Performing Transnational Maya Experiences in Florida and San Juan Chamula in *Workers in the Other World* by Sna Jtz’ibajom and Robert M. Laughlin

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Abstract
This article addresses representations of the relationship between indigeneity and migration in *Workers in the Other World* (*Trabajadores en el otro mundo*, 1998) by Sna Jtz’ibajom and Robert M. Laughlin. The analysis first examines the dramatic ellipses in the context of storytelling and performance art to argue that this structure engages in theatrical activism to attempt to make an intervention in migratory trends. Next, we turn our attention to the characters’ clothing and the play’s representation of AIDS, as both an immunological disease affecting one of the protagonists and a social illness resulting in environmental degradation, lack of access to clean water, and violations of workers’ rights. Ironically, the protagonists of the play have less in Florida than they had in their hometown in Chiapas. As such, the playwrights affiliated with Sna Jtz’ibajom present an overtly anti-migration message, urging fellow Chamulas to remain in Chiapas instead of migrating to the United States.

In the twenty-first century, we are familiar with news reports and mass media coverage of the waves of migrants from Latin America crossing the US border to try their luck in el Norte. Issues surrounding the migration of Latin Americans have long been the focus of much academic inquiry. In their discussion of migratory patterns from Mexico to the United States, Blair Lyman, María de Jesús Cen Montuy, and Edith Tejeda Sandoval explain that most scholarship has focused on mestizo journeys to the North, though there has been increased research on indigenous migration, which “reflects the incorporation of new areas in southeastern Mexico into the U.S.-bound migration stream” to add “a new dimension—an indigenous Maya identity—to the Mexican migratory experience” (169). There has also been extensive work examining primarily Mixtec and Zapotec migrants from Oaxaca (Kearney 1995; Fox and Rivera-Salgado 2004; Stephen 2004, 2007), and there are other miscellaneous studies on indigenous migrant communities from Michoacán (Dinerman 1982). However, there has been little attention to the indigenous diasporic communities from Maya regions of Mexico, such as Chiapas.

Mayas from the Yucatan, Chiapas, and other predominantly indigenous regions in Mexico have unique experiences as migrants to the United States. Aside from issues of ethnicity, there

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1 In the context of Guatemala, I would like to also note that there are thorough investigations detailing migration from the indigenous Western Highlands and the Ladino Eastern regions of this Central American country (Bennett 2015; Foxen 2018; Foxen and Rodman 2012; Miller 2015; Webb 2015).

2 Although the focus of this essay is on the migration of indigenous people from Mexico to the United States, it is important to recognize that given the increasingly expanding tourism industry in Mexico, it has become common for indigenous people to leave their hometowns to work in Quintana Roo or the Mayan Riviera. This domestic migratory pattern parallels “the nationwide trend among Mexican families to have relatives in the United
are numerous factors that distinguish them from their mestizo peers—geographic regions of origin, socio-economic backgrounds, generational differences, language use, physical appearance, clothing use, and, more generally, cultural milieu. Since the Maya diaspora stretches from Central America to Canada, as anthropologists James Loucky and Marilyn M. Moors have indicated, migrants have renegotiated the connections between homeland and new home, which often causes “their conception of ethnicity [to] become] less rooted in physical location and more a matter of cultural transformation over time” (6). Consequently, recent scholars examining migration reject “one-way models of cultural adaptation” like assimilation, instead favoring analyses that underscore “cultural continuity across spatial boundaries” (Fink 146). To engage in this emerging field, this essay will take a cultural studies approach to focus on theatrical representations of Maya identities in relation to migration in the play Workers in the Other World (Trabajadores en el otro mundo, 1998) by Lo’ïl Maxil, a theatre troupe affiliated with Sna Jtz’ibajom based in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas.3

Like many Latin Americans today, Mayas from Mesoamerica have left their countries of origin to migrate to the United States to escape impoverishment and marginalization, largely a result of economic and political policies implemented by the State. Garance Burke, a journalist based in Northern California focusing on politics, migration, and indigenous communities, has noted that “low-intensity warfare and economic isolation have dislocated indigenous communities[, ...] many of whom speak Tzotzil and Tzeltal” (344) Mayan languages. The combination of the vast militarization of the region in response to the Zapatista uprising and increasing rural poverty under neoliberal economic policies (Kelly 82-83; Moksnes 276) have been key factors contributing to the migration of many Mayas from the Chiapan countryside. Anthropologist Shannon Speed elaborates on the role of neoliberal economic violence in the contexts of Guatemala and Mexico. She notes that neoliberal policies were originally intended to bring democracy and the rule of law, but “it wasn’t long before neoliberalism’s extreme market logics combined with preexisting dynamics of crime, corruption, and impunity [...] unleash[ed] a new status quo in which the only law that matters is the law of supply and demand and the only logic is that of the profit motive” (85). In this, socioeconomic and political motivators at home contribute to the decision of many migrants to abandon their countries of origin in route to the United States. Consequently, Maya studies scholar Alicia Ivonne Estrada has argued that “far from the borderless world that dominant globalization discourses promote, sociopolitical borders continue to violently impact [the] daily lives” of migrants (6). Some of the neoliberal policies aimed at fostering “development” and political stability in Mexico’s southern region have made socio-economic disparities even more pronounced, leaving many impoverished Mayas without viable means for social mobility if they remain in Chiapas. Notable examples of key neoliberal economic and political initiatives that have contributed to the migration of Mayas from this region include Plan Puebla Panama—which features the construction of infrastructure projects such as highways, sea ports, fiber optic communications, power plants, and airports (Delgado 124)—and the violent war on drugs in recent decades (Morales 82-3; Celaya Pacheco 1027).3

