond to Jaguar, Q'uq'umätz advises him,

Jun Ajpu', do not spurn your nawal, do not distance yourself from him. Because
he's "the face of your day", he's your helper energy,
He will help you in the obscurity,

He will be with you, and
He will take care of you in every moment: He won't leave your side.
Do not worry: what must happen will happen. (Sotz'il 2012, 8)

However, Jun Ajpu has not woken up from the spell of Our Seven Disgraces, so he continues to ignore Jaguar's attempts to free him from further subordination to Xib'alb'a. This culminates with a scene in which he himself puts his Jaguar nawal – his own helper energy -- into captivity, perhaps representing dynamics of self-punishment and internalized colonization:

Jun Ajpu' dances erratically with the new Kame staff, as if he is wrestling with an energy that is too powerful for him to handle by himself. He struggles to raise himself from the floor with it. Jaguar exhaustingly flies in acrobatic bounds around Jun Ajpu, trying to wrest the Kame staff from him. At its climax, Jun Ajpu and Jaguar are both holding onto the staff with two hands from opposite sides, as if a fulcrum that both are spinning around. This intensifies into a dance of spinning leaps in which they each alternate *tour jetés* in the air, with one kicking one and then two legs in the air while the other tugs at the staff. Finally, when Jaguar exhausts himself, Jun Ajpu pins Jaguar to the ground with the spear point of his Kame Staff, and then traps him with a metal grill (crossed-bars). Owl and the Kame nawal tie Jaguar's hands behind his back.¹⁹³

The twins' captivity becomes self-replicating, and the spell of submission no longer relies on physical entrapments to keep them bound:

Our Seven Disgraces plays a *son* melody on his marimba so that Jaguar will dance. Both Jaguar and Jun Ajpu dance in a circle. Even when Owl secretly cuts off the lasso around his wrists, Jaguar continues dancing with his hands behind his back as if were still lassoed together. When the Lords of Xib'alb'a realize this, they laugh and play exultant music.¹⁹⁴

Still, Jaguar's state of being conscious of his entrapment is visibly different from Jun Ajpu's dead or vacant energy in the way they dance. While Jun Ajpu almost contentedly bounces along like a true follower and brainwashed puppet who buys into the ridiculous dance, Jaguar's dance is more one of exhaustion, dragging himself along, ashamed to be in this position of defeat. He dances like someone who is temporarily defeated, but not

¹⁹³ Author's field notes of an *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* performance.

¹⁹⁴ Author's field notes of an *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* performance.

deceived nor brainwashed. He has accompanied Jun Ajpu to the Place of Fear but his “clean heart” and “alive energy,” in Q’uq’umätz’s words, give him the capacity to lead Jun Ajpu out of captivity.

Leaders who have fallen into disrepute

Because Maya leadership has traditionally been practiced as a service to one’s community, when someone is respected, community members seek out that person for advice and conflict resolution. Miguel states, “When the people look for you and call you, it is because you have assumed a commitment to the community.”¹⁹⁵ In fact, Miguel supports his claim that Sotz’il members are respected in their community by noting that they are being sought after for advice and leadership. I heard reports that Ernesto and Lisandro were visited by community members for this reason. During the course of my fieldwork, I found that Ernesto and Lisandro, as leaders who were respected by many when alive, were invoked and memorialized in the years after their assassinations in moments of silence during assemblies, photos on other families’ altars, banners carried in school parades, and even spontaneous remembrances in casual conversation as a source of inspiration. For respected Maya leaders, physical death is not seen as an endpoint, but rather the transition to another cycle (as noted in Chapter 3). They continue to be called upon for help through the kotz’ij fire of a Maya ceremony.

In contrast, those k’amöl b’ey who abused their power have their “roads closed” in both life and death: they are distrusted, talked about behind their backs, and live out their social punishment of loss of esteem. Instead of a prison sentence, as in Western “criminal justice,” the consequence is that community members no longer seek out a k’amöl b’ey who has fallen into disrepute.

The phrase “cerrar el camino” (“close the way”) is repeated in the play *Oxlajuj B’aqtun* because Jun Ajpu, despite his esteemed position as k’amöl b’ey, has “his road closed” due to being blinded by Our Seven Disgraces. He finally breaks free when awakened by the agonizing screams of his nawal helper energy.

¹⁹⁵ Miguel, interview.

In pursuit of Jun Ajpu's staff of authority, the Lords of Xib'alba' provoke stand-offs with Jun Ajpu and his spirit pair the Jaguar. Through a series of deceptions, temptations, and foul play they get Jun Ajpu' to do their will. This is demonstrated by Jun Ajpu being blinded by a mask and trotting around like a puppet to the melody that Our Seven Disgraces plays. After trying to free Jun Ajpu through various methods, Jaguar finally finds a way to play ancestral Maya melodies on the flute:

Seeing a reed flute near the border of the circular stage, Jaguar grabs it with his teeth (since his hands are still bound, he thinks), and plays it by curling up his body and pressing the flute upright against his foot.¹⁹⁶

Jun Ajpu's hand convulses and extends, as if of its own accord, towards the flute, and then towards his mask. He lays down the Kame staff and dances – but this time his *son* steps are bigger (like at the start of the play), with expansive arms: one goes front and up, and the other goes behind, before switching. Jun Ajpu begins to remove his blinding mask while Wuqu' Qak'ix tries to talk him out of it while shaking half-meter-long brown pods (*tz'a'r*). Recognizing the power of Jaguar's flute-playing, Wuqu' Qak'ix then threatens Jaguar: “Stop playing music, or you'll see the power of those who cause death! [...] Kame, take away the flute from Jaguar! Make the flute stop talking!”

In Maya cosmovisión, flute music is viewed as powerful enough that musical instruments are said to “talk.” In the play, Our Seven Disgraces feels threatened enough by Jaguar's flute playing that he tell his minions to “Make the flute stop talking!”

These scenes demonstrate Sotz'il's beliefs about conflict through the lens of Maya cosmovisión. They highlight the role of *nawales* as a power source for humans to live through violent conflict and who can potentially intervene and support human beings when trapped by corruptive influences.

However, the Jaguar's liberation efforts are not without reprisal. The climactic intensity of the play flips quickly from the climax of near-liberation to excruciating pain. Jaguar's breathtaking flying leaps around the circle animate the *tzak tzak* (an instrument made of cut reeds) that he hits on his legs to clap against each other rhythmically, producing a resonant musical sound:

¹⁹⁶ The Kaqchikel libretto says, “Jun Ajpu draws closer to receive the sound of the sacred voice of the flute (*xul*) and cleans himself off in it.”

Q'uq'umätz then blows her breath over Jaguar, who realizes that his hands have been untied. He writhes to free himself of the metal chest plate. Jaguar brings to Jun Ajpu a pair of tzak tzak¹⁹⁷, saying to him soothingly,

“We need to get out of the obscurity, we should untangle ourselves. Together we can do it: Do not be afraid, just listen to me and let yourself go. Follow me...”

Jun Ajpu, still blinded by his mask, turns his ears towards Jaguar's voice and tilts his head, indicating that he's trying to follow his voice. Jaguar plays the tzak tzak by clacking them – i.e. hitting them against varying parts of this body (his legs, his arms) while dancing – doing gorgeous high, extended leaps around the circular rim of the stage. He thereby produces different pitches and tonalities of a clicking sound when the two sides of the reed hit each other across their slits.¹⁹⁸

This is the height of Jaguar's dance. As an audience member, I felt my spirit fly by seeing him leap, because it allowed me to vicariously feel that leap and the long breathtaking suspension in the air, as if the audience were flying along with him.

This audacious dance of freedom brings down the wrath of Our Seven Disgraces and the viciousness of the minions from the Place of Fear, who begin to torture Jaguar for nearly liberating Jun Ajpu from Xib'alb'a's control. It would be hard not to read this scene as reflecting the last moments of Sotz'il founder Lisandro Guarcax's life when he was tortured by assassins:

Wuqu' Qak'ix orders, “Kame, Tukurur, get the pitchforks.”

Kame and Owl grab Jaguar by the neck with two four-foot sticks that forked at the top, thus immobilizing him. They wrestle him to the ground and pin his arms and legs with the pitchforks and under their bodies.

Wuqu' Qak'ix kneels by Jaguar's face and forcefully grabs his paw. He growls at Jaguar, “Stay still, Jaguar!” Wuqu' Qak'ix draws out a large obsidian blade with a flourish, waiting for the audience to take note of the knife. Then, in what felt like agonizing slow-motion to me as an audience member, he slowly slices off the thick outer layer of Jaguar's paw and his claws while Jaguar emits an excruciating and piercing scream.

¹⁹⁷ An instrument made of a pair of medium length reeds which have two long parallel slits on either end where they can be hit and vibrate, producing a “tzak tzak” sound.

¹⁹⁸ This clacking of reeds against the body is reminiscent of some Indigenous South Pacific and Maori dances.

Note that the musician doing the torturing in this scene is Lisandro's youngest brother, raising questions of whether it is as excruciating for him to perform each time as it is for audiences to watch; or whether it is cathartic and a way for him to feel and process emotions around his oldest brother's final moments of earthly life. The play is not removed from real life; rather, it is heightening our understanding of real life.

In my notes from this performance I've written, "This is hard to watch and hard to remember. It brings up memories of what happened to Lisandro and leads me to send a wish that his final moments were not as agonizing as this."

Having sliced off one of Jaguar's paws and claws, Wuqu' Qak'ix exultantly raises it up like a trophy, letting it dangle from his fingertips. Amidst Jaguar's howls of pain, Wuqu' Qak'ix parades it around the perimeter of the ceremonial space, addressing the public with terrorizing threats (which feels all too familiar, as audiences seem to pick up on with their breathless silence and attention: a terrorization that silences):

"Look, this is what will happen to those who disobey me,
This is what will happen to those who do not feed us,
This is what will happen to those who do not satiate our thirst,
This is what will happen to those who do not seek equilibrium:
We will tear off their/your skin, their claws."

Wuqu' Qak'ix kneels and grabs Jaguar's other paw. Again, agonizingly slowly, he slices the flesh off Jaguar's second paw and then slices off his claws. He rises to his feet and repeats the parading of Jaguar's claws and his intimidations.

After Wuqu' Qak'ix's parade of terror, Kame and Tukur release Jaguar. Jaguar writhes on the ground and drags himself slowly, still screaming in pain. Then unexpectedly, a key turning point occurs: "Jun Ajpu feels this pain and tries to take off his mask."¹⁹⁹ (Sotz'il 2012)

This turning point could also symbolize the experience of Maya community members who perhaps were like the masked Jun Ajpu: perhaps some let themselves be deceived by strongmen's promises of power, resources, and hate-mongering. It isn't until

¹⁹⁹ Like the scene descriptions that follow, this description is based on the author's field notes of an *Oxlaju B'aqtun* performance in combination with quotations of dialogue from Sotz'il's 2012 libretto.

the “pueblo” (Jun Ajpu) hears the cries of those violently tortured (Jaguar) that the pueblo / community finally wakes up from the spell of Our Seven Disgraces – with its fomentation of pride, greedy ambition, envy, lying, destructiveness, self-centeredness, and ignorance - - and tries to take off the blinding mask.

The play also shows interventions from ancestors and nawales that support human beings and keep forces of greed and destruction in check. However, the interventions of the ancestor Q’uq’umätz do not only bring about tranquility. Sometimes Q’uq’umätz’s interventions in the dramatic action happening in the center circle – which has represented actions in the earthly plane and those influenced by Xib’alb’a – arouse the ire of the Lords of Xib’alb’a:

When Q’uq’umätz succeeds in passing Jun Ajpu some of the energy of her fire to light his road, Our Seven Disgraces reacts and scolds Q’uq’umätz and the Time Bearer: “Stop intervening in this time and space!”

Q’uq’umätz and the Time Bearer ignore his words, and Jun Ajpu continues dancing freely. Our Seven Disgraces’ anger explodes and he enters the Clear Road with Owl and Kame in tow. He throws water on the fire (making the audience jump back from the sparks in the performance in Santa Catarina Palopó). While Q’uq’umätz and the Time Bearer are distracted by this, Our Seven Disgraces steals the Time Bearer’s drumsticks one by one in an elegant move, smoothly passing them behind him to one helper (Owl) who passes it to the next (Kame). When the Time Bearer turns around to confront him, Our Seven Disgraces bends around him and without losing a beat picks up the Time Bearer’s drum of time and passes it to his helpers who repeat the chain movement. They carry the drum of time to the Eastern portal.

Unintimidated, Q’uq’umätz yells at Our Seven Disgraces instead of backing off: “What do you want? Get away from me! You put out my fire, you entered in my Way. Get out of here!” Having succeeded in causing disruption, the Lords return to their time and space – the center circle of the stage.

Sotz’il contrasts the moments when Q’uq’umätz will not or cannot intervene with moments when she will step out of the circular Clear Road (the energetic dimension linked to maintaining the cycles of time) to intervene in human affairs and conflicts (in the circular center of the stage). She intervenes twice after acts of injustice and cheating. First, using

the smoke from her kotz'ij fire she heals the wounds of Jun Ajpu after the Lords of Xib'alb'a cheated in the ballgame by stabbing him. Second, after the scene of torture, she finishes the cycle of the Clear Road in a fury and enters the central stage to spray water from her mouth onto the Lords of Xib'alb'a. Recalling an act of metaphysical cleansing performed by curers for sudden fright, this *limpia* gets the Lords of Xib'alb'a to back off and return to their home in the Place of Fear at the Western (interior) border of the circular stage²⁰⁰:

Q'uj'umätz and the Time Bearer swiftly walk eastwards to the four-caña pyramid topped with a bouquet of the four colors of the Maya cross. Q'uj'umätz passes through this portal so swiftly and smoothly that before the audience realizes it she is in the center of the ceremonial space spraying water from her mouth onto the Lords of Xib'alb'a. They “retreat to their caves.” (Sotz'il 2012, 21)

Q'uj'umätz then heals the de-clawed Jaguar using the smoke from her kotz'ij fire. She crosses over to Jaguar and kneels beside him to blow the smoke of her clay bowl of kotz'ij fire over his now but-human hands. While doing so, she humbly asks for the help of the nawales to cure Jaguar's wounds.

The audience is suddenly quiet as Q'uj'umätz heals each hand by blowing the smoke from the kotz'ij fire over each hand three times. The silence is so piercing that you could hear a pin drop.²⁰¹

Q'uj'umätz continues to smudge the rest of Jaguar's body and finally his feet. Jaguar slowly gets up and thanks the energies of the ancestors accessed through the fire. Time Bearer lights the fifth ceremonial vase of yellow and white long candles that has been sitting in the Northern portal. He hands it to Jaguar, who sets it down in the center of the ceremonial space.

However, the one time that Q'uj'umätz says that she cannot intervene is when Jun Ajpu accepts the staff of obscurity from Place of Fear and allows Owl to put the blinding mask on him. Q'uj'umätz scolds Jun Ajpu, saying that that because he is now with the forces of obscurity, “you will suffer, and I can't help you: I have to finish my road.” She is referring to her ultimate responsibility of carrying the cycles of time by walking the Clear

²⁰⁰ Where the ancestral marimba de tecomate is placed.

²⁰¹ I noted this in particular at the Santa Catarina Palopó performance, but this seemed to happen generally at the other regional performances I observed in the Department of Sololá.

Road with the Time Bearer.

After Q'uq'umätz heals Jaguar from the wounds of torture, Jun Ajpu of his own accord removes the objects that kept him bound to the Lords of Xib'alb'a:

Kneeling in front of the kotz'ij fire, Jun Ajpu cuts off the red woven bracelets and offers them to the kotz'ij fire. He removes his silver bauble necklace and saturates it over the fire. Finally, he himself removes the blinding mask and lifts it above his head, then saturates it with incense.

In taking off the mask without eye holes, Jun Ajpu is no longer blinded by his own ambition, ignorance, and pride – and therefore, is no longer dominated by the Place of Fear. He has freed himself. Next, Q'uq'umätz invests him as an ajq'ij (daykeeper) before the kotz'ij fire, the ultimate authority in Maya ontology as the medium for communication with nawales and ancestors:

Q'uq'umätz now brings Jun Ajpu to the center where she leads him in circling the kotz'ij fire. All the musician-dancers join them in circling the fire, and they speak to it, thanking the energies.

Like the beginning of the play, she once again hands Jun Ajpu the staff of authority of the k'amöl b'ey; however, this time she pairs it with the red woven headscarf (su't) of the ajq'ij:

Jun Ajpu flips the red woven scarf in a spiraling motion to wrap around his head. Circling around the fire holding the staff of authority, he talks to the kotz'ij fire. The rest of the characters – the three Lords of Xib'alb'a, the Jaguar nawal, and Q'uq'umätz – walk in a wider circle around both Jun Ajpu and the fire. Meanwhile, the Time Bearer returns to the outer ring of pine needles, the Clear Road, to walk around it once more before all the characters leave the central stage area and the play ends.

