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Balance and Respect vs. Commodification and Control: Conflicting Values in the Work of Maya-Tsotsil Author Mikel Ruiz¹

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Abstract

Mikel Ruiz is a writer from Chiapas, Mexico, who writes in Spanish and in the indigenous Mayan language Tsotsil. His short story “*En medio del desierto*” tells of two men from Chiapas who choose to migrate to the U.S. due to the seeming lack of opportunities at home. His novel *Los hijos errantes* (“The wayward children”) presents several characters in Chiapas who struggle to adjust to the changing world. Ruiz has also written a thesis in which he explains certain aspects of *Lek'il kuxlejal*, a Tsotsil phrase that translates roughly as “good living” but entails much more when examined in the Tsotsil-Maya context. My paper considers how Ruiz's characters maintain their Maya perspective, or fail to, as they try to find a place in the capitalist system which reduces their identity to low-wage labor. Examining the story in light of Karl Polanyi's ideas regarding commodification of land, labor and money in comparison with Víctor Montejo's notions of Maya cosmivision, I conclude that Ruiz's literature and criticism emphasize the importance of living with balance and respect for those around us, rather than in pursuit of ever more power or wealth.

Keywords

Maya, Tsotsil, indigenous, Chiapas, cosmivision, decolonization literature

Mikel Ruiz's fiction and criticism address the proper way for indigenous people to adapt to the changing world, and by extension claims that a life in balance with other people, resources, and the earth in general is superior to one based on continually seeking more. Ruiz's characters stray from their traditional Maya values and toward a Western market-based approach to life, with disastrous results. Poor choices have bad effects, but Ruiz also shows Maya people bound up in forces beyond their control. I will examine two of Ruiz's works of fiction and one of criticism, using Karl Polanyi's ideas from *The Great Transformation* (1944) regarding capitalism's commodification of previously non-market concepts, in comparison with Jakalteq Maya Víctor Montejo's notion of a pan-Maya cosmivision that emphasizes harmonious living, stated in *Maya Intellectual Renaissance* (2005). These two scholars come from different times and hemispheres, one on the margins of Western thinking, the other whose indigenous thinking brings challenges from the margins of the world. Yet both arrive

at similar conclusions: that a market-based society is neither inevitable nor preferable to a system where markets serve the needs of society and social relations matter more than what people own. Ruiz takes up these ideas himself in his thesis on *Lek'il kuxlejal*, which roughly translates as “good living” but has deeper meaning within the Tsotsil cultural context. A key feature is that we must live with respect for all other life. In applying Polanyi and Montejo to Ruiz’s work, I will show how commodification has gone beyond Polanyi’s three categories of land, labor and money, and that although Maya cosmovision may be limited in the face of the global market’s onslaught, the traditional, socially meaningful life still holds the best hope.

The Desert of the Western Market-based Economy

*Stuil anima. Chtuch'bun kich'ob ik' ti yik'e, chchik'ilanbun sbek' jsat. Ti jch'ulele
chk'unibxa ta yeloval sat li jtatatike, muxa xkuch yu'un.*
(Ruiz Gómez, “Desert” 121)

So begins Mikel Ruiz’s story “*Ta o’lol takin osil*,” or “In the Middle of the Desert” (2017), which he wrote in Maya Tsotsil, as well as in Spanish.² Here is the English opening:

My eyes sting. My soul suffers with me under the scorching sun, and doesn’t fight back. The blood smells of death, the stink chokes my breath, and I dry up. The ground is a burning comal, and with each step I feel I’m melting onto it. The hands of the air play with the dust, my body turns into ash.

Skeletons of bushes seem to burn in the fiery light fallen from heaven. Back in my town there are trees, green pastures, fresh air, good and fresh. And here the sun leaves embers, only embers. Still, here I must walk, in front of me burnt branches of invisible wood are cracking, and my mind goes dark, I watch the blue blanket of the sky, blue like the sea. Vultures in circular movements, a ritual in perfect harmony, descend slowly, nobody talks; the silence becomes our prayer from this place, in the middle of the desert, warning us of evil. Land without blood! (139)

Tsotsil is a rather healthy indigenous language, with perhaps up to 400,000 speakers, though estimates vary, and its numbers appear to be growing. Children’s schools in the Chiapas highlands are increasingly using Tsotsil as a language of instruction, various institutions provide classes for adults wishing to learn (including Tsotsil speakers who want to become literate in their native language), and

Tsotsil cultural activities such as art, music and theater are flourishing. So why would people from this vibrant area set off on the dangerous journey across a desert to try to reach the U.S.?

Ruiz himself did not make the journey, but he admits he was at one point very close to doing so, and he says he based this fictional account on experiences he heard of from friends and relatives who did (personal communication 9 July 2016). The narrator Mateo, though he has already traveled far by the time the story opens, provides some background on what prompted him to leave. He says, “If it weren’t for the failure of the potato, bean, and corn crops, I wouldn’t be stuck in this misery here. The crop enhancements and fertilizers the government sent us didn’t work. It seemed the spirit of the fertile earth was robbed by the gods” (140-41). Mateo also felt he had no other worthwhile options at home: “This place isn’t any good, there’s no good work, my studies don’t get me work in the city, don’t think about them . . . what for, better I go away, to see what I can do” (141).

