

Introduction

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Somewhat by accident, Mikel Ruiz wrote the first Tsotsil novel. As a child he did not dream of becoming a writer, or think of himself as a promoter of his Indigenous heritage. Yet he has become a respected author and scholar, published in Mexico, Guatemala, Peru, and the United States, so far. His academic works explore how other Indigenous Chiapas writers like Nicolás Huet Bautista, Ruperta Bautista Vázquez, and Josías López Gómez bring a Maya perspective into their stories and poetry, something he does as well. Though all these writers explore the place of the Indigenous cosmovision in a changing world, Ruiz may go further than any other, so far, in confronting neocolonialism's invasion into Indigenous minds, an invasion that requires no actual human invaders to cause destruction. At the same time, Ruiz shows how this invasion can be aided by acts of Indigenous people themselves.

Ruiz perhaps narrowly escaped becoming an example of an Indigenous person who abandoned his heritage. As might befit a Western story of individualistic self-realization, he says that his father expected him, the first-born son, to take over the family business. His father sold cosmetics in various communities far

from Chicumtantic, where the family lived, and he owned pickup trucks and employed others in the project. Yet Ruiz had no interest in being one of his father's drivers or taking over the business someday, so at the age of sixteen he planned to join a group heading for the United States. A family friend was organizing the trip, and several friends and relatives were included. Mikel felt the sense of possibility. He had saved the required money and was ready to go, when his father told him the group was full. Frustrated and angry, Mikel decided if he would not join the great journey, he would at least take a smaller one. As some of his other friends were doing, Mikel took an exam for a preparatory school, and he passed. The school was in the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas's former colonial capital and current cultural center about fifty miles (eighty kilometers) from Chicumtantic. At the age of sixteen he left his family's house to live in the city, with no intention to return. He didn't tell his father.

Yet he still felt part of him was with his friends heading for the US. This sense, and the stories he heard later from those who returned, would inform his short story "En medio del desierto," published in 2011. Considering the horrific events in that tale, Ruiz might be pleased he was excluded, but his strong sense of connection to the idea leads him to call the story's narrator Mateo "mi otro yo" (my other I).¹ In this respect, it is curious that Mateo as narrator recalls telling his father, "Don't worry, I'll go far away to earn money, this place isn't any good, there's no good work, my studies don't get me work in the city, don't think about them . . . what for, better I go away, to see what I can do" ("In the Middle" 141).

Mikel's studies did get him something, though living on his own in the city was definitely a challenge. Three days after he left his village, his father came looking. He asked Mikel why he never told him he wanted to study. "En el medio de la calle, los dos lloramos," Mikel says—"In the middle of the street, we both

cried.” Eventually his father said, “Hazlo, pero sin mí”—“Do it, but without me.” Mikel felt destroyed, as if dead. They didn’t talk again for three years. By then, Mikel had graduated from the *preparatoria* and begun studying at the Autonomous University of Chiapas in Tuxtla–Gutiérrez.

His mother, on the other hand, supported him in all his decisions, “aunque de manera silenciosa, pues nunca se las platicué abiertamente”—“although silently, because I never discussed them openly.” When he left with his father that early morning, knowing he would not be returning with him, he told his mother about being accepted to the school, and she simply told him to take care of himself.

He still didn’t plan to write literature—in fact, he says he did not know what literature was, and had no particular interest in Indigenous literature. But he took a class with a Zoque professor (the Zoque are the largest non-Maya Indigenous population in Chiapas), and it lit a spark. The professor was working on a project examining how the 1982 eruption of the Chichón volcano in Zoque territory (northern Chiapas) affected people in the area. Since some Tsotsils also live in the region, he asked Mikel to conduct interviews, in Tsotsil, for class credit. This led Mikel back to his own heritage, as one Tsotsil person he knew from the area was his own great-grandfather on his mother’s side, a *curandero*. Regarding this relative, who died in 2019 at the believed age of 108, Ruiz says, “My great-grandfather always expressed his support for my activities, my travels, and he told me, the few times we spoke, that I had not traveled to such distant places without the company of his prayers, his spells, the shelter of the warmth of his words.” Thus Ruiz learned stories from the oral tradition of his own family, stories that he transcribed in Tsotsil and translated into Spanish.

As this project was finishing, two things happened that led Mikel toward becoming a writer. His professor told him about the Centro Estatal de Lenguas, Arte y Literatura Indígenas (CELALI,

State Center for Indigenous Languages, Art, and Literature) in San Cristóbal. This agency was offering courses in creative writing and publishing bilingual books. About the same time, a group of Indigenous poets visited the university, and Mikel was impressed to see them reciting their Indigenous language poetry. He talked with them afterward, and they also encouraged him to connect with CELALI. He did, and the story “Ta o’lol takin osil, En medio del desierto” (In the middle of the desert) from his courses with CELALI is included in the book *Ma’yuk sti’ilal xch’inch’unel k’inál / Silencio sin frontera* (2011), published in English as *Chiapas Maya Awakening: Contemporary Poems and Short Stories* (2017).

