

polylog

52²⁰²⁴

ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR INTERKULTURELLES PHILOSOPHIEREN

Bianca Boteva-Richter
und Hans Schelkshorn (Hg.)

Literatur und Philosophie

... ein ...
... ist, folgt ...
... Zeit des ...
... Sprache der ...
... auf der ...
... moralischen, d. ...
... selbst, auf der inter ...
... fürs Gesetz, also auch ...
... positives G ...
... jede Verminderung ...
... dererung dieser Ta ...
... calischen Gesetzes ...
... der praktischen V ...
... bloß darum nicht i ...
... t, weil subjektive Ursach ...
... so muß die Achtung ...
... oe aber indirekte Wirk ...
... jenes den hindernden ...
... tätigung des Eigendünkel ...
... Grund der Tätigke ...
... ig selber un ...
... nä n Leb sm ...
... e er Tröbf ...
... n als einer ...
... m, m e ...
... fu auch ...
... bft in eine ...

... वृष्टि ...
... चद्भागे सृष्टि ...
... धावित्यलं प्रप ...
... उक्तम्" इति पूर्वण ...
... इति मध्यमावेश ...
... प्रतिक्षणं सिद्धं प्राणविज्ञा ...
... न्मयमेव किन्तु स्तोकं जा ...
... तयोरिहाग्रहणम्, ते च प्रा ...
... त्मना सह तत्र प्रवेशयन्ति, स्वभावबलेन तत ...
... च तेषु नवेषु भावेषु प्रत्यभिज्ञा सा सादृश्या ...
... प्राग्रदादिरूपं लोकत्रयं बाह्यवि ...
... भूतसदातनचिन्मात्रकृतमेव ...
... त्रैलोक्ये ...
... शतः" ...
... सा स ...
... स्व ले ...
... ति ति ...

Mit Beiträgen von
Alena Rettová, Carolyn Fornoff,
Ulrich Schmid, Jana S. Rošker,
Carlos Oliva Mendoza,
Jörg Ossenkopp und anderen

SONDERDRUCK

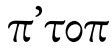
Literatur und Philosophie



- 3 BIANCA BOTEVA-RICHTER UND HANS SCHELKSHORN (HG.)
 Literatur und Philosophie. Einleitung
- 7 ALENA RETTOVÁ
 Philosophie und Gattung: Für eine textuelle Basis der afrikanischen Philosophie
- 35 JANA S. ROŠKER
 Literatur und Philosophie im Zhuangzi: Neue Hermeneutik und die Methode der Aufhebung
- 49 ULRICH SCHMID
 Philosophierende Literatur und literarische Philosophie in Russland
- 61 CARLOS OLIVA MENDOZA
 Codigofagía. Fünf Anmerkungen zur lateinamerikanischen Literatur und Philosophie
- 81 CAROLYN FORNOFF
 The flesh that speaks: Hubert Matiúwàa and mè'phàà philosophy



- 95 JÖRG OSSENKOPP
 Der »Oasenmann« als Philosophie: Maât-Sprechen und Kosmopolitik des Atmens



- 109 POLYTOP – STIMMEN, BLICKE, NETZWERKE



- 110 BERICHTE, BÜCHER & MEDIEN

- 120 IMPRESSUM

- 121 BESTELLEN

CAROLYN FORNOFF

The flesh that speaks: Hubert Matiúwàa and mè'phàà philosophy

ABSTRACT

Hubert Matiúwàa is the first author to publish poetry in the Mè'phàà language. His bilingual poetry collection *Xtámbaa / Piel de tierra / Landskin* (2016) responds to the problems faced by the inhabitants of La Montaña in the Mexican state of Guerrero and narrate how the Mè'phàà community mobilizes in response. The fight of the Mè'phàà people, Matiúwàa contends, is ontological. By systematizing Mè'phàà thought as philosophy in his essays, and lyrically deploying its concepts in his poetry, Matiúwàa traces how Mè'phàà epistemological tools combat regional problems and imagine other worlds, ethics, and futures for La Montaña, and in this way, secure its survival and future.

KEYWORDS

Mè'phàà,
Mexico,
language,
ontology,
poetry,
land

CARLOYN FORNOFF

ist Assistenzprofessorin für Latin American studies am Department für Romance Studies der Cornell University/USA.

in: polylog 52/2024:
Literatur & Philosophie
Seite 81 – 93

* Eine spanische Version dieses Artikels erschien unter dem Titel: »La carne que habla: filosofía y poesía mè'phàà en la obra de Hubert Matiúwàa«, in: *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana*, Nr. 91 (2020), 121-138.

The Mè'phàà poet Hubert Matíuwàa (born Hubert Martínez Calleja, 1986) is from the town of Malinaltepec, located in the La Montaña region of the state of Guerrero in southwestern Mexico. La Montaña is characterized by its cultural and ethnic diversity; Indigenous peoples constitute 62 % of its population, including the Mè'phàà, Nñuu Savi (Mixtec), and Nahua. Today, La Montaña is besieged by violence, poverty, racism, and impunity. The ways of life that historically defined the region, from subsistence agriculture to coffee production, have been destabilized by climate change, drought, and the global decline in the price of coffee. This disruption to the region's agricultural and economic stability has prompted people to leave or to pivot to the cultivation of illicit crops.¹ An aggravating factor is the active presence of organized crime, which operates in Guerrero with impunity and state complicity. Moreover, the increase in the last ten years of open pit mining in La Montaña perpetuates dispossession and ignores the harmful effects of extractivism on the environment and human health. The intersection of dispossession, violence, climate change, and the continuing reverberations of colonialism has put pressure on Mè'phàà communities, fragmenting and splintering them as people have been forced to emigrate or assimilate to survive.

