

“La conjura de Xinum” and Language Revitalization: Understanding Maya Agency through Theatre

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Jan Cohen-Cruz argues in *Local Acts: Community-Based Performance in the United States* that the criticism of conventional theatre is ineffective at assessing the scope, intent, and success of community-based performances. She writes, “expecting virtuosity, we miss the pleasures offered by commitment and risk. We are used to formal, distanced aesthetics and may underappreciate art driven by a personal connection to the material and a need to communicate.”^[1] In this article I argue that this is precisely the phenomenon that has occurred in the criticism surrounding community-based Yucatec Maya theatre in Mexico. Evidence of such criticism can be found in the work of Carmen Castillo Rocha on theatre in the state of Yucatán. In explaining the relevance of theatre in Maya communities compared to the importance of other forms of performance within festivals and rituals in those same communities, she writes

el teatro entre las comunidades mayas, en el mejor de los casos, queda como un fenómeno marginal cuyo origen fue el contacto con la cultura dominante; y en el peor de los casos aparece como un intento occidental de convertir la vida ritual de los mayas en un espectáculo para los ojos occidentales.

Theatre among Maya communities, in the best of cases, remains a marginal phenomenon whose origin was contact with the dominant culture; and in the worst of cases appears as an occidental attempt to convert the ritual life of the Maya into a spectacle for occidental eyes.^[2]

I take issue with Castillo Rocha’s statements above in three respects: first, she argues that Maya theatre is a marginal phenomenon compared to festival and ritual; second, she insists that in the best-case scenario, theatre in the peninsula owes its existence to western or dominant cultures; and finally, she implies that theatre in Maya communities is intended for western eyes. I explore Castillo Rocha’s statement more below, but I introduce it here to argue that Maya theatre in the Yucatán peninsula has been viewed as marginal because of the way that it has been mediated in scholarship, not because it is inherently marginal within the community that created it.

In this article, I argue for the necessity of studying Maya language theatre in the Yucatán peninsula as an art world.^[3] This approach reveals the ways in which the multiplicity of discourses regarding Maya identity and the outside alliances that intersect with individuals and organizations that produce theatre have had an effect upon the valuing of theatre in some Maya areas but not in others.^[4] This recognition is critical for understanding why Maya language theatre in the peninsula has been dismissed as marginal when compared to Mayan language theatre in the Mexican state of Chiapas, for example. I do this by first reviewing the relevant literature on the art world and artwriting, I explore the literature regarding contemporary Maya theatre in the Yucatán peninsula and Chiapas, and I end with a short exploration of the community-based performance in Tihosuco, Quintana Roo, Mexico, called “La conjura de Xinum,”

(The Plot of Xinum) as an act of artwriting. Through this discussion, I argue the play “La conjura de Xinum” should not be dismissed as merely a marginal act by a community theatre group in rural Mexico; rather, I maintain it reveals the agency of Maya artists in advocating for language and cultural revitalization.

An in-depth overview of Maya identity is not possible in an essay of this scope, but a brief review is necessary to contribute to a deeper understanding of Maya theatre in the Yucatán peninsula. The Maya peoples are comprised of a number of interrelated yet distinct linguistic and cultural groups. They have been grouped together under the name “Maya” by both academics and Maya peoples themselves as an act of resistance. The Maya civilization spanned a large portion of Mesoamerica (present-day Mexico and into the countries of Belize, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador). Colonization and independence movements in these countries had a profound effect upon the Maya peoples and their resistance strategies and contributed to shaping distinct practices within linguistic and cultural groups.[5] While Maya people continue to live throughout Mesoamerica, in this essay, I am focusing on the Maya in Mexico, and even more specifically, within the states of Chiapas, Yucatán, and Quintana Roo. Yucatán and Quintana Roo are two of the three states which comprise the Yucatán peninsula, Campeche, the third, will not be explicitly addressed in this article.[6] Yucatec Maya people are the ethno-linguistic group who live in the Yucatán peninsula. In Quintana Roo, Maya is by far the preferred term to use for an Indigenous person from the area, whereas in the state of Yucatán, *mestiza/o* is the preferred term. I use the term Yucatec Maya theatre to refer to theatre created by Maya people in the Yucatán peninsula. While most of these plays are presented in the Yucatec Maya language, some use Spanish as well.

On Art Worlds and Artwriting

My approach for this study of Maya theatre is based on a recognition that the creation, production, and distribution of art, both in its original form and how it is mediated through writing and other modes of criticism, is a collective activity; and further, that the discourses around the work of art itself allow for artwork to gain value in new markets. Howard Becker and David Carrier have theorized these issues through the concepts of “art worlds” and “artwriting,” respectively.[7] Becker describes an art world as “an established network of cooperative links among participants.”[8] Amongst these participants are the artists, the people who interact with the art during and after its production, as well as the critics and scholars who write about the work. Becker refutes the idea that an artist creates their work independently, arguing that the systems within what he calls the art world affect the way that the art is produced, received, and written about.[9] Thus, the study of Maya language theatre, including this article, is an integral part of the art world of Maya language theatre. Becker describes this further in his chapter on aesthetics in his book *Art Worlds*:

Aestheticians study the premises and arguments people use to justify classifying things and activities as “beautiful,” “artistic,” “art,” “not art,” “good art,” “bad art,” and so on. They construct systems with which to make and justify both the classifications and specific instances of their application. Critics apply aesthetic systems to specific art works and arrive at judgments of their worth and explications of what gives them that worth. Those judgements provide reputations for works and artists.[10]