3 Robert M. Laughlin explains that the creation of Sna Jtz’ibajom’s plays began with discussions in Tzotzil by Francisco Álvarez, Rogelio Hernández Cruz, Juan de la Torre, Diego Méndez, other actors involved in Sna Jtz’ibajom, and himself; the play was later translated to Spanish and English by members of the theatre troupe, including Álvarez, Hernández Cruz, and Laughlin (“Pronunciation” xxxiv). Though the play is a collaborative effort involving numerous people, the official credits in the publication of the play in the anthology Monkey Business Theatre (2008) attribute authorship equally to both Sna Jtz’ibajom and Robert M. Laughlin. All quotations from the play are from the version of Workers in the Other World featured in this 2008 anthology; as such, all are written in English.
There are large structural issues that work to ostracize indigenous Mayas in Chiapas, and when “faced with the often-violent structural denial for this subsistence and existence” (Estra- da 5), many Mayas have opted to leave Chiapas in search of a better life in the United States. As anthropologist David Stoll has explained, many Mayas “wish to enjoy the modern world like the readers of [his] book do. They have been watching television, they have been visited by human rights teams, and they have concluded that the only place they can earn a decent living is the United States” (7). Among the migrants from Latin America making the journey to the United States are many indigenous Mayas who also have dreamed of a “better” life in the north: “many Mayas feel compelled economically to cross the border,” and “two former members of Sna Jtz’ibajom, both Chamulans, are now in the States” (Laughlin and Sna Jtz’ibajom 226). The protagonists in Workers in the Other World—Tumin and his wife Xunka’—are literary examples of these Maya migrants. In 2008, the year in which the play was published, it is estimated that approximately 136,000 people migrated from Chiapas to the United States (qtd. in Moksnes 304); consequently, anthropologist Jan Rus has asserted that “since the Revolution of 1910 there has never been such a mass exodus from any Mexican state” (The End 209). Similar to the real-life migrants from Chiapas, Tumin and Xunka’ are theatrical characters who eventually abandon their home in San Juan Chamula to escape systemic poverty and work in tomato fields in Florida.

In this essay I will use the play Workers in the Other World as a fictional case study to examine the complex relationship between indigeneity and migration that the characters Xunka’ and Tumin face as they uproot from San Juan Chamula and make the journey to Florida. In my analysis, I first examine the dramatic ellipses in Workers in the Other World. Analyzing the structure of this play in terms of storytelling and performance art, I argue that the playwrights affiliated with Sna Jtz’ibajom work through a structure of short, concise performances to use this play to engage in theatrical activism and attempt to make an intervention in migratory trends. Next, I turn my attention to the implicit Othering in the play’s title which presents Florida as the “other world” in opposition to Chiapas. In this, I examine the relationship between these two geographic locations through the characters’ clothing and the play’s representation of AIDS, as both an immunological disease affecting one of the protagonists and a social illness resulting in violations of workers’ rights. In San Juan Chamula, Xunka’ and Tumin focus on the resources to which they do not have access, idealizing the United States. The playwrights, however, destabilize this vision of the United States by noting some of the positive and negative aspects of both sides of the border. For example, although the characters romanticize the United States as an infinite source of wealth, the playwrights expose the dangers in the journey to the north as well as the hazardous working conditions and lack of access to clean water in Florida. Even though they are poor, Tumin and Xunka’ have adequate amounts of this fundamental basic resource necessary for their survival in San Juan Chamula. Ironically, in the United States the characters have less than they had in Chiapas. As such, I argue that the playwrights in Sna Jtz’ibajom present an overtly anti-migration message, urging fellow Chamulas to remain in Chiapas instead of trying their luck in el Norte.

Sna Jtz’ibajom was founded in 1982, “with funding from Cultural Survival, Inc.” and the help of Laughlin (Laughlin, Travelers 64, 225). Their theatrical activity began with puppet plays in 1985 (Frischmann 219) using some of the puppets remaining from Rosario Castellanos’s Teatro Petul (Underiner 48), which the Mexican author created in the 1950s for educational purposes among the Tzeltales and Tzotziles of Chiapas (Montemayor 4). The original actors in Lo’il Maxil were primarily male, with the exception of two women—Petrona de la Cruz Cruz and Isabel Juárez
Espinosa (Frischmann 220). Both women encountered opposition to their participation with the Sna theatre troupe (Steele 251; Laughlin, “Personal” 28), so they eventually “left to create a theatre for women, FOMMA (Fortaleza de la Mujer Maya [The Strength of Mayan Women])” (Lee xxvi) in 1993. Since its creation Sna Jtz’ibajom has worked to promote literacy in the Tzotzil and Tzeltal Mayan languages, and they also have initiatives to preserve and promote local traditions through activities such as “the publication of stories and poetry, occasional radio broadcasts, exhibitions of photographs taken and developed by its members, and theatre—dramatizations of folktales, Mayan history, and contemporary social issues” (Underiner 49), including migration and the Zapatista uprising.

Workers in the Other World is an example of one of their plays focusing on social issues, namely the common trend of Mayas from Chiapas opting to migrate to the United States. In this play, audiences watch the characters of Tumin and Xunka as they grapple with the decision to leave their homelands in search of better opportunities in the north. The characters ultimately decide to try their luck and journey with a coyote (smuggler) to the northern border of Mexico where they cross the desert into Arizona before traveling east in a truck to the tomato fields in Florida, where their employers abuse and mistreat them. Unable to earn enough money to support themselves, both characters must abandon their newfound life in the United States to return to San Juan Chamula, where they learn that Tumin has been infected with AIDS and faces certain death.

