

## **Dignity, dreaming, and desire-based research in the face of slow violence: indigenous youth organising as (counter)development**

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### **Abstract**

*This article provides an overview of an autonomous social movement defending and struggling for Indigenous land, dignity, and self-determination in Central America and the postcolonial Caribbean. More precisely, it highlights how Maya communities in Toledo District, Southern Belize are mobilising to protect and continue to breathe life into their culture, customs, cosmovisión, and communities. In doing so, we introduce readers to three of the primary organisations that partially constitute the social movement; the Toledo Alcaldes Association (TAA), Maya Leaders Alliance (MLA), and Julian Cho Society (JCS). In addition to historicising and profiling these groups, their ground-breaking land rights victory, and the unity they have galvanised amongst Maya villages, the piece demonstrates how Indigenous youth are engaging in and actively redefining development within the region. We do this by sharing a synopsis of an action camp that was organised by-and-for Maya youth. Before describing the undertakings and outcomes of the camp, we detail how the gathering was informed and shaped by calls being made for desire-based research. To this end, we explain how our methods and field activities were guided by decolonial, community-based, participatory-action, and creative approaches. Ultimately, the piece reveals how dignity-anchored, dream-driven, desire-based research that is animated and co-created by Indigenous youth not only can contribute to building pathways out of structural and slow violence—but also can at once counter and transform development. Notably, Maya youth are co-authors.*

### **Keywords**

autonomy; decolonisation; desire-based research; development; dreaming; Indigenous resurgence; social movements; slow violence; youth activism

...the struggle of Indigenous people for their dignity is, at its core, a *dream*;  
indeed, a very ‘Otherly’ *dream*.

Marcos (2001)

...it is crucial to recognize that our communities hold the power to begin shifting  
the discourse away from damage—and toward *desire*.

Tuck (2009)



*A welcome banner made by Maya youth hangs across the community and presentation space at the Sounding of the Conch Shell (SOCS) Camp in Toledo District, Southern Belize. The SOCS gathering (detailed in the sections to come) was a holistic environment where Maya youth could come together to freely express their thoughts and share perspectives about their joys, pains, and dreams as Indigenous youth. It was also a space where Maya youth garnered support from peers, elders, and village leaders as they—as youth—stressed the importance of being involved in community decision-making, collective mobilising, and building a better—alternative—future.*

## **Introduction: an indigenous, autonomous, radical movement**

While most social movement and critical development scholars who focus on land, autonomy, and resistance in Latin America and the Caribbean are familiar with the Zapatistas, far fewer have afforded committed attention to the other, parallel, Maya land rights struggle and movement in the region. Remarkably enough, it is a struggle against the ‘coloniality of power’ (Quijano, 2000) that is currently unfolding and uniquely situated in both the Caribbean and Central America. Namely, it is the struggle for land and freedom of the Q’eqchi’ and Mopan Maya communities of Toledo District, Southern Belize.

In 2015, the movement made history vis-à-vis the recognition of Indigenous land rights by winning a victory against the Government of Belize (GoB) in the Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ). The case affirmed that customary Maya land tenure was equal to all other property rights protected under the Belizean constitution (Caserta 2018). Yet even with their historic legal win over the GoB in the CCJ, the movement realises that self-determination is not something that can be secured through either the government or legal system, but rather, only via the political agency and collective work of grassroots communities themselves (Fanon, 1963). The movement recognises, as other targeted and oppressed Indigenous communities do (Rivera Cusicanqui 2007), that the path to freedom is one which will neither be carved nor offered by the state—but only through their own emancipatory praxis. In realising this, the movement has, since its genesis, been engaged in a wide array of diverse tactics and strategies aimed at effecting ‘non-metaphorical decolonisation’ (Tuck and Yang, 2012) and Indigenous ‘sustainable self-determination’ (Corntassel, 2012).

More specifically, this article provides an overview of the Maya Leader’s Alliance (MLA), Toledo Alcaldes Association (TAA), and Julian Cho Society (JCS), which together with the 39 Maya communities of Toledo District (Southern Belize), comprise a coalition and social movement fighting for autonomy. Henceforth, we, in most instances, will refer to the coalition as the ‘MLA-TAA-JCS’ to capture its symbiotic relationship and kaleidoscopic expression. Politically, the coalition is an autonomous and radical (from Latin, *radix*, meaning ‘at the roots’) Indigenous movement that is mobilising against Western institutions (e.g. the state) and the driving forces of capital accumulation (e.g. extractive corporations) (Shoman, 1994; Wainwright, 2011).

We explicitly use ‘radical’ to denote that the movement is attempting to get to the root of the problem(s) (e.g. colonial-capitalist worldviews, domination, exploitation, violence, oppression) and change things structurally. It is also, rather distinctively, socio-culturally positioned in what is at once Central America and the Caribbean (i.e. Belize, a former colony of the British Crown). In addition to a synopsis of the Maya struggle in Toledo District, this piece will primarily highlight how youth are contributing to and vitalising the movement’s desire-based and dream-driven (counter)development in a context of ‘slow violence’ (Nixon, 2012).

A key takeaway from this piece and what we attempt to accentuate and offer is an understanding and brief glimpse of how Indigenous youth are mobilising in a historical-structural context that was expressly arranged to be hostile towards the Maya's very existence. In short, the focus will be on the political agency of youth, not the colonial damage that has been and continues to be inflicted upon their communities and lives. In illustrating this, we share a summary of a youth camp organised in 2019 that encompassed heritage site tours, prefigurative artistic expression, visual storytelling, photovoice, and dream-driven praxis. The last section of the paper, which details the youth-coordinated 'desire-based research' (Tuck 2009), direct action, and camp, is authored by Maya youth themselves.

### **Political context: structural and slow violence vs. *se' komonil***

To contextualise this research politically and conceptually, in Central American and Caribbean countries like Belize ('British Honduras' until 1981) (Bolland, 2003), where relatively large groups of Indigenous peoples reside, national economic development, often taking the form of industrial extraction, continues at the expense of and frequently to the detriment of Indigenous communities (Wainwright, 2011). Indigenous groups are being excluded and not equitably benefitting from national-international development agendas. This is in addition to non-consultation and violations of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent they must contend with (Anaya and Puig, 2017). The adverse impacts have been identified as, inter alia, lack of access to land and natural resources; indigent forms of poverty; reduced options for sustainable livelihoods; negative health effects; gender-based violence; destruction of heritage sites; ecosystem damage; and loss of cultural identity (Munarriz, 2008).