In Mateo’s decision we see a conflict between indigenous and Western values. Like indigenous Americans generally, Mayas see a spiritual connection to the land, to each other, and to the universe. Scholars of Maya culture, including those who are Mayas themselves, use the term *cosmovision*. Víctor Montejo, a Jakalteq Maya from Guatemala, seeks to promote a pan-Maya *cosmovision*, which he hopes can nurture cultural unity, while still allowing for diversity, among the 31 Mayan language groups in Mexico, Guatemala, Belize and Honduras. He says, “An indigenous perspective is needed to find solutions to the problems remaining in post-conflict Guatemala, and this will be achieved through integrating into society the Maya philosophy of esteeming a harmonious life, respect, and coexistence with people, nature and the universe” (2005, 35). Though he emphasizes his own Guatemala, he addresses other Mayan language regions as well, including Chiapas. In his Maya *cosmovision*, the earth has value because it has life, and the key is to live in balance with all lives on earth: “Maya thought, in terms of interrelation . . . [reminds] us that we are human and that we depend on the earth and all that exists on it Interrelation is a universal law that watches over the right to life of all beings inhabiting the earth, including the forests and rivers murdered by deforestation and industrial pollution” (122).

To the Western market-based mindset, land is valuable because of its economic potential; forests and rivers are resources to be exploited. Polanyi’s *The Great Transformation* records how Western Europe changed from a system where the market served the needs of society to one where the market ruled, and society had to serve its needs. According to Polanyi, it was the Industrial Revolution that brought this change, transforming people and nature into commodities, but it did not stop there: “The

Industrial Revolution was merely the beginning of a revolution as extreme and radical as ever inflamed the minds of sectarians, but the new creed was utterly materialistic and believed that all human problems could be resolved given an unlimited amount of material commodities” (42). For the first time in history, and the first place in the world, the economy was “controlled and regulated by markets” (44). As this entirely new cultural-economic development arose, it found champions among scholars eager to claim it as the only possible outcome: “No less a thinker than Adam Smith suggested that the division of labor in society was dependent upon the existence of markets, or, as he put it, upon man’s ‘propensity to barter, truck and exchange one thing for another’” (43). Scholars such as Herbert Spencer, Ludwig von Mises and Walter Lippman followed Smith’s lead, and soon the idea of “the bartering savage” as our primeval ancestor took hold (44). As with Manifest Destiny, the people empowered by this system designated it the ideal and only possible way, and although Polanyi disagrees, he acknowledges the effects: “In retrospect it can be said that no misreading of the past ever proved more prophetic of the future” (43). One hundred years after Smith’s 1776 *Wealth of Nations*, “An industrial system was in full swing over the major part of the planet which, practically and theoretically, implied that the human race was swayed in all its economic activities, if not also in its political, intellectual, and spiritual pursuits, by that one particular propensity” (43-44).

The propensity to trade on a global scale has created a neoliberal system where governments support the major corporate players and the quest for profit dominates. “In Mexico, Carlos Slim was granted control of almost all landline and mobile phone services and soon became the world’s richest man” (Monbiot, n.p.). In Ruiz’s story, the crop enhancements and fertilizer from the Mexican government represent an effort to extract more from the land than it would naturally produce, to increase its material value, rather than to live in balance with it. Therefore, Mateo and his Uncle Manuel leave their sacred land, which when valued appropriately could provide for a healthy life,³ and go into a desert, a “land without blood” (“Desert” 139). Of course, the actual desert had, and has, spiritual life for its indigenous residents, but the desert of the Western market-based economy renders it lifeless.

Polanyi drew his conclusions from studying non-market based societies, whether from the past or in existence at the time of his work (in the 1940s). In other words, he looked at available information regarding indigenous peoples, past or present. He found that among such peoples, The outstanding discovery of recent historical and anthropological research is that man's economy, as a rule, is submerged in his social relationships. He does not act to safeguard his individual interest in

the possession of material goods; he acts to safeguard his social standing, his social claims, his social assets. He values material goods only as far as they serve this end. (48)

This calls to mind the Maya cargo system, which Montejo uses as an example of the communalism of the Maya cosmovision. Like bearing cargo, those elected to leadership positions in this system bear a responsibility to their community. Based on Jakalteq elder Anton Luk's description of the system, Montejo explains:

More frequently those who occupy this position end up being poor because they cannot use this civic-religious position to benefit themselves or to take advantage of others . . . If the elected . . . uses his position to enrich himself or to cause problems for the community, he is immediately thrown out and criticized and disgraced by the community. (Montejo 2005: 150)

Contrast that with our Western system that seems offended by the notion that someone in great authority not be paid huge amounts. Montejo himself made a comparison: "As Anton Luk spoke," he says, "I thought about the immense difference between Maya political systems and those of the corrupt rulers of Guatemala and Latin America" (150). The cargo system was abolished in Jacaltenango in the 1940s. The government feared allowing the Maya to govern themselves (114), and Catholic missionaries flogged and imprisoned indigenous leaders to make them give up their traditional practices (Montejo 2001, xviii), though Montejo also credits a nun and a priest for helping preserve documents some years later (xix).

The cargo system continued in other parts of Guatemala and still exists in many areas of Mexico, including many Chiapas municipalities.⁴ Stefano Varese explains how the indigenous consciously use the system as a means of cultural preservation:

In the indigenous peasant communities of Mexico, resistance and opposition to the consolidated socio-economic forms of differentiation is not necessarily an exclusive function of poverty and limited access to goods and resources but rather an intentional cultural proposal, to a greater or lesser degree, on the part of the members of the collective. (249)

This social arrangement is not market-based: sharing "goods and resources" may be a part of it, but culture is the focus. What does this mean for a young man without enough to eat? Should Mateo have tried harder to survive without abandoning his culture? Perhaps he should not have given up so quickly on his studies—Ruiz himself has been able to find opportunities through education. But not

every young indigenous person can become a writer and scholar, and few benefit from the state-run educational system, which traditionally has not favored indigenous culture nor used indigenous languages: “Most indigenous Maya children do not advance in their schooling beyond the sixth grade. The dreams of many young Maya to find a way to express their personal perspectives and aspirations are crushed by the continuing racism, poverty, and structural violence that impact their lives” (Hernández-Ávila 9). Ruiz advanced further, but his education was entirely in Spanish; he taught himself to write in Tsotsil (Sell and Huet Bautista 183). Appreciation of indigenous culture may be growing—it was a major aspect of the 1994 Zapatista uprising, and in 2003 the *Ley general de los derechos lingüísticos de los pueblos indígenas* (General Law of Linguistic Rights of Indigenous Peoples) recognized that speakers of indigenous languages have a right to government services, including education, in their native tongues. People are pushing back against neoliberal market dominance, but in the meantime individuals must still make choices for their own existence.

