

“Xib’e pa El Norte”: Ethnographic Encounters with Kaqchikel Maya Transnational Migration from Lake Atitlán, Guatemala to Brooklyn, New York

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During the summer of 2010 in Guatemala, I frequently boarded a chicken bus in Panajachel to travel to Sololá, transferred to a mini-van that climbed the winding roads through the mountains lining Lake Atitlán, to ultimately arrive in Xeya’, an *aldea* in a rural region in this Central American country.¹ With each journey, I took the road less traveled, from the tourist town of Panajachel to remote Xeya’. While I was in Xeya’ to record Kaqchikel Maya children’s songs and poetry for my research, the small hand-held video camera, microphone, and tripod I carried attracted attention.

After several afternoons of working with a family in Xeya’, in the thickly accented Kaqchikel Maya of the Lake Atitlán region, one of the elderly men in the family—Filiberto—explained that two of his sons, Javier and Ricardo, had migrated to Brooklyn, New York. It had been several years since any of the family had seen them, so he wanted to know if I would be willing to help create a video that I could mail to the brothers in New York once I returned to the United States. Without hesitation, I said that I would be happy to do so, and we began making the arrangements for the filming.

The family in Xeya’ decided to film the video on a Sunday afternoon in July 2010. That day marked the celebration of Filiberto’s birthday party, so many of his siblings and their families came to celebrate and contribute to the video. As soon as the guests arrived, the excitement and high energy of the day’s festivities was immediately apparent. On every other occasion when I had visited, some members of the family were away working, so all of the house’s occupants were never present at once. However, this was not the case for Filiberto’s birthday party. The house was full, and everyone was scurrying to finish the last-minute preparations for the party and the filming. At the end of the day, I reiterated to the family that I would make multiple copies of the video and the photographs I had taken that summer, one set for the brothers in New York and another for the family in Xeya’.

In this essay, the story of Filiberto and his family provides entrée to my discussion of the migration of Kaqchikel Maya from Xeya’. The migration of Kaqchikel Maya from Xeya’ to the United States has affected their family members who remain in rural Guatemala, specifically through economic remittances and the cultural exchange embodied in the creation of this transnational video. Finally, I draw from my telephone conversations with Javier to problematize the ethnic label “Latino” and its application to indigenous Guatemalans in the United States. In his work discussing the politics of Latino identities, Ilan Stavans poses the question, “Where can one begin exploring the Latino hybrid and its multiple links to Hispanic America?” (16-17). For Stavans, the term “Latino” encapsulates a multi-faceted array of peoples, underscoring that no two Latinos and their corresponding experiences in the United States are exactly alike. Following Stavans’ notion of hybridity, I examine the points of contention that complicate the construction of a unified Latino identity—geographic regions of origin, socio-economic backgrounds, generational differences, language use, and, more generally, cultural milieu—before exploring the relationship between indigeneity and Latino Studies in the context of this case study. From this ethnographic research, I discuss the

implications of being an indigenous transnational subject both in Xeya' and Brooklyn, New York.

Transnationalism generally denotes the implicit blurring of borders as a result of globalization and heightened technological connectivity (Appadurai 8; Foxen xvii; Kearney 553; Ong 10). Due to cultural exchanges made possible by information technologies, when people leave their countries of origin to relocate to another, either permanently or temporarily, they often maintain contact with their family and friends back home. Drawing from Arjun Appadurai's discussion of local narratives and plots in relation to regional, national, and global events, Paul Worley explains that "[g]iven late twentieth- and twenty-first-century technology's ability to facilitate the movement of capital, information, and people around the globe, immigration no longer entails complete isolation from one's home community, much less one's home country" (33). Rather, transnational migrants like Javier and Ricardo occupy what anthropologist Patricia Foxen has described as a "new kind of social space." For her, they "live their lives—that is, tend to their material needs, social commitments, and loyalties—in more than one place, or in the words of many transnational migrants, *con un pie aquí y otro allá* ('with one foot here and one foot there')" (xvii). While they may be physically located in one place, people, cultural influences, and other factors from different geographic locations influence their lives. That is, transnational migrants are in a constant state of in-between-ness. Foxen elaborates on the cultural implications of this new space: "[m]usic, fashion, family dynamics, household and community economies, and ethnic, gender, religious, class, and political formations—in short, what might be labeled cultures—are increasingly produced and consumed between 'here' and 'there'" (xvii). In the context of rural Guatemala, both in the sending communities and in the United States, Kaqchikel Maya like Javier and Ricardo and their family in Xeya' renegotiate their indigenous identities and cultures that result from the blurring of borders implicit with transnationalism and globalization. In the case of Filiberto's family, we will see how the exchange of cultural and economic goods, such as the financial remittances and the transnational video, exemplify the heightened connectivity of the global relationship between two local areas: Xeya' and Brooklyn, New York.

