



Vol. 10, No. 3, Spring 2013, 141-170

www.ncsu.edu/project/acontracorriente

U páajtalil maaya ko'olel: Briceida Cuevas Cob's *Je' bix k'in* and the Rights of Maya Women

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Tortillas, Rights

In 2010 the Instituto para el Desarrollo de la Cultura Maya del Estado de Yucatán (INDEMAYA) conducted what it called its “Tortipack Campaign.” Printed on eco-friendly paper and distributed to tortillerías throughout the state as paper in which to package tortillas or “tortipacks,” these bilingual Maya / Spanish documents intervened in regional, national, and international discourses on human rights through their elaboration of seventeen rights possessed by Yucatec Maya women. As opposed to other methods, INDEMAYA deemed the tortipack an effective method of disseminating these rights due to the fact that purchasing tortillas is a daily activity for most Maya women (“Proteger”). Given that tortilla production or acquisition in Yucatán is an almost exclusively female endeavor, it goes without saying that through the tortipacks INDEMAYA sought to place

these rights directly into the hands of Maya women, and to this end the group distributed over 700,000 tortipacks from March to October.¹

As described in the tortipack, the seventeen rights of Maya women are as follows: to be protected by their families, communities, and governments; to speak the Maya language; to have their work recognized both within the home and outside of it; not to be mistreated physically, sexually, or psychologically; to be informed about methods of birth control; to select the method of birth control they consider most appropriate; to select their spouse freely without any pressure or not to marry at all; to participate actively in assemblies through their voices and votes; to have access to public resources for their projects; to receive health, educational, and job-related services; to hold political office in their communities; to decide about the management of natural resources in their communities; to receive information about their rights; dignity; to share responsibilities and pleasures equally with men; to be recognized as important despite the physical differences between men and women; and to live according to the customs and traditions of their communities. The tortipacks thus recognize and promote Yucatec Maya women as citizen-subjects capable of full participation within the home and at all levels of governance. It is interesting to note that only two of these, the second and the seventeenth, are explicitly cultural while numbers four through seven center on a woman's right to her own body, and number fourteen asserts a woman's right to dignity. The remaining ten address broader problems of gender inequality that could be said to apply as much to women living in the United States or elsewhere as much as to Yucatec Maya women in the Mexico.

While addressing broader cultural concerns like the right to one's maternal language, the tortipacks also speak to ongoing conditions of gender inequality within Maya communities themselves through the inclusion of such rights as the right to an education, the right to contraception, and the right to a voice in community politics. Despite the

¹ The rights were later reproduced in a brochure and distributed at the Feria del libro maya on December 19, 2012.

existence of national and international laws that already protect women's rights, INDEMAYA maintains that

las Mujeres Mayas conocen poco estas Leyes y basta con salir a las Comisarías del Estado para darnos cuenta que son lugares en donde a las Mujeres no se les respetan tan siquiera sus Derechos fundamentales, por lo que se considera de suma importancia promover la difusión de esos Derechos para que llevándolos hacia ellas, se disminuya el grado de discriminación de que son víctimas y puedan hacer efectivo su derecho a tener Acceso a la Jurisdicción del Estado. (INDEMAYA)²

In other words, informing women of their rights via the tortipacks was not so much the final goal of the project as it marked the beginning of a process through which Yucatec Maya women, having gained a better understanding of their rights, might begin the active exercise of these rights in their communities and beyond. As an example of state-sanctioned indigenous activism, the tortipack can thus be read as a document that mobilizes human rights discourses in the context of neoliberal multiculturalism, interpellating indigenous women “as members of the nation-state [which] implies access to rights articulated in the constitution and laws” (Moksnes 6).

I would argue that this diversity of rights, many of which are not particular to Maya women, does not so much reflect a gesture towards a Western or even a universal feminism as it speaks to an indigenous feminism that asserts the particularities of being both indigenous and a woman, mobilizing international human rights discourse in order to seek official recognition of the cultural, discursive, and material agency exercised by Yucatec Maya women in local, regional, national, and international spheres (see Moksnes 7-9; Nash 25-6).³ By imbricating

² See also Kellogg 90-126 for a lengthy discussion of the status of indigenous women in contemporary Mesoamerica.

³ I understand these forms of agency as different and yet overlapping. In her critique of how humanists and anthropologists view cultural agency, Doris Sommer's describes how culture can be both “a vehicle for agency” or creativity as well as a type of “repressive agency” or limitation (13). The same could be said to apply to discursive (linguistic) and material agency. As such, as pointed out by Judith Butler, speech acts can be “a rite of institution” in which subjects participate and “insurrectionary acts” (145). Although he includes it under his broader term *control cultural*, I believe that Guilermo Bonfil Batalla offers a succinct depiction of the material in material agency when he defines material cultural elements as “tanto los naturales como los que han sido transformados por el trabajo humano”

particular cultural concerns with more universal issues of femininity, the tortipack advocates Yucatec Maya women's rights in terms of ethnic and gender difference without privileging one over the other. I call this gesture indigenous feminism in order to highlight its differences with more generalized elaborations of the rights of indigenous peoples as well as to point to how this and other articulations of the rights of indigenous women intervene in international feminist discourses. Using Article 1 of the 1995 Beijing Declaration of Indigenous Women as an example, June Nash notes how indigenous women often refer to motherhood as a basis of identity, in essence using language rejected by many Western feminists (25-6). Taking similar issue with Western feminism, Cree lawyer Mary Ellen Turpel describes the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) and the Inuit Women's Association (IWA) as "not feministic in nature" insofar as they "do not strive for complete 'equality of men and women' in all areas," noting that the NWA, "appears to accept genuine cultural role distinctions" (95). Rather than rejecting the term "feminism" outright, I believe that these indigenous discourses contest hegemonic feminist discourses and point to other modes of femininity. Originating from this position of difference, documents like the tortipack participate in the articulation of an indigenous feminism.