Chiapas has long been subject to outside economic influence; indigenous people long forced to subject themselves to whatever opportunities the market economy could offer, even as they kept some of their traditional customs like the cargo system in place. As Rus and Collier explain regarding Chiapas in the 1890s, private landowners took over communal lands, and “new taxes were imposed that compelled men to seek cash wages; nonpayment of taxes—or of the loans taken out at exorbitant interest to pay the taxes—led to arrest and the sale of one’s debt to labor contractors; and finally, debt labor itself was policed and enforced by the state” (36). By the 1920s, the highland Mayas “resigned themselves” to working on the plantations in order to supplement their production from the little land left to them (36). Thus, seasonal labor under brutal conditions became an expected, if dreaded, part of the culture and assumed the mantle of honest work. “It was a spare living and life but was regular and predictable, and the stability of the region and of the ‘traditional’ Mayan community cultures enshrined in so many ethnographies from the region was built on it” (Rus and Rus 156). In the 1970s, this seasonal labor began to disappear due to “the stagnation of plantation agriculture and the glut of rural workers” (157). With limited options, and the failure of the government’s plan, Mateo comes to see migration as the only way, and many Chiapas men reached a similar conclusion. Rus and Rus, studying a Chiapas village in the Chamula region, state, “news reached the hamlet in the early 2000s of the bonanza of undocumented labor in the United States, a discovery that swept through all regions of Chiapas between 1998 and 2001” (157).

The struggle to cross the desert creates a spiritual crisis as well as a physical one. As Mateo and his uncle Manuel travel with a group, led by a coyote, Manuel tries to keep Mateo's spirits up, saying "*Jtatatik* is with us, and that coyote is taking us where we asked" (139). *Jtatatik* here is an honorific term referring to San Juan, the patron saint of their town San Juan Chamula. But Mateo is losing hope. He says, "I was more convinced that the *Jtatatik* had forgotten us. *Ch'ul* San Juan was not going to help us" (141). Eventually their coyote leads them to a tall, light-skinned man, but they do not know what this man will do and fear he will send them back. "Don't do this, let us pass, please, don't be cruel,' I begged, kneeling at the feet of the evil *güero*, like I used to pray to *Jtotik* San Juan" (142).

San Juan, or St. John, is a Christian figure, not indigenous to Chiapas, so how would praying to him accord with the Maya cosmovision? Recalling Montejo's inclusive notion of "coexistence with people, nature and the universe" (2005: 35) we can see how the syncretic nature of post-conquest Maya religious practices would take in these foreign spiritual beings and make them their own. Rather than the sixteenth-century Catholic notion that entities outside of God's kingdom are with the devil and must be converted or destroyed, Mayas would more likely consider how to integrate these new entities into their existing beliefs. Thus, Mayas became Christian and could pray to God or a saint while also maintaining some indigenous beliefs and rituals, unless church authorities acted to eradicate them.

Nevertheless, to pray to the evil *güero*? Mateo's desperation has led him to submit to this man in the hopes that he can gain work and money. This calls to mind Polanyi's three fictitious commodities: labor, land and money:

A market economy must comprise all elements of industry, including labor, land, and money. . . . But labor and land are no other than the human beings themselves of which every society consists and the natural surroundings in which it exists. To include them in the market mechanism means to subordinate the substance of society itself [and, one might add, the very earth we live on] to the laws of the market. (74)

Mateo's family had submitted their land to government efforts to maximize profits, and now as that has failed, Mateo submits himself to the man who has the power to turn this human being into a mechanism for cheap labor, which is all Mateo can hope for at this point. Indeed, the *güero* gives Mateo and the group work, but treats them no better than necessary for the labor they can produce.

We arrived at this old, abandoned house in Nogales, as they call it; again, they pushed us inside with hits and kicks as if we were dogs. How lucky we are! The others watch us, exchanging looks, a few words, and then they shut up. The pain from the blows changes to sadness in this horrible house. We breathe a sickening odor; nobody ever cleans here. Through the little holes in the roof threads of light visit us in the darkness, illuminate rays of hope; the house is big and full of abandoned dreams. (142)

The story provides no details about the nature of their work or how they are paid. After fifteen days, the men are taken back across the border and left there, disposed of, now that they no longer have value in the market economy. “This fat guy, dark-skinned and short, along with others of different sizes, forces us to leave with kicks, again treating us like stray dogs” (143). The stray dog is an apt comparison—an animal with no home in civilized society, but who also no longer belongs to the environment beyond human civilization. Worthless according to the market, yet many of us could testify to the value of stray dogs we have taken into our homes.

Can people like Mateo and Manuel find value outside of their sacred land? The story continues, as they attempt to cross the border again with another Tsotsil man Pedro, but without a coyote this time. Manuel does not make it. Mateo and Pedro reach the U.S. and find a man who promises them work in the morning, but again, he only values them for that work. With Pedro on the verge of collapsing from hunger, the man provides him no food, and as the story ends it appears Pedro will not survive the night. Compassion and refuge have no value in the market economy. It is notable that although physically the story ends in a city, spiritually we remain in the middle of the desert.

“In the Middle of the Desert” focuses more on the desert’s hardships, the suffering and danger in crossing it, than on the socio-cultural forces underlying the characters’ actions. To interpret it as a morality play for those who abandon their indigenous customs to the colonizers’ values, and thus suffer punishment, may not seem an obvious reading. However, in Ruiz’s novel *Los hijos errantes* (2014), such a reading becomes more evident, at least for some of the characters. Furthermore, from Ruiz’s own critical work, we can see how a decolonizing narrative may be present even when no ladino adversaries appear.

