Contemporary Guatemalan Mayan Women
Write an Identity Based on Respect,
Interconnectedness, Love and Peace

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Contemporary Guatemalan Mayan women writers Maya Cu, Calixta Gabriel Xiquin, Juana Batzibal Tujal, Emma Delfina Chirix Garcia and the Grupo de Mujeres Mayas Kaqla are searching out the published page to voice their message. These writers weave texts around the topics of feminism, resistance, peace and identity. Their works evaluate the aftermath of armed conflict, and seek ways of reconstructing a society divided by ethnicity and socioeconomic level. At present there are a limited number of works written by Mayans available, but this is changing.¹

The Mayan literary voice isn't just now emerging, but rather is now appearing in academic, published, written format. Gaspar Pedro González states Mayan literary expression is a millenary event reflected in stone, paper, wood, ceramics, textiles and other mediums. It is not something new. His literary analysis begins with the cave writings, rather than the recent published texts by contemporary Mayan authors. The glyphs were the early form of writing and oral literature is still being passed down in

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the culture (6). The title of his study, *Kotz’ib*, is a Q’anjobal word that “abarca las distintas maneras de expresar el pensamiento mediante signos, símbolos, colores, tejidos y líneas” (7). He asserts to readers the need to study literature from within its own cultural and historical frame:

La literatura maya como producto cultural de una sociedad, que tiene un particular punto de vista filosófico sobre el mundo y la vida, no siempre debe ser sometida al análisis bajo los cánones de la cultura occidental. Pues los ojos y los sentimientos de sus autores, se enmarcan dentro de esa cosmovisión que les permite la cultura. (7)

Mayan women writers are producing written literature in their own languages to transcribe their culture and reality from within the culture, regardless of Western canons, in an original creation that reflects their personal socio-historical experiences in contemporary society and as a result of colonization. Their poetry and written analysis is unique and paints a picture of their individual experience as perceived from within their cultures, villages, states, nations and world. These works mark a shift from oral to written expression, from Mayan language to Spanish, and from private to public, providing a glimpse of how they interpret themselves and construct their identity creatively.

Rigoberta Menchú acquired access to the published page by narrating her testimony of the armed conflict to Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, who then transformed her oral account into a written published document that received international attention, achieving Menchú’s goal of breaking the silence about the atrocities committed during the more than thirty-year Guatemalan civil war. Although narrating her testimony does not make her a writer according to the canons of Western literary analysis and academia, Menchú considers herself a writer, stating “[d]urante muchos años soñé escribir otro libro” [...]. “Siempre cruzaron en mi camino tantos amigos y amigas que me animaban a escribir otro libro” [...]. “Cuando finalmente tomé la decisión de escribir este libro” (25). She identifies herself as the writer of her testimony in the acknowledgement section of her second book, *Rigoberta: La nieta de los mayas*, which lists her as the author, naming her as the active teller and writer of her story, most likely in reaction to the academic controversy over her first book. The discussion and debate among academia that ensued after anthropologist David Stoll questioned the authenticity and veracity of her testimonial frames this conflict between literary production and analysis.
that Gaspar Pedro González speaks of, especially when works move or are taken across cultural lines or frontiers, thus exposing them to other ways of evaluation and interpretation.²

Whether she is a writer or not, Menchú states that her purpose was to tell her people’s collective story, and she attacks academics for trying to usurp her story, noting that experiences in life create more learned individuals than reading books does. She points out:

Mucha gente nos ha metido en sus esquemas. Nos ha metido en libros y en análisis. Nos estudian y nos estudian. Nos han estudiado a lo largo de siglos. Y lo peor es que mucha gente ha usurpado nuestros conocimientos. Yo creo que es indignante cuando nos convierten en objeto de experimentos. No he querido contar los secretos porque a algunos les gusta ridiculizar nuestras palabras. (123)

In the prologue to Rigoberta: La nieta de los mayas, renowned Mayan poet Humberto Ak’abal notes this need to display the Mayan way of thinking and being from within their culture and way of expression: “Cuánta falta hace que entre nosotros salgan libros con nuestra voz, con nuestra manera de ser, con nuestra forma de pensar” (22). After being misunderstood and misinterpreted, Menchú takes on this task of explaining her culture, from within, rather than as an object of study. She shares that for her the “Quinto Centenario fue una oportunidad para alzar la voz contra quinientos años de silencio” (286). Being able to speak Spanish and tell her story she spoke in the name of all of her people. In her second book she goes on to clarify the Mayan cosmovision and points out its difference from Eurocentric ways of interpreting reality. According to Jean Molesky-Poz,