The relationship between the global and the local is key to an understanding of globalization. As José Rabasa has explained, the local and the global are not mutually exclusive. The concepts are intertwined: "[b]eyond representation, the local manifests its impossibility in its bind to the global. Ultimately, the local must be seen as a catachresis for the national and the global in all their contradictions" (194). Néstor García Canclini has also emphasized this connection: "[e]n la globalización no sólo se reorganiza lo local, sino las relaciones local-local" (131). Innovations in telecommunication technologies have caused local cultures to be in contact with others from across the globe (García Canclini 131; Jameson 55). With this heightened connectivity, there are more opportunities for cultural exchange and the "dissemination of symbolic processes that increasingly drive economics and politics" (Yúdice 29).² Globalization, then, is a relational process that involves the increased movement, or mobility, of people, places, ideas, and things, either physically or via communicational technologies such as the Internet and other digital media. This inadvertently affects identities and their representations via cultural products like Filiberto's family's transnational video. Transnational migrants and their families simultaneously have contact with a myriad of cultural influences from different local places across geopolitical borders, all of which affect their identities to varying degrees. Following this logic, Cristina Szanton Blanc, Linda Basch, and Nina Glick Schiller have argued that transnational migrants are better referred to as

“transmigrants” because their “daily lives depend on multiple and constant interconnections across international borders and [their] public identities are configured in relationship to more than one state” (48). In this context, families like Filiberto’s have innovated their indigenous traditions and identities in diverse ways, negotiating new transnational Kaqchikel Maya subjectivities both *aquí* and *allá*.

Economic and Cultural Exchanges in Rural Guatemala

Discussions surrounding immigration in the United States tend to focus on the effects in El Norte, largely ignoring the consequences for sending communities. During my time near Lake Atitlán, I was constantly reminded of the widespread influences of immigration in the surrounding rural *aldeas*. My physical characteristics of pale skin and blue eyes marked me as a foreigner, so street and market vendors often asked where I was from. When I responded that I was from the United States, many eagerly replied that they had a family member there. These vendors often specified the city or region where the family member resided, before inquiring how close geographically my home in Kansas was to their family. On the one hand, methodologically these informal conversations provided me with a tool to connect with my Kaqchikel interlocutors. On the other, these exchanges were very frequent, which speaks to the fact that migration from rural Guatemala to the United States has become increasingly common. Kaqchikel Maya families who are untouched by migration to the United States are the exception, rather than the rule. Like Filiberto’s family in Xeya’, many Kaqchikel Maya have at least one family member who has left to try their luck in the North.

Maya migration from Guatemala to the United States is not because Maya yearn to join the modern world, as anthropologist David Stoll acknowledges. For him, the Maya have been part of the modern world for the last 500 years (7). Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano explains the concept of modernity in relation to coloniality. Quijano argues that following the arrival of the Spanish to the Americas, “a new space/time was constituted materially and subjectively” (547). It was one of the first examples of broad-scale globalization marked by the exchange of goods and ideas from one continent to another, a milestone that opened doors for the capitalist world market. In the twenty-first century, in the Guatemalan Highlands it is very common to see Maya women at the market who dress in traditional clothing, but also keep a cell phone tucked in their *huipil*. For centuries, Maya have participated in the modern world, albeit in different ways given the technological advances available at the time.

David Stoll explains that many Guatemalan Maya opt to go to the United States because they want jobs and economic opportunities. He explains that Maya “wish to enjoy the modern world like the readers of this 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). In other words, whereas Maya once fled Guatemala to escape the violence of the civil war (Arias 187; Loucky and Moors 4), many Guatemalan Maya in the United States today are chasing the “American Dream.”³ They have arrived with the hopes that through hard work they will achieve economic success and prosperity. The first wave of Maya migrant families in the 1980s featured political refugees whereas following the civil war there were mainly single migrants hoping to get ahead in El Norte. While there are pronounced differences between these trends, Patrick T. Hiller, J. P. Linstroth, and Paloma Ayala Vela caution that “making a clear cut distinction between these migration waves would be misleading since economic migration is strongly connected to the aftermath of the

protracted civil war” (n. pag.). Although the 1996 Peace Accords marked the official end of the war, this period of conflict has left this Central American country with a legacy of traumatic personal memories of the violence and deeply entrenched social inequalities. This situation from the past has contributed to the extreme poverty of today (Flynn 63), which is a key reason why many Maya opt to go to the United States. In the sending communities in rural Guatemala, these migratory trends have resulted in widespread cultural and economic effects.

For example, remittances are a driving factor for many transnational subjects who relocate to the United States from Guatemala and other parts of Latin America, as Patricia Foxen has observed:

Throughout Guatemala, US dollar remittances have become a major source of national revenue over the past two decades, having surpassed tourism and coming in second only to Guatemala’s main export, coffee. As House and Lovell state, “[T]he Guatemalan economy as a whole is increasingly subsidized by foreign remittances,” which are estimated to total US\$500 million per year (House and Lovell 1999; Jonas 1995). It is impossible to calculate exact figures for remittances received in rural towns such as Xinxuc, however. Most K’iche’s send US dollar money orders through courier companies or with *conocidos* who return home [...] (127-28)

Although Foxen’s research addresses K’iche’ migration from Xinxuc, this community is similar to Xeya’ (and other Kaqchikel communities in the Guatemalan Highlands and around Lake Atitlán) in that both are located in predominantly rural areas.⁴ Xeya’, like Xinxuc, has limited access to courier systems like Western Union to deliver the funds from New York. The town with such services closest to Xeya’ is Sololá. Although I did not learn if or how the family in Xeya’ acquired remittances, they informed me that they often receive mail and other packages from the United States in nearby Sololá.