The cumulative consequence of the aforementioned impacts is that Indigenous people, especially women and girls, are among the most vulnerable groups to external market volatility, economic shocks, climate change, extreme weather, and disaster events (Gahman and Thongs, 2020; IACHR, 2017). According to numerous human rights organisations and grassroots advocates, there is a pressing need to provide greater (horizontal) support and solidarity to these communities to further increase adaptive capacity and safeguard rights (Marcos, 2018). A host of movement leaders and political activists also note that, globally, Indigenous communities are at the forefront of responding to these realities by confronting hostile forces and building pathways out of the alienation and repression to which they are being exposed (Montoya, 2016; Nunn, 2018). The MLA-TAA-JCS, inclusive of the youth who volunteer for the coalition, is case in point. It is an Indigenous movement 'from below' that has taken up the mantle of asserting dignity and demonstrating political agency in a Global South/Majority World context of state-sanctioned structural and slow violence (Kus and Miss, 2019; Grandia, 2009).

## **Structural and slow violence**

Structural violence can broadly be defined as exposure to premature death (Galtung, 1969). It is characterised by the suffering and alienation—experienced disproportionately by targeted and marginalised groups—created by oft-unseen social forces and taken-for-granted cultural norms. It is ostensibly invisible because it is deeply embedded within societal structures and institutions (Farmer, 1996). Structural violence includes exclusion from full participation in resource distribution and allocation, political decision-making, education, healthcare services, the rights and entitlements afforded by citizenship and residents with ‘legal’ status, etc (Gahman and Hjalmarson, 2019). It is related to social injustice yet also focuses on health-eroding forms of cultural erasure and epistemic burial, as well as discursive (e.g. stigma, ostracism, ‘othering’) and indirect (neglect, inaction, omission) violence. Structural violence, in short, is the foreclosure of both life chances and expectancies.

Structural violence also comprises institutionalised racism, sexism, xenophobia, classism, heteronormativity, homophobia, ethno-nationalism, transphobia, etc.. For Maya communities in Belize, structural violence is identifiable in the endemic poverty, land dispossession, loss of language speakers, forfeiture of customs, intergenerational trauma, and internalised oppression that has and continues to be generated by the historical trajectories of colonialism, state repression, market-driven extraction, and governmental abandonment (Common Struggles Gathering, 2017). Amidst this exploitative reality, the Maya communities continue to view themselves as neither pitiable nor helpless.

Slow violence, comparably, whilst innately systemic, expands upon structural violence and focuses on what is produced at the nexus of the global economy, resource extraction, industrial production, environmental effluence, ecosystem (ill)health (inclusive of human and non-human life), and risk (Nixon, 2011). It often occurs hand-in-hand with environmental racism and state negligence and refers to the chronic, protracted, and seemingly imperceptible debilitation of communities and ecologies due to fallouts associated with environmental degradation and toxicity (Pulido, 2017).

Examples of slow violence include commercial clear-cut logging; the leaching of mining impurities; fossil fuel removal and burning; deforestation; the commodification and depletion of wildlife; the unsanctioned and unregulated disposal and dumping of pollutants; contaminant bioaccumulation; and the aggregative human-induced causes and lasting upshots of disaster events and extreme weather. For communities in Central American and circum-Caribbean geographies, slow violence takes the form of illness and disease related to tainted freshwater and polluted ecosystems; arable land loss from unsustainable for-profit excavation; the destruction of cultural heritage; disruptions to seasonal subsistence-farming due to climate change and rising sea levels; and increased sexual exploitation from the presence of external corporations, etc.

(Common Struggles Gathering, 2017; Fabricant, Gustafson, and Weiss, 2017; Giardino, 2015).

Noteworthy here are that violations of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) and non-compliance to internationally recognised human rights accords are arguably two of the key immediate drivers of slow violence being experienced by marginalised communities across Central America and the circum-Caribbean as a result of the ongoing coloniality of racial capitalism (Anaya and Puig, 2017). Both the GoB and corporate extractors are culpable for multiple accounts of precisely just these types of violations and non-compliances (Campbell and Anaya, 2008; COA, 2010; Cultural Survival, 2015; OHRHC, 2007; Purvis, 2013)

### ***Se' komonil* and self-determination**

Amidst this avoidable yet imposed structural and slow violence, many Maya, as countless have been doing for over five centuries, are responding with collective resistance and a movement towards social change and transformation (Coc, 2015). Maya communities of Toledo District continue to engage in an unceasing effort to carve out space for Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and living under Western institutions and impositions of 'modernity' and 'development.' The MLA-TAA-JCS's mandate, thus, has been to struggle to co-create alternatives to the (neo)colonial social relations, economies, modes of governance, and even maps that have been forced upon their communities for generations (Wainwright and Bryan, 2009). This entails protecting and revitalising their Maya lands, culture, languages, and cosmovisión. It also means asserting and practicing their Indigenous conceptualisation of dignity and togetherness, '*se' komonil*.'

*Se' komonil* is a deeply layered, intersubjective Maya term signifying togetherness that roughly translates to 'practicing a dignified life, collectively.' When explained further, *se' komonil* means 'living a just and dignified life, reciprocally, through a mutual recognition of worth, interdependency, and intergenerational inter-connectedness that is woven into the spiritual, material, human, and non-human world.' Revealingly, for the Maya, both land and heritage mutually constitute *se' komonil*, i.e. dignity and unity. Hence, reclaiming, recuperating, and revitalising both their lands and heritage sites means doing the same for their dignity.

The MLA-TAA-JCS's defence and assertion of *se' komonil* in the face of corporate extractivism and the consolidated power of a postcolonial capitalist state has not come without consequence. Members of the movement, from its genesis through the present moment, have been harassed, accosted, and arrested. Moreover, several have been subjected to intimidation, vandalism, and violence. In 2015, Cristina Coc, a Q'eqchi' Maya woman, mother, and current spokesperson of the MLA, was arrested, along with 12 other Maya land defenders ('The Santa Cruz 13'), whilst protecting a Maya heritage site from

destruction (Penados, 2015). The government's apprehension of the activists promptly garnered international attention and intense scrutiny, not least of which came from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Victoria Tauli-Corpuz.

