

***Ximonik*: The Unbound Performances of Maya Women's Group Ajchowen**

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ABSTRACT

This article describes Ximonik, an original play by the all-female Maya troupe Ajchowen which premiered in the U.S. at the 2018 NYU Educational Theatre Forum: Performance as Activism. This editorial traces the author's relationship to Ajchowen, which led to their involvement in the Forum. Further, it contextualizes Ajchowen's unique approach to performance as activism in Guatemala, examining the history of their company and their experiences as Maya actresses.

A STOP

In 2014, in Sololá, Guatemala, I experienced what Fels (2012) would call a *stop*: "a stop occurs when... we recognize absence, a gap, a dissonance, a possibility newly perceived" (p. 53). My long-term colleague and Executive Director of the girls' educational organization

Starfish: Her Infinite Impact (Starfish), Norma Baján Balán, had taken me through a cornfield to a local cultural center to see the play *Ixkik* by an all-female Maya theatre company called Ajchowen. Watching the performance, I bore witness to individual and collective embodiments of Maya women's experiences that were grounded, physically expressive, and deeply personal. Ajchowen's art illuminated their world in a way discourse alone could not. It was then that Norma, Ajchowen performers and I began to imagine ways in which their unique theatrical abilities could be shared with the young Maya girls that Starfish served, planting seeds for a partnership that has continued to grow for the past four years.

I have been working with Starfish since 2009 as an applied theatre consultant and researcher. When I first met the performers of Ajchowen, I was engaged in a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project with Dr. Beth Osnes of the University of Colorado at Boulder and Starfish to develop a *Vocal Empowerment*¹ program for Maya girls. PAR is a transformational research methodology; it is community-based and seeks to create a horizontal relationship between researcher/participant in which both learn from each other and work collaboratively toward a shared solution to a proposed challenge/problem (Walter, 2009; Weber-Pillwax, 2009). Applied theatre researchers often turn to PAR because of the similarities to Freire's (1993) axiology (McCammon, 2007). As Weber-Pillwax (2009) advises, "to engage in PAR, a researcher has to trust, has to have faith, has to be able to say, 'I want this' without knowing the end of the journey" (p. 57). At the outset of working with Starfish in 2009, I couldn't have known what our relationship would become; but I knew I wanted to find out.

Following her research with Maori people of New Zealand, Indigenous author Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) asked of researchers in Indigenous spaces: "Is her spirit clear? Does he have a good heart? What other baggage are they carrying? Are they useful to us? Can they fix up our generator? Can they actually do anything?" (1999, p. 10). As a white, Globally Northern, U.S.-based applied theatre practitioner and researcher, I have found myself returning to Smith's words in my work

¹ Drawing from theatre and voice therapy techniques, as well as local knowledges of our Starfish partners, the goal of the Vocal Empowerment program is create a spaces for young women "to engage their voices as they author, rehearse, and critique the various realities they envision for their lives, their communities, and the world" (Hackett & Osnes, 2016, p. 42).

with Starfish as I have developed the Vocal Empowerment program and worked to integrate Ajchowen's theatrical techniques into their school.

A SPACE TO GROW

While our interests in collaboration between Ajchowen, Starfish and myself began in 2014, they didn't grow roots until 2016 when I was commissioned to write the curriculum map for Starfish's brand new all-girls school. When crafting the curriculum, Starfish partners and I saw an opportunity to work with Ajchowen performers: Clara Alicia Sen Sipac Guarcax (Clara), Mercedes Francisca García Ordóñez (Mercedes), Yesica Lorena Poncio Tumax (Lorena) and Graciela Maribel Coz Cuy (Graciela) as artistic experts. We wrote a space of two modules within the curriculum to allow for a partnership with Ajchowen to address multiple artistic standards, focusing largely on theatre and dance. After developing the full curriculum, it quickly became clear that this partnership could also provide unique and generative spaces for inquiry that rests squarely in my field of study: applied theatre. For my doctoral dissertation, I conducted a PAR study on the collaborative development and implementation of the Starfish art curriculum, focusing on its potential as an example of effective intercultural education for Maya girls.