Using the recently concluded tortipack campaign to ground its discussion within the context of the struggle for Yucatec Maya rights in the Yucatán peninsula, this article explores the representation of Yucatec Maya women and Yucatec Maya women's rights in the volume of poetry *Je' bix k'in 'Like the Sun'* (1998) by the Yucatec Maya writer Briceida Cuevas Cob. Although Cuevas Cob does not necessarily participate in INDEMAYA or its work, one finds that her writing anticipates and goes beyond the "official" elaboration of Yucatec Maya women's rights produced by INDEMAYA, underscoring the ambivalent material outcomes of neoliberal approaches to citizenship in Yucatán. Examining this work as an example of life writing, I argue that *Je' bix k'in* constitutes a critical aesthetic intervention into discourses on feminism and the nature of the linguistic, cultural, and

(50). We may add to this as well the agency exercised upon material object through human labor.

gender rights of Yucatec Maya women in the same way that the tortipack intervenes in these discourses from a more officially political angle. I demonstrate how Cuevas Cob's use of Yucatec Maya women's voices in portraying these women's everyday lives configures literature as a sight for the enactment of Yucatec Maya women's rights through its representation of multiple, multifaceted Yucatec Maya female subjectivities.

Contemporary Yucatec Maya Literatures

Before proceeding to a specific discussion of Cuevas Cob and her work, a few words on Yucatán and contemporary Yucatec Maya literature in particular are in order. Although a thorough discussion of the matter lies far afield from the discussion at hand, any treatment of contemporary Mayaness in Yucatán must begin with the recognition that “Maya” is not as widely used as a primary term of identity as some might expect. Rather than being unique to Yucatán, others have made similar observations about Guatemala (Little 122). In Yucatán, for example, anthropologist Juan Castillo Cocom notes that some Yucatec Maya speakers tend to identify primarily with their communities instead of a broader ethnic group (“Maya Scenarios” 19). For him, the notion of “Mayaness” is a Western construct (Castillo Cocom, “Maya Scenarios” 19; Castillo Cocom, “El Quincux” 259-60). As his observation entails, while the use of “Maya” may be on the rise there are many other terms of identity currently employed among Maya-speakers, among them *masehual*, *mayero*, *catrín*, and *mestizo* (Castañeda 19; Güémez Pineda “Mujer”). However, “mestizo” in this case does not designate the mixed-race Mexican nation subject but the peninsula's indigenous residents, a shift in signification that dates to Yucatán's 19th-century Caste War (Joseph 142-3; Hervik 50). Thus, while an indigenous woman on the peninsula may be called a *mestiza* because of her dress, culture, and language, when the peninsula's non-indigenous female residents wear the traditional *huipil* for formal events they pretend to be neither Maya nor *mestiza* (Castañeda 19). Within this context, it would be difficult for one to separate the use of the term “Maya” by organizations such as INDEMAYA from a broader, more diffuse effort of ethnic

consciousness raising among the peninsula's residents. The group Maya'on makes this clear through the literal meaning of its name, "We are Maya."

As such, it would be as difficult to argue that authors who see themselves as writing "Maya literature" do not likewise participate, officially or unofficially, in these efforts. Indeed, the recent history of what we may call Yucatec Maya literary activism demonstrates the intimate connection between writing and the development of Yucatec Maya cultural consciousness. Given the space allotted me, my intention here is to include in this history the names and works of representative Yucatec Maya authors who have published during the last thirty plus years. A complete history of contemporary Yucatec Maya literary activism would necessitate an entire separate volume, and thus remains to be written.⁴

The earliest document on reading and writing in Yucatec Maya that I have been able to find is the "Declaración de la ortografía práctica y morfología del sustantivo del maya-yucateco," written in 1980 by a group of intellectuals in Pátzcuaro, Michoacán.⁵ Dated a year later, taped inside this document there is a bilingual letter signed by the "Estudiantes mayas de Etnolingüística." Addressed "Ti u kaajil maya" 'to the Maya people,' the letter marks an attempt to disseminate a standardized Maya orthography, claims that all peoples have a right to their own languages as well as a right to write in them, and states that soon the Maya people will once again have books written in their own language ("Declaración" n.p.). Several signatories of the Pátzcuaro declaration would go on to participate in establishing the better-known 1984 alphabet ("Memoria" 42-3), but this letter and the declaration it accompanies outline Yucatec literary activism's roots and establish a connection between literature and consciousness-raising through its use of the word "maya." It is no coincidence, then, that

⁴ There are several excellent essays and author biographies that deal with this topic. See Montemayor and Frischmann, Rosado Aviles and Ortega Arango, Leirana Alcocer, and Ligorred 121-40, in the Works Cited.

⁵ The title page lists the place and date of publication as Pátzcuaro, Michoacán November 1980. The Introduction is dated July 1980 (9), and the although the "Declaración" itself (21-9) makes no explicit mention of when it was written, it cites the "Diccionario Maya Cordomex," which was published in 1980. More research needs to be done on this document and the extent to which it participates in the legacy of the Primer Congreso Indigenista Internacional, which was held in Pátzcuaro in April 1940. For a more thorough discussion of Yukatak Maya alphabets, please see Michal Brody's articles listed in the Works Cited.

three people who would go on to become literary and cultural giants, Domingo Dzul Poot, Hilaria Maas Collí, and José Tec Poot, are also listed as having participated or as being present during the 1984 meetings (“Memoria” 42-5).⁶

Dzul Poot is among those who worked on the monumental Maya Cordomex Dictionary, originally published in 1980. In addition to his work on the 1984 alphabet, in the 1980’s he would also published several bilingual volumes of Yucatec Maya literature.⁷ Among her other works, Maas Collí compiled and published stories recorded by the Cuban Anthropologist Manuel J. Andrade during his work with the Carnegie Project in and around Chichén Itzá in the 1930s in a bilingual Yucatec Maya-Spanish format. Through her position with the Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán’s Centro de Investigaciones Regionales (CIR) she continues to give classes in Yucatec Maya language to an array of foreign researchers, Mexican nationals, and Mayas alike. A key figure in the establishment of Yucatec Maya workshops in the early 1980s, José Tec Poot and his career bring us closer to the author under examination here. Tec Poot was among the second generation of students to graduate with a bachelor’s degree in Anthropology under the direction of Alfredo Barrera Vásquez, and even had use of the famous mayologist’s personal library (Orilla 37-8). I emphasize Tec Poot’s training and the relationships he had with non-Maya researchers as these would eventually lead him to a meeting with the Mexican writer and intellectual Carlos Montemayor in Mexico City. When Tec Poot, then director of the Unidad de Culturas Populares de Yucatán, explained the need of improving the quality of Maya Yucatec language materials produced by Culturas Populares, Montemayor proposed establishing a methodology for improving these publications in the form of Maya-language literary workshops. The Dirección General de Culturas