Becker, through his concept of art worlds, argues that criticism about art is not outside of the artwork but

creates value for a particular work of art or artist. Instead of relying on established aesthetic systems to critique the work of community-based artists, we should heed Cohen-Cruz's call to look to the totality of the community-based endeavor, considering the context around the work itself in order to understand "what critical approach is appropriate."[\[11\]](#)

In order to better understand how the "cooperative links" comprising the art world affect the work of art itself, it is first necessary to understand who is involved in the process and how the work of art or artist has been mediated in writing or other forms of criticism.[\[12\]](#) David Carrier argues through his concept of artwriting that art can gain or lose value culturally and materially based on how it is mediated in various discourses that interpret the art.[\[13\]](#) George Marcus uses Carrier's notion of artwriting in his book on the anthropological study of the art world, *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology*. He notes, "objects (or performances) only accumulate cultural value to the extent that they are inscribed in 'histories.'" He continues,

neither the early debates about the avant-garde and modernism nor more recent framings of artistic activity in postmodern terms are external commentaries. They are neither part of a scholarly framework to be settled nor outside the production of art in which the boundaries between the "discipline" and its "object" are distinct. Rather such debates comprise much of artwriting itself; they are quintessentially enabling art to have a "history." And history, or the narrative of art history, is central to the evaluation of paintings and other objects, whose importance is established by their place in a privileged story of culture and civilization.[\[14\]](#)

Thus, it is the discourses accumulating around art that create a history of it. I am not advocating that art without history lacks intrinsic value, but rather that art can be mediated in such a way as to allow for the possibility of acquiring a material or new cultural value within a different society or economy. George Marcus highlights the influence of artwriting on the market:

Imagine, for example, a painter such as Frida Kahlo, who is reevaluated after her death, in contrast to the previously more celebrated Diego Rivera. Her paintings, valued at \$30,000 ten years ago, are now worth over \$1 million. Her work—which emphasizes gender, informality, and the body—becomes significant in the light of current theoretical trends. And, although Rivera's work is far more concerned with the Mexican state, as soon as Kahlo became important outside Mexico, her work acquired national value exceeding Rivera's.[\[15\]](#)

Although Marcus here refers to visual arts, one can extend this concept to an understanding of theatre and performance. As I explore below, Maya theatre in the state of Chiapas has been represented in criticism as internationally relevant. The influence of participating scholars and institutions have lent credibility to the theatre in Chiapas and as a result, it has acquired value outside of the original context of production. By comparison, Maya theatre in the Yucatán peninsula has not had the same level of attention and, as a result, it is generally described in scholarship as a local phenomenon of little consequence when compared with other performance forms. Director of "La conjura de Xinum," Marco Poot Cahun, is keenly aware of the value of academic writing to his work, as he wants people outside of the peninsula to know about what he and his company are doing. He wants people to know about the Caste War of Yucatán (1847-1901) and the continual struggle that Maya people in the peninsula face—poverty, inability to access lands that were once their own, discrimination, and appropriation by the tourism industry.[\[16\]](#) In

interviews I conducted during fieldwork, both Marco and his brother and co-collaborator Manuel Poot Cahun acknowledged that academic writing has value for their work in language and cultural revitalization.^[17]

As reflected in the above review of the literature on art worlds, the discourses around a work of art are implicated in the study of that artwork. In the following section, I review literature on theatre in Chiapas and the Yucatán peninsula in order to explore how Maya theatre in the Yucatán peninsula has been made to seem marginal when compared to Maya theatre in Chiapas.

The Art World of Maya Theatre in Chiapas

Contemporary Indigenous theatre in Mexico often features international collaborators and Maya theatre in Chiapas is no exception. This international component is indicative of how pan-Indigenous organizing has traversed the borders of nations to involve collaborations with international partners, especially non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that seek to protect against human rights abuses.^[18] Pan-Indigenous organizing has also occurred on a national level in Mexico through a series of workshops and programs aimed at Indigenous revitalization beginning in the 1980s. These programs had a profound impact on the production of Indigenous language texts in Mexico.^[19] It is within this context that Maya theatre collectives emerged in the state of Chiapas.

Maya theatre in Chiapas is largely represented by two theatre groups: *Lo'il Maxil* (part of the collective *Sna Jtz'ibajom*) and La FOMMA. Both collectives work out of San Cristóbal de las Casas, a popular tourist destination in the state. The work of these two companies has been described by and associated with anthropologist Robert Laughlin as well as the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics, based at New York University. In this section, I briefly review these two theatre groups and the reason why they have become almost emblematic of Maya theatre in Mexico.