Tauli-Corpuz, in a public statement scolding the GoB issued from Geneva, noted the incident demonstrated disturbing neglect for Maya property rights, which 'the government must respect and protect.' The U.N. Special Rapporteur went on to assert that, vis-à-vis the state's specious rationale for arresting the Maya villagers and Coc, the 'current situation of conflict and mistrust cannot be allowed to persist' (OHCHR, 2015). After nearly a year of equivocation and defamation on the part of the GoB, all charges against Coc and the Maya organisers were dropped. Parenthetically, the criminalization and attempted humiliation of Indigenous human rights and land defenders has been and continues to be a preferred tactic of governments from across Central and South America (Guzmán Hormazábal, 2019; Mendez, 2018).

In short, what the Maya have been fighting for as Indigenous people historically, and what the MLA-TAA-JCS are continuing to defend presently, is self-determination and *se' komonil*. That is, community, life, and dignity. Indeed, *se' komonil* is at the heart of the Maya movement, as well as their Indigenous interpretation of autonomy and formula for 'development.' A version of development that equally undermines and counters orthodox notions of development, which have been defined and demarcated, writ large, by colonial worldviews, liberal Western modernity, and capitalist reason. Notably, youth are a key part of the Maya people's pursuit and process of dignity- and dream-driven (counter)development.

## **History and structure: the TAA, MLA, and JCS**

### **The TAA**

The Toledo Alcaldes Association (TAA) is an association of 78 traditional Indigenous leaders from the 39 Maya communities of Toledo District (UNDP, 2019). It is the main representative body and highest central authority of the Maya people in Southern Belize. A cornerstone of the Maya communities, social movement, and struggle, not to mention Maya culture, has been and remains the Alcalde system. It is the traditional (non-state) governance system of the Maya people. The Alcalde system, which was established and functioning in its Indigenous form prior to Spanish and British contact in the region, is rooted in the customary laws of the Maya villages and communities. Whilst not exclusively non-hierarchical, the ever-evolving system was more decentralised and dynamic than imperialist structures of authority (Mesh, 2017). Specifically, the Alcalde system is a localised form of Maya governance in Belize that is rooted in pre-Columbian modes of socio-political organisation, yet also has been shaped by what Bolland (2003, 131) refers to as 'the dialectic of colonization and

resistance.’ Meaning, the Maya had complex systems of governance which, as Rugeley (1995) notes in the case of the Yucatán, were disordered and eroded away at given that Spanish colonisers reduced the influence of Maya organisations down to the local level and community affairs. Despite the colonial distortions and co-optations, Maya elements such as the *batabs* (village chiefs, town caciques) along with the *a cuch cab* (councils), i.e. ‘those who carry the burden,’ and the *ah kulels* (delegates, representatives, mediators) survived. These features were adopted by the Spaniards in their attempts at indirect rule (Farriss, 1984), as well as serve as the foundation of contemporary Maya governance systems, which are regulated by customary law but discharge elements of statutory law (Penados, 2018).

Presently, each Maya community has two elected Alcaldes, resulting in a total of 78 Alcaldes across Toledo District (given there are 39 distinct communities). The lead up to the selection of Alcaldes involves neither campaigns nor elections. Being chosen to be an Alcalde is a result of building a track record of commitment to the community and dedication to the Maya people. In fact, most, if not all, of the men and women who become Alcaldes are farmers, workers of the land, and village and/or family members themselves, i.e. there are no career politicians, campaign managers, or distant elected officials in the Alcalde system (MLSB, 2019). When selected, Alcaldes for each respective community place themselves in the service of the people. That is, they take on both (non-state) judicial and administrative responsibilities. The duties associated with becoming an Alcalde are effortful and time-consuming. In many respects, the obligations of an Alcalde can best be thought of as weight or ‘cargo’ that must be figuratively ‘picked up and carried.’ Meaning, the position more accurately signifies that one has a burden of responsibility than it does they ‘won an election’ (MLSB, 2019).

In practice, Alcaldes guide and manage the use and occupancy of village lands, render decisions on disputes that arise between villagers, and issue resolutions on how discord and wrongdoings can be rectified and repaired. The Alcalde system is the ‘only legitimate Maya governance body that represents the Maya people collectively, with the TAA being the highest arbiter and custodian for Maya customary law’ (MLSB, 2019). In addition to nurturing the health and spirit of the community, Alcaldes organise and oversee *fajinas*. A *fajina* is a customary Maya practice of collective work that involves village members coming together to communally clean and perform upkeep of village lands (Willoughby, 2019). The *fajinas*, rather than merely being a chore or task to be completed, carry deep meaning for Maya communities. They are significant because they are at once a practice of communal cultural heritage, a traditional rite of passage, and a means for village members to register their interest in and ultimately be able to occupy and use a parcel of land for one’s family and subsistence.

The role of the Alcaldes, in short, is to cultivate peaceful, harmonious, and respectful social relations within their respective communities based upon time-



honoured ways of Maya organising, conflict-resolution, and customary law. Unsurprisingly, under the shadow of a Westminster modelled state and its attendant hierarchy, the Alcalde system has been a key target of government-sanctioned provocation and disavowal for years (Bolland, 2003; Penados, 2018).

## **The MLA**

The Maya Leaders Alliance advocates for over 21,000 Maya people across 39 Maya communities that reside in the hinterland of Toledo District, Southern Belize. As a mutable grassroots alliance, it is comprised of members from the JCS, TAA, and rural villages. Broadly, the MLA is struggling to build, much like the Zapatistas (who are also guided by Maya cosmovisión)—‘a world where many world’s fit’ (Gahman, 2019; Mora, 2017). The MLA is advancing this ambition in the face of both neoliberal extractivism and a repressive postcolonial state. Although the alliance was officially formed in 1999, its members have been involved in community outreach and mobilising for nearly 30 years. The MLA embodies the Maya people’s ongoing collective resistance, intergenerational spirit of revolt, and hopeful outlook for ‘another world’ (McNally, 2006), which dates back centuries (Bolland, 2003). The MLA also represent the 39 Maya communities of Toledo District nationally, regionally, and internationally on issues related to human rights violations, environmental racism, border conflicts, heritage destruction, and threats to cultural survival (ELAW, 2015).

