

Encountering *Milpa*: A Gringo in the Yucatán

by

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Introduction

My Arrival

Under the weight of my pack, I stepped off the bus and onto the streets of Valladolid. There I was, a tall (by Mayan standards), bearded white boy with a beaten-up guitar in one hand and a notebook in the other. A hiking backpack overflowing with my belongings clung to my back and towered over my head, weighing me down. I wore my brimmed Yucatecan hat, made of woven straw that had been sold to me under the tongue-in-cheek assurance that it would make me look more “Mexican.” I felt and looked very out of place, but, having already spent five months in Mexico, I was used to being constantly observed.

I had initially come to the Yucatán Peninsula and specifically the capital city of Mérida as part of a study-abroad program administered by the Institute for Study Abroad at the Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán (or the UADY). I loved the program and time I had spent in Mexico, so when the semester was approaching its close, I was determined to stay. I was also interested in looking at how neoliberal restructuring of the Mexican economy had affected Mayan communities and, in particular, *campesino* (farmer) lives and practices. Farming was an easy entry-point

for me, given my three years of experience working at Wesleyan's student-run campus farm.

I looked at Willing Workers on Organic Farms (or WWOOF), a website that connects farms in need of labor with travelers, to find work in the Yucatán. There were not many farms listed in the region,¹ but nevertheless, one farm caught my eye: Lodgecol. Lodgecol was located in the southeast of the state near the village of Yalcobá, around 30 minutes outside Valladolid, one of the largest cities in the Peninsula. The farm was established two years prior, and was still a fledgling project. It needed workers to help implement labor intensive infrastructural projects: planting an orchard, constructing roads and fences, working on irrigation systems. Eva, a woman from Mexico City, had started Lodgecol with her partner from England, Theo. Both had a background in sustainability. Eva had worked on environmental protection and conservation projects for the Mexican government and various NGOs, while Theo had a background in sustainable engineering. Once Lodgecol was established, their goal was to make the farm into a self-sustaining ecolodge that would support the local economy by employing labor and resources and by hosting visitors for educational workshops and sustainability initiatives. This farm seemed to

¹ Organic agriculture is relatively new within the Yucatán, relative to other parts of Mexico.

be an ideal place to study the affect of neoliberal development policies on the traditional Mayan agricultural system, the *milpa*.

Lodgecol accepted my application and I arrived in Valladolid on a late afternoon in May. The sun was quickly setting as I strained to read the directions scrawled in my barely legible handwriting. I had been planning to catch a *convi*, a communal taxi to Yalcobá, but the bus trip to Valladolid had delayed my arrival quite a bit (Mexican public transportation was very cheap, but you paid for what you got in unpredictable schedules). I walked a few blocks away from the bus station and decided my best bet was to hail a private taxi. After a few minutes of waving and shouting, a taxi driver pulled over and opened his window.

Where do you want to go?

I pointed to my directions and tried to read them out loud.

He suggested: *Yalcobá?*

No, a little to the west of Yalcobá, umm, according to my directions here, exactly 9km west.

You mean Xtut?

No, I mean 9km west of Yalcobá.

That'll be 250 pesos.

250 pesos is a lot for a taxi fare in Mexico (\$20 USD). I had a nagging feeling that I was being ripped off but could not fake enough knowledge of where I was to convincingly haggle with the taxi driver. I threw my bag into the trunk along with my guitar, and we drove off. The cityscape of Valladolid quickly gave way to the highway. The road out of the city was dotted with groups of little boys and older women selling nut cakes and bags stuffed with oranges and mandarins. Along the highway, we passed a few haciendas, brightly decorated with their recently restored colonial facades designed to attract busloads of tourists from Cancún. The haciendas gave way to scattered and dilapidated concrete houses and an odd sign in both Spanish and Mayan for a village or an archaeological site: *Yaax-Haal, Agua Azul, Ek Balam*.

Both the driver and I felt a bit uncomfortable lingering in our silence, so we struck up a conversation. He asked me why I was going to Yalcobá (or, to be specific, 9km to the west of it), and I explained that I was heading there to learn about agriculture by helping out at a farm through a labor-exchange arrangement. I explained that I was particularly interested in learning about *milpa* and the way *campesinos* and the Maya lived. My interest caught the taxi driver by surprise. He turned to me with a confused expression, brow contorted (he probably thought I was

an insane hippie). I told him that I had read about *milpa* in my archaeology classes at my university in Mérida, but wanted to observe and learn about it directly. I had worked on farms in the United States and was familiar with Western systems of sustainable agriculture, but desired to see how the *campesinos* in the Yucatán lived and farmed.

The taxi driver seemed intrigued and genuinely curious. He explained to me that his father (and his grandfather, and so on) had “made *milpa*.” When he came of age and saw his father struggling to keep up with the demanding hard labor and wear of the *milpa*, he moved his family to the city to find work. The driver told me that there was no money and no future in the *milpa*. He had been especially lucky to find a job driving taxis, and even luckier to often get fares from tourists who left their guided tours behind to explore the countryside. He emphasized that he was by no means wealthy but that, nonetheless, he lived a good life.

He continued speaking to me about the increasing difficulties of surviving as a *milpero*. Good land was increasingly harder and harder to find. The soils were getting steadily worse, demanding more and more fertilizer. The young people were not staying to live or work in the *pueblos* much anymore. The newer generations were not interested in the traditions of the *viejos*, the old people. Corn, and even more so, *trigo*

(wheat, a recently adopted crop in southeastern Mexico) were becoming cheaper and cheaper to purchase in the ever-expanding supermarket chains.

For him, there were two options left to survive: move to the city, Valladolid (or even the capital, Mérida) to try to find a poorly paying job (and probably still struggle), or move to Cancún or other resorts along the Riviera Maya to work in the tourist industry. There was, simply and unfortunately, no real future in the *milpa*. No future in the *pueblos*.

Thesis Overview

The taxi driver's sentiments were echoed by other urban Yucatecans I met. To an outsider like me, it initially seemed like the locals were no longer interested in preserving *milpas* or traditional ways of living in the *pueblos*. They appeared to have resigned themselves to accepting the unfortunate but inevitable decay of their traditional practices given the changing landscape of the Mexican economy. Modernity, I immediately concluded, was tearing apart *campesino* society and culture, and spoiling what remained of it.² This was a narrative that I had been

² This perception of ruin, in some ways, stems from my personal background in anarchist and leftist politics that inundated me with a narrative of an all-consuming, all-destroying capitalist modernity that would slowly erode and wear away indigenous cultures on its periphery. This pessimistic worldview admittedly has its attractions: it reduces the complexities of the world, globalization, and capitalism into a simple dichotomy. Adopting it allows activists to construct and imagine a clear *enemy*.

exposed to through my participation in anarchist and leftist circles in the US³:

Mechanized and industrialized agriculture eradicating wise, sustainable, and holistic traditions.

My first impressions began shifting as I spent more time in the area. I questioned if the term “decay” adequately captured the changes that people outlined and that I observed through my experiences and research. Was this simply another instance of the forces of capitalist globalization rolling over and decimating people and customary ways of life on the margins in the Global South? Or, was something more than decay going on here?

My thesis engages these questions and unravels my own dystopic narrative of capitalist destruction on the margins. I paint a textured picture of cultural transformation among indigenous groups in the Yucatan, showing how Mayan ways of life are renovated through critical albeit unequal encounters with the forces of capitalist modernity. Rather than looking at globalization and capitalism as bringing about decay and cultural homogenization in “pristine” indigenous societies, I demonstrate that these global processes are not uniform, but fragmented, contested, and adapted on a local level.

³ It came to me, for example, through my participation in Occupy Wall Street protests in the Fall of 2011, and my activism at Wesleyan the following Spring.

I use the *milpa* as an entry point and metaphor to examine how culture is regenerated through hybridization under neoliberalism. My theoretical building blocks are provided by the interlinked anthropological conversations about hybridity, alternative modernities, and development/post-development. For example, I engage with the work of Nestor Garcia-Canclini (1995), who argues that rather than looking at “modernity-generating processes” as “substituting the modern for the traditional,” we should understand them as precipitating a “hybrid modernity” (Escobar 1995, 218). I link this with James Clifford’s (1988), and James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta’s (1997) analyses that reveal how culture is a constructed, conjectural phenomenon that is constantly changing.

My thesis looks at *milpa* as a hybrid and dynamic “cosmovision,” shaped through encounters with modernity. Arturo Escobar uses the term cosmovision as a device to explain how cultures relate to and understand the world (Escobar 2008, 112). I connect this notion of cosmovision to Stephen Gudemann and Alberto Riviera’s discussion of culture as constituting local models of being and knowing. Using these ideas and studies of the Maya, I show how *milpa* functions as a cosmovision, which encompasses and shapes a diverse range of practices, notions, and values integral to Mayan cultural identity, and is also the basis for articulating

alternatives to development and modernity.

The U Yits Ka'an, an *escuela campesina* or farmer school, for example, uses the *milpa* cosmovision to negotiate consciously and critically with the mainstream development apparatus (e.g. structural re-adjustment program, top-down agricultural and economic planning initiatives). Gustavo Esteva's critical analysis of the development apparatus (1992, 2013) helps to situate and inform my discussion of "post-development", a movement that has emerged in response to the widespread failures of development and neoliberal policies. Escobar's research which articulates alternatives to development and modernity frames my analysis of U Yits Ka'an's post-development efforts (2008).

Post-development destabilizes development discourse's hegemonic position as the "central organizing principle of social life" (Escobar 2008, 171). This destabilization challenges notions of teleological progress that position the Global South behind the West. In a constructed binary of tradition vs. modernity, this teleology necessitates that non-Western cultures remake themselves in the image of the West. Under the auspices of what Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Suri Prakash calls "grassroots postmodernism" (1998), I show how marginalized groups challenge these assumptions by regenerating and reclaiming cultural traditions and values as the basis

for forging their projects of living a good life or the *buen vivir*.

Political and Economic Context

The themes of regeneration, survival, and *buen vivir* acquire particular significance when one considers the destructive impact of development discourse on marginalized peasant communities in Mexico. Over the past five decades, the Mexican state has implemented a set of economic policies that have directly threatened the livelihood of *campesinos* dependent on small-scale *milpa* production.⁴

The Green Revolution, an agricultural development strategy mainly implemented during the 1960s and 70s, marked the beginning of a broader attack on *campesino* ways of living. This revolution, promoted worldwide by the World Bank, US Treasury, and International Monetary Fund (or IMF), called for the “modernization” of “backward” and “inefficient” agricultural systems (e.g. *milpa*) around the world (Sonnefeld 1992).⁵ This was to be achieved through a variety of means: the dissolution of small land-holdings in favor of large-scale, irrigated plots, the adoption of “fertilizer-responsive, hybrid-seed varieties” and “farm management

⁴ Some Mexican commentators label these policy changes a wholesale “attack” on the Mexican *campesino* (Escobar 2008, 114-115).

⁵ It is interesting to note that the Green Revolution actually has its origins in one of the Rockefeller Foundation’s earliest efforts, the Mexican Agriculture Project, which was focused around research to breed hybrid and resistant varieties of maize (Dowie 2001, 105-140).

practices based on biocides and modern farm machinery,” and the embrace of monocropping (Sonnefeld 1992, 32).

Norman Borlaug, one of the main architects of the Green Revolution, argued that it would bring *campesinos* an “enthusiasm and new hope for a better life...displacing an attitude of despair and apathy that permeated the entire social fabric” (Escobar 1995, 157-158). For planners like Borlaug, traditional (read: backward) peasants could choose to modernize and “produce,” or they could remain “apathetic” and, thus, inefficient farmers with no option but to “perish” (157-158). But for other critical observers, this discourse and the Revolution’s efforts represented an all-out war pitted against the “peasantry and rural smallholders” (Sonnefeld 1992, 32).

The legacy of the Green Revolution continues to influence and profoundly shape Mexican *campesino* society. In many ways, the command to “modernize or perish,” despite the obvious prejudices behind its characterization of *campesino* society and the problematic notions of progress and modernity it depends on, is a reality that has profoundly affected *campesino* lives. In the Yucatán, the Green Revolution instantiated the modernization strain of development discourse: for instance, it called for the eradication of “antiquated” practices, and in turn, their

replacement with more “efficient” means. This discourse has since shifted to a neoliberal strain, which emphasizes the influences of market dynamics and pressure on farmers.

In a similar way, neoliberal development policies implemented by the Mexican state have compounded the effects of the Green Revolution. These took shape in the 1980s, when the Mexican government began to turn away from the protectionist policies (e. g. high import tariffs, nationalization of major industries) that it had pursued after World War I (Loewe et al. 2008, 359). This shift from protectionism to neoliberalism began in 1982 after the Mexican government announced that it could no longer meet its debt service obligations to the United States and other foreign governments and financial institutions (Escobar 1995, 90).⁶⁷ This statement unleashed a sense of catastrophe that profoundly shook all strata of Mexican society, not to mention the global financial system. Financiers in the US Treasury Department (the largest owner of Mexican debt) as well as the World Bank and the IMF, feared that this financial panic, if unchecked, would spread beyond Mexico to the United States and other regional economies.

⁶ The Mexican government could not meet these debt obligations for various reasons. Many contemporary commentators believe that the Echevarria government’s corruption and mismanagement of the economy throughout the 1970s was one of the main cause that precipitated this crisis (Esteva 1992).

⁷ Political economist David Harvey goes into detail describing the characteristic features of neoliberalism and such a shift in his book *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Harvey 2007).

The World Bank and IMF quickly negotiated new loans with the Mexican government, but these loans came with significant strings attached: the Mexican state was committed to implementing harsh “structural adjustment policies” (Loewe et al. 2008, 362). These policies were manifold but, for the purpose of this brief overview, can be summarized in three main conditions: 1) the liberalization of trade (i.e. the reduction and eradication of protective tariffs); 2) the privatization of national industries; and 3) the reduction of government intervention in all economic sectors (362). The most direct way that *campesinos* in the Yucatán felt these changes was through the increased prices of key commodities (for example, gas), the steep drop in prices of traditional crops sold for income (particularly corn), and the dwindling government assistance programs (362-363).⁸ Anthropologists Ron Loewe and Sarah Taylor write that, in places like the Yucatán peninsula, by 1987:

The standard of living of the average Mexican had dropped by 30% to 40%. While at the beginning of the decade locals were eating *buul y kéken* [beans with pig], residents were now eating *ceen buul* [just beans] (Loewe et al. 2008, 363).

The passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (or NAFTA) in 1994 between the United States, Mexico, and Canada was the last nail in the coffin for Mexican *campesinos*, including those who lived in Yucatecan pueblos (Faux 2013). It drove “several million Mexican workers and their families out of the

⁸ For example, programs that subsidized the prices of basic healthcare provisions by instituting price

agriculture and small business sectors” as they could no longer compete with the “flood of products—often subsidized from US producers” (Faux 2013). But perhaps most importantly, NAFTA and other neoliberal policies were coupled with the reform of Mexican land tenure laws that changed the decades-long structure of *ejidos*, or “common lands”, on which *campesinos* had depended for generations.

The *ejido* structure is historically rooted in the pre-Colonial land tenure system of the Aztecs. Under such a system, tracts of land were delineated for use by either the king, the nobility beneath him, or for common use. The Spanish conquistadores dismantled this framework and replaced it with the *encomienda* model of plantations that assigned and forced *campesinos* to work particular plots of land. Despite this, the Mexican peasantry and middle-class held on to older notions of common land. The *encomienda* system continued to be implemented under Porfirio Díaz’s dictatorship in the newly independent Mexican state, until the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution in 1910 (Zúñiga Alegría et al. 2010).

During the presidency of reformer Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940), Article 27 was implemented as part of a platform of socialist reforms,⁹ which re-established and re-invented the pre-Colonial *ejido* system. Land held by the Mexican elite or seen as

ceilings.

⁹ The two other main components of Cárdenas’ reforms included the implementation of secular public schooling in Mexico, and the promotion of workers’ cooperatives (Tuck 2014).

under-used was parceled out into *ejidos*. These *ejidos* were administrated by local municipalities and were given to either collective group enterprises or to individual *campesinos*. Article 27 expressly prohibited the privatization of *ejidos* and the sale of land to foreigners and individuals outside of collectives (Schmidt et al. 1992, 497).¹⁰

Even before the passage of NAFTA, the World Bank had asked the Mexican government to reform Article 27, arguing that the *ejido* was “a complex of regulations and land tenure institutions that hurt the rural poor” (Loewe et al. 2008, 363-364). *Ejidors* were “unproductive,” officials at the World Bank had argued, and this stymied foreign agricultural investment (Loewe et al. 2008, 363-364). Essentially, if Mexico’s economy was to change for the better, the *ejido* had to go.¹¹ And it did. Article 27 was reformed in 1992 to include stipulations that no new land would be expropriated to create new *ejidos* or augment older ones. It also allowed owners of *ejidos* to rent, buy, and sell their land, and to “work with private enterprises and individual investors” (Loewe et al. 2008, 363-364).

The reform of Article 27, along with other components of the aforementioned structural adjustment programs demanded by international financial institutions, led the Mexican economy, along with the economies of many other “underdeveloped”

¹⁰ Foreign commercial interests often worked around this stipulation by using Mexican companies and collectives as “holding companies” (Parramond 2010).

¹¹ A study conducted in February 1990, however, “reported that there was no significant evidence that

nations in Latin America and elsewhere, to transition from being net exporters of food to being net importers (Escobar 1995, 104). Prices for corn, the staple food in the Mexican diet and a crop grown by about “one-fifth of the population,” have dropped by 70% since 1994 due to the influx of “massive, low-priced US” corn (Mexico Solidarity Network 2014). Mexican *milperos* are unable to compete against US-grown corn, which is heavily subsidized and minimally taxed due to NAFTA’s erosion of tariffs. For the *milpero*, a farmer whose traditional source of income has been the sale of excess corn, it is unfortunately impossible to continue working the land as his father and his father’s father once did.

Chapter Overview

In the first chapter of my thesis, I examine imaginations and conceptions of indigenous cultures. In particular, I juxtapose two frameworks: racist notions, stemming from development discourse, that ascribe a savagery to Mayans, and in seeming contrast, romantic visions, inherited from the colonial imagination, that attribute a sense of authenticity and uninterrupted tradition to the Mayans. I show how these conceptions, although apparently contradictory, arise out of a similar logic and dichotomy that is predicated on distinctions between what is modern and what is

ejidos are less productive than farms in the private sector” (Loewe et al. 2008).

traditional.

