

WHAT MA LACH'S BONES TELL US: Performances of Relational Materiality in Response to Genocide

MARÍA REGINA FIRMINO-CASTILLO

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Dedicated to Ma Lach (María Santiago Cedillo) and Nan Xhiv Tzunun (Juana Brito Bernal).

Introduction

I was invited to a funeral in 2014, but the bodily remains inside the casket had been stripped of its *itiixhil tiichajil*—in Ixil Maya, its animating force—almost thirty years before, at the height of the Guatemalan army's genocide against the Ixil Maya.¹ In the casket was a skull with perforations where bullets had entered it; there was also a femur and smaller bones I do not know the names of. But I do know the name of the person these bones once belonged to: Ma Lach (María Santiago Cedillo); she was the mother of Mariano, my husband's cousin. At the funeral, Ma Lach's bones were carefully arranged in the casket by a forensic anthropologist, who, with great sensitivity, told the story of what had happened to this body—the body that is/was/and had been Ma Lach. He indicated where bullets had entered and exited and described how remnants of cloth attached to bone helped identify the person the bones belonged to. These bones held traces, genetic and other, that allowed for Ma Lach's return home to her relations. Ma Lach was a set of bones that returned, first to her son, and at the end, back to the earth. This body, the osseous remains of a disinterred corpse, had once been a person; that day, she was remembered, prayed for with song, and cried over. She was still Mariano's mother, and, as in life, she was still part of this earth.

In 2013, about a year before Ma Lach's final rites, I was invited to another funeral. This time it was Pap Lu, the father of our friend, Pap Xhasinib' (Jacinto Santiago Brito). He had recently been found, and brought home, by the same forensic team. Like Ma Lach, Pap Xhasinib's father had also been a victim of this genocide. His casket was larger than Ma Lach's, and sealed. It was painted turquoise blue and draped with a red hand-woven textile. At the foot of the casket

were bottles of distilled cane liquor that guests brought to share during the wake. Throughout the night, Pap Xhasinib’ took a bottle around the room, serving each guest and drinking with them. Late into the night, he reached my husband and me; passing the bottle, and pouring the clear liquid on the ground, he explained: “We are the Earth. Our bones are the minerals. Our flesh is the dirt, the rivers, our blood. Who am I to know!? But that’s how it is. This is why we offer our liquor to the earth before drinking.”



Fig. 1 Pap Xhasinib' and author in Paxil Cave. Photo by Herbert Reyes, 2011.

Ma Lach and Pap Lu’s transitions from persons animated by *itiixhil tiichajil*, to bodies, to cadavers, and then to hidden bones that become forensic evidence, and finally to ‘things’ such as minerals, rivers, and earth lead me to ask: What is a body? What is a thing? What is a person? What degree of *itiixhil tiichajil* survives through these changes? And what ontological categories are troubled by Ma Lach and Pap Lu’s bones in these performances of life, death, and survival?

In what follows, I draw from Freya Mathews and Mario Blaser’s critiques of genocide, modernity, and coloniality, in addition to the unpublished writings of Raphaël Lemkin on colonialism (in Docker), to interrogate three ontological tenets associated with genocidal coloniality: that some persons are things, that matter is inert, and that some humans are independent from an ecological matrix. I examine these tenets through the lens of Guatemala’s recent counter-insurgency war (1960—1996), focusing on the genocide against Ixil Maya communities during the height of the war (approximately 1979-1985). Since 2010, my husband, Ixil artist Tohil Fidel Valey Brito, and I have worked with community members and leaders on a variety of multidisciplinary projects in response to the after-effects of this genocide.² I will share stories from our work in which performance posed insistent challenges to genocidal coloniality’s three tenets

through embodied enactments of the inextricable relational ties between human and other-than-human persons and entities in an agentive and person-filled material world. Three moments of performance, ranging from the quotidian to the ceremonial to the experimental, will be highlighted: performing name exchange with a wild edible plant important to survival during wartime famine; performing *chaj* (ceremony) to address collective trauma from the 1982 mass killing at Xoloché; and, finally, performing experimental theater in collaboration with Mexican artist, Violeta Luna, and Ixil performance ensemble, Teatro Tichiil. I reflect on two terms prevalent in Mayan languages—*kamawil*, or living object, and *kab'awil*, “double gaze” (Adrián Inés Chávez in Chacón)—to explore the potential of Mayan ontologies of materiality and personhood to counter the colonial project’s construal of (some) persons as bodies *only*, to be used and disposed of as objects, in a world of inert matter. I conclude by noting that this centering of persons (human and other) as relational beings underscores the ontological workings of what Gerald Vizenor termed “survivance,” understanding it to be an active resistance to the three tenets of coloniality through the embodied and storied insistence on complex relational personhood and the continued enactment of “transmotion” as inextricable relationality within a living and agentive material world.

I am a Guatemalan-born and U.S.-based transdisciplinary artist and writer. My ancestors are southern European and, most probably, Pipil/Nahua; and I have kin, through marriage, who are Ixil. It is from this circle of family and collaborators (who are artists, farmers, ritual officiants as well as intellectuals), that I first learned about the ways that performance—whether gathering edible plants, conducting ceremony, creating theater, pouring libation, or living in community—creates relationships that weave together life worlds, or ontologies, in resistance to genocidal coloniality’s three ontological tenets, which I will discuss in the next section.

Ontological Tenets of Genocidal Coloniality

Genocide, which is always and already embroiled in coloniality and empire, is not only the destruction of people’s bodies. It is an ontological violence that perpetuates three tenets which coloniality is built upon: some persons are only bodies; all matter is inert; and some humans are independent of an ecological matrix. As jurist Raphaël Lemkin (in Docker) argued in his late unpublished writings, coloniality has an “inherent and constitutive relationship” with genocide (97). To Lemkin, genocide was not an isolated occurrence of mass killings; it was part of a

drawn out process spanning centuries, involving mass killings as well as various forms of destruction aimed at a people’s “attachment to and imbrication in a nurturing cosmos” (in Docker 97). Furthermore, this genocidal destruction of cosmos, Lemkin (in Docker) observed, is accompanied by the violent imposition upon genocide survivors of “the national pattern of the oppressor” (83). Writing about modernity/coloniality, anthropologist Mario Blaser argued that its violence is simultaneously ontological and ecocidal, with “nonhuman others” forming “part of how colonial difference gets established” (12). The colonial domination of people through genocidal violence is also enmeshed with the imposition—partial or whole—of specific ontological frameworks that deny agency and subjectivity to some humans, to most animals, and, as environmental philosopher Freya Mathews (*Reinhabiting Reality*) noted, all matter. This attempt to render human persons and non-human persons into objects and to treat all matter as inert describes the complex ontological violence that has marked the history of Guatemala for the last five centuries. As I will discuss below, this type of ontological violence has continued in the Ixil region during the height of the so-called counter-insurgency war of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The Massacre at Xoloche’. The attempted construal through violence of persons as things and world as object was at play in the massacres committed between 1981 and 1983 at Xoloche’, an Ixil hamlet outside of Nab’aa’. Nab’aa’ (or Nebaj in its hispanicized version) is located in Guatemala’s Cuchumatanes mountain range at an elevation of over one-thousand nine-hundred meters. The town is part of what the Guatemalan army termed the “Ixil Triangle” (Manz 96), and is comprised of Nab’aa’, along with the neighboring towns of Chajul, Cotzal, and numerous hamlets, including Xoloche’, all dispersed throughout the highlands and valleys. The so-called Triangle’s population is of some 148,670 inhabitants: ninety-one percent identify as Ixil, with the remaining nine percent identifying as either K’iche’, Kanjobal, Mam, or non-Indigenous (Fundación Ixil).