Movement of people between Xeya’ and the United States is generally unidirectional due to the difficult circumstances along these transnational routes. Therefore, it is uncommon to receive the remittances from a reliable *conocido*. Filiberto’s family explained that people from Xeya’ often go to El Norte together, following a similar path through Mexico and into the United States because there is trust among the community members to take care of one another. The journey to the United States is highly uncertain, and often migrants are caught and deported, so they must make several attempts before successfully arriving in the United States (Foxen 99). Foxen describes the human rights violations and physically treacherous conditions that make the journey perilous:

Numerous human rights violations by Mexican Immigration and Judicial Police officials (illegal detentions, physical and sexual abuse, bribes, and robbery) have been documented; illiterate K’iche’s with poor Spanish-language skills are particularly susceptible to mistreatment from officials and gangs of thugs who prey on them. The trip across the border between Mexico and the United States is physically exhausting and often dangerous: *Mojados* (wetbacks), or *pollos* (chickens), are dependent on sometimes unscrupulous *coyotes* (smugglers) who are known to demand sexual favors from women or steal from their clients and abandon their charges. [...] Because the United States dramatically tightened its border patrols in the 1990s, *coyotes* have searched for new (and more dangerous) routes and have hiked up cross-border fares substantially. Sensational reports of

border crossers dying of dehydration in the desert, drowning in rivers, and found asphyxiated in the backs of trucks have consistently been reported in the news on both sides of the border [in Mexico and United States]. (99)

There is a history of corruption among *coyotes*, so community members in Xeya' have elaborated intricate routes to the United States. They generally trust only certain *coyotes* who have proven themselves as trustworthy to other migrants who have successfully made it from Xeya' to the United States without incident. In this context, Foxen reasons that border-crossing has become "an increasingly well-organized, sophisticated, and lucrative local endeavor" in which "[l]ocal *coyotes* [..] (both Ladino and K'iche') from the region [...] have learned various routes, methods, material, and other necessities for border crossing" (99). Given the plethora of obstacles that migrants face throughout the journey, the family in Xeya' explained that it is extremely rare for *conocidos*, or people they knew, to return for short visits. Generally speaking, if someone returns from the United States, they do so as a permanent relocation or involuntarily due to deportation. Therefore, Filiberto's family does not rely on *conocidos* returning with the remittances from their family members. Instead, they rely exclusively on the limited courier systems and other services available in nearby Sololá.

As part of their remittances, Filiberto's sons in New York had purchased electrical appliances including an oven for the kitchen. From my interactions with the family, it was unclear if they had bought it, or if Javier and Ricardo had decided to purchase it for them as a gift without their knowledge. There was no electricity in the family home in Xeya', so the oven was never plugged in. When I arrived to the party, Filiberto's wife, Margarita, instructed me to place the cakes that I had brought in the oven. Rather than use the device for its intended function, the family repurposed it to store food prepared elsewhere, protecting it from flies or other bugs. The family continued to prepare their food over a traditional open fire. Just prior to the filming of the transnational video, I worked with other women in the family over an open fire to prepare the dough for the tamales before wrapping them in leaves from the *milpa*. Although an oven is a luxurious appliance, without electricity it did not change how the family approached their domestic tasks in the kitchen. Electric appliances are often simply symbolic purchases of status symbols, yet here the oven also had a practical use.

From the remittances that Javier and Ricardo sent, the family also prioritized allocating monies to support the children's education, perhaps given its implication for their future. Unequal race relations have plagued Guatemala arguably since the arrival of the Spanish; throughout Guatemalan history, as sociologist and political scientist Marta Elena Casaús Arzú explains, racism has been integral to the dominant discourses and ideology of the State (90). Anthropologist Charles R. Hale has used the expression "racial hierarchy" to describe Guatemalan society, noting that it features a "sharp differentiation among distinct strata along the lines of power and privilege, with ladinos generally occupying a higher stratum and Indians a lower one" (209). A good education would provide the children with social capital to perhaps better themselves in their native Guatemala, despite the racial tensions that pose challenges for them as Kaqchikel Maya. One member of the family, for example, had just recently finished her studies to become a school teacher in nearby Sololá, where she was engaged in bilingual educational initiatives that have resulted from Pan-Maya activism. The family used the remittances to open up long-term financial opportunities for the children. Since Javier and Ricardo eventually planned on returning to Xeya', this was perhaps a strategic move to potentially avoid a situation requiring permanent dependence on remittances from their earnings in the United States.

The movement of monies and cultural products is not unidirectional; there is an exchange between the United States and sending communities like Xeya'. Remittances exemplify the movement of financial capital from the United States to sending communities. However, some people who have remained in sending communities like the family in Xeya' have also sent cultural and symbolic items to their family members working in El Norte, as this transnational video evidences. After I returned to the United States, no longer surrounded by the *milpa* in the Guatemalan Highlands but the cornfields of the Midwest, I made copies of the video and the photographs. I then prepared two packages, one which I mailed to New York, and the other to a colleague in the United States who would be returning to Xeya' in the near future. Although these symbolic items were originally created in Guatemala, perhaps ironically they first went to the United States before returning to Xeya'. While I was not a transnational migrant in the United States, nor was I sending a remittance, I found myself working through similar means to deliver the package to the family in Xeya'—working with a trusted *conocido* who would give it to them for me.