In this historical period, the construction of identity is in part a recuperation of knowledge and power. It excavates that which the colonial experience and later liberalism buried and covered, raising to the light that which was hidden in the ensuing oppression. For many, the construction of Maya identity is tied to the emergence and reclamation of Maya cosmovision, and in turn, ancestral spiritual practices. (32)

Rigoberta: La nieta de los mayas, reminds readers that Mayan cultural beliefs embody a “cosmovision” for living in peace. Menchú emphasizes respect as the main vehicle for mutual understanding and acceptance:
no necesito entenderlo para respetarlo. El respeto es más grande que mi pequeño mundo... siempre he sabido que lo mejor es ser modesto y no meterse en el juego de las interpretaciones. No meterse en los juegos de palabras o en la guerra de definiciones y conceptos. Tal vez porque los indígenas siempre fuimos comprendidos y muchos piensan que nuestra diferencia se vuelve un pretexto para desprendernos. (294)

Some societies compartmentalize information in an effort to own and manage it, a practice resulting from a need for dominance that is reflected in the use of modern technology as well. The thought of accepting people or behavior without labeling it presents a considerable challenge. This quote has been taken out of context; this is Menchú’s response to her first exposure to homosexuality during her speaking tours in San Francisco.

Rigoberta Menchú’s comparison of humanity to an ear of corn emphasizes Mayan cosmovision and its global sensitivity, awareness and outlook:

Nosotros siempre nos consideramos como una mazorca. Si a la mazorca le falta un grano, siempre se notará una ausencia, un espacio vacío, porque ese grano ocupa un lugar especial. Somos, a la vez, individuos y actores sociales. El actor social no puede confundir su papel con su importancia y su grandeza sólo por los títulos que posee, sino más bien por la sencillez, la humildad frente a los acontecimientos de una sociedad entera. Cuando se debe entender una herida en esa hermosa tierra quiché, la siento como una herida en el corazón de la humanidad. El mundo perdió esa sensibilidad y por eso ha permitido impunidad y por eso ha permitido miles de muertos y por eso ha permitido que la vida sea tan despreciada en ese corazón del quiché. Porque la humanidad no lo siente como su propia herida. Es lo mismo que Brasil o El Salvador. No sentimos la herida de los kurdos como nuestra herida. Ocurre lo mismo con la tragedia de otros pueblos. La humanidad tiene que retomar esa sensibilidad para evitar guerras o conflictos. La cosmovisión indígena debe ser una aportación al pensamiento sagrado de la humanidad. (163)

The concept of interconnectedness and compassion shines through this metaphor of the ear of corn. Corn as a symbol of existence and subsistence
often emerges in Mesoamerican culture embodying its importance for daily sustenance. Many people don’t experience the deep appreciation for food that occurs when it isn’t always readily available. Juxtaposing corn with the planet leads to the realization that there is a deeper sense of being one small part of the planet, as Menchú questions “First World” politics and materialism and urges all cultures to share the gifts the planet provides.

She defines the dualistic Mayan belief system that consists of Grandfather Sun and Grandmother Moon, a pattern reflected in her own upbringing. Her mother’s spirituality was centered in Mother Nature while her father’s was in Catholicism. Growing up in this two-sided environment leads her to encourage a horizontal belief system, rather than a vertical one. Religious beliefs are often strongly held, making it difficult to consider a horizontal belief system with many points of departure, but this type of thinking displays inclusiveness and unification that lends itself to a sense of an interdependent yet individual global community.

Menchú’s testimonials detail Mayan cosmovision and spirituality in an effort to create more interglobal understanding in contemporary society. Mayan women’s poetic expression also explores the past, especially of the recent Guatemalan civil war as it relates to the present reality. Maya Cu’s poems flip back and forth between a deep inner sadness that needs to be mourned and a hope for rebirth and purity. It seems to reflect the violent past in her country and the desire to begin anew. In “Poesía de lo propio”, Cu defines herself: “Nací mujer / predestinada / al llanto” (71). As the poem continues she speaks of her two countries in which Ladinos represent the conquest and war, and Mayans represent the pueblo or her people:

En mis dos países
hubo muros que
aún quiero derribar
botar piedras de siglos
no es fácil
para cuatro niñas
decinco años –
En mis dos países
aprendía a amar
a las de mi piel
de mi voz
This separation between the two ethnic groups comprising Guatemala is easily visible, and maintaining the invisible racial boundaries can be perceived beneath society’s surface. She points out the role children play in developing the economy in Guatemala by selling wares or working in the fields, although breaking down the foundation of racism and attaining education like their Ladino counterparts would be their goal.