For Matíuwàa, the pressures on his community underscore the urgency of preserving and propagating Mè'phàà knowledge and traditions through writing. Both so that these epistemologies are not lost, but also because they constitute a key survival strategy and source of collective strength. Matíuwàa is the first person to publish poetry written in Mè'phàà. His first bilingual collection of poems, *Xtámbaa / Piel de tierra / Landskin* (published in Mè'phàà and Spanish first with Pluralia Press in 2016, and forthcoming in English translation by Juana Adcock with Girasol Press), addresses injustice in La Montaña. It captures through lyric how the Mè'phàà people process historical pain and mobilize in response.

Although violence and impunity are experienced by countless communities in Mexico, by articulating them in Mè'phàà and from the Mè'phàà worldview, Matíuwàa gives voice to a culturally specific way of seeing, naming, and interpreting these problems. His work positions writing in Mè'phàà as a political act that challenges historical and ongoing processes of cultural extermination. The struggle of the Mè'phàà people, as Matíuwàa sees it, is ontological and epistemological. The survival and future of the Mè'phàà depends on the codification of their practices as philosophy, a goal that Matíuwàa pursues through various literary genres. Matíuwàa demonstrates that writing in and from Mè'phàà disproves the historical fallacy identified by Kelly McDonough and Zapoteco Sideño that Mexico's 68 Indigenous languages are »>dialects< incapable of translating abstract or complex thought.«²

In this article I argue that Matíuwàa's project is two-fold. First, he explicitly advocates for the systematization of Mè'phàà thought as a philosophy in Spanish-language essays published since 2017 in *Ojarasca*, a monthly periodical dedicated to Indigenous issues housed under Mexico's national newspaper *La Jornada*. He later consolidated these essays in a book, *Xó nùnè jùmà xàbò mè'phàà / El cómo del filosofar de la gente piel* (How the Skin People Philosophize), published in Spanish in 2022 with Gusanos de la Memoria (Worms of Memory), an independent publisher in La Montaña cofounded by Matíuwàa. In these essays and subsequent book, Matíuwàa elaborates key concepts of Mè'phàà philosophy, such as the constitutive relationship between being and doing, and between human and nonhuman, and explains them to readers who are part of the community as well as to outsiders. Second, Matíuwàa puts these concepts into action in his collections of poetry, where they appear without exposition as a lyrical expression of how the Mè'phàà understand the world and respond to ongoing and historical pain. These two arms of his project, the expository and the lyrical, conjoin into a cohesive proposal to express the world through Mè'phàà, and to understand this ex-

1 Santacruz-De León/Palacio-Muñoz: *Campesinos mexicanos*, 13.

2 McDonough/Sideño, *Indigenous Literatures*, 297.



pression as a specific, consistent philosophy that can be a source of solutions to social and ecological crises. In this article, I interweave discussion of Matiúwàa's prose and poetry to demonstrate how these strands operate in tandem.

In terms of methodology, in this article Matiúwàa's ideas appear in the foreground, without subordination or contextualization through Western theories. This methodology recognizes, following Arturo Arias, that the knowledge produced by Indigenous peoples can and should be explored from their own perspectives, detached from a Eurocentric gaze that privileges the Global North as the site that produces philosophical theory and reduces Indigenous culture to mere belief or raw material.³ Second, this article addresses Mè'phàà concepts and not Indigenous philosophy or poetry more generally. Here I follow Matiúwàa, who rejects the category of »Indigenous poetry« as well as the descriptor »Indigenous« because it collapses »all the linguistic diversity that exists, regardless of its substantial difference.«⁴ For Matiúwàa, the term »Indigenous« perpetuates the colonial curtailing of philosophical plurality, and as such, it is imperative to avoid replicating this homogenizing move.

PUBLISHING

Matiúwàa's emergence as the first poet to publish a collection of poems in Mè'phàà reflects the rise of so-called Indigenous literatures in Mexico at the turn of the twenty-first century. This boom is the result of decades of activism by Indigenous groups in Mexico to combat national policies that have long promoted assimilation, privileged Spanish-language learning, and actively discriminated against the instruction and use of Indigenous languages. Carlos Montemayor traces the renaissance of literature in native languages in Mexico to the close of the twentieth century, when institutions and networks were formed to support authors. These include the National Meeting of Writ-

ers in Indigenous Languages (Encuentro Nacional de Escritores en Lenguas Indígenas), inaugurated in the 80s; and in the 90s, the Association of Writers in Indigenous Languages (Asociación de Escritores en Lenguas Indígenas), the House of the Writer in Indigenous Languages (la Casa del Escritor en Lenguas Indígenas), and several awards dedicated to Indigenous literatures.⁵ In 2003, the Mexican state institutionalized this grassroots movement with the Law of Linguistic Rights for Indigenous Peoples. The Law mandated the creation of the National Institute of Indigenous Languages (INALI), a federal administrative body in charge of formalizing Indigenous languages and promoting their instruction and use.

In conjunction with these efforts, independent publishers such as Ediciones Pluralia emerged as spaces dedicated to publishing books in Indigenous languages. Pluralia was founded in 2002, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, as an initiative to publish bilingual educational books specializing in Indigenous oral traditions. Starting in 2014, Pluralia began publishing contemporary authors writing in Indigenous languages, with financial support from the Ministry of Culture.⁶

Matiúwàa's first book of poetry, *Xtámbaa / Piel de tierra* (Landskin), was published by Pluralia in 2016 as part of the series »New Voices of Old Roots.« In *Xtámbaa*, each poem appears first in Mè'phàà and then in Spanish translation. As Paul Worley notes, this choice reverses existing power dynamics between the two languages. Monolingual Spanish readers who open the book must first confront an unknown language, the presence of which reveals their ignorance in contrast with the Mè'phàà author's knowledge. The bilingual format acknowledges that the majority of Pluralia readers are not part of the author's linguistic community. Therefore, sometimes Mè'phàà concepts are accompanied by an explanatory footnote in Spanish. However, most Mè'phàà concepts are presented without any gloss, or, as Worley observes, sometimes

3 Arias: *Lost Footprints*, 4.

4 Matiúwàa: *Los hombres*, 12. Citations of Matiúwàa and other Spanish sources appear in my translation throughout.

5 Montemayor: *La literatura actual*, 26.

6 Critchley: *Concepts*, online.

the expository notes in Spanish only appear in the Mè'phàà version of the poem, preventing readers from skipping over the Mè'phàà text, and requiring them to interact with the poem in its original language.