In addition to Filiberto's family, other Maya who have remained in their Latin American countries of origin have also worked with foreigners—often academics—to create recordings to send to their loved ones in the United States. For example, anthropologist Christine Eber documents and transcribes a cassette tape that “Antonia,” a Tzotzil woman from Chiapas, sent to her son working in Alabama in 2009. In her message in Tzotzil Maya which Eber translates to Spanish and English, the mother wishes her son happiness in his work, urges him to save money, thanks God for his safe arrival, and asks God to keep him healthy (209-10). While Antonia's and Filiberto's families work through different media, both send personal, heart-felt messages to their family members working in El Norte.

Negotiating Cultural and Economic Power Differentials in Xeya'

My experiences creating this transnational video working with the family in Xeya' made me acutely aware of the power differentials between the family and me. There were pronounced economic disparities between life in Xeya' and the United States. Moreover, as a researcher from the United States, I had much more access to money and other resources than the family in Xeya'. The fact that I owned a video camera, microphone, and tripod to create the video is but one example of these economic discrepancies. For someone in rural Guatemala like Filiberto working in the *milpa* for approximately 40Q (\$5 US) each day, it would take months to earn enough money to purchase these items. The video equipment was a visual reminder of my privilege.

Apart from economic issues, there were also cultural differences between us, specifically in terms of visual markers of physical appearance and traditional clothing. In Guatemalan society, as in other indigenous regions in Latin America, traditional clothing is a marker of ethnic difference, visually separating Maya from *Ladinos*. As Marcia Stephenson affirms in her study of traditional clothing in Andean Bolivia, “from colonial times to the present, the racialized continuum between ‘visibility’ and ‘invisibility’ has endowed clothing, hairstyle, and language with crucial symbolic resonance” (157). Stephenson underscores the ability of clothing to make a “different” identity visible, recognizing that there are varying degrees of this visibility. Kaqchikel scholar Irma Otzoy expresses a similar idea, arguing that initiatives to conserve Maya textiles allow “Maya to dress in a kind of clothing that satisfies their artistic, moral, and spiritual feelings, and also distinguishes them culturally” (14).

Wearing traditional clothing is a visual cue that signals “Maya-ness.” For this reason, anthropologist Diane Nelson describes Maya clothing as sight specific, “apparently making identity completely available to the gaze: seeing *traje* means one is seeing an Indian” (181). Although Maya distinguish each town by the distinct design of its *traje*, to the viewer who may not be familiar with these differences (including but not limited to *Ladinos* and foreigners), the clothing translates as “Maya” regardless of its municipal affiliation.

In the context of globalization and cultural exchange, it has become increasingly common to see non-Maya tourists wearing traditional Maya clothing, while in many cases the Maya themselves have had to abandon the traditional practice of weaving and wearing *traje*. Given global economic forces and increased poverty in rural Guatemala, many Maya wear T-shirts because they are much cheaper. Many women opt for T-shirts while they are working and save their *huipiles* (if they own any) for special occasions.⁵ During my visits with the family, I was present for work in the *milpa* and Filiberto’s birthday celebration. Regardless of the occasion, the same women wore T-shirts whereas others always wore *huipiles*. When I wore Maya *traje*, many of the women told me, “Jeb’el atzyaq” (Your clothes are beautiful), and asked where I had bought them. In my photographs, I am completely dressed in *traje*, posing with many Kaqchikel Maya women who wear *corte* and a T-shirt. Based on clothing alone, who is Maya in these photographs is not immediately apparent. Instead of the Maya wearing traditional clothing and the foreigner donning Western clothing, there was an inversion in terms of physical appearance.

Maya clothing is a tradition that has come in direct conflict with distinct forms of globalization, and as such, has become a status symbol in many indigenous communities. As Maya religious studies scholar Jean Molesky-Poz notes, one consequence of the Guatemalan civil war “was that widows who had to assume the planting and harvesting responsibilities as well as caring for their children and household no longer had time to weave” (53). As a result, many young women began wearing Western style clothing. As Stephenson has indicated, when indigenous people in Latin America opt for Western style clothing as opposed to traditional clothing, the boundaries are blurred between the ethnicized Other and the rest of society (157). The women in the family in Xeya’ did weave, but they often sold the *huipiles* for profit in the market in Sololá, instead wearing *corte* and a T-shirt. Consequently, several of the family members used the money from remittances to buy traditional clothing for the women. In this way, the family used the transnational capital from the remittances to reinforce visual markers of indigeneity through traditional dress at home.

In sum, there were numerous differences between the family in Xeya’ and I, which manifested themselves to varying degrees. I witnessed the poverty and disenfranchisement in Xeya’ that had provoked Javier and Ricardo to migrate to the United States in the first place. Through my visits with the family several years after the brothers’ departure, I observed the economic and cultural effects of their absence and remittances from the United States. I was constantly reminded of my privilege as a United States citizen, as I reflected on the fact that these brothers had paid very dearly and risked so much to live and work in my country.