I focus on my encounter with the Mayan agricultural system *milpa* in the second chapter. I argue that the *milpa* is best understood as a cosmovision—a way of being and knowing—of the Mayan people, exceeding its positioning as an agricultural system. I situate this cosmovision culturally and historically, not as an unchanging tradition, but as one that is constantly reinvented through its encounter with capitalist modernity.

My final chapter focuses on U Yits Ka'an, an *escuela campesina* or farmer school in the Yucatán, to delve further into the processes of cultural interaction, hybridization, and regeneration on the margins. I use Gustavo Esteva's discussion of "grassroots postmodernism" to explore how marginalized groups critically engage with the neoliberal capitalist order and development logic from the perspective of their own cultural knowledge. Furthermore, I show how these groups construct notions of a good life or *buen vivir* that are at once located and borrowed from translocal frameworks. U Yits Ka'an is a striking example of a local institution that is invested in renegotiating the terms of development to forge an "alternative development," and moves to articulate an "alternate modernity" rooted in the cosmovision of the Mayan people.

Cultural Imaginations

Introduction

I came to Mérida with my own romanticized notions of the Maya. I was looking to discover and immerse myself in a society that was still on the peripheries of modernity: a culture that was “authentic”, “native”, and still largely “traditional” (Walley 2004, 224). My desire to experience this authenticity was rooted in my own background as a farmer, a leftist activist, and, ironically, a student of anthropology trained in critical development studies. Once in Mérida, I encountered two general views about the Maya.¹² One perspective, like my own imagination, romanticized and imagined the indigenous as a sort of untouched “noble savage.” The other vision simultaneously conceptualized of the Maya as uncivilized, and in a way, backwards. I critically examine these apparently incongruous views and argue that they stem from the same problematic and racist assumptions. Whereas one seems to celebrate apparent nonmodernity as something to be preserved, the other decries it as backwardness. And yet, both theses visions share the basic binaries that underwrite developmentalist thinking: modern versus traditional, civilized versus primitive.

¹² For the purposes of this text, I focus my analysis on these two visions of the Maya.

In this chapter, I show how these seemingly paradoxical imaginations of “cultural difference” are produced and circulated in the Yucatán (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 42-43). I begin by exploring the racist attitudes about the Maya I encountered in Mérida, before I embarked upon my fieldwork, showing how they intersect with dominant development discourse, which continues to shape and “colonize” our conceptualizations of “reality” (Escobar 1995, 5). I position romanticized visions of untouched Maya—which I shared with some tourists and Mexicans—against these more overtly developmentalist imaginations. I demonstrate how this celebratory romanticism is embedded in some historical threads of the discipline of anthropology, specifically as it is practiced by salvage anthropologists who “incarcerate” the indigenous in a position without agency, outside modernity (Clifford 1988, 11).¹³

This chapter concludes with a description of my actual experiences and impressions upon arriving in Yalcobá. I highlight the inconsistencies between the romantic world I imagined and the seemingly destroyed world that I experienced, and show how this filled me with such disappointment and despair during my stay at the farm in the Yucatán. I felt that the one place and the one culture that I hoped would be a refuge from modernity was, in fact, consumed by it and decaying as a result. I

13 Anthropology itself had a characteristically “difficult” and “central” disciplinary relation with the development apparatus throughout the 20th century (Ferguson 2005, 140).

use various contemporary anthropologists to show how this feeling of what Michel-Rolph Trouillot calls “postmodernist melancholy”(Trouillot 2003,13) arises out of my leftist conviction that constructs capitalism and modernity as forces that penetrate all places and realities, destroying all perceived cultural difference (Gibson-Graham 1995, 120).

In showing the genesis and fracture of my imagination around Yalcobá and Mayan culture, I portray the slow unhinging of this sense of “postmodernist melancholy”. In this opening, I was exposed to an anthropological framework that refutes assumptions of culture’s “uniform” and “essential” nature, and in turn, envisions culture as being a fragmented, “conjectural”, and “constructed” phenomena (Clifford 1988, 10-11). This reframing, in turn, opens up the space for the new possibilities and phenomena that I discuss in the following chapter: a recognition of the *milpa*’s hybrid identity and its role as a framing principle, and ultimately, a cosmovision in the everyday lives of *campesinos*.

What I Heard

The semester before I went to Yalcobá, I took a Mayan History and Culture class at the Universidad Autonomá de Yucatán (or UADY). The class was specifically reserved for international students studying at the UADY and was meant

to be an introduction to and foundation in the life world of the Maya. Each class was dedicated to systematically reviewing a specific element of Mayan history and culture, such as ancient Mayan civilization, architecture, art, and religion.

When I told other Yucatecans about this class or my general interest in the Maya, they responded, more often than not, by saying, *Oooh, que interesante* (Ooh, how interesting) and would ask me if I had been to Uxmal or Chichen Itza, or some other close archaeological site. I would tell them, *Si*, I had in fact been there, and we would go on to have an empty conversation about the beauty of the architecture or art. When I tried to push on and explain to them that I was interested in actually learning about contemporary Mayans, they often either seemed confused and/or uninterested. *What was there to study? Do you mean going to the little towns and observing them? They are just so traditional, aren't they?* If I wanted to “actually” study the Maya, I would have to read about them in textbooks or talk to professors who were experts in them. Going to the little Mayan villages was fun; it was even considered by many urban Yucatecans as a travel back in time.¹⁴ In many ways, the Mayans themselves

¹⁴ I had Yucatecan friends invite me to go *pueblar* with them: spend a day in the country, going to little towns, and observing people.

were treated the same: cast as a backward Other without any agency to determine or make their own lives, reserved to either entertain or labor for wealthier, mestizos.¹⁵

This sentiment is representative of the particular type of racism common to Yucatán—what some scholars have called a “neo-racism” (Mijangos-Noh 2009, 2). The fact that this racism persists in one of the Mexican states with the highest indigenous population is especially alarming.¹⁶ Alicia Barbas wrote in 1979, “Present-day Yucatán...does not differ very much from the Yucatán of colonial times where the privileged positions were distributed according to skin color, physical traits, and culture” (Gabbert 2004, xvi). Although some progress towards equality has been made, the situation today for the Maya is largely the same in terms of economic and political inequality, coupled with de-facto racism (Gabbert 2004).

This racism is propagated through state, media, and popular narratives that generally function in two ways: 1) those that portray and imply that the Maya are “uncivilized” and “backward” Indians, living in “dirt”, “poverty”, and “disease”, and 2) those that depict Mayan culture as a site of timeless tradition and authenticity (Mijangos-Noh 2009). The legacy of development discourse in the Yucatán, both past

15 In most of Mexico, the term *mestizo* refers to individuals with mixed Spanish and Indigenous heritage. In the Yucatán, this term here refers to people of Indigenous backgrounds. I use the general Mexican version of the term.

16 According to the *Comisión Nacional Para El Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas* (National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples), the state of Yucatán contains around 10% of

and present, underlies the first portrayal. The romanticization of indigenous culture in the second is embedded in the problematic history of the broader discipline of anthropology.¹⁷ For the purposes this analysis, we will begin by examining how ethnocentrism as a doctrine is embedded within, and is integral to developmentalist thinking.

Development as a discipline, and far-reaching discourse, emerged on the world stage after the Second World War as a project to bring “scientific advances and industrial progress” to “underdeveloped” areas and peoples (Esteva 1992, 6). Arturo Escobar in *Encountering Development* applies Foucault’s lens of discourse analysis to critically engage with the language and underlying assumptions that the development regime circulated. Escobar argues, that in examining development as a “historically produced discourse”, we see the “mechanisms” by which it “produces permissible modes of being and thinking”, and in turn, disqualifies others (Escobar 1995, 5-6). Paraphrasing Homi Bhaba, Escobar shows how the development discourse operates similarly to colonialist regimes of power that are “crucial to the binding of a range of

Mexico’s total indigenous population. Around 62.7% of the Yucatán identifies as indigenous (*Comisión Nacional Para El Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas 2005*).

¹⁷ As we will see, anthropology, at times, has worked closely with the development regime, and in turn, the field of development has helped constitute anthropology as a discipline: as Ferguson remarks, an especially *difficult* yet central disciplinary relation exists between the two (Ferguson 2005, 140). In this way, although these two portrayals differ, they arise out of common assumptions and notions we will examine.

differences and discriminations that inform the discursive and political practices of racial and cultural hierarchalization” (Bhaba 1990, 72).

This hierarchalization across development regimes generally privileges certain categories and conditions over others: inscribed in its “blatantly racist” discourse, it privileges “the West over the Rest”, whiteness over dark skin, urban populations over “underdeveloped” and “ignorant” villagers, non-indigenous over indigenous people (Escobar 1995, 35). In this way, critics of development, such as Escobar, have emphasized how development is fundamentally an ethnocentric project (45). They show how it is predicated upon teleological notions of social and cultural evolutionism that see cultures and societies as progressing through certain universal economic stages of development with a common end-stage—Western modernity.¹⁸ To undergo development, therefore, is to imitate and become the West: socially, culturally, and economically (Ferguson 2005, 144-146)

This notion of progress and an eventual *telos* shapes the Yucatan landscape and forms the basis for the ethnocentric racism that denigrates the indigenous as “non-modern”: in this designation outside modernity, Mayans are seen as inferior and beneath the Mestizos. This racism is readily apparent, especially in Mérida, the city

¹⁸ Walt Whitman Rostow’s book *The Stages of Economic Growth* is a classic example of this teleological vision.

that bears the especially fitting nickname: the “White City”.¹⁹ When asked about her study on racism in Mérida, my Anthropology of Mexico professor at the UADY, Dr.

Eugenia Iturriaga, stated in a newspaper interview:

The conclusions [are] that we effectively live in an extremely racist society that discriminates, [one] where there is very strong ethnic discrimination, that one can see in the press, on the television... in public offices, in commercials... day to day in the streets, and one can even find it in the discotheques (López Méndez 2014).

Iturriaga repeatedly emphasized that this racism is perpetuated through naturalization and “coding”: for example, jokes that poke fun at Spanish-sounding Mestizos with Mayan surnames or that subtly compare Mayans to monkeys (López Méndez 2014). Naturalization and coding are parts of violent forms of representation that the Mayan people continue to be subjected to today.²⁰ This regime of representation is an integral component of the development discourse and exerts itself in the “encounter” and “suppression of local cultures”, “identities”, and “histories” (Escobar 1995, 214). With the Mayans in Mérida, this suppression resulted in “closure, difference, and [symbolic] violence”, as Mayans were subject to the entrenched racism alluded to in Iturriaga’s comments (214). This racism had the power to invisibilize certain components of their culture and spaces, while it made

¹⁹Some also refer to the city as “The City for the Whites”(Echeverria 2011).

²⁰ This violence, for the most part, is symbolic and epistemological, not violent.

other elements eminently “visible” and over-emphasized them in order to construct an essential identity (154-157).

For example, popular conceptions of the Maya that I encountered on television and in my everyday life rarely spoke to the complexities of their lives. The Mayans who lived in Mérida were often conceptualized of as poor people who occupied jobs and positions of little power and status—they were not (and in ways, it was implied that they could not be), doctors, lawyers, or teachers, but were dirty children selling fruit to passing cars on the main avenues, women cleaning in Mestizo homes, and day laborers working in the hot sun. When they inhabited other spaces outside these pigeonholed stereotypes, they were often placed in positions that emphasized their Mayan-ness.²¹

My conversations with Yucatecans in Mérida spoke to this effect. Additionally, although the government and most individuals I spoke with did not explicitly state it,²² they implied that *pueblos* were places filled with poor and traditional people who still clung to their antiquated values. The government’s public service announcements (which I will discuss) and Mestizo notions of cultural

21 For instance, a restaurant I attended in the city center, the Chaya Maya, a spot frequented by tourists and richer Yucatecans, paid Mayan(or Mayan-looking) women dressed in traditional indigenous attire to strategically make tortillas in the store-front windows facing the main drag.

22 The Mexican government no longer espouses a blatantly racist discourse as they once did in the past (Garcia Torres et al. 2014)

superiority that I encountered²³ implied that Mayan pueblos were uncivilized places that stood to be “modernized”, through the adoption of “right” values, those that had been adopted and practiced elsewhere in Mexico: movement to cities, full adoption of the Spanish language, abandonment of the *milpa* and other unproductive production, etc. (43).

In Mérida, I was aware and critical of this racism around me. I would not necessarily challenge it, but I often brought it up in conversations with my close Mexican friends, specifically at the UADY. At that time, what I encountered in these conversations seemed to me like the opposite of the racism I saw elsewhere. My friends and I talked about the “beautiful” and “thriving” cultures that survived in the *pueblos*. They organized several ethnographic excursions to small *pueblos* to experience and immerse themselves in Mayan culture. In many ways, they looked at Mayan society as an ideal form for them to imitate, posting anecdotes of “Mayan wisdom” in their Facebook statuses: for example, a Facebook meme that reads in both Mayan and Spanish: “We speak the language of our ancestors”.

What I realize now, after reflecting on my experiences in the Yucatán, is that this romantic conception of the Maya is grounded in the same developmentalist logic

23 My Yucatecan friends and I had several conversations about this notion of cultural superiority that many upper-class Mestizos had.

as the overtly racist depictions. Although it may appear to function differently, this romanticism promotes certain representations of the Maya, and in turn, suppresses autonomous expressions of their culture. Even though romanticism seems to value indigenous cultures for their pristine primitiveness, it is, like the racist discourse, premised on the same fundamental division between tradition-modernity and backward-civilized binaries that structure developmentalism; moreover, both deny the indigenous any agency.

I experienced this romanticism, and in turn veiled racism, firsthand when I lived with my homestay family in Mérida. My family hired a Mayan woman, Maria, to clean our house twice a week. She had been working for my family for more than five years and told me that she made “good money”. She seemed to have a friendly relationship with my host mother and grandmother; I would often hear them talk together about fashion, movies, their children, and their personal lives. And yet, there always seemed to be an unspeakable boundary and separation between them. It manifested in the most awkward of ways when we would sit down for lunch when Maria worked. Someone would always offer Maria food as we ate and she would accept, but she would never sit down at the kitchen table with us; rather, she ate standing up by the counter, separate, isolated, and apart. Although the dynamic

between Maria and the family seemed to suggest they were on equal grounding, clearly the racial and cultural hierarchies of Mérida still influenced their relationship.

Despite this awkwardness, it seemed like my family treated Maria well in comparison to most Yucatecan families I heard about. Friends from my program described living with housekeepers that they never met or conversed with, but who seemed to always be waiting in the shadows. Their families often referred to them as their “chicas”, or *girls*, despite their age. My host mother’s sister, Gloria, told me that Mestizo women chose to hire Mayan housekeepers, because they were hardworking, honest, and conservative. In her words, they were preferable over other unpredictable “types”²⁴. Gloria hired Maria because she knew the real value of “hard-work” and “discipline” after growing up in a poor, but traditional family in one of the Mayan pueblos.

My friends’ ideas of the Maya and the hiring preferences that Gloria alluded to are both manifestations of this broader romantic notion of the indigenous. This conception positions the indigenous in general as keepers of some essential culture, tradition, and “authenticity”(Ferguson 2005, 150). Anthropology, as a discipline, laid the foundation for this fetishization of the indigenous. Ironically, this fetishization

24 She never specified who these other “types” were.

was established while anthropology simultaneously laid the basis for the core theoretical tenets of the developmentalist regime: a project with underlying motivations of civilizing the undeveloped, and by extension, the “uncivilized” (141).

In his essay “Anthropology and Its Evil Twin”, James Ferguson outlines the problematic relationship between anthropology and development. Early anthropology, he argues, was grounded in ideas of social and cultural evolutionism that positioned societies on a spectrum between “savagery” and “civilization”(141). This dichotomy is also an essential part of the development regime, as it envisions modernization as being an inevitable and desirable process with a common *telos*: being fully civilized. Indeed, for the latter half of the 20th century, many anthropologists worked hand in hand with the development apparatus to create and implement policies fundamentally rooted in attempts to civilize and develop “un-modern” and “savage” societies (143).

According to Michel-Rolph Trouillot, this Othering and thus making of the “Savage”, which he calls the creation and maintenance of the “savage slot,” is fundamental in constituting what we know as the “West” (Trouillot 2003, 9). He theorizes that the “savage slot,” rather than being just the theoretical “alter ego” of the West (something to avoid becoming or to use as a foil to define oneself), is one aspect

of a two-faced Janus,²⁵ the other being the West's utopian projection of itself (18).

The "savage slot" is a face or category that is "not static" and is used by the West to define and legitimate its power (20-23). What occupies this "slot" changes based on historical conditions. It is an integral part of Trouillot's trilogy: that of "order-utopia-savagery" (27). In this trilogy, the West uses the "savage slot" to reflexively produce utopian visions of itself, which it then uses to maintain order and hierarchy.

This trilogy was readily apparent in the way by which common state depictions of the Maya worked. These television advertisements, often in the vein of public service announcements, used Mayan pueblos as a foil to show how far an idealized urban, contemporary Yucatecan society had progressed and grown in its development and embrace of modernity. The advertisements would focus on the depravity and disarray of a particular village: barefoot children, trash scattered around the street, errant youths, general "chaos" and "disorder" in all regards. The government would arrive with some modern technology in a coordinated manner, say education or plumbing, and bring modernity and prosperity to the people. In literary campaigns, for example, children were seen reading books, frowns would turn to smiles, and the people were captured applauding the government. Political candidates

25 The two-faced Roman god of time and transitions, beginnings and endings. Trouillot uses the Janus as a device to make sense of how the Savage slot functions.

often released these advertisements in order to advocate for their particular agendas and campaigns for re-election. Through these representations, contemporary Yucatecan society reproduced and propagated notions of the Maya as “savage”, and the urban Yucatán as a fictionalized “utopia”, to maintain the third part of Trouillot’s trilogy: “order”.