Like many university graduates, Mikel spent some time trying to determine his next course in life. He calls it a dramatic period. He had married in 2005, shortly after turning twenty, and was now going through a divorce. He returned to his community with a one-year cargo position, part of the traditional Indigenous governing system. His cargo involved the education of young children. This began in September of 2011, and in a bittersweet turn of events, Mikel’s father, with whom he had completely reconciled, died from complications of diabetes in November of that year. It was during this time that Mikel completed his first draft of *Ch’ayemal nich’nabiletik / Los hijos errantes*, helped by a grant from Fondo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (FONCA, National Fund for Culture and the Arts). As his cargo position was coming to an end in 2012, he would have no job, no father, no wife, and no new grant. He decided to pursue a master’s degree, and with a grant from Programa de Becas de Posgrado para Indígenas / Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología (Program of Grants for Indigenous Postgraduates / National Council of Science and Technology) to promote Indigenous scholars, he connected with the Austral University of Chile and Professor Claudia Rodríguez Monarca, who specializes in Mapuche culture and poetry. He would complete his master’s at this university.

He did not write about the Mapuche, but he studied South American scholars such as Antonio Cornejo Polar, Carlos García-Bedoya, and Boaventura de Sousa Santos, and their publications on Indigenous people in South America informed his interpretations of Indigenous people in Chiapas, like himself. For his thesis he examined ideas from such scholars, along with Chiapas scholars whom he knew personally, like Manuel Bolom Pale, Miguel Sánchez Álvarez, and José Antonio Reyes Matamoros, to explore how Indigenous literature can both follow and challenge literary conventions. He states, “El indígena problematiza su propio mundo desde su lugar de enunciación, desde su visión y experiencia, capaz de presentar su propia mirada interna, compleja e inaccesible para los escritores formados desde otra mirada y pensamiento” (*El Lekil kuxlejal* 20; The Indigenous problematize their own world from their place of enunciation, from their vision and experience, capable of presenting their own internal gaze, complex and inaccessible to writers trained from another perspective and thought). Ruiz then examines how Nicolás Huet Bautista does this in his 2001 story “La última muerte.” Huet’s characters are all Tsotsils, yet Ruiz explores conflicts between those who remain true to the traditional way of life and those who, perhaps unknowingly, embrace the ideals of the colonizers. To do this Ruiz examines the Tsotsil phrase *lekil kuxlejal*, which he translates to Spanish as *buen vivir*, more or less “good living,” though he emphasizes that it is more complex than those two simple words would suggest, and that understanding it, or even describing it, from outside the Tsotsil and Tzeltal language, “desde el otro lado de la línea” as he puts it (37; from the other side of the line), is particularly challenging. Yet he endeavors to explain it in Spanish. A key to *lekil kuxlejal* is an understanding of *ch’ulel*, a concept similar to, and sometimes translated as, “soul” or “spirit,” yet with specific notions that differ from Western notions of those concepts. For one, animals, plants, and some objects have *ch’ulel* in the Indigenous cosmovision, and humans must

realize and respect this—we must have “la capacidad de respetar la existencia de otros y de lo que rodea al sujeto. No basta saber que otros existen, sino que se necesita respetar su existencia” (47; the capacity to respect the existence of others and of that which surrounds the subject. It is not enough to know that others exist, rather it is necessary to respect their existence). Some of Huet’s characters fail in this regard, and therefore Ruiz would say they have lost their *ch’ulel*. This can happen, Ruiz explains, “por un mínimo error, una falta, . . . se pierde, y si no se hace nada para rescatarlo también se pierde el respeto o la vida” (45; through a small error, a lapse, . . . it is lost, and if one does nothing to recover it, one can also lose respect or life).

These same ideas inform Ruiz’s own fiction writing. Although he had completed a draft of *Los hijos errantes* before starting his master’s program, his studies of the *ch’ulel* in Huet’s story led him to emphasize it further as he revised his work, considering how his characters’ choices affected their identities. The idea of losing *ch’ulel* recurs frequently in *Los hijos errantes*—“¿dónde quedó tu *ch’ulel* que actúas así?” a mother asks her son at one point—“Where is your *ch’ulel*, that you act this way?” (104, this volume). Indeed, “Where is your *ch’ulel*” could be an apt title for the novel: What happens to one’s ontological status when they abandon the balance within the Indigenous way of living, the *lekil kuxlejal*, and succumb to the lure of voracious neocolonial materialism? How does this fragment the nucleus of family, community, and polis that had managed to persist among some Indigenous people? In Chile, studying international scholars, Ruiz became more intent on recalling the importance of *ch’ulel* in his own upbringing and education, and thus foregrounding it in his work.