Alienation in New York and Questions of *Latinidad*

After mailing the family’s video and photographs to Javier and Ricardo, I followed up with them to ensure that the package had arrived and to confirm that there were not any technological issues in playing the video. From my initial conversations with Javier, I

immediately became aware of the isolation that the brothers faced on a daily basis in New York. Javier and Ricardo lived in a small, clandestine dwelling behind the garage where they worked. To avoid any potential risks of deportation, they rarely if ever left this building. Moreover, their lack of legal documentation created numerous obstacles. Christine Eber also notes the importance of a photo ID based on her experiences with Antonia's son: "I never realized how important one is in the United States until we tried to get him a library card, a cell phone, and a return visit to the clinic, where they agreed to see him once without a photo ID but not after that" (183). Like Antonia's son, Javier and Ricardo had very little access to public services, healthcare, or consistent cell phone communication (rather than a pay-by-the-minute option). Transnational migrants without legal documentation often do not even seek out these options simply for fear of deportation. Many of the services and resources that I take for granted as a United States citizen were simply unavailable to transnational subjects like the brothers from Xeya'. In addition to their physical isolation in the building where they worked and lived, Javier and Ricardo were also infrastructurally disenfranchised in United States society.

In addition, Javier and Ricardo were linguistically alienated because their native language was Kaqchikel Maya. They had learned Spanish as a second language in Guatemala and had limited proficiency in English from their time in the United States. I am much more proficient in Spanish than in Kaqchikel Maya, but Javier insisted that we talk on the telephone in Kaqchikel. As a Kaqchikel Maya language student taking classes to improve my proficiency in this indigenous language, I was more than eager to reciprocate. Over the next several weeks, Javier called my personal cell phone when he was not working long shifts at the garage just to chat about the day in his native Kaqchikel. This provided him with an opportunity to have contact with someone with whom he did not live or work, and he could speak in the language of his choosing. As a transnational subject from Latin America in the United States, a situation marked by shared experiences of marginalization with others migrants from this region (Mujčinović 6; Luis xiv; Caminero-Santangelo 11-12), having these options granted Javier some degree of agency to combat his alienation. Although he did not explicitly verbalize as much, it seemed that Javier yearned to speak in his language. Was his desire to speak with me in Kaqchikel due to his knowledge that I was learning the language? Could it have been because Javier had no one else in Brooklyn aside from Ricardo with whom to converse in Kaqchikel?

This raises issues of whether the brothers were part of a larger transnational Kaqchikel community in New York. Many Maya have become part of transnational communities in the United States which value their indigenous heritage and Maya languages. Paul Worley notes that in the short story, "Táanxal kaajile' ku chímpoltaj maaya kaaj, ma' je'ex tu lu'umile'," by Yukatek Maya author Felipe de Jesús Castillo Tzec, the protagonist Chuchu Pancho migrates to a transnational Yukatek Maya community in Oregon. Here, Worley explains that "Chucho finds Mayaness to be a mark of prestige" (46), and "[h]e speaks Maya in public and tells Maya stories to his coworkers at the restaurant" (47). Similarly, Arturo Arias describes K'anjobal Maya language use in the PA announcements for the celebration of a Feria de San Miguel in Los Angeles in 1992. In the short story by Felipe de Jesús Castillo Tzec and in the Feria de San Miguel, Maya in both transnational communities value their respective Maya languages and use them in public. The brothers from Xeya', however, rarely left the confines of the building where they worked and lived given their extreme (perhaps warranted) fear of deportation, as we have seen. Even if there was a larger Kaqchikel-speaking community nearby, they may not

have been aware of it. As such, they may not have known of opportunities to speak in their indigenous languages with other Kaqchikel Maya transnational subjects in the area.

My conversations with Javier and the family in Xeya' also reaffirmed that the general use of the ethnic label "Latino" is fundamentally problematic to describe Latin American indigenous persons who have taken up residence in the United States. The term "Latino" has been the subject of much intellectual inquiry in recent decades, and many scholars have questioned its utility. Suzanne Oboler has explained that the category "Latino" has been applied from the outside, "imposed by Americans" (155), which "obscures rather than clarifies" these issues of identity (2). More broadly, the title of this journal, *Label Me Latina/o*, speaks to this phenomenon. While using the command form of the verb "label" can be read in rather ambivalent ways, one possible interpretation is to signal that other agents have ascribed this term to Latin Americans residing in the United States.⁶ The umbrella term "Latino" has a generalizing effect, failing to recognize the nuanced differences of people who come from various geographic regions, socio-economic backgrounds, and cultural milieu of Latin America. As Debra Castillo has noted, although questions of who is a Latina/o have been addressed with "identitarian claims" (10-11), many scholars have refuted the category altogether. Earl Shorris has claimed that "there are no Latinos, only diverse peoples struggling to remain who they are" (12).⁷ Consequently, as Marta Caminero Santangelo explains, "[m]ost savvy commentators now disavow (at least explicitly) the notion of an essential Latino identity" (4). For the brothers from Xeya', their indigenous background, Kaqchikel Maya language use, and Guatemalan nationality (with its legacy of racism from the violence against the Maya during the civil war) have all shaped their experiences in the United States, complicating their potential identification with the essential construct of "Latino."

