

## Around the House. Maya Cú



**Original poetry in Spanish from *Alrededor de la casa* © Maya Cú  
Introduction, selection and translation by Gloria E. Chacón and Juan G. Sánchez Martínez**

Kaqchikel researcher Aura Estela Cumes explains that paternalistic culturalism in Guatemala represents the Mayan woman as a tourist object, a museum piece, a weaver and guardian of culture, but at the same time separates her from the possibility of being an “epistemic authority.” Maya Cú captures this sexist paternalism in the following verses:

(...) to be clear:  
I am not  
an ancestral clay doll  
revived by divine breath  
of postmodern intellectuals.

Since 1996, Maya Cú has been reminding Guatemalan—and by extension Latin American—society how scared they are to look in the mirror and discover how brown, how cinnamon, how mixed they are, how “beautifully brown” [they are] (“Rage”). In her essay “Poetas y escritoras mayas de Guatemala: Del silencio a la palabra” (“Mayan Women Poets and Writers from Guatemala: From Silence to Word”) (2016), Cú questions the censorship of colonial institutions (school, family, church) of Indigenous women voices, but also interrogates the self-censorship of Indigenous women. In some cases, Indigenous women do not recognize themselves as writers (84). In Cú’s words, the expectations of editors and academics about Indigeneity (as a rural and ethnic problem) preclude them from recognizing the diversity of contemporary Mayan expressions. The poems that we publish here are a sample of Maya Cú’s latest book, *Alrededor de la casa* (“Around the house”) (La Chifurnia, 2022).

It was never  
more than a shelter  
from the outdoors

it had  
fragile walls  
humidity

there we cohabited  
rats  
trash  
my sisters  
me

it was the house  
it is the house

root of  
a human  
group

and that woman  
a column  
who refuses  
to let it fall

An aseismic house  
must have a strong foundation  
a deep iron frame

when the earthquake comes,  
the house will hardly fall

What if this tenant does not have a good foundation?

Wooden walls  
vulnerable before fire

aluminum walls avert rain  
but lock the heat in

cement ceilings and walls  
protect from rain, sun, fire

how to avoid loneliness?  
how does one defend oneself from sadness?  
how to build  
kick-proof walls?

who designs houses  
that shelter, feed, protect  
and provide endless doses  
of understanding and tenderness?

*For those in the room. Managua, 2002*

We live together  
we recreate love

we strip  
our skins

we listen to each other  
we fight  
we laugh, we play  
we were girls  
we cry

we were  
the women  
from that room  
killing borders  
creating  
a new house  
from which we didn't  
want to leave

a refuge  
with sisters and mothers  
in a constant coven  
giving us freedom

There is a lot to do  
a lot to do

first  
we will rearrange space

the cardinal points  
will be oriented in the direction  
of heaven

the moon  
will be full  
for a long time  
the rainy cloud will come  
at night  
to sleep on the terrace

where will we put  
the fog?  
the balcony that is  
on its way  
will gladly share  
its flower

you will have an infinite  
wall  
to set up  
your wildest exhibition

for me  
I just want the corner  
from where I will  
see you  
my love  
assembling  
and disarming the world

Where can a young heart go, wounded by distance, melancholy, disdain, if the house is half built? If the walls are fragile and the floor is damp? Seeking refuge without finding it. Leaves running naked, to shelter in other hungry hearts for company.

I aged  
inside

left  
pieces of me  
scattered throughout  
walls

I moved  
by inertia

I left seeds  
in some eyes  
hugs  
in some bodies

I left  
almost empty

now I carry  
wrinkles  
white hair  
nostalgia, pain

I pick up  
my pieces  
I put them in a bag  
and I go out

and I can't find anything  
but sadness...