After debuting his first two collections with Pluralia, Matiúwàà published two other poetry collections in 2018 with a different publisher, Universidad de Guadalajara: *Las Sombrereras de Tsítsidiín* (Tsítsidiín's Milliners, 2018) and *Cordel Torcido/ Mañuwíin* (Twisted Cord, 2018). But, as of 2019, Matiúwàà turned his efforts to establishing his own cooperatively managed publishing house, Gusanos de la Memoria (Worms of Memory), which also serves as a cultural center in La Montaña dedicated to cultivating young readers and writers. There he has published two trilingual books of poetry, *Mbo Xtá rídà / Gente piel / Skin People* (2020) and *Túngaa Indíi / Comisario Jaguar / Jaguar Commissioner* (2021), and his aforementioned book of philosophy, *Xó nùnè jùmà xàbò mè'phàà / El cómo del filosofar de la gente piel* (How the Skin People Philosophize, 2022). These three books are available for download in Gusanos de la Memoria's virtual library, along with bilingual anthologies of stories by local youth.

The online accessibility of these publications combats an issue that has plagued Indigenous writers who have published with Pluralia: distribution. Pluralia's books are primarily available in specialty bookstores in Mexico, meaning that they are often inaccessible in their author's hometowns. A second factor at play in Matiúwàà's shift from publishing through national publishers like Pluralia to creating his own local network is philosophical. It illustrates the expansive way that he approaches writing as an activity that must be accompanied by a praxis of social commitment. Namely, the long-term project of building cultural infrastructures capable of fostering future Mè'phàà, Na Savi, and Nahua readers and writers; ensuring that, while Matiúwàà may be the first to write in Mè'phàà, he will not be the last. The work of the writer, then, is not only the work of the individual, but the work of the collective.

DOING AS BEING

Matiúwàà published his first book of poetry, *Xtám-baa / Piel de tierra / Landskin*, under the *nom de plume* Hubert Malina, a name that invokes his hometown, Malinaltepec. His second collection of poems, *Tsína rí nayaxa' / Cicatriz que te mira / The Scar that Looks at You*, which received the Cenzontle Literary Creation Award in Native Languages in 2016, was published under the name Hubert Matiúwàà, the name he continues to use today. In an interview with Pèr-la Velázquez, Matiúwàà explains that he changed his name after writing his first collection of poems, a process that made him value the power of naming things in his own language, and that he wanted to apply to himself. He chose the name Matiúwàà, which means »squash river« in Mè'phàà, to acknowledge his belonging to the Mè'phàà people, who are considered the people of the squash because of the abundance of chilacayote (black seed squash) in their territory.

The different surnames used by Matiúwàà reflect the Mè'phàà custom of not receiving a name at birth, but of seeking it through experience. For the Mè'phàà, doing determines being; one's actions produce one's identity and name. Matiúwàà elaborates: »all of one's work implies the construction of an ontological name.«⁷ The Mè'phàà are the squash people because the conditions of their land dictated how they would work it, and consequently, how they would define their sense of self. Subsequently, the borders of Mè'phàà territory were not determined by where they lived, but rather by the limit that demarcated where the conditions of the activity that defined them—squash cultivation—was no longer possible.⁸ This illustrates the central role of territory in Mè'phàà philosophy: the land determines the work people do, it generates a way of life, and therefore, it shapes a collective identity. In this view, identity is a state of constant becoming, not static, but discovered along the way, through one's interactions with the world and one's actions. Similarly, the author's ontological name of Matiúwàà was dis-

7 Matiúwàà: *Tu nombre*, 12.

8 Matiúwàà: *Gente de calabaza*, 8.



covered through the work that Matiúwàa performs: giving voice to the experiences of the Mè'phàà through the Mè'phàà language.

Writing and speaking in Mè'phàà is the guiding theme of *Xtám̃baa* / *Landskin*. The poem that opens the collection, »The Scar of My Voice,« begins with the line, »We put the word down to pick up the face.«⁹ The second stanza repeats this formulation: »We put the word down in the wind's ear.«¹⁰ This framing of writing and speaking as »putting the word down« (*poner la palabra*) situates the Mè'phàà language as an act of placement, one that connects the past with the present, both for the Mè'phàà people—whose face the word picks up and recovers—as well their territory—where the word is carried forward by the wind. The nuanced meaning behind the phrase, *poner la palabra*, as Juana Adcock, Matiúwàa's English translator, has explained, is not immediately legible, even to Spanish speakers. Adcock elaborates that it carries with it a specific connotation in Mè'phàà: »to express one's truth in order to contribute to a fairer and more democratic process for a society... a non-hierarchical process in which everyone is invited to speak.«¹¹ This expression of truth comes from a place of historical struggle and resilience. The poem's title, »The Scar of My Voice,« describes the voice that utters the word as a scar: an embodied reminder of past damage, but also of the body's ability to regenerate. Conceptually, voice and body are one, marked by historical wounds and the promise of repair.

The symbolism of the scar, with its simultaneous indexicality of hurt and healing, is even more central in Matiúwàa's second collection of poems, *Tsína rí nayaxa'* / *The Scar that Looks at You*. Jaime Sa'akäsmä explains that the title of this collection refers to the poetic act of assuming the pain suffered by the community and turning it into a poem-scar, an agential materialization of the memory of past pain that looks at and

questions the reader.¹² The inversion of the poem-scar as the subject that does the looking, and the reader as the object that is looked at, upends the traditional understanding of literature (and we might add, of memory, history, and archive) as an object that is looked at, into a subject that produces its own gaze and its own questions to which the reader must respond. In the opening poem of *Xtám̃baa*, a similar proposal is made about the agential nature of language. The word that the collective »we« puts down is described as both »the sad word of our ancestors« and »the word that looks, / that watches over, that lives.«¹³ The Mè'phàà language is a living archive that holds historical memories of pain, and at the same time, a tool of observation, protection, and vitality. »Putting the word down« in one's language is a political act, a way to recover a collective face that looks back at the reader, embodying concepts and memories that have crystallized in specific forms of expression.