With respect to organisational structure, the MLA is governed by a collective board known as the Maya Steering Committee. The steering committee’s function is to guide, advise, and ground the work of MLA on behalf of Maya villages. Meaning, the Maya communities dictate the work and efforts of the MLA rather than vice versa. The structure and character of the movement is at once reciprocal, interdependent, and relational. Steering committee members of the MLA include current Alcaldes (traditional democratically selected community leaders) from the TAA; a union of former Alcaldes; and other Maya member organisations and representatives inclusive of village activists and advocates (Gahman, Greenidge, and Penados 2020).

Board members of the MLA volunteer their time and actively seek commitment from Indigenous community leaders and Elders to maintain stewardship of the MLA’s mission. The MLA is located in Punta Gorda, Toledo District, Belize and often collaborates with a range of international universities, NGOs, and researchers to conduct engaged, culturally safe, participatory research. The research is subsequently put in the service of Maya communities in struggle, as well as partially provides the resources necessary to advance the MLA’s rights-based and anti-racist work.

In short, the MLA blossomed in the early 2000s partly in response to the state’s demand for a single interlocutor at a time when there were several disparate

Maya non-governmental organisations doing advocacy work and the TAA was temporarily not as potent of a community force as it had once been. Consequently, the MLA surfaced and grew in strength in order to serve as a vehicle for concerted action by the loose coalition of Maya NGOs that were operating at the time. Since the early-mid 2000s, then, the Maya have transformed and reshaped the MLA in response to the changing character of their struggle. As the TAA became stronger over the decade-plus that followed, the MLA became a mechanism through which past Alcaldes—leaders who have a long history of involvement in the struggle—could continue to be involved. The MLA, in turn, was transformed into a mechanism and forum where elders and other wisdom-bearers of the Maya struggle could remain active and involved. Today, rather than viewing and parcelling them off as separate entities, the Maya often refer to the MLA-TAA conjointly when speaking of organising.

### **The JCS**

The Julian Cho Society emerged in 2004 as a way of honouring and carrying forward the legacy of its namesake, Julian Armando Cho, a Mopan Maya schoolteacher born in the rural village of San Jose, Toledo District. Cho began a peaceful social movement in response to increasing encroachments upon Maya ancestral territories by logging and oil companies that were being granted concessions by the state (Anaya, 2008). In order to protect marginalised Mopan and Q'eqchi' Maya communities, livelihoods, culture, and bioregional ecosystems, Cho began organising to secure rights to traditional Maya lands. His untimely death in December 1998 was an enormous loss for the Maya people and the defence of their lands and resources.

The precise details surrounding the passing of Cho remain conspicuously both beclouded and unconfirmed (Duffy, 2002). Incidentally, his loss occurred just weeks after he received death threats resulting from the suspension of corporate logging in Southern Belize. Cho, as a vocal defender of human rights and outspoken land rights activist, had been demonstrating against the state-sanctioned concessions afforded to multinational private companies (Wainwright and Bryan, 2009). Noteworthy here is that the broader Central American region remains one of the most dangerous places in world apropos the targeting, suppression, and assassination of Indigenous land defenders (Jaitman, et al, 2017; LRAN, 2018).

In turn, the JCS, alongside its partner organisations the TAA and MLA, continue to honour and give continuity to the legacy of Cho. The coalition breathes life into Cho's memory by carrying on advocacy for both land and human rights in and across Toledo District. The emphasis of the movement's struggle, which endeavours to engender the principles and spirit of Cho, remains centred on social justice, environmental defence, self-determination, grassroots sustainable development, and the assertion of Indigenous dignity. In staying true to Cho's conviction for critically conscious and politically educated

young people, the JCS also provides scholarships and avenues for Maya youth to be involved in the movement. This is in addition to research internship opportunities they offer to non-Q'eqchi,' non-Mopan, and non-Maya international sympathisers and domestic allies.

In practice, the MLA and TAA are community partner organisations with JCS. The MLA's role in this solidaristic and mutually interdependent relationship is to bring together community partners that are working on Indigenous and human rights issues. This fosters collective visioning, synergy of efforts, and a concerted holistic approach to pursuing the long-term aspirations and dreams of the Maya people. Both the TAA and the MLA organise and operate based upon traditional Maya processes of decision making and Indigenous governance protocols (Willoughby, 2019). In the same vein, the JCS, much like the MLA, whilst never abandoning its initial mission has been transformed by the Maya people given the evolving nature of their struggle. The JCS, thus, has become the formalised (state-registered) non-governmental arm of the MLA-TAA. This allows the MLA and TAA to at once adopt and maintain Indigenous leadership, exist as independent organisations outside of the constraints of Westminster style state laws, and remain beholden to Maya cosmovisión and cultural protocols.

In sum, the diverse Maya constituency of MLA-TAA-JCS and the 39 communities comprise the Maya movement. The reciprocal relationship that exists amongst the coalition and villages ensures that the MLA—the point organisation for the majority of the political work conducted by the movement—operates in response to the needs and realities of the Maya people as a whole, across the entirety of Southern Belize. Notably, the Maya youth who co-authored this article and coordinated the camp detailed in sections to come are volunteers with the JCS.

## **Desire-based research**

Our research served as an intervention into and exploration of the in-situ development challenges the Maya of Toledo District are experiencing. Practically and methodologically, the camp included a photovoice project, art-based envisioning exercises, processes of consensus-based decision making, transverse walks, heritage site visits, envisioning sessions, speaker presentations, interactive games, and leisure time. Theoretically, the camp was a creative, engaged, and collective process of identifying and detailing the differing joys, pains, dreams, and *desires* held by Maya youth in an agrarian, postcolonial, Global Southern-Majority World context. Conviviality and critical consciousness served as key goals and watchwords for the camp's spirit and ethos (Freire, 2018; Illich, 1973).

The research practices, in turn, took a variety of flexible, semi-structured, and non-rigid forms, which included photography, narrative-writing, artistic expression, go-along interviews, communal dialogue sessions, and

prefiguration. Of note, is that the youth camp was primarily organised and coordinated by Maya youth themselves, many of whom are co-authoring of this article. In connecting the camp to academic literature, the research activities conducted by the youth were qualitative, community-based participatory-action methods, which took their cue from decolonial praxis (Atallah, 2018; Tuck and Yang, 2012). The design was further guided by principles being used within ‘desire-based’ research frameworks (Tuck, 2009). In addition, the fieldwork activities and processes of data collection were heavily influenced by decolonial (de Sousa Santos, 2015; Smith, 2013), anti-racist (Mohanty, 2013), and intersectional-feminist (Collins, 2016; Spivak, 2008) ethics and epistemologies.