The civil association, *Sna Jtz'ibajom* (House of the Writer), began through the efforts of former local members of the Harvard Chiapas Project in coordination with anthropologist Laughlin. Laughlin helped the group secure funds from Cultural Survival, an NGO, based in the United States with a mission of “advocat[ing] for Indigenous Peoples’ rights and support[ing] Indigenous communities’ self-determination, cultures and political resilience.”^[20] Cultural Survival granted \$3,000 of seed money for the establishment of the writers collective, *Sna Jtz'ibajom*, in 1982.^[21] Laughlin’s approach has been as an active collaborator since the beginning. Early on, Laughlin insisted upon the use of puppets in the production of plays by *Lo'il Maxil*, a hallmark of the group’s work.^[22] After deciding to use puppets for the productions, Laughlin brought in Amy Trompetter of the Bread and Puppet Theater and Ralph Lee, founder and artistic director of the Mettawee River Theatre Company. The presence of both Trompetter and Lee in Chiapas has served to reposition the work of these Maya artists in Chiapas as internationally, interculturally, and cross-culturally significant in the discipline of theatre. Further, because of the influence of Laughlin, and his post at the Smithsonian Institute, the work of *Sna Jtz'ibajom* and *Lo'il Maxil* has always been seen as important outside of Chiapas. Underiner describes it as such, “thus, from the beginning, *Lo'il Maxil*’s work, celebrated everywhere as “Mayan theatre,” has been in fact a highly collaborative effort by artists and researchers trained in very different traditions.”^[23]

The civil association La FOMMA (Fortaleza de la Mujer Maya/Strength of the Maya Women) was started by two former members of *Sna Jtz'ibajom*, Isabel Juárez Espinosa (Tzeltal) and Petrona de la

Cruz Cruz (Tzotzil).[\[24\]](#)[\[24\]](#) Underiner describes the extent of the international reputation that La FOMMA has acquired:

La FOMMA's reputation both in Mexico and internationally has grown, facilitated by their contacts with U.S. supporters, who have coordinated their participation in women's playwriting symposia and arranged performances and speaking engagements in university settings, usually in conjunction with programs on indigenous political and cultural movements.[\[25\]](#)

The influence of these scholars and institutions have allowed the theatre to acquire value outside of the original context of production. In discussing value here I am not speaking to aesthetic value or inherent value, as that can and should really only be decided by those who are creating the work and by those for whom the work is intended. I am discussing value in terms of the stake that it provides to Indigenous organizing; increasing exposure internationally can provide tangible results within home communities. The idea of appealing to governing bodies larger than the state is a characteristic feature of Indigenous organizing. Ronald Niezen notes that one of the hallmarks of international Indigenous organizing is the avoidance of state mechanisms for grievances and moving to address these grievances on an international level. He notes that this "represent[s] a new use of the international bodies of states to overcome the domestic abuses of the states themselves."[\[26\]](#) Just as these grievances can be delivered to international bodies in hopes of having them addressed at the level of the state, an international reputation for artists can provide results in terms of funding and recognition of cultural significance within the state. In comparing the international exposure in Chiapas with that in the Yucatán peninsula, Maya theatre in the Yucatán peninsula has not had the same level of attention.

The Art World of Maya Theatre in the Yucatán Peninsula

Tamara Underiner and Donald Frischmann have been actively writing about Maya areas of Mexico since the 1990s and they often highlight continuities between Yucatec Maya theatre and the theatre of other Mayan language communities.[\[27\]](#) Their work has been influential in developing the field of Yucatec Maya theatre and performance scholarship in the US. Three trends are particularly noteworthy to highlight regarding their work: both focus on theatre in the state of Yucatán, except in the case of the recently published anthology *U suut t'aan*; second, the authors focus predominantly on those individuals who have been working in the literary revitalization movement in the Peninsula; third, both focus on historical and cultural elements in performance.[\[28\]](#) Their contributions have paved the way for this particular research project, which shifts the focus to the theatre produced outside of the literary revitalization movement within the state of Quintana Roo.[\[29\]](#) Building on their analyses of cultural and historical elements within performance, I turn my attention specifically to how the Maya language is used in performance.

Anthropologist Carmen Castillo Rocha has also written on theatre in the Yucatán. I cited her discussion above regarding the marginality of theatre in Maya communities. I do not believe it was Castillo Rocha's intention to dismiss Maya theatre outright as not important, but rather to argue that performance forms occurring within festivals and rituals have deep historical continuity, whereas theatre does not.[\[30\]](#) I would like to spend a moment exploring her statement, however, because it reveals a number of misconceptions about community-based Maya theatre. In comparing festivals to theatrical activities, Castillo Rocha claims that theatre is marginal. I argue that theatre is an important platform for cultural

and linguistic expression in Maya communities in the peninsula. Castillo Rocha argues that Maya theatre owes its origin to Western influence. Western influence is certainly present in the structure of many of the plays but that does not mean that they are not Maya plays.[31] This statement discounts the agency of these theatre artists, even when working with someone from the west or dominant culture to shape the work of theatre to their own worldview. Additionally, productions in Maya communities are not always performed for “occidental eyes” as she suggests.[32] The audiences for productions of “La conjura de Xinum,” for example, are overwhelmingly composed of members of the local community or Maya people from surrounding communities.

An understanding of why and how the Maya language is being used in the work of Maya theatre artists is critical for appreciating the ways artists are engaging with the discourses of language and cultural revitalization in the peninsula. Current scholarship on Yucatec Maya language theatre has not focused on the language itself in performance, leaving an incomplete picture of how the work is significant within the community as well as on the international stage. In the next section, I put forth a brief example of artwriting that provides a view of how language is used within the play “La conjura de Xinum,” centering the performances as a tool for social change, specifically the revitalization of the Yucatec Maya language.