Mè'phàà refers to a group of closely related languages that includes eight variants. Matiúwàa speaks Mè'phàà Malinaltepec/Mañuwiín, the variant that emerged from his hometown of Malinaltepec. Today, there are approximately 120,000 people in Guerrero who speak Mè'phàà. It is part of the linguistic family of Otomanguan languages, including Binnizá (Zapotec) and Ñu Saavi (Mixtec), and has existed in southern Mexico since around 2000 BC. Mè'phàà is also known as Tlapanec; however, this term is an exoethnonym that was imposed by the Mexica people and has derogatory connotations: it means painted/dirty face.¹⁴ As Matiúwàa glosses, »the story of our culture has always been told from the outside, that is why we have so many names. Just like the story of the deer, it is always told by the hunter.«¹⁵ The First Congress of Mè'phàà Language Linguistic Development in 1997 decided to abandon the use of the term *Tlapanec* in favor of *xàbò mè'phàà* (Mè'phàà people), an endoeth-

9 Matiúwàa: *Xtám̃baa*, 6.

10 Matiúwàa: *Xtám̃baa*, 6.

11 Adcock: *Translating Political Resistance*, 54.

12 Sa'akäsmä: *Fisura*, 21.

13 Matiúwàa: *Xtám̃baa*, 7.

14 Oropeza Bruno: *La madre tierra*, 12.

15 Matiúwàa: *Los hombres*, 13.

nonym that means »inhabitant of Tlapa« or »people of the big river,« and affirms belonging to the ochre territory of Guerrero.¹⁶ These sorts of community-led efforts to reclaim control over the Mè'phàà language, name, and cultural legacy are of a piece with Matiúwàa's project to give voice to the community's experiences (thus the collective »we« that puts the word down in *Xtámbaa's* opening poem) in its own tongue.

While Matiúwàa is recognized as the first person to publish poetry in Mè'phàà, he argues that the role of the Mè'phàà poet is primordial. He explains that his grandmother told him that, long ago, when the Mè'phàà were sad and at odds with one another, the opossum brought them the »men who know how to make people laugh« through »the word that counts, the one that united the hearts of the Mè'phàà.«¹⁷ This is the social function of the storyteller: to unite the community through laughter and wordsmithing. Matiúwàa embeds this story in *Xtámbaa's* section of poems titled »Opossum,« where the speaker confesses: »I always wanted to be one of the men who know how to make others laugh, / to unite my people / and forge a single Mè'phàà heart.«¹⁸ This work is fleshed out in the poem »The Sleepless Night,« whose wakeful speaker omnisciently observes everything that happens in his town. The speaker watches grandparents who pray for their emigrated children and hears the ominous stomping of military boots and the soothing crackling of the comal griddle. The speaker operates as observer, omniscient yet empathic, illustrating the thesis that a poet should reflect »the feeling of a territory« and leave »testimony of the time in which they lived.«¹⁹

Despite underscoring the political and ethical stakes of writing in Mè'phàà, Matiúwàa also points out what is lost in the transition from the oral to the written. In the oral tradition, a narrative is constantly in flux, shifting in response to the contingencies of its chang-

ing context. Writing, on the other hand, is incapable of this responsivity. Matiúwàa explains: »Writing systematizes and closes off the possibility of recreation, it petrifies experiences, it makes knowledge into something that is individual, that of the author and the publisher. In contrast, oral memory is open. People can reinterpret their history in accordance with the new problems they are facing, and as such, memory is collective and always dynamic.«²⁰ There is a certain tension at play here. Matiúwàa aims to unite his community through writing, yet he acknowledges that hegemonic logics of writing and publishing privilege the individual over the collective. Similarly, while poems like »The Sleepless Night« position the poetic voice as an omniscient all-seeing figure who documents village happenings, elsewhere Matiúwàa has clarified that his perspective is subjective, and that poetry written by others from his community would capture different aspects of that shared reality.²¹

This tension between the individual author and the collective resolves itself into an idea of a collective that is composed of internal difference. The face that is picked up through the word in *Xtámbaa's* opening poem is described as »our face« as well as the »place where we find ourselves diverse.«²² The act of »putting down the word« thus involves tracing that multifaceted face, with full recognition of the risks of pursuing that very endeavor through writing, such as closure, calcification, and the privatization of knowledge. Matiúwàa's work with *Gusanos de la Memoria* serves as a corrective to these risks, creating the conditions for a »place where we find ourselves diverse« by germinating opportunities for others, particularly young people, to read, write, and publish in Mè'phàà. In this way, Matiúwàa aligns writing and publishing with an invitation to dialogue about what the collective is and should be, »so that everyone contributes and [the word] grows, it is like a meal that is shared.«²³

16 Matiúwàa: *El fuego*, 9.

17 Matiúwàa: *Los hombres*, 12.

18 Matiúwàa: *Xtámbaa*, 65.

19 Matiúwàa: *Los hombres*, 12.

20 Matiúwàa: *Historias*, 6.

21 Matiúwàa: *Los hombres*, 12.

22 Matiúwàa: *Xtámbaa*, 6.

23 Matiúwàa: *Los hombres*, 12.

The Mè'phàà philosophy that doing leads to being, in which praxis is the basis of ontology, is at work here in how writing in Mè'phàà leads to the preservation of the Mè'phàà language and its people.

LANGUAGE AND PHILOSOPHY

For Matiúwàa, writing in Mè'phàà—through essays that systematize Mè'phàà thought as philosophy and through poetry that lyrically gives those concepts form—is a political gesture that counteracts language death. Matiúwàa explains: »for a long time we did not express our pain in own language, sometimes we did not even fall in love in our own language. [It is] essential to name that pain in the language in which we conceive the world, because only then is it loaded with symbolism, with stories that can keep it alive.«²⁴ Writing in Mè'phàà is only a recent phenomenon. The first Mè'phàà alphabet was created in 1977, and its writing rules were clarified in 2006, a complicated project that is still ongoing due to its eight variants. Therefore, although Mè'phàà has historically operated as the mother tongue of everyday life, only recently has there been the opportunity to learn to read and write it.²⁵ Despite these strides, Mè'phàà still runs the risk of language death because of factors like structural racism and migration.