*Maya youth organisers, camp attendees, and advisors from the MLA-TAA-JCS, alongside non-Indigenous and international accomplices and co-researchers, gather together to discuss, co-create, and plan the field activities for the youth gathering in Punta Gorda, Toledo District.*

Overall, then, what this eclectic, collaborative, and even playful research represents is documentation and evidence of Maya notions and practices of (counter)development (Penados and Chatarpal, 2015) and non-metaphorical decolonisation (Tuck and Yang, 2012). Furthermore, it highlights how these Maya notions and practices are anchored in—as well as being driven by—se’

*komonil*, i.e. togetherness, dignity, and the pluralistic yet shared dreams and desires of Indigenous community members themselves, inclusive of youth.

The overarching design of the project was inspired by Eve Tuck's (2009) proposal that communities in struggle, particularly research conducted with marginalised Indigenous and negatively racialised communities, eschew 'damage-centred' research and move towards research that is 'desire-based.' Her proposal to focus on desire over damage is neither meant to insinuate that the aftermaths and wounds of colonialism are 'over,' nor does Tuck argue that they should be denied or go unspoken of. Rather, Tuck is offering desire-based research as an 'epistemological shift' and 'antidote' towards the danger posed by damage-centred research, namely, 'that it is a pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community' (Tuck, 2009, 413).



*Maya youth, along with their collaborators and co-researchers, listen to spokesperson of the MLA, Cristina Coc, discuss Maya technology, biocultural heritage, innovation, and the significance of aj ralch'ooch ('Children of the Earth')—Maya identity.*

In further explaining the implications of damage-based research, particularly that which does not attend to the historical, structural, and ongoing practices and processes of racialisation and colonial power, Tuck writes:

...as I have noted, damage-centred research involves social and historical contexts at the outset, the significance of these contexts is regularly submerged. Without the context of racism and colonization, all we're left with is the damage, and this makes our stories vulnerable to pathologizing analyses. Our evidence of ongoing colonization by research—absent a context in which we acknowledge that colonization—is relegated to our own bodies, our own families, our own social networks, our own leadership. After the research team leaves, after the town meeting, after the news cameras have gone away, all we are left with is the damage.

Tuck's analysis here lucidly illustrates the fraught nature of damage-centred research, even that which is well-intentioned, that focuses upon or defines communities solely by what they are perceived to be lacking, deprived of, or are 'bleeding from.' In elaborating, Tuck argues research that asks or even demands communities and community members to 'show us your wounds' is as poisonous as it is hostile.

Of significance is Tuck avowal that desire-based research neither be viewed as an antonym nor polar opposite of damage-based research. That is, damage and desire are not mutually exclusive, but researching either requires a great deal of (pre)caution, reflection, and community consultation. In particular, with respect to what anticipated or unintended outcomes, either positive or negative, might emerge. The point Tuck asserts is not that research should forget or negate the historical and continued trauma inflicted by colonialism. More readily, she is contending that researchers must be discerning, circumspect, and deliberate about avoiding the pathologising tendencies that arise in research which focuses on damage. Here, Tuck notes that priority given to desire does not shy away from wrestling with pain but takes action against it by highlighting the intricacies and nuances of social action, empowerment, self-determination, sovereignty, and agency—as complex and paradoxical as all of these things can sometimes be.





*Juanita Ical, TAA Executive Member and Second Alcalde of her village, addresses the youth on gender and power relations, the importance of women being in leadership roles, and the key part women play in the Maya movement's resistance, resilience, and overall struggle.*

Tuck's (2009) call to desire-based practice pushes us to ask what might research produce if it looks beyond what is/who are being framed as broken, conquered, and despairing; and towards identifying where there is—as well as who is imbued with—wisdom, hope, joy, and dreams. In offering a cogent summary of a desire-based framework's ability to at once cast light upon hostile forces and explain injurious historical-contemporary contexts whilst doing depathologising work and celebrating 'survance' (Vizenor, 1994), regeneration (Alfred, 2005), and resurgence (Simpson, 2016)—Tuck succinctly states of desire-based research: 'Desire is involved with the *not yet* and, at times, the *not anymore*.'

With this methodological awareness of desire-based research in tow, our co-designed and collaborative project advanced with the goal of amplifying the voices and visions of Indigenous youth. And more precisely, we set out to illustrate how youth in Toledo District are mobilising to co-create the social, cultural, and economic relations—as well as political movement and Maya future—of their desire and dreams.



*Maya youth organisers and non-Indigenous co-researchers play games together to break the ice, familiarise themselves with the places each are from, and set a convivial tone for the site visits, photovoice project, and dream-based envisioning activities to come.*

## **Maya youth organising and authorship<sup>1</sup>**

### **The ‘Sounding of the Conch Shell’ youth camp**

The ‘Sounding of the Conch Shell’ (SOCS) youth camp was conceived by a group of Maya youth organisers who work and volunteer for the JCS committed to bringing Indigenous youth together and moving society forward. As Maya youth organisers, we are seeking to build a space of encounter and community for Maya youth of Southern Belize. Included in the camp were 15 JCS youth scholarship recipients, nine young women and six young men, whose ages ranged from 14-17. The SOCS camp aspired to create a space where Maya youth could begin to participate in dialogues on issues affecting their communities, develop their Indigenous leadership capacities, and highlight the importance of

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<sup>1</sup> This section and its corresponding subheadings are by the Maya youth. Namely, members of the JCS Youth Planning Team, including: Seferina Miss, Roberto Kus, Donna Makin, Florenio Xuc, Rosita Kan, and Elodio Rash. A non-refereed shorter version of this section is at: *Cultural Survival* (Creative Commons): <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/news/koef-grant-partner-spotlight-sounding-conch-shell-youth-camp>



community engagement—all while being cognisant of the crucial role women play in traditional Maya governance.

The conch shell, for which the camp is named, is a tool that has been used by the Maya for generations to invite people to attend community meetings. The conch is sounded by a designated person appointed by a village Alcalde (traditional Maya leader). When the reverberations of the conch shell are heard, villagers are signalled to attend a gathering (referred to as an ‘*ab’ink*’) where they may express their concerns towards any public issues that arise at the meeting. This practice of sounding the conch shell to call people together to an *ab’ink* is what we symbolically adapted for the initial SOCS youth camp. More specifically, *ab’ink* is a Maya term referring to a communal meeting comprised of listening, dialogue, and collective participation. In short, an *ab’ink* involves coming together to join hearts and minds in order to *create*. Notably, the *ab’ink* is part of the Maya creation story told in the *Popul Vuh* (MLA-TAA-JCS, 2019).