Ajchowen and Starfish opened their organizations to my research. The teachers at the Starfish Impact School invited me into their classrooms, trusted me as a co-teacher, and educated me on their unique approach to education for Maya girls. Clara, Mercedes, Lorena, and Graciela of Ajchowen give their time to the Starfish Impact students and helped to put into practice a project-based curriculum that situated the students' learning in their communities. They gave their feedback on the curriculum and offered suggestions for how it might grow and change in the future. Further they offered their experiences as examples of the many ways to be a Maya woman in Guatemala today. Their lived knowledge was essential to the success of our partnership and the learning and growth of the Starfish Impact students. Further, they welcomed me at one of their rehearsals and offered clarity on the Maya Cosmovision throughout my fieldwork.

RECIPROCITY

As a PAR researcher attuned to the unique experiences of working within Indigenous communities as a non-indigenous researcher, I felt that reciprocity was a vital aspect of my research and wanted to ensure that I was bringing not only my skills as an applied theatre practitioner to our partnerships, but also seeking to leverage my privileges as a Globally Northern, white researcher to serve the needs of both organizations and reciprocate the generosity they displayed throughout our time together. While I completed my fieldwork in 2017, our relationships continued and I sought to find opportunities for reciprocity whenever possible.

In 2018, I served on the planning committee of the Program in Educational Theatre's annual forum. The theme of the year's forum was "Performance as Activism" and Ajchowen's work seemed like an incredible example of just that. The committee invited Ajchowen to perform their play *Ximonik* at NYU as a part of the forum. While in New York, they performed their show twice. It was recorded by the *Hemispheric Institute*, a performance-focused organization housed at NYU that unites artists and activists across the Americas; the same institute also recorded an interview of Clara and Mercedes speaking about their work which they will host on their website alongside *Ximonik* in perpetuity.²

The remainder of this article describes *Ximonik* as it was performed at the 2018 NYU Educational Theatre Forum, traces the history of Ajchowen and the historical and current Guatemalan context, and finally outlines the actresses unique experiences of creating theatre as a form of activism for and by Maya women.

XIMONĪK

An orange and yellow wash illuminates a single tree on a proscenium stage, wrapped in intricately woven fabric. A drum begins to play from offstage, signaling that *Ximonik*³ has begun. Three Maya women enter, moving and dancing in ways that match the intricately carved masks they wear: they are *B'atz* (Monkey), *Kan* (Snake), and *Ix* (Jaguar) and

² [View the recording](#) of *Ximonik* at the 2018 Forum

³ *Ximonik* is a Kaqchikel Maya word that translates to Spanish as *amarrar* and English as *to tie (up)*.

represent three of the twenty *nawales*, Maya energies that guide the Cosmos and people. Their arms swing across their bodies and they ground deeply into the floor with bent knees; the pace varies between them, but each woman brings the body of her animal to life with specificity and grace. Their movements evolve as the drumming that underscores them builds to a peak. *Kan* moves to the floor, places the backstrap of a loom around her lower back and begins to weave. The gesture of threading new colors over and under evokes a centuries-old practice. As *Kan* continues to layer the colorful threads, a fourth character enters. Cloaked in a brown-hooded habit, with a large wooden rosary and a sword, this masked figure is a walking representation of the Franciscan friars who arrived on this land 500 years ago.⁴ If there was any doubt of what this character represents, his⁵ words confirm it:

Ejerzan dominio	Exercise dominion
Sobre los peces del mar	Over the fish of the sea
Sobre las aves del cielo	Over the birds of the sky
Y sobre todo ser viviente que se mueve	And above all living beings that move
Sobre la faz de la tierra.	Over the face of the earth.
Juristas y Teólogos	Jurists and Theologians
La consideran	Believe
Como justa causa para la conquista,	it is just cause for the conquest
Si los indios no pertenecieran a la especie humana,	If the Indians did not belong to the human race,
La evangelización no tendría sentido...	evangelization would not make sense
Gracias dios	Thanks be to God
Por darme la oportunidad de aplicar tan justa causa	For giving me the opportunity to apply such a just cause

⁴ The first successful mission of Friars to Guatemala began in 1533. They came to establish religious schools and begin the conversion of the Maya people. The church continued this effort throughout the colonial period in New Spain (Habig, 1945, p. 330).

⁵ While represented by a female actress, this masked figure seemed to represent a gendered male Friar, and more broadly and embodiment of colonial patriarchy, and will heretofore be referred to as male.

