

# Disruptive Bricolage Indigenous Politics, Development and Migration in Guatemala

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## Article abstract

For many indigenous communities in the western highlands of Guatemala, transnational migration is considered critical to community survival. This paper analyzes how extreme migration enables new strategies of social formation and community governance for those who remain. My work builds on the scholarship of “afterlives” that calls for an examination of how historical trajectories embed themselves in contemporary social, cultural, and institutional configurations. Migration can productively be considered in terms of its afterlives. Through this frame, I illustrate how indigenous community members navigate conflicting ideologies of work, progress, and development as they collaborate with non-governmental organizations to support migration prevention initiatives. I argue that community members strategically draw on the Mayan cosmovision to contest western knowledge paradigms of development while simultaneously attending to the demands of external institutional legibility, and in so doing create novel formations of collective governance.

# DISRUPTIVE BRICOLAGE

## *Indigenous Politics, Development and Migration in Guatemala*

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### Introduction

“They are like a training machine, that what they get their funding for,” Catherine sighed with frustration. I was sitting with Catherine outside, in the sun, the hum of lawnmowers somewhere in the background, as we discussed a collaboration between *Nuestro Futuro* (NF) and another local non-profit called the *Mayan Development Foundation* (MDF)<sup>2</sup>. MDF had approached NF in 2018 after receiving funds from the European Union to do organizational capacity building with indigenous community organizations in areas of extensive migration. The stated goal of MDF is to help communities achieve “dignified development”. Catherine was frustrated. She had just returned to the United States from Guatemala, her first trip since the global pandemic, and had learned that MDF was requiring the *Nuestro Futuro* members to leave work and attend bi-weekly training sessions. According to Catherine’s conversations with NF members, some of these trainings were useful, but Catherine worried they were largely disconnected from the aims of NF and that the missed work would result in lower weekly pay for NF members. Despite these concerns, the additional resources *Nuestro Futuro* received as a result of their work with MDF, and their relationship-by-proxy to major transnational development organizations, were benefits hard to overlook during this time of extreme economic and social precarity.

*Nuestro Futuro* was founded in approximately fifteen years ago in a Maya Mam community I call Tnam Toj Qyol. Since the 2000s, Tnam Toj Qyol has become a community of extensive transnational migration, with

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2. Names of local people, organizations, and locations have been changed to protect the identity of my interlocutors.

approximately one third of *Qyolenses*<sup>3</sup> living in the United States at any given time. The high rate of transnational migration from Tnam Toj Qyol leads to attention from various development agencies as irregular migration is increasingly positioned as a “crisis” by migrant receiving countries in the global north. In 2006, a group of migrant *Qyolenses* returned from the United States to Tnam Toj Qyol and began *Nuestro Futuro* with the goal of creating local opportunities as alternatives to migration. Their collective experiences as indigenous migrants in the United States called into question the logics and assumed benefits of transnational migration. The location of NF in a community of extensive migration and its organizational goal of enabling alternatives to migration have drawn the attention of larger development organizations, leading to often complex relationships between a transnational web of development actors and the community members who make up *Nuestro Futuro*. Migration and its effects significantly influence daily life in Tnam Toj Qyol, how people access material and social resources, the structuring of kinship relationships, gender and power, as well as the types of community development that are supported and encouraged. Moving away from reinforcing the binary of those who migrate and those who remain towards a diasporic framing of community, this article asks what political possibilities are produced at the interstices of migration, development, and indigeneity? Given this contingent space of political and social negotiation, how are everyday politics embodied and performed?

### Governance, Development, and Indigeneity

Since the 1990s, scholarship documenting the articulations between market forces, the state, and local communities has laid out the various social, political, and cultural contexts through which development takes place. This includes the entanglements of development and neoliberal frameworks prioritizing standardization and efficiency (Mosse 2005) and the emergence of a cultural politics of development (Arce 2000, Escobar 1997). Additionally, research on how development policy is translated across domains points to the complex and unintended iterations of policies as they are implemented by actors on the ground (Anders 2005, Gow 2008, Mosse 2011). Critical to this scholarship on development is the connection between developmentalist projects and conceptualizations of modernity. These cultural and societal conceptualizations perpetuate logics of who and what are “modern,” and reinforce the binary between the traditional (and of the past) and the modern (and of the present).

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3. A pseudonymized name for how community residents refer to themselves.

