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Decolonize Your Life: Xicanx Eco-Feminist Healing of Body, Mind, Spirit, Earth

By

AA VALDIVIA
DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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DAVIS

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2025

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Acknowledgments (Relations & Gratitudes)

Before anything else, I begin by dedicating this work to my ancestors, plantcestors, and transcestors—the human and more-than-human lineages who carried wisdom in their bodies, leaves, roots, spirits, and transitions. Your survivance, your adaptability, and your insistence on life form the ground upon which this manuscript stands. This work is an offering back to the lineages that dreamed me into being.

I also honor the worlds of cultural lineage that shape me—including the ones that arrive through sound, rhythm, and unapologetic presence. To echo the words of Beyoncé, whose artistry reminds me of inherited audacity:

“I am one of one, I am number one, I am the only one.”

I hold this line not as individual exceptionalism but as a lineage call—a reminder that each of us carries a singular yet communal constellation of ancestors, stories, and futures. I offer gratitude for the ways Black feminist cultural production continues to teach me how to stand in my own multiplicity with joy, clarity, and power.

To my family—thank you for teaching me that knowledge is carried in kitchens, landscapes, memories, and the body. To my mom, whose quiet strength and everyday acts of care have been a constant lesson in love, resilience, and creativity—gracias por sostenerme en cada etapa. To my sister, who has shown me new ways of imagining kinship, courage, and becoming. To Melba and Juliana, whose presence, humor, and generosity remind me that community is also made through tenderness and reciprocal holding. To my tías, whose devotion and contradictions helped me understand the tensions between inherited religion and emerging spiritual futures—gracias por caminar conmigo en ese espacio in-between.

To my mentors, teachers, and scholarly communities who model care over extraction: thank you for expanding my thinking, feeding my spirit, and holding complexity with generosity. You have shown me what intellectual and spiritual abundance can look like.

To the lands, waters, plants, and more-than-human beings who appear throughout this work: thank you for receiving me, teaching me, and insisting on relationality. I strive to honor your teachings without translating them into colonial legibility.

To my friends, loved ones, and compañeres: your laughter, your honesty, your presence, and your belief in me made the work possible. You remind me that joy is theory, that rest is resistance, and that relationality is a practice of care.

Finally, to the self who began this journey—tender, fragmented, and still arriving—thank you for refusing to disappear. This manuscript is a witness to your becoming, a testament to your courage, and a reminder that your singularity is a collective inheritance.

May this work return care to all who contributed to its life.

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Decolonize Your Life: Xicanx Eco-Feminist Healing of Body, Mind, Spirit, Earth

The dissertation begins with a deeply personal declaration: the Prologue stands as the initial autoethnographic data point, establishing the ethical and political urgency of this research. This work confronts the enduring reality that chronic illness and food insecurity are not individual failures, but systemic, geographical outcomes. This chapter, therefore, serves as both a manifesto for Decolonizing Xicanx Eco-Feminism (D-XEF) and the blueprint for its application, transitioning academic critique into a generative, community-based practice of healing and resistance.

Prologue: The Scene of the Crime / El Cuerpo como Evidencia (The Body as Evidence)

(Originally written at age 36, this reflection marks the moment the work of Decolonizing Xicanx Eco-Feminism first took root. This preface is not confession but data — the first autoethnographic entry point for the Decolonizing Xicanx Eco-Feminist method. Here, the wound becomes witness.)

How did I get here? How did I allow this to happen? I thought I was doing everything right. *Lie. Liar.*

I knew in my corazón (heart) that one-dollar cheeseburgers every day were evil. My kidneys tried to warn me that two tacos for a buck — *suck!* I told myself I just needed glasses, that I was getting old. Except why is the world turning so bright, a fog of LED Christmas lights filling my peripheral? I close my eyes and take a breath, hoping I'll wake up from this vision of light.

They say the light is the way. *The way to dónde¹?*

Give me the dark. Give me more of me — my skin, my color, like the Earth.

¹ At times I translate and at times I do not; this unevenness is intentional. As a decolonial interruption, it shifts the burden of translation to the reader rather than assuming all knowledge must be made immediately legible.

I should have listened to her, Madre Tierra (Mother Earth). I think I still can. I do. But I needed to then, before *this* happened to me. Before the colonization in my sangre (blood) manifested — before empire found its home in my veins.

You knew what to do. I know what to do.

I am afraid to say it. I am ashamed to say it. Pero — ¿por qué? Because they tell me, “*You’re so young,*” “*Aren’t you vegan?*” “*I thought you taught exercise classes.*”

I hold my tongue. I bite my lengua (tongue). The salty substance fills my mouth, stains the rocks in my mouth — the teeth that grind against silence.

I stand up too fast. I know better. There are three of everything. This must be what *borracho* (drunkenness) feels like. No wonder I don’t drink. Sixteen years ago the curandera told me my liver wasn’t happy. I should have paid closer attention. But if I had... would I be here now?

A bit of me dies every time I stab myself. The needle full of shame. I hide in the baño (bathroom) to do it, never in front of those I love — adding the poison of another to fight the poison within.

Why can’t I say it? I don’t want to make it their reality — to name this thing in my reality.

Coyolxauhqui, ayúdame.

Tiny pinpricks rain on my soles/souls, not just on my feet.

Prickling. Tingling — and not in a good way. It comes with the light.

I become numb, and secretly want a large pizza with extra toppings to numb myself more. It is what keeps me imprisoned to the Pharmaceuticals.

“Flax seed and canela,” my apa (father) says, “every morning — te ayuda (it will help you).”

But what does he know? He has it también (too). My mamá too.

But not until they were in their sixties. I have it now.

I am only 36. *Only?!*

Does it even matter when? Or is it the why?

This is the epistemology of my brown, Black, colonized body — a theory written in glucose and grief.

Is it my fault? Do I take on the neoliberal responsibility of my own health?

Or is the colonizer a culprit too? *You damn right he is.*

Why can’t I say it?

I remember spinning in circles as a child and collapsing to the floor — seeing the world like a kaleidoscope. It was so much fun then.

I don’t have to spin to feel that now. Too much white flour, white sugar, white food does the trick.

Not fun.

“Just walk,” they say. “It’s no big deal. Move more, eat less. It’s the best thing you can do for yourself.”

Oh, and don’t forget to take your 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 pastillas (pills) and your self-mutilating, cancer-causing injections — all for only \$299.99 a month.

The doctor says: “I’ll write you a prescription for another month, but you’ll have to get someone else to argue about the care I prescribe for you.”

What the!? You pump me with pills, and now that you've gotten your kickbacks and bonus check for hooking me for life to your drugs — you abandon me.
I am not surprised. *Ni modo*.
My corazón says: feed your soul, heal your soul — on your own terms.
I hope I don't die too soon.

This is where Decolonizing Xicanx Eco-Feminism begins — in the body's remembering, in the mind's refusal of colonial amnesia, in the spirit's return to ceremony, and in the earth's insistence on reciprocity. The preface stands as both data and prayer, opening a pathway toward healing as method, relation, and future.

The following chapter builds upon this embodied entry point, translating the wound's testimony into the theoretical and methodological foundation of Decolonizing Xicanx Eco-Feminism.

Chapter 1: From Critique to Creation: Introduction and the Generative Methodology of D-XEF

The Preface stands as the initial autoethnographic data point, establishing the ethical and political urgency of this research. This work confronts the enduring reality that chronic illness and food insecurity are not individual failures, but systemic, geographical outcomes. This chapter, therefore, serves as both a manifesto for Decolonizing Xicanx Eco-Feminism (D-XEF) and the blueprint for its application, transitioning academic critique into a generative, community-based practice of healing and resistance.

I. Opening Reflections / From Pathology to Power: The First Wound and the Refusal

A. The Body as Battleground / Cuerpo-Tierra as Archive

This dissertation is anchored in the premise that the Body is a primary site of colonial imposition. The rising prevalence of diet-related illnesses, which disproportionately affect Latinx-identified women and gender-expansive people — including myself — is argued to be the cumulative consequence of the imperialist white supremacist capitalist cisgendered heteropatriarchy (IWSCCHP). This structure violently restructures foodways, erodes cultural knowledge, and isolates individuals from traditional sources of physical, spiritual, and environmental wellness.

B. Seeds of Inquiry / Planting the Guiding Questions

While the problem is rooted in colonial pathology, the purpose of this work is to center resistance and creation.

Thesis Statement:

This dissertation argues that the Decolonizing Xicanx Eco-Feminist (D-XEF) framework — which holistically links the Body, Mind, Spirit, and Earth — provides the necessary theoretical, ethical, and practical methodology for documenting and achieving liberation from colonial pathologies embedded in Chicanx/Latinx foodways.

The project is guided by two core research questions:

1. Colonial Shaping: How have the food practices, knowledge, and health outcomes of Latinx-identified people across the U.S., Mexico, and Puerto Rico been historically and contemporaneously shaped by the forces of colonialism, neoliberal capitalism, and assimilation?

2. Decolonial Resistance: In what specific and practical ways are participants decolonizing their lives through the conscious reclamation and practice of ancestral knowledge, and how does this resistance manifest across the four pillars of Body, Mind, Spirit, and Earth?

II. Ancestral and Scholarly Lineages / The Four Pillars of Envisioning

This research is rooted in a fundamental critique of conventional Political Ecology (PE) and its tendency toward extractive, problem-oriented analysis. The term Political Ecology originated within human geography (Gregory et al. 2009, 556–57), evolving from foundational debates between positivism (quantitative) and humanism (qualitative) (Gregory et al. 2009; Valentine and Aitken 2006, 24–38). While PE’s strength lies in its structural focus—arguing for “spatial accounts of degradation that link through chains of explanation” (Gregory et al. 2009, 556)—the model often remains tied to Eurocentric, positivist epistemologies, prioritizing material analysis while neglecting political relevance to those being studied (Smith 1984, 12). Indigenous political ecology makes clear that this extractive tendency reproduces colonial logics by overlooking Indigenous knowledge, place-based responsibilities, and self-determining governance (Middleton 2013, 561–76).

The D-XEF model shifts the focus from what is broken to what survives and what is being created.

A. Naming the Lens / Decolonizing Xicanx Eco-Feminism as Theory and Practice

D-XEF is formally introduced as an intersectional, activist theory synthesized from several critical academic and ancestral movements:

- Reframing Political Ecology: D-XEF is a radical refinement of PE. While PE critically examines power relations in environmental decisions (Forsyth 2003), D-XEF insists the analysis must move beyond a realist framework by addressing the power structures the researcher brings and by honoring the Earth as a living entity.
- Marxist Theory: To analyze the power dynamics of class and capital within food production and labor (Rius 1990).
- Chicana Feminism: To critique the stigmatization of race, gender, class, and sexuality, as well as patriarchy within activist spaces. Chicana Feminism emerged from oppression within both the Chicano and white feminist movements, disrupting dominant social standards (Hurtado 1998).
- The Xicanx Nuance: The replacement of *Ch* with *X* symbolizes solidarity with Indigenous nations throughout the Americas (Berta-Ávila 2004) and invokes the gender-neutral *x*, challenging binary constructs and acknowledging the wounds of the gendered *o*² (Pelaez López 2018). As Gloria Anzaldúa asserts, the mestiza straddles cultures and identities, where the “battleground of colonization, colonizer/colonized duality, takes place on brown bodies” (Anzaldúa 2021, 103).
- Decolonizing Methodologies: To ethically ground the research in Indigenous knowledges, ensuring the project becomes an act of Claiming, Story-telling, and Celebrating Survival (Smith 2012).

² The term “gendered o” refers to the use of the masculine ending, such as in Chicano or Latino, which traditionally functions as the default or universal form for a group, thereby minimizing or erasing the female form (Chicana/Latina). The introduction of the “x” (as in Xicanx or Latinx) serves to challenge this binary structure, honor Indigenous roots (particularly the Nahuatl language, which uses the “x” sound), and move toward a more inclusive, non-gendered identity (Pelaez López 2018).

B. Mapping the Four Pillars / Body · Mind · Spirit · Earth

The dissertation employs the Indigenous wellness concept of harmonizing the self with the world — represented by the Mayan principle En Lak’ech (“You are my other me”) — as its analytical structure. This framework views the self as inherently interconnected with all living things (Cajete 2000). The four pillars serve both as chapter dividers and as a holistic roadmap for decolonial life derived from this framework:

- Body: Physical health, diet, illness, and movement.
- Mind: Identity, self-doubt, historical erasure, and knowledge reclamation.
- Spirit: Healing the soul wound, collective trauma, ritual, and ceremony.
- Earth: Land, agroecology, resistance to industrial agriculture, and environmental justice.

III. Ways of Knowing and Feeding / Comida as Método (The Creation)

A. From Problem to Possibility / Decolonial Envisioning as Practice

This research rejects the colonial logic of “problem-solving,” which assumes issues can be externally diagnosed and fixed. Rooted in positivist traditions, such logic privileges measurement and quantification — imposing variables like “calories” onto cultural practices — and erases alternative epistemologies and lived experiences (Mudry 2009).

As both researcher and participant, I situate myself within this study: a Queer Boricua Xicanx, nonbinary body shaped by the same colonial structures under examination. This embodied positioning informs the ethical and methodological core of Decolonizing Xicanx Eco-Feminism (D-XEF), where knowing is inseparable from living, and method is an act of relation.

Instead, this project embraces Decolonial Envisioning: a collective process of imagining, describing, and mapping what a sovereign, post-IWSCCHP life might look like by centering

participant knowledge and cultural practices. This approach departs from positivism and aligns with humanistic geography, situating research in relation to meaning, place, and lived realities (Smith 1984).

B. Designing with Reciprocity / Protocols of Presence

The research design employs a multi-method Critical Ethnography that privileges Generative Knowledge Creation over data extraction, operationalized through Methodological Triangulation (Creswell 2007) integrating multiple qualitative methods to validate and deepen findings.

Core Methods

The methodology integrates Autoethnography (researcher positionality), Testimonios (food-centered life histories), Oral Histories, and Ethnographic Observation. This critical ethnographic approach facilitates advocacy by challenging oppressive structures and illuminating pathways toward liberation (Creswell 2007).

Dinner Discussion Protocol

Bi-weekly dinner discussions in Oakland, Fresno, and Aguascalientes served as ceremonial and collaborative spaces of co-labor. Conducted over eighteen months and totaling more than 100 hours of interviews, these gatherings took place within family (Aguascalientes, Fresno) and community (Oakland) contexts, establishing a foundation of relational trust. Collective cooking and sharing of comida became the central method for generating memory, trust, and narrative data through testimonios — semi-structured interviews focused on food-centered life histories (Albert 2010; Holtzman 2006).

Analytical Engine — Decolonize Your Diet Framework

The Decolonize Your Diet framework (Calvo and Esquibel 2015) serves as the primary analytical and discussion taxonomy. Introduced to participants four months into the process, it

functioned as a critical interpretive lens — codifying narratives along a continuum from colonized practices (e.g., assimilation, food for profit) to decolonial resistances (e.g., ancestral knowledge, small-scale farming).

C. The Burden of Staying Awake / Ethics of Non-Extraction

This project is grounded in a strict commitment to non-extractive praxis and accountability to participants.

Reflexivity and Bias Mitigation

Continuous reflexivity was maintained through Autoethnography and a detailed methodological field journal, used iteratively to examine power dynamics, mitigate researcher bias, and unsettle underlying assumptions. This reflexive process was essential for navigating the complexities of the researcher's political and positional identities.

Presence and Documentation Protocol

To ensure full presence and engagement, no notes were taken during the collective dinner discussions. Data collection relied on direct observation and was supplemented only by photographs or audio recordings when explicit, informed consent was granted by participants. Deeper narrative data (testimonios) were later gathered through one-on-one sessions, allowing for a more in-depth exploration of individual life histories and experiences.

Ethical Stance

The project's ethical framework acknowledges that “the extraction of knowledge is the business of academia” (Posada 2018). In response, it actively repositions the burden of awareness — and the responsibility to ensure the research process honors participants' knowledge, time, and epistemic sovereignty — onto the researcher. This stance aligns with the critical ethics articulated by Abu-Lughod (1990), resisting the tendency to simply “write against culture” and instead foregrounding relational accountability.

IV. Braiding the Journey / Roadmap of the Four Pillars

The dissertation unfolds through the four pillars of Decolonial Envisioning, reflecting a holistic movement from critique to creation, and from the individual body to the collective earth. Each pillar represents a mode of healing, resistance, and reimagining rooted in Xicanx eco-feminist thought and Indigenous epistemologies.

Chapter	Title and Focus	Summary of Contents
2	<i>Decolonial Lens and Generative Methodology — Theorizing and Practicing Xicanx Eco-Feminism</i>	Establishes the theoretical foundation of the Decolonizing Xicanx Eco-Feminist (D-XEF) framework within decolonial, Indigenous, and feminist scholarship on wellness and sovereignty.
3	<i>Decolonizing the Body</i>	Examines embodied decolonial practices that reclaim physical sovereignty through movement, community, and ritual.
4	<i>Decolonizing the Mind</i>	Explores education, memory, and ancestral knowledge as pathways for intellectual and emotional liberation.
5	<i>Decolonizing the Spirit</i>	Investigates spiritual survivance through ancestral memory, ritual, and collective healing practices.
6	<i>Decolonizing the Earth</i>	Analyzes land-based practices of kinship, care, and ecological reciprocity as foundations for decolonial sovereignty.
7	<i>Conclusion: Synthesis of the D-XEF Framework and Emancipatory Futures</i>	Synthesizes the four pillars to articulate a vision of decolonial praxis grounded in relationality, sovereignty, and collective healing.

The following chapter deepens this foundation by weaving theory and method into a single fabric of practice. *Decolonial Lens and Generative Methodology — Theorizing and Practicing Xicanx Eco-Feminism* situates the D-XEF framework within its ancestral and scholarly lineages while detailing its methodological architecture. Here, theory becomes ceremony, and methodology becomes a living act of relation — the means through which this research breathes, feeds, and envisions decolonial futures.

Chapter 2: Decolonial Lens and Generative Methodology — Theorizing and Practicing Xicanx Eco-Feminism

This chapter weaves together the theoretical and methodological foundations of Decolonizing Xicanx Eco-Feminism (D-XEF). It situates D-XEF within decolonial, Indigenous, and feminist genealogies of thought while grounding its praxis in relational, food-centered ethnography. Here, theory is not abstraction but ceremony; method is not procedure but relation. Together, they form a generative pathway toward collective healing and liberation across the four pillars — Body, Mind, Spirit, and Earth.

I. Ancestral and Scholarly Lineages / The Four Pillars of Envisioning

Decolonizing Xicanx Eco-Feminism is rooted in a convergence of decolonial theory, Chicana feminism, Indigenous epistemologies, and eco-critical scholarship. These lineages reject the Cartesian separation of mind, body, and land, insisting instead on an ontology of relation. D-XEF builds upon Political Ecology's concern for environmental justice but departs from its Eurocentric materialism, centering instead a cosmology in which the Earth is alive and knowing (Smith 2012).

Political Ecology: Genealogy, Debates, and Decolonial Turns

Political Ecology (PE) emerged in geography and anthropology to link ecological change with political-economic power, developing out of long-running disciplinary debates between positivism (quantitative, bias-neutral claims) and humanism (qualitative, meaning-centered inquiry) (Gregory et al. 2009; Valentine and Aitken 2006; Smith 1984). Early PE consolidated an

agenda around three foci: it is interactive and dialectical; it traces spatial chains of explanation that connect local decisions to broader structures; and it frames land management within external forces such as the state (Gregory et al. 2006, 546). Foundational work on soil erosion located degradation within state–rural power relations and global political economy (Blaikie 1985), while later syntheses argued that environmental problems cannot be understood apart from their political and economic contexts (Watts 2000; Forsyth 2001). PE also exposed how conservation and “development” often misread or co-opt Indigenous knowledge to consolidate control (Fairhead and Leach 1996).

Methodologically, PE’s critique of top-down expertise opened toward Participatory Action Research (PAR)—co-labor with communities that cycles through participation, action, and reflection (McTaggart 1991)—and toward feminist political ecology, which centers gendered labor, access, knowledge, and everyday ecologies (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, and Wangari 2013). Still, scholars have shown how well-meaning interventions can reproduce colonial logics: “fixing” food insecurity without situating researcher power or community histories (Guthman 2008, 433). Beyond first/third-world binaries, critiques from the “two-thirds world” perspective highlight how material and discursive struggles over environments are globally entangled, with naming itself operating as governance (Escobar 1988; Esteva and Prakash 1998).

D-XEF honors PE’s structural analysis yet moves past its Eurocentric materialism by making embodiment, spirit, and ancestral relation analytical—not anecdotal—categories. Where classical PE maps chains of explanation, D-XEF also maps chains of reciprocity; where PE interrogates the state and capital, D-XEF interrogates the researcher’s own positional power,

aligning with Indigenous protocols of respect, presence, and accountability (Smith 2012). In this sense, D-XEF is a feminist, decolonial extension of PE: it treats Earth not as resource or stage but as kin and teacher, and it orients analysis through the Four Pillars—and, ceremonially, the Four Directions—to hold politics, ecology, and relation together.

Guided by these critiques and expansions of Political Ecology, D-XEF turns analytic attention from extraction to relation, from what is broken to what survives and is continually re-created.

The four pillars—Body, Mind, Spirit, and Earth—emerge as a living map of wellness, sovereignty, and survivance (Anzaldúa 2021). Each represents a dimension of healing within a holistic practice rather than a discrete analytic category. These pillars are also aligned with the Four Directions—East, South, West, and North—which serve as a ceremonial and conceptual compass for this work. Each direction corresponds to one of the pillars: East (Spirit) as awakening and illumination; South (Body) as growth and vitality; West (Mind) as reflection and memory; and North (Earth) as integration and renewal.

Yet these pillars do not exist in isolation. They are not fixed points on a map but currents in motion, always informing and transforming one another. To tend the Body is also to feed the Mind; to honor the Earth is to heal the Spirit. These examples illustrate the permeability of each pillar, but they are not prescriptive—movement happens in all directions, simultaneously and cyclically. Healing may begin in the Body and travel toward the Earth, or it may rise from Spirit and return through Mind; the direction is neither fixed nor hierarchical. This fluid interdependence mirrors Indigenous and Xicanx understandings of wholeness—where knowledge, action, and being circulate rather than ascend. Grounding the Four Pillars within

the Four Directions ensures that this research moves in rhythm with the elements, the seasons, and the ancestors, refusing the fragmentation that colonial epistemologies impose.

Chicana and Black Feminist Lineages: Embodied Coalitions and Spiritual Praxis

Chicana feminism forms the central root of Decolonizing Xicanx Eco-Feminism (D-XEF), forging a vision of liberation that bridges body, land, and spirit as interdependent sites of knowing. Emerging from the margins of the Chicano Movement, Chicana feminist thought directly challenged the racial and patriarchal exclusions embedded within both nationalist and feminist discourses, insisting on a politics grounded in embodied experience and cultural memory. Gloria Anzaldúa theorized *mestiza consciousness* in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*—a borderlands identity that embraces contradiction, ambiguity, and transformation as sources of power (2021, 99–113). Her co-edited anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* (with Cherrie Moraga) forged a foundational coalitional space for women of color feminism, centering solidarity through difference (xix–xxi). Moraga’s *Loving in the War Years* extended this project through a deeply personal and political exploration of sexuality, motherhood, and resistance, asserting that theory itself must be born from the flesh (19–21). Chela Sandoval’s *Methodology of the Oppressed* introduced *differential consciousness*—a flexible, strategic mode of activism capable of navigating and subverting systems of domination (58–61). Collectively, these thinkers establish the ethical and spiritual foundations of D-XEF, modeling a praxis of transformation that integrates *conocimiento*, accountability, and embodied relation. Within this framework, scholarship and ceremony intertwine: theory becomes a form of healing, and healing, a method of knowing.

The embodied practices and spiritual foundations championed by Chicana feminists were always already in dynamic conversation with Black feminist thought. *This Bridge Called My*

Back drew its radical energy from this very dialogue—one that refused isolation and instead forged solidarity through lived struggle (xxii–xxiii). Black feminism, too, insists that liberation must emerge from embodied experience, care, and coalition. Scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, and Kimberlé Crenshaw reveal how race, gender, class, and sexuality intersect to structure power—and, crucially, how marginalized knowledge becomes a site of resistance (Collins 221–23; hooks 9–10; Lorde 110–13; Davis 5–8; Crenshaw 149–50). Collins’s *Black Feminist Thought* situates lived experience as theory, asserting that knowledge rooted in survival carries epistemic authority (32–33). hooks exposes how liberation must confront patriarchy and white supremacy simultaneously (15–17), while Lorde transforms difference into a source of creative power, teaching that the erotic, the poetic, and the political are inseparable (53–59). Davis grounds this genealogy in collective struggle, linking reproductive, racial, and economic justice as interdependent movements (20–23). Crenshaw’s framework of intersectionality provides a methodological compass for D-XEF, ensuring that decolonial work attends to overlapping forms of oppression rather than reproducing hierarchies of visibility (149–50). Together, these Black feminist thinkers insist that decolonization remains inseparable from the struggle for Black freedom.

In conversation, Chicana and Black feminisms create the relational ground on which D-XEF stands. Each offers not only critique but also ceremony: ways of reimagining survival, relation, and liberation as intertwined acts. Their shared attention to the body as archive, to theory as lived practice, and to love as a radical methodology sustains this framework’s spiritual and political commitments. Any eco-feminism worthy of the Earth, therefore, must remain

fiercely accountable to the radical, relational praxis of both traditions—distinct, yet inextricably braided through struggle, imagination, and care.

From Theory to Ceremony

Rooted in the Chicana and Black feminist lineages that center embodied knowledge and collective liberation, my curanderx practice becomes both method and ceremony—a site where these intertwined traditions take lived form. Drawing from Anzaldúa’s *conocimiento* and Lorde’s erotic power, I understand transformation as beginning within the body and radiating outward in relation to land, ancestors, and community. My process of coming out as queer and non-binary taught me to honor the Center—the truth of my spirit—as the first orientation of healing. My six years of curanderx training formalized this commitment, grounding it in a daily ritual of honoring the Four Directions. This practice, deepened through time spent in Chiapas and Oaxaca, cultivates an ongoing dialogue with ancestral teachings and the orienting forces of the Earth. These personal and cosmological lineages are not mere themes but foundations: the pillars that root the Body, clarify the Mind, fortify the Spirit, and hold me accountable to the Earth as kin.

This ceremonial grounding also shapes how I approach research itself.

I align with Gloria Anzaldúa’s call for spiritual activism, utilizing my body as the primary site of transformative *conocimiento*, and I structure this research through Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s decolonizing methodologies, positioning ancestral knowledge as sovereign and challenging the extractive colonial gaze. The compass of this work also points eastward, toward Puerto Rico—an island still claimed by empire—where colonial geographies continue to shape how nourishment, labor, and land remain entangled (Alfred and Corntassel 2005). Furthermore, my understanding of the Four Directions is explicitly mirrored in Smith’s *Indigenous Research*

Agenda (Figure 6.1), which names decolonization, healing, transformation, and mobilization as interconnected processes driven by the tide of self-determination (Smith 2012, 116).

In this convergence of theory, ceremony, and lived experience, I define Decolonizing Xicanx Eco-Feminism (D-XEF) as a praxis of embodied relation that weaves Indigenous epistemologies, Afro-diasporic knowledge, Chicana feminist thought, and political ecology through a decolonial lens. It is both a theoretical framework and a way of being—one that centers the Earth as a living relative, grounds healing in collective sovereignty, and insists that knowledge emerges through ceremony, struggle, and reciprocity.

Emerging from these embodied and ceremonial practices, D-XEF must also be understood within its wider intellectual and activist genealogies. If the Four Directions orient this work cosmologically, then Indigenous, Chicana, and Afro-diasporic traditions anchor it politically and ethically, offering models of sovereignty, relationality, and resistance shaped through generations of struggle. These genealogies remind us that decolonizing the ecological and the feminist is not only a return to land and ritual but a commitment to dismantling the racial, economic, and imperial structures that determine whose knowledges, bodies, and territories are rendered expendable. D-XEF emerges, therefore, as both a critique and a mandate—an insistence that any ecological practice must be accountable to the survival work of Black, Indigenous, and Brown women whose movements have long imagined worlds beyond empire.

II. Naming the Lens / Decolonizing Xicanx Eco-Feminism as Theory and Practice

Moving beyond the spiritual and philosophical roots established through Chicana and Black feminist praxis, this section turns to the theoretical and historical formation of

Decolonizing Xicanx Eco-Feminism (D-XEF). Here, Chicana feminism emerges not only as an epistemological lineage but as a movement forged in struggle—ignited by the political turbulence of the 1960s and 1970s and sustained through writing, organizing, and cultural production. By tracing this intellectual genealogy, I show how Chicana thought converged with decolonial and Marxist critiques to create a framework that is simultaneously analytical and embodied, scholarly and insurgent.

Chicana feminism arose during the political turbulence of the 1960s when Chicanas, marginalized within both the Chicano Movement and white Feminism, began writing to assert their own voices (Simmen and Bauerle 1969). Writers such as Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa used autobiographic storytelling to expose oppression and to theorize healing as an ongoing process (Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015).

Xicanx Eco-Feminism extends this legacy through Marxist and decolonial critiques, drawing on Berta-Ávila (2004) to frame the “X” as solidarity among Indigenous nations and a challenge to gender binaries. Alan Pelaez López (2020) at one point argues that the “X” is a wound — marked by Settlement, Anti-Blackness, Femicides, and Inarticulation — rather than a mere stylistic choice.

As Anzaldúa (2021, 103) writes, “The mestiza is a product of crossbreeding, designed for preservation under a variety of conditions.” D-XEF embraces that hybridity as a site of creation and accountability, acknowledging daily experiences of multiple colonizations (Elenes et al. 2001). Language choices such as *Xicanx* and *Latinx* further signal epistemological commitments: they redefine who produces knowledge and how identities are read within data, refusing colonial grammars that erase gender variance and Indigenous presence (Hurtado 1998; Moraga

and Anzaldúa 2015). I use *-o* or *-a* endings when quoting directly, when individuals have self-identified using those terms, or when referring to proper names (e.g., *Latino Outdoors*), to honor the specificity of their usage within their contexts.

III. Ways of Knowing and Feeding / *Comida* as Método (The Creation)

Comida as Relational Method

Eating together is the method. Conducting group conversations, autoethnography, ethnography, and oral histories while cooking and sharing food eased participants into memory work about *comida*, culture, and identity. Rather than using food as an incentive, meals functioned as ceremony and co-labor: collective preparation, blessing, and eating became the grounds for testimony and relational trust (Abarca 2006; Holtzman 2006).

The opening blessing depended on the group. When cooking with my tías and mom, we began with the familiar rhythm of a Catholic prayer:

Señor, bendice los alimentos que por tu bondad vamos a recibir. Dános Salud para ganarlos, Paz para disfrutarlos y Amor para compartirlos. ¡Amén!

In other gatherings, participants offered shorter acknowledgments—“Thank you everyone, every being, for our food,” or simply, “Just saying grace.” The moment before eating often carried a shared stillness, a brief pause that recognized interdependence. Across groups, these gestures grounded *comida* as an embodied method: a relational space where gratitude, memory, and survival converged, transforming eating into a decolonial practice of knowing.

Knowledge Moves in Circles

Adopting Indigenous epistemologies of circular storytelling, discussions embraced digressions and returns; meaning coalesced across sessions rather than being constrained by

rigid scripts (Wilson 2008; Black 2010). The rhythm of *comida* itself guided transitions—the full cycle, from preparation to sharing, eating, and collective cleaning, created natural pauses and openings for reflection. This circular rhythm mirrors the principles of the Decolonial-X-Epistemological Framework (D-XEF). In this view, knowledge unfolds through relationality rather than linear progression, enacting accountability to process, reciprocity, and the temporalities of relational decolonial research.

IV. Designing with Reciprocity / Protocols of Presence

Sites and Cadence

Fieldwork, rooted in ethnographic and autoethnographic practice, might be said to have begun with my first memory—with the earliest gestures of learning through food, land, and relation. More formally, it began in 2015 across Aguascalientes (MX), Oakland (CA), Fresno (CA), and Puerto Rico, with bi-weekly dinner discussions during the first eighteen months (~100 hours). Thereafter, follow-ups continued through WhatsApp, in-person visits, and voice memos whenever gathering was possible. These exchanges unfolded within familial and community contexts to sustain relational trust. Presence—not extraction—guided setting and pace.

Participant	Relation and Site	Years in Relation / Languages	Relational Context	Communication and Exchange
Juliana	Friend (CSUEB) – Oakland	16 years – English, Spanish	2 (Juliana and I); group discussions with Gloria, Corina, and Melba	WhatsApp, in-person; shared meals and healing conversations; book gifting (DYD)
Corina	Sister – Fresno	44 years – English, Spanish	3 (Corina, Melba, and I); group discussions with Juliana and Gloria	WhatsApp, in-person; shared meals and storytelling; book gifting (DYD)
Melba	Sister’s friend – Fresno	15 years – English, Spanish	3 (Melba, Corina, and I); group discussions with Juliana and Gloria	WhatsApp, in-person; shared meals and storytelling; book gifting (DYD)

Participant	Relation and Site	Years in Relation / Languages	Relational Context	Communication and Exchange
Gloria	Mother – Fresno, Puerto Rico, Mexico	48 years – English, Spanish	Varied (family gatherings with tías and me; group discussions with Juliana, Corina, and Melba)	WhatsApp, in-person; shared meals, storytelling, healing practice; book gifting (DYD)
Ofe	Tía – Mexico	48 years – Spanish	Varied (family gatherings with Gloria, Lupe, Sony, Socorro, Rebeca, and me; also interactions with Corina, Melba, and Juliana at different times)	WhatsApp, in-person during fieldwork visits; shared meals and storytelling
Lupe	Tía – Mexico	48 years – Spanish	Varied (family gatherings with Gloria, Ofe, Sony, Socorro, Rebeca, and me; also interactions with Corina, Melba, and Juliana at different times)	WhatsApp, in-person during fieldwork visits; shared meals and storytelling
Sony	Tía – Mexico	48 years – Spanish	Varied (family gatherings with Gloria, Ofe, Lupe, Socorro, Rebeca, and me; also interactions with Corina, Melba, and Juliana at different times)	WhatsApp, in-person during fieldwork visits; shared meals and storytelling
Socorro	Tía – Mexico	48 years – Spanish	Varied (family gatherings with Gloria, Ofe, Lupe, Sony, Rebeca, and me; also interactions with Corina, Melba, and Juliana at different times)	WhatsApp, in-person during fieldwork visits; shared meals and storytelling
Rebeca	Tía – Mexico	48 years – Spanish	Varied (family gatherings with Gloria, Ofe, Lupe, Sony, Socorro, and me; also interactions with Corina, Melba, and Juliana at different times)	WhatsApp, in-person during fieldwork visits; shared meals and storytelling

Participants and Collaborators

Participants included extended family and community members identifying as Mexican, Puerto Rican, Mexi-Rican, and Chicana. My relationships to participants varied: in Aguascalientes the participants are my paternal aunts; in Fresno my mother, sister, and sister’s friend; in Oakland a friend and former colleague from CSU East Bay. These relational ties are central rather than incidental. D-XEF treats kinship, friendship, and community as valid research structures—forms of accountability that transform “subjects” into collaborators. Here, I use *collaborator* to signify a relational ethic of co-creation and accountability rather than institutional partnership or authorship, following Indigenous and decolonial research principles that define knowledge as relational and collectively held (Smith 2012; Wilson 2008).

Consent was dialogic and renewed each session, and audio or photo documentation occurred only with explicit approval. Relational proximity demanded heightened reflexivity: how love, obligation, and memory shaped the stories shared and the silences held. Boundaries were managed through ongoing consent conversations and collaborative interpretation—sharing my readings of participants’ narratives and adjusting representations as needed. This iterative exchange reflects D-XEF’s ethic of reciprocity, where meaning-making remains a shared and living process.

These protocols of presence made possible a research rhythm grounded in relation rather than schedule, where reciprocity, consent, and care guided every encounter. It is from within this rhythm that *Knowledge Moves in Circles* and *Comida as Método* emerged as embodied frameworks for co-creation.

Presence Protocols

Interpretive validity emerged through iterative dialogue, where participants reviewed, expanded, or reframed my readings of their stories—an approach to rigor grounded in relational accountability rather than methodological triangulation. Contradictions between accounts were not reconciled but held as productive tensions, reflecting the layered and sometimes divergent truths of relational life.

Although the individuals listed in the table above include both relatives and two close friends, all participants are understood as close kin within the relational framework of this project. My mother and sister are traditionally classified as “immediate family,” and my five tías are technically considered “extended family” in Western kinship terminology. However, within my cultural and lived context, these categories do not meaningfully distinguish relational

closeness. My tías function as immediate kin through everyday caregiving, mutual support, and cultural continuity.

Juliana is a long-term friend whose relationship to me has developed through many years of shared care and community work. Melba, meanwhile, is my sister's close friend; because of their deep relationship, Melba has long been part of our family's intimate circle. Our closeness emerges through this kinship pathway—an example of how relationships become familial not only through blood but through proximity, reciprocity, and shared presence. For these reasons, all participants understood themselves as part of a shared kin network and chose to be named as themselves in this dissertation.

This naming practice was reviewed and approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participants were informed of the potential risks associated with being identifiable in an academic publication, and each provided written consent to be named, consistent with IRB requirements for community-engaged work. Consent was reaffirmed during transcript review and member-checking conversations to ensure ongoing comfort with public attribution. This approach aligns with Indigenous, feminist of color, and decolonial research ethics, which recognize that anonymity is not always protective or culturally appropriate and that relational transparency, recognition, and reciprocity are central to ethical practice.

No notes were taken during shared meals to honor presence; documentation was limited to consented audio and photographs. Deeper narratives (testimonios) were collected in follow-up sessions (Albert 2010; Holtzman 2006). All digital files were stored securely in encrypted folders on a password-protected drive, with identifying information separated from

transcripts. Any excerpts used for analysis were reviewed with participants prior to inclusion to ensure accuracy and comfort with representation.

V. The Burden of Staying Awake / Ethics of Non-Extraction

As both researcher and participant, I situate myself within this study as a queer Boricua Xicanx, nonbinary body shaped by the same racialized and gendered colonial structures under examination. This embodied positioning grounds D-XEF, where knowing is inseparable from living and research is understood as reciprocal relation and co-creation among kin rather than extraction (Cruz 2001; Ettore 2017). Because D-XEF is rooted in embodied, relational ways of knowing, these commitments recur throughout the dissertation, each time serving a distinct purpose—whether framing positionality, articulating method, or situating the framework within its broader theoretical lineages.

The surge of anti-transgender legislation in 2023, which saw hundreds of restrictive bills introduced across U.S. states, significantly heightened the safety concerns for researchers studying gender identity, trans health, and LGBTQ+ issues. These laws—particularly those targeting gender-affirming care and educational topics—fuel hostile rhetoric that can lead to threats, harassment, and professional backlash against researchers and clinical providers whose work contradicts legislative goals. As a result, researchers face ethical dilemmas regarding their ability to conduct studies, share data openly, and practice in an environment free from legal and personal intimidation. While these conditions shaped the broader research climate, creating a pervasive environment of risk and extraction that threatened many LGBTQ+

researchers, I felt safe within the networks that held this project. My participants were kin, and the work unfolded through trust, shared care, and spiritual protection.

Rather than relying on institutional safeguards, I turned to the quiet armor of my grandmothers' prayers—an ancestral form of protection that served as a decolonial ethics extending beyond academic guidelines into the spiritual and communal. This ancestral protection resists conventional research paradigms by asserting that safety, relation, and accountability can emerge from intergenerational care rather than institutional oversight.

Following Smith's (2012) concept of *Indigenous Projects*, this research explicitly moves beyond merely studying participants; it enacts a methodological practice of decolonization through Claiming, Testimonios, Storytelling, Celebrating Survival, Remembering, Returning, Protecting, and Sharing. These principles took shape in practice—for example:

- Protecting through co-editing transcripts to ensure mutual consent and narrative control.
- Claiming through occupying and transforming white-dominated academic spaces with embodied, decolonial methods.
- Returning through recipe exchange and collective cooking as a mode of shared memory.
- Remembering through Día de los Muertos altar-building and intergenerational storytelling.

Reflexivity was maintained through a methodological field journal documenting power dynamics, bias, and ethical choices. I began this journaling practice primarily for myself, yet as the research deepened within kin networks, the act of recording increasingly felt like fulfilling an academic expectation rather than honoring relational ethics. Across the 10.5 years since my

qualifying exams in June 2015, I learned that decolonial research unfolds according to relational, not institutional, time. This recognition—of the mismatch between the temporal demands of institutional accountability (the journal, the dissertation timeline) and the slower ethical rhythm of communal reciprocity—became central to navigating D-XEF. Honoring the time the work required ultimately pushed me toward a relational, de-centered practice of reflexivity grounded in presence, accountability, and care rather than production.

Finally, working within kin networks required constant awareness that research reciprocity was familial, not transactional; every story offered carried the weight of love, shared history, and the expectation of non-extractive return. Staying awake to that burden—of care, of relation, of non-extraction—remains the ongoing ethical practice that grounds this work.

VI. Analytical Engine / Decolonize Your Diet Framework

Continuum and Coding

The *Decolonize Your Diet* framework (Calvo and Esquibel 2015) served as an interpretive continuum for this study, mapping narratives from colonized practices (e.g., assimilation, food-for-profit, monoculture) toward decolonial resistances (e.g., ancestral recipes, communal farming, ceremony). Transcripts were coded iteratively along this continuum and then re-organized by the Four Pillars—Body, Mind, Spirit, and Earth—to track patterns of healing and sovereignty.

For example, one participant reflected, *“I can see that. Like before Corina, I never ate stuff like that... prepared meal... Flavor is different... I am colonizing her food. But she’s decolonizing my food diet.”* This exchange, mapped onto the Mind pillar, illustrates a shift in

consciousness: the speaker becomes aware of how everyday consumption reproduces colonial hierarchies of taste, while relational cooking creates space for mutual transformation.

Another participant recalled, *“O las tortillas recién hechas de esta bolita. O de maíz... O sea, le ponían el maíz, el mixtamal y luego ya lo llevaban a moler.”* This memory, mapped onto the Earth pillar, centers ancestral techniques of sustenance and interdependence with land and maize. Here, remembering becomes an act of decolonial continuity—sustaining Indigenous knowledge systems through embodied practice.

Guides and Instruments

Prompt matrices and guiding questions aligned to both sides of the DYD continuum framed discussions without fixing them. Full tables and guiding questions appear in the appendices. Questions were adapted to each site and language context, using accessible phrasing and culturally relevant reference points.

Analysis Pipeline

- Collection: Bi-weekly dinners and follow-up conversations with consented audio and photos, recorded with a digital voice recorder and securely backed up locally.
- Transcription and Translation: Verbatim transcription attending to idiom, tone, and affect. Spanish–English translation was performed by the researcher and peer reviewers, maintaining code-switching through selective back-translation to preserve rhythm and meaning.
- Initial Coding: Line-by-line open coding along the DYD continuum (Colonized ↔ Decolonial). Coding was done manually in Excel to allow flexible grouping across multiple categories.

- Axial Coding: Re-grouping by the Four Pillars—Body, Mind, Spirit, Earth—and linking themes to D-XEF principles.
- Synthesis: Analytic memos and four member sense-checks ensured resonance and accuracy. The recurrence of the number four emerged as a cosmological constant—four directions, four pillars, four themes. This symbolic resonance underlined the spiritual geometry of the analysis.
- Archiving: All materials stored on a password-protected home computer with restricted access. Data will be retained for five years in accordance with IRB guidelines.

Limits and Care

While the DYD framework offered structural clarity, the process of analysis also revealed its affective and ethical weight. The DYD continuum is a lens, not a verdict. Contradictions between colonial and decolonial practices were kept visible as part of lived complexity. Time constraints, language variations, and gendered kitchen dynamics (Cruz 1998) shaped the scope of observation. Yet the most demanding layer of analysis was emotional and spiritual.

Listening to testimonios—especially those of family—often felt like judging lives I loved, so I repeated a quiet mantra borrowed from a TikTok trend: *“we listen, we don’t judge.”* This reminder anchored my role not as arbiter but as observer of patterns. Still, there were moments when emotion overflowed—I cried, sang, even danced while transcribing—and sometimes shared fragments of beauty with colleagues, like one of my *tía abuela’s* lines: *“El nopal ha sido como una bendición que Dios nos ha dado... en los años treinta, cuando no llovía y estaba la guerra de los cristeros.”* Their joy in hearing it affirmed that this work carried collective resonance beyond my own analysis.

Reciprocity often came through remembering itself. My mother, reflecting on her childhood, would tear up at the realization of her own longevity—that she had lived longer than her parents—and those moments became gifts exchanged through memory, not data. I shared interpretive threads with participants in conversation rather than through formal drafts; Melba, for instance, laughed and delighted when she heard my retelling of her mother’s story—“*¡No le pongas tanto aceite en el arroz!*”—recognizing her mom’s voice still alive in the text.

Throughout, I practiced small rituals of energetic care, often beginning analysis sessions with grounding music from *Beautiful Chorus*, especially the song “*I Am Surrounded by Love*.” Still, embodiment marked the labor: long hours at the computer left me hungry and drained, turning sometimes to frozen tater tots when no food was ready—a small irony in a project about nourishment. The weight of kinship occasionally blurred with the responsibility of scholarship; I questioned whether any of it mattered, only to be reminded that meaning, like knowledge, exists in constellations—*one star among trillions*.

Ultimately, I came to believe that research cannot be done on others without first doing research on oneself. This conviction sits at the heart of D-XEF: an embodied, relational, and self-reflexive practice of knowledge-making that resists extraction.

In this way, analysis folded back into movement—each insight an invitation to live differently, to bring theory into breath, ritual, and soil. What follows carries that return.

VII. Braiding the Journey / Roadmap of the Four Pillars

Analysis became a kind of weaving—threads of food, memory, and relation looping back into lived experience. The *Decolonize Your Diet* framework offered a way to read patterns of

resistance, but the Four Pillars revealed how those patterns moved, breathed, and transformed in practice. What follows embodies method itself: for example, theory returned to the kitchen, the altar, the garden, the trail—wherever life insists on relation. Each pillar chapter braids testimonios, autoethnography, and ancestral practice into a living methodology where healing itself becomes research, and research remains an act of relation.

Body Chapter— Movement, Illness Management, and Physical Sovereignty

1. Restoring Body Sovereignty: Praxis and Everyday Acts
2. Movement and the Reclamation of Space
3. Comunidad on the Trail: Latino Outdoors as Decolonial Movement
4. Reclaiming the Sacred Body

Mind Chapter — Education, Memory, and Knowledge Reclamation

1. Education as Liberation
2. Healing from Internalized Oppression
3. Remembering and Honoring Power and Self-Worth
4. Reclaiming Ancestral Knowledge Systems

Spirit Chapter — Ritual, Collective Healing, and Ancestral Presence

1. Ancestral Memory and Spiritual Nourishment
2. The Digital Altar: Communal Rituals of Inherited Survivance
3. Limpias and Liberatory Rituals
4. Decolonizing Death: Collective Memory as Living Praxis

Earth Chapter — Land, Agroecology, and Ecological Reciprocity

1. Living Foods, Living Earth

2. Kinship and Care: Animal Stewardship in Ranchitos
3. Going Against the Grain in Chiapas
4. Queer Ecologies from a Patio Garden
5. The Five Sisters: House, Field, Milpa

The fifth section under *Earth* intentionally breaks the pattern. Where the other pillars hold four, *Earth* holds five—a reminder that balance is not always symmetry, and that land itself often exceeds the structures we make to contain it.

Chapter 3: Decolonize the Body

Tracing the Wound: Colonial Control and the Body

Chapter 3, *“Decolonize the Body,”* argues that healing is a decolonial practice rooted in the physical self. True liberation from colonialism’s impacts requires moving beyond survival to the restoration of bodily sovereignty.

To understand this reclamation, the chapter first delves into the enduring legacy of historical and intergenerational wounds, revealing how colonial violence has manifested in chronic health issues, mental health challenges, disrupted family structures, and economic disparities. Against this backdrop, the testimonios of my tías, Socorro and Ofe, serve as intellectual and methodological anchors, demonstrating how ancestral wisdom, sacred rituals, and intuitive practices function as embodied theories of resistance. From communal moon circles to embodied nourishment and movement, these sections illustrate how individuals actively forge embodied sovereignty. This continuous, conscious practice reclaims personal agency, redefines well-being, and cultivates a decolonial future.

This pursuit of bodily sovereignty is continually undermined by dominant Western health narratives. In sharp divergence from the intuitive approaches to food we will explore, these narratives promote systematized and increasingly commodified dietary regimes, rooted in a “nutritionism” that reduces food to isolated chemical components and heavily influenced by an industry that profits from anxieties about weight, appearance, and disease prevention (Scrinis 2013, 1–3; Nestle 2013, 25–30). These narratives represent an insidious form of control over individual bodies and food choices, directly extending the legacy of colonial thought into everyday life. This occurs through the imposition of a singular “correct” way of being—a form of

cultural suppression that displaces diverse Indigenous practices with dominant norms (Fanon 1963, 210–12)—a dynamic critically exemplified in the standardization of global food systems and eating habits (Shiva 2016, 1–8).

The external system of control is most potent when it becomes internalized, a key feature of colonial power; it is particularly insidious because it functions to discipline individual bodies, particularly women's, under the guise of health and self-improvement (Wolf 1991, 16–20; Bordo 1993, 165–84). Such narratives are presented as universal and benevolent pursuits of individual well-being rather than culturally specific and disciplining forces.

Restoring Body Sovereignty: Praxis and Everyday Acts

Restoring body sovereignty is a crucial process in the decolonial journey toward liberation (Gillon 2023, 45–46; Sood 2020, 102–04). It involves reclaiming control over one's body, identity, and cultural expressions that have long been subjected to colonial impositions. These impositions—forced practices and norms designed to dominate and reshape the lives of colonized peoples—have infringed on bodily autonomy and suppressed Indigenous ways of life (Bhandari 2019, 27; Mady 2023, 15–17). Central to restoring body sovereignty is rejecting these colonial forces and redefining autonomy through Afro-Indigenous and decolonial values that honor the inherent dignity, knowledge, and traditions of marginalized communities. In practice, this process unfolds through five interrelated movements: awareness—recognizing the historical and ongoing impacts of colonialism on bodies, identities, and cultural practices; knowledge—gaining deeper insight into Afro-Indigenous understandings of autonomy; skills—developing tools to resist colonial narratives; courage—challenging dominant norms; and

action—taking concrete steps to embody sovereignty daily (Covarrubias 2019, personal communication, 2019).

The following interview data with Mel and Corina illustrates how such decolonial praxis takes shape in ordinary life. Their decisions about food are not random but represent a continuous, embodied effort that engages the movements of awareness, knowledge, skills, courage, and action—transforming daily food choices into acts of agency and resistance against systems designed to dictate their choices.

Embodied Cravings: Intuition as Resistance

AA: What do you usually plan to eat during the week?

MEL: Honestly, it's mostly in my head.

AA: So you don't write it down or follow specific recipes?

CORINA: Nope, we just go with whatever sounds good in the moment.

MEL: Yeah, and whatever's on sale when we shop.

AA: Oh, so your meals depend a lot on what's available and affordable?

MEL: Exactly. Sometimes we just crave certain things, but mostly it's what's on sale.

AA: Like what do you crave?

CORINA: For me, it's that Olive Garden soup every now and then.

MEL: And I'm all about salmon—salmon burgers, fish, anything salmon.

AA: Nice! Do you get the salmon from somewhere special or just cook it at home?

MEL: Just at home, whatever's available.

MEL: Yeah, or beans—I really crave beans too. It's just about what feels right for us, not sticking to some rulebook.

AA: Going back to the Olive Garden soup— which one do you like?

CORINA: The Toscana soup.

MEL: I'm more into their potato soup.

CORINA: That one's definitely next on my craving list.

MEL: We usually make it homemade, though.

AA: So you like recreating copycat versions?

MEL: Yeah, sometimes.

CORINA: No, not really.

AA: Since you base meals on what's on sale, are there good places to shop around here?

CORINA: There's Grocery Outlet, and they even have a little organic section.

AA: Where's that at?

CORINA: On Tulare and R.
AA: Oh, I know that area. You like Grocery Outlet?
MEL: Love Grocery Outlet.
AA: Yeah?
CORINA: It's right there. For veggies, Fresh Produce by Us is pretty good unless you want fruit.
AA: Where's that?
CORINA: On Butler and Chestnut, and there's another on Dakota and 1st.
MEL: They're everywhere.
AA: But none of those are walking distance?
MEL: No.
CORINA: No.
AA: Anything walking distance?
CORINA: Not really, you have to drive. Grocery Outlet's probably the closest. Smart and Final is for big stuff. No grocery walking distance, but they should have one.
MEL: Grocery Outlet is kinda walking distance. We've gone there—even biked once.
CORINA: I don't remember that...

Negotiating Desire and Survival

The seemingly mundane act of planning weekly meals for Mel and Corina reveals a complex interplay of personal desire, economic constraints, and cultural adaptation (Bourdieu 1984, 87–89; Mintz 1986, 27–28). Their approach to food is refreshingly unburdened by rigid rules and prescriptive meal plans, existing primarily “in [Mel’s] head.” Their method resists the prescriptive logic of dominant Western health narratives, favoring embodied intuition over rule-bound discipline. As Corina explains, “We just go with whatever sounds good in the moment,” a sentiment Mel echoes, adding, “Yeah, and whatever’s on sale when we shop.” This spontaneous, intuitive approach stands in sharp contrast to the systematized, commodified dietary regimes promoted by Western nutritionism. Instead of adhering to external prescriptions, Mel and Corina foreground their bodies’ own inclinations and the immediate realities of their lives.

These individual cravings are not random whims but desires filtered through the lens of a capitalist food system that dictates availability and affordability. For Corina, it's a recurring yearning for "that Olive Garden soup every now and then," specifically the Toscana. This isn't merely about taste; it's about reclaiming comfort and pleasure within the existing food landscape. As adrienne maree brown argues in *Pleasure Activism* (2019, 11–13), prioritizing one's own well-being can be a radical act—one that resists purist notions of "decolonized eating" that shame hybrid or pleasure-driven desires. Melba, on the other hand, is "all about salmon—salmon burgers, fish, anything salmon," and also expresses a strong desire for "beans." These preferences underscore a connection to comfort, familiarity, and distinct flavor profiles that resonate personally. Such desires arise from embodied memory, kinship, and personal history—signals of lived experience rather than deviations from a purist dietary ideal.