Y además, no son capaces de doctrina, Sus juicios son bajos y apocados No tienen artes Ni mañas de hombres, No quieren mudarse ni de dioses ni de costumbres Son cobardes como las liebres, sucios como los puercos Cruelles, ladrones, haraganes, hechiceros...	And besides, the Indians are not capable of doctrine Their thoughts are low and dull They do not have talents Nor tricks of men They do not want to change their gods or customs They are cowards like hares, dirty like pigs Cruel, thieves, lazy, sorcerers
Facilísimamente se juntan con las mujeres como cuervos o víboras Las mujeres sin vergüenza muestran desnudas todos sus pecados, provocando los nobles instintos de nuestros pobres soldados.	How easily they “join” with women like ravens or vipers Women without shame who show all their naked sins, Provoking the noble instincts of our poor soldiers. ⁶

The three Maya energies move frantically at his arrival. They mutter urgently to each other in Kaqchikel,⁷ swerving away from his booming declarations. The Friar laughs and rides his sword like a horse around the stage, wailing pronouncements as he moves. The energies are frenzied as they flee from his presence. The Friar, armed with his sword, pays no mind to their frenetic movements. He grabs the top of *Kan's* head and beheads the snake, removing the mask and replacing it with a sheep's mask. *B'atz* and *Ix* placidly follow course, removing their own masks and forming a new herd. They are reduced to crouching, placidly following the motions of the Friar. They bleat and crawl, then pray in Spanish. They sing a song in Spanish that Evangelical audience members might recognize from Sunday mass. Their conversion seems complete. However, as tension builds, their submission cannot last.

⁶ Original and Translated text from *Ximonik*. Originally spoken in Spanish (Ajchowen, 2016).

⁷ Currently there are twenty-one Maya languages spoken throughout Guatemala. Of those languages, Kaqchikel is one of the most widely spoken and studied, with over 500,000 current speakers. It is the predominate Maya language of the region in which the Starfish Impact School is located (Rohloff & Tummons, 2017).

The former *Kan* resists the Friar, exchanging the sheep mask for the serpent's head once again, and climbs the tree that once anchored the loom. From there, she beckons one to the former Jaguar, *Ix*, signaling for her to remove her mask. With the removal, *Ix* becomes a Woman; as the Woman stands, *Kan* offers her a shining red apple. This scene evokes a different story: the Garden of Eden. The Woman (*Ix*) takes the apple, holds it in contemplation for a moment, and takes a deep bite. This Eve-like Woman, proudly bearing an apple from the Tree of Knowledge, offers the remainder to the final sheep, a stand-in for Adam in the Biblical tale this resembles. The final sheep removes her mask and moves downstage center. She passionately monologues in K'iche'.⁸ After a beat, Eve morphs back into *Ix*, the jaguar she once was, as the last sheep, emboldened with the apple's power, once again becomes *B'atz*, the monkey. Adam and Eve are lost, and the *nawales* are restored.

Having regained awareness of their existence and value, all three Maya figures resist the Friar, who, in the face of their power and suggested femininity, aggressively asserts that women belong in the home. Emboldened with the apple of knowledge, all three masked figures counter the Friar with a dance that grows incrementally stronger and larger, sending him to his knees in shame. They exchange his mask with a sheep's. With this gesture, they defeat the Friar and the colonial power he represents—recovering agency for Maya women and populace at large. As the play closes, *Kan* is once again at work on the loom, leaving the audience with a sense that the Maya Eve, if she was Eve, has been transported to an anti-colonial paradise, her epistemology and ontology fully restored (Ajchowen, 2016).

AJCHOWEN

Ximonik premiered in Sololá, Guatemala November 12th, 2016 and made its U.S. debut at the Frederick Loewe Theatre at New York University on April 21th, 2018. The cast comprised of four Maya actresses mentioned earlier in this article: Clara Alicia Sen Sipac Guarcax (Clara) as *Ix / Eve*, Mercedes Francisca García Ordóñez (Mercedes) as *Friar*, Yesica Lorena Poncio Tumax (Lorena) as *B'atz / Adam* and Graciela Maribel Coz Cuy (Graciela) as *Kan*. Despite

⁸ Another of the twenty-one Maya languages spoken in Guatemala.

Ajchowen being a group of female performers looking at women's issues, group members have continued to make an active choice to work with a male director, Víctor Manuel Barillas Crispin. Ajchowen is connected to and functions as a sister group of a larger cultural organization called Grupo Sotz'il (Sotz'il).