Modernity has always been a moving target, an ideological construct with disciplining techniques that become taken for granted in developmentalist projects. Historically, the prevailing purpose of development was the undoing and eradication of the “‘traditional’ cultural and institutional obstacles that were assumed to block ‘progress’” in order to help the non-modern “catch-up” (Arce and Long 2000, 5). Viewed as threats to the modernist project of nation-building, indigenous peoples are often positioned as a development “problem” to be solved (Povinelli 2002; Smith *et al.* 1990). This results in public-private development partnerships that operate on the premise of disciplining indigenous bodies so that they meet the needs of a modernist state and enable economic expansion (Oglesby 2004). While the stated aims of development have shifted towards a framework of supporting the “cultural” rights of indigenous communities, this shift has not dismantled enduring structures of disenfranchisement of indigenous peoples (Hale 2002). Despite the fact that contemporary development projects emphasize their work as being “in partnership” with local communities and position themselves as collaborators and supporters (rather than implementors) of development, the “rationalities of development” (Mosse 2011) continue to be grounded in taken-for-granted assumptions of “progress” — a progress that often relies on western notions of expertise, rational institutionalism, and individual advancement.

Scholarship documenting how indigenous communities respond to public-private development partnerships demonstrates the complex ways that local actors creatively appropriate, reinterpret, and push back against developmentalist agendas (Beck 2017; Chong 2010; Gow 2008; Fulmer *et al.* 2008; Martinez 2017; McAllister 2009), and conversely, how development actors can strategically appropriate local actor’s worldviews to garner their support programs that are grounded in free-market ideologies and social inequality (Copeland 2015). This heterogeneity in how market forces, governance, and indigenous politics articulate is often grounded in histories of state-sponsored violence and indigenous disenfranchisement. Absent from these analyses is the emerging impact of migration for indigenous communities, and the ways in which living in communities of extensive migration comes to complicate moments of encounter and political negotiation between community members and development actors.

### **Disruptive bricolage**

This article examines how development is negotiated in communities of extensive migration through the performance and embodiment of everyday

politics. Rather than reinscribing the binary of migrant and non-migrant onto community members, I analyze Tnam Toj Qyol within the framework of diaspora, focusing on the community as a *space of migration* where the affective and embodied nature of migratory effects infuse everyday life and possibility regardless of individual migratory trajectories. I show how migratory effects intersect with the social, material, and epistemological worlds of community members, and how indigenous actors, through their everyday political encounters, strategically draw on and destabilize the cultural/political and authentic/modern binaries that still undergird state policy and development work in a practice I call *disruptive bricolage*.

In illuminating this practice of disruptive bricolage, I have two principle aims: to ethnographically demonstrate how extensive migration articulates with development in indigenous communities; and to explore the moments of rupture made possible in this space; moments that are not just rejections of or alignments with development, but complex instances of political encounter and negotiation that upset taken-for-granted schemas of political possibility. In addition to building on scholarship of development and indigenous politics, my analysis reconsiders the concept of *bricolage* (Levi Strauss 1962), attending to community member's critical practices of refusal, citation, and strategically deployed essentialisms to show how people combine, rupture and complicate taken-for-granted positionalities within the paradigm of community development.<sup>4</sup> The work of the *bricoleur* is to make do with what is there, to modify and recombine elements in the creation of new forms (Bastide 1970; Duncan 2011; Duymedjian *et al.* 2010). I define *disruptive bricolage* as the repurposing and recombining of spatial, temporal, and political forms where the significance of the

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4 I draw on postcolonial scholarship of "refusal" coming out of black and indigenous studies (Campt 2017; Sharpe 2016; Simpson 2007, 2014) that positions refusal as the continual rejection of ongoing coloniality. This work pushes back against the intellectual tendency to position people as either subjugated or agentive in relation to structures of power. I use Spivak's (1990) notion of strategic essentialisms to illustrate how indigenous community members living in the wake of migration strategically draw on Mayan identity and cosmivision as they navigate conflicting ideologies of work, progress, and development in their collaboration with non-governmental organizations. Spivak's strategic essentialism argues that given the pull between universal discourses and specificity, it is often strategically advantageous to draw on essentialist understandings in order to achieve specific practical outcomes. My use of the word "citation" here refers to Butler's (1997) work on political possibility existing within one's capacity to engage in citational practices which allow for actors to pre-signify meaning upon which everyday political encounters are built.

component pieces remains the same, but their recombination allows for a rupture in how gender, authority, identity, and belonging are embodied in and through political encounters. It is a rupture that forces us to rethink what composing politics in these complex spaces of engagement means.