In the postmodern era we inhabit, anthropologists have called the power and legitimacy of the “savage” slot into question (264). This challenge to the slot’s validity explains why the government’s invocation of the “savage” above differs in such a remarkable way from the more explicitly racist colonial narratives that Trouillot references in his piece. He affirms that its use has not been discontinued, but rather, has undergone deliberate and conscious changes: it has manifested in a particular fascination and anthropological focus on the “Other” (267). For Ferguson, it exists in contemporary anthropology’s fetishization of the “local, the autonomous,” and “the traditional”; ironically, everything that the development regime sought to negate (Ferguson 2005, 150).

Anthropology’s fascination with these traits is inherited from the way it historically fetishized and essentialized culture as a unit of analysis. In particular, contemporary anthropologists have shown that early ethnographies of “un-modern”

cultures (such as in Claude Lévi-Strauss's works) relied on essentialized visions of culture that saw identity as something "coherent, ahistorical, seamless, and with no internal conflict and contradiction" (Apffel-Marglin 1998, 8). James Clifford argues that the tendency and desire to portray cultures in this light, as something unitary and stable, arises from underlying anxieties of things being "out of place" (Clifford 1988, 6). Like Trouillot's "savage slot", the labeling and systematic analysis of culture is a way by which the West can stabilize the place and identity of the Other, and in turn, constitute itself (Clifford 1988). This making sense of the Other, especially one arising out of a "nostalgia for vanishing cultures" and society in disarray, leads to the fetishized incarceration of a people in time (Clifford 1988, 10-11). Such an incarceration focuses on essentializing ideas of local and traditional indigenous cultures.

What I Imagined

In my Mayan history and culture class, my professor was trying to actively work against this "incarceration". If she could help to expose us to how the Maya actually lived historically and today, if she could help render them "visible" as a complex, changing, and fragmented culture, our incarcerated visions of the Mayan past and present would be challenged. For example, she, a Maya herself, repeatedly

emphasized the connections and continuities between the ancient Maya of archaeological studies and the contemporary, living Maya of the Peninsula: through their language, ritual practices, food, and more. In our class, we focused on the diversity and heterogeneity of the ancient Maya and the contemporary Maya: different dialects, empires, ways of life, pantheons, customs, foodstuffs, etc. In conversations I had with her, she lamented the fact that many foreigners (and evidently, Mexicans as well) nevertheless remained ignorant that the Maya are a people and a culture still vibrantly alive today, rather than some antiquated, exotic empire that built pyramids and left artifacts for visitors from Cancún to explore.²⁶

And yet, despite all her efforts, I failed to make this connection. Although my imagination of the Maya had perhaps become a bit more complex and problematized, I still held on to a vision that imagined the Maya as having an apparently pristine culture, one largely unaffected by its interactions with a capitalist modernity²⁷. It was not a culture in isolation: there would be Coke and jeans (like everywhere else in the world), and the occasional cellphone, but things would remain largely the same, as they always had.

26 While in Mexico, I kept on thinking about how the treatment and conception of the Maya was in many ways similar to popular notions in the USA about Native Americans.

27 In the world I imagined, although Mayan culture in the past was affected and transformed by its interactions with the conquistadors and Spanish colonial regime, it remained the same on an essential basis.

The world I imagined, before arriving in Yalcobá, was multifaceted. I had been exposed to what I thought of as cultural disintegration in visits to the countryside and smaller towns. In particular, during my semester at the UADY, all the students on my study abroad program visited a Mayan pueblo close to Chichen Itza called Yaxunah. The director of our program referred to it as a “cultural immersion” experience; we were going there to experience Mayan culture, in its actuality, outside the cities. They set up an awkward homestay program with a set of families in the town and paid them to provide us with food.

The whole experience bothered me. On one level, it struck me as a patronizing exercise in cultural imperialism. On another, I was amazed by how much of “the West” I encountered in Yaxunah: convenience stores selling chips, candies, sodas, cigarettes, and cakes; Families worshipping nightly telenovelas. The town itself banned the sale of all alcohol, particularly *aguardiente*, a type of sugar-cane spirits preferred by many for its strength and cheapness, because it had apparently wrecked havoc on the village families.

But I thought that the decay I observed was the exception. The results of practices mainly just adopted by more liberal and younger Mayans exposed to urban environments and Western ways of life. For example, I thought to myself: perhaps

Yaxunah's proximity to Chichen Itza and its constant flow of tourists had resulted in the adoption of these practices by young men in town who sold their handicrafts at the site? In my mind, the majority of Mayans still made and worked traditional *milpas* of corn, squash, and beans. The bulk of the food they ate was still comprised of traditional staples, like tortillas and tamales, and they loathed more modern and processed foods such as products made from wheat flour. They may have grown other crops on the side, but these were just supplementary and secondary ventures.

"My Mayans" lived largely in small *pueblos* scattered around the countryside with arcane and unpronounceable names: Xtut, Yaxhau, Ek Balam, Holbox, Hochtún. Families crowded into little *casitas* with thatched roofs, built in accordance with the ritual and traditional prescriptions we studied in my class. They dedicated offerings of *maize* and *atole* to the gods to watch over and protect themselves and their families; they cut the wood for their homes during the full moon to maximize its latent spiritual and material energies. Most of the people in my communities were extremely religious and practiced their syncretic blend of Mayan and Catholic practices. Pictures of the Virgin Mary and Virgin de Guadalupe decorated and adorned houses and shops. The towns were full of young children running around on the streets, playing soccer and other games.

Some inhabitants, mostly younger ones, would occasionally venture out of the *pueblo* to go study or work in Cancún, Mérida, or Valladolid, but largely, they stayed in the town. If some locals did leave to go work or study, they were the particularly ambitious type. The Mayans were known for being hardworking day laborers and general workers—a fact readily exploited by contractors in Cancún and Mérida. In many ways, my Mayan world was an uninterrupted paradise, a world outside the flows of globalization that I had learned about in my anthropology courses. And this was the Mayan world I expected to encounter.

My imagination of the Maya, like those of my friends at the UADY, appealed to notions of an exoticized Other that anthropologists have criticized, with particular regards to tourism. They argue, that as an industry, tourism relies upon fetishizing an exotic Other. Steven Gregory writes in his article “Men In Paradise” that “the international tourism industry constructs, commodifies, and markets exoticized and deeply gendered images of non-European host societies that stress the passivity, servility, and enduring “otherness” of their peoples” (Gregory 2003, 330).

Christine Walley, in her work *Rough Waters*, expands upon this idea by showing how the construction and exoticization of the Other rests on the Western desire to “escape” modernity and experience a culture and a place that is un-ruined or

untouched. Walley argues that in the ecotourism industry one particularly see this desire to encounter and consume “sites and ways of life perceived of as “pristine” and “authentic”” (Walley 2004, 224). Walley shows how advertisements sell an ecotourist destination, often located in the Third World, as a place “that is little changed from ancient times” and “retains a traditional, friendly culture”, and therefore, is a perfect escape from modernity overload (224).

In the Yucatán, a series of amusement and “archaeological parks” along the Riviera Maya named Xcaret and Xel-há attract tourists with similar promises (Xcaret Mexico).²⁸ Their advertisements beckon foreigners to come visit and experience the “cultural richness of Mexico,” and its diverse traditions, contained and represented in Mexico’s “sacred paradise” of the parks (Xcaret Mexico). Visitors can explore authentic Mayan “archaeological sites” and experience the “magic of a thousand-year-old civilization” (Xcaret Mexico). They can explore the natural world along the Riviera Maya that is portrayed as authentic, and filled with a natural beauty, that is unique to all of Mexico (Xcaret Mexico).

Tourists can even explore a rich set of “cultural attractions”. For example, a recently constructed adobe chapel (built in a clichéd Mexican/Southwestern style), a

28 During my stay in Yalcobá, I heard rumors that the company behind Xcaret and Xel-ha were in the process of building another park, but within the interior of the Peninsula. This new park is rumored to

Mexican graveyard built inside a model Mayan village (filled with model Mayan actors), and a model plantation and hacienda. Tours culminate in a nightly cultural show called “Xcaret México Espectacular.” The first part of the performance depicts “pre-Colombian Mexico, including the presentation of a ritual pre-Hispanic Ball Game and a thrilling depiction of the Conquest and mestizaje,” while the second “features a selection of music, dances and traditions from several regions of the country”(Xcaret Mexico). The whole experience is like a Disneyland depiction of Mexico: everything that is violent, brutal, and repressive is erased in the performance, which focuses on all things colorful, sanguine, and peaceful in Mexico’s history.²⁹

Xcaret’s cultural show is an exercise in what Renato Rosaldo calls “imperialist nostalgia”, what he refers to as a “people’s longing for what they themselves have destroyed” (Rosaldo 1989, 87). In this case, Western tourists like me, implicitly see Western modernity as one that changes, contaminates, and ruins a “static” and relatively “stable” indigenous society (Rosaldo 1989, 70). These cultures, within our imperialist and developmentalist worldview, serve as “stable reference points” for defining one’s “civilized identity” (70).³⁰ When the so-called “civilizing

be in construction fairly close to Yalcobá. It supposedly will have a particular focus on ecotourism and Mayan culture.

²⁹ The arrival of the conquistadores and the *mestizaje*, mixing of races, is retold in a positivistic manner, as if the conquistadores brought *culture* and *civilization* to the *savage* and brutal natives.

³⁰ In this section, I ironically invoke the collective pronoun to refer to those “believers in progress” (Rosaldo 1989, 70). This includes me before my actual experiences in Yalcobá.

processes” of Western modernity destabilize and transform “other cultures” we have held up as “stable” and essential in our self-definitions, we feel these transformations as “personal losses”, as a deep sense of “nostalgia” for what once was (70). This results in a desire to escape “modernity”, and to seek out further examples of “stable” indigenous society. Ferguson and Truillot’s theories outlined above help explain how the essentialization and exoticization of an imagined Other can play into this desire-as-violence.

In her discussion of tourism in *Rough Waters*, Walley also illustrates how fragile these romanticized conception can be, focusing on particular anxieties that many foreigners have about pristine, natural ecotourist locales—Mafia Island, in her case—becoming “overdeveloped”, and thus ruined (Walley 2004, 231). Tourists were initially attracted to the island because it was “unspoilt” and “exotic”, but worried that the island would lose its sense of “peacefulness”, “authenticity”, and “wildness”, as it was developed for tourism. In their anxious visions of the future, the people of Mafia would lose their “unspoilt way of life” and the “thing” that made it “special” and unique, would be “lost” (225-231). This anxiety depends upon a “concept of “ruin”” that sees “non-Western cultures and presumably “traditional” peoples and practices as

locked in a “symbolic opposition” with a “modernity that holds the power to contaminate or spoil” (231).

Such a perception of ruin relies on an inversion of the fundamental Western concept that sees Westernization as the ultimate goal of modernization. In this case, both tourists and expatriates reverse the developmentalist privileging: what was traditionally labeled negatively becomes something revered and desired; and vice versa, what was traditionally labeled positively becomes something associated with the “modernity” that individuals are attempting to escape.

Although this sense of ruin and ensuing “imperialist nostalgia” seems to question some of the underlying values inherent in development discourse, it does not actually undermine them. Although ecotourists may now desire authentic, stable, and non-modern ways of life, values traditionally associated with a negative backwardness, the dichotomy between civilized and uncivilized, developed and undeveloped is in no way called into question. In the ecotourist and romanticized framework of ruin and nostalgia, the essence of development discourse and consequent social reality is in a way inverted, but it is never challenged. In failing to call these models into question, these illusions implicitly foster and strengthen the said regime and discourse of development.

In my visions of Yalcobá before I came, I was searching for this illusory, unruined, and uncontaminated space. Like the expatriates attracted to Mafia, I was looking to escape from a modernity that I found everywhere in my travels (Walley 2004, 231). After hearing other Yucatecans talk about the Mayan countryside and way of life, I expected to find it pristine and waiting in Yalcobá. I nostalgically looked forward to encountering this paradise, a slice of life that resembled something predating my own family's entry into modernity. While I was browsing Lodgecol's website³¹ and reading about their visions of sustainability and nature, my expectations only grew. I was looking to experience what they called "a life more ordinary": in other words, an imagined space outside the worry and trappings of modern society (Lodgecol 2014).

What I Encountered

I had expected to find abundant *milpas* and indigenous Mayan culture flourishing all around me in Yalcobá: shamans, traditional dress, an ancient language. *Everything*. I was expecting an unspoiled and uninterrupted culture and landscape. My underlying "imperialist nostalgia" was looking to discover a Maya who were

31 Accessible at www.lodgecol.com

unconquered, authentic, and continually practiced their traditions. I never found my Maya.

In fact, when I first drove through Yalcobá, all I found was a town and culture that appeared to me to be disintegrating, both being torn apart and cast aside in the encounter with Western capitalist modernity. I looked out the windows of the taxi and saw small concrete single-story buildings standing unfinished in seeming ruin, with occasional thatched roof huts, the houses I was expecting to see everywhere.

Where were all traditional Mayan houses? Why would they build with concrete if it the traditional house construction was such an important part of their culture? This was in no way a place outside modernity or capitalism. The Mayans in Yalcobá were not a people who had remained hidden, or who had resisted and fought “the West”. They were a people who were consumed and destroyed by it. Who were cast aside by it and torn apart. Their way of life, their traditions and everything that made them unique were falling apart and scattered around Yalcobá everywhere for me to see.

Instead, younger and older men hung out in the streets and in the plaza, stumbling around and openly drinking from tall bottles of cheap beer. They eyed the taxi and the white boy inside it suspiciously as we passed. When I approached them,

they would either mumble incoherent phrases at me, at times growling, or they would try and befriend me. Several times when I returned to Yalcobá, I sat on curbs as I was drunkenly lectured to about lofty concepts like life lessons: How they could not support their families; how they were worried about their children; how they were honest and hardworking men; how wonderful and great their imaginary United States was. And how terrible and lonely Yalcobá was.

Eva, the Mexican woman I worked with at the farm, did not like the drunks. She would constantly remind me to watch out for them, to be suspicious of everything they said. They were not really hardworkers or honest people, but washed-up, selfish men, wife-beaters often. I was confused and unsure what to think of them, but I remember constantly asking myself: *Did the men in Yalcobá no longer make milpa? Did they no longer keep traditional values? Was anyone actually interested in keeping "the culture" anymore, in consciously working to preserve through practice ancient and timeless traditions like religious rituals and what not?*

It really did not seem that way. Corner stores and mini-markets around the town advertised beer, Coke and Pepsi, and candy in bright obnoxious lettering. The bakery we went to every few days was constantly churning out sweet breads made with high-fructose corn syrup, processed oils, and white flour. The tortilleria, the

store where they made tortillas, the foundation of the Mayan diet, often just mass-produced tortillas made from Maseca, a pre-made, ground, processed, and fortified corn flour. Rotten, discarded, and forgotten fruit carpeted the ground next to fruit trees that produced an abundance of tasty and exotic fruit: guayas, papayas, mangos, bananas, cherimoyas, tamarinds, oranges, limes, the diversity seemed endless. Most of the fruit trees in Yalcobá were past their prime though, beginning to look weathered and beaten, planted a generation or two ago. *Was the rich tradition of growing and cooking Mayan food replaced by cheap, processed junk from the cities?*

Eva lamented that the newer generations no longer cared to plant any more trees for their children, like their grandparents had done in foresight. The elders in the town were quickly losing respect, and it seemed like people only listened to them out of tradition, but behind their backs, mocked and ignored their proclamations. *Where was the “new commons” that Gustavo Esteva(1992) talked about? The spaces that allowed people to “live on their own terms,” to “regenerate” and “recreate” their own cultures and traditions against the onslaught of developmentalist modernity (Esteva 1992, 17-20).*

Every time I went into town, it seemed like there was always someone blasting reggaeton over the speakers. The Internet café was overflowing with people

and you often would have to wait in line for ages to use a computer. Kids were huddled around computers, watching Japanese anime and checking their Facebook and Twitter accounts. When they were not at the café, most of the teenagers I met seemed constantly attached to their cellphones. The majority of the Mayan teens I befriended seemed much more technology-savvy and connected than myself. Few regularly spoke the Mayan language, and instead used Yucatecan Spanish riddled with Mayan slang and vulgarities that made even me blush. They would speak Spanish to their parents who would respond in Maya, and in this way, one-sided conversations slowly wore at the longevity of a language.

After I arrived in Yalcobá and spent a few days working at Lodgecol, I observed how my thoughts and expectations about the Maya were quickly changing: I went from romantically nostalgizing the Maya (and indigenous in general) as a pristine culture, to feeling only despair at their disappearing and dying tradition. It is amazing to think about how quickly my world turned upside down. The first few conversations I had with Eva in particular emphasized this decay. When I asked her why, for example, the *campesinos* did not compost manure and apply it regularly (like we did) she would reply that they had once done so—and perhaps a few still did—but now, the practices were lost, and the people had turned away from them. I

received a similar response when we discussed other practices that had “disappeared”: for instance, the making of biochar,³² the practice of planting lesser-known heirloom varieties of specific crops, the raising of indigenous *melipone* (stingless) bees rather than imported African-hybrid varieties of bees, and other traditions.

In many ways, Eva understood herself and Lodgecol’s efforts as heavily invested in preserving ancient and endangered practices. This complemented our generally held notion and feeling that things everywhere were being lost. Like the salvage anthropologists of the early 20th century, we could perhaps help the people in Yalcobá preserve (or at least chronicle) the disappearing knowledge that surrounded them: plant varieties, techniques, wisdom of the elders, religious practices, the integrity of Mayan society itself. We felt that everything was at risk and could possibly slip away from our grasp at any time. We *had* to fight to keep the culture alive.