He also sought to avoid idealizing the Indigenous. Though the characters are subject to corrupting influences from the world beyond, they make their own choices. As Alejandro Aldana Sellschopp says in his 2014 introduction:

Mikel logra formar personajes complejos, matizados, en su mundo no cabe el maniqueísmo, la visión del mestizo malvado y el indígena bueno, no le interesa, es más, la niega, establece una relación crítica con esa forma de entender la relación entre indígenas y mestizos. En Ignacio podemos observar una profunda confusión, un error constante, el hombre convertido en duda. (xxvi, this volume)

Mikel manages to form complete, nuanced characters; in his world Manicheism does not fit, the vision of the evil Mestizo and the good Indigenous does not interest him, moreover he denies it, thus establishing a critical understanding of relations among Indigenous and Mestizos. In Ignacio we may observe a profound confusion, always erring, the man converted into doubt. (xxxii, this volume)

This is the same kind of doubt that Indigenous Americans have faced since Europeans arrived and started calling them Indians—how much should they embrace this new culture that seems infinitely powerful, and how much should they seek to preserve the Indigenous traditions that have sustained them through the centuries? Ruiz's characters in *Los hijos errantes* generally fail to navigate these questions effectively. They embrace colonial influence, whether it be religion, alcohol, greed, or commodified lust, and in so doing damage themselves and others. Pedro Ton Tsepente' has a position in his village's traditional Indigenous council, but rather than just taking a few drinks of pox to lift his spirits as part of the ceremony, he becomes an alcoholic, subject to blackouts and delirium tremens. His wife Pascuala tries to solve this problem, not through any traditional healing, but by raging at her crucifix, asking God to step in and solve it for her. Their neighbor, seventeen-

year-old Ignacio, is learning about gender relations by watching television shows where the beautiful women are lighter skinned, and learning about sex by watching pornography. This leads to his making disastrous choices. Ruiz presents various and often unstable narrative perspectives to tell the stories of these characters who stray from *lekil kuxlejal*. One might posit that it would be better if they turned their back on the encroaching changes and embraced a wholly traditional life. But this is not possible. Even the Zapatistas, who firmly reject the neoliberal forces that would take away their land for whatever resource extraction might best satisfy capitalism's latest relentless urge, even they remain engaged with the outside world and open to changes, provided the changes align with their foundational ideals. Can Indigenous people engage with the world without being corrupted by it?

Mikel Ruiz himself engages with the world beyond his Indigenous community while remaining focused on the culture he knows. He currently lives in San Cristóbal, and in 2021 his second novel, *La ira de los murciélagos* (The wrath of the bats), was published. He has completed a third, and in September 2021 he became a member of the Sistema Nacional de Creadores de Arte de México, with a grant to write three more books. That year he also conducted the Jacinto Arias writing workshop, coordinated by Unidad de Escritores Maya-Zoque A.C. (UNEMAZ), to teach narrative fiction to young Tsotsil and Tseltal writers. This culminated in the November publication of the anthology *Sk'op bolom, Sk'op choj / Palabra de jaguar, Vol. II* (Word of the jaguar). Near the end of the year, Ruiz completed his PhD program at Centro de Estudios Superiores de México y Centroamérica (CESMECA). His doctoral thesis "Variaciones de la memoria autobiográfica en la narrativa de Josías López Gómez" (Variations in autobiographical memory in the narrative of Josías López Gómez) explores that Tseltal author's story collections *Sakubel k'in al jachwinik / La aurora lacandona* (2005, The Lacandon dawn), *Spisil katbuj / Todo cambió* (2008, Everything changed), and *Sbolilal k'in al / Lacra del tiempo* (2013,

Scourge of time), and his novel *Te'eltik ants / Mujer de la montaña* (2011, *Woman of the mountain*). Ruiz sees López Gómez's realistic, Chiapas-based fiction as a form of autobiographical narrative, where invention steps in to fill memory's lapses and style helps the author use his personal past to re-create the culture. Ruiz acknowledges that his own work does this as well. A writer cannot be objective, cannot separate himself from the world in which he writes. And if the creative writer is also a scholar, he cannot separate the world of his creation from the subjects of his studies.

The view of the Indigenous world in *Los hijos errantes* is a harsh one. Other Indigenous Chiapas writers such as the aforementioned Josías López Gómez, Nicolás Huet Bautista, and Ruperta Bautista Vázquez, as well as Diego Méndez Guzmán, Mikeas Sánchez, María Concepción Bautista Vázquez, and the members of theatrical collectives Lo'il Maxil and Fortaleza de la Mujer Maya, to name just a few, have created a variety of works that sometimes celebrate positive aspects of Indigenous life, sometimes lament the hardships Indigenous people face, and sometimes do both within one work. *Los hijos errantes*, as the title suggests, presents Indigenous people who bring hardships on themselves, though insidious outside influences hold powerful sway. Do not expect to be uplifted reading their stories, but do prepare to be astonished at the bold and unflinching view from this exciting young author.

Note

1. The details and quoted words about Mikel Ruiz's life come from our conversation of August 18, 2018.

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