### Methodological Note

The data for this article are from a larger ethnographic project with took place in Guatemala and the United States between 2015 and 2019. Early in my field work, the director of NF invited me to collaborate on several community initiatives. Over the course of many months, I developed close and enduring relationships with many members of the organization, and they later became my primary interlocutors. I was invited into their households and to join them as they worked, we shared meals and walks around town, and my daughter played with their children. I attended community meetings where the governance structure of NF and its relationship to transnational partners was negotiated, and I was present for intimate conversations in which community members worked through the ambivalent realities of these negotiations.

In addition to this deep ethnographic engagement, I conducted 49 formal interviews with NF members, the Guatemalan director and U.S. based coordinator, related NGO actors, and unaffiliated town residents. These semi-structured interviews took place over various meetings and across many months. Interviewing in this way allowed for a slow ethnographic unravelling, and a sustained opportunity for me to learn with the people who generously guided me through their complex personal and communal histories. For most of my interlocutors, their first language was Mam; however, because of a process of *castellanización* they experienced in primary school, they all also spoke Spanish. It is worth noting that both I and the people I worked with were communicating in our second languages, and for my interlocutors this was the language of colonization. I interpreted my ethnographic data through a multi-round iterative coding process using the Atlas.ti qualitative coding software. I coded for both emic and etic categories to establish and validate relevant patterns across disparate data points.

### Migration as a “Problem”

How a problem becomes construed is often more meaningful than the “problem” itself. The capacity to define a problem is embedded in

relations of power—who has the ability to determine when any given social reality becomes a problem? To whom is it problematic? How a problem is constructed also determines its imagined solutions. Since the brutal physical violence of colonialism, through the structural violence of enduring coloniality indigenous Guatemalans are almost uniformly positioned as the “problem” of the Guatemalan nation-state (Salazar 2014; Smith *et al.* 1990). Indigenous education, political organization, gendered relations, family structure and planning, nutrition, land management practices and, more recently, immigration all have been problematized zones for external intervention. As my friend and interlocutor Marta explained to me in one of our interviews, “Guatemala has been the laboratory of the foreigner” (personal communication, January 13, 2019) There is the sense that anyone with resources can come in and act on what they imagine to be the problems of the people, offering up solutions that may have little to no relevance in the local context, but are legible as “appropriate” to the Western world.

The emergence and proliferation of NGOs in Guatemala is routinely associated with the end of the thirty-year-long internal conflict, and a Guatemalan state that was either unwilling or unable to provide social welfare services to the majority of its citizens (Rohloff *et al.* 2011). The NGO sector, which is both prolific and largely unregulated, tends to be focused on the lives and livelihoods of Guatemala’s indigenous population, forcing “everyday negotiations” (Beck 2017) with organizations whose ideological foundations are frequently constructed through non-indigenous formulations of individual human rights and attachments to western neoliberal notions of progress and modernity. The opening vignette of this article illustrates some of these tensions in the relationship between *Nuestro Futuro* and the Maya Development Fund. Community organizations and their members often find themselves having to navigate a web of external expectations in order to gain access to the resources they need. The push towards credentialism and endless “training” that Catherine was lamenting is one example of how developmentalist ideologies are structured into resource allocation.

### In the Space of Migration

As mentioned in the introduction, *Nuestro Futuro* (NF) was founded fifteen years ago by a group of Maya Mam who had migrated from Tnam Toj Qyol and then returned to the community. Marco, who was one of the original founders, is today the local coordinator. Catherine, who is North American, is still based in the United States but until the

COVID-19 pandemic, had traveled to Guatemala every month to assist in the organizational operations, particularly in managing business logistics for *Nuestro Futuro's* weavers, whose goods Catherine helps sell to North American consumers. In addition to a weaving business, *Nuestro Futuro's* members have a carpentry shop, laying hens, an internet café, a program for educational scholarships, and an on-site pre-school. The founders' experiences as Mam indigenous migrants in the United States are woven into the vision, mission, and operations of NF. They are foundational to how the organization is structured. The ideologies that ground the work of NF are inescapably bound to the indigeneity of its members and their lives in the wake of migration. These factors are not separable from one another; they are mutually informing and produce an everyday politics that draws simultaneously on indigenous epistemologies, relationships with development actors, and knowledges that emerge through the migratory experiences.