I had to work with Eva to preserve Mayan culture: *Me? A white American male with no trace whatsoever of Latino or indigenous blood, who could still barely pass for having a proficient hold of the Spanish language, let alone no Mayan*

32 An organic soil amendment created by processing organic refuse in an oxygen-less fire.

speaking proficiency whatsoever? How did I come to see myself as being particularly positioned to help the Mayans? Reflecting on these questions, I believe that I was under the impression that my background in farming and sustainability in the States would actually allow me some special insights into how to preserve Mayan agricultural techniques at risk of extinction. I felt that my education in anthropology and experiences with leftist organizing and activism situated me in a particular way to aid the Mayans in a manner that was least problematic, and facilitated their own autonomous expression and control

Before helping the Mayans with this preservation, I had to first answer the following questions? *Why was their culture disappearing and being snatched up and lost to time? How could the villagers in Yalcobá, the people I came to help and empower, sit by while so many unique, beautiful things in their society were washed away? Where was the quiet, little, traditional village and culture that I had imagined? How had computers and cellphones, so recent an arrival, taken over the town? How could they so easily disregard two millennia of a rich and vibrant culture, history, and tradition? Where was the pristine and virgin village life that I imagined? Where were the campesinos untouched by modernity? Why had it all fallen apart?*

How I Reacted

Before coming to Yalcobá, I thought I understood that cultures change: they always have. This concept of culture as a dynamic and changing formation was one of the ideas that turned me onto Anthropology early on at Wesleyan in my Anthropology 101 class. I can still remember reading Marshall Sahlín's article "Two or Three Things That I Know About Culture" and writing my class final about it. I used words like fluid, non-discrete, and fragmented to describe the nature of culture in modernity. In my sophomore year, I took a course on the Anthropology of Development that critically engaged and deconstructed these ideas of culture, progress, and development. I was familiar with these notions on paper, but in actuality, I was in no way expecting culture to be such a fluid and morphing formation. I had no idea what it would look like, or feel like to encounter. It was much easier for me to come to Yalcobá expecting to find something unified and whole, unchanged for millennia. And I did not quite know how to step outside the naturalized developmentalist binaries that structure so much of our thinking and practice.

In Yalcobá, it abruptly appeared to me that the traditions and values, even Mayan society itself, were disintegrating. Society was ruined and spoiled by the seeming contagion of a Western capitalist modernity. It seemed like Yalcobá was

quickly adopting everything from Western society that I loathed. *Constantly watching TV and tapping away at smartphones. Eating processed and un-natural things that barely resembled food. Losing our connection with the natural world, and as a consequence, slowly destroying it.* At that time, it seemed inevitable to me that everywhere would be infected. All untouched, undistorted places would be swallowed up whole. There was no room left for the romantic nostalgia that once captivated me, as a capitalism-directed despair took over. Capitalism was everywhere, and it was destroying everything it touched, as many leftist critics had predicted.

In their book *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It)*, J.K. Gibson-Graham critically examine and engage this cultural script that I espoused that envisions the “penetration of capitalism into all processes of production, circulation and consumption, not only of commodities but also of meaning” (Gibson-Graham 1996, 120). Their discourse analysis asks how this representation and its various associated “narratives, complexes, and institutions” facilitate, and enable the “violence of” global capitalism (123). Gibson-Graham show how the script of capitalist penetration “constitutes non-capitalist... relations as inevitably, and only ever sites of potential invasion/envelopment/accumulation, sites that may be recalcitrant but are incapable of retaliation” (126). They essentially argue that leftist discourse has constructed

capitalist globalization as an all-penetrating monolithic power, trampling over everything in sight, destroying diversity and otherness (126). This particular script about capitalism, which I had bought into, does not fully capture or address the complexities and entangled nature of globalization and neoliberalism: its ruptures, gaps, and flows that anthropological critiques have recently begun to highlight and address.

Gibson-Graham's points help situate my reactions when I first arrived in Yalcobá. I saw decay and disintegration because I was playing into a logic and vision that attributed a monolithic and all-powerful force to Western capitalist modernity; there was no outside to it. My despair in seeing Yalcobá in ruin fit into a script with which I was familiar.³³ It is interesting and ironic to reflect on the fact that I came to Yalcobá expecting something pristine and authentic, but upon my arrival, only found something ruined and destroyed. It is as if before I experienced Yalcobá, it fit into my romanticized script as a place thankfully undefiled and on the margins of the global landscape, outside the reach of globalization and neoliberal capitalism. I imagined Yalcobá peacefully existing outside the Yucatán Peninsula, outside Mexico, outside North America, outside the world: contained in its own hermetically-sealed bubble of

³³ This script came to me from various sources: participating in activist circles (especially anarchist) and actions, reading for school and pleasure, and travelling.

cultural, economic, and social isolation. Imagine my disappointment and dismay at the modern ruin I encountered and saw. Where were my Maya?

Conclusion

Both of these imaginations I had of the Maya, my nostalgic romanticism and subsequent utter despair in their “destruction”, are problematic. They over-simplify and reduce what they claim to observe, overlooking the complexities of the phenomena they describe. Both visions play into conceptualizations of “essential” and “uniform” cultures, either pristine or ruined (Clifford 1988, 11). Embracing this theoretical landscape of culture, there is little to no room for conscious, human agency in resisting contact. This conceptualization incarcerates cultures in time, limiting their ability to actively contest the “terms of development” and assert their own alternative modernities, around recognitions of “economic, ecological, and cultural difference” (Escobar 2008, 184, 198). Its vision of only “essential” cultural formations negates the possibility for cultures to reinvent and recreate traditions through the space of encounter. As a consequence, it becomes impossible to articulate and envision the existence of what Escobar calls hybrid modernities, those characterized by “by continuous attempts at renovation, by a multiplicity of groups taking charge of the multitemporal heterogeneity peculiar to each sector and

country”(Escobar 1995, 217). This theoretical landscape makes it near impossible for cultures to survive *through* encounters with modernity.

Relatively new and emerging perspectives in anthropology are challenging this framework; they advocate for an understanding of culture that embraces it as a “contingent”, “constructed”, and “conjectural” phenomena (Clifford 1988, 10-11). With this understanding of culture, new frameworks emerge by which we can understand and re-imagine the encounter between the “West” and the Other. In the words of Gupta and Ferguson, in this space of encounter between the two entities, identity becomes a “meeting point”, a point of suture—that constitutes and re-forms the subject so as to enable them to act (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 13). This reconstitution of a culture’s identity, as much as it can “tear” a society apart, as I originally imagined it doing so in Yalcobá, has the potential to lay the basis for a radical reconstitution of identity founded upon the unique “cultural difference” and knowledges of particular group’s modernity” (Escobar 1995, 225).

Gupta and Ferguson refer to these ongoing processes of the renovation of identity as “cultural re-territorialization”(Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 38-40). They argue, that although it may appear that we inhabit a postmodern era dictated by increasing fragmentation and physical de-territorialization (peoples, cultures, and

identities are increasingly found scattered around the world), this is not actually the case; emerging from the margins on a local grassroots level around the world, indigenous and minority groups are increasingly engaging in cultural processes of “re-territorialization”. This is occurring as said cultures undergo “transformative engagements with modernity” (Escobar 1995, 215-220). Rather than looking at this “cultural difference” as threatened by such an engagement, we can adopt a framework that sees “difference” itself as a product of engaging with a modernity that “differentiates the world as it connects it”(Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 46)

Escobar contextualizes this framework in a broader trend when he writes:

In Latin America, an emergent environmental thought builds on the struggles and knowledges of the indigenous, peasant, ethnic and other subaltern groups to envision the construction and reconstruction of local and regional worlds in more sustainable ways...Sustainability may thus become a decolonial project: thinking from existing forms of alterity toward worlds and knowledges otherwise (Escobar 2008, 155)

Through the space of encounter and engagements with a globalized modernity, a movement is emerging that envisions the hybrid renovation of cultures and spaces as hybrid; this renewal is growing out of knowledges and worlds previously maligned by the development apparatus and capitalist modernity.

The following chapter is an attempt to reframe my understanding of how Yalcobá engaged with modernity. I examine two particular views of *milpa*, what is traditionally understood as merely just an indigenous agricultural system, and

problematize both the following: those, emerging from a developmentalist framework that see *milpa* as antiquated, static, and inefficient, and those from a romanticized sustainability outlook that envision *milpa* as an unchanged system of sustainable indigenous knowledge. I challenge these visions by arguing that *milpa* represents a broader model of nature and being, a *cosmovision*. As *cosmovision*, *milpa* is best understood as a hybrid: as an entity that is dynamic and constantly changing. In my concluding chapter, I look at the *escuela campesina* U Yits Ka'an (and the broader movement it represents) as a site that engages with such hybrid knowledges and practices of "cultural difference"; in doing so, U Yits Ka'an contests the typical "terms of development" and affirms visions of alternative, hybrid modernities (Escobar 2008, 198).

The *Milpa* as Cosmivision

Introduction

My work at Lodgecol with the *milpa* was engaging and entertaining, but it felt mundane to me; there seemed nothing remarkably special about it at first. I was working with *just* a simple agricultural system that was seen by development planners and the state as “antiquated” and “inefficient” (Escobar 1995, 157-158). Captivated by my “imperialist nostalgia,” like the salvage anthropologists of yore, I was looking to investigate and document a disappearing tradition that I feared would soon be swept under the carpet by more “modern” planting techniques (Rosaldo 1989, 87). I was trying to find some essential and unchanged “indigenous wisdom” in the *milpa*: an inherent embrace of sustainability and ecology at the grassroots. I wanted to play a part in preserving and nurturing *milpa* as an alternative to more capitalist schemes of industrial agriculture.

Although I found some aspects of these elements in my exploration of the *milpa*, I was generally underwhelmed by what I encountered. The practice seemed quickly fading and in danger of near extinction. The *milpas* I saw and worked on seemed to barely produce enough for subsistence. I thought to myself: *maybe the*

Mexican government and the development apparatus had been right about milpa? As in my encounter with Mayan culture described in the previous chapter, I experienced an overwhelming sense of “postmodernist melancholy” (Trouillot 2003,13). The “indigenous wisdom” which I had valued and expected to find, seemed to elude me. What I discovered was not as vibrantly alive, since times immemorial, as I had imagined. I was placed in the peculiar position of being both disenchanted with the *milpa* I saw, and yearning for something more sustainable and holistic that I believed had once existed.

Over time, as I became more acquainted with the *milpa* and its intricacies—and especially as I reflected on my experiences after leaving the Yucatán—this feeling of melancholy wore off. I came to realize how *milpa*, like many other “vanishing traditions” erroneously thought of as inhabiting spaces “outside of modernity,” continues to morph and thrive in conversation with modern forces (Escobar 2008, 185).³⁴ In this chapter, I examine the *milpa* as a *contemporary*, culturally situated “cosmovision”: a way of “relating [to] and signifying the natural world”, where the biophysical, human, and natural connect (Escobar 2008, 112). Using this framework of cosmovision, I argue that *milpa* is symbolic of processes of

³⁴ It is important to mention the caveat that I by no means think of myself as an expert on *milpa* agriculture. As such, I present and work with my limited understanding of the above phenomena, which I believe to be well-informed and substantiated but obviously may have their flaws.

“cultural hybridization” that frame how cultures interact with modernity. As a hybrid formation, the *milpa* represents a complex “sociocultural mixture” that confounds commonsensical distinctions between tradition and modernity, backwardness and civilization (Escobar 1995, 218). Positioning *milpa* as a hybrid cultural formation and cosmovision, at once rooted in a specific territory *and* shaped by translocal forces, problematizes the two notions of *milpa* introduced above: the developmentalist outlook that sees *milpa* as antiquated, static, and inefficient, and the romantic vision (that I professed), which envisions it as an unchanged system of sustainable indigenous knowledge.

My Initial Encounter with Milpa

My first day of working at the farm was terrible. I woke up at 5:45 a.m. with a sore back not accustomed to sleeping in a hammock. I grudgingly got dressed and walked to the main cabana where Eva and I huddled around the table as we ate our daily breakfast of instant coffee and sweet breads. The dogs, Unica and Fluke, scavenged for food at our feet. As the sun slowly rose outside and illuminated the cabana beyond the pale light of a lone lamp, we discussed the plans for the day. My arrival had caught Eva by surprise (she had expected me two days later), but no fear, she said, there was always work to be done. I had arrived on the farm just after the

annual time, *la quema*, when the *campesinos* in Yalcobá burnt the fields to prepare for the year's planting. Because we were not going to burn, we had to clear our land by hand.³⁵ That was my job: clearing the *monte* (the wild), which was the site where we were to plant *milpa*. She showed me my machete and *koa*, a blade with a curved sickle edge. I tested the different tools and swung them into nearby tree trunks. They were sharp; a misplaced swing could have easily been the end of my toes.

We walked through the farm, by the craterous, 60-foot deep, *cenote* to the back of the fields where I was to clear. Although it was only 7 in the morning, the sun was already beginning to boil my insides. Eva showed me the weeds I was to chop down and then left me to my work. I awkwardly handled my machete, scared of its blade as I swung at the ground. The ground was parched dry; it hadn't rained for several months. I cut at weeds and plants that seemed to sprout up at every corner, and although stationary, appeared to constantly evade my awkward slashes. I could not figure out how to use the *koa* properly either. After four hours of chopping and what looked like no progress at all, I walked back to my cabana and went for a dip in the *cenote*, the open well on our land.

³⁵ Most Western ecologists argue that slash-and-burn agriculture, under modern conditions, is unsustainable because it leads to increased depletion of nutrients from soils, release of greenhouse gases, erosion, and destruction of virgin forests (Heath, 1990). Eva shares this opinion.

Eva and I ate lunch: eggs with tortilla (always mountains of tortilla), veggies, chorizo, and *agua de Jamaica*, or hibiscus tea. Our conversation began with us both mutually complaining about the heat, and then Eva asked me about my ethnographic work. *So, what did I plan to study?* Before coming, I had sent Eva and Theo (her husband who was on vacation when I arrived to work) an email with information about my research project, but it was a very vague and jumbled description.³⁶ So I explained that I was broadly interested in learning more about the *milpa*, as an agricultural technique. At the time, I really knew very little about the *milpa*, other than what I had read about the so-called Three Sisters approach and what I had studied in my Mayan archaeology class.³⁷

Milpa was just a way of planting corn, squash, and beans together: *nothing more*. *Campeños* would initially plant corn, and then follow it by planting squash. The horizontal spreading of squash across the soil would block out weeds and protect the corn, as it slowly grew vertically. Beans were planted at the base of the corn stalks once they were a foot or so high; they would then slowly wrap their vines around the shafts, using them as support. After a few months, the beans would fruit and produce

36 My research proposal and what I was studying drastically changed and evolved over time. Although I started with some direction and idea, what my thesis became is distinctly different than what I initially imagined.

37 The Three Sisters is a “companion planting technique” where one intercroops “corn”, “pole beans”, and “pumpkins” or squash. As in *milpa*, each of the sisters works in symbiosis with each other (Renee’s Garden 2014)

bean pods.³⁸ Corn would be harvested around this time, alongside whatever squash was produced.

Having this conception in mind, I asked Eva, in her opinion (just to be sure), what is the *milpa*?

She reversed the question, and I responded: *An agricultural system or set of practices.*

Si, pero...no, Eva replied ambiguously, and then added: *Es una manera de ser*. It was an agricultural system, but it was much more than just that: It was a way of being. A way of being? How was it possible for the *milpa* to be anything else other than just planting? I was a bit skeptical, but more than that, I was confused. I asked her what she meant—¿Cómo? How?

She explained that, as an outsider and observer of Mayan agriculture herself, in the two years she had been living and working in Mayan country, she had seen how the *milpa* was *everything* for Mayan society. It was not just an agricultural system nor did it just determine the logical extensions of agriculture: the food the

38 The rooting mechanism of beans (and other leguminous crops) involves nitrogen fixation. This process occurs when root nodules become infected with a particular species of bacteria, *rhizobia*. Bacteria are sustained by energy from the plant's photosynthesis, and convert atmospheric nitrogen into ammonia, which is then made into compounds necessary for plant growth and survival. Once bean plants die, this ammonia is released as a fertilizer into the soil, readily used by other plants (Lindemann et al. 2003).

Mayans ate, for example. It was a structuring principle for Mayan society itself, a critical node around which social life was organized.

For instance, within the *milpa* cosmovision, notions of regeneration are particularly central. This regeneration, a “re-creative and cyclical renewal” of different “forms of life,” is an essential part of the broader Mayan cosmology (Apffel-Marglin 1998, 96). The *campesino*’s cultivation of *milpa* is seen as directly linking the “present with the past in a continuing cyclical motion” and regeneration. This link exists because “anytime the peasant works the milpa,” he or she is seen as repeating, “the actions that brought the first creators” to make mankind (Re Cruz 2003, 497).

A specific Mayan religious ritual, *hetz mek*, part of the broader *milpa* cosmovision, addresses such issues of cyclicity and regeneration. This rite, which originates from practices common during the Mayan empire and is still practiced today in indigenous communities around the Yucatán, involves placing the cut umbilical cords of newborns in the respective spaces associated with the perceived duties and obligations of their gender (Fernández Souza 2007).³⁹ The umbilical cord of male babies is often buried beneath the soil of *milpas* or land (the *monte*) to be cleared for *milpa*; in this way, males are seen as being the conduits for producing

39 This ritual has parallels in many indigenous cultures. Arturo Escobar highlights the similar Afro-Colombian ritual of la *obligada* in his book *Territories of Difference* to illustrate how cosmovisions can function and shape societies (Escobar 2008).

sustenance from nature (Fernández Souza 2007). The umbilical cord of female babies is buried underneath the *fogón*, the cooking space in traditional Mayan houses, to signify women's role in turning what the male produces into sustenance, as a way to reproduce the family itself, and by extension, Mayan society (Fernández Souza 2007). In this way, the ritual of *hetz mek* is indicative of *milpa*'s role in shaping values and notions that constitute gender relations.

Milpa as Cosmvision

Eva's statement and this ritual speak to *milpa*'s role as an organizing principle for society and a cosmvision for the Mayans who I met (Escobar 2008, 112). In Spanish, the term cosmvision literally signifies "worldview" (Frankel 2012). This term has traditionally been used to refer to religious concepts, but has recently been adopted by anthropologists to refer to the general epistemological frames employed by diverse groups around the world (Ward 2008). As a worldview, *milpa* shapes how *campesinos* and *campesinas* relate to, make sense of, and come to understand the natural world and the social order as a unified formation (Escobar 2008, 112).

Alicia Re Cruz, in her article entitled "Milpa as an Ideological Weapon:

Tourism and Maya Migration to Cancún," discusses this notion:

Milpa is a concept that binds Maya people to the whole culture... [By] itself, [it] contains its relational network and surrounding cultural context. Milpa is the system of Maya relationships wherein the individual who produces corn,

the sociocultural Maya order, and corn itself are intimately linked (Re Cruz 2003, 494).