⁶ Dzul Poot and Tec Poot are listed among the participants (42-3). Maas Collí’s name appears next to that of Refugio Vermont Salas as one of two people representing the Departamento de Estudios sobre Cultura Regional de la Universidad de Yucatán (45).

⁷ Please refer to the bibliography for representative titles by authors mentioned in the article such as Dzul Poot, Jorge Cocom Pech, Feliciano Sánchez Chan, and Waldemar Noh Tzec.

Populares officially approved the Taller de Literatura Maya in 1982 (May 351).

Some works of literature produced through these workshops were eventually published under the name “Maya Dziibo’ob Bejla’e” ‘Contemporary Maya Writing,’ and the list of workshop participants grew to include writers from throughout Yucatán and Chiapas.⁸ Certainly, the workshops and Montemayor’s role in them have been heavily scrutinized (Ligorred 126). It should be noted, however, that one of the participants, Miguel May May, describes how working as a group enabled the participants to understand better how different Maya-speakers in Yucatán expressed themselves, as well as to learn the forms of expression they had in common with each other (352). As outlined by May May, this process points back to the connection between literature and consciousness-raising. Several workshop participants who published through the Maya Dziibo’ob series have enjoyed a good deal of success publishing outside of it, among them Cuevas Cob and Feliciano Sánchez Chan. While Cuevas Cob is best known for her poetry, Sánchez Chan has published drama, the volume of poetry *Ukp’él wayak’ / Siete sueños*, and edits an Instituto de Cultura de Yucatán (ICY)-sponsored series of Maya literature.⁹

Given this chapter’s focus on Cuevas Cob, her native municipality of Calkiní in the peninsular state of Campeche merits special mention for its own literary traditions. In addition to being home to the Taller Literario de Calkiní, a group in which Cuevas Cob has participated, the region is also home to the novelist and poet Jorge Cocom Pech and the poet Waldemar Noh Tzec. The former published his *Mukult’an in nool ‘Secretos del abuelo’* through the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) in 2001,

⁸ Some volumes in the first series were published by Maldonado Editores, the Consejo Nacional para la cultura y las artes (CONACULTA), and Culturas Populares beginning in 1990. Others were published in 1994 by the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI). The second and third series were also published through the INI in 1996 and in 1998, respectively. There are several volumes published by Culturas Populares around the time the workshops began in 1982 that would later appear as part of the Maya Dziibo’ob series, and a number of the promotores culturales who wrote these documents also participated in the workshops. It is unclear, however, if these were the first documents produced in the workshops or if they preceded them.

⁹ He is also one of the playwrights whose work is profiled in Underiner’s *Contemporary Theater in Mayan México* (101-20).

framing its publication as part of the larger rebirth of Maya voices (ká síijil t'an) in which written literary texts are testaments to the power of Maya oral tradition (Cocom Pech 24). By comparison, writing about Maya language in his poem "Chan kuchdzón" 'Soldadito' Noh Tzec says that he will discharge the weapon in the plaza, but that

(ésta son las municiones de mi fusil
mi boca
mi dentadura
mi lengua
mi garganta
mi voz
mi discurso). (84)¹⁰

Noh Tzec thus articulates one's language as the equivalent of a weapon, and it should be noted that the Yucatec Maya linguist Fidencio Briceño Chel cites these very same lines in his essay on contemporary uses of Yucatec Maya and Mexico's 2003 law on the linguistic rights of indigenous peoples (98-9). As we shall see, in her work Cuevas Cob adopts a similar approach to language and power, using literature as means through which to give expression to the multifaceted voices and experiences of Yucatec Maya women.

Je' bix k'in: Briceida Cuevas Cob's Lives of Yucatec Maya Women

Briceida Cuevas Cob (b. 1969) is one of the most accomplished contemporary Yucatec Maya poets.¹¹ In addition to having had her work included in numerous anthologies, to date Cuevas Cob has authored three volumes of poetry, *U yok'ol auat pek' tí u kuxtal pek' 'El quejido del perro'* (1998), *Je' bix k'in 'Como el sol'* (1998), and *Ti' u billil in nook' 'Del dobladillo de mi ropa'* (2008).¹² The focus of this article, *Je' bix k'in* was originally published as the first volume in the third series of the Carlos

¹⁰ I assume most readers will be conversant in Spanish (as opposed to Yucatec Maya). As such I follow the Spanish translation of these poems, citing the Maya where appropriate.

¹¹ From *Telling and being Told: Storytelling and Cultural Control in Contemporary Yucatec Maya Literatures* by Paul Worley. Copyright 2013 The Arizona Board of regent. Reprinted by permission of the University of Arizona Press.

¹² For a brief biographical and bibliographic sketch see Montemayor and Frischmann 181.

Montemyor-edited Maya Dziibo'ob Bejla'e, with many of its poems being later recollected in *Ti' u bilil in nook'*.¹³

The 22 poems in *Je' bix k'in* move chronologically through the life spans of Maya women in an anonymous, apparently rural, town referred to as "el pueblo" in the book, dividing these lives into three sections: childhood ("Tu primer arete"), adulthood ("Como el sol"), and death ("Canción triste de la mujer maya," which is further divided into three subsections). I've chosen specifically to analyze this work because of its explicit focus on the lives of Yucatec Maya women and, in particular, its inversion of the representational mode usually associated with the life writing of subaltern subjects. That is, while many such life narratives could be said to "tell of human rights violations" in the context of international discourses on human rights (Schaffer and Smith 1), Cuevas Cob's text does not emphasize rights violated or denied. Rather, by focusing on the agency that Yucatec women exercise in their daily lives, *Je' bix k'in* articulates a vision of Yucatec Maya women's rights that goes beyond the human rights precepts of the Mexican nation-state and international actors such as the United Nations, recognizing the rights these women already claim and already exercise regardless of whether or not they are officially sanctioned by these other entities.