*Maya youth, with collaborators and co-researchers, gather in Laguna Village for the SOCS gathering. The resilience, energy, and commitment of the Maya youth is an essential element in the continued development of hard working, peaceful, and self-governing communities.*

Overall, the SOCS gathering, iterations of which will occur in the future, was a place for concerned Maya youth to meet each other and create. We also saw it as part of a *process* (rather than one-time event) and essential first step towards generating what will be an ongoing series of youth assemblies. SOCS served as a call for and concrete effort in Maya youth participating in the co-crafting of their futures. Moreover, it was a space of encounter where we, as Indigenous youth, could discuss our joys, pains, and aspirations, and develop action plans to address any pressing issues we identified as being in need of intervention or resolution.

### **Why did we organise the SOCS youth camp?**

The sharing and transmission of traditional Maya knowledge from one generation to the other is of grave concern to youth as we are beginning to realise we are losing part of our culture, our heritage, our identity, and ultimately our knowledge. The SOCS was thereby created not only to be a space where youth could gather to regain traditional knowledge, but also a space where they become acquainted with other likeminded youth to start to hone their leadership capacities, and begin addressing concerns they have about their communities and experiences as youth.



*Maya youth reconvene inside to listen together, share and present their narratives, and describe photographs they have taken after an outdoor transect walk that constituted a pilot run-through and practice round of the photovoice project.*



The dissemination of both traditional knowledge and leadership capability to Maya youth from Elders and older youth activists and organisers was a key focal point for the SOCS gathering. The participation of youth in the development of their communities was another area the SOCS gathering set out to address.

In turn, the SOCS gathering was organised with the hope and goal of inspiring Maya youth to become enthusiastically involved in shaping the future of their communities. That is, the youth camp was structured to build the confidence and courage of youth so they would feel empowered to confront complex challenges and sensitive issues within their respective communities head on. Moreover, it was a place for them to see and learn more about Maya heritage. To collectively dream together about and discuss the future they desire to be a part of—and would like to co-create. The definitive goal of the SOCS camp, then, was to inspire youth to contribute to the construction of peaceful, united, hard-working, and self-governing Maya communities.

### **What did we do at the SOCS youth camp?**



*A Maya spiritual leader begins the SOCS gathering with a traditional Maya ceremony to ask for protection and wisdom. Maya spiritual ceremonies are a means of connecting us to both our spiritual realm and inner spirituality with*

*the pinnacle point of the ceremony being the harmonisation of our ancestors' spirits with our present struggles and undertakings.*

The initial SOCS gathering was a one-week camp facilitated by the Maya youth organisers in partnership with the University of Manitoba's (Canada) Community Service Learning Programme in collaboration with the Center for Engaged Learning Abroad (Belize); Aboriginal Youth Opportunities (AYO) of Manitoba, Canada; and the University of Liverpool's Power, Space, & Cultural Change Unit (United Kingdom), which represent three groups with pluralistic commitments to decolonial praxis, global solidarity, local community action, and grassroots social movements. Each organisation also includes select members who have connections with activists from the MLA and JCS, making the joint collaboration an easy fit. We began the camp with a traditional Maya ceremony. Maya spirituality is of great significance to our culture. It is a way to communicate with our ancestors, spirits, and Creator to ask for guidance, wisdom, and protection. Hence, it was only fitting that we launched the SOCS gathering by asking our ancestors for guidance and wisdom as we embarked on dreaming about a sustainable and just future for both our generation and generations yet to come.

To set the tone and open the minds of the youth, keynote presentations were given by Indigenous leaders inclusive of Maya Alcaldes (both men and women), Indigenous rights activists (both local and international), Maya spiritual leaders, and other supporters, sympathisers, and associates. In addition, youth speakers from the grassroots movement AYO, of Cree and Anishinaabe nations respectively, shared their personal stories of youth organising and involvement. This stimulated the 15 Maya youth participants to realise the necessity and importance of amplifying and centring Indigenous voices, as well as building solidarity and supporting one another as part of a youth movement. The week-long SOCS camp also included field visits to Maya heritage sites.



*Maya youth, alongside non-Indigenous co-researchers, break to eat homemade lunch during their heritage site visits and village walks as part of the field activities and photovoice project.*

The camp was divided into three key segments: 1) a photovoice project; 2) an arts-based dreaming session; and 3) the conception and development of an action plan that would later be implemented by the Maya youth attendees. For the photovoice project, the 15 youth participants were given cameras to capture images from differing Maya communities throughout Toledo District. The primary aim was to encourage the youth to take photographs of sites, places, and things that resonated within them; in particular, the joys, pains, and dreams they have and experience as both Maya people and as youth.

The ‘Dreaming of Our Future’ exercise was conducted to provide a medium through which Indigenous youth could share their hopes and aspirations. The third key activity was drafting an action plan, which included themes identified in the photovoice and arts-based envisioning exercises. The camp culminated by assembling Maya Elders, men, women, and spiritual healers to listen to the voices of Maya youth. The closing event was one we especially wanted to



resonate with our elders, namely the TAA Executive and other Maya elders who were invited as special guests on the final day. At the closing, which included traditional Maya song, dance, attire, and food, we communicated our action plan. The action plan was presented by Maya youth to the TAA Executive and Elders to demonstrate that the youth have genuine concerns for their communities, and are motivated to contribute to shaping peaceful, more united, and resilient Maya communities.