The *milpa*, then, can be understood as the basis, even the bedrock, of Mayan society.⁴⁰ According to Stephen Gudeman and Alberto Riviera, in their text *Conversations in Colombia*, the *milpa* represents a uniquely constructed and positioned “local model” for understanding and objectifying the world (Escobar 1995, 62). It is a “cultural code” that encompasses “elaborate forms of knowledge and cultural representations” (Escobar 2008, 220). For instance, the religious and ethical values that make up such a “code” within the cosmovision may manifest themselves in cultural practices (e.g. the ritual of *hetz mek*) (220). In a holistic understanding, *milpa* represents a dense and complex “universe of collective representations” (220).

It embodies a particular “way of knowing” and “understanding,” and inhabiting the world, which is quite distinct from the developmentalist framework and knowledge discussed in the previous chapter (Escobar 1995, 13). The latter delineates and exclusively relies on the modern Western system of knowledge by which individuals and institutions come to understand and negotiate with reality (13). The dominance of the modern Western paradigm, as Escobar has demonstrated, has facilitated the marginalization and disqualification of non-Western knowledge

40 This is not to say that it is the only element that influences Mayan culture, but rather, it is one, if not the most important constitutive elements in their society. For the sake of clarity, although I do not

systems as it has attempted to assert hegemonic control over all processes of meaning-making (13).

Industrial Agriculture and Milpa in Conflict

In the case of the Yucatán (and other parts of Mexico), development planners during the Green Revolution, specifically the Rockefeller Foundation, labeled the *milpa* and other small-scale agricultural systems across Mexico as inefficient and backward.⁴¹ Instead of encouraging increased *milpa* cultivation, they called for the dissolution of small land-holdings in favor of large-scale, irrigated plots, and promoted the adoption of “fertilizer-responsive, hybrid-seed varieties” and “farm management practices based on biocides and modern farm machinery” (Sonnefeld 1992, 32). In many ways, the Rockefeller Foundation’s efforts, working alongside “Mexican industrial capitalists” and “large landholders”, represented an all-out war on the “peasantry and rural smallholders” (31). In effect, there was a systemic effort to eradicate the *milpa* and other indigenous Mexican systems seen as traditional and unproductive.

Epistemologically, the development experts sought to replace the *milpa* cosmovision or local knowledge with a modern framework of agricultural and

assume an orthodox Marxist position, in many ways, *milpa* could be read in Marxist terms as the economic base of Mayan society that determines its superstructure (religion, cultural values, etc.)

technological knowledge seen as universal.⁴² On a practical level, they worked to replace *milpa* holdings with more productive, capitalist agricultural enterprises: monocropping, large-scale animal husbandry, and so on (Sonnefeld 1992, 37-38). As a result of this “war,”—although agricultural production objectively increased during this time—the ownership and control of land was increasingly concentrated in the hands of larger, wealthier landholders (34). As Sonnefeld writes, “agricultural development seems to have been achieved at the expense of [the lives of] millions of rural and urban poor”, and the wholesale, at times “intentional,” destruction of the environment (47).

Although this narrative related above would seem to suggest that there exists a fundamental opposition between industrialized agricultural techniques and those practices in the indigenous *milpa* cosmovision, these models are in fact interwoven in the space of Mayan society in Yalcobá. In a postmodern era dictated by globalization and the widespread adoption of neoliberal policies—elements that seem to diametrically oppose the lifeblood of *milpa* and other indigenous cosmovisions—*milpa* does not simply disappear, nor is it necessarily subordinated. Rather, it exists alongside elements of Western modernity and both transforms modernity and is

41 This labeling and devaluing of the indigenous agricultural system, although less explicit today, still exists.

43 What Escobar calls “technoscience” (Escobar 2008, 31-32).

transformed in the process.⁴³ *Milpa* is experienced and enacted by *campesinos* caught within what Akhil Gupta calls a “postcolonial condition”: one that is inescapably hybrid and impure and that transcends the dichotomy between local and global, and the traditional and modern (Gupta 1998, 6-9).

Under such conditions, *milpa* survives as a hybrid cultural force, and is constantly in articulation with other models in a process of continual deconstruction, formation, and renovation (Escobar 1995, 94-97).⁴⁴ It is neither homogenous nor static and discrete, resembling a “closed system” of meaning (Gupta 1998, 18). On the contrary, it exists in relation to and is informed by the social and cultural conditions of its surroundings (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 3-5).⁴⁵ *Milpa* is a “conjectural” force, one that is actively formed and negotiated with by individuals and groups; it is not part of some “essential identity” of “indigenesness” that is unchanged and stable (Gupta 1998, 18).

Furthermore, the *milpa cosmovision* as a model of knowledge and of nature embraces a logic of “fragmentation and recombination” whereby the boundaries and

43 It is important to also emphasize, that in the same way, elements of Western modernity itself are changed and affected through its interaction with *milpa*. Hybridization is a two-way process, but one that does not necessarily affect.

44 This idea of hybridity will be more explicitly discussed in the following chapter with respect to my experiences at U Yits Ka’an, an escuela campesina engaged directly in negotiating with this hybrid force.

45 Like Western modernity itself, it is also worth pointing out that *milpa* is “heterogeneous” and not without its hierarchies: it is infused with “relations of power and inequality” that are negotiated with by *campesinos* themselves (Gupta 1998, 18). For example, although individuals in Yalcobá share common notions as part of the *milpa* cosmovision, no individual conception is entirely alike.

meanings that surround its epistemology are constantly mixing and shifting (Escobar 2008, 116). For example, terms used to refer to certain elements in the *milpa* cycle evolve and change with time. Practices are drawn from other models and visions of agriculture and the world. As an example, the *milpa* cycle began in the 1970s and 80s to incorporate synthetic fertilizers and laboratory-bred varieties of corn engineered on research farms far off in the United States corn belt. Under the auspices of U Yits Ka'an's direction, a farmer school where I studied, *campesinos* are beginning to manufacture and employ organic herbicides made from Neem, a tree native to South Asia, in their *milpas*.

In the subsequent sections of this chapter, I portray and examine this hybridity within the context of the *milpa*. I portray my participation in two core stages of *milpa*'s agricultural life cycle: the slash-and-burn phase that generates and lays the basis for its fertility, and the planting phase when the *campesinos* negotiate their intervention with the natural world. I use these stages as entry points to reveal how *milpa* functions as a local model and grammar of the environment, yet one that is in articulation and conversation with the forces of capitalist modernity.

La Quema ("The Burn")

Eva, Akna, and I drove past the charred, burnt fields of the milpa-that-was and was-to-be. Akna was a *campesina*, one of the elders: she was around 60 years old or so. She was born in Yalcobá and had lived there her entire life. When Eva and Theo came to Yalcobá two years ago to start Lodgecol, Akna befriended and welcomed them into the community. Akna would go out of her way to help Eva with the farm, and vice versa.⁴⁶ During this particular excursion, she had offered to take us to the ranch where her husband worked in order to collect manure.

We stared at the dark, barren earth before us. Akna said to herself as we passed: *Qué bonita la quema*. How beautiful the burn. The field had been burnt late. Maybe just a week before, the owner of this *ejido*, along with his family and some hired help from the village, had cleared the larger brush in the field and set it aflame. It was early May, and it would soon be nearing the time to plant maize (if it ever rained). The *campesino* who owned this piece of land, this *terreno*, maybe had the premonition that the rains were coming late this year. Very late. Don Pancho had told me in passing the other day when he came by during our lunch, that *las viejitas* in the village were saying that it would not rain for at least three more weeks; the women who had seen many seasons, many more milpas than he had, and who knew the earth

⁴⁶ For example, Eva organized an optional system for Lodgecol volunteers whereby they could pay Akna to process and wash their laundry. Eva also directed volunteers looking to purchase Yucatecan hammocks to Akna's daughter-in-law, a local artisan.

and the ways of things. Maybe the *campesino* that was late had listened to them and had known.⁴⁷

Our black jeep rolled down the dirt road, kicking up a dust storm behind us. The field to the left of the road was burnt black. The fire had consumed all the brush, grass, and trees. The devastation had deposited a thick layer of white ashes on the ground, which blew every which way with the wind. These ashes, if they did not all blow away, would fertilize the milpa and give sustenance to the corn.⁴⁸ The only indication of life that was left in the burn's wake was the signs of its passing: the stiff and hollow trunks of trees that were too big to be chopped down in the clearing of the field, the random patches of soil that had escaped the *quema*. The trunks, standing charred black, were the only remnants of the field and the small, low-growth forest that had once been. Visible cracks reverberated through the parched earth, connecting in networks of desperation, a testament to six weeks without a single *gota*, a drop, of rain. The sun baked down on the field (the black earth absorbing its heat, making it worse). You could see the radiating and undulating waves of heat in the air: the heat that dances, twists, and teases on the hottest of days.

47 Eva and I tuned into the early morning weather report on the radio whenever we had a chance, but more often than not, their predictions never materialized.

48 Corn is a "high-feeder," meaning that it calls for a particularly demanding "diet" and thus feeding of lots of nitrogen and other nutrients. Growing it successfully with any form of fertilizer, whether natural or synthetic, is near impossible.

My reaction to the field was one of dread and concern. How could one not view it as sheer devastation? I thought to myself: *The campesinos had burnt everything that was living. Maybe the burn's ashes would partially fertilize the soils, but based on everything I had read and learned about ecology in the United States, this was a remarkably inefficient way of doing so. Where was the sustainability in "indigenous wisdom?"*

To Akna, however, this burnt field was beautiful. She smiled through her many missing teeth as she said again, *Qué bonita la quema*. Eva, who was driving us, sitting next to Akna while I rode in the backseat, disagreed and echoed my own thoughts when she said, *Yo creo que no. Creo que es feo. Muy feo*. Eva thought it was ugly, very ugly. Akna seemed a bit confused, as her face suddenly contorted into a puzzled look, but then it quickly relaxed. She disregarded Eva's comment. Eva tried to explain what she meant, realizing that what she said might have offended Akna. Drawing from her background in environmental policy-making for such groups as Greenpeace Mexico, Eva explained that the slash-and-burn method was "unsustainable," "bad for the earth," and "bad for the soils."⁴⁹

⁴⁹All valid claims, to some degree. The negative effects of "swidden" or slash-and-burn agriculture have been studied in detail, but the results of these studies have been contested by some indigenous groups (Schmook et al. 2012).

All the while, Akna just nodded, giggled, laughed, and smiled like she always did, exposing the gaps of her missing teeth. Where Eva and I saw destruction, Akna saw *maize*. This disjuncture in perception speaks to the fact that nature is a culturally constructed phenomena; it does not exist as an isolated, empirical object outside of ourselves and uninfluenced by our values, but rather is imbricated with “our knowledge and significations of it” (Escobar 2008, 112). Local models of nature are thus expressions of the “systematic knowledge people develop about their environments” (118). These models posit a coherent “universe” of representation: a cosmovision (120). Local knowledges not only orient practice, but in this case of *la quema* (and other instances), also frame particular conceptions and values surrounding agricultural practices: taken together, these knowledges contain what Escobar refers to as a “grammar of the environment” (115).

For Akna, the *quema* symbolized nourishment and beauty. The burn laid the basis for the harvest and abundance to come that would nourish her people; without the burn, the milpa would not be possible. According to the model of nature that Eva and I shared, one that was anchored in findings in environmental science and ecology, and permaculture—a liberal variation of what Escobar calls the “capitalist model of

nature” (Escoba 2008, 144)—the burn was a misguided, if not, outright destructive act.⁵⁰⁵¹ It was incommensurable with the vision of sustainability that we shared.⁵²

By the look of her face at Akna’s reaction, Eva seemed to understand the futility of arguing.⁵³ We continued driving down the road in silence until we turned left and passed through an old dilapidated gate into a shaded driveway. The low trees surrounded the entrance of the path and gave way to a wider clearing and two buildings: two large, fenced in corrals with an old, weatherworn concrete barn. The whole place had the feeling of desolation and abandonment. We parked the car and I stepped out. The heat washed over and hit me immediately, as well as that cloud of humidity that quickly makes you feel like you are swimming in your own sweat. I reluctantly lifted myself up and climbed onto our jeep as we detached our shovels and wheelbarrows. Akna, excited (as always), led us into the corral. The corral smelled like shit, cow shit to be exact. We were there to collect the manure for composting.

50 I say *liberalized* because our model incorporates notions of permaculture and agroecology that are derived from Western rational scientific observation, but nonetheless qualify the assumptions and claims of a more typical model.

51 Escobar uses the term “capitalist model of nature” to refer to a conception of the environment that he argues is integral to capitalist exploitation of natural resources and processes. For example, in this capitalist model, subjective claims about the environment (e.g. cultural expressions of biodiversity) are disregarded, while empirical observations and statistics are solely relied upon to justify and plan interventions.

52 Permaculture is a discipline that emerged in the 1970s and was developed by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren from their observations of indigenous “perennial farming techniques” (Birnbaum Fox 2009, 14). It “aims to create permanent agriculture...by cultivating a regenerative relationship between people and the earth” (15). In the view of its founder, permaculture does this as it “connects old and new, lending a detailed Western scientific understanding to traditional agricultural practices developed through indigenous methods, and proven by the test of time” (18).

53 At the time, I stubbornly accepted it. I wrote about my disgust with the *quema* in my journal for some time and discussed it with Eva repeatedly. Only after leaving the Yucatán and beginning my research for this project did I come to understand the limitations and my own *stubbornness* here.

The compost was going to be the foundation of the food forest we were planting in two weeks.⁵⁴

Before the introduction of synthetic fertilizers, most *campesinos* had made composts and regularly applied them on their soils (it was the only soil amendment available). Now, the practice was gradually disappearing. Some older *campesinos* I met in the *escuela campesina*, U Yits Ka'an, still made composts, but other *campesinos* did not.⁵⁵ It was easier to go into town and buy synthetic fertilizers at the government-sponsored agriculture store.

Through the agricultural subsidy program, the Programa de Apoyos Directos al Campo (or PROCAMPO), the Mexican government had regulated prices of these goods and subsidized their purchase.⁵⁶ Every year, *campesinos* receive around 1,000 pesos (80 dollars) per hectare of cultivation, which is often spent towards synthetic fertilizers and other agricultural inputs such as pesticides and herbicides. One of the main goals of PROCAMPO's subsidies is to promote "land use intensification" through increased "investment and productivity" (Schmook et al. 2008, 95-96).

54 The planting of food forests is a permaculture technique, whereby one plants a variety of trees and shrubs designed to produce a constant supply of sustenance with minimal maintenance and environmental impact. The El Pilar Forest Garden Network argues that the *milpa* fundamental and original goal is to establish lasting food forests, not cycles of burn like most contemporary Mayan farmers practice.

55 Some farmers I met in Yalcobá opted to burn their manure, setting fires that would burn continuously for days.

56 Translation: Direct Support Programs for the Countryside.

“Land use intensification” emphasizes “efficient” growing methods, as opposed to the apparently inefficient subsistence, practices, such as the planting of *milpa* (Schmook et al. 2008). As a result of this emphasis on efficiency, farmers are encouraged to monocrop, that is, solely plant one commodity crop to sell on the market (such as corn or papaya).⁵⁷ This intensification focuses on the repeated planting of specific areas, as most rural peasants have limited labor and time available during each planting season to clear additional space. It depletes nutrients and, generally, within two or three seasons of planting, results in significant crop losses due to soil infertility. In order to maintain efficiency, then, fertilizer needs to be applied continually on a seasonal basis. Pesticides must also be continually used in a similar way, and at increasing rates, because they not only kill pests but also the natural predators of pests (Humphries 1993, 91). In this way, the government as well as external market pressures encourage *campesinos* to over-exploit soils and use purchased inputs necessary for this type of cultivation (87). This is all done under the auspices of “facilitating the integration of agricultural producers into the market economy” (Schmook et al, 2008, 96).⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Under this system, *campesinos* are expected to purchase their actual foodstuffs from the revenues received from selling their commodity crops.

⁵⁸ In such a way, PROCAMPO is representative of a “roll-out neoliberalism.” This describes a situation whereby the “state creates conditions to foster the free movement of capital” and the full “integration” of the market (Alkon et al. 2012, 351).

The government's encouragement of the *campesinos* to repeatedly plant the same plots of land runs contrary to more traditional indigenous practices of crop rotation and land regeneration. In Yalcobá, just 30 years ago, *ejido* land was much more readily available and abundant. *Campesinos* would traditionally slash-and-burn a parcel of their land, use it for *milpa* cultivation for around 2-3 years, and then let it remain fallow for 20 years. During this fallow period, they would plant secondary crops and non-intensive fruit and hardwood trees. This process allowed the forest and soils to regenerate in a natural cycle not dependent on fertilizer.⁵⁹

Regardless of how one views the use of pesticides, their integration into the *milpa* model, along with other changing and shifting practices, is indicative of its hybridity. In this case, *milpa*'s engagement with modern agricultural technologies, although occurring in the context of “economic and political relations of inequality”⁶⁰ characteristic of neoliberalism (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 47), has resulted in the intermixing of practices. The *milpa* as cosmovision still orients practices and beliefs—for example, as rituals like *hetz mek* and the *quema* are continually practiced—but it has obviously changed through the encounter with modernity. What

59 My reconstruction of past agricultural practices is drawn from conversations I had with older *campesinos*, my experience at U Yits Ka'an, and from a webpage dedicated to promoting sustainable Mayan farming techniques: the “El Pilar Forest Garden Network” (El Pilar Forest Garden Network 2014)

we observe as a consequence of this encounter can not be seen as wholly Western or Mayan, but rather, is a hybrid formation that is at once local and translocal. This “comingling and coexistence of incommensurable beliefs”, the cross-pollination of modern practices with indigenous knowledge, is a definitive feature of the “postcolonial” condition that forms “hybridized” and “syncretic” subjects (Gupta 1998, 232), and also troubles any easy dualism between “indigenous” and “modern” knowledges (226).

The Planting: Akna’s Sembrado

On the day we went to gather manure for our compost, Akna casually showed Eva her *sembrado* or vegetable garden within the corral. Akna modestly referred to it as just a “little something” as she laughed and smiled through her gap-toothed grin: *it was more or less just an experiment, you know, not a serious project or anything*. It was her second garden, a small aside to the larger *sembrado* next to her family’s house.