The final scene shows all the energies, including those from Xib'alb'a, moving around the circle in a harmonious, coordinated fashion without obstruction or conflict – in contrast to their movements at the start of the play which were erratic and antagonistic. Now as ajq'ij using the staff of authority to talk with the kotz'ij fire, Jun Ajpu is able to manage all the energies with their different qualities and tendencies. The play implies that in the end, Jun Ajpu can better lead his people as an ajq'ij who dialogues with nawales and

ancestor energies through the kotz'ij fire.

The theme of the transition to the Oxlajuj B'aqtun cycle of time is also referenced in this closing scene. Time as a circular cycle is invoked through the Time Bearer's final cycle around the Clear Road, this time in the opposite direction, to close the cycle of time that had been opened in the course of the play.

Pablo suggests that the final cycling of the energies around the kotz'ij fire refers partly to having equilibrium among all sectors of Maya society, not giving preference to daykeepers or the traditional authorities, for example, but rather recognizing the contributions of all including "Maya art, medicine, weavers – that all these have an equal level, in equilibrium and harmony." This seems to reflect the sense and organization of the chinamital -- a holistic wheel where all sectors come together. In the Tejido Social movement, they all came together as a Maya mobilization to create Kaqchikel institutions. Now Pablo is stressing not a unified mobilization, but that even if each sector develops independently, each should be valued and regarded as integral to the equilibrium and well-being of Maya society.

CONCLUSION

In the play *Oxlajuj B'aqtun*, Sotz'il explores themes of community leadership and corruption; the escalation of conflict into violence; the power of musical instruments to liberate human beings; the central role of the kotz'ij fire in community decision-making and sociopolitical life; and interventions from ancestors and nawales that influence human beings and social life. The embodied actions are full of Maya ontological significance and communicate the dramatic narrative of the story without a dependence on the poetic dialogue for those who do not understand the Maya Kaqchikel and Mam languages.

By the end of the play, the k'amöl b'ey (traditional authority) has become an ajq'ij – that is, he guides his people in the practice of Maya ontology in contrast to current Maya cofrades and alcaldes auxiliares who are Christian and reject Maya ontology. The play presents an ideal of the *revindicación* movement: that as an ajq'ij, the community leader can better dialogue with and "manage" all energies, even those that may bring about

sickness, rotting, and death. In the staging of their play, the Sotz'iles put the kotz'ij fire at the center of the action. This reflects a goal of Sotz'il (and Maya organizations like Uk'u'x B'e): putting the kotz'ij fire at the center of Maya social life to be consulted in any important organizational or community decision. This implicates a fundamental re-organization of Maya socio-political life in order to (theoretically) take power away from the human dimension.

The play's *revindicación* intervention is important in Guatemala where a majority Maya population has been subjected to colonial oppression and where religious conversion has been violent and destructive of societies and people.²⁰² At the same time, the conclusion of the play conveys an idealized image of Maya ontology. It proposes that the resolution of conflict will fall in the hands of a singular male ajq'ij who, as a human being existing in a social realm, has human imperfections, even if in ideal scenarios Maya ontology has the capacity to mitigate excessive corruption as shown in the play. When considering the implementation of a system like this, some questions arise: Would there be avenues of accountability to ensure against abuses of power? How would duality and the circular power of the collective shape the system? Would there be more openings for a duality of gender expressions?

Also, although in contemporary Maya society there are many women ajq'ijab', their mobility and agency is more restricted than male ajq'ijab' since they still live in a gendered social realm with its imbalances of power. Sotz'il members have said in interviews that their proposal is for various arenas of Kaqchikel life to be balanced – between governance, arts, medicine, spirituality, etc. However, this notion is not directly conveyed by the final scene of their play. I propose that these are important questions for Sotz'il and the members of the *revindicación* movement to discuss.

Furthermore, the conclusion misses the key intervention of Sotz'il, mentioned by multiple interviewees, that responsibilities of governance be shared by a circle or at least two people in order to prevent the accumulation of power in the hands of one person that would expose that person to a greater probability of corruption. Throughout the play Jun

²⁰² As suggested by De Landa's description of his Auto de Fe, which Lisandro also cited in his interview.

Ajpu is accompanied by his nawal so they effectively are a pair; however, the final scene presents a single daykeeper in dialogue with multiple energies. Given that power in the human realm would need to be balanced and shared too, the play misses an opportunity to show at least a couple human ajq'ijab' sharing power.

The conclusion of the play also misses an opportunity to show a balance of power between men and women. Although Q'uq'umätz has been a strong character throughout the play and represents the ultimate authority and wisdom from the metaphysical realm, in the final scene she circles around the fire with the other nawales. As a result, there is no gender duality or balancing on the human plane. Yet, to this day there exist examples of this gender duality in some Maya communities where k'amöl b'ey always carry out their functions as a female and male married couple. If either becomes widowed, the widower can no longer act as k'amöl b'ey due to the principle of gendered duality. The ajq'ijab' who accompany Sotz'il's theater performances also travel and perform their functions as an elder female and male married couple. Also, despite contemporary heteronormative emphases of many expressions of Maya spirituality, there is a notable presence of queer ajq'ijab' living as part of their Maya communities and who are sought out by (that is, they are respected by) their community. The experience of women and queer practitioners of Maya spirituality (as both lay people and ajq'ijab') are areas for further investigation by artists of the *reivindicación* / Siwan Tinamit current like Sotz'il.

However, what the final scene emphasizes is the act of harmonizing. In fact, in the libretto of *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* the references to “harmony” appear most often as a verb – “armonizar” in Spanish, and its literal expression in Kaqchikel is “to make spiraling movements.” That is, *harmonizing* is an embodied act that must be periodically attended to: in Maya ontology through ceremonies; and in the social realm through consultations with elders (pixab'), the guidance of k'amöl b'ey in “conflict resolution,” and community-level dialogues (like the chinamital model). These Maya practices invoke a dynamic of coming into “complementarity.” The final scene of Sotz'il's play invokes this dynamic when the polarization between the two groups of energies is disempowered and both “sides” join the circling. The play suggests that “complementarity” is not fixed, but is a

dance of energies that is always in movement, unstable, and in need of consistent efforts at balancing.

When I asked Pablo what it is to “be Maya,” after some thought he said, “It’s to interact with everything, to feel yourself part of everything.”²⁰³ The final scene of *Oxlajuj B’aqtun* portrays this as all the energies circle around the kotz’ij fire. However, this state of harmonizing was achieved after a phase of bloodshed, pain, conflict, and setbacks. “Returning to balance” after major disequilibria and “out-of-control movements” (“movimientos descontrolados”) required great effort. That is, Sotz’il’s play shows that in Maya worldview, “harmony” is not an idyllic, semi-permanent, static state or paradise but an ongoing practice of balancing, with the help of Maya ontological practices.

Similarly, the theme of “blocking the road” comes up several times in the play and bears great significance in Maya life. This is the consequence for a leader if he does something out of integrity and violates the honor of his office. The penalty is shame: community members no longer seek him or her out as an authority whose accumulated life experience can help others find a way to resolve their problems. This disgraced leader would have the title of k’amöl b’ey without people treating him as such, and perhaps instead even gossiping about him. Within Maya communities, this consequence is more common than court cases in the Guatemalan legal system which historically has not protected the rights of Maya peoples.

Sotz’il’s plays allow audiences to experience a realistic acceptance of their ontology and peoplehood, once they are in full view. By presenting characters embroiled in conflicts pertinent to Maya audiences, Sotz’il shows Maya ontology to be relevant and responsive to contemporary dilemmas.

Sotz’il wages its struggle on the level of ontological valorization and an autonomous subjectivity that is not yoked to dominant nation-state narratives of Maya subjugation. These are things that many of their generation, even their classmates at the Kaqchikel community school, had not been exposed to. Through theater, Sotz’il decolonizes stereotypes that paint Maya cosmovisión as witchcraft. Instead, the play

²⁰³ Pablo, interview.

demonstrates a Maya ontological approach to working through conflict which references ancestral narratives and sacred histories such as the Pop Wuj.

In the next chapter, I will explore how audiences interpret these issues of conflict, justice, violence, and metaphysical interventions and what this reveals about what results from advancing a politics of Maya *reivindicación* through theater.

Chapter 7. Audience Responses: How Sotz'il's Play Shapes Ethicopolitical Commitments to Maya Reivindicación

On the highlands wintery evening of December 2, 2012, Sotz'il was setting up for a performance of their play *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* on the street in front of Sololá's municipal building. Municipal workers and volunteers distributed plastic seats to audience members who had arrived even earlier. As early as two hours before the scheduled performance time, they had started to encircle the performance area, bending with curiosity over the items on the circular carpet of pine needles. A couple rows of seats already circled the performance area. Still, despite several more rounds of wheeling out stacks of chairs, there were not enough plastic seats for all, especially after more and more passersby stopped to gather, look, and wait for the performance.

Chomija' and Ixch'umil (ages nine and six) and I were among the lucky few to have gotten there early enough to have grabbed a couple seats. But the more we waited, the more we were exposed to the increasing cold. Sitting next to me, Chomija' was already shivering under her thick coat and her su't.

When it started to rain, umbrellas began popping up, covering multiple people at once under their reach. More than impressed, I was touched to see that the vast majority stayed, in the rain, waiting for Sotz'il's play. It was a testament to what this performance meant to them – that they anticipated getting something out of the experience that made it worth their while to stay, huddled under umbrellas or plastic tarps, and mostly standing, in the cold wintery highlands night. What was it that they anticipated? Given the conditions, I didn't get a chance to talk to people about why they stayed, but I can surmise: Was it for entertainment? Quenching one's curiosity? Something fun and different to see? Or something that touches them, stirs them, reminds them, makes them feel something about who they are? Or something else?

Sotz'il stepped out to perform, even though the rain dampened their attempts to get a strong kotz'ij fire going. They slipped on the interlocking concrete pavers that were constructed to endure heavy truck and automobile traffic, not receive the leaps and

acrobatic bounds of human bone, muscle, and skin. Yet, this street, like many other town plazas and concrete municipal gymnasium floors, served as their hard and unforgiving stage floor that night. When one of the members took a major slip and fall on the uneven and wet pavers, the Sotz'iles paused and consulted. Although they had already endured the cold and wind (with some dancer-musicians bare-chested), they decided to stop the performance due to hazards of slipping on the concrete while leaping and moving with their clay vessels of kotz'ij fire. They thanked the crowd for waiting in the rain and said they would re-schedule with the Muni for an indoors performance.

Sotz'il exited, and minutes after hearing the announcement, the crowd quickly dispersed. I was disappointed (perhaps like the others) – but I too with the children's family quickly ran towards where their pickup was parked. The quickness with which people dispersed showed that they did not particularly enjoy standing in the rain, but that they were truly making an effort to stay. Some anticipation about the performance had kept them there.

To lay the ground for studying the effects of Sotz'il's theater on audiences, the last chapter analyzed the content of the play *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* in order to understand how Sotz'il expresses Maya ontological perspectives through theater. In this chapter, I examine how audiences respond to Sotz'il's theater performances expressing Maya ontologies in the public sphere – a dynamic that has only been possible since the Peace Accords. I study audience understandings of community performances of Sotz'il's play *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* in 2012 – 2013 and their responses to its themes of conflict, justice, violence, and metaphysical interventions by other-than-human persons. I use ethnographic methods to ground the analysis in audience members' socioeconomic context. This analysis will contribute to our understanding of (a) theater's capacity to communicate Indigenous ontologies that contest Western ontology as upholding the power of coloniality and (b) the effects of theater in appealing to a people's cultural sensibilities and frames of meaning to cultivate an ethicopolitical commitment to Indigenous ontology.

A current area of investigation is the role of emotional attachments in building political willpower and concern among everyday people – that is, sufficient motivation to act, be loyal to, and form community around a particular issue. I am particularly interested in how Sotz’il’s theater speaks to that place of emotion and has brought Mayas to “come to care deeply about certain issues, [and] feel passionately attached” to Maya reivindicación and ancestral practices – that is, “the traditions of practices through which such attachments and commitments have been sedimented into our emotional-volitional equipment” (Hirschkind 2009, 30-31). Hirschkind theorizes that these affective processes have political effects. Consequently, I propose that in the process of identifying with and emotionally attaching to the dilemmas presented in the play, audiences become more willing to mobilize around Maya values and reivindicación.

I conducted audience interviews after performances of the play *Oxlajuj B’aqtun*, which in 2013 was performed in over 15 Maya town plazas and municipal gymnasiums in the department of Sololá (see details in Chapter 1 section on “Methodology”). To focus on this one play, I did not conduct audience interviews for the *Uk’u’x Ulew* play that Sotz’il began to perform in November 2014 after the end of dissertation fieldwork, although I had observed their creation process of *Uk’u’x Ulew*. Even so, some audience members’ understandings of the *Oxlajuj B’aqtun* play were informed by having also seen previous Sotz’il plays. Local Maya audiences’ understanding of the play was deepened by the extent of their ontological knowledge of the significance of particular materials and exposure to Maya oral tradition – something that would differentiate their experience of the play from that of audience members who did not grow up within or around Maya culture.

Sotz’il’s theater, I argue, engages audiences’ “feelings about the injustice.”²⁰⁴ Previous chapters explored what it means to performers to engage the physiological and energetic body on a personal level, in a collective setting, when the public is still living within an environment of social and structural violence. In this chapter, I frame the question differently: in a moment when re-living the past is officially discouraged, what results from offering audiences a space to reflect on their memories and salient experiences

²⁰⁴ Lisandro, interview.

of oppression?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The paradox of the politics of memory of state violence is that, although remembering past experiences of violence is profoundly painful, it is essential to do so for societies to move forward. Diana Taylor's *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War"* establishes why this is important in the context of state violence in Latin America. Writing about the 1976-1983 military dictatorship in Argentina, Taylor writes, "The triumph of the atrocity is that it forced people to look away – a gesture that undid their sense of personal and communal cohesion even as it seemed to bracket them from their volatile surroundings" (Taylor 1997, 122).

Taylor calls this "percepticide." However, she applies the concept of percepticide in the context of dictatorships which have a prescribed beginning and end. This chapter seeks to extend her analysis to the experience of Indigenous and other racialized peoples, where colonization and racialized violence extends before and after a circumscribed period of military rule.

Taylor argues that theater helps audiences to look towards the violence and terror to bring them to full consciousness. This diminishes the power of percepticide that contributes to terror through ignoring whispered news of "disappearances," mass atrocities, and, in Guatemala's case, genocide. In this chapter I will show that Sotz'il's theater contributes to helping Guatemalan audiences hold an awareness of the violence, rather than shut it out and deny its reality due to fear or overwhelm,.

In contrast to television news which can sensationalize violence, or even radio and written news that intellectualize violence, theater offers a space where audiences can sit with their emotions about violence in a safe and collective way and to feel a sense of community.

Second, Taylor argues that theater is useful because, in contrast to the archive, it builds a repertoire of performances that are not ephemeral, but live on in the body and therefore can be passed on to others. I extend Taylor's theory to Indigenous theater of

reivindicación which seeks to embody and materialize rich Maya worlds by emphasizing the sensory dimensions of ontological practices and lifeways. Taylor's theory of repertoire helps us understand that this theater is effective because the body will retain the sensory impressions of the performance. The sensory traces of visualized and embodied experiences – of violence and tension in particular, but also of pleasure – reside in the body, producing effects hours, days, or even years and generations later. This has the potential to affect historical memory as well as the valorization of practices which have been disparaged due to racism and colonization.

Applying the anthropology of violence to theater can be productive, by following Das' urging to probe the meaning of an event of violence and "how these shared symbols are worked through" (Das 2007, 217). Theater expands upon Das' theory in that the way shared symbols are "worked through" is *through the body*. Das insists on viewing eventful violence within the localized context of everyday violence to see what new lens this can offer to our understanding of the social order. Next, across both everyday and eventful violence, perhaps what distinguishes *political violence* is the denial of a public sphere in which to grieve, make sense of one's *loss of the world*, and *recover / re-inhabit one's ordinary world* (italicized terms are from Das 2007, 6-9, 78). I argue that Sotz'il's plays create a public sphere in which audiences can grieve by processing the plays about eventful violence together. Because they are best understood in their local context, I use the ethnographic research tradition for this analysis.

Veena Das' description of how anthropology can "be responsive to suffering" applies to how Sotz'il's theater play has worked through and provided insight into violence. Rather than be didactic, the aim is "to see how diffused feelings of anger and hate could be translated into the actual acts of killing. ... an intricate relation between local-level factors and the sense of national crisis" (Das 2007, 207).

While Sotz'il doesn't explicitly indicate that the violence they portray in their play *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* is a particular historical event, audiences relate to the energetic and social process that leads to a crescendo of conflict, anger, hate, and eventually violence. Sotz'il's play is not a simple, didactic denouncement of violence. Rather, it attends to the

complexity of violence and shows ultimately how a community leader can allow himself to fall prone to it. In fact, again similar to Das' proposal, the play *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* helps audiences see "the eventfulness of the everyday" (218) -- particularly everyday choices -- and "how the violence of the [Event] was folded into everyday relations" (75). In Sotz'il's play, these everyday relations include not just human relations within communities as Das describes, but also relations with other-than-human persons such as nawales and the Lords of Xib'alb'a (the Place of Fear).²⁰⁵ Das argues that this approach is effective because it influences the quality of participants' subsequent social action: "social action ... bears the traces of how these shared symbols are worked through" (217).