Maya Cu expresses her desire to break with a past that entailed subjugation and oppression, and to presently focus on learning to love others. She cries tears freely in an effort to release the sadness and complete the healing process:

No siento vergüenza
de mis lágrimas
ellas son la rabia
por el dolor
de mis hermanas
con ellas
lavo el abuso
de calles, cines y
salas en claroscuro...
    con ellas
condeno las cadenas
de mi casa, mi ciudad
mi país. (Novísimos 72)

She speaks of abuse in a somber and mysterious way, without actually describing it, distancing herself from such a terrible reality but stating at the end of the poem, “ESTOY RENACIENDO” (Cu, Novísimos 73). The chains holding her down refers to the pain experienced and the widespread fear of speaking out against injustice. Throughout the collection she conjures up all the pain from the past, and in her culminating poem, “Canción por la vida”, the eighth part of “Poesía de este mundo”, Maya Cu chooses to focus on the life surging forth from within the earth, letting go of the hatred she’s felt for so long:
Esta vida que nace aquí
no me deja tiempo
para pensarte
viejo odio

Esta vida que está en mi suelo
recibiendo caricias
de tus pies
enredada en hebras de tu trenza
en hilos de arcoiris güípil (Novísimos 101-02)

This action of caressing mother earth with the soles of her feet, of seeing the life in the beauty of the Mayan women’s long braid and her woven güípil is the moment when she no longer suffers but chooses to embrace her identity, subverting the oppression of the past. “Canción por la vida” continues:

Esta vida de lluvia
aire recorriendo ligero
nuestros cuerpos
avivando sangre que palpita
entre flores y yo

Esta vida de rosas marchitas
que transforman mundos
de pinos cipreses de cielo
con manos y cuerpos
en su raíz

Esta vida que vivo
volando y soñándote
nunca podrá morirse
solo
brotar
brotar

brotar... (Novísimos 101-02)

The withered roses represent a society that has been left limp and lifeless after the conflict and violence, yet she is able to see that the bodies
buried beneath the earth will still nourish the roots of the trees, bringing forth new life. The rain cleanses, the air of the spirit moves over bodies reviving them, and the author chooses to embrace the new life sprouting forth after all the devastation. In the end, new plant life always emerges, regardless of what human beings do to hurt one another.

In her poem “HISTORIA”, Maya Cu deconstructs religion, subverting men to confessors and discovering God is a woman, healer and mother. Her final poems explore the internal pain and suffering she experiences being a child born during Guatemalan armed conflict. She tells readers not to expect her to be joyful:

que
no te extrañe
si a tu pedido de
bondad
alegría y olvido
respondo
justicia (La rueda 58)

She wants justice and implores the reader to LISTEN, to hear the tiny brook still flowing, and to join the course of her hope.

Maya Cu’s first compilation of poems, La rueda, explores sentiments of love, identity and the need to circle back to origin, as reflected in the title of her work, The Wheel. Searching for self she sees her double identity, passed down by her mother and bred from her country’s history. She describes stripping away the layers and recognizing herself at the center of the circle she weaves on the written page of her loom:

te debo la necesidad
de repasar los nombres
en la rueda
donde teji óvulos
y piel
a una raíz:

telcículo donde me reconozco (47)

Weaving the womb and skin refers to this process of rebirth and re-identification which is as repetitive as weaving cloth.
The art of weaving and the act as a feminine form of expression is a featured focal point in Guatemala. The patterns Mayan women weave into the cloth sometimes come to them in dreams and visions that they then put into a physical form, employing the loom, color, pattern, and threads as mediums that represent their inner ideas. Valenzuela Sotomayor emphasizes Mayan women’s roles as midwives, weavers, and ceramicists using artistic yet functional objects to display their cosmovision: “Las mujeres indígenas han conservado su lenguaje a lo largo de más de quinientos años” (81). “Su lenguaje” is the artistic expression within, and the women have been able to kindle their inner voice regardless of the oppression experienced in their immediate environment. According to Kaqqa, “[e]s un espacio absolutamente propio, sólido y en el que las mujeres pueden usar toda su creatividad, lo que le aporta a Guatemala una riqueza artística” (78). Weaving has always been a way for Mayan Guatemalan women to display their identity, to be seen and recognized as members of a community reflected in the pattern of the clothing they produce and wear. They also use their creativity to promote economic growth and to exert their presence in the national economy with benefits for the Indigenous. Wearing their own clothing keeps their identity continuously visible in both private and public spaces. The Indigenous presence can be denied, but it would be impossible to ignore within the physical country as it is always visible.