This play is a revision of Don Tomate y sus coyotes (a play that was developed in 1997 in Immokalee, Florida), which was originally written in the United States, “developed for a community of Mayan farmworkers in Florida and then adapted and toured in Chiapas” (Underiner 144). Though most of Sna Jtz’ibajom’s plays are first created in Chiapas, this was not the case in the creation of Don Tomate. As this project in Florida evidences, the group has staged their plays locally in Chiapas and to international audiences throughout Mexico and the United States, and in other parts of Mesoamerica including Guatemala and Honduras. Consequently, not only do some of the Sna’s plays thematically address issues of migration, but the theatre troupe itself is migratory, presenting their work both domestically and abroad.

Similar to other plays by Lo’il Maxil, Workers in the Other World is the product of artistic collaboration. The theatre troupe is multicultural, featuring a mixture of representatives from Maya communities as well as non-Maya artists and researchers. Non-Maya participants include Smithsonian curator and anthropologist Robert M. Laughlin (Frischmann 215-17; Underiner 49-50; Steele 240) and Ralph Lee, the artistic director of New York’s Mettawee River Company, who has staged indigenous plays and cultural traditions from across the globe (Underiner 51).

Although the writers’ collective Sna Jtz’ibajom is based in San Cristóbal de las Casas, the actors and other participants travel from various regions in this southeastern state in Mexico and from

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4 Despite the social limitations for indigenous women in many Maya communities in Chiapas, Sna Jtz’ibajom’s initial plays oscillated between progressively advocating for women’s issues and reaffirming traditionally “appropriate” gender roles. For example, “Snà’s first play, Entre menos burros, más elotes (Fewer Donkeys Mean More Corn, 1988) […] was partially funded by Mexico’s family planning institute [and] addresses the destructive consequences, for both the mother and her family, of having too many children too close together” (Steele 245). However, their next play, El haragán y el zopilote (The Loafer and the Buzzard, 1989) reinforces “traditional sex roles” and “work ethic […] for both genders” (Steele 247). These are some of the gender conflicts that contributed to Petrona de la Cruz Cruz and Isabel Juárez Espinosa’s decision to leave Sna Jtz’ibajom and found Fortaleza de la Mujer Maya (FOMMA).

5 Laughlin began work in the region in 1957 (Laughlin, “Looking Back” 1) and soon thereafter transferred to Harvard University to work with cultural anthropologist Evon Vogt, who had recently started the Harvard Chiapas Project that same year. Lee, however, first came to Chiapas in 1989, seven years after the founding of Sna Jtz’ibajom (Laughlin, “Febrero Loco” 9).
far-reaching geographic locations in the United States to contribute to the Sna's theatre-making troupe, Lo'il Maxil. Underiner describes the dynamic of the collaboration between Laughlin, Lee, and the other members of Sna Jtz'ibajom:

Until recently, Lee would typically spend each February with the group, polishing that year's production. For many years, because Lee knew no Spanish, Laughlin would serve as interpreter and intermediary between the troupe and the director. Two or three of the most experienced members of the troupe would meet with Laughlin to discuss concepts and script development. Laughlin recalls, "I suggested many of the lines in the plays, but they were quick to turn down ones they didn't like." From there, the script would be presented to the whole group for refining. (51)

The members of Sna Jtz'ibajom have varying degrees of influence at each stage in the development of the script. Although issues of collaboration are often complex and conditions are never entirely equal, Underiner explains that the Sna's members maintain autonomy over most of the decisions affecting the group, justifying the theatre troupe's self-identification as a “Maya” organization (52).

Interventionist storytelling through theater

Theatre is an optimal cultural and literary genre for Sna Jtz'ibajom as a medium through which to experiment with questions surrounding indigenous identities in this increasingly global context of transnational migration. It provides audiences with a momentary escape from their everyday lives. Actors are able to “play” with the social norms governing their daily understandings of migration and transnationalism; the stage provides a physical space for actors and audiences to negotiate these contested identities. In an interview with Cynthia Steele, Petrona de la Cruz Cruz has elaborated on the apt ability of theatre to posit social critique:

Through drama we can explore family and social problems that couldn't be expressed any other way. People learn to value their mother tongues and the virtues of their culture, and they are made aware of the vices and defects of our society, all the while being entertained, not feeling attacked or scolded. This makes it possible for people to seek solutions to their problems, or to satisfy the need to express their feelings. (255)

Theatre as a performative genre may be lighthearted in its delivery, so it may not feel “serious,” even though the staged plays address complex socio-political concerns. Moreover, since many Mayas are illiterate, it provides an effective way to communicate history, social action, and other issues pertaining to the community. In this way, social critique presented via performed theatre may potentially reach larger audiences than texts solely presented in written form—audiences experience and internalize the overall content and themes of plays differently than with other forms of cultural production or literature. By working through theatre, Lo’il Maxil is uniquely positioned to renegotiate their understandings of Maya diasporic experiences in the United States and back home in Chiapas.

Actors like those who play Tumin and Xunka’ in Workers in the Other World are able to as-

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6 Lee confirms his lack of proficiency in Spanish, lamenting what he describes as a “rudimentary” command of the language (xxvi).
sume the identity of their characters in the play and push the boundaries of what is acceptable in their everyday lives. If confronted because of their contested transgressions, they can safely explain that they are just “playing” or “only acting.” In his treatment of the formal characteristics of what it means to “play,” Dutch historian and cultural theorist Johan Huizinga explains that a key aspect is “the consciousness, however latent, of ‘only pretending,’” or what he later describes as “an underlying consciousness of things ‘not being real’” (22). There is an overt distancing of what is represented in the play from what occurs in real life. As we will see in *Workers in the Other World*, the actors push the socio-cultural boundaries to question issues of authenticity and traditional dress as well as the potential consequences for contracting AIDS, both for the individual and the community. These issues are at the forefront of their stagings of what it means to be both Maya and transnational in San Juan Chamula and the tomato fields in Florida. The actors are able to go against the status quo while in character because who they are on stage is not who they are in reality. By working through theatre, actors like those who play Tumin and Xunka’ in *Workers in the Other World* have strategically chosen a “safe” genre to represent transgressions of social norms by transnational migrants. If anyone expresses opposition to the controversial issues in the play, the actors can eliminate personal guilt or wrongdoing by explaining that they are in character. That is, they are merely playing their assigned parts and thus—for a finite amount of time—are removed from the “real world,” immune to the consequences of migratory status and renegotiated indigenous identities.