Due to socio-economic and racial differences, the use of the term "Latino" is particularly complicated when referring to Maya from rural Guatemala like Javier and Ricardo. They are inherently distinct from people in the United States from Cuba, Puerto Rico, Mexico, or other parts of Central and South America. Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco and Mariela M. Páez have addressed these discrepancies based on nationality and ethnicity: "the tired and facile 'Latinos- are-a-big-family' glosses over the contradictions, tensions, and fissures around class, race, and color—that often separate them. [...] Bluntly, what does an English-speaking third-generation upper-status white Cuban American in Florida have in common with a Maya-speaking recent immigrant from Guatemala?" (3).⁸ Generational differences aside, white, upper class Cuban citizens have little (to nothing) in common with the brown faced, often poverty-stricken Maya from Guatemala like Javier and Ricardo. Consequently, experiences for Cuban citizens and Maya from Guatemala in the United States are markedly different. There are racial and socio- economic discrepancies, despite what José Martí would have us believe at the end of the nineteenth century when he boldly discounted racial difference in Latin America in his essay "Nuestra América."

More generally, in Guatemala and other Latin American countries with a pronounced indigenous population, the use of the label "Latino" in the United States to refer to transnational subjects like the brothers from Xeya' negates their indigenous heritage. Silvio Torres-Saillant also addresses how indigenous and other people of color are unrepresented in the Latino mold, arguing that

[t]he claim that Latinos constitute one big happy family conceals the tensions, inequities, and injustices in our midst, contributing to a conceptual ambience that legitimizes the absence of black and Indian faces and voices from Latino fora.

The operating logic seems to be that, because everyone in our polychromatic community is really the same, everyone is inherently represented [...]. (53)

The term “Latino” denotes the Hispanic, Spanish heritage, while glossing over—or erasing completely—the history of domination and oppression of indigenous people throughout Latin America.

Labeling Maya from Guatemala like Javier and Ricardo as “Latinos” in the United States compounds their marginalization. It constructs an artificial horizontal equality among the people from this Central American country, failing to recognize the deep history of racism and discrimination against indigenous Guatemalans. As Arturo Arias notes, a large percentage of Guatemalan migrants “are of indigenous descent, or are at least mixed-race Ladinos. These are the types of populations that were suppressed or eliminated through genocidal policies in many other Latin American countries and were killed or placed on reservations in the United States. ‘Indians’ have traditionally been invisibilized in the Americas” (187-88). Even when Maya like Javier and Ricardo are no longer within the geopolitical confines of Guatemala, they are unable to escape—linguistic and symbolic—oppression based on their indigenous ethnicity as transnational subjects in the United States.

To provide a concrete example, Spanish language use is a problematic characteristic to determine who is Latina/o. Scholars have often referred to this Romance language as the “mother tongue” when using it to connect Latinos. For example, John A. García proclaims that “[s]peaking Spanish is still a fairly universal experience for most Latinos” (34), but he later recognizes that not all Latinos speak Spanish. For him, similar to a family, there are “variations in character, lifestyle, personality, and so on” (18). The metaphor implies that while Latinos are a family, not all of them are the same. Perhaps this disclaimer was García’s recognition of the slippery nature of his claim that Spanish language use is “universal” among Latinos. Other scholars, like Oboler, have outwardly rejected the use of a common language as a way to connect Latinos, citing that growing numbers of Latinos no longer speak Spanish (xvi). Furthermore, given the vastness of the continent where Spanish is spoken, there are numerous regional specificities, which further divide Latinos.⁹ Both García and Oboler refer to increasing English language use among Latinos in conjunction with varying degrees of Spanish. The lack of scholarly attention to originary indigenous language use underscores how indigenous migrants are multiply invisibilized in these academic conversations.

For many indigenous people from Latin America, Spanish is not their “mother tongue.” Rather it is the language that Spaniards imposed on their ancestors as a way to facilitate their domination and control over newly conquered territories. Specifically for Javier and Ricardo, their “mother tongue” is Kaqchikel Maya, and they learned Spanish because that was the language of power in Guatemalan society. Most official discourses of the State—legal, juridical, medical, business, etc.—are in Spanish.¹⁰ For many Guatemalan Maya, Spanish may not be a source of national pride or heritage, but rather a reminder of centuries of subjugation. It is perhaps for this reason that it was so important for Javier to communicate with me in Kaqchikel during our phone conversations, even though it was an inefficient, laborious process given my proficiency in the language at the time.

Aside from linguistic, racial, and socio-economic issues, another key difference among Latinos is their length of residency in the United States. Some are immigrants who have taken up permanent residence in the United States, whereas others are migrants who have only relocated to the country temporarily. For example, the majority of the upper-class, third-generation Cubans previously mentioned have permanently relocated to the United States to get

away from Fidel Castro and his socialist policies. However, many recent migrants plan to work for a finite period of time before returning to their homes and families. In this, the dream of return remains vivid on either side of the border. For Javier, Ricardo, and their family, it was always understood that they would work in the United States until they earned enough money, at which point they would return to Xeya'. If the umbrella term "Latino" generally refers to someone from Latin America living in the United States, how do we reconcile the differences between temporary and permanent residency, regardless of legal status? Because migrants like Javier and Ricardo do not intend to stay permanently, they often do not have multiple generations of their family living in the United States.¹¹ Without such generational distinctions, temporary migrants and their families are not as susceptible to language loss and other effects of acculturation. Many indigenous migrants like Javier and Ricardo strongly maintain their autochthonous cultures despite migration, as we have seen with their language use and allocation of remittances to purchase traditional clothing. Given this distinction, then, does the temporary status of migrants preclude them from the Latino rubric? My goal here is not to provide a definitive answer, but to call attention to the need for more nuanced approaches to the driving factors and goals of Latin Americans residing in the United States. We must push theoretical limits to flesh out the territorialization of Latina/o identities rather than simplistically lump them together.