No one enjoys being marginalized, pushed aside, or being a victim of mainstream society’s intent to render them invisible. Sharing experiences of marginalization and racism and shedding tears over the pain these social practices create within humans initiates the healing process in society. The women of Kaqqa also outline the way skin color is used to discriminate, with more value being placed on having whiter skin or other physical characteristics that render one closer to the Ladino race. Being “negrito” has “una connotación de discriminación, peyorativa, de desprecio” (41). In her poem entitled “Rabia”, Maya Cu confronts Guatemalan society for denying its African and Indigenous heritage:

Te aterrás Guatemala y te das vergüenza Guatemala.
Te da miedo verte al espejo y ver tu viejo rostro adolescente, agrietado, herido; morenísimamente hermoso.

Te horrorizarás al saberte híbrida y te lavás la cara.
Tus ojos y
She fearlessly lays the reality on the table and acknowledges the African roots still visibly present in the Garífuna people situated mostly on the Caribbean coast, but also in each Guatemalan who is a result of the mixture of peoples who arrived and developed the present population. And more importantly, our global community must acknowledge its African roots on a personal and societal level.

Having fled to the United States in 1981 after three of her brothers had been killed, Calixta Gabriel Xiquín is more explicit than Maya Cu in her demands that Guatemala’s history be remembered. *Tejiendo los sucesos en el tiempo/Weaving Events in Time*, is divided into seven sections entitled: Roots, Uprooting, Quest, Speaking Out, Refuge, Testimony, and Coming Home. She attacks tourism, research, genocidal governments, torture, false elections and wars that turn brothers into soldiers.

Her poem “Comunismo, capitalismo, socialismo” openly opposes United States foreign policy in Guatemala. Xiquín becres, “Nos acusan de comunistas / mientras apoyan a gobiernos genocidas / en nuestros países” (34). She tells how Indigenous people interpret foreign intervention: “Los indios de América sabemos: / La idea del exterminio es la solución de países / «desarrrollados», / y desconocen nuestra resistencia por muchos siglos” (34). Statements like these provide the voice of opposition from within the country where the armed conflict has taken place, giving Mayan feminine perspective on United States intervention in Guatemala.

Xiquín also puts a more human face on war, stating the fact that soldiers are our brothers, our people, and those who work in the fields. She expresses her genuine concern for them:

Pobre los soldados
ellos son inocentes y víctimas de la guerra.
Los soldados son serviles del sistema.
Pobres los soldados,
cuando van a masacrar a los pueblos
son inyectados de drogas. (40)
The practice of using medication to fire up armed conflict provokes differing inner feelings and perspectives on war, as experienced by soldiers following orders, and community members receiving the impact of armed attack heightened by drug induced emotional states. This places the actors that merely take orders and medication to carry the orders out, and the receivers of said armed conflict in a resulting psychological aftermath that must be appallingly complex for both parties that have been involved in armed confrontations. She recognizes that many soldiers have served in the military out of a sheer necessity for work, while others led the attacks against Indigenous communities out of an innate professional calling for genocide. This poem questions whether coming to blows is ever a good solution to solving an ethnic, socioeconomic and race conflict that has occurred at personal and communal levels since the two different cultures came in contact during colonization.

Xiquín provides a stage for the passive observer of injustice, placing them in the spotlight in her poem “¿Entras tú?”, and challenging the reader to act out in search of justice for all. In “Ausencia de Madre” she prays to the absent Mother:

Madre,
los de California tienen corazón; son buena gente,
pero no entienden nuestra historia.
Me hace falta el calor de tus brazos.
Ellos sufre, pero no sufren como su sufrimiento nuestro.
Tienen hijos pero no son desnutridos ni descalzos.
Tienen oídos,
pero no tienen tiempo para escuchar. (56)

Speaking of hunger and malnutrition gives the reader an opportunity to consider an existence without the luxury of three meals a day, thus provoking a reevaluation of the personal notion of hunger or suffering. The reference to a lack of time for listening is also a frequent defining theme in the “developed” or “first” world. As society spins into frantic chaos, producing over-stimulated and over-scheduled individuals, who will sit quietly and take the time to listen? Her poems echo Guatemala’s tragic past and implore others not to forget the suffering that accompanies such injustice.