The following is a description of the events of November 19, 1982 at Xoloche’ written by Pap Xhas Matom, a *principal* in the *B’oq’ol, Q’ezal Tenam Oxlaval No’j* Council of Principals Thirteen No’j:³

When the *milpas* [maize fields] were already in full harvest, the army executed its criminal implementation of a scorched earth plan and policy: the army forced sev-

eral hundred Ixiles who were forcibly conscripted into the Civil Patrol (PAC) to *tapiscar* [harvest] all the corn in Xoloché and its surroundings, with the promise and deceit that everything they gathered would be transported by helicopter and distributed among the population under army control. Once it was piled up in a true volcano of maize, the army set fire to it. Until now we do not have an estimate of the amount, but the fact is that the red heap of Xoloché's maize was visible from the area of Salquil Grande [approximately twenty-five kilometers away].⁴

According to Pap Xhas Matom, and as documented by *Colectivo Memoria Histórica* (208-213), once the maize was amassed into a large pile, Nan Elsi'm, a blind grandmother, protested aloud. The "volcano," consisting of maize, woven cloth, baskets, pottery and other things, was doused with gasoline and set afire. Nan Elsi'm continued to protest, while others cried silently. Soldiers silenced Nan Elsi'm with a blow, possibly killing her prior to throwing her into the flames; it is also possible that she died in the flames. Those who tried to pull her out were shot dead and thrown into the fire as well. The surviving population was forced to watch. This is how Pap Xhas Matom's account continues:

The army threw garments like *güipiles* [blouses] and the red *cortes* [skirts] of Nebaj into the burning maize, as well as people's cadavers, among them an elder from Nebaj named Elsi'm, who had lost her sight due to old age. Prior to this, the army left activated grenades between the ears of corn, targeting those who attempted to extinguish the fire. And so other Ixiles died when the grenades exploded upon attempts to remove them.

Though I focus here on events at Xoloché, it is important to note that this massacre was not an isolated occurrence. A United Nations commission documented the destruction of four-hundred and forty-four villages in the Mayan highlands during the war, resulting in the internal displacement of more than a million people and the death or disappearance of at least two-hundred thousand (*Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico*). The effects of this collective trauma are difficult to quantify, or to describe, especially considering ways that trauma persists in our embodied memory across generations (Brave Heart).

Trauma as Loss of Relationality. What Eduardo Duran described as the "soul wound" resulting from centuries of genocidal coloniality in the Americas is not just a matter of unresolved histori-

cal trauma; it is also unresolved grief over the wounding of the earth upon which one depends (16). This starts to describe what happened at Xoloche’, except that the relationship is also one of ontological equivalence between people and maize. According to Tohil and Pap Xhas, destroying maize is tantamount to destroying people. A philosophy of regeneration based on an ontological intimacy with maize and its biotic cycles is recounted in the Ixil oral tradition and performed in rituals associated with the growing cycle. Maize is the substance from which we are created, and upon death, our bodies return to the earth to nourish new generations. Paxil, located on the outskirts of Nab’aa’, is a geologic formation mentioned in the *Popol Wuj*⁵ as the place where maize and other important crops were first revealed to humans by their elder brothers: fox, coyote, macaw, and raven. In the spring, seeds to be planted are blessed among the stalactite formations that resemble cobs hanging from the cave’s ceiling. Such is the respectful intimacy with maize that it is a *txaa* (transgression) to leave a fallen kernel of maize on the ground, as it is *txaa* to build a chicken coop or latrine on a piece of land that had once been used to store harvested maize. It is, likewise, a transgression to burn maize fields. The destruction of maize is comparable to the destruction of people, for it is the *materia prima* of human life.

As Maxho’l explained to me, the Ixil phrase “*Kat oojisa un yooxhil*” (“My vital force has left me”) is uttered after an earthquake, or other comparable shock in which the ground—ontological, and that is to say, also material, telluric, relational, and social—upon which one stands is shaken. If one does not call one’s *yooxhil*⁶ back into one’s body after a terrifying event, one is condemned to a limbo state of surviving, but not fully living. De-animated, the person becomes just a body, a relatively inert object, eventually a corpse. The body, without its *yooxhil*, ceases to sustain life, eventually causing the death of the person. Disembodied, the *yooxhil* wanders about, requiring ritual performance to bring it back to its corporeal home, re-incorporated into the body to re-constitute, reanimate, and regenerate the person.

We exist because we are embodied, and our bodies are inextricably enmeshed in a complex self/world with beings who are different, but constitutive of our subjectivities and identities. They are beings and entities with whom we engage—exerting a mutual and ineluctable influence. These relational ties are always and already present, but not always acknowledged. Therefore, one’s manners of recognizing and enacting them are varied and have material effects in the world. Not acknowledging these inextricable relational ties can cause disharmony in our relationships to others, human and non-human. The *yooxhil* wanders about outside the body, poten-

tially causing the death of the person; however, the return of the *yooxhil*—though it entails a re-embodiment—is never a matter of individual healing, nor does it involve a transaction solely between the *yooxhil*, the body, and the person. It is a process that requires embodied re-enactment and performative re-acknowledgment of what is always and already there: an inextricable relationality.

Performance and Genocidal Coloniality: Embodied Assertions of Inextricable Relationality

In thinking about performance and resistance to colonial violence, the centrality of the body has been well-theorized, especially by performance studies scholar, Diana Taylor. Despite the seeming ephemerality of performance, the body constitutes a way of knowing that Taylor has described as an enduring “repertoire” able to survive written archives of knowledge and attacks upon it by colonizing forces. She offers an historical example of this observation. The codices of pre-invasion Mesoamerican societies stored a vast array of knowledges, but Spanish forces destroyed entire libraries, prohibited Indigenous systems of writing, and violently persecuted native intelligentsia who were not willing to become informants. Though embodied forms of knowledge transmission—such as ritual, dance, drama, etc. —were also criminalized, “[t]he space of written culture then, as now,” wrote Taylor, “seemed easier to control than embodied culture” (17). As Taylor’s analysis implies, embodied knowledge survives colonial violence as long as there are living, performing, bodies that remember their own agency (31). One of the cases through which Taylor developed her thesis is an analysis of the *Danza de la Conquista*, a theatrical dance ritual with roots in the Iberian peninsula’s performative representations of the 1492 expulsion of Muslims and Jews by Castilian Catholic forces. The dance is performed to this day in Mesoamerica and in the Andean region and is syncretized with various pre-invasion ritual performances. As Paul Scolieri documented, Castilian Spanish forces used this dance to compel new imperial subjects to portray their own subjugation. On the one hand, the scenario of conquest represented in the dance is a “reiterative humiliation of the native populations” (Taylor, 30). On the other hand, the *Danza* is characterized by veiled meanings and parodic reversals that mark it as a dance of resistance, despite its origins and the intentions of the dance’s originators. Taylor argued that the *Danza*’s agency does not derive from its satirical content or ““hidden transcripts”” (citing James Scott), but from the embodied agency available even in the most strictly scripted scenarios “to rearrange characters in parodic and subversive ways” (31). This does not imply,

however, that merely having a body constitutes agency. For Taylor, performance’s subversive power stems from the body’s capacity to change what is written down, that is, what is discursively established. This points to another way that embodiment is a source of resistance. It subverts the “colonialist discourse” which constructs the Indigenous body as an inert object lacking voice and agency (Taylor, 64). Through the performers’ insistence on agency—even if satirical—the *Danza* overturns the idea of Indigenous person as merely a body—or object—contesting colonial constructions of Indigenous passivity and otherness.