I extend Das' theory to focus on theater as the site of my ethnography of the everyday. Yet, I argue that Sotz'il's play is not removed from real life. Rather, it is heightening our understanding of real life -- particularly of violence against Mayas. As Marxist arts philosopher Herbert Marcuse writes,

The world intended in art is never and nowhere merely the given world of everyday reality, but neither is it a world of mere fantasy, illusion, and so on. . . . As fictitious world, as illusion, it contains more truth than does everyday reality. . . . Only in the "illusory world" do things appear as what they are and what they can be. (Quoted in Dolan 2005, 89)

Jill Dolan writes that performance makes everyday politics and social practices

become more real—in that we grasp them more fully through their embodiment and ours at the theater—and less real, in that theatricality makes glorious, hopeful spectacles of the possibilities of everyday social life. These performances offered daydreams, which Bloch calls 'signs of the not-yet-conscious,' 'where individuals have presentiments of what they lack, what they need, what they want, and what they hope to find.' As Ernst Fischer, one of Bloch's contemporaries said, "Art is necessary in order that [people] should be able to recognize and change the world. But art is also necessary by virtue of the magic inherent in it." (Dolan 2005, 165)²⁰⁶

Complementing the Marxist materialists, experimental theater director Anne

²⁰⁵ Xib'alb'a (Xib'ib'al + b'a) is literally the "Place of Fear" in the K'iche' and Kaqchikel languages, and in the Pop Wuj and Maya cosmovisión in general is "the fearful world beneath the face of the earth, ruled by One Death [Kame], Seven Death [Kame] and other lords" (Tedlock 1996: 34, 361).

²⁰⁶ I differ from Dolan's interpretation of the term "magic" (2005, 165) and instead turn to Anne Bogart for a definition that aligns better with Maya cosmovisión.

Bogart argues that theater is magnetic because it appeals to the imagination and the human desire for “transubstantiation.” While there are ontological equivocations with Maya worldview, this notion suggests that theater is an especially appropriate vehicle for conveying Maya cosmovisión because of its capacity to transcend the material through imagination and transubstantiation, on top of its appropriateness for advancing a material politics, as the Marxist arts / aesthetics philosophers argued.

Bogart takes up the theme of “magic” that Fischer pointed to. About magic’s “ancient roots in alchemy,” Bogart proposes that

The human experience craves an occasional exposure to magic. The desire to be in the presence of enchantment is basic. Magic activates the miraculous: feats of disappearance and transformation, one substance transforms into another in front of your very eyes. (Bogart 2007, 89)

While there are ontological incommensurabilities in this theorization, there may be some “interests in common that are not the same interest” (to borrow de la Cadena’s phrasing), such as Bogart’s contention that “Magic and alchemy are based upon the belief that unseen forces or spirits permeate all things in the universe. Control of these forces gives humans direct influence on the forces of nature” (Bogart 2007, 89). This partially sheds light on the ontological importance of the struggle for power that Sotz’il explores in its play *Oxlajuj B’aqtun*, although their play shows that these ontological “forces” in the end cannot be controlled. However, the play suggests that there is a metaphysical complement to the materialist notion of sociopolitical “agency.” Nevertheless, Bogart’s conceptualization suggests that theater is an appropriate vehicle for conveying Maya cosmovisión because of its capacity to transcend the material through imagination and transubstantiation. Coupling her theory with those of Marxist aesthetic philosophers Bloch and Marcuse suggests that this capacity for transcendence co-exists with (and complements) theater’s appropriateness for advancing a material kind of politics:

The theater is an ideal vehicle for magic and alchemy because it can ask an audience to make an investment of imagination. Antonin Artaud used the phrase “the theater and its double.” What you see has an equal counterbalance in the unseen, the parallel realities of material existence and then what is created simultaneously in the audience’s imagination. Ask an audience to supply their imaginations, and the

results will transcend anything that you can ever afford to put physically onto the stage. And this conjuring is a kind of magic. It is a magic performed by the audience based upon clues that you offer them. (Bogart 2007, 89)

Applying this to Sotz'il's theater, theater allows proponents of Maya reivindicación to shape alternate worlds without literally representing everything about that world, such as all the elements of Maya ontology. It is a materialization of ontology politics, yet without putting all of its elements on stage. In fact, in writing about the craft of fictional literature, Robert Boswell has noted that fiction becomes most compelling and stirring when authors present the world of the story as a “half-known world” and “illusion of people and place. ... This world exists not on the page but in the reader's mind.” To accomplish this, “the writer must suggest a dimension to the fictional reality that escapes comprehension” (Boswell 2008, 5). Presenting Maya ontology as a “half-known world” in Sotz'il's play is what harnesses the power of the imagination – bringing it to life for audiences with an embodied afterlife after the play has ended. It produces a living sense of discomfort and uncertainty, that not everything can be controlled and fully known, while galvanizing the impossible quest for understanding.

There are two ways to view the political potential of existential discomfort and uncertainty: from an intellectual tradition of critical analysis and reflection, and from a meditative tradition that seeks to access an ontological wisdom beyond the intellectual faculties of rational analysis (some would call this a mystical tradition). First, the intellectual tradition is similar to Bertolt Brecht's alienation technique to shock audiences and shatter empathy. Shattering audience comfort and expectations opens a space where audiences need to reflect – in order to make sense of one's *loss of the world*, and to *recover / re-inhabit one's ordinary world*, in Veena Das' words about recovery from violence (italicized terms are from Das 2007, 6-9, 78). This critical reflection, in turn, opens the possibility for change in their habitual actions to occur, beginning with their critical engagement with issues explored in the play.

Second, in the tradition of ontological wisdom and body-based faculties that seek to “quiet” the intellectual mind of argumentation and an attachment to an ego-identity, the

state of *uncertainty* plays an important role. Dwelling in uncertainty allows a space, a pause, in which meditators can circumvent habitual reactions and discover a new response. This opens the potential for an internally-sourced, non-rationalized change to occur. This state of uncertainty can be accessed through contemplative body-based practices such as meditation. However, Maria Popova's review of Umberto Eco suggests that this state of uncertainty can also be accessed through fiction:

Eco sees in the imaginary a counterintuitive assurance of reality — fictional narratives, in a strange way, is the only place where we can become unmoored from our [existential discomfort with uncertainty \[sic - hypertext link to Alan Watts\]](#), for in fiction everything is precisely and unambiguously as it was intended.²⁰⁷

Diana Taylor proposes that theater creates “communities of witnesses” who do not get re-traumatized by re-viewing the violence because theater aims for a Brechtian distance from the enactment of violence, producing an empowering critical reflection on the moment of violence. However, this theory assumes that the audience has a critical distance from the event: after all, she is speaking about past rather than continuing violence²⁰⁸. In contrast, local Maya audiences are still *living within* environments of spectacular and structural violence, where each person's daily tasks bear a degree of bodily risk. For too many, their position is more so one of being *survivors* rather than *witnesses*. Allen Feldman's notion of the “culture of resistance” (Feldman 1991) provides a conceptual framework to analyze this. In the specific embodied context of political prisoners' hunger strikes and their decision to bear the signs – and pain -- of resistance on their own bodies, he argues that these acts of resistance could only be fully understood and appreciated by those within that community and culture of resistance – i.e. by those within the prison site he studies. They could not take on the same intensity, meaning, and signification outside the prison, even among their supporters and allies.

I propose that Sotz'il creates a similar community of signification among *survivors*.

²⁰⁷ Popova, Maria. n.d. *Legendary Lands: Umberto Eco on the Greatest Maps of Imaginary Places and Why They Appeal to Us*. Accessed November 16, 2016. <https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/02/17/legendary-lands-umberto-eco/>.

²⁰⁸ See also (Green 1995) and (McAllister 2003) on the relative safety in speaking about past violence rather than about continuing dynamics of violence in the present.

Rather than Taylor's description of performance creating a community of witnesses who stand external to and at a critical distance from the event, I argue that Sotz'il creates a space of mutual recognition among survivors – those who have borne the violence of the historical and present Maya experience. The mutual recognition happens through the body, which looks out through one's same eyes onto similar scenes, and perhaps gets tense, jittery, startled easily, and set on high alert.²⁰⁹ Consequently, in the anecdote and audience interviews that I will share, the survivors link the play to their experiences of violence.

Sotz'il's theater operates at the crossroads where “eventful” (Das) and structural violence become integrated into everyday life: through an individual's consciousness. When violence gets integrated into a person's psyche, physiology, and energetic body, it in turn circumscribes their choices and actions, thus affecting political and social well-being. I propose that Sotz'il attempts to overturn the way that violence works on the body and psyche through their theater. In their play *Xajoj Q'ojom Kaji' Imox*, Sotz'il dealt with the historical violence of the colonial period. In this chapter, I will focus on the 2012-2013 performances of *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* which focus on contemporary violence.

In their plays, Sotz'il offers to local audiences their own everyday cosmovisión that neighbors and community members “get” (i.e., they recognize its fundamentals) but which has been repressed – by Christian evangelizers, paradigms of racial hierarchy embedded in the way many modernization and development discourses circulate in Guatemala, and by the culture of violence (both outright and symbolic) that Mayas have been subjected to for centuries. Therefore, audiences recognize the basics of Maya cultural references – for example, perhaps they were picked up from their grandparents even if not actively taught, learned, or studied. Still, many aspects of Maya ontology have been distorted and demonized in the public sphere to such an extreme that significant numbers of Mayas themselves fear encountering Maya cosmovisión and associated practices. As one Sotz'il member states, “Sometimes people come to our presentations just for fun [...] and some

²⁰⁹ Corrective to DTaylor, who is privileging visual perception and witnessing. But the archive is also embodied and multi-sensory.

walk out and do not take it deeper, for being – Christian, let’s say. They only look. Yes, they understand. They understand. But they’re afraid to practice it.”²¹⁰

Sotz’il members state that one intention of their theater work is to interest audiences in Maya *cosmovisión* even if they do not fully understand it through their plays. They hope to at least raise questions in their minds about their history and heritage to spark further exploration.²¹¹ Interview responses show that Sotz’il has indeed piqued audience members’ interest.

Shared Symbols and Maya Understandings

Sotz’il’s play embeds Maya ontology by working through shared symbols and narrative tropes. This way, their plays can be read across different languages, especially Maya ones. One of the shared symbols is the character of the Time Bearer. Edgar, a young painter who works at a Maya art gallery overlooking the plaza of his town, noted that he has liked Maya art since he was little, when he started to draw Maya masks. He was excited to see the play *Oxlajuj B’aqtun* because he had painted “a big mural in the house that’s about the end of the era that went out there, the one who carried the drum.” He’s referring to the era that is the subject of Sotz’il’s play, as well as the figure of the Year Bearer, who’s portrayed in Sotz’il’s play as Rejqalem / the Time Bearer. In Sotz’il’s play, the Time Bearer carries time in the form of a drum whose regular, deep booming marks time’s passing. Edgar sounds excited that his paintings have anticipated some themes of the play he just saw.

INTERVIEWER: How did you learn about this figure? Have you always thought of time being carried like that drum?

EDGAR: Yes, I’ve read a little bit of history, and so I drew him like that.²¹²

Another shared symbol that resonated with Edgar were the jaguar’s claws. He said

²¹⁰ Rafael, interview.

²¹¹ Miguel noted that one of Sotz’il’s goals is that even if audiences do not understand Maya *cosmovisión* in their plays, at least they become interested in learning more.

²¹² Edgar, interview by author, February 7, 2013.

that the scene of the torture of Jaguar, when he was stripped of his claws, was the most striking moment of the play for him “because they took away his power, his strength, all that he had. He was left passed out.” Edgar also indicates that his understanding of conflict and power is similar to that which was presented in the play: “Your signs [i.e., nawales] help you – for this reason they are different powers... [that form] a circle in which they are struggling, confronting each other.”²¹³ Edgar’s responses show that not only did he understand the references and narrative arc of Sotz’il’s play, but also that he was engaged in analyzing the play. I conducted this interview with him about fifteen minutes after the play had ended, so these were his immediate impressions of the play.

Sofía also was engaged by and related to symbols and nawales from Maya cosmovisión in the play, particularly the character of the Jaguar.

INTERVIEWER: What was your favorite character?

SOFÍA: The Jaguar!

INTERVIEWER: Why?

SOFÍA, *pensively*: I don’t know, I liked his movements and because he wasn’t easily defeated. Faced with pain, he resisted. He had his conviction and sights fixed on what he was and from what he was made. He couldn’t be tricked easily.²¹⁴

She interpreted the Jaguar as portraying resilience and tenacity. Again, she demonstrates a fairly complex understanding of who the Jaguar was – his motivations and character – despite having just seen the play minutes before the interview was conducted. Again this suggests that audience members are analyzing the play’s scenarios and identifying with the characters’ struggles as they are being performed. Their responses suggest that they are right there with the characters, following their dilemmas and decisions with a high level of identification with the characters, both human and nawal. (Perhaps I am struck by these

²¹³ Edgar, interview.

²¹⁴ Sofía, interview by author, June 9, 2013.

young adults' responses because I have had a lot of time to analyze and reflect on the plays and I did not have the same kind of responses and insights they had. This, I believe, is due to the fact that I did not identify with the characters as they did.)

The play also speaks to Maya understandings of *envidia* (envy) through a story that suggests that human desire for accumulating power intensified conflict and led to Jun Ajpu's fall to the temptations of the Lords of Xib'alb'a. Edgar interprets the cause of the conflict to be envy. When I asked if he felt it was okay that Sotz'il stages scenes that are so strong and show so much suffering, Edgar surprised me by responding, "Yes, so that we learn that if we have something – or have powers – we shouldn't go overboard with acting as if 'I am this-and-this, I am so great.' Because sometimes this happens in life: when one has a lot of things in life, and due to envy they kill you, they take it away."

INTERVIEWER, *asking a question to clarify*: So, it's best to have one's powers, but not be very conceited?

EDGAR, *affirmatively nodding*: Conceited, or very proud, or making oneself to be important.

INTERVIEWER: This is the big question of mine: how one can "have one's power" without calling up the envy of other people. Do you believe that the *play* shows how? Or do you have an idea of how to have power without calling up the envy of others?

EDGAR: Yes, to have power is to give a bit to others. It's simply to give a little bit to the rest of the people.²¹⁵

Edgar's response about how to mitigate others' envy reflects Maya community beliefs about sharing power and duality – hence the conceptualization of the collective as a circle, as Miguel discussed and as Sotz'il represented in their play.

Rafael, an original Sotz'il member who was no longer participating in Sotz'il as an actor when the play *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* was created, gave a long response when I asked what he liked most about the play.

²¹⁵ Edgar, interview.

At times we fight over certain things, and at times we have a materialistic mentality. There's a message in the play that we need to be a unified whole for there not to be an imbalance (*desequilibrio*).

About Oxlajuj B'aqtun: it's not simply that a period of time ends; but rather, that we need to change ourselves in our heart, our uk'u'x. That we show others what ought to be and exist. Unfortunately there are political things that at times pull us, consume us, and awaken certain imbalances. This is what strengthens me from the play: that people keep on involving themselves [in *reivindicación*]. The Christian faith isn't bad; it's the person himself who is in a bad state, not knowing how to act or say what he thinks from our cultural context nor how to value that of the other culture also. Because we as human beings always have our cultural differences. For that very reason, we should not let questions of ego separate ourselves, but rather we should unite.

For the people who never had heard of [the change in era] Oxlajuj B'aqtun, when they see the play, it generates questions and doubts. As in, waking ourselves up – it can be just oneself or as a collective. It's a very big job.²¹⁶

In Rafael's case, he had seen the play a couple times and knows the context of its creation more intimately from having been part of Sotz'il before. His response shows an even deeper level of engagement with the themes of the play. Still, like Edgar he reaches the conclusion from the play that Maya community members should “be a unified whole for there not to be an imbalance” -- to not provoke envy or enmity.

TREATING SOCIO-POLITICAL VIOLENCE THROUGH MAYA COSMOVISIÓN

Does Sotz'il's approach of treating socio-political violence through Maya cosmovisión resonate with audiences? Here I focus on one presentation conducted shortly after October 4, 2012, when K'iche' traditional authorities of the 48 Cantons of Totonicapán had organized a march to protest the hikes in electricity costs and the militarization of civil society. At the Cumbre de Alaska (Alaska Summit), the Guatemalan military and National Civil Police shot indiscriminately at marchers. Eight Mayas were left dead and over 35 were wounded.

²¹⁶ Rafael, interview.

The massacre was interpreted as a sign of the violent and racist treatment of Maya dissent within the first year of the administration of Otto Pérez Molina, a retired General who conducted key operations in Efraín Ríos Montt's scorched earth campaign in the 1980s and later "r[ose] to high levels of influence and power within the Guatemalan intelligence apparatus."²¹⁷ For this reason, the 48 Cantons of Totonicapán were quick to organize and denounce the massacre.