Juana Batzibal Tujal discusses gender roles as delineated by Mayan “cosmovision” in *Mujer maya: Rectora de nuestra cultura*. With her
writing she revisits ancient ways of constructing a balanced society, in harmony with mother Earth, in which both genders are in relation and work together to restructure society and promote education that is based on peace. For her, these ways of living are outlined in the Popol Vuh, The Mayan book of creation. In her text she employs her heritage to construct a more just society. She states that: “Como mujer heredera de la cultura maya, quiero plasmar en estas líneas el pensamiento que nuestros anteces-
tros desarrollaron para construir una sociedad justa, equilibrada, y en perfecta armonía con la madre tierra y con el cosmos” (26).

She reminds readers of the origin of the word “man” in Greek, *omoan*, which means “bond, relationship, connection”, and in Mayan, *Winaq* also means “what is complete, or unity” (27). For her, all of life’s activities revolve around relationships and anything men and women share deals with our implicit interconnectedness. The *Popol Vuh* details this constant interplay between elements, and the importance of these interactions is passed down through oral tradition in Mayan culture.

Batzibal Tujal points out our connection to the cosmos; we are a microcosm of the great macrocosm. This is a theme United States students and citizens desperately need to explore. She holds up the Mayan cross as a symbol whose vertical line points to the depth of their culture and whose horizontal line symbolizes its diffusion. She feels that the long enduring war has deprived people of the time they need to reflect upon their spiritual roots, thus revealing the masculine and feminine duality of each person. The message from Calixta Gabriel Xiquin resounds here too; if we don’t make time to reflect, nothing will change. Batzibal Tujal conjures up the masks worn during Mayan dancing to remind us:

La mujer y el varón no son actores. Sin embargo, vivimos en una sociedad que está llena de papeles. Necesitamos ponernos la máscara para actuar dentro de estos papeles. En los bailes mayas que se realizan en Guatemala, nos recuerda que detrás de la máscara está la verdadera identidad y que por eso es importante quitarse la máscara para actuar de acuerdo con el sentimiento, de acuerdo con el corazón. (37)

The cultural presence of the mask as metaphor festively reappears in most Spanish speaking countries and cultural reenactments or celebrations. Most of us need to shed our masks and open our hearts to the love and peace that each individual is born with, regardless of race, creed or sex. What is our original state? According to Batzibal Tujal, her Mayan ancestors held the answer:
Nuestros antepasados lograron llegar al punto de origen, al cero, por eso crearon sociedades justas. En los negocios, en el trabajo, en las relaciones interpersonales existía la justicia. Era una sociedad donde imperaba el amor, donde el sentimiento humano era el fundamento de todas las relaciones permitiendo la creación de una estructura de la conciencia estética. Esta forma de vida, esta forma de pensar, aún dentro de la adversidad que nos ha tocado vivir durante los últimos 5 siglos, pervive. (35)

What is this “punto cero” that Juana speaks of? In Alas y Raíces: Afectividad de las Mujeres Mayas, Emma Delfina Chirix García has interviewed Mayan women in the Grupo de Mujeres Mayas Kaqla as they come together to re-examine the past and re-define themselves. From the start they state that academic research is not what Mayan women are known for; rather they draw from their daily experiences to analyze life. They do this work in an effort to provide more information about their culture, so Mayans and non-Mayans, and men and women from all social stratum can work together to construct a more just, equal and united society (7-8). Their approach moves deeper than the academic and technical research that seeks to define them, as they focus on afectividad, (translated as love, affection or sensitivity) as a significant social experience that leads to an understanding of the subjectivity involved in ethnic differences in Guatemala.