*Workers in the Other World* is comprised of three acts, each with 3-4 scenes, so it provides the audience with what at first glance feels like a “choppy” argument with “jumps” from one part of the play to another. For example, after Xunka’ and Tumin’s initial exchanges in San Juan Chamula, there is an abrupt scene change before the characters arrive at the border between Mexico and Arizona (which they refer to as “Narizona”). A similarly hurried transition occurs when the characters move from the border in Scene 1 of Act II to the tomato fields in Florida in the following scene. Audiences do not see what happens as the characters travel from one geographic location to the other, so these dramatic ellipses may provoke a disjointed reaction. From a storytelling perspective, however, these abrupt scene changes can be understood as an attempt to communicate a message to an audience that is likely familiar with similar narratives. As Paul Worley has acknowledged in his treatment of storytelling in Yucatec Maya oral discourses, “[a]n audience already familiar with the ideology underlying [the story] is fully situated to capably interpret [it]” (55). Worley elaborates to underscore the dynamic fluidity from one performance to the next, since the actors, artists, storytellers, and others involved adapt the text differently each time it is performed to respond to their audiences’ needs. He explains that “[s]torytellers perform the story in ways that are intelligible to a Maya audience familiar with this narrative tradition (and non-Maya audiences that are not), but nonetheless shape it in accordance with their material and ideological needs and those of the audience at the moment of its telling” (57). The performers constantly gauge their audiences to determine how much (if any) cultural brokerage they require to meaningfully understand the text performed. In the case

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7. The play with words in “Narizona” contributes to the humor and lighthearted delivery of *Workers in the Other World*. In Spanish, the term “nariz” translates as “nose,” and “zona” is a cognate for “zone.” Consequently, the addition of the “N” to “Arizona” could be understood as the “Zone of the Nose” and would likely incite laughter from the audience. Though not all Mayas speak Spanish, it is likely that some Mayas in the audience in Chiapas would have some degree of proficiency in Spanish, given the dominance of this Romance language. A similar joke appears in Luis Alberto Urrea’s novel *The Devil’s Highway* (2004), which details the May 2001 event when 14 Mexican migrants died from hyperthermia in the extreme temperatures of the Sonoran desert. Urrea also includes a reference to “Narizona,” but he translates it as “the Woman with the Big Nose” (48).
of *Workers in the Other World*, the dramatic ellipses in the play can be understood as an attempt to communicate a familiar narrative of migration to the United States. In most parts of rural Mesoamerica, it has become increasingly common to have a family member, close friend, or other loved one leave their hometown to migrate to the United States. As such, many audiences in Chiapas already know this “story,” so they have the necessary tools and knowledge to fill in the blanks for the parts of the play that may seem missing.

Within Chiapas, that the characters Tumin and Xunka’ are originally from San Juan Chamula is culturally significant, given the town’s historical legacy. As Christine Kovic explains, “San Juan Chamula has a reputation [as] the highland municipality [that is] most closed [off] to mestizos, where indigenous tradition[s] [are] most strongly preserved.” She elaborates that this is in response to “political and economic pressures from the mestizo-dominated Mexican state” (71). Throughout much of its history, San Juan Chamula has been the site of political unrest, particularly during the Cuscat Rebellion of 1869-70 and the later Pajarito Movement of 1910-11. Anthropologist Gary Gossen has underscored commonalities between these two historical events, noting that in both instances alternative interpretations of Chamulan pre-Columbian Christian symbols were not tolerated and in each movement all “dissident elements (those not affiliated with prevailing view of the traditionalists, oddly allied, on these occasions, with the Mexican state) [were] purged and expelled” (“The Other” 445). Gossen further explains that Chamula is “a very conservative, ethnically separatist community of ‘Indian’ origin,” which “survives by continually shedding its dissident elements” (“The Other” 447). Because of its historically more indigenous demographic and cultural milieu, San Juan Chamula is a highland town in stark contrast to San Cristóbal de las Casas, which “is generally the Ladino’s territory—those of Spanish, or even mixed-blood or indigenous descent who dress in Western clothing and speak Spanish as their primary tongue” (Frischmann 214). Moreover, San Juan Chamula is also known for its violent approach to maintaining cultural conservatism. Cynthia Steele explains that “Chamula Mayas are portrayed as aggressive, violent, drunken, and dirty” (242), and Jan Rus makes a similar observation, using the savage image of the Chamula Mayas which derives from an incorrect historical account of the Chamula Tzotzil rebellion of 1868-70. This version of the “Caste War of 1869” features the people of Chamula rising up in a barbaric and “cruel war of extermination against their ‘ladino’ neighbors,” culminating in the crucifixion of a young boy “on Good Friday, 1868, as an Indian ‘Christ’” (“Whose Caste War?” 127). Nearly a century later in 1962, Rosario Castellanos uses this fictional account as the basis of her narrative version of this iconic event in her novel, *Oficio de tinieblas*. In short, San Juan Chamula has a prolonged history of heightened conservatism coupled with a preference for indigenous over Ladino cultures and peoples. Turning our attention to the play *Workers in the Other World*, since Tumin and Xunka’ are from this highland town, audiences may (rightly so) infer that these theatrical characters’ non-traditional decision to abandon their homeland and indigenous traditions will be met with opposition from their family and friends.