At the same time, the food industry mobilizes similar "follow your cravings" rhetoric to drive consumption; as Moss shows, companies deliberately engineer the "bliss point" to hook consumers and expand what they call "stomach share" (Moss 2014). This contrast highlights the distinction between cravings that emerge from relational forms of comfort and those manufactured through corporate manipulation. In this context, re-centering internal cues over external dictates becomes a subtle yet significant act of decolonization, challenging the notion that institutional authorities—whether scientific or industrial—should unilaterally determine bodily needs and desires.

However, these cravings do not exist in a vacuum. They are continually shaped by economic reality. Mel's immediate follow-up to craving certain things is "but mostly it's what's on sale." This constant negotiation reveals how financial constraints materially affect the ability

to fulfill desires. Their primary shopping destination, Grocery Outlet, is beloved by both Mel and Corina, not necessarily for its organic selection, but because “it’s right there” and offers discounted prices. Corina notes it “even [has] a little organic section,” suggesting that while health consciousness exists, it is secondary to financial practicality.

This “little organic section” could be seen as a token gesture from capitalism, co-opting the “health food” movement to appeal to a wider demographic without challenging systemic inequities. As Andi Schwartz demonstrates in her analysis of lifestyle activism, such gestures often make “healthy” living accessible only in limited, less-than-ideal forms for those with fewer resources, individualizing solutions rather than addressing structural injustice (Schwartz 2022, 62–64). When Mel says they “usually make it homemade” referring to the Olive Garden potato soup, this act of recreating “copycat versions” is not only about saving money—it is an act of culinary agency and remixing. By taking a mass-produced, branded item and bringing its essence into their domestic sphere, they control its ingredients and make it their own. While this subversion is a form of domestic food sovereignty, it exists within the very food system that created the branded item, illustrating the complex relationship between resistance and capitalist influence. As Peña et al. argue, such acts exemplify how individuals can reclaim agency over their foodways through adaptation and remixing (Peña et al. 2017, 12–15).

The conversation further exposes systemic barriers to equitable food access. When asked about walking-distance grocery options, both Mel and Corina unequivocally state, “No.” Corina laments, “No grocery walking distance, but they should have one,” highlighting awareness of this deficiency. While Mel later asserts that “Grocery Outlet is kinda walking distance” and they’ve “even biked once,” this counterpoint underscores the effort required to

access even their most convenient option. It's not a casual stroll to a well-stocked market, but a deliberate journey requiring time, transportation, and calculation.

Beyond the physical effort of driving or biking, this labor carries a significant temporal and emotional cost—time spent searching for sales rather than preparing food, and the stress of constantly balancing affordability and nourishment. As Alkon and Agyeman note in *Cultivating Food Justice* (2011, 5–9), these non-financial burdens are a critical but often overlooked dimension of systemic inequity. This represents an ongoing form of colonial oppression through economic structure; it's not just about what they can't buy but the energy expended to meet basic needs. The reliance on discount supermarkets like Grocery Outlet or "Fresh Produce by Us" (with multiple locations but none easily walkable) reflects a food landscape shaped by historical disinvestment in marginalized communities. These are the vestiges of a colonial capitalist system that has long left such neighborhoods in what are effectively food deserts—spaces where access to fresh, affordable produce remains limited. Thus, the pursuit of cravings becomes an act of endurance and navigation through the unjust realities of the modern food chain.

Everyday Food Sovereignty: Reclaiming Choice in Constraint

Ultimately, the food practices of Mel and Corina—rooted in intuition, resistance, and economic navigation—underscore the centrality of embodied nourishment to the project of body sovereignty. However, body sovereignty is not exhausted by consumption alone. The decolonial reclamation of the self must also extend to how bodies move, rest, and inhabit space. The following section explores Juliana's journey, which shifts the focus from

nourishment to embodied movement, and how she physically stakes her claim to decolonial space, completing the broader landscape of physical reclamation.

Movement and the Reclamation of Space

Juliana's journey into a barre studio, initially fraught with apprehension, offers a powerful lens into how deeply ingrained societal body ideals shape perceptions within fitness spaces, and how one individual's navigation of these norms can become an act of transformative personal and communal reclamation—an embodied re-entry into spaces historically structured to exclude.

“Walking into that barre studio, I already knew—I didn't belong. The other classes were packed with women who looked like they lived in leggings, their bodies fitting that slim, toned image that society says is ‘fit.’ Me? I didn't see myself in that room, and I didn't want to. So I told myself, if I go, it's only to the Sunday nine o'clock class—nothing else. But last Sunday was different. I showed up with my Brown friend, who's a little heavier, and her friend, also Brown. And for the first time, I felt okay. Like I could actually focus on the workout instead of feeling like I was taking up too much space.”

Juliana's initial apprehension, “Walking into that barre studio, I already knew—I didn't belong,” immediately sets the stage for a discussion on how deeply entrenched colonial ideals of the body continue to define modern fitness spaces (Mama 2011, 34–36). Her observation that “The other classes were packed with women who looked like they lived in leggings, their bodies fitting that slim, toned image that society says is ‘fit,’” exposes the Eurocentric and class-bound aesthetics that shape mainstream fitness culture. This visual regime privileges thinness, whiteness, and affluence, rendering bodies that do not conform—especially Black and Brown,

queer, fat, or disabled bodies—hypervisible and unwelcome (McKenzie 2016, 142–45; Yancy 2005, 58–60). These ideals extend the legacy of colonialism by disciplining bodies into conformity with Western norms of beauty and productivity, turning wellness spaces into sites of quiet exclusion.

Juliana’s feeling that she “didn’t see myself in that room, and I didn’t want to” reflects an act of disidentification with this dominant narrative (hooks 1984, 75). Her decision to attend only the “Sunday nine o’clock class—nothing else” becomes a subtle yet significant act of resistance—an intentional carving out of space and boundary within a system designed to regulate belonging (hooks 2000, 105).

Juliana’s experience also exposes how fitness participation is shaped by economics. She was only able to access the boutique barre studio through a Groupon, which made it financially feasible. This small act of access reveals how body sovereignty is continually negotiated through capitalism’s gatekeeping of wellness. Not everyone can enter these spaces: true decolonial approaches to movement must advocate for accessibility, affordability, and community-based alternatives. Jessica Gordon Nembhard’s *Collective Courage* (2014) highlights how cooperative economics can create sustainable, inclusive wellness infrastructures. Rosemary Deem (1986) situates leisure and fitness within broader class inequalities, demonstrating how low-income women face structural barriers to participation. Similarly, Lance Freeman’s (2006) study of gentrification shows how upscale fitness studios often become symbols of cultural displacement, reinforcing economic hierarchies under the guise of self-care. Juliana’s story underscores that access to fitness is not only about cultural belonging but about the right to occupy space without economic exclusion.

External skepticism—“Why are you paying for that? Just go to the gym”—reveals how narrow definitions of fitness persist. Her friends’ remarks reflect an assumption that “real” exercise must adhere to conventional, high-intensity modalities like gym workouts or running (Sassatelli 2000, 53–54). Juliana’s rejection of these expectations—“I’m done forcing myself to do workouts I hate, especially running”—is a declaration of autonomy. It resists the colonial logic of bodily discipline and transforms movement into self-defined liberation.

This autonomy is echoed by scholars and activists who foreground movement as decolonial self-love. Sonya Renee Taylor argues in *The Body Is Not an Apology* (2021, 27–29) that rejecting body shame and honoring one’s needs—rather than conforming to fitness ideals—is a radical act of reclamation. Jessamyn Stanley, in *Every Body Yoga* (2017, 18–20), reframes fitness as a practice of connection rather than transformation: “connecting with your body as it is, not as you wish it were.” Ilya Parker, founder of Decolonizing Fitness, extends this framework by revealing how mainstream fitness reinforces white supremacy, ableism, and anti-fatness (2022). Parker calls for joy, accessibility, and self-definition as central to any just approach to health. Together, these perspectives position Juliana’s choice to attend barre class not as indulgence but as resistance—an assertion of bodily sovereignty through pleasure and refusal.

If autonomy marks the first step toward decolonizing movement, community completes it. The turning point in Juliana’s experience arrives when she enters the studio with her Brown friends: “For the first time, I felt okay. Like I could actually focus on the workout instead of feeling like I was taking up too much space.” Visible representation and shared identity dismantle internalized narratives of exclusion (Major and O’Brien 2005, 802–03). When

individuals see themselves reflected authentically, belonging is affirmed, stereotypes are disrupted, and agency is strengthened. This shared visibility becomes collective resistance, directly challenging the erasure of racialized and marginalized bodies from wellness culture. Sandra D. Garza's *Decolonizing Intimacies* (2017) illuminates how colorism and the politics of desirability among women of Mexican descent devalue non-white bodies by privileging lighter skin and Eurocentric features (45–46). For Juliana, such hierarchies shaped her self-perception, making her “Brown” body feel less worthy in the studio. The presence of her friends—diverse in tone and size—disrupts this hierarchy, forming an intimate micro-community where difference is affirmed rather than erased. This shared embodiment becomes a living critique of colorism's colonial roots.

In this communal affirmation, Juliana experiences what bell hooks calls “homeplace”—a space of resistance built through shared care and visibility. The solidarity she feels replaces isolation with belonging, transforming the barre studio from a site of exclusion into one of reclamation. Here, empowerment is not symbolic but sensory: she moves differently, breathes differently, and begins to inhabit her body without apology.

Even after achieving a marathon, Juliana found that internalized colonial ideals lingered, eroding her confidence and sense of belonging. Hipolito-Delgado (2004, 204–06) describes this phenomenon as ethnic self-hatred—a psychological wound formed by the internalization of white supremacy's value system. The emotional labor Juliana expended navigating these non-affirming environments was immense, but her decision to reclaim joy in movement signals healing through embodied refusal.

Juliana's choice, then, becomes not just an act of personal preference, but a form of resistance and self-liberation grounded in agency, intuitive movement, and the reclamation of joy. Her movement practice, supported by community and thoughtful instruction, ultimately transforms the barre studio into a secular ritual of reclamation, physically preparing her body for the sacred and spiritual practices of ancestral wisdom explored in later sections. Beyond the studio, however, movement also takes collective form—on trails, in parks, and in community spaces where belonging and visibility are built together.

Comunidad on the Trail: Latino Outdoors as Decolonial Movement

If autonomy marks the first step toward decolonizing movement, community completes it. Beyond studios and boutique fitness spaces, decolonial movement unfolds collectively—on trails, in parks, and within communities reclaiming land as a site of belonging rather than exclusion. For many Latine participants, the national organization Latino Outdoors offers such a space: a reminder that movement through nature is not a luxury but an ancestral right. Yet this movement always unfolds on contested terrain, where the right to move freely confronts a regime that criminalizes movement itself. Melba and Corina first encountered Latino Outdoors through flyers at a local REI—a corporate outdoor space whose mainstream “values-led” branding often masks internal labor inequities (National Employment Law Project, 2025). Drawn by curiosity, they joined a weekend outing and found something far more meaningful than advertised gear or guided recreation: a collective practice of care, joy, and presence that felt, as Melba put it later, “safe” and “relaxed.” Their story opens a window into how Latino Outdoors transforms the language of outdoor access into lived decolonial belonging.

Decolonizing Motion: The Body on Contested Terrain

Latino Outdoors defines its mission as “inspir[ing] and connect[ing] comunidades to the outdoors, centering cultura, celebrating familia and heritage, and uplifting our history and leadership as part of the outdoor experience” (Latino Outdoors, “About Us”). Its vision is explicitly decolonial: to make the outdoors a “safe, inclusive, and welcoming space” where people can “share and celebrate our stories.” Yet the promise of “safe and inclusive” spaces always meets the limits of lived reality. Public lands remain policed spaces, and for many participants—especially those with undocumented status, disabilities, or limited access to transportation—safety depends not only on community care but on navigating state surveillance and structural barriers (Finney 2014, 37–39). Latino Outdoors gestures toward liberation within systems that still constrain it, demonstrating that decolonial practice unfolds inside contradiction rather than outside it.

This tension between community safety and state surveillance becomes even more urgent in the context of the United States’ expanding immigration detention system. As of October 2, 2025, research from the Vera Institute reveals that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is detaining more than 61,000 people across the country—more than at any point in the past sixteen years (Vera Institute of Justice 2025). ICE operates through a sprawling network of over 600 facilities, including private prisons, local jails, and even makeshift sites in hotels, airports, and military bases. These are not abstract spaces: they are landscapes of confinement woven through the same geographies where organizations like Latino Outdoors gather to cultivate belonging. To speak of the outdoors as “safe” while tens of thousands of migrants and asylum seekers are caged within that same national terrain exposes the

contradictions of freedom in settler-colonial space. For Latine participants, movement across land and water can never be wholly apolitical; the right to move—to hike, to camp, to breathe freely outside—exists alongside a regime that criminalizes movement itself. Decolonial joy, in this sense, must always carry an awareness of who is being denied motion (Negrón-Muntaner 2022, 172; Alorme 2025, 4).

In this light, Latino Outdoors’ work to reimagine outdoor recreation acquires new significance. What might otherwise appear as simple leisure becomes a quiet act of defiance against a political order that constrains mobility for so many. Hiking, camping, and outdoor gathering thus emerge not merely as pastimes but as communal practices of cultural continuity and survival. By centering *familia* and *comunidad* as core values, Latino Outdoors resists the colonial myth of wilderness as an untouched, white space—a myth that has historically erased Indigenous and Latin American presences from the landscape (Kimmerer 2013, 13–15; Luna 2021, 43).

Embodied Joy, Care, and Healing

For Melba and Corina, who regularly attend Latino Outdoors outings together, the organization extends the intimate ecology of their everyday lives—gardening, cooking, tending to family—into collective, land-based movement. Their participation transforms ordinary recreation into ceremony. During a recent camping weekend, both women described their bodies as “relaxed and open.” Melba recalled how “morning sunrise... taking time to welcome in the new day” became a practice of embodied awareness. “We set our morning intentions in motion and got our bodies awake for the day,” she explained. “I could hear the birds, the wind, insects stirring about. I appreciated all that was around me.” Corina echoed that sense of gentle

presence, describing how “waking up to see the sunrise—still dark but starting to get color—everything quiet and still, deer grazing, air cold and crisp” made her feel “peaceful, grounded, and grateful.” These quiet scenes of attentiveness to the living world enact what decolonial feminist thinkers describe as a politics of presence—a return to the body and the land as sites of knowing (McKittrick 2006, xi).

Their reflections also reveal the range of experiences Latino Outdoors makes possible. This complex political backdrop does not negate joy; in fact, it renders it a form of embodied resistance. Decolonial practice, the participants show, often emerges not through solemn ritual but through collective play and ease. As Corina put it, “Camping with LO is very different from a moon circle. Nothing like ceremonial or sacred. Just fun. Light-hearted and connected with comunidad.” Her distinction underscores that decolonial movement does not require solemn ritual; joy, play, and laughter can themselves be sacred practices of freedom. At the same time, joy is not uncomplicated. The ease of these campfire moments coexists with the weight of histories that have rendered many Brown and Indigenous bodies unsafe in nature. To feel “relaxed and open” on colonized land is an act of courage, not forgetfulness—an embodied insistence that pleasure, too, belongs here. Their laughter becomes a refusal of erasure even as it reverberates across landscapes shaped by dispossession.

Water became both mirror and medicine—a site of transformation that revealed the vulnerability and trust decolonial community requires. For Melba, “getting into the kayak felt scary at first, then relaxing.” The movement from fear to calm mirrored the vulnerability and trust that collective movement often asks of marginalized bodies. “Being on the water,” she reflected, “helped me slow down, reflect, and enjoy a meaningful moment of peace and try

something new.” She described how Latino Outdoors events—organized with care, covering costs, providing snacks and safety—created conditions for that exploration: “It allowed me to explore the experience safely and stay connected with my community.” Corina, recalling her first time paddle-boarding, said she “felt silly at first,” but once she found her balance, “after all the cracking up and giggling... felt peaceful.” Their laughter on the water, their shared courage, make visible how decolonial community is built through both risk and tenderness.



Figure 1. Views from the kayak. (Left) View from the kayak toward the water. (Right) Research participant seated in the kayak. Photos by research participant, used with permission.

That phrase—“Nature helps you heal”—captures the spiritual and political heart of Latino Outdoors. Healing here is not a private act of self-improvement but a collective return to belonging. On the trail and on the water, care for the self and care for the land converge; movement becomes a way of listening to what the earth and the body already know. This embodied wisdom stands in stark contrast to mainstream wellness culture, which still operates

through what Ilya Parker—founder of Decolonizing Fitness—and Dr. Syd Young describe as “toxic fitness,” a system built on anti-fatness, ableism, and white-supremacist ideals that tie moral worth to productivity and appearance (2022, 10). Their framework calls for “developing a balanced relationship with movement,” one rooted in compassion, accessibility, and self-determination rather than punishment or competition. This reorientation parallels the communal ethos of Latino Outdoors, where hiking, camping, or kayaking is not about optimizing performance but about care, connection, and joy. Within both Decolonizing Fitness and Latino Outdoors, movement becomes relational rather than disciplinary—an act of self-definition and collective belonging that honors the body’s inherent wisdom.

Melba’s sense of embodied joy also carries what Audre Lorde calls “the erotic as power”—a deep satisfaction that resists systems of domination by affirming pleasure as sacred knowledge (Lorde 1984, 53). For her, the trail and the water become spaces where feeling good is not indulgent but radical, where joy itself is evidence of healing. Corina’s description of “fun, light-hearted” connection expands this power into the collective. Their pleasure, laughter, and ease are political; as María Puig de la Bellacasa asserts, care is not a passive sentiment but a relational ethic that binds humans and nonhumans in ongoing response-ability (2017, 4). Latino Outdoors enacts this politics of care each time participants tend the land, pick up trash, or share a meal after a hike—embodying a reciprocal ecology of affection and responsibility.

Collective Presence as Decolonial Geography

This sense of healing through communal movement redefines outdoor recreation as a practice of embodied resistance and relational belonging. It disrupts both the commodified fitness culture Juliana encounters in the barre studio and the long history of exclusion that cast

the outdoors as a predominantly white domain. In this way, Latino Outdoors functions less as an environmental organization than as a movement of reclamation—restoring Brown and Indigenous presence to spaces from which it has long been erased. As Carolyn Finney argues, the American imagination of the outdoors has historically centered whiteness, rendering Black and Brown presence invisible (2014, 9). Each photograph, story, and group hike led by Latino Outdoors intervenes in that erasure, making visibility itself an act of justice (2014, 9–10).

Yet visibility, while powerful, is not without risk. To appear in public as Brown or Indigenous bodies on the land also means exposure—to surveillance, to tokenization, to the gaze of institutions that still define what belonging looks like. Visibility can reproduce the colonial gaze even as it resists it, reminding us that representation alone does not equal liberation (hooks, 1992, 116). True belonging requires not just being seen but shaping the terms of how one is seen.

At the same time, presence on the land does more than repair representation—it reshapes geography. Katherine McKittrick writes that “space is not the innocent backdrop to human action but a terrain of struggle and possibility” (McKittrick 2006, x). Latino Outdoors’ participants transform the trail into a decolonial geography, a site of learning and relational belonging. Corina’s reflection that “waking up to see the sunrise... felt peaceful, grounded, and grateful” demonstrates how such moments become a form of spatial re-mapping: an emotional geography of kinship and gratitude. Similarly, Melba’s recollection that clean-ups remind her of her father’s irrigation work turns stewardship into inheritance—caring for the environment not as policy but as love.

By sharing photos, stories, and bilingual educational materials, Latino Outdoors reclaims visibility for Latine bodies in nature while also redefining what “nature” means. Its volunteer-led model, sustained by a national network of community leaders, challenges the hierarchies of traditional environmental organizations. Rather than reproducing savior narratives, Latino Outdoors foregrounds relational leadership: mentorship and storytelling as tools for empowerment. This reorientation dismantles the colonial binary between “humans” and “nature,” affirming what Indigenous thinkers and ecofeminist scholars have long articulated—that the land itself is kin (Kimmerer 2013, 55; Tang and Jardine 2016, 79).

For Melba and Corina, walking, paddling, and laughing together with others who share language, humor, and heritage turns the trail into homeplace. Their words—“relaxed and open,” “fun,” “peaceful,” “connected with *comunidad*”—become a lexicon of liberation. Their laughter, shared snacks, and unspoken care for one another manifest what bell hooks names “communities of resistance”—spaces where marginalized people can imagine freedom through presence (hooks 1984, 40). Latino Outdoors creates that possibility not through theory but through movement: every hike, cleanup, or campfire gathering becomes a living pedagogy of solidarity.

Through the embodied community it nurtures, Latino Outdoors enacts a decolonial model of movement grounded in joy, care, and collective responsibility. By celebrating *cultura* and *familia*, the organization refuses the colonial logic that divorces recreation from survival, pleasure from politics. In its place, it offers an ethic of *comunidad*—movement as remembering, belonging, and liberation on the land.

Reclaiming the Sacred Body

The following interview excerpts have been edited to respect the participants' wishes for privacy, revealing only the most essential details of their sacred experiences.³ The goal is to honor the deep nature of their personal journeys while preserving the integrity of the spiritual wisdom they offer. These excerpts illustrate the lived experiences of Corina and Mel as they navigate and participate in transformative moon ceremonies.

AA: So, how did you first come into moon ceremonies?

Corina: Oh, that was totally unexpected for me. I ran into an elder from my childhood at a community event. She was leading a moon circle, and a couple of other women I knew were part of it too. It just felt like a quiet reunion.

Mel: Yeah, I remember feeling like something was calling me. Our elder saw we were all looking for healing and invited us to join the circle. I didn't even know what a moon circle was back then, but I felt pulled to go.

AA: Did you both feel ready for something like that?

Corina: I think I wasn't even aware I was missing it until I showed up. It felt like reconnecting to a spiritual part of myself I'd never been taught growing up.

Mel: It's this beautiful space of sisterhood. We share our stories, support each other, and can be vulnerable without fear of judgment.

Corina: Yeah, it's rare to feel so seen and heard, especially for Women of Color.

AA: That visibility feels like resistance.

Corina: Exactly. Women of Color have long done the work behind the scenes, and this ceremony flips the script by centering our healing and stories.

AA: I've seen moon ceremonies popping up in white wellness spaces a lot lately. How do you navigate that?

Mel: I'm cautious. Cultural appropriation happens when people take the parts they like without respecting the meaning, turning something sacred into a trend. And honestly, I don't share everything about the ceremony because it's a private, sacred space. Some things are meant to stay within the circle.

Corina: I'm careful too, only sharing what feels right, always with respect.

Corina: It really is medicine, something to be honored, not a trend.

This commitment to ceremony is itself an act of decolonial resistance. As Corina and Mel's narratives reveal, participation in moon circles fosters deep personal and communal transformation by reactivating an innate connection to spiritual and bodily wisdom. As Nadia

Zepeda explains, full moon circles allow participants to reconnect with Indigenous spiritual traditions on their own terms, countering the historical trauma of detribalization and sustaining activism through collective care (Zepeda 2015, 99–104). Colonial systems fractured the unity of body and spirit, replacing relational knowledge with Western frameworks that naturalized hierarchy through biology (Maldonado-Torres 2008, 246; Quijano 2000, 216; Oyěwùmí 1997, 9). Corina’s reflection on “reconnecting to a spiritual part of myself I’d never been taught” resists this fracture by reclaiming the body not as subordinate but as sacred—a source of wisdom and guidance. For Mel, the pull to join the circle echoes Indigenous traditions of healing in which elders recognize need and invite others into community. Such invitations validate ceremonial life and restore belonging. Within the circle, the body is reclaimed as a vessel of spirit and community, not an object for control, resisting what Oyěwùmí calls the Western “bio-logic” that reduces difference to hierarchy (1997).

These circles further cultivate solidarity, sisterhood, and shared vulnerability. Mel described the ceremony as “a beautiful space of sisterhood,” while Corina emphasized that it is rare for Women of Color to feel so “seen and heard.” Their experiences echo Black feminist thinkers who insist that communal spaces are essential for self-definition and resistance against dominant ideologies. Corina’s insight that the ceremony “flips the script by centering our healing and stories” enacts what Audre Lorde calls honoring difference without hierarchy (Lorde 1984, 9) and what Gloria Anzaldúa describes as embracing fragmentation as strength (2021, 105). In these ways, moon ceremonies do not simply mirror theory—they embody it through lived practice, transforming vulnerability into empowerment.

Mel's caution about appropriation—her insistence that “some things are meant to stay within the circle”—reflects a fundamental decolonial ethic of protection. Colonialism has long operated through mistranslation, erasure, and extracting the sacred to render it commodity. Protecting sacred practice from appropriation, then, is more than simple boundary-setting; it is an act of refusal against the colonial logic that reduces ceremonial life into a consumable trend. Their care ensures that the practice remains medicine—rooted in community, intimacy, and ancestral connection.

Through moon ceremonies, participants reclaim the body as sacred, relational, and sovereign. These gatherings resist the Western “bio-logic” that naturalizes hierarchy while cultivating what the Sins Invalid collective calls a politics of wholeness—an interdependent liberation grounded in community and body sovereignty (Sins Invalid 16). By centering Women of Color, moon ceremonies reject the colonial invention of “woman” as a universal, subordinate identity (Oyěwùmí 1997, 10). Healing arises through collective recognition, affirming difference without hierarchy. As Zepeda observes, by aligning with the moon's cyclical power and the menstrual cycle, participants assert sovereignty through embodied ritual (Zepeda 2015, 97–104).

Through the testimonios and analytical insights of this chapter, we see that embodied sovereignty is cultivated through daily practice. The reclamation of the sacred body through moon circles and intuitive nourishment (Corina and Mel) re-establishes connection to innate wisdom, fosters vulnerability, and safeguards practices from appropriation. Similarly, movement as resistance and the reclaiming of space (Juliana) transform colonial fracture into embodied solidarity. Together, these practices—from the use of ancestral remedies like *limpias*

and herbal teas, to collective ceremony—reveal that every act of embodied care is a site of decolonial praxis. Each practice activates awareness, knowledge, skills, courage, and action, forming a collective testament to human liberation.

Ultimately, as evidenced by the embodied practices explored in this chapter, genuine well-being is inseparable from the active reclamation of body sovereignty. This physical, embodied work—the central focus of *Decolonize the Body*—lays essential groundwork. However, the decolonial journey cannot stop at the skin. Liberation must move beyond the physical to confront and dismantle the colonial systems that continue to shape mental and spiritual landscapes. The following chapter will thus expand the focus to explore how decolonization necessitates liberating the mind from internalized shame, trauma, and the epistemic violence of colonial thought.

Chapter 4: Decolonize the Mind

The struggle for self-definition begins on the terrain of thought. To decolonize the mind is to confront and dismantle the colonial architectures that shape how we think, speak, dream, and imagine possibility (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o 1986, 3). This process is not metaphorical—it is material and lived. It reclaims agency, cultural self-definition, and self-worth from the grip of internalized oppression. Frantz Fanon’s account of psychic decolonization and Paulo Freire’s pedagogy of liberation help illuminate this process, as discussed in Smith (2012, 12).

For Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities, this work begins with unlearning—the deliberate rejection of inherited beliefs that demand permission to exist, that measure worth against white supremacy, or that confine creativity to colonial standards of legitimacy (Anderson 2016; Culp 2004; Memmi 1991; Rudinow 2010; Williams 1991). As Albert Memmi writes, “The colonized’s liberation must be carried out through a recovery of self and of autonomous dignity” (Memmi 1991, 105). Decolonizing the mind thus becomes an act of reconstruction—piece by piece, story by story—through the refusal of imposed definitions and the reclamation of one’s own (Memmi 1991, 105).

Building upon decolonial frameworks of *supervivencia* and *resistencia*—which center the creative and embodied strategies through which marginalized peoples persist under oppression (Anzaldúa 2021, 219)—this chapter takes up the challenge of mental decolonization by moving beyond the theoretical. Following Tuck and Yang, we insist that decolonization is not a metaphor but a lived, ongoing, and material process.

The central thesis of this chapter is that mental sovereignty is achieved through ordinary acts of resistance, care, and creation. Decolonizing the mind emerges not as abstraction but as praxis: a reorientation of perception and a radical claiming of interior space.

Scope of the Chapter: Mapping the Decolonial Mind

In this chapter, I move through four interconnected sections, each exploring a distinct dimension of mental decolonization through the interwoven personal narratives I have gathered. My analysis draws on my own experiences and those of my family—my mother, Gloria; my sister, Corina; and her closest friend, Melba—as central evidence grounding the theoretical frameworks that guide this work. Together, these narratives form a cartography of liberation, charting how decolonial thought emerges from everyday life.

1. **Education as Liberation:** The chapter begins by defining the decolonial mind through the theoretical lenses of Paulo Freire and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, establishing the groundwork for unlearning the colonial architectures of thought. Here, I analyze my own reading of Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* as an act of Creative Sovereignty and a form of liberatory pedagogy, demonstrating how aesthetic choices and artistic reclamation become powerful political statements against imposed colonial standards of beauty, power, and success.
2. **Healing from Internalized Oppression:** Building on the concept of unlearning, this section delves into the mental and emotional work required to heal from internalized oppression, engaging Frantz Fanon’s insights on psychic decolonization. I center the narratives of my sister Corina and her best friend Melba, whose intergenerational dialogue reveals the continuous negotiation between inherited wisdom and colonized convenience. Their

conversation around food and care becomes a living meditation on resistance, illustrating how everyday decisions enact mental and emotional self-sovereignty.

3. Remembering and Honoring Power and Self-Worth: This section turns toward the practice of self-definition as a political act of reclaiming dignity and power. I focus on Sony's spiritual engagement with ancestral foodways and plant medicine, illustrating the grounding strength of heritage and land. This exploration asserts Spiritual and Ancestral Sovereignty as both inheritance and praxis—nurturing mental fortitude, healing, and self-worth within systems designed to sever those ties.
4. Reclaiming Ancestral Knowledge Systems: The final section synthesizes the chapter's arguments by centering embodied praxis and the materiality of resistance. I use my mother Gloria's narrative—her embodied politics of the kitchen—to examine the mental and emotional labor involved in rejecting colonial norms of consumption and productivity. This analysis demonstrates how ancestral foodways anchor Bodily and Food Sovereignty, asserting a radical, lived self-determination that bridges thought, body, and spirit.

The journey of mental decolonization is neither detached nor purely intellectual—it is embodied, relational, and transformative. It requires unlearning hierarchies of thought (Smith 2012, 44), challenging systemic oppressions (Crenshaw 2017, 32), and cultivating self-definition as a practice of collective healing (hooks 1994, 27). It is, as Gloria Anzaldúa writes, a threshold act: "To survive the Borderlands / you must live sin fronteras / be a crossroads" (2021, 217). In this spirit, the chapter traces how thought becomes action, memory becomes method, and survival becomes pedagogy. I begin with the mind, but this journey is not mine alone—it extends an invitation to those seeking to unlearn, to heal, and to imagine otherwise. As each

narrative unfolds, it reveals that to decolonize one's thinking is to reimagine being itself, ultimately laying the groundwork for the chapters that follow on decolonizing both body and spirit.

Education as Liberation

The Pedagogy of Lemonade: Healing and Black Feminist Praxis

To demonstrate *Lemonade*'s transformative power and its role in fostering Black feminist praxis, I include a moment from a conversation with Melba and Corina, in which I (aa) share my perspective, edited for clarity:

aa: "You know what I do now? I go into work and put Beyoncé's *Lemonade* on every single computer—just let it play everywhere. You have to listen to it, but not in pieces. One sitting. Forty-six minutes. It's an experience. The concert? So good. Like, next level. The water part? Yeah, that's the one. I know it didn't hit you [Melba] the same, but that's 'cause it's not just a performance—it's art. I went back and listened to her older stuff, even Destiny's Child, and it's still fun, but it felt... calculated. Like pop engineered to sell. Now? She's doing something else. She's saying something. There's a shift in her voice, her power. *Lemonade* isn't just music—it's medicine. It's about Black womanhood, pain, healing. It's her breaking free from what the industry expects. So yeah, maybe the crowd wasn't hyped like they are at Marc Anthony, but this isn't about hype. It's about awakening."

This dialogue isn't merely a casual fan moment (though I am part of the Beyhive!); it is an act of what *The Lemonade Syllabus*—a community-curated resource guide created by Dr. Candice Marie Benbow—calls "glorious healing" (Benbow 2018, 5). Aligning with the syllabus's assertion that the album "chronicled the experiences of many Black women" and created space for "real healing and transformation," I position this shared interpretive moment as a central act of liberatory pedagogy. *Lemonade* becomes not mere entertainment but ritual—an invitation to engage wholly and intentionally with a vessel of Black feminist and womanist

storytelling, a text worthy of deep study rather than passive consumption (Hall 1997; Brooks et al. 2019).

My description of *Lemonade* as “not just a performance—it’s art,” and “not just music—it’s medicine,” articulates the very purpose that inspired Benbow’s syllabus. As Syreeta McFadden writes, *Lemonade* is “a revolutionary work of Black feminism... a love letter to Black women,” positioning the album as both personal and political (2016). Her framing supports an understanding of *Lemonade* as sacred, emotionally transformative, and intentionally created as a site of healing and resistance for Black women.

In this moment, I model *education as liberation* through a liberatory pedagogy, inviting others into a learning space shaped by oral storytelling and emotional testimony—modalities of knowledge that Paulo Freire and Gustavo Esteva affirm as essential to transformative education (Freire 2000; Esteva 2014). While colonial institutions have long dismissed these embodied ways of knowing as illegitimate (Smith 2012), I elevate them as central. By sharing personal interpretation and emotional resonance with *Lemonade*, I enact a pedagogy that honors lived experience as theory, modeling the very process of *education as liberation* that this chapter seeks to define.

Contrasting the capitalist impulse to consume content rapidly and distractedly (Chang; Hassoun), I advocate for intentional, cyclical time—forty-six minutes of uninterrupted engagement with a visual album that centers Black women’s voices, histories, and healing. My critique of Beyoncé’s earlier “calculated pop” work and uplift of *Lemonade* as a pivot to true artistry identifies a move away from respectability and commercial palatability toward unapologetic Black womanhood.

This move directly engages the work of deconstructing respectability politics: *Lemonade* is raw, angry, sensual, spiritual, and healing, refusing to behave for the white gaze (hooks; Oluo). My insistence that everyone witness this transformation serves as a call to decolonize the mind and center Black women's stories as powerful, sacred knowledge (Nada). In short, I do not just talk about Beyoncé—I teach with her, joining a lineage of Black feminist educators, curanderxs, and storytellers who, as Candice Benbow writes, “tell our stories in hopes of setting us free” (2018, 5). This praxis makes *Lemonade* a foundational text in the curriculum of the decolonized mind.

Sound as Freedom: Beyoncé's Reclamation of Genre, from Renaissance to Cowboy Carter

If *Lemonade* established a pedagogy of healing and self-definition, the visual album *Renaissance* (2022) and the genre-bending *Cowboy Carter* (2024) extend this lesson through sound and cultural reclamation. These works teach liberation by disrupting genre, reclaiming rhythm, and asserting Black joy and authorship (Lester 2024; Chalfonte 2024).

Renaissance reclaims the legacy of Black queer and trans folks who shaped house music and ballroom culture—spaces long underrecognized and appropriated (Bailey 2011; Livingston 1990). The album functions as an oral history set to rhythm, honoring the cultural contributions of marginalized communities while inviting listeners into a joyful, embodied form of resistance (Lester 2024; Norwood 2023; Tambudze 2023). It is an unapologetic celebration of self-love, pleasure, and chosen family, centering the joy and brilliance of queer, trans, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color whose lives and legacies have often been threatened, erased, or appropriated. It teaches that joy is not a luxury but a necessity (Scott 2022, hooks 2000). This is

Black queer futurism in action (Keeling 2019), transforming the dance floor into a site of liberation.

In *Cowboy Carter*, Beyoncé boldly disrupts the historical erasure of Black contributions to country music, challenging the genre's whitewashed roots (Pecknold 2013). Her approach honors Linda Martell, one of the first Black women to break into the country music scene in the 1960s. Despite immense challenges in an exclusionary industry (Royster 2022, Rufus-Barnes 2024), Martell's legacy laid a foundation for reimagining the genre's boundaries.

As Martell observes in the interlude to Beyoncé's "SPAGHETTI," "Genres are a funny little concept, aren't they? ... In theory, they have a simple definition that's easy to understand, but in practice, well, some may feel confined" (Beyoncé 2024). This reflection illuminates how genre can operate as a tool of control (van Venrooij, Miller, and Schmutz 2022), constraining creativity and reinforcing exclusion (Negus 2013; Taylor 2012). Moreover, Martell's statement offers a cultural blueprint for resisting and rewriting internalized narratives imposed by systems of white supremacy. The lesson lies in embracing multiplicity rather than confinement—musically, racially, or otherwise.

Martell's reflections, coupled with Beyoncé's defiant declaration, "This ain't a country album, this a Beyoncé album," embody a direct challenge to the pressures placed on Black and other artists of color to shrink, self-censor, or conform (Jones 2001). Their collaboration disrupts colonial inheritances by asserting complexity and creative autonomy on their own terms. Just as colonialism imposes rigid categories of identity, culture, language, and knowledge (Fanon 1963; Smith 2012), genre functions similarly within the music industry: it dictates who

belongs where, what stories are valid, and which expressions are deemed legitimate (Negus 2013).

When Beyoncé declares, “Never ask permission for something that’s already yours,” she articulates a decolonial ethos—an unlearning of imposed inferiority (Mignolo and Tlostanova 2012) and a reclaiming of ancestral authority (Gegeo 2001). This is a direct challenge to the colonial mindset that insists Black artists must prove their worth within white-established frameworks (Fredrickson 1987). It also highlights the enduring question of who gets to define cultural belonging (Peterson 1997). Through Martell’s legacy, Beyoncé asserts that music is a living, evolving expression (Perlovsky 2010) and that rejecting genre constraints produces a more authentic reflection of lived experience (Negus 2013).

Beyoncé brings this speculative vision to life during her *Cowboy Carter* tour, where the phrase “Never ask permission for something that’s already yours” appears projected on screen as she performs the national anthem. Layered with Jimi Hendrix’s distorted guitar from his 1969 protest rendition (Waksman 2001), the moment nods to a long tradition of Black resistance (Berry 1995; Floyd 1996). Hendrix’s performance deconstructed patriotic myth through sound, turning distortion into a political weapon (Clague 2014). Beyoncé’s invocation of this legacy reclaims Black ownership over cultural and national identity (Radano 2010), especially within a genre that has long marginalized Black voices (Zinn 2015).

The photograph below was taken by me (aa) during Beyoncé’s *Cowboy Carter* tour performance of “Never ask permission for something that’s already yours.” Including it here is part of my own liberatory methodology—an act of witnessing Black feminist pedagogy in real

time. The image, like the performance itself, collapses the distance between spectator and participant and situates learning as an embodied, decolonial practice.



Figure 2. “Never ask permission for something that’s already yours.” Photograph by the author, 2025. Beyoncé performing during the Cowboy Carter Tour, Los Angeles.

Yet, some critics argue that the gesture, while powerful, stops short of confrontation (hooks 2014). Beyoncé’s artistry wields immense cultural power—her blending of Black cultural expression into mainstream Americana has led some commentators to frame her as a uniquely influential cultural force. The protest lives on the surface, stylized and curated, raising questions about whether the reclamation challenges nationalism or repurposes its symbols without dismantling them (Brown 2006; Gitlin 1980). Hendrix’s distortion unsettled; Beyoncé’s polish soothes. In walking this line, she embodies the contradictions of being a Black woman navigating empire and capitalism (Davis 2000). It is a performance that is both deeply resonant and deliberately restrained (Brown 2006).

By uplifting the erased legacy of Black contributions to country music and centering Linda Martell's voice, *Cowboy Carter* demonstrates that decolonizing the mind requires honoring silenced histories (James 1989; Memmi 1991, 105; Smith 2012). Ultimately, Beyoncé's genre-blending becomes an act of liberation, modeling how one breaks down mental and cultural boundaries to reimagine belonging within systems never built for them (Bates 2012).

Beyoncé's Hair, Relationships, and the Personal Politics of Black Women's Sovereignty

If *Cowboy Carter* and *Renaissance* reclaim sound as freedom, Beyoncé's body—her hair, her relationships, her choices—becomes another site of decolonial practice. The work of decolonizing the mind also takes shape in the intensely personal and political realm of Black women's sovereignty (Byrd and Tharps 2014).

Throughout history, the policing of Black women's hair reflects systems of objectification and control (hooks 2014; Mercer 1994). From the eighteenth-century Tignon Laws in Louisiana (Hanger 1998; Long 2004; Spear 2009) to apartheid's "pencil test" (Morey and Wilbraham 2003; Watson 2007), hair became a colonial instrument of racial classification. Across the African diaspora, ideas like *pelo malo* ("bad hair") enforce Eurocentric beauty hierarchies (Gillam 2017; Gilman 1985; Zulu 2024).

Beyoncé's hair choices, then, are acts of autonomy. As Funmi Fetto argues in "Beyoncé Is Right: My Hair Isn't Anyone's Business," Beyoncé's refusal to justify her changing hairstyles—whether braids, lace fronts, or platinum blonde—reclaims authority over her body and defies the need for validation (Fetto 2020). Her choice to wear blonde hair reclaims a style historically coded as white (Greene 2013; Jean-Blain 2021), challenging beauty norms while affirming that

“no one should have to justify the hair they wear or the way they look to anyone else” (Fetto 2020, 12).

Through her art, particularly *Lemonade* (2016) and Jay-Z’s *4:44* (2017), Beyoncé and Jay-Z offered a raw meditation on betrayal, healing, and love. Critics note that transforming intimate pain into public art risks commodifying trauma (Redmond 2014; Marshall 2006), yet for many, these albums opened space for dialogue about Black love, emotional labor, and survival (Collins 2000; Cooper 2018; hooks 2000; Wingfield 2019). Within a Black feminist framework, Beyoncé’s decision to stay and rebuild reflects what Brittney Cooper calls the right “to feel, express, and act on rage while also choosing healing and love” (Cooper 2018). It is a practice of sovereignty—choosing one’s path without apology.

Ultimately, Beyoncé’s choices around hair and relationships exemplify radical self-determination. They enact what bell hooks describes as “the movement from pain to power” (hooks 1996, 87) and what Mignolo and Walsh define as decolonial praxis: the ongoing work of reclaiming ways of being and knowing outside colonial frameworks (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 42). Her entire body of work, from *Lemonade* to *Cowboy Carter*, teaches that freedom begins with reclaiming one’s body and lived experience—no explanations needed. Such acts of personal sovereignty and mental decolonization are not merely symbolic; they are pedagogical, teaching new ways of being, knowing, and healing that embody the very principle of education as liberation this chapter advances.

Healing from Internalized Oppression

From Betrayal to Boundary: Melba's Act of Supervivencia

The work of decolonizing the mind, exemplified through Beyoncé's radical acts of self-definition, is inseparable from the process of healing from internalized oppression. This section explores that journey through personal narratives, revealing how healing itself becomes supervivencia and resistencia—acts of decolonial praxis.

In Melba's words:

"Growing up, the chaos of my family felt like a constant *tormenta*. I loved them, but there was always so much drinking, chisme, and unresolved tension in the air. I helped raise my sister's kids, but I felt like I was always stuck in the middle, trying to balance my loyalty to her while watching her tear down our parents. It was like I was trapped in a cycle where no one really addressed the heart of the issue, and I felt like my salud mental didn't matter as long as I was there for them. But as I got older, I began to realize that protecting my peace wasn't just a choice—it was an act of supervivencia. I could love my family, but I didn't have to stay in the chaos. I didn't have to let the toxic patterns continue just because it was expected. I chose to step away, to find my own path, even if it meant disconnecting from people I thought I couldn't live without. It wasn't easy, and sometimes it feels like a betrayal, but reclaiming my mind and my space is my way of healing. I'm learning that I can love them from a distance, and that my peace is a form of resistencia, too. That's how I take back my energy and my power."

Melba's *testimonio* captures the often-overlooked dimension of decolonial work—the quiet revolutions that unfold within families and within the self. Her story offers a compelling lens through which to examine the intimate struggle against internalized oppression. This is what Hertzberg calls the "private sphere of colonial inheritance," where domination is reproduced through everyday relationships (Hertzberg 1996, 129). Melba's experience illustrates how colonial dynamics quietly persist within the family (Holmes, Hunt, and Piedalue 2015, 539). From a young age, she was cast into a caretaker role, helping raise her sister's children while navigating the emotional landmines of intergenerational trauma, addiction, and silence (Young 2024, 214). These expectations defined who she was expected to be—as a

mujer, as a daughter, as a “good” Chicana (Niemann 2004, 79; Sánchez 2019, 44). The unspoken rule: stay loyal, stay silent, hold it all together (Viruell-Fuentes 2006, 335).

When Melba names this as a “cycle,” she signals her awakening to inherited scripts that told her she had to endure (Rodriguez 1994, 58). The belief that her *salud mental* did not matter as long as she showed up for others reflects how colonization has shaped understandings of love, duty, and womanhood (Lugones 2010, 742). These patterns are not natural; they are colonial. Women are taught to ignore their own suffering for the sake of family unity (Okin 1989, 288), often confusing martyrdom with love (Seed 1988, 133).

By recognizing that “protecting my peace wasn’t just a choice—it was an act of *supervivencia*,” Melba reframes survival itself as resistance (Anzaldúa 1987, 21; Smith 2012, 120; Vizenor 2008, 19). This is more than a personal revelation; it is a decolonial praxis (Walsh 2023, 15). She is not rejecting her culture but refusing the violence normalized within it (hooks 1989, 22; Moraga 2020, 142). She is carving space to love from a distance—to honor her roots without being buried by them (Anzaldúa 1987, 70; Smith 2012, 98; Moraga 2020, 155). That, as Audre Lorde insists, “is a political act of self-definition” (Lorde 1984, 45).

Building on Melba’s choice to protect her peace as a form of *supervivencia*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s articulation of “survance—celebrating survival”—offers a framework for understanding survival not as passive endurance but as active, often joyful, resistance (Smith 2019, 149). *Survivance*, as described by Gerald Vizenor and echoed by Smith, reframes the narrative from loss to presence, power, and continuity (Vizenor 2008, 1; Smith 2019, 153). In this light, Melba’s decision becomes part of a larger continuum of Indigenous and decolonial practice. She engages in what Smith identifies as a deeply spiritual and communal act: the

refusal to disappear (Smith 2012, 121). Her resistance lies in naming the violence and insisting that joy, connection, and life still flourish despite it (Lorde 1978, 55). Choosing to live fully, even while navigating pain, becomes a celebration of cultural survival and a refusal to be erased (Anzaldúa 1987, 74).

Her use of the words *supervivencia* and *resistencia* is not rhetorical—it is political (Hurtado and Porto-Gonçalves 2022, 203). They echo the voices in *The Lemonade Syllabus*, where Black women affirm that healing from harm is not betrayal but liberation (Benbow 2016, 7). Like Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* journey through heartbreak, rage, and rebirth, Melba’s act of walking away is not rejection but transformation—an inheritance reimaged (hooks 2000, 106). In doing so, she claims her body, mind, and spirit as sites of autonomous, ancestral power (hooks 1993, 36; Moraga 2020, 18; Ramugondo 2018, 12; Smith 2012, 215).

Melba demonstrates that the most sacred rebellions often happen quietly—in the decision to rest, to leave, to say no, to stop fixing (Hersey 2022, 24). Her reclaimed peace is not passive; it is active (Hanh 1992, 109). It is a refusal to replicate the trauma that raised her (Lugones 2016, 746), making her choice to create distance a practice of *supervivencia* at its highest frequency (Castillo 1994, 29). Melba’s story reveals how decolonial healing begins within the intimate space of family, demanding an internal confrontation with inherited scripts. Yet internalized oppression extends far beyond the home; it permeates daily acts of cultural belonging—including what we eat, how we speak, and how we present ourselves. These quieter negotiations of identity mark another crucial terrain of *supervivencia* and *resistencia*.

The Scent of Assimilation: Shame and the Policing of the Senses

The process of internalized oppression often begins with subtle erasures—small acts of silencing, shaming, or self-censoring that dismantle self-worth (Memmi 1991, 94; Fanon 1963, 17; Smith 2012, 145). To shift terrain from Melba’s family dynamics to the wider pressures of assimilation, we turn to food, a deep cultural anchor that frequently becomes a primary battleground for these struggles (Counihan 1999, 18). For Gloria, these struggles centered on the shame of cultural foodways. In the United States, the ideology of “Americanization” has long worked to erode the visible and sensory expressions of Black, Indigenous, and immigrant identities—language, ritual, and especially food (Calvo and Esquibel 2015, 11; Lowe 1996, 92; Alkon and Agyeman 2011, 28). This cultural erosion occurs not only through outright prohibition but through internalized shame, where the desire to belong leads to the self-censoring of traditional practices.

Anti-Blackness, in particular, has degraded traditional African diasporic foodways (Harris 2011, 54), labeling them unhealthy, unsophisticated, or excessive (Guthman 2011, 45) while simultaneously erasing the histories of skill, resistance, and nourishment embedded within them (Collins 2000, 114). This cultural degradation is often internalized as a deep-seated shame, leading individuals to mask traditional practices in an effort to achieve cultural “fitting in” (Waters 1999, 163; Grande 2004, 38). These historical processes of assimilation find their most poignant expression in the individual acts of self-censorship for the sake of belonging.

Voices of Assimilation: Gloria’s Reflection on Belonging and Shame

In the following testimonio, my mother, Gloria, reflects on the pressures that assimilation placed on her as a young woman. Her story, like many shared across generations,

reveals how systemic and emotional forms of colonial violence are carried and transformed through family memory:

“You want to fit in. You don’t want to be different. You don’t want to wear different clothes. You don’t want to sound different. You don’t want to look different. And you certainly don’t want to eat your cultural food. You want to be accepted as an equal American... unless you go back home to your own environment where your mom is still cooking the old-fashioned way, and you love it—but you won’t invite your best friend over because you don’t want them to know that you actually enjoy eating that.”

As her child and as a researcher, I approach her story not as data but as shared memory—a living site of knowledge that bridges personal and collective histories. Gloria’s words reveal the quiet violence of assimilation—the painful process through which belonging becomes a forced performance and shame seeps into the most intimate acts of daily life. Her story echoes the experiences of many children from Black, Indigenous, and immigrant communities: the quiet agony of sensory difference—the shame of bringing food to school that smells “different,” the hiding of cherished flavors, and the learned rejection of traditions that once brought joy (Manalansan 2006, 43; Waters 1999, 174; Calvo and Esquibel 2015, 27). This process exceeds the plate; it reflects the internalization of colonial messages that frame ancestral foodways as inferior, outdated, or embarrassing.

Brené Brown defines shame as “the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging” (Brown 2015, 69). In colonial and assimilationist environments, this emotion is not incidental—it is cultivated. Shame operates as a disciplinary force that trains the body and silences the spirit, conditioning young people to distance themselves from their cultures in exchange for mainstream acceptance. Brown’s research notes that shame thrives in silence, secrecy, and judgment—conditions tragically

reinforced when racialized or immigrant children feel they must hide cultural markers like food or scent (Rumbaut 1996, 41; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001, 12). Gloria's reluctance to share her favorite foods exemplifies a "shame script"—a learned response that suppresses authenticity in exchange for acceptance (Brown 2015, 71).

This internalization of shame disrupts the intergenerational transmission of cultural and ancestral food knowledge. As Luz Calvo and Catriona Rueda Esquibel argue, food practices are deeply embedded in cultural memory and identity, yet they are frequently marginalized or stigmatized within dominant narratives of modernity (Calvo and Esquibel 2015, 32). For these authors, *testimonios* and recipes become decolonial acts of reclamation—sites where the value and dignity of traditional foods are restored after centuries of dismissal as "poor," "primitive," or "unsophisticated" (Calvo and Esquibel 2015, 37).

Public-health scholar Rafael Pérez-Escamilla outlines four patterns of acculturation among Latinos in the United States: assimilation (full adoption of mainstream culture), integration (maintaining cultural roots while participating in dominant culture), separation (retaining culture while avoiding integration), and marginalization (losing ties to both origin and mainstream cultures) (Pérez-Escamilla 2009, 988). Gloria's narrative reveals the painful costs of assimilation, which often demands rejecting cherished foodways and, by extension, rejecting parts of oneself in the pursuit of belonging.

Through this lens, the act of eating—or hiding what one eats—becomes both a measure of colonization and a potential site of resistance. Internalized oppression thus operates as sensory suppression, teaching racialized and immigrant children to mute the very markers of culture that anchor memory and joy (Manalansan 2006, 43; Calvo and Esquibel 2015, 27).

Decolonial praxis, by contrast, is an embodied reclamation of the senses—smell, taste, sound, sight, and touch—through which belonging is felt and knowledge is transmitted (Sutton 2001, 3; Kimmerer 2013, 176). The next section moves from the “shame script” to sensory sovereignty, where kitchens, gardens, and tools become grounds for *supervivencia* and *resistencia*.

Escamilla’s Acculturation Framework: Negotiating Identity and the Borderlands

Sociologist Rafael Pérez-Escamilla (2009, 990) identifies four main acculturation patterns among Latino communities in the United States—terminology I retain here to reflect his original framework. However, in discussing the broader lived experiences of Latine and Latinx individuals, I use language that better reflects the fluidity, inclusivity, and decolonial possibilities within these identities. Pérez-Escamilla defines four primary categories: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization.

Gloria’s reflection provides a poignant illustration of the assimilation pattern, wherein individuals adopt dominant cultural norms at the irreparable expense of their heritage (Pérez-Escamilla 2009, 990). Her testimonio reveals the immense emotional labor and identity negotiation required to conform to dominant expectations (Goffman 1963, 54; Holland 1998, 39). She refuses to share cultural meals with peers, conceals the joy of her mother’s cooking, and internalizes the belief that difference is something to be hidden (Fanon 1963, 17). These are not merely food preferences; they are strategies of psychic survival in a society where belonging is predicated on proximity to whiteness (Anzaldúa 2021, 99).

While Gloria continues to find joy in cultural foods at home, the intractable shame she expresses outside the home signifies a fractured sense of cultural belonging (Brown 2015, 69). She is forced to inhabit what Gloria Anzaldúa calls the borderlands—“a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” where “borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe ... and where the prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants” (Anzaldúa 2021, 25). Crucially, Gloria embodies the internal conflict and loss tied to assimilation, distinguishing her experience from Pérez-Escamilla’s ideal of affirmed bicultural integration. Her narrative underscores how assimilation demands shedding outward cultural markers while sowing deep, internalized shame, particularly around embodied traditions such as food and smell (Pérez-Escamilla 2009, 990).