Struggling for the Good Life against Colonialism’s Chain of Power

In his master’s thesis,⁵ Ruiz examines a contemporary (2001) story by Tsotsil writer Nicolás Huet Bautista called “*La última muerte*” (“The last death”). Although all the characters in the story are

Tsotsils, Ruiz identifies aspects that show this to be a work of resistance literature, supporting traditional Maya culture in the face of the encroaching colonial world. Before addressing the story, Ruiz examines the Maya cosmovision as he and other indigenous scholars interpret it. He uses the Tsotsil phrase *Lek'il kuxlejal*, which is the same in the Chiapas-Mayan language Tseltal, to describe the Maya perspective for healthy, harmonious living with earth. He translates it to Spanish as *buen vivir* (37), which in English would simply be “good living,” but Ruiz details that the concept is more complex than the simple phrase might suggest: “To define this concept clearly has never been possible because it is not just rooted in the description of behaviors and knowledge, but also constituted deeply in the language and, as stated before, in orality” (37).⁶ Indeed, Ruiz emphasizes orality as essential to his culture’s survival, especially after the conquistadors destroyed Mayan language books⁷ “As a medium of teaching and communication, orality, ‘as opposed to written culture, sustains the beliefs, the traditions, the cosmovision and its values of the world across the collective memory’” (24, quoting Morales López 63). Ruiz says that although we can approach the idea of *Lek'il kuxlejal* “from the other side of the line” (37),⁸ meaning from the Spanish language in which he is writing, we may not fully understand it outside of the Tsotsil and Tseltal languages to which it belongs. Thus, as he seeks to bring it from the oral to the written and from the Mayan language to the European, he continues to refer to it as *Lek'il kuxlejal*. I will do the same, fully cognizant that I am further removed from understanding, as I attempt to approach the concept from behind the lines of English.

Ruiz analyzes *Lek'il kuxlejal* through three categories. First is *ch'ulel*, which he says may be translated as *ser* (being), *alma* (soul) or *esencia* (essence), “but only while it’s alive and breathing, for the heart, for the blood” (42).⁹ Some say Mayas are born with *ch'ulel*, others say they acquire it as they mature. Ruiz concludes that although it may be present at birth, it develops as the child experiences the world, “apprehends the air, the cold and the warmth of life” (43).¹⁰ With the development of the *ch'ulel* comes the ability to think reflectively, communicate and live among others, the traits of a mature person. However, the *ch'ulel* can be lost too, Ruiz says, “through a small error, a lapse . . . , and if one does nothing to recover it, one can also lose respect or life” (45).¹¹ It is possible that Mateo in “Desert” loses his *ch'ulel* by leaving his native land and begging for work. As we will see in the analysis of *Los hijos errantes*, Ruiz is interested in the choices indigenous people make in the face of pressures and temptations from the modernizing world.

The second category Ruiz examines is *k'anel*, which he translates as *querer* (want), but which he also examines as something more complicated than simple translation can explain. *K'anel* means more than

just wanting something from the world, it means engaging with the community and the natural world in a respectful way. Once a person has *ch'ulel*, they are ready to act as a subject in society: "The foundation of this category is the capacity to respect the existence of others and of that which surrounds the subject. It is not enough to know that others exist, it is also necessary to respect their existence" (47).¹² This includes an awareness of the greatness of the world's offerings, and the corresponding great responsibility to practice care and respect in dealing with these offerings. Ruiz says the phrase *ich'el ta muk'*, which he translates as *recibir en grande* (receive greatly), describes this concept: "The *ich'el ta muk'* is inescapable for balance in society because it assures the maintenance and functioning of the *Lek'il kuxlejal'*" (47).¹³ A subject who cannot respect their fellow subjects, human and otherwise, "is not yet prepared to be a subject" (48).¹⁴ In this case, Mateo seems to qualify. He respects and supports his uncle, and the two of them accept Pedro, the other Tsotsil traveler they had not previously known: "Three days ago we found him half-dead on the trail; his brothers left him there in the hills because he was slowing down their pace, and we helped put faith back in his heart, and he's come with us, his soul torn apart" (140).

Ruiz's third category, *k'uxubinel*, is the most complicated to translate. He offers both *sentir-amar* (feel-love) and *sentir-pensar* (feel-think) as possibilities, but his explanation makes clear that *k'uxubinel* cannot exist absent *ch'ulel* and *k'anel*: "To be human for the Mayas is not just to have *ch'ulel* (soul/being, nahual, conscience), not just to know respect and appropriateness, but also to feel all of that" (48).¹⁵ With the capacity to feel comes the capacity to feel pain, and for the Tsotsils this is not regrettable, but rather an essential part of a valuable life. Part of the word *k'uxubinel* is the verb *k'ux*, to hurt, but it is a pain to the heart that brings understanding: "Only the heart can feel pain that is equally physical, spiritual and emotional" (49).¹⁶ Mateo feels this divine pain for his uncle and Mateo, so it seems *k'uxubinel* is in order for him. It is only in his *ch'ulel* that he perhaps falls short.