The indomitable capacity of embodied memory to counter erasures—whether they be colonial or Indigenous—of ontologically challenging identities is powerfully articulated by Zapotec *muxhe* (third gender) performance artist, Lukas Avendaño in this way: “What we can’t find in my peoples’ codices.... you will find here, in my body.”⁷ Though surviving Zapotec codices do not feature the *muxhe* person (and we do not know if they once did, given the near total destruction by the Spanish of Zapotec texts), Avendaño’s performance puts forth in the world that which relentlessly exists. Merely inhabiting the *muxhe* body is an ontological defiance, but narrating and performing it into being is an act of insistence and affirmation of the ontological complexity that always and already exists. Avendaño’s work is an indefatigable re-embodiment, remembering, and reminding of what may have been twice erased: the ontological survivance (and not just survival) of non-binary genders in Indigenous and non-Indigenous ontologies. Avendaño’s performances onstage and offstage of being-*muxhe* expand the ontological possibilities of our world.

Avendaño’s statement, which I consider embodied theory, implies that there is an agency of another sort that is experienced even before accessing the body’s capacity to change a story. Prior to the embodied epistemic act Taylor writes about, an ontological agency is activated when the colonized subject—discursively constructed as body *only*, that is, as *object*—remembers themselves to be a *person*. By person, I invoke Sylvia Wynter’s insight that the human being is not a noun, but a verb—*praxis*—a nondual composite of both *bios* (biology) and *mythos* (story) (Wynter and McKittrick, 33-34). We are not inert objects, or bodies only, as colonial ontological constructions would have it. I will return to this nondual conception of personhoods below, but for now I want to underscore the following: for performance to be agentive in the face of ongoing genocidal coloniality, remembering and enacting personhoods as performative praxis in opposition to colonial objectification might be a first step toward overturning the three tenets of

the colonial project. Below, I will share a story of how this happens in the everyday performances of living and surviving; this story complicates and expands what it means to remember oneself as person in a way that powerfully challenges the second and third tenets of the colonial project: that the material world is inert and that (some) humans are independent of an ecological web.

The Secret Names of Plants: Ontological Relationality. In the spring of 2013, Tohil and I accompanied Nan Xhiv Tzunun (Juana Brito Bernal), my *chuch* (mother-in-law), on a walk in the countryside to visit *Comunidad en Resistancia Flores de Turanza*,⁸ a settlement near Nab'aa' founded by “*retornados*” (returnees). They were people who, at the height of the war, were forced by the army’s scorched earth campaign to flee their homes, finding precarious refuge in the mountains, the Ixcán jungle, or in México. This military strategy of scorched earth, massacres, and forced displacement was described by the counterinsurgency state as “drying up



Fig. 2 Nan Xhiv Tzunun. Photo by Herbert Reyes, 2011.

the pond to get the fish,” the armed insurgents (Cultural Survival; Steinberg and Taylor). In the process, however, the genocidal campaign nearly destroyed the pond. Along with genocide, ecocide was committed as well, resulting in deep transformations in the agroecology of the region and the disruption of ritual practices associated with the agricultural cycle (Wilson; REMHI in Steinberg and Taylor, 48). This impact on Mayan spirituality was not only an after-effect of displacement; it was a strategic attempt, on the part of the army and the oligarchy in

whose interest it operated, to destroy the ontological relationship of highland Mayans with the land. But relational ontology and praxis continued to be performed in ceremony and in quotidian performances which accompany many daily activities that sustain life, especially in wartime, such as gathering wild edible plants.

Along the path to Turanza, Nan Xhiv showed us the plants she ate in order to survive during her own time in the mountains. As a young woman in the late 1970s, she fled Nab’aa’ after the army targeted her for assassination due to her political organizing, involvement in the Catholic church, and later, in the *Ejercito Guerrillero de los Pobres* (EGP, Guerrilla Army of the Poor). She and her family were exiled in México, Nicaragua, and finally, Cuba, returning only after the signing of the peace accords in 1996. While we walked the path to Turanza, we came upon a certain vine. She directed her voice toward the plant, pronouncing: “*In Tzuk; ax Xhiv*—*así se le dice a la planta, intercambias tu nombre con la planta!*” (I am Tzuk; you are Xhiv—this is what you say to the plant, you exchange names with the plant!). And then she carefully bent back a stem to pull away a set of tender leaves and shoots, telling us how delicious Tzuk can be and how it helped her survive famine. But she also warned us that when gathering from Tzuk, one must exchange names with her lest the leaf become bitter in one’s mouth.⁹

Through Tzuk, we have a point of entry for an Ixil ontology. As suggested by Nan Xhiv’s interlocution with Tzuk, here is a recognition of subjectivity and agency in the many plants one must address with a regard for their *itiixhil tiichajil*—also called *yooxhil* or *tichiil*—which is described as that which gives a being its vitality and strength. It is customary to thank a host at a communal meal for the increase in *tichiil* when the food is deemed to be nourishing. When someone asks about one’s well-being, one can reply with these words, indicating that “there is a future,” one can expect to survive, to thrive even, as Nan Xhiv explained. A maize plant, when it is healthy, strong, tall—when it promises a good harvest—can be said to have *tichiil* (Felipe Brito, personal communication).

I concede that there may be a difference in meaning between the words *itiixhil tiichajil* (*tichiil*), and *yooxhil*, but I have not been able to discern this through my consultations with friends and research collaborators. Maxho’l (Lalo Velasco Ceto) asserts that the three are synonymous (Firmino Castillo, Maxho’l, et al., 63-65). This is supported by the Ixil oral history transcribed and translated by Ayres, Colby, Colby, and Ko’v, in which *itiixhil* and *yooxhil* are both translated as “*espírito*”—as in the spirit of different animals, but also the spirit of money

(286-287 and 290-291), and by implication, other material and symbolic objects. *Itiixhil / tiichajil / yooxhil* may be a quality of organic or inorganic matter. It can also be the quality of a collection of organic and inorganic objects, such as those that constitute a place. A place can also have *yooxhil*, and it is the root of *yooxhib'al*, an Ixil word for ceremonial ground (Firmino Castillo, Maxho'l, et al., 31-32).