In 2000, the Guarcax family created Sotz'il and Sotz'il Jay, an interdisciplinary arts center in El Tablón, Sololá, as a response to the destructive acts that Maya people have been subjected to since the 16th century. Their name comes from the Kaqchikel word for Bat, which is also the symbol of the Kaqchikel people and is an emblem of Sololá. Sotz'il's founding leader Lisandro Guarcax is quoted in Aggaboa Thelen (2010) saying, "we don't do art for art's sake; we do it to recover the dignity of our people" (para. 3). In an effort to "recover the dignity of their people," Lisandro Guarcax and his colleagues innovated a theatrical model rooted in the exploration of extant Maya texts, artifacts, and knowledge held by community elders, with the goal of developing a new theatrical language. Their theatrical performances include physical dances aligned with each of the *nawales*, or symbols of the Maya Calendar—elements of these dances were used in Ajchowen's performance of *Ximonik* to portray *B'atz* (Monkey), *Kan* (Snake), and *Ix* (Jaguar). In 2015 Grupo Sotz'il published a manual outlining the movements and articulating their artistic manifesto, known as *Ati't Xajoj: Danzando con la Abuela* (Dancing with the Grandmother). The book is written in both Spanish and Kaqchikel, the Maya language used in the Sololá region and many of the Sotz'il and Ajchowen performances.

Ati't Xajoj (Grupo Sotz'il, 2015) eloquently articulates Sotz'il's position as an organization comprised of Maya people who embody persistence:

They said that our community didn't exist, that it died hundreds of years ago with the end of the great civilization, that our remains were discovered by the Spanish in their invasion of our lands. They said that we were forgotten. But we said that we were here now, in the present, in this place: in the hills, the lakes, the animals the trees in the words of our mothers, our fathers, in the energies that danced in the fires, in our blood, there is the wisdom, the knowledge linking us to the cosmos (p. 8).

Sotz'il's insistence on a clear presence and identity is at the heart of their

resistance efforts. The religious and cultural colonization by Spanish *conquistadors* embodied in *Ximonik* and referenced in the quote above was one of the greatest violations against Maya people. However, Sotz'il's creation was a response not only to violations committed in the distant past, but to a decades long conflict in Guatemala demonstrating a form of neo-colonialism that stripped Maya people of dignity and life, known locally as *La Violencia*—or the violence. To understand the creation of Sotz'il and subsequently Ajchowen, it is important to have a working knowledge of *La Violencia* from which they grew, and the ways in which their dignity was not lost, but stolen.

ALL TOO RECENT HISTORY

Throughout the early 20th century,⁹ Guatemala was ruled “by a series of autocratic leaders” (Rothenberg, 2012b, p. xxvi). One result of their leadership was the shaping of Guatemala into a Banana Republic with U.S.-based United Fruit Company owning a significant amount of workable land. In 1944, a coup was staged, pushing against the autocratic authorities and the results of their leadership. This coup led to ten years of what is known as the democratic spring. During this time, democratically elected Presidents Juan Jose Arévalo and Jacobo Arbenz passed reforms to improve daily life for the majority of Guatemalans, including policies addressing the redistribution of privately owned land (much of which lay in the hands of United Fruit Company) (Rothenberg, 2012b, p. xxvi). However, in 1954, the U.S. government orchestrated a coup to overthrow Arbenz and put military leaders in power. This began a period of instability and violence, leading to the eventual beginning of a civil war that lasted from 1960-1996.

To simplify a complex history, the conflict was fought between the Guatemalan military and various guerilla rebel groups, consisting predominantly of Maya people. While regimes changed multiple times throughout the three decades of violence, the U.S. continued to provide access to weapons, funding, and training for the Guatemalan military. Grandin et. al. critiqued the U.S. involvement, saying it “turned

⁹ I have summarized here an in-depth outline of recent Guatemalan history provided by Daniel Rothenberg in the introduction to *Memory of Silence: The Guatemalan Truth Commission Report* (2012b). I encourage the reader to refer to Rothenberg's chapter and the wider text for a thoughtful translation of the Guatemalan Truth Commission's report.

Guatemala into a laboratory for repression” (2011, p. 199). The 36 year-long conflict resulted in at least 200,000 casualties, 83% of which were Maya (The Center for Justice and Accountability, 2016). The majority of the atrocities committed by the government occurred between 1979-1982 under the leadership of first, General Romeo Lucas García and then General Efraín Ríos Montt. Major efforts to cool the conflict began in the early 1990’s with a series of talks and eventual Peace Accords (Rothenberg, 2012b, pp. xxvii–xxxi).