“La conjura de Xinum” as a tool for social change

In this section, I advance a brief sample of artwriting through an analysis of productions of the play “La conjura de Xinum.” I argue that “La conjura de Xinum” enacts a scenario of rebellion in order to highlight the contemporary conditions of Indigenous peoples in the peninsula.[33] Diana Taylor’s concept of *scenario* is useful in this study as it reveals the appeal of the historic event of the Caste War for contemporary Maya artists. Taylor’s scenario provides a framework for viewing the performances of “La conjura de Xinum” as part of a larger set of similar performances of conquest, revolution, and resistance in the Maya world. These performances, notes Taylor, make use of “paradigms that structure social environments, behaviors, and potential outcomes.”[34] The Caste War was a nineteenth century war fought in the peninsula between factions of Maya rebels (and their criollo allies) and the elite of Yucatán. The usefulness of the Caste War as subject matter for a performance hoping to inspire social change might be called into question, as it ultimately ended in defeat for the rebels. Though this particular Caste War was ultimately unsuccessful, actor Manuel Poot Cahun notes that he wants to start a “second Caste War,” using Indigenous intelligence versus weapons.[35] His work in Maya language revitalization through the arts is one way that he is doing this. Despite the outcome of the Caste War, the strength and durability of the scenario of rebellion contributes to its repeatability and makes it useful because, as Diana Taylor remarks of the concept of the scenario, it is a “remarkably coherent paradig[m] of seemingly unchanging attitudes and values.”[36]

The Maya language is central to an understanding of how the actors are performing their identity onstage in the play “La conjura de Xinum” and I argue that the actors achieve this through their positioning of the Maya language in opposition to Spanish. I analyze how the actors position the two languages through a study of verisimilitude. Verisimilitude, or likeness to “real life,” considers how characters select from their repertoire of languages based on their social setting.[37] I begin with a brief summary of the play and performance contexts, a description of the events of the Caste War of Yucatán as depicted in the play, and finally an analysis of language vis-à-vis verisimilitude.

“La conjura de Xinum”

“La conjura de Xinum” was written by Carlos Chan Espinosa, director of the Museo de la guerra de castas (Caste War Museum) in Tihosuco, Quintana Roo from 1994-2019.^[38] Marco Poot Cahun has edited and further refined the play after he took over as director in 2010.^[39] The play is structured as a series of narrations interspersed with five short scenes that are largely improvised in performance. Though the dialogue within these individual scenes varies in performance, the actors follow the scenario as outlined in the text. The title of the play, “La conjura de Xinum,” or “The Plot of Xinum,” comes from the historical title given to the early events of the Caste War, which make up the plot of the play.



Figure 1– from L to R: Alfredo Pool Poot, Manuel Poot Cahun, and Marco Poot Cahun. Photo by the author.

The play features three main characters, the three early leaders of the Caste War: Manuel Antonio Ay, played by Marco, Cecilio Chi, played by Alfredo Pool Poot, and Jacinto Pat, played by Manuel. The narration, which opens the play, quickly covers 500 years of colonization, oppressive land and labor policies, and a famous 1761 revolt by the Maya leader, Jacinto Canek. These events are framed as causes of the Caste War of the Yucatán in 1847. After the opening narration, the first scene features the leaders Chi, Pat, and Ay discussing the oppressive circumstances in which they find themselves. The second scene depicts Chi writing a letter to Ay regarding specific plans for the rebellion. In the third scene, a messenger delivers the letter to Ay. The fourth scene depicts Ay and fellow residents of Chichimilá at a cantina in the house of Antonio Rajón, where Rajón discovers Chi’s letter in Ay’s possession. In the fifth scene Rajón tells Eulogio Rosado, the commandant in Valladolid, about the letter. Rosado then sends

soldiers to capture Ay. Ay is interrogated and finally put to death by firing squad.

The play has been performed regularly in the area, especially in the towns of Tihosuco and Tepich, since at least 2002, usually in association with the annual commemoration of the start of the Caste War, which falls in the last week of July. I first saw the play in 2015 and saw three more performances over the following two years. All four performances were staged outside in public spaces in the center of the towns. These public spaces play a significant role in everyday life and are frequented by residents often. Residents of Tepich made up the majority of the audience members for the Tepich performances, whereas the performances in Tihosuco included local audiences as well as those from surrounding communities, some from as far away as Pisté, in the neighboring state of Yucatán, and Orange Walk, Belize.

Interpretation of the Caste War within the Play

The play “La conjura de Xinum” is based upon the novella of the same title written by Ermilo Abreu Gómez. In an interview, Marco mentioned that the text was used as a resource by the playwright Chan Espinosa. Abreu Gómez was a Yucatecan by birth and is known predominantly for *Canek* based upon the Jacinto Canek rebellion of 1761. While Abreu Gómez’s work has been considered by many to be overall sympathetic to the Maya cause, it still represents, according to Paul Worley, a means of control over the Maya in terms of who is allowed to tell their stories. He notes that Abreu Gómez’s *La conjura de Xinum*, “revises the literature on events in the peninsula’s history while denouncing the exploitation and abuse visited on the Maya from the conquest down through the twentieth century, and Abreu Gómez highlights his role as an indigenista cultural broker in his attempts to represent the subaltern voice of the Indio storyteller.”^[41] While Chan Espinosa used the work as a source for the play, its subsequent reformation into dramatic form means that “La conjura de Xinum,” the play, represents a shift from what Worley calls the “discourse of the Indio” to an activation of “cultural control,” wherein Maya artists write from their own perspective.^[42]