I use Marco's personal story, and his work as the current coordinator of NF, to illuminate this process. During his youth in Tnam Toj Qyol, migration to the United States was not yet commonplace. Most families engaged in circular migration to the coast in order to augment their incomes working on large plantations during the costal growing season, returning to the highlands once the harvest was completed. With the changing climate, costal migration as a strategy for economic survival became less effective, and in the 1990s, men from Tnam Toj Qyol began migrating northwards instead. As a teenager, Marco was one of the first from the community to make the trip north. In telling his personal story during our first of three interviews, he explained his time in the United States as "time that gave me the possibility to know many cultures, know different personalities, study a little of the history of Guatemala, during which I became the person I am today. When I emigrated, I did know anything about why I had emigrated" (personal communication, December 7, 2018). Around the same time, more men from Tnam Toj Qyol made the journey north, settling in the same East Coast community as Marco. It was during this time that Marco developed a growing consciousness over how he viewed his status as a migrant, his relationship to his indigeneity and his community, and the vision he had for his own future and the collective futures of Tnam Toj Qyol.

After arriving on the East Coast, Marco signed up for a community ESL course run by a local non-profit. Through these classes, he became connected to a wider community of immigrant rights activists. He began going to presentations on immigrant and women's rights, participating in



marches, and learning about racism in the United States. During this time, the town he lived in was attempting to pass ordinances around housing, noise, and the use of public space that specifically targeted the growing immigrant population. This strategy of criminalizing immigrant populations for the ways in which they occupy space is not new and was increasingly common in the 1990s and early 2000s, as non-urban centers experienced growing rates of migrant settlement (Rodriguez 2017). Marco helped organize other migrants from Tnam Toj Qyol in a fight against these town ordinances. His message to the other migrants was, “Lets figure out why they want to get rid of us, and we are going to tell them that we are here struggling, that they should give us an opportunity, please, don’t get rid of us, because we are also poor in our own countries, and we want to help our families, we want to have a dignified life (*vida digna*), a just life (*vida justa*)” (personal communication, December 7, 2018). Marco described himself to me as always having been drawn to activism, but it was through his contacts with activists in the United States and through a process he describes as *autoformación* that he began to question his circumstances and learn the history behind them.

When I went to the United States, the question was, “Why are you going to the United States?” The answer was simple, poverty. I need to survive, I need a dignified life, a different life. But, why does poverty exist? Who causes poverty?...I arrived in the United States, I began to read, to know with the help of many people the history of Guatemala, and I realized that historically speaking the United States has played an important role in our lives. I began to say, “I’m poor, but this is a strategy. They sold me a religion that is not mine and they began to speak poorly about my cosmovision, the power of my grandfathers, the ancestral knowledge and respect. I said to myself, “Wow, it’s different. Now I know why I emigrated. I didn’t emigrate, they took me out of my country, and that is different.” (personal communication, December 7, 2018)

Marco presents migration as a “strategy” not of the person migrating, but of those who have historically kept indigenous communities in disempowered positions. As a result, he doesn’t describe himself as immigrating, but rather says, “they took me out of my country.” Given that remittances from Guatemalan migrants make up almost 14% of the Guatemalan GDP as of 2019<sup>5</sup>, while state spending on social welfare and infrastructure has historically hovered under 10% of GDP, migration is effectively a development technique of the Guatemalan government, particularly for rural indigenous communities who receive little state

5. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=GT>

investment in social welfare. In this retelling, Marco shifts the paradigm of migration away from individualist migrant/non-migrant binaries, drawing on deeper political and historical experiences of colonization and dispossession. He ties together contemporary migration with the violence of religious evangelizing and the systematic degradation of his ancestral knowledge.