Matiúwàa traces the attrition of the Mè'phàà language back to the 80s. The expansion of the global market into more remote and rural areas in Mexico accelerated a process of cultural homogenization and consumerism that, in Matiúwàa's estimation, diluted the values, languages, and autonomy of Indigenous communities.²⁶ One example of this is embedded in the poem »Corona Extra,« which laments how Corona beer has replaced pulque, a fermented agave beverage that predates colonialism, as the alcoholic beverage of choice.²⁷ Within the logic of global capitalism, learning to write an Indigenous language like Mè'phàà

has no self-evident value because it does not readily insert the speaker within existing monetary flows. The scholar Daniel Barragán Trejo notes that Mè'phàà migrants echo this concern, explaining in interviews that they believe that it is more important for their children to learn Spanish so that they can ensure their future livelihood. Barragán Trejo furthers that Mè'phàà migrants describe migration as a survival strategy, and view speaking Spanish in a similar light. The phrase, »we came here to work out of necessity,« uttered by many of his interview subjects, he suggests, is equivalent to »we stopped speaking the language out of necessity.«²⁸ In other words, for some, like the migrants interviewed by Barragán Trejo who no longer reside in La Montaña, speaking Mè'phàà is perceived as an impediment to survival, a barrier that redoubles the precariousness of the Indigenous subject. Yet Matiúwàa, like many Indigenous activists, proposes just the opposite: the Mè'phàà language and worldview is essential for survival. Not only in terms of the continuity of Mè'phàà culture, but as an epistemic weapon that provides solutions to collective problems.

Thus, at the core of Matiúwàa's project is to outline Mè'phàà thought as a system of knowledge, pushing back against the colonial and racist reduction of Indigenous practices to a series of traditions, rites, or beliefs that are irrelevant to contemporary life. To the contrary, the act of systematizing non-Western cultural practices as philosophical systems expands epistemic possibilities from which to understand the modern world. Here Matiúwàa is influenced by the German linguist and philosopher Carlos Lenkersdorf, whose study of the Tojolabal Maya in Chiapas began with a focus on linguistics in the 70s and culminated in works detailing Tojolabal philosophy in the early 2000s. Lenkersdorf demonstrated that language shapes thought and philosophy, observing that the frequency of the Tojolabal use of the word »we« (-tik) eclipsed the use of the word »I,« particularly when compared with other languages. The linguistic privileging of *we* reflects (and shapes) Tojolabal ideas about the fundamental na-

²⁴ Velázquez: *La preservación*, online.

²⁵ Barragán Trejo: *Desplazamiento lingüístico*, 34.

²⁶ Matiúwàa: *Historia del mercado*, 8.

²⁷ Matiúwàa: *Xtáamba*, 67.

²⁸ Barragán Trejo: *Desplazamiento lingüístico*, 38.

ture of existence, in which the collective carries more weight than the individual. Lenkersdorf stressed that »different worldviews produce different ethics,« and in the case of the Tojolabal: an intersubjective ethics based on collaboration, horizontality, and respect.²⁹ Inspired by Lenkersdorf's work, which transformed the way that Indigenous communities were studied in Mexico at the turn of the twenty-first century when Matiúwàa was coming of age, Matiúwàa has proposed that the systematization of Mè'phàà language and stories as sites of philosophy and ethics can serve as the »foundation for our internal and external decolonization.«³⁰

For Matiúwàa, the study of Mè'phàà origin stories and cultural practices as the basis for decolonization does not mean simply accepting tradition as is but reassessing it with a critical eye. This reflexive posture rejects the idea that Mè'phàà knowledge is static. Matiúwàa questions racism and sexism, calling out the negative connotations of Mè'phàà words used to describe Black people and the exclusion of women from communal governance.³¹ These practices, Matiúwàa argues, are at odds with foundational concepts in Mè'phàà philosophy, including an ontological horizontality in which all beings have an equal say. He brings these ideas into conversation with the work of contemporary feminists like Francesca Gargallo, Julieta Paredes, and Lorena Cabnal. He concludes that »a reconstruction of what is ours must start from depatriarchalizing; we must... update our ideas to reeducate ourselves.«³²

As we can see, Matiúwàa tackles contemporary problems in La Montaña, like globalization, racism, and sexism, through Mè'phàà philosophy. While this is most explicitly performed in his essays, his poetry also performs this work: part of the same project, but through different means and to different ends. Generically, unlike the essay, poetry does not rely on

exposition, it embeds philosophical concepts in affective or lyrical compact forms of expression that can be abstract and opaque. Poetry is unencumbered by the simplification that the essay requires; as a form, poetry paradoxically compresses concepts and at the same time gives them room to breathe, to come alive as feelings, images, and sensations. Whereas Matiúwàa wields the essay as a pedagogical form, primarily elaborated in Spanish for the education of outsiders, his poetry is not didactic. Rather, it celebrates the generative nature of Mè'phàà creative expression in Mè'phàà. Its bilingual or trilingual format invites in readers from different communities with varying degrees of familiarity with Mè'phàà. The density of references to Mè'phàà ideas and experiences in Matiúwàa's lyric bids outsiders to confront their own ignorance, and insiders to take pleasure in the recognition of seeing how the word put down in Mè'phàà can take up the collective face. I now turn to one such case.