Kaqla, translated as “rainbow”, is a woman’s organization whose mission is to deconstruct oppression and form a more dignified, healthy and egalitarian society. They use psychological, spiritual and physical healing techniques to return to their original state and live in harmony. Kaqla is unweaving the past and analyzing each of its threads in an effort to reweave an identity true to their original nature before the war, an identity free of societal and family oppression which have triggered feelings of guilt, lack of self esteem and self hatred. They re-explore the past and look to a healthier future. The women of Kaqla go back to the Conquest and state that the Spaniards legitimized violence towards the Indigenous, and women have been victimized on ethnic-racial, gender and class levels. The women have discovered:

cuando estas experiencias individuales coinciden con otras experiencias colectivas logran tener carácter social. La vivencia de la opresión étnica se refiere a todas aquellas situaciones sentidas por mujeres
indígenas, tales como la desvalorización, desaprobación, menosprecio y humillación. Al verbalizar la experiencia como fenómeno social, toma otra dimensión. Porque no es lo mismo hablar racionalmente sobre la mujer maya, que hablar desde la subjetividad de ser mujer maya. Hablar desde la experiencia humana es enfocar al ser como sujeto activo, como actor en resistencia. Hablar de las necesidades reales de afecto que no han sido satisfechas surge como necesidad porque las mujeres mayas siguen padeciendo malestares y complejos sentimientos negativos. (Chirix García 130)

The women of Kaq'a recognize the pain ethnic and gender oppression has fomented in them, and now they work to transform that realization into self-love. They reflect on themselves, and the metaphorical shedding of the Mayan mask reappears: “comienzan a abandonar las máscaras o roles con que han encarado la vida hasta el momento. Descubren algo más profundo, más propio, empiezan a soltar ideas aferradas que las oprimen y se despojan de sus máscaras para ser más auténticas” (Chirix García 190).

The Popul Vuh speaks of words that are in the belly, words that are too deeply embedded to come up to the surface of one’s being and make the concepts they utter understandable. “For the contemporary Quiché diviner, words that are ‘in the belly’ of a person are words that person is unable to bring to consciousness and articulate” (Tedlock 268). These words in the belly are generally associated with animals as they don’t use words to articulate their sensorial perceptions. However, this seems to refer to the feelings and words that lie in the seat of the human experience, a seat that may harbor negative emotions and store them deep inside as a defense mechanism against violence and oppression.

This is the dichotomy that arises in societies in which power and position on the hierarchy is measured by economic prowess, resulting in the “powerful” exerting their domination by absorbing other’s belongings and dignity, in an effort to increase their own. The Grupo de Mujeres de Kaq’a speak of the cultural conflict that arises when one desires to be a part of the dominant society yet loathes what it represents:

Los indígenas tenemos un patrón o esquema ladino que nos gusta, valoramos más y lo imitamos: la ropa, los apellidos, el comportamiento. Esto sucede porque somos discriminadas, entonces, tratamos de imitar y valorar los estereotipos ladinos, para salir de esa violencia. (66)
Assuming the culture of the oppressor affects the women internally, and aligning oneself with the Ladino culture creates a personal, physical response: “Me ofende que digan que parezco ladina porque eso conlleva que tengo comportamientos y códigos de la cultural ladina que me ha oprimido, discriminado, excluido, marginado, ha tocado mi dignidad” (Kaqla 66). This is reminiscent of the emotions experienced by Latina writers like Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga while searching for a self-defined identity. One must come to terms with the subjugator and the elements of that culture that have unnoticeably internalized themselves in the oppressed, creating an inherent sense of racism that has been passed on to them from society, via the media and other mediums.

The women of Kaqla also delineate the many purposes for using their traje or Indigenous dress. Wearing their woven traje has always made it easy to identify them and often times, discriminate against them. Many Indigenous people have chosen to dress in Western clothing, disguising themselves as Ladaños to avoid discrimination, to display an upward movement in social status, and to assimilate to dominant culture. The women see the impact the decision to dress or not to dress has, and if they dress their children in the traje they want to be sure and protect them from the layers of meaning tangled between the threads of their clothing as they openly display it in their schools and streets. Kaqla defines their objective in wearing the traje:

Para nosotras el uso del traje tiene razones identitarias y culturales, pero también, es una importante acción política y económica, ya que permite que haya un movimiento económico relacionado con el tejido que provee ganancias y autonomía económica a las mujeres. (77)

Wearing the traje has become a political statement and a source of economic solidarity, power and prowess.