There are other plants in the Ixil world that also require specific gestures or terms of address to show respect, gratitude, or to elicit desired medicinal or culinary qualities. When we reached Turanza, we visited Pap Cax Chaas (Gaspar Cobo), one of Nan Xhiv's cousins, who told us many stories of how trees, tubers, wild greens, and other plants conspired to help the Ixil during the war. Pap Cax and Nan Xhiv conversed at length about giant trees that gave refuge from bombings, tubers that multiplied even after being unearthed and chopped to bits by soldiers, and the many wild edibles that provided nourishment during the war. On another occasion, Nan Xhiv Ko't (Maxho'l's mother) told us about Chaapa Tze', a tree with writing on its leaves and with fruits of all kinds growing from its branches. It was the source of strength and knowledge for the people. But since the war, Nan Xhiv Kho't told us, Chaapa Tze' has gone into hiding deep into the mountains. The tree would only return, she stressed, through the frequent performance of *chaj* (ceremony) (Nan Xhiv Ko't in Firmino Castillo, Maxho'l, et al. 59-60). Nonetheless, even from afar, the tree is still connected to the people:

The tree is like the energy of the day. We don't see the energy, but it's there. The tree is not in sight, but the plants are still here despite the absence of the tree.

We're also part of the tree, the serpents are part of the tree, all living beings are part of the tree. (Nan Xhiv Ko't in Firmino Castillo, Maxho'l, et al. 61)¹⁰

The relational ontology developed through performative gestures such as name exchange, *chaj*, storytelling, and other practices, create and sustain an agentive material world. In addition to name exchange with plants, there are inorganic beings such as topographical features, natural phenomena, and cycles of time which are ritually engaged and referred to as *Kub'al* (father) or *Chuch* (mother). These are beings with consciousness, agency, and who exist in relationship to humans; if they are not recognized properly in ritual or treated with respect in the small performances with which many quotidian activities are executed, they make their presence known through material effects ranging from changes in a plant's flavor or medicinal properties, to fruits rotting on a vine, to nuchal cord births, poverty, and other outcomes. These performances

are daily acknowledgements of an agentive material world, performances which contest genocidal coloniality’s second and third tenets: that all matter is inert and that humans exist independently of a material and ecological nexus. In the following, we will return to Xoloche’ to see examples of how genocidal coloniality’s ontological tenet of de-realized matter is challenged collectively, via ceremony as a performative enactment of human and other than human relational personhoods.

Xoloche’: Performances of Relational Personhoods. On November 18, 2012, survivors of Xoloche’ gathered to remember the massacres that occurred thirty years before. The emblematic moment in the many violent events that occurred there from 1981-1983 was what survivors called “*La Quema del Volcán de Mazorcas*” (The Burning of the Volcano of Maize). Pap Xhas Matom, one of the organizers of the commemoration, invited us to the gathering. One of the goals of this event was the revival of *memoria histórica* (collective historical memory) of the war through *chaj* (Ixil ritual) at the site. The creation of a ritual context for collective grieving and remembering is of crucial importance, given the public denial of the genocide by state discourse and the culture of silence that, to this day, keeps children of survivors from knowing their histories. In this sense, the *chaj* at Xoloche’ was an act of healing historical trauma and an effort to make visible what state forces deny. It was also an effort to heal peoples’ relation to the land that had also suffered the trauma of the war. In line with these goals, Pap Xhas and other organizers petitioned the mayor’s office to officially declare Xoloche’ a sacred site.

In total, about two hundred people gathered on that day in a clearing at the end of the



Fig. 3 The four colors of maize. Photo by the author, 2014.

road leading to Nab'aa'. Around the clearing there were a few simple homes built of cinder block with tin roofing; nearby there was a small gorge leading to a forested area. The earth on the cleared ground near the gorge was dark, almost black, and many small pieces of charred maize could be seen there. While we waited for the activities to start, Pap Xhas invited Tohil and me to gather some of the charred maize. Others did the same. The activities took place near a large tree that stood to the side of the clearing, about five hundred feet away from the homes. Pap Xhas spoke, as well as other dignitaries and survivors, but the focus of the gathering was the *chaj* which I will not specifically describe here, for I have not received permission to do so. I will, however, offer a general description of the sequence of events, emphasizing the presence of non-human persons in relationship with humans through the performative dialogue that constitutes this ceremony.

In general, *chaj* consist of a *b'aal vatz tiixh* laying out offerings on the ground in a circle. Candles are arranged by color and in correspondence with the cardinal directions: red in the east; black in the west; yellow in the south; white in the north; and green and blue in the center. In between the cardinal direction candles and around the green and blue ones are placed offerings of incense made from tree resin and tree bark, *ocote* (resinous kindling pine), *panela* (molasses sugar), cacao or chocolate, and sometimes sweet bread, tobacco, honey, and flowers. The candles are lit to start the ceremony. Often, but not always, the cardinal directions are greeted by kneeling and facing each direction in turn (and in a counterclockwise motion) while the ritual officiant opens the *chaj* and greets all the directions before starting the calendar round. The ritual officiant greets the creators, the mountain beings, and the protector of the day. Then the recitation of the calendar round commences, with the naming and greeting of the thirteen permutations of each of the twenty days in the *tachb'al amaq' tetz ixil* (Ixil ritual calendar). At the recitation of each of the twenty days, offerings are made of sesame seed, incense grains, candles made of wax and tallow, liquor, and other gifts for the day-beings, mountain-beings, and ancestors to partake in. At specific times, the ancestors, as well as important mountains and other topographical features, are named, greeted, and addressed.

All the beings invoked in a *chaj* are persons or person-like; they are invited to be present (or acknowledged to already be present) and invited into dialogue. The ritual officiants dialogue with the fire, which is at once its own being and a vehicle for the other beings to speak through. *B'aal vatz tiixh* often wave their hands at the fire, or snap their fingers over it in a circular

motion, imploring the fire to speak through its flames and its changes throughout the unfolding of the *chaj*: flames rising and spiraling; flames gradually extinguishing; fire emitting smoke—white, grey, or black; materials exploding into sparks and crackling; embers and flames changing colors and manifesting forms; fire melting wax and charring offerings in ways that are discernible to experienced *b’aal vatz tiixh*. They are attentive to the signs in the flames, the smoke, the burnt offerings, and changes in the surrounding environment (for example, an insect flying into the flame, a dog’s approach, changes in the clouds or the weather, etc.). A *chaj* ends when the fire extinguishes of its own accord. Often, a *b’aal vatz tiixh* stays with the fire, keeping vigil until all the embers die down.

In this particular *chaj*, many ritual officiants were present and supported each other. At the end of the ceremony, we were invited to pass the charred maize seeds we had gathered earlier over the dying embers. The aromatic smoke enveloped my open hand upon which were the five or six grains of maize; I moved my hand in a counterclockwise circular motion over the smoke, careful that the grains not fall on the ashes and embers left by the fire. Afterwards, with a few grains of charred maize enclosed in a fist, Pap Xhas explained to me that these seeds—burnt by the army, but consecrated in the *chaj*—represented the Ixil knowledge that survived the war and centuries of colonial violence. What once could not fit in the palm of one’s hand was now reduced to a few charred grains. But even if just one seed remained, Pap Xhas explained, it was enough to start, again.