Although many transnational Mayas have opted to cross the border, *Workers in the Other World* underscores the importance of not abandoning their homelands in San Juan Chamula because of the sacred connotations of the land. In the play’s introduction, Robert M. Laughlin and Sna Jtz’ibajom affirm that “[m]ost of them [los coletos auténticos] would not deign to lower themselves by seeking a job under gringos across the border” (225). That is, “traditional” people

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8 In an introductory essay to their collection of plays, Laughlin and Sna Jtz’ibajom explain that “[t]he coleto auténtico immigrants are the people of San Cristóbal (coletos), who, witnessing with disgust and anger Samuel Ruiz’s sympathy for Indians in general and the Zapatistas in particular, named themselves as being the only true
prefer not to migrate to the United States because they do not want to abandon the land, their
gods, and their people (226), as we observe through the characters of Tumin’s grandfather, broth-
er, and sister-in-law, all of whom refuse to leave their hometown in Chiapas. Before departing
for the United States, Tumin attempts to explain the reasons behind his decision to migrate to
el Norte, highlighting the lack of opportunities in San Juan Chamula due to extreme poverty.
However, for his grandfather (known as “Grandfather” in the play) this reason is not enough:
“What, you can’t live off what you earn? If you have some pieces of land, you just need to work
because that’s how our ancestors survived. You shouldn’t abandon San Juan” (231). According
to Grandfather, they are not as poor as they may think. For him, wealth is not determined by mon-
ey, but a symbiotic relationship with the Earth, working the land and sustaining oneself from
the harvests.

In addition to Tumin’s grandfather, his brother, Matyo, also cautions of the dangers in going
to the United States. Early in the play, Tumin and Xunka’ try to convince Matyo and his wife to
migrate with them. However, foreshadowing the threats awaiting in their journey, Matyo ques-
tions Xunka’ and Tumin’s decision to leave San Juan Chamula: “You thought it over, but what if
something happens to you there and you die?” (230). As María Enriqueta Cabrera Cuarón ex-
plains in her study detailing the challenges that migrants face as they travel to the United States,
attempting to cross the border is inherently dangerous: “hombres y mujeres, jóvenes en su mayor-
ía—y algunos de ellos menores de edad—, ponen en riesgo su integridad física, su seguridad,
incluso la vida, decididos a buscar una vida mejor. [...] Año con año aumentan los muertos al
cruzar y las deportaciones” (13). Migrants typically face a number of obstacles as they make the
journey to el Norte. In her study of K’iche’ Maya migrations from the Guatemalan Highlands to
Providence, Rhode Island, anthropologist Patricia Foxen lists some of the factors that make the
journey particularly dangerous: “human rights violations by Mexican Immigration and Judicial
Police officials (illegal detentions, physical and sexual abuse, bribes, and robbery),” mistreat-
ment at the hands of coyotes “who are known to demand sexual favors from women or steal from
their clients and abandon their charges,” and physical risks—on both sides of the border be-
tween Mexico and the United States—such as dehydration in the desert, drowning in rivers, and
asphyxiation in vehicles” (99). Often migrants experience a combination of multiple maladies,
as they are not easily isolated. Despite the fact that these perils frequently become a reality, in
Workers in the Other World Tumin does not acknowledge or respond to Matyo’s question about
the physical dangers of the journey, which arguably is a legitimate concern. Instead, Tumin re-
plies that he will not leave Xunka’ behind because he does not want her to replace him with an-
other man from San Juan Chamula. In this way, Tumin is more concerned with his wife’s fidelity,
even if obligating Xunka’ to go with him to the United States could potentially risk her life or
cause her to fall victim to sexual predators. Emphasizing the potential dangers, Sna Jtz’ibajom
implicitly urges fellow Chamulas to reconsider migrating to the United States.

Deconstructing binaries: Tradition and (trans)modernity

In Workers in the Other World the playwrights represent indigenous cultures as traditional
in contrast to the wealth of the United States as a symbol of modernity. That is, they establish
a simplistic dichotomy between tradition and modernity without recognizing that indigenous
cultures may blur these boundaries. Postcolonial critic Enrique Dussel’s conceptualization of

members of the city” (225). In this way, the “coletos auténticos” are traditionalists who do not typically sympathize
with the Zapatistas and others who break with the status quo.
transmodernity is useful to theorize indigenous subjects who draw from their cultural traditions while simultaneously engaging in processes of modernity. Dussel explains that there are two key moments in the development of modernity, which he describes as a heightened connectivity in a world-system: the first modernity following the Spanish Conquest and the “discovery” of the Americas in the fifteenth century, and the second following the Industrial Revolution and the Enlightenment during the eighteenth century (227, 229). Pushing to move past Eurocentric versions of history, Dussel proposes “transmodernity” because it “demands a whole new interpretation of modernity in order to include moments [and voices] that were never incorporated into the European vision” (223), such as the contributions of indigenous communities and other subaltern groups. The concept of transmodernity proposes an understanding of indigenous communities as continuous participants in processes of modernity. Although Eurocentric versions of history excluded them from official discourses, they have played active roles in determining how they would respond to shifts in the world market and other global events like the Spanish Conquest, the Industrial Revolution, and, more recently, transnational migration, all of which has directly affected the ways in which different parts of the world interacted. In this context, indigenous subjects like Tumin and Xunka’ are not bucolic entities trapped in a long, distant past, but rather they, like other global citizens of the twenty-first century, have negotiated their cultural heritage and traditions in relation to modernity.