Ironically, the atrocities of *La Violencia* were diligently documented,¹⁰ a fact that continues to galvanize organized efforts to try members of the military for crimes against humanity in both the Guatemalan high court and abroad, without much success (Crowe, 2014). In 2013 in an emotional and illustrative moment, General Efraín Ríos Montt was found guilty of genocide and crimes against humanity by a Guatemalan court and sentenced to 80 years in prison. However, only ten days after his trial ended, the verdict was overruled by the Guatemalan Constitutional Court (Maclean, 2013). Montt was being re-tried in absentia when he died of a heart attack in April 2018 (Kinzer, 2018).

A notable exception to the lack of punitive action is a 2016 trial in which eleven Maya women testified against Guatemalan army colonel Esteelmer Reyes Girón and military supporter Heriberto Valdés Asij for their abhorrent acts of sexual slavery. They were sentenced collectively to 240 years in prison and the landmark case “is the first known example of the prosecution in a national court of the crime of sexual slavery during armed conflict as a violation of international humanitarian law” (Birchall, 2016, para. 4). The strength and resilience demonstrated by the Maya women who gave testimony in this case is a testament to the indelible spirit of Maya women.

A WARRIOR AGAINST THE INVASION

Resistance to the atrocities committed against the Maya people was present throughout *La Violencia* and despite the risk that it presented to many local leaders, the Pan-Maya movement began in the 1970’s in an

¹⁰ A recent discovery of an abandoned government warehouse found a stockpile of over 200,000 ID cards of those disappeared or known to have been killed during the Civil War. These artifacts are still being uncovered and catalogued (Weld, 2014).

effort to reclaim Maya culture and expand the rights of Indigenous people in Guatemala. Many formal and political organizations took part in this movement including:

Academia de la Lengua Mayas de Guatemala (Academy of Maya Languages in Guatemala, ALMG), the Consejo de Organizaciones Mayas de Guatemala (Council of Mayan Organizations of Guatemala, COMG), the Consejo Nacional de Educación Maya (National Council of Maya Education, CNEM) and the Mesa Nacional Maya de Guatemala (National Maya Board of Guatemala, MENAMGUA). (Rothenberg, 2012a, p. 172)

Efforts by these and other organizations helped to push for Indigenous inclusion in the 1985 Constitution of the Republic of Guatemala, which came about during the transition from military rule back to democratically elected leaders. The Constitution states:

Guatemala is composed of diverse ethnic groups, among which indigenous groups of Mayan descent are prominent. The State recognizes, respects and promotes their ways of life, customs, traditions, ways of social organization, the use of indigenous dress for men and women, languages, and dialects. (cited and translated in Rothenberg, 2012a, p. 173)

Even after being constitutionally recognized, the Pan-Maya movement still fought for a full representation and reclamation of Maya life in all forms. Part of the driving ideology of the movement was that as Maya people, “they must first regain control over their past... before they can start to build their future” (Fischer, 1996, p. 64). In an interview conducted by Heidi Mckinnon (2016), Lisandro Guarcax described how his parents, grandparents and extended family members were active in the Pan-Maya movement, and were “like the ‘first front’ of community activism...they were under severe constant repression. This ‘front’—these organizations—opened many spaces...now we can project a vision of the future” (p. 17).

The creation of Sotz’il and subsequently Ajchowen demonstrate the efforts to actualize the protections offered by the new Guatemalan constitution and create a world in which the Maya people and their ways of being and living are not only protected but respected. Many in the

Sololá community consider Lisandro Guarcax:

Un abuelo más de la cultura kaqchikel, guerrera desde la invasión y en la guerra que todavía sigue en este país, y que él defendió, recuperando las raíces ancestrales del arte maya, con una fuerte carga política, honestidad y valor.

[A grandfather and defender of the Kaqchikel culture, a warrior against the invasion and in the war that persists [in Guatemala]. He recovered the ancestral roots of Maya art, showing strong political commitment, honesty, and valor.] (“Rebellion,” 2010)

However, not everyone felt his work served their interests. Unfortunately, as many in Guatemala can testify, while *La Violencia* may have ended with the Peace Accords, violence in Guatemala did not. On August 25th, 2010, three days after the birth of his second child, Lisandro Guarcax was found dead. He was kidnapped, tortured, and killed for his outspoken advocacy on behalf of his people, as well as his efforts to preserve Maya culture (McKinnon, 2016, p. 21).