Though I was moved by the *chaj* and all I was learning and honored to experience, I could not help but ask myself (I dared not express my doubts then): How does one regenerate the world from just a few seeds? What was before cannot return; even if it could, how would it stand up to new dangers? I do not have answers to these questions that still haunt me. But perhaps the point is not to regenerate what was once before, but to experiment, to respond, to retry, again and again, even if one seed is all that is left. After all, this is how the world was made in the first place.

Accessing Kab’awil, Embodying Kamawil

The First Experiments. Through an experimental process of trial and error, a council of creator-beings—Tz’aqol, Bitol; Alom K’ajolom; and Tepew Q’ukumatz—made humans. The first were fashioned from mud, but were not firm enough and dissolved. The second were made of wood,

but these humans were ungrateful towards their creators and abusive to the other beings on earth. In other words, they not only ignored the creators, they also objectified the world. As a consequence, all the animals, trees, mountains, household objects, and even their homes and hearth stones hurled themselves at the wooden humans until they were destroyed.

The council of creators, undeterred, tried again, this time with maize. With help from the animals, the *materia prima* was sourced from a single seed of white maize ensconced under an immense rock in a mountain in the eastern quadrant of the world. A rain-being sent a lightning bolt to cleave the monolith, exposing the maize, but also charring it. It is from contact with fire that the other three colors of maize—yellow, black, and red—emerged. Ixmucané ground the corn nine times; she mixed it with water and kneaded it into the dough from which Tz’aqol Bitol; Alom, K’ajolom; and Tepew Q’ukumatz created the first four humans, our ancestors.¹¹

In this narration of our human beginnings, there are pairings of things seemingly in opposition, but related to each other, and couplings of seemingly distinct entities which are, nonetheless, part of a complex unitary being. For example, the creation of humans is paired with the destruction of the eastern mountain where the primordial maize seed was hidden. The grandmother, whose name, Ixmukane, means tomb (Sam Colop, 22), grinds the primordial corn for human life to emerge; grandmother tomb grinds it nine times, suggesting nine months of gestation (Sam Colop, 129). Here there is an inextricable relationality between life and death that is not denied, but acknowledged, narrated, and performed. Similarly, in the *Popol Wuj*, the creator beings’ names are presented in “couplets,” an example of “association parallelism” that is common in Mayan languages (Sparks and Romero, 13). Strategic juxtapositions of things that exist in associative and agentive relationship to each other (15) underscore the relational, rather than the essence of any one thing. So we have Tz’aqol Bitol (the creator of raw material as well as the one who builds from that material); Alom, K’ajolom (the one who impregnates and the one who conceives); and Tepew Q’ukumatz (Majestic Plumed Serpent, the relationality between terrestrial and celestial spheres) (Sam Colop, 20-22).

This juxtaposition of things that might seem opposed is represented by the Mayan terms *kamawil* (living object) and *kab’awil* (double gaze). These are at the core of an ontological relationality based on the enactment of a simultaneous recognition of two things: of the animacy and agency of matter in a living world and of the personhood of humans and non-human others who are part of this living material world. In many Mayan languages, including Ixil and K’iche’

(in addition to Guatemalan Spanish), *kamawil* refers to what are called, in English, pre-Columbian objects or archeological artifacts, and thought of, within a non-Mayan context, as inanimate things. But in Mayan contexts, when *kamawil* are found in the ground, often while planting, or on other occasions, they are kept by ritual specialists as objects of power and invoked as embodiments of the old gods (*dioses viejos*) (Pap Xhasinib’, personal communication).¹² Colonial era and some contemporary commentators report that *kamawil* simply means “*idolitos*,” little idols, (Mondloch). But as Mondloch indicates, *kamawil* is a derivation of the word “*k’ab’awil*” (177), which Sergio Romero describes this way: “*K’abawil* is a pre-Christian [K’iche’] noun referring to divine essences such as deities, ritual objects, caves, and so on” (629).

Kab’awil has a well-established contemporary usage as well. José Roberto Morales Sic, after Daniel Matul, explains that *kab’awil* is the basis of a theory of knowledge that allows us to “understand and value” the “simultaneously multiple and unitary context which we inhabit” (250).¹³ It is, according to Morales Sic, the “double gaze, the long view, the near view, the gaze back, and the gaze forward” (250).¹⁴ In her *Indigenous Cosmolectics: Kab’awil and the Making of Maya and Zapotec Literatures*, Gloria Chacón offers a thorough intellectual history of the term, from its precolonial origins to present day deployments by Maya intellectuals:

[K]ab’awil’s transformation from its glyphic etchings in stone and its painted replicas in codices to its present significance, suggests a relationship with the cosmos that goes back in time to the pre-classic era and a resistance to the experience of coloniality in Mesoamerica. In its late twentieth and twenty-first century deployment, kab’awil straddles spiritual practice, politics, gender, aesthetics, philosophy, and a social experience.

Chacón describes kab’awil¹⁵ as “a vision that duplicates,” countering the binary logic and teleological dialectics of Western philosophy while extending a non-binary theory rooted in a Mesoamerican genealogy of knowledge/being that she and other Maya scholars are dedicated to articulating. Chacón notes that kab’awil presents a challenge to ontological/epistemological frameworks of modernity and coloniality that predate feminist, deconstructionist, and postcolonial critiques. After Chacón, Arturo Arias associates the concept with *k’ot*, the bicephalous bird in many Maya oral traditions (including the Ixil) that has ““one head looking at the sky and the other at the earth”” (117).

Though further research is required on the connection between the terms *kamawil* and *kab'awil*, I speculate that *kab'awil*, as double gaze, conflated with *kamawil*, as animate, agentive object, suggests an ontological status for matter (at least some matter) quite distinct from what Freya Mathews (*For Love of Matter*) described as the “derealization” of matter under “European epistemological colonialism” (175). In this ontological and epistemological condition, matter is “perceived merely as the inert backdrop to our meaning-making” (*Reinhabiting Reality*, 12), while “[o]ther-than-human subjects”—whether organic or inorganic—are silenced (*For Love of Matter*, 176). If one of the violences of coloniality is this derealization of all matter, then *kamawil*, as living object, and *kab'awil*, as double gaze, are both at the core of an ontological relationality based on the recognition of the animacy of the world and the personhood of humans and others. In generative juxtaposition, *kamawil/kab'awil*, especially when enacted in performance, overturn the three ontological tenets associated with genocidal coloniality: that some persons are things, that matter is inert, and that some humans are autonomous of an ecological matrix.

Trans-Temporal Experiments. With every performative gesture, no matter how small, in which the agency and animacy of the material world is recognized, the charred seeds of Xoloche’ are activated. Life is breathed into them, and this is a way to start again, over and over, keeping the world alive.

I witnessed one of these small gestures during my engagement in a performative theater workshop conducted by Mexican artist Violeta Luna in Nab’aa’ in May of 2011. Performative theater, in the manner presented that May, is a practice outside of the ‘traditional’ ones discussed above. Yet *kamawil* and *kab'awil* manifested—briefly and unexpectedly—to reveal the potential of experimentation to elicit ways of being and knowing that persist despite attempts to overturn them.