With these ideas in mind, Ruiz examines "*La última muerte*" by Nicolás Huet Bautista. This story features a traditional Tsotsil healer named Manuel Bolom and another Tsotsil man who believes the healer is evil, responsible for many deaths. Manuel's son Miguel Bolom narrates the story. It opens with Manuel praying and chanting over a patient, whom he cures. Then we see the Bolom family going to their town's festival. Huet presents significant details about the nature of this festival and how fulfilling it is for Manuel. However, at one point, passing by a cantina, Miguel overhears two men talking scornfully of Manuel's seemingly magical healing powers, thinking he uses them for harm, blaming him for deaths and misfortunes. Miguel continues on his way, thinking, "These men were

talking about someone else. My father has a good spirit, cures many people, his mouth always speaks good words; also, he's respected by everyone. Better to go watch the fiesta" (Huet Bautista 35).¹⁷ One of these men is Pedro Ok'il; with the other he gathers a group of five, and they take guns and machetes to kill Manuel and his entire family. The details are brutal. Miguel survives and is taken in by relatives. He grows up and earns a respected place in the community. One day he sees Pedro Ok'il, now a poor old man, bent over as if folded in two. Ok'il asks who he is. He says, "I am Miguel Bolom, son of the late Manuel Bolom" (49).¹⁸ Hearing this, Ok'il anxiously turns away and walks with difficulty into the shadows.

On the surface, this may seem like a conflict among indigenous people alone, having nothing to do with the outside culture. However, Ruiz explains how the story shows the unavoidable force of colonialism, like a "chain of power that influences the culture and pushes it toward self-destruction"¹⁹ (7). Regarding Manuel Bolom, Ruiz says he represents,

the Maya man, who follows the tradition of family and ancestors, who seeks, at the cost of his own life, the well-being and health of others, who through the power of his word, that gift granted by those same ancestors, has the capacity to enter into dialogue with the *ch'ulel* of "long-ago disappeared beings," and who also holds dialogue with "the gods of the dead." (101, quoting Huet Bautista 39)²⁰

Pedro Ok'il, on the other hand, rejects the Maya tradition and takes on the colonizers' view:

Because he lacks the capacity to obtain respect on his own merits, he uses other tools to achieve his objective. . . . [He organizes] the massacre with guns and machetes, tools that evoke the image of the colonizer who entered America with violence, unleashing death without pity with the intention to obtain absolute power, including the death of the children as a symbol of uprooting, and memory that eliminates the "opponent" in order to impose one's might on the weakest. (102)²¹

In this contrast between respectful harmonious living and the desire to conquer and take power, Polanyi's commodifications play no significant role – indeed, the story makes no direct reference to money. Nevertheless, to some extent that very lack of reference helps show Polanyi's and Montejo's point: the Bolom family is connected to their community by social relations and shared traditions. Manuel's prayers involve respecting the earth and acknowledging humanity's place in it, rather than over it. For example, he says, "We breathe a short time/ we tread a short way/ on our sacred Mother Earth" (19).²² He is interested in reverential coexistence, not profit. As for Ok'il, while he may not

exactly be in it for the money, he is interested in the kind of power and position that money could provide, and in taking it rather than earning it. As Ruiz says, he is motivated by “envy of the power of the word, envy for respect in his quest for superiority and authority” (102).²³ Not a commodification perhaps, but a chance to gain at the expense of others, to extract power.

Using the concept of *ch’ulel*, Ruiz examines the importance of orality to Huet Bautista’s narrative, where Manuel has the power of the word that Pedro Ok’il envies. Manuel uses this power for others. His opening prayer expresses awareness of *ich’el ta muk’*, knowing his place in the world and accepting the responsibility that goes with it. The words themselves have power in the healing process: “With this tender song on his lips, and with copal, my father perfumed the man’s body” (19).²⁴ The opening prayer also brings the reader into the Tsotsil world, which may require some adjustment for non-Tsotsil readers; however, Ruiz explains, this opening “revives, in the Tsotsil reader’s mind, the voice of the *totil me’iletik*, a voice that comes from before, from a long time back” (87).²⁵ The phrase *totil me’iletik*, literally “father mothers,” is how Tsotsils refer to ancestors, something they do regularly as part of their interaction with the world. Ruiz asserts that for Tsotsil readers, “That voice, sound and rhythm is magnetized in the memory and courses through the blood, the heart and the *ch’ulel*” (88).²⁶

The power of the word also relates to Miguel’s powers of narration. Ruiz considers that Miguel at times describes things he could not have seen, such as the killers gathering and plotting. Ruiz explains it is Miguel’s *ch’ulel* that does this: “This *ch’ulel* enters into the murderers’ consciousness, into the historical past enclosed in colonial power” (108).²⁷ Later, after the attack, Miguel should be unconscious, but he still narrates, even though he loses his capacity to speak: “All that night my word was stolen by the gods, only my eyes testified” (45).²⁸ The eyes, Ruiz says, “by way of the *ch’ulel*” (110).²⁹ Ruiz compares this with the indigenous silence and withdrawal in the face of massacre and cultural annihilation from European colonizers, “the memory fragmented by their own history going back to the conquest” (110).³⁰

At the story’s conclusion, Miguel has lived through the trauma and stayed true to his *ch’ulel*. He has learned from the pain and developed *k’anel* to live in harmony with all life around him. He has *k’uxubinel* to feel that this is the right path. The *Lek’il kuxlejal*, or as Montejo calls it the pan-Maya cosmivision that embraces “a harmonious life, respect, and coexistence with people, nature and the universe” (2005, 35), means recognizing that even our enemies are part of that universe. Miguel has an opportunity to take revenge, but he declines it. “The splendor of the word has strengthened me,”

he says (49).³¹ He finds his voice to speak to Pedro Ok'il, and the *ch'ulel* in his words carries his power, as it did for his father the healer. Thus, Huet Bautista and Ruiz suggest, through cultural awareness, respect for tradition and for others, indigenous people can find the strength to, as Ruiz says, "free themselves from the chain that historically binds them, from the colonial and the neocolonial" (104).³²

Ruiz's own fictional characters, however, do not find ways to break this chain, and instead succumb to the forces that push them to desperate acts, or the drives that pull them. We have seen how Mateo and his companions lost their way in the desert. In *Los hijos errantes*, Ruiz presents several characters who stay in Chiapas but still fail to maintain their *ch'ulel*. I will turn now to this story.