These women understand the relationship between body and mind, and the devastating effects that witnessing violence can have on the physical body. They express their frustration when Western medicine can't discern this connection:

La mayoría de los médicos no ven la relación entre las emociones y la opresión. Si una mujer indígena, de una comunidad donde mataron a mucha gente, va con el médico porque tiene insomnio, palpitaciones en el pecho, dolor en la espalda, angustia, gastritis, úlcera, y el doctor le da medicina, pero no le dice que tiene razón de sentir eso,
no la apapacha y no le da masaje para que sienta la solidaridad entre los seres humanos – y sienta que el ser parte de la especie humana es una cosa horrorosa, como esa pesadilla que acaba de vivir –, ¿Cómo va a curar a esa persona si no es capaz de entender el dolor humano?

(Grupo 80)

This declaration against Western medicine and its incapacity to perceive the relationship between the mind and body is an excellent confrontation of a fast paced system that seeks to heal with a quick fix by giving a dose of medication, rather than identifying the source of the problem. Mayan women understand the need to delve deeper into the emotional causes of illness, and Western cultures could benefit from this message if they would heed it, to ponder into the underlying factors causing obesity, stress and cancer.

The women of Kaqla have taken a deep look within to identify the source of their illness, and other societies could benefit from the same type of inquiry. They accuse science of affiliating with ideology to state that what can’t be proven using their methodologies, machines, apparatuses and definitions of truth, is therefore false. Science uses this position to disclaim the knowledge Mayan healers employ in their practice when scientists can’t comprehend the way other planes of reality, that aren’t visible to them, have been manipulated (214-15). This conflict between cultures must be resolved, and the only way to begin living in a society that is truly global and international is by respecting all beliefs, regardless of rather they fit into one’s way of thinking and evaluation of “reality.” Kaqla notes how this lack of respect for other planes of existence was shifted to a secondary position to make way for the economic plane:

Igual pasa con lo mental, lo psicológico, lo humano, lo emocional, lo terapéutico, todo eso se subvaloró. Lo importante era lo económico, lo político, lo concreto, lo evidente y todo lo demás no valía. La mayoría de grupos alternativos cuestionamos la sociedad vertical y excluyente, sin darnos cuenta que nos enganchábamos en lo mismo.

(Grupo 215)

Can we say and see that we are living in a vertical and exclusive society, many of us as unaware as the women of Kaqla were, that we are feeding into societal roles that may have nothing to do with our goals and ideals for living in peace and harmony on this planet together?
As stated in the “Final Reflections” of the book, Kaqna women’s process of exploring reality on a deeper level to incite transformation into something more positive requires will, reflection and political action. They urge all women to work together, regardless of nationality: “Es pensar juntas, hacer trabajo con otras mujeres, con otras etnias, con otros pueblos. Es aunar esfuerzos a los de las organizaciones de mujeres de otros continentes e incorporar en los planteamientos las necesidades específicas de las mujeres mayas, como requisito para fortalecer y enriquecer el mensaje diverso y de unidad” (Chirix García 209).

The strength portrayed in this study of affection can fuel the fire for non-Mayans as well. The women point out that Mayan women have been in resistance for centuries, and now the moment to deconstruct the past and reconstruct themselves with more clarity and dignity has come. Some Mayan women turn to the cosmovision of their ancestors for equilibrium and others “proponen la necesidad de construir una nueva cosmovisión o paradigma que genere afecto, bienestar y justicia. Esto significa elevar el afecto al tema de los derechos humanos. La sociedad en general tiene derecho a vivir en bienestar y esto exige que todas las necesidades humanas esenciales estén satisfechas” (Chirix García 204).

The problematic underlying actual publication and how writers are selected for publishing will also influence whose message is distributed, although the freedom of expression the Internet provides may create a more open and accessible international forum. With the invention of the printing press came control over access to the printed word by those in ownership of the printing device, and that has influenced the way information has been edited and presented since its invention. Literary publishing follows a definite pecking order that reflects gender, socioeconomic status, and academic level, and it is driven as much by marketability as by intellectual, creative or artistic value. It is only in the last ten years that Mayan women authors have been published. The Nobel Peace Prize set the international stage for Rigoberta Menchú’s testimonial work, which was then followed by the work of male writers, and now the female writers are having their work published too. This selective publishing has been repeated throughout history internationally, and is mirrored in the limited access to labor and political arenas as well. Silencing takes place on both verbal and written levels.