Gloria’s conflict around cultural foodways reflects broader power structures that define what is considered acceptable, desirable, and “neutral” in public space (Brown 2015, 72). This emotional labor is reinforced by the everyday, often-invisible policing of sensory experience—especially around food and scent—where racialized bodies are marked as out of place (Manalansan 2006, 58; Stoller 1989, 10). Through Gloria’s testimony, we witness how assimilation not only reconfigures identity but also shapes perception, teaching people of color to monitor what they sound like, how they smell, and what they eat. This corporeal control extends the colonial project into the most intimate and sensory realms.

The question remains: how does one move from the shame of assimilation to the sovereign reclamation of these embodied traditions? The following section explores this essential next step, highlighting the *supervivencia* of ancestral foodways through the intentional practice of Sony as she reclaims plant wisdom and healing.

The Politics of Smell: Racialized Sensory Regulation

Gloria's desire to "not smell different" reflects deeper structures of racial and spatial control. Cultural theorist Martin F. Manalansan IV, in "Immigrant Lives and the Politics of Olfaction in the Global City," identifies olfaction—the politics of smell—as a crucial site of immigrant marginalization (Manalansan 2006, 45). In urban spaces shaped by whiteness, immigrant food smells are often labeled too strong, too ethnic, or too dirty, rendering racialized bodies hypervisible and spatially excluded. Manalansan writes, "The olfactory becomes a register of race, class, and culture—a way of coding bodies as belonging or foreign, acceptable or offensive" (Manalansan 2006, 47). This racialized sensorium fuels what he calls aromatic profiling, which marks immigrant homes and kitchens as sites of contamination. This pressure compels many to self-censor their cooking and the sharing of traditional foods, enacting a sensory sacrifice necessary for survival in white-dominant or middle-class environments (Manalansan 2006, 49).

Gloria's simple statement—"So yeah, you're giving up a lot"—echoes this sacrifice. The shame she describes is not incidental but part of a broader system of violence that polices how immigrant and racialized communities take up space, especially through senses that resist containment, like smell (Manalansan 2006, 51). Everyday acts—avoiding bringing leftovers to school or closing the kitchen door while cooking—become forms of self-surveillance shaped by the racialized hierarchy that equates whiteness with cleanliness and cultural belonging with odorlessness (Manalansan 2006, 52). In olfactory terms, the odorless kitchen is the colonial ideal—a norm that equates neutrality with whiteness and disciplines difference into silence (Manalansan 2006, 49; Brown 2015, 120). Sony's kitchen is decolonial noise: thick with steam

and spice, and scored by the percussive grind of the *metate*, it makes presence sensible and non-negotiable.

The association of cleanliness with whiteness and godliness has deep colonial roots. Early American cultural norms linked moral purity, social order, and bodily hygiene, constructing racial hierarchies under the guise of civility (Bushman and Bushman 1993, 402; Brown 2015, 118). Soap and hygiene were never merely about health; they symbolized moral superiority and racial purity (Brown 2015, 120). During European colonial expansion, the so-called “civilizing mission” explicitly linked the perceived cultural backwardness of Indigenous and enslaved peoples to physical impurity, portraying them as inherently “dirty” and in need of moral and physical purification (Arnold 1993, 66; Scott 1998, 89). Dr. Angela Davis argues forcefully that these racialized notions of cleanliness were deployed to justify slavery and systemic oppression, framing Black bodies as contaminating sites that required constant surveillance and control (Davis 1981, 155). In the United States, these ideas evolved into pervasive stereotypes that pathologized Blackness and other racialized identities as unhygienic—stereotypes used to rationalize segregation and systemic inequality (Higginbotham 1993, 199; Gilmore 2007, 211). Whiteness, by contrast, was coded as pure, clean, and even godly, an association that still underpins social expectations around respectability and bodily comportment. These legacies persist in contemporary urban and institutional spaces, where the smells of immigrant and racialized communities are policed as transgressions of social order.

Understanding this history is essential to recognizing that sensory regulation functions as a form of systemic violence. The policing of smell extends colonial domination into the sensory realm, disciplining not only where racialized people can move but how they can be

sensed. It reveals the subtle yet pervasive ways in which empire persists through the body—through what people are taught to erase, to hide, or to sanitize. The supervivencia of the decolonized mind requires a counter-movement to this sensory erasure. The next section turns toward this necessary reclamation: highlighting how women like Sony transform the very senses once marked as “too much” into practices of healing, pleasure, and radical decolonial presence.

A Living Archive: Sony’s Kitchen as Sensory Sovereignty

If Gloria’s story reveals the violence of sensory regulation, Sony’s memories enact its refusal and reclamation. Against the backdrop of racialized olfactory control and the silent costs of assimilation (**Manalansan 2006, 49; Combs 2022, 112**), Sony—who grew up and continues to live in Mexico—offers a luminous counter-narrative. Her recollections of tortillas, frijoles, verdolagas, and nopalitos embody continuity, belonging, and a powerful refusal to internalize the colonial gaze (**Tuitt 2019, 61**).

As Dr. George Yancy explains, to internalize the colonial gaze is to “see oneself through the eyes of the colonizer,” adopting imposed perceptions of inferiority that distance one from one’s own cultural practices and embodied knowledge (**Yancy 2005, 42**). Sony’s joyful sensory memories—of *metates*, *molcajetes* of chile, and the scent of *frijoles de la olla*—actively refuse this imposed perception. She reclaims food as a source of pride, intimacy, and intergenerational love (**Calvo and Esquibel 2015, 25**). Where assimilation demands odorless conformity, Sony affirms food’s assertive ability to mark belonging, survival, and home (**Manalansan 2006, 53**).

Sony: “Comía mucha tortilla, frijoles, nopalitos, chile, queso, leche... carne que yo recuerdo solamente los domingos.”

Sony: “Cocinar **con ganas, con cariño**. Y aunque no sean grandes cosas, pero hacerlas **con cariño** es como el mejor platillo.”

In Sony’s kitchen and memory, foods often dismissed as “poor” or “peasant” fare become sacred offerings—embodiments of care, cultural wealth, and deep-rooted identity (**Calvo and Esquibel 2015, 37; hooks 2014, 41**). Her recollections highlight the sensory power of food to sustain family bonds and cultural memory (**Ferris 2014, 88; Heldke 2003, 63**). These intimate recollections illustrate how *supervivencia*—survival through love and presence—takes sensory form. For Sony, cooking is an embodied pedagogy, a way of transmitting knowledge, gratitude, and resistance through daily acts of care.

Decolonizing the mind here is synesthetic: the lesson arrives as aroma, warmth, percussion, color, and touch—each sense a pedagogy of return (Sutton 2001, 3; Kimmerer 2013, 176).

Within this framework, Sony’s cooking exemplifies liberated labor: her kitchen becomes a space of continuity where the *metate*, *molcajete*, and hearth—tools routinely dismissed by colonial modernity—are reframed as ancestral technologies of resistance and cultural wealth (**Calvo and Esquibel 2015, 29; Counihan and Van Esterik 2013, 35**). These technologies refuse the industrial, scent-neutral kitchen by privileging texture, aroma, rhythm, and proximity—sensory practices that transmit knowledge and bind community across generations (**Heldke 2003, 63; Parasecoli 2018, 17**).

Sony’s joy in remembering the smell of masa, the warmth of fresh tortillas, and the simple abundance of beans and nopalitos stands as a decolonial act of **sensory sovereignty**. Through her intentional practice, she rejects both colonial shame and capitalist notions of

scarcity. The everyday meal is thus transformed into a site of **supervivencia**—a testament to endurance, creativity, and love. In contrast to the odorless modern kitchens valorized by assimilationist culture, Sony’s kitchen vibrates with sound, scent, and memory. It is a living archive and a site of **decolonial noise**, where ancestral wisdom rises with the scent of *frijoles de la olla* and the rhythmic grinding of the *metate*, asserting itself as the true source of cultural wealth.

Liberating the Kitchen: Con cariño as Decolonial Resistance

It is within this understanding of the kitchen as a site of liberation that cooking “*con ganas, con cariño*” emerges as a radical act of resistance for Sony and countless others. This resistance operates at multiple intersections—against colonialism, patriarchy, and the capitalist devaluation of care work. It encompasses Indigenous peoples preserving ancestral foodways (Huambachano 2024, 112), Latine and Latinx communities affirming cultural identity (Santos, McClelland, and Handley 2011, 53), and women and caregivers whose labor transforms cooking into acts of love and defiance (Kalyanam 2021, 89; Williams 2017, 147). Through this intentional culinary practice, they challenge colonial narratives that have long dismissed Indigenous and working-class traditions as inferior or “other” (Calvo and Esquibel 2015, 27; Counihan and Van Esterik 2013, 35).

Centering love, intention, and ancestral knowledge transforms the kitchen from a site of domestic labor rooted in gendered exploitation (Calvo and Rueda Esquibel 29) into a vibrant arena for cultural reclamation and political empowerment. Calvo and Esquibel emphasize that true kitchen liberation lies in distinguishing cooking as an act of love and cultural expression from an obligation born of exhaustion or coercion (Calvo and Rueda Esquibel 31). This practice

directly challenges the pressures that render cooking a forced or invisible burden, especially for women and caregivers, by reclaiming agency over how, when, and why food is prepared (Calvo and Rueda Esquibel 33; Counihan and Van Esterik 40).

To liberate the kitchen is to decolonize one's relationship to food, labor, and care. It honors the often-invisible work that sustains families and cultures while reclaiming Indigenous food sovereignty and challenging the capitalist and colonial systems that marginalize these vital practices (Calvo and Esquibel 2015, 35; Miklossy et al. 2016, 202). Through this lens, Sony's cherished memories of catching fresh cheese on a hot tortilla are not simply nostalgic—they are acts of liberation that carry ancestral resilience into the present (Calvo and Esquibel 2015, 38). Sony's story thus reflects a different path—one aligning with Pérez-Escamilla's notion of a culturally grounded form of integration or strategic "separation" from dominant norms (Pérez-Escamilla 2009, 990). Unlike Gloria's narrative, which illuminates the psychic toll of assimilation, Sony's experience in Mexico exemplifies how cultural preservation can flourish unburdened by the constant policing of a racialized, assimilationist society (Calvo and Esquibel 2015, 40). Her narrative demonstrates that this "separation" is not isolation; rather, it is a strategic centering of cultural logic and ancestral practices as a source of strength, ensuring a lineage of identity and knowledge and fostering profound cultural resilience (Yancy 2005, 44; Pérez-Escamilla 2009, 991).

In the next section, this practice of liberating the kitchen extends outward—from the domestic space to the land itself—where Sony's care for plants, soil, and sustenance becomes a form of ecological *supervivencia* and decolonial healing.

Remembering and Honoring Power and Self-Worth

Understanding Imposter Syndrome: A Systemic Perspective

Imposter syndrome—persistent feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt despite clear evidence of success—disproportionately affects people of color (Clance and Imes 1978, 241). These feelings are not individual failings but symptoms of systemic exclusion. A systematic review by Bravata et al. found that impostor feelings were “particularly high among ethnic minority groups,” intensified by racial discrimination and enduring negative stereotypes (Bravata et al. 2020, 1253). For example, Chakraverty et al. observed that students from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups in MD–PhD programs often questioned their acceptance due to bias and microaggressions, which undermined their sense of belonging and professional identity (Chakraverty, Lee, and Hu 2020, 346–357).

This pattern reflects what Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995, 48; Delgado and Stefancic 2017, 7) and intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991, 1244) reveal: racism and other hierarchies are woven into educational structures, shaping not only opportunity but also self-perception. In this light, imposter syndrome becomes a pedagogy of oppression—one that teaches marginalized individuals to doubt their worth within systems built to exclude them (Freire 2000, 72; hooks 1994, 12).

The testimonies of my mother, Gloria, and me function as a counter-narrative. Our experiences of doubt, radical endurance, and resistance challenge the idea that imposter syndrome is a personal shortcoming, revealing it instead as a mirror of institutional inequity.

Navigating the First-Generation Journey

Gloria embarked on her higher education path as a first-generation college student, shouldering immense responsibility. With a mixture of sarcasm and strength, she recalled balancing pregnancy, school, and work: “I was six months pregnant when I graduated. Nothing but fun.” This wry remark captures the emotional and physical labor many first-generation students bear as they navigate the intersecting demands of family, employment, and academics.

Data from the Pew Research Center reveal that only about 24 percent of first-generation college students earn a bachelor’s degree within six years, compared to 59 percent of their continuing-generation peers (**Fry 2011**). These disparities stem partly from a lack of cultural capital—the unwritten rules and institutional knowledge that make academic systems navigable—often forcing students to find their own paths (**Tinto 1993, 94; Yosso 2005, 76**). Navigating this vacuum of institutional knowledge meant relying on pure aspiration. As Gloria recalled:

“I didn’t know, you know, really too much about it. I just knew I wanted to go to college.”

Her journey, however, was not entirely unguided. She eventually joined the Career Opportunity Program (COP), an initiative that actively recruited minority students and served as a vital institutional resource. As Gloria described, the program “kind of... kind of held your hand a little bit,” providing essential scaffolding for the 40–50 students in her cohort.

Encountering Overt Hostility and Systemic Roadblocks

After earning her bachelor’s degree and teaching credential, Gloria pursued a second master’s program. The subtle systemic barriers of her earlier years soon gave way to open

hostility from faculty: “There were some professors that just were not... supportive. One of them told me, ‘People like you don’t belong at this school.’”

This explicit rejection was a clear act of racialized gatekeeping, exposing the structural racism embedded within academia (Bonilla-Silva 2018, 63; Carmichael and Hamilton 1967, 12; McGee 2020, 108). Gloria’s experience was not unique but part of a broader pattern affecting many Black and Brown educators who faced “a lot of obstacles along the way,” including administrative resistance that delayed or derailed their credentials.

The echoes of this hostility reverberated in my own graduate experience, where similar attacks eroded confidence and fueled feelings often mislabeled as imposter syndrome—emotions that, in truth, stem from systemic exclusion rather than individual inadequacy. These dynamics persist today: racial microaggressions remain pervasive, with over 88 percent of Black, Indigenous, and Latinx Americans reporting such daily indignities (Sue 2010, 8; Owen, Tao, and Drinane 2014, 184). These constant encounters, experienced by both Gloria and me, generate isolation and self-doubt, revealing the crushing psychological toll of structural racism in academic spaces.

Continuance, Internalization, and the Power of Support

Gloria’s narrative reveals the emotional toll: “Self-doubt is always there... I think I internalized that, thinking maybe I wasn’t good enough.” Such internalization aligns with psychological research—particularly studies on stereotype threat—demonstrating how institutional exclusion manifests as persistent self-doubt among marginalized students (Spencer, Logel, and Davies 2016, 424; Steele and Aronson 1995, 808). This doubt often leads to the belief that one is inherently “not good enough.”

For Gloria, this internalization was compounded by the relentless pressure of her daily realities. “It’s not easy being a parent and going to school and working full time,” she emphasized, describing the juggling of responsibilities as “not an easy task.” Her eventual withdrawal, despite nearly completing her degree, illustrates how cumulative obstacles can derail academic progress. Yet her determination endured, sustained by a renewed sense of community and the wisdom she gained:

“Don’t give up. Find another circle that can help you and finish.”

Her later completion of a counseling credential at Fresno Pacific University underscores the power of mentorship and collective support in countering systemic barriers and internalized doubt (Ramos and Wright-Mair 2021, 11). Ultimately, Gloria’s journey—which resonates deeply with my own—delivers a crucial insight: what is often labeled imposter syndrome is not a personal failing but a rational psychological response to institutions historically structured to exclude. Recognizing this shifts the burden of proof from students onto the systems that demand transformation. Her success celebrates the radical endurance of those who persist, heal, and reimagine what belonging can truly mean.

Decolonizing the Classroom: Gloria’s Radical Pedagogy as Counter-Narrative

Gloria’s determination evolved into a career defined by the radical act of decolonizing the classroom—an enduring form of resistance against the very institutions that trained her. Her pedagogy centered on dismantling Eurocentric curricula, honoring multiple ways of knowing, and cultivating belonging for her students (Au 2008/2009). Her classroom became both refuge and rebellion: a living example of how educators of color transform the very

systems that once cultivated self-doubt and sought to exclude them. Gloria's practice exemplifies the radical acts of care and resistance required to transcend systemic barriers. Her lifelong commitment to anti-racist teaching stands as a powerful professional counter-narrative to the institutional forces that once fostered imposter syndrome.

Facing Discrimination and White Resistance

As Gloria began her teaching career, she directly confronted the discriminatory aftermath of desegregation policies. While intended to integrate schools, these measures often resulted in the professional displacement and marginalization of Black and Brown teachers. As Gloria recalled, teachers of color were sent “across town” to predominantly white schools, while white teachers were reassigned to Black and Brown schools. Historical data confirms this trend: an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 Black teachers lost their jobs in Southern and border states after *Brown v. Board of Education*, as Black schools were closed and white teachers prioritized (**National Museum of African American History and Culture n.d.**).

Gloria's assignment to a “very white school” at Eaton Elementary brought immediate white backlash and resistance, as she remembered:

“The parents just were like a big obstacle, you know they... they didn't want to see these Black and Brown teachers at their school to begin with and... we had white flight coming out of the classroom. Like, I don't want my kid in this class, you know, blah, blah, blah.”

In this racially charged environment, Gloria found vital solidarity with her colleague, Don Jones, a Black male teacher. Their mutual support became an essential form of resistance and care amid the hostility. This professional gatekeeping mirrored her academic struggles, yet Gloria's response was to create a classroom that actively affirmed her students' identities and expanded their worlds—a defiant act of counter-pedagogy.

Radical Affirmation Through Culturally Sustaining Practices

Gloria's bold personal style—wearing her hair in an afro and designing her own “loud and crazy outfits” for school—was a defiant counterpoint to professional white norms, earning her the children's affectionate title: their “cool teacher.” These were not mere fashion choices but acts of cultural pride that modeled self-acceptance and embodied resistance for her students (Fan et al. 92; Singleton 47). This message of confidence was crucial in classrooms that were 80 percent Black and largely low-income, where many students had “never left their zip code.”

Gloria also orchestrated radical field trips, including five-dollar flights on PSA airlines: “Basically, it was experiencing thriving on a plane for the first time. It wasn't about going many places; you were just leaving Fresno, going to the San Francisco Airport, and flying back to Fresno. You never even left the airport. It was such a trip.”

These experiences were transformative, challenging the constraints of poverty and expanding her students' funds of knowledge (Behrendt and Franklin 2014, 243). The flights, along with the elaborate graduation ceremonies she organized—boys in white shirts with handmade paper bow ties, girls in matching dresses—were intentional interventions designed to build cultural capital and instill dignity and achievement beyond the classroom walls.

Crucially, Gloria embedded culturally sustaining pedagogy into her curriculum (Paris 2012, 94; Paris and Alim 2017, 1). She introduced her students to music by artists such as Ella Jenkins, teaching African and Black folk songs with call-and-response elements that resonated with their cultural heritage. With songs like “Toom-Bah-Ee-Lero,” Gloria would play the record and follow Jenkins's directions, leading the rhythmic chant as the children joyfully echoed her,

adding percussive claps or stomps of their own. This practice—rooted in Afro-Indigenous oral traditions—fostered communal participation, collective memory, and a sense of shared identity, serving as a fundamental act of decolonization that directly countered Eurocentric curricula.

I, too, vividly remember joining these very same call-and-response songs from my mother's records as a child, feeling the joy and connection they created.

"My classroom was always full of life. We'd put on plays, read so many different books, and learn a whole lot about Black history. And yes, we'd always play Ella Jenkins; her folk and multicultural songs just had a way of showing those children so much."

Gloria's teaching career stands as a powerful testament to decolonizing educational spaces from within. Despite professional hostility and systemic racism that sought to cultivate self-doubt, she created a classroom that fiercely celebrated her students' cultures, expanded their worlds, and unconditionally affirmed their inherent worth.

Spiritual Intervention in the Academy: Personal Healing as Decolonial Practice

My own journey within the academy—marked by encounters with institutional racism and the resulting Xingonx Syndrome, the intersectional manifestation of self-doubt and chronic exhaustion caused by institutional violence—became a testament to the urgent need for personal decolonization and spiritual intervention as resistance against the very structures that perpetuate harm.

In one of my graduate-level ethnographic education courses, I raised concerns about a white student's plan to study Native American spirituality with Native communities. Afterward, a white teaching assistant, operating within a classroom structure that amplified their

authority, pulled me aside and said, “If you’re going to be so angry, you won’t make it in grad school.” They dismissed my critique, told me to “chill,” and insisted I wasn’t articulating myself “properly.” Then came the most jarring statement:

“We’re here to mold you into proper academics.”

I was left feeling silenced, scrutinized, and suffocated by their narrow vision of “proper.” My critique had not been inappropriate—only inconvenient. That doubt resonated with the widespread experience of racial microaggressions reported by over 88 percent of communities of color (Sue 2010, 15).

In another course where I served as a TA, a white woman instructor assigned two TAs of color—myself and another—to assist her. The environment grew increasingly toxic. She questioned my colleague’s marriage to a white man and, turning to me, pointed to the scratches and scars on my legs and asked, “Are you into BDSM or something?” The implication was clear: I was both racialized and sexualized, my body rendered spectacle. We filed formal complaints, but no action followed. By the end of the quarter, she received the award for “Best Instructor.” Meanwhile, we labored behind the scenes—without institutional support—to protect undergraduates of color from the very harm for which she was being celebrated.

These cumulative microaggressions and institutional betrayals left me spiritually and emotionally depleted. My body carried what my words couldn’t: an itch that wouldn’t fade, shoulders locked in tension, a restlessness that followed me from commute to classroom. I screamed into the void on long drives home, the only place I could release the pressure of pretending I was fine. I was working more than eighty hours a week between jobs and school, but the deeper exhaustion came from constantly trying to prove my right to exist in spaces built

to erase me. This sense of isolation is common; students of color are far more likely to report feeling unsupported or disrespected by faculty compared to their white counterparts (Walsh et al. 2021, 960).

When Luz Calvo—my advisor, friend, and light—reached out at the end of the fall 2013 quarter, I didn’t even know I needed to be seen. I had theorized my pain into something abstract, survivable. But when they placed that pouch in my hands, I felt the weight of care I hadn’t known I’d been missing. The spiritual medicine pouch Luz offered was an act of ancestral reclamation, filled with *plantita* power and herbs: Rose Quartz for self-love and peace; Tiger Eye for focus and strength; Hematite for grounding; Yarrow for protection; White Sage for purification and wisdom; and *Tagetes lucida*—Mexican Tarragon, or *Pericón*, also known as Grandmother Plant—to anchor me in ancestral memory.

This pouch was more than a collection of objects; it was a shield, a commitment, a prayer made tangible. It became a daily reminder of the *poder*—the power—of our *antepasados* and a symbol of my refusal to consent to institutional violence. It called me to disengage from harmful narratives, to prioritize well-being, and to seek spaces where my knowledge was affirmed. As Gloria wisely advised, “Don’t give up. Find another circle that can help you and finish.” Luz, through the gift of the medicine pouch, became part of that circle—connecting me to a spiritual community and ancestral strength that the institution could not contain.

I later shared the significance of this medicine pouch publicly on Facebook, writing:

“This pouch reminds me daily of the *poder* of our *antepasados*. It helps me remember that I do not have to consent to the violence of this institution. May all who experience this kind of pain carry something that returns them to their power.”

That act of sharing was itself a ritual—an offering to others navigating similar wounds. The medicine Luz offered confirmed what I had long sensed—that the academy is not the only measure of worth. Healing didn’t make the institution less violent; it made me more honest within it. Fourteen years into this PhD, I understand now that the slowness, the detours, the persistence—they were never failures. They were resistance, the rhythm of a different kind of knowing.

I began to craft my own sacred syllabus of survival, rooted in spirit, community, and refusal—a direct decolonial practice aimed at repairing the wounds the institution had inflicted. One expression of this was the creation of Community Agreements for my classes, adapted from the East Bay Meditation Center’s “Agreements for Multicultural Interactions” (East Bay Meditation Center 2022). Structured around the acronym R.E.S.P.E.C.T., these agreements guided classroom engagement through recognition of multiple truths, self-reflection on identity and impact, non-defensive feedback, and participation grounded in care and choice.

Community Agreements: R.E.S.P.E.C.T.

Letter	Agreement	Description
R	Recognize complexity and multiple truths	Understand that people hold different truths based on their lived experiences. Be open to ideas that challenge your own.
E	Examine your identities and impact	Our race, gender, culture, and other identities shape how we move through the world. Notice how they affect how you take up space — and how others experience you.
S	Sit with feedback, not defensiveness	Your intentions matter, but your impact does too. When someone shares how they were affected, listen with an open heart. Use “I” statements and avoid “fixing” or over-explaining.

Letter	Agreement	Description
P	Participate with care and choice	Engage at your comfort level — and be willing to stretch. Growth often lives on the other side of discomfort.
E	Empathize and honor confidentiality	Follow the Platinum Rule: treat others how they want to be treated. Keep personal stories private; carry the lessons forward.
C	Critique lovingly, not with attacks	We will make mistakes. Speak your truth with compassion and curiosity — not to shame, but to build understanding.
T	Trust the process	The work of justice isn't tidy or finished. We may leave with more questions than answers — and that's part of the journey.

These Community Agreements, structured around the R.E.S.P.E.C.T. acronym, represent far more than classroom rules; they are a deliberate decolonial pedagogical intervention within systems designed to cultivate imposter syndrome and exclusion. The framework emerged from my early experiences as a teaching assistant, where students co-created “ground rules” such as *Keep it 100*, cultivating shared ownership and adaptability. This collaborative spirit deepened during my time as Graduate Student Director for GAAAP, the first UC-based, student-initiated recruitment and retention program for underrepresented graduate students (Student Recruitment and Retention Center 2025).

The current form of R.E.S.P.E.C.T. draws direct inspiration from the East Bay Meditation Center’s “Agreements for Multicultural Interactions.” My contribution lies in integrating decolonial principles and a relational philosophy of teaching that actively dismantles traditional hierarchies of academic power and knowledge.

Rooted in my belief that all students bring a “diversity of knowledges” rather than arriving as “empty depositories,” this framework seeks to create *brave*—not merely safe—spaces by centering relationality. This commitment, informed by my lived experience as a QTBIPOC navigating invisible disability and systemic oppression, is woven through every aspect

of my classroom practice. For instance, “Recognize complexity and multiple truths” embodies the principle of *pluriversality*, validating the coexistence of many ways of knowing. “Participate with care and choice” nurtures agency and self-determination, while “Trust the process” honors the liminality and non-linear pathways of decolonization.

These agreements are not abstract ideals but daily practices—acts of love, courage, and refusal—that challenge the academic norms that once sought to silence me. In practicing R.E.S.P.E.C.T., I teach and learn in reciprocity, co-creating a classroom where healing and liberation are not distant goals but ongoing, collective processes. This pedagogy itself is a radical refusal of the imposter syndrome narrative.

Introducing Xingonx: A Decolonial Anthem for Radical Self-Power

If imposter syndrome names a wound—a raw, painful site of self-doubt—then Xingonx names the scar. This scar is not a flaw or a lingering hurt but a indelible testament to *Survival, Courage, Adaptation, and Reclamation*—the embodied process I call SCAR. The scar marks not weakness but transformation: evidence of healing, beauty, resistance, and the immense power born of enduring and becoming.

This conceptualization aligns with scholarship on post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004, 5), the body’s capacity to heal from trauma (van der Kolk 2014, 21), and the resilience and reclamation inherent within marginalized communities (National Museum of African American History and Culture n.d.). The shared experiences of Gloria and me reveal the inadequacy of individualizing imposter syndrome and the urgent need for a framework that addresses its systemic roots while empowering those who live within its grasp. This is where the concept of *Xingonx Syndrome* offers a radical re-framing.

The linguistic and spiritual journey toward *Xingonx* begins with *chingar*—a word often deemed vulgar, meaning “to mess with,” “to bother,” or “to disrupt.” Yet in its raw energy lies a battle cry: messy, rebellious, unapologetic. Reclaiming *chingar* mirrors the work of decolonization itself—transforming what was once used to degrade into a source of power and defiance. From *chingar* emerges *chingón*: one who embodies unapologetic strength and brilliance. Its feminine form, *chingona*, carries this energy forward—a fierce warrior spirit of survival, refusal, and joy.

Xingonx expands this lineage, adopting the gender-inclusive suffix *-nx* to embrace the power of the nonbinary, Xicanx, and Indigenous self—transcending the binary constraints of colonial language. To fully grasp the political and spiritual depth of this reclamation, we now turn to the etymological and cultural evolution that transforms a word of degradation into an anthem of radical self-power.

Tracing the Etymology of “Chingar”

The origin of *chingar* is debated among linguists, but two main theories prevail—each adding to the word’s layered resonance.

The most widely accepted traces *chingar* to the Caló (Spanish Romani) verb *čingarár*, meaning “to fight,” “to quarrel,” or “to dispute.” As the word entered colloquial Spanish, its meaning broadened from conflict to encompass aggression, disruption, and harm, eventually settling into its modern, vulgar sense of “to mess with” or “to screw over” (Real Academia Española n.d.).

The cultural and philosophical evolution of *chingar*—and especially *La Chingada* in Mexico—is most incisively explored by Octavio Paz in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. In the essay

“The Sons of Malinche,” Paz links *La Chingada* to the historical trauma of conquest—the violation of Indigenous women and the birth of Mexican identity—naming her the violated Mother figure (Paz 1961, 73).

This trajectory reveals more than linguistic drift; it maps the violent imprint of colonization—a process in which the language of conflict was repurposed to describe generational trauma and violation. The reclamation of *chingar*—taking a word steeped in violence and transforming it into a site of defiance—is a deeply decolonial act. This process echoes the work of Chicana feminist theorists such as Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, whose explorations of linguistic code-switching, the politics of language, and the reclamation of “forbidden” words illuminate how language becomes a terrain of survival and transformation (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981, 18).

Reclaiming *chingar* thus enacts the very process that *Xingonx Syndrome* names: the alchemy of turning colonial wound into creative, linguistic power. This language of refusal redefines what it means to speak, to fight, and, ultimately, to heal.

Etymological and Cultural Evolution of "Chingar" Terms

Word	Meaning / Definition	Usage Notes / Cultural Significance
Chingar	Root verb: “to mess with,” “to bother,” “to disrupt,” “to fuck”	Taboo, vulgar; raw energy; versatile verb in Mexican Spanish expressing conflict, rebellion, or disruption.
Chinga	Noun/exclamation: “trouble,” “conflict,” or strong intensifier	Used to express frustration or intensity; common in slang and oral traditions.
Chingado	Adjective/expletive: “damned,” “messed up,” “fucked”	Expresses anger, frustration, fatalism; linguistic marker of emotional intensity.
Chingada	Feminine noun: “the fucked one,” symbol of dispossession, trauma, or colonial violence	Used in curses like “¡Vete a la chingada!”; cultural symbol of historical trauma (see Octavio Paz); collective wound.

Word	Meaning / Definition	Usage Notes / Cultural Significance
Chingadera	Noun: “nonsense,” “bullshit,” “a messed up thing”	Dismissive or frustrated term for irritating or trivial things; shows range of frustration in slang.
Chingón	Reclaimed positive term: “badass,” “powerful,” “skilled”	Respectful, admiring; often masculine or gender-neutral; reclaimed from vulgar origins to express strength and mastery.
Chingona	Feminine reclaimed form: “fierce, powerful woman”	Feminist identity marker celebrating women’s power and resilience; cultural empowerment term.
Xingonx	Decolonial, gender-inclusive evolution of chingona/ón with “X”	Radical intervention symbolizing healing and naming colonial wounds; embraces queer, nonbinary, and ancestral complexity.
Chingónazo	Augmentative: “super badass,” “very skilled”	Emphatic praise; amplifies chingón to express awe or respect.
Chingoncito/a	Diminutive: playful or affectionate form of chingón/chingona	Can be ironic, affectionate, or playful depending on context.
Chingarillo	Mild/playful form, regional variation	Less harsh; colloquial, informal variant showing regional linguistic creativity.
Chingue	Subjunctive form of chingar	Appears in curses and expressions (e.g., “que te chingue”); grammatical form used in strong insults.
El Chingadazo	Noun: “big fuck-up,” “big hit,” “major disruption”	Expresses intensity or impact; used metaphorically to describe a significant event or failure.

The “X” in Xingonx: A Radical and Ancestral Intervention

The “X” in *Xingonx* is both a letter and a lineage—a deliberate decolonial and gender-inclusive gesture that refuses the binaries of colonial language. Like the “X” in *Latinx*, it does not mark a passing trend but a wound that speaks. As Alan Pelaez Lopez writes, the “X” exposes deep histories of settler violence, anti-Blackness, femicide, and silencing (Pelaez Lopez 2018).

In *Xingonx*, the “X” is both wound and weapon—a symbol forged at the intersection of history, identity, and resistance. The first “X” signals healing: a reclamation of what colonialism

sought to erase—fluidity, multiplicity, and sacred contradiction. The final “X” calls those wounds by name—colonization, anti-Blackness, femicide, displacement—while invoking the ancestors who walk beside us, guiding the process of SCAR (*Survival, Courage, Adaptation, Reclamation*).

To be *Xingonx* is to carry all of this: fierce love, ancestral memory, queer brilliance, and unstoppable power. It is to stand in the fire of imposter syndrome and burn it to ash. Where imposter syndrome isolates and individualizes, *Xingonx* connects and collectivizes—embodying ancestral love, queer defiance, and the daily labor of liberation. To be *Xingonx* is to stand in the fire of systemic exclusion and let the wound become a scar—a radical, decolonial anthem of self-power and collective becoming.

The Importance and Resistance of “Xingonx”

For those grappling with imposter syndrome—a condition born of systemic marginalization—*Xingonx* becomes both salve and sword. Reclaiming a term once labeled vulgar, *Xingonx* channels rebellious energy and unapologetic joy. This defiance aligns with decolonial praxis: transforming what once shamed into an active source of strength.

Its rawness may stir discomfort—especially across generations. In my family, “¡Ay caray!” was the strongest expression my tías inherited from their mother. My own mother avoids vulgarity but doesn’t flinch when I use it. This intergenerational tension mirrors the layered power of *Xingonx*—simultaneously rooted in cultural taboo and radical potential. It is a necessary disruption of respectability politics, a challenge to colonial propriety, insisting that healing is messy, embodied, and essential to liberation.

Embracing *Xingonx* becomes a daily, embodied act of resistance. It shows up in how we introduce ourselves, correct mispronunciations, and boldly claim space. Gloria’s journey—from internalized doubt to radical self-definition through her teaching and unapologetic style—reveals how being “too much” transforms into a badge of honor. This pride is its own kind of ceremony, a spiritual homecoming that affirms the SCAR process: *Survival, Courage, Adaptation, and Reclamation*.

More than a word, *Xingonx* echoes through bloodlines: abuelas who cussed and blessed in one breath, Indigenous aunties whose strength was raw, sacred, and generative. The “X” in *Xingonx* doesn’t just include—it invokes. It calls in Indigenous languages, reclaimed power, and queers what it means to be strong. In the spirit of Gloria Anzaldúa’s radical vision (Anzaldúa and Keating 2002, 74), *Xingonx* refuses silence and proclaims: you are not alone—and never were.

Enter Xingonx: The Next Evolution

Inspired by Sandra Cisneros’s concept of *being a chingona* as shared by Mona Alvarado Frazier (Alvarado Frazier 2011) and forged in the generational struggles of Gloria and me, I offer *The Xingonx Syndrome: Ten Steps to Slay Imposter Syndrome*. Each step is rooted in the wisdom of artists, ancestors, and writers who have shaped my decolonial journey. Together, these steps form both antidote and armor—a praxis designed to ignite the courage to live truth and reclaim power.

The Xingonx Syndrome: Ten Steps to Slay Imposter Syndrome

1. **Own Your Spotlight — Channel Your Inner Beyoncé:** Claim your space unapologetically.

As Beyoncé’s anthem declares, “Who runs the world? You!” Step into your brilliance;

burn brighter against the dimming effect of imposter syndrome. Owning the stage is an

act of reclamation. I practice this by refusing to let institutions dull my light. Gloria embodied it through bold dress and unapologetic teaching.

2. **Sashay Away the Doubts — RuPaul’s Rule:** When self-doubt whispers, strut past it. As RuPaul says, “Sashay away.” This step is about asserting your fiercest self—owning your story, your style, your power. I learned to sashay away from those who sought to “mold” me. Gloria did the same, sashaying past professors who tried to erase her brilliance.
3. **Write Your Own Borderlands — Gloria Anzaldúa’s Wisdom:** Live authentically in the in-between, where identities blend and power grows. The borderlands are not limits but fertile ground for creation. My autoethnography became an act of writing my own borderlands; Gloria created borderless classrooms that expanded her students’ worlds.
4. **Transform Your Wounds — Frida Kahlo’s Artistry:** Pain can become masterpiece. Following Frida Kahlo, this step turns struggle into self-expression, fear into creativity. Through complaint, ritual, and spirit work, I transformed microaggressions into art and meaning. Gloria, too, turned desegregation’s wounds into a vibrant, culturally affirming classroom.
5. **Build Your Radical Self-Care Ritual — Adrienne Maree Brown’s Love:** Radical self-care is rebellion. Rest, healing, and compassion are not indulgences but necessities. My medicine pouch and community circle became my ritual of restoration. Gloria practiced self-care through solidarity, nurturing her students and protecting her joy.
6. **Trust the Process — Octavia Butler’s Vision:** Change is science fiction made real. Trust your evolution, your genius, your unfolding. This step defies imposter syndrome’s

demand for perfection, honoring the messy journey instead. I've learned to trust the process of becoming. Gloria trusted hers—finding another circle, another way, and finishing strong.

7. Practice the Four Agreements — Don Miguel Ruiz's Path to Self-Worth

- *Be impeccable with your word:* Speak truth and kindness to yourself.
- *Don't take anything personally:* Imposter syndrome is systemic, not personal.
- *Don't make assumptions:* Challenge "I'm a fraud" with evidence of your power.
- *Always do your best:* Honor effort over perfection.

These agreements anchored me when my insights were dismissed; Gloria lived them through persistence and community.

8. Smash the Mental Colonies — Linda Tuhiwai Smith's Revolution:

Refuse the colonization of the mind. Reject internalized scripts of unworthiness. Knowledge, love, and defiance are your weapons. My refusal to consent to institutional violence was my revolution. Gloria's was teaching from liberation—smashing colonial narratives through culture and creativity.

9. Love Fiercely and Freely — bell hooks's Radical Love:

Love yourself as praxis. As bell hooks teaches, radical love is both resistance and renewal. I loved myself into being—through my style, scholarship, and truth. Gloria modeled fierce love in her self-expression and her devotion to her students' dignity.

10. Listen to the Land — Robin Wall Kimmerer's Wisdom:

Remember you belong to the earth. Slow down, breathe, listen deeply. Healing flows through reciprocity with the

land and with our ancestors. My spiritual practices returned me to this rhythm. Gloria's connection to community and culture rooted her there all along.

Forging Futures: The Path Through Ancestral Wisdom

What emerges from these testimonios—Gloria's steadfast continuance in the face of racialized gatekeeping and my own navigation through microaggressions and institutional betrayal—are crucial lessons for decolonizing the mind. Both narratives reveal that imposter syndrome is not a personal pathology but a pedagogy of systemic oppression: a method through which institutions continually reproduce doubt in marginalized bodies and minds.

The antidote, as modeled by Gloria's radical pedagogy and by my own spiritual intervention, is not adjustment to an oppressive system but alchemy—the practice of transforming harm into power, isolation into connection, and pain into creativity.

To name oneself *Xingonx* is not merely to survive—it is to sing, dance, scream, write, rest, plant, and love one's way into new futures. This is the labor of decolonizing both mind and spirit: turning wounds into wisdom and reclaiming the sacred knowledge that colonial forces sought to erase. The forging of these futures is not an abstract hope but an ancestral inheritance—alive in every act of creation, care, and refusal that keeps us becoming.

Reclaiming Ancestral Knowledge Systems

The Kitchen Table as Sacred Archive: Everyday Acts of Cultural Inheritance

Gloria's words paint a vivid picture of learning at the kitchen table through immersion: "I was taught by my mom and my abuela how to cook traditional dishes, and that was my education in so many ways. My mom and Tía Juanita, my mom's older sister, both showed me

the magic in the kitchen. Tía Jenny, who was my mom’s older sister, was a wonderful cook as well, and I learned so much from her too. Whenever I wanted to know more, I would ask Grandmother Chon, Encarnación. She always had stories and recipes to share. Learning from my family means the world to me. I feel so blessed to have had the chance to learn from them, even if it was for such a brief time. Growing up in those moments, cooking side by side with them... it was special, though at the time, I didn’t fully realize how precious those times were. Looking back, I wish I had written down more of their thoughts and ideas, their wisdom and their ways, because those pieces of them are treasures I carry with me always.”

Gloria’s final reflection—her wish that she *“had written down more of their thoughts and ideas”*—serves as a poignant foreshadowing of the precarity of oral traditions. It is a personal lament that simultaneously speaks to a systemic failure to value and document embodied knowledge passed down through marginalized communities, an erasure central to the project of colonization.

From Recipe to Resistance: The Politics of Ancestral Reclamation

Reclaiming ancestral knowledge systems refers to the process by which individuals and communities actively recover, preserve, and revitalize traditional wisdom, cultural practices, languages, and ways of knowing passed down through generations (Smith 2012, 33; Simpson 2017, 22). This reclamation responds to the historical erasures of colonization, forced assimilation, and cultural suppression (Deloria 1999, 45; Lugones 2003, 10). It involves honoring the teachings of elders, reconnecting with heritage, and sustaining these knowledge systems as living, evolving parts of identity and community life (Simpson 2017, 34; Smith 2012, 44).

Ultimately, reclaiming ancestral knowledge is an act of cultural resistance, empowerment, and continuity (Anzaldúa 2021, 87; Deloria 1999, 52).

Gloria's narrative exemplifies this process—her kitchen becomes a site of learning, preservation, and love, a language of flavors passed from one generation to the next (Calvo and Esquibel 2015, 18; Penniman 2018, 165). Ancestral knowledge often resides in everyday acts: preparing a meal, telling a story, asking questions of elders (Morales 1998, 45). This knowledge is informal, oral, and embodied—both fragile and significantly powerful (Smith 2012, 34; Deloria 1999, 45). The weight of this fragility, and the urgency to protect a living archive from erasure, brings us to the core issue of oral traditions and the need for their active preservation.

The Living Archive: Oral Traditions and the Urgency of Preservation

In many cultures, including Gloria's, recipes and cooking techniques are not written but transmitted through doing, observing, and listening (Calvo and Esquibel 2015, 25). This oral tradition carries more than culinary instruction—it conveys family history, cultural values, spiritual beliefs, and community connection (Simpson 2017, 30). When Gloria learned from her mother, Tía Juanita, Tía Jenny, and Grandmother Chon, she inherited a living archive that had survived displacement, marginalization, and cultural assimilation (Smith 2012, 37).

Reflecting on her experience, Gloria expresses a bittersweet awareness that her time learning from these elders was brief (Battiste 2013, 59). She wishes she had recorded their wisdom more fully (Deloria 1999, 52). This longing underscores the urgency of preservation before ancestral knowledge is lost (Smith 2012, 44). Traditional teachings, especially those transmitted orally, often remain undocumented because Western educational systems have

historically privileged written, Eurocentric knowledge forms. As elders age and younger generations face modern distractions, these embodied knowledges risk erasure (Cruikshank 1998, 45). Gloria's reflection thus becomes a call to honor, document, and sustain these teachings—to ensure they remain living parts of communities, resisting marginalization by dominant epistemologies (Cajete 2000, 45).

Beyond Nostalgia: Global Movements for Cultural and Food Sovereignty

Reclaiming ancestral knowledge is not nostalgia—it is cultural resistance (Tuck and Yang 12). It strengthens identity, nurtures intergenerational bonds, and challenges colonial hierarchies that devalue Indigenous and marginalized ways of knowing (Battiste 34). By practicing traditional cooking, Gloria participates in a wider movement to affirm ancestral wisdom as a source of healing and survival (Counihan 72).

Across the Americas, Indigenous and diasporic communities are restoring these knowledge systems (Smith 2012; Maldonado-Torres 2008, 245; Tuck and Yang 2012, 12). Traditional foodways are revived through seed saving (Kloppenburger 2004, 42), ancestral recipes (Counihan 1999, 72), and the rejection of processed, colonially imposed foods (Kuhnlein and Turner 1991, 15). Movements such as *Decolonize Your Diet* and *The Sioux Chef* reestablish Indigenous relationships to food as expressions of health, care, and political sovereignty (Calvo and Esquibel 2015; Sherman 2017). Likewise, Native Hawaiian immersion schools preserve ancestral languages (Wilson and Kamanā 2006), Anishinaabe educators teach through Indigenous immersion (Hermes 2009), and Nahuatl communities develop bilingual programs to sustain linguistic continuity (Zavala 2008). Curanderas, medicine keepers, and midwives across

Latinx and Indigenous communities also reclaim herbal medicine, spiritual healing, and ceremonial practices that reconnect people with earth-based systems of care marginalized by biomedical models (Mendoza 2016, 164–182; Waldram 1997; Gutiérrez 2008; Briggs 2003; Rafful 2020).

Gloria’s story stands at the heart of this movement. Through cooking, she enacts cultural survival, weaving stories and teachings that thrive despite efforts to silence them (Counihan 1999, 124; Wilson and Kamanā 2006, 78). Her narrative affirms the importance of cherishing and circulating ancestral wisdom within families and communities (Archibald 2008, 37; Lowenthal 2015, 44). These transmissions are not relics of the past—they unfold daily in kitchens, conversations, and relationships.

¡No Le Pongas Tanto Aceite!: Intergenerational Dialogue and the Decolonial Kitchen

In examining how ancestral knowledge continues to live and adapt, a conversation between Melba and Corina illustrates food as a site of tension and transformation—a space where colonized convenience meets ancestral culinary tradition. Their dialogue captures how decolonial practice takes root in everyday choices, in taste, texture, and care:

MEL: You know, it’s funny—before Corina, I never ate stuff like that. My mom made everything from scratch.

AA: Oh, okay.

MEL: And now, sometimes Corina buys these pre-packaged meals, and I’m like, ugh, how can you eat that?

AA: You mean like frozen or microwave meals?

MEL: Yeah, like stuff that just doesn’t taste right to me.

CORINA: Yeah, they have no flavor.

MEL: She’ll have things in the fridge, and I won’t even touch them. The flavor’s just... off.

AA: So she’s colonizing your taste buds?

CORINA: I am colonizing her food! But she's decolonizing my diet, and that's a good thing—for me.

MEL: I guess so.

CORINA: Honestly, I've started liking more Mexican foods because of her.

MEL: One of your favorite things my mom made was the rice, right?

CORINA: Oh yeah, when your mom was alive, that rice was so good.

AA: What kind of rice was it?

CORINA: Just simple Mexican rice—tomato rice with onion, garlic, tomato.

MEL: Yeah, like how everyone makes it, but each family has their way.

AA: Did she fry it first?

MEL: Yes, always. But what made hers different was she barely used oil—just enough to toast the rice. My sister Angelica uses so much oil, and my mom would always say, “*¡No le pongas tanto aceite!*” She didn't like oily food.

CORINA: And the salsa! She would make fresh salsa almost every day.

AA: Like tomato sauce?

MEL: Yes, everything was fresh. Nothing was measured—we just knew by feel.

CORINA: Sometimes she'd boil the tomatoes first, right?

MEL: Yeah, if it was for a smooth salsa. But not for rice.

AA: Was it for salsa you'd eat with chips or for eggs?

CORINA: It was for everyday meals—eggs, tacos, whatever we were having.

The mother's instruction, “*¡No le pongas tanto aceite!*”, is a lesson in flavor, health, and a rejection of the convenience-driven excesses of industrial cooking. This exchange reveals how oral and embodied food traditions carry ancestral wisdom forward (Ritchie 2014, 12), resisting the erasures wrought by industrial food systems and colonial modernity (Gadhoke and Brenton 2016, 207). It highlights the relational, intergenerational essence of reclaiming knowledge (Cruikshank 1998, 89)—not as a static relic (Simpson 2017, 18), but as a living practice grounded in care, labor, memory, and identity (Archibald 2008, 37; Simpson 2017, 21; Cruikshank 1998, 58).

This relational, intergenerational essence of reclaiming knowledge—alive in kitchens and across generations—moves beyond the domestic sphere. The following section explores

how such acts of cultural self-determination translate into formal and informal pedagogies of resistance within broader community and educational settings.

Decolonizing the Diet: Frameworks for Resistance

The Politics of Taste: Foodways as Critical Acts of Resistance

The intimate conversation between Melba and Corina, a microcosm of intergenerational culinary negotiation, resonates powerfully with scholarly frameworks dedicated to decolonizing the diet. This movement, championed by works like Luz Calvo and Catriona Rueda Esquibel's *Decolonize Your Diet* (Calvo and Esquibel 2015), calls for the reclamation of Indigenous and immigrant foodways as critical acts of resistance against the enduring impacts of colonialism on diet and health. Calvo and Rueda Esquibel identify the ultimate goal of the colonial food system as the "Standard American Diet" (SAD Diet)—a phrase that also translates as "qué triste" (how sad) in Spanish. This "sadness" is both literal and metaphorical, naming the grief of cultural disconnection and the health crises produced by a system that prizes profit over nourishment (Calvo and Esquibel 2015, 42).

Melba and Corina's dialogue echoes this critique by illuminating the tensions between convenience foods and the rich, embodied culinary knowledge passed down through family lines (Duruz 2005, 56; Parsons 2015, 385). Their exchange demonstrates that reclaiming food sovereignty is not merely about ingredients; it is about restoring cultural relationships to food, land, and community (Kuhnlein and Erasmus 1996, 22; LaDuke 1999, 39; Whyte 2018, 4). It is within this political context that we turn to the foundational definition established by La Vía Campesina (1996): the right of peoples to access healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, as well as the right to define

their own food and agricultural systems. This framework centers the needs and aspirations of those who produce, distribute, and consume food rather than the demands of global markets and corporate profit. It advocates for intergenerational continuity and offers a strategic pathway to dismantle the corporate trade and food regime that perpetuates inequity and ecological degradation (La Vía Campesina 1996, 3).

Navigating the Continuum: The Colonized and Decolonized Plate

Building on this understanding of food sovereignty as a reclaiming of cultural relationships and communal power, Melba and Corina’s dialogue can also be read through Calvo and Rueda Esquibel’s framework of the colonized versus decolonized diet (Calvo and Rueda Esquibel 2015). They delineate these contrasting paradigms to expose how colonial histories have shaped food systems, preferences, and health outcomes—while decolonized diets offer possibilities for healing, resistance, and return (Calvo and Rueda Esquibel 2015, 64).

Colonized Diet	Decolonized Diet
White supremacy and Americanization programs	Respect for Indigenous knowledge, cultural revitalization
Disavowal, thoughtlessness	Intention, blessings, and gratitude
Refined foods: white sugar, white flour, high fructose corn syrup	Whole foods, nixtamalized corn, whole grains, mesquite, local honey
Wasteful	Resourceful
Advertising, marketing, fads	Ancestral knowledge, oral tradition
Pesticides and monoculture	Permaculture, intercropping, organically grown
GMO seeds	Heritage seeds, seed saving
NAFTA, agribusiness	Small farms, local control, truly fair trade
Food for profit	Food to sustain life
Assimilation	Resistance, resilience

Mel’s mother’s cooking—with its emphasis on minimal oil, fresh salsa, and traditional rice preparation—embodies the resourcefulness and respect for ancestral knowledge that

contrast sharply with the wastefulness and convenience-driven processed foods Corina brings into the mix. Their exchange captures the ongoing negotiation between food choices driven by convenience and profit and those grounded in care, tradition, and nourishment. In this sense, the kitchen becomes a microcosm of colonial and decolonial struggle, where every ingredient and gesture carries political weight (Calvo and Rueda Esquibel 2015, 78).

A Living Practice: The Ongoing Journey of Food Reclamation

Beyond these immediate contrasts, Melba and Corina's interaction reveals the everyday, nuanced ways that cultural knowledge is passed down, adapted, and reshaped. Food practices are rarely purely "colonized" or "decolonized"; they exist along a shifting continuum (Kimmerer 2013, 54; Tuck and Yang 2012, 22). As Calvo and Rueda Esquibel underscore, cooking and sharing meals are acts of healing and resistance, but they unfold within the complex realities of modern life. Real change is not about purity—it emerges through intention, care, and relational practice (Brown 2018, 27; hooks 2000, 101).

Melba and Corina's negotiation over flavor and method illustrates that reclaiming ancestral food traditions is a dynamic, ongoing process (Bodirsky and Johnson 2008, 33). It honors inherited wisdom while adapting to the constraints and possibilities of contemporary life (De La Peña 2010, 119; Mintz 1985, 235; Pollan 2013, 188). Corina's reliance on convenience foods may reflect the exhaustion and pace of modern labor, while Mel's adaptations—reducing oil, sourcing local ingredients, maintaining flavor through technique—represent an embodied negotiation with these conditions. This act of adaptation itself becomes a form of resistance against static, imposed systems that seek to homogenize or erase traditional foodways (Calvo and Esquibel 2015, 89).

Food sovereignty, in this sense, is relational and flexible (Schiavoni 2017, 39). It is grounded not only in what is eaten but in how, why, and with whom food is prepared and shared (Carlile 2020, 72; Jones 2018, 58; Rehber 2019, 46). Reclaiming ancestral knowledge through food thus becomes a living practice—an ongoing choreography of identity and resistance that binds community, asserts self-determination, and defies cultural erasure (Salmon 2012, 84; Wane 2013, 93). It is here, in the everyday gestures of chopping, tasting, and teaching—in the very choreography of the kitchen—that the push and pull of colonial legacies and contemporary challenges unfold, demonstrating that food sovereignty is a living practice of self-determination that defies cultural erasure (Fanon 2008, 182; Said 1993, 273; Tuck and Yang 2012, 30).

The Internal Revolution: Reclaiming Mental Sovereignty

Ultimately, this chapter demonstrates that decolonizing the mind is not a fixed state but a dynamic, ongoing process—one rooted in both individual and collective acts of resistance and reclamation. Across the diverse narratives presented, we witness how creativity, food, and ancestral knowledge converge as sites of decolonial praxis and mental liberation.