Akna’s *sembrado* was amazing. In the middle of the corral, one squash plant wove and vined itself around in a circle around 60 feet in circumference. Little yellow squash offered themselves up from the vine everywhere. Alongside the squash, bright

60 As Gupta and Ferguson remark, it is important to take into account these “unequal relations” and how they frequently, more often than not, underlie the space of encounter (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 47).

red chilies, habaneros, and jalapenos hung from plants. Flowers dotted the corral and were attended to by a swarm of bees and other insects. Culinary and medicinal herbs carpeted the areas where the squash's vines and leaves let light through to the ground. It was a scene of abundance, an abundance that had been nurtured within such a dry and parched corral. It was an expression of diversity and interconnection, as different varieties of plants grew to accommodate niches and opportunities presented by others: bare patches of soil, shade cast by taller plants, stems to grow around and orient oneself upward.

Akna's *sebrado* took advantage of the abundant nutrients available in the decomposing manure of the corral. She explained how, in passing one day, she decided to plant a few squash seeds in the garden that she had saved from the other *sebrado*. Before long, the squash plants were thriving, and she decided to interplant other things. *Malas hierbas*, or weeds, eventually sprouted up, but they were not a serious threat to the garden. Akna uprooted them when they got too abundant, while she let others grow out and cover the soil. Eva was amazed by the *sebrado*—it easily out-produced most of our vegetable gardens at Lodgecol—and asked Akna to share her secrets with us. All the while, Akna just giggled.

The planting of these *sembrados* is one of the traditional agricultural duties of women within Mayan communities. In discussions I had with Eva, she emphasized how both the Mexican government and development planners have often ignored, under-represented, and invisibilized the role and importance of women within agriculture. They effectively portrayed agriculture as an entirely male activity, while in reality, women were an essential part of agricultural work, whose involvement was both necessary and complementary to traditional male activities (The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations 2011).

As planting systems, *sembrados* are located close to the homes and are intensively cultivated.⁶¹ They are typically planted with vegetables like *chilies* and squashes, as well as culinary and medicinal herbs (Alayón-Gamboa et al. 2008). Fruit trees such as mangos, grapefruits, papayas, and guayas are found close to the gardens, and are cared for mostly by women. The *sembrado* is often a space where women experiment with planting new seed varieties, either purchased or exchanged with friends.⁶² The fruit and produce from the *sembrado* is meant to complement the products of the *milpa* to form a more diverse and nutritious diet; it “protect[s] the

⁶¹ Women (as well as young children) often help with planting and maintaining the *milpa* as well, but their work is normally employed in times when immediate labor is needed. They are often in charge of keeping livestock and poultry for the family’s sustenance as well. These activities, along with the marketing of crafts such as hammock sewing are used by women to garner a supplementary income for themselves and their families (Alayón Gamboa et al. 2008, 404).

family” when other crops, like corn, fail (404).⁶³ Without the harvest from the *sembrado*, *milpa* is not whole; as such, it makes up an integral part of the *milpa* system (404).

In recent times, particularly the last 20 years, production in some of these “home gardens” has shifted from solely sustaining and supplementing a family’s diet, towards producing small-scale cash crops such as *habanero* chilies to be sold for profit (Alayón-Gamboa et al. 2008). In many cases, women have been responsible for establishing these small-scale growing enterprises that use traditional planting techniques on larger scales. Coupled with this expansion, some farmers in Yalcobá, through state assistance programs, have begun to aggressively expand their growing operations. For instance, right outside the main dirt road into Yalcobá sits a newly built greenhouse dedicated to the growing of *habanero* chilies for export to Valladolid and Cancún.⁶⁴ This shift in production, and its effects on labor within the Mayan community, is emblematic of the *milpa*’s modern articulations: survival in the postcolonial condition requires shifting production techniques.

62 Such experimentation is emblematic of the hybridization integral to the *milpa* system as individuals test and attempt to shift practices based on their observation and experience.

63 Eva told me that, during the summer before I arrived, the corn harvest largely failed due to lack of rainfall. Yalcobá pooled its resources, and communally harvested and processed Ramón fruit or breadnut to survive through such corn shortages.

64 While I was working at Lodgecol, a *campesino* I was friends with in town, Edgar, had just won grant money from the state government to plant a papaya plantation on the outskirts of town. This grant money was part of a larger push by the state government of Quintana Roo (the state next to the Yucatán where Cancún is located) to cut costs and reduce food imports to the tourist areas, prioritizing growth of food in the Peninsula.

Conclusion: A People Connected to Milpa

Each morning for about a week, I spent hours weeding and preparing our plot for *milpa*. As I worked, I gradually learned how to properly use the curved *koa* blade in unison with the straighter machete edge. The work got faster, but I soon was overwhelmed with the breadth of the project, the near impossibility of what Eva was trying to achieve. We were only just planting an *experimental milpa*, not a *functional* one for sustenance, but still, it seemed like so much work. Our *milpa* only measured around a half acre whereas most *campesinos* planted five or more acres or about 45 kilograms of *maize* grains; we had the luxury and privilege of being able to purchase tortillas and other supplementary foods in town whereas many *campesinos* in Yalcobá and other Mayan towns largely ate what they grew from their *milpas*.

In my mind, it seemed like Eva had two main reasons for making *milpa*: the first being that she was interested in experimenting with growing a more sustainable *milpa*, a *milpa* without the initial slash-and-burn that used composted manure and other natural materials alongside organic, herbal-based insecticides and fungicides, not synthetic ones. If her experiment was successful, she hoped to introduce it to other *campesinos*.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ This intention was in line with the broader goals of U Yits Ka'an, an *escuela campesina* or peasant school where Eva and I studied (see Chapter 3).

Although Eva and I did not discuss it much, her second reason behind planting *milpa* fascinated me. When her husband Theo complained about the seeming fruitlessness of planting such a small *milpa*, and the sheer waste of time it represented, she said that her intention was not to be self-sustainable. Beyond the goal of merely experimenting, she felt that as a Mexican she had a spiritual obligation to planting *milpa* and, specifically, corn. There was something inside of her that “needed” to do it. It was the lifeblood and force of her people.⁶⁶

I encountered similar ideas in other literature about the *milpa* as well.⁶⁷ For example, Re Cruz discusses how the corn plant is understood as facilitating a link between the lower world (the underworld or *Xibalba* of Mayan cosmology), the middle world (the world that humans inhabit), and the heavens (Re Cruz 2003, 495). The *campesino*’s cultivation of *milpa* is seen as constituting and renewing a connection with one’s ancestors” who dwell in the lower world. The planting of maize and the making of *milpa* represents a dialogue between the living and the dead, the earth and the spirits (495).

This notion of connection is something that I initially found very foreign and difficult to understand. But after reading more about *milpa* and specifically looking at

⁶⁶ She had her roots in the more northern state of Sonora, her grandmother being of Yaqui descent. Like the Mayans, however, and practically every indigenous culture in Mexico, they depended on the triad of *milpa*: maize, beans, and squash.

it theoretically as a way of being and knowing, a way of organizing life, I began comprehending why these feelings would emerge among a people whose ancestral lands and cultural practices had been colonized, systematically violated, and threatened with destruction. Not to have a *milpa* or not to grow *corn*—which is increasingly the reality for campesinos after the passage of NAFTA—within a culture established around *milpa* and beliefs about corn’s centrality, would leave one feeling unfulfilled. Although these cultures have changed in many ways over the past few centuries, core values such as the importance of corn persist and influence lives despite the apparent distance some individuals feel from them.

Eva’s feeling of a personal and spiritual connection to planting *milpa* speaks to Mexican author Armando Bartra’s statements in his essay “La Milpa” surrounding the centrality of the *milpa* paradigm for the Mexican people. In this essay, he calls for reclaiming the *milpa* and celebrating it as a source of sustenance, both literal and metaphorical, for the Mexican people.⁶⁸

It has to be repeated. We Mesoamericans do not plant corn, we make *milpa*... maize is a plant, whereas *milpa* is a way of life...if we in truth want to preserve and strengthen our profound identity, not only agroecologically, but also socioeconomically, culturally, and civilizationally, we must move beyond the paradigm of *maize* to the paradigm of *milpa*: a complex concept that includes *maize*, but proceeds beyond it (Bartra, 2010)

67 For example, in the collection edited by Gustavo Esteva entitled *Sin Maiz No Hay Pais*.

68 This essay is written in Spanish, but included is my translation of particular excerpts.

Bartra's remarks encapsulate the meaning of *milpa* as cosmovision, as a means by which a group comes to understand and make sense of their world and ways of living in it, as a way of cultural self-affirmation, and as a local "model of nature" and as a grammar of the environment (Escobar 2008). *Milpa* can be seen as the "structuring principle" of a society, and a holistic way of life, which cannot be reduced to one aspect or element (e.g. corn) alone. By calling for a paradigm shift from *maize* to *milpa*, Bartra is speaking critically to Mexican planners and other development officials. Rather than calling for increased *maize* production, Bartra argues that they must approach *milpa* as a broader holistic entity and system that involves much more than corn; doing so can lay the basis for a cultural revival in the post-development era.

The soul of maize is monotony whereas that of *milpa* is diversity. In the *milpa* the corn, beans, squash... make each other company. In contrast to uniform *maize* plantations, the *milpa* is a broader polyculture. *Maize* is singular whereas the *milpa* is multiple; *maize* discourses, whereas *milpa* dialogues...one plants *maize*, whereas one makes *milpa*; the maize is one cultivar, whereas the *milpa* is everything (including ourselves) (Bartra, 2010).

Bartra's statements should not lead us to romanticize the *milpa* and see at it is something unchanged and static. *Milpa* exists in the context of encounters with other models including that of a Western modernity: it is hybrid. For Bartra, it is a dynamic cultural process: making *milpa* is an act of actively and continually regenerating culture and identity.

In the next chapter, I examine how the *escuela campesina* (or peasant school), U Yits Ka'an, engages with this regeneration of culture in its embrace and promotion of the *milpa* cosmovision. I position U Yits Ka'an and the emergence of other *escuelas campesinas* in a broader narrative of a post-development movement towards *buen vivir*: emerging renegotiations around what it means to live a "good life". These initiatives reimagine and propose alternatives to development and modernity based in particular identities, cultural values, and territories (Escobar 2008, 155). U Yits Ka'an "envision[s] the construction and reconstruction" of the Mayan identity around the *milpa* cosmovision. It embraces the hybrid nature of *milpa* and its coexistence and intermingling with Western models of both industrial and sustainable agriculture. Its engagement with modernity is an active dialogue and mediation, which transforms the *milpa* itself (198-199).

Resistance in a Post-Development Era

Introduction

After modernity we may have the flourishing of a thousand different lifestyles, redefining what living well is in local, rooted terms. Hopefully, we will not have a universal, unique truth, nor global certainties of the kind promoted by the global discourse of development; a thousand different truths, different perceptions of the world, different cosmic visions conceived at the local level, will emerge from the ruins left by modernity (Esteva et al. 2013, 100-101)

Esteva and Prakash's work examines a "grassroots postmodernism" that has emerged out of the ruins of development: one that comprises a "wide collection of culturally diverse initiatives and struggles of the... non-modern 'masses' [in] pioneering radical post-modern paths out of the morass of modern life" (Esteva and Prakash 1998, 3-4). This movement, emerging in the context of social, economic, and ecological upheaval around the world, what the authors call the "breakdown of modernity" (5), is rooted in a rejection of the neoliberal capitalist order and the development logic. In this breakdown, groups are finding their own spaces for autonomy and are "regenerating their traditions, their cultures, and their unique indigenous and non-modern arts of living and dying" as a means of building alternative ways of life in the post-development era (4). In particular, Esteva has long argued that a "new commons" is emerging around the world in spaces marginalized by neoliberal capitalism: groups are coming together to collectively work towards the recovery and redefinition of their own communal "needs" (Esteva 1992, 19).

In this chapter, I examine the Escuela de Agricultura Ecológica U Yits Ka'an as an example of such an emergent new commons. I show how the *escuela's* ideology and teachings are emblematic of "a new, plural, political ecology of knowledge" that is mobilizing around the world to contest hegemonic notions and

practices of modernity (Escobar 1995, 215). I briefly overview the *escuela*'s history, context, and ideological background within a larger network of *escuelas campesinas* (peasant or farmer schools) in Mexico and in other parts of Latin America. U Yits Ka'an, as a school, seeks to educate *campesinos* in "ecology" and sustainable agricultural techniques, and its methodology and curriculum is at once local and translocal (Escuela de Agricultura Ecológica U Yits Ka'an, 2014). U Yits Ka'an builds on liberation theology and the radical pedagogy of Paolo Freire, and is invested in negotiating with the "cultural identity", knowledge, and practices of the Mayan people represented in the *milpa* cosmovision (Escuela de Agricultura Ecológica 2014). As it engages centrally with the *milpa* cosmovision and other components of the Mayan system of knowledge, U Yits Ka'an consciously participates in the intermixing of Mayan and Western cultural practices, and instantiates what Homi Bhaba calls "the syncretic, adaptive politics and culture of hybridity" (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 48).

These negotiations and mediations of hybridity occur in the economic landscape of the Yucatán, and represent an emerging "politics of economic possibility" (Gibson-Graham 2006, xix). Even so, the *escuela*'s initiatives extend far beyond what we traditionally understand as economics. Their interventions are rooted in Mayan cultural difference (e.g. the idiosyncratic features of their cultural identity and cosmovision). U Yits Ka'an's efforts speak to the existence of a politics of diverse cultural possibilities.

In particular, their attempts to forge new ways of living a good life, of *buen vivir*, contests the accepted terms and norms put forth by developmentalist thought grounded in Western capitalist modernity. In so doing, U Yits Ka'an participates in

the articulation of “alternative developments”, projects that contest the “terms of development” but that do not challenge the logic that underlies it (Escobar 2008, 198). As we will see though, some aspects of their work also envision “alternative modernities” that actively contest the cultural premises that underlie traditional development discourse: ideas of progress and modernity (198).

U Yits Ka’an as Post-Development

The *Escuela de Agricultura Ecológica U Yits Ka’an*⁶⁹ or the School of Agroecology is part of a network of *escuelas campesinas* or farmer schools located in the Yucatán Peninsula. *Escuelas campesinas* have existed in Mexico since the early 1900s as government centers for the re-education of indigenous people according to the mainstream literacy models promoted by developmentalism,⁷⁰ but in the 1980s, independent *escuelas campesinas* began to emerge (García et al. 2007). Although exact numbers are unavailable, at least 50 networks of *escuelas campesinas* exist throughout Mexico today (García et al. 2007). In recent years, a gathering (or “encuentro”) of the networks has emerged, as the broader movement of *escuelas campesinas* in Mexico outlines common struggles and perspectives, and works towards common goals (García et al. 2007).

In 1992, a group of Catholic priests from the Archdiocese of Yucatán “immersed in the Theology of Liberation” movement started the original school in the U Yits Ka’an network in the *pueblo* of Maní (Escuela de Agricultura Ecológica U Yits Ka’an, 2014).⁷¹ These priests had experience working in various communities

69 Translation: School of Ecological Agriculture U Yits Ka’an. U Yits Ka’an in Maya translates to the “Sap/Dew of the Heavens”.

70 A large body of Mexican anthropological literature focuses on this problematic legacy.

71 Liberation Theology as a movement emerged in the late 1960s as Latin American Catholic bishops reflected on systemic inequalities, injustices, and oppressions in their respective parishes and countries. They argue for the “establishing” of the “relationship between human emancipation (in social, political, and economic contexts) and the kingdom of God” in practical terms. Peruvian Bishop

around the Peninsula and had observed similar conditions in each of their respective parishes: extensive poverty, hunger and malnutrition, and ecological destruction. Collectively, they came to the conclusion that something needed to be done to address these issues, as the state and the development apparatus's prescriptions failed to adequately tackle them or implement programs that improved *campesino* lives.

Grassroots initiatives, which emerge from such perceived failures of development, are a common feature in the post-development movement.⁷² The rapidly growing movement of *escuelas campesinas* is indicative of a gradual disillusionment with the promised prosperity of Western models of progress, technology, and knowledge, particularly with regards to industrial agriculture and its techniques (e.g. monocropping, and pesticide and fertilizer applications). The post-development era imagines a world in which development discourse is no longer the “central organizing principle of social life” (Escobar 2008, 171).

One critical element in this embrace of post-development is the shift “from education to learning” (Esteva et al. 2013, 104). In this paradigm, activists challenge the monopoly on knowledge-making and mainstream literacy that the dominant developmentalist educational apparatus has held. In turn, they advocate for “autonomous and liberated learning...at the margins, against, and beyond the system [of capitalist modernity]” (105). This learning is actuated through “centers for the production of knowledge outside public and private research centers and conventional institutions” (105). It calls for a pedagogy and curriculum that emerges out of, and is

Gustavo Gutierrez published a book entitled *The Theology of Liberation*, which outlined the theory and ideology of the movement (Williams 2014). During a speech at U Yits Ka'an, I heard one of his most famous quotes: “Poverty is not a misfortune, it is an injustice”.

⁷² For example, a failure of development that activists point out (and argue to be addressing) is staggering global economic and societal inequality that exists despite increased economic productivity (as measured by gross domestic product or GDP).

embedded within, “culture”, not an education that relies on apparently universal norms (Esteva 1992, 18).⁷³ It involves the development of “new technologies” and introduces “new methodologies” that interact with and “challenge the dominant paradigms” (Esteva et al. 2013, 105).

The *escuela*'s growth and transformation over the past 22 years has focused around these goals. The school itself has expanded from Maní to include five other *subsedes* or “sub-locations”. At each of these locations, six-month courses that meet on a weekly basis are offered. These courses cover three general areas of study: “agroforestry” (e.g., ecology, soils, and horticultural practices) “agropecuary” (e.g., beekeeping, and the sustainable management of various types of livestock), and “human-social” aspects (e.g., Mayan traditional medicine, history and legends, health, sexuality and gender studies, and direction and creation of rural development programs) (Vallado et al. 2005, 96). Educators stress how these areas overlap to constitute an interconnected, holistic unit of study throughout the actual instruction in courses; one element without the other leaves knowledge incomplete.