Conclusions

As we have seen, in this case study of the family from Xeya', financial capital from remittances from Brooklyn, New York has provided the family with numerous symbolic goods, such as the electrical appliances in the kitchen. However, as perhaps is to be expected, the absence of Javier and Ricardo has affected each member of the family differently. For example, the brothers' children have access to an education, yet they have only faint memories of the fathers, if any at all. Although there are socio-economic improvements for the family, the psychological effects are also very pronounced, particularly for Javier and Ricardo's spouses and children.

My experiences in Xeya' evidence the constant mobility and transcultural exchange that goes hand-in-hand with migration. In the United States today, discussions of immigration generally call to mind the millions of people from Latin America who now reside in this North American country, with or without documentation. However, this ethnographic account speaks to the multi-faceted effects of globalization. Even when researchers—who, perhaps ironically, are often from the United States—go to remote communities, issues of migration are also prevalent. Many of these rural areas have been unable to escape the trend of going to El Norte. In the twenty-first century, anthropologists and ethnographers do not conduct fieldwork in isolated communities. The "isolated village" model is no longer viable (if it ever really was) in an age when transnational movement and cultural exchange have far-reaching influence. It is perhaps in this context that anthropologists like George E. Marcus have advocated for researchers to move away from single sites to multi-sited ethnography "to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse-time space" (96).

Although the example of Javier and Ricardo's journey to the United States from Xeya' is but one case study, there are numerous other examples, as we have seen with Patricia Foxen's work on K'iche' transnational subjects from Xinxuc who have relocated to Providence, Rhode Island. These brothers' story is not an anomaly, nor an isolated case. As a

member of the Guatemala Scholars Network, I frequently receive emails through the organization's listserv requesting interpreting or translation services for Maya—who in these cases do not speak Spanish—for medical, legal, or court proceedings. This recent trend indicates that there are growing numbers of Maya in the United States from Guatemala, and other Mesoamerican countries.

More broadly, playwright Víctor Hugo Rascón Banda took the phenomenon of indigenous migration to the stage in the context of his native Mexico, with his play *La mujer que cayó del cielo* (2000). Rascón Banda detailed the cultural, linguistic, and physical isolation of Rita Quintero, a Tarahumara woman from Chihuahua, Mexico who found herself in a state psychiatric hospital in Larned, Kansas. As Laura Kanost acknowledges, “[w]hether or not she was mentally ill at all before entering the hospital in 1983, by 1995, when advocates finally identified her language and ethnicity and concluded that she could be released, years of antipsychotic medication and cultural-linguistic isolation had taken a severe toll on her mind and body” (26). As recently as 1983, when authorities encountered an indigenous migrant in Kansas, they assumed that she was mentally unstable and hospitalized her, without further exploration into her culture, language, and ethnic background. More than thirty years later, we no longer erroneously hospitalize that which we do not understand, but there is still progress to be made.

Indigenous people residing in the United States continue to face infrastructural obstacles. For example, Cirila Baltazar Cruz, an undocumented Oaxacan woman who gave birth to a baby girl, Rubí, in a Mississippi hospital in 2009, was separated from her daughter and deported because she speaks Chatino, limited Spanish, and no English (Padgett and Mascareñas n. pag.). The Department of Human Services (DHS) ruled that she was an unfit mother and took her infant daughter, arguing that her lack of English put the child in danger. The social services translator justified this decision by explaining that Baltazar Cruz put her child in danger because she did not bring a cradle, clothes, or formula to the hospital with her. However, as journalists Tim Padgett and Dolly Mascareñas explain in their report of the case, “indigenous Oaxacan mothers traditionally breast feed their babies for a year and rarely use bassinets, carrying their infants instead in a rebozo, a type of sling” (n. pag.). In response, Baltazar Cruz fought a legal battle to take her daughter back to Mexico with her. In a follow-up report in 2014 by Jack Elliott Jr., he explains that the Oaxacan mother “was separated from her daughter for a year before her child was returned to her after the intervention of the SPLC, a nonprofit U.S. civil rights that said it presses for immigrant justice, battles hate and extremism and helps children at risk. [Baltazar] Cruz and her daughter have since returned to Mexico” (n. pag.). This case speaks to the difficulties of mixed status families. Cirila Baltazar Cruz is undocumented, yet because her daughter was born in Mississippi, she is officially a United States citizen and is able to freely return. Many Latin Americans residing in the United States like Baltazar Cruz grapple with complex situations which lead to deportation due to the different legal statuses of their family members. The examples of Cirila Baltazar Cruz’s legal fight, Rascón Banda’s play, and the current activist work by the Guatemala Scholars Network speak to the increasing need for the institutional infrastructures of the State to recognize these cultural differences and make accommodations whenever possible for disenfranchised indigenous Latin Americans.