Through aa's insights into Beyoncé's artistic evolution, we see a reclaiming of Aesthetic and Creative Sovereignty—a challenge to colonial narratives of beauty, power, and success. In Gloria's story, the kitchen becomes a site of both nourishment and resistance, revealing the mental and emotional labor involved in rejecting colonial norms of consumption and productivity in pursuit of Bodily and Food Sovereignty. And in Sony's ancestral practices and living legacies, we find the grounding power of heritage and land: a spiritual inheritance that

nurtures mental fortitude and self-definition, asserting Historical and Spiritual Sovereignty even within systems designed to sever those ties.

Whether through the bold reclamation of musical genres, the quiet defiance of hair sovereignty, or the vibrant continuity of family kitchens and gardens, these stories reveal that personal choices are inherently political. Each act of self-definition becomes a small revolution, working to dismantle the *pedagogy of systemic oppression* (Freire 54) and to cultivate new, sovereign ways of being in the world.

As these testimonios collectively reveal, decolonizing the mind is about unearthing silenced histories, honoring ancestral wisdom, and embracing a radical self-determination that celebrates complexity, affirms belonging, and reimagines freedom on one's own terms. This internal work is not the final destination, but the essential foundation—the clearing of colonized ground. It is the crucial step that prepares the self for a deeper, more vast journey toward the reclamation of spiritual and ancestral continuity, a journey that unfolds in the next chapter: *Decolonizing the Spirit*.

Chapter 5: Decolonize the Spirit

Decolonizing the spirit is not an abstract concept; it's a radical act of reclaiming and reviving knowledge and practices that have been suppressed but never extinguished. It's about recognizing the wisdom encoded in everyday actions, such as pressing tortillas by hand or offering quiet bendiciones, as vital forms of spiritual resilience. These practices serve as counter-narratives to colonial erasure, embodying ancestral memory and forging pathways toward collective healing.

Colonial structures have historically fragmented spiritual life, often imposing religious hierarchies and severing communities from their sacred traditions. Yet, in defiance of this, many communities continue to sustain and evolve inherited practices that affirm spiritual sovereignty. Their resilience is manifest in diverse forms, from ritual food preparation to communal ceremonies and dynamic digital prayer spaces, each representing both resistance and re-connection.

This chapter explores how spiritual nourishment emerges not from abstraction but from tangible, embodied acts, as detailed in "Ancestral Memory and Spiritual Nourishment." It then delves into "The Digital Altar: Communal Rituals of Inherited Survivance," demonstrating how technology can become a site for adapted traditions. Following this, "Limpias and Liberatory Rituals" showcases the power of cleansing ceremonies for personal healing and political intervention. Ultimately, the chapter concludes with "Decolonizing Death: Collective Memory as Living Praxis," illustrating how these diverse practices contribute to the fortitude of ancestral knowledge in the face of ongoing coloniality.

Rather than offering a fixed model, the following sections present a constellation of living practices—rituals, adaptations, and stories that reflect the dynamic nature of decolonial spirituality. Decolonizing the spirit, as illustrated throughout this chapter, is not a return to a single origin point but a layered and evolving process, one that reclaims sacred connections and fosters futures rooted in ancestral knowledge, communal care, and the enduring pursuit of liberation.

Ancestral Memory and Spiritual Nourishment

This section explores how marginalized communities reclaim and redefine their spiritual practices through daily, embodied acts. Rather than treating “spirituality” as an abstract domain, we center rituals, culinary traditions, and collective practices as sites of decolonial resistance, healing, and reconnection to ancestral heritage (Medina and Gonzales 2019, 84; Holmes 2013, 5).

Culinary Rituals as Sacred Memory

“Algo que nunca se me olvida... es el chile rojo que hacía mi mamá en el molcajete. ... Con ese saborcito ahumado del comal. ... Cuando nos sentábamos a la mesa con un taco de frijoles y ese chile, era como si el mundo se detuviera un ratito. ... Para mí, eso era el amor. ... Esa comida sencilla, hecha con lo que había, pero con todo el corazón.”

This intimate memory illustrates how food becomes a sacred archive and a living connection to ancestry. The act of preparing chile rojo in a molcajete and pressing tortillas by hand is more than sustenance: it is ritual, care, and spiritual nourishment. These embodied practices transmit intergenerational knowledge and resist colonial erasure (McKinley 2023, 45).

The mother’s *al tanteo* method—cooking by intuition rather than recipe—embodies an epistemology grounded in the senses, the body, and relational experience. Such practice

locates knowledge in lived, embodied awareness rather than abstract discourse, resonating with Indigenous and Chicanx understandings of relational knowing (Anzaldúa 2021, 61; Grande 2004, 80; Smith 2012, 25). Food preparation thus becomes a spiritual act—nourishing both body and soul (Lupton 1996, 34; Kesten 2012, 211). The warmth of a handmade tortilla and the taste of a simple bean taco carry ceremonial weight, expressing care, connection, and resilience.

These kitchen rituals extend beyond the family home—rooted in ancestral crops like corn, they carry histories of both colonization and survival. Corn lies at the heart of these practices, revered as both staple and sacred crop, with deep roots in Mesoamerican cosmologies (Rodríguez 2014, 15). Spanish colonization sought to dismantle Indigenous food systems, suppressing both cultivation and ceremonial use of corn (Mann 2005, 238). Today, that assault continues through industrial agriculture and genetically modified corn, threatening seed sovereignty and traditional foodways (Kloppenburger 2004, 122). The erasure is visible when sacred corn-based drinks are supplanted by Coca-Cola bottles in regions where Coke consumption outpaces access to clean water (Tuckman and Bagnoli 2019, para. 4; Kakwani 2024, 55).

Yet corn traditions persist: nixtamalizing masa, hand-shaping tortillas, and ritualizing their making serve as acts of cultural preservation and spiritual resistance (Arbino 2019, 92; Thomas 2019, 49). These processes reaffirm ties to land, lineage, and collective memory. As Salmon observes, kitchens are reconceived as vital sites of cultural conservation, where survival intertwines with joy and ceremony (Salmon 2012, 9). In the aroma of chile and the softness of freshly made tortillas, we uncover more than nourishment—we reclaim love, legacy, and

pathways toward liberation. To decolonize the spirit is to honor the sacred in everyday life, restoring a holistic sense of self and belonging amid colonial rupture (Maldonado-Torres 2007, 256).

Bendición: Reclaiming Rituals of Spiritual Kinship

At first glance, *bendición*—a humble request for a blessing among Puerto Rican kin—may appear as a residual Catholic custom. But through a decolonial lens, its deeper meaning emerges: it becomes a gesture of spiritual resistance, ancestral memory, and embodied relational care. Rather than imposing an external religious dogma, it recovers a more expansive spirituality rooted in Afro-Indigenous cosmologies, intergenerational reverence, and the sacredness of everyday exchange.

During conquest, Catholicism was forcibly imposed upon the Caribbean, suppressing and criminalizing Indigenous and African spiritual systems (Murrell 33; Stevens-Arroyo 14). Yet colonized communities infused Catholic forms with ancestral meaning and resistance. In *bendición*, the tradition is reinhabited—not as a hierarchical bestowal of grace, but as an invocation of protection, recognition, and sacred presence among community. Here, the blessing is not conferred from afar but arises from the relational web of elders, ancestors, and kin.

Through this reimagined lens, *bendición* transcends a transactional act. It becomes daily affirmation: “I recognize you. We are connected. I invite your presence into my day.” This challenges individualistic, hierarchical spiritual models embedded in colonial religion and shifts sacred authority into communal relations. This epistemological decolonization centers elders, peers, and community as sources of spiritual life. In an interview, Gloria, a Puerto Rican elder,

reflected: “It’s like an acknowledgment of love ... a special blessing that I get from the person I’m asking. ... Saying it is going to be more meaningful ... but hearing it validates the reason to continue saying it. ... It’s more of a cultural aspect and tradition... not religious” (Gloria, personal interview).

The survival of *bendición* in Puerto Rican households—despite migration, colonial schooling, and religious erasure—stands as spiritual sovereignty. Each utterance resists forgetting, centers care and presence, and reclaims the sacred in everyday life. “There’s not too many people that are greeting me that way. ... If my mom were alive, you guys would all be saying *bendición*.” “I didn’t have close enough family members [in California] to say *bendición*.” These reflections underscore how migration, assimilation, and the loss of elders can disrupt the intergenerational transmission of spiritual practices, producing what Eduardo Durán calls a “soul wound” that reverberates across generations (Durán 2006, 16). This dynamic parallels the intergenerational trauma that Joy DeGruy-Leary identifies as the legacy of systemic oppression (DeGruy-Leary 2005, 123). Still, her effort to “keep the thread alive”—“I usually say *bendición* ... approaching an elderly person I know”—demonstrates resilient reclamation of spiritual memory.

Just as food rituals nourish the spirit through touch and taste, verbal blessings like *bendición* sustain spiritual kinship through word and breath. By saying *bendición*, we honor spirit as relationship—not dogma. We reclaim the sacred on communal, embodied terms. We resist forgetting, and we affirm that spirit lives in the ordinary: love is the altar upon which decolonized spirit flourishes.

Herbal Wisdom and Embodied Healing

In this final section, we examine herbal remedies as forms of spiritual and physical reclamation, illuminating holistic paradigms of well-being rooted in ancestral, land-based practices (Kimmerer 2013, 28; García Swiecicki 2022, 68). Juliana's narrative reveals how such healing is woven into everyday life. As a child, she was offered teas for common ailments—*té de yerba buena*, manzanilla, and lemongrass—as well as dietary advice like eating papaya to aid digestion.

"... my mom would always [give me tea] ... *té de manzanilla* ... my favorite tea was the lemongrass tea. ... She just made it because I really liked it."

"... 'In the morning you have to eat papaya. ... That's gonna help ... digestion. ... When papaya's not in season ... there's an alternative ... There's never just one food remedy.'"

Yet Juliana also describes a phase of rejection in her youth:

"... I was in a very angry stage ... 'No, tea is not gonna remedy that.'"

This tension reveals how ancestral methods can feel insufficient against structural injustice (Fanon 1963, 43). But over time, Juliana returns:

"Now I use lavender and manzanilla tea ... the aroma ... really help me calm down. ... I'm like ... 'I'm gonna do my tea' ... whether it's in my head or not."

Her journey—acceptance, resistance, and reengagement—encapsulates the complexity of reclaiming ancestral wisdom amid colonial pressures. Her mother's guidance about wild greens and her father's rural roots trace her lineage back to land-based medicinal systems. When Juliana asserts, "Cooking a pot of beans from scratch is a revolutionary act," she frames ordinary food preparation as spiritual resistance, rooting care in daily ritual.

The Digital Altar: Hacking the System from Within

Every night, without fail, my tías gather on WhatsApp to pray the *Padre Nuestro* ("The Lord's Prayer"). This brief, familiar ritual transforms traditional prayer into a virtual gathering

that spans borders—across the United States, Mexico, and Puerto Rico—three generations, and multiple time zones, beginning around 7:00 p.m. Central (5:00 p.m. Pacific / 8:00 p.m. Eastern). Their phones become sacred objects, and the chat thread a digital altar—demonstrating how, as anthropologist Genevieve Bell observes, everyday technologies can become sites of spiritual significance (Bell 2006, 141–58).

Scholar of religion and digital culture Brenda E. Brasher similarly notes that religious communities have developed “innovative uses of computer-mediated communication for spiritual practices—such as online prayer chains, e-prayer wheels, and online multiuser religious rituals” (Brasher 2001, 30–31). My family’s WhatsApp prayer group exemplifies such digitally inspired devotional creativity: it transforms an ordinary messaging platform into a space of connection, comfort, and care.

The WhatsApp group began on August 20, 2017 as a response to severe weather warnings before Hurricane María, when my dad was living in Puerto Rico. Note: My mother lives in Puerto Rico too, but she had been visiting her children in California. What started as urgent collective care soon became a nightly ritual, transcending disaster and distance to offer connection across geography and generations. Over fifty family members now participate—siblings, cousins, nieces, nephews, in-laws, grandchildren. The tías serve as spiritual anchors, their words rippling outward. Even in silence, presence is deeply felt.

For Ofe, one of my tías, participating in the nightly prayer “se siente como estar envuelta en el amor de la familia, aunque estemos lejos. Hay calor y tranquilidad, como estar en casa con todos alrededor. Es un momento de paz en medio del día ajetreado” (“like being wrapped in the love of family, even though we’re far away. There’s warmth and tranquility, like

being home with everyone around. It's a moment of peace in the middle of a busy day"). Lupe echoes this connection: "se siente como un abrazo de toda la familia. Como si la distancia desapareciera por un momento y estuviéramos unidas en espíritu. Las voces me recuerdan a casa y a nuestra fe compartida" ("like a hug from the whole family. As if the distance disappears for a moment and we are united in spirit. The voices remind me of home and our shared faith").

This nightly ritual embodies what Gerald Vizenor calls survivance—not mere survival but "an active sense of presence, the continuance of stories" despite colonization (Vizenor 2008, 1). By gathering through prayer, my tías sustain ancestral memory, reinforce kinship bonds (Chelladurai, Dollahite, and Marks 2018, 849–59), and resist what Linda Tuhiwai Smith identifies as Western authority's attempt to dominate "all aspects of Indigenous knowledges, languages and cultures" (Smith 2012, 73–74).

This practice preserves five intertwined lifeways that I condense here for clarity: collective care (family as sanctuary), intergenerational transmission (repetition as memory), adaptation (diaspora/digital flexibility), ancestral communion (the dead included in the circle), and everyday sacrality (phones and threads as ritual space). Together, they enact survivance not as static preservation but as dynamic continuance—culture living by changing.

Guadalupe, Tonantzin, and the Sacred Feminine

Even within Catholic ritual, syncretic continuity endures. Long before colonization, Mexica communities at Tepeyac Hill honored Tonantzin, a sacred maternal presence associated with earth and nourishment (León-Portilla 1973, 9–10; De Sahagún 1952, 139). León-Portilla shows that the *Nican mopohua* was written to explain how devotion to Guadalupe arose "allí donde por tanto tiempo se adoró a Tonantzin" (10), making explicit the continuity between the

Nahua Mother Goddess and the Virgin Mary. When the Spanish erected the Basilica of Guadalupe over that site, Indigenous reverence persisted beneath the imposed iconography—a spiritual layering Jeanette Rodriguez calls “devotional palimpsest” (Rodriguez 1994, 22–23). For Gloria Anzaldúa, Tonantzin and Guadalupe together signify the survival of the sacred feminine: a bridge between colonial violence and spiritual reclamation (Anzaldúa 2021, 46–47, 105–6).

Rather than listing all Marian titles, I highlight a few that resonate with our diasporic circle: Consuelo de los migrantes (Solace of Migrants), Espejo de justicia (Mirror of Justice), and Reina de la paz (Queen of Peace). Framed through a decolonial lens, these invocations affirm a sacred feminine continuity with Tonantzin while naming justice, migration, and peace as spiritual commitments—precisely the terrain our nightly prayer inhabits.

Praying Under Surveillance: Sacred Practice on Corporate Platforms

WhatsApp enables intimacy while running on Meta’s extractive infrastructure. As YK Hong argues, these platforms monetize attention and metadata even when content is encrypted (Hong 2022). My family’s choice is a diasporic calculus: when fragmentation threatens daily, the immediate good of connection outweighs abstract risks. We use the master’s tools to sustain what the master cannot measure—obligation, memory, care—turning a commercial channel into a threshold of the sacred.

At the same time, practice creates accountability. When someone misses their usual line, others notice. Absence triggers care. And each night a litany of the dead keeps memory vivid: “Te pedimos por el eterno descanso de nuestros seres queridos que se han adelantado: Miguel, Anacario, Barbarita.” All three passed within the last year—Miguel in late 2024, Anacario and Barbarita in early 2025—their names spoken with tenderness, refusing the

Western split between living and departed. This is ancestral communion, not metaphor but relation.

My Spirit, Reimagined: Personal Pathways of Liberation

My tías' nightly prayers offer one pathway for decolonizing the spirit through collective ritual and inherited devotion. My own journey unfolds along a parallel route—consciously created yet rooted in ancestral wisdom and an enduring impulse to hack systems from within. It testifies to the multiplicity of decolonial practice that Gloria Anzaldúa and adrienne maree brown describe as transformation through relation, creativity, and lived contradiction (Anzaldúa 2021, 87; brown 2017, 14–17).

My daily rituals remix inherited wisdom with self-created practices, blending cultural and spiritual influences into an evolving praxis that honors both lineage and invention. At the center is living and teaching from the corazón: empathy as epistemology, emotion as method, love as strategy. Echoing Anzaldúa's conviction that "I change myself, I change the world" (Anzaldúa 2021, 87), I understand decolonization as communal and embodied—healing inseparable from the body and from collective well-being.

As a queer, trans, Black, Indigenous person of color, my spirituality arises from the interstices of marginalization and imagination. It refuses the fragmentation imposed by colonial and patriarchal orders, embracing multiplicity as truth. To live within this continuum of selves is to practice liberation daily: to re-member what dominant narratives erase and to make healing intersectional, compassionate, and justice-centered.

Embracing the Fluidity of Being: Navigating Nepantla

It is precisely within this complex tapestry of identity and experience that my personal spiritual practice takes shape. This practice is a living, ongoing exploration, sometimes perfect

in its quiet contemplation, other times imperfectly interwoven with the distractions of daily life. Yet, it is precisely in the tension between these states—in moments of both intention and struggle—that I find beautiful meaning. My rituals are deeply personal, reflecting a constant seeking of connection and liberation.

My personal spiritual path, in particular, was shaped by thinkers like Octavia Butler and Gloria Anzaldúa, who became essential because they spoke to experiences and challenges that traditional faith and existing spiritual narratives, often rooted in colonial Christian frameworks, overlooked or even dismissed. As a Queer, Trans, Black, Indigenous, Person of Color (QTBIPOC), I often faced violence and rejection within my own Latino community. The cultural and religious frameworks I inherited sometimes felt rigid, not making space for queer identities, which often left me feeling isolated and unseen—effectively erased by inherited dogmas. Then, entering predominantly white gay spaces brought another kind of exclusion—racism and erasure—that compounded the pain of not fully belonging anywhere (**Cohen 1997, 325–26**).

Early on, I realized I couldn't rely on external validation or acceptance; I had to become my own strongest cheerleader—a “queerleader” for myself. This meant cultivating radical self-love and resilience amidst conflicting pressures and marginalization. I found inspiration in the wisdom of figures like RuPaul and Marsha P. Johnson. RuPaul often reminds his followers that “what other people think of me is none of my business” (**RuPaul 2011**), a sentiment he later echoes in *GuRu*: “Life is too short to be concerned with what other people think” (**RuPaul 2018, 52**). Marsha P. Johnson's middle initial, “P,” famously stood for “Pay It No Mind.” Together, their words offer both humor and survival strategy—blueprints for self-determination that reject the gaze of those who seek to define or diminish.

Their messages teach me to embrace and love myself, flaws and all, in this very moment. RuPaul's defiant self-creation and insistence on radical self-love, particularly as a queer Black man in the public eye, offers a decolonial blueprint. This became a cornerstone for cultivating spiritual sovereignty—a direct hack against the colonial impulse to internalize external judgment and define self-worth by oppressive standards. These teachings helped me create a personal pathway of liberation that centers self-acceptance, defiance against oppression, and spiritual sovereignty—qualities absent from the inherited forms I encountered.

What I know now is that this spiritual practice wasn't born from abstraction—it was carved through the body, through moments that demanded I choose visibility over disappearance. The urgent need for this self-forged path, and the spiritual insights it demanded, became starkly clear through lived experience.

Violence and Visibility: The Cost of Being Seen

One instance happened when I walked to McDonald's with a beautiful female classmate to place an order for our Roosevelt High School Folklórico group in Fresno, CA. Two cholos—dressed in bandanas and flannels, with that particular way of carrying themselves that in my Fresno upbringing signified history, threat, and neighborhood weight—slowed as they passed, heckling me for walking with the “fine ass heina.” A block later, their car screeched to a halt, and they came at me with baseball bats. I remember curling into a ball on the ground as my friend screamed at them to stop, her voice full of panic. In the chaos, I thought I heard the cold metallic click of a rifle chambering. All I could think in that moment was: Thank God they don't have guns. Thank God they don't have guns.

This violent encounter burned into me the immediate, physical threat of being visible outside of narrow expectations. It taught me that my existence, even simply walking, could be perceived as an affront. For a long time afterward, I carried that lesson in my muscles—the flinch, the hesitation before taking up space. It wasn't clarity that came next, but numbness, then anger, then the quiet work of finding language for what had happened. Only over time did that fear begin to turn into something else: a slow, deliberate resolve to define my own reality, even in the face of danger.

Radical Joy, Racialized Space

My understanding deepened during another encounter on a dance floor. While dancing with a Black man—joyfully, sweat and rhythm in sync—a white guy approached, puffed up with entitlement. “You should be dancing with me,” he barked, drunk and offended. As if our joy needed his permission, or as if our bodies moving together were somehow an insult to his imagined place in the world.

I learned that for some, being visible in my own pleasure was an act of defiance. That night revealed how entitlement polices joy, how the simplest act of dancing freely becomes political for those of us whose bodies are already marked by color. I began to understand that joy itself—the capacity to feel, move, and delight—is a form of resistance, a radical act of spiritual reclamation against a world that seeks to diminish it.

Last Night, a Drag Queen Saved My Life: Protection in Heels, Kinship, and Spiritual Armor

Another night, a white man—wasted and towering—backed me into a corner of the bar. Slurring, grabbing, insisting. I froze. Before I could move, a Mexican drag queen appeared like an apparition in a sequin dress and acrylics sharp enough to cut glass. She pushed between us,

her body blocking his. “They said NO, cabrón,” she spat, dragging me away. She didn’t know me, but she saved me—and then kept dancing like it was nothing.

That’s when I understood: protection doesn’t always come from power. Sometimes it comes from kinship in heels. That experience became a revelation in solidarity and chosen family—how protection and spiritual safeguarding often emerge from the fierce, unapologetic love within marginalized communities, operating outside conventional structures of authority. Liberation, I realized, is sustained through collective care and mutual aid, often in the most unexpected and dazzling forms.

Inclusion Is a Delusion

Another experience illuminated the subtler face of exclusion. It happened in San Francisco, at a mixed gay bar where I had gone expecting music, laughter, and the loose safety that queer space is supposed to promise. Instead, I was asked to leave—not for starting trouble, but because a group of white men threatened to. Staff told me I was “making people uncomfortable” and that I “should leave before things got worse.” All I had done was exist in a space that claimed to celebrate pride.

Their “pride” had no room for people like me. The city that prided itself on acceptance revealed its limits that night, showing how inclusion can fracture when whiteness feels unsettled. Later, at a QTBIPOC scholars’ conference, I heard a trans presenter say that inclusion is a delusion—that true liberation will never come from asking to be invited into systems that were never built for us. We have to center ourselves instead. That truth echoed what my body already knew in that bar: belonging extended conditionally isn’t belonging at all.

Mine had to be forged elsewhere, under threat, in fragments. That moment exposed the performance of certain “inclusive” spaces and how quickly they revert to exclusion when confronted with genuine diversity. It underscored the need to build my own spiritual and communal havens—to understand that authentic liberation cannot be granted by existing systems but must be created and fiercely protected within our own spaces, however fractured they may seem. In those fractures, I began to recognize what Anzaldúa calls *nepantla*—the borderlands of transformation—where fragmentation itself becomes sacred material, the place from which new forms of belonging are made (Anzaldúa 2021, 87).

These experiences became my first initiations—the body as teacher, fear as oracle, joy as resistance. They taught me that sovereignty begins not in doctrine, but in presence.

Spiritual Sovereignty in Practice: Prayer, Ritual, and Self-Compassion

To actively forge this path of spiritual sovereignty, I turned to daily practices, with prayer emerging as a foundation. While my exact words and methods vary, I find myself drawn to practices that emphasize spiritual surrender and presence. I’m inspired by RuPaul’s approach to prayer, which he shares in *GuRu*: “Dear God [that’s what I say, and you can use whatever you choose], Thank you. I ask that you guide my thoughts, my feelings, and my perceptions. I willingly give you all of my resentments” (RuPaul 2018, 11).

RuPaul explains that this act of prayer is a way to “rig the system”—a method to deactivate the ego and acknowledge a presence greater than ourselves, creating space for healing and transformation. His use of humor, camp, and performance transcends entertainment; it becomes a tool for truth-telling and spiritual resistance. Through embracing his whole self, flaws and all, he models how to meet life with presence, vulnerability, and joy.

That kind of openness invites surrender—not to control or perfection—but to the messy, sacred process of becoming.

RuPaul’s practice resonates as a modern form of ceremony, a living prayer that collapses the false boundaries between spirit and body, self and community. It inspires me to cultivate my own ritual space grounded in ancestral knowledge, queer love, and radical joy.

However, it’s vital to acknowledge the complexities that accompany the mainstreaming of drag culture, particularly through platforms like *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. While I draw deep spiritual lessons from RuPaul’s philosophy of self-love and sovereignty, scholars have traced how the show’s rise coincides with neoliberal logics of visibility and consumption. Lisa Duggan names this pattern “the new homonormativity”—a politics of inclusion that privileges market-friendly queer identities over radical collective liberation (Duggan 2003, 175–76). Jim Daems’s edited volume (*Daems 2014*), along with Niall Brennan’s essay, “Contradictions Between the Subversive and the Mainstream,” (Brennan 2017), analyzes how drag’s subversive edge is softened through reality-TV aesthetics and commodification. Ted R. Faust, in *Mother of the House of No Shame*, likewise critiques how the franchise monetizes queer authenticity while marginalizing trans and non-Western performers (Faust 2019). My focus here remains on the spiritual wisdom RuPaul models—his practice of radical self-acceptance—rather than the corporate culture that has grown around his image.

The Spiritual Red Pill: The Matrix and Decolonial Re-coding

Anzaldúa gives the method—*nepantla*, staying in the in-between. *The Matrix* gives the allegory—seeing the code and choosing to rewrite it. The Wachowskis’ later acknowledgment that the film works as a trans allegory mirrors this journey (BBC Newsbeat 2020). My awakening

was gradual: realizing the colonial matrix lived both outside and inside me. Each ritual—chanting, altar work, listening to plants—disrupts that internal code, reminding me I am not machinery but matter, cosmos, soil.

A Hybrid Praxis: Shaping Spirit Beyond Inheritance

While my tías gather nightly to recite the Padre Nuestro, I’ve cultivated rituals that speak in another register—rooted in Octavia Butler’s visionary poetics and Gloria Anzaldúa’s radical spirituality.

Often, when I need steadiness more than spectacle, I listen to a recording of a prayer I composed from Earthseed verses in Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (Butler 1993). It expands on Earthseed’s central teaching—“God is Change”—and takes form as a living theology:

Prayer 1: God Is Change

All that you touch, you change. All that you change, changes you. The only lasting truth is change. God is change.

As wind, as water, as fire, as life. God is both creative and destructive, demanding and yielding, sculptor and clay. God is infinite potential. God is change.

All that you touch, you change. All that you change, changes you. The only lasting truth is change. God is change.

All successful life is adaptable, opportunistic, tenacious, interconnected, and fecund. Understand this. Use it. Shape God.

All that you touch, you change. All that you change, changes you. The only lasting truth is change. God is change.

Any change may bear seeds of benefit. Seek them out. Any change may bear seeds of harm. Beware. God is infinitely malleable. God is change.

All that you touch, you change. All that you change, changes you. The only lasting truth is change. God is change.

In order to rise from its own ashes, a phoenix first must burn. Kindness eases change.

All that you touch, you change. All that you change, changes you. The only lasting truth is change. God is change.

Seed to tree. Tree to forest. Rain to river. River to sea. Grubs to bees. Bees to swarm. From one, many. From many, one. Forever uniting, growing, dissolving, forever changing. The universe is God’s self-portrait.

All that you touch, you change. All that you change, changes you. The only lasting truth is change. God is change.

To make peace with others, make peace with yourself. Shape God with generosity and compassion. Minimize harm. Shield the weak. Treasure the innocent. Be true to the destiny. Forgive your enemies. Forgive yourself. All that you touch, you change. All that you change, changes you. The only lasting truth is change. God is change.

This prayer is no mere mantra; it's a decolonial theology rejecting a fixed, patriarchal god. Butler reframes faith as adaptive strategy—ritual, community, and dreaming as tools for survival and liberation (Butler 1993, 31). Anzaldúa offers the companion method—*nepantla*, the space of transformation where fragmentation and wholeness coexist (Anzaldúa 2021, 95, 87, 98). Drawing from her teachings, I created a second prayer that shifts the focus inward: from God as Change to the self as the site of change.

Prayer 2: I Change Myself, I Change the World

I am an active kneading, of uniting and joining, that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings.

I change myself, I change the world.

Nobody's going to save you. No one's going to cut you down, cut the thorns thick around you. No one's going to storm the castle walls, nor kiss awake your birth, climb down your hair, nor mount you onto the white steed.

There is no one who will feed the yearning. Face it. You will have to do. Do it yourself.

I change myself, I change the world.

Though we tremble before uncertain futures, may we meet illness, death, and adversity with strength. May we dance in the face of our fears.

I change myself, I change the world.

I create my own decolonial consciousness by creating a new mythos—that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave.

The work of decolonial consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps us prisoner, and to show in the flesh and through the images in our work how duality is transcended. The answer to the problem between all binaries lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts.

A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle—but one that, in our best hopes, could bring us to the end of violence and war.

I change myself. I change the world.

Where the Earthseed prayer reaches outward to the cosmos, this second one turns inward, transforming spiritual surrender into radical self-accountability. When I return to them—sometimes often, sometimes after long stretches—they realign me. One prayer reaches outward to the cosmos; the other turns inward toward self-transformation. Together, they form the heart of my hybrid ritual.

The voice reading my prayers is Australian—deliberately different from mine. The choice unsettles habit and surfaces how I’ve internalized which tones sound “authoritative.” I hold that ambivalence as *nepantla* work—curious, not condemning—using awareness itself as a pry bar. Re-indigenizing the body ties the prayers to practice. Melissa K. Nelson calls us to “decolonize and re-indigenize our bodies, minds, and communities by taking back our food sovereignty,” returning what we consume to the soil that sustains us (Nelson 2008, 181). This reclamation resists colonial discipline scripted onto racialized flesh. Fanon exposes “epidermalized” inferiority (Fanon 2008, 95–96, 111–12). Foucault maps the machinery that renders the body “docile” (Foucault 1977, 135–38). bell hooks reclaims embodiment as pedagogy (hooks 1994, 21, 91). Mignolo names the wound “the coloniality of being,” calling for epistemic disobedience (Mignolo 2011, 9, 281). Cherokee Two-Spirit continuities—*asegi* (other/queer) and *gadugi* (reciprocity)—locate belonging in contribution rather than purity (Driskill 2016, 103–8, 111, 114–15). In bringing these teachings into my own practice, I return theory to flesh—reminding myself that knowledge, like prayer, must live through the body and within community, where healing is collective, grounded, and always in motion.

One prayer looks to stars; another to soil; the chant pulls both through the body.

Together, these movements—Earthseed’s “God is Change,” Anzaldúa’s self as change, the elemental chant, and queer Indigenous continuance—form a hybrid spiritual map.

Elemental Embodiment

Alongside these spoken prayers, I ground myself in a simple, sacred chant (Vadhar 1995):

Tierra mi cuerpo, agua mi sangre, aire mi aliento, y fuego mi espíritu.
(Earth my body, water my blood, air my breath, and fire my spirit.)

This chant, shared across Indigenous, Latin American, and Earth-based spiritual traditions, honors the unity of body, spirit, and Earth. Repeating it connects me to the four elements that hold life together—earth for grounding, water for adaptability, air for clarity, and fire for transformation.

Embodying Resistance and Reciprocity

When I move, chant, or feel grief in my chest or joy in my hips, I’m actively refusing the colonial lie that the body is merely a vessel and the mind is what matters most. I’m declaring: my body is knowing. My body is land. My body is memory. This reclamation reweaves me into the sacred web of life—where humans, water, animals, and ancestors are in constant dialogue. This worldview dismantles hierarchies between mind and body, and between human and nature, thereby restoring reciprocity. To re-indigenize is thus an embodied act of resistance and remembrance that proclaims: my body isn’t a machine. It’s sacred soil.

The poem “*Being Human*” by Naima Penniman (Penniman 2020) echoes these teachings. Her line “effort give way to existence” offers a decolonial invitation to rest—to refuse the colonial demand for constant striving. This mantra reminds me that worth is not measured by productivity but by presence, grounding my spiritual work in stillness and self-

acceptance. In these layered practices—movement, chant, stillness—I find the elements converging, guiding me toward a spirituality that breathes through body and earth alike.

A Layered Spiritual Praxis

Together, these four rituals—the Earthseed prayer, the Anzaldúan invocation, the elemental chant, and my evolving mantra—form a layered spiritual praxis. Mirroring the four sacred elements that ground the chant, they carry the wisdom of earth (connection and steadiness), water (adaptation and emotion), air (clarity and unlearning), and fire (transformation and courage).

My tías still gather each night to pray the *Padre Nuestro*. Their rhythm steadies me, even when my own prayers sound different. What I’ve made doesn’t replace theirs—it grows beside it. Between us, I feel not opposition but continuation: many ways of reaching toward what heals.

These continuities of care ripple outward beyond our screens and prayers, taking new form in other embodied traditions. Among them are the *limpias*—rituals of cleansing and renewal that root spiritual practice in the body and the Earth.

Limpias and Liberatory Rituals

Flowing from the same lineage of care that moves through my tías’ prayers and my own rituals, limpias offer another form of embodied healing. They are spiritual cleansing practices of remembrance, resistance, and reconnection. Rooted in the diverse healing traditions of the Latinx diaspora, limpias are an integral part of curanderismo—a dynamic cultural system that understands medicine as sacred, collective, and ancestral (García Swiecicki 2024, 18–20). Elena Avila names curanderismo as “a whole culture of health” (Avila 1999, 39), not a fragment of folk medicine. Each limpia enacts that culture’s resistance—clearing heavy energy (*energía pesada*)

and reclaiming Indigenous knowledge systems that have endured through centuries of colonial erasure and spiritual violence.

The *limpia*, a sacred practice rooted in Indigenous and Afro-diasporic healing traditions, functions as a powerful decolonial technology of resistance that moves beyond individual spiritual hygiene to offer a collective blueprint for political refusal and systemic liberation from neoliberal and racial violence. I trace three *limpias* that operate across personal, communal, and structural scales, revealing how ancestral medicine restores spiritual hygiene, reknits communal relations, and practices epistemic disobedience (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 3–19; Escobar 2018, 4–21).

A *limpia* (Spanish for “cleansing”) is a spiritual and energetic purification used across many Indigenous and mestizx communities in Mexico, Central America, the Andes, and the U.S. Southwest. The diverse forms of the *limpia* include sweeping with herbs (like *ruda*, *romero*, *pirul*, or *albahaca*); egg cleansings (*huevo limpias*); copal smoke; sacred waters; prayer; intention setting; ancestral invocation; and divinatory elements like egg or fire readings (Trotter and Chavira 1997, 36–41). *Curanderismo*, the “way of healing,” remains primarily oral, practiced within families and communities (García Swiecicki 2024, 18–20). Its living repertoire includes *limpias*, *sobadas*, *pláticas*, herbalism, dream work, and ceremony.

Limpis support what many *curanderas* call “spiritual hygiene,” tending the energetic body in grief, stress, or transition—clearing *mala energía*, envy, trauma imprints, and *susto*, and restoring harmony (Buenaflor 2018, 43–46). Grounded in Indigenous and Afro-diasporic spiritual roots, *limpias* emphasize relations between body and spirit, human and environment, living and ancestral—resisting the fragmenting logic of colonial thought (Shiva 2016, 38–39;

Welsh 2017, 277–79). This resistance is embodied through collective ritual gestures that rebind spirit and matter—each movement, sound, and scent recalling the ancestral knowledge that colonial modernity sought to sever.

I begin with the personal scale of the *limpia*, tracing how the ritual offers a form of spiritual triage—a way to tend the energetic wounds left by state and social violence, restoring balance where the body and spirit have been unsettled.

Personal Limpia as Repair

After a particularly rough 48 hours—a hit-and-run near Lake Merritt in Oakland, racial profiling by police in Dublin, and harassment by security in Modesto—I felt overwhelmed and spiritually disoriented. These events echoed patterns of state and social violence disproportionately impacting queer, Black, and Brown people. “Got time for a *limpia* for me...?” I texted a trusted practitioner. Reaching out invoked ancestral tools—spiritual triage for wounds Western medicine cannot see—affirming that my wellbeing is political, sacred, and deserving of protection. As Audre Lorde writes, caring for oneself is “an act of political warfare” (Lorde 1988, 130).

The healing web responded. From Oaxaca, my practitioner connected me with Diana, a Bay Area–based curandere from Curanderismo Sin Fronteras, a grassroots women’s collective offering donation-based *limpias*, *pláticas*, and herbal care, drawing on a lineage that includes Doña Enriqueta (Oaxaca), Estela Román (Temixco), and Atava García-Swiecicki, who lives in New Mexico and has deep roots in the Bay Area. On the phone, Diana’s soft, affirming voice asked what I was holding: fear, violation, the sense my body was no longer mine. “We will call your spirit back,” she promised.

That Sunday in Alameda, I brought rosemary and my medicine pouch; she brought roses, other herbs, and burning copal. Waves, birds, and wind were the only sounds. Copal smoke circled me as Diana brushed plants across my back, murmuring prayers. The weight between my shoulder blades began to lift; breath deepened. No forms, no checkboxes—just spirit to spirit. As this seaside limpia called my spirit home, the next ceremony shows how ancestral practice can call entire communities home to themselves.

Community Healing in QTBIPOC Ceremony

Moving beyond the personal, I turn to the communal scale by tracing a self-limpia organized by the Healing Clinic Collective (HCC). We gathered as Queer, Trans, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color on unceded Lisjan Ohlone land (Oakland) on a Sunday in March 2025, facilitated by Melissa Reyes and Batul True Heart of Floripondio End of Life Planning and Services. HCC offers traditional healing to trauma-impacted communities—survivors of domestic violence, people in recovery, the previously incarcerated, low-income and undocumented folks, especially QTBIPOC—countering the isolating logics of Western clinical medicine through reciprocity, reverence, and justice. Reyes and True Heart, long-time herbalists, ceremonialists, and death companions, are graduates of Cecemmana at Ancestral Apothecary (García Swiecicki 2024, 283). They weave curanderismo, plant medicine, and deathwork to sustain communal healing across life's transitions.

Through plática, plant allies, intentional breath, and elemental work, we released pain and called our spirits home. Accessibility and reciprocity were woven throughout: masks to protect immunocompromised attendees, sliding-scale contributions, and transparent notes about mixed accessibility (ADA room; non-ADA bathroom). This was living pedagogy, not

performance—ancestral medicine centering QTBIPOC needs. As Floripondio teaches, the fragrant floripondio blooms in the dark; we too bloom amid transformation, guided by ancestral wisdom and community care.

For this community, queer and trans embodiment is constitutive rather than incidental. Anzaldúa's concept of *nepantla* names multiplicity as sacred liminality, while Lorde's "erotic as power" locates life-force and self-definition beyond colonial respectability (Anzaldúa 2021, 194–95; Lorde 1988, 53–55). This QTBIPOC self-limpia enacted decolonial queer care—a vital practice of survival, kin-making, and sovereignty of self.

La Limpia de Warren Hall

Moving from the communal to the structural, I now trace a public ritual that mobilized ancestral practice as political action against institutional harm.

Igniting the Ritual: A Decolonial Act of Defiance

On May 4, 2010, students of color gathered at California State University, East Bay, and transformed Warren Hall—an austere concrete hub named for a local businessman—into a living altar. White shirts glowed in the sun; posters declared "We Matter," "Somos importantes," and "Education is Power." A voice cut the quiet: "¡Ahora es el tiempo para luchar y hacer el cambio!" Copal smoke rose from abalone shells. "We invoke our ancestral spirits," someone called. Inside, facilitators handed out raw eggs. "Be very careful with it. Don't give it to anybody," Luz Calvo instructed, demonstrating how to cradle the egg, circle the hall, and exit together to the sky plaza (Ramirez 2010). A limpia typically used on bodies or homes (Trotter and Chavira 1997, 36–41) was thus transformed into a collective spiritual strike—a public act of refusal and reclamation of space and meaning.



Figure 3. Collective Affirmation: Students holding the “Somos Importantes” sign and in ceremony before Warren Hall. Photographer unknown; image from personal fieldwork archive.

The action emerged from Luz’s one-time course, *Students of Color and the Crisis of the University* (Calvo 2010). In class, we reframed the budget crisis as both structural and spiritual harm, reading Christopher Newfield’s *Unmaking the Public University* (Newfield 2008, 1–9, 263–70) and the California Master Plan to name how austerity produces epistemic and communal damage. Within this context, ceremony insisted that ancestral traditions belong within—and can fundamentally transform—secular campus spaces.

Strategic Intent and Decolonial Praxis

From the first invocation, the ritual privileged relation over abstraction. The choreography of tenderness—eggs held like small hearts; slow circling; smoke and bells—embodied a rupture from Eurocentric thought and enacted pluriversal politics in practice

(Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 3–5, 18–19, 114–15; Escobar 2018, 16–21). The movement between freeze and flow on the tenth-floor plaza mirrored Anzaldúa’s *nepantla*—the in-between space where transformation happens (Anzaldúa 2021, 194–95). Here, teaching as liberation (hooks 1994, 13–22) and fugitive study (Harney and Moten 2013, 26–38) became lived through the body, not just theorized on the page.

Dissecting the Crisis, Feeling the Harm

Critical university studies clarified the terrain: neoliberalism’s five tenets (Martínez and García 1997, 1); post-2008 disinvestment (Peck 2010, 263–65; Mitchell, Leachman, and Masterson 2018, 1–2); cost-shifting to students (Goldrick-Rab 2016, 42–45); compounding strain (Berg-Cross and Green 2017, 289–91). SQE’s 2025 Disorientation Guide named the two-pronged struggle—external cuts and internal corporatization (Students for Quality Education 2025, 4–12). Despite CSU generating nearly \$30 per state dollar (California State University n.d., 2), funding fell almost 25% since 2003 as fees rose by nearly 300% (Students for Quality Education 2025, 4–12). California prioritized incarceration over education (California Department of Finance 2024, 5). By 2010 at CSUEB, students faced a 32% tuition hike and 10% less instructor time (Ramirez 2010, 00:06:40–00:07:10). In the video, their diagnoses are plain: “Para mí... hace falta cambio.” “I can’t understand why I’m paying more for fewer classes...”

The Egg as Anticolonial Technology



Figure 4. Embodied Cleansing: Students in a formal line with eggs and a broom, enacting a ritual of refusal against the institutional building. Photographer unknown; image from personal fieldwork archive.

“Absolutely no aggression with the egg,” Luz reminded us (Ramirez 2010, 00:08:20–00:08:40). In curanderismo and Afro-diasporic practice, the egg absorbs dense energies and carries *ashe* (Flores-Peña and Thompson 1997, 55–56; De la Torre 2004, 64–65). As both repertoire and ritual (Taylor 2003, 20–21; Bell 1997, 138–39), the egg became a healing device and political instrument—challenging Eurocentric scientism (Harding 1998, 54–56). Within institutions steeped in colonial and carceral logics (Rodríguez 2020, 26–30), the slow handling of the egg transferred burdens to the altar (Simpson 2017, 19–22) and aligned with Duran’s understanding of trauma as energetic and spiritual (Duran 2006, 15–17). Five students placed

their eggs into a red bucket; the subsequent pouring of water as libation honored ancestors and sustained connection to the larger movement (Murphy 1988, 45; Opala 1997, 78).

Sound, Refusal, and Radical Hope

Sound knit the collective. “We invoke our ancestral spirits” collapsed linear time into ceremonial time (Rifkin 2017, 1–5, 22–25; Simpson 2017, 7–9, 19–22; Alexander 2005, 283–84, 310–12). Refrains—“Your fight is my fight”—echoed the journal line: “Student struggles are everyone’s struggles... not an individual one.” Call-and-response ended with a raised finger from all: our many oppressions are one. Song—“This Little Light of Mine”—worked as sacred survival (Reagon 2001, 86–88; Harding 1981, 425–27). Following Muñoz, these enactments performed disidentifications that remade the political scene (Muñoz 1999, 6–10).

At the edge of the circle, President Mo Qayoumi refused to witness. Footage shows him walking past, deflecting to office protocols, then hurrying away (Ramirez 2010, 00:11:40–00:12:20). This is Ahmed’s “non-performative” diversity (Ahmed 2012, 117–19); as Lemke notes, institutional silence contains dissent (Lemke 2022, 374). Ceremony refused invisibility.

“Your fight is my fight; together we rise, shining light where they try to cast shadows.” The closing affirmation voiced Lear’s radical hope—the courage to imagine life after devastation (Lear 2006, 83–85, 94–96)—animating abolition and decolonization alike (Taylor 2003, 205–07; Muñoz 2009, 1–2, 91–93). Students, seated with knees bent and hands clasped, rose together. Eggs were placed; water completed the rite.

Site and Afterlife

Warren Hall’s prominence—tallest building, administrative core—amplified the ritual’s stakes (Kane 2013, A3; California State University, East Bay n.d.). Its August 17, 2013 implosion

(California State University, East Bay 2013) retrospectively punctuated the limpia's spiritual diagnosis.

Blueprints for Liberation and Futures in Ceremony

The limpia was more than performance; it was a decolonial intervention and a blueprint for an Autonomous University—an institution rooted in service, not profit, envisioning free or low-cost education, Ethnic Studies and environmental justice at the core, unionized labor, deprivatization, and robust K–12 and community partnerships (Davis 2016, 68–71). It modeled what adrienne maree brown calls emergent strategy—small acts that prefigure large-scale transformation, collective gestures that reimagine the terms of power. These are forms of prefigurative politics that enact the desired future in the present.

In this sense, *La Limpia de Warren Hall* was also a rehearsal—a glimpse of the university that could be. The gathering's multilingual chants, embodied care, and refusal of institutional silence illustrated what abolitionist educators describe as liberatory pedagogy: knowledge made through relationship, not hierarchy. What the participants practiced on that sky plaza was an alternative infrastructure—learning grounded in ceremony, in reciprocity with land and ancestors.

As adrienne maree brown writes, “We are in the future, right now,” urging us to “make it irresistible” (brown 2017, 24). The students did just that. Their invocation—“Let the revolution (re)begin!”—linked empowerment, energy, and cohesion (JE07) to collective resistance. “We are here because we matter. We are here because you matter. We are here because our education matters.” The video closes on the stylized *We Matter* logo: a raised fist

before a red star with green wings—an emblem of collective power, radical hope, and ongoing resistance.

Across scales, the limpias trace a continuum of decolonial care: a personal limpia restores integrity and spiritual hygiene; a QTBIPOC self-limpia enacts communal liberation and queer kin-making; *La Limpia de Warren Hall* performs epistemic disobedience and spatial resistance. Together, they reveal that true healing and systemic change are inseparable.

What began as a cleansing became an epistemology—a method for re-membering body, community, and land as co-teachers. The students’ actions remind us that liberation’s seeds sprout not in administrative corridors but in the sacred spaces we create through intention and relation. Ongoing limpia is thus a continuous act of remembering, resisting, and re-storying our collective future—a pedagogy of possibility: decolonized, communal, and always emergent.

If limpia enacts a pedagogy of life in relation, its logic also extends into how we understand death and mourning. To decolonize the spirit fully is to confront how colonial power disciplines not only living bodies but also the ways we grieve, remember, and die.

Decolonizing Death: Collective Memory as Living Praxis

Within Western and colonial regimes of power—and the institutions they have shaped—death is framed as an ending to be conquered, a medical event to be managed, or a private sorrow to be contained. This logic reflects what Foucault calls the biopolitical management of life, where death becomes medicalized, privatized, and stripped of collective meaning (Foucault 2021, 136–44). Grief is pathologized, rituals are commercialized, and mourning becomes individualized, marketable, and managed through therapeutic and clinical

frameworks (Granek 2016, 265–75; Berlant 2011, 95–120). Meanwhile, the politics of grievability determine which losses are publicly recognized and which are erased (Butler 2012, 131–51).

These logics are intertwined not only with colonialism and capitalism but also with ableism and ageism—systems that privilege productivity, autonomy, and youth while devaluing dependence, aging, and vulnerability. Disability Justice organizers remind us that these hierarchies are rooted in capitalism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy (Berne 2015, xi–xii; Kafai 2021, 6–8).

This section argues for a radical re-envisioning of death and remembrance, asserting that decolonizing death is not merely a theoretical exercise but a vital, living praxis of collective stewardship. By refusing the capitalist impulse to conquer and privatize death, this praxis reaffirms the non-linear, interdependent nature of life and loss, forging liberatory connections among ancestors, land, and community. Decolonizing death becomes an embodied refusal of the biopolitical imperative of erasure—a turn toward “living memory,” a reclamation of ancestral ways of being that resist the isolating and extractive logics of colonialism and capitalism.

To demonstrate this decolonial imperative, the following section turns to Indigenous and diasporic frameworks of death and memory, which offer concrete models for transforming grief from a contained private sorrow into a liberatory political ritual. This approach contributes to a growing body of work within critical death studies that challenges Eurocentric understandings of grief and mourning (Fletcher and Amanik 2020, 1–10; Francis, Fletcher, and Maxwell forthcoming, n.pag.). It critiques the medicalization and commercialization of death in

Western societies, where practices of “fixing” or profiting from the deceased often dehumanize and decontextualize transformative life transitions (Champney et al. 2019, 34–38).

As Arthur notes, the “white colonial favor idea” of trying to “fix people to comfort ourselves” stands in direct contrast to a decolonial ethos of deep holding and integration (Arthur 2024, 72–75; Wade 2021, 485–87). This work also engages cultural memory studies, exploring how memory is constructed, transmitted, and contested—particularly through trauma and cultural identity (Erll et al. 2008, 1–15; Hirsch and Smith 2002, 3–12; Steele 2020, 257–59; Tamm 2022, 458–60).

Colonial and imperial frameworks have long sought to sever Indigenous and marginalized communities from land, language, spiritual practices, and traditional knowledge systems. Crucially, this project includes fragmenting relationships with death and the spirit world by imposing linear, individualistic, and materialist understandings of life and loss. Decolonizing death thus aligns with the broader project of decolonizing knowledge and being, challenging the colonality of power that suppresses non-Western epistemologies (Mignolo 2012, 44–45, 118–22).

This framework embraces epistemic disobedience—a refusal of colonial epistemic authority—and centers re-existence, validating ways of knowing and relating to life, death, and continuity that dominant narratives have long dismissed (Smith 2019, 20–25, 39–41; Memmi 2006, 83–89). As my work with QTBIPOC death workers affirms, ancestral wisdom persists, quietly thriving in daily life. Death, in this view, is not an endpoint but a continuous, “billion-year-old ceremony” that existed before, during, and after colonization.

This commitment to epistemic disobedience transforms sorrow into political ritual. It relocates mourning from the isolated psychological realm to the collective political commons. In Indigenous and diasporic frameworks—particularly those rooted in the Americas and the Black Atlantic—grief is reconceptualized not as private affliction but as ancestral accountability and regenerative political labor. These practices enact a cyclical ontology of life and death, viewing the deceased as active participants in the present.

Such understandings resist the colonial drive to conquer and privatize life's end by making body, spirit, and land part of a shared, continuous lineage that demands collective stewardship and care. This section therefore turns to specific QTBIPOC and BIPOC death practices, demonstrated through the words of participants like Mel and Socorro.

In practice, ancestral remembrance moves beyond theory into intimate, material life. Plants become living altars and spirit kin—links to land that resist commodification—while kitchens become archives of resistance, where ancestral recipes carry intergenerational memory. By centering these earth-based, relational, and community-driven approaches to death and remembrance, this work demonstrates how decolonial praxis transforms grief into a source of collective power and living memory—a continuous ceremony of survival, resistance, and renewal.

Sacred Foodways of Healing, Memory, and Care

Mel's testimony reveals a sacred intimacy between food, illness, and ancestral healing. For her, food transcends mere nutrition, becoming a vessel of love, memory, and spiritual sustenance amid the vulnerability of cancer. Reflecting on her mother's illness, Mel describes how food became one of the few remaining ways she could care for her:

“The cooking, and how food is healing—I feel that deeply. It’s something that comes up a lot for me.”

“The doctors gave all these instructions, but it was in the kitchen that I felt closest to her body, her spirit. Every soup I made, every tea I brewed—those were prayers. And she felt that too. There’s a reason why our ancestors always gathered around food, especially during hard times. Food is medicine. And not just because it nourishes the body, but because it holds memory. It tells stories. It’s how we love each other when words fail.”

Mel’s words illustrate how food transforms into a living altar—an embodied practice of care and continuity. Her description of cooking as prayer—“Every soup I made, every tea I brewed—those were prayers”—reveals how preparing food becomes a ritual act, a form of love medicine that bridges life and death.

This intimate relationship with food echoes Luz Calvo and Catriona Rueda Esquibel’s framing of food as a decolonial practice deeply embedded in cultural memory and resistance—an inheritance through which ancestral knowledge is reclaimed and carried forward via culinary traditions (Calvo and Rueda Esquibel 2015, 11–15, 23–27). Luz’s own healing journey after a breast cancer diagnosis similarly reflects an embodied spirituality rooted in reconnection to the earth. They describe how clearing soil, planting seeds, and cultivating herbs such as Mexican oregano became central to restoring a spirit depleted by illness and medical treatment. Gardening became a remedy for *susto*, a cultural illness often described as “soul loss” or spiritual fright—reminding us that healing involves restoring balance not only to the body but also to the spirit, through land, food, and love.

Mel’s experience parallels Luz’s, though her healing occurred in the kitchen rather than the garden. For Mel, the tactile intimacy of preparing food for her mother was itself ceremony. Each soup stirred and tea brewed became a prayer, a ritual bridging body and spirit. Where Luz

tended the land to revive their own spirit, Mel tended to her mother's body through ancestral recipes—enacting care that transcends the biomedical model.

Both Mel's kitchen-based care and Luz's gardening reveal how embodied foodways function as vital sites of decolonial resistance and spiritual restoration. Through these everyday acts of nourishment, ancestral knowledge and love are reanimated, transforming care from task to ceremony. As Aurora Levins Morales reminds us, food is a sacred vessel for spiritual care and ancestral storytelling—preparing and sharing it carries memories, wisdom, and healing across generations (Levins Morales 2019, 23–30, 115–18).