The volume elaborates a wide range of life experiences, from a mother's hope ("Irás a la escuela"), to frustrated love ("La punta de mi rebozo"), and mourning the loss of one's mother. However, these poems' poetic voices often defy this linear orientation, taking the forms, for example, of a mother addressing her pregnant daughter or a daughter lamenting the passing of her mother. That is, within the volume's chronological, linear progression the poems themselves emphasize the cyclical nature of existence, as poems that deal with childhood, for example, also articulate the intergenerational ties between mothers and daughters, grandmothers and granddaughters. In doing so, even if one argues that the volume traces the chronological lifespan of a single woman, it must also be recognized that the work situates that woman within the multigenerational

¹³ There are differences in the orthography, edition, and translation of poems in these two editions. Given that this article treats *Je' bix k'in* as a whole, citations are from the poems as they appeared in this volume in 1998.

social networks of her own family and the rest of her town, moving back-and-forth between the particular voices of individual poems and the universalizing gestures made by these very voices. For example, as the poetic voice of the final poem agonizes over her mother's passing she refers to her mother as the "niña de mis ojos" (Cuevas Cob 68). We can contrast this mourning with end of the first poem in which an as-of-yet unborn woman is told that her mother "renacería con tu nacimiento" (Cuevas Cob 39). The volume thus begins and ends with cycles of death and rebirth, optimistically emphasizing the continuity and solidarity of these women across generations.

This sense of birth and rebirth, however, does not entail an essentialist vision of Maya subjectivities over time. The second poem of the first section, "U ak'abil tu chibil uj" 'Noche de eclipse,' juxtaposes popular wisdom about what pregnant women must do during an eclipse and the actions taken by the poem's protagonist, dramatizing the tension between tradition and change in the context of cultural and biological reproduction. As noted by the Yucatec anthropologist Miguel Güémez Pineda, while Yucatec Maya women play an important, if not primary role in the reproduction of Yucatec Maya culture, Maya women are themselves dynamic actors in this process ("Mujer"). In the poem traditional common knowledge takes the form of an italicized incantation addressed to a daughter from her mother in which the latter tells her progeny,

*Hija mía,
préndete los alfileres en la ropa
ponte la pantaleta roja,
bebe el agua con que se lavó el metate
para que mamá luna no deje su manche
en el cuerpo de tu retoño cuando te rasques.* (Cuevas Cob 39; italics in original)

The pregnant daughter to whom this is spoken refuses to heed this advice, and we are told,

aquella se rascó las pupilas para que su retoño las tuviera
más negras,
engulló a la luna,
y mientras todos buscaban a la luna con la mirada en el cielo,
la mujer alumbraba al pueblo con la luz que desparramaba su
vientre. (Cuevas Cob 40)

Tradition in this case (actions taken so the moon will not stain one) is not forgotten, rejected, or lost, but transgressed as the daughter consciously defies the precepts passed down from her mother, scratching herself in order to darken her unborn daughter's eyes.

The poem can thus be said to echo article 36 of the previously mentioned Beijing Declaration of Indigenous Women, which asks, "That Indigenous laws, customs, and traditions which are discriminatory to women be eradicated" ("Beijing"). By comparison, the tortipack advocates for several rights of Maya women that could be said to be "non-traditional," but only mentions "customs and traditions" specifically when affirming a woman's right to live in accordance with these. As represented in the mother's address to her daughter in the poem, we can consider the vague concepts of "customs" and "tradition" in the light of Bourdieu's *habitus* insofar as these also can be said to "[produce] individual and collective practices ... in accordance with the schemes engendered by history" (82). The daughter eschews the practices laid out by her mother, in essence generating new ones as she gives birth to a member of the next generation. Reflecting these tones of generational conflict within a single household, the daughter's actions have repercussions in the public sphere as the other townspeople's seeking the vanishing moon in the sky is juxtaposed with a light emanating from the daughter's womb that illuminates the town. In addition to suggesting the passage from one generation to the next, this juxtaposition contrasts the external, now disappeared light of the moon with an internal source that lights the town from within. As a metaphor for childbirth and the cultural agency that women exercise in shaping the new generation they bring into the world, this new light articulates a questioning of traditional generational social norms and values that situates change as a powerful, positive force within the community at large.

The penultimate poem in this section, "Yaan a bin xook" 'Irás a la escuela' describes the future that awaits a female child upon entering school in terms that reaffirm both Mayaness and Yucatec Maya womanhood through a juxtaposition between school, home, and the knowledges these represent. As such, it is also the poem that most explicitly critiques the relationship between young Maya women, the Mexican state,

and its institutional apparatus. Similar to the previous poem, the poem is the address of a poetic voice—perhaps a new mother—to a young child, the poetic voice assuming a position of authority. It also begins with a brief italicized section, once again drawn from common wisdom, about how the ants celebrate the births of boys, who drop bits of ground corn for the ants to eat in the *milpa*, and lament the births of girls, who throw hot water on the ants when they go into the kitchen. The poetic voice breaks with this, saying

Tú irás a la escuela.
 No serás cabeza hueca.
 Traspasarás el umbral de tu imaginación
 hasta adentrarte en tu propia casa
 sin tener que tocar la puerta.
 Y contemplándote en el rostro de tu semejante
 descubrirás que de tus pestañas,
 flechas nocturnas prendidas en el corazón de la tierra
 desciende tu sencillez
 y asciende la grandeza de tu abolengo. (Cuevas Cob 41)