Performing Kamawil. Mexican performative theater-maker, Violeta Luna, came to Nab’aa’ via my invitation and that of Pap Xhas Matom.¹⁶ She presented *NK 603: Action for Performer & e-Corn* (which will be discussed below); Luna also offered a workshop on performative theater in a bee-keeping cooperative’s large tin-roofed meeting space. Over the course of three days (with

one rehearsal day), the workshop was attended by approximately fifty participants, most of whom were Ixil and K’iche’ youth. In the workshop, Luna structured situations for participants to develop their own movement vocabularies and narrative structures by way of experience, observation, improvisation, dialogue, and experimentation. On the second day, Luna organized participants into dyads of active and passive partners. The active participant in the dyad consensually manipulated the body of the passive one in order to make a human sculpture, using props—everyday object such as ears of corn, ceramic bowls, censors, grinding stones, etcetera—to set in the gesture. Luna invited participants to create a museum full of statues, or a “Mayan temple.” After the active members of the dyad finished creating the statues, they walked around the room to see what others had created; later, the roles were reversed.

Petrona Tzunux Chivalan, a young K’iche’ secondary school student, and her performance partner, an Ixil student named Vez,¹⁷ chose to work with the following objects: dry corn husks fashioned into a skirt, peacock feathers, and a basket containing dry ears of corn in each of the four directional colors: black, white, yellow, and red. Vez dressed Petrona with the corn husk skirt and peacock feathers, and positioned her kneeling down on a *petate* (straw mat), with back straight, though inclined slightly forward at an angle. He placed the basket of maize in her hands and positioned her arms as if offering or presenting the basket of corn. Violeta asked participants to hold the gestures for a few minutes, long enough for all who were not embodying sculptures to visit the “temple” or “museum” of statues, which varied greatly in the use of



Fig. 4 Petrona Tzunux Chivalan. Photo by Violeta Luna, 2011.

objects and gestures. Suddenly, not completing the time allotted for this part of the exercise, Petrona giggled—collapsing out of her form. She apologized, and explained that she needed to “become a girl again,” adding that she “felt shame because she felt so much pride.”¹⁸

Petrona’s statement, which could easily be attributed to adolescent timidity, is, I contend, more than that. It is suggestive of two Mayan concepts related to the foregoing discussion: *kamawil* (living object) and *kab’awil* (double gaze), terms at the core of an ontological relationality based on the recognition of the animacy of the world and the personhood of humans and others. Apparently, Petrona was simply embodying a statue, but this was not a mere object, or inert matter. She was embodying a *kamawil*: an instance of living matter, and also a divine entity entered into relationally through our gestures toward them, through the stories we tell, and through our experimentations to embody them and know them through performance. In Petrona’s case, this *kamawil* was “*la diosa del maíz*” and became the basis for the performance her group developed and presented during the course of the workshop. As I suggested earlier, this exercise might seem experimental in terms of quotidian practice (not only in Nab’aa’, but almost anywhere outside of the life of a practicing performing artist); yet, it resonates with a long-standing practice in Mayan performance. As Bassie-Sweet noted about classic Maya ritual performance, humans “assumed the traits and power of the deity or were temporarily transformed into the deity” (2) by the wearing of objects associated with divinity and the use of embodied practices. Furthermore, Bassie-Sweet suggests that the category human/divine was fluid due to the performance practices by which ontological categories were transcended. And as the archaeological record and contemporary practices show, the categories animal/human, object/anthropos, and element/person are also fluid; through performance, a human being becomes any one of these, or at least steps out of their selves to consider the reality of another. This, in itself, is a pluriversal practice that pushes against the imposed universalities of the West and its rigid divides between seemingly antipodal things that are, in a relational ontology, inextricable connected.

In the *Popol Wuj*, the divine being associated with maize is Hun-Hunahpu (Taube, 175), father of the hero twins, and represented as male. In Petrona and her group’s reworking of the deity for the play she and her group developed in the workshop, maize—as deity, as human, and as plant—takes on a feminine form. But this is not an arbitrary reassignment; this fluidity across ontological categories has precedents in Mayan languages, oral, and written traditions, including

the *Popol Wuj*, and in the daily performances of living. Bassie-Sweet notes that what archeologists and epigraphers call “Mayan Corn God” (also “God E”), as depicted in codices and the archaeological record from the classic period, is male. He is represented, however, wearing a diamond-patterned skirt associated with female lunar deities. Bassie-Sweet also notes that in the *Popol Wuj*, the first human lineage heads are referred to as “mother-father” and that in many present-day Maya communities primordial ancestors and some ritual specialists are also referred to as “mother-father” (2). This is the case in Ixil, with the word *mamkuk’uy* meaning “primordial grandmother-grandfather” (Firmino Castillo, Maxho’l, et al., 19).

And it is this putting together of disparate things, making new things from them, taking these apart, and making yet other things, that is an experimentation in world-making based on the double vision of *kab’awil*. This simultaneous holding together of seeming disparate things, like a couplet of apparently distinct ontological states, was present in Violeta Luna’s workshop when Petrona embodied a *kamawil* of the maize goddess, sparking in her a simultaneous feeling of pride and shame, and I would venture, of being human and being divine, being maize and being *kamawil*. What brought this on was her engagement in embodied experimental practice that ruptures the colonial quotidian to open a space for accessing a relationality rooted in ways of being that are not precolonial, but decolonial and even *anticolonial*, and always and already present and available. Experimentation, as much as tradition, is a way to remember, create, and embody these relational states that can bring forth other possible worlds.

Within the ontology of the *kab’awil*, this simultaneity is not contradictory nor are these states—divine, maize, human, *kamawil*—necessarily distinct. Indeed, in Ixil, K’iche’ and other Mayan ontologies, these categories are not so separate. As discussed earlier, humans and maize share an ontological intimacy expressed in the *Popol Wuj*, in the oral tradition, and, most importantly, in ordinary and extraordinary (i.e., experimental) praxis. “*La Diosa del Maíz*” intuited the *kab’awil* nature of maize and the gamut of beings it is in paradoxical association and opposition with, according to Mayan narratives and, as will be discussed below, in its plant biology.

The very biotic cycle of maize shares in the gender fluidity performed by “*la Diosa del Maíz*,” it also depends on the enactment of interspecies relational intimacy. Corn is a self-pollinating plant, with both “male” (inseminating) and “female” (inseminatable) parts on the same plant which must come into contact for pollination. In Ixil planting practices, this happens

most efficiently by human intervention. During maize's maturation, a system of red root-like appendages develop at the base of its stalk, reaching into the ground. As my husband's uncle, Pap Cul (personal communication) explained, this is maize's vaginal opening. We must help maize reproduce by sprinkling its own pollen, the semen, onto the sticky fluid found there. Humans, who are made of maize, are essential to the maize's reproductive cycle. In turn, maize is central to ours, for without sustenance, there is no life.