Just as Abreu Gómez’s *La conjura de Xinum* highlights a source of the conflict within the Caste War as ethnic or racial in origin, so too does the play version with which it shares a title. We can see this through the use of humor which pokes fun at the Spaniards in the play, as well as through physical gestures of the soldier characters, who are portrayed as dullards who have difficulty capturing Manuel Antonio Ay. The capturing of Ay is always an audience favorite. The soldiers are directed by Rosado to go and search for Ay. If anyone in the audience is not part of the community, this individual will typically be selected first. Thus, although they are marking difference (often racial difference, especially when white American students are present) they are also signaling to the audience that the Spaniards are unable to perform their mission satisfactorily. The search continues and finally on the third visit to the crowd, they find Ay and bring him to Rosado. This moment of highlighting outsider presence, whether racial in origin or not, is key to understanding how the actors are creatively using the play to comment upon social conditions. For Marco, however, the importance of this production of “La conjura de Xinum” is to teach audiences about the causes of the Caste War.^[43]

Verisimilitude

Language use, despite its imprecision as a characteristic of identity, has been a category used to classify one as Indigenous from the colonial period to the present. Thus, it is a natural place to begin an exploration of the play “La conjura de Xinum.” In his book on language play in theatre, Marvin Carlson

discusses what he calls the “purest” form of heteroglossia: the copresence of two languages on stage. He remarks:

Often verisimilitude is the major structural motivation for such linguistic mixing, but no cultural activity, and certainly not language, is devoid of associations and values, and so beyond the rather simple and straightforward concern of verisimilitude, theatrical heteroglossia almost always involves a wide variety of social and cultural issues.^[44]

As Carlson suggests, verisimilitude is merely the beginning of an exploration of language use in a play, a fundamental consideration for understanding the “wide variety of social and cultural issues” that exist in a given instance of heteroglossia.^[45] What Carlson calls verisimilitude operates on a basic level: just as in real life, some characters in the play speak only Maya, some only Spanish, some a combination of both. Verisimilitude thus corresponds to reality: in this case, both historical and contemporary.

The languages spoken by the characters in each of these performances for the most part mirrors the language choice of their historical counterparts, where such language choice diverges from verisimilitude is a key place for investigation. For the majority of the characters in the play little fluctuation occurs in language spoken amongst the various performances. The soldiers, the judge, and Eulogio Rosado only speak in Spanish; and Jacinto Pat and Cecilio Chi only speak in Maya. The script that I received was entirely in Spanish, however, some actors use Maya in performance, depending on the character they play. When Spanish is used it almost exclusively matches the text in the script, whereas when the actors replace the Spanish text with Maya, they rarely follow the Spanish via a direct translation but instead incorporate a virtuosic display of conversation in Maya – as one might hear offstage in everyday interactions. The decision to change languages for individual characters in “La conjura de Xinum” is significant as it represents contemporary attitudes regarding language use that do not necessarily reflect the historical situation being portrayed. The clearest example of this is in scene five, where a judge interrogates Manuel Antonio Ay after he is captured. To understand the way language use differs from historical accounts it is first necessary to briefly review the history of Maya language use after the conquest.

The onslaught of the attempted destruction of the Maya language and writing system began, of course, with the conquest. Diego de Landa, famous for his *auto de fé* at Maní, preserved selective aspects of the language and culture through his *Relaciones de las cosas de Yucatán*.^[46] Spaniards as well as children of the Maya elite carried out the gradual change from glyphic writing to alphabetic throughout the early years of the conquest.^[47] However, by the late colonial period, Maya, in both written and spoken forms, was used even amongst those who were not considered to be Indigenous. Mark Lentz notes that local government officials “in majority Maya-speaking pueblos absolutely needed to speak the Indigenous language in order to carry out their daily tasks effectively. Many showed an ability to read and write in Maya.”^[48] Using records from court cases throughout the late colonial period, Lentz discusses how individuals in rural communities, Indigenous or not, typically relied on Maya in their everyday lives. Some were even monolingual speakers of Maya. Lentz, in particular, highlights the use of Maya among local officials like the *juez español*. He notes that “*jueces españoles* were the officials most immersed in Maya society and thus the likeliest to speak, read, and write Maya.”^[49] In other words, Maya was used by non-Indigenous Yucatecans both for and outside of official duties.

Lentz's findings become particularly striking if we consider them alongside the interrogation scene in "La conjura de Xinum." In this scene, a judge asks several questions to Ay in Spanish. Ay, in turn, responds only in Maya. The judge repeats his questions multiple times, occasionally slamming his hands on the table, as he grows more and more impatient. Knowing what we now know about the tendency of local officials to know Maya, it is likely that the historical judge would have understood and possibly been able to speak Maya. Therefore, the actor's choice to use Spanish as the language of interrogation in the scene is an important divergence from historical accounts. It is critical to note that by highlighting this moment, I am not indicating that there is something wrong with diverging from historical accounts in the portrayal of this scene. Rather, I am advocating for an approach that considers this an exercise of agency by the actors in actively engaging with history and shaping it to fit present attitudes and anxieties regarding language loss. The choice to have the actor playing the judge speak Spanish instead of Maya creates the opportunity for the actor playing Ay to highlight the act of speaking in Maya as a statement of resistance. This aligns with the priorities of Marco and Manuel in their work within language and cultural revitalization – speaking Maya is a way to combat erasure. While the Yucatec Maya language is not in immediate danger of extinction, the number of native speakers is dwindling as English is often the focus in schools due to the influence of the tourism in the peninsula.^[50] Thus, by engaging with this well-known episode in history and pitting the two languages against one another, the actors have successfully mapped contemporary attitudes of language use onto a past event.