Despite the complex dynamic between tradition and modernity, the playwrights in Lo’il Maxil depict the two concepts in largely simplistic terms. For example, from the onset the play presents the United States as a symbol of modernity, idealizing life in the other world across the border. The first act begins with the entrance of Presumido, Tumin’s cousin; this relative had recently returned to San Juan Chamula after living in the United States. In the performed dialogue of the play, this character identifies his name as “Xapax,” but the written script of the play formally names him “Presumido” in the official list of characters. Consequently, live audiences of the play without access to the script would not be aware of this name. Nevertheless, as an allegorical character, Presumido’s name is an indication of his smug, arrogant demeanor, which is later confirmed when he proudly boasts of the luxurious life that he had in the United States to Tumin and Xunka’:

PRESUMIDO: Yes, there’s loads of work. And you can find money anywhere. They even use it in the restrooms to clean themselves!
TUMIN: (Surprised, doubtful) Oh, how great! And… do you own a house there?
PRESUMIDO: Of course, a whole building and some factories!
Yes, it’s true. I’ve got a lot of money. Why don’t you go up there? Life is different there. It’s much better. I even own a bank! I was going to come in my plane, but the trouble is there’s no place where I could land because of all of the mountains around here. (228)

During this conversation, Tumin—and by extension the audience—questions what Presumido says given the hyperbolic nature of his description of the United States. Later at the end of the first scene, the audience’s suspicions that Presumido’s descriptions are misleading exaggerations are confirmed when he exclaims, “Ha, ha! Now they’ll see you can’t pick up any money there. They’ll suffer the way I did! We’ll all be the same!” (229). The married couple believes what Presumido says even though his self-absorbed comments are unrealistic, sensational misrepresentations. Though we do not have information about Presumido before his time in the United States, since he is the only character at this point in the play who has spent time in the United
States and returned to San Juan Chamula, the implication is that his dishonesty is one of the consequences of his own suffering in the United States. While the characters idealize the modern amenities in the United States, the playwrights do not overlook the ways that life in el Norte negatively affects transnational migrants like Presumido.

Complicating the relationship between tradition and modernity, Lo’il Maxil juxtaposes the traditional clothing with Western clothing typically worn by gringos in their costume choices for the actors. Tumin and Xunka’ dress in traditional Maya clothing, and upon seeing Tumin for the first time, Presumido remarks that Tumin is “dirty, so filthy, so bad” (227). Presumido, however, is proud to wear gringo clothing in bright colors: “Look at my clothes! And I have a gold watch with five alarms. My boots have metal tips. My sombrero is Texan” (228). Although Presumido describes Tumin in negative terms, Presumido is actually the antagonist in the play because he tries to deceive Tumin and Xunka’ before they leave for the United States. As such, the play uses outward appearances as a simplistic and immediate indication of someone’s moral standing. To put it simply, traditional dress denotes the good, whereas Mayas like Presumido wearing Western clothing have changed and are thus inherently bad.

After some difficult moments in the United States, Xunka’ and Tumin begin to wear mainstream US clothing because they believe it will make them fit in better. One of the obstacles for many Maya transnational migrants in the United States is that they physically look different. In his study of Maya migration to Indiantown, Florida, anthropologist Allan F. Burns has noted that many of the Guatemalan undocumented Mayas in Florida were easy to identify: “[t]hey were physically shorter than many other migrant workers [and] wore clothes more typical of rural Guatemala than of the U.S. migrant stream” (153). Many transnational Mayas in the United States are visually easy to identify due to their outward appearance, and language barriers and other cultural differences further compound their estrangement. Although Burns focuses on Guatemalan Mayas, his observations can also be extended to Mayas from sending communities in Mexico, as these regions also have traditional textile forms of clothing. In Workers in the Other World, although Xunka’ and Tumin begin to adapt to their new surroundings in Florida, their Maya clothing from San Juan Chamula visually marks them as outsiders. Even if people in Florida were unable to identify the municipal affiliation of their clothing, at first glance many non-Mayas in Florida would likely recognize their clothing as different from mainstream US fashion styles. Perhaps aware of this shortcoming, Xunka’ and Tumin abandon their town’s traditional Maya clothing. At the end of the play, after the migra catches Tumin and Xunka’ in the United States, the married couple returns to San Juan Chamula, also wearing Western clothing from the United States. Gary Gossen has commented on the cultural significance of clothing choice for indigenous migrants:

A number of Chamulas and other Tzotzils have even gone (legally and illegally) to the United States as migrant agricultural laborers. Most of these economic options present constant opportunities for assuming new cultural, ethnic, and even national identities—the most common of which is to ‘revestirse’ (Sp. revestirse) as a Ladino, a bearer of Mexican national culture. (“The Other” 446; emphasis in original)

In addition to physically leaving San Juan Chamula as a geographic location, Tumin and Xunka’ also leave behind part of their hometown’s culture. The couple opts to revestirse in mainstream fashion styles, even after they return to Chiapas. Although they return to their hometown, their continued preference of gringo clothing visually reinforces that the couple has changed cultur-
ally.

