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# Proposal Title: Ka Winaq: Genocide, Survival and the (Re) Construction of Maya Communities in Los Angeles

Purpose: To complete my book manuscript.

Book Objectives: Most research root the migration of Central Americans to the United States in the Civil Wars of the 1980s. In most recent decades these migratory movements are contextualized as a consequence of economic hardships as well as the rise of drug and gang violence in the region. My book expands the existing literature both in the framework employed and its scope. It contextualizes Maya migration within the ongoing legacies of genocide and state violence against indigenous peoples in Guatemala. I suggest that migration to the United States becomes another form of survival for members of these Maya communities. Though Mayas have been migrating to the US since the late 1970s, their migration recently gained international attention with the violent deaths at the US/Mexican border of seven-year-old Jakelin Caal Maquín (Q’eqchi), eight-year-old Felipe Gómez Alonzo (Mam) and twenty-year-old Claudia Gómez González (Mam). While scholars and the media made the conditions in which the migrants died visible, they continued to explain their migration as merely economic. Thus, in framing these forced displacements as part of the ongoing legacies of the genocide that continue to violently shape Maya lives, my manuscript not only expands the established literature, but also provides other ways of thinking about Maya migration to the United States. Though there are Maya diasporic communities throughout the US, the largest Maya population outside of Guatemala is located in Los Angeles. For this reason, in the book I also examine the ways Mayas in Los Angeles (re) construct a sense of community through the production of collective memories on the genocide, the creation of community spaces and the affirmation of their cultural practices. In doing so, these diasporic communities construct transnational Maya identities that are rooted in their own specific histories and experiences and contest assimilationist as well as homogeneous Latina/o paradigms.

Methods: The book employs an interdisciplinary and cultural studies framework of analysis. It examines various texts that include radio programs, theater, danzas, oral narratives and performance.

Plan and Timeline: The Spring 2020 semester would be used to produce a completed version of my book manuscript for submission to the University of Arizona Press in the summer. What follows is a breakdown of the chapters and timeline.

January 2-March 2: (Write) Introduction: “(Re) Framing Maya Migration to the United States.” Provides the theoretical framework used and literature review.

March 3-April 3: Chapter I (Revise): “’Guat. Hunting’: Coloniality, Erasure and Disposability of Maya Migrants in the United States.” On 18 April 2015, eighteen-year-old Onesimo Marcellino López Ramos was beaten to death by three white men. On the day that the three perpetrators were captured they admitted to the police that they murdered López Ramos, because they had gone “Guat. Hunting.” Jupiter police explained that “Guat Hunting” was a “game” played by the assailants and it required that they “stalk, rob and beat up people of Guatemalan descent.” This notion of “hunting” Guatemalans echoes colonial practices that included “Indian hunting expeditions.” While the “hunting expedition” by the three racist perpetrators in Jupiter, Florida was categorized by police as a hate crime, the lack of public denouncement evident in the silence of Latino and immigrant rights organizations as well as the absence of the murder in dominant media outlets erased these violent practices from the national imaginary and memory. These silences illustrated the ways Maya bodies continue to be marked by a historical racial difference that devalues their existence. In this chapter, I examine how the erasure of Mayas in the United States continues to erase and “vanish” indigenous peoples from our communities to ultimately assimilate them into a larger homogenous Latinidad.

Chapter II (Completed): “Mayanizing the Airwaves: Memory, Resistance and the Voices of the Maya Diaspora” explores the ways in which the radio program Contacto Ancestral challenges the processes of Americanization carried by local and national state entities and reinforced through mainstream Spanish and English-language media. Specifically addressing how Mayas affirm transnational identities through cultural empowerment, interethnic coalitions, and the creation of an audible community-based archive that is rooted in survival strategies Mayas employed during the Guatemalan genocide. The dynamics produced in Contacto Ancestral create an alternative model for recording the social struggles and experiences of Maya diasporic communities.

April 3-May 3: Chapter III (Revise): “Staging Genocide and Maya Migration in Sitting on a Fallen Tree and An LA Journey.” The chapter analyzes two plays written by Maya migrants and performed in Latina/o grassroots community theaters in Los Angeles. Arguing that these two plays not only contribute to the creation of a historical memory that links the genocide in Guatemala with the displacement of Mayas to Los Angeles, but also transmit these memories to a second generation born after the genocide and in the United States. At the same time, both works build a historical hemispheric memory on genocide, displacement and cultural survival. These efforts, I suggest, are not only essential in building a sense of community for the Maya diaspora, but also in creating various forms of solidarity among different ethnic groups in Los Angeles.

Chapter IV (Completed): “(Re) Claiming Public Space and Place: Maya Community Formation in Westlake-MacArthur Park.” In the past two decades, the Westlake-MacArthur Park neighborhood has become one of the most vibrant Maya communities outside of Guatemala. This chapter examines the ways in which Mayas living in the area have altered the city’s landscape through the re-creation of an informal weekend mercado, or public-street market, located on the city sidewalks between Sixth Street and Union Avenue. The Maya residents in that neighborhood not only create a sense of community within this global city but also maintain transnational links to their place of origin.

May 3-June 15: Chapter V (Finish Writing): “Dancing in the Diaspora: Maya Cultural Memory and Movement in Los Angeles.” For the past decade, the Agrupación Juvenil de Disfrases de Guatemala (AJUDISGUA) has welcomed the New Year by performing their danzas, or bailes, in Westlake-MacArthur Park to multi-generation Maya and non-Maya migrants that attend the day-long event. Wearing elaborate costumes that are created and sent directly from the Guatemalan highlands the dancers perform traditional choreographies that express an embodied memory of those cultural practices and community life. This chapter examines the ways the event and the dances reaffirm Maya cultural agency and memory in Los Angeles.

June-16-July 15: Write Conclusion

July 16-August 18: Final revision and submission. Send to University of Arizona Press.

Anticipated Outcomes/Contributions to Field, University and Students: As a contribution to contemporary scholarship on Maya, Latino/Latin American and Diaspora studies my project’s transnational framework provides different analytical lenses and spaces for re-thinking Latinidad, US Central Americans and indigenous diasporas. Established works on the Maya diaspora connect the struggles for survival in the U.S. to social and church organizations that maintain transnational links to specific hometowns in Guatemala. While my book manuscript shares with previous work on Maya diasporic communities an emphasis on the transnational links maintained, it expands the scholarship by examining the specific ways Mayas in Los Angeles construct cultural, physical and social spaces in this multicultural and global center. When the book is published it will be the first to examine Maya diasporic communities in Los Angeles, since other books are centered in Florida, Rhode Island, North Carolina and Texas.

The focus on Maya diasporic communities in Los Angeles provides an important study for our diverse campus. Since my arrival at CSUN in 2003, I have worked with countless students that identify as Maya, but are often forced to hide their identities, because of the racism they face. They also note there is very little scholarship about their LA communities. Additionally, many of our students will ultimately work in neighborhoods that include members of the Maya diaspora. This is because southern California is home to the largest number of indigenous diasporic communities (Maya, Zapotec, Mixtec) outside of their ancestral homelands.