In the Maya calendar, the day of Lisandro’s death was a day of *Ajmaq*, manifested in the bee. According to Grupo Sotz’il (2015): “Es el reconocimiento de que todos los seres tienen voluntad y conciencia. También es el día que nos conecta con la otra dimensión, con los que ya no están con nosotros, con los ancestros” [It is the awareness that all beings have will and conscience. It is also the day that connects us with the other dimension, with those who are no longer with us, with the ancestors] (p. 162).

RESILENCIA / RESILIENCE

On the other side of Lisandro’s story, beside him in his life, and remembering him in his death is Clara Alicia Sen Sipac, who birthed her daughter and buried her husband. I met Clara after seeing her perform in *Ixkik* in 2014. In it she played the title character, Ixkik, a woman from the Maya creation text the *Popol Wuj*, also called the *Popol Vuh* or *Popol Vuj*, who must fight for the life of her pregnant child. She travels with the grandmother Ixmucane to the world of the spirits to battle for the life of her unborn child. I was taken by her strength and embodied performance

before I ever learned of her personal story. Through our time together, I have learned how Clara's pain was integral to the creation of Ajchowen. It is important that to the best of my abilities, I tell this story through Clara's words.

Lisandro's death activated Clara. It motivated her to begin working with Sotz'il in more capacities than she had been during his life. In 2011, while working for Sotz'il in an administrative capacity, she was asked to front an initiative for young women in El Tablón, Sololá. Through a partnership with an NGO and a local Centro Educativo Maya or Maya Educational Center, Clara and Mercedes Francisca García Ordóñez (who was already dancing with Sotz'il) organized 25 girls to take a series of workshops with the intention of forming an all-female artistic group. In these workshops, the entire group learned various forms of art-making: Dance, painting, poetry, sculpture, music, etc. After taking these workshops, the group decided to focus on *artes escénicas*, or scenic arts, integrating dance music and theatre. After this initial series of workshops, Clara and Mercedes continued to move forward in building a performance group that focused on providing a space for women and girls to create theatre around issues that impacted them. It wasn't a simple road. Attendance proved to be one of their greatest challenges. Despite starting with 25 participants, they were unable to assemble more than six at the end. With these six they created their first official performance: a dance-drama called *Ixmucane*. They didn't tour *Ixmucane*, but they did present it to the families of the girls who participated in its creation (personal communication, C. A. Sen Sipac, June 13th, 2017). When asked how she felt taking this on after Lisandro's death, Clara said:

En el caso de Ajchowen...cuando se inició...yo tenía mucho, mucho miedo aun, yo decía... "¿Que voy a hacer? ¿Será que voy a poder transmitirlo a un público? ¿Voy a exponerme públicamente?" Porque en ese entonces yo estaba como aislada...estaba guardada, estaba cuidándome...Yo tenía muchas dudas para hacer eso. ¿Será que mi vida no ha representado peligro? Y si hago eso la gente se va a dar cuenta y va a decir: "Ah, bueno, ella es la pareja de Lisandro y ella también nos está molestando o está interfiriendo acá." Finalmente...tuve que pedir ese apoyo espiritual para poder quitarme todo eso de la mente y empezar como a aliviar y a sanar. A partir del apoyo espiritual que

yo tuve, tuve un poco mas de valor, y yo dije, “Si aquí estoy, yo lo tengo que hacer. Si es el legado de él (Lisandro), pues hay que dar este seguimiento. No se puede quedar estancado... ¿Por qué no lo voy a poder hacer? Tal vez no hablar el nombre de él, pero sí expresarme con la esencia y el sentimiento de él. Lo voy a hacer.

[When Ajchowen started, I was very, very afraid. I said: “...What am I going to do? Will I be able to share this with the public?...Am I going to expose myself?” Because at that time I was isolated...I was guarded, I was taking care of myself...I had a lot of doubts about doing it... Would I be putting my life in danger? And if I did it, would people say: “Well she is Lisandro's partner and...she is bothering us too. She is interfering here.”...Finally I had to ask for spiritual support in order to clear my mind, get some relief and heal. With the spiritual support that I had, I had a little more courage, and I said, “If I’m here, I have to do it. It is (Lisandro’s) legacy, someone has to carry it on, it cannot stay stagnant... Why can’t I do it? Maybe I won’t speak his name, but I will express myself with his essence and his feelings. I will do it.”] (C.A. Sen Sipac personal communication, July 25, 2017)

After creating *Ixmucane*, Mercedes and Clara proceeded with their goal of building an all-female theatre group. Attendance was still a challenge and members continued to swap in and out of the group.