Finally, as much as maize embodies life, it also carries within both its biotic and myth cycles, death and regeneration. The *Popol Wuj* tells how Hun-Hunahpu is vanquished by the lords of the underworld, who hang his decapitated head on a gourd tree. The decapitated head spits into the palm of Xkik', one of the daughters of the underworld lords, thereby engendering the hero twins, Hun-Ajpu and Ix-B'alam Kiej. They, in turn, vanquish the lords of the underworld through a performance in which they kill each other, only to be reborn again and again. The lords demand that this be done to them, too. The twins acquiesce to the demands, but they fail to resuscitate the lords. Like the hero twins, maize must also pass through cycles of death to engender life. Part of its growing cycle entails an important human intervention: the turning down of the green ears of corn when it is at the ripest point, causing the corn to dry on the stalk prior to harvesting. This is a sort of decapitation of the plant to ensure human wellbeing (otherwise, the ears of corn open, remain tender, and are eaten by birds) (Tohil Fidel Valey Brito, personal communication). Along similar lines, after harvest, the remaining corn plant is sacrificed, destroyed and burned to fertilize the soil with its ashes prior to the planting of a new field of corn. So, in maize, too, there is an oscillation between death, life, and regeneration. In what follows, we will see how Violeta Luna's performance of *NK 603: Action for Performer &*



Fig. 5 Violeta Luna performing *NK603* in Nab'aa. Photo by Herbert Reyes.

e-maíz performs this *kab'awil* quality of maize while addressing new challenges faced by both humans and our plant relatives.

NK 603: Performing Kab'awil. On the 28th of May, 2011, in Nab'aa's municipal meeting hall, Violeta Luna performed her *NK 603: Action for Performer & e-maíz*. This performative theater work is named after NK-603, a genetically modified maize strain developed by the Monsanto corporation to be resistant to the glyphosate-based herbicide, Roundup. This herbicide has been found to be a carcinogen, while the introduction of genetically modified maize and other seeds has caused disastrous ecological and economic consequences, especially for subsistence farmers in Nab'aa', all over Mesoamerica, and the world. Luna performed this work before an audience of close to five-hundred townspeople, most of whom were maize farmers and their families.¹⁹

Her body painted dark purple is black maize. She is dressed in a husk skirt, and at the start of the performance, she is both maize and woman and the interdependence between them. On her bare back is painted a resplendent maize stalk, and over her breasts white maize seeds are affixed over her purple flesh. Some young men in the audience whistle at the semi-nude Luna. She silences them with a menacing glare. Despite some audience performances of toxic masculinity, with her hat, rebozo, and bowl of seeds, she inspires awe, and the audience is quiet, even reverent for the rest of the performance. She moves with the bowl of seeds in her hands; her

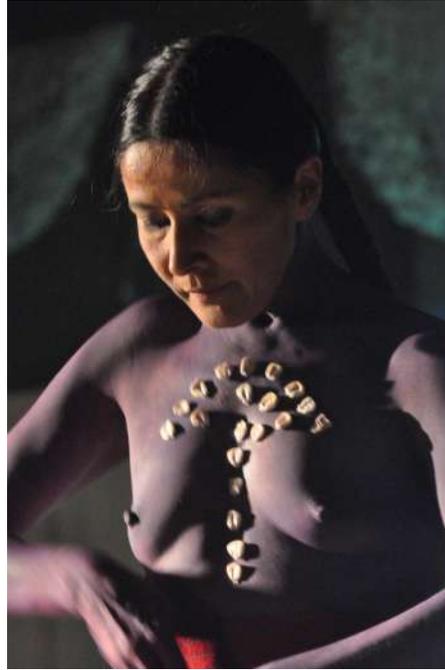


Fig. 6 Violeta Luna in *NK603* in Nab'aa'. Photo by Herbert Reyes, 2011.

gestures evoke prayer, planting, and *tichiil*, vitality. At this point in the performance, her presence and movements suggest maize's growing cycle and its relationality with humans.

As the performance progresses, a new kind of human-maize relationality erupts. This is foreshadowed by audiovisual projections which signal geopolitical interventions, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement, and petri dishes, microscopic views, and other imagery reminiscent of biotech engineering. The projections are on Luna's maize body and in the space around her, suggesting that the effects of these geopolitical and necro/biopolitical forces extend beyond the boundaries of her skin, reaching also beyond the edges of the stage, touching the members of the audience. Clearly, another, more dangerous relationality, is afoot.

A table is set up with metal instruments that are ambiguous, a cross between torture and medicine. Luna as maize/woman gags her own mouth with her long black braids. A man in a lab coat approaches. This is usually a member of the community where the performance takes place; in the Nab'aa' performance, it is Pedro Velasco of Teatro Tichiil. She puts on a metal-spiked



Fig. 7 Violeta Luna and Pedro Velasco in *NK603* in Naa’baa’. Photo by Herbert Reyes, 2011.



Fig. 8 Violeta Luna performing *NK603* in Nab’aa’. Photo by Herbert Reyes, 2011.

corset; he fastens and tightens it around her torso with heavy silver duct tape, contorting her waist into an impossibly small circumference. She adjusts a metal dental dam clamp onto her face, distorting her mouth into gruesome form. Then there is a syringe with red liquid, which she teases the audience with: will she inject it in her eye, her cheek, elsewhere? She jabs the hypodermic needle into her arm, releasing the unknown red liquid into her flesh, looking severely at the audience. One feels indicted. It is difficult to watch Luna as maize doing these things to herself, aided by the scientist whose face is familiar. This is not a facile us/them indictment. We are all complicit in this violence.

At this point in the performance I look around to see audience reactions. I think I see a grandmother weeping; maybe I am weeping. The children look frightened. I am worried that this

performance will provoke a scandal, with the nudity, the violence, and a theatricality not common in Nab'aa'.

Suddenly, there is a transition signaled, again, by audiovisual elements, with the soundscape growing in intensity. Imagery that evokes the Zapatista movement (EZLN) provokes maize/woman to remove the bindings from her body. The same man-in-lab coat/community member now helps Luna cut the tape off her torso, but this looks difficult and dangerous; the huge metal scissor could easily slip and cut into maize/woman's flesh. But it does not. The tape corset is removed; we see its underside where the resplendent maze that was painted on her back is now imprinted on the corset. What did biotech take from maize/woman? Remnants of the resplendent corn are still on her back, but it is smeared, distorted. Luna releases her braids and ties a red bandana around her face, in the same manner that EZLN members protect their



Figs. 9 & 10 Violeta Luna performing *NK603* in Nab'aa'. Photograph by Herbert Reyes, 2011.

identities. The performance ends with maize/woman brandishing a machete, gesturing to the resistance of Indigenous Mesoamerica against new forms of violence.

There is more to say about Luna's work in Nab'aa' and the performance of *NK603* before an audience of war survivors, their children, and their children's children. But it must wait for another telling. For now, I want to return to the thread that connects Petrona's embodiment of a *kamawil*, and its sparking of *kab'awil* and Luna's embodiment of *kab'awil* as maize/woman. Both were trans-temporal responses to current conditions through embodied enactments of Maya epistemological/ontological resistance. By retelling the *Popol Wuj* on their terms—with a female maize deity rather than male—Petrona's performance responded to the erasure of Mayan historical narratives by colonial and neocolonial state discourse in national schools that obviate these histories and present Maya and other Indigenous peoples in the past tense, only. In Luna's

performance of *NK603*, maize is human, and human is maize; both are agentive in the face of technoscientific and necro/biopolitical eruptions in our shared natural and



Fig. 11 Petrona Tzunux Chivalan offering candles in Paxil cave, associated with the mountain where the first maize emerged. Photograph by Herbert Reyes, 2011.

political histories. The performing into being of a *kab’awil/kamawil* ontology of relationality between humans and maize within an agentive material context represents a re-realization of matter and an expanded sense of personhood—both human and other than human—that has the potential to contest the three tenets of genocidal coloniality.