The titular poem of Matiúwàa's first collection, »Xtámbaa,« is dedicated to Mauricio Ortega Valerio, one of the 43 students from the Raúl Isidro Burgos Rural Normal School forcibly disappeared on September 26, 2014, in Iguala, Guerrero. The murder and disappearance of the 43 students from Ayotzinapa was an event of shocking cruelty that exposed the grotesque collaboration of law enforcement with organized crime, as well as the impunity of serious human rights violations in Mexico. To date, forensic specialists have only been able to identify fragments of three victims' remains. The government's initial conclusions that the students had been burned in a garbage dump were refuted by international experts, who exposed the government's obstruction of justice. In 2022, a state-appointed Truth Commission declared Ayotzinapa a »state crime« because of the involvement of authorities in both the crime and its cover-up.³³ Although Ayotzinapa is a watershed case in terms of its global mediatic reach, it is also emblematic of a long history of impunity in Guerrero, of countless unsolved

29 Lenkersdorf: *Filosofar*, 138.

30 Matiúwàa: *Sistematizar*, 9.

31 Matiúwàa: *Otredad negra*, 10.

32 Matiúwàa: *Mujeres*, 7.

33 Encinas: *Ayotzinapa*, online.

cases that did not receive the same level of international and national attention.

Matiúwàa's poem, »Xtámbaa,« consists of eleven stanzas that express the pain experienced by the Mè'phàà community in the face of the horrific loss of one of its members, Mauricio Ortega Valerio. »Xtámbaa« can be situated within a trend identified by Pablo Domínguez Galbraith in Mexican narrative and visual art to go beyond the narration of violence and trauma, and »move towards repairing the social fabric and possible forms of care.«³⁴ Matiúwàa's approach in »Xtámbaa« is even more ambitious. While Ayotzinapa has primarily circulated in the media and in art as a Mexican event of national importance, or as a human rights event of international importance, Matiúwàa's poem frames Ayotzinapa as a regional event with ethnic and territorial implications. Put simply, Matiúwàa narrates Ayotzinapa from the perspective of Mè'phàà ontology. This is particularly meaningful because the indigeneity of several of the Ayotzinapa victims has been glossed over in accounts of the case. By mourning the victims in and through Mè'phàà, Matiúwàa relocates the case as not just a national tragedy, but a tragedy with specific impact for the Mè'phàà.

Illustrative of this relocation is the abandonment of one of the most recognizable strategies of the Ayotzinapa social movement: the focus on the portraits and names of the 43 victims. In the wake of the students' disappearance, activists repeatedly circulated images of their faces taken from their identity cards, displaying these portraits at protests, publishing them in newspapers, pasting them on city walls and on public transportation. The repeated circulation of the black-and-white ID portraits created an immediately recognizable imaginary of the event, »a conspicuous visual case against the State.«³⁵ In addition to the centrality of the face, the names of the victims were similarly foregrounded by activists. As David E. Johnson explains, the act of naming is powerful in the Ayotzi-

napa case because it acknowledges that the victim is more than a victim: a singular being. But, at the same time, Johnson cautions that the act of naming destroys that singularity because a name is necessarily »repeatable, imitable, substitutable.«³⁶ In »Xtámbaa,« Mauricio Ortega Valerio's name only appears once, in the poem's dedication. The rest of the poem narrates the violence against him without naming him, articulating this loss of life as a loss that is felt and processed in collective.

Instead of addressing the elegy to Mauricio in the third person through the proper name, in »Xtámbaa,« the speaker addresses him in the second person as »you.« Throughout the poem's eleven stanzas, the speaker's tone dramatically shifts between lament, rage, fear, and consolation. He begs the »you« to hide, he implores him to reveal where he can be found, he reassures him that they are with him, he demands that he get up, and ends by affirming that he lives. On first read, the »you« appears only to address Mauricio: »a son of the *pueblo* (town/people)« carried away »on buses that have no return,« and whose name was caught by a bullet.³⁷ However, starting in the seventh stanza, the speaker invokes the titular *Xtámbaa* (landskin) in the second person, comfortingly repeating, »I am with you.«³⁸ In the final stanza, the »you« shifts again, now referring to a tree: »you live tree / tree flower of heart.«³⁹ The »you« the speaker addresses thus refers at once to Mauricio, the community, the territory, and nature, eroding ontological or discursive distinction between these subjects. The porosity of the »you,« which amalgamates the human individual with the earth and the trees, illustrates how the Mè'phàà worldview processes the murder of Mauricio Ortega Valerio as a violence that is not singular, circumscribed to the individual, but experienced by the entire territory.

36 Johnson: *Violence and Naming*, 5.

37 Matiúwàa: *Xtámbaa*, 75, 79, 83.

38 Matiúwàa: *Xtámbaa*, 85.

39 Matiúwàa: *Xtámbaa*, 91.

34 Domínguez Galbraith: *Estéticas forenses*, 105.

35 González Flores: *Photo-Portraits*, 488.

LANGUAGE AND LAND

Thus far I have prioritized the discussion of language and people in Matiúwàa's articulation of the collective. But as »Xtámbaa« indicates, the Mè'phàà idea of the collective is unthinkable without taking the nonhuman into account. In Mè'phàà philosophy, all beings—human and nonhuman—have language. However, only humans, known as *xàbò*, which directly translates to »the flesh that speaks,« can communicate and understand one another in the present. If all beings are flesh, what differentiates humans from others is speech. The ability to speak and be understood is a privilege that carries with it an ethical burden: the mandate to represent the words of others, such as rivers, mountains, and birds. The possibility of fluid communication between all beings is deferred to a future moment: the village of the dead or *ná mufuín*, when humans (the flesh that speaks) will be judged by other beings for how they fulfilled their responsibility. So, the person who puts the word down (the writer) also speaks for entities that cannot be heard. He or she must »tell the words of the river contaminated by agrochemicals, the land devastated by open-pit mining, the ocelot whose tanned hide decorates tables... The flesh that speaks must create community in the face of violent policies that alter its life.«⁴⁰ This mandate is put into practice in the poem »The Hummingbird,« which describes the plundering of La Montaña. In response to water pollution and ecocide, the speaker commands the creatures of the mountain to »gather our wings, feet and heads / to fly away / and put down the word.«⁴¹ The »we« here is expansive; as animals flee from violence, so too must the word take flight to draw human attention to more-than-human injustice.