The hegemonic paradigm silences the Other, forcing them to learn the language and modes of expression of those in control of the economic empire in order to be heard, a pattern that can be traced throughout
history. Forcing other modes of expression into the hegemonic paradigm or outline varies the Other’s voice, distorting it, distancing it, and taking it away from its original state and message. Gaspar Pedro González laments the inferior categorization with which hegemonic countries label Mayan wisdom, using terms such as: “artesanía en contraposición de arte; tradición oral frente a la literatura erudita; etnografía frente a la historia; paganismo o politeísmo frente a religión” (99). This is a modern day conquest that requires written published material for validation of a culture and for academic acknowledgement, and Mayan women writers are making their contribution to scholarship, thus decolonizing it, adding another voice and direction to the epistemology of contemporary society and the published, written word. These different forms and frames for thinking, rising out of local histories, recreate a global design as multifaceted and multicolored as a Mayan weaving. Walter Mignolo points out this interminable process towards a diverse epistemology, pondering its origin, direction, and continued thought towards a global reality that reflects all ways of seeing and interpreting without placing more validity on any one view:

If such a picture could have in place a “before” (during the five hundred years of the formation and consolidation of the modern world system), it is only in the past decades that a strong consciousness of the crisis of modernity and the epistemological potential of border thinking is becoming conceptualized as such and worked out, not as marginal or degraded forms of knowledge but as the very potential of the border epistemology emerging from the colonial difference. (213)

Colonial difference, and yet, one part of the cosmovision of the whole, as described by Rigoberta Menchú, with each kernel being a necessary component of the ear of corn, a metaphor for the local voices and languages that make up today’s global epistemology.

Rigoberta Menchú, Maya Cu, Calixta Gabriel Xiquín, Juana Batzibal Tujal and Emma Delfina Chirix García with the women’s group Kaq’äl reiterate the belief that living, educating and advocating for peace is not an external task, but rather an internal one that begins within each individual and is based upon a common desire for peace in one’s home, city and country. Mayan women authors write from within the center of the recent armed conflict, and from the place of five hundred years
of subjugation, pondering their local history and personal trajectory through enslavement, oppression, and racism. They transcribe their oral history onto the written page, adding the thread of their local history to the global weave, meeting the Other on their formal, academic terrain as active agents making sense of their world and the past. Their writing is a revolutionary action in response and reaction to five hundred years of silencing and deprivation of basic human rights such as education. This literature subverts international notions of nation-state, outlining the conquest and Guatemalan history, the injustices of war, the absence of human rights for the Indigenous, and the role of Western society in maintaining its hegemonic empire. Mayan women writers examine gender, class, and racial roles as practiced in Guatemala, finding the subjugator within, and quickly banishing them to the exterior, rejecting social phenomena that discriminate against them on these bases. They reconstruct an identity, seeking out the millenary voices of their Mayan ancestors and adopting a cosmovision based on ancient beliefs and focused on the values of contemporary Mayan women. The writers look to their Mayan roots for an identity that resonates more clearly within them, recognizing Mayan duality inside themselves, and seeking to create a world based on the dualistic nature of humanity in which both sexes work together in harmony. They look to their original state and find the love necessary to heal and induce societal change. These writers move from studied to subject; only they can write their story and outline their inner workings, providing their point of view. Mayan women writers share a glimpse of their horizontal world view, providing a Mayan epistemology, told in their own words, with values only those who have lived their individual local histories can share with the Other. Will the Other finally listen?

NOTES

1 Research conducted under the auspices of a Title VIA grant comparing Mayan and Winnebago cultures at Metropolitan Community College in Omaha, Nebraska, in collaboration with Little Priest Tribal College in Winnebago, Nebraska, revealed there are few published Mayan Guatemalan women, although the Internet provides a more accessible site for women to voice their concerns. The results of this research can be seen at http://www.mccneb.edu/mayanliterature, and include bilingual excerpts for classroom use, as well as a bibliography.
The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy edited by Arturo Arias with a response by David Stoll discusses testimony and authorship rights in the context of the Guatemalan armed conflict, as well as Menchú’s quest for a medium to alert the international community about the atrocities committed on Indigenous people in her country. In Rigoberta: La nieta de los mayas Menchú states that she was innocent and naive at the time they compiled the book, and “Simplemente no conocía las reglas comerciales cuando escribí esa memoria. Sólo daba gracias al creador por estar viva y no tenía ninguna idea de mis derechos de autor” (253).

WORKS CITED