Despite the straightforward appearance of the first line “Teche’ yan a bin xook”—literally “You will go to class” or “You have to go to class—it expresses not so much a command (the command of “to go” is “xen” in Maya) as a sense of obligation or a description of the future, what things *will* or *must* be like. As such, there is no causal relationship between learning in the formal academic setting of the school and the knowledge the young girl gains. Instead, she comes into her own house, a place created through the power of her own mind and imagination, wherein she discovers both her own “simplicity” and “the grandeur of [her] race” through the face of another Maya woman. That is, through her acquisition of knowledge the young woman passes into adolescence and adulthood, an intellectual inheritor of the greatness of the race of which she is a part. Finally, she comes to this knowledge within the context of the home, and learning from another woman “with a face like [her],” a juxtaposition that recalls the fact that many indigenous peoples experience formal schooling as the degradation of their forms of knowledge at the hands of one whose face is not at all like theirs. The poem thus marks an attempt “to hold on to vital knowledge that mere schooling does not admit” (Franco 464).

The juxtaposition of these forms of knowledge continues throughout the poem: “Tú irás a la escuela / y en el cuenco de las manos de tu entendimiento / contendrás el escurrir del vientre de la mujer de tu raza” (Cuevas Cob 41). Repetition of the phrase “yaan a bin” ‘You will go’ (compulsive future) is contrasted with “bin a chuk” ‘You will hold’ (remote future) suggesting a difference in the way these actions are construed by the speaker. Together with the following stanzas, these lines can be read as though the young woman becomes a midwife or otherwise participates in the birth of siblings or cousins, holding the afterbirth of Maya mothers in hands taught by other Maya women, or as a metaphor for her position as these women’s intellectual inheritor. In either reading, it should be noted that among many Maya how one disposes of the placenta influences both the destiny of the newly born baby and the future fertility of the mother (Güémez Pineda “La concepción”). Whether literal or metaphorical, the young woman’s holding the afterbirth in her hands is akin to her holding the future and exercising agency over it.

Moreover, learning to read Latin letters is secondary to knowledge that facilitates the young woman’s exercising agency in this process.

De su calcañal
 descifrarás los jeroglíficos
 escritos por el polvo, el sol, y la humedad.
 grandes los ojos de tu admiración
 contemplarán sus senos desfallecientes
 después de haber derramado vida sobre la tierra. (Cuevas Cob 42)

The passage describes a visceral knowledge obtained through this process of watching women after they have given birth—insofar as the young woman learns to “read” the glyphs written by the dust, the sun and the humidity. This difference between reading in the formal sense and reading in the sense expressed here destabilizes the verb *xook* (‘to read’) in the poem’s title. Indeed, which system of knowledge is denoted by “xook,” the one espoused by formal schooling or the one learned “at the heels of these women”? We know that the young woman learns to read the glyphs written by the dust, the sun and the humidity, but we never know what the young woman reads at school, an omission that challenges this form of schooling and questions its knowledge.

Driving this point home, the last phase of the poem begins: “Irás a la escuela / pero volverás a tu casa / a tu cocina (Cuevas Cob 42). Again, “home,” to which she returns, is both a metaphor for the physical space of the house as well as the imaginary space the young woman creates through her imagination in the poem’s opening. As in the rest of the poem, the return from school to the home becomes a discovery of the self. The young woman returns to the kitchen to tend the fire of its hearth,

Porque el fogón guarda en sus entrañas un
espejo.
Un espejo en el que estampada se halla tu alma.
Un espejo que te invoca
con la voz de su resplandor. (Cuevas Cob 42)

As others have noted, the Maya three-stone hearth constitutes a “symbol of domesticity [...that] gives meaning to numerous aspects of Maya womanhood” as well as possesses powerful connections to childbirth (Gutiérrez Chong 200-1). As schooling possesses the power to “de-Indianize” indigenous peoples and facilitate their introduction into the national whole, actions such as tending the hearth actualize aspects of Yucatec Maya womanhood across generations, hence the flame’s power to “invoke” the young girl “through the voice of its splendor.” Moreover, as anyone who has been to Yucatán can attest, the Yucatec Maya kitchen itself is a social space where, in addition to cooking, women also teach, learn, and tell stories.¹⁴ As much as the young woman keeps the kitchen’s flame alive, so too is she produced by it, her subjectivity as a Maya woman formed through this creative act of tending the flame that connects her with previous generations of Maya women.

The following section, “Je’ bix k’in” ‘Como el sol,’ contains scenes from the everyday lives of women in Yucatec Maya rural communities. There are poems that deal with the turkeys that many women raise in their *solares* ‘patios’ (e.g. “X-tux” ‘La pava,’ “Chan ichkaji tzo” ‘Pavito callajero’), meditations on modes of Yucatec Maya femininity (e.g. “Maan” ‘Señora,’ “Je’ bix k’in” ‘Como el sol’), and love poetry (e.g. “U jo’ol in booch” ‘La punta de mi rebozo,’ “Ualki tu’na” ‘En estos momentos’). As

¹⁴ See also, for example, Lisa Brooks’s comments about the Abenaki kitchen as a gathering place “where stories are made” (231).

with the previous section, these poems articulate Yucatec Maya women in rural communities as cultural, discursive, and material agents through their portrayal of the diverse roles these women play in their communities. Recognition of the agency they employ in these roles entails a rejection of the simplistic representations of Yucatec Maya women that litter popular culture and thus normalize a singular vision of Yucatec Maya womanhood based on a romanticized, mute passivity.

The poem “Señora,” for example, confronts this very sort of imagery. Addressing the woman washing clothes, the poetic voice begins by saying “son tus senos dos niñas que juegan a golpearse cuando lavas. / El arcos iris de tu mirada se halla tendido en la espuma (Cuevas Cob 49). The next lines, however, shatter these images: “Quien te viera diría que no sufres. / No sabe que a los pies de tu batea amontas parte de tu / historia (Cuevas Cob 49).