The opening poem of *Xtámbaa* details the responsibility of the flesh that speaks. The word that is put down must make »the bone listen to the gray of the stone,« »awaken the silence of the bird,« and »raise... the cry of the dry leaf.«⁴² These verbs – listen, awak-

en, raise – formulate the human subject (*xàbò*) as interlocutor in the service of the nonhuman. Humans must assume the responsibility of speech for the nonhuman, listening to them and making their case on their behalf. Yet while the present is defined by a power imbalance in which only humans are the flesh that speaks, there is a universal ontological claim to language, even if is deferred until death. The poems »The Mè'phàà Voice« and »The Rooster« go even further, proposing that the speaker's voice is a »salivated chrysalis,« a »cicada / that they buried in your throat.«⁴³ Which is to say that the human voice is not ontologically native to the human body, but an autonomous entity, something alive. The voice is the pupa of the butterfly and the cicada, quiescent and transitional, the animating force behind speech.

The word *Xtámbaa* translates to »landskin.« *Xtá* refers to skin, the body's largest organ and its protective cover; *mbaa* means earth. In the English translation of the collection, Adcock translates its title as »landskin« instead of »earthen skin,« because *mbaa* indexes a specific plot of land or territory, and the word »land« invokes Indigenous land rights struggles.⁴⁴ The composite concept of »landskin« equates the two terms as coeval, presenting the land as a protective covering, as well as a living being whose body is shielded by protective tissue. Adcock explains that the term is generatively ambiguous: »are we talking about the skin of the land, or are we talking about people whose very skin is made up of the land? Perhaps both are the same thing.«⁴⁵ The root *xtá* is also part of the verbs »to be« and »to live« in Mè'phàà, used to talk about one's way of being, as defined by one's actions. In this light, *Xtámbaa* articulates land as a way of being and a way of life.

Xtámbaa is also the name of a Mè'phàà rite that is performed on each child to transform them into the skin of the earth. The purpose of the ceremony is to remind the child »that the meaning of our being in the

40 Matiúwàa: *Los hombres*, 12.

41 Matiúwàa: *Xtámbaa*, 21.

42 Matiúwàa: *Xtámbaa*, 6–7.

43 Matiúwàa: *Xtámbaa*, 11–18.

44 Adcock: *Translating Political Resistance*, 55.

45 Adcock: *Translating Political Resistance*, 55.



world is to take responsibility for the place where we live.«⁴⁶ The ritual cements the reciprocal relationship with the territory; the child becomes its skin, and inversely, the child's care is entrusted to the earth. It is an ontological transformation in which the individual becomes more than an individual, part of the more-than-human community.

The *xtámbaa* ceremony is only performed after the child's animal sibling (*kwi'ñii*) has been identified. The animal brother is revealed to him through dreams, with the help of shamans (*xi-ñā*). Like other Mesoamerican cultures that share the concept of the animal brother (also known as the *nawal* or *nahual*), the Mè'phàà posit that each person is connected to a nonhuman other for life. It is an other who is also oneself; they manifest different bodily forms, but share a soul. This ontological framework of concurrent sameness and difference establishes an intimate relationship across species that is horizontal and generates its own ethics. The *xtámbaa* ceremony concretizes the connection between the child, their animal brother, and their land. It exemplifies three ethical and ontological dimensions of Mè'phàà philosophy, according to Matiúwàa:

- a) Being: Being in the world in the same condition as all beings.
- b) Being other: Having an animal brother who is oneself.
- c) Being a territory: Assuming that we are not alone and that we are responsible for the »others« in the place where we build our territoriality.⁴⁷

Identity is thus inseparable from the ecological network in which it is embedded. This approach to ethics and the construction of the self through relationality is central to the expression of mourning in the aforementioned poem, »*Xtámbaa*.« By titling the poem about the forced disappearance of the 43 students after this ceremony, Matiúwàa laments the unjust loss of Ortega Valerio as a loss for the land and all the beings that constitute it. Through the second person that at

once invokes Ortega Valerio, the land, and the reader themselves, the speaker probes: »Don't you know that everything they do to you is done to me?«⁴⁸

The skin in *Xtámbaa* is also a metaphor for language. Matiúwàa explains in an interview with Carlos Rojas Urrutia that, according to his grandparents, »language is like a blanket. If it's cold, you cover up with it; if you lie down on a hard place, you use it as a pillow; it's up to you whether you forget it, get it dirty, or keep it clean. It is our skin. If we deny it, we cease to be, we enter into the logic that we are worthless. If we give it the place it deserves in our hearts, it strengthens us, there is no longer any room to accept discrimination and daily violence.« In the poem »*Xtámbaa*« the speaker describes his voice as the »nest« of his pain.⁴⁹ That voice-nest, which belongs to the flesh that speaks, grieves for the dead: »our father's scar,« the »little deer who was going to become a teacher,« »the brothers / who would fill your table with colors.«⁵⁰ This list of the deceased connects Ayotzinapa with a longer history of violence experienced by the Mè'phàà. In the poem's last image, the voice (»the song of my name«) comes to rest on the »foot of the earth,« the »navel root« of Ortega Valerio who has transformed into a tree.⁵¹ The image of the voice of the people rooted in the body of the deceased, now a living tree, articulates the Mè'phàà language as grounded in the land, protected by the skin of the earth.

Matiúwàa explains that there is not a single word for »poetry« in Mè'phàà. Poetry has many names: »*ajngáa xka'tsá* / the word that cheers, *ajngáa dx-áwua* / the word that advises or the word of the stars, *anjgáa xawíí* / the word that awakens, *anjgáa tsi'yaa* / the beautiful word, *ajngáa yáá* / the word of honey, *ajngáa tsíama* / the word that came from time.«⁵² Matiúwàa's poetry reflects this multifaceted role of putting the word down. It bears witness

⁴⁶ Matiúwàa: *Ser territorio*, 12.

⁴⁷ Matiúwàa: *Ser territorio*, 12.