Conclusion: Community-Based Theatre and the Scenario of Rebellion

Diana Taylor's notion of the *scenario* is a useful descriptive framework for understanding how "La conjura de Xinum" re-activates the cultural memory of rebellion in the town of Tihosuco each year. I use Taylor's concept of scenario, a theatrical or performative formulaic structure that references pre-existing cultural memories and meanings, to argue that the performance of "La conjura de Xinum" has larger ramifications than might be initially thought were we to follow Castillo Rocha's conclusion about Maya theatre's marginality.^[51]

Taylor writes, "instead of privileging *texts* and *narratives*, we could also look to scenarios as meaning-making paradigms that structure social environments, behaviors, and potential outcomes."^[52] In Taylor's formation "the scenario makes visible what is already there," including "ghosts, images, and stereotypes."^[53] The play "La conjura de Xinum" can be viewed as a scenario of rebellion as it dramatizes the events of the Caste War of Yucatán. For some, this performance is radical. Others believe that the government has co-opted this scenario and that its performance every year is no longer radical, but rather a showpiece to demonstrate that the Maya are a willing part of Mexico's pluricultural nation. Even though the actors recognize the historical and contemporary injustices in Maya communities, they believe that the elected officials and other dignitaries who attend the Caste War festival don't take their concerns seriously.^[54] Although the productions of "La conjura de Xinum" are funded by the government, the invited officials don't often stay to watch the play, which is always the final event in the evening's schedule. This leaves an audience comprised almost entirely of community members. The actors have a stage where they can voice their concerns but the politician's and elected official's exit before the start of the performance speaks volumes of their symbolic (lack of) attention to the issues the community faces. Despite the fact that the invited officials do not always stay to watch the play, their appearance at the Caste War festival is critical. Taylor notes that "the scenario places spectators within its frame, implicating us in its ethics and politics."^[55] It is clear here, that the political officials "watching" the event, whether they actually stay for the performance or not, are akin to the Spaniards in the play –

Antonio Rajón, the soldiers, Eulogio Rosado, and the *cantinero*. Thus, the performance of “La conjura de Xinum” is not just a play performed as part of the Caste War festival, it is part of the larger scenario of recent Indigenous cultural and language revitalization movements—where Indigenous people fight to be heard in a neoliberal multicultural nation. The performance of this scenario of rebellion thus has a part for all to play: for state officials, who participate as oppressors; for actors and local audience members, who participate as the rebels; and academics, like myself, who participate as well-intentioned documentarians, but nonetheless possess an, often unstated, privilege in writing about Indigenous peoples. Year after year this scenario is reified in the Caste War festivities.

Director Marco and actor Manuel believe that their work is making a difference in the community despite the lack of real government support. They often view the government officials in an adversarial manner, but still ultimately believe that “La conjura de Xinum” has a positive effect in their community by encouraging young people to speak Maya and to learn more about their history. Manuel is especially inspired by the Caste War and views his linguistic and cultural revival efforts as a “second Caste War.”[56]

Charles Hale poses the question at issue for many Indigenous peoples in the Americas: “Under what conditions can Indigenous movements occupy the limited spaces opened by neoliberal multiculturalism, redirecting them toward their own radical, even utopian political alternatives?”[57] Juan Castillo Cocom argues that disconnecting from this system, by refusing to perform scenarios of rebellion as well as the stereotype of the rebellious “*indio*” is the only way that Maya people will be taken seriously in the political climate of neoliberal Mexico.[58] For others, performing within the system but using their own language to subvert the multicultural game is the best option. Whatever the standpoint, the performance of Maya identity through language and culture is an important phenomenon and is critical for understanding how neoliberal Mexico interacts with its Indigenous citizens and the way in which those same citizens fight back or decide to disconnect altogether. By viewing the alliances and connections that ultimately shape the reception of a work of community-based performance like “La conjura de Xinum,” I argue that Maya theatre is not just an inconsequential phenomenon. Theatre is used by Maya artists as a tool for voicing dissent, anger, and highlighting injustice. Maya theatre is not marginal; it is a vital force for social change.

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[1] Jan Cohen-Cruz, *Local Acts: Community-Based Performance in the United States*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 109.

[2] Carmen Castillo Rocha, “El Teatro Regional en Tierras Mayas,” (PhD diss., Universität Hamburg, 2007), 86.