In 2006, he decided to voluntarily return to Tnam Toj Qyol. He was exhausted by the life he had been forced to live in the United States and felt strongly that he could return home to “create something different” for his home community, he could “create a future without migration.” He attributes his ability to analyze the circumstances in his home community and work for a different future to both to his time in the United States and to his epistemological and ontological grounding within Tnam Toj Qyol. He explains the organization’s work as follows,

We believe, if we sow this work that we are doing for ten years or for twenty years, we will see the consequences over time. We are going to have a better society, stable, critical, proud of its roots, like I am...I am grateful to have been born in Tnam Toj Qyol from the roots of great and respected people, with strong knowledges, they have given us names, some people call us indigenous, other *indios*, other Mayas, but we continue on with this investigation into who we are and where we come from. (personal communication, December 7, 2018)

Marco credits having migrated with giving him the ability to identify the continuities between enduring coloniality and anti-indigenous racism. As an individual, it was only through his personal migration that a new vision for his community became possible, a vision he would go on to share through his work with NF after his voluntary return to Guatemala in 2006. While Marco’s story is particularly salient because of his role in founding and leading NF, I frequently heard migration described as a process of *autoformación* that helped people — both migrants themselves, and their families back home — reconsider their relationship to their indigeneity as it connected to a broader social process. How NF is organized and run, its mission, vision, and ability to attract members are all a direct result of existing in a space of migration.

This space of migration informs the embodied positionality of its actors. Marco’s migration narrative attends to how his own indigeneity and gender were produced and reproduced through migration. It was as an indigenous man that Marco was taken out of his country, and this gendered indigeneity was reinscribed in his work as an activist, and later came to inform his

leadership of NF, an organization that is made up predominately of women. Embodiments of gender, identity, authority, and belonging are reproduced through migration and development. In the following analysis, I illustrate how these embodiments are differentially drawn on and disrupted through everyday political encounters.

### Performing for Development

Nuestro Futuro is an organization founded and run by indigenous community members. However, despite having a goal of eventual self-sufficiency, currently the organization is still dependent on outside resources to help pay its members for their work and fund community programming. Catherine describes NF as having to “play the foundation game,” structuring their programming so that it is legible to external funders, who “are always looking for quantitative data” and “just relying on the numbers” to evaluate the program’s efficacy (personal communication, September 3, 2018). To secure resources, the members of NF often find themselves having to navigate the ideological perspectives of progress, modernity, and “authentic” indigeneity. This can range from requiring that NF members participate in invasive household “needs” surveys as a precondition for funding to asking that NF hosts development organization representatives for tours of the community that Marta described to me as “cultural voyeurism” (fieldnotes, August 12, 2018).

The presence of development actors in Tnam Toj Qyol is felt acutely by community members. Many people criticized their influence despite also relying on their funding. Marco explained,

The NGOs, the foundations have come to support our communities with little gifts, but this hasn’t worked. Instead of working, instead of improving they made our communities dependent on them and when an organization arrives everyone comes out to see which little gifts they are going to get, what things they bring, and for this reason our children begin to be beggars, and begin to think that other countries are better, and say “damn, the gringos are good, they have so much money, the gringos are developed.” (personal communication, January 11, 2019)

One young man, Edwin, a recipient of an NF educational grant, described his own experience with the web of NGO actors who had passed through the community. He said,

The NGOs would invite us to workshops...but they were the agendas of the NGO...I participated because of my logic of youth, it allowed me to

open my mind a bit, but after words I felt deceived by the NGOs, I said that they have an agenda here, it is quite rigid, you have to follow them to the letter. (personal communication, October 2, 2018)

Edwin went on to express his disappointment with the appropriative use of Mayan culture by a number of these transnational NGOs. He said they misused and misrepresented Mayan cosmivision in order to promote their programming. He felt the outside NGOs had confused people by teaching them to understand Mayan cosmivision through “rose colored [glasses]” that it is “pure harmony, pure beauty, pure all of that.” Edwin was constantly reminding me of the complexities of his community’s history and culture, a heritage that in addition to a spirituality that was deeply connected with the land, also included over-consumption and environmental destruction, “like all humans” Edwin asserted. Edwin wanted others to learn from this history rather than gloss it over. Despite this frustration, Edwin and other NF members found themselves outwardly drawing on essentialized notions of indigeneity in order to make themselves and their work legible to funders.