That same month, on October 28, 2012, Maya artists in Totonicapán organized an artistic festival, named "K'astajinem: Arte para despertar" (Art to wake up), as a response to the massacre and as a way of showing solidarity for the widows, families, and pueblos at the start of their long legal and organizing struggle to hold the government and soldiers accountable for this injustice. The culminating artistic act of the festival was the theater piece *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* by Sotz'il, presented in Kaqchikel and Mam languages. As a result of the language differences, its mostly K'iche' audience only understood parts of the dialogue (since K'iche' and Kaqchikel are related languages) and relied on the embodied aspects of the play to understand the plot. After the play concluded, the audience processed with vigil candles from the municipal auditorium directly to an intimate park plaza for the closing vigil at the feet of the "Monument to Atanasio Tzul," leader of a historic nineteenth-century Maya K'iche' rebellion.

A couple hours before the presentation, Sotz'il members and friends were shaking out bales of fresh pine needles to create a meter-wide ring of pine needles on the floor to form the outer ring of the performance area. I set my *morral* (a woven or crocheted bag with a single shoulder strap) down on the circle of plastic chairs surrounding the performance area. Upon request of Sotz'il, I started to light the two rows of candles that were set on the inner and outer rim of the pine ring, as the audience slowly filtered in from the previous musical act on the plaza.

²¹⁷ Willard, Emily. "Otto Pérez Molina, Guatemalan President-Elect, with 'Blood on his hands.'" National Security Archive website. Nov. 14, 2011. Accessed on May 5, 2014. <http://nsarchive.wordpress.com/2011/11/14/otto-perez-molina-guatemalan-president-elect-with-%E2%80%9Cblood-on-his-hands%E2%80%9D/>

I had set my *morral* on one of the plastic chairs that formed a couple concentric circles surrounding the performance area. I came back to find that I would be sitting a few seats away from a cluster of K'iche' women, some of whom were standing to rock babies cradled in large *su't* (shawls). The echoes of peoples' conversations were reverberating in the auditorium, and it was hard for the emcee, Josué, to get the audience quiet. Josué urged the crowd to pay close attention to this play. He stressed that it was very relevant to what the Totonicapenses had just experienced with the massacre.

The play proceeded as described in Chapter 6. As the Lords of Xib'alb'a provoked an escalating conflict with the twins, Wuqu' Qak'ix lashes out at Jun Ajpu for not obeying. As punishment, Owl diverts Jaguar's attention with large bones (tempting to a jaguar), and he throws a net of bones in front of Jun Ajpu, stopping them both in their tracks. All of a sudden, Wuqu' Qak'ix sneaks over and emits a sharp puff of breath into a tecomate receptacle that holds sacred white bone powder. This creates a blinding cloud of white bone powder that covers the twins' bodies and paralyzes them.

Without missing a beat, one of the K'iche' women in the group I had spotted earlier remarked in a loud whisper, "*¡Como los antimotines!*" ("Like the anti-riot police!") The other three women laughed, indicating that they had registered the reference to the teargas that is frequently used by the anti-riot police against Mayas participating in land occupations or protest marches. The women may have experienced this themselves when the *antimotines* descended upon the long march of K'iche' Totonicapenses on the day of the massacre at the Cumbre de Alaska. Despite not speaking the Kaqchikel or Mam languages of the play, this group of K'iche' women appear to have understood the play's cultural references and applied them to recent political anti-Maya violence against which they were currently organizing.

This comment is but one way that Maya audiences link Sotz'il's play to current "eventful" and "everyday" violence. It suggests that Sotz'il's exploration of how conflicts escalate to violence, told through the millennia-old Pop Wuj rivalry between the twins Jun Ajpu - Yaxb'alamkej and the Lords of Xib'alb'a, is resonant with their Maya audiences, at least some of whom interpreted the allegory of this story through their current embodied

experiences of political and social intimidation and violence.

Similarly, this comment by random audience members provides insight into the everyday consciousness of these Maya women. This suggests an ability to read through a Maya lens, regardless of their specific religious affiliation. They appear to have understood the Maya ontological references and to have switched in a beat between the Western framework (anti-riot police) and the Maya ontological framework (Sotz'il's play, in which the Lords of Xib'alb'a use bone powder to immobilize Jun Ajpu – Yaxb'alamkej) in their understanding of contemporary violence. The utterance and women's laughter of comprehension suggest that the women were interpreting actions in the play through a social analysis of power (i.e., critiquing the unjust actions of the anti-riot police) as well as through Maya cosmogonic lenses of conflicting "positive" and "negative" energies.

From their vocal response, it appears that this scene in the play spoke to the women's experience of racialized violence from the state. What allows this immediate, on-the-spot association of the on-stage action with the memory of the anti-riot police is the crossroads of the body. The play's narrative does not directly reference the massacre at the Cumbre de Alaska, and in fact appears to be very distinct from that event since none of the characters are military, police, or protest marchers. Despite this, it appears that the women identify with the *experience* of the protagonists' bodies: of being blinded and paralyzed by forces that sought to dominate through fear, in their attempt to halt Maya resistance and enforce submission.

Emotional and cultural landscapes

Sotz'il's play provides a sensory experience for audience members that awakens embodied memories of Maya ways of life and ontology. Several audience members mentioned in post-performance interviews that the play revived memories of their grandparents turning to Maya ceremonies for healing when sick; to resolve conflict; or as a means of protection from violence, jealousy, and negative energies in general. For example, Felipe states that the play "reminds me of before, because my grandparents before used '*Maya protection*.'" Felipe says "Maya protection" with the same emphasis and clear

enunciation as when he says “Maya culture,” as if showing respect with his enunciation. He continues, “They trusted in Maya priests with [questions of] protection, health, and business.”²¹⁸ It sounds like Felipe’s grandparents had complete trust in Maya ontological practices, but that he may not know as much about it now and hence is very careful in speaking about Maya ontology.

Other interviewees claim that many traditions are no longer practiced and imply that they desire a return to the old practices.

INTERVIEWER: What reflection for your life did the play leave you with?

DOMINGA, *pre-school teacher*²¹⁹: To valorize what’s ours, to read the *Pop Wuj* to understand what the Mayas did because now it’s difficult for us to understand. [...] We’ve forgotten the traditions.

INTERVIEWER: Do you believe that this play deals with important current issues?

COUPLE WITH INFANT, *Eugenia, secretary, and Benigno, nurse*²²⁰: Yes, because part of our culture no longer exists nor is practiced.

When speaking about what is no longer practiced, people tend to refer not so much to the pre-colonial musical instruments and dress that Sotz’il has re-constructed. Rather, they refer directly or indirectly to Maya ontological practice and ceremonies, which have been marginalized or guarded in the face of discrimination by many Christians and ladinos in Guatemala. One respondent affirms that discrimination is pervasive. When I asked if he believed that the play valorizes the culture and life of Maya people, he replied, “Yes, because multiculturalism and pluriculturalism is talked about a lot, but they forget the reality that discrimination still exists in Guatemala.”

Finally, respondents indicated that their grandparents’ practices had been set aside

²¹⁸ Felipe, interview.

²¹⁹ Dominga, interview by author, April 1, 2013.

²²⁰ Eugenia and Benigno, interview by author, April 1, 2013.

in some cases because of the effects of a *kaxlan* (ladino / foreigner) cultural hegemony. As a result, turning to ceremony was disparaged as witchcraft (*brujería*) or indirectly invalidated by school systems that have privileged Western science and institutions over Maya epistemologies. From another perspective, the constant flow of families seeking Nan Josefina's expertise in traditional curing belies interviewees' statements that all these practices are just in the "past" or that only a few people know about them. I surmise that declaring that Maya ontological practices are a thing of the past is sometimes a front – discourse that is used in the *kaxlan* world with co-workers, fellow teachers, etc., in order to guard oneself from prejudice.

Several interviewees expressed that it felt good for Sotz'il's play to valorize these practices of their grandparents, and that it made them feel more pride in being Maya and in Maya culture in its entirety. For example, in response to the question, "After having watched the play, how do you feel now about Maya culture and life?" Santiago, who identified himself as a farmer, replied, "It's a sacrifice that the grandparents made that is almost not done now." The lesson he took away from the play was:

that we have to explore with more depth the ancient Maya culture, especially the ceremonial fire: to supplicate for health, curing, harvests, what we cultivate: all that we need. When someone is born, it's necessary to supplicate for life! Supplicate for one's business. ...Yes, [this play] helps us resolve problems because the ceremonial fire is a remedy. For whatever sickness, whatever thing that turns out badly, it's necessary to supplicate. It's like paying a fine or making a sacrifice in order to recover. I used to do this, and everything went well. But now everything has changed a lot.²²¹

Santiago's response reveals that the play has connected with the collective memory of practices now fallen into disuse. About half the respondents expressed that the play dealt with lifeways that were from a long time ago and are no longer practiced today. People's experiences of this distancing from traditional Maya lifeways vary, depending on one's community and family. For example, Maya artists from Sumpango and Totonicapán have told me that midwives no longer use *tuj* steam baths in their community because of discrimination, and/or they personally have never entered one. However, in other

²²¹ Santiago, interview by author, April 1, 2013.

communities and regardless of religious affiliation, diverse families regularly use the *tuj* for family bathing and childbirth – even when neighbors turn mostly to showers instead.

Also, there is evidence of other Maya traditional practices expanding as a result of the revitalizing impact of the Maya Movement. For example, increasing numbers of women and men are training to become *ajq'ijab'* throughout Guatemala. Hence, interviewees who respond that these practices are no longer occurring in daily life may be uncomfortable with and/or trying to distance themselves from these practices, given that these interviews were conducted in communities in the department of Sololá where these practices are occurring. For example, I happen to know that an acquaintance of one interviewee is an *ajq'ij*; however, the interviewee says that Maya ceremonies were done by his grandparents in the past (rather than in the present) and that Sotz'il's play is about an *ancient* past of “the Mayas” (rather than about the contemporary period). I surmise that at least some respondents are influenced by churches or institutions that look down on such practices, and that they have distanced themselves from this reality of their pueblos in other ways.

Among those who stated that the play dealt with an ancient and not contemporary Maya culture, this is an aspect of Sotz'il's play that they liked. They appreciated being reminded of those aspects of Maya culture and feeling that it was valorized and appreciated so that they could reclaim their Maya cultural heritage as something they can pass onto their children with pride. For example, I asked the question, “After having seen the play, what message did it leave you about how the Maya people can find harmony and dignity without violence?” One respondent answered, “By beginning with oneself, accepting the origin of where one is from. Putting ourselves in brotherhood – accepting others as they are. Respecting the traditions of each pueblo.” In fact, respondents agreed that the play gives them a “message for life”: to valorize and revive ancestral practices and “costumbres”– specifically, the *tuj* (steam bath for healing and birthing), ceremony, and resolution of conflicts through consulting with an *ajq'ijab'* or *k'amöl b'ey*.

In response to my question about what they think of the use of the ceremonial fire during the play, Dominga, a pre-school teacher said, “It gives us strength.” Benigno, a

nurse said, “It’s a message for life: to return to the customs that we had before. ... That it is light. Through the fire that the grandmother Ixmukane carried, the brothers Hunahpu y Ixbalamke were revived.” In his response, he cites the twins’ names as spelled in Adrian Recinos’ translation of the *Popol Vuh* (1964). Interviewees who had professional jobs and a higher level of schooling tended to mention the Pop Wuj and / or use the names “Hunahpu” and “Ixbalamke” in their responses. Benigno’s response is an example of this. His response to what he most liked about the play was, “That it’s based in the *Popol Vuh*, because that’s an important [book], for being the ‘Bible of the Mayas,’ that speaks about our origins.”

Interviewees who were manual laborers and who presumably had less formal education tended to not cite the Pop Wuj, although they equally understood the references to the nawales and Maya ontology. One young daughter of an interviewee who is a farmer immediately responded that her favorite character was “Kame,” showing that she’s familiar with this nawal.

The audience responses are a window into the variety of interpretive lenses through which Maya publics viewed Sotz’il’s plays. Yet, while there is a range of interpretations, as with the public reception of any work of art, the responses by randomly-selected audience members also show certain patterns. The significance of these responses is that they reflect that Sotz’il succeeded in its aim to valorize the Maya kotz’ij fire as the center of Maya lifeways, and not only because of their ontological significance. Sotz’il also sought to convey that Maya ceremonies are the hub that holds together the spokes that are the many other customary practices of Maya life, such as making organizational decisions, initiating events, maintaining prosperity in family businesses, and practicing leadership. Almost all the audience members I interviewed walked away from the play with the reflection that the practice of Maya ceremony has been passed down from the *Pop Wuj* and their grandparents and is part of their history. In their responses, Maya ceremony was elevated to a place of respect, as something that should be revived – for healing, protection from violence, and renewing a culture of respect within their communities. In their interview responses, they did not associate Maya ceremonies with the epithet used against

it by many conservative Christian Guatemalans: of being “*brujería*” (witchcraft).²²² The play contributed to both (a) a shift in some audience members’ perceptions and experience of religious and cultural discrimination; and (b) bringing forth what other audience members already believed to be true about Maya ontology but that too frequently and in too many environments in Guatemala has to be stifled.

Identification with elements of Sotz’il’s play

Interviews revealed that Sotz’il’s theater performances evoked an emotional connection to everyday Maya experience among audience members. For example, Emiliana states that Sotz’il’s plays have renewed her emotional connection to the rural landscapes of her community and, through this, to ancestral lifeways:

The first presentation by Sotz’il that I saw was of music. I liked the wind instruments because they reminded me of the places that I like most: the countryside, the mountains, the trees, the rivers. The music of Sotz’il made me think of these beautiful places and of the life of our ancestors. You can see that the Sotz’iles *love* their culture.²²³

As noted in Chapter 5, Felipe said that the *Oxlajuj B’aqtun* performance and the “environment” it produced left him feeling “very calm.” He added that “My spirit opened a lot and remained relaxed ... from remembering Maya time(s) (el tiempo Maya).” Later in the interview he stated that the play was very “special” to him because of “the language, that it was spoken in Maya. It was all done very professionally.” Felipe mentioned the Maya language several times in the interview. This in itself conveys his pride that the Kaqchikel language was used in a professional performance – something that was unheard of before. It suggests that Sotz’il has fulfilled its charge to make performances in Kaqchikel that “portray [the] dignity” of Maya culture.

²²² I chose audience members randomly, mostly at the end of the play. Some I approached before the play, asking if I could interview them afterwards. Audience members who were strict Evangelicals with prejudices against Maya spirituality would simply not have watched the play all the way through, or at all.

²²³ Emiliana, interview by author, August 10, 2013.

Felipe also adds, “I work in collective transport and [while hearing passengers talk] I heard that many people liked the play, because this type of activity is not seen in [my town]. And the speaking we understand, as well as all the content. For us, it was very clear.”²²⁴ Felipe only lamented that there wasn’t a video of the performance since his older children were studying around 6pm and couldn’t attend. He said he felt “proud” to see his culture represented in this way and wishes Sotz’il could “repeat” the play in his town because he missed the first part due to work.

Sotz’il’s embodied intervention resonates emotionally for many audience members whom I interviewed. Take for example the enthusiasm of Magdalena, a legal secretary and mother who is an alumna of strict Catholic boarding schools run by nuns.

MAGDALENA: What touches me about the Time Bearer is the sense that, first, he made me *see* -- from the very form of his outfit, which is spectacular. To see the Time Bearer made into a person, carrying time! That impressed me on the level of spectacle.

INTERVIEWER: What was different about seeing the Time Bearer in texts?

MAGDALENA: They would portray him as if he were seated, with the --
[Magdalena gestures to the burden that the Time Bearer carries on his back with a tumpline. In Maya calendars and ancient inscriptions, the burden carried is a glyph as a pictorial representation of the year’s nawal. In Sotz’il’s embodied characterization, the Time Bearer carries a large drum with a nawal painted on the side.]

As in the calendars that I’ve seen, or books. But upon seeing the character live, as if in person: ¡GUAO! [Magdalena says this breathlessly with eyes opening as if thrilled at the sight.] It touches me with so much emotion! Yes, Sarina, that’s right! That’s what reaches me! The first impression upon seeing this gave me – I don’t know! What a thrill!²²⁵

²²⁴ Felipe, interview.

²²⁵ Magdalena, interview by author, February 10, 2013.

Magdalena begins to praise the woman actor in *Oxlajuj B'aqtun*, and that leads her to talk about the energetic effect of the play on her:

Even when I saw the first presentation and the characters didn't speak much [in that preliminary version], they were dramatizing it and somehow one understood. It was there that I became interested to understand more about *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* [the change of era].

[...] I see in her [the woman actor] -- that she was born for this. That's how I see her. That she presents a very respectable image also -- very, very good!

That's what I perceive. Even the audience feels it: these energies are contagious! With all respect they watch [the play] -- at all times. When there's a little bit of humor in the presentation, they laugh one and all!²²⁶

Magdalena states that her enthusiasm is shared by other audience members. Her testimony also reveals a couple reasons for her enthusiasm: Sotz'il's "spectacular" staging and craftsmanship; as well as the "energies" that the Sotz'iles convey through their acting.