The poetic voice does not elaborate upon the suffering of the woman washing clothes, thereby enabling the term “suffering” to stand in for the multiple economic, social, cultural, and linguistic burdens that many Yucatec Maya women bear, all of which can be found in the dirty clothes gathered at the foot of the washtub.¹⁵ Through the acknowledgement of these burdens the poetic voice establishes a common ground with the anonymous woman doing her washing. The poetic voice also establishes a separation between itself and the poem’s potential readership as the speaker invites the reader to meditate upon a romantic image of this woman only to call attention to the superficial nature of such representations. As a result, the poem forces the reader to interrogate the oft-promoted image of the smiling Yucatec Maya woman (mestiza) going about her daily chores and fill in the “suffering” alluded to in the poem. The poem progresses:

Entonas un silbido,
es tu silbido un hilo y en él tenderás tu cansancio.
El viento
es un chamaco travieso que jala tu lavado.

¹⁵ Statistically speaking, Maya women in rural areas are more likely to be monolingual and illiterate than their male counterparts (Güémez Pineda “La lengua”). These conditions go hand-in-hand with the fact that their modes of work tend to be “traditional,” and so limited economically (Güémez Pineda “Mujer”).

Sobre los árboles de oriente
 el sol es un recién nacido que esparce sus tibias y amarillas
 lágrimas. (Cuevas Cob 49-50)

The movement of the imagery from the woman's whistling to the wind to the sunrise upends the meanings usually associated with a new day, and the image of two girls at play from the beginning of the poem assumes a different tone as the "mischievous" wind pulls at the woman's laundry and the sun cries. Through these images of the wind and the sun nature itself becomes an obligation the woman must manage, and we are not remiss in asking to what extent this is "new" a day if the woman's whistling anticipates her later exhaustion.

The final two poems in this section, "U chan ba'tel x-polok yétel x-chuchul" 'Pequeña riña entre la gorda y la flaca' and "U yalmaj xikín na' X-Tel ti' x-Tude" 'Consejo de doña Teodora a Gertrudis,' are the two which most directly poeticize the everyday speech of Yucatec women. The first of these recounts a public spat in which, more than discussing the reasons for their dispute, two women trade increasingly colorful insults until one retreats in the face of the other. As stated by the first woman, "La gorda" 'Fatty,' "La flaca" 'Skinny' "has bruised the youngest fruit of my womb" (Cuevas Cob 50), seemingly a metaphor for a sexual relationship between the former's youngest son and the latter. From this initial salvo the two women insult each other's clothing, allude to sexual escapades, imply the illegitimacy of each other's children, and trade threats. The poem thus shatters the image of the passive, pleasant mestiza, and replaces it with a decidedly bawdier picture.¹⁶ This relates back to the collection's larger project of endowing this figure with agency insofar as these two women are shown to have concerns, doubts, and fights like any other women. Unsurprisingly, they are just as capable of expressing themselves in colorful, shocking terms as well. The poem, however, does not poeticize the performance of this argument as a mere parody. Even as the poem presents the reader with these perhaps unflattering images of Yucatec Maya women, it articulates these in terms of dignity and Mayaness. With regard to the

¹⁶ Compare this to Guitiérrez Chong's comments on the sexual modesty for which Maya women are supposedly renowned (200). See also Loewe. He states that the everyday speech of Maya women he met in his fieldwork "seemed a lot more irreverent" than what he expected from his reading (xviii).

latter, as the women trade insults they draw parallels between each other and figures within the Maya cultural imaginary. La flaca tells La gorda that of course La gorda has had children because she is like the x-Tabay, a sexually voracious spirit who seduces young men. In her retort La gorda compares La flaca to the X-Takay, a bird whose song precedes an argument.

The poem also dignifies these women even as it portrays La Gorda and La Flaca in what would otherwise be an unflattering light. The introduction to the volume claims this poem shows that even in insults found in Yucatec Maya everyday speech there is poetry (Cuevas Cob 3).¹⁷ In other words, the colloquial is poetic and textualizing the barbs of these women as poetry shows that these are beautiful and artful in their own way, stances that exalt the everyday lives and voices of Yucatec women even if these women do not necessarily embody the “honor and modesty” for which they are popularly famed. Moreover, this poetic gesture underscores the Yucatec Maya woman’s status as discursive agents. That is, she is not the idealized, passive object of popular imaginaries but a subject who is as capable of scorn, invective, and conflict as the rest of humanity. In short, while the poem rejects the picture of the passive, smiling mestiza and replaces it with an active image of Yucatec womanhood, the poem nonetheless implies that this more complicated figure is no less beautiful or less worthy of respect.

The section’s final poem, “Consejo de doña Teodora a Gertrudis,” similarly poeticizes the Yucatec Maya woman’s speech and returns to the theme of transmitting wisdom across generations, in this case from Doña Teodora to Gertrudis. As with the voices found in “Noche de eclipse” and “Irás a la escuela,” the poem takes shape as the words spoken by a mother to her daughter. She invites her daughter to come and sit at her feet, to listen to her advice. In poetic language she states that she has noticed that a young man, Susano, has taken an interest in Gertrudis. Teodora warns her that, despite Susano’s good looks, “[él] no mide el día como el Señor Sol, /

¹⁷ Titled “Algunas cosas acerca de la obra,” it is unclear whether this introduction was written by Cuevas Cob or the collection’s editor, Carlos Montemayor.

no percibe salario por cuidar la plaza / ni por sostener todo el día al roble en su espalda” (Cuevas Cob 55).

Imploring her daughter to heed her words, Teodora ends the poem with the melancholy realization that

el amor te ha cerrado los oídos
 como tiempo atrás tapó los míos
 cuando veía entreabrirse y cerrarse los labios de tu abuela
 como se entreabren y cierran ahora los míos. (Cuevas Cob 60)

In addition to the mother (Teodora) and daughter (Gertrudis), the poem represents a multiplicity of Yucatec Maya female subjects through Saturnina, the old maid whose voice is her only progeny (Cuevas Cob 58), and the dissipated Felipa, a woman Teodora claims is drowning in perversion (Cuevas Cob 59). As Teodora’s council suggests, Gertrudis should not follow the examples set by either of these women but rather find a suitable, stable partner. In a preceding section, Teodora makes clear the fact that Gertrudis has any number of such desirable suitors among the town’s young men, namely Nicolás the mason, Alberto the cobbler, and Arnulfo the butcher (Cuevas Cob 56-7). All of these young men must deal with Gertrudis’s indifference towards them.