To cook, to grow, to feed—these are not only acts of survival but also of mourning and continuance. Within the larger context of decolonizing death, such practices hold space for loss without erasure, transforming grief into sustenance. Foodways thus become ritual archives of love and resistance: nourishment as remembrance, healing as a form of collective survival.

Expanding the Praxis: Food, Ritual, and Collective Care

Reliance on ancestral foodways often operates as a conscious refusal of colonial food systems and the racialized surveillance of marginalized bodies. Mel's insistence on cooking her mother's food—and her later reflections on rejecting the clinical environment's diet culture—represent acts of decolonial food sovereignty, a refusal of the nutritional imperialism embedded in Western medicine. Her actions illuminate the spiritual and relational dimensions of healing that elude biomedical models, transforming her kitchen into a site of cultural survival and political resistance.

This expansive understanding of care deepens through Socorro's testimony. Like Mel, Socorro understood healing not only through medicine but also through food, ritual, and the

refusal to abandon joy. When her daughter, Edith, was diagnosed with cancer, care became a holistic, intergenerational practice grounded in ancestral accountability. Socorro took on the role of caretaker with steady hands, offering nourishment and ritual:

“Le daba muchas verduras, fruta, pollo, carne de res... comida natural... frijoles, lentejas... todo con amor. Siempre cocino con amor, Beto. Siempre cocino con amor.”

(She gave her many vegetables, fruit, chicken, beef... natural food... beans, lentils... everything with love. I always cook with love, Beto. I always cook with love.)

Food was not merely sustenance; it was a daily offering of tenderness. Socorro’s care extended beyond the plate into the realm of spirit, as she performed *limpias*—traditional energy-cleansing rituals—to help Edith release spiritual heaviness:

“Sí, yo sí la he curado de asustar... les rezo tres credos y les paso así la velita por su cuerpo.”

(Yes, I have healed her from asustar—from susto, or spiritual fright or shock... I pray three creeds over them and pass the little candle over their body.)

This integrated approach—combining nourishment with *curanderismo*—enacts *epistemic disobedience* by affirming non-Western healing knowledge and rejecting the colonial fragmentation of body and spirit. It reclaims care as relational, ritual, and political.

Together, Mel and Socorro’s narratives reveal that collective stewardship transcends both the clinical and the individual. By centering ancestral knowledge in the kitchen and the home, their foodways materialize remembrance, keeping the spirits of loved ones—and their cultural histories—active, visible, and nourished. Through these practices, care itself becomes a ceremony of continuance, sustaining the living and the dead within the same circle of relation.

This commitment to maintaining *living memory* through tangible acts of care extends beyond the kitchen. It is equally visible in the practice of ancestral altar-building—a ritual praxis that defies linear notions of loss and enacts ongoing relationship with those who came before.

From Culinary Autonomy to Ancestral Time

Mel's navigation of body shame and fatphobia amid caregiving reveals how colonial and capitalist systems intertwine to regulate bodies—particularly those of women of color. Her reflections resonate with critical fat studies, which examine how fatphobia functions as a disciplinary technology within racialized regimes of embodiment (Gould 2010, 15–18). Patricia Hill Collins's intersectional framework deepens this analysis by revealing how race, gender, class, and body size co-construct experiences of both marginalization and resistance (Collins 2000, 20–23). In this context, Mel's decision to pursue a “sugar detox” emerged not only from health concerns but from navigating the insidious shame and scrutiny directed at her Xicanx body within clinical spaces.

Critiques of nutritional imperialism by Aisha Nyandoro and Andrea Freeman further situate Mel's choices within broader systems of food colonialism and wellness culture that routinely exclude or harm communities of color (Nyandoro 2017, 102–4; Freeman 2019, 12–15). Thus, Mel's “sugar detox” transcends the logic of diet culture—it becomes an embodied reclamation of sovereignty against systems that commodify and discipline her body. Her practices echo Black and Brown feminist approaches that center holistic healing as emotional, spiritual, and communal resistance to dominant biomedical and capitalist wellness narratives (brown 2019, 87–90; Thomas 2019, 31–33).

This resistance is made tangible through culinary autonomy. As Mel explained:

“I could say, ‘I’m not buying processed food today. I’m going to roast chiles like my abuela did.’ I didn’t have to rely on hospital food or some nutritionist who didn’t understand our culture.”

Here, Mel's kitchen choices become political acts—resisting the alienation imposed by industrialized food systems and Western biomedical frameworks. Her commitment to ancestral foodways, like the *curanderismo* expressed in Socorro's *limpias*, transforms food preparation from a domestic chore into a radical assertion of agency and love. In this sense, the kitchen becomes a ceremonial site where an ancient, relational model of care endures.

Mel's acts of culinary autonomy—roasting chiles like her abuela, refusing processed foods, and reclaiming ancestral recipes—extend beyond bodily or spatial resistance. They enact a continuity of ancestral time, where care and resistance circulate cyclically across generations. Each meal becomes a living archive, connecting the temporal threads of past and future through the embodied present of cooking. As Devon Peña writes, food sovereignty is not merely about access to healthy food but about recovering ancestral relations to land, community, and spirit (Peña 2017, 41–45).

This sense of temporal continuity—echoed in Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's understanding of resurgence and Audre Lorde's assertion that self-care is political warfare (Simpson 2017, 22–25; Lorde 1988, 130–31)—links decolonial foodways to a refusal of colonial time itself. Through the tactile, relational labor of feeding and remembering, Mel transforms her kitchen into a space where sovereignty, spirituality, and temporality converge.

Her practices reveal that decolonial care is not bound to the body alone—it is a temporal act of reconnection, reaching backward toward ancestors and forward toward descendants. This cyclical nourishment becomes the bridge between spatial and temporal resistance, preparing the ground for the next understanding of healing: *time itself as an ancestral, transformative continuum*.

Ancestral Time, Transformative Grief, and Futurity

Embedded in Mel's reflections is an Indigenous worldview that affirms cyclical and relational time, challenging Western linear temporality. This perspective—exemplified by the principle of seven generations—emphasizes responsibility to both ancestors and descendants, situating healing as a temporal practice spanning past, present, and future (Haudenosaunee Confederacy 2018, 1–2; Simpson 2017, 27–30; Kimmerer 2013, 317–19). This relational temporality resonates with queer and crip theorists such as Elizabeth Freeman and Alison Kafer, who reconceptualize time as non-linear and transformative, especially for marginalized bodies (Freeman 2010, 58–59; Kafer 2013, 35–38). Eve Tuck's work on refusal and futurity further underscores grief's generative potential as a radical, embodied act (Tuck 2009, 412–14).

Mel articulates this non-linear, relational temporal framework with stunning clarity:

"I used to think honoring my ancestors was about altars and candles. And it is. But it's also in what I do with my body... healing is circular. I'm healing backwards and forwards."

Her words enact the principle of seven generations, demonstrating how personal healing participates in ancestral and future relationalities. Through her embodied practice of remembrance and care, Mel shows that grief and healing are not linear recoveries but continuous processes grounded in Indigenous and queer temporalities.

This understanding of grief as cyclical and relational also aligns with Black feminist and queer-of-color thought, which frames mourning as a generative, world-building act. Thinkers such as Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Saidiya Hartman, and José Esteban Muñoz describe grief not as the closure of life but as an opening toward radical futurity—a practice of remembering otherwise (Gumbs 2018, 62–65; Hartman 2007, 16–20; Muñoz 2009, 22–25). Similarly, Fred

Moten and Stefano Harney remind us that grief is both rupture and creation—a space of “fugitive planning” where life continues in the hold (Moten and Harney 2013, 94–97).

Mel’s story—rooted in Indigenous resurgence and resonant with Black feminist futurity—embodies grief as world-making. Her devotion to cooking, memory, and healing amid loss reveals how love, when enacted through care, becomes a method for building otherwise. In this sense, grief is not a retreat from life but a preparation for it: a radical rehearsal for the living future that emerges in the collective ritual spaces of remembrance, such as *Día de los Muertos*.

Cultural Practices and Ancestral Connection: *Día de los Muertos* as Living Praxis

In Xicanx and Indigenous communities, ancestral remembrance is not a static memorial but a living, evolving spiritual practice intertwined with cultural survival and decolonial healing (Simpson 2017, 22–25; Smith 2019, 143–46; Anzaldúa 2021, 68–73). *Día de los Muertos* altars embody this living praxis, serving as vibrant sites where the presence of ancestors is actively maintained and celebrated (Brandes 2006, 3–7, 14–18; Arredondo and Casillas 2019, 203–06). In this context, death becomes a space of relational continuity rather than rupture, reflecting the ongoing connections between the living and the dead (Anzaldúa 2021, 68–73). Yet this continuity is often a conscious act of resistance against dominant colonial narratives that seek to sever such ties. This section explores how culturally rooted practices like *Día de los Muertos* challenge Western grief paradigms, offering relational models of mourning and memory that move beyond the privatized, linear understandings of loss.

Mel shares that she has “always” set up an altar since her father passed, noting its gradual evolution: “it gets better. It’s gotten better through the years where it’s been six years,

gonna be six years”. This ongoing ritual sustains an enduring presence for ancestors, defying Western expectations that grief is finite or should be “moved past”—a paradigm that burdens those whose mourning follows cyclical or relational rhythms. Rather than a season of mourning, Mel extends the altar’s presence “through the holidays, until after New Year’s.” She explains the feeling of continued connection: “it’s kinda like they’re with us... or they’re... through the holidays?”. This temporal expansion enacts Indigenous relational time—a cyclical process in which ancestors live on with us in daily life rather than existing solely in memory or absence (Simpson 2017, 22–25; Tuck and Yang 2012, 3–5).

This refusal to confine grief to the past is echoed by my tía, Rebeca, another participant in this research, who reflects on her own mother’s passing: “De la hora que falleció mi mamá se me hace como que fue ayer...” (*From the hour my mom passed away it feels like it was yesterday.*) Mel’s altar becomes, in her words, “a visual for everybody,” ensuring that ancestors “are not forgotten.” In this sense, remembrance operates as both private devotion and communal resistance to cultural erasure.

The evolving nature of Mel’s altar also represents a generational reclamation. She contrasts her practice with her mother’s, who “would put velas [candles] for her deceased... loved ones. But that was it.” Mel attributes this simplicity to her mother’s complicated family relationships. Her decision to “do that different,” incorporating flowers and real plants, signals a deliberate expansion of inherited practice—a reclaiming of ancestral spirituality beyond previous constraints. This mirrors broader movements in which younger generations reinhabit and revitalize Indigenous and Xicanx traditions as acts of decolonial resurgence (LaDuke 2005, 123–28; Simpson 2017, 27–30).

The community-rooted dimension of ancestral remembrance also shines in Mel and Corina's account of an Oaxacan *Día de los Muertos* celebration. Unlike commercialized or touristic renditions common in settler contexts, this event was "very different," grounded in land and collective labor. Participants "actually grew marigolds," cultivating "maybe four to six rows" before harvesting them fresh that very morning. The altars featured "fruit hanging from a string," a detail Mel "had not seen" before—underscoring a vibrant ecological intimacy between people, plants, and place. This emphasis on real plants, food, and communal participation reflects an Indigenous spiritual ecology in which life cycles and reciprocity are honored through tangible acts of care (Cajete 2000, 77–81; Deloria 2003, 85–88). These land-based rituals stand in stark contrast to the colonial commodification of cultural heritage, demonstrating how decolonizing death requires restoring ancestral knowledge within place-based relationships.

Yet even as Indigenous rituals persist, they are continually reshaped and sometimes co-opted within colonial frameworks. Corina recalls her introduction to *Día de los Muertos* through a "homework assignment" in high school, exemplifying how institutional education can abstract and depoliticize sacred knowledge. Such assignments risk erasing the deeper spiritual and political meanings of these practices for future generations. Despite this, familial traditions endured: "Mom would put... candles and things like that. His picture was up for a very long time." This persistence reveals the tension between imposed colonial erasure and lived cultural continuity, highlighting the ongoing negotiation of identity and memory within settler-colonial contexts (Tuck and Yang 2012, 28–29).

Embodied Spiritual Inheritance and Spiritual Ecology

The depth of ancestral connection often transcends conscious intention, revealing itself somatically and intuitively. I describe altar-making as “therapeutic,” noting, “All the elements happen to be there, but I don’t remember making a conscious effort to put them there. So somehow, subconsciously, that happened.” My sister, Corina, insightfully responds, “Your ancestors are takin’ over,” framing this intuitive embodiment as a form of ancestral knowledge transmission beyond the intellect. Such embodied spiritual inheritance affirms that ancestral wisdom is embedded within body and spirit, guiding praxis even when it is not consciously articulated (Barker 2011, 22–26; Simpson 2017, 35–39).

This intuitive guidance emerges from an animate worldview. Mel’s strong affirmation—“We believe that humans, animals, plants have spirits. I believe that with no doubt”—expresses an Indigenous cosmology grounded in animacy and interconnectedness. This worldview resists Western anthropocentrism and materialism, instead positing a spiritual ecology that unites all beings within a relational web of care and reciprocity (Cajete 2000, 77–81; Deloria 2003, 83–88). Here, the body knows how to relate to the dead and to the earth because it is part of the same living, spirited continuum.

This inherent wisdom becomes manifest in post-mortem rituals that embody reverence and continuity. Rebeca describes the meticulous, intergenerational care given to the body after death: *rezar el rosario* (praying the rosary) and the careful washing and dressing of the deceased—practices inherited from her grandparents. These gestures remind us that even in death, relationship endures. Such rituals affirm that the passage between life and death is not a

severance but a continuation, a sacred choreography of care that sustains both ancestors and descendants.

Intergenerational Responsibility: Seven Generations Praxis

This spiritual commitment to a living, interconnected world directly informs a praxis of intergenerational responsibility. Mel and Corina’s embrace of the “seven generations past and before” principle situates ancestral remembrance within an expansive, cyclical temporal framework. Corina articulates:

“Just that you’re honoring, not only you’re honoring your past but by putting it and practicing what you’re doing in your body, you’re also contributing to the future generations that come after.”

This worldview understands present actions—such as sustaining traditional foodways and ritual practices—as responsibilities owed to both ancestors and those yet to come. In our conversation, I build on Corina’s insight, noting that this responsibility “doesn’t have to be like their genetic spawn... it could be anybody,” emphasizing that relational care extends beyond bloodlines and into broader communal and ancestral networks.

Such a framework contests Western linear temporality and individualism, embodying Indigenous principles of collective stewardship, reciprocity, and survival (LaDuke 1999, 132–37; Wildcat 2009, 57–60). It invites us to imagine care as inheritance—an ongoing promise enacted through the body, the land, and community practice.

This generative guidance offers the ethical and political blueprint for the ultimate act of decolonial care: self-determination at the moment of death.

Indigenous End-of-Life Care and Self-Determination

Beyond remembrance, ancestral practices also shape Indigenous approaches to end-of-life care, emphasizing dignity, autonomy, and communal presence over medical intervention.

Rebeca recounts her mother's unwavering desire to remain at home in her final moments—choosing spiritual surrender over invasive procedures. Her mother said:

“La voy a llevar a internar para hacerle estudios y dijo mi mamá. Sabe qué doctor mire si Dios me quiere llevar. Si no me quieres sanar aquí en mi casa...”

(I was going to take her to be admitted for tests and my mom said, ‘You know what, doctor, if God wants to take me. If you don’t want to heal me here at my house...’)

This decision to forgo further medical treatment—captured in Rebeca's observation, “mi mamá dijo no”—embodies an ultimate act of self-determination in the face of death.

For Rebeca's family, the dying process was a communal act of love and presence, not a solitary medical event. She describes the intimate gathering:

“Todos todos estaban ahí todos todos entraba uno y salía entraba y salía estaba... su casa que ver sus hijos, los que todos allí nos tomamos dormir con ella y en su cama al lado de ella...”

(Everyone was there, everyone—one came in and went out, came in and went out. Her house was full of her children, all of us there, sleeping with her, beside her bed.)

This collective vigil reclaims death as a relational passage, radically contrasting with the sterile isolation of Western hospital-centric deathscapes. The family's insistence on honoring her mother's wishes—“Ella quería saber qué me iba a hacer... y dijo mi papá, ‘No, ella no’” *(She wanted to know what you were going to do... and my dad said, ‘No, not her’)*—reaffirms the home and community as sacred spaces for a dignified, humanized death.

In this moment, the cycle of decolonial praxis completes itself: life, care, and death are rejoined through love, relation, and ancestral sovereignty. The family's choice to let death unfold within the rhythms of home and kinship transforms the end of life into a final act of resistance—reclaiming the dying body from the biopolitical state and returning it to the sacred continuum of the living world.

Land as Lifeline: Sustenance, Sacred Space, and Enduring Lineages

The deep connection between people, their ancestors, and the land is a cornerstone of decolonial remembrance, transforming what coloniality defines as property into a living, sacred space. This relationship is not merely symbolic—it is deeply practical, providing sustenance and serving as a tangible repository of history and identity. Within this framework, the land becomes a continuous source of life, memory, and ancestral presence. This understanding aligns with Indigenous geographies and land-based epistemologies that describe land as a living relative—an archive of knowledge and a source of being (Simpson 2017, 18–21; Deloria 2003, 87–92; Gómez-Barris 2017, 3–7).

Socorro's vivid recollections of her family's ranches embody this living relationship. She describes the crops her family cultivated, linking heritage directly to the bounty of ancestral ground. She recalls the specific varieties of beans her father planted: "The bean that my dad used to plant, 'May flower,' 'June flower,' that's what they planted here." She elaborates on a pink, round bean grown in Jalpa, explaining its symbiotic relationship with corn in the milpa: "Always there when we were in Jalpa they always planted that bean because you plant it in the cornfield and the stalks get tangled." These memories reveal both deep agricultural knowledge and an understanding of relational ecology—plants supporting one another, land and labor intertwined.

Beyond annual crops, Socorro remembers fruit trees carefully cultivated by her father: "peaches, quinces, and some apricots" on one ranch, and "a row of peaches" on another. Each tree becomes a living marker of heritage, labor, and love. The grapevines (*parras*) she recalls carry particular symbolic weight. Many have since been removed, but "the only one who has

little grapevines there is Elpidio,” she notes. “He is the only one who has that little piece of grapes and he has fig trees, peach trees there at his house.” Her account holds both loss and endurance—the erasure of once-thriving ecosystems under modernization and the survival of small, persistent nodes of continuity. These narratives deepen understandings of how specific landscapes hold Indigenous knowledge and function as living archives of memory (Spruce and Thrasher 2009, 67–71; Geniusz 2009, 5–9).

This reverence for the land is echoed in Sony’s practice of planting lemon trees as memorials for her parents—one for her mother, one for her father. The trees are not mere symbols but spirit homes, physically embodying her parents’ ongoing presence. Through this act, the land becomes altar: a personalized sacred space where grief is grounded, relational, and alive. Sony’s remembrance of jacaranda trees “in the ranch... there with the grandparents’ houses” expands this practice to a communal scale, where flora tie families to place, memory, and multigenerational identity. The landscape itself—through its cultivated plant relatives—becomes a collective archive, strengthening intergenerational bonds and affirming the land as a source of shared history and continuous remembrance.

This worldview rests on a decolonial understanding of the earth as sentient—an active participant in human life and memory. As QTBIPOC death worker aa explains, the concept of “*Ides de la cósmica*” invokes “the winds of the Earth, the Guardians of the Earth.” They describe how “when we go anywhere, there are Guardians. Nature has Guardians. They want us to know who they are, and they want us to know who we are. So, we need to acknowledge the beings, acknowledge the Guardians, be in relationship with the Guardians, living with awareness. Everything is about relationship. Everything is about acknowledgment.” This cosmology

transforms being on the land into an ongoing sacred dialogue, an ethic of relational awareness in which emotions themselves are understood as Guardians of nature—energies meant to flow, to teach, to guide.

This inherent respect for all beings and the natural cycles of life and death elevates the land from resource to lifeline—a living sanctuary that nourishes body and spirit and continuously connects communities to their ancestors (Kimmerer 2013, 7–9, 173–76; Lloyd and Recollet 2022, 64–68; Gómez-Barris 2017, 10–12). Decolonial ecocriticism reveals how human and ecological well-being are interdependent, and how the colonial exploitation of land produces specific, often disenfranchised, forms of grief (Simpson 2017, 78–81).

Ultimately, the land—as remembered and tended by Socorro and Sony—serves as the ultimate site of collective stewardship. This decolonial perspective insists that care for the earth is inseparable from care for the ancestors, making reciprocity the highest form of remembrance. The vitality of the cultivated ranch and the memorial trees embodies a cyclical ontology that resists colonial linearity: loss and renewal are interwoven in the life of the land. This enduring commitment—transforming disenfranchised grief over land loss into active re-existence—provides the spiritual and communal strength needed to navigate life’s pivotal transitions, ensuring that ancestral wisdom remains a resilient, guiding force.

Living Transitions: Grief, Transformation, and Generative Memory

In decolonial contexts, grief extends far beyond the Western, individualized understanding of loss. It is a continuous current interweaving personal sorrow with collective histories of trauma, migration, and transformation. Dominant Western frameworks—such as

Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's "five stages of grief"—tend to present mourning as a linear process to be "fixed" or "overcome." Yet, as I observed in a QTBIPOC death work set of classes, such models are often "weaponized against POC," pathologizing natural and communal forms of mourning. This critique aligns with critical grief studies that challenge universalizing, linear models and assert that "grief is for holding, not fixing; grief and loss are to be integrated, not overcome" (Neimeyer and Gillies 2006, 27–32; Arthur 2024, 185–89).

This distinction recognizes grief as dynamic and collective—a force that can be "unintended," "passed on," or "held in the land." It acknowledges that grief is inseparable from positionality and from disenfranchised loss, the sorrow of dispossession. In this expanded view, emotion itself becomes ecological—"Guardians of nature," meant to flow and teach rather than be suppressed or pathologized. Such an approach resists colonial narratives of control, embodying a holistic vision of emotional well-being rooted in relationship and release.

This broader understanding allows emotional continuity to persist through rupture. Socorro's recounting of her mother's sadness when Rebeca left without saying goodbye—a moment of intimate pain that gestures toward the grief of migration and separation common to diasporic life—demonstrates this adaptive wisdom. Socorro's gentle reassurance, telling her mother that "children grow and fly," honors both the ache of parting and the necessity of life's transitions. Her words hold sorrow within the natural rhythm of cycles, showing how families sustain emotional coherence through change. These narratives resonate with scholarship on intergenerational trauma and historical grief, which trace how colonialism and displacement generate collective, transgenerational sorrow that persists as embodied memory (Brave Heart 2003, 8–10; Duran et al. 1998, 60–63; Vanzant 2010, 213–16).

Mel's evolving *Día de los Muertos* altar similarly embodies grief's regenerative power. Her altars, "getting better through the years," remain vibrant, relational spaces—"like they're with us... through the holidays." They are not static memorials but living entities, continually re-woven into the fabric of daily life. This practice enacts what Gerald Vizenor calls *survivance*: "an active sense of presence, the continuance of stories" beyond victimry (Vizenor 2001, vii–x, 15–18). Through ritual adaptation and care, Mel transforms mourning into continuity, showing how grief itself becomes a site of creativity, resilience, and world-making (Borges-Méndez and Caron 2019, 92–95; Kirmayer, Brass, and Tait et al. 2009, 84–87).

In these ways, navigating transitions is not about overcoming loss but about integrating it into the continuum of life. It is an act of remembering forward—drawing upon ancestral wisdom to understand grief as a living force that sustains lineage, land, and collective identity across generations. Through this ongoing practice of holding, transformation, and connection, communities enact the generative power of grief: to nourish, to teach, and to ensure that memory remains alive and relational through time.

From Spirit to Soil

Across *Decolonize the Spirit*, I have traced how ancestral memory, embodied ritual, and collective care fundamentally reconfigure the boundaries between body, soul, and world. From *limpias* that cleanse colonial residue and foodways that nourish spiritual continuity, to grief practices that transform loss into generative presence and ancestral altars rooted in land-based remembrance, these acts reveal the spirit itself as a site of decolonial action. Here, healing is never merely personal—it is ancestral, communal, and ecological, sustained through acts of remembrance, reciprocity, and relation.

To decolonize the spirit is to remember that healing does not end at the body's edge but continues through the land that feeds us and the ancestors who dwell within it. This insight, echoed by thinkers such as Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Robin Wall Kimmerer, reminds us that the sacred is ecological and the ecological is sacred (Simpson 2017, 18–21; Kimmerer 2013, 173–76). When the spirit is tended, the earth stirs; when the land is honored, the spirit is restored.

This movement from spirit to soil leads naturally into *Decolonize the Earth*, which explores how these same currents of care manifest through food, animals, and the living ecologies that sustain us. The next chapter turns to the everyday practices that materialize this continuity: cultivating living foods, renewing kinship with animals, reimagining queer ecologies, and reinhabiting the *milpa*. If *Decolonize the Spirit* traced the path of remembrance, *Decolonize the Earth* asks how we embody that memory—rooted, relational, and alive with reciprocity in the living world.

Chapter 6: Decolonize the Earth

To decolonize the Earth is to unlearn the colonial story that land exists for human use alone. It is to remember that soil, water, plants, and animals are not resources but relatives—living beings with whom we share breath, memory, and obligation. Across kitchens, ranchitos, and milpas, these truths endure in practices of care that refuse extraction and affirm interdependence. The recipes, rituals, and relationships that sustain life are more than nourishment; they are acts of resistance and renewal, living archives of decolonial thought. This chapter traces those interwoven lineages: from the living foods that ground us and the animals that teach reciprocity, to the journeys in Chiapas that move against the grain of colonial order, queer gardens that imagine new kinships, and the five sisters whose homes and fields grow from the same body of the Earth.

Living Foods, Living Earth

In my family, food has always been the language of love. It appears in the constant offering of a fresh pot of beans, the communal labor of making tortillas, and the stories that simmer alongside the food on the stove. These traditions, passed down through generations, reveal a worldview that resists the dominant logic of modern food systems. They embody a decolonial ethic of nourishment—one that refuses extraction and instead treats the earth as a community of living beings to whom we are accountable. Within this worldview, food is not a resource to be consumed but a relationship to be honored.

Food as Kinship

During one of our conversations, Mel read aloud from *Decolonize Your Diet*: “We believe that humans, animals, and plants have spirits. When we eat, we connect to the spiritual

essence of what we ingest” (Calvo Esquibel 2015, 17). She paused and then affirmed softly, “I really believe strongly... ‘We believe that humans, animals, plants have spirits.’ I believe that with no doubt.” In voicing this conviction, Mel unsettles the colonial logic that turns food into commodity and nature into resource. Her belief reframes eating as an act of relationship rather than consumption, where tortillas, beans, marigolds, and even the air itself are recognized as living relatives who give with care and call for reciprocity in return. This ethic of kinship, grounded in everyday acts of nourishment, extends beyond belief into the ways people cook, share, and speak to one another.

Relational Ethics and Cosmologies

This understanding of food as kinship is not only a personal philosophy but a lived practice, embodied in gestures of care such as Tía Sony’s hospitality. She explained:

“Aquí en México, como hay tanta necesidad, nunca rechazamos a la gente cuando toca la puerta pidiendo comida. Les damos lo que tenemos, y si no tengo nada, les pido que esperen y preparo algo. Porque siento que tengo animales a los que alimento—¿cómo no voy a alimentar a otros seres humanos que tienen necesidad o hambre?”

Her words reflect a relational ethic in which feeding others is inseparable from caring for one’s community and recognizing shared vulnerability. To offer food is to affirm belonging in a world of mutual dependence.

Relationality also lives in language. As Kimmerer writes, the grammar of animacy teaches that “we use the same words to address the living world as we use for our family. Because they are our family” (Kimmerer 2013, 56). Eating and harvesting thus become acts of accountability and gratitude, guided by what she calls the Honorable Harvest: “Sometimes, in return for the gifts of the earth, gratitude is enough. But I think we are called to go beyond cultures of gratitude, to once again become cultures of reciprocity” (Kimmerer 2013, 161). This

ethic of moderation and respect insists that what is taken must also be tended, sustaining a balanced relationship with the more-than-human world.

Relationality extends still further, into perception and cosmology. Kohn reminds us that “all living beings, and not just humans, think, and all thoughts are alive” (Kohn 2013, 72). His insight challenges the human-centered notion of intelligence and moral responsibility, suggesting that every being participates in the work of meaning. Similarly, Inuit cosmologies teach that Sila—the breath circulating through all life—is “both climate and a life force” (Todd 2016, 6). Sila binds air, life, and environment into one continuum, reminding humans that our own vitality depends upon the well-being of all living systems.

The Politics of Reciprocity

To decolonize the earth is not only about changing ingredients but about recovering food, land, and practice as forms of relationship. This work begins with recognizing the agency of the more-than-human. As Kimmerer reminds us, “The taking of another life to support your own is far more significant when you recognize the beings who are harvested as persons, nonhuman persons vested with awareness, intelligence, spirit—and who have families waiting for them at home” (Kimmerer 2013, 185). Decolonization, then, is also a project of ethical epistemology and political accountability. As Todd insists, Indigenous thought “must be seen as not just a well of ideas to draw from but a body of thinking that is living and practiced by peoples with whom we all share reciprocal duties as citizens of shared territories” (Todd 2016, 17).

In this light, the kitchen, field, and altar become braided spaces of learning, healing, and justice—places where food is not merely ingested but honored as a participant in a larger cosmology of interdependence.

Maize as Sacred, Everyday, and Spiritual

“O las tortillas recién hechas de esta bolita. O de maíz... le ponían el maíz, el mixtamal y luego ya lo llevaban a moler.”

In this memory, maize is not just a crop but a living presence, carried through ritual labor: soaked in lye, ground by hand, pressed into tortillas that hold family and community together. Abuelitas and tías passed these skills down not as written recipes but as embodied knowledge—whoosh, whoosh, the sound of kernels rubbed and masa shaped—a rhythm that encodes survival and continuity (Warman 1988, 6). As my Tía Ofe remembered, “Pues de tu abuelita, de tu tía Rebeca... de verla, de verla, sí. No me acuerdo que me hayan dicho esto así, yo creo que de verla.” Learning happened not through instruction but through presence, repetition, and observation; each gesture was an inheritance, inscribed in muscle and memory.

The absence of maize was felt as more than hunger—it marked a rupture in the cycle that binds people to land, ancestors, and each other. As Tía Ofe recalled, “Él platicaba que no había tampoco maíz, entonces no podían hacer tortillas... pero nopal siempre hay.” Even when nopales stood in as a substitute, the missing tortillas revealed a disruption in daily life and spirit. Each round tortilla, steaming from the comal, carried both sustenance and prayer (Warman 1988, 6; Salmón 2012, 3). The presence—or absence—of maize thus measures the continuity of relationship itself, shaping not only diet but the moral and spiritual bonds that sustain community.

Seed Memory, Relational Ethics, and Agroecology

Maize is inseparable from relational ethics: humans, plants, animals, and the earth are entwined in cycles of care and reciprocity. To plant and tend corn is to nurture both soil and community; raising an ear of corn becomes a metaphor for raising children, sustaining culture, and passing on values (Salmón 2012, 3). Each seed is a vessel of memory, carrying the lessons of survival, adaptation, and care: “Porque la semilla es la memoria de la planta de cómo vivir bien en este lugar” (Peña 2005, 276). Potawatomi philosopher and climate justice scholar Kyle Powys Whyte describes this process as “renewing relatives,” in which Indigenous knowledge preserves ecological memory through language, mentorship, and spiritual relationship. This renewal restores enduring bonds while creating new ones that sustain communities for the future (Whyte 2018, 158–62). Seed memory, then, is both biological and ethical: planting, saving, and sharing seeds are cyclical acts of responsibility to ancestors and descendants alike.

These intimate practices of care are always entangled with broader political and economic conditions that determine whether they can continue. Agroecology depends on secure and equitable access to land, water, and seeds—conditions often undermined by corporate regimes that consolidate seed markets or privatize biodiversity. When such rights are denied, the capacity to sustain life becomes precarious. By contrast, commons-based practices—community seed saving, land reform, and collective stewardship—strengthen biodiversity and food sovereignty (Anderson et al. 2019, 49–57; Holt-Giménez 2017, 59). Tending maize and its companions is thus inseparable from defending the conditions that allow communities to cultivate them, ensuring that the ethics of reciprocity remain rooted in both earth and justice.

What Seeds Remember

Maize is both material and spiritual: a staple, a ritual, a thread connecting past, present, and future. To prepare, share, and eat maize is to participate in reciprocity and stewardship, enacting continuity in the face of scarcity, colonization, and ecological change (Peña 2017, 282; Warman 2003, 66–67). This continuity stands in sharp contrast to the deliberate colonial efforts to dismantle Indigenous food systems. From the burning of Haudenosaunee cornfields during the Sullivan Expedition to allotment policies that displaced communities from their agricultural lifeways, colonial violence sought to sever the intimate bond between people and seed (Mihesuah 2005, 94; LaDuke 2016, xiii).

Yet despite this devastation, seeds remember. As Rowen White writes, they are “life capsules of memory” and “Earth Apothecaries” that heal intergenerational grief and embody the covenant to feed future generations (White 2019, 187, 197). Seeds are not property but inheritance—borrowed from the children who will one day depend on them (White 2019, 194).

As Tía Ofe recalled with a smile, even in scarcity the tortilla remained a structuring form: “Era un nopal como tortilla y el otro arriba, como si fuera la comida. Un sándwich.” Her memory speaks to adaptation without rupture—as tortillas, even in their absence, continued to define what it meant to eat together.

From Habichuelas to Frijoles, Beans as Resistance⁴

“When we came here, our everyday food was habichuelas and rice. That’s what sustained us,” my mother Gloria reflected, pausing. “But people here see that food as poor.” She remembered her mother’s kitchen holding both Puerto Rican and Mexican traditions: “My mom made habichuelas... she would make Puerto Rican-style rice [and] Mexican-style beans... flour tortillas and a big pot of frijoles, you know, Mexican-style refried beans, so good.” These meals stitched together different geographies—*tortillas*, *frijoles refritos* with *sofrito*, alongside *arroz con*

⁴“Habichuelas” refers to the Puerto Rican word for beans, while “frijoles” refers to the Mexican word. I keep the terms distinct to reflect the geographies and memories they carry.

gandules. What others dismissed as “poor food” was, for Gloria, abundance—family gathered around pots that blended memory, migration, and survival. In their combination, Puerto Rican and Mexican foodways became a quiet form of resistance, insisting that nourishment and belonging could cross imposed borders.

This sense of beans as both sustenance and strategy surfaced again in Juliana’s playful account of a vegetarian New Year’s meal. She described experimenting with nopales and calabazas as a way to keep food on hand that could stretch across days: “I was like, what can I do... to have a prep food already that I can add eggs to, make a taco out of, put it in a soup—just like rice and beans, but vegetable stuff.” She laughed about craving a McDonald’s burger earlier that week—“I don’t even like ‘em anymore. But I just wanted meat.” That craving, quickly abandoned, revealed the tension between convenience and care. Juliana returned to what she called her “shortcuts”: nopales prepped in advance, squash baked into enchiladas, tamales, or casseroles, always accompanied by the familiar comfort of a pot of beans on the stove. “My mom always had frijoles simmering when I was growing up,” she remembered. For Juliana, beans linked her kitchen experiments to her memories of home.

If Juliana emphasized the everyday work of stretching food across meals, Mel turned to the written word for affirmation. Reading from *Decolonize Your Diet* struck a chord. As she read aloud Calvo and Esquibel’s reminder that “cooking a pot of beans from scratch is a revolutionary act that honors both our ancestors and future generations” (Calvo and Esquibel 2015, 17), she paused and laughed: “I crave beans.” Her laughter transformed craving itself—from a symptom of lack into a gesture of connection. To crave beans was to crave continuity. Corina nodded as Mel read, adding, “There’s a fresh pot of beans always around,” remembering her own home. For Mel, too, fresh beans were never just survival but joy: “Sometimes we

would just have like beans, you know, and that was like a big deal because we loved fresh beans. And my mom would make tortillas every day.” Their reflections revealed exactly what Calvo and Esquibel describe: that what might look like ordinary kitchen labor is, in fact, a practice of sovereignty and resistance, keeping ancestral foodways alive across generations.

What might seem like a simple pot of beans emerges, through their lens, as an ecological and political practice—a refusal of colonial systems that devalue Indigenous staples in favor of imported wheat, processed meat, or packaged convenience. In different ways, they each described this constancy: my mother recalling how a pot of habichuelas was always ready to share, Juliana remembering her mother’s frijoles simmering on the stove, Corina noting that there was always a fresh pot at home. To simmer beans slowly is to reclaim time from a world that demands speed, but also to remain in rhythm with the earth’s pace. To share them at the table is to reaffirm community in the face of individualism and to honor soil and seed in the face of extraction. Beans carry histories of survival across borders, plantations, and missions. Each pot insists: our traditions are alive, our bodies nourished, our lands remembered, our spirits not erased. In their steam, the seeds remember how to live well in this place (Peña 2017, 277).

Everyday Abundance Remembered

If maize carried memory across generations, beans carried it across borders—binding migration to nourishment, and remembrance to everyday survival.

My mother reflected on this same chapter of *Decolonize Your Diet* by Calvo and Esquibel and offered a personal testament to its power: “Immigrants arrive healthier, eating habichuelas, corn, squash, chile—the so-called ‘poor people food.’ But within five years here,

the health advantage reverses”. For her, this was not an abstraction but a recognition of family history. She grew up with Puerto Rican *habichuelas*, but when her mother migrated to California she adapted quickly to Mexican-style cooking, working with the ingredients she could find and selling lunches to Mexican farmworkers. Out of those kitchens came new blends: pots of *refritos* simmering beside *arroz con habichuelas* or *gandules*, tortillas stacked next to *arroz guisado*. For her, these dishes never canceled each other out but folded into one another, creating a repertoire that was both Puerto Rican and Mexican, both remembered and improvised.

For Gloria, *habichuelas* anchored every table, no matter how many people showed up. An invitation was always understood—neighbors, cousins, church friends, even priests could stop by, and the pot would stretch to feed them. “There was always a pot of *habichuelas*,” she told me, “always ready to share.” That constancy—nourishing, adaptable, and communal—defined her family’s sense of care. Meals were never about display, but about whether there was enough to go around. Gloria still practices this spirit of hospitality today: every time I’ve visited, she waves neighbors in without hesitation, setting extra places at the table as if she had been expecting them all along.

I didn’t always feel the same way. Growing up, I used to hate beans—mainly because the pinto bean skins would get stuck in my teeth, and I swore it felt like *cucaracha* skin. I avoided them whenever I could. Now, though, I’ve come back to them with curiosity and care, expanding my bean repertoire and learning to love their variety. My favorite these days are black beans, whose earthiness feels like a comfort I didn’t know I would crave. My mother, though, still prefers the brown variations she grew up with. When she reflected on immigrant

health, she recognized in her own experience exactly what *Decolonize Your Diet* described—that so-called “poor people’s food” had carried her family through migration, even as the health advantage it provided was fragile (Calvo and Esquibel 2015).

As psychologist Margarita Alegría observes, despite stress and low income, immigrant Latinos show lower rates of psychiatric illness, heart disease, and cancer than wealthier whites—a finding she calls “quite a paradox.” Public health scholars describe this as the Latina/o Immigrant Paradox: new immigrants arrive healthier, but within a few years the advantage begins to erode (Pérez-Escamilla 2011, 988–91). This erosion is not only biological but political, reflecting whether families can continue to center foods like *habichuelas*—foods that were never labeled “vegan” or “sustainable,” yet embody long-standing practices that conserve land, water, and labor with an efficiency industrial food systems cannot match (Anderson et al. 2019, 49–50).

If scholars describe this continuity in terms of nutrition and ecology, families recall it in meals and memories. *Habichuelas* were abundance, comfort, and inheritance—a practice that resisted scarcity by refusing to forget how to stretch and share. Mexican tías remembered childhood meals made of “tortilla, frijoles, nopalitos, chile, queso, leche... carne solamente los domingos.” *Frijoles* and tortillas anchored the everyday, while meat was reserved for rare occasions. These testimonies underscore that *frijoles* carried meanings beyond nutrients: they were the foods that conserved land, water, and labor with an efficiency industrial food systems could never match.

This continuity was lived in memory. Tía abuela Aleja, they recalled, always had *frijoles* simmering on the *fogón*. Sometimes she cooked in the small kitchen with its dirt floor, but

mostly she preferred the outdoor area, where a large *comal* stretched across the fire. A clay pot rested nearby, *frijoles* bubbling slowly as tortillas puffed hot on the *comal*, one after another. The air was thick with smoke and the smell of corn. Beside her, a *molcajete* held *chile de árbol* ground with tomatillo, its bright red paste waiting to be spooned onto a tortilla. Guests were never turned away. “Nos ofrecían eso, las tortillas recién hechas con frijoles y tacos de chile. Qué ricos.” Nothing about the scene was elaborate—*frijoles* in a clay pot, tortillas, chile—yet when the tías remembered it, their voices carried gratitude. In their remembering, the act of cooking itself became a form of prayer: each tortilla, each pot of beans, a renewal of relation between earth, body, and spirit.

Adaptation and Care

Yet *habichuelas* were not always forgiving. My Puerto Rican mother laughed as she confessed, “I’m at the stage where *habichuelas* are not nice to me.” Her tía’s remembered advice was practical, almost ritual: soak them, rinse them, let a pinch of baking soda soften their edge. A small gesture, but one carried through generations—a folk wisdom that taught the body how to live with beans. Her own strategies drew from this inheritance and from the tools at hand: pressure cooking—the method she preferred when beans had to be ready in a hurry—a time-saving vessel that could turn hard beans tender, making them gentle for the body and, in their cultivation, restorative for the land itself. In our conversation, I layered in another possibility drawn from research: tepary beans—the drought-resistant Tohono O’odham staple recalled in *Unnatural Causes: Bad Sugar* (2008)—as an alternative known for easier digestion and for carrying the memory of a food that sustained a people through scarcity.

These adaptations were not just culinary but ecological, extending from kitchen remedies to planting practices tuned to drought cycles, desert soils, and water scarcity. As my Mexican tía recalled, “*Sembraba: arreglar tierra, regar, dejar que seque un poco, luego poner los frijoles, y como a los quince días empieza a salir la plantita.*” She remembered her father’s guidance too: “*Sí, mi papá decía que se plantaba en abril y la cosecha como en agosto.*” Such words illustrate how beans have long practiced their own forms of resistance—pushing through dry soil, returning season after season, feeding families even in scarcity. Among them, the tepary bean makes this endurance most visible: with its deep roots and minimal water requirements, it embodies what Devon G. Peña, co-editor of *Mexican-Origin Foods, Foodways, and Social Movements*, calls a living example of how seeds “enact an evolving memory” of drought survival and timing (Peña 2017, 279).

This agroecological knowledge, which “focuses on Indigenous, locally adapted, genetically diverse, and traditional crops” (Anderson et al. 2019, 55–56), is itself a form of medicine. Salmón underscores this point: “The foods themselves are medicine for both the soul and the body” (Salmón 2012, 17). I recognized this in small, ordinary lessons at my abuela’s table—running my hands through a pile of pinto beans, listening to their dry clatter against the bowl as I searched for the tiny pebbles hidden among them. The rhythm of sorting, of setting aside what could harm a tooth or spoil a bite, was its own quiet lesson in care. In this sense, sorting, rinsing, or seasoning beans are not just habits of the kitchen but part of a gentle hand—practices that sustain cultural and ecological resistance (Peña 2017, 284).

From my abuela’s kitchen, these gestures revealed a deep knowledge; from the outside, they were too often mistaken for monotony. What outsiders dismissed as repetition was, in

fact, a repertoire of earth knowledge, combining culinary creativity with ecological intelligence. The beans that once felt like *cucaracha* skin in my teeth are now the ones I reach for—proof that even aversion can be remade into care, and that care itself becomes resistance when memory and inheritance are given time to cook.

Nopales de Cocina y Tierra

My grandparents' longevity was a testament to a different kind of endurance. My grandmother lived to eighty-nine, sustained by the daily rhythms of the *cocina* (kitchen) and the nourishment of *frijoles* and *nopales*. My grandfather reached nearly one hundred and three, his years carried not just by these same staples but by the steady labor of the *tierra* (land), which he tended well into his early nineties. He often told us he owed his long life to my grandmother—“*por cuidarme bien*,” he would say—a life built on a foundation of care for each other. Their endurance, in their telling, came from both *cocina y tierra*: from shared tending as much as from the food itself.

This story offers a quiet counterpoint to the dominant Western nutritional logic that food politics scholar Gyorgy Scrinis calls *macronutrient reductionism*.

Protein Logics and Lived Realities

Scrinis argues that nutrition science has long defined diets through nutrient ratios, “reducing foods and their effects on bodily health to one or two key nutrients, biomarkers, or nutritional concepts” (Scrinis 2013, 193). In its “functional” form, this ideology promotes high-protein foods as a means of “optimizing” bodily performance (Scrinis 2013, 303). It underwrites the commonsense idea that a meal requires a separate “protein,” typically meat.

At my family's table, this notion was playfully dismantled. "*Pues entonces toda la vida hemos comido mal, ¿no?*" Gloria teased, her sisters breaking into laughter that mocked the absurdity of the protein-first mindset.

Critical food scholars Julie Guthman and Charlotte Biltekoff extend this critique, noting that in Silicon Valley's speculative food economy, protein is cast as "the one macronutrient that remains unequivocally good" (Guthman and Biltekoff 2016, 657–58)—a story that fuels the myth of a coming "protein crisis." These "fictional expectations," as they call them, sustain investment in novel protein technologies (Guthman and Biltekoff 2016, 660), enriching corporations while commodifying traditional foods.

The family's reaction stood in gentle defiance. Diana shook her head at the mention of powders and shakes: "*¿Eso es comida? Mejor los frijoles de ayer.*" Their laughter embodied what Scrinis terms a *food quality paradigm*—food understood through cultural practice, ecological embeddedness, and preparation rather than isolated nutrient counts.

The Abundance of Nopales

I wasn't always a believer in this paradigm. When I was little, *nopales* were my enemy. The *babas* clung to the fork, slid across my tongue, and made me gag. That slime was not for me. Even now, I slip them into beans to mask their slickness or shave them raw into a crisp salad with *jícama* and chile-lime dressing.

But the way my *tía* Sony makes them? That's different. Her *nopales* have a little crunch, alive in the pan—a testament to her practiced hand. The sizzle of garlic in hot oil fills the kitchen as she instructs patiently:

“Mira, les quitas un poco de babita en agua hirviendo y muy poquita sal, es nada. Los escurres, y en la cazuela pones ajo picadito, un poco de orégano, toda la cebolla que quieras, y un chile que se dore o suavice. Una cucharita de consomé o sal, fuego bajito, mueves y mueves, y luego los nopalitos. Mezclas todo y—pa’ la boca. Checas la sal, poco a poco... provechito.”

This traditional knowledge, Scrinis notes, “enhance[s] the quality of food by making them more palatable and nutritious” (Scrinis 2013, 412). The family’s voices echoed this sense of sufficiency: “*Si no hay más que nopales, todos están contentos... No necesitamos carne asada; tenemos nopales.*” Laughter rippled around the table, a sentiment that cast nopales and beans not as “survival food” but as choices of abundance—foods of endurance, care, and joy.

Archives of Endurance

This sense of abundance and sufficiency is rooted in collective memory. As Sony stirred the *nopales*, Lupe and Ofe remembered together, their stories forming a living archive. Lupe recalled, “Tu tía Rebeca... siempre raspando espinas, tenía su ritmo,” a memory of her sister’s practiced hands. But it was Aleja’s mole with cactus that lingered in their voices as more than just a recipe. It was a dish of celebration, dressed in *chile* and spice, a reminder of the creativity of making do—transforming what was at hand into something rich and festive. These recollections revealed that *nopales* carried endurance not only in their ability to nourish but also in their capacity to adapt and take on new forms across generations. With that, lineage itself entered the pan: the family’s history and knowledge passed on through the very act of cooking.

This testimony reclaims beans and cactus as “real food,” in Scrinis’s terms (Scrinis 2013), and as part of what Enrique Salmón calls our biocultural heritage (Salmón 2012). The nopal itself—with its spines and fleshy pads—embodies this continuity between land and memory. In the hands of my tías, it is transformed from a wild, desert plant into a kitchen staple, a living

symbol of ancestral knowledge handed down through generations. It is in this intimate pedagogy of *cocina y tierra*—in the gestures of my tías and the labors of my grandparents—that the story of resistance deepens into a tangible, embodied archive of ancestral knowing.

Cooking and eating, in this light, become acts of memory and defiance: practices that decolonize the earth by favoring sustainable, rooted foods over the extractive logic of industrial agriculture. Each meal, like each story, is a lesson in survival—a recipe for remembering.

The Manifesto of the Meal

The narratives woven through this section—from the relational ethics of Mel and Tía Sony to the embodied knowledge of maize, the defiance simmering in a pot of beans, and the enduring vitality of *nopales*—are not isolated stories. Together they express a single, foundational idea: that decolonizing the earth is not metaphor but daily practice. The longevity of my grandparents, the constancy of beans on the stove, and the rhythms of tending maize each testify to a logic that stands in sharp contrast to the colonial view of nature as resource. Within these gestures, nourishment becomes a philosophy of life—one rooted in reciprocity, attention, and care.

A Living Archive of Resistance

Each food, from the tortillas that bind family to the *habichuelas* that carry memory across borders, is a tangible link to a past that was never severed. They are not merely nutrients but living connections to land, ancestors, and a cosmology of interdependence. This is the decolonial project in its most intimate form: rejecting the acceleration and disposability of modern life and choosing instead a rhythm of gratitude and continuity. It is a slow, deliberate act of remembrance that affirms our belonging to a richly inhabited world of plant, animal, and elemental kin—a world sustained through care rather than consumption.

Reciprocity as Hope

Ultimately, to eat these foods is to enter into a covenant of accountability and hope. Nourishment becomes a sacred trust, a gift that calls for reciprocity. To prepare, share, and eat is to participate in a lineage of care, ensuring that the seeds of memory—whether of corn, beans, or *nopales*—are not only preserved but continually renewed. These are not just meals; they are manifestos. They remind us that to decolonize the earth, one must first learn to listen to it—and in doing so, to feed not only the body, but the spirit and the community that make life possible.

Kinship and Care: Animal Stewardship in Ranchitos

If maize, beans, and nopales root care in the soil, then animals extend that web of reciprocity into movement and breath. Ranchitos—small-scale ranches scattered across Southern California—are more than production sites; they are living archives of culture and resistance. As Juliana, a member of one such community, explains, they form a “subculture of Mexicans” who maintain goats and cows in the urban–rural edges of Los Angeles, Orange County, and the Inland Empire. Within these spaces, families sustain both land and animals while transmitting intergenerational knowledge. Ranchitos function as centers of everyday resistance, where Mexican-origin communities uphold traditional food practices, share ancestral knowledge, and reinforce social bonds despite the encroachment of industrial food systems. Here, ethnobotanical wisdom, culinary skill, and medicinal practice are exchanged across generations, sustaining both cultural identity and ecological stewardship (Gutiérrez et al. 2022, 10–12).

This approach to care reveals that knowledge and relationality are central to sustaining life, culture, and resistance (Gutiérrez et al. 2022, 13). It echoes a long lineage of rural life in

Mexico, particularly the traditions of ranchera women whose labor ensured the continuity of family, land, and community. Anthropologist Martha Chávez Torres documents how these women “no sólo [participan] en la reproducción biológica del grupo, sino también en la social”—not only in biological reproduction but in social reproduction as well—shaping future generations “desde el seno del ámbito doméstico” (“from within the domestic sphere”) while also working “en los potreros del rancho con los animales y en los cultivos” (“in the pastures of the ranch with the animals and in the fields”) (Torres 1998, 179–80). Authority in these spaces is not granted but earned, “a través de largas y abrumadoras jornadas de trabajo” (“through long and overwhelming workdays”), underscoring how domestic life and women’s labor are foundational to the cultural and economic survival of rural communities.

In this light, the practices of ranchito families in California can be read as a continuation of these broader ranchera traditions—where women’s work sustains both community and culture across generations, and where care for animals becomes an act of kinship, autonomy, and cultural endurance.

Relational Foodways and Community Networks

In Southern California, small-scale ranchitos are more than productive spaces—they are vibrant hubs of community networks and relational foodways. Within these spaces, families sustain both land and animals while preserving intergenerational knowledge. Their approach to care demonstrates how relationality—rooted in reciprocity and trust—remains central to sustaining life and culture, offering quiet resistance to the industrial food system (Gutiérrez et al. 2022, 13).

Juliana described the ranchitos she visited as small, intimate operations, far removed from industrial agribusiness. Each kept ten to twenty goats, a few chickens, and modest gardens. These plots produced just enough for household use, trusted exchanges with neighbors, or occasional sale. There were no large-scale crops or commercial ventures; instead, every animal and plant was tended to meet the family's immediate needs. This ethic reflected pueblo roots in Jalisco, where survival depended on maximizing the yield of small plots and herds. Even in California, these families recreated that ethic, privileging relationship over profit. Access to eggs, produce, or milk was mediated by social bonds rather than markets, emphasizing interpersonal accountability and community care.

Among these products, raw milk was most central—valued not only for nourishment but for its healing properties. Juliana's mother emphasized its digestive benefits, knowledge passed down through generations. For the family, raw milk was steady sustenance, not ritualized luxury. Where public health agencies warn of hazards in unpasteurized milk, Juliana's family framed it as nourishing, practical, and culturally embedded. Their emphasis on experience, observation, and continuity demonstrates how intergenerational knowledge can guide food choices even when they diverge from biomedical authority (Gutiérrez et al. 2022, 10).

Accessing fresh milk relied on trust-based networks operating outside commercial systems. Juliana found a ranch through a compadre of her father's co-worker—illustrating how personal ties, not market transactions, structure exchange. This relational approach exemplifies decolonial food practice: community-based resource sharing where trust mediates participation and abundance, not profit, guides distribution (Gutiérrez et al. 2022, 10). Economic life in ranchitos thus blends sharing and modest commerce; milk, eggs, and garden produce circulate

primarily through relationships, revealing a hybrid system where social bonds, rather than formal markets, sustain the flow of nourishment.