Furthermore, Maya audience members identify with the nawales and Maya worlds that Sotz'il has staged. For example, as discussed above, Edgar identified with the Jaguar's experience of having his power taken away when he was stripped of his claws. As another example, Magdalena emphasizes that she can watch the play *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* over and over again because she identifies with the struggles, conflicts, and failings of each of the characters, particularly those that demonstrate their mistakes like Jun Ajpu (the protagonist, a human community leader) and even the Lords of Xib'alb'a:

As human beings, in different ways we make mistakes in our lives. Like with Jun Ajpu: they cover his eyes and they put a mask on him, and you go towards other things that in the long run do not benefit you at all! -- In terms of spirituality and with family, children, work.

[...] Because yes, they're realities! Like with the characters of the underworld: Often we on the face of the earth become like them, when we feel envy or resentment towards someone -- we're exactly that! Yes. Everything, everything that they [the Sotz'iles] represent rubs off on the audience, and makes the audience reflect. In my case, that's what happens! That's right. I can see it [the play *Oxlajuj B'aqtun*] any number of times, and I don't get tired, I don't get bored.²²⁷

²²⁶ Magdalena, interview.

²²⁷ Magdalena, interview.

Magdalena's comment shows how she relates to the play personally and that each time it causes her to reflect on her own life in a very open and humble way. She is not alone in this. Sofía also identified with the duo's dilemma of being "hypnotized" by the Lords of Xib'alb'a:

It's like how they [Jun Ajpu and Jaguar] were captured for a time. They [the Lords of Xib'alb'a] hypnotized them and everything. And that's how we are these days. Hypnotized by anything.

We even end up doing shameful things for any reason, for vanity, without realizing that we are committing a lot of mistakes. So, this play was like a wake-up call, to put it like that. There's a lesson very much that we need to wake up already from our hypnosis.²²⁸

Additionally, Sotz'il's play helps Maya audiences to feel empowered and to see Maya ontology as a source of empowerment. When I asked Felipe if he learned something about Maya spirituality, he replied:

FELIPE: Yes, I learned how to confront Evil and different [*pauses...*] – problems, enemies, and other types of problems. For me, it's very important to see and know how to protect oneself. One can help others. Yes, this play showed me that it's possible to confront Evil and liberate [oneself] from Evil. To me, this is very important because who knows who you will come up against.

INTERVIEWER: How can people find harmony?

FELIPE: For me, it's through analyzing, looking for help, and looking for protection in the system of the Maya culture.

Felipe notes that harmony and protection is found through the system of Maya ceremonial practices. This is a significant statement to make given that the practice of Maya ceremony had been underground less than twenty years before this interview. Also, the play seems to empower audience members like Felipe to comment authoritatively about elements of Maya culture. Felipe later adds, "Yes, they [the Sotz'iles] have a spirit – not only for acting, but also they understood many of the elements [of Maya culture /

²²⁸ Sofía, interview.

spirituality] that they showed (*manifestaron*) in the play.” Felipe’s expression of claiming Maya culture in a positive way is a contrast with the way that Maya culture is disparaged in kaxlan (ladino) Guatemalan society. It is a contrast with the way many Mayas try to escape from being identified as Maya due to intersectional experiences of oppression.

Acting differently as empowered Maya subjects

Sotz’il’s theater performances create a space for Mayas to identify as empowered Maya subjects, particularly younger people. In a quotation cited above, Sofía identified with the Jaguar’s resistance, conviction, and astuteness, thus linking the character with characteristics she sought to embody in her life. Likewise, when discussing the scene of the torture of Jaguar (above), Edgar reflected on the Maya concept of power, symbolized by the claws of the Jaguar *nawal*, and under what circumstances it can be stripped away. Edgar linked the message of the play with a reflection about current social violence and how to go unnoticed, under the radar so to speak, of those who murder for envy (*envidia*) by giving some of one’s power “to the rest of the people.” He affirmed that re-enactments of violence are not too painful to watch for him as an audience member, and in fact are necessary for Maya peoples to take away lessons about how to protect themselves in their lives and not attract unwanted attention or envy.

This identity and self-assuredness as Mayas is motivating young people to reflect on how they want to act differently in the world:

Really there’s no day in which we’re not in bad shape. Because with the times that we’re in now, it’s dangerous everywhere, with so many killings everywhere. [...]

It’s like a wake-up call because they [Jun Ajpu and Yax’balamkej, after accepting gold and silver] were locked up and cut off from everything. It’s like the world we live in, with so much technology and so many things, and -- boy, a person can’t even understand!

We have to place ourselves a little bit more in what’s simple, in what’s humble, in everything that surrounds us. Don’t focus on great things, because sooner or later those run out. [...] This is a big reflection because [Jun Ajpu and Yaxb’alamkej] were forged from what was simple, and those of the underworld came to put luxuries and jewelry on them. But that is only a mirage, it’s only an illusion that lasts for a moment. Because the pretty thing runs out, gets used up and worn out,

and is ruined. On the other hand, what's simple continues on. Even if it is very simple, but there it is, still going!²²⁹

Simplicity is a quality that is valued in Maya culture. To say that one is simple (*sencillo*) is often a compliment and signifies that one is aligned more with the traditional Maya lifeways. It is often framed in contrast to the accumulation of riches and dominating power due to greed, ambition, and the rest of the “seven disgraces” that, in Maya worldview, cause people to become corrupt. Hence, Sofía’s statement is valorizing the simplicity of idealized traditional Maya lifeways and critiquing the accumulation of material wealth as a mirage.

Edilberto speaks to what it means for Maya youth to “have identity” in today’s Guatemala, commenting, “When someone has this *energy* of being self-assured about where one is, you no longer encounter critiques. They criticize you one or two times. The third time, they no longer do it. They check themselves.”²³⁰

This was Edilberto’s response to a question asking why the workshop participants stated that one of the greatest current challenges to their Maya communities is that youth no longer have “identity.” Rather than focus on stopping others’ debasing remarks against Mayas, Edilberto focuses on empowering Maya people. He proposes that when one is self-assured about one’s identity as Maya, she or he can withstand the “critiques” and insults from dominant society – and that in fact one’s self-assurance causes the insults to fade.

In sum, Sotz’il’s plays allow audiences to reflect on their approaches to future social action and interpersonal relations. As a result of the play, audience members I interviewed have reinforced their commitment to current practices or shifted their perspective to adapt certain practices such as: standing up for their dignity as Maya people, revitalizing Maya lifeways, and considering how to share power rather than hoard it.

²²⁹ Sofía, interview.

²³⁰ Edilberto, interview by author, May 26, 2013.

**STRENGTHENING AUDIENCES' ETHICOPOLITICAL COMMITMENT TO MAYA
REIVINDICACIÓN**

Sotz'il has responded to inferiorization and stigmatization by valorizing and bringing to light aspects of Maya ontology that have been degraded. As Lisandro stated, "We have our own stories. We have a history that we've been prohibited from seeing and hearing."²³¹

A result of valorization is increased self-esteem among Maya audiences. Sofía, a young K'iche' woman, spoke of the play resonating deeply with her on an emotional level as well stirring her to change in her life:

INTERVIEWER: What did you like most about the play? Any particular scene, character, or the music or dance?

SOFÍA: Really, I liked everything: everything, everything, everything, *everything!* Their dances and especially the teaching that they give through the play or presentation. It's like a system of reflection for us nowadays. [...]

INTERVIEWER: How do you feel now, after seeing the play?

SOFÍA: I don't know. Strange. They're strange and different reactions. But above all, they're very beautiful because they teach you many things and you also learn about difficult things.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you say "strange"?

SOFÍA: Because they're a lot of feelings, to put it that way. There was joy, sadness, happiness, agony.

INTERVIEWER: How does the play make you feel about Maya culture and life?

SOFÍA: Truthfully, I am very happy with this because really we belong to this and how great that it's arising again! Because it [Maya culture] was forgotten. It was being trampled on and humiliated by many people who didn't understand who a Maya person was.

²³¹ Lisandro, interview.

Sofia's response shows that from her emotional connection to the play, the play leads audiences to renewed commitment to reivindicación in order to counter historical shaming.

Extending Hirschkind's concept of "ethical soundscapes," I contend that the affective memories awakened by Sotz'il's soundscapes and theatrical landscapes lead audiences to internalize and emotionally attach to identity-based causes and values. This in turn strengthens audiences' ethicopolitical commitment to Maya revitalization.

Rafael says that Sotz'il's plays have helped young people to feel more confidence in "being oneself from one's cosmovisión" and to "think in Maya [terms], to be Maya", adding that because of historical repression, "we have a lot to discover."²³² He adds that in this respect Sotz'il makes up for a weakness of the Guatemalan school system which should be doing this kind of cultural education but does not (apart from Maya schools like Tijob'al). In any case, he says, the schools would only teach this through books, but Sotz'il's plays are a form of education that is "more pragmatic, [and] experiential. [...] We listen to music, feel this connection with Nature, and continue with these values in Kaqchikel, in our language."²³³

Rafael gives examples of Maya practices that he does on a regular basis: "I am always guided by the Maya calendar. Harvesting corn has to be during the full moon. The group does this. You have to offer incense, and they live this. But some youth no longer respect these practices due to ego." Rafael implies that a Maya epistemology of practice is important both to him and to Sotz'il as part of the project of reivindicación.

Renewing ancient practices that have been stigmatized: Elders

*Ukotz'ijal Ajpu: We chose this name for our group because it's the plant that never dies: it always stays alive. ... You can uproot it and put it on a rock, and with the air alone it will stay alive.*²³⁴

Sotz'il has inspired their elders to take up practices that they had discarded, at the

²³² Rafael, interview.

²³³ Rafael, interview.

²³⁴ Ukotz'ijal Ajpu member, interview. Ukotz'ijal Ajpu is a ballgame and music group mentored by Sotz'il.

same time that their elders have taught and mentored them. First, when Sotz'il was just starting out, members asked one of their mothers to approach a local elder master of the *marimba de tecomate* for 25 years, Tat Francisco Yaxón, to ask whether he would teach them to play. They sent her as their best ambassador because their request was a stretch: it was considered out of the ordinary for musicians to teach non-relatives. Furthermore, Tat Francisco "suffered from cancer in his thighbone. He had stopped playing marimba - he could no longer carry his marimba. He had been hospitalized, and with his physical impediment could no longer do anything. [...] He was left alone with nothing and sold his marimba de tecomate," recounted Lisandro.²³⁵ Tat Francisco didn't answer when his mother paid the visit.

But eight days later, Tat Francisco returned the mother's visit and agreed to teach marimba to Sotz'il members. To this day, he continues to be actively engaged with Sotz'il as a teacher, mentor, and elder. This is significant because Sotz'il influenced an elder to return to a traditional Maya practice. Thus, in engaging with their elders, Sotz'il is not just passing on old traditions to a new generation. They are also inspiring elder generations to view differently the very traditions and values that they have been inheritors of, because for every elder that has taught Sotz'il to "portray [the] dignity ... of the [Kaqchikel] ancestral line," there also have been elders who have been subjected to societal pressures to abandon and discredit the very practices they had grown up with. In this and other examples, Sotz'il has "reversed" the assumed trajectory of assimilation among various generations.

Sotz'il has also resuscitated the ontological influence of elder daykeeper couples in each of their performances. An elder *ajq'ijab'* wife and husband accompany each of their *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* performances. Sotz'il picks them up from their home, and they are there during the whole set-up of the performance space and breaking down afterwards, sometimes returning to their home late in the evening. They saturate with incense the dancer-musicians as they enter the performance area and they tend to the main *kotz'ij* fire. Before I met Sotz'il and to this day, I haven't seen another Maya theater or performing arts

²³⁵ Lisandro Guarcax, interview.

group that so centrally involves a daykeeper couple at every performance.

Thirdly, Sotz'il also captures the attention of elders in their audience through the materials that they use in their plays and the ontological environment they shape. An elder man sitting next to me at the performance in the town plaza of San José Chacayá responded to these instruments and set materials with delight, pointing them out to his granddaughter and mentioning to me that these things were “Maya”— he had seen them when he was younger. His delighted reaction implied that he hadn't seen these materials in a while. He said he wished the Muni had done even more promotional announcements for the production, to tell people that the theater event “would be like *this*.” The issue was that local people weren't used to seeing theater in general and didn't know what to expect when this event was announced. He had just come because it was the town fair. “But,” he said, “if I had known it would be like *this*, I would have told others” (pers. comm., April 1, 2013).

Rafael, one of the founding members of Sotz'il, gave a couple examples of how people have changed after seeing the play.

RAFAEL: For example, my sister, living with her husband in [another town]. After seeing all these elements of our work, now she practices Maya spirituality. That is a very powerful point. Sometimes the people change totally.

INTERVIEWER: What was her process?

RAFAEL: She had seen us also here [at Sotz'il Jay], and all that we practice. [...] But there are people who *don't* accept [Sotz'il's plays], and look at them [saying]: “Púchica, what is this?!”²³⁶

Rafael also notes other smaller changes, like the fact that the ladino school principal where he teaches has brought Maya calendars home.

While Sotz'il may not make a pivotal influence in all audience members' lives, it has made a significant, singular influence in enough cuates' lives that they have gone on to carry their inspiration to other organized spaces within their communities. Take the

²³⁶ Rafael, interview.

example of Edilberto, a Tz’utujil schoolteacher from San Juan La Laguna. He was so inspired by the first theater presentation that he saw of Sotz’il in November 2012 that, less than four months later, he was a committed participant – always one of the first to arrive - - in Sotz’il’s eight-week workshop on Maya “artes escénicos” (performing arts; literally, “scenic arts”) for Mayas from various communities in the department of Sololá.

As part of the workshop series, one weekday morning participants were invited to a special performance of the play *Ixkik* by Ajchowen, the all-women’s group associated with Sotz’il Jay. Edilberto was so inspired that he decided to make the *Ixkik* play the subject of his classroom lesson that afternoon. He taught his students to do a version of the play, assigned them roles along the lines of what he saw in the *Ixkik* play, and added roles for his male students.

What most caught his attention about the *Ixkik* play, as well as the attention of his students, was that the play revolves around actions taking place in the *tuj* / steam bath. “Because in [my town] we don’t use the *tuj*, due to the heat there,” he explained. He felt that the highlight of the play for the young women was:

The depiction of the *tuj*. And imagining themselves in the *tuj*. Because we went to see a *tuj* with the students, since women need a *tuj* when they are pregnant. And only one of the young women has a *tuj*. That’s why we went to visit a *tuj*. Now they feel more at ease [with the *tuj*].²³⁷

The play *Ixkik* allows women and youth to remember and re-consider for themselves the use of the *tuj* that has been decreasing in (and in many cases, disappearing from) communities due to ladino discrimination against traditional Maya practices. Concerning Sotz’il’s work, what Edilberto says is political is “Their proposal. Calling upon people to care for what we have, and to re-live in the present [the ancestral ways] that we had. To reflect.”²³⁸

Rafael said that audience members who express an interest in learning more about Maya cosmovisión can learn, not necessarily from Sotz’il, but rather from “those who play marimba. The midwives and weavers.” He says that Sotz’il is focused on art, but that

²³⁷ Edilberto, interview by author, May 26, 2013.

²³⁸ Edilberto, interview.

those who become interested in reivindicación after watching the Sotz'il play can look out for "How to incorporate these values in their work, so that they build consciousness of the rescue (*rescate*) of all of this." He added that he's seen new music groups and Maya ballgame teams created who had learned from Sotz'il members.

A common theme that community members expressed to me in interviews is that many have gained new understandings of Maya ontological perspectives from Sotz'il's plays. For example, one family said that they had been hearing media hype about the impending apocalypse in anticipation of the start of the Oxlajuj B'aqtun cycle (on December 21, 2012), but that watching Sotz'il's play of the same title helped them understand the significance of the change in era in a way that made sense to them. The following interview excerpt with Gabriela, a student at a local college and a substitute school teacher, and her mother shows how the play also provided a counter-narrative to dominant local discourses from Evangelical pastors and *patrones* (bosses) regarding Christian notions of hell and impending damnation (and ascribing those fates to Maya non-believers).

GABRIELA: I don't know if you remember that last year [2012], there was all this talk of, "The prophecies! The prophecies! The prophecies!" But when Sotz'il brought out [the play Oxlajuj B'aqtun], all our people here said -- "NO! The prophecies don't say *that*. There's no "end of the world"! It's only a change of era. Something is finished, and something else is begun. It was something like that that they [Sotz'il] brought to people's attention.

... Because when people said, "2012 is coming!" it was all because of the prophecy. And if we realize that the government was promoting this, promoting that! What the businessmen did was to take advantage of this and produce a product – produce a ton of things. In the moment, you realize that your own people of the community are realizing that, "No! There's no end of the world! It's only a change. We should be good people. We should be positive. Let's not do bad things that harm our environment." That is....