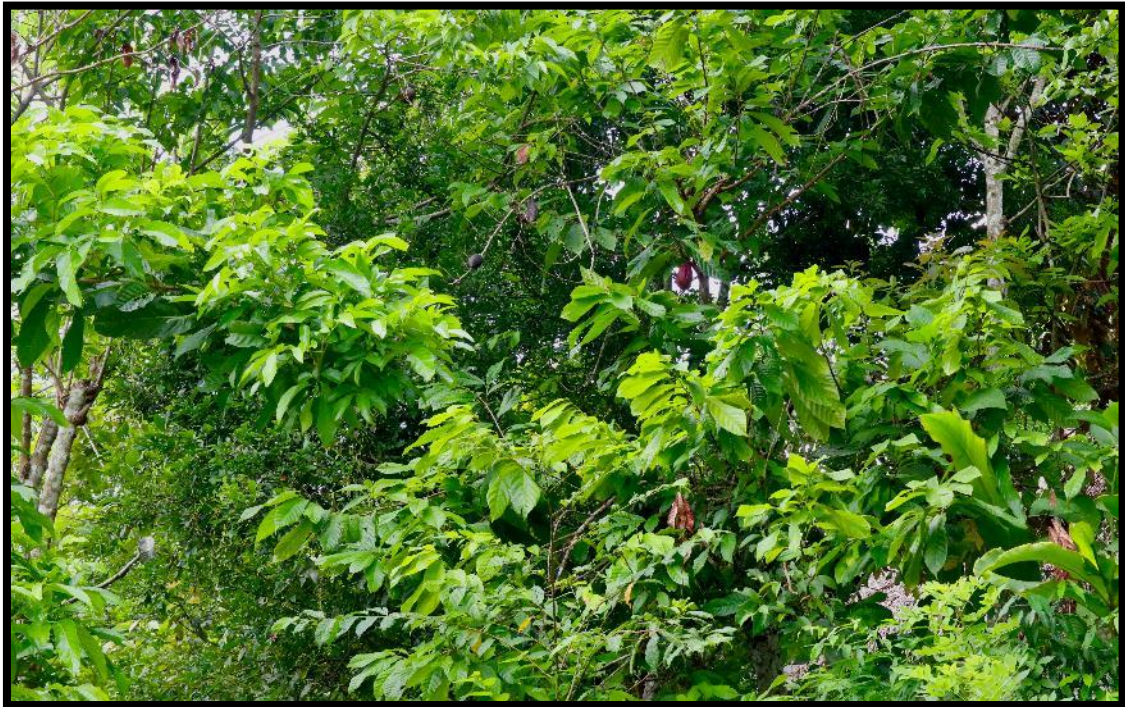
*Maya youth present their photovoice images and dreams on the final day of the gathering to community members before enjoying traditional Maya fare, song, and dance. ‘Togetherness’—‘Se’ Komonil’—is embedded in our culture. It is by working together with our leaders, elders and youth we will be successful in maintaining our traditions, knowledge, and philosophy.*

The closing of the SOCS gathering culminated with a traditional Maya ceremony at Nim Li Punit, a Maya Temple and heritage site. During the ceremony we offered our thanks to the creator and our ancestors for their guidance, wisdom, and protection throughout the initial SOCS gathering, as well as asked for further wisdom as we continue our journey.

## **What were the research activities of the SOCS youth camp?**

### ***Photovoice***

The photovoice project challenged the youth to fully immerse themselves in their communities and to connect with their joys, pains, and dreams. Participants were separated into teams to travel along differing routes across Southern Belize Maya visiting multiple Maya communities. The mobile method was as a means that enabled the youth to see more villages and heritage sites than usual whilst capturing photos and drafting narratives they would like to share with their peers and Elders. The youth, armed with cameras, were able to take photos related to the strengths, challenges, opportunities, and threats that are being experienced by Maya communities and culture. During the photovoice reflection, one team spoke on the significance of embracing culture and heritage, another addressed the importance of education in liberating one's mind, and one team highlighted the importance of protecting the Earth and the resources She provides.



*Photo taken by Maya youth participant as part of the photovoice project (narrative below):*

*'The cocoa tree is an important element to the Maya life. The cocoa drink is a channel for youth to reconnect with our ancestors to maintain our traditions. Us youths may well accomplish this by gathering with our Elders to enable the continuity of traditional oral knowledge.'*

The youth's stance on cultural revival, gender equality, and environmental protection was adamant. These were themes that continually re-emerged throughout the week-long SOCS camp. In addition, the youth were particularly enthusiastic when they realised their peers had photographed and spoke about similar themes and held concerns in common—they saw they were not the only ones thinking about cultural revival, environmental protection, and being involved. That is, Maya youth at once realised the potential they possess and the change they can bring about if they unit and continue to share their collective thoughts, dreams, and desires about what type of communities, and world, they would like to live in.

### ***Dreaming of Our Future***

The 'Dreaming of Our Future' exercise solicited youth for aspirations about their communities and futures. The SOCS gathering and the 'Dreaming of Our Future' envisioning activities were constitutive components of a larger ongoing initiative by the movement to articulate a dream and course of alternative development for both Maya communities and the land. The dreaming exercise involved art-based methodologies that are informed by communal practices that are part of the Maya *ab'ink*. Participants were posed with the question: 'Where do you see your community in the next 5-10 years?' They were then handed a clean canvas to illustrate, paint, and cast their dreams upon. The dreams shared by the youth throughout the exercise are dreams Maya people have continuously envisioned over the course of our historical and present-day struggles.





*Maya youth, after their arts-based envisioning session, organise drawings and stories into themes and action items. The ‘Dreaming of Our Future’ exercise was modelled after the Maya ab’ink and provided youth the opportunity to share their joys, pains, and dreams.*

The envisioning exercise produced colourful drawings of future dreams about living in peace, taking care of the environment, and practicing Maya culture. In addition, many of the youth drew and coloured scenes recognising the importance of good health, gender just social relations, and the value of critical education. A few drawings also represented the significance of continuing and passing down Maya traditional knowledge and customs. In short, they were dreams of Indigenous resurgence and flourishing.

From the dreaming exercise we, along with the other Maya youth participants, identified six themes for promotion and continued action: 1) Maya youth leadership; 2) Land; 3) Education; 4) Gender Equality; 5) Identity, culture and traditional knowledge; and 6) Health. Using these themes as inspiration, the youth developed action points that proposed ways to either enhance their joys or remedy their pains, as well as achieve the dreams and desired activities they intend to carry out in 2020. The Maya youth, via the envisioning exercise, made clear their awareness of issues faced by their communities and demonstrated they are willing to continue the struggle for Maya rights, recognition, and resurgence.