In the academic sense, scholars who work in indigenous, migration, and Latino studies must also confront the realities of this transnational phenomenon involving Maya and other indigenous communities. The ways in which ethnicity and race contribute to transnational

experiences in the United States are nuanced. As Caminero-Santangelo explains, in Latin America, social constructions of race and ethnicity vary regionally:

For one thing, of course, the Hispanic-race-as-melting-pot construction, in its most extreme form, ignores the *continuing* existence of indigenous or African-descent populations in Latin America. (Not *everyone* identifies as “mestizo” or “mulatto.”) For another, not all historical manifestations of syncretism are the same; the mixture of peoples and cultures looks very different in the Caribbean, where the indigenous peoples were decimated and large numbers of African slaves imported to sugar plantations, from how it looks in Mexico, Guatemala, or El Salvador, where the influence of the indigenous presence is much more obvious. And, needless to say, the indigenous peoples in different geographical spaces were themselves different peoples. (14)

There are marked differences between indigenous and African-descent peoples and their cultures in the Caribbean, Mesoamerica, and the Andean region, and these discrepancies inform migrant experiences in the United States in unique ways. There is a plethora of studies concerning migrants in the United States from Mexico and the Caribbean (namely Cuba and Puerto Rico), yet indigenous peoples have been the focus of relatively little scholarship. Even though this special edition of *Label Me Latina/o* is a step toward remedying this gap in scholarship, there is still much to be done. We as scholars must continue to push the boundaries of research to engage in less exclusionary terms and question the utility of identitarian, essentialist labels such as “Latino” (and others) in our approaches.

Notes

1. I have used pseudonyms for the town and the family members to protect their identities due to the small size of the town and the delicate nature of research on undocumented persons in the United States.

2. From an ethnographic perspective, according to cultural anthropologists Edward F. Fischer and Peter Benson, “[e]thnographic sensibilities tend to privilege the local over the global, often assuming a broad backdrop of globalization as either hegemonic imposition into a local world (a globalized locality) or local resistance against distant market forces (a localized globality)” (7).

3. Arturo Arias extends this observation to the rest of Central America, claiming that Central Americans once fled the isthmus to escape the political instability at the end of the twentieth-century: “[t]he high numbers of Central Americans in the United States are an inevitable result of the wars fought in the 1980s, when about three to four million people fled from the nightmare of violence and massacre to the apparent safety of the United States” (185). In Guatemala, the State targeted the country’s indigenous population for subversive behavior during the genocidal 36-year civil war (1960-1996). The military raped, tortured, and “disappeared” many Maya, leaving their *aldeas* in ashes. The Historical Clarification Commission (*Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico*) investigated the human rights violations from January 1962 until December 1996 with the signing of the Peace Accords. According to historian Virginia Garrard-Burnett, the truth commissions estimate that 80% of the victims during the early 1980s were Maya (7). For more information on Maya accounts of the Guatemalan civil war, see the following testimonials: Victor Montejo’s *Testimony: Death of a Guatemalan Village* (1987) and Rigoberta Menchú Tum’s *Me llamo Rigoberta*

Menchú y así me nació la conciencia (1983), which she published with Elizabeth Burgos.

4. Foxen has followed up on this research with anthropologist Debra H. Rodman detailing migration from the indigenous Western Highlands and the Ladino Eastern regions of Guatemala in their co-authored essay, “Guatemalans in New England: Transnational Communities Through Time and Space.”

5. Similar to the Maya *traje*, in some cases subsistence agriculture associated with the *milpa* is also a dying tradition. In the context of Neoliberal economic policies, many Maya do not have time to take off from work or the space to cultivate their *milpa*. In postwar Guatemala, some Maya have recognized the economic benefits of growing other cash crops, like broccoli, in place of their traditional *milpas*. Anthropologists Edward F. Fischer and Peter Benson explain that many Maya opt to grow broccoli and other export crops because they realize that growing only *milpa* will not afford the standard of living that they desire for their families (24). Read as a performance, the *milpa*—like the traditional clothing—is an outward representation of Maya-ness, of cultural identity and even spiritual tradition, and both are Maya traditions that have come in conflict with distinct forms of globalization.

6. The poem by a K’iche’ woman included in this special edition, “I am not Latina,” is perhaps a response to such politics of identity and conflicts of agency.

7. Marta Caminero Santangelo, however, notes that Shorris’s “book is paradoxically entitled *Latinos: A Biography of the People*” (6).

8. To this, Debra Castillo adds issues of religion, posing the question: “[H]ow about a Jew from Argentina?” (11).

9. As Roberto Suro and Gabriel Escobar note, it is appropriate to remember that “Hispanics in surveys routinely describe themselves as culturally distinct from one another” (10). Even though they may share a common language, they perceive themselves to be different from Latinos from other parts of Latin America.

10. For more information, see Melvyn Paul Lewis’s doctoral dissertation, *Social Change, Identity Shift, and Language Shift in K’iche’ of Guatemala* (1994). In the context of medical lexicon and semantic domains, see the study on Kaqchikel language use and revitalization techniques by Emily Tummons, Robert Henderson, and Peter Rohloff.

11. Although permanent residence is not migrants’ intention initially, the longer migrants are away from their countries of origin (and their respective families), the more likely it is that they will permanently settle in the country where they work, establishing a new household and family. This permanent dislocation often results in a reduction in the remittances sent, and it is common for them to cease completely (DeSipio 9; Chimhowu, Piesse, and Pinder 93).

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