NAN FABIANA [*Gabriela's mother, who has been sitting a couple feet away on the porch after her interview, excitedly jumps in*]: It's like, it's like – Pardon me for ... I know this is her interview!

INTERVIEWER: That's OK!

NAN FABIANA: It's like what my mother-in-law said. One of my sisters-in-law came over and said – she had been working in a house, and the people where she was working are Evangelicals. She said, “My employers said that the end of the world is coming. That the world will open up and we're going under. That's what their pastor had said. My employers are really frightened by this.”

But since we in our family had been talking – and my mother-in-law had seen *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* [Sotz'il's play] – she said to her, “No! Don't believe that, Blanca! That's not true! Because the Sotz'iles are demonstrating something else. Don't listen to what the pastor says because all of that is a LIE!” [*Nan Fabiana says “LIE” loudly with a forceful tonal punctuation, then laughs heartily.*]

There you see that yes, the Sotz'iles taught something that motivated the people to believe more in them than in what others are telling them!²³⁹

One interviewee stated that this work of the *reivindicación* of Maya arts is political because it is:

the recovery of our culture – our spirituality, the ballgame, and other ancestral practices. They're presenting them before groups of Maya people who have an idea about them, but don't know how to practice them. For this reason, this work is political but for the common good, not for personal gain like party politics.²⁴⁰

Sotz'il's foremost intervention is not about advocating for a “pure” Maya cosmovisión and subjectivity. Rather, they promote un-suppressing Maya ontology to reverse the effects of distortion and demonization. That way, it can become once again part of a full Maya consciousness without existing as the demonic, feared thing that must be escaped at all costs, such as through re-making oneself into the image and oppressive, violent behavior of the colonizer. The result is that Maya cosmovisión is taking on a transformed meaning for generations of Mayas who had been taught to believe that their worldview and practices are evil, savage, inferior, and the reason for their continuing subjugation as Mayas. Generations of Mayas have been socialized to believe that the “Maya” parts of themselves ought to be excised and rejected. Sotz'il's theater

²³⁹ Gabriela and Nan Fabiana, interview by author, July 26, 2013.

²⁴⁰ Ukotz'ijal Ajpu member, interview.

demonstrates a counter-hegemonic position of contextualized valorization of stigmatized practices and ontological orientations.

Sotz'il theater is valorizing and empowering, especially for Maya audiences, through re-integrating Maya subjectivity and practices. That is, its theater re-integrates and re-members what has been dismembered and pushed to a distance. Sotz'il theater is literally a "re-membering" -- a knitting together and re-integration of maligned "members" (components) of Maya worldview, to be viewed without abuse.

Family members have seen the effects of ceremonies on the lives of the Sotz'iles. As a result, certain members of their households (though not all) have taken an increasing interest in Maya ontology. Now those family members continue their ontological practices independent of the Sotz'iles. One grandmother independently felt called to become an *ajq'ij* a few years ago. Now she travels with other female relatives to daykeeper gatherings and thus has her own independent network of *ajq'ijab'*. This is also true for the sister of another founding member of Sotz'il. Regarding the grandmother, many members of the community come to her specifically for her guidance on ontological matters: mostly women, many who primarily speak Kaqchikel, and many people who are more in her social sphere of influence rather than that of the Sotz'iles. Hers is one example of how her process of *reivindicación* was mutually reinforcing with that of Sotz'il. Now Sotz'il calls on her as an elder during their "validation" process of their play. The lines of influence are mutually reinforcing and crossing, and they are intergenerational and in dialogue with each other.

Sotz'il's influence on elders -- like their marimba teacher Tat Francisco (whose story was presented above), the *ajq'ijab'* couple that accompanies Sotz'il performances, and the elder from San José Chacayá -- is a social process of recovery that opens up a counter-hegemonic, alternate possibility than the assumed fate of assimilation. Their politics does not get expressed as antagonistic movements confronting the state. Rather, it is a grassroots process that guides Mayas to valorize practices and aspects of their identity that they had been socialized into depreciating about themselves. It an active "re-

membering” in its literal meaning of weaving back together the “members” (parts) of a social fabric that has been rent asunder by processes of repression and stigmatization.

Taken together, these examples are part of a social process of Sotz’il’s engaging people in their social fabric and their network of cuates and inspiring them, not with a specific ideological message, but an orientation towards Maya identity and practices based on the environment (social, spiritual, and cultural) that the Sotz’iles grew up in.

Our ancestors came from Q’umarkaj, and passed close to our community, and spent a couple days here. [...] Miche’, the son of an ajpop [governor] was buried in a mountain here. This tomb is very important.

I learned this story from the oral tradition. My great grandfather told me this story at the side of the fire, in the afternoons and evenings when we couldn’t go out.²⁴¹

In producing their plays, Sotz’il has had to publicly confront obstacles to community acceptance. Inviting neighbors to your performance is community-based artists’ equivalent to going door-to-door to invite neighbors to neighborhood meetings. Going out on a limb to do a theater performance in front of your neighbors -- some of whom are wielding violent power against Sotz’il, and which Sotz’il’s performance is a response to -- is the artists’ equivalent to organizing a public meeting with gatekeepers where you make your demands publicly known. Theater may be even more vulnerable because (in Lisandro’s words) it doesn’t put on “a combat-hardened face, saying ‘I am strong! We must do this!’” as some forms of political protest do. Lisandro said that instead, “One must have even deeper feelings about the injustice to protest through art.”²⁴²

This sets the stage for why it was challenging for Sotz’il to present their artistic work to their communities, especially at the start; and why the Ri Ak’u’x Festivals after Lisandro’s assassination were very important to break the ice, on two levels: around the intimidation-coerced silences around the kidnappings and assassinations in Sololá, on the one hand; and around Sotz’il’s artwork as still being on the margins of acceptance in their

²⁴¹ Ukotz’ijal Ajpu member, interview.

²⁴² Lisandro Guarcax, interview.

local community, on the other hand.

Speaking to the challenges with community acceptance, a member of a fellow artistic group in the region said:

We have to be careful because in any space, there will be people who like what you do, and others who don't, in all senses.

Yet it's important to present the Maya arts so that other youth will know about it and continue with these values. Perhaps through our group's presentation, another new Maya arts youth group will emerge down the road. Our participation can open many doors.²⁴³

CONCLUSION

Theater provides a forum to hold up Maya *principios* (principles) for public reflection. First, it is embodied. As Barbara Tedlock theorizes in her “epistemology of practice,” in Maya culture, principles are embodied rather than converted into the abstract discourse of a blueprint. This can be seen in the cumulative process of leadership development in a *cofradía*, where women and men pass through years serving in incremental roles of increasing responsibility before the community selects respected elders to become *k'amöl b'ey* who guide intracommunal conflict resolution. Theater, then, can contextualize the application of *principios* (such as respect and dialogue with the *nawales*) within a particular scenario in which characters negotiate or explore the value of these *principios* and the consequences of not adhering to them.

Also, pragmatic factors make theater a more appropriate medium than written forms of communication in Sotz'il's community. These factors include the limited circulation of texts in Guatemala (partly due to expense), Mayas' valorization of oral tradition and the spoken and performed word, and a significant proportion of Mayas who do not read or write (particularly older women).

The theater space gives Sotz'il a blank slate in which they get to present their worldview. Even the dramatic conflicts on stage are framed by the authors on their own

²⁴³ Ukotz'ijal Ajpu member, interview.

terms. The world they craft is an example of “theatrical sovereignty.” I extend Michelle Raheja’s theory of “visual sovereignty” beyond mass media and new media technologies to community-based theater:

a way of reimagining Native-centered articulations of self-representation and autonomy that engage the powerful ideologies of mass media... Under visual sovereignty, filmmakers can deploy individual and community assertions of what sovereignty and self-representation mean and, through new media technologies frame more imaginative renderings of Native American intellectual and cultural paradigms (Raheja 2007, 1163, 1165).

The imaginaries that Sotz’il creates are significant in a sociopolitical context in which Maya Sololatecos’ agency is limited in terms of material conditions: violence, marginalization, poverty, discrimination, and social standing as youth. The Sotz’iles exercise agency and a degree of “sovereignty” in the microcosm of theater rehearsals. They then take their finished productions to town plazas and municipal gymnasiums, where their performances influence communities’ and other youths’ sense of what they can make, shape, and impact. This is psychologically and historically liberating. While Sotz’il may not involve people in participatory ways as mass social movements do, the advantage that theater provides is starting from a blank canvas for a production: the limit is the imagination.

Sotz’il’s play *Oxlajuj B’aqtun* allows Maya audiences to reflect on familiar violence through the lens of Maya ontology. Through performances, Sotz’il empowers audiences by using shared symbols to work through common concerns. This, in turn, allows audiences a space to reflect on their approaches to future social action. This chapter has found that Sotz’il’s play evokes in audience members sensory memories of practices associated with Maya cosmovisión. These affective memories awaken an emotional connection to everyday rural Maya experience. I contend that these affective memories strengthen audiences’ ethicopolitical commitment to Maya revitalization.

Through staging Maya worlds and embodying nawales with which many Mayas identify, Sotz’il allows Maya peoples to envision empowered Maya subjects. I conclude that by performing Indigenous ontological dimensions of experience, Maya performers

help audiences to vicariously step outside the limitations of the material world (racism, poverty, exclusion) and into another landscape where they envision the exercise of other forms of agency (spiritual and metaphysical). As a result, audiences come to view Maya revitalization as a means of empowerment to overcome injustice.

Chapter 8. Conclusion:

Ethical Worlding as a Terrain of Struggle

Our strategy should be not only to confront empire, but to lay siege to it. To deprive it of oxygen. To shame it. To mock it. With our art, our music, our literature, our stubbornness, our joy, our brilliance, our sheer relentlessness – and our ability to tell our own stories. Stories that are different from the ones we’re being brainwashed to believe.

The corporate revolution will collapse if we refuse to buy what they are selling – their ideas, their version of history, their wars, their weapons, their notion of inevitability. [...]

Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.

— Arundhati Roy, *War Talk*

This dissertation has examined theater’s capacity to communicate Maya ontologies and nurture cultural-political imaginaries among rural Mayas engaged in decolonization politics. Through an ethnography of rehearsals, theater productions, and audience responses to the theater group Sotz’il, I have analyzed what Sotz’il’s theater performances do for performers and audiences. In Chapter 1, I presented the theoretical framework of the study. As historical background, I traced the emergence of the ontological turn in the Indigenous Americas and framed Maya *reivindicación* as a project of cultural dignification with a particular interest in ontological decolonization. In Chapter 2, “From Tejido Social to Ontological Decolonization: A Revisionist History of Maya Politics (1970s – present),” I traced the genealogy of a predecessor to Sotz’il -- the “Tejido Social” Kaqchikel movement in Sololá which sought to rebuild Kaqchikel institutions and political power in the public sphere. I used the concepts of “Maya reducido” and “pueblos reducidos” (reduced Maya language and towns (Hanks 2010)) to theorize Sotz’il’s ontological break with Tejido Social’s more recognizable politics. In Chapter 3, “‘Dicen que Somos del Monte’: Unearthing Youth Identity after Genocide,” I explored why *reivindicación*

became a powerful motivator for youth founders of Sotz'il when they came of age in the decade after the 1996 Peace Accords. I studied Sotz'il members' intersectional experiences of racism, sexism, and "religious discrimination" in order to understand how these shaped their desire to "decolonize" – that is, unearth repressed practices of rural Maya culture that have been disparaged. I found that Sotz'il's politics of decolonization has been concerned not only with the Spanish colonial era, but also, and perhaps more immediately, with intensified Christian evangelization in Maya communities since the 1970s (Garrard-Burnett 1998, 2010) and many Mayas' distancing from lifeways and markers of Maya identity such as last names. Sotz'il group members interpreted these behaviors as meaning that their neighbors "prefer to be ladino [non-Maya]." In response, Sotz'il created a particular type of theater that I analyzed in the following chapters.

In Chapter 4, "Playing with Sensory Worldings: Sotz'il's Process of Collective Creation," I examined Sotz'il's creative process and staging rehearsals of the play *Uk'u'x Ulew* in order to understand how Sotz'il developed an ontologically-based political critique through theater. I found that Sotz'il's embodied experimentation and collective brainstorming allowed them to engage in Maya ontological world-making during theatrical staging and performance. Chapter 5, "Becoming I'x: Body Training and Creating Worlds with Living Materials," was an ethnographic examination of Sotz'il's training of the body to take on or become energies from a Maya ontological perspective. This includes their approach to engaging materials with *ruk'u'x* in their plays. This chapter explored some effects of Sotz'il's attending to the energetic dimensions of embodiment and materials with *ruk'u'x* in their plays. Sotz'il members and audiences affirmed that their experience of Sotz'il theater made them feel affectively closer to Maya cosmovisión and embodied Maya lifeways.

Chapter 6, "Maya Theater during Sanctioned Violence and New Age Hysteria: The Play *Oxlajuj B'aqtun*," addressed why Sotz'il's theater is powerful to Maya audiences by analyzing community performances of their play *Oxlajuj B'aqtun*. I examined how Sotz'il communicated a Maya ontological perspective on everyday Kaqchikel dilemmas through theater. I found that, by presenting characters embroiled in conflicts pertinent to Maya

audiences, Sotz'il showed Maya ontology to be relevant and responsive to contemporary dilemmas. Through theater, Sotz'il decolonized stereotypes that paint Maya cosmovisión as witchcraft. Instead, the play demonstrated a Maya ontological approach to working through conflict. In Chapter 7, "Audience Responses: How Sotz'il's Play Shapes Ethicopolitical Commitments to Maya Reivindicación," I examined how audiences respond to Sotz'il's theater performances expressing Maya ontologies in the public sphere – a dynamic that has only been possible since after the Peace Accords. I studied audience understandings of community performances of Sotz'il's play *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* and their responses to its themes of conflict, justice, violence, and metaphysical interventions by other-than-human persons.

In sum, extending Hirschkind's concept of "ethical soundscapes," I contend that Sotz'il shapes Maya ontological worlds through theater – that is, they are worlding through theater. This research finds that Sotz'il's theater performances evoke sensory memories of Maya lifeways associated with Maya cosmovisión. I contend that by awakening an emotional connection to everyday rural Maya experience, Sotz'il strengthens audiences' ethicopolitical commitment to Maya reivindicación.

In this dissertation I have analyzed Indigenous theater as a space of experimental visioning that has shaped performers' and audience members' ethicopolitical commitment to reivindicación. I have examined how Sotz'il's theater appeals to sensoria, affect, and Maya ontologies. However, the question remains: Is the reverberation of Sotz'il's political intervention limited to the theater space? Sotz'il's theater intervention has been established as an autonomy project that does not directly engage and maintain Kaqchikel village networks, partly due to differences around Maya ontology, Christian evangelization, and dynamics of internalized racism; and partly due to violent repression. Yet, these village networks proved to be central to Kaqchikel Sololá communities' mobilizing power both in securing their self-defense in the late 1970s through the end of the war in 1996 and in the florescence of the Tejido Social movement in the 1990s. Given that Sotz'il's project stands in tension with maintaining village networks – and that Sotz'il has, to a degree, abdicated

these organized “social fabric” networks in favor of an autonomy project that is more consistent with Maya cosmovisión through the space of theater -- what is the future of Sotz’il’s project amidst repression? Is it doomed to failure if it doesn’t confront the state and larger structures of power about violence and repression?

I propose that Sotz’il uses the act of worlding as a political strategy instead of representation and utopias. As with autonomy movements, Sotz’il’s strategy is to not confront the state directly; instead, its focus is Maya ontological worlding. This is not just a question of empowerment, valorization, and augmenting self-worth nor of creating more positive representations of Mayas in performance. Instead, Sotz’il’s act of worlding influences how audiences internalize and emotionally attach to issues and values, some which may be identity-based. Their act of worlding shapes the foundational *embodied* vision that people and communities mobilize around. It pre-figures the social, ontological, and political outcomes that are desired in the context of a particular ontological landscape that is familiar to Sotz’il’s community. While possibly most powerful when in conversation with a social movement, worlding as a political intervention is not limited to social movements as a political formation. It is a political intervention that is available to subaltern peoples, but it can also be used to suppress subaltern politics. I will explore these ideas briefly in this conclusion.

I describe Sotz’il’s theater project as an act of *worlding* rather than just *visioning*. While visioning is an important part of the creative and political process of worlding, the term “visioning” does not get at the embodied, spatial, experiential, tactile, and sensory aspects of worlding. Through the worlds they create in theater, Sotz’il presents their vision to a broader community in an embodied way and through engaging living materials.

Additionally, the term “utopia” is insufficient to describe Sotz’il’s theater work because utopia connotes a positive, singular universalized paradise. Instead, worldings are situated and can be struggled over. As I argue below, politics is a struggle over competing worldings. Also, utopia is not necessarily embodied nor sensory, in contrast to worlding. Furthermore, world-ing is an active process; the concept of utopia is not necessarily so. (Traditionally it has been described as static; in recent decades, Ernst Bloch and others

have theorized it to be processual.) However, what I take from the notion of utopia is its foregrounding of the imagination, as in “the utopian imagination.” Worlding at its best is a process that engages a ripe utopic imagination.