*Photo taken by Maya youth participant as part of the photovoice project (narrative below):*

*'This picture creates happiness within me, seeing individuals encouraging women to become leaders in their community, because they can be anything. In my mom's generation, she said that females can't just do anything without the father or husband's permission or can't voice their opinions too. Women now attend community meetings, can voice their opinions and become leaders. Sometimes, women execute better than men. To further improve the current situation more spaces need to be created for women. To engage women because being a leader may appear as male work... but men and women have equal rights, so women can be leaders.'*

### **Action plan and future mobilising**

The youth were grouped to initiate conversation on how they could begin to address the concerns pinpointed in the envisioning exercise. From the six themes identified, the Maya youth further narrowed down to three that they felt needed the utmost attention, the three themes they selected are: 1) Identity, Culture and Traditional Knowledge 2) Maya Youth Leadership and 3) Gender Equality.





*Maya youth gather with family members, Alcaldes, and village members to share their action plans and perspectives on a sustainable and just future from their arts-based dreaming exercise. The amplification of young people voices will be beneficial to the future is heard in every corner of the world. However, this is even more authentic for Maya youths. Their energy and spirits are radiating with the desire to be productive Maya people, anchored in Maya philosophy.*

A group felt that the way to build the youth leadership skills of the present Maya youth was for them to collectively learn from their elders. They expressed the need for exemplary leadership in their communities and further stressed on the need for the youth to be taught the skills that will make them morally grounded, committed and full of integrity. They stated they would like to have another gathering focusing solely on what it takes to be an impeccable traditional leader. Another group's action point focussed on gender equality - they thought that they should sensitise the youth on the importance of women in traditional Maya governance and they felt that this should be done through the mediums of workshops inclusive of youths, elders and traditional leaders. They wish to empower young women to become actively involved in the affairs of their communities and inform young men on the importance of giving respect to women. A third group reasoned that they could identify elders in their respective communities who they could invite to give them teachings on various traditional practices, ensuring the passing on of knowledge from one generation to another. It will be the hub to build connections between the young and elder. These workshops will be spanned across the year 2020 and will have the youth learning traditional practices and knowledge they may have not had the chance

to learn growing up, honouring our ancestors in the process and ensuring that traditional knowledge survives in this generation and for generations to come.



*Youth visiting the sacred temple and heritage site at Nim Li Punit to raise the Maya flag during the photovoice project of the SOCS gathering. (narrative below)*

*‘The SOCS gathering was consistent in character with the larger Maya struggle in revitalising our culture and ensuring the protection of our land rights and human rights as Indigenous people. The ethos of the gathering was one of harmony, illumination, and respect among youth, with all expressing the importance of such spaces in joining their thoughts, words, and dreams.’*

### **What comes next?**

The Maya youth have spoken. They need to be a part of decision-making processes, even if it is just to be informed about new developments within and across their communities. They have made their mandate. In light of this, what is beyond the initial SOCS camp? Common ground related to the joys, pains, and dreams of the youth has been established. Maya youth organisers are now pursuing the action plans they developed fervently and are willing and hoping to

collaborate with other Indigenous groups to create their own versions of SOCS, and endeavouring to hold an annual SOCS camp in Southern Belize. The Maya youth organisers are also continuing to actively seek guidance from their mentors and elders in the MLA-TAA-JCS. For the reason that, as the Maya voice, it is by *se' komonil*—togetherness—that we conquer every challenge we have—particularly neo-imperialism and capitalism.

Progressive work has already begun on calibrating the ideas generated by the 15 youth who attended the SOCS camp. Holding events developed from the action plan throughout the rest of 2020 are on the Maya youth agenda. Issues related to gender equality, primarily shedding light on women in governance, masculinity, women's rights, and gender stereotyping, have all been made priorities. Secondly, an emphasis on Maya youth leadership and future mobilising was stressed. Meaning, we identified the need for youth to be present at every Alcaldes Assembly and on the Alcaldes Steering Committee. We feel it crucial that youth collaborate with the TAA, and that every community meeting conducted by Alcaldes be more inclusive of youth and women. Thirdly, we identified Traditional Knowledge and Practices as a topic of importance. Our aim going forward is to see youth be informed, included, and even contribute to upcoming projects and workshops that will ensure that Maya knowledge and *cosmovisión* are both revered and transferred.

In sum, the initial SOCS was a success. The projection of another SOCS gathering next year with a different goal to tackle or build upon what was started at this year's camp is now being planned. The Sounding of the Conch Shell camp, which was led and organised by Maya youth, will contribute to the construction of peaceful, united, hard-working and self-governing Maya communities through the continued assembling and mobilising of Maya youth.

## Conclusion

To end, the Sounding of the Conch Shell was an apt name for the gathering. It provided space for Maya youth to engage with each other, the reality(ies) of their communities, and to dream of the sustainable and just future(s) they desire, would like to live in, and will co-create. And, just as it has for generations, the conch shell continues to echo through Maya villages and across the landscape of Belize. It reverberates to call community members together for an ongoing *ab'ink*.

The SOCS gathering, in turn, was an *ab'ink* where Maya youth could come together to discuss challenges, strengths, problems, assets, threats, conflicts, joys, pains, happiness, hardships, solutions, and their respective gifts and plans of action related to their dreams. Notably, the conch shell is traditionally sounded by the Alcalde or a person assigned by the Alcalde. And in the case of the SOCS gathering, the Maya youth were handed the conch, afforded the opportunity to come together, and asked to share their vision. In turn, youth directly involved with the MLA-TAA-JCS took up the mantle and sounded the



conch. Markedly, Maya youth across Toledo District responded, as did several of their comrades, compañer@s, and accomplices, both Indigenous and otherwise.

What can be taken from the SOCS gathering, then, is confirmation that Maya youth—Indigenous youth—are mobilising under the shadow of state power and directly in front of capitalist threat, unapologetically, to create spaces for engagement. The *ab'ink* of the Maya youth has begun, their place of listening has been cultivated, and they are already listening to each other. And as they listen and share, they are demonstrating their capacity as Indigenous youth to at once imagine and build *an(Other)* world—a world that honours the past and opens up to the future. A world that is rooted in Maya heritage, culture, and cosmovisión, but also a world that welcomes and provides space for *Other* worlds and—to call back to the Zapatista quote that opened this article—‘*Otherly*’ dreams.

Indeed, in the face of state, structural, and slow violence the Maya youth have responded with dreams, agency, action, and an assertion of their dignity. They have also responded by collectively breathing life into *se' komonil*—community and togetherness. Undeniably, the message the youth have sent is that the Maya are neither static nor to be pitied, but that they have survived, are resurgent, and beginning to build the sustainable and just future they both desire and deserve.

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