Pajaretes: Ritual, Resistance, and Reinvention

This networked approach to food is visible not only in the daily movement of milk but also in the ritualized ways it has been consumed in Mexico and beyond, a theme most visible in the practice of pajaretes. Originating in ranching regions like Jalisco, Michoacán, and Nayarit, pajaretes were traditionally a ranch worker's morning drink: fresh, frothy milk drawn straight from the cow or goat, mixed with chocolate, sugar, and a splash of high-proof alcohol. Less a luxury than a form of sustenance, it provided nutrition and energy for long workdays.

For families in Juliana's circle, *pajaretes* were remembered as communal events. Making one required coordination: the animal, the milker, and often the gathering of neighbors. These everyday rituals became moments of shared labor, gossip, and care. Even when recalled with humor or nostalgia, the *pajarete* condensed values of vitality, togetherness, and resourcefulness. In Southern California, the drink has been reinvented in clandestine "ranches" and weekend gatherings. Raw milk remains central, but now the *pajarete* serves as the centerpiece of social life, music, and diaspora creativity. These gatherings assert cultural continuity and defy regulations that criminalize raw milk, illustrating how foodways can migrate, transform, and resist (Robles-García et al. 2018, 7).

Within Juliana's family, memories of pajaretes are faint. Her parents recall them from childhoods in Morelos, but their emphasis is elsewhere: on the raw milk itself. For them, milk was the steady nourishment, the part of everyday life carried forward across generations. The

pajarete, while a ritual drink, belonged to adult gatherings and formal occasions—children observed but did not participate.

The Intergenerational Value of Milk

Raw milk's importance extends beyond social and cultural meaning. It also embodies an intergenerational knowledge of health and nutrition. Juliana's mother advocated raw goat milk for her son Elias, a child with Down Syndrome and autoimmune sensitivities, despite modern medical warnings. Her insistence framed raw milk as a form of "green health insurance" (Gutiérrez et al. 2022, 10). Public health agencies caution that unpasteurized milk may contain harmful bacteria, yet advocates argue for its digestive benefits and natural enzymes (Lucey 2015, 189). This immediate reaction validated a practice grounded in cultural knowledge rather than scientific authority.

Historically, raw milk's role in everyday life has been shaped not just by nutrition but by social and cultural practices. Communities with domesticated herd animals relied on raw milk for household routines, particularly for butter and cheese. Its consumption was culturally specific and influenced by adaptations such as lactase persistence, highlighting that milk's everyday role is as much social as it is nutritional (Byrne 2010, 121–25).

The understanding of milk's medicinal value is reinforced through stories of previous generations. Tía Rebeca recalls:

"Por ejemplo, una familia de San Vicente, cuya madre no podía producir leche, recibió la recomendación de darle a su bebé leche de cabra o de burro... Solo se da una pequeña cantidad, poquito a la vez, pero es muy nutritiva."

This testimony demonstrates that the use of farm animal milk for nutrition and health is an intergenerational practice, deeply embedded in cultural memory. Academic research

corroborates these traditions: Alonso-Castro notes that goat milk is often combined with other animal products in the treatment of ailments such as coughs, highlighting its recognized therapeutic properties in traditional Mexican communities (Alonso-Castro 2014, 65–67).

In Ranchitos, raw milk also connects to autonomy and female stewardship. Women like Tía Rebeca learned from their mothers that caring for animals was not only a form of labor but also a route to independence:

"Si quieres vivir sola en el rancho, tienes que cuidar animales."

Milk and its products—whether drunk fresh or turned into cheese—were both nourishment and economic resource, a "cuenta de banco" enabling self-sufficiency without reliance on men. In this sense, relational foodways, pajaretes, and raw milk practices operate on multiple scales: sustaining health, family, community, and culture, even in the context of diasporic displacement and industrialized food pressures.

In this sense, relational foodways, pajaretes, and raw milk practices operate on multiple scales—sustaining health, family, community, and culture, even amid industrialized food pressures. For families like Tía Rebeca's, caring for animals became both daily ritual and a pathway to female autonomy.

Gendered Stewardship and Independence

Beyond its health benefits, the stewardship of animals also served a deeper purpose for Tía Rebeca's family: it was a path to female independence. In Ranchitos, animals are central to women's independence and the intergenerational transmission of knowledge. Tía Rebeca's mother provided a foundational lesson in autonomy, telling her: "Si quieres vivir sola en el rancho, tienes que cuidar animales." Rebeca recalls a daily ritual that embodied this lesson,

where her family would gather in the corral to drink fresh, warm milk directly from their cows. This practice was a direct link to the animal, providing not only nourishment but a sense of self-sufficiency. As a young girl, Rebeca also learned from her mother how to turn the remaining milk into fresh cheese, a process that added value to the animals' production and prevented waste. For her mother, animals were not just food or income—they were a "cuenta de banco" (bank account) that allowed women to sustain themselves without reliance on men.

Rebeca herself recalled moments when the value of women's labor had to be defended outright. At one harvest, her father and brothers were surprised she had managed to grow a crop at all. Yet their surprise quickly shifted into assumption—that what she had produced would be handed over freely for their livestock. Her refusal—"they could purchase it like everyone else"—was not framed as rebellion but as common sense. Still, it revealed a contradiction at the heart of ranchito life: men's labor, visible in wages or agricultural production, was counted in the economy, while women's labor in kitchens, corrals, and gardens was treated as invisible, even though it secured the household's survival (Torres 1998, 179–80; Waring 1988, 16–17).

This concept of animals as a form of capital aligns with patterns identified by Marilyn Waring, who observes in *If Women Counted* that much of the daily labor performed by women—caring for children, preparing food, fetching water, and tending land—is systematically excluded from formal economic recognition, despite its essential contribution to household sustainability (Waring 1988, 16–17). In ranchitos, women's work with animals and land represents real economic productivity and autonomy, even if it falls outside formal accounting systems.

Tía Rebeca's mother was not a man-hater; she was a strategist in a patriarchal world. Her insistence that her daughters learn to care for animals and manage the land was not about rejecting men but about ensuring they could thrive with autonomy and dignity, no matter the choices or limitations imposed by society. Her guidance reflects a deep care for her daughters' futures, teaching them that security and independence could come from their own labor, knowledge, and stewardship of the land, rather than from reliance on male providers. Framed this way, her teaching empowered her daughters rather than positioning men as the enemy.

Ecological Awareness and Land Knowledge

This self-sufficiency and understanding of animals are intertwined with ecological literacy. Families in *ranchitos* maintain livestock in arid, urban-rural pockets, aligning their activities with seasonal and reproductive cycles. As Juliana describes, many ranches are “mostly dry,” yet people find “rural” pockets even in unexpected places like Compton. This intimate ecological knowledge also shapes social life; for example, events are held in the early mornings because, as Juliana notes, it “gets really hot.” Such attentiveness to environmental rhythms reflects a relationship-centered understanding of land, animals, and human needs.

Yet this same awareness also sharpens families' recognition of the growing threats to their traditions—pressures rooted in broader socioeconomic and environmental change.

Threats to Traditional Livelihoods and Culture

For families like mine, *ranchitos* and *ejido* lands were once safeguards of survival, tying work, food, and kinship to communal property redistributed after the Revolution. Yet today, these spaces face overlapping pressures from agribusiness and urban expansion that threaten their survival as places of livelihood, culture, and memory.

Families often described their gradual exit from ranchito work as the pursuit of “una vida mejor”—a better life. For younger generations, this meant steady wages, education, or release from the backbreaking stigma of agricultural labor. Older family members expressed ambivalence, noting both relief at their children’s opportunities and grief at the loss of skills and traditions. Some also spoke of pragmatic compromises, such as the adoption of GMO seeds and chemical inputs. These were not narrated as betrayals of tradition but as necessary adjustments, a resignation that survival in the present required practices they simultaneously relied on and lamented (Cohen 2011, 32; Dufour and Piperata 2014, 396–400).

Industrial agriculture, such as the avocado boom in Michoacán, drives widespread deforestation, threatens water sources, and concentrates economic profits in the hands of large corporations, leaving little for local communities (Denvir et al. 2018, 156). This dispossession and precarity compel many to migrate, a process that strains family structures and contributes to the erosion of cultural knowledge. As sociologist Jeffrey H. Cohen documents, migration often transforms household roles and limits the social connections that are vital for community well-being (Cohen 2011, 32). Families also frame migration as a pathway to education and social mobility: rural schools often provide only basic instruction, pushing parents to send their children to cities where degrees are imagined to lead to better jobs and status (Dufour and Piperata 2014, 399). At the same time, rural mechanization, declining demand for farm labor, and episodic violence further encourage out-migration, even though many migrants find themselves in precarious urban environments (Dufour and Piperata 2014, 396–97, 399–400).

Ejidos as Survival and Justice

Yet for my family, migration is only part of the story. The ejido system was born from the revolutionary reforms codified in Article 27 of the 1917 Constitution, which declared that land and water ultimately belonged to the nation and could be redistributed to ensure social justice. Article 27 framed ejidos—communal lands held collectively rather than privately—as an antidote to hacienda domination and a guarantee of subsistence and autonomy for land-poor communities (“Mexican Constitution” 1917, art. 27). This reform directly countered the devastation of the Porfirian era, when *deslindadora* companies and administrative expropriations dismantled campesino holdings and concentrated roughly one-fifth of Mexican land in fifty hands (Esteva 1983, 7). Yet, as Gustavo Esteva argues, campesinos continued to struggle throughout the twentieth century to make the Constitution’s promise real. It was not until the administration of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–40) that agrarian reform reached its height, with more than 20 million hectares redistributed and ejidos covering nearly half of Mexico’s cultivated land (Esteva 1983, 8). Between 1920 and 1992, over 106 million hectares were redistributed to more than 29,000 agrarian communities, representing some 5.6 million rural households, with campesino communities holding 56 percent of the country’s agricultural land and 70 percent of its forests (Agrawal 2005, 149–50).

From the start, ejidos carried a symbolic charge as much as a practical one. They embodied what scholar Kashwan calls the “sediments of earlier struggles,” making them living institutions of campesino and Indigenous demands for justice after centuries of dispossession (Kashwan 2017, 208). They represented food security and autonomy, but also recognition: the idea that those who worked the land deserved rights to it (208–09). Through ejido assemblies,

collective decision-making itself became a practice of autonomy and belonging, forging community identity while governing parcels and commons (218–19).

On the ground, this symbolic weight translated into a daily moral economy: land as survival, maize for tortillas, milk from cows and goats, nopales from the hillsides. Ejidos provided not only calories but dignity and continuity across generations. Even when migration pulled people into cities, they remained a home base, a place to return to and a tie to ancestral soil.

My own family lived this continuity. My abuelo and his siblings were recipients of ejido land after the Revolution, and that parcel sustained his growing household. Yet the gendered architecture of ejido law—where full rights rested with a (usually male) household head and could pass to only one heir—helps explain why, when my abuelo died, the land was split unevenly among twelve children: most went to his seven sons, while his five daughters—including my Tía Rebeca—received smaller shares (Agrawal 2005, 160–61). Rebeca carried that inheritance forward, tending her ranchito with animals, corn, and other agricultural products as both daily labor and cultural continuity.

And if Rebeca's story shows how women carried forward uneven inheritances, then my tía abuelas, Aleja and Martina, reveal how even a fragment of ejido land could sustain both survival and memory.

Aleja and Martina, the Tías Abuelas of the Ejido

With only a fragment of the original *ejido* parcel in San Vicente, Aleja and Martina, my *tías abuelas*, shaped a life of subsistence, care, and continuity. Unlike their brothers, who received larger grants, they made do with a modest plot. They never married, remaining

together and working side by side into old age. On their land they planted peanuts and corn, the crops that anchored survival, but they also drew on what grew just steps away.

Martina once recalled how *nopales* sprouted thick in front of their house, among the mesquite trees, so abundant they hardly had to walk more than a few feet to gather them. She remembered slicing them into thin strips: “El nopal ha sido como una bendición que Dios nos ha dado. Eso era lo que comimos en los tiempos de hambre... en los años treinta, cuando no llovía y estaba la guerra de los cristeros.” In those years of drought and violence, *nopales* were not a delicacy but salvation—proof that the *ejido* and its commons could sustain life even in scarcity.

Their subsistence was humble, but it carried textures of care and continuity. They boiled peanuts in honey, sometimes pressing the sticky mixture into corn husks to make *pepitoria*—a sweet, nutty treat I still remember unwrapping with sticky fingers on hot afternoons. They ate *frijolitos* from the *ollita*, flavored stews with *chile de árbol* and *tomatillo*, and grew flowers alongside a *mata de jitomate* or *chile* in the garden. Much of their daily life centered on maize, and they carried out the entire nixtamalization process themselves—soaking kernels in lime water overnight, rinsing them clean, and preparing them for grinding.

The patio held a *molino* with its heavy stones, turning under their hands as they broke the softened maize into *masa*. Next to it sat a *metate*, where the dough was worked finer still, stone on stone, before being patted into tortillas. A few steps away stood the large *comal*, blackened with years of use, lit with mesquite wood gathered from the same open land that gave them *nopales*. I remember spending summers there and taking my turn at the *molino*, pushing the handle round and round with an old broomstick—or maybe a piece of mesquite

wood—until my arms ached. The circles seemed endless, but they were rhythmic, a way of entering into the same motion my *tías* had done for decades. The *molino* itself still exists: one of my cousins has it now, and I find myself hoping that one day I might see it again, turn it once more, and feel the stone move under my hands. For me, it is not only a tool but a relic of the everyday labor that sustained Aleja and Martina, and a piece of inheritance as meaningful as the land itself.

The *ranchito* was also alive with animals. They kept goats for milk, a donkey that I sometimes rode with delight, a pig or two, and plenty of chickens that scratched around the yard. Their corrals were built from the heavy stones abundant in Zacatecas, stacked in the traditional style of *piedra seca* (dry-stone) walls, without mortar. The same stones lined the fence that enclosed the entire property, marking the boundary of their modest inheritance with materials pulled straight from the land around them.

Aleja and Martina also passed on these foods as memory and play. With the children who crowded their patio—nieces, nephews, neighborhood kids—they turned subsistence into oral tradition. One of their favorite games was a call and response they demanded with mock seriousness: “¿Qué comiste?” And the children, trained to answer, shouted back in chorus: “Verdolagas y quelites, que de veras te creíste.” This refrain, half rhyme and half riddle, transformed humble wild greens into a shared joke, a chant that carried the pride of making do. The *dicho* reminded everyone that food was more than calories; it was story, humor, survival, and community. In this way, their modest inheritance gave more than sustenance—it created memory, belonging, and dignity rooted in the land. Their story, like so many within *ejido* communities, shows how everyday practices of food, labor, and play kept communal life alive

across generations. Yet these practices did not unfold in isolation. By the late twentieth century, new waves of reform once again reshaped the terrain of *ejidos*, placing that continuity under fresh pressure.

Neoliberal Reforms and New Dispossession

Even the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s did not fully erase these communal practices. While many feared the 1992 reforms would lead to widespread privatization, most *ejidos* used PROCDE to secure boundaries and rights while preserving the commons. By the mid-2000s, privatization rates remained minimal, though the reforms introduced new exclusions and pressures—for example, conservation rules in places like Calakmul made household titling less attractive, even as assemblies continued to govern *milpa* within the commons (Agrawal 2005, 159, 161–62).

As anthropologist M. Bianet Castellanos argues, neoliberal housing reforms and the privatization of ejido lands have transformed communal property into speculative commodities, with debt and foreclosure operating as contemporary forms of dispossession (Castellanos 2010, 12–16). In Cancún, she shows how state-backed tourism projects and real estate markets consumed ejido lands and forced Maya families into debt-financed housing. Similar pressures reach families like mine, where suburban expansion and agribusiness reframe ranchitos as “underutilized” or ripe for development. My Tía Rebeca’s ranchito—passed down unevenly after my abuelo’s death—carries the weight of that history. It is rooted in revolutionary redistribution, yet today it stands in a tightening vise: a smaller plot in her hands, pressed between agribusiness on one side and encroaching suburbs on the other.

Just across the street, the state's largest milk producer has announced plans to build a processing plant. At ninety, Rebeca still tends to her animals and has a nephew who cultivates *milpas* on her plot, so the prospect of an industrial factory taking root so close is unsettling. Yet she does not see it only as threat. She imagines that perhaps she could rent out a room to one of the workers, finding a way to adapt to the new reality. According to her, many of the poor families nearby also welcome the factory, grateful for the possibility of steady wages in a region where work is scarce. This ambivalence captures the contradictions of the present: the *ranchito* remains a living inheritance of the *ejido* system, but it now exists in the shadow of industrial expansion that promises opportunity for some while deepening the marginalization of smallholders (Castellanos 2010, 12–16).

The consequence is not only the physical reduction of space for farming but also the erosion of the ecological knowledge, food traditions, and languages tied to agrarian work (Saynes-Vásquez et al. 2013, 40). In this sense, gentrification and urban expansion directly reshape the futures of *ranchitos*, placing cultural continuity at risk alongside material survival—the same continuity that Aleja and Martina once safeguarded on their modest plot. Remembering their care for nopales, tortillas, and animals makes clear that what is at stake is not only land, but the foodways and relationships that have long sustained communities. It is here that questions of food justice and cultural resilience come into focus.

Food Justice and Cultural Resilience

In *ranchitos*, the everyday practices of raising livestock and preserving traditional foodways—from nopales and tortillas to goats and *milpas*—are deliberate acts of cultural and ecological sovereignty. These practices sustain intergenerational knowledge, steward local

ecosystems, and persist as grounded forms of resistance to hegemonic, industrial food systems (Gutiérrez et al. 2022, 12). Families also show that food security is not only access to calories but a fabric of relational care, cultural affirmation, and community autonomy—work that confronts macro-level forces by building power locally through community-based food projects (Broad 2016, 16–18).

The practices of ranchito families—sustaining animals, gardens, and intergenerational knowledge—illustrate the principles youth advocate in the *Food Bill of Rights*, including culturally affirming, locally grown, and poison-free food, as well as fair treatment for food system workers. Youth assert that communities “have the right to culturally affirming food” and to “local food...to cut the use of fossil fuels and reduce the globalization of our food system” (Youth Food Bill of Rights 2014). They also demand that everyone working in the food system “must be treated with respect...and earn at the minimum, a just living wage” and insist on “poison-free food...no chemical pesticides in our food” (Youth Food Bill of Rights 2014).

Ethnobiological research supports this connection, showing that community-driven stewardship sustains both ecological and cultural knowledge (Robles-García et al. 2018, 7). The practices of ranchito families demonstrate that resilience emerges not from external systems, but from grounded, intergenerational relationships with land, animals, and each other—a model for alternative food systems that centers care, kinship, and justice.

Going Against the Grain in Chiapas

Personal Grounding – The Journey to Chiapas

In the spring of 2011, I was taking a class on social movements in Latin America with Juliana at CSU East Bay. One afternoon, a guest speaker—a former student who had studied

abroad—visited and told us about a program called Contrapelo, which means "against the grain." Her stories were full of grassroots resistance, community organizing, and everyday people finding revolutionary ways to live. Juliana and I looked at each other and thought: we should do that. I wanted to learn how to be a revolutionary, too. That summer, we made it happen.

The trip was supposed to be about ten days, split between Mexico City and Chiapas. In Mexico City, we stretched our shoestring budget to its limit. Our cheap phones were useless, so we relied on public transportation, paper maps, and strangers' directions.

Determined not to rely on tours, I navigated our own way to the pyramids of Teotihuacán—a climb to the top of ancient monuments. We also attempted to tackle the enormous Anthropology Museum, but barely made it halfway through before giving up. Here, in the city, Indigenous culture felt like a subject of history, something to be studied through relics and displays. We were fascinated by the past, but we had no idea what it meant for the present. We lost our way more times than I could count, but somehow we always managed to stumble back to our cheap hotel.

Juliana later told me she remembered the climb differently: gripping the rope that ran down the center of the steep steps, using her hands as much as her feet. At the top, she felt chest-full awe—"this is my people," she said, "bigger than my grandparents, bigger than memory itself." At the museum, she connected the exhibits to her mother's teachings about elemental energies, realizing that what was labeled as mythology was also a way of understanding biological systems and spirituality. For both of us, Mexico City revealed indigeneity as the past, preserved in ruins and museum glass. But it also felt like a threshold, a

glimpse of something larger waiting beyond the capital. Chiapas would reveal the rest: indigeneity not as memory, but as presence—alive in language, food, and struggle, and central to the true purpose of our trip.

After our whirlwind tour of Mexico City, we turned our attention south—to Chiapas, and to the purpose that had been calling us from the beginning.

Contrapelo: Learning Toward Another World

The Contrapelo Itinerant Program in Chiapas was a grassroots educational initiative offering intensive language classes in both Tsotsil⁵ and Spanish within a broader socio-cultural and political context. Organized by an independent collective in San Cristóbal de las Casas, the program was grounded in the idea that thought, language, and reality together shape identity and open pathways for diverse forms of expression. Beyond grammar and vocabulary, participants engaged with the living realities of Chiapas through visits to human rights centers, women's organizations, indigenous medicine groups, Zapatista communities, and independent media projects. Reflection sessions, thematic discussions, and video screenings deepened understanding, connecting language learning to histories of resistance, autonomy, and contemporary struggles.

Structured as a one-week intensive course (45 hours total), the program blended formal instruction at multiple levels with experiential learning, ensuring that participants not only studied language but also immersed themselves in the social, cultural, and political life of Chiapas. By weaving together linguistic practice, critical dialogue, and direct encounters with local movements, the program offered a decolonial pedagogical model—one that sought to

⁵ Tsotsil (sometimes spelled Tzotzil in older sources): I use Tsotsil throughout, except in direct quotations where the original spelling appears.

honor indigenous knowledges, challenge dominant narratives, and cultivate solidarity across languages and cultures. All of that would come into focus once we actually arrived.

We flew from Mexico City into Tuxtla, the nearest airport. Stepping off the plane in the middle of summer meant being hit instantly with a wave of hot, heavy humidity. We had no idea how to get to San Cristóbal, but after a little wandering and watching the locals, we found the combis—small buses that, for 60 pesos, would take us straight there.

By midafternoon we pulled into the San Cristóbal bus station, and my tourist self decided we should walk to our hostel. It wasn't that far—about a mile—but with our large rolling suitcases, the choice quickly proved foolish. San Cristóbal's cobblestone streets are iconic: narrow, winding, steep in places, designed centuries ago to channel heavy rainfall. Their colonial charm hides the fact that they're brutal on luggage wheels. We dragged our bags across the stones, sweating and worn down, as the streets shifted beneath us—Nacional one block, suddenly Zapata the next. Even with a map, nothing matched. In San Cristóbal, I learned quickly that no one rushed to help you find your way. You had to figure it out on your own, and that lesson in self-reliance was just the beginning.

Juliana laughed remembering the same scene—how tiny the Tuxtla airport was, how we ended up following the crowd because there were no signs, how chaotic San Cristóbal's streets felt with their shifting names. “We didn't know where the fuck we were,” she said, “but somehow we ended up there.”

We finally stumbled to our hostel, a large and unwelcoming place filled with too many people. The hostel felt more like a social club than a place for rest, and Juliana and I both felt a low-level discomfort. I knew immediately I wasn't going to like it there. The moment I got on

the spotty Wi-Fi, I found a small bed and breakfast a couple of blocks away. Juliana decided to stick it out for the night, but joined me the next day after seeing the place for herself, confirming we had made the right choice.

Day 2: Class Begins

That next morning, the Contrapelo program itself unfolded in a large house with an indoor patio, filled with small rooms and buzzing voices. We were split into two groups: Spanish speakers learning Tsotsil, a Mayan language spoken throughout the highlands of Chiapas, and non-Spanish speakers learning Spanish. I found myself in the Spanish-speaking group alongside Juliana and several students from Puebla. The room carried a quiet hum of anticipation—some leaning forward with curiosity, others flipping nervously through their notebooks. I felt both excitement and hesitation: excitement at the possibility of learning Tsotsil, a language rooted in the land and history of Chiapas, and hesitation about whether I would be able to truly understand it beyond vocabulary lists. Surrounded by mostly Mexican students, the atmosphere felt at once familiar and slightly daunting, as though I had stepped into a space that belonged deeply to them and I was just beginning to trace its edges.

Every morning began with revolutionary songs—voices rising together in Spanish and sometimes in Tsotsil. One that I still remember is *Sin maíz, no hay país*—without corn, there is no country. Its chorus carried both defiance and tenderness, reminding us that survival itself is rooted in maize, in land, in Indigenous knowledge. We gathered in a circle and lit candles one by one. At first it felt corny—like a retreat exercise—but as each flame passed from hand to hand, the room grew still. By the time all the candles were lowered into the community fire pit, the glow felt bigger than us. At first our voices were shy, and honestly, sometimes Juliana and I

would glance at each other and roll our eyes at the kumbaya feel of it all. But eventually we gave in—we clapped, sang louder, and totally namasté'd our way into it.



Figure 5. The Contrapelo Candle Ceremony: Students lighting a candle in a communal circle. Photo by author, 2011.

Classes shifted between borrowed spaces—sometimes the entryway patio of someone's house, other times a community space or a small storefront. Nothing about it felt institutional: no desks lined in rows, no polished whiteboards. Juliana remembered these details more clearly than I did—the young Mayan Tsotsil teachers, serious at first but slowly revealing a dry humor, the chalkboard scrawled with drawings, the reminder that even the act of learning was happening inside someone's home. It made the program feel less like school and more like

being welcomed into a living community, where knowledge was not a commodity but part of the air, the land, the relationships that held us there.

Day 3: Cosmology

But it wasn't just about vocabulary—it was about cosmology. To understand the words, it was necessary to step into the worldview behind them. For example, there was no direct word for “property.” Land was not something to own with a title; it was a relationship, a bond. As Kohn explains, “selves, not things, qualify as agents” (Kohn 2013, 92), emphasizing that land is not a possession but a relationship sustained through living bonds. Even greetings carried a depth that startled me. Instead of the casual “how are you,” people asked, *How is your heart today? How is your soul?* That simple difference revealed how language can hold more than information. As Smith observes, Indigenous forms of communication “educate the heart, the mind, the body and the spirit” (Smith 2012, 146), underscoring that words carry relational and spiritual dimensions as well as informational ones.

Listening to Tsotsil itself was transformative. Its rhythm, tone, and cadence felt night-and-day compared to Spanish (or English!). Where Spanish moves with Latin-based familiarity, Tsotsil sounded utterly distinct: glottalized consonants shifting meaning, the x pronounced like “sh,” the b sometimes implosive or softened into an “m.”

Juliana noticed how even tone shifted depending on whether you spoke to one person, an elder, or a group, and how meaning itself bent in relation to context. Everything, even in grammar, was relational. To hear it spoken—bats'i k'op, “true word”—was to enter a soundscape that insisted on another world.

I recognized this worldview as a form of *mestiza consciousness*, an idea I had learned from Gloria Anzaldúa about creating a new culture while navigating multiple worlds (Anzaldúa 2021). The Tsotsil greeting, with its question about the heart, felt like a direct response to the colonial logic I had always lived inside—one that prioritizes the head over the body and rational thought over spirit. Through this simple daily exchange, I discovered a different way to be. It was a spiritual homecoming, a way to speak a truth that heals the soul from the “isms” of the world by embracing a more holistic sense of being.

Our small groups clustered on wooden stools, bodies restless but spirits alert, as teachers guided us. They moved calmly through the space, small in stature yet steady and assertive, becoming more playful by the week. Language was never taught as a neutral set of terms; it was presented as cosmology. Each word carried a story of why, when, how, and for whom it was spoken. The teachers explained explicitly that every word was anchored in *cosmovisión*—that language was not just communication but a worldview, a practice of relating to land, spirit, and community. Juliana tied this to what we later learned at the Chamula Church, in the nearby Tsotsil town of San Juan Chamula. A syncretic space where Catholic saints stand alongside offerings of candles, pine needles, and chickens used in healing rituals, the church embodied the idea of three earths—layered worlds that language helped navigate and give meaning to.

Such a pedagogical orientation is not unique to Tsotsil *cosmovisión*. Among the Nishnaabeg, an Indigenous people of the Great Lakes region, knowledge is also framed as inseparable from land. In this epistemology, learning is not abstract or classroom-bound but embodied, spiritual, and relational. As Leanne Betasamosake Simpson explains, students

“learned both from the land and with the land,” where *aki* functions as both context and process (Simpson 2017, 7). Knowledge flows “through relationships between living entities” and obliges learners to live teachings responsibly and share them ethically within webs of reciprocity, humility, and respect. To learn is therefore also to be accountable. While Nishnaabeg and Tsotsil lifeworlds are distinct, both refuse the colonial abstraction of property and instead position land as relation. Just as Tsotsil greetings ask after the heart and soul, Nishnaabeg pedagogy frames learning as a practice of relational accountability, where knowing is inseparable from obligations to land, community, and creation.

This relational pedagogy also resonates with Sylvia Wynter’s critique of Western epistemologies, which have historically overrepresented *Man* as the universal human while erasing other ways of being and knowing (Wynter 2003, 257). What I witnessed in Chiapas was a refusal of this abstraction: words, greetings, and teachings were never detached from land or spirit. Whereas Western frameworks impose abstract and hierarchical standards of knowledge, Simpson’s land-centered pedagogy demonstrates that to know is to be bound in relationship and responsibility (Simpson 2017, 7). To learn is to be accountable to more-than-human worlds, a framework that reframes education itself as a practice of decolonial resurgence.

Day 4: State-Run Eco-Village

On August 2nd, 2011, we traveled to a small planned village in the mountains of Chiapas, roughly two hours from San Cristóbal de las Casas. The morning began in a rhythm I would come to know well in San Cristóbal: a kind of spiritual reset. The damp air clung to the smell of wet cobblestones, and I’d hear the steady clatter of wooden carts as vendors set up, their voices breaking the silence. It felt like returning to something already within me: a sense

of finding spirit in the everyday—the way the earth offers renewal through rain, and how community care shows up in the simple rhythms of people setting up life together. That sense of renewal stayed with me as we left the city behind and entered the settlement.

First Impressions of the CRS Settlement

At the time, I didn't yet know we were standing in one of the state's *Ciudades Rurales Sustentables* (Rural Cities Program, CRS), model settlements designed to concentrate rural populations. What I first noticed were the houses built on stilts to adapt to the uneven terrain. In the village center, a state sign read *Vivir Mejor*, and some homes displayed the phrase *Son Hechos, no palabras*. The words struck me as out of place—ambitious promises in a setting that otherwise felt sparse and unsettled.



Figure 6. Eco Village Home: Students standing in front of a home with “Son hechos, no palabras” painted on one side of the doorway and a rainbow geometric flower with the word “Vivir” painted on the other. Photo by author, 2011.

At first glance, the village felt almost desolate, like a ghost town—there was no one in sight for a good hour or so. Perhaps residents were nervous to see strangers, though we were with people they knew, or maybe they were simply not interested in engaging. Eventually, a small group of children—all under six years old—ventured out to play and spend time with us, bringing a quiet, fleeting liveliness to the streets.

Not a single tree shaded the pathways. Instead, brand-new lamp posts lined the streets, signaling modern infrastructure while underscoring the starkness of the settlement’s improvised environment. Electricity, now widely available, represented a sharp break from earlier practices, when families relied on firewood or candles for light and heat. What once came from local and largely self-managed sources was now mediated by the state-operated Comisión Federal de Electricidad (CFE). Survival became tied to cash-based systems, narrowing autonomy and binding everyday rhythms to state structures.

Small Improvisations and Big Absences

At first glance, the settlement felt staged more than lived in. A basketball court sat quiet in the middle of empty streets, and a small corner store carried mostly canned goods and *chatarra* (junk food) rather than the fresh produce of a *mercado*. Each home plot was tiny, leaving almost no room for gardens or subsistence crops.

Juliana noticed the same patterns, remarking, “Homes don’t take into account multi-generational family structure... these eco-friendly homes are not collective.” Her words pointed to a deeper issue: the state’s designs left little space for families to shape their own dwellings or gather collectively. What appeared as amenities meant to simulate community—courts, stores,

driveways—only underscored their absence in practice. Despite these constraints, residents quietly improvised, tucking small patches of corn and beans into leftover corners, making the most of the limited space. Philosopher and social critic Ivan Illich calls this loss of freedom a degradation to the role of mere consumer: houses become pre-fabricated units to occupy rather than spaces that can be shaped collectively in relation to family and community (Illich 1973, 11).

Suburban Logics and Imposed Order

The staged elements of community we had noticed—the quiet basketball court, the corner store with its rows of canned goods—came into sharper focus once I understood the settlement’s origins. Only later did I learn that this quiet, desolate village was part of the Rural Cities Program (*Ciudades Rurales Sustentables*, CRS). These state-sponsored settlements were promoted as instruments of progress, promising electricity, water, schools, health care, and jobs. In official discourse, the program emphasized rights, gender equity, and sustainable development, presenting relocation as voluntary and beneficial (Ley de Ciudades Rurales Sustentables 2010).

Those mottos we had seen on signs—*Vivir Mejor* and *Son hechos, no palabras*—took on new meaning once I learned their history. Far from being organic community expressions, they were state-imposed narratives, part of political branding campaigns that projected progress while masking everyday precarity (Radio Zapatista 2011; Fernández-Vega 2014; Chiapas Paralelo 2012; Diario de Chiapas 2012). *Vivir Mejor*, widely associated with the federal administration of President Felipe Calderón (2006–2012), appeared on infrastructure and signage across Chiapas during that period (Fernández-Vega 2014). Meanwhile, *Hechos, no*

palabras had deep roots in Chiapas's political branding—first coined by Governor Juan Sabines Gutiérrez and later revived by his son, Juan Sabines Guerrero, during his 2006–2012 term (Chiapas Paralelo 2012; Diario de Chiapas 2012).

Critics argue these mantras serve more to project a façade of action and progress than to reflect community-driven agendas. Building on this critique, Juliana observed the mismatch between design and daily life: “Why did the streets look like suburban Mexico or the U.S.? ... Driveways and I’m just like, nobody even have the car.” Her words echoed a broader critique of urban design under capitalism. As David Harvey explains, the “right to the city” is not merely access to infrastructure but the collective freedom to shape urban life; yet space is too often produced to absorb surplus capital and enforce abstract order, rather than to serve the everyday needs of residents (Harvey 2012, 4–5). In the settlement, this meant driveways without cars, stores without fresh food, and courts without play—mantras materialized in concrete, projecting progress without sustaining daily life. As Harvey suggests, such spaces absorb surplus capital while enforcing abstract order, and in Chiapas this order also functioned as marketing: a way to showcase modernity while preparing the ground for larger economic projects.

Aesthetics as Marketing

In practice, critics argue that CRS represents a form of territorial reorganization for neoliberal economic projects. By moving Indigenous and peasant communities off their ancestral land, the program facilitates resource extraction—oil, minerals, water, biodiversity, agroindustry, and tourism—under initiatives like *Proyecto Mesoamérica* (formerly *Plan Puebla Panamá*), a state-backed integration plan advancing infrastructure, trade, and extractive

projects across southern Mexico and Central America (Radio Zapatista 2011). The glossy image of sustainability and progress thus conceals a harsher reality: displacement severs communities from land-based subsistence, eroding food sovereignty and forcing dependence on cash and market systems. As David Harvey argues, this process exemplifies “accumulation by dispossession,” where land and labor are detached from residents to be made available for capital, even as the rhetoric of empowerment masks deeper forms of control (Harvey 2007, 178–80). Juliana’s observations made this abstract critique tangible.

She pointed out how aesthetics themselves became part of the marketing: “They’re still out there trying to have this aesthetically pleasing housing... I’m just wondering, like, who’s the marketing person behind this? Like, all they need is a pink house and we will get them all to come.” These “blueprints of modernization” present orderly façades that displace communal ways of living, leaving people “less and less human” as their spaces and practices are dismantled (Esteva and Prakash 2014, 4–5).

Juliana pointed to the hollowness of these newly constructed homes: “What is this room with a sink? They have to purchase their own stove... an empty house.” The contrast between the stark, planned infrastructure—paved streets, lamp posts, basketball courts—and the improvised life residents carved out created a strange mix of possibility, absence, and resilience. It was progress by appearance rather than substance, sustained only by the quiet persistence of people making life in the gaps of imposed design.

Contradictions and Commodification

These contradictions became sharper when set against the Zapatista Caracoles, which embody an opposite model: autonomous, decentralized communities that sustain their own

health, education, and production systems outside the control of the state or global markets (Radio Zapatista n.d.). Where CRS settlements uproot people and reduce them to passive dependents within a neoliberal framework, the Caracoles root life in local resistance, autonomy, and cultural preservation.

They reveal that what counts as development is not relocation or new infrastructure, but the capacity to sustain relationships with land, community, and knowledge systems. In this sense, the CRS village I visited represents a contested space—a microcosm of broader tensions in Chiapas, where state narratives of progress collide with the lived realities of dispossession, resilience, and the ongoing struggle for autonomy.

Juliana captured this tension in her reflections: “It’s a place of contradictions ... you do have, you know, the extractive nature of culture that somehow [is] happening here and culture being sold and produced.” Her words expose the contradiction Tuck and Yang describe: decolonization reduced to performance and display, where Indigenous life is aestheticized to market progress even as the material demand for land return is denied (Tuck and Yang 2012, 2–4).

Tensions That Endure

The CRS village offered a stark illustration of how state-led development and neoliberal frameworks reshape space, labor, and community life. Residents navigated the tension between imposed infrastructure and their own improvisational practices, while the Zapatista Caracoles nearby demonstrated an alternative rooted in autonomy, collective care, and cultural resilience.

Yet as we left the ordered stillness of the CRS settlement for the rhythms of San Cristóbal, I was struck by how these contradictions persisted. The mantras of *Vivir Mejor* and *Hechos, no palabras* echoed in the rhythms of San Cristóbal—development projects, tourist markets, and cultural performances all colliding with everyday struggles for survival and autonomy. What looked like progress often carried the same façade I had seen in the Rural City: appearances of order masking deeper currents of dispossession, resilience, and resistance. The next day, these tensions came into sharper focus at the oldest *mercado*, where labor, value, and visibility collided in new ways.

Day 5: The Oldest Mercado

Day 5 brought me to the oldest mercado, a vibrant maze of stalls overflowing with colors, textures, and smells. Here, the intersections of labor, value, and visibility were unmistakable. Artisans displayed their craft alongside tourists and volunteers, some framing themselves as intermediaries in the name of “supporting Indigenous women.” It was a place where wealth and poverty coexisted uneasily, and where solidarity projects sometimes reproduced the very hierarchies they claimed to challenge.

Immersion in the Market

At Mercado Viejo in San Cristóbal de las Casas, the senses are overwhelmed. The ground floor is dense with life: the sharp scent of raw meat and damp herbs, piles of beans in every shade arranged like mosaics, stacks of potatoes laid out on their own leaves. Vendors sing out prices while women slap tortillas onto hot comales, the air thick with smoke and voices rising together. Children dart between stalls with baskets, and neighbors pause mid-bargain to trade news or laughter. The market is not just a commercial space but a social one, a place where survival, culture, and improvisation meet.

This layering of smell, sound, and touch reveals how the market is not simply a site of exchange but a site of relation, where food and craft carry memory, cosmology, and survival at once.

The Tortilla and the Soul

Watching women cooking in Mercado Viejo reminded Juliana of another moment in Chiapas—a tour where food itself became the lesson. Our time there blurs together now, mercado and tour and classroom, but her memory belongs here because it, too, was about food as cosmology and survival. She remembered coming upon a group of women weaving and cooking by a wood-burning stove. One older woman shaped tortillas without a press, rotating and slapping the masa in her hands until it grew round and even. The smell of corn and ashes pulled Juliana back to her grandparents' house in Mexico, where her great-aunt had moved her hands with the same practiced magic. As a child, she'd thought it was sorcery, learning to do it herself before the skill fell out of use in her daily life.

The woman handed her a fresh tortilla dusted with pumpkin seed powder. It was rolled into a warm, savory bundle that felt both familiar and new. The taste carried her straight to her godmother, who used to make taquitos in the same way, rolling the tortilla tight with a little salt and even adding a splash of masa water so it wouldn't come undone. That bite was more than a snack—it was a memory of home, of childhood, of the people who had shaped her.

But it was also a lesson. The women explained that many foods introduced through colonialism, like cheese, make Indigenous bodies sick; most of them were lactose intolerant. Cheese, they said, wasn't part of their ancestral way of eating. For Juliana, this small moment became what she called another “unplugging from the matrix”: realizing that even the simplest

choices about food are bound to history, politics, and identity. That single tortilla was a cosmology in her hands—an archive of memory, kinship, and colonial disruption folded into everyday sustenance.

From Tortilla to Poultry

Just beyond the tortillas, the market spilled into another world of food and meaning: the poultry stalls. Rows of chickens, some trussed breast-up on wooden tables, others carried alive by their feet, lined the aisles. The birds hung still, subdued by gravity, their wings slack against their bodies. Holding a chicken this way is both practical and symbolic: it calms the animal long enough for a buyer to inspect its health, saves space on the journey from home to market, and serves as proof of freshness for those who want a living bird rather than one already butchered, as I learned from my Indigenous instructors in the Contrapelo program. The copal smoke curling upward, the flicker of candles, even the voices of vendors rise together as a kind of “heat made visible,” echoing Chamula values that prize hot, well-formed vitality in festival and cure alike (Gossen 1975, 449–50, 456, 458–59).



Figure 7. Trussed chickens arranged breast-up on a wooden table. Photo by author, 2011.

Yet outside of this context, the practice is often condemned as harmful. Animal welfare blogs and forums recount birds dying after only minutes upside down. In *The Feather Brain*, Bri—a white scientist and chicken keeper—frames the practice as dangerous, citing risks of suffocation, organ strain, and tonic immobility, the fear-induced paralysis often mistaken for calm (Bri 2022). Scientific studies echo these concerns: Gallup, Nash, and Wagner’s foundational study of tonic immobility in chickens showed that manual restraint induces fear-based immobility, not peace (Gallup, Nash, and Wagner 1971, 237–39). What looks like calm in one cosmology registers as trauma in another—a sharp reminder that knowledge, too, is situated.

Ritual Significance of Chickens and Birds

Chamula traditions also cast birds as messengers of the Sacred Mothers—the Earth, the Moon, and the Virgin—signaling rain, fertility, or recovery. In curing, a chicken may be sacrificed alongside the appearance of a bird like the warbler, whose song confirms the patient’s healing. The shaman passes the chicken over the sick before offering it to the spirits; afterward, the family eats it to absorb its protective power, part of a curing logic that restores balance through candles, herbs, foods, and prayer (Pérez and Rus 2023, 122–32; Vogt 1969; Pitarch 2010; Gossen 1975, 451–52).

From tortilla to chicken, food is not just nourishment but cosmology—living archives of survival, memory, and healing.

Everyday Social Rhythms

Vendors sing out prices while women slap tortillas onto hot comales in rhythmic succession. Children dart between stalls with baskets, and neighbors pause mid-bargain to trade news or laughter. Upstairs, the scene shifts to ceramics, candles, and textiles—colors layered upon colors, patterns that hold entire histories. In Chiapas, such markets function as postcolonial spaces where Indigenous presence and organization blur the line between economic exchange and social life, even as the social fabric they sustain is shadowed by outside gazes and misrecognition (Vargas-Cetina 2001, 68–69, 73–74).

Here the textiles, like the tortillas, carry more than utility—they are both strategy and burden, tools of survival and signs of authenticity under the tourist gaze.

Contradictions Outside the Market

In San Cristóbal, contradictions of labor and spectacle ran through everything. Mercado Viejo, with its vast and labyrinthine rows, pulsed with Indigenous work, sustaining daily life

through its own rhythms. Just a few blocks away, another world unfolded: eco-tourists crowded the andadores, chasing “Zapatista tourism”—a safari of rebellion that turned Indigenous life into spectacle. On those tourist streets, cafés such as Bar Revolución—draped in revolutionary iconography and popular with visitors seeking a taste of “authentic Chiapas”—stood in stark contrast to the women selling tortillas or herbs at the market’s edge. Both spaces depended on Indigenous presence, but in radically different registers: one commodified rebellion as décor, the other sustained life through daily labor, indispensable but unevenly valued.

Juliana laughed when she recalled how deep this contradiction ran:

“There’s a Burger King here and I didn’t even know it was a Burger King—blended into the aesthetic with old stone arches, like they were trying to hide the Whopper inside a colonial façade.”

Just around the corner, cafés promised “ethical Chiapas coffee,” with signs advertising organic beans “direct from Indigenous producers.” Some were Zapatista cooperatives, others boutique tourist cafés—indistinguishable except for who actually benefited.

“It’s a place of contradictions,” Juliana said, “where culture gets extracted and resold, where rebellion is branded and poured into a latte.”

At night the ironies multiplied. White backpackers with matted dreadlocks and jangling crystal amulets set up on the cobblestones to sell “handmade jewelry” or “authentic brownies,” their new-age aesthetic staged as anti-capitalist freedom but propped up by the very tourist circuits they mocked.

“Five dollars for a pot brownie from someone who looked like they’d been living out of their backpack for weeks,” Juliana remembered, “another tourist selling rebellion as if it were a craft.”

These encounters echoed the same logic as the cafés and markets: rebellion and authenticity staged as consumable surfaces. The smells of incense, the clatter of guitars, and the thick sweetness of brownies for sale lent the streets a carnival air—so different from the earthy smoke and maize of Mercado Viejo, yet connected by the same circuits of consumption.

Commodified Rebellion

These tensions felt even sharper nearby at the Santo Domingo Craft Market, a colorful ring of stalls encircling the old church where artisans sold textiles, embroidery, and jewelry. At its center was the rebozo: a handwoven shawl that is at once clothing, tool, and symbol. Draped across shoulders or used to carry infants and bundles, the rebozo is both practical and ceremonial, deeply tied to Indigenous women's everyday lives. Each piece carries distinct designs—geometric patterns, stripes, brocades—that connect weavers to their communities, languages, and ancestral lineages.

Yet these garments also shaped how outsiders read women's labor and whether their selling carried weight. Huipiles and rebozos signaled "authenticity," drawing tourists who might otherwise pass by. At the same time, the expectation of dress felt almost compulsory, a uniform that secured income while flattening complexity into a consumable image. I felt complicit and critical at once—complicit because I, too, was drawn in by their colors and patterns, and critical because I saw how they were being read less as living expressions of identity and more as marketing tools.

Juliana noticed the same irony but came at it sideways:

"They make it seem like you're buying culture off a rack—like if the shawl is colorful enough, it comes with ancestral wisdom included in the price."

For her, the contradiction wasn't only about outsiders consuming culture, but about how easily even solidarity projects slipped into spectacle.

"You walk around the stalls and you don't just see textiles—you see tourists performing their own enlightenment: buying a rebozo becomes proof they 'get it.' And that's what stings, right? Because the women weaving don't get the same recognition, just the transaction."

That afternoon, as I bought rebozos directly from local women, two white volunteers from Seattle—running a nonprofit “supporting Indigenous women” while enrolled in the Contrapelo program to learn Spanish—remarked that I was “getting a really good deal” because the designs were “last season’s models.” Their words—spoken with the confidence of volunteers who imagined themselves allies—landed awkwardly. In the moment, I registered the exchange as strange but harmless: I was excited about the bargain, even as something in their phrasing made me uneasy. It was only later, reflecting back, that I saw myself too caught in the thrill of the deal—hungry for color, eager to belong, but blind to how that desire was shaped by the very logics I critiqued.

Authenticity and Its Costs

This logic of commodification is not confined to Chiapas; it echoes across histories of race and performance in the Americas. Cultural historian Eric Lott, in *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, shows how minstrelsy created and circulated caricatures that turned Black performance into consumable stereotype—at once celebrated and tightly constrained (Lott 2013, 3–5). bell hooks similarly critiques how racial difference is commodified and consumed, “eaten” as a form of spice or authenticity while the lives behind it remain devalued (hooks 1992, 21–22). Building on this genealogy, María Elena García, in

Gastropolitics and the Specter of Race: Stories of Capital, Culture, and Coloniality in Peru, demonstrates how authenticity itself becomes a terrain of struggle in contemporary Latin America (García 2021). Much as Tuck and Yang caution, this kind of consumption of difference risks sustaining settler futurity rather than unsettling it (Tuck and Yang 2012).

Juliana, with her wry eye, noticed how this logic played out not only in the markets but in the streets:

“Even the bars were selling revolution—like Bar Revolución, plastered in Zapatista posters so tourists could drink rebellion by the pint. It’s the same move over and over: take culture, take struggle, package it as décor.”

For her, authenticity wasn’t just about what Indigenous women had to wear or sell, but about how rebellion itself became a commodity in the tourist imagination.

“It’s like Chiapas was curated for outsiders: you get the huipil, the coffee, the bar with Che Guevara murals. The one thing missing? The people whose lives make those things possible.”

What García observes in Peru’s gastropolitical sphere resonates in Chiapas’s textile markets: the rebozo, like the “authentic” dishes at Mistura, is staged as proof of cultural depth while also serving as a strategy of survival. It becomes a sign that outsiders can consume, a surface on which difference is legible. But just as Andean producers harness the market’s hunger for authenticity, Chiapaneca women wield the rebozo as both burden and resource: a compulsory uniform within the tourist gaze, yet also a fabric that allows them to remain visible in the market and convert outsider desire into survival. In that moment of hindsight, I saw how the rebozo was both survival and vulnerability, both strategy and burden—a way of claiming space in the market while also being confined by its gaze.

Taken together, these markets reveal the complex negotiations of Indigenous life under neoliberalism: spaces of vibrancy and autonomy, yet also of extraction, exoticization, and uneven solidarities (Harvey 2012, 3). The state and NGOs may cloak their interventions in slogans and projects, but the lived reality of vendors is a constant struggle to assert value, dignity, and continuity on their own terms—contradictions that spill beyond the markets into the streets and plazas, shaping everyday life in San Cristóbal.

Juliana caught the absurdity of it with characteristic bluntness:

“You walk those streets and it’s like authenticity on display everywhere—crafts, coffee, even rebellion itself. But the joke is, what’s being sold isn’t life, it’s the costume of life. The real thing is happening just outside the frame, where nobody’s buying.”

Her irony lingered, but I left the mercado with a sharper sense of what was at stake: markets as sites where decolonial survival and neoliberal extraction clash in real time, where food and fabric hold memory and power, and where my own position is never innocent but always implicated.

Day 6: The Las Abejas Massacre Site

We thought we were going to meet beekeepers.

“Las Abejas,” I kept repeating to myself on the combi ride out of San Cristóbal, picturing apiary garb and jars of amber with labels in careful Tsotsil script. You laughed when I whispered, “Do you think they’ll let us try the honey?” We were both new enough to Chiapas to still mistake poetry for literal translation. Bees are bees. How could “Las Abejas” be anything else?

Juliana later teased me about it: *“Of course you thought bees meant honey—you were still expecting Chiapas to serve up poetry with a taste test.”* Her irony cut through my naiveté,

but also captured something truer: how often sweetness and wound, beauty and violence, sit side by side here.

The van climbed through the pines until the sky widened. No tour buses, no glossy brochures—just a driver, a name, and the coordinates of a wound. At the village, crosses marked with names circled a small chapel. Murals and memorials told the story: Acteal, December 22, 1997. Forty-five people from Las Abejas—women, children, elders—were murdered while praying inside the church. Not rival families, but members of a PRI-sponsored paramilitary group called the Mascaras Rojas. Soldiers stationed nearby never intervened. As Max Weber reminds us, the state defines itself through its “monopoly of the power to compel by physical coercion” within a given territory (Weber 1978, 910).

In Acteal, however, this monopoly was abdicated: soldiers withheld protection while paramilitaries acted with tacit sanction. The omission itself became a form of violence, extending what Nixon calls “slow violence” through denial and delay (Nixon 2011, 46). Las Abejas are a Christian pacifist Tzotzil Maya organization that had publicly supported the Zapatistas’ principles while maintaining independence, and it was this political alignment that made them a target (Zinn Education Project n.d.).

What I had expected as a tasting turned out to be a teaching: not honey, but history; not sweetness, but the residue of state-sanctioned harm.

Erasure as Colonial Order

The shock of expecting honey and finding a massacre memorial revealed how state violence often remains hidden to outsiders like me. Such harm consists of “things so remarkable, which happen to have remained unheard and unseen until now, should be brought

to the attention of many and not lie buried in the sepulcher of oblivion” (Nixon 2011, 46). I had arrived expecting sweetness and productivity, unaware of the persistent, slow violence shaping life there—violence that is not always visible in daily routines, yet lingers in memorials, communal memory, and the quiet endurance of survivors. As Lynn Stephen shows in her study of Zapotec weavers, counterinsurgency in Mexico extends beyond massacres: it works to erode communal life itself, targeting Indigenous autonomy through neoliberal reforms, harassment, and even assassination (Stephen 2002, 200–04). This dynamic of erasure resonates in Acteal, where militarization and paramilitary violence sought not only to kill but to dismantle Indigenous ways of being. In this sense, the massacre also embodies what Guillermo Bonfil Batalla identifies as the deeper colonial order: a system “by nature excluyente,” which negates Indigenous cultures as incompatible and collapses distinct peoples into the homogenizing category of *indios* destined for subordination (Batalla 1996, 119–22). Seen this way, Acteal is not an exception but a lens: a place where erasure becomes legible and where memory refuses to comply.

Nonviolence and Refusal

Our guide then explained that Las Abejas were founded in 1992 after a land dispute widened into a collective struggle. They share the Zapatistas’ demands for dignity, land, and justice but reject armed struggle. Their name, I learned, invokes not sweetness but sociality—how bees live: organized, persistent, protective.

As scholar of leadership and sustainability Marco Tavanti documents, Las Abejas’ refusal of armed struggle is not passive but a conscious political stance of “nonviolent resistance as political contention,” one that is both moral and strategic (Tavanti 2003, 162–63). In one

striking episode, hundreds of Abejas—mostly women and children—formed human chains to block Mexican soldiers from establishing a base at Xoyep, pushing them back despite tear gas, shields, and helicopter support (Tavanti 2003, 159–60). Their pacifism demonstrates how Indigenous communities enact nonviolent strategies of survival and dissent, rooted in both global traditions of nonviolence and five centuries of Maya resistance (Tavanti 2003, 161, 165).

This pacifism is a deliberate stance grounded in Maya-Christian communal life rather than acquiescence (Tavanti 2003, 162–63). Read with Tuck and Yang's insistence that decolonization is "not a metaphor" but the repatriation of Indigenous land and life, their refusal of guns emerges as a decolonial refusal: a decision not to fight on the settler state's terms while insisting on modes of survival, governance, and memory beyond those terms (Tuck and Yang 2012, 1–7, 21–23). In contrast to "settler moves to innocence" that domesticate nonviolence into reconciliation, Las Abejas' practices keep faith with incommensurability—pursuing autonomy and protection of communal life without being folded back into the state's economy of violence (Tuck and Yang 2012, 9–19; Tavanti 2003, 161, 165).