Indeed, Teodora’s overriding fear is that Gertrudis will follow her own example: not heeding the words of her mother and running off to marry a man who lacks a profession and hence the means to provide for his family. The significance of the potential repetition of this life history is that it indirectly points towards discord within the current family. The only male figures within the poem are the suitors and the father / husband, the latter of whom is defined by his absence and the fact that Teodora explicitly compares him with a character like Susano in the lines “el amor te ha cerrado los oídos / como tiempo atrás tapó los míos (Cuevas Cob 60).

In turn, this parallelism between the father and Susano hints at the problems currently endured by the family itself and the mother’s disillusionment with the young man who eventually became the absent father/husband of the poem. We can assume that the father, like Susano, “does not measure the day like the Sun” (Cuevas Cob 55) a metaphor for a dissipated lifestyle if not alcoholism, whereas the lines about not receiving

a salary for guarding the plaza or leaning on the oak tree allude to the fact that he lacks a profession and spends his days and nights in the plaza.

Teodora's words emphasize the discursive and material agency of Maya women insofar as these women provide advice to others based on their own experiences and make decisions that shape their lives and the lives of their offspring. Teodora's own authority (and her conclusion) has precedence in the fact that her own mother gave her similar advice when she was Gertrudis's age. The intimate power of this conversational tone is all the more apparent when contrasted with the image of Saturnina, the woman whose song is her progeny. Here and elsewhere in the collection, from mother to daughter these words become part of the thread through which these women connect the past, present, and future. By listening, if not also heeding, the daughter embodies the counsel and wisdom that her mother passes down to her. By comparison, although there is a kind of discursive of agency found in Saturnina's song, her voice itself, something that is ephemeral unless taken up and remembered by others, becomes her only legacy. That is, in the absence of connections the voice and its knowledge are disembodied and have an uncertain future.

The volume's final section consists of three poems under the heading "U ok'om k'ay maya' ko'lel" 'Canción triste de la mujer maya.'¹⁸ Although these poems explicitly focus upon the death of a nameless woman whose lifecycle comes to a close in these final poems, they also fulfill the promise of earlier poems insofar as the knowledge with which these were preoccupied has been transmitted to the next generation in the form of the living daughter who narrates the poem. Despite the mother's passing and her daughter's grief, the mother's physical death does not portend the loss of the culture and/or knowledge. On the contrary, her death closes her a single cycle, the continuance of which is represented by the daughter.

A unifying aesthetic feature of the three poems is the onomatopoeic repetition of the woman's grief, "je'iiiiiiiiin," which begins the first poem (Cuevas Cob 61), closes the final poem and the volume itself (Cuevas Cob 69), and increases in frequency as the poems take the reader from the side

¹⁸ "Ok'om k'ay" is literally "sad song."

of the recently deceased woman to her burial.¹⁹ While earlier poems sought to capture the oral expression of the Maya woman through conversations (“Noche de eclipse”; “Consejo de doña Teodora a Gertrudis”), arguments (“Pequeña riña entre la gorda y la flaca”), or interior monologues (“La punta de mi rebozo”), these final poems constitute a “song” sung by a daughter to her late mother. In a sense it is a conversation between a mother and daughter similar to the song by the unmarried Saturnina to her unborn children. Gesturing towards the inexpressible, the contraction “je’iiiiiiiiin” verbalizes the fact that for the daughter: “Mi sufrimiento no tiene fin, / Mi sufrimiento no tiene medida” (Cuevas Cob 69).

Beginning with the first poem the poetic “I” sings her loss in terms drawn from the domestic world of Yucatec Maya women.

Aquí está mi alma
asida a los pies de tu alma que se eleva como el humo de mi fogón,
madre mía,
porque el pájaro carpintero de tu corazón
ha cesado su muy animoso picoteo en el árbol de tu pecho. (Cuevas
Cob 61)

As discussed above, there is a strong cultural connection between Maya women, the traditional three-stone hearth, and motherhood. “Irás a la escuela” textualized the hearth as a mirror that produces and is produced by the women that tend it. Whereas the previous poem connected the hearth with the beginning of one’s life, this poem connects the hearth with death through the image of the young woman at the feet of her mother’s soul rising like smoke from her hearth. Collectively these images do not so much emphasize the hearth as the ones connected with biological childbirth as they articulate an intimate connection between the hearth and the cyclical production of Yucatec Maya female subjectivities. The image of the mother’s spirit ascending like smoke from the hearth of the speaker suggests that the speaker now occupies the center of her own domestic sphere. The speaker has thus reproduced a social space like that once held by her late mother, a move that emphasizes the continuity of Yucatec Maya female subjectivities through the common literal and symbolic experience of tending the three-stone hearth.

¹⁹ According to a friend this is an expression of grief derived from “Je’el in wok’ol” ‘I am going to cry.’

This poem continues to destabilize the popular image of Yucatec Maya women (*mestizas*) and Maya domestic tranquility. The daughter goes on

Si una vez herí tus ojos con mi atrevimiento,
 perdóname, madre mía, perdóname.
 Si una vez lastimé la delicadez de tus oídos con la impureza de mis
 palabras
 perdóname, mujer madre, por piedad perdóname. (Cuevas Cob 62)

The mention of domestic squabbles recalls the language of “Pequeña riña entre la gorda y la flaca,” hence the daughter’s plea that her mother forgive her for the “impurity of [her] words.” Moreover, this discord also points to words unheeded, such as those in the pessimistic, cyclical ending of “Consejo de doña Teodora a Gertrudis.” Finally, the poem also calls upon the power of the voices of Yucatec Maya women found in the rest of the poem as the daughter worries that her words have wounded her mother’s ears. Yet despite these differences and failings, the daughter not only asks her mother’s forgiveness but also asks, “¿Por qué me abandonas en la más negra noche?” (Cuevas Cob 61).