In *Workers in the Other World*, Western clothing leaves Tumin and Xunka’ as imperfect imitations of US culture, which creates tensions in both Florida and San Juan Chamula. We can understand Xunka’ and Tumin’s desire to look like gringos by drawing from Rey Chow’s conceptualization of the first level of mimeticism. According to Chow, “the white colonizer, his language, and his culture stand as the model against which the colonized is judged; the latter is expected to imitate, to become like his master, while knowing full well that her efforts at imitation will forever remain unsatisfactory” (104). Even though Tumin and Xunka’ attempt to look more like they “belong” in the United States, they are still unable to fully pass. The same clothing, which cannot bridge the cultural gap in the United States, also has an isolating effect on the characters upon their return to San Juan Chamula. When Tumin and Xunka’ see their family for the first time after returning from the United States, Tumin’s grandfather says that Xunka’ looks like a clown. To defend herself, Xunka’ responds, “I look like a gringa. Isn’t it true, Grandfather?” (245). In this scene Xunka’ and Tumin are similar to Presumido in that they also have physically and culturally changed in the United States, manifest in their outward appearance.

AIDS and (social) illness

The simplistic treatment of the United States in direct opposition to Chiapas is further compounded through the play’s representation of AIDS following Xunka’ and Tumin’s return to San Juan Chamula. After justifying their return explaining that Tumin has fallen ill, the couple needs the pity of their family to help cure him. When they look for someone to treat the disease, Xunka’ proclaims that “it’s certainly AIDS!” (246). This brief play does not include information concerning how Tumin contracted the disease. Despite these unknown variables, and the fact that “there is little evidence that AIDS is commonly contracted by Mayas who seek work in the United States” (Laughlin and Sna Jtz’ibajom 226), the playwrights establish a connection between AIDS and the United States given that Tumin falls ill with this immunological disease there.

In *Workers in the Other World* Lo’il Maxil represents AIDS as an inherently foreign disease from the outside. Historically speaking, this is an accurate portrayal. In their epidemiological study of the first cases of AIDS, Dr. Beatrice H. Hahn and her team of researchers have traced AIDS to the chimpanzees in sub-Saharan Africa. Although the playwrights of *Workers in the Other World* connect the United States with AIDS, the disease’s global reach is even more extensive given its origins in Africa. AIDS does not come to San Juan Chamula solely from the United States, or even other regions in the Americas more broadly, but rather from across the Atlantic Ocean.

Following this logic, AIDS is similar to the diseases such as smallpox, influenza, and measles that the Spanish conquistadores brought from Europe to the Americas in the sixteenth century. The movement of illnesses across the seas to San Juan Chamula and other regions in Latin

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9 Dr. Beatrice H. Hahn and her colleagues indicate that the two known genetically distinct AIDS viruses—human immunodeficiency virus-1 (HIV-1) and human immunodeficiency virus-2 (HIV-2)—both originated with primate populations in Africa (4).

10 These earlier illnesses decimated indigenous populations in the Americas. Historian Noble David Cook has argued that although the violence committed by the Europeans and their indigenous allies was significant in reducing indigenous populations, a critical factor was the deadly illnesses to which indigenous people had not previously been exposed and thus did not have any immunities (17). US scientist Jared Diamond has also underscored the role of diseases in the Conquest (17).
America began with the arrival of the Spanish. For this reason, Peruvian theorist Aníbal Quijano has argued that the Spanish Conquest is one of the key historical moments marking the beginning of wide-scale globalization across the Americas, noting that “a new space/time was constituted materially and subjectively” (547). Following the encounter between Europeans and indigenous communities, there was an increased exchange of goods and ideas (and by extension we can add illnesses) from one continent to another. These sixteenth century, European-based diseases which spread to Chiapas and other regions in the Americas originated across the Atlantic Ocean. Similar to the European illnesses that plagued the Americas following the arrival of the Spaniards to the region, AIDS is also a disease which originates in a foreign continent across the Atlantic Ocean. However, although much has changed since the sixteenth century, in both historical contexts once the diseases are in Latin America, Spaniards and indigenous people alike continued to spread these germs. Both groups traveled throughout the region coming into contact with people (of varying ethnicities) infected with the diseases. Moving forward to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the presence of outside illnesses like AIDS in San Juan Chamula is not a new phenomenon, but rather follows in the historical trajectory of wide-scale, intercontinental globalization stemming from the Spanish Conquest. In Workers in the Other World Lo’il Maxil represents medical illnesses as a manifestation of globalization and potential consequence of human migration. Indigenous people like Tumin bring AIDS and other illnesses to the region, which have the potential to destroy their own communities. In the case of Tumin, AIDS is a physical manifestation of his cultural decadence after migrating to the United States and is but one example of the conditions and struggles that Maya migrants like Tumin may experience in el Norte.

By extension, the playwrights represent the United States as a country with an incurable disease, socially speaking. The reference to AIDS not only functions on the physical level to denote Tumin’s illness, but it also provides a direct critique of capitalism by representing the social injustices and violation of workers’ rights that plague those who try their luck in the United States, including but not limited to Tumin and Xunka’. For example, during their first day of work, a fellow worker becomes overwhelmed with thirst:

WORKER 2: Boss, I want to drink some water.
FOREMAN: You didn’t come here to drink water. You came here to work!
WORKER 2: But... I’m thirsty.
FOREMAN: Well then, drink the water out of the ditch! Drink that so you learn how to work! (237)

Because the practice of making undocumented workers drink from the ditches is relatively common, Laughlin elaborates that many migrant workers have coined the expression, “el agua del dich” (“Immokalee Special” 33). The development of this expression linguistically illustrates the frequency that workers are obliged to drink from unhealthy water sources like the ditches surrounding the fields where they work, most likely contaminated with pesticides and other chemicals that were used on the agricultural crops. Although Tumin and Xunka’ believe that they have finally found a “better” life, they quickly learn that at their new place of employment laborers suffer unsafe work conditions and do not have access to clean water for consumption."