[3] In common parlance, and even in academic contexts, the terms Maya and Mayan are frequently confused. In this article, I subscribe to the use of the terms most clearly elucidated by Quetzil Castañeda in the field guide for the Maya language, “Ko’ox Tsikbal Maya T’aan.” See Castañeda, “Ko’ox Tsikbal Maya T’aan,” (Field guide, Open School for Ethnography and Anthropology, 2014), 10-12. Castañeda notes that Mayan is not used to refer to a group of people, but rather a language family, the Mayan language family, which contains around 30-some different languages spoken in Guatemala, Mexico, Honduras, and Belize. Within the family of Mayan languages there is one particular language called Maya. While scholars might refer to it as Yucatec Maya, speakers of the language rarely do—to them it is more likely *maayat’aan* or simply *maaya*. In addition to the name of the language as spoken in the Yucatán peninsula, Maya can be used as an adjective—Maya culture, Maya traditions, Maya theatre, but Mayan languages (unless you are referring to the specific language of the Yucatán, in which case it would be the Maya language). Maya is a mass noun so it does not need to pluralized. To call the Maya of the Yucatán “Mayans” is not just incorrect in terms of cultural practice, but as Castañeda notes, would be like referring to native English speakers as “Germanics,” because “the language that these persons speak are part of the Germanic branch” of languages. (Castañeda, “Ko’ox Tsikbal,” 11); See Howard Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

[4] See Stuart A. Day, *Outside Theater: Alliances that Shape Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2017).

[5] See Matthew Restall, “Maya Ethnogenesis,” *The Journal of Latin American Anthropology* 9, no. 1 (2004). Translation by author.

[6] I am not addressing Campeche in this article because I have not completed fieldwork there and thus my knowledge of the specific circumstances with regard to community-based theatre is limited.

[7] See Becker, *Art Worlds*; See David Carrier, *Artwriting* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987).

[8] Becker, *Art Worlds*, 35.

[9] Becker, *Art Worlds*, 35.

[10] Becker, *Art Worlds*, 131.

[11] Cohen-Cruz, *Local Acts*, 111; 113.

[12] Becker, *Art Worlds*, 34-35.

[13] Carrier, *Artwriting*.

[14] George E. Marcus and Fred R. Myers, eds., *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 27. Within the passage Marcus cites three works by Arthur Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986); “Critical Reflections,” *Artform* 28 (September 1989): 132-133; and “The State of the Art World: The Nineties Begin,” *Nation* (July 9): 65-68.

[15] Marcus and Myers, *The Traffic in Culture*, 28.

[16] The Caste War of Yucatán (1847-1901) was a rebellion against the government based in Mérida, Yucatán by a majority Maya peasant force. Although the war was not explicitly racial in origin, its interpretation in academic writing in the 1960s and 1970s certainly provides that impression. Today, scholars mostly agree that class rather than race or ethnicity had more to do with the reasons for the revolt. See Victoria Bricker, *Indian Christ, Indian King: The Historical Substrate of Maya Myth and Ritual* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981); Don E. Dumond, *The Machete and the Cross: Campesino Rebellion in Yucata?n* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997); Wolfgang Gabbert, "Violence and Ethnicity in the Caste War of Yucata?n," (presentation, Latin American Studies Association Annual Conference, Miami, FL, March 16-18, 2000); Wolfgang Gabbert, "Of Friends and Foes: The Caste War and Ethnicity in Yucata?n," *The Journal of Latin American Anthropology* 9, no.1 (2004); Reed, Nelson. *The Caste War of Yucata?n*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964; Restall, "Maya Ethnogenesis;" Terry Rugeley, *Rebellion Now and Forever: Mayas, Hispanics, and the Caste War Violence in Yucata?n, 1800- 1880* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

[17] Marco Poot Cahun, Personal Interview, 8 October 2017; Manuel Poot Cahun, Personal Interview, 29 July 2016.

[18] See Ronald Niezen, *The Origins of Indigenism: Human Rights and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

[19] See Alicia Salinas, "'Tu táan yich in kaajal' [On The Face of My People]: Contemporary Maya-Spanish Bilingual Literature and Cultural Production from the Yucatan Peninsula," (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 2018) and Carlos Montemayor and Donald Frischmann, *U túumben k'aayilo'ob x-ya'axche': Antología de escritores mayas contemporáneos de la península de Yucatán* (Mérida: Instituto Cultural de Yucatán, 2010).

[20] Cultural Survival, "Mission." "About Cultural Survival." See <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/about>.

[21] Robert Laughlin and Sna Jtz'ibajom, *Monkey Business Theatre*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 2-3.

[22] Laughlin, *Monkey Business Theatre*, 3.

[23] Tamara Underiner, *Theatre in Mayan Mexico: Death Defying Acts*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 51.

[24] Underiner, *Theatre in Mayan Mexico*, 54.

[25] Underiner, *Theatre in Mayan Mexico*, 57.

[26] Niezen, *The Origins of Indigenism*, 16.

[27] Although there are several theatre scholars writing in Spanish on Maya theatre in the state of

Yucatán (See Carmen Castillo Rocha, “El Teatro Regional en Tierras Mayas,” (PhD diss., Universität Hamburg, 2007); Fernando Muñoz Castillo, *Teatro maya peninsular: precolombino y evangelizador* (Mérida, 2000); René Acuña, *Farsas y representaciones escénicas de los mayas antiguos* (Ciudad de México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1978); and Jennifer Lynn Cassels, “La Utopía en Tierras Mayas: El Teatro Comunitario Maya Yucateco 1982-2002.” (MA thesis, Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán, 2004) Frischmann and Underiner are two that have helped the work to gain a larger audience in the US.