⁴⁸ Matiúwàa: *Xtámbaa*, 81.

⁴⁹ Matiúwàa: *Xtámbaa*, 81.

⁵⁰ Matiúwàa: *Xtámbaa*, 87.

⁵¹ Matiúwàa: *Xtámbaa*, 91.

⁵² Matiúwàa: *Los hombres*, 12.

to current social and ecological crisis; it voices the pain experienced by the collective when one member suffers. Matiúwàa names pain, but that pain also acquires agency, it is »a scar that looks at you,« which commands the reader to acknowledge the wound. The Mè'phàà voice is a system of knowledge that diverges from the binaries of Western thought, such as nature/culture and human/nonhuman. In this sense, the Mè'phàà voice not only bears witness to the pain

suffered by its community, but also proposes ethical frameworks for a better future. It articulates an ontological imbrication between human and nonhuman, in which land, animals, and »the flesh that speaks« coconstitute and weave together into the same voice. Through his essays and poetic work, Hubert Matiúwàa systematizes Mè'phàà philosophy, putting it into action, illustrating the possibilities of seeing and naming the world differently.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adcock, Juana: »Translating Political Resistance in the Mè'phàà-language Poetry of Hubert Matiúwàa.« *Places that the map can't contain: Poetics in the Anthropocene*. Edited by Julia Fiedorczuk and Pawel Piszczatowski. Göttingen, Germany: Brill, 2023.
- Arias, Arturo: *Recovering Lost Footprints. Volume 2: Contemporary Maya Narratives*. Albany: SUNY, 2018.
- Barragán Trejo, Daniel: »Si no la haces, ¿de qué vives? Le vamos a enseñar poco tlapaneco<: Un desplazamiento lingüístico en proceso entre migrantes mi'phaa (tlapanecos de Tlacoapa) en Tlaquepaque, Jalisco, México.« *Cuadernos interculturales* 7, 12 (2009): 21–46.
- Critchley, Adam: »Concepts of the World<: Publishing in Mexico's Indigenous Languages«. *Publishing Perspectives* [22.8.2017]. <https://publishingperspectives.com/2017/08/mexico-indigenous-language-publishers/>.
- Domínguez Galbraith, Pablo. »Estéticas forenses en México: La arquitectura de lo sensible en el caso Ayotzinapa«. *Revista Etesis* 6 (2019): 90–107.
- Encinas, Alejandro: »Ayotzinapa fue un crimen de Estado; funcionarios del más alto nivel son responsables de la verdad histórica,« *Presidencial Comuniqué*, September 27, 2023.
- González-Flores, Laura: »What is Present, What is Visible: the Photo-Portraits of the 43 Disappeared Students of Ayotzinapa as Positive Social Agency«. *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 27, 4 (2018): 487–506.
- Johnson, David E.: *Violence and Naming: On Mexico and the Promise of Literature*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2019.
- Lenkersdorf, Carlos: *Filosofar en clave tojolabal*. México, DF: Porrúa, 2005.
- Malina, Hubert: *Xtámbaa / Piel de Tierra*. México, DF: Pluralia, 2016.
- Matiúwàa, Hubert: »El fuego de la lengua me'phaa«. *Ojarasca La Jornada* 258 (oct. 2018): 9.
- : »Gente de la calabaza«. *Ojarasca La Jornada* 252 (abr. 2018): 8.
- : »Una historia del mercado global en la montaña«. *Ojarasca La Jornada* 254 (jun. 2018): 8–9.
- : »Historias de origen«. *Ojarasca La Jornada* 256 (ago. 2018): 6.
- : »Los hombres que hacen reír«. *Ojarasca La Jornada* 245 (sep. 2017): 12–13.
- : »Mujeres de montaña«. *Ojarasca La Jornada* 255 (jul. 2018): 6–7.
- : »Otriedad negra y racismo en Guerrero«. *Ojarasca La Jornada* 243 (jul. 2017): 10.
- : »Por qué sistematizar el pensamiento filosófico de los pueblos originarios?«. *Ojarasca La Jornada* 246 (oct. 2017): 9.



- : »Tu nombre en el tiempo«. *Ojarasca La Jornada* 249 (ene. 2018): 12.
- : »Xtámbaa: Ser, ser otro, ser territorio«. *Ojarasca La Jornada* 251 (mar. 2018): 12.
- McDonough, Kelly, y Gustavo Zapoteco Sideño: »Indigenous Literatures of Mexico«. *A History of Mexican Literature*, Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado, Anna M. Nogar y José Ramón Ruisánchez Serra, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2016. 397–410.
- Montemayor, Carlos: *La literatura actual en las lenguas indígenas de México*. México: Universidad Iberoamericana, 2001.
- Oropeza Bruno, Iván: »La madre tierra y su sustento tangible«. *Ojarasca La Jornada* 257 (sep. 2018): 12.
- Rojas Urrutia, Carlos: »Hubert Matiúwaa: Cicatriz de la montaña«. *Confabulario* [16.6.2018]. <https://confabulario.eluniversal.com.mx/hubert-matiuwaa-cicatriz-de-la-montana/>.
- Saákäsmä, Jaime: »Fisura donde hundo el silencio«. *Ojarasca La Jornada* 262 (feb. 2019): 21.
- Santacruz-De León, Eugenio Eliseo, y Víctor Herminio Palacio-Muñoz: »Campesinos mexicanos: entre la subsistencia, el mercado y los cultivos ilícitos«. *Quivera* 16, 2 (2014): 11–25.
- Velázquez, Perla: »La preservación de la lengua, la memoria, y la identidad«. *Noticias 22 Digital* [9.9.2018]. <http://noticias.canal22.org.mx/2018/09/09/la-preservacion-de-la-lengua-la-memoria-y-la-identidad/>.
- Worley, Paul: »In Review: *Xtámbaa—Piel de Tierra* by Hubert Malina«. *Asymptote* [5.7.2017]. <https://www.asymptote-journal.com/blog/2017/07/05/in-review-xtambaa-piel-de-tierra-by-hubert-malina/>.