Conclusion

To conclude, I want us to return now to Ma Lach and Pap Lu’s bones and the stories performed in relation to them. It is their bones that led me to the foregoing reflection on the relationalities humans have with each other, with other organic beings, and with matter in general. Those bones led me to ask what these relationalities have to do with surviving genocidal coloniality. Those bones return to the earth and become, as Pap Xhasinib’ reminded me at his father’s funeral, the veins, flesh, and bones of a living, breathing earth. As such, I consider these bones, which are now reinterred in Nab’aa’s municipal cemetery, as *kamawil*, “*idolitos*,” that is, objects of power, granting, perhaps that “vision that duplicates” (Chacón n.d.), that is, allows for increasing complexity.

Ma Lach and Pap Lu’s bones are the traces of persons who lived, who had names and engendered children. But they are also forensic objects that establish the cold facts of genocide. At the same time, around Ma Lach’s bones took place a ritual of collective mourning—both per-

sonal and impersonal—for many at the funeral, including her son, hardly got the chance to know her in life. Nonetheless, the bones stand in for the relationships she had, and may have had, had she lived her life in full. As Pap Xhasinab's libation, and the concept of *kab'awil*, suggests, these relationships include humans, but also others. He compared bones, flesh, and blood with minerals, earth, and rivers. Though a seemingly simple act, it performatively theorized the relational ontology that constitutes the Ixil world, created through a web that entangles persons, but also other kinds of bodies and things. The *itiixhil tiichajil* that animates flesh and bone to make persons exists in humans and other animals, but also in the surrounding mountains, rivers, and forests of the Ixil world.

Petrona and Luna's performances, Nan Xhiv's name exchange with Tzuk, Pap Xhasinib's libation to the earth/body, and the Xoloche massacre survivors' dialogue with fire to heal from the genocidal fires of three decades before, are each, in their own way, performances of *kab'awil*. This ontological insistence, through small quotidian acts, collective ritual, and staged experiments in performance, is a way of accessing *kab'awil* through *kamawil*. That is, it is a way of accessing a double-vision and even pluriversal vision via living-matter in resistance to genocidal coloniality's construal of all matter as inert and (some) persons as bodies *only* to be used and disposed of as objects. This underscores the ontological workings of what Gerald Vizenor termed survivance, meaning “more than survival, more than endurance or mere response” (15). It is more than mere existence, but what precisely does survivance entail? The foregoing reflection suggests that survivance is a continuous and insistent enactment of Indigenous worlds through all means—from the small performances of daily existence to experimental aesthetic overtures, to more direct resistance when necessary and possible. Another signature term of Vizenor's is an important part of this ontological insistence and resistance: transmotion. Visionary and performative “transmotions” enact, wrote Vizenor, “a dialogical circle” of relationality and resistance, and “not a monotheistic, territorial sovereignty” (15-20). This suggests transmotion to be a constantly dynamic and trans-temporal acknowledgment of our inextricable relationality with and in a living, agentive material world. Transmotion has the qualities of *kab'awil*; it is double-headed and double-edged, requiring great care and responsibility in its wielding—like a wild edible plant named Tzuk.

Notes

¹ The United Nation’s Historical Clarification Commission found that the Guatemalan army committed genocide against groups of Mayan people under the pretense of counterinsurgency. Between 1982 and 1983, an estimated fifteen percent of the Ixil nation was killed by the Guatemalan army, with sixty percent of Ixil towns and hamlets destroyed and sixty percent of the population displaced (*Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico*).

² For more on our work, see Firmino Castillo, Maxho’l, et al. (2014) and Firmino Castillo (2016).

³ No’j is a day in the *tachb’al amaq’ tetz ixil* (Ixil ritual calendar) associated with the woodpecker as well as wisdom and knowledge; thirteen refers to the potentiality of the day No’j. The *B’oq’ol, Q’ezal Tenam Oxlaval No’j*, as a governing body with authority over local affairs specific to the canton Xo’l Salch’il, is named for the attributes of the day No’j.

⁴ Translation is mine; original in Spanish. Pap Xhas—who had been a combatant in the *Ejercito Guerrillero de los Pobres* (EGP, Guerrilla Army of the Poor) at the time—did not witness the events first-hand; his summary is compiled from oral histories he collected from massacre survivors.

⁵ For a complete version of the *Popol Wuj*, a colonial era text translated into Spanish from the original K’iche’, see the version by Luís Enrique Sam Colop.

⁶ *Yooxhil* is synonymous with *tichiil*, a gloss of the more formal *itiixhil tiichajil*, which I mentioned at the start of this article.

⁷ Original in Spanish; translation is mine.

⁸ Community in Resistance Peach Blossoms; *Turanza* is the Ixil word for peach.

⁹ In this text, I capitalize Tzuk given its treatment in Ixil as a proper noun. I also refer to Tzuk in the feminine pronoun, following Nan Xhiv’s practice.

¹⁰ Original in Spanish; translation is mine.

¹¹ The foregoing narrative combines content from the following: Luís Enrique Sam Colop’s direct translation of the colonial era *Popol Wuj* from K’iche’ into Spanish, Karen Bassie-Sweet’s summary of the classic period Maya creation narratives culled from the archeological record, and Ixil oral tradition.

¹² Sometimes *kamawil* are found while looting pre-Columbian graves and archaeological sites, and they are sometimes illegally sold to collectors in violation of Guatemala governmental Decree 26-97 (Articles 11 and 24).

¹³ Original in Spanish; translation is my own.

¹⁴ Original in Spanish; translation is my own.

¹⁵ *Kab’awil* is not italicized here, in the discussion of Chacon’s text, following and respecting her convention.

¹⁶ Violeta Luna’s visit was made possible through the auspices of the *Cooperativa Apícola Santa María Nebaj* (Beekeeping Cooperative of Santa María Nebaj), Teatro Tichiil of Nab’aa’, and other Mayan organizations, including FundaMaya, Escuela Normal Bilingüe Intercultural, and TVMaya. Also, Felipe Brito and Pedro Velasco, of the *Cooperativa Apícola Santa María Nebaj*, were extraordinary in their support of this project, having founded their own theater group named Teatro Tichiil a few years earlier.

¹⁷ Vez is a pseudonym, as I do not have contact with the young man and therefore did not secure his permission to use his name in this article.

¹⁸ Petrona's original statement was in Spanish: "*Siento vergüenza por sentir tanto orgullo.*"

¹⁹ *NK 603* was opened by four short theater works developed by workshop participants mentioned earlier; musical performances by Ixil vocalist, Evelyn Pérez, Ixtab ali'ob': Las Hijas de Ixtab, a "post-industrial" punk-goth ensemble from Guatemala City; and a magic show by a local teacher. For more on Luna's residency in Guatemala, see *Diario de Centroamérica*, May 20, 2011. For more on Luna's *NK 603: Action for Performer & e-Corn* see: <http://www.violetaluna.com/NK603.html>, and <http://hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/fr/enc09-performances/item/100-09-violeta-luna/100-09-violeta-luna>. The work is also described in Woy-narski (2017).

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