Juliana once noted a similar contradiction at a Zapatista committee meeting we attended: men spoke as if embodying liberation while women strained for space to intervene. Her observation echoed in Acteal, where nonviolence itself had to be insisted on, defended not only against state violence but also against the silences and exclusions within community life. This is refusal as ongoing labor: not a single stance but a repeated practice of saying no to the terms of harm and yes to the terms of life.

Everyday Resistance and the Work of Memory

Standing in the chapel, the smell of pine and candle smoke thick around us, I began to understand that memory is itself a form of work here. Survivors still gather each year, not to forget but to insist: justice must be harvested like bees gather light—slowly, stubbornly, together. As Phillip Berryman explains, liberation theology’s Christian Base Communities wove prayer and reflection together with collective action; liturgy and Bible study often ended with building a road, organizing a cooperative, or resisting injustice (Berryman 1987, 68). In this way, the practices of fasting, prayer, and commemoration in Las Abejas are not apolitical rituals but enactments of resistance, where faith becomes a language of justice. Las Abejas’ vigils, fasts, and commemorations function as what James Scott calls “everyday forms of resistance”: informal, often covert practices that seek de facto gains outside open confrontation (Scott 1985, 33). If counterinsurgency aims to unravel communal time, these commemorations re-knit it—row by row, candle by candle.

Harvesting Justice

The name *Las Abejas* signals more than a metaphor; it encodes a mode of collective survival. As Thomas Seeley demonstrates in his study of honeybee swarms, consensus emerges not through hierarchy but through what he calls a “unitary democracy,” in which individual signals gradually converge toward unanimity for the good of the whole (Seeley 2010, 118). Similarly, Las Abejas enact resistance through practices of prayer, fasting, and commemoration that consolidate communal voice against erasure. Their resilience lies in this capacity to swarm—to transform dispersed acts of faith into a collective politics of memory and endurance.

On the ride back, Juliana leaned over with a half-smile: “So... *no honey*.” We both laughed, but her words stayed with me. The sweetness I expected was not absent, just

transformed: memory itself was the harvest, stubborn and collective. And in that harvest I recognized my own position—not above the wound as a witness, but inside the field of relations that make remembering possible.

The Weight of Silence

Standing inside the chapel, the cool stone walls holding the smell of pine and candle smoke, I felt the weight of silence more than anything else. The air was thick with memory—something that clung, that pressed against my skin, as if each breath was shared with those who once prayed here. My body knew I was in a sacred place long before my mind caught up.

I realized that violence is not only the gunfire that echoes in a single night but also the long shadows it casts over decades—silences, absences, daily precarities. And resistance, I saw, is not always dramatic confrontation; sometimes it is persistence, the stubborn refusal to let memory be buried, the quiet gathering of voices in prayer. What I thought of as fragility—fasting, weeping, remembering—revealed itself as a strength that outlasts armies.

To “harvest justice” instead of honey is to gather what is life-giving from what has been scorched. It is to tend to memory as bees tend to flowers, patiently, season after season, knowing sweetness can be coaxed even from bitterness. To harvest justice is to draw sustenance from endurance, to insist that what was taken will someday return—not as honey on the tongue, but as light carried forward, together.

Day 7: Universidad de la Tierra

On the final day of the Contrapelo program, we visited Universidad de la Tierra (UniTierra) Chiapas⁶, a community-based network of autonomous universities across Mexico

⁶ UniTierra, or the University of the Earth, is an experimental learning project founded in Oaxaca, Mexico in 2001. It provides spaces for people to learn whatever knowledge or skills their communities need—practical trades, research, philosophy, or other fields—through mentorship and apprenticeships, and then return to share that

that centers learning through practice rather than formal accreditation. Founded in the spirit of Zapatista autonomy, UniTierra campuses cultivate spaces where knowledge circulates collectively, without tuition fees, exams, or degrees. Instead, they invite participants to learn by doing—whether through carpentry, farming, sewing, or philosophy—and then return to teach others.

I carried my camera everywhere, but the photos alone don't quite capture what it felt like to walk through those spaces.

Architecture of Conviviality

The buildings themselves seemed alive, made from clay and wood, the walls still holding the fingerprints of the people who shaped them. Even the quiet corners carried art—from carved benches to painted murals. This kind of architecture resonated with what Ivan Illich once called conviviality: “autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment” (Illich 1973, 11). The walls here were convivial tools—materials from the land, shaped by community hands, creating dwellings that resist dependency on industrial systems and instead root autonomy in ecological balance.

At the entrance of one classroom, a sign announced in Spanish and Mayan:

Centro Universitario de Filosofías y Teologías Contextuales “Samuel Ruiz García”

Post- y (Des)colonialidad del Poder, del Saber y del Ser

Centro de Estudios y Prácticas sobre Adisciplinariedad, Pluriversalidad y Ecologías

Grupo (Des)colonialidad Latino/a América

Taj Partik Yan Balumil. Jun Balumil Tibu Muyuk Jnet'ubane jetik, tiyakutik smeltsanel. Ta olon ja tset unai.

This is our world, one world where we gather together, living and working in our shared home. We dwell in the depths of the water.

learning with their communities. Campuses exist across Mexico, California, and other locations, all emphasizing collective, community-centered education over standardized, classroom-bound instruction.

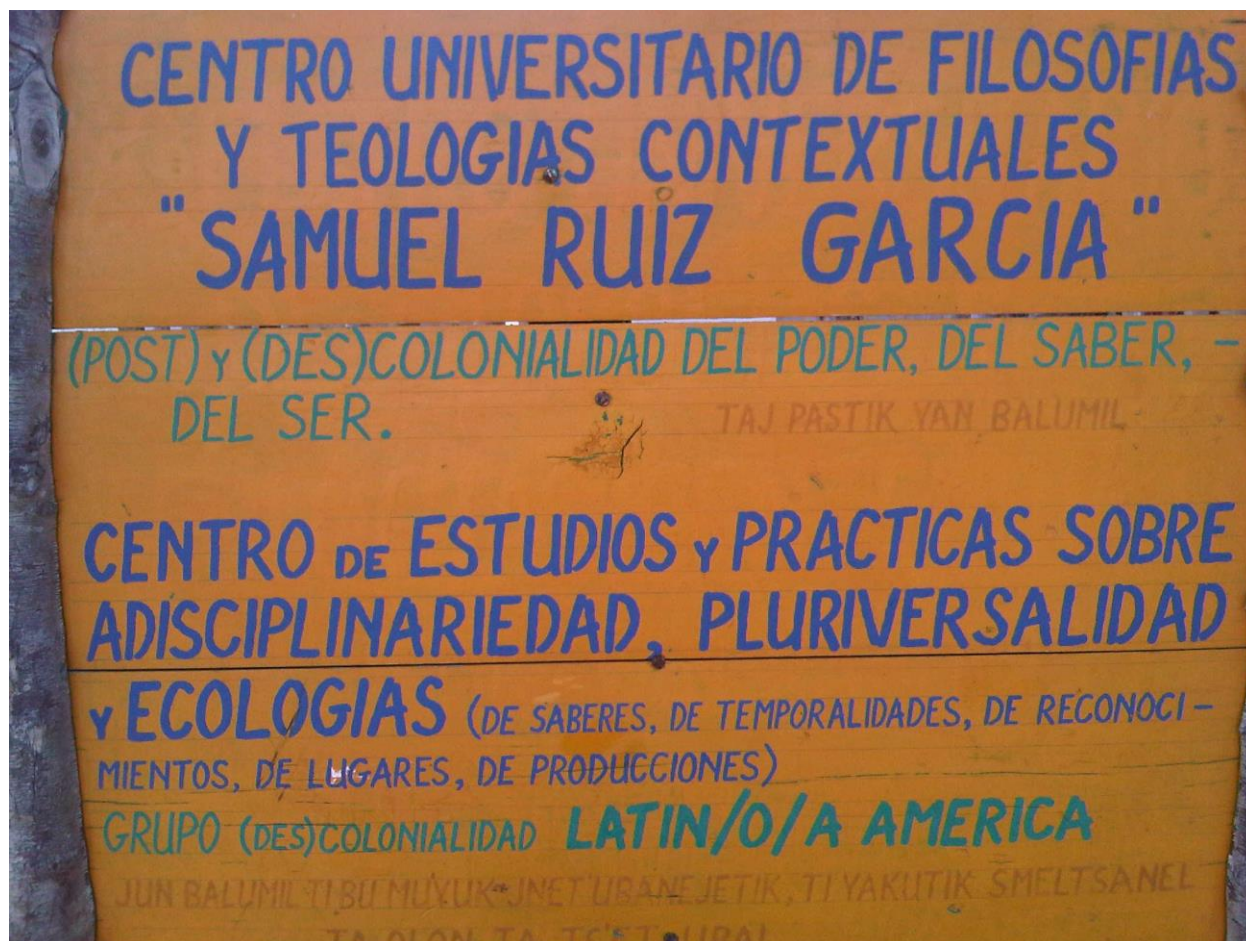


Figure 8. Centro Universitario de Filosofías y Teologías Contextuales sign. Photograph by author, 2011.

The sign was more than administrative text. It was pedagogy in itself: trilingual, pluriversal, cosmological. It reminded every passerby that learning happens in a shared world, a dwelling sustained by collective care and deep waters. To walk into the classroom was to step through this declaration, entering not just a space of study but a world-in-the-making.

Circles of Pedagogy

The campus was a living story, with every space teaching a different lesson. In the classrooms, the tables were arranged in circles, resisting the hierarchy of a “front” of the room. This design reflected Zapatista pedagogy, a resonant public pedagogy that emphasizes collective decision-making, horizontal communication, and a dialogical approach to learning

(Anderson and Springer 2018, 151, 154). It was a direct response to what Paulo Freire called the banking model of education, where teachers deposit knowledge into students. Instead, as Freire insisted, liberation requires that “both are simultaneously teachers and students” (Freire 2000, 72). This spirit of problem-posing education was alive in the circles at UniTierra, where students and teachers faced each other, learning together. The same ethos was visible in the Zapatista principles of *mandar obedeciendo* (to lead by obeying) and *proponer y no imponer* (to propose, don’t impose), which emphasize collective decision-making and accountability to the community (“Sharing Leadership Series” 2009).

This wasn’t just theory; it was practice. The pedagogical spirit wasn’t confined to the classrooms alone; it extended into the hands-on workshops. We moved into spaces for weaving, music, sewing, woodworking, metalwork, and bookbinding. These skills weren’t just trades; they were acts of resistance, teaching self-sufficiency without reliance on capitalist supply chains. The workshops offered another dimension of conviviality, providing “the freedom to make things... and to put them to use in caring for and about others” (Illich 1973, 11–12). They also reflected the Zapatista principle *Todo Para Todos, Nada Para Nosotros* (everything for everyone, nothing for ourselves), with each workshop strengthening the community rather than producing profit for a few.

The same principles extended to the fields. In the agroecology section, handmade bridges crossed small creeks leading to greenhouses and fields of corn. Here, agroecology was a classroom in sovereignty, where seeds, soil, and hands taught autonomy through practice. This mirrored *La Vía Campesina’s* campesino-a-campesino pedagogy, a Freirean method where farmers learn from one another and fields become classrooms (Rosset and Martínez-Torres

2013, 10). Corn carried sustenance and sacred origin, while marigolds and herbs signaled ritual and medicine, making cultivation a form of ceremony and care.

This was more than alternative pedagogy—it was pluriversal pedagogy. Arturo Escobar’s vision of the pluriverse, “a world where many worlds fit,” was visible here, echoing the Zapatista slogan (Escobar 2018; EZLN 1996). Boaventura de Sousa Santos’s call for epistemologies of the South also resonated in how knowledge at UniTierra was situated, relational, and collective, refusing universalizing claims (Santos 2007). In the fields, this meant students learned to see themselves not as masters of nature but as participants in an ecology of relations. Here, Sylvia Wynter’s notion of the human as *bios + logos*—life and meaning inseparably intertwined—came alive. Agroecology lessons were not simply about growing food; they re-enchanted the human as a being in conversation with soil, water, seeds, and spirit, challenging Western anthropocentrism.

The Spiral Ethic

Across classrooms, workshops, and fields, I began to notice a pattern in how knowledge, labor, and care unfolded: it moved in spirals rather than straight lines. Skills were repeated, revisited, shared, and refined, much like the snail’s spiral. Each rotation built on the last, linking past and present, individual and community, theory and practice. This spiral ethic—slow, iterative, and attentive—was the invisible rhythm behind everything at UniTierra, guiding both pedagogy and daily life.

Symbols of the spiral were everywhere. Inside one classroom, a painted figure at first looked like a flower, but the longer I stared, the more it resembled a butterfly, its wings spread in every direction. In Maya cosmology, flowers and butterflies often belong to the same

symbolic register, tied to beauty, breath, and transformation (Taube 2004, 70–71; Chinchilla Mazariegos 2017, 56). The figure’s multidirectional orientation also echoed the world tree cosmogram and the Zapatista vision of pluriversality.

The most resonant symbol was the snail shell, a central Zapatista emblem that evokes slow, patient, and collective movement. Though it appears simple, the snail embodies a philosophy of patience, deliberation, and communal action. In *caminar preguntando* (“walking while asking questions”), the spiral illustrates that transformation is rarely linear. This symbolism became organizational in 2003 with the inauguration of the *caracoles*, or regional centers of autonomous governance, designed like spirals in practice: with doors and windows for listening and speaking, layers of decision-making that move outward from the collective core, and networks that connect distant communities while preserving local autonomy (González Casanova 2005, 79–82; EZLN 2003).



Figure 9. Snail mural depicting the Zapatista-inspired spiral motif. Photo by author, 2011.

Standing before the snail mural, I felt something stir in me. The spiral was not just a Zapatista philosophy but a mirror of my own learning: tentative, recursive, full of pauses and returns. I realized I was being asked to slow down, to honor the time each lesson needed, to carry what I had learned on my back like the snail. To rush, to skip steps, would be to leave behind the accumulated knowledge, care, and labor of others. The spiral demanded humility—an ethic of learning that was patient, nonlinear, and relational.

Contradictions in Motion

Even in such a carefully cultivated space, contradictions persisted. As one student noted, men often dominated committee meetings, while women struggled to find space to speak—a

reminder that autonomy and transformation are never perfect, but always in motion. I remember sitting in one gathering where women's comments were interrupted or absorbed into men's proposals. Their shoulders tightened, voices dropped, and silence stretched in the gaps. The tension in the room was palpable, unsettling.

This dynamic echoed historical struggles within revolutionary movements. Comandanta Ramona, one of the few female leaders in the largely male Zapatista command, drafted the Revolutionary Women's Law to assert women's rights within her communities and the army (Wolfwood n.d.). Like Ramona, students at UniTierra were negotiating entrenched hierarchies, learning that constructive transformation requires patience, dialogue, and deliberate action. The university embodied the principle of *construir y no destruir* (to build, not destroy): moments of tension were not failures but opportunities to build inclusivity, equity, and collective strength, honoring the spiral ethic of gradual, intentional change.

Spiraling Forward

UniTierra embodied a radical ethic: no tuition fees were charged, and once a student mastered a skill, they returned to teach it to others, ensuring knowledge circulated through the community rather than being hoarded. I later visited UniTierra campuses in Puebla and California, seeing how these principles of communal learning adapted to different local contexts. Everywhere, the same message pulsed: decolonization is not a metaphor but a material, collective endeavor (Tuck and Yang 2012, 1–4, 5–8).

Even in the kitchen, where everyone washed their own plates and contributed to the meal, cooking became pedagogy. As Meredith Abarca argues, everyday acts like cooking hold an “epistemological force,” turning ordinary meals into community (Abarca 2006, 3–6, 9).

The contradictions—gendered silences, uneven participation—did not erase the lessons of UniTierra. Instead, they reminded me that transformation is a spiral, never linear, never finished. Each loop—whether in the classroom, workshop, or field—was a turn in the ongoing work of learning and unlearning. To walk through UniTierra was to step into this spiral, to glimpse another world in practice: slow, patient, communal, and alive.

Embodied Relationality, Ethical Practice, and the Messiness of Decolonial Practice

Life in Chiapas entered my body first—through breath after the rain, through walking, through rhythms that valued presence over productivity. Quiet mornings washed the streets clean, the air carrying the scent of wet clay. I walked constantly—up hills, through markets, across plazas—my steps adjusting to a new cadence. The streets were uneven, cobblestones shifting underfoot, so I had to be fully present with each step. My rhythms shifted, and I noticed how presence, not productivity, structured each day. It was a spiritual reset, a reminder that busyness is not the same as living. Even before the classes fully ended, I sensed something in me had changed. On the plane home, I knew without hesitation: I would return.

The teachings on land as relationship confirmed something I already knew in my bones. This worldview wasn't entirely new so much as it was a return—a remembering of what lived beneath the noise of modern life. Juliana's reflections crystallized this: indigeneity is not a relic of the past, something to be admired in a museum—it is alive, present, and encountered daily in language, food, and care for the land. To ask in Tsotsil, "How is your spirit today?" or to learn the slow rhythm of patting tortillas with Sonia was to practice relationality, to be reshaped through attentiveness and reciprocity. As Leanne Betasamosake Simpson writes, resurgence

happens in small, everyday acts; tending soil, meals, and relationships in reciprocity is itself a decolonial gesture (Simpson 2017).

Ethical Practice

Yet Chiapas also revealed how contradictions live inside every attempt at transformation. Juliana's critiques of the government-built eco-village—driveways where no one had cars, spaces designed for aesthetics rather than communal life—exposed how colonial and neoliberal logics infiltrate even “progressive” projects. Her observations of Zapatista tourism and the commodification of rebellion reminded me how easily culture and solidarity can be consumed as markers of personal enlightenment, while the lived realities of communities remain marginalized.

These lessons unsettled me. As a visitor, camera in hand, I felt my own complicity—was I participating in the very tourist gaze I was critiquing? The contradictions became sharper in Zapatista spaces, where men often dominated committee meetings, while women had to fight for space to speak. Shoulders tensed, voices dropped, and silences spread across the room. These moments recalled María Lugones's critique of the colonality of gender: liberation movements themselves are not immune to reproducing hierarchy (Lugones 2007). Ethical practice here was not purity or perfection—it was the slow, deliberate work of building what the Zapatistas call *construir y no destruir* (to build, not destroy).

Messiness of Decolonial Practice

Returning to the U.S., I confronted the messiness of carrying these lessons home. Corporate waste systems, the high cost of sustainable products, and the limits of individual action raised difficult questions: *Am I doing this to feel good about myself? Wouldn't it be more effective to address systemic structures?* Chiapas taught me that revolutionary practice is as

much about noticing rhythms, attending to care, and honoring relationships as it is about slogans or theory. Decolonizing the earth is a practice of presence: of listening to soil, water, and community; of recognizing our participation in extractive systems; and of cultivating ways of living that restore rather than dominate.

The trip reshaped how I understand belonging and what I call priority. Possessions do not anchor us—relationships do. Care, connection, and justice are inseparable; learning to tend tortillas is inseparable from learning to tend the earth. These lessons are not confined to Chiapas. They travel with us, reshaping neighborhoods, communities, and lives.

I keep circling back to the UniTierra classroom sign, its words still guiding me like a compass:

Taj Partik Yan Balumil. Jun Balumil Tibu Muyuk Jnet'ubane jetik, tiyakutik smeltsanel. Ta olon ja tset unai.

This is our world. One world where we gather together, living and working in our shared home. In the depths of the water we dwell.

What began as an inscription on a wall has become a way of inhabiting my life: a reminder that decolonial practice is not an abstraction but an everyday ethic of presence, humility, and relational responsibility. It is messy, imperfect, and deeply human—a practice of living together. Like the *caracol*, its rhythm is slow, spiraling, patient. Each turn carries the memory of past struggles and gestures toward futures still in the making. I also know that living this way is hard, especially within the constraints of colonization and capitalism. I cannot step fully outside those systems, but I can choose how I move within them—imperfectly, unevenly, doing the best I can. Perhaps that is what the *caracol* teaches most of all: that every step

matters, even when the ground is uneven. And maybe that is the lesson I carry home from Chiapas—that presence itself is a practice, learned one careful step at a time.

Queer Ecologies from a Patio Garden

From the small limits of my patio, a queer ecology emerged—playful, continuous, overflowing, entangled.

Volunteer Kin: Playfulness and Surprise

I first noticed them in the half-barrel, little sprouts lifting their round leaves on thin stems. I hadn't planted them; they must have come from the compost I'd turned into the soil. They looked delicate but determined—small, green bodies leaning toward the light as if to say, *we're here too*.

Only upon reflection did I recognize that their quiet insistence carried an echo of the chant. Born of queer liberation movements and acts of collective defiance—first popularized by Queer Nation activists in the early 1990s—the full cry declares: we're here, we're queer, get used to it. That chant, shouted in the streets against erasure and violence, claimed visibility as a form of survival—a lineage of presence I recognized belatedly in the small insistence of those tomato seedlings. The volunteers claimed space without apology, playfully improvising their way into my patio garden. A gardening guide notes that a volunteer plant is “the seedling of a desirable plant that appears in a garden without having been planted” (Gill 2015). Volunteers are “nature's gifts,” free and often thriving where they sprout (Gill 2015).

Gardeners call them volunteers, but I thought of them as Volunteer Kin—arriving uninvited yet wholly at home. As Robin Wall Kimmerer teaches, plants are not objects but relatives, and the tomatoes made that truth visible on my patio. María Puig de la Bellacasa, a scholar of feminist ecological thought, likewise insists that “care is not a human-only matter,”

but a vital politics in interdependent worlds (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 6).

Patty Krawec, an Anishinaabe and Ukrainian writer and author of *Becoming Kin*, writes that becoming kin is not a matter of shared blood or origin but of learning how to live responsibly with what and whom one depends on. Her story of the deer and the people who had to remember how to listen again shows that kinship requires change—it is a practice of returning to relationship through care and accountability. I’m moved by that sense of renewal: the idea that kinship can begin again, even after neglect, when I choose to listen differently. The volunteer tomatoes seemed to emerge from that kind of quiet reciprocity—life re-forming through what had been discarded, a gesture of the soil’s willingness to try again (Krawec 2022, 175–88).

Taking up that sense of renewal, I understand the volunteers through what Tyler Bradway and Elizabeth Freeman, theorists and authors of *Queer Kinship*, call kin-aesthetics—forms of relation that exceed design and inheritance, renewing kinship through improvisation and shared gestures. The volunteers, in their persistence, seemed to enact this very practice—thriving through accident and exchange. In this sense, queer kinship is less a lineage than a field of experiment, a practice that takes shape through chance proximities and care, even as it remains entangled with histories of power that both bind and unbind belonging (Bradway and Freeman 2022, 1–6).

Their presence felt like a gift from the patio itself, a reminder that life circulates even through what we discard. I remember tasting the first fruits: roasted early girls, bright and tangy in soup; cherry tomatoes sliced into salads, their sweetness sharp against the greens.

Eating them felt like receiving more than food—as if the garden was improvising, giving me back nourishment I hadn’t asked for.

The volunteers unsettled the idea that every harvest comes from design or intention. They embodied a different ethic: kinship that sprouts unexpectedly, composted from remains, rooted in surprise. Queer kinship, too, often grows this way—not from planned reproduction or straight lines of inheritance, but from chance encounters, leftover fragments, and chosen improvisations. It is a kinship that begins not with a plan of reproduction, but with play—the joyful surprise of the simple, insistent *we’re here*.

The volunteers were not weeds to be pulled but kin to be welcomed, reminders that care is not always deliberate, yet still deeply alive.

Daily Continuities: Practice of Survival

The snap of a kale leaf was how mornings began. Bend, reach, snap—a choreography of care that mostly belonged to my partner’s hands. Sometimes I joined him, but often I watched: the way he moved through the garden with patient attention, pulling leaves from the stalk, stacking them into the blue colander we always used. The garden marked time not by calendar but by return—watering, snapping, composting—the slow continuity of what kept growing.

If tomatoes embodied surprise, kale grounded the patio in endurance. One plant thrived for over six years, its stalk thickening, curling upward with each season. He harvested from the bottom while new leaves unfurled at the top—an unhurried spiral of growth that nourished soups and smoothies year after year. The plant did not announce itself; it stayed. Tender and small in early growth, toughened as it matured, sweetened after frost, wilted in heat—always returning, even as other plants came and went.

Kale didn't dazzle, but it endured—not as forced resilience, but as a quiet practice of being. This was survival made ordinary: repetition as care, continuity as a form of love. As Lauren Berlant urges, we can read endurance environmentally rather than as event—not spectacle, but the ambient scene that reproduces life from day to day (Berlant 2007, 760). In that frame, the kale bed is an environment of persistence, its watering, snapping, and composting organizing “ongoingness, getting by, and living on” (Berlant 2007, 759). The work here is not crisis management but life maintenance (Berlant 2007, 759–61). Kale's persistence refused crisis as the only register of endurance; it offered steadiness instead, a rhythm that outlasted moods and distances.

Caring for it meant returning—sometimes one of us, sometimes both—to water, to prune, to feed the soil with compost from shared meals. These concrete gestures resisted metaphor and abstraction. As Tuck and Yang write, decolonization must involve “the repatriation of land” and renewed relations with it, not symbolic acts or metaphors (Tuck and Yang 2012, 7). The daily maintenance of the kale provided a small-scale instance of this non-symbolic relationality. Kale asked for care not as sentiment but as maintenance—“a vital politics in interdependent worlds” that joins labor, affect, and ethics (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 6–7). The labor of care was shared, uneven, and real: enacted with hands and hose, with soil and time.

Its life cycle offered a model of queer temporality, operating outside linear, reproductive time. Rather than moving toward a single endpoint—fruit, seed, conclusion—kale unfolded through cyclical rhythms of tending and renewal. This slower, returning rhythm stands apart from what Elizabeth Freeman calls chrononormativity—the institutional regulation of

time that organizes bodies toward productivity (Freeman 2010, 3). Kale's slow unfolding resists these disciplining rhythms; its cycles of cutting and regrowth linger in a queer present that values persistence over advancement. Each act of care, whether done together or apart, returned us to what Freeman calls the "nonsequential rhythms" of queer time, where repetition can be restorative rather than restrictive. This temporal drift—watering, snapping, composting—cultivated presence over progress, re-embedding our relationship in the slow, shared rhythm of continuity over culmination.

In this ongoingness, I sense what Leanne Betasamosake Simpson calls a "constellation of co-resistance": relations among beings who sustain each other through reciprocity rather than extraction. In Simpson's terms, this is grounded normativity—care as consent, visiting, and reciprocal recognition among human and more-than-human nations, enacted in place rather than owned (Simpson 2017, 59, 153, 175). Read this way, tending kale participates in relational continuance as decolonial praxis, a small-scale practice of co-resistance rather than possession (Simpson 2017, 170–71). The kale, the soil, our bodies, the compost—each depended on the others to persist. Continuity became collective. The plant's endurance taught that care, too, can stretch across distance: not heroic, but habitual; not grand, but grounding.

The kale showed that survival is not an emergency but a practice—a rhythm of tending that binds living beings to the slow pulse of the garden.

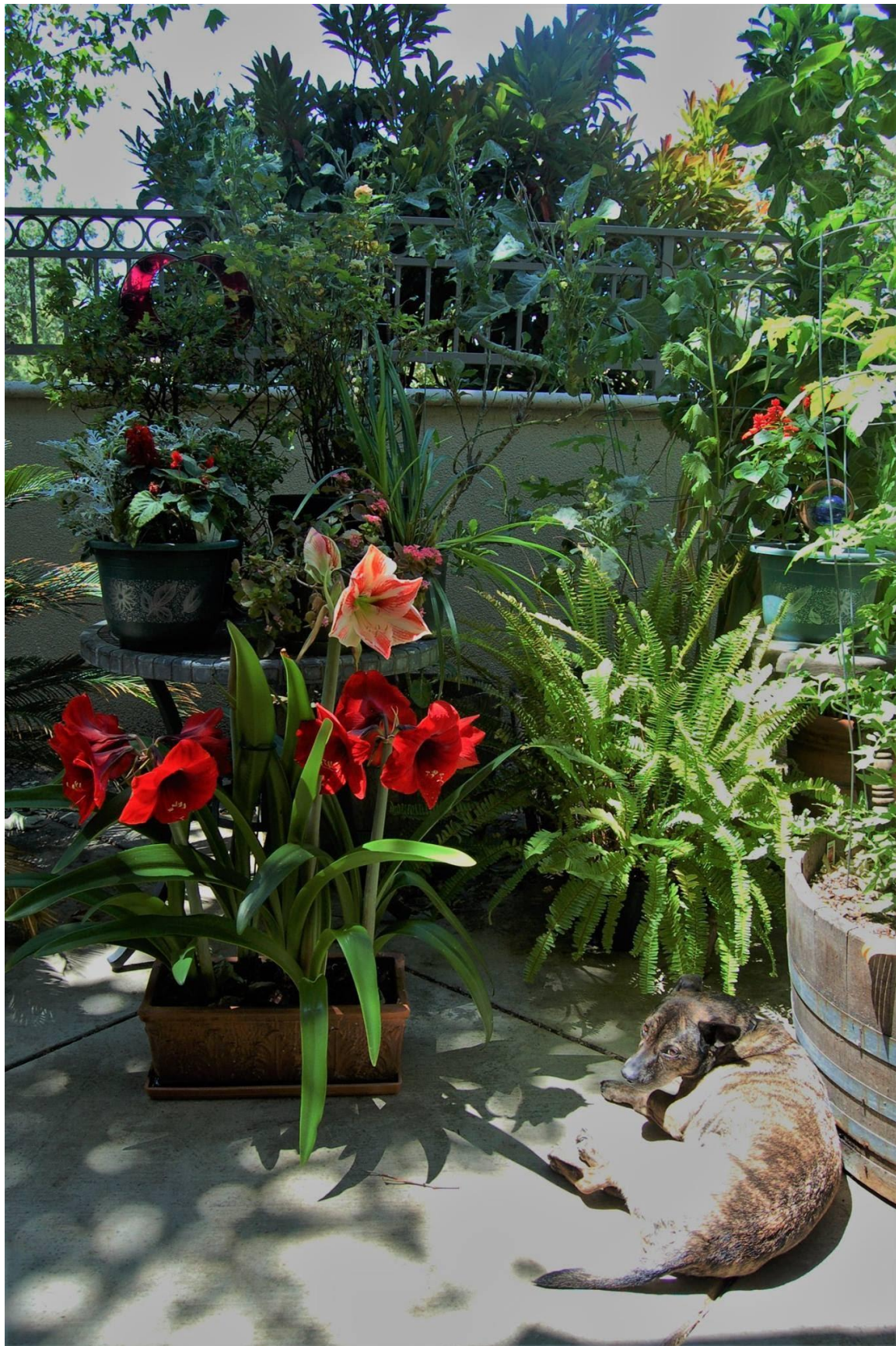


Figure 9. Patio Garden: The patio in its earlier form, with containers neatly ordered and freshly turned soil, and Lei-lo bathing in the sun. Photo by author.

Overflowing Refusals: Beyond Containment

Some plants refused the patio's limits. Yerba santa, also known as hoja santa, carried from Oaxaca, began modestly in one barrel but soon outgrew its container, dwarfing even the kale. Its broad, heart-shaped leaves spilled into the narrow walkway, imposing a new geometry on the space; they brushed against my arms as I moved past, forcing me to bend my path and navigate differently. The patio seemed to narrow with each new leaf, paths bending around its sprawling form. I dried the leaves, filled jars with powder, and used them to season beans or make herbal sprays, carrying its medicine forward through the year. The flavor it imparts to beans is earthy, slightly anise-like, and warming—a subtle yet persistent presence that lingers with each bite. Its unruly spread reminded me that even in constrained spaces, some plants insist on expansion.

I first met hoja santa—or mumu, as I've come to call them—in Chiapas, where the plant's heart-shaped leaves flavored tamales and beans. Years later, during a trip to Oaxaca, I brought a small start home—a fragment of that memory, rooted again in new soil. Now thriving in my garden's filtered light, mumu has become one of the newest members of my family of plantcestors. They're not metaphors for ancestry but living relations who remind me that care and memory are reciprocal. Layla K. Feghali conceptualizes plants as “our Plantcestors,” living relatives who hold memory and guide return to land through daily tending (Feghali 2024, 56–58). Through Feghali's language, tending mumu becomes a form of plantcestral remembrance—a way of re-rooting belonging through care. This understanding echoes Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's concept of rematriation, which understands land and beings as active

agents of resurgence, reclaiming their own ways of thriving beyond colonial containment. In this sense, yerba santa's refusal to stay small becomes a gesture of sovereignty. Its overflowing spread is not disobedience but self-determination—what Simpson might call a refusal in motion, a rematriated insistence on flourishing within and against constraint (Simpson 2017, 123). The plant's insistent physical expansion embodies that political force.

This overflow resonates with queer Indigenous and other marginalized lives, where bodies, desires, and temporalities exceed the narrow scripts of colonial normativity (Simpson 2017, 127). Just as yerba santa grows beyond the edges we set, its abundance mirrors other practices of care that overflow containment: seasoning beans as ceremony, drying leaves as remembrance, creating sprays as small rituals of protection and healing. These acts recall what Sarah Hunt and Cindy Holmes describe as decolonial intimacy—everyday practices that reconfigure relationship, land, and body as interdependent (Hunt and Holmes 2015, 45). In this way, tending the plant becomes an act of relational continuance, a rematriation of space through daily, embodied care.

In both plant and person, overflow becomes a practice of refusal—a refusal that nourishes. It is not only defiance but creation: what Mishuana Goeman calls spatial remapping, where Indigenous presence redefines the boundaries of possibility (Goeman 2013, 31); what Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel describe as a return to “everyday acts of resurgence” (Alfred and Corntassel 2005, 92); what Gerald Vizenor might name survivance, the active presence that resists victimry (Vizenor 1999, 23). Yerba santa's expansive reach actualizes this continuum of care and resistance—asserting presence, insisting on nourishment, and shaping the world in ways that refuse containment.



Figure 10. Mumu / Yerba Santa: The yerba santa plant at its peak, its broad heart-shaped leaves spilling over the rim of the barrel. Photo by author.

Coexisting Strangers: Community in Tight Quarters

If yerba santa taught me about overflow—the unruly insistence of life to exceed containment—the succulents offered a quieter lesson in coexistence. Where mumu claimed space through abundance, the 99¢ succulents practiced survival through proximity: crowded, touching, leaning into each other’s shadows. Their shared persistence redefined what community could mean in a small, overheated patio. Together they showed that care and relation are not always expansive; sometimes they emerge from compression, from the intimacy of limited space and shared need.

And then there were the succulents. If the tomatoes offered surprise, the kale endurance, and the yerba santa refusal, the succulents synthesized all three—an ecology of surprise, persistence, and overflow contained within a single pot. Thirty succulents from the 99¢ store formed a dense, entangled community. Though mass-produced and inexpensive, they were far from inert objects; they were active participants in their own survival. As Eduardo Kohn observes, “Plants are also selves...selfhood can be distributed over bodies...or it can be one of many other selves within a body” (Kohn 2013, 75). Crowded into tight quarters with scarce resources, the succulents demonstrated resilience and relational vitality, exemplifying a queer ecology of survival in which life and relation are not determined by market value.

Their persistence illustrates the semiotic nature of life: each succulent responded to light, water, and proximity to its neighbors in ways that suggest interpretation and adaptation. Kohn emphasizes that “any entity that stands as a locus of aboutness...can be said to be alive” (Kohn 2013, 77). Mass-produced and sold for minimal profit, they arrived already marked as

disposable, yet on the patio they rooted themselves into endurance. Even as inexpensive, commodified items, these succulents acted as agents in a small-scale ecology, their intertwined roots and growth patterns generating a network of survival strategies. Arjun Appadurai's *The Social Life of Things* helps illuminate this dynamic: even objects considered "cheap" participate in social and ecological networks, acquiring significance beyond their monetary cost (Appadurai 1986, 4, 7–9). In this sense, discount stores themselves—often overlooked—become unexpected sites where human and nonhuman interactions unfold, and where relational value emerges outside capitalist metrics.

The succulents' crowded community also mirrors broader patterns of survival and kinship under marginal conditions. Jason W. Moore argues that capitalism defines value primarily through labor productivity, privileging human work that can be commodified while ignoring the contributions of nonhuman nature and unpaid labor (Moore 2015, 61–63). The succulents' survival—nourished by sunlight, water, and minimal human care—illustrates vitality beyond the capitalist calculus, where life persists even when overlooked or undervalued (Moore 2015, 66–67). Donna Haraway writes that kinship extends beyond humans: "All critters share a common 'flesh,' laterally, semiotically, and genealogically...kin are unfamiliar...uncanny, haunting, active" (Haraway 2016, 162). In their quiet persistence, these 99¢ succulents enact multispecies kinship, demonstrating survivance in community. They are coexisting strangers—neighbors entwined, enduring together, and refusing erasure—whose cheapness grants them a relational vitality that transcends capitalist value. Their existence reflects accessibility, overlooked potential, and active sym-poetic entanglement both within human and more-than-human worlds.

In this way, the patio garden becomes more than a site of decoration or consumption. These succulents challenge conventional assumptions about value, showing that ecological and social significance emerge not from price tags but from entanglement, adaptation, and the persistent act of living together. They are living proof that life—whether encountered through surprise, routine, or refusal—thrives through relationality, care, and connection. The small, contained space of the patio thus yields a queer ecology where kinship is forged by necessity and defiance, embodying a sym-poetic resistance to capital and normativity. Together, kale’s endurance, yerba santa’s overflow, and the succulents’ coexistence trace a constellation of survival practices—care as continuity, expansion, and entanglement—each rooted in the quiet insistence of life to persist.

Queer Offerings: The Kinship of the Kitchen

Cooking queer tamales became a multispecies ceremony. Each ingredient carried its own pulse—the corn, the squash, the beets, the chiles—alive with histories of land, migration, and care. Bringing them together became a ceremony of relation: a gathering of species through heat, touch, and intention. In the kitchen, I worked by myself, the air thick with the sticky scent of lime, the haze of smoke, and the hum of conversation. My partner cleaned as I worked, moving around me like a quiet current, letting me make a mess of color and masa. Later, I shared them with both my chosen family and my blood family—each skeptical at first, then reaching for seconds, laughing at how the rainbow lived in a tamal. When I cut them open, the insides glowed—golden squash, deep red beets, bright green pesto, purple-blue potatoes—each bite a playful expression of pride.



Figure 11. Queer Tamales: Tamales made in vibrant colors—red for resistance, yellow for maize, green for medicine—each color holding its own story, a record of joy as praxis. Photo by author, December 24, 2012.

Each color carried its own story—red for life and resistance, orange for healing, yellow for sunlight and maize, green for nature and medicine, blue and purple for spirit and memory (*after Gilbert Baker's original Pride flag design*). When I plated them, the tamales shimmered like a flag translated through the language of the kitchen—queer color reimagined as nourishment rather than spectacle, a lineage of pride folded back into food and earth. This queer cooking was a precise art. Mixing the masa was a kind of fusion—body and water learning to move together, the hand's rhythm binding grain and flow into a single pulse of

intention. Soaking the husks asked for patience: the slow rehydration of memory. Wrapping the filling required protocol and trust, the careful folding of boundaries so that nothing leaked.

By the time the tamales were steaming, the kitchen had transformed: heat rising in waves, condensation thickening the air until it felt like breathing inside a cloud. The steam added an unseen density to the space, blurring the edges of exhaustion and satisfaction. Everything was moving—moisture, breath, memory—circulating through me as through the room itself. This circulation felt like a current, where unseen exchanges were already happening beneath the surface. It was an essential, underground mingling: the vital boundary layer where surface elements meet hidden reserves, keeping the entire system alive. My kitchen became that zone: a living confluence where grief, pleasure, and the residue of resistance mixed until something subversive surfaced. That space—of hidden currents and vital exchange—is what scientists call the hyporheic zone.

Making *Nopales Over the Rainbow* was another kind of fieldwork—a full-sensory prayer. The nopales carried a tangy, citrusy scent after their soak, while spiralized zucchini and sweet potato added a springy crunch. Chopping vegetables brought bursts of color to the table; tossing everything with a cilantro-lime vinaigrette made the kitchen smell bright and alive. When plated, the salad was its own pride flag—reds, oranges, yellows, greens, purples, and creamy avocado.

The nopales wept a thin mucilage that clung to my fingers; the air grew heavy with steam. Donna Haraway writes, “to be one is always to become with many,” and in that humid room, I felt that entanglement unfold—matter thinking through touch and taste (Haraway 2008, 4). At the same time, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson frames land as relation rather than

object—“a series of responsibilities and reciprocities performed in the everyday” (Simpson 2017, 22). Each rinse and cut, each trace of mucilage on my hands, was part of that ethic: an everyday ceremony of returning to relation. The kitchen was already a kind of watershed, each gesture a mingling of body, water, and land, a rehearsal of relation that would surface later in theory.

This porous entanglement recalls the hyporheic zone: a space where boundaries blur and exchange becomes the condition for survival. Cleo Woelfle-Erskine describes this zone as the porous layer beneath a river where surface and groundwater mingle—an ecology of exchange rather than hierarchy (Woelfle-Erskine 2021). Life persists through these minglings: water, sediment, microbes, and memory circulating across boundaries to sustain the river itself. In retrospect, my kitchen became that zone. The bowls and knives carried their own quiet turbulence—grief, pleasure, and resistance mingling below perception until they re-emerged as flavor, as warmth, as breath.



Figure 12. Nopales Over the Rainbow Prep: Ingredients arranged by color—nopales, citrus, herbs, and roots—reflecting a seasonal moment in kitchen-based fieldwork. Photo by author, September 29, 2013.

The Nopal as Border Ecology: Thorns, Memory, and Governance

The kitchen's hydrology carried beyond the sink. The nopal revealed itself as a living desert cistern—holding, filtering, and redistributing life. Its function mirrored the hyporheic zone, the unseen current beneath a river where surface and groundwater mingle to keep the stream alive. If the river has a hyporheic, the border does too. Nopal is its underflow: water held in flesh, acid as memory, thorns as protocol. We engage this system directly when we slice, salt, and rinse the slime like field scientists reading a mixing curve (Woelfle-Erskine 2021, 8–10, 26–30; cf. Anzaldúa 2012, 60–61).

Sometimes nopales are a hard sell—slimy, bitter, dismissed as “survival food.” Against a pipeline of toxins that runs from old mines to urban shorelines and into Black, Latinx, and Southeast Asian bodies, we built another kind of infrastructure: knife → bowl → mouths at my table—a brown-commons network that circulates nourishment instead of mercury.

Gloria Anzaldúa reads the cactus as a mirror of the mestiza body—defenseless yet enduring. “Soy nopal de castilla... I have no protection. So I cultivate needles, nettles, razor-sharp spikes to protect myself from others” (Anzaldúa 2012, 60–61). In her hands, the nopal becomes a method for living within injury—a queer practice of protection and offering. Theresa Delgadillo calls this transformation spiritual *mestizaje*, a process of unfolding that ties critique to care (Delgadillo 2011, 4–7). The thorns are not metaphor but method: an ethic of boundary and touch that queers the sacred at the *frontera*, where survival itself becomes offering.

Priscilla Solis Ybarra extends this logic into an ecological ethic. Desert lifeways, she writes, are not barren but abundant; they model endurance through reciprocity—“living well” as simplicity, sustenance, dignity, and respect (Ybarra 2016, 4–6, 28). Devon G. Peña grounds that kinship in practice: seeds, cuttings, and cultivars travel with people and labor, linking plant resilience to human survivance (Peña 2005, 3–5, 12–14). In this sense, the tamal and the nopal are forms of governance as much as food—technologies for distributing care across difference.

Unseen currents—Indigenous protocol, queer grief, kitchen tables—shape movement long before policy notices. These acts of relational continuance, from desert lifeways to kitchen tables, converge as thorned devotion: care practiced under constraint, cultivated in community, and oriented toward justice. This praxis of relational continuance is the fertile ground for revolutionary love.

Revolutionary Love and the Seven-Generations

In this kitchen, where the air hangs thick with the sticky scent of lime, the haze of smoke, and the hum of conversation, I try to practice multispecies kinship. The work of de-thorning nopal—born from slow devotion—reaches toward Kim TallBear and Angela Willey’s call for critical relationality: a belonging practiced through action, not lineage; through care, not category. Cooking nopal is a ceremony of relation, not domination—slime, salt, and smoke binding my body to land, plant, and one another. My queer kinships are intimacies that rival the couple form TallBear and Willey critique. They rehearse what those authors describe as becoming otherwise—through consent, care, and obligation toward a planetary belonging tasted in cactus and laughter (TallBear and Willey 2022, 6–13). Zsea Bowmani’s call for a Black queer feminist ecology gathers these threads into a praxis of care, reminding me that every thorned hand that cuts or salts nopal becomes an abolition ecology—an offering that joins queer survival to the labor of tending earth (Bowmani 2022, 129).

Out of this shared tending emerges a synthesis of care and labor—a revolutionary love that hums in my hands. Calvo and Esquibel remind me that food is medicine—for the body, soul, and spiritual connection (Calvo and Esquibel 2015, 12). Every slice of cactus is a small remembering, a creative act of resistance that honors the seven generations before and after me (Calvo and Esquibel 2015, 17–18). Cooking nopal is a way of returning to the milpa ethic in miniature, where sustenance circulates through reciprocity, not extraction (Calvo and Esquibel 2015, 36–39). Decolonizing the diet is not abstract reform but daily devotion: holding my queer kin through sickness, planting seeds, and insisting that to feed one another tenderly is already

to resist—and that to love toward seven generations yet to come is the resistance itself (Calvo and Esquibel 2015, 17).

What Still Insists on Living

Through these offerings—tomatoes’ playfulness, kale’s continuities, yerba santa’s refusals, succulents’ coexistence, tamales and nopales reimagined—the patio garden became a queer classroom. It taught me that survival is playful and persistent, overflowing and entangled, improvising within and against constraint. But time, too, is a teacher.

Since COVID, I haven’t stepped into the patio garden at all. Whatever remains has been left to fend for itself, roots pushing against concrete or drying back into soil. I only peek from my window every now and then, watching what still insists on living. This, too, is part of queer ecology—survance does not always look like tending. Sometimes it looks like letting go, trusting what I’ve planted to find its own way back to life—or to rest.

Ancestors, plantcestors, and trancestors guide this work. Ancestors remind me that survival is resistance, migration and return two beats of the same drum. Plantcestors teach that healing is cyclical, that roots remember even after drought. Trancestors show me that queerness is not rupture but continuity—another way of carrying care across generations. Together they form a braid of survival, survance, and re-creation.

This braid resonates with the thinkers who root me: Donna Haraway’s kin-making beyond species (Haraway 2016), María Puig de la Bellacasa’s insistence that care is collective (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017), Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s rematriation as return to relation (Simpson 2017), and Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang’s reminder that responsibility is not metaphor but practice (Tuck and Yang 2012).

This is what queer ecology means in my body. Ancestors, plantcestors, and trancestors carry me forward as I cook, plant, and imagine. They hold me steady in a seven-generation ethic where belonging is abundant, cyclical, and chosen—practiced not through replication, but through reimagination. Even here, in a patio garden gone feral, queer ecologies remind me the world is wide, unruly, alive with kin.

The Five Sisters: Houses, Fields, y Milpas

Preface

There are five sisters in this story—my tias, Sony and Socorro, who keep house and field from going empty, and Rebeca, Ofe, and Lupe, who mirror the milpa as corn, beans, and squash. None stands alone; each completes the others. Their voices carry flavors and practices rooted in land, their kitchens and surcos (fields) interdependent, feeding us not only with food but with memory and care.

Part I: A House That Never Sits Empty (Tía Sony)

The stories my Tía Sony tells do not arrive in a straight line. They come like the plants in her house: some rooted in old pots passed down from her mother, others replanted after loss, others still blossoming unexpectedly. Her voice moves among flowers, trees, and food, carrying memory in fragments that, together, trace a lineage of care.

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson defines decolonial life as the “everyday practices of Indigenous living that regenerate Indigenous worlds” (Simpson 2017, 45). Linda Tuhiwai Smith describes how knowledge endures through material acts that carry memory across generations (Smith 2012, 112). Sony’s practices—planting trees for the dead, cooking meals that transform leftovers into memory, and re-rooting life where something has been lost—are powerful

examples of this. They are the embodied gestures that make futures possible: rooted continuities that bind ancestors, family, and generations yet to come.

Flowers and Everyday Kinship

“Cuando una planta se ha secado, le pongo un hijito de otra: darle continuidad,” Sony explains. “Hasta que no mueran, ponemos nuevas.” Replanting is never substitution. A cutting is a *hijito*—a child who carries forward the life of what came before. Continuity here is kinship: when one form of life ends, another begins in its place, rooted in the same soil.

As Simpson observes, these gestures are daily “practices of renewal” that bind past, present, and future (Simpson 2017, 176). To say “hasta que no mueran” is to refuse finality, to insist that loss is always met with renewal. In this ethic, tending plants becomes a practice of survival, echoing how families persist despite absence.

The ethic does not stay contained within a single pot but spreads across Sony’s garden, where each plant, each act of tending, becomes memory in bloom. What Smith calls material acts of continuity (Smith 2012, 112) appear here in cracked terracotta, in fingertips stained with earth. Each refusal to let a pot sit empty becomes an act of lineage: inheritance rooted in care. Risling Baldy names this an ethic of continuance—embodied, place-based practices that revitalize reciprocity with land and ancestors and catalyze intergenerational healing (Risling Baldy 2018, 125–29, 134–36).

Tending Toward the Future

Everyday tending and ceremony share a common ground: both are theory-in-action, teaching survival and care through embodied practice. Sony’s daily tending—watering plants, pressing cuttings into soil, cooking meals that turn leftovers into memory—functions as ceremony in this sense: repeated acts that bind kin, land, and ancestors together. As Risling

Baldy, Simpson, and Smith describe, ceremony is survivance, gendered leadership, and place-based teaching made material (Risling Baldy 2018, 126–27; Simpson 2017; Smith 2012).

Her devotion is also Catholic: she crosses herself before watering, whispers “gracias a Dios” when fruit ripens, offering both prayer and care. For Sony, the rosary and the watering can belong to the same ritual of continuance.

These intimate acts of continuity take on greater weight in the context of climate crisis—especially in Aguascalientes, where summers grow hotter, rains arrive suddenly and with force, and long dry stretches leave soil cracked. “El agua se está acabando, hay que cuidarla,” she explains. Her noticing aligns with Kyle Whyte’s description of climate crisis as an “intensification of colonially-induced environmental changes” (Whyte 2017, 154). Both mark how altered ecologies demand practices of renewal that sustain life across generations.

Sony’s tending is thus memory work and climate work: everyday futurity that refuses the colonial timeline of loss and insists on continuity. In her hands, a cutting is not just a plant but a prayer for survival. The ethic of continuity does not stop at the edge of a pot. It spills outward, rooting itself in soil where memory is planted as tree. If flowers teach Sony to tend renewal in the everyday, lemon trees extend that lesson into lineage—where grief itself takes root and bears fruit.

Limones as Lineage and Memory

“Hay limones,” she smiles. “Está uno... mi mamá, y el que está aquí abajo es mi papá.” In her naming, the trees are not symbolic but living parents, rooted in soil yet still part of the household.

We planted them after a call I made driving home from school, in the week my abuelo passed. I am not one for emotional, teary conversations, but that day I couldn't wait until I was home. With the road stretching ahead and my voice unsteady, I told Sony we should plant something for him—root grief back into the soil so it could live on. “Se acostumbraba... cuando moría alguien, poner un árbol,” she remembers. So they planted two: one for my abuelo, one for my abuela.

At the grandparents' rancho, jacarandas were chosen—“son un poco delicadas... las heladas”—their fragility a reminder of how memory can be undone by frost. But here in the city house, “los limoncitos están, ya comimos el fruto: no tiene semilla y está muy ácido, que es el limón bueno.” One tree grows in the indoor patio, pressed against the wall, its branches bent under fruit. The other rises from the rooftop garden, exposed to sun and wind. When the air shifts, citrus fragrance drifts sharp and clean through both spaces.

“It's not work, it's cariño—regarlos, podarlos, recoger el fruto,” she explains. The fruit is more than she can use, so lemons spill into bags for neighbors, cousins, church friends. Everyone leaves with a handful. This is what Smith names connecting: food as an infrastructure of kinship, circulating and binding people in everyday networks of reciprocity (Smith 2012, 170).

Roots of Rematriation: Grief and Continuity

For Sony, lemon trees are living parents, their roots carrying grief and memory into the soil. Planting after death binds loss to regeneration, keeps the dead within the living world. Deborah Bird Rose calls this ecological kinship, where human and more-than-human lives entwine in reciprocal continuance (Rose 1992, 302). Eduardo Kohn describes how living beings extend meaning across generations (Kohn 2013, 78).

Planting lemons for her parents is rematriation in this sense—what Gould and Rowe describe as returning the dead to the land so they can continue to nurture the living (Gould 2019, 142; Rowe 2019, 59). Unlike repatriation, which centers remains or objects, rematriation emphasizes women's leadership, relational responsibility, and land's role as mother. For Sony, this gesture is quiet but insistent: grief rooted back into soil, regeneration made edible.

To slice one of her lemons is to taste ancestry itself—sharp, seedless, enduring—a fruit carrying her parents into the living world. From soil to table, the same ethic endures. What trees teach through fruit, the kitchen teaches through flavor. Sony's hands move seamlessly from pruning branches to stirring beans, each gesture translating continuity into sustenance. If lemons carry ancestry in their sharpness, *comida del recuerdo* carries it in taste: scraps remade into memory, absence transformed into abundance.

Comida del Recuerdo: Transforming Leftovers into Memory

"Comía mucha tortilla, frijoles, nopalitas, chile, queso, leche... la carne, sólo los domingos," Sony recalls—except eggs and milk, always "huevitos de gallina contenta" y "leche de vaca contenta."

Her aunts' *fogón* kept "sus frijolitos" warm. Smoke curled, perfuming the kitchen. The metate rasped as hands pressed chile and cheese into paste. The molcajete echoed: pestle on stone, rhythm on rhythm. Then the tortilla, steaming—soft, pliant, hot against the fingertips. Corn released its earth. These were not just tools. They were anchors to another way of life.