Regular courses are administered alongside other workshops and activities open to the general public. These workshops are geared towards the dissemination of specific agro-ecological practices such as beekeeping or compost production. As part of a larger effort to actualize and demonstrate techniques on a larger scale, U Yits Ka'an recently opened two commercial-scale, organic farms in the Yucatán Peninsula, entirely staffed by their students and alumni; all proceeds from the farms go towards sustaining the expansion and continued function of the *escuela* (Escuela de Agricultura Ecológica 2014). U Yits Ka'an is also in the process of establishing a

⁷³ Mexico's history is littered with countless, failed state-sponsored attempts to promote the

new program entitled “Selling as Brothers”, which has broad objectives of establishing an internal “fair trade” network and supply chain for alumni and associated organic producers in the Yucatán. Their intention is to link this supply chain up with larger population centers in Mérida (Escuela de Agricultura Ecológica 2014).

The school is administered by a directive council made up of representatives from the original founding group of priests, professors involved with the school from various universities around the Yucatán (such as UADY and la Universidad Autonomá Chapingo), chefs, and alumni. This council operates via consensus, with a few subordinate executive councils administrating specific locations (Vallado et al 2005, 93-96). Through these efforts, students’ active participation and engagement with the structure, methodology, and curriculum of the school is emphasized. As such, the exact form of the school is dynamic and has constantly changed over time, but the school remains committed to several objectives.

This subversion of the traditional educational apparatus and paradigm is fundamentally hybrid in nature as it is centers around “juxtaposing and combining learned knowledge with local memory, erudite with empirical knowledge” (106). In the case of U Yits Ka’an, indigenous Mayan techniques central to the *milpa* cosmovision (for example, their traditional production system and local grammar of the environment) are brought into conversation with techniques integral to Western sustainable agro-ecology and other non-Western systems.⁷⁴ The interweaving and

“incorporation and integration” of indigenous into the “civilizing process” of Mexico through “education” and forced adoption of the Spanish language (Vallado et al. 2005, 92).

⁷⁴ It is important to emphasize the caveat that both these systems, even before they come into conversation, are hybrids themselves: the resultant products of their environmental, economic, social, political and ecological conditions, and their encounters with other cultures. As “local models”, they are constantly in flux.

intermixing of models in this hybrid encounter challenges the singularity of the traditional modern paradigm; one that is dependent on clear-cut distinctions between established systems of knowledge. This hybridity has the potential to unsettle Western capitalist modernity, as it questions the traditional “terms” and homogenous logic of development, allowing for the articulation of alternative modernities. These modernities arise in response to particular needs and circumstances within Mayan communities rather than according to universal assumptions (Escobar 2008, 179). The expression and formation of alternative modernities is a crucial element in the post-development ethos.

Within Latin America, the movement of *escuelas campesinas* can be read as part of a larger post-development move towards *buen vivir*. This term, which translates as “to live well” in Spanish, describes alternatives to and reimaginings of development that emerge from the historical and contemporary struggles of grassroots movements of “indigenous, peasant, ethnic, and other subaltern groups” in their contestation of traditional development discourses and proscriptions (Escobar 2008, 155; see also Gudynas 2011).

This contestation calls for a “reconstruction of local and regional worlds” around identities and ways of life that are fundamentally tied to notions of territory and culture (Escobar 2008, 155). These identities and ways of life, elements of the broader *cosmovisions* examined in the previous chapter, were previously invisibilized or disqualified by the development apparatus (Escobar 1995, 90-97). In an era of grassroots postmodernism, this “insurgence of indigenous forces and practices” has the capacity to “significantly disrupt prevalent political formations...by rendering

illegitimate (and, thus, denaturalizing) the exclusion of indigenous practices from nation-state institutions” (De la Cadena 2010, 336).

Activists and groups like U Yits Ka’an use *milpa* and other cosmovisions (in conversation with other systems) to negotiate with the forces of modernity and development (Escobar 1995, 13). This negotiation with such rationalities is part of U Yits Ka’an’s articulation of an “alternative development”. This approach contests the typical “terms of development,” in this case dependency on industrialized agricultural production and food systems, without undoing the need for development (Escobar 2008, 179). U Yits Ka’an’s work to promote Mayan food sovereignty in the Yucatán Peninsula is one of the main components in its alternative development.

Via Campesina or the International Peasant Movement describes food sovereignty as a community’s “right to define their own food and agriculture system policy” and “to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods” (Alkon and Meres 2012, 347).

Educators within U Yits Ka’an believe that increased food sovereignty is essential to ensuring adequate nutrition and better livelihoods in Mayan communities that have been historically plagued by hunger and poverty (Escuela de Agricultura U Yits Ka’an 2014). In ensuring their own control over food production, distribution, and consumption, they argue for the adoption of traditional production systems that make up the *milpa* cosmovision: *milpa* and *sembrados*.

A critical component in U Yits Ka’an’s program to ensure food sovereignty is revealed in its efforts to preserve indigenous or what are colloquially called *criollo*

varieties of plants and animals unique to the Yucatán.⁷⁵ These include, for example, *criollo* pigs⁷⁶, *melipone* bees⁷⁷, *maizes precoces*⁷⁸, and other heirloom varieties of crops. The preservation of these “landrace varieties” is not pursued as a means of solely “preserving seeds or improving diversity,” as it motivates efforts to preserve biodiversity by sustainable agricultural initiatives in the States and Europe (Escobar 2008, 152). It is orchestrated with a “complex system in mind that links seeds [and specific animal varieties], food needs, ecological and human requirements (e.g. labor, gender), the market, and a host of cultural aspects from culinary considerations and the shape and color of landrace materials to ritual” (152). These “practices are guided more by pragmatic concerns than by the desire to come up with the “best” or “high-yielding varieties” (152); they provide for the resilience, adaptability, and longevity of Mayan communities.

A Typical Class

When Eva heard about my interest in learning more about the *milpa* and formally studying it, she immediately suggested that I attend U Yits Ka’an with her.

75 The use of the term *criollo* here is particularly interesting. It has various translations in Spanish. It primarily refers to creoles, people of Spanish and European descent who were born in the colonies and who occupied a high position in the hierarchy of the colonial caste system (Halperín Donghi 1993, 49). In a seeming paradox, it also can mean “local” and “vernacular” (“WordReference.com”). In my eyes, disjuncture in meaning is suggestive of an inherent hybridity in the origin of said varieties. For example, a species of citrus, say the lemon, which originated in the Old World, but was brought to the New World, and was changed in the process; a plant that was altered by indigenous *campesinos*, and in doing so, was claimed and made *their own*.

76 A variety of pig called the *pelon* brought to the Yucatán Peninsula by the Spanish conquistadores. They are omnivorous and good, so they are readily suited to meat production for those *campesinos* with limited resources to purchase feed. The *pelon* is internationally recognized as in danger of extinction, but recently within the past 20 years, there have emerged a diversity of efforts to re-establish them (Sierra Vásquez et al. 2005).

77 *Melipone* bees are a stingless variety of bee. They are native to Central and South America, and were worshipped and bred by the Mayans long before the arrival of the Spanish. They produce significantly less honey than most typical varieties of honey bees (African hybrids), but their honey is revered for its touted medicinal qualities and potency. They are in danger of extinction as they face competition against imported African varieties (Villanueva et al. 2005)

78 *Maizes precoces* are varieties of corn that have a shorter time-to-harvest than traditional varieties. Because of this shortened time-to-harvest, they play an important dietary role as they fill in the gaps when normal foodstuffs (e.g. corn) would not otherwise be ready; in turn, growing them also confers an economic advantage as other producers do not yet have normal harvested maize on the market (Rafael Ortega 2003).

She had been attending classes at the school's location in Valladolid for a few weeks already. When I listened to her describe the mission and objectives of the school, I was immediately enthralled. U Yits Ka'an intrigued me as a grassroots effort by *campesinos* to educate other *campesinos* collectively. Coming from my anthropology courses at Wesleyan and experience in anarchist circles in the United States,⁷⁹ it appealed to me as a form of an alternative, bottom up pedagogy: one emerging from the grassroots as a response to indigenous re-education efforts and economic initiatives ran by the Mexican state to get *campesinos* (often forcefully) to grow non-indigenous, cash crops, train in Western agronomical sciences, and to abandon antiquated practices like the growing of *milpa*.

I had the chance to hear Gustavo Esteva deliver a lecture at Wesleyan during the Spring of 2012 in which he highlighted the movement of *escuelas campesinas* in México as an example of grassroots postmodernism. Even before I came to the Yucatán, I was captivated by the idea. At the UADY, I had several anthropology professors who mentioned emerging studies about *escuelas campesinas*.⁸⁰ I was especially eager to hear about Mayan farming practices from the *campesinos* themselves, rather than understanding them solely through Eva's categorization of some practices as beneficial, efficient, and logical, and in turn, others as illogical, inefficient, and even foolish.⁸¹ I was interested in hearing how *campesinos* would talk about sustainable farming and agricultural systems elsewhere

79 For example, from my experience at Occupy Wall Street demonstrations in New York City, I was exposed to ideas of grassroots forms of non-hierarchical knowledge-sharing(e.g. skill shares).

80 For example, my professor in a course on Neo-Evolutionalism and Cultural Ecology, Esteban Krotz had referenced several of his articles on changing paradigms in education and anthropology within Mexico.

81 These were categories that I also used.

Every Saturday, Eva and I (along with around 15 other students) set aside a day of farm work to go to classes.⁸² We would wake up around 5:15, before the first light of dawn, and would perform our morning chores half-asleep. Driving into Yalcobá on the dusty unpaved roads that wove themselves in the town, we would pick up a teenage student, Jesus, dressed in his finest clothes with his slicked back, gelled hair, and would later stop in another village along the way to pick up two other *campesinos*. We liked to jokingly call ourselves the Lodgecol taxi service, but the truth of the matter is, without Eva's offer of driving them, the *campesinos* who shared our ride would probably not be able to afford the fare required to take public transportation into Valladolid. Many students could barely afford to cover the suggested *escuela* tuition fee (around 30 pesos a day or \$2.50) that they paid as a group each week.⁸³

The school is located in a strange part of the city, nestled in what seems like the outskirts. You have to pass by one of Valladolid's largest and most ornate cathedrals, drive over a hill (a rare and significant feature for the exceedingly flat Yucatán), and over a set of rusted train tracks to get to the school. Other houses and small plots surround the school. U Yits Ka'an is unofficially housed in the facilities of an abandoned boarding school. From the outside, it looks like a concrete building long past its prime and quickly fading. Paint peels from the walls and several windowpanes are broken or completely shattered. Sections of the walls around the

82 Setting aside a whole day of labor to attend classes is a considerable sacrifice for most *campesinos*, and farmers in general, regardless of one's wealth. Eva's husband Simon, often the cynic, pointed out several times how this was such a big expenditure for the *campesinos*, and how in his opinion, it was a clear waste of their time.

83 This tuition fee went towards paying for food (if we were eating lunch as a group that day) and for covering our instructor's transportation and overnight lodging fees to get to Valladolid to teach. The class came to a consensus on how to compensate him before I arrived: for example, how to account for individuals who could not afford the fee, or who had to take expensive public transportation to get

complex look as if they might crumble at any moment. Plants and large trees surround the building; in particular, a *ceiba* tree, the sacred world tree in Mayan mythology, towers over the outer courtyard, casting its shade on the premises. Beneath the *ceiba* tree is a small, unassuming altar, occasionally adorned with the green Mayan cross and burnt offerings of copal incense.

The inside of the school contains a labyrinth of rooms that ring around an outer courtyard. The courtyard is full of trees and larger plants (most of them medicinal) all with wooden placards designating their name in Maya, and occasionally, Spanish. Beyond the courtyard is a small, fenced-in area: a sort-of experimental garden where students plant small-scale versions of *milpa* and tend fresh rows of greens and vegetables, kept for educational purposes (as well as to supplement lunches).

Our classes were held in what was the former cafeteria of the boarding school. There was a long central table in the room, facing a chalkboard at one end. We sat around the table in old school desks and chairs. We were about 20 students in all, around a quarter of whom were female. The crowd was mostly middle-aged, with some notable exceptions: three, little old women who spent two hours each Saturday morning taking a taxi from their small pueblo nearby Chichen Itza to Valladolid to attend classes. Jesus, another young *campesino* in his early twenties, and I were the youngest. Eva, Jesus, and I were an especially odd group. A loud and independent *chilanga*,⁸⁴ a quiet and stoic teenage boy with glistening hair and jeans, and a bearded gringo with wild hair from Gringolandia. Our teacher, Emanuel, stood at the front near the chalkboard and lectured us each week. The whole atmosphere of the school

there. U Yits Ka'an paid our teacher, Emmanuel, a stipend as well, but not a significant salary in any way.

was very informal. Although classes technically would start at 8 or 9 am, people would regularly arrive 30 or 45 minutes late.

The first time I attended class, I sat awkwardly and quietly in my chair, as Eva introduced me to several of her friends. They smiled and enthusiastically shook my hand, but were clearly confused. I was a strange sight, one of only a few *gringos* they had ever seen at the school. I tried to chat with Jesus, but he stuck to the usual one-word answers, returning to tapping away at his cellphone games. After a while, Emmanuel called the room to silence. The group continued to murmur on and he pleaded again for silence. He began by introducing the topic of that day's class: problems with crops (insects, molds, and other diseases) and how to treat them naturally. Before launching into the lecture, we discussed logistical details. Emmanuel mentioned upcoming field trips, which the class would take to a Mayan medicinal plant garden and a model farm with irrigation. Eva, recently elected the group treasurer, discussed the group's finances and expenses. She casually reminded those who had not paid their tuition for the past weeks to come see her after class.⁸⁵ The group needed to collect money in order to compensate Emmanuel for his travels, and to pay for the limited electricity, gas, and water needed to maintain this location of the school. Eva considered this transparency and collective managing of the finances an essential element of the experience of the school itself: a demonstration of how individuals can collectively organize and address issues that are of common and local interest, without being subordinated to higher authorities.

84 A colloquial term that describes someone from Mexico City.

85 Eva would often cover for participants out of her own pockets. She would work out specific payment schedules for those who could not pay for whatever reason, but intended to later. For certain individuals, for example the three women who travelled from afar, she waived the entire fee completely. For others, she would allow them to bring fruits and vegetables to make lunch with as compensation. Like all the other students, I paid this fee, and donated some of my money to the school upon leaving.

Once finances were cleared up, we proceeded to the lesson. Emmanuel started by talking about the sources of different types of plant diseases and plagues. He showed the class how certain conditions brought about each disease. For example, how over-humidity and poor drainage could cause mold to accumulate on plants and rot fruits, especially in the wet season. The lesson was like a chapter I would read out of an organic farming book available to me in the United States, except Emmanuel had a way of portraying it in a very coherent, succinct, and understandable way. You could tell by tracing the gazes around the room that he commanded a great deal of respect from his students. He subtly blended terms and ideas from Western agro-ecology (e.g. basic principles of plant genetics and heredity) with Mayan notions and practices important and familiar to *campesinos*.

Emmanuel then elucidated several remedies for treating these diseases. He shifted to the chalkboard and wrote down the names of some medicinal plants and asked the class to shout out their properties. Throughout the lecture, discussions broke out among students about particular plants. *Really, that would work? Wow!* When our teacher asked the class if there were any questions about specific remedies, many hands were raised. Questions went on for minutes and seemed like carefully planned dissertations on the subject matter: people discussed plant remedies and rituals practiced by their ancestors for generations, which they had learned from their parents and grandparents.

It was especially interesting for me to see Emmanuel list very traditional Mayan plants, alongside plants sourced globally that are used as pesticides. For example, he highlighted the effects of using the mahogany tree, or what is known as *cedro* or *kuyche* (respectively, in Spanish and Maya) indigenous to the Yucatán, in

treating specific types of bacterial infections (identified in both Maya and Western taxonomical delineations) (Jardín Botánico Los Gajos 2014). At the same time, he also directed us in preparing a concoction derived from the naturally insecticidal and fungicidal leaves of the Neem tree, a plant native to India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.⁸⁶

There was a consistent emphasis on plants and remedies, both local and from elsewhere, that would be cheap and accessible to all *campesinos*. For example, the main remedy we focused on in class was a garlic-based fungicidal. This concoction was prepared by fermenting garlic and onion cloves over a period of a few weeks; Emmanuel suggested that we administer the solution by using spray bottles that had once contained synthetic insecticides. As a class, we mixed and processed the remedy, everybody intently observing and commenting on how rancid the solution smelled. One of my classmates, a former agronomy engineer who worked with industrial growers in the Peninsula, commented on how amazing it was that he could produce and apply non-toxic remedies, without having to worry about poisoning himself like he normally did with industrial remedies.

After three hours or so, class slowly came to a halt. Groups of students congregated and we trailed outside to check on the plantings the class made a few weeks back. People seemed more comfortable with me now and started to ask me about my background. They seemed genuinely confused, yet intrigued by my interest in *milpa* and agriculture. I weeded some of the rows of greens while some of my

⁸⁶ In recent years, a U.S.-based chemical conglomerate W. R. Grace and Company filed a patent for an anti-fungal product derived from Neem. The Indian Government and many global environmental groups challenged W. R. Grace's claim to the patent, as they argued their methods were based on methods and traditions 2,000 years old. As of 2005, W. R. Grace's patent was revoked, but this is illustrative of emergent discussion surrounding bio-piracy and patent rights. In the Yucatán, I encountered similar anxieties about the patenting of their traditional crops multinationals for profit (Neem Foundation 2014).

classmates harvested Neem branches from a nearby tree to make their own home remedies. My classmates slowly dispersed, and our taxi loaded up to leave the city.

Alternative Pedagogies

This first impression of class at U Yits Ka'an was indicative of the pedagogy of the school grew out of Paolo Freire's ideas, specifically those expounded in his seminal work *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Vallado et al. 2005). The distinction between student and teacher as it exists in the normal classroom setting is complicated in U Yits Ka'an's courses. As I witnessed, students were encouraged to share knowledges specific to their experiences and to question and challenge the teacher and his knowledge. In turn, Emmanuel himself would often provoke and test students' knowledge. In this way, students and the teacher were expected to actively "learn from each other and help each other learn" (Freire 1974, 59). In addition, the *escuela's* promotion of various aspects of the Mayan *cosmovision* can be seen as posing a threat to traditional conceptions of what types of information can be classified as *knowledge*, and in turn, to what degree this knowledge has practical benefits.⁸⁷ By having Mayan *campesinos* teach and organize courses communally with their peers, the school challenges implicit racist dynamics embedded in the traditional and historical hierarchy of knowledge-production in the Yucatán and other parts of Mexico.⁸⁸

Another element of Freirian influence on the pedagogy of U Yits Ka'an is seen in the school's emphasis on education as a "process of learning" (Vallado et al. 2005, 92). As a part of such a process, a *campesino's* education at the school consists

⁸⁷ For example, some of the religious and spiritual doctrines they teach would be looked at as ridiculous, logically unsound, and ultimately, unfit for instruction in more traditional classroom settings.

of provoking an understanding of an active, changing reality (92). Learning is more than merely obtaining literacy or an education measured through accumulated class time and exam scores. It is a continual activity, one that emerges outside the classroom, as much as in it, in one's engagement with society. Learning is realized through making *milpa*, testing out and exchanging different seed varieties and knowledges, experimenting with new planting techniques, observing and learning from one's failures and missteps (Esteva et al. 2013, 105-106).