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11 It is important to note that migrants do not need to leave their country of origin to experience exploitation. As Lewin Fischer explains, domestic migration from rural indigenous communities to Mexican tourism centers is financially advantageous: “[i]n nearly all economic sectors, wages in Quintana Roo were nearly double those found in Yucatán” (9). Although earnings are higher, there is a need for further interdisciplinary research to examine other aspects of the work conditions domestic indigenous migrants experience when working in areas surrounding...
The lack of access to safe water sources due to environmental degradation destabilizes the idealization of the United States in contrast to Mexico. Even though Tumin and Xunka’ believe that they will have access to more resources in the United States, they do not have clean water in Florida. Perhaps ironically, they had water in abundance in their native San Juan Chamula, yet in the United States they no longer enjoy this vital resource that is crucial to their survival in what they believe to be the “land of opportunity.”

Furthermore, as undocumented workers, migrants like Tumin and Xunka’ do not have institutional access to health care or other basic rights. Following the exchange between the Foreman and the Worker over access to clean drinking water, the Foreman physically attacks a pregnant woman because she has not picked enough tomatoes, throwing a bucket at her. Doubling over in pain, she exclaims, “Ow, my stomach hurts. I feel terrible! I don’t know what’s going to happen to me” (238). According to the stage directions, they try to cure her at home since they are undocumented and “can’t go to a clinic” (238). In response to the Foreman, the woman’s husband addresses the other workers, who also feel abused, and they collectively decide to seek punitive action. The workers bring their complaint to the attention of a local lawyer, who speaks to them in Spanish with an American accent. Although they are able to provide eyewitnesses, ultimately the lawyer is unable to assist them with the legal proceedings since they are undocumented:

LAWER: I understand, but since you are illegal, I can’t do anything for you. If they mistreated you, hit you, or whatever, too bad! You aren’t citizens of this country!

WORKER 1: But sir, please help us! With a bucket they hit my wife in the stomach and she’s pregnant. She may lose the baby!

LAWER: Look, boys, the law here does not protect illegal workers. If they try to do something, it’s pretty sure they’ll be sent back to the country they came from.

WORKER 2: No, that can’t be, sir, because we haven’t done anything bad! We just came here to do some honest work!

LAWER: Well, like I said, if you want to continue working here, you have to stand all the abuse you get. (238-39)

As undocumented workers, they risk deportation if they turn to the police or the legal system to press charges against their employers. In this context of structural marginalization, in which workers must be complicit to avoid the legal consequences of their immigration status, migrant workers like Xunka’, Tumin, and the injured pregnant woman are disenfranchised both medically and legally. Seeking medical attention or legal protection could cause them to be sent back to Mexico. As a result, the lack of adequate work conditions and violations of employees’ rights are common with undocumented workers since they have little to no recourse to protect themselves.

Conclusion

In the United States Tumin and Xunka’ have less than they had in San Juan Chamula. Although the conditions in their native town are not perfect, according to Workers in the Other World, they are not worse than the lives of undocumented migrants in the unknown lands of the United States where the migra “hunt[s] for them, like rabbits” (Laughlin and Sna Jtz’ibajom, Cancun and other tourist attractions.)
Workers 244). In other words, even though there is a dichotomous treatment of Chiapas and the United States in the use of traditional dress and references to AIDS, through the representation of the lack of access to clean water and the physical abuses of migrant workers in the United States, this play shows that it is overly simplistic to conceive of these two places in reductionist, binary terms.

More broadly, through the references to the land, clothing, and AIDS, the playwrights posit the question as to whether it is possible to maintain indigenous identities in the United States. As we have seen, once the characters return to San Juan Chamula, they no longer dress in traditional clothing, opting instead for brightly colored gringo garments. In addition, the playwrights imply that there is a loss of morality and good judgment as evidenced by Tumin’s contraction of AIDS and the general demeanor of Presumido. What happens with language use once Mayas migrate to the United States? If they dominated an autochthonous language, do they still speak it with their family and friends once they return? In Gary Gossen’s 1974 publication on Chamulas and Maya oral traditions, the anthropologist notes that “Chamulas who leave their home municipio temporarily or permanently tend generally not to become acculturated; nor do they cease to speak Tzotzil, for sufficient numbers work and relocate together to make it possible to maintain a microcosm of normal Chamula life” (Chamulas 5). More than forty years later, is this still the case, or has the cultural relationship to language changed, perhaps due to different migratory trends or evolving attitudes toward language use? Continuing in this vein, how does migration affect other markers of indigenous identity? Apart from language use, there are numerous possible markers of indigeneity, and consequently Maya-ness, such as subsistence agriculture, Maya spirituality, connections to the land, and traditional dress, as we have seen in the play. Since these factors are often not isolated from one another, this raises questions of how Mayas identify when one or more of these “markers” come in contact—or are missing.

The plurality of possible representations of Maya-ness further complicates these politics of identity for transnational Mayas like Tumin and Xunka’, both in sending communities and in el Norte. Even Mayas who have not left Chiapas to migrate to the United States must negotiate what have traditionally not been Maya cultural references and beliefs. For example, in San Juan Chamula and other parts of Chiapas, there has been a prominent presence of Evangelism, which deviates from traditional forms of Maya spirituality; consequently, many Mayas have engaged in these belief systems to adopt and appropriate them into their own religious understandings. I use this as but one example to show how it has become more and more difficult to definitively discern what is “authentically” Maya. In response to international cultural exchanges many Mayas have innovated their traditions and engaged with modernity. Consequently, in the globalized twenty-first century, it has become increasingly more difficult to define Maya-ness, as such politics of identity are multi-faceted and complexly nuanced. Through their work with theatre, Sna Jtz’ibajom has contested and redefined what it means to be both Maya and transnational in the twenty-first century, crossing literary and cultural borders as they enter and exit the stage.
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