The structure and objectives of *Nuestro Futuro* are fundamentally informed by a contemporary practice of Mayan cosmivision, principally the rejection of capitalist accumulation and individualism and an assertion of *T Kuj lal tib’il*, a Mam concept that reflects notions of reciprocity, generosity and working for the common good. As Marco explained, in one of our many conversations,

Because North Americans, and us, the original people, the community, if we unite to do this work, that is the fear of capitalism, that we can do this work that they have defined as individualist. They have a strategy down to their saying of “divide and conquer,” and it is the rule they have followed, but the Mayan cosmivisión is different, it’s seeing us as a collective... our thoughts as intertwined, living as one. (personal communication, January 11, 2019).

Notwithstanding, when communicating with external funders and visitors to the group, NF members strategically extoll a notion of cosmivision that is grounded in strategic essentialisms as opposed to critiques of capitalist accumulation. The importance of Mayan cosmivision to *Nuestro Futuro*’s work is one of first things Marco discussed with the many groups of outsiders who came to visit during my time in *Tnam Toj Qyol*, and it is a central theme of the organization’s English language website. The version of cosmivision as relayed to outsiders lies in the same essentialisms Edwin critiqued above. The group’s published materials describe Mayan cosmivision as “based on harmony with nature and the intimate relation

that man has with the earth and the cosmos,” continuing on to say that, “although Mother Earth does not belong to them, the Mam people love her and work the land with the care and love of parents for their children.” This depiction utilizes the essentialized conceptualizations of indigenous peoples as cultural actors, connected to nature and outside the realm of politics.

I argue that this choice is both political and strategic. Navigating development institutions has meant straddling a presentation of cosmivision as harmony and collectivity that development actors have come to expect, and a critical cosmivision that calls into question the tenants of neoliberal individualism and capitalist productivity that serve as the basis for developmentalist logics. During the annual General Assembly meeting of NF, I was able to witness this negotiation play out in real time. I had been invited by Marco to attend the meeting ostensibly to see how the governing body of NF functioned. The meeting included the members reporting out on various programs and voting for their new board of directors. This gave me the opportunity to watch Marco attempt to secure funding from the local Rotary Club.

As the last presentation on NF operations wound down, Marco strode confidently to the front of the room to call the general assembly to attention and introduce the invited guests. He pointed first to a light skinned ladino man who had been standing next to him and gestured that he should sit in a chair that was placed in the front of the room. Marco introduced the man as Paolo, a representative from the Rotary Club in Xela. For the next half hour, Marco spoke directly to Paolo as the rest of us sat and watched. He lauded the programming of *Nuestro Futuro* and decried the realities of the education system in Tnam Toj Qyol. Finally, Marco reached his ask, he would like the Rotary Club to finance a private school in Tnam Toj Qyol. He explained to Paolo that they no longer want to rely on the government to provide their children with an education, they do not want to just “take, take, take”; they want to build and create something of their own.

After the presentation finished, Paolo stood up in front of the group, praising Marco and *Nuestro Futuro* as “different.” He did not directly specify what the group was different from but extolled the members for not waiting for the government to give them a handout, claiming that he “shares their ideology...you have to work, because nothing is given” (fieldnotes, August 12, 2018). He agreed to bring their case back to his Rotary Club members and to connect them with an affiliated Rotary club in Los Angeles. Together, he assured Marco, they would be able to help build the school.

Marco's performance for Paolo strategically aligned disparate elements to present *Nuestro Futuro* as worthy of funding. Paolo was brought into a room filled with indigenous women sitting attentively in traditional *traje* as Marco exercised his authority in presenting the merits of their organization. Evidence of *Nuestro Futuro*'s institutional organizational form — presentations by NF members on their various enterprises and voting for a new board of directors — highlighted a democratic and communal structure that is viewed positively by NGO funders. In his repetition of the community not wanting to “take, take, take” from the government, Marco was pre-signifying a stereotype of dependence as a counterpoint to *Nuestro Futuro*'s self-reliance. Strategically drawing on a binary of “traditional” indigeneity and “modern” democratic organizational structures was a political act. It allowed Paolo to see NF members as embodying appropriate indigeneity, while operating an organization grounded in democratic values and neoliberal self-reliance that was worth funding. Despite frequently critiquing the values Paolo espoused as grounded in occidental thought and coloniality to NF members, Marco allowed Paolo to assume that they shared similar world views. Witnessing an upper class, ladino man tell a room of predominantly indigenous women they had to “work, because nothing is given” was disturbing from my perspective, but from Marco's, it was a pragmatic necessity.