In this dissertation, I have shown that Sotz’il engages in the process of sensory worldings through a collective creative process. In theater rehearsals, Sotz’il members work out their experimental, embodied proposals for theater worlding and their responses to improvised interactions, all of which create a rich and dense Maya ontological environment.

I have used an ethnographic qualitative research approach to study Sotz’il’s process because a theater performance is not the final word or event. Extrapolating from Veena Das’ theorization of “eventful” versus “everyday” violence, I propose that we can also think about eventful versus everyday politics and eventful versus everyday performance. A theater performance is a moment of eventful politics and eventful performance. Furthermore, the way to counter both eventful and everyday violences is through not only eventful politics (including both social movement protests and theater performances) but through paying careful attention to everyday politics. The latter would include looking at how politics is practiced in daily life and how violence is reproduced in political and artistic organizations. This critical attention also includes the political imperative to not be silent about everyday violence within organizations. Sometimes silence about everyday violence is used as a political strategy to shore up support for eventful politics – for example, out of a concern that a Leftist party may not win an election due to a pervasive inequality of power in Guatemala. Instead, I highlight the importance of everyday politics and performance as the birthing ground of eventful politics and performance. This reveals that strategic silences can perpetuate violence against the communities that radical political organizations purport to serve. As one solution, autonomy and pre-figurative movements have provided models for how to pay careful attention to everyday political practice as the foundation for transforming society.

In studying theater performance, I have been just as interested in the preparations of the performers outside the eventful performance. In particular, I have analyzed the

question: what are the everyday practices that train not just the body but also the whole person – one’s ontological orientation – for the performance? Even improvised performances involve preparation. Through this dissertation, I have sought to highlight that the preparation process also expresses a politics; and furthermore, as performance studies theorists have noted (Schechner 2013), even the “eventful” performances are situated. I have sought to situate Sotz’il’s performances in their communities with situated responses from audiences.

The discipline of anthropology and the ethnographic research tradition provide tools to study theater as everyday politics and performance -- that is, as process. Studying the everyday practices that accumulate to produce an eventful performance is especially helpful when looking at Maya ontologies because it allows us to explore negotiations of meaning and reveals equivocations between incommensurable ontologies. The study of everyday practices also reveals where eventful politics or performance fall short of the creators’ intentions laid out in the process of rehearsal. The resulting performance critique can be more constructive – helping the artists to get where they want to go, so to speak – in comparison with evaluations of performances that lack an understanding of the artists’ creation process.

I find that Sotz’il’s work is most powerful when considering the process that created it, from their sociopolitical and historical context to their more immediate rehearsal process. Sotz’il’s theater also becomes most broadly political in that light, on multiple registers and beyond one ontology, as well as beyond the realm of aesthetics. Examining their process of emergence has shown that Sotz’il’s theater is engaged in ontological decolonization and reivindicación as well as expressing political support for Maya organized movements such as those protesting mining and resource extraction in Maya territories.

Amiri Baraka wrote a vision for Black artists shaping and performing “a place where Black people live...[and]...move in almost absolute openness and strength” (Jones [Baraka] 1967, 124-125). He suggests the power that would result from that place. However, theorists of Afro-pessimism argue that this is an unrealizable pursuit in an anti-

Black world. While I do not intend to collapse the specific histories and ontological experiences of Black and Indigenous peoples, this articulation of non-white, non-Western worlds led me to conceptualize Sotz'il's project as shaping a world in which Maya people live – that is, a world that offers a decolonizing sense of being Maya, somewhat like reversing the process of “*Maya reducido*.” Worlding through theater is a powerful medium for this decolonizing project because it offers immediate sensory impressions that are experiential and embodied. Interviews with audience members show that they had powerful impressions of the ontological reivindicación politics of Sotz'il's theater pieces without needing all the details or a platform of their project.

In creating Maya ontological worlds, Sotz'il engages their people's emotions, body-based cultural sensibilities, and ontological frames of meaning. The works of Sotz'il taken together demonstrate a reformulation of Maya aspirations that run counter to a politics of superación (the betterment of social status and material wealth). Through staging Maya worlds, embodying nawales with which many Mayas identify, and engaging metaphysical energies, Sotz'il allows Maya audiences to experience a world that is more consistent with Maya cosmovisión and Maya ontological experience. Through this, they help audiences to vicariously step outside the limitations of the material world (racism, poverty, exclusion) and into another metaphysical landscape where agency is not bound by material limitations. Through this energetic and visionary process, some audience members come to view Maya revitalization as a means of empowerment to overcome injustice.

An important aspect of politics is persuasion, and the act of worlding can be used to persuade through engaging affect. In the West, the hegemonic means of persuasion has been through rational argumentation (as Hirschkind discusses). While that style of argumentation helps with sociopolitical and materialist analysis, it is not necessarily the most effective means of persuasion and motivation. Even in the West, commercial marketing and electoral political campaigns exploit human reactivity based on emotion, principally pleasure, pain, and fear. In Sotz'il's case, the act of worlding resonates with audiences because it engages their emotions and familiar cultural understandings.

Sotz'il engages affect for decolonizing and progressive purposes. However, engaging affect in politics is not always progressive. An emotion-based valorization of identity has been used both by those who organize against Western corporate capitalism and by those who seek to bolster capitalist hegemony and fascism. The recent global rise to power of the far Right may have been propelled in part by appealing to emotions – particularly fear and anxiety about economic and social status – in consolidating a white supremacist identity through racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia. The populist appeal of fascism underscores the need to understand the role of emotion, affect, and cultural sensibilities in deepening ties to identity in politics, as well as the role of theater and staging devices, and that these dynamics can be applied to any political orientation – not just those that seek decolonization and liberation.

Ultimately, the significance of worldings in Indigenous politics has to do with harnessing cultural resonance in order to persuade. What is at stake is a shift from “facts” (Western scientific rationalism) to what is emotionally resonant through accessing ontological sensibilities. I derive this line of thinking (of the role of affect in bolstering ethicopolitical commitments) from Hirschkind's theorization of Muslim ethical soundscapes. I also derive my theorization of worldings from Marisol de la Cadena (2015) who cites her lineage as feminist scholars Anna Tsing and Donna Haraway.

However, the original theorization of worlding is politically and ethically problematic. Martin Heidegger's conceptualization of “worlding” as well as of “being” and “essence” were foundational to phenomenology. Heidegger coined the term *worlding* in his 1927 book *Being and Time*. In 1933 he joined the Nazi party and oversaw the burning of “un-German” books while university rector aligned with the Nazi party-state (Kirsch 2016). It is an open question how much Heidegger's earlier writing, such as that on “being” and gesture as gestating worlding, creates a philosophical opening for Nazism. Kirsch argues that Heidegger's philosophy “leaves the door open for fascism” since it does not found itself on ethics or morals; instead, “the allure of profundity and authenticity can lead to the destruction of ethics and of thought itself” (Kirsch 2016). While Charles Hirschkind based his theorization on Egyptian Muslims' concern for ethics, Heidegger is not at all

concerned with ethics or morality. Instead, in his explorations of nihilism, Heidegger was principally concerned with emotions such as “fear, alienation, anxiety, rather than love or joy” (Kirsch 2016, n.p.).

Therefore, the act of worlding is powerful, but it is not liberatory in and of itself. That is, worldings are situated and can be used for any range of political purposes. As Worlding.org notes,

Many of us think about a better world. But opinions may vary over how to get there, and especially about what “there” we want. The imagination and realization of worlds has become a driving force in both “real” and “virtual” environments, with both negative and positive consequences. Worlding can be selfless or selfish. It can reinforce what exists or point to something else. But it can never be neutral. Historically critiqued as a colonializing device, the term worlding now also is regarded as a utopian strategy. ... The desire for something not-yet-achieved drives most people in individual or collective terms. (Trend n.d.)

I propose that the process of any particular act of worlding reflects its politics; it is where interventions can be made. The analysis of Sotz’il theater reveals that their ontological worlding is not just about affect. It is also about another way of being in the world that involves a relationship of responsibility as part of their living “environment,” that is, as part of interacting and feeling oneself to be part of everything, to paraphrase Pablo. This then is a form of “ethics” that is mutual and collective, in contrast to Heidegger’s model which is individual, not concerned with ethics or morality, and nihilistic. Sotz’il’s worlding in theater is based on Maya cosmovisión’s interest in life-making. It is from that worldview that Maya world-making is “ongoing” and “generative” (Kirsch 2016).

I conclude, then, that Sotz’il’s project has relevance outside the space of theater because its work involves worlding, and competing worldings are a terrain of political struggle. Sotz’il creates a worlding of *reivindicación* to form the basis around which the cuates generation has been organizing.

Sotz’il’s theater work has been most powerful when its intervention about Maya ontology is connected to a sociopolitical analysis – through de la Cadena’s phrase “not only, but also” to get specific about particular ontological differences. In this ethnography,

I have found that critical thinking and sociopolitical analysis – not just a Marxist class analysis of global capitalism but also an intersectional analysis of racism, heteropatriarchy, and colonialism--helped participants to be less vulnerable to manipulation on material issues by people of any political persuasion. The founders of Sotz'il were articulate about both a sophisticated critical analysis of Western capitalism as well as their practice of Maya cosmovisión. Hence, to understand how oppression functions, Sotz'il's ontological turn can involve praxis – perhaps in the vein of what Black theorists describe as a more complex “double consciousness” across more than one ontology. Joy James describes the double consciousness of “the uncompromisable knower ... one who straddles, standing with a foot in both worlds, unsplit by dualities.”²⁴⁴ Joanne Rappaport has argued that great Paez leaders / intellectuals like Quintín Lame had a global consciousness that was formed through participation in social movement organizations at regional and national levels while still being fundamentally rooted in their communities' worldviews. Rappaport contends that these leaders enjoy an enduring influence because they “translated” notions of global resistance into their peoples' worldviews and symbols (Rappaport 1998). What appears to be most important in countering oppression is a broader contextualization beyond direct experience in order to understand larger patterns of domination. Sotz'il engages in this kind of analysis when it frames its politics as decolonizing.

For the most part, the state has escaped scrutiny in Sotz'il's works. Although the events in their first play, *Kaji' Imox*, position the Guatemalan state as a product of colonization and the object of Maya resistance, the state is irrelevant to the major forces at play in *Oxlajuj B'aqtun* and *Uk'u'x Ulew* – in the vein of “provincializing Europe.” While Sotz'il's plays do not address the state's perpetration of repression, that can be the work of Maya organizing that Sotz'il may inspire. Sotz'il members' interest is valorizing Maya ontology and practices for Maya audiences. Theoretically, this move could empower Maya grassroots mobilization – it is not antithetical to it, even if Sotz'il members themselves are not interested in that work. Regarding the future of Sotz'il's politics: Sotz'il has not stated that there should *only* be theater with no other kind of political organizing. To the contrary,

²⁴⁴ W.E.B. DuBois' term; quotation from Joy James (1996, 187).

Sotz'il members have stressed that various sectors should develop in balance. However, unlike COMS, Sotz'il members have not been engaged with those other sectors directly nor through coordinating meetings.

It is possible for Sotz'il to practice a politics of autonomy without being isolationist. That is, Sotz'il can dialogue and build relationships with groups doing grassroots organizing. In this dissertation I have discussed 1970s antecedents of Maya decolonization politics that were in relationship with massive organizing movements through a chinamital-like model of relations of dialogue. One possibility to explore is whether Sotz'il can gradually link into a chinamital: yes, develop Kaqchikel theater as an autonomous branch, but like COMS also be in conversation with the full range of organizations in Sololá to realize the potential of Maya mobilization. That is, the dense village networks of mutual responsibility need not be abandoned despite internal differences. Ceremonies and theater, while practices of autonomy, can be in addition to a grassroots strategy of engagement and proliferation. A radically heterogenous process – like the chinamital model – continues to be an important means of Maya political intervention through visioning with extended village networks.

I propose that organizing and mobilization should always be available as tactics to draw upon. First, they maintain the village networks which are the base of Maya sociality and interwovenness through building trust and a sense of interconnectedness. Second, and more importantly, through worlding Sotz'il is trying to shift the foundational vision that knits together their social fabric (Tejido Social). Given the current circumstances of religious polarization, this shift may not happen without dialogue or some other opening for new audiences to view Sotz'il's work. One practical way for Sotz'il to initiate chinamital-inspired dialogues is through facilitated audience discussions after each theater performance. This can be conceived and organized as an extension of the chinamital model.

In sum, my recommendations and closing reflections are the following:

1. Worlding is not just about a finished product (the event of a theater performance); rather it is a process. Shaping the parameters of the process is a powerful way to shape what is included in (or excluded from) the worlding, such as its principles and how heterogeneous it is. World-making is most malleable and rich during the process of ongoing, everyday politics (dialogues, exchanging ideas, mutual fertilization of cultural and political imaginaries during the embodied brainstorming of rehearsals). Rather than reducing participants' principles to a flattened manifesto or blueprint, the principles get embodied in the process of worlding and then tested in the form of experimenting with interpersonal interactions through theater.

The point is to pay attention to the process of worlding. Conservative think tanks create one kind of political strategy and vision that is exclusionary, racist, and white male supremacist. There is an alternative to that top-down dynamic: Movements that are focused on plurinational liberation can engage in world-making through processes that are grassroots, collective, and inclusive. They stay politically heterogeneous as long as the group and the process respect and empower marginalized voices.

2. I extend Hirschkind's "ethical soundscapes" to theorize *ethical worldings* with a stress on the descriptor "ethical." Harnessing the power of emotion, affect, cultural identification, and ontological resonance has the most liberation potential when connected to a sociopolitical analysis. I recommend that Sotz'il take advantage of this immediately after performances through organizing chinamital-like dialogues, since so many people are gathered as audiences. With facilitation, audience members could process and talk about the play. Given that there are cultural precedents for this kind of dialogue, I suggest that this has the potential to extend and deepen village relationality; consequently, it would contribute to organizing against repression.

3. The autonomy project of Sotz'il does not need to be isolationist. It can dialogue with other networks, even if not along the lines of previous alliances. In this way, Sotz'il's intervention would not be limited to the theater space. Instead, it can relate to grassroots organizing even if that is not the focus of their everyday practice. Sotz'il can engage the community and community organizational structures in which it is embedded.

In conclusion, worlding is a dimension of politics that we need to pay attention to. I propose that this be not only at the level of The Event (the theater performance interacting with an audience). Also very important is the process through which the worlding is shaped. That is where different voices can intervene to mold the particular form the worlding eventually takes. Worlding must be ongoing and processual in order to consistently undo the fixed boundaries of nationalisms of all forms in order to generate worlds without borders.

Ontological worlding can be autonomous and still engage the village networks via the chinamital format – independent of an electoral goal. That is, rather than using the chinamital purely for instrumental ends to win elections, the SUD Civic Committee and Sotz'il can return to engaging the chinamital model for the purpose of dialogue, relationship-building, trust-building, and a fertilization of creativity and ideas – to come to understand each other as community members, towards a “proliferation of the imagination.” The chinamital model is notable for its very visible outward effect of massive mobilizations (eventful politics). However, what I contend is more profound and transformative is the process (everyday politics) of visioning and coming together despite the differences that always exist within communities and which makes dialogue all the more rich. For the duration of time that the political (as opposed to religious) community division in Sololá remains incendiary and violent, it would be important for Sotz'il and the SUD Civic Committee to dwell in this stage of collective visioning and collective creation through the nested layers of the chinamital. Returning to this stage of the “proliferation of the imagination” lays the seeds of a future movement: to first ensure that there is fertile soil since the division has dried it up.

I have argued that worlding is an alternative means of generating subaltern politics for social justice. The principal intervention of Sotz'il's Maya theater is sensory and ontological world-making. Worlding allows Sotz'il to share and proliferate not just a mental vision but an embodied environment that resonates with Maya audiences' ontological subjectivity. Audiences can subsequently organize around these embodiments if they wish. In this way, Sotz'il theater contributes to the long-term viability of Maya

movements in their community despite the apparent odds.

Looking ahead: The next stage of analysis

In this dissertation, I have sought to name, understand, and analyze Sotz'il's theater work as an ontological worlding. Rather than use terms (both in theater and in reference to Maya "spirituality" and "culture") that originate from and reinforce settler ideologies of the nature/culture and mind/body divides -- and that therefore are inadequate to describe the processes I am referring to -- I propose to use terms and conceptual tools that more precisely map onto Sotz'il's ontology. This is a complex challenge because Maya interlocutors in Guatemala use terms like "espiritualidad Maya" to differentiate certain practices that they deem significant from those of Christianity, and it is for that reason that in this dissertation I have used these phrases. Furthermore, they view their theater work as a relatively new phenomenon in their communities, so while they adopt variants on Western terminology ("artes escénicos" instead of "theater" and "estructura dramática" instead of plot) they are mostly still related within the same ontology, with exception of the phrasing and concept of "xajoj q'ojom." However, it is worth unpacking this legacy of colonization in Indigenous communities and beginning to use other terms. This will involve tracing a genealogy of the local introduction of terms like "spirituality" and "religion."