[28] I am intentionally leaving the work of the Laboratorio de Teatro Campesino e Indígena (LTCI) out of consideration here despite the fact that they have an international reputation as the company did not originate in the peninsula, but rather in the state of Tabasco. Underiner in *Theatre in Mayan Mexico*, writes that “almost everyone I spoke with expressed concern over the community participating as ‘extras’ in the spectacle, with the maestros having the central performing parts” (98). This, in addition to Maya rituals being staged out of context and fetishized for a tourist audience (93-99), leaves the company’s work outside of the scope of this particular view of community theatre in the Maya language. A more mild critique of the work of LTCI appears in Carmen Castillo Rocha, “The ‘Laboratorio de Teatro Campesino e Indígena’ and the Construction of a Good Life in Ticopó, Yucatán, Mexico,” *Intercom: Revista Brasileira de Ciências da Comunicação* 39, no. 2, (May-August, 2016): 131-144; Donald Frischmann and Wildernain Villegas Carrillo, *U Suut T’aan: U t’aan maaya ajts’i?ibo’ob tu lu’umil Quintana Roo* (Chetumal: Plumas Negras Editorial, 2016).

[29] This is an important consideration because it tends to leave out those who are working at the community level but aren’t publishing their work.

[30] Castillo Rocha, “El Teatro Regional,” 85.

[31] See Donald Frischmann, “Contemporary Mayan Theatre: The Recovery and (Re)Interpretation of History,” in *Imperialism and Theatre: Essays on World Theatre, Drama and Performance*, ed. J. Ellen Gainor (New York: Routledge, 1995), 71-84; and Carlos Montemayor and Donald Frischmann, *U túumben k’aayilo’ob x-ya’axche’: Antología de escritores mayas contemporáneos de la península de Yucatán* (Mérida: Instituto Cultural de Yucatán, 2010), 48-54.

[32] Castillo Rocha, “El Teatro Regional,” 86.

[33] See Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

[34] Taylor, *Archive and the Repertoire*, 28.

[35] Manuel Poot Cahun, Personal Interview, 29 July 2016.

[36] Taylor, *Archive and the Repertoire*, 31.

[37] See Marvin Carlson, *Speaking in Tongues: Languages at Play in the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009).

[38] The Caste War Museum is a community museum based in Tihosuco, Quintana Roo that opened in 1993. See <http://www.museogc.com/Museo/Museo-Museum.html>.

[39] Marco Poot Cahun, Personal Interview, 8 October 2017.

[40] Marco and Manuel have been involved with the play since 2010 and I found production photos dating back to 2002 in the museum archives. I found another photo that seemed to show the three Maya leaders from the year 2000, but I can't be sure that this was from the play "La conjura de Xinum." Doña Antonia, who works at the museum told me that the play had been in production since she could remember, starting a year or two after the opening of the museum in 1993. Don Carlos did not state an exact year either, saying it had been at least ten years, but said that the play was developed for the annual commemoration and that it was first performed after the museum opened in 1993.

[41] Paul Worley, *Telling and Being Told: Storytelling and Cultural Control in Contemporary Yucatec Maya Literatures* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013), 78.

[42] Worley, *Telling and Being Told*, 17; Here Worley is referencing Guillermo Bonfil Batalla's concept of "cultural control." See Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, "Lo propio y lo ajeno," in *La cultura popular*, ed. Adolfo Colombres (México: Dirección de Culturas Populares, Premia editora de libros, 1984), 79-86.

[43] Marco Poot Cahun, Personal Interview, 8 October 2017.

[44] Carlson, *Speaking in Tongues*, 14.

[45] Carlson, *Speaking in Tongues*, 14.

[46] Published in a commonly available English translation by William Gates, trans., *Yucatán Before and After the Conquest by Friar Diego de Landa* (New York: Dover, 1978).

[47] Victoria Bricker, "Linguistic Continuities and Discontinuities in the Maya Area," in *Pluralizing Ethnography*, eds. John M. Watanabe and Edward F. Fischer (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2004), 71-3.

[48] Mark Lentz, "Castas, Creoles, and the Rise of a Maya Lingua Franca in Eighteenth-Century Yucatan," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 97, no. 1 (2017): 48.

[49] Lentz, "Castas, Creoles," 49.

[50] Lentz, "Castas, Creoles," 56-7.

[51] Taylor, *Archive and the Repertoire*, 13.

[52] Taylor, *Archive and the Repertoire*, 28.

[53] Taylor, *Archive and the Repertoire*, 28.

[54] Alfredo Pool Poot, Personal Interview, 8 September 2017.

[55] Taylor, *Archive and the Repertoire*, 23.

[56] Manuel Poot Cahun, Personal Interview, 29 July 2017.

[57] Charles R. Hale, "Neoliberal Multiculturalism: The Remaking of Cultural Rights and Racial Dominance in Central America," *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 28, no. 1 (2005): 11.

[58] Juan Castillo Cocom, Personal Interview, 10 October 2017.



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Table of Contents:

- “Introduction ‘Local Acts: Performing Communities, Performing Americas’” by Jocelyn L. Buckner”
- “The Architecture of Local Performance: Stages of the Taliesin Fellowship” by Claudia Wilsch Case
- “‘La conjura de Xinum’ and Language Revitalization: Understanding Maya Agency through Theatre” by Sarah Alice Campbell
- “Exploring the History and Implications of Toxicity through St. Louis: Performance Artist Allana Ross and the “Toxic Mound Tours” by Rachel E. Bauer and Kristen M. Kalz
- “Finding Home in the World Stage: Critical creative citizenship and the 13th South Asian Theatre Festival” by Arnab Banerji

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