### Critical Ruptures

While the outward presentation of NF's work conformed to the expectations of funders and development organizations, in their day-to-day functioning, members of NF were negotiating what the stated values of communality, collectivity, and self-sufficiency could and should actually look like. Members saw the organization as promoting a different vision for the community than what they had grown up with. This vision was a product of heterogeneous resources, drawing on experiences of migration and interactions with development organizations, as well as local ontological and ideological funds of knowledge. The ways in which this vision was reinterpreted and reembodyed throughout various encounters within the organization illuminates the everyday political negotiations of NF members. These moments of political encounter show how community members simultaneously employed strategic essentialism and citational practice when interacting with external development actors while engaging in critical acts of reinterpretation and refusal of developmentalist norms in their everyday praxis.

Despite the founders being mostly men, when it began, *Nuestro Futuro* focused primarily on the female residents of Tnam Toj Qyol. Initially, the people who migrated to the United States were men; thus, those who returned home to begin the organization were also men. Women became the organizational focus because Marco and the other founders felt that the community would be stronger if people were not so dependent on migrating family members for income. This meant increasing opportunities for women to work outside of the home. These gendered dynamics of the organization were produced and reproduced by migration. While Marco was initially criticized by community members for encouraging women to work outside of their homes, when the global financial crisis of 2008 struck and many migrants living in the United States lost their employment, their families remained solvent because of the income these women earned through *Nuestro Futuro*. Migration, gender, indigenous epistemologies, and interactions with development actors have changed over time to create a structure of governance within the organization that is novel and constantly evolving.

The discursive positioning of the organization by Marco and the other founders was always grounded in collective governance, communality, and complementarity. As one a younger male member explained to me,

If we create employment, we create it for everyone, not just to benefit my family, not just to benefit my community, not just to benefit this or that sector, but to benefit everyone, because we benefit everyone. We cannot be thinking of a project and do it, or develop it using the Spanish [European/Occidental] model, we need to do it in this other way. (personal communication, October 16, 2018).

Another female member who has been with NF since its founding described the model similarly,

How do I understand it? The truth is I understand [the organization] to be very different, constructive, I would say. Because it is an organization, yes? But it is also a request that in reality we want the advancement of the community, that is an organization that does not just seek its own benefit, but that works for a different community by means of a different education, or through of a different way thinking. (personal communication, November 29, 2018)

The “difference” she refers to was largely communicated to members through monthly meetings. Serving a very similar role to the activist workshops Marco himself attended in the United States. These meetings aimed to *concientizar* (make aware/bring consciousness to) the community,

teaching the history of colonization, what they saw as the realities of migration, and the drawbacks of the occidental values of individualism, consumption, and materiality. Despite this process of awareness building for members, the day-to-day functioning of the organization did not always reflect these values.

A few years after NF was founded, operational statutes were drawn up and the organizational structure was defined. However, over the first ten years of the organization this structure did not function as intended. Rather than being communally run with distributed power, the organization was hierarchical and replicated common preexisting gendered structures within Tnam Toj Qyol, with Marco as the authority. The office and workshop where most of NF's programs are run belong to Marco's family, and up until a few years ago, all the organization's money was handled by Marco and meaningful decisions were made by him. Despite encouraging people to see the organization as theirs during community meetings, the material and logistical reality of NF showed that it was not.

Over time, NF experienced several meaningful changes which allowed for this process of *concientización* to be reinterpreted, embodied, and performed by members in ways that disrupted authority within the organization. Programming that was focused on adult literacy for early female members resulted in increased literacy rates, and the educational level of members increased through the group's educational access grants. Grantees were also required to attend monthly meetings and were automatically brought into the organization as members, which diversified the membership. As the organization evolved and migration trends in the community shifted, more youth of both genders began to take part in the programming, working as after-school tutors and teachers, in the carpentry shop, or helping organize the sales and distribution of artisanal goods. Though most of the members are still women, these small demographic shifts have helped promote an environment, according to Marta, that began to encourage members to question the status quo. Marta describes what this process was like:

Yes, there wasn't a vision for where we wanted to go, clearly, everyone believed that they were employees. They say, "No, it's that we are here for the benefit of the community" but there is something clear, what is it that we want? What do we want to improve? ... Where I came to see what the statutes were, a year had already passed, and they [the members of the board of directors] began to ask questions. Why is it if the board of directors and the general assembly are supposed to be in charge, do they



just come to us and say, “sign here?” They began to question themselves, to ask questions, there were many questions, and finally they understood. And one day he [Marco] said, “this, this and this, it is going to be like this” and they [the board of directors] responded, “but that is not what’s in the statutes.” (personal communication, January 17, 2019)

This act questioning the status quo, Marco’s power, and their own role in the organization was significant political encounter between a predominantly female board of directors and Marco. It ruptured existing dynamics and meant members of the community were adopting, and making their own, organizational policies that had initially only existed on paper.