# ALREDEDOR DE LA CASA

colección el fuego perdido

MAYA  
CÚ

poetas guatemaltecos contemporáneos



Proyecto Editorial **La Chifurnia**

I dreamed  
of a house

White  
surrounded by flowers  
and tall trees

I only asked for a  
deserved  
roof and floor

I never had it

Yesterday  
a provider  
of certainty appeared  
He daily  
builds  
next to me  
this new house

in mutual discovery  
we are laying  
the foundations

we make the walls

we share the dream  
to put our pieces together  
to build a new house  
where we will live

Today I undressed

I posed for  
the camera

the room strewn with  
clothes throughout

my footprints  
scattered

when I stopped  
I realized  
that  
all the mirrors  
disappeared

I found my body  
dancing  
smiling  
friendly and passionate

and it was enough for me

She

knows that upon her return  
she will open the door  
and feel joy to meet you  
for coffee  
for dipping bread  
in coffee  
to listen to the radio  
and dance to the beat of your song

He

knows that upon his return  
he will remove the wire from the gate  
cross the patio to reach  
your side

he will greet you happily  
because he managed to finish a day's work  
because the earth responds to his care

the sun was benevolent and did not burn his skin  
the rain is generous and will fall later

he will show you the best seeds  
that he found  
for the next sowing

they will eat next to the stone-bench  
beans and hot coffee  
corn tortillas from their harvest  
and cheese

melted  
like them

## **Elena visits the house**

### **I**

#### **Strange communion with Elena**

Did you hear my name?

You looked for it and you preferred it, because you know that here, behind this nomenclature, my soul is waiting for a reunion celebration.

But, the only celebration we put up today is one of tears.

Time and time again, the weeping, why unites our hearts like this? Is our sorrow for these beloved cities so great that it is capable of uniting our distant melancholies?

### **II**

#### **girls reunion**

Painting that afternoon would be fun if Elena was calm enough to pose.

But Elena is a restless girl who bites her nails and spits the waste on the chair. She wets her feet in the firm sand of a sea that cannot be crossed. A sea that erased the way back to the city of our daydream, our dream, our ephemeral root, our space of communion. I, the little sister, watch her carefully, while I wait for time to stop on this piece of beach, asking Yemayá to take care of us, to be our mother, our goddess, our friend, our compass, to return to that city.

### **III**

#### **The one I'm not**

Diva  
elegance in the word  
voice and erudition  
corporeal strength  
unattainable height  
charismatic presence

a story that I would like as my own  
feet dancing on the urban cobbled street  
sand full of your feet  
water full of your fear  
lips reciting verses next to Reynaldo

eyes alive of revolution

flashing fingers

mestizo song  
eternal song  
cheerful song  
song with tone  
song with you  
your song  
my song

Song not yet written  
half song  
song without score  
broken song  
shared song  
song in two rhythms

distant song  
oppressive  
uncertain

sad song without reason  
sad permanent weep

never ending pain  
intimate pain  
pain countering  
parallel pain

the one you are not  
the one we are

## IV

### Epilogue

If I ever belonged to someone  
it's to you

because you chose me  
or because my shadowy female ancestor  
chose you

## Image

Grandma whisks cocoa  
gathers the fire  
secures the ocote-sticks

the girl braids garlic  
draws a circle, and skeletons  
rise dancing at its center

inviting to swing  
a song  
of few notes

I dance  
the mist fills with colors  
I rise

the image  
is immortalized  
behind the door

## More about Maya Cu

- Maya Cú's anthology in the project [Mayan Women, The Mayan Among Us](#).

## The translators

**Gloria E. Chacón** is Associate Professor in the Literature Department at UCSD. Both her research and teaching focus on indigenous literatures, autonomy, and philosophy. She is the author of *Indigenous Cosmolectics: Kab'awil and the Making of Maya and Zapotec Literatures* (2018). She is currently working on her second book tentatively titled *Metamestizaje, Indigeneity, and Diasporas: Challenging Cartographies*. She is co-editor of *Indigenous Interfaces: Spaces, Technology, and Social Networks in Mexico and Central America* by Arizona Press (2019). She is also co-editing an anthology *Teaching Central American Literature in a Global Context* for MLA's Teaching Options Series. Chacón's work has appeared in anthologies and journals in Canada, Colombia, Germany, Mexico, and the USA. She has co-edited a special issue on indigenous literature for DePaul's University academic journal, *Diálogo*.



**Juan G. Sánchez Martínez**, grew up in Bakatá, Colombian Andes. He dedicates both his creative and scholarly writing to indigenous cultural expressions from Abiyala (the Americas.) His book of



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