The following poem, “Canción triste de la mujer maya mientras llevan a su madre a enterrar,” traces the thoughts of a poetic “I” as she accompanies her mother’s corpse, presumably from their house, to the cemetery. Having begun with a meditation upon the unexpected death of a mother who “ayer a estas horas conversabas conmigo / con viveza en los ojos, / con viveza en el ánimo (Cuevas Cob 63). The speaker meditates upon the daily passage of time in the family *solar* within the context of the mother’s absence. She begins this passage by asking, “¿Pero qué dirá mi alma / mañana cuando no ve tu rostro? / ¿Mañana cuando mire que tan solo tu hamaca cuelga?” and ends by inquiring,

Y qué dirá la tarde
 cuando se detenga ante la puerta para acariciar tu frente
 y no estés?
 Je’iiiiiiiiin, je’iiiiiiiiin. (Cuevas Cob 63-4)

In between the grieving daughter describes two of the daily activities that Maya women commonly undertake, asking

¿Qué dirán tus gallinas
 cuando te llamen a recoger sus huevos
 y no estés?

Je'iiiiiiiiin.
 ¿Qué dirán tus pavos
 cuando como corredores en maratón
 acudan a engullir en la palma de tu mano
 y no estés?
 Je'iiiiiiiiin. (Cuevas Cob 64)

The poetic articulation of these activities reclaims them as integral to the daily lives of Yucatec Maya women and lays claim to their status as work. As the speaker makes clear, these domestic animals are her mother's and they respond to her almost as if they were her children, the hens "calling" to her and the turkeys seeking her out "like runners in a marathon." The question "What will they say?" evokes the multiple voices present throughout the text, implying a back-and-forth, intimate relationship between the mother and the animals for which she cares. Their calling out becomes a kind of speech, a speech that her mother understands and to which she can capably respond.

The speaker shifts tone as the funeral procession moves from the domestic space of the home and passes through the town itself on the way to the cemetery. Whereas the speaker describes the interior space of the home in terms of an almost idealized domestic tranquility with the maternal figure as its center, the exterior space of the town is fraught with conflict. The speaker rails against doña Felipa, doña Anastasia, and doña Lorenza,

Ellas que vertieron el veneno de sus bocas
 sobre el nombre de mi madre.
 Todas las angustias que a ella le causaron
 un día las pagarán. (Cuevas Cob 65)

There is an important shift in address in this passage from the "you" of the mother to an unidentified listener as the speaker hints at what these women have said about her mother. The daughter's not repeating such accusations in the poem underscores her belief that these are baseless while perhaps also betraying a very human desire to idealize one's own mother. These are *her* song and *her* voice, her composing the song while silencing and threatening these other women emphasizing the agency the young woman exercises through the creative act of composition.

Despite these expressions of grief and loss, the volume nonetheless ends by emphasizing the intergenerational ties among many women in rural Maya communities, privileging the cultural, discursive, and material agency that these women exercise in their daily lives. A given woman's life does not end with her death but, as stated towards the beginning of this section, has profound ramifications upon the lives of the women who come after her long after she is gone. Among Cuevas Cob's work, this volume best represents how literature and in particular poetry intervene in broader discourses on human rights and feminism through its explicit portrayal of the lives of rural Yucatec Maya women. In recognizing the dynamic contributions these women make to Maya ethnogenesis across generations, the volume places women at the center of creative and intellectual life in rural Maya communities..

Conclusion

On March 28, 2001, Comandanta Esther of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) delivered an important address on the state of indigenous people's rights in Mexico's Palacio Legislativo. In her criticism of current national policies with regard to the country's indigenous peoples, Esther described how the recently passed "Ley COCOPA," so called because of members of the Congress's Comisión de Concordia y Pacificación drafted the law, "legaliza la discriminación y la marginalización de la mujer indígena" ("Derechos"). Her address thus intervenes in discussions about the law while directly critiquing how this law would affect Mexico's indigenous women in particular. This insistence on the particular situations of indigenous women is also reflected in INDEMAYA's tortipack cited at the beginning of this article. By describing the rights that Yucatec Maya women possess in their relationships with their families, communities, and local and national governments, the tortipack promotes a specific kind of agency that Yucatec Maya women can and should exercise.

While not an official declaration on the rights of Yucatec Maya women, Briceida Cuevas Cob's collection of poetry *Je' bix k'in* stakes a claim to similar concerns. However, through their representations of myriad Yucatec Maya female voices, particularly in rural areas, these poems

eschew offering us a vision of new subject positions that Yucatec Maya women *could* occupy in favor of describing the multiple positions that they *do* occupy, and hence the forms of agency that they *already* exercise as indigenous women, mothers, daughters, lovers, wives, students, and midwives. The volume articulates these female subjects from a position of difference with regard to Western feminist discourses, in essence claiming a space for the elaboration of Yucatec Maya female subjects and subjectivities in terms frequently rejected by Western feminists.²⁰ This privileging of difference speaks to an indigenous feminist discourse and an indigenous feminism. One also finds that the volume anticipates many of the rights outlined by INDEMAYA. That is, as demonstrated through the multivoiced quality of Cuevas Cob's poetry, Yucatec Maya women have always been centers of agency. This is not to make light of the material difficulties faced by Yucatec Maya and other indigenous women or idealize the economic hardships many of them face. Rather, these poems bear witness to the fact that the officially elaborated recognition of this agency through human rights discourses, not this agency itself, is what is new. When these women become politicians (Güémez "Mujer") or take on leadership roles in the mechanized factories of multinational corporations (Castilla Ramos), these women are exercising an agency and drawing upon a wisdom passed down from grandmothers to mothers to daughters. Thus Cuevas Cob shows us that, in addition to making these women broadly aware of their rights, the elaboration of Yucatec Maya women's rights is also about recognizing the active roles these women have always played in their relationships with their families, their communities, and beyond.

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²⁰ Again, see Nash 25-6.

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