Other Items (that Should Not Be) for Sale: Sex, Religion, Joy

Commodifications beyond those Polanyi discussed are apparent in Ruiz's novel *Los hijos errantes*, if not through desperate quests for basic income (though that too), then through Western influence leading characters from the harmonious pan-Maya cosmovision into one of consumerist drives. In this final section, I will examine how *Los hijos errantes* shows evidence of Western commodification and redefinition regarding other important yet vulnerable aspects of human life: sex, religion and joy.

For sex and money to be connected is hardly a new development, but sex packaged in boxes, for sale and consumption, is. Ignacio Ts'unun in *Los hijos errantes* longs for a woman to call his own, and he thinks he would know what to do with her because he's seen it on a video. As Ignacio watches his disc, Ruiz's narration also reveals something of the scene as it was recorded, and thus we simultaneously witness a sex act becoming a commodity and the reaction from one of its consumers – for example: "She has a lost look, as if searching for someone else within the room. Ignacio presses another button to speed up the video" (120).³³ Ignacio speeds through the part that delays his desire, not interested in any human connection, not curious about the woman's lost look or how she got involved in this activity, only wanting the satisfaction the product is meant to deliver. After climaxes occur onscreen and off, we find the girl was not aware she was part of an economic enterprise:

On the screen, the boy gets up quickly, leaving the girl on the bed, and goes to the bathroom with his semen in his hands. On the side of the bed the girl sits and adjusts her blouse. As she picks up the skirt from the ground, her face freezes as she sees the camera on the table. Looking stunned, she gets to her feet, seems unsure what to do.

Behind her the boy appears, anxious, and moves quickly toward the camera. The recording is interrupted. (121-22)³⁴

If Ignacio has noticed her discomfort, he does not care. On the contrary, his lingering feeling after the viewing is a longing for possession:

The girl from the video appears in his imagination. He pulls and closes the door to his house, then stuffs her mouth with the rag. He immerses himself in her skin, she becomes his without restrictions. He feels how her heart beats in fear, her blood stops flowing. His fingers touch her skin, he is lost in her cries. (122)³⁵

Ignacio is 17, at an age to begin seeking a wife, perhaps with advice from older men in his community (his father has died). His *ch'ulel* should be developing so he understands and respects the feelings of others. But the invasion of Western technology has brought with it a packaged sexuality, and like fast food it is quick, cheap, easy and at least temporarily satisfying; how the consumer feels is its only concern. Moreover, Ignacio learns from this. His fondness for quick and easy sex couples with his insecurity over competing for actual women who, he feels, value material goods in a man:

He imagines being with other girls, but who? Nobody wants him, those he talks to say he is a loser, lazy, no money, not dressed nice like other guys, with boots, denim pants, patterned shirt and leather jacket. Ignacio only has two pairs of pants and three worn-out shirts. "If I stay here, I'll never change," he says to himself. "If I go work in my milpa, I'll die there too, alone." (121)³⁶

Like Mateo in "Desert," Ignacio sees no point in trying to follow a traditional path. He too plans to leave, though he shows none of Mateo's respect and communal responsibility. Ignacio abandons his mother without notice to seek work in San Cristobal. We might say Mateo loses his *ch'ulel* during his travels, but with Ignacio it seems he lost it long before, perhaps when he started watching television. Rather than being pushed out due to lack of opportunity, Ignacio is more pulled out by lust, and it is the new commodities that specifically inspired his longing: television showed him images of better lives elsewhere, and pornography shaped his desire for sex. Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith notes,

capitalism and Western culture have transformed earlier trade practices (such as feudal systems of tribute), through the development of native appetites for goods and foreign desires for the strange; the making of labour and consumer markets; the protection of

trade routes, markets and practices; and the creation of systems for protecting the power of the rich and maintaining the powerlessness of the poor. (89)

Perhaps no one involved in the system that brought a pornographic disc (as well as the electricity, TV and DVD player necessary to watch it) to Ignacio's hands was actively thinking of maintaining indigenous powerlessness, but Ruiz suggests that is a result. As Debra Satz notes in *Why Some Things Should Not Be for Sale*, labor markets can shape people, creating "submissive inferiors and dominating superiors" (5). Satz's assessment of prostitution might equally apply to pornography: it "is a theater of inequality; it displays for us a practice in which women are seen as servants of men's desires" (147). The televised representation of reality that Ignacio accepts as real distorts his *k'anel* and keeps him from engaging with his community in any healthy way; it convinces him that he is inferior, but gives him one option for exercising domination: it tells him that as a man, he can dominate a woman. This he proceeds to do, raping his young neighbor Elena, among the sheep in her family's corral.

Pascuala Tsepente', Elena's mother, is fervently religious, but her idea of religion is that Christ should grant her prayers. We do not see her going to services or participating in rituals, and she complains about her husband Pedro taking a cargo position: "It's a stupid idea, it doesn't do us any good, our words carry no weight, and if it weren't for that you wouldn't be falling-down drunk" (123).³⁷ She may have legitimate concerns about Pedro's alcoholism (as I will address later), but her solution is horrific—when he is passed out, she ties him up and cuts out his tongue: "Wait for me here, think about it well, I'll bring you a little more *pax* [cane liquor], a gift I prepared for you. I have to hurry so you won't feel any type of bite, nor the machete's blade" (126).³⁸ Pascuala thinks she can justify this because she has prayed to her crucifix for her husband to stop drinking, and he has not done so: "She hopes that at last [Christ] would intervene on behalf of Elena. Otherwise, he will be the one responsible for her acts" (117).³⁹

This is not a commodification in the sense of Pascuala putting monetary value on her piety, but it does show she is in it for what she can get. "Why do I keep praying to you if you do nothing for me?"⁴⁰ she asks at one point (169). In addition, it is significant that it is to the Christian image, which the colonizers brought over, that Pascuala addresses her angry demands. This is different from ordinary syncretic practices, through which the expansive view of the world expressed in *ich'el ta muk'* could allow Chamulans to accept San Juan as their town's patron saint: Pascuala's religious views lead her to more isolation from her family and community. Though her interpretation of Christianity may

contrast as much with Christ's actual teachings as with Maya cosmovision, it does align with the colonial interpretation of Christianity as imposing a single-minded authority and seeking destruction of all that stands in its way. Also, once Pascuala is certain the "product" doesn't work, she disposes of it: she eventually throws the cross into her stove (176).