Part of this unpacking requires re-visiting the history of the Maya Movement, which I have begun to do here. For a future project I hope to further define my intervention and broader argument about the complex interrelationship between local Maya politics and the traditional Left. What is clear to me is that the common characterization of a schism between culturalistas and populares is a misrepresentation. From both interviews and a literature review, I found that the radical moment of the revolutionary war pushed both the traditional Left and diverse Maya political groups to become more radical in their own ways. On the Maya side, the trajectory was toward radical "ideologies" based on Maya cosmovisión and towards autonomy and self-determination. This radical dynamic has been missing in recent years throughout Guatemalan society, and hence terms like "autonomy"

and “self-determination” are no longer heard in common Maya parlance outside of circles that were formed during the period of (Maya and Left) radicalism.

Unpacking and revisiting the history of the Maya Movement will also lead me to trace the flow of community politics, which will give me analytical sites to get at more of the messiness of Sotz’il’s position within and interactions with their communities.

Also, in this version I have not spent as much time with embodiment as I would have liked. Because of references to “worlds” and “dimensions” by some interlocutors and theorists of theater and Indigenous ontology, I have focused on the dimension of worlding. I realize that this has come at the cost of embodiment, a dynamic that Sotz’il members also focus their attention and discussion on. I will dwell more on this in the next stage of this analysis.

Finally, in terms of research methods, this dissertation is not conventional ethnography nor activist anthropology. I have sought to develop an approach to research that is consistent both with Sotz’il’s politics and ontological turn as well as my own distinctive approach to political engagement. Yet the question of how to best research the conjunction of the ontological turn and theater is complex and I have not yet arrived at a conclusion on this topic. Consequently, one of my next writing projects will be to articulate my distinct methodological intervention.

Appendices

APPENDIX A:

TIMELINE OF THE TEJIDO SOCIAL MOVEMENT IN SOLOLÁ MUNICIPALITY (1975-1999)

NOTE: National events are in italics. The rest are local events in Sololá municipality.

1980	Military repression (<i>La Violencia</i>) escalates in Sololá and nationwide: includes state violence, massacres, and massive displacements.
1981-1982	Organizing begins in Sololá for self-defense from military violence and for the rights of Indigenous peoples.
1985-1986	The Progressive Youth Group and the Potable Water Committee are founded in San Jorge.
1988	Organizing is getting stronger and more public in Sololá with the mobilization against the <i>guardia de hacienda</i> .
April 23, 1989	While performing in San Jorge's Cultural Night, Guillermo Fuentes announces that Jaibal belongs to San Jorge.
1989	Jorgeños analyze their land situation and begin strategizing and organizing to recover their traditional lands.
<i>December 2, 1990</i>	<i>Army massacre of Mayas in nearby Santiago Atitlán.</i>
March 23, 1992	San Jorge La Laguna land occupation of Jaibal (K'ayb'al).
March 31, 1992	First eviction attempt. Women and children form a human chain to block the eviction.

April 4, 1992	Second eviction attempt by anti-riot police squad and over 2,000 military soldiers. Seventy-four Jorgeños are detained. All cantons unite to support San Jorge.
July 27, 1992	<i>Cabildo Abierto</i> (constituent assembly) pressures Official Municipality to officially support San Jorge's land struggle.
October 12, 1992	Continental Indigenous protests of celebrations of the Columbus Quincentennial. Maya organizations emerge publicly in Sololá. Days later, Rigoberta Menchú is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.
1993-1995	Frequent protest marches held in Guatemala City including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • August 3, 1993: March of the Children • October 1993: Occupation of Congress
1994-5	Bartolo Panjoj is elected to head the Indigenous Municipality. He leads efforts to research the chinamitales and found the Coordinating Body of Maya Organizations of Sololá (COMS).
February 1994	Sololá campaign for the right of Maya children to wear <i>traje</i> instead of school uniforms.
1995	The Maya Tz'oluj Ya' Educational Center (Tijob'al Tz'oluj Ya') is founded.
---	Maya community decision to run candidates for office through the SUD Civic Committee.
March 23, 1995	En route to a protest march in Guatemala City, the bus transporting Jorgeños flips over on the highway, causing injuries.
October 5, 1995	<i>Army massacre in Xamán, a Maya returned refugee community.</i>
December 1995	First elections in which the SUD Civic Committee participates. Its

candidates for mayor (Pedro Iboy) and municipal council are elected, marking the first Maya Kaqchikel administration (1996-1999) of the Official Municipality since it was established in 1901.

December 29, 1996 *Final Peace Accords are signed by the URNG and Guatemalan Government. An official end to the internal armed conflict.*

June 18, 1997 *URNG begins legal process of becoming a political party.*

December 18, 1998 *URNG party is officially inscribed as a legal political party.*

April 26, 1999 Settlement is signed between the Civil Society of San Jorge La Laguna and the landowners of Jaibal.

APPENDIX B: MAPS



Source: *Relaciones Geográficas* at the Benson Collection

Cabecera: ATITLÁN, SANTIAGO. Guatemala.

Date of map: Feb. 8-27, 1585

Dimensions of map: 61.5x81 cm.

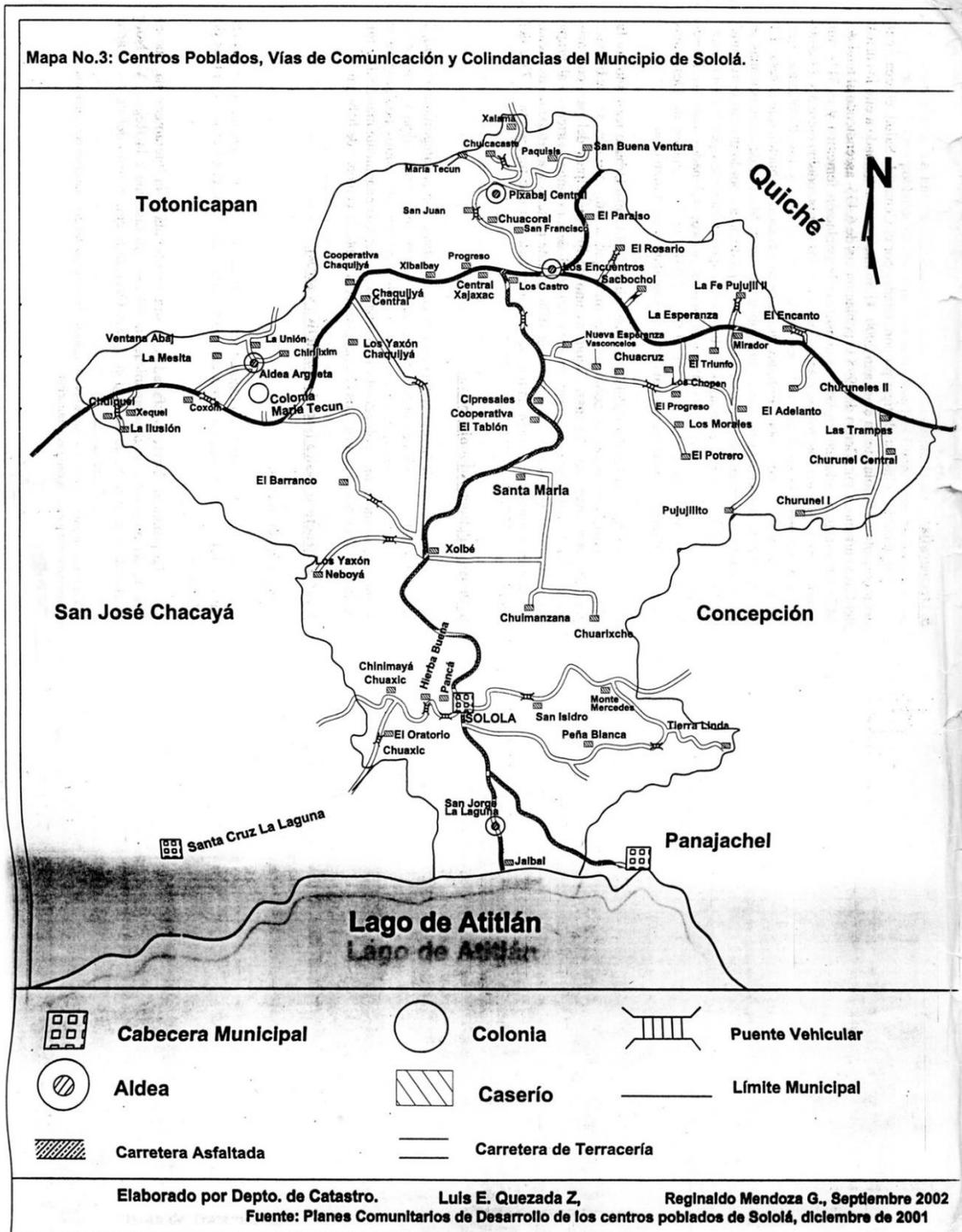
Language of glosses: Spanish

Contemporary location name: Santiago Atitlán, Guatemala

Holding Institution: Benson Latin American Collection at The University of Texas at Austin

Author's Note: Sololá would be on the left, towards the upper part of the map. The volcanoes and Cerro de Oro feature prominently in the map.

Mapa No.3: Centros Poblados, Vías de Comunicación y Colindancias del Municipio de Sololá.



Source: Oficina de la Coordinadora Comunal de San Jorge La Laguna (2006).

APPENDIX C: CHARACTERS IN *UK'U'X ULEW (ESSENCE²⁴⁵ OF EARTH)*

After GRANDMOTHER MOON (Ik', "Clarity of Night and Day"²⁴⁶, played by a male actor) drums to signal the moon rising while DOG (Tz'i', "Words of the Energies") howls, four dancer-musicians enter the performance area as a procession of the ELEMENTS:

- First, EARTH (Ulew, "Womb of life") enters dressed in a Cobán-style corte, colored electric green.
- Second, FIRE (Q'aq', "Heat that envelops and protects") is dressed in bright red and carries a bowl of ocote and fire.
- WIND (Kaq'iq', "Breath of existence") wears white owl wings like fans over his hands.
- WATER (Ya', "Blood that flows") is dressed in brilliant blue colors like the trajes of Santa Catarina Palopó and wears a Fish *tocado* (headdress made of paper maché).

The Human-Monkey Baby character is identified as "Life" (K'aslemal) and "Matter and Energy" ("Materia y energía").

²⁴⁵ In their program notes, Sotz'il translates uk'u'x as "esencia" in Spanish, or "essence" in English. In the rest of this dissertation, I have chosen to translate the term as "heart" due to Kaqchikel's literal references to body parts and because the term "essence" is fraught in English and particularly in academic discussions.

²⁴⁶ Character names and descriptions (in quotations marks) are from the program notes for *Uk'u'x Ulew* from March 12, 2015, with my translation from the original Spanish.

APPENDIX D: CHARACTERS IN *OXLAJUJ B'AQTUN*

*Q'uq'umätz*²⁴⁷ is played by the only company member who is a woman and who is Mam. The character is named for the Quetzal-Serpent figure of Maya and Aztec tradition – what some have called the “Feathered Serpent.” While many popular sources about the Mexican figure write the name as Kukumatz, the Sotz'iles write the name according to its Kaqchikel components: a merging of Q'uq' (quetzal or feather) with “kumatz” (the Nahuatl-derived term for snake). In contrast to the male gender that is assigned to the figure in most Mexican renditions, in Sotz'il's play *Q'uq'umätz* is played by a woman. The green coils on her head recall several important figures at once: snake coils, the head of a quetzal bird, and the hair wrap of women k'amöl b'ey (traditional authorities) in Palín, Escuintla. In the text I refer to this character as Q'UQ'UMÄTZ because of the popularity of the Aztec name, while writing the name in its Kaqchikel form.

Q'uq'umätz is accompanied by *Rejqalem, the bearer of time*. This character is portrayed as a human figure carrying a drum on his back with a tumpline (*mecapal*, a strap made of maguey that passes around the forehead to carry loads on the back). In the text I refer to this character as TIME BEARER for the comprehension of non-Kaqchikel readers.

*Wuqu' Qak'ix*²⁴⁸ literally means “The seven things that cause us shame” or “Seven our shames / embarrassments”. In the text I use the name “OUR SEVEN DISGRACES” for ease of reading. He is the leader of the Lords of Xib'alb'a and is a “proud, ambitious, envious, lying, destructive, self-centered, and ignorant character” -- that is, he embodies the seven qualities that cause shame.²⁴⁹ Sotz'il has picked up on the wordplay (double entendre) in the *Pop Wuj* where, in most translations, the character's name is written *Wuqub' Kaqix* meaning Seven Macaw²⁵⁰. While Sotz'il has chosen to pronounce and spell

²⁴⁷ The quetzal-serpent (“feathered serpent”), the combination of q'uq' (feather, quetzal) + kumätz (serpent).

²⁴⁸ As in the *Pop Wuj*, it is also a play on words with Guacamaya: Kaqix.

²⁴⁹ Sotz'il program for *Oxlajuj B'aqtun*, March 2011. (“personaje orgulloso, ambicioso, envidioso, mentiroso, destructivo, egocéntrico e ignorante”)

²⁵⁰ (D. Tedlock 1996). The significance of Seven Macaw has also carried over into Native American literature through Leslie Marmon Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* in which one twin brother Wacah (perhaps referencing the original “Wuqub” and the sound of the bird's cackle?) communicates with two spirit macaws. The novel also references storytelling about a “Prince Seven Macaw.”

his name to stress the theme of “Our Seven Disgraces” (characteristics that Seven Macaw also represents in the *Pop Wuj*), Sotz’il retains the second meaning of “macaw” by portraying this character as a macaw.

The Hero Twins from the *Pop Wuj* are the dual protagonists in the play, presented as *Jun Ajpu* (a reference to the Maya nawal and day name “One Ajpu” and which can be translated as “he who uses the blowpipe” for shooting birds and other animals in hunting) and *Yaxb’alamkej* (literally, “Green-Jaguar-Deer”). Together this duo is described by Sotz’il’s program as “sun and moon, unity and spirituality, vision and light; blowpipe hunter, walker, human being [Jun Ajpu] and jaguar”.²⁵¹ In the play, Yaxb’alamkej is portrayed as a Jaguar acting as the nawal or “protector” of the human Jun Ajpu. In the text I refer to Yaxb’alamkej as JAGUAR both for the comprehension of non-Kaqchikel readers and because Sotz’il has chosen to write this name in Kaqchikel very differently from the older popularized translation of the *Popol Vuh* (Recinos 1950) who spells the name Ixbalanque²⁵². In the text I use the name JUN AJPU because of its reference to the Maya nawal and day name Ajpu, which is harder to translate to English in a condensed form.

The minions of Wuqu’ Qak’ix – the minor Lords of Xib’alb’a – are:

- The nawal *Kame*, portrayed as a skeleton representing the “underworld, obscurity [absence of light / lack of clarity], death.”²⁵³
- *Tukur*: Owl, the messenger of Xib’alb’a.

In the text I refer to these characters as KAME, for its reference to the nawal Kame, and OWL, for the comprehension of non-Kaqchikel readers.

²⁵¹ Sotz’il program: “sol y luna, unidad y espiritualidad, visión y luz; cerbatanero, caminante, ser humano y jaguar.”

²⁵² Maxwell and Hill II (2006b) discuss differences between the translation by Maya linguists and Recinos’ version.

²⁵³ Sotz’il program: “Inframundo, oscuridad, muerte.” “Oscuridad” translation from Spanishdict.com, accessed January 20, 2017.

Glossary

<i>caserío</i>	hamlet
<i>envidia</i>	envy
<i>k'amöl b'ey</i>	elder married couples whom are sought out by community members to facilitate marriage proposals and to guide intracommunal conflict resolution. The pre-requisite to being eligible for this position is having passed through all the roles and levels of responsibility of the <i>cofradía</i> . Then the community chooses the most respected of these elders to become <i>k'amöl b'ey</i> (“those who guide on the road”).
<i>nawal</i>	helper energies, associated with days in the Maya lunar calendar
<i>Wuqu' Qak'ix</i>	“the seven things that cause us shame.” Portrayed as a macaw, he is the leader of the Lords of Xib'alb'a and is a “proud, ambitious, envious, lying, destructive, self-centered, and ignorant character.” That is, he embodies the seven qualities that cause shame.
<i>ajq'ij / ajq'ijab'</i>	daykeeper / daykeepers
<i>Ri Ak'u'x</i>	artist alliance formed in the wake of Lisandro Guarcax's assassination. Eventually the name changed to <i>Ruk'u'x</i> .
<i>sotz'</i>	bat nawal
<i>Sotz'il Jay</i>	“House of the Sotz'il,” cultural center of Grupo Sotz'il. Can refer to both Sotz'il's rehearsal center and the scope of Sotz'il's artistic project, which encompasses Sotz'il's theater productions, workshops for schools and regional artists, affiliated groups like the women's group Ajchowen, and more.
<i>xajoj q'ojom</i>	dance – music and all that falls between those two categories. Can also be read as “theater.”

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