Freire's ideas, among others, about the distinction between education and learning and what counts as transformative knowledge, have been critical to the post-development ethos that underlies the *escuela* movement. U Yits Ka'an's pedagogy are indicative of this emphasis on learning. For example, although the *escuela* focuses on familiarizing students with a particular curriculum of sustainability and ecology, it is much more "than a traditional educational center" (Vallado et al. 2005, 92); its ultimate goal is to cultivate a certain type of subjectivity in its students and staff. This cultivation is seen as essential as the school works to actively resist "neoliberal policies" and notions in modernity "that seek to create [certain kinds of] individuals" (92). Although I never encountered a statement whereby U Yits Ka'an explicitly identified the traits of these individuals, their work and valorization of particular qualities (for example, community and interdependence) implied what they were working against: self-interested and self-actualizing autonomous individuals who conceived of themselves as outside the influence of their respective communities; individuals who rejected the interdependent nature of humans, animals, and the

88 For example, in my experience at UADY and in discussion with peers at other universities, it seems like there are fewer indigenous professors and teachers in both pre and post-secondary schooling.

earth's elements, and in doing so, facilitated the exploitation of limited and fragile ecological resources.

To counter these neoliberal values, U Yits Ka'an attempts to re-form *campesinos* and cultivate in them collective and critical subjectivities. Participation in learning at the *escuela* is oriented so as to bring about *campesinos* "becoming ethical communal subjects," grounded in a local cosmology and selective borrowing from other traditions (Gibson-Graham 2006, 125).⁸⁹ For U Yits Ka'an, this embrace of a communal ethos arises out of insights from the Maya *cosmovision* and hybrid blend of Christianity and Mayan religion: what the *escuela* calls its "ecothology" (Escuela de Agricultura Ecológica 2014).⁹⁰

The Moon Ritual

I encountered ecothology first-hand one particular Saturday afternoon at U Yits Ka'an. It was the full moon, a particularly important day in the traditional Mayan cosmology.⁹¹ We took a break from our normal instructions to attend a service in honor of the full moon with a visiting group from a radical Catholic church. Eva told me that they were visiting to study how the *escuela campesinas* connected with spiritual practices. We walked to the front of the *escuela* beneath the great shade of the *ceiba* tree, and gathered in a circle around the small wooden altar that bore a green Mayan cross, adorned with garlands of wildflowers.

A man dressed in all white, from the church group, cleared his throat and spoke.

89 In their book *A Postcapitalist Politics*, Gibson-Graham show how the idea that education as a process can work to cultivate and change an individual's subjectivity, stems from Robert Owen's ideas around collectivism (Gibson-Graham 2006, 125).

90 A term discussed and unpacked in my conclusion.

91 U Yits Ka'an produces and sells an annual planting calendar *Tzolkin* that lists planting and harvests dates in accordance with the lunar calendar. It is interspersed with quotes from famous Mayan texts

Welcome, brothers and sisters.

The crowd responded: *Welcome, padre.*

The *padre*⁹² opened the service by lighting a bowl of *copal* resin. The bluish grey smoke slowly rose from the bowl and he waved it over the crowd, fanning it towards each member of the circle, as he returned it to the altar to offer up as sacrament. He spoke in a mixture of Mayan and Spanish, and from what I could gather from Jesus, who translated bits for me, the *padre* recited some usual Catholic liturgies, like the *Hail Mary*.⁹³ Interspersed between these psalms and prayers, the *padre* celebrated the grandeur and power of “Él Padre-Madre Dios”, the Father-Mother God: his-her reign over la Madre Tierra (“Mother Earth”), over the planting, over the moon (“La Luna”), and over the Mayan peoples. He read a section from one of U Yits Ka’an’s publications such as Tzolkín, an annual planting calendar interspersed with quotes from Mayan texts, famous liberation theologians, and radical social and ecological thinkers.]He encouraged those present to continue on the path to honoring “Él Padre-Madre Dios” by loving the earth, by following ecologically-sound planting techniques, by making *milpa* and honoring ancestral traditions, and by recognizing one’s connection to all and to the Divine.

The service ended and members of the circle were invited to share how the moon was worshipped and honored in their respective communities. People talked about plantings of particular crops, rituals practiced in accordance with the moon’s cycles, naming rituals of children, etc. Almost every *campesino* eloquently

and liberation theologians. It is available online at the following link:

http://www.uyitskaan.org/?page_id=380 (Escuela de Agricultura Ecológica 2014)

⁹² The *padre*, Atilano Ceballos, was one of the founders of U Yits Ka’an. He is a Catholic priest who was heavily involved in the Liberation Theology movement in Latin America.

⁹³ This was the first Catholic service I had ever attended, so to say the least, I was quite confused and lost.

expounded upon how their particular pueblo honored *La Luna*. When it came my turn to speak, and the crowd turned to me, all I could say was:

Although my culture once honored the moon, we mostly ignore it now.

My response seemed to catch the crowd off guard, but before they had time to react, another speaker began talking. After we finished going round the circle, the Padre led us in a closing liturgy and prayer. Eva briefly introduced me to him, and we shook hands before he and his group took off.

When I had a chance later in the day, I asked Eva about the padre and the other church leaders. She said that they were all still very active in running the school as administrators. Many of them ministered and openly embraced the syncretism between Catholic teachings and the Mayan *cosmovision* to form what U Yits Ka'an calls an "ecotheology" (Escuela de Agricultura Ecológica 2014). In many ways, this ecotheology lays the basis for the post-development counterwork that the school engages in. It was a form of what Marisa De La Cadena calls "cosmopolitics" (De La Cadena 2010). This "cosmopolitics" conceives of "nonhuman" spiritual forces, entities, and beliefs (elements of the cosmos) as having agency in not only the spiritual realm, but also the "political arena" and beyond (364). This politics is a common feature of *buen vivir* movements throughout Latin America, and informs how indigenous groups draw upon their own *cosmovisions* to negotiate with modernity towards broader political, economic, cultural, and social ends (De La Cadena 2010).

In the case of U Yits Ka'an, activists see the Maya *cosmovision*, and its syncretic and hybrid engagement with Christianity, as the fundamental element that orients how the school and its adherents should proceed and interrogate modernity.

This ecotheology is among the main inspiration and guiding principle behind U Yits Ka'an's mediation and interrogation of *buen vivir* in Mayan communities.

Conclusion: An Emerging Resistance

Using the framework put forth in Arturo Escobar's book *Territories of Difference*, we can divide U Yits Ka'an's engagement with *buen vivir* into two broad categories: gestures at alternative development and alternative modernities.

Escobar uses the example of an agricultural grower's cooperative, Conagropacífico, in Colombia to examine how an alternative development initiative may function. He writes that although this program is "informed by idioms of progress and rational decision making," it actively works to combat "control by experts and sociocultural elites"(Escobar 2008, 179). In a similar manner, U Yits Ka'an's educational and agricultural initiatives are oriented so as to challenge outside influence.

The main way the *escuela* works to achieve this is by striving to become a center for "indigenous, peasant cultural resistance" (Vallado et al. 2005, 92). The type of resistance that U Yits Ka'an envisions does not only evoke and draw from the "past as an inspirational element [and structuring principle]," but also necessitates active efforts at renew and renovating a hybrid Mayan cosmivision that arises out of interactions with other paradigms, models, and experiences (92). In order to actualize this counterwork, the *escuela* works to form *campesinos* as "agents of change in their communities" (92), which is very much in line with notions of Freirian collective action and reflection or "conscientization" (Freire 1974). As I showed above, U Yits Ka'an's pedagogical efforts aim to cultivate in its students a knowledge and "impulse to actualize autogestive [self-managed] programs of sustainable, community-based

rural development” (Vallado et al. 2005, 92). This intention to foment such a subjectivity, one that advocates for a particular type of development, lays the basis for U Yits Ka’an’s articulation of “alternative development”: one that contests the typical terms of development, and in this case, a dependency on top-down planning initiatives, and industrialized agricultural production, but that does not call into question the cultural premises that underlie developmentalist thinking: ideas of teleological progress and the binary between tradition and modernity (Escobar 2008, 179).

Simultaneously, U Yits Ka’an engages in work with more radical aims focused around fostering an alternative modernity. In his book, Escobar examines a grassroots literacy initiative, *Gente Entintada y Parlante*, to show how such a project may manifest. His analysis reveals how alternative modernities, in contrast to alternative development projects, challenge traditional Western visions of culture and development (184).

U Yits Ka’an works towards these objects as it cultivates in its students a “reevaluation of tradition, cultural customs, and ethics” (Vallado et al. 2005, 92). This reevaluation, in itself an active conversation and engagement with Mayan cultural identity, is at the basis of their efforts to regenerate and support the Mayan community (92; Escuela de Agricultura Ecológica 2014).⁹⁴ This renovation of cultural identity and difference, arises out of an embrace of the Mayan (the *milpa*) cosmovision, and lays the basis for the *escuela*’s articulation of alternative modernities. This valorization of Mayan culture is the foundation on which U Yits Ka’an challenges the underlying cultural premises that underlie development

discourse and notions of modernity. As they resist these premises, these initiatives in turn articulate alternative modernities grounded in insights specific to the Mayan experience of “existing cultural difference and place-based” knowledge (Escobar 2008, 179-184).

Although this cultural project of regeneration, of defining an alternative modernity, and the school’s work to foster an alternative development may seem to be “partially conflicting” in their aims and means—as they vary with regards to the extent that they challenge development and modernity’s underlying preimises—they are also “potentially complementary” (198). As Escobar writes, “one may lead to creating conditions for the others”, and they may in turn work towards common ends (198). Activists, in this case U Yits Ka’an, must hold in tension the particular characteristics of these different projects in order to formulate effective post-development strategies (198): doing so may be critical for their survival.

U Yits Ka’an’s most recent statement, their 2014 “Call”, suggest that that the articulation of these post-development projects is especially important and necessary as the Yucatán is increasingly confronted with the real threat of an emerging and present ecological crisis (Escuela de Agricultura Ecológica 2014).⁹⁵ The author of this statement, Atilano A. Ceballos Loeza (the *padre*), writes:

From the humble experiences [and insights derived from our time at] U Yits Ka’an, we call on all [elements of] society in this regional peninsula to cultivate in every family the *Buen Vivir*, which does not consist of having lots of money, but rather [consists of] living in peace and harmony with ourselves and our environment (Escuela de Agricultura Ecológica 2014)

94 I adapted this quote from a grammatically incorrect English translation and my own translation work. To say enough, what is conveyed in Spanish does not easily translate into the constraints and idioms of the English language and my ability to translate.

95 In many ways itself, a situation that is a byproduct of and is exacerbated by “failures of development” and the logic underlying Western capitalist modernity: the pursuit of endless growth and progress with a complete disregard of social and environmental repercussions (Escuela de Agricultura Ecológica 2014).

U Yits Ka'an's educational work and broader efforts to regenerate Mayan culture and society, its work around alternative development and alternative modernities, is an exercise in forging a *buen vivir*. Returning to the quote that opened this chapter, we have seen how U Yits Ka'an's efforts arise out of their own particular truths and perceptions of the world, their *cosmovision*. Emerging from "the ruins left by modernity" and neoliberal policies in the Yucatán, the *escuela* is part of a global movement of grassroots postmodernism that is "redefining what living well" means in "local, rooted terms" (Esteva et al. 2013, 100-101). This redefinition of *buen vivir* guides U Yits Ka'an in its navigation of post-development: it orients their curriculum, pedagogy, objectives, and philosophy. Their history and accomplishments show us how indigenous groups, rather than disappearing in the wake of modernity, can come to evolve and negotiate consciously with the world around them.

Epilogue

“We are the community of memory and hope, we are the people of Mother-Father God, we are the brothers and sisters in communion with life, we will honor all those beings which allow for the harmony between the world and the universe. We are the grandmothers and grandfathers, the umbilical cord that feeds the present, preserves the past, and maintains faith in the Heart of Heaven and the Earth. This is something we have forgotten, and thus we must work to call all women and men, girls and boys, and young people to continue honoring the memory, through our new Altar, that which is the reflection of Mother Earth and the lives of Mayan people” (Escuela de Agricultura Ecológica 2014).

The quote below, taken from U Yits Ka’an’s webpage on “Indian Theology”, describes the general thrust of their ecotheology. The new “Altar” referenced above is the cosmovision of the Mayan people: the *milpa* cosmovision. The act of planting and maintaining *milpa* itself is a way of connecting the present to the past and the future (Bartra 2010). It is the way by which the “Altar” is worshipped.

The renovation of Mayan society and culture, the radical renewal of their world and their assertion of *buen vivir*, necessitates the adoption and promotion of this cosmovision. Without such a framework, a true and resilient regeneration of cultural identity, one that can actively resist and respond to neoliberal development, is not possible. Escobar alludes to this point in *Territories of Difference* when he discusses emerging criticisms around sustainable development. This paradigm argues for the embrace of an “ecological consciousness”: a consideration of ecological concerns and factors in development planning (Escobar 2008, 144). The adoption of such a framework can elicit positive and transformative effects. In U Yits Ka’an’s case, it may precipitate the implementation of agro-ecological practices and techniques. These strategies have the potential to improve the livelihood of marginalized peoples and provide for the maintenance of environmental conditions integral to a group’s survival.

Many critics argue, myself included, that this is not enough. As with alternative development, the sustainable development paradigm does not effectively root out the systemic sources and causes that explain how indigenous groups come to be marginalized in the first place. It does not address or promote groups' autonomous self-expression and right to decide *buen vivir* (144). In the eyes of many critics, this shortcoming stems from the fact that, ultimately, the sustainable development paradigm does not challenge the logic that underlies Western capitalism and development: ideas of progress and modernity.

Critics allege, for example, that in a sustainable development paradigm, indigenous practices and beliefs are often co-opted by the state and development apparatus as “experiments” (142). They are to be drawn from and built upon within a neoliberal capitalist framework, but are not permitted to exist independently outside this realm. Detractors argue that this amounts to a “green developmentalism” and “complex politics of cooptation...that leaves intact the underlying framework of economics and the market that is inimical” to nature and autonomous cultural expression itself (142-143). I take this position and believe that U Yits Ka'an, though it never openly states this, also acknowledges these limitations.

Activists at the *escuela* understand that the renewal and renovation of Mayan culture necessitates a broader embrace of cosmivision, of what Escobar calls “ecosophy”(144). This ecosophy links the “world/cosmos, humans, and the supernatural god” and has the potential to bring about a “cosmotheandric experience,” a “relinking of nature, humans, and the spiritual world” (144).⁹⁶ As a cosmivision, a

⁹⁶ Escobar also describes ecosophy as a frame that links the “biological, cultural, and the technological” (144). Although this listing of elements seems more politically correct and academic, I personally do not think it speaks to the full extent of U Yits Ka'ans's vision. They are for the linking of

way of understanding the world, *milpa* embraces this cosmotheandric experience, as it imagines a worldview of interconnections and interbeing. This worldview, a place-based subjectivity, challenges the underlying cultural premises of development and Western modernity (e.g. scientific rationalities that disavow the existence of spiritual entities, clear dichotomies and divisions between plants, animals, spirits, inanimate elements, etc.), and in turn, represents the basis of an “alternative modernity” (184).

As we have seen, U Yits Ka’an’s articulation of alternative modernities is not isolated from its work around forging a path of “alternative development” in the Yucatán Peninsula. Alternative development strategies (some that could be characterized as instances of sustainable development), such as the *escuela*’s initiatives around food sovereignty, contest the dominant development paradigm. At the same time, they rearticulate what development means locally and how it should be practiced to ensure livelihood and food autonomy for Mayans (Escobar 2008, 198). In turn, U Yits Ka’an’ articulates alternative modernities as it works with the *milpa* cosmovision as a means to “shelter economic, ecological, and cultural difference”, that “even in the midst of a globalizing modernity” continues to characterize the Mayan community (198).

In their preservation and regeneration of *milpa*, U Yits Ka’an is part of a wider movement of “grassroots postmodernism” (Esteva and Prakesh, 1998). In the “ruins left by modernity” (the failure of development and and the widespread ecological and economic crisis it predicated), U Yits Ka’n negotiates with the *milpa* cosmovision as a means of post-development. Its efforts are just one example of a global grassroots movement, a “radical pluralism” that has emerged around the

the said elements, but above all, this unity depends on a spiritual vision that I think is not captured by

recognition and celebration of a “thousand different truths”, “perceptions of the world” and “cosmic visions conceived of at the local level”(Esteva et al. 100-101). This pluralism asks us to engage with the diversity embodied in the world’s cultural difference but not to renounce our “own universe” and cultural groundings (Esteva and Prakesh 1998, 130).

U Yits Ka’an’s efforts are emblematic of this two-fold approach: negotiating with modernity and development, but through the lens of one’s own being. After embarking upon my research for this thesis, I believe that this is the best—and perhaps the only viable—approach to guide how marginalized groups can move forward in modernity. In my opinion, a strategy that solely involves a negotiation with modernity and development does not actually challenge the apparatus and structural inequalities that support it. Likewise, a mediation of the world through cultural identity and ways of life, without the above negotiation, may not practically pose a threat and realistic alternative to economic realities produced by the neoliberal capitalist order.

To survive necessitates that individuals and groups diversify their being, their means of resistance, and their ways of living. To regenerate culture means to allow for hybridity, conversation, and recombination with other models. To nurture a people requires an honest assessment of one’s particular circumstances and a celebration of *cosmovision*. U Yits Ka’an is but one example of how a marginalized group engages in these processes. In a similar way, my thesis is my own personal exploration of their efforts. Hopefully, it has shed some light on how these practices manifest.

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