In the indigenous system, religion and community involvement are inseparably linked in *k'anel* (wanting a connection with others) and *k'uxubinel* (feeling that connection), and they bring joy. Belonging to and acting in this system provide fulfillment beyond the capabilities of money. In "*La última muerte*," Miguel describes how his father felt when attending the town festival: "My father smiled and conversed with his old friends, drank *pox* and smoked tobacco; I had never seen him so happy, and for good reason: we were in the pueblo together with the gods" (31).⁴¹ They see the festival as a time when their gods are with them—the social and the spiritual going hand in hand. Stimulants like alcohol and tobacco have a place in these ceremonies, enhancing the joyful communal spirit of *k'uxubinel*.

However, alcohol and tobacco are products, and if consumed only at the occasional festival, they will not provide significant profits for their producers. Therefore, marketers seek to create demand, and have no market-based incentive to limit consumption. Just as Ignacio wants a ready supply of on-demand sexual satisfaction rather than healthy, meaningful sex as part of a harmonious life, Pascuala's husband Pedro seeks a ready supply of alcoholic stimulus rather than just the occasional social pleasure. He drinks out of misery when his first child is a girl, and he drinks out of happiness when his second one is a boy, and not just in a one-time celebration: "Pedro went and got drunk for a whole week from pure happiness, he spent the whole week away from home" (170).⁴²

Ignacio's longing for sex and Pedro's for alcohol represent what L.T. Smith calls "the development of native appetites" (89), the creation of desires that the market can happily fulfill, at a price. Whether purposefully or by an "invisible hand" (to quote another Smith), the colonizing society maintains its control over indigenous subjects, even if no colonizers are immediately involved.

Conclusion

Mikel Ruiz is one of many indigenous writers cultivating a perspective both new and ancient through his literature. It is new for Mayan language writers to contribute to the world of academic and literary discourse—*Los hijos errantes* may be the first published Tsotsil novel—but the ideas they commit to writing convey wisdom from before colonization. Karl Polanyi realized the sensibility of indigenous

practices; Víctor Montejo grew up among such practices, and then learned their greater context in the history of the Maya people. By applying the ideas of these two scholars to the works of a contemporary Maya-Tsotsil writer, I sought to show that indigenous Maya voices are increasingly expressing wisdom the rest of the world should value.

Through his own characters, and through analyzing those of Nicolás Huet Bautista, Ruiz shows how indigenous people react when the outside world's forces invade—and both “In the Middle of the Desert” and *Los hijos errantes* have more horrors than those mentioned here. Ruiz's writing, whether literature or criticism, suggests that subordination to the Western colonial forces that tend to commodify our every connection to the world and each other leads at best to a soulless life and at worst to lonely death. However, by understanding *Lek'il kuxlejal*, indigenous people (and perhaps others?) may to some degree withstand the assaults of commodification and find meaning in connection to others. Far better to stop worshipping the market and place our faith instead in social relationships and harmonious living.

Ruiz is currently working on another novel, and other Chiapas writers are producing works of poetry, prose and criticism to help their culture flourish. As the field of comparative literature expands to and beyond areas of subaltern and decolonial studies, Mayan language writers like Ruiz, Huet Bautista and others remind us there are ever more new frontiers, not for colonizing and extracting this time, but for listening and learning.

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Notes

¹ A shorter version of this article was presented at the Languages Graduate Student Association Conference at the University of Connecticut on November 11, 2016.

² Ruiz published this story under the name Miguel Ruiz Gómez, which is also the name he used for his master's thesis, discussed below. For his novel *Los hijos errantes*, he used Mikel Ruiz, and since that is the most recent work, I will refer to him generally as "Ruiz."

³ This is not to say that Tsotsils never otherwise leave their land. The market economy has made local subsistence living difficult for many years. The more customary, temporary migration for the past century has been to large plantations elsewhere in Chiapas, where seasonal labor was available, usually under severe conditions. In recent years the urge has come about for a relocation that is more substantial, and more likely to become permanent, showing the increasing influence of global market forces. See Rus and Rus, 2014.

⁴ San Juan Chamula, where Mateo, and the author Ruiz come from, still uses the cargo system, but it is subject to corruption and attack. This past July, the Chamula town leader was killed, and in October his successor stepped down, citing death threats. Information on what's behind this is unclear, so I won't speculate. Suffice to say that maintaining traditions will not keep all problems away.

⁵ "E/Lekil kuxlejal (*Buen vivir*) y la heterogeneidad literaria. Dos categorías para leer el cuento maya tsotsil "La última muerte" de Nicolás Huet Bautista"; "The *Lekil kuxlejal* (Good living) and literary heterogeneity. Two categories for reading the Maya Tsotsil story "The last death."

⁶ In the author's original Spanish version: "Definir este concepto nunca ha sido posible tan claramente porque no sólo radica en la descripción de comportamientos y de conocimientos, pues se constituye profundamente desde el lenguaje y, como hasta entonces, en la oralidad." From now until the end of the article, all translations of Ruiz (or Ruiz Gómez when he published under that name) and Huet Bautista are my own. These endnotes provide the authors' original Spanish.

⁷ : "Como medio de enseñanza y comunicación, la oralidad, 'a diferencia de la cultura escrita, sustenta las creencias, las tradiciones, la cosmovisión y sus valores del mundo a través de la memoria colectiva.'"