According to Mercedes, Maya women often face pressure from their families to stay home and care for children or are critiqued for performing and told they shouldn’t be focusing on art-making. In an article she wrote about Ajchowen, Starfish’s ED Norma Baján Balán (2016) cited a local female resident of Sololá who told her “Ajchowen should be ashamed of what they do. The community doesn’t value women in art...and most husbands don’t allow women to participate in such activities anyhow...It would make me feel embarrassed to participate” (para. 22). Despite these challenges, Ajchowen persisted and was able to produce a total of three original creations: *Ixmucane*, *Ixkik*, and *Ximonik* (M.F. García Ordóñez, personal communication, July 25, 2017).

THE POWER OF PERFORMANCE

Throughout the seven years that Ajchowen has been in existence, Clara has experienced a personal shift and grown through theatre. She said,

Siempre digo que...el arte, para mí, es una herramienta de sanación personal, porque eso se fue sanando poco a poco. Y entonces ya después dije, "yo tengo que seguir, yo tengo que hacerlo, tengo que hacer ahora ya no solo por Lisandro, sino por mí, por mí como mujer. Por lo que yo siento, por lo que yo tengo, lo voy a hacer por mis hijos, lo voy a hacer por las mujeres. Ya no voy a hacerlo solo por él... Ya detrás de todo eso, hay varias personas, hay varias razones, entonces si yo no lo hago, no sirve, no estoy contribuyendo nada. Si mi aporte es hacerlo desde el teatro, pues entonces que se sea. Lo voy a hacer desde el teatro.

[I always say that, for me, art is a tool for personal healing because, little by little it was healing me, and afterwards I said I have to continue, I have to do it, I have to do it now not only for Lisandro, but for me; for me as a woman, for what I feel, for what I have. I am going to do it for my children, I'm going to do it for women, I'm not doing it just for him now... Now behind everything (I do) there are many people, many reasons. If I don't do it, I am not serving them, I am not contributing anything. If my contribution is to make theatre, then so be it, I will do my part through theatre.] (C.A. Sen Sipac, personal communication, July 25, 2017)

Clara has shared her sense of purpose with the various members who have participated in Ajchowen throughout its existence. Sometimes, her collaborators don't have the same sense of the urgency of their work, which Clara attributes to the pressures they have in their lives and the difficulty of being a female artist. In those instances, Clara serves as a leader, telling them:

Miren, muchas lo estamos haciendo por una reivindicación, lo estamos haciendo porque queremos contribuir a esta transformación social...Al ser conscientes de esa parte, seguro que lo vamos a disfrutar mucho más, y ya no vamos a poner más 'peros' y ya no vamos a decir 'no puedo ensayar' o 'mejor me quedo,' 'eso ya me ha aburrido' eso ya no va a pasar sino que vamos a sentirnos

plenas y libres para poder realizar el trabajo colectivamente. Y eso es lo que hace falta.

[We are doing all of this for vindication. We are doing it because we want to contribute to social transformation...By being aware of that part, surely we're going to enjoy it so much more, and we're not going to have any "buts" or say "I can't rehearse" or "it's better I stay home" or "I am bored"...that won't happen anymore... We are going to feel fulfilled and free to carry out the work together. And that is what is needed.] (C.A. Sen Sipac, personal communication, July 25, 2017)

Clara's story encapsulates the spirit of Ajchowen: they stand amongst histories of erasure and make themselves known through theatre. Their work through *Ximonik* and their other performances is a form of activism that resists through its presence. I leave this article with a quote from Clara that demonstrates how she, and by extension Ajchowen, view the power of performance:

...Llevar a la escena es como que "Aquí estoy, Aquí me libero. Aquí trato la manera de también quitarme algunos miedos, y sanar todas esas heridas que llevo."

[...To put something on stage is to say: "Here I am. Here, I am liberated. Here I try to let go of some of my fears, and heal all of the wounds that I carry."] (C.A. Sen Sipac, personal communication, July 25, 2017)

SUGGESTED CITATION

Hackett, C. (2019). *Ximonik: The unbound performances of Maya women's group Ajchowen*. *ArtsPraxis*, 5 (2), 18-35.

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