Her father's rule was clear: "si el guisado... ya era de días, mejor no lo comiéramos." Only fresh food. Never day-old. But necessity shifted this ethic. Sony remembers her sister

mixing frijolito... arroz... lo que queda. She called it *comida del recuerdo*. Leftovers, yes—but not lack. Memory reborn in a pot.

Each pinch of salt, each stir of the spoon, was an act of remembering. These improvisations echo women's long histories of stretching scarcity into sustenance, everyday strategies that ensured nourishment and cultural continuity in working-class Mexican households (Pilcher 84).

Sony's own repertoire carries this ethic. *Frijoles atoluditos con mucho juguito. Pollo en chipotle. Nopalitos*. Dishes alive with improvisation. Never wasting. Always transforming. The sweetness of *calabacitas con leche*, mentioned only in passing, carries her sister Lupe's memory. A taste so tender it lingers like a hymn.

She always murmurs *gracias a Dios* before serving. For Sony, feeding family is both nourishment and prayer, Catholic gratitude braided with ancestral recognition that food arrives through land, labor, and lineage alike.

Remaking Abundance

What began as necessity—stretching a handful of beans with rice, stirring yesterday's tortillas into caldo—becomes an ethic of transformation. Calvo and Esquibel name this a “Coyolxauhqui imperative”: fragments gathered, re-membered into new wholeness (Calvo and Esquibel 2015, 136–38). Gloria Anzaldúa describes how the goddess's scattered body demands creative reassembly, an invitation to turn brokenness into possibility (Anzaldúa 2021, 217). Sony's *comida del recuerdo* participates in this imperative: scraps recomposed into sustenance, memory reshaped into survival.

The act of eating carries memory not as abstraction but as taste. Chile's bite on the tongue. The sweetness of *calabacitas con leche* lingering like Lupe's presence. To eat is to remember. To remember is to keep lineage alive.

In Sony's kitchen, food is never wasted because memory is never discarded. Scraps become abundance. Domestic labor becomes rematriation. Each pinch, stir, taste—resistance. A quiet sovereignty. It keeps family alive. It keeps history alive. It keeps love alive.

One Tortilla, One Root, One Refusal

Flowers replanted so the house never sits empty. Lemon trees rooted as living parents. Meals made from scraps so that nothing is wasted. Together, these fragments form a map of continuity. They are not spoken as theory, yet they embody what some traditions call seven generations: a commitment to life that stretches beyond the present, refusing finality (Whyte 206).

The house never sits empty because Sony refuses absence—pressing cuttings into soil, planting lemons for the dead, stirring memory into beans and tortillas. Each gesture is a refusal: of waste, of erasure, of colonial severance.

What looks like ordinary care is insurgent inheritance, carried forward one pot, one fruit, one tortilla at a time. Smoke curling from the *fogón*, lemons bright against sun-warmed walls, a child of one plant pressed into the soil of another—these are her living prayers. They ensure the house remains full: of memory, of promise, of seven generations yet to come.

Part II: The Field Never Forgets (Tía Socorro)

Preface: Learning in the Furrows: Memory and Care

When my tía Socorro speaks, her memories stretch beyond the house into the fields and orchards. Her voice carries the work of sowing seeds, harvesting fruit, preserving food, and

caring for kin. Socorro's voice brings us to the *surco*, the *milpa*, and the orchard heavy with fruit; her stories remind me that inheritance is not just what is cooked and eaten, but what is planted and preserved—a living lesson that, as Leanne Betasamosake Simpson teaches, “the land, *aki*, is both context and process” (Simpson 2014, 7). Each seed planted, each fruit preserved, each field tended is not just survival but a lesson: knowledge learned in the furrows, passed on in jars, inherited in stories.

Frijoles de la Milpa: Survival and Interdependence

Socorro's voice:

Mi papá sembraba frijol flor de mayo, flor de junio. En Jalpa también sembrábamos otro, rosita, redondito, que se enredaba en las cañas del maíz. Así era la milpa: frijol y maíz juntos, creciendo abrazados. Y entre ellos también las calabacitas, tiernitas para cocer con leche, canela, o con poquita sal.

La flor de calabaza la poníamos en quesadillas. Cuando crecían grandes, las metíamos al horno caliente después de hacer gorditas. También el camote, las hojas del camote para asar. Mi mamá aprovechaba el calor del horno, y en la mañana ya teníamos desayuno.

(In the morning, my mamá would scoop them from the oven, their earthy sweetness filling the kitchen. The crackle of the horno, the taste of warm camote—these were not just recipes but systems of survival, what kept hunger at bay and made the next day possible.)

The smell of those tender *calabacitas* still lingers—sweet milk, a trace of cinnamon rising from the pot. Outside, the beans twined around the corn, holding fast. What Socorro describes is what Robin Wall Kimmerer calls reciprocity: each plant teaching and sustaining the other, the milpa a classroom without walls (Kimmerer 2013, 134).

Socorro's voice:

El tomatillo también se sembraba. Cuando estaba maduro, se cortaban las matas y se ponían a secar. Después lo cocía y lo volvía a secar para guardarlo en frascos. Así, cuando no había fresco, teníamos guardado para hacer salsa.

Those jars of tomatillo on the shelf were insurance against lean months, a quiet refusal to let the family go without. Vandana Shiva argues that for thousands of years, women like

Socorro have carried this work: saving, drying, exchanging seed and fruit to protect the future.

For Shiva, seeds are kin—“members of our earth family, the very foundation of life itself” (Shiva 2010, 220, 225). Each jar was a lesson, each seed a memory passed on.

Duraznos y Parras: Abundance and Rupture

Socorro’s voice:

En el rancho de mi papá había hileras de duraznos, membrillos, chabacanos, ciruelos. Hacíamos cajeta de membrillo. También había parras de uva, todo un viñedo enfrente de la casa. Comíamos fruta fresca, hasta llenarnos. (The orchard was an abundance of sweetness. Sticky peach juice ran down our hands. The tartness of quince lingered on our tongues. Grapes burst dusty and warm in our mouths. Cicadas droned in the heat. Bees hovered heavy over blossoms. Sunlight filtered through the vines in a green-gold haze.)

In the kitchen, quince simmered slowly. Fruit and sugar caramelized until it thickened into *cajeta*, spoons sticky, jars cooling on the counter. This is what Deborah Bird Rose names ecological kinship—the trees and vines as relatives who feed us, asking only that we tend them in return (Rose 1992, 7). Robin Wall Kimmerer calls it reciprocity, the orchard teaching generosity through its seasonal gifts (Kimmerer 2013, 137).

Socorro’s voice:

Después, con el tiempo, ya nadie volvió a plantar las parras. Mi papá mientras pudo lo hizo, pero los nietos ya no siguieron. Ahora sólo uno de los primos tiene unas parritas, higueras, y unos duraznos en su casa.

Her voice softens here, carrying both memory and ache. The sweetness of full orchards is shadowed by the silence of empty rows. Where care is not continued, kinship ruptures.

Cutchy Risling Baldy writes of this discontinuity—when women’s ecological responsibilities are interrupted, the threads of rematriation fray (Risling Baldy 2018, 112). Although the orchard is remembered, its abundance is no longer guaranteed.

Only one cousin tends a few vines, fig trees, and peaches. Kyle Whyte observes that seven generations are not promised. They depend on replanting. They depend on choosing responsibility across time (Whyte 2017, 158).

If the milpa was survival, the orchard was abundance. One taught endurance. The other revealed the fragility of inheritance—the risk of what is lost when planting stops. The orchard lingers in Socorro’s voice. It lingers in my own hands as I tuck seeds into envelopes, as I write her stories down. Each act is a small replanting. Each one promises that the sweetness will not be forgotten.

La Única Hija en el Surco: Gendered Labor and Rematriation

Socorro’s voice:

De las hijas, yo fui la única que anduve sembrando. Tenía diez años. Mi papá rentaba ranchos, y con las yuntas volteábamos la montaña. Uno abría el surco, y yo iba detrás sembrando la semilla, y otro atrás tapando la tierra. Así hasta terminar. También me tocó tirar abono a puños, cubeta por cubeta. Después vinieron los tractores, pero mientras tanto ahí estaba yo, sembrando, pisqueando, cortando jitomate y chile.

The work pressed itself into her body. Dust rose from the furrows, clung to her sweat, cut into her palms. Her arms ached from scattering fertilizer, her back bent under the sun, her breath caught in the dirt. Yet there she was, at ten years old, planting, covering, harvesting—her small hands in the same soil as her father’s.

Listening to my tía’s story, I realize her work challenges the picture of domesticity often tied to the past. Her memory interrupts assumptions about gendered labor, reminding us that women not only cooked what came from the fields, but also sowed, fertilized, and harvested. This work was a form of land stewardship, a responsibility that colonialism often erased by assigning rigid gender roles, as María Lugones shows (Lugones 2003, 215). To name her role is to rematriate history itself, returning women’s presence to the field where it has always belonged, a practice that Corrina Gould describes as a vital act of decolonization (qtd. in Hoover 2019, 23).

Continuity is not only about planting seeds. It is also about planting stories that refuse silence, ensuring that women's labor is carried forward. Linda Tuhiwai Smith reaffirms that storytelling is itself a decolonial practice, a way of transmitting knowledge outside colonial archives (Smith 2012, 145). Each story Socorro tells is another seed sown, another refusal to forget, another restoration of women's labor to family memory.

The field remembers, because she names her place in it. And through her stories, so do we.

Las Abuelitas: Care, Hands, and Lineage

Socorro's voice:

Casi siempre me iba a dormir con mi abuelita Lina, o con mi abuelita Josefa. Mi mamá me mandaba, porque decía: vete con mi mamá, para que no esté sola. Ellas me cuidaban, y también ayudaban a mi mamá en el quehacer. Cuando mi mamá tenía mucho trabajo, las abuelitas siempre estaban allí, ayudando, cocinando, acompañando. Yo me acuerdo de dormir en sus casas, de estar con ellas en la noche.

Ellas hacían todo a mano. Las tortillas bien redonditas, delgaditas, sobre el comal de leña. El chile molcajeteado. El queso fresco. Todo con sus manos. Eran solas, pero nunca estaban sin trabajo. Nunca sin cuidado para los demás.

The slap of masa against palms. The smoke of leña clinging to hair. The tang of chile rising from the stone molcajete. These were the sounds and scents of their care.

The work of their hands—rolling tortillas, grinding *chile*, caring for kin—was a lineage of survival, a living inheritance that I can still feel in the warmth of a tortilla, a taste I still carry.

Carole Counihan explains that foodwork has always been women's work, shaping not only meals but kinship (Counihan 1999, 54). Paul Connerton calls these embodied gestures "forms of memory," knowledge carried not in books but in hands (Connerton 1989, 72). Socorro's words bring these theories to life: her abuelitas' daily labors were memory made edible.

This caregiving network was also a form of resurgence. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson describes rematriation as returning women to their central roles in sustaining communities and

ensuring continuity (Simpson 2017, 112). When Socorro remembers her abuelitas, she is remembering a circle of women who held the line, kept the fire burning, kept the tortillas turning on the *comal* so no one would be left alone.

Closing the Surco: The Field as Archive

In Socorro's voice, the field becomes archive. Beans entwined with maize. Calabacitas steaming in the oven. Tomatillos dried for leaner months. Orchards heavy with peaches and grapes. A girl sowing at ten years old beside her father. Abuelas shaping tortillas on the comal. Together, these memories form a record of survival and care.

They show that rematriation is not only tending what is inherited, but also reckoning with what risks being lost. They carry both abundance and rupture, teaching that seven generations depend on remembering—and replanting—again and again. Gerald Vizenor calls this *survivance*: endurance through storytelling, an active presence that refuses absence (Vizenor 1999, 1).

For me, the lesson is this: the milpa becomes the meal, the field becomes memory, and my tía's stories become my inheritance. Writing them is my way of replanting, of keeping the fire and the tortillas and the seeds alive.

The path is never straight. From Socorro's surco and orchard, we arrive in the kitchen: Rebeca's masa. Ofé's olla. Lupe's calabaza. The milpa becomes the meal, and the field becomes memory made edible.

Part III: Milpa (Tías Rebeca, Ofé, Lupe)

The Three Sisters: Kitchens as Milpa

The kitchen hums when Rebeca, Ofé, and Lupe are together. Pots simmer, tortillas puff, knives knock against wooden boards. In my family, the kitchen is a field where three sisters

grow together: Rebeca, the towering corn; Ofe, the twining beans; and Lupe, the wide-spreading squash. None stands alone; together they sustain.

This image is not just metaphor but memory rooted in the land. In the *milpa*, corn gives height and structure, beans climb and enrich the soil, and squash spreads low, shading the ground. Native farmers across the Colorado Plateau still coax these holy plants from red soils, practices Enrique Salmón shows are embedded in origin stories and central to cultural survival (Salmon 2012, 88–92). The interdependence of the Three Sisters is not only agricultural but cultural, a way of ensuring continuity.

Such practices also stand in stark contrast to what Vandana Shiva names *maldevelopment*: processes that displace women, degrade ecologies, and obscure the life-sustaining productivity of both (Shiva 2010, 6–7). To recover what she calls the feminine principle—productivity understood as sustaining life—is to restore balance and possibility (Shiva 2010, 11–12). The *milpa* offers that principle in action: plants leaning into one another, sustaining the soil and those who eat from it.

Robin Wall Kimmerer highlights that plants “speak” not in words but through what they do—corn reaching upward, beans twining, squash spreading shade (Kimmerer 2013, 129–33). In their growth, they tell a story of reciprocity, teaching that respect and support yield enough for all. Watching my tías cook, I recognize that story in human form: Rebeca pressing *masa*, Ofe stirring *caldo*, Lupe tending *calabazas*. Their kitchens are as interdependent as the field, feeding us not only with food but with memory and care.

Rebeca — The Corn: Structure and Provision

Rebeca’s voice:

“Ay mijo, con eso desde que nacimos es lo que comíamos — gorditas, tortillas, tamales. Las

tortillas nunca faltaban en la mesa. Aquí no se usaba el trigo, siempre era maíz. Yo aprendí viendo a mi mamá moler, hacer la masa, y hasta me corté con la rozadera queriendo ayudar. Éramos catorce en la casa, y cada quien comía como una docena de tortillas al día, con frijolitos o con lo que hubiera. Eso nos daba fuerza.

Me acuerdo también de sembrar. Mi papá decía que había que esperar la luna llena o las lluvias para empezar. Él sembraba maíz, y también frijol y calabaza de Castilla. Cuando se secaba el elote, lo desgranaba y guardábamos el maíz para todo el año. A veces sacábamos hasta quinientos kilos de frijol, y también cosechábamos calabazas. Todo eso se sembraba para tener con qué comer.”

In the Three Sisters milpa, corn is the anchor, providing structure and provision.

Rebeca’s voice, like the corn itself, carries this story of sustenance. The grainy sound of maize grinding on the piedra and the smell of masa on the comal live in her memory. Her words carry not only sound and scent but the weight of daily strength.

Rebeca remembers tortillas not as a luxury but as daily sustenance, food that never failed on the table. Devon Mihesuah asserts that corn has long been a cultural and nutritional anchor for Indigenous peoples, the basis of health and identity (Mihesuah 2005, 45). In Mesoamerican cosmovisions, maize is also origin: people made from *masa*, human life bound to corn (León-Portilla 1973, 24).

Her memories of sowing—waiting for the moon, planting maize alongside beans and squash, harvesting together—are lessons in interdependence. Robin Wall Kimmerer calls this the architecture of reciprocity in the Three Sisters: corn grows tall, beans twine, squash spreads to protect (Kimmerer 2013, 130–34). In her recollection, the *milpa* is not abstraction but lived practice, a choreography of interdependence that ensured survival.

This embodied knowledge—learning to grind *masa* at her mother’s side, planting in rhythm with the land—highlights what Vandana Shiva critiques in Western economic models: that commodity output is called “productivity,” while the life-sustaining work of women and

plants is rendered invisible (Shiva 2010, 6). Yet Rebeca's tortillas, and her family's small *milpa*, are productivity in the truest sense—daily regeneration of life.

Kimmerer also describes corn as the firstborn, the stalk that grows tall so others may climb, and as the Corn Mother, “the mother of hundreds,” each kernel carrying nourishment (Kimmerer 2013, 130–31, 136–37). In Rebeca's memory we see both: the tall, steady structure that holds up family meals, and the endless generosity of maize as cultural and ceremonial food. Through her voice, corn is not only provision but presence. And Rebeca herself, steady and generous, becomes the stalk upon which others lean.

Ofe — The Beans: Memory and Binding

Ofe's voice:

Claro que me gustan los frijoles, porque tienen un sabor muy rico, sobre todo acabados de cocer. El frijol peruano, recién salido de la olla, con quesito fresco y chilito de molcajete, es delicioso. El caldito humeante, espesito, con ese olor a chile asado, siempre abre el apetito. Es una comida muy necesaria porque tiene mucho hierro. Personas que están un poquito faltas de vitaminas, cuando comen frijolitos ya se les ayuda mucho. Desde pequeños nos daban caldito de frijoles con sopitas de tortillita, y nos encantaba. La sopita se inflaba y quedaba suave, y uno la sacaba del caldo con la cuchara, con ese sabor sencillito pero completo. Los frijolitos nunca faltan en la comida mexicana. Con carne asada, con chilito de puerco, siempre recién cocidos. Y cuando no hay otra cosa — porque la carne está cara — con frijolitos, tortillitas, leche, quesito y un molcajete de chile es más que suficiente. Siempre con un huevito a un lado, los frijolitos hacen una comida deliciosa, abundante y humilde al mismo tiempo.

Reflection: Nutritional and Ecological Binding

If Rebeca is the corn that provides structure, Ofe is the bean that binds — both in the soil and at the table. The deep, earthy smell of beans fills the kitchen, signaling comfort and abundance. The pot hums and shifts on the stove, steam curling into the air like soft threads connecting everyone present. The sopitas swell and soften, the broth thick and rich, the clink of the ladle a rhythmic heartbeat. Watching Ofe stir the beans, I feel the pull of care in every motion. Her hands move the pot and the family together, just like the beans twine the soil.

Beans complete corn nutritionally, offering the lysine maize lacks. Devon Mihesuah emphasizes the centrality of corn and beans as both cultural and nutritional anchors in Indigenous diets (Mihesuah 2005, 115). Robin Wall Kimmerer notes that beans fix nitrogen in the soil, enriching the earth not only for themselves but also for corn and squash (Kimmerer 2013, 133–34). Enrique Salmón observes that even in the aridity of the Colorado Plateau, small fields continue to coax holy corn, beans, and squash, sustaining both food and cultural memory (Salmon 2012, 88–89). Together, these ecological and nutritional threads demonstrate interdependence, the Three Sisters in action.

Reflection: Social and Political Binding

Beyond ecology, Ofe enacts social binding. She keeps conversations flowing, passes bowls, tastes the broth, checks that each sibling has enough. In her kitchen, she binds family through care and presence. Vandana Shiva calls this *subsistence sufficiency*: meals that may seem modest are sovereignty, daily acts of life-sustaining work undervalued by development ideologies (Shiva 2010, 8–9). Kyle Whyte describes relational continuity, the ways food practices carry relationships across time (Whyte 2017, 158). Carole Counihan emphasizes how memory and sustenance are encoded in women’s foodwork (Counihan 1999, 54). Ofe’s pot of beans is both memory and survivance—everyday abundance that binds her family together, like the beans binding the *milpa*.

Lupe — The Squash: Nurture and Protection

Sony’s voice (earlier memory):

Yo le escuchaba que decía: “¿A qué les voy a dar de cenar?” Y cuando había calabacitas, vayan a traerse unas calabacitas. Era una delicia ir a cortarlas en el campo. Ella mientras ya tenía la leche preparando, las hacía cuadritos chiquititos, a coserlas, y eso cenábamos. A veces lo tomábamos como caldo, a veces como bebida, porque no lo hacía espeso. Teníamos mucha leche, bendito Dios, y con una cucharita sacábamos los trozos de calabaza.

Lupe's voice (continuing the memory):

Me gusta cocinarlas cuando ya están más crecitas, que no llegan a ser enormes. Las pongo a hervir con poquitita agua y canela. Cuando ya están casi blandas, les pongo leche o piloncillo. Me encantan frías o calientes.

Recuerdo en el rancho cuando se sembraban muchas matas de calabaza, y las flores enormes, amarillas, me fascinaban. Ahora también hemos sembrado; tu tío Rutilo nos ayuda, y yo sembré algunas que florecieron muchísimo. Hacía quesadillas de la flor de calabaza con queso, y ahora hasta hago pastel: en lugar de manzana, rallo calabacita. Queda muy bueno.

Reflection

If Rebeca is corn and Ofe is the bean, Lupe is the squash — spreading wide to shelter and protect. The kitchen smells of simmering calabaza and cinnamon. Milk bubbles softly in the pot, and the pieces of squash float tenderly in the spoon. The field hums in memory — leaves rustling, flowers bright against the green vines. Watching Lupe, I feel the same care and protection her mother, Sony, provided. At the table, Rebeca's tortillas, Ofe's frijoles, and Lupe's calabacitas come together, each sister's labor sustaining the others, just as corn, beans, and squash rely on one another in the milpa.

Squash was the earliest of the Three Sisters to be domesticated, thriving long before beans and corn joined it in the field (Landon 2015, 113–15). For Lupe, *calabaza* is both comfort and invention, feeding continuity across generations. Robin Wall Kimmerer describes squash as the protector plant, spreading bristly leaves that hold moisture, shade soil, and keep weeds at bay (Kimmerer 2013, 131–32). Polycultures like the Three Sisters rely on squash's sheltering presence, and in Lupe's kitchen, her recipes cover and nourish her family in the same way.

Ofe's beans and Rebeca's corn intertwine with Lupe's *calabaza*, binding meal, memory, and family together. Vandana Shiva critiques *maldevelopment* for displacing women from food systems, privatizing land, and eroding ecological renewal (Shiva 2010, 2–3). Lupe's *calabaza* resists that logic, keeping alive women's ecological labor both in the field and the kitchen.

Cutchá Risling Baldy emphasizes Indigenous women's ecological labor, and Corrina Gould describes rematriation as returning women to stewardship roles (Risling Baldy 2018, 112; Gould 2019, 23).

The pot becomes both memory and survivance, and watching Lupe cook, I see how this lesson shelters me too — teaching care, continuity, and the enduring work of women across generations.

Closing the Milpa: Interdependence and Care

The Five Sisters — Sony, Socorro, Rebeca, Ofe, and Lupe — form an ecology of care. Like the milpa's Three Sisters, their labors interlock: one provides structure, another binds memory, and a third shades and nourishes. Watching them, I see the ways their kitchens, fields, and hands sustain the family, interdependent as the plants that inspired them.

Squash, maize, and beans were domesticated over millennia, converging into the *milpa* about 3,500 years ago (Landon 2015, 112–15). Their interdependence is ecological as much as cultural: corn as stalk, beans as nitrogen-fixer, squash as shade (Kimmerer 2013, 130–34).

Today, small fields and gardens persist, often tended by women, holding memory and sustaining community despite rupture. As Enrique Salmón states, “small fields will have a large impact” on cultural and ecological resilience, carrying memory forward across generations (Salmon 2012, 94–96). Vandana Shiva emphasizes that modern development often displaces women and erodes ecological renewal (Shiva 2010, 2–3), but these sisters preserve life through care, sustenance, and interconnection.

Kimmerer frames the ethic succinctly: “Respect one another, support one another, bring your gift... and there will be enough for all” (Kimmerer 2013, 132). The Sisters are never alone;

they rely on a fourth partner, the planter, for reciprocity to be complete (Kimmerer 2013, 139–40). In the kitchens and the fields, their labor enacts survivance, weaving care, memory, and nourishment into a fabric that sustains generations.

Food becomes archive; memory becomes nourishment; and through the sisters' hands — in field and kitchen — the promise of seven generations is carried forward. Watching them, I see my place as the fourth partner in the milpa: writing, remembering, and replanting these stories so that care, memory, and sustenance endure across generations.



Figure 13. Four of the Five Sisters at the rancho—Socorro, Ofé, Lupe, and Sony—captured mid-frolic (left to right). Photographer unknown; used with permission of the sisters.

Coda: The Five Sisters — A Braid of House, Field, and Milpa

The Five Sisters — Sony, Socorro, Rebeca, Ofé, and Lupe — form an ecology of care.

Rebeca presses masa, her tortillas feeding the table; Socorro's sowing ensures the maize and beans arrive on that table; Sony replants the kitchen and memories, echoing Lupe's protective

calabaza leaves; Ofe's frijoles bind all together, memory steeped in broth. Each action flows into the next, their labor intertwined like a braid.

The braid is tight and strong, strands of house, field, and kitchen intertwined; its texture rough with soil, smooth with memory. Corn provides structure; beans bind memory; squash shades and nourishes. The *milpa* of their labor, the field of their hands, carries forward care and memory across generations. Squash, maize, and beans were domesticated over millennia, converging into the *milpa* about 3,500 years ago (Landon 2015, 112–15). Their interdependence is ecological and cultural: corn as stalk, beans as nitrogen-fixer, squash as shade (Kimmerer 2013, 130–34). Today, small fields and gardens persist, tended by women, holding memory and sustaining community despite rupture.

Enrique Salmón states that “small fields will have a large impact” on cultural and ecological resilience, carrying memory forward across generations (Salmon 2012, 94–96). Vandana Shiva emphasizes that modern development often displaces women and erodes ecological renewal (Shiva 2010, 2–3), but these sisters preserve life through care, sustenance, and interconnection. Kimmerer frames the ethic succinctly: “Respect one another, support one another, bring your gift... and there will be enough for all” (Kimmerer 2013, 132).

Food becomes archive; memory becomes nourishment; and through the sisters' hands — in field and kitchen — the promise of seven generations is carried forward. Watching them, I see my place as the fourth partner in this braid: writing, remembering, and replanting these stories so that the field, the *milpa*, and our lineage never go empty.

Care, Kinship, Continuity, and Rematriation

This chapter braids together the stories of the Five Sisters, weaving a practice of relational accountability from the house to the field, the milpa, and beyond. Their labor — from Sony and Socorro tending kitchens and fields to Rebeca, Ofé, and Lupe enacting the milpa's reciprocity — models care as both action and ethos. The Five Sisters' labor embodies continuity; queer ecologies reveal relational breadth; living foods and animal stewardship deepen our ties to the land; and collective resistance in Chiapas enacts persistence in the face of structural violence. Together, these threads form a network of responsibility, memory, sustenance, and rematriation across generations.

En Lak'ech grounds this ethic: *"Tú eres mi otro yo...Si te hago daño a ti, me hago daño a mí mismo...Si tomamos cuidado de la tierra; la tierra nos cuidará."* What we harm or nourish today ripples backward to our ancestors and forward to those yet to come. Seven Generations extends this principle: our present actions ripple across time, entangling humans, more-than-human kin, and the land itself. Rematriation is enacted as both a framework and a daily practice: a restoration of responsibility, care, and decision-making to Indigenous and community lineages.

From Sony's kitchens, where tortillas, beans, and calabacitas carry memory into sustenance, to Socorro's fields and orchards, where seeds and fruit embody continuity, the Five Sisters enact care as an ethic. Rebeca, Ofé, and Lupe mirror ecological interdependence — corn, beans, and squash growing together — while their hands, pots, and recipes braid relational knowledge across generations. Queer ecologies and feminist lineages further reveal that care is multidimensional: it circulates through bodies, across spaces, and among species. Living foods,

attentive soil, animal stewardship in ranchitos, and collective resistance in Chiapas show that sustaining life is inseparable from ethical responsibility.

Decolonization is not metaphor but material practice. Tuck and Yang remind us that it requires tangible acts of responsibility, refusing settler moves to innocence and demanding the repatriation of Indigenous life and land (Tuck and Yang 2012, 10, 16–17, 21). Kyle Whyte situates climate justice within the Seven Generations principle: our actions must be accountable to descendants and nonhuman relatives alike (Whyte 2017, 160). Together, these perspectives illuminate how care, rematriation, and interdependence are lived through everyday acts—planting, cooking, feeding, and stewarding.

Food becomes archive; memory becomes nourishment; and through the Sisters' hands — in field and kitchen — the promise of seven generations is carried forward. Watching them, I see my place as the fourth partner in the braid: writing, remembering, and replanting these stories. This ethic asks us to respond to the Earth as both teacher and kin, to tend it as we tend ourselves, ensuring that what is loved, fed, and remembered persists. Rematriation, enacted daily, knits together people, land, and memory into a living continuity.

Chapter 7: Now What: Toward a Decolonial Praxis of Body, Mind, Spirit, and Earth

Opening Invocation

En Lak'ech

Tú eres mi otro yo. (You are my other me.)

Si te hago daño a ti, (If I do harm to you,)

Me hago daño a mí mismo. (I do harm to myself.)

Si te amo y respeto, (If I love and respect you,)

Me amo y respeto yo. (I love and respect myself.)

If we poison the earth, we poison ourselves.

If we pollute the waters, we pollute our bodies.

If we contaminate the earth; we contaminate our food and life itself.

If we take care of the earth; the earth will take care of us.

If we love the earth; we love ourselves.

If we respect the earth; we live.

If we love ourselves, we will take care of ourselves.

If we love humanity, we will not hate.

If we protect our sacred mother, we live.

If we understand our role in the universe, we create.

— Raza Educators in Tucson, *Precious Knowledge* (2012)

This poem opens as both mirror and compass—an ethic of reciprocity that ignites every act of decolonization. To live En Lak'ech is to act from relation, to know that healing never happens alone, and that liberation is always braided—human, more-than-human, and ancestral. It invites a return to the earth not as conqueror or consumer, but as kin. What follows is praxis: a lived cartography drawn through body, mind, spirit, and earth—a map written in motion, in testimony, in prayer.

I offer the next prayer as grounding and orientation. Its four elements—earth, water, air, and fire—sustain my decolonial journey, each one insisting that theory must breathe and

that the sacred and the material are never apart. Together they form the framework for what follows, four directions of practice and return. This praxis unfolds through four essential movements: Tierra (Body) as the site of healing and sovereignty; Agua (Mind) as the current of memory and critical consciousness; Aire (Spirit) as the choreography of sacred care and ancestral connection; and Fuego (Fire) as the transformative force that returns all previous praxis to the land as collective, material action. The fourth element, Fuego, acts as the catalytic fire that gathers Tierra, Agua, and Aire into renewed relation—a flame of collective transformation that roots body, memory, and spirit back into the land.

Tierra, mi cuerpo
(Earth, my body)
Agua, mi sangre
(Water, my blood)
Aire, mi aliento
(Air, my breath)
Y fuego, mi espíritu
(And fire, my spirit)

Tierra — Body

The body is the first frontier of colonization and the first site of return. To decolonize the body is to listen to what empire tried to silence—the pulse beneath scar tissue, the memory embedded in muscle, the intuition carried in the gut. Healing, I have learned, is not a metaphor; it is labor performed daily in kitchens, fields, and quiet acts of rest. It begins in the wound and moves toward sovereignty, rejecting the logics that measure worth through productivity or purity.

My tías, Socorro and Ofe, prove that the body knows before language. Their *testimonios* stand as the curriculum of another world—where nourishment is measured not in calories but in reciprocity. Against the violence of “nutritionism,” which dissects food into commodities and

control (Scrinis 2013, 1–3; Nestle 2013, 25–30), they cultivate a different science—one of taste, scent, and memory. In their hands, beans and *calabacitas* become living archives, carrying ancestral codes of survival and joy. Meanwhile, Corina and Mel hold the moon circles, where stories become medicine and memory moves through ritual.

To reclaim the body is to seize the right to feel, to rest, to move in ways that honor pain and pleasure alike. Fanon insists that liberation demands the “reorganization of the self” from within the colonized body (Fanon 1963, 112). In this reorganization, rest becomes rebellion, dance becomes testimony, and nourishment becomes theory. My body, like the soil, requires tending, rotation, and regeneration. Through embodied sovereignty, I learn to trust its cycles—its hungers, its griefs, its expansions—as forms of decolonial knowledge.

Tierra asserts that radical self-love is insurgent. As my ethnographic collaborators teach, to feed oneself with care defies starvation by design; to move with joy dismantles control. Healing the body reignites kinship, creating an embodied sovereignty that fuels the reorganization of the self and the unlearning of empire’s logic.

Agua — Mind

If the body is soil, the mind is river. Thought courses through generations, carrying silt, story, and sediment. Gloria Anzaldúa writes that “identity, like a river, is always changing, always in transition, always in *nepantla*... you begin to define yourself in terms of who you are becoming, not who you have been” (Anzaldúa 2013, 556). To decolonize the mind is to redirect this current, loosening the rigid banks of empire’s design. The struggle for self-definition begins on the terrain of thought (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o 1986, 3). Liberation requires reclaiming imagination itself as a site of freedom—for, as Anzaldúa warns elsewhere, rigidity means death.

Fanon and Freire insist that decolonization begins on the terrain of the mind: it is not abstract but lived, the continual labor of unlearning what empire has inscribed within consciousness (Fanon 1963, 179; Freire 2000, 44). This process entails excavating internalized permissions—those quiet demands that knowledge receive whiteness’s sanction to be deemed true. In the *testimonios* of my mother, Gloria, and my sister, Corina, thought becomes tactile: it stirs pots, corrects children gently, resists silence with song. Their dialogues reveal that theory breathes in kitchens as powerfully as in classrooms.

Mental sovereignty flows like water; it refuses enclosure. It insists on creativity, memory, and intuition intermingling until the colonial scaffolding dissolves. When Beyoncé sings *Lemonade* into being, I witness what Freire calls *conscientização*—critical consciousness forged through art (Freire 2000, 51). Creation is pedagogy; beauty is defiance.

Anzaldúa names this threshold as the “crossroads” where living *sin fronteras* becomes survival (Anzaldúa 2021, 217). Water knows this truth: it resists containment, erodes stone, and returns again to the sky it once was. So too does the decolonial mind—flowing, relentless, carrying ancestral wisdom downstream. Each act of thought becomes a ceremony of return, a deliberate reorientation toward dignity and collective becoming.

Agua demands that we think together—not a universal “we,” but a collective shaped by shared struggle, memory, and care. The mind’s liberation is never solitary; it depends on the currents that sustain it. My ideas are not mine alone—they are confluences of many voices: Fanon’s rage, Freire’s hope, my family’s everyday pedagogy of survival. Water insists that liberation, like its current, cannot be dammed forever.

Aire — Spirit

Spirit is the breath between worlds—the space where memory inhales and imagination exhales. To decolonize the spirit is to breathe differently, to fill the lungs with histories that empire tried to suffocate and release them as prayer. Breath is not metaphor here; it is action. It is the embodied vow that we, the living inheritors of those breaths, exist because others exhaled before us, and that air carries the ancestral voices we are charged to honor.

My collaborators in spirit and practice demonstrate that spirituality is a choreography of care. Cooking chile rojo, blessing tortillas, or whispering a bendición before a journey—these acts are insurgent epistemologies. They locate the sacred in motion, scent, and attention. To bless is to declare connection; to cook is to pray with one’s hands. Each gesture sutures what colonialism severed—body to spirit, kitchen to cosmos, ordinary to divine.

María Lugones exposes how colonial modernity fractured being itself, dividing soul from flesh, and knowledge from spirituality (Lugones 2010, 744). In answer, the women in my family—my mother, tías, and sister—assert spiritual sovereignty: the right to define holiness through the labor of everyday life. Their practices embody what Leanne Betasamosake Simpson describes as “resurgent relationality,” a return to care that outlives institutions (Simpson 2017, 54). A bowl of beans, a handful of herbs, a whispered prayer—these are archives of continuity, lessons of survival written in steam.

Decolonial spirituality refuses nostalgia. It adapts, transforming like breath to meet the present’s needs. In the warmth of handmade tortillas and the rising scent of *hierba buena* steeping in water, I encounter what Anzaldúa calls “spiritual activism”—the union of inner and outer worlds for collective transformation (Anzaldúa 2021, 75). To breathe with awareness is to

participate in creation itself. *Aire* commands us—those who breathe in remembrance—to act with reverence: every exhale an offering to ancestors, kin, and futures still forming.

Fuego — Earth

Fire transforms. It devours and gives light, dismantles and renews. Here, at the edge of the elements, I return to the earth through flame—the energy that animates kitchens, milpas, and movements alike. Fire insists that care is active; it demands tending. It reveals that warmth and resistance are born of the same spark.

In my family, the fire lives in the *fogón*, where the Five Sisters—Sony, Socorro, Rebeca, Ofé, and Lupe—turn memory into sustenance. Their labor enacts the decolonial ethic of continuity: tortillas, beans, and *calabacitas* as edible testaments of love and survival. Through their hands, I learn that the earth is not resource but relative. Food becomes archive; eating becomes ceremony. Their kitchens ignite what María Puig de la Bellacasa names “matters of care”—an ethics of attention that fuses sustenance with survival (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 97).

Beyond the house, *Fuego* blazes in collective struggle. In Chiapas, I witnessed *todo para todos, nada para nosotros* embodied—the Zapatista truth that freedom is collective, never solitary. Their praxis, like my tías’ kitchens, fulfills what Tuck and Yang demand: a refusal of “settler moves to innocence” (Tuck and Yang 2012, 16). Decolonization is not metaphor but material responsibility—the restoration of land, life, and relation (Tuck and Yang 2012, 21). Fire names this truth with heat: transformation requires friction; creation requires flame.

I find this fire again in my queer ecology, where tomatoes, kale, and *yerba santa* sprout against concrete. Even when left untended, the garden insists on living, proving that care is not always cultivation—sometimes it is the radical act of trust. Ancestors, plantcestors, and

trancestors teach that survival is cyclical and chosen. As Haraway asserts, kinship “must be made,” a constant act of becoming-with (Haraway 2016, 2). In tending this fire, I engage in rematriation—the restoration of care, decision, and memory to those long dispossessed (Simpson 2017, 60).

Fuego summons the living toward collective praxis. It demands that transformation be kindled not in theory but in action: composting systems, shared gardens, communal tables, mutual aid. Fire exposes that creation and destruction are kin—it devours the old to make space for what must live next. In this glow, I see many worlds already in motion—decolonial, abolitionist, ecological, queer. Each burns with distinct brilliance, yet together they illuminate a shared horizon of liberation.

Crescendo and Closing

To decolonize the body, mind, spirit, and earth is not a linear ascent but a spiral—an ever-returning commitment to care and accountability. These elements are inseparable forces: soil that holds, water that flows, air that heals, fire that transforms. Together, they construct a living blueprint of continual becoming.

I do not claim to offer a new map; many already exist, carried by ancestors, organizers, healers, and dreamers. My task is to join them—to write, plant, and tend within the collective flame. As I move forward, I carry the teachings of my family and the Zapatistas alike: *queremos un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos*—we want a world where many worlds fit. This is the ethic of *En Lak’ech* carried through every element: care as reciprocity, sovereignty as relation, liberation as everyday act.

I breathe. I plant. I write. I remember.
Each gesture is both seed and offering, small and infinite.
And as Gloria Anzaldúa commands,
"I change myself, I change the world." (Anzaldúa 2021, 86)

Epilogue — La Tierra Me Recuerda / The Earth Remembers Me

I. Opening Return — The Body After the Light

The light that once burned holes through my vision now lands like morning on adobe—warm, no longer blinding, but gently tracing the scar it once revealed. I still get light-headed; dizziness still visits. Only now it comes from the other side—lows instead of highs, pressure dipping, the tide receding. I know my body better. I know my triggers: stress like static, the way emails can spike me more than *pan dulce* ever could. I feel the aches, *sí*, but I also feel cozy in my body—like slipping into a sweater someone I love wore yesterday, their scent still in the weave.

I tell my younger self—the one in the bathroom with a needle and a secret, the one blinking against LED fog—*You got this. Esto también pasará. We are segments of star dust, flotando en el universo, and the body is a constellation you will learn to navigate.* The wound remains, but now it speaks. It is a teacher who doesn't whisper; it drums.

Soil, sun, breath—in *halo*, out *humus*.

I AM NOT CURED; I AM IN RELATION.

II. Remembering Coyolxauhqui — Fragmentation as Ceremony

Coyolxauhqui returns, not as a rescue call but as a companion on the walk home.

Camina conmigo, she says. I accept the invitation. My fragments gather where I set down a mat: in writing, in prayer, in playlists that turn kitchens into temples, in the quiet *pausa* when I

decide not to fall down the dark hole today. I practice being okay with not being okay. I stitch myself with pep talks and pods—virtual messages, in-person circles—the constellations of care that keep me from going nova.

This is ceremony: *progreso, no perfección*. Each sunrise is a new altar. Each boundary is an offering. My “no” often arrives dressed as a “yes” to self: I take myself to a musical; I text folks where I’ll be—*fila J, asiento 12*—and let joy be a public practice. I stretch what I can stretch, I lift what I can lift, I let others knead the knots that grief braids into my shoulders.

My body map is honest: a pancreas almost ghosted by the projections of white coats; retinas with a decade of un-diagnosis etched into their grain; a shoulder that froze and thawed like winter learning spring again. But I trace those fragments—the scarred retina, the thawed shoulder—and claim them. *Lo holístico* is not an ideal but a practice of gathering the ghosted pieces back to the self. My survival stance? I tense—and I prepare for battle. And still, I remember: being queer, being trans, being nonbinary—refusing the mispronounced certainties cast at my body. All my pieces count.

Coyolxauhqui teaches me that colonization cracks us to scatter us—and ceremony is how we become sky again.

III. Madre Tierra and the Healing Curriculum

I apprentice myself to plants who are patient with my rush. *Romero, sábila, canela*—kitchen saints and backyard professors. I tend aloe as it teaches me to hold water without hoarding, and rosemary as it keeps my memory from fraying—lessons in relational medicine, resisting the hoarding and amnesia colonization demands; cinnamon warms the blood without

demanding the burn. I listen to marigolds who know the border between life and death, petals that mark the path home.

Madre Tierra keeps reminding me: be in relationship with endings, because endings are relationships too. Be with the plant as it yellows; be with yourself as you shed. Healing isn't fixing—it's *acompañar*. Grief is not a problem; it is a teacher whose lessons arrive in tides: face, feel, understand, integrate. Emotions are winds—*aires*—guardians that must move. They are not “bad”; they become harmful when we trap them.

I learn the elements as pedagogy, the land as mentor. I practice deep listening—*escucha con todo el cuerpo*. Consent with plants, consent with people, consent with myself. The altar holds the guardians: water for flow, copal for prayer, flowers for high vibration, a bowl for compost because medicine continues after beauty fades.

Colonial medicine offered prescriptions and abandonment; the earth offers relationship and responsibility. People's medicine survived conquest because it was memorized in kitchens, whispered on porches, sung in lullabies, coded in hands. I return to that oral library and remember: *eres medicina*.

IV. The Politics of Survival

The act of surviving is itself a political refusal.

Survival is not compliance; it is refusal with a pulse. *Seguir viviendo* under a system that profits from my unwellness is not neutrality—it's rebellion. I reject the shame economy: the needles done in hiding, the pill-count like a punitive rosary. I move my body in ways that feel sovereign rather than surveilled. I call out the kickbacks built into care that wasn't care.

My family is not pathology; they are continuity. *Mi mamá, mi apa, mis abuelas*—their diagnoses are not destiny, they are data and devotion. My father’s morning counsel—*linaza y canela*—is not superstition; it is inheritance. I am not a lone patient; I am a people learning itself again, a continuum that refuses to be broken.

To those living under similar colonial medical logics: your feelings are real, but they aren’t always facts; hold them like wind, let them pass through. Rest is resistance; joy is liberation. Survival is ceremony that happens on Thursdays at 2 p.m. and in the checkout line and in the choice to say “no” without explaining why. We do not owe empire a dissertation on our boundaries.

V. Time as Teacher / El Tiempo como Maestra

I couldn’t have written *this* dissertation ten years ago, although I might have written *a* dissertation. The difference is what a decade of embodiment taught me. In those years, theory moved into muscle; politics became pulse. I say this because of the illnesses that slowed me down until I could hear my own breath as data. I say this because of the communities that held me when the academy could not. I say this because of the deaths that instructed me in how to live, the plants that modeled reciprocity, and the students who reflected my healing back to me.

Time is not distance—it is compost. These ten years fertilized the soil of this work, transforming me into someone who knows that a body is an archive, that a wound is a library, and that theory without breath is brittle.

In these ten years, illness took me to the underworld of fluorescent waiting rooms; grief re-tuned my ears to hear the hum beneath silence; *curanderx* circles taught me that

confidentiality is ceremony; death-work taught me to sit vigil without fixing—to be present, to witness, to name death without making it rude. I learned to let go as practice, to befriend endings, to say the real words, to ask for consent—even at the threshold.

What would the earlier me have written? Something sharp, perhaps brilliant on paper, but missing the marrow. They would have argued well; I now listen well. They would have cited empire; I cite my grandmother's kitchen, my own blood, the neighborhood garden where I learned to move emotions like wind through leaves.

The difference is the marrow—knowledge gained not through reading, but through breathing.

VI. Toward Collective Healing / Future Invocation

The future I want smells like rosemary and tortillas; it sounds like laughter over a cutting board; it looks like a classroom with an altar in the corner and a syllabus that breathes. Gardens where children learn that emotions move; clinics where consent is sacred; kitchens where someone says *tómate tu agüita* and means *I see you*.

My work feeds that world—writing that remembers the soil it came from; teaching that treats knowledge as relationship; ceremony that welcomes the unwell without shaming; care networks where showing up is expertise. I will keep going to musicals alone and with everyone, letting joy recalibrate my nervous system. I will keep telling the truth that the body is not a failure; it is a field.

To whoever is still in their own scene of the crime: when your hands tremble, remember they are seeds. Feelings are weather; you are the climate. Rest is not a reward; it is a right. Joy is not a treat; it is technology.

Closing offering

Respira.

La tierra no olvida.

Y tú — sigues floreciendo.

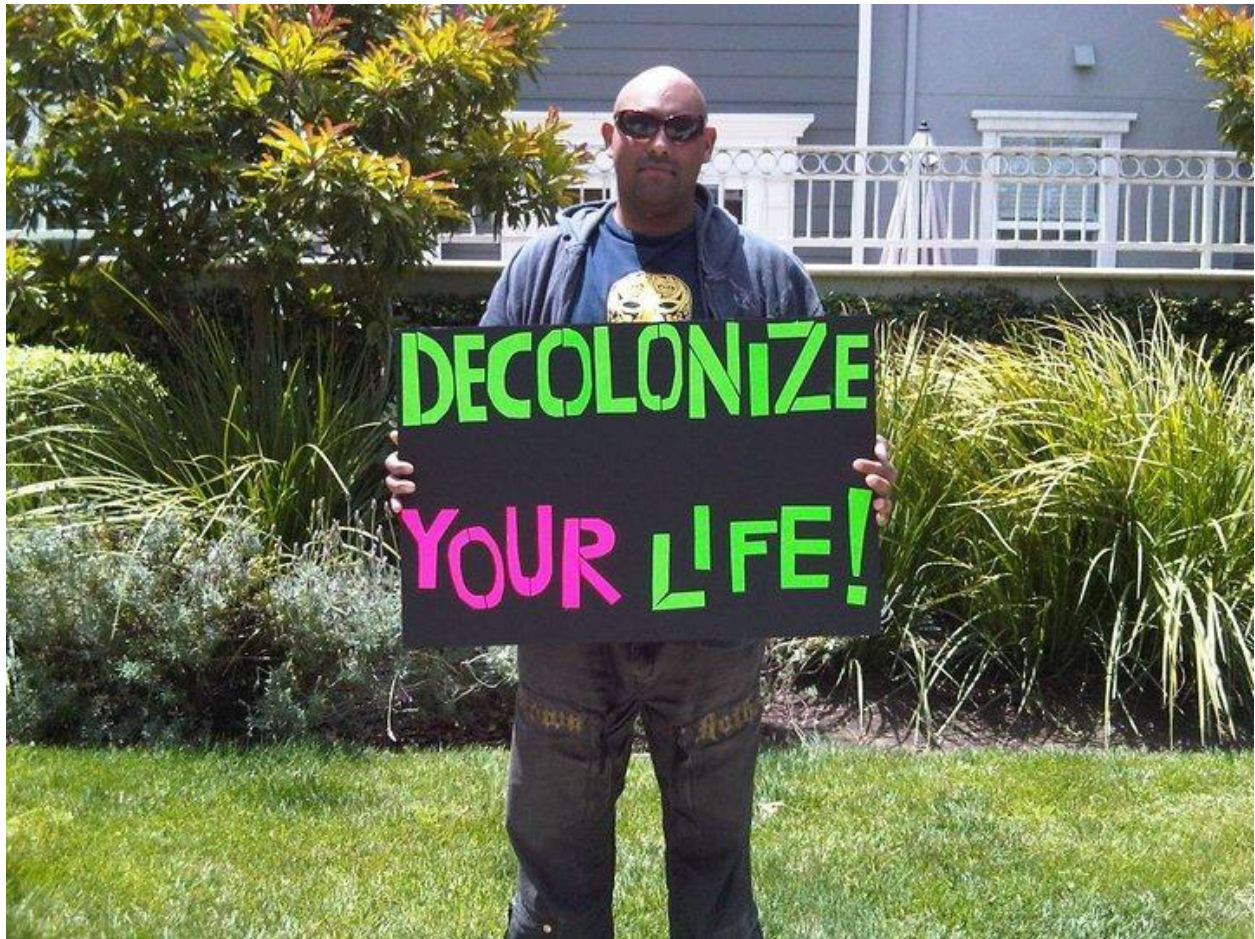


Figure 14. The author in 2011 as a recent graduate, holding a “Decolonize Your Life” sign. Photograph by the author’s mother, 2011.

Appendix (Supplementary Relations)

Appendix A – Dinner Discussion General Questions

What are your favorite foods?

Where did you learn to cook? eat?

In what ways do your own eating habits differ from those of your family members, extended family, or from your friends?

How often do you eat at fast food restaurants? Which ones do you prefer and why?

How often do you eat at street food? Which ones do you prefer and why?

What does food mean to you?

What does comida mean to you?

What practices/foods are the same from your parents and grandparents way of eating? What practices/foods are different? Why are they the same, why are they different?

What role does food play in your lives beyond nutrition?

What determines the cultural authenticity of these dishes?

Have you heard of the term Genetically Modified Organisms or Genetically Modified foods (GMOs or GM foods)? What are your thoughts on them?

How important is it for you to know whether scientists through genetic engineering have altered the corn, tomato, or other produce you are eating? Would it make a difference in whether you ate it?

How important is it for you to know whether the corn, tomato, or other produce you are eating has been altered through plant breeding? Would it make a difference in whether you ate it?

What kinds of foods make up a healthy, balanced diet? How did you learn this?

What kind of food would be in your ideal meal?

Do you grow any food? What foods do you grow?

What should the government's responsibility be in personal food choices?

What should the community's responsibility be in personal food choices?

Have you ever decided not to eat something even though you knew it would taste good? Why did you decide not to eat it?

What did you eat at your last meal? What factors determined what you ate?

What is the last meal you prepared from scratch? What does homemade mean to you?

Where did you grow up?

Where were you born?

Where were your parents born? grow up?

Where were your grandparents/great grandparents born? grow up?

What kinds of family recipes do you have?

Do you still prepare them? Why?

Are you concerned with pesticides?

Do you preserve foods? (jam, pickling, dehydrating, etc.)

Where do you get food from?

What are your most frequently visited places that you get food from?
 What varieties of vegetables/fruits/foods do you use?
 What does healthy eating mean to you?
 Did you teach your children to cook? to eat?
 Do you intend on passing family recipes on to your children?
 Do you like your grandparent's cooking? parent's cooking? why or why not?
 What foods are part of a celebration?
 Do holiday family gatherings have a focus on traditional food?
 Do you have a partner? Does your partner contribute to food preparation?
 Do you often share food with others? why? for what occasion? (meals or backyard bounty - garden produce, fruit trees)
 Are there any foods that you wouldn't eat as a child that you eat now?
 Are you a good cook? who is? why?

Appendix B – Decolonize Your Diet Framework Guiding Questions

Colonized Diet Guiding Questions

White Supremacy and Americanization Programs

Have you ever decided not to eat something even though you knew it would taste good? Why did you decide not to eat it?

What does healthy eating mean to you?

Disavowal, thoughtlessness

Do you know where your food comes from?

Refined foods: white sugar, white flour, high fructose corn syrup

Are there any foods that you wouldn't eat as a child that you eat now?

What did you eat at your last meal? What factors determined what you ate?

Wasteful

Do you compost? Why? Why not?

Advertising, marketing, fads

Have you ever tried a 'diet'?

Pesticides and monoculture

Are you concerned with pesticides?

GMO seeds

Have you heard of the term Genetically Modified Organisms or Genetically Modified foods (GMOs or GM foods)? What are your thoughts on them?

How important is it for you to know whether scientists have altered the corn, tomato, or other produce you are eating? Would it make a difference in whether you ate it?

NAFTA, agribusiness

What are your thoughts on food subsidies?

Food for profit

How often do you eat at fast food (or street) restaurants? Which ones do you prefer and why?

Assimilation

What practices/foods are the same from your parents and grandparents way of eating? What practices/foods are different? Why are they the same, why are they different?

Where places do you get your food?

Did you teach your children to cook? To eat? Do you intend on passing family recipes on to your children?

Decolonized Diet Guiding Questions

Respect for indigenous knowledge, cultural revitalization

What does food mean to you? What does comida mean to you?

What role does food play in your lives beyond nutrition?

Do you like your grandparent's cooking? parent's cooking? why or why not?

Intentions, blessings, and gratitude

Do you often share food with others? why? for what occasion? (meals or backyard bounty - garden produce, fruit trees)

Whole foods, nixtamalized corn, whole grains, mesquite, local honey

What is the last meal you prepared from scratch? what does homemade mean to you?

Resourceful

Do you preserve foods? (jam, pickling, etc.)

What varieties of (foods, fruits, etc.) vegetables do you use?

Ancestral knowledge, oral tradition

Where did you learn to cook? eat?

What determines the cultural authenticity of dishes during the holidays?

What kinds of family recipes do you have?

Permaculture, intercropping, organically grown

Do you grow any food? What foods do you grow?

Heritage seeds, seed saving

Do you garden? Parent's garden? Grandparent's garden? Why? Why not?

Small farms, local control, truly fair trade

What should the government's responsibility be in personal food choices?

What should the community's responsibility be in personal food choices?

Food to sustain life

What kinds of foods make up a healthy, balanced diet? How did you learn this?

What kind of food would be in your ideal meal?

Resistance, resilience

In what ways do your own eating habits differ from those of your family members, extended family, or from your friends?

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