⁸ "Desde el otro lado de la línea."

⁹ "Pero solamente es eso mientras se trata de luz y aliento para el corazón, para la sangre."

¹⁰ "Aprehende el aire, el frío y el calor de la vida."

¹¹ "Por un mínimo error, una falta . . . , y si no se hace nada para rescatarlo también se pierde el respeto o la vida."

¹² "Lo que fundamenta esta categoría es la capacidad de respetar la existencia de otros y de lo que rodea al sujeto. No basta saber que otros existen, sino que se necesita respetar su existencia."

¹³ "El ich'el ta muk' es ineludible para el equilibrio en la sociedad porque asegura el mantenimiento y funcionamiento del *Lek'il kuxlejal*."

¹⁴ "Aún no está preparado para ser sujeto"

¹⁵ "Ser humano para los mayas no nos basta tener ch'ulel (alma/ser, nahual, conciencia), no nos basta saber respetar y corresponder, sino también sentir todo eso."

¹⁶ "Sólo el corazón logra sentir el dolor tanto físico, espiritual y emocionalmente."

¹⁷ "Estos hombres platicaban de otra persona. Mi padre tiene espíritu bueno, cura mucha gente, su boca siempre pronuncia palabras buenas; además es muy respetado. Mejor hay que ver la fiesta."

¹⁸ "Me llamo Miguel Bolom, hijo del finado Manuel Bolom."

¹⁹ "Cadena de poder que influye en la cultura que los impulsa a auto-destruirse."

²⁰ "Hombre maya, el que sigue la tradición familiar y ancestral, el que busca, a costa de su propia vida, el bienestar y la salud de los demás, quien a través del peso y poder de su palabra, ese don otorgado por los mismos ancestros, tiene la capacidad de dialogar con el *ch'ulel* de sus 'seres desde muchos años atrás desaparecidos' y que también dialoga con 'los dioses de la muerte.'"

²¹ "Al no tener la capacidad de obtener ese respeto por sus propios méritos, usa otras herramientas para lograr su objetivo. . . . [organiza] la masacre con armas y machetes, herramientas que evocan la imagen del colonizador cuando entra en América con violencia, desatando la muerte sin piedad con la intención de obtener el poder absoluto, incluso con la muerte de los hijos es el símbolo del desarraigo y la memoria que elimina al 'opponente' para imponer su poderío sobre los más débiles."

²² "Sólo respiramos un rato/ sólo ensuciamos/ a la Madre Tierra."

²³ "La envidia al poder de la palabra, la envidia por el respeto en la búsqueda de superioridad y autoridad."

²⁴ "Con este tierno canto en los labios de mi padre, y con copal, sahumaba el cuerpo de aquel hombre."

²⁵ "Revive, en la mente del lector tsotsil, la voz de los *totil me'iletik*, una voz que viene de antes, de hace mucho tiempo atrás."

²⁶ “Esa voz, sonido y ritmo, se imanta en la memoria y recorre la sangre, el corazón y el *ch’ulel*.”

²⁷ “Este *ch’ulel* entra en la conciencia de los asesinos, en el pasado histórico encerrado en el poder colonial.”

²⁸ “Toda la noche mi palabra fue robada por los dioses, solamente mis ojos atestiguaban.”

²⁹ “A través del *ch’ulel*.”

³⁰ “La memoria fragmentada por la propia historia colonial a partir de la conquista.”

³¹ “El esplendor de la palabra me ha fortalecido.”

³² “Liberarse de la cadena que lo ata históricamente, de la colonia y lo neocolonial.”

³³ “Ella tiene la mirada perdida, como si buscara a alguien más dentro del cuarto. Ignacio presiona otro botón para adelantar el curso del video.”

³⁴ “En la pantalla el joven deja de inmediato a la muchacha y se dirige al sanitario llevando en las manos su semen. A la orilla de la cama la joven se sienta y se acomoda la blusa; al levantar la enagua del suelo, su mirada se congela al dar con la cámara sobre la mesa. Pasmada, se pone en pie sin saber qué hacer. Detrás de ella aparece apresurado el joven y rápidamente va por la cámara, la grabación se interrumpe.”

³⁵ “La joven del video aparece en su imaginación, jala y cierra la puerta de su casa, le tapa la boca con el trapo con que se había limpiado. Se sumerge en su piel, la hace suyo sin restricciones. Siente cuánto late su corazón de miedo, su sangre deja de recorrerla. Le roza la piel con sus dedos, se pierde en su llanto.”

³⁶ “Imagina estar con otras muchachas, pero ¿quiénes?, nadie lo quiere, aquellas a quienes habla dicen que es un haragán, un flojo, no tiene dinero, no se viste con buena ropa como los demás jóvenes, con botines y pantalón de mezclilla, camisa de cuadros y chamarra de piel. Ignacio sólo tiene dos pantalones y tres camisas en desuso. “Si permanezco aquí, nunca cambiaré”, se dice a sí mismo, “si sigo en la siembra de milpa, así me moriré, solo.”

³⁷ “Es una estupidez, no servimos para nada, nuestras palabras no tienen sentido, y si no fuera así no estarías tirado por borracho.”

³⁸ “Espérame aquí; pensándolo bien, traeré otro poco de aguardiente, un regalo que te preparé. Debo apurarme para que no sientas ningún tipo de mordida, ni la del filo del machete.”

³⁹ “Espera que por fin [Cristo] interviniera por Elena: de lo contrario, él será el responsable de sus actos.”

⁴⁰ “¿Para qué te sigo rezando si de nada me sirves?”

⁴¹ “Mi padre sonreía y conversaba con sus viejos amigos, bebía pox y fumaba tabaco; nunca lo había visto tan feliz; y con razón, estamos en el pueblo junto a los dioses.”

⁴² “Pedro fue a emborracharse una semana completa de puro contento, pasó toda la semana ausente de la casa.”