For years, NF members had been required to attend meetings and workshops in which they discussed the values of collective leadership, questioned capitalist logics, and critiqued migratory processes. One participant described these as “meetings [where] they would teach all of the women who work here, so that they discover, that they understand the importance of what it is to work in a collective” (personal communication, December 4, 2018). However, talking about the importance of collectivity and enacting their own vision of it are distinct. As community members negotiated the heterogeneous knowledge paradigms of development, indigeneity, and migration, they began to selectively draw on and transform this knowledge in order to initiate structural change within the organization.

As mentioned earlier, in 2018, NF began working with a transnationally funded local NGO, the Mayan Development Fund. MDF ran various workshops with the members of NF. During one workshop on organizational structure, the leader of the workshop noted that in the statutes there was supposed to be a process by which members of NF could become associates, giving them ownership of the organization and real power. For the women who attended the workshop, this was a revelation. Why had they not been given this opportunity? A group brought up the issue with the board of directors and with Marco. Initially he brushed off the concern, claiming that it was a difference without a distinction. However, the women were persistent, bringing up the issue at every general meeting, and eventually threatening to walk off the job if a process by which people could become associates were not established. This refusal of the status quo successfully forced organizational change. The board in conjunction with Marco drew up a plan for enabling members to become associates which would give them a legal stake in the organization. Here we see NF members presented with a concept at a development training. They then transform and reinterpret this new knowledge within this contingent space of political

and social negotiation, leveraging interactions with an outside development organization to create a structure of governance more aligned with the communal governance and complementarity they had come to believe in.

Another example of rupture occurred when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the community. There was pressure on the organization both from the Guatemalan government and the U.S.-based funders to ensure that the members had safe working conditions. In an effort to satisfy these dual pressures, Marco unilaterally decided that the seamstresses, who normally worked together in one room, would now have to work in shifts of two at a time. From a public health perspective, this decision was perhaps a reasonable one. However, the way the decision was made did not reflect the governance structure that was supposed to be in place, and also did not attend to the values of the women the decision impacted. In response, the seamstresses walked off the job for a week, asserting that their right to work and make decisions collectively was more important to them than their income or the potential health risks. This refusal forced Marco to sit down with the women to strategize a working arrangement that honored their communal workspace and still protected their health. While this moment of rupture may appear small, it demonstrated a new level of ownership by members both over the organization itself and the values that structure it.

### **Conclusion: Disruptive Bricolage**

In the examples above, I explore moments of rupture within *Nuestro Futuro* that are not just rejections of neoliberal development, but more complex examples of political encounter and negotiation. In their encounters with development actors, members strategically drew on and destabilized the cultural/political and authentic/modern binaries in order to secure resources and initiate structural change within their organization. I argue that this daily political work operates as a form of disruptive bricolage as people make use of indigenous epistemologies, information, and ideas shared through migratory processes, and interactions with development agencies in the creation of new social formations and modes of governance. In their work as bricoleurs, community members pushed back both on traditional authority within the organization and on the requirements externally imposed by development agencies that did not suit their needs or values.

These everyday politics are embodied and performed as “authentically” indigenous as they are modern and demonstrate the ability of communities

living within overlapping structures of coloniality to operate within those structures while still working for their dismantling. I argue that existing in this intersection allows for community members to draw on these heterogeneous resources as they imagine what their community's future could and should be. Paying attention to this work of disruptive bricolage helps expose what it means to compose politics in a way that upsets the taken-for-granted binary schema we are accustomed to thinking with, and demonstrates how knowledge can be transformed across this specific set of political and social circumstances. I am not arguing for an acceptance of the epistemological and ontological violence that indigenous communities face, particularly as they become the focus of developmentalist agendas. Instead, I hope to have shown how despite these enduring colonialities, communities find ways to continue creating, and working for presents and futures of their own.

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